Tolkien The Anarchist

Middle Earth, Chomsky, and the Search for the Everyday Shire

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February 27th 2020

Middle-earth is arguably the most primordial, intricate, and influential fantasy world in the canon of Western literary culture. John Ronald Reuel Tolkien's most complete narrative works, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, have sold millions of copies in dozens of languages, have come to life in a series of Academy Award-winning films, and have inspired generations of artists, writers, misfits, trogs, freaks, and all sorts of awkward adolescents alike. It is a complete and utterly expansive world of harmonious wizards, ethereal elves, and hardy hobbits, brought to ruin by greedy sorcerers, corrupted orcs, evil monsters, and disruptive technologies—a fantastic and exhaustive escape from the trials and tribulations of the everyday. Tolkien's world of Middle-earth is ruined by greed and malice, and saved by heroes of varying yet unimportant stature. Small farmers from idyllic lands and humble kings from ancient lineages play equally important roles throughout Tolkien's comprehensive, fictional history.

But in exploring his writing, the foundational reasoning and philosophy that built the world's first legendarium come to light, and it leaves us wondering what other parallels there might be between the narratives of Middle-earth and our own unfolding narratives here on this planet. In this moment of crisis we find ourselves in, people across the country and across the world are questioning all kinds of status qui, no longer willing to just accept the way things are as inevitable. Just as Tolkien himself was drawing complicated maps of his imaginary worlds and inventing new and complete languages and cultures, he did all of that conjuring in the war-torn world of the early 20th century, when populations all around him were forced to reorganize and survive the consequences of the Industrial Revolution, the ravages of the first Gilded Age, and the crushing of what he saw as naturally harmonious ways of life.

He saw a corrupting influence on the desperately poor and working classes. Not only did it destroy the environment and bastardize traditional labor expectations, it engendered a materialistic lust for power as even the most power-deprived individuals could still seek the smallest degree of power over other men by one day becoming their boss. The simpler world he had idealized as a child was expressed by his Shire, and the evil ravages of wars and dehumanizing machines and the few 'industrialists' who controlled once intimately connected communities were embodied in all of the seductive power and destructiveness of his infamous Ring.

Today, we too find ourselves in a tidal wave of globalization, misunderstood systems of digital technological oppression, and a discordance overall in our communities and society as a whole.

We find ourselves in the second Gilded Age, and ominously enough, the age of surveillance technology. Perhaps this explains why the core tenet behind Tolkien's ultimate fantasy realm was his embrace of anarchy. And though it might seem counterintuitive to use concepts of anarchy—a frequently dismissed ideology— to somehow restore our more perfect union, if we step back and think about what anarchy really means, in all of its complexity, we may understand more about what is really in the hearts and minds of the inhabitants of Middle-america.

It is a term associated with a supposed breakdown of polite society, fictional or otherwise. It is commonly—and incorrectly—associated with violence and chaos, with a lawless world where the mighty prey on the weak. Tolkien, however, saw systems like capitalism, fascism, white supremacy, misogyny, and the like as the power-hungry systems responsible for driving men to capitalize on the oppressed to feed their own desire for power.

Most forms of anarchy demand overwhelming proof to justify the existence of any institution which holds power over others. So while Tolkien expressly denied claims of metaphorical messaging, he wrote often in support of anarchic principles in both his world and ours.To Tolkien, anarchy represented a natural peace, lived out in total harmony, wholly free from even the slightest need for political power.

This anarchy is not the wonton demolition of justifiable governance, but the sometimes-violent dismantling of systems of power. The goal of Tolkien's anarchistic philosophy is to loudly demand a justification for any and all systems of power, and when they fail to provide that justification, to speak in what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called, "the language of the unheard." When those systems fail to justify themselves to the people, they are taken apart. No exceptions.

As Noam Chomsky, the father of modern linguistics and someone even the most liberal media deems an "anarcho-syndicalist" puts it, "institutional structures are legitimate insofar as they enhance the opportunity to freely inquire and create, out of inner need; otherwise, they are not." To Tolkien, anarchy represented any actions that worked to restore a natural peace; one lived out in total harmony, wholly free from even the slightest need for political power.

He believed, like Chomsky, that his natural order was not aligned along the basis of race, class, or nationality, but rather along lines of language and culture which can be shared, adopted, and beloved by all. Neither were these natural barriers an intentional thing to be lauded; they simply were, and the men and women who worked for peace and harmony outside of the natural confines of society were sometimes the most unusual, but always the most interesting.

The heroes of *The Lord of the Rings* and 21st century anarchists for that matter, do not pursue political or martial power, though they may wield it when a dire situation demands it, in order to establish peace or destroy evil. Instead, Elven heroes and progressive real world leaders alike rely on a political or martial revolution generated by a grassroots organization that stems exclusively from the express will of the people. The natural states of Middle-earth's societies, from the idyllic Shire to the nightmarish Mordor, are all accompanied by heavily moralized implications for how one's political power is sourced and wielded. Anarchy has no use in an idyllic society like the Shire; simply because there are no systems to overthrow, no illness or starvation, no invaders to fight back against (until there are).

One of the primary reasons anarchy cannot be functionally established and endure in today's world is the fact that such a system would inevitably put an end to certain basic institutions which can only exist as strict hierarchies—the best example being our armed forces. Without generals and admirals and a strictly structured system of processes and commands, the military as we know it would cease to exist and therefore the nation would be left defenseless in an imperfect,

violent, power-hungry world. It follows in Tokien's world that all military actions in Middle-earth are only considered to be morally good when a grassroots community is existentially threatened by power and leverages what might they have to defend themselves. As Chomsky noted, "This much, at least, is true of people who regard themselves as moral agents, not monsters—who care about the effects of what they do or fail to do."

Then, how do we act heroically, like Aragorn or Frodo did against the armies of the Dark Lord Sauron? We must stand together, unified under a truly grassroots banner, in the face of wholly and clearly unjustified systems of power. Especially against those who have twisted Tolkien's ideas to serve their nouveau libertarian strangling grip on power. One highly privileged soul, empowered by wealth and exclusionary institutional access, has amassed an army of underlings to build a network that corrupted the truth, weaponized malicious intent, and brought about the emboldening of our society's most vile and hateful actors.

Are we referring to the Dark Lord, forger of the One Ring of Power, Lieutenant of Melkor, Sauron? Or does this more closely resemble the Mark Zuckerbergs and Elon Musks who may have been a little bit too influenced by the seductive power found in their own disruptive technologies—their own one true Rings— that have a seemingly supernatural level of control and oppressiveness over the global population? They have dragged the culture of Tolkien up from their teenage man cave basements and out into their frightening corporate cultures. In 2018, Facebook even developed a notification for employees that would trigger when other Facebook staff were accessing their private information. It was called, "the Sauron alert." While fellow libertarian overlord, PayPal Mafia billionaire, and neo-fascist Peter Thiel actually named his secretive data scraping firm Palantir after the magical stones Sauron used to corrupt the forces of good across Middle-earth and enlist them in his evil machinations.

Irony has its place in this misuse and misinterpretation of Tolkien's language and mythology. Like many of the great writers, Tolkien wrote for a very specific, and limited, audience: his children first, himself second, and thirdly he wrote for his immense love of the myth-dusted history of language. In fact, the entirety of Middle-earth creation was largely an exercise in linguistics. If an Elven King must have a name, that name must mean something; it must come from somewhere. That meaning was derived from Tolkien's intimate knowledge of language, an obsession that manifested itself mainly in the forms of Quenya and Sindarin, two very distinct Elvish languages, each of which had several dialects based on the (fictional) speaker's (again, fictional) place of birth.

There is no one who would better understand the power of language to define culture and the incredible strength that lay behind the entities capable of disseminating it than J.R.R.Tolkien. He spent more time crafting the history and languages of Middle-earth than he did its heroes and villains.

Every child has a father, every sword has a smith, and every word he created had its own history, sourced from the languages he built, which themselves drew deeper still from the rich realms of Old English, as well as ancient Norse and Germanic languages, most notably Finnish. In Tolkien's mind, the origin of a thing is its only source of power. Thus, any action taken whose motivational origin is to acquire power over others is noted as evil, while those actions which free people from power are inherently good. If the industrialization of his bucolic countryside after the war was, to Tolkien, an overreach of the highest order, the complete demolition of individual privacy in the age of social networking, data mining, and election hacking we are experiencing today would have likely inspired a far greater villain than Sauron.

The power in the hands of the few, be them in politics or communication, is counterbalanced in Tolkein's worlds by the immense, if often underestimated power in the hands of the many. The road to dismantling systems of unjustifiable power depends on the small actions of small groups of small people confronted with unimaginable evil. In our world, Tolkien, like Chomsky, wished for anarchy universally, suggesting that this totality was the only way the concept as a whole might ever work.

The school-to-prison pipeline, the mass incarceration complex, and police brutality in communities of color are some of the most pervasive and oppressive systems of power in America today, but they cannot be dismantled by one protest, one new law, or even one vote. They are in fact the civil rights battle of our century. In other words, this will require a movement. As Tolkien said in a letter to his editor, "you can make the [One] Ring into an allegory of our own time, if you like: an allegory of the inevitable fate that waits for all attempts to defeat evil power by power. But that is only because all power, magical or mechanical, does always so work."

Today, the armies of the Dark Lord Sauron and the corrupting influence of his One Ring of Power take the form of "a transnational crime syndicate masquerading as a government," to quote anti-authoritarian scholar and journalist Sarah Kendzior. As a supposed anathema to this administration's unprecedented dismantling of American democracy, and the further consolidation of oppressive power, we now are being seduced by the idea that to fight this kind of authoritarianism we need more authoritarianism, just in a better fitting suit and an incomprehensibly large television ad buy.

This siren's call of power today—whatever the ring may look like for the individual— is not necessarily drawn along party lines. Just as the interpretations of Tolkien's stories may lend themselves to either peaceful anarchy or toxic libertarianism, the reader's interpretation plays a pivotal role in who is a villain and who is a hero and what constitutes an unjustifiable system of power. From the most progressive, socialist, far-left voter to the MAGA red-hat crowd, the Americans that feel betrayed, left behind, or blatantly ignored and oppressed by their system of government are alike in believing themselves to be the unheard, and are, ultimately, alike in that they have far greater power to decide what comes next than the singular rulers—king, politicians, heroes—that stand out from the masses.

It is not the idea of the individual that changes the system, but the idea of the people—the collective acceptance that could lead to a more peaceful countryside, in Middle-earth or in Middle America for that matter. Anarchy, in America today, cannot exist as a permanent state. But it can efficiently be used as a selfless catalyst by the people, a way of restoring our Shire to peace, be it though the backing of political candidacy, the marching in the streets, or the usurping of corrupt magical entities by force. When rebellious anarchy serves as a pathway forward, it is peaceful anarchy upon which the next system may be built. It's a glimmer of hope for a more peaceful future.

Throughout the long histories of pain and struggle, above all there truly is hope and love in Tolkien's words. Words that ring truer than ever as we face the rise of highly modernized modes of power across the globe in the forms of fascism, authoritarianism, and white supremacy.

> "I have found that it is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay. Small acts of kindness and love."
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> — Gandalf the Grey

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