

INDIVIDUALISM AND COMMUNITY IN SOCIALIST THOUGHT*¹

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1. Introduction

For many socialists, capitalism is to be condemned not only as a system based on the exploitation of one class by another — with all the further patterns of domination and control consequent upon this — but also for the individualistic character of its social relationships. This individualism is understood as taking a variety of related forms, such as: the conception of economic activity as the rational pursuit of individual self-interest; the reinforcement of competitive, acquisitive and possessive attitudes; the idea of liberty as the protection of individuals from the otherwise intrusive actions or desires of others; the perception of the ‘problem of social order’ as that of reconciling peaceably the intrinsically conflictual nature of individual interests; and so on. In Opposition to individualism, socialists have presented an ideal of community, in which cooperative, non privatised, non-acquisitive individuals share in the common task of producing and distributing goods to meet social needs, and in which this communal nature of economic activity is reflected in other social relationships also.

By contrast, liberal theorists, whilst often displaying some degree of unease about the ‘injustice’ of capitalism’s distribution of social goods, have typically been highly resistant to the socialist critique of individualism, and have regarded the ideal of community as at best a recipe for dull and restricted uniformity, and at worst a guarantee for the denial of individual rights in a repressive police state. Quite often, disputes between liberals and socialists on this issue degenerate into an exchange of insults expressed, for instance, in the respectively favoured epithets of ‘totalitarianism’ and ‘bourgeois individualism’. With the hope of somewhat improving the level of this debate, I propose that a useful starting-point is to introduce a ‘third term’ — conservatism. For, as I will sketch out briefly in the following section, the critique of ‘individualism’ in the name of ‘community’ first emerged, historically, in the responses of various conservative writers — such as Joseph de Maistre, Edmund Burke and Thomas Carlyle — to the two key developments of late eighteenth century Western Europe, the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. And given that this is so, a number of important questions arise, particularly these: what (if anything) distinguishes the socialist from the

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conservative critique of individualism; and what (if anything) distinguishes their respective conceptions of community?

I will argue that, in order to answer these questions, we need to understand in what ways capitalism is to be seen, from a socialist standpoint, as ‘progressive’ in relation to feudalism; and that part of the answer to this is, roughly, its individualistic character. Thus the socialist critique of individualism must be one that properly recognises its progressive character, and which ‘preserves’ certain features of this in its conception of community. This is what distinguishes socialist from conservative community. I shall also argue that we can find, in Marx’s *Grundrisse*, a view of the relations between individualism and community that partly conforms to this analysis, but which, when examined in more detail, displays a number of problematic features for an adequate account of the nature of socialist community.²

2. The conservative critique of individualism

In *The Sociological Tradition*, Robert Nisbet argues that we should regard Tönnies’ conceptual distinction between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* (normally translated as ‘society’ or ‘association’, and ‘community’) as the systematic expression of a number of central contrasts in the critical responses of conservative writers, earlier in the century, to the French and Industrial Revolutions. And he shows how, for instance, Weber’s contrast between rational and traditional authority (and more generally, his concern with the themes of rationalisation and disenchantment), and Durkheim’s analysis of egoistic and anomic suicide, are rooted in this same conceptual dichotomy.³ For Tönnies, the exemplar of the *Gemeinschaft* was the (pre-modern) family, whilst that of the *Gesellschaft* was the modern economic enterprise and its accompanying form of legal and social relations. In the *Gesellschaft*, relationships are founded on the assumption of independent individuals who, in pursuing rationally their own interests, may choose to combine with others on the basis of some explicit agreement that happens to suit their individual purposes. Obligations are thus generated only by specific contracts, rather than by some framework of traditional or customary authority which pre-exists and defines the relationships of individuals to one another, as is the case in the *Gemeinschaft* — other examples of which were the medieval guild, or holy orders.

Nisbet quotes the following passage from Tönnies to illustrate this distinction:

The theory of the *Gesellschaft* deals with the artificial construction of an aggregate of human beings which superficially resembles the *Gemeinschaft* insofar as the individuals live and dwell together peacefully. However, in *Gemeinschaft* they remain essentially united in spite of all separating factors, whereas in *Gesellschaft* they are essentially separated in spite of all uniting factors. In the *Gesellschaft*, as contrasted with the *Gemeinschaft*, we find no actions

that can be derived from an a *priori* and necessarily existing unity; no actions, therefore, which manifest the will and the spirit of the unity even if performed by the individual; no actions which, insofar as they are performed by the individual, take place on behalf of those united with him. In the *Gesellschaft* such actions do not exist. On the contrary, here everybody is by himself and isolated, and there exists a condition of tension against all others.⁴

Tönnies claimed that in the movement from feudal to modern society, *Gesellschaft* came to replace *Gemeinschaft* as the predominant form of human relationships in the various different spheres of social existence. This claim, Nisbet argues, encapsulates in a more systematic theoretical form earlier conservative responses to the two Revolutions. The French Revolution had been seen by its conservative critics as an attempt to reconstruct the nature of political and social authority on the basis of contractual agreements made by rational individuals. Traditional forms of authority and obligation were seen to be undermined by measures such as the legal abolition of medieval guilds and trade corporations the Confiscation of church property, and revisions in the laws concerning marriage and the family: such as the 1792 law defining marriage as a civil contract, attempts to limit the quasi-monarch authority of the father, and the contractualisation of relationships between the family and its domestic dependants.

In their responses to the Industrial Revolution, Nisbet argues, conservatives focused especially on the following of its features: the transformed character of property, the rise of the industrial city, and the degradation of labour. Thus landed property was seen to be replaced by industrial and finance capital, an abstract and impersonal form which, as shares, could be bought and sold on the market, involving no personal or historical relationships between owner and Property, no network of traditional loyalties and expectations typical of the earlier landed form. Closely related to this transformation was the process of urbanisation, with the organic rhythms and face to-face relationships of rural life replaced by the mechanical patterns and anonymity of the industrial city, whose very physical form — sprawling ‘aggregates’ of buildings spreading out into the countryside distinguish them from the order and stability expressed in the walled design of the medieval town. And a similar contrast between the organic and the mechanical was an important theme in the conservative perception of the changed character of labour. Thus, in addition to ‘humanitarian’ protests at the sheer Poverty and suffering of the industrial worker, and at the loss of security and rootedness involved in the wrenching of labourers from the (supposedly) more protective contexts of the village, guild, and family, we find, for instance in Carlyle, a concern with the way mechanical work processes displaced the individual skills of craft-labour, and at a more general mechanisation of human life that affected not ‘the external and physical alone but the internal and spiritual also. . . Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as

in hand.’⁵

Whilst it is, I think, fairly clear how Tönnies’ conceptualisation of these historical changes in terms of the contrast between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* is related to these conservative responses to the two Revolutions, it is worth exploring further how the concept of individualism was involved in this critique. For at least some conservative writers, the displacement of community was seen to be rooted in certain earlier developments in European society: in particular, the protestant Reformation, and the rise of ‘modern’ science and philosophy. Thus de Maistre, commenting in 1820 on the French Revolution’s undermining of traditional forms of authority, wrote of ‘this deep and frightening division of minds, this infinite fragmentation of all doctrines, political protestantism carried to the most absolute individualism.’ (My italics — R.N.K.)⁶

The suggestion here is that the ‘new’ conception of political authority as based on contractual agreement between free and equal subjects is in some way expressive of the protestant emphasis on the individual’s unmediated relationship with God. Steven Lukes — who claims that this passage from de Maistre is the first actual use of the term ‘individualism’ in social philosophy— defines what he calls the ‘religious individualism’ of Protestantism as ‘. . . the view that the individual believer does not need intermediaries, that he has the primary responsibility for his own spiritual destiny, that he has the right and duty to come to his own relationship with his God in his own way and by his own effort.’⁷ He goes on to argue for a close link between this doctrine, and what he calls ‘ethical individualism’, the view that ‘. . . the *source* of morality, of moral values and principles, the creator of the very criteria of moral evaluation, is the individual: he becomes the supreme arbiter of moral (and by implication other) values, the final moral authority in the most fundamental sense.’⁸

It was the replacement of traditional authority by the judgement of the individual that, for at least some conservative writers, showed also a link between nineteenth century individualism and the seventeenth century ‘revolutions’ in science and philosophy. Thus, for example, Nisbet notes how de Tocqueville detected in American democracy an affinity between its belief in the possibility of government based upon the common sense and reason of each individual, and the epistemological assumptions of Cartesian philosophy. For de Tocqueville, the latter’s central feature was the rejection of all claims to knowledge justified by reference to authority, and a reliance instead upon the judgements that each individual could make, applying systematically the method of doubt to all . . . previously, uncritically, accepted beliefs.⁹

It is worth noting that, from this perspective, what are in other respects important differences between ‘rationalists’ and ‘empiricists’ in the rise of modern philosophy, are less signify can’t than what they have in common. Thus Bacon, whose somewhat plodding inductivism is often contrasted strongly

with Descartes' rationalism, can also be seen to share the latter's emphasis upon individual judgement and the rejection of authority. Whether knowledge is acquired by the senses or by reason, the relevant capacity is conceived as one that everyone has, and that enables them to challenge and evaluate for themselves any previously, authoritatively, made claim. Indeed, as the twentieth century conservative Michael Oakeshott has noted, both Bacon and Descartes believed it possible to specify a certain *method*, in principle operable by anyone, by which all epistemic claims could be rationally assessed; and he argues that it was no great step to extend this view to the realm of political decisions, as well as scientific ones.¹⁰

3. Socialist v. conservative community: a dialectical model

Thus we find in nineteenth century conservative thought a number of more or less closely related themes in a critical response to the 'individualism' of modern European Society and based on a contrast between this and the nature of (pre-modern) community: between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*, the mechanical and the organic, industrial work and craft labour, the economic market and the (traditional) family, finance capital and landed property, contract and tradition, (individual) reason and authority, and soon. I do not wish to claim that all these antitheses are essentially identical, or that there is some single, homogeneous body of conservative thought' which employs all of them. But this schematic account does, I think, enable us to identify a little more clearly the dimensions of the 'problem' that was introduced near the outset of this paper: what is it that distinguishes socialist from conservative critiques of individualism, and thus also their respective conceptions of community?

In very general terms, the beginnings of an answer to this Individualism and Community seem to me as follows. The conservative contrast between individualism and community is essentially 'backward-looking', in that it derives its models for the latter from pre-modern, especially feudal, societies. That is, the diagnosis of modern societies as 'individualistic' is based on a contrast with historically prior forms of social existence; and, to the extent that individualism is seen at all as a potentially alterable or eliminable phenomenon, the prescription is typically for some kind of revival of these earlier forms. Presumably, however, we would expect a socialist, and certainly a Marxist, analysis to be highly resistant to this retrospective dichotomisation, and to regard 'individualism', for all its possible defects, as in some ways historically progressive, and thus to be (hopefully) replaced by a form of community which is not specified by reference to pre individualistic social relationships, and which may indeed attempt to incorporate certain elements of individualism.

One example of a socialist attitude towards individualism that displays this perspective is the following passage from Louis Blanc:

Three great principles divide the world and history: Authority, Individualism and Fraternity.

The principle of individualism is that which, taking man out of society, makes him sole judge of what surrounds him and of himself, gives him a heightened sense of his rights without showing him his duties, abandons him to his own powers, and, for the whole of government, proclaims *laissez-faire*.

Individualism, inaugurated by Luther, has developed with an irresistible force, and, dissociated from the religious factor . . . it governs the present; it is the spiritual principle of things.

... individualism is important in having achieved a “ass progress. To provide breathing-space and scope to human thought repressed for so long, to intoxicate it with pride and audacity; to submit to the judgement of every mind the totality of traditions, centuries, their achievements, their beliefs; to place man in an isolation full of anxieties, full of perils, but sometimes also full of majesty, and to enable him to resolve personally, in the midst of an immense struggle, in the uproar of a universal debate, the problem of his happiness and his destiny . . . this is by no means an achievement without grandeur, and it is the achievement of individualism. One must therefore speak of it with respect and as a necessary transition.”¹¹

Marx, in discussing the effects of the English occupation upon Indian village life, in effect expressed considerable antipathy towards any conservative love of pre-modern ‘community’:

Now, sickening as it must be to human feeling to Witness those myriads of industrious, patriarchal and inoffensive social organisations disorganise and dissolved into their units, thrown into a sea of woes, and their individual members losing at the same time their ancient form of civilisations and their hereditary means of subsistence, we must not forget that these idyllic village communities inoffensive though they may appear, had always been the solid foundation of Oriental despotism, that they restrained the human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it the unresisting tool of superstition enslaving it beneath traditional rules, depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies. . . . We must not forget that these little communities were contaminated by distinctions of caste, and by slavery, that they subjugated man to external circumstances instead of elevating man into the sovereign of circumstances, that they transformed a self-developing social state into never changing natural destiny. . . .¹²

I now want to introduce a more systematic way of conceptualising the differences between conservative and socialist community, and their respective attitudes towards individualism. I will do this by borrowing a theoretical framework developed by G. A. Cohen to analyse the distinctive nature

of human labour in feudal, capitalist and communist societies, and extending it to the case of individualism and community.¹³ Having done this, I will try in the following Sections to show how Marx's account of exchange relationships, in the first chapter of the *Grundrjsse*, can fruitfully be interpreted in terms of this theoretical model.

In 'Marx's Dialectic of Labour', Cohen elaborates a quasi-Hegelian model for understanding the character of various kinds of developmental sequences, ranging from individual ontogenesis (for instance, the development of a child's relationship to its parents) to large-scale historical sequences (such as changes in the relationship between worker and the activity of working). The general developmental model is, in a sense to be specified later, dialectical; and it involves a sequence of three stages, which are termed: 'undifferentiated Unity', 'differentiated disunity', and 'differentiated unity'. Each stage consists in a specific form of relationship between two items, which we can call 'A' and 'B'. 'Unity' and 'disunity' can be understood, roughly, as the absence and presence, respectively, of some form of perceived conflict or constraint in the relationship between A and B; and differentiation and undifferentiation as the respective existence and non-existence of a perceived separateness of identity on the part of A or B.

Thus in the first stage, of undifferentiated unity, there is, let us say, an absence on the part of A of any sense of separate identity from B; and there is a consequent absence of perceived conflict or incompatibility of interests, desires, and so on. Cohen describes this as a state of 'engulfment'. In the second stage, of differentiated disunity, A has achieved a sense of separate identity, of independence from B; but their relationship is such that, for instance, A sees B as a possible obstacle or constraint to his or her desires and interests being satisfied: the relationship is at least potentially conflictual. This state is described by Cohen as one of 'detachment'. In the final stage, of differentiated unity, A maintains his or her separateness of identity, but no longer relates to B in the mode of conflict or constraint. Instead, a certain kind of harmony or mutuality characterises their relationship. .

As one example of a sequence apparently displaying this form, Cohen describes the possible development of a marital relationship:

In its early stages a person may feel his interests and purposes to be identical with those of his spouse. Both may feel that way, and thus combine their lives to an extent which from outside looks artificial or moronic. But then one or both may revolt against fusion, and become hostile to continued connection. Finally, a new harmony may supervene, not through relapse into complete mutual absorption, real or pretended, but by discovery of a unity which is not antagonistic to the individuality of each.¹⁵

Cohen's main interest is in using this model to illuminate Marx's account of the distinctive character of labour in pre capitalist, capitalist and communist societies. He suggests, for example, that in feudal craft labour, the worker exists in a relationship of engulfment to both his work, and the more general social position with which it is necessarily associated. The craft labourer has no sense of individual identity that is independent of that pre-defined position and activity. By contrast, the wage-labour in capitalist societies relates to his work in an external, instrumental manner. He is 'detached' from it (and indeed from its Products), with a strong sense of separate identity, and of the necessity to work as in many respects a constraint upon, or in conflict with, his more immediate or valued desires. He has achieved freedom from engulfment, a state of 'differentiation but at the cost of 'disunity'. In communist societies, then, the disunity is replaced by Unity, by a certain kind of harmony: but not one that involves a loss of individual identity, any relapse into the 'undifferentiated state of engulfment.

I will not comment on the adequacy of this representation of the three forms of labour, since my main interest is in applying this model to the problem of individualism and community. But before Outlining how this might be done, I need to elaborate briefly on the sense in which this model can be seen as a dialectical one.¹⁵ The sequence is dialectical in that its third stage represents a transcendence, or overcoming (*aufhebung*) of the Opposition between the first two. Thus, whilst the second stage (differentiated disunity) represents a complete, though determinate, negation of the first (undifferentiated unity), the third (differentiated unity) both negates and preserves each of its predecessors More specifically, the third stage preserves the differentiation of the second, whilst negating its disunity; and in doing so it negates the non-differentiation of the first stage, whilst Preserving its unity.

However, we must not think of the third stage as consisting simply in some aggregate or conjunction of its two elements, each taken from one of the Preceding stages: unity from the first plus differentiation from the second. For, at the very least, Hegel's doctrine of 'internal relations' implies that, in some sense, the character of the relation between any two items affects, or is indeed intrinsic to, the character of the items themselves. Thus we should think of the unity of the third stage as to some extent differing from that of the first, just because it is now in relation with differentiation, and no longer with undifferentiation And likewise, the differentiation of the third stage differs from that of the second, because it is now combined with unity, rather than disunity. So what is 'preserved' in the third stage's dialectical transcendence of the opposition between the first and second stages (*viz*, differentiation and unity) is not simply a combination of these two elements in the form in which they existed in the two transcended stages.

In attempting now to apply this model to the problem of distinguishing conservative and socialist conceptions of community, and their respective attitudes towards individualism, the basic move is

fairly obvious. I suggest the following ‘equations’:

- (1) Pre-capitalist/feudal community = undifferentiated unity.
- (2) Capitalist individualism = differentiated disunity.
- (3) Socialist community = differentiated unity.

And, if one wishes to, as it were, ‘add’ political philosophies to these equations, we would presumably have: (1) = conservatism; (2) = liberalism; (3) socialism.

Thus, whilst from the standpoint of conservatism, individualism is seen as completely Opposed to the ideal of community (as undifferentiated unity), the socialist attitude towards both individualism and conservative community is more complex. For although the stage of (capitalist) individualism displays a disunity, which is to be replaced by the harmonious unity of a socialist community, this individualism also involves the achievement of differentiation, of independent self-identities, by contrast with feudal community. Thus individualism is not to be simply opposed or ‘negated’ by the socialist advocate of community, since those of its features which represent the ‘release’ from feudal engulfment are to be Preserved — though, as noted previously, in a somewhat modified form.

So far, of course, this application of the model is extremely abstract and schematic. In particular, we need to give some determinate senses to ‘unity’, ‘differentiation’ and their Opposites. Partly in order to do this, I turn now to examine some central themes in Marx’s *Grundrjssel*6

4. Three forms of sociality in Marx’s *Grundrisse*

The main text of the *Grundrjssse* — as distinct from the ‘Introduction’, some passages from which I will comment on later in this section — is conventionally divided into two main parts, the ‘Chapter on Money’ and the ‘Chapter on Capital’. In the former, Marx analyses the character of exchange, the production, sale and purchase of commodities. A recurrent feature of this chapter is his use of a three-stage model of different forms of society, defined in roughly the following way. The first, often illustrated by reference to feudalism, is marked by a relatively undeveloped form of production, and a relative absence of exchange; and the third is that of communism, which is marked by, amongst other things, the absence of exchange-relationships, though with a highly developed level of production.

However, before proceeding to explore how this three-stage model corresponds to the one introduced in the previous section, it is important to clarify the status of Marx’s account of the second stage, the exchange-society. It is clearly not intended by him to represent by itself, even in an idealised form, the character of an actual historical form of society. In particular, it is a model neither of capitalism, nor of any pre-capitalist formation. For it is only in the second part of the *Grundrisse*, the ‘Chapter on

Capital', that Marx introduces into his analysis the crucially distinctive features of capitalism, namely the 'extension' of exchange to include the purchase and sale of labour-power, and thus the class-organisation of production, the exploitation of labour by capital, and so on. Nor, of course, did pre-capitalist societies exhibit fully developed systems of exchange. So I think that we should see the 'Chapter on Money' as an analysis of only one of a number of features which together define the capitalist mode of production, but which was an important emerging element in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. This, anyway, is how I shall be regarding the methodological status of this account of commodity-exchange in what follows.¹⁷

Marx characterises these three forms of society in the following way:

Relations of personal dependence (entirely spontaneous at the outset) are the first social forms, in which human productive capacity develops only to a slight extent and at isolated points. Personal independence founded on *objective* [*sachlicher*] dependence is the second great form, in which a system of general social metabolism, of universal relations, of all-round needs and universal capacities is formed for the first time. Free individuality, based on the universal development of individuals and on their subordination of their communal, social productivity as their social wealth, is the third stage. The second stage creates the conditions for the third. Patriarchal as well as ancient conditions (feudal, also) thus disintegrate with the development of commerce, of luxury, of money, of exchange value, while modern society arises and grows in the same measure. (p. 158)

In talking of the second form as involving 'personal independence founded on objective dependence', Marx is drawing our attention to the central features of commodity-exchange. On the one hand, the participants in exchange-relationships exist as free and equal legal subjects, between whom there exist no ties of personal dependence deriving from pre-existing definitions of social position and obligation. Their relationship involves a voluntary contract between legally independent individuals. On the other hand, there is a specific, non-personal form of 'dependency', namely one that is mediated by the 'objects' which they exchange: they depend upon each other via the exchange of commodities. Furthermore— though I shall say less about this in what follows than about the other features of exchange just mentioned — Marx suggests also that each individual is 'dependent' upon the generalised system of commodity-exchange, in the sense of being controlled by it rather than exercising control over it.

A clearer view of how Marx regarded the first, pre-exchange, form of society can be gained from the following passage, where he contrasts it with the second form:

When we look at social relations which create an undeveloped system of exchange, of exchange values and of money, or which correspond to an undeveloped degree of these, then it is clear from the outset that the individuals in such a society, although their relations appear to be more personal, enter into connection with one another only as individuals imprisoned within a certain definition, as feudal lord and vassal, land lord and serf, etc., or as members of a caste etc. or as members of an estate etc. In the money relation, in the developed system of exchange (and this semblance seduces the democrats), the ties of personal dependence, of distinctions of blood, education, etc., are in fact exploded, ripped up (at least, personal ties all appear as personal relations); and individuals seem independent (this is an independence which is at bottom merely an illusion, and it is more correctly called indifference), free to collide with one another and to engage in exchange within this freedom;.. . (pp. 163—4)

It should, I hope, be apparent how Marx's account of these two forms seems to 'fit' the stages of undifferentiated unity and differentiated disunity in the theoretical model I introduced in the previous section. The 'individuals imprisoned within a certain definition' are in a state of 'engulfment'; and the 'indifferent' individuals, 'colliding' with one another in exchange, have achieved a separate identity but lack a certain form of unity or harmony. In precisely what sense this is so, I will explore further in the following section. But first it will be helpful to relate what Marx says in the 'Chapter on Money' about the nature of exchange-relationships and the kind of 'personal independence' involved in these, to some of his comments in the Introduction to the *Grundrisse* about the methodological errors of the political economists.

In the section of the Introduction entitled 'Production', Marx begins by criticising theorists such as Smith and Ricardo who, by taking as their starting-point the 'individual and isolated hunter and fisherman', mistakenly present as the natural and eternal character of human beings what is instead to be seen as a historically specific form of social existence: namely, "civil society", in preparation since the sixteenth century and making giant strides towards maturity in the eighteenth'. It is only in civil society, a product of 'the dissolution of the feudal forms of society', and of 'the new forces of production developed since the sixteenth century', that 'the various forms of social connectedness confront the individual as a mere means towards his private ends, as external necessity'. (pp. 83—4)

It is important to note here that Marx is not (altogether) denying the existence of these 'isolated' individuals who stand in instrumental, external relations with one another, but is claiming (quite rightly) that they are not to be 'eternalised', not to be seen as how humans by nature are and always

have been. ‘Civil society’ (a concept corresponding roughly to that of exchange-societies in the ‘Chapter on Money’) is itself a historical product; and one that will, according to Marx, be replaced by communist society, in which the character of social relationships will be significantly different.

I emphasise this point about the historical reality of ‘the isolated individual’ because it is easy to confuse Marx’s rejection of the eternal nature of such individuals with a quite different point, which he goes on to make immediately afterwards — indeed [am not convinced that Marx himself properly recognised the difference. This point is that it is always a mistake to think of humans in entirely a-social terms, as if they were somehow ‘first’ just independent beings, who might ‘later’, as it were contingently, come together in some form of social existence. Thus he says:

Production by an isolated individual outside society — a rare exception which may well occur when a civilised person in whom the social forces are already dynamically present is cast by accident into the wilderness — is as much of an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living together and talking to each other. (p. 84)

Here, I take it, Marx is saying that humans are always, and necessarily, ‘social’: they use language, which cannot be understood as an ‘individual’ phenomenon; they produce things via their relationships with one another; and so on. It is true, he acknowledges, that individuals may sometimes find themselves in completely isolated situations — the Robinson Crusoe phenomenon — but such individuals, if they are recognisably human, must already have ‘become’ so through their sociality. It follows, then, that in this sense of sociality, the individuals of civil society are as much ‘social’ individuals as those of previous, or possible succeeding, forms of society. That is, all individual humans are ‘social’: but the particular form this sociality takes is historically specific, and indeed one such form, namely that of civil society, is markedly ‘individualistic’, or ‘a-social’ — but here, of course, in a different sense of ‘sociality’.

It may be useful to indicate these different senses by different terms. I suggest we use ‘generic sociality’ for that kind of sociality that all humans must have, as part of their nature as humans. Which features are included here can be left open — as noted already, Marx himself in this passage (as elsewhere) emphasises production and language. We now need some further means of identifying the various historical forms that this generic sociality may take: in particular, for distinguishing the pre-capitalist, capitalist, and socialist forms. We can call these: ‘pre-individualist sociality’, ‘individualist sociality’ and ‘social individuality’. And we can say that, in these opening pages of the *Grundrisse*, Marx is making two distinct criticisms of (some) political economists: that they misrepresent individualist sociality as ‘eternal’, as if it constituted generic sociality; and/or that they present humans in a way that denies altogether their generic sociality. Further, Marx can be seen to claim that

no humans are ever merely ‘generically social’: their generic sociality always takes a specific form.

My analysis here of Marx’s comments on ‘the isolated individual’ is I think, confirmed by the way he goes on in this section of the Introduction to make a parallel series of comments about the concept of production. Again, his main concern is to criticise those political economists who misrepresent as eternal, characteristics of production that are in fact historically specific. But he insists that there are, nonetheless, common features of all these historical forms, which provide a legitimately ‘eternal’ concept of ‘production in general’. For instance, there must be instruments of production, ‘stored-up, past labour’, and some kind of property in the general sense of ‘appropriation’. However, this concept of production in general is, he says, ‘abstract’, in the sense that any actual process of production must be characterised not merely by these general features, but by some historically specific form of them. Thus capital, for example, is certainly ‘an instrument of production, and also objectified, past labour’: but it is not just an instantiation of these abstract, universal factors of production. The same applies to private property, as distinct from property or appropriation in general. And Marx goes on to criticise those who, under the guise of talking about the requirements of production in general, surreptitiously smuggle in its historically specific features, and thereby (mis)represent them as eternal, necessary, and so on. (pp. 85—86)

It should, I think, be clear how these points about production parallel those about sociality, with production in general corresponding to (what I have termed) generic sociality, and its historically specific forms corresponding to different forms of sociality. I now want to look in more detail at the way Marx characterises (what I have termed) individualistic sociality, and the social individuality which he sees as replacing it.

5. The ‘mutual indifference’ of exchange-relationships

In describing the nature of exchange-relationships in the ‘Chapter on Money’, Marx gives considerable emphasis to the attitudes towards each other displayed by the participants; and the phrase that he uses most frequently in this respect is ‘mutual indifference’. Each produces out of their own self-interest, and views the other only as a means for the fulfilment of their own individual aims. They recognise that, in order for each to satisfy their interests, they must produce what will in fact satisfy the other’s: this operates as a determinant, or at least a limitation, upon what they choose to produce. Thus they recognise their dependency upon each other, but remain ‘indifferent’ to each other in that the satisfaction of the other’s interests is perceived only as a means — only instrumentally, or externally — in relation to the satisfaction of their own.

Thus, Marx says, there is a sense in which exchange-relationships do indeed display some kind of ‘reciprocity’, which is ‘a necessary fact, presupposed as natural precondition of exchange’. But, he

goes on:

. . . as such it is irrelevant to each of the two subjects in exchange, and. . . this reciprocity interests him only in so far as it satisfies his interest to the exclusion of, without reference to, that of the other. That is, the common interest which appears as the motive of the whole is recognised as a fact by both sides; but, as such, it is not the motive, but rather proceeds, as it were, behind the back of these self-reflected particular interests, behind the back of one individual's interest in Opposition to that of the other. (p. 244)

In other words, whilst there is an 'objective' reciprocity, an inter-dependence of individual interests mediated through the exchange of commodities, this reciprocity is not itself, for each individual, what motivates their actions. Reciprocity is recognised as a fact but not as a motive: individuals are indifferent to one another's interests as such, being concerned with satisfying the other only as an instrumental means to their own satisfaction.

If we now take this account of mutual indifference, together with Marx's view of pre-exchange societies as ones in which individuals are defined only in terms of their social Positions, we can arrive at the sense in which, applying the concepts of the dialectical model introduced earlier, exchange-societies can be said to display 'differentiated disunity'. On the one hand there is disunity, because individuals are essentially concerned with their own interests, and relate to one another only instrumentally. Thus, although their interests may sometimes coincide — or at least, may do so when suitably modified — there is no intrinsic unity between them. For each individual, the other's interests are at best a convenient means of realising their own; at worst, there will be a direct conflict between them, to be resolved only by some kind of compromise which imposes limitations on what each would otherwise have chosen to do. On the other hand, this is a state of differentiation, since each individual is a legally free and equal subject, with a sense of personal identity that is not provided through the occupation of a specific social position with its pre-defined set of obligations and expectations. The participants in exchange relate to each other as independent individuals, and they are 'objectively' dependent upon each other; but they remain indifferent to each other's interests as such, and relate to one another only via the exchange of objects.

This, then, is the 'individualistic sociality' of differentiated disunity, of the system of exchange. So what would a situation of differentiated unity be like: what would 'social individuality' consist in? To answer this, we need 'to consider what is, in effect, Marx's account of communist society, of the 'third stage' that will replace that of exchange. In the 'Chapter on Money' he characterises this mainly by suggesting how the indirect and instrumental 'sociality' mediated through the exchange of commodities will be transformed in such a way that, as it were, the 'sociality' will become an intrinsic

feature of production itself, and of the motives and attitudes of those who are engaged in it. Thus:

The communal character of production would make the product into a communal, general product from the outset. The exchange which originally takes place in production — which would not be an exchange of exchange-values but of activities, determined by communal needs and communal purposes — would from the outset include the participation of the individual in the communal world of products. On the basis of exchange values, labour is posited as general only through exchange. But on this foundation it would be posited as such before exchange; i.e. the exchange of products would in no way be the medium by which the participation of the individual is mediated. (p. 171)

And:

In the first case the social character of production is posited only *post festum* with the elevation of products to exchange values and the exchange of these exchange values. In the second case the social character of production is presupposed, and participation in the world of products, of consumption, is not mediated by the exchange of mutually independent labours or products of labour. It is mediated, rather, by the social conditions of production within which the individual is active. (p. 172)

But it seems to me that these comments — and others in a similar vein — are far from satisfactory since they do not give any determinate content to the idea of production for ‘communal’ purposes, and thus of what it is that will distinguish the ‘instrumental’ sociality of exchange from the preferred form of sociality that is said to be somehow embedded in production itself. And this problem is by no means ‘merely’ one for the philosophical analysis of individualism and community, since it has important ramifications for the economic organisation of a communist society: roughly, for what is to replace the use of the market as the means for the coordination of economic activity — and thus also for the acceptability of ‘market socialism’.

My suspicion is that, here in the *Grundrisse*, Marx is still operating with a conception of communist society that is rooted in his account of species-being in the early writings of 1843-4: that what he means by ‘communal needs and purposes’ are those which every individual can come to have in common by virtue of their (recognition of their) being members of the human species. That is, the ‘mutual indifference’ of egoistic individuals will be replaced by a situation in which each individual pursues the (universal) species-interest, and thus no longer regards the interests of others as a potential limitation or obstacle upon their own. Whilst recognising that such a suggestion here would require a great deal more justification than I can provide here, I will try to give some support for it. First, there

is a striking similarity between some of the passages I have so far quoted from the *Grundrisse*, and the following one from the (1844) 'Excerpts from James Mill's Elements of Political Economy', where Marx characterises exchange-relationships like this:

I have produced for myself and not for you, just as you have produced for yourself and not for me. In itself the result of my production has just as little direct relation to you as the result of your production has to me. That is to say, our production is not man's production for man as man, i.e. it is not social production. As men none of us has a claim to enjoy the product of another. As men we do not exist as far as our mutual productions are concerned. Hence our exchange cannot be the mediating movement which confirms that my product is for you because it is an objectification of your own nature, of your need. For our products are not united for each other by the bond of human nature. Exchange can only set in motion, it can do no more than confirm the character each of us bears in relation to his own product and hence to the product of the other. Each of us sees in his product only his own objectified self-interest, hence in the product of others the objectification of a different, alien self-interest, independent of oneself.'¹⁹

Here, the contrast is made between self-interested production, and 'man's production for man as man', a 'truly social' form of production in which, as it were, each individual produces simply 'as' a human. An identity or harmony of individual needs is generated by the fact that each individual's needs are those of 'humans'; and thus each in producing for their own needs is necessarily also producing for everyone's. The problem of coordination of needs or interests to which the market has seemed the best solution for many liberal theorists, is thus given a radically different solution in terms of this theory of species-being.

That this is what lies behind Marx's account in the *Grundrisse* of the difference between exchange-societies and communism is further supported, I believe, by noting the way in which the 'progressive' nature of exchange is specified, in relation to its historical predecessors. He frequently emphasises the universalising character of a system of exchange, displayed, for instance, in its tendency towards the development of a world-market; and he contrasts this with the limited, parochial nature of the social relationships in pre-exchange societies. Thus, in a passage already quoted above, he says that in the historical stage of 'personal independence founded an objective dependence', '... a system of general social metabolism, of universal relations, of all-round needs and universal capacities is formed for the first time'. (p. 158) And a few pages later, in noting how the 'objective bond' which connects individuals in exchange-relationships 'belongs to a specific phase' of historical development, he continues:

The alien and independent character in which it presently exists vis-a-vis individuals proves only that the latter are still engaged in the creation of the conditions of their social life, and that they have not yet begun, on the basis of these conditions, to live it. It is the bond natural to individuals within specific and limited relations of production. Universally developed individuals, whose social relations, as their own communal (*gemeinschaftlich*) relations, are hence also subordinated to their own communal control, are no product of nature, but of history. The degree and the universality of the development of wealth where this individuality becomes possible supposes production on the basis of exchange values as a prior condition, whose universality produces not only the alienation of the individual from himself and from others, but also the universality and the comprehensiveness of his relations and capacities. (p. 162)

Thus production for exchange is seen by Marx as generating ‘universality’ in the form of a world-wide framework of objective interdependence and reciprocity; and as thereby releasing humans from the narrow, restricted, parochial character of, for instance, feudal societies. But this form of universality is regarded by him as inadequate, as in a certain sense ‘abstract’, since it exists only as an objective ‘fact’ that may at most be recognised by the participants in exchange, but in no way enters directly into their motivations for acting as they do, or into their attitudes towards one another: they remain mutually indifferent. To remove the abstract character of this universality will require a radical transformation of these self-interested beings into ones who see themselves as universal beings. But I find this idea extremely problematic, with respect both to its ‘practicability’, and to whether any significant sense of ‘differentiation’ can be said to exist where ‘Unity’ is understood in this way.

6. Concluding remarks

I noted at the outset that a typical liberal response to the Socialist critique of ‘individualism’ in the name of ‘community’ was the claim that the latter could be realised only as some kind of (imposed) uniformity, and with the consequent loss of what, for liberals, were the primary social values — of autonomy, individuality, and suchlike. I then tried to show how, in the nineteenth century conservative critique of ‘individualism’, one can indeed find elements of opposition towards these liberal values. But I argued that we might reasonably expect a socialist response to individualism to display a very different character, which recognised the ‘progressive’ elements of individualism, and attempted to specify a form of community which preserved these, even if in a modified form; and I suggested how a certain, very general dialectical model might be used to do this.

This model, I went on to argue, could be seen in several respects to ‘fit’ the account given by Marx in the *Grundrisse* of three historical forms of society. But I then suggested that, when examined in more detail, the contrast drawn between (in my terms) ‘unity’ and ‘disunity’ was problematic, in that it

appeared to rely on a distinction between (individual) self-interest and (individual) species-interest, such that it was unclear what genuine degree of 'differentiation' was compatible with this conception of unity. With respect to this element in Marx's account of communist society, then, one might feel that the traditional liberal fears of community have some justification.

It should be emphasised, however, that my argument here is intended mainly to identify what may seem to be a problem, rather than to show conclusively what is 'wrong' with Marx's analysis; and that it is in any case addressed only to particular elements in a particular text. It is clear that, to provide a full account of Marx's conception of communist society as 'community', one would need to include many further elements in his theoretical work — to explore, for instance, the relationship between the abolition of exchange relationships and the end of the exploitative class-relationships of capitalism. And it is also clear that Marx himself saw communist society as one in which a certain kind of individuality would flourish — for instance, in the individually-expressive nature of labour. Nonetheless, I think there is a significant tension between this last view, and the way in which community is contrasted with 'mutual indifference' in the parts of the *Grundrisse* I have been focussing upon; and I will conclude by suggesting a possible diagnosis of the difficulties involved in this contrast.

If one compares Marx's account of exchange in the *Grundrisse* with one of his earliest writings, 'On The Jewish Question' (1843), there is a striking similarity between what might be called their 'moral vocabularies'. In particular, his description in the latter of 'civil society' is couched in terms of 'egoism', 'self-interest', 'instrumentality', 'the war of all against all', and so on.²⁰ These moral concepts (displayed also in the 'Excerpts from James Mill's Elements of Political Economy', quoted in the previous section) are more or less identical to those employed in the *Grundrisse*'s 'Chapter on Money'. And it seems to me that they provide an inadequate basis for constructing an acceptable version of socialist community, since they imply a simplistic and moralistic rejection of 'self-interest' in the name of 'communal-' or 'species'-interest

Briefly, I think it is mistaken to regard self-interest as intrinsically undesirable, and to regard the existence of any kind of conflict or incompatibility between (individual) interests as a sign of imperfection. It seems to me preferable that people should recognise the diversity and possible incompatibility of each other's needs and desires, and accept the limitations that this implies for the satisfaction of their own, than that their (legitimate) self-concerns should somehow be removed. And we should, I think, conceive of socialist community more in terms of the real equality of people's opportunities to pursue and satisfy their own aims, than in terms of the elimination of 'self-interest'. Finally, I am sceptical of the idea that we should try to specify, as a political ideal, the construction of a single form of social relationships, which is to be displayed in pretty well every area of a person's

social existence. It seems to me legitimate that we should engage in a number of quite different kinds of relationships, which meet different needs and desires and involve different attitudes and feelings towards others. There is no single ideal pattern to which social relationships should conform; and, in particular, the absence of self-interest provides no general formula for this.

Notes and references

1. Most of the ideas in this paper have been developed whilst teaching a course on Political Ideas, at Lancaster University, over the past few years; I am grateful for the comments of numerous students, and of my co-teachers, Geoffrey Smith and Michael Hammond. An earlier version was read to the Philosophy Department seminar: thanks especially to John O'Neill and Gaya Kowszun for their comments.
2. In addition to the books and articles specifically mentioned in the text and notes below, I have found the following extremely helpful: E. Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1942; K. Mannheim, 'Conservative Thought', in his *Essays in Sociology and Social Psychology*, (ed.) P. Kecskemeti, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1952, pp. 74-164; L. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Oxford University Press, London, 1974; R. Plant, *Community and Ideology*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1974; and C. Gould, *Marx's Social Ontology*, MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1978.
3. R. Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition*, Heinemann, London, 1967, especially chs. 1-4. (This is the best book I've come across on the relations between conservatism and social theory, and much of this section of the paper draws heavily upon it.)
4. Quoted by Nisbet, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-76: the italics are Nisbet's.
5. Quoted by Nisbet, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
6. Quoted by S. Lukes, *Individualism*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1973, p. 4.
7. Lukes, *op. cit.*, p. 94.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
9. See Nisbet, *op. cit.*, p. 129.
10. M. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, Methuen, London, 1962, Ch. 1.
11. Quoted by Lukes, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.
12. Quoted by Nisbet, *op. cit.*, p. 68.
13. G. A. Cohen, 'Marx's Dialectic of Labour', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 3, 1974, pp. 235-261. (This article has influenced my thinking about individualism and community more than anything else has.)
14. Cohen, *art. cit.*, p. 236.
15. In what follows, I am adding somewhat to Cohen's account.
16. K. Marx, *Grundrisse* (1857-8), translated and edited by M. Nicolaus, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1973. (Page references for the passages quoted below are provided in the main text, to avoid unnecessary footnotes.)
17. See also the discussion of this methodological issue in Nicolaus's Foreword to his translation of the *Grundrisse*.
18. In Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, the industrial entrepreneur, Mr. Thornton, responds to Margaret Hale's use of the term 'gentleman' in the following way (Margaret is the daughter of a rural parson, 'displaced'

to a Northern city):

A man is to me a higher and a completer being than a gentleman ...I take it that 'gentleman' is a term that only describes a person in his relation to others; but when we speak of him as 'a man', we consider him not merely with regard to his fellow-men, but in relation to himself, — to time — to eternity. A castaway, lonely as Robinson Crusoe — a prisoner immured in a dungeon for life — nay, even a saint in Patmos, has his endurance, his strength, his faith, best described by being spoken of as 'aman'. I am rather weary of this word 'gentlemanly', which seems to me to be often inappropriately used, and often, too, with such exaggerated distortion of meaning, while the full simplicity of the noun 'man', and the adjective 'manly' are unacknowledged— that I am induced to class it with the cant of the day. (Penguin edition, 1970, pp. 27-8.)

19. K. Marx, *Early Writings*, (ed.) L. Colletti, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1975, pp. 274-5.

20. See Marx, *op. cit.*, especially pp. 220 and 230. I examine Marx's position in 'On the Jewish Question' in my 'Liberal Rights and Socialism', to be published in a forthcoming collection of essays in political philosophy edited by Keith Graham (*Contemporary Political Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press 1982).