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Why Bother Defending the Shire?

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Here are two contrasting images of the city. The first is from David Hume, the second Tolkien. Hume argues that civilisation relies on the intimate relationship between commerce and refinement in the arts and sciences. These combine in the city. Hume writes:

> The more these refined arts advance, the more sociable men become… They flock into cities; love to receive and communicate knowledge; to show their wit or their breeding; their taste in conversation or living, in clothes or furniture. Curiosity allures the wise; vanity the foolish; and pleasure both. Particular clubs and societies are every where formed: Both sexes meet in an easy and sociable manner; and the tempers of men, as well as their behavior, refine apace. So that, beside the improvements which they receive from knowledge and the liberal arts, it is impossible but they must feel an increase of humanity, from the very habit of conversing together, and contributing to each other's pleasure and entertainment.[1]

The city is an allure of fashion, opulence, and vanity. It incites what is best about us, argues Hume, our "relish for action," quickness of mind, and our very humanity. The city, for the Scot, is a beachhead in the Whig transformation of civilisation. This transformation is on going:

[1] D. Hume, "Of Refinement in the Arts," Essays Moral, Political and Literary (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), p. 271.

urbanization is a global phenomenon and accounts for massive contemporary migrations. Hume would certainly defend a fashionable city, but the Shire?

Middle-earth has its share of magnificent cities but, interestingly, in LOTR they are mostly marked by decay. Osgiliath is in ruins, Dwarrowdelf a tomb, Rivendell is emptying, and the White City sparsely populated. Pippin, coming to the White City for the first time, is struck by its grandeur and power:

> Yet it was in truth falling year by year into decay and already it lacked half the men that could have dwelt at ease there. In every street they passed some great house or court over whose doors and arched gates were carved many fair letters of strange and ancient shapes: Pippin guessed of great men and kindreds that had once dwelt there; and yet now they were silent, and no footstep rang on their wide pavements, nor voice was heard in their walls, nor any face looked out from door or empty window (RK, 736).

And at the heart of the White City:

> A sweet fountain played there in the morning sun, and a sward of bright green lay about it; but in the midst, drooping over the pool, stood a dead tree, and the falling drops dripped sadly from its barren and broken braches back into the clear water (RK, 736).

Tolkien does not celebrate cities like David Hume. He is far more sympathetic to Vincent McNabb's assessment: the "unceasing Nazareth cry is: `Come back, not to Ur, Memphis or Jerusalem, but to Nazareth, lest you prepare another Golgotha.'"[2] In *The Silmarillion*, the great Númenórean city of Armenelos is consigned to the sea by the wrath of Eru as punishment for the human sacrifice practiced there (S, 271-74). In *The Hobbit*, Erebor is a wreck occupied by the worm, Smaug, and the Elves, at least, think the Dwarves rather invited Smaug with their greed.

An influence on Scheler and Schmitt, the late-Victorian, German social theorist, Ferdinand Tönnies, has this to say about the ancient city of Rome:

[2] V. McNabb, O. P., *Nazareth or Social Chaos* (Ihs, 2010).

> The rule of Rome over the orbis terrarum, which has its material foundation in commerce, brings all cities closer to the one city, and gathers together all the shrewd, bargaining, prosperous individuals, the entire ruling elite of this boundless empire, all haggling together in the Forum. It erases their differences and inequalities, gives them all the same outward appearance, the same language and form of expression, the same currency, the same culture, the same covetousness and the same curiosity. The abstract human being, the most artificial, `routinised' and sophisticated of all machines, has been conjured up and constructed, and can be observed – like an apparition – in the bright unglamorous light of day.[3]

The commercial city erases peoples' "differences and inequalities" and literally makes the human anew on the model of a routinised machine. LOTR expresses Tolkien's dislike of mechanization. Though Boromir speaks lovingly about the White City (FR* 45), and Aragorn and Arwen renew it (RK, 950-51), nonetheless the Shire, a constellation of villages, is Tolkien's ideal. Hobbits, he tells us, in "close friendship with the earth," "do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water-mill, or a hand-loom" (FR, 1). Hobbits are not a commercial people, dedicated to the refinements of the arts and sciences.

Tolkien echoes McNabb's 1933 *Nazareth or Chaos*, where Old and New Testament leaders are documented as shepherding their people "out of decadent city organization back to the land." And not merely to the land, but to property based upon land holding. Like McNabb, fellow distributist Hilaire Belloc argued that the average citizen of the industrial West lived a servile life. His basic claim was that a person is servile unless he or she can step away from the working world. This freedom only exists if one owns productive land, which grants a degree of self-sufficiency. The Middle Ages bequeathed garden and cottage industry, as well as the commons, a public space for grazing livestock at the centre of English village life, but Whig industrialism gradually stripped all this away. Interestingly, the great Dutch historian, Johan

[3] F. Tönnies, Community and Civil Society (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 217.

Huizinga, observes that the commons of the English village functioned as playing fields and fostered modern sporting life.[4] Home ownership is no replacement for land ownership, because such an asset is invariably mortgaged, oftentimes requiring two adults' wages to sustain the payments. Wage-servitude is another way to think of home-ownership.

Belloc's demand for a free-holding yeomanry sounds like the effusions of nostalgia and utopianism, but he rejected this. Servility is so repugnant to human dignity that people ought seriously to think about how to generate genuine land distribution. Not for no reason is Bag End a feature of LOTR because widespread land ownership, houses and their productive gardens, is basic to distributist thinkers; an example of Pope Leo XIII's "ownership of productive property."[5] Owning such property, as opposed to stock or other capital instruments, commits one not only to participation in a surrounding world but just that, a surrounding, a belonging, a place. This point is well made in the film version of The Hobbit. Bilbo, criticised by Thorin for being overly preoccupied with thoughts about Bag End, retorts that he is there to help the Dwarves precisely because they have no home: all should hanker to belong to a place like Bag End (H1* 29). And, of course, the Dwarves do long for a home: think of the wonderful scene when Thorin and Balin finally enter Erebor again (H2* 26). Terror first comes to the Shire in the guise of the Ringwraiths. The Nazgûl hunt Frodo. Formerly Kings of Men but corrupted by the

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[4] J. Huizinga, Homo Ludens (The Beacon Press, 1955), p. 197.

[5] Pope Leo XIII made this point in 1893 but it is still found in the writings of popes today. For Pope Francis's skepticism towards urbanization, see The Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium), paragraph 73. For Pope Benedict XVI's criticism of an international class of managers divorced from the community and his requirement that capital be invested in the place of its origin, see Charity in Truth (Caritas in Veritate), Chapter 3.

Ring now, severed from all community, they roam the earth on their horses or take to the air on missions for Sauron. Detached from the land they represent a fascination with mobility that is one of the hallmarks of commercial civilisation but also show that goodness collapses without belonging and home. Why exactly?

Tolkien believes Hume's city of fashion, vanity, and mobility, mistakes the very foundations of civilisation. It might be thought that Tolkien's Toryism, his emphasis on a person belonging to some place with an inherited communal identity, runs the risk of making persons epiphenomenal to the dynamics of communities. Tolkien turns this on its head, though: it is the Whig commercial city of the "abstract human being" where this is most likely to happen. One of the finest features of Tolkien's work, I think, is the stress he places on the eccentricities of his many characters. Eccentricity is seldom celebrated today, puzzlement or mockery typically the reaction, but Tolkien is of apiece with the Catholic literature of his times in welcoming eccentrics. To read Evelyn Waugh's Brideshead Revisited with its love of the land and Bridey's matchbox collection is little different than reading about Bilbo, his books, and his adventure, "there and back again." The eccentricities of Bilbo, Éowyn, and Bombadil, to name only a few, are a way for Tolkien to stress how an inherited identity enhances rather than smothers.

Tolkien might concede that friendship and culture is possible in a city, however, he certainly thinks this far more likely in villages and towns. Each village is, in its own way, an eccentricity. The Ring is the Enemy because hostile to the multiplicity and oddities of distributism. The unity sought by the Ring cancels a plurality of manners of life and therewith cancels a host of value orders distributed throughout these manners of life. This is why goodness collapses without place. In Middle-earth, cities are more like villages. Its cities are for Dwarves, Men, and Elves, not "the abstract human being." Each is a bastion of the distinctive

characteristics of their builders. This is because homes generate solidarity, shared values that guide. There is a risk. The life of a place requires a preparedness to protect that home. Solidarity requires a solidification of the enclosure, and now I turn to Tolkien's belief that risk, evil, and war, are problems inevitably wrapped up with solidarity.

A civilisation is always exposed. The cultivation of the land, its buildings, and institutions, runs the risk of drawing unwanted attention. In the last twenty years or so, Carl Schmitt has emerged as one of the most important minds of the twentieth century, a man who is also notorious, tainted by his Nazi associations.[6] As a Catholic, his inspiration is not the Middle Ages but a triad of radical modern Catholic conservative thinkers, de Bonald (d. 1840), de Maistre (d. 1821), and Donoso Cortés (d. 1853). He mentions them in all his major works – his Political Romanticism provides one of his longer treatments of their significance – and I think Tolkien found some, not all, of their basic insights congenial.

Of the three, Schmitt relies most on de Bonald. Famous for the claim that political legitimacy is historical, an inheritance of a people and a land, de Bonald argues that political life take its bearings from a community bounded by time and space, that human acts take their orientation from a place. Schmitt deepens and darkens this claim and the Shire illustrates Schmitt's analysis. Schmitt's Concept of the Political (1927) is known for its signature thesis that the friend-enemy distinction is inescapable: inescapable on account of the fact that borders are ineliminable (Political Theology [1922]). This is the core thesis of The *Nomos* of the Earth (1950) where Schmitt argues that an elemental gesture of human life is the man ring: forming

[6] Dozens have written on the extent and character of Schmitt's relationship to the Nazis but the place to start remains Joseph Bendersky's Carl Schmitt, Theorist for the Reich (Princeton University Press, 1983).

their bodies into a circle, persons foster face-to-face communication in the man ring but also establish a boundary with their backs. The idea is found in McNabb: about Nazareth, he says: "it was a family of families gathered together in aid and defence of life. Within its circuit dwelt the little self-sufficing group of land-workers and hand-workers." A similar idea is found earlier in the work of Protestant army chaplain, Adam Ferguson, a leading light of the Scottish Enlightenment, who thought Smith and Hume ignored the formative aspect of war. He writes:

> …slavery and rapine are first threatened from abroad, and war, either offensive or defensive, is the great business of every tribe. The enemy occupy their thoughts; they have no leisure for domestic dissensions. It is the desire of every separate community, however, to secure itself; and in proportion as it gains this object, by strengthening its barrier.[7]

This idea is found again and again in Tolkien. Amongst many instances in *The Hobbit*, the Dwarves form a man ring at the on-rush of Elf riders in Rivendell (H1* 15) and Gandalf uses his staff to light a defensive ring around himself to hold at bay the power of Sauron (H2* 29). Gandalf does the same in LOTR when covering the retreating cavalry of the White City (RK* 21). The Ents form up in a man ring (TT, 474). As Gimli, Legolas, and Aragorn track the Uruk-hai raiding party that has snatched Pippin and Merry, they find themselves strangers in Rohan. Crossing paths with a Rohan contingent of cavalry, Jackson has the Riders of Rohan swirl marvelously round the trackers only to quickly tighten formation into a circle enclosing the trackers that they might be questioned (TT* 11). At the end of the movie, outside the Black Gates, the hordes of Mordor surround Aragorn's forces who all then position themselves back-to-back as a man ring (RK* 65).

[7] See Adam Ferguson's 1767 An Essay on the History of Civil Society (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 122.

Man rings are enclosures that mark land with values. "The enclosing ring – the fence formed by men's bodies, the man ring – is a primeval form of ritual, legal, and political cohabitation" (NE, 74). In consequence, as at Rome, the city walls were sacred. Borders and veneration are birthed together. Gandalf understands the point perfectly. At the Siege of Gondor, the walls of the White City threatened by Lord Sauron's forces, Gandalf, arrayed in the glory of the White Wizard, mans the walls. Realizing that Denethor, Steward of Gondor, is unhinged by the threat the city faces, Gandalf calls to the men of Gondor to man the walls: riding through the city on Shadowfax he shouts again and again, "Prepare for battle! To the walls! Return to your posts!" This is nicely done in the film (RK* 36). Johan Huizinga (no fan of Schmitt) confirms his point:

> Every place from which justice is pronounced is a veritable *temenos*, a sacred spot cut off and hedged in from the "ordinary" world. The old Flemish and Dutch word for it is *vierschaar*, literally a space divided off by four ropes or, according to another view, by four benches. But whether square or round it is still a magic circle, a play-ground where the customary differences of rank are temporarily abolished. Whoever steps inside it is sacrosanct for the time being.[8]

Tied to the land, the man ring is a normative enclosure: Schmitt writes, "nomos means dwelling place, district, pasturage; the word nemus has the same root and can have ritual significance as forest, grove, woods."[9] The entire community and its laws are given an orientation from one place towards other places (NE, 74-5).[10] LOTR abounds in loving descriptions of pasturage and forests, descriptions that express Tolkien's conviction that personal

[8] J. Huizinga, Homo Ludens (The Beacon Press, 1955), p. 77.

[9] C. Schmitt, The *Nomos* of the Earth (Telos Press, 2003), p. 75.

[10] See also Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago University Press, 1958), p. 64, n. 64.

dramas have a geography and history. Think of this vivid geographical statement of the man ring by Boromir:

> Believe not that in the land of Gondor the blood of Númenor is spent, nor all its pride and dignity forgotten. By our valour the wild folk of the east are still restrained, and the terror of Morgul kept at bay; and thus alone are peace and freedom maintained in the lands behind us, bulwark of the West. But if the passages of the River should be won, what then? (FR, 239)

Like Plato and Aquinas, Tolkien rejects self-creation, insisting that not all that is good is new (S, xiii & LOTR, xv). Schmitt, in a book he wrote towards the end of his life, Political Theology II, argues that vanity celebrates what is new, the novel, the novum, but forgets the ovum. LOTR begins in Hobbiton, literally in a hole in the ground from whence emerges the hobbit, Bilbo. It begins at Bag End and far from Bilbo's adventure being a journey of self-creation it is a tale "there and back again." The *ovum* is an historical community (de Bonald) rooted in fertile pasture (Schmitt). Elrond, appointing the Fellowship, makes the point: "This is the hour of the Shire-folk, when they arise from their quiet fields to shake the towers and counsels of the Great" (FR, 264). For this reason, dwellings in Middle-earth are melded into the land. Bag End is under the hill, Dwarrowdelf is built into the mountain, Caradhras, and Minas Tirith about one, Mount Mindolluin (S, 304). Amidst the trees of Lothlórien, the seat of Galadriel and Celeborn is the city Caras Galadhon, the City of Trees (FR, 344-45). Civilisation itself then is always, in Pope Leo XIII's phrase, "that portion of nature's field."

On account of Schmitt's own lack of moral character and his throwing in his lot with the Nazis for a time (1933-36),[11] it is easy to think that his talk of the man ring is really a surrogate

[11] I do not mean to ignore or belittle the question of whether Schmitt's ideas have a deep affinity with Nazism. Kolnai, for one, thought the connection profound. Later in

for a virulent nationalism, a valorization of wars of aggression and imperial expansion. Yet it is an implication of the foregoing that a crucial theme for Schmitt is defense, not attack. Schmitt's man ring restricts personal agency to bearings derived from the land and the community's past. A solidaristic enclosure deferring to the land is evident in the mines of Moria for the Dwarves, Lothlorien for the Elves, and, behind hedges, the hobbit houses inside the knolls of the Shire. A lovely example from *The Silmarillion* is the Girdle of Melian. Married to the Elvenking, Thingol, Queen Melian, being of "divine race," an Ainur, or one of The Holy Ones, casts a defensive ring around Doriath. Melian, by her Girdle, "Doriath defended through long ages from the evils without." With the death of her beloved Thingol at the hands of Dwarves, her spirit breaks and part of the defensive wall, the river of Esgalduin, is weakened: "The enchanted river spoke with a different voice, and Doriath lay open to its enemies" (S, 234).

The idea is also beautifully captured after the War of Wrath when Morgoth is defeated by the host of the Valar. Captive, Morgoth is pushed through "the Door of the Night beyond the Walls of the World." Eärendil watches "upon the ramparts of the sky" and "a guard is set for ever on those walls" lest Morgoth attempt a return (S, 255). The places of Middle-earth all express the idea. The City of Gondor is a city made up of inner and outer rings that arc out around Mount Mindolluin. Edoras has a ring-wall, a stockade atop a sort of table mountain that itself acts like a ring-wall. And a few other examples: The circular tower of Saruman's Orthanc, Sauron's own circular eye, the Ring itself, and Mount Doom, a volcano with a circular opening,

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this book (Chapter 6), I address whether there is a significant continuity between Tolkien and fascism. For Kolnai's analysis of Schmitt see PVNS, pp. 45-83.

being origin and home of the Ring, with Shelob – herself an engorged circle – standing sentinel at the only pass, the Stairs of Cirith Ungol.

Land, argues Schmitt, "contains law within herself, as a reward of labour; she manifests law upon herself, as fixed boundaries; and she sustains law about herself, as a public sign of order" (NE, 42). Land and law are tied, insists Schmitt, with the land having a regularity and fecundity that rewards human labour upon the land. Labour rewarded, land manifests law upon itself: there being the boundaries of the crops, partitions of the fields, and above and across the land develops all the public signs of order. Law is, says Schmitt, originally a fence-word, meaning a place to dwell (NE, 74-75). The common law of a people is upon the land, the people's shared life, orientated by the rich lawfulness of land. The two giant statues at Argonath, "the sentinels of Númenor" (FR, 383) are a good example of Schmitt's point. "Upon great pedestals founded in the deep waters stood two great kings of stone… The left hand of each was raised palm outwards in gesture of warning" (FR, 383). Land and law united. By contrast, the sterility about Mordor, and the lush forests of Isengard destroyed, point to the disorder of the rule of the totalitarians Sauron and Saruman. It is little surprise that Gollum is so fixated upon Bilbo's thievery of his property, or that the theft of the Silmarils brings so much doom, because property is a basic expression of land, law, and common life. For Gollum, the exile, the ring is a surrogate, pointing to something lost is indeed very precious.