Leslie J. Vaughan,
Randolph Bourne and the Politics of Cultural Radicalism
(Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas 1997)

In 1944, Dwight Macdonald remembered Randolph Bourne, whose professional life was confined to New York intellectual centers and lasted less than a decade, as the "intellectual hero of World War I in this country." Why? Because Bourne defied G. B. Shaw's truism that people, when forced to accept an impossible situation, "in order to save themselves from unbearable mistrust and misery, or from being driven by their conscience into actual conflict with the law, fall back on the old rule that if you cannot have what you believe in you must believe in what you have."

Randolph Bourne steadfastly refused to follow that rule. Since the twentieth century record of pragmatic liberalism, with its frequent and sometimes unconscionable compromise of principle, supports Shaw's observation, Bourne's defiance invariably comes to the rescue as a breath of fresh air. That's what makes this intellectual monograph so stimulating. Despite its all too frequent jargonistic prose (the text is full of social scientese: "internal dialogization," (44) "educationism," (77) "ist" is added to nouns at random, "progressivist," Tammanists, (77) "suggested a different *problematic*?"(136)), Vaughan brings Bourne to life intellectually by astute quotations from his work which drive the reader back to the original texts to get the rich rewards of his nuanced insights and masterful prose style. While the author maintains a critical, analytical stance, it is obvious that she has a strong personal commitment to Bourne's gadfly temperament. The book is dedicated to "ALL MALCONTENTS."

Vaughan's book is not a biography; there have been at least four, and innumerable biographical and critical essays written by well established scholars. Vaughan has done the research of a biographer and appears to have read carefully everything of any consequence written by or about her subject and a good deal that is peripherally relevant. Her interest is in analytical and theoretical criticism as a way of probing the "roots of American political thought" as well as focusing on the "contradictions of progressive liberalism," i.e., its tendency toward militarism, statism and bureaucratic social control as well as its frequent tolerance for racial and ethnic stereotyping. She deals extensively with all of the major themes of her subject's work during his remarkably productive and eclectic writing career.

Bourne's fame rests, for the most part, on his devastating critique of John Dewey's pragmatic instrumentalism in support of American intervention in

World War I, when, as Vaughan puts it, "'intelligent service' replaced critical intelligence." Despite the fact that Dewey had been Bourne's mentor, his essays attacking the philosopher's pro-intervention stance are classic pieces of analytical demolition. They were so eloquently persuasive that they later inspired Dwight Macdonald, Noam Chomsky, Staughton Lynd and others during the anti-Vietnam War movement. The situations were similar. Bourne's "best and brightest": Dewey, Herbert Croly, Walter Weyle, Walter Lippmann et. al defended the war as a crusade for democracy. The sixties' "best and brightest": McGeorge Bundy, Robert MacNamara, Walt Rostow, echoed the same nationalistic nonsense a half century later. So persuasive was the Bourne critique that Dewey never really recovered from it and during the 20s and 30s repudiated not only his earlier position but the logic by which he had arrived at it.

In this acrimonious debate Vaughan persuasively defends Bourne against historical criticism that has been inclined to dismiss him as a romantic, an anarchist, a man outside of and not in touch with the real world. This is the traditional stance of those dedicated to what they, in Orwellian newspeak, call the "responsibilities of power." In effect Vaughan is interested in Bourne's notion of the "responsibilities of the intellectual" in a democratic society. This question has been addressed endlessly and it always comes down to the same thing: can one be more effective as an insider influencing policy toward desired goals or is it better to avoid the corruption of power and badger and meddle from the outside. The Lippmanns and the Schlesingers insist that they have a much more effective impact on policy. True, they risk corruption but they avoid irrelevance. Their opponents insist that by becoming attached to the engines of power they inevitably accommodate themselves to the *realpolitik* of the State. Vaughan is acutely sensitive and receptive to Bourne's skepticism concerning the "political independence of the intellectual." She forthrightly rejects the argument of the servants of power, that men like Bourne and, by implication, Thoreau and all of those in the dissenting tradition, are simply escapists. On the contrary their waging war "below the battle" was "not a means of lying low...but a disruptive act, a way to redefine the terms of the debate and deliberately to avoid the orthodoxies of current social thought." (109) As she subsequently illustrates, Bourne was not simply interested in redefining the specific terms of this debate, he wanted a redefinition of politics, culture, art, literature. He wanted to break down conceptual barriers and to look at the world in a different way outside of the prevailing orthodoxies. He devoted his short professional life to that task. Many of his contemporaries saw him as a model of what the intellectual should be and do. As for the charge of naive romanticism, it wasn't Bourne who thought it was a "war for democracy" or, as Dewey once put it, a war for a "democratic

reconstruction at home and abroad." It was Dewey and the editors of *The New Republic*, who week after week insisted that America's intervention would help bring about an international socialization. Bourne did not believe in an antiseptic war and steadfastly insisted that the means do in fact corrupt the ends. The devastating red scare, racism and xenophobia that gripped the nation shortly after his death in 1918 would not have surprised Bourne, for he had predicted the damage a so-called liberal war would do to democracy.

The second major focus of Bourne's thought that has contributed to his historical and intellectual longevity was his participation in the debates, early in this century, concerning the absorption of foreign immigrants into American society. This interest was closely related to his critique of American intervention because here again his stance was vigorously anti-nationalist when a militant war-time nationalism threatened "'enemies within,' deportations, the criminalization of dissent and vigilantism...and the demonization of the foreign Other." He called his defiant response to the forces of 100% Americanism "transnationalism" which was closely related to the cultural pluralism of Horace Kallen and even to the contemporary multiculturalists. Bourne was exhilarated by cultural diversity but not by cultural nationalism. Again Vaughan is a sure guide through Bourne's transnational essays. She deals carefully with the many facets of this debate concerning nationalism, patriotism, assimilation, and ethnic diversity. Bourne was above all the ultimate cosmopolitan. For Bourne the mark of the intellectual is to "have overcome the confines of orthodoxy and provincialism, enabling him or her to be truly critical." What interests Vaughan most about the transnational essays is Bourne's promotion of "prefigurative politics" which she defines as "neighborhood based politics of halfway houses, settlements, experimental schools and cooperatives that involved feminine labour, self help and nonstatist alternatives to centralization and bureaucratic management." Thus is revealed the communitarian thrust of this volume. What attracts Vaughan and many of the younger generation of left-leaning scholars (Casey Blake, Gregory Sumner and Jeffrey Isaac come to mind) is Bourne's adaptation and rejuvenation of Josiah Royce's "beloved community." This is what attracted Dwight Macdonald who could even fit the cocktail party into a beloved community. In this worldview the state is always suspect, and it was Bourne who declared that "War is the health of the State." This anti-statism is one of the profound dilemmas of leftist political theory because it is so vulnerable to right wing reactionary exploitation in order to deny any collective responsibility. Bourne did not live long enough to confront that dilemma but his admirer, Dwight Macdonald, did. Late in the latter's life he was reading and endorsing the likes of Milton Friedman and returning to Friedrich von Hayek's *The Road to*

Serfdom (1945). But of course both Bourne and Macdonald understood that a progressive, democratic government could make prefigurative politics not only possible but vital. When Bourne and his admirers attacked the state it was usually in opposition to its militarism and nationalism and demands of cultural conformity which their sometime conservative allies invariably supported.

There is much more in this volume. Of particular interest is Vaughan's discussion of Bourne's anti-consumerism and fear of the debilitating effects of mass culture. Contemporaries often look askance at Bourne's pejorative references to mass culture as the rudimentary American culture of

> the cheap newspaper, the 'movies,' the popular song, the ubiquitous automobile...the downward undertow of our civilization with its leering cheapness, and falseness of taste...the absence of mind, and sincere feeling which we see in our slovenly towns, our vapid moving pictures, our popular novels and the vacuous faces of the crowds on the city streets. This is the cultural wreckage of our times.

Despite the cries of elitism from the current students of popular culture, Bourne's clear-eyed appraisal still rings true and makes his critics sound like Shaw's victims of intolerable situations who insisted that we live in the best of all possible worlds. In this connection Lizabeth Cohen has recently argued that the working class used mass culture to serve their own second generation working class interests and to mount oppositional political action. Vaughan cites Casey Blake's observation that Bourne understood "that power relations did not disappear when Americans went to the same movies or cheered the same baseball teams." But in her epilogue she concedes that Bourne's "critique of a one dimensional mass culture and its commercialism" is unsupportable today because Bourne "underestimated the possibility of democratic resistance." This reviewer, recently having been to a ball park and a basketball game, finds little to hope for in the way of an oppositional counter culture. It would appear that Bourne's own "bread and circuses" analysis was and remains on-target. Despite what Bourne saw as the snobbish elitism of the Anglo Saxon high culture champions, he couldn't "feel any glee" about what it was being substituted with.

Vaughan's treatment of Bourne's educational, literary, and cultural criticism makes one long for the return of his kind of nay saying, independent, public intellectuals. Bourne had a conception of himself, which Vaughan carefully outlines, and he crafted his own legend by living up to what he understood to be his obligations. Randolph Bourne knew that he was a voice in the wilderness, "howling like a coyote that everything is being run wrong." But he also knew

that he had "a real genius for making trouble, for getting under people's skin." An intellectual with such a talent would have been terribly remiss if he had not done his duty. Leslie Vaughan, with her sophisticated, intelligent and appreciative criticism and analysis, has also done her duty.

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