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# Mobilizing William Godwin, the “Father of British Anarchism”

History, Strategy, and the Intellectual Cultures of  
Post-war British Anarchism

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British Anarchism

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that included Godwin and stressed his importance to, and relevance for, contemporary anarchism, Woodcock and Ward challenged the emphasis on class struggle to stress other models of political thought and action. Godwin became a cipher for these struggles, and was mobilized to legitimize the broader aspirations of a Woodcock, Ward, or Meltzer.

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## Abstract

This article examines the reconfigurations of British anarchist politics and culture, focusing on the reception of William Godwin by three influential anarchist writers and activists: George Woodcock, Colin Ward, and Albert Meltzer. It argues that mobilizing Godwin was an important part of their efforts to define, and then defend, a particular version of anarchist intellectual culture in Britain, each with its own unique history and strategic perspectives regarding social and political change. These competing conceptualizations of Godwin's legacy and significance therefore reflected both their independent political and intellectual concerns and developing rifts in the broader anarchist movement, especially between proponents of gradualism and those of more militant forms of anarchism. Ultimately, for all three, Godwin became a cipher for internal ideological struggles in anarchist politics, as his pliable ideas were mobilized in the battle for the meaning of British anarchism.

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The late eighteenth-century radical polymath William Godwin has occupied an awkward position in anarchist intellectual culture in Britain. Early historians of anarchist ideas such as Max Nettlau and Paul Eltzbacher defined Godwin's philosophical contribution to the French Revolution debate in Britain, the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), as an early work of anarchist political thinking.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Peter Kropotkin argued that "it was Godwin ... who was the first to formulate

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<sup>1</sup> Nettlau, Max, *Bibliographie de l'anarchie* (Brussels, 1897), 4–5; Nettlau, Max, *A Short History of Anarchism* (1932–4), trans. Pilat, Ida Isca (London, 1996), 18–21; Paul Eltzbacher, *Anarchism*, trans. Steven T. Byington (New York, 1908), Ch. 2.

the political and economical conceptions of anarchism.”<sup>2</sup> Later historians like George Woodcock and Peter Marshall likewise include Godwin in their accounts of anarchism—with the latter calling him “the father of British anarchism”—even as they recognize that Godwin could not have been part of the anarchist movement that grew in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> To support his inclusion in the anarchist canon of writers and thinkers, all point to Godwin’s thorough rejection of law, political institutions, and private property, which they consider essential features of anarchism. However, Godwin’s *Political Justice* was written as a rejection of *ancien régime* society rather than as a critique of modern industrial society. For this reason, scholars such as Benjamin Franks consider that, although Godwin may have influenced anarchist thinking, he cannot be understood to have been an anarchist or to have contributed to an ideology that is “a product of industrialism and post-industrialism, modernity and post-modernity.”<sup>4</sup>

Debates about Godwin’s inclusion in the anarchist canon, then, relate to broader questions on the origins, nature, and dynamics of anarchism as a historically situated political ideology. In this article we shed new light both on the history of postwar British anarchism and on the neglected reception history of Godwin’s work.<sup>5</sup> Historians of British anarchism have

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Kropotkin, “Anarchism,” in Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings*, ed. Marshall S. Shatz (Cambridge, 1995), 233–47, at 238.

<sup>3</sup> Woodcock, George, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (Harmondsworth, 1963), 59 and Ch. 3 more broadly; Marshall, Peter, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (Oakland, 2010), Ch. 15. In the introduction to his biography of Godwin, Marshall goes so far as to claim that “what Locke is for liberalism and Marx is for communism, Godwin is for anarchism.” Peter Marshall, *William Godwin* (New Haven, 1984), 3; Marshall, “Colin Ward: Sower of Anarchist Ideas,” in Carl Levy, ed., *Colin Ward: Life, Times and Thought* (London, 2013), 20–27, at 20.

<sup>4</sup> Franks, Benjamin, *Rebel Alliances: The Means and Ends of Contemporary British Anarchisms* (Oakland, 2006), 29–30.

<sup>5</sup> On Godwin’s reception see Clemit, Pamela and Offer, Avner, “Godwin’s Citations, 1783–2005: Highest Renown at the Pinnacle of Disfavor,”

ism that should inspire righteous fury in nascent revolutionaries.

Godwin is a part of the history of anarchist political thought, but he sits awkwardly with its broader history. Given this ambiguity, the thinkers examined here worked to define Godwin’s position in their broader assessments of the anarchist tradition, while in mobilizing him they were animated by contemporary controversies in the broader movement. How best to conceive of anarchism? Was it an intellectual tradition or a social movement? How should anarchists pursue change—through gradualist experimentation or revolutionary action? And what is the value of intellectual work versus political, radical work? This is a problem with which academic historians have grappled too, albeit less acrimoniously. As one historian has written, there are two predominant ways of writing this history: one as a “political philosophy, centred on the works of great men of genius,” and the other an “analysis of anarchism as organisation or institution.”<sup>169</sup>

This was a cleavage—between what might be termed “movement histories” and “intellectual histories”—dividing Meltzer from Woodcock too. For the former, an intellectual history of anarchism was essentially a contradiction in terms, for “there were never theoreticians of Anarchism as such,” only “theoreticians who discussed aspects of the philosophy.”<sup>170</sup> The fact that Godwin could not have been part of the movement and its struggles implied his exclusion from anarchism.<sup>171</sup> By contrast, Woodcock would write in the 1960s that, against a history of failure, it was necessary to recover and circulate the core ideals of anarchism rather than reproduce the habits of revolutionary anarchists.<sup>172</sup> By offering an account of anarchism

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<sup>169</sup> Sharif Gemie, “Historians, Anarchism and Political Culture,” *Anarchist Studies* 6/2 (1998), 153–9, at 154.

<sup>170</sup> Meltzer, *Anarchism*, 18.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>172</sup> Woodcock, *Anarchism*, 468.

especially for “children who were either excluded from schools or had excluded themselves through truancy.”<sup>166</sup>

Speaking before the establishment of state education, Ward’s Godwin was thus one of “those quiet voices of dissent and scepticism” thanks to which we can shake off the “automatic inescapable influences all around us.”<sup>167</sup> He represented the libertarian side of the authoritarian–libertarian dialectic which, adapting from Kropotkin, Ward considered to be “a permanent aspect of the human condition.”<sup>168</sup> Ultimately, Godwin stood at the genesis of a tradition of educationalists and teachers who advocated independent and free education, outside or against the state. More than an astute critic of state education, however, Godwin was also, for both Ward and Woodcock, an educational thinker and practitioner whose methods anticipated those of twentieth-century progressive educationalists and were congruent with anarchist politics and gradualist revolutionary aims.

## Conclusion

Command over an ideology’s history is central to the process of ideological definition. In anarchist intellectual culture, writing the history of anarchism is an effort to define the contours of a tradition, to clarify and justify political aims and objectives, and to debate and defend tactics. The register of these histories is also a projection into the future. For Woodcock, this was a romantic story of inevitable failure, informing a politics of lambent utopian aspiration; for Ward, it was a narrative of noble experimentation informing a quietly constructive politics; for Meltzer, anarchist history was a story of ordinary hero-

<sup>166</sup> Ward, *Anarchism: A Very Short Introduction*, 73–4. This concern with the exclusion of significant numbers of children is also a key component of Ward’s “Modest Proposal.”

<sup>167</sup> Ward, *Influences*, 8.

<sup>168</sup> Ward, *Anarchy in Action*, 31.

identified a split, emerging in the decades following the Second World War, between anarchists whom we might term gradualists and class-struggle revolutionaries.<sup>6</sup> However, they rarely examine the stakes of that split, or the way in which it was embedded in the intellectual reconfiguration of anarchism in the second half of the twentieth century, as anarchists sought to formulate new responses to the emerging postwar consensus and the growing welfare state.

This article focuses on three key figures of the postwar anarchist movement: the “gradualists” George Woodcock (1912–95) and Colin Ward (1924–2010), and their frequent foil, the class-struggle revolutionary Albert Meltzer (1920–96). Woodcock entered Britain’s literary and anarchist milieu in the 1930s, and played an important role in anarchism’s intellectual life as a member of the Freedom group, before emigrating to Canada in 1949 and drifting away from the movement.<sup>7</sup> He manifested an interest in William Godwin during the war, publishing a pamphlet collecting selections of Godwin’s writings in 1943, and then *William Godwin: A Biographical Study* in 1946, which offered a reappraisal of Godwin after decades of neglect. His most famous contribution to anarchist scholarship came in 1962, with the publication of *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*, which Colin Ward viewed as “the most widely circulated piece of anarchist literature during the last half-century.”<sup>8</sup> Ward, described as “one of the most influential anarchists of the twentieth century,” was

Nineteenth-Century Prose 41/1–2 (2014), 57–52; Pollin, Burton, *Godwin Criticism: A Synoptic Bibliography* (Toronto, 1967)

<sup>6</sup> Franks, *Rebel Alliances*, 53; Honeywell, Carissa, *A British Anarchist Tradition*: Herbert Read, Alex Comfort and Colin Ward (2011) (London, 2013), 3–4; David Stafford, “Anarchism in Britain Today,” in David E. Apter and James Joll, eds., *Anarchism Today* (London, 1971), 84–103.

<sup>7</sup> For a full account of Woodcock’s life see Douglas Fetherling, *The Gentle Anarchist: A Life of George Woodcock* (Vancouver, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Ward, Colin, “Grand Old Anarchist,” *The Guardian*, 18 February 1995, 30.

drawn to anarchism following his conscription in 1942.<sup>9</sup> Like Woodcock, whom he befriended, he became an influential member of the Freedom group, serving on the editorial board of its newspaper *Freedom* from 1947 to 1960. He then edited his own highly regarded monthly magazine *Anarchy: A Journal of Anarchist Ideas* from 1961 to 1970.<sup>10</sup> Throughout his life Ward was also an active journalist, lecturer, and author on topics as varied as childhood, education, urban planning, and social policy, all of which he examined from his idiosyncratic anarchist perspective.

While Woodcock's and Ward's anarchism may be defined as gradualist in its rejection of anarchism's revolutionary heritage, Albert Meltzer's was steeped in the tradition of revolutionary syndicalism.<sup>11</sup> Described by his friend Stuart Christie as a lifelong enemy of "humbug and injustice," Meltzer saw himself, first and foremost, as an activist. Supposedly drawn to anarchism through boxing, he displayed his pugilistic skills fighting Oswald Mosley's blackshirts at Cable Street in 1936, before supporting the Spanish Revolution and participating in a "mutiny" of disaffected soldiers in Cairo in 1946.<sup>12</sup> Similarly pugnacious on the page, Meltzer was involved with the Freedom group in the 1930s, briefly coediting, with Woodcock and others, its wartime newspaper *War Commentary*, before founding the Anarchist Black Cross with Christie in 1967 to support anarchist prisoners, partly through its newspaper *Black Flag*. Here, and in other publications, Meltzer frequently challenged

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<sup>9</sup> Kinna, Ruth, *The Government of No One: The Theory and Practice of Anarchism* (London, 2019), 89. On Ward's life see Sophie Scott-Brown's *Colin Ward and the Art of Everyday Anarchy* (London, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Carl Levy, "Introduction: Colin Ward (1924–2010)," in Levy, *Colin Ward*, 7–19, at 8.

<sup>11</sup> Scott-Brown, *Colin Ward*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Meltzer, Albert, *I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels: Sixty Years of Commonplace Life and Anarchist Agitation* (Edinburgh, 1996), 112–18.

To do so, he reconstructed an early history of radical education against a Whiggish history that he thought was perpetuated through teacher-training programs and by teachers' unions, and which depicted the Elementary Education Act of 1870, and the establishment and extension of compulsory schooling, as unquestionably positive.<sup>163</sup> Whereas *Political Justice* offered an unheeded philosophical argument against state education, working-class private schools of the nineteenth century offered a similarly unheeded practical argument against it. In both his lecture on "The Anarchist and Schools" and his chapter on education in *Anarchism: A Very Short Introduction*, Ward drew from revisionist accounts of working-class education in Victorian England to suggest that the Elementary Education Act of 1870 had lowered the quality of education for working-class children because of the effects of centralization and state oversight.<sup>164</sup> Moreover, Ward related Godwin's arguments to key developments in the history of education that he considered were evidence of increasing state control over instruction, designed to further—as Godwin had warned—the state's interests and established traditions. This is particularly salient in his comments on the Education Reform Act of 1988. In addition to condemning the legal provision of a form of "collective worship" that had to be "wholly or broadly Christian in character," Ward deplored the imposition "of a National Curriculum," as it would lead to the circulation and perpetuation of a single, state-sanctioned view of British history.<sup>165</sup> Later, he complemented this argument by highlighting the negative effects of the National Curriculum

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<sup>163</sup> Ward, *Talking Schools*, 13; Ward, *Anarchism: A Very Short Introduction*, 55; Ward, "A Modest Proposal," 214–16; Ward, *Anarchy in Action*, 14.

<sup>164</sup> Ward, *Talking Schools*, 12–13; Ward, *Anarchism: A Very Short Introduction*, 53–5.

<sup>165</sup> Ward, *Influences*, 31–2.



argued in favor of scrapping national education altogether. When he returned to Godwin and Wollstonecraft in *Influences*, the Education Reform Act of 1988 had significantly increased the central government's power over schools by establishing a national curriculum and assessment practices, and decreased the power of "democratically elected LEAs [local educational authorities]."<sup>159</sup>

Rather than seeing contextual difference and historical distance as problems, Ward embraced them. By drawing his readers' attention to them, he made a case for how seminal, radical, and right Godwin already was in the 1790s. Ward consistently stressed what he saw as the uniqueness of Godwin's position, its affinity with contemporary radical educational thought, and the confirmation of his predictions. In *Influences*, Ward asked, "Now why, at the end of the 20th century, do I stress those theoretical objections from the end of the 18th century? For the sound and simple reason that Godwin was unique among the philosophers of education in warning us against them."<sup>160</sup> In *Anarchy in Action*, he similarly claimed that Godwin was "worth quoting at length, because his lone voice from the end of the eighteenth century speaks to us in the accents of the de-schoolers of our own day."<sup>161</sup> Writing as John Ellerby in *Anarchy*, he deemed Godwin's points particularly valuable "not only as the classic anarchist position on this issue, but also because they have had such ample subsequent justification."<sup>162</sup> Taking on the role of theorist of twentieth-century anarchism that he described in the "Unwritten Handbook" of 1958, Ward then complemented Godwin's historical arguments with additional evidence, bolstering his opposition to national education.

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<sup>159</sup> Paul Sharp, "Central and Local Government," in Richard Aldrich, ed., *A Century of Education* (London, 2002), 93–116, at 94.

<sup>160</sup> Ward, *Influences*, 30.

<sup>161</sup> Ward, *Anarchy in Action*, 101.

<sup>162</sup> Ellerby, "Reflections on Parents, Teachers and Schools."

the Freedom group's understanding of anarchism and its strategic decisions.<sup>13</sup>

Examining Godwin's reception by these three important postwar anarchists, this article shows that the ideological reconfiguration of anarchism informed a parallel effort to reshape and redefine its intellectual culture in competing ways. The first section examines the context of this reconfiguration, describing the place of the Freedom group in the split between gradualists and class-struggle revolutionaries. The second focuses on aspects of anarchist political culture that expose the conflicts between Woodcock, Ward, and Meltzer as they worked to articulate independent visions of anarchism. Finally, the third section considers education—a field in which Godwin was held to have made an important contribution—in the context of the growing postwar state and the broader questioning of anarchist strategies for securing social change.

## **New dilemmas: politics and the intellectual cultures of postwar British anarchism**

The postwar period was one of refocusing for the British anarchist movement. Its thinkers and activists grappled with the changing nature of the modern state and the prospects for revolution.<sup>14</sup> Revitalized by the Spanish Civil War, the first issue of the newspaper *Spain and the World* emerged from the remnants of the Freedom group, a collective cofounded by Peter

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<sup>13</sup> Stuart Christie, "Albert Meltzer, Anarchist," ed. The Kate Sharpley Library, in *A Life for Anarchy: A Stuart Christie Reader* (Chico, CA, 2021), 118–22, at 119; Meltzer, *I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels*, 380.

<sup>14</sup> For this history see Hermia Oliver, *The International Anarchist Movement in Late Victorian London* (London, 1983), 24–66; Rob Ray, *A Beautiful Idea: History of the Freedom Press Anarchists* (London, 2018), 7–52; John Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse* (London, 1983), 1–102.

Kropotkin after his arrival in Britain in 1886. The newspaper warned in December 1936 of a “darkness of the international horizon,” and suggested that it was imperative to recognize the nature of Spain’s conflict as an existential “struggle between progress and reaction.”<sup>15</sup> Anarchism’s reemergence as a political force drew a number of thinkers towards the awakening British movement. Woodcock, the art critic and poet Herbert Read, and the novelist Ethel Mannin all declared themselves anarchists. Meltzer, then a schoolboy, began associating with the Freedom group in 1935.<sup>16</sup> Putting an end to *War Commentary*, their wartime successor to *Spain and the World*, the editors resurrected the title *Freedom* in 1945. Colin Ward became involved in that year too, following the *War Commentary* trial, when the British state prosecuted members of the Freedom group who had edited the newspaper for “conspiring to cause disaffection in the armed forces.” Ward, a serving soldier, was called as a witness for the prosecution, but ultimately forged a durable and productive friendship with the group.<sup>17</sup>

Anarchists in Britain alerted their readers to the invidious political choices before, during, and immediately after the Second World War, especially as hardening ideological postures and an arms race marked the onset of the Cold War. A key issue was pacifism. For intellectuals drawn into anarchism’s orbit, the failure of the Spanish Revolution was, in Woodcock’s words, evidence of the “folly” of revolutionary violence.<sup>18</sup> Read

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<sup>15</sup> “Mistaken International Policy: Attitude of France and Britain: A Lesson from Spain,” *Spain and the World* 1/1 (1936), 2.

<sup>16</sup> Meltzer, *I Couldn’t Paint Golden Angels*, 39.

<sup>17</sup> David Goodway, *Anarchist Seeds beneath the Snow: Left-Libertarian Thought and British Writers from William Morris to Colin Ward* (Liverpool, 2006), 311. Honeywell, *A British Anarchist Tradition*, 134. See also Carissa Honeywell, “Anarchism and the British Warfare State: The Prosecution of the War Commentary Anarchists, 1945,” *International Review of Social History* 60/2 (2015), 257–84.

<sup>18</sup> George Woodcock, “The Folly of ‘Revolutionary’ Violence,” *The Adelphi* 23/3 (1947), 55–61.

new ideas and experiments appropriate to local needs. Second, Godwin claimed that schemes of national education run contrary “to the nature of mind,” because they imply the avoidance of responsibility for one’s own education, nurturing “perpetual pupillage” instead of creating agents capable of acting according to their own will to meet local situations. Third, Godwin attacked the “alliance” between schools and “national governments,” charging the state with consistently making use of public education to “strengthen its hand and perpetuate its institutions” at the expense of the interests of the citizenry.<sup>157</sup>

Godwin’s, Woodcock’s, and Ward’s respective contexts for opposing national education could hardly be more different. This partly explains the urgency of Ward’s arguments. In Godwin’s time, national education was yet to be implemented in any comprehensive manner. However, the idea formed a key part of the French revolutionary project, and as Dominique Julia notes, state-provided education aimed to create “new habits that would nourish the republican spirit.”<sup>158</sup> Godwin’s sections on national education in *Political Justice* are an indirect response to French debates on the subject. When Woodcock was writing his biography of Godwin, an extensive, centralized system of national education had yet to be instituted in Britain. Ward, however, wrote about education in the context of greater state control, one in which the division between “primary,” “secondary” and “further” education, established in 1944, had become entrenched. In 1965, he had

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<sup>157</sup> William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, Bk. 6, Ch. 8, in *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, gen. ed. Mark Philp, vol. 3 (London, 1993) (for the subsequent minor modifications to that chapter, see vol. 4, 279–80); Ward, *Influences*, 29–30; Ward, *Anarchy*, 101–2; Ward, *Talking Schools*, 11–; Ward, *Anarchism: A Very Short Introduction*, 52–3; Ellerby, “Reflections on Parents, Teachers and Schools.”

<sup>158</sup> Dominique Julia, “Instruction publique/éducation nationale,” in Albert Soboul, ed., *Dictionnaire historique de la Révolution française* (Paris, 1989), 575–81, at 575.

of bringing about equal parent–child or tutor–child relations, Ward highlighted that Godwin was “speaking the language, not of a disingenuous 18th century *theorist* like Rousseau, but of a 20th century *practitioner* like David Wills.”<sup>153</sup> He highlighted again the relevance of Godwin’s work to educational practices at the end of the twentieth century, particularly as it related to the psychological development of the child and to the fostering of social relations grounded in freedom and equality. For Ward, such social relations are the basis of the alternative, libertarian society, which “is always in existence, like a seed beneath the snow,” and their extension is revolutionary practice.<sup>154</sup>

For Ward more than for Woodcock, Godwin was essential to the criticism of state education. Woodcock had acknowledged the value of Godwin’s criticism of national education but remained brief on the subject.<sup>155</sup> Ward, in contrast, emphasized the importance of Godwin’s arguments at much greater length. There are two reasons for this. First, from a theoretical perspective, Godwin’s philosophical arguments echoed Ward’s own views on the problems posed by state institutions in general and state education in particular. Second, from a more immediately political perspective in the British context, they echoed his deep-seated concerns regarding the development of post-war education.

In *Political Justice*, Godwin made three arguments against state education, which Ward probably encountered first in Woodcock’s biography.<sup>156</sup> First, Godwin argued that schemes for national education “include in them the idea of permanence.” In other words, they lead to the catechistic repetition of the dominant ideas of the time rather than to open-ended inquiry, in turn sustaining flawed assumptions and stymying

<sup>153</sup> Ward, *Influences*, 39, our emphasis.

<sup>154</sup> Ward, *Anarchy in Action*, 23.

<sup>155</sup> Woodcock, *Godwin*, 80; Woodcock, *The Anarchist Reader*, 266.

<sup>156</sup> Woodcock, *Godwin*, 79–80.

shared this vision, calling in *Freedom* for anarchists to renounce their “romantic” attachments to bombs and barricades and embark on a “piece-meal, non-violent, insidious,” and ultimately “humane revolution.”<sup>19</sup> Both Read and Woodcock would contribute to the activities of the peace movement, as did other anarchists, notably Alex Comfort and Nicolas Walter, who had practical links with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Committee of 100.<sup>20</sup> For Woodcock, such activities reflected the truism that anarchism was the “logical end” of pacifism.<sup>21</sup>

For a movement defined by heterodoxy, the idea that anarchists should become Gandhian pacifists was, unsurprisingly, moot. Accompanying Read’s encouragement for anarchists to revisit their tradition was an editorial note observing that his position was “controversial.”<sup>22</sup> While Tony Gibson saw “a growing alignment” between anarchism and pacifism in these years, many anarchists remained unconvinced by Read’s assertion that “the absolute power of passive resistance” was the solution to the growing power of the modern state.<sup>23</sup> Responses to Read’s essay published in the correspondence page of the next several issues ranged from the convinced to the incredulous.<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, the debate occasioned by Read’s

<sup>19</sup> Herbert Read, “Anarchism: Past and Future,” *Freedom: Anarchist Fortnightly* 8/10 (1947), 2, 6, at 6.

<sup>20</sup> Sophie Scott-Brown, “Inventing Ordinary Anarchy in Cold War Britain,” *Modern Intellectual History* 20/4 (2023), 1251–72.

<sup>21</sup> Sophie Scott-Brown, “Acting Local, Thinking Global in Post-war British Anarchism,” *Global Intellectual History* (2022), DOI:10.1080/23801883.2022.2136100, 11; George Woodcock, “Anarchy Is the Logical End of Pacifist Thought,” *Peace Pledge Union Journal*, Dec. 1946, 7, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Read, “Anarchism,” 2.

<sup>23</sup> Tony Gibson, “Pacifism and Anarchism,” *Freedom*, 26 July 1947, 2; Herbert Read, “There Is Now No Other Way: An Appeal to Youth,” *Adelphi*, Oct.–Dec. 1945, 9–16, at 16.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Marletta, “Anarchism: Past and Present,” *Freedom*, 14 June 1947, 7; Jack Larkman, “Anarchism: Past and Future,” *Freedom*, 28 June 1947, 7; Alan Smith, “On Being an Anarchist in 1947,” *Freedom*, 28 June 1947, 2. J.

intervention revealed enduring divisions over the question of violence, contrasting attitudes that had always been present in the anarchist movement, but took on a fresh dimension in the context of nuclear war.<sup>25</sup> The *Freedom* editorial board reflected this dynamic. Issuing a majority response, they respectfully challenged Read and called for tactical pluralism, defending the power of violence to actuate change, while reminding readers that a commitment to mutual aid did not “exclude the idea of struggle.”<sup>26</sup>

These debates also had implications for anarchist responses to the new international conditions of the Cold War. In the days before representatives of the victorious powers met in London for the fifth Council of Foreign Ministers, *Freedom* anticipated the later judgment of historians that this would be a “dismal” event, as they suggested that now a “‘cold war’ [was] being waged between the two imperialist groups.”<sup>27</sup> This diagnosis echoed the essential argument of the *Freedom* group during the war itself, that despite the efforts of the Allies to position themselves as the defenders of liberty, naked political interest and statist expansionism were the central driving factors.<sup>28</sup> While the editors of *Freedom* insisted on the consistency of their line, other anarchists, such as Woodcock’s American friend Dwight Macdonald, argued that a “Third Camp indepen-

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Mc.D, “Anarchism: Past and Present,” *Freedom*, 14 June 1947, 7; J.S., “Anarchism: Past and Future,” *Freedom*, 28 June 1947, 7. A[lbert] M[eltzer], “Anarchism: Past and Future,” *Freedom*, 28 June 1947, 7; C[olin] W[ard], “Anarchism: Past and Future,” *Freedom*, 12 July 1947, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism* (Princeton, 2011), 256–77.

<sup>26</sup> N.A. “Anarchism: Past and Future: A Summing Up by the Editors,” *Freedom*, 9 Aug. 1947, 2. For a response see G[eorge] W[oodcock], “Anarchism: Past and Future: The Editorial Minority’s View,” *Freedom*, 23 Aug. 1947, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Anne Deighton, *The Impossible Peace: Britain, the Division of Germany and the Origins of the Cold War* (Oxford, 1990), 207; N.A. “The Cold War,” *Freedom: Anarchist Fortnightly* 8/24 (1947), 1.

<sup>28</sup> See Marie Louise Berneri, *Neither East nor West: Selected Writings, 1939–48* (London, 1988).

shift from a belief in the “rapid conversion of humanity” to his ideals, to an understanding that this could only proceed “by small and often imperceptible changes over a long period,” reveals two key characteristics of Woodcock’s own anarchism: its gradualism and its intellectualism.<sup>149</sup> Declaring, in 1962, that, “as a movement, anarchism has failed,” he observed that despite the best efforts of “inspiring” figures like “Malatesta and Louise Michel,” the revolution that anarchists had dreamed and fought for never appeared. Nevertheless, Woodcock held that the ideal of anarchism, embodied in the “incitement to return to a moral and natural view of society which we find in the writings of Godwin and Tolstoy, of Proudhon and Kropotkin,” was still vital in nurturing resistance to the “movement of world centralization ... by the impact of its truths on receptive minds.”<sup>150</sup>

Where Woodcock emphasized the principles underpinning Godwin’s educational commitments, Ward, accepting many of Woodcock’s insights on the idea of children’s self-realization, combined a discussion of Godwin’s educational principles with the practical applications of his ideas. He stressed the continuities between him and later progressive and radical educationalists, highlighting Godwin’s—and anarchism’s—continued relevance. In *Talking Schools*, Ward reflected on Godwin’s rejection of “solitary education at home” or in “large schools,” concluding that, had Godwin “lived 200 years later, he would be a supporter of the National Association for the Support of Small Schools.”<sup>151</sup> In *Anarchy in Action*, Ward argued that the “entirely different conception of the school” offered by radical thinkers, including Mikhail Bakunin, Everett Reimer, and Ivan Illich, had “already been envisaged by Godwin in 1797.”<sup>152</sup> In considering the practical challenges

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<sup>149</sup> Woodcock, *Godwin*, 125.

<sup>150</sup> Woodcock, *Anarchism*, 467. He had changed his mind by the time of the publication of the revised edition of the book in 1986.

<sup>151</sup> Ward, *Talking Schools*, 10–11.

<sup>152</sup> Ward, *Anarchy in Action*, 103.

ideas of his friend Herbert Read—stressed the importance of “the free development of consciousness and responsibility” through a pedagogical praxis devoid of a “system of dogma,” where nurturing “self-discovery” and a “voluntary love of learning” was achieved in an informal setting stressing artistic play.<sup>144</sup> In the end, however, Woodcock would distance himself from the project when “some doctrinaire” followers of the spiritual philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti “gained control.”<sup>145</sup> Despite the failure of the venture, the idea remained, for Godwin as for Woodcock, that nurturing minds “receptive to truth and capable of reason” would lead to the growth of adults “who would be prepared to live according to the laws of natural justice.”<sup>146</sup>

For Woodcock, Godwin’s emphasis on the education of children in the late 1790s also indicated a shift in his understanding of the temporality of political and social change. While *Political Justice* laid the foundations of a systematic political philosophy of anarchism, its revolutionary optimism was misplaced, not only because of the repressive apparatus of the British state in the 1790s, but also because Godwin had, in 1793, a mistaken view of the temporality of radical change. In Woodcock’s view, “he did not then realise how strongly the false ideas which have been implanted in childhood will stay in the minds of adult and even intelligent men and women.”<sup>147</sup> As much as this applied to Godwin, it also reflected Woodcock’s disillusionment with anarchists in the early postwar era who held on to a form of revolutionary optimism.<sup>148</sup> Woodcock’s description of Godwin’s

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<sup>144</sup> George Woodcock, “Wolf Lake School: Draft Prospectus: Fall 1976,” GWPQU, 11:15, 1–4, at 4, 1, 2.

<sup>145</sup> George Woodcock to Nancy Macdonald, 5 April 1977, GWPQU, 3:18; George Woodcock to Gillian Fleming, 28 Aug. 1976, GWP, 5:74.

<sup>146</sup> Woodcock, *Godwin*, 125.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>148</sup> Sureyyya Evren and Ruth Kinna, “George Woodcock: The Ghost Writer of Anarchism,” *Anarchist Studies* 23/1 (2015), 45–61.

dent of the warring sides and hostile to both” was a fantasy. In that light, the “imperfectly living, open society” was axiomatically preferable to the “perfectly dead, closed society” of the Soviet Union.<sup>29</sup>

Macdonald’s language echoed a developing response to the Cold War, formulated by liberal intellectuals as diverse as Hannah Arendt, Karl Popper, Jacob Talmon, Raymond Aron, Isaiah Berlin, and Judith Shklar, that contrasted the necessary openness and piecemealism of societies scarred by the experiences of total war, and cognizant of the “frailties of the human psyche.”<sup>30</sup> They responded to the crises of the mid-century with what Lewis Coser described as a “recoil from radical involvement,” and shared a common urge to turn to the history of ideas in order to reveal the causes behind the crimes of the twentieth century—especially the constrictions of ideological thinking and the historical determinism of Marxist pseudoscience, which was the intellectual heir of multifarious schemes of social engineering that promised, in Talmon’s words, a “final solution to the problem of social evil.”<sup>31</sup>

In this context, the anarchists around Freedom Press assumed a number of different stances but cohered in seeing anarchism as a surer guide to the problems of the present. Ward welcomed the challenge that this liberal critique posed to particular features of the historic anarchist tradition. Respond-

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<sup>29</sup> Dwight Macdonald, *The Root Is Man: Two Essays in Politics* (Alhambra, CA, 1953), 59, 60.

<sup>30</sup> George Woodcock, “‘The Root Is Man’: Part I: The Durable Polemic,” *Resistance* 12/1 (1954), 8–10. Jan-Werner Müller, “Fear and Freedom: On ‘Cold War Liberalism,’” *European Journal of Political Theory* 7/1 (2008), 45–64, at 58.

<sup>31</sup> Lewis Coser, “Millenarians, Totalitarians and Utopians,” *Dissent* 5/1 (1958), 67–72; J. L. Talmon, *Political Messianism: The Romantic Phase* (New York, 1960), 15. See also Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 1, *The Spell of Plato* (London, 1962); and Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 2, *The High Tide of Prophecy* (London, 1962). See also Iain Stewart, *Raymond Aron and Liberal Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 2020), 14–18, 120–66. Müller, “Fear and Freedom.”

ing directly to Talmon, Popper, and Berlin, he highlighted four themes in anarchism demanding further reflection: its perfectionism, which encouraged doctrinaire habits; its rejection of compromise, which informed a “religious fanaticism”; its “Messianic” vision of revolution; and its idealistic perception of human nature.<sup>32</sup> Cautiously conceding some terrain, Ward nevertheless insisted that the liberal solution of “the middle way in politics” was no answer: the desired “open society” could not exist alongside its natural enemy, the state.<sup>33</sup> Woodcock surrendered more ground to these challenges four years later, as he urged anarchists to reconnect with the “positive trends” of their tradition to nurture a “pluralist” society in the present, while admitting that the conception of anarchism as a mass movement “has been passed over by history.”<sup>34</sup>

Both Ward’s and Woodcock’s responses traveled some way with the liberal critique of utopian thinking epitomized in Berlin’s defence of plurality.<sup>35</sup> However, Woodcock, like Read, defended the utility of utopianism as an aspect of anarchist politics, judging it a vital corrective to the kind of “piecemeal” politics espoused by a thinker like Popper as “it gave direction to a man lost in the desert.”<sup>36</sup> This was the lesson that the anarchists around Freedom Press gleaned from Marie Louise Berneri’s posthumously published survey of the utopian

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<sup>32</sup> Colin Ward, “Anarchism and the ‘Open Society,’” *Freedom: The Anarchist Weekly*, 22 Nov. 1952, 2.

<sup>33</sup> Colin Ward, “Anarchism and the ‘Open Society,’” *Freedom: The Anarchist Weekly*, 29 Nov. 1952, 2, 4, at 4.

<sup>34</sup> George Woodcock, “Nurture the Positive Trends,” *Freedom: The Anarchist Weekly*, 27 Oct. 1956, 2, 4, at 2.

<sup>35</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (1959) (London, 2003), 12, 46. See also Joshua L. Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin’s Political Thought* (Oxford, 2013), 112–30.

<sup>36</sup> Herbert Read, *Anarchy and Order: Essays in Politics* (London, 1954), 21; Woodcock, “Nurture the Positive Trends,” 2; Popper, *Open Society*, 1: 164.

Godwin’s writings on education, and particularly *The Enquirer*, so important even today, perhaps more than ever today when education is being used to teach men submission rather than to teach them wisdom.<sup>141</sup>

Following this realization, Woodcock argued, Godwin developed a theory of education that embodied the “reciprocal relationship” between freedom and education and allowed for individual self-realization. This model had three key characteristics. First, it placed supreme value on the freedom of the child, especially the freedom to determine their course of studies and reading. Second, and consequently, it displaced the “customary relationship of children to their instructors.” Teachers were to follow the child’s lead; children should not be forced to study something, but rather persuaded to learn it by “the exhibition of some motive that will make [them] desire knowledge.” Lastly, *contra* Rousseau, Godwin emphasized book learning, which Woodcock relates approvingly, seeing Godwin’s arguments in favor of “the development of an early taste in reading” as a “universally valuable” insight.<sup>142</sup>

The bookishness of Godwin’s educational model and the “reciprocal relationship” between freedom and education are part of a conception of gradual social change that appealed to Woodcock. In 1976 an opportunity seemed to present itself to put these theoretical principles into practice. Writing to Nancy Macdonald, he informed her that he had become involved with a project to found “a free school on more or less anarchist principles on Vancouver Island.”<sup>143</sup> Woodcock’s draft prospectus for the venture—which drew on the anarchist educational

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<sup>141</sup> Woodcock, *Godwin*, 126.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 162–9. See also especially William Godwin’s essays “Of an Early Taste for Reading,” “Of the Communication of Knowledge,” and “Of Choice in Reading” in Godwin, *The Enquirer*.

<sup>143</sup> George Woodcock to Nancy Macdonald, 5 April 1976, GWPQU, 3:18.

Both Woodcock and Ward saw Godwin as a visionary anarchist educational thinker. The former considered the collection of Godwin's pedagogical essays in *The Enquirer* "the most remarkable and advanced treatise on education that had appeared by the end of the eighteenth century," adding that "it anticipates the best in modern educational theory, and is actually still in advance of educational practice."<sup>138</sup> Ward described Godwin as "the most impressive anarchist philosopher of education."<sup>139</sup> They also both saw education as central to the development of anarchist practices and to the extension of anarchist social relations, with both highlighting two central aspects of Godwin's educational thought: his early opposition to the establishment of state education (mostly in *Political Justice*) and his advocacy of what has come to be known as child-centered education, the idea that children should, to a significant extent, be free to choose their own educational path (mostly in *The Enquirer*).<sup>140</sup>

Despite these similarities, however, Woodcock and Ward framed Godwin differently, revealing both the varying emphases in their broadly similar approaches to anarchism and Godwin's pliability. Woodcock's Godwin was a pedagogical innovator, who clarified the role played by the practice of freedom in social and educational relationships. For Woodcock, Godwin "realised eventually" that

Education ... is the basis of freedom; but the proposition is equally true in the reverse direction—freedom is the basis of education. The realisation of this reciprocal relationship is what makes

<sup>138</sup> Woodcock, *William Godwin*, 132.

<sup>139</sup> Ward, *Talking Schools*, 10.

<sup>140</sup> This is reflected in Woodcock's selections from Godwin's writings in the "Liberating Education" section of George Woodcock, *The Anarchist Reader* (London, 1977). On child-centered education see Christine Dodington and Mary Hilton, *Child-Centred Education: Reviving the Creative Tradition* (Los Angeles, 2007).

tradition, *Journey through Utopia*.<sup>37</sup> Read praised Berneri for showing that the rationalist utopias of the "marxist [sic] socialist and ... monopoly capitalist" are the most "terrible" of all, but noted that this did not invalidate utopianism in general, as it remained the route to "new forms of life, new fields of consciousness."<sup>38</sup> Ward was more cautious but agreed with Read's essential interpretation, seeing in the book "an encouragement" for readers "to discover their own" utopias.<sup>39</sup>

As the realities of modern warfare and the Cold War encouraged anarchists to revisit their tactical assumptions, welfarism also posed fresh challenges to antistate politics. The "wartime vogue for economic planning" displaced older models of mutualist and decentralized socialism.<sup>40</sup> *War Commentary* reckoned with these developing changes as it responded to the Beveridge report in December 1942. Admitting that its "recommendations are in line with the general political and social development of modern times," it nevertheless criticized a number of its provisions, including its parsimonious unemployment benefit, which would be quickly outpaced by the "rapidly rising cost of living"; its ungenerous pension provision; and its vision of comprehensive health care, which looked good "on paper" but was destined to be "miserly." The overall assessment was that the envisioned welfare system would appeal to the middle classes by strengthening their resources, while incorporating them into the system through lucrative employment as it created a new cadre of civil servants. It would, however, leave the

<sup>37</sup> Marie Louise Berneri, *Journey through Utopia* (London, 1950).

<sup>38</sup> Herbert Read, "The Utopian Mentality," *Freedom: Anarchist Fortnightly* 11/26 (1950), 2.

<sup>39</sup> Colin Ward, "Book Review: Journey through Utopia," *Our Generation* 9/4 (1973), 78–80, at 80.

<sup>40</sup> Ben Jackson, *Equality and British Left: A Study in Progressive Political Thought, 1900–64* (Manchester, 2007), 223. Honeywell, *A British Anarchist Tradition*.

causes of poverty untouched, as it inaugurated a “standardisation and codification of permanent poverty.”<sup>41</sup>

Despite the assessment that the Beveridge plan was a palliative rather than a panacea, once the postwar Labour government began acting on these plans, anarchists, like other leftists, had to respond to them and to the ideological implications of the perceived affluence of the postwar world. This meant rethinking both the nature of capitalism and their political strategy. The emergent New Left challenged Labour’s captivation with building on the gains of the welfare state across the 1950s and 1960s to create a “property-owning democracy.”<sup>42</sup> Conceding ground to an anarchist analysis, its theorists criticized “the statist and bureaucratic tendencies of pre-existing Labour nationalization strategies,” while advocating more democratic, community-based forms of common ownership.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, some anarchists struggled to define a position congruent with the deeper theoretical history of the tradition. As Alan Smith noted in 1947, the reality was that the state and society were now “co-extensive,” and the “functions of arbitration and co-ordination” that the state increasingly assumed would have to endure, even in postrevolutionary society. To repudiate all state activities “lock, stock and barrel” was therefore “unsound ... and becoming unsounder.”<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Nicolas Walter reflected in 1960 on broader changes on the Marxist left, and proposed “a ‘revisionist’ approach” to anarchist strategy, meant to accommodate the existence

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<sup>41</sup> N.A., “Scavengers of Misery: Our View of the Beveridge Report,” *War Commentary* 4/4 (1942), 1–2, at 1, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Ben Jackson, “Revisionism Reconsidered: ‘Property-Owning Democracy’ and Egalitarian Strategy in Post-War Britain,” *Twentieth Century Britain* 16/4 (2005), 416–40, at 418.

<sup>43</sup> Madeleine Davis, “Arguing Affluence: New Left Contributions to the Socialist Debate, 1957–1963,” *Twentieth Century British History* 23/4 (2012), 496–528, at 527.

<sup>44</sup> Smith, “On Being an Anarchist,” 2.

with hostility.”<sup>134</sup> As a consequence, Ward argued, instead of raising the school leaving age—as per the 1944 Education Act—compulsory education should be scrapped altogether. To justify this claim, Ward mobilized Godwin. Through him, Ward argued that “study with desire is real activity: without desire it is but the semblance and mockery of activity. Let us not, in the eagerness of our haste to educate, forget all the ends of education,” suggesting that those ends had indeed been forgotten.<sup>135</sup>

Ward quoted from Godwin’s *Enquirer* selectively and strategically, as he had done with his article on the Peckham experiment. In the original essay, entitled “Of the Communication of Knowledge,” Godwin had stated that “the true object of juvenile education, is to provide, against the age of five and twenty, a mind well regulated, active, and prepared to learn”—something Ward might not have endorsed.<sup>136</sup> But such strategic quoting allowed him to invite his readers to challenge their assumptions about the purposes and institutions of education, while invoking Godwin grounded that challenge both historically and ideologically. For Ward, Godwin offered both a prescient critique of state education and the contours of a prefigurative model of small-scale, decentralized schooling, centered on individual children’s desires and interests, and with full respect for the child’s autonomy.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid. 216.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. 215.

<sup>136</sup> Godwin, *The Enquirer*, 115. Ward more frequently quoted Godwin’s other claim, that the “true object of education ... is the generation of happiness.” Colin Ward, *Talking Schools: Ten Lectures* (London, 1995), 11; Ward, *Influences*, 15. He may have first encountered this statement in Woodcock, *Godwin*, 126.

<sup>137</sup> Ward, *Anarchy in Action*, 100–3; Ward, *Talking Schools*, 10–13; Ward, *Influences*, Ch. 1; Ward, *Anarchism: A Very Short Introduction*, 51–4. John Ellerby [Colin Ward], “Reflections on Parents, Teachers and Schools,” *Anarchy* 43 (Sept. 1964), 275–87, at 277–8.



cock with examples of effective social critique and modes of change targeted at contemporary debates. One of the key areas for the development of such libertarian modes of social interaction was the education of children. Though the strengthening of state control over education in Britain can be traced back at least to the Elementary Education Act of 1870, the establishment of the postwar consensus led to increasing state oversight and regulation.<sup>130</sup> In this context, both Woodcock and Ward mobilized Godwin's educational writings to bolster their arguments in favor of free education, to challenge the idea that compulsory state education was a form of unmitigated social progress, and to present a gradualist path toward an anarchist society. By contrast, Meltzer considered the state's "educational system" to be a feature of the "Apparatus of Persuasion" constituting "an authoritarian society," and sidelined educational efforts to bring about social change.<sup>131</sup> At the center of his argument was class struggle, and "anarcho-syndicalist tactics": the formation of revolutionary unions able to instigate proletarian "mass action," on the understanding that "social changes for the whole of society can only come about through a change of the economy."<sup>132</sup>

In his 1965 article "A Modest Proposal for the Repeal of the Education Act," Ward argued that compulsory schooling and the national education system were failures, and that the conception of education underpinning them was flawed.<sup>133</sup> Compulsory national education entrenched social inequality while making "education into an obstacle race," which led "many children" to "react to education and all it stands for

<sup>130</sup> Richard Aldrich, Dennis Dean, and Peter Gordon, *Education and Policy in England in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1991); Brian Simon, *Education and the Social Order: 1940–1990* (London, 2000).

<sup>131</sup> Meltzer, *Anarchism*, 40.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>133</sup> Ward, "A Modest Proposal for the Repeal of the Education Act," *Anarchy* 53 (July 1965), 214–16, at 214.

and growth of the postwar state.<sup>45</sup> But for most anarchists this reassessment of the tradition's essential opposition to the state may have been a revision too far.<sup>46</sup>

Ward, in particular, labored to articulate a distinctively anarchist response to the challenges posed by the expansion of state power through its provision of welfare. His counterpoint was a revisionist reading of the history of social welfare and a political analysis of the tensions between, on the one hand, individual and community behaviour and, on the other, the totalizing logics of both the market and the (welfare) state.<sup>47</sup> In effect, he echoed the central premises of the critical appraisal of the Beveridge report in *War Commentary*. The welfare state was fundamentally inefficient, he argued, creating a bloated managerial class that replaced working-class traditions of decentralized mutual assistance with "top-heavy" centralization.<sup>48</sup> For Ward, this technocratic model also emerged from the prejudices of a middle class, employed in the bureaucracy, and characterized by its "undisguised contempt for the way ordinary people organised anything."<sup>49</sup> One of its broader effects was also, therefore, the reduction of space for the exercise of individual initiative, a process that corroded relationships between people, while eroding their capacity for self-direction.<sup>50</sup>

With the advent of the welfare state, and the possibilities for social mobility that its new institutions offered, it also appeared that the place of the working class in anarchism might change. A 1960 survey by *Freedom* offered a snapshot of the

<sup>45</sup> Nicolas Walter, "Anarchism: A 'Revisionist' Approach," *Freedom*, 2 Jan. 1960, 2.

<sup>46</sup> See Parker's rebuttal of Walter in S. E. Parker, "Revisionist Anarchism: a Comment," *Freedom*, 23 Jan. 1960, 2; and Walter's defence in Nicolas Walter, "Revisionist Anarchism: A Reply," *Freedom*, 30 Jan. 1960, 2.

<sup>47</sup> Colin Ward, *Social Policy: An Anarchist Response* (London, 2000).

<sup>48</sup> Colin Ward, *Anarchy in Action* (1973) (London, 1996), 15, 109, 14,

<sup>49</sup> Ward, *Social Policy*, 11.

<sup>50</sup> Ward, *Anarchy in Action*, 35, 10, 11.

class composition of its readership. It revealed that “only 15 per cent ... belonged to the traditional groupings of workers and peasants,” while 85 per cent of readers were classed as “white collar” workers, with the largest group consisting of “teachers and students, and there were many architects and doctors as well as people employed in the arts, sciences and journalism.”<sup>51</sup>

Anarchist thinkers met this development in different ways, based on their competing understandings of anarchist history, their assessment of the place of intellectual activity in the anarchist movement, and their understanding of who the agents of social change were.<sup>52</sup> Already in 1955, Ward had suggested that “a paper like *Freedom* tends to be read by people who have had the advantage of more formal education than the majority of manual workers.”<sup>53</sup> In his pseudonymous analysis of the *Freedom* survey in the pages of *Anarchy*, he went further. Instead of deploring the fact that “the next generation of anarchists will have a predominantly middle-class background,” he observed that this was partly the result of the reorganization of a society divided along class lines, after the development of the post-war state.<sup>54</sup> Following Paul Goodman, he suggested that the traditional model of class divisions might be unhelpful to understand what he saw as the new constituency for anarchism: the “independents,” who “do not properly belong to the system” but are not part of the exploited “poor.”<sup>55</sup> In this sense, Ward embraced the notion that anarchism might have departed from its traditional basis in the working class, but could resist the implication that anarchism was merely becoming a middle-class ideology.

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<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Franks, *Rebel Alliances*, 57.

<sup>52</sup> Scott-Brown, *Colin Ward*, pp. 129–32; Franks, *Rebel Alliances*, 58.

<sup>53</sup> Colin Ward, “What Is ‘Freedom’ For,” *Freedom*, 27 Aug. 1955, 2.

<sup>54</sup> Tristram Shandy [Colin Ward], “Who Will Be the Anarchists?,” *Anarchy* 12 (1962), 57–59, at 58.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

that anarchism should be conceived in movement, rather than intellectual, terms. Woodcock read Godwin as an exemplar of intellectual aloofness, furnishing a defence of the necessary independence of the truly critical thinker that supported Woodcock’s own increasingly fraught relationship with the British anarchist movement. At the same time, Godwin’s Englishness revealed what he described as an “English strain of libertarianism,” supporting a reading of British history where libertarianism was not an alien presence, but indigenous to its political thought, and worth reviving and foregrounding in the face of the growth of state authority.<sup>128</sup> Ward shared this sense of Godwin as a representative of an English anarchism, identifying him as the foundational thinker of the “liberal wing” of anarchism that he saw emerging in a process of convergent evolution with its Continental cousin, which was rooted in socialism.<sup>129</sup> But rather than a model of intellectual detachment, Ward’s Godwin was a pioneer of applied sociology. Recovering this reading of Godwin demonstrates the complexities of Ward’s self-description of his pragmatic anarchism. Ward’s politics were rooted in an analysis rather than a rejection of anarchism’s theoretical content, and his treatment of Godwin reflected the particularity of this reading.

## **Finding (historical) alternatives: Woodcock, Ward, and Godwin’s educational legacy**

Placing Godwin at the head of an alternative tradition of radical thinking opposed to both state socialism and the insurrectionist tendencies of anarchism provided Ward and Wood-

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<sup>128</sup> George Woodcock, “The Libertarian Virtues,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 April 1978, 477.

<sup>129</sup> Colin Ward, “Accidental Bed of an Anarchist,” *New Society*, 27 March 1980, 664–5, at 664.

they achieved between the practical and the philosophical.<sup>124</sup> Throughout the chapter, Ward wove together a narrative of Godwin's educational experiences both as a pupil and as a teacher, with an analysis of his key texts dealing with education and pedagogical practice: the *Account of the Seminary* (1783) and the collection of essays *The Enquirer* (1797). It is in these texts that Godwin's intellectual method was most congenial to Ward's. Unlike *Political Justice*, which, Godwin admitted, was primarily a work of deductive reasoning drawn from "one or two simple principles," *The Enquirer* was composed, Godwin claimed, through "an incessant recurrence to experiment and actual observation."<sup>125</sup> This inductive approach was not only compatible with Ward's; it also provided a broader intellectual model for teachers who, he argued, usually did not construct their own educational philosophies but rather mimicked those to which they had been subjected, in a process that tended to perpetuate Britain's hidebound class structures.<sup>126</sup> Beyond this model of practical and philosophical engagement, as we shall see in the next section, Ward further contended that because Godwin foregrounded an "empathy" that placed the happiness and "freedom of the child" at the center of education, his work was a foundation from which to assess the vicissitudes of British educational policy.<sup>127</sup>

For Meltzer, Woodcock, and Ward, a reading of Godwin was an important part of their political identity, but these readings constructed different Godwins pointing in subtly different directions. Meltzer read Godwin as standing at the head of a revolutionary tradition, but qualified his importance by arguing

<sup>124</sup> Ward, *Influences*, 11.

<sup>125</sup> William Godwin, *The Enquirer*, ed. Pamela Clemit, in Godwin, *Political and Philosophical Writings*, gen. ed. Mark Philp, vol. 5 (London, 1993), 73–289, at 77.

<sup>126</sup> Ward, *Influences*, 13.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 15, 46–7; Colin Ward, "Games Adults Watch: Review," *New Society*, 11 Nov. 1976, 316–17, at 316.

In contrast, class-struggle anarchists like Meltzer lamented the dwindling of working-class anarchism in the columns of *Freedom*. Judging the group "moribund," he blamed the prevalence of a pacifist bloc in the group, with their "lack of interest in class struggle and increasing fixation with academia."<sup>56</sup> Opposing the intellectual turn of the Freedom group, Meltzer echoed earlier critiques of *Freedom* from fellow anarchists who had dismissed the Freedom group as "middle-class faddists."<sup>57</sup> Class-struggle anarchists routinely condemned the pacifism preached by a number of thinkers associated with the group, judging it inherently contradictory, morally dubious, and antithetic to anarchist principles.<sup>58</sup> In a similar vein, the group's "quietist" politics was deemed a "militant liberalism," "trapped in an abstract pursuit of freedom" that overlooked class as the truly salient political issue; it was, as another commentator put it, "anarchism with the guts out."<sup>59</sup>

Woodcock and Ward were regarded as guilty purveyors of this "Liberal-Anarchism" and were charged with revising the history of anarchism to fit their perspective. As Meltzer and Christie's organ *Black Flag* noted, "the renegade Woodcock" advocated this attenuated politics through the construction of "historical myths" about the anarchist movement.<sup>60</sup> Such ac-

<sup>56</sup> Albert Meltzer, "Interpreting the Freedom Questionnaire: Analysis of an Analysis," *Freedom*, 12 March 1960, 2. Meltzer, *I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels*, 144, 126; Honeywell, *A British Anarchist Tradition*, 136.

<sup>57</sup> Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse*, 59.

<sup>58</sup> "Sectarian," "The Problems of an Anarchist Movement," *Black Flag: Anarchist Monthly* 2/3 (1971), n.p.

<sup>59</sup> N.A., "Anarchist Organisation," *Anarchist Black Flag* 2/1 (1971), 13–15, at 14; N.A., "Anarchist Squabbles," *Black Flag: The Anarchist Fortnightly*, 6 Aug. 1984, 6; N.A., "Question and Answer on Anarchism," *Black Flag: The Anarchist Fortnightly*, 14 July 1986, 2. See also Nicolas Walter's defence of the Freedom group in his response to "Anarchist Squabbles," IISH/CWP/ARCH03180/15.

<sup>60</sup> N.A., "Anarchy and Freedom," *Black Flag: The Anarchist Fortnightly*, 11 Feb. 1986, 6; Albert Meltzer, "The Nature of Nonviolent Fascism and the George Woodcock Myth," *Anarchy* 1/11 (1973), 28–32, at 28.

cusations were further developed in reviews of Woodcock's highly influential *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (1962). Marking the publication of a revised edition in 1986, Meltzer dedicated most of a scathing *Black Flag* supplement to what he called Woodcock's "school of falsification."<sup>61</sup> Ward and *Anarchy* were dismissed as similarly "revisionist," and he further "divided the activist movement from Freedom Press and its clique" of "Failed Mandarins."<sup>62</sup> While Woodcock thought the journal "the best of all English-language anarchist periodicals," Meltzer, unsurprisingly, saw it as a product of the kind of deviationism that Woodcock himself represented.<sup>63</sup> He accused the journal of "reinforcing the myth of a non-violent, bourgeois, sanitised 'anarchism'" that paved the way for the libertarian-right defence of capitalism.<sup>64</sup> The test here was action. As Meltzer complained, for both Ward and Woodcock, their understanding of activity went no further than writing "pedantic" historical articles, when what was needed was people who "were prepared to fight as well write."<sup>65</sup>

Ideological disagreement was encrusted with layers of mutual hostility, with the result that the invective leveled by each side tends to obscure and distort their competing theoretical perspectives. For Meltzer and *Black Flag*, Woodcock was a careerist who drew on the resources of the Freedom group for the "literary aggrandisement" that enabled his acceptance

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<sup>61</sup> Colin Ward, *Anarchism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2004), n.p.; Fetherling, *The Gentle Anarchist*, 105; Albert Meltzer, "Liars and Liberals. The Other Anarchism: The Woodcock-Sanson School of Falsification," *Black Flag*, supplement no. 3 (n.d. [1986]), 1-4, at 1, 2; Stuart Christie, "Review of Anarchism by George Woodcock" in Christie, *A Life for Anarchy*, 68-9, at 68, 69.

<sup>62</sup> Meltzer, *I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels*, 322, 177.

<sup>63</sup> George Woodcock, "Anarchy in Action: Book Review," *Our Generation* 10/4 (1975), 83-7, at 83.

<sup>64</sup> Meltzer, *I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels*, 322.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

chist applications," but it also drew on his sense of the model offered by Godwin.<sup>119</sup> Taken by the "stately 18th century prose" in which Godwin composed *Political Justice*, and impressed by his unbending commitment to elaborate "every point from first principles," Ward's real sense of Godwin's significance lay in the balance between the practical and philosophical importance of his work.<sup>120</sup> Two themes of consequence to Godwin, Woodcock, and Ward stand out here: decentralization and education. In two pieces on "regionalism" published in *Freedom* in late 1947, Woodcock placed Godwin at the head of a tradition of anarchist arguments in favor of decentralization and communal politics at the level of "parishes."<sup>121</sup> This unit of local political organization, which Godwin had indeed advocated, was revisited in Ward's 1952 article "The Parish Pump." Ward argues that local residents should take more interest in and have more control over local services, instead of letting municipal politics become "a silly miniature of national politics."<sup>122</sup> While Godwin is not directly referred to, both the language of the parish and Ward's general line of argument echoed his hopes for a future decentralized society, in which "political power is brought home to the citizens, and simplified into something of the nature of parish regulation."<sup>123</sup>

With regard to education, Ward dedicated a chapter of his 1991 book *Influences* to Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. Not only did he hold up the importance of their work as "educators," but he also reasserted his sense of the admirable poise

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<sup>119</sup> Ward, *Talking Anarchy*, 69.

<sup>120</sup> Ward, *Influences*, 26.

<sup>121</sup> George Woodcock, "Regionalism v. Nationalism," *Freedom*, 1 Nov. 1947, 7; Woodcock, "Regionalism: A Basis for a Free Society," *Freedom*, 15 Nov. 1947, 2. He revisited this point in Woodcock, *Godwin*, 71-3.

<sup>122</sup> Colin Ward, "The Parish Pump," *Freedom*, 24 May 1952, 3. We are grateful to Sophie Scott-Brown for bringing this point to our attention.

<sup>123</sup> Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, 610 [Bk. VI, Ch. 7]. On this aspect of Ward's thought see also Scott-Brown, *Colin Ward*, 115-18.

non-anarchists.<sup>113</sup> Like Woodcock, he focused less on millenarian revolutionary moments, and more on the historical and contemporary instances of the “choice” between libertarian and authoritarian solutions that “occurs every day and in every way.”<sup>114</sup> This was an attempt to “put anarchism back into the intellectual bloodstream, into the field of ideas which are taken seriously.”<sup>115</sup> One way of doing this was by highlighting the “topicality” of anarchism by offering “experimental verification of the constructive ideas of the ‘classical’ anarchist thinkers,” such as Godwin.<sup>116</sup> This strategy is perhaps best exemplified in the use of parallel quotations in Ward’s anarchist rereading of the experiments at the Peckham Health Centre after it closed in 1951. There, quotations from Godwin’s *Enquirer* appear under three thematic headings: “education,” “freedom in society,” and “no dogma, no training.”<sup>117</sup> By bringing the analytical power of anarchism and the practicality of its conclusions for everyday life to the fore, Ward, like Woodcock, hoped for the emergence of “the kind of political consciousness that can lead to useful changes in the world. A consciousness of the need not to change governments, but to by-pass them.”<sup>118</sup>

This vision inspired Ward’s key work, *Anarchy in Action* (1973), a book he later described as a “kind of manual of anar-

<sup>113</sup> On the importance of addressing non-anarchists see Colin Ward, “‘I think that’s a terrible thing to say!’ Elderly Anarchist Hack Tells All ...” in *100 Years of Freedom* (London, 1986), 62–3.

<sup>114</sup> Colin Ward, “The Unwritten Handbook” (1958), in Ward, *Autonomy*, 29–31, at 30; Pietro di Paola, “‘The Man Who Knows His Village’: Colin Ward and the Freedom Press,” in Levy, *Colin Ward: Life, Times and Thought*, 28–52.

<sup>115</sup> Scott-Brown, *Colin Ward*; Colin Ward and David Goodway, *Talking Anarchy* (Nottingham, 2003), 54, 35. Colin Ward, “A Last Look Round at the 50’s,” *Freedom*, 26 Dec. 1959, 1, 3, at 3.

<sup>116</sup> Ward, “What Is ‘Freedom’ For?”

<sup>117</sup> Colin Ward, “Anarchist Aspects of the Peckham Experiment,” *Freedom*, 11 August 1951, 2; for a broader discussion, see Scott-Brown, *Colin Ward*, 90–91.

<sup>118</sup> Colin Ward, “A Change in the Climate?,” *Freedom*, 5 Jan. 1957, 2.

“by the Establishment.”<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile, to Woodcock’s mind, Meltzer was a perpetually “hostile” presence, jealous that his interest in anarchist history posed a threat to Meltzer’s own spurious “authority” on the topic.<sup>67</sup> While a proud autodidact himself, Woodcock’s inclination to “be rather vain” compounded his condescending sense that Meltzer was a “pompous young man of undefined education.”<sup>68</sup> Privately, Woodcock deemed Meltzer a doctrinaire “bigot,” and suggested that their true animus lay in the fact that he had exposed as a “total fraud” his “pose of ‘working-class writer.’”<sup>69</sup> Ward was sensitive to accusations of liberalism and demanded not to be associated with “holy liberals.”<sup>70</sup> Defending the version of anarchist outreach that he and Woodcock advocated, Ward accused his critics of considering that their “real sin ... is to have some kind of reputation outside the anarchist world (or subculture).”<sup>71</sup> He also derided the posthumous edition of Meltzer’s *Anarchism: For and Against* (1996) as reading “like a parody of revolutionary tracts of an earlier generation.” Unlike Woodcock’s *Anarchism*, which Ward thought “may probably have won more adherents to anarchism than any other postwar book,” he concluded that Meltzer’s, because of its outdated political idiom, could not speak “to the people we

<sup>66</sup> N.A., “Anarchy and Freedom,” *Black Flag: The Anarchist Fortnightly*, 11 Feb. 1986, 6; Meltzer, “Nonviolent Fascism,” *Anarchy* 1/11 (1973), 28–32, at 28.

<sup>67</sup> George Woodcock, *Letter to the Past: An Autobiography* (Toronto, 1982), 246.

<sup>68</sup> Nicolas Walter, “George Woodcock (1912–1995),” *Freedom*, 25 Jan. 1995, 5; Woodcock, *Letter to the Past*, 245.

<sup>69</sup> George Woodcock to Mary Canipa, 31 Oct. 1975, George Woodcock Papers, Queen’s University, ON (hereafter GWP), 5:74; George Woodcock to Emile Capouya: 20 Feb. 1974, GWP, 5:74.

<sup>70</sup> Colin Ward to Arthur Moyses, 8 May 1989, IISH/CWP/ARCH03180/15. Ward refers here to Moyses’s article “Holy Liberals and Housing,” published in *Freedom*, May 1989, 6.

<sup>71</sup> Colin Ward to George Woodcock, 10 Jan. 1990, IISH/CWP/ARCH03180/15.

have any chance of attracting to anarchist ideas in the early 21st century.”<sup>72</sup>

Though embittered by personal conflict, these competing conceptions of anarchism relate to disagreements about the key problem of trying to find “an audience for anarchism” in postwar Britain.<sup>73</sup> Despite their disagreements, however, British anarchists cohered in judging it necessary to root anarchism in British soil. A parallel exists here with the coterminous effort of the Communist Party of Great Britain to rethink Marxism for British conditions, a cause exemplified in its programme *The British Road to Socialism* (1951), which endeavoured to tap into the patriotism of the “people’s war” and shifted strategic attention away from revolution and towards “constitutional means.”<sup>74</sup>

One of the clearest indications of the effort to discern anarchist roots in British intellectual history was the rediscovery of Godwin, who enjoyed a revival in postwar anarchist circles. Woodcock’s biography of Godwin appeared in 1946, and he had already published selections from *Political Justice* during the war. In 1953, André Prudhommeaux and Hem Day dedicated the first issue of their Franco-Belgian periodical *Les cahiers pensée et action* to Godwin, leading with an article by Woodcock.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ward, copy of “The Anarchist Case, Propagated,” a “review article sent for *Anarchist Studies*” in which he reviews Howard Ehrlich, *Reinventing Anarchy, Again* (Edinburgh, 1996); Albert Meltzer, *Anarchism: Arguments For and Against* (1981) (Edinburgh, 1996); and Brian Morris, *Ecology and Anarchism* (London, 1996). International Institute for Social History, Colin Ward Papers, 150.

<sup>73</sup> Carissa Honeywell, “Paul Goodman: Finding an Audience for Anarchism in Twentieth-Century America,” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 15/2 (2011), 1–33.

<sup>74</sup> Keith Laybourn, *Marxism in Britain: Dissent, Decline and Re-emergence, 1945–c.2000* (Oxford, 2006), 37. See also James Eaden and David Renton, *The Communist Party of Great Britain since 1920* (Basingstoke, 2002), 116–17.

<sup>75</sup> George Woodcock, “L’oeuvre méconnue,” *Les cahiers pensée et action* 1 (1953), 1–7.

fore of a postwar pluralist British society some of the historical “positive trends” that he wanted to see “nurture[d].”<sup>107</sup>

This was also an objective of one of the readers of Woodcock’s *Godwin*: Colin Ward.<sup>108</sup> He wrote later of his “excitement” at the book’s appearance in 1946, as it broke the conspiracy of silence that had enveloped the eighteenth-century philosopher.<sup>109</sup> Just as a reading of *Godwin* was an important component of Woodcock’s developing political identity, *Godwin* would play a parallel role for Ward.<sup>110</sup> His perception of *Godwin* became a component of what one scholar has described as the “Englishness” of Ward’s intellectual vision, which, notwithstanding the inherent cosmopolitanism of the anarchist movement, encompassed a broad eschewal of “theory” in favor of empiricism in a manner that bore the imprint of the critique of millenarian political thinking popularized by Cold War liberals.<sup>111</sup> As has been observed, the “pragmatist” Ward’s approach to the question of theory was influenced by a sense of the challenges that grand theoretical projects posed to the pluralism notionally privileged by anarchism.<sup>112</sup>

Ward’s stance, then, did not amount to a repudiation of anarchism’s theoretical contributions and intellectual history, but instead pointed to an effort to revisit them to renew the ideology’s relevance, and to exhibit this pertinence to

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<sup>107</sup> Woodcock, “Nurture the Positive Trends.”

<sup>108</sup> Colin Ward, “Nurture the Positive Trends,” *Resurgence* 156 (1993), 45–6.

<sup>109</sup> Colin Ward, *Influences: Voices of Cultural Dissent* (Bideford, 1991), 15.

<sup>110</sup> Marshall, “Colin Ward: Sower of Anarchist Ideas,” 20, 23, for instance, connects Ward to Godwin regarding the means of reform.

<sup>111</sup> Levy, “Introduction: Colin Ward,” 11. See also Nicolas Walter’s comments on Ward’s social vision in Nicolas Walter, “They Don’t Want to Do It: Review,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 Jan. 1996, 27.

<sup>112</sup> Damian F. White and Chris Wilbert, “Notes,” in Colin Ward, *Autonomy, Solidarity, Possibility: The Colin Ward Reader*, ed. White and Wilbert (Chico, CA), 321–37, at 325 n. 57.

mesticating the radical ideas of anarchism for the British public, he thus showed that they were not just the preserve of “intemperate Russians and Latins.”<sup>102</sup> The potential for difference had roots even in conservative Britain, and while Godwin may have died in obscurity, his anarchism lived on. Woodcock traced Godwinian values through to Robert Owen and the cooperative movement, showing that anarchism found a home in Britain’s developing labor movement.<sup>103</sup> Anarchist tendencies came into conflict with Jacobinical ones, which Woodcock perceived in Chartism’s fixation on a narrow “change of political institutions.” This was a problematic reading of Chartism given its theoretical breadth and Godwin’s own significance to it, but it supported Woodcock’s thesis concerning the institutionalization of socialism across the nineteenth century and its monomania for “ideas of a socialist state.”<sup>104</sup> Seeing Jacobin ideas of state capture and centralization becoming a lodestar, he then broadened this connection by arguing that not only the communists and parliamentary socialists, but also “the Fascists and Nazis,” could trace their conception of the state back to the French Revolution.<sup>105</sup> This was not a convincing assessment of Godwin’s position in the history of British socialism.<sup>106</sup> However, it had ideological and rhetorical power in the postwar context. Against the promises of communist nationalization and those of the social liberal state of the Beveridge report, it offered a distinctively British view of the possibilities for social change grounded in the circulation of ideas and the enactment of alternative practices. Woodcock thus brought back to the

<sup>102</sup> Woodcock, *Letter to the Past*, 298.

<sup>103</sup> Woodcock, *Godwin*, 250, 253, 249.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 252. On Godwin and Chartism see Tom Scriven, *Popular Virtue: Continuity and Change in Radical Moral Politics, 1820–70* (Manchester, 2017), 92–5.

<sup>105</sup> Woodcock, *Godwin*, 252.

<sup>106</sup> See the contemporary criticisms of this reading in “The Fallen Philosophy: George Woodcock: William Godwin,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 Feb. 1947, 2; D. S. Savage to George Woodcock, 10 March 1947, GWP, 2:36.

In the decades that followed, writers such as Woodcock, Ward, and Peter Marshall would contribute to sustaining interest in Godwin’s reformist anarchist radicalism.<sup>76</sup>

The key elements of Godwin’s thought that offered resources in such a context include his individualist, pacifist, and gradualist but thoroughgoing approach to social change; his emphasis on reason, deliberation, education, and the circulation of knowledge; and his commitment to decentralization and experimentation. Against a millenarian, class-based view of violent revolution, in *Political Justice* Godwin argued in favor of “gradual, but uninterrupted,” individual-driven social change.<sup>77</sup> Such change would be carried out by acting inside existing society toward the utopian horizon of the “true euthanasia of government,”<sup>78</sup> imagined as the advent of a propertyless society based on the voluntary cooperation of individuals. Collective decisions and regulations would be made on an ad hoc basis, at the level of the “small parish,” which, “upon extraordinary occasions,” may band together as a “confederacy of lesser republics.”<sup>79</sup> For Godwin, more than the struggle of the working classes, it was the “conviction of the understanding” of the individual that was essential to bring about such social change.<sup>80</sup> This relied on the unrestricted ability of individuals to exercise their reason, enquire, communicate the results of their enquiries to the greatest

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, Peter Marshall, *William Godwin* (New Haven, 1984); and his selection of the *Anarchist Writings of William Godwin*, ed. Peter Marshall (London, 1986). Marshall ascribed his interest in Godwin to reading Woodcock’s biography in 1971 (*ibid.*, 7), and recalled discussing Godwin with Ward in “the early 1970s.” Cf. Marshall, “Colin Ward: Sower of Anarchist Ideas,” 20.

<sup>77</sup> William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (Harmondsworth, 1976), 250 [Bk. III, Ch. 7].

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 610–11 [Bk. VI, Ch. 7], see also Bk. V, Ch. 22.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251 [Bk. III, Ch. 7].

number, and experiment.<sup>81</sup> As a consequence, education was a key theme for Godwin and, having criticized the prospect of state education in *Political Justice*, he explored different antiauthoritarian approaches to the education of children in his 1797 collection of essays, *The Enquirer*.<sup>82</sup> In their attempts to revitalize British anarchism, Woodcock, Ward, and Meltzer all engaged with Godwin as they sought to defend and bring light to the libertarian strand of historical socialism. But they did so with distinct political objectives in mind.

## Models: Godwin as intellectual and anarchist

For both sides of the split, mobilizing the resources of anarchist theory and history was essential in establishing the legitimacy of their politics. For Meltzer, privileging an anarchism that emphasized concerted proletarian action as the *sine qua non* of the anarchist identity shaped his perception of anarchism's history. Pointedly using the term "precursors" to describe Godwin, Proudhon, and, unusually, Hegel, he argued that this designation reflected the fact that it was anachronistic to discuss anarchism before the mid-nineteenth century, and that these figures could not legitimately be thought of as the founders of anarchism, as "none of them engaged in Anarchist activity or struggle."<sup>83</sup> Proceeding to question the idea of anarchist "theory" entirely, he insisted that anarchism had been "given body" by thinkers such as Kropotkin, Errico Malatesta, and Luigi Galleani, but that "there were never theoreticians of

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<sup>81</sup> This follows from Godwin's emphasis on the "right of private judgment" (cf. *ibid.*, Bk. II, Ch. 6). For the link he highlights between social progress and the progress of truth, see for instance *ibid.*, 302–3 [Bk. IV, Ch. 5].

<sup>82</sup> For Godwin's critique of state education, see *ibid.*, Bk. VI, Ch. 8.

<sup>83</sup> Meltzer, *Anarchism*, 12.

of the London Corresponding Society.<sup>98</sup> The radicals did not take kindly to this and accused Godwin of betraying the cause. In Woodcock's favorable interpretation, the opprobrium that Godwin faced from the left for criticizing Jacobinical methods and privileging intellectual persuasion was "an ironical and disgraceful fact," which left "the greatest English radical philosopher" at the mercy of "the Government hacks" who attacked him in the late 1790s.<sup>99</sup> Godwin's principles were correct, but he stood on the losing side of an argument between libertarian and authoritarian politics on the left. The political commitment to centralization on a Jacobinical model captured the minds of subsequent generations of political activists, evinced in the rise of the "Blanquist conspiratorial societies and, later, the organised Marxist parties."<sup>100</sup>

Godwin not only helped Woodcock reassess his relationship with the anarchist movement, but also allowed him to identify an enduring "English ... libertarian tradition" that survived despite the political successes of authoritarianism.<sup>101</sup> Do-

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<sup>98</sup> William Godwin, "Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr Pitt's Bills, concerning treasonable and seditious practices, and unlawful assemblies" [1795], in *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, vol. 2 (London, 1993), 121–62.

<sup>99</sup> George Woodcock, *William Godwin: A Biographical Study* (London, 1946), 113. On the debate following Godwin's "Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr Pitt's Bills" see Mark Philp, "Godwin, Thelwall, and the Means of Progress," in Robert Maniquis and Victoria Myers, eds., *Godwinian Moments from the Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Toronto, 2011), 59–82; and Jon Mee, "The Press and Danger of the Crowd: Godwin, Thelwall, and the Counter-public Sphere," in *ibid.*, 83–102; John-Erik Hansson, "The Genre of Radical Thought and the Practices of Equality," *History of European Ideas* 43/7 (2017), 776–90, at 786–7. This debate also had an afterlife in relation to anarchism in the pages of the *American Political Science Review* (APSR) in the early 1970s: Isaac Kramnick, "On Anarchism and the Real World: William Godwin and Radical England," *APSR* 66/1 (1972), 114–28; John P. Clark, "On Anarchism in an Unreal World: Kramnick's View of Godwin and the Anarchists," *APSR* 69/1 (1973), 162–7.

<sup>100</sup> Woodcock, "The Writer and Politics," 7.

<sup>101</sup> Woodcock, *Godwin*, 248.



But this position also contained an implicit critique of the kind of politics offered by Meltzer, which Woodcock thought similarly inhibited intellectual freedom. As he wrote, anarchist groups, “when they have become highly organised movements concerned mainly with the tactics of struggle and propaganda of generalisations, symbols, and slogans,” posed a threat to the writer’s independence. To “write obediently” in this manner was a guarantee of failure, and Woodcock held up Godwin as a model worthy of emulation.<sup>96</sup> Rather than Meltzer’s precursor of revolutionary anarchism, Woodcock’s Godwin embodied the moral strength of the truly dissident intellectual. Seeing Godwin’s era as one of ideological rigidification, as the “authoritarian and dogmatic character” of Jacobinism captured radical politics, Godwin’s insight was recognizing the importance of disengagement:

Godwin, realising this trend, kept aloof from the more highly organised political groups. He worked for social change as an individual co-operating with other individuals ... On critical occasions he himself willingly co-operated with other radicals ... but he held that such alliances should be temporary and should not be allowed to harden into associations with permanent codes determining the ideological beliefs which each of their members should hold.<sup>97</sup>

For Woodcock, the key event in Godwin’s life illustrating his attachment to intellectual independence also led to his downfall. In 1795, Godwin published an infamous anonymous pamphlet, in which he criticized both the British government’s curtailing of the freedoms of speech and assembly, and the actions of the radical associations of the time, especially those

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 6, 7.

Anarchism as such.”<sup>84</sup> Anarchism may have produced “theoreticians who discussed aspects of its philosophy,” but to concentrate on them missed the fact that anarchism was “a creed that has been worked out in action rather than as the putting into practice of an intellectual idea.”<sup>85</sup> One problem for the popular understanding of anarchism was that this focus on the intellectual canalized the writing of anarchist history in ways that reproduced class prejudices. “Very often,” he wrote, “a bourgeois writer comes along and writes down what has already been worked out in practice by workers and peasants,” and, thus consecrated as a “leader,” is treated by subsequent historians as proving that “the working class relies on bourgeois leadership.”<sup>86</sup>

For all the invective that Meltzer leveled at purveyors of “academic pedantry,” he did, nevertheless, offer a lineage of anarchist intellectual development.<sup>87</sup> Godwin was central to this story. Describing him as the “Father of the Stateless Society movement,” he saw three strands emanating from him, two deeply pernicious, one positive and aligned to his own politics. One of these he deemed “classic American Individualism,” which included figures like Henry David Thoreau and simultaneously informed the pacifism of Gandhi and Tolstoy and pro-capitalist libertarianism. The second strand encompassed “simple liberalism” and “militant liberalism,” whose proponents “convince themselves that they are the real Anarchists” and do great “damage” to the broader movement as a result.<sup>88</sup> While presenting the pacifist and liberal wings of anarchism as distinct tendencies, in reality Meltzer ran them together, dismissing both as heterodox, contradictory,

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>87</sup> Stuart Christie and Albert Meltzer, *The Floodgates of Anarchy* (London, 1972), 20; Meltzer, *Anarchism*, 13.

<sup>88</sup> Meltzer, *Anarchism*, 13.

and damaging perversions of anarchism. Returning to his emphasis on action, he deemed this “phoney” pacifist–anarchist fusion “authoritarian” for its inability to countenance decisive action, but also for its emphasis on “moral persuasion,” which legitimized a self-appointed elite “who keep everyone else in check.”<sup>89</sup> Here, a lack of class analysis was again key. Unable to “comprehend the class struggle” and committed to the politics of moral persuasion, anarchist–pacifists were left with the impotent ambition that the rich may willingly “give up their possessions.”<sup>90</sup> If these two strands were a deviation from the true spirit of anarchism, Meltzer also saw Godwin as inspiring a line of “Revolutionary Anarchists” that culminated in his own politics. However, returning to his thesis that historians tended to miss the truly important activity of working-class activists, Meltzer argued that Godwin’s idea of the “Stateless Society” was really popularized by Ambrose Caston Cuddon, an associate of the American individualist Josiah Warren and Welsh socialist Robert Owen.<sup>91</sup>

Meltzer’s history of anarchism was practically and theoretically underdeveloped. Delineating anarchism’s intellectual development was not a strategic priority given his emphasis on action, and indeed this very lack of attention reflected the principles he thought essential to the tradition: navel-gazing histories did little to advance the cause of the working class. Yet he clearly did think about this history, and while he worked to write this history in a way that recognized the work of anarchism’s “precursors” without affording them a privileged status, the distinction between those that gave it “body” and those who defined its principles in day-to-day

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>90</sup> Meltzer and Christie, *The Floodgates of Anarchy*, 60.

<sup>91</sup> Meltzer, *Anarchism*, 14. For more on Cuddon see Christopher Draper, “The First English Anarchist?”, at [www.katesharpleylibrary.net/89336n](http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/89336n) (accessed 10 Aug. 2022).

struggle was tenuous.<sup>92</sup> Godwin is a case in point. While Meltzer positioned him at the apex of the tradition, his exact influence remained vague. At the same time, highlighting the comparatively unknown Cuddon, with little explanation or exploration, is a clear attempt to return the argument to Meltzer’s favored position that anarchism’s development should not be thought of in theoretical terms alone.

Woodcock also positioned Godwin at the head of the anarchist tradition but did so to reach a radically different assessment of anarchism. While Meltzer’s emphasis on action made ruminations on its history secondary, Woodcock’s understanding of anarchism led him to place much greater emphasis on its intellectual history. He made the spirit of his reading clear in his essay “The Writer and Politics,” which appeared shortly before his biography of Godwin. Here Woodcock reflected on the necessity of the politically engaged writer striking a balance between intellectual independence and the duty of “eliminat[ing] some of the evils” inflicted on humanity by the present “structure of society.”<sup>93</sup> Where in the past it may have been possible for a writer to avoid confronting social issues, he argued that the frenetic politics of the twentieth century made this impossible. Yet Woodcock saw an “inevitable disillusionment” emerging in literary circles given the patent inadequacy of the model provided by the Soviet Union. With its “palpable dishonesty and bad faith,” evidenced in the absurdities of the Popular Front and its betrayal of the Spanish Revolution, many dissident intellectuals were left searching for a resting place.<sup>94</sup>

Woodcock’s key point was that anarchism offered a natural stance for the truly critical intellectual: “subvert[ing] a corrupt society” as an “agitator, an anarchist, an incendiary.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Meltzer, *Anarchism*, 17.

<sup>93</sup> George Woodcock, “The Writer and Politics,” *Now* 4 (n.d. [1944]), 1–11, at 1.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 2, 3.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 5.