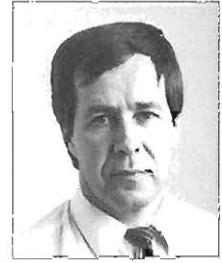


Keijo Virtanen

The Dialogue between Finland and the United States — and the Finnish-Americans



As a historian, I shall outline the Finnish-American relations from the 19th century from two perspectives: 1) by introducing very briefly the main trends in the cultural interaction and how it has changed in time; 2) by looking at people, i.e. the Finnish immigrants and their descendants, who physically founded their colonies in the New World, but also helped build the Finnish-American connection.

The Cultural Contacts to 1940

During the first one hundred years of independence the United States laid the basis of its own culture and society, and for this reason the Americans' interest in other cultures was limited. If they had any interest in other people, stereotypical conceptions prevailed. Sweden and Switzerland meant the same, or Geneva and Genoa; the Swiss were watchmakers and yodlers, the French passionate lovers, the Scots tight for money, and the Scandinavians tall, blond and speechless farmers and lumbermen.

The beginning of emigration from Finland to America in the 1870s was of crucial importance for the development of mutual relations. Emigration, and consequently also America, became ques-

tions which absolutely forced a response, even among the upper social groups. The attitude towards emigration was critical. The migrants were seen as traitors of the home land.

Nevertheless, opinion in Finland at this stage was very neutral toward the U.S., filtered by the distance and exoticism of the society far away beyond the Atlantic. The Finnish press, undergoing a strong period of expansion (caused by the new elementary school system and by the mild censorship practiced by the Russian authorities) also played an important role in the transmission of a public image of America. Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in Finnish in 1856 as the first American novel. It was very popular and an important image maker. After that the road was open to more translations. In the 1880s the Finns learned to know the stories of Mark Twain, Cooper and many others.

They also knew American women's movements, temperance ideas and some religious innovations. During this early period of American ideas, it was the temperance movement which seemed to find the best growing ground in the Nordic countries. The making and the use of spirits were big problems.

Conversely, Finland was poorly known in the New World in the 19th and early 20th century. Some works of the Finnish writers, Runeberg and Topelius,

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were published in America in the 1870s and 1880s. But — as was natural — Finnish culture had no possibilities of penetrating into the other side of the Atlantic. The best known literary work was the *Kalevala* which had its first English translation before the turn of the century. Intellectually, literature was virtually the only area in which Finns were of any interest in America; the *Kalevala* was, and still is, the most important individual work, which on the other hand has continually reinforced the idea of a primitive Northern people.

It was only during the period of oppression under Russian rule at the turn of the century, when the Finns came to be seen as a heroic Western nation struggling for its legitimate political rights. I quote an article published in *The North American Review* in 1904: "The period of conflict had set in all over Finland... It is a conflict between the Russian power, that illegally and destructively intervenes in the political life of Finland, and the Finnish nation in its entirety fighting for its existence. It is, moreover, a conflict between eastern despotism and western principles of justice and love for law-abiding freedom." At least at the official level this interest and sympathy was not very concrete: the Finnish question came to be seen as a matter of domestic policy within the Russian Empire. Still, it was the first indication to see Finland and the Finns as a nation in the Western World.

When Finland declared independence in 1917, many things in its relationships with the other countries naturally changed. They were to be official now. Together with many other European nations Finland had received loans from the United States in the aftermath of the First World War to rebuild its economy. Many people may perceive it as a myth that the favorable image of Finland in America

was based on the payment of these loans. But it is not a myth; instead, it is the single most important factor in the Finnish-American relationship — cultural and other — between the two great wars and also in the long run. Even though the first repayment of 1933 was not very big (about 150 000 dollars), Finland was the only European nation to pay, and this immediately created an image of a "small, but brave Finland, which always pays its debts". In the polls of the late 1930s Finland was one of the most popular European countries in the U.S.

Culturally the 1920s and 1930s saw the breakthrough of American popular life in Europe, even though the official culture was Germany-oriented in the 1920s and 1930s. German and even French cultural influences were more important than the contacts with the English-speaking world. English was not an important language in the Finnish school-system. The *Yleinen kirjallisuuden historia* (History of World Literature), published in 1937, cleared the American literature in a few indifferent pages.

On the other hand, more than half of the foreign movies shown in Finland were American between the two World Wars. The movies were extremely important in shaping an image of the American society, even though it was easy to criticize them for stereotypes and a star cult. But for many it was the only channel to life on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

Finnish scientists and artists began to study and travel in the New World much more than previously. A good example is the architect Eliel Saarinen, who settled permanently in southern Michigan after winning second prize in the Chicago Tribune building competition in the early 1920s. Even though there was no organized cultural exchange between Finland

and the U.S. before the Second World War, "the popular America" was reality in Finland at the outbreak of the war.

The Immigrants as Mediators between the Old Country and the New

This cultural interaction had and has no face as such. The Finns who physically faced the colonizing effect of American values in their every-day life were those 400 000 emigrants who moved over the Atlantic between 1870 and 1930 — and their children and grandchildren. They shaped the image and stereotypes on America also here in Finland, but I will now take a look at their lives and concrete interaction with the American culture in the U.S.

Roughly 90% of the Finnish emigrants to America planned to make only a preliminary working trip: their purpose was to earn money and then return to Finland. Only 20% did so. This contrast between the original motives of the migrants and the final result of the Finnish overseas emigration is interesting. Why did the great majority of the Finns stay in America for good even though their original plan was different? What impact did this original motive have on the willingness of the Finns to integrate into American society?

During the last 70 years a lot has been written on immigration and integration of immigrants. This is quite natural, since by the end of the 1920s more than 35 million people arrived to the United States alone. Historically, the research that has been accomplished in the receiving countries, especially in the United States, can be divided in three chronological groups.

Firstly, in the late 19th century, the advocates of Anglo-Saxon culture

thought that it was possible and also necessary for the immigrant to throw out the old language and the old habits in favor of the Anglo-Saxon, Protestant core culture of America.

Secondly, a new interpretation was born in the beginning of this century when the departure area of European emigration spread to the southern and eastern parts of the continent. The rapid industrialization and urbanization of the United States needed a lot of cheap labor power. In 1909 the term "melting pot" was born. It claimed that the immigrants of various nationalities and races would assimilate into one entity in the new country.

Thirdly, researchers of immigration who had taken for granted that various nationality groups would rapidly assimilate in the new environment, found to their surprise (roughly in the late 1960s) that immigrant communities were still alive decades after the great emigration period. During the last 20–25 years the melting pot theory has been put aside, and it has been replaced by "ethnicity", which refers to the maintenance and preservation of the original features of different groups. Today scholars of ethnicity do not think that the assimilation begins when somebody decides to emigrate, or — at the latest — when he arrives in the new country.

Still, the common philosophy of all these three approaches has been in the assumption that immigrants have come over the ocean to settle permanently. Scholars have not paid much attention to the so called temporary labor power. While keeping this in mind and knowing that — in spite of their motives at the time of departure — only one-fifth of the Finnish emigrants, for example, returned permanently home, we can find fresh dimensions in the assimilation and adapta-

tion conversation. Why has the ethnic identity of various groups survived so long? Had the immigrant any reason to try to adapt or assimilate into the new society since he planned to stay there only for a few years? The immigrant was an egotistical person: the strengthening of his own economic situation guided his actions almost completely. An American scholar, Arthur W. Thurner concludes that the Finnish immigrants in the Copper Country of northern Michigan were so stubborn that they did not even want to learn English language.

On the other hand, it was necessary for the immigrant to find features which eased his stay in the new society. It is a well-known fact that different groups tended to settle in the same areas: Finns in the little towns and countryside in northern Michigan and Minnesota, Italians in the big cities of the eastern parts of the United States, etc. In these communities immigrants founded organizations and had other activities.

Over the years and decades the immigrant became so used to his new home, however, that he did not return to the old country; thus most Finnish immigrants stayed for the rest of their lives as immigrants. There were many reasons for this. One was the continuous flow of new immigrants up to the 1920s. The immigrant communities received new members, men sent tickets to their families, relatives, and friends, etc.

The Finnish immigrant belonged to three worlds: 1) to the immigrant world where Finnish language dominated and where all the activities were concentrated around Finnishness, 2) to the receiving country, which became more familiar over decades and because of children, and 3) to the old country, the home village, which he never could forget, and to which he tried to keep contact. The Fin-

nish immigrant adapted himself to the new conditions, but he was an immigrant with citizenship.

The Second Generation

After the adoption of quotas in the United States in the 1920s, however, the process of integration and assimilation changed its nature with the ending of the new flow of immigrants. The immigrant community got older, and the children and grandchildren of immigrants became an important factor for assimilation. They went to English-language schools, they were able to make contacts outside their own community, and they married persons from other ethnic groups which had been rare among the first generation of immigrants. In other words, they assimilated rapidly, and simultaneously this had a considerable impact in binding and connecting their parents to the American society.

To investigate ethnic culture in the second and subsequent generations from outside the ethnic community is difficult, for the understanding in depth of its mentality depends on experiencing it personally. In his analysis of social change in immigrants' children vis-à-vis their parents, P.G. Hummasti comments, highly relevantly: "Being a third-generation Finnish-American I have known, in addition to my parents, many members of the second generation. I base much of what I say here on my observations of their experiences."

Personal involvement provides a basis for the retrospective understanding of current scholarly debate on ethnicity, in which ethnicity is seen as a cultural construct determined by historical development, and in which American society is seen as consisting of ethnic components rather than social classes. From a histori-

cal point of view, however, there is no need to discard earlier perspectives on the idea of Americanism. Ever since the beginning of the 19th century, American society and culture have been explained on the basis of the assumption that there is such an entity as American man and American culture, in spite of the fact that the nation consisted of many distinct ethnic groups. Arthur Schlesinger Jr is still optimistic as regards the strength of the 'one nation' American ideal over against the 'ethnicity cult'. Eugen Weber has noted: "No community can exist as a community without common references. In a modern nation they come from history."

Throughout the period of immigration, a striking feature of American acculturation policy has been the constant reiteration of American values through the mass media, schools, and other channels of the culture. Although ethnic minorities and community conflicts persist in the United States, the vast majority of the population has in the course of time adopted the American system of values, which would have been impossible without conscious, deliberate effort.

What contribution can be offered in this context by the scholars in the migrants' country of origin? Kathleen Neils Conzen et al. have argued that a crucial phase in the process of 'ethnicization' is reached when the second immigrant generation reaches adulthood. The younger generation challenges its elders, in relation both to their ethnic tradition (i.e. to their country of origin) and to their future (i.e. to American society). This interface between the generations is a point at which scholars from the societies of origin may also have a contribution to offer, since their mentality incorporates one of these temporal polarities, the tradition of origin: they are familiar with 'Fin-

nishness', and with Finnish emigration, its causes and motives; they are familiar with Finnish society, and with the profound changes that had occurred in that between the 1880s and the early 20th century. They are thus in a position to identify those features in the immigrant community's collective consciousness which can be explicated in terms of the tradition of origin, and those which cannot.

The prime reason why the clash between the first and second generations of immigrants did not occur until the inter-Wars period was that the majority of the Finnish immigrants landing in the early years of the century were young and single, and married only after having settled in America. Furthermore, the introduction of the Quota System in the 1920s soon equalized the numbers in the first and second generations. It is thus interesting to note that (as far as the Finnish ethnic community is concerned) the community construction phase was very brief, if measured in terms of the ratio between the first and second generations: the peak numbers for Finnish-born persons resident in the United States as a whole was reached in the 1920 Census; yet by the 1940 Census, the peak for second-generation Finns had already occurred.

We know, for instance, about phenomena occurring at the intersection between the first and second generations such as increased involvement of parents in cultural activities and the like, e.g. Finnish-language schools, in order to bind their children more firmly into the ethnic community. Michael G. Karni reports that certain institutions, such as the Lutheran clergy, the co-operative movement, and the labor organizations were at least partly successful in recruiting from the second generation; on the other hand, he also records that it was common for many

of the immigrants' children born in the inter-War period to conceal their origins. What made this possible was the second generations' better command of English in comparison to their parents: "We spoke Finnish at home, but English outside, since otherwise we'd have been taken for gypsies".

In a corpus of several dozen interviews carried out in Chicago, Finnish clearly emerged as the dominant language of the home among first-generation immigrants, but English almost without exception for the second generation. Nonetheless, some kind of command of Finnish was widespread in the second generation as well.

A crucial factor in terms of language retention was the degree of closeness of the immigrant community. In smaller Finnish communities, such as those in northern Michigan, Finnish continued to be used for Sunday school and for confirmation classes longer than in the large cities. In cities the size of Chicago or Detroit, however, the Finns found themselves in constant close contact with members of other communities, as is evidenced by the considerable proportion of first-generation immigrants who modified their forenames into a more 'American' form.

The American school from its part implanted the idea that the road to success lay through access to white-collar jobs, which in turn required further education and therefore meant moving away from small towns and rural areas. The ambitions of the first generation had been to become successful miners, fishermen, or farmers; in the second generation, and even more clearly in the third, these ambitions were pushed aside.

While gender unquestionably plays a crucially important role on the individual plane, however, it is of less importance in

regard to the maintenance or loss of ethnic identity in the urban environment. In the first generation, women undoubtedly enjoyed better opportunities for integration into American society than the men did, but by the second generation this situation would appear to have evened out, with regard to the acquisition of English, education, occupational status and choice of marriage partners.

Conclusion: The Post-Second World War Interaction

Pride in one's ethnic origins did not come into vogue in America until in the 1960s; but by that time, collective awareness of Finnishness had missed its chance. None of these factors in themselves — neither the loss of Finnish, nor education, nor change of occupation — necessarily raised insuperable obstacles to the maintenance of a vigorous immigrant community even in the second generation. The really crucial factor was one of attitudes, and of the pressures for integration exercised by the surrounding environment on a small ethnic group. The 'empty' decades after the Second World War, with no immigration, had undermined the basis for Finnish ethnicity, irrespective of the continued activities of Finnish-Americans thereafter. The Finnish revival in the 1970s and 1980s is probably most accurately seen in terms merely of the preservation of Finnish cultural tradition, in which collective ethnic consciousness has no more than a marginal role to play.

This is not to say that Finnish ethnicity has disappeared; on the individual level, however, 'ethnicity' cannot mean the same today as it did for the first-generation immigrant women and men, whose life in the New World was largely dependent upon the sense of group identity.

In an interesting article, Michael G. Karni has described his own awakening to ethnicity, like that of many others in the third generation. It was not until the Vietnam War that he began to question his own 'Americanness', and to ask where he had come from, and what his own background was. Nonetheless, his own Americanness has hardly been diminished, and his sense of Finnishness may in fact considerably depend on a feeling of nostalgia and even the exotic.

Moreover, it needs to be borne firmly in mind that 'Finnishness' is also undergoing change within Finland, and may not bear a very close resemblance any more to the characteristic mentality taken with them to America by the migrants at the end of the last century. It is, for example, a question of world view and interpretation how much credence should be given to the superhuman qualities of *sisu* (determination) and *talkoohenki* (collective solidarity) attributed to the immigrant generations; certainly they do not appear to be particularly applicable as a feature distinguishing the present generation of Finns in Finland from other nationalities.

What, then, is the situation of the cultural interaction between Finland and the U.S. today? Even though the mass migration period ended decades ago, I could claim that the thorough interest toward American culture in Finland is essentially a post-Second World War phenomenon. Even though the connections date back to the 19th century, the contacts in all fields of life — in high culture, popular culture, official level, etc. — have become reality only after 1945. The Allies won the war; they and the values they represented became fashionable immediately. The traditional Europeanism was "out" for several decades; in fact, it has started to recover as a value system only during the

past couple of years, together with the political and economic integration of Europe.

The immediate Second World War era raised the cultural contacts between the U.S. and Finland to an official level. This Fulbright program was based on the loans Finland had received from the U.S. in 1919. The exchange of scholars and students proved to be very important for the development of the Finnish academic life; during certain years in the 1950s and 1960s, there were more Finnish students in the U.S. than from any other European country — in relation to the population. American fine arts, architecture, literature and serious music actually came to the Finnish vocabulary only after 1945. Nowadays, all the American books, which are thought to be of importance, commercially and otherwise, are translated automatically.

When youth culture differentiated as a distinctive subculture in the early 1950s in the U.S., this gave the "final" boost to the Americanization or similarization of Western culture. Simultaneously the world economy has integrated, and this has made almost all the nations look similar to each other. It seems to be common knowledge among the Finnish intellectuals that Finland is the most Americanized country in Europe, the colony of American culture. Let us not be desperate though, since we are not alone. The Swedish ethnologist, Åke Daun, states in his newest article (1992) that — measured with main stream trends like fashion, movies, fast food, and music — Sweden is regarded as the America of Europe.

I will conclude with one concrete note. As a historian I understand, but still am sometimes amazed how slowly the images about another nation change. I would argue first of all that it has been very hard for the Americans to make the

Finns, or other Europeans, appreciate American intellectual and "high-cultural" achievements; they somehow seem to fall under the popular images and influences, and the aggressiveness of the American impact. This image was born in the 19th century, and it stubbornly continues its life. Reversely, and what is quite natural, the average American does not know anything about Finland.

An abridged version of the paper presented at an international conference *Narratives and Narrated Subjects of Colonialism. 500 Years of European-American Cultural Interaction*, December 4-5, 1992, in Turku, Finland.

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