Putting Liberty in Context*

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The American individualist anarchist newspaper, Liberty, Not the Daughter But the Mother of Order (1881-1908), edited by Benjamin R. Tucker, was "the longest-lived of any radical periodical of economic or political nature in the nation's history and certainly one of the world's most interesting during the past two centuries." It provided "a forum for native American radicalism...which earned the admiration of H.L. Mencken, George Bernard Shaw and Walt Whitman."1 Besides the writings of its editor, Liberty published writers of high quality, including Bernard Shaw and Vilfredo Pareto, as well as a host of lesser-known individualists. The recent resurgence of interest in anarchism has led to renewed appreciation for Tucker and his journal. Liberty is now generally acknowledged to have been the most important anarchist periodical to appear in the United States: "It is impossible to overemphasize the influence Liberty had over the development of libertarian thought in America"; "arguably the finest libertarian periodical ever published in the English language."2 Benjamin Tucker's own writings, after appearing in Liberty, were reprinted as pamphlets and in book form and have recently surfaced in anthologies of anarchism.3 Modern libertarians have been particularly interested, so much so that Stephen Newman, an analyst of libertarianism, refers to Tucker and his followers as their "true culture heroes."4 Libertarians trying to reappropriate the radical thrust of classical liberalism naturally find historical allies in the individualists of late nineteenth-century America. Tucker and the contributors to Liberty confronted the early development of the centralized American state and the complicity of mainstream liberalism in this development by discussing and criticizing laissez-faire economics, political reforms, and such theoretical issues as natural rights. Their critiques of reformers' reliance on the state have become newly relevant as the welfare state is increasingly criticized and Soviet-style communism continues to fragment.

Yet to locate Liberty's significance merely in its prophetic criticisms dramatically curtails and ultimately distorts the nature of the ideology it helped to define. Liberty was not just a treasure trove of protoliberarianism, but the culmination of fifty years of radical individualism and labor reform. The preeminent analyst of American individualist anarchism, James J. Martin, refers to Tucker's newspaper as "theoretical anarchism matured."5 Even recognizing its historical roots, however, is insufficient, for Liberty also reflected, and partici-

parted in, the dramatic political and intellectual changes occurring around the turn of the century. The same newspaper that popularized the decades-old theories of Josiah Warren, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and Max Stirner was also one of the first American journals to print works by and about Bernard Shaw, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Henrik Ibsen. Tucker and his associates wrote perceptively about the Russian nihilists of the 1880s and the French bombthrowers of the 1890s, the development of anarchist communism, reformers such as Henry George and Edward Bellamy, and the temptations of Populist politics. Rooted in a radical past, reacting to (if not notably shaping) a dramatic present, and bearing lessons for the future, *Liberty* must be considered in several temporal contexts.

As the topics indicated above show, *Liberty* also cannot be constrained by its obvious connections to American life or to liberal theory. Although individualist anarchism was nowhere larger in scale than in the United States, the anarchism expressed in *Liberty* owed only a general debt to individualist thinkers in America such as Thoreau or Jefferson and a substantial debt only to one American thinker, Josiah Warren. The major intellectual influences were British, French, and German: the "law of equal freedom" from Herbert Spencer, mutualist economics (especially the mutual bank) from Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and egoist ethics from Max Stirner. *Liberty*’s connection to liberalism is also more apparent than real, or rather more critical than thankful. Individualist anarchism shared liberalism’s concern with individual liberty, but took that to extremes that liberals could not contemplate. For instance, under the influence of Proudhon, the labor theory of property became a critique of state-enforced property rights, while, under the influence of Stirner, contract became the basis for creating "rights," not the mechanism for enforcing preexisting natural rights. The economic and political fixations of classical liberalism were transcended in *Liberty* as it went beyond even J.S. Mill and Mary Wollstonecraft in addressing the problems of women, children, and education in individualist terms.

Thus, if one examines *Liberty* closely, a complex, interesting, and potentially confusing phenomenon emerges: an American newspaper with European sensibilities and concerns, an individualist organ whose primary concern was with the "labor problem," and an anarchist project that aimed not to destroy the state, but rather, in Proudhon’s suggestion, to dissolve it within a transformed economy. The standard selections from Benjamin Tucker’s work only hint at this complexity, while his own anthology, *Instead of a Book*, represents only the first twelve years of *Liberty*’s publication and, as James Martin points out, is unacceptable as a representative collection because "significant material was omitted from its contents."

**Liberty and American Individualist Anarchism**

While *Liberty* was the most interesting and significant of American anarchist newspapers, it was neither the first one nor the only one in existence at the time.