

A MARXIST LOOKS AT MIDDLE EARTH

OR

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE SHIRE

A scientific analysis of the society in Hobbitland seems called for. Certain aspects it is true remain unexplained and for other mechanisms must be assumed so that the economy can remain in equilibrium. Furthermore, Hobbits DO remain a different species from mere humans and some of their achievements can only be understood because of the particular biology as well as the cultural milieu in which they find themselves.

The Shire, we are told, measures about 40 leagues by 50 or 120 miles by 150 miles. (At a minimum, therefore, assuming all its corners are rounded, it must cover an area of 1,5000 square miles. In parts it is quite densely settled and at an average density of 100 persons per square mile, this would give a population of around 1½ million. However, there is also evidence that quite large areas are thinly populated. Sam's cousin went up with Mr. Boffin for the hunting to the North Farthing which has high moors and sharp fresh air while cultivation such as it is in this area, is of the hardier cereals, oats and barley. There are also quite large areas of woodland and marsh within the Shire, though some parts of the latter have been reclaimed for farms (Rushey and Marish). A minimum population density of 10 persons per square mile would give a total population of about 150,000. This seems a bit on the low side and my preference is for a figure of around 300,000 to half a million, nearer the lower than the upper limit particularly as this fits in with the other evidence. In any case, even with a highly productive agricultural base the exceptionally large individual food inputs of the Hobbits, rich in animal protein, would suggest the smaller number.

The technology available to the Hobbits is pretty advanced; that for agriculture seems to be better than the best practice in the early nineteenth century, while that for industry, forges, bellows, windmills and handlooms, is, with some exceptions, that of the mid-eighteenth century. Mining, quarrying and some aspects of metallurgy seem rather backward, due in part to the lack of gunpowder for blasting; but with the exception of armaments, which are very primitive and confined to bows, clubs, axes and knives, the technology set is a rich one, far more productive for instance than that available to any non-European society at the end of our middle ages. Power sources are also relatively considerable from wind and water, while for smelting, brick furnaces and household heating, wood is used. Paper too must be made fairly extensively. The problem of the fuel supply means that there must be considerable areas of carefully cropped woodland together with frequent coppices and there is clear evidence of this. We know little of farming methods save for the use of horses for draught rather than oxen but it looks as if there are moderately labour-intensive methods with high yields per acre by the use of organic techniques.

This general description implies considerable specialisation of function among all producers and therefore trade within the Shire of both industrial and agricultural goods. North Farthing beer is a regional delicacy but the tobacco and wines of the South Farthing are probably more important. Hobbits travel on business, which confirms the extent of trading relationships for commodities; while Maggot's complaints about prospects suggest an active market in agricultural produce.

Capital goods are also bought and sold. Frodo purchases a little house near Crickhollow while Pimple, during the absence of the Travellers from the Shire, buys up mills, malt houses, inns, farms and leaf plantations, of which more anon. This leads on to the whole question of the means by which all these transactions are carried on. Now there is no banking system or well developed credit system, so coined money plus perhaps some personal credit is used, and in aggregate there must be quite a lot of metallic money in the Shire. Of course a certain amount of trading could be carried on with credit during the year and debts settled up at the annual Fair of the White Downs. There are no mints and as it has been shown recently that coins have an active life of about 30 years, there is a fairly constant stream of money entering the Shire, otherwise liquidity would dry up and a nasty deflation would ensue. This stream must come, and can only come, from the dwarves and the export of services which the Hobbits render to them when they pass through the Shire and stay at the inns there. Indeed it also seems likely that there is some export of agricultural produce to the dwarf mines in the Southern Blue Mountains. Food is one possibility, though I believe that tobacco from the celebrated Longbottom area is more probable. Certainly dwarves have some demand for tobacco. There may be some small exports by the dwarves, of brass buttons, clocks and similar articles, possible of services of specialised craftsmen (erecting the party tent) but not much to balance their payments account. This seems about the only international economic relation which the Shire is involved in, although the costless imports of technology from the Elves were clearly greater, indeed crucial, importance to Hobbit development.

We must now look at the institutional arrangements by which the Hobbits maintain and develop their economic system before sketching out a probable model of economic history for the Shire. First the Hobbits have a society where private property in land is maintained, often jealously. One remembers Frodo's trespassing on Maggot's farm and what is more, land appears to be held in freehold without feudal tenures or servitudes with one exception dealt with in Appendix I. In addition to the universality of freehold land, craftsmen are free, as is labour generally, and the ownership of productive property is widely spread. However, though widely spread, resources are clearly unequal among individuals. There are both rich and poor Hobbits and there is respect for wealth, for eccentricity is tolerated only in the rich, and there is even some differentiation of accent, though this may well be exaggerated in translation. Frodo, like Bilbo, is of course wealthy and well born. He lives in a most comfortable dwelling and can afford a servant who addresses him deferentially as 'sir', while he does not work at all save for some gentle antiquarian research. Even the Gamgees' rise to eminence may be at least in part due to Frodo's considerable inheritance; while on the other hand, Maggot has four landless labourers living in, as well as his family, to help him work his farm, so there is clearly a proletariat of some kind.

Clearly associated with this class structure, which is in all essentials a bourgeois one, there is a residual nobility of tribal origins which is maintained by its ownership of real estate and of which Bilbo and Frodo are a junior part. The Thain is very wealthy and so are the Oldbucks. Primogeniture is likely, as estates as well as farms, workshops and small trades, tend to remain unchanged for generations. What is odd about Hobbit society is that there are no wealthy capitalists, just a number of old rentier families, with a very broad middle class shading off into landless labourers. This generally petty bourgeois society is not quite general yet, for in the quasi independent frontier chieftainship of Buckland, which controls the Bridge and the forest hedge, patriarchal relationships seem to have survived longer.

Master Gorbodoc never had less than a couple of hundred relatives living with him; and around Tuckborough too society seems more old fashioned, more tribal and more militarised under the direct and personal authority of the Took. For most of the population, though, all that survives of this authority is the Shire Moot and Muster which do not, in fact, take place.

The extraordinary nature of Hobbits as opposed to human society, is that with the exception of the economically irrelevant rentiers who come to the fore politically of course in the military emergency at the end of the Third Age, there is merely an economy of petty commodity producers with unfettered exchange relationships but no large scale capitalist accumulations which subordinate this economy and society to them. The rentiers can of course utilise these exchange relationships by their considerable ownership of land to gain an income. This situation begins to come to an end when evil, that is to say, imperialism, enters the Shire with the purchase by Pimple, presumably with Saruman's money, of a large proportion of the productive resources of the territory. Such an import of capital would lead to inflation, and furthermore, to pay the interest and profits on this investment, there is a large export of commodities. As a result, there is a fall in real incomes as the smaller quantity of goods has to be spread around the same population. There is production for profit, profit which is either reinvested in fixed capital formation, or stocks within the Shire, or exported to Isengard in the form of commodities. To further the process of capital accumulation, natural resources are recklessly used up, in particular the carefully conserved fuel resources. To enforce this new dispensation a parasitic state bureaucracy and a mercenary army must be created whose provision drains off still more production and lowers still further the standard of living. This state is till in an embryonic form, its taxation system is just crude robbery and its army small and inefficient, so that it is easily destroyed in the rebellion led by the Travellers in November 1419 S.R. The Shire after this reverts to its previous form of a petty bourgeois paradise of familiar face to face economic relationships, but where the division of labour and level of technique is sufficient to provide a standard in food and housing up to the level of the advanced capitalist countries of today.

What is the mechanism which prevents the accumulation of commodities, the turning of these commodities into capital and the subsequent domination of society by capitalist relationships within the form of a strong state? In the Shire, after all, the state, far from having withered away, has never really got started as tribalism has decayed. Now Hobbits do have certain advantages over us. They are, for instance, very honest. The wide variety of customary contracts which they must have are rigidly adhered to so that there is no need for courts, rascally attorneys, and highly paid advocates and behind them the necessary coercive power. The key mechanism by which accumulation is prevented, though, must be the habit of present and party giving, in this respect reminiscent of the British Columbian potlach. Saving, accumulation and net investment have taken place if only to provide younger children with sufficient land or capital to earn a living. Beyond this customary level surpluses are automatically dissipated in shared conspicuous consumption. In this respect, at least tribal habits remain strong though neighbours as well as relatives, share in such feasts. There is, of course, considerable evidence of past net investment in land creation as in the draining of the area around Rushey and Marish and the assarting of Buckland. However, such events raise the whole question of Hobbit population dynamics which I have relegated to Appendix II.

Before I end with a short economic history, two or three further matters must be dealt with which require explanation. Populations do not undertake intensive cultivation and the expensive and difficult draining of marshes if suitable fertile land is available unoccupied around them. Landless Hobbits in particular would leave to settle, rendering both incomes from land ownership valueless and the social structure more equal. To maintain the nobility it would be necessary to impose forced labour, whether slavery or serfdom, on the population. Clearly, Gandalf, who needed the Hobbit nobility to conquer Sauron, also felt that such a society would not have generated the necessary moral qualities for his purposes. So how was Hobbit settlement confined within the boundaries of the Far Downs, the Brandywine, the Northern Moors and the Marshes of the South? The moors and marshes themselves are clearly unsuited for settlement, but colonies could have been established beyond these barriers, round Lake Evendim, by the banks of the lower Baranduin and across the Brandywine to the north and south of the dangerous Old Forest. My guess is that on Gandalf's instructions, the Rangers would quietly discourage any such move. In any case with their limited manpower, the shorter the perimeter they had to defend, the better. Without protection, the Hobbits might be very wary of any isolated colony, for the only one remaining was in Bree and that existed in symbiotic relationship with humans. The others must have been destroyed and the small physical size and primitive military technology of the Hobbits could be an explanatory factor. By simply failing to provide protection, the Rangers could prevent the spread of the Shire and this might account as well for the fear and distrust in which Hobbits hold regions outside their native land. Westwards of the Shire on the Tower Hills were the Elves, and the Hobbits were clearly intimidated by them. With their departure at the end of the Third Age, the area of Westmarch was promptly settled in 1452 S.R. exactly thirty two years after the ending of the War of the Ring and thereby taking care of the population explosion that took place at that time. The excess of young Hobbits approaching adulthood could be accommodated there as was Elanor Gamgee born in 1421 S.R. Little is known so far of the boundary of the Shire in the Southwest towards the Blue Mountains, but perhaps further research will elucidate the problem of a stationary frontier here.

One should finally point out the key part played by the Elves and Gandalf in settling up this interesting social experiment. The costless import of the relatively high level technology meant that the extremely painful stage of slave or serf societies were unnecessary, and the creation of this society in isolation meant that merchant capital being absent was unable to dominate the small producer by its control of long distance trade. It is interesting that Saruman's attempt to rule the Shire involved the use of high value easily transportable commodity of tobacco. I believe that the Elves too nudged the Hobbits into the institutional forms of property ownership which would internalise the productivity gains from the new technology. The tribal nobility was paid off without conflict by confirming its ownership of a large proportion of the limited supply of land and establishing it to draw an income via the new money economy. With stable prices and a fixed technology, because the Hobbits do not appear to be very inventive, things could continue indefinitely. Still one has the feeling that despite primogeniture the old nobility was gradually fading away by the division of inheritance. I am thinking in particular of Belladonna Took, Bilbo's mother, who though not an only child, inherited considerable property. The nobles had, of course, a revival after the War though it may well have been temporary. The Fairbairns of Westmarch seem to have been well endowed by King Elessar for example.

Finally, a reconstruction of Hobbit history would go something like this:

A relatively small number of Hobbits, two or three thousand, crossed the Baranduin in 1660 to settle in the Shire under fairly onerous conditions imposed by the High King. In tradition, as is usual, this migration appeared much more numerous than it really was. Despite the fact that most of the Hobbits in Eriador followed them, the dreadful plague of 6.S.R. and the terrible war which ended the North Kingdom in 374 S.R. meant that the total population in 400 S.R. was no bigger than at the time of the first settlement. Perhaps they sent only 100 bowmen or so to the war which was the reason for the lack of records about their contribution. The main area within the Shire that they inhabited was round Tuckborough, where they were able to hide in holes, and just south of the bridge where the marshes provided some cover for the Stooks. In the next 700 years, there was great population growth, the colonisation of the rest of the Shire and Buckland and the importation of Elvish technology. Towards the end of the period, a useful commodity was introduced - tobacco - the Hobbits one great innovation. There was then at the end of this time, a crisis of some kind following the Orcish invasions and a terrible famine when Gandalf had to intervene in 1158 S.R. In my view, the crisis and subsequent loss of life from starvation was caused by the pressure of population on resources and Gandalf almost certainly pushed into being the institutional changes which enabled the population to be stabilised. This certainly seems a time of strain; a number of Tooks had "adventures" around then! (See family trees). From then on the Shire existed in peace and prosperity with a stable population of about a quarter of a million to a third of a million, and with the nobility steadily diminishing in importance. The bad winter of 1311 was easily surmounted twenty years after Bilbo's birth.

I would conclude that we can explain the achievement of the Shire by examining the historical account. Once more, I must report that it was the Elves and Gandalf who "set up" this happy experiment by utilising their superior knowledge and the quasi-religious respect in which they were held.

APPENDIX I

Feudal Incidents and Labour Services

The only ones mentioned are those laid on the entire Hobbit community by King Argeleb when they settled in the Shire, to repair the roads in the area, maintain the Bridge and speed the King's messengers. These might be a considerable burden when the population was very small, but growth would diminish their weight per capita. It suggests too that the economy of markets and money was not fully developed at that time or, perhaps there had been some regression. Anyway, the disappearance of the North Kingdom three hundred years later meant that the provision of food and accommodation for the messengers and their horses would no longer be necessary while the roads would need to be kept up as part of the Hobbits own social capital. They may well have developed a whole system of subsidiary roads. The only real cost then was that of maintaining the Bridge over the Brandywine which clearly does not now justify the existing traffic. However, once built, its maintenance cost would not be unequal to the expense of the provision of a ferry. It might even be less. No toll is charged so I believe some land must have been set aside to pay for the bridge keeper and the occasional repairs to the weathered stone. After all, a masonry bridge can last indefinitely as long as the piers have been solidly sunk to the rock beneath the subsoil. An example is Alcantara in Spain. Certainly the engineers of the North Kingdom in the days of its power would have been capable of that. As far as the other provision of public works in the Shire was organised, I believe it would have been done by a mass labour levy from the whole Shire, a reversion to tribal practice that when only occasional was regarded as enjoyable rather than a burden. This view was done after all to clear up the mess left by Saruman's activities.

APPENDIX II

The Population Dynamic of the Shire

The population at any one time until equilibrium has been reached, can be expressed as :

$$P_n = 2^{\frac{n}{x}} P_o$$

where P_n is the population at time in years
 P_o is the original population
 n is the years elapsing
 x is the time taken to double the population

Hobbits did, of course, mature much later than men. I assume a doubling every 100 years.

$$\text{Therefore } P_n = 2^{\frac{n/100}{2000}}$$

$$\text{Then } P_{1158} = 2^{7.58} \cdot 2000$$

$$= 358000 \text{ (by logs)}$$

This figure is well over the 250000 mark which I have assumed for stability. A doubling every hundred years is very slow, even with the age factor among Hobbits. Unless of course there were great infantile mortality. To assume that population continued to increase beyond this point, would be straining the evidence far too much. The only other way the problem could partly be resolved would be by assuming a very much smaller initial migration or even greater losses in the plague and war. I have pushed these estimates pretty far.

The only problem was, how did the population stabilise. Given a nil illegitimacy rate, then also given that a high proportion at any one time were landless and propertyless, living-in servants unable to marry, the matter would be accounted for. Sam did not expect to marry and live in. If the birth rate was more accurately known, we could estimate the proportion of propertyless Hobbits, but since average family size was unknown, we cannot. all we can say though is that propertylessness was a function of fertility and vice-versa.

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