

From ‘bisexual’ to ‘queer’: the radical sexuality of Paul Goodman

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This article explores the nature of Paul Goodman’s sexuality within his historical context, arguing that his radical queerness influenced his social and political radicalism in important ways. His unrepentant homosexuality allowed him to identify as a social rebel, and it also broadened his understanding of the human condition. His visibility as a self-identified ‘queer’ provided a model for the early 1970s American gay liberation movement. Goodman’s conservative attitudes about gender, however, also encouraged the sexism found in many 1960s American social movements.

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At the heart of Paul Goodman’s sexuality was a stark contradiction. On the one hand, he was heterosexually married (twice), and, by most accounts, a devoted father and family man. His attitudes about gender and women were conformist, even conservative, for his time. On the other hand, he cruised men for sex compulsively, relentlessly and joyfully throughout his adult life. He was an open, unapologetic sex radical at a time when American society had little tolerance for homosexuality.

Goodman’s basic contradiction – married family man and lustful gay cruiser – wasn’t all that unusual in the USA during the 1950s and 1960s. Todd Haynes’ film *Far from Heaven* (2002) memorably portrayed a 1950s man-in-a-grey-flannel-suit with a wife and children, who prowled public parks at night seeking sex with men. But that film’s stereotype of a guilt-ridden, dishonest, tragic gay man living a secret double life doesn’t fit Paul Goodman. Goodman’s openness about his sexuality was highly unusual in these decades when homosexuality was outlawed, psychologists considered it a mental illness and the US Federal government deemed lesbians and gay men ‘security risks’ unsuitable for government employment (Loftin, 2012). Goodman, in contrast, wrote and published about his same-sex affairs, talked about them on television and even badgered his friends, colleagues and students with tales of his sexual adventures. His astounding brazenness is illustrated in a 1956 passage from his published diary *Five Years*:

I see an attractive fellow far off, but as I approach along the beach I see he’s with his wife, to my no small frustration. She smiles at me, ... I say, ‘Stop grinning at me Why don’t you fly a kite and lose yourself, so him and me can be men together and end up sucking off?’ (Goodman, 1966, pp. 67–68)

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(The suggestion was rejected, he reported, less than politely.) Elsewhere, he wrote that he had

cruised rich, poor, middle class, and petit bourgeois; black, white, yellow, and brown; scholars, jocks, Gentlemen C's, and dropouts; farmers, seamen, railroad men, heavy industry, light manufacturing, communications, business, and finance; civilians, soldiers and sailors, and once or twice cops. (Goodman, 1994, p. 109)

His lust for men was a central preoccupation of his life. It is difficult to find any contemporary American intellectual who so freely, proudly and publicly boasted of his same-sex affairs (aside from Allen Ginsberg, perhaps).

Goodman didn't like the word 'gay', however, preferring 'bisexual' and 'queer' at different moments in his life. 'Gay' was a still hip, insider term in post-World War II America – more whimsical, playful and camp than the dreary, clinical 'homosexual' (Loftin, 2012). But for Goodman, the word 'gay' reeked of orthodoxy and establishmentarianism. 'Gay' people had, in his view, created their own version of an 'establishment' that replicated many of mainstream society's dehumanizing tendencies. He wrote, 'In their in-group, Gay Society, homosexuals can get to be fantastically snobbish and a-political or reactionary' (Goodman, 1994, p. 109). Thus, despite Goodman's unapologetic enthusiasm for having sex with men, he felt as alienated from 'gay society' as he did from mainstream society.

He was similarly dismissive of the early 1970s Gay Liberation movement. Goodman worried that these young gay activists were too narrowly focused on their own cause at the expense of deeper root issues. He urged gay activists to make alliances with other civil rights and peace activists. Anti-gay prejudice, he suggested, was merely symptomatic of a broader crisis of confidence in American society. 'What we need is not defiant pride and self-consciousness, but social space to live and breathe', he wrote in 1969 – sounding more like a mild-mannered 1950s 'homophile' than a radical Gay Liberationist. 'The Gay Liberation people have finally gotten the message of indivisible freedom, but they have the usual fanaticism of the Movement', he added (Goodman, 1994, p. 109). Like 'gay society' more generally, Goodman worried that Gay Liberation activists were creating their own orthodoxies and 'establishment' at the expense of personal freedom and creativity.

For Goodman, the word 'bisexual' better captured the duality of his sexual life compared to 'gay'. Bisexuality, however, is a complicated concept historically and culturally. Few people proclaim it as an identity, yet behaviourally, bisexuality is widespread. Goodman interpreted his own sexuality through a largely Freudian lens. He believed his bisexuality a stunted dimension of his sexual development, writing: 'as a male, the homosexual part of one's character is a survival of early adolescence' (Goodman, 1994, p. 107). Goodman relied heavily on Freudian concepts such as narcissism, infantilism or neurosis when analysing his sexuality, yet he rejected the stigma and shame that usually accompanied these concepts. Goodman never saw his sexuality as a defect, going against the grain of American psychology in these years.

In his writings, Goodman, surprisingly, ignored the pioneering research of Alfred Kinsey. Kinsey became the USA's top sex expert after the popular success of his 1948 book *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. Kinsey, like Freud, emphasized the frequency of bisexual behaviour, reporting that over one-third of his American male

research subjects reported sexual experiences with other men, even though only 4% were 'exclusively' homosexual. Kinsey created his famous 'Kinsey Scale' to rank his subjects along a spectrum of bisexuality, with '0' being exclusively heterosexual and '6' exclusively homosexual (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948). Kinsey would probably have ranked Goodman a '4' on his scale: primarily homosexual, but with more than incidental heterosexual experiences. In his writings Goodman's descriptions of sex with women are laden with a sense of dread, anxiety and failure that is lacking in his gleeful accounts of sex with men. But he also described feeling genuine attraction to women at times, even if his fundamental drive was towards men (Goodman, 1966; Stoehr, 1994, p. 3).

By the 1960s, Goodman increasingly used the term 'queer' rather than 'bisexual' to describe himself, deliberately casting himself as an outsider and social rebel, not *merely* someone who had sex with both men and women. The label 'queer' gave him a sense of solidarity with other oppressed groups. He referred to himself as 'queer', for example, when he appeared on British television in 1967 with beat poet Allen Ginsberg and Black Power leader Stokely Carmichael. Goodman tried, unsuccessfully, to convince Carmichael that being 'queer' in American society marginalized him in a comparable manner to African-Americans (Lee, 2011).

Goodman similarly emphasized his solidarity with African-Americans a few years later when he opened his essay 'Being Queer' with the provocative line, 'In essential ways, my homosexual needs have made me a nigger'. His sexuality had made him formally subordinate, he wrote, and 'subject to arbitrary brutality from citizens and the police' (Goodman, 1994, p. 105; see also Goodman, 1962a, p. 164; Goodman, 1970, p. 194). In the late 1960s, the incendiary 'n-word' crept into a variety of radical manifestos, reflecting the heated political rhetoric of the era (see Farber, 1969). Like 'nigger', 'queer' in the 1960s carried overtones of violence, exclusion, bigotry and outright hatred. Goodman called himself 'queer' long before the term became fashionable during the 1990s in academic and activist circles as a more inclusive, flexible alternative identity to 'gay' or 'lesbian'. 'Queer' was still a fighting term, akin to 'faggot'.

Goodman's understanding of himself as a 'queer' (that is, as a sexual outcast and rebel) was central to his broader anarchic-pacifistic ideology and critique of American society. His male affairs, he argued, gave him a more authentic understanding of himself and a greater appreciation for the diversity of humanity. Gay sex's universality freed him from racism, he claimed, and its messiness from middle class banality (Goodman, 1994, p. 113). In his diary, he noted: 'I think my homosexual needs, involving rough company, catch-as-catch-can chances, and dirty practices, got me out of a lot of snobbery', exposing him to different people, points of view and ways of living (Goodman, 1966, p. 247).

Although sexuality is not a major theme in Goodman's most influential political book, *Growing Up Absurd*, several passages in the book point to connections between Goodman's radical sexuality and his radical politics. Juvenile delinquency, he argued early in the book, for example, often stemmed from socially imposed sexual guilt. When parents shamed adolescents about their natural sexual curiosity, it created distrust between child and adult, and could fester into deeper social alienation (Goodman, 1960, pp. 38–39).

Considering Goodman's own sexuality, shame over homosexuality certainly figured into his analysis (see Goodman, 1962b, pp. 7–8). As he noted later in the

book, 'Among young people every kind of nonconformism in a contemporary tends to be thought of as homosexual, whether it be a passion for music or a passion for social justice' – implying that homosexuality occupied a central place in basic American conceptions of normal and different, right and wrong. Anxieties about homosexuality were so culturally engrained in American society that no one even noticed them, to the detriment of both the individual and society (Goodman, 1960, p. 128).

Towards the end of *Growing Up Absurd*, Goodman wrote that American society had been progressing towards greater sexual freedom, but that progress had stalled, leaving an 'unfinished sexual revolution' that had been 'strongly resisted by inherited prejudices, fears, and jealousies'. As a consequence, 'older children and adolescents ... are trapped by inconsistent rules, suffer because of excessive stimulation and inadequate discharge, and become preoccupied with sexual thoughts as if these were the whole of life' (Goodman, 1960, p. 225). This mass sexual neurosis, Goodman believed, lay at the heart of postwar America's sense of purposeless and alienation.

In a caustic review of *Growing Up Absurd*, Alfred Kazin wrote that Goodman's interest in juvenile delinquents seemed suspiciously driven by his sexual desires. In fact, Goodman freely admitted that his sexual attractions provided significant motivation and inspiration in his career and profession. To be *turned on*, and to be *open* to being turned on, he believed, made him a better thinker, a more engaged person, and more interested in other people than he otherwise would have been. Controversially, Goodman also believed that sexual attraction towards his students improved his teaching: 'The teacher–student relation is almost always erotic', he wrote (Goodman, 1994, p. 114), and stifling that eroticism inhibited the teacher and damaged the student. For Goodman, perhaps the greatest sin of the modern American education system was its puritanical refusal to realistically confront the sexual development of students, and instead imbue all discussion of sexuality with anxiety, fear and punishment (Goodman, 1962a, pp. 78–79). Even a wood shop class, he argued, could benefit from honest discussions of sexuality. Sawing, clamping and hammering have sexual undertones for adolescent males. Ignoring or repressing that sexual energy, he once wrote, caused the work to suffer (Goodman, 1966, p. 7). Given such attitudes, it is not surprising that Goodman was fired from several teaching jobs.

But what *is* surprising about Goodman's radical sexuality is how it existed alongside such conventional, mainstream attitudes about gender and women. Goodman wrote practically nothing about gender as a concept, or about women as a minority, in his books, which is remarkable considering how he tended to dart from one topic to another like a grasshopper in his writings, drawing connections between psychology, society, religion, politics, education and other realms of human knowledge. Somehow, in *dozens* of books, Goodman mostly ignored women. Goodman's world is decidedly male, so naturally patriarchal that gender need not even be addressed. This is especially surprising, considering the rise of second-wave feminism in the USA throughout the 1960s. Perhaps Goodman's powerful attraction to men blinded him to the existence of women as a group.

In *Growing Up Absurd*, Goodman addressed the topic of women in a strikingly dismissive way. In a tacked-on paragraph at the end of the introduction, entirely in parentheses (as though he could barely be bothered to write such a paragraph), he explained: 'The problems I want to discuss in this book belong primarily, in our

society, to the boys; how to be useful and make something of oneself', he wrote. 'A girl does not *have* to, she is not expected to, "make something" of herself.' Instead, girls and women simply 'will have children' that will provide them all the meaning and sense of purpose in life they need. 'With this background, it is less important, for instance, what job an average young woman works at till she is married' (Goodman, 1960, p. 13). In a scene from the documentary film *Paul Goodman Changed My Life* (2011), an older woman reads this passage aloud in a bookstore, then wonders why she wasn't more offended by it in 1960 when she first read the book.

This is not to suggest Goodman wasn't a good teacher to female pupils, or that he wasn't a good father to his several daughters. By most accounts, he treated them fairly and equally. But his second marriage undoubtedly suffered from his hypocrisy over gender and sexuality. While he cruised for men, hours a day, year after year, he forbade his second wife any of the same freedoms. 'My wife does not want me sexually; she wants others', he wrote woefully in his diary. 'I do not let her go freely because it pains me and I will not let myself increase my own pain.' He was clearly aware of his hypocrisy, but just could not reconcile it – a striking failure of imagination considering his intellectual brilliance. 'I am destroying myself, for I am not, in the teeth of pain, nevertheless affirming the right state of things, the general freedom, including hers. Having so betrayed myself, I do not get a hard on' (Goodman, 1966, p. 149). No hard on, no inspiration.

Goodman's blind spot in relation to women also caused him to ignore completely the social plight of lesbians – another striking omission, considering his own enthusiasm for homosexuality. His few references to women seem to presume that they are all heterosexual; lesbians simply don't exist in his political analysis. Women exist only in relation to men.

Unfortunately, Goodman's gender bias seemed to rub off on many male New Left activists and countercultural radicals, who exhibited a comparable macho sexism amidst talk of peace, love and revolution. In Students for a Democratic Society and other organizations influenced by Goodman, for example, women were largely told to fetch coffee and make themselves sexually available to the male activists. Such attitudes drove many women to the feminist movement throughout the 1960s (Breines, 1989).

Despite this blind spot, however, Goodman's radical sexual openness, and its influence on the broader history of sexuality, has never been appreciated within the American LGBT community. His experiences as a 'queer' gave him unique insights into American society that inspired his highly influential call for social rebellion in *Growing Up Absurd* and other writings. Sexual hypocrisies pointed to other societal hypocrisies: economic, educational and political. By refusing to pass as a heterosexual, and by constructing that refusal as a basic human right, Goodman's life provided a model for Gay Liberation's widely adopted and highly successful 'coming out' strategy during the 1970s. By the time of the Stonewall riots in 1969, which signalled a broader acceptance within the gay community of his radical visibility, however, Goodman had grown tired, weary and cynical. As his sex drive decreased, so did his enthusiasm for life itself.

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