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Possession of Liberty

The Political Economy of Benjamin R. Tucker

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The political economy of Benjamin Tucker represents an alloy of its major influences, synthesizing the work of radical thinkers such as Josiah Warren, William B. Greene, Ezra Heywood, and Lysander Spooner to create a mature, comprehensive individualist anarchism. From Heywood came Tucker's trademark analysis of the wrongs of rent, interest, and profit, "follow[ing] closely the motto that Ezra Heywood had printed in large letters over his desk: 'Interest is Theft, Rent Robbery, and Profit Only Another Name for Plunder.'"¹ Josiah Warren endowed Tucker with an iron conviction about the sovereignty of the individual, a hostility toward every attempt to "reduce him to a mere piece of a machine" and to accomplish reform through coercive, manmade "combinations." For a system of free market monetary and banking reform, Tucker learned from William B. Greene, whose work had articulated a mutual banking scheme based on free, open issuance of currency. It was Greene who, in 1873, introduced a young Benjamin Tucker to the work of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Greene's personal

¹ Martin Blatt, "Ezra Heywood & Benjamin Tucker."

acquaintance and the first to call himself an anarchist.² Greene further encouraged Tucker to undertake the first translation of Proudhon's *What is Property?* into the English language, a work published by Ezra Heywood's Co-operative Publishing Company. In Tucker, these influences coalesced and congealed into a single movement for which he and his journal *Liberty* became the focus.

It bears remarking that Tucker carried on his career in radical polemics all while working as an editor for mainstream publications. In a 1943 article in *The New England Quarterly*, Charles A. Madison noted "the mutual respect between Tucker and his employers" at Boston's *Daily Globe* despite Tucker's determined advocacy of anarchism during a time which witnessed opposition to the idea at a "hysterical intensity." It is undeniably difficult to imagine a newspaper of any considerable size or reputation housing an open anarchist in its editorial staff today. Notwithstanding the present day's pretensions to openness and liberality, it seems almost certain that today's literary and intellectual elite screens its pet orthodoxies and *status quo* politics from questioning and criticism far more devoutly than did the literati of the latter half of the nineteenth century. Tucker enjoyed the respect of his *Globe* colleagues for no less than eleven years, even as he plunged ever more deeply into the world of radical politics, from aiding Ezra Heywood in the publication of *The Word* to issuing his own *Radical Review*. Later, after he had commenced publication of *Liberty*, Tucker worked as

something different from and *more than* the simple proposition that everything is worth only what someone is willing to pay for it—which fact is, of course, impossible to rebut. The important and substantive critique contained in Benjamin Tucker's political economy is too often summarily dismissed as relying on a discredited economic fallacy, without due cogitation on its many arguments and implications. The burden of principled consistency fell to Benjamin Tucker and *Liberty* as it falls to left wing individualists and C4SS today. Tucker suggest that "Anarchy may be defined as the possession of liberty by libertarians,—that is by those who know what liberty means." That question, the meaning of liberty, is what we as anarchists are attempting to puzzle out. For so many, the life and work of Benjamin Tucker has been the lodestar in that odyssey, ever an inspiration and point of reference.

² In an 1887 issue of *Liberty*, Tucker wrote, "[T]hanks to Colonel Greene, I read Proudhon's discussion with [Frédéric] Bastiat on the question of interest, and then the famous 'What is Property?'" and great indeed was my astonishment at finding in them, but presented in very different terms, the identical ideas which I had already learned from Josiah Warren, and which, evolved by these two men independently, will be as fundamental in whatever social changes henceforth come over the world as has been the law of gravitation in all the revolutions of physical science which have followed its discovery,—I mean, of course, the ideas of Liberty and Equity."

nostrum at times put a gulf between the ideas of his *Liberty* and the rest of the labor movement, though he always acknowledged his individualist anarchism and socialism as being “armies that overlap.” Indeed, Tucker offered what this author still regards as the best definition of socialism, or perhaps the definition of socialism at its best, as “the belief that the next important step in progress is a change in man’s environment of an economic character that shall include the abolition of every privilege whereby the holder of wealth acquires an anti-social power to compel tribute.” Tucker therefore assumed no necessary or principled stance against popular labor movement whipping boys such as, for instance, wage labor or even large trusts. He argued that insofar as the anarchist principle of equal liberty is undeviatingly observed, “it will make no difference whether men work for themselves, or are employed, or employ others.” Drawing an income without working—i.e., rent, interest, and profit—was the economic phenomenon to be opposed by anarchists, and this, Tucker argued, depended upon aggression always.

It is rather ironic that the free market schools which trumpet methodological individualism most boldly and are most skeptical of empirics deride even the faintest possibility that complete freedom of exchange might not lead to an environment that is recognizably capitalist. Given their concession that the existing economy is indeed far removed from a true free market, one wonders what makes them so sure that individualist anarchists such as Tucker were economically nescient quacks. We needn’t rely on any labor theory of value to safely conclude that existing wealth inequalities and concentrations depend pivotally on just the kinds of coercive legal privilege to which the flag-bearers of *laissez faire* profess opposition. The individualist anarchists, moreover, understood the theoretical importance of marginal utility quite well, as has been noted elsewhere. Unlike the caricature of their view, their labor theory of value, such as they articulated it, was perfectly reconcilable with the subjective theory of value and attempted to explain

an editor for *Engineering Magazine* in New York City, “refus[ing] to write articles that might compromise his anarchist principles.”³

In the very first issue of *Liberty* in 1881, Tucker enunciated the periodical’s *raison d’être* and its prescription in politics and economics, writing, “Monopoly and privileged must be destroyed, opportunity afforded, and competition encouraged.” Still, like Proudhon, from whom Tucker took so many ideas on currency and banking reform, Tucker held that the usurious economic arrangements he opposed ought to, in Proudhon’s words, “remain free and voluntary for all.” The gates of competition thrown open to all and the “disturbing forces”⁴ of privileged abolished, these embodiments of exploitation would, he argued, become practically impossible. “[I]f the power to take usury were extended to all men,” as Tucker argued it should be, “usury would devour itself, in its very nature.” The role of the state, then, was to insulate the privileged few holders of capital, who live in “luxury on the toil of their artificially-created slaves,” from the salutary effects of competition.

Tucker’s consistency and his deft ability to expose the absurdities of *both* political and economic power have much to teach today’s liberty movement. Were he alive today, Tucker would see privilege, corporate welfare, and insults to liberty everywhere he looked. No more natural or inevitable are today’s dominant economic relationships than were the conditions of old-time slavery, though apologists for both would insist that the mere fact of their existence proved their justness. Tucker was a visionary political economist in that he imagined things could be different, debunking the “just so” stories of liberal economists and daring to push their liberal ideas—which had so grown in popularity—to their logical limits. “[G]enuine Anarchism,” he famously said, “is consistent Manchesterism.” For Tucker politics and economics

³ Wendy McElroy, “Benjamin Tucker, *Liberty*, and Individualist Anarchism.” Footnote 6.

⁴ John Beverley Robinson, *Economics of Liberty*.

were inseparable, the questions of one necessarily implicating the other; he regarded capitalism as a system of exploitation created by the state, that is, by aggression or force against the sovereign individual. Tucker's labor politics, though, are distinctive—and perhaps distinguishable from the ideas of today's radical labor movement—insofar as he rebuked capitalists without advocating collective ownership or organization of capital, identified exploitation without condemning competition, and championed workingmen without necessarily denouncing trusts (or “industrial combinations”) and while remaining lukewarm on labor unions.

Tucker argued that efforts to obstruct or outlaw any kind of voluntary combination or association were simply authoritarian attempts at *control*, intolerable to anarchism regardless of any underlying good intentions. He saw nothing essentially or necessarily wrong with the sale of one's labor for a wage—indeed going so far as to argue that proper Anarchistic Socialism did not attempt “to abolish wages, but to make *every* man dependent upon wages and to secure to every man his *whole* wages.” Tucker's socialism was straightforwardly based upon the notion that labor should be paid with its full product; the fact that labor *was not* paid was indeed the whole problem. State socialism's government ownership of the means of production was no way to accomplish this end, but was simply a new form of enslavement much the same as the old. Ultimately the state would always be an institution by and for a plutocratic ruling class.

Tucker's economics furthermore eschewed facile and superficial distinctions, such as, for example, the arbitrary and unsystematic differentiation between capital and product⁵ and, as

⁵“Proudhon scoffed at the distinction between capital and product. He maintained that capital and product are not different kinds of wealth, but simply alternate conditions or functions of the same wealth; that all wealth undergoes an incessant transformation from capital into product and from product back into capital, the process repeating itself interminably; that capital and product are purely social terms; that what is product to one man immediately becomes

noted above, between economics and politics. Any thoroughgoing consideration of “the industrial problem” could not rely simply on an analysis of the laws of exchange alone, as if those laws operated in a vacuum, detached from the realities of law and policy. As one of Tucker's key influences, Joshua King Ingalls wrote, “Political economy has thus far been little more than a series of ingenious attempts to reconcile class prerogative and arbitrary capitalistic control with the principles of exchange.” The central error of *bourgeois* political economy in Tucker's day is identical to contemporary libertarianism's chief mistake—its critical oversight of the countless and constant contraventions of just those free market principles being espoused. Then and now, liberal or free market political economists will maintain that political and economic questions must be treated together, that economic rights are political rights, only to turn around and discuss existing economic conditions and relationships as if they are purely the consequence of legitimate market exchanges and property forms.

The analytical precision of Benjamin Tucker was not so easily confused as to allow him to be duped by defenders of capitalism, to convince him that free market relationships would be much the same as capitalistic relationships. Tucker could not believe that the mortifying subjection of the penniless many to the prosperous and propertied few developed from undiluted *laissez faire*. As “An Anarchist FAQ” observes, “While an Individualist Anarchy would be a market system, it would not be a capitalist one.” Tucker never retreated from his defenses of competition or saw a need to water them down. Nor did he ever admit that exploitation was possible without aggression or invasion, or accept that equitable commerce and justice for the worker could only be accomplished through legislative reforms. His total lack of faith in any legal or governmental

capital to another, and vice versa; that if there were but one person in the world, all wealth would be to him at once capital and product ...” – Benjamin R. Tucker