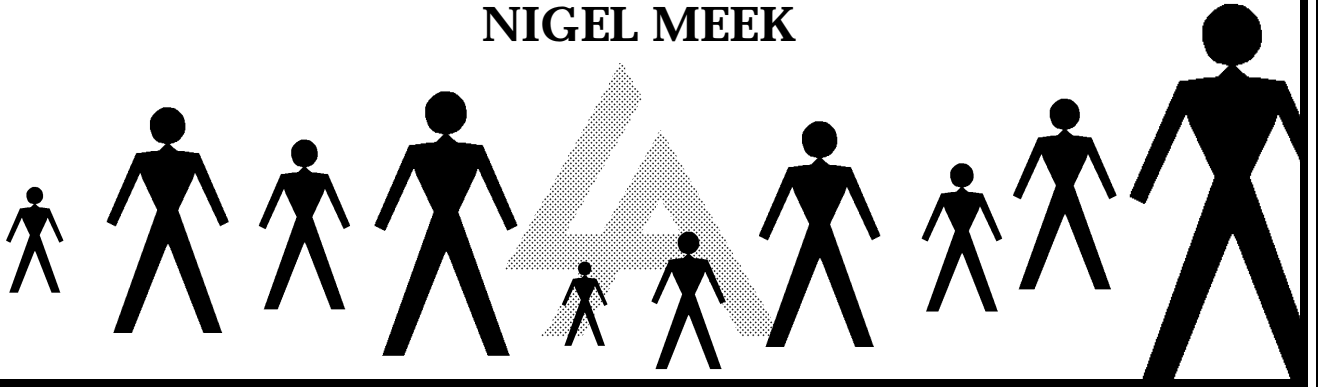


# 'SOCIETY' DOES NOT EXIST (AND IF IT DID IT SHOULDN'T)

NIGEL MEEK



## THE LURE AND TRAP OF 'SOCIETY'

Words such as 'society' and 'community' seem to be commonplace at the moment: friendly 'hurrah' words that make people feel warm and safe. They hold out the promise of, contrary to the chilling view of the fate of the individual propounded by atomistic libertarianism, a social system where each individual will be part of something bigger and better; a something that will love, honour and obey, in sickness and in health (albeit with *no* chance of divorce). All one has to do, goes the sales-pitch, is surrender just a *little* bit of liberty and everything will be okay (Boston Anarchist Drinking Brigade, 1995).

In reality, though, the deployment of such terms is often little more than fine-sounding rhetoric used to camouflage or justify "the brutalities and human degradation of collectivism, altruism and statism ..." (Tame, 1989: p. 2).

But it is no surprise that the general notion that people can only find hope in the collective is so popular: the

ideology has been relentlessly churned from every conceivable source, not least the universities. Whilst the hero of the social sciences used to be the individual, with the rise of anti-individualistic ideologies from the end of the 19th century, in Germany (mystical nationalism) and then in Russia (Bolshevism), and their incorporation into the social sciences, the collective has become the dominant force (Todd, 1985: p. 99). It is surely true that, with their consistent contempt for individual consciousness and their insistence on the importance of the collective in determining events (Todd, 1985: p. 99), most (Marsland, 1995: p. 2) latter-day social scientists are ironically the real heirs of the various 'fascists' etc. that they so commonly denounce.

## AN HISTORICAL TANGENT: THE RHETORIC AND REALITY OF MARGARET THATCHER'S MOST (IN)FAMOUS SAYING

No other statement was held to define Margaret Thatcher's ideology more than her statement that "There is no such thing as 'society'." It seems likely

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

that some of the outrage generated by her comments was a product of an almost visceral hatred of her and what she stood for (Flew, 1991: p. 62). This hatred was partly based on a syllogism which ran something like this: A neo-liberal (Thatcher) has been Prime Minister since 1979; social problems have increased since 1979; therefore these social problems have been caused by neo-liberalism.

Ignoring for our purposes the doubtful notion that there has actually been a general increase in certain specific social problems such as poverty (Pryke, 1995), the trouble is that the underlying assumption of the above — that neo-liberalism stalked the land between 1979 and 1997 — is simply not true. Health services, the police, education, the law, transport, the utilities, and especially local government were more truly ‘nationalised’ — that is under non-commercial, bureaucratic control — after the best part of two decades of a supposedly free-market Conservative government than at any time in the modern period (Jenkins, 1995). If taxation as a proportion of GDP provides a good measure of the relative size between individual versus collective choice (Flew, 1994: p. 3), then at a figure of around 40% throughout this time Britain can hardly be said to have been in the thrall of rampant libertarians in any absolute sense.

Regrettably, the gap between Thatcherite rhetoric and reality is unbridgeable. But the carefully nurtured *impression* that between 1979 to 1997 we were living under an ‘anti-society’ government remains. This myth has been a powerful weapon in the arsenal of statist true-believers.

### ‘SOCIETY’: WHY IT DOES NOT EXIST

If individualism is held to be wrong, either from a normative moral position or a purely utilitarian one, there must therefore be something else for it to be compared with: presumably collectivism of some sort. But Society is just a figment of the collectivist and bureaucratic imagination: when the psychologically disturbed were ‘released back into the community’ — the last being an even friendlier-sounding synonym for Society — they quickly found that it did not exist (Duncan and Hobson, 1995: pp. 300-301).

Taking a Popperian view of it, one must require of proponents of the existence of Society to specify what empirically observable phenomenon would disprove their hypothesis (Flew, 1989: p. 482). It is submitted that they are unable to provide this. Society is the paradigmatic example of a reified concept which is not objectively real (Sloman, 1993: p. 3). Far from being controversial, Margaret Thatcher’s statement was no more and no less than a metaphysical truism (Flew, 1991: p. 62).

“The self is an object to itself in the sense that it can use its own acting, willing, doing and perceiving as stimuli” (Miller, 1967: 40). Furthermore, just because

the individual can incorporate the responses of others as stimuli and hence part of his/her own response this does not mean that the whole ‘will’ of the individual is furnished by others or the environment. Ultimately, only other individuals influence other individuals: there is no corporate or social mind (Miller, 1967: pp. 40-41).

The social group of course does exist: all of a group’s individual members can be replaced and yet the club or whatever still exist; but ultimately anything done to or by the club can only be done to or by its individual members. What ever is said about any supposed social whole must, at some stage, be related and explained with reference to its components (Flew, 1991: pp. 61-63).

### ‘SOCIETY’: WHY IT SHOULD NOT EXIST EVEN IF IT DID

“History shows that all of the worst things which a state can inflict upon individual human beings — conscription, apartheid, expropriation, compulsory contraception, genocide — are characteristically marked by some collective abstraction like ‘the State’, ‘society’, ‘nation’, ‘race’, ‘proletariat’, ‘community’ or ‘space-ship Earth’ whose interests are said to override those of the individual, and so justify the coercive and repressive actions of the State” (Duncan and Hobson, 1995: p. 298). In authoritarian systems “individuals ... become of value and significance ... only insofar as each [is] committed towards objectives stipulated by a central authority [and to] lose himself in a cause higher than himself” (Miller, 1967: p. 159). The intimidation of non-strikers during the 1984-85 miners’ strike was the reality behind the rosy illusion of communal solidarity (Duncan and Hobson, 1995: p. 303).

The commonality of purpose needed in the collectivist social order just cannot be continuously sustained beyond the level of the sporting club, except when all, *as individuals*, face the same threat. It is no surprise that the occasions when Britain has come closest to outright totalitarianism were during the apex of sanguinary (and supposedly voluntary) common purpose: the two world wars. Whatever justification there may or may not be in this with Hitler encamped twenty-odd miles across the channel and the Luftwaffe razing the cities of Britain (although even then the Society for Individual Freedom was founded in 1942 partly to combat war-time oppression *in this country*), there is emphatically *not* in peacetime (Duncan and Hobson, 1995: pp. 7-8). Or to put it another way: if it took massive coercive powers — censorship and suppression of the media, military conscription, the direction of both capital and labour, imprisonment without trial for years — when the people of Britain were probably more genuinely united in a common cause then at any other time, what does it take to enforce a large-scale collective purpose in peacetime?

Even in the most ‘civilised’ social-democratic collectivist systems the natural way of things is for those in power to quickly come to identify their own self-interest and preferences with that of Society’s and therefore with everybody’s (Ashford, 1995: p. 4). Economic and societal planners have an objective which implicitly or explicitly assumes that everybody has the same goal (Miller, 1967: p. 161): *their* goal.

The point of this is that the development of personal identity and fulfilment of an individual will never be achieved (except by a small number of oligarchs) against a background of the coercion needed to sustain (in reality just the illusion of) a collectivist Society.

As the state increases its authority so it must inevitably narrow the scope of individual responsibility and hence destroy moral sense until, like drug addicts, individuals are no longer able to function at all without their fix of welfare or interventionism or prohibition or whatever, and withdrawal leads to moral collapse. This we have seen most dramatically in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union (Duncan and Hobson, 1995: p. 368; Walton, 1995) but also in the growth of the ‘underclass’ in the West (Murray, 1996).

Of course there is a ‘social or cultural matrix’ (Miller, 1967: p. 150), but the voluntary and constantly changing customs and practices of an individualistic society are quite different from the holistic, totalitarian collectivist vision or actual nature of Society. Individualism fully accepts the legitimacy and indeed necessity of voluntary social co-operation. But it also holds that at all times these relationships exist for the good of the individuals involved and not some higher entity such as society, race, or nation (Tame, 1989: p. 2).

### THE BACKWARDNESS OF COLLECTIVISM

Certain collectivists like to present themselves as ‘modern’; they have even appended ‘New’ to their title. In fact they and those with similar views are the inheritors of an old system of beliefs. Modern social scientists and others who oppose individualism and who speak of Society and cultural, racial, sexual or other determinisms have simply revived and updated pre-renaissance, medieval concepts that we are just helpless prisoners of God’s will (Miller, 1967: p. 53). Those who support the idea of Society are merely championing primitive, traditionalist views which blurred the distinction between the individual and their group. Along with this view comes a concomitant pressure to conform: for in a collectivist system a non-conformer is rejecting the whole, everything that is ‘true’ (Miller, 1967: p. 140), and those who challenge the collectivist Witch Doctors’ vision of this superior truth must be brought to heel (Rand, 1961: pp. 17-19).

There is certainly a long-standing socialist and communitarian tradition of an attachment to a romanticised, pre-industrial past (Duncan and Hobson, 1995: pp. 194-197). Moreover, this spreads across the col-

lectivist political spectrum: Christian Socialism has always historically been closely associated with High Anglicanism (and therefore to anti-individualistic, collectivist Catholicism) and thus to High Toryism (Duncan and Hobson, 1995: p. 276); all of them part of that dreadful “ruling consensus of socialist ideologues, Liberal opportunists and Tory paternalists” (Harris, 1998). The idea that individuals can only ‘realise themselves’ within a larger group — Society — is the common theme which links ‘civilised’ ideas such as Christian Socialism and One-Nation Toryism — as well as the generally expressed views of the modern Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative Parties — with fascism and communism (Duncan and Hobson, 1985: pp. 9 and 238).

### THE BENEFITS OF INDIVIDUALISM

The benefits to the individual of individualism are considerable. The psychological principle of ‘self-actualisation’ — the striving of individuals through their own efforts to achieve a better version of themselves (Atkinson *et al*, 1993: pp. 547-549; Miller, 1967: pp. 7-8) must necessarily be limited by membership of a non-voluntary whole, no matter how illusory.

There is strong empirical evidence for the benefits to the individual of an individualistic value system. To take one example: Waterman (1984) conducted a meta-analysis which hypothesised that there would be a positive correlation between high measures of individualism (as measured by a wide range of psychometric tests) with other psychological traits such as a greater tendency towards principled moral reasoning, personal responsibility, internal locus of control, co-operative and helping behaviour, achievement and maintenance of mutually supportive relationships, high levels of self-esteem, robust psychological emotional health and tolerance of diverse viewpoints and behaviours. Waterman examined the literature concerning 574 tests of the ‘superiority of individualism’ hypothesis and found: 320 significant positive results, 247 null hypothesis outcomes and only 7 significant negative results. To be sure, Waterman demonstrated that individualism is not the only source of moral worth, but the evidence that it is a substantial component seems irresistible.

But the general benefits are also immense. Adam Smith’s concept of ‘the invisible hand’ is well-known (Flew, 1991: p. 83), but amongst collectivists there is a moral repugnance at the truth that the welfare of others is best improved by the non-directed self-interest of individuals (Duncan and Hobson, 1995: 291). The converse of this, that people may sometimes be poor due to their own failings, is anathema to many collectivists who believe that ‘success’ — like ‘fulfilment’ and indeed ‘wealth’ — is another fixed-quantity good (Micklethwait, 1992: p. 2) which needs to be rationed out ‘fairly’ by the community to which it belongs, often in the spurious moral-high-ground-capturing name of ‘social justice’ (Flew, 1993: p. 6). This zero-

sum notion is of course nonsense (Micklethwait, 1994; Ashford, 1995: p. 3), but collectivists still cannot shake of its simplistic allure (Duncan and Hobson, 1995: p. 290).

The collectivist social science establishment seems obsessed with that irrelevant concept 'inequality' (Marstrand, 1994: p. 2). An individualistic society will certainly not be equal, but it will provide the best basis for individual growth on the basis of personal aspirations, ability and application (and some luck too) (Miller, 1967: p. 147). Although at times this may be difficult, individuals in an individualistic society can choose what parts of their environment — culture and so forth — they wish to *try* to incorporate (Miller, 1967: p. 45), a choice not available in a collectivist society where they are held to be a subsumed part of a larger whole.

Individualism requires novelty, creativity and innovation, and only by individualism can any worthwhile progress be made. For it is the individual, and not some nebulous higher entity, that is the fountainhead of creation (Miller, 1967: 3-4). Only through personal achievement and self-actualisation can there be any substantial personal — and hence also societal — development, and this can only come about in an individualistic society (Miller, 1967: p. 172).

## LIBERTY AT STAKE

The whole concept of Society, and the idea that therein lies any general route to personal fulfilment, is nonsense. It is probable that some proponents of these ideas still proclaim them with a good heart, but behind other voices one can frequently discern a more sinister motive (Micklethwait, 1996). These individuals, having realised that direct appeals to support their malign and bankrupt ideologies will no longer work, have turned to ideas of 'community' to attempt to lead people into a 'finlandization of the spirit' that is attacking individual liberty by appeals to 'social conscience'. There has been an attempt by statists to install a visceral sense of guilt, to create a moral uncertainty and fear, so that people are less sure about defending liberty (Roberts, 1986: pp. 1-2).

There are too many people — self-interested individuals after all — with too much invested in collectivist theories and in the (for them) profitable and pleasurable machinery of the state to surrender their positions easily. But if for the moment they remain hard to shift in practice, then at the very least we must resolutely proclaim that their theft of our liberty is morally, psychologically and economically unjustifiable.

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