



ILLUSTRATION: JOHANNA KARMAKAR JUI

of me get here? How is there this road that takes me from my home to my workplace? How is it that the bathrooms here are clean, when they were anything but when last I left? Who opened the doors in the morning and turned on the lights? How is there a building here in the first place? How is it that I am able to write in this way? Where will my next meal come from? What will I do if it doesn't? Why do I not need to worry?

Questions such as these lead inexorably to an inconvenient truth—our worlds are not our own. Very little of who we are, what we do, and what we *can* do, can be attributed to our actions. If human beings are defined by the act of consciously producing our lives and means of living through work, as the young Marx and Engels put it back in the mid-1840s (in *The German Ideology*), then any structural and sustained division of that work (i.e. the 'division of labour') produces a partial consciousness of how our world is produced and reproduced. We are never fully aware of how much the Other's sweat and blood makes our lives possible—the other race, the other gender, the other class, and countless other Others. While such a partial blindness is as old as social hierarchies are ancient, since the 17th and 18th centuries it has been nurtured and fed by a discourse that did not exist before, and which since the 1980s has reigned more

tion, 'the market' is the modern agentive individual worshipping itself. This is why it has become almost impossible for us to conceptualise all human productive activity as fundamentally social, and to see through the illusion of individual effort separate from our surrounding complex networks and the wealth of capital, accumulated through the ages, from which we draw every day.

It is our inability to account for the combined labour of others, labour that makes our lives possible, that fuels our comfort with obscene displays of wealth, and our discomfort with working class demands for a higher minimum wage and shorter work hours. It reduces our understanding of the modern world into one where there are only so many kinds of constraints on agency (the physical/natural, the technical, and the legal), making forms of social, inertial and other kinds of power invisible and unintelligible. The idiom of individual agency can also be seen in our complete identification of 'democracy' with 'elections,' to the extent that the two have come to mean effectively the same thing. Thus, when democracies are 'ranked' by international organisations and political scientists, 'free and fair elections' dominate all other criteria. Modern day elections resemble little more than an array of choices of television channels—all that matters is the ability to choose. Even when collective action is acknowledged, it is rarely understood as anything more than an additive product of individual agency. The idea that political agency might actually *originate* in the collective is completely unintelligible to the modern liberal subject.

So what has any of this to do with May 1? An awareness of the need for collective action has been at the heart of popular egalitarian movements as far as back as historical record can take us. But it was particularly in 17th century England, amidst a vicious Civil War, that traditions of collective action fused with a new counter-hegemonic discourse of history and power to produce a proto-socialist politics. Amongst them were the Levellers, who agitated for political equality, religious tolerance and popular sovereignty, and the Diggers, who proclaimed the injustice of the enclosures of ancient common land (a development responsible for creating mass landlessness and destitution, directly contributing to the birth of a property-less working class) and their right to occupy the commons once more. By the next century, socialist politics of various forms could be found all over Europe and America, enabling

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# A Sense of Smallness

## The poverty of the individual and the need for collective action

**SHEHZAD M ARIFEEN**

*"The day will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you are throttling today"*

— Engraved on the Haymarket Martyrs' Monument

Forest Park, Illinois, USA

There are few things more difficult in life than a full awareness of the conditions of one's possibility. To come to terms with how little of my world is my own creation, and just how much of it is the accumulated labour of dead generations and living masses far removed from my consciousness, is to grapple with a sense of smallness and insignificance. It makes living in an age of hyper-individualism and entitlement a constant struggle. How is it that I have clean clothes to wear today? How did this plate of food in front

or less unchallenged in our private and public imaginations.

The idiom of the 'agentive individual' has always been fundamental to the cosmology of liberal modernity, occupying the same status in social thought that the atom has long occupied in natural science. The concept of individual agency infects our academic, professional and folk knowledge about how society works. It fundamentally prefigures the kind of reality we can see or dream of. It lies, I believe, at the heart of the extraordinary reverence with which we treat 'the market,' which to us has become an infallible, non-human/'natural' subject that orders our post-Hobbesian world caught in a permanent state of war. The market and the agentive individual are two sides of the same coin; just as religion was for Émile Durkheim 'society' worshipping itself through projection and misrecogni-

2006

Bangladesh Labour Act, 2016 (BLA) is enacted—consolidating over 25 pre-existing laws on various labour related issues.

2012

117 killed in a fire in Tazreen Fashion factory in Ashulia.

