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Wooden huts, anyone? Paul Goodman's *The Community of Scholars* after (more than) 50 years

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Arguably, administrators are killing our universities. More than 50 years ago, leading American intellectual Paul Goodman counselled secession. Is it time to revisit this option?

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Out of the dreary desert of writing about higher education, who is the twentieth-century author who stands out? For me, it is Paul Goodman. Why should that be? He wasn't a professional educator in the conventional sense. He lived by his pen, speaking – during his final decade or so – to large, disparate, intelligent, university and college, but not necessarily 'educated' audiences. He thought of himself as a university man, but he wasn't *of* the university. Perhaps that's it; he wrote not as one of 'them', but as a self-confessed 'man of letters', a generalist. And then he was never dull – most writers on higher education are very dull, whereas Goodman's prose is sharp, colloquial and exciting.

In *The Community of Scholars* (1962), he asks profound and difficult questions: how did administration get into universities (a historical question)? What is it doing there (a functional question)? How can we get it out? If indeed we can get it out – ultimately he seems to suggest that we can't, hence the significance of the book's final and most original chapter, 'A Simple Proposal'. You could say that he is an administrator's nightmare, except that it under-describes him. He is an articulate libertarian advocate for profound and necessary social and political change. The pity nowadays is how few people read him.

Forget today's corrosive notion of the university as some kind of win-all 'collaboration' between industry and academia; the university that Goodman favours is leery of outside organizations. It is volatile and inharmonious – what he describes as 'animally and civilly unrestrained' (1962, p. 25) (today's university teachers might smile at that notion), poor (money is not something that it cares much about) and small, even intimate.

Using a favourite metaphor, he compares it to a bullish little city, conducting itself – intellectually, at least – as if walled from the larger community, but active in that

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community's concerns. Such a wall is necessary, he writes, for if it is to be a true community of scholars – liberal, international in outlook and 'universal' in its culture (1962, p. 25) – then it must teach to a higher ideal, a higher set of standards than any held by the wider community.

He gives other characteristics. It is 'tightly local' (1962, p. 19), yet linked by federation to other universities. It is sited, ideally, in an urban and impoverished location. It is the 'home and brotherhood' of all of its members (1962, p. 18), past and present. It makes teaching and learning a 'personal relation' (1962, p. 14). Its teachers are not by and large career academics, but 'veterans' who have earned their livings in the world, and who teach because they have to. And, crucially, it is a self-governing community – or even a community without government.

How many institutions of higher education were there in the United States when Goodman was writing? He numbers 1900. These were of all sorts – from community colleges through Ivy League to experimental colleges, the latter little outposts of innovation, like Mark Goldes' and Alvin Duskin's Emerson College in Pacific Grove, California, and the Robert Hutchins-inspired St John's College at Annapolis. Since the 1930s, most of the larger institutions among them had grown in size. To the impartial observer they appeared then to be thriving.

But what did Goodman find following visits to between 30 and 40? He found conformity:

> Put it this way, there are 1,900 colleges and universities; at least several hundred of them have managed to collect faculties that include many learned and creative adults who are free to teach what they please. Yet one could not name ten that strongly stand for anything peculiar to themselves, peculiarly wise, radical, experimental, or even peculiarly dangerous, stupid or licentious. It is astounding that there should be so many self-governing communities, yet so much conformity to the national norm. (1962, p. 7)

'How', he asks, 'is it possible?' (ibid.).

Obviously, the students were not to blame. They were birds of passage. Neither, with some qualifications, were the academics. No, the real culprit was administration in its contemporary form of 'top-down co-ordination' (1962, p. 31). This had broken up the universities' traditional face-to-face relationships, and reconstructed them as part of a 'social machine'.

'The machine has no educative use', he writes. And he continues:

> But it occupies the time of the students. It pays the salaries of scholars, and it manufactures licenses and marketable skills. Yet these are not its purposes. Like the American economy itself, the system of universities is really a machine for its own sake, to run and produce brand goods for selling and buying. Utility is incidental. More revolutionary products like free spirit, individual identity, vocation, community, the advancement of humanity are rather disapproved. But frictionless and rapid running is esteemed; and by clever co-ordination of the moving parts, and lots of money as lubrication, it can be maximized. (1962, p. 63)

Administration's interests were not then the community of scholars' interests. But then, as Goodman concedes, perhaps it was ever thus. As long as there are nation-states and ecclesiastical authorities, they will almost always find a way of muscling in, of relieving the community of the burdens of autonomy. Sometimes the teachers themselves help the process. Being human, they are often greedy; the civic authorities

offer them baubles. Others among them are intimidated and easily squashed. And so, some new official is grafted on to the community of scholars.

Goodman has particularly harsh things to say about administration's effects on what he calls the 'academic personality'. But then, in his view, university teaching is not itself a profession. This is a striking observation. It isn't a profession for a number of reasons, but mainly – and here he quotes John Rice, the founder of Black Mountain College (of which more below) – because 'teaching [of older adolescents] is a secondary art. A man is a good teacher if he is a better something else' (1962, p. 86). Why? Because he or she has 'done something' in the world; they have proved themselves by being able to earn a living, and, ideally, stood up for university values. Whereas the career academic is often exactly that: academic, with all that the word implies in terms of hair-splitting and intellectual narrowness.

Administration deforms the academics, he says, by stripping them of their traditional role in character development. Then it emasculates them intellectually by turning the natural dissidents among them into hypocrites and time-servers.

> The credits, grading, 54-minute scheduling, departmentalism, narrow expertise, and bureaucracy constitute an administrative mentality in the faculty. It is a system that serves well enough to produce paper degrees and even bales of publications; and it is by such success that institutions acquire prestige, grants, and the pick of the students. But it is not a system calculated to elicit original genius, to help the young find vocations, or to encourage the exploration of nature. (1962, p. 97)

As for the college president (in UK terms, the vice chancellor), his function, asks Goodman, is what? To some people, he or she *is* the university. Why, in heaven's name, is that? 'It is evident that the President's real function is to encourage extramural interest in the college and to discourage intramural incidents that might arouse extramural antagonism' (1962, p. 73). 'He is the master in his own house', a wangler of 'prestigious and congenial' professorial appointments and a kicker-out of 'trouble-makers' (1962, p. 74). In other words, hardly what one would think of as a scholar.

> They [the college presidents and the other administrators] do not propose nonacademic colleges for the nonbookish. They do not encourage new communities and differentiation. Instead they behave like department stores opening new departments and sometimes branches, and increasing efficiency by standardizing the merchandise and the sales force. (1962, p. 76)

Goodman would not have been Goodman without suggesting some ways out of these troubles, some of which were taken up, while others still await their champions. Cut out the middle man; students should pay their teachers directly. Test students more often, grade them less. Transform the PhD from a 'piece of narrow research to a philosophical and historical handling of the subject'. This, he says, would 'at least give the young instructor, in his first uncertain year, something to *teach*. … It might also enable him to communicate with the other teachers' (1962, p. 96). Discourage staff mobility (with caveats). 'For a faculty to be strong and willing to fight an issue to the end, the members must be able to count on one another, and this requires an acquaintanceship of many years' (1962, p. 105). Strip away the expensive sports facilities and residential quarters. 'Quonset huts, wooden barracks, or an old house in the neighbourhood serve

well enough for dormitories and classrooms' (1962, p. 136). Incorporate the veterans, i.e. the professional practitioners, into the faculties. And reform the public relations, perhaps by including genuine student views in the prospectuses.

Ultimately, though, he counselled secession. This, he said, in his final and most original chapter, was 'classical' (1962, p. 160). It was also, of course, the traditional remedy of artistic and religious avant-gardes. Think Klimt, think Kandinsky. Think of the many Protestant groups who led schisms or rebellions against Catholicism. And think, too, of the many dissenting academies that emerged following Britain's Act of Uniformity of 1662 – for these, too, were a kind of secession. Yet, this being the early 1960s, secession, he notes, was happening in various forms anyway. Increasingly, youngsters were dropping out and 'little academies' were being formed, the aforementioned Emerson being the best early example. Though the problem with these, he remarks, is that they include few 'senior scholars who know something, and few veterans who undertake to teach professions in an objective and systematic way' (1962, p. 160). In other words, their teachers too lacked the moral depth and the professional expertise that he looked for in a university teacher.

A far better example he thought than these contemporary attempts at a community of scholars was the by-then defunct Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where he had himself briefly taught (until he effectively put himself beyond the pale for what he terms his 'wicked ways' – in fact, his plain-spoken advocacy of homosexuality both between and among the staff and students) (1962, p. 166). This college, he says, was 'really the first Beat school'; 'its graduates have been leaders in this kind of art and culture' (1962, p. 166).

It certainly had a stellar staff; among its teachers were John Cage, William de Kooning, Charles Olsen, Joseph Albers and Merce Cunningham. It also had no trustees and, crucially, no administration to speak of. Unfortunately, it was also 'feeble' in the 'universal culture' so dear to him. Neither did it 'sharply turn to the world'. It was a 'lovely intentional communit[y]', but not what he would call a true community of scholars (1962, p. 168).

A number of small regional secessions 'from about twenty colleges and universities' is therefore Goodman's preferred solution. Five or so teachers from each, plus five or more locally recruited professionals, some of the latter teaching part-time. 'With a class size of twelve to fifteen for ten teachers, there would be 120 to 150 students' for each little university (1962, p. 167).

'Fees and salaries would be roughly proportionate to those at existing universities', he adds, for though it would be nice if they *could* provide an education more cheaply than conventional universities, that, of course, would not be their point. And, in any case, 'those who want to transform a system of society, rather than to withdraw from it or destroy it, must operate practically within it' (1962, p. 169).

The advantages to the students would be of the sorts hitherto mentioned: authentic relations with the teachers, solid teaching by 'veteran' professionals and, of course, the absence of an administrative body.

As for libraries and laboratories, if not available municipally, these could be borrowed from the established universities. Finally, perhaps existing graduate schools could be persuaded to accept a course of study at the new universities as equivalent to a first degree, so in the new students' case their 'first accredited degree would be a master's or doctor's' (1962, p. 172).

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Now how, in the 1960s, did Goodman's suggestions fare? And what role, if any, could his writings have today in a higher educational system even more conformist and over-administered and already awash with ideas of a contrary nature? To answer the first of these questions, you have to step back a bit. While Goodman was the pre-eminent New Left influence on American students – at least until 1967 – many of his criticisms of higher education were, as he himself recognized, standard, even clichéd. It is often difficult therefore to disentangle his influence from that of other critics, libertarian and otherwise, of the so-called 'Organized Society'.

Some personal factors are also relevant. While Goodman was inspirational on the one hand, he could be charmless, aggressive, querulous and downright discouraging on the other. Consequently, he had a habit of 'falling out' with people. This meant that he was more isolated than he needed to have been, and, more importantly here, that his influence was not always fairly acknowledged.

Typical in respect of his querulousness are parts of a dialogue he held with Alvin Duskin, one of the two founders of Emerson College, California. Having been disappointed by Goodman's remarks about Emerson in *The Community of Scholars* and in another of Goodman's publications, Duskin sought him out. Goodman then invited him to New York, and their conversation was recorded by a radio station and published as a pamphlet by the San Francisco New School, one of the many 'free universities' that were then springing up, in America first, then continental Europe and finally, post-1966, in England. Many of these were indeed influenced by Goodman, but others were not. Take FUNY (the Free University of New York), for instance. This owed more to Marx, Veblen and to the artistic avant-garde than it did to any contemporary literary or political intellectual.

At the heart of Duskin's concern was Goodman's statement that though secessions were already occurring, they were occurring wrongly – because they included 'few senior scholars who know something, and few veterans who undertake to teach professions in an objective and systematic way' (1962, p. 160). Duskin thought this was unrealistic. Who were these veterans? Where were they to be found? They certainly weren't queuing up to join the faculty at Emerson.

Mark Goldes' – Duskin's colleague's – first idea for the college had been the traditional Utopian one: a parcel of land would be bought, scrub would be cleared and a building built. He and Duskin would call it Walden West, in reference to Thoreau. However, it didn't turn out that way and eventually they rented a large rambling Victorian house that had been turned into apartments. They put classrooms and an office on one floor, student accommodation on the other, and a library in the attic.

Soon, they had 11 students. A historian, a psychologist and even a physicist joined the faculty. Then more students and teachers arrived, and the school began to prosper a little – still, notably, without any sort of separate administration (almost all of that side of things being done – *plus ça change*! – by Duskin) and, again, without attracting any of Goodman's 'veterans'.

Yet, even if it was just a little too much like a milder, smaller version of Black Mountain College, Duskin was proud of what they'd achieved. But Goodman was carping. Duskin, he said, was doing too much – he was making himself too responsible for the students' lives; the college wasn't sufficiently academic or professional – it wasn't a proper 'community of scholars' at all, but merely an 'experimental college'. (Of course, this too was a 'fine thing', he added. 'Who could object to that?' [1965?, p. 8].

But it wasn't the sort of community that he was talking about in *The Community of Scholars*.)

'You're all too young and none of you has established a reputation in the academic world', he remarked. 'Since you can't get your students into the graduate schools, you get idealistic, disaffected people rather than the earnest, solid citizen kids [that he would have preferred]. It was just that way at Black Mountain' (1965?, p. 23).

Finally, Goodman offered to teach a course himself if Duskin would move the college to Hoboken, New Jersey. 'A college like this must be based on personal contacts. But you have them, everyone has. You have to work with the people you know. Otherwise everything is hopeless' (1965?, p. 31).

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It doesn't take much imagination to see the relevance of *The Community of Scholars'* criticisms to today's universities. I certainly haven't felt the need to labour them. Goodman's observations on the established universities of his day – on their conformity, their partiality to major businesses, their government by a system of 'top-down co-ordination' – are just as pertinent to the universities of our day.

As for the academics who staff these institutions, by and large they are still insufficiently critical of their administrations. How many, for instance, hold their vice chancellors to a higher standard than administrative 'know-how' or financial 'competence'?

Most interesting to me is Goodman's final chapter, 'A Simple Proposal'. Is there any appetite in today's universities for secession? I don't mean by celebrity academics, but by ordinary lecturers and professors; and if so, how could they contribute to what, in Goodman's terms, would be an educational institution run by and for professionals and their apprentices?

'Experimental' colleges of various types are once again legion, of course. But those, as he emphasized in his dialogue with Duskin, were not what he had in mind. He wanted his communities to teach the humanities, what he elsewhere called a 'universal culture'. And not an assortment, as so often today, of modish art 'practices', radical and/or working class agitprop and left- or ultra left-wing politics. Goodman's preferred colleges, he said, should be poor and small, inharmonious, 'animally and civilly unrestrained', 'walled from the world; yet active in the world' (1962, p. 25). They should be self-governing by their members.

Surely the time is right for everyone who cares about our universities to return to Goodman's prescient 1960s masterpiece.

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