

The 1650s: The Lamb's War and the Social Order

A chapter from the book *Quakers and Capitalism*
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Introduction

The Quaker movement began as an *apocalyptic* movement, in both senses of the word. *Apokalypsos* in the Greek of Christian scripture means “revelation,” and early Friends believed they were revealing God’s word in a definitive and radically new way. The revelation went beyond the apocalypse of the word, though the words proliferated, in sermons, epistles and pamphlets. It was an apocalypse of the *Word*, an opening of the world to the inbreaking presence of Christ himself. Early Friends believed they were witnesses of—nay, *agents of*—the Second Coming of Christ, which did not entail cosmic manifestations, but the surrender of individual human hearts to the Inward Light of Christ. For Jesus had always been trying to bring his people into the Life, but now he was finally doing so in a crescendo of enlightenment, as Protestants unseated the Papist monarchy and established the Protectorate, as the visions of George Fox and other early ministers of the Word were fulfilled, with amazing numbers of seekers turning toward the Light.

Early Friends naturally turned to the biblical Apocalypse, the *Book of Revelation*, to express their goals, methods and sense of urgency. From John’s Revelation, they borrowed the imagery of the Lamb’s War, full of the language of God’s martial judgment, but reading the text in terms of the Word, the Light and Teacher.

Because early Friends waged the Lamb’s War primarily against an apostate church held captive by darkness and untruth, their apocalyptic vision of all things made new in Christ addressed what we now call economics and the wider social order only indirectly. ‘Economics’ had not, in fact, been identified as a distinct sphere of human activity yet. You couldn’t study it as a discipline in school, for instance. (The word itself only emerged with this meaning around 1870, replacing the earlier term ‘political economy,’ itself coined in the late 18th century.)

Because their primary ‘weapon’ was the word, the gospel both preached and *lived* as witness to the Truth, early Friends did not at first seek to replace existing structures and institutions of economic (or other forms of) power with new ones. They had no ‘economic politics’ as we understand it today; they were not analytical or programmatic, in the ways that characterize Quaker witness today—or, for that matter, political struggle throughout the long, liberal-philosophical tradition that grew out of the Enlightenment in the West.

Rather, early Friends *anticipated* economic restructuring as a natural result of bringing the world itself under the rulership of the Lamb. Friends did ‘attack’ the

English class system *indirectly*, because they associated it with the church establishment and saw it as a product of humankind's fallen state, which, through the Children of Truth, Christ was now redeeming. The class system therefore fell within the purview of the Lamb's War. They also expected wealth to be redistributed, not forcefully, but as part of the world's renewal, in which "the Lord's government" would redistribute all spiritual and civil authority.

Friends singled out 'economics' for treatment or emphasis only in terms of personal conduct in business. Fox wrote pastoral epistles enjoining the Friends of Truth to hold to truth in business as a matter of personal morality and integrity. He and other leaders largely ignored the structural, systemic, institutional dimensions of economic life. This moral, rather than ethical (let alone political) emphasis continued to dominate Quaker attitudes toward money, commerce, and economics until the 20th century. Indeed, it dominates today.

However, notwithstanding this apparent lack of a formal 'stand' on issues of economic justice and institutions *per se*, their contemporaries in the 1650s saw Friends as dangerous destabilizers of the social order. In fact, in the most commonplace everyday encounters with Quakers, people experienced the most visible outward behavior of Friends as a direct affront to social class standing. I mean the practices of "plain speech," the refusal to offer "hat honor," and, to a lesser degree, "plain dress," also. Folks who engaged Quakers in conversation or simply passed them on the street tended to infer a broader, reformist economic agenda behind these practices, which, in reality, had an altogether different motivation. In fact, Friends have yet to express any such broader reformist agenda in a clearly articulated, recognizable, corporate testimony, beyond the economic implications (vaguely expressed) of the testimonies on equality and simplicity. Yet these earlier testimonial witnesses of plain speech and hat honor clearly thrust in the face of deeply entrenched assumptions and practices regarding economic status in English society. Friends were literally in their neighbors' faces with a bold rejection of institutions designed to reinforce the social-economic status quo.

'Hat honor' and 'plain speech'

You are walking down a street in Bristol or a country lane in Cumbria and come upon another man. (I have never seen a discussion of the courtesies required of women in such public encounters, let alone a commentary on how they varied in terms of social class, as Quaker histories have often done for men. I would predict that custom might require women to modify their curtsies according to the class of the man or woman encountered. I presume, also, that women's dress signified class, just as men's did. I suspect the style of bonnet was the key signifier.) You can tell the social station of the person you encounter by her or his dress and, in particular, by their headwear. If this person is your social superior, you doff your hat and you greet her or him differently, according to your relative social station.

Early Friends refused to observe the class distinctions involved in these social niceties. In effect, they treated all persons as though they were of an equal social station. They doffed their hats to no one and addressed everyone as “thee,” even when persons of higher station expected to be addressed as “you.” George Fox and William Penn actually refused to take their hats off before the king, though the moment turned almost comical for Penn. [see Research Snippets]

Friends held to these controversial and confrontational practices, not from some liberal political rejection of the class system, as such, or because they embraced a social ideology of human equality, as we might today. Rather, they sought to bear witness to a spiritual truth which they found in a close and peculiar reading of Acts 10:34: “Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, ‘Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.’” With characteristic emphasis on inward religious experience, they held the conviction that the only status that really mattered was your inward state of grace. All humans *were*, in fact, equal before God, *in their state of sinfulness*, and only God knew whether you had been redeemed from that burden of sin. Because you could not presume to know another’s spiritual status yourself, you had no authority to signify relative spiritual status through outward behavior. And relative *worldly* status didn’t matter: because God was “no respecter of persons” in their outward station in the world, you had no authority to be a respecter of persons either.

So also with the social conventions regarding personal address in speech. Just as Friends did not doff their hats to persons of higher station, so they did not address them as “you.” Instead, they took the ‘default’ position of addressing all persons with the “thee” and “thou” which one used with one’s peers. The same religious rationale applied in both practices of ‘hat honor’ and ‘plain speech.’

Most of the time, no doubt, the subtleties of Quaker faith in these matters never surfaced in the encounter itself because of the utterly *unsubtle* effect of the Quaker practice. People took offense. Well, not “people”—the *upper classes* took offense, to the degree that public recognition of their social station fed their self-image or supported their power base.

The practice of Friends tended to undermine asymmetrical power relations in very concrete terms. For one thing, it took courage and conviction—that is, power—to pull it off, especially in public. Nor was it easy for the aggrieved upperclassman to reverse the effect in the moment, especially for men who needed to retain at least the appearance of seemliness and dignity. What could you do to a man who had just refused to doff his hat and then continued walking? Make a scene, knowing you might only get a sermon unpacking some quote from Scripture or some other deft religious argument, while a crowd of rabble gathered, sniggering at your bluster and nodding at the arguments?

In practice, most upper class men must simply have gritted their teeth and ignored the Quaker, who was himself/herself in effect ignoring you. But the

situation remained charged in the moment and it just kept on happening—for decades.

We today have trouble imagining how disturbing and provocative these practices were. They represent the first leaning toward what would become our testimony on equality, played out as repeated personal acts of witness to Christ's word, without much regard for their systemic effects on the social-economic order. [research needed here: when did hat honor disappear?]

The Social Class of Quakers

Which raises the question: of what social classes *were* these Children of Truth? Where in the several strata of English society did most Friends fall? How often did such scenes take place? Put another way, if you were a Friend in the 1650s, how many of the people you encountered every day were you challenging in this way?

The answer is that it must have happened quite often because, in the 1650s, the Children of the Light came mostly from the working classes: most were yeoman farmers and husbandmen or artisans.

[Insert a table with statistics here?]

England's economy was pre-industrial and barely post-feudal, many decades distant from the commodity-based economy we have today, which is based on mass consumption of goods and services that are produced through industrial modes of production. It was still based in large part on agriculture and household-based trades, but, increasingly, *commerce* was providing the engine of new capital formation. In fact, the idea and processes of "new capital formation"—that is, the

creation of 'surplus' wealth available and intended for reinvestment—was only just emerging. I call this emergent stage of capitalism 'commercial capitalism.' [What do economic historians call this pre-industrial state of capitalism?] Trade, including international trade—of humans, natural resources, stolen gold and exotic agricultural products like tea and spices—is expanding rapidly and taking over the economy.

Though the trades were growing in importance, the social base of the English economy was still largely rural and local economies dominated everyday life. London, the largest city, had only 500,000 people in 1650; Bristol and Norwich, the next largest, had populations of roughly 30,000 souls. [Raistrick] The yeoman and

yeoman:

a person who owns and cultivates a small farm: specifically, a class of English freeholders below the gentry (a class of landed proprietors entitled to address as gentlemen and to bear a coat of arms, though not of noble rank).

husbandman:

one that plows and cultivates the land: farmer

husbandman classes were descendents of the feudal villein class. These were peasants enjoying no privileges or responsibilities that bound them economically, socially or politically to their superiors, unlike thanes and sokemen, above them. They owned their own land in their own right, as cotters below them did not. Our word villain derives from the name for this social class. Says something about the social/moral outlook of the times and especially of the class above them, the 'gentleman,' which denotes those who did not work for a living, but rather drew their incomes from rents, from the ownership of property, or from inheritance.

As we shall see, the persecution of Friends soon drove these farmers off their land and into the trades. Through the 1650s, though, when Friends were aggressively waging the Lamb's War, their class guaranteed that the streets and the encounters of normal social and economic converse became one of the Lamb's War's most active and volatile fronts.

The rise of capitalism and the Quaker ethic

Other trends and movements in the 1650s helped shape the rise of Friends into the emerging capitalist culture, also. The momentum of the broader Protestant reformation and, especially, the peculiar character of English Puritanism, created an ethos that harmonized Christian faith with economic practice in a manner most favorable to capitalism's development. Max Weber's classic *The Rise of Capitalism and the Protestant Ethic* first described this process. In it, Weber discusses Quakers specifically, and most of his analysis of Puritan culture applies equally well—if not more pointedly—to Quakers in the late 17th and early 18th centuries than it does to Puritans.

Weber emphasizes two elements of the "Protestant ethic" that deserve mention here. The first is the sense of *duty* at the heart of the Protestant/Quaker soul, and the second is the theology of personal *calling* which pulled the trajectory of God's will down into one's worldly life. Duty to God (and associated imperatives of honesty, hard work, faithfulness and discipline) transformed *work* (and, indeed, all aspects of your life) into a form of religious expression, a calling from God.

Early Friends internalized this "Protestant ethic" of work as sacred and livelihood as divine calling and success as a sign of faithfulness. They drew up short of the Calvinist equation of material success as a sign of God's favor, or even of redemption. But they did believe that all life, including work, was (at least potentially) sacramental; that is, it was to be conducted under the rulership of Christ and dedicated to his glory; and that faithfully inviting his rule over barn, shop and counting house would naturally nurture the business. Conversely—negatively—*failure* raised suspicions of sin, of wantonness, or, especially, of imprudence, which bordered on breach of what we call today the testimony of integrity, the religious imperative to bring your outward life into congruence with your inward life: if your outward (business) life was in a shambles, your inward life needed some work. This made Quakers *very* careful of their business conduct and their phenomenal success

soon strongly reinforced their beliefs and general practical approach along these lines.

The New Model Army

Out of this zeitgeist characterized by what Weber called the “Protestant ethic” among English Puritans there emerged an *institutional vehicle* for transforming tangible social-political-economic relations: Cromwell’s New Model Army. Perhaps ‘vehicle’ is too focused a word; ‘crucible’ might be better.

As its name suggests, Cromwell and his associates sought self-consciously to remodel military command structures and advancement. Because so many men were involved, and because its more experimental beginnings lasted quite a while, as these things go, the New Model Army became an incredibly fertile Petri dish for experimentation in new social forms of all kinds, because of its own radical innovations in social organization. It invited vital, informed and broadly exercised philosophical and political discourse. It provided practical training in revolutionary strategies, experiments and disciplines. And it supported vigorous networking. The result: a new set of social expectations, and leaders trained to act on them

Here’s a brief sketch of the ways that Cromwell’s innovations affected the socio-economic and ideological environment in which Quakerism emerged and the way the Quaker stance toward money and class evolved during that first radical decade:

- ✧ First, Cromwell cut across old manorial lines to form his fighting units. Units had been organized manor by manor, with forcibly conscripted serfs serving under the command of the manor’s lord and a staff drawn from the social ranks below lord. Cromwell deliberately overturned this feudal structure and formed units from men who came from all over Britain and they served under officers they chose themselves. This practice partially short-circuited the ways in which military service reinforced the static, hierarchical social relations of feudalism and it directly undermined the manorial system.
- ✧ Second, Cromwell filled the ranks through volunteer enlistment. This elevated the motivation for military service from that of force, fear and subservience to the lord, which had tied the foot soldier to the lord’s obligations to the king’s cause, to willing service based on personal opportunism and religious ideology—in a word, *calling*.
- ✧ Finally, Cromwell advanced his officers and enlisted men according to *merit*, not social rank. This improved the quality of the leadership, rewarded excellence and service, and trained up a generation of men who otherwise would have had no real prospects for betterment.

The conjunction of cause, opportunity and broadly trans-geographical, ‘cross-cultural’ exposure within the ranks not only deconstructed traditional post-feudal social and economic relations for an entire generation of the nation’s men; it also

created the perfect environment for *plotting*, for groups to come together around ideas. Eventually, plans for taking the revolution to the next level emerged.

These more radical movements had a vision of an even newer model for social life. Some of these groups became radical enough to threaten the New Model Army itself, and Cromwell eventually cracked down on them. Thus, just as Cromwell's own most forward-thinking leaders began articulating radically new sets of expectations and visions for society, they were forced out of the army and persecuted. Many found their way into the Quaker movement.

Correlate movements for radical economic change and their influence on Quakers

The Diggers—radical economic communarians

In April of 1649, Gerard Winstanley and William Everard led a group of about forty so-called Diggers to uncultivated common land on Saint George's Hill in Cobham, Surrey. Their intention: "to dig, plow, plant and dwell upon the commons, without hiring them, or paying Rent to any." ["A Letter to Lord Fairfax and His Councell of War. . ." 1649] After they had been living there in tents for a week, government troops dispersed the Diggers just as they were preparing to cultivate a second hill, and they arrested the leaders. Winstanley and Everard were convicted and levied stiff fines, but the colony itself held on at Cobham until 1651. Eventually, though, the Diggers were disbanded. Many of their number and some of their leaders joined Friends. Though a devout Christian, Winstanley rejected organized religion as a support to the class structure of England. True to his principles, he never joined the Children of Truth, but he maintained a close association with early Friends until his death in 1676.

He developed a communistic social theory that he derived from his reading of the gospel and his lively relationship with the living Christ. Though his thought encompassed a broad social-political theory of equality, he focused on a religious rationale for the rejection of private property and, more specifically, he articulated the common people's right to free access to English common land. He criticized the partial revolution of Cromwell and the Commonwealth Parliament, which he claimed gave lip service to a just and judging, powerful and watching "Kingly power of Righteousness," and which he condemned for failing to cast down the kingly power of unrighteousness (that is, the Devil) in themselves, though it had cast down the monarchy.

When Cromwell disbanded the Diggers, many in the movement migrated to Friends, taking their egalitarian economic ideology with them. They were already fervent in their religious belief that Christ was actively transforming their world—or trying to, at least—and ready to serve as his active disciples. Fox's preachment of the Inward Light and the calling of the Lamb's War must have seemed attractive, making Friends a natural new home for these refugees from its most active

economic fronts on Saint George's Hill and elsewhere. In return, they brought to Friends articulate social theory and practical experience in experimental economic alternatives.

Neither the theory nor the practice seems to have fallen on very productive soil. At least, as far as I can tell, the writings of early Friends show no clear influence of the programmatic ideas of the Diggers, and the history of Friends reveals no clear movements toward communitarianism or agrarian "land reform," as we call peasant squatting and commons seizure today.

The Levellers—radical political egalitarians

Though the Levellers explicitly disavowed claims that they sought to level wealth, as the Diggers, or "True Levellers," did, they did seek equality under the law. From the Levellers, through John Locke, we get the phrase, "by natural birth all men are equal and alike borne to like property, liberty and freedom." [web page 7 of 7, #4]. Their philosophy of 'natural rights,' English common law as the basis of law over against Norman innovations, and their philosophical sanctification of private property led them to see legitimate government as necessarily a social contract between free and equal men (sic) whose primary purpose was to protect private property.

Like the Diggers, the Levellers cited a religious foundation for their platform, though their tone and expectations were less apocalyptic. They relied, rather, on the power of social contract and straightforward political processes and institutions to realize their goals. Levellers exercised enough leverage within the New Model Army to force a series of so-called Putney debates, in which common soldiers debated the political constitution of the Commonwealth with the Army's generals and presented a draft constitution in pamphlet form titled *An Agreement of the People* (1647). In this and two subsequent drafts, they proposed abolishing the House of Lords, distributing government powers between executive, legislative and judicial branches, and vesting supreme authority in a representative body elected annually. The Agreement guaranteed a range of individual liberties against the claim and expansion of statute law, including religious freedom to all but Catholics and certain "licentious" sects, and a wide range of judicial protections. Modern Libertarians claim the Levellers as their original forbears.

A series of mutinies in the army led Cromwell to disband their movement in 1649. The Levellers' most prominent spokesman, John Lilburne, was convinced to abandon his Puritanism and to join the Children of Truth in 1655, though he was forced to maintain his relationship from a distance. Tried for treason twice—acquitted in 1649, convicted in 1650—Lilburne was banished for life, and died in the Netherlands in 1662.

The Levellers had a considerably greater impact on Quaker political values than the Diggers had on Quaker economic values. Religious toleration became a hallmark

of Penn's Holy Experiment and the Pennsylvania constitution [real name] broadened the franchise along lines suggested by Lilburne and his fellows, as just two examples. But the most important influence—or perhaps we should avoid speculation about causes and speak of *correspondences*—lie in the embrace of the *social contract* as the key revolutionary heir to the role of *covenant* in social-political-economic life. We will discuss this in greater detail soon, turning for guidance to Doug Gwyn's groundbreaking work in *The Covenant Crucified*. Here, I'll just say that the radical expectation of a 'holistic' transformation of the social order, including economic relations, gave way, under the pressure of the persecutions and the imposition of 'gospel order' in the latter decades of the 17th century to resigned acceptance of a worldview bifurcated into sacred and secular spheres. This social contract philosophy split the covenant theology-philosophy of a new world order emerging through Christ's second coming into its two components, one private and moral-religious, the other public and legal-contractual.

For the most part, then, Quakers absorbed two radical social movements that could have turned Friends' attention toward a truly forward-thinking testimony on economic relations and policy, (as it helped to do for religious freedom through the Levellers)—but this didn't happen. Friends ultimately turned inward with their 'economic' testimony instead, focusing on private conduct in business, rather than on transforming the social order.

This process was the crucial turning point in Quaker economic history. It defined Quaker economic life, both in its inward and testimonial dimensions and in its outward expressions in the world, from the end of the Lamb's War in 1661 to the present. The shift takes place during a transition period I shall treat more fully in the next chapter, a period that begins with the Restoration of King Charles II, the end of the great Puritan experiment in government, and with an onslaught of persecution that tried to empty Quaker purses into the state treasuries.

As apocalyptic fervor cooled in the face of its failure, Puritans and Friends alike increasingly set the religious life apart and ceded to the secular sphere all expectation for and authority over the social order. The private contract became the platform for economic relations and the state was ceded authority for overseeing contractual relations on behalf of individual property rights. The collective religious vision of a remade *world* that had animated the Lamb's War constricted until it circumscribed only the oversight of individual moral behavior in the *market*. In return for calling off the Lamb's War and withdrawing from the public social-political-economic scene as religious-apocalyptic revolutionaries, Friends won religious tolerance and relative sovereignty over private moral conduct.

The split took time, proceeding gradually—but ultimately, decisively—over a transition period of several decades. Both internal and external forces drove this transition. The dual character of Quaker culture that finally emerged, however, embodied a *reaction* to history more than a set of choices made proactively from a

platform of corporate inspiration such as drove the Lamb's War. Friends would remain socially reactive in their testimonial life for the next two centuries.

We can't fault them, though, for the lack of forward-looking vision for the social order during the transition period: they were surrounded by, carried along by, and integral to, new currents in socio-economic history of a magnitude and significance not seen since the collapse of the Roman empire. Have you ever been in a flood? I have. All you really care about is staying above water. Nowadays, we call the flood Quakers faced in the early 18th century *industrial capitalism*. This new economy, the social milieu it created, the political culture it demanded, hammered the human soul itself into a new shape in the forges of its iron foundries, the looms of the textile mills, and, for Quakers, especially, the desks of the counting houses.