Director Peter Jackson’s blockbuster *Hobbit* trilogy, like his three *Lord of the Rings* films before it, has brought a resurgence of interest in the fantasy novels of J. R. R. Tolkien. Of course, Jackson’s movies did not create the Tolkien juggernaut; they merely capitalized on it. Tolkien’s novels are two of the three most popular of all time (behind only Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*), and Tolkien, a towering academic figure in his day, has only grown in importance as a literary figure since he died some forty years ago.
Scholars have spent decades debating the literary and theological significance of his novels. There’s been less careful treatment of Tolkien’s political and economic thought, even though, as Tolkien commentator Joseph Pearce has put it, the longer novel’s “political significance” is “second only to the religious in its importance.”

Partial readings of Tolkien might lead one to conclude that he was a pacifist, a Luddite, or an environmentalist. For instance, the hobbit hero Frodo goes in for nonviolence near the end of *The Lord of the Rings*. Plus, Tolkien loved trees and a verdant countryside, and detested the ugly elements of industrialism. Surely if the Oxford don were alive today, the thinking goes, he would be a Prius-driving, organic-smoothie-drinking, coexist-bumper-sticker-sporting liberal.

But wait. What of all the stuff in his work about honor, chivalry, family, battlefield courage, and moral absolutes? Focusing on this, some on the Left have concluded that, no, Tolkien must have been an old-fashioned dead white male conservative who glorified war.

Both views can’t be right. Is the truth somewhere in the middle? Was Tolkien a soft-edged moderate?

This doesn’t sound right either. Tolkien was a moderate beer drinker and pipe smoker. But there was nothing moderate about his political views.

Rather than casting Tolkien in any of these molds, we think the better course is the inductive one: a careful study of what he wrote personally, and of what he presented in his fiction.

**Hardly Any Government**

The first hint in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* comes from the beloved homeland of the hobbits, the Shire. The pastoral villages have no department of unmotorized vehicles, no internal revenue service, no government official telling people who may and may not have laying hens in their backyards, no government schools lining up hobbit children in rows to teach regimented behavior and groupthink, no government-controlled currency, and no political institution even capable of collecting tariffs on foreign goods.

“The Shire at this time had hardly any ‘government,’” Tolkien wrote in the prologue to *The Lord of the Rings*. “Families for the most part managed their own affairs.” Indeed, the only visible police are the “shiriffs,” who don’t wear uniforms and focus mainly on returning stray animals. In other words, their primary job is to protect private property.

This is significant because Tolkien once described himself as a hobbit “in all but size,” and in the same letter commented that his “political opinions lean more and more to Anarchy (philosophically understood, meaning abolition of control not whiskered men with bombs).” As he explained, “The most improper job of any man, even saints, is bossing other men. Not one in a million is fit for it, and least of all those who seek the opportunity.”

In the Shire, it seems, Tolkien created a society after his own heart.

**Resistance to Tyranny**

Near the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo, along with his friends Sam, Merry, and Pippin, returns home to discover that a group of bossy outsiders has infiltrated the Shire. The newcomers are “gatherers and sharers . . . going around counting and measuring and taking off to storage,” supposedly “for fair distribution,” but what becomes of most of the bounty is anyone’s guess. Ugly new buildings are being thrown up, beautiful hobbit homes are spoiled, and for all the effort to “spread the wealth around” (to borrow a phrase from our current president), the only thing that seems to be spreading is the regulatory power of the gatherers.

Here we see a critique of aesthetically impoverished urban development, to be sure. But conservatives and progressives alike have seen in this section a pointed critique of the modern, hyperregulated nanny state. As Hal Colebatch put it in the *J. R. R. Tolkien Encyclopedia*, the Shire’s joyless regime of bureaucratic rules and suffocating redistribution “owed much to the drabness, bleakness, and bureaucratic regulation of postwar
Britain under the Attlee Labour Government. Tolkien showed his contempt for such statist machinations.

**Distributism?**

Some observers suggest that in economics, Tolkien advocated “distributism.” Championed by the English Catholic writers Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton, distributism is often described as a “third way between capitalism and socialism.” It has been marked by a deep nostalgia for pastoral life, seeking to move society toward more local, agrarian, small-scale, and family-centered practices, where each family owns sufficient “productive property” so that, if push came to shove, they could grow their own food.

The connection to the Shire is easy enough to discern. The hobbits live an idyllic life uncluttered by the excesses of modern big-city capitalism, a life with the qualities that distributists hoped to cultivate in contemporary life.

But there’s good reason to doubt that Tolkien would have embraced the details of the distributist vision. We should remember that the agrarian Shire is not the only society in Middle-earth. Any full account of Tolkien’s vision must include not just the home of hobbits but also the dwellings of dwarves, elves, and men. It must consider the miserly greed of Smaug the dragon, the cronyism of the Master of Lake-town, the initiative of Bard and the rebuilt Dale, the urban grandeur of Minas Tirith, and the biomimetic technology of the elves.

Also, Tolkien emphasized that the preindustrial life of the hobbits was not meant to function as “a Utopian vision” or to encourage us to return to preindustrialism and freeze in time a particular historical moment. This, he explained in a letter, was the “weakness” of the elves, who “regret the past” and “become unwilling to face change: as if a man were to hate a very long book still going on, and wished to settle down in a favourite chapter. . . . They desired . . . to arrest change, and keep things always fresh and fair.” This is a warning relevant to distributism, which is marked by an intense nostalgia for the agrarian past.

Such nostalgia is prominent in the thought of Belloc, a contemporary of Tolkien. Belloc and Tolkien departed in other ways as well. One obvious difference: Belloc was for several years a member of Parliament for the Liberal Party, whereas, so far as we know, Tolkien was a Tory who wasn’t willing even to endorse the word democracy.

The main divergence between Belloc and Tolkien involves Belloc’s call for the machinery of the state to actively redistribute “productive property” and then keep it well distributed through a variety of taxes and regulations. In his *Essay on the Restoration of Property*, Belloc wrote: “We must seek political and economic reforms which shall tend to distribute property more and more widely until the owners of sufficient Means of Production (land or capital or both) are numerous enough to determine the character of society.” The implication is plain: if land and capital are “unequally” owned, the state needs to equalize the situation by using its powers to confiscate private property and redistribute it along presumably more egalitarian lines.

Lest anyone miss the point, Belloc went on to insist that “the effort at restoring property will certainly fail if it is hampered by a superstition against the use of force as the handmaid of Justice.” Note the paradox: Belloc wanted to distribute the power and wealth of certain private actors—large landowners and capitalists—to avoid concentrations of power in the hands of the few. But this meant giving more power to the entity that already possesses a near monopoly on coercion: the state. In other words, to disperse concentrations of power in the private sector—the realm of voluntary exchange—Belloc proposed that we concentrate more power in the political sector: the realm of coercion. To be sure, Belloc proposed the gradual use of state power, not the radical collectivization that Lenin and Stalin attempted. And later distributists have sought to resolve this problem. In any case, Tolkien never advocated anything like using the state’s power to redistribute wealth.

The creator of Middle-earth surely knew more than a little about the views of Belloc and Chesterton, but he appears never to have endorsed their policy ideas or even uttered the word distributist. Although he advocated the use of force for self-defense from violent aggression—as when Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin retake the Shire after Saruman and his toadies overran it—he never recommended that the state make it its regular business to redistribute.
legally owned property in the pursuit of equality. Just the opposite: he was opposed to governments’ extracting wealth disproportionately from citizens. In a letter to his son Michael after *The Lord of the Rings* had begun to earn him a comfortable income, he exclaimed, “Don’t speak to me about ‘Income Tax’ or I shall boil over. They had all my literary earnings until I retired.” Elsewhere he referred to “the claws” of England’s “Taxgatherers.” He found the whole mind-set of pursuing aggressive reform through the coercive arm of the state fraught with danger. In another letter he warned of “‘reformers’ who want to hurry up with ‘reconstruction’ and ‘reorganization’”; their goals might be innocent enough, but “pride and the lust to exert their will eat them up.”

At the end of *The Hobbit*, Tolkien lampoons the impulse to divvy up the wealth of the well-to-do. Bilbo arrives home to find his property being auctioned off, and of course he wants his stuff back. Although there’s a good bit of grumbling, the common opinion is that Mr. Baggins’s stuff is Mr. Baggins’s stuff, even if he did return from his adventures with more treasure than he knows what to do with. It never crosses the hobbits’ collective mind that some government official should have the power to appropriate a sizable portion of Bilbo’s property and distribute it more equitably throughout the community.

A Consistent Enemy of Big Government

Tolkien’s political vision doesn’t fit neatly into the simple American two-party system, or into schools of thought developed by others. We wrote a book, *The Hobbit Party*, to do it justice. In Tolkien’s fiction, that vision involves diverse communities, what we might call “civil society,” and even trade between different species of sentient creatures. If allowed to speak on his own, Tolkien might help bridge the divide between conservative free-market thinkers and distributists. But there’s a line running through all that nuance that isn’t the least complex, one we tried to capture in the title of the first chapter of our book: “In a Hole in the Ground There Lived an Enemy of Big Government.”

Unlike the many self-appointed “radicals” in lockstep with the spirit of his age, Tolkien was the true radical—the square peg in the round hole of modernity. In an age of secularism and the growing leviathan state, he was a conservative Catholic calling for the old virtues, a more vibrant civil society, and smaller, less meddlesome government.

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