



## Capitalism need not conflict with conscience

Sandra Sinclair

### THE QUAKERS: MONEY AND MORALS

by James Walvin  
John Murray, £14.99

**M**ARX'S theory of class conflict rested heavily on the notion that capitalists derived benefit from exploiting their workers - and that one of the weapons in their armoury was the control they exercised over public debate, through their control over the mode of production. Marx should have paused to check these ideas by evaluating the independent mindedness of the Quakers. For Marx, religion was the opium of the masses. Maybe there is an element of truth in what he was getting at, but he was supposed to be constructing philosophy on a scientific basis. His theses, therefore, have to be judged in terms of scientific standards.

**T**he Quakers came to play a huge role in 19th century capitalism. They built financial and industrial empires, giving them extraordinary power which, according to the gospel of St. Marx, they should have used to exploit their workers. They did seek profits; but they also built villages with homes of the highest standards for their employees around the factories such as those owned by the Cadbury and Rowntree families (*one of them is pictured below*).

Their commitment to the highest standards of honesty did not prejudice their ability to

trade in the capitalist economy. The care with which they kept the profit and loss accounts did not diminish their recognition of social responsibility. Service to customers was acknowledged as a necessary part of a viable community. They were not entrepreneurs because of warped egos; nor acquisitive because of a fatal ostentatiousness. By and large, they were concerned to add value to the wealth of the nation from which everyone would gain; and they expected a fair deal in return.

James Walvin's history of the Quaker's pursuit of money explains how the sect operated to ensure that erring individuals were either put back on the straight and narrow path or were expelled.

Capitalism did not compromise the Quaker spirit. The state was continually challenged to justify its laws. In all the major social reform movements of the last 200 years, Quakers were at the forefront of campaigns to assert people's rights. They worked to produce a humane society. Institutionalised religion was provoked into questioning whether it conformed to the gospels. A class-ridden society was taunted by the classless attitudes of the men and women who quietly went about their business. If Marx had studied the history of the Quakers he would have come to appreciate that religion can play a leading role in arousing a social conscience which can lead to an active engagement in public affairs in a manner that can improve the fabric of society. Violent revolution driven by class antagonism is not the only way to break a corrupt mould.

Walvin's treatment is not a full survey of the reformist campaigns - on prisons, slavery, education. It does remind us that, as individuals, we do have free will, but we also need the support of appropriate social institutions within which to work for freedom. The history of the Quakers affords some important lessons on how to detach ourselves from the overbearing forces that do riddle society at any given time, in order to nourish the commitment to enlightened change.



## The silencing of the lambs

Paolo Bellarossi

### THE UNCONSCIOUS CIVILISATION

by John Ralston Saul  
Penguin, £7.99

**T**HIS BOOK is in the category of "If you read one book only this year, this should be it". The Canadian author has stirred literary circles with *The Unconscious Civilisation*, but the book ought to be compulsory reading for the economics fraternity.

Saul's thesis is that citizens have been rendered mute by the corporate interests which have sliced up what we like to call the democratic process, and they have even managed to deprive citizens of the capacity to think. His account is beautifully reasoned, packed with useful facts and blunt in attributing responsibility for the parlous state in which we find ourselves.

Saul develops the thesis to be found in authors like J.K. Galbraith, that private enterprise is now run by risk-averse managerial bureaucracies. But he goes much further, analysing the way in which citizens have been victimised by being deprived of the capacity to critically examine the way that they have been swindled of their rights.

The weakness in his analysis is in the link between history and the present. He notes that Adam Smith referred to the idle consumers of his time - "the aristocracy, the courtiers, the professionals, the land and property owners (who live off rent income), the bankers and so on". But from there he leaps to modern managements who administer trans-national corporations, and somehow equates the rental income of the erstwhile landed aristocracy with the fat salaries and golden parachutes of the chief executive officers of today. There is, of course, a huge difference between these two classes of people and that difference would provide Saul with important new perspectives.

Nevertheless, Saul does provide some valuable economic insights on which economists need to build. For example, he notes that corporate managements - especially in banks and pension funds - are attracted to property speculation and rental income. "This is the kind of administrative, non-capitalist, non-capital good venture the managerial class loves." There is little risk attached to deals involving property, or so it seems until the