

Ursula K. Le Guin's *Lathe of Heaven*

A Post-Neoliberal Parable?

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"To objectivise life means to destroy it."

– Ana Esther Cecune, *Development Dialogue*, January 2009.

The Marxist David Harvey, who has made an academic career out of tracking neoliberal thought from the bungled Chilean coup in 1973 to present, achieved near-notoriety in the fall of 2008, as did a lot of other radicals who found themselves suddenly in demand on lecture circuits. With derivative market/swaps surfacing like so much bilge at a gated resort, many of us were intellectually unprepared for the sweep and alarm of the panic. But Harvey's analysis was a soothing tonic. Invariably, though, as Harvey recalled (in December 2008), those discussions came down to neoliberalism and its predicted end. And, inevitably, he'd reply: "Well, it depends on what you mean by neoliberalism."

Those discussions continued, of course, heated and passionate, but ever less about the predicted collapse, and ever more about coping in this terrifying new post-neoliberal unreality. Since 2008, though, there has been a much deeper understanding, thanks to Harvey, about the meaning of neoliberalism and its murky agenda: when it began, how it globalized, and its many mini-bursts, configurations, stalls, and re-emergence as an evasive post-neoliberal phenomenon. But, as Harvey insists, we need to stay focused and consider, always, that what's been going on from its beginnings in the post-fascist World War II era is the slow relentless consolidation of class power and wealth. Since the most recent consolidation in 2008, however, we've been forced to travel new terrain, further along an ahistorical continuum to a realm of fantasy and paradoxes. And it is to such a realm that I'd like to take my discussion of Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*, written when all of this talk of neoliberalism was just a pipedream. Actually, the comparison is not so farfetched if one considers that both are works about unreality, abnegation, and the perils of misguided ambitions. So we should congratulate Le Guin who, like Harvey, has been so prescient, whether she realizes it or not. This review is in praise of that vision.

THE PARADOX OF NEOLIBERALISM

Le Guin began writing *Lathe of Heaven* in the late 1960s (it was published in 1971), setting it in the latter half of the twentieth century, with 1984 (political repression), 1998 (The Crash, the Carcinogenic Plagues), and the post-1998 dreamscape world as key moments. It is this dreamscape, though, that I equate with our own post-neoliberal utopia—a global consumerist society built upon whim, narcissism, and convenience. The idea was fascinating enough to intrigue PBS, known for its intellectual verve back in 1979, to make a television adaptation, which Le Guin co-produced. Another version followed in 2002, though it was not as popular.

The landscape in the novel is post-apocalyptic, and after a series of wars, economic crashes, famines, plagues, and severe environmental problems through the 1980s and 1990s, bad enough to alter weather patterns, there just

isn't much left of the planet except for Portland, Oregon, around which the novel unpacks amid an endless deluge of acidic rain. It is in such a world that Le Guin places the main character George Orr, who has a special talent for dreams that alter reality, and William Haber, a psychologist, his antagonist, who seeks to cure him of his ability to dream, and in the process to acquire that ability, with the help of his dream augmentor, to rid society of its ills. It is a mighty task that only someone of Haber's grand liberal—should I dare say neo?—intellect can undertake.

The year 1998 in *Lathe of Heaven* marks the beginning of the end of normal life, and a descent into fantasy and rupture, particularly as Haber increasingly fiddles with the outcomes of Orr's effective dreams. This fantasy and rupture is not unlike the neoliberal's unreal landscape of denial, creating the conditions for political repression and climate-change acceleration. In Haber's world, dreams alter historical continuity—and deny reality. But this retreat from the realities of overpopulation, economic inequities, and environmental degradation, found in both the neoliberal agenda and Haber's remedy, open another door only to encounter a completely new set of problems.

Haber convinces Orr that he is motivated by a deep desire to improve society, but like the neoliberal, it is delusional. And like a good neoliberal, he rationalizes it. It's what makes us human, he boasts, and is so woven into our DNA and consciousness that we can't act otherwise. (Much like the neoliberal paradigm that exists today, there's always a price to pay for these good intentions.) It's utopian, too, in that this ideal world is never fully realized, nor is that in any way desirable. The illusion of attainability is what's important.

In 1998, the French theorist Pierre Bourdieu made the same fascinating connection between neoliberal ambitions and a utopian construct, which he, too, posited as delusional. What if, he asked, "in reality, this economic order, while promising utopia, is really just a political problem? One that, with the aid of the economic theory that it proclaims, succeeds in conceiving of itself as the scientific description of reality?"

This engine of progress at the core of neoliberalism dates back to the Enlightenment, of course. It is this engine that provides us with a misguided sense of continuity and autonomy and is the target (and title) of Le Guin's critique: "To let understanding stop at what cannot be understood is a high attainment," she writes in an epigraph, quoting Chuang Tsu. "Those who cannot do it will be destroyed on the lathe of heaven" (30). Haber and his ambitions exemplify that engine of progress that exacerbates the contradictions and disconnections found in neoliberalism. But in *Lathe*, Le Guin naturally takes a more Taoist approach, and so her critique is considerably broadened to include the Enlightenment as well as late twentieth century liberal democracy.

"It's like a fairy tale," she explained to Bill Moyers during a 1980 interview. "Someone is trying to do good, but is defeated by reality, because doing good is not enough." The historical parallels in the book to the unrealities of this late twentieth century world of neoliberalism is what distinguishes Le Guin's novel from other science fiction of the era. It's less pulpy, speculative, even conceptual (i.e., setting off on hyper-linked realities through Haber's augmentor) than a parable on the follies of the Enlightenment. But Le Guin admitted to Moyers that she had no idea what she was writing or where the plot would take her. She described how the characters talked to her—particularly George Orr, how she had to be patient and wait, then listen. All this has a mystical—even Taoist—touch. Most writers are too impatient to listen to their characters, imposing their wills on them, very much as Haber does in *Lathe of Heaven*. Most of us don't even get it, and when we think we have it, as when Moyers pointed out that this listening was a part of being creative, we immediately move toward generalities. LeGuin, though, seemed to have had something else in mind, but Moyers pursued it. [1]

What makes *Lathe* such a potent and unforgiving critique of liberalism (à la 1960s, personified by the pragmatist-capitalist-psychologist Dr. Haber) and, of course, neoliberalism, is that all well-meaning intentions, residuals of the Enlightenment, are self-abnegating. The dystopia is deeply buried within us, in our notions of progress, in humanity. All we need to do is revisit the slave trade of the 1600s to see an obscene barbarity piloted by a divinely-inspired philosophy of good intentions. That it persisted so long was due in part to a cautious liberal democracy. In hindsight, the Enlightenment—the predecessor to neo-liberalism—legitimized and sustained the hegemony, with a stark unreality based on equality and democracy.

Haber, I suspect, is Le Guin's own inchoate version of a John Locke or a more contemporary Milton Friedman, not inherently evil, well-meaning in theory, but banal—as with those affable middle-aged policymakers during WWII whom Hannah Arendt had characterized as officious but deadly bureaucrats. Haber plays the unrelenting optimist to Orr's more reluctant but wiser naysayer. "You speak as if that were some kind of general moral imper-

ative,” Haber says to Orr’s refusal to impose his dreams on society. “But in fact, isn’t that man’s very purpose on earth—to do things, change things, run things, make a better world?” (82)

But attempts to fix a crisis only worsen them, and this is the paradox of the Enlightenment and of neoliberalism. In this unreality, there is little difference between Haber augmenting Orr’s effective dreaming and our own use of the IMF to improve conditions on earth. Or consider another neoliberal paradox: the problem of scarcity. Solving the energy problem with ethanol has caused global food price instability and has provoked food crises and riots. Strategies are designed that “worsen the catastrophe, such as the transformation of forests into transgenic soy or maize plantations for the production of biofuel, which is much less productive and just as polluting and destructive as oil,” explains Ana Esther Cecena in “Postneoliberalism and Its Bifurcations” (*Development Dialogue*, January 2009). Confronted with this paradox, we are driven further into unreality.

Lathe is filled with such paradoxes. With each altered reality, a whole set of problems arises for Haber. Near the end of *Lathe*, for instance, when the good doctor has his ultimate neo-liberal dream-wish—a society without racial prejudice—it comes with a price: security, uniformity, homogeneity, amnesia. This is precisely the post-neoliberal moment for us as well. Orr dreams up a world where race simply doesn’t exist. “I was envisaging a political and ethical solution,” Haber complains to Orr, after he has effectively dreamed the racial homogenization of society. “Instead of which, your primary thinking processes took the usual short cut, which usually turns out to be a short circuit, which this time they went to the root. Made the change biological and absolute. There never was a racial problem! You and I are the only two men on earth, George, who know that there ever was a racial problem!” And this is absolutely true about our own reality: increasingly, as we move through this “end of history” paradigm (which I’ll touch on shortly), we are unable to imagine a pre- or even a post-capitalist world! Writing in 2007 of the looming credit crisis and the aftermath of Katrina, *Guardian* columnist George Monbiot remarked smugly that “We are all neoliberals now.”

Call it whatever you like, each attempt to correct reality—whether a new phase of democratic capitalism, or enlightened humanism, or globalization—sets the terms for more exploitative actions. “The same system saw itself obliged to go beyond neoliberalism,” explains Cecena in *Development Dialogue*, “in moving its ordering axis from individual freedom (and private property), promoted by the market, towards social and territorial control, as a way to re-establish its possibility of future prospect. The ideological slogan of ‘the free market’ was replaced by that of ‘national security’, and a new phase of capitalism starts to open up.” Neoliberalism’s ability to run a course or arc and then mutate into another theoretical paradigm is similar to the evolutionary ability of humans to adapt to their environment, something that Haber discourses on as rationale for his dream augmentor: “interrelating, conflicting, changing, the less balance there is—and the more life.” And who, Haber asks, would be against life?

Our cultural adaptations for survival that Haber admires have, in a biological sense, made us completely out of balance with reality and nature, and have thrust us toward a cultural rigidity some would call reification. At one time we would have been able to envision an alternate universe and put our hopes into action. But now that dreams are easily conjured through virtual technologies that give the semblance of community, what need is there to enact them? Even when there is a crisis, as in 2008, we continue to rally around sustaining the engine that continues to oppress us. (The fierce and sustained opposition to universal health care is just one example.)

In a post-9/11 world and with a new round of prohibitive identities, Le Guin explained in a November/December 2001 interview on SF Site that it was hard to live in the United States anymore and feel positive in the face of “the unrelenting use of increasingly exploitative and destructive technologies: not so much weaponry, at this point, as technologies that could and should be useful and productive.” Haber’s augmentor is an example of such benign technology gone exploitative. Despite Orr’s plea to be cured, Haber ignores his wishes because that would work against the “greater good” of humanity. Still, Orr persists: “Please stop using my dreams to improve things, Dr. Haber. It won’t work. It’s wrong. I want to be cured.” Haber, of course, in his manipulation of dreams, and in his quest for a liberal—and benign—democracy creates the ultimate NGO.

And not surprisingly, no one is able to question Haber’s hegemonic actions anymore. Because Haber controls dreams, no one has any fixed point of revolt in a history that is continually being subverted and rewritten. A nice conundrum, indeed. And when Haber toasts “To a better world!” it is to the availability of bourbon, conjured up in an effective dream and not a pledge to resuscitate a malfunctioning world. The paradox, for the neoliberal in

Haber, at least, is that Citizen Orr refuses to be a party to deceit, and instead just wants the real thing, in all its horrors and imperfections.

Ulrich Brand, one of the editors of the January 2009 *Development Dialogue* issue on neoliberalism, explains that this post-neoliberal gloss is actually a “politics of destruction,” maintained through “specious liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation.” Michael Brie, in that same issue, calls it a shape-shifter that promotes a type of stalled “decivilization,” lurching from one calamity to the next without identity or history. It’s an utterly sad place, where revolutionary actions are limited to “the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history,” as Francis Fukuyama wrote of “The End of History.” Except for the increasing repression, our post-neoliberal landscape resembles Fukuyama’s museum piece, one devoid of real meaning, people, and feelings. But for Brand and the other authors in *Development Dialogue*, things had definitely turned nastier: more porous, undetectable, territorial, and repressive out of class survival. It’s a place of “broad strategy on the part of economic, political and cultural (and sometimes military) elites to destroy the (peripheral) Fordist compromises and to restructure power relations, institutions, overall orientations and truths, in particular societies and at the international level, even more towards capitalist interests.”

Russia and, certainly, China are the models upon which a post-neoliberal planet sustains itself, especially as resources become even scarcer. In this post-neoliberal dreamscape (and unlike in *Lathe*, there are no cute turtle aliens to remind us of our simple humanity), the power consolidators, as Harvey noted in a 2009 *Counterpunch* article, have efficiently transformed the “word government into the word ‘governance’, making governmental and corporate activities porous.” Echoing George Orr’s plea to stop the dreams, the authors in *Development Dialogue* suggest we begin with real programs oriented to real systemic crises, and not ones invoked for diversion, to shock into complacency and obedience or lull with dreams that things will turn better.

All the forecasts tell us otherwise. As U.S. Intelligence Czar Dennis Blair, for example, pointed out in a briefing before the U.S. Senate (“Global Slump ‘U.S. Security Threat,’” BBC, February 12, 2009), “The primary near-term security concern of the United States is the global economic crisis and its geopolitical implications.” He went on to say, “Economic crises increase the risk of regime-threatening instability if they persist over a one- to two-year period.” Added to the list just recently have been climate change and poverty as destabilizing threats to consumer happiness. Indicators such as unemployment, shifting financial markets, poverty, and lack of credit are now viewed, officially, as troubling incubators for terrorism and not as symptomatic of the inequity of the systems.

Back in the early 1960s when the project of neoliberalism began, Le Guin was aware that when the dream’s unfolding becomes subject to control, desires and aspirations follow—then history, discourse, and finally, memory. This is the outcome of a subtle reification, where, as Adorno informs us, capitalism colonizes every crevice of revolt—those positions of marginality historically sought by outlaws, political refugees, artists, even such dreamers as Orr.

Orr has the classic worker epiphany: “I’m a born tool. I haven’t any destiny. All I have is dreams. And now other people run them” (75). In this post-neoliberal scenario, Timothy Bewes reminds us (in *Reification: or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism*, Verso, 2002), any resistance to the consumer capitalist society is futile. The post-neoliberal enemy is everywhere, Michael Brie tells us in “Ways Out of the Crisis of Neoliberalism” (*Development Dialogue*), yet nowhere—and we all eventually collapse with exhaustion into a condition of being “poverty refugees” on the high seas, victims of ecological and social catastrophes as well as of state failures in the Third World. Yet like our newly reconfigured identities, there are shadows left in the spaces of history in *Lathe of Heaven* when the augmentor is invoked and Orr dreams. And like George Orr’s female companion *Lelache*, we feel the absence but quickly adapt to the reality that is presented to us. It is a familiar narrative, concocted in the late 1940s when there was real resistance to ideology: to promote our way of life, our democracy, our capitalism, will just simply require more and more control. And who would be against such a tradeoff? In weaving the narrative of our dreams, Haber realizes, you control the past and the future. Yes, Haber says, as he surveys the depopulated, deracialized city of Portland, at the height of his authority “things were being run very differently, now.”

But Haber cannot sustain the imagination, and his dreams soon turn sour. And in that sudden turn to reality lies the hope for George Orr, and for us as well. Near the end of *Lathe*, after the neoliberal urge is tamed and society is back to some sense of its humanity, Orr and *Lelache* decide to visit Haber, less for answers than for resolution. The psychologist has been committed to the Federal Asylum for the Insane, where he spends all his time staring into a void. He finally has clarity and has actually seen—or seems to understand—the world and humanity post-1998.

But such a reality is a tad too dystopic for an old neoliberal. “He was looking at the world as misunderstood by the mind; the bad dream,” Le Guin explains, suddenly stepping into the narrative to tell a story. And it is a story about a bird, in the poem “Burnt Norton,” in Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, who cries out that “mankind cannot bear much reality.” But that’s just a misperception, Le Guin explains, and a common error. “Man can endure the entire weight of the universe for eighty years. It is unreality that he cannot bear.”

NOTES

For a more in-depth discussion of class power, see David Harvey’s interview with Marco Berlinguer and Hilary Wainwright, December 13, 2008, under the title “The Crisis and Consolidation of Class Power” on davidharvey.org.

Pierre Bourdieu’s piece, “The Essence of Neoliberalism,” appeared in the December 1998 issue of *Le Monde*. Italics in the original.

The Moyers interview is included on the 1980 DVD, but segments of it are also available on Youtube.

In “Burnt Norton,” it is human kind, and not mankind, that cannot bear very much reality Elliot further reminds us that “Time past and time future/What might have been and what has been/Point to one end, which is always present.”

1. In a December 2001 interview that appeared online at SF Site, Le Guin elaborated, “I have never written a plot-driven novel. I admire plot from a vast distance, with unenvious admiration. I don’t do it; never did it; don’t want to; can’t. My stories are driven (rather slowly and erratically, with pauses to admire apparently irrelevant scenery) by a different chauffeur.”

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