

1 Feb 1997 Milano. PAUL GOODMAN

It is good news that the anarchist publishers Elèuthera have produced the volume of essays by Paul Goodman, Individuo e Comunità. I need to congratulate the translator, Guido Lagomarsino and the editor Pietro Adamo, on their achievement because Goodman's English (that of a self-conscious writer) is not necessarily the English best understood in England, quite apart from Italy).

For a writer to be accessible to readers, his or her work needs to be available, and this is what Pietro Adamo's collection achieves for Paul Goodman. It also draws attention to two important books of his in different fields which already exist in Italian translation. These are the important book on community planning, written in the war years with his brother Percival Goodman, Communitas: Means of Livelihood and Ways of Life, and the book that Goodman wrote with Frederick Perls and Ralph Hefferline, Gestalt Therapy. Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality, which is available in most European languages.

Paul Goodman, who was born in 1911 and died in 1972, was a New York poet, playwright, novelist and critic, who was also an educational thinker, a psycho-therapist, and advocate of homosexual liberation, long before this was fashionable, ...and an anarchist. He and his family lived in bohemian poverty for, not years but decades, until in the wave of American self-criticism at the end of the Eisenhower years, his book Growing Up Absurd (La Gioventù assurda) about the dilemmas of the young, made him a best-selling author and a media celebrity.

In my opinion, he handled this unexpected fame very well. We anarchist propagandists usually suffer from the absence of an audience and few of us have any experience of being given continual access to radio and television, the press and publishers. In the 1960s he produced book after book and became an idol for the bewildered young men of the student generation, involved in campaigns for civil rights and opposition to the US government's disastrous involvement in military adventures in Vietnam and in the bomb culture of the Cold War. No doubt they attracted him sexually, but they were rebuked by him for their glib authoritarian Marxist sloganising and romanticisation of violence.

Instant media reputations instantly evaporate, and by the time of his death Goodman was once again an unfashionable thinker, ready to be poured down

the 'Memory Hole' of Orwell's 1984. He would have disappeared from the world of available books, and consequently from the public memory, but for several unrelated things.

Perhaps the most important of these has been the endless energy of his literary executor and prospective biographer, Taylor Stoehr (professor of English at the University of Massachusetts in Boston). He has worked hard to keep Goodman's name before a series of reading publics in a variety of American journals and has succeeded to the astonishing extent of at least twelve books by Goodman now reprinted.

Very interestingly, from an anarchist point of view was an article published by Taylor Stoehr (Dissent, Fall 1990) on "Rereading Paul Goodman in the Nineties", where he points, in my view persuasively, to the continuing relevance of Goodman's ideas to that audience - somewhere out there - that you and I want to reach:

"Many of those ideas are now part of common knowledge and experience, as they were from the start part of common sense. They were never his creation or property - they were truths of human nature, traditional wisdom remembered at a moment of impasse. I am thinking of Goodman's anarchist call for decentralisation and local autonomy based in community life; his urging a more livable balance of urban and rural values; his reminder that technology properly belongs under the jurisdiction of moral philosophy and not the R&D (Research and Development) teams of the corporations or the Pentagon; his critique of the lockstep educational system and the art-killing mass media devoted to a wasteful, venal standard of living. Although we cannot say that such ideas have now won the day in any practical way, they are surely part of our truth, and Goodman is one of our guides to making it practical."

But there are other reasons, with different audiences, why Goodman remains relevant. One of these is the interest in Gestalt Therapy, where he has a reputation and status separate from his reputation as a literary figure and as an anarchist propagandist. I rely on Taylor Stoehr to assure me that when, "translated into terms relevant to psychotherapy" the anarchist thinking in Kropotkin's tradition of seeking "a citizenry that can rely on its own initiative and resourcefulness, that is not at the mercy of a system outside its real experience but knows itself and its world and can act for its own good" is precisely the rationale and aims of Gestalt therapy.

Yet another of Goodman's specialist readerships was that for the book Communitas, produced by the unemployed architect and the draft-dodging anarchist during the second world war. Long after it became unavailable

a series of advocates, like Daniel Bell or Lewis Mumford in the United States, or Carlo Doglio and Giancarlo De Carlo in Italy, were telling students that this book was the most important discussion they could find on the future of urban settlements.

I think there are many reasons why Goodman, with his very fragile links with the American anarchist movement of his day, can be seen as one of the most significant twentieth-century anarchists. I would like to draw your attention to the very last of his articles, published in the American press after his death in 1972, many years before the collapse of the Soviet empire. Goodman remarked that,

"For me, the chief principle of anarchism is not freedom but autonomy, the ability to initiate a task and do it one's own way...The weakness of 'my' anarchism is that the lust for freedom is a powerful motive for political change, whereas autonomy is not. Autonomous people protect themselves stubbornly but by less strenuous means, including plenty of passive resistance. They do their own thing anyway. The pathos of oppressed people, however, is that, if they break free, they don't know what to do. Not having been autonomous, they don't know what it's like, and before they learn, they have new managers who are not in a hurry to abdicate..."

I find this remark from a quarter of a century ago to be an intensely relevant observation, and this is one of the reasons why I would like you to read Pietro Adamo's collection of Goodman's writings on Individuo e Comunità.