



# **Quaker Conscience and the Revolutions of 1660, 1776, and 2020**

By Daniel A. Seeger

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Some years ago, when I was serving as Executive Director of Pendle Hill, I was a member of Birmingham Meeting. Birmingham Meeting happens to be located in the middle of the field in which the Battle of the Brandywine was fought, pitting Washington's American revolutionists against British forces led by General Howe. Interred in the graveyard adjacent to the meeting house are both British and American soldiers. The Quaker meeting house itself has bullet scars in its walls.

In the early part of the Battle of the Brandywine, which took place on September 11, 1777, the Americans sent the British into retreat. But the British regrouped, and later in the day defeated the Americans decisively.

Every year there is an elaborate re-enactment of the Battle of the Brandywine, with Revolutionary era costumes and ancient armaments. The enactments traditionally only reproduce the early part of the battle, when the Americans sent the British packing. The decisive victory of the British later in the day is not re-enacted.

Birmingham Friends eventually wearied of these enactments portraying the pacifist Quakers cravenly slinking off before the battle was joined. One year they determined that henceforth the Quakers themselves would re-enact early Friends. So at the enactment, Birmingham Friends conducted a mock meeting for business as the battle loomed, a business meeting at which the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's discipline against war and militarism was



Birmingham Friends Meeting



Birmingham Meeting Graveyard



Artist's rendering: American soldiers at the Battle of the Brandywine

discussed and explained. This departure from conventional battle re-enactments attracted the attention of the Philadelphia *Inquirer*, which included in one of its editions a full page spread all about the Quaker participation in the re-enactment, publicity which gratified Friends enormously.

A few weeks after the re-enactment, when I arrived at Birmingham's meeting for business, I saw on the agenda an item entitled "costume closet." I had never seen such an item in a Quaker business meeting agenda, and was naturally quite curious. It turned out that Friends were dissatisfied that their re-enactment was carried out with inauthentic garb, and the search was on for authentic colonial dress for future re-enactments.



Battle of the Brandywine Re-enactment

When Norval called me to ask me to address the issue of Quaker conscience for this First Day gathering, the thought of Friends during the Revolutionary War and of Birmingham Meeting's costume closet sprang to mind. I rashly proposed the topic: "Quaker Conscience and the Revolutions of 1660, 1776 and 2020." I say "rashly" because when I sat down to get organized for this it quickly became apparent that the topic was far too ambitious for a 30 minute presentation.

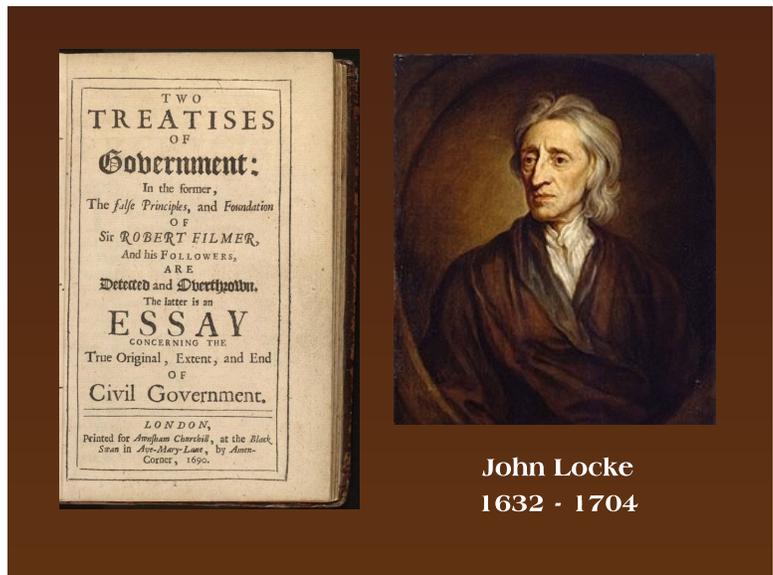
What I would like to do, therefore, is treat the topic essentially in outline form, sketching what a full treatment of the topic might look like, and spend most of our time together on the Quaker conscience and the imperatives facing America in 2020.



If we think back to the 1660s, the entire company of Friends were united in their opposition to the fundamental premises of the established order. Refusing to take their hats off when in the presence of the king was not merely a picturesque gesture. Like their refusal to swear oaths in court, and like their abolition of the clergy in favor of the ministry of all believers, these were dramatic acts which struck at the very heart of the aristocratic-ecclesiastical complex which held society in its oppressive grip. Friends opposed theories of the divine right of kings and asserted

their radical egalitarianism well before John Locke anonymously published his *Two Treatises on Government* in 1689. And the significance of Friends' radical challenge to the established order was not lost on their contemporaries. It is estimated that as many as 7,000 Friends were jailed, and many died in prison.

If there were time for a fuller treatment of the Quaker conscience in revolutionary periods, I would be inclined to argue that as time passed Friends became conformed to the world's business as usual, confining their opposition to a few specific evils, like war and slavery and the oppression of women, and even in these respects allowing a few saintly outliers, like John Woolman and Lucretia Mott, to carry the ball for them. There were no 7,000 Friends jailed for their opposition to the oppressive social system of the American colonies – a system which included chattel slavery.



John Locke  
1632 - 1704

Consider the colonies in America as they were 100 years after the Valiant Sixty endured many hardships as a result of their opposition to the established order back in England. The thirteen American colonies were deeply reflective of the late medieval British society from which they sprang, and which had excited the opposition of the first Friends. Aristocratic people in America owned great landed estates like Mount Vernon, Monticello, and Montpelier, the plantation homes of our first, third and fourth presidents. Actually, magnificent as each of these were, they were dwarfed in comparison to others. The Rensselaerwyck estate in the Hudson Valley was over a million acres in size, while the Fairfax estate in Virginia was over five million acres and incorporated land in twenty counties.

Historians estimate that approximately half the white people who migrated to America during the colonial period came as indentured servants, who, upon the end of their indentures, became the rural and urban poor. And then, of course, were the thousands upon thousands of enslaved African-Americans, and the increasingly restive Native Americans.



Monticello, home of Thomas Jefferson

While Friends by the thousands had refused to take their hats off in the presence of magistrates and the King, one hundred years later, when John Woolman donned undyed clothes to protest the slave trade, no other



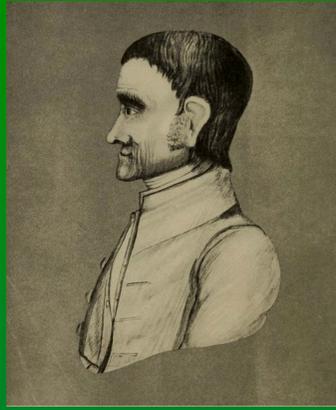
Artist's rendering: Constitutional Convention

Friends followed suit, and only slowly and reluctantly was the Society of Friends itself cleared of slave-holding. While Friends insisted on their right not to bear arms in the Revolutionary War, they did not protest as the founding elites of the United States cynically employed the rhetoric of the Enlightenment about human rights, equality and liberty to rally the masses around the rebellion from England, while at the same time cleverly devising a system of governance which would ensure their own continued privilege and dominance. The new Constitution managed to ignore the rights of Native Americans, enslaved African Americans, women, and propertyless white men – that is, the great preponderance of the population of the new nation. As has been often pointed out, ensuring the perpetuation of the institution of slavery was an animating motive for many of the arrangements which characterized the new government. Friends seem to have been silent about all of this.

Ten of the first twelve United States presidents felt comfortable buying, selling, owning, and cruelly exploiting other human beings. Although President Lincoln never did so personally, during his presidency the plantation-style executive mansion in which he lived, the White House, was itself staffed by enslaved human beings. That it required a dreadful Civil War before there could be an end to slavery is itself a tribute to the ingenuity of the founders in ensuring that the trappings of democracy would not easily result in substantive democracy. Even the great Union general, Ulysses S. Grant, the seventeenth president, owned slaves himself before the Civil War took place.



Lucretia Mott  
1793 - 1880



John Woolman  
1720 - 1772

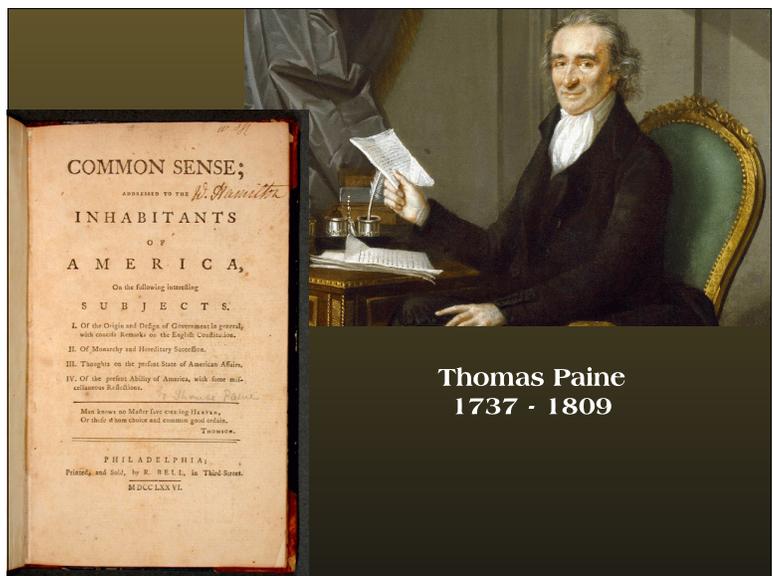
Throughout all this Friends gradually cleared their Religious Society of slaveholders, and many Friends participated in the underground railroad and opposed the fugitive slave laws. Most insisted on their right not to bear arms.

But Friends in the colonial era and since have selectively read the works of John Woolman, admiring his testimony against slavery, hardly controversial nowadays, and the sweetness of his spiritual disposition. But Friends have not followed or celebrated John Woolman's devastating critique of the country's political economy, a critique which he set forth in several essays. And there certainly has been no widespread Quaker opposition to the fundamentally unjust and anti-democratic principles and practices which have characterized the nation since its founding, no opposition comparable to that which the first Friends mounted against the aristocratic-ecclesiastical complex of their own day.

Today we are still saddled with the hypocrisy of our nation's founders, and have even seen the remnants of democracy which have survived their machinations whither away. The founders' public proclamations of human rights, equality and liberty persists, as does the reality that the institutions which presumably give expression to these principles actually subvert them. What are we to make of the fact that in the Senate, which consents to treaties and to the appointment of Supreme Court justices, a state like Wyoming with less than a million citizens has the same representation as a state like California with 40 million citizens? And that the electoral college which elects presidents is similarly lopsided? And that the process for amending the Constitution is weighted similarly, making adjustments next to impossible?

It is no accident that we are saddled with the ridiculous situation that corporations are considered to have the same rights as human beings, that money is equated with speech, that office holders can be bought and paid for by special interests, that the environment is being irretrievably plundered, and that no way can be found to ensure that every person has an equal right to participate in tamper-free elections.

The American Revolution of 1776 was inspired in a large measure by a pam-



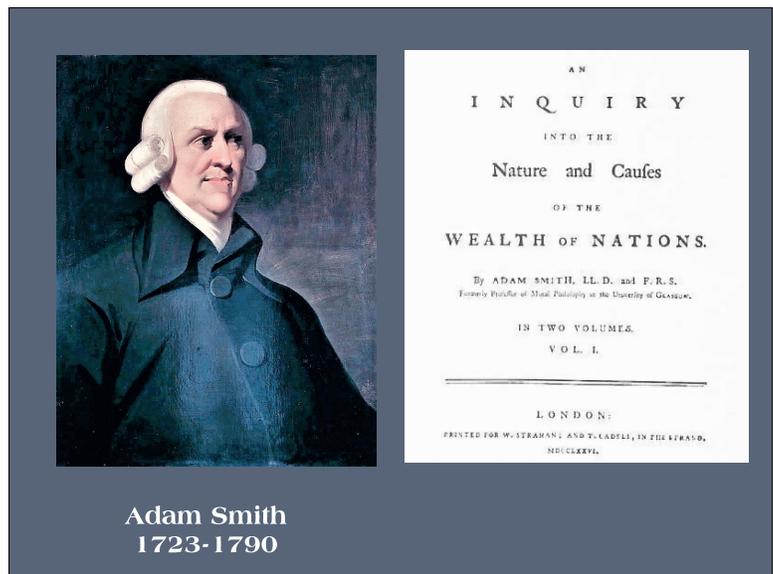
Thomas Paine  
1737 - 1809

phlet by Thomas Paine called *Common Sense*. John Adams wrote that without Paine's pamphlet Washington's sword would have been raised in vain. Paine applied common sense principles to the prevailing ideology of the day which justified hereditary monarchy, or what Paine called "the regime of crowned ruffians." Like John Woolman, Paine decried the amassing of land and property by private individuals.

Like the Friends of 1660 and 1776, we ourselves live on the threshold of revolution. What principles would a "Common Sense" pamphlet for the Revolution of 2020 espouse? I will conclude this reflection with an outline of sixteen principles, or axioms, which might express a common sense understanding of the situation which afflicts us in our own time.

1. Economics is not a science.

Adam Smith, often called "the father of economics," was greatly influenced by the scientific age which was getting underway during his lifetime. His theories evidence a desire to explain social and economic phenomena with the same certitude and the same elegant simplicity which characterized Newtonian physics. Alas, Smith's idea that economics can be practiced as a science still haunts and misleads us in the present day.



Economists, business leaders, bankers, public officials and various pundits, when making assertions about economic policy questions, will often assume a tone as if they were purveying principles which no intelligent person would dare question.

In a true science, theories are tested over and over under exacting conditions by different researchers until a general agreement can be reached which allows the accurate prediction of future events drawn from the scientific theory which has been proven. In economics, there is no possibility of conducting such experiments under controlled conditions. Moreover, no general consensus has emerged in the economic field regarding the most important questions which face us, and economists and business leaders are frequently confounded by the results of their own policies and practices, as was once again demonstrated by the financial meltdown of 2008.

Citizens must be constantly skeptical of anyone who poses as an expert on economic questions. There are no such experts, Nobel prizes notwithstanding. There are only people posing as experts who are advancing nostrums they believe will work for the short term advantage of themselves, or of the people who are paying them to make the

pronouncements. Cynics have said, with considerable justification, that you could lay all the economists in the world end-to-end and you would not reach a conclusion.

2. Economic laws are not natural laws.

This follows as a natural corollary from common sense principle number one. So-called experts who act as if economics is a science will expect the rest of us to believe that economic outcomes are as inescapable as the law of gravity. In reality, there is no law of nature which determines economic results; such outcomes are entirely of human invention. People, not nature, have determined that Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon, can earn more than \$100,000 per minute while workers in Amazon fulfillment centers



urinate into jars because they are allotted insufficient time for bathroom breaks.<sup>1</sup> The unnaturalness of such situations are entirely of human creation, and it is our responsibility as human beings to correct them.

3. The economy is not a meritocracy.

So-called experts are always trying to convince us that the unfettered free market assures us that those who rise to wealth and power do so by virtue of their Darwinian superiority. The most casual observation demonstrates the falseness of such a claim; it was not necessary for Donald Trump or Jeffrey Epstein to enter the limelight for this to be apparent. The lopsided distribution of wealth from which the nation suffers is the result of the



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<sup>1</sup> See *The New Yorker*, January 7, 2019, page 55.

illegitimate access by certain privileged groups to society's common treasure and their misappropriation of it for their own benefit; it is the result in some instances of pure chance; and all too frequently this concentration of wealth arises from myriad criminal practices and systems of corruption.

It may be reasonable for economic arrangements generously to compensate people who make uniquely valuable contributions to society's general prosperity and well being . To do so can stimulate effort and inventiveness. But the present huge concentration of wealth in a small elite has nothing to do with this principle of compensation on the basis of meritorious service. Simple observation demonstrates that, while talents are unevenly distributed among people, the differences are not so radical as the lopsided distribution of wealth in a small elite suggests.

4. A true meritocracy would assure equality of opportunity.

The mis-allocation of decision-making power affecting the general welfare to people who are either intellectually unqualified or morally unfit, or both, but who are socially advantaged, is hugely costly to society. Unless care is taken to ensure that opportunity (access to education, nutrition, leadership opportunities, and the exercise of inventiveness) is open to all on an impartial basis of merit, society as whole suffers. From the less-than-brilliant people who lied to us to get us into the Iraq War without giving a thought to how we might end it, to the economic meltdown of 2008, we see the price of allowing privileged dim-wits to run things. America's lurch from disaster to disaster is the price we pay for failing to operate a society which is truly a meritocracy based on equality of opportunity.

5. While the statement that "all property is theft" is an exaggeration, it is not much of an exaggeration.

Although the establishment of laws and customs may appear to give legitimacy to property transfers and ownership, at earlier stages of social evolution the biggest share simply went to the biggest bully, and no subsequent legalisms can obscure the fundamental illegitimacy of this originating condition.

Even so recent a history as that of the settlement of the Americas by the European colonists demonstrates this truth. When Thomas Jefferson bought the Louisiana purchase from Napoleon, it was pointed out to him that he would have to acquire it all over again from the people who actually lived there and who really owned it, that is, from the Native Americans. Jefferson is said to have replied simply, "They will kill some of us, but we will kill all of them."

In 1846 the United States launched a completely illegitimate war against Mexico, at the end of which we simply annexed fully half of that country's territory, another example of the bullying at the foundation of property rights.

Private ownership of the earth and its resources is not an absolute right, but can only be justified and continued if such ownership is exercised for the common good.

Ownership is a trusteeship carried out on behalf of the community as a whole. Exploiting ownership to elevate oneself over the common lot of humanity is illegitimate.

To quote John Woolman: “As he who first formed the earth out of nothing was then the true proprietor of it, so he still remains; and though he hath given it to the children of men, so that multitudes of people have had sustenance from it while they continued here, yet he hath never aliened it; but his right to give is as good as at the first, nor can any apply the increase of their possessions contrary to universal love, nor dispose of lands in a way which they know tends to exalt some by oppressing others, without being justly chargeable with usurpation. And though by claims grounded in prior possession great inequality appears amongst men, yet the instructions of the great proprietor of the earth is necessary to be attended to in all our proceedings as possessors or claimers of the profits of the soil.”

6. Most standard measures of the performance of the economy have nothing to do with the well-being of the average person.

The Gross Domestic Product, stock market indices, and the consumer price index which are used as measures of the economy’s performance, and which are often used to lull the citizenry into the view that everything is okay overall and their personal economic distress is their own fault, do nothing to address the question of distributive justice. None of them say anything about how the average person is faring in the economy. The unemployment rate is wildly misleading, as is often demonstrated – it does not count people who have dropped out of the labor market from discouragement, it does not count people who are employed part-time when they need full-time jobs, it does not take account of people who are working more than one job and who still cannot make ends meet, it does not count people in the temporary employment pool or the gig economy which provides them with no benefits. So it is necessary to be aware that the official conversation about the economy is based on data which actually masks the reality from which common people suffer.

7. Full employment with decent compensation is the only legitimate measure of an economy’s success.

There is one simple criterion for measuring the success or failure of a modern economy. Does it, or does it not, provide employment and reasonable economic security for every person who is willing and able to work, and does it provide adequately for the elderly and disabled? If it does not, it is failed and broken, and prevailing arrangements should be speedily replaced with something better.

Wealth should be so distributed so that all can live decently and simply, rather than so that some can enjoy an absurd degree of excess while others are deprived.

Those who will quickly claim that bad as things are, any change will only make them worse, are simply promoting a status quo which works to their own advantage, are discounting centuries of human ingenuity in addressing communal needs, and are

seeking to distract their fellow citizens from numerous examples of successful societies which have enjoyed prosperity rooted in justice and fair play.

President Donald Trump, when railing against the immigrants seeking entry into the United States, claimed that he did not see why we should admit people from African countries, using an unrepeatable epithet when referring to them. He averred that he wants people from countries



Marool Aalesund, Norway

like Norway to come to America. Why, I thought to myself, would a Norwegian ever think of coming to the United States? Norway has the fourth highest per capita income in the world. It has had the highest Human Development Index ranking in the world since 2009, a position it also held previously between 2001 and 2006. It has also had the highest inequality-adjusted ranking until 2018, when Iceland moved to the top of the list. Norway ranked first on the World Happiness Report for 2017, and currently ranks first on the OECD<sup>2</sup> Better Life Index, on the Index of Public Integrity, and on the Democracy Index. It has one of the lowest crime rates in the world. The Norwegian state has large ownership positions in key industrial sectors, and provides universal health care and a comprehensive social security system. Perhaps President Trump might import to the United States some of Norway's public policies instead of entertaining the vain hope that Norwegian people will ever want to relocate themselves here.

8. Economics, properly understood, is the practice of social ethics, rather than a branch of the natural sciences.

Every individual human exchange, every cultural and social practice, every piece of legislation, and every economic transaction, has an ethical dimension. There is no sphere of life which is truly amoral in that it exists in a realm where ethical and moral principles need not be taken into account. Even the celebrated "private acts between consenting adults" do not occur in some amoral sphere; it is just that, having analyzed the ethical situation, some people deem, whether rightly or wrongly, that their ethical impact on society is negligible.

The justice and fairness of economic arrangements and economic policies need constant ethical review by an alert citizenry to ensure that the effects on society as a whole are fair and reasonable, that innocent people are not being exploited, that profit is not

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<sup>2</sup> Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development.

being gained by a few at the expense of everyone else, and that the air, land and water upon which people depend is not being degraded for the benefit of some at the expense of others.

Economics, then, rather than being a science, is more properly understood as a branch of social ethics. Who gets what, how, why and when are all ethical questions, not scientific ones. It is the proper role of a truly democratic government to codify practices which uphold moral principle, as the people who are constantly citing the Ten Commandments as the basis of our legal system keep reminding us.

9. Human beings are not mere commodities.

Markets appear to be innate to the human condition. For all of known history, people have engaged in trade with each other for their mutual benefit. Nor need anyone resent the achievement of a fair profit for able dealing. Markets function at their best when they facilitate the exchange of goods and services among many sellers and many buyers all of whom are approximately equal in overall wealth and power – the skilled craftsmen who provide implements for knowledgeable farmers, and who in turn benefit from the farmers’ agricultural products.

But when some people approach the market impoverished while other participants command large surpluses, the results, in experience, rarely turn out to be fair or good. The outcomes are particularly inhumane when some people approach the market with nothing but their labor to sell when, through no fault of their own, the supply of labor greatly exceeds what those in command of huge economic entities can see as useful for further increasing their own vast wealth.

This reduction of the human person to a mere object of supply and demand, an object which is perfectly dispensable if it does not meet the perceived needs of the already wealthy to further increase their assets, is a profound flaw in modern economic organization which distinguishes it from ages-old trading and bartering practices.

Treating another human being as an object, as merely a means to one’s own end, violates every ethical precept, religious and secular, eastern and western, which humankind’s long search for meaning has produced. Yet it is a practice which modern market economies routinely employ on a vast scale.

10. There is no such thing as a “self-made” man (*sic*).

Economists frequently view the government as an outside force impacting on the economy, usually implying that its impact is harmful to general welfare. Actually, government and the economy are intrinsic to each other. The means through which individuals, families or groups are allowed to acquire and control assets are defined by humanly designed laws and customs established in government, and have no other basis for their existence. Without government one could possess something only in the way a dog possesses a bone.

Economic agreements, relationships, practices and contracts need to be enforced, and setting up such a system of contract enforcement is no mean feat. Many societies have failed to accomplish it. It involves an enormous commitment by all members of the society to do so – a financial commitment to pay the necessary costs, and to establish, maintain and change rules and regulations as needed.

All wealth, then, is made possible by the political and social system. It cannot be viewed solely as the creation of the individual or small group which may claim it as a private possession. Any idea of a self-made man is a deceptive myth. As members of a presumably democratic society, all of us collude in the amassing of great fortunes, no matter what individual or small group may presume to own them, and we bear a burden of responsibility to see that such fortunes are not misused.

11. Greed is not good.

The idea that the anarchy of an unfettered free market magically transforms the greed of individuals into the common good, and that through it wealth somehow automatically trickles down from the super-rich to the benefit of everyone else, is surely one of the most enduring exercises in wishful thinking humankind has ever known. This idea that the greed of individuals benefits the community is to moral philosophy what the alchemists' attempt to turn lead into gold is to chemistry, and what the amateurs' perpetual motion machine is to physics.

12. Corporations are not persons.

Corporations have a long and fascinating history. People have joined together for the shared purpose of making a profit since the dawn of history, as when groups of Athenian and Phoenician merchants pooled their savings to build a boat. The concept of "limited liability" arose in 15<sup>th</sup> Century England. It is an arrangement whereby the loss which owners and shareholders of a business can incur is limited to the amount they have invested in the enterprise and does not extend to other personal assets. In 1600 C.E. Queen Elizabeth I granted to a group of investors the right to be "one body corporate" known as the East India Company and bestowed upon them a trading monopoly in India. Similarly, in 1606 C.E. the Crown vested in a syndicate of "loving and well-disposed" subjects the right to develop Virginia as a royal domain.



Queen Elizabeth I  
1533 - 1603

Note that in these cases corporations are an

artificial invention, a set of rules and regulations, designed to enlist the citizenry in an enterprise to advance state purposes.

Corporations are nowhere mentioned in the American Constitution, so, as has been commonly understood, duties not assigned to the new Federal Government were reserved to the states. After the Revolutionary War the several states only granted corporate charters to public service companies, that is, companies organized for the purpose of building docks, bridges, turnpikes, canals and waterworks. But in 1811 New York State set the precedent that people could launch an incorporated enterprise for any reason at all, using the special provisions, rules, and regulations of this artificial entity for purposes entirely of their own, unrelated to public need – rules and regulations which included limited liability and the right to sell shares to the public. Other states quickly followed suit, and the Frankenstein monster was unleashed.

But things were carried to an absurd level in 1886 when the United States Supreme Court, in a semantic sleight of hand, construed the system of rules and regulations governing the business practices of an artificially created corporate entity as, in and of themselves, a “person,” thereby cynically applying to corporations the rights enunciated in the Fourteenth Amendment intended to protect newly freed African-American human beings.

This would be like declaring a game of chess a person or a soccer team a person. There is no rational or logical way for a politically devised system of rules, regulations and operating principles to be construed as an entity having the same rights as an individual human person endowed by a divine Creator with inalienable rights, yet this is the anomaly with which the political economy of the nation has been saddled for well over one hundred years, an anomaly carried to an appalling extreme by the Supreme Court’s 2010 *Citizens United* decision.



United States Supreme Court

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As citizens we do have the right of freedom of assembly for political purposes, but the principle of one person one vote is egregiously violated when some citizens can amplify their voices above all others with the wealth garnered from people of all political persuasions through business arrangements made possible only by the government functioning as an enabler. Until the Supreme Court decisions of 1886 and 2010 are nullified authentic democracy will never be possible here in the United States.

13. Money is not speech.

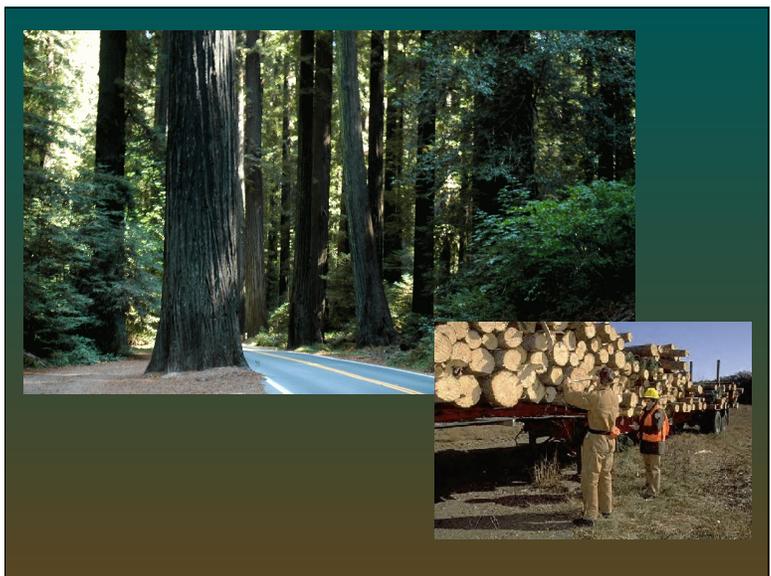
This follows as a corollary of principle Number 12. While common sense acknowledges that money is not the equivalent of speech – that it simply amplifies the speech of those in possession of the money – the Supreme Court has carried its errant reading of the meanings of “person” and “money” to the extreme conclusion that corporations should have First Amendment Free Speech rights to spend limitless amounts to influence election outcomes. Yet, in reality, it is a system that allows corporations and the wealthiest individuals to drown out the voices of everyone else, ensuring them of unequal access to and leverage over elected officials.

14. There are many economic and social needs which markets cannot address.

There are many necessary social services and products which the free market is incapable of producing, and which have to be developed by non-market means. Large areas of a healthy economy must function outside of the greed-based, take-every-advantage-to-maximize-profit system. For example, electricity was brought to rural America by means of government-supervised monopolies. Likewise, it would make no sense to build ten railroad lines between New York and Chicago to see which would prevail in a competitive marketplace. Public education and medical services are provided by professional people who do not watch for windfalls so as to raise their fees because there are more children to be taught or because an epidemic has resulted in more sick people to be cured. Firefighters and other first responders serve in a similar fashion. Suppose, if we were injured in an automobile accident or taken ill in the street, we had to comparison shop for the least expensive and most reputable hospital. It is astonishing indeed that a society which depends on the selfless service of so many people should allow entrepreneurs to wear their greed as a kind of halo.

15. The earth, the common property of humankind, is the ultimate source of all wealth.

How could we make any goods without nature’s free gifts? These include the air, water, minerals, airwaves, farmland, forests, and the oceans and their fish. Historically, businesses have taken a lot from the world around them without paying for it, using society’s vast infrastructure of laws, roads and money to sell their products. It is a process through which special interests manage to appropriate common assets to themselves and then sell back to everyone



else what in truth they ought already to own.

16. Capitalism pits us in a war against the earth, a war which threatens humanity's survival.

The malady of the mal-distribution of wealth which inheres in the practice of anarchistic capitalism has been masked by a commitment to "growth," so that the great preponderance of people who are being swindled on a daily basis will focus on the incremental improvement of their own lot gained out of the new wealth which is being created, rather than on a just redistribution of the gains already accumulated through the effort of all and illegitimately concentrated in the hands of a few. But this commitment to growth has pitted human economic activity into a war against the earth itself, the very basis of human survival.

Fully half the world's forests have been decimated. Among the most important fisheries that have already collapsed are Atlantic halibut, Atlantic bluefin tuna, Atlantic swordfish, North Sea herring, Grand Banks cod, Northern California sardines, and Southern California abalone. Hardrock mining has caused vast areas in the United States to be fatally contaminated, with cleanup costs of hundreds of millions of dollars facing American taxpayers. The contamination of the atmosphere threatens us with global warming. All of these problems are not marginal or peripheral or remote in time, but are having major dislocating impacts now which can only escalate in the very near future.

Many civilizations in the past have withered away due to the over-exploitation of the environment available to them. In our own case we can readily see that one of the free market's most dangerous flaws is that it has no inherent method of dealing with the finitude of the earth. No all-wise invisible hand of the marketplace steps forward to tell us when to refrain from over-exploiting the environment.



## Conclusion

We live in a time of profound transition – a time when the world's habitual way of doing things has outlived its usefulness, has exhausted itself, and is foundering on its own internal contradictions. Disagreement and doubt are everywhere. The job that is given to us – we did not choose it – is to lay the foundations for a new civilization. This is a task not to be undertaken with sadness, resignation, anxiety or desperation, for that would taint the result, but should be addressed with joy, confidence and hope. For truth is never without its

witnesses; there are always discriminating and responsive people willing to join with others in the decent management of our common human affairs.

To quote John Woolman: “The Creator of the earth is the owner of it. . . His tender mercies are over all his works; and so far as his love influences our minds, so far we become interested in his workmanship and feel a desire to take hold of every opportunity to lessen the distresses of the afflicted and to increase the happiness of the creation. . . Wealth is attended with power, by which bargains and proceedings contrary to universal righteousness are supported; and here oppression, carried on with worldly policy and order, clothes itself with the name of justice and becomes like a seed of discord in the soil.”

Devising a just economic order for the future will be an exercise in social ethics and spiritual vision. It is a work which will bring joy and fulfillment, but it will involve effort. God, the creator and owner of the earth, both enables us and requires things of us. The economic system of the future cannot be rooted in greed and self-centeredness, but must acknowledge the divinely ordained interdependence of all parts of the earth. Let us, then, strive to ensure that human laws and arrangements become consistent with the fundamental truth of things, so that they express what John Woolman calls “the regulations of universal love.”

*Daniel A. Seeger*  
*March 31, 2019*