

BOOK REVIEWS

The Debates of Liberty: An Overview of Individualist Anarchism, 1881–1908. By Wendy McElroy. Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 2002.

THERE WAS A PERIOD in the latter nineteenth century when a distinctively American kind of radicalism flourished, a time when key thinkers could be called, and called themselves, individualists, libertarians, anarchists, and socialists all at once. As individualists and libertarians, they were concerned to achieve a maximum of freedom for each individual. As anarchists, they saw the institution of the state as the principal danger and the principal source of remediable evil in human affairs. As socialists, they shared a labor theory of value and opposition to rent, interest, and monopoly, all of which were conceived as having their roots in state-sponsored and enforced aggression, and shared with other socialists a passion for social reform to bring about a better society. A central figure was Benjamin Tucker who, through his periodical, *Liberty*, helped to make a self-conscious social movement of individuals influenced by thinkers like Josiah Warren, Pierre Proudhon and Lysander Spooner, gave it voice and contributed to shaping it.

It would be far from the truth, however, to suppose that these individualists all managed to agree on the major social and intellectual issues that confronted them. A range of issues, political, cultural, and theoretical, were hotly debated, and *Liberty* provided an outlet and forum in which the debates could be conducted.

Wendy McElroy's book, *The Debates of Liberty: An Overview of Individualist Anarchism, 1881–1908*, begins with a brief chapter, setting the historical context and giving background on Tucker's role and follows with seven more chapters, each following through with the major arguments and positions developed with respect to some issue. The debates explored range over fundamental institutions, questions of political and moral theory, and issues of strategy.

McElroy gives us a window on those debates, and through them, on the people and times involved. But her work is of more than antiquarian interest: their debates and the issues they faced often sound strikingly modern.

For example, one of the early debates was over the foundational issue of natural rights versus egoism. Many favored the natural-rights doctrine that individuals had certain enforceable rights against others by virtue of their nature. "The substance of these claims is generally stated as a right to the protection of person, property, and peaceful actions" (p. 51). Others, including Benjamin Tucker, and largely as a result of the influence of Max Stirner's *The Ego and His Own*, came to think that natural rights were myths, that the only kind of appeal that made sense was to a person's interests and that the only "right" worth the name was the right that arose through agreement or contract.

Contemporary readers of contractarian political philosophy, especially of a Hobbesian cast, will find much that sounds familiar here. There is the same idea that ultimately reasons must be rooted in what individuals want, that the only kind of constraint on pursuing what they want has to derive from something like a contract, and that it would only be sensible to participate in such an agreement to the extent that it furthered one's prospects for getting what one wants. The *Liberty* debaters also faced the hard problem of what this means for children, and others, not yet able to enter into a contract on equal terms. Interestingly, though evidently without being very comfortable with the position, Tucker and others admitted that their combination of egoism and contractarianism left no place for children but as property. A mother might "throw her baby into the fire as a man throws his newspaper" (p. 78). (Tucker thought he would probably interfere to save the child, but that he would deserve to be punished.)

There are many other debates recounted in the book that will repay consideration, some for the light they throw upon issues and the new (or just forgotten) directions they suggest in contemporary discussions, others for the insight they provide into American intellectual history. On either count, there is much to enjoy and profit from here.

I have only a single minor quibble to raise, which pertains to the organization of the book. Several chapters deal extensively with strategic matters, with questions of the right means for bringing about desirable social and political change. Voting, violence, civil disobedience, and participation in legal institutions are all discussed, but the discussions are not united in the same chapter or even the same sequence of chapters. Substantial discussions can be found in chapters 2, 3, and 7. Similarly, questions having to do with the institutions of an anarchist society, including what will do the job of courts and police, whether intellectual property will be recognized,

and fundamental issues of money, banking and economics are discussed in chapters 3, 6, and 8. It is not transparent what plan was followed in ordering the chapters. Something in the way of explanation would have been appreciated.

However, this is a minor problem with what is, all in all, a very useful book. In large part, McElroy lets the very eloquent thinkers who debated in the pages of *Liberty* speak for themselves. When she provides explanatory and connecting material her exposition is clear and interesting, while her own commentary is both plainly distinguished from the opinions of her subjects and unobtrusive. McElroy succeeds admirably in what should be the objective for any work of this kind—whetting one's appetite for the original.

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