

**The challenges of solidarity
in an anarchist utopia:
Margaret Killjoy's *A Country of Ghosts*
as a utopia of process**

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Abstract

The article discusses Margaret Killjoy's literary realization of an anarchist society in her 2014 novel *A Country of Ghosts*. Killjoy creates a vision of society which is highly decentralized, anti-authoritarian, and egalitarian. It is based on free association and voluntary participation, yet its success is dependent on solidarity, mutual aid, and acceptance of responsibility. The depicted social reality is examined as a utopia of process, namely one which is open-ended, dynamic, and also not perfect – the author identifies the challenges that the solidarity of such a utopian space would face: the clash between communal consensus and personal autonomy, the treatment of potential conflict, maladjustment and crime, the performance of the decentralized state in the face of global crisis. Finally, the novel is analyzed as a work of modern anarchism, insofar as it demonstrates the impact of other contemporary anti-authoritarian movements, the result being a novel that is not merely an anarchist utopia, but one which may also be perceived as a queer utopia, a feminist utopia or an ecotopia.

Key words

anarchism, utopianism, feminist utopia, queer utopia, ecotopia

**Wyzwania solidarności w anarchistycznej utopii:
A Country of Ghosts Margaret Killjoy
jako procesualna utopia**

Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest analiza literackiej wizji społeczeństwa anarchistycznego ukazanego w powieści autorstwa Margaret Killjoy *A Country of Ghosts* (rok wyd. 2014). Killjoy opisuje społeczeństwo zdecentralizowane, egalitarne i nie uznające hierarchii, czy władzy zwierzchniej. Jest ono oparte na solidarności, wzajemnej pomocy i poczuciu odpowiedzialności. Przedstawiona rzeczywistość społeczna analizowana jest jako utopia dynamiczna i niedoskonała – autor ukazuje różnego rodzaju próby, jakim może być poddana solidarność takiej społeczności: zderzenie pomiędzy konsensusem społecznym a osobistą autonomią, konflikty, przestępczość, nieprzystosowanie społeczne, jak również kwestia funkcjonowania zdecentralizowanej społeczności w obliczu globalnego kryzysu. Powieść analizowana jest także jako tekst reprezentatywny dla nowoczesnego anarchizmu, ponieważ widać w niej wpływy innych współczesnych ruchów społecznych: powieść jest utopią nie tylko anarchistyczną, ale może też być postrzegana jako utopia feministyczna, ekologiczna, lub utopia queer.

Słowa kluczowe

anarchizm, utopianizm, utopia feministyczna, utopia ekologiczna, utopia queer

A Country of Ghosts by Margaret Killjoy is an explicitly anarchist utopian novel, published in 2014. Killjoy is a young and relatively unknown author, who describes herself as a modern nomad and a cultural creator. Her main preoccupations in-

clude writing, editing, publishing, print design, photography, and music. She is also an activist for environmental causes. However, first and foremost, Killjoy is a believer in anarchism and perceives it as her duty to encourage people to question the current political and social situation. She has worked towards this goal by writing articles on anarchist thought; she also published a collection of interviews with writers, including, among others, Ursula Le Guin, on the connection between the personal politics of authors and their works (*Mythmakers and Lawbreakers*, published in 2009).

Killjoy uses utopianism as a medium through which to voice her anarchist convictions. The feasibility of this endeavor may stem from the fact that anarchism and utopianism share many parallels. Both are strongly political in nature and aimed at reform. Also, one of anarchist strategies is the creation of intentional communities, which is closely aligned with utopian activism. Anarchism, like utopianism, interrogates the present and visualizes improved forms of existence. Moreover, both are characterized by an emancipatory impulse. Utopian thought experiments, like anarchist speculation, free us from the ruts of habitual acceptance of status quo and the conviction that our political system is the only possible one. Utopian thinking exposes the arbitrariness of dominant perceptions of reality and nudges us to consider other, alternative ways of being. Finally, both ideologies are notoriously misunderstood and misrepresented: they are unfairly criticized for being abstract and unrealistic. Utopianism is also often accused of being stagnant, which stems from the perfectionist nature of many literary utopias. However, such perceptions are misconstrued and result from a grossly oversimplified understanding of what these ideologies stand for.

As far as anarchism is concerned, it is typically defined as an anti-statist philosophy, which advocates the abolition of government and all the associated institutions. However, equating anarchism with the advocacy of statelessness is a conflation which is both incomplete and inaccurate. Anar-

chism means primarily “the negation of authority over anyone by anyone” (Sargent 2009: 211). Hence, anarchists oppose all forms of oppression, be it social, sexual or racial (Walter 2002: 48). Hence the links with workers’ movement, feminism, civil rights movement or, more recently, LGBT movement, as well as with environmental and anti-globalization activism. Twenty-first century anarchism is a heterogeneous phenomenon concerned with “religion, ethnicity, sex and sexuality, art and the environment” (Kinna and Prichard 2009: 271), and *A Country of Ghosts* reflects this variety.

As for utopianism, contrary to what is often assumed, it is neither escapist nor naively idealistic. Utopian visions are not examples of social dreaming, but of social theorizing and social criticism. Regarding the supposedly rigid and static character of utopias, in fact most modern utopias are anti-perfectionist and dynamic, and as such they are not compatible with end-state model of utopia, which presents a complete final vision (Davis 2009: 5, McKenna 2001: 51). Instead, they are examples of process model of utopia, which is open-ended and remains in the state of constant flux. Killjoy’s utopia fits this model as it is not a perfect finished product, but a work in progress – it is flexible and undergoes constant evolution and adjustment.

The depicted social reality is also egalitarian, decentralized and characterized by adherence to such core values as freedom, responsibility and solidarity. These characteristics hark back to Ursula Le Guin’s anarchist utopia, *The Dispossessed*. Killjoy, by her own admission, is greatly influenced both by Le Guin’s fiction and non-fiction on anarchism, particularly by Le Guin’s definition of an anarchist, whom she characterizes as “one who, choosing, accepts the responsibility of choice” (qtd. in Killjoy 2009: 8). The importance of personal responsibility in an anarchist society is emphasized in Killjoy’s novel. It shows a society which is based on free association and voluntary participation, yet its success is dependent on solidarity and mutual aid. For both Le Guin and Killjoy freedom and re-

sponsibility are tightly connected and mutually dependent (Le Guin, Killjoy 2010), as anarchist utopians need to work collectively and responsibly to ensure the continued existence of their world.

The novel has a typically utopian structure – it is narrated by a utopian visitor, Dimos Horacki, native to dystopian expansionist Borolia. Dimos is a journalist sent to the front as a war correspondent, yet various twists of the plot result in his prolonged stay in an anarchist country of Hron. Hron remains in stark contrast to his country of origin, whose various social problems are indicated at the beginning of the novel. The text thus conforms to the utopian/dystopian dichotomy that many such works follow in order to highlight the superiority of utopia, as opposed to an inferior counterpart. On perceiving the discrepancy, the narrator undergoes a surprisingly speedy and complete conversion to anarchist ways. This relatively seamless transformation, as well as the novel's occasionally explicitly didactic tone, are its weakest points. Still, even though the novel most certainly is not a masterpiece of the caliber of Le Guin's anarchist utopia, it makes for quite engaging reading and is successful in showcasing the author's anarchist views.

The text is set in an imaginary world, whose level of civilizational and scientific progress roughly corresponds to “a nineteenth-century alternate world” (Bright 2017). Killjoy justifies this choice of setting by her willingness to avoid the implication that she is trying to provide a blueprint for a perfect future society (Montgomery-Blinn 2014). It is meant solely as an example of a world in which self-determination and personal autonomy are given priority.

Hron is clearly a visualization of Killjoy's political and social philosophy, which she has expressed in her essays on what she calls “post-civilization”. Killjoy defines this term as rejection of civilization, however, not in the sense of returning to the primitive state, which is advocated by anarcho-primitivists. Killjoy equates civilization with the domination of the state as well as with globalist attitudes which promote an imposed ho-

mogenized culture (Killjoy, "Take What You Need" 2010: 4). She also regards it as being defined primarily by non-egalitarianism, class division, and coercion (Killjoy, "Anarchism" 2010: 2). She perceives it as "a failed experiment", which has resulted in "genocide and ecocide" (Killjoy, "Take What You Need" 2010: 1). The author therefore advocates the establishment of a post-civilized culture, which would be the result of dismantling hierarchical systems of domination. This, according to Killjoy, is to be achieved by focusing on one's community and landbase and by adapting to the landscape. Recycling, scavenging and squatting are favored instead of exploiting resources and mass producing redundant items. In contrast to civilization, a post-civilized culture is sustainable because it is decentralized and organized from the bottom up. Killjoy writes that such society "would consist of smaller groups that retain their individual identities but are capable of working together for the common good" (Killjoy, "Take What You Need" 2010: 5). For this goal, cooperation, mutual aid and solidarity are indispensable.

Hron corresponds in many ways with Killjoy's idea of a post-civilized anarchist state. It can be described as a regional collective of smaller groups which are locally and loosely bound into towns, villages or smallholdings. Even in cities the area is "split loosely into various quarters, dominated by a different style of living, though each of the quarters bleeds into others" (Killjoy 2014: 146). Dimos is surprised to discover that the boundaries between communities and the people who inhabit them are not merely fluid, but almost non-existent. The social organization is a peculiar mixture of fragmentation and communal intermingling. Dimos observes that "Microcultures formed around all kinds of identities, from work preferences to sexual preferences, but I never met anyone [...] who belonged to only a single group or really came across as committed to the distinction between the groups" (Killjoy 2014: 146). As a result, there is no factionalism or animosities based on identification with one group or another. Instead, diversity and

sharing experiences are encouraged. Hron does not represent a single, homogenous monoculture, but it is a composite of diverse cultural groups acting in solidarity with one another. Hence, it follows that Hronians practice solidarity both within and between groups. They practice a sort of solidarity-in-difference, as differences are not suppressed, but encouraged. This diversity links Hron with postmodern anarchism, which emphasizes fluidity and heterogeneity. Ruth Kinna writes that this brand of anarchism has been influenced by Michel Foucault, Giles Deleuze and Jean-François Lyotard due to its “avoidance of totalizing systems” (Kinna 2012: 22), which are characterized by a high degree of formalization and standardization of people’s behavior. In contrast, postmodern anarchist ventures may be described as “a perpetual process of struggle that brings individuals together in complex networks of action, facilitating the expression of their differences rather than seeking finally to resolve them” (Kinna 2012: 22). Anarchists understand that equality does not entail sameness by precluding personal uniqueness. They perceive diversity as an empowering value, one which makes their cooperation possible. This conviction has also been expressed by Mikhail Bakunin: “thanks to this diversity, humanity is a collective whole in which the one individual complements all the others and needs them. As a result, this infinite diversity of human individuals is the fundamental cause and the very basis of their solidarity” (qtd. in Graham 2005: 222). In Hron diversity is a fact of life that goes without saying. While they do not celebrate diversity per se, they do celebrate freedom, which includes the liberty to be different. This is mostly seen in the lack of norms or standards that would regulate the lives of Hronians.

Hron is a post-capitalist state with no money and no paid labor. Food is shared and goods are exchanged based on a system of gift economy. It is not barter, as immediate compensation is not required, nor is the exchange regulated by any written agreements. The narrator introduces a glass maker who

explains that “it can’t work one-for-one” as “people only need windows every now and then, and I need food every day” (Killjoy 2014: 125). It is a matter of informal agreement within the community: the glass-maker is free to acquire his supplies in the town, whereas the people of the town can receive glass from him whenever such a need arises. On a larger scale, the redundancy of immediate reward can be seen in the practice of mutual aid between communities: when one or more communities are hit by crop failure, other communities aid them with food, knowing that the gesture will be reciprocated if they find themselves in similar circumstances.

Hron is also characterized by complete decentralization, which goes even further than in Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, in which there does exist a coordinating unit that regulates the activities of inhabitants. Here, all problems are solved within communities and decisions are made independently “by individuals or small groups” (Killjoy 2014: 131). If a situation occurs which might affect other members of the community, a council is called. Such meetings are coordinated by a facilitator who is not supposed voice their opinions, but to guide the discussion. Decisions are reached by common consensus and the facilitator makes sure that everyone’s voice is heard, as well as that there are no objections or counter-proposals.

Participation in the communal decision-making process may be seen as a fundamental element of the anarchist model of utopia: “self-management is the key to achieving order without authority” (McKenna 2001: 52). Such a solution proves the point that anarchism is not against organization per se, but against organization which is hierarchical or coercive (Davis 2014: 219), and Hron is an example of a system that is organized in some way, however loose it may be, but it is completely free from domination. The decisions of the council are only binding to those who choose to abide by them – no one can impose their will on anyone else.

This is the first challenge that the solidarity of such a state would face. If obeying communally reached arrangements is

not obligatory, one might wonder what would entice anyone to adhere to them. Here, opponents of anarchism point to the potentialities of chaos and disorder that might occur in the wake of government abolition. However, Hronians mostly choose to abide by regulations because it ensures their status in this society. As one of the anarchists explains, “I get a hell of a lot out of being a part of society, and if I want to continue to do so, I probably am going to abide by most of the council’s decisions” (Killjoy 2014: 131).

There are also certain social forces in operation in Hron, which are not forcible, but which compel people to behave responsibly. A lack of acceptance for anti-social behavior is an instance of such social coercion. People’s behavior is not without consequences, as it contributes to the establishment of one’s reputation, which, in turn, defines where a person stands in the social consciousness. As one café caretaker explains, “In Hron, you are measured by reputation” (Killjoy 2014: 98); based on it the caretaker chooses who to give food to. The food, in turn, is provided to him by local farmers, who give it to him for exactly the same reason – his reputation: “they know [he] distribute[s] it fairly” (Killjoy 2014: 98). However, it has to be emphasized that since Hron is not a uniform state, but an assembly of free individuals, everyone is at liberty to make their own decisions regarding the reputations of others. Consequently, “a reputation might mean different things to different people” (Killjoy 2014: 98). This is an example of the fluidity of Hron, whose anarchist nature precludes any forms of rigid categorization: “like everything in Hron, [a reputation] is flexible, dynamic” (Killjoy 2014: 98). As a result of the fluidity of reputation, people must work for it all their lives.

Already as children Hronians learn the “social cost” (Killjoy 2014: 109) of, for example, stealing, since other children do not play with thieves. If a serious crime, like murder is committed, the perpetrator is expected to show contrition and to grant some sort of compensation to those affected. The community also decide if such a person deserves a second chance

or not, in which case they may be expelled. In one of her essays on anarchism, Killjoy describes such actions as “community responses to problems” (Killjoy, “Take What You Need” 2010: 7) and proposes that they should be the only way in which serious crimes are dealt with, foregoing the interference of law enforcement or such measures as imprisonment. Hronians believe that prisons are inhumane and pointless, as they deprive criminals of the chance to be with other people and in this way “come to understand the need for social behavior” (Killjoy 2014: 108).

However, Killjoy is aware that believing in everyone’s ability to act responsibly would be overly idealistic. Hence, the narrator learns that those truly remorseless are not given seconds chances: “If they are clearly a danger, like an unrepentant rapist or murderer, then we’ll probably kill them. If they aren’t, if they are just an asshole who doesn’t want to act socially with others, they can go to Karak, or out to the rest of the world” (Killjoy 2014: 110). Karak is a Hronian “town of the anti-social” (Killjoy 2014: 110). It is anarchist, insofar as it has no money, no government and no law, but it is “full of people who are too proud to apologize, who’d rather fight someone than talk things out, who don’t care how their actions affect their neighbors” (Killjoy 2014: 110). Killjoy uses Karak as a dystopian negative example – a clarification that anarchism is not just about rejecting government and hierarchy. The inhabitants of Karak have done that and they enjoy unlimited freedom, in which they perceive their superiority over Hronians, who, despite having no laws, respect certain principles which regulate their behavior to a certain degree. The people of Karak resent all regulation and therefore consider themselves freer, better anarchists. Karak is a place where even killing someone has no consequences. Killjoy clearly indicates that promoting absolute autonomy is not characteristic of anarchism, but rather of its perverted version. After Dimos has to spend two weeks with the people of Karak, he begins to truly understand the nature of anarchism: “Freedom, I think, isn’t enough. You need free-

dom and responsibility paired together. [...] freedom is a relationship between people, not an absolute and static state for an individual” (Killjoy 2014: 179). This is why Hron is a utopia of process – freedom is not something given – true freedom and true solidarity can only exist among people who recognize their value and who work to maintain them. Hronians emphasize their commitment to mutual aid and define themselves as “people who have each other’s backs, because having someone’s back means someone has yours and that’s a good way to live” (Killjoy 2014: 81).

Dimos quickly realizes that solidarity is a crucial feature of Hron. He observes that the adjectival form of the word “solidarity” is in constant use in their language, while his own native tongue does not even include it. This discovery is probably meant to trigger a similar realization in English-language readers, namely that English is characterized by the same lack. This may lead one to the conclusion that solidarity does not exist as a valid component of our reality and this lack is mirrored in the language. In accordance with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, Killjoy might be suggesting that changing the way we describe social reality on the linguistic level may determine the manner in which we perceive social relations.

Solidarity and responsibility can also be seen as factors which guarantee that people perform various jobs, even though they are neither paid, nor required to do so. This is yet another challenge: if everyone is free to do what they want, how many people will actually work? In Hron almost everybody does. First of all, not being dependent on economic aspects, they volunteer to do jobs they truly enjoy. Secondly, working is a part of being a respectable community member. Hronians realize that by working they contribute not just to the community, but directly to their own welfare: “people work in Hron because it’s fulfilling to do something socially productive and because it’s necessary” (Killjoy 2014: 143). Work is defined as “doing things for ourselves and our communities” (Killjoy 2014: 90). Everyone is expected to clean after themselves after

using various facilities, for example wash the dishes in a café or clean bathrooms in a guest hall. Even children are taught the importance of making themselves useful by performing simple jobs like gate welcome or helping with field work.

Killjoy manages to avoid being obnoxiously idealistic by including characters who are not especially fond of work and who try to avoid it. Dimos meets a student of philosophy who describes herself as “a layabout” and scoffs at “labeling people based on their job preferences” (Killjoy 2014: 145). She contributes by occasionally performing odd jobs and studying philosophy. It seems that as long as there are those who believe that what she does can be even remotely thought of as useful, she will be fed. Thus, Killjoy acknowledges the fact that people are not only very different but also fallible and achieving perfect harmony in which all individuals operate like hinges in a machine is not possible. Hronians themselves admit the system is not perfect, but they see it as the best option considering the alternatives. The narrator also perceives this superiority, but is careful not to be overly enthusiastic, instead giving a realistic depiction of Hronians as real people with ordinary problems: “On the whole, people seemed happier in Hronople than Borol, but not staggeringly so. They worried about their relationships and their health, they worried about the war, they worried about mortality and the afterlife. They worried about everything I’d grown up worrying about, except work, bosses, and poverty” (Killjoy 2014: 147). The narrator points out that life in Hron is not perfect, but the fact that it is anarchist eliminates at least some of the problems that trouble those who live in a capitalist system.

The communal solidarity of Hron is put to trial, when it is attacked by the expansionist Borolians. Dimos seems to have doubts whether the war effort has a chance of success without any coordination from “a central decision-maker” (Killjoy 2014: 158). However, he finds out that the lack of hierarchy is empowering, as people who are not used to relying on a higher power for governance are more likely to take responsibility and

show initiative. In order to decide on a common course of action, a general council of war is announced. All the communities cooperate, and even Karak decides to join in. Most Hronians treat the threat of war seriously. And though most of them fear battle and are not trained soldiers, they consider it their responsibility to fight for their way of life. They manage to hold the enemy off, even though they are outnumbered. The reason why they succeed may be said to lie in their politics (Intellectus Speculativus n.d.) and the responsibility they take for each other and for their own actions. However, there are also those who decide not to participate, and they are not stigmatized for it – people’s choices are never questioned in Hron.

A Country of Ghosts was designed as an anarchist utopia, but it displays features of other types of utopian visions, such as a queer utopia, a feminist utopia or an ecotopia. This can be attributed to the fact that modern anarchism demonstrates the impact of other contemporary anti-authoritarian movements, and the novel seems to reflect this.

Hron can be seen both as a feminist utopia and a queer utopia, primarily due to its non-binary character. Sexism and heteronormativity are non-existent. Men and women are equal and free to live exactly as they choose. There are no gender-based standards regulating appearance, behavior or job choices. Sexual orientation in Hron is a non-issue. The narrator himself is queer, and this fact is neither frowned upon nor even discussed in any way. Hronians are also tolerant of open relationships and casual sexual encounters, which is quite common in feminist utopias. It should come as no surprise that anarchists, who champion freedom in all spheres of life, should practice free love. In doing so, they reject relationships of power and achieve sexual liberation, which becomes symbolic of more broadly understood freedom. In accordance with the well-known feminist slogan, “the personal is political”, the practice of free love becomes “an expression of anarchist politics and utopian desire” (Davis 2009: 4). Judy Greenway re-

marks that “anarchists, women especially, saw free love as the basis of a wider struggle around issues of sexuality and gender, central to a critique of an unjust and authoritarian society” (Greenway 2009: 160). Also marriage and parenthood in Hron are remodeled and bear strong resemblance to many feminist utopian solutions. Same-sex marriages are clearly not uncommon, and neither are children with two mothers.

Like many feminist utopias, Hron is also ecotopian – respect for the natural world is expressed by implementing eco-friendly solutions. They use thermal vents to harness volcanic energy, and worms to process waste from toilets. There are no factories or military production, as these would lead to atmosphere pollution. Hronians prefer to protect the environment even at the cost of being defenseless. Similarly to free love, eco-consciousness may be viewed in political terms, as green anarchists see the violation of the natural environment as connected with hierarchical domination within society. In Hron, practices which are not ecologically sound are believed to create “unhealthy spaces that deny the relationship of freedom between people” (Killjoy 2014: 151). The interconnection between society and the environment may thus be perceived as a mutual relation – social problems engender ecological disasters, and environmental degradation makes it impossible to practice freedom.

To sum up, Killjoy creates a vision of an anarchist society which is a process model of utopia as it is neither static nor perfect – it is flexible as the utopians face various challenges, both internal and external. The overarching themes in the novel are responsibility and solidarity, which are shown as the defining features of true anarchism and the necessary conditions of its continued existence, however challenging their fulfillment might be. As Erin McKenna notes, “freedom is not easily acquired or easily carried. Anarchy asks a great deal of people” (McKenna 2001: 53) and Killjoy’s depiction of a life in an anarchist society confirms this. Killjoy is careful to avoid rigidity and prescriptive politics. She has said that her vision

of an anarchist society can in no way be treated as a blueprint because “an anarchist society is one of self-determination, on an individual and community level, so it would never make sense to just copy another person’s ideas” (qtd. in Montgomery-Blinn 2014). Subtitled: “a book of The Anarchist Imagination”, it merely explores a possible alternative and opens a conceptual space for utopian and anarchist theorizing.

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