

# **Benjamin Tucker**

Jeff Shantz

2001

Born into a wealthy liberal family in New Bedford, Massachusetts and raised in a climate of radical Protestantism and Paineite individualism, Benjamin Tucker's personal experiences convinced him that people, following their own reason in a community of fellowship, could govern themselves without recourse to instituted authorities such as the state. Tucker was the first prominent American thinker to identify himself as an anarchist. He would become the central figure in the emergence and development of philosophical or individualist anarchism in the U.S., introducing the works of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Max Stirner, among others, to North American audiences. A well rounded person, in addition to anarchism he advocated egoism, atheism and free love. Influenced by his Quaker upbringing, Tucker refused to sanction violence in the cause of anarchy. Indeed, he would eventually break with the anarchist communist organizer, Emma Goldman, over her support for the attempted assassination of the industrialist Henry Clay Frick by Goldman's partner Alexander Berkman.

His bookstore, the Unique Book Shop in New York City, proved an important social space for anarchists and other free thinker of various stripes. Eugene O'Neill was introduced to Tucker by Louis Holladay during his time at Princeton and soon became a regular at the Unique Book Shop. The eclectic collection at Tucker's bookstore exposed O'Neill to experimental and provocative works of philosophy, politics and art that were not available anywhere else in the U.S. Many of the works had been translated and/or published by Tucker himself. Tucker was the first to publish in North America Max Stirner's individualist classic, *The Ego and Its Own*, a book that was quite influential on the development of O'Neill's political consciousness. Tucker published the important libertarian journals *Radical Review* and the highly influential *Liberty*, which became regarded as the best English-language anarchist journal. Tucker was admired by writers including Bernard Shaw and Walt Whitman.

Tucker's anarchism, unlike that of anarchist communist contemporaries Goldman and Berkman, was based on gradual, non-violent, rather than revolutionary, social and cultural change. In place of force, Tucker advocated the liberation of the individual's creative capacities. Tucker looked to gradual enlightenment through alternative institutions, schools, cooperative banks and workers' associations, as practical means to enact change.

Social change, for Tucker, required personal transformation first and foremost, a perspective that O'Neill himself claimed as a great influence on his own outlook. At the same time, while rejecting force, which he termed domination, Tucker did assert the right of individuals and groups to defend themselves against.

Tucker spent the last years of his life in anonymity, choosing to live an anarchist life quietly with his lover Pearl Johnson and daughter Oriole Tucker, in France. He died in Monaco in 1939, aged 85.

## Further Reading

Diggins, John Patrick. 2007. *Eugene O'Neill's America: Desire Under Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Dowling, Robert M. 2007. "On Eugene O'Neill's Philosophical Anarchism." 29

Pfister, Joel. 1995. *Staging Depth: Eugene O'Neill and The Politics Of Psychological Discourse*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press

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