

On property and freedom

Benjamin Tucker

28 January 1888

Do you think property rights can inhere in anything not produced by the labor or aid of man?

I do not believe in any inherent right of property. Property is a social convention, and may assume many forms. Only that form of property can endure, however, which is based on the principle of equal liberty. All other forms must result in misery, crime, and conflict. The Anarchistic form of property has already been defined as “that which secures each in the possession of his own products, or of such products of others as he may have obtained unconditionally without the use of fraud or force, and in the realization of all titles to such products which he may hold by virtue of free contract with others.” It will be seen from this definition that Anarchistic property concerns only products. But anything is a product upon which human labor has been expended, whether it be a piece of iron or a piece of land.¹

You say, “Anarchism being neither more nor less than the principle of equal liberty,” etc. Now, if government were so reformed as to confine its operations to the protection of “equal liberty,” would you have any quarrel with it? If so, what and why?

If “government” confined itself to the protection of equal liberty, Anarchists would have no quarrel with it; but such protection they do not call government. Criticism of the Anarchistic idea which does not consider Anarchistic definitions is futile. The Anarchist defines government as invasion, nothing more or less. Protection against invasion, then, is the opposite of government. Anarchists, in favoring the abolition of government, favor the abolition of invasion, not of protection against invasion.

It may tend to a clearer understanding if I add that all States, to become non-invasive, must abandon first the primary act of invasion upon which all them rest: the collection of taxes by force — and that anarchists look upon the change in social conditions which will result when economic freedom is allowed as far more efficiently protective against invasion than any machinery of restraint, in the absence of economic freedom, possibly can be.

¹ It should be stated, however, that in the case of land, or of any other material the supply of which is so limited that all cannot hold it in unlimited quantities, Anarchism undertakes to protect no titles except such as are based on actual occupancy and use.

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