

AMERICAN STUDIES IN NORWAY

Historic Ideals and Contemporary Challenges

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Abstract: Because of its particular history of institutionalization, American studies in Norway has come to fill a unique role in higher education, one that requires broader recognition to secure the field a stable future. In this article, Falke connects the past of American studies in Norway to its present by focusing on three founding moments. These three are the establishment of the Fulbright Program, which she uses to discuss shifts in funding American studies; the creation of the professorship of American studies in Oslo, which clarifies differences in the goals of British and American studies; and the initiation of the Salzburg Seminar, which reveals the field's interdisciplinary core. The article closes with three generalizations about the landscape of American studies teaching in Norway today related to America as a political imaginary, internationalization within American studies as a discipline, and the presumed relationship between American literature and lived experience of the culture.

Keywords: history of American studies, interdisciplinarity, Fulbright program, Sigmund Skard, Salzburg Seminar, political imaginary

Proper English in Norway is British English. If I submit to our university administration a course description for our master's program, the document returns to me "corrected" to master's "programme." The linguists on my hall teach students that there are many correct Englishes, but in Norwegian education administration, there is only one, and it is British. My administrators are preserving a long tradition. In 1887, when Knud Brekke published his *Lærebog i Engelsk for Begyndere*, he clarified that English, when spoken correctly, sounds like the "unrestrained, cultivated everyday language of Southern England."¹ Norway is not unique in its historical prioritization of British over American language and culture. Until World War II, the teaching of British language, history, literature, and culture so thoroughly dominated international English teaching that the US Advisory Commission on International Educational and Cultural Affairs lamented to Congress that "teaching about American civilization scarcely existed in the universities, colleges, and secondary schools of almost all nations of the world."² Following the war, things changed rapidly. Administrators may maintain a preference for "cultivated" British spelling and accents, but my students speak American. Between the close US-Norway cooperation during the war and the subsequent rise of American popular culture among Norway's younger generations, the study of American literature, culture, and history has received top-down and bottom-up support over the last seventy-five years. Immediately after the war ended, there was a recognition, in Norway and Europe as a whole, that the US would play a prominent role in an increasingly interconnected postwar world.

It was in this postwar moment that American studies emerged through a combination of European desire to understand the increasingly powerful US and the US's explicit bid to extend soft power globally through education. In Scandinavia and all of Europe, American studies

bears traces of the postwar moment's conflicts—optimism about international cooperation and interdisciplinary methods in tension with concern about cultural imperialism. In his seminal work, *American Studies in Europe*, Sigmund Skard writes that "[t]he United States emerged from the Second World War with overwhelming power and prestige." In contrast, Europe was "completely exhausted," feeling strongly its "dependence and need for help." At just this moment, "[t]o the starved and war-torn people of the Old World poured, in a continuous stream, all the products of the New." On the same page, however, Skard shifts his tone and calls this outpouring "a veritable invasion of Europe by American Civilization."³

As the founder of the European Association of American Studies (EAAS) and the University of Oslo's first professor of American studies, Skard was especially well placed to observe universities' reception of this New World bounty in Norway and elsewhere. However, the uncertainty of his tone offers a foretaste of the contradictory interpretations of US involvement in postwar Europe. Viewed from Washington, the new Fulbright program for international scholarly exchange and the establishment of centers of American studies abroad were seen as part of "a new vision of American conversation with the rest of the world"—not a monologue, but a multi-directional, multi-participant conversation.⁴ However, Skard's research revealed resistance on Europe's side: "[t]he political and social radicalism of America, its lack of traditional inhibitions and its concern with the needs of the common man in the present-day world served as a permanent protest against the exclusiveness and the conservative complacency of Old Europe."⁵ Writing in 1958, Skard blames the resistance to American studies on Old World snobbery. But America's "political and social radicalism" and its concern for common people have not proven as permanent as Skard hoped, nor

has the idea that American studies reached Europe as a product of progressive influence been permanently accepted. In 2018, a group of “leading scholars” charged with assessing American studies in Europe stated flatly that it was “[b]orn as a project of ‘cultural imperialism’ during the Cold War.”⁶ American studies in Norway has internalized this history of ambivalence about US influence abroad. Students pursuing any level of English qualification in higher education—one-year certification, BA, MA, or teaching degree—must study American literature at every university in the country. However, within any American studies course, students meet critiques of US class inequality, of racially motivated violence, of border policies, and trends toward commercialization. The rigorous critique of past and present priorities in US politics and society, I would argue, works to counteract any vestiges of cultural imperialism that might have remained. In contemporary American studies classes, the US functions as a social and political imaginary through which professors and students in Norway contemplate not only what America is or has been, but also ethical and political questions important for Norway’s future.

In this essay, I want to connect the past of American studies in Norway to its present and to make some general observations about the field’s present challenges insofar as these manifest themselves in American studies classrooms. I discuss three founding moments of American studies in Norway and Europe and close with three generalizations about the landscape of American studies teaching in Norway today. On the whole, American studies teaching has retained interdisciplinary characteristics, but because courses focused on the US are now siloed in English literature programs, the insights arising from these courses risk being seen as matters of aesthetics at a moment when aesthetic education in universities is being devalued at national and local levels. Although aesthetics, par-

ticularly the history of literary stylistics in different modes of American literature, forms a key part of American studies surveys, debates in the field, both in the scholarly literature and in the classroom, focus much more on American literature as an expression of how the country sees itself. The American imaginaries suggested by literary texts are then refracted through students’ perceptions of the US, perceptions which reflect portrayals of America in international media. The United States functions symbolically as a container for “macromappings of social and political space through which we perceive, judge, and act in the world”—an “imaginary,” as philosophers and social scientists have come to use the term—and literature becomes a means by which these typically “pre-reflective” assumptions become available for reflection and debate.⁷ Whether the best or worst aspects of American history and culture are in focus, the rising generation in Norway studies the US with more than aesthetic interest, contemplating key issues such as environmental degradation, Indigenous rights, immigration policies, and gender nonconformity by means of America’s gigantic, messy, diverse past and present. For this reason, American studies serves an important role in many students’ development, but one that remains invisible to most administrators and education policy makers. That invisibility endangers the future of American studies; if the important functions that such courses now serve are not recognized, the courses will be cut and hiring discontinued.

Three Founding Moments

American studies in Norway was founded with a great deal of hope. Architects of new international academic staff exchange programs and American studies centers in Europe believed strongly in the power of education-based people-to-people diplomacy to ensure a more

peaceful future. One moment that became significant for American studies in Norway was the founding of the Fulbright Program. In 1945, Senator J. William Fulbright advocated the sale of US war properties, recommending that the profits be invested in a program for scholarly exchange. His advocacy led to the creation of the world's largest educational exchange organization. To date, almost 400,000 scholars from 160 countries have participated in the Fulbright program with the goal of supporting "friendly and peaceful relations between the people of the United States and the people of other countries."⁸ One may object to the naivete of that goal, but I know of no more democratic program for cultural diplomacy.

Norway joined the Fulbright initiative early; it was the eleventh country to partner with the US in the program. Now, around forty Norwegians and twenty-five Americans benefit from a Fulbright exchange each year—some as students and some as professors. The Norwegian government, via the Ministry of Education and Research and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, now provides 70 percent of the program's funding.⁹ In his historical review of scholarly exchange as a foreign policy instrument, Robert Spiller treats the Fulbright program in Norway as exemplary. It achieved the "most substantial and gratifying result of American cultural foreign policy" because by the mid-sixties, Norway housed "one of the best centers for the higher study of American literature and related subjects outside the United States itself," and it was "wholly supported by Norwegian funds."¹⁰ A shift had occurred. Instead of Americans teaching about America abroad, Norwegians had embraced the study of the US as an academic pursuit on par with the study of Great Britain. Now, sixty years later, the focus on American studies that characterized the early years of the program has subsided. Although the special designation of an American Literature and Culture position at the

University of Bergen has been preserved and three roving scholars are expected to teach American studies at Norwegian secondary schools, the other sixty-plus annual Fulbrighters research everything from ice engineering to the oboe. The main support for American studies in Norway no longer comes from the Fulbright program, but from the Norwegian university system itself. Being housed in and supported by universities, American studies courses benefit from more continuity of staff and fuller integration with university programs than could be achieved through one-year Fulbright appointments. However, the teaching of American studies in Norway has now become vulnerable to the national government's changing priorities for higher education.

Today, participants in cultural, political, military, technological, and economic spheres stand poised for further Norway-US cooperation, but two factors in the present direction of Norwegian higher education indicate that American studies is no longer valued by educational policy makers as an agent of such cooperation. First, the English language is viewed as a threatening competitor to the Norwegian language. In Norway's most recent long-term plan, the Ministry of Education and Research expresses "concern" that "Norwegian has lost ground to English . . . in both research and higher education."¹¹ Second, the Norwegian Government increasingly prioritizes vocationally oriented skill sets over broad, democratic education. In her research on neoliberalism in Norway, Denmark and Sweden, Susan Wiborg, writing in 2012, found that Norway and Denmark had adhered to traditional "egalitarian values" associated with Scandinavian societies longer than Sweden, but that pressure to view higher education as a servant to "market forces" was mounting across the political spectrum.¹² Norway has now given in to the same neoliberal pressures threatening the humanities programs in the US and the UK. Whereas the US-Norway

Fulbright Foundation remains, in the words of its most recent director, committed to “promot[ing] further mutual understanding between the peoples of the United States and Norway,” the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research directs universities to “develop the capacity of their programmes in line with the skills needed in different areas of the labour market.”¹³ In this vision, the nation is a market first and a democracy second, prioritizing not “people,” but “skills.” The future of American studies in Norway seems uncertain within the logic of Norway’s new national priorities for education.

The second moment significant for the founding of American studies in Norway was the appointment of Sigmund Skard as “Professor of Literature, especially American” at University of Oslo in 1946.¹⁴ Skard had spent the war years in America, but upon committing to the new post in Oslo, he solicited the Rockefeller Foundation for money to spend a year really learning the country “as a physical fact.”¹⁵ His request was granted, and in the summer of 1946, he shipped back to New York. Having been given a “free hand” to research the US as he saw fit, Skard toured the Grand Canyon on muleback. He visited a “sugar cane plantation in Louisiana and gambling dens in Las Vegas” studying “the human landscape.”¹⁶ The University of Oslo faculty had insisted that the university create the new position because “American literature today is not only of great value in itself, but is one of the most important means, even an indispensable means, for the study of American social and cultural life as a whole.”¹⁷ They projected that cooperation between Norway and the US would “become even more intimate and profitable in the future,” all the more so if it were “given a foundation in scholarly studies of American civilization.”¹⁸ Skard’s conviction that he could only teach American Literature after encountering “America itself as a physical fact” presumes that knowing the literature both demanded and produced understanding of the country’s cultural

reality necessary for intimate and profitable future collaborations between Norway and the US—an assumption apparently shared by the faculty at the University of Oslo and the Rockefeller Foundation.

American studies teaching in Norway continues to juxtapose America’s aspirations, often solidified in literary and historical texts, and lived reality, especially as that reality is reported on by historically oppressed groups. Since most American studies students cannot travel into the “human landscape” of the US as Skard did, texts must stand in for direct experience, but instructors ensure that students encounter regional and ethnic diversity. Syllabi also feature texts that circulate beyond the conventional circuits of literary publishing. The use of contemporary texts from cultural spheres other than literature mirrors Skard’s and the UiO faculty’s early conviction that the goal of studying American literature is to learn about America as such. For example, at the University of Bergen, the American Literature and Culture class includes Alex Rivera’s *The Border Trilogy*, a series of short films depicting the free movement of products across borders people are forbidden to cross. Students in the same class read *A Saloonkeeper’s Daughter*, an 1887 coming-of-age story about a Norwegian immigrant, and “A Different Mirror,” a non-fiction exploration of multicultural America by historian and ethnographer Ronald Takaki from 1993. Filmic and written, fiction and non-fiction, each of these works invites students to contemplate not just the literatures of migration and integration, but the ways different moments in history promote or conceal different views regarding these experiences. Rather than assuming continuity between life and literature as Skard and his hiring committee sometimes did, contemporary American studies courses in Norway ask students to question it. Still, the assumption that American literature should or can be looked *through* more than looked *at* persists in a way it does not for British literature.

The third moment I want to mention is the founding of the Salzburg Seminar in 1947, a moment in which 112 American studies scholars from Europe and the US met at a castle to initiate the conversations that would give rise to the European Association of American Studies (EAAS) in 1953. The American Studies Association of Norway (ASANOR) followed in 1974.¹⁹ Initiative for the Seminar came from three Harvard graduate students, Austrian Clemens Heller, and Americans Richard Cambell, and Scott Elledge. When the first participants gathered at the Schloss Leopoldskron for an immersive, collaborative study of the United States, participants included a Czech resistance fighter, an Italian anti-fascist, a Jewish-Romanian snatched from a gas chamber line at Auschwitz, and an Austrian Nazi who learned English in a prisoner-of-war camp in Kentucky. Sleeping on iron cots donated by the Red Cross, they shared dorms for six weeks and discussed diplomacy, economics, and cultural anthropology.²⁰ Salzburg Global Seminars in American studies continue annually, and until 2024, ASANOR and the US Embassy of Norway have cooperatively sent a representative. Conversations still address contemporary issues from a variety of disciplinary perspectives and in a spirit of shared inquiry. Participants now come not just from Europe, but from around the world.

Although the Salzburg Seminar is only tangentially related to the history of American studies in Norway, the faith in searching, interdisciplinary dialogue legible there reveals the mood in which American studies was founded throughout Europe, and Norway was involved in that founding from the beginning. Skard, a Salzburg Fellow in 1953, found the form of academic interchange there utterly unique and even claimed that the “tendency to break the bonds of specialization and embrace all aspects of civilization in an integrated and structural ‘Kulturkunde’. . . originated in Europe.”²¹ He attributes

this robust interdisciplinarity not to an abstract commitment to an academic principle, but to the need to find “a neutral field of investigation which at the same time would be of immediate relevance to present-day problems.”²² Reporting on the first Salzburg gathering, Alfred Kazin similarly recalled that they discussed “America not as a country but a particular sector of modern society.”²³ Other historians of American studies might dispute Skard’s attribution of the field’s interdisciplinarity to Europe. Gene Wise, for example, discusses interdisciplinary American studies work underway at Yale, George Washington University, Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania, and Western Reserve already in the 1930s.²⁴ Even so, the motive for interdisciplinary collaboration in Europe—the treatment of US culture as “neutral” ground for the investigation of present-day problems—distinguishes early American studies in Europe from the field’s early US history.

The topics currently covered in American studies courses suggest that America still functions as a political imaginary through which students and professors in Norway can contemplate contemporary issues, regardless of whether the US serves as inspiration or a cautionary tale. Courses explore refugee narratives, legal histories of gender oppression, the social construction of race, multicultural approaches to ecological preservation, and media representations of technological advancement. The US is hardly neutral ground for approaching these topics since political priorities in Norway and the US have differed significantly. That does not lessen student or scholarly interest in the topics; it might increase it. What does decrease when the US moves away from Norway politically is national investment in American studies programs. For example, Ole Moen has noted that American studies became “politically incorrect” in Norwegian universities in the late sixties “mainly be-

cause of the Vietnam War.” He suggests that disapproval of America’s actions negatively impacted hiring in American studies in Norway even into the 1990s. Hiring for American studies in Norway has never returned to its pre-Vietnam pace. Disciplinary diversity has also been lost.²⁵ Between 1946 and 1956, the University of Oslo offered forty-five courses on American subjects: “23 were on literature, 5 on civilization generally, 4 each on Geography, History, and Political Science, 3 on education, and 2 on law.”²⁶ In contrast to the broad disciplinary spread of the forties and fifties, the study of the US is now carried out almost exclusively as part of a literary component in English programs. In the last two years, ten American studies courses were taught at UiO, and nine were subjects in English.

Although upper-division courses continue to be taught on topics like American environmentalism or Indigenous studies, the bulk of the American studies teaching that happens in Norway, in terms of frequency of course offerings and number of students, is the first-year survey of American literature and culture. Almost all students studying English in higher education in Norway take some version of this class, and teaching clearly invites students to approach American culture using multiple disciplinary methodologies. My colleague at UiT, Justin Parks, teaches work by Harvard historian Jill Lepore. The Universities of Oslo and Bergen include “history of ideas” (ENG 1304: UiO) and “historical, social, and aesthetic perspectives” (ENG 122: UiB) in the course descriptions. The interdisciplinary inquiry foregrounded in American studies at the Salzburg Seminar and through the EAAS reaches students through these survey courses. Still, regardless of how interdisciplinary the course content is, because the study credits earned in these courses count toward English degrees, hiring priorities follow the needs of English literature sections rather than a research-driven agenda for American studies as such. The idea of America continues to facilitate inquiry into issues that

exceed any one nation’s boundaries, but the institutional space given for this inquiry has shrunk.

American Studies in Norway Today

Looking at the scene in Norway today, one sees American studies courses driven by critique more than in the post-War moment. The interdisciplinarity that characterized American studies from the start is still there, but there are fewer Americanist positions outside of English sections. In concluding, I offer three generalizations connected to these circumstances, each of which comes with benefits and challenges.

Following World War II, scholars in Norway and the US-based organizations that supported them seemed confident that works of American literature provided lenses through which the world’s problems could be productively examined. American literature continues to provide these lenses, but the ways literature colors and sometimes biases perception remain more constantly in focus. This leads me to my first generalization. There might be a tendency to see American literature less as a space to which scholars from many nations and disciplines can come to work through basic problems of being human together—the way it functioned in Salzburg in 1947—and more as a political imaginary through which differences can be clarified. This is a challenge in that discovering differences does not lead to building new courses, programs, or research projects as often as the discovery of similarities. Coupled with America’s ongoing political disfavor and the Norwegian government’s increasingly neoliberal priorities for higher education, the fragmentation of American studies as a field has contributed to a decrease in cooperation, hiring, and visibility. But the constant questioning of what the value of studying America might be is also positive.

Any American studies scholarly community outside of the US needs to question why it privileges the US as an object of inquiry, not just in order to justify its existence to students and funding bodies, but because rigorous scholarship in the field demands it. Contradictory positions keep such inquiry alive.

Second, American studies, always interested in its own national as well as disciplinary boundaries, has become more transnational. A “transnational turn” has occurred in American studies at large as the idea of America is understood to be an international construct, and as the role of cultural inflows and outflows is increasingly appreciated. Additionally, Anglophone literature, as a discipline, is more anxious than ever about the historical overlap between English and colonialism, English and capitalism, and English and military intervention abroad. Both the interdisciplinary of American studies and the discipline of English literature now press toward international perspectives within and about the US. This is a benefit insofar as it challenges nationalistic narratives of isolationism, but a challenge insofar as it further expands an already diffuse field. Course offerings in American studies have been reduced. Each semester has a limited number of weeks. As the field becomes more inclusive, it becomes even more challenging to cover it well in a short period.

Third, and finally, I have saved my favorite story about Skard to the end. After his travels, he accepted the job in Oslo, and he was still reading furiously in trying to prepare. In a letter to his wife, he recalls reading Emily Dickinson for the first time:

[m]any years have passed since a poet moved me so deeply. And it's blissful . . . I sang and conducted all of Mendelssohn's violin concerto afterwards, while dressing . . . and I am still in a general state of exaltation. To find myself still capable of such

an experience . . . as the direct result of the new reading of a new author from far away, strengthens my self-confidence and determination: this is going to be my real job, to experience such things, and to make others do the same. What a challenge!²⁷

Although Skard would go on to translate and publish analyses of Dickinson, at this stage, her work was brand new to him. Being taught mostly at the first-year level, and with literature, culture, civilization, history, and economy all packed into a class, American studies surveys still demand that instructors teach material we know comparatively little about. In many ways, this is a challenge. We would not do research that way. But in some ways, not knowing can be a strength in teaching. To find ourselves exalting at discovering something new, we have to be teaching something new. No one can be an authority on the breadth of material an American studies survey demands, so the subject requires constant learning. Furthermore, since American studies has functioned in Norway as a space in which pressing social and political questions can be asked, syllabi tend to change from year-to-year as the urgency of social and political issues changes. This makes it a difficult subject to teach but an exhilarating one.

However correct or cultivated my administration may find British English, Norway as a whole remains troubled by and interested in the United States. A quick Google Trends search of the nation's names or the names of their politicians, their musicians, their wars, reveals how much more interested the Norwegian populace is in America than Great Britain. Regardless of how one accounts for that, it suggests that the American imaginary continues to loom large in Norwegian thinking. American studies may have begun in Norway as an arm of soft power policy,

but it consolidated interest in the US around ideals that still belong in Norwegian higher education—promotion of mutual understanding, cross-disciplinary inquiry, confidence in the connectedness of art and life, and enthusiasm for a new discovery. As national policymaking lowers the country's historical prioritization of these values, American studies courses still strive to promote them.

Notes

1. Brekke, *Lærebog i Engelsk*. Original phrasing is "den utvungne, dannede dagligtale i det syden-gelske." Translated in Ragnhild Lund's "A Hundred Years," footnote 4.
2. W. Johnson, "A Special Report."
3. Skard, *American Studies*, vol. I, 39.
4. W. Johnson, "A Special Report," 3.
5. Skard, *American Studies*, vol. II, 640.
6. Costaguta and Pignagnoli, "Introduction," 162, 161.
7. Steger, *The Rise*, 6.
8. Fulbright Scholar Program, "A Foundation of Excellence."
9. Næss, "Looking Back."
10. Spiller, "American Studies," 1, 9.
11. Norwegian Ministry, "Long-term plan," 78.
12. Wiborg, "Neo-Liberalism."
13. Næss, "Looking Back," 25; Norwegian Ministry, "Long-term Plan," 70.
14. Skard, *The Study*, title page; Moen, "American studies," 1.
15. Skard, *Trans-Atlantica*, 72.
16. Skard, *Trans-Atlantica*, 71, 73.
17. Quoted in Skard, *Trans-Atlantica*, 61.
18. Quoted in Skard, *Trans-Atlantica*, 61.
19. Moen, "American Studies," 3.
20. Salyer, "President's Report," 23.
21. Skard, *American Studies*, vol. I, 36.
22. Skard, *American Studies*, vol. II, 635.
23. Kazin, "Salzburg: Seminar in the Ruins."
24. Wise, "Paradigm Dramas," 305.
25. Moen, "American Studies," 2.
26. Skard, *American Studies*, vol. II, 436.
27. Skard, *Trans-Atlantica*, 68.

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