
# Decentralizing Power

## Paul Goodman's Social Criticism

TAYLOR STOEHR

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Paul Goodman, circa 1970

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# Introduction

Paul Goodman's years of public prominence coincided with the youth movement in America. From *Growing Up Absurd* (1960) to *New Reformation* (1970) the young gave him his subject, his audience, his troops. But if youth provided perspective, his angry eye ranged the entire social order, and his proposals for other ways of growing up covered not only schooling, work, and family life, but also religion, psychotherapy, the standard of living, media, community planning, racial justice, political activism — the list could go on. He had already written books in several of these areas.

*Growing Up Absurd* came at the right moment to heighten the self-consciousness of a new political constituency and help shape its program. He told the young that they were right to rebel against a society that did not give them meaningful work, sexual freedom, a community to be proud of, and food for the spirit. He reminded them that it had not always been that way. Part of the thrill in reading him was the recognition that we have a past to be worthy of — splendid ideas and works of art, stirring acts, glorious human beings. Much to deplore too, of course, though it hardly matched the "super power" or the nuclear warhead. Indignation and hope were the feelings he roused in the young.

Another side of Goodman's appeal was that he was so evidently not a member of the establishment, neither in grey flannels nor tweed jacket. He was a scruffy interloper who had somehow gotten hold of the microphone and was "telling it like it is." Some hostile reviewers were scandalized by his sympathy for roughnecks making free with other people's property, or his championing of sexual freedom for teenagers — but these were the very things that won him disciples. The young needed an adult world that reflected their experience of growing up, but also — and this was what Goodman gave them — permission to *be* young and enjoy it. Paradoxically, it also took many older readers aback to find Goodman writing so unabashedly about traditional ideals. Again and again he was described as "old-fashioned" and even "old-fashionedly moral," because he spoke of honor and faith and a sense of vocation. Indeed, the values he loved to mention — prudence, thrift, honesty, patriotism, temperance — sounded like the Boy Scout Oath, except that he included lust, curiosity, and a spirit that was ready to break the rules for the sake of an evident good.

These were Goodman's own habits and ideals, the fruit of fifty years of bohemian life in his beloved New York City. Raised fatherless in a home full of women (his father abandoned them before he was born, and his brother Percy left at 13), Goodman had been a pampered, brainy kid, given the best free education the city could provide. The family was Jewish, but not part of the wave of immigration from Eastern Europe. On the mother's side — and it was the matriarchal line that always held things together — they were Sephardim, from the low countries, already in the United States for over a century, and relatively prosperous before the father ran off. Despite their poverty they had petty bourgeois values and a proprietary air as they walked the streets of Washington Heights.

Graduating from City College in the early years of the Depression, Goodman lived with his older sister, who supported him while he attempted a literary career. He published a few stories, poems, essays, a play — one of which won a prize — and he even got some fan mail, but very little money.

In 1936, he was offered an assistantship at the University of Chicago, and he began work on his doctorate in philosophy. There he married and had his first child. But being bisexual, Goodman continued to cruise the parks and bars for young men. Although his wife did not object, university officials finally did. He was fired when he would not promise to keep his amorous pursuits off campus.

He might have kept his job if he had been willing to knuckle under, but by 1939, Goodman was homesick, and quite ready to return to Manhattan where the literary avant garde had at last "discovered" him. He finished his dissertation in a hurry (published fourteen years later as *The Structure of Literature)* but could not find a teaching job to support his little family.

Then came Pearl Harbor. When the editors of *Partisan Review* realized that their new film critic was not only a flagrant queer but also advocated draft dodging, his work stopped appearing in their pages. A few places kept publishing him, but soon he was relying on friends with little presses of their own to bring out his books. By 1950, *The Dead of Spring,* probably his best single work of fiction, had to be printed by subscription in David Dellinger's anarchist shop. Meanwhile, his wife had left him, he had remarried and fathered another child. (Neither of his marriages was legally ratified by the State.) They lived below the poverty line on his wife's wages as a secretary, augmented by what he could make teaching in the night school at New York University and one summer at Black Mountain College.

Goodman's antimilitarism brought him in touch with the anarchist groups of New York. He wrote for *Why?* and *Retort* as well as for Dwight Macdonald's *Politics,* the most important of the radical magazines grappling with the disintegration of the Old Left. Parts of both *Communitas* and "The May Pamphlet," Goodman's major political writing of the forties, first appeared in the anarchist press. During this period, he also had his fleeting contact with Wilhelm Reich, an event which launched him on his own self-psychoanalysis. An article that he wrote on Reich for *Politics* brought him in touch with Frederick and Lore Perls, and their friendship led in turn to the founding of the Gestalt therapy movement. It was Goodman rather than Perls who actually wrote the theoretical portion of *Gestalt Therapy* (1951), though the book was a genuine collaboration of ideas — just as *Communitas* (1947) had been with his brother Percival, who furnished the architectural expertise.

Up to this time, Goodman considered himself primarily an artist, but stories and poems poured out of him much faster than they got published. Although he had acquired a dedicated little audience, and was even nominated (by W. H. Auden) for an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Goodman finally gave up trying to blast his way into New York's literary establishment. He turned to psychotherapy as a way of making a living and for the next decade took private patients, ran groups, and held training sessions for the Gestalt Therapy Institute.

Yet he could not keep from writing. Four of Goodman's plays were produced in the fifties by the Living Theatre, for whom he was a kind of guru. *The Empire City,* a long comic epic that was doubtless the greatest achievement of his thirty years as a novelist, finally found a mainstream publisher in 1959, through the efforts of two young editors who ended up losing their jobs over it. But none of this brought money or fame. Meanwhile he contributed to the new political magazines *Dissent* and *Liberation* as well as to student publications like Harvard's *i.e., The Cambridge Review* that were beginning to crop up. By the end of the decade, he had become an unofficial editor of *Liberation,* welcomed by A. J. Muste, David Dellinger, Bayard Rustin, and other pacifist and civil rights leaders. Then came the invitation to write the book on juvenile delinquency that became *Growing Up Absurd.*

At the same time that his new book appeared, Goodman's publishers brought out a paperback edition of *Communitas,* the decentralist manual of community planning that he and his brother had written in the forties. In *Communitas* can be found the main

strands of what might be called his "anarchist ecology," elaborated further in the sixties but not essentially modified: abhorrence of waste and revulsion from American's commodity-ridden standard of living, rethinking the balance of urban and rural values, and insistence that decisions about technology be made on other than crudely commercial criteria.

Before long, it was apparent that Goodman's anarchism of the forties was precisely the New Left politics demanded by the young of the sixties. He reissued "The May Pamphlet" under the title *Drawing the Line,* adding an assessment of the current "Crisis and New Spirit." Written when he faced the draft during the Second World War, these fifteen-year-old essays wrestled with questions that were to face the young during the Vietnam War: At what point must the free citizen resist the violence of the State? What was the nature and force of the moral law that took precedence over the laws of society? In a crisis of legitimacy, what was the duty of the citizen?

Henceforth Goodman would publish at least a book a year — sometimes two or three — and he spoke on several campuses every week. It took four or five publishers to keep up with his social commentary and to drain the backlog of fiction, poems, diaries, plays, and literary criticism. Although he continued to give his work to *Liberation, Dissent,* and the "little magazines," he could now be read in many mainstream publications catering to liberal opinion. He was making money; his wife quit work and had another baby.

He became the first visiting fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies, the radical think-tank founded in 1963 to lobby policymakers in Washington. After that, he also made several semester-long visits to various universities, where he acted as gadfly-in-residence. When the "Free Speech Movement" erupted on the Berkeley campus, Goodman flew out to have a look for himself, and was invited to speak at one of its mass meetings. He was surprised by the anarchist character of the movement — its grassroots communication network, its "leaderless" steering committee, its sophisticated use of the general strike — and for a moment, he thought the situation, at least in Berkeley, was genuinely revolutionary. For the next few months, he was likely to receive phone calls at four a.m. from his "crazy young allies" wanting to discuss tactics with him.

But even at this point in the movement, early 1965, there were signs that his love affair with the students would not last. There can be little doubt that the "free university" experiments, at Berkeley and elsewhere, were largely inspired by Goodman's *Community of Scholars* (1962), just as his book on elementary level schooling, *Compulsory Mis-*

*education* (1964), heavily influenced the "free school" movement. Yet his harping on the historical lessons that were to be found in the model of the medieval university, and his badgering students to create alternative institutions on that model instead of simply "bringing down" the Ivory Tower, raised suspicions of bourgeois individualism in some quarters. Nonetheless, in the Spring of 1966, he became the first student-hired professor in the Experimental College at San Francisco State University.

Goodman summed up the case for such decentralized counter-institutions in the book he wrote at the Institute for Policy Studies, *People or Personnel* (1965), a compendium of practical proposals for down-scaling and humanizing the Organized System. He was no social Luddite, and there was nothing doctrinaire about his Utopia. "Decentralization is not lack of order or planning, but a kind of coordination that relies on different motives from top-down direction, standard rules, and extrinsic rewards like salary and status." Yet his argument was not based on a romantic view of human nature. On the contrary, "My experience is that most decentralists are crotchety and sceptical and tend rather to follow Aristotle than Rousseau. We must avoid concentration of power precisely because we *are* fallible; *quis custodiet custodes?* Democracy, Aristotle says, is to be preferred because it is the 'least evil' form of government, since it divides power among many."

By the middle of the sixties the Vietnam War had escalated enough to bring the rebelling campuses into direct confrontation with the government. Goodman's next book was *Like a Conquered Province: The Moral Ambiguity of America* (1966), which originated as a series of lectures for the Massey Lectures heard on the Canadian Broadcasting System. Goodman never focused exclusively on the Cold War or the conflict in Southeast Asia, but rather raised questions about the society that made such things possible: "It should be obvious by now that the vital conflict today is not between one bloc and another bloc, nor between Left and Right, but between a worldwide dehumanized system of things and human decency and perhaps survival. Yet only the young seem to recognize this — in remarkably identical language from Berkeley or Prague or Warsaw or Madrid. The people of my generation cannot see the woods for the trees. ... We do not know how to cope with the new technology, the economy of surplus, the fact of One World that makes national boundaries obsolete, the unworkability of traditional democracy. We must invent new forms."

By the spring of 1967, the radical young on the campuses had become the shock troops of the antiwar movement, which now included

many thousands of adult activists. Goodman's fellow editor at *Liberation,* Dave Dellinger, was co-ordinator of a series of protest marches and demonstrations. In April, at a huge rally in New York's Central Park the first mass burning of draft cards took place, organized by a group of Cornell University students including Goodman's son Mathew. Goodman joined Grace Paley and Karl Bissinger in forming the New York branch of Resist, which gave adult support and counsel to draft dodgers. One of the five indicted for such activity (in the famous Dr. Spock case) was his friend, Marc Raskin, at the Institute for Policy Studies, and Goodman was prepared for a similar fate.

His son Mathew's own prosecution for draft refusal seemed imminent that summer. Mathew had never registered, and the FBI was investigating his case. Father and son talked it over at the old farmhouse in northern New Hampshire which Goodman had purchased with the first proceeds from *Growing Up Absurd.* He hoped Mathew would choose to go into exile in Canada, as many draft resisters were doing, but that seemed unlikely. His son's character was a very stubborn one. Then, on August 8th, during a hiking and blueberry-picking party up one of the local peaks, Mathew was killed in an accidental fall.

Nothing Goodman did after that had the same meaning for him. A new recklessness entered his antiwar work, and he seemed to be courting arrest and jail through "aiding and abetting" the draft resisters.

As the 1968 elections approached, Goodman began to speak of a "crisis of legitimacy," and of a "new populism" in response to it, a wave of disgust sweeping over ordinary people, not just the young or the blacks or the poor. "Throw the rascals out!" was the mood he sensed. Perhaps so, though the country elected Richard Nixon. But it was not just the mood of the common man that was getting ugly, nor Goodman who was ready for a reckoning. Many young radicals who had come to the fore in the movement were now calling for violence to meet violence.

Goodman still hoped the "populist" masses were moving toward a new consensus, and tried to use his leverage in the media to encourage the Jeffersonianism that was America's native anarchist tradition. To the movement's vanguard this seemed nothing but a liberal ploy to blunt revolutionary zeal. His speeches began to be heckled and his writings vilified. When the New York *Times* published Goodman's little survey called "The Black Flag of Anarchism," which distinguished anarchist and Leninist strands in the SDS protests at Columbia, Murray Bookchin snapped at him, "How long do we have to endure ...

your senile posturing as the Establishment's 'spokesman' for anarchism in the United States?" (Bookchin later apologized.)

Goodman delighted in *ad hominem* polemics. It never threw him off his stride to be heckled, but he was angry and depressed as he saw the movement whipping itself up into romantic fantasies of insurrection. Even *Liberation* magazine had adopted this desperate rhetoric, so much so that Goodman decided to resign. Aside from Dellinger (and Sid Lens in Chicago) none of the original editors were left, and no one in the production collective even recognized him. They were busy pasting the next issue together when Goodman walked in and said he wanted his name off the masthead. Someone handed him a razor blade and told him to do it himself.

However deluded they were about the "revolutionary situation," Goodman did not cease hectoring the young about their historical moment. From the very beginning he had spoken of it as a religious phenomenon, in the tradition of Luther's denunciation of the Whore of Babylon. Goodman's last book of social commentary bore the title, *New Reformation: Notes of a Neolithic Conservative* (1970). Once again, he deplored the failure of scientists and professionals to live up to their responsibilities, but the young too were at fault. Their apocalyptic struggles to bring down the heavens were not justified by the times. He ended by telling the story of his son's brief pacifist career — modest, earnest, practical — so different from the ambitions of the new cadres of violence.

Goodman was nearing the end of his own life. He seemed to know this even before his first heart attack in 1971, and from now on each of his books ended with a little *apologia pro vita sua.* The "Notes of a Neolithic Conservative" were such, as was the "Defence of Poetry" in his next book, *Speaking and Language* (1971). He was summing up his work.

*Speaking and Language* culminated many years' work. He began collecting material for it in 1960 and had used several of his teaching semesters to think it through. A critique of the linguistic positivists on the one hand and the media mongers on the other, it was more important to him as a scholar and an artist than most of his social commentary. He was disappointed when both the literary and the academic establishment ignored his treatise — but what did he expect from the very persons he had attacked?

His last book brought these personal testimonies to their climax. In *Little Prayers and Finite Experience* (1972) a series of short poems were printed on the *verso* pages, while on the *recto* pages facing them appeared three essays on "how I think," reflections on his way of being

in the world — as one of its creatures, as a citizen, and as a spiritual being. The "little prayers" were poems he had written for himself in moments of crisis over a period of thirty-five years, coping "with the despair, horror, joy, or confusion of my existence." The essays distilled for others the lessons of that existence.

His "peasant anarchism," as he now called it, seemed to lie deep in his character. He hadn't changed his political ideas since he was a boy. No doubt this was partly because, in his own words, "I don't learn anything, but it is partly because political truth is so simple that a boy can see it with a frank look, namely: 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."

In his younger days — even a mere ten years earlier — he had breathed fiery thoughts. Were they the same thoughts today?

They seemed less hot to handle. "I am bemused," he wrote, "as I spell out this politics of mine, at the consistent package of conservative biases, the ideology of a peasant or a small entrepreneur who carries his office and capital under his hat":

> Localism, ruralism, face-to-face organization, distrust of planning, clinging to property, natural rights, historical privileges and immunities, letters to the editor that view with alarm, carrying on the family craft, piecemeal reforms, make do, and let me alone.
>
> No. It is not a possessive peasant nor a threatened small entrepreneur, but a small child who needs the security of routine. There is no father. Mother is away all day at work. He is self-reliant because he has to be. It is lonely, but nobody bugs him, and the sun is pouring through the window.
>
> ... Politically I want only that the children have bright eyes, the river be clean, food and sex be available, and nobody be pushed around. There must not be horrors that take me by the throat, so I can experience nothing; but it is indifferent to me what the Growth Rate is, or if some people are rich and others are poor, so long as they are *pauvres*, decently poor, and not *misérables* (Péguy's distinction). I myself never found that much difference between being very poor and modestly rich.
>
> Idolatry makes me uneasy. I don't like my country to be a Great Power. I am squeamish about masses of people enthusiastically building a New Society.

> The great conservative solutions are those that diminish tension by changing 2 percent of this and 4 percent of that. When they work, you don't notice them. Liberals like to solve a problem by adding on a new agency and throwing money at it, a ringing statement that the problem has been solved. Radicals like to go to the root, which is a terrible way of gardening, though it is sometimes sadly necessary in dentistry.

Such were his thoughts in the middle of his sixty-first year. He finished his book in April 1972, but it did not appear until after his final heart attack in August. Goodman was working on his *Collected Poems* when he died.

He had already published four volumes of poetry during the sixties, as well as two books of stories, a novel, three plays, and his journals. Of these only the novel and about half of the poems were actually written during the decade, but even so, combined with ten books of social thought, it was a tremendous output.

Perhaps it will be the poems, a few of the stories, and *The Empire City* that future generations will read, major works that will hold their own against time and fashion. But at this moment in our history, we need his decentralist ideas more than ever. In this new collection of his most acute and durable political writing, readers will recognize the spirit of indignation and hope Goodman first roused in 1960 with *Growing Up Absurd,* the book that set so much of the agenda for the Youth Movement. Many of Goodman's ideas are now part of our common political heritage, in the line from Jefferson through Garrison and Thoreau to Randolph Bourne — truths of human nature we remember and rethink at moments of impasse and crisis. We need to harken once again to his call for decentralization and local autonomy based in community life; to his urging a more livable balance of urban and rural values; to his reminder that technology properly belongs to moral philosophy, and not to the research and development teams of the corporations or the Pentagon; and to his critique of the lock-step educational system and the art-killing mass media, both so devoted to our wasteful standard of living. Whether we call these ideas radical or conservative, Goodman was right when he said that States and institutions interfere too much in people's lives, undermining initiative for the sake of soulless order and mindless material growth. We still have much to learn from him.

*Taylor Stoehr*
*Cambridge, Massachusetts,*
*October 1994*

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# Textual Note

The first essay in this collection, "Social Criticism," was found in Goodman's papers after his death, and has never been published. It was written in 1963, just before Goodman began his period in Washington as senior fellow of the new Institute for Policy Studies. He seems to have decided not to publish it because he now had hopes that social criticism—his own—might make a difference after all. Moreover, his essay had as one of its themes the question: "If things are as bad as the social critics say, why is there no widespread rebellion?," and just as he was finishing it, the upheaval of the sixties was beginning in earnest. The question was moot.

The other items have been published in various books and magazines, some of them rare and most of them long unavailable. Although they have been slightly edited in removing them from their original contexts, there has been no attempt here to update or streamline them.

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"Notes of a Neolithic Conservative": *New Reformation,* pp. 191-208.

# Social Criticism

## 1

In the past decade, there has accumulated a whole literature of sweeping critique of American institutions that has come to be called Social Criticism, and I shall try to locate some specific properties of this genre. I think it has peculiarities, different from other literature of protest, polemic, and satire. Much of it has been excellent and acute as sociology and moral philosophy; much of it has been immensely popular, including some pretty meretricious performances. There is no doubt that it has had an important influence on the cultural tone of the present, yet very little influence on apparent social and political behavior. This certainly merits examination. In this essay, I shall avoid mentioning particular works and authors, but just think of the ground covered, the multiplicity of targets! — the lonely crowd, the manufactured taste, the wasteful production, the tailfin cars, the pseudo-news, suburban emptiness, career anxiety, the paper-economy, the disillusionment of youth, the administered colleges, the conformist executive, the bureaucratic labor-union, the inhuman housing, the perverted use of sociology and psychology, the garrison state, the power-elite, the damaging motherhood, the poisoned land, the insidious advertising, the devolution of democracy. I stop at twenty.

In some of the authors, the peculiar "social criticism" quality, desperate sweeping attack on the general cultural tone, is part of a more specialist scientific analysis, including constructive suggestions, in economics and technology, sexology and pedagogy, ecology and city-planning, etc. And the criticism naturally aims at traditional objects of political and moral reform, at race-prejudice, poverty, political graft, bureaucratic stupidity, the arms race. Nevertheless we must explore how Social Criticism is different from scientific analysis and reform politics.

Conversely, there is nothing new about Social Criticism itself. Especially since the First World War, in such diverse writers as Benda and Ortega, or Mumford and Borsodi, or Freud, the tone is often very like our contemporary critique. In the preceding century, since the Industrial Revolution, much moral philosophy and even most of sociology, sounds somewhat like Social Criticism, in Coleridge, Ruskin,

Proudhon, Marx, Veblen. Earlier, the tone is, if anything, more unmistakable, among the satirists and *philosophes,* Voltaire, Swift, Rousseau, Mandeville, and so back to Erasmus and the Reformation, Rabelais and Cervantes, and the Millenarians and proto-reformers of the Middle Ages. The sentiment that it is not this-or-that that is wrong, but all of the way men go about living. But it is just in this historical perspective that we can notice how the present literature is unique.

## 2

Let's make a quick survey of other literatures of social protest. First there is the satire and invective of a Loyal Opposition. It is loyal in the sense that it accepts the existing social structure or State, but attacks the government or party in power. In muck-raking, however, this opposition is more outraged and desperate, for it is felt that the abuse includes all the available parties, not merely the one ostensibly in power. Muck-raking therefore verges easily into frankly revolutionary propaganda; it wants to subvert the State and change the social institutions. The question is, which institutions? How profound a change is necessary? Economy and politics? Law? Technology? Family and Morals? Science and Religion? Education and Child-Care?

In theory, frank revolutionists like Marx and Proudhon wanted rather total change, and they reasoned that changes in productive and legal relations would encompass all the other necessary changes. In fact, however, they assumed that enlightened men — enlightened according to the contemporary standard — industrialized or craftsmanlike, were solid stuff to make a revolution with. They really did not question the education, science, aesthetics, family morals, or technology of the times. The problem was, as Engels said, to replace the government over people by an administration of things.

But if we go back to the French Revolutionary writers, Voltaire, Rousseau, de Sade, we meet a more thoroughgoing dismay and a tone in some ways more like our own. For they felt that not only was the regime corrupt but it had corrupted the entire nature of man. But the *nature* of man was not corrupt; mankind was not inhuman but vicious; and the cure was Enlightenment itself, to make men rational, wholesome, and free. Accordingly, there was, until 1787, almost no overtly "revolutionary" writing (perhaps Paine); rather, the writers are busy with primitive anthropology, permissive pedagogy, the religion of reason, politics as a science, natural economics. The revolution was bound to occur; they were looking to a post-revolutionary reconstruction. It was as if, on the one hand, the thorough-