

Paul Goodman: Anarchist and Patriot

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For Chris Lanier

“THE WORST FEATURE of our present organized system of doing things,” Paul Goodman wrote in 1960, is “its blurring of the object.” Official speech was evasive about “crying objective needs,” such as education, meaningful work, and spaces for democratic self-government. “Everybody talks nice,” but public discussion refused to acknowledge what everyone knew. As a result, the young grew up in “a society in which one’s important problems are treated as nonexistent.” They were “early resigned” and stayed that way.

Honest and unafraid, Goodman wrote *Growing Up Absurd* in a colloquial style that recalled the great Anglo-American tradition of plain speech and pamphleteering. The book was “homespun of oatmeal gray,” as he titled one of his last collections of poetry. Goodman had a blunt eloquence that recalled William Cobbett, Tom Paine, the Populists, and William James, as he denounced a culture unworthy of Americans’ allegiance. He wrote too fast, sometimes churning out clotted prose that provoked ridicule from detractors. But at its best, his language conveyed simple truths that readers dared not utter lest they look unsophisticated—or because they could not admit how the organized system had broken their hearts. Goodman didn’t care if he seemed naive or sentimental. Who else among the New York intelligentsia upheld earnestness as a virtue? He believed that people still cared about fulfilling work, sociability, love of place, and faith in a world responsive to their strivings. It took courage to be utopian, to hope for a society “where people are not afraid to make friends.” It took greater courage to offer “dumb-bunny” solutions to the problems of everyday life. Proposals poured out in book after book: seer-suckers for nurses who wasted hours ironing starched white uniforms; a ban on cars in Manhattan; tiny neighborhood schools run at a fraction of public school budgets; and more. To Goodman, these were

commonsense projects a free people could agree on and pursue that very day. Gaining confidence in their own competence, citizens could then take on the democratization of the workplace and nuclear disarmament. Irving Howe observed in 1962 that “Goodman continues to write as if it were still possible to move people: perhaps not sufficiently or in sufficient numbers, yet with some sense that speech remains a power.”

The most original feature of *Growing Up Absurd* was its synthesis of anarchist utopianism with unabashed cultural conservatism. That combination bewildered many reviewers but no doubt appealed to the generation that founded both the Young Americans for Freedom and Students for a Democratic Society soon after the book's publication in 1960. SDS leader Carl Oglesby later claimed that conservative traditionalists and student radicals were “morally and politically coordinate.” Goodman had made a serious study of the Founders in the late fifties, and the Jeffersonian tradition figured prominently in all the social criticism he wrote from that point forward. “I rely heavily on the following method of argument,” he noted in his journal as he worked on his breakthrough book: “I make a list of unaccomplished or lost causes and accumulate them as a program for action. . . . The Missing Community of social stability is found by summing up the modern revolutionary aims that were in their time compromised and unfulfilled.” “Socially and psychologically,” this strategy “has the effect of making my radical rejection of the status quo seem spectacularly conservative. (In fact, I am conservative.)” Indeed he was. Reading George Washington's 1783 farewell letter to his army gave him the courage to write the book. He whistled “The Star-Spangled Banner” as he delivered the last chapter to his publisher.

To call Goodman one of the great cultural conservatives of the twentieth century will strike many as preposterous. After all, Goodman coauthored the founding document of gestalt therapy and championed Wilhelm Reich against the neo-Freudians; had two common-law wives and raised children while cruising New York's waterfront and hitting on virtually every young man he encountered;

and lost teaching jobs by insisting that faculty and administrators acknowledge his very public bisexuality. Even Black Mountain College sent him packing. Then there was the party in the 1950s at the apartment of a prominent psychiatrist when he started French-kissing with a German Shepherd dog, in a grotesque attempt to shock guests into recognition of their animal nature. (When the psychiatrist pulled the dog away and locked him in the bedroom, Goodman began to protest. "It's *my* dog, Paul," the host told him.) Jonathan Lee's documentary on Goodman makes clear how much this self-proclaimed "queer" mattered to gay men in the pre-Stonewall era. And of course he was an anarchist from the day he first read the Russian revolutionary Peter Kropotkin in the 1930s. Not a Marxist, not a sober social democrat, not a liberal "realist"—an anarchist. He opposed World War II, the Cold War, all wars. With Randolph Bourne he believed "War is the health of the State." Occupy Wall Street will be hard pressed to surpass the succinct statement of anarchist change in the 1945 *May Pamphlet* he wrote for his fellow war resisters: "A free society cannot be the substitution of a 'new order' for the old order; it is the extension of spheres of free action until they make up most of the social life."

This is hardly the life one associates with a conservative critic of modernity. Yet the chapters on "Work," "Patriotism," and "Faith" that form the moral center of *Growing Up Absurd* are a traditionalist's lament of loss and waste. Americans floundered without "manly" work, a love of country and place, and the grateful acceptance of a creaturely existence that alone made possible a creative life. The corruption of patriotism by state power especially disabled the young as they launched themselves into adulthood. In a patriotic culture children learned stories of civic heroism that gave them a confidence in their country's possibilities, and their own. Without that "patriotic opportunity," the young came with "a fatal emptiness to the humane culture of science, art, humanity, and God." "I am an anarchist and a patriot," he wrote in his journal in 1958—"a curious kind of thing."

Goodman's fierce indictment of "our abundant society" in the introduction to the book went to the heart of the matter.

It is lacking in enough man's work. It is lacking in honest public speech, and people are not taken seriously. It is lacking in the opportunity to be useful. It thwarts aptitude and creates stupidity. It corrupts ingenuous patriotism. It corrupts the fine arts. It shackles science. It dampens animal ardor. It discourages the religious convictions of Justification and Vocation, and it dims the sense that there is a Creation. It has no Honor. It has no Community.

Goodman was obtuse in thinking the maladies he diagnosed in his book were irrelevant to the experiences of girls and women. That was another side of his conservatism. But he was not obtuse in insisting that all those capitalized words mattered, and that their waning was a source of profound sadness for many Americans. "Tradition has been broken, yet there is no standard to affirm. Culture becomes eclectic, sensational, or phony."



Forgotten for decades, *Growing Up Absurd* was from the time of its publication until well into the 1970s a fixture in the libraries of aspiring intellectuals and young professionals living in college towns and still-affordable urban neighborhoods. Half a million copies of the book sold by the time Goodman died of a heart attack in 1972 at age sixty. It stood on shelves alongside other books the postwar "paperback revolution" made available to readers seeking to understand the roots of modern domination and the resources available to resist it. There, stacked on plywood planks laid down on cinderblocks, were Arendt's *Eichmann and Jerusalem* and *On Revolution*, Norman O. Brown's *Life against Death*, Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*, Arnold Kauffman's existentialism anthology, Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*, and an edition of the young Marx. Those with theological leanings found room for Niebuhr, Tillich, and Buber. Marcuse, Mills, and Chomsky soon claimed a place on the shelves of leftists seeking a more incisive critique of advanced capitalism, alongside James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Starting

in the 1980s, those paperbacks would be swept away—replaced by translations of the French structuralists, then the Western Marxists, then Foucault and Derrida, then Judith Butler. The books Goodman and his contemporaries wrote are literally devouring themselves a half century later, as acid turns their pages into dust. Who knows what the Kindles and iPads are saving for posterity? Perhaps Slavoj Žižek in the original Esperanto.

The most compelling works in that postwar canon voiced a passionate radical humanism curiously reminiscent of conservatives like Joseph Wood Krutch, the Southern Agrarians, and T. S. Eliot. After World War II, Daniel Bell observed, many former socialists concluded that “dehumanization” had superseded economic exploitation as the greatest threat to ordinary citizens, rendering older political categories obsolete. The task for radicals was to find some core of human nature unscarred by a murderous century as the foundation for a new politics. Dwight Macdonald anticipated much of what was to come in his 1946 essay, “The Root Is Man.” “We feel,” he wrote, “that the firmest ground from which to struggle for that human liberation which was the goal of the old Left is the ground not of History but of those nonhistorical values (truth, justice, love, etc.) which Marx has made unfashionable among socialists.” The search for a meaningful way of life was as important as a political program, maybe more so. “We must emphasize the emotions, the imagination, the moral feelings, the primacy of the individual human being, must restore the balance that has been broken by the hypertrophy of science in the last two centuries.” Camus argued in an essay of the same year, “Neither Victims nor Executioners,” that the cultivation of human decency was both the condition and goal of political action. The challenge was “to fight within History to preserve from History that part of man which is not its proper province.”

Such defenses of the human resounded in the manifestos of the early New Left. *Liberation's* “Tract for the Times” and the SDS’s “Port Huron Statement” joined the revival of direct democracy to a search for “a meaning in life that is personally authentic,” as Tom Hayden and friends put it. Mario Savio, the Berkeley Free Speech

Movement leader, gave voice to that radical humanism in his famous speech calling on students to throw their bodies on the gears of the Machine. We are not the “raw materials” of the knowledge industry, he shouted to the protesters outside Sproul Hall in 1964. “We’re human beings!”

Goodman spoke the same language. He launched his inquiry into the “problems of youth in the Organized System” with a polemic against social scientists who discarded the idea of human nature in the name of culture, delivering adolescents to a regime of “socialization” that wasted their talents and stunted genuine growth. “Socialization to what?” Goodman demanded. To the cynicism and indifference that pervaded schools, corporations, and state bureaucracies? The self-image of American society was of an “Apparently Closed Room” with a “rat race” at its center. All the talk of directing youthful discontent into productive channels had the same underlying message: “There are no alternatives.” It was time to ask “if the harmonious organization to which the young are inadequately socialized” was “against human nature, or not worthy of human nature.”



After a decade spent writing novels, poetry, plays, and criticism that no one read, Goodman received his big break in August 1959 with a \$500 advance for a book about juvenile delinquency. A social category invented after World War II by psychiatrists and police, juvenile delinquents sparked hysteria (the Kefauver hearings on comic books) and obsession (*Rebel without a Cause*, *West Side Story*)—or both (*The Wild One*). The manuscript Goodman produced by the end of October was rejected by the small firm that originally contracted the book, only to be snatched up by Random House editor Jacob Epstein on the recommendation of his friend Norman Podhoretz, who at age thirty had just taken over the editorship of *Commentary*. Podhoretz serialized three chapters in advance of the book’s publication, signaling the magazine’s revival as a forum for social criticism. *Growing Up Absurd* was “everything I wanted for the new *Commentary*, and more,” he later recalled: “it was the very

incarnation of the new spirit I had been hoping would be at work in the world, as it had been in me.”

Goodman wrote about “JDs” with great attentiveness and compassion, but *Growing Up Absurd* took on much more than juvenile delinquency. Readers expecting a sociology of troubled youth found instead an excoriating account of America’s spiritual desolation. Goodman’s powerful insight was that Organization Men, delinquents, and bohemian adventurers “On the Road” suffered together in an organized society that stifled their capacities as human beings. The elevation of consumption over satisfying work had fostered a base cynicism among Americans of all backgrounds. Seemingly at odds, the junior executive, the gang member, and the Beat were united in thinking that role-playing composed the sum total of human relations. An “organized system of reputations” had displaced older standards of excellence that challenged adolescents to master and surpass what they had inherited from previous generations. The young had lost the very idea of an “objective changeable world,” the “conviction that there is a Creation of the Six Days, a real world rather than a system of social rules that indeed are often arbitrary.”

The aspects of *Growing Up Absurd* that feel most dated today are those it shared with other social criticism of the period. David Reisman’s *Lonely Crowd*, William H. Whyte’s *Organization Man*, John Kenneth Galbraith’s *Affluent Society*, and Vance Packard’s *Hidden Persuaders* had popularized critiques of consumerism and white-collar conformism among the very people who had most benefited from the postwar boom. Like those books, *Growing Up Absurd* overestimated the extent of postwar prosperity and assumed a Fordist, mass-production economy was the logical end point of capitalist development. The problem with the organized system was that it functioned too well, in Goodman’s account, not that it left millions in desperate straits. In retrospect, the persistence of economic inequality during the boom years is clear; so is the *disorganization* of American capitalism relative to Western Europe and Japan (and now China). Goodman was too quick to dismiss labor unions as co-opted, too slow to see the gathering force of a resurgent, pseudopopulist

right. He was a religious seeker who returned again and again to Buber and Lao Tse but took no notice of the Christian revival surfacing around him in many forms, from Billy Graham's evangelicalism to the Catholic Left.

All of which is to say his was a book of its moment, above all in its assumption that the human nature in need of defending was male. A girl did not grow up absurd because she had a meaningful vocation ahead of her, Goodman asserted in the book's introduction. "She will have children, which is absolutely self-justifying, like any other natural or creative act." The problems of male youth were nonetheless "intensely interesting to women, for if the boys do not grow up to be men, where shall the women find men?" One of the most visible bisexuals in American history traded on the panic over "feminized" white-collar men that rattled Cold War culture, including Friedan's attack on the feminine mystique. "If the husband is running the rat race for the organized system," Goodman warned, "there is not much father for the children." Then he let the matter drop. It tells us a great deal about the times that Goodman only added a rationale for omitting girls and women at the last second, and even more that many of his male *and* female admirers from the sixties now shake their heads in astonishment that this exclusion passed them by unnoticed.

Goodman's book distinguished itself from other social criticism of the day in the account of "missed and compromised revolutions" that gave his work its historical ballast. The concluding chapter ran through a list of lost causes since the dawn of the modern age—from the Protestant ideal of vocation, republican self-government, and agrarianism to urban functionalism, workers' control of production, and Progressive education. The corruption of Progressive pedagogy especially appalled him; it figured in all his social criticism as a microcosm of an Enlightenment perverted into its opposite. Goodman read John Dewey as a radical betrayed by managerial liberals, his democratic theory recast as a strategy for "adjusting" youth to existing social roles. Such people had likewise transformed William James's pragmatism into an ideology of technocratic control. He

admitted the radical programs he admired were inconsistent, often at odds with one another, and each in its own way flawed. But the time had come to “achieve them all.” “We have no recourse to going back, there is nothing to go back to.”

There was no going back, yet Goodman the conservative wanted to go back. The realization of the “modern spirit”—of the entire radical agenda at once—was the way to recover the traditional community decimated by the organized system. His heroes Kropotkin and William Morris had seen radical decentralism as a means to recover a culture of mutuality, craft skills, and local autonomy they associated with medieval towns. Their recuperation of a precapitalist past anticipated the efforts by Dewey, Bourne, Thorstein Veblen, and Lewis Mumford to translate the republican ethic of craftsmanship into a modern idiom. Such ideas continued to shape the work of contemporaries Goodman may well have found uncongenial—Edmund Wilson, Dorothy Day, and Jane Jacobs—as well as his anarchist comrades Macdonald and Ivan Illich. The late historians Christopher Lasch and William Appleman Williams, as well as our contemporaries Wendell Berry and Marilynne Robinson, have passed on to us a radical traditionalism whose lineage Goodman knew well. Yet it’s inconceivable he would have joined many of these figures in a wholesale repudiation of the modern project. He was a modernist and a conservative, just as he was an anarchist and a patriot. The question remains: What exactly did Goodman think was the modern path to the past?



The long arc of Goodman’s career reveals his determination to answer that question by joining the decentralism of the Jeffersonian and anarchist traditions to psychotherapy, urban planning, educational reform, and professional ethics. As early as the 1945 *May Pamphlet*, he was including “group psychotherapy” in his “revolutionary program.” Two years later he and his architect brother Percival published *Communitas*, a manifesto for a utopian urbanism that regarded “community life as a continuous group-psychotherapy

in our sick society, in which just the anxieties and tensions of living together become the positive occasions to change people and release new energy altogether.” Harold Rosenberg, one of Goodman’s few advocates among the New York intellectuals, understood his friend was both pedagogue and therapist. In fact, Goodman’s proposal for a new university curriculum in *The Community of Scholars* culminated “in a course of group therapy for the senior year”—a successor of sorts to the required course in moral philosophy taught by college presidents in the early nineteenth century. “I envisage groups of less than ten for a two-hour weekly session,” Goodman told readers. “Of course such a course must not be called ‘psychology’ but preferably be put in the Humanities, where indeed it belongs.”

Although Goodman’s commitment to “group sesh” is less visible in *Growing Up Absurd*, that book drew deeply on his theoretical and practical involvement with psychotherapy in its assault on socialization. Taylor Stoehr’s *Here Now Next*—still the best study of Goodman—demonstrates the centrality of his 1951 book on gestalt theory (coauthored with Fritz Perls and Ralph Hefferline) for everything that followed. Goodman was chiefly responsible for the theoretical apparatus of *Gestalt Therapy*, which detailed an interactive model of the self reminiscent of James’s psychology. Human experience was at its best a continuing, dynamic process in which the individual probed and expanded the boundary separating the self and environment. Therapy itself was an exercise in testing boundaries, as therapist and patient cultivated awareness of the possibilities of the present situation and collaborated on practical measures to further individual autonomy. “The aware self does not have fixed boundaries,” he explained.

When Goodman lashed out at manipulative strategies for “adjusting” children to existing social roles or bemoaned a culture of role-playing, he was writing as “sociotherapist of the body politic,” in Stoehr’s words. The great tragedy of midcentury America, Goodman thought, was how few of its citizens imagined that “the society I live in is my own”—the title he used for a collection of open letters to public officials. Elders owed adolescents the chance to grab a

concrete task with both hands and mold their world more to their liking. That's what pushing the boundary was all about. He elaborated on this theme in *The Community of Scholars*: "There is no other way for them to grow up to be free citizens, to commence, except by discovering, in an earnest moment, that some portion of the objective culture is after all natively their own; it is usable by *them*."

Group therapy loomed large in Goodman's criticism as the modern equivalent of the Athenian agora, medieval university, and New England town meeting, its practitioners equipped with insights into humans' emotional and libidinal needs that those earlier face-to-face communities ignored. It was the site where Buber's unmediated "I-Thou" relationship flourished, a psychospiritual analogue to anarchism in its commitment to experimental self-fashioning and effective action. Yet if the premodern institutions Goodman admired worked—with all their exclusions—they did so precisely because they insisted participants set aside their interior, emotional lives as they entered into public deliberation. They were not patients in the civic arena, or therapists for that matter, but citizens, scholars, and neighbors. Goodman might well have argued that psychotherapy equipped people for self-government, but the public life often demands that "I" defer to "Thou" for the sake of the commonweal. Therapy may not always teach that discipline. Sadly, Goodman's own life provides a cautionary lesson on this score. His insatiable neediness drove away many friends and is often all too present on the printed page. His private journals, Rosenberg wrote, were "a chronicle of hunger" for sex, recognition, community, and transcendence. He regretted that Goodman reordered his notes for publication under thematic headings, wondering "how many of the notes belong under any but 'Myself.'"

Whatever its psychological benefits, group therapy could not bear the weight of Goodman's political expectations. The agora and town hall were explicitly political institutions in a way therapy groups are not. They were sites for factional contestation as well as deliberation, and operated in a larger landscape of social conflict and competition (with the army and the church, kings and merchants, slaves

and serfs). To make group therapy the engine of democratic renewal only exacerbated the problem that bedevils all anarchist thinking—how to extend “spheres of free action until they make up most of the social life” in the face of entrenched opposition.

The same might be said of Goodman’s courageous defense of professional ethics in his last work of social criticism in 1970. Written after the democratic promise of the early New Left curdled into a crude rhetoric of “revolution” and “armed resistance,” *The New Reformation* revealed a man weary of the young people he’d formerly embraced as his “crazy young allies,” tired of the endless round of protests and speeches, and simply burned out from the public life he’d lived since *Growing Up Absurd*. The contempt late-sixties students displayed for liberal learning, so different from the spirit of the early teach-ins and Free Speech Movement, left him sick at heart. “There was no knowledge” for such students, he concluded, “only the sociology of knowledge.”

Knowing the odds were against him, Goodman made one last attempt to reclaim the modern project as a way of reviving older communal values. His goal was not a revolutionary overthrow of the existing order but a “Reformation” of modernity comparable to Luther’s assault on Rome in the name of Christian principles. Here the Veblenian current implicit in his earlier writings on education reemerged as a full-throated defense of professionalism. To be faithful to their vocation and useful to their communities, professionals had to resist the subordination of their work to corporate and military agendas—and at the same time ignore demands that they put down their books and join the Revolution. Professionals had come to assume for Goodman the role craftsmen and peasants played in earlier anarchist movements and that small farmers did for the Populists. Their organizations might yet serve as the craft guilds and granges of the twentieth century, modeling high standards and mutual aid for a society enthralled by power.

It was power that had deformed the professions, however, and indeed had constituted many of them—engineers, for example—in their modern form. Most professional organizations demanded a

monopoly on specialized knowledge indistinguishable from the technocratic claims Goodman denounced in business and government. Much of what he wanted from professionals was in fact the ethic of an older middle class, which he extolled elsewhere for its “independence, initiative, scrupulous honesty, earnestness, utility, respect for thorough scholarship.” The new class of salaried professionals was a different animal altogether, the product of a society that subordinated individual virtue to the demands of centralized organization. Reformation of the professions required a more searching investigation of the intertwining of corporate power, expertise, and education.

Goodman’s appeal to professional integrity was a noble conclusion to his own career as a voice of public conscience. He wanted teachers to educate “for keeps,” scientists to pursue disinterested inquiry, and architects to interrogate the ethical assumptions in their functionalist designs. He had tried to speak plainly and honorably as an old-fashioned man of letters, and he expected professionals to do the same. Yet one closes *The New Reformation* with the sense that Goodman himself knew it was not enough. The author of *Growing Up Absurd* described himself as an “Angry Middle-Aged Man, disappointed but not resigned.” A decade later that disappointment had deepened.

Goodman’s last years were a time of despair. The death of his son from a hiking accident devastated him. Radical students ignored him in the rush to revolution. The hurricane of the sixties had blown away much of his career as a literary artist. He wrote his best poetry at the end but essentially gave up on fiction. His health declined, and then his heart gave way. In a posthumously published essay Goodman summed up his “crazy hope” for a world made “tolerable” for human life. “Politically I want only that the children have bright eyes, the river be clean, food and sex be available, and nobody be pushed around.”



“Everybody talks nice,” he’d complained in *Growing Up Absurd*. “At most there is some unruliness and dumb protest, and some

withdrawal.” There was a lot more unruliness after 1960, and as the movement exploded Goodman found himself in demand everywhere. Very important people wanted him to speak at very important forums on *The Problems of Youth*, popular magazines and newspapers solicited articles, he appeared on television, lectured at campuses, testified before school boards, joined one demonstration after another. Celebrity brought with it strange invitations, including one from the National Security Industrial Association—a consortium of arms manufacturers that asked him to speak at its October 1967 symposium in Washington on “Research and Development in the 1970s.” In a comic collision of events, the meeting took place just as antiwar protesters gathered in the capital. While his friends picketed outside locked doors, Goodman tore into his hosts as enemies of American democracy. “You are the military industrial [complex] of the United States, the most dangerous body of men at present in the world, for you not only implement our disastrous policies but are an overwhelming lobby for them, and you expand and rigidify the wrong use of brains, resources, and labor so that change becomes difficult.” He continued as the audience sat in stunned silence: “The best service you people could perform is rather rapidly to phase yourselves out, passing on your relevant knowledge to people better qualified, or reorganizing yourselves with entirely different sponsors and commitments, so that you learn to think and feel in a different way. Since you are most of the R&D [research and development] that there is, we cannot do without you as people, but we cannot do with you as you are.” Then the laughter and boeing began, along with scattered applause, but Goodman would not be stopped. The assembled napalm and bomb makers claimed they defended the American Way of Life, “but we believe, however, that that way of life is unnecessary, ugly, and un-American.” Shouts from the audience: “Who are ‘we’?” Goodman pressed on: “We are I and those people outside—we cannot condone your present operations; they should be wiped off the slate.”

Anarchist, patriot, conservative moralist, and champion of the modern, Paul Goodman was anything but nice.