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Where goes a 'Neolithic conservative'?

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Paul Goodman's politics have long been misunderstood, in part because he was a startlingly original thinker. Buried in the cultural chaos of the 1960s, Goodman's legacy as a radical anarchist is often overlooked, or simply forgotten. What he meant by 'Neolithic conservatism' provides a key to remembering his significance. Against the shallow charge that his anarchism tended toward neo-conservativism, Goodman's critique of the New Left sheds light on the political fault-lines of his time and our own.

Keywords: Paul Goodman; anarchism; conservatism; 1960s; New Left; student movement

In 1970, two years before the end of his life, Paul Goodman published his last work of social criticism, *New Reformation: Notes of a Neolithic Conservative*. The book in many ways signaled the author's exhaustion at the end of the 1960s. For nearly a decade after *Growing Up Absurd* (1960), his signature contribution to the *Zeitgeist*, Goodman had worked tirelessly on behalf of the student and anti-war movements. He had delivered countless speeches, appeared at countless demonstrations, and helped advance the early agenda of the New Left as much as any American intellectual could. Yet by the late 1960s Goodman felt at a loss.

The collapse of the New Left into competing factions was part of the problem. But what most concerned Goodman was a broader erosion of faith in the American political tradition. In the latter years of the tumultuous decade, he wrote, everything from the content of political slogans to increasing violence on the streets lent credence to a sense of looming 'political, cultural, and religious crisis'. Many worried that there would be another American revolution, or at least another American bloodbath. 'So I look for a "New Reformation"', Goodman affirmed, not quite optimistically. Trapped in a political, cultural and religious maze guarded by 'Marxist-Leninist rhetoric' on one side and 'Law-and-Order rhetoric' on the other, he offered his final quixotic notes as a 'Neolithic conservative' (Goodman, 2010, p. 188).

In 2016, amidst another season of American political disarray and what might be a resurgence of 1960s-style populism, many may wonder what the aging social critic meant by his arcane label. Particularly for those who identify with 'the Left', Goodman's so-called Neolithic conservatism may sound dangerously close to neo-conservatism. Modern conservatism is bad enough, knee-jerk critics will say, and the Neolithic period was awfully long ago.

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Yet Goodman was nothing if not a shrewd psychologist. He knew what he was up to in all his books, and in *New Reformation* he anticipated this line of criticism to a T. 'Conservatives at present seem to want to go back to conditions that obtained in the administration of McKinley', he wrote.

> But when people are subject to universal social engineering and the biosphere itself is in danger, we need a more Neolithic conservatism. So I like maxims such as 'The right purpose of elementary schooling is to delay socialization' and 'Innovate in order to simplify, otherwise as sparingly as possible.' (Goodman, 2010, p. 181)

Contemporary 'liberals' may balk at these maxims as suspiciously out of date, if not outright objectionable – and they might be onto something, at least at first appearances. It is one of the peculiarities of Goodman's biography that he did not quite know at the end of his life that he sat on the fault-line of the neo-conservative moment. Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell and Norman Podhoretz – all younger New York Jewish intellectuals whom Goodman knew in passing – went on to have great influence in the cultural-political climate of the 1970s and 1980s. Yet Goodman died in 1972, just ahead of Richard Nixon's re-election. He did not live to see the rise of Reagan/Thatcherism, and he did not get to participate in the debates that dominated the aftermath of the sixties.

Had he lived longer, Goodman would have likely distinguished his ideas from neoconservatism with a few swift strokes of his pen. But he probably also would have still called himself a Neolithic conservative. What did he mean by this self-description, and what kind of conservative was he?

Ten years ago, after I finished my honors thesis on Goodman, I remember my advisor saying at the awards reception that she couldn't understand why I liked 'this guy who sounds so much like Ronald Reagan'. It was a telling remark. She was genuinely mystified by my interest, and by what the author of *Growing Up Absurd* amounted to in political retrospect. I didn't have a good answer at the time. But I've been thinking about her challenge ever since.

The essential starting point for answering Goodman's leftist critics is what his biographer Taylor Stoehr calls Goodman's 'attitude of anarchism'. As Goodman noted late in life,

> Anarchism is grounded in a rather definite proposition: that valuable behavior occurs by the free and direct response of individuals to the conditions presented by the historical environment … . Anarchists want to increase intrinsic functioning and diminish extrinsic power [since] behavior is more graceful, forceful, and discriminating without the intervention of the state, wardens, corporation executives, central planners, and university presidents. (Stoehr, 1994, p. 56)

As both a practical state of mind and a basis for political decision-making, Goodman favored anarchism because it privileged the individual over a smooth-operating society. It wasn't just abstract 'freedom' that mattered to him, but the quality of individual autonomy. He made this point clear in *Little Prayers and Finite Experience*, published shortly after his death in 1972:

> For me, the chief principle of anarchism is not freedom but autonomy, the ability to initiate a task and do it one's own way … . The theory is that my organism tends to actualize itself if I stand out of the way. It is an article of faith. (Stoehr, 1977, p. 30)

On one reading, these statements mark Goodman as an eccentric but still fellow traveler of the American Right, of the libertarian stripe in particular. It's worth acknowledging that there are certain congruencies which place Goodman alongside other critics of modern liberalism. As he wrote in *New Reformation*, 'Liberals want to progress, which means to up the rate of growth by political means. But if the background conditions are tolerable, society will probably progress anyway, for people have energy, desires, curiosity, and ingenuity' (Goodman, 2010, p. 181).

It is true that Goodman did not like the state. Seemingly targeting President Lyndon B. Johnson and the Great Society, he opined,

> We see that all of the resources of the State cannot educate a child, improve a neighborhood, and give dignity to an oppressed man. Sometimes it can open opportunities for people to do for themselves; but mostly it should stop standing in the way and doing damage and wasting wealth. (Goodman, 2010, p. 181)

Beyond this smoking gun, one of Goodman's last aphorisms (from *Little Prayers and Finite Experience*) seems to perfectly anticipate Margaret Thatcher: 'Society with a big S can do very little for people except to be tolerable, so they can go on about the more important business of life' (Stoehr, 1994, p. 50).

So there is that. But a closer reading of Goodman's life and work quickly dispels the view that he was simply a neo-con in the making. Indeed, his conservatism was far more elemental and American than a casual glance lets on. In a 1966 appearance on William F. Buckley's 'Firing Line', for example, Goodman had to correct the host and specify that, 'I'm a Jeffersonian'. He often wrote and spoke of 'defend[ing] and extend [ing] areas of liberty, locally, on the job, in the mores' (Goodman, 2010, p. 185). And as early as 1945 he had developed his own conception of libertarianism.

Not coincidentally, this came on the occasion of the first US war that Goodman opposed: World War II. *The May Pamphlet*, which he carried under his arm to the local draft board, was as incendiary a text as he ever published, and it would have deeply upset Ronald Reagan. '*Free action*', Goodman asserted as an open bisexual in full-tilt opposition to the war effort, '*is to live in present society as though it were a natural society*' (Stoehr, 1977, pp. 2–3). This is the core argument that would be present in all the books Goodman wrote over the next 25 years, including *New Reformation*. Unnatural conditions prevailed anywhere individual liberty was coerced or compromised. Yet, '[i]n the mixed society of coercion and nature, the characteristic act of libertarians is Drawing the Line, beyond which they cannot cooperate' (Stoehr, 1977, pp. 2–3).

Not surprisingly, Thoreau was another one of Goodman's early American heroes. As he distilled his formulation of civil disobedience 10 years before the first signs of the civil rights movement, '*Merely by continuing to exist and act in nature and freedom, the libertarian wins the victory, establishes the society; it is not necessary for him to be the victor over any one*' (Stoehr, 1977, pp. 2–3). Goodman also had a soft spot for George Washington, whom he praised as 'conservative in disposition but resolute in the disruptive action that has to be performed' (Goodman, 2010, p. 184). This fondness

for the American political tradition was much of what made Goodman's thinking seem so original during the 1960s. Yet his underlying ideas had not changed since the 1940s.

It took the 1940s and 1950s for Goodman to hone the voice that would stir millions in *Growing Up Absurd*. But even during the latter years of the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration, he was already building his case against what he alternately called 'the industrial machine', 'the Organized System' and 'the Whore of Babylon'. As he wrote in *The May Pamphlet*,

> The society that needs to buy up the products of its industry *is* in a state of continuous alarm: what time has *it* for vegetation, memory, reflection? And the 'high' standard of living thus purchased exists in emergency conditions that are preventive of any natural standard of living whatever … this habit of alarm, in the hearing of words and the consumption of commodities, lays people open to still further coercion in whatever direction, for a man is swept along. (Stoehr, 1977, p. 36)

Here is the essence of what divides Goodman from the neo-cons, the Reagan/Thatcherites, the Bushes, the TEA partiers, just about every member of the Republican Party (living or dead) and Donald Trump (not quite part of any human subgroup): he saw 'the modern industrial system' itself as a mistake. It was 'against reason, freedom and nature!', for it marked the descent of man into 'unnatural society', into a '[fixed] timetable and minute division of labor' (Stoehr, 1977, p. 5), into creeping anxiety, alienation and despair. It made individuals subject to new forms of hierarchical power, especially the state, over which they had no direct say or control. And it meant that communal life – what Goodman considered small 's' (i.e. 'natural') society – was gradually replaced by mass culture.

In Goodman's view, this is the tragedy that lies at the beginning of modern history. In addition to Jefferson and Thoreau, he admired and learned from Rousseau, Marx, Prince Kropotkin and Freud. Yet unlike his junior classmates at the City University of New York (including Kristol and Bell), Goodman never flirted with socialism in any of its authoritarian varieties. From the time he was 20 years old until his death, his politics were thoroughly and radically conservative in the American grain.

Near the end of his life, Goodman wrote that he 'sometimes calls [his outlook] "anarchism" and sometimes "neolithic conservatism"' (Stoehr, 1994, p. 7). Once he adopted the latter label in *New Reformation*, it seemed to stick. Yet we still wonder at it. Perhaps it's worth remembering that our own confusion is sometimes the basis for misunderstanding.

Historical context also helps clarify differences. Few denizens of the digital age know how to question the bountiful consumer economies we've learned to take for granted, much less the global web of transactions and distribution that seems all but necessary in the twenty-first century. But during the 1960s, people responded to Goodman's ideas with great fanfare.

In *Growing Up Absurd*, he addressed young people in particular. Drawing on the Gestalt theory he had been integrating with his anarchism since the late 1940s, Goodman ventured the sweeping social diagnosis that made him famous almost overnight. '*Growth, like any ongoing function*', he wrote, '*requires adequate objects in the environment* to meet the needs and capacities of the growing child, boy, youth, and young man, until he can better choose and make his own environment' (Goodman, 2012, p. 20). Without such

opportunities, the growing young person wallowed. His natural curiosity turned to inner frustration and isolation. Left unchecked, overt rage became a dominant symptom. (Although Goodman failed to include girls in his account of 'youth problems', he indirectly predicted third-wave feminism as a further example of outrage; he may or may not have acknowledged this later.)

Goodman was invited to write the book that became *Growing Up Absurd* at an opportune moment. In response to the wave of public interest in Beat poetry, films like 'Rebel without a Cause' and an apparent uptick of gang fights in New York, a small publisher asked him to write about 'juvenile delinquency', hoping that he would draft something speculative and sexy. Yet Goodman did not produce the book he was asked to write. As he informed his initial editor, and nearly 20 others who subsequently rejected his manuscript, he was not satisfied to assume, like most commentators, that American society was fundamentally sound. Instead, Goodman used this opportunity to draft a kind of magnum opus. His thesis, drawn from *The May Pamphlet* yet transformed for a mainstream audience, was that Americans lived in a sick society. What was clear at the beginning of the 1960s was that this society was losing the ability to mask its symptoms.

Subtitled *Problems of Youth in the Organized System*, Goodman's book in its basic tack was to look beneath the surface of 'juvenile delinquency' and other instances of so-called maladjustment. The cause of alienation, youthful and otherwise, he argued, was rooted in the structure of modern American society. As he put it in the opening pages to *Growing Up Absurd*, there was a connection between

> the Organized System of semi-monopolies, government, advertisers, etc., and the disaffection of the growing generation: Our abundant society is at present simply deficient in many of the most elementary objective opportunities and worth-while goals that could make growing up possible. (Goodman, 2012, p. 20)

In light of this basic disconnect, Goodman suggested reframing the current debate over youth unrest altogether:

> Perhaps there has *not* been a failure of communication. Perhaps the social message has been communicated clearly to the young men and is unacceptable. In this book I shall therefore ask, 'Socialization to what? to what dominant society and available culture?' And if this question is asked, we must at once ask the other question, 'Is the harmonious organization to which the young are inadequately socialized, perhaps against human nature, or not worthy of human nature, and *therefore* there is difficulty growing up?' (Goodman, 2012, p. 20, original emphasis)

The emphasis on human nature here was a key part of Goodman's argument and a central tenet of his anarchism/conservatism. Having been a student of Aristotle, Kant, Wilhelm Reich and the pragmatists William James and John Dewey, Goodman's conception was rooted in what he called 'the nature of things'. Yet it was also dynamic. 'There is a human nature', he wrote in *New Reformation*, 'and it is characteristic of that nature to go on making itself ever different' (Goodman, 2010, p. 193).

The engine of human nature's unfolding was what Goodman called 'creative adjustment'. In 'Novelty, Excitement, and Growth', his dense theoretical contribution to *Gestalt Therapy* (1951), he detailed some of the characteristics of creative adjustment, which were developed more concretely in *Growing Up Absurd*. All organisms,

all natures, Goodman argued, functioned by means of '[s]electing, initiating, shaping, in order to appropriate the novelty of the environment to itself … . Adjusting, because the organism's every living power is actualized only in its environment' (Stoehr, 1994, p. 51).

For there to be adequate adjustment between organism and environment, Goodman wrote, '[the] environment must be amenable to appropriation and selection; it must be plastic to be changed and meaningful to be known' (Stoehr, 1994, p. 51). *Therefore* there was difficulty growing up in late 1950s America. *Therefore* there was a swell of youthful discontent that would soon rock the nation.

In *Growing Up Absurd*, Goodman was at his most outspoken and prescient. Yet as the 1960s wore on, he found that the timbre of youth radicalism was increasingly out of tune with his own. What happened?

'In my opinion', Goodman wrote in a March 1966 column that was syndicated in 27 college newspapers, 'anarchic incidents like civil disobedience are essential parts of the democratic process (Goodman, 1967a). They are indispensable in the endless vigilance required for liberty, to keep the system of power approximate to the evolving moral and political sense of the community'. Such was the strength of his support for the student movement on Neolithic conservative grounds. But a year later, in *Like a Conquered Province* (1967b), he had this gripe to add: 'In their ignorance of American history, [the young] do not recognize that they are Congregationalists, town-meeting democrats, Jeffersonians, populists' (Goodman, 1967b, p. 122).

As Goodman's frustration with the New Left grew after 1966, he came to believe that many young radicals were acting in a moral and philosophic vacuum. This sense was amplified by the tragic death of his son in a mountain climbing accident near the family's New Hampshire home in 1967. The loss of Matty devastated Goodman, and it certainly diminished his faith in what the young might accomplish. Yet the wider student movement was also evidently imploding.

In various organizations, moderate goals and local concerns were being co-opted by Marxist-Leninists and others calling for violent revolution. Meanwhile, Vietnam burned, and President Nixon prepared to escalate the war and crack down on dissent. As Goodman summed up the situation in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1968,

> The problematic character of youthful anarchism at present comes from the fact that the young are alienated, have no world for them. Among revolutionary political philosophies, anarchism and pacifism alone do not thrive on alienation. They require a nature of things to give order. (Stoehr, 1977, p. 220)

This was the beginning of Goodman's requiem for the sixties. When he began writing *New Reformation* in early 1969, he was convinced that the problem of alienation permeated American society so deeply that it would take a New Reformation 'to purge and reform … the common faith' (Goodman, 2010, p. 33). In *Growing Up Absurd*, he had been modestly hopeful about the prospects for piecemeal reform. Yet in the final analysis, Goodman wrote, 'It is evident that, at present, we are not going to give up the mass faith in scientific technology that is the religion of modern times; and yet we cannot continue with it, as it has been perverted' (Goodman, 2010, p. 33).

This tragic sense was echoed in other books of the period, such as Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* (1970) and Daniel Bell's *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976). Yet Goodman's turn to religious language and imagery signified a different response to the modern predicament. 'As a conservative anarchist', he wrote,

> I want to derange as little as possible the powers that be; I am eager to sign off as soon as conditions are tolerable, so people can go back to the things that matter, their professions, sports, and friendships … . In principle I agree with the hippies. (Goodman, 2010, p. 189)

As he had lived most of his life, Paul Goodman died a sui generis conservative and a sui generis radical. As he wrote for the dust jacket of *Little Prayers and Finite Experience*, 'Goodman chooses (and is stuck with) experience that is concrete and limited; its terms are Here, Now, and Next, and Darkness beyond the horizon' (Stoehr, 1994, 9, p. 7).

We would be well-served to remember his example.

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