



The storming of the Bastille – Contemporary print.

Thompson, Godwin, and the French Revolution *by Mark Philp*

In his Introduction and Epilogue to the English edition of *Social Policy in the Third Reich*,¹ Tim Mason performed an exemplary act of intellectual honesty when he reported how his original intention, to write a general history of German Fascism from the end of the first to the end of the second world war, fell apart when he realised that he could not simply tack on the war years to the account of the inter-war period given in *Social Policy*. . . . What happens in the war, he realised, profoundly affects how one must read the earlier events.

All historians I suspect face this kind of difficulty at one time or another in their lives. No historian knows everything, every reading of events is a partial one, and there are always going to be areas which one knows one should address but for which time, inclination or energy may be lacking. In the case of E. P. Thompson it should not be surprising, given the wide range of his work, that we might be able to note the odd lacunae or blind spot. The question – the ‘Mason question’ – must be how far such absences are benign and how far they affect his general argument. In this paper I want to identify two areas in his analysis of English popular politics at the time of the French Revolution which he himself identified as questions he wished to return to address on another occasion, but which he was unable to. And I want to ask how far an adequate account of these two areas might throw into question some of the broader claims made in *The Making of the English Working Class*. The two areas might seem to be rather disparate – they concern William Godwin and the intellectual radicalism of the 1790s on the one hand, and the place of popular or vulgar conservatism on the other – but, I hope to show, a similar problem underlies Thompson’s treatment of them.

Godwin occupies a curious place in Thompson’s work. He is referred to on several occasions in *The Making* . . . , and he makes a surprise appearance in *The Poverty of Theory*, which is where Thompson issues his

promissory note 'As for the Godwinian moment, and its tragic aftermath, I hope to tell that story another time.'² In so far as that other time ever came it was shortly before Thompson's death, in a review in the *London Review of Books* of my edition of Godwin's *Political and Philosophical Writings*, together with a facsimile edition of *Political Justice*.³ Thompson had written to me shortly before the review appeared saying I would not altogether like it, although it was not unfavourable, and that it contained his usual grump against Godwin. Let us begin with the grump.

In *Poverty of Theory* Thompson describes Godwinism as 'a moment of intellectual extremism, divorced from correlative action or actual social commitment (. . . which freaked out half the young intelligentsia in England between 1794 and 1798)'. Not that Thompson was wholly hostile:

. . . those Godwinians, in the only moment when the English intelligentsia adopted, in their theory, an ultra-Jacobin posture, had some spirit about them. They questioned everything. They questioned Reason itself. Seconded by Wollstonecraft . . . they made the institution of marriage spin. They frightened everyone. They frightened their own culture into a premature Victorianism, before Victoria was born. They frightened, above all, themselves.⁴

Thompson sees Godwin as an intellectual, and as an extremist. There is no practical, no organic, connection to the real ether of political struggle, namely the organisation of extra-parliamentary reform societies and the proselytising of radical principles among the artisan and working classes: the influence of *Political Justice* is described as 'confined to a small and highly literate circle';⁵ and the intellectual legacy of Godwinism is a narrow one, directly descended to Shelley, and perhaps also contributing to the emergence of certain feminist strands of thinking. But the basic thrust of Thompson's analysis, one driven by concerns other than a desire to get the record straight on Godwin, is that Godwin was simply a part of the larger middle class reaction to the French Revolution: a reaction which was at first favourable, but which deserted the cause *en masse* after the September Massacres of 1792, and which left it to the artisan and working classes to organise themselves without any significant middle class leadership. We have an 'advanced democratic populism' on the one hand, and a pusillanimous middle class on the other, prepared to be bought cheap, and late, by the fractional reform of 1832 rather than risk alliance with a force that threatened the status quo with an egalitarian political philosophy. Despite his 'intellectual extremism', Godwin is found implicated in this resistance to the masses: 'Hence the peculiarly repressive and anti-egalitarian ideology of the English middle classes (Godwin giving way to Bentham, Bentham giving way to Malthus, M'Culloch, and Dr Ure, and these giving way to Baines, Macaulay and Edwin Chadwick)'.⁶

A similar connection is drawn in Thompson's Godwin review. Godwin, and the Godwinians, are identified again as 'trying to establish for themselves . . . a supremely privileged position of wholly disinterested rationality; from which great height they could look down on their fellow beings, whether aristocratic or vulgar . . . With Godwin benevolence (and Reason) has migrated to the radical intelligentsia . . . sandwiched between aristocratic institutions and mob ignorance.' Moreover, benevolence is seen as increasingly submerged in utilitarianism – 'and utilitarianism of a bleak kind, with all its repetitious, self-satisfied abbreviations of history and culture.'⁷ Once again, it is seen as a short step to Bentham, political economy, and the philosophy of Gradgrind.⁸

The second promissory note issued by Thompson which I wish to raise here, concerns his acknowledgement of a point made by Geoffrey Best in his review of *The Making* . . . in the *Historical Journal* for 1965. Best suggested that Thompson had paid too little attention to the 'flag-saluting, foreigner-hating, peer-respecting side of the plebian mind' and Thompson responded by recognising that this was something about which 'we have, as yet, almost everything to find out'.⁹ There are comments in *The Making* . . . and in *Customs in Common* (in the revised 'Patricians and Plebs' chapter) which say something about this area, but as with the comments on Godwin, they seem more reflex than fully thought through. At the end of the 'Patricians and Plebs' essay, Thompson refers to the way that the reciprocal relationship between poor and gentry which had existed for nearly a century, albeit favouring the latter, had nonetheless served to maintain the poor's traditional culture, arrested the work-discipline of early capitalism, enlarged the scope of the poor laws, and allowed them to resist dearth:

they enjoyed liberties of pushing about the streets and jostling, gaping and huzzaing, pulling down the houses of obnoxious bakers or Dissenters, and a generally riotous and unpoliced disposition which astonished foreign visitors, and which almost misled them themselves into believing that they were 'free'. The 1790s expelled that illusion, and in the wake of the experiences of those years the relationship of reciprocity snapped. As it snapped, so, in the same moment, the gentry lost their self-assured cultural hegemony. It suddenly appeared that the world was not, after all, bounded at every point by their rules and over-matched by their power.¹⁰

For Thompson, it becomes possible, for the first time, 'to analyse the historical process in terms of nineteenth-century notations of class.'

This is a powerful vision of the emerging dynamics of class struggle in the 1790s, but it is one which I think we have to resist – just as we have to resist the way Thompson marginalises Godwin and the intelligentsia of the 1790s, giving priority to a plebian movement which is seen as largely self-directing. The reasons for doing so turn out to be very similar. Just as there are good

grounds for seeing a much more direct connection between Godwin and the radicalism of the 1790s (and beyond), so too there is a case for saying that while the relationship between gentry and masses changes in the period of the French wars, it does not change in ways which are well captured by the language of class.

It is a tall order to challenge such a reading of a complex series of events in a short paper. The best I can do is make an indicative argument, which I want to centre around an issue which joins neatly the interpretation of Godwin with the issue of popular loyalism: namely, the question of Godwin's position in his pamphlet *Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr Pitt's Bills concerning treasonable and seditious practices* (1795). Thompson describes Godwin as seeming 'to come forward (anonymously) to condone legislation against popular organisations like the London Corresponding Society and assemblies judged to be tumultuous (such as John Thelwall's public political lectures), while moaning on and on about Bills so loosely drawn that they might even touch benign philosophers like himself'.¹¹ But this is not the best reading of the pamphlet. What is striking about *Considerations* . . . is how much it has in common with Godwin's other political writings from the end of 1792 to his *Thoughts occasioned by the perusal of Dr Parr's Spital Sermon* (1801) – not least with his *Mucius Letters* (1791–4 – but also an earlier set of these letters published between 1785 and 1786) and his more famous *Cursory Strictures* (1794) written on the eve of the Treason Trials. Thompson and others have consistently sought to portray Godwin as an airy idealist, divorced from practical politics, and a fanatical votary of Reason. But the man is not up to the model. Godwin's earlier political writings (a vast quantity of journalism and a number of extremely complex pieces of political pamphleteering) undertaken between 1782 and 1791, indicate an impressive understanding of contemporary political affairs.¹² It is that understanding that he brings to bear in his later political letters and in his demolition job on the Crown's case of constructive treason against the radical societies. Are we to suppose that his *nous* deserts him in 1795, when faced with the prospect of mass unrest? This seems improbable, not least because everything he writes expresses doubts about the outcome of mass action – doubts which seem perfectly understandable (as Thompson admits) in the light of the Gordon riots, the Birmingham riot of 1791, and the various loyalist demonstrations which pepper the early and mid 1790s. Nor is his willingness to criticise the London Corresponding Society, and his friend Thelwall, simply an act of public betrayal. Godwin's pamphlets and political letters are marked not by their unstinting and unquestioning support for radical principles, but by their ability to show that any right thinking person must endorse his view that the government, or the Attorney General, or John Reeves, or whoever, is acting in a way indistinguishable from tyranny and unacceptable to anyone who respects the traditional rights and liberties of the English people. Even if we want to tar

Political Justice with the brush of 'French principles' the more direct political writings are simply not susceptible to such a treatment.

It is an uncharacteristic piece of misrepresentation for Thompson to describe Godwin's *Considerations* . . . as seeming to condone the government's legislation. The pamphlet plainly shows that even if we grant that the government has a legitimate interest in the maintenance of public order, the steps it proposed far exceed in their threat to the liberty and security of the citizenry anything which might be feared from the meetings of the LCS or Thelwall's public lectures. But it would equally misrepresent Godwin to claim that he was arguing tactically – pretending to disavow the actions of the LCS so as the better to make his case against the character of the government's reaction. Rather, Godwin quite sincerely believed that what was happening was a progressive polarisation of political conflict between the government and status quo, and those who were persuaded of the need for reform. It was a polarisation which he linked to the Treason Trials – 'one of the early measures, by which government conspicuously forced the moderate and the neutral to take their station in the ranks of the enemy (i.e., with the French)'.¹³ Moreover, it is one which he had earlier linked to the opening of the war with France:

The war will presently be more extensively unpopular, than ever it seemed to be popular. From what spring did the French anarchy originally flow? From the distresses that the old government imposed on the great mass of the people. And at such a period as this are we importing a new cargo of distress among ourselves? Every cargo will bring over with it the pestilence of anarchy. Every ship that we launch, every regiment that we embark, as being a new source of expense, will be an invitation to the French to invade us and endeavour to spread the flames of discontent at our very doors.¹⁴

Godwin is fearful of the consequences of that polarisation, because he is reluctant to invite chaos. But the reluctance is not, contra Thompson, new to 1795. Godwin was never in favour of revolutionary violence, and he consistently deplored steps which might lead to it – but those steps, for the most part, he laid at the door of government. If we are to endorse Thompson's view of Godwin we have, I think, to believe that he was part of a small intellectual elite who could afford the luxury of such views when those who were practically involved in the struggle for reform had no choice but to contemplate insurrection. But this view is surely mistaken. Although Thompson describes the radicals and reformers as Jacobins he cannot import with this term the revolutionary ideology of the French. Indeed, it was an ideology expressly repudiated by the vast majority of the radicals. The reform societies looked for political reform, they were not revolutionaries, nor were

they socialists or egalitarians: indeed, it is their anti-Jacobin enemies who seek to smear them with the purported levelling principles of the French. But most English radicals, at least until late in the 1790s, by which time government repression had driven some into looking to cooperate with a French invasion, are being caricatured, not characterised by such terminology. They, like Godwin, believed in a steadily growing weight of opinion which would deliver a gradual change in institutions and reform of abuses, and they were constitutionally wary of mob violence (not least because they were so often the victims of it).

This helps explain how Godwin could remain such an important figure in metropolitan radical circles throughout the 1790s, and for a considerable time after. His contemporaries did not consider him an apostate (he and Thelwall had a brief falling out over *Considerations* . . . but it was only brief), and while he was not an intimate of all the leading members of the LCS his circle of acquaintance was extensive enough to include many (irrespective of class background). Although Thompson treats the 1790s as a polarised conflict from the end of 1792, with the intelligentsia frightened off by the September massacres leaving a relatively class-pure movement to pursue class-based strategies, his own evidence does not support his reading. Many of those he discusses who played an active part in this movement are members of the middling orders – Margarot, Gerrald, Muir, Palmer, and others – moreover, they are clearly tied up with intellectual and political circles associated with extra-parliamentary activity in the metropolis which cut right across the class structure (and also frequently include elements of the parliamentary opposition). Godwin is an important and continuing presence in such circles – nor is there much evidence to think that there is any watershed, whether in 1792 or 1795 which separates the plebian from the middle class reformers.¹⁵ Thompson's suggestion that the 'unity between intellectual and plebian reformers of 1792 was never to be regained' simply does not bear much scrutiny if we are to take it to apply to Godwin and his circles. Indeed, on Godwin's view it was not until the summer of 1797 that defections of the friends of freedom took place to any significant extent.¹⁶

It is also inaccurate to insist on the irrelevance of *Political Justice*. While the whole text may not have circulated widely, sections of it were reprinted in papers like Eaton's *Politics for the People* and Spence's *Hog Wash*. These were not the more fanciful sections of the work upon which modern readers enjoy casting aspersions, they were the swingeing critiques of monarchy and aristocracy of Book Five, as powerful in their way as anything in Paine. What links Godwin to the radical movements of the 1790s, and keeps him connected throughout his life, is his ineradicable hostility to the monarchical and aristocratic orders of Europe. He may not have believed in revolutionary violence to eradicate them, but few of his English contemporaries did – even when they sought every means to ensure that the government would fail to extinguish their protests.

On this view there is more of a connection between Godwin and the radicals than Thompson allows. It can also be argued that there is more in common between Godwin and Thompson in their analysis of the plebian and artisan mind than Thompson would care to admit. In his 'Essay against re-opening the war with France' Godwin draws a distinction which Thompson also implicitly recognises. Discussing the outbreak of war he argues that

a momentary cry is indeed excited among a small part of the vulgar through a kind of hereditary hatred against the French; but will that cry be lasting? It is among the thoughtless only that the cry is heard . . . It is in a very different branch of the lower orders that republican principles have found a reception. Sullen, obstinate, and sensible of oppression, they will not easily forget. 'Let us drub the French', is a cry not founded in any permanent principles of our nature. But republican principles, whether true or only specious, appeal to some of the most favourite prejudices of the mind, the love of equality and the love of independence.¹⁷

It is not difficult to find a similar distinction in Thompson. Between, on the one hand, the vulgar mob, marshalled in 'carefully fostered demonstrations of loyalty', persuaded by 'momentary bribery and licence',¹⁸ and the broader people in whom Thompson senses a sea-change of attitude – one, again, deriving from republican principles: 'Painite ideas, carried through by such artisans to an ever wider plebian culture, instantly struck root there.'¹⁹ There can be little doubt that in this respect at least Godwin and Thompson share a basic commitment to the view that the 1790s saw a breakthrough to a popular audience of an egalitarian creed which posed a fundamental challenge to the status quo. Moreover, both treat loyalist demonstrations, military recruitment, the raising of the militia and the volunteers, and the repeated Paine burnings and popular demonstrations in celebration of British victories, as orchestrated, coerced and elite led – and, above all, as an inauthentic expression of plebian views. Both, then, offer an asymmetrical explanatory account of popular radicalism and popular loyalism. The former is understood in terms of a process of political education and enlightenment – a permanent fissure in the politics of hegemony and deference by which Thompson characterises the eighteenth century. The latter is elite led and imposed, and is an inauthentic expression of plebian or artisan politics.

This asymmetry cannot be sustained. There is without doubt a good deal of elite input into the organisation of Paine burnings and similar occasions – not least in financing of hogsheads of beer, the provision of food, and the orchestration of the ritual. But, if popular participation on such occasions might be motivated less by ideology than by the attractions of a spectacle, so too might participation in radical events. Membership of the radical

societies fluctuated dramatically, week by week and month by month. Although there may be a core of artisan and plebian support for radical principles, the penumbra is both extremely variable and of doubtful consistency. It is not surprising that this might be the case. Thompson's view that there is a solid plebian commitment to radicalism which shatters the traditional structures of power within the community, implicitly assumes that in the place of a plebian-patrician structure a class struggle emerges because of the diametrically opposed social and economic interests of those involved. But this argument places more weight on the economic and social dimensions of the radicalism of the 1790s than it can really bear. For all the vilification directed against the radicals by the loyalists and anti-Jacobins, the major and consistent aim of the reformers was political reform – time and time again economic and social reform was repudiated from the radical platform:

Remember I do not mean equality of property. This is totally impossible in the present state of human intellect and industry; and if you could be seduced to attempt a system so wild and extravagant, you could only give to vandals and cut throats an opportunity, by general pillage and assassination, of transferring all property into their own hands, and establishing a tyranny more intolerable than anything of which you now complain. The equality I mean is the equality of rights.²⁰

The speech is Thelwall's – but the sentiment is clearly a common one. In 'The Address of the British Convention assembled at Edinburgh' in November 1793 the same point was made: 'The only objects of our association are the restoration of annual Parliaments, and universal suffrage. WE GO NO FURTHER.'²¹ What was being demanded were political rights – and it is these that were being refused, albeit often under cover of insisting that one step down that road would bring down the whole system in a revolutionary deluge of blood.

The polarisation of the political spectrum in the 1790s was largely driven by loyalist propaganda and government repression – it was not an expression of a fundamental class cleavage. As a result, the impact of this polarisation on the broader public was complex. If, on the one hand, radicalism was rendered a more dangerous and costly option, on the other, it offered a tempting moment of transgression replete with the frisson of playing with the fears of the ruling elite.²² Against the attractions of transgression lay the radicals' purported association with France, Britain's traditional enemy, and their susceptibility to charges of disloyalty, subversion and a refusal of patriotism. Yet the radicals were able to offer an alternative tradition of patriotism, and they could capitalise on considerable public hostility to the war. The war, in many ways, epitomises the gap between core radical and loyalist positions and the attitudes of their wider popular audiences. Proportionately the numbers fighting in the war were greater than those

involved in the Great War of 1914–18, so for most people it was impossible not to be touched by the conflict – not least once the French began to pose a very real threat of invasion. But, while there was extensive public feeling against the war, the impact of the war on ordinary members of the public was not uniformly detrimental. The mass-mobilisation it required, especially on the domestic front with the volunteers and militia, served to include a wider section of the public than ever before in a range of public forum and public performances related to the conduct of the war. But neither ground was sufficient to allow either radicals or loyalists to feel that they could count on wide popular support for their respective causes. In such circumstances Thompson is both right to insist that the old patterns of traditional patrician hegemony could not survive, and wrong to think that all that could replace them was a conflict structured in class terms. The government, through the loyalist movement, the volunteers and the militia were forced to mobilize the population practically and ideologically on an unprecedented scale. This does not mean that all those who participated were dyed in the wool loyalists, nor does it mean that radicals could not escape involvement, but it did mean that members of the middling orders down to common artisans were being offered new forms of inclusion within the public domain that could be extremely attractive (while at the same time the disincentives to involvement with radicalism were ratcheted up). This did not make their allegiance beyond question. Thompson is surely right to think that in this decade the status quo could not hold in its traditional form. But in its place emerged alternative avenues of political involvement and personal advancement for ambitious individuals – avenues which invited a more pragmatic attitude to ideology than is implied in the idea of emerging class consciousness (or, indeed than is implied in recent work on the emergence of nationalism).²³ Hence the phenomenon of ideological migration – not just of radicals becoming loyalists – as with Henry Redhead Yorke (who was reformed by his jailor's daughter) – but also of loyalists becoming radicals (Ritson's curious transition from Jacobite to Jacobin), and others moving backward and forward – notably William Hamilton Reid, or Jew King.

In short, we have to recognise that the changing context for political action in the 1790s is not one which naturally unfolds an authentic working class radicalism, in contrast to the unthinking xenophobia of the marshalled ranks of Church and King mobs and popular loyalism. Similarly, just as an asymmetry of explanation for popular radicals and loyalists misses the very complex character of radical and loyalist political performances in the period so too does it tend to assume the very polarisation which loyalists (and rather fewer radicals) were attempting to create. Hence the difficulty Thompson has responding to and classifying Godwin.

By way of conclusion there is one further point I wish to make. It concerns the limits of the radicalism of the popular reform societies of the 1790s. The movement was rooted in domestic traditions of dissent and political opposition; indeed, a great deal of it was expressed in the language of old

corruption, although there were other elements imported into the political controversy by the ‘debate’ on the French Revolution between 1791 and 1793. Thompson tends to characterise the ideology of the radicals as predominantly Paineite, with elements of Spence and Thelwall. But Paine’s natural rights doctrines were foreign to the political idioms of both middle class and artisan radicalism in England and, while there can be no doubt about the reach of his work, there is considerable uncertainty as to how far plebian radicalism ever became Paineite. Moreover, just as we should not over-state the social and economic dimensions of that radicalism so too we must recognise its ideological limits. The movement was locked into a struggle for political rights the terms of which were largely set by earlier extra-parliamentary movements. For all the French example, and for all the supposed impact of French principles one has to look hard to find much evidence in the platforms of the reform societies of hostility to slavery, in favour of women’s enfranchisement, or against the conduct of the British government in its overseas empire.²⁴ Indeed, there seem to have been strict limits to how far the English radicals were prepared to sympathise with their Irish brethren. If we want to explain the limited character of radicalism we can get a long way simply by looking at the parliamentary agenda. Slavery is associated with Wilberforce, and Wilberforce with Pitt; India is associated with Burke, and Burke with reaction. And female suffrage – is simply not on that agenda.²⁵ In each case it seems clear that the popular, extra-parliamentary, radical organisations disavowed issues which would have muddied the conflict between the governing parliamentary elite and the extra-parliamentary movement and their opposition supporters. But this suggests that the political agenda for radicalism was not developed from a set of indigenous class concerns, but was determined by a narrower set of political controversies which revolved around the parliamentary arena. One can overstate this case, but it is an important corrective to the view that the popular politics of the 1790s is a clear case of nascent class politics. Even if it had a broader class base than any previous movement its agenda was not, for the most part, driven by that base.

Moreover, if I am right about the character of the conflict it becomes still more plausible to think that plebian support for radicalism was as conditional as was its support for loyalism – although a national political culture and a national political agenda was emerging it was only emerging, and given that most people’s lives were most profoundly affected by their local experience we should not expect popular or plebian culture to offer unconditional support for either radical opposition or loyalism. This is part of the point about asymmetrical explanations – it is tempting to think that there is something self-evident about the demands for equality – political, social or economic – whereas there is something odd about plebian or working class conservatism. But historical accounts cannot make these assumptions, they have to examine the social context and the organisational and institutional structures within which people participate and in which

their political identities emerge. That is why we cannot treat vulgar loyalism as something we can simply add on to the *Making's* account of the formation of class identity – if we take it seriously it threatens the broader narrative of emerging class consciousness which Thompson tries to sell. Similarly, I believe, if we take Godwin seriously we are left with a picture of the 1790s which departs significantly from the account Thompson offers. Not least it challenges the view that there is a sharp fall off in middle class reformist support for radicalism after the autumn of 1792, leaving this plebian movement to its own devices. Far from this being so, there is a great deal of evidence to support the view that intellectual support for France and radicalism continues relatively undiminished until the late '90s. And if this is true then we have substantially to revise the account of the 1790s which Thompson has left us. That is, to return to the Mason question, a full understanding of Godwinism or popular loyalism must inevitably cast doubt on the existing story.

Why did Thompson take against Godwin and his friends? Why was he so unwilling to see anything positive in their contribution to the radicalism of the 1790s? In one sense we can explain this by the beliefs he held about the character of the popular movement and its desertion by the middle classes. But a contributory factor might also have been his tendency to see the 1790s in the light of the 1960s and 70s. In *Poverty of Theory* Godwin makes a formal appearance as the original tragedy later to be repeated as farce by Althusser and Foucault. But the more plausible target of Thompson's hostility is less French structuralism and more the British who embraced it with enthusiasm – perhaps most prominently the editors of *New Left Review*. Is Thompson's Godwin really Perry Anderson? Even if we leave aside this speculation there is an important sense in which Thompson did read the 1790s in the light of the disputes of his own era. In the 1950s, 60s and 70s it was possible to read off someone's beliefs on a whole range of issues from a few basic ideological commitments. The ideological terrain was clearly polarised and organised – the 'sides' sharply demarcated. Thompson's own essays reveal his clarity about where the divisions lay and where stands should be taken. But he tends to read the ideological disputes of the 1790s as having a similar clarity and it is this move which cannot be defended. Ideological and intellectual commitments in the 1790s did not line up cleanly and clearly in patterns of polarised conflict, it is a much more fractured and fragmented domain – one which is correspondingly rich and complex, although seemingly very confused.²⁶ And if we try to line people up ideologically we fail to capture the subtlety and nuanced character of their ideas.²⁷ When we look at the social and cultural links which existed between the various elements of radicalism we cannot help but recognise extensive social interaction, intellectual cross-fertilisation (for example, both Gerrald and Thelwall acknowledged that their greatest debt lay to Godwin), and an on-going process of intellectual and ideological experimentation and development. The tyrannies of the ideological politics of the

twentieth century were not in place and because they were not in place we cannot use this later experience to frame our analysis of the earlier.

This paper has been critical of Thompson – but he knew I would want to defend Godwin (and I had been hoping to do so in his presence) and I do not think he would take the attempt amiss. Not least because he knew that although a new generation of historians of the 1790s were beginning to question his work, they were able to do so only because they had begun by following in his tracks.

NOTES

- 1 Tim Mason, *Social Policy in the Thurd Reich* (London, Berg, 1993) esp., pp. 275–283.
- 2 E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and other essays* (London, Merlin, 1978), p. 373.
- 3 E. P. Thompson, 'Benevolent Mr Godwin', *London Review of Books* 8/7/1993, pp. 14–15.
- 4 *Poverty of Theory* p. 373. The thought is repeated in the *LRB* review: 'It was one of those rare moments when a section of the English intelligentsia called all things into question, and the vibrations were felt for decades. A most un-English moment.' p. 15.
- 5 E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, Penguin 1968), p. 107.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 888
- 7 'Benevolent Mr Godwin', p. 15
- 8 One curious move Thompson repeatedly makes in discussing Godwin is to appeal to the wisdom of Wordsworth. In the review he cites Wordsworth's strictures against abstract systems of moral philosophy which lack the power to 'melt into our affections, to incorporate itself with the blood and vital juices of our minds'. These bald and naked reasonings are impotent over our habits, they cannot form them.' In *Poverty of Theory*, and in *The Making* . . . we are offered the *Prelude* as a touchstone for a sound English response to events in France, with Thompson quite evidently finding Wordsworth's rejection of 'French principles' eminently appealing – the idea (see above note 4) that Godwinism was a most 'unEnglish moment' is a very Wordsworthian sentiment.
- 9 *The Making of the English Working Class* pp. 916–7.
- 10 E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1993), pp. 95–6.
- 11 'Benevolent Mr Godwin', p. 14
- 12 See *The Political and Philosophical Writings of Willam Godwin* (London, Pickering and Chatto, 1993) volume 1 (Volume editor, Martin Fitzpatrick)
- 13 *Poltical and Philosophical Writings*, volume 2, p. 160 ('Considerations . . .').
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 48 (Godwin's previously unpublished 'Essay against re-opening the war with France' written c. March 1793)
- 15 It is true that the bulk of prosecutions are levelled against those practically involved in the political associations or in the publishing or selling of Paine's works – and that it is only later in the decade, around 1797–8, that the hegemony of literary radicalism is broken and Godwin and his fellows are subjected to vilification by an insurgent anti-Jacobin press. That makes their earlier radicalism less obviously dangerous and costly (although Holcroft was due to be tried for treason, and Godwin might well have fallen too had the trials succeeded). But Godwin does not break beneath the onslaught in 1798.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 'Thoughts occasioned . . .' pp. 166–8.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 'Essay against re-opening the war . . .' p. 48.
- 18 *The Making* . . . p. 123
- 19 *Customs in Common* p. 86.
- 20 John Thelwall, *Peaceful means and not tumultory violence the means of redressing national grievances* (London, 1795), p. 14
- 21 See also Charles Pigott's entry for 'equality' in his *Poltical Dictionary* (London, 1795) which distinguishes between an equality of rights and that which 'in the Alarmist vocabulary,

signifies everything morally and physically impossible; equal wisdom, equal strength, equal wealth &c, &c . . .'

22 Perhaps paradigmatically in the fable of King Chaunciere, which Daniel Eaton was prosecuted for publishing, which he attributed to Thelwall, but which Thelwall (according to his widow) denied telling. See Marilyn Butler, *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy* (Cambridge University Press, 1984) pp. 185–8. The piece is discussed in more detail in my essay, 'The fragmented ideology of reform' in Mark Philp (ed.) *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 50–77.

23 E.g., Linda Colley, *Britons* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993).

24 Harry Dickinson rightly reminded me in a comment on this paper that there was interest in the anti-slavery movement and in relation to women and India among radicals in the early 1790s. I do not wish to dispute this; my point was more limited – namely that the popular political societies developed a narrower agenda in which many of the concerns of radical sympathisers in the early nineties become peripheral or purged as the agenda of the controversy becomes more and more centred around the objective of parliamentary reform.

25 Again, this is not to say that female suffrage and aspects of what we now call feminism were not there in the 1790s – clearly Wollstonecraft, Hays and many others testify to their presence. But these also were issues which are marginalised as the political societies settled on a course of confrontation based on the narrower agenda of political rights (for men) – an agenda largely set by earlier extra-parliamentary movements.

26 I have argued for this picture of the reformers in my 'The fragmented ideology of reform', pp. 50–77.

27 Consider, for example, the complex role which sensibility plays both as an element of some radicals' critique of contemporary mores and as an object of their criticism (especially when associated with Burke). The complex and very varied role played by the concept is inevitably missed if we assume that an endorsement of sensibility must be either radical or conservative – such a position would make Wollstonecraft's work unintelligible.