

Paul Goodman: Advocate of Community-Based Education

by Steve Welzer

Green Horizon Magazine, Spring 2007

[Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes below are taken from Paul Goodman's contribution to the discussion volume *Summerhill: For and Against* (Hart Publishing Company, New York, 1970), pages 205-222]

Few American writers were more prolific than Paul Goodman during the middle decades of the twentieth century, and few matched Goodman's scope of inquiry. His short stories, novels, poems, plays, and essays covered a wide range of subjects—politics, social theory, education, urban design, literary criticism, even psychotherapy.

Theodore Roszak, in *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1969), named Goodman as one of the primary influences on the young activists of that period. Goodman consistently paid close attention to the preoccupations, passions, and aspirations of the youthful dissidents, even if he didn't always approve of their agenda or modes of expression.

Goodman lectured at college campuses all around the country during the sixties and wrote articles that appeared widely in the youth-centric underground press. After 1968, as the student left was careening toward a reckless and hotheaded Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, Goodman was urging consideration of an alternative: a pacific, ecologically-aware, decentralized—some might now say "proto-Green"—form of anarchism.

He disapproved of the imprudence and fanaticism of many of the young radicals, but he was not surprised by it. He had earlier termed their conditions of adolescence "absurd" (*Growing Up Absurd*, 1960). Where is the basis for maturity, morality, and integrity, he asked, when so much of adult life typically revolves around the production of widgets for faceless masses in order to maximize profits?

Alternative modes of education and socialization

Goodman is well-remembered as a critic of the industrial state and its dispiriting system of "compulsory mis-education," but he is not often cited for his positive vision of alternative modes of education and socialization of the young. In this arena, as in all others, communitarianism was the bedrock of his perspective. (Vide: "[As a Gestalt therapist] he had no interest in helping his patients adjust to mass culture and corporate standards. If, as Goodman believed, neurosis is the response of a creative individual to a repressive or coercive situation, and if that situation was replaced by human community and mutual aid, then self-healing would become possible."—Marty Jezer in *Z Magazine*, May 1995).

Goodman recognized that organic education within the context of real community would be both more natural and more effective than the modern system of institutionalized schooling:

In all societies ... until quite recently, most education occurred incidentally. Adults did their work and other social tasks. The children were not excluded.

Incidental education takes place in community labor, master-apprentice arrangements, games ... Generally speaking, this incidental process suits the nature of learning better than direct teaching. The young experience cause and effect rather than pedagogic exercise. Reality is often complex, but every young person can take that reality in his own way, at his own time, according to his own interests and own initiative.

I have often spelled out this program ... and I have found no takers. Curiously, I get the most respectful, if wistful, attention at teachers colleges, even though what I propose is quite impossible under present administration ... However, in a general audience the response is incredulity. Against all evidence, people are convinced that what we are now doing must make sense or we wouldn't be doing it. It does not help if I point out that in dollars and cents it might be cheaper—and it would certainly be more productive—to eliminate most schools and have the community itself provide more of the education.

Integration of the young into the life of the community

Goodman's point was not just to "de-school society" nor to home-school. The former gives a negative framing to the issue, and the latter can result in isolation. Rather, Goodman asserted that participation by, contribution from, and integration of the young into the social/productive life of the community could most effectively yield the "educational" desiderata that our schools strive for but too often fail to achieve: knowledge, character, and esteem. Learning, he said, flows from interaction with adults and peers within a context of common, socially valued activity.

Goodman was discomfited that "in every advanced country, the school system has taken over a vast part of the educational functions of society."

Like jails and insane asylums, schools isolate society from its problems, whether in preventing crime, or in curing mental disease, or in bringing up the young. To a remarkable degree, the vital functions of growing up have become hermetically redefined in school terms ... The young do not know the adults who are involved in [the productive activities of society].

The old monkish invention of formal schooling is now used as universal social engineering. Society is conceived as a controlled system of personnel and transactions ... and the schools are the teaching machines for all personnel. There is no other way of entry for the young. But engineering in education is inefficient. It tries to program too much, to pre-structure syllabi and lesson-plans. Human behavior is strong, graceful, and discriminating only to the extent that, in concrete situations, it creates its own structures as it goes along. Things can be learned securely, quickly, and naturally only through coping.

Will children learn if they are not schooled?

Goodman acknowledged the influence of John Holt's work on his own thinking, especially in regard to the question of how children learn: "The archetype of successful incidental education is that of an infant learning to speak, a formidable intellectual achievement that is universally accomplished [within the micro-community of the household/extended family, where] the main conditions seem to be what we have been

describing: Activity is going on involving speaking; the infant participates; he is attended to and spoken to; he plays freely with his speech sounds; it is advantageous to *him* to make himself understood."

So learning occurs optimally in "real life" through social-task achievement and problem solving. The institutional simulations set up as part of "educational curricula" in schools are artificial and solipsistic. Under those conditions, students feel that their objective is to become expert in the academic process: "...the young discoverers are bound to discover what will get them past the College Board examinations ... The 'concept' which is developed in the classroom is not an act of intellect grasping the world, but is a method of adjustment to the classroom, the constricted seats, the schedule, the teacher's expectation, the boring subject-matter to which one must pay attention."

Requirement: a different value system

Community-based education requires that the work life of adults, as a matter of course, includes "apprentice attention time." Just as children most thrive within families where the parents give them real responsibilities, treat them as valued co-contributors, and help them to become such, so would the young learn best by having community members attend to the educational function organically within the course of everyday activity.

This implies a certain value system. In the production centers, "bottom line" efficiency would be sacrificed to the extent that adult workers make time to, in essence, nurture younger workers—through demonstrating, guiding, monitoring, appraising. Contrary to the values of mass urban-industrial-commercial society, integration of the youth and building of character should be among the objectives of work life, rather than just maximal production of things: "In technocracies like ours ... the function of long schooling is to keep the useless young *away* from [productive life]."

My own thinking [Goodman writes] is that:

- We must drastically cut back schooling because our extended tutelage is against nature and actually arrests growth.
- The effort to channel growing up according to a preconceived curriculum discourages the young and wastes many of the best of their powers to learn and cope.
- Schooling does not prepare for real performance; it is largely carried on for its own sake.
- Incidental education (taking part in the ongoing activities of society) should be the chief means of learning.
- The chief task of educators should be to see that the activities of society provide incidental education.
- On-the-job education is the quickest way to workers' management, which, in my opinion, is the only effective democracy.
- Our system of education, isolating as it does the young from the older generation, alienates the young.

Alienation of the young results in the kind of socialization difficulties Goodman covered extensively in *Growing Up Absurd*—as well as the loss of generational continuity-in-place we are finding to be a discomfiting characteristic of modern life. The young feel so little in the way of ties that the idea of establishing adult residency in their native community is a very low priority. Under these circumstances, once the children are grown, the family unit becomes hollowed out, increasingly just a dispersed network of individuals dependent upon long-distance transportation and communication

technologies to maintain any degree of affinity. This portends a qualitative change in family life that people are starting to recognize as highly problematic.

Summerhill as a model

Goodman lauded the Summerhill model, though with some reservations. A. S. Neill had published his seminal book about Summerhill in the same year that Goodman published *Growing Up Absurd*. Summerhill was a boarding school in England and Goodman thought that the participatory-democratic aspects of the experiment had as much to do with its success as the freedom aspects (freedom to attend or not attend classes):

A. S. Neill's Summerhill School, a recent form of progressive education, was a reaction against social-engineering. Neill reacted against the trend to "1984" as Orwell came to call it, against obedience, authoritarian rules, organizational role-playing instead of being, the destruction wrought by competition and grade-getting. Since going to class is for children in the immutable nature of things, Neill's making of attendance a matter of choice was a transformation of reality; and to the extent that there was authentic self-government at Summerhill and to the extent that small children were indeed given power, the charisma of all institutions was challenged.

I think Summerhill can be easily adapted to urban conditions. Probably, an even better model would be the Athenian pedagogue touring the city with his charges; but for this to work out, the streets and the working-places of the city would have to be made safer and more available.

Viable community a prerequisite

Paul Goodman said: let's get kids out of those school seats, out of those rows, out from within those institutional walls; let's liberate them from their social segregation and enable them to take their place as community members. A prerequisite, of course, is that there exist a viable community for them to contribute to and aspire to become a member of!

This implies that community-based education can and should become an integral aspect of the burgeoning Relocalization movement. In his article, "Localized Economics the Key for Green Development" (GHQ issue number 13, Fall 2006), Alexander Petroff writes: "Carefully directed local alternatives which provide employment opportunities for the local population also provide the basis for green and sustainable development." To that we can add: Relocalization is the key to providing the context within which socialization of the young once again becomes viewed as an organic process involving and benefiting citizens of all ages.