Return Migration: Numbers, Reasons and Consequences.
A European Overview

Opening lecture to the annual AEMI meeting 2002

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The theme of the AEMI-seminar this year is return migration. My task in this opening lecture is to give you an overall picture of this theme; that is to say something about the numbers, reasons and consequences of return migration – and what impact it had on the country or region they returned to. I am building this presentation mainly on Mark Wyman’s book Round-Trip to America. The Immigrants return to Europe 1880 – 1930, which was published in 1993. Mark Wyman is Professor of History at Illinois State University and was key-note speaker at the People of the Move conference here at the Stavanger University College in May 2000, held in conjunction with the 175th Anniversary of Norwegian Emigration to America. His book is also on the curriculum for the intermediate course on European migration history offered at the Stavanger University College. During the last four years some eighty students have taken this course.

A major source of return migration is the U.S. governments attempt from 1908 to 1923 to count both immigration and emigration. The grand totals were 9.9 million immigrants and 3.5 million leaving. 88 percent of those returning were Europeans. The return rate among all groups was 35 percent for the period. The country-by-country breakdown is presented on the table on the following page.

Temporary immigrants

The immigrants who return are called temporary immigrants, and Mark Wyman defines this temporary immigrant as one who left Europe intending residence in the U.S. and who remained at least one year.

The study of remigration started in the 1880s when immigration to America radically changed both in numbers and origin: from the Northwest to East and South Europe. This was a result of the transportation revolution on both land and at sea. New railroad network throughout Europe allowed emigrants from East and Central Europe to reach new ports of embarkation: Trieste and Naples, Constanta and Varna. Here they embarked steamships which by the late 1870s had replaced nearly all sailing ships.

The combination of low fares and aggressive marketing made it possible for even the poorest ones to make the crossing. The steamship lines were the overall reason for this development.

Also the wage differential was crucial
for Europeans wishing to return. The short-term migrant needed high wages in America to justify a short stay. As the Dillingham Commission, concluded: “With comparatively few exceptions, the emigrant of today is essentially a seller of labor seeking a more favourable market”. In America they became the crucial part of the industrial revolution – labourers replacing skilled workers, tenders of machines or human robots doing specific tasks. Jobs often held in disdain by native workers.

By 1914 95 percent of the workers at Henry Ford’s many plants were unskilled laborers, trained to do just one operation, that according to Ford “the most stupid man can learn in two days”. These workers came into an America experiencing an economic explosion. Railways grew from only 35,000 miles in 1865 to 242,000 by 1900, including 5 transcontinental railroads. By 1900 USA had passed England as the world’s leading industrial nation.

Considerable credit for this growth must go to the immigrant labourers. One economist has estimated that Europe lost one quarter of its labor force to the New World from 1850 to 1914; and within the United States one third of the increase in labor force from 1870 to 1910 was accounted for by immigration.

The majority of these immigrant workers were Italians, Poles, Russian and Austro-Hungarians. In Michigan copper mines Finns were the largest single ethnic group. The Italian became the road builder in America. Lacking mechanical skills he could “contribute nothing more, and nothing more was asked of him, than the strength of his arms”. By 1890 some 90 percent of Italian wage earners in New York were engaged in public construction; they constituted a monopoly of the sanitation department in San Francisco and did 99 percent of Chicago’s roadwork. These immigrants did not often turn to agriculture despite their background. Digging sewer lines proved easier that becoming an American farmer; and perhaps most of all: farming did not suit their goals of quick money.

The majority of the new immigrants were males. From 1870 to 1920 between 60 and 70 percent. In the peak immigration year of 1907 – 72.4 percent. This did not necessarily mean that they were not married. Many of them had their spouses at home. Investigations among the meat packing workers, showed that 90.2 percent of Bulgarians, 79 of the Serbians, and 42.4 percent of the Italians had wives and families at home, in contrast to 3.7 percent Germans, 1.9 percent Swedes and 0.9 percent of the Irish. This fact made the assimilation process among the new immigrants difficult, because as Georg Gilkey expresses it: “at home their dream was of America, in America their dream was of home”.

**New Immigration**

The question why large numbers of immigrants planned only a temporary stay began to draw attention in the late 1880s, and the idea became attached to the New Immigration. The answer was, it seems, money. They were all eager to save money – that became their main ambition, and it dictated their every move.

Italian laborers had the highest savings rate – $1.00 per day from wages of
only $1.25 – 1.65. The slogan was: “a good job, save money, work all time, go home, sleep, no spend”. Their great savings were carried back by returnees or transferred through postal money orders. In the five year period 1897 – 1902 Italian immigrants sent home an estimate of $100 million. Remittances to Sweden averaged $8 million yearly from 1906 to 1930, making up a quarter of Sweden’s balance of payments.

**Housing**
Closely connected to the immigrants’ desire to save and his willingness to put up with dismal jobs conditions, was his acceptance of housing that was primitive and congested to the extreme. Immigrants made up 90 – 95 percent of the slum population in New York, Philadelphia and Chicago.

In coalmining areas the immigrants sometimes lived in deserted pigpens and cowsheds. Even food supplies were often sacrificed in the immigrants desire to save. Some therefore suffered from malnutrition.

**Assimilation difficulties**
The desire for a short, profitable stay in America, combined with ethnic clustering in slums, isolated the immigrant. And this situation was clearly worsened when immigrants were predetermined not to become Americans. They lived in an immigrant colony, worked among immigrants and learned little of life in the U.S. These persons considered it impractical to devote time and money to such activities as learning English, attending citizenship classes, or joining American organizations. They simply did not plan to become Americans.

A 1915 study of 33,000 immigrant workers in Detroit found that 75% did not know English. The Dillingham Commission investigations of 246,000 foreign – born employees, revealed that 44.4 percent of the males and 61.5 percent of the females could not speak English.

**Reasons for returning**
Let us now turn to the reasons for returning. During the 1908 – 1923 period alone, more than 3 million people returned to Europe. One writer in 1920 reported that “the outward drift was the most significant feature of the immigration movement. Without it the record of arrivals is as incomplete and misleading as the debit side of a cash account without the credit side”.

Italian historians Francesco Cerase and Dino Cinel have listed several reasons behind return: failure, retirement, investment and innovation. Finland’s government inspectors that quizzed those returning in 1918 found reasons like homesickness, rejoicing families, politics, fulfilment of economic objectives and unemployment.

Mark Wyman makes a synthesis of the two, and groups these explanations of return in four: 1. success – goals attained in America; 2. failure to reach goals (injuries etc.); 3. homesickness (patriotism, family obligations, caring for elderly parents, saving the family farm); 4. rejection of the U.S – for political and/or religious reasons and the inability to assimilate.

**Economic reasons**
Economists have long noted the close relation between the economic down-
turns and return: For example, in 1893, there were 28 remigrants for every 100 immigrants, but as the financial depression took hold in 1894, the rate climbed to 61 for every 100; and further in 1895 to 79. Similarly, as a result of the Panic of 1907, return migration surged. From June 1, 1907 to June 30, 1908 more than 135,000 Italians were admitted, while 167,000 returned.

In the aftermath of the Panic of 1907, railroad construction gangs were quickly laid off, steel mills cut their forces, miners and factories simply closed. In Chicago alone, more than 100,000 people were reported unemployed, among these 2,000 Norwegian newcomers. Special trains were put on to take immigrants from all around the country to New York, on their way home. And in Germany 104 special trains took the returned eastward from Bremen. Those who could not afford to go home, were sometimes offered work on the farms on the Plains or in the South.

Embitterment against America
If unemployment was one reason for return, embitterment against America was another. Many immigrants returned with a ruined life, injured in the industry or suffering from tuberculosis and other deceases. And many European governments actually assisted them in their efforts to go home. In 1908 the Greek government gave money to help Greeks return, and at the same time it publicly criticized conditions in America. In Sweden, an anti-emigration group in 1907 sought creation of a national labor exchange to draw the emigrants back to jobs at home, and Crown Prince Gustav was urged to visit Swedish settlements to whip up interest of return.

American reactions
Americans were increasingly angered by the tactics of European governments and also church officials, and many in America considered return migration an offence to national well-being. The controversy included natives' fears of job or wage loss, repugnance at the newcomers' living conditions, patriotic stirrings and often a scarcely concealed racism. This was clearly demonstrated in the Chicago Evening Journal that complained that "these Italians, like the Chinamen in this country, are aliens, not citizens", and charged that those who import "cheap and ignorant Chinese, Polish and Italian laborers to compete with better men are public enemies."

Emphasis was increasingly placed in on differences between broad ethnic groupings the so-called Old Immigration from Northern and Western Europe and the New Immigration from the South and East.

The sharpest criticism came from the new commissioner-general of Immigration, F. P. Sargent, who in 1904 attacked the immigration piling up in the cities. He put the blame on the foreign countries that were alarmed at their population losses "unable to block departures, they had directed all their political, social and occasionally religious sources to one end: to maintain colonies of their own people in this country, instructing them through various channels to maintain their allegiances to the countries of their birth." Such actions were crucial to these countries, he argued, "because it insures the return of the emigrant with his accu-
This opposition to the New Immigrants began to work its way into the political system. It started with a call for a literacy test, a simple test of the reading abilities of the incoming passengers. It was backed by organized labor, the Knights of Labor and American Federation of Labor, which argued that “the peasants of southern Europe flooding into U.S. Labor markets, stole money from the pocketbooks of American workers and returned home.”

This hostility towards New Immigration gained strength before W.W.I., when thousands of Lithuanians, Austrians, Greeks and Italians returned to defend their homeland. In pre-war 1913, 35,000 Germans returned, 88,300 Scottish and English. The numbers dropped when war broke out, and u-boats attacks in the Atlantic caused a decrease of both immigration and remigration.

The War brought major changes to the immigrant colonies within the U.S. Germans, the most organized and politically active of all immigrant groups, suddenly became the enemy and their ethnic organizational apparatus evaporated. And when America joined the war, there was a demand for total, unconditional support. “Hyphenation” was out, and the literacy test was finally passed in 1917.

This anti-immigrant attitude gained momentum after the war. In 1919 the American Federation of Labor recommended a two-years suspension of immigration, and believed that foreigners should be forced to learn English: “If you are an American at heart, speak our language. If you don’t know it, learn it. If you don’t like it. MOVE.” A wave of “speak American” demands swept the nation, typified by the Iowa governor who asserted that freedom of speech did not guarantee the right to speak any other language than English, and he barred use of foreign languages in schools, public places, even over the phone.

**Immigrants response**

The immigrants were terrified at rumours that they would be forbidden to speak their own language. They also felt that the new Prohibition amendment – the anti-alcohol Campaign often was directed mainly against foreigners. Interviews on a returning Scandinavian ship showed that Prohibition was often mentioned as one of the reasons for leaving America. Rising organized crime and the way Americans treated the Negroes were others.

For many these examples showed that America’s freedom was slipping away. “It isn’t the old America any more, a Norwegian said as he went home after 17 years in the Northwest. Others claimed that “The United States was alright if you think the way they want you to think”. This anti-immigrant attitude in the 1920s America made others than the new immigrants from East and South Europe return.

**Consequences**

Finally, let us look at the impact return migration had on the country they relocated in. As already mentioned, saving money was for many the only motivation for emigrating to the U.S. Some of the money saved returned with the emigrants, but much of it was sent back to the families in the home country. This
seems to have been a tradition in most European countries.

In Norway the “American money” started to come as early as in the 1850s. The flow of money increased with the years, transmitted as money orders and bank drafts, or by the steamship companies. A calculation from 1905 suggests that 20 million kroner (some 5 million dollars) was sent that year. This may have been a record year, but 12 to 15 million kroner must have been sent every year between 1905 and World War I. These were gifts to relatives and the savings of people who intended to return. The sums were considerable at a time when the total annual imports from the United States were valued at 15 to 18 million kroner, and the Norwegian national budget was only 90 to 100 million kroner. More recent local studies shows that 18 millioner kroner was transmitted as money orders alone to people living in the county of Rogaland for the years 1895 – 1915. And that was not all: immigrants often sent cash in ordinary letters, e. g., special cards with a slot into which a silver dollar could be inserted, put in envelopes and mailed.

In 1920, the peak year, the total received from all emigrant sources in Italy, was estimated at 200 million dollars. Remigrant savings became the principal source of cash in some areas in South Italy. And for many individuals, money meant a chance to improve and enlarge their property. And that is a major fact of return migration: those returning generally went back to rural areas. In Finland it was very rare that groups other than farmers and tenant farmers returned permanently. One investigation showed that only 11.3 % of those classified as workers returned, compared to 57.8 of farmers and 47.1 of tenant farmers. In the small community of Randaberg, just outside Stavanger, 20 percent of the farmers had been to the U.S. according to the Norwegian national census of 1910.

Money also meant climbing the social ladder. In Italy the number of landowners increased by 280,000 from 1901 to 1911. In Swedish Småland village 25% of the real estate was purchased by U.S. dollars from 1897 to 1941. But there were alternative investments as well: In Sweden and Greece large travel agencies were established by returned emigrants; in Romania a returned emigrant established saving banks.

Emigrants who had done well in America sometimes set up endowments or gave large sums of money for the local authorities to build homes for elderly people. Again examples from the county of Rogaland can illustrate this: In 1928 the testamentary inheritance of Ola Ingebreten Erland was used to build an old people´s home in Grinde. Later, in 1987, Rakel Kristin Fossan Nygård, gave 780,000 kroner to her home community Forsand, for the same purpose.

But what did the many emigrants who actually returned do with this money? Speaking in very general terms, land was often the only investment considered. Houses were second in importance, followed by shops or other businesses, and then personal interests such as education, paying back debts, medical care or simply a richer life style. In her book The American Lista. With 110 Volt in the House, [my translation] Siv Ringdal shows how both the building technique and interior decoration of houses in
the small community of Lista on the southern tip of Norway, was influenced by American architecture, standards and design.\textsuperscript{8}

The remigrant also brought home things, like the Singer sewing machine, bicycles and doubled-bitted axes. New logging procedures were introduced in Finland, new fishing methods in Yugoslavia and Norway, just to mention a few things.

And not only things, also the skill and know-how, introducing such American activities like adult education, libraries in Germany and the Dewey system to Norway. Some returned emigrants also engaged in the labor movement after having learned their unionism and radical activism in America. As the Norwegian-American historian Odd S. Lovoll has observed “It is revealing of transatlantic connections that leading Norwegian politicians on the left directly experienced political dissent in America, before engaging in reform efforts at home”.\textsuperscript{9}

Foremost of these was Martin Tranmæl, born to a farming family in Melhus, south of Trondheim in Norway. In March 1900 he emigrated together with his sister to his two elder brothers living in the port city of West Superior in Wisconsin. Then he traveled west to San Francisco before he ended up in Los Angeles. He earned his living along the way as a painter in the building industry and joined his American union, the International Brotherhood of Painters. After a visit to Norway to take part in the elections of 1903 as a political agitator, Tranmæl went back to America for another couple of years until the end of 1905, spending most of his time in Los Angeles. Through his membership in the American Socialist Party and his contacts with the Industrial Workers of the World, Martin Tranmæl brought back to Norway new ideas on Marx’s theory of exploitation and political evening schools. Most important was perhaps a new understanding of the development of capitalism as seen through the many harsh conflicts of these years.\textsuperscript{9}

Other remigrants climbed to top political positions and became the country’s top leaders: Prime minister Johan Nygaardsvold in Norway, who had been a construction worker in the U.S.; Oskari Tokoi became prime minister in Finland after a decade as miner, and Karlis Ulmanis, who returned to Latvia in 1913 after eight years in the United States, became the new country’s first prime minister in 1918 and its president of state in 1936.

Along with their ideas about politics and labor rights, returned emigrants brought home different clothes, words, food and customs. In some countries like Sweden and Norway, remigrants also challenged the traditional state Lutheran churches, establishing Baptist and Methodist congregations. The pioneer among the Methodist preachers in Norway, was O. P. Petersen, a converted seaman who worked on the Bethelship in New York, and upon returning to Norway in 1849 made the city of Fredrikstad his mission field.\textsuperscript{10} Baptism came to Norway via Swedish-American missionaries, and Norwegian Baptists received economic support from both America and Sweden.\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{Conclusion}
From 1908 to 1923 3,498,185 people left the U.S. and returned to Europe.
In Norway J. E. Backer has figured out that between 1890 and 1940 around 155,000 Norwegians relocated in their homeland after some years in the New World. Except for a few standard publications, like the one by Mark Wyman that I have based this article on, Theodore Saloutos’ They Remember America: The Story of the Repatriated Greek – Americans, Dino Cinel’s The National Integration of Italian Return Migration 1870 – 1920, and Keijo Virtanen’s Settlement of Return: Finnish Emigrants (1860-1930) in the International Overseas Migration Movement, to mention some, relatively little has been written about how this phenomenon of return migration has created impulses for bringing about change in Europe.

In Sweden, a former M. P. Hans Lindblad, cast an illuminating light on this theme in his book Tur och Retur Amerika (Round Trip to America). He claims that there is a strong connection between return migration and the growth of Swedish folk movements, and that the returnees brought back impulses that contributed to free enterprise, growth and well-being as well as ideas of the individual’s worth and responsibility. 12

In the Stavanger region, where I have started investigating the extensiveness and impact of return migration, a lot of research need to be done before making any conclusions. However, I assume I run no risk in making the words of Maisa Martin mine: “Remigration contributed to a mingling of cultures which encouraged change as well as helping bring a gradual integration of the cultures of Europe and America”.13

Notes

1 This article is based on Mark Wyman’s book Round Trip to America. The Immigrants Return to Europe, 1880 – 1930. Cornell University Press, New York. 1993. All other sources referred to are listed in the notes.
2 Intervju med Haakon Frank Jenssen, Stavanger 21.03.03.
4 Ingrid Semmingsen, p. 164
6 Ingrid Semmingsen, p. 164
7 Birger Lindanger: Randaberg Gard og Ætt. Vol. II
11 Ingrid Semmingsen: Veien mot vest. Vol. II. P. 485