

**Chocolate on Trial: Slavery, Politics and the Ethics of Business** is centred around the controversy surrounding the use by the British Quaker chocolate company, Cadbury Bros., of cocoa produced by slave labour on the islands of Sao Tome, a Portuguese colony, in the early years of the twentieth century. Cadbury were initially unaware of the situation, until alerted around 1904 by the vigorous agitation of anti-slavery campaigners, notably Henry W. Nevinson. They subsequently made their own investigations into labour conditions on Sao Tome. However, when these investigations confirmed that these were indeed far from free, Cadbury continued to use the cocoa beans produced on the islands whilst they lobbied the Portuguese colonial authorities and planters to make improvements, simultaneously urging successive British Conservative and Liberal governments to push them into doing so. In this way, they repudiated the pressures of the more radical humanitarian campaigners that they boycott Sao Tome cocoa in favour of supplies from elsewhere right up until 1909. Conversely, they argued the correctness of their own course in working for improvements and the implementation of Portuguese labour codes that, in theory, should have provided for the freedom of labour, and most importantly, for the paid repatriation of labourers to their country of origin at the end of their contracts. Yet in temporizing, even if from motives which they themselves deemed to be well-intentioned, Cadbury Bros. were to run into a storm which had as much to do with contemporary political controversies in Britain as it had to do with what was or was not happening in Sao Tome.

George Cadbury, paterfamilias of the family firm, was not only a staunch Liberal but owner of the *Daily News*, an influential Liberal paper which had strongly criticized the then Conservative government for allowing the import of Chinese “coolies” to alleviate labour shortages in South Africa after the Boer War. What a delight it was, therefore, for a Tory newspaper, the *Standard*, to level the charge of rank hypocrisy against Cadbury for using cocoa produced by slave labour in an editorial of 1908 (reproduced in full in Satre’s appendix). *The Standard* contrasted the company’s devotion to philanthropy and the welfare of its workforce at home to the miseries of the ‘contract labourers’ employed in Sao Tome: “It is not called slavery; ‘contract labour’ they name it now; but in most of its essentials it is that monstrous trade in human flesh and blood against which the Quaker and Radical ancestors of Mr. Cadbury thundered in the better days of England” (p.228). Cadbury sued, and a high profile trial followed, whose own drama melded with that of the simultaneous titanic struggle going on in parliament, where the Tory Lords were choosing to defeat a reforming Liberal budget (thereby setting the scene for the two elections of 1910, and the eventual capping of the right of the peers to overturn legislation from the Commons). Cadbury were to emerge formally triumphant, but a jury which they believed was Tory-inclined had the last laugh by awarding them insulting damages of just one farthing. Thereafter, to be fair, Cadbury – who were by now drawing the major portion of their cocoa supplies from the Gold Coast – continued pushing government to push the Portuguese, but it was not until the 1920s that slavery in Sao Tome wound down, as much because of the new availability of cocoa supplies from elsewhere as from political pressures from abroad.

I was presumably tracked down to write this review because, more years ago than I

## The Bitter Sweetness of Chocolate\*

Roger Southall

### Chocolate on Trial: Slavery, Politics, & the Ethics of Business

by Lowell J. Satre

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care to recall, I wrote my doctoral thesis on *Cadbury on the Gold Coast: The Dilemma of the ‘Model Firm’ in a Colonial Economy* (University of Birmingham, 1975). This had its own dramas: I started off as a candidate in politics, but was eventually abandoned by my supervisor in horror, and ended up with a doctorate in social and economic history! The major source material for this was the same set of company records used by Satre which had been deposited by Cadbury in the Birmingham University library in 1971, and I must say that in reading the present book, memories of leafing through that mound of (as yet uncatologued!) dusty correspondence, minutes and ledgers came flooding back! As did many of the questions which I had to pose about Cadbury’s motivations in going to the Gold Coast to establish cocoa-producing and cocoa-buying operations in 1907, answers to which were provided in part by a very brief review of the Sao Tome affair which prefaced my examination of their record in colonial Ghana.

Of course, one key issue was precisely that which was posed by the *Standard* case: Were Cadbury’s commercial actions guided and constrained by the Cadbury family’s Quaker morality? Yet my own view was that for my particular story, this was a bit of a red herring. Yes, Cadbury did make some considerable efforts to pursue practices of “fair trading” with peasant producers. Nonetheless, it was all too easy to prove that Cadbury the family, and Cadbury the firm, fell short of the human perfection which both their political critics, and indeed subsequent historians, have chosen to demand of them. Hence my focus was, I am afraid, on the much more amoral one of what impact Cadbury had on cocoa production and buying in the Gold Coast. In the end my overall conclusion was that cocoa farmers played a much greater role in shaping the industry and the politics of the colony than the firm had ever envisaged! Yet the question of Quaker morality is necessarily much more central for Satre.

Satre’s book is manifestly a product of years of careful and dedicated scholarship. Paradoxically, too, while maintaining the relativism and reserve of the historian (and hence avoiding trite judgement of the social and political attitudes which prevailed in Britain a century ago), it is also commendably passionate. Passionate about detailing the realities of slavery under the Portuguese; and passionate about recording the dedication of those liberal humanitarians, individuals like E.D. Morel and Henry Nevinson, who campaigned against it. Meticulous dissection of contemporary records, pamphlets, newspapers and so on provides us with chapter and verse of the whole saga surrounding Cadbury in careful detail which I am not going to attempt to summarize. I can but point readers to the book as, apart from anything else, a well constructed tale which will also serve as a major source-book for later considerations of the morality and motivations of early colonialism. Nonetheless, there are four issues which the book brings out for me, all of which have a very contemporary relevance.

The first is, yes, that of the moral responsibility of Cadbury, and by implication, other capitalists. The fascination of Cadbury is *precisely* because, whether we think that they lived up to their principles or not, those principles *were* influential in guiding and shaping their business practices. Satre details at length how Cadbury were taken aback by the crusading zeal and “radicalism” of Henry Nevinson, whose book *A Modern Slavery*, largely a compilation of articles he had written for *Harpers’s Monthly Magazine* following his investigative trip to Angola and Sao Tome (December 1904 until July 1905) was published in 1906.

The implications of Nevinson’s evidence and of his subsequent campaigning both pointed in the direction of Cadbury boycotting Sao Tome cocoa, yet this was a conclusion that the firm was uncomfortable to draw. They argued that they wanted more time to establish the facts (which they had sought to do by dispatching their own man, Joseph Burt, and later, a couple of times, William Cadbury to Africa), and to see if by their commercial weight as significant buyers they could bring pressure to bear upon the British and Portuguese governments and the planters themselves to bring about an improvement of conditions. Was this, as the *Standard* was to allege, merely mealy-mouthed hypocrisy, a strategy to protect their immediate interests whilst searching elsewhere for more legitimate supplies of cocoa? A strategy for buying time? Or was it not only a moral but a realistic argument, which recognized that an awful situation was unlikely to be changed overnight, and that concerted pressure could lead to immediate amelioration of the condition of the cocoa labourers and their freedom in the longer term? Satre, I think, does enough to indicate that Cadbury were far from being hypocrites, that they did make real efforts on the labourers’ behalf, and that Quaker-like, they wanted to believe in the humanity of the planters as much as that of the slaves; yet, simultaneously they ducked difficult decisions for a few critical years which undid much of their good work.

I think it follows from this, and from the subsequent behaviour of Cadbury in the Gold Coast, that they were indeed morally better – far better – than most capitalists. The Cadbury family, as witness their bountiful good works and their well intentioned construction of Bournville, a model suburb for their workers in Birmingham, were solid, good and worthy citizens and employers. Yet it was their location as capitalists engaging with empire that forced them into an almost impossible situation of seeking to reconcile their commercial objectives with their ethical concerns. Ultimately, they chose to follow the right path by boycotting Sao Tome cocoa in 1909; yet, it was only after much tergiversation and anguish.

The dilemma they faced then was to be even more forcefully posed some several decades later, when the anti-apartheid movement was to demand of Western capital to withdraw from South Africa. But compare Cadbury’s significant moral

anguish in the early 1900s with the crafty and often deliberately misleading moral wriggings of firms with investments in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. There were, indeed, one or two which chose to withdraw on moral grounds, but they were the exception. In contrast, the Barclays Banks of this world only pulled out when political campaigning began to prove too much for them and it began to damage their interests elsewhere.

Consider, again, the extremely dubious corporate morality of those companies of various nationalities which are rushing to invest in oil in, yes, today’s Sao Tome, and in other countries of western and central Africa! If only, we might say, they were run by George and William Cadbury rather than the strategic considerations of a George Bush and the material greed of anonymous corporate moguls! Perhaps I am being too harsh, but it is a pity that notwithstanding the title of his book, Satre does not provide us with any discussion of politics and the ethics of business that goes much beyond his immediate case.

The second issue which the book highlights is the undisputably important and in many ways heroic role played by the anti-slavery campaigners and, by implication, today’s activists on behalf of a just cause. Satre’s hero is William Nevinson, and it is good to see him get the retrospective praise that he deserves. Indeed, the author has effectively done for him what Adam Hochschild did for E.D. Morel in *King Leopold’s Ghost*. Nevinson, in brief, was a politically committed journalist – committed that is, to exposing the brutalities of slavery and replacing it with a more just system. Critical, too, one feels, was his belief in human equality. Unusually for his time, “he regarded the natives as hardworking and intelligent people who cared greatly for their families. He never referred to them as being inferior to Europeans. He did not wish to ‘civilise’ the natives but to free them to practice their own unique and important way of life” (p.12). In contrast, however well-intentioned, the Cadbury family was paternalist and steeped in a tradition of Quaker middle class benevolence which had strayed considerably from the radical egalitarianism of their moral ancestors, the seventeenth century Levellers.

Apparently from a lower middle class background and born of evangelical parents, Nevinson himself eschewed religious belief and opted rather for the social gospel, serving first at Toynbee Hall (the settlement for the working class in East London) and belonging to the H.M. Hyndman’s Social Democratic Federation (one of the major predecessors of the Labour Party) in the 1880s and 1890s. Teaching history and literature at a succession of schools, he wrote a number of books about the English working class before accepting invitations from the *Daily Chronicle*, a liberal newspaper, to cover the Greek revolution on the island of Crete, followed by the Spanish-American War and, in 1899 and 1900, the South African War. Thereafter, after leaving the *Chronicle* and joining a group examining conditions in Macedonia, Nevinson – by now a “recognised journalist and writer who respected the working poor and identified with the oppressed in their struggles against tyrants” (p.29) – was asked by Harpers to report upon conditions in Portuguese West Africa. He approached William Cadbury to see if he could be of any assistance to him in his own enquiries, but the latter felt that any enquiries Nevinson made would be hampered by his lack of Portuguese, and opted rather to employ Joseph Burt, a fellow Quaker, as his commissioner.

Cadbury insisted that a representative sent to Sao Tome by his company, rather

than by the humanitarian societies (the Anti-Slavery Society and the Aborigines' Protection Society), would be more acceptable to the planters. Burt himself was a decent man enough; yet, he clearly did not have the strength of character of Nevinson and was to find himself too easily charmed by the planters, too easily committed to presenting a "balanced" case. It was Nevinson's passion for justice, combined with the concerted activism of the likes of Thomas Fowell Buxton and Henry Richard Fox Bourne ("a stubborn, pugnacious and single-minded man who devoted himself to helping the oppressed") of the APS, who "confounded the British government" (p.12) and in the end provided the wealth of information which forced Cadbury to defend themselves in a court of law. These are names which are as deserving of mention in Africa's roll call of honour as any of the later activists for the struggle for freedom of Africa with which we are more familiar today.

The third point which Satre (almost brutally) drives home is the pusillanimity of governments when moral imperatives impinge upon their political and material interests. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, all European powers were seeking regular and inexpensive labour for their colonies. The formal ending of slavery and the slave trade (in *part* the triumph of yet earlier humanitarians) meant that they had to look to other schemes, notably indentured labour and the employment of appropriate tax regimes, to force Africans into colonial employment. The difference between such schemes and slavery may not have been wholly evident to the labourers so employed, for the majority of whom the increments in freedom which were registered by various international conventions and different labour codes were often effectively irrelevant. Yet the differences were, in fact, fundamental in the sense that they drew a principled distinction between "slave

labour" (which guaranteed no rights or privileges at all) and supposedly "free labour", which (at any rate in legal terms) did (such as that of repatriation to their home country at the end of their contracts). Naturally, this fundamental difference in the legal status of labour was trumpeted by colonial governments and their apologists and allies, even as they used it as a fig leaf to cover the continuing abuse and brutal oppression of labour. Yet, simultaneously, it provided an opening for humanitarian campaigners, who were not shy of pointing out not only the limited empirical differences between, say, indentured labour and slavery, but also the miserable failure of governments to compel the implementation of the most limited labour rights.

And so it was with the situation in Sao Tome. The Portuguese proclaimed free labour but kept Africans in shackles. Humanitarians exposed abuses and called for action, but successive British governments, although fully cognizant of the reality of the situation, were never prepared to call a spade a spade lest it disrupt their alliance with Lisbon (even while they schemed with Germany to divide the Portuguese colonies between themselves). The tragedy, perhaps, is that the most culpable of British governments were the Liberal governments from 1906 onward. Domestically, these were some of the most radical that Britain had ever seen, laying the foundations of the welfare state and asserting the supremacy of the Commons over the Lords.

Yet, in the scheme of things, the continuation of slavery in Portuguese Africa mattered little. This was certainly the case with the long term Liberal Foreign Secretary, Edward Grey, who cared far more about maintaining the balance of power in Europe, although, as Satre notes, he has been strongly criticized by historians for failing to spell out to other powers, particularly Germany, how Britain would

respond in the event of a conflict (p.214). While his role in the conflagration of Europe that followed in 1914 will continue, inevitably, to be the major focus of scholarly interest in his years of office, this book will further batter his reputation. Even if Grey was merely the instrument of greater forces (Hobsbawm, for instance, argues that by the early 1900s war was in effect unstoppable<sup>1</sup>), his role in the Sao Tome affair cautions us to take what governments say with a very large dose of salt. To return to the present, is it mere coincidence that the G8 is promising debt relief to the poorest countries, and Tony Blair's Commission for Africa is calling for massive increases in aid, at a historical juncture when the great powers are embarking upon a new scramble for the scarce oil and other mineral and energy resources that the continent possesses? We should not mechanically repudiate the professed good intentions of our present politicians, just as we should not discount those of the Cadbury family years ago. Yet again, as with the most noble professions of Edward Grey, we would be very foolish if we take them at face value.

The final marker laid down by Satre concerns the continuation of slavery. To be sure, Satre gives the book an appropriate conclusion in which he narrates how in 2000 he abandoned the archives for a first trip to Sao Tome, where he explored the harbours, railways, buildings and plantations he had been writing about. Most, he says, are still in existence, and some are even still functioning. But slavery has long been abolished, and for this we must pay due homage to the efforts of the humanitarians. Nonetheless, for all that, freedom has brought little but a poverty which is unrelieved by the idyllic beaches for tourists which are as yet largely "undeveloped". In short, the cocoa industry, for all the pain that it has inflicted on Sao Tome, has left little that is worthwhile behind it, and hopes for the development of the islands now rest fairly and squarely (and probably

misguidedly, given experiences elsewhere) on a potential oil bonanza.

Sadly, it is necessary for the work of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Societies to live on in the continued commitments of Anti-Slavery International, which still fights against slavery just as its forerunners did in the early twentieth century. This body reported in 2002 that an estimated 284,000 children work in West Africa's cocoa industry, with between 2,500 and 15,000 of them working in conditions of slavery (p. 222). Elsewhere, of course, in a continent which is now ironically desperately short of employment, reports emanate continuously of children being recruited as child soldiers or sold into bondage as sex slaves. Nevinson, notes Satre, would expect organizations like the United Nation's Children's Fund and Anti-Slavery to keep this issue before the public, lest interest dissipates in a (even more) "modern slavery".

Satre's book is concerned with too particular a matter to attract a wide readership. And even those specialists of African history who pick it up will be distressed by the lack of an index which is a huge drawback in a book which is so densely detailed. And why on earth do publishers continue to provide pages of endnotes wherein the chapters are numbered but not titled, and the wretched reader is forced to scurry back and forth between notes and text to find out what chapter he or she is reading? Nonetheless, this text is a major contribution to the study of slavery and serves to remind us of the bitter roots of chocolate in sin.

## Notes

\* An earlier version of this review was first published online in the EH-Net Review.

<sup>1</sup> E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire 1875-1914* (London: Phoenix Press, 1987), pp. 302-327.



## Let the People Speak: Tanzania Down the Road to Neo-Liberalism

Issa G. Shivji

"This is an extraordinary record of one country's descent into 'neo-liberalism', which roughly translated means socialism for the rich and capitalism for the poor. Issa Shivji's shrewd eye concentrates on Tanzania, but his stories could be from almost anywhere in Africa, if not the world".

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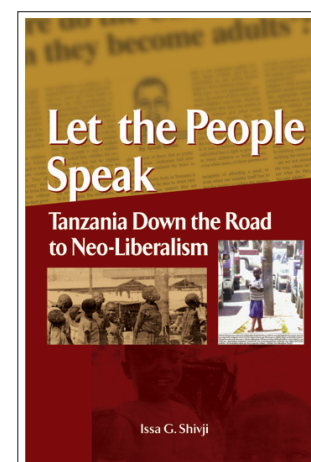
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