Randolph Bourne and the Politics of Cultural Radicalism

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The country must be dotted with dissatisfied people who cannot accept any of the guides offered to them.
—Randolph S. Bourne to Van Wyck Brooks, 1918

We can be skeptical constructively, if, thrown back on our inner resources from the world of war which is taken as the overmastering reality, we search much more actively to clarify our attitudes and express a richer significance in the American scene.
—Randolph S. Bourne, “A War Diary”

Bourne contributed to the construction of his own myth, as I suggested at the outset of this book. Through the artful creation of personality and the crafting of auto-American-biographies designed to unite his destiny with that of his generation, he wanted, he wrote, following Nietzsche, to turn his life into a work of art. In his autobiographical writings, he constructed himself as a witness to, and prophet of, his generation’s ideals, formed by their experiences in the modern world of corporate liberalism. Living as an “unintegrated self,” he participated in “both worlds”—the puritan world of restraint, rationality, and guilt and the pagan world of personal
expressivity, alternative families, and social activism—a contradictory situation that he regarded as a common one for young moderns. With an ironic stance of “creative skepticism,” he traveled between “both worlds,” in his words, comparing “the is and the ought,” much as Nietzsche’s aesthetic impulse moved dialectically between the dream and the reality, to compare, to “build out a new world.”

But of course he could not control his story, and by the 1920s, he had become a mythic figure, a martyr to the war, and a voice of conscience. Part of the myth relied on the idea that his radicalism was a function of his personal dislocation, or more plainly, that his “irreconcilability” was a result of his physical differences—his hunched back, his twisted face, his dark cape worn to hide his misshapen body—and of his marginality, which made it easier to dismiss his politics, as did Amy Lowell (“deformed body, deformed mind”). For his critics, his radicalism was the result of his being an alienated and embittered outsider, longing to belong. For others who knew him, he was marked—indeed, chosen—as the prophetic voice of the age. As they told it, the afflictions of the body were overcome, disembodied by the miracle of speech, in Dreiser’s account, or by acts of moral courage, in the memoirs of Oppenheim and Frank. One of Oppenheim’s poems is typical:

For in himself  
He rose above his body and came among us  
Prophetic of his race,  
The great hater  
Of dark human deformity  
Which is our dying world.

For Dos Passos, his ability to transcend reached biblical proportions. Perhaps it was his iconic status that delayed serious studies of his work. For decades, his name appeared as a footnote in histories of the twentieth century, principally as an opponent of World War I, protesting that “war is the health of the state.” There were a few exceptions, a full-length biography, Max Lerner’s valuable assessment of his theory of the state, and the recovery of his antimilitarist writings and personal letters by the editors of Twice-a-Year in the 1940s. With Christopher Lasch’s influential study of the “new rad-
icals” in the 1960s, Bourne scholarship took a dramatic turn. He
became the subject of several biographies, a central figure in intel-
lectual histories of the early twentieth century, and a political critic
considered by political theorists to be a significant influence on
the tradition of American dissent. His communitarianism was
recovered by Wilson Carey McWilliams as a critique of liberalism,
its emphasis on friendship and fraternity as a counterweight to its
individualism. Thomas Bender established Bourne as a public in-
tellectual, the last of the independent intellectuals, committed to
a cosmopolitan American culture and a democratic society. In
Robert Westbrook’s definitive intellectual biography of Dewey,
Bourne emerged as its hero, his criticism of Dewey’s wartime in-
strumentalism vindicated by Dewey’s later embrace of it in a stance
of “cultivated naivete.”

The critical reception was different from the myth in that it was
not uniformly celebratory. Lerner dismissed Bourne’s critique of
the liberal state as reductionist and insensitive to the distinctions
between imperialism and totalitarianism, depending too closely on
the working class to defend against the “anti-democratic and anti-
humanist” state. Harold Laski, by contrast, rebuked Bourne for
ignoring the corporatist nature of liberalism. Charles Forcey sought
to restore Bourne’s politics to the plane of liberal respectability,
concluding that the differences between his political criticism and
that of the progressives were a matter of style, not of content. Sid-
dney Kaplan reached the same conclusion but saw Bourne as a “half-
way figure” between liberalism and socialism/syndicalism. More
recently, Sheldon Wolin characterized Bourne as sympathetic to
conservatism because of his interest in restoring community values
and rescuing America’s “usable past,” although Casey Blake’s study
of the Young Americans of the early twentieth century carefully dis-
tinguished his communitarianism as a combination of the roman-
tic anticapitalist and republican traditions in American thought,
leaning, perhaps, too far toward romanticism.

The revolution in Bourne scholarship prompted by Lasch’s work
also altered the analytic framework, introducing a psychosocial analy-
sis of political ideas. Historicizing the “new radicalism” of Bourne’s
generation as a response to the growing crisis of liberalism in the
twentieth century, Lasch interpreted Bourne’s critical dissent as a
product of both personal and generational alienation. As a member of the first class of self-described intellectuals, Bourne (and his generation of new radicals) was alienated from his middle-class background because of the breakdown of family values, the absence of discipline, and the reliance of weak and ineffectual parents as well as the schools on experts to administer private relations. The progressives, according to Lasch, sought reintegration in society by supporting programs that aimed to impose a (repressive) social order through practical or intellectual forms of control, but Bourne pursued a form of personal politics based on friendship rather than on citizenship, an immature assessment of political agency that was inadequate as a political solution to the crisis of authority in the family and in other social institutions. Blake’s study of the Young Americans reflected the Laschean psychological analysis, arguing that the breakdown of the late Victorian family (read: the absence of the father and the failure of material nurturance) turned these culture critics inward, in an infantile craving for “oceanic” wholeness or unity, searching for a “beloved community” that consequently weakened their civic commitments.6

The new radicals’ lack of attention to institutional politics and their turn to personal politics formed the basis of the Laschean critique. Lasch seemed to be troubled by the influence of the new radicalism on the culture of contemporary America. His argument, subsequently debated for almost three decades, suggested that the politics of the new radicalism led indirectly to the further breakdown of the family and patriarchal authority in the later part of the twentieth century; the decline in marital love; the rise of a culture of narcissism, with its turn to experts, therapy, personal expression, and the general escape from adult responsibility; and, as a particular example of its excesses, its influence on the personal politics of the New Left.7

Lasch’s critique of the crises of capitalism, and his disdain for the culture of narcissism that ironically supported it, is less important to my analysis than the psychological premises on which it is based. Lasch seems to fear the loss of the idea of a stable, unified self, able to establish internal boundaries and discipline and to enforce the reality principle, to determine the limits of the possible. I have suggested that Bourne’s rejection of the terms of a lib-
eral discourse can be seen to extend to his rejection of the liberal conception of the self, on which it is based. Lasch, and to a lesser extent, Blake, is wary of the breakdown of boundaries—between self and society, love and friendship, history and truth—yet Bourne recognized and welcomed the collapse. This is not to say that he embraced a sense of the performative self, playing out a “drama” of fantasies on a refracted mirror stage (Lacan), but he did regard the self as a “network of representations of the various codes and institutions of society,” a socially embedded and fragmented or multiply affiliated self, that prefigured the postmodern self, constructed by self-alienation (separation).

The “unintegrated self” of Bourne’s social psychology confronted the possibilities of boundary breakdown—between the masculine and the feminine, the young and old—and, in particular, did not fear the feminine, or in Bourne’s terms, the dionysian. It is important to be clear. The construction of a “vital” and resilient self in Bourne’s understanding did not collapse the boundaries between self and other or between the natural and the social, contrary to Ross Posnock’s reading, but it did, as Posnock suggested, permit a fluidity of affiliations and an instability of perspective that Bourne cultivated to keep his radicalism from collapsing into orthodoxy. Therefore, if one considers the Freudian self as the norm, with its well-integrated super ego, then the “unintegrated self” of Bourne’s psychology, with its embrace of the feminine, will seem to be immature or stuck in adolescence.

Bourne’s “unintegrated self” had its political and intellectual corollary in his stance of “creative skepticism” in that he was both connected to the particularities of day-to-day politics and at the same time grounded in theory. This position, which Posnock termed the politics of nonidentity, meant that Bourne’s political commitments were constantly in flux, contingent on specific circumstances but relying on “intellectual suspense” to test them critically. In a letter written to Paul Strand in 1917, Bourne described the difficulty of translation and transcendence:

Being of marked physical deficiency and therefore draftless, I often fear that I write about the war without that poignant sense of it that must come to the men who have the direct
issue made for them. I feel it all, but I may be too much “in the air,” as they say. One is happy, however, in these times, to find one’s self saying anything that brings help to anybody.9

In this rare reference to his physical disability, Bourne underscored the dangers of abstraction. “Intellectualism is the ‘liberal’ curse, the habit of moving in concepts rather than in the warm area of pragmatic life,” he wrote to Brooks. The restlessness of a “creative skepticism” reformulated the experimentalism of pragmatism and recovered the Jamesian “personal point of view.”

Despite the many troubling implications of Lasch’s critique of the culture of self-love, his thesis cannot be dismissed out of hand. The implication that Bourne was stuck in suspended adolescence or, more generally, was unable to offer a mature or constructive politics to deal with the political crises of corporate capitalism is a recurrent theme in Bourne scholarship. It has found its expression in Mumford’s disappointment in Bourne’s “romantic defeatism,” and, more recently, in Michael Walzer’s reading of Bourne’s final writings as a retreat into “despair” and “distance.”10

Against the psychosocial imagery, I would like to address the same issue by repositioning Bourne’s politics within the Nietzschean terms of this book and particularly in the metamorphoses of the three spirits. In Zarathustra’s first speech, he relates the voyage of the spirit: “Of the three metamorphoses of the spirit I tell you: how the spirit becomes a camel; and the camel, a lion, and the lion, finally, a child.”11 In Nietzsche’s allegory, the camel was the stage of the “yea-sayer,” the long-suffering, willing bearer of pain, who would carry any burden and submit to any pain. It was the soul’s moment of reaction, enduring life’s contradictions and accepting them as natural. The lion represented the “nay-sayer,” the rebel whose form of rebellion was in absolute negativity against all that went before. The lion was not creative in his revolt but sought only to be free. The final stage, the moment of the child, was the stage of willful innocence and potential rebirth. Through the act of forgetting, that is, in the willful remembering of one’s past and of taking it in, a return to the stage of childlike joy was possible. Only those individuals who were stuck in their pasts, who had grievances they could not forget, were unable to move to the
last stage, unable to act to liberate themselves. They were at war with their own time and at war with themselves.12

The interpretation of Bourne as stuck in the stage of Nietzsche’s lion—in the position of always saying no—is persuasive in light of the breadth of his critique and the persistence of his “irreconcilability.” His hostility to bureaucratic institutions, his antistatism, his repudiation of scientific management and professional expertise, and his animus toward the myths of progress aided by technology were consistent and absolute. His fears of conformism under the “herd instinct” of the family, the school, the state, and the communities of feminists and the literati followed him from his first writings on the generational conflict. His critique of the misdirected faith in science—not of science itself—and the experiments in social reform and welfare administration placed him outside the progressive community in the view of many people within it. His critique of a one-dimensional mass culture and its commercialism left him in a compromising position for a cultural democrat. Many of these positions are unsupportable today, even for people on the left—because such views underestimate the possibility of democratic resistance and dismiss the constructive role of statist politics—but they raise the question of whether the nature of his dissent was so thoroughgoing that it precluded any constructive or creative politics of affirmation.

My point is that Bourne’s politics, although largely anti-institutional, were neither defeatist nor irredeemably negative. His support for the prefigurative politics of a transnational American culture was not in itself anti-institutional. Indeed it redefined the nature of politics and opened up the political space to outside voices and alternative sites of engagement. His politics of cultural experimentation were grounded in a democratic impulse that communities of artists and writers could reorganize social relations in their own practices as well as produce art for all classes. His belief that cultural solutions could stimulate political responses grounded his enthusiasm for the transforming influences of architecture and city planning.

Moreover, Bourne did indeed endorse some forms of institutional politics, what I have called prefigurative politics, or the neighborhood-based politics of halfway houses, settlements, experimental
schools, and cooperatives that involved feminine labor, self-help, and nonstatist alternatives to centralization and bureaucratic management. Prefigurative politics were not substitutes for centralized institutional politics, but they were practical, experimental, and alternate spaces for education and engagement, where the relations between family, work, and the community were reorganized. His redefinition of the political was a breakdown of the boundaries between institutions and culture, public and private, on which liberalism depended.

Put in Nietzschean terms, Bourne saw power (or the will to power) in both nature and in convention, constituting individuals and structuring their activity and discourse. While Nietzsche dissolved the concepts of community and culture (and past and future) in the interest of creating the autonomous individual, Bourne aimed to free men from both nature and convention for participation in "beloved community." In his fragment, "Old Tyrannies," his resignation to the forces of social determinism, the fact that "we live a completely social life" in which we "have never overtaken the given," seems complete. Perhaps it was less a cry of despair, as most have read it, and more a recognition of the need to create alternative communities without the "sect-pressures" of both natural and conventional groups.

Let us compel the war to break in on us, if it must, not go hospitably to meet it. Let us force it perceptibly to batter in our spiritual health. This attitude need not be a fatuous hiding in the sand, denying realities. When we are broken in on, we can yield to the inexorable. Those who are conscripted will have been broken in on... [Others] can resist the poison which makes art and all the desires for more impassioned living seem idle and even shameful. For many of us, resentment against the war has meant a vivid consciousness of what we are seeking in American life.13

These communities, in my view, were not insular enclaves or an opportunity for escape into romantism but an anchor against the centripetal forces of society, dispersing individuals and atomizing them, and the centrifugal forces of the state, imposing a national/patriotic identity.
Perhaps the issue of Bourne’s negativism might be differently phrased, in order to inquire into the implications of his dissent. If one chooses to analyze power from outside the state and outside mass society, is one in a difficult position to look for a source of resistance? Is one forced into a position of a solitary critic, or can one find a basis for a democratic criticism that speaks to the common experience in the common language? The answer seemingly depends on a reading of Bourne’s critical position, “below the battle,” the space where he worked out both his critique and his proposals for America’s “promise.” Taking a position “below the battle,” he argued, was a stance for impossible situations: when one is forced to choose between two fixed or false choices or when choices are foreclosed by the “inexorables” of social and political forces, making individual resistance ineffective and mass protest untenable. It was not a position of political quiescence, contrary to Blake, or of aloofness. “This does not mean any smug retreat from the world, with the belief that the truth is in us and can only be contaminated by contact.” It was a position that was necessary for the “malcontents” of all classes, who “cannot accept any of the guides offered to them.”

Ironically, at the same time that Bourne’s stance was a concession of the limits of dissent—for the critic who is below the battle cannot influence official policy, but neither need the critic support it—it created the precondition, indeed the necessity, for a creative politics worked out in the unmapped space of the impossible. Its “creative skepticism” resembled Nietzsche’s aesthetic impulse, moving between dream and reality, or in Bourne’s terms, between the is and the ought. The tension was creative; the comparison of alternatives, the shifting of the light, in his photographic metaphor of the ironic vision, altered the nature of reality, until the normal became the deviant and the sane became insane. By altering perception, heightening imagination, and shattering illusions, irony was both constructive and destructive. “If the ironist is destructive, it is his own world he is destroying; if he is critical, it is his own world that he is criticizing . . . his irony is his critique of life.” His effort, like Nietzsche’s artist, was to show other moderns how to see the world differently and thereby to change it.

Perhaps it does not misconstrue the nature of his dissent therefore to conclude that he was not caught in Nietzsche’s “laughing
lion” but was drifting to the stage of the child, trying to recover a youthful innocence that came, for Nietzsche, in remembering the slaughter that founded nations so that if one took it in, it burned in one’s memory in order not to repeat it. “We have art in order to not die from the truth,” according to Nietzsche. Bourne’s call for “creative desire,” in a similar fashion, may be a means to recover from the truth:

A more skeptical, malicious, desperate, ironical mood may actually be a sign of more vivid and more stirring fermenting in America today. It may be a sign of hope. That thirst for more of the intellectual “war and laughter” that we find Nietzsche calling us to may bring us satisfactions that optimism-haunted philosophies could never bring. Malcontentedness may be the beginning of promise. That is why I evoked the spirit of Williams James, with its gay passion for ideas, and its freedom of speculation. . . . It is the creative desire more than the creative intelligence that we shall need if ever we are to fly.16

In this way, the politics of affirmation would come of necessity from a position “below the battle.”