

FABIAN SOCIETY

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# Does society exist?

## The case for socialism

*Brian Barry*

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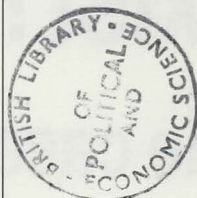


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# Does society exist? The case for socialism

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# The problem

# 1

Mrs Thatcher's policies are based on the social theory of individualism. But it is wrong for socialists to oppose individualism in all its forms because of this.

Long after the deeds and misdeeds of Margaret Thatcher have been forgotten, she may well be remembered for saying "There is no such thing as society". We have only to make the effort to imagine these words being uttered by predecessors such as Winston Churchill or Harold Macmillan to appreciate that something has changed in our society. Perhaps Mrs Thatcher would have to regard that last sentence as unintelligible, but socialists are presumably committed to believing that the word 'society' refers to something, since 'social' and 'society' have the same root. But if as socialists we believe in society, what exactly are we committed to believing in? I see the attempt to answer this question as a part of the intellectual stocktaking that we need to engage in if we are to give the lie to another of Mrs Thatcher's *dicta*: her boast that she will preside over the disappearance of socialism from the political arena.

Although Mrs Thatcher is not an original thinker, and would make no pretensions to being one, she does not need to be. She has plenty of people to do her thinking for her, and they have put together a coherent social theory that has been enormously important in giving her government a sense of purpose that was signally lacking in the governments presided over by Harold Wilson and James Callaghan.

The social theory upon which Mrs Thatcher draws for sustenance can be encapsulated in one word as individualism. But should socialists simply oppose individualism in all its guises? To do so would be, I believe, to fall into a trap. We should not put off potential adherents by suggesting that to be a socialist you have to accept extravagant and implausible philosophical assumptions. The Fabian Society has taken as its mascot the tortoise, no doubt because (like Fabius Maximus) it is patient and persevering. But we can learn more from the tortoise than those virtues. It also has the good sense never to stick its neck out further than is necessary for getting to its destination.

Individualism takes a number of forms and in what follows I shall look at three of them. In each case I shall ask whether socialists should adopt the individualist line or the opposite. The first contrast I shall

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draw (in chapter 2) is between individualism and holism. Here the individualist position denies the very existence of social entities or their ability to explain anything. I shall argue that the question of existence is trivial but that the question of explanation is very important, and I shall illustrate this by showing in some detail how an individualist approach can usefully be brought to bear on the reform of the National Health Service.

The second contrast (chapter 3) is between individualism and solidarism. The issue here is between alternative accounts of the genesis of obligations to others. On the individualist account these arise from voluntary acts: the standard form of obligation is a contractual obligation. On the alternative solidaristic account, obligations arise directly from our membership in a society. I shall argue that neither of these alternatives should be accepted and that a different account from either of them is more satisfactory. I shall, however, show that the conclusion sought by the solidarists – the existence of obligations of mutual aid – stands up equally well in my account, but is more securely based.

The third and last contrast I shall draw (in chapter 4) is between individualism and collectivism, and here I come down unequivocally on the side of collectivism, understood as an emphasis on the importance of collective provision. Indeed, socialism is, I shall argue, best understood as the union of two ideas: social justice and collectivism.

The essay concludes (chapter 5) with a discussion of the implications of all this for the Labour Party. The policies endorsed by the Party at its last two Conferences do not, I believe, provide the necessary sense of direction. Even worse, the priorities to which a future Labour government is currently committed virtually guarantee that it will be once again 'blown off course'.

If Labour is to turn the current discontent with Mrs Thatcher's Government into stable support for an alternative vision of society it needs to articulate that vision. It needs to demonstrate – what is indeed true – that there is an interconnection among the things that have gone wrong with our society in recent years. And, above all, it needs to argue convincingly that it has a coherent approach from which its policies and its priorities flow.

When Mrs Thatcher came to power, she was able to draw upon more than a decade of systematic effort devoted to working out the means of undermining collective provision and engineering a redistribution of income and power from the poor to the rich. The left does not – let us hope – have the luxury of such a long lead time. But the essential first step is knowing where we want to go. This pamphlet may perhaps appear to be starting a long way back, but I believe that we have to begin by deciding where we stand on individualism.

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# Should socialists be holists?

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Some form of methodological individualism should be accepted by socialists. It forces new thinking to be done about proposed institutions and how people are to be motivated to work in a socialist society.

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**L**et me begin by dismissing the relevance of one interpretation of the claim that there is no such thing as society. The claim might be taken literally to mean that there simply does not exist anything corresponding to the word 'society'. In the same vein, somebody might say that there are no such things as forests, only trees.

As it happens, we can be fairly sure that Mrs Thatcher would not want to deny that society exists in this literal sense. For she went on to say that "there are only individuals and families". This, taken as a claim about what exists, would be like saying that there are no such things as forests, only trees and coppices. It would be hard to take that notion very seriously.

I said earlier that socialists should not automatically join the anti-individualist camp, and I do not think that any argument for socialism requires the existence of social wholes. But neither does any argument for it rest on the denial of their existence. In fact, my suggestion is that socialists need not take a stand on either side of the issue because nothing turns on it.

So, why does anybody think that it matters? The reason is that there is a genuinely significant issue of individualism versus holism, and it is mistakenly supposed that the position one takes on this is determined by one's position on the question of the existence of society. The issue that does matter involves the explanation of social phenomena.

The usual name for this dispute is 'methodological individualism versus methodological holism'. In this context, 'methodological' means simply that we are concerned with how to explain rather than with what exists. The question involved may at first sight appear extremely abstract and remote from any practical question that need concern socialists. I hope, however, to show that this is far from the truth.

## *Methodological individualism*

The most plausible statement of methodological individualism, which also makes the least sweeping claims, runs as follows: *all satisfactory explanations of social phenomena must be capable, in principle, of being couched in terms of individuals' actions.*

Before going any further, let me dispel one common misunderstanding. There is no claim here that every social phenomenon must have been brought about by the deliberate efforts of individuals to bring about just that phenomenon. On the contrary, very often an explanation couched in methodological individualist terms will appeal to the unintended consequences of a mass of individual actions.

Thus, orthodox contemporary economics, which adheres self-consciously to the tenets of methodological individualism, does not suppose that phenomena such as inflations or stock market crashes come about because individuals act with that end in view. What it does insist is that we should try to understand how a whole series of individual decisions (eg, to buy and sell) eventually add up to a social phenomenon recognisable as an inflation or a stock market crash. An explanation of a social phenomenon in terms of methodological holism would, in contrast, invoke something like 'the functional needs of capital', while resisting the suggestion that such a statement should be capable of being translated into one about the actions of individual capitalists.

There is a vast and often arcane literature addressed to the truth or falsity of methodological individualism. I shall bypass this by arguing that, even if it is not completely true (though I suspect it is), there are three reasons why socialists would do well to adopt methodological individualism as a working hypothesis.

First, I appeal to the tortoise principle. Methodological individualism is at the very least a plausible and attractive idea. If people are told that to be good socialists they have to subscribe to methodological holism, a lot of potential supporters will be gratuitously put off. They will conclude that there must be something wrong with a doctrine that rests on such questionable foundations.

Second, the explanatory and predictive record of the best-known theory embodying methodological holism, Marxism, has been thoroughly wretched: it has not come to terms with (let alone predicted) any of the major developments of the twentieth century. There may be many reasons for this, but I suggest that the habit of ascribing motive power to entities such as capital ought to be high up on the list.

The third attraction of methodological individualism is that it forces us to ask hard questions about the operation of a socialist society's institutions. If we propose that in future things ought to be organised in a certain way, methodological individualism bids us to press the question: how are individual men and women to be motivated to act in



the manner that these institutions require? It is highly salutary that such questions should be asked in advance of any attempt to introduce new social arrangements. For otherwise the most likely result of attempting to introduce them will be disillusionment and, following upon this, the discrediting of socialism.

It should be noticed that, as defined so far, there is nothing built into the idea of methodological individualism that sets limits to the kinds of motivation that might be ascribed to people. Thus, you could, quite consistently with the tenets of methodological individualism, say that in a socialist society payment could be entirely divorced from work effort because people would work out of love of humanity or enthusiasm for building a socialist commonwealth. All that methodological individualism insists on is the necessity of confronting the problem of individual motivation and providing an answer to it. Others may then judge the plausibility of the answer and draw appropriate conclusions.

I have emphasised the complete generality of methodological individualism with respect to kinds of motive because it is often tarred with the same brush as a much narrower and, from a socialist point of view, much more sinister doctrine, ie, the idea that people are invariably motivated by self-interest. There is no doubt that applied across the board this doctrine is inimical to socialism. But at the same time I can see absolutely no reason for accepting it.

### *Some illustrations*

I can best illustrate what is at stake here by showing the two ideas at work in analysing a particular institution – the National Health Service, which I take to be (in its general principles if not its detailed operation) an exemplary socialist institution in that it replaces profit with service as the rationale of its activities.

No doubt that is enough in itself to make the NHS highly distasteful to Mrs Thatcher and her more ideologically-driven colleagues. But it would be too simple to suppose that the only explanation for the Government's proposed revamping of the NHS is the desire to destroy a stronghold of values alien to those of the market. A complementary explanation is that the denizens of the think-tanks whose advice the Government listens to really cannot imagine that an organisation can possibly work effectively unless incentives are rigged so that decision makers find it in their interest to do whatever they ought to do. They are so besotted by the rational-choice paradigm in this form that they just deduce from first principles what a health service driven by self-interest would be like and put that forward without feeling any necessity for looking in detail at the strengths and weaknesses of the existing system.

The existing organisation of the NHS does not in general connect

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decisions about the choice of treatment with the incomes of doctors or of organisations such as hospitals. This creates a certain ethos that both patients and providers find valuable, and for good reason. In the American health care system, by contrast, patients are aware that physicians have a financial interest in either overtreating them or undertreating them, depending on their financial arrangements. If an insurance company picks up the bill, there is an incentive to carry out unnecessary procedures in order to increase income, and there is in fact much evidence that surgery for which there is no medical justification is often carried out. If, however, the patient belongs to a so-called Health Maintenance Organisation (the model for the Government's proposals for financing general practitioners in Britain) there is an incentive to spend as little as possible on treatment, since the patient pays a fixed annual fee and the prosperity of the practice depends on keeping down outgoings. Thus, either system gives rise to perverse incentives for the physicians and creates a wholly justifiable mistrust of their motives in recommending courses of treatment.

Fortunately the American health care delivery system, for all its grievous faults, does not work out as badly in practice as one might expect from that description of its incentive structure. But the reason for this is precisely that physicians tend not to abuse their virtual monopoly of information *vis a vis* their patients by recommending treatment in accordance with the economic incentives facing them. This, however, is to say that the system works as well as it does only because most medical professionals are not profit maximisers but are to a large extent motivated by the desire to do well by their patients.

I am not suggesting that American physicians are not deeply interested in the amount that they get paid – but then so are those who work in the NHS. The point is simply that, although no doubt a lot of wombs and tonsils fall victim to the profit motive, the great mass of individual decisions about treatment are taken on legitimate medical grounds.

The lesson to be drawn is that the introduction of commercial calculations into micro-level decisions within the NHS is not the way to go. If we have qualms about the way in which decisions on treatment are taken – that considerations of cost-effectiveness are not given sufficient weight, for example – what we need to do is find out exactly how decisions are taken now and then try to see what might be done to modify this, perhaps by supplying better and more usable information. The object should be to build on, and indeed reinforce, the motive of benefiting patients, rather than seeking to introduce the extraneous motive of material advantage into decision making.

Old-fashioned socialist thinking used to run along the following lines: if we, as a society, want to get something done, the best way of getting it done is to set up an organisation and tell the people running that organisation to get on with it. The history of the public corpora-



tions set up by the 1945 Labour Government shows what is wrong with this idea. If we want a public enterprise to offer a cheap, safe and reliable service, to provide safe working conditions, to combat racial and gender discrimination and to be sensitive to environmental considerations, we cannot afford to turn over decision making to some obsessively secretive board and sit back.

The virtue of methodological individualism here is to remind us that appropriate motivation cannot be taken for granted. There is no sovereign remedy, but identifying the problem encourages the search for ways of pressing decision making in the right directions. Three devices which international experience suggests are always useful here are: more openness so that the basis for decisions can be subjected to public scrutiny; more power to those directly affected (eg, workers' representatives with respect to safety); and the creating of jobs within the organisation whose holders are specifically charged with promoting certain objectives such as minority hiring or reducing pollution.

The triumph of the New Right consists in not merely spreading the conviction that what I have called the old-fashioned socialist approach is simple-minded but in making it seem axiomatic that the only alternative is to arrange things so that somebody can make a profit out of doing whatever it is we want to have done. This idea is actually a good deal more simple-minded than the one it displaced, since anyone who gets past the first chapter of an economics textbook will soon realise how restrictive are the conditions under which there is any reason for expecting people pursuing a profit to bring about a socially desirable outcome. (They are grotesquely far from being met by telephones, water and electricity or, for different reasons, health care delivery.) Long live the competing entrepreneurs selling fruit and vegetables from their barrows in London's Berwick Street – but the further we get away from them the more dubious the profit motive becomes.

Methodological individualism, rightly understood, presses us to ask the questions that ought to be asked about the organisation of public enterprises, both local and national. We do not have to make the crass assumption that each person must find it in his or her direct personal interest to follow the right course of action. However, I would suggest this much of a bow to the forces of economic self-interest: it is a bad idea to set things up so that there is a financial incentive to do wrong.

Here is a deliberately simple illustration of the distinction. We pay firemen a fixed amount for doing their job, which means that when deciding exactly what to do in fighting a fire they must be motivated by something other than an individual cost-benefit calculus. We could in theory switch to a system of payment by results, so that a fireman got a bonus of (say) £100 for each person rescued from a burning building. It is, however, highly doubtful that we should feel safer knowing that a fireman, in deciding whether to enter a burning build-

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ing, was trying to determine on a basis of self-interest whether the risk involved was worth taking in return for an additional pre-tax £100. It is not merely nicer but actually more efficacious to pay people to be firemen and then rely on norms of professionalism and public service to motivate them to accept discomfort and danger in the course of discharging their duties.

There is, then, no financial incentive here for doing more than the minimum necessary to avoid dismissal, but equally there is no financial disincentive. To illustrate a perverse financial incentive, imagine that each team of firemen had their pay reduced according to the amount of water they used. This would obviously mean that they would no longer be motivated solely by their professional judgement in deciding how much water to use but would have a personal financial incentive to minimise the amount. I am suggesting that we should not put people in a situation where doing their job well actually costs them money.

The example I have just given is fanciful (I hope). But the American health care system, as I have pointed out, provides a real life example of perverse financial incentives. For another, we need look no further than the way in which in Britain it is possible (and indeed common) for a consultant under contract to the NHS to work also in the private health care sector. As the leading Canadian medical economist, Robert Evans, has observed, this arrangement (which is prohibited in Canada) opens up perverse incentives, since "the British private consultant can use his dual role to select and steer patients according to their resources and the nature of their problem. He can even use his position within the NHS to manipulate waiting lists and other aspects of access so as to ensure that private health care will be preferable to those who can afford it. The Canadian physician who chooses to go private must go all the way. He cannot use a strategic position within the public system to cream off only the profitable patients for his private services" (Robert G Evans, 'We'll Take Care Of It For You: Health Care in the Canadian Community', *Daedalus*, 17, Fall 1988).

This is the kind of case in which the *a priori* approach beloved by the so-called rational-choice theorists comes into its own. We need not, in other words, establish just how frequently abuses of the kind depicted by Robert Evans actually occur. It is enough to condemn the existing system that it sets up perverse incentives. The implication is, obviously, that working in the private health care sector should be incompatible with working in the NHS.

Although more could be said, I hope I have done enough to suggest that a moderate form of methodological individualism, so far from being inimical to socialism, is a useful tool in that it forces us to ask hard questions about the institutions that we propose. And the example just given illustrates that, deployed where it is appropriate, even the self-interest postulate can form part of the arsenal of socialism.



# Should socialists be solidarists?

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The choice between individualism and solidarism is a false one and both should be rejected. Instead, it is argued that social obligations arise from specific conventions underpinned by general moral principles.

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Let us return to Mrs Thatcher's assertion that there is no such thing as society. I have said that this is not plausibly regarded as a claim about what exists. She need not, therefore, deny that the United Kingdom forms a society whose members are defined by common social, economic and political institutions. But there is a further claim that I believe Mrs Thatcher would wish to reject, and this rejection could be expressed by saying that there is no such thing as society.

The claim in question is that the existence of a society in the sense discussed so far constitutes a ground for a general obligation to provide for the well-being of the members of the society. 'Society' now carries normative implications: a society is defined by common institutions *and* mutual obligations of care. I shall call this conception of society 'solidarism', because it bases obligations upon social solidarity.

I can best give some substance to the doctrine of solidarism by citing a line of argument that is not uncommonly made in support of various kinds of collective provision. This runs as follows. We think of it as natural and proper for the members of a family to accept some responsibility for one another. A family that had the collective resources to care for all its members but let some of them go without food, shelter, clothing, medical care or education would rightly be condemned. But, in exactly the same way, the members of a society should accept responsibility for one another. And a society that had the resources to care for all its members but neglected some should be condemned.

According to this line of argument, a society is a family writ large. The obligations that are generated by membership in a society are not identical with those generated by membership in a family, but they arise naturally in the same manner out of existing relationships.

The etymology of the word 'society' derives from the Latin 'socius',

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meaning a friend or comrade. If we take friendship and comradeship to have built into them certain obligations of mutual aid, then we can say that solidarism is a conception of 'society' that seeks to give more than nominal force to its connections with friendship and comradeship. For those who see a society as constituted by common institutions – above all by a uniform set of laws applying to all equally – it is quite understandable that the mode of salutation should be 'Citizen'. By the same token, to the solidaristic conception of society corresponds the salutation 'Comrade'. This does not, of course, entail that solidarists should actually go around calling one another 'Comrade'; but, then, outside the French Revolution (or maybe films about it) people have not gone around calling one another 'Citizen' either. I am merely pointing out that each of these modes of address has a foundation in a conception of society.

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Family and social obligations do indeed have a common source. The conclusion of the argument I cited is therefore sound. At the same time, however, I want to say that the premise of the argument – the doctrine of solidarism – is mistaken. But I do not propose that we should, this time, embrace the individualist alternative. Rather, we should reject both. The kinds of conclusion that socialists want to get from solidarism can be better defended through an approach that cuts across the conflict between solidarism and individualism.

If solidarism is the idea that obligations arise naturally out of social relationships, individualism in its pure form is the idea that obligations arise only artificially from some voluntary act. The model of obligation is contractual obligation: people consent to obligations in return for the benefits that they expect to obtain as a result of others likewise accepting obligations.

Individualists are not very often completely pure. Thomas Hobbes is the only major figure in the history of social contract theorising who has followed through the individualist programme with ruthless consistency and sought to ground even obligations within families on contractual relations. John Locke is more typical in fudging the issue of families, and simply insisting that families are in no way a model for societies, which are based on contract. Mrs Thatcher, in excluding families from her anathema on society, thus shows herself to be, whether she knows it or not, an adherent of the Lockean version of individualism. (For a much more detailed discussion of a complex story see Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Polity Press, 1988.)

Solidarism and the form of individualism that constitutes its antithesis share a common assumption: that either obligations arise naturally from actual relationships or they arise artificially as the result of the voluntary actions of morally independent individuals. This is seventeenth century sociology, and I think we should get away from it.

Let us start again in a different place. Suppose that in Britain (but



not necessarily anywhere else) a group of people go into a pub and somebody buys a round of drinks. There is then a general expectation that the other members of the group will buy a round in turn. Where does this expectation come from? Not from explicit agreement, so the voluntaristic theory of obligation cannot serve. But invoking a natural obligation scarcely seems any better. The obvious answer is that what is at work here is a convention.

But to leave it there would fail to explain why if someone skips out without standing a round after accepting drinks from others this is regarded as unfair. What this reaction shows is that the convention taps into a moral norm, the norm of fair play. This is a general principle, common to every society, that one should play one's part in a co-operative arrangement from which one benefits or stands to benefit. The variable part, which is provided by a convention, is the part that establishes what kinds of co-operative arrangements there are and what constitutes benefiting or standing to benefit.

It is my suggestion that all social arrangements can be analysed in the same way as that rather trivial case. We can always find, in other words, an element that varies from society to society and underlying it a general moral principle that gives it whatever moral force it has. This is not to deny that there are natural inclinations, and no doubt the more durable conventions will be found to be those that go with the grain of inclination rather than against it. But the range of variation in conventions between societies is too great for us to say more than that.

### *Family relations*

Families illustrate this as well as any other social institution. Doubtless there is some biological basis underlying care of parents for children. The survival of the human race would otherwise have been pretty insecure. But we also have to take cognizance of the enormous variety of kin relationships that within different societies are taken to constitute membership in a single family, and the equally enormous variety of obligations that family membership is taken to entail.

When we reflect on these kinds of variation we are led to reject the idea that we have a fixed set of relations – family relations – and that obligations arise naturally out of these. At the same time, however, we are not in the least tempted to believe that these obligations within families arise out of voluntary agreement among their members.

In place of either of these notions, what I am suggesting is that the constitution of a family and the obligations among its members are both social constructs. They are, in the terms of my analysis, conventions. But it should be borne in mind that, within the usage I am adopting, to say that an institution is conventional is not to say that it is arbitrary or that it could easily be changed. The obligations are real enough. But,

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as with the convention of standing rounds in a pub, the moral force of the convention arises from the morally relevant general considerations that can be advanced in its support.

My analysis amounts to the proposal that social obligations should be interpreted on the model of legal obligations. A law creates a legal obligation as a matter of legal logic, but the moral force of the law derives from whatever value is created by obedience to it. Some laws may be so bad that they are better disobeyed if this can be done without detection, or if the risk of detection is worth accepting. (A perfect example would be a law prohibiting homosexual acts between consenting adults.) But for the most part life goes better if laws are widely obeyed, even if it is possible in many cases to see how they could be improved. Jeremy Bentham's prescription – "To obey promptly; to censure freely" – is a generally sound rule, and I suggest that the same should be said of the obligations that arise not from legal enactment but from social convention.

Where does this leave the argument that took the social obligations of family members as a model for those of members of a society towards one another? I said earlier that I applauded its putting familial and social obligations on the same footing. But I must lay rough hands on the form of the argument itself, even while endorsing its conclusion in favour of the welfare state.

From the perspective I am putting forward, the family as an institution in Britain today consists of a core of legal obligations reinforced and extended by social obligations. For example, a man has a legal duty to support his family, and can be put in prison for wilfully failing to do so, though this sanction is rarely invoked since he certainly cannot support his family while in prison. But the expectations that arise from shared social norms about what family members owe one another extend far beyond anything captured in legal enactments.

Both the legal and the social norms derive whatever moral force they have from the same source: the valuable results that follow from adherence to them. But when we look at the contribution that families make to the realisation of human welfare, we soon see that they have severe inadequacies. The case for the welfare state is the same as the case for family obligations in that they are complementary means of serving the same ends.

The full development of these ideas would require a lot of space, but, at the inevitable risk that brevity will make for crudity, let me give a few illustrations. A family is, among other things, an economic unit. In societies where extended families are the norm, families offer some real protection against adversity: one adult who cannot find employment or is incapable of work can be supported by the work of several others. The nuclear family, in contrast, offers a very weak defence against loss of earnings, and this establishes the case for a programme of income



replacement based on individual earnings.

Similarly, within an extended family the cost of rearing children can be spread over a number of adults. The nuclear family cannot provide this kind of limited collectivisation of the cost of child-rearing, and the high rate at which marriages break up means that many children are raised in one-parent families. We can easily see here how to make out the case for collectivising the cost of child-raising across a whole society, so that every child attracts a grant corresponding to the full cost of food, clothing, shelter and recreation in (say) an average working-class household.

In the same vein, we can observe that, in the four decades since Michael Young and Peter Willmott did their fieldwork in Bethnal Green, families with grandparents and other relatives living next door or just around the corner have become a much rarer phenomenon (*Family and Kinship in East London*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949). The need for provision of creches and nursery schools thus becomes more pressing as the alternative of child-minding within an extended family declines in importance.

The line of argument just presented eschews any appeal to the idea that social relationships are somehow pregnant with social obligations which may or may not be actually incorporated in practice. Instead it takes a positivist view of both legal and social norms: they have a verifiable existence, though the process of verification is quite complex. But we must then ask whether, as they stand, they are well adapted to achieving the outcomes that we regard as morally important.

As we have seen, where families fall down on the job, we are led to turn to societies to step in to do what is needed. In the nature of the case, the element of legally-mandated provision will be higher for burdens carried at the societal level, though we should also be looking for changes in social norms to accommodate social changes.

The same analysis must, however, be pursued beyond the level of societies. Just as a family is too small a unit to be an unconditionally self-sustaining economic entity, so is a society. At least half the world's population lives in countries which could not, however well they organised their internal distribution of income, give all of their members a decent standard of living. The case for transfers from rich countries to poor ones is exactly of the same kind as the case for transfers within countries.

Needless to say, the entirely different institutional setting of international transfers means that the arrangements will have to be quite different. But the point to be made here is that there are no conceptual problems in making the case. At the minimum all we need to do is acknowledge that malnutrition, disease, ignorance and poverty generally are evils and that it is possible to alleviate them. This is quite enough to ground a case for transfers.

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In contrast, the solidarist approach has a great difficulty in generating international obligations that are not based on the mutual self-interest of states. Either supporters of this approach admit that obligations stop at the boundaries of countries or they are forced to invoke a 'world society' in which to ground international obligations. But whatever solidarity there is among the world's inhabitants is scarcely enough to generate much in the way of obligations.

I have been arguing that solidarism is an ill-conceived moral theory. However, reflection on the case of international transfers may well suggest that it still has a valid place as an explanatory theory. That is to say, it seems pretty clear that as a matter of fact human beings are much more likely to accept sacrifices to benefit those with whom they interact or share common institutions than they are to accept sacrifices to benefit other people to whom they are not related in these ways. The implication of this is plain: that if moral considerations lead us to the conclusion that the existing amount of transfer is inadequate, we should favour anything that increases a sense of solidarity.

This should be qualified. The Second World War was an excellent creator of a sense of solidarity, since everyone shared in the danger of defeat and the blitz created a genuinely common hazard. And generally natural disasters of all kinds have been found to have a stimulating effect on mutual aid, at any rate up to the point at which a sentiment of *sauve qui peut* takes over. But this should hardly lead us to welcome an increase of solidarity created by war or natural disaster. We must therefore fall back on shared institutions.

Socialists are right to think that public transport is more than a device for moving people around: it also throws people from different social classes and areas of the country together and creates a common interest in the efficient running of the system. Conversely, driving a car creates a spirit of competition with other road users in which those who are prepared to be anti-social (eg, by pulling into an intersection or not letting pedestrians cross the road) gain at the expense of others. It is a common observation that, as traffic congestion gets worse in London, standards of civility and considerate behaviour decline. Is it likely that the aggression and rudeness displayed on the road are completely left behind when the car is parked?

The socialist case against the car in city centres is not just that it creates mutual frustration but also that it makes people worse. Across the board – education and medical care are two other obvious examples – collective provision on a universal basis fosters attitudes of co-operation and concern while private provision is divisive and conducive to selfishness.

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# Should socialists be collectivists?

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Socialists must take a stand on the anti-individualist side of the contrast between individualism and collectivism. Indeed, the connection between socialism and collectivism is the strongest possible one. Collectivism does not merely support socialism: it is partially constitutive of it.

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**A**lthough I have talked about socialism a good deal, I have not so far offered a formal definition of it. I have, however, presupposed that socialists share certain objectives, including the preservation of the National Health Service from market forces and the defence and expansion of the welfare state. Any satisfactory conception of socialism would, I take it, have to lead to the implication that these are socialist measures. But the time has come to put all this on a more systematic footing. I propose, then, the following concise definition: socialism = social justice + collectivism.

## *Social justice*

It is significant that both 'socialism' and 'social justice' seem to have originated at about the same time, around the 1830s in France and Britain, in response to the perceived evils of the emergent form of industrial civilisation. And the two ideas have run in tandem ever since, with 'social justice' to be found on the lips of socialists, while anti-socialists have tended to disparage the very notion of social justice.

The claim underlying social justice is that all the major institutions of a society can and should be subjected to the test of conformity with principles of justice. This includes the methods of political decision making, the legal system, the educational system, the way in which work is organised and paid for and the system of taxes and transfers.

What, then, are these principles of justice against which institutions are to be assessed? The most basic principle, which underlies all post-Enlightenment ideas of justice, is one of the fundamental equality

of human beings. We start from a rejection of any claims to special treatment based upon any alleged fundamental superiority whether grounded naturally or supernaturally. Racism, the privileges of an hereditary aristocracy, and any system of thought such as the Hindu *varna* system are thus ruled out.

What follows from this is that all inequalities in rights and access to scarce resources have to be justified in terms that can be accepted by everyone, including those who stand to finish up with less than others in the way of rights and access. There are only two candidates with any plausibility: *desert* – those who deserve more should get more; and *common advantage* – if everyone stands to gain from some social arrangement that sets up or generates an inequality, we have at any rate a *prima facie* good reason for everyone to accept the inequality.

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The big problems arise not in stating the criteria but in trying to determine what concrete implications they have. Thus, although there is unquestionably a logical connection between justice and desert, this leaves a good deal of room for disagreement about what kinds of activities create desert. Some socialists, from Robert Owen onward, have argued that in the economic sphere the conditions required for differential desert do not obtain, since anybody with superior productive abilities owes them to some combination of fortunate genetic endowment and fortunate environment. Others have followed John Stuart Mill in suggesting that effort should be rewarded but not, for example, skill – except in as far as this is in itself the result of previous effort. Other socialists have a more relaxed attitude to desert, and are prepared to countenance as a basis of extra reward productive capacity not traceable to current or previous effort, so long as the educational and training system has not provided some with unfair advantages over others. (Since this proviso is unlikely to be met, the last version may not differ in actual consequences from the other two as much as might appear at first sight.)

I shall not attempt to adjudicate the issues here. For, whatever its precise scope, the criterion of desert constrains severely the kind of thing that can be said in defence of inequalities.

Common advantage, even more than desert, clearly leaves open a range of disagreements about its practical implications. Thus, in the economic sphere, familiar arguments about allocative efficiency and incentives enter in as justification for unequal rewards. If we think (as I believe we should) that among the equal rights that people should have is the free choice of occupation, thus ruling out the direction of labour, we are committed to some degree of material inequality unless we are extraordinarily optimistic about the potential of moral incentives. However, a lot of the arguments put forward for the efficacy of inequality are made in bad faith. There is, no doubt, some room for dispute about the degree of inequality that can be justified by invoking



common advantage. But the example of Sweden shows that a country can be highly prosperous while greatly compressing lifetime post-tax earnings, so that only a minority of workers in full-time employment are more than twice as well off as those on the minimum full-time wage.

Thus we can again say that the criterion of common advantage, while leaving room for some disagreement as to its implications, sets severe constraints on what kinds of inequality can be defended. To see that the two criteria set real limits to inequality, we have only to observe that inherited wealth can be justified only to a quite small extent (and then only by looking at it from the point of view of the testator rather than the beneficiary) and that the inheritance of wealth that was itself inherited cannot be defended.

By defining socialism as social justice plus collectivism, I thus depart in two ways from the idea that 'socialism is about equality': by substituting 'social justice' for 'equality' and by adding collectivism. Equality is an inaccurate representation of a distinctly socialist goal. If taken as fundamental equality – the equal claim to consideration of all human beings – it does not distinguish socialism from liberalism or indeed from most (non-racist) forms of modern conservatism. If taken as material equality, it is also inaccurate since very few socialists have ever been or are now in favour of complete material equality. What is true is that social justice entails far greater equality than now exists in Britain. But if social justice is the goal and relative equality a theorem derivable from an adequate account of social justice, we should say that.

## *Collectivism*

Those who argued for dropping collectivism made things much too easy for themselves by showing that it was inadequate as the entire specification of socialism. They should have recognised that the alternative to dropping it was adding to it. It is an undeniable objection to the identification of socialism with collectivism that the two biggest monsters of the twentieth century, Stalin and Hitler, were both collectivists. And, of course, while Stalin maintained that he was building 'real existing socialism', Hitler led the National Socialists. But their claims would collapse under my definition as both Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany were so far from satisfying the criteria of social justice.

A second argument was that the definition of socialism should concern itself with ends and that collectivism is a mere means. The fallacy here lies in supposing that collective and individual provision are no more than alternative ways of achieving a certain distributive goal which would be equally valuable achieved in either way.

What has united socialists historically – and this is a statement that would include Marx, the Webbs, and everybody in between – is a belief in collectivism. If this is dropped from the definition of socialism there

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is no way of distinguishing socialists from adherents of social justice who favour dividing everything up so that each person gets his or her fair share and then leaving them to pursue their ends independently. 'Socialism' as a term, then, would no longer be distinguishable from the leftist branch of liberal individualism.

I have not so far given an explicit account of the contrast between collectivism and individualism, though I think that in broad terms it should have been fairly clear what I had in mind. The issue between them is the desirability of collective action to bring about ends that cannot be achieved by individual actions. Individualism in its classic form is the idea that the state should create a framework for individual action by prohibiting injury to others and enforcing contracts. The left liberal version that I mentioned stipulates that income should be redistributed through some general system of taxes and transfers. In other respects it follows the same line. Collectivism is simply the rejection of individualism in either its classical or its left liberal form.

It is individualism as anti-collectivism that has flourished in the past ten years. Although it would not naturally be expressed by saying that there is no such thing as society, it does systematically downplay the significance of the aspirations that people have as members of a society and exalts those that they have as individuals.

The case for collectivism is twofold. The first is the one outlined at the end of the previous chapter: the more that the members of a society are associated in common institutions the more likely they are to see themselves as being all in the same boat and to accept redistributive measures. An extension of this is simply that the human quality of a society in which people concern themselves with the fate of others is higher, quite apart from any difference it may make to policy outputs.

The second argument is that there are many things we want which can be achieved only by collective action. This is worth some more attention because the cliché that the left 'has been losing intellectual ground' seems to be very largely based on the idea that some powerful new argument in favour of individualism has been discovered recently. This idea is that it is better to have a choice than not to have one. To Mrs Thatcher's more ideologically-adept colleagues, 'choice' has become a shibboleth. That some state of affairs arose as a result of a set of individual choices is supposed to put it beyond criticism.

### *Choice*

This celebration of choice as such, regardless of its object and context, is quite witless. Stated baldly, the proposition that a choice is always better than no choice is false. Stated with qualifications it is of no interest since, if more choice is only sometimes better than less, we have to proceed on a case by case basis, and we then need some other



criteria for assessing the value of choice in particular contexts.

Thus, it is extremely easy to see that a certain person having a choice may be worse for other people than that person not having a choice. Suppose you have a choice between putting leaded and unleaded petrol in your car. According to the free-market paradigm, you are better off having this choice. You may well decide that the ambient lead level will be so slightly raised by your using leaded petrol that you are, all things considered, better off using the cheaper leaded fuel. But the rest of us are made a little bit worse off as a result of your having the choice. We would prefer it if you had no option but to use unleaded fuel.

Moreover, it may well be that all of us would prefer a rule prohibiting the use of leaded petrol to one permitting it, when we take account of the increased cost of lead-free fuel and compare it to the reduction of the amount of lead in the environment. Thus, we may all lose from our all having a choice, because we would prefer the outcome that occurs when we are all prevented from doing what we would choose when given the choice.

Can it be worse for the person concerned to have a choice? Clearly it can: everything turns on the precise terms of the choice. Consider the following question: Is it better to be offered a choice between your money and your life than to be killed outright without the option? Obviously, it is better to have the choice. But is it better to have to choose between your money and your life than not to have to make that choice at all? Equally obviously, it is better not to be placed in a situation where you have to make the choice. So we must conclude that, given the situation, you prefer having the choice. But you would prefer not to be in that situation in the first place. For you would be better off if you could keep both your money and your life.

It may be said that this does not show that an extension of options can make things worse for the person concerned. But there is no difficulty in suggesting cases where someone would be better off if a certain option were withdrawn. The disappearance of the option of fighting a duel saved many people from a violent death. Similarly, the option of being paid below some statutory minimum wage or borrowing money at a usurious rate of interest is not an advantage to the person with the option. For his or her bargaining position may be stronger if excessively disadvantageous options are ruled out.

The case of hospital consultants, mentioned in chapter 2, illustrates the same point very well. The choice offered by a consultant between private and public treatment is, literally, the choice between your money and your life – if not your actual existence then your freedom from pain and discomfort and your ability to function normally. The existence of the choice does nothing to add to the resources of the NHS. The waiting lists are just as long, and all that happens is that there is an option of jumping the queue by paying for the privilege.

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From the point of view of the collective interest of users of the NHS, there is nothing to be said for this state of affairs. Choice is worse than no choice. We cannot draw any conclusions from the fact that when the choice is offered some choose life over money. It is equally true that most people confronted with a mugger prefer to hand over their wallets.

The school system offers another example of the way in which choice can make things worse. To make the point as simply as possible, let us contrast two kinds of set-up. In one, children are allocated to schools so that each school will be representative of the social and ethnic mix of the district – say the area of the local authority. In the other, parents either have educational vouchers which can be used at any school or have the right to apply for their children's admission to any school in the appropriate age range run by the local authority. The schools in turn can select children from among the applicants.

Looking at the operation of the second system, the decisions by parents and schools will result in some pattern of allocation which nobody chose and perhaps nobody wants. Typically, it will be one in which there is a pecking order of schools. Even if all the schools in an area have equally good facilities and equally good teachers, all that is needed to create a hierarchy is a preference by parents for schools with more rather than fewer children of high academic attainment and selection by schools among applicants based on academic attainment.

From a consumer point of view, this may be a quite unattractive outcome. If there are five schools and most parents rank them in the same order, most of the parents are going to be disappointed. Freedom of choice is really no more than freedom to apply: the only school that can be chosen unconditionally is the one at the bottom of the heap – precisely because so few have chosen it. There is no way in which it can be shown *a priori* that parents or children will be more satisfied on average with such a system of so-called parental choice than with one in which each child is allocated to a school whose composition is similar to that of the others in the area.

Suppose, however, that parents were happy enough to have their children educated in schools that were relatively homogeneous with respect to social class and ethnicity. The system of parental choice could then count as a success from the consumer point of view. But from the point of view of the citizens – those with children currently in the school system and those without – it should be looked on with misgivings.

We all have a legitimate interest in the harmony and stability of our society, and a legitimate concern – derived from considerations of social justice – that all children have equal opportunities at school. We all therefore have good reason for fearing the legacy of socially and racially separate schools, and for objecting to a system of sex-segregated Muslim schools designed to restrict the occupational opportunities and aspirations of girls emerging from them.

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# Retrospect and prospect

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Conservative policies over the last ten years have proved the collectivist case. But Labour must have a vision of the future and develop a theory to bind together its policies into a coherent alternative.

**T**he *Fabian Essays* were published in 1889, so this centennial year is an appropriate occasion to recall the claim made by Sidney Webb in his contribution, that collectivism was already well advanced (he particularly drew attention to the then current vogue for taking water supply into municipal ownership), and that all this had “been done by practical men ...[who] in their every act .....worked to bring about the very Socialism they despised; and to destroy the Individualist faith which they still professed”.

Webb's claim seems to me correct. Interference in the market and its outright replacement occurred during the hundred years beginning around 1880 as a response to the manifest failure of markets to provide the conditions of civilised existence. Most obviously, it has always been true that in a market society those who live by their labour must fall into penury whenever their capacity to earn ceases for whatever reason. Beyond this, however, it became clear as capitalism matured that market wages would in many cases be insufficient to provide every family with decent housing at an affordable cost, with an education that gave opportunities to all children, or with good quality medical care for everyone who needed it.

Over time, it became equally clear that the workings of the market have no tendency to eliminate the deep-seated inequity between the pay of men and women, or to prevent racial discrimination in the job or the housing markets. It should be said that there is indeed an argument, popularised by the American economist Thomas Sowell, which purports to refute the last proposition. But, the most that it shows is that discriminating may cost the discriminator something in that it may entail turning down the highest bidder for his house or the lowest bidder for the job on offer. But the price of discriminating will not generally be very high and, almost by definition, in a racist society very many people will be willing to pay that cost. Sowell's argument tells us that if people were 'rational' – ie, had no racist preferences – the market would work satisfactorily. But if hardly anyone had racist

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preferences there would be no problem in the first place.

Again, common sense suggested and common experience verified the conclusion that 'natural monopolies' are most appropriately publicly owned, whether municipally or nationally, because the private monopolist has no incentive for providing a cheap and efficient service on standard terms to all. 'Gas and water socialism' was introduced in the cities by Liberals such as Joseph Chamberlain for precisely that reason. Similarly, it was found highly unsatisfactory to have public services in London run by a patchwork quilt of more than 300 single-purpose authorities for sewerage, paving etc. They were swept away in 1855 and replaced by a more coherent system, which in turn was replaced by the directly-elected London County Council in 1886.

Mrs Thatcher, like the mad scientist in a horror movie, has in the past decade subjected the British body politic to an experiment which has succeeded only in proving the collectivist case. The Government's lack of regional policy, its hands-off attitude to the housing market, and its draconian restrictions on the activities of local authorities have meant more ill-housed and homeless people. Everyone sees that the privatisation of 'natural monopolies' results in worse service at higher cost. The abolition of the GLC has had the result that there is no body with the authority deriving from direct election to take the hard decisions that the management of the capital's problems requires.

It is apparent that traffic congestion in London is getting worse and has now reached the point at which it only requires the closure of one of the Thames bridges to create paralysis. Strong measures to encourage the use of public transport and discourage the use of the private car are needed, but nobody except the central government now has the power to act. The various 'residuary bodies' created to take over the functions of the GLC have no authority to take a broad view of their duties that would fit particular policies into an overall strategy.

Thus, to take a small but telling example, the public service ethos would dictate that there should be a place to eat cheaply on the premises of the Royal Festival Hall. Instead, the South Bank Board has leased out every site to a licensee that charges extortionate prices. No doubt the accountants are delighted with the rents raised from these licensees, but in terms of social accounting it is a fiasco.

What is of the greatest interest in this context is the total imperiousness of the pro-marketeers' belief system to contrary evidence. I am not just talking here of those who are constrained to have pro-market ideas by political ambition or the need to make a living in a right-wing think-tank. The same obliviousness to reality infects highly reputable academics. After a lunch with Thomas Sowell some years ago, one of the others present said to me that it was rather like talking to someone who made perfect sense once you conceded that he was Napoleon Bonaparte. And there is, surely, something almost clinically



crazy about maintaining in face of the evidence that the market left to itself will eradicate racial discrimination.

At the same time, nobody should underestimate the power of an idea, even if it is a bad one. Mrs Thatcher's Government has been able to call on decades of work by the Institute of Economic Affairs and other more recently founded pro-market think-tanks in order both to formulate and defend its policies. Labour's reply is supposed to be the Institute for Public Policy Research, and I wish it well; but I have to express some qualms about the sense of direction of an organisation whose first report comes out in favour of road pricing.

### *Labour's alternative*

Meanwhile, Labour politicians are good enough at the opportunistic exploitation of embarrassments such as transport accidents and salmonella in eggs, and they have had some success in capitalising on the unpopularity of government measures such as poll tax and water privatisation. But there is no theoretical structure tying together these separate reactions and presenting them as elements in a coherent alternative to the pro-marketeters' vision. Under these conditions a Labour lead in the polls simply reflects dissatisfaction with the Government rather than enthusiasm for a completely different set of ideas.

It is, of course, true that scattered through the Labour Policy Review documents are references to the desirability of more public expenditure. But the seriousness of this commitment is fatally undermined in the Introduction by Neil Kinnock to *Meet the Challenge, Make the Change*. One paragraph of this runs as follows: "Under Labour's policies for sustained and balanced economic growth, we believe that the scope for public spending will be greater but it must be clear at the outset that advance towards the objectives set out in the Policy Review will necessarily depend on achieving that growth. We will not spend, nor will we promise to spend, more than the country can afford."

Suppose somebody with around the average income were to say, "I attach tremendous priority to getting waterproof shoes and warm coats for my children. In fact, if ever I get a pay increase that exceeds the rate of inflation, I shall spend part of it on that". We would surely judge the priority that this person gave to buying weatherproof clothes by the unwillingness to do it out of the current level of income. If you really think something is important, you show it by being prepared to give up something else in order to obtain it. Anything whose purchase depends on extra income is (for anyone with plenty of discretionary income already) by definition a low priority item.

Neil Kinnock's statement, which also forms the constant refrain of John Smith, in effect lets Mrs Thatcher set the level of public expenditure of a future Labour government. The existing amount of aggregate

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take-home pay is taken to be sacrosanct. But if collective expenditure is really important then this should entail that the existing ratio of private to public expenditure is wrong and that money should be transferred from one to the other.

Economic growth is irrelevant. If the private/public ratio is right, economic growth should be distributed to maintain roughly that ratio. If the ratio is wrong then it should be put right irrespective of economic growth. There is simply no plausible account of the place of public expenditure from which the official Labour policy can be deduced.

It is always possible that the Conservatives will be obliging enough to lose the next election without Labour having to win it. In that case there may be some electoral merit in the present strategy of eliminating everything from the Party's programme that might offend anyone and then sitting tight. But Conservative governments have a way of pulling something out of the bag when it is needed – a well-timed boom or a foreign adventure, for example. There is, therefore, a strong case in terms of sheer electoral arithmetic for developing a genuinely different vision from that of Mrs Thatcher.

The case is further strengthened if we look beyond the next election. Suppose Labour were to win on a programme whose implementation depended entirely on an improvement in the rate of economic growth. Then, barring a miracle, this Labour government will be 'blown off course' just as surely as were its predecessors. For the rate of postwar economic growth in Britain has, taking one year with another, shown a remarkable consistency, staying around two and a half per cent pretty much irrespective of what governments have done.

There are things that would be worth doing for their own sakes – such as better education and training and a strong regional infrastructure policy – that hold out some hopes of speeding up the jog-trot that has characterised Britain's economic progress until now; but their impact would be measured over decades rather than years. Any government that makes itself a hostage to the growth rate is one that is almost certainly doomed to spending five years of futility in office and then being dumped by the voters.

Instead of saying that we cannot afford increased public expenditure until times are better, Labour should be saying that the less good the times are, the less we can afford the wastefulness of individualism.

A lot of work would still need to be done to translate the collectivist idea into concrete policies. The problems that I raised in my discussion of methodological individualism cannot be brushed aside. Imagination and ingenuity, as well as determination, will be called for if collectivist institutions are to serve our ends. But the precondition of everything else is a firm grasp on the objective to be pursued. If socialism is social justice plus collectivism, then I think that the objective can be summed up in one word: socialism.

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## Does society exist? The case for socialism

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**M**argaret Thatcher has famously said "There is no such thing as society". Brian Barry takes this quote as his starting point for a discussion of the compatibility of individualism with socialism.

He first accepts that there is some force in methodological individualism: if socialists wish to change society, they need to ask how people are to be motivated to work in the new set-up. Although it is not necessary to ensure that each person must find it in his or her direct personal interest to do the right thing, it is a bad idea to set things up so that there is a financial incentive to do wrong.

Brian Barry then looks at the choice between individualism and solidarism: do obligations arise only artificially from some voluntary act or arise naturally out of social relationships? Both should be rejected, he believes, as a false antithesis. Instead he shows that social obligations arise from specific conventions supported by general moral principles which are common to all societies.

Rather it is collectivism, together with social justice, that is a necessary constituent of socialism.

Collectivism is necessary because:

- the more that members of a society are associated in common institutions, the more likely they are to see themselves as being all in the same boat and to accept redistributive measures;
- there is much that can only be achieved through collective action.

Professor Barry concludes that it is not enough for Labour to exploit the Government's embarrassment over transport disasters and poison in food or to wait for unpopular measures such as the Poll Tax or water privatisation. What is needed is a coherent theory and a vision of the future to bind together Labour's policies. That theory should demonstrate the wastefulness of individualism: the vision of the future is of collective action to promote social justice.

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