



North-North-East Reflective Portfolio

New York x Norway – does not describe any brand cooperation or music collab, but the combination of my two exchange semesters: Firstly, the study in the north-eastern American state in autumn 2024 and secondly, the exchange to the northern European country in spring 2025. This combination is bound to both commonalities and differences, which give insight into both places' culture. In the following essay, we will discuss how an intercultural dialogue would look like between the citizens of the Empire State and the Kingdom "Kongeriget Norge". On the basis of a picture collage, representing common impressions to gather at the respective place, I present my pivotal experience I gathered while studying there. Instead of the whole United States of America, I will primarily focus my delineation of the American experience on the state New York. Given the vast cultural diversity within the USA, this is essential, to narrow the focus of this essay to the two given specific cultural groups.

Initially, looking at the collage, the most noticeable colour is blue – various shades of the colour like ocean blue, sky blue, navy blue – but blue. This is not that astounding, as most civilizations in the world were built along coastlines and rivers, but particularly for New York and Norway, waterways and also air routes were their fundamental origins of economic growth. Whereas in the Kingdom, fisheries, shipping, and oil industries in the fjords and the Norwegian Sea made up for the economic success, the financial district in Manhattan developed through the important water trade routes, i.e. the Erie channel, the Hudson River, and the access to the Atlantic Ocean. In the former Nieuw Amsterdam, the Wall Street evolved continually from its construction time in 1653, where it was built as a protection against a feared invasion by British troops. Here, merchandisers, traders, and businesspeople gathered over the years, so that the financial centre we know today was developed. This short illustration is necessary to state the origin of both economies' success, significant for each cultural flux.

Though, I discerned that not only the surface culture of both countries got more and more commercialised, but also the behaviours and customs in the deep culture are tainted by a capitalist mindset.

At this juncture, the surface culture can be discerned by looking at the picture collage. Not astonishingly, the Empire State presents grandeur in width, height and glory. I

experienced a true sense of vastness above all during my adventurous travels – journeys that took me far from civilization by travelling with the Amtrak train into unfamiliar landscapes, where I saw spectacular mountain views stretching across the entire state.

Concerning “height and “glory, the working or study life is shaped by the constrained motivational structure: Seeing the skyscrapers in the Big Apple already incentivizes you to reach for the higher. American students want to experience the same morning joy their fellows enjoy by ordering a Pumpkin Spiced Latte or a Caramel Frappé. Driving half a mile by car to school instead of walking is not unusual as it serves convenience, practicality, and sometimes status. For me this wealth-oriented culture was a dominant one in New York, and I will elaborate why I think so with one contrasty and repetitive experience:

As a 20-year-old student, I was not able to rent cars in the United States, which is why I always drove with public transport from NYC to my home university in Troy. Here, especially my bus drives around Albany showed me the contrast to the glorious Urban-luxury lifestyle. As the poor society cannot afford driving cars, they usually drive the bus, although sometimes they neither can afford that. I should point out that especially in the United States, boarding the bus – including ticket checks and ticket purchases – always takes place at the front with the driver. Not seldomly (at least each bus drive) a person had to beg the driver to be allowed to board. During the ride, I became aware of the situation of the gap in the society: Most families, being unable to afford cooking healthier nutrition at home, carried big fast-food boxes. The stereotype of sugary drinks, and large amount of food is thus not unfounded. Other passengers wore torn clothes, drunk alcohol, but cheerfully chatted about social media posts and video games. Usually, the bus smelled like weed. On the one hand, I always felt sorry for every child who couldn't buy a ticket and had to ask the bus driver to let them ride. Accordingly, my friend once told me “It breaks my heart to see the other passengers on the bus. I see so much misery”. On the other hand, based on those experiences, I transferred a lot of cultural insights from comparing these bus drives to the life in the university or the life portrayed by American high society. Lifestyles vary according to income level, but they are similar in the pursue of more abundance, joy, and events. Faithful to the American Dream, a lot of people in New York not only believe in personal success but also try to imitate and adopt a more luxurious lifestyle via intense consumer behaviour, material success and visibility. A consumer-driven culture that

values branding over authenticity, e.g. through the purchase of Starbucks' drinks, designer clothing (whether its fake or real is irrelevant here), or tickets to see celebrities, is to be discerned. The problem here is that while wealthy individuals can afford this kind of joyful lifestyle and balance it out with for example, healthy eating, poorer people are drawn to these supposedly happiness-inducing consumer goods, which in turn harm their health and worsen their living conditions.

The commodification of culture hence also complicates to encounter deep values of the New York society as most value is oriented towards material things. Nevertheless, I discovered seminal American deep culture while looking at the collage: Steadfastness and monumentality, habits like spending of free time with family in friends in nature, and big dreams which also in my case were coupled with a lot of adventures. My professor told me, "Us Americans, we always see the glass half full, or even full". Correspondingly, the cheer in the society, chummy body language, an orientation towards merit-based fairness, and a certain willingness to take risks that could be quite useful for some Europeans, displays the powerful values in the American society. It's no surprise than that the bus driver ends up letting the passenger ride for free, because in New York, there's a friendly culture of people supporting one another so that everyone has a chance to achieve something big. Appropriately, I remember the president of my university saying, "During your studies, we will support you so much, that one day you will all earn a lot of money, as bosses of large corporations, developers of new technologies, ...". Those discoveries reflect that only looking at the surface culture of a country will not reveal how life squarely can be seen. Instead, the New Yorker deep culture uncloaks that stereotypes ascribed to Americans like overconsumption and materialism should not be taken to pre-judge foreign citizens, because other characteristics like mutual promotion and hospitableness check this existing superficial image about the United States. Whereas in Europe it might be uncommon to invite a student into a Christmas theatre, my international programme coordinator even asked me out to spend a dinner with her family. As an international student in America, you thus learn to become more approachable, open-minded, and frank. You may engage in a 4-hours chat in the train with a MIT-student, together with other students harvest fruits and vegetables at a Capital District farm around Thanksgiving or go out on a camping tour to the Catskills with your new friends – Americans are eager to take action and do something in company. This friendliness,

the sense of community and in general the warmth can so be seen in the collage, in which I deliberately used warmer tones on the left-hand side (New York).

In contrast to the warm sunsets in combination with a powerful, collaborative, but consumerist New Yorker culture, the right-hand side, presenting common impressions from Norway, appears colder, more secluded, and somehow magic. From the outside, the Kingdom is often seen as the land of the fjords, the midnight sun and the northern lights. A similar width in landscape as in New York, is discernible by contemplating the vast snowy Scandinavian mountains, and the Northern lights dancing at the distant horizon. As outlined in the beginning also here, economic success somehow shaped the culture of the country, but less in the way of consuming in excess and to experience a lot of different activities and events. Instead, Norwegians highly esteem the quality in things as in their relationships. Consequently, service deliveries, handcrafted goods, and concerts or reunions with friends and peers are estimated intensely and more than in the United States. The general estimation of each other and valuation of resources is deeply rooted in the country and to be related with a sustainable social attitude. For instance, the economic welfare was not only built upon the discovery of large oil resources in the Northern Sea but particularly on the well-developed public and Nordic welfare system, which in contrast to most OPEC-states budget with their resources so that citizens in next and future generations can equally prosper. Generally, Norway is known for its inter-generational fairness and egalitarianism.

Again, the best way to reflect about the culture is via starting with a description of a quotidian scenario, this time, of waiting at the bus stop. Here, reclusiveness is the suitable word for representing each Norwegians individual and secluded lifestyle. Physically, the people at the bus stop stood far apart – so much that even COVID-19 distancing regulations would have been satisfied. But beyond the physical distance, there was also a mental and relational separation; everyone seemed entirely absorbed in their own world, disconnected from those around them. Hence, it is pretty usual for Norwegians to ignore even acquaintances in every-day life, as they only mind their own business. The intention here is not to show that Norwegian citizens are impolite, after all they are accurate to keep a respectful company with others. However, their curtesy is defined differently: In Norway, in difference to New York, people deliberately give room to individuals to find their own solutions and navigate things independently.

It is seen discourteous to offer people to tell the way, as it seems like the relevant person would be unable to act autonomously. At the bus stop, so help is only given when someone explicitly asks for it. For instance, there were situations where skiers with their ski sticks and ski equipment looked like they could need help to enter the bus, but they remain obstinate and help themselves albeit me or others could have assisted. This kind of independence backs to the times, where Norwegians were usually self-supporters and self-caterers, and is still present in their traditions of hiking to little huts in nature, isolated from society, where they must provide for themselves. Appropriately, I absorbed Norwegian autonomy literally step-by-step: From hiking several hours to a waterfall in the midst of a pluvius afternoon to aurora-night-wandering with friends to the Northern tip of Tromsø, both required orienting oneself and acting decisively. Whilst scouring in the wilderness either alone or with a small group of friends, the chance is high to encounter an elk, reindeer or other Nordic fellows in the woods.

The Norwegian culture additionally is enriched with prudence in lifestyle like healthy nutritional practices and a valuation of fitness and exercise. No one wants to draw attention to themselves through flashy designer clothes or obvious status symbols. What's more valued is inner character, modesty and a sense of equality, reflected in how people take care of their appearance while dressing in minimalist, high-quality, but discreet clothing. The Nordic happiness comes more from all the small experiences, like embracing the coziness of reading a book while lightning up the candles, baking waffles with "Brunost" together with friends, or admiring how the Polar lights dance at the night sky. Those fascinating, singular and tranquil impressions are illustrated in the picture collage via the more deep and fluorescent colours.

Consequently, in contrast to the New Yorker culture, Norway tends less to collaborate to aim for individual masterstrokes and instead facilitate self-organization for a harmonic togetherness. Where the American society is more quantity-oriented, cheerful, and energetic, the Norwegian one is more quality-oriented, independent and pensive.

By reason of those intercultural considerations, we can distinguish the variety of culture already appearing between two industrialized societies. Serving as a mediator of the intercultural dialogue between New York and Norway, I was in the position to benefit

greatly as the diversity of values and traditions contributed to my personal development. At this point, the exchange of culture serves interesting findings on how people act and will probably act at both places. The intercultural dialogue hence enables to draw conclusions from countries' values, customs and behaviours on their thought patterns and decision making.

Whereas I subsume my study experience in the Empire State in the term "adventure", I select the term "mindfulness" for my lived experience in the Kingdom. Taken both sides of the collage together I think "the width" best describes what to expect from both countries' culture. As a reason, I deeply recommend diving into those cultures and exploring its fantastic shapes.

To that effect, I take the collage as a beautiful souvenir of the study and explorer experience at both places.

Thank you for the opportunity of this reflective essay,

Sincerely,

Kevin Clauß