



Distributism in the Shire

By Matthew P. Akers

Peter Jackson's film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* has increased the popularity of Tolkien's classic work among twenty-first-century viewers and readers, making Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings* household names. Although much less well-known, Distributism, the economic and philosophical system derived from papal encyclicals and developed by G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc in the early twentieth century, is also undergoing a renewal of interest. IHS press, which prints both classic and modern Distributist works, opened its doors in 2001; numerous blogs and internet sites discuss Distributism and its modern applications; and recent books such as Rod Dreher's *Crunchy Cons* have introduced Distributist principles to modern readers.¹ It is not surprising that *The Lord of the Rings* and Distributism appeal to modern audiences: both grapple with common problems of modernity. In fact, Tolkien included Distributist solutions to problems associated with modernity in his trilogy.² The Shire, the home of the hobbits, faces many problems that our modern society faces, in particular an economic crisis, environmental destruction, and the lure of imperialism. Let us examine, then, how the hobbits of the Shire apply Distributist principles to these problems in order to see how we might handle these problems in our own society.

In the modern world, we are accustomed to a highly-centralized industrial economy that engages in international trade and is controlled by the twin powers of "big government" and "big business". In contrast, the Shire's Distributist economy is a diffuse system based upon small farmers, small business, and local trade. Distributists



Road Goes Ever On by Jef Murray

such as Belloc and Chesterton have argued that the modern industrial economy promotes greed, materialism, and a servile attitude among the population, and discourages freedom, widely distributed private property, and traditional Christianity. Distributists have sought to revitalize aspects of the Medieval economic system—such as an agricultural economy based upon the small-landholding peasant—in the face of a modern economic system that they believed was destroying traditional culture and man's humanity.³

The Shire embodies the Distributist economic vision. It is a rural community composed of farmers, craftsmen, and small businessmen, and its economy is based upon agrarianism. Many hobbits, including Sam,

The Old Gaffer, Farmer Cotton, and Farmer Maggot, are gardeners or farmers. The only trade in which the Shire engages is based upon agricultural products such as the Shire's famous pipeweed, though the hobbits only trade with outsiders after their own needs are met. The one "industrial" site mentioned is the old mill, which can hardly be deemed a large industrial operation since it is run by a local hobbit, who inherited the business from his father. The mill is used to meet the needs of the local community; it is not intended for large-scale trade. Furthermore, the mill grinds corn, a staple of the Shire's agricultural production.

The two controlling powers of the modern industrial economy—big government and big business—are absent from the Shire. Bigness in any form is foreign to the Shire's economy, which is localized, agricultural, and hobbit-sized in every sense.

After Sam, Frodo, Pippin, and Merry leave on the quest to destroy the ring, the Shire's economy changes dramatically. When the four hobbits return from their quest, big government and big business have encroached upon the former hobbit-sized economy, industrializing it. A large bureaucracy comprised of outsiders now controls the Shire's economy, and its principles of production have expanded well beyond what is necessary simply for maintaining the needs of the Shire and its inhabitants. Pimple and Sharkey, two aptly named villains who lead this attack upon the hobbits, buy up much of the Shire, concentrating land and resources in the hands of a few, which is antithetical to the Distributist insistence upon the necessity of widely distributed private property. Most

telling of the destruction of the Shire's economy is the fate of Sandyman's Mill. The new owners tear down the hobbit-sized mill and build a new industrial mill, which is run by wheels and contraptions and is powered by fire rather than water. Instead of grinding corn, the new mill makes iron, ostensibly to produce weapons for war. The effect on the Shire is far-reaching: whereas the Shire formerly produced life through agrarianism, it now produces death through industrialism. The limited agricultural work that remains in the Shire is based upon an industrial system and "free trade" with surrounding communities. The formerly self-sufficient economy that was focused on localism and on providing what was needed to maintain its own citizens becomes a "global market" that seeks consumers outside its boundaries and leaves those within hungry.

When the four questing hobbits return to the Shire and discover what Sharkey has done, they lead the charge to restore the Shire's rural-based economy. Though it will take years for the hobbits to undo the effects of industrialism, they set about at once to restore a Distributist economy in place of the modern industrial economy set up by Sharkey. They destroy the new mill and return the land to farmland and wooded areas. Private property is returned to its original owners, and the hobbits who had been employed in the factory-like mill return to their fields and their small crafts. The redeemed Shire gives hope that a restoration to a Distributist economy is possible and shows that it is preferable to a modern industrial economy.

So far we have only hinted at another of the conflicts between industrialism and Distributism, and that is the environmental impact of each system. Distributists dislike the environmental destruction caused by industrialism. Indeed, "greenness" is one reason that Tolkien and Distributism both receive positive attention today from many circles. While both Tolkien and "Distributists were 'greens' before anyone dreamed of that label" (Cooney 12), their identification with the modern secular environmental movement needs clarification.

Tolkien and Distributists were not greens as a result of any liberal political ideology or because they worshipped the earth mother goddess; rather, they believed that respect for the land and love of nature were essential components of their conservative and traditional beliefs in the family, in the arts, and, most importantly, in Christianity. They believed that modern industrialism and its disregard for nature attacked the very foundations of traditional communities, which were based upon agriculture and a close relationship with nature. This conservative greenness has been held by a number of twentieth-century conservative thinkers in addition to the British Distributists: T. S. Eliot, Russell Kirk, the agrarian authors of *I'll Take My Stand*, and Wendell Berry to name but several.⁴ They equated an industrial economy and the culture it produced with negative progress and liberalism. Thus, an agrarian society that is close to nature and experiences her natural ebb and flow has a greater respect for the environment than an industrial society, which emphasizes its independence from and dominance over nature.

In the beginning, the Shire is a pastoral paradise. Tolkien's description and Peter Jackson's depiction both emphasize the Shire's rural beauty. A number of hobbits—including Sam and his father, the old Gaffer—live in close proximity to the land, whether they are farmers or gardeners. Even those businesses that are not strictly agricultural are environmentally friendly and work in concert with nature. Sandyman's mill, for example, runs by water-power.

Once Frodo, Sam, Pippin and Merry set out on their quest, though, they begin to see lands affected by industrialism: both Isengard and Mordor represent war-torn lands as well as industrial wastelands. Indeed, Tolkien often employs the environmental destructiveness of war to illustrate the ecological cost of industrialization. At Isengard, Saruman has destroyed the surrounding forest in order to feed his industrial fires that he uses to produce weapons. Sauron's saber rattling and environmental destruction has so decimated Mordor that

he must import water and food for his troops. In both places, war and industrialization are bosom buddies. Throughout the trilogy, Tolkien identifies industrialism with warfare, and agrarianism with peace.

The most heartbreaking image of environmental destruction is what the hobbits see when they return to the Shire. Unfortunately, Peter Jackson leaves the Shire's destruction and its restoration out of his film adaptation, meaning that people who have only seen the movie version miss the significance of this important scene. In the hobbits' absence, the Shire has become a little Isengard or Mordor. The sight causes Frodo to weep and to proclaim, "This is Mordor".⁵ The forest has been leveled in order to supply Sharkey and his men with fuel to feed the fires in the industrial mill, which pollutes the water, the air, and the land. Farmer Cotton describes the actions of the industrial overlords as "hack, burn, and ruin".⁶ The countryside of the Shire has been ravished, and Sharkey gleefully tells the hobbits that it will take years to repair the destruction to the land. The pastoral paradise has become an industrial hell.

This environmental destruction has also destroyed the indigenous culture of the hobbits. They have become industrial serfs rather than agricultural freemen. Now, the hobbits depend upon the industrial work they perform at the new mill for their livelihood rather than enjoying the fruits of their agricultural labor. They also crouch in fear before the big government that has taken over the Shire, for this new government controls the mill, the hobbits' source of livelihood. Once the hobbits are severed from nature, they are severed from their very essence: they are no longer free and fun-loving. Instead, they have become industrial slaves, both to their masters at the mill and to their bureaucratic masters in government. Ted Sandyman, the former owner of the mill, now works there as a wheel cleaner—a menial laborer—for the new owners.⁷ Once the hobbits' reliance upon nature is destroyed, their self-sufficiency follows. The hobbits and their community are lost when the land is forsaken.

After the questing hobbits return, Sam begins an agrarian and environmental restoration of the Shire, using the magical soil that the Lady Galadriel gave to him to replant trees that were destroyed by industrialization and to revitalize forsaken gardens and orchards. The Shire rebounds quickly, and the next year produces the greatest harvest on record. This provides hope that even the worst of environmental destruction can be reversed, and that the land, when treated properly, can be coaxed into producing beauty and life once again.

The third issue that confronts the Shire and our own society, imperialism, is closely tied to industrialism. Tolkien and many other Distributists connect industrialism and imperialism, arguing that the former encourages the latter. The effects of both are often similar: destruction of men, destruction of the environment, and destruction of culture. Tolkien and the Distributists were not pacifists, but they did oppose imperialism. Distributists celebrate the armed defense of hearth and home—as Tolkien does within *The Lord of the Rings*—but they frown upon imperialistic adventures, and Chesterton especially sympathized with those who defended their homes against invaders, while criticizing the imperial wars of “modern industrial empires”.⁸ For instance, Chesterton wrote a Distributist novel, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, in which Adam Wayne, the hero, raises an army of locals to defend his native district of Notting Hill against neighboring London districts, which are attempting to confiscate a portion of Notting Hill in order to run a highway through it. Wayne and his fellow defenders of Notting Hill win, demonstrating that defending one’s own home or town against invasion or aggression is a Distributist virtue. By the end of the novel, however, the Notting Hill people, overcome by the lure of imperialism, are destroyed by it when they attempt to conquer neighboring lands and are defeated.⁹

Tolkien’s trilogy teaches a similar lesson against imperialism. Sauron, the evil dark lord, is an imperialist who attempts to con-

trol all of Middle Earth and subdue it to his will through the power of the one ring. Obviously, Sauron’s will is evil, so it is easy to condemn his actions, but what if the imperialist tendency embodies seemingly good values?

Tolkien provides an answer in the scene in which Sam undergoes a temptation to use the ring to lead an armed agrarian revolution against Mordor. Like Sauron, Sam wishes to use the ring, but, unlike Sauron, Sam wishes to use the ring to promote freedom. He has a vision in which he sees himself brandishing a sword and using the ring to lead an army into Mordor in order to conquer it and to transform the industrial wasteland into a giant garden. While this vision is highly appealing to Sam, he ultimately realizes that “the one small garden of a free gardener was all his need and due, not a garden swollen to a realm; his own hands to use, not the hands of others to command”.¹⁰ Sam recognizes that he cannot make his agrarian vision a reality through imperialism, and he rejects this imperialistic and militaristic temptation.

In the end, Sam accomplishes his agrarian restoration, but it is not in foreign lands or through the force of the ring; instead, he accomplishes his goal at home, where the hobbits understand Distributism and desire an agrarian restoration. Sam’s views of

imperialism are similar to those of Chesterton, whose “nationalism was simply incompatible with imperialism”.¹¹ Both Sam and Chesterton love their native land too much to risk ruining it by attempting to force its values on other lands that are not prepared for them.

Modern society has much to learn from Distributism and from the Shire. Critics of Distributism often say that it is unrealistic, a bit of romantic medieval nostalgia for old fogies or young idealists who reject modernity. Likewise, Tolkien’s Shire is dismissed as a mere fantasy that has nothing to teach us today. Admittedly, a whole-scale implementation of Distributist and Shire values throughout our society seems unlikely, but Distributists think small rather than big, and believe that the seeds of ideas need to be planted at the local level before they can bear fruit for the larger community. Accepting some of the Shire’s economic principles in our own families—such as planting a garden, buying local goods, and supporting small business—will make a difference in our communities. Rejecting the materialism of the modern industrial economy will benefit our wallets, our souls, and our environment. A rejection of imperialism and of the idea that we can remake the world in our image might cause us to focus on fixing our own problems, such as our



economic crisis and our environmental destruction, here at home. We can work on restoring our republic rather than exporting our empire. Those of us who agree with these changes must, like Sam, resist the temptation to implement them through force; instead, we must seek to change peoples' hearts, which is where a Distributist restoration—like the one that took place in the Shire—must begin.

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References

1. Distributist Blog: <http://distributism.blogspot.com>; IHS Press: <http://www.ihspress.com>. Cf. also Anthony Cooney, "I Fear No Peevish Master", *Beyond*

Capitalism and Socialism (Norfolk, Virginia: IHS Press, 2008), pp. 9–20.

2. Joseph Pearce and Charles A. Coulombe both discuss Distributism in *The Lord of the Rings* (Joseph Pearce, *Tolkien: Man and Myth* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998), pp. 159–163.

3. In "Distributism: A Manifesto", Arthur Penty, an architect and Distributist writer, declares that modern machinery and industry "has de-humanized and de-spiritualized the industrial workers". Arthur Penty, "Distributism: A Manifesto", *Distributist Perspectives*, Vol. 1. Ed. J. Forest Sharpe (Norfolk, VA: IHS Press, 2004) p. 90.

4. For a great introduction to Distributism, see John Sharpe's Introduction to *Beyond Capitalism and Socialism: A New Statement of an Old Ideal*, (Norfolk, Virginia: IHS Press, 2008), particularly pp. xxxii-xxxvii. Sharpe also examines the relationship between modern conservatism and

Distributism, noting that the older conservative critique of industrialism has disappeared from most types of modern conservatism, which has, in fact, completely endorsed industrialism and the "free market".

5. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), p. 297.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 292.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 292.

8. G. K. Chesterton, *Saint Francis of Assisi* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), p. 221.

9. Chesterton, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978). In his biography *Tolkien: Man and Myth*, Pearce summarizes Tolkien's debt to Chesterton and Distributism (pp. 160–181).

10. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, p. 177.

11. Jay P. Corrin, *G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1981), p. 2.