Godwin's Place in the Anarchist Tradition — a Bicentennial Tribute

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In a quest for a saner life many anarchists simultaneously look backward to an age of pristine peace and forward to a time of willed perfection. So open a persuasion has allowed itself to find spiritual ancestors on all parts of the globe extending back over two millenia. A movement that can draw on writers, philosophers, and religious thinkers as disparate as Jesus, Sir Thomas More, Fenelon, Thomas Jefferson, Herbert Spencer, and Nietzsche is hardly a movement at all in the traditional sense of the term: it is rather an effort to define through whatever texts will reveal a self-directed moral life in a free society.

Three Hellenic schools of philosophy, the Cyrenaics, the Cynics and the Stoics, have been claimed as forerunners. Zeno of Citium (336–264 B.C.), the founder of Stoicism, propounded the good life free of government and given to virtue and harmony. In China, Lao Tsu (sixth century B.C.?) proclaimed the Tao, "the basic, undivided unity in which all the contradictions and distinctions of existence are ultimately resolved." The disciple who has become centered in the Tao is self-governing, harmonious in relations with others and with the inner self.

Religious groups such as the Beghards, Waldenses, Albigenses, Anabaptists, and early Quakers have been an inspiration to anarchists. These sects to one degree or another espoused equality, communality of material goods, purity of morals, rejection of human authority, and an individual interpretation of belief in the Divine. The fifteenth-century radical Hussites, known as the Taborites, imagined a millennial future free of private property, human laws and all mundane authority: a brotherhood of all mankind subject only to the divine precepts of the Lord.

Anarchists have regarded the secular revolt of the Diggers, or True Levellers, in seventeenth-century England led by Gerrard Winstanley as a source of pride. Winstanley, deeming that property is corrupting, opposed clericalism, political power and privilege. It is economic inequality, he believed, that produces crime and misery. He championed a primitive communalism based on the pure teachings of God as comprehended through reason. People must "work and eat together, making the earth a common treasury…[for] the poorest man hath as true a title and just right to the land as the richest man…[It is the] government that gives liberty to the gentry to have all the earth and shuts out the poor… [therefore it is akin to an] imaginary, self-seeking, Antichrist."

The Enlightenment, promoting scientific inquiry and freeing natural law from its traditional and religious moorings, gave birth to ideas of progress, individuality, and liberty that are as useful to anarchism as to concepts of just government and enlightened despotism. The "age," according to Francis Haber, "was in quest of universals…[wherein] Western man's view of the world was revolutionized." Enlightened philosophers believed in the state of natural innocence, the perfectibility of man, and of course a society built on a rational basis. Thinkers sought to locate goodness in nature. An immutable and comprehensible reason now became not

only a means to this quest, but a realm itself of eternal virtues and a living motive force of intellectual human community. With universally valid laws, equality and greater knowledge could be attained. People could then recognize the primacy of moral consciousness and be their own deliverers.

The eighteenth century in England was also a time rife with religious dissenting groups: Methodists, Moravians, Muggletonians and Antinomians. Seeking freedom of conscience and faith, they drew into enclosed, self-governing social enclaves without centralized authority. Such groups bred a "slumbering radicalism" and bordered, according to E. P. Thompson, on "anarchy." In face of industrial change, the enclosure movement, social dislocation and poverty, popular working-class movements espoused egalitarian ideas and radical agitation proliferated among intellectuals, including many former ministers.

One such sensitive clergyman of the Sandemanian sect, steeped in its militant nonconformity and sense of mission, was William Godwin (1756–1836). Raised in the traditions of dissent, he devoured the works of Swift, Rousseau, Helvetius and other writers. Godwin's thinking continuously moved in a direction that today's political language would define as leftward. He eventually rejected religious dogma in favor of an ethics based on an unassailable reason shorn of an enslaving religion or state. As Protestantism desired to abolish the barriers between man and God, Godwin sought to remove the barriers among people. The perfectibility of man's individuality replaced the kingdom of God. "I knew of nothing," Godwin wrote, "worth the living for but usefulness and the service of my fellow-creatures." After a stint on Grub Street he became known as an author and a regular contributor to political pamphlets in the defense of freedom. By the early 1790s he was widely recognized as a radical.

For many people in Britain, already primed by dissenting and liberal traditions, the French Revolution awakened grandiose visions of a new era, not only for many intellectuals, but for workers as well. Reform of society and government seemed imminent. Many men and women enthusiastically sped to Paris to participate in the new world being created. Associations and corresponding societies dotted the island. *The Rights of Man*, penned by the iconoclastic Thomas Paine, and promoted by Godwin, captured some upper- and middle-class dreamers clamoring for utopia. During the 1790s portions of the lower classes, suffering from poverty, rising prices, crop failures and famine, rebelled not so much for a perfected future as against a ruthless laissez-faire economics that was breaking down customary ways. Aligning themselves with the intellectuals, popular leaders held huge outdoor protest meetings. Values were altering and a working classes sense of identity began to develop.

The excesses of the French Revolution panicked the ruling elements, who had favorably received the first news of the fall of the Bastille. Tightening their ranks,

they came to reject all innovation and began to defend even corrupt anomalies. An attack on the king exasperated them further. Abetted by a split in the Whig ranks, a growing French Jacobin terror, the spread of revolutionary "contagion" to other parts of Europe, and ultimately a French declaration of war, the Pitt ministry curtailed English liberties. Burke's trenchant *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, meanwhile, had polarized both radical and conservative camps. A tricolor scare unfurled. The government employed numerous spies, suspended the Habeas Corpus Act, passed the "Gagging Acts," and conducted well-publicized treason trials. Rabidly patriotic riots broke out as a counterthrust to the revolutionary mobs. Mutinies and an Irish rebellion later fanned antirevolutionary passions.[1] Many radicals fell silent, but Godwin in published broadsides declared that "it is better not to live at all, than to live in perpetual fear."

The Revolution caused Godwin's "heart [to] beat high with great swelling sentiments of Liberty.. and sanguine hopes" and he was desirous of change that "should flow purely from the clear light of the understanding, and..generous feelings." In the midst of the nascent repression, Godwin issued his two-volume *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Morals and Happiness*. Published in February 1793 after sixteen months of writing, it may be considered the starting point of modern anarchist thought.

Godwin did abhor the excesses and violence, especially the guillotine. His taste was for reason and moderation. "Political justice" meant that each person must peacefully exercise judgment and sagacity, based on an equitable morality for the greatest amount of good. Every person, as a mutual partaker of the truth, must be a ruler over his own passions and relations. The powers of the human mind, Godwin believed, are limitless. Truth, and hence perfectibility are realizable. Social reform and personal transformation will come of the application of immutable laws heretofore used in the natural sciences. This change is to be effected gradually by educated instructors and small groups of thinkers, for virtue and "true wisdom is best adapted to a slow, unvarying, incessant progress." An objective reason that recognizes the good, a virtue that pursues the truth and a benevolence that rises above self-interest: together these will bring universal justice. Justice and happiness will then be indissolubly linked; society and the individual will be in concord.

If "Reason is the only legislator, and her decrees are irrevocable and uniform," it follows that government, not only monarchy and aristocracy, but a democracy as well, fosters retrograde customs, torpidity, vice and inequality in status and property. Breeding illusionary distinctions, "any government is" therefore "an evil,

[1] Godwin had written eloquent defenses for men accused of treason, even helping secure a victory for the defense. This trial was a landmark in English legal history. From now on people could not be convicted of treason for word and pen

[a] usurpation upon the private judgment and individual conscience of mankind." Democracy differs from a despotic polity only in the degree of evil. If despotism depresses the spirit by uniform usurpation, then democracy subjects the spirit to conformity and capriciousness. "The pretense of collective wisdom is among the most palpable of all impostures." A "democratic" state is an oppression by an ambitious and benighted majority over a minority, which "introduces the evils of a fictitious unanimity" and stifles creative freedom. Democracy is "a monstrous and unwieldy vessel, launched upon the sea of human passions, without ballast."[2] "With what delight," Godwin exulted, "must every well-informed friend of mankind look forward to the auspicious period, the dissolution of political government, of that brute engine which has been the only perennial cause of the vices of mankind,"[3]

Religion should also go the way of government. It is "a system of blind submission and abject hypocrisy" duping people into a false sense of virtue. Claiming monopoly on a supposedly arcane knowledge, "Its authors communicated to the world as much truth as they calculated that the world would be willing to receive."

We know too little of the system of the universe, are too liable to error respecting it, and see too small a portion of the whole to entitle us to form our moral principle upon an imitation of what we conceive to be the course of nature.

If religion is an oppressor, then the idea of God is tyrannical. Godwin later wrote, "the idea of an intelligent Creator and Governor of the universe… strikes my mind as the most irrational and ridiculous anthropomorphism."

Godwin believed that the "good things of the world are a common flock, upon which one man has as valid a title as another to draw for what he wants." An accumulation of property, especially allied with church and state, translates into social power, and breeds selfishness, crime, cupidity, and poverty. A cooperative sharing of the bounties of the earth, devoid even of barter and exchange, would bring increased knowledge, moral improvement, and an end to war. Every individual, however, should have enough personal possessions, their quantity and use governed by self-restraint, to satisfy his or her particular needs and well-being. "Private interest would visibly accord with public good, and civil society [would] become all that poetry has feigned of the golden age."

Society as Godwin envisioned it is to be a very loose confederation of democratic parishes similar to the ancient Hellenic cities temporarily guided by a council of wise men. The individual, social relations, and technology (with a minimal amount of physical labor) will ceaselessly improve amid simple needs and rational cooperation. Under our present system we are but "mere shadows of men, with a specious

[2] A benign form of democracy is acceptable as a transitional state.

[3] Any association is to be eschewed that interferes with universal benevolence. Even orchestras and marriage deny individuality!

outside.. destitute of substance and soul. But when "we [shall] arrive at the land of realities.. men shall be known for what they are, by energy of thought and intrepidity of action!" A world free from anguish, melancholy, resentment and disease might even hold death at bay.[4]

Even during the writing of *Political Justice*, Godwin's views appreciably altered and evolved. Beginning with some regard for good government, he ended by rejecting it altogether. This book, torturous to present-day readers accustomed to a less ornate style, has many contradictions and incongruities, largely attributable to hastily getting the first edition to press. The second edition was published in 1796, and the third in 1798. They contain extensive changes, additions of concepts, and shifts in emphasis. Man's perfectibility, for instance, initially a realizable goal, Godwin later requalified as continuous progress.

It has been claimed that *Political Justice* lacks feeling. William Hazlitt declared that "Mr. Godwin has rendered an essential to moral science, by attempting (in vain) to pass the Arctic Circle and Frozen Regions, where the understanding is no longer warmed by the affections, nor fanned by the breeze of fancy!" Mary Wollstonecraft regarded it as "icy philosophy." Godwin, after becoming a family man, himself later admitted that he should have given more place to emotions and "the empire of feeling." He even sketched an outline for a book to compensate for this neglect. Godwin nevertheless declared that he had been "animated by the love of truth, and by a passion inseparable from its nature, …which is almost the same thing under another name, the love of my species."

As Godwin claimed, we do not always strive for the noblest or the good, nor does a "Vulcan" reason always control our emotions. There also sadly exists a disparity between our individual perception of what is good and its application. Perhaps Hazlitt is right in observing that Godwin "conceived too nobly of his fellows.. [and] raised the standard of morality above the reach of humanity." That was a fault of his age, when sober philosophy believed that reason and the application of immutable laws to man's behaviour could control individual passions and society. "At a time when religion was increasingly recognized as an agglomeration of primeval fears and superstitions," observes William St. Clair, *Political Justice* "offered a reassuring modern scientific explanation to put in its place, …t was wonderfully liberating and refreshing..[it helped]..burst out from the fetters [those] privileged few whose improved perceptions [would] accelerate perfectibility."

Political Justice was deemed dangerous and seditious. During a session of the Privy Council, shortly after publication, Godwin's possible prosecution was considered. Pitt, it has been claimed, remarked that "a three guinea book could never

[4] The abridged first edition deleted this section but in the third edition, Godwin rejected absolute immortality as a goal. He did, however, believe life could be immeasurably prolonged.

do much harm among those who had not three shillings to spare." *Political Justice* nevertheless immediately became a best-seller and was circulated widely, for radical societies and workers' associations scrimped their meager savings together and loaned out single copies to their members. The notoriety of Godwin as the author of *Political Justice* as well as a number of novels brought him and his ideas to the attention of such distinguished men as Coleridge, Priestley, Southey, Lamb, Hazlitt, and Wordsworth. Mary Wollstonecraft, the famous advocate of women's rights, married him in 1797. She died a few months later after giving birth to Mary, the future author of *Frankenstein* and future wife of Godwin's most noteworthy and ardent disciple, Shelley. To many enthralled radicals, Godwin became "a prophet, ..[and] they built upon his speculations the superstructure of a dream that was all their own." Opponents also abounded. Malthus wrote an *Essay on Population* as a rebuttal to *Political Justice*. Burke considered Godwin's work "Pure defecated Atheism, the brood of that putrid carcase [sic] the French Revolution."

The time of euphoria was short. Public opinion hardened in favor of tradition and the status quo. A growing disillusionment with excesses of the French Revolution, an anti-Gallicism among the masses, a successful repression by the government, and dissension between the hot-headed radicals and advocates of moderation such as Godwin, weakened the forces of reform. Godwin became an object of obloquy. He suffered grievously over the death of his wife. His fame quickly faded, so much so that in 1811 his future son-in-law Shelley thought that his name had been "enrolled.. on the list of the honourable dead." Hazlitt declared that he had "blazed as a sun in the firmament of reputation.. [but] has sunk below the horizon.. [in] the serene twilight of a doubtful immortality." His second marriage was difficult. His remaining years were dogged by the financial problems engendered by family responsibilities and literary pursuits, which sometimes strained his relationship with Shelley.

Although Godwin used the word "anarchy" to refer to chaos and never perceived himself as an "anarchist," Woodcock justifiably calls him the "father of modern anarchism" for this first systematic exposition of anarchist theory. Godwin's status in anarchist thought is similar to that of Beethoven's in music — he summed up all that had come before him and foreshadowed all that was to come after. The smashing of old forms, the creation of new potentialities and the freeing of the mind lend themselves to comparison. Godwin's thought surfaced in debate between Jeffersonians and Federalists, and according to one historian "became a beacon to generations of rebels" in the United States. Shelley's poems "Queen Mab," "Ode to Liberty," "The Revolt of Islam," "The Masque of Anarchy," and "Prometheus Unbound" were inspired by Godwin's anarchism. Nineteenth-century anarchist thinkers ignored him, but Kropotkin praised him. Godwin's thought anticipated the British labor movement in its nonrevolutionary moderation, Robert Owen in his belief in the

liberating force of education, the Chartists in their attack on the distribution of power, and the Fabians in their humane socialism. Even Karl Marx's vision of a withering away of the state and theory of surplus value had an indirect precedent in Godwin. His writings left their mark on Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charles Dickens, Henry George, Oscar Wilde, and H. G. Wells.[5]

Godwin declared that "If oppression [of any sort] had been the school of wisdom, the improvement of mankind would have been inestimable, for they have been in that school for many thousand years." Humanity is still going to school to hatred and war. Pollution and disrespect for all creatures violate life itself even in its simplest forms. Harmony still eludes the most impatient of species. Passions remain ungovernable. A reading of *Political Justice* would probably be of benefit for us, for we are in need of a worldview that will "admit into our bosoms neither contempt, animosity, resentment nor revenge. The cause of justice is the cause of humanity. We should love this cause, for it conduces to the general happiness of [hu]mankind."

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Bibliographic Notes

I am using the first edition of Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness* (Raymond A. Preston, ed., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), because it has more chutzpah than the succeeding two editions and reflects more poignantly the enthusiasm of the times. Since this work was partially abridged, I used the third edition (F. E. L. Priestly, ed., Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1946) as a back-up. I have not made an extensive comparison among the three editions. Since I am primarily using the first edition (and an abridged one) a thorough analysis of the differing texts would be beyond the scope of this short article, I can only ask for tolerance for any fault. In addition, I consulted Godwin's *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Constable & Co., Ltd., 1927) and the *Uncollected Writings (1785–1822): Articles in Periodicals and Six Pamphlets* by William Godwin, Jack W. Marken and Burton R. Pollin, eds. (Gainesville, Fla.: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1968).

[5] Engels wrote that the "two great practical philosophers of latest date, Bentham and Godwin, are, especially the latter, almost exclusively the property of the proletariat."

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