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PAUL GOODMAN THEME SYMPOSIUM

Guest Editor's Introduction

Paul Goodman (1911–1972)

Martin Levy[a,b]*

[a]*Independent scholar, Halifax, UK;* [b]*Special Collections Department, University of Bradford, Bradford, UK*

There's a story about the American anarchist and 'man of letters' Paul Goodman. When he visited London to take part in the summer 1967 Congress on the Dialectics of Liberation, he was in the habit of 'flirting his buttocks', dressed only in his underwear, in the bathroom of the house that the congress organizers had hired for him and some of the other participants.

Herbert Marcuse – no friend of Goodman – told the story to the editorial committee of *New Left Review* (*NLR*) the evening before he (Marcuse) was due to give a speech to the congress, on the theme, as it happened, of 'liberation from the affluent society'.

As the *NLR*'s managing editor, the late Alexander Cockburn, remembered it, Marcuse told the anecdote 'twitch[ing] his behind in parody of the licentious author' as, 'slightly shocked, our group waited to continue with probing questions about the Frankfurt School' (Cockburn, 2007).

'Too much civilization, not enough Eros', Mrs Marcuse then 'muttered wryly', in allusion to one of her husband's books, *Eros and Civilization* – meaning of course that in contrast to the wanton American, her husband was (too) civilized. She could, of course, have compared and contrasted her husband and this other giant of the

*Email: mlevy@bradford.ac.uk

international libertarian left in other ways, but then the wit would probably have been lacking.

Although the anecdote is trivial and embarrassing, it nevertheless captures two essential features of Paul Goodman's impact during that remarkable '60s summer. For Goodman, as Marcuse's reference to his buttocks suggests, *was* largely homosexual, and he *was* nothing if not exhibitionistic.

Other anecdotes from the congress have him kissing a young man without any preliminary conversation (Private communication, 2014). And, even more extraordinarily, telling a young woman and other listeners how he had once allowed a tramp to bugger him (Private communication, 2011). On reading stories like these, older readers might shrug their shoulders and say, 'Well it was like that in those days', while younger readers might simply marvel at Goodman's inappropriateness.

American anarchism had many distinguished representatives during the middle years of the twentieth century, but none who was so multifariously talented. Goodman was not only a critic, a social and political theorist, an activist, a lecturer and educationist, a psychologist and therapist, but also a poet, playwright, diarist and novelist – and even a farmer of sorts.

He called himself, as in the description quoted above, a 'man of letters' and at other times a humanist – which is perhaps another way of saying that he did not believe that the accumulated learning of the past was merely a dead weight upon present convenience, but that it had lessons to teach us.

Goodman was born in New York in 1911 and it was to that city that he must have owed much of his verve and curiosity. During his youth, left more or less to his own devices by a hard-working mother and an absent father, he cycled everywhere, immersing himself in the parks, libraries and street life that the great city had to offer (Fisher, 2010). Later, he set this experience at the heart of his politics, railing long and hard against the superstition that kept less fortunate young people effectively cooped up in over-sized schools and colleges.

It wasn't just that the mass of schools and colleges were ill-designed for human flourishing; they were, he argued, failures according to their own lights. As he wrote in an article for *Saturday Review* in 1968:

> School methods are simply not competent to teach all the arts, sciences, professions, and skills the school establishment pretends to teach. For some professions – e.g. social work, architecture, pedagogy – trying to earn academic credits is probably harmful because it is an irrelevant and discouraging obstacle course. Most technological know-how has to be learned in actual practice in offices and factories, and this often involves unlearning what has been laboriously crammed for exams. … Those who are creative in the arts and sciences almost invariably go their own course and are usually hampered by schools. It is pointless to teach social sciences, literary criticism and philosophy to youngsters who have no responsible experience in life and society. (Quoted in Geiger, 1968, p. 8)

Such comments might suggest that Goodman's views were utopian, and perhaps they were; but, as he told Roger Barnard, Bob Overy and Colin Ward in an interview during the Congress on the Dialectics of Liberation, only in the sense that 'they', meaning the powers that be, 'aren't going to do [anything about them]!' (Barnard et al., 1970, p. 87).

It's worth pausing here, as his speech and interviews during the congress drew on many of the same themes that in America had helped to make him famous. And

famous in his own country he was – from 1962 with the publication of *Growing Up Absurd*, his first commercially successful book, to 1967 or thereabouts, probably no comparable intellectual enjoyed a greater level of prominence.

The congress, by the way, was organized by two other Americans – the 'anti-psychiatrists' Joe Berke and Leon Redler (with help from R.D. Laing and David Cooper), and was designed to 'demystify human violence in all its forms, and the social systems from which it emanates', according to the publicity at the time.

Unlike some of the other speakers at the congress – Jules Henry, Paul Sweezy, Marcuse, for instance – Goodman didn't arrive with a carefully crafted script. He spoke casually, picking up on previous speakers' arguments or introducing points that were of interest to him; 'it was almost as if he was engaged in a running dialogue with his audience, except that he was anticipating questions and answering them as he went along', reported Roger Barnard, who covered the congress for *Peace News* (Barnard, 1967, p. 12).

Goodman aimed many of his remarks at the various Maoists and other Marxists at the congress. They were too ideological on issues like nuclear proliferation, environmental degradation and the proper use of technology, too ideological and insufficiently pragmatic, he stated. He, on the other hand, was an 'old Jeffersonian, way out of date' – by which he meant more piecemeal, more modest in his ambitions. The most that could be expected from government – any government – he said, was that it could 'help guarantee a situation of minimum decency, in which maybe some good could occur'. Anything else was probably moonshine.

Later in his speech, he said a great deal about Ireland of all places, praising the quality of life there. True, the average national income was just a quarter of the United States', and there was barely a fraction of the technology. But that was his point – the conventional yardsticks were mistaken.

As for his own country, the main problem was not as the black power activists at the congress had suggested: the exploitation of blacks and Hispanics. That interpretation was out of date. Instead, it was their exclusion from mainstream, technological society:

> They are unnecessary. … We don't need their labour. Finally, we don't need their raw materials. But, unfortunately, they are people who when they starve get rambunctious. See, and why don't they shut up? See, why do they exist? I can tell you, frankly, that the real inner policy of the United States upper-class – I don't mean the upper-class, I mean the great majority of the people – with regard to the negroes is not racist at all. The [Americans] hold nothing against the negroes – if only they would go in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean and drown. You see that's different. It's a different attitude. What a bore. Why don't they go away? (Goodman, 1967, from speech transcript)

And then the aged were excluded too, he added. As were the insane, many of the young and, most important of all, the farmers. But, then, few people in the United States were interested in the farmers. Indeed, 'the settled policy [of the industrialists, the supermarkets, etc.] was to get rid of them'.

Finally, he spoke eloquently about the need for the decentralization of power within schools, factories and other types of social and industrial organizations, and about the 'free universities' and the role of professionals. Unfortunately, most professionals in present day, technological society were 'finks', he said, in as much as they were completely lacking in professional autonomy.

Some of the topics he addressed during his contribution to the congress also entered into his interview with Iain Sinclair, the writer and filmmaker. Sitting on a sofa in the house I mentioned at the beginning of this article – his 'shirt open, comfortable, workmanlike' – Goodman introduced another topic: his fellow speaker, Allen Ginsberg, and Ginsberg's revival of a 'kind of bardic role for the poet'. But it was on the subject of technology again that he was probably most intriguing.

'Science', he said, 'is an absolute value. … It's sort of tragic & you are stuck with its consequences. Technology on the other hand is a part of moral philosophy & the criteria there is prudence'. It should not be so 'grandiose that it prevents other values from existing'. The reason we hadn't taken that route, he added, had nothing to do with technology itself. It was to do with the fact that technologies had been 'extended for profit or for power' (Sinclair, 1971, unpaginated).

Paul Goodman died on 2 August 1972, following a series of heart attacks.

The articles that follow, for which I extend my grateful thanks to the contributors, revisit his life and achievements.

Notes on contributor

Martin Levy currently researches a number of topics, including twentieth-century counterculture and Jewish identities. He is the author of a small number of publications including books on eighteenth-century social history and articles on universities and anti-psychiatry. He holds a Master's degree in librarianship and information management from the University of Northumbria, and works at the University of Bradford as special collections assistant.

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