

ARTICLE

Community through market competition

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Abstract

This paper uses the link between markets and the meeting of needs to argue the ostensible tension between market exchange and community can be overcome. It argues this can occur within a market economy with the following features, and that these features can be stable. First, individuals use as their motivation to act competitively in response to market signals the very social benefits that this behaviour brings about. And second, market control and regulation turn market competition from a high stakes into a low stakes (but still serious) friendly competition.

Keywords: Community; G. A. Cohen; market competition; social contribution; price signal

1. Introduction

In 447 the city walls of Constantinople suffered major damage from an earthquake. For its inhabitants this was some bad timing, for Attila the Hun was descending on the city. The story goes that to rebuild the walls quickly the city's commander used a clever trick, turning the rebuilding project into a competition between Constantinople's two major chariot racing factions. By channelling this competitive rivalry, the commander rebuilt the walls so quickly he boasted that this was 'an achievement even Pallas Athene could scarcely have matched' (McGeer 2022: 121). This anecdote shows competition can sometimes be a good thing. The competition in board games is what makes them fun; the competition between athletes is what brings out the best performance in each of them.

The competition in markets can also be a good thing. For instance, in many sectors competition keeps prices low and encourages innovation and development (if one individual overcharges for a service then a competitor will undercut them, if one business doesn't exploit new technologies then a competing one will, and so on). Positive effects from market competition such as these are often then used in arguments that markets are justified in virtue of their consequences (at least when limited to certain domains and properly regulated to bring them about).

Market competition however is rarely taken as a good thing in all respects. One argument commonly levied against it is that it undermines, or prevents from occurring, relations of community between its individual participants. This is because, the argument goes, market competition relies on the self-interested attitudes of *Homo economicus* – selfishness, fear and greed – and these attitudes are a far cry from the prosociality that makes up relations of community, where individuals care, for its own sake, about the lives of others going well. I'll call this the *In-Tension* view (Cohen 1994, 2009; Sandel 2012; Vrousalis 2012; Hussain 2018a; Satz 2019; Spafford 2019: 230–237; Arnold 2020; Hussain 2020. Cf. Brennan 2014). While proponents of *In-Tension* readily concede that markets often lead to socially beneficial outcomes (at least under certain conditions), what they insist is that such outcomes cannot result from individuals' care and concern for others, but only from their desire to look after themselves and get ahead. Proponents of *In-Tension* are not just claiming there is a conflict between markets and community when markets look a certain way or form part of particular economic systems, but instead have as their focus the character of market relations in general – the claim is that the tension between markets and community goes all the way down.

In this paper I provide a response to the *In-Tension* view by claiming community between society's members can be realized through the competitive relations that make up market mechanisms. Specifically, I argue that this can occur within a market economy that has the following features. First, individuals use as their motivation to act competitively in response to market signals the very social benefits that this behaviour brings about. And second, the form of market regulation turns market competition from a high stakes into a low stakes (but still serious) friendly competition. I will argue it is possible to construct a market economy where these conditions are stable, and that when they hold, individuals who care for its own sake about how their productive activity enables the lives of others to go well will have good reason to want to leverage the mechanisms such markets and market competition provide. My claim is not that markets across all possible sectors and in all their varieties can be consistent with community (often they are not). Instead, my claim is only that there does exist a possible economic system whereby market relations can be a core means through which relations of community are realized.

A common response to *In-Tension* is the following: concede the point that markets are anti-communal, but use this to argue that community is best promoted by ensuring non-market (often read as non-economic) means to its realization are made available. This is a standard view in work on the moral limits to markets (Radin 1987; Anderson 1990; Panitch 2020), but it also occurs elsewhere (Miller 1977: 486–489; Frye 2023: 250). Such a view is not market abolitionist but instead claims markets and social values such as community can only coexist when we protect a sphere of non-market life in which these values can flourish. The position in this paper differs from these accounts given the claim I'm advancing is that relations of community can be developed and sustained not just alongside, but *in and through* market relations that take a certain form. This strategy meets proponents of *In-Tension* head-on by providing an account where market exchange and community do not just coexist, but are actually mutually supportive and reinforcing; we need markets to realize community.

While this approach is of course more demanding it is preferable because it does not give up on the goal of community in economic life. If we care about community

such a goal is important for two reasons. First, given the sheer amount of time people spend working the attitudes and social relations encouraged in economic life are likely to have strong staying power and will not be easily countervailed in other social spheres. But beyond just that, the ability of society's economic institutions to foster community is also particularly important because these economic institutions and the work opportunities they make available are more closely tied than any other social institution to individuals' mutual interdependencies and ability to help others carry out their ends (Cholbi 2018: 1122). As such, it is hard to imagine a society that realizes the values of community and prosociality that *doesn't* realize these values in and through work and the economy. And given markets are so often the defining feature of modern economies, this amounts to saying it will be hard for a communal society to be realized unless the values of community and prosociality are realized in market exchange.

This paper proceeds like so: in section 2 I unpack the In-Tension view by first outlining what I take to be the three strongest reasons its proponents offer as to why markets conflict with community, as well as commenting on what kind of community is the appropriate object of concern in this debate. In section 3 I then argue, by way of a response to each of these reasons, that community can be realized through markets and In-Tension is false. Specifically I argue that the profit motive can be other-regarding; that direct competition in markets can be made 'friendly' by lowering its stakes; and that any distance between individuals and the nature of their contribution in modern society doesn't result from the commodification in markets per se. Section 4 concludes by way of a response to a concern about the feasibility of my account and the attitudes and behaviours it expects of individuals.

A central point on which my argument will be built is that competitive market behaviour leads to social benefits. The basic idea is this: the market is a system of exchange that uses prices and the commodification of labour's products and services as the mechanism to allocative productive activity, based on incentivizing agents to respond competitively to price signals in a way that maximizes their own position. As many note, this mechanism of competitive behaviour is able to access and use the information contained in price signals in an especially efficient manner, such that markets end up clearing and the prices of commodities reflect the degree to which they are in demand (Dietsch 2010: 224–225; Satz 2010: 15–21; Brennan 2012: 318–320; Herzog 2021; Brown 2022: 232; Zwolinski 2022: 206–207; Frye 2023: 240). And because markets are able to exploit the immensely complex and decentralized knowledge about what people want and need, with no centralized mechanisms currently able to capture all these factors, then the upshot is that markets are uniquely placed to solve the allocation problem and consequently allow persons to coordinate their productive activity in an effective and non-wasteful manner.

I take the above points provide a reason to think the effective meeting of needs in society requires an economy that gives a central place to market mechanisms. Hence, my subsequent argument will be that community can be realized through the institutions making up a market economy.¹ But, with this said, it is also important to note that the above points don't provide a reason for being critical of all market interventions or limits to markets. This is because, as any reasonable

¹My focus is on the relationship between market competition and community only. For a wider range of ethical questions raised by market competition see Halliday and Thrasher (2020).

account of market benefits recognizes, for such benefits to occur markets need to be regulated (sometimes quite heavily), especially in order to correct for market failures and to protect the competitive environment on which their allocative function is based. While sometimes, the kind of good being provided means nonmarket mechanisms to allocate production will be preferable in certain sectors (e.g. in the provision of nonexcludable public goods). Furthermore, there are some classes of activity whose marketization would be problematic because turning them into an ‘exchange’ (of any sort) mischaracterizes what is going on and only undermines the values they are supposed to realize (e.g. judges selling their decisions undermines the rule of law and buying votes undermines democratic equality) (Arrow 1972: 357; Satz 2010: 102–104; Panitch 2020). And finally, acknowledging the allocative power of market competition does not mean one has to accept the distributive effects of markets left to their own devices, as in principle you can combine the allocative function of markets with any distributive scheme you like (Rawls 1971: 273–274; Vrousalis 2021: 47–48). All this is just to say that while my account argues that community can be realized through exchange in a market economy, this does not mean community is best realized by letting the free market loose in all realms of life, and I will outline several constraints and conditions on what a market economy needs to look like for community to be achieved. Borrowing the terminology of Lisa Herzog (2021), the position towards markets in this paper is that of a ‘critical friend’, where “markets are welcomed as an instrument for achieving certain aims *within* the framework of the state”.

Importantly, none of this brings me into disagreement with proponents of the In-Tension view, as their position does not deny that markets coordinate productive activity especially effectively (Cohen 2009: 60–61; Kandiyali 2020: 570–571; Vrousalis 2021: 47–48). G. A. Cohen (2009: 60–61, 76–79) for instance fully admits that markets often lead to “public benefits” and “desirable ends”. But the interesting follow up for Cohen (2009: 62) is:

whether it might be practically feasible to preserve the information function of the market, to continue to get the benefits it provides of information generation and processing with respect to what should be produced, while extinguishing its normal motivational presuppositions.

The In-Tension view is supported by a suspicion that the answer to this question is a negative one. This paper advances a case for a positive answer.

2. Markets against Community

In-Tension is a widely held view, being advanced by writers from across the ideological spectrum: including Marxism and socialism (McNally 1993; Ollman 1998; Cohen 2009; Spafford 2019; Arnold 2020; Kandiyali 2020), communitarianism (Sandel 2012) and liberal egalitarianism (Rawls 1971: 521–522; Hussain 2018a, 2020), just to name a few. What In-Tension picks up on as its starting point is something that was recognized about markets almost as soon as market societies developed – that the social benefits resulting from trade and

the division of labour need not be caused by altruism but only by individuals' regard for their own interests (take Adam Smith's (1968: Bk. I Ch. 2) quip: "it is not from the benevolence of the butcher ...").

Cohen gives a representative and particularly influential account of In-Tension. Cohen asks us to imagine ourselves on a camping trip and to think about the kinds of attitudes we would want to permeate throughout the group. We could, as one possibility, do what campers really do, and decide to have the trip defined by community and reciprocity, where "people cooperate within a common concern that, so far as is possible, everybody has a similar opportunity to flourish, and also to relax, on condition that she contributes, appropriately to her capacity, to the flourishing and relaxing of others" (Cohen 2009: 4–5). Or, we could instead base a camping trip on the principles of "market exchange", where individuals do things like trade the apples they found on a hike for more room in the tent, charge for sharing information about how to crack acorns, or expect more fish at dinner time because they are the best at fishing (Cohen 2009: 6–7). Cohen (2009: 39–40) thinks that individuals would (or ought to) hate the second scenario given it describes a situation where individuals are only serving others because they can get something out of it, and not because they are motivated to act prosocially where they see such service as good for its own sake. Generalizing out then, the ostensible lesson is that having a society based on market relations occludes the development of the kind of community epitomized in the camping trip.²

Cohen's account is an example of the In-Tension view because he does not argue that markets are a threat to community only when they take a certain form or operate in certain sectors, but that the realization of community is threatened by the market itself as a form of exchange. This is perhaps most obvious with Cohen (2009: 39) directly contradistinguishing relations of community and market exchange (he calls the principle of community an "antimarket principle"). But this feature of Cohen's account is also evidenced in his comments about market socialism, as while Cohen regards market socialism quite positively in some regards (such as its eradication of the divide between capital and labour and its redistributive mechanisms enabling it to be more consistent with demands of distributive equality), he still thinks "community ... is prejudiced, under market socialism, because exchange under market socialism is no less market exchange than it is under capitalism" (2009: 69), and "[e]very market, even a socialist market, is a system of predation" (2009: 82).

As far as I can gather, Cohen and other proponents of In-Tension offer three distinct reasons why community cannot be realized in market relations. One, the profit motive inherent to market competition makes meeting needs only instrumentally valuable to market participants. Two, market competition puts some of its participants in direct opposition and so individuals cannot win and lose

²It can of course be questioned whether Cohen's camping trip is sufficiently analogous to society such that the appeal of community in the former can be generalized to the latter (e.g. Ronzoni 2012). In this paper I am mostly granting the appeal of society-wide Cohenite community – where there is a shared goal around which society's members orient themselves – for the sake of argument. However I will make some positive claims about how the fact of deep diversity puts constraints on the content of any account of community, and how Cohenite community can be read as acknowledging this.

together. And three, the commodification built into markets disconnects individuals from how their activity meets others' needs.³ But before unpacking each of these reasons, it will first be helpful to consider the kind of community that proponents of In-Tension take to be at stake.

2.1 Markets against what community?

What proponents of In-Tension take to be the core feature of community is that individuals care, for its own sake, about the lives of others going well.⁴ This aligns them with the standard way community is understood as social relations where individuals share ends, identify with the interests and ends of others, and take the achievement of those ends as valuable in itself (Rawls 1971: 521–522; Hussain 2018b: sec. 3). Now, in many instances of community the shared ends are internal to comprehensive conceptions of the good. But, when it comes to the compatibility of markets with community the concern is really about the relations that obtain between society's members as a whole. And so, because there exists reasonable disagreement between society's members about comprehensive doctrines, this means the focus of the community at stake for proponents of In-Tension cannot be internal to comprehensive ends. The community at issue must instead be based around an overarching shared end within which the more particular and divergent ends of individuals are situated (allowing a Catholic to be in community with a Protestant, a surfer to be in community with a poet, and so on).

How could the desire that the lives of others go well form part of a shared 'political' end? I suggest it could if the desire is cashed out as a concern that others are able to effectively carry out their own plan of life. If we were in a community oriented around this end, then what matters to me is whether you are able to carry out the plan of life that *you* take to be valuable according to *your* own lights, and what matters to you is whether I can carry out the plan of life that *I* take to be valuable according to *mine*. And because the attainment of each person's ends depends upon and relies on the contributive activities carried out by others (no person is completely self-reliant), then a core part of individuals living in community is going to be that they are predisposed to act prosocially – i.e. in ways that contribute to others successfully carrying out their plan of life. This account is able to capture the way Cohen (2009: 39–40) articulates relations of community, where "I serve you not because of what I can get in return by doing so but because you want or need my service, and you, for the same reason, serve me." Such an account of community does not take a stand on the relative merits of the controversial conceptions we each endorse, but simply takes them as they are.

While Cohen's account of community on the camping trip is sometimes read as failing to appreciate deep diversity insofar as its oriented around goal-monism and shared ways of living (Ronzoni 2012: 179–181; Van Schoelandt 2014: 148–151),

³For a different typology of the forms the In-Tension view can take, see Frye (2023).

⁴There is an ambiguity in Cohen's writings between this reciprocity-based community and an alternative justificatory-based community which gives importance to tests of interpersonal justification, especially regarding material inequalities (Cohen 2008: 42–43; 2009: 35–36). In this paper I focus on Cohen's reciprocity-based community because this is what he uses to argue markets violate community and it better corresponds with how other proponents of In-Tension portray community.

we need not read Cohen's account of community (nor those of other proponents of the In-Tension view) as internal to a particular comprehensive conception of the good. As Cohen describes it, on the camping trip we each desire that everyone else has a good time where each does the things that they like best. And crucially, he (2009: 3) makes note of the fact that "some of these things we do together; others we do separately". I think a plausible interpretation here is that Cohen is recognizing that what each person likes to do best will not be the same. I might not give a hoot about fishing (I might even think it silly and misguided), but the knowledge that you derive much satisfaction from it might change my behaviour – I'll leave room in the car for your fishing rods, I won't swim at the prime fishing hour, I'll bring ingredients that pair well with fish. The community that is possible in modern society is not one where everyone is on the same page in *all* respects, but one where individuals want to help others achieve their often very different plans of life. This of course is a demanding requirement, and implies more than just the absence of certain nefarious attitudes like greed and fear but also the presence of attitudes like care and concern, but community is a demanding ideal.

Two upshots from characterizing community in political terms in this way. The first is that one might worry that this is only going to dilute the concept of community, thereby weakening any subsequent response to the In-Tension view. For instance, relying on a similar kind of point about deep diversity, Harrison Frye (2023: 262ff.) has recently argued that while there is a kind of community that can be maintained through market interactions, such a community cannot rely on homogeneity of comprehensive conceptions or "harmony of perspective on what is worth pursuing". Resultantly, the community compatible with markets that is possible for Frye (2023: 256–260) is both narrower in scope and shallower in depth than the sorts of thick communities that can exist between like-minded individuals in private life. And so while for Frye the tension between markets and community is less extreme than commonly made out, he concedes that the attitudes markets realize still "fall short of what full community requires on its own terms" (2023: 250), and only "satisf[y] the value of community . . . in a limited, thin sense" (2023: 248). But why must we think individuals are unable to regard shared 'political' ends as equally important as whatever ends they endorse from within their own comprehensive conception? As counterexamples we can think of political communities that are collectively proud of their democratic institutions, or accounts of civic friendship based on mutual concern through economic interdependencies (Schwarzenbach 1996; Brudney 2013). If anything, given community implies shared ends and interests between its members, then a community that obtains across difference might be especially strong given it is tapping into commonalities that generally obtain between persons at a deeper level.

The second upshot is that because the idea of a political community describes a set of relations between all members of society, then the focus in this paper is on community between individuals across the entire market and not just whether pockets of different competing communities can be achieved within it. For instance, perhaps it is the case that even if the competition between firms prevents community between them (and so between the individuals that make up those firms), this competition need not prevent, and might even encourage, community being developed within firms (e.g. Gheaus and Herzog 2016: 76–78). Even if this was

true (although see discussion about the relationship between cooperation and competition at the beginning of section 3), this doesn't suffice to show that the sort of community relevant to In-Tension will be realized because it is very unlikely that there would exist inside firms the diversity that obtains across individuals in society at large, and so the shared ends around which any community obtains would not be sufficiently general in the political sense (the shared ends in some firms might even be internal to comprehensive conceptions of the good).

2.2 The profit motive makes meeting needs only instrumentally valuable

Turning now to the three ways market competition is taken to conflict with community. The first is based on the profit motive inherent to market competition. The claim here is that because a core principle of market logic is responding to price signals in order to maximize profit, then individuals acting in this way cannot actually be producing goods or services because they want to help others meet their needs for its own sake. Instead, the needs of others are just something market participants are exploiting to further their own position. This claim is present in Cohen's (2009: 39) point that market relations are intrinsically motivated by greed and fear, where persons see their opposite numbers only as sources of enrichment. He goes on to say that "the market motivates productive contribution not on the basis of commitment to one's fellow human beings and a desire to serve them while being served by them, but on the basis of cash reward" (Cohen 2009: 39–40, see also Anderson 1990: 182–183; Bowles 1991: 12–13). This aspect of the In-Tension view might be buttressed by the empirical evidence suggesting extrinsic rewards can crowd-out intrinsic motivations to undertake activities (Deci *et al.* 1999). A classic example being how markets in blood actually reduce levels of donation as they can erode the association between giving blood and civic duty (Titmuss 1971).⁵

2.3 Market competition puts people in direct opposition

Markets are also taken as inconsistent with community because market competition puts (some) individuals in direct opposition. This aspect of market competition is why Cohen (2009: 40) thinks market actors will inevitably see each other as "threats to one's success". Or take how Waheed Hussain (2020: 81) characterizes the competition in a job market:

each citizen looking for a job will do real damage to the citizens whom she beats out, but she can't act on a concern for others if she's going to land a job and prevent the damage from being done to herself and her loved ones. She therefore has a powerful reason to act with disregard for her fellow citizens. They have a similar reason to act with disregard for her. And mutual disregard is, in this way, built into the very nature of competitive institutions.

⁵Titmuss's empirical claims were criticized by Arrow (1972) and subsequently defended by Singer (1973). Although the case is far from clear cut, more recent data seems to side with Titmuss and Singer over Arrow (see Mellström and Johannesson 2008; Lacetera and Macis 2010; Costa-Font *et al.* 2013).

Such competition is inimical to the development of community because as we have seen community is based on a mutual concern that others are successful in carrying out their plans of life, where individuals win and lose together. Yet here we have a situation where an individual acting out on their own desire to do well cannot be separated from an act that ensures others lose out.

Now it is of course true that in many ways markets and their interactions are positive sum – each party in a transaction is left better off than they were before the trade, the competition between sellers leaves buyers better off, and so on. Stepping out, the enormous rise in GDP over the last century or so and the way markets have converted the luxuries of previous generations into ordinary consumption for later generations also demonstrates how market economies so often are positive sum, and I don't want to deny this (indeed my argument about the socially beneficial outcomes from market competition relies on it). But what the In-Tension view gets right is that despite whatever results come about from market competition as a whole, there are classes of competition internal to market economies which unavoidably put individuals' interests at odds. This is especially true for the competition between sellers and the competition between buyers respectively. For instance, while society and its members might benefit overall from the existence of a competitive labour market for socially useful jobs (this helps the most qualified get the job after all), the situation is very different for individuals qua job seekers.

2.4 The disconnecting effects of commodification

The third way some proponents of In-Tension take market competition to occlude the realization of community relates to how the widespread commodification of products and services in market economies ends up disconnecting or alienating individuals from the wider effects of their productive activity. The classic articulation of this kind of view is the one by Marx (2000: 477–479), where markets are taken to cloak the work process under a “mystical veil”, where the real social relations imbued in and through work end up hidden from workers. The idea is that because markets turn the products of labour into commodities, people end up regarding work activities only in terms of monetary relations between products and services, and not in terms of interpersonal relations based on generalized reciprocity. This then undermines community because instead of individuals affirming and identifying as interdependent persons who are responding to one another's needs, the market forces them to come together to trade only as disinterested parties (or encourages them to believe that others are only trading as disinterested parties). As one example, Nicholas Vrousalis (2015: 130–131) argues that if money was introduced to mediate the activities on Cohen's camping trip, then this would obfuscate the awareness that each individual is producing for others non-instrumentally and for its own sake (see also Maguire and Brown 2019: 3–4, 7–8). Under this view, planning production in direct response to need can express mutual concern and fellowship in a way commodified market relations never can.

3. Community through Markets

The structure of my response to In-Tension is to argue markets can be a means to realize the good of community even after granting what its proponents say about the inherent competitiveness of market relations. A different kind of response would be to argue that markets are less competitive than proponents of In-Tension make out, relying not just on maximizing behaviour but also on more community-friendly attitudes such as trust, cooperation and transparency, especially in repeated market interactions between the same actors over time.⁶ But I take the emphasis on competition to be warranted for the following reasons. While market participants might sometimes cooperate to achieve shared ends (e.g. colleagues working together to achieve organizational goals, firms collectively lobbying in support of legislation, or companies working together as part of a division of labour to bring about some output), the central role of competition in the logic of market economies (one cannot understand the price mechanism without it, for instance) means that it is not possible for market participants to always cooperate or to always have open-ended interactions. As such, any concern with markets and community is going to have to come to terms with competition at some point. And relatedly, much of the cooperation that does occur in a market economy will still occur within an overarching competitive environment. That is, market participants might cooperate, but often only because cooperation is instrumentally valuable to maximize their position or gain a competitive advantage against others (we cooperate as colleagues to ensure our firm beats out others, and so on). It is as if the cooperation is still imbued with a competitive rationale, like two cyclists in a race who work together to break away from the main pack only to become competitors once it is clear that only one of them can win. By characterizing markets as inherently competitive in this way, I am able to respond to proponents of In-Tension in their own terms.

3.1 Profit motivation as other-regarding

The first claim of the In-Tension view was that the profit motive built into market competition makes any concern with meeting needs for its own sake impossible – market actors are motivated by the cash reward only. Perhaps this accurately describes much of market motivation under contemporary capitalism. But even today there are exceptions, and one doesn't have to look too far to find market participants with other-regarding attitudes (e.g. the business owner motivated to help the local community through economic development, the executive of the charity organization, and so on) (Steiner 2014: 143–146; Van Schoelandt 2014: 150–151; Maguire and Brown 2019: 6; Frye 2023: 242–243). After all, contra to the crowding out literature mentioned earlier, there is also evidence that in certain circumstances market mechanisms can crowd-in other-regarding behaviour where prices are seen by agents as means which, by sending information, allow them to undertake the contributive activity they regard as important (Deci *et al.* 1999: 628; Khanna and Sandler 2000; Bolle and Otto 2010; Bönke *et al.* 2013). This reflects the more general finding that what markets and monetary incentives mean to those who

⁶This gets it half right. Rather than cooperation replacing competition, my view will be that individuals can use market competition to cooperate.

use them is sensitive to how they are framed and the institutional context in which they occur (Zelizer 1994; Frey 1998: 444; Folbre and Nelson 2000: 130–134; Feldman and Teichman 2008; Brennan and Jaworski 2015: 1062–1066).

This suggests we ought to be cautious in making claims about any attitudes and values being intrinsic to market economies: what markets mean can vary. Of course, it would not be a terribly convincing argument to just conclude from this that markets can be based on the pro-social attitudes demanded by community because markets can be based on whatever attitudes we want them to be. The more reasonable takeaway is just the point that the meaning of markets is going to be sensitive to how society understands the purpose of a market economy and the manner in which it is utilized. And as we have seen the market's price mechanism gives markets an inherent connection to the meeting of needs, so couldn't this then be how a society decides to institutionalize and interpret their meaning and be what motivates individuals to engage in them? I might want to act as a competitive marketer not because I want to get ahead, but because I recognize that doing so forms part of an effective system to coordinate productive activity and presents a unique opportunity for me to help others carry out their ends. This could be the case so long as I knew the market economy in which I'm operating was appropriately constrained to result in socially beneficial outcomes in the ways outlined earlier.

In thinking through the plausibility of a market system where individuals' motivation to act competitively is the social benefits this behaviour brings about, a helpful starting point is the account presented by Joseph Carens (see also Kolm 1983: 22–28; Brennan and Pettit 1993: 192–205). Carens (1981) outlines that even if some economic system had a 100% tax rate (so take-home earnings are completely disconnected from market activity), it would still be rational for individuals who have a desire to contribute to be motivated to maximize their pre-tax income. This is because “[t]he market [can be] simply a mechanism which makes it possible for the community to indicate to people what productive activities they can engage in if they wish to help the community achieve its goals” (Carens 1981: 195). In a similar vein, Robert Sugden (2018: 232–255) argues that market participants can deploy a form of ‘team reasoning’, where competitive behaviour is motivated out of an intention to play one's part in practice that is beneficial for all. Other writers make similar points, arguing that prices can work less as incentives and more as offers to make a contribution that others can take up (Miller 1996: 286–287; 2014: 133–134; Frye 2017: 375). Indeed, the use of prices as signals for opportunities for contribution can be especially effective given the difficulties in knowing how we can best cash out a desire to meet the needs of others (Roemer 2012: 286ff.; Zwolinski 2022: 209). Ought we just follow our instinct and hope for the best? What if I am wrong? (People might not actually like the portraits I draw of them in the park, or the singing I do in the street . . .) An easier decision is to pick some activity in which we expect to be successful in meeting market demand, as answers as to what might fit that criterion ought to be clearer (I know I could never make it as an artist or a singer). While Carens's account is helpful because it isolates the right variables, it is important to note that community is not only possible in a system like Carens's where individuals are altruistic saints, as Cohen (2009: 43) himself recognizes, but also when individuals come into the market with more of a motivational mixed bag

(Frye 2023: 252–255), so long as the other-regarding motivation provides an independent ground not contingent on any self-serving one.

A concern here might be that using prosocial motivations as the basis for market activity will only be self-defeating as it will undermine the very social benefits that are hoped to be brought about. After all, it is probably fair to construe my account as arguing that we can make the invisible hand visible. Sure, you might say, but won't that just take the life out of it (Smith 1968: Bk. IV, Ch. 2; Miller 1977: 486–487; Cohen 2009: 76–79; Maguire and Brown 2019: 10–13)? Is it realistic for competitive market behaviour to really be the means through which individuals carry out their genuine concern to meet others' needs? This is of course a valid concern. We might think of scenarios like bosses who don't fire redundant employees out of an understandable concern for their well-being, only to cause the whole company to go under, or individuals who start selling their products below the market-clearing rate because they admirably want to make it easier for people to access them, with this only meaning fewer products can be produced and so fewer people benefit.

Here it is important to remember my account is not arguing that community can be realized through markets in the abstract, but only through a market economy that is contained within the framework of the state. Part of this, as I have already mentioned, is because political and legal institutions are required to ensure the market is appropriately regulated and limited. But as the point about the sensitivity of the meaning of markets to their institutionalization implies, and the literature on economic sociology also emphasizes (Granovetter 1985; Fligstein 1996), the state also has a role in influencing the behaviour of market actors as part of a larger mutually reinforcing relationship between political institutions, social norms and market behaviour. What the institutions of the state can also do then is contribute to the *point* of markets being widely and publicly known. For the account laid out here, this would involve communicating not only why society has decided to implement markets (the effective and non-wasteful meeting of needs) but also how individuals need to behave to bring this about (act like competitive marketeers). After all, the negative outcomes in the scenarios mentioned above are not caused by prosocial motivations *per se*, but by individuals acting in ways contrary to competitive behaviour in response to price signals. The issue then isn't that individuals want to help others (in the ways relevant to an ideal of political community), but that they misunderstand the behaviour required to do so. Having a larger political and social environment that reinforced both how the market can realize certain values and what norms are required in participants to bring this about, would help ensure individuals who are prosocially motivated recognize they have a shared reason to endorse and participate in competitive market behaviour, thereby preventing them acting in ways that undermine the proper functioning of markets.

The feasibility of this might be strengthened by noting that within business ethics there are already accounts of similar ethical norms, where competitive market behaviour is deemed moral in virtue of the social benefits such behaviour brings about (McMahon 1981; Heath 2014). Once markets are endorsed in virtue of their function of enabling the effective meeting of needs, it seems hard to escape the conclusion that individuals qua market participants are obliged to act in certain ways (even if this is contrary to how one needs to behave in other social realms). How political institutions could best serve any communicative role will be sensitive

to a range of contextual questions (including not only what political institutions make up society but also what the political justification is for the value of community). But the basic point is that through aspects of the political environment – such as the legislative order in which markets operate (e.g. the rules of exchange, property rights regime, tax policy) and the larger practices in which discussion about markets and enterprise takes place (e.g. public debates, civic education, citizen assemblies) – then it could be communicated and reinforced to individuals that if they want to act out on their desire to help others meet their needs, then behaving competitively in the market economy is one especially effective way to do so. Indeed, by having markets operate within such a system this would not just allow individuals with pre-existing prosocial motivations to contribute in a way compatible with community but would likely also encourage and cultivate such prosocial attitudes in individuals more widely, by highlighting the community-relevant values that are inevitably at stake through participation in market activity. Of course the concern with community extends beyond how citizens behave in economic life, and such a norm would need to be integrated as part of whatever wider system of norms and values is required to bring about a meaningful form of political community in society. But the suggestion is that when such a wider environment obtains, individuals who are prosocially motivated will be unlikely to act uncompetitively because they understand that this will only be frustrating their intentions. Rather, they will understand that if they want to contribute to meeting others' needs, then when they are acting as a market participant the best way to do this is to take this competition seriously and try their hardest to win, where winning is understood not as how they personally fare but as how well they respond to price signals.

Even with something like the above in place, it is probable that some individuals will try to meet others' needs by acting uncompetitively in the market. But so long as the number of such individuals stays comparatively small, this is no problem because one thing the history of economic development shows us is that there is some slack in the system – not everyone today acts maximally competitively in response to price signals either.

3.2 Making competitions friendly

The second claim was that markets and community are at odds because certain classes of market competition put individuals in direct opposition and rule out their ability to win and lose together. My reply here does not deny market competition is sometimes like this, but argues even when it is such competitions are only a threat to community when the stakes are so high that competitors regard others as threats, and that the stakes of competition in a market economy need not be this high.⁷

⁷One could defend markets here by emphasizing markets are a 'parallel competition' and not a 'friction competition', and so only aim to foster independent pathways for each competitor to do their best as opposed to facilitating a clash between competitors. And resultantly, argue this difference means the competition between market actors is nonrivalrous and hence more community-friendly (Agmon 2022: 11–12, 27–28). It might be the case that parallel competitions are more community-friendly, but they can still put individuals' interests at odds and their compatibility with community is dependent on their stakes. Are two athletes' respective interests in winning a 100 metre race not at odds when they take their marks? And if

Community and friendship survive low stakes competitions all the time (the board game nights, the basketball runs at the local park, and so on).⁸ But, as the consequences of losing a competition worsen, the more a person's opposite number becomes a threat, an adversary, an opponent who needs to be defeated for good. As Hussain (2018a: 571) puts it: "a friendly competition is one thing; a life or death struggle is another".

What then affects the stakes of market competition? What is important is whether market activity is the only means through which individuals can secure their fundamental interests, such as meeting their basic needs, and securing their dignity and self-respect. When winning in the market is the only way to foot the grocery bill or hold your head high, and because certain classes of competition prevent everyone winning, then of course we won't be able to use it as a means through which we act out a genuine concern that the lives of others go well. Instead, we will be forced to wish that others are the ones that lose out.

But market competition need not be the only way persons secure their fundamental interests, as this only occurs when a market economy is situated within a political and social system that fails to protect individuals from its worst distributive effects. If, instead, state structures ensured that these interests could be secured outside of the market, then the stakes of market competition are drastically dropped. I won't lay out here a full account of what this requires, but will mention two institutional provisions that seem important. The first of these is a redistributive scheme that ensures individuals, regardless of whether they enjoy market success, meet a threshold where their fundamental interests can be met (this would involve mechanisms of monetary transfer but also institutional protections like bankruptcy law and so on). This then drastically lowers the market's stakes, as the success of one competitor will no longer spell doom for another.⁹ The second is providing individuals opportunities for meaningful work or employment outside the market, through a job guarantee (Jacobs 2003: 161–168). This is important because in the scenario considered here individuals care about helping others through their work, and so it seems likely that their ability to do so would be linked to their status or self-respect as participating members who do their part. (To get a sense of the attitude: if you want to help out on the camping trip but feel you can't, you're going to feel rotten.) But because economies tend to have a natural rate of unemployment,

winning is the only way to secure their fundamental interests, won't they become adversaries of the very worst sort?

⁸Individuals' interests being in direct opposition requires there to be some scarcity of resources over which market participants compete, and it might be thought that it is this competition over scarcity that is inimical to community and not necessarily competition's stakes. But whether scarcity-induced competition is divisive depends on whether those competing have a shared reason to endorse and participate in it. I take it this is why the competitions in board game nights and basketball runs don't undermine community, even though the participants are competing over the scarce resource of 'winner'. The role of the political and social environment that reinforces ideals and norms of community (section 3.1) is not to counteract any inherent 'anti-communal' influence of (even low stakes) scarcity-induced competition, but to ensure the activity of market competition is recognized and affirmed by its participants as an expression of their will to serve others and meet their needs.

⁹This would also help prevent a market economy developing into a 'market society' given cultures of greed and mass consumerism are at least in part the product of material insecurities (Cunningham 2005: 134–138).

then unless nonmarket forms of decent work are made available opportunities for social contribution will be a positional good. This would result in individuals being pitted against each other in order to have the opportunity to act out their shared desire to help others meet their needs, and that does not sound particularly community-inducing.

An objection might be that ‘winning’ in the market is still going to be a matter of high stakes for individuals who are motivated to participate in market activity in order to contribute to others in a particular way. Let’s say I am passionate about cooking, and derive much satisfaction and sense of worth from contributing to others through my restaurant business. Won’t it matter deeply to me that I actually succeed in doing so? If this goes belly up because I can’t compete with the neighbouring restaurants, this will be a great loss to me. And this, the thought goes, would continue to be the case even if some job programme ensured nonmarket opportunities to contribute were still available. For the fact of the matter is that I wanted to contribute in *this* way.

Two things to say in response. First, it is not unreasonable to expect individuals to adjust their expectations as to how they can contribute in response to what is being communicated through the market. I might have believed that it was through my cooking that I was going to best contribute to meeting others’ needs. But so long as the market is operating as it should, my lack of success is suggesting otherwise. If my concern to help others is a genuine one, then I’ll listen to what I’ve been told through others’ market behaviour – my cooking is not what they want. And second, for prosocially motivated individuals ‘winning’ in the market isn’t even necessarily required for them to feel as if they are contributing to others and helping them meet their needs. What truly matters is participating in the mechanism that leads to socially beneficial outcomes (acting competitively in response to prices). And so even if individuals ‘lose’ in this competition, the fact their successful competitors were trying to beat them, and this in part is what led to a better outcome for others, means individuals could still see themselves in taking part in the process that brings about the effective meeting of others’ needs. While my restaurant might have failed, it is because of the effort I was putting into my cooking that the food at my competitor’s restaurant was as good as it was.

Of course, for the individuals in question reconciling themselves in these ways will not be easy, and I don’t want to deny that friendly market competition could still lead to some inequalities in esteem or regard in those classes of competition that inevitably have both ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. But for competition to be compatible with community it doesn’t have to have no stakes, and I don’t see why some inequalities in esteem from competitions like these would be a problem. After all, don’t evaluative comparisons that lead to some inequalities in esteem still exist even when community occurs in environments that are non-competitive? For instance, Cohen’s campers might regard positively the skills of others and wish they could contribute in those ways too (being able to erect impressive tarpaulin shelters or catch live fish is far cooler than collecting firewood after all). But does that really suffice for community to be undermined?

A final concern: we might worry that reducing market competition’s stakes will reduce its positive effects by modifying how individuals respond to price signals. More concretely, if the stakes are lower perhaps all this will do is reduce the

motivation in individuals to work by taking away what was a major incentive. While the earlier concern about making the invisible hand visible was questioning whether it would be feasible for a widespread norm of competitive market behaviour to feature amongst a group of individuals who cared for its own sake about the value of social contribution, the concern here is more about whether it is realistic to expect individuals across society to endorse the value of prosociality in the first place. For perhaps, the critic might say, altruism is a scarce resource such that it won't be able to replace material incentives as a general motivation for individuals to undertake socially beneficial activity (Arrow 1972: 354–355).

This is not just an objection to my reply to In-Tension but an objection to the entire terrain on which this debate is carried out, as it applies to any account giving significant space for altruism in the major domains of social and political life (of which the accounts of community affiliated with In-Tension are an example). And while I have said some things about what community requires given the fact of deep diversity (see section 2), for the most part I have for argument's sake just granted there are possible worlds where communal attitudes can be widespread.

But I will say two things here, one relating to altruism in persons and one relating to the place of altruism in my account. Regarding the former, there are several reasons to be sceptical that altruism is such a scarce resource that any social arrangement relying on it is doomed to fail (especially one backed up by institutional and cultural sanctioning of the sort I outlined earlier). These include evolutionary accounts of humans as a cooperative species (Axelrod and Hamilton 1981; Bowles and Gintis 2011), experimental evidence showing individuals are strongly motivated by concerns of altruism and reciprocity (Fehr *et al.* 2002; Fehr and Fischbacher 2003), but also, and I think most importantly, the fact altruism seems less like a finite resource that gets 'used up' when it is deployed and more like a resource that gets replicated and reinforced in the using of it – altruistic acts foster more altruism in oneself and others (Singer 1973: 319; Fowler and Christakis 2010; Jordan *et al.* 2013). This suggests it would be a mistake to take the propensity for self-interest today as fixed and to resultantly claim a concern for others could not replace high stakes material incentives as a strong motivator to engage in competitive market behaviour.

I am not saying my account is feasible because persons are not in any way selfish by nature (that would only swing the pendulum too far back in the other direction). But this is no problem because as outlined earlier community through the market does not require a concern for others to be the only reason why individuals act as competitive marketeers, and there is nothing wrong with self-regarding incentives playing some role in determining the behaviour of market participants. In my account of friendly competition there will still be incentives based on monetary reward and esteem (see also Cunningham 2005: 138–139). And so long as prosociality is still a significant reason and is independent of any motivation based on self-regard, then individuals using such incentives in their market behaviour is compatible with relations of community coming about. What my account does remove is the incentive to compete based on the threat of individuals' fundamental interests riding on their success, but there are enough examples of countries with strong welfare states alongside productive market economies demonstrating such a threat is not needed to reap the benefits of market competition. All this

demonstrates that in friendly market competition price signals can still operate as a behavioural control that makes some options more attractive than others, such that when it comes to what the behaviour of individuals looks like from the outside it won't be easy to tell the difference between a friendly (but still serious) market competition and a high stakes one.

3.3 The distancing effects of pluralism

The third claim was that commodification brings about a disconnect between persons and their social contribution by turning relations of mutual interdependence into mere monetary relations. But if we understand social contribution in the way I have argued is required for an account of political community, such that satisfying others' needs is just contributing to their ability to carry out the plan of life that they take to be valuable, then claims about commodification's inherent distancing effects lose much of their force. Doesn't demand through prices in an appropriately regulated market economy suffice to show that one's products or services are useful to others? If they weren't, why would they pay for them?

It is true that commodification involves some distance between the worker and their social contribution. But this distance seems less a result of the monetary relation and more just an inevitable feature of individuals, with different conceptions of the good, helping others achieve plans of life that are different from their own. Such distance will still exist in nonmarket societies – even under communism “paintings might be used as ironing boards” (Miller 1977: 484). Take the fact a musician might not understand in intricate detail the exact ways their songs enable others to carry out their plans of life, and might even find certain appreciations of their music confusing or misplaced. But the mere fact they can sell it in the market communicates to them that it is indeed useful, in the same way that smiles, without communicating all the details, don't disconnect individuals from the fact that others enjoy their company. Perhaps then the emphasis should not be on prices and commodification bringing about a distance between producers and their beneficiaries, but instead on how prices and commodification actually enable social contribution to occur between persons who have some aims and ends that diverge (Coleman 1987: 87; Brown 2022: 232–233).

Such a feature might be a source of grievance for a Marx-inspired perfectionist account that values mutual completion around ‘human essence’. But what accounts like that get wrong is they forget that community between society's members will always be defined by disagreement and diversity over comprehensive conceptions of the good. It is a mistake then to think community between society's members could only occur between individuals with ongoing and open-ended relationships, and thereby cannot be achieved through the necessarily closed and substitutable interactions that make up market exchange (cf. Maguire and Brown 2019: 10–12; Frye 2023: 262–264). When you buy flowers from my store I do not need to know details about or approve of your use of them in order to feel confident that such an exchange has genuinely satisfied and expressed my desire that your life goes well.

A problem of communication might remain however from the recipient's perspective. You, as the producer, may well be motivated in the ways required by an

account of community, but so long as your productive decisions in a market economy are determined by maximizing logics in response to the price signal, how can I be certain of that (Maguire and Brown 2019: 7–8)? As I have been arguing, the behaviour of self-interested marketeers and other-regarding marketeers can look exactly the same from the outside, so for all I know maybe you are just the former. This would be a problem because community doesn't just require individuals care for its own sake about serving others and meeting their needs but requires that those individuals being served know that others care about them for its own sake. But we can respond to this concern by returning to the earlier argument about the wider system in which markets are located and the mutual relationship between market behaviour, political institutions and social norms. Insofar as these values and norms in question are deemed legitimate and accepted by others more widely, then this would give individuals confidence that those they meet and interact with in the market are acting out of the same concern. This wider political context ensures individuals recognize why they, as a society, have decided to utilize markets in the first place, deploy them in the way they do, and act within them in a certain kind of way. It is this wider context of acceptance and endorsement that, when it exists, would give each person good reason to believe that their fellow market participants' maximizing behaviour is not conditional on the monetary reward, but is instead the manifestation of a noninstrumental concern that the lives of others go well.

4. Markets as a Game

Through responding to the three distinct claims making up the In-Tension view, I have argued that relations of community can be realized through commodified exchange in a market economy whose structure enables individuals to use as their very motivation for competitive market behaviour the positive social effects such behaviour brings about, and ensures market competition is an instance of a low stakes (but still serious) friendly competition. In such a system the market can be one way individuals express and live out their concern that the lives of others go well.

I recognize however that the duality of attitudes expected of market participants in my account might appear rather strange – perhaps even unfeasible. Will individuals who believe it is good in itself to serve others really be able at the same time to act in the ostensibly harsh and indifferent ways required of profit maximizers? And won't acting in this way only undermine their original prosocial motivations? Vrousalis (2012: 158–160; 2015: 122–123) offers a concern of just this sort, in arguing that something like the arrangement I have argued is possible in this paper, where persons voluntarily submit themselves to the market for the social benefits that result, leads to a kind of “schizophrenia”, where individuals only join hands in the afternoon after being at each other's throats in the morning (see also Ollman 1998: 104–105).

But this concern can I think be alleviated if we take a lesson from another kind of competition – the competition that occurs in games. Take for instance how in games

there is often the shared desire amongst participants for there to be a ‘good play of the game’ which, following the influential account from Rawls (1971: 526), is “a collective achievement requiring the cooperation of all”. Now, for this to occur it is often required that the competition within the game is taken seriously, whereby each participant is trying their hardest, within the rules defining the game, to win (a game of poker is diminished if participants don’t exploit good hands when they get them, a game of basketball is diminished if the opposing team is allowed to score just to keep up) (Hurka 2015: 319–321; Nguyen 2019: 437, 441–442; Suttle 2022: 203–204).¹⁰ Part then of the cooperation required in games is that persons act competitively. Not because participants want to defeat and show up their opponents just for its own sake, but because competitive behaviour is required to bring about a result that is mutually desired (the satisfaction that comes from participating in a game played well) (cf. Maguire 2022: 11–12). Of course, individuals playing the game might not have this overarching goal at the front of their minds all the time. When we’re playing basketball I’m not going to be thinking much about why trying my hardest to win is what makes the activity fun (I’m going to be busy actually trying to win!). But, in a cool moment I am of course aware that this is the real reason for us playing (O’Neill 2008: 45; Albertsen 2019: 383).

I don’t bring up the comparison between competition in games and competition in markets because I am making an argument by analogy (the positive argument in section 3 is independent from any comparative claims). I bring it up because I take my account of markets to be sufficiently similar to games in one relevant respect such that the concern about psychological attitudes can be responded to. In the account I have put forward in this paper, market exchange is similar to games in that it is a low stakes competition in which participants are aware that acting in a competitive manner, where they are trying their hardest to win, is going to bring about the result that is mutually desired – in this case, the effective meeting of each other’s needs. And if my account of market competition is similar to games in this way, then the psychological attitudes it requires are perhaps less strange than they first appear. It is not an anti-communal kind of attitude to be at your throat within the context of Monopoly, so long as I keep the overarching end of the competition well within view. And this is true even if we sit down to play every morning. So why think that being at each other’s throats in market competition must be anti-communal? In markets I don’t have to be at your throat because I wish you and all my other competitors ill. So long as our exchange takes place in a market economy that is appropriately regulated and controlled, then I could be at your throat simply because I recognize that this is how we best ensure the lives of others go well. Of course, given our prosocial motivations, in one respect we might well indeed rather act in an uncompetitive manner (‘if you need my products then just

¹⁰The point is about behaviour within games. When it comes to the overarching rules of a game considering how some participants could be allowed to ‘keep up’ can be relevant to a good play of the game, especially in between competitive periods (think drafts in North American sports leagues). But even when this occurs a good play of the game still requires individuals within the game to be trying their hardest to win – as criticism of the phenomenon of ‘tanking’ demonstrates. In market economies, a corresponding effort to allow individuals to ‘keep up’ would be policy regimes that maintain a competitive environment (antitrust legislation, resource redistribution, and so on).

take them for free'). But we are each aware of the larger social effects that are brought about by acting in a certain kind of way. It is a game we can play to satisfy our shared desire to help each other realize our ends.

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