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Liberty and Taxation

Benjamin Tucker

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The power of taxation, being the most vital one to the State, naturally was a prominent subject in Liberty's discussions. Mr. F. W. Read, in the London revue *Jus*, attacked the position of Anarchism on this point and was answered by Mr. Tucker with the following article.

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THE idea that the voluntary taxationist objects to the State precisely because it does not rest on contract, and wishes to substitute contract for it, is strictly correct, and I am glad to see (for the first time, if my memory serves me) an opponent grasp it. But Mr. Read obscures his statement by his previous remark that the proposal of voluntary taxation is "the outcome of an idea ... that the State *is, or ought to be*, founded on contract." This would be true if the words which I have italicized should be omitted. It was the insertion of these words that furnished the writer a basis for his otherwise groundless analogy between the Anarchists and the followers of Rousseau. The latter hold that the State originated in a contract, and that the people of to-day, though they did not make it, are bound by it. The Anarchists, on the contrary, deny that any such contract was ever made; declare that, had one ever been made, it could not impose a shadow of obligation on those who had no hand in making it; and claim the right to contract for themselves as they please. The position that a man may make his own contracts, far from being analogous to that which makes him subject to contracts made by others, is its direct antithesis.

It is perfectly true that voluntary taxation would not necessarily “prevent the existence of five or six ‘States’ in England,” and that “members of all these ‘States’ might be living in the same house.” But I see no reason for Mr. Read’s exclamation point after this remark. What of it? There are many more than five or six Churches in England, and it frequently happens that members of several of them live in the same house. There are many more than five or six insurance companies in England, and it is by no means uncommon for members of the same family to insure their lives and goods against accident or fire in different companies. Does any harm come of it? Why, then, should there not be a considerable number of defensive associations in England, in which people, even members of the same family, might insure their lives and goods against murderers or thieves? Though Mr. Read has grasped one idea of the voluntary taxationists, I fear that he sees another much less clearly, — namely, the idea that defence is a service, like any other service; that it is labor both useful and desired, and therefore an economic commodity subject to the law of supply and demand; that in a free market this commodity would be furnished at the cost of production; that, competition prevailing, patronage would go to those who furnished the best article at the lowest price; that the production and sale of this commodity are now monopolized by the State; that the State, like almost all monopolists, charges exorbitant prices; that, like almost all monopolists, it supplies a worthless, or nearly worthless, article; that, just as the monopolist of a food product often furnishes poison instead of nutriment, so the State takes advantage of its monopoly of defence to furnish invasion instead of protection; that, just as the patrons of the one pay to be poisoned, so the patrons of the other pay to be enslaved; and, finally, that the State exceeds all its fellow-monopolists in the extent of its villainy because it enjoys the unique privilege of compelling all people to buy its product whether they want it or not. If, then, five or six “States” were to hang out their shingles, the people,

I fancy, would be able to buy the very best kind of security at a reasonable price. And what is more, — the better their services, the less they would be needed; so that the multiplication of “States” involves the abolition of the State.

All these considerations, however, are disposed of, in Mr. Read’s opinion, by his final assertion that “the State is a social organism.” He considers this “the explanation of the whole matter.” But for the life of me I can see in it nothing but another irrelevant remark. Again I ask: What of it? Suppose the State is an organism, — what then? What is the inference? That the State is therefore permanent? But what is history but a record of the dissolution of organisms and the birth and growth of others to be dissolved in turn? Is the State exempt from this order? If so, why? What proves it? The State an organism? Yes; so is a tiger. But unless I meet him when I haven’t my gun, his organism will speedily disorganize. The State is a tiger seeking to devour the people, and they must either kill or cripple it. Their own safety depends upon it. But Mr. Read says it can’t be done. “By no possibility can the power of the State be restrained.” This must be very disappointing to Mr. Donisthorpe and *Jus*, who are working to restrain it. If Mr. Read is right, their occupation is gone. Is he right? Unless he can demonstrate it, the voluntary taxationists and the Anarchists will continue their work, cheered by the belief that the compulsory and invasive State is doomed to die.