

# War and the Intellectuals: Bourne, Dewey, and the Fate of Pragmatism

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My purpose here, apart from convincing you that John Dewey was quite possibly right about American entry into World War I, is to address the repression and mutilation of pragmatism by left-wing intellectuals in the twentieth century. These would seem to be very different purposes, but in fact they are the same. If we are to understand how pragmatism acquired its unsavory reputation among leftists everywhere, we must go back to 1917, when Randolph Bourne denounced not only Dewey's decision in favor of American entry but also pragmatism itself as the source of that decision. These almost ancient denunciations would not matter very much, except that they are repeated in every subsequent account of the American Left in World War I, and are recalled if not reiterated in every subsequent critique of pragmatism – they still determine our thinking about Dewey, about pragmatism, and about the war. Revisiting this primal scene allows us to ask why. It allows us to convert the following statement, which still serves as a left-wing credential, into a question: Dewey's support for American entry into the Great War demonstrates that pragmatism is a philosophy of acquiescence to "the existing fact," a philosophy that must validate capitalism, accept imperialism, and repudiate socialism.

I begin in the confessional mode because I used to take this very statement for granted. Many years ago, I finished an M.A. in Russian history and switched to U.S. history for the Ph.D. My original and enduring guide to the historical contours of American culture – my chosen object of study – was Lewis Mumford, whose books of the 1920s and early 30s became sacred texts for me. I went out and found hardback editions of *The Golden Day* (1926), *Herman Melville* (1929), and *Technics and Civilization* (1934). I copied and memorized passages; I modeled my life and work and prose on his, even to the point of using colons instead of periods in endless paragraphs of speculation about American civilization. And so I accepted without question his judgments about pragmatism, which he asserted most

emphatically in *The Golden Day*. It was, he claimed, the “attitude of compromise” perfected by the bewildered “children of industrialism”: William James was merely “warming over the hash of everyday experience during the Gilded Age.” By the same token, I accredited the *antecedents* of these judgments in the arguments of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, Harold Stearns, and their distant echoes in the more recent arguments of C. Wright Mills, Christopher Lasch, and Jeffrey Lustig. Like Mumford and Lasch, I simply took it for granted that Bourne was right to denounce Dewey for supporting American entry into the Great War – that abstention from or opposition to this “War of Steel and Gold” was the only productive political position one could have taken. Like Mumford and Lasch, I also took it for granted that Bourne was right to trace the *intellectual* origins of Dewey’s *ideological* idiocy to the erudite expedience of pragmatism.<sup>1</sup>

And then I was driven back, but not yet a boat against the current, to the original pragmatist texts. I was working on literary naturalism in the late 1980s, trying to decipher its lack of finished characters and its studied ambiguity with respect to the formal choice between realism and romance. A phrase from an essay by James – consciousness “is a kind of external relation,” he said, not some private Eden of the inner self – kept insinuating itself in my attempts to understand and explain *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser’s first novel, I suppose because the lack of self-consciousness in the title character worked as a practical demonstration of James’ proposition. I began, then, to read James more carefully as I was writing about Dreiser. In doing so, I discovered that something was going on beneath the surface of the straightforward if not simple prose of the essays in radical empiricism. Or rather I discovered, like many of James’ contemporaries, that right there on the surface of his everyday language, where many homely, commercial, and monetary metaphors congregated, something new was happening, something new was getting said, but in a diffident, almost casual way that refused the intonations of profundity, or even novelty. I finally understood what D.H. Lawrence told us long

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<sup>1</sup>See James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940* (Chapel Hill, 1994), ch. 9, “The Romantic Acquiescence: Pragmatism and the Young Intellectuals.”

ago: when reading American authors, you have to trust the tale, not the teller.<sup>2</sup>

Gradually I realized that Harold Bloom was probably wrong to suggest that the American response to the post-Enlightenment crisis was more or less romantic, from Emerson and Whitman to Stevens and Williams. Gradually I realized that Alfred North Whitehead was probably right to distinguish between Henri Bergson and William James by associating the former with a “romantic reaction” to modern-industrial society and placing the latter in a category all his own. But what followed? What if Mumford’s affiliation with Bergson made more sense than James’ admiration of Bergson? What if James had proposed both a post-Kantian solution to the problem of knowledge by adjourning epistemology and a post-romantic solution to the problem of modernity by accepting and appropriating the possibilities of the “credit economy” that underwrote corporate capitalism? Did his pragmatism then allow us to treat this stage of capitalism – a new cultural moment as well as a regulated market economy – as both impediment *and* means to the realization of social-democratic purposes, at any rate as something other than deviation or devolution from a more democratic past?<sup>3</sup>

My book of 1994, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940*, was my first attempt to answer these questions. It has an unmistakably Oedipal feel because I was writing to explain my apostasy to myself among others. I was renouncing my intellectual youth by pronouncing on it, that is, by criticizing Lewis Mumford’s romanticism and defending Williams James’ pragmatism. I wasn’t much interested in Dewey except as a disciple of James, although I did ask in a footnote why Casey Blake and Robert Westbrook still gave Randolph Bourne the benefit of the doubt in analyzing the issues raised by the Great War. I also briefly suggested that in promoting American entry, Dewey was advocating a program that resembles what we used to call “multiculturalism,” and that in thinking through the possibilities afforded by public mobilization for war production, he was refusing to settle for state capitalism as the obvious or inevitable result. But I didn’t feel any pressing need to develop this line of argument. Why would I? To do so would clearly be to repress the memory of Eugene V. Debs, who was, of course, jailed for speaking out

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., ch. 6.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., chs. 8-10.

against American entry (or at least against conscription), and to suggest that the Socialist Party USA was perhaps wrong to oppose the war as such. To develop this line of argument would seem, moreover, to require a defense of American imperialism – a difficult assignment for someone like me, who values the “revisionist” works of William Appleman Williams, Walter LaFeber, Carl Parrini, Martin Sklar, Emily Rosenberg, Marilyn Young, and Lloyd Gardner as much as the cultural criticisms of Lewis Mumford.<sup>4</sup>

When I wrote the preface to the paperback edition of *Pragmatism and Political Economy*, I tried to make explicit the “transition questions” that had remained implicit in my argument. The transition from feudalism to capitalism, I claimed, was comparable to the transition from proprietary to corporate capitalism, mainly because both transitions allowed and enforced radical redefinitions of property, subjectivity, and social relations more generally. The long, slow, incomplete “social death” of the landed nobility which was permitted by its transfer of control over agricultural production to commoners was recapitulated, I suggest, in the long, slow, incomplete “social death” of capitalists which was permitted by its transfer of control over industrial production to salaried managers in and through the bureaucratic milieu of the large corporations. From this standpoint, the twentieth century begins to look like the moment of transition from a capitalist mode of production to a social formation in which capitalism and socialism actively collaborate as well as peacefully coexist – in which the regulation and socialization of markets becomes a cross-class and transnational project.<sup>5</sup>

In a more recent book, *Pragmatism, Feminism, and Democracy* (2001), I address these “transition questions” from a different perspective. Here I argue that pragmatism and feminism navigated the passage from proprietary to corporate capitalism, ca. 1890-1930; in this sense, I claim, they mediate between capitalism and socialism, and thus teach us to live with the ambiguities and contradictions of the hybrid social formation we still inhabit. By saying that the transition from proprietary to corporate capitalism was a passage navigated by pragmatism and feminism, however, I do not mean to suggest that these social-intellectual movements were “superstructural” forms that merely revealed the

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 361n.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., (1997 ed.), xv-xxi

more basic content of an inexorably “economic” change. I mean instead to suggest that these forms *determined* the content of the transition by making it intelligible and actionable.<sup>6</sup>

Notice that both pragmatism and feminism are, by this account, idioms in which corporate capitalism gets defined as the horizon of political expectation and the condition of intellectual innovation rather than the sign of democracy’s demise or the enemy of the human spirit. They are ways, in other words, of accepting the fundamental reality of “corporateness,” as Dewey put it, rather than believing that corporations and their bureaucratic rationality are the problem for the Left. Perhaps that is why pragmatism has suffered so persistently at the hands of left-wing intellectuals (historians included), who are so attached to a world in which corporations and bureaucracies don’t yet exist that they can’t yet accredit the post-artisanal moral universe created in the course of the twentieth century.

What, then, does pragmatism initiate, how does feminism address, include, and complete the pragmatist project, and how did they mediate between the disintegrating past and the impending future? There are many ways to define pragmatism, of course, but for present purposes I will suppose that its proponents share three premises. First, there can be no cognition without purpose, to paraphrase Charles Peirce. This is a way of saying that values and facts, or reason and desire, are not the terms of an either/or choice because each is ingredient in, and interchangeable with, the other. Thus objectivity is not attained by suppressing or ignoring values and desires, but by recognizing their function in designating the domain of the factual and the reasonable. Second, the meaning or content of any idea cannot be known apart from its consequences or embodiment in the world available to our observation if not our control. Taken together, these two premises suggest that pragmatists assume that all knowledge is an effect of changing the world in the manner of modern science, by manipulating the objects of our knowledge in light of the provisional conclusions we call hypotheses, and that any ontological distinction between thoughts and things, or subjects and objects, or mind and matter, merely obscures the dynamic relations between fluid and porous moments in time. “Matter

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<sup>6</sup>*Pragmatism, Feminism, and Democracy: Rethinking the Politics of American History* (New York, 2001).

is effete mind,” as Peirce put it, “inveterate habits becoming physical laws.”

Third, the procedures of epistemology, by which we posit the irreducible qualities of a “transcendental” or transhistorical subject as the condition of knowledge, truth, agency, and morality, become useless or irrelevant in light of historical change in the character and consequences of subjectivity. This is a way of saying that pragmatists reject the notion of a fixed, “natural” person, or “transcendental” subject, and that in doing so, they historicize the very idea of personality or subjectivity; as a result, they historicize its presumed attributes in knowledge, truth, agency, and morality.

Feminist theory in the twentieth century quite clearly reenacts the deliberate break from epistemology which pragmatism inaugurated – indeed it is convened as a “critique of the subject,” as a method for explaining how and why the gender of this “transcendental” subject is so insistently male. As such, it often functions as a radical critique of the same dualisms pragmatists tried to adjourn on their way to a post-metaphysical model of genuine selfhood. Perhaps that is why so many contemporary feminists position themselves in an intellectual lineage that begins with Peirce, the original semiotician, or with George Herbert Mead, the Hegelian pragmatist who profoundly shaped the thinking of Jürgen Habermas. But contemporary feminists have, I think, been more consciously committed than pragmatists to a “double strategy” through which previous truths about the character and consequences of subjectivity – or about the causes and effects of the subjection of women – are both annulled and preserved in their new models of genuine selfhood and their pluralist notions of womanhood. I mean that the feminist “critique of the subject” has not, generally speaking, simply refused the legacy of the Enlightenment residing in the “rights of man,” but has instead tried to incorporate it in a more inclusive notion of subjectivity which allows for identities that are functions of interdependence and association. This strategy is no more “paradoxical,” however, than the “double consciousness” through which black folk have negotiated their specifically American identities; indeed I would say that the “double strategy” of feminism will seem paradoxical to us only insofar as we assume that meaningful change or progress requires not the recuperation but the repudiation of the past.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>The preceding paragraphs are drawn from *ibid.*, particularly the Introduction, 1-14. Peirce quoted at 8.

Feminists have been more willing than pragmatists, for example, to treat modern individualism as an indispensable moment in the development of the “social self” – that is, the socially constituted or culturally constructed self – rather than as an obvious anachronism or the last word on the subject. Feminists have also been more willing than pragmatists to go beyond state-centered, electoral, and policy-oriented politics by treating civil society as the site of significant struggle, by claiming that “the personal is the political,” and consequently, by making the “overthrow of the state” (the “war of maneuver,” as Antonio Gramsci called it) an afterthought. They have been more willing, in other words, to emphasize the kind of cultural or identity politics that Gramsci called the “war of position” – the kind of politics made possible and necessary by the “dispersal of power” from the state to society which he discerned in the corporate-industrial (“Fordist”) world of large-scale production – but they have never agreed that changes in the law, in party programs, or in government policy are irrelevant to the hopes of women and the prospects of democracy. Instead, feminists have developed an attitude toward history which permits both a recuperative reading of the politics of the past and a redemptive reading of the politics of the future. They remain open to the political promise of the twentieth century because they refuse either to repudiate or to reinstate the political vernacular of the nineteenth century.

But it is this refusal to treat the past and the future as the terms of an either/or choice that finally unites pragmatism and feminism, and makes them useful as ways of thinking about the historically variable sources of subjectivity. For pragmatists and feminists, genuine selfhood is an accomplishment that is never quite complete because it is “a relation that unrolls itself in time,” as James put it, and is therefore contingent upon the internal articulation of modern society. “Individuality is not originally given,” Dewey explained, “but is created under the influences of associated life.” Or, as Judith Butler would have it, “the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency.” So this subject, this individual, must be studied as an historical artifact, as a register of social history, rather than be presupposed as an unproblematic origin of reason, truth, or knowledge, that is, as the bearer of a suprahistorical “consciousness.”<sup>8</sup>

Pragmatists and feminists such as Jessie Taft, Jane Addams, and Dewey could, then, suffer the dissolution of modern subjectivity – the

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., chs. 2-3, 6. James, Dewey and Butler quoted at 155, 152.



form of subjectivity specific to what Slavoj Žižek calls the “era of the ego,” ca. 1600-1900 – because they assumed that the “social self” they saw emerging from the wreckage of the nineteenth-century market economy and the changing circumstances of “associated life” would not simply eradicate what they knew as the “old individualism.” The newer form of subjectivity would instead include *and transform* the old by permitting “the regress of self-sufficiency and the progress of association,” as Henry Carter Adams of the University of Michigan put it in 1896. Like Adams, a close friend and political ally of Dewey, the pragmatists and feminists who came of age around the turn of the last century understood that the “progress of association” was being driven by the socialization of modern industry via corporate legal devices, and by the implication of the family in a new universe of social organizations. In sum, they understood that what had been private or “individualistic” – even one’s “inner self” – was now becoming public or social, and that this process of extroversion or “reification” was animated by the advent of the collective identities residing in the “trust movement,” that is, by the creation of corporate bodies. But they saw deviation from inherited norms of subjectivity as evidence of evolution in the acceptable forms of subjectivity, not the erasure of its content.

So, where many intellectuals and activists saw the tragic demise of the self-sufficient individual – the “natural person” who had typically appeared in political discourse as the small producer, the male proprietor of himself – these pragmatists and feminists saw something else altogether. They saw that the increased interdependence and association determined by a corporate world of large-scale, even global, production would augment the sources and meanings of subjectivity by multiplying the kinds of identifications available to individuals, and by putting the capacities of collective entities, corporate bodies, at the disposal of individuals. They saw that individualism would change and develop, not disappear, as the rural idiocy of the pioneer past gave way to the “social claims” of the corporate-industrial future. In short, they knew that principled abstention from corporate bureaucracy, or simple opposition to the corporations as such, was neither the equivalent nor the condition of progress toward democracy.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>See Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC, 1993), pt. I. Adams quoted in *Pragmatism, Feminism, and Democracy*, 10-11, 172-73.



Of course it is all very well for me to follow this example and say that we must stop treating corporations as the undifferentiated, bureaucratic “Other” from which we must somehow abstain. But how can we accept the atrocities caused by corporate capitalism, even if we acknowledge its complexity – that is, even if we acknowledge that socialism is both a condition of its emergence and a component of its continued development? To be more concrete, and to bring us back to the subject at hand, can we construct a “comic frame of acceptance,” as Kenneth Burke named it, which would allow us to grasp the Great War as something more or less than a tragedy determined by corporate capitalism and its attendant imperialism? If we can, we might say that John Dewey was right about it (the first time) after all. We might also extricate pragmatism from the genealogy in which it still appears as erudite expedience – that is, from the ubiquitous narrative in which Dewey’s support for American entry signifies the intellectual emptiness of pragmatism.<sup>10</sup>

We live forward, but we understand backward. That is why historians still have a cultural function, and why I will move from the present to the past in constructing the comic frame of acceptance Burke would expect of us. I begin in the here and now, with the rhetorical surplus and the political effect produced by familiar statements about the Great War – the statements we still take for granted, the statements of “historical fact” that still regulate our thinking about its consequences. Then I turn these statements into questions, to allow inquiry into the political ambivalence and intellectual complexity of this formative moment.

Here are those familiar statements:

1. World War I was a capitalists’ war, the “War of Steel and Gold” caused by irreconcilable programs of national and imperial aggrandizement. There was no progressive possibility or working class stake in it – thus abstention from it was both possible and necessary.
2. Support for American entry signifies *both* opposition to the program of the Socialist Party USA – thus presumably to socialism as such – *and* capitulation to the malignant reality that was imperialism and its capitalist antecedent.
3. Pragmatism (as enunciated and personified by John Dewey) is the American idiom in which that capitulation was, and is, expressed.

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<sup>10</sup>Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* (1937; rev. ed. Boston, 1961)

The key figure in establishing this correlation is Randolph Bourne, whose arguments of 1917-18 inform every subsequent critique of pragmatism, from Van Wyck Brooks, Lewis Mumford, Harold Stearns, Waldo Frank, C. Wright Mills, and Christopher Lasch to Casey Blake, Robert Westbrook, John Diggins, Jackson Lears, Wilfred McClay, Peter Osborne, and Brian Lloyd. At some point in this lineage, probably in 1926, Bourne became a kind of talisman or totem, perhaps even a “fetish object,” in the reiterations of the statement and the reproduction of the critique. He reminds us of what might have been precisely because he is irretrievable. So he is the pivot on which my questions will eventually turn.<sup>11</sup>

Here are those questions, which are merely interrogative responses to the three statements I have just summarized or paraphrased:

1. What kind of war was it? V.I. Lenin and Woodrow Wilson and Samuel Gompers fully agreed, as far as I can tell, on the origins and character of the war, but didn't they disagree on how to address its causes and consequences? Didn't they disagree on the treatment rather than the diagnosis? Didn't just about everyone know that this war was about shifting the seat of empire but also transforming the means *and* the ends of imperialism? Wasn't abstention therefore impossible unless there was no pluralism in imperialism – unless imperialism meant only colonialism, domination, and exploitation expressed and enacted in racialized categories of “civilization”?

2. Didn't support for American entry have plural rationales? Wasn't socialism in the U.S., and in history as such, more variegated than the public, political, programmatic positions Debs and the party happened to take? Certainly many left-wing intellectuals saw the transnational, cosmopolitan possibilities of this moment as domestic leverage, as a way, if you will, of *importing* the social question. W.E.B. DuBois, Thorstein Veblen, Robert Rives LaMonte, Walter Lippmann, and William English Walling, for example, saw American entry not as capitulation to imperialism or capitalism but rather as an opening wedge

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<sup>11</sup>These authors cited in *Pragmatism and Political Economy*, ch. 9, except for John Patrick Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority* (Chicago, 1994); Wilfred McClay, *The Masterless: Self and Society in Modern America* (Chapel Hill, 1994); and Brian Lloyd, *Left Out: Pragmatism, Exceptionalism, and the Poverty of American Marxism, 1890-1922* (Baltimore, 1997). Peter Osborne's work on pragmatism is forthcoming from Verso.

against both. Were they so blind? Didn't the American redefinition of imperialism in the early twentieth century make a difference in how people, then and now, could imagine their futures? That is, didn't the "open door" world posited by U.S. policy-makers, then and now, allow the possibility of a "post-imperial" future by insisting on the political integrity and sovereignty of nation-states, including less-developed countries in Asia and Latin America; by assuming that the increased transfer of technology in the form of direct capital investment would permit and enforce social, political, and cultural development in all parts of the world (including the western metropolis) which remained open to this transfer; and by defining both civilization and progress in broadly political-economic terms rather than in racialized categories?<sup>12</sup>

3. Is Bourne's critique of Dewey so telling and definitive that it should serve as the absent cause of every subsequent critique of pragmatism? My answer is no, of course not, so let me stop asking questions and proceed to an examination of that critique.

There are three moments in Bourne's argument. He passionately denounces war as such – not this war, not the particular historical circumstances of American entry and engagement, but war as such, and, in doing so, he not only aligns Dewey and pragmatism with the "forces" of war, he begins to sound like a rhapsodic rendition of Herbert Spencer: "Professor Dewey has become impatient at the merely good and merely conscientious objectors to war who do not attach their conscience and intelligence to forces moving in another direction. But in wartime there are literally no valid forces moving in another direction. War determines its own end – victory, and government crushes out automatically all forces that deflect, or threaten to deflect, energy from the path of organization to that end. . . . Willing war means willing all the evils that are organically bound up with it."<sup>13</sup>

There was and is no reply to this position unless one chooses to defend the atavism of, say, George Patton, or unless one notes that only pacifists can afford this cosmic logic, or unless one remembers that good is neither imaginable nor attainable in the absence of evil. As

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<sup>12</sup>See Martin J. Sklar, "The Open Door, Imperialism, and Post-Imperialism: Origins of U.S. Twentieth-Century Foreign Relations, Circa 1900," in *Postimperialism and World Politics*, eds., David G. Becker and Richard L. Sklar (Westport, CT, 1999): 317-36.

<sup>13</sup>Randolph Bourne, "A War Diary," *Seven Arts* (September 1917), reprinted in *The Radical Will: Randolph Bourne Selected Writings*, ed., Olaf Hansen (New York, 1977), 319-30, here 328; see also "Twilight of Idols," *Seven Arts* (October 1917) in *ibid.*, 336-47, here 344.

historians, we know that wars are events which typically register and amplify the social, cultural, economic, and political changes that caused them in the first place. As an accomplished historian of philosophy and law, Dewey knew that this war could not be conducted in an intellectual space that was exempt from the emergent imbrication of capitalism and socialism in American civilization; so the point was to ask how it could be comprehended as something more than mere “crisis,” as something like a fulcrum for political progress.

Bourne also claims that the possibility of cultural renewal is revoked by political and intellectual implication in the Great War. “The war – or American promise: one must choose,” he insisted: “One cannot be interested in both. For the effect of the war will be to impoverish American promise. It cannot advance it, however liberals may choose to identify American promise with a league of nations to enforce peace.” The reply to this move is easier because it allows an empirical approach to a very simple question: did the Great War impoverish American promise? The short answer is the fulfillment of American cultural promise in the Harlem Renaissance, which, as George Hutchinson and Ann Douglas have shown, was itself predicated on the intellectual earthquake sponsored by the original pragmatists. The long answer would identify America’s coming of age with the New Negro, the New Woman, and the new, more cohesive working class of the 1920s; with the “decolonization” of American culture by means of a new literary canon, new literary experiments, new mass sports and new mass media (especially but not only radios, phonographs, and movies); with new painterly strategies in the visual arts which mediated between photographic realism and the abstractions of cubism and dada by drawing on pragmatist insights into the fungible relation between the observer and the observed; with new musical forms founded on a “black aesthetic” that nevertheless redrew the color line; and with the rapid maturation of a “post-industrial,” consumer society in which the once transparent relation between the production of value through work and the receipt of income was attenuated if not dissolved.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Bourne, “War Diary,” 329. See otherwise, George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, MA, 1995); Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York, 1994); and Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York, 1967). There is no comprehensive work on what Cruse calls the cultural revolution of the 1920s; certainly there is nothing that deals with painterly strategies and popular musical forms as both expressions of a similar aesthetic and innovations related to the larger cultural field.

Bourne claims, finally, that “pragmatic realism” is the affiliate of “war,” and therefore must be construed as the enemy of American promise, the enemy of cultural renewal. Here he followed the lead of Brooks, who had excoriated “our real awakeners” as the “apostles of a narrow efficiency [“the ideal posited by Professor Dewey”], and the pragmatic and realistic philosophers who stand behind them.” Their philosophy was only “the rationalization of the whole spirit of American life at least since the Spanish war” – the rationalization, that is, of imperialism and war. Pragmatism was the culprit because it had “assumed the right to formulate the aims of life and the values by which those aims are tested, aims and values which, we are led by history to believe, can be effectively formulated only by individual minds not in harmony with the existing fact [in this case, war] but in revolt against it.”<sup>15</sup>

The reply to these claims against pragmatism *per se* requires an examination of the possibilities faced by American policy-makers and by those who, like Dewey, believed that the relation between ought and is, values and facts, ethical principles and historical circumstances, was a great deal more complicated than Bourne or Brooks would allow; for it is only in light of those possibilities and complications that we can assess Dewey’s support for American entry and grasp the multiple meanings of this war from the standpoint of those who observed it.

As I understand the situation in the spring of 1917, and more importantly as those who were on the scene understood it, there were three possible outcomes in the *absence* of American entry. These were not “counterfactuals,” they were impending realities. The first was German victory, which in the form of *Mitteleuropa* would reinstate the Napoleonic dream of a closed continental empire and accordingly foreclose the anti-colonial imperialism proposed in the “Open Door” notes (1899-1900) and policy of the U.S. By cordoning off the European continent and establishing barriers to international trade and capital flows, it would also magnify rather than modulate the “hot, commercial rivalry” between advanced industrial nations that Wilson, among many others, identified as the seed of war in the modern world. Peace on German terms would lead, in other words, to another Great War. The second possible outcome was victory for the British and French allies; but this result was no more congenial to an “open door”

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<sup>15</sup>See esp. Bourne, “Twilight of Idols,” in Hansen, *Radical Will*, 336-47; Brooks quoted and discussed in Livingston, *Pragmatism and Political Economy*, 226-27.

world than a German victory, and thus no more productive of peace in the long run, because in June of 1916 these allies had met in Paris and vowed to exclude neutral parties – including the U.S. – from their colonial possessions and from the markets of the European continent. In effect the allies had vowed to continue and enlarge the neo-colonial policies that, by carving Asia and Africa into exclusive “spheres of influence,” had led to world war in the first place. So peace on allied terms would also lead to another Great War. The third possible outcome was stalemate in the trenches leading toward civil war and revolution, which would inevitably elicit an armed and probably successful reaction from established military elites and their middle-class allies. The Russian version of this already unfolding scenario was not the only or even the most worrisome – Germany was also at risk in 1917, and would remain so until 1923, when the *Freikorps* finally disbanded and became the basis of a social-political movement called National Socialism.<sup>16</sup>

According to its advocates, American entry into the war would avoid these outcomes by preventing either side’s total victory and by breaking the stalemate on the ground. Doing so, they believed, would not just give the U.S. a role in shaping the postwar international order, in postponing a reversion to neo-colonial models of empire, in pointing the world toward a post-imperial future, although they knew these were conditions of diplomatic progress in any and every sense. They also believed that because American ideals were intrinsically trans-national and thus *potentially* universal values, entry into the world war would make room for *domestic* reconstruction. Their goal, in this sense, was *not* to universalize American values or to erase all differences between America and the rest of the world, but to bring that world and its values into an often parochial debate about the promise of American life. Again, they construed foreign policy as a means to domestic ends, but not, as Williams and his fellow revisionists would have it, as a way of “exporting the social question.”

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<sup>16</sup>On the American approach to war, I have relied on Carl P. Parrini, *Heir to Empire: United States Economic Diplomacy, 1916-1923* (Pittsburgh, 1969) because it is the only account I know that foregrounds the long-term dangers of allied victory; but, see also John A. Thompson, *Reformers and War: American Progressive Publicists and the First World War* (New York, 1987), ch. 5, esp. 150-68; and Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (trans. New York, 1967). On the *Freikorps* and National Socialism, see Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, vol. 1 (trans. Minneapolis, 1987), 3-249.



At any rate Dewey saw “foreign” policy as a way of *importing* this very question, as a way of blurring the difference between the external and the internal. His argument in favor of entry never acknowledged that the choice was between war (the external) and the promise of American life (the internal); as a good pragmatist in favor of adjourning all ontological distinctions, he saw them as inseparable dimensions of the same question, which was whether democracy could become both end and means of modern-industrial life, at home and in the world elsewhere. His assumption was that the United States was already implicated in that world, and vice versa.

Dewey began his consideration of this war, not war as such, with a book called *German Philosophy and Politics* (1915), which might be read as a precursor to Karl Popper’s *Open Society and Its Enemies*. Here he traced the apparent worship of the state in German culture to the mad abstractions of German philosophy in the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – Kant is the real villain of the piece, but Hegel does play a supporting role in the last chapter. The point Dewey was trying to make was intended for Americans wondering whether their country had a stake in the European conflict: “Instead of confining intelligence to the technical means of realizing ends which are predetermined by the State [as in Germany], intelligence must, with us, devote itself as well to construction of the ends to be acted upon.” The meanings of statehood and nation were at stake in this conflict even if the United States abstained from it.<sup>17</sup>

So the field of American action had broadened to the world, whether Americans understood that or not. In 1916, Dewey noted: “Facts have changed. In actuality we are part of the same world as that in which Europe exists and into which Asia is coming. Industry and commerce have interwoven our destinies. To maintain our older state of mind is to cultivate a dangerous illusion.” The promise of American life could not be realized, then, except as an international or transnational proposition. Dewey believed this in part because the U.S. was itself home to many peoples and cultures: it was international or cosmopolitan by definition, by internal composition, and therefore had a vested interest in “promoting the efficacy of human intercourse irrespective of class, racial, geographical and national limits.” He wanted, therefore, to “make the accident of our internal composition

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<sup>17</sup> John Dewey, *German Philosophy and Politics* in *The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, vol. 8, ed., Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL, 1979), 202. Hereafter cited as *MW*.



into an idea, an idea upon which we may conduct our foreign as well as our domestic policy.”<sup>18</sup>

The nation of nations that was the United States had something to teach the world. “If there is to be lasting peace,” Dewey claimed in 1916, “there must be a recognition of the cultural rights and privileges of each nationality, its right to its own language, its own literature, its own ideals, its own moral and spiritual outlook on the world, its complete religious freedom, and such political autonomy as may be consistent with the maintenance of general social unity.” Again he was looking outward *and* inward. Certainly he did *not* claim that Americans had realized these promises by recognizing the cultural rights and privileges of its many nationalities. For he knew that “Americanism” and preparedness often took retrograde forms: “No matter how loudly anyone proclaims his Americanism, if he assumes that any one racial strain, any one component culture, no matter how early settled it was in our territory, or how effective it has proved in its own land, is to furnish a pattern to which all other strains and cultures are to conform, [and to be] a traitor to an American nationalism. Our unity cannot be a homogenous thing like that of the separate states of Europe from which our population is drawn; it must be a unity created by drawing out and composing into a harmonious whole the best, the most characteristic which each contributing race and people has to offer.”<sup>19</sup>

Even so, Dewey argued that Americans had already posited if not realized this unity in diversity as their constitutional premise and purpose (constitutional in both senses, as an effect of the Fourteenth Amendment and as the principle that constituted the people as a nation):

We have solved the problem [of the rights of nationalities] by a complete separation of nationality from citizenship. Not only have we separated the church from the state, but we have separated language, cultural traditions, all that is called race, from the state – that is, from problems of political organization and power. To us, language, literature, creed, group ways, national culture, are social rather than political, human rather than national interests.

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<sup>18</sup>“Schools and Social Preparedness,” *MW*, vol. 10, 193; *German Philosophy*, *MW*, vol. 8, 203.

<sup>19</sup>“Nationalizing Education,” *MW*, vol. 10, 204; “The Principle of Nationality,” *ibid.*, 288–89.

And Dewey understood the appeal of this literally international solution: "Let this idea fly abroad; it bears healing in its wings."<sup>20</sup>

He also understood that mobilization for war held out a promise to American life and to modern-industrial societies elsewhere. He did worry about statism of both the socialist and capitalist varieties. For example, in 1918 he noted: "Many of the measures thus far undertaken may be termed in the direction of state capitalism, looking to the absorption of the means of production and distribution by the government, and to the replacement of the present corporate employing and directive forces by a bureaucracy of officials." But Dewey realized that mobilization for war had thrown "into relief the public aspect of every social enterprise," and thus had revealed "the amount of sabotage which habitually goes on in manipulating property rights to take a private profit out of social needs." In other words, "Industrial democracy is on the way," as he put it in July of 1917: "The rule of the Workmen and the Soldiers will not be confined to Russia; it will spread throughout Europe; and this means that the domination of all upper classes, even of what we have been knowing as 'respectable society,' is at an end."<sup>21</sup>

Indeed Dewey spent much of 1918 thinking through this end of domination by existing upper classes, which he understood to be the impending consequence of the world war – in his view, the eclipse of class rule was not something that would happen in spite of the upheaval of war, as Bourne's jeremiad would have it, but because of that upheaval. In this sense, once again, the Great War appeared in his analysis as an event that was, or could be, consistent with the promise of American life; for it had accelerated certain tendencies specific to modern-industrial corporate capitalism, and one of those tendencies was socialism. Here is how he put it in "What Are We Fighting For?," a piece of 1918 written for *The Independent*:

It must be borne in mind that the war did not create that interdependence of interests which has given enterprises once private and limited in scope a social significance. The war only gave a striking revelation of the state of affairs which the

<sup>20</sup>"America in the World," *MW*, vol. 11, 71.

<sup>21</sup>"What Are We Fighting For?" *MW*, vol. 11, 104; "Internal Social Reorganization After the War," *ibid.*, 82; Dewey on "respectable society" quoted in Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, 1991), 204.

application of steam and electricity to industry and transportation had already effected. It afforded a vast and impressive object lesson as to what had occurred, and made it impossible for men to proceed any longer by ignoring the revolution which had taken place. Thus the public supervision and control occasioned by this war differ from that produced by other wars not only in range, depth, and complexity, but even more in the fact that they have simply accelerated a movement which was proceeding apace. The immediate urgency has in a short time brought into existence agencies for executing the supremacy of the public and social interest over the private and possessive interest which might otherwise have taken a long time to construct.<sup>22</sup>

By the same logic, Dewey argued in 1918 that the political presence and power of the working class would increase as a consequence of this war: "If one takes a cross section through the warring countries at present, one finds a striking rise in power of the wage-earning classes. Through the necessities of war, their strategic position in modern social organization has been made clear, and the Russian Revolution has brought the fact to dramatic self-consciousness." He explored this and related issues in an address at Clark University in March of 1918 – it was later published as "Internal Social Reorganization After the War." Here Dewey outlined a program he claimed was already being accomplished by the prosecution of the war: his task, as he saw it, was to articulate this unconscious movement, to show that Americans, and by implication the rest of the world, were heading, willy-nilly, toward social democracy. "It is so common now to point out the absurdity of conducting a war for political democracy which leaves industrial and economic autocracy practically untouched," he declared at the outset, "that I think we are absolutely bound to see, after the war, either a period of very great unrest, disorder, drifting, strife – I would not say actual civil war, but all kinds of irregular strife and disorder, or a movement to install the principle of self-government within industries." From Seattle to Chicago to the West Virginia coal fields – where the United States Army Air Force, such as it was, strafed striking miners in 1923 – Dewey's prediction of postwar unrest was of course

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<sup>22</sup>*MW*, vol. 11, 103.

verified on both counts: every kind of “irregular strife and disorder” was on display in 1919 as a direct result of left-led movements to install “self-government within industries.” Those movements did not succeed, for the most part, but, as Lizabeth Cohen, Dana Frank, and others have shown, neither did they simply fail. The house of labor did not fall in the 1920s. It relocated.<sup>23</sup>

Dewey’s program had three elements: full employment (the “right to work,” as he put it), public administration “under state and municipal auspices” of a socially determined and acceptable standard of living, and finally “industrial democracy.” These proposals were solutions to the “chief weaknesses” of the “existing order” – that is, the inability of private enterprise to provide steady and useful employment to those who wanted it (“the problem is not inevitable”), the degradation of the working class as a result of its effective exclusion from higher education, and the loss of efficiency or productivity that was “due to the failure of work, under present conditions, to enlist the interest and the attention of the great masses of the wage-earners.”<sup>24</sup>

Dewey did not believe that the realization of his program was inevitable just because it was obviously immanent in actually existing capitalism: “We are not, I think entitled to unthinking optimism about the certainty of great progress or about the particular direction which social reorganization will take after the war.” He was more pointed in a review of a book on the redefinition of work: “Only as modern society has at command individuals who are trained by experience in the control of industrial activities and relationships, can we achieve industrial democracy, the autonomous management of each line of productive work by those directly engaged in it. Without such democratization of industry, socialization of industry will be doomed to arrest at the stage of state capitalism.”<sup>25</sup>

But Dewey did believe that there was no going back to a world in which the rights of property or the unconscious forces of evolution

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 99, 85. Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York, 1990); Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929* (New York, 1994). See also David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor* (New York, 1987), chs. 8-9 and Joseph McCartin, *Labor’s Great War: the Struggle for Industrial Democracy and the Origins of Modern American Labor Relations, 1912-1921* (Chapel Hill, 1997).

<sup>24</sup>MW, vol. 11, 74-78.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 81, 335.

or the market power of corporations would seem natural or normal or tolerable. The “one great thing that the war has accomplished. . . of a permanent sort,” he insisted, “is the enforcement of a psychological and educational lesson.” And what lesson was that? That workers’ self-government, the central principle of socialism, was not utopian or even impractical – it was *merely necessary* to the efficient conduct of any enterprise, large or small, public or private, and it was happening in any event. “Is it not conceivable that some future historian may find this consequence outweighing any for which the war was originally fought?” Dewey asked the question in 1918. It is probably time we tried to answer it without assuming that he was wrong about the nature of this war, without assuming that support for American entry foreclosed any affiliation with socialism, and without assuming that pragmatism, then or now, precludes any critique of capitalism.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 81, 99.