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MARIA JOSÉ CANELO

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Colégio de S. Jerónimo, Coimbra

Correspondência:

Apartado 3087

3000-995 COIMBRA, Portugal

Maria José Canelo*

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Abstract: This paper looks into Randolph Bourne's cultural critique at the time of the United States entry into World War I. As one of the few dissident intellectuals at the time, Bourne brought into light the interdependence between war and the State: "War is the health of the State" is his phrase and has resonated ever since. He looked well beyond nationalist hysteria and economic imperialism to examine the reasons for the State to support militarism, but he also sought pacifist alternatives to the U.S. intervention in the war, namely an educational service that could prepare the nation for creative rather than destructive action. Although Bourne wrote a hundred years ago, the questions he raised remain true and therefore deserve to be revisited.

Keywords: World War I, intellectuals, pacifism, the War State, Randolph Bourne.

Introduction

President Woodrow Wilson's initial promise that the United States would stay neutral to the war gradually gave way to a rhetoric of support to the Allies based on two key ideas. The U.S. intervention would make this "a war to end all wars", while "making the world safe for democracy". To his mind, patriotism and a sense of responsibility would be enough to honorably bring the nation to arms. At this stage, a national consensus was badly needed, and, as Wilson admitted in April 1917, "It is not an army we must shape and train for war, it is a nation".¹ Yet, a national consensus proved very difficult to achieve.

When volunteer enlistment started before conscription, in the beginning of recruitment, barely 73,000 registrations obtained to fill in the million places initially needed (Zinn, 2003: 83).² Obviously the cause of the war did not move the Americans' hearts. Randolph Bourne's writings, in speaking the voices of the "disloyal", the "idealist", the "irreconcilable", the "impossibilist", the "radical", and even the "anarchist" (which he was not but shared some traces with), give evidence of the resistance the cause of the war effectively met in the United States. Bourne's reflection

* Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Portugal. Contact: mjc@ces.uc.pt

¹ *Apud* Boyer *et al.*, 1995: 505.

² 24 million men had registered by November 1918, of which nearly 3 million were drafted (Boyer *et al.* 1995: 502). The draft was enforced by the Selective Service Act, in 1917.

on and arguments for pacifism are also inspiring in terms of the options a Government can make when it comes to how to manage its citizens' lives.

Randolph Bourne was a young intellectual whose radical cultural critique³ flourished in little magazines, such as the *Dial*, the *Masses* and the *Atlantic Monthly*; and also, during the war years, *The New Republic* and *The Seven Arts*. He was invited to cease collaboration with the former, which engaged in a zealous defense of the war, whereas *The Seven Arts* (1916-1917) fell victim to Bourne's radicalism: it barely survived a year of publication, as the journal's patron capitulated to pressures over Bourne's too radical freedom of expression regarding the war. This, of course, while President Wilson was calling to arms on the excuse of making the world safer for democracy.

Bourne's life was marked by several unfortunate circumstances that conditioned his experience of social life and eventually had an impact on his writing and criticism as well. He was a very gifted young man but frequent health and financial problems prevented him from finishing the education he initiated at Columbia College with the likes of philosopher John Dewey (his mentor) and historian Charles Beard. Although he saw himself more as an observer, he was a regular in the intellectual circles of New York and his writings made quite an impression on his contemporaries. John dos Passos, curiously when returning from the battlefields of Europe, utterly disappointed, sketched out an image of Bourne that might serve him well for an introduction, hinting both at Bourne's physical disability, his scorching tone about the times, and also at how Bourne's memory endures:

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.*⁴

³ Broadly put, a blend of his individual creativity with his ideals of social justice, in Bourne's terms. Abrahams argues that he was basically a progressive until 1917, following his mentors' ideals, but the war introduced an unsurmountable rift and established Bourne's radicalism (35). The publication of his book *Youth and Life*, in 1913, also positioned Bourne on the Left fairly early.

⁴ Extracted from dos Passos's novel *1919* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin Company), 81. *1919* is the title of volume 2 of dos Passos's *USA* trilogy.

Yet more unscared than Bourne's ghost, dos Passos suggests, was the truth behind his "shrill soundless giggle: / *War is the health of the State*", that would resonate throughout the twentieth century, and beyond. Bourne left an unpublished manuscript titled "The State", in which the aphorism was coined, and it actually echoes in every other essay he wrote as a critique of the U.S. intervention in the war.

For two vital preoccupations led Bourne's critique regarding the war period: the power of the State and the power of the intellectuals. Unlike other intellectuals, Bourne coherently opposed the war from start to end (he died two weeks after the armistice, at the age of 32). From the position of non-intervention to the total-war effort, Bourne witnessed a transformation in the Government's action that triggered his curiosity about the source of the power on display. Bourne distinguished the machinery – the Government –, from the idea – the State –, and the territory – the nation. They might live all separate from one another, the State working as the core of authority; but it was in an exceptional situation like that of war that all three entities came together in perfect communion, fulfilling thereby the ultimate goal of the State. War thus allowed the Government to manipulate the State to make whatever demands on the nation. In a time of war, the Government *embodied* the State, making visible all its defensive and aggressive powers.

Bourne's critique targets first the aggressive power of the Government against its own citizens under the banner of 'protection,' or defense of the common good; according to him, the prime function of a Government was to generate the conditions for its citizens to develop as creative human beings; a condition the war completely thwarted. Whether by means of propaganda or by political repression⁵ – what he also termed "white terrorism" (1988: 15) –, the war undermined the cultural resources of the nation, wearing them down, literally fostering an ethics of numbness and death where life and vitality should be.

This became particularly evident in the case of the apathy expressed by the young intellectual generation regarding both the war and the draft. As Bourne writes about a friend of his, also a young intellectual about to be conscripted, he was a dead soldier even before he entered the battlefield because "[h]is mind [had] turned sour on war and all it involve[d]" (1917a: 270).

⁵ Actually, Bourne suggests that the State's protective role is a disguise, for the war justifies its repressive power in order to warrant consent (1988: 18).

The complacent intellectual

Bourne assigned a fundamental role to the intellectual establishment in creating a strong anti-war front, and, more importantly still, in supporting the young generation's spiritual disavowal of the war. And at first, in 1914, this was the position of the most outstanding intellectuals, such as John Dewey.

Most intellectuals had however changed sides as the pro-war climate intensified and the cause for non-intervention became tainted with unpatriotism and disloyalty. It was not the case that an authentic war-sentiment emerged, though; obedience had largely to be fabricated. The Espionage Act and the Sedition Amendment of 1917 and 1918 that punished anyone who spoke or wrote against the Government, the Constitution, the flag, or the military were good examples of the type of consensus on which the entry into war relied.

And the people yielded, pressed by the political powers the intellectuals eventually rushed to legitimize. More than disappointed, Bourne was embarrassed by the complacency of the intellectual community: "An intellectual class gently guiding a nation through sheer force of ideas into what the other nations entered only through predatory craft or popular hysteria or militant madness" (1917b: 1), he accused. The failure of the intellectuals was intellectual at core, for they were expected to produce the most difficult: justifying American neutrality and how it could be used to lead the world towards democratic practices – in education, reflection, by building an informed public opinion, securing peace and democracy for both the U.S. and the world. That would, however, demand the intellectuals to be utterly creative – and they had failed because they had made other choices.

The intellectual class had regressed, Bourne wrote. It behaved as a colonial mimic, submitting to "the ranks of big business" that had infiltrated more deeply "in the richer and older classes of the Atlantic seaboard, and was keenest where there were French or English business and particularly social connections" (1917b: 2), a sentiment that spread over the country as a class phenomenon touching everyone who identified with these same groups (*ibidem*).

The intellectual elite had thereby sacrificed its progressive mindset: for it established an alliance with the most conservative classes in society – ironically, the least democratic of all, when the great cause of the war was stated as democracy. For Bourne they were not therefore behaving as a leading group but as any social class, becoming entangled in a struggle that was not theirs. If America was going to war to

defend the economic interest of the highest classes, these intellectuals had to be identified as something else.⁶ Having dispensed with their 'intellectual privilege' and decided to behave like common citizens, the intellectuals allowed themselves to be led by their emotional dispositions (1917b: 7), in other words, criticism had been replaced by emotional propaganda (*ibidem*). He came short to calling them mercenaries, who sold themselves either to the 'business compact' or to the 'Government think-tanks': they had focused all of their energies on "a feverish concern with the management of the war, advice to the fighting governments on all matters, military, social, and political" (*ibidem*: 6), thus neglecting the study of how the country could constructively contribute to peace.

"Twilight of Idols" is the text that marks Bourne's rupture with Dewey and all the intellectuals who subscribed to the war. Dewey eventually cut relations with him and Bourne assumed his isolation, and even his alienation at times (Abrahams 1988: 87-88).

The disloyal pacifist

But, even if isolated, Bourne did not soften his views. Although Bourne was a revolutionary socialist, he aligned with pacifism for the purpose of anti-war protest and followed where others had given up, namely in trying to articulate a pacifist position that was not synonymous with inaction or paralysis. He sought to make sense of neutrality, trying to justify inaction in the sense of non-aggression, and to devise an alternative and productive vocabulary for peace that proved that pacifism was not to be equated with disloyalty.

Yet, a lot of self-defense was required. A pacifist was by definition an idealist. While the realist believed a control of the event could only be effected from within, the pacifist was seen as an obstructionist who surrendered all power of influence because he never allowed himself to be within and so was inevitably discredited (1917b: 9). Bourne tried to articulate a position that was not defeatist or a deadlock and saw its chance in the figure of the intellectual who, in a context of war, refused to "crystallize", that is, was on permanent alertness to discourse and ideology, leading the people towards a clear reading of the events. For instance, Bourne called attention that the true enemy in the present situation was not Germany, or the German people, but the war itself

⁶ Although Bourne does not go deep into the class question, it – fear of socialism and anarchism – became a critical issue justifying State repression before, during, and especially after the war (with mass imprisonments, deportations, and killings).

(*ibidem*), as dangerous were all the ideological byproducts that such belief was producing (*ibidem*). The anti-war intellectual, he stressed, engaged in this kind of water-stirring, avoiding permanent truths; he kept pace with life, because he was a defender of life (*ibidem*: 10) as opposed to death – the argument of those for war, in Bourne's view.

This view of the intellectual was associated with the role Bourne assigned to education. In an essay titled "A Moral Equivalent for Universal Military Service" and published in 1916, he exposed the nation's unpreparedness to go to war or to provide the world with a vision for peace as a structural weakness derived from a neglect of education. The Government called for action, and the pacifist was negatively labeled as inactive, but what the people needed, according to Bourne, was a dynamic education that corresponded to action but in a constructive rather than destructive way. He resorted to William James's ideal of "a moral equivalent to war" (1916b: 217) to conceive of a "productive army of youth, warring against nature and not against men" (*ibidem*). He imagined such possibility as based on an educational structure that fostered ingenuity and the imagination, to be applied by the public school system on a national, or what he called a universal, basis and supervised by the national Government. By this means, Bourne also revealed concerns with gender inequality that were rather uncommon among the male writers of his time: "It is only a national service of this kind [meaning educational] that would really be universal. Military service is a sham universality. It omits the feminine half of the nation's youth" (*ibidem*: 218). The ultimate goal of this form of 'educational service' will be "the improvement of the quality of [...] living" (*ibidem*), an idea completely at odds with the values of discipline and obedience on which military training was based which stiffened personal qualities and individual creativity. Bourne went further in rendering the idea concrete and proposed "organized relief, the care of dependents, playground service, nursing in hospitals [...]. On a larger scale, tree-planting, the care and repair of roads, work on conservation projects, [and] the care of model farms" as the tasks this 'peaceful army' could perform" (*ibidem*).

Bourne took up the educator's role himself, which was no more than that of the active intellectual for peace, when he assisted his audience in understanding the source of the general indifference towards the U.S. participation in the war, providing them with alternative readings to those of current propaganda. The matter was not between patriotism or fear, as the newspapers easily proposed (1917a: 1), but rather a lack of choice or indifference as to the consequences. Excepting himself, Bourne defended that

a whole generation of young followers of John Dewey absorbed his instrumentalist philosophy, yet utterly failed in the capacity of developing visions or ideals: "They are vague as to what kind of a society they want, or what kind of society America needs, but they are equipped with all the administrative attitudes and talents necessary to attain it" (1917c: 697).

A third category, beyond patriots and cowards, was needed – and the intellectual should work on it: Bourne named it 'the malcontent' (*ibidem*: 701), someone developing what he called a 'personal and social idealism,' a creative desire based not on the typical American optimism, but rather on a "skeptical, malicious, desperate, ironical mood [...] as a sign of hope" (*ibidem*). It had to be a feeling so authentic to shame a President who called himself 'democratic' yet pushed for war against so much resistance and indifference: "there is a personal and social idealism in America which is out of reach of the most skilful and ardent appeals of the old order, an idealism that cannot be hurt by the taunts of cowardice and slacking or kindled by the slogans of capitalistic democracy" (1917a: 5). This idealism was what Bourne deemed "the only genuinely precious thing in a nation, the hope and ardent idealism of its youth" (*ibidem*: 6), and connected with life, against the materialism that corroded a democracy whose brand belonged in the semantic field of dead bodies.

Along the same lines, he stressed that patriotism was not a spiritual bond to the nation but another war-technique: it manipulated particular national masses to kill their kin from other nationalities (the Germans), instigated by the States from the corresponding nations. War was the master-technique animating the populations, aiming at a future organization of the world founded on a particular idea of democracy controlled only by the involved States.

At the time of war, the Government used the State as an instrument to activate the most basic instincts of power and protection in the people. Turned into the army, the people became one more vehicle for the technologies of destruction demanded by the war which relied on non-rational or non-intellectual motivations:

The kind of war which we are conducting is an enterprise which the American government does not have to carry on with the hearty cooperation of the American people but only with their acquiescence. And that acquiescence seems sufficient to float an indefinitely protracted war for vague or even largely uncomprehended and unaccepted purposes. Our resources in men and materials are vast enough to organize the war-technique without enlisting more than a fraction of the people's conscious energy (1917d: 1).

The people ceased to be a living unit, with inner motivations, or aspirations. Deprived of their creativity or individual talents, it was but a mass moved by “the soothing irresponsibility of protection [it] associate[d] with obedience” (Bourne, 1988: 11), an idea that Bourne also developed in the image of the herd.⁷ That was why the Government could afford to dispense with a critical examination of democracy and punished independent thought if it was anti-war.⁸

The War State

Turning the Government's most effective catchwords upside-down, Bourne wrote that the U.S. was indeed in no condition to offer the world a vision of democracy. Democracy was a catchword “useful as a call to battle, but not an intellectual tool” (1917c: 693). The task of thinking through democracy remained unfinished.

Bourne himself worked on new possibilities. His project for a “trans-national America”, another wartime text (1916), is particularly cogent in the context of domestic intolerance, intimidation, and prosecutions witnessed during the war period. It was meant for a society whose dynamics thrived on, instead of containing, difference; he imagined a sort of pluralist cosmopolitanism, in which intellectuals like himself could dialogue freely.

Instead, political prosecution escalated after the end of the war – the years 1919-1920 were absolutely horrific for foreigners living in America – and the following decade perpetuated the anti-foreign upsurge.

In his unfinished manuscript, “The State”, Bourne showed however to be fully in tune with *the times to come*: in his perceptiveness of the idea behind the totalitarian state, as of the alliances between the military and the economy (which I packed all together under the term ‘War State’). Here, Bourne maintained that the essence of the State was war because only through war did the State attain full unity (1988: 17). At this point, one can take another perspective and consider in how far Bourne was not

⁷ Bourne was probably influenced by Wilfred Trotter's *Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War*, published in 1916, which he read (*in* Abrahams, 1988: 85).

⁸ Repression of dissent was very harsh indeed in the war years. Howard Zinn reports that, under the espionage act, a law that aimed at those who spoke or wrote against the war, nine hundred people went to prison (2003: 88), while the number of those prosecuted was over twice that; sixty-five thousand men registered as conscientious objectors, although humiliation and abuse were common in the places they served at, and there was persecution in schools and Universities –professors were fired on grounds of their opposition to the Government's decisions, while some others resigned on grounds of their independence of thought, such as Charles Beard, the Columbia University historian (*ibidem*: 92). The same motives closed down the popular Communist leaning magazine *The Masses*.

audaciously dislocating the traditional logics of war from the enemy or evil, onto the State itself. Apparently, he was expanding on Max Weber's idea of the State's monopoly of violence, but beyond the defensive tradition, to expose the State's very claim to the right of *aggression*. The self-proclaimed protective State was, in Bourne's terms, an intrinsically aggressive entity that fed on violence.

Toward this goal, the State had to position itself against other states, according to logics of competitiveness and obviously no such scheme could be in place without a defensive structure; so, to fulfill its alleged mystical side, the State required very material structures, namely, a military establishment (*ibidem*). In a time of war, the State exploited the nation's entire resources in order to protect them – for the people depended on them, a circular motivation that also explained why the modern State, as Bourne noted, had become perfectly autonomous from the people's authority:

all that is really needed is the co-operation with government of the men who direct the large financial and industrial enterprises. If their interest is enlisted in diverting the mechanism of production into war-channels, it makes not the least difference whether you or I want our activity to count in aid of the war (1917d: 2).

The State might be said to be identical with the nation in the popular mind – but its instrumentalization had always been the privilege of a particular class, and for its particular interests. The State was an instrument of power, as he concluded: “We are learning that war doesn't need enthusiasm, doesn't need conviction, doesn't need hope, to sustain it. Once maneuvered, it takes care of itself, provided only that our industrial rulers see that the end of the war will leave American capital in a strategic position for world enterprise” (*ibidem*).

Conclusion

The pacifist's ultimate vindication – life – was therefore pointless, in the context. But, no matter if absurd from the pacifist's point of view, Bourne ultimately demonstrated that *war* was the health of the State, for it *cared for* the structures of power and kept the people united; this was the logics of the world Bourne witnessed.

When the Spanish flu took away his life, Bourne envisaged that the essay “The State” would become the reference for future radicalism in America; perhaps he should know better that his nation was not so rife with visions or ideals; but the same did not apply to pragmatism. For despite the fact that the U.S. had no proper military structure

to show at the time of World War I, it needed less than forty years – and another world war –, to erect the so-called military-industrial complex that plainly confirmed Bourne's insights about the nature of the State, its commitment to war, and its harsh relations with pacifism. But even if we easily recognize this world as our own, Bourne's strenuous defense of the value of education should be kept in mind; not the world Bourne witnessed but the world he imagined: "Our need is to learn how to live rather than die; to be teachers and creators, not engines of destruction; to be inventors and pioneers, not mere defenders." (1916a: 219).

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