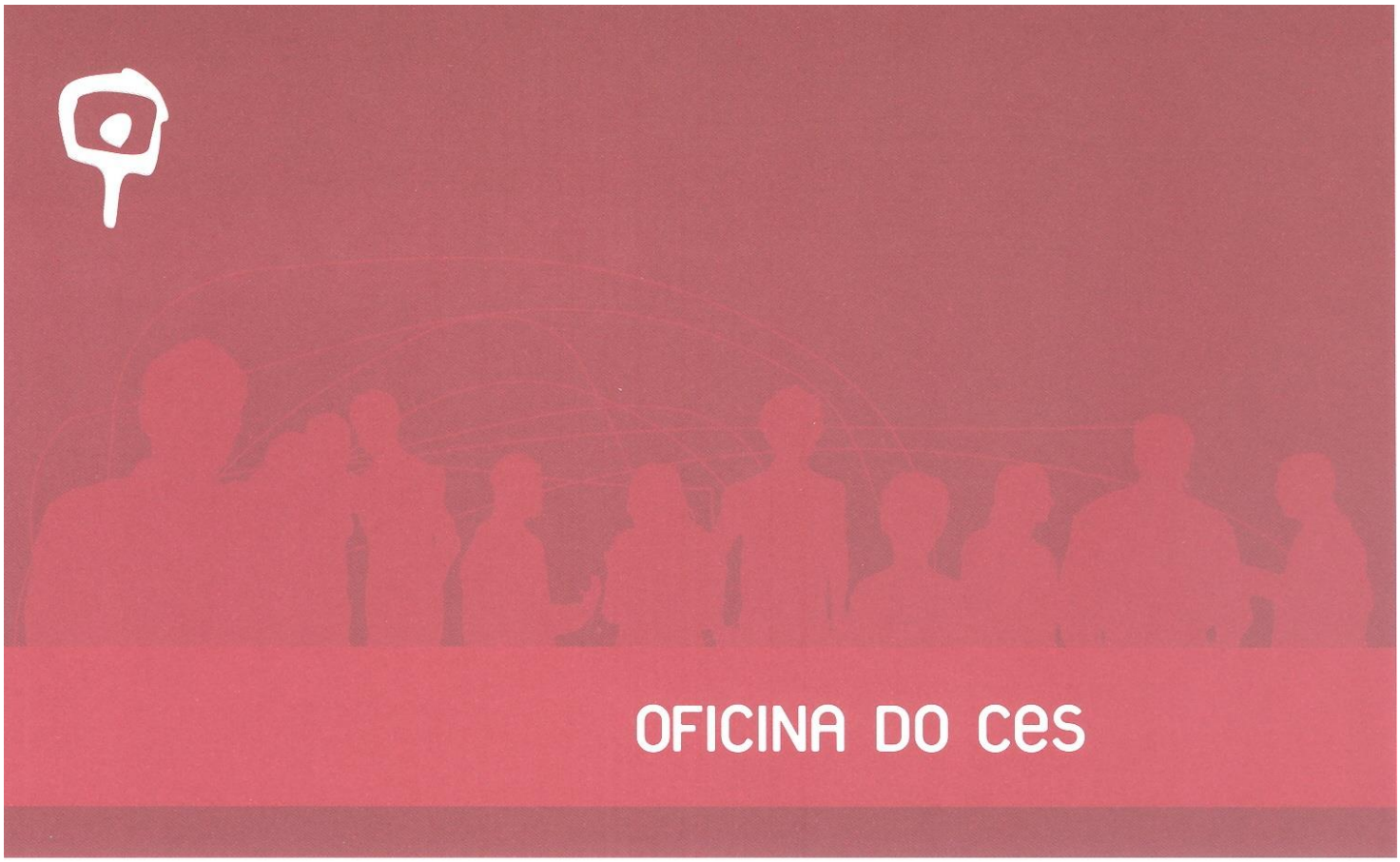

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Abstract: 1916 was the year Randolph Bourne published his inspirational essay "Trans-national America". Amidst the fanaticism of xenophobic discourses, intellectual and political persecution, and the call to war, Bourne tenaciously stood up to a liberating and reinvigorating ideal of cosmopolitan citizenship that would redefine the terms of identity, belonging, and the nation itself. This paper will attempt a critique of Bourne's thesis in light of later arguments for cosmopolitanism (Bhabha, 1996; Appiah, 1996), as a way to shed more light on both the potentials and the limitations of Bourne's theory. Particular attention will be paid to important to his search for an organic culture linking high and low cultural forms that valued ethnic difference against 'melting-pot' homogeneity vis-à-vis the narrative of American exceptionalism that still undergirds his theory, in order to discuss contradictions usually underplayed in the criticism of Bourne's work.
Keywords: Randolph Bourne; transnationalism; cosmopolitanism; American exceptionalism; World War I.

Introduction

2016 marks the centennial of the publication of Randolph Bourne's essay "Trans-national America," in general a much celebrated piece of writing for its anticipation of a world citizenship in a time of intolerance – if not declared persecution *tout court* – of all forms of difference and dissent. My argument in this paper takes a different direction, though; despite the evidence of Bourne's effort towards the definition of a cosmopolitan non-discriminatory life-enhancing citizenship, I intend to bring to the fore and discuss a strain of American exceptionalism that seems to be overlooked in the established criticism of Bourne's work (e.g. Blake, 1990; Abrahams, 1988) and which, to my mind, challenges a simple celebration of Bourne's project as cosmopolitan. I assume it to be more productive to perhaps modify the category in order to evince other complex aspects that have so far remained in the shadow.

Randolph Bourne was a young intellectual whose radical cultural critique[1] flourished in little magazines in the first decades of the 20th century, from the *Dial* to the *Masses* and the *Atlantic Monthly,* in which "Trans-national America" was published; and also, during

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[1] Broadly put, this was a blend of his individual creativity with his ideals of social justice. To critic Edward Abrahams's mind, it was the confrontation with the war that established Bourne's radicalism, for he was basically a progressive until 1917, following John Dewey's ideals, but the war introduced an insurmountable rift (Abrahams, 1988: 35). Besides, the publication of his book *Youth and Life*, in 1913, had positioned Bourne on the Left fairly early on.

the war years, *The New Republic* and *The Seven Arts*, where he was a particularly troublesome voice against the war. He died two weeks after the armistice, at the age of thirty-two.

Bourne's life was marked by several unfortunate circumstances that conditioned his experience of social life and eventually had an impact on his writing and criticism as well. He was a very gifted young man but frequent health and financial problems interfered in his life and career; for instance, by delaying his graduation at Columbia College, where he studied with the likes of philosopher John Dewey (his mentor) and historian Charles Beard, and became familiar with authors who would leave a strong mark on his critique, such as Josiah Royce and William James. Although Bourne saw himself more as an observer, he was a regular in the intellectual circles of New York and his writings made quite an impression on his contemporaries. One of them, John dos Passos, sketched out an image of Bourne that might serve him well for an introduction, hinting both at Bourne's physical disability and his scorching tone about the times, but also stressing how his memory defeats time:

> If any man has a ghost
> Bourne has a ghost,
> a tiny twisted unscared 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*'
>
> (Passos, 1932: 81)

Yet more unscared than Bourne's ghost, as John dos Passos's lines suggest, was the truth behind his giggle: "*War is the health of the State*" that would resonate throughout the twentieth century, and beyond. Bourne left an unpublished manuscript titled *The State* (1998 [1919]), in which the aphorism was coined, and counts amongst his most interesting works, along with "Trans-national America."

As a member of the so-called generation of the Young Americans, along with Waldo Frank, van Wyck Brooks and Lewis Mumford, Bourne was particularly concerned with the relation between the individual and the community within the frame of the modern industrial society, which, in its stress on technique and the division of labor, threatened to separate practice from the creative imagination. This intellectual generation, also known as the

Lyrical Left,[2] refused political affiliation because it trusted the power of cultural renovation instead, following the teachings of William Morris, John Ruskin, and the transcendentalists. The Young Americans championed a form of cultural nationalism that attempted a synthesis of both high and low brow cultural forms (Abrahams, 1988: 116-117) aiming at establishing a fruitful connection between experience and individual creativity (Blake, 1990: 5).

But Bourne's ideas must also be considered against the backdrop of the First World War, a reality that was particularly harsh on individual freedom and creativity. Widespread migration in the U.S. (and other regions), fear and the persecution of both of immigrants and of citizens who would not support the war, brought into evidence the nation-state's appetite for power – aggressive power –, both on an international and a domestic level. This explains why Bourne, as other intellectuals, started questioning both the role and the morality of national sovereignty; it explains additionally why trans-national institutions emerged as desirable alternatives, also for the management of migrant populations (Fischer, 2007: 152).

What is novel in Bourne's ideas at this point in time is his location of the source of the creativity commanding cultural renovation in the United States on ethnic difference. He addressed immigrant integration in a radical perspective, turning the assimilationist model upside down in order to value the contribution of the immigrant's difference. Cultures foreign to the national unit should be seen as enriching rather than disruptive of national unity – and it is this vindication of hyphenation that appears as one of the most liberating aspects of Bourne's cosmopolitanism: it combines loyalty to the nation with detachment from national identity and freedom to establish other affiliations. This was indeed for Bourne the promise cosmopolitanism held: detachment from a restrictive and partial national identity based on assimilation, the model in place at the United States at the time.

Bourne commented on the obvious fact that the war had led immigrants to retrieve their original memories and traditions, ultimately with a disuniting effect (Bourne, 1977: 248). Had Americanization failed? Certainly, the melting-pot had. If the process was to be examined from the perspective of the immigrant and bearing in mind the immigrant's own contribution to the community, Americanization would, as it ought to, be taken as an active instead of a passive process. Assimilation techniques emptied out the immigrants' spiritual substance, something impossible to be replaced; whatever took its place was doomed to be artificial, sterile, unable to foster a true integration. It could therefore only breed a shallow nationalism that was no real alternative to what he called the "old nationalism" (Bourne,

[2] The term was coined by John P. Diggins, in *The American Left in the Twentieth Century* (1973).

1977: 255), a colonial import defined as a compound of competition, exclusion, inbreeding, pride, and self-interest amounting to "scarcely veiled belligerency" (*ibidem*: 257), which Bourne also saw as the main cause of the present war. Bourne's hope was however that the U.S. could develop a more positive form of national feeling, one able to avoid the obvious, if fictitious, temptation of national homogeneity.

"Trans-national America", 1916, and the Great War

The essay "Trans-national America" engaged precisely in defining this new unifying but non-coercive feeling that could bring the nation together without the dangers of ethnic hierarchies. "Trans-national America" projected a society that would not call into question the belongingness or the loyalty of its immigrants and citizens alike on grounds of their difference, but whose dynamics became stronger because of their difference.

Bourne called for a U.S. plurinational, pluricultural and pluriethnic society, "a cosmopolitan federation of national colonies […] the world-federation in miniature" (Bourne, 1977: 258). This model would offer old warring Europe alternative non-nationalist forms of patriotism that would also be non-discriminatory and lead towards the liberation of individual creativity: "to weave a wholly novel international nation out of our chaotic America will liberate and harmonize the creative power of all these peoples" (*ibidem*: 263).

Bourne called this form of feeling the nation "an intellectual internationalism" (*ibidem*: 259) and linked the concept to education and intercultural dialogues already under way in the U.S. universities, which were attended by the children and the grandchildren of immigrants who had originated in the most diverse parts of Europe: "In his colleges, [the American] is already getting, with the study of modern history and cultures […] the privilege of a common outlook such as the people of no other nation of today in Europe can possibly secure" (*ibidem*: 258). Unlike nationalism, this emerging form of cosmopolitanism was unifying at core but relied on solidarity and cooperation, on contact with, respect, and understanding of other cultures**,** rather than competition (*ibidem*: 259). It created, overall, a more receptive attitude towards difference. Precisely because his project was chiefly cultural, made of ideas and attitudes, he defined it as an "intellectual cosmopolitanism". Divested of emotional feeling, this brand of cosmopolitanism was meant to be based on individual creativity because it was free of provincialism, prejudices and tradition, and because it did away with the demands of unconditional and irrational loyalty to one place, the nation.

But Bourne worked deeper on the project, envisioning the corresponding legal mechanisms that could endorse a pacific cohabitation, since a transnational formation required adequate forms of nationality and citizenship: it should be "not a nationality but a transnationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors" (Bourne, 1977: 262), suggesting a dynamic dialogue between the host country and the immigrants' places of origin. Bourne also brought to the fore already existing citizenship mechanisms, which were however very little in use, if not forbidden in a time of war, such as double citizenship, which he discussed as a step towards the cosmopolitan mode of belonging: "Dual citizenship we may have to recognize as the rudimentary form of that international citizenship to which […] we aspire" (*ibidem*: 260). The ultimate commitment was therefore to provide individuals with a pass into a borderless world "the new spiritual citizenship, as so many individuals have already been given, of a world" (*ibidem*: 263).

Bourne's project and current critiques of cosmopolitanism

In order to shed more light on Bourne's project, I thought it might be useful to see his theory vis-à-vis that of two contemporary critics, who offer opposite critiques of cosmopolitanism: namely, Kwame Anthony Appiah and Homi Bhbaha. Although this debate is much wider, Appiah and Bhabha have laid out important lines of thought when defining civic cosmopolitanism, on the one hand and vernacular cosmopolitanism, on the other. Appiah, for one, puts forth a liberal perspective whose focus is the free and enlightened individual for whom the cosmopolitan experience is a process of self-development. This ideal cosmopolitan moves in the world at will and has free choice to hybridize and enlarge his/her identity. Sustaining this unrestrained form of mobility there is web of institutions, but it exists solely to facilitate mobility. According to Appiah, the ideal of common cultures is not so important because what the individuals truly share is the access to these institutions to which they commit themselves freely; cosmopolitanism, like patriotism, is a sentiment. In other words, for Appiah and his model cosmopolitan, the only form of culture that counts is political in a basically pragmatic (not conflictual neither emancipatory) way (Appiah, 1996: 186).

Homi Bhabha (1996), in turn, is suspicious of what he sees as an elitist form of cosmopolitanism. Bhabha's critique sheds light instead on the most common brand of migration in our days, as in all times: poor immigrants in the diaspora, refugees, illegal immigrants, exiles, and foreign workers who share the aspect of mobility with Appiah's

'cosmopolitan patriots' – yet, are they cosmopolitan in the same way? To begin with, as Bhabha stresses, choice is an unknown privilege for illegal immigrants, and the reinvention of identity is not a voluntary and self-conscious experience; for them, identification and disidentification are everyday strategies of survival.

Bhabha stresses that migration makes the participation of these migrants in power structures (what Appiah would term the web of institutions) all the more difficult because of movement, institutional hostility, straightforward discrimination and the denial of rights; for them, the shade of illegality looms at every step because mobility, too, holds different meanings, in a chain of necessity: displacement, dislocation, removal, economic immigration… What Bhabha terms the vernacular cosmopolitans' experience is therefore one of forced detachments and prohibited affiliations, in which culture is often a proxy for racial discrimination.

Now, to come back to Bourne's theory, it effectively attends to the two different constituencies mentioned above as cosmopolitans, although not in the same terms. On the one hand, Bourne refers to the second and third generations of immigrants in the U.S. who attended the university and benefitted from that trans-national atmosphere of dialogue it provided. On the other hand, Bourne draws attention to the southern European unskilled workers, who are only temporarily in the U.S., but will return with challenging ideas of openness, diversity, and dialogue that will inform the cultures back in their regions of origin with the (American) trans-national spirit.

Bourne seems indeed to evade the pitfalls of universalism when he defends a hyphenated cosmopolitanism based on ethnic diversity, the immigrant's difference, as I mentioned. But perhaps this is also his weakness: for Bourne's perspective on U.S. immigration is clearly geographically biased: focusing on the east coast alone, and so defined by the so-called 'New Immigration,'[3] that is, still white Europeans, even if poor and non-protestant. This tinges Bourne's view with ethnocentrism: 'trans-national America' remains oblivious regarding non-European strains of culture, for instance, the Chinese or the Mexican, which were already established communities in the West, at the time of Bourne's writing, let alone the African- or the Native-Americans, whose cultural and political integration was so painful (and never fully effective). One must conclude, thus, that the receptiveness of Bourne's cosmopolitanism regarding otherness is well-meaning but limited.

[3] The term defines the high numbers of immigrants who arrived in the U.S. from Eastern (many Jews) and Southern Europe, after 1890 and into the first decade of the 20th century.

Mitchell Cohen has called Randolph Bourne's project a 'rooted cosmopolitanism', meaning that it defines attachment to several cultures while keeping a common ground (Cohen, 1992: 480), a definition close to Appiah's. As in other critiques of cosmopolitanism, it implies that all loyalties hold equal value. Yet, I can not but read, in Bourne's discourse, the imprint of a specific form of particularism that inserts a hierarchical principle among the plurality of loyalties: American exceptionalism. In effect, Bourne's tone in "Trans-national America" verges the messianic when he announces that America's already accomplished "federation of nations" is unique: "[n]o Americanization will fulfill this vision which does not recognize the uniqueness of this trans-nationalism of ours" (Bourne, 1977: 263), for, as he also admits, American values are unique: "Only America, by reason of the unique liberty of opportunity and traditional isolation for which she seems to stand, can lead in this cosmopolitan enterprise" (*ibidem*: 262), and, still following Bourne in the same essay, "[o]nly the American – and in this category I include the migratory alien who has lived with us and caught the pioneer spirit and a sense of new social vistas – has the chance to become that citizen of the world" (*ibidem*).

In this line of thought, the cosmopolitan is a new pioneer, one who takes the spirit of trans-nationality around the world, including to the remote areas from which the 'migratory aliens', the unskilled laborers from southern Europe, originated, and who become, upon returning, and still in Bourne's words, "missionar[ies]" of the American trans-national ideal "to an inferior civilization" (*ibidem*). America was therefore meant not just to provide the world with the gift of this ideal, but to *lead* the world into the new model.

I assume that it would be ultimately naïve to conceive of Bourne's discourse as completely devoid of any ideological traces of American exceptionalism, since the cultural generation of which he was a part, the Young Americans, defended cultural nationalism, even if also showing awareness of its flaws. Bourne's project does share some of the elitist bent of Appiah's liberal view, so maybe it is a form of rooted cosmopolitanism. But my title, exceptionalist cosmopolitanism' is, of course, not only contradictory but ironical, for one must not neglect Bourne's emphasis on diversity, difference, and mobility, so, 'rootedness' might not be the best solution either. In any case, and given the near future – which Bourne could not witness anymore but did somehow forebode in another of his referential essays, *The State* (1998 [1919]) –, stateless citizens were left prey to persecution and genocide by more or less authoritarian political regimes. So, it might be more cautious or realistic to imagine the cosmopolitan individual with one foot on safe ground rather than abstractly floating in the world, unaware of local particularities and interests.

Yet, the contradiction remains because Bourne's setting of the United States as the trans-national example *par excellence* and the source of a liberating and creative form of cosmopolitanism, suggests the superiority of this nation over any other in the world. This inevitably roots his discourse in an ideology that is locally determined and therefore threatens to undermine the reflective distance that stands as one of the most promising hallmarks of cosmopolitanism. Furthermore, and even if unwittingly, it is also this remark of his that brings to mind that the larger economic and political conditions that predetermine international relations *do* interfere in the mobility of people, their actual choice, and their freedom to move; not only are many in our world, as in Bourne's, unfree to move, as they are also, and previous to that, treated as profoundly unequal.

One hundred years later, Bourne's courageous vindication of the trans-national still calls for our applause and admiration; but time has shown that critiques like Homi Bhabha's are useful in levelling our optimism. In its own time, Bourne's critique was emancipatory in the sense that it inverted the assimilationist paradigm, both in valuing difference and in apparently rejecting cultural hierarchy. Yet, as I expect to have shown, his vision of an intellectual cosmopolitanism in the metaphor 'trans-national America,' despite promising, was not deprived of prejudice. Indeed, it focused on the east coast reality alone, hence rendering invisible the experience of other immigrant groups whose integration remained problematic, let alone their free movement. Finally, Bourne's project was deeply biased by American exceptionalism: he entrusted the leadership of this design of a cosmopolitan citizenry to the U.S., introducing a particularism that was not neutral but rather revived the myth of the exemplary city upon the hill, playing cosmopolitan for the world to watch and follow along.

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