
Benjamin Tucker, *Liberty*, and Individualist Anarchism

— ◆ —
WENDY MCELROY

“**L**iberty, Equality, Fraternity, these three; but the greatest of these is Liberty. Formerly the price of Liberty was eternal vigilance, but now it can be had for fifty cents a year.” So wrote Benjamin Ricketson Tucker (1854–1939) on the first page of the first issue of *Liberty*.¹

The American periodical *Liberty*,² edited and published by Tucker from August 1881 to April 1908, is widely considered to be the finest individualist-anarchist periodical ever published in the English language. Over its twenty-seven-year life span, during which it issued first from Boston and then from New York (1892), *Liberty* chronicled the personalities and the shifting controversies of radical individualism in the United States and abroad.

It also fostered those personalities and controversies. The scroll of contributors to *Liberty* reads like an honor roll of nineteenth-century individualism: Lysander Spooner, Auberon Herbert, Joshua K. Ingalls, John Henry Mackay, Victor Yarros, and Wordsworth Donisthorpe are only a partial listing. Speaking with a cosmopolitan and avant-garde voice, *Liberty* also published such items as George Bernard Shaw’s first original article to appear in the United States,³ the first American translated excerpts of Friedrich Nietzsche,⁴ and reports from economist Vilfredo Pareto on political conditions in Italy.

1. Tucker (1881a, 1). Representative excerpts from *Liberty* are available in Benjamin R. Tucker (1893) and (1926).

2. The periodical began in a four-page newspaper format and went to an eight-page format on May 17, 1884. It returned to a four-page format on July 25, 1891, varied from sometimes twelve to mostly eight pages from February 24, 1894, until the February 1906 issue, in which Tucker announced a format and publication change that would continue until close to *Liberty*’s last issue in April 1908. “Liberty expects to greet its readers bimonthly hereafter, in the form given to the present issue—a pamphlet of sixty-four pages.” During its run, *Liberty* varied from a weekly to a fortnightly and then finally to a monthly schedule.

Wendy McElroy is a research fellow of the Independent Institute.

The Independent Review, v. II, n. 3, Winter 1998, ISSN 1086-1653, Copyright © 1997, pp. 421–434

Of seminal importance in the history of individualist ideas, Tucker's periodical also served as the main conduit of Stirnerite egoism and of radical Spencerian thought from Europe to America.⁵ As such, *Liberty* was both an innovator in individualist theory and a mainstay of that tradition.

The periodical was also remarkable for the consistently high quality of its content and the clarity of its style. The issues debated within its pages have a sophisticated, almost contemporary ring, ranging from radical civil liberties to economic theory, from children's rights to the basis of rent and interest. Contributors to *Liberty*, as well as other individualists who published articles elsewhere, often found themselves on the defensive against Tucker's intransigent demand for "plumb line" consistency in all things.

As a professional journalist,⁶ Tucker also insisted on a clear, precise style. He took great pride in raising *Liberty* far above the standards for layout and grammar of most other radical periodicals of the day.

Tucker's Background

Tucker was born on April 17, 1854, in South Dartmouth, Massachusetts.⁷ Coming from both a Quaker and a radical Unitarian background, Tucker grew up in an atmosphere of dissent and free inquiry, and attended the Friends Academy in New Bedford, a nearby seaport. At his parents' prompting, he later attended the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for three years.

In Boston, Tucker became politically involved in the 1872 presidential campaign of Horace Greeley and made the acquaintance of the veteran individualist anarchists Josiah Warren and William B. Greene through attending a convention of the New England Labor Reform League in Boston, a veritable hotbed of individualists. Greene, who served as the chairman, made an immediate and deeply favorable impression on

3. The article was a critique of Max Nordau's *Degeneration*. Reprints of Shaw's work had appeared earlier. The first such reprint was entitled "What's in a Name?" and appeared in the April 11, 1885, issue only a month after it had appeared in Henry Seymour's British periodical *The Anarchist*.

4. These excerpts were translated by George Schumm at Tucker's request. Tucker wrote: "I believe that my friend George Schumm, to whom I am indebted for the little knowledge of Nietzsche that I have, could either write, or translate from other sources, a much truer account of this new influence in the world of thought. Will he not do so, and thus make Liberty the means of introducing to America another great Egoist?" (*Liberty* 9 [October 1, 1892]: 3).

5. Nineteenth-century "American" anarchism tended to run along different ideological lines depending on whether it was based on native or immigrant thought. The native tradition ran from the writings of Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine, through William Lloyd Garrison, Henry David Thoreau, Josiah Warren, William Greene and Lysander Spooner directly to the individualist anarchism of Tucker. The more recent immigrant tradition owed much to the influx especially of German socialists and eventually evolved into communist or socialist anarchism (among other positions).

6. Tucker was an editorial writer for the *Boston Globe* and later for *Engineering Magazine* (New York), although he refused to write articles that might compromise his anarchist principles. He was especially proud of *Liberty's* typography, on which he expounded at length.

7. Perhaps the best portrait of Tucker, the man, remains Paul Avrich's "Benjamin Tucker and His Daughter" (Avrich 1988, 144–52).

the young MIT student.⁸ The introduction to both Greene and Warren had been facilitated by the abolitionist and labor reformer Ezra Heywood. Tucker would later look back on these initial encounters as the pivotal point in his career as a radical. At the convention, Tucker purchased Greene's book *Mutual Banking* (1850) and Warren's *True Civilization* (1869), along with some of Heywood's pamphlets.

An ongoing association with Heywood, the publisher of the Princeton labor-reform periodical *The Word*, soon followed.⁹ From his involvement in the labor-reform movement, Tucker became convinced that economic reform must underlie all other steps toward freedom. From a later admiration of the radical abolitionist Spooner, Tucker's voice acquired a radical antipolitical edge as well. To these influences were added the European flavor of Herbert Spencer, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Max Stirner, and Michael Bakounin.

In editing *Liberty*, Tucker both filtered and integrated the theories of such European thinkers with the uniquely American labor, freethought, and free-love movements to produce a rigorous system of individualist anarchism subsequently identified with him¹⁰. It became known as "philosophical anarchism" or, in a phrase often applied derogatorily, "Boston anarchism."

In 1876, in what may be considered Tucker's debut into radical circles, Heywood published Tucker's English translation of Proudhon's classic work *What Is Property?* Shortly afterward Tucker commenced the publication of a freethought periodical entitled *Radical Review* (New Bedford, Mass., 1877–1878), which lasted only four issues. A substantial portion of the four issues, however, was devoted to a partial translation of Proudhon's *Systems of Economical Contradictions*, also translated into English by Tucker.

Although Tucker was a prolific writer, virtually the entire body of his work, other than his translations, appeared as articles in *Liberty*. Some of these articles were subsequently issued as pamphlets. Tucker's key work, *Instead of a Book, by a Man Too Busy to Write One* (1893), was a compilation of articles selected from *Liberty* with the subtitle *A Fragmentary Exposition of Philosophical Anarchism*.

The Social Context of *Liberty*

In the late nineteenth century, Tucker and *Liberty* formed the vital core around which a radical individualist movement reconstituted itself and grew. In a wider social and

8. Greene's main impact seemed to have been to serve as a conduit to Tucker for Proudhonian ideas.

9. Although *The Word* clearly began as a vehicle for labor reform, Heywood's personal commitment to promoting birth control resulted in its pages' becoming increasingly devoted to free-love issues—much to Tucker's dismay.

10. The Freethought movement demanded the complete separation of church and state. The Free Love movement demanded that all sexual arrangements be left to the consent and consciences of those adults involved, with no control by legislation.

cultural context, however, *Liberty* was merely one among many radical periodicals published in America around the turn of the century.

The post-Civil War decades were a time of social turmoil and erratic economic growth, with many voices calling for reform. The ideologies expressed ranged from state socialism to populism, progressivism, and anarchism. A jumble of issues competed for space in newsprint: single-tax, temperance, women's suffrage, labor unions, land reform, birth control, state-funded education, and others. A wide array of movements offered different solutions to societal problems. Few of these movements were individualistic.

True to the maxim "war is the health of the state," the Civil War had nearly killed the radical individualist movement in America. The rampant growth of government caused by the war and its aftermath had created an environment increasingly hostile to individual rights. Moreover, the groups and personalities who had constituted the core of the individualist movement—such as William Lloyd Garrison and his abolitionist cadre—had been badly divided by internal conflicts largely about whether or not to support the war.

After the devastation, radical individualism tended to be expressed not as an integrated movement in its own right but as an extreme faction within other movements, particularly within labor-reform, freethought and free-love. Against this broader social and political backdrop, *Liberty* began its career. It became the focus around which a distinctive individualist movement coalesced and gained vigor.

Major Themes

Radical individualism in nineteenth-century America is commonly called individualist anarchism. As part of this continuing ideological tradition, *Liberty* neither emerged from nor operated within an intellectual vacuum. The tradition from which *Liberty* arose centered on two fundamental themes.

The first was "the sovereignty of the individual," sometimes expressed as "self-ownership"—a term popularized by Garrisonian abolitionism. Self-ownership maintains that every human being, simply by being a human being, has an inalienable moral jurisdiction over his or her own body and over what he or she produces. This universalizable right, or claim, was what Tucker meant whenever he used the Spencian phrase "the law of equal liberty." As Tucker (1893) wrote, "Equal liberty means the largest amount of liberty compatible with equality and mutuality of respect, on the part of individuals living in society, for their respective spheres of action" (65).

The second theme of individualist anarchism was economic: in general, the movement espoused a version of the labor theory of value, often expressed by the phrase "cost the limit of price."¹¹ Adherents of the labor theory of value claimed that all wealth is created by labor and usually implied that, therefore, all wealth belongs unquestionably to the laborer. Individualist anarchists considered this concept to be a

direct extension of self-ownership. As Tucker phrased it:

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. 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. (61)

***Liberty* Appears**

Liberty first issued on August 6, 1881, from Boston with an introduction typical of Tucker, then a journalist in the editorial department of the *Boston Globe*.¹² “It may be well to state at the outset,” he declared of *Liberty*, “that this journal will be edited to suit its editor, not its readers.”¹³ Despite this caveat, *Liberty* served as a relatively open forum for radical individualist debate, with many of the early unsigned editorials, often ascribed to Tucker, being actually written by Spooner or Henry Appleton.

Fittingly, the subtitle of *Liberty* was a quotation from Proudhon—“Liberty: not the daughter but the mother of order.” The journal’s primary commitment was to economic reform. It was broad enough in its interests, however, to feature a portrait of Sophie Perovskaya, a Russian nihilist martyr, in the center of its front page. As in issues thereafter, the first page was entitled “On Picket Duty” and presented a survey of contemporary periodicals, events, and personalities. The remainder of the issue dealt with labor, freethought, rights theory, and other antistatist issues.

Liberty served as a clearinghouse for contemporary individualist periodicals, with Tucker ever alert to the appearance of a relevant new journal in America or abroad, ever poised to condemn the deviations of an established one. He reprinted appropriate or egregious articles and often praised or engaged in debate with editors and contributors. Debates were especially common with British individualists such as J. Greevz Fisher, with whom *Liberty* disputed economic theories of interest and the tangled question of children’s rights.¹⁴

11. This key phrase was the title of the second section of *Science of Society*, Stephen Pearl Andrews’ 1852 presentation of Warren’s philosophy. *Liberty* serialized it, October 30, 1886, to December 31, 1887. Thereafter, it was published by Sarah E. Holmes, an intimate of Tucker’s, and advertised by *Liberty*.

12. In 1892, *Liberty* moved from Boston to New York as a consequence of Tucker’s becoming the editor of the New York periodical *Engineering Magazine*.

13. *Liberty* (1 [August 6, 1881]: 1). During its time of publication, *Liberty* showed the influence of several persons, not the least of whom were A. P. Kelly and Victor Yarros, each an associate editor for a period.

14. To the ears of modern individualists, the economic theories of the British individualists sound more “Austrian” and contemporary.

Debating Egoism and Natural Rights

Liberty's first major debate was an internal one among its own regular contributors over the newly emerging ideology of Stirnerite egoism. The debate was sparked by Stirner's pivotal work on law, property, and the state: *The Ego and His Own*.¹⁵ Sketching this debate provides a window into the tone and level of intellectual discussion *Liberty* promoted.

Stirner, whose real name was Johann Kaspar Schmidt, had published *Der Einzige* in German in 1845 to widespread but shortlived acclaim. In the late 1880s, interest in Stirner's ideas among American intellectuals was stirred by the translations and popularization provided by James L. Walker, Steven T. Byington,¹⁶ and John Beverly Robinson. Walker published the first twelve chapters of his pioneering work *Philosophy of Egoism* in the May 1890 to September 1891 issues of the anarchistic *Egoism*.¹⁷ Even before this series, however, *Liberty* had introduced egoism through the articles of Walker and of George Schumm, a close associate of Tucker who spent much of his life as a proofreader for the liberal weekly *The Nation*. The ensuing debate centered on whether egoism or natural rights formed the proper basis of radical individualist theory.

The March 6, 1886, issue of *Liberty* printed an article by Walker, who often wrote for Tucker under the pseudonym of Tak Kak. This article, "What Is Justice?" initiated the debate. Walker referred to such ideas as "right," "wrong," and "justice" as "merely words with vague, chimerical meanings."¹⁸ Previously, natural law had been widely assumed to be the foundation of individualism, radical or not. Now egoism rejected the concept of "ought" as a proper factor in governing man's emotions or behavior and claimed instead that enlightened self-interest provided the only realistic basis for human conduct.

Natural-rights theorists—John F. Kelly, Gertrude Kelly, Sidney H. Morse, William J. Lloyd—claimed there was an objective right and wrong to human behavior based on the nature of man and reality. Only by having an objective standard of values could people have a benchmark against which to judge whether government laws were just.

15. The *Ego and His Own* was published in an English translation by Steven T. Byington in 1907. Before then, much of American egoism was based on the secondary material produced by radicals who read German.

16. Some ambiguity exists about the spelling of Byington's first name. It sometimes appears in *Liberty* as "Steven," and certain secondary sources favor this spelling, but at other times *Liberty* lists him as "Stephen"; for example, Byington (1900).

17. *Egoism* (1890–97), edited by Georgia and Henry Replegle from California, was also a significant vehicle of Stirnerite philosophy. *Egoism* had considerable influence on Tucker. When Tucker agreed with J. Greevz Fisher's natural-rights position on children, its editor, Henry Replegle (under the pseudonym of "H") rushed to correct him. "H' very properly takes me to task," Tucker commented in *Liberty* (9 [June 29, 1895]: 3). Tucker changed his position to conform with this criticism.

18. Walker (1886, 8). James L. Walker apparently formulated his theory of egoism independently, only later discovering the great similarity to Stirner's theory.

The Stirnerite egoists were no less antigovernment than their natural-rights counterparts. They merely constructed anarchism along different lines. They rejected the state because it sought to chain the individual to the general will. This argument was not a rejection of society or its value, which Stirner called “union by advantage.” Society provided true and invaluable benefits to the individual, benefits the state disrupted. But the egoists rejected more than natural rights: they abandoned the concept of “principles” itself. Tak Kak declared that “the devotee of a fixed idea is mad. He either runs amuck, or cowers as mesmerized by the idea” (Walker 1887).

In early 1887, John Kelly, who was a staunch Spencerian, accurately assessed Tak Kak as saying “that the idea of right is a foolish phantasy, or that there are no rights but *mine*,—that is to say, that there are not rights, only might” (Kelly, 1887b, 7). The natural-rights side of the debate accused the egoists (Tak Kak, Tucker, Schumm) of destroying not only natural rights but also individualist anarchism.

The egoists argued that they were merely reducing the concept of rights to its proper place as an artificial, useful construct with which to organize society. Converted to egoism, Tucker continued to believe in what he called “society by contract,” but he came to view rights as by-products of contracts between individuals, not as existing on their own. Tucker suggested that rights were

a tacit agreement or understanding between human beings...as individuals living in daily contact and dependent upon some sort of cooperation with each other for the satisfaction of their daily wants, not to trespass upon each other’s individualism, the motive of this agreement being the purely egoist desire of each for the peaceful preservation of his own individuality. (Walker 1886, 8)

John Kelly leaped to attack Tucker’s version of rights as springing full grown from the act of contracting as being self-contradictory. He wrote, “What I contend is that it is impossible to base a society upon contract unless we consider a contract as having some binding effect, and that the binding effect of a particular contract can not be due to the contract itself” (Kelly 1887a, 7).

By this statement, Kelly pointed out what he believed to be the major philosophical flaw of egoism. A contract presupposes a moral system—for what does it mean to contract if not to voluntarily exchange what is mine for what is yours? Embedded in the very idea of contract is the concept of a voluntary as opposed to a forced exchange, and the concept of property, of mine versus thine. Property, the natural-rights advocates maintained, is a moral concept. To claim that rights spring from contract, they contended, is to invert the logical order. Contracts can occur only in relation to preexisting rights.

From this point of departure, the debate became more heated and complex. Eventually, the controversy polarized the contributors to *Liberty*, prompting many of the natural-rights advocates to withdraw permanently from its pages.

Thereafter, *Liberty* decidedly leaned toward egoism, though the content changed little as a result. The first English translation of Stirner's *The Ego and His Own* was published by Tucker and given such priority that he decided not to issue the February 1907 *Liberty* in order to concentrate on that work. "Thanks to Mr. Byington, the translator," Tucker wrote, "it is superior to any translation that has appeared in any other language and even to the German original." Tucker's commitment to egoism may be judged by his statement, "I have been engaged for more than 30 years in the propaganda of Anarchism, and have achieved somethings of which I am proud; but I feel that I have done nothing for the cause that compares in value with my publication of this illuminating document" (Tucker 1907, 1).

***Liberty* and Literature**

Although *Liberty* focused on politics and social theory, Tucker appreciated the importance of culture and its impact on societal attitudes.

For example, literature played a prominent role in *Liberty*'s emphasis on internationalism. Tucker kept current on the state of art and letters in France, England, and America. When Max Nordau published his antimodernist work *Degeneration* (*Entartung*), Tucker was discerning enough to solicit a critique from the one man best able to handle it—George Bernard Shaw. Shaw's subsequent essay, "A Degenerate's View of Nordau," was one of the first articles by the British literary giant to appear in America. Among the literary works *Liberty* translated and published were Claude Tillier's *My Uncle Benjamin*,¹⁹ Emile Zola's *Money*,²⁰ Octave Mirabeau's *A Chambermaid's Diary*,²¹ Felix Pyat's *The Rag Picker of Paris*,²² and Sophie Kropotkin's *The Wife of Number 4,237*²³—an account of her experience with her husband Pierre Kropotkin at Clairvaux prison.

This fascination with cosmopolitan literature led Tucker to publish *The Transatlantic* (1889–90), a biweekly literary magazine. The advertisement for this publication in *Liberty* promised: "Every number has a complete translated novelette, a piece of European Music, a Portrait of a Foreign Celebrity and part of a translated European Serial." *The Transatlantic* was said to consist of the "cream of the European press translated into English. Not only from foreign periodicals, but from books as well."²⁴ Predictably, much

19. This 312-page novel was translated from the French by Tucker and published in both cloth and paper. It was first advertised in *Liberty* (7 [November 29, 1890], 7).

20. This 435-page novel was translated from the French by Tucker and published in both cloth and paper. It was first advertised in *Liberty* (7 [April 4, 1891], 8).

21. This 460-page novel was translated from the French by Tucker and published in both cloth and paper. It was first advertised in *Liberty* (7 [December 1900], 8).

22. This 325-page novel was translated from the French by Tucker and issued in both paper and cloth. It was first advertised in *Liberty* (7 [July 12, 1890], 8).

23. This material was translated from the French by Sarah E. Holmes at Tucker's request and reprinted in five segments, beginning March 6, 1886.

of the literature that interested Tucker had political implications. When Oscar Wilde's plea for penal reform, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*,²⁵ was widely criticized, for example, Tucker enthusiastically endorsed the poem, urging all of his subscribers to read it. Tucker even published an American edition. From its early championing of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*²⁶ to a series of short stories by Francis du Bosque in its last issues, *Liberty* was a vehicle of controversial, avant-garde literature.

***Liberty* Abroad**

Tucker and *Liberty* were hybrids, rooted both in the uniquely American tradition of individualist anarchism and in some distinctively foreign traditions. The cosmopolitan Tucker acknowledged no intellectual boundaries and tolerated no political ones; national boundaries were simply physical manifestations of government, an institution he adamantly rejected.

Tucker's stress on internationalism was apparent from the first page of the first issue of *Liberty*, on which, under the heading "About Progressive People," he reported news of foreigners such as Percy Shelley, whose son had died; Patrick Egan, who had just purchased the "Dublin Irishman"; and Lord Kimberley, who had been suddenly converted to the cause of land reform. Here and in subsequent issues Tucker made particular note of foreign periodicals. For example, he declared to America that "the first number of a weekly journal called 'Victor-Hugo' recently appeared in Paris" (Tucker 1881b, 1).

His embrace of international anarchism was reflected in the many articles *Liberty* reprinted from foreign journals and in the correspondents who reported on the progress of liberty in their native countries. These correspondents included David Andrade (Australia), Vilfredo Pareto (Italy), and Wordsworth Donisthorpe (England), founder of the Liberty and Property Defense League.

Distinctly foreign events and concerns, such as the plights of Russian nihilists and Irish tenants, often received from *Liberty* more attention than American concerns. Tucker was outraged by the imprisonment of the Italian Amilcare Cipriani, the trial of Louise Michel, and the plight of Russian refugees in Paris. His attempt to establish individualist anarchism as an international movement was best exemplified by *Libertas*, a German-language version of *Liberty*, published by Tucker and edited by George and Emma Schumm. "This will be the only thoroughly Anarchistic German journal ever

24. *The Transatlantic*, subtitled *A Mirror of European Life and Letters*, was first advertised in *Liberty* (6 [October 5, 1889]: 8) as being issued on the 1st and 15th of the month.

25. Tucker published both a cloth and a paper edition, which were first advertised in *Liberty* (13 [May 1899], 8).

26. First advertised in *Liberty* (1 [July 22, 1882]: 4). Tucker appended a challenge to various officials responsible for the suppression of *Leaves of Grass*. He advised them of his intention to sell the work and offered to deliver a copy of it to them at their place of choice to be used in evidence against him. There were no takers.

published in the world,” Tucker wrote in announcing *Libertas*. “The paper will be of the same shape and size as the English *Liberty*, and the two will alternate in the order of publication—the English appearing one week and the German the next” (Tucker 1887, 4). *Libertas* was short lived.

The Demise of *Liberty*

Liberty came to a sudden, tragic end. In 1907, Tucker rented a ground-floor space at 502 Sixth Avenue in New York City, which housed “Benj. R. Tucker’s Unique Book Shop.” Some blocks away, at 225 Fourth Avenue in a structure known as the Parker Building, Tucker stored the stock of the books he published and the equipment to set print for *Liberty*. In January 1908,²⁷ the Parker Building was consumed by a fire that he described in what was to be the last issue of *Liberty*.

Tucker, who had been publishing and stockpiling material for thirty years, had pursued a deliberate policy of not holding insurance in order to protest the artificially high premiums propped up by the legal system. To offset the total loss, friends of *Liberty* launched a fund-raising drive, and Tucker continued to sell the stock that had survived by virtue of being at the Sixth Avenue address.

The efforts to salvage *Liberty* were not successful, however, and Tucker announced, “It is my intention to close up my business next summer, and, before January 1, 1909, go to Europe, there to publish *Liberty* (still mainly for America, of course) and such books and pamphlets as my remaining means may enable me to print” (Tucker 1908, 1–3).

These plans never materialized. The April 1908 issue of *Liberty* was the last. Tucker moved to Europe, living first in France until World War I erupted, then settling in Monaco, where he died at the age of eighty-five on June 22, 1939. Born seven years before the start of the Civil War, he died the same year that World War II began. For the last decades of his life, Tucker largely limited his writing efforts to correspondence with friends and acquaintances.

In many ways, Tucker exemplified golden-age radical individualism, which faltered in the face of growing statism and militarism. Like other individualists, Tucker watched this growth of the state and became pessimistic. From Europe he wrote, “I hate the age in which I live, but I do not hate myself for living in it.”²⁸

During the advance of statism, his views began to shift. It was no longer clear to

27. The date of the fire is reported as April 1908 in the usually reliable *Men Against the State*, by James J. Martin (1970), and as January 10, 1908, in Paul Eltzbacher “Benjamin R. Tucker” in *Anarchism: Exponents of Anarchist Philosophy* (1960). An account of the fire was published in the April 1908 issue of *Liberty*, in which Tucker announced ambiguously, “No later than January 10 this composing room, together with the entire stock of my publications and nearly all my plates, was absolutely wiped out by fire” (1).

28. Letter to Ewing C. Baskette, November 7, 1934. The New York Public Library maintains the Tucker Papers, with letters and documents relating to Benjamin Tucker.

Tucker that economic freedom alone could overcome the problems created by government monopoly. His pessimism increased with time. In a letter to his old friend C. L. Swartz, a despondent Tucker expressed his belief that civilization was in its death throes.

Perhaps this despair, coupled with his love of French culture, led Tucker to support the Allies in World War I. Although he supported the communists Sacco and Vanzetti against persecution by the American state, Tucker displayed less and less interest in American affairs. Two days after his death, he was buried in Monaco with a private, civil ceremony. He was survived by his wife and daughter.

Other than writing a few articles and conducting a correspondence with the editors of various journals, Tucker was unproductive in his last years. His death, like that of Spencer, marked the end of an era. Individualist anarchism as an organized movement in America would not appear again for many years.

Liberty: Success or Failure?

Was *Liberty* or, more generally, nineteenth-century radical individualism successful? The answer depends on the standard of success being employed. By its own stated goals of changing society toward individual freedom and away from state control, radical individualism was certainly a failure. But one of Tucker's greatest achievements lies in his many translations of foreign radicals, such as Proudhon, Bakounin, Hugo, Tolstoy, and Chernyshevsky.²⁹ History, though, is more likely to credit the impact of these works to the authors rather than their translator.

A more generous approach to *Liberty's* legacy, however, is to assess the movement's externally imposed limitations, asking how much it achieved in spite of them.

The last decades of the nineteenth century were a golden age of radicalism in the United States. Anarchists issued nearly 500 periodicals in a dozen languages, ranging from French to Yiddish. Only a minority of these periodicals were individualistic, for the dominant radical philosophy of the day was socialism in its many forms.

In essence, the Civil War had dealt such a severe blow to the individualist movement that it never recovered. The war ushered in conscription, the suspension of habeas corpus, widespread censorship, military law, political prisoners, and legal tender legislation, as well as soaring taxes and tariffs. The status and functions of government inflated as never before.

Equally important, the prevailing view of government changed. With the Declaration of Independence and the cry of "no taxation without representation," government had been deemed to rule through the consent of the people. When the North refused to permit the South to withdraw its consent through secession and when it

29. Tucker's influence extended beyond the political sphere. Eugene O'Neill claimed that Tucker had deeply affected "his inner self," and Whitman exclaimed, "I love him: he is plucky to the bone" (Woodcock 1962, 459).

imposed an unpopular government on the South, the consensual view of government was severely weakened. Moreover, instead of viewing the relatively autonomous states as forming a loose federal union—as composing “*these* United States”—a new description arose, “*the* United States.” As this centralized nation was deemed to be “One Union under God,” the mystification of the American state proceeded.

In addition, the Civil War had caused extremely divisive schisms within the individualist movement. Some of the abolitionists had welcomed the conflict as a holy war to end slavery. Others had considered it to be an unavoidable evil in pursuit of good and therefore supported the North as the least objectionable alternative. Even the staunch pacifist Garrison had supported the war. His support had horrified other abolitionists, such as Heywood and Spooner, who saw the war as a massive violation of life and property, which could not be justified by reference to any goal. By the end of the war, individualist principles had been so compromised and the state had achieved such prominence that the individualist anarchist movement could not be a significant force in American politics.

After 1865, radical individualism existed as an extreme faction within various other reform movements such as freethought, free love, and the labor movement. Although the basis of a systematic philosophy existed in the writings of theorists such as Warren and Spooner, it lacked cohesion. Not until Tucker’s publication of *Liberty* did radical individualism become a distinct, independent movement functioning in its own name and seeking its own unique goals.

This consolidation was the primary accomplishment of *Liberty*. It discussed and integrated ethics, economics, and politics to build a sophisticated system of philosophy. For three decades it provided a core around which a revitalized movement could flourish. During those years Tucker issued an unremitting flood of pamphlets and books promoting individualist thought. Even in the last days of *Liberty*, translations such as that of Paul Eltzbacher’s *Anarchism* appeared. Eltzbacher’s classic *Anarchism: Exponents of the Anarchist Philosophy* was translated by Byington. As with many of the translations offered by *Liberty*, the imprint of the anarchist translator was keenly felt, not only in the word choices but also in Byington’s many added notes and his preface.³⁰

Tucker himself was acutely aware of the slow progress of social reform. He wrote, “The fact is that Anarchist society was started thousands of years ago, when the first glimmer of the idea of liberty dawned upon the human mind, and has been advancing ever since—not steadily advancing, to be sure, but fitfully, with an occasional reversal of the current.”³¹

30. For example, in the chapter entitled “Benjamin R. Tucker,” Byington comments on what he considers to be a misinterpretation of Tucker’s words “the law of equal liberty”: “TRANSLATOR’S NOTE: Eltzbacher does not seem to perceive that Tucker uses this as a ready-made phrase, coined by Herbert Spencer and designating Spencer’s well-known formula that in justice ‘every man has freedom to do all that he wills, provided he infringes not on the equal freedom of any other man’” (Eltzbacher 1960, chap. 8, n. 11).

Yet radical individualism hindered itself. The historian David De Leon in *The American as Anarchist* (1978) observed: “Nineteenth century anarchism failed primarily because it seemed archaic in the twentieth century” (82). Perhaps most destructively, individualism clung to the labor theory of value and refused to incorporate the economic theories arising within other branches of individualist thought, theories such as marginal utility. Unable to embrace statism, the stagnant movement failed to adequately comprehend the logical alternative to the state—a free market.

References

- Andrews, Stephen Pearl. 1852. *The Science of Society*. New York.
- Avrich, Paul. 1988. *Anarchist Portraits*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Byington, Stephen. 1900. Marriage and Kindred Contracts. *Liberty* 14 (December): 2–3
- De Leon, David. 1978. *The American as Anarchist: Reflections on Indigenous Radicalism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.
- Eltzbacher, Paul. 1960. *Anarchism: Exponents of Anarchist Philosophy*. Translated by Steven T. Byington and edited by James J. Martin. Plainview, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press.
- Greene, William Bradford. 1850. *Mutual Banking*. West Brookfield, Mass.
- Kelly, John. 1887a. A Final Statement. *Liberty* 4 (July 30): 7.
- . 1887b. Morality and Its Origin. *Liberty* 4 (February 26): 7.
- Kroptokin, Sophie. 1886. The Wife of Number 4,237. *Liberty* (March 6–May 22).
- Martin, James J. 1970. *Men against the State: The Expositors of Individualist Anarchism in America, 1827–1908*. Colorado Springs: Ralph Myles.
- Mirabeau, Octave. 1900. *A Chambermaid's Diary*. New York: B. R. Tucker.
- Proudhon, Pierre Joseph. 1968. *What Is Property? An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government*. New York: Fertig.
- Pyat, Felix. 1890. *The Rag-Picker of Paris*. New York: B. R. Tucker.
- Stirner, Max. 1845. *Der Einzige und Sein Eigenthem*. Translated by Steven Byington as *The Ego and His Own* (New York, 1907).
- Swartz, Clarence Lee, ed. 1926. *Individual Liberty*.
- Tillier, Claude. 1890. *My Uncle Benjamin*. Boston: B. R. Tucker.
- Tucker, Benjamin R. 1881a. On Picket Duty. *Liberty* 1 (August 6): 1.
- . 1881b. About Progressive People. *Liberty* 1 (August 6): 1.
- . 1887. Anarchy in Germany. *Liberty* 5 (December 31): 4.
- . 1926. *Individual Liberty*. Edited by C.L. Swartz. New York: Vanguard.

31. *Liberty* (December 1900). Ultimately, Tucker himself seemed to lose faith in the inevitability of liberty. In an interview with Paul Avrich, his daughter Oriole reported, “I was never really an anarchist. I don’t think it would ever work. Neither did Father at the end. He was very pessimistic about the world and in his political outlook” (Avrich 1988, 152).

- . 1893. *Instead of a Book, by a Man Too Busy to Write One; A Fragmentary Exposition of Philosophical Anarchism*. New York: B. R. Tucker.
- . 1907. On Picket Duty. *Liberty* 16 (April): 1.
- . 1908. On Picket Duty. *Liberty* 17 (April): 1–3.
- . [1881–1908] 1970. *Liberty: Not the Daughter but the Mother of Order*. New York: Greenwood Reprint.
- Walker, James L. 1886. What Is Justice? *Liberty* 3 (March 6): 8.
- . 1887. Egoism. *Liberty* 4 (April 9): 5–7.
- . 1905. *The Philosophy of Egoism*. Denver.
- Warren, Josiah. 1863. *True Civilization an Immediate Necessity and the Last Ground of Hope for Mankind. Being the Results and Conclusions of Thirty-nine Years' Laborious Study and Experiments in Civilization As It Is, and in Different Enterprises for Reconstruction*. Boston.
- . 1869. *True Civilization: A Subject of Vital and Serious Interest to All People but Most Immediately to Men and Women of Labor and Sorrow*. Cliftondale, Mass.
- Wilde, Oscar. 1899. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. New York: B. R. Tucker.
- Woodcock, George. 1962. *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*. Cleveland: Meridian.
- Zola, Émile. 1890. *Money*. Boston: B.R.Tucker.

SUBSCRIBE NOW AND RECEIVE A FREE BOOK!



“*The Independent Review* does not accept pronouncements of government officials nor the conventional wisdom at face value.”

—**JOHN R. MACARTHUR**, Publisher, *Harper’s*

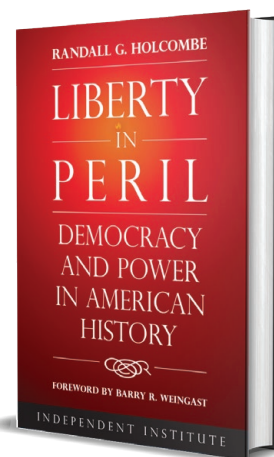
“*The Independent Review* is excellent.”

—**GARY BECKER**, Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences

Subscribe to [The Independent Review](#) and receive a free book of your choice such as *Liberty in Peril: Democracy and Power in American History*, by Randall G. Holcombe.

Thought-provoking and educational, [The Independent Review](#) is blazing the way toward informed debate. This quarterly journal offers leading-edge insights on today’s most critical issues in economics, healthcare, education, the environment, energy, defense, law, history, political science, philosophy, and sociology.

Student? Educator? Journalist? Business or civic leader? Engaged citizen? This journal is for YOU!



Order today for more **FREE** book options

SUBSCRIBE

The Independent Review is now available digitally on mobile devices and tablets via the Apple/Android App Stores and Magzter. Subscriptions and single issues start at \$2.99. [Learn More.](#)

