

MOVEMENT AND THE PARADOX OF RESISTANCE

Paulina Aroch Fugellie

Abstract: In this article, I analyze the notions of sequentiality and simultaneity in Ursula K. Le Guin's science fiction novel *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (1974). I extrapolate this analysis to the contrasting epistemic sensibilities surrounding the concepts of 'revolution' and 'resistance' respectively. I am particularly concerned with the role these concepts play in contemporary academic production in the humanities. My aim is to understand the implications of the different conceptions of time and representation associated with each of those two concepts, and what their actual ideological operativity is in the context of the present status quo.

Keywords: Resistance, Revolution, Contemporary theory, Zeno's paradox, Representation

In his Progressive Dichotomy Paradox, Zeno argued that a runner will never reach a fixed goal along the racetrack. The reason is that the runner must first reach half the distance to the goal, but when there he must then cross half the remaining distance, then half of the new remainder, and so on. If the goal is one meter away, the runner must cover a distance of $1/2$ meter, then $1/4$ meter, then $1/8$ meter, and so on *ad infinitum*. Because there is no final member of this sequence, the runner will never reach the goal.

Bradley Dowden

Resistance: Opposition of one material thing to another material thing, force, etc. Esp. in the physical sciences: the opposition offered by one body to the pressure or movement of another.

Oxford English Dictionary

While the concept of revolution implies a change from one status quo to another that takes place subsequently in time, resistance refers to a disjuncture that is not external to the time-space frame inhabited by the system under critique. In *The Dispossessed*,

U.S. writer Ursula K. Le Guin explores a similar tension. She deploys the notions of sequentiality and simultaneity to address the ideologies associated with these different conceptions of time, as well as the possibility of bringing them together. In this article, I analyze her fictional narrative in order to explore the degree to which it may throw light on the question of the marked displacement that has taken place in the academy from the concept of revolution to that of resistance.

The Dispossessed was first published in 1974. As often occurs in the genre, the novel employs extrapolation and analogy to comment on its own historical context. The fiction unravels on two planets, Urras and Anarres. Urras resembles the Earth during the Cold War period. While in the anarchistic Anarres there are no internal frontiers, Urras is divided into two blocks: the Communist Thu and the Capitalist AI-o. There is also the equivalent of a Third World in Urras: a set of poor countries in which Thu and AI-o fight out their battles. Yet, throughout the narrative, we only get to visit one country in Urras, AI-o, as we follow the voyage there of the protagonist Shevek. In AI-o, Shevek, an Anarresti physicist, discovers an unjust society, governed by the laws of the free market and its corresponding Manichean conceptions of class, race and gender.

Anarres had been colonized two-hundred years before the start of the novel by dissidents from Urras. Founded according to the ideals of an anarchistic revolutionary woman, Odo, Anarresti society has neither private property nor any form of government. Despite its imperfections, Anarres functions to a large extent as a utopia, especially when compared to Urras.¹ Like all other Anarresti, Shevek has never been to another planet. Yet, his scientific curiosity has led him to establish radio contact with the Urrasti and, through that medium, he receives an invitation to the planet. In Anarres, the idea of his trip is met with severe resistance. But because of the anarchistic system of Anarres, nobody can actually forbid his departure. Shevek, who questions Anarresti reality due to its insufficient congruence with the ideals of its founding revolution, hopes to find new answers on Urras, which stands for the historical origins of his own people. Although he is conscious of the injustice that reigns in Urrasti society, he distrusts the intentions behind negative propaganda about Urras on his home planet.

As a newcomer to Urras, Shevek acts candidly, without noticing that he is being utilized as a political instrument. The AI-o government seeks to appropriate his theories because their technological application would guarantee AI-o's power over other nations and planets. Gradually, Shevek becomes aware of the interests to which he is subject and of the danger of his situation. He becomes involved in an organized resistance group in AI-o that is violently repressed by government forces. Shevek manages to escape and embark back home. Once on the spaceship, he broadcasts his scientific discovery to all the planets of the known world in order to avoid its use as a political weapon. The novel concludes moments before Shevek descends from his spaceship landing back in Anarres.

Shevek's scientific purpose, and the reason for his trip to Urras, is to converse with other physicists and to unify the theories of sequentiality (prominent on Shevek's home planet) and simultaneity (prominent on Urras) into a General Temporal Theory (the one

1. The subtitle of *The Dispossessed* is *An Ambiguous Utopia*.

he radio-broadcasts at the end of the novel). I hold that sequentiality may be associated with the concept of revolution, while simultaneity is akin to the concept of resistance. This holds for the associations respectively awakened by sequentiality and simultaneity even outside the novel.

In *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin is centrally concerned with the notion of history. That concern is significant in view of what Fredric Jameson has described as the ‘disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions.’² The emphasis of *The Dispossessed* on historical consciousness thus comments not only on its own historical context, but also on the different conceptions of historiography that prevailed during the seventies. In an interview, Le Guin describes one such conception: ‘History is one way of telling stories, just like myth, or fiction or oral storytelling ... Historians now laugh at the pretence of objective truth.’³ This view of history as a meta-narrative, equivalent to fictional storytelling, necessarily destabilizes the utopias towards which the Enlightenment idea of progress had been directed.⁴ Once the sense of past (what is narrated) and future (the expectations implicit in the notion of progress) are altered, history, as the sense of direction in the present, is also altered. *The Dispossessed* is concerned precisely with that alteration.

The conception of history put forward in the novel may be correlated with the time of its production. When *The Dispossessed* was first published, repression had started to wear out the revolutionary movements of the sixties. As the last large-scale utopian movement of the twentieth century, this is a critical moment in which the ideals of modernity (such as the emancipation of the subject) have reached their apex and their downfall has begun. The sense of decadence that has started to take hold is also a result of the two world wars and the threat of a third (nuclear) one. Utopian visions are becoming smaller under the shadow of looming nihilist pessimism. This pessimism may be defined as a loss of sense: a lack of coherence and direction resulting from the questioning of the system as a whole, of grand meta-narratives, of the Enlightenment ideals as inclusive and absolute goals, of all stable structures.⁵ There is also the emergence of movements that frame their contestation in terms of resistance rather than the teleological concept of revolution. I am referring to feminist, homosexual and ethnic group identities that accentuate the multiplicity, or simultaneous coexistence, of different readings of reality,

2. Fredric Jameson, ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society’, in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Washington, Bay Press, 1983, p. 125.

3. Cited in Jonathan White, ‘Coming Back from Silence’, in Carl Howard Freedman (ed.), *Conversations with Ursula K. Le Guin*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2008, p. 94.

4. With the Enlightenment idea of progress I refer to ‘the belief that events in history develop in the most desirable way, bringing about an increasing perfection ... The principal implications of the concept are as follows: -the course of (natural and historical) events constitutes a linear series ... -every term in the series brings about an increment in value over the preceding term’. Nicola Abbagnano, *Diccionario de filosofía*, trans. Alfredo N. Galleta, Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1985, p. 956-57. All translations from Spanish are mine.

5. See Josep Picó, *Modernidad y posmodernidad*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1990, p. 45.

as they strive for the inclusion of marginal perspectives. In sum, the period witnesses a decentralization of perspectives, and a generalized lack of sense.

This paradigm shift is accompanied by a movement away from the vocabulary associated with the concept of revolution and its teleological complicities, and towards that of resistance, wherewith opposition is conceived, in the case of the French post-structuralist philosopher and historian Michel Foucault, for example, as not entirely alien to the power it contests.⁶ In the academy, the switch towards the concept of resistance has been prominent in the fields of anthropology and postcolonial studies. Even some of the most critical theorists within each of those fields, and even those whose epistemologies are strongly informed by Marxism, have emphasized the concept of resistance over that of revolution.

Before I move on to examples of such theorists, let me stress that their disregard for 'revolution' is significant given the place of the concept within the Marxist tradition, not only in the strict sense of the class mission of the proletariat, but also for the possibilities it has opened up in the history of dialectical thought. As Raymond Williams' etymological history of the concept shows, in contrast to associated words such as revolt, resistance, reform and rebellion, revolution indicates 'fundamental change'.⁷ In distinction from resistance then, the term demarcates an opposition that seeks (if it does not possess) externality to the system. The counter-punctual force that such a position offers has been exploited by an array of philosophers in the dialectical materialist tradition, as late as Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution* or Herbert Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution*.⁸ Although the term has also been appropriated by the post-structuralist tradition, Julia Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* being a case in point, it remains largely marginal today for its complicities not only with Marxist political ideals, but with teleological goals in general.⁹ While the word's association with Marxism prevails today, Raymond Williams evidences that it was in fact the French Revolution that consolidated our contemporary understanding of it. During that period 'revolution' became finally disengaged from its original sense of a *circular* motion and moved towards the understanding of it as *linear* movement, signalling a route towards change and the new, as opposed to the old and the stationary.¹⁰

As I have suggested, in contemporary academic production the distrust of teleological narratives has led to a replacement of the concept of revolution with that of resistance. This is evident in fields within the humanities and social sciences that were never particularly prone to progressive conceptions of time insofar as their object of study was

6. See, for instance, Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley, London, Penguin, 1990.

7. Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, London, Croom Helm, 1976, p. 229.

8. See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, London, Faber and Faber, 1963, and Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution* (1941), Boston, Beacon Press, 1961. There are many later works on the subject, yet the books mentioned mark the beginning of the end of the concept as prevalent over resistance in allegedly oppositional theoretical production, especially within First-World academic circles.

9. See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Leon Roudiez, New York, Columbia University Press, 1984.

10. See Williams, *Keywords*, 226-29.

concerned—such as anthropology—and in fields that emerged in conjunction with the ‘linguistic turn’ in contemporary thought—such as postcolonialism.¹¹ Yet it is striking to notice that even theorists within those fields that have striven to incorporate materialist dialectics into their analyses not only avoid ‘revolution’, but openly align themselves with ‘resistance’. For example, Max Gluckman inaugurates a solidly materialist critique of colonialism and capitalism from within anthropology, yet upholds a structuralist approach to the variable of time. It is largely due to the structuralist influence in his work, that he resists the notion of revolution.¹²

In the context of postcolonialism, Gayatri Spivak is an analogous case. While Spivak is notable among the major postcolonial theorists for her serious incorporation of Marxism, this certainly does not include the teleological concept of our concern. In a 1993 essay in which she comes to terms with Foucault, Spivak openly aligns herself with the concept of resistance.¹³ She argues that power and resistance are not opposites, but constitutive elements of a system, which always tends towards self-perpetuation. Reframing Foucault’s concept of *pouvoir-savoir*, Spivak deploys the image of a whole (social, political, economic) system as a magnetic force-field. Within that system, the tactics of *pouvoir-savoir* are envisaged as everyday actions that find their support in terminals of resistance. Although these terminals may be utilized in an oppositional manner, they are still constitutive of the overall system (power structure or force field) in which they are inserted.¹⁴

Here Spivak clearly takes advantage of the meaning of ‘resistance’ within physics to further her metaphor in the political realm. ‘Revolution’ has been subjected to a similarly double-sided exploration involving both politics and science, paradigmatically in Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.¹⁵ Likewise, the implication of both terms across fields has been explored in fiction. In *The Dispossessed*, the politically, physically and ultimately philosophically intertwined implications of revolution and resistance are brought to light through the deployment of the two antagonistic theories of time held by the characters: sequentiality and simultaneity.

Sabul, a physicist who opposes Shevek’s project of travelling to Urras and creating a General Temporal Theory, stands in for the conservative forces of Anarresti society. He upholds the sequential theory of time, discarding the work of local dissidents and of the Urrasti. Sequentiality accounts for the flux of time, for its linear succession, for time as it is perceived by human consciousness. Shevek describes it as follows:

11. Anthropologists have traditionally denied progressive time where the studied other is concerned (usually tribal niches in the Third World), yet they believe in the existence of progressive time in their own societies. This is what Fabian has denounced as the ‘denial of coevalness’. See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1983.

12. See, for example, Max Gluckman, ‘Custom in Stability and Change’, in Max Gluckman, *Politics, Law and Ritual in Tribal Society*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1965, pp. 268-314.

13. See Gayatri Spivak, ‘More on Power/Knowledge’, in Gayatri Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, New York, Routledge, 1993, pp. 25-51.

14. See Spivak, ‘More on Power/Knowledge’, p. 35.

15. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1970.

Sequency explains beautifully our sense of linear time, and the evidence of evolution. It includes creation and morality. But there it stops. It deals with all that changes, but it can not explain why things also endure. It speaks only of the arrow of time—never of the circle of time. (*TD* 197)

Simultaneity, the theory preferred by the Urrasti, accounts for time as a cycle and regards temporal succession as a subjective phenomenon. Shevek exemplifies it by exploiting the performative dimension of language and briefly transporting the reader of *The Dispossessed* back to his or her present on planet Earth: ‘It would be a little like reading a book, you see. The book is all there, between its covers. But if you want to read the story and understand it, you must begin with the first page, and go forward, always in order’ (*TD* 196). Yet, as the protagonist observes: ‘But within the system, the cycle, where is time? Where is beginning or end? Infinite repetition is an atemporal process. It must be compared, referred to some other cyclic or noncyclic process, to be seen as temporal’ (*TD* 197).

Each of the theories alone is insufficient to account for reality in its entirety. Thus, Shevek argues for the necessity of both:

You know that we think the whole universe is a cyclic process, an oscillation between expansion and contraction, without any before or after. Only *within* each of the great cycles, where we live, only there is there linear time, evolution, change. So then time has two aspects. There is the arrow, the running river, without which there is no change, no progress or direction or creation. And there is the circle or the cycle, without which there is chaos, meaningless succession of instants, a world without clocks or seasons or promises. (*TD* 198)

It is significant that in Urrasti society physicists should be inclined towards a conceptualization of time that is not dependent on the individual but on an absolute, allegedly external condition. Urras holds static values and is characterized by its religious and moral hierarchical structures, expecting its members to respect an order beyond both human reasoning capacity and individual desire, imposed from the outside. Meanwhile in Anarres theories of simultaneity are discarded as ‘mysticism’ and sequentiality is upheld. The latter is suitable for a society that values individual action, the sense of historical responsibility (coherence between past, present and future), and revolutionary congruence. Indeed, Anarresti society is the product of a revolution, and the main role of the novel’s protagonist is to perpetuate that revolution and never to conceive it as a mission accomplished, thus impeding the society’s stagnation and corruption. In contrast, on Urras, what we witness is not a revolution, but isolated movements of resistance that do not manage to overthrow the existing order, but do delimit the (dynamic) boundaries of its further expansion. Even if in direct opposition to the reigning order, and perhaps even because of it, these resistances draw the outer boundaries that define the actual form of the present status quo.

In the opposition of sequentiality and simultaneity in the novel, the difference between modern and postmodern conceptions of time insinuates itself. In the fiction, sequentiality is ethically tricky because, even while it embraces the subject’s capacity

to make him or herself responsible for the cause-effect relation, it runs the risk of unidimensionality, associated with the Enlightenment conception of progress. While, in theory, simultaneity holds a greater amplitude of vision, it is disjointed and in that respect may be associated with contemporary aesthetics. Such aesthetics are linked to information technology which ‘tends to reduce events to the plane of simultaneity’ by means of fragmentation and superimposition.¹⁶ Fredric Jameson calls the temporal discontinuity of postmodernism schizophrenic because ‘schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence.’ Like simultaneity in *The Dispossessed*, postmodern temporality implies an incapacity to act with sense in time. A schizophrenic ‘does nothing, since to have a project means to be able to commit oneself to a certain continuity over time. The schizophrenic is thus given over to an undifferentiated vision of the world in the present.’ Following Jacques Lacan, Jameson employs the term ‘schizophrenic language’ to imply a disorder that has as a consequence the breakdown of the relation between signifiers.¹⁷

Hence, articulation, or its lack, informs the conception of time motivating representation. Shevek articulates two different representations of time. He does so in a language that relies on numbers, diagrams and equations, rather than letters or sounds as its material support. The syntax that Shevek seeks and manages to articulate is inherent to scientific theory as a particular system of meaning and as a particular mode of representation. Le Guin thus re-introduces in contemporary outlooks the sense of a coherent construction in time, an attempt to overcome the sceptic *impasse* without losing sight of the historical reasons that led to the critique of progress in the first place.

The author’s implications in that regard are not only relevant to her historical context, but also to the scientific discussions that pervade it. To explain, I return to Shevek. As he expands the margins of his perspective and capacity of action (by entering into contact with ‘the other’), Shevek gains objectivity as a scientist. Today objectivity in science is defined relationally. As physicist Rodolfo Gambini argues: ‘the objectivity of knowledge in physics does not reside in the independence of its statements from all reference to human participation, but in their independence from the particular observer’.¹⁸ In this sense, Shevek’s position is a deconstruction of the Cartesian vision that relied on the possibility of unmediated access to reality. Gambini elaborates:

The identification that, at the birth of modern philosophy, Descartes used to establish between reality and that which is knowable mathematically (that of which we can have a clear and distinct idea) is unsustainable today. Not because reality is not susceptible to rigorous analysis, but because the latter does not account for all of reality and only refers to it indirectly, by means of the exact description of our operations on reality and the answers that are expressed through operationally defined and quantifiable concepts.¹⁹

16. Picó, *Modernidad y posmodernidad*, p. 48.

17. Jameson, ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society’, pp. 119, 120.

18. Rodolfo Gambini, ‘Física y realidad’, in Rodolfo Gambini and Roberto Markirian (eds.), *Certidumbres, incertidumbres, caos*, Mexico City, Ediciones La Vasija, 1999, p. 27.

19. Gambini, ‘Física y realidad’, p. 46.

Through his critique of sequentiality, Shevek indirectly questions Enlightenment ideals of progress and other meta-narratives, just as with his critique of simultaneity he questions the apparently opposite (yet actually co-constitutive) reaction, due to the latter's incapacity to consolidate meaning in time and its tendency towards political and epistemic immobility. The main point here is not the critical and self-critical possibilities brought about by the protagonist, but the capacity to construct, out of two limited truths, a third one that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Shevek has been raised in a world that explains reality only sequentially: an explanation he finds incongruent even as a kid. He observes that, if the space that an object covers to travel from A to B is a continuum, that is, if it is nothing but a succession of points, infinitely divisible, then the actual completion of movement would be impossible.²⁰ Wondering about this at school, the boy argues:

let's say you throw a rock at something. At a tree ... to get from you to the tree, the rock has to be halfway in between you and the tree, doesn't it. And then it has to be halfway between halfway and the tree. And then it has to be halfway between *that* and the tree. It doesn't matter how far it's gone, there's always a place, only it's a time really, that's halfway between the last place it was and the tree ... It doesn't matter how you aim it. It *can't reach the tree.* (*TD* 25)

The paradox emerges as a consequence of the distance, discussed above with reference to Gambini, between mathematical cognition and empirical reality. The theory on which the paradox is founded isolates certain aspects of perceptible reality and develops them both logically and teleologically. The unravelling of discourse, just as the unravelling of the phenomenon described, are linear to the point of hindering positive movement. The paradox shows that classic linearity alone is insufficient to account for the phenomenon of completed displacement.

Shevek's paradox is a slightly different version of that proposed by Zeno of Elea in the fifth century BC, quoted as an epigraph to this article. Zeno questioned Euclidean space and linear time (which had come into being with the invention of the Greek alphabet and consolidated with Aristotle), on the basis of Parmenides's Monad philosophy.²¹ In this way, and assuming the divisibility of the continuum, Zeno argued against the possibility of movement as such. In the context of Shevek's quest, the paradox does not so much serve to demonstrate the impossibility of movement as it directs our attention to the presuppositions that determine it as an abstraction of reality.

Shevek takes the logic of sequentiality through to the ultimate consequences of its own mode of reasoning. He pushes the logic to the point that a perceptible fact—a rock hitting a tree—is exposed as unrealizable and even absurd. Yet, in contrast to Zeno, Shevek takes the paradox with humour: 'He had been stupid to tell the joke about the rock and the tree, nobody else even saw it was a joke' (*TD* 7). This intention to make fun creates a distance between the paradox and its enunciator, as well as

20. According to Abbagnano, *Diccionario de filosofia*, pp. 234-36, the two main criteria defining 'continuum' in the history of mathematics have been divisibility and contiguity.

21. See Leonard Shlain, *Art and Physics*, New York, Quill Editions, 1991, pp. 28-37.

inviting for a similar distance to be taken between the paradox and the interlocutor, completing the subversion. What is funny about the joke-paradox is that the possibility of the real is being judged in terms of a priori postulates. As Paul Valéry comments, Zeno's paradoxes

are due to an error in observation that implies placing the operation of dividing something before the existence of that something and as its presupposition. The line is supposed to have parts ... *before it exists!* And this partition is opposed to a movement along the line—*which is none other than the line itself.*²²

Hence, the mode of thought from which the paradox is constructed in the first place is one that travels in a single direction. It deconstructs the whole into its constituent parts on the basis of a postulate that precedes the act and which does not take experience into account.

We face a problem of representation. The logic playfully ridiculed by Shevek reduces movement to a line drawn on a plane surface, and reduces that continuum to its infinitesimal analysis. Furthermore, the factor of time is not handled with consciousness of its identical divisibility, while the magnitudes of the objects involved (the weight and size of the rock, its speed, etc.) are only considered on the human scale of observation. Such a model, even if internally logical, is based on a discriminatory selection of 'the real', and it would not be unusual if it were not for the fact that it makes experiential reality compete, in equivalent terms, with that which (in theory) is deduced from experiential reality. For Shevek what is funny and absurd is not the paradox, but the foundations it takes for granted, its pretension of being more realist than reality itself. For Shevek, in contrast to Zeno, the paradox does not discard sequentiality as such but merely serves to frame it within its own limits, evidencing the insufficiency of this theory alone to account for movement.

Shevek's teacher is under the impression that the boy is trying to show off with his comments and asks him to leave the class. Frustrated, Shevek goes out and struggles to turn his mind to numerical patterns to hold back his tears. At night, he dreams of 'the primal number'. He has a nightmare that changes tone once he discovers a number that relieves his anguish:

A stone lay there. It was dark like the wall, but on it, or inside it, there was a number; a 5 he thought at first, then took it for a 1, then understood what it was—the primal number, that was both unity and plurality. 'That is the cornerstone', said a voice of dear familiarity, and Shevek was pierced through with joy. (*TD* 29-30)

Zeno argued in favour of unity and against plurality. Yet, for Shevek, the concept of unity cannot exclude plurality. For Shevek the joke, which has the structure of a paradox, serves to foreground both the conclusions that follow it and the foundations that precede it. That distance questions the argument as a whole and evidences it as a form of representation.

²² Paul Valéry, cited in Miguel Morey, 'Conjeturas Sobre Zenón de Elea', *Revista*, Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, 2001.

The infinitesimals that structure the continuum and the rock that is displaced along a finite line are presented to us simultaneously, yet on their respective scales. They appear in specific and mutually exclusive frames of reference that define space-time measures locally. The sphere of the infinite, occurring on a micrological scale, is that of the absolute. There, as the paradox signals, movement is not possible. But the displacement of the rock does not occur in the microscopic world. With respect to the rock, its dimensions and velocity, the goal line is perfectly reachable. The displacement of the rock is possible precisely because it takes place on another scale, in the sphere of the finite, because it is here, and here only, that movement is possible. Only within finite time can change or the need for movement be conceived.

Zeno's paradoxes irrupted in the reigning everyday logic of causality in the fifth century BC perhaps as much as Albert Einstein's theories in his own time. As Shlain argues: 'Einstein's was the first real challenge since Zeno of Elea proposed his four paradoxes concerning space and time ... The radical idea that notions of sequence ... were solely dependent upon an observer's relative speed came crushing through'.²³ In Zeno's time, space was conceived as infinite, while the finite lines that were sketched out on it were conceived as the sum of inextensive points, which would tend to support the conception of the divisibility of the rock's trajectory as finite.²⁴ The whole edifice of Euclidean spatial logic is founded on the following presupposition:

[...] the inextensive point, [is] a rational absurdity. Euclid's first definition effectively reads: 'A point is that which has no parts'. In this way, the object of geometry, that is, extension (a form of quantity), would have as its primary element—contained within it—inextension. The point as transcendental cause.²⁵

In contrast, space is finite according to the laws of relativity.²⁶ It is not simply an empty, divisible recipient, but an interactive field: 'Space and time are now dynamic quantities: when a body moves, or a force acts, it affects the curvature of space and time'.²⁷ As Einstein explains: 'According to the general theory of relativity, the geometrical properties of space are not independent, but they are determined by matter'.²⁸ In destabilizing the classical notions of those dimensions, Einstein introduced the question of frames of reference. Inertial frames of reference (regarding the resistance of bodies to a change in their state of rest or motion) were accepted by classical mechanics. Einstein's innovation in 1905 was to postulate that there is no privileged frame, that there is no true, independent time that becomes distorted only from certain perspectives.²⁹

23. Shlain, *Art and Physics*, pp. 133-34.

24. Today, it has been proven through calculus that the sum of certain infinite series—like the one used in the paradox—may give a finite result. Yet there are other ways of subdividing that same finite line that would throw up an infinite result: 'Although $1/2 + 1/3 + 1/4 + \dots$ is infinite, the more rapidly decreasing series $1/2 + 1/4 + 1/8 + \dots$ is 1', Bradley Dowden, 'Time', in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2001.

25. Morey, 'Conjeturas Sobre Zenón de Elea'.

26. See Albert Einstein, *Relativity*, trans., Robert W. Lawson, London, Methuen, 1920, p. 153.

27. Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, New York, Bantam Books, 1988, p. 34.

28. Einstein, *Relativity*, p. 151.

29. In 1913 Einstein extended this principle to all other systems besides inertial ones.

The distance to be covered by the rock can and cannot be finite at the same time, it all depends on the frame of reference from which we measure. Quantum mechanics admits the adjudication of more than one trajectory to the movement effectuated by a single particle.³⁰ In the paradox, the observer witnesses how, on the anthropomorphic scale, the rock hits the tree: the trajectory is finite. The event does not have to be absolute in order to take place; actually, it is able to take place precisely because it is not. Meanwhile, that same trajectory in space may be infinitely divisible, but this only concerns the retrospective analysis of the micrological dimension. On that scale, the specific situation of the observer is determinant of the (form of) completion of the movement itself. Classical mechanics is still perfectly accurate to describe events on our anthropomorphic scale of observation. Shevek's paradox works as such because it superimposes on that space an Euclidean and micrological one.

The theoretical question Shevek is concerned with reflects Le Guin's concerns as a writer. The sequentiality versus simultaneity issue may be seen as a reproduction of the tensions opened up for a writer's formal and diegetic handling of time in the construction of science-fiction and, particularly, of a quest narrative. While written discourse is primordially linear, the weight of analogy in science-fiction and of the mythical return in quest narratives tips the scale towards simultaneity as well. These formal and thematic concerns of *The Dispossessed* as a whole are metaphorically contained in the paradox of the rock and the tree. At the first instance, the paradox is about the impossibility of the continuum. From that perspective, the paradox operates as such due to the central tension between empiricism (the observable trajectory of the rock to the tree) and rationalism (the logical, a priori, analysis of the phenomenon). But, while apparently opposites, both empiricism and rationalism are framed in the modern paradigm of conscience that assumes the mirror-like reflection of reality as an ultimate goal.³¹

That pretension is exposed in *The Dispossessed* as the very cause of the paradox and so our attention is drawn to the problem of the *representation* of the continuum, displacing attention away from the problem that originally concerned Zeno. But our attention is also drawn to the fact that not even this gesture of taking up a distance from representation can overcome it. Le Guin does not stop at the critique of the modern paradigm, but effectuates a cautionary reading of contemporary discourses that may all too easily declare themselves to transcend representation. As the author illustrates, the grand meta-narratives and the linearity that such discourses tend to criticize are not the exclusive home of ideological belief and metaphysical claims.

As befits a discussion of science-fiction, I have approached 'resistance' through extrapolation and analogy.³² I now return to resistance. As I have suggested, sequentiality

30. 'A nice way of visualizing the wave/particle duality is the so-called sum over histories introduced by ... Feynman. In this approach, the particle is not supposed to have a single history or path in space/time, as it would in a classical, nonquantum theory. Instead, it is supposed to go from A to B by every possible path.' (Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, p. 62)

31. See Seyla Benhabib, 'Epistemologies of the Postmodern', in Linda J. Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism / Postmodernism*, New York, Routledge, 1990, pp.110-12.

32. Jameson views science-fiction as an experimental variation of reality. He argues that the 'principal

and simultaneity may be associated with the conceptions of time respectively prevalent during modernity and postmodernity. Today, these different epistemic outlooks denote the invocation of different histories, and thus function as competing ideologies in the present. Contemporary academics, especially scholars working in the field known as ‘theory’, tend to prefer the concept of resistance and to accuse narratives spun around ‘revolution’ of being complicit with Enlightenment ideals.³³ This criticism refers not only to the fact that such narratives sketch out a teleology propelled by utopian goals but, perhaps more importantly, it hinges on the fact that metaphysical claims are necessarily implied in the foundational assumptions of those meta-narratives.

‘Resistance’, like simultaneity, may imply a movement away from teleology as a content-value. Yet, as a particular form of representing opposition, resistance is, like any other narrative, built upon teleology and foundational a priori. In that sense, the contemporary sensibility that resists not only the social possibility of fundamentally changing the system over time (i.e. revolution), but also the epistemic possibility of provisionally suspending our disbelief of the rift between language and empirical reality in order to become articulate (i.e. representation), may be compared with rationalism. Rationalism highlights its analytic coherence and internal logic, while distrusting the synthetic jumps and external dependencies that characterize empiricism. Yet rationalism is the example *par excellence* of a system sustained on metaphysical assumptions. A similar self-referentiality, and a similar analytic tendency (decomposing language into its minimal constituent binary structures) characterizes contemporary theory, which is also founded on metaphysical presuppositions. Yet, contemporary theory, erecting itself as the most radical critique of metaphysics, rarely acknowledges the metaphysical implications of its own assumptions.

Those assumptions would perhaps best be described as infra- rather than metaphysical, because they exert the same ideological function but through a different strategy. As Shevek’s paradox illustrates, even discourses founded on the infrastructural cannot escape accountability. Likewise, uncritical post-structuralist discourses would make it appear that they transcend ideology, insofar as no grand meta-narrative is invoked. This is why Culler has accused them of being founded on an ‘ideology of the sign’ or

techniques of such narrative experimentation, of the systematic variation, by SF, of the empirical and historical world around us—have been most conveniently codified under the twin headings analogy and extrapolation’. He adds that since science-fiction is not governed by a reality principle, it opens up as one of the few contemporary literary forms capable of reaffirming the cognitive function of literature. The exceptionality of science-fiction in this regard is due to the fact that ‘the total system of late monopoly capital and of the consumer society feels so massively in place and its reification so overwhelming and impenetrable, that the serious artist is no longer free to tinker with it or to project experimental variations’. Fredric Jameson, ‘World Reduction in Le Guin’, in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Modern Critical Views*, New York, Chelsea House Publishers, 1986, pp. 61, 60.

33. Like Chow, [b]y “theory” ... I mean what is generally referred to as “poststructuralism” and “deconstruction,” terms that stand for ways of reading that have radicalized Anglo-American academic worlds since the 1960s. Rey Chow, ‘Theory, Area Studies, Cultural Studies’, in Rey Chow, *Ethics After Idealism*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1998, p. xiii.

what I prefer to call an ideology of the signifier.³⁴ As Jameson's analyses of contemporary aesthetics evidence, the scepticism regarding the fulfilment of meaning through the linear connection of elements along the signifying chain is closely interrelated with the exacerbation of the materiality of the smallest units of technical mediation. In other words, the decreased importance of progression (as both a formal effect and a cultural value) in contemporary narratives is in direct proportion with the reification of the signifier. Originally a means and not a thing in itself, the focus on the signifier as such paralyzes its function. Teleology and representation continue to operate, they are now merely founded on a different place: on the micro-, rather than on the macro-logical, and on the hyperinflation of mediation. Apparently, mediation would no longer be obfuscated, yet the extreme close-up that characterizes discourses based on the ideology of the signifier has a myopic effect and thus surreptitiously continues to blind our view.

The Dispossessed enacts a cautionary approach to light-handed claims of transcending representation and the syntactic and referential teleologies that are its support. This surfaces in the way that taking the paradox as a joke and taking it at face value are contrasted. Shevek's teacher is allegedly a revolutionary, an advocate of sequentiality. In theory, he should have a sensibility to processes rather than a commitment to static values. Yet, like Sabul, the other conservative Anarresti, he cherishes 'change', 'process', 'revolution', and 'sequentiality', but only as static values. His lack of understanding of the relational, performative and context-specific importance of those values is evidenced in his incapacity to take a distance from an act of representation and see it as such. Just like the Urrasti he criticizes, he cannot understand the dynamic character of representation, and misreads Shevek's performative intentions due to his lack of acceptance of actual, rather than merely nominal difference and change.

When 'change' is accepted as a value divorced from its function in the context in which it is held, it tends to simulate and thus foreclose actual change. Shevek's paradox sheds light on the role that contextual frames of reference play in our understanding of change. In their respective spheres of influence, 'frame' and 'ideology' can both be defined as that which structures our vision but into which we do not see. The spectator of the paradox, like the contemporary critic of teleology, is asked to contemplate the empiricist frame operating on an anthropomorphic scale, in an attempt to look into the frame itself, and thus supersede ideology. But, to do so, the spectator must leave aside the insight that ideology, like a frame, is not a thing, but a condition of seeing. As some contemporary critics of teleology stare at what functioned as a frame for the advocates of 'revolution', (mis)taking it for the frame *per se*, their own vision must necessarily rely on another structuring framework.

The confusion that operates in contemporary theory between Enlightenment ideology and ideology as such enacts the classical hegemonic move of instituting a particular as a universal. In that way, contemporary theorists naturalize their own position as the transcendence of ideology as such. The strategy is continuous with structuralist

34. See Jonathan Culler, 'Structure of Ideology and Ideology of Structure', in *New Literary History*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1973, pp. 471-82.

ones, as exemplified in as unlikely a place as Gluckman's work. The founder of the Manchester School of anthropology states that the differentiation of time as measured by nature, on the one hand, and time as measured by the interrelation of the natural, social and moral spheres, on the other, is a valid criterion for distinguishing between the structural time of the societies he analyzes versus 'history in the sense of a progressive development'.³⁵ Although I endorse the distinction and the notion of the relational as a basic defining criterion of structural time, there is a tendency in Gluckman's work to align subjectively constructed (structural) time with the societies studied, and to align progressive (historical) time with the anthropologist's own. Furthermore, he disregards the role of the relational in the constitution of progress. Yet change, the very core of progressive time, is inconceivable without taking into account the structural relationship between two points on a continuum. Furthermore, Gluckman's definition of structural time is in itself structural in the sense that it can only exist as such in opposition to another construct—time as a progressive continuum—which functions as an external referent.

Likewise, Shevek's paradox operates as a paradox insofar as the superimposition of frames of reference generates a resistance that remains unresolved. Actually, at a diegetic level, the confusion between reality and representation is one of the two elements opposing resistance to the completion of the rock's trajectory. The second factor is the inversion of cause and effect: the line is deconstructed into its constituent parts before it exists. Significantly, such metonymic inversions are common practice in postcolonial studies, particularly in those that are most univocally aligned with the precepts of contemporary theory. Rey Chow accuses practitioners in the field of employing difference as a function of language as a substitute that stands in for (and thus blocks from view), actual, geo-economic difference. That substitution is denied by means of a chronological reversal. In Chow's words, 'the turn toward otherness that seems to *follow* from the theoretical dislocation of the sign is, strictly speaking, the very historicity that *preceded* the post-structuralist subversion'.³⁶

Although the cause-effect relation is one of the most threatened articulations of responsibility in the contemporary world, its celebration, by articulating contestation in terms of revolution, for example, would be insufficient. As Le Guin suggests, no theory of movement, no alignment to a particular understanding of time, is a guarantee in itself. To believe so would be to fall into the sort of chronological confusion denounced by Chow, which, in obfuscating the cause-effect relation, obfuscates historical responsibility. Ideological positions cannot be reduced to the representational constructs they employ, such as 'resistance' or 'revolution'. However, this does not cancel out the fact that, as qualitatively specific mechanisms, particular representations of reality, and of particular phenomena in reality, such as oppositional movement, do hold a particular potential. Resistance, as a conceptualization of contestation that relies on the paralysis of the progression of an opposing force while being intrinsic to it, shares in the epistemic

35. Gluckman, 'Custom in Stability and Change', p. 269

36. Chow, 'Theory, Area Studies, Cultural Studies', p. 5.

sensibilities of simultaneity and postmodernism. In view of the reigning aesthetics and epistemic strategies of the present hegemony, 'revolution' is perhaps least likely to become emptied, appropriated and turned into simulation.

Nonetheless, even if the conceptualization of contestation as 'resistance' calls for a halt in the signifying chain, resistance is a reference without which no movement could occur, and as such, it is constitutive of the latter. Whether manifesting itself as the gravitation against which physical displacements occur, as the silence that moulds language, or as the opposition that structures the status quo, if taken alone, 'resistance' risks reification. But to renounce to it on those grounds would be to reproduce the very reification that is feared. Wary of the possibility of displacing belief into that signifier as such, I advocate 'resistance' insofar as its dialectic with 'revolution' and its own context are not disregarded. 'Resistance' cannot be elided because, as a relational and structural category, it points to movement in potential. Yet the question of a Unified Field Theory remains.

Paulina Aroch Fugellie
University of Amsterdam

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