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"All we have is means": Ursula K. Le Guin's utopianism as ongoingness

Utopianism. Abolitionism. Anarchism. Ongoingness. Social movements.

This article argues that we can affirm the impulse to change our current course and start over, while rejecting the idea that new beginnings take us out of our social and historical embeddedness. Instead, I propose using Ursula K. Le Guin's science fiction and anarchist attention to process and "ongoingness" as a political good. Bringing her novels *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971) and *The Dispossessed* (1974) into conversation with contemporary movements for prison abolition, this essay asks how her imperfect utopianism contributes to understandings of political prefiguration, process, and the idea that social transformation must be an ongoing project.

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We are in the middle of a process that will end, if we don't change course, with the intense immiseration and the destruction of much of the life on Earth. How might we start a new course, begin anew? In this article, I argue that we can affirm the impulse to start over while rejecting the idea that new beginnings take us out of our social and historical embeddedness. Instead, I look to an understanding of process and "ongoingness" as a political good. This approach can help us think about engaging in collective political work on complex problems that do not admit of easy solutions, and which no individual can solve alone. I am thinking here of problems such as the cascading climate catastrophe, mass extinctions, capitalism, colonialism, mass imprisonment, and the global trend towards authoritarianism. We are in the middle of all of these, and more. It won't work to try to start again as though all of the history that has constituted the mess we are currently in had never happened. Part of that mess comes from legacies of oppression and violence, and part of it comes from the beautiful work of ordinary people working for collective liberation.

One way to help build practices of ongoingness is through the imperfect utopianism of Ursula K. Le Guin, placing her science fiction in conversation with contemporary movements for liberation. Le Guin is perhaps best known for her fantasy series "Earthsea", which begins in *The Wizard of Earthsea* (1968) with a boy who goes to a school for wizards and goes on to become a powerful mage, but which goes on to become a meditation on death, living in balance with ecology, and the meaning of freedom. Indeed, freedom and bondage are abiding concerns across her fictional and critical work, which includes young adult fantasy novels, science fiction, and essays. For example, her ecological novel *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) is an extended polemic against resource extraction, imperialism and human exceptionalism; this novel discusses collective Indigenous self-determination and was written in part in response to the US's involvement in the Vietnam War. In a very different mode, *The Annals of the Western Shore* trilogy, written later in Le Guin's life, investigates modes of "power-over" subjection, from feudalism to authoritarian theocracy to chattel enslavement; each of the books in this series explore ways of building resistance through the power of collective story-making. Many of the books in her "Hainish" cycle, which includes one book I focus on here, *The Dispossessed* (1974), are set at planetary and society-wide sites of political transformation, and concern reckoning with legacies of enslavement, living after revolution, and building the possibility for directly democratic collective social worlds. Her monumental and strange ethnography of the future, *Always Coming Home* (1985), is perhaps her most political work, depicting a conflict between an authoritarian resource-hoarding military society and a loose configuration of self-organized polities. While we can read Le Guin's books as light (while always enjoyable) speculative fiction, we can also read them as offering complex political ideals for our consideration.[1] In this piece, I focus on one aspect of her own complex anarchist thought through her novels *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971) and *The Dispossessed*. Her attention to the significance of prefiguration, process, and non-instrumentality in her work can help those of us interested in contemporary social movements think about our own practices.

ABOLITIONISM AND THE HORIZON

Take movements against mass imprisonment, police violence, and the rise of the surveillance state, for example. Today, abolitionist movements in North America call for defunding the police and refunding social goods such as schools, affordable housing, and health care. They are part of the broader movement for Black lives, which is also connected to movements for migrant and refugee rights and against the existence and enforcement of borders. Abolitionism aims for those possibilities beyond militarism, state governance of the movement of people, and mass imprisonment. As Mariame Kaba and others have framed it, "abolition is the horizon" (2021, 96). This is in part to say that it is what abolitionists aim for, but also that it is continually moving out ahead of those of us who take up these politics – a horizon is what we move toward, but never reach. And yet, we move. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes, abolition is "the context and content of struggle, the site where culture recouples with the political; but it is not struggle's *form*. To *have form* we have to organize" (2022, 42).

Current abolitionist movements flared up in the wake of increased attention to police murders of Black people in North America in 2020, but they were connected to the constellation of thinking and activism from groups such as Critical Resistance, formed in 1997. The abolitionist movements of the late 1990s were in turn rooted in the work against prisons by imprisoned people in the 1960s, which called back to much older global struggles for the abolition of prisons and enslavement. Each iteration of these struggles builds on the work of people who came before, and inherits the complex limitations and legacies of their movements. Oppression works similarly. Enslavers in North America responded to the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade by intensifying their extraction of people's lives for profit; when chattel slavery was abolished, new laws criminalizing not having a place to live – vagrancy – applied to formerly enslaved people who left plantations with no place to go or way to live. When they were arrested and imprisoned, further laws allowing forced labor meant that imprisoned people were mandated to work without pay. Imprisoned people and people institutionalized in disability "sheltered workplaces" remain people to whom laws about minimum wage and work choice do not apply. Pursuing a world without prisons involves not just doing away with the buildings that currently contain people; it involves creating a world in which social problems are solved by other methods than shutting people away. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore said, "Abolition is about presence, not absence. It is about building life-affirming institutions" (quoted in Davis et al. 2022, 51). It is, I believe, central to this sense of abolitionism that the work is ongoing. Gilmore writes elsewhere:

> If unfinished liberation is the still-to-be-achieved work of abolition, then at bottom what is to be abolished isn't the past or its present ghost, but rather the process of hierarchy, dispossession, and exclusion that congeal in and as group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death. (2022, 475)

Both oppression and liberation are processes and practices; they are unfinished and therefore we can begin again towards horizons unpredicted by our current path.

Beginnings imply endpoints from which we might look back on where we started, but also the purpose or reason that we do something, and the result of something we aim for. Beginnings and ends are stitched together by the process of getting from one to another; it is the duration of activity in the middle that creates a start and a conclusion. This bit in the middle is "process", the part of what we're doing that is a "how", a method. We are perpetually in the middle: what we're doing is our means of activity and why we are doing it, or the outcome we are aiming for, is our end. This article will focus on two aspects of attending to means: the idea that what we do and how we do it matters very much, and the idea that there is no point at which the work of social transformation ends. We can have many beginnings, and many more processes and "hows", and, indeed, many ends toward which we aim – but any end will be simply a new beginning in an ongoing process. I'm particularly interested in the implications of thinking about process for contemporary collective social movements. Literature is a generative space for thinking about social transformation. As I will show, science fiction is an especially fertile site for exploring the idea that process is important for collective social movements.

PREFIGURATION AND THE REFUSAL OF INSTRUMENTALITY

The phrase "the ends justify the means" signals, even as it points to an end point, many senses of beginnings – a projected destination that can be achieved, a reason for the activity to come, and a good that the doer intends to accomplish. The significance of thinking about means and ends is canonized in ethical theory in Immanuel Kant's injunction to never treat others as mere means, but always as ends in themselves (2006, 38). That is to say, we oughtn't to use others for our own purposes or make their goals and life subsidiary to our own. Instead, we ought to relate with others as full and autonomous beings.

Le Guin is a theorist of means and ends, or process and ongoingness, of continuing without fixed essences. I read her work in its anarchist register, but I think this attention to process comes primarily perhaps from her life-long study of Taoism. *The Lathe of Heaven* may be her most Taoist novel, featuring a character (George Orr) whose dreams change reality, a manipulative therapist (Dr. Haber), and (eventually) pretty neat aliens. The therapist becomes convinced he can make a better world through shaping the things that George dreams. Dreams, of course, are difficult to manage. As things get more and more involuted with each successive shift in reality, George reflects on the ways Dr. Haber is using him, and the ways they together are shaping the world without its consent. He thinks: "The end justifies the means. But what if there never is an end? All we have is means" (83). If beginnings are only determined from some way down the road, how do we decide that something is an end? And who has standing to determine the direction of the world? We could here think of Jean-Paul Sartre's argument that when we choose as individuals we are choosing for everyone, and that part of the burden we feel when we confront our own freedom is precisely this understanding (2007, 24). In Dr. Haber's case, this is literally true – he is choosing for the world. George objects to this, but also to being personally used. He explains of Dr. Haber: "He's not … not an evil man. He means well. What I object to is

his using me as an instrument, as a means – even if his ends are good" (45). A key lesson in this claim that *all we have is means* is this idea that we ought not use others as instruments for our ends, whether they are good or bad.

In activist work, this approach involves being against instrumentalist organizing, and for what is sometimes thought of as "prefigurative politics". As Chris Dixon defines it, the term "prefigurative politics" names

> activist efforts to manifest and build, to the greatest extent possible, the world we would like to see though our means of fighting in this one. Examples of such efforts include using directly democratic methods of making decisions and building institutions through which people can self-organize to meet popular needs. (2014, 83)

Paul Raekstad and Sofa Saio Gradin define the concept as "*the deliberate experimental implementation of desired future social relations in the here-and-now*" (2020, 10; emphasis in original). A prefigurative approach often implies the idea that we should never treat others as means to another end, or use means that are at odds with the ends we aim for. So, for example, if we aim to create a world not organized around sexist divisions of labor, we would actively work to not have all of the cleaning, notetaking, and emotional care work in a group done by women – even if they are currently better at these tasks than men in the group.

Dixon's theorization of the idea begins from the *how* question, but expands it significantly. He writes, "The core idea here is that *how* we get ourselves to a transformed society (the means) is importantly related to *what* that transformed society will be (the ends). The means *prefigure* the ends" (2014, 84–85). His expansion of this concept, based on extensive interviews with long-term anti-authoritarian organizers alongside a deep engagement with anarchist theory, is important: prefiguration is not just how people treat one another, or whether we live countercultural lifestyles, but also whether we are building counter-institutions that have the capacity to meet people's needs such that those institutions replace the role the state currently plays. Further, we can attend to whether we are organizing, which is to say "bringing people together in ways that build their collective power – with a horizontal orientation" (85). These four characteristics of prefiguration, as manifested in anarchist-inflected social movement spaces, inform how I understand the idea of means as Le Guin is using it.

Zoe Baker's history of anarchist theories and practice in Europe and the US encapsulates another factor in this approach, that in working to change the world, we also transform our own subjectivities. Baker writes:

> the reasons anarchists gave for supporting or opposing particular strategies were grounded in a theoretical framework – the theory of practice – which maintained that, as people engage in activity, they simultaneously change the world and themselves. This theoretical framework was the foundation for the anarchist commitment to the unity of means and ends: the means that revolutionaries proposed to achieve social change had to be constituted by format of activity that would develop people into the kinds of individuals who were capable of, and were driven to, (a) overthrow capitalism and the state, and (b) construct and reproduce the end goal of an anarchist society. (2023, 10–11)

This tendency frames the unity of means and ends as carrying a politics and a practice. It invites us to change the world – but also to change ourselves so that we become the kinds of beings who can live in the world we collectively make. Or, as Dean Spade puts it, "By participating in groups in new ways and practicing new ways of being together, we are both building the world we want and becoming the kind of people who could live in such a world together" (2020, 17). We become both the means and the ends of that world.

Veteran organizer Myles Horton, who co-founded the Highlander Folk School, a training ground of civil rights activism, reflected in his autobiography:

> I think it's important to understand that the quality of the process you use to get to a place determines the ends, so when you want to build a democratic society, you have to act democratically in every way. If you want love and brotherhood, you got to incorporate them as you go along, because you can't just expect them to occur in the future without experiencing them before you get there. (1998, 227)

There is a key experiential quality to centering the question of how we do things – it is through experiencing the possibility of, for example, genuinely democratic decision-making that we might develop confidence that such a thing is possible at all.

This also works at the level of organizations. As Jura Federation's critique of the First International famously put it in the Sonvilier Circular,

> How can we expect an egalitarian and free society to emerge from an authoritarian organization? Impossible. The International, as the embryo of the human society of the future, is required in the here and now to faithfully mirror our principles of freedom and federation and shun any principle leaning towards authority and dictatorship. (1871)

The generative paradox here is that while we cannot expect an egalitarian and free society to emerge from a hierarchical and frequently authoritarian one, this world is the only one we have from which to work for freedom. Even though our beginning is fraught, we still might aim to create a free world in which free people can live. Indeed, this is the only way that liberation has ever been pursued.

One solution to the problem of bringing something into being that doesn't exist yet is to nourish the seeds of that world to come. This might be amplifying the small-scale ways we can treat one another with care and dignity, or it might be the idea of starting with a small group of competent people who agree on a way forward and chart the path for others to follow. Prefigurative approaches often critique the idea that in order to transform the world we should have a core organizing committee or vanguard who set a political line or plan and relate with the masses of people necessary to social transformation as fungible, fuel for the revolution. Stereotypically (but also to some extent historically), this vanguardist approach is connected with Vladimir Lenin's analogy for how we would set go about building something like a brick wall: Many of us have the skills and capacities to haul brick, to pile things on top of one another. But only some people understand how to correctly set a line to make a structurally sound wall, how to mix mortar and apply it, how to set bricks. Similarly, the analogy goes, in social struggle there is often a small group of people who have trained themselves in political analysis, who have the time and skills to assess how we should proceed to make collective change (1963, 178). Of course,

even the most ardent Leninist understands themselves to be doing advance work for the benefit of the people who do not yet clearly understand the political situation; no actual vanguardist I've known has expressed that they think they're smarter or better than an ordinary worker, though they may say that they have a better political education or more time to work on the publication that helps lay out a political program for the masses. The transitional program even of vanguardist groups aims, ultimately, at full governance by the proletariat. And of course conversely even non-vanguardist activist groups that aim to express a prefigurative praxis and not use people instrumentally do themselves end up burning people out, replicating the very patterns they aim to transform, and using means they abjure to try to get to ends they desire. Working for collective transformation is perhaps the most frustrating, near-impossible task we can take up, and there is never a way to do it without messing up.

Like the character George Orr, or Immanuel Kant, we can find many examples of activists being committed to the idea of not treating others as mere means to use on the way to an end I set. Abolitionist organizing offers one good example. As Davis et al. put it,

> an abolitionist lens teaches us that our work is not simply about "winning" specific campaigns but reframing the terrain upon which struggle for freedom happens. Indeed, one of the fundamental precepts of abolition is that winning a campaign is not the only measure of success: *how* we struggle, how our work enables future struggles, and how we stay clear about what we are fighting for matters. (2022, 33–34)

Later, they write: "How struggle unfolds matters" (66). If "freedom is a constant struggle" (111) and how the struggle unfolds matters, it's fruitful to attend to the question of this "how."

I do not think the ends justify the means, or that we will come to a good conclusion on the basis of consistently sacrificing people, ecologies, or our sense of what it right and good to do. Most people don't set off to ruthlessly exploit others for their own benefit. Most employers wouldn't aim to become the kind of people who would fire someone because their mother's surgery went badly and they have to take time off work to care for her. The reasons for their actions are before or beyond them – the whole system of capitalism militates against being able to express care to an employee.

In *The Lathe of Heaven,* Dr. Haber explicitly sets out to be a force for good. Justifying his use of George Orr's power to dream new worlds into being, Dr. Haber reflects: "A person is defined solely by the extent of his influence over other people, by the sphere of his interrelationships; and morality is an utterly meaningless term unless defined as the good one does to others, the fulfilling of one's function in the sociopolitical whole" (53). This framing comes eerily close to a formulation Le Guin explores in *The Dispossessed*: the idea that the purpose of a society is to allow each individual in it to most fully and beautifully manifest what they personally can and love to do best. In that work, this is framed as their "cellular function", and Dr. Haber's conception retains an attention to the importance of interrelationships and the question of how we each have a role in a sociopolitical whole.[2] But a key difference is the idea that what defines us is our *influence over* other people. Dr. Haber's practice

enacts this understanding: he genuinely thinks that the way to make a better world is through his individual force of will. He eradicates racism-as-colorism by having George dream everyone into having always been an identical shade of gray; his instruction to bring peace to Earth takes the form of all the governments of the planet uniting to oppose an alien invasion. This stands in sharp contrast to the idea that what defines us is our *relationships with* others and the world.

Over the course of the novel, George repeatedly tries to convince Dr. Haber that he is making changes that make things worse for everyone, saying: "We're in the world, not against it. It doesn't work to try to stand outside things and run them that way. It just doesn't work, it goes against life. There is a way but you have to follow it. The world *is*, no matter how we think it ought to be. You have to be with it" (140). Dr. Haber's hubris and conviction that he's making a better world only grow. A key point here is that the critique of instrumentality is not just about the ways it is wrong for Dr. Haber to use George as the means towards his personal ends. Rather, Le Guin is naming the idea that we ought not use the world as a means towards our ends. We cannot stand outside of life and try to run it, because we're part of the world.

The alien invasion George dreamed into being turns out to hold the key in the novel. The aliens too have people whose dreams can change the world, and so they are concerned for George, because he is dreaming alone. One approaches him and explains that they have a term for what he does – *Iahklu'* – and that there is a way to practice this dreaming in a good way. That approach, called *Er' perrhnne*, recognizes that *Iahklu'* is "too much for one person to handle alone" (168). People need a little help from their friends. *Er' perrhnne* names a kind of collective dreaming, finding a way to change the world that is with life and the world, not against it, because it recognizes the dreaming, potent self as always a part of a whole. The solution to instrumental dreaming is to dream with others.

Because we're in the middle of an ongoing stream of life, history, inheritance, we're also called to recognize ourselves as in the middle of other people's needs, interests, and ideas. In political work for collective liberation, those of us who benefit from existing systems of oppression can easily fail to perceive how our lives are connected to others. One antidote to this is to take leadership from those most affected by a decision, or to foreground the interests of those historically oppressed by the systems one aims to dismantle. From this stance, if we're working on issues of imprisonment, we should listen to prisoners. In this approach, there can be an impulse to find the "most oppressed" member of a group and take leadership from them, according epistemic privilege to the people most affected by a political situation. But since everyone experiences multiple vectors of oppression and benefit, and since no one person should bear the burden of dictating the direction of a whole movement, individual epistemic privilege is limited.

Le Guin's approach in *The Lathe of Heaven* offers a different approach, consonant with collective social movements. Dreaming with others, working with them in horizontal relationships of practice, puts us in the middle of difficult decisions and complex histories; only from there can we make good collective decisions. So, people will have different access needs – one person may need to stim (make repetitive move-

ments) or chew gum to comfortably be in a space, another may have misophonia or be very easily distracted by movement around them. Similarly, people have different insights into the political stakes of activist decisions, informed by their histories and the social relations they inhabit – one group's call to build a new jail so their imprisoned family members have access to air conditioning can come up against another group's campaign to not build any new jails but instead to release imprisoned people. It is only through working together in groups, toward shared goals, that we find ways to argue both for the conditions for dignified lives inside prisons and simultaneously an end to prisons, or that we set up rooms or have noise-modifying headphones on hand so that someone stimming or chewing does not prevent someone else from participating in decision making. This is a form of practicing collective epistemic privilege in making political decisions. Collectivity, with all the messy implications involved in being with others, comes along with means being all we have. This approach offers one example of Le Guin's solution to the problems of individual heroism and small-group vanguardism in her work generally. Decision making from the middle of history and in the muddle of complex problems can only be meaningfully done with others, not alone. *Er' perrhnne*.

I read Le Guin's formulation that *all we have is means* is as expressing also that it matters *how* we do things. In a collective or revolutionary mode, that *how* includes not only how individuals and groups treat people or the world, but also whether we build the conditions for collective, horizontal decision making. In order to have such decision-making, we'll need to become people who can participate in making the decisions that shape our lives. And in order to make those decisions carry any weight at all, we'll need to create institutions and infrastructure that can bear the weight of collective care, everything from water treatment plants to growing food to educating one another to tending people who are sick or dying. The unity of means and ends, in prefigurative mode, involves our interpersonal connections, but also physical and hermeneutic infrastructures for justice.

THERE WAS PROCESS: PROCESS WAS ALL

Le Guin's novel *The Dispossessed* is set on a moon, Anarres, where a colony of anarchists has modeled their lives and built a society in part on the writings of a revolutionary called Laia Asiao Odo. Their anarchism is Odonianism, a variation of what on Earth we would call anarchist communism. Le Guin renders ongoingness, process, and the idea that the "means are the end" a core part of the Odonian conception of a good society. The subtitle of *The Dispossessed* is "An Ambiguous Utopia", naming the ways that the anarchist society it depicts is imperfect. Readers encounter anarchism on Anarres nearly two hundred years after the revolution; that far away from the idealistic inauguration of a collective project, what calcifications, diffusions, and corruptions creep in? Le Guin models remarkably plausible failure modes of syndicalist anarchist societies, from the ways people highjack consensus process to how informal hierarchical fixity can become difficult to disrupt, precisely because people claim that there are no hierarchies. The novel focuses on a theoretical physicist of temporality, Shevek, and his journey to and

from the propertarian planet Anarres orbits. His journey allows Le Guin to stage a series of conversations about anarchism, mutual aid, and the questions of means and ends. Ultimately Shevek and his friends start a new syndicate called the Syndicate of Initiative, which catalyzes the main events of the novel. Thus, beginnings are central to this book, but process and the means by which we pursue our ends turn out to be equally important.

Le Guin writes about one of the key characters, Takver, that "she too was an Odonian, and the separation of means and ends was, to her too, false. For her, as for [Shevek], there was no end. There was process: process was all. You could go in a promising direction or you could go wrong, but you did not set out with the expectation of ever stopping anywhere" (1974, 334). Notice here some key aspects of this formulation of process: There is a unity of means and ends, which I've framed above as a prefigurative approach to social transformation. As well, there is the sense in which you can *go in a promising direction*, which requires a criteria and capacity to say what is promising, and why. Finally, there is this sense in which when you set out, you don't expect to stop – there will not be a point, in a living and collective world, at which the work of building that world together ever stops. Le Guin understands this as the imperative for society to be a permanent revolution. Our work has goals, but it will never be done.

I first began thinking about the idea that our work is never done while doing interviews with people who were AIDS activists in the Canadian context in the 1980s and early '90s. I often think of the Emergency Drug Release Program (EDRP), a four-year campaign from 1990 to 1994 to provide access to experimental drugs, especially when they had been approved for use through studies in other countries. Immediately upon winning this fight, members of the activist group AIDS ACTION NOW! (AAN!) turned their attention to working on getting practical access to the drugs, since many of the newly-available medications were prohibitively expensive. In the province where I live, Ontario, the program they won in 1995 (The Trillium Drug Program) is still one of the main ways people get access to drugs they need, thanks to the work that AIDS activists did. But that work in turn was grounded in an understanding that there were significant barriers to people accessing social services that would shape their experience of living with HIV and AIDS. The work that AAN! took up to fight for funding for drugs was possible largely because they had always seen the question of pharmaceutical access to be inseparable from the questions of affordable housing, clean needle supply for injection drug users, access to harm reduction supplies of all kinds in prisons, and more. As I learned more about the histories of AIDS activism, there were so many examples of cases like the EDRP and the pivot to create the Trillium program for access to drugs in times of financial need. These are situations where activist work won a major victory, and where those same activists immediately took up the next fight, which they had opened through that win. In that case, they won again. But it was just as often the case that they lost, and had to regroup and try for something else.

After learning this lesson from AIDS and other activists, historical and current, I began to perceive it as a pattern in my own activist work. Myles Horton closes his autobiography with a reflection on setting goals that illuminates this point:

> Goals are unattainable in the sense that they always grow. My goal for the tree I planted in front of my house is for it to get big enough to shade the house, but that tree is not going to stop growing once it shades my house. It's going to keep growing bigger regardless of whether I want it to or not. The nature of my visions are to keep on growing beyond my conception. That is why I say it is never completed. I think there always needs to be a struggle. In any situation there will always be something that's worse, and there will always be something that's better, so you continually strive to make it better. That will always be so, and that's good, because there ought to be growth. You die when you stop growing. […] [E]ven if we had a revolution, the quality of that revolution wouldn't necessarily be satisfactory, so I'd have to try to make it better. (1998, 228)

Just as the tree continues growing past the goal it was planted to fulfill – shading the house – social movements should continue growing and changing past the goals they were created to achieve. They will be passed down to and among others, and change as they take shape with their lives.

It is a good thing that we cannot conceive of what will happen to a vision or goal we set up, because this means that we are neither constraining it to what is currently conceivable nor artificially stunting the possible growth and change we seed. Just as they resist the giant agrochemical corporation Monsanto creating seeds that require proprietary chemicals to germinate, preventing farmers from saving seed from year to year, activists can resist any impulse to fully master the future. Instead, we can remain open to impossible things becoming possible. The idea Le Guin offers, that *process is all*, doesn't mean that there is never any winning or losing. It means that whether we win or lose, we carry on. As long as we're part of a living whole, things will be in movement. If we make things better, we'll still need to tend them, or reach for what could come after that. If we fail in a goal, or lose a fight, that too is the beginning of the next attempt. Every win or loss is a new beginning for the next struggle, and we have no intention of stopping.

A couple of things follow from a process-based approach. The first comes back to a non-instrumental approach to organizing. The second is an appreciation of continual and ongoing change as the basis of a good society, which I'll discuss below. From an approach where the ends justify the means, if we treat people badly or burn them out during a certain campaign, and we win our goal, that is worth it. We may have used up the energy, good will, and sense of connection of some number of activists, but we have won! From an approach where means is all we have, and where we're assuming that even wins are just steps on a path with no final destination, there is profound concern about any organizing based on people burning themselves out. Instead, we ask: How is everyone at the end of each campaign? Are they nourished and more connected to one another, or exhausted and angry, sometimes more at their fellow activists than at the things they oppose? As Davis et al. (2022) invite us to consider, we can ask whether our work *enables future struggles*, and attend to *how we stay clear about what we are fighting for*. An approach based in process and a sense

of continual beginning implies that even losses can leave a group stronger and more energized through the work. Often, though, this doesn't happen. Orienting toward the work we're doing as part of a continual messy beginning, perpetually something to begin again, corrects any tendency to use people instrumentally, to despair if we don't win soon or easily, or to rest on our laurels when we accomplish things.

SOCIETY AS AN ONGOING REVOLUTION

Including awareness of process in any thinking about social transformation also invites us to understand the ways it matters that we're always stepping into something that precedes us. In turn, anything we create must continue to change. In *The Dispossessed*, the spark that moves the narrative is that a group of anarchists have created a new syndicate, the Syndicate of Initiative, which initiates the first direct contact between the anarchists of Anarres and people on Urras, the propertarian planet they fled two hundred years earlier. This is the site for significant conflict on Anarres, and discussions about personal freedom and collective wellbeing – is it selfish and egoizing for the new syndicate to act as they have? When Shevek ultimately leaves Anarres to visit Urras, is he betraying the anarchist cause?

The seed of the Syndicate of Initiative was in conversations between Shevek and his friend and sometimes lover Bedap; he is profoundly critical of how things are run on Anarres in ways that shock Shevek, but also compel him. Bedap says, passionately, "Change is freedom, change is life – is anything more basic to Odonian thought than that?" (Le Guin 1974, 166). This is almost a truism when we think about our personal life: Anyone who is alive is continually and necessarily constantly changing. We are in a dense and continual relationship of mutual transformation with our world in basic biological ways, with every breath we take or bite of food we take. Here Odonian thought asks how we might apply that basic orientation to a collective situation. Just as individuals must continually change or die, so societies must be in a continual process of change. Le Guin writes, "Bedap had forced [Shevek] to realize that he was, in fact, a revolutionary; but he felt profoundly that he was such *by virtue of* his upbringing and education as an Odonian and an Anarresti. He could not rebel against his society, because his society, properly conceived, was a revolution, a permanent one, an ongoing process" (176). Holding to process requires a practice of society as a permanent, ongoing revolution.

For readers familiar with Marxism this reference to "permanent revolution" may call to mind Leon Trotsky's formulation of the "Permanent Revolution" as a way to account for the possibility of a revolution that did not progress through the stages Marx and Engels suggested would follow one another. As Michael Löwy carefully outlines, while we see this theory of revolutionary stages in Marx and Engels, they also speak of the need for a "uninterrupted revolution" and sometimes "permanent revolution" ([1981] 2010, 8–29). Mao Zedong departed from and transformed Trotsky's concept into the idea of "continuous revolution," arguably one of the leaping-off points for what became the Cultural Revolution; this theory cannot be discussed apart from the ongoing aftermaths of that political program. Thinking about the idea of revolutionary ongoingness thus both references and calls for a reckoning with how a key

phrase or concept like "continuous revolution" is implicated in the immiseration and deaths of millions of people. Le Guin would likely have encountered these framings as part of participating in political life when she was writing *The Dispossessed*, but I would argue that the meaning and rendering of Shevek's reflections on the society of Anarres being a permanent revolution departs from both Trotsky's and Mao's uses of these concepts (which are, again, very different from one another). Indeed, although I have no direct evidence that Le Guin formulated her process-based anarchism in direct opposition to Lenin, Mao, and Stalin, she certainly articulated her anarchism as in opposition to the state, explicitly naming authoritarian state socialism. Her novel *The Telling* is both a meditation on the power of collective memory and explicitly a critique of Mao's Cultural Revolution, especially with attention to its suppression of Taoism. Various anarchist thinkers have also articulated the idea that there would not be an end point to any social transformation we might call revolution, and Le Guin may have been reading some of them. She positioned herself explicitly in the lineage of Paul Goodman, Emma Goldman, and Peter Kropotkin, but I see her work here as also resonating with others.

Anarchist Gustav Landauer, for example, theorizes the process of change as an ongoing shift from a what he called a *topia* to a *utopia*. As he wrote: "not only the state, the estates of the realm, the religious institutions, economic life, intellectual life, schools, arts, or education, but the combination of all of those; a combination that, for a certain period of time, rests in a relative state of authoritative stability. We call this combination – the current state of communality – topia" (2010, 113). For Landauer, the way that any communality changes is through "individual life", which he frames as "a combination of ambitions that will never reach their goals" (113). The attempt towards something beyond the *topia* constitutes a revolutionary break, which is resolved into a new *topia*. Landauer says, "If we call the topias A, B, C (etc), and the utopias a, b, c (etc), then the history of a community goes from A to a to B to b to C to c to D, and so forth" (114). But, he jokes, this makes it seem as though history starts from the beginning of the alphabet, so perhaps we should instead go with the middle of the alphabet, M, m, and so on. But even then, we would need to decide if history begins with society or the revolutionary idea. Indeed, because Landauer sees history as necessarily having no end point, there is no beginning; process is all.

CONCLUSION

In their book on prefigurative politics, Paul Raekstad and Sofa Gradin formulate what they call a "process"-based view of revolution. They distinguish three main ways in which anti-capitalists think about revolution: 1) "the one big event view", a singular event in which people seize state power; 2) "the flash-flash-bang view" – with reference to autonomous Marxists and especially John Holloway's formulation of transformation – as "a series of cracks or ruptures within capitalism and/or the state", and 3) the "process" view. They define this approach thus:

> Here revolution is conceptualised as a process of creating and developing ongoing mass organisations and movements which fight for reforms in the present and aim to replace

> capitalism and the state with free, equal, and democratic socialist institutions. As such organisations grow, develop, and struggle, they change the powers, drives, and consciousness of their members individually and collectively. Their growth and development and winning of reforms increases their powers and the powers of their members, developing and altering members' drives and consciousness, making it possible for them to replace capitalism and the state. (2020, 58)

Raekstad and Gradin articulate this process-oriented conception of fundamental societal transformation as in some real way requiring a prefigurative politics. If we think about prefiguration in the expanded way Dixon outlined above, which is to say as including both transformations to how we live and to the social and material infrastructures of our lives, we can perceive some of the usefulness of linking the unity of means and ends with a conception of ongoing societal transformation.

Being always in a process of change places us as part of multiple ongoing processes, where the means are all we have and we don't expect to ever stop. Arguing with one of the propertarians on Urras, Shevek says:

> We don't want purity, but complexity, the relationship of cause and effect, means and ends. Our model of the cosmos must be as inexhaustible as the cosmos. A complexity that includes not only duration but creation, not only being but becoming, not only geometry but ethics. It's not the answer we are after, but only how to ask questions… (Le Guin 1974, 226)

Shevek is of course here a fictional character talking about his passion, physics. In his love for complexity and attention to means and ends, though, I find resources for how we might attune to starting again, and again after that. The horizon of transformation – abolishing certain social relations, building others – may forever recede before us, but a commitment to ongoingness makes that a delight and a promise rather than a burden and a disappointment.

NOTES

[1] I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting I mention the broader context of Le Guin's work in this regard. There has been, of course, quite a lot of writing about the politics of Le Guin's literary offerings. I am in this essay thinking specifically with Lewis Call (2007), Laurence Davis and Peter Stillman (2005), Shiobhan Leddy (2019), John Plotz and Elisabeth Ferry (2024), Ursula K. Le Guin and Margaret Killjoy (2010), and Richard D. Erlich (2010).

[2] There is much to say about how Le Guin's formulation contrasts with many strands of theorizations of the relationship between the individual and society in political philosophy, from Rawls to Rousseau to Aristotle or Hobbes, but space does not allow me to unpack these connections.

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