Randolph Bourne and the Politics of Cultural Radicalism

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In the “little rebellion” that swept New York’s Greenwich Village before World War I, few figures stood out more than Randolph Bourne. Hunchbacked and caped—the “little sparrow-like man” of Dos Passos’ U.S.A.—Bourne was an essayist and critic most remembered today for his opposition to U.S. military involvement in Europe and his assertion that “war is the health of the state.” A frequent contributor to The New Republic, he died in 1918 at the age of thirty-two, arguing that a “military-industrial” complex would continue to shape the policies of the modern liberal state.

“The extraordinary importance and resonance of Randolph Bourne is brilliantly revealed in this reading of him as living and thinking at the opening of American modernity. By getting closer than any other critic to the historical Bourne, Leslie Vaughan captures the complexity and creativity of his inheritance of progressive rationality and embrace of Nietzschean desire. More clearly and powerfully than anyone else, she elaborates and supports his redefinition of the political, of its relation to the aesthetic, and of the relation of the intellectual to democratic politics. This outstanding book makes Bourne available in a fresh way for our own conversations about liberalism, multiculturalism, and democracy.”—Thomas Bender, author of New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York City from 1750 to the Beginnings of Our Own Time

“By stressing Bourne’s autobiographical writings, his focus on generational politics, and his call for the creation of a new democratic (and ironic) personality to supplant the liberal ideal of character, Vaughan extends the location of American political thought into the complex (and dangerous) terrain of culture and spirit. As a self-styled marginal and outcast, Bourne’s cultural-political vision is a timely reminder that issues of identity and inclusion have long been just beneath the surface of American political discourse. By recovering and synthesizing this vision, Vaughan does both Bourne and contemporary political thinking a notable service.”—Eldon J. Eisenach, author of The Lost Promise of Progressivism

“An important contribution to the study of modern American political thought. Vaughan’s excellent grasp of the workings of psychosocial dynamics at the dawn of the twentieth century, combined with her lucid exposition of the connections and tensions among American liberalism, multiculturalism, aesthetics, and democracy, make her book valuable to both a general audience and specialists in the discipline.”—American Political Science Review

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