Randolph Bourne and the Politics of Cultural Radicalism

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Randolph Bourne was a leading figure in the pre–World War I rebellion of the twentieth century, a time of political activism, cultural experimentation, and youthful optimism, when, in the words of the visiting Irish painter John Butler Yeats, “the fiddles were tuning up all over America.” As a member of the first generation to inherit a corporate capitalist order, Bourne became its spokesman and also one of its deepest critics. He advocated a broad-based cultural renaissance to rescue the “personal point of view,” invoked by William James, and to institute a “culture of feeling,” to offset the growing emphasis on technology, bureaucratic administration, and social control through the application of reason. He encouraged a youth revolt, generational in consciousness and concerned with freeing personal relations and social roles. He advanced the idea of a “trans-national” American culture, a cosmopolitan “federation of cultures” that would include America’s newest immigrants as equal partners in the social compact.

He is remembered primarily for his opposition to military intervention in World War I. “War is the health of the state,” he warned in an unfinished essay published after his death. Woodrow Wilson’s war policies had centralized state power, rationalized the economy, Americanized the schools, and criminalized dissent, permanently altering the nature of liberal politics. Bourne reserved his harshest criticism for the “younger intelligentsia” of his own generation who, like Walter Lippmann, became publicists for the war, working for
the Creel Committee on Public Information; or who mobilized consensus as journalists and educators in support of the war; or who, like John Dewey, the nation’s leading philosopher, replaced the creative pragmatism of William James with an instrumentalist approach, its “vision” subsumed by “technique.”

When he died at the age of thirty-two, six weeks after Armistice, Bourne was remembered in scores of testimonials and tributes. To many people, his death signified the end of an era and the martyrdom of a certain spirit of youthful innocence. To others, his was a voice of singular courage and political independence. Out of his public opposition to the war, a persistent legend emerged. He was the haunting figure of Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.*:

This little sparrowlike man,
tiny twisted bit of flesh in a black cape,
always in pain and ailing,
put a pebble in his sling
and hit Goliath in the forehead with it.
War, he wrote, is the health of the state.

A crucial part of the legend fastened on Bourne’s radical difference:

If any man has a ghost
Bourne has a ghost,
a tiny twisted unscared ghost in a black cloak
hopping along the grimy old brick and brownstone streets
still left in downtown New York,
crying out in a shrill soundless giggle:
*War is the health of the state.*

As with many writers, the corporeal image was an important part of the myth. Bourne’s hunched back and crooked frame, in contrast to his moral rectitude, were recounted in a dozen memoirs, poetry, and at least two novels that since have become a part of the cultural fabric of the literary and political left. In the 1920s, legend had it that Bourne spent the last year in silence and disrepute, his manuscripts seized by federal agents and refused by publishers. It was said that he died poor and alone, abandoned by friends and
persecuted by the government. His writings went unread, and Bourne himself became a text to be interpreted.²

In the 1930s, the legend was reinvented, this time by American Marxists, among them Michael Gold, who searched for indigenous sources of political radicalism. They heralded Bourne as the “Great American” literary critic who prized the virtues of proletarian art and literature.³ In the 1940s, antifascists interpreted his solitary opposition to the state and to corporate impersonality as an exemplary resistance to democratic totalitarianism.⁴ Again in the 1960s, his writings were reprinted and his ideas reconsidered by a New Left interested in “personal politics” and by student activists protesting the “multiversity’s” role in state-sponsored research, education, and administration.⁵ Not surprisingly, perhaps, during the 1980s, a time of reaction, Bourne’s writings went out of print,⁶ and his importance came to rest primarily on his failures as a “forgotten prophet,” the last of a dying breed of visionaries or rebels whose failed and perhaps impossibilist mission to restore youthful virtues to an aging America has been relegated to the detritus of history.⁷

“The text finally disappeared under the interpretation,” Nietzsche wrote of the French Revolution, a fate affecting Bourne’s life and work as well. The legend mediates every reading, even in some examples of Bourne scholarship, telling us more, perhaps, about the generation that invented it than about the subject itself.⁸ Legends are, after all, part of a culture’s conversation with itself, reflecting and refracting its own anxieties about and aspirations for its common condition. They can reinspire a culture, as Nietzsche maintained. But they can obscure an intimate knowledge of their subjects or distract (and sometimes depoliticize) their inventors. The Bourne legend has obscured in this double sense. Yet it has also obscured unexpectedly, ignoring the role Bourne himself played in creating his own myth. We know Bourne by his shadowy, ghostlike presence in Dos Passos’s text, not by his own words. We know him as other people have constructed him, not as he constructed himself.

In this book I return to a study of Bourne’s life and work by offering an analysis from categories derived immanently, that is, from within his work itself. I do not try to demystify the Bourne legend or separate the “man from the myth”; rather, I seek to explore the
particular role Bourne played in the creation of his own myth or “epic” (his word) and to evaluate the significance of that effort for his political thought. Through the epic nature of autobiography, I suggest, Bourne revealed a Nietzschean disposition to shape his own fate, to intensify his experience and make more of his being, in stories that others of his generation might read.

The Nietzschean influence I have chosen to highlight is consistent with the terms Bourne used to frame his own role as a radical critic and to construct the forces he saw as shaping modern culture. According to Nietzsche, every culture can be characterized by a particular combination of the moral and spiritual impulse of the apollonian and the physical and emotional energies of the dionysian. Nietzsche’s apollonianism stood for art and the organizing capacity to create order, illusion, and form. The dionysiac pertained to the deeper recesses of passion and chaos, which often gave rise to communal revelry and frenzied bursts of energy but which could also inform and vitalize an apollonian construct. For Nietzsche, as for Bourne, it was in the balance between order and artful creation and the vitalism and energy of the pagan that a culture could regenerate itself.

Bourne theorized American political culture in similar terms. He found the apollonian will-to-form in Victorian counsels of self-control as well as in the progressives’ fascination with scientific management. He saw the dionysian impulse in the crowds and lights of the city streets as modern-day carnivals and in the personal expressivity of neighborhood pageantry and artists’ cooperatives. His attention to both sides of the modern experience—its rationality and irrationality, its order and disorder, the “puritan” and the “pagan”—and his unwillingness to choose between them or resolve them into some higher synthesis was unique among the progressives and radicals of the early century. For him, contradiction was creative, anticipating Herbert Marcuse, and the stance of “intellectual suspense” was a creative impulse, restlessly moving between dream and reality, following Nietzsche. It is this perspective—as a confirmed modernist who anticipated the “post-modern” (his word)—or, as he wrote of himself, as a social reformer with aesthetic aspirations—that makes him a pivotal figure in the history of American political thought.9
This book is informed by the recognition that Bourne’s thought is valuable precisely because it offered a new political discourse and a set of cultural possibilities for American society at the height of the modern age. Influenced by and responding to the romanticism of Nietzsche, the irrationalism of Henri Bergson and Georges Sorel, the idealism of Walt Whitman, the pragmatism of James and Dewey, and the democratic socialism of Graham Wallas, G. B. Shaw, and Henry George, his political and cultural criticism kept alive the competing tensions of this contradictory legacy. His writings, amounting to over 1,500 articles, several volumes of essays, hundreds of letters, and a dozen unpublished essays, written in only seven years, reveal a vision that was generous and democratic and a mind that was corrosive and increasingly impatient with liberal politics.

In this book I try to reposition Bourne’s thought at the center of debates about the nature and limits of American liberalism. Writing in what Antonio Gramsci calls the “national-popular” language, Bourne participated in public debates about war preparedness, immigration, educational reform, and feminism, but, I argue, his analysis was framed in terms other than those that were ordinarily given. Writing from a position “below the battle,” he rejected the political options offered at the time—that one must be either prowar or antwar, an American or an immigrant, a poet or critic—as choices constructed within the terms of liberalism itself. This stance, I suggest, created a contradictory situation for him: in repudiating politics, he did not repudiate the political. In my view, however, redefining politics and the outlines of political agency, the public space was opened to outside voices and alternative sites of engagement, creating the prospects of a more inclusive, more democratic politics.

It was a position that involved risks and limitations. It risked political isolation, as it was clearly oppositional. It was unpalatable to the intellectual who “craved certainty.” It was difficult to sustain as a form of democratic politics. And, perhaps most significantly, it was a concession to one’s ineffectiveness in shaping current policies. Nevertheless, when political alternatives were foreclosed, Bourne argued, his position “below the battle” was the most advantageous place from which to generate alternatives to liberal consensus.

This interpretation challenges the more familiar one initially offered by Lewis Mumford and more recently recalled by Casey
Blake in his formidable study, *Beloved Community*; that Bourne’s politics were a form of romantic defeatism, or even worse, a retreat into political passivity. It is my contention that Bourne’s position “below the battle” was neither a retreat from politics nor a place taken outside the line of fire, as the phrase might suggest; rather, it was another form of political engagement, a way to free oneself from hegemonic certainties that block genuine debate, preclude alternatives to politics-as-usual, and prevent democratic change. Indeed, I argue that it is precisely from this “third space,” borrowing Jacques Lacan’s term, that Bourne was able to participate in practical, ongoing, grassroots efforts to reorganize relations among and between family, work, and community. As alternative forms of political organizing and education, these activities were practical—not utopian—expressions of politics, based in the neighborhoods of modern cities, that effectively reconstructed social relations among workers, students, writers, and activists that anticipated the kind of democratic politics Bourne wanted to see instituted in the nation as a whole.

In historicizing his thought within the debates about American liberalism, I seek to accomplish several objectives. My first goal is to uncover the historical roots of American political thought, and in particular, to locate the roots of twentieth-century radical thought. My primary focus is on the contradictions of progressive liberalism, especially with regard to the role of science and expertise in shaping the social and political order, the importance of nationalism in building a common culture, and the nature and role of the liberal state in a democratic society. Because Bourne shared many of the intellectual assumptions of the pragmatic progressives at the *New Republic*, the aesthetic commitments of the cultural nationalists at the *Seven Arts*, and the political convictions of the radical critics at the *Masses*, his thought can best be understood as a chronicle and critique of modern twentieth-century American political thought.

Second, I hope to clarify the relation of intellectuals to institutional politics, or what Norman Birnbaum has termed the “excessive integration of intellect and power,” which first emerged during World War I. The support of progressive intellectuals for an administrative state and a centralized economy, indeed their integration
with the state, marked a turning point in the political role of intellectuals and revealed a crisis within that class, and within the middle class generally, about the nature of political responsibility and involvement, which became a legacy of the war.  

Finally, I seek to offer an understanding of the ideas and experiences of a particular political generation and of the influence of generationalism on Bourne’s thought. I regard his generational affiliations both as a context for his radical dissent and a vehicle for its construction. Part of my inquiry addresses the question of Bourne’s representativeness, or his ability to represent the views of his generation, and by extension the experiences of young moderns. In his view, his experiences of personal struggles to deal with physical disability and exclusion represented the experiences of America’s outsiders—the immigrant, the activist, the urban poor—and his own generation, discontent with Victorianism, politically powerless, and diffident toward corporate capitalism. In theorizing the nature of his representativeness, I also hope to explore the relationship between the modern intellectual and the public culture.

The chapters are organized conceptually. In Chapter 2, I provide the theoretical background to Bourne’s political thought and to that of his generation and examine the nature of his representativeness as a young radical and modern intellectual. Chapter 3 analyzes his first autobiographical essay as a conversion narrative, or the spiritual journey, in Michael Rogin’s words, of a “unique, and therefore, representative” American. Taking the form of an “auto–American-biography,” in the fine phrase of Sacvan Bercovitch, it was offered as the story of a representative individual whose destiny was understood to be tied to that of his community. In Chapter 4, I examine the “trans-valuation” of Bourne’s (given) marginality to his (chosen) stance of purposeful discontent, a position that, I argue, was an effort to disembody his radical difference into a philosophical stance. Ironic criticism combined the poetical (dionysian) and the analytical (apollonian) approaches to critical judgment, detached and yet committed simultaneously.

In Chapter 5, I analyze Bourne’s advocacy of the idea of a youth rebellion, encompassing feminism, educational reform, and pragmatism, which were constructed as several means of “trans-valuing” personal relations and, through the artful creation of “personality,”
preserving the dionysian spirit of youth. His idea of a youth revolt was a challenge to the twin apollonian impulses of the age: the Victorian emphasis on the building of character and the progressives' fascination with scientific expertise. I try to make clear the connection between a fading Victorianism and an emergent progressivism by contrasting his idea of a youthful rebellion with Walter Lippmann's plea for "mastery" to rescue their generation from "drift," through professionalism and management skills, a move that Bourne regarded as a sign of premature aging.

Chapter 6 focuses on his wartime critique of the purely instrumental moment in social reform, the deceptions of the progressives' preoccupation with social control, and the risks of the integration of intellectuals with the state. Bourne's ambivalent relation to progressivism before the war was crystallized in his critique of Dewey's wartime pragmatism and led to Bourne's unyielding antistatist political theory in his essay on the state.

I outline Bourne's search for conditions that would fulfill America's "promise" in Chapter 7, analyzing his support of an ethnic and national cosmopolitanism as a counternarrative to the dominant discourse of "Americanization" and the melting pot ideal in the early twentieth century. A transnational American culture was based on the prefiguration of a more democratic form of politics and a new conception of national identity, taking account of individuals' cultural, ethnic, and political affiliations in the idea of a dual citizenship. Although Bourne did not fully work out the relation between political and cultural citizenship, the idea of multiple memberships remains a central issue in debates about the nature of contemporary democratic theory.

In Chapter 8, I investigate Bourne's literary and cultural theory, his theory of the role of art in society, and the prospects of a revitalized (dionysian) culture in America, supported in part by "beloved communities" (using Josiah Royce's phrase) of cultural workers acting collectively to bring art to all classes. I argue that his theory of the role of art—as a tool of social reform and as a means of reinspiring a culture—reflects the progressivist and Nietzschean influences on his thought, respectively. His literary criticism similarly combined a modern appreciation of the importance of creating a national literature and a postmodern sensibility in read-
ing texts, tracing the thread of desire in the novels of Theodore Dreiser, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Willa Cather.

In the Epilogue I return to the Bourne myth and the significance of his critical theory. Against the scholarship of the last three decades, I evaluate his work within Nietzsche's three metamorphoses of the spirit, where, it has been said, Bourne was caught in the role of Nietzsche's lion—the position of always saying no—unable to offer an affirmative politics for radical work in the future. This interpretation, although persuasive in light of the broad sweep of his dissent, does not take into account his concession to the limits of dissent against the "inexorables" of war or his prefigurative politics of transnationalism and efforts to free the aesthetic impulse. In taking a position "below the battle," I suggest, he found an unmapped space to keep the "intellectual currents" flowing and pursue creative alternatives to impersonal bureaucratic politics, in an effort to fulfill America's "promise."