

The Individual and Society

by Arthur E. Foulkes

Over lunch recently a philosophical friend of mine reflected, “U.S. history is the story of a struggle between the individual and society as a whole.” A few days later another friend, equally philosophical, said something similar: “It always comes down to a conflict between the individual and the community.”

I have often heard this. The individual and the community have conflicting needs and wants. This is simply the truth.

Or is it?

“Society” is essentially the regularities, customs, and ground rules of interhuman behavior. These practices (and their acceptance among people) are tremendously important to how humans act and interact with each other. But is there really such a thing as a “society” whose goals conflict with those of individuals? I don’t think so.

Society does not exist independently of individual human beings. As Ludwig von Mises noted, “The individual lives and acts within society. But society is nothing but the combination of individuals for cooperative effort.”¹ Indeed, he continues, “The fundamental facts that brought about . . . society . . . are the facts that work performed under the division of labor is more productive than isolated work and man’s reason is capable of recognizing this truth.” In other words, soci-

ety exists to serve individuals—not the other way around.

This reasoning casts an entirely different light on the relationship between individuals and society. But this reasoning is not new. Individuals have long understood that they can satisfy their expanding wants only through exchange and association with others. The tremendous bounty of such cooperation, famously explained by David Ricardo nearly 200 years ago, makes social interaction the individual’s greatest tool for achieving his goals.

Of course, individuals are expected to obey certain rules when dealing with others. Murder, theft, fraud, and intimidation are contrary to cooperation. But, as Frédéric Bastiat noted 150 years ago, individuals would resist and punish these behaviors “even if specific laws against them were lacking,” meaning, therefore, that such resistance does not owe its origin to a “social contract,” but rather flows from “a general law of humanity.”² It is wrong to interpret these “general laws” as being somehow in conflict with the wants of individuals. On the contrary, these laws assist in attaining those wants.

Why then all the talk of an eternal conflict between the individual and society? I believe it is because the “common good” is such an effective political card to play. A multitude of government schemes are justified in the name of the common good—even if they benefit only a small minority. Schemes rang-

Arthur Foulkes (Arthurfoulkes@cs.com) is a freelance writer in Indiana.

ing from “livable” neighborhoods, sustainable (“smart”) growth, Food and Drug Administration regulations, government schools, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting have all been justified in the name of the “common good,” society, or the “general welfare.”³ Resistance therefore is effectively attributed to “selfishness” or “stubborn individualism.”

What such government schemes have in common is mistrust of individuals’ choices in a free-exchange environment. They seek to impose “a new vision” designed to save us from the chaos of the unregulated marketplace.⁴

I do not have to look far to see the fruits of such collectivist genius. A few years ago our town’s local department of redevelopment decided to spend 6.1 million tax dollars to build a mixed business/residential building downtown. The building’s commercial and residential units would be rented at approximately “market rates,” but nevertheless, the redevelopment bureaucrats never expected the project to make money. “We know for sure [the project] has to be subsidized for about the first 12 years,” the director of the redevelopment commission told me in an interview. The 12-year price tag was expected to be several million dollars on top of the construction costs.

Not a Rousing Success

That was four years ago. The five-story building now stands in the heart of our downtown just a couple of blocks from my office. It houses a small pizza parlor, an independent bookshop, and some residential renters. And to make things even better, the

building is a sort of sickly yellow color. “Livability,” indeed.

The beauty of voluntary exchange and the free market is that it allows consumers to peacefully allocate resources according to their own preferences. That’s what Mises called the “sovereignty of the consumers.” The millions of dollars wasted on our town’s “revitalization project” would have otherwise gone to consumers’ needs. But autonomous individuals, not government planners, would have determined those other needs. For the planners, that is always the problem.

Bastiat nicely summed up the attitude of the planners when he wrote,

While mankind tends toward evil, the legislators yearn for good; while mankind advances toward darkness, the legislators aspire for enlightenment; while mankind is drawn toward vice, the legislators are attracted toward virtue. Since they have decided that this is the true state of affairs, they then demand the use of force in order to substitute their own inclinations for those of the human race.⁵ □

1. Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action*, 4th rev. ed. (Irvington-on-Hudson, N.Y.: Foundation for Economic Education 1996 [1963]), p. 143.

2. Frédéric Bastiat, *Economic Harmonies*, trans. W. Hayden Boyers (Irvington-on-Hudson, New York: Foundation for Economic Education, 1996 [1850]), p. 2.

3. The Clinton administration proposed spending \$1.7 billion on schemes aimed at promoting “livability”—meaning planned communities with “mixed-use downtowns,” “green spaces,” and more, all for the “common good.” See “Livable Communities for The 21st Century: Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by Vice President Al Gore, Livability Announcement,” January 11, 1999, at www.smartgrowth.org/library/gore_speech11199.html. For more on “sustainability” see Environmental Protection Agency—Region 10, “Smart Growth,” www.epa.gov/r10earth/sustainability/smartprin.htm.

4. Gore.

5. Frédéric Bastiat, *The Law* (Irvington-on-Hudson, N.Y.: Foundation for Economic Education 1998 [1850]), pp. 32–33.