

## William Godwin's ethic of leisure and the riddle of social justice

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"The object in the present state of society is to multiply labour," wrote William Godwin (1793) in *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, "in another state it will be to simplify it." "The genuine wealth of man is leisure," he declared in a subsequent essay, "when it meets with a disposition to improve it. All other riches are of petty and inconsiderable value." Godwin (1797) concluded the latter essay, "Of Riches and Poverty," with the question: "Is there not a state of society practicable, in which leisure shall be made the inheritance of every one of its members?"

In *Thoughts on Man: his nature, productions and discoveries*, Godwin (1831) clearly articulated what had been a persistent motif in his earlier writing – that leisure was no less an essential element of a person's calling than was one's trade or occupation:

The river of human life is divided into two streams; occupation and leisure—or, to express the thing more accurately, that occupation, which is prescribed, and may be called the business of life, and that occupation, which arises contingently, and not so much of absolute and set purpose, not being prescribed: such being the more exact description of these two divisions of human life, inasmuch as the latter is often not less earnest and intent in its pursuits than the former (164).

Godwin stressed that leisure was of primary importance for self improvement, citing the example "that schoolboys learn as much, perhaps more, of beneficial knowledge in their hours of play, as in their hours of study." Godwin's reference to occupation clearly evokes Calvin's doctrine of the worldly calling. Repeatedly in *Thoughts on Man* Godwin reprised the proposition "that every human creature, idiots and extraordinary cases excepted, is endowed with talents, which, if rightly directed, would shew him to be apt, adroit, intelligent and acute, in the walk for which his organisation especially fitted him" (53).

Godwin had been educated as a Dissenting minister. His first tutor in theology, Samuel Newton, was a follower of Robert Sandeman, practitioner of an especially strict Calvinist creed. Many commentators have noted the persistence of Godwin's Calvinist habits of thought, despite his wavering successive professions of atheism and deism (Hazlitt 1825; Stafford 1980). "The Calvinist doctrine of the calling," observed William Stafford, "can be discerned just below the surface in *Political Justice*. It is a man's duty to labour in the station to which God has called him; he is answerable for every scrap of time, every thought and deed" (292). While correctly observing the Calvinist undertone in *Political Justice*, Stafford neglected Godwin's systematic reformulation of the doctrine of the calling by his elevation of leisure.

As Harriet Martineau wrote in 1837, "The first attempt to advocate leisure as the birthright of every human being was made now some half-century ago." Martineau was referring to Godwin's *The Enquirer*, published in 1797, although he had also advocated for universal leisure in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, published four years earlier. One might expect that such a formidable and precocious advocacy of leisure *for all* would make Godwin a major figure in leisure studies. Or at least a minor figure? However, there is no mention of William Godwin in *A Handbook of Leisure Studies* (2006), *The*

*Routledge Handbook of Leisure Studies* (2013), or *The Palgrave Handbook of Leisure Theory* (2017).

Moreover, there is no mention of Godwin in any of the subsequent articles that Google Scholar lists as having cited either of those publications. Searches for William Godwin in journals with "leisure" in their names covered by Google Scholar, JSTOR and EBSCO Academic Search Premier produced zero results.

In his preface to volume II of capital, Friedrich Engels defended Marx from charges of plagiarism by Johann Karl Rodbertus and his protégé, Rudolf Meyer, by citing the anonymously published pamphlet, *The Source and Remedy of the National Difficulties* as a forerunner to both Rodbertus's and Marx's analyses of surplus value. Engels praised the pamphlet as "but the farthest outpost of an entire literature which in the twenties turned the Ricardian theory of value and surplus-value against capitalist production in the interest of the proletariat" and credited Marx with having saved the pamphlet "from falling into oblivion." As for that purported rescue, Marx only mentioned the pamphlet once in passing in works published during his lifetime. It turns out, though, that Marx did discuss the pamphlet extensively and very favourably in notebooks published long after his death.

The author of the anonymous pamphlet has subsequently been identified as Charles Wentworth Dilke, who was a dedicated and enthusiastic follower of William Godwin. Dilke's pamphlet is sprinkled with allusions to Godwin's ideas on leisure, including specifically Godwin's claim that the "genuine wealth of man is leisure." Dilke added a flourish to Godwin's doctrine, "there is, thank God! no means of adding to the wealth of a nation but by adding to the facilities of living: so that wealth is liberty—liberty to seek recreation—liberty to enjoy life—liberty to improve the mind: it is disposable time, and nothing more." It is noted that Dilke's version was not identical to Godwin's.

In a crucial passage of Karl Marx's *Grundrisse*, he paraphrased Dilke's passage as, "Truly wealthy a nation, when the working day is 6 rather than 12 hours. Wealth is not command over surplus labour time' (real wealth), 'but rather, disposable time outside that needed in direct production, for every individual and the whole society. (The Source and Remedy &c. 1821, p. 6)." Instead of replacing Marx's loose German paraphrase with the original, the translator of the *Grundrisse* translated Marx's German version back into English to show what Marx thought was worthy of noting.

The paragraph citing Dilke is in the famous "fragment on machines." Moishe Postone quoted the first half of the paragraph *twice* in *Time, Labor and Social Domination* -- as if to emphasize that he viewed it as a touchstone for interpreting Marx's mature critique of political economy. Inexplicably, though, Postone omitted the *Source and Remedy* quote at the end of the paragraph and was silent on the relationship between Dilke's pamphlet and Marx's analysis.

There are subtle differences between Godwin's statement and Dilke's, and between Dilke's statement and Marx's paraphrase of it. But there is also an unmistakable continuity and influence. Marx's mature analysis of surplus value and disposable time (free time, leisure) needs to be situated within its relationship to Dilke's thought, and by extension, Godwin's.

In "The Ambivalence of Disposable Time: *The Source and Remedy of the National Difficulties* at 200," I documented Godwin's influence on Dilke's pamphlet and the pamphlet's influence on Marx. A multitude of consequences and implications of that influence needs to be fleshed out and articulated. Two of the issues I want to briefly touch on today have to do with "alienated leisure" and the so-called "work ethic."

When Marx wrote about disposable time in the *Grundrisse*, he foregrounded the contradictory nature of the capitalist process that sought to both reduce working time to a minimum but also to retain working time as the ultimate sole measure of exchange value. "Disposable time" was not an inevitable result of that process but a *potentially* emancipatory alternative to the perpetual expansion of increasingly superfluous production needed to continue the accumulation of surplus value (and spew carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, but that is another story).

Furthermore, time outside of work does not magically translate into free time. In Marx's early works, he argued that the arbitrary dichotomy between work and leisure led to alienated leisure as well as alienated work. According to Hinman, "rather than eliminating the problem of alienated labor, the gradual increase in free time serves to reinforce and perpetuate the fundamental alienation of labor." Hinman thus argued that "Marx's position involves an overcoming of the dichotomy between work and play found in capitalist society and a rethinking of the traditional categories in terms of which work and play as forms of human activity are understood." Hinman enumerated "seven conditions under which the worker's leisure can be said to be alienated or the worker can be said to be alienated from his or her leisure" including when leisure is solely justified to the extent it increases worker's productivity and when leisure is "transformed into consumer activity."

Dallas Smythe's analysis of the "audience commodity" offered valuable insight into that transformation of leisure into consumer activity. Smythe argued that mass media aggregates audiences for the purpose of selling the audience's attention to advertisers. He claimed audiences performed work when they were watching or listening to programs and advertising and asked, rhetorically, "Am I correct in assuming that all non-sleeping time under capitalism is work time?" My answer would be no, leisure time doesn't have to be considered as "work" to be none-the-less alienated. Despite its flaws, Smythe's concept of the audience commodity opened up important lines of inquiry into the political economy of alienated leisure that are being rediscovered now in the context of social media. See Jakob Rigi's and Robert Prey's "Value, Rent, and the Political Economy of Social Media."

These Marxist critiques of alienated leisure would be amplified and clarified by attention to Godwin's and Dilke's influential early critiques of nascent consumerism. In his essay, "Of Avarice and Profusion," Godwin argued there were very few commodities that contributed substantially to subsistence and if only those were produced, the hours freed from labour could be devoted to "the cultivation of the understanding, the enlarging our stock of knowledge, the refining our taste, and thus *opening to us new and more exquisite sources of enjoyment.*" [emphasis added] In his pamphlet, Dilke presented a dystopian "last paragraph" of a future historian who laments the moral degradation of a society in which "the splendour of luxurious enjoyment in a few excited a worthless, and debasing, and selfish emulation in all."

Attention to Dilke and especially Godwin would also immensely complicate Max Weber's narrative of the Protestant ethic along with Colin Campbell's account of "The Other Protestant Ethic." While opening the door to *one* other ethic, Campbell slammed it shut to alternatives. William Wordsworth is a central figure in Campbell's case for an "ironic inversion" of the Romantic ethic of imagination, creativity, and pleasure that led ultimately to consumerism. Campbell cited Wordsworth's preface to the second edition of his *Lyrical Ballads* as emblematic of the Romantic sensibility of pleasure. Indeed,

Wordsworth maintained there that the imaginative aesthetic he advocated would demonstrate that, "it is possible that poetry may give other enjoyments, of a purer, more lasting, and more exquisite nature."

Godwin's name does not appear in Campbell's book. Presumably, Campbell was not aware of Godwin's influence on Wordsworth or, specifically, on the phrase, "enjoyments... of a more exquisite nature." Incidentally, Campbell's criticism of Thorsten Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* is severely challenged in the context of Dilke's "last paragraph" of a future historian, which uncannily anticipated Veblen's argument while being placed squarely within the "two, three, many Protestant ethics" Campbell's Romantic Ethic both implied and repressed.

As mentioned earlier, Godwin was trained as a minister in the Calvinist tradition of Rational Dissent. His essay on the two streams in the river of life is arguably more faithful to Calvin's doctrine of the worldly calling than was the pastoral literature Weber focused on exclusively in his discussion of the Protestant ethic.

It is worth mentioning, in passing, that the so-called "work ethic" is a propaganda neologism. Weber never used the term. Calvin himself only mentioned work as one part of one's calling, which explicitly also included family and civic duties, not reducible to hard work or business success. Prior to the 1970s, the now ubiquitous "work ethic" appeared rarely in academic literature and almost never in the press. When it did occur, it was almost invariably prefaced with the modifier "Protestant." The "*non-denominational* work ethic" became canonical only after President Richard Nixon invoked it in his re-election campaign against Senator George McGovern as part of an attack seeking to identify McGovern as the candidate of the "anti-work" hippies and the (dog whistle alert) inner city "welfare constituency." Nixon's invocation of the work ethic was a discreetly intellectualized appropriation of George Wallace's cruder dog whistle appeal to the proverbial hard working, tax paying, law abiding (white) citizens. It has been reported that a speech writer included a reference to the Protestant ethic in a 1971 Labor Day speech. Nixon told him to "keep religion out of it. Let's just call it the work ethic."

Appearing nearly 100 years after publication of *The Source and Remedy of the National Difficulties*, Stephen Leacock's *The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice* came to much the same conclusions about the superfluity of productive capacity and commodity production as had Dilke in his pamphlet and Godwin in *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*. The riddle remains unsolved, but all the clues are hiding in plain sight.