7 Individual and Interest

Conscious choices are made by calculating individuals. For that reason they are always and everywhere self-regarding choices. Whether to feed the pigeons or to starve the poor, rational individuals will consistently rank the scenario that provides them with more satisfaction above the scenario that yields them less.

Rational individuals will choose what they want. Their choices in the economic market will, however, be subject to a situational constraint. Consumers, budget-limited, can at least make an unrestricted selection in the range that leads up to the financial cut-off. Utility-seekers and not profit-seekers, the simple fact that their self-interest is directed to final values and not to intermediate instrumentalities gives them the freedom to divert to famine-relief the money they had earmarked for a car or a holiday. Producers are not so fortunate. The business must make its choices with one eye on the competition and in line with the strict test of market survival. The firm is condemned by the interdependent nature of competitive rivalry not to serve the down-and-out who cannot pay or to carry a crippled co-worker cut down by a stroke. Ecclesiastics 27:2 is clear on profit: ‘As a peg is held fast in the joint between stones, so dishonesty squeezes in between selling and buying.’ The capitalist in a competitive environment knows that his membership in the golf-club and his children’s school-fees depend on his turning a deaf ear to invocations such as these. As a consumer he retains the freedom to divert to the homeless the money he had earmarked for restaurant meals. As a merchant or a manufacturer his choices are more circumscribed. The quid pro quo of market exchange presupposes a gain-seeking orientation. There would be little contracting in the bazaar or at the bargaining table if the buyers and the sellers all loved their neighbours as they loved themselves.

Business is business and the market is cold. It is possible to see in competitive capitalism the quintessential Hobbesian confrontation, the ultimate state of nature in which the struggle to survive means for the individual an insecure existence, forever ‘solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short’ (Hobbes, 1651:186). Karl Marx was quick to impute a connection. Marx found not in the apocryphal past but in the profit-seeking present the clearest evidence of that ‘greed and the war amongst the greedy – competition’ (Marx, 1844b:107) which in his view lay at the root of ‘the consciousness of reciprocal exploitation as the general relationship

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of individuals to one another’: ‘I derive benefit for myself by doing harm to someone else…. All this is actually the case with the bourgeois. For him only one relation is valid on its own account – the relation of exploitation.’ (Marx and Engels, 1845–6:110). Marx contended that the market reduces the value of the person to supply and demand, product and appetite, narrow selfishness and commodity-worth. So, surprisingly, did Hobbes: ‘The Value, or Worth of a man, is as of all other things, his Price; that is to say, so much as would be given for the use of his Power: and therefore is not absolute; but a thing dependant on the need and judgement of another.’ (Hobbes, 1651:151–2).

Hobbes describes the state of nature as a market for might. It is from that socially contingent covenancing only a small step to argue, as C.B. Macpherson has done, that the Leviathan is the story not so much of psychological constants as of the nascent possessive individualism which its author had observed in the decreasingly ascriptive Britain of his own times: ‘The postulate of innate desire of all men for more power without limit is only apparently tenable about men who are already in a universally competitive society…. He mistakenly attributed the characteristics of market society to all societies, and so claimed a wider validity for his conclusions than they can have.’ (Macpherson, 1962:45, 99). Business is business, competition is ‘Warre’ – ‘and therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and …endeavour to destroy, or subdue one an other’ (Hobbes, 1651:184).

Marx and Macpherson treat market capitalism as the ultimate cause of the Hobbesian bellum. Their interpretation of self-seeking as gain-seeking, their vision of the High Street as red in tooth and claw, their perception of freedom of enterprise as homo homini lupus, lends a sombre urgency to this chapter on Individual and Interest. It is a window on the world which could easily lead a true Hobbesian, sharing with the socialists a deep distrust of market anarchy, to demand the dictatorship of an absolute autocrat in order that individuals motivated by interest might be compelled to keep the peace. An alternative perspective would, however, be that market capitalism does not so much provoke as resolve the conflicts that for the true Hobbesian call into question the viability of decentralised activity. The basis for collaboration as Adam Smith saw it was the self-interested exchange: ‘Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want, is the meaning of every such offer…. Nobody but a beggar chuses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow-citizens.’ (Smith, 1776:1, 18). The Hobbesian bellum, the true Smithian would say, is more likely to be