

Remembering Randolph Bourne, Wilson nemesis, and scourge of fake progressives.

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PATRICE GREANVILLE

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I have to admit that I hardly knew about Randolph Bourne until very recently, when I bumped into his name among one of those resilient and deeply principled outliers who, about a century ago, when most "progressives" were cheerfully embracing the call of nationalism and war (or caving in to Wilson's intimidation), refused to do so. Bourne, despite his painful physical deficits, was quite a man, and I regret I have spent most of my life unaware of his existence. His [Wikipedia page](#) provides some insights into this man:



Randolph Silliman Bourne (May 30, 1886 – December 22, 1918) was a [progressive](#) writer and intellectual born in [Bloomfield, New Jersey](#), and a graduate of [Columbia University](#). He is considered to be a spokesman for the young radicals living during [World War I](#).

His articles appeared in journals including [The Seven Arts](#) and [The New Republic](#). Bourne is best known for his essays, especially his unfinished work "The State," discovered after he died. From this essay (which was published posthumously and included in *Untimely Papers*^[1]) comes the phrase "war is the health of the state" which laments the success of governments in arrogating authority and resources during conflicts.

Bourne's face was deformed at birth by misused forceps and the umbilical cord was coiled round his left ear, leaving it permanently damaged and misshapen.

At age four, he suffered [tuberculosis of the spine](#), resulting in stunted growth and a hunched back.^[2] He chronicled his experiences in his essay titled, "[The Handicapped - by one of them](#)", considered a foundational work in disability studies. At age 23, he won a scholarship to study at Columbia University, from which he graduated in 1912 with a Bachelor of Arts degree and a [Master's degree](#) in 1913. He was a journalist and editor of the Columbia Monthly, and he was also a contributor to the weekly [The New Republic](#) since it was first launched in 1914, but after America entered the war, the magazine found his pacifist views incompatible. From 1913 to 1914, he studied in Europe on a Columbia Fellowship.^[3]

[World War I](#) divided American progressives and pitted an anti-war faction—including Bourne and [Jane Addams](#)—against a pro-war faction led by [pragmatist](#) philosopher and educational theorist [John Dewey](#). Bourne was a student of Dewey's at [Columbia](#), but he rejected Dewey's idea of using the war to spread democracy. (He was a member of the [Boar's Head Society](#).^[4]) In his pointedly titled 1917 essay "[Twilight of Idols](#)", he invoked the progressive [pragmatism](#) of Dewey's contemporary [William James](#) to argue that America was using democracy as an end to justify the war, but that democracy itself was never examined. Although initially following Dewey, he felt that Dewey had betrayed his democratic ideals by focusing only on the facade of a democratic government rather than on the ideas behind democracy that Dewey had once professed to respect.

Bourne was greatly influenced by [Horace Kallen](#)'s 1915 essay, "Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot". Like Kallen, Bourne argued that [Americanism](#) ought not to be associated with [Anglo-Saxonism](#). In his 1916 article "Trans-National America," Bourne argued that the United States should accommodate immigrant cultures into a "cosmopolitan America," instead of forcing immigrants to assimilate to the dominant Anglo-Saxon-based culture.

Bourne died (at age 32) in the [Spanish flu](#) pandemic after the war, in 1918.^[2] [John Dos Passos](#), an influential American [modernist](#) writer, eulogized Bourne in the chapter "Randolph Bourne" of his novel [1919](#) and drew heavily on the ideas presented in *War Is The Health of the State* in the novel.

His [antiwar essay, which I reproduce below](#), resonates with some cultural themes—amplified by state propaganda— that are still very much relevant today. With the world on the brink of truly "a war to end all wars" (as WWI was so cheerfully marketed)...because this one would finish humanity, along with much of innocent creation, it is a matter of decency to read and refresh our arguments against such catastrophes. Here's Bourne's way of looking at the problem:

The War and the Intellectuals: Randolph Bourne Vents His Animus Against War

Pro-war statements and speeches—as well as more coercive measures—gradually captured American public discourse in 1917. Fairly quickly, those who rejected the rationales for United States participation in the war found themselves increasingly isolated. Liberals, intellectuals, and even many socialists soon supported American intervention. A youthful critic in his twenties,

Randolph Bourne wrote a bitter essay in the intellectual magazine *Seven Arts*, lambasting his fellow intellectuals for lining up so readily behind the war effort.

To those of us who still retain an irreconcilable animus against war, it has been a bitter experience to see the unanimity with which the American intellectuals have thrown their support to the use of war-technique in the crisis in which America found herself. Socialists, college professors, publicists, new-republicans, practitioners of literature, have vied with each other in confirming with their intellectual faith the collapse of neutrality and the riveting of the war-mind on a hundred million more of the world's people. And the intellectuals are not content with confirming our belligerent gesture. They are now complacently asserting that it was they who effectively willed it, against the hesitation and dim perceptions of the American democratic masses. A war made deliberately by the intellectuals! . . .

Those intellectuals who have felt themselves totally out of sympathy with this drag toward war will seek some explanation for this joyful leadership. They will want to understand this willingness of the American intellect to open the sluices and flood us with the sewage of the war spirit. We cannot forget the virtuous horror and stupefaction which filled our college professors when they read the famous manifesto of their ninety-three German colleagues in defense of their war. To the American academic mind of 1914 defense of war was inconceivable. . . . They would have thought anyone mad who talked of shipping American men by the hundreds of thousands—conscripts—to die on the fields of France. Such a spiritual change seems catastrophic when we shoot our minds back to those days when neutrality was a proud thing. But the intellectual progress has been so gradual that the country retains little sense of the irony. The war sentiment, begun so gradually but so perseveringly by the preparedness advocates who came from the ranks of big business, caught hold of one after another of the intellectual groups. With the aid of [Theodore] Roosevelt the murmurs became a monotonous chant and finally a chorus so mighty that to be out of it was at first to be disreputable and finally almost obscene. And slowly a strident rant was worked up against Germany which compared very creditably with the German fulminations against the greedy power of England. The nerve of the war-feeling centered, of course, in the richer and older classes of the Atlantic seaboard and was keenest where there were French or English business and particularly social connections. The sentiment then spread over the country as a class-phenomenon, touching everywhere those upper-class elements in each section who identified themselves with this Eastern ruling group. It must never be forgotten that in every community it was the least liberal and least democratic elements among whom the preparedness and later the war sentiment was found. The farmers were apathetic, the small businessmen and workmen are still apathetic towards the war. The election was a vote of confidence of these latter classes in a President who would keep the faith of neutrality. The intellectuals, in other words, have identified themselves with the least democratic forces in American life. They have assumed the leadership for war of those very classes whom the American democracy has been immemorably fighting. Only in a world where irony was dead could an intellectual class enter war at the head of such illiberal cohorts in the avowed cause of world-liberalism and world-democracy. No one is left to point out the undemocratic nature of this war-liberalism. In a time of faith skepticism is the most intolerable of all insults.

Our intellectual class might have been occupied during the last two years of war in studying and clarifying the ideals and aspirations of the American democracy, in discovering a true Americanism which would not have been merely nebulous but might have federated the different ethnic groups and traditions. They might have spent the time in endeavoring to clear the public mind of the cant of war, to get rid of old mystical notions that clog our thinking. We might have used the time for a great wave of education, for setting our house in spiritual order. We could at least have set the problem before ourselves. If our intellectuals were going to lead the administration, they might conceivably have tried to find some way of securing peace by making neutrality effective. They might have turned their intellectual energy not to the problem of jockeying the nation into war but to the problem of using our vast neutral power to attain democratic ends for the rest of the world and ourselves without the use of the malevolent technique of war. They might have failed. The point is that they scarcely tried. The time was spent not in clarification and education but in a mulling over of nebulous ideals of democracy and liberalism and civilization, which had never meant anything fruitful to those ruling classes who now so glibly used them, and in giving free rein to the elementary instinct of self-defense. The whole era has been spiritually wasted. The outstanding feature has been not its Americanism but its intense colonialism. The offense of our intellectuals was not so much that they were colonial—for what could we expect of a nation composed of so many national elements?—but that it was so one-sidedly and partisanly colonial. The official reputable expression of the intellectual class has been that of the English colonial. Certain portions of it have been even more loyalist than the King, more British even than Australia. Other colonial attitudes have been vulgar. The colonialism of the other American stocks was denied a hearing from the start. America might have been made a meeting-ground for the different national attitudes. An intellectual class, cultural colonists of the different European nations, might have threshed out the issues here as they could not be threshed out in Europe. Instead of this, the English colonials in university and press took command at the start, and we became an intellectual Hungary where thought was subject to an effective process of Magyarization [i.e., making diverse peoples into Hungarians or Magyars]. The reputable opinion of the American intellectuals became more and more either what could be read pleasantly in London or what was written in an earnest effort to put Englishmen straight on their war-aims and war-technique. This Magyarization of thought produced as a counterreaction a peculiarly offensive and inept German apologetic, and the two partisans divided the field between them. The great masses, the other ethnic groups, were inarticulate. American public opinion was almost as little prepared for war in 1917 as it was in 1914. . . .

We have had to watch, therefore, in this country the same process which so shocked us abroad—the coalescence of the intellectual classes in support of the military program. In this country, indeed, the socialist intellectuals did not even have the grace of their German brothers to wait for the declaration of war before they broke for cover. And when they declared for war they showed how thin was the intellectual veneer of their socialism. For they called us in terms that might have emanated from any bourgeois journal to defend democracy and civilization, just as if it were not exactly against those very bourgeois democracies and capitalist civilizations that socialists had been fighting for decades. But so subtle is the spiritual chemistry of the “inside” that all this intellectual cohesion—herd-instinct become herd-intellect—which seemed abroad so hysterical and so servile comes to us here in highly rational terms. We go to war to save the world from subjugation! But the German intellectuals went to war to save their culture from barbarization! And the French went to war to save their beautiful France! And the English to save international honor! And Russia, most altruistic and self-sacrificing of all, to save a small State from destruction. Whence is our miraculous intuition of our moral spotlessness? Whence our confidence that history will not unravel huge economic and imperialist forces upon which our rationalizations float like bubbles? The Jew often marvels that his race alone should have been chosen as the true people of the cosmic God. Are not our intellectuals equally fatuous when they tell us that our war of all wars is stainless and thrillingly achieving for good? An intellectual class that was wholly rational would have called insistently for peace and not for war. For months the crying need has been for a negotiated peace in order to avoid the ruin of a deadlock. Would not the same amount of resolute statesmanship thrown into intervention have secured a peace that would have been a subjugation for neither side? Was the terrific bargaining power of a great neutral ever really used? Our war followed, as all wars follow, a monstrous failure of diplomacy. Shamefacedness should now be our intellectual's attitude, because the American play for peace was made so little more than a polite play. The intellectuals have still to explain why, willing as they now are to use force to continue the war to absolute exhaustion, they were not willing to use force to coerce the world to a speedy peace. . . .

The results of war on the intellectual class are already apparent. Their thought becomes little more than a description and justification of what is going on. They turn upon any rash one who continues idly to speculate. Once the war is on, the conviction spreads that individual thought is helpless, that the only way one can count is as a cog in the great wheel. There is no good holding back. We are told to dry our unnoticed and ineffective tears and plunge into the great work. Not only is everyone forced into line but the new certitude becomes idealized. It is a noble realism which opposes itself to futile obstruction and the cowardly refusal to face facts. This realistic boast is so loud and sonorous that one wonders whether realism is always a stern and intelligent grappling with realities. May it not be sometimes a mere surrender to the actual, an abdication of the ideal through a sheer fatigue from intellectual suspense? The pacifist is roundly scolded for refusing to face the facts and for retiring into his own world of sentimental desire. But is the realist, who refuses to challenge or criticize facts, entitled to any more credit than that which comes from following the line of least resistance? The realist thinks he at least can control events by linking himself to the forces that are moving. Perhaps he can. But, if it is a question of controlling war, it is difficult to see how the child on the back of a mad elephant is to be any more effective in stopping the beast than is the child who tries to stop him from the ground. The ex-humanitarian, turned realist, sneers at the snobbish neutrality, colossal conceit, crooked thinking, dazed sensibilities, of those who are still unable to find any balm of consolation for this war. We manufacture consolations here in America while there are probably not a dozen men fighting in Europe who did not long ago give up every reason for their being there except that nobody knew how to get them away.

But the intellectuals whom the crisis has crystallized into an acceptance of war have put themselves into a terrifyingly strategic position. It is only on the craft, in the stream, they say, that one has any chance of controlling the current forces for liberal purposes. If we obstruct, we surrender all power for influence. If we responsibly approve, we then retain our power for guiding. We will be listened to as responsible thinkers, while those who obstructed the coming of war have committed intellectual suicide and shall be cast into outer darkness. Criticism by the ruling powers will only be accepted from those intellectuals who are in sympathy with the general tendency of the war. Well, it is true that they may guide, but if their stream leads to disaster and the frustration of national life, is their guiding any more than a preference whether they shall go over the right-hand or the left-hand side of the precipice? Meanwhile, however, there is comfort on board. Be with us, they call, or be negligible, irrelevant. Dissenters are already excommunicated. Irreconcilable radicals, wringing their hands among the debris, become the most despicable and impotent of men. There seems no choice for the intellectual but to join the mass of acceptance. But again the terrible dilemma arises—either support what is going on, in which case you count for nothing because you are swallowed in the mass and great incalculable forces bear you on, or remain aloof, passively resistant, in which case you count for nothing because you are outside the machinery of reality.

Is there no place left, then, for the intellectual who cannot yet crystallize, who does not dread suspense, and is not yet drugged with fatigue? The American intellectuals, in their preoccupation with reality, seem to have forgotten that the real enemy is War rather than imperial Germany. There is work to be done to prevent this war of ours from passing into popular mythology as a holy crusade. What shall we do with leaders who tell us that we go to war in moral spotlessness or who make “democracy” synonymous with a republican form of government? There is work to be done in still shouting that all the revolutionary by-products will not justify the war or make war anything else than the most noxious complex of all the evils that afflict men. There must be some to find no consolation whatever and some to sneer at those who buy the cheap emotion of sacrifice. There must be some irreconcilables left who will not even accept the war with walrus tears. There must be some to call unceasingly for peace and some to insist that the terms of settlement shall be not only liberal but democratic. There must be some intellectuals who are not willing to use the old discredited counters again and to support a peace which would leave all the old inflammable materials of armament lying about the world. There must still be opposition to any contemplated “liberal” world-order founded on military coalitions. The “irreconcilable” need not be disloyal. He need not even be “impossibilist.” His apathy towards war should take the form of a heightened energy and enthusiasm for the education, the art, the interpretation that make for life in the midst of the world of death. The intellectual who retains his animus against war will push out more boldly than ever to make his case solid against it. The old ideals crumble; new ideals must be forged. His mind will continue to roam widely and ceaselessly. The thing he will fear most is premature crystallization. If the American intellectual class rivets itself to a “liberal” philosophy that perpetuates the old errors, there will then be need for “democrats” whose task will be to divide, confuse, disturb, keep the intellectual waters constantly in motion to prevent any such ice from ever forming.

Source: Randolph Bourne, “The War and the Intellectuals,” *Seven Arts* 2 (1917): 133–136.

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