

“Why should a nation be more altruistic than I?”

Benjamin Tucker

1907

May 2, 1907

Dear Mr. Schumm:

I am expecting you as usual next Saturday evening.

I have just read with interest your well-written letter in tonight's "Post," but I don't agree with it. It seems to me idealistic, based on illusion.

A proposal that the United States, for instance, should straightaway abolish its army and navy must be made either by one who does, or by one who does not, value the national existence as such. Your comparison with Roosevelt, since it implies a comparison of different means with a view to one and the same end, indicates that in the "Post" you are arguing from the position of one who does not value the national existence, for that of course is the end that Roosevelt has in view. Now such a proposal as yours, argued from that point of view, seems to me sheer lunacy. To suppose that the result of such a policy would not be the speedy extinction of the U.S. as a nation, and its absorption by another nation, or its division between other nations, is pure dream. And it is no argument to say with Nietzsche that opposition to such a policy is to stigmatize other governments as hypocrites and crafty criminals ready to pounce. Such a stigmatization is an accurate description of governments in general. I did not suppose that you entertained any illusions on that point. In short, the position of Nietzsche and yourself is nothing more or less than national Tolstoianism, i.e., the very last stage of Utopian fancy. Furthermore, it is national altruism, utterly unStirneristic. Do you say that I, as an individual, should perish rather than arm myself against attack? Undoubtedly not. Then (presuming the nation to be a good thing) why should the nation be more altruistic than I?

Of course the case becomes altogether different the moment you view it from the standpoint of who does not value the national existence. As an anarchist, I should rejoice to see the US go crazy and seek its own destruction by disarmament. Of course, as a result, another government would be my master. But, if the same craze were to seize the other nations, one by one, there finally would be but one nation left, owning the earth. And then Anarchism would begin to make headway, for the efforts of all liberty-loving men would be directed against domestic despotism, and their attention could not be distracted by fomenting foreign quarrels.

Only an anarchist can logically and sanely favor disarmament by a single nation, and he can favor it only on egoistic and anti-nationalistic grounds. I answer Nietzsche that to favor such disarmament is to idealize governments as champions of liberty and justice. Do you not see that you have unwittingly taken the attitude of a worshiper of the State?

Yours sincerely, Benj. R. Tucker

PS After reading the foregoing, I have half a mind to print it, together with yours, in the August Liberty. When you are entirely through with it, you may send it back to me, if you are willing.

I sail May 16

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