

NASSS 2008 Professional Conference Sunday, July 27  
at Nanzan University, Nagoya Campus Social Science  
Sectional Conference II Report

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Presentation: "Reorganization of Gender Relations among East European Immigrants in the United States: Realities and Representations" by Yamamoto Akiyo

Comments by Chris Dixon

As a commentator, Prof. Chris Dixon asked three major questions about Prof. Yamamoto's paper.

First of all, Prof. Dixon asked for precise statistics, which might show "a little more detail about the demographics of Hungarian migration to the United States." Secondly, he inquired about the Hungarians' response to the development of companionate marriage in the United States. Did they think of it as a part of the Americanization process? Thirdly, Prof. Dixon questioned the so-called "sexual services" allegedly provided by immigrant women in boarding houses. He wondered if this aspect of immigrant life would have been compatible with American norms of womanhood in the Progressive Era. Prof. Dixon also made a comment concerning this last question on the sexuality of female Hungarians. He suggested that the relationship between immigrant women and middle-class American feminists deserves further attention.

Replying to the first question, Prof. Yamamoto provided basic statistical information. By quoting official records compiled both on American and European shores of the Atlantic, she speculated that the number of Hungarian immigrants before World War I could be some two million and that one third of them were women. The number of those female immigrants drastically increased around the year 1910 partly because of a "growing demand for female labor" by U. S. industry. She also mentioned the ratio of returnees and the marital status of Hungarian migrants. In answering the second question, Prof. Yamamoto expressed her opinion that companionate marriage developed among Hungarians in the 1920s mainly because of the growing influence of the American way of life. She concluded that the process of Americanization enabled the Hungarian community to accept companionate marriage. On the third question of prostitution by immigrant women, she showed us several historical instances which suggested how female sexuality and male-female relations had been in the

East European enclaves of American cities.

At the beginning of the question and answer session, Prof. Jennifer Lee extended her comments and questions. First of all, Prof. Lee expressed her high appraisal of Prof. Yamamoto's paper in that it made women active agents of the immigration process through a fine gender perspective. Prof. Lee also asked three sets of questions: 1) How were the perceptions of male Hungarians transformed in the period before and after World War I? 2) What were the class differences among Hungarian women in the United States? How did Americans view Hungarians according to their class status? 3) How did Hungarian immigrants construct their white ethnic identity? How did they view African American women and African Americans in general?

Prof. Yamamoto answered by pointing out that class differences in the Hungarian community were large, but that middle class leaders organized their working class compatriots around strong causes such as the building of the Kossuth Statue. She also mentioned that the racial identity of Hungarians was transformed by the 1950s when they encountered African American migrants in Northern cities.

From the floor, Mr. Moriyama Takahito of Kyoto University offered two questions. The first was about why Prof. Yamamoto chose Hungarians out of many other Eastern European peoples to prove her thesis. His second question was on association activities by immigrant women. Why were they so significant to female immigrants? Prof. Yamamoto replied that the most intriguing point about Hungarian immigrants was that they were an extremely diverse kind of people in terms of race, ethnicity and religion. On the second question, she stressed that female Hungarians established their own independent associations during World War I and they became more and more important in the post-war Hungarian community.

Prof. Tanaka Kei, from Niigata University inquired whether the proximate marriage practices of Hungarians in Prof. Yamamoto's paper had generated any racial prejudices among American people. Prof. Tanaka also wondered if Hungarian "savageness," a term often used in late 19<sup>th</sup> century newspaper articles had any racial connotations. In response to the question, Prof. Yamamoto referred to the press coverage during Homestead strike in which the savageness of Hungarians was compared to that of Asian immigrants.

Prof. Takenaka Koji, from Tohoku University asked a question about "savageness" too. He wondered if the term which expressed racial discrimination was originally invented in Europe. In answering the question, Prof. Yamamoto mentioned that Hungarians in the U. S. suffered from racial prejudice that assumed their proximity to the Huns, a symbol of anti-European culture.

Prof. Okuyama Michiaki, from Nanzan University inquired about the concept of Eastern Europe itself. He wondered if it had a special connotation in an American context. How can we define Eastern Europe in history? Did the concept come from self-identification or was it a label applied from the outside?

In response to these questions, Prof. Yamamoto referred to the recent rise of central European identity among Czechs and Slovaks to show the transforming concept of East European.

Finally, Prof. Jennifer Lee made additional comments on the discussion. She pointed out that the concept of Asian-Americans was made and labeled in the United States. So, in actuality, most Asian-Americans identify themselves more ethnically like Chinese and Koreans. Prof. Lee suggested there could be some similarity in the cases of East Europeans. Prof. Tanaka Kei made an additional contribution by citing Japanese-American examples.

Through the lively discussion in this session on Hungarian women in America, we had a great opportunity to reconsider the meaning of divisions within the immigrant community, such as race, gender, class, ethnicity and religion. Furthermore, these examinations led us to a more general academic stage in which we can conceptualize ethnicity by working on the identity and labeling of migrating peoples.