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The Netherlands | Stuck in Uncertainty

by David Henig and Nikkie Wiegink

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On Wednesday, 11 March 2020, we had the last in-person seminar of our jointly taught undergraduate course. Despite the news about the rising numbers of Covid-19 cases in the Netherlands, the attendance was as good as any earlier week. The theme of that week’s lecture was global chains, the frictions that shape them, and the unexpected alliances, collaborations, fragilities, and events that may occur as things, people, and ideas

move across the planet. We concluded our class with a discussion about what would happen if these supply chains were suspended and industry halted. We then asked our students to reflect on the spread of Covid-19 and what it might mean for the future of global chains as we know them. What was initially planned to be only a thought experiment became within hours our own lived experience.

Before our students left the seminar room, we reminded them about a field trip to Utrecht University's Green Lab planned for the following week. As with every Wednesday after teaching our class, we had a quick debrief and discussed the pending tasks for the upcoming field trip. The next day, Utrecht University announced that all teaching would take place remotely for the rest of the current teaching period (i.e. end of April). On Tuesday, 17 March, we received an announcement that all university buildings, including the libraries, would be closed. The measures taken by the university mirrored the increasingly tighten measures of physical distancing in public spaces introduced by the Dutch government. The government closed all schools, and prohibited any gatherings of over 100 people at first, and later of no more than three people. These measures turned the otherwise bustling city of Utrecht into a tranquil state. Restaurants, bars, streets, and squares were getting quiet. Pasta, tinned food, fresh vegetables, and toilet paper disappeared from the shelves in the supermarkets.

This tranquility of the place where we live and teach could not be more distant from our experience. We had a frantic weekend ahead of us as we had to plan how to

move the remainder of our course online. At the same time, we were answering distressing emails from our students, while trying to make sense to what all of this will mean for our personal lives and our families. Now, two weeks later, the city is even quieter and its genius loci seems to be thriving on this emptiness. Yet we are still stuck where we were two weeks ago – physically isolated and in an uncertain present as any planning even for a near future has been suspended. All schools remain closed, the university keeps adjusting the measures for teaching and exams every few days, the travel bans to places where our families and relatives live are still in place, and the word “cancelled” appears too often in our diaries for talks, workshops, and conferences that were planned to take place in the next few months. We start with this juxtaposition of the stillness of the place, and our own “stuckedness” in the uncertain and constantly-shifting present because it helps us to process the speed and the scale of how our lives, academic and personal, have been profoundly disrupted.



Tranquil streets of Utrecht

Let's move two weeks back and start with the frantic planning to "go remote." We were lucky that we had to plan only for three remaining weeks of teaching and a take-home exam. As we started navigating the world of "remote teaching," many of our colleagues from all around the world had already been sharing tips, jokes, and witty initiatives on social media and via emails (the "I Will Survive" song was a highlight). This was as uplifting as it was overwhelming. We had about seventy-two hours to put together a plan. With so many technologies available these days, we realized that we would be able to record our lectures quite smoothly. The main challenge, however, has been how to provide guidance, inspiration, and critical feedback to a class of

eighty students that now spans several time zones as many of our students returned to their families in Australia, the USA, Finland, Costa Rica, and Italy. We set several clear moments during which students could contact us for feedback, created online discussion forums for what would otherwise be weekly class assignments, and provided the students with short home-made clips to accompany the readings for the remaining weeks. Guaranteeing inclusivity of our teaching that would maintain access to the course content for all students became our main priority, taking into consideration that the university libraries were closed, and not all students were necessarily equipped for taking an online course from home. Although students were grateful for our efforts, we feel that some of the creative transformative potential of the classroom has been lost in the hasty move to remote teaching.

While some undergraduate students from our class were leaving the Netherlands due to tightening Covid-19 measures, students in our Master's and Bachelor's programs who were conducting their compulsory fieldwork had been called back. Students in Guatemala, Ethiopia, India, islands of the coast of Ireland, Italy, and many other places had to make sudden arrangements to be able to get back often on the last flight or the last boat. For us and our colleagues, the anxious period of uncertainty calmed when all our students reported back to us, confirming that they were safe, healthy, and well. We shared a sense of relief, but also of privilege that unlike many stranded others around the world, all our students were able to travel home. However, once one kind of uncertainty went away, another one emerged.

The disruption of fieldwork, for many the highpoint of their studies, will have consequences in the months to come. While some of the students have picked up enthusiastically the “corona situation” as a new research topic and delved into conducting online research and keeping “corona diaries,” others have understandably lost their access and motivation to continue. We are figuring out together with our students how to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in the time of Covid-19. But this also leaves a broader question of what the consequences of the corona crisis will be for our discipline and ethnographic fieldwork more broadly in the (near) future. One of our specific challenges for the coming weeks will be to help our students with rethinking their projects, and in guiding them in writing a dissertation of which they can still be proud.

When we started discussing what we would like to write about in this essay, we both wanted say something about care. An emphasis on care and solidarity – “hope this email finds you healthy and safe,” or “take good care of yourself” – became part of our daily communication. We write these things to our colleagues, students, relatives and friends, and receive such messages from others, as acknowledgements of the trying and uncertain circumstances. On an institutional level, our university has been understanding and caring, acknowledging that the quality of education and research will not be as normal (but then again, what is normal?). At the same time, however, many questions and uncertainties arise for our colleagues with precarious contracts, which remain unanswered and deserve more attention.

The last two weeks have dramatically changed our own roles as carers. About the same time as we were asked to work and teach remotely from our homes, all schools in the Netherlands closed. For one of us in particular (Nikkie), this now means a new challenge; namely, balancing a full-time academic job with teaching a six- and eight-year-old math, spelling, and reading. Again, switching to online homeschooling was sudden and threw all parents into uncertain waters. As the days go by, new irritations within the family emerge, as do new connections and joys over practicing multiplications by eight, and new appreciations for primary school teachers. There seems to be too much time to entertain the kids, but also too little of it to finish other tasks. All days seem the same while realizing that we are living in extraordinary times.



Temporary homeschooling

After two weeks of living confined to the walls of our homes, the world has shrunk in many ways. Our families, relatives, and partners (in David's case) are abroad. We worry about them. They worry about us. It remains uncertain when we will see them again. What would we do if anything happened to them? How to care for them "there" when we are stuck "here" and cannot travel? Of course, we are aware that unlike many others in the world, we are expressing these concerns from a privileged position. However, for one of us (David), the experience of growing up behind the Iron Curtain in communist Czechoslovakia brought up many anxieties within the family after the Czech borders were sealed off and any movement suspended

two weeks ago. If Covid-19 uncertainty suspended our (near) futures, it has also brought back the (traumatic) past to our present in unexpected ways.

As we were finalizing this text, the university announced that the next teaching period (the end of April – June) will also be conducted remotely. We were asked to put together plans for online teaching as soon as possible. New and urgent online meetings have been scheduled, fieldtrips have been cancelled, and schools and the borders continue to be closed. Our stuckedness in uncertain times continues.

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David Henig is associate professor of cultural anthropology at Utrecht University.

Nikkie Wiegink is assistant professor of cultural anthropology at Utrecht University.

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