

The Algonquin Round Table 1919-1929: In The Know and Inordinately Trashy

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Abstract

Contemporaries of the Algonquin Round Table accused the members of “logrolling”—exchanging plugs of one another’s work through the numerous publications in which they took part as writers, critics, and editors. This group of friends and literary geniuses in New York City met daily for lunch between the years of 1919-1929 and had access to the foremost publications of the time through which their witticisms were disseminated—cornering the communications circuit from all sides. An analysis into the success of the group in the cultural field is supported by the theories of Robert Darnton, Pierre Bourdieu and Bridget Fowler’s investigations of Bourdieu’s theories.

Key Words

Algonquin Round Table, New York City, Wit, Humour, Communication circuit, Cultural capital, Dorothy Parker, Publishing

Introduction

In the first decade after the First World War the wittiest of humorists, journalists, critics, actors, poets, and playwrights met for lunch each day at the Algonquin Hotel on 44th street in the heart of Midtown Manhattan. The influence of these men and women was inseparable from all aspects of the cultural scene in New York City and their opinions on literature and drama (including, their own) were considered to be the gospel in society. They held enormous sway at a time when the written word reigned supreme, during which, there were 19 daily newspapers in Manhattan alone and 85 theatres in Times Square (Slesin, 1987). This literary guild of sorts was founded on a practical joke and sustained by sharp humour through which the members represented the popular culture in a class of their own, or rather, as French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu describes bohemia, “a society within a society” (1992, 86).

Members and Friends

The “Vicious Circle” as they were often referred to, was comprised of ten or so charter members that included Franklin Pierce Adams, best known for his column in *The New-York Tribune*, “The Conning Tower.” Although contributions were not paid, an appearance was enough to launch a career and gave many members such as Robert Benchley, George S. Kaufman and Dorothy Parker their first big breaks. Robert Benchley was a deadpan humorist and made a living as a writer and columnist for *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker*, then finding great success in Hollywood as a film actor. George S. Kaufman, was the drama editor for *The New York Times* from 1917 to 1930 and an award-winning playwright in later years. Dorothy Parker is known as the most quoted writer of her day. She was a poet, screenwriter, short story writer and critic. (Gaines, 2007)

The only married couple in the group was made up of Heywood Broun, sportswriter and columnist and Ruth Hale, a dedicated women's rights advocate and freelance writer. Marc Connelly was a playwright, director, and producer of musicals. Harold Ross, is known most notably as the founder and editor of the *The New Yorker* and the Circle members were some of its first contributors. Robert E. Sherwood, was an editor, screenwriter, and playwright. Along with *Vanity Fair* and *Life* magazine he worked for Alfred Hitchcock writing for the silver screen and also as a speech writer for President Franklin D. Roosevelt. John Peter Toohey, was a publicist for Broadway.

Alexander Woollcott, thought by many to have been the ringleader of the group, was a critic and journalist whose book reviews and literary observations were heard on his popular radio show, *The Town Crier*. The group's first meeting at the Algonquin Hotel was organised to be what is now considered, a “roast”, and its aim was to knock Woollcott (overly fond of

telling his war stories) off his Napoleonic high horse. Woolcott was so humoured and flattered, however, that they organised to meet again the next day and so the ten year long lunch began (Teichmann, 1976). Membership¹ was not fixed but fluid, and a gaggle of additional guests came and went as it suited them.

Situated in New York's past between the national trauma of World War I and the Great Depression is the get rich quick era of the 1920's, which was fertile ground for creativity. This time of affluence could be called communist in its open access to the cultural industry. The sheer volume of production during this time meant that art was available for anyone and everyone and this allowed for the expansion and maturity of the popular, or as Bourdieu calls it, "middlebrow" taste. Drama specialist, Gerard Weales, in a review on the book *Wit's End: Days and Nights of the Algonquin Round Table* by James R. Gaines, remarks upon how difficult it is to truly appreciate the humour and fame of the group out of context.

All those once-funny, long-dead remarks lie on the page like a judgement, suggesting that the Algonquin Round Table sparkled a little less than King Arthur's did. More than that, jokes which formed the casual interchange of friendship look simply mean-spirited in print... (Weales 1980, 12)

The circle of playwrights, poets, and especially- critics from the Algonquin Table had much to do with what became popular. Their opinions held great sway because of their combined symbolic and cultural capital.

As it concerns the members of the Vicious Circle and their work, Bourdieu's economy of symbolic goods must be altered to suit the distinct position they occupied between "high" and "low" culture. Their social classification is imprecise and limiting by this standard as they were both artists and patrons of the cultural industry with an indispensable wealth of wit but in some cases a salary that allowed them to subsist only on eggs and gin. The critical investigation of cultural theorist Bridget Fowler expands upon the position between the Bourdieu's two margins much more suited to the Circle: "the middlebrow". "He notes that middlebrow art, like legitimate art, is the product of professionals, but that it derives from 'competition for conquest of the market' and that it is linked with the "self-censorship" of the writer so as to appeal to the average reader" (Fowler 1997, 148). Bourdieu may acknowledge that an appeal for middlebrow art does exist but does not concede to it as

1 Other Round Table associates included: Tallulah Bankhead, actress, Margalo Gillmore, actress, Estelle Winwood, actress, Peggy Wood, actress, Jane Grant, journalist and feminist (married to Harold Ross,) Beatrice Kaufman, editor and playwright (married to George S. Kaufman,) Neysa McMein, magazine illustrator, Harpo Marx, comedian and film star, Margaret Leech, historian and writer, Alice Duer Miller, writer, Edna Ferber, author and playwright, Donald Ogden Stewart, playwright and screenwriter, Frank Sullivan, journalist and humorist, Deems Taylor, composer, and Joseph Cookman, journalist and drama critic.

being more than a disparaging means for an author to gain more economic capital. Fowler expands on this point further in her supposition that Bourdieu would never have considered middlebrow art worthy of canonization. (Fowler 1997, 148)

Fowler makes a mention of how Bourdieu opposes the Marxist theory of the social space and instead defines it as “a (multi-dimensional) space constructed on the basis of principles of differentiation or distribution constituted by the set of properties active in the social universe under consideration, that is, able to confer force or power on their possessor in that universe” (Bourdieu 1991, 229). One can easily decipher how this can apply to the multi-dimensional space of the Algonquin Table because of how highly publicised they were in the literary and dramatic universe of New York City. What the round-tablers distributed among the public in their various print forms be they poems, columns or essays, were the witticisms of their previous lunch. They quoted each other freely and daily, and humour was at the centre of it all.

If one were to slightly modify the communications circuit model of the cultural historian Robert Darnton and introduce it to the incestuous network of print and literary production of the Round Table it could not be more obvious the kind of power and stimulus they enjoyed in New York City (Darnton, 2002). The significance of each of their coordinates in New York’s foremost publications such as *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *The New-York Tribune*, *Life* (a humour magazine), *The New York Times*, and *The New Yorker*, was instrumental in creating their sensational identity as a whole and their success as individuals. Their intimately public group was quite literally the talk of the town but that is unquestionably due to the fact they were situated in the communications circuit as not only authors or writers, but as also as publicists and publishers of unparalleled connections. (Benchley and Fitzpatrick, 2009)

For Darnton’s communications circuit to adequately represent this conglomeration of cultural spokesmen (and women), it must be reconfigured by discounting the part of the circuit which accounts for booksellers, printers, suppliers, and shippers. To discuss how the work of the Round Table and the drama and literature they critiqued became popular or middlebrow we must take into account their professional associations with each and the market reach this generated. As authors and publishers (or producers, in the case of plays) they were represented in every communication medium: live performance, newspapers, magazines, television, film and radio. This meant that their market reach went beyond the rose room in the Algonquin hotel to readers/viewers across the country because their individual humour and collective presence permeated each available media outlet. Outside of their obvious talent, they became so popular because of their sheer abundance and involvement in the communications circuit.

Though there were members of the Vicious Circle who were politically active, they held no government positions that would have redirected the communications circuit further in their favor. Nevertheless, they went to great lengths to make their political opinions known and exercised their freedom of speech enthusiastically and sometimes, at the risk of being fired or even imprisoned. Many intellectuals of the day such as Albert Einstein and H.G. Wells, along with some Circle members, disagreed with capital punishment in the case of anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti, found guilty of robbery and murder. Parker, Benchley and Ruth Hale protested their execution in Boston on 10 August 1927. Parker was arrested and charged for “sauntering” while at a demonstration for a re-trial. Heywood Broun felt strongly on the matter which had divided the country and having a great sense of justice, he used his column to condemn what he thought was the unreasonable execution of the self-named anarchists. He was fired. In 1930, Broun, a socialist, ran and lost for a seat in congress. (Slesin, 1987)

If we dig deeper into Fowler’s interpretation of Bourdieu and how he may be applied to the cultural phenomenon of the Algonquin Round Table, it is clear his theory of masculine domination does not particularly suit.

It is especially through its powerful depiction of the *society within the mind* that it achieves its impact. He makes us see the aura radiating from male power itself so that it creates a social unconscious, capable even of denying the fact of repression... in Western societies, masculine domination is accomplished by the workings of educational institutions and particularly through the cultural capital acquired by men. (Fowler 1997, 135)

The women of the circle were massively successful, outspoken, and independent and transcended the structural exclusion of the cultural field. They may have been considered ‘bad’ by Bourdieu’s standards of sexual purity and subordination as they were known for having multiple sexual partners, divorces, abortions, and attempted suicide, but despite these imperfections they were by no means in need of a male ‘guardian’ to set them straight. (Fowler 1997, 136) Though some were well-known for their faults-Dorothy Parker made her living writing about them-they were germane to those of artists but not of the female sex. Ruth Hale, wife of Heywood Broun, is one of many examples of Round Table women to not fit Bourdieu’s sexist profile. She was a stalwart leader of the feminist movement and she is believed to have been the first American woman to have a house deed in her name. She also demanded the United States government to issue her a passport with her name printed as ‘Ruth Hale’ instead of ‘Mrs. Heywood Broun’ but she was denied.

Although Bourdieu and Darnton’s theories may not fit the cultural sensation of the Vicious Circle perfectly-and what theory could? -it is apparent that the distinctive characteristic of these people and their popularity was due to how funny they were.

The kinds of capital, like trumps in a game of cards, are powers which define the chances of profit in a given field... For example, the volume of cultural capital determines the aggregate chances of profit in all games in which cultural capital is effective, thereby helping to determine position in the social space (in so far as this position is determined by success in the cultural field). (Bourdieu 1991, 230)

The round-tablers were all-in one way or another-in the business of social life and publicity and their daily playful lunches, a stage for depreciated malice and sharp wit could not just exist as a friendly game once their celebrity had amplified.

The lunches were still fun but became a kind of work instead, jokes evolved into a self-conscious *mêlée* for funny material and the rose room of the Algonquin befitted an extension of the office. It is true, however, that no matter how much they tried to outdo each other in this game of wit, they were deeply fond of one another and were known to wander into the studio of Neysa McMein, magazine illustrator extraordinaire and honorary round table member, in the hopes of meeting up again before an inevitable reunion at dinner time.

As the twenties were coming to a close the group had attracted the attention of various wealthy individuals who would host them for as long as a night, a week, or a summer just to gain proximity to the comedic and intelligent banter the group shared. It was a common occurrence to hear "Benchley, say something funny!" when they enjoyed what the mega-wealthy had to offer. Although they enjoyed more wealth and prestige than ever before in these later years, to some, their popularity became a disease choking their creativity. Telling jokes or writing meaningful work became ever more difficult, and their ties to each other began to fray when some decided to focus on their new-found lifestyle and others on what brought them together in the first place: their art.

Like "being" according to Aristotle, *the social world can be uttered and constructed in different ways*: (italics mine) it can be practically perceived, uttered, constructed, in accordance with different principles of vision and division, it being understood that groupings founded in the struggle of the space constructed on the basis of the distribution of capital have a greater chance of being stable and durable... (Bourdieu 1991, 232)

As the Great Depression loomed ever closer and the Circle drifted naturally apart into other career ventures it may not have become immediately apparent how unique a group they had been. Outside of documentary films and some historical biographies it is nigh on impossible to get a glimpse into this close-knit assembly of brilliant jokers and artists because although they may have published each other's anecdotes the best ones are always insiders with friends. Like Bourdieu says of the social world, it is highly changeable and dependent on the views of the group and how they have communicated them. The personalities and artistic acumen of the ten men and women of the Algonquin Round Table

were so very integrated into New York City and the greater United States at this time that in a way, one must have felt they knew them. It is a cruel side-effect of time that their work and wit have lost their popularity and contextual significance and what survives them are a few quotes that originated in a lunch conversation among friends.

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