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Benjamin Ricketson Tucker, Part 1

by Wendy McElroy

The first issue of the radical individualist periodical *Liberty* (1881–1908) opened with the words,

Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, these three: but the greatest of these is Liberty. Formerly the price of *Liberty* was eternal vigilance, but now it can be had for fifty cents a year.

The publisher and author of those words, Benjamin Ricketson Tucker (1854–1939), defined the radical extreme of American individualism from the post–Civil War era to the first decade of the 20th century. Indeed, the pioneering *Liberty* is widely considered to be the finest individualist publication ever issued. Many of the brightest American radicals and reformers passed through its pages; some came to praise, some to argue.

Liberty also hosted the best contemporary European voices of individualism and integrated their ideas into the uniquely American movements of labor, free thought, and free love. Through this integration, Tucker produced the rigorous system of individualist anarchism upon which modern libertarians, such as Murray Rothbard, drew heavily.

Tucker stated the crux of his political philosophy:

The [Individualist] Anarchists are simply unterrified Jeffersonian Democrats. They believe that “the best government is that which governs least,” and that which governs least is no government at all.

Tucker’s background

The man who sold *Liberty* — both as a commodity and as an ideal — was born on April 17, 1854, in South Dartmouth, Massachusetts. Coming from both a Quaker and a radical Unitarian background, Tucker grew up in an atmosphere of free inquiry and attended a Quaker academy in the nearby town of New Bedford. He later enrolled in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, where he studied engineering for three years.

Politics soon loomed large. In 1872, although he was still too young to vote, the 18-year-old Tucker founded a Greeley-Brown Club in New Bedford; Horace Greeley was an unsuccessful

presidential candidate that year. More significantly, Tucker attended a meeting of the New England Labor Reform League (NELRL) in Boston, where he met the veteran individualists Josiah Warren and William B. Greene. Warren was an anarchist renowned for founding utopian communities that put social theories into practice. Greene was a Unitarian preacher best known for the free-market monetary theories expressed in his popular book, *Mutual Banking*.

The NELRL — of which the two men were prominent members — was a broad and active coalition of labor reformers, who sought to sweep away the evils of capitalism. The antipathy toward capitalism came largely from the belief that “profits” — e.g., interest — were created and maintained by state regulation. As strange as it sounds to modern ears, their solution to capitalism was the free market. For example, to destroy the capitalistic monetary system, they advocated free banking: the removal of all governmental restrictions. Their antipathy was also based on an acceptance of a version of the labor theory of value.

Tucker also met the renowned abolitionist (anti-slavery advocate) and anarchist Lysander Spooner, from whom he acquired an even sharper anti-political tone.

Through NELRL Tucker came to conclusions that would guide the rest of his career as a radical: economic change was the primary need of society; and electoral politics was not the path to freedom. By the time Tucker was 20 years old, the ideas that would define the next five and a half decades of his life were firmly set. A photo of a younger Tucker reveals the same basic expression and posture that he retained in later photographs. His dark eyes stare with calm certainty from a pale face fringed by a carefully coifed beard and dark hair. His attire is simple but respectable: a three-piece suit that fits him well. In later photographs, his hair would be gray and his body thickened, but the calm certainty of his gaze would not falter.

Tucker brought his own gifts to the radical community: sophistication and a worldliness rare in Americans. In 1874, he made the first of several journeys to Europe, where he absorbed the influence of such political philosophers as Pierre Joseph Proudhon, Herbert Spencer, Max Stirner, and Mikhail Bakunin. Tucker’s voice became a unique blend of the best within American and European radicalism.

His introductions to Warren and Greene had been facilitated by the individualist Ezra Heywood, who, along with his wife, Angela, published the labor-reform periodical *The Word*; Tucker joined its staff as an associate editor in April 1875. An ongoing association would continue for more than three decades.

Under Heywood’s tutelage, Tucker also debuted as a social activist. In 1875, he refused to pay taxes to Princeton because he had “no contract” with the town. He passed a few days in jail until the sum was anonymously paid.

A year later in 1876 Tucker debuted as a scholar when Heywood published his translation of Proudhon’s classic and massive book, *What Is Property?* Shortly thereafter, however, Tucker resigned from *The Word* because he disagreed with the periodical’s shift in emphasis. Heywood

had just published his most famous and controversial pamphlet, entitled *Cupid's Yokes*, in which he argued for free love — the right of adults to choose their own sexual arrangements without state involvement. This became Heywood's focus. Meanwhile Tucker continued to focus on labor reform.

In departing from *The Word*, Tucker wrote,

[Let] me say, the cause of free love can be rendered no such effective service as by that revolution in the rewarding of labor which shall place woman in a position of independence.... Self-dependence is the foundation of self-respect; and self-respect alone makes free love possible.

(Tucker's attitude may have been influenced by a disillusioning romantic association with the firebrand, Victoria Woodhull, whose free-love periodical, *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*, he had read since the age of sixteen. He later referred to her as "a loathsome adventuress.")

Tucker now began publishing a labor and free-thought periodical entitled the *Radical Review* (New Bedford, Mass., 1877–1878). As a movement, free thought sought freedom of conscience independent of church or state authority. The *Radical Review* lasted four issues, with much of its run devoted to a translation by Tucker of Proudhon's *Systems of Economical Contradictions*. (Such translations would play a prominent role in *Liberty's* pages, as Tucker kept readers current on European art and politics.)

The *Radical Review's* abrupt demise was due to Heywood's 1878 conviction for mailing "obscene" material: namely, *Cupid's Yokes*, which advocated abstinence as a form of birth control. The mailing violated the repressive new Comstock Laws. Heywood was sentenced to two years' hard labor.

Tucker assumed temporary editorship of *The Word*. He was also instrumental in organizing a crusade of American reformers who demanded the release of Heywood. They succeeded. After serving six months, Heywood received a pardon from President Hayes.

Tucker's next venture would be *Liberty*, which he would publish and edit for the next 27 years.

The context of *Liberty*

Liberty did not arise in a political vacuum. The post–Civil War era was a time of social turmoil and erratic economic growth, with many voices calling for social change. The ideologies ranged from state socialism to populism to anarchism. A jumble of issues fought for space in newsprint, including the single tax, temperance, women's suffrage, labor unions, land reform, and birth control. The movements offered divergent solutions but few were individualistic. True to the maxim "War is the health of the State," the Civil War had dealt a severe blow to individualism in America.

Tucker used *Liberty* to forge an integrated philosophy of radical individualism from the diversity of issues, but the need for economic reform was always the framework. He asserted,

Liberty, to be effective, must find its first application in the realm of economics and nowhere has that been emphasized more continually than in this journal.

Liberty brought together individualist writers who were scattered through other movements. Thus it became the nexus around which a distinctively individualist movement coalesced and revitalized. Some were anarchists; others wanted to limit government to the protection of person and property.

As a general statement, they all shared a commitment to a voluntary society in which force was justified only in self-defense. Tucker called this arrangement “society by contract.”

Philosophically, *Liberty* was built around two principles: Sovereignty of the Individual; and Cost the Limit of Price.

Sovereignty of the Individual was also known as “self-ownership” — the principle that every person, simply by being human, possesses an inalienable jurisdiction over his own body and the peaceful use thereof. This universal right carried a corresponding duty to respect the self-ownership of others. It was this reciprocal right and duty that Tucker referred to when he used a favorite phrase from Spencer: “the law of equal liberty.”

Cost the Limit of Price is an American version of the labor theory of value, which claims that all wealth is created by labor and, so, properly belongs to the laborer. Tucker viewed the right to such wealth as a direct extension of self-ownership and condemned capitalistic practices such as charging interest as unjust. Again, although it sounds strange to modern ears, his solution to “capitalism” was to remove state laws and establish the primacy of contracts instead. But what if a contract involved the payment of capitalistic profit such as interest? Tucker was clear: if you signed a contract to pay interest, then it was your right to enter into such a foolish agreement and no one had any business interfering with that contract.

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