Some fallacies are easy to detect. Consider the fallacy of composition: take a group of human beings and ascribe to it capacities only individuals can have. “Society says,” “We decided,” “America is violent.” Strictly speaking, none of these claims can be true. Society has no mind and mouth with which to say or do anything. Nor are we able to decide anything. You, I, and others may decide the same thing. That is the only sense in which we’ve decided.

Ordinarily when we say such things, it is usually well enough appreciated that we are taking linguistic shortcuts. “America is violent” is supposed to mean only that a significant number of folks in America are willing to deploy violent means to solve problems. Or it refers to the government and not to Americans at all.

Unfortunately, the care necessary to keep this in mind is not always diligently exercised. Karl Marx did not exercise that care when he said humanity is “an organic whole.” Strictly speaking, humanity has no convictions, thoughts, memories, imagination, intentions, purposes, or any other attributes of individual human beings.

So what, you say. Why fret?

Changing Standards

The problem is that once you forget that humanity comprises concrete human beings, instead of some big entity, the standards by which we evaluate societies change. After all, it is sometimes necessary to sacrifice a part to save an organic whole. A cancerous organ or gangrenous limb is removed to save the person.

Thus holistic social thinking can have dangerous consequences. Some people’s goals, perhaps even their lives, will begin to seem available for sacrifice for the sake of others. Why? Because individuals are not seen as possessing the same rights to life, liberty, and property, but rather are regarded as parts of a whole whose priority is set by public policy.

Why is this kind of thinking even plausible? The reason is that in some contexts groups almost become a single entity. A close-knit acrobatic team, orchestra, or choir nearly exhibits single-mindedness. A jamming jazz ensemble not only works as a single musical unit, but also embarks on the kind of spontaneous innovation that we would usually expect only of individual human beings unencumbered by the necessity of pleasing others. It almost looks as though individuality has disappeared.

Yet it is precisely individuality that makes such cooperation possible. Failure to cooperate is also attributable to individuals, as, for example, when someone fails to understand what is needed to maintain unity. Complex cooperation requires the utmost concentration by the individual participants.

Indeed, there is usually a critical mass
beyond which groups in pursuit of a single objective cannot function well without central direction. A jazz group can jam and produce great music. A swing band cannot—too many people. The same is true with teams, choirs, and other large ensembles. The marketplace, which can comprise the largest number of people, succeeds precisely because there is no central direction and each member is free to pursue his own objectives. A free society has no purpose. Rather, it exists because it enables its members to achieve their own purposes, which they do by using spontaneous institutions to coordinate their activities.

**Inspiring Harmony**

Witnessing the beauty of harmonized activities aimed at a single purpose can be so inspiring that one might wish to see similar cooperation extended globally. When a modern-day Karl Marx envisions humanity acting like an organic whole, he extrapolates from the musical ensemble, convinced that what is possible for the small group could be, indeed ought to be, realized for the entire species.

Marx knew that this wasn't possible and never had been. But his vision of its beauty formed a standard of humanity's health and well-being, making it something to be achieved in the future and to be used in judging the present.

The big problem with this vision is that in life any given human being can embrace only so many others, after which the fit will be forced and, indeed, must be coerced. Human beings are essentially individuals geared to moderate social entanglements. Our emotion-

al make-up does not prepare us to be intimate members of a world society, or even of a country, in the sense that we are members of a family. Despite what President Reagan said, America is not a family, nor is Ireland or Iran. Families are sized to permit, with some attention and vigilance, their members to stay close to one another—celebrate birthdays and weddings, attend to the sick, mourn the dead.

If we were the kind of collective beings Marx and other champions of collectivism have imagined us to be, we would have to spread our emotional energies way beyond what they are capable of. We would lose our capacity to love intimately, to care, and to be close. Circles of friends and families are reasonably sized so that one is not always torn between sadness about someone's mishap and joy about someone's good fortune. But if we attempted an intimate relationship with every member of humanity, nothing could be felt toward others because it would be canceled out by opposite feelings every time.

The kind of community that fits human beings can vary a good deal; some people are much more gregarious than others. Thus it must be left to free choice to discover how much intimacy is right and how many communities we can honestly join.

The individual’s right to choose freely whether to belong to this, that, or another group is the best moderator of our social capacities. We can overestimate or underestimate what we are capable of in this as in many other regards. But in the long run such things are best left to each of us rather than having visionaries impose an impossible and ultimately destructive social dream.
To the Editor:  

There is much in Gregory Bresiger’s article, “Train Wreck” (The Freeman, August 1999), that is factual, but some that is misleading and false.

Yes, at least some railroad leaders after World War II were “lulled” by the strong performance of railroads during the war into “thinking that the good times are back.” Yes, most of the railroads’ troubles over the years were attributable to (1) wrong-headed government regulation, (2) the tax-financing, subsidization, and government promotion of competitors to the railroads, and (3) the intrusion of labor unions into decision-making that belonged, then as now, in the hands of management. And, yes, government ownership and operation of railroads were prime goals of socialists and communists through much of this century, their relative quiescence today notwithstanding.

But to say, as Mr. Bresiger does, that the troubles of the railroads after the war resulted in “The death of an industry” is manifestly and totally false. Total rail freight volume in 1997 was actually double that of 1944, the peak war year, when railroads carried three-fourths of total traffic in the United States.

True, a very few sizeable railroads, most notably the Rock Island, did “die” and go out of business after the war. Most, however, were acquired by other railroads and continue operating today as part of larger independent systems, thus continuing the same process that has led to the consolidation of railroads throughout history. Still others, mostly smaller railroads, continue as independents even today. Some serve as feeder lines for larger systems, and others perform specialized services, such as for sightseers and train buffs.

Nor is it correct that the “once mighty Pennsylvania . . . was typical of a sick, over-regulated industry.” In fact, the Pennsylvania (later Penn Central) was actually atypical within the industry. The troubles that led to its bankruptcy and takeover by the government were directly traceable to the wrong-headed policies of its early management, especially of the railroad’s first chairman and CEO Stuart Saunders. Saunders’s decision to cave in to union demands as the price for its support of the Penn Central merger was a disaster. The common share price soon after the merger was upward of $80. By the time it was taken over by the government a short while later, the price had plummeted to $2.50.

As for passenger service, the problem “in a word,” Mr. Bresiger says, was “politics.” Not so. The real problem was, is, and may always be the automobile, which today as for years past handles over 90 percent of total U.S. passenger travel. Only in World War II were railroads a significant factor in the movement of people in the United States, and that was out of necessity.

The proper role for railroads is, always has been, and always will be to move goods. Even in the heyday of passenger service, the movement of people accounted for only slightly more than one-fifth of total railroad revenue. Largely because of the automobile, Amtrak will always be a money loser. Mr. Bresiger’s failure to distinguish between the two services, freight and passenger, is at the root of the confusion that pervades his otherwise well-written article.

—CHARLES O. MORGRET
Holmes Beach, Florida

Gregory Bresiger responds:

Mr. Morgret makes a convincing case in criticizing my article. He argues that the poor leadership of the Pennsylvania Railroad in the 1950s hastened its downfall and that the railroad industry is alive and well. I have two points in response. First, the article focused