Notes of a Neolithic Conservative

Paul Goodman
MARCH 26, 1970 ISSUE

1. For green grass and clean rivers, children with bright eyes and good color, and people safe from being pushed around—for a few things like these, I find I am pretty ready to think away most other political, economic, and technological advantages.

Some Conservatives seem to want to go back to the Administration of McKinley. But when people are subject to universal social engineering and the biosphere itself is in danger, we need a more neolithic conservatism. So I propose maxims like “the right purpose of elementary schooling is to delay socialization” and “innovate in order to simplify, otherwise as sparingly as possible.”

Liberals want to progress, that is, to up the rate of growth by political means. But if the background conditions are tolerable, society will probably progress anyway, for people have energy, curiosity, and ingenuity. All the resources of the State cannot anyway educate a child, improve a neighborhood, give dignity to an oppressed man. Sometimes the state can provide capital for people to do for themselves; but mostly it should stop standing in the way and doing damage and wasting wealth. Political power may come out of the barrel of a gun, but, as John L. Lewis said, “You can’t dig coal with bayonets.”

2. Edmund Burke had a good idea of conservatism, that existing community bonds are destroyed at peril; they are not readily replaced, society becomes superficial and government illegitimate. It takes the rising of a prophet or some other irrational cataclysm to create new community bonds. It is like a love affair or a marriage—unless there is severe moral disagreement or actual physical revulsion, it is wiser to stay with it and blow on the embers, than to be happily not in love or not married at all. The hard decisions, of course, are when people imagine that they are already in love elsewhere; but nations of people are rather cautious about this.

In his American policy, Burke was a good conservative; he was willing to give up everything else to conserve the community bonds. It is just here that phony conservatives become trimmers and tokenists and talk about “virtual representation” or “maximum
feasible participation of the poor,” protecting their vested interests. A proof that the American Revolution was justified is that the British government did not take Burke’s and Pitt’s advice. Later, during the French Revolution, Burke was a sentimentalist clinging to the bygone, for after Louis tried to go over to the invaders, there were no community bonds left to conserve.

3. The problem is to avoid emergency, when dictatorship is inevitable and decent people sometimes commit enormities. There was the real emergency of Hitler, and we have not yet finished with the growth of the military-industrial that was rooted back there. But Woodrow Wilson foresaw the military-industrial in 1916 and we did get out of it. So long as ancient Rome had vitality, it was able to dismiss its dictatorships. We, however, have trumped up the at least partly paranoiac emergency of the Cold War now for more than twenty years.

But the worst is the metaphysical emergency of Modern Times: feeling powerless in immense social organizations; desperately relying on technological means to solve problems caused by previous technological means; and when urban areas are already technically and fiscally unworkable, extrapolating and planning for bigger urban areas. Then, “Nothing can be done.”

I think it is first to escape feeling trapped that I improvise dumb-bunny alternatives. I can then show that the reasons men are not free are only political and psychological, not metaphysical. Unlike most other “social critics,” I am rather scrupulous about not attacking unless I can think up an alternative or two, to avoid rousing metaphysical anxiety. Usually, indeed, I do not have critical feelings unless I first imagine something different and begin to improvise upon it. With much of the business of our society, my intuition is to forget it.

4. Coleridge was the most philosophical of the conservatives writing in English: “To have citizens, we must first be sure we have produced men”—or conserved them. The context of this remark, in The Constitution of the Church and State, was his critique of the expropriation of the monasteries by Henry VIII. The property was rightly taken away from the Whore of Babylon, to stop the drain of wealth from England to Rome; but Coleridge argued that it should then have been consigned to other moral and cultural institutions, to produce men, rather than thrown into the general economy. He made the same point vividly in another passage, in The Friend. A Manchester economist had said that an isolated village that took no part in the national trade was of no importance. “What, sir,” said Coleridge, “are 700 Christian souls of no importance?” The English factory towns destroyed people for the economy. We increasingly do not even need people for the economy.
As a man of letters, I am finally most like Coleridge (with a dash of Matthew Arnold when the vulgarity of liberalism gets me by the throat). Maybe what we have in common is our obsessional needs, his drug addiction and my frustrated homosexuality. These keep us in touch with animal hunger, so we are not overly impressed by progress, the Gross National Product, and credentials and status. For addicts and other starving people, the world has to come across in kind. It doesn’t.

My homosexual acts have made me a nigger, subject to arbitrary brutality and debased when my outgoing impulse is not taken for granted as a right. It is not that I don’t get what I want; nobody (except small children) has a claim to be loved. But there is a way of rejecting someone that accords him his right to exist and be himself and is the next best thing to accepting him. I have rarely enjoyed this treatment.

Stokely Carmichael once told me and Allen Ginsberg that our homosexual need was not like being black because we could always conceal it and pass. That is, he accorded us the lack of imagination that one accords to niggers. (Incidentally, this dialogue was taking place on national TV, that haven of secrecy.)

A vital nigger can respond with various kinds of spite, depending on his character. He can be ready to destroy everything, since there is no world to lose. Or he might develop an in-group fanaticism of his own kind. In my case, being a nigger seems to inspire me to want a more elementary humanity, wilder, less structured, more variegated. The thing is to have a Liberation Front that does not end up in a Nation State, but abolishes the boundaries.

5. Usually we ought to work to diminish social anxiety, but to break down arbitrary boundaries we have to risk heightening social anxiety. Some boundaries, of course, are just the limits of our interests and people beyond them are indifferent or exotic. But as soon as we begin to notice a boundary between us and others, we project our own unacceptable traits on those across the boundary, and they become foreigners, heretics, untouchables, persons exploited as things. By their very existence, they threaten or tempt us, and we must squelch them, patronize them, or with missionary zeal make them shape up.

Thus, the excluded or repressed are always right in their rebellion, for they stand for our future wholeness. And their demands must always seem wrong-headed, their style uncalled for, and their actions to violate due process. But as in any psychotherapy, the problem is to tolerate anxiety and stay with it, rather than to panic and be in an emergency.
Curiously, the half-baked and noisy culture of the young is hopeful in this respect just because it is so dreadful. It is embarrassed or brazen, sometimes resigned, sometimes spiteful, but it is not up tight. It is a kind of folk art of urban confusion, and where there is a folk art there might get to be a high art. It is not advance-guard, for they don’t know enough to have an edge to leap from. It is not even eclectic but a farrago of misunderstood styles. But it is without some previous boundaries. There is something in its tribalism, as they call it. It is somewhat a folk international. And it is boring, like all folk art; a little bit goes a long way.

6. Lord Acton, who understood conservatism, praises the character—George Washington was a good example—that is conservative in disposition but resolute in the disruptive action that has to be performed. A good surgeon minimizes post-operative shock, and having cut, he at once resumes as a physician, saying, “Nature heals, not the doctor.” The advantage of a conservative, even backtracking, disposition in a successful revolutionary is to diminish the danger of take-over by new bosses who invariably are rife with plans. After the American Revolution, the conservative disposition of the chief leaders blessed us with those twenty-five years of quasianarchy in national affairs, during which we learned whatever has made the American experiment worthwhile. “It’s a free country, you can’t make me”—every immigrant child learned to say it for over a century. The same would have occurred in the French Revolution if they had enjoyed our geographic isolation from invasion. The first French revolutionary leaders were the reverse of Jacobin; Danton wanted to get back to his wine and girls. But a defect of Leninist revolutions is that, from the beginning, they are made by Leninists. They have ideas.

7. I myself have a conservative, maybe timid, disposition; yet I trust that the present regime in America will get a lot more roughing up than it has, from the young who resent being processed; from the blacks who have been left out; from housewives and others who buy real goods with hard money at inflationary prices hiked by expense accounts and government subsidies; from professionals demanding their autonomy, rather than being treated as personnel of the front office; from every live person in jeopardy because of the bombs and CBW. Our system can stand, and profit by plenty of interruption of business as usual. It is not such a delicate Swiss watch as all that. Our danger is not in the loosening of the machine, but in its tightening up by panic repression.

8. It is true that because of massive urbanization and interlocking technologies, advanced countries are vulnerable to catastrophic disruption, and this creates a perceptible anxiety. But there is far more likelihood of breakdown from the respectable ambitions of Eastern Airlines and Consolidated Edison than from the sabotage of revolutionaries.
In a large modern complex society, it is said, any rapid global “revolutionary” or “utopian” change can be incalculably destructive. I agree; but I wish people would remember that the Establishment itself has continually introduced big rapid changes that have in fact produced incalculable shock. Consider, in the past generation, the TV, mass higher schooling, the complex of cars, roads, and suburbanization, mass air travel, the complex of plantations, chain grocers, and forced urbanization; not to speak of the meteoric rise of the military industries and the Vietnam War and the draft. In all these, there has been a big factor of willful decision; these have not been natural processes or inevitable catastrophes. And we have not begun to compound with the problems caused by these utopian changes. Rather, in what seems an amazingly brief time, we have come to a political, cultural, and religious crisis that must be called pre-revolutionary—and all because of a few willful fools.

9. There is also authentic confusion, however, not caused by bad will. Worldwide, we are going through a rapidly stepped-up collectivization which is, in my opinion, inevitable. I have just been watching the first lunar landing and the impression of collectivity is overwhelming. We do not know how to cope with the dilemmas of it. Surely the only prudent course is to try piecemeal to defend and extend the areas of liberty, locally, on the job, and in mores. Any violent collective “remedy” would be certainly totalitarian, whatever the ideology.

Needless to say, I myself have hankered after and pushed global institutional changes: Drastic cut-back of the military industries, of the school system, and of the penal system; giving the city streets back to the children by banning the cars, and the cities back to the citizens by neighborhood government; vigorous nourishment of decentralized mass-communications and rural reconstruction; guaranteed income and a sector of free appropriation. I look for the kind of apprentice system that would produce workers’ management, and the kind of guild association that would affirm authentic professionalism. The effects of these changes are also incalculable; it is hard to think through the consequences in our society that would flow from any and all of them. But I believe that in the fairly short run they would be stabilizing rather than explosive.

10. A moment’s reflection will show that in any advanced society there is bound to be a mixture of enterprises run collectively and those run by individuals and small companies; and either kind of management may try to be busy and growing or conservatively content to satisfy needs. Thus, there are always “socialism” and “free enterprise,” “production for profit” and “production for use.” The interesting political question is what is the right proportion and location of these factors in the particular society in the particular circumstances. Safety from exploitation, safety from bureaucratic tyranny, flexibility and style of innovation, the possibility of countervailing power, all those political things
depend on this balance. But cost efficiency also depends on it: “For any set of technological and social conditions, there is probably a rough optimum proportion of types of enterprise, or better, limits of unbalance beyond which the system gives sharply diminishing returns. A good mixed system would remain within the efficient range.” *(People or Personnel, ch. V)*

But nobody wants to explore this subject any more. When I was young, it used to be a respectable liberal ideology called the Scandinavian Way. Now if I say that a mixture is inevitable and desirable, it is dismissed as “common sense,” meaning a trivial platitude.

Since I am often on Canadian TV and radio, I tell it to the Canadians. If they would cut the American corporations down to size, it would cost them three or four years of high unemployment and austerity, but then Canada could become the most livable nation in the world, like Denmark but rich in resources, space, and heterogeneous population, with its own corporations, free businesses, cooperatives, a reasonable amount of socialism, a sector of communism or guaranteed income as fits modern productivity, plenty of farmers, cities not yet too big, plenty of scientists and academics, a decent traditional bureaucracy, a non-aligned foreign policy. A great modern nation not yet too far gone in modern mistakes. There would be a flood of excellent immigrants from the south.

11. In one of his later books, *The Third World War*, C. Wright Mills had a conventional proposition far below his usual strong sense. The concentration of decision-making in our interlocking institutions, he argued, makes possible big changes for the better if the decision-makers can be rightly influenced—he seemed to be thinking of John Kennedy. It is doubtful if any administrator indeed has the kind of power to make an important change of policy; by the end of 1961, the Kennedy people complained that they could not. But even if it would and could make policy, concentrated power can’t produce human results anyway; it freezes what it touches. But, there is perhaps a different kind of truth in Mills’s idea. The interlocking of institutions, the concentration of decision-making, and the mass communications are the things that render people powerless, including the decision-makers; yet because of these same things, if freedom-loving people, honest professionals, or any other resolute group, indeed fight it out on their own issues, the odds are against them but their action is bound to have resonance and influence. In a reckless sentence in *Growing Up Absurd* I said, “One has the persistent thought that if ten thousand people in all walks of life stand up on their two feet and talk out and insist, we shall get back our country”—and damned if I don’t still think so, with more evidence than I had then.

12. The right style in planning is to eliminate the intermediary, that which is neither use, nor making for use. We ought to cut down commutation, transport, administration,
overhead, communications, hanging around waiting. On the other hand, there are very similar functions that we ought to encourage; like travel and trade, brokering, amenity, conversation, and loitering, the things that make up the busy and idle city, celebrated by Jane Jacobs. The difference seems to be that in logistics, systems, and communications, the soul is on ice till the intermediary activity is over with; in traffic, brokering, and conversation people are thrown with others and something might turn up. It is the difference between urbanism that imperially imposes its pattern on city and country both, and the city of squares and shops and contrasting rural life.

It was the genius of American pragmatism, our great contribution to world Philosophy, to show that the means define and color the ends, to find value in operations and materials, to dignify workmanship and the workaday, to make consummation less isolated, more in process forward, growth as well as good. But in recent decades there has occurred an astonishing reversal: the tendency of American philosophy, e.g. analytical logic or cybernetics, has been to drain value from both making and use, from either the working and the materials or from moral and psychological goods, and to define precisely by the intermediary logistics, system, and communications, what Max Weber called rationalization. The medium is all the message there is. The pragmatists added to value, especially in everyday affairs. Systems analysis has drained value, except for a few moments of collective achievement. Its planning refines and streamlines the intermediary as if for its own sake; it adds constraints without enriching life. If the computation makes no difference to the data or the result, e.g. “garbage in, garbage out,” then, to a pragmatist, the computation adds to the garbage. In fact, the computation abstracts from the data what it can handle, and limits the possibilities to the questions. Certainly, cybernetics could be enriching, as psychiatry or as ecology, but it has not yet been so—an exception is the work of Bateson.

It is interesting to notice the change in the style of scientific explanation. At the turn of the century they spoke of evolution, struggle, coping, the logic of inquiry. Now they emphasize code, homeostasis, feedback, the logic of structure.

13. A decade ago it was claimed that there was an end to ideology, for the problems of modern society have to be coped with pragmatically, functionally, piecemeal. This seems to have been a poor prediction, in view of the deafening revival of Marxist-Leninist rhetoric and Law and Order rhetoric. Yet it was true, but not in the sense in which it was offered. The ideological rhetoric is pretty irrelevant; but the pragmatic, functional, and piecemeal approach has not, as was expected, consigned our problems to the province of experts, administrators, and engineers, but has thrown them to the dissenters. Relevant new thought has not been administrative and technological, but existentialist, ethical, and
tactical. Administrators and planners write books about the universities and cities, extrapolating from the trends—and asking for funds; but history does not seem to be going in their direction.

Rather, pragmatism has come to be interpreted to include the character of the agents as part of the problem to be solved; it is psychoanalytic; there is stress on engagement. (Incidentally, this is good Jamesian pragmatism.) Functionalism has come to mean criticizing the program and the function itself, asking who wants to do it and why, and is it humanly worth doing. Piecemeal issues have gotten entangled with the political action of the people affected by them. Instead of becoming more administrative as expected, affairs are becoming more political. The premises of expertise and planning are called into question. The credentials of the board of trustees are scrutinized. Professionalism is a dirty word. Terms like “commitment,” “dialogue,” “confrontation,” “community,” “do your thing” are indeed anti-ideological—and sometimes they do not connote much other thought either; but they are surely not what The End of Ideology had in mind. And it turns out that they are relevant to the conditions of complex modern societies.

14. An advantage I have had over many others—I don’t know whether by luck or by character—is that I have never had to do, nor forced myself to do, what was utterly alien to me. I was good at school work and liked it. From age fifteen I never had a job that was altogether useless, or harmful, or mere busywork, or that did not use some of my powers, so that I could try to do a good job in my own style. This does not mean that I did what I wanted. Sometimes the work was unpleasant or boring and it was almost never what I should have been used for. I was poor, without connections, bisexual, and socially inept, so that I was always driven by need and had to take what turned up, without choices. But I could not do—I did not consider as a possibility—anything that I could not somewhat identify with. If somebody had offered me a stupid job at good pay, I could hardly have refused, but this never happened. I always worked hard in a way that made sense to myself—and sometimes got fired. I often had no job at all, and wrote stories.

It is devastating that this is not the common condition. If people go through motions that do not make sense to them and do not have their allegiance, just for wages or other extrinsic rewards, there is an end to common sense and self-respect. Character is made by behaviors we initiate; if we initiate what we do not mean, we get sick. And we see, the accumulation of such motions that are not continually checked up as meant can produce calamities.

15. The time I spend on politics—it is not much time but it is more than I have—is a fair example of how I work at what is mine but is onerous and boring. As a conservative anarchist, I believe that to seek for Power is otiose, yet I want to derange as little as
possible the powers that be; I am eager to sign off as soon as conditions are tolerable, so people can go back to the things that matter, their professions, sports, and friendships. Naturally, politics is not for me. In principle I agree with the hippies. They become political when they are indignant, as at the war or racist laws, and they also have to work at power and politics in order to protect their own business and community, e.g. against police harassment; but otherwise they rightly judge that radicals are in a bag.

But I am political because of an idiotic concept of myself as a man of letters: I am that kind of writer who must first have done his duty as a citizen, father, and so forth. Inevitably, my disastrous model is John Milton—and it’s a poor state to be waiting to go blind in order to be free to write a big poem. But at least, thereby, I write with a good conscience. I do not have to be a political poet. I am immune from the stupidity of Sartre’s artist engage—how the devil would an artist, relying on the random spirit as we do, choose whether or not to be engage?

16. In normal fiscal conditions, the way for free citizens to check the government has been to grant or refuse taxes, usually through the parliament, but if both the parliament and the government are illegitimate, by individual refusal. At present, some are refusing their Federal taxes, or 70 percent of the amount, in protest against the armaments and, of course, the Vietnam War. (They estimate the military budget as about 70 percent of the total.)

I agree with the principle of refusal, yet, except for the surtax and the telephone tax, I pay the taxes because of a moral scruple; for in the present fiscal set-up, the kind of money I get is not really pay for my work, is not mine, but belongs to the very System I object to. I have a comfortable income. I well deserve an adequate one and a little more; I worked hard till forty-five years of age, and brought up children, on an income in the lowest tenth of the population; nor have I found that my late-come wealth has changed my thoughts, work, or even much my standard of living. But most of my money is “soft” money, from the military economy and the wasteful superstructure, and I cannot see how I am justified to keep Caesar’s share from dribbling back to him through my hands. For instance, I am paid a large sum to give a lecture—mainly because I am a “name” and they want to make their series prestigious; the lecture series is financed by a Foundation; and you do not need to scratch hard to find military-industrial corporations supporting that Foundation—perhaps as a tax dodge! I give the lecture innocently enough; I am probably not indispensable to give it, but I do by best and say my say. But it would not help to refuse the money, or most of it, since by Parkinson’s law that all the soft money will be spent, the money will certainly be spent.

I wouldn’t know how to estimate the pay that I get for hard work in hard money, on which
I would feel justified in refusing the tax because it is mine to give or refuse, but it cannot be much of the whole. There is an hypothesis that in our society pay is inversely proportional to effort. The idea, I guess, is that big money accrues from being in the System, and the higher you are in the System, the less you move your ass. But empirically it is not quite accurate. Top managers and professionals work hard for long hours for high pay; those on a thirty-six-hour week work much less, for varying pay; farmers, hospital orderlies, dishwashers, and others work very hard for miserable pay; some students work hard and it costs them money; unemployable people do not work for inadequate pay. In my experience there has been no relation whatever between effort and pay. For twenty years I averaged a few hundred dollars a year for good writing that I now make good royalties on; I work hard for a possibly useful cause and lay out fare and a contribution, or I do the same work at a State college for a handsome honorarium and expenses. Third class on planes is usually the most luxurious because, if the plane is not full, you can remove the seat arms and stretch out. My editor takes me to costly lunches at the firm’s expense, and the food is poor.

The lack of correlation between effort and pay must be profoundly confusing and perhaps disgusting to the naive young. In my opinion, it is unfortunate at present but promising for the future: it creates the moral attitude, “It’s only money,” and politically, a soft-money affluent society can easily come to include a sector of communism, in the form of guaranteed income or free appropriation or both.

The telephone tax, however, was explicitly a war tax and my wife and I don’t pay it, getting the spiteful satisfaction that it costs the government a couple of hundred dollars (of the tax-payers’, our, money) to collect $1.58. We also have refused the 10 percent surtax, which rose directly out of the Vietnam War. This tax for this war is like the ship tax that Charles I exacted for his Irish War, that John Hamden refused. The FBI seems to be breathing down our necks about it, but if they arrest me I’ll bring up that shining precedent—and they’ll be sorry that they picked on me. (No, they finally simply attached my account.)

17. In otherwise friendly reviews and expostulatory fan mail from young people, I read that there are three things wrong with my social thinking: I go in for tinkering. I don’t tell how to bring about what I propose. I am a “romantic” and want to go back to the past. Let me consider these criticisms in turn.

My proposed little reforms and improvements are meaningless, it is said, because I do not attack the System itself, usually monopoly capitalism; and I am given the philological information that “radical” means “going to the root,” whereas I hack at the branches. To answer this, I have tried to show that in a complex society which is a network rather than
a monolith with a head, a piecemeal approach can be effective; it is the safest, least likely to produce ruinous consequences of either repression or “success”; it involves people where they are competent, or could become competent, and so creates citizens, which is better than “politicizing”; it more easily dissolves the metaphysical despair that nothing can be done. And since, in my opinion, the aim of politics is to produce not a good society but a tolerable one, it is best to try to cut abuses down to manageable size; the best solutions are usually not global but a little of this and a little of that.

More important, in the confusing conditions of Modern Times, so bristling with dilemmas, I don’t know what is the root. I have not heard of any formula, e.g. “Socialism,” that answers the root questions. If I were a citizen of a Communist country, I should no doubt be getting into (more) trouble by tinkering with “bourgeois” improvements. The problem in any society is to get a more judicious mixture of kinds of enterprise, and this might be most attainable by tinkering.

18. A second criticism is that I don’t explain how to bring about the nice things I propose. The chief reason for this, of course, is that I don’t know how or I would proclaim it. Put it this way: I have been a pacifist for forty years and rather active for thirty years, and…. But ignorance is rarely an excuse. What my critics really object to is that I accept my not knowing too easily, as if the actuality of change were unimportant, rather than just brooding about it, when in fact people are wretched and dying.

As I have explained, I do not have the character for politics. I cannot lead or easily be led, and I am dubious about the ability of parties and government to accomplish any positive good—and which of these is cause, which is effect?—therefore I do not put my mind to questions of manipulation and power, I do not belong to a party, and therefore I have no tactical thoughts. Belief and commitment are necessary to have relevant ideas. Nevertheless, somebody has to make sense, and I am often willing to oblige, as a man of letters, as part of the division of labor, so to speak.

I do agree with my critics that there cannot be social thought without political action; and if I violate this rule, I ought to stop. Unless it is high poetry, utopian thinking is boring. “Neutral” sociology is morally repugnant and bad science. An essential part of any sociological inquiry is having a practical effect, otherwise the problem is badly defined: people are being taken as objects rather than real, and the inquirer himself is not all there.

For the humanistic problems that I mostly work at, however, the sense of powerlessness, the loss of history, vulgarity, the lack of magnanimity, alienation, the maladaptation of organisms and environment—and these are political problems—maybe there are no other “strategies” than literature, dialogue, and trying to be a useful citizen oneself.
19. I am not a “romantic”; what puts my liberal and radical critics off is that I am a conservative, a conservationist. I do use the past; the question is how.

I get a kind of insight (for myself) from the genetic method, from seeing how a habit or institution has developed to its present form; but I really do understand that all positive value and meaning is in present action, coping with present conditions. Freud, for instance, was in error when he sometimes spoke as if a man had a child inside of him, or a vertebrate had an annelid worm inside. Each specified individual behaves as the whole that it has become; and every stage of life as Dewey used to insist has its own problems and ways of coping.

The criticism of the genetic fallacy, however, does not apply to the negative, to the lapses in the present, which can often be remedied only by taking into account some simplicities of the past. The case is analogous to localizing an organic function, e.g. seeing. As Kurt Goldstein used to point out, we cannot localize seeing in the eye or the brain, it is a function of the whole organism in its environment. But a failure of sight may well be localized in the cornea, the optic nerve, etc. We cannot explain speech by the psycho-sexual history of an infant; it is a way of being in the world. But a speech defect, e.g. lisping, may well come from inhibited biting because of imperfect weaning. This is, of course, what Freud knew as a clinician rather than a metapsychologist.

My books are full of one paragraph or two page “histories”—of the concept of alienation, the system of welfare, suburbanization, compulsory schooling, neutral technology, the anthropology of neurosis, university administration, citizenly powerlessness, missed revolutions, etc., etc. In every case my purpose is to show that a coerced or inauthentic settling of a conflict has left an unfinished situation to the next generation, and the difficulty becomes more complex in the new conditions. Then it is useful to remember the simpler state before things went wrong; it is hopelessly archaic as a present response, but it has vitality and may suggest a new program involving a renewed conflict. This is the therapeutic use of history. As Ben Nelson has said, the point of history is to keep old (defeated) causes alive. Of course, this reasoning presupposes that there is a nature of things, including human nature, whose right development can be violated. There is.

An inauthentic solution complicates, and produces a monster. An authentic solution neither simplifies nor complicates, but produces a new configuration, a species adapted to the on-going situation. There is a human nature, and it is characteristic of that nature to go on making itself ever different. This is the humanistic use of history, to remind of man’s various ways of being great. So we have become mathematical, tragical, political, loyal, romantic, civil-libertarian, universalist, experimental-scientific, collectivist, etc., etc.—these too accumulate and become a mighty heavy burden. There is no laying any of
it down.

20. I went down to Dartmouth to lead some seminars of American Telephone and Telegraph executives who were being groomed to be vice-presidents. They wanted to know how to get on with young people, since they would have to employ them, or try. (Why do I go? Ah, why do I go? It’s not for money and it’s not out of vanity. I go because they ask me. Since I used to gripe bitterly when I was left out of the world, how can I gracefully decline when I am invited in?)

I had three suggestions. First, citing my usual evidence of the irrelevance of school grades and diplomas, I urged them to hire black and Puerto Rican dropouts, who would learn on the job as well as anybody else, whereas to require academic credentials puts them at a disadvantage. Not to my surprise, the executives were cogenial to this idea. (There were twenty-five of them, no black and no woman.) It was do-good and no disadvantage to them as practical administrators. One said that he was already doing it and it had worked out very well.

Secondly, I pointed out that dialogue across the generation gap was quite impossible for them, and their present tactics of youth projects and special training would be taken as, and were, co-optation. Yet people who will not talk to one another can get together by working together on a useful job that they both care about, like fixing the car. And draft-counseling, I offered, was something that the best of the young cared strongly about; the Telephone Company could provide valuable and interesting help in this, for instance the retrieval and dissemination of information; and all this was most respectable and American, since every kid should know his rights. Not to my surprise, the executives were not enthusiastic about this proposal. But they saw the point—and had to agree—and would certainly not follow up.

My third idea, however, they did not seem to know what to do with. I told them that Ralph Nader was going around the schools urging the engineering students to come on like professionals, and stand up to the front desk when asked for unprofessional work. In my opinion, an important move for such integrity would be for the young engineers to organize for defense of the profession, and strike or boycott if necessary: a model was the American Association of University Professors in its heyday—fifty years ago. I urged the executives to encourage such organization; it would make the Telephone Company a better telephone company, more serviceable to the community; and young people would cease to regard engineers as finks. To my surprise, the prospective vice-presidents of A.T. and T. seemed to be embarrassed. (We were all pleasant people and very friendly.) I take it that this—somewhere here—is the issue.
I am pleased to notice how again and again I return to the freedoms, duties, and opportunities of earnest professionals. It means that I am thinking from where I breathe.

Letters

*O Canada!* June 18, 1970

© 1963-2014 NYREV, Inc. All rights reserved.
O Canada!

Jocelyn Dingman Fulford
JUNE 18, 1970 ISSUE

In response to:

Notes of a Neolithic Conservative from the March 26, 1970 issue

To the Editors:

I was struck by Paul Goodman’s point [NYR, March 26] that Canada is a great modern nation not too far gone in modern mistakes, and that if we could cut the great American corporations down to size, we would get a flood of excellent immigrants from the south.

We are already getting a flood of excellent immigrants—nonpolitical draft dodgers and deserters. We are also getting a flood of American intellectuals; the Americanization of Canadian universities is a big issue here right now. I wish Paul Goodman, or someone they respect, would explain to these people that they have come to a country where such freedom as we have has been achieved through English common law—freedom broadening down from precedent to precedent—and through a slow boring process of constitutional reform. Our social fabric has not been torn by revolution. New citizens must still swear allegiance to Queen Elizabeth and her heirs and assigns forever, though everyone knows that the Queen is not allowed to have anything to do with our government. Our social injustices—and they are many—must be dealt with by constitutional means, if we are to preserve our integrity as a nation.

American intellectuals find our politics boring and our history uninteresting, and I feel they are importing into our political life a style and rhetoric which is both alien and threatening. I strongly suspect that if Sir George Williams University in Montreal had not been a haven for New Left intellectuals, the great computer burning of last year would not have taken place. Symbolically, this was an exciting event, but in fact it widened the generation gap, and set back the causes of improved race relations and student power in Canada.

It is just insofar as we have so little exciting history—wars and rebellions—and so much
boring constitutional history that we are a happy nation. I wish the United States would send us more people like Jane Jacobs and fewer hotheaded revolutionaries.

Jocelyn Dingman Fulford

Toronto, Canada