

Comments on: Dr. Yamamoto Akiyo's
"Reorganization of Gender Relations among
East European Immigrants in the United States:
Realities and Representations"

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Dr. Yamamoto presents us with a fascinating paper exploring the experiences of female Hungarian migrants to the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Acknowledging that those experiences were shaped in part by popular images of immigrants, Dr. Yamamoto also considers the ways in which Hungarian women were represented in the United States. Examining those issues from a range of perspectives, she paints a picture of Hungarian women immigrants as a group who endured considerable social dislocation and hardship, but whose resilience and initiative enabled them to both adapt, and contribute, to their new homeland. Dr. Yamamoto's paper also raises a number of interesting questions concerning American society and culture during a period characterized by dynamic economic growth and challenges to the established political order and culture.

The gendered nature of late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century European migration to the United States has long been apparent to historians. As Dr. Yamamoto notes, however, there are few detailed analyses of individual immigrant women, or of women who belonged to specific national or religious groups. In particular, historians have paid scant attention to the experiences of Hungarian women who migrated to the United States. This paucity of specific secondary studies exploring migrant women's experiences has been only partly addressed by the growth of "women's history" and "gender studies." Dr. Yamamoto's paper helps fill that historiographical lacuna.

Dr. Yamamoto points out that prior to 1911, relatively few Hungarian women migrated to the United States. During the next three years, however, there was a dramatic transformation of immigration from Hungary, so that by the outbreak of World War One, the number of Hungarian women migrating to the United States exceeded the number of male immigrants. This was a significant transformation, which raises several questions. First, it would be useful to have a little more detail about the demographics of Hungarian migration to the United States. Precise statistics are no doubt elusive, but some more detail regarding the numbers of migrants, their marital status, their place of origin in Hungary (beyond the general point that most migrants were from rural areas), as well as the ratio of

male and female migrants, would all be useful for those of us unfamiliar with this particular migration to the United States.

It would be useful, too, to know a little more about the class status of the migrant group under review. Dr. Yamamoto notes that some Hungarian men who had already migrated to the United States sent instructions to family members back in Hungary about how best to dispose of their land. Yet for some men, one of the motives for migration was to send money home to Hungary to enable the family to purchase land or start a business. This implies they enjoyed middle-class, or at least lower-middle-class, status. And certainly the evidence presented in this paper suggests—as we would expect—that most Hungarian migrants belonged to the working, rather than middle classes. That was certainly the view of many other Americans, who resented the involvement of Hungarian and other Eastern European women in the bitter strike actions of the 1890s. Dr. Yamamoto thus has the material at hand to contribute to our understanding of the specific class origins and aspirations of, as well as gender relations amongst, the Hungarian immigrant community in the United States. It would also be helpful to know something about how many of those Hungarians who emigrated made their homes permanently in the United States. How many returned to Hungary? Again, such statistics might be difficult to locate, but even a general sense of the number of “returnees” would enhance the narrative. Finally, it would be interesting to know specifically what happened in 1911 that prompted an increasing number of Hungarian women to migrate to the United States.

Dr. Yamamoto’s case study of Mária Sedlock’s experiences puts a human face on the process of migration. Clearly, women such as Sedlock had relatively few life choices in Hungary, and Dr. Yamamoto is right to point out that emigration was one prospective means of securing material security and greater opportunities. Her description of the relatively “closed” nature of the Hungarian community in Mingo Junction, Ohio, and the consequent pattern of endogamy, was of course not particular to that community at that time. Amongst a range of comparable processes was that which had long occurred on the western frontier of the United States. By the late nineteenth-century Ohio was no longer on the frontier as it was famously, if largely mythically described by Frederick Jackson Turner; but many of the traditions and practices of frontier life persisted long after 1893, when Turner announced the frontier had closed.

The nineteenth century also witnessed the rise of what historians have labeled as “companionate marriage.” For the women—and men—of Dr. Yamamoto’s case study, marriage was more a pragmatic decision than a romantic attachment. If Hungarian migrants to the United States made marital choices largely on the basis of material, rather than romantic considerations, it would be useful to learn a little more about their responses to the development of companionate marriage. For example, did expectations—on the part of Hungarian men as well as women—shift over time, and was romantic love considered to be an “American” phenomenon? If so, was companionate marriage amongst Hungarians a

component of the process of "Americanization."? As Dr. Yamamoto's paper demonstrates, Hungarian immigrants took matters of national loyalty and patriotism very seriously, particularly during the First World War, which not only pitted the Austro-Hungarian Empire against the Allies, but also encouraged Hungarian nationalism and independence.

As part of her broader discussion of gender relations amongst the Hungarian migrant community, Dr. Yamamoto provides an interesting, and at times disconcerting, analysis of the practice of taking in "boarders." Many nineteenth-century American families took in boarders, sometimes to ease the transition for recently-arrived migrants, but usually to supplement the family budget. No doubt, despite the cramped conditions, which afforded little room for private space, the companionship of boarders was often welcomed. However, as Dr. Yamamoto reveals, the companionship that was sometimes expected, and apparently sometimes provided, was of the most intimate kind. Hungarian women who stayed at home to manage households in which there were boarders could be exposed to sexual harassment, extending all the way, in some cases, to expectations that they would provide sexual services to their boarders. This is perhaps the most interesting, and provocative part of Dr. Yamamoto's presentation. As well as raising fundamental questions concerning the nature of domestic economies amongst Hungarian immigrant families (for example, what was the size of migrant families, and were Hungarian migrants able to buy their own property, or did they continue to live in rented accommodation?) she has challenged us to think about the ways in which sexuality was constructed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In effect, Dr. Yamamoto is suggesting that at least some Hungarian women were reduced to a form of prostitution. This, in turn, raises challenging questions concerning the commodification of women—particularly working class, migrant women—in a culture where women were expected to be living symbols of purity, and where gender roles were constantly being challenged by social, political, and economic forces.

Within the inevitable constraints of a conference presentation, Dr. Yamamoto has provided some tantalizing glimpses into the intimate lives of Hungarian migrants. Whilst it is never a straightforward matter to analyze the most private aspect of human behavior, there is scope to press the analysis further. One question that came to mind concerned contraception: if some Hungarian women were resorting to a form of prostitution, were they able to exercise any choice about conception? What forms of contraception were available to them? What, indeed, did they know about family planning?

I wondered, too, about men's role—apart from the obvious one—in all of this. The fact that some Hungarian women were reduced to providing sexual services prompts questions about those who availed themselves of such services: were they Hungarian men, other immigrants, or native-born Americans? Beyond the obvious determination of some men to satisfy their sexual urges, did men think of

all women as sexual objects? Did Hungarian men accept the prevailing cultural norm in the United States, whereby women were regarded as morally superior to men? Did they put “their” women on a pedestal, from which some women apparently fell—albeit with a considerable “push” from sexually predatory men?

The issues that Dr. Yamamoto raises concerning the sexual lives of Hungarian women also prompt further questions regarding relationships between Hungarian women and native-born “American women”—particularly those middle-class women who played such a significant role in shaping cultural norms of womanhood, and who were prominent in the reform movements of the day. This issue can be addressed from two perspectives. In the first instance, it would be fascinating to learn more about the ways in which American feminists thought about, and reacted to, the issues confronting women migrants from Hungary. It is often asserted that the American feminist movement played little attention to the plight of migrant women. Separated from migrant women by language, custom, culture, and class, feminists often found it difficult to understand or empathize with women whom they frequently considered uncultured, uncivilized, and perhaps unfit for the rights of citizenship. Nonetheless, even as the feminist movement focused on the struggle for women’s political rights, there was also a recognition that the underlying culture of sexism that sustained political inequalities could not be separated from that which commodified women and their labor—including their sexual and reproductive labor.

This, in turn, raises questions about the relationship between Progressivism and migrant women. As we all know, and as our students inevitably remind us, Progressivism was an amorphous, often contradictory impulse. Yet if the Progressives did not constitute a coherent “movement,” they did share a number of values, or at least principles. And whilst the feminist movement might equivocate about the role of migrant women in American democracy, Progressive women labored to help migrants and working-class women. No doubt, that form of the Progressive spirit was less in evidence in smaller town, or rural areas, but in large urban centers such as Chicago and New York women such as Jane Addams devoted themselves to helping those less fortunate than themselves. Their activism sometimes reflected a middle-class distaste for what they considered as the “dirty” habits of the migrant women forced to live in overcrowded, unhealthy conditions, and much of their work centered around teaching working-class women—who were often migrant women—how to maintain their domestic environments and their families in a healthy condition. Progressive women—including a few middle-class Hungarian women who involved themselves in the reform movements of the day—were thus seeking to extend their vision of women as protectors of the nation’s physical and spiritual welfare, and as the essential guardians of the next generation of Americans, to the millions of women who arrived in the United States from the nations of Europe—including Hungary.

In that context it is implausible that Progressive women were not appalled by

the sexual abuse of migrant women. Adding to this clash of sexual values was the fact that during the post-bellum period a "purity crusade" sought to regulate—and ultimately abolish—prostitution and other forms of what was regarded as sexual deviance. Purity crusaders' complementary attempts to regulate contraception, and to prevent the distribution of information about contraception—including the passage in 1873 of the notorious Comstock Law—suggested the extent to which many middle-class reformers were alarmed by what they regarded as sexual promiscuity and the debasement of womanhood.

It is beyond the scope of Dr. Yamamoto's current paper to provide a detailed investigation of where Hungarian migrant women in the United States fit into this complicated and sometimes contradictory culture of proscription and fear. But I hope she is able to consider these questions in her future work. Similarly, Dr. Yamamoto has provided us with fascinating clues regarding the ways in which Hungarian women conformed to, and challenged, the prevailing culture of "separate spheres." At the same time as some Hungarian migrant women found employment outside the home, others were little more than domestic slaves, confined to the private sphere, and with few opportunities to participate in or engage with public life. The notion of separate spheres, and the domestic ideology that sustained the distinction between "private" and "public" was in large measure a cultural construct, rather than an accurate reflection or description of how most women lived their lives. Yet even as cultural constructs, domesticity and the celebration of women's role in the private sphere, and the distinct women's networks they encouraged, were powerful influences, and represented ideals to which many women aspired. For Hungarian women during the early twentieth century, determined to prove their fidelity to their new nation, even as they continued to value their Hungarian origins, domesticity comprised a fundamental aspect of the American "ideology." Dr. Yamamoto is to be congratulated for giving us so much to think about.