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Historicizing sixties counterculture via Paul Goodman and the Beats

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In this article, I explore Paul Goodman's ambivalent relationship with Allen Ginsberg as a fellow elder statesman of the sixties, and argue that his conflicted attitude towards the Beats is reflective of broader tensions within the radical cultures of the period. Finally, I also suggest that by exploring points in common between Goodman and the Beats, we can gain a better understanding of the links between 1960s counterculture and its precursor and successor movements, from Romanticism to Green politics.

Keywords: Paul Goodman; Allen Ginsberg; Beat movement; 1960s; counterculture; New Left; Dialectics of Liberation; Romanticism; Wordsworth; ecology

Introduction

As Marianne DeKoven notes in *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern*, Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd*, first published in 1960, was 'an initiatory text of the sixties' (DeKoven, 2004, p. 200). However, she also identifies Goodman's book as 'characteristic of a crucial sixties genre, which includes works, mostly philosophical but also psychoanalytic and/or largely unclassifiable' by authors such as R.D. Laing, Norman O. Brown, Erich Fromm, A.S. Neill, Wilhelm Reich and Alan Watts (p. 200).

A crucial aspect of DeKoven's definition of this set of 'largely unclassifiable' sixties works is that while they were once 'widely read by radical countercultures, and influential in sixties ideologies, affects, and cultural-political practices', they 'have now largely fallen off the intellectual, cultural map' (2004, p. 18). Ultimately, she suggests, the reason why Goodman, Laing and others have 'fallen off' the map even as fellow sixties radicals such as Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari have come to occupy a central place in academic discourse, is that these two groups represent different sides of the sixties fault-line between modernity and postmodernity which DeKoven attempts to delineate in her book. A similar point is made in the foreword to the 2012 reissue of *Growing Up Absurd*, in which Casey Nelson Blake evocatively recalls the ubiquitous presence of Goodman's books in the 1960s and 1970s; they were typically to be found 'stacked on plywood planks laid down on cinder blocks' in the homes of those 'seeking to understand the roots of modern domination and the resources available to resist it', before in succeeding decades they began to be 'swept away', replaced by the works of Foucault, Derrida and others (Blake, 2012, p. xi).

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Some measure of Goodman's high status during the 1960s can be taken from reading his 1972 obituary in *The Los Angeles Free Press* (*aka* 'the Freep'), one of the major underground papers of the period. The author notes the prophetic nature of Goodman's wide-ranging proposals for the restructuring of society, ideas that became central to sixties counterculture, but had mostly already been set out by Goodman in works written in the 1940s and 1950s. Building on this idea of Goodman as prophet, the obituarist envisages how

> his prophecy … reaches outward to the next several centuries, so that a thousand years hence our shining descendants may look back and see in Paul Goodman their only kin; the rest of us they will disown bloodline with, as we now disown our kinship with the apes. (Ponte, 1972, p. 2)

Clearly, this kind of rhetoric – whose religious overtones match the obituary's opening reference to 'the halo' of 'this modern St Paul who walked in the wilderness of our society' – is fantastically overblown, especially when we consider how Goodman's works were rapidly swept off the shelf in the years that followed his death. Nonetheless, the obituary's attempt to historically contextualize Goodman provides us with a prompt to consider what Goodman's sixties status tells us about the dynamics of the period, including the relationship between the counterculture and its precursor and successor movements. As a focal point for my argument, I will use Goodman's complicated relationship with the Beat movement and with Allen Ginsberg in particular, a figure who, like Goodman, acted as a link between the sixties and its prehistory, and thus emerged as an elder statesman of the counterculture.

Goodman and Ginsberg

Just as Goodman, in various works written in the 1940s and 1950s, was already bringing the sixties into being long before he published the 'initiatory' *Growing Up Absurd*, so were Ginsberg and other Beats engaged in a similar task. As early as 1945, Ginsberg and Kerouac were discussing how to hasten a forthcoming change in world history and consciousness, which they termed the 'New Vision' (see, for example, Ginsberg, 2001, p. 35). Ginsberg's 1948 'Blake vision' – a numinous (and non-drug-assisted) experience during which he heard the disembodied voice of William Blake speak to him from beyond the grave – was taken by the Beats as a sign that this epoch of 'New Vision' was approaching, and in a 1960 journal entry, Ginsberg signals his belief that it is the coming decade that will be transformational: '1960 has come with its apocalypse' (Ginsberg, 1977, p. 171).

Goodman and Ginsberg shared many similarities in terms of background. While they would both become iconic figures for the sixties youth movement, they were born in 1911 and 1927 respectively, and thus were well into middle age by the time the sixties was in full swing. In *Growing Up Absurd*, Goodman describes himself as an 'Angry Middle-Aged Man', in contrast to the 'Angry Young Men' who were his present subjects, and who would later become his 'crazy young allies' (Goodman, 1961, pp. 55–56). Both came from middle class, New York Jewish families, but experienced significant familial turmoil as children: Goodman's father abandoned the family before Goodman's birth, while Ginsberg's mother suffered from severe mental health problems. Additionally, both men had a longstanding interest in psychoanalysis, both

had been involved in or inspired by the socialist and anarchist movements that predated the sixties (but always avoided allegiance to any political party), both were homosexual or bisexual, and both were committed to living their unconventional lives in a remarkably open manner, long before the arrival of the more widespread sexual and political revolutions of the late 1960s. Finally, of course, the two men also had common literary interests, for which they sometimes struggled to find space within their complex lives. Goodman became known primarily for his social criticism and anarchist philosophy, but was also a poet, novelist and dramatist (and always wanted to be considered as such), while by the late 1960s, Ginsberg was known equally for his poetry and for his countercultural 'psychopolitics'.

Unsurprisingly, given these many similarities between Goodman and Ginsberg, their paths crossed in several different contexts during the 1950s, while later, Goodman's status as 'one-man think-tank for the New Left' (Goodman, 2011, back cover) and Ginsberg's role as 'central switchboard' and 'elder statesman' of the counterculture (Miles, 1989, p. 394) brought them together as vital cogs in the machinery of sixties alternative society. It therefore seems quite natural to read Goodman praising Ginsberg in *Growing Up Absurd* as one of the 'best spokesmen' of the Beat movement (Goodman, 1961, p. 172), to hear Ginsberg describe Goodman in a 1968 interview as one of the 'psychic heroes of America' (Ginsberg, 2001, p. 180), and to find them sharing a platform at the 1967 Dialectics of Liberation congress in London.

However, while Goodman devotes much of *Growing Up Absurd* to sympathetic analysis of the Beat writers and their 'beatnik' followers, this is mixed with some unexpectedly harsh criticism, directed not just at individual Beats but also at the movement as a whole. Thus, the book provides early evidence, as I argue here, of Goodman's deeply conflicted attitude towards the Beat movement and the hippie counterculture to which it gave rise (and with which he was generally assumed to be aligned).

Critiquing the Beats

The opening pages of *Growing Up Absurd* set out Goodman's argument that the 'Beat or Angry young men' have every right to reject an empty consumerist society, which ultimately fails to satisfy not only them but also the 'Organization Men' who are more integrated into society but share the same inner dissatisfaction. America, he concludes, must therefore change to accommodate the Beats, not the other way around. Accurately predicting the forthcoming cultural and political revolution of the sixties, Goodman claims that if mainstream society does not make this adjustment, 'where now there are thousands of these young men, there will be hundreds of thousands' (1961, p. 123). Later in the book, Goodman praises the creativity and communal purpose of Beat culture as 'immensely admirable'; this, he says (again predicting sixties counterculture), 'must have a future' (pp. 65–66). Equally, Goodman is thoughtful and sympathetic in his analysis of the practical dilemma facing the Beat generation of how to earn money without becoming part of the 'organized system' which they have rejected, or as Goodman pithily puts it, how to find a job in which 'no beards have to be shaved' (p. 68). Typically, Goodman proposes a solution that manages to be utopian yet practical, conservative yet radical: the introduction of recurring short periods of (civilian) national service in return for a guaranteed lifelong basic income (p. 69; as Goodman explains, this is an idea he had first set out over a decade earlier in *Communitas*).

However, it is also typical of Goodman's book that within the same passage where he sympathetically discusses this Beat dilemma, he also continually makes the reader aware of the distance between subject and author. One example of this is his rather stuffy explanation that in the language of the Beats, money is called either 'bread' or 'loot' (p. 67). More damagingly, he launches an attack on the 'false notion that the kind of artistic activity that proliferates among the Beats is art' (p. 67), complaining that the Beat style of 'jazz-and-poetry' is 'feeble' and 'childish, in the light of their knowledge and abilities' (p. 64).

It is noticeable that when he discusses individual Beat writers, Goodman reserves especially harsh criticism for Jack Kerouac. *Growing Up Absurd* includes as an appendix a critical review Goodman had earlier published of *On the Road*; this review ends with a particularly acerbic passage in which the book's literary value is likened to the nutritional value of the fast food consumed by the novel's characters, which Goodman characterizes as 'the drink-down quick-sugar foods of spoiled children, and the precut meat for lazy chewing beloved of ages six to ten':

> Nothing is bitten or bitten-off, very little is chewed; there is a lot of sugar for animal energy, but not much solid food to grow on. I suppose that this is the most significant observation one can make about *On The Road*. (1961, p. 283)

Similarly, while *Growing Up Absurd* contains some sympathetic analysis of the role of religion in the Beat movement, this discussion swings towards outright criticism when Goodman turns his attention to a key passage from Kerouac's essay, 'Beatific: The Origins of the Beat Generation', in which Kerouac proclaims:

> For the crucifix I speak out, for the Star of Israel I speak out, … for sweet Mohammed I speak out, for Buddha I speak out, for Lao-tse and Chuang-tse I speak out, for D. T. Suzuki I speak out. (Quoted in Goodman, 1961, p. 135)

Despite acknowledging that it is natural for a disaffected subculture 'to see their choice, fraught with crisis, as a religious movement' (p. 135), Goodman completely ignores the essay's substantive attempt to use religion to realign 'Beat' with 'beatific'. Instead, he accuses Kerouac (named only as 'one of the favorite spokesmen of the Beat Generation') of behaving with the cynicism and ignorance of a politician who 'includes all voting creeds and betrays a similar lack of acquaintance. The bother is that the speaker is in his late thirties and ought to know better' (pp. 135–136).

This accusation of shallowness is linked to what Goodman believes is a more general problem of 'defensive ignorance of the academic culture' on the part of the Beats; it is therefore significant that Goodman singles out Ginsberg as a possible exception to this rule: 'I was delighted, the other night, to hear Allen Ginsberg, one of their best spokesmen, … boast of going to Walt Whitman's house' (1961, p. 172). However, while Goodman's differentiation between these 'best' and 'favorite' Beat spokesmen indicates where his sympathies lie, he can at times be cutting towards Ginsberg, too. In the middle of his review of *On the Road*, Goodman recalls how he had recently heard Ginsberg perform 'Howl', and concludes: 'it was not much of a poetic experience, but it was something, it was better than feeling nothing at all that night' (p. 280). Although Goodman admires the 'justifiable rage' of the Beats towards the 'organized system' within which they are trapped, he makes it clear

that he views their artistic and philosophical responses to this situation as inadequate. Once again revealing his own ambivalent position of critical friendship towards Ginsberg, Goodman recalls telling him, '"You can't *howl* a gripe, Allen. You can howl in pain or rage, but what you are doing is griping"' (p. 280).

'The crisis … requires more seriousness'

Bearing in mind the 1960 publication date of *Growing Up Absurd*, a plausible argument could be made that Goodman's ambivalent attitude towards the Beats is simply a sign of his failure to appreciate that their embryonic struggle against the 'organized system' was soon to give birth to a much broader political and social revolution that would make them his allies, as fellow elder statesmen of the alternative society. When, in the middle of 1967's 'summer of love', Goodman and Ginsberg shared a platform at the Dialectics of Liberation congress at London's Roundhouse, Ginsberg concluded his speech on 'Consciousness and Practical Action' with an admiring reference to an idea Goodman had recently promoted, a variation on his longstanding interest in the concept of a universal basic income. Ginsberg enthusiastically summarized it thus:

> Goodman's suggestion: applying immediate social welfare ideals and principles – *pay* people to live in the country – like people on New York welfare. Give them the same money … That'll depopulate New York, remove the pressure on New York, straighten many heads out, calm everybody down to some extent. … And also save all the giant bureaucracy costs of the city. (Ginsberg, 1968, p. 7)

Furthermore, Ginsberg's concern throughout his speech with balancing the principles of 'autonomy' and 'community' seemed to fit closely with the decentralizing anarchist philosophy of Goodman, while Ginsberg's insistence that 'the only thing that will allow each of us to create his or her Utopia is praxis' (p. 7) clearly contradicted the assertion made by Goodman in *Growing Up Absurd* that the Beats' emphasis on art and drugs left them lacking in 'ethical and political goals' (Goodman, 1961, p. 172).

However, despite such apparent closeness of ideology between Goodman and Ginsberg at this crucial sixties event, Goodman remained reluctant to fully acknowledge the Beats as allies. When he was interviewed by Iain Sinclair during the congress and asked for his opinion of the Beats, Goodman immediately dismissed Kerouac as 'a conceited person who can't write a line and who I've no interest to discuss whatever' (Sinclair, 2006, p. 43). On the other hand, he praised Ginsberg as 'a lovely person' whose psycho-political effort 'to revive a kind of bardic role for the poet, as a folk-speaker for a group … is very beautiful. … He serves as a catalyst whereby people get to touch one another and this is done without brutality and with an outpouring of affection' (pp. 43–44).

However, Goodman still found Ginsberg's poetry wanting: 'I think most of what he does is not good enough'. Overall, Goodman's most significant criticism of Ginsberg is that 'the crisis of modern people is one which requires more seriousness than Allen as yet dares to have. He's afraid of being serious' (p. 44).

What, then, should we make of Goodman's continued criticisms of the Beats, and especially his insistence that Ginsberg is not 'serious' enough? In part, I believe this reveals the way in which Goodman continues to view himself, even at the height of his sixties fame (and even as he was putting his own liberty at risk through his anti-draft activism) as fundamentally an outside observer on the counterculture. Furthermore, his emphasis on Ginsberg's lack of 'seriousness' is indicative of the way in which

he always straddled the boundary between radicalism and conservatism – a fact he acknowledged in the title of his final work of social criticism, *New Reformation: Notes of a Neolithic Conservative* (2010; orig. 1970).

However, Goodman's lack of appreciation for the playful side of the counterculture can also be linked to two further binaries. First, I want to return to Marianne DeKoven's valuable observation that the reason for the rapid decline in Goodman's academic reputation after the sixties is that his works fell on the 'wrong' side of the emerging divide between modernism and postmodernism, while the works of other sixties radicals such as Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari – whose interdisciplinary concern with philosophy, literature, psychology, educational reform and social criticism reflects Goodman's own interests – were increasingly privileged within academia because of their postmodern playfulness. Arguably, for example, Goodman's lifelong belief in anarchistic decentralization could be productively linked to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome; in both philosophies, a society is envisaged in which connections between individuals can spread out non-hierarchically in all directions. However, the writing style of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), in which the authors attempt to reflect the nature of their subject through an often playful, non-linear mode of writing, is entirely alien to the mode of Paul Goodman.

Secondly, we can plot the relationship between Ginsberg and Goodman on to the divide between 'hippies' and 'New Left' in the sixties. I am not arguing here that there is an absolute divide between psychedelically oriented hippies and politically oriented New Left; in many ways the most distinctive element of the sixties counterculture was the way in which these paired elements were able to merge into one another. However, it is instructive to note that in his own speech to the Dialectics of Liberation congress, Herbert Marcuse – one of the godfathers of the New Left – also criticizes the 'masquerade and clownery' of the 'Hippies', and explicitly separates this from what he calls the 'political element' of the counterculture which manifested itself in opposition to the Vietnam War (Marcuse, 1968, p. 190). Like Goodman's complaint that Ginsberg was 'afraid to be serious', Marcuse's dismissal of countercultural 'clownery' encapsulates the failure by some on the New Left to understand that there could be a transformative, political element to 'play'. In contrast, during his own interview with Iain Sinclair during the congress, Ginsberg talked of play as a political tactic, and the necessity of behaving in ways that are 'so distracting and delightful and mutually pleasurable that even the old-fashioned citizens will be too bemused to go back to the old habit patterns of thinking' (Sinclair, 2006, pp. 36–37).

The past and future of the sixties

Having shown how the different approaches taken by these elder statesmen of the alternative society reflect some of its internal conflicts and contradictions, I want to conclude this article by briefly highlighting two of the less obvious connections between Goodman and the Beats, which allow us to further historicize sixties counterculture by making links to its past and future. The first of these involves the way in which the sixties drew on the nineteenth-century countercultures of British Romanticism and American Transcendentalism, while the second concerns the way in which the sixties, as configured by both Goodman and Ginsberg, enabled an ecological understanding of the human situation which grew stronger in succeeding decades, and thus gave birth to modern Green politics.

Goodman alludes in *Growing Up Absurd* to the nineteenth-century origins of the Beat movement and incipient sixties counterculture; during 'the early Romantic Movement', Goodman writes, '[h]uman nature unmistakably demanded liberty, equality, and fraternity – and every man [was] a philosopher and poet' (1961, pp. 6–7). Meanwhile, in the *Los Angeles Free Press* obituary, Goodman himself is described as 'an urban version of the 19th Century American anarchist Thoreau' (Ponte, 1972), and as we have just seen, Goodman's critical belief that the Beats were ignorant of 'the academic culture' was tempered by his 'delight' at hearing Ginsberg 'boast of going to Walt Whitman's house'. In fact, however, Ginsberg's visit to Whitman's house was just one of many pilgrimages he made throughout his life to sites associated with the Romantic and Transcendentalist writers who inspired him (Walker, 2013a, 2013b). Furthermore, Ginsberg was exceptionally knowledgeable about the life and work not only of his 'guru' William Blake, but also of the other Romantic poets; this was an interest which, in his role as 'central switchboard', he tirelessly promoted within sixties counterculture.

It is also significant that around the time of their participation in the Dialectics of Liberation congress in the summer of 1967, both Goodman and Ginsberg were drawing particular inspiration from Wordsworth. During a break from the congress, Ginsberg visited the Wye Valley and began to compose a major work entitled 'Wales Visitation', which was explicitly modelled on Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey', and which he proudly described as 'his first great big Wordsworthian nature poem' (Walker, 2013b, p. 209).

Goodman's own keen interest in Wordsworth is apparent in an essay written shortly before the congress, 'Two Points of Philosophy and an Example', where he refers to Wordsworth in relation to the nineteenth-century enclosure of common land (Goodman, 2011, p. 121), and more particularly in an essay he wrote in 1968 entitled 'Wordsworth's Poems'. In this piece, Goodman undertakes detailed analysis of several Wordsworth poems, making links between the Wordsworthian 'moment' and Freud's 'return of the repressed', and reflects on the way in which the poetry of Wordsworth has become a comfort to him following the death of his son in a hiking accident, an event that occurred immediately after Goodman's return from the Dialectics of Liberation congress (Goodman, 2011, pp. 245–248).

While Ginsberg and Goodman jointly reveal the strong Romantic inheritance of the sixties, their work also makes apparent one of the most significant contributions of sixties counterculture to future generations, i.e. ecological thinking and what would soon be called Green politics. It is noticeable that whenever Ginsberg refers to Goodman, including within the 1968 interview in which he calls him one of 'the psychic heroes of America', it is Goodman's ecological thinking that impresses him the most (Ginsberg, 2001, p. 190). It is also clear, from a letter Ginsberg wrote to environmentalist and fellow Beat writer Gary Snyder, that it was the ecologically focused speeches of Paul Goodman and Gregory Bateson at the congress (both in Cooper, 1968) that inspired the focus in 'Wales Visitation' on 'Ecology, / the wisdom of earthly relations' (Morgan, 2009, p. 93; see also pp. 112–113).

Thus, reading Ginsberg's 'great big Wordsworthian nature poem' reveals the Romantic inheritance of sixties counterculture but also its ecological contribution to the future. Finally, despite the differences between Goodman and the Beats, Goodman's presence can be discovered within both the Wordsworthian and ecological

aspects of Ginsberg's poem, so that these two elder statesmen of the counterculture can be found alongside one another, looking forwards and backwards from the sixties.

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Notes on contributor

Luke Walker is an interdisciplinary scholar whose main research interests revolve around the links between Romanticism and subsequent countercultures. His PhD, 'William Blake in the 1960s: Counterculture and Radical Reception', was completed at the University of Sussex in 2015, and he has published several articles on the influence of Blake and Wordsworth on the poetry of Allen Ginsberg. Further articles are forthcoming shortly on the impact of the American Beats on British poetry, and on the three-way relationship between Blake, the Beats and Bob Dylan. Luke's other research interests include the influence of Gnosticism on the Beats, the relationship between Romanticism and Buddhism, and the influence of William Blake on contemporary children's literature.

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