SOCIETY, EDUCATION, AND WAR: JOHN DEWEY AND HIS STUDENT RANDOLPH BOURNE

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Introduction

John Dewey and Randolph Bourne took different positions on World War One. Although conflicted, Dewey saw the war as an opportunity to expand a more American style democracy into some of the as yet undemocratic states in Europe. Randolph Bourne, a former student of Dewey, on the other hand, believed that the consequences of war created problems that would prevent significant change. This paper is a description of this disagreement as a means of analyzing the positions of both Dewey and Bourne on the issue of the war and, further, it is an investigation of similarities of the rhetoric surrounding the American entrance into World War I and our current situation. This is then used to generate some questions concerning the role of the intellectuals in a time of war – preemptive or otherwise. Actually I would like to begin with last item first.

Dewey

Two years before America’s entry into World War I, Dewey wrote German Philosophy and Politics based on prepared for the John Calvin McNair foundation. These lectures were delivered in February 1915 at the University of North Carolina. The war was into its seventh month and the sinking of the Lusitania was two months in the future. Neutrality was the governmental line but many Americans denounced the German barbarity in the invasion of neutral Belgium and clamored for entry on the allied side. Former President Theodore Roosevelt gave speeches across the country supporting the build up of the military and over all military preparedness. His critics claimed that Dewey had succumbed to the war fever but Sidney Hook in his introduction to volume eight of the Middle Works of Dewey’s collected works says German Philosophy and Politics is primarily an essay in the history of ideas.¹

Dewey tried to avoid the pitfalls of historians who used history for purposes other than the search for the unfolding of the human experience. The influence of Hegel might be seen in his view that,

“... historians are really engaged in construing the past in terms of the problems and interests of an impending future, instead of reporting a past in order to discover some mathematical curve which future events are bound to describe.”²

The lectures and the ensuing book discuss the relationships among German culture, politics, and philosophy. But they also look into the German philosophy of history and the relationships of philosophy, culture, society, politics, and social psychology. Marxist economic determinism is found, for example, to be dogmatic, holding that “economic forces present an inevitable and systematic change or evolution, of which state and church, art and literature, science and philosophy are by-products.”³ German idealistic philosophy reflects the historic evolution and organization “as an organic instrument of the accomplishment of an Absolute Will and Law...” (MW8:199-200) Outside of Germany,” he continues, the career of the German idealistic philosophy has been mainly professional and literary. It has exercised considerable upon the teaching of philosophy in France, England and this country. Beyond professorial circles, its influence has been considerable in theological directions. Without a doubt, it has modified for many persons the transition from a supernatural to a spiritual religion; it has enabled them to give up historical and miraculous elements... and to retain the moral substance and emotional values of Christianity. But the Germans are quite right in feeling that only in Germany is this form of idealistic thinking both indigenous and widely applied.⁴

Dewey, of course, finds experimental philosophy more appropriate for American society. He wrote, “It is difficult to see how any a priori philosophy, or any systematic absolutism, is to get a footing among us, at least beyond narrow and professorial circles. Psychologists talk about learning by the method of trial and error or success. Our social organization commits us to this philosophy of life. Our working principle is to try’ to find out by trying and to measure the worth of the ideas and theories tried by the success with which they meet the test of application in practice. Concrete consequences rather than a priori rules supply our guiding principles.”⁵

Dewey saw America’s situation as different from Germany or, for that matter, Europe. The openness of the society in America made it unsusceptible to the dogmatic and absolutist philosophies of the old world. The constitutional democracy mitigated against continued domination by any one group. The hypothetical and tentative mind set extended to the entire society. He said,

America is too new to afford a foundation for an a priori philosophy; we have not the requisite background of law, institutions and achieved social organization... Our history is too obviously future. Our country is too big and too unformed... We must have system, constructive method, springing
from a widely inventive imagination, a method
touched upon at each turn by results achieved.10
Dewey lays much of the blame for the war on the
nationalist attitudes so prevalent in Europe in the late
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He tied
German nationalism, philosophy, needs for unification,
and views on race to the drive toward conflict. Writing
about nationalism, he said,

**Philosophical justification of war follows inevitably
from a philosophy of history composed in
nationalistic terms . . . . The idea that friendly
intercourse among all the peoples of the earth is a
legitimate aim of human effort is in basic
contradiction of such a philosophy.**

Along with nationalism, Kantian philosophy,
thought Dewey, played a role in the development or
pretty well described the German psyche. He found,

**Kant’s decisive contribution** is the idea of a dual
legislation of reason by which are marked off two
distinct realms – that of science and that of morals.
Each of the two realms has its own final and
authoritative constitution: On one hand, there is the
world of sense, the world of phenomena in space and
time in which science is at home; on the other hand,
is the supersensible, the noumenal world, the world
of moral duty and moral freedom.8
The importance of this is that,

Kantianism has helped formulate a sense of a
national mission and destiny . . . . his formulation
and its influence aids us to understand why the
German consciousness has never been swamped by
its technical efficiency and devotion . . . . Freedom
of soul and subordination of action dwell in
harmony. Obedience, definite subjection and control,
detailed organization is the lesson enforced by the
rule of causal necessity in the outer world of space
and time in which action takes place. Unlimited
freedom, the heightening of consciousness for its
own sake, sheer reveling in noble ideals, the law of
the inner world. What more can mortal man ask.9
In addition to nationalism and Kant’s philosophy,
Dewey viewed the influence of racial considerations as
important in the cultural and social development of the
German world view. He wrote,

A purely artificial cult of race has so flourished in
Germany that many social movements — like
antisemitism — and some of Germany’s political
aspirations cannot be understood apart from the
mystic identification of Race, Culture and the State.
In the light of actual science, this is so mythological
that the remark of an American periodical that race
means a number of people reading the same
newspapers is sober scientific fact compared with it.10

**German Philosophy and Politics**, prepared and
delivered in the early days of the war underscored how
an otherwise highly civilized people could become so
warlike and ruthless. Dewey was critical of the war and
the underlying causes, nationalism, racism, and
absolutist philosophy. The book was intended for the
American audience as a warning about the admixture of
*Réalpolitik* with absolutist idealist philosophy. Dewey
recognized that the class stratification and hierarchical
nature of social organization were supported by the
“immutable principles,” social, historical, and
philosophical in nature and that these attributes
contributed to the will to war.

The prevalence of an idealistic philosophy full of
talk of Duty, Will, and Ultimate Ideas and Ideas,
and of the indwelling of the absolute in German
history for the redeeming of humanity has disguised
from the mass of the German people, upon whose
support the policy of the leaders ultimately depends
for success, the real nature of the enterprise in which
they are engaged.11

Dewey believed, however, that America should not
be too complacent. He thought that the war had shown
that rapid change and development, advances in science,
the development of technology, industry, and
commerce, as desirable as they seemed at the time, are
not progress. They may provide the environment for
progress but they may just as surely provide an
environment for a more efficient means of extending the
status quo. He said, “We have confused . . . rapidity of
change with progress . . . the breaking down of barriers
by which advance is made possible with advance
itself.”12

Dewey thought that the war might serve as a wake-
up call, a reason to reassess the condition of the world.
He wrote,

If we have been living in a fool’s paradise, in a
dream of automatic uninterrupted progress, it is well
to be awakened. If we have been putting our trust in
false gods, it is a good thing to have our confidence
shaken, even rudely . . . . We can hardly welcome
the war merely because it has made us think, . . . but
since the war has come we may welcome whatever
revelations of our stupidity and carelessness it brings
with it and set about the institution of a more manly
and more responsible faith in progress than that in
which we have indulged in the past.13

Progress had been overcome by the use of force. For
Dewey force “is the only thing in the world that effects
anything.”14 Force consists of “power or energy,
coercion, violence, and law and these often “come into conflict; they clash.” Force, then is to be used, it is a means to achieve and end and is to be treated as such. He wrote, “To be interested in the ends and to have contempt for the means which alone secure them is the last stage of intellectual demoralization.”

Dewey’s support for the war had its qualifications. He could recognize the existence of the conflicts, historical, philosophical, ethnic, economic, imperial, etc. that led up to the war. He could recognize the misapplication of science, technology, and force to achieve an end that was not necessarily desirable and was certainly not worth the costs involved. “Men justify war,” he said,
in behalf of words which would be empty were they not charged with emotional force — words like honor, liberty, civilization, divine purpose and destiny — forgetting that a war, like anything else has specific concrete results on earth. Unless war can be shown to be the most economical method of securing the results which are desirable with a minimum of the undesirable results.

Pacifism was not acceptable to Dewey. He found the pacifists’ objections to force of any kind as unacceptable, making the peace movement a movement based on the mistaken impression that war springs from the emotions of hate, pugnacity and greed rather than from the objective causes which call these emotions into play reduces the peace movement to the futile plane of hortatory preaching.

Dewey did, however, allow for conscientious objection to the war. He believed that American society had an innate sense of good will and that to create a sense of war was the supreme stupidity. Increasingly, after the Spanish American War, an isolationist attitude grew. When the war came it was, at first, viewed as “over there.” Dewey summarized the changing mood of the people. He said, “we at peace were the preservers of sanity in a world gone mad . . . . (P)acifism was identified with good business, philanthropy, morality and religion. Combine Mr. Carnegie and Mr. Bryan and you have as near the typical American as you are likely to find.” Peace, divorce, and temperance were the main topics in the churches. Young people took those lessons to heart. It is no wonder that many could not make the transition from maintaining the peace to killing the Hun. Dewey thought “ . . . such young people deserve something better than accusations, varying from pro-Germanism and the crime of Socialism to traitorous disloyalty, which the newspapers so readily “hurl” at them.” And that it was insufficient to provide jobs for conscientious objectors which would keep them off the front lines but forcing them to serve. That such action might be the means “to punish the objectors as dangerous malefactors instead of asking to what tasks they may most usefully be assigned.”

Dewey’s tacit support for the war was tempered by his realization of the dangers inherent in wartime activities. He called for toleration while recognizing that almost all men have learned the lesson of toleration with respect to past heresies and divisions . . . when some affair of our own day demands cohesive action and stirs deep feeling, we at once dignify the unpopular cause with persecution . . . and lend it importance by the conspicuousness of our efforts at suppression.

He thought too much power was ascribed to the “Greenwich Village pacifists or socialists”— Bourne and a number of leftists, pacifists, and socialists lived in Greenwich Village — who we try to gag and force from sight. These were accomplished through Woodrow Wilson’s Patriot Acts which Dewey opposed because “with the entry of the United States into the war what had been before wrongheadedness became sedition and what had been folly became treason.” The Espionage Act of 1917, which made it a crime for a person to convey information with intent to interfere with the operation or success of the armed forces of the United States or to promote the success of its enemies. The Sedition Act of 1918 made it illegal to speak out against the government. Eugene V. Debs was jailed for obstructing recruiting after his Canton, Ohio speech opposing the war and the Postmaster General was given the authority to declare letters, circulars, newspapers, pamphlets, and other materials that violated the Act to be unmailable. Newspapers like The Appeal to Reason, the New York Call, the Milwaukee Leader and other newspapers and journals were denied the use of the mails.

Dewey observed that “the official in Washington . . . will deny the mails to the Call and the Vorwaerts. If he does it is possible the act will mark a turning point. If the act should not elect Hillquit (the Socialist candidate) as Mayor of the City of New York, it would come so near to doing so that, as the saying goes, there would be no fun in it.” (MW9:293) Hillquit lost to the Hearst and Tammany-backed candidate but so did the incumbent notwithstanding the boisterous help of Theodore Roosevelt and the jingoist pro war campaign.

Dewey, always the democrat, appreciated the play of ideas. He thought effective democracy was more likely to be hampered by the lack of open debate and discussion. He felt that “the ultimate American
participation should consist not in money nor in men, but in the final determination of peace policies which is made possible by the contribution of men and money.\[^{27}\]

He might have added ideas, after all, the cornerstone of Wilson’s plan for lasting peace consisting of Fourteen Points had been discussed in the Socialist press for two years before they appeared in his 1918 speech.\[^{28}\]

Another concern of Dewey was the status of education in wartime. He delivered a statement and participated in a question and answer session before the Committee on Military Affairs hearing on Senate Bill 1695, Universal Military Training. The bill provided for military training for the male youth of the country between the ages of 12 and 23. He was concerned that Universal Military Training would soon become the task of the schools. Dewey said he appeared “as one humble representative of the multitudes who still believe in the historic spirit and ideal of democratic America . . . but as one can not contemplate with anything but abhorrence a system which should preoccupy his sons from the age of 12 with military instruction.”\[^{29}\] He did not trust the program as envisioned to provide the physical, social, and moral benefits nor did he think that the proposed program of training would meet the needs of the military resulting in the expansion of military training taking resources away from all other aspects of education.

Dewey noted that hygiene training was an important part of the bill though no provision was made for the training of girls in the schools. He suggested that the military aspect be dropped and concentration be placed on universal medical inspection, on school and neighborhood clinics for the care of teeth, eyes, and orthopedic remedies, secure intelligent supervision and instruction to eliminate from schools the faults which breed physical defects, undertake a nationwide movement for providing playgrounds and instructors to lead in healthful games and plays, promote such organizations a Boy Scouts and the Pioneers, and there can be no doubt about the result.\[^{30}\]

Dewey thought that supporters of the proposed bill held a low opinion of the moral, physical, and social condition of the youth of America. To him they drew a lurid picture of the “moral degeneration of the American youth, their lack of respect for their elders and for work, the decline in obedience, the increase in flabby self-indulgence, the unwillingness to make any sacrifice for a common good, etc.”\[^{31}\] Of course much of this sounds like generation-gap thinking. The older generation always thinks the youth are not what they should be. On the other hand, Dewey doubts whether the proposed law would make matters much better. He continues,

Then military training, automatic obedience to the command of a superior, is offered as a moral patent medicine. At the same time we are informed that the same course will promote the independence, the initiative, and voluntary cooperative spirit of those who . . . become cogs in a vast machine.\[^{32}\]

What Dewey supported was voluntary training with the primary emphasis put on health and sanitation and that physical education be expanded and to be begun by the age of eight so that some of the childhood afflictions could be caught and limited. He also supported raising military pay in order to provide a volunteer military.

Dewey’s support for the war centered on the realization that peace is not an absolute and war, though an evil, was sometimes a necessary evil to be exploited for socially beneficial goals. The opportunity existed, he thought, to improve the international social order, to reconstruct American society. Problems like unemployment, the class structure, inefficient production and distribution, drift and lack of organization . . . now would be liquidated as by-products of the past, alterable with the application of sufficient will, determination and force . . . Recognition of the common good would transcend private greed.\[^{33}\]

America’s role in the war was not successful in improving the international social order let alone the reconstruction of American society. The failures of the Treaty of Versailles, the League of Nations, the Five-Power Treaty, and Four Power Treaty and other diplomatic efforts to institute a lasting peace. The war proved to be an ineffective means for spreading democracy or indeed ending war itself. What it did accomplish, Dewey hoped, was to end the isolation of America from the rest of the world. America would influence other nations rather than other nations influencing America.

Randolph Bourne

Randolph Bourne was born in 1886 to a middle class family in Bloomfield New Jersey. His birth was difficult. He was pulled from the womb rather harshly by forceps. This left his head misshapen and scarred. At the age of four a case of spinal tuberculosis stunted his growth and deformed his back. He never attained the height of five feet. But what Bourne lacked in appearance or size was made up for in personality and intellect. Raised in the Presbyterian church and educated in Bloomfield High School, Bourne was a good student and a faithful church member. Bourne recorded in his diary that the Bible verse read to the not yet
fifteen-year-old deformed boy at his church union ceremony was “Whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely.” In school “Randolph not only developed a forceful, active identity, he projected confidence and ability. He was a debater, and editor as well as a writer, a memorizer of Bible verses, a student, a success. His classmates elected him senior class president.”

**Bourne graduated from high school in 1903 and was admitted to Princeton but he was denied financial support for higher education.** He wanted to work in New York City but was unable to find any job for the two years he tried. No one was interested in hiring what one of his friends described as a frog prince. Finally he began giving piano lessons in the “parlor of the big house on Belleville Avenue, like a maiden aunt” and later worked as a factory hand in the office of a Morristown relative playing piano at the movie theater and as an accompanist. In 1905 Bourne found work making piano rolls by playing popular music on a machine that cut the rolls.

Bourne was a voracious reader. While still in high school he read as many of the accepted literary works as he could. He bought many of them in the inexpensively bound sets offered at that time. His interests shifted from the works of Scott, Lowell, Whittier, Longfellow, etc. to the contemporary social conditions. Through his reading he became interested in unitarianism and socialism, supporting the liberalization of the young-men's Bible class and the Boy Scouts. His socialism was of the populist variety. He was not a great scholar of Marx and Engels, or, for that matter, Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Later he would write in *Columbia Monthly*,

“Much of Marxism are doctrinaire and static in its concepts, and yet the three cardinal propositions of Marx — the economic interpretation of history, the class struggle, and the exploitation of the workers by capitalistic private ownership of the means of production — if interpreted ‘progressively and experimentally’ are the sine qua non of Socialism. . . . Anyone who accepts these three propositions as an interpretation of history, a philosophy of society, and the basis of a collective struggle for reform, is a Socialist.”

For him that was sufficient.

In 1909 Bourne took the scholarship examination at Columbia and received a full-tuition scholarship. Six years after high school the twenty-three-year-old Bourne entered Columbia soon making friends and joining the Intercollegiate Socialist Society founded in 1906 by Upton Sinclair and Jack London. In January of 1910 Bourne’s first essay was published in the *Columbia Monthly* and by the spring of 1911 at the end of his sophomore year, the *Atlantic Monthly* helped launch Bourne on his literary career. It was, in fact, at the request of Ellery Sedgwick, the *Atlantic Monthly* publisher, that Bourne wrote his essay, “The Handicapped, By One of Them” (*Atlantic Monthly*: 1911) Later published in *Youth and Life* as A Philosophy of Handicap. He described the attitude of the handicapped person,

He has constantly with him the sense of being obliged to make extra efforts to overcome the bad impression of his physical defects, and he is haunted with a constant feeling of weakness and low vitality which makes effort more difficult and renders him easily fainthearted and discouraged by failure. He is never confident of himself, because he has grown up in an atmosphere where nobody has been very confident of him; and yet his environment and circumstances call out all sorts of ambitions and energies in him which, form the nature of his case, are bound to be immediately thwarted. This attitude is likely to keep him at a generally low level of accomplishment unless he have an unusually strong will, and a strong will is perhaps the last thing to develop under such circumstances.

Then he offered the following advice,

So to all the handicapped and the unappreciated, I would say, — Grow up as fast as you can. Cultivate the widest interests you can, and cherish all your friends. Cultivate some artistic talent, for you will find it the most durable of satisfactions and perhaps one of the surest means of livelihood as well . . . . do not take the world too seriously, nor let too many social conventions oppress you . . . . In a word, keep looking outward; look out eagerly for those things that interest you, for people who will interest you and be friends with you, for new interests and for opportunities to express yourself. You will find that your disability will come to have little meaning for you, that it will begin to fade quite completely out of your sight; you will wake up some fine morning and find yourself, after all the struggles that seemed so bitter to you, really and truly adjusted to the world.

Bourne was often seen on the streets and in the restaurants and coffee shops of Greenwich Village dressed in a black cape to obscure his hunchback. He was evidently a person with many friends of whom he said, “My friends, I can say with truth, since I have no other treasure, are my fortune. I really live only when I am with my friends.”

Bourne at some time during his career at Columbia
became interested in the work of the pragmatists. The thought of William James captivated him and the ideas and writing of John Dewey became important. He called Dewey the most significant thinker in America since the death of William James. Bourne was in one or more of Dewey’s classes at Columbia. Of Dewey as a teacher, Bourne observed, “It will do you no good to hear him lecture. His sentences, flowing and exact and lucid when read, you will find strung out in festoons of obscurity between pauses for the awaited right word.” He used Dewey’s *Ethics* and other works in his criticism and book review essays and called himself an instrumentalist, accepting wholeheartedly “assumption behind Dewey’s pragmatism that human intelligence could envisage the future clearly because human beings, in addition to being purposeful, were at heart rational and good.”

Bourne came to appreciate the significance of the application of pragmatism to the social order. In a short essay, “John Dewey’s Philosophy,” Bourne writes, His philosophy of “instrumentalism” has an edge on it that would slash up the habits of thought, the customs and institutions in which our society has been living for centuries . . . his tolerant democracy loves all human values, and finds nothing so intolerable as artificial inequality . . . Professor Dewey’s fundamental thesis has been that . . . the mind is not a looking-glass, reflecting the world for its private contemplation, not a logic-machine for building up truth, but a tool by which we adjust ourselves to the situations in which life puts us. Reason is not a divinely appointed guide to eternal truth, but a practical instrument by which we solve problems. Words are not invariable symbols for invariable things, but clues to meanings.

Bourne also recognized the value of Dewey’s philosophy to the development of the new society, the broader application of science to the evolving American democracy. He wrote, It is in showing the unity of all the democratic strivings, the social movement, the new educational ideals, the freer ethics, the popular revolt in politics, of all the aspects of the modern restless, forward-looking personal and social life, and the applicability to all of them of scientific method, with its hypotheses and bold experimentation, that Professor Dewey has been the first thinker to put the moral and social goal a notch ahead.

Bourne understood the dilemma of pragmatism. He wrote, I am conscious of his horror of having his ideas petrified into a system: He knows that it will do no good to have his philosophy intellectually believed unless it is also thought and lived. And he knows the uncanny propensity of stupid men to turn even the most dynamic ideas into dogma. He has seen that in his school world.

As the recipient of the Gilder Fellowship on graduation from Columbia, Bourne traveled to Europe in 1913. He visited England, France, Italy and Germany. He was in Dresden on the day Austria declared war on Serbia and in Berlin two days later when the Kaiser arrived to cheering crowds. His views of the populace reinforced Dewey’s analysis of the *Kultur*, an eager unquestioning belief in the Kaiser and the State. Bourne recognized the relationship between culture and politics and the seduction of citizens who will most greatly sacrifice for the State. When one sees Europe at this point in history, one sees a clear vision of what this complex thing called Americanism must not become. Austria declaring war on Serbia, Germany invading Belgium, madness is brewing there, and it is a madness fueled by age-old fears and hatreds of other races and cultures. We must learn from the terrible mistake. Europe is making and stay out of this war at all costs. War is a killer of culture and culture is America’s only hope.

He wrote, Patriotism becomes the dominant feeling, and produces immediately that intense and hopeless confusion between the relations which the individual bears and should bear toward the society of which he is a part. The patriot loses all sense of the distinction between State, nation, and government.

The problem was that patriotism and pacifism or antiwar feelings became mutually exclusive. Bourne thought that Dewey had missed a big segment of the antiwar sentiment, the segment that, neither wants martyrdom nor hopes to be saved for its amiable sentiments . . . and it is just this attitude, far more significantly ‘American’ than ‘conscientious objection,’ that John Dewey has ignored in his recent article on ‘Conscience and Compulsion.’ The result has been to apply his pragmatic philosophy in its least convincing form . . . the instrumental use of the intelligence for the realization of conscious social purpose.

“How,” questioned Bourne, “could the pragmatist mind accept war without more violent protest, without a greater wrench?” In *Twilight of Idols*, Bourne expresses his displeasure with John Dewey for what he saw as the misapplication of the pragmatist/instrumentalist philosophy.

We are in the war because an American Government
practiced a philosophy of adjustment, and an
instrumentalism for minor ends . . . an intellectual
attitude of mere adjustment, of mere use of the
creative intelligence to make your progress, must
end in caution, regression, and a virtual failure to
effect even that change which you so clear-sightedly
and desirously see . . . instead of creating new values
and setting at once a large standard to which the
nations might repair.50

Bourne, I think, still believed in Dewey's philosophy
but was chagrined that it was not being applied as it
should be and that its misuse constituted a return to
irrationality, blind faith patriotism, and the search for
dissenters, pacifists, German sympathisers, and traitors.
He thought,
The recent articles of John Dewey's on the war
suggest a slackening in his thought for our guidance
and stir, and the inadequacy of his pragmatism as a
philosophy of life in this emergency.51

Bourne blamed Dewey and other intellectuals for
failing to see that democracy cannot be spread by war.
The consequences of war do not lend themselves to
remaking the world and the restructuring of the social
order. This has been often proven since. Dewey, thought
Bourne, should have known better. He said,
A philosopher who senses so little the sinister forces
of war, who is so much more concerned over the
excess of the pacifists than over the excesses of
military policy, who can feel only amusement at the
idea that any one should try to conscript thought,
who assumes that the war-technique can be used
without trailing along with it the mob-fanaticisms,
the injustices and hatreds, that are organically bound
up with it, is speaking to another element of the
younger intelligentsia than that to which I belong.52

For three years there was sufficient resistance to
entering the war and much discussion about the
advantages and disadvantages to entering the war was
published. The idea of the war making the world safer
democracy, the concept of and international
organization that might prevent or minimize another
war, and the pursuit of ways to limit the size of armies
and the manufacture and maintenance of weapons were
all products of this time. Eventually, however, war was
chosen
from motives alien to our cultural needs, and for
political ends alien to the happiness of the
individual. But nations, of course, are not rational
entities, and they act within their most irrational
rights when they accept war as the most important
thing the nation can do in the face of metaphysical
menaces of imperial prestige. What concerns us here

is the relative ease with which the pragmatist
intellectuals,' with Professor Dewey at the head,
have moved out their philosophy, bag and baggage,
from education to war.53

Bourne considered the war to be so contrary to
Dewey’s experiences that it removed him from his
intellectual environment and forced him to apply his
intelligence to the problematic situation. Bourne found
his response lacking. He wrote,
Evidently the attitudes which war calls out are
fiercer and more incalculable than Professor Dewey
is accustomed to take into his hopeful and intelligent
imagination, and the pragmatist mind . . . it is not an
arena of creative intelligence our country's mind is
now, but of mob-psychology.54

Bourne thought that the war intellectuals were being
disingenuous. He found, "contrast between what liberals
ought to be doing and saying if democratic values are to
be conserved, and what the real forces are imposing
upon them."55

In Europe it was patriotism that helped provoke the
war. In America the war succeeded in evoking
patriotism, a patriotism of blind faith. This kind of
patriotism is distinguished from the genuine patriotism
of good works whose other name is public spirit or civic
virtue. To practice the real patriotism of civic virtue is
the first duty of a citizen; an instinctive and servile
loyalty to the group, right or wrong, is not citizenship it
is subjection. Bourne wrote,

War is the health of the State. It automatically sets in
motion throughout society those irresistible forces
for uniformity, for passionate cooperation with the
Government in coercing into obedience the minority
groups and individuals which lack the larger herd
sense. The machinery of government sets and
enforces the drastic penalties; the minorities are
either intimidated into silence, or brought slowly
around by a subtle process of persuasion which may
seem to them really to be converting them . . . the
nation in war-time attains a uniformity of feeling, a
hierarchy of values culminating at the undisputed
apex of the State ideal, which could not possibly be
produced through any other agency than war . . . The
State is intimately connected with war, for it is the
organization of the collective community when it
acts in a political manner, and to act in a political
manner towards a rival group has meant, throughout
all history - war . . . .56

In “The Collapse of American Strategy.” Bourne
asked how entering the war was to serve as a means for
the creation of an international order that would prevent
future wars. Bourne suggested the use of naval force as
a means of armed neutrality to keep the shipping lanes free. If successful in stopping submarine warfare the Germans would be deterred and the United States could still serve as peace broker. As soon as the United States entered the war, any hope of “peace without victory” was lost. The Allies were then primed for an ultimate victory over the Germans. American strategy was forgotten. Progressives defended American intervention in the war on the grounds that it would provide a unique opportunity to reorganize the world into a radically democratic social order. Bourne countered that participation in the war would negate any opportunity for expanding democracy. He said, If the German people cannot effect their own political reorganization, nobody can do it for them. They would continue to prefer the native Hohenzollerns to the most liberal government imposed by their conquering enemies . . . . Guarding neutrality, we might have counted toward a speedy and democratic peace. In the war we are a rudderless nation to be exploited as the Allies wish, politically and materially, and towed . . . in any direction which they may desire . . . . The new strategy . . . ‘conquer or submit.’

Bourne and Dewey

Bourne, I think, never ceased to be a supporter of Dewey and his instrumentalism. I believe that he was disappointed in the intellectuals, especially the progressives, in America for not remaining true to their ideals. He was disappointed in John Dewey in particular. For if there was one person who should have been able to foresee the consequences of America’s entry into the war it was Dewey. His criticism of Dewey led him back to William James. He wondered if James would have provided a different kind of intellectual leadership. “Whether James would have given us just that note of spiritual adventure which would make the national enterprise seem creative for an American future, this we can never know.” He thought for James to support the war he would have had to give up his “moral equivalent for war” for an “immoral equivalent for war.” Bourne said, “I evoked the spirit of William James, with his gay passion for ideas, and its freedom of speculation, when I felt the slightly pedestrian gait into which the war had brought pragmatism. It is the creative desire more than the creative intelligence that we shall need if we are ever to fly.”

John Dewey on the other hand came to dislike the Greenwich Village pacifists and socialists and Bourne especially. When Dewey was selected as an editor of the Dial when it moved from Chicago to New York along with Thorstein Veblen, Helen Marot, and George Donlin he noticed that according to the organization plan the associate editors would be the real editors. Among the associate editors was listed Randolph Bourne. Dewey immediately resigned as a Dial editor. The publisher upon learning of Dewey’s resignation and the reason dismissed Bourne as an associate editor and encouraged Dewey to return. Bourne continued submitting articles to the Dial but the articles printed were largely limited to review essays. Bourne’s dissent no longer had a place for expression. A similar fate befall Bourne at the New Republic. Once the decision was made to go to war, Bourne’s dissenting voice was not allowed to be heard. He was limited to educational and literary topics. The Seven Arts published several of Bourne’s more provocative essays beginning in April 1917 but The Seven Arts lost its benefactor and was forced to cease publication in September 1917.

Only after the failure of the Versailles Treaty to implement the Fourteen Points and the failure of the international community to set up a workable organization to limit war and provide the means to settle disputes between nations did Dewey come to realize that American involvement might have been manipulated to the benefit of the allies. A Dial editorial under the names of the editors, Dewey, Veblen, and Marot read, America won the war; America has lost the peace, the object for which she fought. It is a thankless task to bring in a bill of particulars—-to show in detail how one by one the fourteen points to which America and the Allies bound themselves have been abrogated by the actual pact.

Dewey observed that “might still makes right,” that all that can be done by “those who favored America’s action in the war from idealistic reasons” is “to make the best of it . . . blurring over disagreeable features so as to salvage vanity . . . . The consistent pacifist has much to urge now in his own justification.” But by the time these words were written, Bourne had been dead for ten months.

Education

It is interesting and somewhat ironic that it was in the period of the First World War that Dewey’s capstone works in education appeared, Schools of Tomorrow and Democracy and Education. Dewey included a statement of the importance of education, Education is the means of the advancement of humanity toward realization of its divine perfection. Education is the work of the State. The syllogism completes itself. But in order that the State may carry on its educational or moral mission it must not only possess organization and commensurate power, but it must also control the conditions which secure
the possibility offered to the individuals composing it. To adopt Aristotle’s phrase, men must live before they can live nobly. The primary condition of a secure life is that everyone be able to live by his own labor. Without this, moral self-determination is a mockery.63

Perhaps his experiences with the First World War broadened Dewey’s thinking from psychology and education to a more inclusive philosophy and social theory. Reconstruction in Philosophy, Human Nature and Conduct, Experience and Nature, The Public and Its Problems, and A Quest for Certainty were all written in the in the 1920s.

Dewey’s philosophy, properly applied, might have made a difference but proper application did not mean creating a Deweyan system or converting Dewey’s precepts to some kind of dogma. Bourne appreciated Dewey’s “horror of having his ideas petrified into a system. He knows that it will do no good to have his philosophy intellectually believed unless it is also thought and lived.”64 As was discovered when the New York City Schools tried to institute the Gary system, the transfer of even a successful system to another environment is fraught with problems. Still Bourne observed,

For both our revolutionary conceptions of what education means, and for the intellectual strategy of its approach, this country is immeasurably indebted to the influence of Professor Dewey’s philosophy. With these ideas sincerely felt, a rational nation would have chosen education as its national enterprise. Into this it would have thrown its energy though the heavens fell and the earth rocked around it. But the nation did not use its isolation from the conflict to educate itself.65

John Dewey, if I have read him correctly, would not approve of the current state of affairs, let alone

Randolph Bourne. Dewey came to see, as Bourne saw from the first, that war is not the extension of civilized forces and is not capable of producing good from its evil. Only the selfless application of intelligence can overcome the horrors of war. After World War II the creation of the United Nations provided a means to seek other means to solve international problems without resolution to armed conflict. The Marshall Plan allowed Western Europe to rebuild and regain some of its power in the world. But the rise of great-power politics and the cold war limited the effectiveness of both the world organization and the American charity.

Naomi Wolf’s book, Fascist America, in 10 easy steps, looks at the condition of American democracy. Wolf’s “ten easy steps” are:
1. Invoke a terrifying internal and external enemy. Drugs, terrorism, Iraq, Iran, Russia, North Korea; take your pick.
2. Create a gulag. Guantanamo and other camps, some known, some secret hold “enemy combatants” and, perhaps, others.
3. Develop a thug caste. Security contractors work
outside the law in Iraq and have been deployed in the United States after Katrina in New Orleans. Organized poll watchers harassed voters in Florida.
4. Set up an internal surveillance system. The National Security Agency has the ability to monitor all kinds of personal activities, from phone and email to banking and library transactions.
5. Harass citizens’ groups. Any group that dissents may become a target for investigation.
6. Engage in arbitrary detention and release. Many people are prevented from air transportation because of expressing anti-war or anti-government sentiments.
7. Target key individuals. If they won’t go along with the program, get rid of them which is exactly what the justice department did to eight otherwise competent federal prosecutors. Valerie Plame’s identification as a CIA operative causes irreparable harm to that agency because her husband wrote an op-ed criticism of the administration. How many people have left the administration for ideological (or ethical) reasons?
8. Control the press. Reporters are consistently fed the “correct” information about the Iraq war. There is no opportunity for a free press and serious investigative reporting.
9. Dissent equals treason. The right to dissent is no longer taken for granted. There have been too many instances of individuals who have been threatened with punishment for speaking out against the activities of the government.
10. Suspend the rule of law. States of emergency can now be used to mobilize the National Guard at the behest of the President. Virtual martial law.

One of the things she mentions is the complacency of American citizens. We assume that things are pretty much OK. We are told that things are pretty much OK. Information to the contrary is limited. We don’t recognize the dangers that are inherent in the steps the government is taking during the various wars we have won but are still engaged in. Machiavelli recommended to the Prince that he keep his nation on a war footing. We are in up over our boots.

Dewey’s pre-war optimism is of little help to us now. His post-war realism would be more appropriate. Bourne’s skepticism about the role of nations exporting ideology (democratic or otherwise) seems to ring true.

Bourne has a ghost,
a tiny twisted unscarred 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.
John Dos Passos, 1919

3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., pp. 199-200.
5. Ibid., p. 200.
7. Ibid., p. 197.
8. Ibid., p. 147.
10. Ibid., p. 188.
13. Ibid., p. 234.
15. Ibid., p. 212.
16. Ibid., p. 213.
18. Ibid., p. 214.
20. Ibid., pp. 261-262.
21. Ibid., p. 262.
30. Ibid., p. 382.
32. Ibid.
33. Lewis Hahn, “Introduction to volume 10,” MW 10, p. xii.
36. Ibid., p. 77.
39. Ibid., p. 135.
42. Randolph Bourne, John Dewey’s Philosophy, p. 332.
43. Ibid., p. 334.
44. Ibid., pp. 334-335.
47. Randolph Bourne, “War is the Health of the State,” in The Radical Will, p. 357.
50. Ibid., p. 344.
51. Ibid., p. 336.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid., p. 339.
54. Ibid., pp. 336-337.
55. Ibid., p. 338.
56. Randolph Bourne, “War is the Health of the State,” p. 360,
59. Ibid., p. 338.
60. Ibid., p. 347.
64. Randolph Bourne, “In a Schoolroom,” in The Radical Will, p. 186.
68. http://www.guardian.co.uk/usa/story/0,,2064157,00.html