The country is . . . dotted with young men and women, in full possession of their minds, faculties and virtue, who feel themselves profoundly alien to the work which is going on around them. . . . They are genuine pragmatists and they fear any kind of absolute, even when bearing gifts.

—Randolph S. Bourne, “A War Diary”

In the first decade of the twentieth century, America underwent a dramatic revolution in all aspects of cultural life: in taste and manners, in morals and philosophy, in institutional arrangements and personal relations. Social conventions regarding gender roles, women’s “nature,” workers’ rights, immigration policy, internationalism, and artistic freedom were contested openly in a brief experiment in America’s political culture that has come to be known as the “little rebellion.” The young progressives, feminists, socialists, and bohemians who participated tried to break free from prevailing norms in political consensus, sexual conformity, and cultural formalism. They formed themselves into a highly self-conscious if somewhat disorganized group, certain of their historical role and their ideas for the future.¹

The prewar rebellion was national in scope, but its primary centers of activity were in many of the nation’s cities, including New
York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, Milwaukee, Madison, and Portland. In New York City, the “little renaissance” was based in Greenwich Village, its compressed spatial geography contrasting sharply with its cultural internationalism. Social reformers and political revolutionaries, writers and artists, socialists and anarchists, suffragists and settlement workers lived and worked together, often side by side. Their public culture took place in literary salons, armories, eating clubs, and art galleries where they displayed their paintings, performed experimental theater, and held literary readings. They formed political organizations to secure suffrage rights, educate children of the working class, protest labor conditions, and resist war preparedness. In their private lives they experimented as well, forming themselves into alternative families, bound together by friendship and shared ideals. And they made a deliberate effort to bridge the class barriers between themselves and the new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, college students, and the urban poor, often living in the same neighborhoods.

In 1913 Alfred Stieglitz founded the Photo-Secession Gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue, a gallery-workshop-meetingplace for artists and their friends. The gallery exhibited the works of a new group of American artists and photographers—Georgia O’Keeffe, Marsden Hartley, Max Weber, Arthur Dove, and other modernists—and became an intimate and informally organized community space for social gatherings and discussions. In the same year Mabel Dodge formed her famous salon, where the likes of Walter Lippmann, Max Eastman, Lucy Claire Mitchell, and others convened to discuss current ideas in Freudianism, feminism, imagist poetry, and labor radicalism. Dodge captured the flavor of those evenings in her memoirs, describing the crowd that gathered as a mingling of “Socialists, Trade-Unionists, Anarchists, Suffragists, Poets, Relations, Lawyers, Murderers, ‘Old Friends,’ Psychoanalysts, IWWs, Single Taxers, Birth Controlists, Newspapermen, Artists, Modern-Artists, Club Women, Woman’s-place-is-in-the-home Women, Clergymen, and just plain men.”

A number of little theaters sprang up, such as the Provincetown Players and the Washington Square Players in Greenwich Village, to perform contemporary material, including one another’s work.
Neighborhood theater companies were formed, companies of non-professionals (and neighbors) who participated in the performances. Group pageants were also a popular form of experimental theater. The famous Paterson Pageant of 1913, re-creating the Paterson garment workers’ strike of 1912, produced a kind of performance art on a massive scale, attracting 15,000 audience members, according to one historian, most of whom were working class and many of whom walked from New Jersey to Madison Square Garden in order to participate in the event. The pageant was a success in its own terms: it publicized the strike, drew support for the strikers, and, in broader cultural terms, broke the barriers between audience and performers in a staged rally/performance that spanned two days. In the dance world, Isadora Duncan scandalized genteel critics with her free-form modern dance. Among immigrant workers, Emma Goldman, among others, held public meetings to advocate free love, birth control, and women’s health education, where she was frequently arrested, often before she even began to speak.

Perhaps the archetypal event of the time was the Armory Show of 1913. An immense exhibition of 1,600 paintings, prints, drawings, and pieces of sculpture, the show introduced many Americans to the work of the European cubists and futurists. The bold colors and shapes of Matisse, Kandinsky, Duchamp, Brancusi, Rouault, Lehmbrock, and other artists shocked members of New York’s art community. After spending “an appalling morning” at the show, the staid art critic Kenyon Cox wrote that he had witnessed the “total destruction of the art of painting.” “To have looked at it is to have passed through a pathological museum where the layman has no right to go. One feels that one has seen not an exhibition, but an exposure.”

Exposing the pretenses of literary respectability was one of the objectives of the “little magazines.” Based in Chicago, New York, and Boston, these small-circulation journals, some frankly socialist, others merely rebellious, aimed to break down the boundaries between high culture and popular culture and the modernist divide between art and politics. Among the little magazines founded in the prewar years were the irreverent Masses in 1911, edited by Max Eastman and Floyd Dell, prosecuted in 1918 by the U.S. govern-
ment for sedition during the war; Harriet Monroe’s journal *Poetry* in Chicago in 1912, a forum for the avant-garde; and the *New Republic* in 1914, edited by Herbert Croly, Walter Lippmann, and Walter Weyl, progressive intellectuals with an interest in the possibilities of a democratic socialism. Croly’s opening editorial suggested the journal’s slightly incendiary purpose; its aim, he wrote, was “less to inform or entertain its readers than to start little insurrections in the realm of their convictions.” The lively and sophisticated *Seven Arts* was founded in 1916 by Waldo Frank, James Oppenheim, and Floyd Dell as a forum for American art and culture. In its two short years, the *Seven Arts* managed to publish noteworthy, new American authors, among them, Robert Frost, Amy Lowell, Sherwood Anderson, Stephen Vincent Benét, Theodore Dreiser, Max Eastman, Carl Sandburg, Eugene O’Neill, Vachel Lindsay, John Reed, H. L. Mencken, Harold Stearns, Paul Rosenfeld, and Van Wyck Brooks, some of them reaching fame decades later. Committed to cultural nationalism, it also welcomed European contributors, including Romaine Rolland, Kahlil Gibran, Bertrand Russell, D. H. Lawrence, John Butler Yeats, and writers issuing manifestos for a Young India, a Young Ireland, and a Young Italy, whose efforts were considered a part of a growing spirit of internationalism in an ever-shrinking world.  

It is important to understand the genealogy of the little rebellion and to locate Bourne’s place in it. According to Nietzsche, a genealogy is not a chronological tracing of origins but a logical inquiry into the consequences and practices of a concept or an idea. It is not interested in the thing-in-itself (the nature or essence of an idea) but in the conditions of its expression and the ways in which it is constituted and constrained by institutions and practices. A genealogy, therefore, reverses conventional historical logic, which, as Nietzsche showed, imposes an artificial unity on its subject, after the fact. A genealogy shows, as Judith Butler suggests, what is at stake in labeling something as a cause rather than as an effect.  

At stake, therefore, in the genealogy of the little rebellion is another understanding of the “lost promise” of progressivism recently studied by Eldon Eisenach. I explore the cultural causes
of that failure rather than the internal contradictions within progressivism itself. The circumstances that Eisenach understandably viewed as progressivism’s failure as a “political regime”—its failure to construct a national unity based on nationalism, the idea of a common American identity, and democracy as a civic religion—can be seen as a success in the creation of a little rebellion, a significant moment of cultural renaissance whose cultural ideals were often at odds with those of liberal progressivism. Ideas and events that might be considered a failure from a political perspective can from a cultural perspective be recovered as a triumph. This genealogy turns our attention to some of the critics of progressivism and some of its disillusioned followers rather than to the architects of progressivism itself. It offers a framework for understanding the “lost promise” of progressivism as less of a failure and more of a brief triumph in the creation of an alternative cultural politics.

To establish a genealogy of the little rebellion, it is necessary to return to the influences that shaped it and to understand the ways in which it created its own unity, despite its many internal divisions. Paradoxically, the movement—perhaps it was an outburst—was both a revolt against the past and a continuation of a revolution already under way in the universities and in the public culture generally. Rejecting a fading Victorianism, still influential in the public culture, middle-class progressives and radicals rebelled against its standards of morality, its Anglophilia in literature and art, and its romanticism. As a continuation of a “revolt against formalism,” as Morton White termed it, begun by progressive intellectuals and activists in the 1880s, it expanded the challenge to the moral, scientific, and epistemological standards of late nineteenth-century realism and absolutism in philosophy, law, and the social sciences.

Among the many significant intellectual developments of this knowledge revolution was Charles Beard’s economic determinism, which looked into the private interests that shaped public choices; O. W. Holmes’s legal theory, which maintained that law was, in great measure, “experience,” hence pragmatic and inductive and not deduced from timeless principles or abstract rules; James Harvey Robinson’s history, which offered a pragmatic tool for explaining
the present and controlling the future; Thorstein Veblen's institutionalism, which studied empirically the connections between economic institutions and other aspects of culture; and William James's pragmatism, which maintained that truth "happened to an idea" or that truth was a process, not residing in pure intellect alone but in its application, and that the pragmatic truth of an idea could be judged by the practical difference it made in one's life. These rebel fathers, as a group, abandoned the nineteenth-century preference for rationalism and positivism and the distinctions between fact and value, knowledge and morality. They rejected abstractions such as history or reason to explain social or historical change and looked to experience and empirical evidence—of economic interests or political motivations—to uncover human purposes in history. They were interested in concentrating on techniques of research, investigation, and experimentation rather than on developing grand theory. Antiformalism toppled the universalizing tendencies of Western philosophy and social science prevalent during the 1860s to the 1880s in a way that was distinctively modern.

For many children of the prewar generation, James's influence was especially important. In addition to the anti-Platonism of his philosophy, denying the idea of an essence residing in persons or things, James's pragmatism offered an inducement to practical involvement in the social world. It emphasized action as revealed meaning, according to John Diggins, which in turn encouraged young activists and intellectuals to apply their ideas in practical, political involvement in the real world.\(^{10}\)

Moreover, James was the most sympathetic of contemporary philosophers to the politics of the subaltern and held the most idealist views among the American pragmatists, taking seriously the role of subjectivity in creating meaning. The emphasis on subjectivity as a constitutive force in the construction of culture had captivated the European public in the thought of Bergson, Sorel, and Nietzsche and had inspired French and Italian syndicalists.\(^{11}\) Young socialists and pragmatists in America in turn took the ideas of European idealists, refocused through the lens of James, and turned their attention to the role of individual creativity and imagination as a stimulus to action and to the idea of authoritative freedom in the individual as a force for social change. Further, James's
therapeutic philosophy held great attraction for middle-class youth who, whether caught in spiritual crises, having rejected their Protestant upbringing, or in personal uncertainty over how to contribute constructively to social change, could resolve personal crisis and spiritual doubt through a philosophy that looked beyond questions of ontology or metaphysics to one that emphasized the practical consequences of one's ideas.

In addition to James, American moderns were enthralled with Nietzsche. To them, he was arch-rebel and unregenerate. As Bourne put it, "The pagan, liberating, audacious message of Nietzsche touches the old puritan ideals to the quick."His psychology of power became a tool for a corrosive critique of the genteel tradition and Protestant moralism in general. According to Alfred Kazin, Nietzsche had become the philosopher in vogue at the turn of the century, attracting older writers and public figures, including Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, Frank Norris, and Theodore Roosevelt, who were fascinated by his analysis of force and his emphasis on vitality. The new, tough, muscular men of the new century took Nietzsche as the architect of the vitalist ideal and the proponent of an ethic of magnetic energy. Socialists in Bourne's generation, including Max Eastman and John Reed, moreover, saw no contradiction in combining Nietzsche's rhetoric of the idea of a super race with plans for a democratic socialism, arguing against Nietzsche that the idea could be universalized for the majority. Along with Nietzsche, European socialists such as Graham Wallas, Bertrand Russell, and G. D. H. Cole, who made the case for guild socialism, emphasized direct action and social engagement; and Walt Whitman became the apostle of democratic camaraderie.

Popular culture reinforced the emphasis of progressive intellectuals on action and practical success. Roosevelt's idea of the "strenuous life" appealed to the young rebels of the 1910s, some of them prizing the outdoor life, others the rise of the New Woman, and yet others the vitalism and activism of the muscular spirit. Youth itself became a virtue, an escape from the archaic moralism of the old century and a release from "drift," in Walter Lippmann's terms. The New Woman was described as bold and courageous, qualities formerly ascribed to men. As women became more assertive, John Higham has suggested, men became more martial. As
progressives sought social influence, they reached for political power. The link between progressivism and imperialism was common by the end of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{14}

The shift from a producer culture to a consumer culture that historians have described was experienced by middle-class progressives and radicals, as evident in their writings, as economic dislocation.\textsuperscript{15} The emphasis in the colleges and universities was on the new scientific disciplines. College students were being trained for the new professions in economics, political science, and sociology and for participation in an increasingly corporatized society as technicians. Bureaucratic institutions required scientific managers and administrative experts. Accordingly, their discourse reflected an awareness of the new conceptions of economic rationality and the importance of scientific expertise and professionalism for working men and women.

Some intellectuals, like Walter Lippmann, were convinced that a new, rationalized order, embodied by the manager, the engineer, the professional bureaucrat, and the technician, was the welcome harbinger of the modern age. Science, management, and technology could make the society hum with efficiency and render scarcity obsolete. Other critics, however, including Bourne, opposed the rationalization of society by either the Puritan fathers or their technocratic sons, rejecting the impersonality within the corporate enterprise, the routinization of professional employment, and standardization (of knowledge and time). The bureaucratic "Moloch," quoting Bourne, threatened to "swallow" individual personality and creativity, and he and his compeers gravitated toward the presumably freer forces of irrationality and disorder, following a Nietzschean or Bergsonian inspiration.\textsuperscript{16}

Historians have also characterized the "age of transition" as a shift from a culture that emphasized character and self-control to one of personality and self-expression.\textsuperscript{17} In these terms, the children of the middle classes experienced the clash among cultural expectations of individual responsibility, social obligation, and personal desire as occurring within the family and often constructed it in familial terms. Their discourse consequently signified a rejection of the fathers and the rigid, life-denying ethic of a Puritan self-denial and a pursuit of their own values of youthful spontaneity
and self-gratification and, alternatively, a pull toward collective responsibility, social work, or political involvement. As Bourne put it, “We feel social injustice as our fathers felt personal sin.” Their discourse was remarkably similar, whether as social reformers or poets, and it emphasized the importance of cultivating a public personality as its own resource. They rejected the requirements of the genteel culture, with its expectations of marital fidelity, personal character, and public honor as obsolete and as insufficient preparation for their participation in an economic order that now required marketing skills and job adaptability.

The link that joined these different and often competing discourses—the languages of the family and of the market, or in Michael Rogin’s words, the languages of love and of contract, which are protean in American literature—was the idea of generationalism and generational change. Generationalism marked a new effort in America and Europe to periodize history and to acknowledge lines of affiliation outside traditional economic classes and outside the family. Generations signified political divisions that could bring together like-minded individuals, regardless of class or educational background, to form new forces for social change. The idea of a generational revolt represented an important boundary breakdown for American generationalists, among them Jane Addams, Lippmann, and Bourne, as a way, as Addams explained, to create a unity between an unprepared middle class and a displaced working class while at the same time finding common cause with all rebels of the age. The unity of the younger generation was a constructed unity, to borrow Eisenach’s phrase about progressivism’s created unity, but it was a unity constitutive of its political identity. The discourse of generationalism broke down the divide between the language of the market and that of the family and created a symbolic unity that crossed class, gender, and ideological divides.

The younger generation shared concretely three sets of attitudes and goals captured in the idea of youth: a common set of assumptions about past grievances, a common agenda for personal and social change, and a highly developed consciousness about their collective destiny and historic role. Thus, despite the many and significant differences between the progressives, anarchists, and other
radicals in the first decade of the twentieth century, the idea of a generational revolt captured their doubled-edged rebellion and the basis of their common cause: a revolt against the rigidity of the Puritan fathers and a resistance to the impersonality of the new corporate order. For the younger generation, the enemy was less the institutions of capitalism or socialism; it was the older people of the world who stood in the way of change. Social change would take place in the battle between the old and the young.

Ironically, the younger generation was never so united as when it abolished itself as a political generation. Its disarray, evident in the patchwork of clubs and organizations and public activities that proliferated before the war, was quieted when wartime preparedness began in earnest. Political activities were consolidated, narrowed, and became one-dimensional. Feminist issues and issues regarding educational reform became secondary. When the United States entered World War I, as Bourne explained, “This motley crew of ex-socialists, and labor radicals, and liberals, and pragmatist philosophers . . . united for the prosecution of the war.” As a distinctive political force, the younger generation became invisible by 1918.

For Bourne, however, generationalism had a personal meaning as well. As a disabled child from an old-line Protestant family, his experiences were in many respects uncharacteristic of his middle-class generation—his physical challenges, a disabled father, six years of intermittent employment and a few years of factory experience, and an ambivalence toward institutions both as alternative families and as forces that suppressed the Jamesian “personal point of view.” These differences between himself and his peers he thought generationalism could elide, given the common identity of youth. Generationalism became a means of affiliating with others who also had been marginalized or excluded (young and old), a figurative unity that was instantiated in the generational narratives he wrote. Bourne’s identification with America’s outsiders—its immigrants, public women, and the poor—linked the idea of difference (from the fathers) and marginalization (from the market) to his own experience of exclusion. It became constitutive of his public identity as a cultural radical before the war and as an “irreconcilable” during it. His autobiographical essays, in particular,
were written in terms that were meant to capture the experience of growing up outside the dominant cultural norms.

To present Bourne's life and work as representative of a particular generation and a particular cultural crisis, therefore, is to present a paradox: he was representative precisely in his difference. Although generations are always based on their difference (from other generations), representatives are similar to those groups they represent. Just what is meant by characterizing Bourne's work as representative? By that term I mean an individual who has the capacity to organize meaning in such a way as to make sense of a cultural moment and its contradictions. A representative figure therefore "speaks" for him- or herself, but also for others. A representative's personal journey is linked to the struggles of his or her community. A representative is, or can be, an exemplary individual, as Emerson would have it, but the elitist implications of the Emersonian conception are undercut, in my view, when a representative speaks to the "common sense" of a culture. Representatives in this sense are thus constitutive of the conditions they seek to explain or signify in their work. They represent, not by mirroring that common experience, but in translating it into terms that are shared and instantiating it in their narratives.

This signifying function of the representative is meant to contrast with political theories of representation that locate representation in relations with a subject already presumed to exist. Political theorists have identified three types of representatives—the formal representative (Hobbes), the descriptive representative (Burke), and the symbolic representative—each of which infers a certain relationship with constituents and a corresponding obligation of accountability. None of these conceptions, however, acknowledges the constitutive capacity of representatives. In Hannah Pitkin's pivotal study of theories of representation, for instance, the authority of the representative is derivative; it follows from his relation with his constituents. A representative that creates a constituency, by contrast, acts as a political agent, constructing a public, or the idea of a public, where there was none. It is in this sense, I suggest, that Bourne's representativeness can best be understood.