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Source: *The New England Quarterly*, Sep., 1943, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Sep., 1943), pp. 444-467

Published by: The New England Quarterly, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/361029>

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## BENJAMIN R. TUCKER: INDIVIDUALIST AND ANARCHIST

CHARLES A. MADISON

**B**ENJAMIN RICKETSON TUCKER, chief American exponent of individualist anarchism, or the doctrine of the stateless society with complete and equal liberty for all, had his roots deep in Yankee idealism. Of Colonial and Quaker ancestry, born in Dartmouth, Massachusetts, in 1854, when the agitation for abolishing Negro slavery was reaching its crest and the noblest minds of the time were extolling the blessings of individual liberty, he grew up in an atmosphere of social reform. He was a very bright child and was early stimulated by the radical preaching of the Unitarian minister whose church he attended. He became "a daily devourer of the *New York Tribune* from the age of twelve,"<sup>1</sup> when Horace Greeley was at his best as the journalistic spokesman for American liberalism. During his early teens he studied the writings of Darwin, Spencer, Buckle, Mill, Huxley, and Tyndall, each of whom helped to strengthen his tendency to nonconformity. He also went regularly to the winter lectures at the New Bedford Lyceum, and heard such advanced speakers as Wendell Phillips, Garrison, and Emerson. By the time he graduated from the Friends School in 1870 he was, much more than his fellows, eager to reform the world to his idealist pattern. His parents persuaded him to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he remained for three years—though more absorbed in social problems than in the study of engineering. A chance meeting with the aged Josiah Warren, the pioneer anarchist, so accelerated his interest in individual liberty that he decided to make it his prime concern. Many years later he had this to say of his adolescent zeal:

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<sup>1</sup> Emanie Sachs, *The Terrible Siren* (New York, 1928). Tucker contributed an autobiographical chapter to the book.

I naturally took a decided stand on all religious, scientific, political and social questions, and cherished a choice collection of chaotic and contradictory convictions, which did not begin to clear until I reached the age of eighteen, when a lucky combination of influences transformed me into the consistent anarchist that I have remained until this day. In the meantime I had been an atheist, a materialist, an evolutionist, a prohibitionist, a free trader, a champion of the legal eight-hour-day, a woman suffragist, an enemy of marriage, and a believer in sexual freedom.<sup>2</sup>

For all his intellectual aggressiveness, Tucker was at eighteen a very shy youth. He was, moreover, too busy deepening his philosophic roots and too preoccupied with the establishment of the newly organized New England Labor Reform League to suffer from the lack of feminine friendship. It was as a representative of the League that he met the still alluring Victoria Woodhull, notorious feminist and free lover. She was having difficulty in obtaining permission to lecture in Massachusetts towns on the Principles of Social Freedom. When Tucker heard of this denial of free speech, he at once joined her manager in the fight for her constitutional rights. After considerable exertion he succeeded in browbeating the mayor of one city into acceding to his request. A few days later Victoria delivered her speech. When her young champion was introduced to her, she was at once attracted to him. Some months afterwards she again visited Boston. She invited him to call on her, and promptly proceeded to seduce him. Although she was then twice his age, he found her charming. Shortly thereafter he went to New York to meet with radical groups, and while there he resumed his intimacy with Victoria as a matter of course. Nor did he think it odd that she and her family should accompany him abroad when his father had agreed to send him away for a year's study. After several weeks, however, Victoria returned

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<sup>2</sup> Sachs, *The Terrible Siren*. See also Lilian Symes and Clement Travers, *Rebel America* (New York, 1934), 155-156.

to New York and the two went their separate ways thereafter.

Early in 1875 young Tucker was back in Boston, an enthusiastic anarchist and eager to broadcast his beliefs to his fellow Americans. While in Paris he had continued his reading of Proudhon's writings and found their advocacy of mutualism a complement to Warren's individualism—the two becoming in his mind the twin-pillared foundation of equal liberty. For more than a year he assisted Ezra Heywood in editing *The Word*, a progressive periodical. He also translated Proudhon's *What Is Property?* and managed to publish the book with his own meager funds. All this time he planned to edit a journal of his own. In May, 1877, he succeeded in issuing the first number of the *Radical Review*, a quarterly aiming to serve, according to the Prospectus, as an "adequate literary vehicle for the carriage and diffusion of the most radical thought of our time." This standard he maintained in the four issues which he published. The contributors were among the leading contemporary libertarians, such as Lysander Spooner and Stephen Pearl Andrews; and their essays on literary, religious, and economic topics were the product of solid effort. Tucker's own contribution was his translation of Proudhon's *System of Economic Contradictions*.

His own money having run out and being unable to obtain more for radical ventures from his parents, Tucker went to work for the Boston *Daily Globe*. For eleven years he was a regular and highly regarded member of the editorial staff, although he refused to write on any topic which might compromise his anarchistic principles. Since he had during this period persevered in the exposition of his radical philosophy until he became the generally acknowledged local leader of the individualist anarchists, and since throughout the eighteenthies the agitation against anarchism was keyed to a hysterical intensity, the mutual respect between Tucker and his employers reflects favorably on both his ability and their liberalism.

As soon as he had established himself on the *Globe* and

had accumulated a little money, Tucker began to plan for the publication of a periodical that would become a national repository for anarchist opinion. In August, 1881, the first issue of *Liberty* appeared. The title and masthead were made up of Proudhon's challenging assertion: "Liberty not the daughter but the mother of order." The top of the first column was headed by the following lines from John Hay:

For always in thine eyes, O Liberty!  
Shines that high light whereby the world is saved;  
And though thou slay us, we will trust in thee.

Tucker's own pungent paragraphs, extending across the first page, followed under the title of "On Picket Duty." These comments, as well as his longer editorials and polemical articles, usually dealt with current events which had roused his ire or with ideas and problems which seemed to him in need of further elucidation or rectification. The remainder of the eight large pages were devoted to contributed essays on a variety of topics, letters from correspondents and replies by the editors, excerpts or complete pieces from other publications, and occasional book reviews. As the magazine became better known, it received voluntary contributions from men of international reputation.

The salutatory announcement in the first number ended with the following declaration: "Monopoly and privilege must be destroyed, opportunity afforded, and competition encouraged. This is *Liberty's* work, and 'Down with Authority' her war-cry." These principles Tucker expounded with regularity and with forthright earnestness throughout the long life of the periodical. The frequent polemics which he carried on with all comers became one of its exciting features. He had no patience with lukewarm partisans, and gave no quarter to sophists and hypocrites. His usual procedure was to print the communication or article of his adversary and then proceed to hack it to shreds. His logic was incisive and devastat-

ing, and his power of analysis cut straight to the heart of the fallacies of his opponent. The effectiveness of his attack was accentuated by his clear, concise, and often caustic style which enlivened the pages of every issue. George Bernard Shaw, in *The Impossibilities of Anarchism*, had to admit that "an examination of any number of this Journal will show that as a candid, clear-headed and courageous demonstration of Individualist Anarchism by purely intellectual methods, Mr. Tucker may safely be accepted as one of the most capable spokesmen of his party."<sup>3</sup> Voltairine de Cleyre, who differed with Tucker in principle, praised him for "sending his fine hard shafts among foes and friends with icy impartiality, hitting swift and cutting keen, and ever ready to nail a traitor."<sup>4</sup> Other eminent libertarians the world over were attracted to *Liberty*, and in time it exerted an influence far beyond the extent of its circulation, which had never exceeded six hundred subscribers. As Eunice M. Schuster stated in her objective study, *Native American Anarchism*, "Benjamin Tucker won the attention and sympathetic interest of the American people more than any other anarchist in the United States."<sup>5</sup>

Although Tucker had valuable and devoted editorial assistance most of the time, *Liberty* was as much his personal publication as the *Liberator* was Garrison's. It appeared as regularly and as frequently as he was able to bring it out. When he lacked the means or went abroad or was too much preoccupied with his other publishing ventures, the magazine was temporarily suspended. When he moved from Boston to New York in 1892 to work for the *Engineering Magazine*, the office of *Liberty* was transferred as a matter of course. Two years later he adopted what he termed the "ragged-edge" style of typography on the ground that no justification of lines made possible better spacing between letters as well as a considerable saving in the cost of composition. In 1906, owing to

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<sup>3</sup> Fabian Tract, Number 45 (1891), 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Selected Works*, "Anarchism," 115-116.

<sup>5</sup> *Native American Anarchism* (Northampton, Massachusetts, 1932), 152.

difficulties with the postmaster but primarily as a consequence of his enlarged publishing plans, he began to issue *Liberty* bimonthly and changed its format to that of a small pamphlet. Fiction and poetry, some of it by writers of international eminence and all of it libertarian in emphasis, occupied many of its sixty-four pages. The end of the periodical came abruptly early in 1908, when a disastrous fire destroyed its office and stockroom and hastened Tucker's decision to make his home in France. His expectation to continue the publication of *Liberty* from abroad remained a vain hope.

A pacifist and intellectual, Tucker believed in the efficacy of the written word. While making *Liberty* the hub of his didactic activity, he was ever busy planning and publishing books and pamphlets which furthered the cause of individual liberty. Since most of this literature was of European origin, he went to great trouble to familiarize himself with the writings of prominent radicals and journeyed several times to the Continent in his eagerness to make advantageous arrangements with authors and publishers. An additional responsibility was the frequent necessity of translating the works he decided to issue; his numerous adaptations from the French were highly praised. Thus, in addition to the two books of Proudhon already mentioned, he translated and published Felix Pyat's *The Rag Picker of Paris*, Claude Tellier's *My Uncle Benjamin*, Zola's *Money and Modern Marriage*, Octave Mirbeau's *A Chambermaid's Diary*, and Alexandre Arsene's *The Thirty-Six Trades of the State*. He also translated and published French versions of Bakunin's *God and the State*, Chernishevsky's *What's to be Done?* and Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata*. In addition, he issued many books and pamphlets by American and English libertarians, such as Stephen Pearl Andrews' *The Science of Society*, William B. Greene's *Mutual Banking*, Lysander Spooner's *Free Political Institutions*, Shaw's *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* and *The Sanity of Art*, and Oscar Wilde's *Ballad of Reading Gaol*. One of his last ventures was to bring out an English translation of Paul

Eltzbacher's *Anarchism*.<sup>6</sup> All these volumes were priced to fit the purse of the literate worker; and since financial loss was practically inevitable in each case, the size of the editions depended upon the means Tucker possessed at the time of issue.

Tucker managed this publication program with a minimum of money. His own earnings were never large, and his parents, who disapproved of his anarchistic views, refused to finance any of his projects; after his father's death his mother occasionally presented him with the expenses of a trip to Europe but continued—with one exception—to dissociate herself from his radical activities. Nor were monetary contributions from friends and sympathizers either frequent or considerable; only around 1900 did Henry Bool give him substantial assistance. As a consequence he had to do most of the editing, and sometimes even the typesetting, after a full day's work at his regular employment. When his savings were spent and credit was refused him, he had to wait until he could accumulate additional money or obtain it from friends. The result was that a number of his projects were either abortive or short-lived. For a long time he planned to edit a periodical which would make available in English the best of European writings. When he did succeed in launching the *Transatlantic*, a first-rate literary monthly, in 1889, he could not keep it going for more than a year. Shortly thereafter he began to issue *Five Stories a Week*, but this magazine had an even briefer existence. Undismayed by this lack of popular response, he continued with individual book projects until, with the help of a few devoted sympathizers, he succeeded early in 1900 in organizing the Tucker Publishing Company, which was to issue pamphlets weekly and books at frequent intervals. Nine months later, however, the company was liquidated at a small fraction of its original capital.

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<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Miss Agnes Inglis, curator of The Labadie Collection in the University of Michigan Library, for biographical and bibliographical information.



It was more than a year afterwards before Tucker had money enough to resume the publication of *Liberty*.

The settlement of his mother's estate provided him with a sum of money large enough to give him relative independence. After investing the larger portion in annuity shares, he put aside about ten thousand dollars for his publication projects. With more ample means he was able to develop a plan which had long been maturing in his mind: a non-profit mail-order bookshop containing "the most complete line of advanced literature, in the principal languages, to be found anywhere in the World."<sup>7</sup> For this purpose he made an extended trip to Europe in order to make the necessary arrangements with friendly publishers. On his return he opened the Unique Book Shop. An inclusive descriptive catalog of books in English was soon made available, and annotated lists of foreign-language publications were in preparation. For the first time in his long and laborious career Tucker felt himself on solid footing.

In January, 1908, occurred the fire which destroyed practically his entire free capital. Since, in consequence of his place of business being in a fireproof building, he had "deliberately refused to insure, because of the absurdly high rates now prevailing (the rate for the stock in my book shop exceeds four per cent a year), the loss was total, amounting to at least ten thousand dollars."<sup>8</sup> A few friends tried to collect money in the hope of enabling him to continue with his publications and bookstore, but the financial depression of that year made contributions few and inadequate. Tucker had by then made up his mind. As soon as their child was born he and his young companion, Pearl Johnson, would settle in France, where he had long wished to live and where his annuity would give him twice as much as in New York. "It is my intention," he wrote in the last issue of *Liberty*, "to

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<sup>7</sup> *Liberty*, February, 1906, 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Liberty*, April, 1908, 1.

close up my business next summer, and, before January 1, 1909, go to Europe, there to publish *Liberty* (still mainly for America, of course) and such books and pamphlets as my remaining means enable me to print. In Europe the cost of living and of publishing is hardly more than half as much as here.”<sup>9</sup>

Benjamin R. Tucker was the advocate rather than the innovator. He arrived at his anarchistic beliefs not, like Josiah Warren, through a pioneering effort of the imagination but through a study of those advanced doctrines which appealed most to his lofty idealism. As already indicated, the glorification of individual liberty had reached its peak during his formative years. The Civil War and the abolition of slavery were being consummated with passionate determination. Every lyceum resounded with praise for Emerson's tenets of democracy and self-reliance. The youthful Tucker was enormously impressed by the Golden Day which men of good will were then envisioning. Like so many other adolescents, he began to dream of paradise on earth. He read Mill on Liberty and was confirmed in his belief that freedom was the elixir of life. Spencer's disquisition on the state convinced him that organized government was the enemy of the good society; the bold assertion that the state was founded by aggression and maintained by aggression squared with his increasing antagonism to compulsion in any form. When the aged Warren befriended him and taught him his principles of "the sovereignty of the individual" and "cost the limit of price," the eighteen-year-old youth became his ardent disciple. Two years later, while in France, he re-read Proudhon and compounded the principle of mutualism with his other economic beliefs. Finally, in full maturity, his moral views were sharply modified by Max Stirner's *The Ego and His Own*, which he published in this country and which in the first flush of his

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<sup>9</sup> *Liberty*, April, 1908, 3.

enthusiasm he regarded as “the greatest work of political philosophy and ethics ever written.”<sup>10</sup>

He was convinced that individualist anarchism was inherent in the political thinking of the founding fathers. They believed that that government was best which governed least; he followed Thoreau in the logical preference for a government which did not govern at all. “The anarchists,” he asserted, “are simply unterrified Jeffersonian Democrats.”<sup>11</sup> Hating the very thought of compulsion, he defined anarchism as “the belief in the greatest amount of liberty compatible with equality of liberty.”<sup>12</sup> Such propitious anarchy, he pointed out, already prevailed in the arts, in religion, and in social intercourse; why then should it not function in other spheres of human activity?

To Tucker, individual liberty, with its nineteenth-century emphasis on economic laissez-faire and personal self-reliance, was “both the end and means” of human happiness. So certain was he of the evil effects of force and of the efficacy of liberty as “a sure cure for all vices,” that he readily argued for “the right of the drunkard, the gambler, the rake, and the harlot to live their lives until they shall freely abandon them.”<sup>13</sup> Whatever seemed to him inimical to equal liberty for all, he fought without quarter. Since the state was the most formidable practitioner of aggression and constraint, he advocated its ultimate complete abolition. Anarchism, he emphasized in italics, is “*the doctrine that all the affairs of men should be managed by individuals or voluntary associations, and that the State should be abolished.*”<sup>14</sup>

He argued eloquently that human beings are capable of living together amicably and advantageously and that they have no need whatsoever to subject themselves to the rule

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<sup>10</sup> *Liberty*, December, 1906, 4.

<sup>11</sup> *State Socialism and Anarchy* (New York, 1899), 14; first published in *Liberty*, March, 1888.

<sup>12</sup> *Instead of a Book* (New York, 1893), 365.

<sup>13</sup> *State Socialism and Anarchism*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> *State Socialism and Anarchism*, 15.

of an aggressive government. In answer to those who regarded the state as synonymous with society and feared that the dissolution of the one would destroy the other, he explained that the opposite was the case. "Society is a concrete organism. . . . Its life is inseparable from the lives of individuals . . . it is impossible to destroy one without the other. But though society cannot be destroyed, it can be greatly hampered and impeded in its operations, much to the disadvantage of the individuals composing it, and it meets its chief impediment in the State."<sup>15</sup> Once this obstacle was removed, society would enjoy a rich efflorescence.

The problem of how to maintain equal liberty for all without resorting to force proved a stumbling block to all individualist anarchists. Although Tucker, following Stirner, rejected the idea of moral obligation or the existence of inherent rights and duties, he did acknowledge the duty of society to restrain and punish the invasive individual. "Anarchism," he stated, "does not recognize the principle of human rights, but it recognizes human equality as a necessity of stable society."<sup>16</sup> The protection which will assure this equality is "a thing to be secured, so long as it is necessary, by voluntary association and cooperation for self-defence, or as a commodity to be purchased, like any other commodity, of those who offer the best article at the lowest price"; and this voluntary association "will restrain invaders by any means which may prove necessary."<sup>17</sup> Although such restraint entailed the force of police power, Tucker insisted that it did not violate the principle of anarchism since it was exercised to protect peaceful and non-invasive individuals. He also asserted that in a free society crime and perverseness would be reduced to a minimum and that voluntary juries would deal with the few aggressors. Yet the mere employment of restraint and punishment, involving a form of police power,

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<sup>15</sup> *Instead of a Book*, 35-36.

<sup>16</sup> *Instead of a Book*, 64.

<sup>17</sup> *State Socialism and Anarchism*, 14.

must in actual practice entail the use of organized force, and thus becomes the negation of anarchism.

In the stateless society all association was to be absolutely voluntary. An individual was free to do as he pleased, provided that he did not invade the liberties of others. If he preferred to evade the communal tasks on which the life and safety of the group depended, nobody could compel him to do his share. For the individualist anarchist, being opposed to compulsion as such, considered the decision of the majority quite as repugnant as the commands of the state itself. "Rule is evil," Tucker explained, "and it is none the better for being majority rule."<sup>18</sup> Acting on this premise, he refused to vote and never entered a polling booth. His criticism of this basic democratic right, expressed with trenchant extravagance, points more to the Nazi *Ja* elections than to our own exercise of suffrage:

What is the ballot? It is neither more nor less than a paper representative of the bayonet, the billy, and the bullet. It is a labor-saving device for ascertaining on which side force lies and bowing to the inevitable. The voice of the majority saves bloodshed, but it is no less the arbitrament of force than is the decree of the most absolute of despots backed by the most powerful of armies.<sup>19</sup>

Since religion presupposes man's submission to the will of a Supreme Being, the anarchists would have nothing to do with it. They professed atheism and scorned the rites and precepts of the several churches. Their rejection of the bonds of marriage and the curbs on divorce was an obvious corollary. "To them," Tucker expounded,

legal marriage and legal divorce are equal absurdities. They look forward to a time when every individual, whether man or woman, shall be self-supporting, and when each shall have an independent home of his or her own, whether it be a separate house, or rooms

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<sup>18</sup> *Instead of a Book*, 169.

<sup>19</sup> *Instead of a Book*, 426–427.

in a house with others; when the love relations between these independent individuals shall be as varied as are individual inclinations and attractions; and when the children born of these relations shall belong exclusively to the mothers until old enough to belong to themselves.<sup>20</sup>

This sexual freedom among anarchists, made notorious by their detractors, did not actually result in any flagrant profligacy. Many of them lived with their companions and children in the same monogamous intimacy as the most devoted of legally married couples. Tucker himself was deeply attached to his companion, Pearl Johnson, and lived with her and their daughter till the day of his death.

Tucker was fully aware of the fundamental position of economics in modern society. Like other reformers of his day, he was strongly affected by the spread of urban slums and the excrescences of mass poverty in a land of abundance. Yet much as he sympathized with the aims of the emerging schemes for social betterment, he rejected all those which implied governmental interference or the socialization of the means of production and distribution. He was of the opinion that the several types of socialism would merely replace a laissez-faire capitalism with a large-scale bureaucracy which might prove even more burdensome to the great majority of the people. As an anarchist he maintained that even the best of economic systems would become oppressive and obnoxious if it involved the arbitrary distribution of goods according to statute law. He demanded liberty above all, including the liberty for man to control what he produced, as "the surest guarantee of prosperity." The policy of complete non-interference—enabling everyone to mind his own business exclusively—would permit wealth to "distribute itself in a free market in accordance with the natural opera-

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<sup>20</sup> *State Socialism and Anarchism*, 15.

tion of economic law.”<sup>21</sup> Such truly free competition would enhance the welfare of society without curbing the initiative and enterprise of the ambitious and the capable.

As an advocate of free competition Tucker condemned all forms of monopoly. He called the monopolists “a brotherhood of thieves”<sup>22</sup> and ascribed all economic ills to their state-sanctioned nefarious practices. All our millionaires, he insisted, owed their wealth to the plunder and ruthless exploitation which they practised with governmental permission. “The State is the servant of the robbers, and it exists chiefly to prevent the expropriation of the robbers and the restoration of a fair and free field for legitimate competition and wholesome, effective voluntary cooperation.”<sup>23</sup> To solve the economic problems which have long plagued civilized society, he advocated the abolition of the state and with it the four major types of monopoly—those of land, money and banking, trade, and patents and copyright.

Tucker urged the “abolition of landlordism and the annihilation of rent.”<sup>24</sup> He proposed the occupancy-and-use formula as the only valid title to land. Such observance would free millions of tillable acres and valuable city parcels owned, but neither occupied nor used, by some of our wealthiest families. The needy farmers would then take possession of as much land as they could cultivate, and the poor city workers would obtain their dwellings for only a fraction of the current rent. Yet he insisted that no forcible measures must be taken against the large landlords. He fought Henry George’s single tax plan because it entailed arbitrary and compulsory state regulation. He likewise opposed the nationalization of rent on the ground that it “logically involves the most complete State Socialism and minute regulation of the

<sup>21</sup> *Instead of a Book*, 347.

<sup>22</sup> Victor Yarros, “Philosophical Anarchism, 1880–1910,” *Journal of Social Philosophy*, April, 1941, 256.

<sup>23</sup> Victor Yarros, “Philosophical Anarchism,” *American Journal of Sociology*, xli, 475.

<sup>24</sup> *Instead of a Book*, 300.

individual.”<sup>25</sup> His solution was education: if most of the people were taught to accept the validity of the occupancy-and-use principle, the rich laggards would in time see the wisdom of giving up voluntarily the land which they themselves were not using. He pointed out that since land reform would occur not in isolation but as part of a general social revolution, the landlords would not prove so obdurate as then seemed likely.

The most radical change proposed by individualist anarchists concerned money and banking. Assuming that the monopoly of money was responsible for most of the economic inequities within our society, they urged the complete liberalization of all monetary functions. Tucker condemned the high interest rates which the government permitted in his day. “The usurer is Somebody, and the State is his protector. Usury is the serpent gnawing at labor’s vitals, and only liberty can detach and kill it. Give laborers their liberty, and they will keep their wealth. As for the Somebody, he, stripped of his power to steal, must either join their ranks or starve.”<sup>26</sup> In his enthusiasm over the advantages of free money he asserted that it was “the first step to Anarchy.” He argued for “the utter absence of restriction upon the issue of all money not fraudulent.”<sup>27</sup> Thus anyone in need of money would have the right to issue it—the paper bills with his signature having the value of promissory notes and their acceptance depending upon the assets and standing of the issuer. Once this practice became general, lending and borrowing, and consequently interest, would virtually disappear. “If the holders of all kinds of property,” Tucker elucidated, “were equally privileged to issue money, not as a legal tender, but acceptance only on its merits, competition would reduce the rate of discount, and therefore of interest on capital, to

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<sup>25</sup> *Instead of a Book*, 339.

<sup>26</sup> *Individual Liberty*, edited by “C.L.S.” (New York, 1926), 89.

<sup>27</sup> *Instead of a Book*, 374.



the mere cost of banking.”<sup>28</sup> This practice would break up the monopoly of money, enable every man to be his own banker and enjoy the full product of his labor, and abolish poverty, along with conspicuous wealth.

In the field of business Tucker followed Proudhon in asserting that under monopolistic capitalism wealth was robbery because it was accumulated iniquitously under the protection of the state. He made clear, however, that in a free society private property was legitimate and everyone had the right to own what he could gain by his own enterprise and efficiency. The assumption on his part was that without the exploitation of others one could not amass much property. His antagonism to monopoly made him an outstanding exponent of free trade and free competition. Anarchists, he stated, believed in “competition everywhere and always.” Joseph A. Labadie, writing in *Liberty* in 1897, agreed with the editor on the advantages of laissez-faire economics: “Personal responsibility and private enterprise in business and industry produce the best results. . . . There is no doubt at all in my mind that liberty has a good effect in economics. Free competition is the soul of progress.”<sup>29</sup> Tucker, in a speech on trusts made two years later, observed that he had no objection to large corporations as such, but only to their throttling of competition. He argued that free competition would cut the roots of monopoly, limit the concentration of wealth, and assure the well-being of all men. Earlier he had stated, “when interest, rent, and profit disappear under the influence of free money, free land, and free trade, it will make no difference whether men work for themselves, or are employed, or employ others. In any case they can get nothing but that wage for their labor which free competition determines.”<sup>30</sup>

His opposition to patent and copyright laws was based on

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<sup>28</sup> *Instead of a Book*, 474.

<sup>29</sup> *Liberty*, April 18, 1897, 7.

<sup>30</sup> *Instead of a Book*, 274.

his desire to see the principle of liberty prevail in every field of human endeavor. He had no objection to a fair compensation to the inventor of a useful device or to the author of a book, but he saw no reason why the public should be penalized to the extent required by the established laws. He protested in particular against the practice of large corporations gaining control of patents for small sums and exploiting the monopoly on successful inventions, to their great enrichment.

It was inevitable that Tucker should disapprove of government ownership. He regarded state control as the most complete and therefore the most obnoxious form of monopoly. "The government," he maintained, "is a tyrant living by theft, and therefore has no business to engage in any business." He believed, moreover, that the bureaucrat was usually less able than the private entrepreneur and too irresponsible to be trusted. Again and again he condemned the inefficiencies of the post office and praised the presumably superior service of the competing express companies. "The government has none of the characteristics of a successful business man, being wasteful, careless, clumsy, and short-sighted in the extreme."<sup>31</sup> He therefore fought every proposal for government ownership with all the power of his polemic gifts. The agitation of the Populists for state-owned granaries and of the urban liberals for city and federal control of the essential public utilities struck him as well-meant confusion worse confounded.

Tucker's economic views were not presented systematically or at length. They were first expressed in *Liberty*, either in editorials on current events or in polemical replies to his numerous correspondents. His only full-length volume, *Instead of a Book, By a Man Too Busy to Write One*, issued at the request of his admirers and only after they had sent him advanced orders for six hundred copies as evidence of their

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<sup>31</sup> *Instead of a Book*, 265.

interest, was merely a compilation of material from *Liberty*. As a consequence, he has said little or nothing on aspects of our economy which require elucidation for a fuller understanding of life under individualist anarchism. In fairness it should be said that he was not interested in blueprints for the future society. All his social views converged in a worship of pure liberty. He was in truth a Utopian peering over the Pisgah heights into a civilization blessed with perfect freedom and happily spared the greed and passions that afflict our own paltry society. He had a right to his vision, of course, and to criticise it would be a thankless task. One can do no better perhaps than to quote the following summary statement of his economic credo:

Liberty will abolish interest; it will abolish profit; it will abolish monopolistic rent; it will abolish taxation; it will abolish the exploitation of labor; it will abolish all means whereby any laborer can be deprived of any of his product; but it will not abolish the limited inequality between one laborer's product and another's. . . . Liberty will ultimately make all men rich; it will not make all men equally rich.<sup>32</sup>

As an exponent of complete individual liberty Tucker disapproved of communism, even when it was to be practised within the stateless society. In his numerous polemics with anarchists who advocated communistic living, he maintained that while voluntary organization for specific tasks was desirable and even advantageous, the socialized community could not but deprive its individual members of certain precious liberties. Why subject oneself to the restraints of socialized duties and obligations, when one could live in peace and plenty without such limitations? One needed only to learn to abide by the motto "Live and let live."

Of Quaker background and inclination, he was a thorough

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<sup>32</sup> *Instead of a Book*, 347–348.

pacifist and deprecated violence in any form except that of self-defense. He insisted that nothing good or lasting was ever accomplished by force, and that violence tended only to multiply itself. Much as he desired the abolition of the state, he refused to achieve it by means of terror. He knew only too well that it was neither possible nor desirable to dissolve the state before the people had learned to live freely and fruitfully without it. The premature and violent overthrow of government would only retard the advent of anarchism. "If government should be abruptly and entirely abolished tomorrow, there would probably ensue a series of physical conflicts about land and many other things, ending in reaction and a revival of the old tyranny."<sup>33</sup> He therefore preached widespread education and ultimately a passive resistance that was to take such forms as the refusal to pay taxes, the evasion of jury duty and military service, and the nonobservance of other types of compulsion. Consequently, when John Most came to this country to further the "propaganda of the deed" as a means of achieving anarchism, Tucker condemned him on the ground that the end never justified immoral means—and force was immoral except when used to prevent and punish aggression. For many years these two leaders of rival factions carried on a contentious polemic in their respective periodicals.

Yet Tucker never permitted his political philosophy to affect his promptitude to attack injustice of any kind. "On Picket Duty," spread over the front page of *Liberty*, recorded his vigilant thrusts against crooked politicians, malefactors of wealth, the aggressiveness of the powerful against the weak. Whether it was a Massachusetts law against syphilitic prisoners, or the protective arrest of known pickpockets in New York just prior to Grant's funeral services, or the ill-treatment of individuals who refused to conform to the *mores* of the majority—he was ever the alert crusader bent on combating

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<sup>33</sup> *Instead of a Book*, 329.

organized force and defending the rights of the minority.

A prime instance of his love of justice was his stand during the Haymarket hysteria in 1886. Much as he disapproved of the terroristic doctrines of the anarchists on trial for the bombing at the Haymarket meeting in Chicago, he was convinced that the defendants were innocent of the charges against them and that they were being tried not for what they had done but for what they believed. He therefore fought this act of spurious justice with all the force of his explosive rhetoric. When the Illinois supreme court upheld the action of the trial judge, he wrote, "The judges say that Spies and his comrades must hang, though they cannot prove them guilty of murder. It is for the people now to say that the judges must go, there being no doubt as to their guilt."<sup>34</sup> When Henry George, at that time an influential liberal, refused to join the distinguished defenders of the condemned men and readily accepted the verdict of the higher court, Tucker attacked him as a traitor; for "to him perhaps more than to any other single person did lovers of liberty and friends of labor confidently look for willing and effective aid and leadership through and out of a crisis pregnant with results beyond all human vision."<sup>35</sup> Nor did *Liberty* cease to decry the crime committed against the victims until Governor Altgeld had courageously done his best to make amends.

When, several years later, Alexander Berkman, a young Russian anarchist eager to strike at social evil, shot and wounded Henry Clay Frick to avenge the workers who had lost their lives in the bloody Homestead strike, Tucker refused to join the defense of the imprisoned anarchist. As an opponent of violence he could not condone murder as a means of propaganda. "The hope of humanity," he wrote, "lies in the avoidance of that revolution by force which the Berkmanians are trying to precipitate. No pity for Frick, no praise for Berkman—such is the attitude of *Liberty* in the

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<sup>34</sup> *Liberty*, September 24, 1887, 1.

<sup>35</sup> *Henry George, Traitor* (New York, 1887), 5.

present crisis.”<sup>36</sup> Some time later he was urged by friends of Berkman to use his influence in an effort to obtain a pardon for the prisoner. Tucker told them that he would do so only if Berkman would agree to abstain from acts of terrorism in the future; since these friends could not expect the prisoner thus to bind himself, Tucker declined to proceed further.

Long before the fateful fire in 1908, which precipitated his decision to settle in France, Tucker had come to see that the tide of affairs was running counter to his philosophy of liberty. With the passing of the years he could not avoid the realization that his dream of anarchism had lost its appeal to those engaged in the struggle against a powerful capitalism. Never popular within labor circles, individualist anarchism began to dwindle rapidly after 1900. Some of its former adherents joined the more aggressive communistic faction led by Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman; many others began to favor the rising socialist movement as the only effective weapon against billion-dollar corporations. Because Tucker continued to believe in the superiority of philosophical anarchism over all other forms of society, he could not but be depressed by the thought of mankind having to go the long way around to reach its final goal. The destructive fire had thus merely hastened a withdrawal from the social conflict which he had been considering for some time.

On leaving the United States at the end of 1908, he had no idea that he was never again to see his native land. Since his modest income made traveling a luxury, he planned first to take root in his new home before taking the costly trip back. By the time he found it possible to visit America, the outbreak of war in 1914 made the voyage practically impossible. He did go to England with his family and remained there until France became safe enough for their return.

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Lilian Symes and Clement Travers, *Rebel America*, 155.

While in England, Tucker disappointed a number of his American friends and followers by suspending his pacifism in favor of the war against Germany. These men and women, far from the scene of battle, perceived the struggle as a battle for markets between rival imperialisms and refused to take sides. Not so Tucker, who deeply appreciated the French way of life and could not accept Prussian arrogance and brutality with objective equanimity. So far as he was concerned, the German armies had to be driven back or civilization would collapse. In a letter to Joseph Labadie dated December 23, 1914, he explained his stand:

I favor the Allies because I pity the Belgian people, because I admire the British influences that make for liberty, because I feel some (though I regret to say a declining) concern for the future of the American people, because I have a considerable sympathy for the *people* of Russia, and because I hate and fear the German people as a nation of domineering brutes bent on turning the whole world into a police-ridden paradise of the Prussian pattern. I have numerous other reasons for favoring the Allies, but the above is the main reason and a sufficient one.<sup>37</sup>

Shortly after the United States entered the war in 1917, Tucker learned of the mistreatment of conscientious objectors. True to his libertarian beliefs, he wrote a long letter to *The Masses*, the leading radical magazine, protesting against this brutality on the part of the government and pointing out why he, a pacifist, felt impelled to support the cause of the Allies. The editors published the protest but omitted the remainder, thus making it appear that Tucker was as much against the war as the sponsors of *The Masses*. To rectify this false impression he wrote to a number of his friends to explain the incident. The uncommon prescience of the man, not to mention his persuasive logic and good sense, may be noted in the following extract from one of these letters:

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<sup>37</sup> Miss Agnes Inglis has kindly provided me with a transcript of the letter.

Germany's onslaught on civilization in August, 1914, confronted all liberty lovers with a horrible alternative: either to offer no resistance, and thereby suffer, at Germany's hands, a well-nigh total and probably permanent annihilation of our liberties, or to resist, and, to make the resistance effective, suffer, at our own hands, a partial and possibly only temporary annihilation (or suspension) of those liberties. I take it that any earnest man who could hesitate in his choice must be so blinded or dazzled by idealism, as to be incapable of interpreting the march of events with even the smallest degree of realism. For me, at any rate, there was but one road, and I took it promptly. From the start I have favored war to the limit—war till Germany (rulers and people alike) shall be so whipped and stripped that never more shall she have the will or the power to renew aggression. In choosing this course I deliberately accept, though with soreness of heart, the evils involved in it, to none of which I am more blind than Max Eastman himself or any other pacifist. Among those evils I accept conscription, though conscription, which must commend itself to every believer in the State equally with taxation so far as principle is concerned, is entirely counter to my political philosophy. I accept also the incidental evil of having to cooperate for a limited time with a considerable number of brutes. But I reserve the right to square accounts with brutality after the liquidation of *l'union sacrée*.”<sup>38</sup>

Always an omnivorous reader of newspapers, he spent his declining years perusing the important journals from many parts of the world and clipping the items which interested him. His plans to resume the publication of *Liberty* and various books, as well as the urge to write about his philosophy of life, were deferred from day to day by a lassitude which the years tended only to aggravate. After going through the various papers he had no more time or energy for anything else. Although he lived for twenty years after the Peace of Versailles and witnessed the rise of a fascism far worse than

<sup>38</sup> Mrs. Pearl Johnson Tucker kindly provided me with a transcript of this letter as well as with other information incorporated in this essay.



the Prussianism which he had condemned so vehemently, he lacked the drive to rouse himself out of his strange lethargy. Only his newspaper clippings kept accumulating, and by the time he died in 1939 he had collected enough to fill twenty-odd volumes. These pasted newspaper clippings on a wide variety of topics, properly arranged and indexed, are now awaiting the hospitality of a library.

A deep pessimism possessed him during his old age. He felt himself in the grip of irresistible forces: a strident monopolistic capitalism, a madly aggressive nationalism, and a worldwide social goose-stepping were brutally stifling individual liberty. Twentieth-century authoritarianism was riding roughshod over the ideals of human freedom cherished by the previous century, and the first victim was anarchism. Benjamin R. Tucker, unable to quicken his wan ideal and unwilling to nurse a delusion, was reduced during his final years to becoming an onlooker rather than a participant: to cutting topical clippings and dreaming of the distant day when mankind will bask in the enduring glory of a free society.