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The Schism Between Individualist and Communist Anarchism

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paganda could be made. The strategy of parallel institutions was *Liberty's* attempt to answer a much asked question: what would happen to the structure of society if government did not provide essential functions such as courts and defense? Anarchists needed to demonstrate how such essential services could evolve in a voluntary system, and what they might look like. For example, Tucker advocated starting a parallel banking system and forming private defense organizations.

In Eltzbacher's *Anarchism*, Byington commented on the defensive associations: "The defensive associations receive especially frequent mention because of the need of incessantly answering the objection 'If we lose the State, who will protect us against ruffians?' but Tucker certainly expects that the defensive association will from the start fill a much smaller sphere in every respect than the present police." Tucker speculated that more than one defensive association would exist side by side. "There are many more than five or six insurance companies in England, and it is by no means uncommon for members of the same family to insure their lives and goods against accident or fire in different companies. Why should there not be a considerable number of defensive associations in England in which people, even members of the same family, might insure their lives and goods against murderers or thieves? Defense is a service, like any other service." Under such a competitive system, the best agency might well reap the majority of business, but it would do so on the quality of its service, not because it enforced a monopoly.

The rejection of violence as a political strategy led the 19th individualist movement into complex and productive lines of reasoning about the alternative strategies through which societal change could be achieved. Given that the oppressive nature of the state has not fundamentally altered since *Liberty's* voice was stilled, the strategies it advocated are an aspect of the periodical that may sound fresh to modern ears.

A later encounter between Tucker and a poll tax-collector on May 17, 1888 illustrates his drift on this particular strategy. The editor paid the tax ‘under protest’ and made an attempt to educate the taxman collecting the fee. Then, Tucker published an account of the exchange in *Liberty*. For example, when offered a receipt for the \$1.00 payment, Tucker refused, saying “I never take a receipt for money that is stolen from me.”

Tucker registered his protest, while behaving in a manner that acknowledged the superiority of the force being leveled against him. The reason for his compliance: until and unless a general foundation of anarchistic education had been laid, acts of individual rebellion against unjust law were acts of martyrdom that drained the vitality of a movement and created a backlash of state violence against it. Instead, anarchists should strive vigorously to create “a public sentiment” that would make unjust laws into dead-letter ones because they would meet too much popular resistance to be enforced.

Passive resistance, as opposed to civil disobedience, involved the passive refusal to obey unjust law rather than the direct confrontation with such laws. A prime example of such passive resistance occurred over the issue of trial by jury. When a jury selection law passed in New York State to which the *Liberty* offices had moved, Tucker was disheartened and commented, “We are confronted now with a condition, not a theory.” He urged readers to adopt the passive resistance strategy employed by the Irish rebel Charles Parnell against the occupying British: that is, “the policy of loud and steady protest, the policy of embarrassment, hindrance, blockade, and obstruction.” Then, he went on to explain the specific behavior that constituted such resistance in terms of trial by jury. “If each and every one of you, on being placed in the jury box and before each trial begins, will rise in his place and say to the court: ‘I most earnestly protest against having to serve on this jury...I serve here only on compulsion and in a spirit of indignant discontent,’” then — Tucker believed — a powerful contribution to anarchistic pro-

The image of a bomb-throwing anarchist is a cultural caricature and, as with many caricatures, there is some truth behind the depiction. Certain forms of anarchism — specifically, the strain of 19th century communist anarchism that arose in Russia and Germany — did embrace violence as a political strategy. Other forms of anarchism, however — such as Leo Tolstói’s Christian anarchism and the indigenously American strain of individualist anarchism — consistently repudiated the use of violence for political ends. Indeed, one of the charges brought against early individualist anarchism was that its ideology was too peaceful, and its communities would be defenseless against aggressors.

In the late 1800s, however, the pacific image of anarchism changed drastically. In the decades preceding the Russian Revolution, several communist anarchist groups repeatedly committed acts of brutal and almost random violence as a strategy to topple capitalism. These acts, called “propaganda by deed,” were directed against people who belonged to the capitalist class, and included throwing bombs into crowded restaurants on the assumption that only capitalists could afford to eat there.

Violence erupted in America as well. On May 4, 1886, labor protesters and the police clashed in the streets of Chicago, during a meeting whose organizers included communist anarchists. The event, known to history as the Haymarket affair or incident, left dead bodies on both sides. Although the eight radicals who were arrested and tried thereafter were demonstrably innocent, the Haymarket affair cemented the connection between anarchism and violence in the mind of the American public. Anarchists became the enemies of society and of civilization. During the Haymarket proceedings, the prosecutor declared:

“Law is on trial. Anarchy is on trial. These men have been selected...because they are leaders... [C]onvict these men...save our institutions, our society.”

The radical community reacted with outrage. Yet throughout the arrest and the trial of the Chicago martyrs, and even upon the exe-

cution of four defendants and the suicide of one, Benjamin Tucker was reserved in his support of the accused. Tucker wrote:

“It is because peaceful agitation and passive resistance are weapons more deadly to tyranny than any others that I uphold them...[B]rute force strengthens tyranny... War and authority are companions; peace and liberty are companions... The Chicago Communists I look upon as brave and earnest men and women. That does not prevent them from being equally mistaken.”

The Haymarket incident was the proximate cause of a deep schism that occurred in America between individualist anarchists and communist anarchists with whom they had formerly aligned, but it was actually the last of a series of events. The schism was rooted in ideology, specifically in the question of whether force could be employed as a political strategy.

***Liberty* and Violence as a Strategy**

To judge from the first page of the first issue of *Liberty* on August 6, 1881, Tucker celebrated both violence as a strategy and the people who employed it for political ends. At the head of the middle column, and dominating the text, was a handsome engraving of the Russian nihilist Sophie Perovskaya — “*Liberty’s* Martyred Heroine” — who was proclaimed to have been “Hanged April 15, 1881, For Helping to Rid the World of a Tyrant [Czar Alexander II]”. Tucker declared the engraving to be “the first authentic likeness published in America of the most famous and heroic of the little Russian band...Sophie Perovskaya.” A memorial poem by Joaquin Miller followed.

Three issues later, Tucker continued to praise the Russian nihilists for their violent resistance to tyranny “...which the Nihilists alone are prepared to tear out by the roots and bury out of sight forever. Success to the Nihilists!” Nevertheless, on the same page, an article by Tucker entitled “*Liberty’s* Weapons” began, “Our meth-

During the twenty-seven year span of *Liberty*, many strategies were advanced to eliminate the philosophical error that was ‘the state.’ In the broadest of terms, the strategies fell into four categories: education, civil disobedience, passive resistance, and the creation of parallel institutions.

An example of *Liberty’s* attempts to educate was the Anarchist Letter-Writing Corps. On March 24, 1894, the egoistic Stephen T. Byington announced a strategy of organized letter-writing — usually letters-to-the-editor at daily newspapers — aimed at educating the general public, as well as influential individuals, toward the ideas of individualist anarchism. Byington wrote, “Those who are at all familiar with the Single Tax movement know that it has been much helped by the ‘Single Tax Writing Corps...A number of persons have pledged themselves to write at least one letter a week, in advocacy of the single tax, to such addresses as may be given by the secretary... With each name is usually a statement of the position taken by the man of paper, or a pertinent quotation from some recent public utterance made by him or it...”

As a result of the Single Tax Letter-Writing Corps, Byington declared that the issue had been brought before the eyes of the public and important editors on a weekly basis. The same strategy was successfully employed in the service of anarchism. Civil disobedience was another strategy advocated by the *Liberty* circle, but Tucker advised great caution in employing it. For example, an anarchist should refuse to pay taxes only when he or she “feels exceptionally strong and independent, when his conduct can impair no serious personal obligations, when on the whole he would a little rather go to jail than not, and when his property is in such shape that he can successfully conceal it...” Tucker’s advice was based on personal experience. In August 1875, he had been imprisoned for his Thoreaulike refusal to pay a poll tax, but his protest ended quietly when a friend unilaterally decided to pay the fine. However, Tucker came to believe that civil disobedience was a poor strategy, except when it had an overriding educational value.

Conclusion

The primary conflict between individualist and communist anarchists, both in terms of theory and strategy, centered on the issue of violence: what was its definition?; and, could it be used as a tactic to achieve social change?

Communist anarchists defined violence in socio-economic terms and, by their analysis, a state of war already existed between the laboring and the capitalist classes. As a logical extension, self-defense was defined in such a manner as to allow communists to attack anyone belonging to the capitalist class on the basis of their class affiliation alone. Since they considered open warfare to already exist, the use of violence to achieve their ends was not only strategic but also necessary.

Individualist anarchists used either natural rights or Stirnerite egoism as the ideological frameworks within which to examine the issue of violence. Both approaches considered the individual to be primary and defined violence on an individual, rather than on a class basis — that is, individuals were responsible on a personal level for any aggression they committed. Even those members of the oppressing class, politicians, were held individually responsible for the specific acts they committed or facilitated, and *Liberty* commonly referred to them by name. Thus, violence against anyone but an individual who had aggressed could not be justified.

Moreover, the true source and bulwark of political oppression lay not in the actions of politicians but in the sanction, or obedience, rendered to the political system by society. The state could not be destroyed by eliminating a class of people because the state was, in essence, an idea embraced by society. The idea itself had to be eliminated. As 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.” The solution: eliminate any sense of legitimacy that the State could claim.

ods are the methods of peace. Liberty is not the advocate of force...” Realizing that such a jarring juxtaposition of articles might confuse his readers, or lead them to accuse him of inconsistency, Tucker voiced what he imagined to be their reaction, “And yet Liberty finds words of approval for the...tyrant-slayers who in secrecy plot the revenges of fate. Why? Because Liberty is forced to choose between one class that slays to oppress and another that slays to free.” To those who still expressed confusion, he urged patience in their “great hurry for a full and systematic explanation of Liberty’s philosophy and purposes...Patience, good friends, patience!” Almost thirty issues later and still without the promised ‘systematic explanation’, Tucker commented upon the assassination of the French politician Leon Gambetta with the words, “It is a fitting ending to the life of one of the most dangerous characters of Europe, over whose disappearance Liberty, not in a spirit of triumphant revenge, but simply voicing a sincere desire for the public welfare, can only rejoice.” Yet, whenever acts of violence against politicians occurred within the United States, *Liberty* reacted in a markedly different manner than it did toward similar attacks in Europe. For example, when President Garfield was assassinated by Charles Guiteau in 1881, Tucker declared, “As to the act committed by Guiteau all sensible men agree. Nothing but its insanity saved it from being dastardly, bloodthirsty, and thoroughly devilish, without reason, proper motive, or excuse.” Tucker’s criticism of the American assassin Guiteau occurred two issues after his idolization of the Russian assassin Sophie Perovskaya. Some two dozen issues thereafter, Tucker expressed joy at the death of the French politician Gambetta, thus eliminating the possibility he had changed his attitude toward violence as a political strategy in the brief interval between praising Perovskaya and repudiating Guiteau.

The explanation of this apparent inconsistency lay in Tucker’s view of violence as a last resort strategy that could be justified only when freedom of speech and freedom of the press had been destroyed, as they had been in Perovskaya’s Russia. As long as radi-

cals in America could speak out and publish, however, they could educate the public toward “the Anarchistic idea” and inspire rebellion.

Although Tucker was acutely aware of the restrictions on freedom of speech and freedom of the press within the United States, he insisted that newspapers, “if not allowed to say everything they would like to, are able to say all that is absolutely necessary to say in order to finally achieve their end, the triumph of liberty.” Then, and only then, with the solid foundation of an educated citizenry could an anarchist society succeed. Until that foundation had been laid, Tucker counseled radicals in America to eschew violence against the State and to prefer peaceful means of agitation.

Liberty's rejection of tactical violence in the United States was part of a systematic view of strategy. The reasons for this rejection were well expressed in an article entitled “Violence Breeds Violence” written by Florence Finch Kelly, under the initials ‘F.F.K.’ Kelly flatly stated that no “permanent good” could be achieved through the use of violence. She asked every radical to “stop and study well” the effect of State brutality upon his own heart. She argued: the violence had not convinced him to accept the State or to embrace it as legitimate. The violence had only hardened his beliefs and angered him to respond in kind. So, too, would a strategy of violence impact the American people: the bomb-throwing revolutionary could only “terrify them, and in their terror they can only strike back and hug their beliefs all the closer.” The use of violence would result in “nothing but a brute battle for physical supremacy with a rabid determination on each side to exterminate the other. And it happens that the probabilities of extermination are all on the wrong side.”

By insisting upon peaceful agitation within the United States, the individualist anarchists placed themselves at odds with the communist anarchists, some of whom, as immigrants, had imported political strategies of violence with them from Russia and Germany. For example, the communist anarchist leader Johann

and radicals who might be disillusioned in the wake of the executions.

The Wake of the Haymarket

The socialist historian Morris Hillquit has observed with some justice, “The Chicago incident was practically the closing chapter in the history of the anarchist movement in this country.” Many radicals who had considered themselves to be communist anarchists now shifted their energies and allegiances over to the more moderate socialist cause. Labor organizations, such as the International Working-Men’s Association which had aligned with anarchists on certain issues, now eschewed anything and anyone anarchistic. Events of the late 19th century cemented rather than dissipated this prejudice.

For example, in July 1892, the communist anarchist Alexander Berkman attempted unsuccessfully to assassinate the Carnegie steel magnate Henry C. Frick. About this debacle, Tucker wrote, “During the conflict now on between capital and labor, seldom a day passes without the shedding of blood... I freely confess that I am more desirous of being saved from friends like Berkman, to whom my heart goes out, than from enemies like Frick, from whom my heart withdraws.” Subsequent discussion within *Liberty* of the scandal revolved around Most’s public assertion that the communist Berkman was actually a devotee of Tucker’s individualist-anarchism and Tucker’s denial of the claim.

From a point of early co-operation, individualist and communist anarchists now deemed each other’s label to be a damning insult to be publicly hurled and publicly denied.

I work.” As the day of execution drew near for the convicted men, Tucker expressed deep sorrow but he did not change his evaluation of the situation one whit. He wrote, “the day approaches on which the brutal State proposes to execute upon these rash but noble men a base and far more rash revenge.” He concluded that the lesson to be gleaned from the upcoming tragedy was this: the State is a monster “that cannot be reformed; *it must be killed*. But how? Not by dynamite; that will not harm it. How, then? By light. It thrives in the darkness of its victims’ ignorance; it and they must be flooded with the light of liberty. If the seven must die, such must be the lesson of their death.”

On November 11, the executions occurred. The first page of the November 19th issue of *Liberty* was entirely devoted to a poem in memory of and in tribute to the Haymarket martyrs. On page four, Tucker ran a memorial column. However, he also reprinted a lecture he had delivered before the Anarchists’ Club, a few days prior to executions. There, again, Tucker expressed a dual response: he was outraged and sorrowful at the prospect of the State murdering innocent men, but he was determined to distinguish individualist anarchism from Chicago ‘anarchism’.

By now, Tucker was sufficiently sensitive to the reaction of his peers that he had felt it necessary to interrupt the speech to insert a side note of explanation. He had interjected, “And inasmuch as my subject compels me to say something in criticism of these men’s opinion, and inasmuch also as five days hence they are to die upon the gallows...you will excuse me, I am sure, if I interrupt my argument...long enough to qualify my criticism in advance by a word of tribute and a declaration of fellowship.” After the brief tribute, a lengthy criticism ensued.

Tucker became so committed to distinguishing individualist anarchism from communist anarchism that he announced a new German-language periodical entitled *Libertas*, to be edited by his close friends George and Emma Schumm, in order to enunciate individualist anarchism to those German-speaking State Socialists

Most arrived in New York from Germany in 1882 where he began publication of the German language paper *Die Freiheit*, in which he openly called for workers to commit acts of violence against the State. *Liberty* offered a sense of the urgency with which Most called for insurrection through a translated excerpt from *Die Freiheit*. Most cried out, “The existing system will be quickest and most radically overthrown by the annihilation of its exponents. Therefore, massacres of the enemies of the people must be set in motion.” Because of his preferred method of explosive ‘resistance’, the editor of *Die Freiheit* was nicknamed Dynamost. With such profound theoretical differences between the traditions of individualist and communist anarchism, it was inevitable that a bitter schism would eventually separate them. Nevertheless, Tucker’s strong links to European Anarchist periodicals and personalities, as well as his championing of Proudhonian economics had forged a bond that resisted severing. For example, on July 16, 1881, when the moribund International Working People’s Association revived in London, Tucker had been ecstatic. In an article entitled “Vive l’Association Internationale”, Tucker enthused, “To this momentous event, which marks an epoch in the progress of the great labor movement...*Liberty*, in the present issue, devotes a large portion of her space.”

As the historian Margaret S. Marsh observed in her book *Anarchist Women*, there had initially been good will and co-operation between the individualist and communist anarchists. “Their conflict...came after a brief period of harmony. Tucker and the Individualists had wanted initially to cooperate with the European anarchist movement. In 1881 the editor of *Liberty* hailed the creation of the anarchist ‘Black International,’ proposing that his paper serve as its English-language organ.”

For a while, *Liberty* served this function. The November 12, 1881 issue carried a report by J.H. Swain who, as a representative of individualist anarchism, had attended a follow-up conference in Chicago where he was extremely well received even though the

majority of attendees were socialists. A year later, the two factions of anarchism became bitter enemies. The schism was sped along not only by theoretical differences but also by three specific events: the second Congress of the International held in 1883; *Liberty's* expose of the 'New York firebugs'; and, the Haymarket incident.

Second Congress of the International

After welcoming Most to America, *Liberty* soon became a vocal critic of the communist anarchist leader. Henry Appleton, writing under the pseudonym 'X' led the assault on Most, whom he labeled a "State Socialist" rather than an "Anarchist." Appleton pressed Most to answer one question: under the social system he proposed, what would become of a peaceful individual who did not agree to live by his economic theories? Appleton demanded to know "whether Communistic Anarchists propose to let me severely alone, provided I decline to take any part in their schemes, but choose to paddle my own canoe, at my own cost?"

It seemed clear to Appleton that if he withdrew from Most's society and happened "to be personally occupying, cultivating, and using forty acres of land, upon which I have built a home, a barn, and bought tools, domestic animals" that it would be only a matter of time before he was "torn from my bed and cleaned out to make room for one of Herr Most's elect." All he had built and cultivated would be "declared the property of the Commune." For this reason, Appleton concluded, "these Communists are not Anarchists, but, when crowded back upon their basic resources, are at war with *Liberty*, whose very incarnation true Anarchy is."

In 1883, Chicago anarchists — many of whom were communists — organized a conference to be held in Pittsburgh. Its purpose: to establish a platform on which radical agitators of all ideologies, from Marxism to Individualism, could agree. Dominated by Most, the planned conference managed to alienate both the Marxists who

York firebugs and his stated reservations regarding the Haymarket defendants. Yarros declared, "No wonder many of our best friends are disgusted."

Speaking as a Philosophical Anarchist himself, Yarros stated clearly, "I do not wish to be mistaken as opposing the position *Liberty* has taken on the question of force...", but he wished to vigorously protest against Tucker's representation of Anarchism as "pacific" and non-violent. He expressed contempt for "Christian meekness and all-forgiving love in a radical." As a ringing conclusion, Yarros cried out, "Anarchism means war..We have a right to use force and resist by all means the invasion of the self-constituted rulers..." In an uncharacteristically muted manner, Tucker responded, "While giving hearty assent to what I take to be Mr. Yarros' general meaning...I desire to be a little more explicit." He explained that the terms "'philosophical' and 'pacific' do not trouble me, no matter who applies them."

In response to Yarros' declaration of war against the State, Tucker observed that war measures "are almost always violations of rights." Then, he drew an important distinction between the New York Communists who had caused the death of innocents in insurance fires and the Chicago Communists who had been rash and reckless in resisting the State. "The New York firebugs are contemptible villains; the Chicago Communists I look upon as brave and earnest men and women. That does not prevent them from being equally mistaken." Their mistake, however, was not one of principle, but of strategic vision.

In response to what Yarros termed a general "disgust" being directed toward Tucker from the radical community, the editor bluntly announced, "Call me brute, call me coward, call me 'kid-gloved Anarchist', call me what you will, I stand to my post. I have yet to learn that it is any man's duty to sustain his reputation for bravery at the cost of his loyalty to truth...when I in turn shall find myself at close quarters with the wild beast [the state], I consent to have my courage judged. For that day I wait. And while I wait,

a human being deprived of his fundamental rights it can be nothing but sympathetic.” On the next page of *Liberty*, an article by Appleton entitled “The Boston Anarchists” spelled out the peaceful principles and policies of individualist anarchism which stood in stark contrast to those of communist anarchism. Appleton followed up in the next issue with a piece entitled “Authority-blinded”. While not forgiving Most for “the late assaults upon person and property”, Appleton decried the vicious treatment of the arrested man at the hands of the police and in court. In the same issue and on the opposing page, the communist anarchist Dyer D. Lum complained that “the grave situation in which the Chicago ‘Communists’ (if you will) are placed demands...more than dissertations or well-rounded and careful distinctions by ‘X’ [Appleton] between ‘Boston Anarchists’ and the ‘savage Communists of Chicago.’” Tucker — whom Lum also called to task — replied, “I have denounced the treatment of the Chicago Communists in the strongest terms that I could think of. I could have done nothing more except subscribe for their defense and ask *Liberty*’s constituency to do likewise.” Then he expanded on his belief that the use of force in resisting the state merely lent the air of justification to the state’s subsequent repression. Recalling the example of Anthony Comstock’s persecution of many free speech radicals in the 1870s, Tucker argued that, if the victims of Comstock had responded by shooting their persecutor, the cause of censorship would have been strengthened by the public’s outrage.

In one of his first major appearances in the pages of *Liberty*, the Russian immigrant Victor Yarros stirred up controversy by doing something few other contributors dared: he took Tucker publicly to task. Yarros warned that the ‘Philosophical Anarchists’ were in imminent danger of becoming both “respectable” and spoken well of by “a sort of people whose friendship would be the greatest misfortune and disgrace to any serious movement. These are friends that *Liberty* must be saved from.” Yarros was referring to the general press — which lauded both Tucker’s condemnation of the New

refused to attend and the individualists who broke off all official co-operation with the conference.

On October 6, 1883, on the first page of *Liberty*, Tucker denounced the scheme to promote a latitudinarian platform for radicals which was to be introduced at the October 14th conference. The scheme itself was embodied in a document prepared by the communist anarchist Burnette J. Haskell, editor of the San Francisco *Truth*. Tucker flatly declared the document to be a failure. Moreover, he considered it to be “specious and implausible”, calling it “perhaps the most foolishly inconsistent piece of work that ever came to our notice.” In the same issue, Tucker published an open letter to Haskell, upbraiding the *Truth* for being inconsistent and for losing the passion of its first issues. On a more personal note — and, perhaps, the more important one — Tucker professed surprise at reading of Haskell’s intention to serialize an English translation of Bakounine’s book *God and the State* in the *Truth*. Tucker was curious because he had been the first person to “introduce Bakounine to America in any marked way”. He had already announced his own intention to translate and publish an English edition of the referenced work.

In a proprietary tone, Tucker asserted, “I was deeply adverse to having this author first introduced in English handicapped by misleading associates”. In short, Tucker did not want the first English translation of *God and the State* to issue from Haskell. Instead, he “hurried to completion” his own translation, “placed it in the hands” of printers, and dispatched an advertisement of the work to the *Truth*. The ad was rejected, purportedly because it included the words, “monstrous schemes of Karl Marx and Lassalle”. Haskell explained that he was attempting to reconcile all the forms of Socialism, and to form “common ground for unity between Socialists and Anarchists”. The wording of Tucker’s advertisement ran counter to this goal.

Tucker responded with characteristic bluntness, “In addition to the eyes of Beelzebub, have you acquired the smooth tongue of

Mephistopheles?... How gauzy your excuse! Frankly, now, was not the real reason for the rejection of my advertisement a desire to prevent your readers from knowing that I was before you in the publication of 'God and the State'..." As for Haskell's attempt to unify Socialism and Anarchism, Tucker expressed the deepest of skepticism.

Predictably, Haskell answered within the pages of his own paper, thus prompting Tucker to pen yet another open letter to him in *Liberty*. Although the second letter added no substance to the former, clearly the relationship between the two editors had deteriorated into bitterness and ad hominem attacks. When Haskell wrote privately to Tucker years later asking him for a favor, Tucker declined to accommodate him in a letter published within *Liberty*. He prefaced the public rejection with the observation that "[Haskell] once called frantically and in vain for a Brutus to plunge his dagger into the Anarchist Caesar who sits on the editorial throne of *Liberty*..." Where Tucker had expressed good will toward both Most and Haskell, the opposite sentiment now existed in perpetuity.

The New York Fire Bugs

In the March 27, 1886 issue of *Liberty*, in an article entitled "The Beast of Communism", Tucker took the remarkable step of publicly airing a 'movement' scandal. He named names, and one of them was John Most. Tucker began by condemning Most and the "New York Germans" for converting the word 'anarchist' in the public mind into a term synonymous with criminal activity, violence, and destruction. He wrote, "...the word has been usurped, in the face of all logic and consistency, by a party of Communists who believe in a tyranny worse than any that now exists..." Tucker labeled this hard core of communism as "a gang of criminals whose deeds for the past two years rival in 'pure cussedness' any to be found in the history of crime." *Liberty* usually reserved such strong language for

proceeded to New York to prepare herself for the radicalism that would consume the rest of her life.

Against this backdrop of passionate and profound reaction, Tucker became the main voice for prudence within the radical community. Indeed, his initial response annoyed some associates by its reserved tone. Some of his subdued attitude may have been due to the timing of *Liberty*: the first issue in which Tucker could comment on the Haymarket affair appeared on May 22nd, almost two weeks after the event had occurred. By then, Tucker had undoubtedly read and reflected upon the call-to-arms emanating from other sources. He believed that only the utter suppression of free speech could justify an armed revolution, and this condition did not yet exist, nor had it been present on May 4th in the Haymarket Square.

Tucker clearly denounced the brutality of the Chicago police and of everyone else involved in savaging the arrested men: "The conduct during the last fortnight of the police, the courts, the pulpit, and the press, including many of the labor organs themselves, has been shameful in the extreme." But he also criticized communist anarchists in general and the arrested men in particular for having advocated the use of force to achieve political ends. In their meetings, for example, communists speakers often and consciously incited their listeners to violence. *Liberty* asked rhetorically, "Have they not been preaching for years that the laborers need no other provocation than their steady oppression by capital to warrant them in wholesale destruction of life and property? Was not this very meeting [the Haymarket one] held for the purpose of advising the laborers to pursue such a policy?...This event at Chicago opens the whole question of the advisability of armed revolution." Nevertheless, Tucker concluded with a backhanded defense of Most, who had been arrested as well for his incendiary views, even though he had been in New York during the bombing. Tucker wrote, "[A]mong the victims of these authority-ridden maniacs is John Most. Toward him as a social reformer *Liberty*'s attitude has been and will be hostile in the extreme, but toward him as

The city of Chicago was gripped by hysteria. Businesses closed their doors. Respectable society demanded blood for blood. Anarchists were rounded up with no concern displayed for whether or not they had been actually involved in the incident. Thirty- one people were indicted for murder, sixty-nine for lesser crimes. Eventually, eight men remained accused and were tried for murder in a court case that was a travesty of justice and of just procedures. For example, the jury was not chosen in the normal manner: a bailiff was instructed to go out into the street and select whomever he wished to serve. The Haymarket incident and the backlash it inspired in the consciousness of the American public was the beginning of an ongoing prejudice against and hatred of Anarchism. The impact of the incident on radicalism can hardly be overstated, and may be best understood by considering two personal examples.

The individualist anarchist and feminist Voltairine de Cleyre, upon reading a newspaper headline announcing that anarchists had thrown a bomb into a crowd, had exclaimed "They ought to be hanged!" She regretted the words instantly. Her regret became more bitter as she learned, shortly thereafter, the true circumstances surrounding the Haymarket affair. Fourteen years later de Cleyre was still haunted by her imprudent words, "For that ignorant, outrageous, blood-thirsty sentence I shall never forgive myself..." Much of de Cleyre's anarchistic activity in the ensuing years can be seen as an attempt to expiate her sin, and her most passionate addresses were the ones she delivered at the yearly memorials held for the Haymarket martyrs.

The communist anarchist and feminist Emma Goldman described her reaction in her autobiographical *Living My Life*. After becoming hysterical, Goldman fell into a deep sleep. Upon awakening, she discovered something new and wonderful within her soul. It was "a great ideal, a burning faith, a determination to dedicate myself to the memory of my martyred comrades, to make their cause my own..." Goldman abandoned her newly wed husband and

politicians and other agents of the State. Tucker proceed to explain why he now directed this language toward fellow radicals. He declared that "a large number of the most active members of the German Group of the International Working People's Association in New York City, and of the Social Revolutionary Club" were setting fire to their own property in order to collect on insurance policies, even though those properties were sometimes tenements with hundreds of occupants. In one such fire, a mother and a newborn baby had burned to death. In another, a mother and two children lost their lives. Tucker listed fire after fire, death after death.

Moreover, Tucker expanded his accusations to include "well-meaning editors of leading journals of so-called Communistic Anarchism." These editors knew of the death of innocents, but they held their silence out of "mistaken party fealty." Tucker pointed his finger specifically at Most, whom he said was shielding the criminals from detection. "[A]fter he was made aware of these acts," Tucker continued, "he not only refused to repudiate them, but persisted in retaining as his right-hand men some of the worst of the gang." After consulting with some of the most prominent Anarchists in the country, Tucker felt impelled to expose the murderous crimes that were being committed in the name of class justice. One event spurred him on. While he had been debating the matter, a mother and her baby had perished in another fire. Tucker bitterly reproached himself: had he published his expose earlier, the fire would not have been set, and the mother and child would still be alive. Berating himself, Tucker made an overt show of remorse in the pages of *Liberty*.

Then, in a move considered treasonous by many fellow radicals, he called upon "every honorable newspaper in America to lay these facts before its readers, placing the blame where it belongs and distinguishing the innocent from the guilty. And especially do I address the Anarchist press. Every Anarchistic journal ought to copy this exposure and send it forth with the stamp of its approval..."

Many papers acceded to his request: the respectable mainstream ones did so with glee.

A furor broke out in radical circles, exacerbated by the fact that many “honorable” papers grabbed onto the scandal as a means of discrediting Anarchism. The radical *Der Arme Teufel* — a German weekly published from Detroit by Robert Reitzel — lamented “these charges are published by the capitalistic press with great gusto and satisfaction.” Forced by publicity to respond, Most denied any knowledge of the insurance fires, and denounced Tucker’s motives in exposing the alleged crimes.

Tucker refused to back down. In an article entitled “Time Will Tell”, he reiterated the charges and declared, “I have done what I could to save the lives and possessions of unoffending people and to save Anarchy from being smirched by association, even in name, with crime and criminals.” He printed two letters which tended to support his original charges: one from Reitzel, the other from Justus H. Schwab, a prominent member of the International Working People’s Association whom Tucker had mentioned favorably for having registered a protest against the fires. Meanwhile, in *Die Freiheit* Most promised to clear up the matter in future issues. Unfortunately for him, subsequent investigations substantiated most of the charges Tucker had brought against the communist anarchists. The turbulence caused by Tucker’s expose had barely subsided before the most significant event to rock 19th century Anarchism occurred: the Haymarket incident. Again, Tucker found himself at odds with the communist anarchists.

The Haymarket Incident

The city of Chicago seemed to act as a magnet for immigrant radicals, most of who were communist or socialist, and many of whom were deeply committed to the labor movement. The most popular labor organization, the International Working People’s Associ-

ation, published five papers out of Chicago alone, three of which were in German. Indeed, Chicago sent more delegates than any other city to the Second Congress that Tucker had denounced earlier. The large and vocal population of radicals seemed to inspire extreme brutality within the Chicago police force who made a point of violently breaking up even the most peaceful of labor assemblies.

Perhaps in response to police brutality, the Chicago anarchists openly embraced violence as a political strategy. August Spies, the editor of *Die Arbeiter Zeitung* — and one of the Haymarket defendants who was executed — penned a resolution that was passed by the Central Labor Union in that city. It read in part, “We urgently call upon the wage-class to arm itself in order to be able to put forth against their exploiters such an argument which alone can be effective — *Violence!*”[Emphasis in original] The native American Albert Parsons, editor of the *Alarm*, was no less passionate in his call for armed resistance. He wrote, “The Communist and anarchist urges the people to study their schoolbooks on chemistry and read the dictionaries on the composition and construction of all kinds of explosives and make themselves too strong to be opposed with deadly weapons.”

With the emergence of the Eight-Hour Movement in spring of 1886, 65,000 workers in Chicago either went on strike or were locked out by their employers. As May Day drew near, violent encounters between laborers and the police increased. On May 3rd, the police fired upon a crowd of laborers, killing several people. The next day, on May 4th, a protest meeting was held in the Haymarket Square. As the crowd began to break up peacefully due to rain, the police interrupted a speech being delivered by Samuel Fielden, a leader of the demonstration. From the sidelines, someone threw a bomb toward the police, who opened fire. The shots were returned. In the final count, seven policemen died: the death toll of the crowd has never been established, but it has been estimated to be in excess of twenty people.