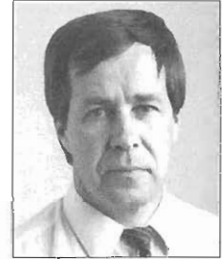


Keijo Virtanen

The Influence of Migration on Finnish Cultural Identity in the Twentieth Century: Some Preliminary Considerations



A lot has been said about the demographical basis of the Finnish overseas migration as well as the adaptation and assimilation process of immigrants in the United States and Canada. This is no wonder, since by 1930 alone close to 400 000 Finns emigrated, and only one-fifth of them came back permanently. The Finnish immigrants and their descendants are an important group to study even today because of their lively activities in the second, third and subsequent generations and because of their contacts with other ethnic groups.

Much less has been said about the influence of the migration phenomenon in Finnish society. The fact that Finland has lost hundreds of thousands of people to overseas countries, Russia/Soviet Union, Sweden, etc. has certainly left its mark on the Finns and Finnish society – on people who have never emigrated abroad themselves. It is a part of the history of the Finnish mentality. There is a new research project by Dr. Juha Siltala (University of Helsinki) on the history of the Finnish Angst, that is characteristics like with-

drawal, anxiety, uncertainty, etc. To what extent this particular approach is fruitful for the study of the influence of migration on the Finnish identity is another question. But this kind of approach shows us clearly what is in the air now, and that we can find new aspects to the migration phenomenon.

This problem is a very large one and requires a lot of scholarly work in various disciplines. I am certainly not able to present here any comprehensive interpretations at this stage. In my paper I will concentrate on only one aspect: what has been the reaction to the migration phenomenon among the Finnish authorities, social groups, individuals, and the press over the course of the 20th century, and what kind of measures have been taken to prevent or encourage emigration? I will include the contacts between Finland and the Finnish-Americans, since I find this an important factor shaping the Finnish cultural and social identity also in Finland.

Another aspect familiar to me would be the impact of returning migrants on the development of their home area as a part of the identity problem. The interaction between the returnees and those who never emigrated is quite revealing, and I

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have treated that problem in my doctoral dissertation. However, I am not going to concentrate on this. In general, I will be on quite a concrete level, hopefully raising ideas to be analyzed in future studies. The comprehensive "mentality" approach requires a lot of empirical work, and my point of view here represents only one aspect of this problem of the Finnish identity.

The Finnish authorities first noted the existence of emigration back in 1873; but throughout the period of heavy emigration, they never succeeded in coming to grips with it. The Migration Committee – I will talk about it below – was not appointed until 1918, and it did not submit its report until 1924, by which time the overseas migration was largely over – to revive again only in the 1950s and 1960s.

In the early phases of the migration and later, too, it was mainly the religious circles who were most concerned with overseas emigration. The first ministers were sent to the United States, especially to Michigan, as early as in the 1870's. Suomen Merimieslähetysseura (Finnish Seamen's Mission) was founded in 1875 concentrating on assisting Finnish seamen who had got into difficulties in foreign countries. In 1891 Bishop Johansson suggested an official committee to consider the social, economic and moral consequences of emigration. Nothing happened.

Before the Finnish independence other actions were planned, too. They dealt with the validity of overseas immigrant marriages in Finland, the activities of migration agents in Finland and the sending of funds from abroad to Finland. These efforts did not usually lead to any active measures.

When we look at migration from the viewpoint of an individual it is easy to see that the Church took a very critical attitude which was understandable on moral grounds. State and local officials as well as

the educated classes condemned migration for nationalist and economic reasons. On the other hand, it must be remembered that the Church took the first steps to take care of immigrants in the host countries.

The emigration was seen as harmful also in those local groups with members from the rural population, at least in Southern Ostrobothnia. In Åland, the emigration was seen by the landowning farmers as a threat to the future of the Province, whereas the crofters, cottages, and tenants saw it as beneficial both to themselves and to the Province, since in their opinion it enriched the lives of those who had been to America, and in this way benefited the entire community.

Right from the beginning of the emigration, it was the disadvantages which were emphasized. The moral consequences, in particular, were seen as noxious, and even in the Migration Committee's Report in 1924 these were still seen as more serious than the economic consequences. Thus, adultery by the wives of the men who had emigrated, on the other hand, and bigamous marriages abroad by the men, on the other, were seen as the greatest dangers. When the municipal council in Karstula reported that as many as 70 % of the wives left behind had committed adultery, the Committee found this "too terrible to be true".

Economic disadvantages to the country were, however, also as a source of anxiety, since emigration was not diminishing but growing at the turn of the century. The authorities and scholars made attempts to assess the value of the emigrants in capital, and stressed the loss of labor abroad.

In general, the darker sides of the emigration were emphasized in various reports and other writings; the good sides of the host country were easily overlooked or minimized. The primary reasons of emigration, i.e. that the home country simply

was not able to provide reasonable living conditions, were not analyzed. Attitudes towards emigration and emigrants were mainly emotional, even panicky: the Finnish nationality becomes extinct, or the Finnish identity is severely damaged. The emigrants were seen as the traitors of the nation. All this reflected the vague feeling of identity which was natural, however, since the country was not independent. Political pressures ran high at the turn of the century, and therefore the movement abroad was experienced as a severe hit against the home country.

The development in Sweden was similar to that in Finland: a Committee was set up in 1907, and its report was published in 1913. No concrete restrictions on emigration were taken up; instead, the emphasis was put on reforms (job opportunities, better wages, better housing, etc.), i.e. on preventive action. In Italy, on the other hand, the attitude of the state authorities to the emigration differed sharply from that in the Nordic countries. The main reason for this was that right from the start the emigration from Italy was highly temporary in nature. Migrants planning their return dispatched large sums of money back to Italy, and this won the active support of the Government for temporary migration.

In Finland, the attitude of the press was also to emphasize the negative sides of the emigration at the turn of the century, and to criticize the inaction if the authorities over preventing it. The articles in the press reflected fairly closely the fluctuations in the emigration, and included attempts to influence the minds of those planning to leave. The people had other sources of information, however, e.g. letters, and the press failed to achieve its desired effects. The viewpoint of the prospective emigrant was entirely private, whereas the press based its position on the public aspects.

In the study of the press in Southern Ostrobothnia it has been found that the emigration was mainly opposed by Swedish-language papers and by those supporting the conservative and liberal parties, whereas those supporting the Agrarian Party and the Social Democrats adopted a more understanding attitude, since they identified their readers with that part of the population from which the majority of the emigrants were recruited. Roughly the same findings were reached in a study of the press in Turku: at the beginning of this century, mainly for nationalist and patriotic reasons, the conservative press adopted a negative attitude towards the emigration, whereas — partly because of their position as the voice of the opposition, and partly following from their interpretation of socialist theory — the left-wing papers started out by supporting the emigration whole-heartedly, although later on they contented themselves with providing information for those planning to leave.

The Irish press criticized the emigration from Ireland harshly; the object of criticism, however, was not the emigrants, but the conditions prevailing in the country which occasioned the emigration. Thus it appears that in those countries where the emigration tended to be permanent in character, such as Ireland and Finland, it received considerable criticism, whereas in countries where there were visible benefits to the home country from the migration, such as Italy, the attitude was the opposite.

Once the emigration had begun to decline sharply in Finland, after the First World War, the press began to turn its attention to the contacts between the emigrants and their home country. The moralizing editorials ceased, and the emigrants were declared "innocent" in the press. Emigration was no longer blamed on the

lack of a sense of responsibility. The task of the state came to be seen as the removal of the real causes for emigration now. Thus the Migration Committee was set up in 1918, almost immediately after Finland had received its independence. The Committee obtained literature, carried out enquiries, both in America and more particularly in Finland, requested statements from the employers' and labor organizations, carried out questionnaires, etc.

The Migration Committee rejected the idea of attempting to restrict emigration by legislation, and argued that conditions in Finland should be improved to the point where there would no longer be any interest in emigrating. One of the methods proposed by the Committee was that returning migrants should be able to start farming their own land, since this was specifically what they wished to do. Plans to raise the economy were also urged, e.g. the development of industry.

It was only after the achievement of Finnish independence that increasing attention began to be paid to improving the contacts between the Finnish emigrants and Finland. The reason for this was that the emigration came to be seen as a *fait accompli*, in which case it was no longer justified to adopt the same attitudes towards the migrants as before; rather, it was hoped that with the improvement of contacts, some of them might then return.

Even before the First World War, both the state authorities and the press wanted to encourage as many migrants as possible to return to Finland. The press in Turku, for example, commented with satisfaction on the record number of migrants returning in 1907, which was caused by the economic depression in North America.

The overall change in the attitudes towards the emigration in the 1920s — as well as many of the initiatives — were belated, however, since the movement abro-

ad was largely over and actually ended in 1930. There was no need to be critical any more. Instead, what the authorities could hope for was the return migration. During the early Great Depression in the 1930s, a campaign was initiated in Finland to persuade the Finnish-Americans to move back to Finland. The results of the campaign remained modest, however.

Also the Finnish-Americans drew up plans for return in large groups in the early 1930s. It was believed that most emigrants suffered from homesickness, but on the other hand they were well aware of the formerly hostile attitudes towards the emigration back in the old country. Therefore it was necessary for the returnees to settle in the same areas. The newspaper *Lännen Suometar* (Western Finn) suggested a mass movement back to Finland, to establish a lakeside community settlement somewhere near the cities of Helsinki, Turku, or Tampere. A joint community — a Finnish-American village — would help the returning migrants to adapt into Finnish society more successfully.

Thus the problems of adaptation were recognized in connection with the return, and efforts were made to solve these in advance. This was reinforced by the foundation in 1933 in Helsinki of the *Amerikan Suomalaisten Seura* (Society of American Finns) whose aims included "to be a point of contact for Finns in America, and to provide assistance to members in difficulties; to provide guidance and support in the achievement of goals of material and intellectual progress...".

Membership was open to all Finnish citizens who had been resident for at least two years in the United States or Canada. Its activities do not appear to have developed very far, however, since the last information on the Society is a minor set of alterations in its official name and statutes, recorded in the Register of Asso-

ciations in 1935. A similar lack of success met the *Suomen Ulkomaankävijäin Seura* (Finnish Overseas Travelers' Association), founded in 1934, which two years later had only 38 members.

These efforts and others like them were late-born. The migrant remembered very well the critical attitudes which were dominant at the time of his departure. Therefore he had many reservations in his mind, and therefore the measures taken in Finland and among the Finnish-Americans to increase return migration had little success.

The first friendship societies to promote contacts between Finland and the Finnish-Americans were born about the same time as the attitudes towards the emigration started to become more positive. The *Suomi-Seura* (Finland Society) and the *Ulkosuomalais-Yhdistys* (Overseas Finns' Association) were founded in 1927. Their main function was not to inform or advise those who planned to emigrate because the movement overseas was largely over. Instead, the most important area of activities was directed to "building a bridge" between the immigrants and their original home country so that they would not lose their roots. In the early years, during the 1930s, the most central question was to change the image of the home country, i.e. the negative memories that those immigrants had who had moved overseas at the turn of the century.

I cannot concentrate in this deeply. I want to point out though, that these organized contacts started from the Finnish end, not among the Finnish-Americans or Finnish-Canadians. Up to the end of the 1950s the membership and the activities in the friendship societies were small. Still there were many disagreements between the societies, especially in the late 1920s. Finland was taking its initial steps as an independent nation, and the strengthening of

its national identity was reflected in the strategies of the friendship societies, too. For example, in the late 1920s the *Ulkosuomalais-Yhdistys* emphasized the preserving and promoting of Finnish cultural identity among the Finnish-American population. *Suomi-Seura*, on the other hand, wanted to create closer contacts between Finland and the immigrants; it organized summer visits to them, and sent news and articles to be published in immigrant newspapers and periodicals.

Finally, in the late 1950s the activities of the friendship societies (mainly the *Suomi-Seura* and the League of the Finnish-American Societies) rose to a new level when charter flights by jet planes were started between Finland and North America. Membership grew rapidly, and this in turn stimulated new kinds of contacts (cultural exchange, etc.).

When we compare the attitudes towards the emigration during the active years of the movement and thereafter, we can make some preliminary concluding remarks from the viewpoint of Finnish national identity. Migration and the migrants have always been seen as an essential part of Finnish society. Their emigration was a threat to the nation; it was complex; the authorities, the press, and the individuals did not know what would be the result; they were afraid that everybody would leave. Therefore the attitudes were negative and condemning but there were no good ideas what should be done. The emigrants were "traitors", but when the departures decreased and practically ended, it was easy for attitudes to change. There was nothing to lose regarding the migrants overseas — only to win if there could be a way to get them back home. Therefore the attitude changed for the better.

In the 1920s and 1930s also the friendship societies stressed the strengthening of

return migration, but fairly soon the official goals changed to emphasize and promote mutual contacts between the Finnish society and the immigrants and their descendants. But even that is a clear indication of the fact that Finnish society tends to "stick to its own", its own identity – also in the first, second, third and even fourth

generation of Finns overseas. After all, we are a very small nation, and every member of the nation is important.

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