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On track with Swedes in Minnesota

Jimmy Engren, *Railroading and labor migration: class and ethnicity in expanding capitalism in Northern Minnesota, The 1880s to the mid 1920s*, Acta Wexionensia, Humaniora, 122, Växjö: Växjö University Press, 2007. 434 s.

Jimmy Engren's dissertation explores an American community in transition at a crucial time in the history of labor – when new towns were being settled in the interests of mining and railroad-construction intended to serve the developing steel industry. The community is the town of Two Harbors, Minnesota, where iron ore from the mines was transferred to ships for further transportation via the Great Lakes to the final destination of Pittsburgh. The workers in the new towns were immigrants – at first Swedes and Norwegians, then central Europeans, Finns, and Italians. As the towns developed, so did the power of industrial capitalism. With close attention to the community, Engren traces the lives of the workers of the town. Focusing on Swedish immigrants and their children, their politics and social lives; he tells the story of a developing oppositional culture and politics that were ultimately compromised in the wake of the Great War.

As a historian of migration, I note that migration history is a field with notoriously unwieldy definitions and scarcity of data, because the people who migrate do not leave systematic traces of their lives and seldom allow the historian to know where they will go next – or who is coming after them. As a consequence, apart from a few exceptions like the parish registers of Sweden (which do not make an appearance in this study, of course), historians of migration resemble historians of early periods in that they work with fragmentary sources and attempt to recreate a world and solve historical problems from those fragments. This is the historians' craft.

A close look at Engren's sources reveals that they are, in some ways, scant sources indeed. His primary sources for this study of class and ethnicity include employment rolls from the D&IR railway for two years, 1885 and 1920, along with the manuscript censuses for those years. Censuses are like an aerial photograph, because they catch people at one point in time but do not tell their story – and their story clearly involved movement because people were so soon gone again. The website Ancestry.com was built on the 1920 census and was only useful for tracing heads of families and did not include sons and brothers (much less wives and daughters). In addition, Engren found incomplete runs of the local newspapers which contained stories about community politics, picnics, social activities, and elections. He also used the archives of that good old American organization, the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association). There were also railroad company archives, including letters from the founder's son to his father in faraway Pitts-

burgh. But in contrast to Friedrich Engels's reports to his father from Manchester, this businessman's son only wished to inform his father that everything was going well. And from the perspective of the management so they were, since there were no large and spectacular strikes in the history of Two Harbors and the D&IR railroad. Engren draws the reader in with the story of Emil Andersson, who arrived in Two Harbors in 1910, but his store of autobiographical sources is not rich.

In short, Engren's project did not discover any wonderful new source revealing everything we have always wanted to know about worker migration and ethnicity in North America. Rather, Engren found such historical sources that, as usual, were created for others and for purposes other than those of the historian and which can be essentially flat – offering fragments of information but no more.

This is part of the reason why *Railroading and labor migration* is such a great success. Without astonishing new revelatory sources, Jimmy Engren creates a world and an argument about it based on a profound knowledge of, and engagement with, several historical fields. Engren demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the history of immigration to the U.S.. He knows well the history of U.S. labor, the history of the U.S. railroad, the history of working-class politics, of the YMCA, and the regional history of the Great Lakes as part of the steel industry that extracted ore from the mountains of Minnesota, transferred it to ships at Two Harbors, and then transported it to Pittsburgh's steel mills. The mastery of these literatures, including the emerging literature on "whiteness", the role of race to white ethnic workers in the U.S., is an important accomplishment that indicates a breadth of scholarship that few authors can boast.

Engren's refined knowledge of scholarship is complemented by the analyses that set up the book, and then permeate it throughout. He does not investigate class and ethnicity separately, but rather uses them in tandem with culture in relation to hegemony, distinguishing Gramsci's forceful *dominio* from the hegemony that enabled the railroad bourgeoisie, along with town politicians, to guide Two Harbors away from socialism to a unitary and Americanized identity. Engren marks every chapter with analyses, bringing analysis of each aspect of this study to the foreground as it unfolds. The point about race and whiteness is emphasized most forcefully by the sole photo in the dissertation, a shocking photo of two workers in blackface – in Two Harbors, miles from any African American.

What unfolds is an exciting story – and also a discouraging one, since it corrects the misguided question "why is there no socialism in America?" by relating how socialism first flourished in and then disappeared from Two Harbors. Along the way, Engren shows the reader not only the power of bourgeois capitalism and its close links with political forces, but also the contingencies of history that set it apart from predictive social sciences: in this case, the Great War and the ensuing push for Americanization that marginalized immigrants and, most especially, radical immigrants.

Engren also analyses another concept that is now being written about in migration studies: the understanding of time and assimilation (or insertion).¹ Today's immigrants have made us realize that the time frame for understanding assimilation has changed over the years, and has drastically affected our understanding of immigrant success. Should we analyze assimilation after a decade? A generation? Moreover, Engren systematically investigates the time newcomers have been in the U.S., and notes what difference this makes. Surprisingly, this has not been much done previously. It is worthwhile to keep track of the role of generations, but by also noting time, Engren's study enters another phase of migration scholarship.

Finally, although Engren states that this dissertation is not about gender or about women, he gives the reader plenty of information upon which to build an understanding of the history of women in Two Harbors, such as "Ma Blake" and Mrs. Flynn who provided room and board for the young men who made up most of the labour force in the 1880s. As was the case in the Swedish town of Sundsvall, women worked as servants for the wealthy and some fell into socially disapproved behaviour, such as the two women who were expelled from the (Immanuel parish) Swedish church in 1897 for their disorderly ways.² Prescribed behaviour was illustrated, as Engren points out, in the company magazine which provided fashions for the working girl and recipes for the housewife: single women were to have respectable positions such as clerks in railroad offices, and married women were to stay out of the labour force. The women who worked as station agents in 1920 in the smaller railroad stations may well have been widows.

Although the contingencies of history set it apart from the predictive social sciences, this does not mean that there are no lessons to be learned here for the present. Nor does it mean that there is no resonance between the triumph of industrial capitalism and Anglo hegemony in Two Harbors, Minnesota, in the 1920s and the muscular neo-liberalism that began to be promoted in Britain and the U.S. some 30 years ago by the likes of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Minnesota in the 1920s and the U.S. (and Britain) of the late twentieth century do relate to each other. Historians are uniquely placed on a two-way track: The present can lead them to pose better questions about the past and the past can make them better note processes that are occurring (or not occurring) today. Jimmy Engren seems firmly placed on that track. His attention to the present, and the questions posed by today's historians, have enabled him to make forceful and convincing arguments about the interactions of class, ethnicity, generation, time, and hegemony. His history of socialist Two Harbors is the best kind of history, because it presents a useable past.

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1. Nancy Green, "Time and the study of assimilation", *Rethinking history* 10:2, June 2006, pp. 239–258.

2. Lotta Vikström, *Gendered routes and courses: the socio-spatial mobility of migrants in nineteenth-century Sundsvall, Sweden*, Umeå 2003.

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