May Day Thoughts: Individualist Anarchism and the Labor Movement

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May Day, the international holiday of the socialist and workers' movements, is popularly viewed in the U.S. as "that commie holiday." It's commonly associated with big parades and displays of military hardware on Red Square, and exchanges of "fraternal greetings" between leaders of the USSR and its satellites.

In fact, though, it's a holiday that started in the U.S., and is as American as apple pie. In 1884, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions, predecessor of the AFL, called for a nationwide general strike in favor of the eight-hour day. It was to be introduced on May 1, 1886. The political strife resulting directly from that movement included the Haymarket bomb and the subsequent police and judicial riot. The celebration of May Day as a worker's holiday dates back to that movement.

The foreign and communist associations of May Day, in the popular mind, are in large part the outcome of an elite propaganda campaign in the U.S. U.S. ruling circles attempted to identify the assorted workers' and populist movements, in popular consciousness, with foreign radicalism, "unAmericanism," and "Red Ruin." This campaign finally paid off in the War Hysteria and subsequent Red Scare of the Wilson administration, which was used as an opportunity to suppress (via mass arrests, "criminal syndicalism" laws, etc.) organizations as diverse as the I.WW., the Non-Partisan League, and the Farmer-Labor Party. Thanks to the war propaganda, the Palmer Raids and the quasi-private vigilantism of groups like the American Legion, socialism largely ceased to exist as a mass-based movement in the U.S. Around the same time, Congress designated May 1 as "Loyalty Day."

Bear in mind, also, that May Day and the workers' movement behind it were by no means a monopoly of communists and syndicalists, or collectivists of any other stripe. The International Working People's Association, formed by anarchists who withdrew from the First International as it fell increasingly under Marx's sway, played the chief role in organizing the general strike for the eight-hour day. Although anarcho-syndicalists certainly predominated in that organization, individualist anarchists of the period also had an interesting record of participation in it.

The "Boston anarchists" (individualists in the Tucker group) were, admittedly, mostly lukewarm toward labor unions. But some members of Tucker's Liberty circle had been active in the New England Labor Reform League, which promoted the mutual banking of William Greene and

J.K. Ingalls' land theory as a way to eliminate exploitation by free market means: "*free contracts, free money, free markets, free transit, and free land.*" "The currents of labor reform and radicalized laissez-faire," Frank Brooks wrote, "*came together under Tucker's tutelage to form the individualist camp of anarchism in the mid-1880s.*" Some of the individualists in the League were later involved in the politics of the IWPA.

Ezra Heywood, for example, had been involved with the Worcester Labor Reform League (a precursor to the NELRL) and William Sylvis' National Labor Union. Because capital controlled finance and the means of production, not to mention the press and pulpit, Heywood argued, it could sit back and wait for recalcitrant workers to starve, without any word of rebuke from mainstream society. "*But if labor, obedient to a sterner necessity, demands more pay, the air swarms with 'strike,' 'dictation,' 'force,' 'riot,' 'insurrection,' and many other epithets of rebuke…*" And most importantly, government enforcement of privilege was at the root of the problem: "*Through cunning legislation, …privileged classes are allowed to steal largely according to law.*"

The American Labor Reform League, an organization formed subsequently, included (like the NELRL) several members of Tucker's circle: Heywood, William Greene, J.K. Ingalls, and Stephen Pearl Andrews. Heywood, in the first issue of his newspaper *The Word*,

> warmly approved the declarations of the International Workingmen's Association at its gatherings in Belgium and Switzerland, especially those which called upon the members everywhere to "obliterate" nationalism and "abolish" patriotism, which he called "the most barbarous and stupid of virtues." He sounded one note of disapproval, however, reflecting the bitter dispute which had already split the anarchist and socialist factions in Europe: "It is not pleasant to see Dr. Marx and other leaders of this great and growing fraternity lean so strongly toward compulsory policies. If the International would succeed it must be true to its bottom idea–voluntary association in behalf of our common humanity."

Heywood also participated for a time in the IWPA, joining in 1872.

As Tucker was later to do, Heywood considered employers in the main to be the guilty parties when strikes resulted in violence, and to emphasize the role of state violence in aiding the side of the companies. Heywood, on principle, was unenthusiastic about combinations of labor, and preferred to leave the power of capital to be ended by the abolition of privileges like the land and money monopolies. Nevertheless, he considered the Mollie Maguires to be "morally lawful belligerents" engaged in "defensive warfare."

Tucker himself, despite his ambivalence concerning unions, responded enthusiastically at first to the 1881 revival of the IWPA in London. He expressed some reservations at the idea of coordinating propaganda work with organizational work, since he saw education as central to achieving a permanent revolution. But still, he supported the Socialistic-Revolutionary Congress in Chicago, aimed at organizing an American federation within the International. He sent J. H. Swain as *Liberty*'s delegate to the Congress, and was informed that the body met "Josiah Warren's American socialism" with a "cordial reception." The Congress selected *Liberty* as its English language organ.

Tucker's attitude toward the labor war was reflected in this quote about Homestead:

> …It is not enough, however true, to say that, "if a man has labor to sell, he must find some one with money to buy it"; it is necessary to add the much more important

> truth that, if a man has labor to sell, he has a right to a free market in which to sell it, — a market in which no one shall be prevented by restrictive laws from honestly obtaining the money to buy it. If the man with labor to sell has not this free market, then his liberty is violated and his property virtually taken from him. Now, such a market has constantly been denied, not only to the laborers at Homestead, but to the laborers of the entire civilized world. And the men who have denied it are the Andrew Carnegies. Capitalists of whom this Pittsburgh forge-master is a typical representative have placed and kept upon the statute-books all sorts of prohibitions and taxes (of which the customs tariff is among the least harmful) designed to limit and effective in limiting the number of bidders for the labor of those who have labor to sell…
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> …Let Carnegie, Dana & Co. first see to it that every law in violation of equal liberty is removed from the statute-books. If, after that, any laborers shall interfere with the rights of their employers, or shall use force upon inoffensive "scabs," or shall attack their employers' watchmen, whether these be Pinkerton detectives, sheriff's deputies, or the State militia, I pledge myself that, as an Anarchist and in consequence of my Anarchistic faith, I will be among the first to volunteer as a member of a force to repress these disturbers of order and, if necessary, sweep them from the earth. But while these invasive laws remain, I must view every forcible conflict that arises as the consequence of an original violation of liberty on the part of the employing classes, and, if any sweeping is done, may the laborers hold the broom! Still, while my sympathies thus go with the under dog, I shall never cease to proclaim my conviction that the annihilation of neither party can secure justice, and that the only effective sweeping will be that which clears from the statute-book every restriction of the freedom of the market…

More significant than any in the Boston group, however, was Dyer Lum, who attempted a genuine fusion of individualist anarchist economics with radical labor organization. According to Brooks,

> Lum developed a "mutualist" theory of unions that led him first to activity within the Knights of Labor and then to promotion of anti-political strategies in the American Federation of Labor…
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> To fully appreciate Lum's significance in bridging this gap in anarchist historiography, it is useful to consider his evolution to anarchism, his mature vision of anarchism, and how he applied and modified that vision as an anarchist activist between 1885 and 1893. Lum moved toward anarchism because of frustration with abolitionism, spiritualism, and labor reform. While anarchism could develop out of such indigenous movements, it also arose out of immigrant socialism. As these two strains of anarchism converged in the 1880s, Lum concentrated on how to unite them into an anarchist movement. Drawing upon the economic reforms of the "Boston anarchists" and the revolutionary strategy of the "Chicago anarchists," Lum offered a more holistic anarchism than most of his comrades. He realized that anarchism, like any movement aiming at radical social change, had to combine an organization that

> could lead and coordinate action, an effective strategy, and an ideology that was convincing, inspiring and relevant to American culture.

Despite Lum's confusion at times over the role of the state in his agenda…

> Lum began to develop an ideology that centered on the labor reformers' demand: "The Wage System must go!" Post-war labor reform inherited much of the moral fervor of abolitionism, as well as its connections to republican theory. For Radical Republicans and labor reformers, this legacy came together in the concept of "wage slavery." While widely used, the concept was also variously interpreted. Ira Steward, for example, focused on long working hours and urged adoption of the eight-hour day. Henry George, on the other hand, criticized the private appropriation of rising rents and advocated the "single tax." In part because of the breadth of his contacts, Lum interpreted "wage slavery" broadly, advocating reforms such as the Greenbackers' demand for the retention of paper money as legal tender, a land-loan bill, eight-hour legislation, and restriction of Chinese immigration. He saw these as interrelated reforms. Land, monetary, and labor reform were all necessary because "rent, interest, profit are the triple heads of the monster against which modern civilization is waging war."

he still brought an individualist sensibility, "a radicalized form of laissez-faire economics," to bear on the issue of exploitation, empasizing the state as the central force for privilege:

> This inclusive and radical economic analysis led Lum to lay some of the blame for wage slavery at the feet of American national government. For example, instead of opening land up to settlers through a land-loan bill, the federal government offered huge grants of land to the railroads. Lum, echoing republican ideology, saw this as "class legislation," subordinating the public interest to the private interests of "soulless" corporations.

Lum's individualist leanings owed much to the influence of Herbert Spencer and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. He often quoted Spencer's "law of equal freedom." Lum, along with many other anarchists and trade unionists,

> found in Spencer's scientific analysis cogent arguments for individual liberty and against collectivism, especially as they competed with Marxists within the labor movement. Many, including Lum, were also amenable to a radical interpretation of "laissez-faire," where government would not interfere in the sphere of labor activities, even through "favorable" legislation, for fear that this would undermine organized labor's initiative and independence.

Lum's fusion of individualist laissez-faire economics with radical labor agitation was a creative one:

> From the collectivists, he kept the strategic focus on organizing proletarians as a revolutionary class. From the individualists, he kept ideological focus on an anarchist economics that was theoretically sophisticated and grounded in labor reform

> and laissez-faire. At the same time, Lum's alloy had an external function, creating a radical labor ideology that could attract enough adherents to become a significant force for revolutionary social change. His appeals to American and European history and thinkers, his commitment to solving the "labor problem," and his advocacy of forcible efforts at social change were all designed to make anarchism a magnet to radicalized workers…
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> Dyer Lum applied radical laissez-faire economics to union and anarchist organization, hoping to develop a theoretical underpinning that was sophisticated and grounded in American labor reform. He cited liberal thinkers such as Thomas Paine and Herbert Spencer to give theoretical and rhetorical weight to this project. Paine seemed useful rhetorically as a hero of the American Revolution and a radical liberal. Spencer's contribution was more theoretical: he argued for an expansion of individual liberty and restraint of government action on both natural-rights and evolutionary grounds. Spencer seemed especially useful to Lum as a counterweight to the influence of Marx on the collectivist anarchists. While Spencer and Paine were useful primarily in developing a critique of the state, Lum drew from the French anarchist Proudhon, as mentioned earlier, a radical critique of classical political economy and, perhaps more importantly, a set of positive reforms in land tenure and banking…
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> Combining thinkers such as Proudhon, Spencer, and Paine, Dyer Lum produced an antistatist economics that drew upon liberal economics and labor reform in order to promote the interests of the proletariat. Following individualists such as Tucker, Lum argued that the "labor problem" could be explained by the government's creation of "monopolies," particularly the land and money monopolies. Echoing Joshua K. Ingalls, an anarchist active in the New England Labor Reform League, Lum argued that the land monopoly had been created when the state granted legal titles to land. The way to destroy it was to abolish these titles and to institute the principle of free access to land. This would make it impossible for landlords to extract rent from the labor product. The money monopoly was the result of the state establishing its monetary notes as the only legal form of currency. Following Proudhon's American disciple, William B. Greene, Lum argued that this monopoly would be ended when mutual banks were set up to issue their own currencies. This would provide enough stable money to supply the needs of a growing economy and thus undercut the ability of moneylenders and bankers to charge interest. 39
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> Yet land and monetary reform were not enough for Lum; they simply laid the groundwork for the ultimate solution to the labor problem, producer cooperation.

Lum had a close association with the Knights of Labor in the 1880s and the AFL in the 1890s. By the latter time, he was coming to soften his revolutionary stance in favor of an evolutionary approach, relying on peaceful education and organization of counter-institutions. Working in the AFL, he published a pamphlet, The Economics of Anarchy, to be read in "worker study groups"; it centered on the theme of "mutual banks, free access to land, and producer cooperation."

Lum's agenda of bridging the gap between individualist laissez-faire radicalism and the radical labor movement was taken up, as well, by Joseph Labadie and Voltairine DeCleyre.

Labadie promoted individualist and mutualist ideas in the I.W.W. in much the same way that Lum had in the Knights of Labor and the AFL.

> …Nothing exists without a cause, and the cause of the labor movement is that labor products have not been justly distributed. This defect in the present industrial system has brought into existence the trades unions, the political labor parties, the socialists, communists, anarchists, single-taxers, etc., the central aim of all being to give to the laborer the full fruits of his toil…
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> Liberty of the individual should be the guiding principle of all reforms…Individual liberty does not, however, destroy the right of association for the accomplishment of specific objects…
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> It seems to me that those who are desirous of reform should keep these things in mind, namely, that the movement is international, and any attempt to confine it within national boundaries simply retards it; that immigration or the prevention of immigration is no means of reform, and is of no practical benefit to the movement in general; that occupancy and use only must be recognized as a valid title to land; that the monopoly of machinery must be destroyed by the abolition of the patent right system; that the furnishing of a currency, of a medium of exchange, must be left to individuals and associations, taking away from the general governments the monopoly of making the tools of exchange–that, in fact, general governments have no more right to monopolize the making of the tools of trade than they have to monopolize the making of the tools of production; that the true interests of the working and business classes is in the repeal of laws instead of the making of new ones, and that the powers and functions of governments must be reduced as so as to leave the individual a greater degree of freedom and responsibility for his own acts.

DeCleyre evolved in a direction the direct opposite of Lum's, starting out as an orthodox Tuckerite individualist, and developing increasingly strong ties with the radical labor movement. She eventually formulated a theory of "anarchism without adjectives" (roughly equivalent to panarchy), as a non-coercive framework within which individualist and collectivist anarchists could co-exist peacefully.

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