



# Benjamin R. Tucker On Free Thought & Good Citizenship



By **William O. Reichert**

**F**or those libertarians who have discovered in Benjamin R. Tucker a source of inspiration in their individual efforts to work out an intelligent definition of liberty, it will come as no surprise to find him labeled an ardent freethinker. In the very first issue of *The Radical Review*, his initial venture in journalism, Tucker reprinted an excerpt from Proudhon's *System of Economical Contradictions* that clearly extolled the virtues of "humanitarian atheism" over the methods of conventional religious belief. If there was any doubt that *The Radical Review* was to be genuinely radical, that doubt was surely dispelled when Tucker printed Proudhon's claim that "the last step in the moral and intellectual enfranchisement of man" will have been taken when men refuse any longer to allow their minds to be held captive by the idea of God as the ultimate power on earth, a conviction that was to remain with Tucker to the very end of his colorful life.<sup>1</sup> Five years later when Tucker brought out his new journal, *Liberty*, he advised those of his subscribers who could read French to send for a copy of Bakunin's "Dieu et l'Etat" in which theology was presented from an anarchistic perspective and which concluded with the profession that "God, or the illusion called God, is responsible for all the authority that oppresses, and most of the evils that afflict, mankind."<sup>2</sup> Although one of his subscribers, a practicing

## Benjamin R. Tucker and the Champions of *Liberty*

Catholic living in Providence, R.I., burned that issue of *Liberty* and buried the ashes in a hole five feet deep in his back yard, Tucker later translated Bakunin's essay to make it available to those of his readers who could not read it in the original French, so convinced was he that free thought is the essential method of philosophy.

In his outspoken attack upon the notion of God, Tucker was not an irresponsible iconoclast seeking cheap notoriety or sensationalism but a serious exponent of a profound and rigorous social methodology that might aid humanity in its quest for a meaningful definition of freedom. Tucker proclaimed religious authority the primary source of intellectual confusion and hence a social sickness that must be eradicated before the work of social and political reform might begin.

From Tucker's point of view, the major shortcoming of the conventional religious mind is that it is incapable of freeing itself from petrified notions of right and wrong. Where men accept truth as the sacred commandments of a god, Tucker argued, the individual can assert no right to deviate from that which has been commanded. "God, to be God, must be a governing power," he proclaimed, and hence the entire social structure that has come into being within organized Christianity stands as a formidable obstacle to any modification or reformation of the human condition.<sup>3</sup>

Tucker was not oblivious of the fact that the acceptance of Christ's admonition to his followers to act with love toward their fellowmen was intended to uplift the actions of men within society and thus to bring about a better world. But he countered, "the whole doctrine of love of neighbor as a 'commandment' is the utter denial . . . and a perversion of the word 'love'." Those who love their fellowmen because they have been ordered to do so totally obliterate the crucial distinction that must be drawn between love and its opposite, hate, and therefore their love is rendered superficial and socially ineffective. Such a love is "a stifling of all natural attraction to that which is lovable and of all natural repugnance to that which is hateful, - a rigid, formal, heartless, soulless, and sort of unconsciously hypocritical joining of hands."

Tucker was keenly concerned with moral questions and heated discussion of right and wrong was never absent from the pages of *Liberty*. As Victor Yarros, one of his associates, pointed out, Tucker was incapable of thinking in anything other than ethical

## Benjamin R. Tucker and the Champions of *Liberty*

terms. "One could feel the Quaker in all his utterances. He was an atheist, but his utilitarianism was touched with high moral fervor. He spoke earnestly of right and wrong. Human rights, he declared, were 'an august thing.' It was a sin to support government. It was the duty of the right-thinking person to work for the gradual overthrow of the state."<sup>4</sup> Yet Tucker, for all his moral concern, called for a world in which the commanded duty to love one's fellowman would be entirely eliminated.

As Tucker approached the problem of morality, "A society negating all authority would differ from a society affirming the authority of Christ very much as white differs from black," for the ethical system he championed did not allow authority any foothold whatever.<sup>5</sup> In this he reflected the influence of Proudhon whose entire social perspective was founded on the dictum that "self-government is incompatible with law." This is not to suggest that either Proudhon or Tucker were nihilistic and thus unmindful of the fundamental importance of law in all human relationships. To the contrary, both of them were ardent champions of the view that law permeates every level of the universe — economic, social, or political — and that the person who ignores that law does so at his own peril.

What both Proudhon and Tucker opposed was the monopoly of law and morality that characterizes political modernity. When the modern world followed Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau in their insistence that the state is the principal source of law and right, the individual as citizen was converted from a social or moral agent acting on his own feelings and sentiments into a mindless subject who must follow the dictates of established government without regard to his own powers of reason. And this was as true in the realm of religion as it was in the realm of politics. Thus it was that Tucker held that "Church and State are themselves the very rotten roots of social evil. From the start they have had almighty God himself as a backer. They have had all the money, all the land, all the saints, all the bayonets, and all the fools (whose name is legion) to work with . . ."<sup>6</sup> If this be irreverence, Tucker taunted his contemporaries, feel free to make the most of it.

But Tucker most certainly was not irreverent, however intemperate his language may have been. Tucker's primary concern in opposing the idea of God as the ultimate and final source of human moral authority was not to denigrate the sincere religious senti-

## Benjamin R. Tucker and the Champions of *Liberty*

merits of individuals but "to abolish all those gratuitous fictions by which any and all gods, theological, political, and social, are saddled by force upon unwilling shoulders." It was conceivable to Tucker that particular individuals might willingly accept the teachings of Christ, Mohammed, or some other religious teacher through their own free choice and that it was socially permissible when they did so, although by no stretch of the imagination could he visualize himself or any other thinking person in this role. What he denied was "the authority of anybody's god to bind those who do not accept [that authority] through persuasion and natural selection."

It is important to note here that Tucker's definition of authority equates with the definition of authority offered by free thought, that is, authority is "any coercive force not developed spontaneously and naturally out of the constitution of the individual himself or herself." This was not to deny that human beings are inevitably structured in their individual actions by forces of one kind or another. In fact, Tucker held, nature itself is made up of forces that have a direct impact upon everyone. "But we want native, healthy, spontaneous forces in social life, not arbitrary, extraneous, usurping forces," Tucker insisted. "And we believe in authority too," he urged, "when authority is made to mean that which is sifted through reason and made welcome by choice."

In defining authority in this manner, Tucker, like Proudhon, placed himself squarely within the school of natural right which holds that right and wrong are not wholly arbitrary or figments of the imagination but binding principles that every serious individual must observe if he is to realize the full potential of his social nature. Moral principles, that is to say, were not for Tucker relative to the situational needs or interests of isolated individuals, and hence expendable when the situation called for it, but socially operative forces that were created by virtue of the deliberate choice of free agents acting upon native instincts they felt within.

These moral forces could not be handed down from on high by some religious or political authority but must be generated anew by each functioning group in society as one age of humanity gave way through time to another. As Tucker put it in the very first volume of *Liberty*, "Right and wrong are principles that must ever be defined, qualified, and circumscribed by the individual, in his associative capacity . . . ; circumscribed [only] by the inflexible

## Benjamin R. Tucker and the Champions of *Liberty*

law that all action, individual and associative, shall be at the cost of the party or parties acting." Under this conception of things, any individual had a perfect right to do anything he might voluntarily choose to do providing that he was willing to accept the full consequences of his actions. Were this one basic law made universal, Tucker argued, and the hands of "Church, State, and every other arbitrary, coercive" despotism removed from the shoulders of the individual, "perfect Liberty will result as naturally as all other things find their level in nature."

Tucker may have been overly optimistic in making this prediction, given the historical circumstances that followed his age, but this does not invalidate the social and political theory he offered his contemporaries but merely illustrates the firm grip that mythical thought has had upon the modern mind.

As editor of *Liberty*, Tucker not only was compelled to battle those who clung to the wrecks of Church and State for moral and political security, but those false prophets who came at him with unsheathed ideological daggers from within the ranks of anarchism itself. In response to those anarchists who insisted that human freedom was impossible until the State was blown away by dynamite or violent revolution, Tucker retorted that "Anarchy does not mean a sudden overturning of the existing order of things."

Tucker was not unmindful of the tremendous economic inequities of his age and he was not in the least timid at the thought of radical social change. To the contrary, he would have welcomed the total reformation of existing American society, were this possible through some practical means. But freedom no more could be bestowed instantly upon a people than an adult can bypass the stages of childhood and puberty.

"Anarchy," Tucker insisted, "means a slow growth of the principles of liberty and justice; the gradual dropping of the 'thou shalt' and the 'thou shalt not' of laws and constitutions as men slowly learn that it is better to be governed by reasonable and intelligent conviction from within than by compulsion from without . . ." And the first step in this procedure, he held, is to disabuse oneself of the idea that government, even when that government takes the form of parliamentary democracy functioning after the principle of majority rule and minority rights, is capable of assuring the individual freedom or of bringing about a condition of harmonious relations among people. If mankind is ever to

## Benjamin R. Tucker and the Champions of *Liberty*

realize justice in its actual social relations, the notion that the individual citizen has a moral obligation to the State must be completely abandoned. We anarchists, Tucker proclaimed, "look upon all obligations, not as moral, but as social, and even then not really as obligations except as these have been consciously and voluntarily assumed."<sup>10</sup> And this means nothing less than that the State, which is to say formal government itself, must be discarded as an instrument of social control.

Having discarded government along with public administration as a legitimate method of providing an orderly system for the conduct of social affairs, Tucker was constrained to suggest some alternative to put in the place of the machinery that he had relegated to the junk yard.

In coming up with a viable alternative, he was fully cognizant of the fact that regulation of human conduct is essential at some point, for cooperation and coordination are necessary to social order. But instead of tying the individual to the state through the myth of a fictitious social contract, as Hobbes and other proponents of social contract theory did, Tucker followed Proudhon in arguing that the indispensable basis of social order must be derived from a consistent adherence to libertarian principles. Where Hobbes had conceived of law as binding chains from the lips of the public sovereign to the ears of the subservient citizen, Tucker insisted that the citizen, "Instead of making oath to God and his prince," ought to swear only "upon his conscience, before his brothers, and before Humanity," for "between these two oaths there is the same difference as between slavery and liberty, faith and science, courts and justice, usury and labor, government and economy, non-existence and being, God and man."

Aside from the loose use of the word "conscience" employed here, Tucker reflected his philosophical indebtedness to the moral theory advocated by his mentors, Josiah Warren, Stephen Pearl Andrews, William B. Greene, Lysander Spooner, and other figures in the tradition of Mutualist socialism which found its most complete expression in the political philosophy of Proudhon.

"Anarchy," Tucker urged, "means something more" than the [mere] possession of liberty."<sup>11</sup> To be free, that is to live without being coerced by other human beings, is most certainly the ultimate value in all social relations, and this is only possible where anarchy has replaced the State. And anarchy is best defined "as the posses-

## **Benjamin R. Tucker and the Champions of *Liberty***

sion of liberty by libertarians — that is, by those who know what liberty means." In Tucker's conception of the fundamentals of political obligation, the paramount duty of the good citizen is to turn his back upon formal government, even if this means being accused of being an anti-democrat. "No one can read Proudhon carefully and intelligently," he chided his reading audience, "and still cling to [the] reactionary faith in majority rule as a means of securing justice."<sup>12</sup>

Tucker's solution to the social problem was framed within the doctrine of individual moral obligation which took its basic form from Josiah Warren's principle of individual sovereignty. Unless the individual citizen fully assumes the obligation of acting as the primary sovereign power in all private and public relations with his fellowmen, the State must assume that function through the use of political means, thereby dominating the entire structure of social relationships in society. This, of course, was precisely what was beginning to take place in Tucker's day, and it was in an effort to block this destructive tendency that he had entered the field of radical journalism in the first place. With all libertarians, therefore, Tucker called for a social order in which every individual would be totally responsible for every action he might undertake and be required to assume full responsibility for his acts in open court among his peers.

Undoubtedly it was under the partial influence of Herbert Spencer's version of individualism that Tucker wrote that "The law of liberty is spontaneous association by natural selection," a statement which his detractors in later times were to employ in their attempts to destroy his credibility as a social thinker. But when Tucker argued that "the basic factor of social existence [is that] the individual shall be left absolutely free to regulate his life as experimental contact with other equally free individuals may seem to direct,"<sup>13</sup> his purpose was not to eliminate the weak or unfit but to allow maximum opportunity for the development of the creative powers of the individual.

Tucker recognized that social progress proceeds at the pace of individual development and that most of the forward strides in civilization have come about through the accidental discovery of innovative theory and ideas by free individuals rather than under the direction of centralized planning and direction of affairs by government.<sup>14</sup> Tucker warned that the Supreme Court of the

## Benjamin R. Tucker and the Champions of *Liberty*

United States had become the chief source of superstition and mindless obedience to authority in place of the Church which formerly had held this power over men's minds. As he put it with his characteristic bluntness, "the judges [like] priests are simply tools and confederates, employed by the government, to overawe ignorant and superstitious people, and keep them in subjugation. They are simply weights, which the government throws upon the people, to prevent their rising in rebellion against the oppressions which government practices upon them."<sup>15</sup> To look to the courts for our liberties, as Liberal Democrats even to this day continue to recommend, was for Tucker the supreme folly.

As to the essential nature of the rights which the individual does possess, Tucker took the position that human or civil rights do not take form in any bill or document announced by government or hallowed pronouncements made by some supposedly wise and benevolent group of founding fathers but from free social contracts made between individuals and groups acting with social responsibility toward one another. As Tucker saw things, this was a question of how far we had better given each other a *right to do* that which each may think *it is right to do*.<sup>16</sup> If human rights are to be effective in establishing a genuine social order within which individuals may live in peace and reciprocity with their neighbors, they must be grounded in conventions reached through open and free negotiations between sovereign citizens. Such genuine rights are not "liberties that exist through natural power but liberties that are created by mutual guarantee" of one free individual or group acting in complete social responsibility with another.

Tucker's thinking here was in conformity with the libertarian premise that moral or social agreements, to be binding, must arise from the internal desires of the individual to live within a harmonious and fruitful social environment. If no such desire actually exists, life certainly will be as short, nasty, and brutish as Hobbes predicted. But Tucker, like all libertarians, was not convinced that man's basic nature is destructive or anti-social. To the contrary, he was committed to the view that man's essential nature, once the destructive influence of government has been removed as a source of constant irritation and confusion, is primarily social. "*Just as truly as Liberty is the mother of order,*"

## Benjamin R. Tucker and the Champions of *Liberty*

as he put it in his widely quoted dictum, so "*is the State the mother of violence.*" For Tucker the choice was clear; only as people became convinced freethinkers adjuring the helping hand of the State could Americans become free citizens.

### Footnotes

1. "Review of Proudhon's System of Economical Contradictions," *The Radical Review*, 1 (1877):96.
2. Advertisement for Bakunin's "Dieu et l'Etat," *Liberty* 24(1882):4.
3. Benjamin R. Tucker, "Moralism and the Denial of Love," *Liberty* 310(1895):2.
4. Victor S. Yarros, "Philosophical Anarchism, 1880-1910," *The Journal of Social Philosophy* (April, 1941), p. 260.
5. Tucker, "Anarchy Necessarily Atheistic," *Liberty* 73(1886):4.
6. "The Twin Children of Tyranny," *Liberty* 34(1883):3.
7. "The Root of Despotism," *Liberty* 2(1881):2-3.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
9. S. Blodgett, "Tu-whit! Tu-who!," *Liberty* 68(1885):4.
10. Tucker, "The Relation of the State to the Individual," *Liberty* 17(1890):5-7.
11. Tucker, "Protection and Its Relation to Rent," *Liberty* 136(1888):4.
12. Tucker, "On Picket Duty," *Liberty* 50(1884):1.
13. Tucker, "Our Purpose," *Liberty* 1(1881):2.
14. F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 22-38.
15. Tucker, "Justice Gray," *Liberty* 12(1882):2.
16. Tucker, "Rights and Contract," *Liberty* 328(1895):4.
17. Tucker, "Liberty and Violence," *Liberty* 8(1886):4.