

A CONSCIENCE A

VERSUS

SOCIAL CONSCIENCE



NICK ROBERTS



I am a libertarian. I believe that the people of the Western world are being coerced, confused and misled. The very people who benefit so much from the liberal freedoms of enterprise, of religion and secular conscience, are abandoning these liberties to support the tyranny of statist regulations and laws.

Something is sapping their will to defend liberty. I believe that the principal factor in this finlandisation of the spirit is the concept of "Social Conscience".

"Social Conscience" is the tool with which the Marxists and their fellow-travellers are trying to carve a new and ghastly world.

THE REAL THING

I do not possess a social conscience.

I make do with the real thing.

It is called a conscience. Also known as "private conscience", or "personal conscience" or "individual conscience", this phenomenon tells me when I have done right, it tells me when I have done wrong, and who is to blame either way. I blame me. It's a simple sturdy thing, my conscience. It's easy to define, and to identify. It is rigid and universally applicable to all my moral choices.

Here's how it works. If I were to rob my neighbour, I would expect to feel guilty (which I would be). I would expect to be punished for my crime. I would not blame impersonal circumstances, the system, or fate.

And I would not expect my neighbour, my parents, my former teachers, or Sir Clive Sinclair to be carted off to prison in my place. I'm a big boy now, a grown up.

GENEVA SPIRIT

The liberal (old-fashioned, private conscience, libertarian, or rational) concept of morality evolved, to a great extent, from the Protestant Reformation of the 16th and 17th Centuries. Some Christians decided that they could commune best with God if they worshipped in ways which they decided for themselves. They acted according to the dictates of their private consciences, outside the rigid orthodoxy of the Catholic Church. Religious schism ensued. This theory quickly spread to the secular, economic, and political spheres. Soon Caesar and God alike were faced with large numbers of morally self-confident men and women, all rendering unto each what they, personally, thought was due.

Civil political and religious wars were fought to try the issue. New states with new kinds of laws were established.

By the 18th Century Europe and North America were full of people, Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, agnostic and free thinkers, busily making moral judgements, with hardly a word to the local priest or landowner. The belief in personal conscience led to the Age of Reason, an unparalleled period of freedom, of inquiry and discovery, in all fields of human endeavour.

The greatest discovery of them all was free enterprise. This last, I hope to show, is the main victim of the charlatanism known as "Social Conscience".

A SHORT HISTORY OF CONFIDENCE TRICKS

Before the Reformation and the subsequent Age of Reason, the basis upon which most people in the Christian world built their moral judgement was the medieval concept of Original Sin.

Political Notes No. 24

ISSN 0267-7059 ISBN 1 85637 202 2

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

© 1986: Libertarian Alliance; Nick Roberts

Nick Roberts is a journalist on the *Lancaster Guardian*

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame
Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait
Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb



FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

All the world's ills were put down to Man's supposedly flawed nature. This then, was the classical pretext for the theory of collective responsibility. For the men who ran the various states, and their clerical apologists and partners, Original Sin, was a good little earner. How could it matter who warred on whom, or who extorted taxes or labour or "confessions" from whom, when all men were inherently miserable sinners? The lords and the cardinals, the squires and the village priest took upon themselves the responsibility for all actions, criminal or otherwise. Each individual, mindful of the collective conscience, could pass any guilt he might feel as a consequence of his actions onto the man or woman on the next step of the hierarchical ladder. A man paid his taxes, his tithes and his compulsory feudal labour dues, then confessed his sins. Thus absolved, he marched off to war, propertyless and almost unthinkingly, free only to murder, rape and die for his seigneur and Mother Church.

NEW BLAMES FOR OLD

The latter part of the 19th Century gave the world democracy, nationalism, socialism, Marxism, and mystical conservatism. Along with these secular faiths, particularly Marxism and socialism, came a great resurgence of belief in various forms of collective responsibility. Today, steeped in a century of statist propaganda, the West cringes under unceasing cries to display "Social Conscience".

The Marxists keep its meaning vague, for fear it will be exposed as the fraud it is.

Who is this chorus of vague guilt aimed at, and how does it function in practice?

CHEESECLOTH AND ASHES

The first group are those whom Lenin dubbed "useful idiots". They are the wealthy, educated, so-called "liberal" middle classes.

They believe themselves to have "Social Consciences". It is a masochistic creed. They exist, drenched in a monsoon of self-loathing and formless guilt. The "social commentators", the pundits, the wise and the good, the *Guardian* and Channel 4: all these generate a climate of delicious blame-worthiness. The Volvoed and jacuzzied middle classes, themselves the progeny of capitalism, fear the ultimate source of their privileged existence. With pavlovian unreason, they cry "mea culpa" in university-educated English, amid the health foods and ethnic cheesecloth shawls of expensive, radical-chic boutiques.

They should defend liberty: it created them. Alas, Social Conscience has got them first.

When the self-hatred gets too strong, they can always assuage their undeserved guilt by off-loading it onto something else. The target the Marxists have been aiming at all along.

BRASS = MUCK

Yes, capitalism. Free enterprise. The people who create and approve of private property. These are the ultimate victims of the cult of "Social Conscience".

Here's how the argument goes:

"Wars, poverty, and inequality exist on Earth. What else exists on Earth? Society, of course. Therefore, who is to blame for 'injustice'? Why, Society. What sort of society is

on top? Capitalist society. Therefore, capitalist society is the cause of our formless guilt. Therefore ... ?"

I won't try to show how free enterprise creates wealth and abolishes poverty in this essay. I just want to show you whose necks will be on the block once the "Social Conscience" brigade unthinkingly let the Marxists into power. It's you. It's me. And, of course, it's the useful fools.

OFF WITH THE HEAD, INSTEAD

"Social Conscience" is the antithesis of private conscience. It negates virtue, inverts morality, disguises and denies personal responsibility. Worst of all, it transfers guilt from the criminals to their victims.

Are these sketches so untypical of the language of "Social Conscience"?

— "Surely your social conscience can't permit you to actually *blame* those two poor Welsh lads? So they crushed a scab taxi-driver to death. Society is really at fault — they were only protecting pits, jobs and communities ..."

— "How anyone with a shred of social conscience can criticise a teenage boy for raping and robbing an old lady of her meagre pension, I don't know. Society tolerates the mass unemployment which drove him to it ..."

— "I blame society, I really do. I mean, how do you expect these lads to behave, anyway? They are all so under-privileged. Besides, it cost them a fortune getting to Brussels in the first place, what with greedy tour operators charging the earth, and all. The Italian fans were really provoking them, in all their fancy, expensive clothes. Society's to blame, making them so poor. Where's your social conscience? ..."

— "For God's sake, Roger, stop whining and get back in the car before someone calls the police! Society shouldn't force children to play in a dangerous place like the road in the first place. I ask you, whatever are the parents thinking of? They must have no social conscience at all. You can have another drink, *when we get home* ..."

I want to condemn and refute the perverted creed of "Social Conscience".

It is travesty of the civilised and rational discrimination between right and wrong. "Social Conscience" is the ultimate cop-out, providing a universal scapegoat: "Society did it. It's society's fault. Don't blame me!"

Society does not murder, rob and enslave people. Individuals do. To remain civilised and free, people need a precise, discriminating yardstick, against which to measure right and wrong, and to distribute praise and blame. Private conscience provides it. Private conscience is the executioner's bullet, which strikes and punishes the culpable, leaving the innocent to thrive.

"Social Conscience", on the other hand, is like the terrorist's bomb, injuring the saint and the sinner alike. It creates moral uncertainty and fear. It engenders an atmosphere of ethical ambiguity and confusion, in which only tyrants and their grisly practices flourish.

A conscience is a good thing, and every libertarian should have one.

Beware cheap imitations.

They can be terribly expensive.