

William Godwin, Shelley and Communism

Just over a hundred and fifty years ago died William Godwin, author of *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, one of the seminal works in Britain of radical criticism of existing class society. Godwin had been born in 1756, the son of a nonconformist preacher, as he himself had been for a few years before coming to see through religion as untrue. The first edition of his *Political Justice* appeared in 1793, his contribution to the ferment of social and political ideas sparked off by the French Revolution, then still in progress. In 1797 he married Mary Wollstonecraft, author of the pioneer feminist work, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Godwin was also the author of a number of novels expressing his views, one of which - *Caleb Williams* - has been a television serial. In addition his *Of Population*, written in 1820, was the classic contemporary refutation of the nonsense peddled by Malthus.

Godwin has been described as a "utilitarian anarchist". This is not an unfair description since he was very much in the Age of Reason philosophical tradition which saw humans as isolated individuals pursuing happiness as a measurable quantity and he could be described as an anarchist insofar as he looked forward to the "euthanasia of government".

In *Political Justice* Godwin set out to examine what form of society would have to be established to conform to the principles of justice as laid down by Reason. Defining government as "regulated force", he came to the conclusion that this would have to be "a simple form of society without government". What he envisaged was the division of a country like Britain into self-administrating districts which would run their own affairs without the need for laws, or prisons, or "regulated force" in any form and which would send delegates to a central confederal assembly in the rare event of any situation requiring co-ordinated action on a national scale. It is this proposal for a "society without government" that has led to anarchists regarding him as one of their forebears.

But Godwin was not simply an advocate of a society without government. He was also an advocate of "equality of conditions", "a state of equal society" as he called it. "Equality of conditions", he wrote, "or, in other words, an equal admission to the means of improvement and pleasure, is a law rigorously enjoined upon mankind by the voice of justice"(All quotes are from 1976 Pelican Classic edition). His argument went as follows:

Human beings are partakers of a common nature; what conduces to the benefit or pleasure of one man will conduce to the benefit or pleasure of another. Hence it follows, upon the principles of equal and impartial justice, that the good things of the world are a common stock, upon which one man has as valid a title as another to draw for what he wants.

In every society, the produce, the means of contributing to the necessities and conveniences of its members, is of a certain amount. In every society, the bulk at least of its members contribute by their personal exertions to the creation of this produce. What can be more desirable and just than that the produce

itself should, with some degree of equality, be shared among them?

This was a familiar argument with advocates of an equal society in place of existing unequal class society. It led some of them to advocate "a community of goods to be maintained by the vigilance of the state" as Godwin described one such proposal current in his day. Naturally, as an advocate of a society without government, he strongly rejected this speaking of "how pernicious the consequences would be if government were to take the whole permanently into their hands, and dispense to every man his daily bread".

What, then, did he propose? How did he envisage goods being distributed in his "free and equal state of society"? Here a misunderstanding has sometimes arisen due to the fact that, in Book VIII ("Of Property"), Godwin defends a right to property. He distinguishes three "degrees" of property. The first is property in the goods an individual uses personally. The second is property in the product of an individual's own labour. The third is property which entitles the beneficiary to appropriate the labour of others.

For Godwin, this third type of property was unjust as it involves exploitation:

All wealth, in a state of civilised society, is the produce of human industry. To be rich is merely to possess a patent entitling one man to dispose of the produce of another man's industry.

Privilege entitles a favoured few to engross to themselves gratifications which the system of the universe left at large to all her sons.

This "monopoly of property", exercised by both landlords and capitalists (Godwin actually uses the term), should simply be abolished by the state ceasing to uphold it. The other two types of property should remain inviolate. Nobody, neither another person nor the community, had a right to deprive a person of their personal effects nor the produce of their own labour. This is where the misunderstanding has arisen, with some misinterpreting this defence of a right to property as meaning that Godwin was not a "communist" but merely a "leveller", somebody who did not want to abolish property but merely to equalise property holdings within the framework of a commodity society.

But this was not at all what Godwin meant. For although he argued that no-one, not even the community as a whole, had the right forcibly to deprive someone of the product of their own labour, he argued equally forcefully that it was the duty of everyone to make available to other people the products of their labour over and above their own needs. In other words, instead of selling their surplus produce for money and accumulating wealth from the proceeds, they ought to make it available free for other people to satisfy their needs. Godwin did not go into the practical details of how this would work but he was quite clear that buying and selling would not enter into it. Discussing the division of labour, he wrote:

Shall each man manufacture his tools, furniture and accommodations? This would perhaps be a tedious operation. Every man performs the task to which he is

accustomed, more skilfully, and in a shorter time than another. It is reasonable that you should make for me that which perhaps I should be three or four times as long in making, and should make imperfectly at last. Shall we then introduce barter and exchange? By no means. The moment I require any further reason for supplying you than the cogency of your claim, the moment, in addition to the dictates of benevolence, I demand a prospect of reciprocal advantage to myself, there is an end to that political justice and pure society of which we treat.

And in *The Enquirer*, a collection of essays he published in 1797, he was even more explicit:

Were the members of any community sufficiently upright and disinterested, I might supply my neighbour with the corn he wanted, and he supply me with the cloth of which I was in need, without having recourse to the grovelling and ungenerous methods of barter and sale. We might supply each other for this reason only, because one party had a superfluity and the other a want, without in the smallest degree adverting to a reciprocal bounty to be by this method engendered; and we might depend upon the corresponding upright and disinterested affections of the other members of the community, for the being in like manner supplied with the commodities of which we were in want.

So Godwin resolved the problem of who, in his "free and equal state of society", was to distribute goods according to people's needs by saying that it would be the producers of particular goods of their own free will. His equal society was to be a "spontaneous equality of conditions" not an enforced one. Although he did not use the term "communism" (which was not then in use) or even that of "community of goods" - in fact, to tell the truth, he was too much in the individualist tradition to have used such terminology - his system was equivalent to what might be called a "voluntary" communism (as opposed to one "maintained by the vigilance of the state"). For, if we assume that the producers deposit the surplus over their needs of their particular product in some general storehouse from which they can take the products of other producers that they need, then we have the classic distribution system proposed by previous pre-industrial communists such as Thomas More and Gerrard Winstanley.

Although the social change Godwin advocated - the euthanasia of government and the abolition of "the monopoly of property" - was a radical one, the method by which he saw this coming about - the slow and gradual "progress of the human mind" - was in stark contrast and led him to oppose any kind of organised political action to further the cause of an equal society. In fact the only kind of organised activity he would accept were philosophical debating societies. In this sense, Godwin was a classical armchair philosopher. However, as often happens in such cases, his radical social criticism was taken up by others who did not share his qualms about political action.

One of those to be influenced by Godwin's ideas was the poet Shelley, who the previous year had been expelled from Oxford University for producing an atheist pamphlet. Shelley came across Godwin's works at the age of 18 and was very impressed. He was eventually to marry Godwin's daughter who, among things, wrote the original Frankenstein story.

So impressed was Shelley by Godwin's proposals for a new society in which people would be motivated by "disinterestedness" rather than selfishness that he set out to express them in verse, in a long poem called Queen Mab which he published privately in 1813. This is a vision of the past, present and future of mankind. In it Shelley attacks kings, war, commerce and, in particular, priests and religion. In fact the criticism of christianity, in the poem as well as in prose notes attached to it was so hard-hitting that when it was republished in the 1820s the publisher was sent to prison for blasphemy. Queen Mab became the work that publishers used in defiance of the restrictive press laws of the time. Each time they were convicted of blasphemy. But as a result Queen Mab, and thus Godwin's social ideas, came to be widely read in Chartist and radical circles.

In part V of Queen Mab Shelley attacks commerce which he sees as a product of selfishness in the sense of people wanting to sell their surplus for money rather than give it to others to satisfy their needs:

Hence commerce springs, the venal interchange
Of all that human art or nature yield;
Which wealth should purchase not, but want demand,
And natural kindness hasten to supply
From the full fountain of its boundless love,
For ever stifled, drained, and tainted now.
Commerce! Beneath whose poison-breathing shade
No solitary virtue dares to spring,
But Poverty and Wealth with equal hand
Scatter their withering curses, and unfold
The doors of premature and violent death,
To pining famine and full-fed disease,
To all that shares the lot of human life,
Which poisoned, body and soul, scarce drags the chain,
That lengthens as it goes and clanks behind,
Commerce has set the mark of selfishness,
The signet of its all-enslaving power

Upon a shining ore, and called it gold:
Before whose image bow the vulgar great,
The vainly rich, the miserable proud,
The mob of peasants, nobles, priests and kings,
And with blind feelings reverence the power
That grinds them to the dust of misery.
But in the temple of their hireling hearts
Gold is a living god, and rules in scorn
All earthly things but virtue.

Later Shelley continues his criticism:

All things are sold: the very light of Heaven
Is venal; earth's unsparing gifts of love,
The smallest and most despicable of things
That lurk in the abysses of the deep,
All objects of our life, even life itself,
And the poor pittance which the laws allow
Of liberty, the fellowship of man,
Those duties which his heart of human love
Should urge him to perform instinctively,
Are bought and sold as in a public mart
Of undisguising selfishness, that sets
On each its price, the stamp-mark of her reign,
Even love is sold; the solace of all woe
Is turned to deadliest agony, old age

Shivers in selfish beauty's loathing arms,
And youth's corrupted impulses prepare
A life of horror from the blighting bane
Of commerce; whilst the pestilence that springs
From unenjoying sensualism, has filled
All human life with hydra-headed woes.

It is quite clear that Shelley was expressing Godwin's idea that, in a just society, producers would give away their surplus produce free rather than sell it for money, Hence his opening description of commerce as "the venal interchange of all that human art or nature yield; which wealth should purchase not, but want demand, and natural kindness hasten to supply". When he later describes what will happen when people are motivated by the "consciousness of good" he naturally states that they will have no need of "mediative signs of selfishness" - of money - and that "every transfer of the earth's natural gifts shall be a commerce of good words and works".

This commerce of sincerest virtue needs
No mediative signs of selfishness,
No jealous intercourse of wretched gain,
No balancings of prudence, cold and long;
In just and equal measure all is weighed,
One scale contains the sum of human weal,
And one, the good man's heart.

Part V of Queen Mab ends as follows:

But hoary-headed Selfishness has felt
Its death-blow, and is tottering to the grave:
A brighter morn awaits the human day,
When every transfer of earth's natural gifts
Shall be a commerce of good words and works;

When poverty and wealth, the thirst of fame,
The fear of infamy, disease and woe,
War with its million horrors, and fierce hell
Shall live but in the memory of Time,
Who, like a penitent libertine, shall start,
Look back, and shudder at his younger years.

It is only by completely ignoring these passages that Paul Foot is able to claim in *Red Shelley* (1980) that "Shelley was not a socialist. Shelley was a leveller". Shelley, at least at this time, was just as much an advocate of a "spontaneous equality of conditions" that amounted to a voluntary money-less communism as was Godwin.

In one sense this argument as to whether or not Godwin and Shelley were socialists is anachronistic since the modern idea of socialism, as the solution to the problems of a majority wage-working class within a capitalist industrial society, had not yet come into being. This is partly why in this article we have used the word "communist" rather than "socialist" to describe the moneyless equal society advocated by critics of the essentially agrarian class society that existed before industrial capitalism developed. It was of course the low level of development of the means of production that accounts for the frugal, even Spartan, character which the preindustrial communists were obliged to give to the egalitarian society they advocated, but it still remains true that people like (in England) More, Winstanley and Godwin and Shelley and (in France) Morelly, Babeuf and Buonarrotti were forerunners of the socialist industrial society of abundance that we modern socialists now advocate. ALB