

Paul Goodman's Last Testament

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2012

A review of *New Reformation: Notes of a Neolithic Conservative* by Paul Goodman, PM Press, 194 pages, trade paperback, \$20.00

Although Paul Goodman established himself as one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century, by the end of his life the anarchist philosopher felt dissatisfied with the direction of the political movements his writings had inspired.

In *New Reformation: Notes of a Neolithic Conservative*, his last book of social criticism published two years before his death in 1972, Goodman attempted to resynthesize his theories with a wider scope, and address the problems he saw in the movements of his time. In many ways it was an update of his "May Pamphlet," a manifesto written in 1945.

In *New Reformation*, Goodman makes the argument that for much of society, youth in particular, science has become the new religion. "It is evident that...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," he writes in the Preface.

What he proposes is a "New Reformation," along the lines of the Protestant Reformation, to restore faith in the sciences.

Goodman begins his analysis from the perspective that much of this change must come from the sciences and professions themselves. If science is a religion for modern times, he argues, then "technology is a branch of moral philosophy, not of science." Technology's current place in the realm of the sciences, both in "the universities, in funding, and in the public mind," is a bastardized position, devoid of what it needs most: moral perspective.

Relying on technologists to enforce morality within their professional sphere makes sense not only from a utilitarian perspective, he assesses. The more over-used a technology gets, the less productive it ends up being, and from an environmental perspective, as well. In order to ensure the survival of ourselves, and the planet, a more responsible and modest approach to technology is necessary.

Goodman is quick to dismiss the idea that science and technology are "value-neutral," arguing that it is scientists and engineers, the creators of the technologies themselves, who are best equipped to judge the merits of what they create and the best ways to put them to use. While critics may claim that these ideas lead to non-egalitarian technocratic social structures, Goodman's idea of a new branch of science, which would focus on the responsible application of technology, makes sense in the context of the future anarchist society that Goodman envisioned.

In his ideal society, as explicated here, our existing hierarchical social structures are replaced by egalitarian guilds based on people's professions, and how they contribute best to society. Interestingly, he calls this sort of organizing, where professions are organized and make decisions about their work output, "guild socialism," though it is on par with what anarcho-syndicalists have not only envisioned, but practiced.

The emphasis of much of Goodman's writing is on youth and their social conditions, and in the second section of *New Reformation* he focuses on the problems of youth, exploring the causes of, and possible solutions to, the problems he perceives with the youth movement of the 1960s.

The problem, from his perspective, lies with the education system. Schools are less about education than they are about indoctrination; something youth of that era had come to realize, and ultimately reject. According to his critique, incidental learning offers better instruction than formal learning. "My bias," he writes, "is that 'teaching' is largely a delusion. People do learn by practice, but not much by academic exercises in an academic setting."

The solution, as Goodman saw it, was to put education back into real world settings, encouraging the natural inclination to learning through lived experience the way a formal education doesn't. "Our aim should be to multiply the paths of growing up, instead of narrowing the one existing school path," Goodman writes.

The education plan Goodman proposed involved, first shifting the purpose of elementary pedagogy, through age twelve, to "delay socialization, to protect children's free growth," to allow children to "learn to learn."

"They must be encouraged to guess and brainstorm rather than be tested on the right answers," he writes. Further, Goodman advocates the transforming of educators, away from enforcers of indoctrination, and towards enablers of education, as companions on the educational paths not as authoritarian rulers.

As children grew and could not only engage in enquiry and discussion, but contribute meaningfully to their society, the time was right for them to begin thinking about professions. Here, Goodman's model for the ideal anarchist society, organized into professional guilds, meshes perfectly with his ideas of anarchist education.

Instead of plodding the existing path from middle, to high school, to university, a robust system of internships and apprenticeships would exist where children would have the opportunity to first discover, and then pursue their life's calling.

One of Goodman's most important points is his emphasis on the importance of reading and the value of literature, not merely as a means of communication, but as one of the truly beautiful and valuable acts of human existence. For Goodman, there was a real fear that not just reading and literature were being co-opted, but that the whole of language itself was under threat.

"The most dangerous threat to humane letters," he writes, "[is that] language is reduced to be a technology of social engineering, with a barren conception of science and technology, and a collectivist conception of community. This tendency has been reinforced by government grants and academic appointments, and it controls the pedagogy in primary schools."

In order for language to be truly free, writing, and reading have to be brought out of the education system and into society where they can flourish naturally through active use.

In part three of *New Reformation* Goodman attempts to tie in all the theoretical ideas he has developed, with the realities of the present at the time in which he wrote. His examination focuses on the legitimacy of the state and society, but he also critiques the efforts of the student movement to rebel against both, and the legitimacy of those efforts.

Part of Goodman's critique of the contemporary youth movement of the 60s is that many were losing political perspective, and most had no sense of economics. While this is a harsh view when we take into account *The Port Huron Statement*, *On the Poverty of Student Life*, and numerous other radical critiques coming out of the student movements themselves, there is a cold rationality to Goodman's criticism.

What primarily discouraged him is that very few embraced anarchism, which Goodman saw as the only truly revolutionary path. "Of the political thought of the past century," Goodman writes, "only anarchism...the philosophy of institutions without the State and centrally organized violence--has consistently foreseen the big shapes and gross dangers of present advanced societies." Those that did call themselves anarchists had a "problematic character...[coming] from the fact that the young are alienated, have no world for them," he writes.

This leads them into a confused state, expressed in "their self-contradictory amalgam of anarchist and Leninist thoughts and tactics, often within the same group and in the same action."

Where this takes them is not towards the building of a new anarchist alternative to society, as Goodman would have liked to see them go. Instead, while "their frank and clear insight and their spontaneous gut feelings are anarchist," he writes, "...their alienation is Leninist, bent on seizing Power."

Goodman devotes the rest of this section to arguing for the anarchist alternative, specifically the anarchist-pacifist alternative, to Marxist-Leninist ideas generally, and to calls for armed struggle specifically.

In Goodman's anarchism, revolution is not merely about seizing power, but about doing away with power completely. For him, revolution "means the process by which the grip of authority is loosed, so that the functions of

life can go on freely, without direction or hindrance.” It is towards that end that he seeks to inspire readers in the remainder of this section.

As a whole, *New Reformation* is in many ways the culmination of Goodman’s writing, a synthesis of his ideas, tempered by both age and experience. With the revival of popular interest in his writing, many of his ideas are slowly gaining traction with a new audience.

As the Occupy movement ushers in the next upsurge of politically awakened youth, Goodman is well poised to take his place as one of the most important thinkers of the past century, and to influence yet another generation of radicals.

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Fifth Estate #387, Summer, 2012

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