Debate Ammunition: What Is Society?

Published: July 11, 2026, 6:08 am

THE RICHARD J MURPHY YOUTUBE CHANNEL

DEBATE AMMUNITION

What Is Society?

Funding the Future | July 2026

Topic

Why the economic assumption that society emerges from independent individuals is wrong and why understanding that individuals emerge from society changes everything about how we think about the economy, markets, money, and institutions.

The video to which this Debate Ammunition relates is available here.

The Core Argument

Mainstream economics begins with the suggestion that we are all independent individuals and then treats society as an afterthought, and little more than the aggregate of millions of separate rational choices. That story has always been implausible.

None of us begins life as an independent individual. Every one of us comes into the world wholly dependent upon other people, upon language, care, education, family, and community. We do not produce society; society produces us. Independent individuals emerge from society, not the other way round.

If that is true, the economy cannot be understood as something separate from, or prior to, society.

In the same way markets depend upon trust, law, education, infrastructure, and a stable monetary system. Society does not depend upon markets, then. Markets depend upon society.

In this context, the economy is just one of the ways in which society organises relationships so that people can live together, meet their needs, and realise their potential.

The purpose of society is therefore not to maximise production or growth. It is to create and maintain the conditions in which every person can realise their potential, whilst respecting the limits of the living world. Everything else, including the economy, exists to support that purpose.

The Argument Structure

Step 1 — The individual-first assumption is false:

Mainstream economics imagines people existing independently, making rational choices to satisfy their own wants, with society appearing almost as an afterthought. But none of us begins life as an independent individual. Without care we would not survive. Without language we would not learn to think. Without education, families, neighbours and communities, we would never become the people we eventually are. Society does not emerge from independent individuals. Independent individuals emerge from society.

Step 2 — Society is a network of relationships, not a market outcome:

Society is the name we give to an extraordinarily complex network of relationships. We exist in relationships with our families, communities, colleagues, and natural environment. We inherit knowledge from previous generations and pass it on to those who follow. We learn through cooperation and depend upon trust. Even our sense of identity is formed through our interactions with other people. Reducing this to a market is not simplification; it is a category error.

Step 3 — Markets depend upon society, not the reverse:

Markets require trust between strangers, laws that define rights and obligations, education so that people understand the transactions they undertake, public infrastructure, a stable monetary system, and confidence that agreements will be honoured. In short, markets depend upon society. Society does not depend upon markets. And money itself only works because we collectively agree that it will. Every payment, every loan, every tax payment records a relationship between people, organisations, and the society whose currency they use.

Step 4 — Society's purpose determines the economy's purpose:

Once we accept that society is prior to individuals and that the economy exists to serve society, the question shifts. In that case, the purpose of society is to create and maintain the conditions in which every person can realise their potential, whilst respecting the limits of the living world upon which we all depend. Education, healthcare, care, justice, knowledge and a healthy environment all follow from that. The economy exists to support these purposes. It cannot replace them. And that is why institutions, including government, are not optional extras but the necessary means by which societies sustain the relationships upon which they depend.

Their Argument → Your Rebuttal

They Say

Your Response

Society is just a collection of individuals. Margaret Thatcher was right that there is no such thing as society, only people and their families.

That claim collapses the moment you ask how any individual came to exist as a thinking, speaking, working person.

Every capability we have, including language, knowledge, practical skills, and the ability to enter a market, was developed through relationships with other people. Strip those away and you do not have an independent individual. You have an infant who cannot survive.

The claim that there is no such thing as society is not a description of reality. It is an ideological move that makes inequality appear natural and collective action appear illegitimate. Both conclusions suit some interests rather well.

Markets are the most efficient way to organise society. We should let them do as much as possible and keep government to a minimum.

Markets are tools. Like all tools, they are useful for some purposes and useless for others, and they require conditions to function that they cannot themselves create.

A market requires trust, law, enforcement, education, infrastructure, and a stable currency. None of those things arise spontaneously from market activity. All of them require collective organisation, which is to say they require society and government.

Markets may help coordinate countless exchanges between strangers. But the question of what should be produced, for whom, and at what ecological cost, is not a question markets can answer. It is a question that only society, acting through democratic institutions, can answer.

The economy should be about growth. Social purposes are fine, but growth is what creates the resources to pay for them.

Growth is not a purpose; it is occasionally a byproduct of pursuing genuine purposes. Maximising it as an end in itself frequently destroys the things that make it worth having.

An economy that delivers rising output while degrading the natural environment, concentrating wealth in fewer hands, and leaving large portions of the population unable to realise their potential is not a success. It is a failure dressed up in statistics.

The purpose of the economy is to support the conditions in which people can flourish. Growth may sometimes contribute to that. It is not a substitute for it.

Institutions like government are inefficient and crowd out private initiative. We would do better with less of them.

Every successful society in history has created institutions, and for an obvious reason. Relationships do not maintain themselves. Trust can be eroded. Knowledge can disappear. Justice can fail. Shared resources can be exhausted.

Institutions exist because there are responsibilities that individuals cannot discharge alone. The question is never whether societies should have institutions. The real question is whether those institutions strengthen the relationships that allow people to flourish, or weaken them.

The argument against institutions in general is not a description of how successful societies work. It is a description of how they fail.

The One-Liners

“Society does not emerge from individuals. Individuals emerge from society.”

“Markets depend upon society. Society does not depend upon markets.”

“Markets depend upon trust, law and education. None of those things come from markets.”

“The purpose of the economy is not growth. It is to help people flourish.”

“Every payment records a relationship. Economics that ignores relationships understands neither payments nor economies.”

“The question is not whether we need institutions. It is whether those institutions serve everyone or only a few.”

Questions to Ask

If society is just individuals choosing freely, how did everyone acquire the language, knowledge and skills they use when they choose?

Which of the conditions markets require, such as trust, law, education, infrastructure, and stable money, would exist if markets alone had produced them?

If the economy's purpose is growth, what happens when growth conflicts with the conditions that allow people to flourish?

Which existing institutions are strengthening the relationships that allow everyone to flourish, and which are weakening them?

Further Reading

Post

Date

What it covers

[The stories that lead to the politics of care]

18 Jun 2026

Sets out directly the claim that we flourish through relationships of care, and that the purpose of society is to help everyone realise their potential, precisely the argument this video makes.

[The foe of the politics of care]

19 Jun 2026

Explains how the neoliberal mindset that places the individual above all else is the direct opposite of a relational understanding of society, and why institutions built on that belief undermine flourishing.

[What is the role of the market in a politics of care?]

19 Jun 2026

Argues that markets cannot define a society's purpose and must instead be embedded within, and judged by, their contribution to a vision of a good society that markets themselves cannot supply.

[Cooperation]

1 Jul 2026

Explains money as the information system that allows society to coordinate cooperation, drawing the same distinction between money as accounting tool and real wealth as the goods and relationships it organises.

[What is economics? A logical explanation]

29 Jun 2026

Builds an if-then logic from the observation that every human being depends upon relationships with others, concluding that every society must organise those relationships, making institutions and collective action necessary rather than optional.

[Politics for People and the political economy of care: the core principles]

4 Feb 2026

Lays out the core principles of a political economy that begins with what care is needed and what real resources exist, rather than with narrow financial constraints, echoing this video's argument that the economy exists to serve society's purposes.