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Pedagogy, Community, and Praxis Commentary

The View from Norge¹: Rights-Based Discourse and Human Rights Education in Norway

David Tow*

Abstract

This paper uses the author's time as a Fulbright Roving Scholar in American Studies to Norway as an entrée into exploring human rights discourse and Human Rights Education in Norway, a country that is often thought of as one of the centers of human rights work in Europe—and appreciates this association. It begins by situating human rights in Norwegian law and history, connecting it to the author's home and teaching context. It then recounts the experience of serving as Roving Scholar, connecting it to observations both positive and potentially detrimental within Norway, concluding with some brief thoughts on a balance between Norwegian and American education systems.

Keywords: human rights, human rights education, international education, public education, teaching and learning

¹ *Norge* is the name for Norway in *Bokmål*, one of the official written forms of the Norwegian language. This paper would not be possible without the support of San Rafael City Schools and Terra Linda High School, the U.S.-Norway Fulbright Foundation, and the Fulbright Commission in Ireland.

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“Do you find it ironic to be an American lecturing us about human rights?” was the first question I was asked in a room of sixteen-, seventeen-, and eighteen-year-old students in Kongsbakken *videregående skole*, an upper-secondary school in Tromsø, the largest city in Northern Norway. It was the tail end of winter, but the nights were still long and there was a freezing wind buffeting me as I made my way up the hill from my hotel to the upper-secondary school. There, I met students and families who had lived in and around Tromsø for generations, new internal migrants to the region, drawn by the growing aquaculture and seafood industries, and students who moved from elsewhere in the world to Norway—families of diplomats or business executives as well as those fleeing conflict, political instability, or persecution and hardship. In this classroom, there were over a dozen national origins represented. I was there to conduct a workshop on American politics and political identity, but something in my background, biography, and research interests gave one student pause.

It was a fair question. “If that’s what I was here to do,” I answered, “then yes, absolutely.” I agreed that the United States has a poor track record of protecting and guaranteeing rights, and that while it was not alone in this, it was certainly not a good role model in many ways. However, I suggested, I would rather us look together and see what we can learn together from Norwegian and American history about human rights and identify ways we can further ensure rights for all. “Might you all be interested in that instead?” I asked. The class agreed, and we spent the next hour unpacking barriers to rights in our respective contexts, leaving American politics for another day. In my role as a Fulbright Roving Scholar in American Studies to Norway for the 2022–2023 school year, these kinds of split-second pivots were quite common and necessary.

This essay aims to recount my overall observations about human rights discourse and human rights education (HRE) from my time with Norwegian students and teachers. First, I will sketch some of the human rights and HRE landscape in Norway, situating it in relation to my home context and research. Then, I will summarize my work as a Roving Scholar in American Studies and describe the program. Finally, I will explore some of

the positive qualities and potential challenges I witnessed in Norwegian schools, ending with some notes on a balance between the Norwegian and American systems.

Background and Context

In the United States, I am an English and social science teacher at a medium-sized public high school located in Northern California. My educational philosophy, as well as my site and district leadership roles, revolve around empowering students and advancing rights-based discourse. In many ways, my teaching environment reflects larger trends occurring across the United States.² The demographics of my school are changing, having been predominantly white for much of its history but now becoming much more representative, with no single racial or ethnic group a majority. However, also like the rest of the United States, policy is slow to catch up to the needs of these students. My school, Terra Linda High School, has around 1150 students and 55 faculty members. Over 47% of our students identify as Hispanic, 38.7% identify as white, 6.2% of our students identify as Asian, 5.2% identify as biracial or multiracial, 1.7% identify as Black, with less than a percent each identifying as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander and Indigenous American. Close to 20% of our students are designated English Language Learners, while more are recently redesignated English Language Learners. 41% of our students are reported as economically disadvantaged and 39% are free-lunch eligible (California Department of Education, 2023). Although the electoral map of my community may look politically uniform, local politics and grassroots justice movements highlight previously unseen divisions and prejudice. As a graduate student in International and Multicultural Education with an emphasis on Human Rights Education, I am interested in school reforms that build diverse and inclusive communities and center human rights with an eye towards social change. I am also

² For more about how race, power, and privilege manifest in my region, see Rainey (2019), who reports on the continued efforts to desegregate local schools, and Perez (2018) who analyzes systemic barriers hindering Latinx academic success. For a broader conversation of how changing school demographics, race and racialization, and teacher education interact with conversations around school reform, see the new academic journal *Whiteness and Education*.

invested in finding ways that human rights instruments, especially those protecting children and marginalized communities, can lead to binding policies that positively impact school life in the United States.³ For these reasons, I was eager to see where these paths led in one of the world's wealthiest nations, Norway.

Part of my goal for applying as a Fulbright Roving Scholar had to do with a desire for inspiration—like many educators, teaching during the heights of the pandemic had been exhausting—but I was also eager to witness how their vocational training other non-academic trajectories served students' and communities' needs, as well as how all schools foster students' sense of civic engagement and how human rights are taught and supported in schools. I was also interested in comparing education systems. Like the United States, Norway is a wealthy liberal democracy, and is also deeply enmeshed in global affairs and political unions—it is a member of NATO and the Council of Europe—but also like the United States, it does not subscribe to these partnerships wholesale—it does not use the Euro, is not a member state of the European Union, and is experiencing a recent upward trend in Euroscepticism and right-wing political movements (Duxbury, 2019; Poll of Polls, 2024). The country spends nearly as much in education per student as the United States and, like the United States, seems to be amid a rightward drift (relatively speaking). Norway is almost the same size as California, my home state, but with a population of 5.4 million—to the 7.75 million that live in the San Francisco Bay Area (opendatatsoft, 2024). And like the United States, Norway continues to grapple with migration and diversity in some exclusionary and xenophobic ways and is facing a reckoning about its ongoing unequal treatment of the Indigenous population of northern Fennoscandia, the Sámi.⁴

³ For more about how these values might be manifest in classrooms, see Bajaj & Tow (2021).

⁴ In Norway, there is no nationwide definition on who qualifies as Sámi, making exact populations difficult. However, it is estimated that there are between 40,000 and 60,000 Sámi in Norway—just over 1% of the Norwegian population—making Norwegian Sámi the majority of the estimated 100,000 Sámi worldwide—Norway, Sweden, Russia, and Finland primarily (IWGIA, 2023).

The Human Rights Peaks and Valleys in Norway

As a teacher and researcher interested in human rights, I was first drawn to Norway when I learned that human rights were enshrined in the *Grunnlov*—the Norwegian Constitution, both in its original form in 1814 and additional enumerated protections added on its bicentennial. These include an obligation on behalf of the state to recognize and defend human rights, both those explicitly named within the Constitution and those guaranteed by human rights instruments to which Norway is a signatory (Constitution of the Kingdom of Norway, § 92). The document also establishes equality under the law (§ 98), the right to a healthy environment (§ 112), and other protections. It was also among the first to ratify the European Convention on Human Rights. Meanwhile, The Human Rights Act of 1999 not only granted some human rights conventions—including the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966)—the full weight of Norwegian domestic law, but also granted them supremacy over other policies and laws. Norway has also ratified more than a dozen international human rights treaties.⁵ Section 109 of the Norwegian Constitution articulates a universal right to an education that, among other things, inculcates ideas of human rights, while section 104 asserts the rights of children as full citizens and protects their speech and agency in public decision-making. Similarly, the 2016 Norwegian Institution for Human Rights Act, established the *Norges institusjon for menneskerettigheter* (NIM—the Norwegian National Institution for Human Rights), a national organization tasked with advising the Norwegian and Sámi Parliaments, monitoring human rights, promoting and teaching about human rights, and connecting political authorities and civil society (§1-3).⁶ In sum, the idea of human rights as such are present in legal theory,

⁵ Rosas (1986) provides useful background on pan-Nordic ratification of human rights and other rights-based treaties, and Keskinen (2019) helpfully situates rights discourse within broader colonial and racial discourses.

⁶ In Norway, the Sámi Parliament (*Sametinget* in Norwegian and *Sámediggi* in Northern Sámi, the most widely spoken Sámi language in Norway) serves two functions: as the constituent assembly of Norwegian Sámi and as an institution protecting cultural autonomy. While the *Sámediggi* exercises a significant amount of authority over Sámi culture and territory, the Norwegian national parliament, the *Storting*, has the final legal and political say for matters of national policy.

documents, and policies throughout Norway, and rights as a framework appear to help drive policies forward.

There are also a robust network of policies and curricula emphasizing rights throughout Norwegian education. The Ministry of Education and Research largely accomplishes this through two avenues. First, they work to develop curriculum guides, standards and learning objectives, and assessments—these former two done in collaboration with Norwegian school teachers and educational researchers. Second, they support independent foundations and advisory boards that, “promote democratic values and attitudes” (European Commission, 2023) with a particular emphasis on intercultural awareness and tolerance. Amnesty Norway, the country’s branch of the international organization, has several ongoing projects aimed at embedding human rights throughout compulsory Norwegian education and, indeed, advancing models of HRE as well (Amnesty International, 2019).⁷ There are two universities offering graduate degrees in human rights: University of Oslo (which also houses the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights, an organization that designs materials and courses that emphasize human rights) offers a master’s degree in Theory and Practice of Human Rights, while the University of Southeastern Norway (which houses an international journal, the *Human Rights Education Review*) offers a master’s degree in Human Rights and Multiculturalism. Beyond these two graduate programs and two human rights and HRE-oriented bodies, there is a climate friendly to HRE in Norway. A 2017 Council of Europe report on the state of citizenship and HRE in Europe makes repeated reference to progress in Norway—collaboratively-created learning objectives about democracy, rich connections with human rights and HRE initiatives, bi- and multilateral seminars and conferences on HRE and democratic culture (p. 21, 68, 74). In a 2015 report following the Constitution’s bicentennial, a report from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) described the many organizations creating materials that educate on human rights, the

⁷ Indeed, Amnesty International was the most active and consistent non-governmental organization advocating for universal human rights during my year in Norway. Student members and young activists were present, campaigning, and advocating at nearly every civil celebration, including May Day, the Nobel Peace Festival, Norway’s Constitution Day, and others throughout the year.

new regional bodies that disseminate these materials, and the newly empowered role of schools and regional administrators to ensure that education in Norway centers human rights (see: Lile, 2019a). Throughout my visits, I saw upper secondary teachers in English language, Norwegian, history, and Religion and Ethics point to textbooks that included education about human rights, their history, and case studies from around the world that invited students to explore the contrast between the promise and implementation of a universal human rights regime.

There is a body of research suggesting, meanwhile, that while Norwegian government and agencies engage in human rights discourse as frameworks and objectives, the aspiration of human rights does not necessarily penetrate to civil society writ large. Vesterdal (2016) argues that “through educational steering documents... human rights are positioned as fundamental values of education” but that “there seems to be a gap between promotion and implementation of human rights education” (pp. 246-7). In a careful examination of this gap, Lile (2019b) identifies a similar weakness, concluding:

Norway is a country with a strong commitment to human rights abroad, in its foreign policy. It is regarded as the most developed country in the world according to the UNDP. A majority of Norwegians are very proud of their country and regard the Norwegian culture as superior to that of others. I think this proudness affects the country’s commitment to HRE. The aims and values of HRE are superimposed on to the system without encouraging any deeper changes. Human rights are seen as part of Norwegian values, and thus HRE is not seen as necessary in itself—or, more accurately, promoting Norwegian values is seen as the same as HRE. (p. 160)

In these readings, Norway’s relationship with human rights refigures them as a matter of national identity, pride, and patriotism (Vesterdal, 2019). While the consistent recognition of human rights is admirable, the unreflective elevation of them occludes many critical possibilities. This relationship is illustrated on the Norwegian government’s website, where human rights is housed under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, emphasizing “the promotion of human rights” as “a key component of Norway’s foreign and development policy” rather than something that must first be protected domestically. This

helps illuminate that while human rights are key to Norwegian national identity and policy, it primarily first functions as a lens to view the world at large.

Despite this dedication to the principles of human rights, there are also well-mapped canyons in Norway's human rights landscape. The 1814 Constitution contained a so-called "Jew clause," an extension from Danish law, which prohibited Jewish people from living in Norway (see: Abrahamsen, 1968). After multiple attempts at repeal, it was finally removed from the constitution in 1851—only to be briefly reintroduced by the Quisling government, who were Nazi collaborators during World War II. There is a long history of discrimination, marginalization, cultural erasure, and colonization against the Sámi, best embodied by the 18th and 19th century policy of Norwegianization, whereby the Norwegian government used religion, education, agriculture, and other arms of the state to forcibly assimilate the Sámi and Kven⁸ populations into a nascent national "Norwegian" identity.⁹ "[T]here are still challenges," the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples (2016) concluded, "with respect to adequately defining and recognizing the S[á]mi people's rights over their land and related resources, and that further efforts are needed to advance and strengthen S[á]mi rights, particularly in the face of increased natural resource investments in the Sápmi region" (p. 1). This observation is

⁸ A Western Finnic ethnic minority in Norway, comprised of descendants of Finnish migrants to Norway throughout the 18th and 19th century, who have specific protections as a minority population with a nationally recognized minority language (Norske Kveners Forbund, 2014).

⁹ It is important to note that the Sámi have a long history of resistance to historical Norwegianization and contemporary erosion of their self-determination. One important episode is the Kautokeino Rebellion in 1852, where Kautokeino residents attacked the non-Sámi Norwegian merchant, sheriff, and newly arrived pastor. For more on the Kautokeino Rebellion, see Kristiansen (n.d.). In 2019, the Sámi parliament in Sweden requested a truth and reconciliation commission be formed, and since 2021, Sámi activists in Norway have continually protested the government's continued development of their lands used for reindeer herding for wind farms, despite the Norwegian Supreme Court declaring the development unconstitutional (United Nations Regional Information Center for Western Europe; AP, 2024). For more on the ongoing Sámi activism in Norway, see Hess (2023) and the 2023 movie portraying the Norwegian government's 1978 construction of a dam in Sámi territory, *Ellos eatnu la elva leve* (Let the river flow). Though there are many books about Northern European history that deal peripherally with the history and experiences of the Sámi, one good but not perfect volume that focuses on the Sámi across Fennoscandia is Neil Kent's (2019) *The Sámi peoples of the north: A social and cultural history*.

echoed in NIM's 2024 report arguing that climate change in the Arctic is exacerbating violations of the Sámi's rights.

Recent research and observations point to additional, broader inadequacies in the protection of rights in Norway. In 2015, a report by the Commissioner for Human Rights from the Council of Europe, Nils Muižnieks, noted that while Norway had a strong framework protecting people with disabilities, it did not translate to meaningful self-determination in many circumstances, especially as concerns involuntary mental health placements. He also found that the Roma and other Norwegian Traveler communities are disproportionately subject to interventions from child-protective services, law enforcement, and mental health services, concluding "the human rights of Roma should be fully respected without discrimination" and that "Education is of key importance to the empowerment of Roma and their enjoyment of human rights" (§ 76-77). As recently as 2021, in fact, the Norwegian government's child protection agency had been accused of aggressively separating children from their families, most often single mothers and refugees (Quell, 2021).¹⁰ The United States Department of State also found inadequacies with access to asylum for refugees, perceived limits on free discourse for religious minorities (especially Muslim communities), and poor communication with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or gender expansive, queer and/or questioning, intersex, asexual, and two-spirit (LGBTQIA2S+) communities in Norway, among other issues.¹¹

Overall, Norway has protected universal human rights by including them in both their founding documents and through myriad organizations and governmental bodies but does have continued failures to ensure that all those living in Norway have access to them equally. Civil society possesses the means and the literacy to engage in conversations about human rights but tends to consider them either superficially or else merely as a normative

¹⁰ One such case became the subject of *Mrs. Chatterjee vs. Norway*, a 2023 legal drama.

¹¹ To their credit, many Norwegian teachers and students were often aware of these systemic injustices, though they did not frame them as such, and often compared them to analogies in the United States. The latter issue became prominent in Norway shortly before my arrival after a June 2022 mass shooting in Oslo during the city's Pride celebrations.

framework. Norwegian education addresses rights throughout compulsory schooling and curricula frequently contain elements of HRE, but primarily uses rights as a lens to compare Norway's preservation of rights to other countries' violations of them.

Experience as a Fulbright Roving Scholar

Although it is under the umbrella of the Fulbright Scholar program, a United States Cultural Exchange program focusing on intercultural relations and competence as well as cultural diplomacy, the Roving Scholar program is unique to Norway.¹² For nearly 40 years, the program has sent American professors, teacher-educators, or classroom teachers like me to Norway, where we conduct workshops with students, teachers, teachers-in-training, and others across the country over the course of an academic year. Unlike traditional Fulbright Scholars, Roving Scholars are not affiliated or placed at a single academic institution. Instead, we are supported by the Fremmedspråksenteret (Norwegian Centre for Foreign Languages in Education) at the Østfold University College in Halden. For the 2022-2023 cycle, there were four Roving Scholars.¹³ One was a teacher-educator who

¹² Although there is much criticism of the Fulbright Program, both as a mechanism of American foreign policy and as an ineffective method of international diplomacy, as well as robust responses to those criticisms, this ongoing conversation is beyond the scope of this short paper. Lally and Islem's (2023) mixed-methods study probes the long-term effectiveness of the Fulbright Program. For more about the origins of the Fulbright Program and reckoning with it today, see: Fischer (2023), Lebovic (2013), and Garner and Kirkby (2019). For a broader analysis of the function, utility, and impacts of international scholarship programs like the Fulbright Program and others, see the early and incomplete but incredibly elucidating Cormack (1968), as well as Scott-Smith (2008), Keilson (2004), Snow (2008), and Perna et al (2014). Brogi, Scott-Smith, & Snyder (2019), in their excellent edited volume, engage deeply with both threads of this conversation, especially Garner and Kirkby's (2019b) analysis of how scholars' identity figures within the broader changes in the Fulbright program and Lebovic's (2019) exploration into the geopolitical stances throughout the 20th century contrast the internationalism inherent in the Fulbright Program. For more detail about the nature, scope, and impact of the Fulbright Program in Norway in particular, see Røsdal et al (2014). Finally, for more about the Fulbright Roving Scholar program, see Jaquette, Fairbanks, and Cohen's (2019) examination of their experiences as Roving Scholars and how it impacted their subsequent teaching and Virtue's (2010) reflection as a middle-school teacher.

¹³ In the time since my tenure as a Fulbright Roving Scholar, the U.S.-Norway Fulbright Foundation for Educational Exchange, the managing organization of American Fulbright grantees in Norway and Norwegian Fulbright grantees to the United States, has added an additional Roving Scholar position which specializes in elementary-level school visits.

visited schools of all levels in Østfold, a part of the fylke called Viken which is east of Oslo and along the Swedish border. Another was a middle school social science and English teacher who focused on ungdomskolen (lower secondary schools), for students between 12 and 15 years old and is most like American middle school or junior high. During this year, there were also two Rovers who focused on videregående skole visits—a professor of dance history and me.

I was based in Oslo but spent most of my time traveling outside of the capital to cities and towns in all 15 fylker (the Norwegian equivalent of states or provinces), where I mostly visited upper-secondary schools and worked with students studying both *yrkesfag* (vocational training) and *studieforberedelse* (general academic subjects). During my time in Norway, I visited small schools and conducted workshops with a single student and spent time in some of the largest schools in the country, leading sessions of nearly 200 students. By the year's end, I had worked with thousands of students, teachers, and other participants over the course of more than 250 workshops. Although I arrived in Norway with nearly two dozen ideas, there were four student workshops that comprised the overwhelming majority: “A History of America Through 10 Songs,” a workshop that tried to examine historical trends and themes through music, often associated with justice movements, culminating in participants telling history through their own playlist; “American Politics—Contest or Conflict?” which aimed at exploring the American political landscape and its many ruptures while also drawing parallels to Norwegian politics; “No One America,” a workshop that illustrated the degree to which the United States is a collection of diverse regional, cultural, economic, religious, and other social identities, encouraging students to explore regional identities in their own lives; and “The Long Road to Social Justice,” which focused on grassroots organizations and movements throughout American history to build a counternarrative to dominant perceptions of the United States. Similarly, there were three workshops of my dozen options that were most requested by Norwegian teachers: “Teaching Argumentative Writing in a Divisive Age,” which draws on my nearly two decades as a composition teacher and offers some frameworks on teaching argumentative and persuasive writing in a way that

maximizes understanding and community-building; “Human Rights Education—Teaching About, Through, and For Human Rights,” a workshop whose focus might be self-evident to readers, helping support Norwegian teachers in developing or refining HRE and HRE-informed methods and curriculum; and “Centering Critical Thinking in Teaching and Learning,” a teacher workshop that tried to complicate and disrupt narrow conceptions of critical thinking and advance a variety more compatible with culturally sustaining practices. Regardless of topic, my workshops were designed to challenge superficial, flat, or incomplete understandings of Norway, the United States, and the world, instead leaning into complexity, historical and critical thinking, and personal reflection.

Strengths of the Human Rights Regime in Norway

Through conducting my workshops with students, teachers, teachers in training, and others in the Norwegian education system around the country, I came to realize three major strengths as pertaining to rights and HRE. First, human rights are ubiquitous in the discursive landscape in Norway. As discussed above, there is a consistency with which rights appear and are discussed throughout civil society. Similar conditions can be found in Norwegian upper secondary and vocational schools. Students and teachers seemed to understand human rights as universal and supranational, transcending any conditions or limits on the part of the state. For example, students across the country engaged deeply in the broader social and historical context of my workshops on the march for social justice in the United States, recognizing that grassroots movements were really aimed at bringing national law in line with universal human rights and deontological ethics. Teaching materials, especially those in upper secondary English- and Norwegian-language classrooms, both those created by teachers and those extracted from national curriculum guides, are explicit in their goals of having students understand rights as a normative framework for society—both within and beyond the borders of Norway. During my workshops on HRE in Drammen, decolonization in Kautokeino, and diversifying reading lists in Ski, teachers in Norway readily addressed human rights issues and

protections relevant to the project, whether it was a letter-writing activity protesting new regulations for cruise ships or an autobiographical poetry unit. Students in vocational programs, meanwhile, were similarly able to discuss how economic and social rights overlap with their future union membership.¹⁴ For example, my workshop on American history through music often prompted students in electrical, technical, and construction programs to discuss protest music and its role in building solidarity. Teacher educators and teachers in training demonstrated the deepest understanding of human rights, but also the widest range of positions on human rights, with those studying or lecturing in HRE programs having the most robust understanding. Both young students and adult learners who were new to Norway appeared comfortable talking about a right to a national identity, to education, and to participate in civil society, as well as rights protecting discrimination or prejudicial treatment, even when those rights were infringed upon by individuals or government agencies. I fondly remember workshops in Levanger in central Norway with recent migrants where our conversations on regional American identity grew to expand how local governments in the United States, Norway, and their countries of origin offered unique sites of resistance against abuses by national governments. And this trend continues into young adulthood outside of compulsory schooling; young adults in university, in the workforce, and in military service seemed at a bare minimum literate in rights and able to discuss rights and the lack thereof, especially when it comes to rights protecting free speech and expressions of identity.

Second, schools foster political engagement. Very early on in my time in Norway, I was intrigued by the political engagement of young people. Of course, I am accustomed to student activism, which is a part of daily life in my California high school, but in Norway student political engagement was more clearly connected to partisan political apparatuses and to policy and decision-making in communities. For example, students in Bergen and Stavanger—larger cities on the western coast—described their involvement

¹⁴ Around 50% of Norway's workers are union members, while over 70% are covered by a collective bargaining agreement (CBA) (ETUI, n.d.).

in youth party leadership and often examined social issues that their American counterparts were experiencing through that lens. Party-based political engagement looks different from its analogue in the United States. Not only are there more national parties, but because their parliamentary system and voting blocs require greater collaboration than the United States—as well as other parliamentary democracies—the political distance between most political groups are minimal. Moreover, even among the fringe parties, there is still a *prima facie* dedication to democratic norms and principles. Within this environment, politically engaged students are often comfortable voicing their positions on policy debates. I observed classes in English and Norwegian language, as well as ethics and history, where students would default to identifying common ground and had a much harder time sketching the extremity of the debate than my students in California. This is doubly true in matters than concern school life such as national examination policies or attendance requirements. While this might be true of my students back home as well, I found their understanding of the broader conversations around these topics more sophisticated. While I spent much less time in lower-secondary and elementary schools, from what I experienced the importance of concepts like consensus-making and the value of a strong community prime young learners for applying these principles in their later years of schooling. Teacher educators in the northern Norway city of Tromsø who specialized in training new elementary and lower-secondary teachers spoke at length about community rules and norm-building through play and creativity. While this does not always translate to voting—teachers often decried the precipitous drop in voting among young people—they were uniformly informed.

Third, Norwegian schools encourage a critical stance that is oriented towards internationalism. Throughout the language and social science classrooms I visited, students were nearly always thinking about Norwegian politics, economics, and society in terms of broader international terms. Sometimes it was in strictly comparative or bilateral terms, typically between Norway and either the United States or Sweden. More often than not, these conversations would either start or end either tautologically proving Norwegian superiority in some dimension—civil liberties, an independent

press, supports for refugees, or consistency with human rights, for example—or as an opportunity to denigrate what limited view of the United States—and it was quite commonly the United States—they had at the time. However, it was not every conversation I had, and there were plenty of students and adults capable of discussing the nuances of American, Norwegian, and global political life. I also found people who identified as non-white Norwegians or recent immigrants to Norway, Jewish and Muslim students, and the Sámi students I spoke with to be more reasonable and reflective in terms of comparative analysis between Norway and the United States, as well as multilateral discussions of global affairs. Conversations about migration, borders, and national sovereignty, though, were characterized primarily by nuance: students and their teachers understood the myriad push and pull factors involved in regional and global movement, and they also articulated the challenge to both support new migrants or minority groups while also giving them the tools and access to navigate society fairly. Other times, students were engaging in regional or global geopolitical analysis that situated Norwegian interests within trends or events. During my year, the sabotage of a Nord Stream pipeline¹⁵ was one such event, where students understood it as a part of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Another is the entrenched dependency on oil wealth in Norway, what kind of economic compatriots it forces the country to associate with, and the long-term prospects for a viable alternative economic model.¹⁶ I also found that these conversations did address rights, the rule of law, and international order quite regularly, especially for the older students who were usually

¹⁵ Nord Stream is a network of offshore gas pipelines running from Russia and Germany through the Baltic and North Seas to support Western Europe's natural gas needs. On 26 September 2022, there were a series of underwater explosions which damaged two of the pipelines. The perpetrator is, as of this writing, uncertain. For more, see Bowden (2023).

¹⁶ It is important to note that oil wealth transformed Norway from the poorest country in Europe to one of the wealthiest in the world in less than one generation. Nearly three-quarters of the earnings from the country's oil go into the sovereign wealth funds, colloquially called the "Oil Fund," which combined own about 1.5% of all publicly traded companies globally (Norges Bank Investment Management, 2024). As a result, conversations about moving away from fossil fuels and climate change, while urgent and existential for every living thing on earth, are uniquely associated with material wellbeing and sovereignty. For those who want more about how oil has changed Norway, see Cleary (2017) or Røste (2021), both of which are uniformly positive about Norway's relationship with oil but are informative nonetheless.

heading either to university or compulsory military service the following year. Mostly, I was impressed that Norwegian students were aware of and deeply committed to some kind of global rule of law resulting in durable peace and were able to anchor what they saw in a universal rights paradigm.

Pitfalls to Norwegian Human Rights Progress

Although these are major successes to be praised, I did also discover three major potential hazards, not just to human rights and HRE, but to the continued health of Norwegian society. First, Norwegian society struggles to have sustained productive conversations around race and racialization. Although the narrative of Norway as exclusively white has been false for decades,¹⁷ the idea that in some way race is a proxy for national identity—and vice versa—has proved resistant and particularly toxic. I met Norwegians whose families immigrated to Norway from Vietnam or Somalia sometimes as early as the 1970s, but who are still described as “being of an immigrant background,” when the same might not be said of people who immigrated from Poland or Hungary. Some white Norwegian students were quick to fall back on national mythmaking concerning race. Several of these conversations developed following a 2022 racist incident in an Oslo bar, where a white Norwegian comedian confronted a Black Norwegian journalist in a hijab, suggesting that she was “too Black” to be in the bar—and in the country. Those white Norwegian students, more often young men, were quick to minimize the confrontation or chalk it up to mere comedy. This was not the only such episode during my time in Norway. Others, however, were more interested in unsettling this semantic shorthand for national identity. Many white Norwegians often responded to challenges by comparing racism in Norway to racism in the United States. While the same regular threat of vigilante and state violence does not exist to the same extent in Norway, the daily effects of racism and marginalization impacted students and their

¹⁷ Norway is over 80% ethnically “Norwegian”—a vague term that includes the Sámi and other minority groups, nearly 9% other European extraction, and nearly 10% other race or ethnicity. However, these national statistics obscure the reality of diversity in Norway, which can be found in the biggest cities, which while not nearly as multicultural as San Francisco, but are, in large part, not that far off.

families in real, tangible ways. These conversations are complicated by role dialects of the Norwegian language play in identity. In addition to having two nationally recognized written forms of the language, there are six major dialects and over a hundred local forms. Furthermore, there are the many dialects of indigenous Sámi languages—and the Kven language, which is a Finnish dialect spoken in northern Norway. Considering that Norwegian is a difficult (but not impossible) language for non-native speakers to master, Norwegians are keenly aware of imperfections in spoken Norwegian, and that dialects quickly identify the community from which a speaker hails, matters of language, race, and identity as a Norwegian are tightly intertwined. The same can be said of religion. I met several Jewish Norwegian students who explained that their Norwegian identity was what could be best described as contingent—they felt Norwegian up until the point when they were made to feel Jewish.¹⁸ The legacy of the Norwegianization of the Sámi in Norway casts a shadow upon others in Norway who are aware that their position as Norwegians may be called into question.

Second, the labor conditions of teachers in Norway are changing amid broader changes in education. Shortly after I arrived in Norway, teachers across the country began a series of rolling strikes to protest wage stagnation, accreting workloads, and a lack of qualified teachers (“Teacher strike in Norway!,” 2022). The strikes continued throughout most of the fall, and I did my best to complete my duties as a Roving Scholar without functioning as a strikebreaker or scab. In my conversations with teachers in Norway before, during, and after the strikes, several common themes arose. As expected, teachers resent the relatively low wages and contract agreements that do not keep up with the cost of living. Several midcareer teachers described comparing their salaries with others in the private sector and finding little justification to stay other than job satisfaction. Most teachers I met who shared their annual salaries earned between 500,000 and 600,000 Norwegian Kroner—the equivalent of \$47,000 to \$56,000 USD per year. While this is

¹⁸ Aside from the dreadful history of the “Jew Code,” the few Jewish people in Norway—around 1,200—and the deportation and extermination during World War II make Jewish Norwegians aware of their positionality. For more on the Jewish people in Norway, see the Oslo Jewish Museum’s exhibition guide “What Happened in Norway?”

much less than the average salary in my California school district, Norwegian teachers benefit from the robust social welfare system and a supplemental pension plan (in addition to public transit and infrastructure), whereas many teachers with whom I work are rent burdened, spending 30% or more of their monthly net salary on rent. Accompanying flat pay is a gradual increase in workload and duties. During the early years of the pandemic, many occupations within Norwegian society were called upon to do their civic duty, but while nurses and others were compensated with increased wages or other benefits, teachers' contracts were repeatedly deferred.¹⁹ Norwegian teachers described, variously, feeling like they were being taken advantage of, that policymakers did not respect the profession, and that their job was being devalued. Additionally, teachers across the country discussed the increase in duties, responsibilities, teaching loads, class sizes, and other elements that indicate a slide towards the structural overwork that characterizes, among other things, the neoliberalization of education—efficiency-oriented reforms and austerity. This frustration was even more pronounced in academic subjects that were not a part of vocational tracks, and in some of the most competitive schools in the country where teachers felt a palpable pressure to perform. Schools in Norway do wear many hats, especially in rural municipalities where they are the surest path towards a lucrative career, but the increased workload for teachers and demands on schools is taxing.

Lastly, I observed a generalized aversion to self-criticism.²⁰ In my conversations with Norwegians across the country, I found an atrophied willingness to critique and criticize their country, to draw parallels that were not flattering to Norwegian society or the state. It is not that people were not able to point out weaknesses or flaws in Norwegian system—they were, in fact, and often did criticize the Norwegian state or society when they were

¹⁹ It is important to note that there are really two major teacher unions in Norway: one serving teachers in the capital, Oslo, and one serving the rest of the country. Oslo teachers had a renegotiated contract in 2022, resulting in some increased compensation and improved pension disbursements. The rest did not.

²⁰ For more about the social psychology of Norway in the context of Northern Europe, see Carlquist, Nafstad, & Blakar (2007).

not in mixed company, I learned towards the end of my time as a Roving Scholar—but that it was considered *mean-spirited* to do so. Norwegian students were quick to point out problems in the United States—systemic racism and police violence, the gun violence epidemic, the extreme cost of healthcare, consumerist culture—and happy to wallow in what sometimes became mockery. But when asked to turn the mirror back on their own history and environment—Norwegianization, the high rates of heart attack and stroke, public surveys on racism, their welfare state subsidized by oil wealth—most would balk and end the conversation, equivocate by saying the two countries were impossible to compare, or redirect.²¹ Again, this was not true of every conversation, but it was common enough to justify inclusion here. Those most willing and able to meaningfully criticize Norway for its legitimate failures were teachers living in a region other than where they grew up or students (including adult learners) who were new to Norway. I do think that my presence as an American and perhaps a representation of the influence the United States has on Norwegian domestic politics and foreign policy prompted local teachers and some Norwegians to leap to the country's defense. Teachers in Norway from the global south described experiencing similar reactions, though not necessarily as severe as mine at the end of my 90-minute lessons. I expect someone from elsewhere in Europe would experience the same. Partially, I suspect that the Norwegian national narrative—of a country dedicated to human rights, founded in response to hundreds of years as a vassal state, that awards the Nobel Peace Prize in its capital's city hall—produces dissonance for the average Norwegian.

Of all the structural potential hazards to human rights I witnessed in Norway, this one seems the most serious. An unwillingness to criticize one's own nation, in public or private, in mixed company or among family and childhood friends, belies a greater dedication to orthodoxy than to the right thing. It concerns me in Norway and when I see it in the United States too.

²¹ I do not often say it, but it was one of the few times I felt proud to be an American. For all our many faults, American society does tend to air its dirty laundry in public. Our political conversations are heated and contentious, but they are also public. I have also found that no one criticizes the United States like an American, aware of its potential and possibilities as well as the moral compromises and turpitude it spent to get partway there.

Steps Towards Growth

There are opportunities for the Norwegian system, where I spent time teaching and learning, and the American system, where I call home, to learn from each other. I think a dedication to diverse local, national, and international civic identities that transcend mere patriotism would help foster the kind of cosmopolitan stance that I admired in Norwegian young people. However, it would be best married with a ubiquitous critical stance, like that I admire in my students in California, but one pointing towards a shared investment in a national project. I think my students and those across the globe would benefit from the multiple flexible educational trajectories used mostly to reach personal goals. In both the United and Norway, a rededication to the ideals and reinvestment into the coffers of public education and the public sphere it often represents are much needed.

Of all the things I learned and saw in Norway, the aspect of Norwegian society that most primes it for the kinds of changes offered by and resulting from HRE was a single word: *dugnad*. The word is untranslatable, but most closely means help or support. It refers to large local coordinated voluntary community work.²² When our neighborhood record store moved into a larger space in the middle of winter, the patrons and nearby businesses helped them move every record and piece of furniture into the new space. That was a *dugnad*. The nearby elementary school knit and crocheted wool tubes to keep neighborhood plants warm over the winter, that was a *dugnad*. And if we can forget our parochial interests and look forward to an expansive idea of human rights as a big tent with room for everyone, every step closer to that mission is a *dugnad*.

²² This concept is closely related to, though not identical to, mutual aid practices of voluntary and collaborative exchange for common benefit that stem from Kropotkin (1902) and others, and which Kaba (2023) argues “has to do with changing the social relationships that we have amongst each other, in order to be able to fight beyond this current moment, beyond the current crisis, beyond the current form of a disaster that we’re trying to overcome.” Some examples include the Black Panthers free breakfast program in Oakland or Food Not Bombs, a cooperative food bank and meal distribution program that I participated in with my mother when I was growing up.

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