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Origin of Nordic Emigration

By

Ingrid Sernmingsen
University of Oslo

"Emigration" wrote the publicist Ludvig Kristensen Daa in 1853 "is undoubtedly the most extraordinary phenomenon of all in these strange times. Those changes of government, the wars, and the rise of industry in our old Europe which first catches our attention, sinks into insignificance compared to the emigration of half a million Europeans every year". He predicted that: "Before the end of the nineteenth century, emigration will most likely have changed the entire globe into a Europe with its civilization, its greatness, its disasters and, we would hope, its Christianity".

Daa wrote further that "the stream of emigration" derived "its overwhelming force from the energy of the Europeans and from their poverty and hunger," but also from "the exaggerated demands and pleasure seeking of the age," – and from "overpopulation."

Daa believed that "if history primarily sought its topics among the most significant and important events – emigration would already have a historical literature." This he missed in his own "strange" times, marked by political and industrial revolutions, and he found the explanation of this lack in the fact that the colossal movement of emigration was due to "countless small, unobserved causes in which human lives have the same kind of effect as do chemical elements on the crust of the earth".

Today we have a rich historical literature about emigration. There is not space here to survey this literature or the ongoing research, or new methods now in use and the theories that attempt to account for migrations more generally.

I shall attempt, briefly, to point out some factors that are central in accounting for European emigration generally, and some special characteristics of Norwegian emigration.

We shall begin by considering the rapid and constant population growth which began in western Europe about 1800 and in Norway

after 1814. It was due to the declining death rate, primarily in infant and child mortality. The declining death rate was linked to improvements in agriculture, which made the food supplies more secure. It was also due to the growth of an industrial society, and a revolution in transportation which had far-reaching effects. Other factors are the growth of public health services and later progress in medical science.

Factors also are intertwined when we consider them from the point of view of the receiving country, of which the United States was without comparison the most important. The flow of people in the productive age groups made it possible to cultivate the wide expanses and exploit the other resources – coal, iron, oil and precious metals. The immigrants helped to speed up the tempo of American industry. The economics expansion in turn made it possible to receive more immigrants and give them a standard of living which lay significantly above what Europe could offer during the period of mass emigration. Population growth and the difference in the standard of living between the sending country and the receiving one, to oversimplify it, were the most important factors in explaining emigration.

There was, in addition, a general increase in mobility, which industrialization brought with it, and finally there were the stresses which the old livelihoods suffered in the changes induced by industrialization. These transformations and the new mobility stirred up unrest and innovation, broke down old ties and attachments, tore people out of the old community of village or neighborhood, and made them receptive to new ideas, giving substance to new demands and expectations.

It is not in itself strange that Norwegians also emigrated to lands across the sea. It would have been stranger if they had not taken part in this movement.

What is remarkable is that the emigration was so intense and the rate of emigration so high, compared to that of our nearest neighbors. It is true, of course, that the tempo of economic development in Norway was slower than in Sweden and Denmark in the last century, and that population growth was somewhat greater up to 1865, when mass emigration began. But the difference is hardly great enough to give us the whole answer to the question: why so many from Norway?

Eight hundred thousand people left Norway between 1825 and 1930, and most of them were gone forgood. There were three big

waves during the period of mass emigration 1865–1915, the largest of them in the 1880s and the beginning of the 1890s. Over one quarter of a million Norwegians landed in the United States in the course of fifteen years. This was a massive bloodletting for a people which in 1880 consisted of less than two million persons. Yet the population continued to grow in Norway. It even grew a bit faster than the Swedish population in the second half of the century.

Perhaps the Norwegian emigrants were so numerous because the movement was initiated so early? It began some fifteen to twenty years earlier than in Sweden and Denmark.

The American census of 1860 shows that there were more than twice as many Norwegians (44,000) in the United States as Swedes (19,000), whereas the Danes amounted only to 10,000. This meant a great deal when mass emigration got under way five years later. It meant much more frequent contacts across the sea to Norway; it meant that a great many more Norwegians knew of places they could go to and meet people they knew; and it meant that many more could get money for travel sent to them than in Sweden or Denmark. In Norway there already existed an emigration tradition in 1865, just at the time when the Homestead Act was voted in, the law that gave every adult male 160 acres of land practically gratis.

We can observe that this factor was significant in the next big wave as well. In the 1880s Sweden, which had established its emigration tradition in the 1860s, reached about the same level of intensity as Norway, while Denmark, which had had a modest emigration in the 1860s, was still less deeply affected. The factor of tradition is further illuminated by the (still incomplete) statistics we have on those who left on prepaid tickets. There is reason to believe that about one-third, perhaps forty percent, of all emigrants from the end of the 1860s got their tickets paid from America.

Some scholars use the term "the self-generating or self-amplifying effect" of this building up of an emigration tradition. The expression is not a happy one. It smacks of automation, and we ought not without further ado count on the existence of such an automatic effect from those who have gone before. A number of circumstances must be present if a tradition is to establish itself. The first prerequisite is that there must be contact between home and the new country: oral or written reports must be available. The emigrants must have managed to build up tolerably good economic circumstances, in keeping with their needs and expectations. And they must be relatively satisfied with their environment, and with the

social, political, and religious conditions in the place where they have settled.

Wc may ask lurthcr: Why did emigration start earlier in Norway than in the neighboring countries?

It was not because wc werc a seafaring nation. It is true that the *Restauration* left from Stavangcr, and that the Sloopers came from coastal communities. But in the years immediately following, the emigration impulse made some peculiar leaps – not only to inner parts of Hardanger and Sogn, but to Voss, Telemark, and Numedal, Hallingdal, and Valdres valleys of Central Norway. We have many accounts which show that the emigrants were far from being used to the sea. "I almost believed that now the ship was tipping over" wrote a young girl from Hallingdal in her diary when she felt the ship begin to roll. "It has as yet not happened, but I am fearful that it might happen before we get to the distant shore." The diary shows that she did reach land.

The seafaring communities had few emigrants in the early years. The south coast, which had had a rather impressive emigration to the Netherlands in earlier centuries and should therefore have had a long tradition of migration, was for a long time practically untouched by thc "America-Eevcr". Only when the transition from sail to steam began, did the coastal districts join in, and then in great numbers.

Can we say that shipping made it easier in Norway to get passage across the sea? Here too we must reply in the negative. Norwegian vessels had not initiated long distance transportation to any extcnl by 1840. It was easier to get a passage to America in Gothenburg than in either Kristiania or Kristiansand. Norwegian shipowners were not immediately ready with offers of ship space which, to any degree, could meet the demand. A great part of the earliest emigrants went by way of other ports, for instance, Gothenburg and Lc Havre. One might almost turn the argument around and say that the desire to emigrate acted as a stimulant, a source of income, which the shipping interests learned to exploit in the course of the decade. After 1850 the picture is difterent. Then the shippers began to stimulate emigration by reducing the prices of passage.

It may be useful once again to look at the reports which, from the mid 1830s, came to Norway in the letters from America. We shall attcrnpt to find out if they contained any special appeal to the people in the mountain, valley, and fjord communities. I shall particularly concentrate on letters from the Mardanger farmer,

Gjert Hovland, because they were the first and because we know they were copied and circulated, and that they stimulated emigration. "Here there is room for everybody," wrote Hovland, because there is "an immense amount of land which the United States owns." On this land there was no more forest than needed for household use, but there was as much hay as one needed, and whatever one sowed and planted "grows beautifully".

Gjert Hovland was also well satisfied with the political conditions. "There is good order here, and good laws". Taxes were low and, perhaps still more important: "Nor are there other needless burdens." He specifically mentioned that inheritance and estate settlement was cheap and that nobody grabbed the inheritance "like beasts of prey in order to live by the sweat of another's brow." There was also freedom in America. One could travel without a passport and one could undertake whatever one was "equipped to do in trade and activity." And one might "use what learning and religion one pleases."

Gjert Hovland urged people to go to America. His wish was that all those in Norway who had to bring up their children in humble circumstances should leave, as well as all servants, who in Norway were paid "little or almost nothing."

The message in these letters was simple and easily understood in the local communities: easier income through work with land and cattle, no officials who interfered in local affairs, no restraints on those who wished to try their luck as craftsmen or merchants, as there still were in Norway in the 1830s.

But why just in the mountains, the fjords, and the valleys? Some have tried to explain it by suggesting that the people in such communities had for a long time been used to moving, that they were mobile. It is correct that statistical evidence and recent studies show that there was a seepage of population from the upper communities down the valleys and out to the coast. But these were mostly young, unmarried persons. They were not alone in this type of youth migration. Mobility was most likely just as great, if not greater, in other more centrally located communities.

The early emigration to America was something else: these were permanently settled people who left. If we were to compare this rural exodus to any migration within the country, it would have to be the colonization of Målselv and Bardu by people from Østerdalen and Gudbrandsdalen, and the settlement of northern Norway which took place in the nineteenth century.

The communities where emigration started were still characterized by self sufficiency, and there was little specialization or division of labor. The surpluses were small and the taxes were a burden. Agriculture was making progress also in these communities, but the pressure on their resources by the younger age groups was great. These were small communities without great differences between the social groups, but they were probably becoming noticeable and one could fear that they would increase. Nevertheless there were many small freeholders here who could feel that the words in the letter about bringing up children in humble circumstances were addressed to them. They might, to be sure, be poor compared with farmers on bigger estates both in this country and in the neighboring countries, farmers who had many hired laborers and sizeable surpluses to sell, but they were not poor in the sense that they were unpropertied. They owned just enough worldly goods to be able to implement a decision to move across the sea.

The sociologist Eilert Sundt wrote that the age was at once an age of progress and an age of distress, when he wanted to characterize the 1840s. Progress was most obvious in urban occupations in the widest sense, since they could offer the greatest number of new opportunities. But the smallholders in the fjord- and mountain valleys had little love for the towns and their ways. When they came to town, they were conspicuous for their clothes and their dialect. Their local communities were among the most tradition-bound in Norway. Here we encounter a paradox. Leaving for America was a radical break with all that was familiar to them. Just the same they made this break, precisely in order that they might continue in the new world the same way of life they were used to in the old. They wanted to secure a home for their children – a place where they need not go and scrape among the stones for hay with a short-handled scythe. "I don't regret it," we read in a letter from a woman in Hallingdal, "especially when I think of the burdens I am freed from – caring for the cattle in winter, fear of having to buy hay, gathering of leaves and twigs for fodder. Here you don't have to be stingy with the hay."

They carved, as it were, a bit, a parcel, out of their community or their little society and moved the parcel across the sea. There they wanted to replant their society on more fertile soil and rule themselves without interference from zealous officials. In the new land they would elect them themselves.

If we now turn our attention back to our neighboring countries,

it is easy to see that Norway had more such small independent freeholders than they, both absolutely and relatively. Sweden had them in Småland, where emigration also began early. We can also safely say that Norwegian farmers in the 1830s and 1840s were more consciously anti-bureaucratic than their fellows in Denmark and Sweden. They were more politically active, and they defended their little communities with greater vigor in local politics and in parliament.

This does not necessarily mean that it was the politically most conscious who emigrated. We do have examples of keen, almost bitter critics of society among the pioneers. It means, rather, that similar factors could make some persons politically conscious at home, while driving other active ones to emigration.

Yet the movement became much more than a rural exodus. After a time the cities joined in. Thousands of craftsmen left in the big wave of the 1880s. Norwegian sailors found work in American shipping: the Norwegian colony in Brooklyn teemed with them. They sailed on the Great Lakes and on the Pacific coast. Norwegian fishermen found work in the halibut, cod, and salmon fishing based in Seattle, and the men of Sunnmøre especially tried their luck as gold diggers in Alaska.

Above all, emigration changed more and more into an emigration of young people, with a predominance of young men, instead of the earlier exodus of entire families. By the end of the mass emigration period the connection between general mobility and emigration is clear. The relation of migration within the country to emigration varies with economic conditions, and is different in the different parts of the country. Areas near growing cities always had a greater proportion of internal migration and less emigration.

The contact created across the sea made the radius for the virtually normal migration of youth expand enormously. It was no longer a question of merely seeking employment in the neighboring valley or joining the fishing fleet on Norway's west coast or becoming an apprentice in town. One could also try America, at least for a few years, when times were good. An international labor market had come into being. Along the south-west coast of the country a new tradition of migration was founded – a round-trip migration. Young and middle-aged men saved their money in America and spent it in Norway on a house, a boat or land. This tradition has lasted until our day. On May 17th, 1975, when a local radio reporter was describing what the people of Lista, on the southern tip of Norway, lived on, he first mentioned a little agriculture, a

little fishing and shipping, and added: "Well, and then of course there is the America trip." But even if some returned, most of them stayed in America.

Many have raised the questions: Were they driven out of the country? Did poverty force them to leave? Or were they tempted by the opportunities that America appeared to offer people with enterprise, possibilities that werc magnificd in the picture of America that was presented in letters and books and impressed on the retina through steamship advertising.

Poverty is a relative concept. Viewed from our allluent society today the great majority of people both in America and Norway were still quite poor in 1900. But on the other hand they were well off in comparison with what their grandparents had been. They had all in all a more assured income and a more secure existcnce. For workers and the middle class progress had been relatively laster in Norway than in America from the 1840s to the turn of the century, since the starting point had been at a lower level and since the distribution of income was less uneven in Norway in 1900 than in America.

But, as Eilert Sundt pointed out: "... the demands on life, as it is called, rise day by day at least as fast as the means to satisfy them become more abundant." As the concept of "what is needed to live a happy life" gradually cliangcd, the relative poverty was also felt more keenly, especially when possibilities lor better circumstances opened up in other places. Therefore the feeling of poverty, dissatisfaction with the conditions one lived under, and the expectation, the hope of achieving something better, were in reality two sides of the same coin. But for the individual emigrant the accent – the stress – might lie more heavily on one or the other side. And lastly, it may be worth mentioning that if we disregard overseas emigration, Norway had during the entire period a modest surplus in her exchange of people with other nations.

We may feel a certain sadness when we think of the hundreds of thousands of people who lelt that there was no place for them in this country, but we can also feel admiration for the courage that was shown by the pioneers, for the demand lor a better Iife, the expectations for a richer existence which the ever younger emigrants must have carricd in their hearts. Whether their expectations were realized is something no one can say with full assurance.

NOTE

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