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Christopher McKnight Nichols. "Rethinking Randolph Bourne's Trans-National America: How World War I Created an Isolationist Antiwar Pluralism." *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 8.2 (April 2009), 217-57.

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Review by **Ross A. Kennedy**, Illinois State University

Randolph Bourne was one of the most interesting and significant antiwar intellectuals to emerge in the United States during World War I. In this article written for the *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, Christopher McKnight Nichols provides a fresh interpretation of Bourne's wartime writings, arguing that Bourne's concept of a "trans-national America" was an expression of "radical and idealistic isolationist thought, guided by his developing vision for peaceful cultural international engagement and an expansive domestic pluralism." (219, 222) For Nichols, Bourne was a unique thinker whose idea of transnationalism "illuminates an important moment in the intellectual history of isolationism." (222)

Bourne laid out much of his thinking about transnationalism in an article he wrote for the July 1916 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*. Composed at a time when he felt increasingly alienated from the pro-war drift of opinion then gaining momentum among liberal intellectuals, "Trans-National America" applauded what Bourne saw as the cosmopolitan character of American society. He rejected the idea of a "melting pot" producing some kind of new nationality out of America's various ethnic groups, arguing, according to Nichols, that such a nationalism was "conceptually and practically bankrupt," as well as jingoistic and anti-democratic. (231) Instead, Americans should recognize the reality of their persistent ethno-cultural pluralism and consciously work to encourage "an eclectic cosmopolitanism" among the nation's diverse groups; what was needed was not any sort of "coerced assimilation" or "ethnic particularism" but an effort, led by young intellectuals, to promote an "intense cross-fertilization of cultures." (236, 242)

Bourne's argument for transnationalism was directly connected with his belief in American exceptionalism, which in turn underlay his view of America's proper role in the world. As a nation composed of immigrants, the United States was uniquely positioned to

forge a transnational culture that could serve as a counter-example to the rival nationalisms that Bourne believed had led to the war. America's traditional aloofness from Europe's militarized international political system, indeed, had allowed a transnational sensibility to begin to emerge within American culture. Involvement in the war or in any type of binding political-military commitments abroad (like those proposed by the League to Enforce Peace) would cut short this development, spur the very type of belligerent cultural uniformity Bourne deplored, and rob the world of the transnational model it needed to have in order to move toward a more peaceful international system. The task of the United States, then, was to stay out of the war, or any war outside the hemisphere for that matter, maintain a strict neutrality, develop its own transnationalism, and promote cultural internationalism through participation in a "League of Neutrals" of the non-belligerent states. (243) "Only America," Bourne argued, "by reason of the unique liberty of opportunity and traditional isolation for which she seems to stand, can lead in this cosmopolitan enterprise." (236-237)

Nichols' overview of Bourne's "blend of exceptionalism, transnationalism, and the isolationist tradition" sheds light on much of Bourne's approach to international affairs. His article especially gives readers a richer understanding of why Bourne opposed American entry into World War I and rejected American involvement in any international organization aiming to uphold peace through military force. At the same time, though, Nichols presents relatively little analysis of Bourne's other foreign policy positions. To be sure, he does briefly note that Bourne "came to agree generally" with other "antiwar internationalists" who called for an end to the war on the basis of the Stockholm Plan: "no forcible annexations; no punitive indemnities; and self-determination for all nationalities." (247) But Nichols plays down the importance of this stance, suggesting that what really mattered to Bourne in 1917 and 1918 was to do what he could to combat the bellicose nationalism he saw around him; "his goal," Nichols states, "was thorough going cosmopolitan isolationism: to block the United States from future wars, not just to find immediate peace." (247)

One wonders, though, how Bourne's transnationalism related to his preferred war aims. How did Bourne reconcile his call for transnationalism with his support for self-determination for all nationalities? Did he endorse the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a multi-ethnic state that arguably seemed to have elements of the transnational culture Bourne wanted to promote? How did Bourne perceive the consequences of the Stockholm Plan for Europe's balance of power and, more specifically, for Germany's ability to dominate Central and Eastern Europe? Did Bourne see German gains in the war as compatible with his goal of generating "an expansive transnational culture" in international affairs? (242) Or did he simply not pay any attention to such issues? These questions all seem relevant to an examination of Bourne's transnational thought, but Nichols does not address them.

Still, this is a thoughtful and well-written article. As Nichols observes, Bourne's ideas are certainly relevant today, particularly to those searching for the "internationalist and

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noninterventionist options available to the United States in a troubled, violent world.” (256) Nichols’ article is an excellent introduction to the complexity of Bourne’s wartime views, and anyone interested in Bourne, American isolationism, or progressive internationalism should read it.

Ross A. Kennedy received his Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley. He has taught at the Johns Hopkins University-Nanjing University Center for Chinese and American Studies and is an associate professor of history at Illinois State University. He is the author of *The Will to Believe: Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and America’s Strategy for Peace and Security* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2009). Professor Kennedy is currently working on a book analyzing U.S. national security strategy from 1921 to 1941.

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