

# Remapping Territories: The Revolution Controversy and Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*

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The painted veil, by those, who were, called life,/ Which mimicked, as with colours idly spread,/ All men believed and hoped, is torn aside;/ The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains/ Sceptreless, unclassed, tribless, and nationless,/ Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the King / Over himself...<sup>i</sup>

--- P.B.Shelley in *Prometheus Unbound* (III, iv, 190-196).

Freedom of inquiry is all that I wish for; let nothing be deemed too sacred for investigation; rather than restrain the liberty of the press I would suffer the most atrocious doctrines to be recommended: let the field be open and unencumbered, and truth must be victorious.

---William Wordsworth<sup>ii</sup>

The two epigraphs borrow their philosophical vision from William Godwin (1756-1836) in envisioning a society which is uncircumscribed by the distinctions of class and privileges the spirit of enquiry.<sup>iii</sup> The frontispiece of an unidentified pamphlet (fig1), attacking Pitt's restrictions on the freedom of speech, depicts a woman symbolizing liberty as surrounded by Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793),<sup>iv</sup> Paine's *Rights of Man* and John Thelwall's *Lectures*. Like the two epigraphs, the print also throws into relief some of the seminal concerns of the revolutionaries, like deliverance of man from chains of unjust political system, annulment of parliament, universal suffrage and liberty. The print effectively illustrates the centrality<sup>v</sup> of Godwin in the radical politics of 1790s as he symbolized reform, "liberty, truth and justice" (Hazlitt 2) in the popular imagination of the time.<sup>vi</sup> However, Godwin was soon hurled from the "zenith of unwholesome popularity" (Hazlitt) into the "list of the honourable dead" (Shelley)<sup>vii</sup> in his own life time by the reactionary forces that became entrenched in England around 1800.

The swift rise and fall in Godwin's popularity highlights the kaleidoscopic nature of the French Revolution, which is marked by rupture, overturning of set definitions and patterns of thoughts, and transient intellectual fame and authority. Also, this period is characterized by the birth of multiple concepts of revolution. This paper intends to read Godwin's re-definition of revolution, not as a violent overturning of existing social order but as a gradual change, by placing him in his personal, historical and intellectual context. Godwin's revolutionary potential lies in his conceptualization of an ideal society which is devoid of laws and government but based on reason. It focuses on the moral and intellectual progress of the individual. Furthermore, Godwin's radicalism reaches new heights in his rejection of the state organized education and also of the institution of the family and marriage, which has been one of the most elemental building blocks of all societies. The last part of the paper analyzes his discussion of the attempt to bring about change through discursive practices in the light of Jürgen Habermas's idea of the public sphere, thereby, seeking to further interrogate the dynamics of this egalitarian space.

Godwin's preface places the text in the Revolution Controversy<sup>viii</sup> by stating that the French Revolution "gave birth to the work" as "ideas" like a simple form of government and society generated by the Revolution are the source of much of his political theory (Preface 5). Dr. Price's Sermon *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country* marked the beginning of a pamphlet war in England where Edmund Burke represented the conservative camp while Mary Wollstonecraft and Thomas Paine voiced Jacobin revolutionary politics. Interestingly, Godwin, it seems, like the Revolution defies being labeled into either of the camps. His political thoughts depict the influence of both Burke and Paine. Godwin also differs from both, especially, in terms of the readers that the text targets, the nature of language that is deployed and the politics that underlies the text.

Burke's text is named "reflections" but it was produced too early (1790) for him to have considerably reflected on the Revolution. Contrastingly, Godwin's text is an "enquiry," that is a systematic investigation of a matter of public interest. It was written slowly and after deep contemplation. Furthermore, Burke's text, offering a conservative defense of the monarchy, is theatrical in nature as he deploys rhetoric to inspire pity and terror in the masses. Contrastingly, Godwin's prose, aiming not to incite passions but thought and reflection in the readers, is lucid and logical. His audience does not appear to be masses at large but "men of study and reflection" (Preface 5). Although Godwin criticizes monarchy and argues for the 'Rights of Man', unlike other revolutionary writers<sup>ix</sup>, he was not punished for this work. The possible reasons seem to be that, unlike Paine and Wollstonecraft, he was not writing pamphlets that were cheap and easily circulated. Godwin wrote an erudite book intended for bourgeois intellectuals. Secondly, it was marketed at a very high price of three guineas. Prime Minister Pitt also remarked that there was no need to censor it as "could never do much harm among those who had not three shillings to spare" (Brailsford 92). The book, however, became highly popular among the working classes.<sup>x</sup> Many labourers contributed to procure a copy and many societies read it aloud in their meeting for the benefit of the illiterates.

This propels one to probe into the reasons behind Godwin's radicalism and immense popularity. The root of Godwin's heterodoxy and political radicalism lies in his upbringing as a Dissenter<sup>xi</sup>, like Dr. Price. This was the class that Burke feared would initiate revolution in England as Dissenters were denied specific civil and political rights. Thus, Dissenters opposed the prevalent social, political and religious order and argued for social change, reformation of government and assertion of the rights of mankind. Godwin's Dissenting background, then, places him outside the structures of power and enables him to critique them in return. One gets a glimpse of his revolutionary ideals even in his views about religion. He rejects the idea of the Original sin, a central tenet of Christianity, in order to argue for the perfectibility of man. This perfectibility enables the man to attain progressive improvement in political and intellectual realms. Man's ability to think, reflect, compare and judge distinguishes him from Animal. Thus, reason reigns supreme in his scheme of things. Reason also drives humans to virtue and universal benevolence. He also rejects Helvetius's view that man is motivated by self love only. Thus, Godwin opposes Christian, Hobbesian<sup>xii</sup> and Helvetian views and presents man as perfectible, rational, benevolent and equal.

Godwin not only rejects traditional views of man but also rejects of all kinds of political control and authority. Godwin is "recognized as the first and the most capable exponent of anarchism" (Marshall 2)<sup>xiii</sup>. Apart from his dissenting background, Godwin is indebted to Burke's *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1756)<sup>xiv</sup> which he hailed as the first literary expression of philosophical anarchism. Burke's treatise is an anarchist critique of the state in which the evils of

the existing political institutions are displayed with “incomparable force of reasoning and lustre of eloquence...” (C.W.Previté-Orton). *Political Justice* deals with Godwin's vision of a new world which is based on reason and devoid of any form of government. Godwin begins his discussion of the society by rejecting Paine's idea of “natural rights of man” and also the right to choose government. He also rejects John Locke's idea of the right to property. He draws on Paine's *Common Sense*<sup>xv</sup> to distinguish between government and society: “society is in every state a blessing; government in its best state but a necessary evil” (81). He examines different forms of government like aristocracy, monarchy and democracy in order to arrive at the best form of administration. Monarchy, he argues, is “unavoidably corrupt” while aristocracy, as it is based on “false hereditary” (83) and unjust distribution of wealth, is also rejected. Democracy appears to be the best of all but it also has its weakness according Godwin. He feels that elections bring out the worst in people. Secondly, democracy tends to limit the debate by producing an unnatural uniformity of opinion. Thirdly, Godwin shows his reservations in accepting the prevalent revolutionary statement about the potential equality of all men. Godwin also undercuts popular notion that the voice of the people is the voice of God. Godwin believes that universal consent cannot turn right into wrong. Godwin, thus, argues “for the dissolution of political government, of that brute engine, which has been the only perennial cause of the vices of mankind” (84).

Godwin not only dismantles unjust political institutions but also intends to make government less necessary. Furthermore, Godwin's sketch of the ideal society also includes demolition of the institution of family, which forms the bedrock of all societies across cultures.<sup>xvi</sup> French Revolution gave rise to numerous discussions about the notion of the family, its internal dynamics and relation to the state. Burke in *Reflections* laments the demolition of the French royal family. As opposed to the depraved aristocracy, Paine in *Rights of Man* upholds the American working class family that reads the Constitution. Godwin, unlike Burke and Wollstonecraft, theorizes family as a political unit. It is a site from where both ideologies and political discrepancies emerge.<sup>xvii</sup> In doing so, Godwin seeks inspiration from the French intellectuals who argued that “the family is a small state, just as the state is a large family.”<sup>xviii</sup> These “petitioners urged the new legislature to curtail the authority of despotic fathers, secure equal inheritance for all sons and daughters, and foster mutual esteem within the family” (Desan 1). Godwin realizes that the personal and the political realms are not distinct but closely entwined.<sup>xix</sup>

French philosophers explored the manner in which the ideals of the Revolution can be extended to the private space of the family. French philosopher Comte d' Antragues draws “connections between public and intimate politics: if the state was now to be rooted in a contact , freely chosen by the people, then marriage, too, should rest on the free choice and contract of individuals”(Desan 15). Godwin, however, goes a step further and rejects the institution of family and marriage as it leads to accumulation of property and destroys individualism by fostering common opinions and ideologies. He believes that marriage is an evil as people's commitment to each other is based not on reason but on contract. Also, it is “an affair of the property” that turns humans into commodities (94). In his utopian society it will not be significant for a child to know his lineage, especially his father, as the mother will raise him with the spontaneous help of the neighbours. He furthers his argument by saying that it is aristocracy, self- love and considerations of inheritance that propel humans to attach unnecessary attachment to their family names. Thus, abolition of marriage and family would lead to the growth of unselfish benevolence and equal treatment of all as no one would be given preference because he is a kin.

Unlike the institutions of government and family, Godwin envisaged education as the means of reform. He believes in the dictum: 'to make men wise is to make them free'. Godwin, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau,<sup>xx</sup> argues for the creation of new centers of knowledge production or that of imparting education outside the two conventional sites namely, the church and the court. In believing that humans are born with innate ideas, Godwin voices the beliefs of Locke and Rousseau.<sup>xxi</sup> He believes that man is born equal and innocent. Man is the product of his conditions, especially of those which he can strive to modify like religion, government and education. Godwin, unlike Paine and Wollstonecraft, is against state organized education. He argues that state 'regulated institutions will stereotype knowledge, thereby, contributing to the permanence and uniformity of thought. Godwin stresses that no government should be trusted with the power to create and regulate opinion through schools as it results in the weakening of the spirit of the dissent and enquiry that originates in the independent mind. Godwin also rejects the idea of the Church imparting education to children as it is a dogmatic institution that would indoctrinate the masses with static and restrictive ideas.

Godwin's dislike for monolithic, propagandist viewpoint informs his own politics which is much more complicated and resists easy labeling or smooth categorization as either radical or conservative. He is viewed by many as espousing the middle path between the extremes of both Burke and Paine. Kroptin argues that his anarchism is characterized by not only revolt against the State's coercive activities but also against the collective action by the citizens/mob. The root of such philosophy lies probably in the "extreme individualism which felt that a man surrendered too much of himself, too much of truth and manhood in any political associations" (Brailsford 87). Godwin's work is characterized by certain gravity as he avoids indulging in the blame game and propaganda politics. He re-defines revolution not as a violent overthrow of the existing order, but focuses on the gradual process of inner transformation of the individual. Godwin argues for reforms in place of revolution, which offers "mythical promises: the instant abolition of all existing abuses" (119) and results in "tumult and violence" (Preface 5). He believes that revolutions, when violent, defeat their own purpose as they become inimical to the spirit of independence and intellectual enquiry. These ideas of Godwin have a long afterlife in the works of Romantics like P.B. Shelley. The passage quoted in the epigraph shows Shelley's intellectual debt to Godwin. Shelley upholds the vision of the world that is devoid of oppressions caused by monarchy, aristocracy or distinctions of class and nation. Furthermore, the liberation does not come at "one stroke" but it is a slow and gradual process as Godwin argues. "Hundred ages" have passed before the regeneration of the world is complete. Shelley in *Prometheus Unbound* espouses the Godwinian belief in human perfectibility. Prometheus revokes the curse that he had pronounced on Jupiter. Shelley solves the problem of the evil by expunging from Prometheus's heart all hatred and malice. His spiritual reformation is the outcome of a gradual change. Like Godwin, Shelley also seems to argue that the revolution must be inward as there should be a change in the human heart.

Godwin believes that persuasion and argument, and not violence, are the proper means of effecting change. For Godwin, truth is produced by debate, "collusion of mind with mind" (80). Discursive activities in the public sphere are of prime importance in Godwin's scheme of things. Mark Philip argues that one traditionally pictures romantics as being outcasts, however, the eighteenth century intellectuals "were not isolated heroes and heroines of Romanticism pursuing a lonely course of discovery; they were people who worked out their ideas in company and who articulated the aspirations and fears of their social group" (127). Godwin, who argues in favour of freedom of thought and expression, therefore, must be read in conjunction with other intellectuals of the time.

Godwin's views about reform offer one occasion where the rising rift between the high culture and popular culture within radicalism becomes apparent. Godwin represents "polite liberal radicalism which advocated 'force of reason' " as opposed to " a more republican, proto-socialist radicalism which advocated the 'force of reason' along with the 'force of numbers' "as represented by intellectuals like Thelwall (Haywood 38). Like Habermas's conceptualization of public sphere,<sup>xxii</sup> Godwin's idea of political culture appears exclusive as it is visualized as a "speech community of intelligent men, ideally talking in pairs" (Haywood 38). Godwin appears closer to Burke in his expression of disdain for violence and mob activity. He seems to "present plebian politics in negative terms, as a politics of baser sensations" (Haywood 41). He feels that during crisis "imagination and zeal outrun" reason (120). He seems to disconnect revolution with the popular politics. He says that among gentlemen "reason will spread and not a brute and unintelligent sympathy" whereas in "mixed assemblies, all is delusion or tumult" (146). In his scheme of things the task of spreading enlightenment is left to "a few favoured minds" of "enquiring men" (122) who would shape public opinion through discussion and enquiry. He believes that knowledge and ideas would descend in "regular gradation from the most thoughtful to the most unobservant" (115). Godwin's vision appears to be exclusive as the leaders who would be ushering social reform are intellectual elites and not artisan leaders of the popular revolutionary societies. Is Godwin, then, in a danger of creating another kind of hierarchy?

To conclude one can say that Godwin's revolutionary ideology is rendered slightly problematic due to his vision which is at times impractical, utopian and exclusionary. In spite of this, the text is revolutionary as it makes the individual its primary focus. Godwin also uncovers the links between the personal despotism and political tyranny and dismantles the institution of family and marriage.



<sup>iv</sup> Subsequently in the paper the name of the text has been abbreviated as *Political Justice*.

<sup>v</sup> Godwin's *Political Justice* occupies a central place in the print.

<sup>vi</sup> A contemporary critic commented: "... in the midst of this shoal of minor speculations, suddenly appeared a great leviathan in the shape of Godwin's *Political Justice*." This has been quoted in Peter Marshall's *William Godwin* . p 58.

<sup>vii</sup> These lines have been taken from Shelley's letter to Godwin. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Ed. Frederick Jones. Oxford: Clarendon press, 1964. 1:220

<sup>viii</sup> This refers to the debate around the French Revolution.

<sup>ix</sup> *Political Justice* was published when sedition trials were already underway. Jacobins writers like Wollstonecraft were caricaturized and Paine's effigies were being burnt. Furthermore, twelve reformers, including Holcroft, involved in revolutionary politics were tried for treason.

<sup>x</sup> The print commodity has a volatile ability to circulate as by 1799 more than 4000 copies of the book were sold and a third edition of the book was printed. In the subsequent editions, especially the second, much of the book was recast and, many chapters were rewritten. This edition was "more cautious" but Godwin abandons none of his primary ideas (Brailsford 94).

<sup>xi</sup> Godwin's father and grandfather were also Dissenting ministers. He was educated at Hoxton Academy under the radical Dissenter Andrew Kippis. Interestingly, *Political Justice* was published by a Dissenting publisher, George Robinson.

<sup>xii</sup> Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651) emphasizes the brutish quality of human nature. He believes if humans are allowed to live independently, they would act keeping in mind their own self-interest, without regard for others. He believes that in the natural state human beings are in perpetual struggle against each other.

<sup>xiii</sup> Anarchism is a political philosophy that considers the state or any form of government to be unnecessary.

<sup>xiv</sup> Edmund Burke's *A Vindication of Natural Society: A View of the Miseries and Evils Arising to Mankind* (1756) is a satire of Lord Bolingbroke's deism where Burke argued that his attack against religion also extends to all institutions.

<sup>xv</sup> *Common Sense* is a pamphlet written by Thomas Paine in 1776, during the American Revolution.

<sup>xvi</sup> Later when he married Wollstonecraft, they never resided in the same house as his politics did not permit this.

<sup>xvii</sup> William Blake, who is Godwin's contemporary, also seems to have anarchic tendencies. He also denounces the institution of marriage. However, Blake, unlike Godwin,<sup>xvii</sup> addresses the issue of the body and sexuality. Godwin was highly inspired by Rousseau but does not use his central argument that is related to the body. *Political Justice* does not engage with the issue of the gender, body and sexuality in any significant way.

<sup>xviii</sup> These lines are by the petitioners named the "Younger Sons of Provence" (Desan 1).

<sup>xix</sup> Elizabeth Inchbald, in *Nature and Art* (1796), also links political tyranny with the suppression in the personal sphere.

<sup>xx</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile, or On Education* (1762) deals with the issue of children's education.

<sup>xxi</sup> Locke's idea of "tabula rasa," meaning blank slate, refers to the idea that humans are born without any pre-conceived ideas and thus their knowledge comes from experience, perception and understanding.

<sup>xiii</sup> In *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jurgen Habermas talks about the emergence of bourgeoisie public sphere that took shape in the eighteenth century England where learned men gathered together in the coffee houses and discussed literature, politics, religion and other matters of public interest over cigars and coffee. This public opinion, he stressed, became a way to keep monarchial domination in check.

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