

# Quakers and Capitalism

Introduction to the book *Quakers and Capitalism*  
by Steven Davison

Who would you say is the second most famous Quaker? I am assuming that William Penn is the first most famous Quaker, and that Richard Nixon does not qualify as a Friend, despite his nominal membership.

In the United States, it might be Herbert Hoover. He's certainly famous enough. Problem is, so few people know he was an active Friend all his life.

The answer, I propose, is John Bellers. A prominent British Friend around the turn of the 18th century, Bellers was well known to his contemporaries. Yet you would join an overwhelming majority of modern American Quakers if you have never heard of this man.

So why do I say he's the second most well known Friend in world history? Because some of his essays were required reading in Soviet schools throughout the Soviet period in the former Soviet Union—tens of millions of Russians have known who he is. Because he impressed Karl Marx and Friederich Engels so much that *Das Kapital* mentions him by name.

Here is a man who enjoyed the fullest respect of his own generation, who possessed a deep, compassionate heart and a creative and far-ranging mind, who brought these faculties to bear on the problems of his own time in searching moral critique and bold proposals for pragmatic solutions to the problems he so clearly defined—in some cases for the first time. With equal measures of insight and foresight, Bellers wrote about economics and the plight of the worker, medical research and education, international politics and domestic social policy. He was the first person in the English-speaking judicial tradition to call for the abolition of the death penalty.

So how has this important contributor to Quaker—and even Western—history fallen into such relative oblivion among his own people? And what, if anything, does this say about Quaker culture and our testimonial relationship to the concern that most exercised him: the social organization of capitalist enterprise? Why do I start my essay with John Bellers?

For me, our Bellers amnesia is a useful indicator of a bigger puzzle. Bellers is not the only important political economist whom we've forgotten; I would add Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree [dates] and, more importantly, David Ricardo [dates]. Moreover, while Quakers from their earliest days have had a disproportionate influence on capitalist culture, especially in Great Britain, as we shall see, nevertheless, we are only now beginning to develop a coherent, comprehensive testimony on economics. To my knowledge, no one has tried to write an economic history of Friends, despite its obvious and enormous importance, until this leaky vessel you are reading right now, though there

have been some marvelous treatments of specific people and topics. Friends are weird about money, too, as anyone who's served on a finance committee well knows. Why?

Why, when we have for so long been in the forefront of efforts to reform prisons, stop war, serve its victims, advance the rights of women, end slavery, have we been so tardy in addressing the social failures of capitalism? For years, I have felt led to try to answer these questions and John Bellers was my first poster boy, if you will.

I believe this approach-avoidance conflict lies near the heart of our corporate character. John Bellers' fate dramatizes a tension in the tradition of Friends between our crucial role in the birth and growth of capitalist and industrial economies and our nervousness about its conduct and consequences.

In the following pages, I will offer a brief economic history of Quaker culture with these questions in mind. I argue that we were collectively traumatized by the persecutions that began with the Restoration of Charles II in England in 1661 and we've been 'conflicted' about wealth, power and the economic order ever since. Timing and proximity also played a crucial role: we emerged as a people just as capitalism emerged as an economic system, growing up and coming of age on the same block, as it were. This profoundly affected us both. The third major factor was Quaker character and Quaker culture and the spirituality that gave rise to both, a combination I call the *double culture* of quietist withdrawal from all worlds but the related ones of business, science and technology, in which we were engaged with extraordinarily creative intensity.

The tension expresses itself *creatively* in the works of Bellers, Woolman, A.J. Muste, and others, and through a long history of economic reform and financial philanthropy.

It also expresses itself *dysfunctionally* in Bellers-amnesia, in the notable lack of any clearly defined historical corporate testimony on economic life like the ones we have for peace and simplicity, and in the weird envelope of silence and invisibility that surrounds the issue of financial support (at least in the unprogrammed tradition) for our monthly meetings. We could add other examples from our own experience.

I want to explore these tensions and their manifestations in two stages.

- ✧ The first section of the essay tells the parallel stories of Quaker contribution and Quaker response to the evolution of capitalism in England and, to a lesser extent, in North America.
- ✧ The second section will be more editorial: it will draw some conclusions from the history and seek out themes, exploring their implications for Friends today and, especially, for Quaker witness. It will raise capitalism up to the light of our current witness testimonies and offer a draft proposal for a coherent, comprehensive testimony on economics and the social order. The second section will end with some challenges to Friends and some project proposals.