Matthew Wormer
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The Utility Debate and the Birth of Liberal Political Economy in Britain

Beginning in the 1780s, utility became a central concept in discussions of political and economic reform in Britain.[1] A raft of publications argued that the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number – the maximization of utility – must form the starting point for any theory of proper governance. Yet definitions of utility remained supple and unfixed, with numerous authors deploying conflicting conceptions of the term.[2] Focusing on the parallel lives of Jeremy Bentham and William Godwin, the two most influential of these early utilitarian writers, this paper traces the fate of their competing notions of utility during the 1790s and early 1800s. Specifically, it demonstrates the close relationship between Godwin's conception of utility and that developed by Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, both of which placed utility in a relational theory of human psychology emphasizing the imaginative faculties of the human mind.[3] Bentham, on the other hand, understood utility as a calculable function derivable from the predictable actions of self-interested, atomized individuals, radically diverging from both Smith and Godwin in proposing a "felicific calculus" which would allow for the mathematical calculation of human pleasure and pain.[4] Extracting utility from the psychological framework proposed by Smith and Godwin, Bentham instead placed it within a purely material context, dismissing sympathy and antipathy as mere "sources of irrational exercises of the will" and

[1] Utility first appears as a key political concept in the writings of David Hume, but it is in the 1780s that thinkers from a number of traditions began a broader discussion of the term. See Frederick Rosen, *Classical Utilitarianism from Hume to Mill* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003); Michael B. Gill, *The British Moralists on Human Nature and the Birth of Secular Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[2] The major examples are William Paley, *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002; first published 1785); Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, in *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham*, J.H. Burns and H.L.A. Hart, eds. (London: The Athlone Press, 1970; first published 1789) and William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, vol. 3 of *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, Mark Philp, ed. (London: William Pickering, 1993; first published 1793). Bentham traced his idea of utility to Joseph Priestley's *An Essay on the First Principles of Government* (London: Printed for James Williams, 1768), although Priestley does not develop a thorough-going theory recognizable as "utilitarian." See Margaret Canovan, "The Un-Benthamite Utilitarianism of Joseph Priestley," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45, no. 3 (1984): 435–50.

[3] For Smith's account, see *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, part IV., "Of Utility," pp. 179 – 193.

[4] Smith's objections to the mathematical modeling of human behavior are well known. See his comments on the field of political arithmetic in the *Wealth of Nations*, vol. ii, 42. See also Adam Smith to George Chalmers, 10 November 1785, in *The Correspondence of Adam Smith*, Ernest Campbell Mossner and Ian Simpson Ross, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 288. For the felicific calculus see Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ch. IV.

imagination as merely "the source of irrational exercises of the understanding."[5] It is here, rather than in Smith, that the outlines of an identifiable *homo economicus* come into view.[6]

Understanding the process by which Bentham's unusual conception of utility became embedded in the emerging discipline of political economy requires an approach to the history of ideas concerned as much with political contingencies and institutional constraints as with readings of particular texts.[7] Amidst a concerted campaign against republican subversion in Britain, radicals such as Bentham and Godwin had to navigate the active threat of political persecution by the authorities while pursuing their ambitions for societal reform. Here, their different conceptions of utility were crucial. Bentham, preoccupied with utility as an end achievable through scientific legislation and administrative efficiencies, and intensely hostile to doctrines of natural rights, could present his radical philosophy as a means of depoliticizing controversial issues, isolating economic problems as purely technical questions concerned with the facilitation of material development.[8] Godwin, attached to a holistic conception of utility embedded in the psychological faculties of interrelated human beings, instead took up the cause of economic justice as a pressing political issue, riding the wave of post-1789 Revolutionary optimism only to crash upon the rocks of press censorship and political persecution.[9] The displacement of Smith's psychologically rich, non-essentialist conception of utility by Bentham's reductive materialism thus points to core tensions within liberalism itself, a liberalism deeply shaped by the political turmoil of the Napoleonic era, which imprinted a fundamentally anti-democratic approach to human subjectivity upon the DNA of liberal political economy. The

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[5] Jeremy Bentham to Étienne Dumont, 17 May 1802, in *The Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, 11 vols., J.R. Dinwiddy, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 7:34.

[6] All the more remarkable, then, is the almost complete lack of attention paid to Bentham in the scholarship on political economy after Adam Smith. The sharp break in attitudes toward economics after 1789, and Bentham's centrality to this shift, has not, however, gone entirely unrecognized. See J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 50.

[7] On the necessity of such an approach see Pierre Rosanvallon, "Towards a Philosophical History of the Political" in *The History of Political Thought in National Context*, eds. Dario Castiglione and Iain Hampshire-Monk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). The debate over "context" in the practice of intellectual history is a vast one, with the writings of Quentin Skinner of particular salience here. See Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Vol. 1: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Too often among intellectual historians, "context" beyond the texts becomes simply the backdrop for a particular interpretation, rather than a reality actively shaping the production and reception of ideas.

[8] Bentham's absolute rejection of the concept of rights as a foundation for political action was evident from his very first political writings. His first publication, written with John Lind and solicited by the British government, famously attacked the American colonists' declaration of independence from Britain as "nonsense upon stilts." See the essay appended to John Lind and Jeremy Bentham, *An Answer to the Declaration of the American Congress.*, 6th ed. (Aberdeen: Printed for J. Boyle, 1777), 119 – 132.

[9] For a full treatment of Godwin's political marginalization in the 1790s, see Kenneth R. Johnston, *Unusual Suspects: Pitt's Reign of Alarm and the Lost Generation of the 1790s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), ch. 2.

association of liberalism with representative institutions thus occludes the key opposition between its economic assumptions and its ostensible political commitments, an opposition which emerged directly from the particular politics of anti-Revolutionary Britain.

The Utilitarian Moment

When Adam Smith first takes up the question of utility in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he embeds it immediately within a complex psychological context. Describing the dynamic relationship between the "conveniency" of an object and its perceived aesthetic value, he gives the example of a watch, a device designed to facilitate punctuality and precision, a function so prized that, if it "falls behind above two minutes in a day, is despised by one curious in watches."[10] Yet Smith emphasizes not the utility of the watch for keeping our engagements but rather the ways in which we lose sight of that utility in favor of the intrinsic beauty of its mechanism, going so far as to trade in a slightly faulty watch for a far more expensive one of only marginally greater convenience. The aesthetic experience of utility quickly overwhelms its practical purpose.[11] Indeed, as Smith wryly notes, the owner of a fine watch may in practice "not always be found either more scrupulously punctual than other men, or more anxiously concerned upon any other account to know precisely what time of day it was." Irrationally, utility loses its connection to convenience and instead becomes valued as a kind of beauty. Smith leaves us with the image of people so obsessed with the aesthetic perfection of useful devices that they "ruin themselves by laying out money on trinkets of frivolous utility," walking about "loaded with baubles… of which the whole utility is certainly not worth the fatigue of bearing the burden."[12]

Utility thus becomes, for Smith, not a material quantity one might measure and model but a species of irrational passion, in which the apparent usefulness of an object in producing a particular convenience leads to an irrational fetishization of the object itself. It is a sentiment rather than a quantity. It is from here that he enters into a discussion of economic life. He describes a "poor man's son" who, comparing his life to that of the rich, comes to despise his own condition, and aspires to obtain their conveniences and pleasures. He imagines himself living in the fine houses of the wealthy,

[10] He owes much of his reading of the relationship between utility and beauty to David Hume, who explores the topic at length in both the *Treatise of Human Nature* and the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*. Smith sees his principal contribution as delineating the irrational effects produced by utility's perceived aesthetic value.

[11] Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, IV, ch. i., 179 – 180: "that this fitness, this happy contrivance of any production of art, should often be more valued, than the very end for which it was intended; and that the exact adjustment of the means for attaining any conveniency or pleasure, should be frequently more regarded, than that very conveniency or pleasure, in the attainment of which their whole merit would seem to consist, has not, so far as I know, been yet taken notice of by any body."

[12] *Ibid.,* 180.

being "carried about in machines" and with a "numerous retinue of servants." "Enchanted with the distant idea of this felicity," he becomes consumed with ambition, and "with the most unrelenting industry he labours night and day to acquire talents superior to all his competitors." Far from relishing his success at the end of his days, however, the poor man's son instead discovers that he has merely "sacrificed a real tranquility that [was] at all times in his power" for the false dream of an imagined utility, and dies in a condition "in no respect preferable to that humble security and contentment which he had abandoned" for the luxuries of the rich.[13] In the end, "wealth and greatness are mere trinkets of frivolous utility," and the boy who may have spent his days "[sunning] himself by the side of the highway" instead dies "wasted with toil and diseases, his mind galled and ruffled by the memory of a thousand injuries and disappointments."[14]

What to make of this curious parable? If read simply as a moralizing diatribe against the false promise of material wealth, it seems ill-fitted to Adam Smith, theorist of capitalism.[15] Yet it is in this very chapter that the image of an invisible hand first appears.[16] In Smith's account, our economic activities occur within a complex circuitry of psychological desire and aversion. Our imaginative faculties compel us to pursue ends which quickly spiral beyond their logical limit, and it is "this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind," maintaining that "oeconomy of greatness" which supplies the wealthy with their "trinkets and baubles" even as it supplies the poor with "that share of the necessaries of life, which they would in vain have expected from [the wealthy man's] humanity or his justice."[17] Patterns of market exchange arise from a dense network of psychological affinities, and the invisible hand underscores not the tranquil equilibrium brought about by market exchange but the the complex interweaving of desire, fear, emulation, and aversion which shapes our everyday social interactions. If these interactions nonetheless bring about some measure of prosperity, it does not follow, for Smith, that this prosperity represents a good in itself. Continually preoccupied with the moral and psychological dimension of social relations, his political economy never confines itself to pure materiality, and the proper end of a just economic

[13] *Ibid.*, 181.
[14] *Ibid.,*181, 185, 181.
[15] The debate over luxury was central to Enlightenment thought. See J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003; first published 1975); John Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger, eds., *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003)
[16] Smith, *TMS*, 184.
[17] *Ibid.,* 183 – 184.

order lies not in greater wealth but in shared access to the conditions necessary for mental wellbeing, that "real tranquility" he cites as the true test of a successful life.[18]

With William Godwin utility becomes the central object of political action. Writing to his mother at the age of twenty-eight, Godwin claims to see "nothing worth living for but the usefulness and the service of my fellow creatures. The only object I pursue is to increase as far as lies in my power the quantity of their knowledge and goodness and happiness."[19] Again in a letter to the novelist Harriet Lee (whom Godwin unsuccessfully attempted to woo), he argues that it is "in acts of utility, which, by producing the happiness of individuals, add to the general stock, a wise and a just man will place his pleasure and his pride."[20] The emphasis on quantity and measure, on a "general stock" of happiness constituted by the happiness of each individual, appears akin to Bentham's felicific calculus. Yet closer attention to Godwin's writings reveals a concept instead, like Smith's, embedded in a rich analysis of human psychology. In *Political Justice*, the fullest expression of his political theory, Godwin makes a firm distinction between intellectual and material pleasure, arguing that "intellectual and moral happiness is extremely to be preferred to those which are precarious and transitory," making a case for the infinite perfectibility of men and women premised not on a mechanical hedonism but on the capacities of our moral imagination.[21] He decries the tendency to reduce people to "mere machines," and praises "works of imagination" as the means for presenting the "materials and rude sketches of intellectual improvement," waxing lyrical on the mind's capacity to "shake off the fetters of prescription and prejudice, when it boldly takes a flight into the world unknown."[22]

Persistently placing utility within a language of moral and intellectual development rather than material satisfaction, Godwin rejects arguments for political economy premised solely on the production and accumulation of wealth. Instead, he argues that the perfection of humanity depends on an economics of redistribution, ending the injustices imposed upon the poor by the rich through

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[18] *Ibid.*, 182 – 183.
[19] William Godwin to Anne Godwin, August – September 1783, in *The Letters of William Godwin*, 2 vols., Pamela Clemit, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1:21.
[20] William Godwin to Harriet Lee, 27 June 1798, *Letters of William Godwin*, 2:34.
[21] William Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.
[22] *Ibid.,* 100 – 101. Godwin's own greatest publishing successes came from works of fiction. See *The Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin*, Mark Philp, ed. (London: William Pickering, 1992) as well as *The Plays of William Godwin*, David O'Shaughnessy, ed. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2010).

their control of the state apparatus.[23] Much like Smith, his central emphasis is not merely on material, but on psychological wellbeing: "every man is entitled, so far as the general stock will suffice, not only to the means of being, but of well being. It is unjust, if one man labour to the destruction of his health and life, that another man may abound in luxuries. It is unjust, if one man be deprived of leisure to cultivate his rational powers, while another man contributes not a single effort to add to the common stock."[24] Godwin claims that "the spirit of oppression, the spirit of servility, and the spirit of fraud… are the immediate growth of the established system of property," a system "hostile to intellectual and moral improvement."[25] Instead, he argues for an equal distribution of property, an end to rights of inheritance, and equal access to material resources, which alone can allow for the perfection of our mental capacities. If such "leveling principles" sound far removed from the system of natural liberty proposed in the *Wealth of Nations*, recall Smith's own castigation of primogeniture and entail as premised on "the most absurd of all suppositions, the supposition that every successive generation of men have not an equal right to the earth, and to all that it possesses."[26]

For both Smith and Godwin, utility clearly remains embedded in a psychological framework centered more on our moral and imaginative faculties than our material interests. This conception fundamentally shapes their economic analyses, as evidenced by their convergent concern with the mental wellbeing of the laboring classes, their opposition to laws of inheritance, and their consistent denunciation of the injustices committed by landlords, merchants, and employers against the mass of the population. With Bentham this changes. For him, utility simply comprises the sum of pleasures over pains, considered with regard to their "intensity, duration, certainty or uncertainty, and propinquity or remoteness."[27] He makes no distinction between mental and physical pleasure, and rejects systems of morality, such as Smith's, premised on the "principle of sympathy and antipathy," which falsely relate our emotional sentiments to ethical action.[28] Instead Bentham believed that by

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[23] Godwin, *Political Justice*, 22, 24 – 25. See also William Godwin's letter to the editor of the *British Critic*, 7 June 1795, noting that "the law authorised a rich man to spoil the crop of a poor one, to poison his cattle, or to commit him to jail upon an absurd and sophistical charge of burglary." *Letters of William Godwin*, 1:117.
[24] Godwin, *Political Justice*, 423.
[25] *Ibid.*, 432. Godwin is acutely aware of the moral degradation induced by the continual experience of economic inequality: "Humanity weeps over the distresses of the peasantry of all civilised nations; and, when she turns from this spectacle to behold the luxury of their lords, gross, imperious and prodigal, her sensations certainly are not less acute. This spectacle is the school in which mankind have been educated. They have been accustomed to the sight of injustice, oppression and iniquity, till their feelings are made callous, and the understandings incapable of apprehending the nature of true virtue," p. 429.
[26] Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, bk. III, ch. ii., 409 – 410.
[27] Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 38.
[28] *Ibid.,* 25.

focusing his attention solely on the "sensations" produced by particular acts he could produce an entire framework of government rigorously grounded in material outcomes, a "pannomion" so comprehensive as to render politics itself irrelevant.[29] Shunning the emphasis on communication, social affinity, and imaginative empathy shared by Smith and Godwin, the "hermit of Queen's Square Place" sought to reform humanity from his drawing room, continually perfecting his schemes "with reference to the service of mankind."[30]

Political economy was central to this program of radical reform. A convinced disciple of Smith, whom he referred to as "that illustrious master," Bentham believed that the science of political economy offered the key to the achievement of material abundance, and as such, to utility itself.[31] Yet his professed allegiance to the Scottish master betrays profound differences, differences stemming from their divergent conceptions of human nature. According to Bentham, political economy is a science concerned solely with "directing the national industry to the purposes to which it may be directed with the greatest advantage," the end of which is the accumulation of wealth.[32] He dismisses outright the notion that economic equality, or rather the problem of ensuring "that the poorer should be less poor rather than that the richer should be less rich," belongs to the subject at all, dismissing it as something which "will hardly be thought to come within the pale of political economy."[33] Where Smith in the *Wealth of Nations* dwells at length on questions of economic justice, Bentham banishes them entirely from consideration. Severing the connection between psychological wellbeing and economic growth, Bentham argues for a strictly delimited economic materialism, emptied entirely of broader political and social concerns.

Instead, he occupies himself only with explicating "the axioms and principles relating to subsistence and abundance." Gain and loss, taxation and exchange, profit and price: these, for

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[29] On the idea of a pannomion (a neologism coined by Bentham), see *Jeremy Bentham's Economic Writings*, ed. W. Stark, 3 vols. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1952), 1:91. Also Bentham to James Madison, 30 October 1811, *Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, 8:182.

[30] Bentham repeatedly refers to himself in his correspondence as a hermit, "never seeing anybody but for some special reason," and refers to his home at Queen's Square Place as a hermitage. See Jeremy Bentham to John Mulford, 1 November 1810, *Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, 8:77 – 78.

[31] Jeremy Bentham to George Ross, July 1799, *Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, 6:184. In his "Manual of Political Economy" he again refers to Smith as "that illustrious writer." See *Economic Writings*, 1:223. See also his letter to Adam Smith in July 1790, *Correspondence*, 4:134; In another letter to his brother regarding recent corn riots, he writes that "my prepossessions are certainly in favour of liberty and Adam Smith," Jeremy Bentham to Samuel Bentham, 15 September 1800, *Correspondence*, 6:359 – 360.

[32] *Ibid.*, 1:226.

[33] *Ibid.*, fn. 1.

Bentham, form the sole object of political economy, of which the mind "can abstractly consider everything… and form a general theory concerning it."[34] At the center of this general theory lies not the Smithian subject, motivated by a complex concatenation of competing desires, emotions, sympathies, and aversions, but a subject in which "self-regarding interest is predominant over all other interests put together… by the principle of self-preference… every human being is led to pursue that line of conduct which, according to his view of the case, taken by him at the moment, will be in the highest degree contributory to his own greatest happiness, whatsoever be the effect of it, in relation to the happiness of other similar beings, any or all of them taken together."[35] Only now does something resembling *homo economicus* resolve into view. Individual actors, concerned strictly with their own material well-being, interacting in the market with a view only to heightening their own pleasures and lessening their own pains: utility-maxizing agents competing under the golden rule of *laissez nous faire.*[36]

Radicalism and Revolution

Explaining why Bentham's conception of utility became central to classical political economy requires an account of the fate of political radicalism in Britain during the late eighteenth century. The years between the loss of the American colonies in 1783 and the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 were years of flux, an era of ideological "eclecticism" marked by a willingness to draw "freely on a wide range of intellectual traditions and [to mobilize] rhetoric from a variety of political languages."[37] It was in this climate that young radicals such as Bentham and Godwin first found their political footing. Bentham, educated as a barrister at Oxford and Lincoln's Inn, published his first summation of the principle of utility as part of a critique of William Blackstone's commentaries on the common law.[38] Godwin, trained as a minister in the dissenting tradition, found his religious opinions too heterodox for his congregations, and soon moved to London, where he began writing for Whig newspapers and political journals.[39] For both, the outbreak of revolution in France elicited euphoric reactions. Writing to his father, Bentham described himself as "full of joy at the dawn of prosperity that opens to them [the French], and of hope for its consummation."[40] Likewise Godwin,

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[34] *Ibid.*, 1:94.
[35] *Ibid.*, 3:421.
[36] For Bentham's use of the phrase, see Jeremy Bentham to Baron Holland, 13 November 1808, *Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, 7:567.
[37] Mark Philp, *Reforming Ideas in Britain*, 118.
[38] Jeremy Bentham, *A Fragment on Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988; first published 1776).
[39] In particular, the *New Annual Register* and the short-lived Whig journal *Political Herald.*
[40] Jeremy Bentham to Jeremiah Bentham, 23 August 1789, *Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, 4:88.

writing to the opposition Whig minister Charles James Fox, described the era as one "from which the liberty and melioration of the world will take their date. Nothing can stop the dissemination of principle. No power on earth can shut the scene that has been opened."[41]

These hopes led both to plunge into agitation for political reform. For Godwin, this meant participating in the political scene of 1790s London, associating with the likes of John Thelwall, Mary Wollstonecraft (whom he married), and Thomas Paine, all radical activists calling for the overthrow of aristocracy, the redistribution of property, and the rights of man.[42] A highly visible voice in the press, he publicly rebuked the conservative government of the younger William Pitt, defended Paine during his trial for seditious libel, and spoke out against the regime of domestic surveillance and censorship imposed by the Tory administration.[43] In a series of letters published under the pseudonym Mucius, Godwin decried the "despotism and injustice" of the campaign against radicalism, condemned the Society for Protecting Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers for their attacks on Thomas Paine, and described the turn against reform in Britain as a revival of the "principles of the inquisition."[44] He reached the height of political fame with his celebrated attack on the government during the Treason Trials of 1794, defending members of the London Corresponding Society and the Society for Constitutional Information against the charge of high treason for their activities in support of the French Revolution.[45] Committed to the optimism unleashed by the events of 1789 even amidst Robespierre's terror, Godwin became, after Paine himself, perhaps the leading light of Revolutionary politics in Britain – a position for which he would pay a heavy price when the space for radicalism narrowed after 1795.[46]

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[41] William Godwin to Charles James Fox, 29 September 1793, *Letters of William Godwin*, 1:87.

[42] On Godwin's outspoken admiration for Paine see William Godwin to Thomas Paine, 7 November 1791, *Letters of William Godwin*, 1:64 – 65. The publication of the second part of Paine's *Rights of Man* in 1792 provoked government persecution, setting in motion the series of sedition trials which began at the end of 1792 and would continue through much of the decade. For a full account of Godwin's involvement see Mark Crosby, "The Voice of Flattery vs Sober Truth: William Godwin, Thomas Erskine and the 1792 Trial of Thomas Paine for Sedition," *The Review of English Studies* 62, no. 253 (February 1, 2011): 90–112.

[43] For Godwin's critique of the so-called "Gagging Acts" of 1795 (the Seditious Meetings Act and the Treason Act), see "Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr. Pitt's Bills, Concerning Treasonable and Seditious Practices, and Unlawful Assemblies" in William Godwin, *Political Writings II*, vol. 2 in the *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, Mark Philp ed. (London: William Pickering, 1993), 123 – 162.

[44] See the articles in the *Morning Chronicle*, 8 February 1793; 26 March 1793.

[45] See "Cursory Strictures on the Charge Delivered by Lord Chief Justice Eyre to the Grand Jury," *Political Writings II*, 65 – 121.

[46] For Godwin's opinion on Robespierre see William Godwin to Alexander Jardine, 25 – 29 September 1793, *Letters of William Godwin*, 1:84 – 85: "Do not exclaim so bitterly upon Robespierre! I, like you, will weep over his errors; but I must still continue to regard him as an eminent benefactor of mankind." On his prominence in radical circles see Johnston, *Unusual Suspects*, 24.

Bentham responded to the Revolution quite differently. While he expressed an enthusiasm equal to Godwin's, his political motives remained distinct. For Bentham, 1789 presented the opportunity to put his legislative principles into practice. Avoiding the furor of treason trials, reform societies, and public debate, he instead sought to influence the activities of the French Assembly directly. Claiming that he did not "care two straws about liberty," and that the "best thing that can happen to the Declaration of Rights, will be, that it should become a dead letter," Bentham's support for the Revolution was qualified from the beginning by his absolute aversion to the idea of natural rights.[47] Instead, his interest remained unswervingly in remaking France's penal and legal institutions in accord with the principle of utility. By 1791, even before the rise of the Jacobins, Bentham had already turned against the Assemblée Nationale, disgusted with the "violent hands" they had laid upon private property."[48] In perhaps the best summation of his views on Revolutionary politics, Bentham, in response to the news that the assembly had granted him the honorary status of *citoyen*, declared that "passions and prejudices divide men: great principles unite them. Faithful to these - as true as they are simple - I should think myself a weak reasoner and a bad citizen, were I not, though a royalist in London, a republican in Paris."[49] Devoted only to ends, Bentham believed he could safely disregard political differences as so much smoke and mirrors – utility alone mattered.

A Conservative Reaction?

Godwin and Bentham's divergent political responses to the French Revolution would have profound effects on their respective fates during the turn against radicalism which began with the passage of the Treason and Seditious Meeting Acts in 1795. The so-called "Gagging Acts" marked a sharp authoritarian turn in the government's response to revolutionary activism, a turn which would drive Godwin and many other radicals out of politics altogether.[50] Bentham, however, remained untouched. Why? Answering this question demands a more nuanced reading of British political culture in the 1790s than typically provided, moving beyond its characterization as purely "conservative" or "reactionary" to understand precisely which kinds of radicalism became out of bounds, and which –

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[47] Bentham to George Wilson, 8 July 1789; Bentham to Jacques Pierre Brissot de Warville, August 1789, *Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, 4:79; 4:85. Bentham's opposition to the Declaration of the Rights of Man led him to write, but not publish, his work *Anarchical Fallacies*. See John Bowring, ed., *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, vol. 2 (London: Simpkin, Marshall and co., 1843).

[48] Jeremy and Samuel Bentham to Baron St Helens, 8 July 1791, *Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, 4:319 – 320.

[49] Bentham to Jean Marie Roland de la Platiere, 16 October 1792, *Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, 4:401 – 402. The French Assembly granted Bentham his honorary citizenship by virtue of his proposed draft for a reform of the French judiciary.

[50] Kenneth Johnston describes Godwin as being "virtually erased as an independent individual." *Unusual Suspects*, 24.

more importantly – proved useful. Here Bentham's peculiar doctrines, at once unquestionably transformative and yet committed to a kind of anti-politics, concerned above all with placing legislative and judicial procedures on a firmly "scientific" footing, proved especially suited to the times.

Godwin's politics, on the other hand, did not. His erasure from public life began in earnest in 1798, with the publication of his *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Hurriedly written through a haze of grief in the months following Mary Wollstonecraft's death in childbirth in September 1797, the memoirs offer a compelling, affectionate, and all too truthful account of his dead wife.[51] Open about her unconventional lifestyle and her controversial attitudes towards contemporary sexual mores, the book provoked a storm of invective against Godwin and Wollstonecraft. *The Anti-Jacobin Review*, a successor to the government sponsored *Anti-Jacobin*, published a series of cruel and misogynistic articles on their relationship, the tenor of which is adequately captured in the satirical poem "The Vision of Liberty: "William hath penn'd a waggon-load of stuff/ and Mary's life at last he needs must write/ Thinking her whoredoms were not known enough… Being her spouse, he tells, with huge delight/ How oft she cuckolded the silly clown/ And lent, o lovely piece! Herself to half the town."[52]

This was compounded by a series of attacks upon Godwin by former friends and political allies, many of whom had by now turned against the revolution. Samuel Parr, a committed supporter of Charles James Fox and one-time mentor to Godwin, preached a long sermon on Easter Tuesday 1800 against the doctrines of *Political Justice*.[53] James Mackintosh, author of the *Vindiciae Gallicae*, one of the first rebuttals of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, renounced his former views by denouncing Godwin in a series of lectures at Lincoln's Inn in 1799, to which Godwin wryly responded by noting that he seemed "to be of the same use to him [Mackintosh] as the devil is to a fanatical parson."[54] Publishers refused to work with him. Writing to Thomas Wedgwood, brother of the famous potter, Godwin noted that "some booksellers are averse to any dealings with me, on account of the

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[51] Mark Philp, ed., *Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin*, vol. 1 (London: William Pickering, 1992), pp. 85 – 143.
[52] *Anti-Jacobin Review*, August 1801, 518.
[53] Samuel Parr, *A Spital Sermon, Preached at Christ Church, Upon Easter Tuesday, April 15, 1800: To Which Are Added Notes* (London: J. Mawman, 1801). Godwin's response can be found in William Godwin to Samuel Parr, 24 April 1800, *Letters of William Godwin*, 2:133.
[54] William Godwin to George Tuthill, 27 August 1799: "You have probably heard of Mackintosh's Lectures, which he delivers in Lincoln's Inn Hall, & in which I am regularly gibbeted, & seem to be of the same use to him as the devil is to a fanatical parson," *Letters of William Godwin*, 2:92. See also Godwin to James Mackintosh, 27 January 1799; Godwin to Mackintosh, 2 – 3 February 1799, 2:64 – 65, 2:70. See also Winch, *Riches and Poverty*, 274.

political obloquy annexed to my name."[55] In another letter, he claimed that "many of them [booksellers] are prejudiced against me by political considerations," and he feared that "Mr. Godwin, the republican and atheist" would soon find himself driven to the poorhouse as a result of the blanket refusal to publish his writings.[56] Despairing of his political hopes, by the early 1800s Godwin had retreated into obscurity, his revolutionary dreams dashed, his hopes for reform abandoned.

Yet where the political reaction of the mid- to late-1790s crushed the hopes of republicans such as Godwin, and with them their dreams of a political economy devoted to human wellbeing and political emancipation, Bentham's utilitarian radicalism, which explicitly rejected doctrines such as natural rights, began to find adherents among those searching for a third way, one outside the dichotomy of jingoistic patriotism and Jacobinical radicalism. For this, Bentham's own conduct during Pitt's reign of alarm provides part of the answer. Where Godwin decried attacks on the liberty of the press and the regime of surveillance imposed after 1795, Bentham – despite his professed zeal for free speech – proved himself a consistent defender of the political order. He devoted much of the 1790s and 1800s to his panopticon scheme, a proposal for total surveillance and penal reform which appealed to officials such as Dundas and Pitt as they attempted to manage domestic unrest at home.[57] Bentham's plans at this time frequently refer to the dangers posed by political protest. His letters refer disparagingly to the republican "pandemonians" disrupting the political order, and he compares the Jacobins to the followers of John Wilkes, who kept England "year after year in a flame."[58] In 1801, the very year Godwin endured the vicious scorn of the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, Bentham wrote to William Cobbett proposing that he publish his own attack on republicanism and natural rights, the *Anarchical Fallacies*. Should Cobbett not wish to publish it, Bentham helpfully proposes that he is "welcome to hand it over to the Editors of the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, who, it is probable enough, may pass judgment on it."[59]

Bentham's combination of reform with anti-Republicanism proved especially enticing to former supporters of the Revolution. Nascent bastions of liberal politics, including the *Edinburgh*

[55] Godwin to Thomas Wedgwood, 7 April 1801, *Letters of William Godwin*, 2:219 – 220.
[56] Godwin to Sir Francis Burdett, 17 May 1800, *Letters of William Godwin*, 2:140 – 141.
[57] Bentham's correspondence between 1790 and 1812 is dominated by the Panopticon scheme, which ultimately failed due more to his inability to procure land for its construction rather than to any principled opposition.
[58] Bentham to the Duc de Liancourt, 11 October 1795; to Samuel Bentham, 23 September 1795; to William Wilberforce, 1 September 1796, *Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, 5:145; 5:153; 5:252 – 253.
[59] Bentham to William Cobbett, 30 June 1801, *Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, 6:409.

Review, began to publish favorable reviews of Bentham's proposals beginning in the early 1800s.[60] The parallels with Godwin's own career are especially striking. Just as former allies such as James Mackintosh and Samuel Parr turned their backs on Godwin, they sought out a new ally in Bentham. Utility – of the Benthamite variety – appeared to offer an alternative to both conservatism and Jacobinism. Parr, writing to Bentham in 1804, stated that he would address the "question of utility" in a sermon, and that he would "mention you [Bentham], in the Pulpit, by name - nothing shall protect you - fear nothing for you will find me not very distant from you in Principle, and I shall have occasion to commend the correct and logical way in which you state your opinions - not so, by Godwin, and his French Treason."[61] James Mackintosh, the Whig lawyer who had treated Godwin "as the devil is to a fanatical parson," likewise turned to Bentham for philosophical guidance.[62] Named recorder for Bombay in 1803, Mackintosh met Bentham at Queen's Square Place for advice, offering "to carry into execution there, as far as his powers extended - not Panopticon only, but any and all other ideas that I would give him."[63] The new imperial official even claimed to have tried to "convert" others to Utilitarianism, and "spoke of the means which he hoped to have in his hands for making improvements, and begged of me to communicate to him any ideas of mine etc etc as if assured before hand of finding them meet his own, and undertaking to carry them, if possible, into practice."[64]

Thus by the turn of the century, even as Godwin's Smithian conception of utility retreated to the margins of polite discourse, Bentham's moved towards center stage. His influential disciples, particularly James Mill and David Ricardo, began to rewrite political economy as a science of wealth premised on calculation, self-interestedness, and a narrowly-defined notion of human rationality. With alternative radicalisms crushed under the weight of political persecution, Bentham's doctrines – uniquely suited to the anti-democratic politics of the era – displaced alternative approaches to economics concerned as much with the emotional and imaginative faculties of human beings as with their material needs. Such notions, ever-present in Smith's own writings, instead filtered into the thinking of the early Romantics, where a circle of young artists heavily influenced by Godwin,

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[60] See, for instance, Francis Jeffrey, review of *Traites de Legislation Civile et Penale; precedes de Principes Generaux de Legislation, et d'une Vue d'un Corps complet de Droit; termines par un Essai sur l'Enfluence des tems et des lieux relativement aux Lois*, by Jeremy Bentham, *The Edinburgh Review* 4, no. 7 (April 1804): 1–26. Newspapers increasingly began to put Bentham's name forward as a legislator for new territories. See A. Z, "Mr. Bentham-Legislation.," ed. Leigh Hunt, *Examiner*, no. 253 (November 1, 1812): 698–99.

[61] Samuel Parr to Jeremy Bentham, 23 December 1804, *Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, 7:297.

[62] William Godwin to George Tuthill, 27 August 1799, *Letters of William Godwin*, 2:92.

[63] Jeremy Bentham to Étienne Dumont, January 1804, *Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, 7:258 – 259.

[64] Jeremy Bentham to Samuel Bentham, 22 September 1804, *Ibid*, 7:278 – 279.

including Shelley, Samuel Coleridge, and Robert Southey, began to develop a new critique of the emerging industrial order. Opposed to the stultifying and reductive science of political economy, with its "epicurean selfishness" and disregard for human desires and motivations beyond pure avarice, they turned to nature, to emotion, and to a "rebirth of sentiment" characteristic of early Romanticism.[65] In a peculiar twist of fate, then, the core of Smith's own thought on political economy lived on, not through his professed disciples among the classical economists, but through their professed opponents, suggesting a closer linkage between Enlightenment thought and Romanticism than to the mainstream of nineteenth-century liberalism itself.

[65] Winch, *Riches and Poverty*, 348.