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## Freedom-Vrijheit-Liberté

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Consider freedom of movement *qua* freedom. What is it? What is this new kind of freedom in Europe today? Here are a few examples.

You take a train. The station looks modern, the train fast. The two of you have been looking forward to this for a long time. The train departs, and rolls out through the city. You both laugh as local commuter trains overtake it. The announcements come in three languages – English, Dutch and French, with distinctive, slightly false accents. They are apologising for the delay. The train eventually enters a long tunnel, and suddenly it is travelling fast. When it comes out, the landscape is different, flashing by. Twice as fast. You arrive in the heart of a new city in less time than it would have taken to get out to the airport and pass through security in the first. You take another fast train. The cities and countries spin by in a blur, while you talk, station to station, trans-Europe express. The world outside is familiar, but strange. The new currency you hold can be used everywhere. You arrive in another new city. European modernity rises up around you ... You feel liberated. Eurostars.

You finish your undergraduate studies and decide to leave home. You throw all your things into a ruck sack, and say goodbye to your parents and home town – an affluent small city in the provinces of continental Europe. You take a cheap airplane, with a one-way ticket that flies you direct to a small, modern airport, miles out from the city. When you arrive in the big city – the capital of European finance and media – you find a job a couple





of days later, making BLT sandwiches every morning for the biggest chain of lunchtime cafés. This is a means not an end. At nights you study English and follow courses for an MA in graphic design or business studies. You live in a damp £100-a-week dorm, with three other young Europeans. One of them works as a sandwich-board guy for the West End bargain computer shops, while his girlfriend is handing out leaflets for language schools round the corner. Someone else just got a job making coffee for the commuters on the trains. There are parties most nights, and you meet new friends every day ... You feel liberated. A free mover.

You finish work early and head down to the Irish pub near the international institutions to meet up and chat with friends of ten different nationalities. Everyone speaks English, but it's a new continental version, no longer defined by the Queen of England or the BBC (which you still watch on cable), and certainly not the President of the United States. You love listening to all the different European accents, and charming hybrid grammatical inventions. Everyone seems to be enjoying the way you can step in and out of national identities in this place. Someone suggests a Greek restaurant, and the evening spills on into a lively salsa bar near the centre. Later, you wander the streets, before finding an underground night club in a bombed-out building, that serves up lemon vodka and hip hop, until 5 in the morning ... You feel liberated. A denationalized European.

You decide to quit your job with the company, and start afresh. Some friends abroad are offering you a chance to go it alone. You fly out to see them, and over a few beers, the deal is done. They agree to be your first clients. You set up the company, work out the red tape. There are no barriers to service provision here. Work conditions are good, and the business starts rolling in. It's fun to be in a new city, a new country. There are tax breaks, and other associates who have cashed in the same way. The lifestyle is good, the quality of living even better. The city feels open, tolerant, and liberal. You are a foreigner, but your international connections bring in the work. You wonder why you never did this before ... You feel liberated. A cross-national entrepreneur.

You retire from your job, and sell your home where you have both lived for thirty years. You put everything you own in a car and drive south. You leave your country. There are no passport controls, and the grass now grows over checkpoints that once marked out the military borders of nations. One country, then another. The weather improves, and the air gets warmer. You reach the ocean, and smell the olive trees. You arrive at your new white-washed house, silhouetted against an azure sky. At the small town down the road you can collect your pension from your offshore account, arrange to see a doctor, or draw money on an international credit card. You eat and sleep well, and begin to forget the stresses of your old life, the cold damp



mornings on the commuter train. You like your new life as citizens of nowhere ... You feel liberated, sexy beasts. The new barbarians.

These are the stories to expect. Everyday lives, simple stories, banal even, but stories revealing trajectories nevertheless unique to this new Europe in the making. Freedom of movement of persons may just be the most remarkable achievement of the European Union, and its slow fifty-plus year progress towards integration, enlargement, and unity.

Individuals can now build lives – careers, networks, relationships, families – beyond the nation-state containers that once defined personal identity and personal history. This freedom of movement is not a global phenomenon; it is regionally defined, and specific to Europe. There is nothing else quite like it on the planet. If you are American, you cannot just move to London and get a job. If you are Australian, you still have to line up in the foreigners' channel at the airport, fill out a landing card, and get your passport stamped. If you are Indian, you might be able to live permanently in Britain, even vote in the general election, but every time you travel abroad within Europe, you have to get a visa. These kinds of migration restrictions are still the norm in a world of nation-states, a world of national identities and bounded citizenships. This world certainly still exists, but something else exists within the integrating space of the European Union. European freedom of movement is a unique legal and political construction in the modern world, in which one has the right to move, travel, live, work, study, and retire without frontiers. In which any invocation of national boundary to restrict these opportunities for European foreigners is considered discrimination.

This distinctive new form of freedom, European freedom, deserves to be explored. How does one experience this freedom? Can one really live out and fulfil this freedom? If so, where? Is it really freedom? What are its downsides? If you ask those who appear to be the most free, what do they say?

### **You Are Free**

The train rolls into Centraal Station, Amsterdam. *Natuurlijk*. When you step off the train, here, you know you've arrived in Europe. You step over the junkies and out the hall, and there it is: perhaps the most well-known square mile of freedom in the Western world. Ahead, stretching up the waterside, lies the sordid strip up Damrak to Damplein: past sex museums and kebab shops, tacky shops selling souvenir dildos and clogs, boats crowded with sweaty tourists. Take a left, follow the smell, and you're straight into the red light zone. You rub shoulders with leery stag weekend groups and naïve frat boys, all in search of the rowdy coffee shops and supermarket-style brothels that make this place famous. Every few seconds, an edgy drug pusher catches your eye,



whispering an inventory of mind altering substances as you pass by. This is everyone's first idea of Amsterdam, the place where everything is permitted.

So let's start here, as so many do. For instance, Ray from Ireland, who runs a successful transportation business in the city:

*Soft drugs ... was my main knowledge of it. I hadn't spent a huge amount of time on mainland Europe. All I really knew about Amsterdam was that it was small, everybody spoke English, they had a red light district, and you could smoke a joint without too much hassle – which nine years ago seemed (smiles) ... reasonably OK. For someone of my situation ... Being single (laughs).*

This much is no different to the American frat boy's idea of freedom, of course, with the red light zone in Amsterdam a must-do on any quick EURAIL tour of the continent. Only here, in old Amsterdam, the frat boys can kiss and hold hands, and nobody seems to mind. It's only a start, but it feels good. *Free.* Ray, again:

*The premise [here] is that you can do what you want as long as it doesn't bother anybody else. If you want to wear a bikini on roller-skates going down the Herengracht that's up to you. Try doing that in Dublin and you're in a padded cell (laughs).*

If you stay awhile, you learn to stop being a tourist, and start (trying) to be a resident. You get a job, look for a flat, and start taking part in city life. You realize that the red light zone and toleration towards soft drugs and sex work is only a part of how the place works. The city in fact offers much more appealing types of freedom. Susan, a young English woman, who works for a bank:

*Amsterdam is so diverse, so many different cultures. It brings out the best in all worlds in some ways. What annoys me is people base their idea of Amsterdam on the red light district, which is absolutely the wrong thing to do. It's not representative. Like Leidseplein, another big touristy area ... I can understand why they're there, I'm sure that's where we went when we visited the first time, but ... You kind of forget it's there when you've been here awhile. When you live here ...*

You start getting annoyed rather than flattered that the Dutch respond to you systematically, in perfect, albeit strongly accented English. You start trying to take on board some of their distinctive habits: milk with bread and cheese for lunch; abusing pedestrians who get in your way in the cycle lane; joining clubs with strange mottos or initiation rites. As you get to know it, Amsterdam begins to feel less weird and unique, more like it's the quintessential European city. Behind it, the Netherlands takes shape as the



prototypical, model European society; if only because its contours are so clearly drawn, its self-contained social system so distinctive, so constructed, so vividly *Dutch*. It's not the only way of being European, or even the most European, but it sure is European. Europe at its best, perhaps? A lot of the foreigners who move here think that when they arrive. Such as Valerio, from Italy, who works as a costume buyer for a theatre:

*Let's say when I was a student, everything was different. I was attending [expecting to find] people who had the same interests that I had ... It was a kind of fairy country.*

What is this freedom that Amsterdam embodies? Is it just freedom from the state, the dream of anarchists everywhere? Spaces in society that escape the state's penetrative gaze, its will to legislate and control, tell you what you should and shouldn't do? Yes and no. For sure, Amsterdam outscores any city in Europe in terms of its liberal appeal. Its historical tradition of religious tolerance and asylum, and famously liberal attitudes, make it a magnet for all seeking a refuge from conservatism. American progressives, in particular, who despair about their own society, love it here. So is it in the coffee shop where we find freedom? In a haze of smoke? Or in legalized sex for money? Is that it? Not quite. The freedom here is, in fact, all legislated, regulated, controlled. These Dutch freedoms are organized spaces carved out of a society otherwise not so permissive in its attitudes. The Dutch even have a word for it: *gedogen*. To overlook, to ignore, to pretend it's not there. There is a set place for everything.

But there *is* more to it than that. Amsterdam, Dutch society, *does* seem to embody some of the most open possibilities of progressive modernity. There are, for example, gay people in all levels of society. Guillaume, a French freelance journalist and activist, explains why this makes you feel free:

*[When I arrived] many people were gay and it was not an issue. Like you have brown hair or black hair, it was nothing special. Wow! It felt very impressive ... In the gay life [here] half of the people are foreigners, and 50 percent of the reason they came here was to be free. They don't come because it's gay city, that's a mistake. They come because it's non-homophobic, which is really not the same thing. They come here to be able to be normal. Here nobody cares. You are just human.*

This city, like others, is seen as a *refuge*: from the provinces, from the intolerant, the xenophobic, the small-minded. From persecution. From ingrained tradition, hierarchy, privilege, thoughtless social reproduction. From other people's norms. From where you've come from. As Guillaume stresses, it's the place to be yourself, to be *human*. The freedom of experiencing cities like this also teaches you things. Ingrid is a Danish European Union *fonctionnaire*,



nearing retirement after more than thirty years in Brussels, a city in which she feels completely at home:

*I'm for opening, and the understanding of different people. Tolerance is a really important element in everyday life. If you don't have tolerance you can't live in peace with yourself. You learn that also in a city like Brussels ... In an international job, you see that people are very different. It's fortunate to live and work in an environment like that.*

This urban atmosphere in turn can be the key to one's own well-being and happiness. Sandra, a Germanophone artist from Luxembourg, resident in London, puts it this way:

*I love London. I think it's a very beautiful city. I think the people [here] are very tolerant ... Once they accept you, they accept you the way you are. You can unfold your own creativity, whatever you want to do, without being criticized. When we lived in Germany – in Germany I'm a foreigner as well – the Germans are much more critical about everything. Here you can really be your own self. I never had the feeling of claustrophobia in London.*

Within these quintessential international cities, there are local spaces where the intersection of cultures and diversity is even more intense. The easiest way to find them is to look for multi-ethnic gentrifying neighbourhoods, in which old locals, new ethnic minority immigrants, and a cosmopolitan sprinkling of foreign urban professionals intermix. Some have developed now into highly affluent areas, such as the Jordaan in Amsterdam, Islington in London, and Châtelain in Brussels. Others are still in development: De Pijp in Amsterdam, Shoreditch in London, Sint Katelijne in Brussels: exciting, protean places where the cosmopolitan brew of Eurocities best comes together in a specific locale.

London, Brussels, and other Eurocities share these dimensions, but Amsterdam might be thought of as emblematic. It helps us remember that freedom is a cultural thing too: it is, as John Stuart Mill would say, about lifestyles, diversity, and experimentation as much as anything else. Freedom must, of course, be economic and political too, as is more commonly stressed. Amsterdam, of course, is a free and open city – like London and Brussels – partly because of globalization and all that: of historical free trade, of its being a centre of global networks, of the flows and mobilities of the modern world in which it is a node. The freedom to move money and things across borders, as well as people. Amsterdam is a free society, like others, because liberal society has embraced the wisdom of giving people rights to do these things. A society in which transactions do not end at the borders of a nation-state. A society not embedded in the inertia of rooted national traditions, or



singular cultures. A society built on the promise of some cosmopolitan future, not one based on ideas about the natural, national order of things.

In a sense, this is what the Dutch Enlightenment was all about. Creating a modern society, free from history, from nature, from the impossibility of an inverted land, in which the sea level is higher than the land on which the people live. As the Dutch never cease to remind you: this society, this city, is a man-made miracle. Rational, modernistic, organized down to the last brick, and thus emboldened in its defiance of nature. God might have made the world, but human hands and minds built the Netherlands. Amsterdam is a city built on stilts, with tall buildings sitting on soft mud and water, and oceans penned back behind *dijks* and the system of land-reclaimed *polders*. I remember my rapt discovery of the wonderful embossed diagram in the *stadhuis*, when you realize for the first time just how low Schiphol airport is relative to the city. It lies several meters below sea level. All of this, of course, was the fruit of the first golden age of globalization, the Dutch seventeenth century.

Amsterdam might then represent modernity – European modernity – at its best. Where freedom from tradition – from Old Europe – is also freedom from where you came from, from how you were socialized. For those that move across the New Europe, this aspect of freedom is crucial: it is freedom from the nation-state, the most insidious and persistent source of identity in the modern world; the power of national culture to mould us in each other's image, as citizens belong to this nationality, this culture, and no other. The way society disciplines our behaviour as a set of standardized, nationalized norms. For some, particularly young women, this might take the form of freedom from your family and their expectations. Anastasia is a young Greek woman, who chose Amsterdam for this reason:

*There is a freedom here, a sort of a freedom we don't have in Greece. They are not so attached to the family here. They don't have to make such compromises. I don't know a lot of Greeks here, because Greeks don't move [abroad]. I felt free not to compromise on all this. You have to marry, you have to have kids, have to have things and make things, prove yourself, like having a good job, a nice husband, a good family. Everybody feels they can exercise control on you. You can go on a bus and the lady next to you can make remarks to you. Here, because I'm a foreigner, nobody cares what I'm doing.*

Once you move away from home, your family, things change. You get a new deal. If you are Belgian, for example, London or Amsterdam might provide this. Saskia, who works in finance in London:

*The thing is, my father is quite well known figure in Belgium: the head of [a major nationalized company]. Belgium is a small country, you are always known as*

*the daughter of someone else. If I'm at a wedding, I get asked, if I am connected [professionally] to him. It's interesting that my sister is in Luxembourg, and I'm here [in London]. It's nice to know that when you get a job it's really what you do and not what your father did.*

This is freedom from parochialism, from the old-boy network of home. If you are a German woman you might find what you are looking for in Amsterdam or London. Nina came to “relaxed, very laid back” Amsterdam to get away from working in a patriarchal German law firm. Freedom for her was symbolized by buying a little nutshell boat with her German partner, and being able to drink a bottle of wine out on the canals. If you are an English woman, the same thing might be found in Brussels. For example, Janet, a trade journalist. For her, it is the multinational quality of the place, that defines the space it allows her:

*It's because of the distinct lack of Belgian nationality, there isn't a strong stamp. You can make a space [here]. In Paris, it would be harder, you would have more of a French [context] ... Brussels allows you that space to create your own life, that is semi-attached to the expat life, semi-attached to the Belgian life, kind of floating in-between.*

Belgians describe going to the Netherlands in terms of escape from a conservative culture, or nationalist politics. Amsterdam feels like a liberation. But a Dutch person in Brussels can feel the same way about their relation to home. Joannet, who is working as a political consultant on Dutch-Belgian affairs in Brussels, puts it in terms of “quality of life”:

*The one thing I like is that I have the feeling here of freedom. In the Netherlands, there are all these rules. They have this character thing where you always control what other people are doing. People are always giving their opinion, even if you don't ask them. With the Dutch, if eating goose is in then it's goose for everyone, if it's too hot with the window open, then it's too hot everywhere ... That goes for clothes, the movies you like, the books you read, what you do and what you don't do generally in life ... I feel much happier here. I don't have this idea that I should do something because its in or everyone is doing it.*

The short move to Brussels enabled her to escape the national norms, and see her own country in a new light – something of great practical use in her daily work.

*I get angry about Dutch issues. I'm not always proud to be Dutch. I went further away [from the Netherlands] but I got closer involved. It's true I find it much easier to criticize the Netherlands now: whether it's the political system, or our*

*businesses, or the people, or a consumer organization, or how the house sale of my mum is handled ... The Netherlands is a really really small world. I sometimes find that hard to understand. I'm a bit impatient there. [I think] come on guys! Let's be bigger than that, be a bit a more flexible!*

What everyone is talking about here is freedom from the nation-state, a *denationalized* freedom: in both the spatial (economic) and cosmopolitan (cultural) sense. You are free to move, to leave your country and live and work abroad. And you are free to benefit from this distance it gives to be self-critical, and to play around with ascriptive national identities that hitherto might have felt fixed and stamped for life. When I talk to Bernhard, a German lawyer in Brussels, about his national identity, he pinpoints another dimension of this freedom.

*Do I think about it? From time to time, of course. [Before] it was clear, but after two years in Brussels it is changing. In relation to my friends back in Germany, they live in another world somehow. I realize that I'm slowly moving out of that context. That makes it quite interesting. I don't ask about it, I just observe. I'm German, but it's great fun being European and making fun of your nationality and other nationalities. That's a game with the identities that you can observe a lot around here, which I like a lot.*

Nicole is a web designer in London on a modest income. She gives another spin on this theme:

*I'm two hours from Lille. I feel French in England, and English in France. I love that. Being abroad, being a stranger, being different [here]. And I love going back to France, and being different. I have a little more.*

It's a common refrain among the French in London. Nathalie, who works for a retail company, says:

*It's a pity that most people are not sometimes a foreigner somewhere. I am much more free [after this experience]. I realize I am "me", not French, not English.*

This is freedom with an almost existential quality. Ray, the businessman in Amsterdam, eventually settled down, but he didn't become Dutch.

*I've never had any problems with being a foreigner. I enjoy being a foreigner. I'm a professional foreigner wherever I go. I consider myself not to fit in. I have the same thing back in Ireland. I feel no different to how I feel here. The only difference is I kind of fit in more over there. They don't notice. They think it's because my accent is kind of like theirs, that I know what they're talking about. But I'm lost in their*



*conversations as well. Yes, I couldn't imagine [now] I would feel anything other than a professional foreigner. I can't imagine it.*

This attitude is equated in Ray's case with personality: the wish to not be part of one's ascribed group identity – often one of the hardest things to avoid as a stereotyped, nationally labelled “expat”.

*When I first came here, my circle of friends was through work, or other Irish people I met in The Tara [a well known Irish pub in Amsterdam]. It's an acceptable way to be a complete stranger, and make some friends in an evening. Not now. My circle of people tend to be of mixed African/Portuguese descent [his wife is from Angola], as opposed to Irish in fact. In fact, I have no Irish friends in Holland. I'd hate to think I missed one (smiles), but no I don't think I have any Irish friends. Among the Irish [here] there is fairly strong “paddyish” club, lots of people. I'm not part of that. I'm a family man, not interested in anything very much outside my wife and daughter.*

As Ray suggests, family remains important in these lives, even if nationality does not. You want some space and freedom, but not too much. This provides the other key aspect that European mobility allows. Saskia, in London, has also worked in Boston, Massachusetts, and Luxembourg. Neither felt right.

*There is a certain freedom that comes with being a foreigner somewhere. There are not that many expectations, and if people expect things from you and you don't do it, you always have this escape. I've grown used to it, to really like being a foreigner somewhere. When I was in Luxembourg, it was like being back in Belgium. I was still a foreigner there, but I was not perceived as one. I was expected to be back in the group, which I really hate. Here, I'm a foreigner, I'm perceived as foreigner, it's OK. But, unlike in the US, I'm very close [to home]. I really enjoy going back, [but] I'm not sure I could live in Belgium.*

Saskia has the professional freedom of the globe, the desire to be mobile, and the open-minded attitude to make it work. But living and working in London, she is close in space and time to home, to family, to the key reference points in her life. European mobility is sometimes all about regional movement over small distances separated by large national boundaries. With this, another key element of this distinctively European freedom falls into place.

The open, integrating space of Europe still has many such boundaries; so many distinctive national and regional cultures, ways of being. With so many boundaries to transcend, rights of free movement in hand, and transportation getting easier, the sheer number of potential border crossings and



self-transformations means that the kind of freedom available is rapidly exponential. Maria is a high-flying Portuguese lawyer, working for a major Dutch bank:

*For me, it's incredibly important to know new people, to travel, with different languages, different places, cultures. It's amazing the way we are. So far, I'm just completed 26, and I've lived in four different countries [all in Western Europe]. It's quite an experience! I can't say that average Portuguese students do this.*

The European *movers* thus open up dimensions in their life, inaccessible to the national *stayers*: the people back home whose lives are immersed and contained in their own national culture. Move even once, and it has consequences; it changes you. You can never really go back. The liberating feeling can even get to be quite addictive. You might keep chasing it. It could even hold the key to the deepest freedom of all: freedom from your *self*. Jeroen, a Dutch scientist working in the pharmaceuticals business in London, puts it this way:

*I've never been so comfortable with the label of being Dutch. There are all these habits I'd never thought of. I thought I did everything different than my parents, but still there are a lot things. I do like to know this. To do stuff consciously, to wonder where it comes from, what motivates me. That helps you get some form of freedom, I guess. To be free floating [in this way].*

Eurostars in Eurocities enjoy all these possibilities. The distinctive freedoms of European modernity. Surely the most enticing fruit from fifty years of European integration and European free movement rights.

### **A Management Consultant's Tale**

David is living with his partner Pete in a classic Amsterdam apartment, overlooking a canal. He is one of the very few Eurostars I find with homes in this kind of location. It isn't so easy to get set up like this here. The flat's entrance is a stone's throw away from Regulierdwaarastraat, the centre of the city's male gay social life. It is a flat high in the roof, the ceiling's a bit low, but – wow! – the view is great. David is ready to talk. It was he that approached me for the interview, and he is very reflective, autobiographical and – eventually – confessional. He has much better theories about the Netherlands than me, and knows a lot more about this society. A near-perfect Dutch speaker, and now a successful independent consultant working with Dutch businesses, he is about as close as you can get to an acceptable foreigner here. He is the model of integration. Still, when I arrive, he offers me a cup of tea.

*(Continued)*

### A Management Consultant's Tale—cont'd

Initially, I moved around a lot. My partner, Pete, had been in Holland since he was ten. We met at Cambridge University. It came to a certain point where he was finishing some piece of research, and we had a choice to stay in the UK or move to Holland. For lots of reasons there wasn't much to make us stay. The intention was that Pete would continue with the Dutch part of his research, and that I would find a job here.

It took a long time initially, because I couldn't speak Dutch. For the first year, we moved around, staying a few months with his family, then an apartment we couldn't afford. I saw an advert for a job as a English teacher in a college of Higher Education, and that seemed like a good idea. It wasn't something I wanted to do, although I had done it as a student, but it was the obvious thing to do. So I applied and got it. It was a quite a difficult year from arriving to actually starting in that job. We didn't have any money. Pete had unemployment benefit for one person, because I officially wasn't allowed to be here. It was a job in Leeuwarden, in Friesland, the north of Holland. At the time, I naively thought Holland is such a small country, it won't matter where you are. Anyway, later we found out ... We ended up living there for about five years. About eight years ago we moved to Amsterdam.

Did you decide these moves together?

No, he followed me. Eight years was a long time in Friesland! It took two years to find my feet. After that we started getting itchy feet ... At the beginning it was easy for me to find a job because of my knowledge of several languages, even though I didn't speak fluent Dutch. The easiest way to get a job over here was to know at least English, then use your other languages to work with companies that have trade with others abroad. Especially in customer services.

I started working for an American management consultancy firm in Amsterdam. I had a job as a communication specialist, so I had to work with the consultants, check presentations, research proposals and other things. I'm in the process of going freelance now. Shortly I'll be going to three days a week, and sell my three days back to the company or work on a three day contract. It's a good moment to do it. I've built up quite a broad network. People often don't stay in consultancy companies for long. Eventually so many people were calling me that it was obvious there was enough work to live on. It has worked out very successfully ... It's now general management consultancy. I'm working for Phillips, KLM, etc., improving production processes, reducing costs – you know, improving profits, whatever (laughs).

David and Pete saved up, found a house in a dream location after enduring years out in a much less glamorous suburb.

We never intended to stay there, to be honest. We always thought we'd buy [in central Amsterdam] as quickly as possible, but we stayed there for five years, a long time. Our salaries kept rising, and we thought the longer we wait the better – until we realized that house prices were rising a lot faster than our salaries. So we looked around and found this place.

We always wanted to live on a canal, but the quite simple reason why we live right here is that the bars we go to are just two minutes' walk. My gym is a two minute walk in the other direction, and I just liked being in physically beautiful environments. I studied in Cambridge, I lived in a beautiful farm in Friesland, now we live here. You've got to be able to afford it. If you can afford it, you can do it [live in the centre as a foreigner].

In Friesland, we rented a farmhouse. Then one of the farmer's sons wanted to move in. There was a lot of resentment – that was a case of competing for scarce resources, just

### A Management Consultant's Tale—cont'd

like it is in Amsterdam. When we moved to Amsterdam, we didn't particularly know how the system worked. We didn't know anybody who knew of anything we could move into, so we ended up getting something that happened to be available, renting on the free sector. It was a new housing estate, that had just been completed. It was also quite expensive, on the edge of Amsterdam, in Oostdorp, on the way to Schiphol. There was a lot of families with young children, and one particular family who didn't like us, who was always very hostile. I could never figure out quite why. Whether it was because we were foreign or whether it was because we were two guys living together ... We lived there for about five years, commuting or driving to work, or a long tram ride into the centre of Amsterdam. It was a 15 minutes' walk to the last tram stop. There were a lot of foreigners there, a lot of immigrants. If ever you got a taxi, that was one thing that the taxi drivers always used to point out. They often used to make us get out and walk the last part.

There are other neighbourhoods in Amsterdam, such as the Bijlmermeer, the infamous area of south Amsterdam, that are similarly off the map for most West Europeans and white Dutch in the city.

Personally I never found it so dramatic [there]. The houses are quite big. The particular one we lived in was all new. I never felt threatened there, I never felt outnumbered. It's only maybe to do with me and my history ...

We talk about the complex strategies native Dutch use to get housing. It requires long-term planning.

I know how some people get houses because they know someone, or they rent from someone who is officially there. Personally I wouldn't feel comfortable doing that [subletting is illegal], but I know a lot of people who do that. We didn't have that network of people who might help us out. Social networks are one of the main reasons we moved to Amsterdam. We thought – rightly so – that we would meet people. First of all, people at our educational level – which there were very few of in Friesland – and secondly, people who were gay. There are very few of them in Friesland, and that was actually the main motivator in coming to Amsterdam. That certainly worked out as we hoped it would.

David now begins to retrace his own personal mobility story, a story deeply linked to his sexuality.

When you change countries, there are always things pushing you to leave, and things attracting you to where you end up. In my case, it was quite clear. I thought there was a very unpleasant atmosphere [in Britain]. I was 21, 22, and I felt that I could develop much more self-confidence in Holland than I ever could there. I think I probably have. Friesland is not intolerant. People were always very friendly. We went to village parties, for a drink at New Year. I was very touched by that when I arrived in Holland. I certainly could not have expected that in the UK in a similar place.

Cambridge was quite a easy place to be, but I'd grown up in the north of England. It was the late 80s, the heyday of Thatcherism, and people had lots of irrational fears about AIDS. It was very difficult to find somewhere to live. We were refused somewhere because we were gay, and my family weren't comfortable with it. Then, in contrast, whenever I came to Holland, people accepted it as a banal fact ... In a conversation in Holland, the first question is "Have you got a girlfriend?" and if you say no, they ask "Have you got a boyfriend?" just in the next breath. Pete's family were British, of course, but they always accepted me

(Continued)

### A Management Consultant's Tale—cont'd

*in a way that I didn't feel accepted by my own family. I just felt I would have better chances here, and that I would learn to love myself more being in Holland.*

*One thing I felt in the UK, was that the police would never protect me if I needed it. Quite the opposite. I had this fear that if ever they found out I was gay they might beat me up or whatever. Or if I got bashed up for being gay, I didn't believe for one minute the police would be interested. So really I had this fear for my physical safety. Whereas in Holland I've never had that. I've never had to test it, but I always thought that the police wouldn't treat it as an issue that I'm gay, if anything ever happened.*

Our talk turns to how he deals with cultural differences.

*I've been here long enough here now really to not notice the difference between Dutch and British cultural practices. I tend to notice the difference when I go back [there] than when I'm here. In actual fact, I've spent all my working life in Holland. People who don't know I'm English, don't know that I'm not Dutch. They might hear something strange and wonder what strange corner of Holland I come from. But they wouldn't realize that I'm not Dutch. In any case, the one identity doesn't cancel out the other. By assuming a Dutch identity, it doesn't cancel out my British identity. It's something you add on.*

That requires a very high level of know-how and linguistic competence. High enough to allow you the freedom to decide yourself.

*Yeah. Most of my friends are Dutch, and a few of them are foreigners. Most of them are well integrated. They speak Dutch, live here permanently. I speak Dutch with most of my friends. Then there are one or two Americans, that's a clique that does not speak Dutch. That's a closed crowd. If you get into that crowd, it's all expats. But all of them, they've all been attracted to Amsterdam because of the gay life you can have here.*

That seems like a special dimension to the city, even when its an expat experience. You would probably tolerate the environment a lot more if you were here for that. Maybe it would not be the same for a straight couple?

*Yeah, I think if you are gay, you might put up with more things because the benefits are greater.*

So where is home?

*Home? This place suits me best. I may end up living somewhere else for certain periods, but I'd always like to have a place in Amsterdam. I'd be quite happy to grow old here. I like travelling a lot, but it's always nice to come back to Amsterdam ... Put it this way, if they ever say to me "Are you Dutch?" I'd hesitate, but if they ask, "Are you an Amsterdammer?" I'd just say "Yeah!", straight out.*

Would an Amsterdammer, born and bred, agree?

*Yeah, I think they probably would!*