

Final Paper
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Hallie Jones

Compare and Contrast: Amsterdam v. New York

The cities of Amsterdam and New York City have many similarities and also stark differences, which makes them idyllic partners for juxtaposition. Amsterdam can be said to be rather left and socialist leaning, even though the Netherlands are in the process of transitioning its economic model into a more liberalized system of capitalism. Amsterdam has been said to be the birthplace of global capitalism in conjunction with the Dutch East India Trading Company. However, since the 1920's, great strides were made to ameliorate the disparities of the wealth divide in the Dutch society. It was only until recently, that the Netherlands began to slash the social welfare state of which the effects of cuts are now manifesting into the reality of its citizens on the micro level. Put simply, they are starting to feel the effects. New York City, with very little socialist leanings, is an example of the extremity of market forces on all levels of life. Within the past 30 years, New York has begun to make strides into the areas of property management, rent control, and cooperative housing structures. Otherwise, New York is the capital of capitalism. These two cities serve as sound baselines from which to compare and contrast these opposing societies (although recognizably in transition) with very different ethos about life, economics, and society at large.

In both cities, many similarities can be found. However, for each discernable similarity, a number of smaller idiosyncratic differences are revealed. First, a comparative analysis of Amsterdam to New York City will lead the discussion, underscoring what like things the cities have in common. Second, the two cities will be contrasted to uncover a more fine grained understanding of where and how these two cities divert in their overall character. Third, some additional comments about the differences of Amsterdam and New York City will be offered. Finally, the paper will conclude with a more theoretical discussion of the concepts of social justices, freedom, and creative expression.

Amsterdam and New York City are both major urban hubs on the global scale. Amsterdam is substantially smaller than New York City in terms of overall population, but both cities are economic capitals of their respective countries. Residents of both cities enjoy the investment that has been made in their multi-modal transit infrastructures. Amsterdam with its tram, bus, and small-scale subway system provides residents with a high degree of mobility allowing them expeditious travel throughout the entire city with no need to own a vehicle. Likewise, New York City with its intricate subway system and bus lines provides access to everyone from all five boroughs, making it easier and less expensive to travel and live life without an automobile. Both cities offer a high degree of urban livability. The high density and mixed-use development provides citizens with housing that is in close proximity to commercial services, transit stops, and employment opportunities. A resident of either city has the basic needs of life

covered in terms of being able to shop for tooth paste, groceries, clothing, or dog food. Everything a person could need is generally within five miles of where they live or work.

Amsterdam and New York City are extremely diverse. They are the homes to a variety of ethnic, national, and religious backgrounds. However, both cities are experiencing some degree of racial and religious tension. Another way in which the cities are similar is that they have an uncountable amount of street art/graffiti. They both have a ton of aerosol art, stencils, wheat pastings, and sticker art. Both cities can also tout architecture significance and historic preservation on their lists of accomplishments.

With all the above similarities, there are a number of differences from which the two cities diverge. In relation to transit, Amsterdam is extremely bike friendly, if not the most bicycle friendly city in the entire westernized world. New York does have some bike lanes, but the network of paths and lanes are slim in comparison to Amsterdam's full integration of the bicycle into the urban transit system. New York City is much more automobile dependent than Amsterdam, whereas Amsterdam gives priority to the bicycle as the favored mode of transportation. According to discussions with students, the national government of the Netherlands subsidizes the bicycle, and financially discourages the automobile. In America, the situation is the opposite in that the national government subsidizes the automobile making all other forms of transportation inferior, subordinate, and by extension a less safe method of travel.

In the context of food, the Netherlands has a large variety of options. In Amsterdam, there was a bakery on almost every block, and the same was true for small grocers, produce markets, cafés, and restaurants. New York is multifarious in its food offerings as well, but it does not seem to have nearly as many options as offered in Amsterdam. In New York, the food is much less healthy, which is a product of Federal malfeasance in terms of regulating agricultural production techniques, import standards, and factory food production. Overall in Europe, the food is of a much higher quality, as the use of hormones, antibiotics, and pesticides are discouraged or even prohibited. Additionally, there is more whole food in abundance. The fast food chain is not as prevalent, and people tend to eat much better diets all around. In the States, it is very difficult to maintain a healthy diet.

This is a major reason why you also see a difference in the health and size of Europeans versus Americans. Europeans eat vegetables and fruit, walk to work and home, and overall have a healthier diet combined with physical activity. Stateside, the average diet seems to consist of thousands calories per meal, refined carbohydrates and high fructose corn syrup all crispy fried in a vat of grease. Plus, Americans drive to almost everywhere they need to go (some probably even drive to the end of their driveway to get to the mailbox), on top of having sedentary career lifestyles in which they sit inside in a cubical behind a computer for 50 hours per week. This discussion did digress from the Amsterdam v. New York topic, but it was necessary to explore the systems for

which an entire continent of people stay healthy or destroy their bodies. In Amsterdam, there were very few individuals who were overweight. In New York City, there are overweight and obese people, although there seems to be less of them than what we have in America at large (compared to Midwestern cities or rural areas where nobody walk to anything and everyone buys their food at Wal-Mart and McDonalds). One other important observation to note is that there is no Mexican food in Amsterdam, but there is a ton of Mexican food and Hispanic restaurants on New York City. Being an American vegetarian, it was difficult to spend 8 days in Amsterdam, as I was forced into bean withdrawal (which is my staple food in the U.S. – Mexican food is generally the most healthy option and the cuisine does not revolve around meat).

The racial segregation in Amsterdam takes a different than what New York City deals with. Based on discussions in class and conversations with residents of the Netherlands, the racial/nationality divide is mostly between the Dutch and the Moroccans, Middle Easterns/Muslims, and Ukrainians. In New York, the divide is mostly black and white, with some Hispanics thrown in for good measure, specifically Puerto Ricans. In New York, there is probably other racial tension not named here, but the divide between blacks and whites in the states is still so thick today because of the roots in slavery. Additionally, American society has largely failed to assimilate people into mainstream culture in terms of mixed-ethnicity and mixed-income living arrangements. The racial and economic segregation in the States has created severe divisions and urban

problems that will be dealt with by many generations to come. In Amsterdam, they have done a much better job of assimilating blacks into their society.

However, the Dutch are making the mistake of liberalizing the housing market, which means that economic and the inevitable racial segregation looms on the horizon as a challenge for their society.

In Amsterdam, graffiti and street art was legal (or at least, not enforced) until recently. Discussions with some graffiti artists revealed that when an artist gets caught painting by the police, they are only given a ticket that equates to a slap on the wrist. In New York, they have passed an ordinance that makes it illegal for anyone under the age of 26 to purchase or carry spray paint. People have been arrested for carrying markers in their back packs. The penalties are much stricter in New York City, however the limitations and constraints serve to propel the movement forward because rebellious youth have a shared cause to rise up against. See WoosterCollective.com for more research on street art culture and graffiti artists.

In Amsterdam, the city has an edge. The sprawl is minimal, and the distinction between where the city ends and where the country begins is clearly demarcated. In New York, there is sprawl in all directions that there is land. This sprawl that is characteristic to the American city is beginning to effect European cities, however. Students we met in Almere were complaining of their sprawl. Yet, the situation is minimal compared with the problems brought on by sprawl in America, which has killed most inner cities. Additionally, the heavy

dependence on the automobile is no doubt the major culprit creating the massive greenish-brown cloud of smog that hovers over New York City like cancerous growth. Amsterdam seemed to have much cleaner air.

The architecture between the two cities is substantially different. New York is the home to skyscrapers and modern buildings that create its famous skyline. Amsterdam does not have a skyline, as it has very few modern buildings and the ones that are newer, are not very tall, comparatively. Amsterdam's architecture is historic, and they have managed to maintain these structures from antiquity in excellent condition. Recently, many of the buildings have begun to lean forward toward the streets because of the warping wooden frames that have become dried out as a result of paved roads that prevent moisture from sinking into their foundations. The absence of a downtown with massive skyscrapers and modern buildings made it very difficult for me to personally orient myself in the city. This class was the first occasion in which I had ever visited a city that had no skyscrapers downtown. My psychological perception of a city has been constructed upon the idea of skyscrapers making up a downtown with a skyline and lights, which identifies downtown from other areas and helps one to determine their approximate location. This perception of "city" is because I grew up in America where every first and second tier city is fashioned in this way. The skyscraper is symbolic of "city" in America. Being in Amsterdam inverted my perception of what a city consists of, and I had a very difficult time

feeling like I was oriented. Largely, I maintained the feeling that everything looked the same, and I felt lost most of the time I was there.

New York City is greener than Amsterdam in terms of park space, grass, and trees. Amsterdam was seriously deficient in park space and trees, other than Voldelpark. New York City offers Central Park, in addition to multiple smaller parks throughout the city and the five boroughs. There are many more trees in New York, as well. The lack of trees really bothered me while I was in Amsterdam. It truly felt like a concrete jungle.

In terms of safety, both cities have issues. In Amsterdam, you have to be aware that someone is going to pick your pocket at all times. Another concern that I experienced, and which kept running thru my mind, was the danger of a terrorist attack. After the transit bombings in London and Spain, the danger of an attack is real. In Amsterdam, the tensions between the Muslims and the Dutch are a growing problem. So my fear of being the victim of a random attack was likely palpable. I kept a constant eye out for anything that I felt could visually convey the presence of a potential threat. In new York City, the threat of a terrorist strike is also very real. Additionally, there are many other safety issues in New York. The threat of a pick pocket is much less than the threat of being mugged, held up at gun or knife point, etc... At certain times of day, one can be extremely vulnerable to all types of personal dangers when using the subway. The train platforms don't have security, they are not defensible space as they are underground and isolated from the street surface. In Amsterdam, a

transit worker drives the tram while another rides in a booth in the middle and keeps an eye out. In New York City, seeing a transit worker on the subway is rare. Additionally, as a female I felt much more safe in Amsterdam than in New York. In New York, there are many gangs, guns, homeless people, and a higher amount of street and violent crime. The safety level is much lower in New York.

Living in Amsterdam seems to be much less of a struggle than living in New York City. Amsterdam is more laid back, and the amount of poverty is minimal compared to what you see in New York City. New York City is very loud, busy, fast, and in your face. People seem to be more stressed and edgy than in Amsterdam. In New York, many people are poverty stricken and even homeless. The living conditions of the poor are much worse than the living situations of the poor in Amsterdam who are provided with a basic standard of housing. In Amsterdam, the egalitarian quality of the Dutch culture leads to the absence of an underground/sub-culture because the ethos is more communal. In New York City (as in all of American society), the extreme individualism leads to an abundance of sub-cultural enclaves in which people band together for support and to share a common identity that is not a product of the mainstream.

In Amsterdam, of course, drugs and prostitution are not criminalized. In New York City, those vices are illegal and dangerous to consume. Drugs are obtained and supplied by the black market, and their quality and safety is always questionable. Additionally, finding a dealer can be just as dangerous, if not more so, than consuming the questionable substances themselves. Prostitution is

highly risky, as many prostitutes are addicted to drugs and they sell their bodies in order to get a fix. They are not checked for STD's, and can be spreading disease to many people unknowingly... or worse, with full knowledge and disregard for their customer's health. The women themselves must place themselves in dangerous situations to conduct their business, standing on dark street corners and hiding in dark alleys. They have to get into vehicles with Johns who can take them off to isolated corners of the city and cause them physical harm. Prostitution is a gamble for both the consumer and the dealer.

Social justice in Amsterdam is much stronger than in New York City where it basically does not exist. The Netherlands provide a social safety net for citizens, something which American's can only dream of. In Amsterdam, as mentioned earlier, the basic needs are provided. In New York City, people scrape by, and they struggle for the same basic standard of living that is a given in Amsterdam. In New York City, the majority of people live check to check.

The differences between Amsterdam (egalitarian) and New York (individualistic) are many. The egalitarian nature of the Dutch society does not necessarily maximize freedom or creative expression. Freedom as a concept is measured as dichotomously related to opposite concepts such as restraint, control, limitations, and/or oppression. Essentially, the less economic or societal control and oppression there in, the less freedom can exist, as they are inversely related. When one shrinks or expands, so does the other. The extent to which a society lives under governmental or economic control (such as in America where

there are tons of laws and economic independence is difficult to obtain), the higher the degrees and variations of freedom can exist. In Amsterdam, the egalitarian nature of society is less controlling and less oppressive. Therefore, there is less freedom to be had.

Additionally, the concept of an egalitarian society is based on the notion of equality and also is endowed with a collective ethos. The States have an individualistic society. The United States Constitution imbued American society with the conflicting values of democracy (collectivity) and individual liberties. Generally, the conflicts in America are in some way related to negotiating the balance between infringing on individual liberties and being counter-majoritarian or undemocratic. The constant conflict inherent in American society generates unrest, discourse, and competition. The tight rope between democratic control and individualism inspires creative expression. For some, creative expression is about rebellion. For others, it is about survival. In egalitarian societies, such as the Dutch, there is not so much of a need for individuals to set themselves apart from others. In the Netherlands, it is better to blend in with the rest. Being unique and different is not valued as much as fulfilling social norms.

In conclusion, there are many benefits to living in Amsterdam. There are many things that the society boasts which I view as highly desirable aspects of urban life. The egalitarian nature provides basic economic and social justice to the people. However, individuality is a quality that I am partial to as an American. The individualistic nature of American society comes with many

problems that appear to be leading us down a hopeless path toward environmental depletion and inhuman ways of constructing society. On the other side of the equation, that individualistic quality of American life provides a vibrant energy and edginess that I have come to thrive upon. The underground, the independent, and the enclaves in which I can retreat to break away from the humdrum of mainstream society are my refuge. The fact that I have the ability to set myself apart from others and that uniqueness is highly appreciated in America (to some extents), drives me forward. The individualistic quality of American society inspires creative expression and competition. The accepting and egalitarian culture of the Dutch society, to me, lacked an essential spark that I'm accustomed to. Obviously, each society has positives. Ultimately, the key to the future will likely be combining the best of both worlds for a more refined model of living, working, and being.