

Tolkien's Romantic Anarchy

Meredith Veldman & Graham Culbertson

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The Sarehole Mill in Birmingham, near where Tolkien grew up, and the inspiration for the mill in *The Shire*. Photo by Dorian Le Sénéchal / Unsplash

Everyday Anarchism goes back to where it all began: the romantic anarchism of J.R.R. Tolkien. Meredith Veldman, author of *Fantasy*, *The Bomb*, and *The Greening*

of *Britain*, joins me to talk about the romantic protest underlying *The Lord of the Rings*. We discuss the romantic quest for reintegration at the heart of the novels, the appeal that romanticism has for both anarchists and fascists, and why Palantir is such an ironically good name for Peter Thiel's big data company.

Graham: Hello, everyone. Welcome back to everyday anarchism. I'm your host, Graham Culbertson. For this episode, I revived the old tradition of starting chatting with my guest and never doing an introduction. So here's the introduction. My guest today is Meredith Veldman, and we're here to talk about her book, *Fantasy, the bomb and the Greening of Britain*, which is to say. A book that explains the connections between the romantic tradition and then the anti war movement of the second-half of the 20th century. And then in between talks about the work of these counterculture and yet also deeply conservative romantics, CS Lewis and JRR Tolkien. And as you know, Tolkien and his connections to William Morris and conservative anarchism are of deep interest to me. So that's what Meredith and I talked about, although we start. Talking about the way that colleges. And universities are are meant to run in in a Guild style, in the anarchic style, without traditional hierarchies and bosses and managers, but they they they don't anymore. So here's that conversation coming up after the music. One of the things that has struck me about this journey into anarchism and the idea that someone like Tolkien would be an anarchist and of course, when you when you read his his letters, which I've just done recently. He's is just constantly ***** about everything, but the idea that. It it college, it comes from colleagues. It is the idea that the people, it's an old Guild idea, maybe never actually really existed, but had the idea that the people who run the institution and the people who do the work of the institution are the same people. And that just runs all through Kropotkin's work in his definition of anarchy. So when you think of Oxford, I just visited Oxford for the first time recent. And you look at it as an absolute bastion of power and privilege. It's the furthest thing from anarcho communism. But if you think of it as internally as a bunch of people who have, you know, hierarchies and some of them are professors and some of them are not. Professors and I as an American, I don't understand this, but supposedly there's not a CEO and a CFO who come from a different class. Supposedly it is a corporate body in that sense, Oxford is in some ways the I. Deal Tory or conservative anarchist institution? I don't know. Is that is that? Is that ridiculous?

Meredith: That makes absolute sense, and it makes so much sense that talking, except for a little time. At Leeds. Spent, you know, pretty much his life there. Same thing you know with with CS Lewis because because it was this little Oasis away from. The world that. Was out there and and to to a remarkable degree remains today. I mean, what we're supposed to American universities faculty is supposed to. Be in charge and it's strange, you know, in in conversations with administrators and even other faculty to have to say you do recognize I'm not your employee. Yeah. And you know, they're

shock and and increasingly, certainly at LSU that were listed as employees. And it's like. Actually, we're not. This is different, you know.

Graham: Yeah, it's this I. Mean so. So, first of all is. Would say I am a teaching professor, so that means I I I mean I don't know sort of so Reg regular on the word if we what what used to would have been called staff they have to at UNC track their hours and even if there's there's various rules about how supervisor you are and the hours are tracked differently and I. I am faculty member in the sense that my uh. My hours are. Not tracked in that way. My benefits are handled differently, but yeah, I mean, I'm constantly. Filling out paperwork. Yeah. Where? It says, you know, put the name of your supervisor here. And I just want to explain to someone that the chair of the English department is a democratically elected member of the corporate body, is not my supervisor, but that no one knows that.

Meredith: Yeah, yeah, I know. I know. And and it is happening even at Oxford, you know, in the UK ever since Thatcher. A. A real kind of state managed bureaucratization, and I know even at Oxford they have to account for their time weekly. How much time spent researching how much time you know, which I think I do modern Britain do. Do I count the hours I spend watching British television?

Graham: Ohh Meredith, you are you are. So you are. So already speaking my language because this, I mean this is. This is precisely what I mean when I'm talking about every day anarchism is, you know when people are like, you know the so James C Scott has been a huge influence on me lately and this idea of seeing like a state and so if like the question is.

Meredith: Oh, OK, yeah.

Graham: Like what do you want to do? Let's say educate young people. Alright. Well, step one would be draw up some spreadsheets of what you want the education to be and then assess your resources for what you are doing for education. So for example, again to speak for my own life. My contract says it's 80% teaching, 20% service, 0% research is making this podcast or my other podcast that I that I make that is actually for the department. Is that is. That research is it, is IT service? It does. It doesn't make any sense. You cannot divide my job into 8020. Zero. It's nonsense. But if you go to.

Meredith: No.

Graham: These rooms and say. Like, look, I work hard. I do my best. Frankly, I work too hard. I wish I actually spent more time relaxing instead of. Always thinking and reading and emailing students and doing independent studies. And I don't have time for. Can you just leave me alone and I will do my job. And there's like, no we need.

Meredith: Yeah, right.

Graham: Please give us the report on how you spent 80% of your time and then another report on how you spent 20% of your time.

Meredith: The joy of. Assessment and all that. Yeah. Yeah, I. Yes, yes. Have do you know the work of EF Schumacher?

Graham: So actually, no, I don't know the work of of EF Schumacher, although I mean I Schumacher has come up recently as I've been looking at things. No, I don't know the. Work of Schumacher.

Meredith: He interesting guy. So he's in in that book of mine and German immigrant to England. Kind of. I guess we call an early green, you know, but he's been really influential for me. One of the things that he argues is there are divergent problems and convergent problems. And convergent problems are those if we get the math right, if we get the science right, if we get the data right, we. Will find the answer you know. How to make a good video recorder right there was Beta Max. Now we know no, I mean that kind of thing. Right. And he and he uses education as an example of a divergent problem that no matter how much data we get, no matter how many scientists, no matter how many experts. We will never agree on how to educate because that's not that kind of a problem and I find it really helpful. You know, as I want. The assessors come in and I just keep thinking this isn't a convergent problem, folks. We're never going to agree, you know.

Graham: OK. So that actually is a great place to start. And So what I'll do usually I just do a little intro in the episode, but I'll record a separate intro and explain who you are. So first let me ask because Schumacher is in this quote, were you aware that your book was recently mentioned in the London Review of Books? Because that's how I found out about it.

Meredith: Oh my goodness, definitely not.

Graham: Alright, so let's see, let me pull this up. So tehila sason. Don't wanna say that name wrote a book called the Solidarity Economy Nonprofits and the Making of Neoliberalism after Empire. And it was reviewed by, I believe, a historian named Susan Peterson. And it was. I got to tell you, it's not a I'm sorry. Tequila. But it was not a positive review from Susan Peterson. I haven't read the book. I have no investment in this book. But let me. Read to you the final paragraph. Of this review, so someone isn't the first scholar to find Schumacher A fascinating subject and to contextualize him in a new way. In 1994, Meredith Veldman published fantasy, the bomb, and the Greening of Britain, which was like the solidarity economy. To break in. I guess that's that's the name of the song. Back to the quote, a book that emerged from a PhD dissertation as a graduate student at Northwestern. Reading the making of the English working class on the train into Evanston, Veldman had the odd feeling that it was somehow the same book as the one she was reading for, fun told King's the Lord of the Rings, and in some structures of feeling since it was so, she used Thompson Schumacher. And the fantasy novelists to show that post war, oppositional politics and culture repurposed romantic ideals. So there you go.

Meredith: God. That's that's wow and.

Graham: And I.

Meredith: I'm I mean, Susan Peterson. She's wow. She's a. So that's that's great.

Graham: All right. Well, so I I I have been, you know, working on talking in a sort of haphazard way for a few years ever since David Graeber pointed me to tokens

famous, at least among anarchists. Claim that he is. He doesn't say he's an anarchist. He's a believer in philosophical anarchy or a constitutional monarchy. It's so it's so funny, but I have done. I have engaged very little in the scholarship on talking for a few reasons. One is I just, I didn't really have the time. I wasn't deeply invested in it. And two, you know, pretty soon as soon as I start looking at the cost of talking, it seems like it tends to go one of two ways. One is like some sort of, like philology of Elvish, which let me tell you I have no interest in and then some sort of. Like hero worship, thinly disguised as cultural criticism, which I maybe have even less worship in. So I got this reference to this book and I thought Tolkien as a romantic connected to William Morris. Well, that's what I've been saying for four years. I should take a look at this book and I got it. And it was a. And it's fantastic. So, Meredith, thank you for writing this wonderful book. Thank you to Susan Peterson. I guess for for for telling me about it, for using it as example is great work. And thank you for coming on this show to talk. About these issues.

Meredith: Well, thank you. Thank you for having me it. It's it's not a book that's had a huge readership, so I'm I'm always, always delighted to hear someone read. It that's great, yeah.

Graham: Well, Susan Peterson has read it nearly, and now I and now I have as well and I don't think I'll have my students read the whole book, but I'm sure we'll read a few chapters of it. So that'll well, I should say, in 2025 I will assign a few chapters of it whether. Gotta. Gotta be realistic about this. So I was going to start with asking a question about romanticism, but if you also if you want to just explain the broad sweep of the book first, that's really up to you, we can, I'm. Very relaxed. We can do it however you want.

Meredith: No, no, no. Let's, let's let's stick to the what you were. What? You're.

Graham: OK.

Meredith: Paying interest. Sorry. Yeah.

Graham: So yeah, so let's start with Romanticism, which is, you know, romanticism is a is a slur pretty pretty often. And if you want to you can capitalize it with an R to make it. Not a slur. So the romanticism of Ruskin is maybe not a slur, but the lower case are romanticism or a romantic view of the Middle Ages is it is a slur. I myself am trying to hold on to, you know, capital R and lower case R of of romanticism. I'm I have totally. Completed my my switch from technological in in Enlightenment progressive to, you know, romantic anarchist. So when we and ohh and of course. I'm I'm a 19th century Americanist and most of my work was in the late 19th century in the early 20th century, but our our most beloved American writers are all in one way or another, capital. Our Romantics as well. Melville wasn't very romantic in the in the odes to, you know, truth and beauty and nature. But as they in the reaction to the Enlightenment and as part of the movement and being influenced by people like. Emerson, who he thought was overly romantic and Carlisle and that sort of thing. These are these are romantic. So the romantic movement is it's been very important in my work. I am not as knowledgeable about it. In 19 century Britain, although following talking to people

like Morris and Ruskin, it's really important. I'm talking too much. So tell us when you when you say romantic. In in your book and in the context of people like Morris and Ruskin and later talking, what are what are we talking about when we're talking about Romanticism?

Meredith: Right, right. Yeah. Yeah, it's. It is a tricky term. And I was very hesitant to use it because of that and. It is. I mean, I have read a few reviews of my book where they just assume from the beginning that because I'm using the term romantic, I actually am very critical of fantasy literature. And the other thing that I just keep thinking, just read the book, you know, very strange to me. But yeah. I think I mean, I guess I tend to use capital R for the romantic movement 1780 to 1830. The romantic poets and and lowercase are for what I'm talking about, which is something that, although rooted in that movement, I think. Definitely transcends it, and it's not in any way an ideology. I would say it's more a worldview, a set of presuppositions, a kind of attitude, which is why you can find fascist romantics, anarchist romantics, socialist romantics, the whole thing, but I really. The term comes from the term that for me most symbolizes what I'm talking about is. The quest for reintegration, which actually comes from a literary scholar from the 60s, kind of HG Schenk. But I think quest for reintegration is is is the key here. It's the reintegration of the human being with the natural world. It's the reintegration of the human being. With some sort of transcendence, whether that be spiritual world or supernatural, or, you know, reintegration of the individual with powerful community life and the reintegration of the individual with the. Their labor, their work, the product of their labor or just their work itself. And all of that as a reaction to the Enlightenment and to the reduction of reality to what we can prove with our senses, you know, to to the empirical. Not rejecting the empirical unlike you know, certain leaders that we have, but recognizing that that is limited also I would say what I was tracing the rejection of the Enlightenment, but also rejection then of the industrial revolution, which of course in England.

Meredith: Britain as a whole really. Is at the same time as the Enlightenment. That's where the British experience is so different because you've got industrialization in northern England, southern Scotland, the coast of Wales, 1740s already so that those two things come pretty much hand in hand. So, so rejecting. The the environmental degradation again, that reintegration with nature, the urbanization, but much more than that, rejecting the industrial revolutions kind of consequences in terms of reducing human beings to what they produce, what they buy, what they sell, you know. Economic man. So you get a real reaction against that. And what I argue is that I I call it romantic protest not only because it's protesting against the Enlightenment and the Industrial revolution, but also because the main strand in British culture. Particularly English, but I would say Scottish as well is. The imperial trade. You know that sort. Of even on a very popular way that the the the cult of the amateur in English life, where oh, if you just have enough common sense and use your head and see reality for it is you can figure it out, right. Truth is easily accessible to the senses and then you know. Or in terms of intellectual history. If you think of not just the Enlightenment, go back to

the contrast between Newton and DeJarte. Right English empiricism versus Cartesian rationalism. Or you can even go all the way back to the Middle Ages. William Upham, Roger Bacon. If anyone wants to get into the weeds of intellectual history. But there is this this current that, you know, English culture, English intellectual thought is very empirical. And so I see the romantic protest as a kind of counter. Current against that and and coming up in in fairly unusual places, I mean that that was my book. But yeah, I I would say talking definitely rooted in that and talking then rooted in the people that we do recognize right away as romantics whether capital or not like Ruskin like Morris like Coleridge. People like that.

Graham: OK, great. So briefly, first of all and this is. Is an old hat for anyone who's listening to this show frequently, but I, you know, I never know. Some people clearly just listen to 1 episode. So the word, you know, like anarchist, the word, you know, used positively is used first by Proudhon in France. But when Kropotkin writes his history of anarchism as a, as a modern. Thing so you know, he says Lao Tzu is an anarchist, but also that's not. That's not precisely what we mean. In the same way that you know, if you want to, you can find romantics in the 2nd century BC as opposed to empirics in the 2nd century BC. But if we're confining ourselves to this historical framework of when people are using the word. Chris Perkins says it's not the the first anarchist is improved on. The 1st anarchist is Godwin, so that when if you accept that framing, which I certainly do, that makes anarchism in this modern sense. Part of the romantic movement. So there's a very, very broad sense of anarchism that you can apply to everything in the early Christians were anarchist, and I certainly do. But when you, when you look at it this way, the fact that Tolkien is is a romantic and says that he is philosophically inclined to anarchy. It's it's not a. It's not a WAVY line, it's a straight line from the first anarchist, William Godwin, who you know is is the the father of Mary Shelley and the influencer of Percy Shelley. So there with Percy Shelley. Mary Shelley, we were in capital. R romantics, right? There and then, Ruskin and Morris write. Write the way through. So this is to call Tolkien an anarchist, to call him a conservative anarchist. If if you want to or a Tory anarchist that doesn't. Fit. Quite as well. Seems like such a shocking contradiction to so many people. But understood as a romantic anarchist, it's not only not shocking, it seems to me as a as a again as a straight line. Alright, I'm repeating myself so I'll just say like is that, does that sound good? Is there any? Would you like to say anything about Godwin and and Russ, can I really haven't covered them on the podcast or. Should we? Should we? Should we move on?

Meredith: I you know, it's. I don't know much about Godwin at all. I didn't he he never came up in anything. I read of tokens writings. Whereas both Ruskin and Morris came up a lot. And Coleridge. So those were the ones I focused on. But that romantic tradition was absolutely important. I mean tokens. Anyone interested in Tolkien should, and I think it's online. Could should read his essay on fairy stories from 1939, right? That's where he lays it all out. And that essay is very much based on coal ridges. Literary theory and his worldview. And and and Tolkien was very, very clear about

that. He drew his whole idea of the creation of secondary worlds as a religious act. He drew that straight from Coleridge, and he drew a lot of his ideas about the dignity of handicraft labor. And about individual agency from from Ruskin and Morris Morris was, you know, his absolute inspiration, particularly the part of Morris. Nobody seems to read anymore, which are his. **** romances, I guess you'd call them. I'm not quite sure if they're called novels, but the House of the Wolves, I mean, the the titles are so token. You know, the House of the Wolves. Things. The roots of the mountains. The wood beyond the world. All these things that Morris wrote in 1880s, they were hugely influenced on talking enough to make him learn old. Icelandic, you know. I'm I'm going to learn lots of. Old languages but. And one of the reasons he ends up. Actually writing The Hobbit and then the Lord of the Rings. I mean, he's composing his world and silmarillion, but the reason the answer is kind of the publications that get him out there is in part because his friends see his. Louis says to him, we're going to have to write the books we want to read because nobody else is doing it, you know, and that's the discussion that comes out of more. So yeah, he's he's definitely rooted there.

Graham: OK, that's fantastic. And then you know Morris is, I mean, I'm going to go back to this idea of reintegration because I forgot to pick it up, which is I didn't, you know, I hadn't really thought of that definition of romanticism before. Certainly, it fits. It fits Emerson. And. And and Thoreau perfectly. And then with Hawthorne. And Melville, I would say they're more like obsessed with the. Desire for and yet impossibility of reintegration. So it's the same thing. Humankind needs to be reintegrated. And you know Melville is like, good, good luck with that. Like to not want reintegration, I think for Melville is is, you know. Crazy. And then to believe in reintegration in the midst of industrial society is is also crazy, I think, for Melville. So you've just, you know, been thinking about Millville for a long time, and you've you've helped me so much with that. And then of course the.

Unknown Speaker: I think choking.

Meredith: Would fit in there. I'm sorry in there.

Graham: Yes, no, go right ahead.

Meredith: Because you know, if I. I have a seminar with undergraduates at LSU called saving the world. The British hero in popular culture, and we do. We do Lord of the Rings, the mayor. Has all been edited version. Tokyo would be. Horrified. So, you know, readers Digest condensed version but. Afterwards, the students always say. Wow, in the end this is actually a really sad book and I said yes, it is because, you know, he was a really sad man because he didn't think short of heaven that we can be reintegrated. And The thing is, you know, the Elves leave in the end and Middle Earth is passing. And even though the. Shire is, you know, cleansed. We all know that it's not going to last very long. And. Evil will come back, so you know, through his very Catholic religious frame. I think he too is saying this is what we all long for, but. We're fallen and we will never get it short. Of. Death, you know.

Graham: Look again. So this goes. This goes to the heart of. Of this version of of anarchy and then Christianity. So one of the big questions, maybe the biggest question

about Jesus is was he. Was he trying to say that heaven was a place on Earth that could be achieved through through anarchy, through throwing away? Property and family, and reintegrating into this almost, I mean almost inconceivably tight knit community or was what it was the claim, as has been broadly understood, at least since. Augustine, if not, you know the apostle Paul, is the claim that this community cannot be found on Earth and you can sort of temporarily simulated, but ultimately the only way to have the the, the gentle anarchy of heaven is through. Is through the apocalypse. The extinguishing of this world and and being being beyond now. Again, this is going to be repetition for some people. But for my money, the first anarchist is not God. When it's when Stanley, as long as. You believe if. So let's say the first modern anarchist, if you're willing to start the modern world a little bit earlier than Kropotkin and Hobbs, Baum are are willing to do, then the first modern anarchists. Are coming out of the English Revolution, not the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. And when Stanley? I mean, reintegration. I mean, he he calls it digging, but it could be reintegration. We are a community. We are together. We are going to grow and we are going to eat what we grow and he is absolutely explicit. Heaven is a place on Earth. Jesus commanded us to make it. Right here and now, we are not waiting for the perfect heaven. We're gonna make it here and it can be perfect as long as we all. Agree. And of course it falls apart. You know immediately. Not not just because of opposition from the state, but also because the people do not behave the way when Stan Lee wants them to. And so this does seem to me to be a huge break. Between and. So if I've been saying there's a straight line and I can see a straight line from when Stanley to Morris to talking in, in, in, in this idea of reintegration. But the idea that. And and this is where when Stanley is in a certain way was really totally backwards looking, but he's also a progressive in that he says, you know, there used to be a garden of Eden. And let's make a new one. Talking, I think the thing that really sticks in people's crawl when I say that he is an anarchist is Morris. For a while. Tried to build a new world in which this reintegration could happen for everyone talking and talking did not. I mean, it seems that he probably, yeah.

Meredith: No, he would have rejected it. Absolutely, completely, you know, and that's what I mean. Not only not an ideology, but a a worldview. A priest set of precepts, positions. But it can lead in so many directions and a lot of it has to do with the different directions have to do with. Do you see human beings as fundamentally? Good or not, and token would not you know they're not. And so something like when Stanley's efforts are going to fail because. It seems that form of reintegration is no longer available to us. You know, like I said, I mean, you know, he's not only looking at it as romantic, he's also a very conservative Roman Catholic. And I think right, so you end up in, in, in a very different set of of political or this worldly attitudes. So for him, the the retreat into a world of literature, the retreat into. Ancient languages was what he calls the escape of the prisoner, right? It's it's not the flight of the deserter, it's it's the escape of the prisoner. I'm imprisoned in this world and until I can get back to the right place. This is going to be my reality, you know? And and. Lucky for

us, you know the results of. The Lord of the Rings which? Is such a powerful work and has been used in so many different contexts. You know that it it it the symbolic. Potential of that work, I think just continues to amaze me. I mean that, that company that does all the spyware stuff, that's really dangerous talent here, you know, I mean, that's what you think. Whoa. You know this the, the, the precise thing that token would have been.

Graham: Uh. Now it's. Yeah.

Meredith: Utterly horrified by. It it, it just continues to amaze me the language of his language.

Graham: Yeah, I mean this, this wasn't one of the things I was planning on talking about, but it is, it is worth talking about and I've gotten emails. About Tolkien and the Italian fascist I I'm aware of that connection. I can't. I can't see it myself. I mean, I can't. I I can't. I can't see it. I can't see why someone who likes Mussolini and Marinetti would like talking, it seems. Yeah I mean, if not playing with Marinetti Marinetti is, you know, one of the earliest. Modernist he's part of this movement called Futurism, and you know, the futurists make amazing art, and they inspire Dada and surrealism. They're really part of the mainstream of of, of modernist visual art and highly influential on on socialist and. On an anarchist art, as as we understand it and but I mean they're futurists, they they love the future, they love technology. And when World War 1 happens. I cannot think of anyone literally in the in the entire world. I've never read anyone besides Marinetti who is just like. This is fantastic. Yeah. He like the the. He's like all of this metal flying through the air, obliterating people. I. Look at it and it is. The future and to think that, yeah, that this man who becomes a a fascist and is one of the chief cultural figures in fascism. To think that you could admire him and token who token I didn't know. I'm reading the letters now during during the Battle of Britain. Or at least shortly thereafter is like I hate the RAF. I know. I I'm glad that they're protecting us, but Oh my God, the existence of air. Planes is the worst thing that ever happened.

Meredith: Compares them to the nazgul. Yeah, yeah in the letters to his son, who is in the Rif.

Graham: Yeah.

Meredith: Which is yeah. Well, I mean, again, fascism, I mean and the Nazism from the wing of fascism, the strong state, that wouldn't obviously work with with anarchy. But there is a romantic element. So I think much stronger in, in, in Nazism than in fascism, but it's there. And that both fascism and Nazism were these conglomerations of all kinds of different political tendencies. And contradictory thoughts, but I I think we have to acknowledge that a lot of those ideas found themselves in very unsavory places. And you do have this wing of token adopters who. Who I think are attracted by his rejection of the modern world. But also by the fact that. That. In the end, there is a war and there is that clear hierarchy, and there sure aren't very many women. You know, those kind of elements coming through. But yeah, the the adoption on the far right is, is is was very pronounced. It's clearly there and you compare that to. There's

a whole strand of punk punk bands in in England who are very tolkienesque and just try and imagine these people coming together, you know, but it should be said during the Spanish Civil War.

Unknown Speaker: War.

Meredith: Tolkien was a strong supporter of Franco because of. Ah. The Catholic connection.

Graham: And I think also you know, I continue to not have had my episode on on the Spanish Civil War because it just hasn't come out. Maybe it should be a dozen episodes, but it also strikes me. I mean, I've read, I've. I've read the letters, and I think the Franco, I think the Catholic thing makes by far the the most sense. But if we if we understand the Spanish Civil War the way we often understand it as sort of a fight. Between a fight between fascism and and liberal democracy then it's it becomes supporting Franco seems. Nonsense. But if you understand it, say the way Orwell describes it. I know this is a famous people have argued about this, Orwell says I, you know, I was told it was a fight between fascism and liberal democracy, but I got there and I discovered it was a true out and out bottom up, left wing revolution. And if you think of it as. A sort of a right wing military govern. Tournament. You know, a sort of a we can't say Trump anymore, right? But in sort of John McCain government versus a actual, you know, like Pancho Villa or Zapata Uprising. You can imagine a lot of modern quote, you know, liberals in whichever way you want to use that term would. Be more comfortable. If John McCain in charge of Spain, then with Zapata in charge of. Spain, that, that. If you can see it that way, it's like, yeah, I I get. I mean, look, I've got an anarchist podcast, you know, who I'm picking in that side. But there's a great many of your friends and neighbors would. Rather have a. Center, right. Militaristic, authoritarian. Then the destruction of their current civilization and its replacement with a working class revolution. I don't think that's a controversial.

Meredith: Right. No. And and I mean for talking, I think it was there was a Catholic who was defending the church and there were people killing nuns and priests. You know, so that was very clear. And also, you know, after the after the war ended, he was very much against the Labour government and the formation of the. Welfare state in in Britain. I mean, that's where I guess you know, you could trace certain elements of his anarchy. He he didn't like a regulatory state. He didn't like a training state, even if it meant. Feeding children, even if it meant ensuring access to educational opportunities for kids. He just he yeah, he would prefer a much smaller state and he was a very apolitical person. He was not very socially aware. I think the civil war, the Frank Spanish Civil War. Came within his agreement, probably through going to church, and I would imagine there were.

Unknown Speaker: Hmm.

Meredith: Sermons about the atrocities happen. Against Catholics in Spain and that would be where he would have gotten it because he wasn't a man who sat down. And read the paper and.

Graham: Yeah, I mean I, you know, I have great sympathy with the the left side on the Spanish Civil War, but when I was in Barcelona. You know, and you want to see the plans of the Sagrada Familia. And gaudy is, you know, to me, a pretty much a Catholic anarchist, of which there are, of which there are many, but you can't see the plans of the Sagrada Familia because the anarchists burned them. So you know, like that's that. If if that's what you see. If that's what you think. Anarchy is the murder and destruction of. The the people in power then it's very. And then of course, talking is going to be against the I I do just need to go back again. Cause you know we mentioned Palantir, we didn't discuss it, this is.

Meredith: Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

Graham: You know, I went on at length about Marinetti and the irony of someone liking both token and Marinetti, but yeah, Palantir is worse. Palantir, if you haven't read the Lord of the Rings, those of you out there is these these orbs, which can be they were built with good intentions to be able to see and communicate. And then they were turned. By by powerful people into weapons of control. Literally, Palantir is a Peter Teal company designed to take the Internet, which was designed for. And seeing and turn it into a weapon of control. So he's named it perfectly. How one is supposed to reconcile that he did this as a fan of the Lord of the does he not understand that if you use a Palantir for that person for sorry for that purpose, you are sorry Oman, you are soron you are the villain of the story. I can't. I mean, I'm not asking you to spec. When Peter Thiel. How these? I mean that I try and have the most open. I'm a literary scholar. I try and be open to all readings. That is a misreading of. The world of the readings.

Meredith: Well, I mean, as you say, it's it's absolutely perfect, except he doesn't seem to realize that you.

Graham: Know. So yes, exactly like you named it the right thing. But. That's what, that's what. How how can you think it's a good thing if you gave it that name I.

Meredith: I mean, it's like, well, let's call it or think you. Know anything? You know what? Yeah.

Graham: Alright. Yeah. Yeah. No, it's. It's astonishing. So let's so let's talk about hierarchy. Was the other thing I wanted to talk about cause when I when I started this podcast, I did an introductory episode and then I did a Q&A episode. And the first time I addressed a a specific topic was the Lord of the Rings also say it's the first episode. I mean, it's technically the third episode, but it's the first time that I. Did anything besides throat clearing and introductory work? And going through the Lord of the Rings, I was just talking to a buddy about this who was like, yeah, you know, I thought it was really weird. Your podcast is about anarchy. And you claim Tolkien as an anarchist, and he's the book is literally about a king taking power. When you go through the book. And I did pretty assiduously at the beginning, cause I had time before because I I wasn't teaching. I'm not sure I can find in all three books an instance of. Coercion, like an order, given that must be obeyed because the person who

gives the order has bureaucratic or official power. That is not. That is not bad. Every I think instance of an order given. Is always with the implied consent of the person. You know, my friend I had on says, you know, airborne is the battle, commander. So if he says barricade the doors, barricade the doors. But if someone. Says by order of my authority, I require you to do this. That person is Solomon or Denethor, or some assorted villain. So there is, I think I I think the novel I I went through it. I went through it again recently is perfectly anarchist in its denial of coercion. And yet, as you say, it's so clear and this is where the fascists come in, that Aragorn is, is a better person than many people around him. He seems to be a better person, in large part because of his, his lineage. He literally has, you know, kingly.

Meredith: Yeah, yeah.

Graham: Heritage and we are just. We just accept in tokens world that everyone will consent to. Aragorn by nature means he's radiant with natural authority. So first of all I wanna see if if you think I'm right that like coercion doesn't really exist. And then secondly, what are we to make of this? You know, you talking doesn't have to have coercion. You can imagine a world in which aristocracy, in its true sense, rule by the best flows naturally and and doesn't ever seem to become oligarchy.

Meredith: Right, right. Yeah, absolutely. Well, I think that is I. Mean that is it. He's he's drawing on. I you know, the other theme of romanticism which is this use of the Middle Ages as this very symbolic reservoir and and of course in the Middle Ages, the idea of the king. Is is there? Is in a sense, divinity flowing through them, or at least. God symbol there and it is natural authority and it is right authority and. You. You don't need coercion because everyone recognizes it. You know, just like in the Arthurian legend, you know, when young Arthur has to sword. I mean, then you're going to obey him. Because everyone can see. The authority there. So it's completely obviously contrary to any logic or reason or modern understanding. But by setting it in this medievalist world, all of a sudden it makes perfect sense, right? The the the right one is there. And yes, I agree. All coercion is not, you know, I was thinking of when the hobbits come back to the Shire and they're all those notices put up by order of the teeth. Right. They're tearing them all down and any bureaucracy. And then any kind of rules, you know. And if you think of the Shire, there's. The king is this far away thing. Even once Aragorn comes back and Sam ends up as mayor. But you don't have this sense that, like the mayor does anything, you know, it's just a pub. And so everybody rules their own little life and and that is clearly talking. Ideal like I he. He recognized it was important, but he really resented the wartime regulations during World War 2, which I mean, we're incredibly invasive. How much water you could put in your tub, how much food you could buy, you really resented that and saw that there was the seed. Of a kind of tyranny of the democratic state coming in, saying I'm going to make this better or I'm going to make it more equal, but then intervening in in people's lives. So yeah, I think that's how he squares the circle is you have this medievalist monarch to whom the habits pay homage, but then of course airborne pays homage to them as the ones who saved the world, and then they go off back to their

Shire where. There isn't really a king, there's just hobbits, you know. And of course that that's talking, right? I mean, he he was pretty open about his identification with the hobbits.

Graham: Yes, in his letters, he's always describing himself as Hobbit, like, except in in stature. Yeah, no, I think, I mean, I think it makes sense that it's it is just it's a it's a medievalist fantasy.

Meredith: Yeah.

Graham: It's. I like to imagine, and of course Ursula Leguin does this in in the dispossessed, but not in her, you know, fantasy of Earthsea. I like to imagine a Tolkien who could write a world without without a king, but I think that's a I think that's a political stance. Of a kind that he wasn't interested as. In other words, I just learned this from you. He wasn't. His letters are filled with sort of political philosophy of the Lord of the Rings, but it's all. It's usually in response, either to a if someone writing him and asking him a question, or B. The exactly as you say, political decisions are being made in his life that are affecting him and he doesn't like it. And so he. Writes to Christopher. I don't like airplanes. I don't like government restrictions. And then, I mean, I guess at this point I just. Need to say like this is. This is an incredibly common argument I have, as someone who is, you know, a good a good Liberal Democrat and also a philosophical anarchist with my friends who are just like, why do you hate clean water or Graham, don't you know the state needs to regulate that? I'm like, well, I. So someone needs to make sure the water is clean. I I agree with that. But I tend to I tend to incline to this somewhat anarchic view that if you create a giant water bureaucracy, then you're going to have a lot of bad things come along with that. And then the the the big question, this is the William or William Morris question that again. Familiar to listen to the show, Morris solves this problem by not having big things in news from nowhere. So the the question, and this is what the dispossessed is about. So it seems pretty easy to have an anarco-primitivist world in which everyone has clean water, because everyone lives near a spring and there's always a neighbor helping out, and the world population is 1 billion and there's no factories. So that's that's easy. The question is whether we can have a world with, you know, Kropotkin talks about a world with good. Small factories and clean water without a state. That's not Morris's vision. And that's just so far. From Tolkien's concern, he has no. Interest in that. But I again what I'm trying to say is and this is the shocking, scandalous thing is I like the federal income tax, you know, like the federal income tax created this enormous bureaucracy in the United States, and you're just supposed to celebrate that wholly as an unalloyed good if you, you know, are voting for. A Democrat in 2025, but David Graber was like, you know, really, like, do we need this big of a bureaucracy around money? And the answer is, if you have giant corporations. You do, you do. You do need one bureaucracy to fight another bureaucracy, but I read talking and I think maybe maybe the sheer would. I don't want to live in Gondor, but I do want to live in the Shire. And that's when someone that's when someone calls you a romantic, right? And they don't.

Meredith: Yeah.

Graham: And they don't mean. A reader of of Keats and Shelley. That is not what they mean when they call you a romantic.

Unknown Speaker: Yeah. Yeah, right.

Meredith: Right. Yeah. I mean it is. Very tough. If you look at the history of Britain in through the Industrial Revolution, people who culturally and historically were against any kind of overweening central power since since Cromwell. And the triumph of laissez-faire and utilitarianism. But by the end of the 19th century, you. Actually have quite. Way that the nucleus of what becomes the welfare state because of just the problems of modern urban living. But I the most effective solution. Came at the civic level. What the British called Municipal socialism. It wasn't really socialism, it was just communities taking charge. So Birmingham, taking charge of the water, Manchester taking charge of the traffic or whatever and I think.

Unknown Speaker: Hmm. Mm-hmm.

Meredith: To go back to someone we mentioned earlier, EF Schumacher, the other principle I've learned from him is actually comes because he was also a Roman Catholic. The principle of subsidiarity, subsidiarity, that. You always bring authority and action down to the lowest level so that I as a teacher in my classroom, should have the authority to choose what I'm teaching. You know, that kind of thing that that is a matter of human dignity and you know. In the Catholic teaching of religious right. And UM. I think. That's kind of Tolkien's vision of the Shire, and probably it's something Liberal Democrats of which I am one too. As we face this world in which we are, we need to recognize people, have real grievances and just saying the status quo is, you know. Let's get another Obama that's not going to work. That's not going to work and we need to empower our local communities. I mean, what's happening now is not doing that, but we need to empower.

Graham: Yeah.

Meredith: You know, so if if Trump were. Taking all that money and issuing it to local communities. But of course we know this.

Graham: Sure. Yes, I mean this, I just have to, I mean, I have to admit now as you know, in the Biden administration. I I was quite happy and I mean, even before Trump was like, I was quite happy to agree with many sensible kind of libertarian ish things that emanated out of the right way. And I mean, but when they said when they said give education back to the local communities. They didn't mean it for a second, and so in some ways, I. You know, was probably silly to ever say. I mean in the same way that you know when when RFK criticizes the the, the drug companies, when RFK criticizes the Pharmaceutical industry and you know, big agriculture. Sir, I could not agree more with those critiques. But to think that any sort. Of. To think that he's actually going to 1000 farms are going to bloom with local produce, so that's it. But I mean, what what are my options, RFK or Ezra Kleins? Let the corporations do whatever they want, I mean. Again, you know, take a shot of your preferred beverage of choice. If you're losing this podcast for me to complain about the Ezra Klein abundance

book again, which is just like, you know, what's wrong with the world? Too much local control. That's basically the through line of that book is people want control over their own cities, and we need to take that away from them and let developers. Build whatever they want to build if that's what the Democratic Party is selling. Then again, the Shier starts to look super appealing.

Unknown Speaker: Yeah.

Graham: The the last thing I needed to ask you before we go, although I'll give you a chance to say when whenever you would like first is this this question. I mean I know that token had to had to flee Oxford to get away to get away from his fans. And I know I was speaking to my friend Ruth Kinna about this and she mentioned the. His distaste for, you know, the hippies, and it seems to me. E that it's probably pretty easy to see why he disliked the hippies, but I think it's also easy to see why the hippies liked the Shier. So if you want to, I don't know. Just say anything about about this, it's an it's another contradiction that I'm asking you to to to to make sense of.

Meredith: Yeah. No, absolutely. I mean the the Lord of the Rings does not become a phenomenon until. Well, sort of the 60s as we call it, right. And suddenly people find, you know, all these resonances, which of course they should and and. Part of my book has been looking at the green movement, which wasn't called the green movement at the time, but and people definitely reaching back to a lot of tokens, ideas and and finding again this this symbolic resonance. I'm. Uh. Once you know about Orcs, you have such a great symbol for as all of us see, you know the degradation around us. I mean, talking with a man of his generation. So of course that. These. Were beyond him. He was a very conservative Roman Catholic. He was a man who believed in. Natural what he would have thought of as natural social hierarchies, including quite a gendered hierarchy. And so yeah, much of again the symbolic 60s simply horrified him.

Graham: Yes.

Meredith: And I would think, yeah, having fans at his house on the one hand, he was delighted to be read. He really was and he was delighted that people understood some of what he was saying. So there's the famous picture of him on. In the roots of a tree, kind of and and he says I'm always on the side of the trees. And he liked that. People got that, you know? But sure, the cultural clash there between what he stood for and. And what a lot of his readers then embrace. I think it was was pretty pretty overwhelming.

Graham: Yeah, I mean, it just seems like. I can imagine Tolkien and you know. The the the Woodstock people getting along in the Shire if they were all in the Shire together, right. I can't imagine them getting along.

Meredith: Right.

Graham: When when one of the, I mean because the Shire does not have Oxford, it does not have Roman Catholicism, it does not have these. The the the. The conservatism of the Shire is all 100% small, see everyday conservatism and I'm and I'm all for this, this for the conservatism. Of knowing your neighbors, the conservatism of growing food near you, the conservatism of walking, if if progress means flying

through the air while fiddling with a device so that you can argue with strangers, then I am not a a, a, a progressive, right.

Meredith: I.

Graham: But the there were there's big Capital C conservatism in Toll King's life as well, and the hippies like the small C conservatism. I mean just listen to a hippie talk about growing pot and you will find that they're also friends of the trees, right? But then, but they probably also want to.

Meredith: Hmm.

Graham: Spray paint. Oxford if not out and out. Molotov cocktail. Well, they're probably too high to do that, but anyways, they're definitely. They're definitely the hippies are hanging out with the SDS's who want to burn Oxford to the ground and probably want there to be no more Catholic Church. And that is.

Unknown Speaker: Yes.

Meredith: Right. Absolutely. And you know, and he had a an intellectual hierarchy as well. And so the the traditions, the rituals of Oxford as well as of monarchy, those meant a great deal to him, you know. And you can see that in the Lord of the Rings. He he believes in.

Graham: That's not going to do it.

Meredith: Tradition and ritual and and and all of that. And so that element of the 60s of burn it down, tear it down and you also believe, you know, the whole argument over the Canon would have would have been. This is a man who was really angry that when they took away the rule that everyone had to learn Anglo Saxons.

Graham: Yeah, and it seems that Morris. I mean it's like again romanticism as a slur is like, more romanticized the Middle Ages. It does seem that. And I'm not. I've read plenty of more as compared to the average person, but not that much compared to a Morris scholar, it seems that Morris side steps.

Unknown Speaker: Yeah.

Graham: This monarchical, I mean, he writes beautifully and I think persuasively that the Middle Ages were much. Less hierarchical than we than we think of. You know, the average peasant is not interacting with, you know, coercive power anywhere near as much as we interact with course of power in our day-to-day life, the average peasant has more control over their life than you do. If you go to work like. He writes very persuasively about that. He doesn't seem to. Mention too often when the taxpayer does come and maybe burns down the peasants house, that just does not come up in Morris, does it?

Unknown Speaker: Right.

Meredith: No, no, no. You know and. Neither does Black Death, you know? Yeah.

Graham: Yeah, this is. You know, I mean, another way of putting it, I was speaking with a friend, I guess I'll say my friend John McGowan cause the he's been on the podcast A. A. Few times and you know and he said basically what you're arguing. For Graham, I mean, I was trying to make a sort of Morris argument is you're arguing for. The Middle Ages without the bad parts and you know, I think the average progressive

is trying to argue for industrial society without the bad parts. And at this current juncture, it seems to me more likely that we could have. A nice Middle Ages style world and figure out a way to make insulin and vaccines and grow enough food then that we could have a giant. Technocratic conservation and figure out a way for people to have enough trees and and clean air and not be surrounded by chemicals and smartphones. Of those two of of a modernized Middle Ages strikes me as more plausible. Than a greened techno world, but. It's I I you know, I I can't prove this. This is just a matter of taste, but perhaps a romantic sensibility. Perhaps we're back where we started.

Meredith: Absolutely, absolutely.

Graham: OK, Meredith, this has been such a pleasure. Anything else you would like to share before we go?

Unknown Speaker: Yeah. Yeah, no.

Meredith: No, no, but no, it's great. It's always fun to. Yeah. You know how often you get. To talk about ideas like. This.

Graham: Well, I try and do it I. Try and do it every. Week and I think my that's my goal.

Meredith: Which is terrific. Absolutely. Absolutely.

Graham: Every other week coming soon. All right. Well, thank you. Thank you so much for your time. It's such a pleasure.

Meredith: All right. Thank you.

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