Josiah Warren was a musician from Boston who turned to manufacturing in Ohio after inventing a new kind of lamp. In the 1820s, however, Warren was swept up by the utopian socialist ideas of the English reformer, Robert Owen. In 1825, Warren sold his own manufacturing interests and moved to Owen’s new experimental colony of New Harmony, Indiana. The New Harmony experiment soon failed, and the disillusioned Warren returned to his earlier pastime of inventing. The experience in New Harmony convinced Warren that the socialist approach of common property advocated by Owen was doomed to failure. Instead, Warren embraced a system of philosophical anarchy and an economic theory based on labor costs. Over the next several decades, he promoted the idea that “labor notes” should replace other forms of currency and that prices for goods and services should equal the cost of labor and materials to produce them. Warren demonstrated the practicality of his ideas by operating a “time store” that operated on the labor-cost principle and a utopian community of his own in New York. During the Civil War, he published an extended examination of the importance of nonviolence and individual liberty and blamed the war on America’s failure to appreciate the true principles of government.

Josiah Warren, True Civilization (1863)

Every individual of mankind has an “INALIENABLE right to Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness;” “and it is solely to protect and secure the enjoyment of these rights unmolested that governments can properly be instituted among men.” In other terms, SELF-SOVEREIGNTY is an instinct of every living organism; and it being an instinct, cannot be alienated or separated from that organism. It is the instinct of Self-Preservation; the votes of ten thousand men cannot alienate it from a single individual, nor could the bayonets of twenty thousand men neutralize it to any one person any more than they could put a stop to the instinctive desire for food in a hungry man.

. . . [T]he legitimate and appropriate mission of governments is the defense and protection of the inalienable right of Sovereignty in every individual within his or her own sphere.

. . .

The whole proper business of government is the restraining offensive encroachments, or unnecessary violence to persons and property, or enforcing compensation therefore; but if, in the exercise of this power, we commit any unnecessary any violence to any person whatsoever or to any property, we, ourselves, have become the aggressors, and should be resisted.

But who is to decide how much violence is necessary in any given case? We here arrive at the pivot upon which all power now turns for good or evil; this pivot, under formal, exacting, aggressive institutions or constitutions, is the person who decides as to their meaning. If one decides for all, then all but that one are, perhaps, enslaved; if each one’s title to Sovereignty is admitted, there will be different interpretations, and this freedom to differ will ensure emancipation, safety, repose, even in a political

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atmosphere! And all the cooperation we ought to expect will come from the coincidence of motives according to the merits of each case as estimated by different minds. Where there is evidence of aggression palpable to all minds, all might cooperate to resist it; and where the case is not clearly made out, there will be more or less hesitation: Two great nations will not then be so very ready to jump at each other’s throats when the most cunning lawyers are puzzled to decide which is wrong!

Theorize as we may about the interpretation of “the Constitution,” every individual does unavoidably measure it and all other words by his own peculiar understanding or conceits, whether he understands himself or not, and should, like General Jackson, recognize the fact, “take the responsibility of it,” and qualify himself to meet its consequences. The full appreciation of this simple but almost unknown fact will neutralize the war element in all verbal controversies, and the binding power of all indefinite words, and place conformity hereto on the voluntary basis! Did any institution-makers (except the signers of the “Declaration”) ever think of this?

It will be asked, what could be accomplished by a military organization, if every subordinate were allowed to judge of the propriety of an order before he obeyed it? I answer that nothing could be accomplished that did not commend itself to men educated to understand, and trained to respect the rights of persons and property as set forth in the “Declaration of Independence;” and that here, and here only, will be found the long-needed check to the barbarian wantonness that lays towns in ashes and desolates homes and hearts for brutal revenge, or to get office or a little vulgar newspaper notoriety?

But what shall ensure propriety of judgment or uniformity or coincidence between the subordinates and the officers? I answer, Drill, Discipline,—of mind as well as of arms and legs,—teaching all to realize their true mission. The true object of all their power being clearly defined and made familiar, there would at once be a coincidence unknown before, and but slight chance of dissent when there was good ground for cooperation.

No subordination can be more perfect that that of an Orchestra; but it is all voluntary. When we are ready to protect any person or property without regard to locality or party, there can be no hostile parties or nations!—Nothing to betray by treason!—Nothing to rebel against!—No party to desert to! . . .

A “Union” not only on paper, but rooted in the heart—whose members, trained in the constant reverence for the “inalienable right” of Sovereignty in every person, would be habituated to forbearance towards even wrong opinions and different educations and tastes, to patient endurance of irremediable injuries, and a self-governing deportment and gentleness of manner and a prompt but careful resistance to wanton aggression wherever found, which would meet with a ready and an affectionate welcome in any part of the world.

Every intelligent person would wish to be a member or to contribute, in some manner, to the great common cause.

No coercive system of taxation could be necessary to such a government! A government so simple that children will be first to comprehend it, and which even they can see it for their interests to assist. . . .

Government, strictly and scientifically speaking, is a coercive force; a man, while governed with his own consent, is not governed at all.

Deliberative bodies, such as Legislatures, Congresses, Conventions, Courts, etc. are not, scientifically speaking, are not government, which is simply coercive force. But, inasmuch as that force should never be employed without a deliberate reference to its legitimate object, and upon which all available wisdom should be brought to bear, a Deliberative Council, acting before or with the government, seems highly expedient if not indispensable.
When the simply wise shall sit in calm deliberation, patiently tracing out the complicated and entangled Causes of avarice, of robberies, of murders, of wars, of poverty, of desperation, of suicides, of Slaveries and fraud, violence and suffering of all kinds, and shall have found appropriate and practical means of PREVENTING instead of punishing them, then the Military will be the fitting messengers of relief and harbingers of security and of peace, of order and unspeakable benefits wherever their footsteps are found; and, instead of being the desolators of the world, they will be hailed from far and near as the blessed benefactors of mankind.

... I may have a neighbor who is an old line Presbyterian, and who goes every Sunday to hear what I consider destructive theories; but, holding his sovereignty as sacred, I offer no obstacle other than acceptable counsel. If I have anything in his way, I will hasten to take it out of the way. My public duty towards the Catholic and every other persuasion is the same. I have no issue with either till an attempt is made to enforce assent or conformity from me or others. And my duty towards all political creeds and theories is precisely the same. They are all entitled to forbearance till some attempt is made to enforce them on the unwilling. The attempt is an encroachment upon the great sacred right of self-sovereignty—an attack upon the Divine law of Individuality, and will always beget resistance and war.

... FREEDOM TO DIFFER. Freedom for you to do (at your own cost or within your own sphere) what I may consider wrong, foolish, or inexpedient, is the vital principle of peace and all progress; for your experiments may prove that you are right!

... For true order and progress we must preserve at all times and in all things FREEDOM TO DIFFER in word and in act, and thus approach cooperation by degrees instead of by any violent or sudden leap. No matter how perverse any one may be, he never can get outside of the propensity to have his own way.

This point of coincidence once universally understood, there can be no outsiders, no foreigners, no hostile tribes or Clans, no political party, except “the party of the whole”!

... One party denies the right of secession or self-sovereignty, to the whites of the South and to their white subordinates at home, and in the same breath assert that right in favor of the blacks of the South!

The other party leaders claim that right for themselves, but deny it to their white subordinates, and to the black people of the South! This is the difference between the parties! That is, no difference at all. Both fatally contradict themselves, and become entangled in a web of confusion, from which nothing but the simple admission of that great inalienable right of sovereignty in every person (within his or her own sphere, as explained) can possibly extricate them.

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