

## DEBATING VISIBILITY: *Race and Visibility in the Finnish-American Press in 1908*

### Abstract

This article examines Finnish-American press debates on “Finnishness” in the United States in the aftermath of a 1907 miners’ strike on the Mesabi Range of northern Minnesota. Finnish workers had an extremely visible presence in the picket lines. The strike helped in dividing Finnish migrants into two hostile groups, conservatives and radicals, which disagreed vehemently on the question of how Finns should be seen by “Americans”, an often vaguely defined group of people. As the article concludes, Finnish migrants’ understandings of how “Finnishness” should be seen in the United States in the early 1900s were not uniform but a complex mix of different cultural and ideological strains. The paper has broader implications on studies of migrants’ contestations over their visibility in media.

### Keywords

Visibility • migration • Finnish Americans • race • media

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## 1 Introduction

During the last decades, there has been a growing interest in the study of whiteness and race amidst historians of European migration into the United States, with many historians noting the importance of the categories of “race” and “whiteness” in the assimilation of European migrants. As migrants learned to “claim their whiteness”, scholars have argued, nativist hostility against eastern and southern European migrants subsided, and migrants and their descendants became accepted as “white” Americans. By claiming for themselves a share of white privilege, migrants worked to make themselves less visible targets for American nativist sentiments (see e.g. Ignatiev 1995; Jacobson 1998; Roediger 2005).

While there is much truth in this characterization, there is still little research on the ways in which European migrants themselves understood the concept of “race” or how they sought to control the ways in which they were seen “racially” by the U.S. political establishment, media or economic elites (for a recent exception, see Zecker 2013). This article examines the debates on “Finnishness” in the United States that occurred in the Finnish-American press in the aftermath of the 1907 strike on the Mesabi Range. The article contributes to burgeoning scholarly discussions on “visibility” by examining migrant media as a forum for debates on and contestation of migrant visibility in the host society. In this article, “visibility” is employed as a useful metaphor or shorthand to refer to a complex and multifaceted phenomenon: How a certain category of people is represented in the media or other spheres of publicity. The article is not, however, much preoccupied with the “actual” representation

of Finns in the U.S. media. Rather, it examines the ways in which Finnish migrants themselves, in a certain historical context, strove to change the way they were portrayed in the United States and how they imagined the broader category of “Americans” to whom they wanted to show their moral worth.

In studying Finnish migrants’ differing conceptions of their own visibility in the U.S., it is useful to concentrate on a period when there was a sense of crisis regarding the portrayal of Finns in the United States. The aftermath of the 1907 miners’ strike in northern Minnesota provides an example of such period. The 1907 strike helped in dividing Finnish migrants into two hostile groups: the conservative Church Finns who opposed the strike and the radical Red Finns who supported and participated in the strike. The strike was widely condemned in Minnesota’s mainstream press and Finns were often pinpointed in the press as the main perpetrators of the strike. Hostility towards Finns had a racial angle as well: Finns were often depicted as belonging to the “Mongolian” race, which was used to explain their unbecoming behaviour. This bad publicity that Finns made for themselves in Minnesota’s English-language press resulted in a heated debate within the Finnish migrant community about the visibility of Finns in the U.S. society.

One of the points of contention from early on was the cultural and racial position of Finns in the United States. Race was an important contemporary category for making sense of social reality and constructing hierarchies, and new migrant groups to the early-1900s U.S. were often scrutinized by native-born whites with recourse to racial discourses (Higham 1968). Little wonder, then, that “race”

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emerged as an issue in debates on Finnishness in early-1900s Minnesota as well. For conservative Finns, the real or imagined anti-Finnish sentiment amidst Minnesota's native-born Americans was a telltale sign of the threat of socialism to the "Western" credentials of Finns. Socialists, for their part, dwelled less on this question of Finnish respectability as a nationality. They did, however, put forward a criticism that turned the conservative arguments on their head: it was through adopting the rational ideology of socialism and by organizing in labour unions that Finns could best showcase to native-born American workers that they, too, could perform the role of an organized "American worker". While it is, then, important to study how migrants made sense of "race" and their own position within U.S. racial hierarchies, it is equally important to take stock of other forms of categorizations—such as class or civilization—that were employed by migrants when claiming belonging in U.S. society.

This paper illustrates that European migrants' attempts to control their visibility in the eyes of "Americans" were not done in uniform manner: conservative and leftist migrants often disagreed as to who exactly were the "Americans" to whom they should show their moral worth. What is more, this article complicates any easy assumptions about migrants' understanding of the nebulous category of race. The question of race was an important part of the anti-Finnish sentiment in early-1900s Minnesota, but Finnish migrants did not share a common outlook on the matter. For some, the issue of race was clearly irrelevant or incomprehensible, as they sidestepped the concept completely. Others understood the significance of the concept in U.S. society, but did not necessarily connect the concept to any understandings of biological inferiority. Rather, a superior racial position was seen in civilizational and behavioural terms. Finally, racism implicit in the race debate did not go uncontested: socialist newspapers published articles that openly ridiculed the scientific pretensions of U.S. racism and suggested that Finnish migrants steer clear from any pretensions of racial superiority.

## 2 Data and Methods

The data of this paper consist of articles published in Finnish-American newspapers during the spring of 1908 that commented on the image of Finns in the United States. The material includes articles published both in the conservative press (mainly in Duluth, Minnesota-based *Amerikan kaiku* ["The Echo of America"]) and the radical press (mainly in Hancock, Michigan-based *Työmies* ["The Working Man"]). *Amerikan kaiku* was a conservative newspaper founded in 1905 in Brooklyn, New York, but later transferred to Duluth, Minnesota, where it served as an outlet for Iron Range's religious and politically conservative Finns. *Työmies*, for its part, was founded in 1903 in Worcester, Massachusetts, as the first explicitly socialist Finnish-language newspaper in the United States. The newspaper relocated to Hancock, Michigan, in 1905, and became the voice of Midwestern Finnish socialists. In later years, *Työmies* became known as the mouthpiece of more left-wing Finnish socialists, while its east coast counterpart, *Raivaaja* ["The Pioneer"], was more social democratic in its line. The article makes also use of some articles published in the English-language *Duluth News-Tribune*, one of the leading newspapers of northeastern Minnesota.

The material was gathered from microfilmed runs of these newspapers. I have systematically gone through articles and news stories published in the newspapers between January and May of 1908. This was a time of intense debate between socialists and anti-socialists about the image of Finns in the United States, and I have

included every article and news story that comments on this theme in my material. My analysis will concentrate on the close reading of those articles that explicitly discuss the racial position of Finns in the United States. Eight articles—four from the conservative press and four from the radical press—have been chosen for a closer reading in this article.

## 3 Visibility of Migrants: Nativism and Racialization

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a category of people referred to as "immigrants" became perhaps more visible than ever in U.S. politics. To be sure, the United States had been a major destination of mobile workers for much of the nineteenth century and anti-immigrant agitation as such was not a novel phenomenon. Still, the politicization of anti-immigration sentiment, or nativism, of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was in many ways a more intensive affair than previous waves of anti-foreign agitation. Especially suspect for nativists were foreign radicals, anarchists and socialists who were seen increasingly not as mere nuisances but more ominously as threats to national security. Migrant support for the Socialist Party of America (founded in 1901) and the increase in anarchist acts of terror—most prominent among them the 1901 assassination of President William McKinley by a Polish-American anarchist—were portrayed by many anti-immigration intellectuals, politicians and journalists as testaments to the radical proclivities of migrants and the threat that their radicalism posed for U.S. society.

But while the anti-radical strain of U.S. nativist thought gained a new lease on life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the anti-radical argument alone was not entirely convincing as grounds for any wholesale restriction of immigration. After all, only a minority of migrants were actually involved in radical politics—a point made routinely by the opponents of restriction, native-born and migrant alike—which easily made attacks on *all* migrants for the actions of a few appear unreasonable and unjust. Indeed, while the 1901 assassination of President McKinley did ignite small-scale nativist fury against foreigners, much of the nation's press soon concurred that not all migrants were to blame for the activities of an anarchist minority (Higham 1968: 111). While anti-radicalism was, then, a major part of the ideological mix that made up turn-of-the-century U.S. nativism, it alone was not sufficient in giving anti-immigration sentiment the potency it started to have already in the pre-World War I period.

What gave anti-immigration sentiment much of its potent political force was the racialization of the debate on southern and eastern European immigration. Already in the 1890s, some individual scholars and politicians had started to use racial language in their support for the restriction of unwanted European immigration. Henry Cabot Lodge, an influential Massachusetts historian, Congressman, and one of the leading intellectuals of U.S. nativism, argued in a 1891 study that new immigration from the non-Anglo-Saxon parts of Europe threatened "a great and perilous change in the very fabric of our race" (quoted in Higham 1968: 142). In the early 1890s, Lodge was still rather unique in his way of combining anti-immigration arguments with European racial theories, but his fulminations against immigration of the "lesser races" of Europe would soon prove pioneering. In the early 1900s, intellectuals in favour of immigration restriction started to increasingly draw on European scholarly discussions on eugenics and racial anthropology. While it was not until Madison Grant's 1916 magnum opus, *The Passing of the Great Race*, that this racial

nativist strain received its most sophisticated treatment in print, the pre-World War I years already saw a discernable increase in racist nativism (Higham 1968: 149–157).

As anti-immigration intellectuals, politicians and journalists increasingly casted southern and eastern Europeans as a racial threat, there was no short supply of analogies and parallels for such racialization of unwanted strangers. Immigration from China's Guangdong province to the west coast of the United States had been depicted in racial terms by local politicians, labour unions and common workers at least from the 1850s onwards. As historian Erika Lee (2003: 35) has noted, the nativist arguments regarding the unassimilability and racial inferiority of the Chinese were extended with relative ease to other migrant and minority groups, such as the Japanese and Mexicans—and, from the 1890s onwards to southern and eastern European migrants as well. As the demand for restriction of European migration gathered steam in the early 1900s, the analogies between Asian and non-Anglo-Saxon European migrants were often made explicitly. Italian migrants, for example, were referred to by some North American labour activists as “the Chinese of Europe” or “European coolies” (Lee 2003: 35).

Other, more scholarly oriented nativists sought to go beyond metaphors and argue that certain purportedly European migrant groups were, in fact, Asians. Drawing on vogue European racial theories, they insisted that while residing technically *in* Europe, some Slavic, Semitic, Turkic and Finnic peoples had been so intermingled with the “Mongolian races” of the Eurasian steppe that they were not of Europe in any real, racial sense (Lee 2003: 35). “Who reflects that, with Chinese and Japanese, Finns and Magyars, Bulgars and Turks,” sociologist and anti-immigrant activist Edward Ross, for example, wondered in 1914, “about half a million more or less Mongolian in blood have cast their lot with us and will leave their race stamp upon the American people of the future?” (quoted in Kivisto & Leinonen 2011: 18).

As the Ross quote suggests, Finnish migrants were also often depicted as belonging to that vague group of eastern Europeans whose racial heritage was not entirely unambiguous. Already, the classic European racial theorists of the nineteenth century had categorized Finns as belonging to a yellow or a Mongolian race in their widely read racial mappings of the humankind—most famously by the French aristocrat Arthur de Gobineau in his highly influential *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853–1855) (Kemiläinen 1998). While these European theorists' ideas on Finnish racial Asianness were, then, reproduced by some U.S. intellectuals in their musings on race, it bears mentioning that not all U.S. racial theorists agreed about Finns' position in the European racial order. The influential economist William Z. Ripley, for example, maintained that Finns, along with Scandinavians, were of “Teuton” background in his tripartite division of Europeans into “Teuton,” “Alpine” and “Mediterranean” races (Kivisto & Leinonen 2011).

But while European racial theories started to have an increasing influence amidst U.S. anti-immigration activists in the early years of the 1900s, it was not this scholarly discussion alone that gave racial nativism its popular potency in the pre-World War I period. Rather, nativism emerged as a more commonly shared ideology as anti-immigrant ideas became conflated with popular racism (Higham 1968: 167–175). In the midwest, the anti-immigrant sentiment and the racialization of Finnish migrants were often fuelled by imagined or real proximities of these migrants with the region's Native American population (Ronning 2006). This was especially evident in northern Minnesota where the bustling mining industry had attracted tens of thousands of migrants and that still had a relatively visible Native

American presence. “Indian savagery, an atavism identified by whites in Indians' supposed frequent and violent drunkenness, indolence, sloth, clannishness, predilection for communism and stubborn occupation of undeveloped land in the face of inexorable, market-driven change”, Gerald Ronning (2006: 360) notes, “provided an easily comprehensible archetype transposable to the immigrant workers of the Range”. Alleged similarities between Finns and Indians in alcohol consumption patterns, their seemingly shared propensity for living in the wilderness of northern Minnesota forests and their supposedly uniform practices of magic and shamanism all contributed to Anglo-American Minnesotans' stereotypical characterizations of Finnish migrants as “jackpine savages”—as migrants whose national traits made them more akin to Indians than Europeans. Coupled with these cultural stereotypes, the notion of Finnish racial Asianness promoted by much of the contemporary racial theorizing was bound to further elevate beliefs in Finns' natural proclivity to savagery and brutishness (Ronning 2006: 368–376).

The ideas regarding Finns' savagery did not develop in a social vacuum, of course, but were very much intertwined with early twentieth century Minnesota's political and labour strife. As the state had in the late nineteenth century developed into one of the major mining regions of the United States, much of the state's northern Iron Range had ended up under the control of the powerful Oliver Mining Company. The company sought to assert a quasi-colonial control over the ore-rich landscape and the workers on its payroll, the majority of whom were of recent migrant background—Italians, Poles, Finns and South Slavs. Unionization was vehemently discouraged by the company, and any incipient attempts at industrial action to improve the dismal working conditions, to shorten the working day or to increase wages were rapidly smothered by the authorities and the company henchmen. In 1907, the company was able to smother a major strike declared by the Western Federation of Miners in support of an 8-hour day and a wage increase (Karni 1977; Ross 1977).

While the strike attracted support from all migrant workers of the Iron Range, it was especially popular amidst the area's Finns, who comprised some 75% of the 10,000–16,000 striking workers. As U.S. companies of the time generally assessed and managed their workers as national or racial collectives, gauging the qualities and abilities of an individual worker through his or her “racial” or “national” background (Roediger & Esch 2012), the visibility of Finns in the picket lines was commonly taken as proof of Finns' natural proclivity to rabble-rousing and radicalism. This coupling of Finnishness with radicalism led the company to shun Finnish workers after the strike, with many Finns blacklisted by the company and refused work after 1907. “All the races employed on the Vermilion Range [adjacent to the Mesabi Range] are good laborers except [the Finns]”, a mining company superintendent estimated the qualities of Finnish workers to a government inspector a year after the strike. “Their people are good laborers but trouble breeders. [...] [T]hey are a race that tries to take advantage of the companies at every opportunity and are not to be trusted” (quoted in Karni 1977: 78–79).

These sentiments towards Finnish radicals on Minnesota's Iron Range culminated in an attempt by a Minnesota District Attorney to deny all Finns the right to naturalize as U.S. citizens on racial grounds. This attempt took place in January 1908 as John Svan, a socialist Finn, and 15 other Finns had applied for citizenship but had had their naturalization papers rejected by the District Attorney John C. Sweet. The reason for this rejection was Sweet's contention that Finns were “Mongols” and thus ineligible for naturalization, restricted as this right was to “free white persons” and to “aliens of African nativity and persons of African descent”. Reflecting the extent

to which many contemporaries associated political beliefs with racial essence, Sweet depicted the socialistic ideology of Finnish radicals as an “East Asian philosophy,” testifying to the Asiatic frame of mind of Finns as a people. The case was ultimately thrown out of court by Judge William Cant who maintained that while Finns had been racially mixed, miscegenation had resulted in Finns becoming one of the “whitest people in Europe” (Kivisto & Leinonen 2011). Despite this conclusion, Minnesota’s conservative Finns were shook by the John Svan case. During the following months, Minnesota’s Finnish migrants debated vehemently on the question of how “Finnishness” was to be understood in the United States, with the conservatives and radicals of the community becoming ever more hostile towards each other.

## 4 Debating Visibility: Visibility and Race in the Finnish-American Press

Scholarship on Finnish American history has often noted that the heated arguments following the 1907 Mesabi Range strike were in many ways the final breaking point in the relations between the conservative “Church Finns” and the radical “Red Finns,” setting off a frenzied animosity between the two factions. “The strike was a crucial event that helped to stimulate the intense internecine conflict that was to characterize Finnish-American life for several decades”, Peter Kivisto (1984: 103) has noted. While the conflict between the two groups of Finns has been often characterized as an internal skirmish within the migrant community, a major part of the squibbing was the image that Finns presented of themselves to the wider public. Both factions argued that it was the other that had ruined the reputation of their nationality in the eyes of “Americans”. What is more, both factions hoped that the damage done could be fixed and Finns might still be accepted within the boundaries of a wider U.S. polity. The below analysis takes stock of these arguments and discerns the vehement points of disagreement between the two sides.

### 4.1 Conservatives and Finnish Visibility

What had most shaken Finnish American conservatives in the strike of 1907 was how Finns were portrayed in Minnesota’s English-language media. As Finnish workers had been in the forefront of the strike, much of the ire of the area’s businessmen, politicians and media was directed at Finns. *Mesaba Ore* of Hibbing, Minnesota, for example, noted in a front page story about a strike demonstration that “fully ninety percent of those in line were Finlanders – fiery followers of the Red Flag” (quoted in Karni 1977: 76). The bourgeoisie newspapers were critical of all strikers, but as Finns were so conspicuous a presence in the picket lines they were often singled out for especial scrutiny.

Some Minnesota newspapers, particularly those farther away from the heady atmosphere of the strike, adopted a somewhat more considered approach to Finnish radicalism, seeking to explain Finns’ proclivity for rabble-rousing with their historical background. “[T]he largest number of Mesabi workers came from Finland, in the frozen north, a land where Russia’s oppression has bred a hatred of government and a rampant form of socialism”, a Minneapolis newspaper remarked. “No more dangerous fusing of raw material could be devised it seems” (quoted in Karni 1977: 77). Gendered and sexual imagery was also prominent. The coverage of the strike in Duluth’s main newspaper, for example, made much of the

unseemly presence of Finnish women in the strike demonstrations. “Finns March Through Streets of Sparta, Led by Amazon Bearing the Emblem of Anarchy—Other Females Also Sport the Gory Color”, ran one title (*Duluth News-Tribune* 1907b). Another article that appeared during the strike identified Finnish-ran brothels on the Range as “hotbeds of socialism”, where “the women are red hot socialists and help to inflame the Finnish mind” (*Duluth News-Tribune* 1907a).

For conservative Finns, this coupling of Finnishness with anarchism and labour radicalism was hard to swallow. In a letter to the editors of Duluth’s leading newspaper, *Duluth News-Tribune*, John Saari, a Finnish member of the Minnesota legislature, protested the newspaper’s proclivity to blame all Finns for the sins of a loud minority. Saari noted that the newspaper had classed “Finns as being common prostitutes, living in lust and infamy and running blind pigs [i.e., speakeasies] and other immoral joints”. “It appears to be the policy of the Duluth newspapers”, the writer lamented, “to generally represent the Finnish people in the most detestable light” (Saari 1907). “While it is true”, Saari conceded, “that many of the Finnish miners are participating in this strike, I cannot but enter a strong protest against the manner in which the Duluth papers are maliciously and indiscriminately blaming the Finnish people for everything that has or may occur in connection with it”. Saari pleaded to the editors that they would “send someone [sic] to make an investigation as to the domestic, moral, and social affairs and the ideals of the Finnish people as a whole”, so that they could establish that Finns were “law-abiding citizens” (Saari 1907). While the newspaper promised in its response to Saari to make a clear distinction in its strike coverage between decent Finns and their more radical brethren (*Duluth News-Tribune* 1907c), conservative Finns continued to be shaken by the bad name Finns had made for themselves in the eyes of “Americans”.

The willingness of conservative Finns to showcase their nationality as good “law-abiding citizens” became especially acute in the wake of the John Svan trial of January 1908 as Finns’ right to citizenship had actually been challenged. While this challenge seems in retrospect to have been doomed from the start (no European migrant group before or after the John Svan trial had their whiteness challenged, let alone revoked, in an U.S. court of law), the contemporaries were obviously much less certain about the matter. One journalist for a conservative newspaper, for example, noted that while a contrary decision by the court would have been “senseless”, it was entirely in the realm of the possible if only the judge would have been “some man hostile to the Finns”. The writer noted that the attempt to rob Finns of the right to citizenship with the “Mongolian question” could be made again with a different outcome. Assigning Finns to the status of Mongolians might not only deny them of U.S. citizenship but also heavily restrict their migration to the United States. Even worse, Americans would be tempted to associate Finns with the looming “yellow danger” in the Pacific. “What would be the fate of the Finns if Americans were led to believe that the Finns are Mongolians”, the writer queried, “and then a war with Japan was to break out? Then the life of a Finn would not be worth much in this country. Because the war between America and Japan would not only be a war between two states but also a war between two races (—s 1908)”. As these fears demonstrate, many conservative Finns were utterly shocked by the John Svan case and imagined a future where Finns would be lumped together with “the Mongols” as a real possibility.

While the conservative activists of the Finnish migrant community were, then, worried about the John Svan case and its implications for Finns’ ability to naturalize as citizens, there was no clear or uniform understanding about the concept of “race”. In later years, conservative Finnish migrants would come to display a

strong willingness to “prove” Finnish whiteness by explicitly denying that Finns were “yellow” by race and colour (see e.g. Kivisto & Leinonen 2011), but this understanding of race-as-colour cannot not be read backwards in time (see e.g. Jacobson 1998). In 1908, Finnish migrants were still rather unknowledgeable about theories of racial heredity or anthropology, with “race”, as they understood it, having more to do with behavioural traits and the level of civilizational development than with notions of biological inferiority or superiority.

This understanding of race as a civilizational and behavioural affair was common amidst other recently immigrated groups as well. In her discussion of Syrian migrants’ socialization into U.S. racial and ethnic discourses, Sarah Gualtieri has noted that when first countering challenges to their status as whites in America, Syrians often formulated their claims for whiteness with preexisting notions of difference. Reared in the Ottoman *millet* system that stressed religious affiliation over other forms of difference, early Syrian migrants sought to counter Americans’ suspicions as to their racial standing by emphasizing their devout Christianity and millennial traditions of civilization. It was only later that Syrians learned to define their whiteness by stressing their difference to blacks and Asians (Gualtieri 2009: 69–72).

In accordance with this civilizational and behavioural understanding of race, the Finnish conservative activists who sought to prove Finnish fitness for citizenship in the aftermath of the John Svan trial dwelled little on racial theory and more on civil behaviour. It was the unruly behaviour of socialist Finns, these conservatives argued, that was to blame for the recent attacks on Finns’ racial status in the United States. For the conservative writer who had conjured up the image of Finns becoming involuntary victims of the impending race war between Japan and the United States, for example, it was through a change in behavioural patterns that Finnish Americans could best avoid the Mongolian stigma and the calamities that were sure to ensue. “Those citizens who have with their unthinking activities brought about this anti-Finnish hostility amidst Americans have put Finns in a great danger”, the writer argued, and it was only by “quitting the gamble that few daredevils are playing with the happiness of our people” that Finns could throw off the threat of being denied the U.S. citizenship on racial grounds (—s 1908). “What is certain”, another conservative writer bellowed, “is that our socialist group’s course of action must change, because the national-minded [Finns] in this country will never allow that our revolutionaries with their rowdiness put our nationality into the position of the Chinese” (Amerikan kaiku 1908c). The suggestion that simple “rowdiness” of socialists might lead to the demotion of Finns’ racial status was illustrative of the extent to which many Finns understood race in behavioural terms.

In 1908, “race” was, then, a rather nebulous and incoherent concept for many Finnish migrants; they were more comfortable in claiming their belonging to the United States with religious and civilizational concepts. As Finnish conservatives mounted a large-scale campaign in Minnesota and Michigan in the spring of 1908 to advertise their fitness for citizenship to Anglo-Americans and to denounce the activities of their socialist brethren, they organized special “Citizens’ Councils” for concerned Finnish Americans to correct Anglo-Americans’ purportedly distorted view of Finns. The councils were led by clerics and other prominent non-socialist Finns and they were “intent on redressing what they saw as the harm socialists had done to the Finnish community” (Kivisto 1984: 103). The aim of the councils was to correct the “false” image Minnesotans had of Finns. The emphasis of this corrective effort was on convincing Anglo-Americans and other nationalities of Finns’ decency and civility

and on isolating radicals from the rest of the migrant community. The statement issued by the Citizens’ Committee condemned socialism as “Eastern-Asian barbarianism” and declared:

We abhor and condemn the actions of the Socialists in their past acts and inflammatory speeches disgracing the Christian Religion and civilization, tending to destroy the moral and chaste welfare of home and society, laying the foundations for atheism, corruption and anarchy [...] Therefore, let it be resolved that on behalf of the majority of the Finns, that we can no longer silently bear the loss of the employers’ confidence which has been caused by the instigation of the Socialists, and on the returning of that confidence depends the success and welfare of our homes (quoted in Kivisto 1984: 103–104).

In contrasting socialists’ “Eastern-Asian barbarianism” with the Christian morals and civilizational attainments of conservatives, the statement of the Citizens’ Council illustrates the salience of the concepts of religion and civilization for conservative Finns. For them, it was the “atheism,” “corruption” and “anarchy” of their socialist compatriots that had brought Finns into bad repute in the eyes of “Americans” and it was through the alienation of these elements from the Finnish community that Finns might regain their respectability.

#### 4.2 Socialists and Finnish Visibility

While Finnish socialists were not as concerned as conservatives about the acceptance of the mainstream media, politicians or company bosses of Finns’ credentials as “good citizens”, they were keenly interested in the acceptance of another group of native-born Americans, that is, the labour movement and the Socialist Party of America. For Finnish socialists, it was the role that Finnish workers had played as “scabs” in past labour struggles that had tarnished the reputation of Finns in the eyes of “American workers”, and it was now the prerogative of Finns in the United States to do their utmost in changing this perception of Finns. While Finns had been respected in the past by the American bourgeoisie, one socialist writer noted, “the ‘Finns’ had a terrible reputation” amidst American workers. “They were considered the lowliest people in many places. The Finns really were famous – as scabs. [...] Finnishness was, then, manna for the exploiters, but it was bitter bile for the wage slaves”. It was only when Finns have embraced socialism *en masse* that the bad name they had made for themselves would start to evaporate. “The real value of the Finns – if we are for a moment ardent ‘nationals’ – has risen only during the past few years and it is all thanks to socialism. [...] The Finnishness that has been trampled here to a disgusting mire has now been elevated to the heights of its honorability, and it is all thanks to international social democracy” (—pi 1908).

Socialist Finns generally interpreted the accusations of Finnish “Mongolianness” as bourgeois attacks against socialists. The editors of a Massachusetts socialist paper ridiculed the scientific credentials of the claims of Finnish “Mongolianness” and saw racial categories as mere reflections of the social status that a given migrant group had in the eyes of American capitalists: “This research of racial origin might be a bit unscientific, but it works for Americans. The results of this kind of science are the following: If we Finns are the humble servants of the Republicans, then the blood that flows in our veins is of a Germanic variety – we are ‘white-skinned[.]’ [B]ut if we are unionists or socialists, then we are ‘black sheep’, ‘Mongolians’, maybe even ‘blackamoors’”. The socialist editors

dismissed promulgations of racial pride as vacuous and at odds with the more important notion of one's pride as a worker. "We do not give a hoot about what race we are – the main thing is that we are people, people who lift their noses from the dirt, who are not against other workers when living in this country as workers" (Raivaaja 1908).

It is naturally true that this socialist nonchalance regarding the racial status of Finns was in part a reflection of the rather secure legal whiteness of Finns in the United States; not "giving a hoot" about one's racial position was a luxury that most African or Asian Americans, for example, could ill afford (see e.g. Fox & Guglielmo 2012). The critical distance that socialist Finns adopted towards racial theories in the United States did, however, also reflect the real reserve with which many radical Finns regarded any notions of racial or national superiority. Proletarian internationalism offered an alluring vision of the world for many contemporary migrant socialists, but it was often also the experience of being a "foreigner" that made some migrants retain a critical distance from racist discourses, associated as they were with nativist hostility.

But for some Finnish socialists, the universality of their internationalism did have its limits, and, in a certain irony, these limits were often drawn in a manner similar to their conservative rivals: against "Asians". In their attempts to prove themselves as good, organized socialists in the eyes of the U.S. labour organizations and the Socialist Party, Finnish socialists had to do their utmost to shake off the image of Finns as "scabs" and "strikebreakers"; in other words, as workers who were not capable of organizing themselves and of fighting for decent standard of living like other American workers. This attempt required that Finnish workers distance themselves from those migrant workers who assumedly did fit this bill. For the early 1900s U.S. socialists, the group that was the most despised for its purported inability to organize and live like "white workers" was "the Orientals". The movement for Chinese exclusion in California and elsewhere in the western United States had relied heavily on labour support, and as the question of the Japanese exclusion heated up in the early 1900s, the conservative labour movement and also the more radical Socialist Party were again united in their opposition to immigration of "Orientals". This opposition mixed economic, cultural and racial arguments. Morris Hillquit, a leading Party theoretician, wanted to see the gates closed from "all backward races", while another theoretician, Victor Berger, was insistent that he would "fight for my wife and children [...] for all your wives and children" against "Asiatic immigration". When the Socialist International in its 1907 Stuttgart conference decreed that its member parties should work to organize migrant workers, the Socialist Party of America adopted a different course of action and continued in its opposition to the migration and organization of Asian workers (Daniels 1962: 30).

The entrance of the Finnish Socialist Federation to the Socialist Party of America in 1906 coincided with these debates on the "Asian question". While Finnish socialists did assent to the general line of the Party on the question, there was some internal squabbling. These tensions emerged in a debate on the pages of the socialist *Työmies* just days after the John Svan case in January 1908 when one socialist Finn, J. Fellström, critiqued the Socialist Party's position on the "Asian question" as detrimental to working-class solidarity and a concession to bourgeoisie "race hatred". "[The Socialists] think, like the bourgeoisie, that Asia for the Asians and America for the Americans. We own this half of the globe where we must hunt Asians. There's liberty, fraternity, and equality for you!" (Fellström 1907). On the same page, accompanying the Fellström letter, was a reply penned by a defender of the Socialist Party position. The author noted that while a "lengthy reply" was not necessarily

required, "considering the general opinion [on the Asian question] in the Finnish Federation", the author still wanted to point out the flaws in Fellström's argument and to defend the U.S. Socialists' position so that the Finnish socialists, who "were themselves a migrant folk", would have "a clear line in this question". The author concurred with both the economic and, more interestingly, cultural explanations for the Asian exclusion of the Socialist Party. The author noted that if "an unlimited flood of Asians" were to hit the shores of the United States, even Finns working the mines of the Midwest would not be spared from the detrimental impact of Asians on wages (T.H. 1908).

But it was not only the economic competition with the Chinese that aroused the ire of the Finnish socialist writer, it was also the strange culture that these Asians brought with them across the Pacific. "One can get an idea of the lifestyle of the Chinese [...]," the author remarked, "if one takes a look into a window of a 'laundry' some night". "There one can see a gang of thin ghosts sitting around a table, using a pair of forceps to eat grains of rice as small as a mosquito one at a time". "The Asian races must develop forward in their own country and white-skinned workers everywhere must help in that development", the author concluded (T.H. 1908). While it is true, then, that Finnish socialists were not particularly active in the anti-Chinese fulminations of the late 1800s and early 1900s, as Peter Kivisto has noted, most of them do appear to have conformed to the anti-Asian policies of the Socialist Party with apparent ease. What is more, as Kivisto suggests, Finnish workers also reaped the benefits from these exclusionary policies supported by the labour organizations and the socialists. When a violent mob had driven the Chinese off the Wyoming coalfields in the late 1800s, for example, the Chinese labourers were largely replaced by Finns (Kivisto 1984: 88–89).

The position of Asian workers as despised "scabs" in the eyes of the labour unions and much of the Left in the United States made the Chinese and other Asian workers in many ways a pariah class from which other migrant workers needed to distance themselves. While socialist Finns were, then, not as concerned as their conservative compatriots about the U.S. bourgeoisie thinking of them as "Mongols", they were more sensitive to the associations between Finnish workers and Asian workers. Criticizing heavily his conservative compatriots' efforts to "salvage" the reputation of Finns in the eyes of the American bourgeoisie, one socialist writer made the point that it was not by challenging the power of the U.S. bourgeoisie—as socialists had done—that Finns risked being identified as Asians; rather, he suggested, it was just by kowtowing in front of the bosses that Finnish workers were in danger of being classed with the Chinese and other Asians. "A fact is", he contended, "that the American working population is well organized [...] and they naturally frown upon those foreign workers who are unable to organize. This is what explains the hostility towards the Japanese, the Chinese, and all other nationalities and races that are unable to organize". Finns had in some localities been in a similar position, pulling down wages and breaking strikes; it was only when Finnish workers had joined unions and taken a prominent role in industrial actions that the ill repute that Finns had made for themselves had started to evaporate (*Työmies* 1908).

It was clear from the context that the writer was not inclusive of Asians in his definition of the "proper workers of this country". Equally clear was the fact that if Finns wanted to be accepted and to belong to this class of "proper workers", they needed to stop acting like Asians. The irony of the socialists' and conservatives' debate on the visibility of Finnishness in the United States was that they sometimes shared one underlying assumption: Finns should not be classed with Asians.

## 5 Conclusions

As Johanna Leinonen and Mari Toivanen (2014) point out, scholars relying on notions such as “visibility” and “invisibility” should pay attention to the processes of racialization and “othering” that are at play in the construction of such notions. The analysis of Finnish migrants’ debates on the preferable forms of visibility in the early 1900s United States is a testament to this acute observation. Both conservative and socialist Finns argued that Finns had been or were “visible” in a wrong way and both made efforts to increase Finns’ visibility in the United States in a more positive way. They disagreed heavily on what they meant with desirable visibility, but they both formulated their arguments in the same historical and social context of the turn-of-the-century United States, where migrant visibility was often hard to detach from discourses of race. How migrants interpreted the concept of race was, however, not a straightforward matter.

The analysis of the debates on Finnish visibility in the early-1900s United States has, then, implications for studies on race and immigration in a broader sense as well. As the examination of Finnish conceptions of “race” suggests, migrant views on race were often instable and incoherent, with few migrants being but shallowly knowledgeable about contemporary racial theorizations in eugenics or anthropology. While Finnish migrants were generally aware of the racial hierarchy that positioned “Mongolian” or “yellow” races below “European” or “white” races in the United States and beyond, they had no clear or coherent idea on the implications of this hierarchy—there emerged, in other words, no immediate sense of Finns needing to “claim their whiteness” in the early years of the 1900s. For some, mainly in the conservative camp, the claims of Finnish “Mongolianness” were understood in cultural and moral terms: the “anarchy” and “corruption” of socialist Finns had resulted in Finns being lumped together with Asians, which meant that the changes in behavioural patterns were necessary to “right” the American

conception of Finns. For socialists, on the other hand, the claims of Finns’ “Mongolianness” were interpreted as reflections of capitalist power politics. As Finnish socialists had started to claim their economic and political rights as workers, the U.S. capitalists sought to malign them with racist characterizations. This coupling of racial categories with economic power politics gave impetus to both rather insightful anti-racist argumentation and to attempts at proving Finnish workers’ credentials as good “American workers” by distancing them from the purportedly unorganizable Asian workers.

While this paper has been preoccupied with historical material, the conclusions that can be drawn from the above analysis have implications for studies of contemporary migration as well. As scholars examine migrants’ desires to be seen by the “host society” in a certain way, there is an acute need to stay sensitive to internal tensions and contestation as well as to power dynamics at play. The question of who can claim the right to speak for his or her “group” or “community”—and in what discursive terms—is just as relevant today as it was some hundred years ago in Minnesota.

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