2 Markets and Communities – a Romantic Critique

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Lands should be as much in commerce as any other goods
(Adam Smith)¹

Men talk of ‘selling’ land . . . but the notion of ‘selling’, for certain bits of metal, the Iliad of Homer, how much more the Land of the World Creator, is a ridiculous impossibility! (Carlyle)²

ROMANTIC PERSPECTIVES ON COMMERCIAL SOCIETY

Arguments about the relationship between market and state are today usually referred to the competence of specialised knowledge within the political and economic sciences. Historical expeditions, on the other hand, which seek to excavate earlier forms of such arguments from the past will often have to move into foreign territory. Evans’s contribution to this volume (p. 13–18) has shown how much nineteenth-century doctrines of laissez-faire owed to the influence of theology. This chapter will look at the polemical opposition of ‘markets’ and ‘communities’ that developed from an essentially aesthetic viewpoint in the tradition of German and English romanticism.³ Most readers will associate the characteristic features of romantic art or, more generally, of a romantic temperament with a disposition of intense introspection and exuberance of feeling. Over-shadowed by such preconceptions, the ideal of community can easily be misrepresented as but the projection of ‘romantic’ nostalgia – of the poet’s flight from the prosaic realities of the modern world: ‘Rosebushes and poor rates, rather than steam engines and independence’.⁴

However, when reconstituted in the original historical framework of an avantgardist theory of art and culture, the romantic ‘com-
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Community’ can become the strategic reference-point for a comprehensive critique of commercial civilisation. As such, it offers a unique perspective upon the wider political and cultural meanings bound up in the process of economic modernisation. This perspective relates the crises and dislocations of a transitional period directly to the erroneous assumptions of the new science of political economy which, as the critics see it, has broken the unity of civil society into the separate spheres of market and state, private and public life, economic and political knowledge. The romantic critique seeks to reverse the process of division and fragmentation by claiming for the ‘state’ a field of meaning far more extensive than the institutional domain of law and government. It draws all the manifestations of a nation’s particular identity – its language, religious beliefs and moral customs, its economic practices and characteristic art forms – into a common focus. In thus stressing the integrative, rather than the specialised, nature of political knowledge, romanticism points to a problem that readers will encounter in other chapters of this book. Cross-national comparisons of the market-state relationship will habitually invoke the imponderable effects of ‘political culture’ in order to accommodate the residues of inexplicable differences in an otherwise homogeneous pattern of regularities. Although notoriously elusive, the concept has a definite function. It suggests the need for a vantage point of historical understanding, outside the boundaries of a given field of analysis, which could transmit the interdependence and interconnectedness of all of society’s institutions and collective practices. This extra-territorial domain of Kulturkritik is the homeground of romantic theorising. (From here, to quote Schumpeter, the romantic literati ‘roamed all over those parts of philosophy and social science that happened to attract them’.

The next section will outline the main ideas that define the historical origins of romanticism as an all-encompassing theory and critique of modern culture. I shall concentrate, in the first instance, on the initial romantic programme expounded in the closing decade of the eighteenth century by a group of German poets and philosophers – the brothers August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845) and Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1823), Novalis (1772–1801), and Schleiermacher (1786–1834). Later sections will be concerned with the process in which those aesthetic ideals and modes of theorising came to bear upon the tension between market and community. The writers most relevant here are, on the one hand, Adam Müller (1773–1825) and, on the other, those English romantics who, like Coleridge