

Redefining the Terms of National Belonging in War and Peace in Randolph Bourne's Critique of the Great War

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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 intellectuals who opposed the war, 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 concrete pacifist alternatives to the U.S. intervention in the war that involved the intellectuals in particular. This paper sheds light on these alternatives based on Bourne's anti-war writings, namely his proposals for an educational service to prepare the nation for creative rather than destructive action, and the intellectuals' renewal of the dialogue between democracy and pacifism en route to a transnational understanding of community and belonging.

KEYWORDS

Randolph Bourne, The Great War, pacifism, trans-nation, intellectuals, the War State

What is political love and what is the relationship of political love and political loyalty? If one loves a political community, does such love require uncritical solidarity with certain elements of that community ...? What kind of loyalty does political love engender and require? To what extent is love compatible with critique and to what extent is critique compatible with loyalty?¹

Introduction

The relation between free thinking, individual autonomy and belonging to a society regulated by State politics, as suggested in the epigraph I borrow from Wendy Brown, could apply to most societies. But this applies yet more acutely to periods of exception, of which the war is possibly the most extreme. Fashioned as the world upside down, the war claims on the State measures that demand an emotional investment and habits of civic participation based on uncritical devotion, unlimited loyalty, and absolute subordination to nation-state power, precisely the values Wendy Brown elaborates as political love, or love for the nation, and whose limits she interrogates. This paper reflects on the critical work of an intellectual, Randolph Bourne, who positioned these issues in the course of the Great War, while attempting a rearticulation of the relation between the individual and the community by reflecting critically on concepts such as love for the nation, patriotism and belonging. His answers involved a staunch defense of peace, freedom of expression, and freedom of belonging which immediately won him the label of disloyal pacifist as well as ostracization on the part of some of his peers. Bourne himself would in turn classify the intellectuals who subscribed to the official discourse of repression and bellicose propaganda as complicit with

1 Wendy Brown, "Political Idealization and Its Discontents," in *Dissent in Dangerous Times*, ed. Austin Sarat (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 23.

the war effort. The war thus offered a reflection on the role of intellectuals vis a vis that of the State in moments of political and ideological duress and dispute.

The United States arrived late to the Great War, deferring entry until April 1917, but it is widely accepted that its participation was decisive in bringing the conflict to an end. President Woodrow Wilson's initial promise that the United States would retain its neutrality gradually gave way to a rhetoric of support for the Allies, which Wilson grounded on two fundamental ideas: U.S. intervention would make this a war to end all wars, while at the same time it would make 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 1917, "[i]t is not an army we must shape and train for war, it is a nation."²

Yet, national approval proved very difficult to achieve. When volunteer enlistment started, barely 73,000 registrations were obtained to fill the million places initially needed,³ whereas, in November 1918 and precisely evincing the success of the propaganda campaign, the number of registrations had risen to twenty-four million, of which nearly three million were drafts⁴ supported by the Selective Service Act issued in 1917. Obviously the cause of the war did not move American hearts. Randolph Bourne's writings, in speaking the voices of the "disloyal," the "idealist," the "irreconcilable," the "impossibilist," the "radical," and even the "anarchist," epithets frequently associated to him at the time, provide evidence of the resistance the cause of the war effectively met in the U.S. Although Bourne's cultural criticism has been approached in detail in studies such as Casey Nelson Blake's *Beloved Community* (1990)⁵ and more recently Arthur Redding's *Radical Legacies* (2016),⁶ I believe an articulation of his pacifist arguments with his ideal of the 'beloved community' is still pending, so this analysis offers a contribution in that direction. Bourne's reflection on and arguments for pacifism are also inspiring in terms of both the role of the intellectual in society and the relation between critique and national belonging, as questioned by Wendy Brown in my epigraph.

Randolph Bourne

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 experienced frequent health problems that started at birth and marked his body with deformity. At Columbia College he studied with the likes of philosopher John Dewey (his mentor) and historian Charles Beard and became familiar with authors who would leave a strong

2 "President Woodrow Wilson's Proclamation Establishing Conscription, 28 May 1917", [firstworldwar.com](https://www.firstworldwar.com/source/usconscription_wilson.htm), https://www.firstworldwar.com/source/usconscription_wilson.htm, (February 28, 2019).

3 Howard Zinn, *The Twentieth Century. A People's History* (New York: Perennial, 2003), 83.

4 Paul S. Boyer et al, *The Enduring Vision. A History of the American People*. Vol 2 (Lexington, Mass., and Toronto: D. C. Heath and Company, 1995), 502.

5 Casey Nelson Blake, *Beloved Community. The Cultural Criticism of Randolph Bourne, van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank and Lewis Mumford* (Capel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

6 Arthur Redding, *Radical Legacies: Twentieth Century Public Intellectuals in the United States* (Lanham/Boulder/New York/London: Lexington Books, 2016).

imprint on his thinking, such as Josiah Royce and William James. Although he saw himself more as an observer, a distance granted to him largely by his physical difference, he was a regular in the intellectual circles of New York and his writings gained him the respect of his contemporaries. John dos Passos for one, after returning utterly disappointed from the battlefields of Europe, sketched out an image of Bourne that might serve well for an introduction, suggesting the grotesque duality attending the combination of his physical deformation and his intellectual brilliance:

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.*⁷

Indeed, more unscared than Bourne's ghost, as dos Passos suggests, the prescience of his ideas – the truth behind his giggle: “*War is the health of the State*” – would be proved throughout the twentieth century and beyond. Bourne left behind an unpublished manuscript titled *The State* in which the aphorism was coined and this sentiment echoes in every other essay he wrote as a critique of the U.S. intervention in the war.

Bourne had stood out in the literary milieu at a young age after he published the study *Youth and Life* in 1913, which immediately won him a position on the hard Left. Until then, Bourne had been seen as a progressive, following John Dewey's concerns about education and democracy and his teachings on the importance of learning by experience. But Bourne's insistence on the value of individual freedom and creativity when attacking the U.S. war effort and the intellectual establishment supporting it ultimately connected him to radicalism.⁸ The war was in effect a critical event in his life; firstly on a very material level because he was in Europe at the time the conflict started and was forced to return to the U.S. Secondly because of his intellectual engagement with the event, his critique of the U.S. position and his pacifist writings which crafted him a particular place in the intellectual milieu. Public debate at the time evolved at venues such as newspapers and particularly 'little' magazines and the publications to which Bourne contributed were visibly affected by the war. For instance, he was encouraged to cease collaboration with the *New Republic*, whose editorial politics opted for a zealous defense of the war; meanwhile, the pacifist *Seven Arts* (1916–1917) fell victim to Bourne's radicalism: it barely survived a year of publication, as its patron capitulated to pressure over Bourne's 'excessive' use of freedom of expression in his anti-war essays. In addition, Bourne's confrontation on the same matter with John Dewey left deep scars, since it isolated him from a source of authority and dialogue that had informed his own intellectual development, although it also signaled his emancipation from his mentor's teachings.

Bourne's critique of war must be articulated with his stances on culture, community and the individual. As Casey Blake has demonstrated, Bourne was a precursor of cultural criticism, as a part of the so-called Young Americans, a generation that included the likes of Waldo Frank, Van Wyck Brooks and Lewis Mumford. They were all particularly concerned with the relation

7 John Dos Passos. 1919 (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1932), 81.

8 Edward Abrahams, *The Lyrical Left. Randolph Bourne, Alfred Stiegliz and the Origins of Cultural Radicalism in America* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), 35.

between the individual and the community within the frame of the modern industrial society, which in its stress on technique and the division of labor threatened to separate practice from the creative imagination. The group, also known as the Lyrical Left,⁹ trusted the power of cultural renovation over that of politics, following the teachings of William Morris, John Ruskin, and the transcendentalists.¹⁰ The Young Americans championed a form of cultural nationalism that attempted a synthesis of both high and low brow cultural forms,¹¹ asserting the value of experience in the development of individual creativity.¹² Individual subjectivity was both expressed through and developed by civic participation, so any democratic organization allowed for and benefitted from the creation of what Bourne identified as the utopian ‘beloved community.’¹³ The ultimate concern of these critics was however the renewal of public culture itself through the individual’s civic participation in society: “a communitarian vision of self-realization through participation in a democratic culture,” as Casey Blake has put it.¹⁴

The First World War, however, put the ideals of individual freedom and creativity to a harsh test. Widespread migration in the U.S. (and other regions), fear and the persecution of both immigrants and citizens who would not support the war brought into evidence the nation-state’s appetite for aggressive power both on an international and a domestic level. This explains why Bourne, as other intellectuals, began questioning both the role and the morality of national sovereignty in tandem with their interest in devising alternative trans-national institutions to the nation-state and its mechanisms governing national belonging. Obviously, the hand of the State over the duties of belonging challenged individual freedom and creativity. The figure of the intellectual emerged for Bourne as that in which the conflict but also the promise for resolution took shape: “Young Americans believed that democratic radicals had to put questions of personal identity and creativity at the center of their politics and in the process offer an alternative to the traditional discourse of progressive politics.”¹⁵ Bourne’s own words prove the best assertion to this belief and its dynamics: “[i]t is the creative desire more than the creative intelligence that we shall need if we are ever to fly.”¹⁶

On love for the nation

Indeed, two vital preoccupations led Bourne’s critique: the power of the State and the power of the intellectuals. Unlike other thinkers, Bourne assumed a coherently anti-war position throughout (he

9 The term was coined by John P. Diggins in *The American Left in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Hartcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973).

10 Blake, *Beloved Community*, 3.

11 Abrahams, *The Lyrical Left*, 116–117.

12 Blake, *Beloved Community*, 5.

13 Randolph Bourne, “Trans-National America,” in *Randolph Bourne. The Radical Will. Selected Writings 1911–1918*, ed. by Olaf Hansen (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1977), 264.

14 Blake, *Beloved Community*, 2.

15 Blake, *Beloved Community*, 5.

16 Randolph Bourne, “Twilight of Idols.” *The Seven Arts* II (Oct 1917): 702, <http://www.expo98.msu.edu/people/bourne.htm> (May 31, 2019).

died two weeks after the armistice at the age of thirty-two). From the position of non-intervention to that of 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 and the citizenry – the nation. These entities might all live separately 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. For war allowed the Government to manipulate the State to make whatever demands on the nation. In a time of war, the Government actually embodied the State, making visible all its defensive and aggressive powers, the nation being both its goal and instrument.

Bourne's critique targeted firstly the violent power of the State against its own citizens under the banner of 'protection,' or defense of the common good; according to him, the prime function of a State was to generate the conditions for its citizens to develop as creative human beings, but this was a scenario the war completely thwarted. Under the guise of its protective role, the State exerted its repressive power in order to warrant consent,¹⁷ a power Bourne identified as "white terrorism."¹⁸ So, whether by means of propaganda or by political repression, the war undermined the cultural resources of the nation, wearing them down, literally fostering an existence based on spiritual numbness and the prospect of death rather than on vitality, desire and life. This process became particularly salient 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, 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]"¹⁹ and yet, as a citizen, he was expected to uncritically obey the draft.

Because the State dominated the war rationale and imposed its ideological agenda nationwide, a critique of the war had to be external to power and it required an intellectual grounding. Bourne assigned a fundamental role to the intellectual establishment in creating this strong anti-war front, and, more importantly, in supporting the young generation's spiritual disavowal of the war. At first, in 1914, this was the position espoused by the most outstanding scholars, such as John Dewey. Most of those who opposed the war 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 however the case that an authentic war-sentiment emerged because obedience was largely fabricated: the Espionage Act and the Sedition Amendment of 1917 and 1918, which punished anyone who spoke or wrote against the Government, the Constitution, the flag, or the military were good examples of the type of consensus that sustained the decision to enter the war. The citizenry yielded, pressed by the political powers the pro-war intellectuals eventually rushed to legitimize. More than disappointed, Bourne was embarrassed by the complacency of the intellectual community

17 Randolph Bourne, *The State* (Tucson: See Sharp Press, 1988), 18. Mises Institute, https://mises-media.s3.amazonaws.com/The%20State_3.pdf.

18 Bourne, *The State*, 15.

19 Randolph Bourne, "Bellow the Battle," *The Seven Arts* II (July 1917): 270, *The Modernist Journals Project*, https://library.brown.edu/cds/mjp/render.php?view=mjp_object&id=SevenArtsCollection, (February 28, 2019).

that was “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,”²⁰ as he denounced.

Bourne’s bitterness towards John Dewey derived from Bourne’s perception of the inadequacy of pragmatism as a critical framework to analyze the emotional climate of the war, on the one hand, and his views on how pragmatism had contributed to create a particular type of objective mind that would accommodate rather than resist the war effort, on the other. For Bourne, The U.S. at war was “a world of human nature . . . raw-nerved, irrational [and] uncreative”²¹ moved by what he also termed a form of “mob psychology.”²² Dewey’s teachings were naively optimistic in considering that rational formulae and scientific method could control and regenerate a world ruled by hatred, madness and immorality; whereas Bourne noted that only a world at peace could accommodate “a philosophy of hope, of clear-sighted comprehension of materials and means.”²³

Bourne’s disappointment with Dewey also linked to what he perceived as the philosopher’s neglect of education at the expense of a focus on dimensions of the war effort that were not pedagogical nor intellectual. The emphasis had shifted from education and creativity to “technical organization rather than the organization of ideas, on strategy rather than desires.”²⁴ Dewey therefore stood for an elite that had failed to present creative policy alternatives to violence: “[o]ur intellectuals have failed as value-creators, even as value-emphasizers.”²⁵ According to Bourne, alternatives were to be found in education and critical reflection, by building an informed public opinion, and securing peace and democracy for both the U.S. and the world.²⁶

For Bourne, the ultimate ‘sin’ of the pragmatist intellectuals was their eventual siding with the economic interests of the most powerful classes that had infiltrated national political decisions, an inevitable consequence of their support for the war, even if Dewey himself had been moved by the belief that Wilson’s promise to make the world safe for democracy would indeed promote progressive agendas on an international level. But rather than justifying U.S. neutrality and how it could be used to lead the world towards democratic practices, the pro-war intellectuals ended up aligning with class interests that were completely at odds with their task. In this sense, Bourne considered the intellectual elites to have regressed, as they ultimately established an alliance with the most conservative classes in society, a pact which prevented them from being the leading group they were expected to be.²⁷ Bourne argued that having dispensed with their ‘intellectual

20 Randolph Bourne, “The War and the Intellectuals,” *The Seven Arts* II (June 1917): 1, *The Modernist Journals Project*, https://library.brown.edu/cds/mjp/render.php?view=mjp_object&id=SevenArtsCollection, (February 28, 2019).

21 Bourne, “Twilight of Idols,” 689–690.

22 Bourne, “Twilight of Idols,” 689.

23 Bourne, “Twilight of Idols,” 690.

24 Bourne, “Twilight of Idols,” 694.

25 Bourne, “Twilight of Idols,” 700.

26 Bourne, “Twilight of Idols,” 691.

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

privilege' and behaving like common citizens, the intellectuals had allowed themselves to be led by their emotional dispositions,²⁸ so that criticism had been replaced by emotional propaganda.²⁹

Bourne called out the intellectuals as mercenaries who had 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."³⁰ Their craving for experience and action was misdirected to distant foreign lands, while they should have been committed to action at home:³¹ studying how the country could constructively contribute to peace. To Bourne's mind, they had behaved as colonial mimics, submitting to "the ranks of big business" that had infiltrated more deeply "in the richer and older classes of the Atlantic seaboard."³² "Twilight of Idols" was the text that summed up Bourne's criticism and marked his definite rupture with John Dewey and all the intellectuals who supported the war.

On Political Loyalty

Despite his isolation, Bourne did not soften his views. Although he 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 as a form of non-aggression, and to devise an alternative and constructive defense of pacifism that denied equation with disloyalty.

Yet, much self-defense was required. A pacifist was by definition an idealist. While the realist believed that controlling the event could only be achieved from within, the pacifist was seen as an obstructionist who surrendered all power of influence because he never allowed himself to be within.³³ Bourne tried to articulate a position that was not defeatist or resulted in deadlock, but saw its chance in the figure of the intellectual who in a context of war refused to "crystallize," i.e. was on permanent alertness to discourse and ideology, leading the people towards a clear reading of events. For instance, Bourne stressed that the true enemy in the present situation was not Germany, or the German people, but the war itself³⁴ along with the danger lurking in all the ideological byproducts that such belief was producing.³⁵ The anti-war intellectual engaged in this kind of water-stirring, avoiding permanent truths. But a condition for this critical sensibility was precisely detachment, so he had to remain outside of the events.

This idea of the intellectual was associated with the role Bourne assigned to education. In a 1916 essay titled "A Moral Equivalent for Universal Military Service," he resorted to pacifist

28 Bourne, "The War and the Intellectuals," 7.

29 Bourne, "The War and the Intellectuals," 7.

30 Bourne, "The War and the Intellectuals," 6.

31 Bourne, "The War and the Intellectuals," 6.

32 Bourne, "The War and the Intellectuals," 2.

33 Bourne, "The War and the Intellectuals," 9.

34 Bourne, "The War and the Intellectuals," 9.

35 Bourne, "The War and the Intellectuals," 9.

philosopher William James's ideal of a moral equivalent to war to conceive of pacific means of social collaboration and education. James's essay, given as a speech in 1906 and titled "The Moral Equivalent of War," anticipated the Great War in its awareness that the most powerful nations were already engaged in an arms race. The philosopher's utmost concern was to devise pacific forms of national organization and alternative models to violence, although these new guises of association should also be able to generate national unity. James's utopia was based on the creation of a civil military corps aimed at preserving what was positive in martial values but for fighting natural threats alone, hence its designation as a moral equivalent to war.

Bourne set this idea into dialogue with another priority of his, education. To his mind, the neglect of education was one of the most appalling national weaknesses, one which explained both the U.S. unpreparedness to go to war and to provide the world with a vision for peace. The State 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 in a constructive rather than destructive manner – or what he deemed, after William James, "a productive army of youth, warring against nature and not against men."³⁶ He imagined such a possibility as based on an educational structure that fostered ingenuity and the imagination to be applied by the public school system on a national basis and supervised by the national Government. In the same essay, Bourne also revealed concerns with gender inequality that were uncommon among 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."³⁷

The ultimate goal of this form of 'educational service' would be "the improvement of the quality of . . . living,"³⁸ an idea completely at odds with the values of discipline and obedience on which military training was based and which stiffened personal qualities and individual creativity. Bourne went further in rendering the idea concrete, proposing particular activities based on solidarity: "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." These were the tasks this 'peaceful army' could perform.³⁹

Indifferent to the accusations of disloyalty and lack of patriotism, Bourne sought a constructive critique that would not be incompatible with belonging or love for the nation but rather constitutive of the national feeling. The roles of the educator and the activist intellectual were therefore one and the same, as he showed when assisting his audience in understanding the source of the general indifference towards the U.S. participation in the war, providing citizens with alternative readings to those of current propaganda. The matter was not between patriotism and fear, as the newspapers easily proposed⁴⁰ but rather a lack of choice or indifference as to the consequences. Bourne defended that a whole generation of young followers of John Dewey reduced his teachings to an instrumentalist philosophy. They utterly failed in the capacity of developing

36 Randolph Bourne, "A Moral Equivalent for Universal Military Service." *The New Republic* 1 (July 1916): 217, Hathi Trust Digital Library, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hxqfp5;view=1up;seq=227>, (February 28, 2019).

37 Bourne, "A Moral Equivalent," 218.

38 Bourne, "A Moral Equivalent," 218.

39 Bourne, "A Moral Equivalent," 218.

40 Bourne, "Below the Battle," 1.

visions, values, or ideals because pragmatism when applied to war resulted in sheer technique that articulated all too well with the war-technique. They were particularly apt to order events and solve political and industrial problems, being themselves “the product of the swing in the colleges from a training that emphasized classical studies to one that emphasized political and economic values.”⁴¹ Intellectual formulation was far from their strengths, as much as the distinction between means and ends, technique and values. The result was that they were “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.”⁴²

On Critical Idealism

The critique Bourne assigned to the intellectual class was to address the political core of U.S. society – democracy. Besides dismantling the discourses of power, the intellectual-educator also had to devise a new political vocabulary to match a new social vision. To begin with, a third category beyond patriots and cowards was badly needed; Bourne proposed ‘the malcontent’⁴³ as 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.”⁴⁴ The malcontent’s desperate hope had to inspire a feeling so authentic that it would shame President Wilson, who had declared his politics democratic and progressive, 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.”⁴⁵ This disposition was not just a moral duty for the nation, but a sign of solidarity with the younger generations and their natural idealism. Bourne described it as “the only genuinely precious thing in a nation, the hope and ardent idealism of its youth”⁴⁶ and connected it to life, in opposition to the growing materialism associated to industrialization that tended to foster passivity, making the individual more complacent with the status quo and affecting civic participation. Bourne believed that the citizenry were becoming more and more alienated from the rule of the Government, failing to take critical and creative stances against the society they lived in.

This distancing became more crucial in this period because of the emotional investment in the nation demanded by the warring State, that is civic love that in the context took form in the State-sponsored form of patriotism. Emotional manipulation worked on different levels. In times of war, the Government used the State as an instrument to activate the most basic instincts of power and protection. Turned into the army, the people became one more vehicle for the technologies of destruction demanded by the war:

41 Bourne, “Twilight of Idols,” 696.

42 Bourne, “Twilight of Idols,” 697.

43 Bourne, “Twilight of Idols,” 701.

44 Bourne, “Twilight of Idols,” 701.

45 Bourne, “Below the Battle,” 5.

46 Bourne, “Below the Battle,” 6.

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.⁴⁷

Under State-sponsored patriotism, 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"⁴⁸ an idea that Bourne also developed in the image of the herd.⁴⁹ That was why the State could afford to dispense with a critical examination of democracy and punished independent thinking if it was anti-war. Repression of dissent was very harsh during the war years. Historian Howard Zinn reports that under the Espionage Act, a law aimed at those who spoke or wrote against the war, nine hundred people went to prison,⁵⁰ while the number of those prosecuted was over twice that number; sixty-five thousand men registered as conscientious objectors, although humiliation and abuse were common in the places they served, and there was also persecution in schools and Universities. Professors were fired on grounds of their opposition to the Government's decisions, while some others resigned in order to keep their intellectual independence, such as Charles Beard, the Columbia University historian.⁵¹

In Bourne's demystifying reading, patriotism could not stay on the same foot as idealism and hope. Patriotism was not a spiritual bond to the nation but another war-technique in as far as it manipulated particular national masses into killing their kin from other nationalities (the Germans), instigated by the States from the respective nations. As such, war was the master-technique animating the populations, aiming at a future organization of the world founded on a specific brand of democracy controlled by the involved States alone.

On Intellectual Cosmopolitanism

A debate on democracy was therefore part of the agenda, for no public culture based on the active critical participation of citizens could effectively come into being in a nation-state that stifled individual creativity and free participation. It also demanded taking into consideration the social and cultural composition of U.S. society, the particular dynamics of an ethnically different citizenry, the forms of participation and the contributions of different social groups. Bourne sided with Horace Kallen's arguments for cultural pluralism against the rampant and popular melting-pot theory.⁵² Bourne's most original contributions to this debate lie in his approach to ethnic difference

47 Bourne, "A War Diary," 1.

48 Bourne, *The State*, 11.

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

50 Howard Zinn, *The Twentieth Century. A People's History* (New York: Perennial, 2003), 88.

51 Zinn, *The Twentieth Century*, 92.

52 After the massive influx of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, the so-called 'new immigrants', together with the Chinese in the west coast, arguments radicalized regarding immigration. Immigrant integration in turn produced

as a source of creativity and cultural renovation. He addressed immigrant integration in a radical perspective, turning the assimilationist model upside down in order to value the contribution of the immigrant's difference. Cultures foreign to the national unit should be seen as enriching rather than disruptive of national unity – and it is this vindication of hyphenation that appears as one of the most liberating aspects of Bourne's cosmopolitanism: it combines loyalty to the nation with detachment from the national identity. This was indeed for Bourne the promise cosmopolitanism held: detachment from a restrictive and partial national identity based on assimilation that would allow the individual to develop different loyalties.

Bourne commented on the evidence that, in leading immigrants to recover their original memories and traditions, the war had been divisive.⁵³ In this sense, the melting-pot had failed because assimilation techniques had removed the immigrants' spiritual substance and it could not be replaced; whatever took its place was doomed to be artificial and unable to foster a full integration. On a par with Horace Kallen's ideas, Bourne saw Americanization as an active process, from the perspective of the immigrant's own contribution to the community. Otherwise, it would breed a shallow nationalism that was no real alternative to what he called the "old nationalism,"⁵⁴ a colonial import based on competition, exclusion, inbreeding, pride, and self-interest, which Bourne understood as the main cause for the present war. An immigrant nation like the U.S. could develop a more positive form of civic bonding, love and loyalty for the nation instead.

Thus turning the State's most effective catchwords upside-down, Bourne stated that the U.S. State was indeed in no condition to offer the world a vision of democracy. Democracy devolved into a mere catchword used to manipulate the masses, "useful as a call to battle, but not an intellectual tool."⁵⁵ The task of thinking through democracy remained unfinished, but Bourne himself ventured into new possibilities. His project for a "trans-national America," the title of another wartime text published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1916, is particularly cogent in the context of the myriad forms of domestic intolerance, intimidation, and ethnic and ideological prosecutions witnessed during the war period. The essay projected a society that did not call into question the belonging nor the loyalty of its immigrants or its citizens on the grounds of their differences, but whose dynamics became stronger because of difference. In fact, Bourne believed that it was not the immigrants who should assimilate into the American society, but rather the latter that should learn from the immigrants' cultural legacies. The nation would then develop a more inclusive form of attachment, one able to avoid the temptations of homogeneity and the self-serving calls of patriotism and nationalism.

This would be the original vision of democracy the U.S. could ultimately offer belligerent Europe and the world. Denouncing the dominant form of nationalism in the United States as a "scarcely veiled belligerency,"⁵⁶ Bourne called for a U.S. plurinational, pluricultural and pluriethnic

assimilationist and pluralist positions. Kallen's essay "Democracy versus the Melting-pot" (1915) made a solid argument for cultural pluralism becoming a reference in a debate to which Bourne also contributed. Less than a decade after this discussion and past the war, nativism completely overrode the pluralist take with the passing of anti-immigration and blatantly racist legislation, the Jackson-Reed Act of 1924.

53 Randolph Bourne, "Trans-National America," 248.

54 Bourne, "Trans-National America," 255.

55 Bourne, "Twilight of Idols," 693.

56 Bourne, "Trans-National America," 257.

society, “a cosmopolitan federation of national colonies . . . the world-federation in miniature.”⁵⁷ This model would cultivate and offer alternative non-nationalist forms of patriotism that would therefore be non-discriminatory but include difference as creativity: “the attempt to weave a wholly novel international nation out of our chaotic America will liberate and harmonize the creative power of all these peoples.”⁵⁸

For Bourne this was also a form of civic attachment, of love for the nation. He called it “an intellectual internationalism”⁵⁹ and saw it as an experience that could be formative of a new ethos that would change the sense of belonging. He linked the idea to education and intercultural dialogue in U.S. universities, institutions attended by the children and the grandchildren of immigrants who had originated in the most diverse parts of Europe (although Bourne was clearly considering solely the immigrant community with European origins, especially the so-called new immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe): “In his colleges, [the American] is already getting, with the study of modern history and cultures . . . the privilege of a common outlook such as the people of no other nation of today in Europe can possibly secure.”⁶⁰ Unlike divisive nationalism, this emerging form of cosmopolitanism was unifying at core because it relied on solidarity and cooperation, rather than on competition.⁶¹

It was therefore the rejection of uniformity which would turn the United States into a nation capable of resisting hate and competition among nations. Cosmopolitanism should avoid all martial temptations attached to orthodox nationalism that had sparked off the Great War. In Bourne’s imagined pluralist cosmopolitan community, intellectuals like himself could dialogue freely in a contrast to all forms of intolerance the war period witnessed, some of which Bourne experienced first-hand, as the shutting down of the anti-war little magazine *The Seven Arts* to which he was a regular contributor, but also of bigger popular intellectual venues, such as the communist leaning magazine the *Masses*.

Bourne also envisioned legal mechanisms to ensure a pacific social and cultural dynamics, since a transnational formation required corresponding forms of citizenship and belonging. He called for “not a nationality but a transnationality” whose dynamics he explained through a textile metaphor: “a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors.”⁶² In a more concrete fashion, he valued already existing citizenship mechanisms, which were however very little in use, if not forbidden, in a time of war, such as double citizenship. Bourne discussed it as a step towards a full transnational citizenship or a cosmopolitan mode of belonging: “Dual citizenship we may have to recognize as the rudimentary form of that international citizenship to which . . . we aspire.”⁶³ But the ultimate achievement of this project was a world citizenship:

57 Bourne, “Trans-National America,” 258.

58 Bourne, “Trans-National America,” 263.

59 Bourne, “Trans-National America,” 259.

60 Bourne, “Trans-National America,” 258.

61 Bourne, “Trans-National America,” 259.

62 Bourne, “Trans-National America,” 262.

63 Bourne, “Trans-National America,” 260.

“[t]he attempt to give [these people living in America] the new spiritual citizenship, as so many individuals have already been given, of a world.”⁶⁴

Two years after writing “Trans-National America,” Bourne however diverted his attention from transnationalism onto its Other, as it were – the strengthening of the State into a new category, the War State. Indeed, the reality that followed, even after the end of the war, was profoundly different from Bourne’s designs; political prosecution escalated and the years 1919–1920 were absolutely horrific for foreigners living in the U.S., while the following decade perpetuated the anti-foreign upsurge and the State’s security apparatuses. Bourne’s premature death prevented him from witnessing that harsh reality but his unfinished manuscript, *The State*, written in 1919, was prescient about the direction national politics was taking and the feelings it would demand from its citizens. He anticipated the idea of the totalitarian state, as of the alliance between the military and the economy. In this text, Bourne maintained that the essence of the State was war, because only through war did the State attain full unity.⁶⁵ At this point, one can take another perspective and consider in how far Bourne was not 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 legitimation of the State’s monopoly of violence within its own territory,⁶⁶ but beyond the defensive thesis; Bourne was disclosing 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 rested on violence. No matter if absurd from the pacifist’s point of view, Bourne ultimately demonstrated that war was the health of the State because it cared for the structures of power and kept the people united.

The State wholly represents Bourne’s view of the intellectual as an educator. The essay dismantles the State and its inner logics in order to bring to light the darkest motivations of modern politics. The State had to position itself against other states, according to a logic 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.⁶⁷ In a time of war, the State exploited the nation’s entire resources in order to protect them arguing that the people depended on them. This created a circular motivation that also explained why in another perverse twist to democracy the modern State 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,”⁶⁸ as he commented on the occasion of the Great War. 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 for its own 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,

64 Bourne, “Trans-National America,” 263.

65 Bourne, *The State*, 17.

66 Weber, Max. “Politics as a vocation,” <http://polisci2.ucsd.edu/foundation/documents/03Weber1918.pdf>, (February 28, 2019).

67 Bourne, *The State*, 17.

68 Bourne, “A War Diary,” 2.

provided only that our industrial rulers see that the end of the war will leave American capital in a strategic position for world enterprise.”⁶⁹

Before the Spanish flu took his life, Bourne envisaged that the essay *The State* would become the reference point for future radicalism in America. It would not have been impossible but certainly it was difficult for such a movement to materialize as fast as the ‘State’ itself did. For despite the fact that the U.S. had no proper military structure to show at the time of the Great War, 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 and its commitment to war. Bourne’s world is easily recognizable by many as our own, that is why his strenuous and courageous defense of intellectual solidarity and creative criticism remain timely: “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.”⁷⁰

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69 Bourne, “A War Diary,” 2.

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