

Returning Shevek to Anarres

By Lee Cicuta

I chose Lee Shevek as a pen name early on in this ongoing writing project, when my theoretical focus was on insurgency and counterinsurgency. Shevek is the name given to the main character in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, a book that held — and still holds — a special place in my heart and in my early political development as an anarchist. In the anarchist society she both celebrates and critiques within the piece, names are assigned via a computer. There are no living people with the same name, but once one dies, the name returns to the system and is assigned again to a new person to do what they will with it. What appealed to me early on about this name, specifically about this naming system and the world it suggests, is the burden it imparts without a corresponding sense of glory. As my writing was getting increased attention, I wanted a name to remind myself that I am one anarchist among many, in a long line of people who have fought the same fight, that I am the inheritor of all of their failures as well as their victories, and that I, too, will fade into the obscurity of time. I am responsible for addressing the failures and there will be no victory I can claim as my own.

Since my focus in recent years has shifted strongly towards theorizing on domestic violence and sexual assault, it seems more important to speak directly on this chosen name. In the novel, the character Shevek sexually assaults a woman at a party, well after flashbacks to his earlier life he goes to lengths to establish that he — supposedly — has a deep respect for women and consent. When I first read this book I thought that this scene was discordant, shocking, and out of character for Shevek. I was disappointed at how little this scene impacted him and the rest of the novel. A decade past my first reading, I find the idea that a fervent and seemingly compassionate anarchist could also be a sexual predator far less incongruent than I once did and I remain frustrated at what appears to be Le Guin's lack of consideration in inserting this scene and allowing it to hang, unexamined, over the rest of the piece. The moment, with more consideration I think, could have served in much the same way as the rest of the novel is intended to: as a biting critique of yet another failure within the anarchist movement. Even as he comes from one of the most anarchistic upbringings that can be dreamed of, when Shevek comes to a patriarchal society he steps fluidly into Manhood, into power over women, and uses that power to commit sexual violence. This is something we have seen occur with relentless regularity in anarchist circles. It is the topic and drive behind much of my own theorizing. However, like we see play out time and time again in the political circles of our own world, Le Guin's narrative appears to shrug the assault off and in-so-doing reads as a form of apologia for it. Upon my reading, she appears to situate the assault as a result of the context that Shevek finds himself within, seems to cast Shevek as a co-victim of the assault, rather than its perpetrator.

This is something I've considered for a while, a component of the pen name I've chosen that has felt incongruent with the content of my theorizing. When I first set out to write this piece, my aim was to have an explanation that spoke to how I have personally conceptualized this name in relation to the character it connects me to, so that people who have a reaction to the name would have an explanation of my approach to it, the spirit in which I originally took it and carry it still.

How I think of this name as an anarchist inheritance, as an indicator of what is still left undone, what failures must be addressed in the anarchist movement, and so on.

I wrote that piece and thought about it for two days and, despite my satisfaction with the essay itself, the very process of explanation seemed to me a sort of contradiction to my political project. Certainly, in my own context and relationship to the text I can explain a name I chose four years ago in such a way that it can feel congruent to the work I am doing. I know I chose the name as a more intentional referent to the naming system of Anarres rather than an appreciation for the central character who shares the name. All of that is true. However, what is also true — and far more relevant to me — is that there are survivors who have read *The Dispossessed* and know that Shevek is a character who sexually assaults a woman and the author didn't make it a problem for him, didn't take the time necessary to form the event into a critique, and are unsettled by the reference. Survivors who see the name Shevek and think of unchallenged sexual violence, of a scene that treats the assaulter as a victim of a context that drove him to do it rather than as a man who heard no over and over again and continued anyway.

As I thought about this piece — the piece it used to be — I reflected on the fact that I am not interested in overriding or undermining that response in anyone. I am, actually, very interested in stoking the militancy of that response. I don't particularly wish to write and publish a piece that suggests people stifle or reconsider their reactions to this character. I don't want them to have to work to change their feelings about it because of how they feel about me and my work. I don't feel correct about making anyone who wonders at it dig through my writing to find an essay about how I personally feel about it. I also don't feel right about the possibility that me writing under the name Shevek and writing specifically about domestic and sexual violence could inadvertently make critiques about the sexual violence in *The Dispossessed* more difficult to find.

Therefore, I have decided to send the name Shevek back to Anarres. With a sincere thank you to Ursula K. Le Guin for the name and for creating a piece that widened my political imagination so early on in my development as an anarchist. From now on I am taking on a new name to better represent the direction and focus of my theoretical and creative work: Lee Cicuta.

Cicuta (ci-cue-tah), commonly known as water hemlock, sometimes known as *death-of-man*, is one of the most poisonous plants on the continent. I find myself drawn to tools of asymmetrical warfare — the weapons that the oppressed reach for when facing opponents who can mobilize massive machineries of systemic violence — and poisons are the oldest of all. Poison is the weapon of the wife, the child, the servant, the enslaved. Poison is wielded by the same hands that prepare the food and drink, by people who are so expected to perform their reproductive role for the powerful that their acquiescence is seen as total, their ability or desire to resist unthinkable. Cicuta is easily mistaken for edible plants such as celery, wild carrots, and wild parsnips but water hemlock can kill in just 15 minutes. Seemingly innocuous, relentlessly deadly. I believe it is a name that suits me personally as well as the message and intent of my theorizing.

I have changed my name to Lee Cicuta on all platforms I have access to, and have likewise gone through all of my published zines on my [ko-fi](#) and updated the name on each cover. If you distribute my zines I would very much appreciate it if you did so with the updated file with my

new name. If you see my work on other platforms I would equally appreciate it if you updated my name there as well, where possible. Thank you.

This text was first published on [Medium](#) on October 3, 2024