

Paul Goodman's Anarchism Has Meaning Today

The Radical Decentralist Politics of Paul Goodman

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There is a 2011 documentary (directed by Jonathan Lee) titled, “*Paul Goodman Changed My Life*.” This was true for me and many others in the “sixties.” Paul Goodman (1911-1972) was the most well-known anarchist of the period (much better known at the time than was Murray Bookchin). He was widely influential in the student and anti-war movements. His books were extensively read. After his death, George Woodcock, the historian of anarchism, called him possibly “*the only truly seminal libertarian thinker in our generation.*” (quoted by editor in Goodman 2010; 13)

From my current perspective of revolutionary anarchism, I have come to see limitations and flaws in his views. But there remains a great deal of value in his work, for today’s anarchists and other radicals. He is not so well known now, but it is, I believe, well worth reviewing some of his key ideas.

There is no overall system of “Goodmanism” (unlike Bookchin’s efforts to create a total world-view). But central to Goodman’s thinking was what he called “*the anarchist principle.*” This was a belief grounded in historical evidence but also in humanistic faith. He thought that people, working in a face-to-face community, could solve problems with which they were directly in touch. They performed better without threats, coercion, external bosses, extrinsic rewards, top-down direction, and pre-set agendas. “*A man [note] is dependent on his mother Earth. We are forever dependent in the universe, but not on princes.*” (Goodman 1962a; 16)

“*Anarchism is grounded in a rather definite proposition: that valuable behavior occurs only by the free and direct response of individuals or voluntary groups to the conditions presented by the historical environment....Anarchists want to increase intrinsic functioning and diminish extrinsic power.*” (2011; 29)

Goodman defined centralization and decentralization as not just being big or being small, but as types of social organization. “*In a centralized enterprise, the function to be performed is the goal of the organization rather than of persons....The persons are personnel. Authority is top-down. Information is gathered from below in the field and is processed to be usable by those above; decisions are made in headquarters and... are transmitted downward by chain of command....The system was devised to discipline armies, to keep records, collect taxes, and perform bureaucratic functions and for certain types of mass production. It has now become pervasive.*”

“*The principle of decentralism is that people are engaged in a function and the organization is how they cooperate. Authority is delegated away from the top as much as possible and there are many accommodating centers of policy-making decision. Information is conveyed and discussed in face-to-face contacts. Each person...works at it in his own way according to his capacities. Groups arrange their own schedules. Historically, this system of voluntary association has yielded most of the values of civilization....*” (1965; 3-4)

He rejected the common argument that people had to be impossibly good for anarchism to work. On the contrary, he writes, anarchists believe that power corrupts, therefore no one is good enough to have power over other people. That is why we need decentralization, pluralism, participatory democracy, and checks-and-balances. “*The moral question is not whether men are ‘good enough’ for a type of social organization, but whether the type of organization is useful to develop the potentialities of intelligence, grace, and freedom in men.*” (1965; 19) (Note that he used “men” generally to mean people—or perhaps just men.)

For Goodman, freedom did not mean simply being left alone by the state (freedom-from), but the opportunity of individuals and groups to initiate, to make society, to be autonomous citizens (freedom-to). “*Civil liberty must mean the opportunity to initiate a policy, enterprise, or an*

idea....It cannot mean merely freedom from restraint....Such liberty will not be preserved, except in form." (1962a; 48) He ends *Communitas* with "the remarkable and thought-provoking sentence of Michelet, 'Initiation, education, and government—these are three synonymous words.'" (Goodman & Goodman 1990; 224)

Overall, he argued, "We are in a period of excessive centralization....In many functions this style is economically inefficient, technologically unnecessary, and humanly damaging. Therefore we might adopt a political maxim: to decentralize where, how, and how much [as] is expedient. But where, how, and how much are empirical questions. They require research and experimentation." (1965; 27)

Using his definition of "decentralism" to mean a form of radically-democratic, voluntary, and federalist self-organization (and denying that this means "anarchy" in the sense of chaos), Goodman writes, "...Most anarchists, like the anarcho-syndicalists or the community-anarchists, have not been 'anarchists' either, but decentralists." (1965; 6) Yet he continued to describe himself as an anarchist.

Goodman's Anarchism, Its Roots and Consequences

Goodman was of course strongly influenced by the classical anarchists. His book *Communitas* (1960), co-written with his brother Percival, is, in many ways, an updating of Peter Kropotkin's *Fields, Factories, and Workshops* (Kropotkin 1985). He was much influenced by the bioregionalist Lewis Mumford and by decentralists such as Ralph Borsodi. Thomas Jefferson's radically democratic vision (at least for white people) was important to Goodman. "Jefferson championed decentralization, for people can reasonably decide only what they know about intimately...transforming the town meeting into an experimental, self-improving unit....Any basic function could be the principle for the small political unity....Applied to industry, the unit is the soviet." (1962a; 69)

Goodman was greatly influenced by John Dewey, the great liberal, progressive educator, and advocate of decentralized community and industrial democracy. Goodman applied Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism to various fields.

He was also inspired by Karl Marx. "I found, again and again, that the conclusions I slowly and imperfectly arrived at were already fully and demonstrably...expressed by Karl Marx. So I too was a Marxist! I decided with pleasure....But as regards political action, on the other hand, I did not see...that the slogans of the Marxians, nor even of Marx, lead toward fraternal socialism [the absence of state or other coercive power], rather they lead away from it. Bakunin was better. Kropotkin I agree with." (1962; 34) On the relation between anarchism and Marxism, I am essentially in agreement with Goodman. (I also agree with his philosophical grounding in Dewey's pragmatism.)

Such a perspective led him to condemn much of the industrial capitalist society. His most well-known book, *Growing Up Absurd* (1962b), had a main message: that "youth problems" (delinquency, alienation, etc.) were not due to the youth but to the society they are growing into. Young people needed a worthwhile world in which they could explore their potential abilities and find their way into work and activities which were useful and creatively productive. Similarly, his voluminous writings on education (from elementary ages to graduate school) did not focus on improving the schools. Instead he advocating making society itself educative, in all its activities and occupations, so that young people could grow into being self-developing, society-making, subjects.

I am not going to discuss his political activities, which were mainly in the antiwar movement “*Any acts for peace...are in fact proposing a radical relaxing of centralized sovereignty and power as a way of organizing society. But this is anarchism.*” (1962c) For awhile he was in danger of being arrested for supporting draft refusers during the U.S.-Vietnam war.

He was bisexual but did not participate in any LGBT movement. His main contribution here was being a prominent writer who lived openly as a Gay person (for which he got fired from various teaching jobs).

He wrote little about the African-American liberation struggle (the major issue of the time, besides the war). He did point out that “*most of [the] progress toward civil rights so far has come from local action....The Negro organizations themselves have been decentrally coordinated.*” (1965; 13) (I am not covering his fiction writing, his poetry, or his psychological works—he was a co-founder of the psychotherapeutic school of Gestalt Therapy.) As he summarized, “*The hope in face-to-face community...is still the only truth I know.*” (1962a; ix)

A Libertarian Approach to Technology

Of all the topics Goodman discussed, the one which most affected me was his view of technology. One of the main arguments against anarchism was, and still is, that modern technology requires centralization, massive industries, stratification, and a strong state. This is the dominant view of liberalism and most varieties of Marxism. This is even though Marxism says that capitalists do not organize industry to be most efficient in making useful products, but organize it in the best way to produce surplus value (profits)—not the same thing at all. And that modern capitalists have recently reorganized industry into smaller factories and workplaces, in order to better control the workers.

Goodman demonstrated (to my satisfaction anyway) that industry could be reorganized to be consistent with a decentralized, communal, society—democratically self-managed—while still maintaining a comfortable level of living with plenty of free time. This required “*a selective attitude toward the technology....Nor is it the case, if we have regard to the whole output of social labor, that modern technical efficiency requires, or is indeed compatible with, the huge present concentrations of machinery beyond the understanding and control of small groups of workers.*” (1962a; 35-36)

“*For the first time in history we have...a surplus technology, a technology of free choice, that allows for the most widely various community-arrangements and ways of life....We could centralize or decentralize, concentrate population or scatter it.....If we want to combine town and country values in an agroindustrial way of life, we can do that. In large areas of our operation, we could go back to old-fashioned domestic industry with perhaps even a gain in efficiency, for small power is everywhere available, small machines are cheap and ingenious, and there are easy means to collect machined parts and centrally assemble them.*” (Goodman & Goodman 1990; 11–13)

“*I do not believe that an advanced technology necessarily involves... concentrated management, bureaucracy [and] alienation of labor....Quite the contrary,, these are by and large inefficient, unexperimental, uncritical, and discouraging to invention.*” (1962a; 109) *Self-determined workers and engaged citizens should decide, “This should be automated, this should be made in small plants, this by domestic power tools, this by hand, and this isn’t worth the trouble to make at all.’*” (1965; 38-39)

Communitas was originally written in 1947. This was before the modern ecology movement demonstrated the terrible “side effects” of centralized industrialization as organized by capitalism. It was before E. F. Schumacher’s “small-is-beautiful” movement which showed the possibilities of what has been called “alternate,” “appropriate,” or “liberatory” technology. It was before the Internet created the possibility of widespread coordination-from-below of units of small scale production.

In this area, Goodman’s work has been continued by the anarchist Kevin Carson (2010; 2016). He has updated Goodman’s analysis of the possibilities of a decentralized technology, based on the latest developments.

Weaknesses and Limitations

Probably the worst flaw in Goodman’s social criticism was his attitude toward women. This was often patronizing and condescending. In his *Growing Up Absurd* (1962b), he explained that the “problems of youth” he was discussing referred to the problems of boys and young men. Women, he claimed, already had meaningful and creative work in being wives and mothers. No doubt taking care of children and maintaining a home can be important and meaningful work—for women or men. It is mistaken, however, to see this work as completely fulfilling for a lifetime—and to be blind to the oppression of women. Of course most men were blind in this regard, especially before the “second wave” of feminism. However, Goodman was acquainted with the most advanced radical thought of his time and chose to not know better.

Goodman was not a standard liberal or state socialist, but he was a gradualist, pacifist, and reformist all the same. Except for occasional rhetorical flourishes, he did not advocate revolution. In his earliest writings he presented his program as implicitly revolutionary only in aim. Under conditions of prosperity, he argued, “*We may...act in a more piecemeal, educational, and thorough-going way...Our attack on the industrial system can be many sided and often indirect, to make it crash of its own weight rather than by frontal attack.*” (1962; 35)

Over decades he became less radical, partly due to his alienation from the radicalizing youth (for good and bad reasons). He told his brother he did not want to update *Communitas* because “*he no longer believed in schemes for improving the human condition.*” (Goodman & Goodman 1990; 225) Really speaking for himself, he wrote, “*I don’t think that there’s any anarchist thought at present which is interested in a total revolution of society.*” (1962c) Instead, he preferred “*conservative solutions...that diminish tensions by changing 2 percent of this and 4 percent of that.*” (2011; 100) He made proposals for subsidizing small farmers, for encouraging local television, for expanding workers’ rights in industry, to ban cars from Manhattan, to set up local children’s classes without schools, and so on.

Instead of the classical anarchist program of libertarian socialism (or communism), Goodman came to advocate a “mixed system” (1965). By this he meant a combination of consumer and producer cooperatives, small businesses, NGOs, state enterprises, and capitalist corporations. This implied the continuation of a capitalist market and state.

This reformism (by which I do not mean support for reforms but a belief that reforms are enough) was consistent with his life-long radical pacifism. Goodman had often been insightful when opposing imperialist wars or nuclear armament. But his pacifism led to opposition to revolution and wars of national liberation.

His gradualism and pacifism led to an estrangement from the radicalizing generation. At first he was influential due to his well-put opposition to the multiple evils of our society. But left students and youth were, unfortunately, influenced by the examples of Mao's China, Ho's Vietnam, and Castro's Cuba—that is, by Stalinist/state-capitalist regimes which appeared to be fighting U.S. imperialism. Goodman was completely correct in rejecting the authoritarianism of the developing new left. Yet he was wrong in opposing revolution—considering how total was the crisis and how unyielding the capitalist class remains in holding on to their wealth and power. His gradualism, reformism, and pacifism turned off the tens of thousands of young activists who were moving toward revolutionary politics. Since he was the most well-known anarchist at the time, this made it harder for anarchists to oppose the influence of Stalinism (including orthodox Trotskyism).

Part of the problem was that Goodman's politics solidified in the period of the capitalist boom after World War II. Like most others, he expected the underlying prosperity and stability to last indefinitely. He did not expect the return of the crisis-laden economic and social-political conditions of the pre-war period. His brother, Perceival, later recognized at least the ecological aspects of their misunderstanding. "*About a half-century later [after Communitas], what had seemed an everbrimming cornucopia threatens to run dry. Limits, not free choice, scarcity, not surplus, are now the facts that will condition our future.*" (Goodman & Goodman 1990; 226) This implies the need for a revolutionary, rather than reformist, anarchism.

Utopian Thinking

Goodman raised a method which he called "*utopian thinking*." This meant to look at social problems in their objective contexts, and to propose direct solutions which were technically practical—ignoring the obstacles of conventional politicians and conformist public opinion. Hopefully, this could pressure the authorities (if this was at all possible) and educate the people. It was to be "*direct: to start with things that need doing and to find available skill and labor willing to do them.*" (1965; 143) That might be part of a piecemeal, reformist, approach. But this method is also consistent with what has been called "non-reformist reforms" or "transitional demands" (such as solving unemployment and poverty by dividing all the work which needs to be done by all the available workers, and similarly dividing the wealth available for pay—the "sliding scale of wages and hours"—which is actually the principle of a socialist society). This approach could be part of a revolutionary program for the working class and all oppressed people.

Is a humanistic, radically-democratic, and libertarian-socialist revolution possible, in time to avert catastrophe? I don't know. However, referencing de Tocqueville on the French Revolution, Paul Goodman wrote at one point, "*It will be said that there is no time. Yes, probably. But let me cite a remark of Tocqueville. In his last work, L'Ancien Regime, he notes 'with terror,' as he says, how throughout the eighteenth century writer after writer and expert after expert pointed out that this and that detail of the Old Regime was unviable and could not possibly survive; added up, they proved that the entire Old Regime was doomed and must soon expire; and yet there was not a single [person] who foretold that there would be a mighty revolution.*" (2010; 122)

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