

Forever the Day Before

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Ursula Le Guin was already 45 when her well-known anarchist text *The Dispossessed* was published in 1974. Today, she’s almost a decade older than the unlikely shero of Laia Odo, the feisty matron who wrote the core theoretical texts that shape the anarchist society described in the “ambiguous utopia” of the novel. The short story as prequel called “The Day Before the Revolution” discusses Odo in her later years, preparing to die before her dream gets realized.

Respect for one’s elders is not central to the cultural anarchy many of us got reared on. For too many, age in years equals authority instead of wisdom, and an anarchism of pure impulse might unduly ignore the experience extended to us by our elders in the radical community. Many of our elders are veterans of the failed anarchist revolutions of the twentieth century. Some have already passed away, and those remaining with us will not live forever, will likely die before they see a successful anarchist revolution. What does it feel like to live before the revolution? Will we always live before the revolution? What might Odo, Le Guin, and our other activist elders teach us about living forever on the eve of the revolution?

In the tithe after the revolution, in *The Dispossessed*, the dream is realized deliberately and delicately and remains so distant that it must reside on a different planet. And the novel’s protagonist, a scientist of intergalactic renown, rebels against the cooperative utopia by traveling by spaceship to the capitalist mother planet. While it’s strange and beautiful to see a society practice cooperation as the norm, we’re more familiar with the life of the protagonists in the prequel, people for whom “all the friends” are “in all the jails.”

In both “The Day Before” and *The Dispossessed*, anarchists recognize the price of their path—dealing with prisons and repression before the revolution and exile on a desolate planet to harvest the fruits of the revolution. Le Guin’s fictional anarchisms intentionally reveal flaws and imperfections, and while clearly anarchist societies of the communal, left-wing variety, they nonetheless portray a passionate asceticism, a conservative mood of selfless austerity.

Odo owns nothing but her body. Her possessions are few, and her only treasures are her ideas; these, of course, she gives away for free. The primary aphorism of anarchist wisdom in “The Day Before” is a line about taking personal responsibility that could easily have been spouted by one of today’s cultural conservatives.

But both Odo and the scientist Shevek in *The Dispossessed* are “bad anarchists” and benefactors of individual notoriety, even fame. When Laia Odo utters a politically incorrect term, she mocks herself: “why in the hell did she have to be a good Odonian.”

“The Day Before the Revolution” causes me to crave respect for our anarchist elders, for the Odo among us. “The Day Before the Revolution” reminds me how many revolutionaries die before the revolution. But because history has taught us over and over again the horrors of what happens “after the Revolution,” this day before—which is our day before—ultimately suggests that it is always the day before any revolution that is worth what we are fighting for.

Is it better to grow old living and yearning for an unrealized ideal you believe in, than to always settle for what is? Might we learn from the allegedly successful so-called revolutions of the last century that sometimes the time

before the revolution has its advantages? How might we square a compassionate patience with ourselves to our impatience with a dispassionate society?

To relish wanting and waiting for revolution is not to accept or prolong the injustices of the present order, but rather, to remind ourselves that the hunger of a noble yearning often breeds more cooperative behavior than the satiety of a bloody victory does. Before the revolution, we are a human fraternity of equals, each striving for something better. After the revolution as played out in history, we are appointed to positions of power to protect and preserve the status quo. Appetite and anticipation season the palate for satiation. "The Day Before The Revolution" describes the hunger of youth, the hunger of old age, the hunger of the ages and the age, thirsty as we must be, like Odo and Le Guin, for peace and freedom and participatory justice.

In her introduction to "The Day Before The Revolution," Le Guin does not describe anarchism as a perfect or superior political philosophy, only as the most "idealistic" and most "interesting." Perhaps "winning" revolutions would not be as interesting as wanting freedoms, of keeping our ideals intact without turning our ideals—even anarchism—into mere idols.

Thinking of Laia Odo and Ursula K. Le Guin in our day, at the dawn of yet another decade, the day after many past revolutions and the day before many future ones, let's be like the anarchists of these stories, always seeking and questioning, never owning much more than our ideals and practicing them the day before, the day after, and most of all, today.

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