CHAPTER 3
Contesting the State in 1790s Britain

Entrenched perceptions about the role of intellectuals in the public and political life of Britain have continued to be shaped by contrasts with Continental approaches, especially French intellectual culture, accentuating the virtues of British exceptionalism and, indeed, anti-intellectualism in public life. As Stefan Collini has pointedly remarked, “the contrast, implicit where not explicit, has been, above all, with France” and has also been consolidated through progressivist nineteenth-century Whig interpretations of history.\(^1\) Despite the palpable wider effects of the cataclysmic demise of the ancien régime in France in 1789, however, the subsequent period in Britain entailed more than a series of divergent responses to or comparisons with events across the channel as suggested by the “debate on France” and revealed the vitality of British intellectual life and its intimate engagement with an increasingly fluid and ideologically inflected domestic public sphere. The wider significance of the period for the development of British political thought and history has been the subject of much historical reflection.\(^2\) Alfred Cobban has described it as “perhaps the last real discussion of fundamentals of politics in this country,” a recognition that something far from evanescent to the fabric of British political culture was taking place.\(^3\) Echoing this, Mark Philp has highlighted its seminal place in British popular politics, regarding it as “a watershed in the development of British liberal and conservative thought and… an important moment in the growth of the popular press and the evolution of a popular political style.”\(^4\)
The decade set the foundations for the demarcation of the future political landscape in Britain, while stifling the passing of significant political reform for a further thirty years. It also remained captive to the long shadow of Britain’s own “Glorious Revolution” of 1688, alternate readings of which had continued to influence rhetorical jostling for political legitimacy throughout the eighteenth century. In addition to this preoccupation with the “ancient” constitution and the liberties it engendered, the rise of “commercial society,” and with it the middle orders, toward the latter half of the century had already begun to shift the contours of political discourse. This had forced the question of reconciliation between the moral health and material wealth of the country and the nature of the relationship between the concomitant ideas of virtue and luxury. Underlying these various aspects of political argumentation was the question of the appropriate nature and locus of political authority, including those that informed the protoanarchist writings of William Godwin. It is within this complex intellectual landscape that the nuances in Godwin’s own antiauthoritarianism can be better discerned rather than simply through a textual appreciation of his works channelled through the prism of a post hoc anarchist tradition.

This chapter traces the significance of the malleability of a variety of political contexts and discursive vocabularies that are pertinent to a reevaluation of Godwin’s thought, particularly his shift from rational utopianism to polite skepticism, which I trace in detail in the following chapter. These include discourses of liberty and (anti)authority, radicalism and conservatism, and gradualist and revolutionary transformation. In this respect, the chapter serves to set the wider intellectual, social, and political scene that frames my interpretation of Godwin’s thought and draws attention to the vernacularization of political and philosophical argumentation, as well as claims to civility, during this period. It is the first of three historical chapters in this study that focus on an interpretation of the significance of politeness in the anarchist thought of William Godwin. The aim in these chapters is to provide the intellectual resources from which the idea of “polite anarchy” will subsequently be constructed and applied to an understanding of diplomacy in contemporary IR theory in Chapter 6. This chapter explores the social, political, and intellectual climate in Britain in the decade following the revolution in France at a time when the nature and scope of government authority became the subject of increasing contestation, exploring some of the wider contexts for understanding the formation and transformation of Godwin’s thought. Chapter 4 will focus more directly on the textual and biographical aspects of Godwin’s political thought during this period. Chapter 5 will then explore Godwin’s international thought.