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The *Liberty* Debate on Participation in Politics

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WENDY MCELROY

To appreciate the debate that erupted in Benjamin R. Tucker's individualist-anarchist periodical *Liberty* (Boston 1881–92, New York 1892–1908) over the propriety of electoral politics, it is necessary to understand the prevailing view of the State expressed by that nineteenth-century tradition.¹ The most fundamental and integrating theme of that tradition was the primacy of individuals, which implied an extreme respect for their sovereignty. Accordingly, individualist-anarchists wished to eliminate all but defensive force from human interaction. Tucker proposed what he called “a society by contract” to replace the society by force he saw around him.²

The Enemy: Unjust Authority

Tucker understood unjust authority as “any coercive force not developed spontaneously and naturally out of the constitution of the individual himself or herself.”³ For Tucker, the dual buttresses of “society by force” were the authority of the Church and the authority of the State, a union he referred to as a “double-headed monster.”⁴ He sought to eliminate both. In place of the forceful jurisdiction of Church and State, he wished to establish the self-jurisdiction of the individual within a voluntary society.

Tucker carefully distinguished the authority of the Church and the authority of the State, or Government.⁵ The former did not necessarily use force, whereas the latter was inherently invasive. Tucker did not denounce the act of joining a church as a personal choice or the acceptance of religion as a personal code of morality. Indeed, he admired

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The Independent Review, v.IV, n.3, Winter 2000, ISSN 1086-1653, Copyright © 1999, pp. 377–391

certain religious sects, such as the Quakers, who had contributed heavily to the abolitionist movement, a forerunner of individualist-anarchism.⁶ But Tucker absolutely rejected the authority of the Church: that is, he rejected the incorporation of religious values or of privileges for the Church into law. He wrote, “We intend no disrespect to God as an ideal that an individual may hold dear provided such God assumes no authority over others. . . . It is God the office-seeker and office-holder with whom we take issue, and it is only such a God . . . that makes the politician possible” (Tucker 1881b, 3).

Tucker acknowledged that noble intentions might well underlie the Christian principle of loving one’s neighbor. In fact, if the principle of brotherly love were consistently applied, a crime-free society based on human cooperation might be the result. But to enforce brotherly love by force or law was a contradiction in terms. Tucker argued that to convert the principle into “a ‘commandment’ is the utter denial . . . and a perversion of the word ‘love.’”⁷

He was equally clear about what constituted the authority of the State, which an individual could never rightfully join or employ. “The anarchist defines government as invasion,” he explained, “nothing more or less” (Tucker 1893, 22). Its secondary feature was territoriality, “the assumption of authority over a given area and all within it, exercised generally for the double purpose of more complete oppression of its subjects and extension of its boundaries” (Tucker 1893, 22). A State claimed a monopoly of force and of jurisdiction over a given territory and over all people within that territory,

1. For an overview of the individualist-anarchist tradition and *Liberty’s* pivotal role within it, see McElroy 1998. For a more general treatment of the tradition, see Martin 1970.

2. Tucker was careful to defend the right of self-defense. He wrote: “He who resists another’s attempt to control is not an aggressor, an invader, a governor, but simply a defender, a protector” (1893, 23), and “Anarchism justifies the application of force to invasive men” (81). Moreover, he defended the use of a collective defensive force, believing that if a victim “has a right to use force himself for such a purpose [reclaiming of property], he has a right to secure such co-operative force from others as they are willing to extend” (157). Tucker also declared that “there is nothing sacred in the life of an invader” (*Liberty* 7 [August 30, 1890]: 4).

3. As quoted in William O. Reichert, “Benjamin R. Tucker on Free Thought and Good Citizenship,” in Coughlin, Hamilton, and Sullivan 1981 (169).

4. See *Liberty* 1 [August 20, 1881]: 2–3 for more on Tucker’s theory of the double-headed monster.

5. Tucker tended to use the words *State* and *Government* as synonyms. At one point, after defining the State as “aggression,” he wrote, “Aggression, invasion, government, are interconvertible terms” (1893, 23). Elsewhere, however, he distinguished the State and the Government. The State consisted of two factors: aggression and territoriality. Government referred only to aggression. Government was the enforcement arm of the State and its most visible aspect. Adding to the confusion, Tucker, like many anarchists, also used *government* in the sense of the “self-government” of the individual or of a voluntary community. At one point he declared, “The State is not government, since it denies Liberty” (*Liberty* 1 [April 15, 1882]: 2–3).

6. Abolitionists also tended to view government and religion as joining hands in support of human slavery. It could be argued that the first American individualist anarchist was William Lloyd Garrison, the main figure within abolitionism.

7. As quoted in William A. Reichert, “Benjamin R. Tucker on Free Thought and Good Citizenship,” in Coughlin, Hamilton, and Sullivan 1981 (167).

for example, a monopoly over the right to resolve disputes through a police and a court system in order to protect society against deteriorating into unrestrained violence. Tucker considered such protective measures to be, in reality, an outright invasion of person and property.

The State maintained itself primarily through two invasive monopolies—the power to tax and to issue money. Through these monopolies, the State negated individuals’ “freedom . . . in their industrial, commercial, social, domestic, and individual lives” (Tucker 1893, 57). The State also invaded personal liberty by establishing monopolies over a wide variety of services, thus denying choice to the individual. As an example of such a State monopoly, Tucker pointed to national defense. He argued,

Defence is a service, like any other service. It is labor both useful and desired, and therefore an economic commodity subject to the law of supply and demand. In a free market this commodity would be furnished at the cost of production. The production and sale of this commodity are now monopolized by the State. The State, like almost all monopolists, charges exorbitant prices. Like almost all monopolists, it supplies a worthless, or nearly worthless, article. (Tucker 1893, 32)

Moreover, in contrast with a society by contract, the State did not allow members to secede peacefully, but demanded they continuously recognize its authority. Statists have often argued that, by continuing to live in a particular society, an individual agrees to be bound by its rules. Tucker countered, “To indefinitely waive one’s right of secession is to make one’s self a slave. Now, no man can make himself so much a slave as to forfeit the right to issue his own emancipation proclamation” (Tucker 1893, 48).

Nor could a man forfeit the right to defend himself against aggression. Therefore, a society by contract had no right to take action against a “non-contracting party” who did not attempt to enter its territory. As Tucker wrote,

if, somewhere between these divisions of territory, had lived prior to the formation of the association, some individual on his homestead, who . . . had declined to join in forming the association, the contracting parties would have had no right to evict him, compel him to join, make him pay for any incidental benefits that he might derive from proximity to their association, or restrict him in the exercise of any previously enjoyed right to prevent him from reaping these benefits. (Tucker 1893, 44–45)

To those who maintained what is currently called a love-it-or-leave-it stance, Tucker replied, “By what right am I thrust into the alternative of recognizing the machinery of the State as the only chance left me in rescuing my life, liberty, and possession from invasion?” (Tucker 1882c, 2).

Our Primary Enemy: The State

In the wake of events such as the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* and the growing popularity of evolutionary theory, Tucker believed the authority of the Church had been severely shaken. But he also believed that the masses had merely transferred their obedience from the Church and to the secular State.⁸ Tucker wrote passionately of "those who have lost their faith in gods only to put it in governments, those who have ceased to be Church-worshippers only to become State-worshippers; those who have abandoned pope for king or czar; and priest for president or parliament;—have indeed changed their battle ground, but none the less are foes of liberty still" (Tucker 1881b, 2).

Perhaps it was this belief that led Tucker to shift his focus as he moved from the first periodical he edited, the *Radical Review* (New Bedford, Mass., 1877–78) to the subsequent one, *Liberty*. The former publication can be viewed primarily as a freethought periodical—that is, one that advocated the separation of Church and State, leaving all spiritual choices to the individual.⁹ *Liberty* was focused on discrediting the authority of the State rather than that of the Church. In doing so, Tucker stressed psychological rather than physical disobedience to the State: that is, he stressed the need for people to withdraw their consent and the loyalty upon which the authority of the State rested. He believed that the very concept of the State—along with, especially, the illusion of its legitimacy—was what commanded obedience from the American citizenry. In essence, this concept was that any person or body of people could properly impose law upon peaceful, dissenting individuals. Destroying any particular manifestation of the State would be folly without first destroying the institution's underlying legitimacy, which lent it the air of just authority.¹⁰ Tucker wrote, "Our purpose is the abolition, not only of all existing States, but the State itself. . . . It is not a thing that can be especially defined. . . . The State is a principle, a philosophical error in social existence" (Tucker 1882a, 2).¹¹ Perhaps because of Tucker's philosophical approach to the State—that is, his rejection of the concept of

8. The idea that the masses transferred their obedience from the Church to the State was common in nineteenth- and twentieth-century anarchism. In his essay "Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism," the twentieth-century anarchist Rudolf Rocker wrote, "And just as the 'will of God' was used to justify the will of privileged castes, so today there hides behind the will of the state only the selfish interests of those who feel called upon to interpret this will in their own sense and to force it upon the people" (Eltzbacher 1960, 230).

9. To say that the *Radical Review's* primary topic was freethought does not diminish the importance of its other political and cultural discussions. For example, Tucker's translation of Pierre Joseph Proudhon's *Systems of Economical Contradictions* occupied a great deal of space within the four issues, as did reviews of recently published literary works.

10. Etienne La Boetie is recognized as the first political philosopher to focus on the strategy of withdrawing legitimacy from the State. In the sixteenth century, he wrote: "Obviously there is no need of fighting to overcome the tyrant, for he is automatically defeated if the country refuses to consent to its own enslavement: it is not necessary to deprive him of anything, but simply to give him nothing" (La Boetie 1975, 50).

11. One of the most ambitious attempts to define *Liberty's* "philosophical anarchism" was William Bailie's nineteen-part series of articles entitled "Problems of Anarchism," which ran in the first eight months of 1893.

the State rather than merely of its specific manifestations—his form of anarchism became known as “philosophical anarchism.”

Destroying the Concept

To destroy the State as a concept, Tucker believed it was necessary to educate a sufficient number of people in the principles of anarchy.¹² He argued against the use of force to promote anarchism because such a strategy only strengthened the State. As long as the common man did not accept anarchist principles—that is, as long as the State was viewed as legitimate—any violence on the part of radicals would be seen as justifying the inevitable backlash of State tyranny that would follow. In short, violence by anarchists further legitimized the State.

Tucker also believed that voting legitimized the State by allowing politicians to claim they ruled through the will of the people. Thus, the majority of those associated with *Liberty* considered any participation in electoral politics to be a violation of anarchist principles. They rejected both bullets and ballots as means of reform or revolution.¹³ Although the *Liberty* circle rejected voting because it legitimized the State, two other basic reasons had nothing to do with legitimization. One was a matter of principle, the other a matter of strategy.

As a matter of anarchist principle, electoral politics—the process of electing a person to a position of power over others—was considered inherently invasive because the power would be exercised over people who had not consented to it as well as over those who had consented through their voting. In other words, a politician claimed jurisdiction over those who had not voted or who had voted against him as well as over his supporters. Thus, anyone who voted for a successful political candidate was an accomplice to an act of “legal force” committed against unconsenting third parties.

As a matter of strategy, electoral politics was rejected because power corrupts, as the British classical liberal Lord Acton famously observed. Even the purest and best-intentioned reformer would be degraded by the process of assuming and exercising unjust power. This outcome was to be expected not merely of the politician but also of the judge, the policeman, and anyone else involved in making and enforcing unjust laws. One of *Liberty's* regular columns, sardonically entitled “The Beauty of Government,” was devoted to this theme. Because Tucker opposed the concept of the State itself, he did not condemn merely the vicious real-world consequences of electoral politics. He denied that the institution, by its very nature, could ever be just or legitimate.

12. When discussing tax resistance, Tucker offered the figure of one-fifth of the population. He asked the reader to imagine “the enormous and utterly irresistible power of a large and intellectual minority, comprising say one-fifth of the population in any given locality, refusing to pay taxes” (1893, 412). He believed the State would have to do more, in both spending money and taking oppressive measures, to collect the withheld taxes than the other four-fifths of the people would be willing to support.

13. For more on this theme, see *Neither Bullets nor Ballots: Essays on Voluntarism*, 1983, or posted back issues of *The Voluntarist* at <http://users.aol.com/vlntryst/toc.html>.

Attacking Legitimacy

More than any other figure, the veteran abolitionist and anarchist Lysander Spooner set the antistatist tone for Tucker and *Liberty*.¹⁴ Tucker's extreme admiration of Spooner led him to publish his mentor's lengthy "Letter to Grover Cleveland, On His False, Self-Contradictory, and Ridiculous Inaugural Address" in nineteen installments in *Liberty*. He later issued the work as a book.¹⁵ For Spooner, too, a free society was based on voluntary association, and a legitimate government required the consent of every person over whom it claimed jurisdiction. Without an individual's explicit consent or delegation of authority, the government had no rightful claim over that person.

What would such delegation entail? According to Spooner, it would require that the person possess the right being delegated; that the delegation be explicit and not merely assumed; and that the person be able to withdraw his delegation—otherwise he would have given away not simply the exercise of a particular right but his entire liberty. In short, only those people who had voted for the government could be deemed to have delegated their rights to it. Those who had not so voted were free from that government's jurisdiction.¹⁶

Even those who had voted for a particular politician or party could withdraw their support, much as they could cancel the services offered by a lawyer. Indeed, this capacity reflects the meaning of the term *inalienable rights*: the rights belonged to the individual to exercise or not, to assign or to reclaim. As Spooner explained this limitation, "No man can delegate, or give away his own natural right to liberty . . . or . . . give to another, any right of arbitrary dominion over himself; for that would be giving

14. This is not to say that Tucker and Spooner held identical views on electoral politics. Spooner rejected the idea that by voting you offer sanction to the State. In *No Treason*, he argued that voting could be a means of self-defense, but it is not clear that he actually advocated voting defensively. Whatever strategy he personally advocated, Spooner clearly rejected the results of electoral politics: that is, politicians in office. In an 1845 letter from Spooner to his friend George Bradburn of the Liberty Party, he wrote: "I do not rely upon political machinery . . . for the principle of it is wrong; for it admits . . . that under a constitution, the law depends on the will of the majorities, for the time being, as indicated by the acts of the legislature" (*Liberty* 1 [June 10, 1882]: 4). Spooner was something of an annoyance to Bradburn, who, as an abolitionist, had heralded the antislavery Liberty Party. Although Spooner fully shared a commitment to abolitionism, he refused on principle to vote for Liberty Party candidates.

15. The full title is telling: *A Letter to Grover Cleveland, On His False Inaugural Address, the Usurpations and Crimes of Lawmakers and Judges, and the Consequent Poverty, Ignorance and Servitude of the People*. Equally interesting for the legitimacy question are the titles of two earlier works by Spooner: *A Letter to Thomas F. Bayard: Challenging His Right and the Right of All Other So-called Senators and Representatives in Congress—to Exercise any Legislative Power Whatever over the People of the United States and Natural Law; or the Science of Justice; A Treatise on Natural Law, Natural Justice, Natural Rights, Natural Liberty, and Natural Society, Showing that All Legislation Whatsoever Is an Absurdity, a Usurpation and a Crime*.

16. Moreover, Spooner doubted whether even those who voted for the government, as constructed by the Constitution, could be said to render consent. He believed that a secret ballot created a secret government, to which no one owed allegiance and for which no one took responsibility. For more on Spooner's theories of "legitimate" government, see *No Treason*, no 1, no. 2, and no. 6. Of what was originally intended to be a six-part series, only three segments appeared.

himself away as a slave. And this no one can do. Any contract to do so is necessarily an absurd one and has no validity” (Spooner 1882a, 2).

Predictably, Spooner objected strenuously to anyone’s holding political office, regardless of who the particular officeholder might be.¹⁷ By what right, Spooner asked, can one person occupy a position of power over the life of another peaceful human being if that other human being has not delegated the power? Spooner could discover no circumstances in which such power would be proper.

The Debate in *Liberty* Begins

Tucker clearly and strongly stated his position on voting and officeholding: he denied that either ballots or bullets (politics or violence) could be used to construct liberty.¹⁸ In an editorial, he nicely captured the intransigence of his position:

If liberty has a weak-kneed friend who is contemplating a violation of his anarchist principles by voting just for once, may these golden words from John Morley’s “Compromise” recall him to his better self: “A principle, if it be sound, represents one of the larger expediencies. To abandon that for the sake of some seeming expediency of the hour is to sacrifice the greater good for the less on no more creditable ground than that the less is nearer.” (Tucker 1884, 4)

Two years later, in the pages of *Liberty* on April 17, 1886, the American anarchist Henry Appleton took up the theme of “expediency” in political activity and alliances. Indeed, Appleton’s opening the subject had been occasioned by his having attended a lecture entitled “Anarchism and Expediency” delivered by another *Liberty* contributor, Gertrude B. Kelly. Although he complimented “the subtlety of the young lady’s intellect” and “her personal loveliness,” Appleton wished to air a disagreement with Kelly’s arguments and those of “Brother Tucker.”¹⁹ The disagreement revolved around whether it was proper for an anarchist to support a popular

17. *Liberty* presented this particular argument of Spooner’s in two parts. The first was entitled “A Letter to Thomas F. Bayard” (*Liberty* 2 [May 27, 1882]: 2–3); the second “A Second Letter to Thomas F. Bayard” *Liberty* 2 [May 17, 1884]: 6–7).

18. The phrase “neither bullets nor ballots” became popular in nineteenth-century individualist anarchism. Tucker explained its meaning: “What is the ballot? It is neither more nor less than a paper representative of the bayonet, the billy, and the bullet. It is a labor-saving device for ascertaining on which side force lies and bowing to the inevitable. The voice of the majority saves bloodshed, but it is no less the arbitrament of force than is the decree of the most absolute of despots backed by the most powerful of armies” (Tucker 1893, 426–27).

19. It is not likely that Appleton was engaging in sarcasm, inasmuch as he had a high opinion of Kelly. Moreover, the casualness of the address, “Brother Tucker,” probably expressed a feeling of comfort and equality with Tucker. Appleton was a newspaperman (Providence, R.I.), a former contributor to Tucker’s first periodical, the *Radical Review*, and one of the most frequent contributors to the early issues of *Liberty*, where his articles were usually signed “X” and sometimes “Honorius.” In other words, he probably felt free to take liberties with peers.

labor organization of the day, the Knights of Labor, which used political activity to further its goals. Appleton clearly opposed the use of ballot boxes to solve the problems of labor. However, he believed in expediency. Moreover, he had infiltrated the Knights of Labor in an attempt to achieve certain goals through the organization, and he was determined to defend his actions. He wrote:

Possibly Brother Tucker has yet to learn that compromise is a true scientific principle under Anarchism, and that in its proper sense it is logically enjoined upon the faithful. I have never found a final settlement of any problem yet, save that of my own ignorance: therefore do I rise for prayers, and ask Sister Kelly and Brother Tucker to keep me from going astray. (Appleton 1886)

Directly beneath Appleton's article, Tucker published one of his own entitled "Plumb-Line or Cork-Screw, Which?" He prefaced his lengthy reply with the words, "Compelling this discussion, then, he must take the responsibility of its results. If he finds that it involves the saying of things to him unpleasant, harsh, and severe, the blame will rest with him for forcing me, his friend, to speak of him in public with that frankness" (Tucker 1886a, 4).

Tucker disputed the main claim of Appleton's article, which had been used to argue for compromise. Appleton claimed to have converted many Irishmen to anarchism through a series of letters he had written to the *Irish World* under the pseudonym of "Honorius."²⁰ In those letters, Appleton had compromised anarchism by refusing to condemn a certain organization. "Instead of this [expressing condemnation]," he wrote, "I 'compromised,' by quietly fishing out whatever I could find of Anarchistic method in the Irish movement, calling it by some other name than Anarchism" (Appleton 1886). Tucker questioned the claimed effectiveness of that strategy: "And after all how many staunch Anarchists, with a deep-rooted comprehension of Anarchism did the 'Honorius' letters ever make?" Answering his own question, Tucker reckoned probably not more than half a dozen. He also wondered whether the letters were truly the cause of the conversions in anything more than a proximate sense.

Appleton had claimed Gertrude Kelly as one among the ranks of those converted by his writings in *Irish World*. Tucker countered, "She became an Anarchist principally because she had brains in her head and was bound to become one in very short order." He denied that Appleton had provided anyone with even an "adequate idea of the meaning of liberty" (Tucker 1886a, 4). Instead, Tucker attributed the converts to

20. *Irish World* was a radical Irish "no-rent" periodical edited by Patrick Ford, in whose pages various contributors to *Liberty* appeared. For example, J. K. Ingalls and Sidney Morse (the latter under the pseudonym "Phillip") contributed. Tucker thought well enough of the periodical to declare, "*Liberty* is not always satisfied with it . . . but, all things considered, deems it the most potent agency for good now at work on this planet" (*Liberty* 1 [August 6, 1881]: 3).

another anarchist writer, “H,” or “Phillip,” both pseudonyms of Sidney H. Morse, whose articles appeared in *Irish World* at the same time as Appleton’s letters.²¹

The next issue of *Liberty* contained an article entitled “Liberty and Compromise,” by a more restrained Appleton. Again Tucker responded, in a more muted fashion; but the flurry over the issue of compromise as a strategy continued, even though the bitterness of Tucker’s initial response could not have encouraged other contributors to openly support such “compromises” as voting or aligning with organizations that used the ballot.

In his last contribution and goodbye to *Liberty*, Appleton himself confessed to having been intimidated by Tucker.²² Appleton explained why he was “sneaking out of the ranks.” He declared himself to be more of a “builder” than a “fighter.” By this Appleton meant that he wished to construct a system to replace the State rather than merely to rail against the existing order, as he implied Tucker was doing. Like several subsequent contributors, Appleton had been driven away not so much by disagreement as by the vicious manner in which the argument had been conducted.²³

The Debate Resumes

Nearly ten years later, the young Russian anarchist and associate editor of *Liberty* Victor Yarros published an article titled “Anarchists in Politics.” It began, “No question seems to be simpler at first blush than that of the proper attitude of Anarchists toward political struggles. Absolute non-participation is obviously the clear deduction, the inevitable corollary from the general Anarchistic philosophy. Yet. . . .” (Yarros 1896a, 2). Following his provocative “yet,” Yarros asked whether, if some immediate and practical good could be achieved by casting a vote, an anarchist could legitimately do so. Was it impossible that the immediate and practical good could be so beneficial as to outweigh the possibility of a vague far-off harm such as legitimizing the State? Yarros concluded, “Answer this question in the negative, and all reasons for boycotting politics vanish” (3).

According to Yarros, although Leo Tolstoy’s Christian anarchism eschewed violence, scientific anarchism should adopt a more “situational” ethics, namely, the position “that the ethical propriety of men’s acts must be determined by the requirements and possibilities of the situation.” Part of the situation was that people still adhered “to governmentalism,” and hence government would have to be abolished gradually.

21. In the same issue as this exchange, there appeared a letter to the editor praising a lecture Appleton had recently delivered to the Knights of Labor. It was from Victor Yarros, with whom Tucker would later lock horns over the issue of voting.

22. By this point, however, Appleton himself had proven willing to sling intellectual mud. He wrote that “in Tucker’s eyes I may be a cork-screw, and he in my eyes an intellectual pollywog” (*Liberty* 4 [July 17, 1886]: 5).

Given the context of gradualism, Yarros did not consider it “inconsistent to use government to abolish government” so long as the gains to anarchism outweighed the damage done. In this case, voting would be a matter of personal preference, not of principle.

I think I should vote in the case supposed, but I am not at all sure that Mr. Tucker would. . . . The behavior of any individual Anarchist would depend on the vividness of his imagination, the intensity of his feelings, the bent of his mind. Some would unhesitatingly make an exception to their general rule, while others would adhere to the rule. (Yarros 1896a, 3)

In the same issue, in an article titled “Principle, Policy, and Politics,” Tucker replied. He admitted that there were circumstances in which he would use a ballot to further his goals. They were the same circumstances in which he was willing to use dynamite and risk injury to innocent parties. He cautioned Yarros against an implication of the argument in his article:

Anarchists should be careful to make it plain that to them the use of the ballot is something more and worse than a trivial act of inutility. Mr. Yarros, to be sure, declares parenthetically that use of the ballot is aggression, but certainly the tendency of his article as a whole is to make light of its aggressive aspect. (Tucker 1896a)

In the following issue, Yarros defused the charge of making light of aggression by stating that to “argue in *Liberty* that majority rule is aggression is to burst in an open door. I passed over the question as too well settled for argumentation.” Yet, while admitting the aggressive nature of majority rule, Yarros denied that voting was necessarily an act of force. He offered the example of voting in favor of free trade by voting down a proposed measure that would enforce protectionism. What if one vote alone would ensure free trade? How would casting that one vote violate anyone’s rights?²⁴ “If no one’s rights are violated,” Yarros concluded, “those who vote for free trade are not guilty of any offence. . . . What I did was to vote for freedom, for the absence of restrictions. I injured nobody and hence have not transgressed the limits of equal liberty” (Yarros 1896b). Yarros declared such noninvasive voting to be an exception to the general rule that ballots and bullets were inherently aggressive. Instead, he maintained that casting a referendum ballot was an act of self-defense because “the majority has a perfect right, under equal freedom, to prevent the minority from

23. Martin (1970) inaccurately ascribes Appleton’s departure to the viciousness of another debate, namely, the subsequent one about natural rights versus egoism.

24. Yarros was pointing out a distinction between voting to elect someone to political office—that is, to a position of unjust power over the lives of unconsenting others—and voting in a referendum—that is, to decide a specific issue with no necessary electoral implications.

imposing restrictions,—that is, from committing aggression” (Yarros 1896b). Yarros freely acknowledged one of Tucker’s points, perhaps because it was a point he himself had made in the initial article. The sight of anarchists voting in *any* fashion could “confuse the public mind” as to what constituted anarchism and, thus, could dilute anarchism as a force in the larger political life. That objection, however, was a strategic one, not a principled one.

Again, Tucker’s response preceded Yarros’s article—a tactic the editor often employed, whether for layout reasons or for strategic ones we do not know. In an article titled “Aggression and the Ballot,” Tucker accused Yarros of shifting the ground of argument in several ways. One was by tacitly premising “such a transformation of politics that invasion is eliminated.” For example, a voting system not financed by taxation: this condition in no way resembled the current state of affairs and, therefore, “has not the slightest bearing on the question whether it is possible for Anarchists to non-aggressively participate in the invasive thing that politics are to-day” (Tucker 1896b, 4). Then Tucker hit directly on what he considered the key flaw in Yarros’s argument: Yarros conflated electoral voting with voting on referendums, but each produced a distinctly different result. “Voting for a law maker” (electoral voting) involved placing someone in a position of unjust power through which that person could impose invasive measures. Tucker added of Yarros, “If he votes for a man who favors a particular libertarian measure, this man will vote in the legislature . . . not alone for the one libertarian measure, but for a thousand invasive measures. Any man who would not do so could not be elected, for the majority are in favor of invasion in most matters.” Moreover, even if Yarros’s candidate voted for nothing but “libertarian measures,” he would still be paid a salary gathered by compulsory taxation. The costs of the election—for example, counting the ballots—would also be paid by taxation.

The next and last exchange between the two men showed an erosion of goodwill, with Yarros accusing Tucker of taking advantage of “a slip of the pen” by which the former had misstated his own position. Again Tucker’s reply preceded Yarros’s article. Tucker claimed to be pleased by the “manifest weakness” of Yarros’s article, which relieved him of the task of answering it point by point. The debate on the propriety of anarchistic voting was over; again, more because of ill will than because the issues had been resolved.

Power Corrupts: Furor over Henry George

Another basis for *Liberty*’s rejection of the political process was the belief that power corrupts. Even well-meaning, principled candidates would become corrupt once they were elected. The corruption was an inevitable consequence of holding a position of unjust power: the accommodation with injustice changed anyone for the worse. In the very first issue of *Liberty*, Tucker had firmly condemned anarchists who ran for political office. “The most lamentable spectacle today is the

short sighted reformer attempting to secure greater liberty by advocating the method of greater authority, more intervention, more government” (Tucker 1881a). Tucker’s contempt for reformers who swelled the ranks of lawmakers never lessened.

Indeed, in the same issue in which the debate between Yarros and Tucker erupted, sandwiched between Yarros’s article on voting and Tucker’s response was an article titled “Henry George, Traitor” from the pen of *Liberty*’s editor. Remarking on the impressive showing George had made as an independent mayoral candidate in New York City (receiving 68,000 votes), Tucker excoriated the reformer for not using his ensuing prominence to call for clemency for the Haymarket martyrs.²⁵ After the Illinois Supreme Court upheld the stiff sentence imposed on the so-called Chicago anarchists, Tucker accused George’s newspaper, the *Standard*, of being the only labor paper that did not protest the verdict. Appeals had poured in to George, urging him to speak out against the opinion of the Supreme Court. Tucker declared that George had been placed in an “embarrassing dilemma.” “Should he spring to the side of those innocent victims, upon whose fate turned the question of free speech in America, and thereby absolutely ruin the prospect of his immediate political advancement, or should he continue in his mad struggle to attain the goal of his ambition, and leave the innocent to die?” (Tucker 1896b).²⁶ Tucker explained George’s silence: the man was campaigning for political office. Tucker further observed,

In January 1887, he [George] had started his weekly paper, the ‘Standard,’ and by this and other means he was bending all his energies to the creation of a new political issue in the Single Tax with himself as a standard-bearer of a new political party. He claimed that he would poll 250,000 votes for secretary of State, and that with hard work he could be elected.

When the public pressure for George to take a stand became too great, the Single Taxer made a public declaration on page one of the *Standard* of October 8, 1887. In essence, George declared that he now believed the Chicago anarchists to be guilty of murder simply because the Illinois Supreme Court had not overthrown the verdict.

25. The Haymarket incident of May 4, 1886, at which labor protesters and the police clashed in the streets of Chicago during a meeting organized by communist anarchists, caused fatalities on both sides. Although the eight men who were arrested and tried were demonstrably innocent, the incident cemented the connection between anarchism and violence in the mind of the public. See Henry David, *History of the Haymarket Affair* (1936), and Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (1984).

26. The article “Henry George, Traitor” was reprinted as a pamphlet and issued separately by Tucker’s press. George’s vote total projection had been reported earlier in *Liberty* (5 [October 1887]: 1).

Tucker expressed outrage. Under the heading “The Demagogue and the Sophist,” *Liberty* printed a letter from W. T. Doty that had been rejected by the *Standard*, presumably because it criticized George’s stand on the Haymarket defendants. Doty wrote, “Said a gentleman today, after reading yesterday’s ‘Standard’: ‘Can it be that Henry George, after all, has become a mere ward politician, a panderer to the mob?’” (Doty 1887, 4).

It was a turn of events Tucker had predicted a year before, when he had wished George success in true Tuckerian fashion:

I hope Henry George will be elected. . . . The laboring men who vote for him will then have a chance to see how little difference it makes to their welfare. . . . The only difference that I have ever detected between labor politicians and the politicians of the other parties is the usual readiness of the former to sell themselves at a lower price than the latter insist upon. (Tucker 1886b)

In the person of George, Tucker believed the maxim “power corrupts” could be made visible to the laboring man who still harbored a belief in the power of politics to achieve good.

Conclusion

If individualist-anarchists of the late nineteenth century had a united strategic vision with which they approached social problems, it was their opposition to political solutions. In place of voting, they looked to social reform movements and grassroots organizations for the solutions that could not be reached through electoral politics. They sought to repeal laws. They championed strikes, boycotts, unions, and other peaceful means of economic restructuring. They experimented with alternative educational systems, such as the Modern School Movement, and alternative social arrangements, such as the New Harmony or Utopia communities. In response to the criticism that Tucker offered no positive structure or program with which to replace the State, the editor wrote: “We have something very tangible to offer,—something very rational, practical, and easy of application. We offer cooperation. We offer non-compulsive organization. We offer associative combination. We offer every possible method of voluntary social union by which men and women may act together for the furtherance of well-being.”²⁷

27. Since the 1880s, there has been a marked tendency to identify anarchist strategy with violence, largely stemming from the much publicized class-violence strategy of communist-anarchists in Russia, called “propaganda by deed.” Yet violence was embraced by only one faction of the anarchist movement, and it certainly was never incorporated into most other factions, such as Tolstoy’s Christian anarchism (in America, Garrisonian anarchism) or individualist-anarchism. Nevertheless, with the Haymarket incident of 1886 and the assassination of President McKinley in 1901 by a self-professed anarchist who claimed to have been inspired to violence by a speech delivered by Emma Goldman, American anarchism became tarred with the charge of violence.

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