Tolkien, Thompson, English Modernity, and the Left

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> Yet such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere.
>
> —J.R.R. Tolkien

> The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making.
>
> —E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*

There has been something of a desire by those of all ideologies to claim Tolkien for their own cause, and while this essay may follow similar lines, the attempt is not to say that Tolkien was left wing: such a statement would be anachronistic and false. Rather, this is an argument for Tolkien as a resource for those on the left, especially those of an anti-authoritarian stance. In particular, I look at the work of the British historian and socialist humanist E. P. Thompson as a figure whose projects and outlooks have significant intersections with Tolkien's work.

Tolkien: Reactionary?

To draw links between Tolkien and the left may appear strange to some. After all, Tolkien's biographer, Humphrey Carpenter, wrote that, in being a monarchist who was not exactly enamoured with democracy, Tolkien was right wing, albeit "in modern jargon" (*Bio* 128). There is also a charge that a reactionary mindset pervades Tolkien's work in both his depiction of political structures such as monarchy and also the undeniable racial element to his work. Perhaps the worst example of this is his description of the orcs, which ventures into the language of racial othering (Fimi, "Was Tolkien Really Racist?"). Born into Victorian society, Tolkien would almost inevitably inherit a racialized worldview that bled into his writings, yet his understanding

of race is perhaps best considered more as a mix of "confusion and vagueness" than any malicious intent (Fimi, *Race and Cultural History* 157). As he grew older, especially during the rise of Nazism in the 1930s, Tolkien was outspoken against racial chauvinism as it manifested in the world (*Letters* 37–38). He began to take pains to distance his own work from the appropriation of racists, noting that words such as "Nordic" had become associated with racist theories which he wanted nothing to do with (*Letters* 55–56). Despite his personal repudiation, the works of Tolkien continue to be claimed by far-right white supremacist groups (Martinez). Tolkien's treatment of race in his work is certainly problematic and it is not something that can or should be ignored. The racially coded language is regrettable and the cultural eurocentrism feels outdated. Nevertheless, our acknowledgement of Tolkien's imperfection, that he did not always live up to the high standards of some of his characters and themes, does not preclude us from finding meaningful value in the majority of his work and themes (Sisto and Marchese).

Is it fair to say that Tolkien was a conservative of a reactionary nature, one whose creations appeared at the intersection of nostalgia and nationalism? For Raymond Williams, Tolkien belonged to a class of writers whose rural fantasies "scribbled over" the "real land and its people" (Williams, *Country and the City* 258). Fred Inglis would go even further, drawing fascist equivalences: for instance, "instead of Nuremberg, Frodo's farewell" (Inglis 40). Societies have claimed and reworked idioms of the past into the national myths of the present to justify a thoroughly modern nationalism (Hobsbawm 6), and Tolkien's conservatism is most prominent in his idealization of certain political formations, especially that of bloodline kingship. In *The Lord of the Rings*, this is taken to a somewhat absurd extent, with Aragorn taking his "rightful" place as king (*RK*, V, viii, 136) after a thousand years of his family's absence, somewhat equivalent to the descendants of Harold Godwinson showing up in the twenty-first century United Kingdom and attempting to eject the Windsors from Buckingham Palace. Tolkien also mostly favors aristocratic characters in his narratives, with the majority of speaking characters, whether they are human, dwarf, elf, or hobbit, being renowned for their elite lineage. Sam is a notable exception to this, of course, and it could be argued that his character's metaphorical growth (unlike Merry and Pippin who grow literally) makes him the central figure of the tale.

Still, there is a danger here that readings of Tolkien that stay so close to the ostensible may miss the larger stories at play as well as the ways in which people have responded to the tale. The aristocratic characters serve as archetypes to explore themes of power and

personal growth in the face of adversity. Alongside the more reactionary themes, there is also a more ecological conservatism at play. In *Defending Middle-earth*, Patrick Curry researched the 1990s British eco-protest scene and found that the members of one group protesting the destruction of a forest were almost all Tolkien fans (Curry 54). Curry's suggestion is that this was not coincidence, but a testament to Tolkien's value as a resource for the progressive movement as distinct from social conservatism. We see similar patterns in regard to the popularity of Tolkien among the hippie counterculture of the 1960s U. S., who took eagerly to the environmental subtexts of *The Lord of the Rings* as well as the theme of revolution being led by the marginalized (Ciabattari).

E. P. Thompson and the Making of the English Working Class

The writer and historian E. P. Thompson's most famous work, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), was a ground-breaking book that subverted many historiographic conventions of its time. Writing of the tumultuous period of incipient British capitalism between 1790 and 1834, Thompson rejected determinism and insisted on a story of working-class struggle that saw the people as not merely voices worthy of hearing, but as active participants in their own formation. This did not put working-class power on an equal footing with capital, but nevertheless saw an important role for how workers' agency would shape both material and perceptual outcomes in the years ahead.

Thompson refused to wear rose-tinted glasses in describing the pre-industrial era, yet neither did he put on the blinders of so-called historical progress. Thus, his narrative walks a careful line between the claims of either the romantics or the techno-progressives, instead focusing on the shifting relationships of workers to capital and the state. By the early nineteenth century the idea of a golden age of English countryside, "when the weaver worked at his own loom, and stretched his limbs in his own field" (Feargus O'Connor, qtd. in Thompson, *Making* 230), was a vivid driving force of movements like the Chartists. Thompson notes this "myth" is not false, but that it was memory winnowed down through nostalgia (*Making* 230). Pre-industrial weaving, in some calibrations, could resemble servitude, yet the social division of labor meant that weavers were not under the weight of what would become the ideology of work discipline, but could decide their own working day (*Making* 274). Workers in the early eighteenth century were caught temporally between an old paternalistic regime of limited but solid protections and the new laissez faire, a virulent ideology of

so-called free markets that hypocritically required government enforcement and would lead to round upon round of wage cuts.

Thompson and Tolkien: Against Authority

Purely at a superficial level, Thompson and Tolkien are opposites. Thompson was a lifelong leftist committed to working-class education, whereas Tolkien was a cloistered academic whose Catholic habitus made him fervently opposed to communism (Birzer 116–19). Yet this surface difference obscures an alignment on a deeper level, one captured by Meredith Veldman in her book *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain*, which notes they shared a will for "romantic protest against a secular and materialist society" (Veldman 305).

Thompson's leftism was intrinsically moral, and while he had been a member of the Communist party, he eventually left in disgust as Stalinism's "mechanical idealism" became apparent after the invasion of Hungary (Thompson, "Budapest" 44). Thompson's leftism was intrinsically grounded in humanism and he rallied against utilitarianism, reasoning that "a moral end can only be obtained by moral means" (Thompson, "Socialist Humanism" 125–26). For Tolkien, communism seems to be associated with a hyper-rational statism; in *The Lord of the Rings*, it is perhaps Saruman, the fallen wizard, who best embodies the idea of how power corrupts good intentions. While Gandalf and Galadriel both realize that if they were to take the ring, their purposes would soon spiral into outright domination, Saruman in his heel-turn speech to Gandalf still maintains that he would use the ring for good and that "there need not be, there would not be, any real change in our designs, only in our means" (*FR*, II, ii, 273). Here then is one link between Tolkien and Thompson in their rejection of placing morality subordinate to strategy. Unlike the intrinsically evil Sauron, Saruman is a modern villain, and in his indiscriminate felling of the forests and the creation of the Uruks, he sought "to destroy everything to do with the past and create his own version of the future" (Davis 57). It is easy, then, to see that Saruman is written as an embodiment of the technocratic and often despotic socialism most often associated with Stalinism. Thompson and Tolkien, despite being nominally in political opposition, shared a common detestation for authoritarian socialism; Tolkien may have agreed with Thompson's description of Stalinism as "socialist theory and practice which has lost the ingredient of humanity" (Thompson, "Budapest" 44).

A running theme throughout *The Making of the English Working Class* is the instances where nominal political allegiances break down amidst righteous public fury at the feckless governing classes. On

Tolkien's side, his hatred of the hyper-rational state was not only directed at communist or socialist incarnations; in a note explaining his opposition to plans to build a road through the Oxford countryside, he concedes that this "spirit of 'Isengard'" is being put forward not by socialists but by the right-wing Tory government (*Letters* 235). Despite the nominal affiliations, there are thus clear lines of alignment between Tolkien and Thompson against technocracy. So it is no surprise that both saw the atomic bomb as the cursed apex of this ideology. Tolkien, in one of his clearest political analogies, noted in 1952 after Britain's testing of the atomic bomb that the "billowing cloud" had been produced by allies of Barad-dûr who, like Saruman, "have decided to use the ring for their own . . . purposes" (*Letters* 165). In the 1980s, Thompson became a dedicated activist against nuclear weapons in the U. K. and Europe ("60 Faces") and wrote a paper against nuclear weapons with a subheading "America's Europe: A Hobbit Among Gandalfs," though the reference is deeply ironic, claiming that proponents of nuclear weapons envisioned their enemies as akin to inhabitants of Mordor (Thompson, "Letter to America" 3, 7). The metaphor used in the article confirms that Thompson was at the least familiar with Tolkien's work, although for the purposes of this paper, the argument is not that the similarities between Tolkien and Thompson were a result of direct influence.

The element of *The Lord of the Rings* that deals most clearly with social order and rupture is the Shire, the tale of which bookends both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* and reminds one of the sort of pastoral fantasy that Thompson declared a "montage of memories" (Thompson, *Making* 230). In a bid to claim Tolkien for the libertarian right, Jonathan Witt and Jay W. Richards in *The Hobbit Party* claim that "one of the most attractive features of this land of small people is that it is also a land of small government" (Witt and Richards 30). The authors claim that the primary and perhaps only role of the Shirriffs is to safeguard property rights, and emphasize the book's characterization of Saruman's takeover as one led by "'gatherers' and 'sharers.'" However, rather than a simplistic reading of Saruman's new order as socialist, an alternative reading sees the Scouring of the Shire as rebellion against hyper-rational industrialism and the ensuing authoritarianism, whether it be under capitalist or communist states. When the character Hob tells the returning hobbits, "they do more gathering than sharing," (*RK,* VI, viii, 278), this seems to be more a criticism of centralized power than of socialism per se. Furthermore, the technological bent of Sauron's rule suggests a clear comparison to the industrial revolution and the social and economic shift in nineteenth-century Britain to capitalism. Karl Polanyi's analysis of

this "great transformation" posited that the economic sphere was formerly subject to the logic of society. The ideology of capitalism meant that the economic sphere, known as "the market," was now self-governing and should not be interfered with by the demands of society. Industrial capitalism in this respect would alienate workers from the fruits of their labor (Marx 716), and we see this in the Shire, as the pipe-weed and other goods produced by Hobbits are transported out of the region, presumably to be sold for higher prices elsewhere (*RK,* VI, viii, 291–92).

Power is needed to enforce the new logic of alienation. This manifests to the hobbits when they are told they cannot stay the night. Once again Hob is the bearer of the new restrictions against "taking in folk off-hand like, and eating extra food, and all that" (*RK,* VI, viii, 278). Putting the economy to the service of social need is not allowed in Saruman's world. Instead, the impersonal rules of the market govern all, regardless of need. Our heroes of course set about ignoring this new regime: "Pippin broke Rule 4 by putting most of next day's allowance of wood on the fire" (*RK,* VI, viii, 279).

One who reads "The Scouring of the Shire" and *The Making of the English Working Class* in close proximity cannot help but draw comparisons. Both Tolkien and Thompson rebel against a new order of things bringing pollution, work discipline, and sovereign-sanctioned violence in defense of industry with no regards to the collateral damage it causes. There are some key differences, most notably that Tolkien depicts a colonial relationship while Thompson describes working-class dispossession and agency at the heart of the British Empire. What the accounts share, however, is an emphasis on bottom-up organization against power.

Narratively, "The Scouring of the Shire" ends in victory. *The Making of the English Working Class,* on the other hand, can only follow the more bitter truth of history. Of the countless failed proletariat rebellions described by Thompson, the attack on Burton's Mill at Middleton in April 1812 bears the most similarity to the Scouring. The mills of England and the new machinery they brought were not simply a threat to livelihood, but the rebellions against these "centres of immorality" were also against the oppressive systems of exploitation they heralded (Thompson, *Making* 548). There is certainly a danger to an overly critical response to the industrial revolution, after all the goods it has brought us: medicine, transport, labour-saving devices are not mere luxuries but are genuine instruments in the "service of life" (Williams, "Culture" 26). History has not been kind to the Luddites, with their name having become a synonym for technophobia. Yet, as Thompson demonstrated, the smashing of a machinery was a proxy for a rejection

of the new social order which they represented, rather than an innate hatred of machines (Thompson, *Making* 532). The Mill at Middleton was attacked by a crowd of thousands, armed with stones and muskets. They did not want to turn back the hands of time, they just wanted sustainable livelihoods. The attack was brutally put down by the military, and many of those at Middleton were hanged or sentenced to transportation.

There is a danger of drawing too close a parallel between the Scouring and Luddite rebellion. After all, the emphasis of the Scouring is on the oppressive new rules rather than the descent of skilled workers into wage labour. Nevertheless, the birth of the modern English working class was not simply about material needs and wants either, but the imposition of a new discipline that shaped working class to the "productive tempo" of the clock (Thompson, *Making* 410). We also know that the issues of industrial and social change were in Tolkien's thoughts, particularly his sentimental recollections of Sarehole Mill: "I always knew it would go—and it did" (qtd. in Ezard). Tolkien and Thompson may have invoked the grand shifts of English society in different ways and with different frames of reference, but nevertheless they seem to strike at the same veins running through English history, with rupture, loss, and imagination fuelling a moral rebellion against the forces of arbitrary power.

Any claims that modernity is both acultural and universal are contradicted by the particular ways in which it has unravelled across the world (Gaonkar 19, 22). We can conceive of modernity as a certain forward motion of both the material and the spiritual/cultural spheres (Chatterjee, *Fragments* 6). Thompson did not either deny modernity or overly romanticize the premodern. Instead, he rescued the working class from the ignominy of being cast as objects by mainstream history and instead described an alternative modernity on the site where people were actively "present at their own making" (Thompson, *Making* 9; Gaonker 18). Thompson saw that there was an element of society that had never and perhaps could never be commodified and compartmentalised and that Marxism needed to have "a sense of humility before those parts of culture which it can never order" (Thompson, "Romanticism"). For some, the idea of *English modernity* might seem odd, as we are accustomed to thinking of England as a sort of default nation in the capitalist epoch, a sort of aggressive *tabula rasa* that has blanketed the world in its own dull vision. Yet Tolkien's fictional depiction of "a Europe that has not been 'Europeanised'" (Luling 53) and Thompson's view of English capitalism as a temporal gap between the old and new commons (Stevenson 17) helped to sets the tone for an imagination of alternative English modernity.

Tolkien's mythology and Thompson's history are both idiosyncratic attempts to create a sort of Englishness decoupled from the state: "ethnicity of the margins" (Hall 447). While Tolkien was certainly more romantic in his output than Thompson, to ask whether Tolkien was or is an anti-modernist is perhaps to ask the wrong question. To label that which exists in the present and critiques rationalist modernity as pre- or anti-modern is a logical fallacy (Chatterjee, *Governed* 7) and Tolkien's writing was not, could not, be anything other than a dialogue with the time in which he lived (Flieger 6). It might be better, then, to cast both Tolkien and Thompson as *in and against* modernity, with all the contradictions such a statement brings.

Utopia and Fantasy

Imagination is a powerful tool for both romantics and humanists. Tolkien saw that fantasy was escapist, but eschewed the negative connotation of the word, as he described elements of fantasy as invoking "Joy beyond the walls of the world" (*M&C* 153). Yet fantasy is still more than a therapeutic daydream. Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch's concept of *vor-schein* (usually translated as anticipatory-illusion) posited that fairy tales were not stories rooted in the past but endured as means of wish fulfilment. In a world in which political and social action has been conditioned by hyper-rationality, "imagination rises up in protest" (Zipes 164). Patrick Curry borrows the phrase "radical nostalgia" from Fraser Harrison to show how Tolkien's work can be used as an emotional and intellectual resource for those who would dream of something better than modernity's grim façade (Curry 26). This idea, of fantasy acting to pierce the common sense of our era, runs parallel to arguments made by Thompson in defence of utopian thinking, particularly in his writing on the British romantic socialist William Morris. Morris, like Thompson, took an often derided moral and idealistic approach to socialism, but this idealism was according to Thompson a tonic against the "imaginative lethargy" of the orthodox Marxists (Thompson, "Romanticism"). Our fantasies, even the everyday reverie of a schoolchild's aspiration, are not expressions of narcissism but the "scenes where creative and autonomous agency is performed" (Cho and Apple 163). Utopia and fantasy then, for both Thompson and Tolkien, serves an instrumental purpose in allowing humanity to break free of constrictive modes of thought.

This essay has attempted not to claim that Tolkien was a left-wing writer, but rather to identify the ways in which parts of his writing aligned with currents of left-wing thought, most clearly with that of the English socialist humanist E. P. Thompson, who like Tolkien, was

suspicious if not outright hostile to the forces of authoritarian modernity in whatever guise they appeared. While their seminal projects, of history and fantasy, appear to be counterposed, there is a strong bond of what we might call instrumental, or indeed radical, nostalgia linking them. Our folk memories of the past are not always in the service of regression, but may help us map the way to the future. Despite clear political differences, Tolkien, the radical green, and anti-nuclear movements all shared a "vision of the past as a guide for the future" (Veldman 306).

Tolkien, like all of us, was a complex figure, not easily pigeonholed into any particular political ideology. Thus, despite his undoubted conservativism, there is also a progressive, anti-authoritarian streak within his work, that has been a resource for the politically radical and will continue to be for years to come.

> As for romance, what does romance mean? I have heard people mis-called for being romantic, but what romance means is the capacity for a true conception of history, a power of making the past part of the present.
>
> —William Morris, "Old and New"

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