

Great Anarchists

These short introductions delve into the anarchist canon to recover some of the distinctive ideas that historical anarchists advanced to address problems relevant to their circumstances. Although these contexts were special, many of the issues the anarchists wrestled with still plague our lives. Anarchists developed a body of writing about power, domination, injustice and exploitation, education, prisons and a lot more besides. Honing in on different facets of the anarchist canon is not just an interesting archaeological exercise. The persistence, development and adaptation of anarchist traditions depends on our surveying the historical landscape of ideas and drawing on the resources it contains. The theoretical toolbox that this small assortment of anarchists helped to construct is there to use, amend and adapt. Agitate, Educate, Organise!

William Godwin

Godwin was an eighteenth-century radical writer and journalist and one of the leading participants in the debates sparked by the French Revolution. An ally of Tom Paine, he was also a critic of Edmund Burke, the Whig-cum-conservative author of *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Godwin shared Burke's abhorrence of The Terror but wholly rejected his glowing defence of aristocracy. At first enthusiastic about the Revolution, Godwin made two lasting interventions into revolutionary debates, the theoretical treatise *Political Justice* and the novel *Caleb Williams*.

Godwin is sometimes credited with being the first philosophical anarchist, a claim that has perhaps created a misleading impression that he was an engaging armchair critic and/or that his contribution to radical politics rests on the rigor of his system, best assessed by its strict, logical dissection. These approaches simultaneously underplay the active role he took in politics and the character of the philosophy he advanced. Like many of his contemporaries, Godwin understood publishing as a form of activism, an intervention into public debate that was intended to shape it and which also entailed risk. Godwin suggested that *Political Justice* escaped censorship because it was judged too expensive to inflame public debate, but it sold in the thousands and was read widely in the societies that mushroomed across the country in the 1790s. As activists turned to the book to press for democratic change, Godwin went out of his way to protest the arrest of friends and fellow radicals on charges of treason and to defend rights of free speech, the press and assembly curtailed by the Government's Gagging Acts. Similarly, when it came to political philosophy, Godwin was as disparaging of ideal systems as Proudhon. Perfectibility meant the capacity to improve not the achievement of perfection. This ruled against the discovery of model political orders – such as Rousseau's *Social Contract*, the text that animated the French Jacobins – as well as habitual reliance on precepts derived from logic or faith. As he explained: 'to rest in general rules is sometimes a necessity which our imperfection imposes

upon us' but 'the true dignity of human reason is, as much as we are able, to go beyond them, to have our faculties ... act upon every occasion that occurs, and to correct ourselves accordingly'. Judgment and experience were the proper guides to action, not Reason or Law.

Today, Godwin is as likely to be remembered for his family connections as he is for his independent contributions to radical politics. He married Mary Wollstonecraft in 1797, five years after she published her best-known book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She died the same year, after giving birth to their daughter Mary, the future author of *Frankenstein*. His influence was felt strongly in and through the writing of his son-in-law, the Romantic revolutionary poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley. Yet with the exception of Kropotkin, who identified him as the first person to set out an anarchist doctrine, he was barely read by later anarchists. In recent times, Tom Paine has emerged as the eighteenth-century champion of anarchistic thought, though he probably aligns more easily with left republicanism. It was Godwin who distinguished himself as the critic of government. This 'boasted institution', he said, 'is nothing more than a scheme for enforcing by brute violence the sense of one man or set of men upon another'. He did not call his critique anarchist, but as Kropotkin later argued, aspects of Godwin's thought resonated with the overt anarchism that Proudhon and others advanced after 1840.

Anarchy and anarchy

Godwin presented two views of anarchy, one negative and one hopeful. The negative conception came from the common understanding of anarchy as the absence of government. In this guise it was as a condition of disorder, usually less attractive than established social orders. This view was reminiscent of the state of nature depicted by Thomas Hobbes. However, Godwin departed from Hobbes in two ways. First, Godwin explained the nasty, brutish insecurity of anarchy as a result of unrestrained passion, not a lack of universal moral standards. Second, Godwin's anarchists are not atomised egos programmed to compete for power until they die, as Hobbes's are. They are excited by the lack of restraint and so 'grasp at power' in a 'rigorous, unfeeling and fierce' manner. Against Hobbes, Godwin concluded that it was impossible to imagine an idea 'more pregnant with absurdity' than that 'of a whole people taking arms against each other till they are all exterminated'.

In Godwin's view, anarchy is an uncivil condition, not an asocial one. It was a 'short lived mischief' – akin to a revolutionary uprising – which led to the temporary suspension of reason and so undermined virtue. Yet his greatest fear of anarchy was that it cleared a path to despotism and tyranny by enabling despots to package the 'horrible calamity' of anarchy as an incurable failure of self-government. 'Men rendered mad with oppression, and drunk with the acquisition of new born power' were judged incapable of exercising 'rational

functions'. In fact despotism usually explained these momentary suspensions of virtue and reason. Pressing home the point about the Hobbesian construction, Godwin noted: 'it is to despotism that anarchy is indebted for its sting. If despotism were not ever watchful for its prey, and mercilessly prepared to take advantage of the errors of mankind, this ferment ... being left to itself, would subside into an even, clear and delightful calm'.

Rejecting the despotic construction, Godwin argued that anarchy had a positive face. It may result, he argued, in 'the best form of human society'. In this sense, it could be likened to 'true liberty' and defined as a vehicle for justice and virtue; it was usually generated by 'the hatred of oppression' and 'a spirit of independence' which 'disengages men from prejudice and implicit faith'.

Ordinary observations of human behaviours indicated that this positive form of anarchy was entirely practical. Rejecting the idea that law made people good, Godwin argued it was always coercive. Similarly, he believed that the threats posed by law-breakers were minimal, though they were often exaggerated. Every community sheltered a few children 'of riot and plunder' but it was only the 'satirical and censorious' who believed that their conduct cast a 'general slur and aspersion' on the 'whole species'.

When we look at human society with kind and complacent survey, we are more than half tempted to imagine that men might subsist very well in clusters and congregated bodies without the coercion of law; and in truth criminal laws were only made to prevent the ill-disposed few from interrupting the regular and inoffensive proceedings of the vast majority.

Godwin's theoretical outlook may look old-fashioned. The problems that occupied him turned on the promotion of virtue and enhancement of reason in a violent, corrupted and prejudiced world. However, his argument speaks to problems of structurelessness created by the exercise of power without constraint and that the collapse or destruction of existing social orders creating political vacuums for tyranny to fill. Godwin explored the virtues of anarchy as a practical reformer, not an ideologue. His view was that anarchy required the control of dominating behaviours to check potential mischief. Instead of presenting a choice between rule and no-rule, he outlined the tension arising from government and self-government. His conclusion was that refusing self-government was unjust and that self-government 'imperfect as it is' was 'more salutary than any thing that can be substituted in its place'.

Obedience and self-government

In the notes for the projected second part of his semi-autobiographical novel *The First Man*, Albert Camus wrote: 'Learning justice and morality means to decide whether an emotion is good or bad according to consequences'. Godwin argued similarly and *Political Justice* gives

considerable space to the discussion of improvement, education and pedagogy as a result. He also shared Camus' commitment to 'autonomy' and his demand for 'independence in interdependence'. Yet Godwin talked about obedience in preference to using Camus' term and his concept of independence was strict. His 'simple truth' was that 'no man can in no case be bound to yield obedience to any other man or set of men upon earth'.

Rather than measure freedom against obedience, Godwin distinguished between three types: voluntary, forced and habitual. Turning to the first, he described voluntary actions as acts of obedience because they conformed to our judgments, conscience or reason, formed in a social context. The obedience driven by our independent judgment was qualitatively different from the second type, repressive obedience. Godwin associated this with inequality, the desire to secure someone's approval or, even more starkly, avoid punishment. These were all destructive forms and they were linked to uneven distributions of property, wealth differentials and the cultural biases and social hierarchies that went hand-and-hand with economic injustice. Godwin depicted the relationship in *Caleb Williams*. When the anti-hero Williams discovers that his master, Falkland, is a murderer and requests that he be allowed to leave his service, the furious, diminished Falkland tells him that he will forever remain a slave to his whims:

You shall never quit it with your life. If you attempt it, you shall never cease to rue your folly as long as you exist. That is my will; and I will not have it resisted. The very next time you disobey me in that or any other article, there is an end of your vagaries for ever ...

Do not imagine I am afraid of you! I wear an armour, against which all your weapons are impotent. I have dug a pit for you; and whichever way you move ... it is ready to swallow you ... If once you fall, call as loud as you will, no man on earth shall hear your cries: Your innocence shall be of no service ... I laugh at so feeble a defence. It is as I say it; you may believe what I tell you.

Godwin distinguished the third type of obedience from these two. This came from what he called 'confidence' and it was similar to authority of the expert that Bakunin later discussed and allowed. Godwin disagreed, using the example of the builder and the mechanic to discuss the interdependent relation that Bakunin identified in the skill of the shoemaker and the dependency he feared in the specialist knowledge of the scientist. The problem with this kind of obedience, Godwin argued, was that the obedient not only sought the help of the expert but also learned to defer to their judgments and submit to their directions. Whether the skill was practical or intellectual, the harm was the same.

For Godwin any departure 'from the independence of our understanding' which 'general and unlimited confidence necessarily includes' was to be resisted. The obedience instilled through confidence was always generally pernicious. It was one thing to be forced to obey a master for fear of the consequences but quite another to give up private judgement and

common deliberation. In contrast to habitual obedience, repressive obedience did not entail the loss of independence. As Williams tells Falkland when his master eventually manages to send him to prison, 'I am henceforth to be deprived of the benefits of integrity and honour. I am to forfeit the friendship of every one I have hitherto known, and to be precluded from the power of acquiring that of others'. Yet facing a life of dishonour and disgrace, Williams adds, 'If I am to despair of the good will of other men, I will at least maintain the independence of my own mind'.

Respect and toleration

If Godwin anticipated do-it-yourself ethics, he remained suspicious of do-it-ourselves. The kind of independence he valued was rooted in freedom of expression and thought. This assumed community but also a delicate relationship between individuals and the whole. Godwin believed that individuals had a duty to advance the common good but rejected the imposition of contracts, promises and oaths to ensure compliance with abstract ideals. Marriage was an example. Although Godwin married Mary Wollstonecraft, apparently to save her the social censure of mothering an illegitimate child, he described it as the worst of all law. Represented as a protection against 'brutal lust and depravity', marriage in fact assumed that women were rightfully men's property and that men had a right of being 'loved and esteemed' irrespective of their behaviours. More generally, promises and oaths merely concealed the violence required to coerce people to adopt unattractive conventions. 'If the laws depend on promises for their execution', Godwin asked, 'why are they accompanied by sanctions?'

Godwin believed in social progress and 'the advancement of mind': 'That which is to-day a considerable melioration, will at some future period, if preserved unaltered, appear a defect and disease in the body politic'. Government lacked the 'elasticity' to encourage progress and human beings, always imperfect, were also prone to regressive behaviours. Religion, democracy and party politics were some of the forces that encouraged individuals to band together to force others to do their bidding. Yet virtue sprang from intellect not conformity. It followed that self-government expressed common purpose, not collective action, and that it demanded mutual respect and toleration.

Toleration, and freedom of opinion, are scarcely worth accepting, if, when my neighbour differs from me, I do not indeed burn him, but I take every occasion to insult him. There could be no freedom of opinion, if every one conducted himself thus. Toleration ... requires, not only that there shall be no laws to restrain opinion, but that forbearance and liberality shall be moulded into the manners of the community.