“A Mere Dream Dreamed in a Bad Time”

A Marxist Reading of Utopian and Dystopian Elements in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Always Coming Home*

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Abstract
In Ursula K. Le Guin’s novel *Always Coming Home*, utopian and dystopian elements interact according to patterns inspired by anarchism and Taoism to criticise material excesses and oppressive social structures under capitalism. Via discussions of gender, state power, and forms of social (re)production, this Marxist reading proposes that the novel’s separation of utopia from dystopia hinges on the absence or presence of a state. The reading also suggests that the novel’s utopia is by its own admission a “mere dream” with limited relevance to anti-capitalist politics, and employs the novel’s own term “handmind” to show that the aesthetic and philosophical dimensions of its anti-capitalist sentiments encourage a reconsideration of utopia, to be viewed not as a fixed future product – a good-place – but as a constant process of becoming – a no-place.

Keywords: anarchism, class, ideology, production, science fiction
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**Introduction**

Ursula K. Le Guin’s fiction often employs a combination of anarchist and Taoist ideals to criticise the excesses of capitalism. Despite its experimental style, her 1985 novel *Always Coming Home* should be familiar to readers of Le Guin’s other works in this regard. In its future, post-capitalist setting, the juxtaposition of utopian and dystopian societies forms a yin-yang pattern through a collection of texts, including prose, drama, and poetry, framed by commentary that might best be described as a pastiche of anthropological scholarship. While the anarcho-Taoist influences on the novel’s structure contribute to its aesthetic and philosophical depth, however, they also contain and give rise to certain contradictions. One such contradiction is inherent in the very combination of anarchism and Taoism, that is, of the opposition to unjust hierarchies on the one (anarchist) hand and the implied cyclical collapse and re-emergence of such hierarchies on the (Taoist) other. Another contradiction arises when readers who expect to find radical political content in the novel instead discover the practical limitations of anti-capitalist sentiments from this tenuous anarcho-Taoist perspective.

Rather than treat *Always Coming Home* as an instance where the contradictions introduced above have arisen by accident, this reading applies a Marxist perspective to show that they are in fact systematic results of the anarcho-Taoist ideology permeating the text. This ideology lends *Always Coming Home* a propensity to treat capitalism as primarily an aesthetic and philosophical enemy, leaving political questions aside or considering them only through the idealising lens of a utopian future. The primary question being evaluated relates to the presentation of utopian alongside dystopian societies in the novel’s post-capitalist setting: what differentiates utopia from dystopia in the first place and how are they kept separate? This question is answered through an examination of three elements crucial to social organisation: the division of people into different categories (gender is used as the concrete example, though ethnicity, age, and so on, would also be viable candidates) and the potential oppression of some categories by others; the absence or presence of a state apparatus; and finally, the modes of (re)production within these societies, both material and ideological. Two secondary enquiries also figure, to be evaluated mainly in the last section, namely: what utopia functionally is – if it is a finished product or a process of becoming – and to what extent a utopian novel can serve any radical political function.
Readers of Le Guin’s works often anticipate them to contain critiques of capitalist social and economic structures, particularly from her characteristic anarcho-Taoist position. No doubt her 1974 novel *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* set the bar for these expectations from a political perspective, prompting discussions of anarchism in relation to Marxism in utopian fiction (see, for instance, Tony Burns and the discussions in *Science Fiction Studies* 1973-1974 that he alludes to). *Always Coming Home* has garnered somewhat less attention, and of a slightly different sort. It was unfortunately not yet published at the time of James Bittner’s 1979 *Approaches to the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin*, which nonetheless remains useful in linking the novel back to Le Guin’s earlier career. Political readings of the novel often home in on its ecological perspectives (see Lisa Garforth); also, the novel’s atypical structure has invited rather academic discussions about the difficulties in pinning it down generically (see Garforth, Margaret Hostetler, and Andy Sawyer). *Always Coming Home* is arguably a less concentrated book than, for instance, *The Dispossessed*, and perhaps that is why critics compartmentalise its politics.

When it comes to reading *Always Coming Home* from the point of view of Marxism, then, most criticism is indirectly available, either via Le Guin’s tendency to reiterate and re-examine her themes, or via discussions of utopian literature more generally. Fredric Jameson examines utopia and its aesthetic relevance to radical politics in his essay collection *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2007), wherein he also often discusses Le Guin with some sporadic comments on *Always Coming Home*. Throughout this essay, utopia is considered within the generical tradition and context suggested by Jameson and complemented with some more cursory definitions from *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* and Le Guin’s own texts. This reading also leans on some of Terry Eagleton’s early works about the relationship between literature, criticism, and ideology, as well as employing writers who are part of political rather than literary traditions, from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to Thomas Hobbes. Perhaps this indulgence is justifiable given how inextricable utopian politics are or should be from utopian aesthetics.
On *Always Coming Home*

*Always Coming Home* is characterised by non-linear storytelling and narrative layering that disrupts the sense of utopia’s essentialist character and its proximity to late industrial capitalism. The novel consists of a collection of texts describing a fictional people, the Kesh, who “might be going to have lived a long, long time from now in Northern California” (Le Guin, *Always* ix), in an area called the Valley. This places them far away in time and certainty – the contorted tense indicating that their existence is both in future and the past, insofar as the “might” grants their existence any leeway at all – as well as in culture. Geographically, however, they are close, likely with the intent to produce an effect of both familiarity and strangeness whereby the Kesh and the imagined future they represent sit just out of reach of realistic prediction yet remain, as it were, too close for comfort. Furthermore, it is implied that the Kesh texts have been compiled by a fictional editor whose commentary forms an additional narrative frame and another layer of distance, this time ideological, between the future and the present. This editor voice explains that the first half of the novel consists of the Kesh people’s “voices speaking for themselves in stories and life-stories, plays, poems, and songs” (ix) and the second half, “The Back of the Book”, contains the editor’s own commentary on Kesh society. Thus, anyone attempting to turn the Kesh into a mere political tool must sift through several layers of resisting narrative structures.

Today, it may be tempting to count the futuristic setting of *Always Coming Home* to the post-apocalyptic genre, which has grown considerably in the early 2000s. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to call it simply post-industrial or post-capitalist, however, since the details about the break of industrial capitalism or whatever followed it from the emergence of the Kesh are left obscure, even omitted as irrelevant, along with the considerable wastelands so commonly left behind in the more popular iterations of post-apocalypse. Still, despite a thriving flora and fauna, Earth in *Always Coming Home* has become “almost depleted of many of the fossil fuels and other materials from which the Industrial Age made itself” (Le Guin, *Always* 379-380), rendering the rampant production of commodities that is often linked to the idea of advanced civilisation physically impossible. Traces remain, instead, of the impulses that supposedly brought humanity so close to ruin; these lingering dystopian tendencies appear like dark inversions of the “utopian impulse” that Jameson (xiv and throughout)
identifies as a human drive and need for utopian art and politics throughout history, and they manifest in the imperialistic Dayao people who, led by a sovereign ruler called the Condor, threaten the Kesh way of life through military conquest. There is, in other words, at least some limited overlap between the novel’s setting and the dystopian return to a state of war over scarce resources common to post-apocalypse.

The focus of the novel is not conflict as such, though, but tentative exploration of post-capitalist social dynamics. In its entry on Le Guin, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* counts *Always Coming Home* to her middle-period works, which it claims are marked by a deliberate movement towards utopianism but also an increasing reluctance to make any definitive political or ethical statements, noting that the novel “consciously demands a more contemplative kind of attention than … most sf” (704). In many ways, *Always Coming Home* does read more like a rumination than a programme or critique, raising more questions than answers about how to live in such a way that the implied catastrophe which gives rise to the Kesh and Dayao societies never occurs – unless, perhaps, it *ought* to occur in order to provide a foundation for utopia. The novel turns its own texture into an ideological stand, in that it attempts to resist the easily consumed prose and structures that characterise commodified genre fiction, notably science fiction and fantasy, in late capitalism. Furthermore, the novel is highly aware of its own strategy of defamiliarisation and that by resisting the ideological pressures on its own production, it can make a case for the possibility of radicalism through imagination. The Kesh have their own cultural strategy of reversal, for instance: by certain Kesh ritual groups, “language was deliberately dislocated for subversive effect (as in surrealist poetry and imagery)” (Le Guin, *Always* 42). This reversal strategy is present on several layers of the novel itself – from the stylistic and thematic to the narrative and structural – prompting a reconsideration of the values central to liberal capitalist democracies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Like surrealism, however, this strategy – it might be described as anarcho-Taoist literary praxis – produces rather obscure conclusions as far as political commitments are concerned, thus setting a boundary for the novel’s critique which sticks to questions of aesthetics and philosophy; a critique of capitalism’s ugliness and moral bankruptcy rather than of the economic and political details of its decline and fall.
The novel’s anti-capitalist stand also contributes to the sense that utopia is hopelessly inaccessible to people living in the late-twentieth, early-twenty-first centuries if the industrial excesses of capitalism continue; a reminder that utopia is as much a no-place as it is a good-place. If it is as Eagleton claims in one of his early attempts to schematise literature’s relationship to ideology, “that every text intimates by its very conventions the way it is to be consumed, encodes within itself its own ideology of how, by whom and for whom it was produced” (Criticism 48), then Always Coming Home brings to the table a mostly aesthetic and ethical denunciation of overproduction and overconsumption by and for those modern readers who see the unsustainability of capitalism but who are perhaps reluctant to engage in direct political action to resist it. Arguably, this weakens the novel’s political relevance by providing a comfortable philosophical surrogate for radical anti-capitalism; if utopia is not materially attainable, then it seems to remain the stuff of dreams.

Utopia, Dystopia, and Marxist Criticism
One of the most prominent features of Kesh society is its utopian character, then, but the word utopia is fraught with ambiguity. The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction notes in its entry on utopia that when the term “was coined by Thomas More … he derived the word from ‘outopia’ (no place) rather than ‘eutopia’ (good place), although modern usage generally implies the latter” (1260). With the Kesh, both senses of the word are relevant, since the good-place, the hypothetical enclave wherein the Kesh can emerge, is the Earth depleted of resources and freed from the yoke of unbridled industrialism. In other words, this enclave is definitionally inaccessible to readers under capitalism who themselves, though participation in this mode of (over-)production and consumption, seal the Kesh utopia off into a no-place. The novel proposes that only upon its own ultimate negation could industrial capitalism be succeeded by a mode of production and subsistence akin to that of the Kesh. Perhaps, then, the “low birth rate, short life expectancy, high incidence of crippling disease [of the Kesh]—had a reverse side also” (Le Guin, Always 380) in that it has allowed a society to emerge free from many of the ills that plague industrial capitalism. This intermingling of the utopian with what approaches the at least implicitly dystopian – the utopian as achieved only through the
destruction of all things familiar, even of human biological parameters – is characteristic of the novel and one of its great ambiguities.

Not just implicit but overt dystopian elements also figure in *Always Coming Home*, and these are primarily represented through the Dayao people, whose campaign and wars of conquest threaten the stability of the Kesh. Dayao society thrives on the subjugation of the masses by a small ruling elite, the Condor and his Sons; it is strictly regimented to this end and individuals are subordinated to the idea of society itself as a monolithic construct, despite its deep social fissures. These are traits that *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* links to dystopias in its entry on the genre. Also, unlike utopia, which is a relatively autonomous genre and whose forms vary greatly, dystopias tend to be more directly shaped by the anxieties of the industrial era and the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. *The Encyclopedia* further states that dystopias usually entail or constitute “urgent propaganda for a change in direction”, primarily framed within the “political polarization of capitalism and socialism” (360). In other words, while utopias can afford to be ruminative and to stay mostly within the realm of the aesthetic and philosophical, political readings are closer at hand when it comes to dystopias, which are generally perceived to argue that what they propose or identify as problematic should be overcome or at least confronted.

Dystopia is a more recent genre than utopia, however, and has perhaps not had time to detach from its historical context to the same extent. Nor is it the case that utopian literature is completely apolitical; as Jameson notes, “Utopia has always been a political issue” (xi), so it is as good as impossible to conceive of a reading of utopia that does not have at least political implications. Jameson attempts to locate the historical basis for utopian writing and its historical ebb and flow at different moments in the class struggle, prompting the question whether utopian literature is radical or reactionary. He proposes that utopianism in general might be conceived of as “an imaginary enclave within real social space” (15), that is, a kind of retreat to values of stability and abstract hopefulness. From a Marxist point of view, then, these utopian enclaves often seem to harbour at least as many reactionary sentiments as radical visions, if they develop out of transitional epochs in history to evade the actual political struggle in favour of seemingly impossible yearnings for a purely intellectual turn of society to the better. *Always Coming Home* sometimes seems to express reactionary sentiments akin to these,
emphasising no-placeness, not as the primary characteristic of utopianism, but as a feature hopelessly interlocked with utopia’s good-placeness.

Marxists have a long history of scepticism towards utopian thinking. Engels speaks of even the most sophisticated utopian thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – precursors to his and Marx’ supposedly scientific view of historical development – as mere dreamers. To these utopians, Engels claims, “the bourgeois world … finds its way to the dust-hole quite as readily as feudalism and all the earlier stages of society. If pure reason and justice have not, hitherto, ruled the world, this has been the case only because men have not rightly understood them” (Socialism 42). In other words, a common, perhaps defining, strand of utopian thinking is to suggest that the ills of society are accidental; a result of mistaken thinking that can be remedied by revising the ideas which have led historical development into a blind alley.

So although Always Coming Home identifies and skilfully dissects many of the destructive elements of capitalist society, its critique – like any critique – is limited by its own ideological slant: the anarcho-Taoist predisposition to subvert authority for its own sake coupled with the notion that forms of authority arise again, cyclically, out of their own absence, amounts to a devaluing of political organisation in favour of aesthetic and philosophical condemnations. That is not to say the novel is not aware of these limitations; through one of the Kesh characters it claims to be “a mere dream dreamed in a bad time … an Up Yours” (Le Guin, Always 316) more than a political rallying cry. While aesthetically and philosophically cathartic, then, Always Coming Home is a step away from the more overtly political – but still utopian – narrative in, for instance, The Dispossessed. The next section explores elements in the novel that appear radical, but whose political force is softened by their ruminative framing.

**Utopian and Dystopian Elements in Always Coming Home**

The anarcho-Taoist influences on Always Coming Home are visible in its use of dynamic binary pairings in conjunction with a critique of institutionalised hierarchies. For instance, one of the oldest and most visceral experiences underlying the yin and yang symbolism of the Tao might be that of sexual difference, which is as crucial to the integrity of Kesh culture as it is to the Dayao. While there no significant questioning goes on in the novel of the idea that ideological gender categories arise universally,
perhaps from a division of labour based on sex differences, the oppression of one category by another is a structure relegated to the dystopian, masculine-coded Dayao whereas the absence of oppression among the Kesh can be read as a symptom of utopia’s necessary statelessness. The Marxist perspective clarifies this relationship by highlighting how the state uniquely enables and reinforces the systemic exploitation of the lower classes’ productive and reproductive labour by the ruling classes. Additionally, the element of production, both material and ideological, can be understood to stand in a mutually reinforcing relationship with the general structure of the Kesh and Dayao societies.

Gender Categories and Gender Oppression

A feminist reading of Always Coming Home might be dissatisfied to find that one of the great ambiguities in the novel is the presence and content of ideological gender categories, which remain almost stereotypical among the otherwise utopian Kesh. Indeed, the categories of woman and man are a crucial, unquestioned part of Kesh ritual life that seems to help them maintain their community. Yet the novel presents the institutionalised oppression of one gender category at the hands of another within the dystopian Dayao society both as in itself repugnant and as part of a larger self-destructive ideology wherein the feminine connotes the subhuman. In short, binary gender categories in Always Coming Home constitute a perhaps ambiguous but apparently inevitable aspect of utopian life, whereas gender oppression is a specifically dystopian feature that undermines and ultimately negates itself.

The development of Le Guin’s works over time undoubtedly owes a great deal to feminist influence. As Jameson observes, “her deployment of the paradigm of the struggle between Good and Evil becomes socialized and historicized by way of feminism” (67), which in Always Coming Home allows her to analyse and problematise the abstraction of evil in the more concrete terms of the dystopian, patriarchal, and imperialistic as a single unit or aspect of the yin-yang binary pair. On its own, however, feminism cannot easily explain the link between gender oppression and state power, and this may largely be due to its difficulties in finding an appropriate definition of womanhood in the first place. This is reinforced by Iris Marion Young’s description of the problems inherent in many attempts to form a feminist theory that remains
adequately inclusive without losing its explanatory power: “In large part feminist discourse about gender was motivated by the desire to establish a countertheory to Marxism, to develop a feminist theory that would conceive sex or gender as a category with as much theoretical weight as class. This desire employs a totalizing impulse” (16), in other words, an impulse to find a basis for social inequality that is not gender blind that unfortunately squeezes a range of people in different circumstances into the same homogenising category of woman.

Were one to read Always Coming Home to find justification for the “totalizing impulse” described above, one would encounter similar complications, as the novel paints several vastly different pictures of what womanhood involves, or of what values cluster around the idea of womanhood and the yin aspect. Stone Telling, the half-Kesh, half-Dayao narrator of the longest story in the novel’s collection, learns this the hard way when she leaves her Kesh village to go with her father to live with the Dayao and finds that he begins to look at her not as a daughter but “as a woman among the other women, a squawking hen among the poultry”, making her think “more than I had ever thought before, about how to be a human being” (Le Guin, Always 195). It is telling that her mind goes to humanity first and womanhood second, since for her there is no political difference at play; being a woman is simply a way or mode in which to be human, with some ritual and perhaps reproductive implications, whereas for the Dayao it means living without dignity or privilege, being “kept in but left out” (200); Dayao womanhood is of great political relevance. Furthermore, Dayao women are of “two kinds, Condor’s daughters and hontik, … as different as sheep and goats”, with the former enjoying the privilege of “giving orders” to the latter (197). Stone Telling finds the hontik more sympathetic, “more like Valley women” (198), while to the Dayao they are less like human and more like a mixed bag of otherness together with “foreigners and animals” (193). In Kesh society, meanwhile, the politics of womanhood mostly pertains to questions of lineage and inheritance. Among the Kesh, “descent was through the mother” (424) which “on the mother’s side … ensured a double bond; on the father’s side it could easily turn into a double bind” (425) since it strips away the ideologically enforced notion of men as heads but not keepers of the household. By sticking to a model of heredity that does not entail hierarchical monogamous coupling, the Kesh have retained or returned to the mother right, the abolition of which Engels
describes as “the world-historic defeat of the female sex” and the beginning of class stratification (Origin 67, original italics). Without resorting to an essentialist view of womanhood as directly linked to sexual function and capacity, then, it is difficult to get a grip of ideological womanhood within just this one piece of fiction, let alone the world at large.

If no feminist countertheory to class analysis has emerged, this is probably due to a mistaken equation of gender and class at the level of function and abstraction. Whereas class, in the Marxist sense, indicates someone’s material relation to the means of production rather than their ideological status or their self-chosen or imposed identity, gender is primarily an ideological category. It is true that sexual reproductive function is a highly material aspect of existence, as opposed to gender categories which have now repeatedly been described as ideological, but the most relevant question seems to be: why should there be a binary division among the utopian Kesh at all? They are said, albeit usually in passing, to have categories for woman-living men and man-living women (Le Guin, Always 426), so the categories are not absolute (although it is unclear if these terms refer only to people in same-sex relationships, or people taking on a different gender role than the one assigned to them, or both – or indeed if the Kesh would perceive any difference between those interpretations). It seems unsatisfactory to suppose that the novel’s proposed reason for the gender divide is something so deterministic as a biological predisposition, though; too much at odds with the patterns of fluidity and individual freedom at work in Always Coming Home, let alone utopia. Such a reading would seem to entail that the structures that upholds the binary distinction between women and men in the first place are maintained in the novel, even though the bourgeois overvaluing of the man is rejected. In effect, no structural change would be taking place; only a discursive bait-and-switch within an already established ideological matrix influenced by the very industrial capitalist values the novel attempts to question.

From a Marxist point of view, the difference between how the Kesh and the Dayao treat gender is a symptom of a more fundamental difference, namely the presence of state power. Indeed, the novel can be shown to target the institutionalised asymmetry of power in one gender’s oppression of another, rather than the gender differences themselves.
The Role of State Power

By assigning gender categories to the ideological structure of both Kesh and Dayao society while limiting gender oppression only to the latter, the novel suggests that sex differences between people give rise universally to a binary set of ideological gender categories. This is unsurprising given its reliance on the yin-yang as an artistic pattern. The oppression of one gender category at the hands of another, however, is condemned and limited to certain social formations, specifically to state society. Gender oppression is thus not presented as the cause of the Dayao dystopia but a symptom of it; what fundamentally sets the Kesh apart from the Dayao is the role of state power and hierarchical class division.

Marxist theory agrees that the root of many systemic forms of oppression, such as sexism, is in the formation of state power and the enforced stratification of people into classes, some of which are exploited and others which exploit them. Arguments against the state therefore tend to be ethically grounded and focus on the power abuse inherent in it. The state is “a power that arose from society but places itself above it and alienates itself more and more from it.... It consists of special bodies of armed men having prisons, etc., at their command” (Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Todd Chretien 45), whereby the state maintains, through the threat of violence, an order which benefits a minority at the expense of the majority. Put differently, the state is that institution which “claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (Max Weber 55, original italics), enabling and encouraging an overrelance on violence to solve its problems and propagate its ideology.

The Dayao people’s head of state, the Condor, personifies the narrative of the state arising from society but placing itself above it and becoming cut off from it. The Condor himself is never seen in the flesh by the masses; during his only brief appearance in the story he is encapsulated in a ritual garb that Stone Telling interprets as a shell setting him apart from the world: he is “only casings and surfaces.... To be The Condor is to be outside” (Le Guin, *Always* 351). The state, embodied by the Condor, is portrayed as specific interests disguised as disinterested machinery. Rather than present himself as a person who is part of a specific sector of society with specific interests, the Condor only makes appearances in the assumed role of impartial leader, who is paradoxically related to his people in virtue of his distance from them. This ritualised
behaviour is part of the Dayao’s ideological hegemony, much like the ritualised
behaviour of Dayao women “[hiding] their eyes and [wailing] when the Great One
flies” (193), the Great One being the condor bird which, rather than representing – or
precisely because it does represent – majesty, comes to symbolise the detachment of the
Dayao rulers from their people. Certainly, the Kesh also have their rituals, but among
them the rituals are known to be such, whereas the Dayao naturalise their ideology:
“The Dayao way was without clowns or clowning, without reversal or turning, straight,
single, terrible” (201). The Condor, through his own closedness, thus highlights the
utopian quality of openness – a quality that the state must oppose in its own interest
because the tools of the state are mystification and fear.

The Dayao state is practically a planned economy, albeit an inefficient, quasi-
industrial one, upheld precisely by the threat of state violence and the hegemony of fear.
A small ruling class decide the details and extent of production and military conquests,
at the whim of the Condor’s final say. Here the novel displays a dual criticism of
industrial capitalism on the one hand, which grotesquely exploits the labour power of
the masses, but also of Marxism and purportedly socialist systems on the other, since
these are implied to involve or at least lead to the kind of totalitarian sovereignty that
the Condor embodies. The more resources are poured into the Dayao war machine, the
more of a toll it takes on the Dayao people, whose own urban centres cannot sustain
them. Since the Dayao god “had ordered The Condor to make the City in lava beds to
be safe from enemies … they had to bring food in from places where food was” (Le
Guin, *Always* 351). Thus, the Dayao must always conquer new lands and peoples to
maintain their hierarchical social structure, and to this end the lower classes who “used
to grow crops, or herd, or hunt, were employed in the great labors of making the
Weapons and supplying them with fuel. Grain that animals and humans would have
eaten was eaten by the machines” (352). This vicious and redundant cycle is not a
capitalist one, to be sure, which draws attention to the real object of the novel’s
criticism: not the capitalist mode of production as such, nor the ideologies emergent
from it, but rather the systemic imposition of the will of the few on the lives of the
many, epitomised by the state.

For in practice, of course, the Condor and the state he represents are neither
disinterested nor infallible, but susceptible to a great deal of corruption, which
demonstrates another structural weakness of a hierarchical social system, be it capitalist or socialist or otherwise. Advisors “putting new plans in [the Condor’s] head” (Le Guin, *Always* 342) leads to an intensification of their war of conquest and hastens the downfall of their civilisation as well as amplifies the misery of the masses. Since the state is not impartial, but made up of people from the ruling class, it rules in the favour of this class, or at least some influential section of it, but it also gives rise to internal conflicts and alliances. The novel effectively proposes that the more government hinges on the whims and gullibility of a single individual, the more tyrannical and dystopian the state is likely to appear, especially to a readership from a liberal democracy in the West.

It seems fair, then, to assume that the state along with institutionalised oppression and excesses constitute the dystopian rub in *Always Coming Home* rather than any specific mode of production or subsistence. According to Jameson, it is the monopolisation and systematisation of violence that Le Guin’s anti-capitalist novels generally oppose, rather than the use of violence as such (275). This echoes what was said in the previous section: that the institutionalisation of gender oppression, with its implication of violence, rather than gender differences as such, is what the novel attempts to excise from the utopian future. The state thus emerges as the defining feature determining whether gender differences will simply be a mode in which to be human, as with the Kesh, or a source of oppression. The juxtaposition of Kesh and Dayao, statelessness and statism, is one of several examples in the novel of a yin-yang pattern wherein the author finds that generally, “[y]ang is control, yin acceptance” (Le Guin, “Ursula K. Le Guin”). Kesh culture, of course, embodies the yin of this binary pair and appreciates imagery and values associated with the yin-aspect. Dayao culture does the same with respect to the yang, and even more prominently, the Dayao state apparatus may be the most complete expressions of the yang aspect in the novel, just as states are viewed as marks of civilisation and progress in bourgeois history. *Always Coming Home* deconstructs the relationship between yang-ness, civilisation, the state, and various forms of oppression by reevaluating the entwined aspects of the yin-yang. Thereby the novel turns the idea of the state as a peaceful or disinterested institution on its head; rather, it is a warmongering and egomaniacal one. To Stone Telling the Dayao women initially seem “crazy” for letting their rulers keep them locked away indoors but
the truth, of course, is that there is a war constantly being fought under the state, which is the reason that “Dayao women lived under siege all their lives” (Le Guin, *Always 195*), preventing their political participation and organisation. That siege comes not from outside Dayao society but from within it. The state of war proposed by Hobbes echoes here, not as something pertaining to (as it were) a stateless state of nature, but to civilisation itself: war, he claims, “consisteth not in battle only … but in a tract of time, wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known” (13). Hence the anxieties, contrary to what Hobbes believed, of any class society, since class struggle is itself a war – a class war – imposed on any oppressed sector of a given society by their rulers.

The Kesh have no internal conflicts on par with those of the Dayao. In fact, the Kesh seem not so much to be defined negatively, as a people lacking a state, but as possessing something that a state would rob them of, whether that is freedom or peace or mindfulness or something else. The looseness of their society’s utopian structure itself takes on the appearance of a presence rather than an absence. Dayao culture, meanwhile, seems to stare itself blind at its own glorious arrangements of ideologically enforced hierarchies, whose crowning glory is the state. One of the Dayao households seems to Stone Telling to be “arranged like a himpi-pen” (Le Guin, *Always 199*) – himpi being a small, rapidly-breeding animals rather like guinea pigs, commonly kept by Kesh households – which clearly conveys the efficiency of using physically enclosed spaces to reinforce the oppression that keeps the state stable and in power. There is a sense, in other words, that things must stay in their proper place among the Dayao whereas the Kesh view “listing and charting … as somewhat childish and—in fixing and ‘locking’ the information—as risky and inappropriate” (44). The point being made through these differences between Kesh and Dayao culture seems to be that a people like the Kesh, who will not even lock information *in*, could hardly lock a woman or slave *up*.

Identifying the state as the fundamental element representing the possibly quite narrow difference between utopia and dystopia is only doing half the work, however. *Always Coming Home* does not shy away from confronting the implication of its own anarcho-Taoist perspective: that within the aspect of utopia sits the kernel of a potential dystopia, and vice versa. In order to evaluate the stability of utopia, it is helpful to look
at how the novel treats the material and ideological production of the Kesh and Dayao; in other words, how and to what extent they perpetuate their respective societies.

**Material and Ideological Production**

While the state, particularly the Dayao state, is the element that fundamentally separates the utopian future from the dystopian in *Always Coming Home*, in dialectical fashion, the state both grows out of and leads to statelessness, much as reaction follows upon action and in turn becomes new action. The anarcho-Taoist patterns of the novel nurture the idea that in the balance of dualities, the threat or promise of one is always present within the other, and this is reflected in the way both Kesh and Dayao produce and reproduce their cultures, materially as well as ideologically. Yet these patterns also constitute one of the novel’s own great ideological ambiguities, in that they seem to yield easily to a pessimistic view of social struggle and of utopia in general, whereby constant cyclical change makes political action irrelevant.

The purpose and scope of material production is starkly different between the two cultures. The Dayao starve their people for the sake of war and conquest while in the Kesh language there is “no word for famine” (Le Guin, *Always* 437). Ideologically speaking – which is not to bring up something floating freely from material reality but something emergent from it – production and reproduction are more complex. By ideology, Marx means the sector of the superstructure that “consists of certain ‘definite forms of social consciousness’ (political, religious, ethical, aesthetic and so on)”, and whose “function … is to legitimise the power of the ruling class in society; in the last analysis, the dominant ideas of a society are the ideas of its ruling class” (Eagleton, *Marxism* 5, quoting Marx, Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*). If ideology serves the ruling class, though, it presumably operates differently in a stateless society where there is no such class.

Ideological reproduction of social structures in *Always Coming Home* is offset by the idea that a seed of the utopian aspect lies in wait within the dystopian and vice versa; ideology is subordinate to the cyclical metaphysics of the Tao. Le Guin seems to find this pattern indispensable to utopian literature since she claims elsewhere that “[e]very utopia since [Thomas More’s] Utopia has also been, clearly or obscurely, actually or possibly, in the author’s or in the readers’ judgment, both a good place and a
bad one. Every eutopia [good-place] contains a dystopia [bad-place], every dystopia contains a eutopia” (“Ursula K. Le Guin”). Examples of this pattern abound in the novel, often in a limited way. Stone Telling is a literal example of the presence of one aspect within the other, being the result of sexual, and later ideological, intermingling between Kesh and Dayao. She is never able to abandon her Valley origins, despite her best efforts: “my heart wanted to be a Condor’s heart. I tried to be a Condor woman. I tried not to think in the language or the ways of the Valley. I wanted to leave the Valley, not to be of it, to be new, living a new way. But I could not do that” (Le Guin, Always 192). Similarly, her Dayao father shows some affinity for Kesh symbolism, which he uses to argue his case when the Kesh locals resist his army’s incursion into the Valley and its appropriation of their infrastructure: “let them [the Dayao army] flow through the Valley, as water through the wheel of the mill” (35). His metaphor displays an oratory skill that the Kesh find more difficult to reject than the crude threat of violence. Thus, the scene can be read generously as evidence that there exists even within a commander of the Dayao army an impulse towards the yin. It can also be read more cynically as the coloniser’s strategy to appropriate the language and conventions of the colonised, the better to rule over them, since he is ultimately not able to separate himself from his origins any more than Stone Telling. Finally, the response of some Kesh people, mostly men, to the Dayao threat is to form a Warrior Lodge, in effect a minuscule army to meet the violence with more violence, thereby causing the dystopian element to erupt from within utopia. Notably, though, for all the eagerness of the Kesh men and boys to pick up weapons and fight the Dayao, which comes across as rather endearing despite the gravity of the situation (another short story in Always Coming Home, “A War with the Pig People” [129-134], describes how the Kesh view and perform war, and readers knowledgeable about conquest on a massive scale will probably find that this closely regulated game with its relatively few casualties would stand no chance against the Dayao war machine), the idea of forming a Dayao-like state does not seem to ever be on the table, again suggesting that the state is the most crucial barrier separating utopia from dystopia.

Yet unlike the examples of Stone Telling and her father, the Kesh Warrior Lodge and its links to masculinity and yang-ness is a more fully formed emergence of one aspect within the other. This Lodge claims to recruit “the bravest young men” but
“they took any man who asked to join” (Le Guin, _Always_ 175), inverting the traditional notion that social stability is undermined by women or femininity – the yin aspect. Instead, the novel ties social disruption in Kesh culture to masculinity. While this reversal is refreshing, it somewhat undermines the novel’s anti-state position by locating the source of social collapse within a sector of society – the men or general yang-ness – state notwithstanding; the men plainly seem more susceptible by nature to the allure of battle. Nor is this pattern of men’s superstition and adventurous psychology only used with respect to Kesh instability. The attraction of the Warrior Lodge, inspired by the Dayao warriors yet conceived of as an opposition, mirrors what Stone Telling learns about the origins of the Dayao: they were nomads who, inspired by a vision of their god, followed the first Condor on a journey to the place of their first city state, where their dystopian society began to emerge (377-378). Religious superstition and the promise of glory, then, were the driving forces behind the Dayao’s initial settlement, which, as explained previously, ends up a tyrannical planned economy built on faulty premises with destructive results. Similar promises beckon the Kesh boys and men to step outside their old utopian world into the instabilities of dystopia in a balancing act between fair criticism of patriarchal values and an implication of biological determinism.

Crucial to both Kesh and Dayao ideology is the duality of inside and outside, though like so much else, they value these aspects very differently. To the Kesh, living “outside the world” roughly means living in civilisation or what we would call history (Le Guin, _Always_ 152-153), inverting the typical usage of these terms. The Kesh do not conceive of individuals or communities as isolated cells, but as relations both to each other and to the rest of the world. Thus, they reinforce these connections in their ideological production through rituals and crafts. The Dayao, conversely, produce a society of isolated and single-minded individuals, people who in the words of Stone Telling are forced to learn through severe social conditioning “how to be a warrior” (348), their kinship with others obscured by barriers such as gender and class. Compare this to the Kesh, who seem to customarily leave the door open “for the cat and the wind” (10) when travelling out of town and who live highly individual lives despite sharing – or rather, because they share – both the means of production and the products thereof collectively. The Kesh are all together inside their world in virtue of their
participation in its complex interrelations, and so being inside to them comes to entail what we would call openness.

The openness of the Kesh might explain one of their central cultural concepts, “handmind”, a harmonious relationship between individual, product, and production that blurs the boundaries between them. “Nothing that we do is better than the work of handmind”, claims Stone Telling, adding that “[p]urity is on the edge of evil” (Le Guin, Always 175). This is perhaps the most concise way of distilling Kesh ideology. They do not regard themselves as separate from the world at large any more than they view their products as distinctly separate from producers or the act of production. The Kesh not so much co-create as participate in the world; purity to them is a suspicious abstraction that leads to the kind of evils that the Dayao represent, just like schematising or locking information seems to them potentially dangerous. It should come as no surprise, then, that purity is at the core of Dayao hegemony. Purity is a crucial asset of the state, an ideological tool by which it justifies its own glory; the Condor is the purest reflection of the Dayao god One, and “so the Condor is to be praised and obeyed” whereas “women and foreigners and animals, have nothing to do with One at all” and are barely fit to be counted as human beings (Le Guin, Always 200). The war of conquest and the internal class struggle it fuels are perhaps the opposite of the work of handmind, at least if it is interpreted in light of a Kesh saying: “To conquer is to be careless” (312). In the Dayao’s case, conquest is an attempt to purify the world outside Dayao hegemony by forcibly subjecting it to and subsuming it under rule of One. Thus, the Dayao, unlike the Kesh, separate the work of hand and mind, and increasingly displace themselves from the world even as the ostensible might of their society increases.

Ultimately, the Dayao are so much at war abroad and amongst themselves that they set themselves up for destruction. The closed system self-annihilates, hinting at how industrial capitalism may have collapsed in the future sketched by Always Coming Home. The Dayao war of conquest is described in terms of cannibalism, not of others but of themselves, as conveyed by Stone Telling: “when I came there they were dying. It was themselves they ate” (Le Guin, Always 194). Lewis Henry Morgan observes something similar in his anthropological study Ancient Society, namely that “[t]he dissolution of society bids fair to become the termination of a career of which property is the end and aim; because such a career contains the elements of self-destruction.... the
next higher plane of society.... will be a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient gentes” (qtd. in Engels, *Origin* 219). This analysis pertains not only to the Dayao, but eerily reminds us of the skeletal shoulders of the giant that the Dayao stand on, namely industrial capitalism. The Dayao build their final machines of war using “the Memory of the Exchange” (Le Guin, *Always* 379), an enormous sentient databank presumably constructed at the pinnacle of industrial society, before the old civilisations fell, and the resources that are poured into this project seem to seal the fate of Dayao civilisation also. The act of producing one’s own destruction is a neat example of poetic justice for dystopian civilisation. The appeal of this irony to Marx and Engels is revealed in their observation that capitalism, upon exhausting its capacities to further develop the means of production, gets swept aside: “[w]hat the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers” (84). By tenuously linking the Dayao dystopia to industrial capitalism, *Always Coming Home* suggests this to be the fate of any state society; the ruling ideology will eventually take its excesses too far, and the system will collapse in favour of a new one.

When it comes to utopian society, the inevitability of destruction seems much less appealing, perhaps unthinkable. Yet the Kesh are no more invincible than the Dayao, even though the openness of Kesh ideology appears more sustainable than Dayao imperialism. Paradoxically it is part of the Kesh ideological system that it has let go of any need to be lasting in the first place. The Kesh “owned their Valley very lightly, with easy hands”, like some of the – perhaps idealised – pre-settler Americans who seem to have inspired them (Le Guin, *Always* 4), and will likely vanish without a trace. The next section examines the finitude of utopia in *Always Coming Home*, since this quality seems at odds with what is normally expected from a utopian society, namely that it should be stable and continuous, without any threat to its existence.

**Utopia as a Work of Handmind**

If the Kesh utopia is impermanent and perhaps even carries within it the seed of the Dayao dystopia, two questions might be raised in objection to it. First, is this utopia relevant at all to radical politics, or is its criticism of capitalism only paying lip service? Second, is utopia even to be thought of as a finished product, a good-place, or is it definitionally a no-place, perhaps an aspect of the struggle against state power?
There is some weight to the first objection, that the Kesh utopia is too distant, temporally or conceptually, to be relevant to the political present, or if it is relevant, that it is too costly or otherwise impractical to implement. The emergence of the Kesh in the first place seems to assume, if not demand, the destruction of industrial capitalism along with the civilisation and the ideologies of consumption and accumulation that it has produced. This destruction and the associated exhaustion of Earth’s resources that the novel describes are also what keeps the volatile growth of the Dayao in check. The price for such a balance is very high. Yet Jameson concludes the first half of his essay collection on utopia by saying that, although the political strength of utopia has always waxed and waned historically,

\[t\]he very political weakness of Utopia in previous generations – namely that it furnished nothing like an account of agency, nor did it have a coherent historical and practical-political picture of transition – now becomes a strength in a situation in which neither of these problems seems currently to offer candidates for a solution. (232)

Jameson in other words seems to say that utopia has outlasted the relevance of political programmes for social change in postmodernity, when no strong revolutionary alternative remains on the left. Furthermore, he says this even though he claims that the strength of utopia lies in “forcing us to think the break [with the present] itself, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would be like after the break” (232), which is largely the opposite of what *Always Coming Home* does in its painstakingly crafted sketch of the future itself, at the expense of detailing how that future comes to be in the first place. The decade since Jameson’s collection was published has been eventful, however, and perhaps utopia is now teetering on the brink of irrelevance again as radical movements protesting capitalism begin to resurface.

Yet if utopia does have a place in radical politics its role is surely to supply precisely the vision of the future, not as an abstraction but in the concrete, albeit speculative terms that only art can really provide. Marxism, after all, has no specific blueprint for the future; it does not claim to know the concretes and specifics of post-capitalism since “[o]nce such [post-capitalist] people appear, they will not care a damn about what we today think they should do. They will establish their own practice and their own public opinion, conforming therewith, on the practice of each individual and that will be the end of it”, as Engels so emphatically puts it (*Origin* 100). *Always Coming Home* might be accused of glossing over the emergence of the Kesh, but it
might also be viewed as doing precisely what Engels is endorsing, namely to be disregarding our impoverished notions of what utopia is or can be. Perhaps a preoccupation with the novel’s content at the expense of its form is a mistake on par with what a too-orthodox Marxist reading might accuse the novel of, namely idealism. Academic writing on Le Guin’s works in the 1970s “gave me [Le Guin] the impression that I have written about nothing but ideas…. as if the books existed through and for their ideas…. as if one should discuss the ideas expressed by St. Paul’s Cathedral without ever observing what the walls are built of” (Le Guin, “A Response” 44). Le Guin’s concern that the content of her own texts is neglected in favour of a symbolic interpretation of that content seems relevant given the great lengths the novel goes to in order to portray precisely concrete experience rather than abstract idealism.

In fact, the layered narrative structure of *Always Coming Home* is such that much of its content is deliberately distorted. The Kesh have certain pieces of literature and ritual “which they never wrote down or recorded in any way…. To reproduce such a text would be, in their view, most inappropriate, not because it was sacrosanct but because its oral/occasional/communal character was essential” (Le Guin, *Always* 503). Extending this to the utopian question suggests that an inevitable corruption of the utopian idea occurs in the very attempt to represent or pin down the utopian quality, just as any anthropological research necessarily conveys a reductive view of its object. This idea is a concrete expression of a general observation made by Eagleton that, in fact, “the ‘truth’ of the text is not an essence but a practice – the practice of its relation to ideology” (*Criticism* 98). Given that the cathedral walls of *Always Coming Home* are made partly of anthropological pastiche, the novel seems to be conscious of its own paradoxical reluctance to define utopia beyond statelessness; insofar as the Kesh are utopian, they must be understood in their own terms, to which anyone outside the utopian enclave has limited, imperfect access. Perhaps the concept of handmind discussed in the previous section is thus to be read as a key to the definition (or non-definition) of utopia proposed in *Always Coming Home*; as steady process of becoming that can only be imperfectly communicated in terms of a product.

The second objection is a reaction to how *Always Coming Home* attempts to link the unusualness of the Kesh – their apparently self-chosen spartan lifestyle, their application of automated technology on a need-for basis, their unfamiliarity with
famine, and so on – to their anomalous mode of existence. “Hunting-and-gathering is supposed to be a mode of subsistence incompatible with farming; when people learn to herd and farm they stop hunting and gathering, as a rule. The Kesh disobeyed that rule” (Le Guin, *Always* 437). In doing so, they evade the materialist laws that Marxists maintain are the key to analysing historical development; the Kesh have wriggled out of the trap of predictable history, which has led not only to the horrors of imperialism, colonialism, and unbridled industrialism, but also to the volatile attempts to overthrow capitalism but led to totalitarian bureaucracies. Yet the picture of a people liberated from the constraints of material reality or historical determinism is corrupted somewhat by the implied sexual determinism discussed previously; the Kesh do not float entirely free. Along with genetic predispositions, something like innate goodness or evil also seems to simmer in the portrayal of the Kesh and Dayao cultures. Le Guin might say that evil, insofar as it is concrete enough to speak of, is inevitable and necessary in the way that sex is; evil “appears in the fairy tale not as something diametrically opposed to good, but as inextricably involved with it, as in the yang-yin symbol” (“The Child” 62). It is not, then, a problem to solve but the process of “all the pain and suffering and waste and loss and injustice we will meet all our lives long … and admit, and live with, in order to live human lives at all” (65-66), in other words, a reality that must be accepted in order to then be constructively managed. Insofar as the Kesh utopia can reach into modern-day capitalism, it does so only in terms of its good-placeness, the aesthetic and philosophical relief that the utopian enclave provides from excessive production and consumption, while remaining politically in the no-place.

It must be acknowledged again in closing, though, that reading the political out of *Always Coming Home* in favour of the aesthetic or philosophical – insofar as these aspects are separable at all – is not an unprompted move. The novel itself describes the utopian future it portrays as “a mere dream dreamed in a bad time” (Le Guin, *Always* 316), thereby attempting to self-impose a restriction on its own critique of capitalism. In a cynical interpretation, the novel tries to weasel out of a commitment to concrete political struggle. More generously it might be said to know the limitations of its medium and choose deliberately to focus on questions of aesthetics and philosophy first, leaving political activism to the activists. Also, the power of dreams is significant in Le Guin’s works, at least on an aesthetic level. Jameson makes this point in relation to her
1971 novel *The Lathe of Heaven*, where the protagonist’s dreams literally shape the world (Jameson 293). These real dreams demonstrate that utopia itself cannot be dreamt, “yet in the very process of exploring the contradictions of that production, the narrative gets written, and ‘Utopia’ is ‘produced’ in the very movement by which we are shown that an ‘achieved’ Utopia … is a contradiction in terms” (294). This, too, speaks against utopia as a finished place or product and in keeping with the structure and themes of *Always Coming Home*, perhaps utopia is better described as a production process, whose distance from the here and now is an essential part of its definition, just like the impermanent, oral quality of certain Kesh texts is regarded by them as an essential part of their character. If so, it is not inconceivable that the greatest gift the Kesh can give is that notion of handmind, encouraging a redefinition of the object to include in its definition the constant process of becoming – of utopia as always becoming home.

**Conclusion**

The anarcho-Taoist influences on *Always Coming Home* single out state power as the fundamental element separating utopia from dystopia, but concomitantly entail a reluctance to make any definitive statements about how utopia comes about, how it is made to last, or even what it more precisely is. In fact, the yin-yang juxtaposition of Kesh and Dayao society suggests that utopia arises cyclically out of dystopia and vice versa, independently of organised social struggles. This suggests that the novel favours an aesthetic and philosophical meditation on the dynamics of utopian and dystopian development rather than any political commitment to radical anti-capitalism. Therefore, *Always Coming Home* might be accused of political irrelevance. It pre-empts this criticism, although it does not challenge it, by referring to its own utopia as a mere dream in a bad time. Nonetheless, the ideology of the stateless Kesh differs starkly from that of the hierarchical Dayao, the open system of the former producing people who are trusting and respectful of their own work and their surroundings, whereas the closed system of the latter produces anxiety and class war. Both systems are ultimately finite and fated vanish without a trace owing to their light and gentle living, but the passing on of the gift of handmind can be interpreted as an exercise in reevaluating the common
definition of utopia, emphasising no-placeness – utopia as a steady process of becoming – over good-placeness – utopia as a definitive future product.
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