Apprentice Cosmopolitans

Social identity, community, and learning among ERASMUS exchange students

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Abstract

The present dissertation is an ethnographic study of the Erasmus Programme, the European Union’s student exchange programme. This programme has, for the last three decades, resulted in an unprecedented exchange of ideas and people within the European Union, and it has quite radically changed the conditions for, and the appearance of, student life in many European universities. Over the years the community has developed a distinctive lifestyle, replete with partying and travel, and is characterized by a strong social cohesion and exclusive ethos. Empirically the study is a multi-local field study involving participant observation and interviews in two European capitals, namely Stockholm and Athens. Both present and former Erasmus students have been included in the study and were followed for an extended period of time. The study takes a close look at some of the experiential and social processes of the ‘Erasmus lifestyle’ and tries to understand them in the light of wider cultural and political processes such as the European unification process, cosmopolitanism, youth culture, and tourism. In the process it surveys part of the programme’s political history, local configuration, social dynamics, communication practices and global interfaces. According to the present thesis, the Erasmus Programme can be seen as a learning apprenticeship through which the young students gain entrance to and get valuable training in the reality of living in an increasingly interconnected world. The strong experiences engendered by the programme, both emotionally and cognitively, lead to a transformation in the student’s self-perception, social representations and social identity. For some students the programme leads to a drastic reconfiguring of their social networks and extant allegiances (e.g., towards their nation, culture), prompting them, after the end of their sojourn, to explore new venues in terms of career development, family life, and place of residence. Although the students do not seem to integrate with the host country to any significant degree, their extended experience of transnational mobility and their first-hand acquaintance with cultural diversity within the group encourages them to develop a more cosmopolitan outlook on the world and their place within it.

Keywords: multisite ethnography, cosmopolitanism, exchange students, mobility, transnational networks, cultural diversity, learning apprenticeship, liminality, transformative experience, life world, social identity, social representations.

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Introduction

In early January and early August the campus of Stockholm University is usually a desolate and empty place. Save for a few staff members everybody is still on their scheduled leave and not expected to return for at least a couple of weeks—with one exception. Around this time a special group of people make their entrance into the campus area, either alone or in small groups. They are not the usual local students on their way to a lecture or some carefree school children on an educational excursion. Their colourful travelling bags and heavy backpacks betray a different origin. On their way through campus to the residential areas of Lappis, where many of them will live for the next half year or so, they evidence their stranger status by gazing with curious eyes into the novel surroundings, they exhibit signs of fatigue and frustration from their long journey, and they intercept local pedestrians with trivial but highly polite questions about directions. They look like tourists but are actually the newly arrived Erasmus students, part of the European Union’s student exchange programme. As enrolment day approaches the Erasmus students are joined by a steady stream of local students and teachers, all preparing for the start of yet another academic term.

This study aims to investigate the social and cultural processes involved in being an exchange student under the auspices of the Erasmus Programme. This programme has for the last three decades resulted in an unprecedented exchange of people and ideas within the European Union and quite radically changed the conditions for, and the appearance of, college life in many European universities. Vast numbers of students—a total of more than two million since 1987—are circulating within the European Union and often spend several months in various countries before returning to their home universities.¹ It is almost as if a new student youth culture has emerged as a result of this politically motivated programme; a culture oriented towards international study experiences, but also the aesthetic appreciation of cultural difference and various leisurely pursuits. This is leading to a re-imagination of youth identities toward more European and cosmopolitan ones, a process that I have chosen to call ‘cosmopolitan apprenticeship’.

Aim and scope of study

The main focus of this study is the exploration of the social world of the Erasmus students, these modern day “nomads” of the European Union. My interest, thus, is not in the Erasmus Programme per se but more so in its flesh-and-blood incarnation; the students that travel along its many crisscrossing routes. For this reason, I will attempt to paint a vivid picture of the life and times of the Erasmus students in two European cities; namely, Stockholm and Athens. In so doing I hope to increase our knowledge about the social and educational experiences of these young people and probe their potential ramifications, in terms of both the programme’s influence on personal development and its sociocultural significance.

A large part of the thesis will be devoted to describing and understanding the experiential aspects involved in being an Erasmus student. I have aimed to get close to these students, convey their joys and sorrows, witness their collective activities and capture their personal thoughts and queries. In addition to this central concern the thesis looks into the relational and

¹ Statistical information about the Erasmus Programme can be found at http://ec.europa.eu/education.
communicative patterns of the Erasmus students. Since they occupy a rather marginal position in their host societies, in the sense that they are visitors for a given period of time, and present a rather heterogeneous linguistic and cultural picture, it is of interest to see how they interact with each other, with people from the host society, as well as with their friends and relatives back home.

A considerable part of the thesis is also devoted to investigating the wider context of this educational programme. For many students the Erasmus Programme represents their first attempt at an independent living away from their family. At the same time it represents an opportunity for international travel, which many of the students appreciate and make good use of. Going away for a while, thus, has a dual character for the Erasmus students; it both disconnects them from their familial environment and connects them to the wider world. This experience of a simultaneous disconnection from close kin and friends, and the exploration of new social connections and intimacies is a key feature of the Erasmus project.

A related issue is how the Erasmus students are affected by the transnational context and whether a more cosmopolitan awareness is growing out of their border-crossing experiences. It is tempting, in this regard, to imagine the Erasmus students as a group of apprentice cosmopolitans training in transcultural skills, skills that will potentially be of use to them in navigating an emerging new world order where national and/or ethnic belongings are not the all-important cultural markers they used to be. The crucial issue here is how their new experiences feed back on their view of themselves and on the world around them, how they change their attitudes and perspectives, and fashion new social identities or performative repertoires. To be able to reflect along these lines, however, we need to get a more precise picture of what this “cosmopolitan training” looks like, what skills it produces and what its effects are. The Erasmus programme epitomises many of the changes that have followed in the wake of globalisation and the European unification process. Following its participants up close as they try to find their place in this new world order and craft a personally meaningful and emotionally satisfying relationship to cultural diversity is, therefore, an intellectually worthwhile task.

Learning as apprenticeship

A question of central concern is how the Erasmus Programme influences the lives of the young students; more specifically, their outlook on the world and their social position in it. An approach that I found particularly useful is to see the Erasmus Programme as a cosmopolitan apprenticeship, a form of “vocational training” that equips them with the necessary skills and cultural capital for living in an increasingly interconnected and global world (Griffith & Marion, 2018). Even though this is just a metaphor it captures many aspects of the students own experiences as they were told to me or as I witnessed them myself. Above all, it offers a processual way of thinking that can incorporate and accommodate most of the material of this study.

Apprenticeship theory was developed largely as a reaction to more individualised learning theories, such as the behaviourist stimulus-response model or the cognitivist transmission-reception model. Some of these developments originated in anthropological studies of learning in traditional societies (Lave, 1991, 1993) while others in the field of psychology and its attempts to develop more socially encompassing learning models (Bruner, 1983). These two strands, initially independent, came into contact with each other in the 1980s and even fused in
some later works (Rogoff, 1991, 1995). Apprenticeship theory also touches upon wider theoretical discussions in the social sciences about the nature of knowing, and in particular the recent interest in embodiment and practice (Csordas, 1990; Bloch, 1991; Lakoff, & Johnson, 1999; Wacquant, 2015).

Apprenticeship in its strict sense is a formal tutelage wherein a novice learns a traditional craft from a recognised master. In a broader sense, however, apprenticeship can be seen as a context-based form of learning-by-doing (Hansman, 2001; Collins & Kapur, 2015). It takes into account not only the learning task at hand, which at times can be quite ill-defined, but also the interpersonal relationships, social identities and cultural practices that surround it and give it form and meaning. It also considers the graded access of group members to culturally valued resources and interprets learning as the transformation in understanding, identity and knowledgeable skill that takes place as apprentices move centripetally from legitimate peripheral participation towards full participation in communities of practice. According to Jean Lave (1991: 65, 71-72, my italics), a pioneer in the study of socially situated learning, knowledge is a form of participation:

I propose to consider learning not as a process of socially shared cognition that results in the end in the internalisation of knowledge by individuals, but as a process of becoming a member of a sustained community of practice. Developing an identity as a member of a community and becoming knowledgeable skillful are part of the same process, with the former motivating, shaping, and giving meaning to the latter, which it subsumes . . . knowledge and skill develop in the process—and as an integral part of the process—of becoming like master practitioners within a community of practice. This more inclusive process of generating identities is both a result of and motivation for participation. It is through this process that common, shared, knowledgeable skill gets organised, although no one specifically sets out to inculcate it uniformly into a group of learners. It is rarely the case that individual apprentices must take the initiative in getting someone to teach them in order to learn in circumstances where ongoing everyday activity provides structuring resources for learning. Gradually increasing participation in that practice, and a whole host of relations with the activities of more and less adept peers, also provide resources for learning. In short, investigations of situated learning focus attention on ways in which the increasing participation of newcomers in ongoing practice shapes their gradual transformation into oldtimers. Newcomers furnished

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2 This theoretical synthesis was to a large extent based on methodologies and concepts developed by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1978).

3 In his review of the literature anthropologist David Lancy (2012) found that apprenticeship is characterised by a number of traits, common across different cultures and historical contexts. Apprenticeship is an exclusive relationship afforded only a select few, it involves leaving one’s home and living at the place of tuition, it is a hierarchical relationship (between master and apprentice), it involves plenty of menial work which is cumbersome to the apprentice but gainful to the master, the tasks are laddered according to degree of difficulty, the master is reluctant to pass on his secrets, there is little active teaching (learning builds mostly on observation, imitation and trail-and-error), it entails prominent use of punishment and abuse in training, originality is not encouraged, the apprenticeship is lengthy and not always successful, and it ends with a graduation ceremony. In this sense apprenticeship—and in particular it’s hierarchical, exploitative and abusive elements—is rather discordant with the typical student exchange experience. This underscores an important fact, namely that the ‘apprentice relationship’ in the case of the Erasmus students is mostly metaphorical in character; their apprenticeship relates more to modern notions of learning-by-doing and communities of practice than anything else (Hansman, 2001; Collins & Kapur, 2015; Griffith & Marion, 2018).

4 Perhaps the most concise and eloquent formulation of this notion of learning as participation was put forth by John Dewey (Dewey, 1916: 393; quoted in Rogoff, 1995: 151):

If the living, experiencing being is an intimate participant in the activities of the world to which it belongs, then knowledge is a mode of participation, valuable in the degree in which it is effective. It cannot be the idle view of an unconcerned spectator.
with comprehensive goals, an initial view of the whole, *improvising* within the multiply structured field of mature practice with near peers and exemplars of mature practice—these are characteristics of communities of practice that re-produce themselves successfully.

This perspective on learning as apprenticeship can be fruitfully combined with a number of other analytical concepts. Two such concepts that will be used throughout this thesis are those of communication and representation. They are well known from the scientific literature but can also be given a specific meaning in relationship to learning. Barbara Rogoff (Rogoff, 1995: 148, my italics), working from within the apprenticeship paradigm, sees communication as an integral part of the learning process.

Communication and coordination occur in the course of participation in shared endeavors, as people attempt to accomplish something. Their activity is directed, not random or without purpose; understanding the purposes involved in shared endeavors is an essential aspect of the analysis of guided participation. As people direct their activity toward implicit, explicit, or emerging goals, they may not be able to articulate their goals. Their goals may not be particularly task oriented (e.g., their aim may be to pass time enjoyably or to avoid an unpleasant task) or held entirely in common with others (e.g., some may resist the direction of others). However, people’s involvements are motivated by some purpose (though it may often be sketchy), and their actions are deliberate (not accidental or reflexive), often in an opportunistic, improvisational fashion. Communication and coordination with other members of the community stretches the understanding of all participants, as they seek a common ground of understanding in order to proceed with the activities at hand. The search for a common ground as well as to extend it involves adjustments and the growth of understanding.

Jürgen Habermas’ (1979) theory of *communicative action* gives an added depth to the communicative aspect. With its focus on performative expressions (e.g., speech acts), pragmatics (the contextual determination of meaning) and psychological maturation it is well suited to capture the intricacies of dynamic social interactions and also relates to well-known anthropological theories of liminality, ritual and social drama (cf. van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969, 1988). By generating shared meanings and coordinating joint activity communication helps to establish common life worlds, the realm of informal, culturally-grounded understandings and mutual accommodations that are a prerequisite for more elaborate forms of social organisation. Communication thus steers action towards social integration and solidarity. This same process is also responsible for generating people’s social identities (Habermas, 1979).

However, communication also harbours the seeds of new knowledge and social renewal. Especially when more explicit communication forms are involved, as in mutual deliberation or purposeful argumentation, the emerging consensus can lead to reconsiderations of received wisdoms and adjustments in established practices (Habermas, 1979). One way that this renewal takes place is through a dialectical process in which a given thesis is countered by an antithesis, either in words or in deeds, and from their mutual opposition a synthesis emerges (Adorno, 1958; Schnitker & Emmons, 2013). This recursive process gradually transforms both extant knowledge and the social identities that go with it. This dialectical process has its counterpart on the social realm where processes of border control, legitimation, contestation, segmentation and transformation play an equivalent role (Barth, 1969; Turner, 1969; Strauss, 1982, 1984; Whitehouse, 1995).

Another concept that can be helpful when researching learning is that of social representations. Social representations are consensual understandings that grow out of the fertile soil of everyday informal discussion and communication within groups. They provide a framework of interpretation for people’s experiences; they make the unfamiliar familiar, and
thus, help satisfy the member’s need to understand his or her world. As such they generate working hypotheses, which structure the member’s expectations and function as cognitive filters through which events and experiences are compared and evaluated. Social representations are, therefore, an unmistakable expression of group membership and can also signal the person’s feelings of belonging and solidarity with his group. Such adaptation to the ideational realm can, sometimes, also be a formal prerequisite for membership in a group. Finally, the distribution of social representations effectively demarcates the borders between groups as well as their spheres of influence (Durkheim, 1895; Holy and Stuchlik, 1983; Sperber, 1985; Moscovici, 1989).

Since social representations are composed of both an image of a phenomenon and a creative expression of human intersubjectivity they exhibit a peculiar dialectical character: they are neither a simple depiction nor a twisted construction of their object. This composite nature of social representations leaves them open to contestation, and often necessitates a negotiation of their exact meaning. Consequently, their formation and dissemination is always associated with systematic variation leading, in differing degrees, to distortion, addition and/or omission (Holy and Stuchlik, 1983; Sperber, 1984; Moscovici, 1989). In this regard, the intensification of cultural contact of the last decades—intensified media use, international travel and all sorts of translocal connections—and the alternative lifestyles it has spawned has made such adjustments more relevant than ever. In particular, notions of national belonging and ethnic loyalty have increasingly come under fire by both laymen and scholars. In the words of Michael Herzfeld (2005: 91):

Clearly, people do not think, act, or speak exactly as the schematized ideologies of statism would prefer. Nevertheless, they do continue to serve their national entities with great loyalty and to move within the legal and political frameworks that the latter provide. By questioning the naturalization of culture in statist ideologies as well as the concomitant reification of nature, we can perhaps begin to understand how sensitive actors can negotiate the tensions of social identity and daily life within the turbulent context of the modern nation-state, and how they can be fiercely patriotic and just as fiercely rebellious at one and the same time. This perspective represents an epistemological militant middle ground; it entails recognizing agency rather than surrendering to either regress or reification.

The experiences of the Erasmus students can thus be seen as a cosmopolitan apprenticeship wherein social representations are formulated, disseminated and contested in communication with fellow exchange students (present and former), university administrators and local students. For this reason, it is interesting to see what particular representations are entertained by the Erasmus students vis-à-vis their sense of national belonging, extant loyalties and discursive practices. There is the distinct possibility that their new experiences, in accord with the general spirit of the time, may effect substantial changes in their preferred world view and self-representation.

Cosmopolitanism: a new civic mentality

As mentioned above, the historical changes of the previous century have propelled the development of new forms of community and identity. One such development is the increased incidence and acceptance, or at least promotion, of cosmopolitanism. But what is cosmopolitanism? The discussion that follows will try to shed some light on the meaning and
potential implications of cosmopolitanism.\footnote{5} According to Ulf Hannerz (1996: 103-104) a cosmopolitan is a person who has an explicit wish to engage with other cultures and people. Such a person is characterised by an intellectual and aesthetic openness towards divergent cultural experiences. He or she has also developed a familiarity with a wide range of human and natural environments. Finally, he has acquired a degree of competence and sophistication usable in a multitude of milieus. For Hannerz (1990) this special attitude and competence helps the cosmopolitan to adapt to the exigencies of local culture, but also to detach him- or herself from its rigidities, thereby making possible a truly meta-cultural stance towards the cultural diversity of our shared world.

In contemporaneous public debates cosmopolitanism stands for an intellectual openness towards cultural and social diversity; it represents a view of the world as a unified experiential field. Much of its power of attraction comes from the radically altered conditions of life that have followed in the wake of post-industrialism and globalisation, a development that has facilitated new understandings and skills as well as new institutional arrangements. People need to take an active stance towards this new situation and cosmopolitanism is one of the competing new ideologies that tries to offer functional tools, intellectual and practical, suitable for the new millennium (Vertovec & Cohen, 2002).

Theoretically, cosmopolitanism has two major dimensions (Hannerz, 1996; Vertovec & Cohen, 2002; Delanty, 2005; Beck & Grande, 2007).\footnote{6} The first is political in nature and concerns questions of supranational institutions, global governance and issues of universal human rights. The second is more cultural and experiential in nature and focuses on the importance of awareness and appreciation for disparate lifestyles, world views and cultural artefacts. Both versions of cosmopolitanism are opposed to those forces that resent globalisation: nationalism, xenophobia, and cultural fundamentalism. This does not imply that cosmopolitanism takes an unproblematic stance towards the various processes and consequences of our increased interconnectedness. On the contrary, many advocates of globalisation suggest that our only hope of achieving a genuine and workable transnational community is in the restriction of the purely economic exchanges that, hitherto, has dominated the scene (Bauman, 1998; Sennett, 1998). The expansion of market economies and consumerism over the whole world, with its unjust allocation of wealth and its deleterious effects on the environment, is in this view seen as part of the problem, not as a solution. Despite of this, cosmopolitan critics (e.g. social movements like Attack, Occupy Wall Street) purport to work in a boundary-transcending way; including people and groups perceived as different from oneself is considered more important than excluding them.

Despite its merits, cosmopolitanism has also been subjected to various criticisms. Cosmopolitanism has, for example, been criticised on the grounds of being an elite phenomenon (Calhoun, 2002; Friedman, 2007). In this view cosmopolitanism does not represent something

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\footnote{5} Cosmopolitanism is not a new invention. It is actually a concept with a very long history, being originally coined by the ancient Greeks. Since then it has gone through a number of transformations, as well as lying dormant for extended periods of time, and has recently resurfaced as a potentially useful analytical tool in the comprehension of our increasingly complex world (Inglis, 2012).

\footnote{6} A third form of cosmopolitanism, an epistemological one, has been forcefully propagated by some scholars (see Beck, 2002). According to this view, nationalism has historically had such a pervasive influence on society so as to shape even the ways people conceptualise and investigate their world. Thus, much of western social science is geared towards the study of phenomena happening within the confines of the nation-state system or at best to various international phenomena. This is an unnecessary restriction that has affected both the issues chosen for study and the methods used to study them. However, this situation is by now untenable and in need of reformation. As a result of the dramatic changes of the last half century the system of nation-states is increasingly becoming obsolete and its hold on people’s lives and common affairs has lessened in both strength and outreach. Hence, there is an urgent need to invent new research topics and methodologies better suited for the realities of a transnational world. There is, in other words, a need for a cosmopolitan epistemology; a new outlook on the age-old issues of politics, economics and jurisdiction.
truly new—for example, the adaptive evolution of a new civic mentality—but rather, the periodically recurring globalisation of ruling elites due to a decrease in their regional or national power (similar phenomena have occurred in the past). The weakening of the welfare state and of national sovereignty that has taken place in recent decades has set the stage for both the cosmopolitanisation of elites, in a process of upward mobility, and the ‘indigenisation’ of downwardly mobile sectors of the population. This new indigenisation can be seen in the fact that large segments of the world’s population are still unable to free themselves of the shackles of restrictive locality and are able to travel only rarely or clandestinely (Bauman, 1998).

Related to the above is the view of cosmopolitanism as a ‘thin’ ideology. The fact that it has historically been an outgrowth of the aristocracy’s extravagant leisure activities (e.g., the renaissance Grand Tour) or the opportunistic ventures of long-distance traders has only strengthened this view. It is thus often seen as a personal choice and characterised by a lack of unifying symbols, lasting experiences and/or noticeable consequences. For these reasons, it is argued, it seldom leads to strong commitments or loyalties. These deficits are problematic since social cohesion and solidarity are important prerequisites of a well-functioning democracy and an active citizenship (Calhoun, 2002; Hannerz, 2005: 202-205). Nationalism, on the other hand, is generally based on a long-term condensation of shared experiences that gives it a considerable historical and cultural depth and, hence, generates durable commitments and loyalties for its subjects (Billig, 1995). Ethnically based nationalism especially (in contrast to the more inclusive civic version) exhibits an extreme cultural density and is able to muster high levels of social solidarity. In recent times, however, there has been a ‘thickening’ of the cosmopolitan ideology, mainly due to the increased incidence of travel and creolisation. Hence, according to Ulf Hannerz (2002), it is nowadays possible to find cosmopolitan ways of life predicated on collective sentiments of considerable potency.

Another criticism sees cosmopolitanism as a by-product of late capitalist developments in the western world (Calhoun, 2002; Friedman, 2007). In a political landscape where substantive ideological differences have evaporated and democratic rule has been reduced to technocratic management, neo-liberal economics and New Public Management policies have taken on the role of legitimising the emerging new world order as well as offering new outlets for the masses to satisfy their curiosity and voice their discontent. In this scenario, citizen participation is increasingly canalised through various forms of market consumerism, mass media and mass tourism, a fact which has led to a surge in the levels of cultural commodification (Zelizer, 1999; Micheletti, 2003). The increasingly popular incidence of cosmopolitanism in the western world is thought to belong to this class of phenomena.

Finally, cosmopolitanism has also been criticised on ontological grounds. It has, until very recently, simply been an analytical concept; a concept formulated by academics and politicians in their attempts to better understand and manage a rapidly changing world. The concept is generally not used outside this limited category of people. It is, therefore, not part of most people’s conceptual equipment and has hitherto played a limited role in their subjective or intersubjective experience. This may be changing, however. As people’s daily lives—their professional careers, kinship ties, friendship networks, media consumption and recreational habits—are increasingly situated outside of their original place of residence, the opportunities for transnational connections and the intensification of extant ones increase accordingly (Hannerz, 1996). As a result of this an increasing number of people today have had significant, even formative, experiences of border-crossing meetings and engagements with different peoples and cultures. This has led to considerable, and wide-ranging, changes in popular attitudes and ideology. Among them we find a popularisation and democratisation of the concept of cosmopolitanism as well as a reimagining of its classical legacy (Delanty, 2005; Beck & Grande, 2007; Inglis, 2012). It is not unlikely, therefore, that the concept of cosmopolitanism will soon gain a wider appeal among the general population than is currently
the case; there are actually some indications to this effect (Szerszynski & Urry, 2002). In the long run this development may help supersede a number of parochial ideologies that still have a strong hold on the world's populations: nationalism, protectionism and fundamentalism (Billig, 1995).

The Erasmus Programme may be one of the processes that contribute to such a change in attitudes, helping to generate and disseminate cosmopolitanism. Erasmus students seem to be both qualified and motivated for such a task: they want to travel and are well endowed to do so. Consequently, they are getting the necessary practice that may someday contribute to realising this new worldview.

Given all the above, it is worthwhile to look at how an eventual spread of cosmopolitan aptitudes and attitudes to new social strata may be configured and organised in the specific case. Are we dealing with a hegemonic imposition or a grassroots phenomenon? Many transnational processes have undeniably had their origin at the macro level (e.g., the various initiatives of the EU Commission) and only trickled down to the ‘common citizen’ after legislation and enforcement. There are, however, also instances of movements that have started at the grassroots level and spread to a broader public through common experiences, personal contacts and various forms of political activism (e.g., the environmental movement). Thus, an important issue in the study of cosmopolitism is to try and ascertain what kind of processes we are observing, top-down or bottom-up. Thereafter one can try and find out if these two basic types of processes intersect at any point. Of course, the possibility of hiterto unknown channels for the spread of cosmopolitanism, beside the two basic forms mentioned above, should always be kept open.

**Europeanism**

Concerns about globalisation and its effects have also occupied the work of the European Commission (Bellier & Wilson, 2000). The European unification process, still under development, is the biggest proof of this. However, such an ambitious political project depends for its fruition on the achievement of a number of ‘softer’ subsidiary objectives. One such objective is the education of a new kind of citizen, a citizen with wider, more transnational affiliations and loyalties. The Erasmus and Socrates programmes have, in this regard, been important institutional vehicles for this intervention. Cris Shore (2000: 26, 30), who has studied the work of the Commission from the inside, has this to say:

Identity-formation and ‘culture-building’ have thus become explicit political objectives in the campaign to promote what EU officials and politicians call l’idée européenne or ‘European idea’. . . Constructing Europe requires the creation of ‘Europeans’, not simply as an objectified category of EU passport-holders and ‘citizens’ but, more fundamentally, as a category of subjectivity. This transformation of identity and consciousness—or, to use the language of neofunctionalism, ‘the process by which actors are persuaded to transfer their loyalties and allegiances’—is crucial to the long-term success of forging the European Union.

This ‘building’ of a New Europe has some counterintuitive similarities to the nation-building of earlier times. Gellner (1983: 126, my italics), who defines nationalism in contradistinction to agrarian society, sees it as being ‘about entry to, participation in, identification with, a literate high culture which is co-extensive with an entire political unit and its total population’. According to this view a nation-state or federation of nation-states can only arise when a high culture is established and reified, a population is relatively culturally homogenous and when there is a sufficiently wide-ranging and stable education system that allows the possibility of all members of the nation gaining access to that high culture. In societies lacking such prerequisites (e.g., agrarian societies) the implementation of a nationalistic project is much more difficult, if
not impossible (cf. Anderson, 1983). This time, however, it is not nationalism that is the ‘output’ of the educational process.

According to several scholars, this process is, at least partly, moving in the direction of an increased cosmopolitanism. Gerard Delanty (2005: 405), for example, claimed some years ago that cosmopolitanisation is a more fitting description of the processes currently refashioning Europe than either internationalism or federalism. Such a process is predicated on ‘a cultural logic of self-transformation rather than as a supranational identity or an official EU identity that is in a relation of tension with national identities’. It represents a post-national self-understanding that places the citizen as much beyond as within national boundaries and identities.

In a similar, albeit more political vein, Beck and Grande (2007) purport, as if anticipating later political turns, that a cosmopolitan philosophy and approach is urgently needed if Europe wants to overcome its current political and moral crisis. Such an approach may offer a new political vision and concept of political integration, and hence, help move the current situation to a truly post-national model of democracy, a model that is no longer concerned with harmonising rules and eliminating (national) differences, but instead, with recognising and using them as parts of the democratic decision-making process.

The Erasmus Programme is, therefore, part of a wider political project which aims for the improvement of various socioeconomic outcomes—what is sometimes called rationalisation—through the use of targeted social engineering (Bellier & Wilson, 2000; Shore, 2000; Weber, 2001). The fruition of such a project demands not only the mobilisation of learning resources and technocratic structures, but also, and above all, a renewed willingness to engage with and understand others, which Jürgen Habermas (1979: 120; my italics) has called communicative action:

As learning processes take place not only in the dimension of objectivating thought but also in the dimension of moral-practical insight, the rationalization of action is deposited not only in forces of production, but also—mediated through the dynamics of social movements—in forms of social integration. Rationality structures are embodied not only in amplifications of purposive-rational action—that is, in technologies, strategies, organizations, and qualifications—but also in mediations of communicative action—in the mechanisms for regulating conflict, in world views, and in identity formations. I would even defend the thesis that the development of these normative structures is the pacemaker of social evolution, for new principles of social organization mean new forms of social integration; and the latter, in turn, first make it possible to implement available productive forces or to generate new ones, as well as making possible a heightening of social complexity . . . Their progress cannot be measured against the choice of correct strategies, but rather against the intersubjectivity of understanding achieved without force, that is, against the expansion of the domain of consensual action together with the re-establishment of undistorted communication.

In this, the Erasmus Programme has an important propaedeutic role. By systematically facilitating academic mobility it allows the students legitimate peripheral participation in this emerging political landscape and initiates them into a prolonged tutelage. One aspect of this learning experience is the establishment of new forms of communication between European youths; another is the development of knowledgeable skill in handling cultural diversity and transnational relationships. Taken together, these two aspects form the outlines, or the ‘curriculum’ you might say, of a cosmopolitan apprenticeship.
Unfinished business and unintended consequences

When dealing with processes of such magnitude, it is sound, I believe, to also insert some reservations and qualifications. Although the Europeanisation process has come a long way, among other things by the institution and implementation of several educational initiatives, we cannot be certain of its final outcome. Does the Erasmus Programme foster intercultural learning? Will it lead to the development of a pan-European identity or of cosmopolitan citizens? We do not know. What is certain, however, is that this is a process of becoming, a crafting of new selves (Kondo, 1990), that affects the lives of millions of people and the transformative effects of which—in people’s understanding, identity and knowledgeable skill—will go on for decades. The present study offers a glimpse into this unfinished project.

Another thing worth keeping in mind is that all purposive social action has unanticipated and unintended consequences. In his classical study sociologist Robert Merton (1936) tried to systematise the causes of these rather embarrassing outcomes and came up with four main ‘suspects’. Two of them are relatively easy to comprehend and control for; namely, error and ignorance. The two remaining ones, however, are more insidious. He aptly called them the imperious immediacy of interest (allowing well-intended pursuits to blind us to the consequences of our actions; for example, spoiling the child) and the self-defeating prediction (a forecasted development changes the course of history thereby negating itself; for example, the overpopulation-starvation prediction).

Coming back to our case it is not difficult to see that the national peculiarities of the member states—conditioned by different historical circumstances, bureaucratic traditions, and political discourses, as well as ‘temperamental’ differences in the public life of the respective countries—filter the overall applicability of various EU projects and make their outcome a highly unpredictable event. We can therefore be sure that they will also engender a number of unintended consequences. What are the unanticipated effects of the special institutional arrangements (and generous provisions) offered to the incoming students? And is it possible that the massive influx of exchange students due to the Erasmus Programme may alter the demographics of the student pool to such a degree as to negate its own professed goals? The following chapters will look more carefully into some of these issues.

Delineating the field

The present thesis is an ethnographic account of the social life of a group of Erasmus students, describing their experiences, goals and motives, as well as their attitudes towards a number of other social processes, both national and transnational, going on in their surroundings. Achieving a view ‘from within’ this youthful group and uncovering the several layers of meaning with regards to their perspectives on themselves, their peers, and their surroundings, was a central concern for this study; it has guided and structured many of the descriptive and analytical efforts to follow. The most important tool for achieving the above goal has been the participant experience of the researcher; alternating between the roles of an observing participant and a participating observer has provided most of the working material as well as the intellectual acumen for answering the main questions of this study (Gold, 1958).

7 This uncertainty has most dramatically been showcased by the British government’s decision to leave the European Union. This ‘Brexit’ process has teared up a big ‘wound’ in the heart of the Erasmus Programme, as Britain is one of the biggest contributors to the programme. Besides creating a number of legal and bureaucratic problems it has also provoked the anger and disappointment of a large number of British students who, thanks to their participation in the Erasmus Program, have a thoroughly European identity and extensive friendship networks across the continent (Breeden, 2016).
Two cities within the European Union, Stockholm and Athens, were chosen for the purposes of my study. The reasons for their selection form an amalgamation of practical and theoretical concerns. For one thing both of them seemed convenient as sites for my fieldwork since I currently live in Stockholm and have lived in Athens in the past. In both countries I have personal roots and extensive contacts. Thus, many practical and economic issues surrounding a fieldwork study could easily be dealt with. The two cities, however, are interesting for theoretical reasons as well. The fact that they are situated in two very different countries—with respect to economic development, family structure, historical background, and religious denomination, for example—gives them the character of an ‘odd couple’, and allows for plenty of opportunities for interesting comparisons.

In each city I chose the biggest university for my study: Stockholm University in Stockholm and the Kappodistrian University in Athens (however I also kept an eye on some of the smaller universities). The field sites I frequented consisted of the main university buildings and their immediate surroundings, as well as the dwelling areas of the students. These areas were in many respects closely linked to each other; either spatially (physical proximity) or temporally (the students passed through them during their day). Beside these areas I was also interested in the relational patterns and mobility habits of the students, and therefore, tried to follow them close-up as they passed from one space or relationship to the other.

The time I spent in each site was different, though. In Stockholm I spent the spring term studying the Erasmus students. Given that the spring term is longer than the autumn term and includes part of the summer, this meant around six months. In Athens, during the autumn, I spent a total time of three months. This asymmetry means that my statements and conclusions about the Stockholm population (where I myself have been a student) carry somewhat more weight. Nevertheless, the fact that my findings from Athens are in line with those from Sweden, as well as with other international studies on the subject, bespeaks their basic validity.

Empirically the study is a multi-local field study involving fieldwork in a number of interlinked sites (Marcus, 1998). This methodological approach seemed pertinent for a number of reasons. Firstly, my dual national affiliations made a multi-local ethnography seem like a good idea. I could readily take advantage of this fact, and thus, more easily get access to sites and cover ground which was of interest for the study. A second reason, more related to the study subject, had to do with the choices and actions of the Erasmus students. The Erasmus students are by definition a transnationally and translocally mobile group of people and any study of them ought to follow, at least partly, their border-crossing trajectories.

This kind of research strategy seemed particularly appropriate for the study of a group of young mobile students, and one that is adopted frequently in contemporary social anthropology. It may partly be seen as a reaction to the epistemological shortcomings of established techniques; for example, the view of communities as isolated and bounded entities, but also as a well-needed adaptation to a changing world. It has been considered especially apt for use in the context of urban and transnational studies (Marcus, 1995; Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Faubion & Marcus, 2009). This is how George Marcus (1998: 90), one of its principal proponents, describes it:

Multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography.

By following the paths of the Erasmus students through various localities and across borders, strategically pausing at critical nodes in their complex trajectories, I was able to ‘take the pulse’ of their sociality and catch their ideas on the flight thereby gaining valuable insights into their
special way of life. These insights were accentuated by my own embodied participation in this highly transnational and mobile way of life.

Methodological considerations

Studying the life of the Erasmus students and reflecting on their potential for becoming future cosmopolitans has been a highly rewarding research project. Their often spontaneous and exuberant way of life made for a stimulating adventure, socially as well as intellectually. However, there are also considerable challenges associated with such a study. Besides the particular challenges involved in gaining access and rapport with a lively group of adolescents constantly on the move there is also the general problem of ethnographically ‘grasping’ a phenomenon like cosmopolitanism, pertaining as it does to large-scale, aggregated and dynamic processes.  

Data collection

My study of the Erasmus students, in these assemblages of sites, included participant observation, interviews, and analysis of policy documents, as well as two small surveys (a network survey and a representational survey). The use of such a qualitative methodology seemed especially relevant for a study of the Erasmus students given their large heterogeneity, high mobility, flexible lifestyles and the limited number of earlier studies on them.

I went about approaching the two major field sites in roughly the same manner. First I tried to get a good picture of the relevant field. In Stockholm I did that through a pilot study and in Athens with the help of a reconnaissance trip, both of which took place in 2003. The pilot study consisted of my following of the Introduction Week for foreign students and some interviews with administrators. The trip was a three-week stay in Athens during which I visited key sites (i.e., various universities) and had my first contacts with officials and students. This was followed by the fieldwork proper, in 2005; the Swedish part during the spring and the Greek counterpart the following autumn.

During the first stages of fieldwork I immersed myself in the Erasmus population and tried to get to know as many students as possible. Subsequently, I closed in on a smaller number of people with whom I had developed a closer relationship, in order to get more in-depth information and more personalised accounts of their lives. I tried, as much as possible, to make a varied selection of informants so as to give voice to many different personalities and nationalities (cf. Rodman, 1992). The group that I followed, all in their early twenties, consisted of the following persons, with study subject, marital status and nationality in parenthesis: Nico (Mathematics, single, Greek), Amelia (Law, single, Greek), Simon (Law, single, German), Benjamin (Swedish, single, German), Fernando (French/Italian, single, Italian) and Juliet (Social anthropology, single, Slovenian). With the exception of Simon and Juliet these students all knew each other. In Athens I became attached to a group of students of Swedish and Norwegian nationality where I also found my main informant, Martha (who was half Greek).

8 Arjun Appadurai, probably in a moment of sincere confession, goes so far as to call studies of globalisation ‘a mild exercise in megalomania’ (Appadurai, 1996: 18). Of course, his intent is not to discourage anyone from doing such studies but rather to sensitize his readers to the inherent problems in this rather new field and place the resultant works on a more provisional basis.

9 For information on the network survey see Note 3 in Chapter 6. In the representational survey I asked some students to produce words/concepts that they associated with the Erasmus experience and then had them rank and categorise them in certain ways. The results from these surveys informed some of my initial thinking about the Erasmus students, and offered valuable methodological ‘triangulation’, but they are not systematically presented in this dissertation (on the importance of methodological triangulation see Marcus, 1995; Hannerz, 2003).
Another informant in Athens was the Turkish student Mehmet; he was in his late twenties, doing postgraduate studies, and was also married (his wife stayed in Turkey).10

Throughout the study I tried to be as explicit as possible with my informants and contacts about my interest in their whereabouts. Hence, when possible, I informed them of my research position and the goals of my study. I also tried to use the information I received from them in a prudent way so as not to offend or embarrass anyone. This later consideration has also been carried into the written text, where all my informants appear with pseudonyms.

The environments in which I engaged with the students were many and varied and will be presented shortly. For now it suffices to say that they were quite different for the two cities. In Stockholm most of my participant observation took place around the university campus with an occasional visit downtown or some longer excursion. In Athens, the spaces of engagement were more diverse and spread out all over the city.

**Entering the field of the Erasmus**

In both Stockholm and Athens, entering the field was a relatively smooth process; at least in the sense that I did not encounter any physical borders, restrictions or unfriendly gatekeepers as is often the case with many other anthropological fields. The doors were wide open, metaphorically speaking, and I felt pretty much at home. The field was well known to me from my previous experience as both student and researcher. Thus, the whereabouts of the exchange students, their recreational habits, and their way of life were already fairly familiar to me.

I soon realised, however, that all was not easy. As days passed and I tried to hang in there, I noticed that I was not always invited or welcome. This probably had to do with me being no longer a student, but a researcher, and the fact that the Erasmus students were a rather homogenous age group. I was not one of them and they certainly noticed it. I was much older, grey-haired, dressed differently and I was living in some remote Stockholm suburb. I also did not and could not attend all of their activities. For example, following their Swedish language courses was not possible. Hence, I was often left out from various activities, organised or spontaneous, that they undertook. This probably happened both intentionally, since they did not want to have me in their group, and unintentionally, since I was not living in close proximity to them. Consequently, the effort I had to make in order to stay in touch with them was at times quite cumbersome.

The fact that I did not live in close proximity to the residential areas where they lived—Lappis, Kungshamra, or the Solna Cabins (suburban areas on the fringes of Stockholm city)—and that I could not study Swedish with them, turned out to be a hindrance when it came to trying to hook up with them on some of their many excursions and travels. Erasmus students are prolific travellers, both within their host country and outside its borders, and I had to try and follow them on some of their many escapades (more on that later). What I realised, however, was that it was difficult to do so since many of the decisions to travel were made “on the fly” of the moment by students living in the same quarters and meeting each other daily; they were often corridor mates or living in the same house. Under such conditions it was hard for an outsider like myself to make my plea heard and even harder for the spontaneous students to show the proper concern and fidelity. So, even though I repeatedly told them I wanted to join and they repeatedly promised they would let me in, I was usually, at the end of the day, forgotten. Still, in the end, I got my fair share of student adventure and travel.

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10 For the exchange students in Athens I lack exact background information (for example, departmental affiliation) since the university did not supply me with such information despite my request. The main reason for that, I surmise, is that they did not have aggregate data readily available.
Engaging the Erasmus students

As briefly mentioned above, the main methods I used for this study were participant observation and interviews. In the beginning, I repeatedly reflected on my methodological approach to see if it was any good. Did my approach yield any useful information? Did it have any inbuilt problems and limitations? Perhaps it was prone to show diminishing returns after a couple of trials? So, in tandem with the ongoing fieldwork, I exercised considerable self-monitoring in order to see where I stood and where I was heading. As other researchers have pointed out, the open-ended character of ethnography calls for a rather self-reflexive and improvisational stance in order for it to be fruitfully carried out (Davies, 2008).

The troubles I encountered during my participant observation were rather typical of fieldwork. Like many anthropologists before me I faced some of the typical problems; namely, that of gaining entry, meeting ‘the right people’, keeping away from unproductive dead ends and persevering in the face of adversity. As mentioned above, I only had some minor problems with gaining entry; they occurred at an intermediate stage in my fieldwork period. More disturbingly, I also met with some informants who, though initially inviting, were not too eager to engage further with me. In particular, Fernando from Italy and Nico from Greece were interested in socialising with me in the beginning but subsequently stopped ‘paying dividends’, leaving me with a lot of frustration and wasted investment of time and energy. They both seemed rather uninterested, not always letting me in after the first joyful days, and not responding willingly to my needs for sympathy and help. Fernando, a master’s student, turned out to be quite introverted and spent most of his time either with his Italian friends and corridor mates or with writing on his thesis work. Nico was more active and social. We talked about doing things together but in the end very little happened. Hence, I could not completely rely on him for participation. Both of these dead ends forced me, around the middle of the term, to change plans and seek out ‘greener pastures’ (that is, new informants).

After some time in the field, I broadened my network of contacts and informants. One group that I got to know were Nico’s friends. I discovered at some point that they were more responsive and reliable than my original contact. The other source of new input for my study was sheer luck. I happened to meet a guy at a student pub, but after our first meeting I lost track of him. Later when I was faced with a “drought” of informants he miraculously showed up. We became friends and had many long and interesting discussions. Another random meeting was occasioned through a colleague at the department who had contact with an Erasmus student, Juliet from Slovenia. She introduced me to her, and I immediately fell in with her. These new contacts provided a richer yield of information than the previous ones. Still, I never entirely lost contact with my initial informants.

The interviews with my informants as well as a selection of other students and administrators, twenty-four in all, were of the non-directive kind (Kvale 1996). Initially I also tried out a semi-structured interview guide but after some thought I decided to use a non-directive version instead. The non-directive interview guide seemed to produce a more coherent and spontaneous flow of information than the semi-structured, which presented a more partial and fragmented picture. Some of the interviews, most of which were conducted in my office at

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11 I also had some material from my earlier pilot study which contained some good descriptions of the Introduction Week (a central event in the reception of incoming students). Back then, in the autumn term of 2003, the Introduction Week was one week long while this time it was just three days long; since the students were fewer in the spring term the organizers at Stockholm University had opted for a shorter version. For that reason and also since not much was really new the older notes on the Introduction Week of 2003 were much more extensive and detailed than the new ones. They are thus used in several parts of the text.
the department, flourished into vivid and passionate narratives and, thus, delivered both the raw material I needed and the more personal accounts I hoped for.

Quite quickly, however, I realised that there was also an issue of diminishing returns involved. After just a couple of interviews it seemed as though most of my informants, unwittingly and unintentionally, were telling me similar things. Of course, this is not necessarily bad, but it certainly made me think. I started reflecting on various explanations for it. The similarity in responses could be a positive indication of some sort of streamlining of opinion due to social processes, a social construction, or groupthink process happening right under my nose and caught on tape. It might be that I had reached a point of redundancy, implying that I had managed to capture some of the main themes. A potentially more disturbing explanation had to do with the interview guide itself. Maybe it was inadequate despite being non-directive? And perhaps it is more difficult to get beyond the self-evident ruminations of the trivial when conducting a non-directive interview. Getting “under the surface” of things often requires well guided interrogation and non-directive interviews are, by definition, not well suited for that; the interviewees easily drift away into collective trivia even if the interviewer tries to steer them with follow-up questions. Anyway, these doubts were quickly dispelled by the fact that I then obtained a number of interviews that seemed to deviate from the mainstream. The interviews were made with a number of students who seemed to go their own way in defiance of the wider Erasmus group and who frankly gave expression to their experiences. If my interview guide could identify and extract their opinions, then it was probably not as infertile as I feared.

Ethnography at home: some personal reflections

I have a personal relationship with travelling and student exchanges. To begin with, I am a third-generation immigrant. My grandparents on my father’s side came to Greece after the First World War as refugees from Bulgaria. My grandparents on my mother’s side also came to Greece as refugees, but from Turkey. My parents both left Greece during the 1960s—my mother went to Germany as a gastarbeiter and my father went to Sweden as a political refugee—and after they met they eventually settled together in Sweden. I myself have constantly moved between Sweden and Greece, physically as well as emotionally. The physical travels have mostly been for summer holidays, but I also followed my parents in two of their attempts (one failed and one successful) to repatriate in Greece. Thus, part of my childhood memories, friendships, loyalties, and the like are divided between these two countries. Measured in flights, air miles and airports, I believe that I have travelled more than most other people, and from my earliest infancy.

My relationship to the Erasmus students goes through a more direct route. In 1989 I came to Sweden to study at the university. I came as a ‘foreign student’, which at the time was an established administrative category very much like the Erasmus students’ status is today. I also received a similar administrative treatment to the one offered the Erasmus students. Actually, many of the current administrative procedures, such as the Introduction Week, were already in place back then and have only been transferred to a new target group, the Erasmus students, as the occasion arose. Likewise, many of the other circumstances that surrounded my life as a student at that time had similarities to the ones that face the Erasmus students today: I lived in the typical student residence area, I socialised with other international students, and frequented the usual student pubs.

Finally, later in my student life, after the mid-1990s, I became very interested in the incoming Erasmus students and actively sought out their company. This was at the time when their inflow to Stockholm University increased dramatically and they were starting to have an impact on the social life on campus. It did not take long for me to realise that they were a fun group to be around and soon I was almost exclusively socialising with them: parties, travels,
drinking, barbecues, friendships, reunions, and so forth. This lasted for four years and represented the most memorable part of my student years. My Greek background and the fact that I lived in the same residential area made it easy for me to blend in and join them. In fact, I was often mistaken for an Erasmus student, an impression that I did not always care to correct. Even after my student years were over, I could blend in with them easily, though not as seamlessly as before. My involvement with the Erasmus students has been so close and long-standing that managing to keep an intellectually healthy distance from them has been a much bigger problem than getting access to them or understanding their situation.

Not surprisingly, my participant observation occasioned a fair amount of critical self-reflection. Many of the thoughts I entertained had to do with the fact that I was doing fieldwork ‘at home’, as it were. This methodological approach, in which academic pursuits are mixed up with personal experiences, has lately become increasingly common and its particular challenges have been amply discussed (Jackson, 1987; Amit, 2000; Khosravi, 2010). Like all methods it has both advantages and disadvantages.

The advantages are easy to see. Doing fieldwork at home implies a familiarity with the field, which affords the researcher an increased proficiency in his or her work. The researcher is thus better protected from various ‘accidents’—misunderstandings, blunders, harassment— which the early anthropologists, with limited linguistic and cultural pre-knowledge of their hosts, often fell prey to. Shortcomings of this kind can seriously jeopardise and even invalidate anthropological studies (Keesing, 1989). The anthropologist working at home does not have to suffer this trouble, at least not to such a degree. His or her knowledge of the terrain, both physical and cultural, gives him the privilege of being able to make quick and relatively sound decisions as to which investigative venues are relevant, worthwhile, and feasible to pursue. On the other hand, doing anthropology at home is open to the criticism of generating rather trivial results at a high cost-benefit ratio, competing as it does with more standardised and “comfortable” scientific methods (e.g., questionnaires, database analyses). Therefore, to this day, doing anthropology at home may provoke a degree of suspicion and resistance from both colleagues and informants (Amit, 2000; Caputo, 2000).

As an anthropologist doing fieldwork at home I benefited from my pre-given knowledge. My previous knowledge of Stockholm University and its student life guided me in my initial investigations and saved me both time and energy, not to mention the many blunders I would otherwise have made. I knew where my informants were, what they used to do, how they socialised, and so on. This made access to them and my life as a fieldworking anthropologist much easier. This pre-given knowledge also made note-taking easier as most interactions I observed could be penned down immediately without much cultural “deciphering”; the risk of misunderstandings basic interactions or communications was minimal.

However, as the fieldwork period progressed, I became increasingly aware that there was also a flipside to doing anthropology at home. At several points I realised that my private life was not always in line with my professional interests. My established habits, my conveniences, my personal friends, and leisure activities all seemed to place demands on me, explicit and implicit, which if not counteracted could encroach on my research activities. Such conflicting demands can result in slacking motivation. As an anthropologist working at home you have to put in an extra effort to stay engaged with your field (Davies, 2008; Amit, 2000). For example, I often forced myself to hang around on campus for hours waiting for something interesting to come around. On other occasions I had to stay up late in order to catch a glimpse of the student’s nocturnal activities.

This distracting effect, however, had an unexpected positive effect. Given the fact that I have myself been an exchange student and lived close to the Erasmus students (as an aficionado of their exuberant social life) prior to my professional engagement with them, there has always been an issue of managing to keep a healthy critical distance. Being totally immersed and...
absorbed by them would not have been good for my academic judgment. The occasional periods of inertia occasioned by my rather settled lifestyle helped me keep this distance without much conscious effort. Sometimes I simply did not have the energy needed to follow the Erasmus students on every one of their escapades. Complete immersion in a field is difficult when doing anthropology at home (Davies, 2008; Amit, 2000).

Last, I can imagine that doing fieldwork at home, as opposed to being a guest in an unfamiliar geocultural environment, does not lead to the same levels of revelation and potential alterations of consciousness as doing more classical fieldwork. This, too, is slightly problematic since such experiences, besides being intellectually interesting, can be very strong and memorable. Hanging around at a familiar campus, in my case, is less so. Furthermore, learning by mistakes is an approach which, despite its negative connotations, can have certain methodological advantages (Garsten 2013).

Ethnography at one’s second home: further reflections

What about my fieldwork in Athens, Greece? Despite my Greek origin, fluent bilingualism, general cultural competence, and fieldwork there, Athens is not ‘my’ city in the world. My current life is firmly rooted in Stockholm, a city I have actively chosen for a multitude of reasons. Last time I lived in Athens was in the 1980s and nowadays I only visit the city occasionally. Thus, this fieldwork, apparently an instance of ‘anthropology at home’, was not fully at home after all.

My fieldwork in Athens exhibited a mixture of features, some of them typical of classical field studies and some typical of more contemporary forms of ethnography. For one thing, after many years of permanent residence in Sweden, and despite my frequent summer visits to Greece, the necessary adjustment time for me when I go back to my parents’ country of origin had gotten longer and longer. I tried to compensate for this effect by plunging head-on into work and repressing the soft spots of my human nature but, nevertheless, this situation gave rise to a number of practical problems and intellectual considerations.

This ‘in-betweenness’ endowed me with a special feeling; sometimes eerie and disturbing, sometimes liberating and refreshing. The ambivalence showed itself in various forms: a longing for the comforts of my Swedish home, sometimes a fear about what was waiting for me, sometimes anger over Greeks and their ways, but also the delight of doing something new and exciting or the joy of being liberated from the dull realities of my ordinary life. This feeling of ambivalence, of being in liminal space (Turner, 1969) was permanent throughout my fieldwork in Greece. Did the Erasmus students feel the same? Although of a slightly different nature, liminality, as my study would show, was also a part of the Erasmus experience.

On a more practical note, doing anthropology at home is connected with a number of logistical pros and cons. During my three months of fieldwork in Athens I had to share quarters with my parents; I lived in their flat in Piraeus. This, of course, had a number of implications. For one thing I had to show them some concern and spend quite some time socialising with them. It was hard for me not to do so, especially since my parents are getting older and I don’t have the opportunity to see them too often. Furthermore, bringing home student friends for any purpose was quite difficult, if not to say inconceivable. Therefore, most of my meetings and socialising with Erasmus students took place outside my home; either in public spaces downtown or in their homes. Similarly, my own situation was partly flavoured by my status in the household. At times I felt more like an adolescent son (and pretty often was treated by my parents as a child) than as a grown-up. I tried to resist this treatment, at least partly, shaking off this juvenile status and reclaiming my status as a grown-up, in order to be able to carry on my job as a researcher. For the same reason I often said “No, thank you” to socialising with my family and relatives so as to have sufficient time and energy for my professional pursuits.
The fact that I lived with my parents also had a practical effect on my mobility status. Since their flat is located in a suburb of Piraeus this meant that I lived in a slightly different part of the city than most Erasmus students. As mentioned above most of them ended up around the city centre of Athens and, hence, were in relatively close proximity to each other. This made my attempts to follow them, “hook up” with them, and “hang out” with them a little bit more difficult than I had expected. They could easily congregate on short notice in some central Athenian location; their residential proximity afforded them the privilege of social spontaneity. Though this spontaneity was not as noticeable as in Stockholm, where most students literally shared quarters in the residential areas of the university, it was much greater than what I could afford. Living at a distance from central Athens, most of the time I could not follow them on their most spontaneous outbursts of sociability. To get to Athens I needed to travel by bus or subway for about 35-55 minutes (depending on where exactly they were to meet). Given that timetables for buses in Greece are non-reliable, public transportation can be a very unpredictable affair. This meant that I had to be ahead of them in my planning in order to make it in time for their meetings. Most of the time that worked out nicely, but in a few cases it did not. All in all, I was most of the time sufficiently quick on my feet to be able to attend a satisfactory number of their spontaneous meetings.

Returning to one’s former home country (or one’s parents’ home) after many years also actualises many dormant social and personal projects which can potentially interfere with one’s declared purpose. One meets old friends and relatives, visits places with some special significance, buys stuff that are unavailable at home, etc. All this takes time and energy away from one’s scheduled activities. This happened to me, too. Thus, I often had to strike a delicate balance between these partly conflicting demands. My priority was to devote most of my efforts to my research project, even though some time and energy was unavoidably lost in the pursuit of these private projects. One way I struck this balance was by mercilessly working double shifts. There was very little rest for me during these two and a half months in Greece; both days and nights were jam-packed with work, to the worry of my onlooking parents. This situation is hard to avoid when one does anthropology at home (or near home); one’s private interests, habits and social relations have a tendency to relentlessly encroach on one’s declared mission.

Now that the theoretical background, goals and methods, as well as practical considerations of this study have been set out, it is time have a more detailed look at the Erasmus Program and its flesh-and-blood incarnation, the Erasmus students. In the next chapter I will describe, and ethnographically illustrate, part of the institutional framework that surrounds this student exchange program. I will also address a number of relevant questions: Which motivations drive the Erasmus students to move abroad and what kind of students end up participating in the program? Is the Erasmus Program opening up to the world or closing in on the European Union? Is this process conducive to the emergence of the sought after “European citizen”?
History

For more than three decades the Erasmus Programme has organised the mobility of thousands of students, who in search of higher education and career opportunities, as well as other more personal goals, crisscross the borders of Europe and settle, for longer or shorter periods, in some university city. Today most students and teachers take this situation for granted. From the outset of their studies many students plan for a semester abroad, while lecturers expect foreign students to attend their classes as a matter of fact. But it was not always this way. So how did it all begin?

The present chapter will take a closer look at the history of the European Union’s educational initiatives and try to discern in what way they have influenced the development of the Erasmus Programme. In parallel with this it will also examine the economic and administrative provisions that underlie this ambitious piece of social engineering. An important challenge, in this regard, will be to try to discern any ulterior motives in this extensive set of decisions and policy making. One possibility that has caught the interest of several scholars is that the European Commission is trying to cultivate a new civic mentality, a transnational or cosmopolitan attitude, conducive to the ends of the European unification process (Delanty, 1995, 2005; Shore, 2000).

A final task that will be pursued in his chapter is to give some relevant background information on the students who participate in the Erasmus Program. What kinds of motives underlie their decision to embark on an international student exchange program? Likewise, it is interesting to know something about the demographic background of the students and how it influences their preferences and decisions.

The Erasmus students in a comparative perspective

For the students of Europe there are many incentives, besides their general curiosity for different cultures, to move abroad for a certain period of time (see Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014). There is, for instance, the prospect of furthering their academic careers which can be pursued by relocating to a foreign university. Furthermore, there is the opportunity to spend some time away from home and test their adult skills. It is my opinion, however, that the single most important motive pushing students to travel abroad relates to their need to ‘measure up’ to a social ideal or norm. In many of the social contexts in which students partake, the concept of travel and cross-cultural contact has become an increasingly important, almost mandatory, element. It is surrounded by positive expectations which are continually supported by the mass media and the propaganda of the European Union. This situation creates an interest to move abroad for a period of time, to mimic one’s peers if nothing else, and the Erasmus Program offers a highly attractive outlet in this regard. Helen, who had visited Sweden, put it in a nutshell:

Well, although some time has passed, several years actually, I have to say that it was one of the best moments of my student life. And also I should mention that upon entering the university it was something I had in mind and wanted to do. I had heard very good things, good experiences from others, and of course wanted to go abroad, even for such a short time,
Despite the positive expectations surrounding the Erasmus Programme, moving abroad as an exchange student—from half a year up to a whole year—is much less a recreational experience than other forms of youth travel (e.g., tourism). This is corroborated by survey studies in which descriptors like ‘improve language’, ‘employment prospects’, and ‘academic knowledge’ make up a big part of their motives to go abroad (Krzaklew ska & Krupnik, 2006: 14-15; Van Mol & Michielsen, 2014). Further, as most students participating in the program are young and unexperienced, they do not always have a clear view of what to expect. When they leave home, often for the first time in their lives, they do so with a mixture of tense anticipation and insecurity. As Helen’s quote above suggests, however, this does not exclude having a good time.

The Erasmus students also differ from other categories of young travellers. For example, business apprentices and language teachers travel because they have to; it is a mandatory element in their vocational training. The Erasmus students are not subject to such external forces. Thus, their sojourn has more the character of a free choice; they often choose the country they will visit as well as the city where they will stay. The few restrictions they are subject to can usually be overcome by various forms of informal arrangements, often ingenious. Sometimes Erasmus students do not even study the subjects they are supposed to—the ones that are part of their study program at home—but pick and choose from the host universities’ extant inventory of courses. I once met two German girls on vocational training in Athens. They told me that they were a bit envious of the Erasmus students, with whom they socialised regularly. The Erasmus students, with their freedom of choice and flexible schedules, were seen as lucky in comparison to their own predicament.

The sojourn of the Erasmus students is also characterized by relatively high levels of safety and comfort. Compared to other kinds of travellers, such as backpackers or aid workers, who often have to endure various hardships and manage on their own, the Erasmus students move within the confines of a mostly protected environment. Erasmus students get both financial backing and special privileges from the EU when they decide to go abroad. The various itineraries are well known ahead of time and the students usually travel in good company. Likewise, many host universities go to considerable lengths in their attempts to welcome and accommodate the incoming students. There are some national variations, of course, and we will discuss them shortly, but this is still the general picture. The Erasmus Program is a very agreeable way to travel and meet new people.

The Erasmus Program is also special at the institutional level, both in a synchronic and a diachronic perspective. It was for example initiated by a specific political decision. Further, it is constantly supervised and evaluated by a specially appointed bureaucracy. And, finally, it is supported, both economically and politically, by a confederation of nations, the European Union (see next section for details). This is a unique situation which sets it apart from most other forms of organised travel which generally rely, to a much higher degree, on local self-organisation and commercial self-interest. This is also reflected in many of the Erasmus students’ self-understanding; they are not mere tourists or simple exchange students but rather something ‘more and better’. Even though most students are not explicitly aware of the political overtones of the program, these overtones are definitely part of their ‘institutional luggage’.

In conclusion, we could say that the Erasmus Program offers a safe way for the young students to socialize with their peers, test their adult skills, advance their educational careers and get to know the host country in a carefree manner. Part of this privileged position comes,
counterintuitively, from the student’s marginal social position, their status as strangers (cf. Simmel, 1950). Elizabeth Murphy-Lejeune (2002: 38) summarises the complex status of Erasmus students:

European student travellers are defined as new strangers because their experience, close to that of other strangers, is nevertheless distinct. They are temporary strangers, mobile and moving, young, capable of adapting and changing. They are student strangers who integrate their experience abroad into their initial education and training. They are considered in their various dimensions, as individual subjects, social actors, foreign language and culture learners. The critical assumption is that student travellers represent an innovation in European research.

The EU legacy: ideology and goals

Even though the European unification process started out as an economic cooperation, its scope was successively widened to include the social and cultural domains as well (Delanty, 1995; Shore, 2000). While the Treaty of Rome in 1957 only had one ‘educational’ goal, that of vocational training, this number soon increased. Thus, in 1976 the educational ministers of the European Community agreed on a number of measures under the first ‘community action plan’ on education. This non-binding resolution included six areas of concern: the education of migrant children, closer relations between the educational systems of Europe, the compilation of common records and statistics, a plan for higher education, the teaching of foreign languages, and the granting of equal opportunities (European Commission, 2008a).

With the Maastricht treaty in 1992, a new level of international cooperation was reached. The treaty says: ‘[t]he Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between member states and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the member states for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity’ (European Commission, 2008b). Since then the European Commission has, in its attempts to enhance and facilitate the unification process, poured out astronomical amounts of money in every conceivable direction (Bellier & Wilson, 2000; Shore, 2000; Weber, 2001). As a result of this the unification process has made tremendous leaps forward and the nations of Europe are now cooperating and integrating at a historically unprecedented rate.

Many of the treaties and policy documents of the European Union, as can be seen in the quote above, are written in a strictly bureaucratic language which alludes to precision, value neutrality, and benevolence. The pursuits of the European Commission are, hence, portrayed as well-intentioned and in the common interest of all parties, both those high up and those at ground level. However, like all political institutions, the Commission and its local branches also have ulterior motives; and these are seldom stated. Reading between the lines of these seemingly innocuous objectives, a socially wide-reaching and psychologically ingenious set-

1 This aspect becomes apparent if we compare the Erasmus Programme with some other exchange programs. A case in point is the Peace Corps, a foreign aid and peace initiative that became popular during the 1960s. Being in the Peace Corps, however, was a much more dangerous thing. A number of them actually died in the line of duty, albeit mostly as a result of unintentional injuries, such as motor vehicle accidents, or following illnesses. Also the Peace Corps were heirs to a highly politicised worldview; not so the Erasmus students who have very few, if any, political worries. Further, the Peace Corps, as a social movement, was much more parochial in character; it started out as an American organisation and only subsequently, and to a limited degree, found adherents abroad. Thus, even though it had clear international ambitions, it was basically a ‘one nation show’ and not as thoroughly multicultural as the Erasmus Programme (Cobbs-Hoffman, 1998).
up emerges. According to Cris Shore (2000:1), the ulterior motive is to ‘foster a “European identity” that will extend integration into the more “cultural” and psychological domains of everyday life’. Similarly, Irene Bellier and Thomas Wilson (2000:15) claim that creating and moulding culture and identity is precisely what the EU is doing, and we contend that it cannot succeed in its other pursuits unless it succeeds in these areas, because of the feedback relations between its political and economic projects on one hand and its cultural infrastructure on the other. The building of the EU is not only a process of harmonization and integration, but one of legitimization, in which the structures and aims of the EU must find approval and meaning among its people.

So, if the European Union wants to survive it must explain and legitimise its many activities to the people at ground level. And in order for this continued existence to be of a more qualitative nature, as opposed to a mere prolongation of a not-so glorious past, it has to be supplemented with the cultivation of a new civic mentality and other related virtues. This goal, of producing a new breed of citizen, is obvious to most students of European affairs (Delanty, 1995; Shore, 2000). Great visions, however, require great measures if they are ever to materialise. So how does one achieve such a change in consciousness? A good way to start is to start early. Irrespective of what method of indoctrination one chooses, it is preferable to focus on the younger generations. Adults and elder people are more resistant to change. Education is another important element. Placing young people at the school desk is one of the best ways to shape their preferences and allegiances and form a common identity. However, this is not enough. Effective educational systems—of the kind instituted by the European nation states—require a substrate of cultural homogeneity. Europe, on the contrary, is characterised by an enormous cultural heterogeneity. Thus, any educational measures must also be coupled with some sort of intercultural learning; otherwise, the internal diversity of Europe will become a serious obstacle in the implementation of the new civic virtues.

This is precisely what the European Commission chose to do. It instituted a series of educational initiatives mainly geared to the needs of the younger generations. Many of these initiatives were eventually gathered under a common ‘umbrella’, the Socrates Programme, formally inaugurated in 1994. These educational initiatives have, in a comparative perspective, been very successful (Papatsiba, 2006). As a consequence of this they have proliferated and expanded in recent years.

The first, and most well known, of these educational programs is the Erasmus Program. This is an exchange program open to students and teaching staff from all academic disciplines and all levels of higher education in Europe and even includes some non-member states. The Erasmus Program has by now a relatively long history. For many students now entering higher education it is a natural part of their educational milieu; they are informed about it, hear stories of it, contemplate using it, and so forth. Thus, they either end up going abroad themselves or have classmates and friends that have done so. However, this was not always the case. In the beginning of the 1990s Erasmus students were still a rare occurrence in most European cities. And earlier than that they were just a curiosity. From the start though, and this is important to emphasise, there was a clear intention to increase student and teacher mobility within Europe.

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2 Here is another legal text that shows the educational ambitions of the European Commission. In the Treaty Establishing the European Community / Part Three – Community Policies / Title XI – Social policy, education, vocational training and youth / Chapter 3 – Education, Vocational Training and Youth / Article 149 (ex Article 126) / Paragraph 2, we can read that ‘Community action shall be aimed at developing the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States; encouraging mobility of students and teachers, inter alia by encouraging the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study; promoting cooperation between educational establishments’ (European Commission, 2006a).

3 Today the Socrates programme has been replaced by the Lifelong Learning Programme, established in 2007.
The word ERAMSUS is actually an acronym that stands for European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students. This ‘scheme’ was established by a Council Decision on 15 June 1987, with the first phase of the program covering the academic years 1987/88 – 1989/90. The main goal of the Erasmus Programme is the furthering of student mobility and improving the climate for academic exchange and cooperation within the European Community. The program offers university students the opportunity to undertake a longer period of study (a minimum of three months) in another member state fully recognised by the home university as an integral part of their degree. This task is carried out with the help of Inter-University Cooperation Programs (ICPs) which are, as the name indicates, bilateral agreements between universities which jointly set up a mobility scheme and which can also incorporate (in addition to student mobility) other activities such as teaching staff mobility, development of new joint curricula, undertaking preparatory visits, and intensive programs. The ICPs establish a wide-ranging university network and constitute the organisational ‘backbone’ of the Erasmus Programme (Maiworm et al. 1991: 7; European Commission, 2006a).

A corollary of the Erasmus Programme, instituted at about the same time, is the European Community Course Credit Transfer System (ECTS). This system ensures that students studying abroad can have their course credits fully recognised by the home institution as an integral part of their degree, thus circumventing the need for lengthy bureaucratic procedures of translation and accreditation (Maiworm et al. 1991: 7; European Commission, 2006a). In retrospect, this was a highly influential reform as it not only made possible the internationalisation of higher education but also enabled the creation of a unified educational market. This meant that Europe now could ‘compete on a regional basis for international students with the other major markets in the US and Australia’ (Wright & Rabo, 2010: 4).

The success of these educational initiatives has also meant that many national institutions, such as universities, have had to adjust to the radically changed conditions for higher education (Papatsiba, 2006; Wright & Rabo, 2010). The most visible proof of this, and the pinnacle of educational cooperation, is the so-called Bologna process. This was a series of ministerial meetings and agreements between European countries, named after the place where it was proposed, with the explicit aim of ensuring comparability in the standards and quality of higher education qualifications. In 1999 this process resulted in the Bologna Declaration which proposed a series of common standards and policy recommendations and effectively created a European Higher Education Area, a common ‘educational space’ in which students and graduates could move freely between countries, using prior qualifications in one country as acceptable entry requirements for further study in another. Following this a number of national governments made adjustments in line with the recommendations of the Bologna process. The Swedish government, for example, passed a new bill (2004/05: 162) which had a clearly international twist to its educational proposals.

It should be mentioned, though, that the Bologna process was not solely a top-down technocratic initiative devised in the high perches of Brussels and Strasbourg. In many respects education had already become internationalised in Europe long before the declaration was made, and this called for policy adjustments in order to better align the educational practices of various countries with the extant reality; this was definitely the case in Sweden (Börjesson, 2005). Thus, the Bologna process was also prompted by bottom-up influences.
The Erasmus grant

Once a university has been approved by the European Commission for participation in the Erasmus Programme, it is entitled to apply for various educational funds. Part of these funds comes from the European Commission directly and part of them comes from the National Agencies set up in every country. These funds are then distributed to various recipients in the educational hierarchy. As far as the students are concerned, the money reaches them in the form of the Erasmus grant. This financial help is offered to both students and teachers who chose to move abroad for a period of time (usually from six months to a whole year). The Erasmus grant is the main vehicle for the achievement of the European Union’s educational goals (see above).

Interested students can apply to the international office for the grant, or to the Erasmus office of their home university, as long as it has ICPs with other European universities. Any student that is participating in a student exchange program with a partner institution is eligible for an Erasmus grant (but only one application per student is allowed). This includes both undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as doctoral candidates. The Erasmus grant is calculated according to a monthly rate (which varies according to destination country) and is set before the beginning of the academic year by each country’s national Erasmus Agency. Every student receives the monthly rate according to the number of months stipulated in his or her Erasmus contract. The Erasmus grant is supposed to cover only some of the transitional and transactional costs of moving abroad, such as travel costs, tuition fees and accommodation. In the school year of 2005/2006, when my fieldwork was conducted, the average amount was 157 € per month. The Erasmus grant is a generous grant, at least in a comparative perspective, as it covers an extended period of time and is free of any major qualifications (there is no paying back, no interest rates, no penalties).

The Erasmus grant is an important motivator for the students. Especially for many students from southern countries, where the threshold for recreational and educational mobility has historically been higher, its role is undeniable. For them the Erasmus Programme, with its lavish educational grant and respectable objectives, represents their only chance of trying out a more independent way of life away from home, where they are otherwise under the close supervision of their parents who pay for both their tuition and their sustenance.

An informant of mine in Stockholm, Nico from Greece, was such a case. In one of our first meetings, in a downtown bar, we had an interesting discussion. Nico was almost euphoric and said, ‘The Erasmus Programme is great! Meeting all these people and seeing different places. It brings people together’. I told him that I agreed and that it was probably also the intention of the architects of the EU. He saw mobility as something definitely worthwhile but hard to achieve, and so the grant offered by the Erasmus Programme was seen by Nico as crucial. ‘It is the only way to increase the mobility of the EU. You can’t just say to people go and live there, not in its initial stages (Benincasa, 1997). In the long run, however, the story can have a much brighter side to it.

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4 Recreational travel is especially important in this regard since it can be seen as a measure, an index if you wish, of the propensity to travel and the pretexts under which it is done (Urry, 2002a). Where recreational travel is not a well-established social habit one can suspect a different sociocultural matrix than that prevalent in many northern European countries. Even in poor or underdeveloped countries there can be plenty of international travel. The critical difference, however, is under which forms and pretexts such mobility takes place. In many such cases travel has the character of forced mobility and such mobility is most of the time surrounded by a basically negative ideology; both because it is accompanied by negative experiences and because of historical traditions (for a discussion of such issues see Clifford, 1994; Bauman, 1998; Cohen, 1997). Thus, for instance, thousands of Greek students are studying abroad but this travel is precipitated by the lack of university seats at home and the tremendous pressure the students are under from their parents to educate themselves and excel; a clear instance of brain-drain migration. Further, these studies abroad (usually a whole undergraduate program) are financed by the parents who have to go to great lengths in order to afford such enormous expenses. Consequently, the students feel a great, and psychologically burdensome, indebtedness towards their parents and the parents assume the rightful privilege to place explicit demands on their sons or daughters. Such travel is not a light-hearted business, at least not in its initial stages (Benincasa, 1997). In the long run, however, the story can have a much brighter side to it.
or go and work there. But if you lure the young with studies and experiences, it happens. They go abroad. I see it as the “founding stone” of the EU’. Like in the Aristotelian worldview, where immobility is the basic condition of nature, he thought that an external force was needed to get people moving; the Galilean worldview of constant motion, admitted more difficult to conceptualise in natural terms, seemed irrelevant.

Reception on the ground

The previous discussion makes it quite clear that the European Commission has had quite specific political goals with its launch of the Erasmus Programme. One can therefore ask whether this ambition to create the European citizen has trickled down to the many workers at ground level—those responsible for the administration of the various educational programs—or if it is just a hegemonic dream of the ruling elite. Is there any bottom-up counterpart to the clever social engineering performed at the high perches of Brussels and Strasbourg? This is a central question for a study such as this. The answer that emerges from my empirical material is affirmative. While in Athens I had several meetings with the chief national coordinator of the Socrates-Erasmus Programme. Sophia, a sharp and hardened official, was crystal clear in her evaluation of the situation. Her well-rehearsed answer is telling. It is also strikingly similar to many modern definitions of cosmopolitanism (cf. Delanty, 2005):

Ioannis: What are, according to your opinion, the aims of the Erasmus Programme?
Sophia: The creation of the European citizen. The creation of the individual who will be able to think outside ethnic boundaries, that will be able to truly think as a citizen of the world, as a citizen of Europe and not within narrow boundaries. However he should always retain his civilization, his culture and his peculiarities as a people but nevertheless manage to adjust to the European unification, adjust to the European situation and not remain within the narrow confines of . . .

Ioannis: Do you think this goal is achieved in any way?
Sophia: It is succeeding, it is succeeding. You see, by now it [the Erasmus Programme] is a force to reckon with. To be able to adjust and live with other people and give the best from his culture and civilisation and receive in return is the meaning of the European citizen.

The ambitions of the European Union, and its local representatives, are also reflected in the promotional material used to inform the students about the merits of the programme. This material usually contains basic information about the programme—for example, how to apply and what benefits to expect—but also, and more importantly, value judgements and moral injunctions couched in a highly persuasive and celebratory language. One even finds allusions to spiritual enlightenment and personal transcendence. Below are some headings taken from three different sources:

- Changing lives, opening minds (accompanied by a photograph of young adults in a moment of cheerful social intercourse)\(^5\)
- Erasmus+ can transform your life and career (text only)\(^6\)
- Erasmus; stand out from the crowd (showing a smiling adolescent looking down from a rooftop and with hair blowing in the wind)\(^7\)

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\(^6\) As above.

\(^7\) Leaflet ‘Stand out from the crowd’. Source: British Council and EU:s Education and Culture Directorate-General (Lifelong Learning Programme).
• Earth belongs to you (showing a picture of a smiling girl holding planet earth in her open palm)

In one of the leaflets one can also read the following promotional text as an answer to the question, ‘Why Erasmus’:

Europe must equip its citizens with the education, skills and creativity that they need in a knowledge society. The world is changing fast, and education systems need to modernize and adapt to new ways of teaching and learning and embrace the new opportunities that exist. Education, training and non-formal youth learning are key to creating jobs and improving Europe's competitiveness. That’s why Erasmus+ will make a key contribution to addressing these challenges.

Not surprisingly, similar ideas are also echoed by the students who partake of the benefits of this ambitious educational programme. They too seem to be aware of the fact that ‘something big’ is going on and that this something ultimately has to do with some sort of transformation in their way of thinking or their lifestyle. Even though their opinions on the matter were not as explicit and well-rehearsed as those of the official quoted above, they were not far off. If pressed to elaborate their views on the matter, they easily articulated a similar opinion. The following quote from an interview shows this nicely. For this student, Franz from Germany, the Erasmus Programme was related to the European integration process and the emergence of a new collective consciousness:

Ioannis: What does it mean for you to be an Erasmus student? Could you describe the experience?
Franz: That’s an interesting question. Well, in the first place, when I chose to have a year abroad or half a year abroad it was not that necessary to be an Erasmus student; for me the motivation was to go abroad. Being here, being part of so many nationalities, so many countries, was really interesting. In a way somehow you developed a kind of identity that makes you part in this whole thing, and that’s really interesting. Since I was also interested in the whole European integration process and stuff like that I really liked the idea of Erasmus.

Ioannis: So you had some interest in the European integration?
Franz: Yes.
Ioannis: Is it academic or more personal and political?
Franz: It’s a mixture of both actually. I was a member of a student union in Germany, a European-wide student organisation called AEGEE, mainly focused on European issues and European integration. We have a lot of conferences and meetings with people all over Europe, not only within the European Union, and in this way we try to find out on which basis the European integration and European identity can be built.

So there seems to be a certain confluence between top-down intentions and grass-roots reception, even though there is an amount of discrepancy as well. The discrepancy, however, is not so much about the principal goal or the direction of change underway but rather more so about its final configuration and public articulation. While the administrators were quite unequivocal regarding the sought-after result—the achievement of the European citizen—the students had a more open-ended forecast of the future to come. They generally thought the programme was about increasing the contacts between people and nations as well as enhancing the prospects of international education.

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Who studies abroad?

The impression that most people have is that the Erasmus Programme has been quite successful in increasing mobility within Europe. This impression is correct. Thus, we learn that the number of students studying abroad with an Erasmus grant (by country of home institution) has steadily increased in Europe since its humble beginnings: from 3,244 in the year 1987/88, to 79,874 in 1996/97, 144,037 in 2004/05, and 270,000 in 2012/2013 (European Commission, 2006b, 2014).

The Erasmus Programme has, no doubt, increased the formal opportunities for students of all socioeconomic backgrounds to travel and study within the European Union. And this is a very important thing, unprecedented in its democratic inclusiveness, massive participation, and economic generosity. But given the fact that the above numbers are still just a fraction of the total student population and that formal opportunities are not always translated into real opportunities it is interesting to ponder what might hinder young people from realising such splendid travel opportunities.

As it turns out, not everyone is equally eligible for international travel, not even within the equitable confines of the Erasmus Programme. Hence, people with a certain personality structure, family history, chronological age and travel experiences tend to have an advantage in achieving international mobility. According to Murphy-Lejeune (2002) this blend of factors makes up every person’s mobility capital. This mobility capital, ceteris paribus, determines the degree and kind of mobility available to different people. Ballatore & Ferede (2013), for example, found that Erasmus students are significantly more likely than sedentary students to have had early travel experiences with their family (see also Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014).

The north-south divide

Maiworm et al (1991: 37), in their early study of the Erasmus Programme, say that ‘students from various southern European countries had less experience of staying in foreign countries’. As for the national origins of these students we learn from the same study that ‘about five percent of the students surveyed were from Denmark, Ireland, Greece and Portugal’ (Maiworm et al. 1991: 20). With the exception of Denmark, whose inclusion in this group is puzzling, this is evidence of the smaller proclivity to travel prevalent in many small countries. It is also an indication that smaller countries, with scarcer organisational resources, might be less able to participate on equal grounds.

Likewise, the travel destinations seem to be skewed in favour of northern European countries. Looking at the flows from home to host countries Maiworm et al (1991: 21) note that ‘46 percent of the students surveyed were exchanged among the United Kingdom, France and Germany, a further 40 percent of the flows between these three countries and the other EC Member States, and 14 percent among the other EC Member States’.

In any case, participation in the Erasmus Programme today seems to be fairly equitable according to my information, with small countries having mostly bridged the gap and sometimes even having an advantage. The fact that these small nations were underrepresented to such a degree might be because in the early years of the program it took a bit more time for small countries to build up the necessary momentum and catch up with the traditional troika of founding nations (Germany-France-England). The threshold for participation for them was therefore higher.

Socioeconomic background

But what about the socioeconomic background of the participating students? Krzaklewska & Krupnik (2006: 10), in their survey of the Erasmus Programme, report that ‘61% of the
respondents described their family’s income as average. 31% described it as above the country’s average. 8% described it as below the country’s average. This information shows that there is a considerable breadth in the backgrounds of the participating students even though the majority of students come from a pretty similar socioeconomic stratum: that of the middle class. Importantly, the number of students with a family income above average is disproportionately large (31%) while the number of students with a family income below average is disquietingly low (8%).

The potentially skewed recruitment to the Erasmus Programme is further underlined by the study of Ballatore & Ferede (2013). Using a multimethod approach and covering France, Italy and the UK they concluded that the Erasmus Programme, although formally open to all eligible students, mostly caters to the needs of people of higher socioeconomic status. A high proportion of the students enrolled in the program come from milieus with above average academic and cultural capital who often use their sojourns abroad in order to signal distinction and privilege.

The importance of a student’s family income should not be overlooked. The Erasmus grant is only enough to cover some basic costs, like for example housing. Most students cannot make it on the Erasmus grant alone and have to rely on their families for supplementary funding; without such supplementary funding there is no possibility of participating in the Erasmus Programme or at any rate to participate ‘successfully’. Juliet, a Slovenian informant of mine, made this clear for me.

Even with the grant from the EU many students wouldn’t make it economically without the help of their parents. Perhaps Swedish students are more independent economically but in Slovenia we are not. However, with the Erasmus we can pretend to be adults, though we are not truly independent.

As the above quote suggests, this problem is unequally distributed across the continent. Simply put, it mainly afflicts the poorer countries of the European Union, those found to the east and south. Students coming from these areas are much more dependent on the benevolence of their parents and relatives. From this follows that the socioeconomic status of the parents is an important, if mostly hidden, selection criterion for the Erasmus Programme (Paunescu, 2008; Ballatore & Ferede, 2013; Van Mol & Michielsen, 2014). At the same time those who do embark are much more accountable for what they do abroad than their northern counterparts. This difference partly ‘colours’ the experience of the participating students (more on this later). Hence, even within the equitable confines of the Erasmus Programme, travelling opportunities seem to be structured according to a systemic logic which affords different degrees of freedom to people from different socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds (cf. Bauman 1998).

**Parental education**

A similar picture emerges when one looks at the level of parental educational attainment. Maiworm et al (1991: 34-35), in their early study of the Erasmus Programme, found that about 35% of the Erasmus students had a father with a higher education degree, while the proportion of parents with at least compulsory education was even higher, on average (for both parents) close to 40 per cent. In a later study the percentage of fathers with higher education sank a bit, coming down to 21% (Maiworm & Teichler, 1996: 11). Similarly, Krzaklewksa & Krupnik (2006: 10-12) found that 45.7% of the students had both parents with an educational attainment above the country average, 51% had both parents with an average educational attainment, while 3.3% had parents with an educational attainment below the country average.

Once again the recent study of Ballatore & Ferede (2013) consolidates this picture of unequal distribution. Like in the case of socioeconomic background, the higher echelons of the
educational attainment scale are overrepresented among the Erasmus students while the lower end is disturbingly small. This accords well with my personal experience; even today it is uncommon to find an Erasmus student that is the son or the daughter of a welder or a peasant.

The issue of social stratification comes to the fore, even more forcefully, if the exchange students are seen in a comparative perspective. If they are juxtaposed against other categories of travelling people, such as refugees or immigrants, new disparities emerge. Exchange students are, in this respect, a migratory elite and have an ‘eccentric’ social position compared to many other categories of travelling people (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Ballatore & Ferede, 2013). Many Erasmus students are not particularly keen to meet and socialise with their compatriots living in the country they are visiting; not even in the cases where they themselves exhibit a strong national sentiment. During my fieldwork I found very few exceptions to this rule.

**Personal and professional commitments**

Another factor that seems to be of importance when it comes to student mobility, beside the socioeconomic and educational factors reviewed above, is how socially settled a person is. This realisation, which is quite unremarkable actually, struck me while comparing the exchange experiences of students with those of teachers. The teacher counterpart of the Erasmus Programme is not as extensive as that for the student population. Much fewer teachers go on an exchange, even though it is much shorter than that for the students, and this has long troubled administrators in various countries. In one of the reports of the International Programme Office for Education and Training (2002)—the Swedish authority responsible for the implementation of the EU’s educational programs—they plainly state the failure to engage enough teachers in educational exchanges. The chief Erasmus official at Stockholm University concurs with the reality of this:

> . . . if we had a better flow on our teacher exchanges; there are actually not enough teachers that travel with the Erasmus Programme, which they have the opportunity to, and it is probably an organizational question coming down to our lack of resources. We need to be many if this program is going to grow. At our university it doesn’t grow. We are too few.

The reasons for this are not difficult to see. Teachers usually have longstanding commitments at home which hinder them in their international mobility. This situation also holds true for a small part of the Erasmus students and showcases the fact that formal rights may not always be translated into actual opportunities. Many students with families or other longstanding commitments probably abstain from studying abroad. Even those who manage to do so can be suspected of living a rather different life than the bulk of the Erasmus students. The ones I met were often less indulgent in their extracurricular life and also made a greater effort to keep contact with their home country, a contact which most other Erasmus students happily neglected. They also experienced more emotional turmoil by being separated from their loved ones at home (partners, children, etc.) than the rest of the group. These differences, though not extreme in any way, were noticed by other students and created subtle but highly consequential divisions within the Erasmus community.

For example, a Turkish doctoral student I met in Athens told me that he missed his wife and that the longing was hard to bear. He added that such separation could create irritation and

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10 Many of these earlier ‘visitors’ have a history as either migrant workers or refugees and this clearly differentiates them from the Erasmus students. They did not come to the country for the same reasons or with the same motivation as the students. And their experiences, emotional as well as intellectual, are substantially different.
jealousy in a relationship. I agreed with him that it was hard to be separated for such a long time. I was actually in a similar, if less dramatic, position. Stories like this, and there are several others, taken together with the lack of mobility among teachers show that there is a kind of age segmentation in academic mobility.

Maiworm et al (1991: 38) corroborate this impression with statistical data. According to them, ‘ten percent of the students lived with a partner immediately before the ERASMUS-supported period abroad, and one percent had children at that time... Altogether, these data suggest that students who live with a partner, as well as students who have children, rarely opt for a study period abroad’. Further both Maiworm et al (1991) and Krzaklewska & Krupnik (2006) report that the average age of the Erasmus students was 23 years. This gives an indirect proof as to the existing long-term commitments of the students; at age 23 the level of commitment is generally very low in most European countries. Thus, it seems as though the Erasmus Programme is mostly geared towards the needs of younger students.

Language barrier

Finally, another obstacle to realising the formal travel opportunities offered by the European Union is the language issue. This acts on many levels. For one thing, the Inter-University Cooperation Programs (ICPs) that formed the spinal cord of the early Erasmus Programme were not equally spread out over all the European languages. Thus, Maiworm et al (1991: 20) state in their study that ‘major host countries of the Erasmus students surveyed were the United Kingdom (30%) and France (26%)’. This concentration has its obvious reasons: a lot of students know the languages of these countries and can thus easily follow classes there.

Because of this imbalance the European Commission ‘pursues a deliberate policy of stimulating the increased involvement of small EC Member States and Member States with less common languages’ (Maiworm et al. 1991: 22). This policy has been quite successful, but it is doubtful whether it can change the basic structure underlying the problem (Papatsiba, 2006). Similarly, the general level of language competency is different in the various countries of the European Union and, therefore, one can suspect that students from countries with a low proficiency in foreign languages will have a higher threshold for participation in the Erasmus Programme; throwing oneself out into Europe is less likely if the only language one possesses is one’s mother tongue. Once again, the separating line seems to coincide with the north-south divide.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter I have looked at the historical background of the Erasmus Programme as well as the institutional framework that has grown around it. I showed that the program was instituted in the late 1980s in order to foster inter-educational cooperation and language training and that it was gradually enlarged as the European Union’s political and educational ambitions grew; first through the Maastricht treaty in 1992 and later with the Bologna process. The foundation of the program, however, has pretty much remained intact and rests on two pillars: the Inter-University Cooperation Programmes (ICPs) and the Erasmus grant.

I then considered the fact that the European Commission, through its educational initiatives, seems to be engaged in the promotion of a new civic mentality, a kind of European consciousness or identity, conducive to the process of European unification. Further, I discussed the various motivations that prompt the students to leave home and study abroad. Among them we find an interest in improving their career prospects and testing their adult skills but also the need to experience adventure and fun. In parallel with this I examined the demographic
background of the students enrolled in the program and found that it is biased in favour of students with higher socioeconomic background and people without familial or professional commitments. Jennifer, the administrator at Södertörn University College, sums it up nicely:

I mean, I think the Erasmus is incredibly important since without this Erasmus grant the majority of students would not be able to afford going abroad as exchanges. Not in Sweden, since we have economic student support, but if one looks to other countries where they perhaps get twenty thousand as an Erasmus grant. Without that amount they would never have been able [to go abroad]. So, for them it is a new world, a gate opening, a chance to see something different and develop. I think that the Erasmus Program, and the others also, are incredibly important for the integration in Europe.

In conclusion, one can say that the Erasmus Programme has opened up a ‘free space’ where the educational and travel motivations of students can find a creative outlet. Studying abroad has until recently been a non-option for many students; an aspiration blocked by economic or cultural shortcomings. This has been especially true, as shown by the statistics above, for people from southern counties which lack a tradition of recreational or educational travel. This has partly changed thanks to the European Union’s student exchange program even though people from lower socioeconomic strata still seem to be underrepresented. Now there is at least a formal opportunity to travel abroad and learn within a European context, an opportunity increasingly seized by the youth of Europe. Thus, the students, like a current of electrons driven by a power differential, have flowed out to fill this newly opened-up ‘space’.
Locality

Now that we have familiarised ourselves with the historical background and institutional framework of the Erasmus Programme, it is time to look closer at how the programme is configured and implemented at the local level, with particular emphasis on Stockholm and Athens, the two field sites around which this study revolves. The reader should keep in mind that the principal interest here is the social situation of the visiting students in the host country and not the situation in their country of origin.

An issue that immediately comes to mind concerns the institutional arrangements available at each university for the reception of the incoming students. There is, in this regard, a large body of literature pointing to significant differences between the north and south of Europe (Herzfeld, 1992; Putnam et al., 1994)—the former being characterised by corporatist welfare states and the latter by clientelist party states—and it is imperative to have a look at these issues as they relate to the present study. Are there any relevant differences between Stockholm University and the Kapodistrian University, the two major national institutions of each city? How do they influence the curricular and extracurricular lives of the Erasmus students? Related to this issue is that of residential accommodation. For many students finding a place to stay is a pivotal task during the first days abroad that dominates many of their concerns and initial activities. How is this issue handled in the two cities of Stockholm and Athens?

It is also important to look at how these circumstances affect the student’s adaptation to their new environment as well as the personal solutions and social relationships they develop. Here, too, there is a vast literature on intercultural learning and adaptation and we have to have a look at some of its predicates and predictions (Dahlén, 1997; Zhou et al., 2008). Do the Erasmus students fare well in the new country, perhaps even developing cosmopolitan discernment, or do they experience discomfort and alienation, perhaps even cultural shock? Are there any significant differences between the two cities in this regard? A related aspect of this exploration is to find out to what degree this process of acclimatisation involves the local inhabitants of the host country. Are the Erasmus students getting in touch with the local population or staying apart from it?

Attempting to elucidate these issues will inevitably also touch upon the question of the nature of culture (Verene, 1970; Geertz, 1973; Wikan, 1999). Is culture a bounded and rigid

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1 Some relevant statistics are in place here. They were gathered by me personally from the respective administrations. At Stockholm University the number of incoming students in the year 2004/05 was 849 (the count is per head; thus students that stay for two semesters are not double counted as is the administrative praxis). The overwhelming majority of these exchange students were Erasmus students. During that academic year the majority of incoming students belonged to the following four national groups, in declining order of magnitude: Germany (164), France (118), Spain (40) and Italy (34). At Södertörn University College the number of incoming students in 2004/05 was around 160.

In the Kapodistrian University of Athens, which is the biggest public university in Athens, the number of incoming students in the year 2001/02 was 170 while in 2002/03 it was 204. In 2005/06 the number had increased to 238 students. Here, too, the overwhelming majority of the exchange students were Erasmus students. During the academic year 2005/06 the majority of incoming students belonged to the following four national groups: Germany (55), France (43), Italy (21), and Spain (16). Most other countries contributed less than ten students. In the Athens School of Economics the number of incoming students in 2003/04 was around 150.

As can be seen from these figures the inflow of exchange students to the two big universities is unequal numerically while the inflow to the small ones is roughly equivalent. The proportion of the participating nationalities, however, is very similar in the two big universities.
entity, linked to a particular locality and group, or is it a flexible repertoire of behaviours and attitudes amenable to creative use as the circumstances call for it? The view that is favoured here, and supported by the findings of this study, is the latter one. Still, this does not negate the need to look into the particular difficulties that regularly accompany travel and relocation and that necessitate more or less painful adaptations. There is also, finally, a need to qualify the discussion according to demographic background variables, as everyone is differentially influenced by the realities of cultural encounters.

The reception of incoming students

Soon after arriving in Sweden, usually sometime in August, it is time for the exchange students to enrol at the university. Usually the large building complexes of the campus manage to handle the many students and their social life relatively easily, thus giving a smooth and unobtrusive character to the constant student traffic in and out of its domains. But not at this time. Enrolment day occasions a large influx of students to the various departments and as a result the Stockholm University campus experiences one of its activity peaks. This is a hectic period with activity buzzing in every corridor and every student office. One’s customary auditory input of the Swedish language is for a couple of days crowded out by a cheerful mixture of languages and dialects from all over the world. Actually, the exchange students are so numerous and so loud that you often get the impression of being on an international airport!

The Introduction Week

Stockholm University goes to great lengths and shows considerable proficiency in welcoming, receiving, and accommodating the incoming students. For this purpose, it has developed a number of bureaucratic structures and procedures to facilitate the process. From what I know, they were in place well before the Erasmus students appeared on the academic scene and were used to take care of another category of students, the foreign students that were visiting Sweden. The centrepiece of this administrative engineering is the Introduction Week. The first time I came in contact with the Introduction Week was almost thirty years ago when I was myself a foreign student at Stockholm University. I revisited it again during my fieldwork. My first impression while sitting there among the approximately 300 students, besides the tense anticipation, was of a massive and well-oiled bureaucratic machinery. Thus, youthful enthusiasm and adventurousness were met with calculation, planning and organisation. The information offered—besides the obligatory welcomes, practical advice and recurring pleasantries—also included a number of explicit instructions and demands placed on the students as to what they should do with regard to their most immediate civic and academic duties. This made me think of what possible reverberations this could have in the minds of the newly arrived students. Although most of them could be assumed to have been partly drilled in the Erasmus Programme’s formal procedures, otherwise none of them would be there, this bureaucratic “fiesta” certainly must have exceeded most of their expectations and experiences back in their local Erasmus offices. Also, since many of them probably arrived well in advance of the first formal gathering, taking the chance to acquaint themselves with the country in a relaxed and carefree manner, living the life of ‘unsupervised tourists’, this return to bureaucracy

2 Here I should mention that other Swedish universities had similar welcoming programmes. Södertörn University College, which I also had a look at, had its own reception programme called Orientation Week. The similarities with the one at Stockholm University were obvious. Actually, the two programmes seemed almost identical on paper.
might for some of them represent a rather disturbing ‘crash landing’ into reality. Such a situation might generate a number of mixed emotions; for example, joy, enthusiasm, fear, and stress.

During this first week all exchange students are given basic information about Sweden and Stockholm University, they are given lists with telephone numbers and email addresses, they are collectively enrolled and offered email accounts, after which they are treated to a guided bus tour, a grand welcome dinner and a walk-the-city quiz. Finally, the administration offers every incoming student a private mentor—in the form of a local Swedish student—to guide and help them through their entire stay in Sweden.

The Introduction Week functions as a rite of passage into the Erasmus experience. Many of the social meetings and activities cleverly engineered during the Introduction Week give a rich social yield not immediately obvious at first glance; especially not through the thick veil of technicalities and formalities that surround this event. Hence, acquaintance groups are formed, joint self-help ventures are undertaken, and an improvised solidarity network is set up. This provision makes the social life of the incoming exchange students, of which the overwhelming majority are Erasmus students, much smoother and helps them throughout the rest of the season. More than that, the Introduction Week also establishes a kind of path dependency when it comes to the friendship choices and group identifications of the students.

This rudimentary life world is important given the fact that loneliness and alienation potentially lurks around the corner of every stay abroad, especially for young and inexperienced travellers (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). The importance of the Introduction Week is illustrated by the experiences of a French student I interviewed. He told me that the fact that he missed parts of the Introduction Week caused him great difficulties in getting to know other Erasmus students. It was as though the ‘doors closed’ and he was left alone on the platform while the ‘Erasmus train’ rolled on. He had not been properly initiated.

Visiting a national shrine

During this Introduction Week I met many of my future informants, two of them being Nico from Greece and Fernando from Italy. Much of the happenings during this week took place in the main university building, a massive functionalist complex built in the 1960s and 1970s called Södra husen (the Southern Houses). In corridor after corridor and classroom after classroom the visiting students had the chance to acquaint themselves with the many facets of the university administration as well as to have their first contacts with the teaching staff. However, the minds behind this ambitious welcoming programme had also planned for some outdoor activities, perhaps so as not to suffocate the enthusiasm of the students in the dull interiors of this modernist building. In one such occasion, organised by the Student Union, the students were to make a trip to IKEA, the all-Swedish icon. Although I do not know the exact reasons behind this choice of destination, I suspect a blend of representative and utilitarian motives. IKEA, being both a national “shrine” and a place to buy home equipment, is a good place to visit for sensation and furniture-seeking exchange students.³

I decided to accompany them. We were going to meet at the main entrance of the Central Station. Upon arrival, I was somewhat surprised to see that a huge crowd of students had almost totally taken over the small square. Actually, they were aware of this ‘takeover’ and seemed to enjoy their exuberance. There was chatting in multiple languages and I mixed into a cheerful collage of appearances. After a while the person in charge (a girl of Asian background working for the Student Union) arrived, stepped up on edge of the fountain, and addressed the crowd. She told us that we were taking the subway to Skärholmen, the suburb where the IKEA department store is located, and she gave us instructions as to where that was and how to get

³ When I conducted my fieldwork, IKEA warehouses were not as common outside Sweden as they are today. Thus, they were more ‘exotic’ for visiting exchange students.
there. Once there we would walk to IKEA. She said that the train was soon to arrive and that we had to hurry. And away we went in a hurry.

Inside the subway cars the international murmur of the exchange students became the lead acoustic motif of the journey. There was a feeling of spontaneity and warmth among us. The ‘positive vibrations’ we sent out were so palpable that our spirit slowly took hold of the whole subway. One could literally see how the other passengers were swept along; some who had been solemn and reserved had big smiles on their faces while others who had been mostly mute started talking to whoever happened to sit beside them.

Eventually I hooked up with Nico, my informant, and another young man from Greece. We talked generally about stuff and tried to make time pass. We had no seats, so we were standing. Close by were three young women from the Baltic countries. Everybody was engaged in discussion or light chatting. While talking to Nico about differences between Greece and Sweden, and how they could be accounted for, he said, ‘the Greek metro is much better, much cleaner, than Stockholm’s’. He wanted to boost his national pride, it seemed. However, he was also critical of Greece and gladly expressed his amazement and wonder over the generally nice and tidy conditions in Sweden.

Upon arrival we went upstairs and out into the fresh air. There we regrouped again under the auspices of the Student Union officials in charge. We started to walk towards IKEA. We were a highly visible crowd walking, almost in ceremonial procession, through the main street of Skärholmen’s commercial centre, on a kind of ‘pilgrimage’ to a Swedish consumerist and national shrine. It felt nice being part of this big crowd; it somehow conferred a feeling of power and pride. We were united in our common status as foreign students but also in a burgeoning sense of community. Many of the students sensed that there were nice days ahead of us, as a group that is, and rejoiced in it.

At some point, a little bit past the shopping centre area, we had to cross a road. There was no real zebra crossing at that spot, so we crossed the road a little inappropriately. Some of the students got into a slight panic over this, as could be seen by their warily oscillating gaze, but still went along with the flow. I commented on this by loudly saying, ‘as a flock of sheep’. This humorously derogatory comment got unexpected support by an Erasmus student next to me as we were crossing the road. This Anglophone said with a grin, ‘They can kill one of us, but not all of us’.

When we reached IKEA, we went straight to the restaurant where we were offered coffee for free. The Student Union representatives and Amanda from the Student Office also encouraged those of us who were hungry to try one of the Swedish dishes available there, especially the all-Swedish meatballs with lingonberry jam. The students entered the restaurant and took over the tables one after the other. I took some coffee and sat by one of the tables. Soon an Australian exchange student came and sat down opposite to me. She immediately started talking to me and we had a friendly chat for several minutes.

After that we were given the freedom to shop at will. Unleashed like an invading army, we went off into our ‘plundering raid’. Although the previous walk somehow conferred the feeling of a large well-formed crowd, once well inside the lofty interiors of IKEA’s department store, we soon started to fragment and dissipate. IKEA ‘swallowed’ us and broke us down into singular visitors anonymously indulging their consumerist urges.

*Enrolment day in Athens*

One of the first things I did upon arriving in Athens was to visit the Kapodistrian University. I went straight to the ‘headquarters’, an impressive neoclassical building beautifying one of Athens’s busiest streets, and I presented myself and my cause to some of the officials; they were sympathetic to my project. The university also had a campus located on the outskirts of
Athens (a suburb called Zografou). This campus was, as it turned out, not a very popular hang-out for students—as is its equivalent in Stockholm—but still a place that students had to visit regularly in order to take their classes. I visited the campus some days later. After meeting some of the university officials I learned that enrollment day was to commence in two days and that it would take place in the headquarters building. I was on track and ready to (en)roll.

On enrollment day I took the bus early in the morning and went downtown. I entered the building and took my seat by some of the students. The whole procedure was taking place in one of the main halls of this palace-like building, a hall which had been turned into an open-office landscape. A number of officials were sitting by their desks and doing what appeared to be rather menial tasks. The officials were occasionally going over to each other’s desks and engaging in some collegial discussion or gossip. Their faces showed traces of anticipation mixed with an authoritative stance. They were biding their time before ‘unleashing the animals’. The students, on the other hand, were located in one of the corners of the hall were a small corridor had been formed with the help of some movable walls. There they were queuing, with marked nervousness, waiting to be called in by the officials. I was standing there as well, engaging in some improvised small talk. When the time was right the officials started to call the students in, one by one.

Suddenly it was my time to go forth. I sat down with the official I had met earlier and, instead of enrolling, talked with her about their reception of incoming students. I also asked her if she had compiled the list of names and contact information of the incoming students that I had requested. I needed that list in order to get an overview of the student inflow as well as to be able to contact students for my interviews and network survey. She was not ready with it yet and said that the ‘contact information’ part was especially hard for her; they did not really have any such information. She told me I would have to wait another week. I thanked her and went back to the group of students. There I talked with some of the girls. We decided to meet outside after enrollment and go for a lunch. During this whole enrollment day I was working incognito; I was, after all, a student myself. Only some days later did I start revealing my true agenda to some of the students.

A few days later I visited the Athens School of Economics, one of the minor universities of Athens. Here I did not have a first-hand experience of the enrollment day but still I managed, through discussions with students and officials, to get a picture of the whole event. In both these universities the reception of the incoming students was really minimal and in most cases consisted of nothing more than enrollment day and a welcoming speech. During enrollment the students were registered, offered a bunch of application forms to fill out and handed a small package of print material for their information. There was no special ceremony during enrollment, no special help with residential accommodation, no practical instructions offered. If students asked for more, they were given some added information, but most of the interactions taking place were generally short and concise. The rest of the term the Erasmus Office was open for a few days per week and students who wanted to could go there to see what was on offer. A Polish student I interviewed expressed his disappointment over this situation:

**Ioannis:** What’s your impression of those two classes and the contact with the university?
**Stephan:** I had some difficulties with registration at the beginning. Hum… I had some problems with people. They didn’t speak English, so I couldn’t communicate in any way.
**Ioannis:** The bureaucrats at the university or…?
**Stephan:** Right. I’ve also had to do a lot of paperwork and they told me to do things in Greek.
**Ioannis:** So you had to do the paperwork in Greek?
**Stephan:** Yes, and of course I couldn’t do that because, you know, I don’t know Greek. And they of course knew about it, because it is obvious.
The preceding discussion points to an important fact. The organisational readiness of the Greek universities to receive and accommodate the incoming flow of Erasmus students in a rational and effective way was very limited. Often it consisted of nothing more than enrolment day. This situation contrasts sharply with the situation in Stockholm. The thorough reception found there, with its well-weighted balance of planning and spontaneity, made the life of the incoming students much easier than it would otherwise be; and it can be hard otherwise (see below). Some of the Greek administrators were quite aware of this situation, as discussions with them revealed. They generally complained of having too few resources and a bad organisation.

The situation was somehow balanced by the fact that two of the universities had voluntary student associations that were engaged in these issues. Actually, it seemed partly as though the university administrators relied on them for the successful accommodation of the incoming students, especially as far as their sociocultural integration was concerned. These voluntary associations did not seem to have any formally established ties with the administration and hardly received any form of economic or material support. Still, as my subsequent research revealed, these voluntary associations performed a vital function despite their apparently marginal status. But even with the addition of these student associations, the difference in contrast to the situation I encountered in Stockholm was substantial. In Athens the administrative procedures surrounding the Erasmus Programme left much to be desired.

Consequently, for most Erasmus students, the first period in Athens was characterised by a sense of urgency and gravity. Since they received almost no concerted help at all they had to manage on their own; and right from the very start. The message was clear: 'swim or sink'. The volunteer student associations mentioned above tried their best to help the distressed students but lacked the necessary economic means to assist them in any substantial way; they could only offer them some advice and consolation.

So, while the exchange students coming to Stockholm had a kind of ‘honeymoon’ during the first period, a phenomenon that probably shaped their retrospective accounts of their stay, their fellow students in Athens had to get to work at once. A number of students therefore told me that their first period in Athens was hard; they were lonely, insecure and/or frustrated. As a result, many were, at least initially, disappointed with their choice of country and university.

The urban setting: comparative exercises

At this point I would like to introduce another comparative dimension. It relates to the character of the two cities in question, and especially that of Athens (Tsoukalas, 2006). As the setting of the Erasmus student’s life, the city has an immediate impact on their experiences and choices. What kind of city is Athens, physically and socially? At the risk of both partiality and oversimplification these are my answers. To begin with it is a much bigger city than Stockholm (and much older, as most Greeks would point out). Its population is roughly three times bigger than Stockholm and consists mostly of ethnic Greeks. In the last couple of decades, however, its ethnic composition has slowly but steadily changed due to a large amount of labour migration. In particular, the Albanian and Chinese contingent of this population influx is worth mentioning as it has had both economic and cultural implications (the Albanians mainly serving as cheap labour and the Chinese as merchants). This migrant population has recently, following the many armed conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, been supplemented with a large influx of war refugees (mainly from Syria).

Athens is also a city built almost without any city plan and thus gives the impression of a big mess. Further, many of the old buildings that beautified the city in the past have either been demolished and replaced by new ones or are left to decay and ruin. Add to this an enormous number of cars and motorbikes, a noisy street life, the lack of green areas, and an asphyxiating level of air pollution and you get the significant contrast with a city such as Stockholm. Athens
is in this respect a very tough city to live in. It takes a very heavy toll on one’s physical and psychological resources.

Another issue is the Greek indifference and suspicion toward the public domain (Herzfeld, 1992). This indifference, and the limits on public solidarity that it creates, is rather widespread in southern Europe (Putnam et al., 1994). This is most visible in the way public affairs are handled. Thus, in the public sector transactions are generally conducted in a spirit of suspicion, indifference and boredom (ibid). The clerks are often uninterested and irritated, and the clients are suspicious and on guard. Many of the clerks seem to resent their work and only bide their time waiting for their coffee break or to go home. Many Erasmus students told me that the first contacts they had with the public authorities—like when trying to get a residence permit or fix their health insurance—were really stressful. Some of them even felt mistreated. Fortunately, most got over it.

A corollary of the above is the relative aesthetic indifference that Greeks seem to have for the maintenance of public spaces. Thus, many public spaces—roads, parks and schools—are often not cared for enough and show clear signs of mistreatment and decay. The most iconic example of this is the National Polytechnic School of Athens, which besides the customary neglect is also subjected to an annual, almost ritualised, vandalising and arson (on the anniversary of the student uprising of 1973; usually by an ‘unidentified’ crowd of leftist protesters). How much a place is neglected seems to be a function of its relative distance from the “inner sanctum” of Greek life, the family. Hence, the interior of a home is tidier than its front yard, which is tidier that the street outside, which is tidier than the park across the street, all the way to the near apocalyptic shambles that can be found in certain public spaces.

This situation makes for a striking contrast to many cities of northern Europe, including Stockholm, which are very orderly and beautified places, and of course this is noticed and contemplated by most students coming to Greece. Once during fieldwork in Athens, I went for a drink with a German girl. We met at Syntagma and went to an outdoor bar. While talking she told me that she found Athens dirty, noisy and messy and the Greeks unfriendly and rude. The university buildings at Zografou she found almost to be a joke. They were run down beyond description. I could not really disagree with her. Getting used to the orderly urban life of northern Europe and then coming to Athens must feel like a hard blow to the head! Athens is aesthetically rough, we concluded.

The importance of this aesthetic discrepancy is strengthened by the fact that it is also noticed by Greek students going abroad for an Erasmus stay. Many Greek students I talked to, in a moment of cultural intimacy, felt slightly embarrassed over the situation in Athens when compared to that of other European cities; the lack of city planning and green areas in particular were sore points. A girl I met in Athens, who had been to France as an Erasmus student, told me that ‘Paris is like a painting. It is wonderful wherever you go, even the suburbs. No comparison to Athens at all; Athens is a mess’.

This reaction is something of a recurring theme in many of the conversations of the Erasmus students, centred on social comparisons as they are, and appears with higher than average frequency and more than ordinary strength (see later chapters). Once a French student told me that she was happy she only took one semester in Greece and not a whole year. Her implication was clear: there was not much to see in Athens. In this connection, however, I suspect that many Erasmus students fall prey to their own prejudices. They have high expectations before departure, only to crash-land in a less than idyllic environment. Modern Athens has very little in common with the idealised wonders of Greco-Roman civilisation and also falls short of the highly advertised summer pleasures to be found elsewhere in Greece (especially the islands). This discrepancy between expectation and experience oftentimes gives rise to disappointment, at least initially.
Actually, I reacted in a similar way myself. At times I could find some traits of the Athenian cityscape attractive, especially since I spent part of my youth there and still had certain nostalgic attachments to it, but most of the time they simply annoyed me. Having lived most of my life in Sweden I had acquired a rather different set of preferences by then and thus tended to resent this immersion in chaos and stress. Every evening when I returned home from my down-town work I was exhausted in body and soul, in a way not similar to my working life in Sweden. This, of course, made me think about the city and its peculiar character. After one week there I decided to buy earplugs!\(^4\) I wore them whenever I had to traverse crowded streets or automobile highways. One of the Norwegian girls in my group had done the same.

Finally, Athens also presents a rougher street life. In many corners of Athens there are hardly any street lights and certain roads and squares are frequented by people with clearly clandestine intentions, such as illegal merchants, drug addicts, prostitutes, and hustlers. Overall, the impression is of imminent danger lurking in the streets of Athens more than anywhere in Stockholm, and even though first impressions can be deceptive, this one is probably true. Many students told me that this situation frightened them and made them think twice before they ventured outside their homes at night. They took a number of precautions when going out, especially the girls, such as avoiding certain streets, taking company or getting a cab if the situation called for it. Even for a relatively big guy like me, certain quarters of Athens were not pleasant to walk through at night-time. Omonia Square—the most central Athenian square—had an especially bad reputation among the students and was generally avoided as much as possible.

Despite this, most students seem to like Athens in the end. Anna, one of the organisers behind the voluntary student association Esperasmus, explained this development thusly: ‘Their first impression of Athens is for some of them negative, and turns gradually into a positive one, due to the fantastic life they have with the other Erasmus students, thereby getting to love Athens, and as for others they like it from the outset’.

The accommodation issue

As mentioned above there are substantial differences in the extent to which the respective university administrations accommodate the incoming students.\(^5\) This variance is most starkly evidenced in the area of student housing. In Stockholm the overwhelming majority of exchange students are offered a place to stay in one of the student residence areas of the city. Most of the students actually received the offer even prior to setting their foot on Swedish soil. This feat is made possible by the cooperation of the Student Office and the Student Housing Programme of Stockholm (SSSB). Every year SSSB puts aside a number of rooms and flats for use in the Erasmus Programme; these rooms cannot be applied for by local students. This provision alone places, to my knowledge, Stockholm University in a league of its own compared to most other universities in Europe. Even though the proportion of incoming students helped by this quota has dwindled in recent years, Stockholm University still makes concerted efforts to accommodate the incoming students residentially. The most striking evidence of this is the

\(^4\) The earplugs were of the ‘intelligent’ type; they just filtered out noise but allowed normal conversation to be audible.

\(^5\) Concerning the issues of administrative support, there is a need for more statistics. Available statistics (e.g., Maniworm et al., 1991; Krzaklewska & Krupnik, 2006) are good in certain respects but do not really suffice in others. The biggest limitation of extant studies is that they are based on subjective estimates by the students themselves; such estimates can be misleading if not counterweighted by more objective measures. It is, after all, not very useful to learn that students in both Germany and Greece were almost equally satisfied with the administrative provisions they were offered. We know that the provisions in the two countries are substantially different! There is an air of artificiality over such results.
building of Solna Cabins, a residential area especially set up to cover the shortage of student rooms precipitated by the sudden increase of incoming students in recent years.

There are a number of student residence areas in Stockholm. During my study I mostly frequented three of them. The first is Lappis, which is the campus area’s own student residence area. Lappis is a pure student accommodation complex with no other inhabitants than students. The second student residence area is Kungshamra. Kungshamra is an integrated part of the suburb of Bergshamra and only one subway stop away from the university. The third, and most peculiar area, is Solna Cabins. In Solna Cabins the students live separated from the surrounding society, in a no-man’s-land between two neighbouring suburbs, near a highway and a couple of factories. The first two areas consist mostly of student dormitories (“corridors” as they are called in Sweden) where ten to twelve persons live in separate rooms but share a large kitchen and a living room. The Solna Cabins area deviates from this standard pattern and has a disposition of its own. It consists of small wooden cabins, each accommodating a single student, and a number of communal cabins used for laundry, socialising and computer use.

In Athens, in contrast, the housing situation was more diversified. There was no prearranged and predetermined type of accommodation to which the Erasmus students were referred. Incoming students had to rely on their own efforts to find a place to stay: using contacts they had from before (perhaps via parents or friends), asking other Erasmus students in the city, using the volunteer student associations and their mailing lists, and contacting private Greek landlords with connections to the university world. Most of these activities were informal and uncertain; there were no guarantees of success.

For this reason the accommodation issue was of the utmost importance in the early stages of the Erasmus sojourn in Greece. Since no one cared to help them find a place to stay, they had to do it themselves. If they failed, they might literally end up sleeping under a bridge. Thus, the whole Erasmus project could be jeopardised by the outcome of this early endeavour. I actually heard stories of several students failing in finding accommodation and being forced to return to their home country. This is what Stephan, an Erasmus student from Poland, had to say:

Ioannis: Did you find a place to stay alone or did they help you?
Stephan: They didn’t, which is a bad thing because finding an accommodation here is a really difficult thing. I mean especially if you come that late. Thankfully there is a mailing list for students coming to Athens, and through that I found someplace to stay.
Ioannis: So they helped you?
Stephan: Well, it is a mailing list with people from different places in Europe. They write and they exchange some data, some information.

Often the students had to exercise considerable ingenuity in order to solve the problems caused by this lack of centralized provisions. An important role in this regard was played by various information technologies, and in particular the use of mailing lists. The majority of messages in these lists were about finding residential accommodation, and not only during the early days but throughout the term (students often had to change residence as well, for a number of reasons ranging from costly rents to being thrown out by the landlord). In their ‘threads’, newly arrived students asked for accommodation, information was shared, roommates were sought out, second hand contracts were offered and so on. Below is a sample of titles from this mailing list:

Re: [erasmus_in_athens] room for rent
Re: [erasmus_in_athens] searching for an accommodation
Re: [erasmus_in_athens] Looking for roommate and flatmate
Re: [erasmus_in_athens] bedroom available
This situation also implied that the residential standard for the Erasmus students, given the lack of central control, could vary considerably. Thus, some students lived in flats, others lived in small houses, some lived alone, others shared quarters, some lived with foreigners, others lived with Greek families, some lived in modern blocks of flats, others in old and half-abandoned blocks, some moved into furnished flats, others just got four walls. Likewise, the rents could vary considerably. This situation meant that, at least residentially speaking, most students got a very individual, one could say unique, experience. There was no standardisation of their residential situation as in the typical student accommodation areas of Stockholm. The only ‘streamlining’ of residential experience I noticed was that most Erasmus students ended up in central Athens. This situation is corroborated by Anna, a former Erasmus student now active in one of the voluntary student associations of Athens (Esperasmus).

Anna: No, no. As I said it is purely on an individual basis. There is no organisation from the university. It is up to them and us. You understand?
Ioannis: Yes, I see. Do they live in particular places, in special student accommodations, or are they dispersed?
Anna: No student accommodations. They are dispersed and that is the biggest problem.
Ioannis: In private flats?
Anna: In private flats, yes. That is the only point where the university has some involvement in the sense that they give them upon arrival a list with available landlords. Without, however, the university having checked to what extent these landlords are trustworthy. Because many times there have arisen problems with landlords from this list. But still this list is totally inadequate. Now, as for the areas, most prefer to stay in the centre or Zografou if their university is up there.

Even though most students managed nicely with their allotted quarters there were also less successful cases of residential accommodation which evidence the shortcomings of this approach. A tragic result of this lack of central planning and regulation is the story of a girl, communicated to me in person, who got electrocuted while switching on the lights of her bathroom. The apartment she had rented, obviously, had substandard electrical equipment. The accident, which thankfully was not lethal, forced her to spend almost a whole night desperately looking for medical care. At the same time she tried to get in contact with the landlord in order to ask him to fix the problem. He was initially defiant and later disappeared, whereupon the girl had to ask for the intervention of the police in order to find a solution.

From an interview with a Swedish Erasmus student to Italy I learned that similar problems were found there. In Rome there was even a student uprising (!) provoked by the difficult living conditions:

Ioannis: But was there no planning, no interest for taking care of the Erasmus students in such a way as to ensure that they gained from the experience?
Martin: No. Because every professor decides himself how his course will be and nobody questions a professor. Nobody! That could only be done by the university’s rector but otherwise nobody dares to, it is a serious matter.
Ioannis: So there were not many opportunities for the Erasmus to influence...
Martin: I can say it squarely. There were no opportunities whatsoever to influence, no channels one could follow to influence anything. The only thing you could do was some kind of strike, as we did in our house.
Ioannis: So you made a strike?!
Martin: Yes, a kind of general uprising because of the terrible maintenance of the house.
Ioannis: So you made a protest, an uprising, because of the bad condition the house was in.
Martin: Well yeah, there were no regular . . . there were protest lists circulating which showed our general discontent with the situation. In the end the rector of the university came and checked the house with his own eyes and of course he saw that it was horrible, with fungus and everything, which nobody knew of.
Ioannis: And the house belonged to the university.
Martin: No, but it was they who administrated it, kind of.
The only example of a residential situation that slightly resembled the situation in Stockholm was a block of flats in central Athens where most of the apartments were occupied by Erasmus students. The landlord, an elderly woman, realised the monetary potential of the incoming Erasmus students and set up a successful business around them, a clear instance of urban gentrification with parallels in other cities (Malet Calvo, 2017). In this house, student life was quite vibrant and reminiscent of the social life in the student dormitories of Stockholm.

For the record I should mention that Greece too has a programme of public student housing. These residential areas are called esties, which means steads, and are usually located in some suburb. These areas are similar, at least in conception, to the residential areas found around Swedish universities. But the differences between them are substantial. These facilities are exclusively provided to students with low parental income and, therefore, most Erasmus students were not allowed to use them. Furthermore, these residential areas are much fewer than in Sweden. For example, the ones operated by EIN, the biggest institutional ‘player’ in this game, accommodated a total number of 7,100 university students.²

Most importantly, however, these residential areas seem to have a marginal position in the public life and collective awareness of the Greeks (including the younger generations). Most students in Greece look down on them as cheap and substandard. Consequently, they either ignore them or actively avoid them and instead seek private solutions to their housing needs. In Sweden, as suggested above, the situation is the opposite. You can hardly be a student in Sweden without having an explicit relationship to these public housing facilities; it is there that most students live, it is there most parties take place, it is from there that collective activities are organised. Living in such facilities is considered both commonplace and advantageous. So despite this formal provision, the Erasmus students of Athens, like their Greek counterparts, were most of the time forced to rely on the private market in order to find a place to stay.

Double fencing

The accommodation issue, thus, plays an important role in the social life of the Erasmus students. Above I enumerated some of the challenges it gave rise to that the students, at least in Greece, had to grapple with. What is intriguing about this situation is that it also had some counterintuitive implications, especially in regard to the issue of contact with local society.

Everyone has heard the proverb that ‘too much care can spoil the child’, and most people know cases where an overzealous and overprotective parent has restricted his child’s life space and learning opportunities despite the best of intentions. How does this relate to our topic? Well, it is my suspicion that Stockholm University, in its attempts to take good care of the visiting students, actually, if unintentionally, hinders them in their integration with the local society. The Student Office, which is in charge of the Erasmus Programme on a central level, together with the Student Union’s two Exchange Coordinators, puts in a large amount of time, energy and money every year for the sole purpose of receiving, welcoming and accommodating the inflow of exchange students. Thus, when they come, they are usually provisioned with all they need and probably more than that. The most visible sign of this generous provision is the fact that a large number of incoming students are offered a furnished room upon arrival. An example is perhaps necessary to illustrate this point. The area of Solna Cabins, an area set up to cover the shortage of student housing in Stockholm, is the most illustrative case.

I visited Solna Cabins several times. The first of them was in the middle of winter when there was half a meter of snow. In order to get there I had to cross a large open field and climb a small slippery hill. On top of the hill lay Solna Cabins, the newest addition to the Erasmus

² EIN is the acronym of Εθνικό Ίδρυμα Νεότητας which means ‘national institute of youth’. For the sake of accuracy I should mention that EIN not only offers housing but also free catering and recreational services to their residents. See http://www.ein.gr.
accommodation programme. It consisted of small individual cabins—each housing a single student—as well as a number of communal areas; for example, an internet room, a TV cabin, and laundry facilities. Standing there, with my feet deeply submerged in the cold wet snow, I realised that this was no ordinary residential area. The kindest denomination I could think of for this place was ‘an international camping site’, and while camping at a Mediterranean seashore may be a pleasant experience, camping in the middle of the arctic winter is a totally different thing.\(^9\) One has to see it with one’s own eyes…

Upon arrival I rushed into one of the open cabins, one of the communal ones, to warm my hypothermic body. As soon as I had recovered from the cold an eerie feeling took hold of me. I could not help feeling like a frontiersman who had just arrived in a no-man’s land (as mentioned previously the cabins are located in a relatively isolated area). What was it like to live there? As it turned out most students did not really mind living there. Perhaps in this stage of their lives their residential living standard was not the most important thing. Besides that, they did not have much of a choice. Also, the character of this area added an extra touch of exoticism to their stay in Sweden, an element that many of them seemed to appreciate. Nonetheless, most of them were aware that these were not ordinary living quarters.\(^10\)

The Swedish accommodation of the incoming students is also interesting from a demographic point of view. The incoming exchange students are all lumped together and placed out in one of three student accommodation areas. The overwhelming majority of people living in these areas are university students. Furthermore, of this student population a large proportion are already foreign students that study (or work) in the country. This blend of people deviates markedly from the distribution of occupations and nationalities found in the rest of the country. For the foreign students visiting the country this means that they only get in touch with a restricted spectrum of the general population, mostly other students and, as often as not, their own compatriots.

This situation has not escaped the notice of some of the administrators involved in taking care of the students. The following excerpt from an interview I had with the Student Union’s exchange coordinator at Stockholm University underscores the point. Before taking on her position as an exchange coordinator, Victoria had herself been an Erasmus student to Italy. This experience gave her a comparative perspective and a dose of healthy self-criticism.

**Ioannis:** In Italy it [the reception of the exchange students] was less organised and you imply that that led to the Erasmus students being more inconspicuous.

**Victoria:** Yes. Well, you notice them anyway but they have to manage on their own to a large extent. So it is a coincidence if you meet the other exchange students, or you meet them in the language courses held in the beginning of the term. But then, for the rest of the term, there are no special activities.

**Ioannis:** So they are a bit more dispersed, perhaps?

**Victoria:** Yes. I can actually say, after a year as an exchange coordinator, that given the lack of special Erasmus parties the students go much more to places with Italians.

**Ioannis:** I thought of it, too. It sounded a little as if the administrative neglect in Italy may result in the Erasmus students ending up in closer contact with the Italian society.

**Victoria:** Yes. I am realising more and more that this exchange coordinator service should actually focus on helping the students in the beginning to get out and get in touch with others in similar situations and later turn more to activities aiming to get the students in touch with

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\(^9\) A girl that answered my questionnaire remarked that there was a ‘summer camp feeling’ over the whole Erasmus experience. She lived in the Solna Cabins area…

\(^10\) Interestingly, Södertörn University College, one of the newly founded universities of the Stockholm region, has opted for a similar residential solution. They too have their own ‘camping place’, this time in the middle of the woods. It does not seem as though they have openly imitated their ‘big brother’ but it is difficult not to suspect some sort of cultural streamlining. The Swedes have a predilection for collective housing solutions in naturalistic environs.
Swedes. So that it doesn’t just end up being ‘Erasmus’. So there is a risk with exchange coordinators.

Ioannis: All right. So there is a risk somewhere in being too well organised, taking care of them too well, since it encapsulates them in a separate world.

Victoria: Yes. I think they have a good time but there are not many Swedes around and they don’t learn any Swedish.

This potential problem has been known for quite some time. Even back in the early days of the Erasmus Programme it was evident that student residential areas were good at promoting contacts with other students but ‘of less help than other types of accommodation in establishing contacts with other host country people’ (Maiworm et al., 1991: 109). In certain cities there have even emerged processes of local gentrification driven by the needs and tastes of the incoming Erasmus students (Malet Calvo, 2017). Murphy-Lejeune (2002: 161, 187) has called this the ‘double fencing’ of exchange students, a phenomenon common to many big university cities:

In any case, the choice they make in terms of residence means that life will take on a different guise for them. Accordingly, between the student community living on an international campus and the broader social community open to those who share their living quarters with natives, the modalities for gaining entry into the social scene through shared activities and social links are quite different and induce rather varied personal experiences.

Murphy-Lejeune’s term ‘double fencing’ suggests something akin to a *ghetto*. Though this term may sound a bit harsh it is, nevertheless, descriptive of the situation. At least in the case of Solna Cabins we may speak of a ghetto. The place is isolated from the rest of the community, the housing facilities are simple and substandard (wooden cabins), and only members of a particular student group live there. Lappis is dangerously close to being a ghetto as well, as it is just an appendix to the university, with hardly any shops or public life and dominated by its foreign contingent. The only ordinary living quarters available to the visiting students is Kungshamra which, although clearly a student residence area, forms a part of Bergshamra, a typical Stockholmian suburb.

In Athens, in contrast, there was no double fencing. The students received no special treatment from the university administration and thus ended up living in fully ordinary Athenian neighbourhoods, for better or worse. This, of course, does not mean that the relative lack of provisions is all well and good. As several students indicated to me, such neglect or forced self-reliance can have negative effects (see note 6). This risk is especially imminent given the fact that Greece is more culturally opaque than Sweden. Most people in Greece still do not speak good English, the native language is radically different from most European ones, bureaucracy is rife, and the welfare state is underdeveloped. It is, therefore, not difficult to imagine problems of acclimatisation for lonely visitors.11

Even though many points in the direction of segregation in the case of Stockholm University, this question can ultimately be ascertained only by a differently designed study; thus, only tentative conclusions can be drawn from the previous discussion. Still, my impression is that what was happening in Athens was more conducive to an integration of the visiting students in the host society than the ‘Swedish model’, in the sense that they were more exposed to the local inhabitants and their culture. In any case, it seems as though ‘accommodation policies regarding foreign students set the framework for the kind of social contacts most likely

11 On the other hand Greece and Athens also have some cultural advantages. For instance, the social and recreational opportunities they offer their visitors are hard to beat for most northern European cities.
to develop’ (Maiworm et al., 1991: 109). Or in the words of the Student Union’s exchange coordinator:

Victoria: Yes, I think so. It is a very different way of life if one compares it with, for example, Italy. There are no student corridors there.
Ioannis: One can also talk of a more forced integration in Italy than here.
Victoria: Yes.
Ioannis: Here you just end up in a special place…
Victoria: …where a lot of exchange students live, especially in Solna [she laughs].

This discussion clearly shows that the Erasmus Programme has some important unintended consequences. Following Robert Merton’s (1936) classification schema we could say that the imperious immediacy of interest shown by Swedish authorities, their eagerness to help, actually promotes the double fencing of the Erasmus students. In the next chapter we will look more closely into what potential consequences this spatial segregation may have vis-à-vis their learning opportunities and social relationships, and how this relates to the cosmopolitanisation process.

Coursework

Although the issue of coursework falls mostly outside the scope of this study, it nevertheless deserves some mention. One such consideration has to do with the motivation of the exchange students and how it influences their academic performance. As discussed in a previous chapter, the Erasmus Programme offers students an opportunity to further their academic education and improve their career prospects. Indeed, this is an initial motive that drives many of the Erasmus students I met during the study. Despite these intentions, however, many Erasmus students seem to consciously relax their educational ambitions while abroad and instead focus more on the social aspects of their visit. Helen, a Greek student that visited Stockholm, was very frank about it: ‘Most of us didn’t go to Sweden for the studies, of course; we went there to have a nice time. And if we could, incidentally, pass our exams that was just a bonus’. There are several possible explanations for this.

One explanation for this outcome could be related to the language of instruction. International studies are today usually conducted in English, the reigning lingua franca of our time. While Stockholm University had a satisfactory supply of courses taught in English, the universities of Athens did not have any instruction in English; the incoming Erasmus students had to follow classes in Greek. There was not any systematic provision for the linguistic needs of the Erasmus students. This lack was a serious obstacle in the pursuit of their studies.

Many students that visited Athens told me that they often skipped class since they could not understand; it was ‘all Greek’ to them. A minority of students, with dictionaries in hand, fought courageously with their books and weekly assignments but it was a losing battle. A few students were lucky in that they fell into the hands of teachers who volunteered to lecture in English. However, this was unusual. It also meant that, when it happened, the foreign students had to be separated from the rest of the student population and given a separate class. Most of the Erasmus students I met had to rely on secondary sources in order to make it through their coursework: they relied on rumours and hearsay, they exchanged lecture notes with each other, they sought out equivalent books in their own language, etc.

Similarly, the Greek teachers who wanted to help the Erasmus students also had to rely on secondary and informal channels. Since there was no central planning and provision they had to devise their own solutions to the problem: they had private consultations with students, they gave them assignments in English (which the Greeks did not receive), they held oral
examinations in English with them instead of the written exams, they gave them separate lectures in English, and so on. These efforts had a heroic touch to them. For example, one teacher told me that he was not paid for the things he did for the Erasmus students, but that he nevertheless felt an obligation to do them. Even so they were often inadequate. Taken together these obstacles made it almost impossible for many Erasmus students to pursue excellence in their exchange studies and instead gave them ‘license to fail’.

Related to the issue of language of instruction is that of language learning. As mentioned earlier, one of the aims of the Erasmus Programme is that students should learn the languages of the EU. Therefore, all Erasmus students are required to attend language training classes. Such language training, though ultimately aiming at the same goal, differs in form and content from country to country and from university to university. Thus, in Sweden it generally had the character of regular classes; the students had Swedish classes once or twice a week. In Greece, on the other hand, it was organised as language training camps located in various regional sites—Epirus, Crete, and so on—where the Erasmus students were sent *en masse* to learn Greek. In these camps they stayed for several weeks before the regular term commenced. These camps seemed to have been a pleasant experience for most students. They were also important as networking hubs; in these camps the students established acquaintances and friendships that often played a significant role in their subsequent stay.

However, though language training is required and provided in both cities, it is not compulsory in the strong sense of the word. As a consequence, many students ignore it or take it very lightly. Not surprisingly, very few students, according to my records, learnt to speak the language of the host country, let alone achieve any proficiency in it. Overall, language training did not seem to add any substantial weight to the workload of the Erasmus students.

Another aspect relates to the relationship of the students with their teachers and supervisors. Due to their exchange status Erasmus students often receive special treatment from the university administration and its teachers (see above). For this reason, it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that Erasmus students are occasionally treated more leniently than the local students. This extra care is probably undergirded by a sense of moral obligation: the exchange students are seen as guests and should be well taken care of. Katrine, a German student in Stockholm, has this to say:

**Katrine:** Erasmus student means *status*. You can come to any place you want and they will always be friendly and nice because you are an Erasmus student. So you get better treatment than other students from the university. Yeah, and it is all easier for you since it’s been organised for you. Yeah, and then you have some kind of group identification because you are all Erasmus students. So there is a group of students from other countries who are also Erasmus students and you have contact with them from the beginning.

**Ioannis:** Ok. You mentioned that it is a bit easier for you because you are Erasmus students. Could you elaborate a little more on that?

**Katrine:** No one expects you to speak Swedish, for example. Whatever person you meet you will be talking English to him, and if you speak Swedish it’s ‘Oh, great’. You need not know the organisational things at the university because you are only here this year and need not know.

**Ioannis:** Ok, so you have it a bit more served up for you.

**Katrine:** Yes… The principle is not to be very good at studying, because now I am in another country; they don’t expect you to do all the stuff and that can make it an easy time.

Indeed, some students seem to take this fact into consideration when they decide which country to visit. I even heard rumours of ‘shopping for cheap credits’: if a given course is very difficult to pass at home they try to take it abroad. Even though this sounds a bit exaggerated, I believe that prospective Erasmus students get counsel from earlier students as to the difficulty level of
various educational systems before embarking on their trip. Many students told me, for example, that coming to Sweden helped them get easy credits as the study requirements were much lower. Andres, a student from Spain, told me in apparent delight that ‘I have never studied less in my whole my life’, implying that even in kindergarten he had to exert a bigger effort. Obviously, there are differences in national study systems and many students from southern Europe claimed that coming to Sweden resulted in a significant decrease in their workload. Such a decrease in workload is in most cases ‘translated’ into an increase in various leisure activities. However, ‘going south’ as an Erasmus student could also imply a diminished workload, albeit for different reasons. Stephan, a Polish student in Athens, corroborated this view:

**Stephan:** Well, many students come here because they don’t have to do anything, because they can always say they are Erasmus students; it is what happens all the time, and I’ve heard from most of the people I know here, from different countries, that they come here and don’t have to do anything. They either study something different than back home, or they simply don’t have to do anything here.

**Ioannis:** Because they can’t attend the classes, understand the language?

**Stephan:** Right.

On the other hand, I have also heard of students who complained about the difficulties they had in studying abroad. Such a predicament is easily explainable in terms of differences in study requirements, examination systems, and language of instruction. Of course, there is also the general issue of culture shock discussed below. Thus, for example, in Stockholm many students from southern Europe found it difficult to adjust to the constant emphasis on teamwork and the frequent examinations. In Greece the situation was even more problematic as the incoming Erasmus students received almost no organised help in acclimatising to their new environment and the availability of suitable courses in English was very limited. This, of course, makes studying and getting good grades much more difficult.

Apparently studying abroad can influence academic performance in contradictory ways. My impression is, however, that the first situation is more prevalent than the second; being an exchange student seems generally to lead to a reduction in workload. The reason for this is twofold. If the students happen to encounter an ‘easier course’ they will likely excel and get good grades. If, on the other hand, the students experience difficulties—for instance, they encounter a more difficult course or feel alienated by the change of environment—then there is usually not much they can do about it. While studying harder would be the natural thing to do, acclimatisation difficulties hinder most students from doing so. Learning the ropes of a new educational system in a few months is out of reach for most students. Thus, exchange students opt for the only reasonable thing: they study less and devote more of their time to leisure activities.

**Adapting to a new environment**

Although the Erasmus Programme usually turns out to be a positive experience for most students, it is unavoidably also accompanied by a certain degree of confusion and discomfort. Most people residing for an extended period abroad go through a phase of adaptation and various degrees of culture shock (Oberg, 1960; Zhou et al, 2008). Everybody moving to a foreign country has to go through such a phase of ‘landing’ in the new environment, and sometimes even of ‘crash-landing’. This is especially true of young people given their incomplete socialisation. However, as time passes most people adjust themselves to the new situation and either endure or adapt. Slowly, by imitating others and through role
experimentation, the visitors become more and more adept and comfortable in navigating the new sociocultural terrain (Galani-Moutafi, 2001; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). This is an embodied, almost visceral, form of learning and perhaps the most inconspicuous part of the students’ cosmopolitan apprenticeship: the adjustment of their bodies to varied living conditions.

Many of the students I met went through such an adaptation phase. Common reactions during this phase were homesickness, stress and fatigue. In most cases the homesickness is quite mild and only goes as far as the occasional craving for some home country item—music, food, etc.—or the longing for old friends and relatives. One afternoon I visited Juliet, one of my informants. I got to know her through my department, where she was studying, and we soon became friends. In her cabin, while drinking tea, our discussion slipped into this topic. She told me that she had regretted the fact that she had left all her Slovenian CDs at home and only brought foreign music with her. Now, alone in a foreign country, foreign music gave her little consolation and she longed for the music of her home country. The attachment to one’s accustomed ways is not easy to break, after all.

Sometimes, however, homesickness can be quite extreme. In one of the early group activities organised by the Student Office at Stockholm University, I sat with a group of girls from the Baltic countries. After having some typical Erasmus exchanges—where are you from, what do you study, where do you stay, and so on—one of the Estonian girls ‘seized’ me and used me as a ‘father confessor’ to ease her burden. A flood of sincere and emotionally charged reflections poured out of her. She said that she missed her fiancé and family terribly and that she had been crying the whole first month!

The tribulations of adaptation can also be of a more physical character. Culture shock for many students means that they suffer from mood swings or insomnia. Nico, for example, had problems sleeping and complained about the constant Nordic light. He had bought dark curtains in order to stave off this annoying phenomenon but that did not help enough. The strong light still found ways to percolate through his improvised defenses. Perhaps the annoyance was all in his mind; perhaps it was not caused by light at all but, rather, some ineffable measure of cultural alienation. Still, the problem was real enough for him.

For others, culture shock implies that they suffer from malnutrition or digestive problems. One day I met two friends for a coffee. They were both friends of Nico; I actually got to know them through him. Amelia was Greek and Benjamin was German. Amelia told us that she had been feeling dizzy and not feeling well. I asked her if she was eating well and resting enough and suggested that it may be a vitamin deficiency. Amelia replied, ‘My diet has really deteriorated since I came to Sweden’. I told her that for the next several days she should try to eat properly. She replied, ‘I don’t like Swedish food’ and Benjamin took the opportunity to insert, ‘Me neither’. I tried to tell her that she could cook her own food at home but my suggestion was not well received. She answered that she did not like cooking and besides that the raw materials were different in Sweden. She had opted for drinking bottled fruit juices instead.

Finally, there is the issue of language use. For many Erasmus students, living in a foreign linguistic community constituted a psychological strain. This often necessitated a small retreat to some compatriot group where they could ‘rest’ their ears and tongues through some effortless communication in their own language. Most students then ‘rebounded’ and returned to the wider Erasmus community and its English parlance. In more unfortunate cases, though, it could permanently relegate some students to the monolingual environment of their compatriot group. I first became aware of this during the first stages of my fieldwork in Stockholm. During a large downtown gathering of exchange students I stumbled upon Amelia at one point. She was with some other Greek students. She greeted me with a smile and with apparent embarrassment in her voice said to me in Greek ‘We are speaking Greek. We have to talk our language also. All this English and all those Erasmus is tiresome. It drives me crazy!’
At Stockholm University and Södertörn’s University College the administrators responsible for the reception of the exchange students actually prepared for this process. They informed the students about the coming ups and downs and also tailored part of their student counselling according to the expected culture shock. Juliet remembers that they ‘explained how we would feel here. In the beginning everything will be fantastic and then our life will fall down! Because we are frustrated about things in the end’. In this regard the administrators used a well-known theoretical model from the field of intercultural studies to guide and structure their work. The model is the U-curve of intercultural adaptation (Oberg, 1960; Zhou et al., 2008). This curve depicts a broad pattern of adaptive responses, stretching over the whole period abroad, and includes ‘two big ups and one big down’. During the ‘ups’, which occur at the beginning and end of the period, the students usually experience positive emotions like joy, curiosity and euphoria. During the ‘down’ the students are often afflicted by physical discomforts (e.g., fatigue, gastrointestinal upset, tachycardia) and/or psychological problems (e.g., anxiety, loneliness, depression).

The issue of culture shock and adaptive responses, however, is far from uncomplicated. Actually, it is quite controversial and ‘infected’ (for a review see Dahlén, 1997). The main contention is the conception of culture that it implies. Several anthropologists have claimed that the concept of culture is increasingly being used in a deterministic fashion, similar to that of race, which creates an illusion of bounded homogeneity, saturated with stereotypes and generalisations, that serves to distance and divide people from each other (Wikan, 1999). According to Arjun Appadurai (1996: 12):

The noun culture appears to privilege the sort of sharing, agreeing and bounding that flies in the face of the facts of unequal knowledge and the differential prestige of lifestyles, and discourages attention to the worldviews and agencies of those who are marginalized and dominated.

Most importantly, for our purposes, this concept of culture also facilitates the reification and commodification of culture. Many complex cultural processes are thus reduced to simplistic notions and mechanical reactions in the service of particular political and commercial interests. This is most clearly visible in the booming industry of intercultural consultancy and cross-cultural training.

Another concern is that pragmatic change probably has ‘outrun’ the received wisdom of many classical theories of intercultural communication, especially those based on the extensive migrations/diaspora literature. The radical changes of recent decades have rendered many older theories outdated if not obsolete (Dahlén, 1997). This does not imply that all prior theories are to be abandoned—far from it—but it certainly suggests that not all people moving around in the world need to be devastated by cultural shocks. As Zygmunt Bauman (1998) has pointed out, we are all strangers and vagabonds nowadays, if not physically then at least spiritually.

Therefore, the idea that cultural contact necessarily leads to dysphoria and shock may be heavily exaggerated and an artefact of theoretical misconception and commercial interests. In line with this, several investigators have failed to notice any significant culture shock among their subjects. Helena Wulff (1992), for example, who studied Swedish youths in New York only noticed mild instances of homesickness and transient bouts of ‘symbolic ethnicity’ (the performative accentuation of national traits).

However, there is no need to throw out the baby with the bath water. Given the vital importance of culture and language in people’s lives there is little doubt that ‘one’s original home is a potent structure and force and that being uprooted from it is so painful. Real dislocation, the loss of all familiar external and internal parameters, is not glamorous’ (Hoffman, 1999: 50). Murphy-Lejeune (2002), for instance, is a scholar that still upholds the use of this theoretical framework. According to her, moving to a foreign country, or even
visiting one, can be a very upsetting event (unless one is a complete tourist!) and in most cases this intercultural encounter begs for an explanation. Still, she does not completely buy into the standard model of intercultural adaptation and though she does not reject it, she gives it a thorough and critical re-evaluation in light of her new findings. She knows that many of the exchange students she studied did not undergo any radical turmoil and only noticed minor psychological reactions. Thus, she claims that there is no big U-curve but only a number of ‘mini U-curves which reoccur for a while as a gentle wave’, and she also postulates a basic tripartite division of the period abroad (usually of six months) into a euphoric, a tribulation and a constructive phase (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002: 138).

Murphy-Lejeune (2002) also believes that the level of culture shock is critically modulated by a number of intervening variables. She singles out four as the most important. Thus, we learn that the accommodation issue (finding a place to live, with whom one shares quarters) is of crucial importance in conditioning their future adaptation to the new milieu. Likewise, the general conditions of their entrance and immersion into the new country (administrative trouble, health incidents, bad experiences with natives) are also important. A decisive role is also played by various kinds of cultural brokers (mentors, teachers, roommates) who via their interest in foreign people and their self-appointed patronage guide them gently into society. Finally, she also includes the impact of previous experience—a wise choice, as many youngsters are well travelled and a few could even be called compulsive travellers—and this results in a further modification of the model. The destinies of incoming students can, therefore, vary considerably according to their particular ‘allocation’ of the above determining factors. The students with most travel experience, as well as those who are unlucky, usually skip the first (euphoric) phase and only experience moderated versions of the latter two (tribulation and constructive) phases.

The issue of culture shock also seems graded according to socioeconomic background. Hence, it appears that the more well endowed a person is with various forms of capital (e.g., symbolic, cultural) the easier it is for him or her to adapt to new environments and adopt a cosmopolitan outlook (Börjesson, 2005; Ho et al., 2015). In the case of the Erasmus students, several studies have shown that they represent a rather privileged segment of society well suited to accept the challenge of an increasingly transnational and interconnected world (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Ballatore & Ferede, 2013).

Although my study cannot settle this controversy, the Erasmus students I worked with were in many ways representative of this new condition. Even though most of them were too young to be expert travellers or cosmopolitan connoisseurs, they were nevertheless familiar with the expanding cultural landscapes and the intensified interconnectedness brought about by the developments of recent years; through the mediated communications of TV-broadcasting and the internet, if nothing else (Szerszynski & Urry, 2002). Most students I talked with were open-minded and enthusiastic and experienced their newfound situation as a positive challenge. This attitude contributed to making their transition from one country to another easier and smoother.

Midway through the term, for example, Nico had several discussions with me where he showed clear signs of discomfort and pessimism. I then realised that Nico, perhaps for the first time, felt alone and alienated in his role as an Erasmus student. Obviously, the euphoric ‘honeymoon’ with the Erasmus group was over and now brute reality was kicking in with escalating intensity; coursework had to be attended to, credits taken, contacts with the home country rekindled, and so on. This was also the period when the differences between the various Erasmus students—in national origin, study subject, level of ambition, and so on—started to come to the fore. Many students now turned inward—looking after themselves and their work—or retired into small circles of friends, often their compatriots.

This receding of the initial, and partly illusory, appearance of uniformity in the Erasmus group marks the end of their first cycle of community in the new country. It also leads to a weakening of the group’s social cohesion, with bonds of friendship being either weakened or
reconfigured. Social cohesion usually rebounds after a while, but this cannot undo the impact of this emotional recession. For most students this is a rather disturbing period, equal in intensity and revelatory potential to the first enthusiasm of the Erasmus ‘initiation’.

A couple of months later, close to the end of the term, Nico had a second period of tribulation. This time much of the discomfort and pessimism wasoccasioned by the fact that, one by one, his friends and contacts were returning to their home countries, leaving him alone and under-stimulated. He complained that nobody was around to do things with and that he was ‘bored to death’. Like the previous example, this reaction pattern seems to coincide with significant ‘sociological events’ built into the curricular and extracurricular life of the Erasmus students. It is inevitable that the social cohesion of the Erasmus group (or its subgroups) at some point will collapse and this, of course, has a number of negative psychological consequences. After some time in this condition, Nico once again managed to rebound and see the bright side of life. He remembered all the fun he had had and rejoiced in the many friendships he had made—many of which he thought he would keep for life—and decided to finish his Erasmus sojourn by a round of carefree and solitary tourism.

An interesting phenomenon is that many young people experience a similar adaptation phase upon return to their home country. To begin with, they have to make a number of practical readjustments, many of them unpleasant, in order to revert to their former lifestyle. For many students, going back home also implies going back to being economically dependent on their parents; and often living with them. This can be a tough experience after a prolonged stay abroad. However, the most difficult thing to bear is the fact that they have to live with the incomprehension and indifference of their friends and relatives who most of the time just do not understand what they were doing over there and what they went through. This predicament is psychological and moral in character, and hence, more upsetting. This ‘reduction of one’s personhood’, of not being seen for what one has become, can be as painful as the one they experience as strangers in foreign land, not being seen for what they are (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). Juliet, who had high hopes of her Erasmus stay as a potentially transforming experience, was quite wary about her return home. She feared the reaction of her parents.

Juliet: We will see what will happen when we get back. Really. It might be worse.
Ioannis: You might get a shock.
Juliet: We might get a shock. They might not have changed the image of me and act the same as before and so it will be just a disaster.
Ioannis: Yes. But you will have changed a little bit, probably. Become a little bit more independent.
Juliet: Yes. Also you forget the feeling of being together and you don’t feel so much the obligations to your family anymore.
Ioannis: It loosens up the obligations towards your family and kin.
Juliet: Yes, yeah.
Ioannis: You fear that it will be an even worse readjustment?
Juliet: Yeah. Well, I don’t know. But parents also have to change their thinking and image. They also do it; they are not static.
Ioannis: Yeah. I think they change too. Perhaps in another pace.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter we have taken a look at the first contacts of the Erasmus students with their host country. We focused especially on their administrative reception, residential accommodation, and language of instruction, and we looked at how these aspects of the exchange programme...
are configured in our two locales, Stockholm and Athens respectively. As it turns out the situation is quite different in the two countries.

In Stockholm the Erasmus students were met by a centralised and well-oiled administrative machinery, culminating in the Introduction Week. In Athens, on the other hand, the reception was minimal, consisting of scarcely more than enrolment day and complemented by private initiatives and voluntary organisations. In a similar vein the students of Stockholm were offered considerable assistance in finding a place to stay while in Athens the residential situation was harsher and the visiting students had to manage on their own. Finally, Stockholm offered a broad range of courses in English to the incoming Erasmus students, while in Athens the language of instruction for all courses was Greek. This created considerable problems for the students and teachers in Athens who had to come up with ingenious devices and tailor-made solutions in order to pass their course requirements.

Such variability in educational settings is quite natural given the large diversity of countries that constitute the European Union (Byram & Dervin, 2008). A number of factors enter into the picture and influence the way the Erasmus Programme is configured in specific locales: academic institutions, administrative traditions, economic situations and sheer luck. Fortunately, for analytical purposes, this diversity of circumstances seems to crystallise into a rather neat dichotomy between two basic administrative models. Elisabeth Murphy-Lejeune (2002: 167) summarises the situation in the following way:

University traditions seemingly differ radically in Europe between institutions which feel it their responsibility to take care of their students’ social and collective integration and those where such a drive does not exist (Galland, 1995). In the first context, students develop a strong sense of identification with their place of study, which is often also their place of residence as well as the venue for their leisure activities. In the second context, the feeling of affiliation to the university is minimal. Quite obviously, this dimension of university life will have repercussions on the integration of foreign students. For some of them, life on the campus involves more than strict professional aspects and includes experiencing the whole gamut of student social life.

Despite these differences the Erasmus students seemed to thrive in both cities and their experiences moved along similar lines and tropes. Most of the Erasmus students had no trouble adapting to their new environment. For some of them, however, the move to a foreign country was connected to a certain degree of discomfort; homesickness, stress reactions and fatigue were the most common complaints. Despite this it is questionable if we could speak of any true culture shock. Such a statement does not do justice to the complex picture of cultural contact and exploration that is inherent in the Erasmus experience and appears, therefore, as too exaggerated. Given the increasing transnationalism of our time it is also theoretically outdated.

All in all, the Erasmus Programme offers a relatively safe way for the students to familiarise themselves with the host country and its language and culture. During these first weeks, replete with tense anticipation and joyous engagement as they are, important arrangements and acquaintances are made which set the stage for the burgeoning social life of the Erasmus students. During the following months a more elaborate life world will develop bearing the unmistakable marks of the ‘Erasmus spirit’. But what does it mean to be an Erasmus student? What is the emotional impact of such an experience? What forms of sociality, spontaneous or organised, are to be found among the Erasmus students? What kinds of social identity, newly crafted or re-invented, crystallise during the exchange period? We will explore some of these issues in the next chapter.
As soon as the Erasmus students have found a place to stay, they start going about their business. Their new life in the host country is both spontaneously ordered by themselves and planned by the university administration; it is both created de novo and handed down to them by previous generations of exchange students. This way of life, though it has similarities to that of the local students, is also different in important respects.

The current chapter will try to look more closely at this way of life; specifically, its emergent forms, temporal development and intergenerational continuity. A good way to start this discussion is with the realisation that the Erasmus Programme, for many students, represents a first attempt at independent living, away from parental supervision and supporting social institutions. Hence, in order to succeed in their venture, the students need to develop a number of new skills, try out novel social roles, and build supportive social networks. How do they manage on their own? And how does this fledgling mentality colour the Erasmus experience?

In parallel with this personal development, the Erasmus students are also engaged in a profound exploration of ‘otherness’; they have to familiarise themselves with the surrounding environment, the host population, its local culture and spoken language. What do their exploratory ventures look like? To what degree do they come in contact with local society? Also, do they accept the challenge with cosmopolitan ease and discernment or do they resort to the comfort of familiar ways and national stereotypes?

Another question that will occupy us in this chapter is the elucidation of the Erasmus student’s everyday life. After all, even during a short period abroad, some sort of settled life does eventually emerge. What types of activities predominate their day-to-day interactions? What locales ‘attract’ their social life? And what kind of social networks and personal relationships do the Erasmus students rely on?

There are, also, several practices among the Erasmus students that merit a closer inspection. Previous investigators, for instance, have shown that the lives of the Erasmus students are characterised by the centrality of mobility and leisure time activities (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). Looking at the particulars of these practices and how they relate to wider cultural processes of a similar nature—like organised travel or international youth culture (Sansone, 1995; Bauman, 1996; Urry, 2002a)—will help place the Erasmus Programme, and the experiences it engenders, in their proper context.

From a theoretical point of view, the activities and experiences of the Erasmus students touch upon a number of interesting issues. One such issue is the relationship between socialisation and individuation (Fromm, 1942; Weber, 1968; Habermas, 1979). The Erasmus Programme actualises this issue in a highly consequential way: it separates the students from their family, and it separates them from their nation state. Their cosmopolitan apprenticeship opens up a whole universe of personal and social opportunities, as well as dead-ends, which the students have to navigate as best they can. In this liminal state of being, performative and symbolic acts flourish, and this playfulness may lead to a renegotiation and reinterpretation of received wisdoms and national traditions (Simmel, 1950; Turner, 1969; Gans, 1979).

Another theoretical issue, related to the above-mentioned one, is that of group belonging and social identity (Strauss, 1982, 84; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). The special circumstances surrounding the Erasmus students—separation from family, common dwellings, social orchestration—contribute to the creation of cohesive social groups with a distinctive sense of
collective consciousness, akin to that of a subcultural formation (Gelder, 2007). In this process the students seem to retain considerable degrees of freedom and use the availability of new group affiliations, and the role experimentation that goes with them, to ‘craft new selves’ during their stay abroad (Kondo, 1990); selves more suitable to their new predicament. This is most epigrammatically shown in the emergence of new attitudes and representations, among them cosmopolitanism.

The overarching interest in this chapter will be to showcase the various social and cultural processes behind these developments and how they influence the student’s self-understanding as well as their outlook on the world. To the degree that this effort is successful, it will open up a window into the fascinating world of young European travellers, as it appears in the cities of Stockholm and Athens, and probe its potential consequences and ramifications.

The Erasmus experience: a way to adulthood

As discussed in the preceding chapter, studying abroad represents for many young people the first opportunity to live on their own. When I first met Nico, my Greek informant in Stockholm, he had never before lived on his own. During his first days in Stockholm he was therefore very busy. There were important matters to attend to; for example, getting money sent to him by his parents and getting a student and library card. In addition, he had to do all those things which were previously taken care of by his mom and dad: shopping, cooking, laundering, cleaning and paying bills.

Given the scope of this new challenge it is no surprise that many students initially get distressed and scared. Most students manage nicely, however. For Nico the excitement of being in a new country for the first time, as well as being independent from his parents for the first time, was unmistakable and he was full of superlatives about his generous host; he liked Stockholm, he liked Sweden, he liked the people, he liked the educational system, he liked his corridor mates. And he was anxious to get out and capture it all with his new digital camera. I told him he should. It was a wonderful day, not too cold and with a lot of sun, and after taking his leave politely he went out to enjoy his newfound status.

This situation is well known to the many administrators catering to the needs of the incoming Erasmus students. Actually, they cannot help but notice it since many of them are called to function as ‘surrogate parents’ for the slightly bewildered youngsters. Jennifer, the administrator at Södertörn University College, gives a very good description of the situation:

Many of the students that go on exchanges are perhaps 21, 22 or 23 years old, perhaps it is the first time they leave home, the first time mommy is not with them to cook and take care of them, and this makes that many of them . . . I mean they are here to study, yes, but they are also here to discover themselves and live alone and take care of themselves, which implies that they do not always study forty hours every week.

This is a natural development and an inescapable part of growing up and gaining independence from one’s primary caregivers (usually the family). In adolescence the youth is gradually weaned from his dependency on his family and encouraged to become more self-confident and self-sufficient.1 This is usually done with the help of a number of social institutions whose purpose is to coach young people into more independent living. Among them we find such institutions as vocational training, marriage, and military service. Increasingly, at least in the western world, international travel for various purposes has taken up a similar role; for example,

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1 Erich Fromm (1942) called this process *individuation*. Individuation can be seen as the opposite process of socialization, freeing oneself from excessive amounts of social control.
language learning courses and au-pair work. During this training the youth’s circle of social contacts is radically expanded and organised beyond that of the family and its close relatives. The ultimate goal is for the youth to find his place in the society of adults and be able to make a positive contribution. These are the words of a French girl taken from one of my questionnaires:

I have realised that I have sort of grown older here; I am stronger in my personality and I am not troubled anymore by being alone sometimes or solving problems on my own without my parents . . . I think this is a very good thing about an exchange although I was surprised by it.

The Erasmus Programme is part of this wider developmental process. It gives the young students the chance to locate their efforts further away from home, in a more public and international environment. Such a secondary socialization was actually part of the original intention behind the programme (Papatsiba, 2006: 99). Juliet, my Slovenian informant, was well aware of this situation. During a discussion we had she pressed hard on this point:

The Erasmus Programme is a way to become an adult, to be independent from one’s family and immediate surroundings. In Slovenia we are not really independent although we may live apart from our parents. They often support us economically and pay for our studies. So the Erasmus Programme helps us escape from this bondage.

In Sweden she felt for the first time truly free and independent. This delighted her. She had the chance to try out many things that were really out of reach for her when at home (like studying Swedish design) as well as stand on her own feet. However, as the clever girl she was, Juliet also inserted a qualification: ‘but in reality we still are dependent on our parents . . . It’s not very visible that you rely on something. It looks like you are really independent . . . Because you don’t see the parents who actually support you’. As mentioned earlier the EU grant alone is not enough to cover the expenses and costs of a study period abroad. Still, this was the closest she had ever come to the coveted goal of independence. And this partial or illusory independence was all she needed. It was real enough for her, at least in this phase of her life, and seemed strong enough to drive through a number of consequential changes in her life. This keen awareness of ‘interdependency issues’ expressed by Julia was shared by many other Erasmus students.

The expansion of social circles also has psychological consequences for the persons involved. It is like an ‘experimental theatre’ where new masks and roles can be put on and tried out. Membership in new groups and organizations circumscribe and describe the participants in new ways; they uphold a new mirror in which they can catch glimpses of themselves. Thus, following the various new meetings and acquaintances, the person is forced to reconsider his self-image and habitual behaviours. Rapid personal development is usually the result of such lifestyle changes (Wulff, 1992; Galani-Mutafi, 2001). Using the vocabulary of Dorinne Kondo (1990) we could say that through their membership in new groups the students were crafting selves. Jennifer, the Södertörn University College administrator, continues:

Ioannis: What do you think it means for these students to be an Erasmus student or go on an exchange? What does it mean for them personally?
Jennifer: I think that for many this exchange implies a personality development. And that they learn a lot; that is very important. Both academically and for life.
Ioannis: Are they changed by this experience?
Jennifer: Yes, I think you can see that many of them grow. They grow as human beings, they grow mentally; many of them mature considerably.
In this regard, research has pointed to an interesting development in many western, post-industrial countries. Such countries usually require a high level of educational attainment and vocational training for entry into the most lucrative professions (usually information-based) and, therefore, many young people remain in school and refrain from marriage and parenthood well into their mid-twenties. Consequently, the transition from adolescence to adulthood, which in the past was rather well marked and swift, has become increasingly diffuse and prolonged. The psychologist Eric Erikson (1968) was one of the first to observe this trend and gave it the suitable name ‘psychosocial moratorium’, a notion also used by some anthropologists (Wulff, 1992). This concept has many similarities to the concept of liminality proposed by Victor Turner (1969). More recently psychologist Jeffrey Arnett (2000) has called this period in life emerging adulthood and even claimed that it should be seen as a separate developmental stage. According to Arnett (2000: 469):

Emerging adulthood is distinguished by relative independence from social roles and from normative expectations. Having left the dependency of childhood and adolescence, and having not yet entered the enduring responsibilities that are normative in adulthood, emerging adults often explore a variety of possible life directions in love, work, and worldviews. Emerging adulthood is a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life’s possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course.

In my view, the Erasmus Programme epitomises these developments. The Erasmus stay abroad can be seen as a massive psychosocial moratorium which plunges the students into a prolonged period of liminality during which their psychological attitudes and social relations are remodelled and renegotiated. Out of this testing and experimentation emerges a new person, one with a more personally crafted social identity and a more acute sense of his collective rights and responsibilities.

The notion of cosmopolitan apprenticeship can also be related to these developments. It can actually be seen as both an overarching framework that has steadily been growing in the western world and the apex of sociocultural training available to adolescents and young adults. Participation in the Erasmus Programme provides the young students sociocultural training in a transnational environment and prompts them to reflect on issues pertaining to cultural contacts and group relations potentially opening the way to more cosmopolitan conceptions of belonging.

Familiarization with the local environment

One of the first challenges that face the Erasmus students is the need to familiarise themselves with their immediate physical and social surroundings. Part of this process begins at day one. Even upon their arrival at the airport, the youngsters must quickly learn a lot of things, from finding the exit hall and handling the new currency to figuring out which bus leads downtown. The first contact with the university, some days later, is also of an orienting character. Helen, a Greek Erasmus student I met in Stockholm, remembers that during the Introduction Week ‘They showed us the facilities at the university, how to move about. They were very helpful; I can’t complain. But it was within the confines of formality. I mean what else could they have done for us; after all we were not children’.

However, it is not until the students have spent some time in their new quarters, when the fluster of the first weeks has settled and an air of normality arrives, that they venture outside
the limited perimeter of their residential areas to see what is on offer in the new land. Only then do the students go beyond appearances and start a more thorough and personal exploration. Such an act of exploration—perhaps the quintessence of the whole journey—requires a certain amount of composure before it can commence (Simmel, 1950).

For the Erasmus students in Stockholm, the natural starting point of this exploration was the campus area. According to my friend Helen, ‘the common meeting ground was the university. It was there that we met each other, in the sense that all of us went there almost every day, either to read, meet up, or go to class’. The computer rooms, library and coffee houses of the campus area were natural starting points for such activities. The students spent a large part of their waking hours in these three areas.

The campus was not only the scene for their everyday life, but also seemed to have been elevated to a cherished part of their new self-definition; they were proud of it. Of course, local students also frequented the campus, but for them it was not imbued with the same emotional importance since there were also other areas to command their presence and attention, such as homes, neighbourhoods, city centres, and workplaces. Not having such ‘alternative habitats’, the Erasmus students quickly became ‘hooked’ on campus.

Actually, the Erasmus students were aware of this situation, though they were humorous enough to joke about it. One day while sitting with some friends at Café 3:an, the biggest and loudest coffee shop on campus, the discussion slipped into this issue. I took the opportunity to ask Amelia, one of the girls, if she spent much time on campus, apart from attending lectures and seminars. She replied that she was there often. One of the boys inserted, with a slightly ironic tone of voice, that she was there all the time. Amelia smiled and acknowledged that she was there all the time. ‘Some of us don’t really have much to do during the day, so we are here all the time’, she added with a smile, cleverly implicating Nico and Benjamin as well. She said that she often came to campus to have coffee and check her emails. ‘The computer room is our living room’, she added with a peculiar mixture of pride and embarrassment.

The residential areas in particular, functioned as the receptacles of the incoming exchange students and were thus jam-packed with them. A lot of socializing took place there (e.g., in the dormitories) that motivated the students towards various explorative tours. Thus, after some discussion and planning a lone student or perhaps a band of friends would commence on some sort of explorative venture, such as a sight-seeing trip, a search for a discount shop, or a visit to the hospital. According to Murphy-Lejeune (2002: 154) these spaces are organised by the students into a rudimentary cultural geography:

One tendency consists in the organization of places in identifiable zones, the division of large expanses into smaller discrete units centred on a specific familiar location. These are often represented as a series of concentric circles which get larger. In other words, differentiation in sub-spaces appears as a first cognitive step towards familiarization with new spaces.

The ‘concentric circles’ are, according to Murphy-Lejeune (2002), populated by three categories of people: close friends, party partners and acquaintances. These people constitute the ‘brothers in arms’ with the help of whom Erasmus students gradually ‘conquer’ their newfound environment. This process, however, should not be seen as a mere geographical exploration but also as a sociocultural learning experience.

This is a gradual and cautious process for most youngsters. At first the students only know a limited number of areas and people: their residential area, the campus, the city centre, their teachers and some classmates. Soon, however, their curiosity and activity enlarges this domain and helps them—through expanding concentric circles of spatial familiarization—appropriate their surroundings and make themselves comfortable in it. In the words of Murphy-Lejeune (2002: 154):
The discovery of new spaces is then conceived as crossing ‘bridges’. From one known space to another, the ‘bridges’ which are established are often represented by the specific individuals or activities associated with the place. Interestingly, students pick up quite naturally well-known metaphors to translate their experience of strangeness.

To the extent that the students succeed in their social and cultural exploration of this new life space, they will feel at ‘home away from home’. This feeling of familiarity and comfort away from one’s usual habitat is, according to Ulf Hannerz (1990), one of the things that characterise the cosmopolitan outlook. Most students I met, despite their inexperience and young age, took this first step towards a cosmopolitan outlook with relative ease and determination.

In Athens the situation was quite similar from a sociocultural point of view, despite differences in academic organization and urban landscape. Here, too, the students started out from some well-known places and gradually made larger and larger forays into the new environment. Since the University of Athens has no campus in the traditional sense, the exploration usually started from some of the central university buildings or some commercial establishment nearby.

Soon after arrival, then, the Erasmus students start to socially appropriate their new surroundings. During these first explorative ventures the students in both countries made contact with a variable mixture of people. In Stockholm this mixture was clearly dominated by its student contingent while in Athens it also included a sizable portion of local inhabitants. The students showed up in various places in small groups of friends or big rambling bands, and left their distinctive mark in the atmosphere, a mixture of international murmur and juvenile enthusiasm.

The social life of the Erasmus students

The Erasmus students have a very rich social life as evidenced by the multitude of curricular and extracurricular activities they engage in. These activities give them ample opportunity to experiment with various forms of sociality, reconsider their extant loyalties and established commitments and expand the borders of their mutual solidarity and belonging. In what follows I will try to paint a detailed picture of this social life.

The end result of these social activities is the emergence of a distinctive life world (Habermas, 1979). Through the initiative of a few people, in the right time and place, a rudimentary community is formed. This kind of sociality does not require any pre-existing organization or tradition to thrive (though it can use elements of such); it is, rather, self-contained and self-perpetuating. It builds on a pressing need to communicate with and understand each other and leads to a common definition (often re-definition) of a situation conducive to collective action. As my informant Helen put it in our interview, ‘I mean, in the beginning they wanted to declare that ‘we are the Erasmus’, so they organised their own parties and their own gatherings, and these continued afterwards also. But slowly we started to integrate with the wider university life. I mean we wanted contact with the other students at Stockholm University’. As this quote indicates, the special character of life worlds does not preclude contact and cooperation with the surrounding society; such expansion and consolidation is actually an expected development. Its level, however, may vary according to the circumstances (Strauss, 1982, 1984).
Communal Dinners

A typical feature of the social life of the Erasmus students is the many dinners that they organise. These dinners, at least initially, take place in their living quarters or nearby. Soon, however, these dinners are moved further and further out in the perimeter, perhaps visiting some lonely student far removed from the mainstream of exchange students. Later in the term these dinners might even be moved to other towns as the students visit friends and contacts that happen to study in some other university. All this ‘traffic’ means that the students have to traverse physical as well as sociocultural space in search for some relevant locale or meeting place.

Some of the dinners I observed were international—with the occasional presence of local students as well—while others were national. When the gatherings were international they were often characterised by a dual ‘aura’ of reciprocity and competitiveness (cf. Mauss, 1922). Thus, if a national group pulled off a successful dinner, the others wanted to follow suit and outshine them. On these occasions it is very common to serve and consume national dishes, or something resembling national dishes (we must remember that the cooking skills of many students are elementary). This is a way for the students to reaffirm their ethnic identity and feel the pride and joy of belonging.

I participated in several dinners of this kind. One of them was organised by two Finnish girls of our Erasmus group. It was a sweet irony of fate that these two girls happened to live in the same corridor that I myself had lived in fifteen years earlier. Going there for me was, therefore, not a mere professional activity; it was something of a personal ‘pilgrimage’. It was nice to be back. All the sights and smells—many of them neither tidy nor fresh—filled my heart with a bittersweet nostalgia.

When all of us were in place I could clearly see that this was a pure Erasmus gathering. I was the only non-Erasmus there. The group of friends consisted of my two informants Nico (Greece) and Benjamin (Germany), another Greek boy (Peter), two German girls, an Estonian girl as well as the Finnish girls who hosted the dinner. I had brought a cake with me. The Estonian girl had brought some Estonian candies. When the food was ready we paused our pleasant mingling and took our seats at the table. The main course was Karjalanpaisti, a Finnish meat stew served with boiled potatoes, boiled carrots, dark bread and a salad. While we ate, questions were asked about the food and the two Finnish girls gave us a proud presentation; we were eating a culinary ‘heirloom’. For dessert we were offered Finnish pastries and liquorice sweets. Gastronomic comparisons were constantly made between the various nationalities represented. For example, most participants did not seem to appreciate the gustatory qualities of liquorice sweets; a rather common type of sweet here in the northern latitudes.

The atmosphere was very jovial during the dinner. There was continuous chatting and joking and a number of pictures were taken. There was some sort of spontaneous fraternity uniting us all, here in foreign land. At some point, Nico and Peter announced that a Greek dinner would follow suit after the scheduled trip to Norrland (which, by the way, was organised by the Student Union). They wanted to follow the good example of the Finnish girls, and if possible outshine them. He told me it was a matter of national pride, now that all the others were doing national dinners, and asked me if I knew how to cook any Greek dishes. Mousaka and dolmades were on his menu; he thought these were good examples of Greek cuisine. I told him that I would contribute as best I could.

After some hours in the kitchen we were invited to one of the Finnish girls’ room for a more cosy ‘after dinner’ continuation of the event. The room was sparsely equipped but nevertheless had a distinctive sense of décor. There were some frames with girlish motives on

2 While I do not know the exact proportions, it is my impression that the international dinners predominate over the national.
the walls and a decorative vase on the smaller table by the bedside. There we made ourselves comfortable. Some sat on chairs, some on the bed, and some on the floor. Drinks were offered by the girls while we continued our various conversations.

This was a lovely evening. I sensed that the Erasmus students were well on their way to becoming friends. The relaxed and carefree atmosphere was occasionally punctuated by curious forays into each other lives and bold self-disclosing expositions. At some point, while talking about music, Heidi from Germany told us that she did not like CDs but preferred LP records. She actually collected old records. She later went on to tell us that she also played in a band in Germany. We started talking about music and some other students told us their preferences. Some of the girls talked about exchanging discs and cassettes. After some time in the room I thought it was time for me to leave. Peter, the Greek student, was also about to leave. I followed his lead. We went together to the metro. He was going to Lappis to meet a friend and study for an assignment they had. He seemed to be really ambitious about his studies.

As Helena Wulff (1992) showed in her study of Swedish youths in New York, such activities are quite common and have a clearly performative character. During these events the youths put on a mantle of ‘symbolic ethnicity’ which they proudly wear through a series of staged and rehearsed social dramas (cf. Gans, 1979; Turner, 1969, 1988). This implies that they accentuate their national or ethnic heritage, in performance if not in substance, as a means of facilitating initial contact with their compatriots, in a kind of summoning call, and they also distinguish themselves form the locals in their exploratory ventures, in a kind of territorial safeguarding of personal space. This tendency manifests itself in various forms of same nationality gatherings, nostalgic re-enactments of cherished national traditions, dinners where national foods are devoured, and other activities that cultivate a loyalty to one’s former lifestyle. These group tendencies often gather such momentum, at least in the initial stages of adaptation to the foreign land, that they sweep away even the most critical and internationally oriented participants. Suddenly and unwittingly, people who have never celebrated their ethnicity before become champions of patriotic virtue (Galani-Moutafi, 2001; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002).

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3 Over time more elaborate forms of national and/or ethnic organisation develop. This is most clearly visible among people who have opted to become permanent residents in the new country, like for example migrants or refugees, but can also be exhibited by long-term visitors like business people or visiting researchers. Such organisations are often instrumental in the cultivation of the national heritage abroad, taking care of and helping the newly arrived, and serving as focal points around which expatriate life crystallises (Wulff, 1992; Fuglerud, 1999). For newly arrived persons such rudimentary organisations can be very important since they represent one of few ‘safe havens’ where they can experience a semblance of ordinary life.

These activities, however, vary in degree and intensity. Compared to groups of expatriates or migrants, the Erasmus students are rather ‘anemic’ in their organizational efforts. They do not, generally speaking, set up elaborate organisational structures or partake of the activities and benefits of the already extant ones. Their organisational activities are more modest and contingent in nature. They are provided for many of their needs by the hosting university.

Still, even among the Erasmus students there is a form of rudimentary self-organisation and it pretty much fulfills the same psychological and social needs as those of other visitors. A group of exchange students, for example, set up a stylish and informative homepage dedicated to all the inhabitants of Lappis; the residential stronghold of the Erasmus in Stockholm. Every new inhabitant of Lappis can partake of its benefits. This homepage contained general information, a forum, a picture gallery (with the students own pictures), and a small shop with Lappis memorabilia. Its main function seemed to be to offer assistance for new residents and nostalgia for old ones. The website was one big encomium for this residential area. However, it is my impression that this website is not well known to most Erasmus students, as few mention it and even fewer seem to use it. This impression was corroborated by Victoria, the Student Union’s exchange coordinator. In 2019, after sixteen continuous years of operation, the organisers decided to close the page down; its inactive form, though, can still be found at: http://www.lappis.org.

Another way to see this parochialism is as a reassertion of an otherwise slumbering nationalism. Most people are deeply shaped by the traditions and customs of their home country and even in today’s highly interconnected world this influence survives as a kind of ideological undercurrent, what Michael Billig (1995) has called ‘banal
Despite being imbued by a spirit of competition and ethnicity these dinners were, more often than not, constructive social events. By comparing national customs and traits the students were often trying to find a common ground on which to stage their cooperative ventures. Communicating about such issues often took the form of a dialectical process where a postulated thesis (‘we do it this way’) was often countered by an antithesis (‘we do it another way’), only to be followed by a synthesis (‘we could do it in a new way’). Iterated over successive social events, this dialectical process was conducive to increased cosmopolitanism as it helped increase the understanding and coordination between the different national factions.

**Processions through town**

Another example of group action with a clearly exploratory character consists of the many ‘processions’ undertaken by the Erasmus students. Generally, public displays of various kinds (e.g., hanging out on street corners, roaming the streets) are popular among young people and seem to be related both to their need for exploring the city and its geopolitical borders and to the signalling of group belonging and social identity (Hannerz, 1969; Sansone, 1995).

One night we were all invited to a reception by the City Hall of Stockholm. This was almost a month after the Introduction Week so most Erasmus students were well acquainted with each other and had also developed a rudimentary attachment to the group. When the reception was over we all slowly started moving towards the exit. I had at that time hooked up with Nico’s group and we were talking about going downtown to some bar or club where we could spend the rest of the night. Out on the street all the Erasmus students, upwards to one hundred, spontaneously formed a long ‘procession’ slowly moving towards the city centre. The procession was almost half a kilometre long and had an aura of triumphant and joyous exaltation. From my observations of the event and my small talk with several students I got the impression that they were well aware of their numerical strength and their group visibility. They were ‘a people’, united and strong! They walked proudly and with unmistakable collective determination through the cold and empty streets of Stockholm. Somehow this large body of Erasmus students managed, as if by cybernetic ‘magic’, to coordinate itself and decide upon a destination.

After some walking and talking we entered the subway and headed for Medborgarplatsen (a central subway location) to find a pub. The large procession had by now broken up into smaller groups. My group consisted of Amelia (Greece), Nico (Greece), Fernando (Italy) and Benjamin (Germany)—all future informants of mine—as well some Finnish and Baltic girls. After finding a place we took our seats by the bar and on a nearby sofa and started chatting with each other. The atmosphere was relaxed and friendly. We sat there for a couple of hours during which the students socialised intensively. A natural topic of discussion was each other’s background and objectives: what are you studying, where do you come from, how long are you going to stay, and so on. Eventually, though, more personal questions entered the picture. Also, many of the students were excited about being part of the Erasmus Programme and tried to boost their newfound group identity with collective pledges and shouts of jubilation.

Similar socializing patterns were observed in Athens. There, too, it was common for the Erasmus students to congregate in large numbers at some point in central Athens, where most students lived, and walk through town towards some destination, to finally occupy a large portion of some facility or establishment (schoolyard, restaurant, club, etc.). On one such occasion, early on in the semester, I had gotten a message from my informant Martha that a group of Erasmus students were going out for a drink. As soon as the call was over I started nationals’. Well outside their home country, and as a reaction to their temporary estrangement, this banal nationalism tends to reassert itself; in deed if not in principle.
preparing for the occasion—shaving, dressing, and so on—and shortly after I was standing at the bus station waiting for a bus to central Athens.

When I came to the meeting point on a central street of Athens, I greeted everybody and looked for Martha. I found her and went to her corner. There I met some other friends. She told me that we had to wait for some Spanish students who were late. As soon as the last student showed up we started walking towards the bar. We were now a procession of almost fifty people, and very conspicuous. We mingled intensively as we walked, and some students were openly flirting. A cheerful buzz consisting of a mixture of at least a dozen languages radiated outwardly and made the occasional pedestrian turn his head and look. There was tense anticipation on the youngsters’ faces.

After a while we arrived at a square and followed Martha to the proper club. She was a very active and talkative girl and had assumed the responsibility of coordinating us for this nocturnal event. The club she had chosen for us was a fashionable, centrally placed, three-storied club, very nice indeed. It was good that it was big since we were many. We entered cheerfully. Most of us went up to the second floor and spread ourselves around the stylish interiors and trendy furniture. Though there was no dance floor the loudspeakers were on almost full blast. The Erasmus group took up almost the whole floor.

During such processions a kind of social ‘magic’ took place. The enthusiastic spirit of the youngsters helped make the atmosphere pleasant and infuse this heterogeneous assembly of students with a sense of instant communion and collective purpose. They were a fellowship forged in the plight of travel and adventure, inhabiting a new land far away from their habitual life-world. The sentiment, though hard to describe, was highly tangible. A term that immediately comes to mind is Victor Turner’s (1969) *communitas*.

**Partying: non-stop**

What most clearly distinguishes the Erasmus students from the natives is their relationship to leisure time. They take it very seriously. Their way of life is loaded with high amounts of partying and travel, within a limited period of time. The time and energy left over for studying is consequently significantly reduced. This blend of circumstances singles them out from the student and general population of the country. It is not that local students do not like to have a good time, but that their recreational activities are usually embedded in the wider cycles of work and leisure typical of their society, and consequently, they follow a more predictable and low-profile pattern. These safety valves protect them from destabilizing rouses and keep them firmly in place in the confines of their ordinary lives. As a result, local students do not get swept away by their extracurricular activities to the same degree as the Erasmus students. The Erasmus students, having neither safety filters nor ordinary lives, do get swept away.

In Stockholm this recurring, almost institutionalised, partying was naturally centred around the campus area. In Sweden it is customary that the faculties and student unions provide for the social needs of their members and thus organise a number of activities, from movie nights and excursions to dinners and parties. The campus of Stockholm University is also equipped with a number of establishments, such as restaurants, pubs, and coffee houses, which facilitate such activities. Many students, especially those living close by (like in Lappis and Kungshamra), visit these facilities on a regular basis. Many Erasmus students are among them.

The pubs and clubs of the campus area are important for another reason as well. The nightlife of downtown Stockholm is practically inaccessible to a considerable segment of the adult population, including exchange students, due to the prohibitive age limits that many establishments have (young people are not allowed entrance and the face control is strict and often discriminatory); this is a peculiarly Swedish thing that most exchange students find annoying if not outright insulting. To this one could add several other negative factors: the high
entrance fees of many clubs, the expensive alcohol, and the long distances that have to be traversed, often in bad weather, in order to get there. Such an unfortunate conglomeration of factors pushes the students even more into the ‘hands’ of the campus nightlife. At campus nightlife is close by, open, and cheap.

The recreational life of the Erasmus students is both extensive and intensive. Almost all Erasmus students I met were engaged in partying in some way. Partying among the Erasmus includes a variety of activities: partying at the campus facilities, going downtown on the weekends, organizing corridor parties (sometimes including a whole block of flats), going on cruises, having beach parties. Thomas from Ireland was clear about it:

Ioannis: Could you describe student life among the Erasmus or among the exchange students in general?

Thomas: I think the exchange students are a bit more easy-going than a lot of the Swedish students because, well, we are obviously all here to study, but there is a temptation to kind of treat it as being on a kind of a holiday. It’s something new, something different and you meet lots of new people. There are generally parties going on, definitely all through the weekend, and a lot during the week as well. There are always people going out who you can meet up with. I think also the best people have done a lot of their Bachelor’s degrees back home and they only need a few classes here to make it up, and given the way that the Swedish system works—where you are doing one course at a time over a few short weeks—that means there are periods were you do have a lot of time when you have nothing else to do academically. So it does give you a chance to go and visit places and go out a lot.

Allhuset, in particular, plays a central role in this partying. This multipurpose facility is partly turned into a recreational area every Wednesday and Friday night (and on other days if the occasion calls for it). The Wednesday Pub is one of the central organizing principles in the collective life of the Erasmus students of Stockholm University. These pubs/clubs are an institutionalised part of social life at the university and are run on a voluntary basis by the students themselves. Here the students congregate en masse every Wednesday night in order to meet their friends, exchange news and opinions, have a nice time and of course party, drink, and flirt. This pub, which is open to all students of Stockholm University, has practically been ‘kidnapped’ by the exchange students during the last ten years and nowadays the overwhelming majority of its visitors (I would say around seventy percent) are foreign students.

There are also two other pub activities usually taking place on Wednesdays—one at the Yellow Villa (Gula Villan) and the other at the House of Law (Juristernas Hus)—but these are of lesser importance, though appreciated by those who want to avoid the massive ‘meat-market’ of Allhuset. On Fridays and Saturdays there are also pubs/clubs, often bigger and with live band appearances, but these are less often frequented by Erasmus students as many of them prefer to go downtown and get a piece of the real Saturday nightlife of Stockholm.

I had been to Allhuset innumerable times as a student and knew the milieu inside out. Now as a fieldworking researcher I visited it anew. Over time, I became a regular at the Wednesday Pub. In one such visit I got to know a German young man named Simon who later became one of my main informants. He was studying law and was staying in Sweden for a whole year. We started talking over a beer and kept contact throughout the night. He was curious and asked me about my studies—where I lived, my country of origin, and so on. I was equally curious, of course. During the night I also spotted, and had the opportunity to talk with, many other familiar faces in the Erasmus cycle. This was the place to be.

The nights at Allhuset are usually crowned by a massive ‘dance explosion’. Usually around 11 p.m. the big dance floor is opened and all those keen on dancing rush in and go about their business. At this time the drinking and mingling, which previously dominated the social intercourse of the students, gives way to various forms of erotic courtship. The atmosphere is
electrified and pulsating. It is also sweaty and crowded. However, after a couple of hours the dancing slowly loses energy and starts to abate. The students start bidding each other farewell and slowly head towards the coat closet. Some unlucky students, those living far away and forced to travel by train or bus, leave even earlier. Still, an impressive amount of students stay until the end.

An important element in these nocturnal activities is the mating and pair-bond formation that they stimulate. Going out and meeting friends is, for many, often a euphemism for trying to find a sexual liaison. In Allhuset this was in plain sight as many students were openly flirting with and courting members of the opposite sex. In this regard a Spanish contact informed me of an interesting piece of student exchange lore. With his voice clearly tinged by the mixed emotions of excitement and embarrassment, Andres told me that in Spain the Erasmus Programme was actually called ‘Orgasmus’. He went on to explain why it had gotten this peculiar nickname:

If you are a guy and you don’t get a girl here you really have problems. Because Erasmus girls are so easy, so easy. This happens because everyone here is exotic and this calls your attention. Everyone is exotic; it is only once in your life.

The intense recreational activity of the students can be seen as a liminal experience. According to Victor Turner (1969: 96) liminal experiences can transform a gathering of people into a rudimentary social and moral community by revealing, ‘however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalised social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties’. Such profound social bonding is common in many adolescent activities—fuelled by various facilitators such as lack of parental control, alcohol consumption and/or sexual license (Demant & Östergaard, 2007)—and helps explain the very distinctive life worlds that they give rise to (Habermas, 1979). In the case of the Erasmus Programme this life world happens to be populated by a thoroughly multinational assembly of people, a fact that gives it a cosmopolitan feeling.

In this the Erasmus students partake of a larger pattern. Youth culture and leisurely entertainment crossed their paths a long time ago and have today given rise to a number of distinctive cultural ‘genres’ (Frith, 1980; Sansone, 1995; Elsrud, 2001; Urry, 2002a.). One of these many genres, and in all likelihood the first cosmopolitan youth culture to become truly global, is the well-known phenomenon of ‘disco dancing’. In the words of sociologist James Farrer (1999: 480-481):

Global disco, in its mass-culture form, is perhaps more appropriately described as a super-culture rather than a sub-culture. Rather than spaces for identifying with a particular musical culture or sub-culture, large commercial discotheques are spaces where youth experience the larger society beyond their neighborhoods and their family and work lives (Willis 1984: 38), sites for experiencing a glamorous modernity in which one does not distinguish oneself by class or locality. . . . The culture of disco was thus opposed to the formation of exclusive sub-cultural Gemeinschaften, but represented entry into an anonymous and glamorous Gesellschaft of transnational styles and fluid sexualities.

Before leaving this topic it is worth mentioning that, although most students were satisfied by the nightlife at Stockholm University, many were nevertheless struck by what they perceived as its peculiar character. While partying at Allhuset I met two exchange students from Greece, a man and a woman, who went on and told me their opinion about the student life in Stockholm. The man said it was of really ‘low class’. He was amazed about the student parties on the campus. They were so peculiar, a kind of ‘social inbreeding’ that did not exist in Greece. He explained that
in Greece we go downtown to taverns, bars, coffee shops or clubs like normal people; we meet all kinds of other people, old and young, working class or middleclass. Here in Stockholm students only go out with other students and to really low-class places like the Wednesday Pub. What is this? I am shocked. This is really a kind of provincial, childish behaviour; like a stupid, tasteless flock of sheep. Still, we sometimes come here because downtown nightlife isn’t much better. There are really just a few places that have class and besides that you have this system with queues and doormen which is really bothering me. It’s not nice being turned away just because you happen to have dark hair.

**Athens by night**

As suggested by the quote above the partying in Athens took a slightly different form than in Stockholm. Most of it took place in commercial venues with no formal connections to the university. Bars, clubs, restaurants, taverns, coffee shops and the like were all used as platforms where the Erasmus students staged their various social activities. Most of these activities were nocturnal but there were also equivalent meetings during the day like, for example, going for a coffee, having lunch together, going for shopping together, and so forth. Despite this predominance of commercial interests the places frequented were not completely random. In reality, a number of clubs, bars and coffee shops had specialised in the Erasmus students and their social needs. In return, these establishments were usually preferred by the Erasmus students in their activities. For special occasions, though, more exciting nightspots were sought out.

This situation had partly to do with the different organization of the Greek universities. In Greece the universities are not organised on the same corporatist principle as in Sweden. In Sweden a number of interest groups and functions—for example student unions, sports facilities, and travel agencies—are functionally integrated under the auspices of the university. Such encompassing organization does not exist in Greece. This is most clearly evidenced by the lack of a centrally organised social life at the universities. There are fewer social, cultural and entertainment activities carried out under the auspices of the organised academia, whether that is the faculties, departments, or student associations. Students, including exchange students, are left to their own devices and are in the hands of private interests in this respect. The rule is to socialise with the rest of the Athenian population in private or public venues.

However, despite these differences, the extracurricular life of the visiting students was also characterised by the twin themes of partying and travel. As in Sweden these two activities were accompanied by a proportional fall in the level of academic ambition and achievement. Actually, in Greece this fall was exacerbated by the linguistic barrier. It is hard to maintain a high level of ambition and excel in your studies when “it’s all Greek” to you . . . Understandably most students put their academic ambitions to the side and focused on more interesting things.

One night in October a party was planned in a student apartment. I learned about this event during the day while hanging out with some exchange students. Two Spanish girls were going around and informing people of the upcoming event. We all decided to meet up later in a square.

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5 This claim is not built on any careful scrutiny of their academic records, since those were out of reach for me, but more on my first impressions and sound judgment. It must be harder to be academically productive when you party incessantly than when you take it easy and concentrate on your studies. Similarly, this claim rests partly on my informants’ own views. They often claimed to be less meticulous with their studies and more indulgent in their social and nocturnal activities. Actually, this was a recurrent theme in their conversations and something they used to take pride in. It was “cool” to stray away from the curriculum in this way. It was also something that they used as a distinguishing mark to separate themselves from the regular student population. Still, the claim may be misleading. Its correctness can only be shown by further studies.
in the Exarchia district. There the girls would come and fetch us and take us to the flat. I arrived first at the square and had a look around. There were some drug addicts sitting on a bench, a couple of stray dogs chasing each other, and some Greek teenagers playing around. Soon other students joined. I did not know them but still could tell they were exchange students. I was in good company. We all started to talk. Soon the girls also showed up and after some additional talking and mingling they took us to the flat.

Most people had brought along their own drinks and snacks. The Spanish girls had brought cheap red wine and Coca Cola in big quantities which they mixed into a Spanish drink called ‘kalimocho’. They offered us a taste. It was good. We mingled and talked for hours. The people there were mostly Erasmus students but there was also a big contingent of local Greek students. The flat had a big balcony and we spent most of our time there looking over the Athenian skyline and its ‘forest’ of TV antennas. The party did not turn out wild. It was more of a cocktail party.

On other occasions the partying could be more intense. I vividly remember a private party in Athens. The apartment was jam-packed with people but students were still pouring in. In the kitchen there was alcohol available for self-servig while in the living room two loudspeakers stacked on each other played music on full blast. There did not seem to be any specific person hosting the event; it was ‘open day’ and even people from the street found their way in. At some point a group of Spanish people tried to ignite the party. They took on the role of ‘party engines’ trying to get the others on board. The ‘hot latino’ personality was masterfully incarnated by the enthusiastic youngsters. One Spanish guy especially, a short and sturdy lad, was really into this thing. He moved around in the crowd revving people up and making a lot of noise. At some point another boy took out his guitar and started to play to the background of the music coming out of the loudspeakers (but to a different tune). Some other Spanish people joined him in song and hand-clapping in something that resembled Spanish music, perhaps flamenco. After having played Spanish songs for a while they switched to something sounding a little bit more American. Despite being rather crude (there were high amounts of alcohol in circulation) the performance added some new excitement to the party. Some people started on an improvised dance with elements of heavy stomping. The whole apartment started vibrating and the noise reached alarming levels. This was going to be a crazy night.

It goes without saying that sometimes this partying was carried to excess. During the weekdays many of the Erasmus students seemed tired even though they tried to keep an energetic appearance. It was not hard to guess why. Many of them had partied for several nights, often staying up until dawn next day; and that was besides all their daily duties which at least in the beginning of the academic year were not negligible. Thus, exhaustion was always close to the surface and many of them were going on their ‘spare tire’. Actually, several of my informants complained that they really had to get some rest because otherwise they would collapse. And this strain should be added to the occasional discomforts produced by the culture shock mentioned earlier.

**Travel: young vagabonds**

As mentioned previously, travelling makes up a large part of the Erasmus student’s experience. As such it deserves a closer look. Even though it has some peculiarities of its own the travelling of the Erasmus students is, in many ways, a special case of a general trend in the western world, namely that of tourism. While tourism was in the past mostly a preoccupation of the wealthy layers of society its practices and social representations, what John Urry (2002a) called the

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6 This district is the infamous anarchist hang-out of Athens. Despite this notoriety it also houses a number of fashionable night clubs.
‘tourist gaze’, has nowadays trickled down to the working classes as well. Tourism is now a force to reckon with even in the non-western world (Bauman, 1998).

Travelling, like partying, was one of the main organizing principles in the social life of the Erasmus students. This was an activity that was ‘their own’; they did it pretty much on their own and did not share it with other students or locals. This travelling had its own logic and conferred a particular feeling and a unique rhythm to the preoccupations of the students. The spirit was generally joyous. These trips resulted from a particular mix of spontaneity and planning. They were spontaneous in the sense that the students decided them on their own and usually in a rather unpredictable way. The decisions were often made on the fly; in an instant they could be on their way to some destination, sometimes with no more baggage than the clothes they wore. However, some planning was involved as the students constantly discussed travelling even though most such discussions never led to any actual travelling. The process was also iterative: they spent time planning their trips, then they were away for some days, upon return they had to recuperate and do some catch-up studying, and then the process went full cycle and started all over again.

Suddenly some of my informants would vanish from Stockholm and, as if by magic, be hundreds of miles away in places like Copenhagen, Tallinn or Sundborn (a famous Swedish village). I had a hard time keeping track of their location. The Erasmus students took great pride and joy in making small excursions or longer weekend trips to various destinations in Sweden and outside. They were a kind of tourist, though perhaps a bit more discerning and eclectic, and a big part of their energy went into looking up and exploring various places and attractions. A few travelled alone but most of them teamed up in small bands of friends or followed some of the pre-arranged tours that were on regular supply.

This travelling of the Erasmus students can be seen as the last phase, the apogee if you like, in their appropriation of the host country’s cultural geography. As some of these trips take place outside the host country they also have the function of familiarizing the students with the cultural diversity of the European continent and further stimulating their ‘appetite’ for travel and exploration. This creates a ripple effect as their efforts to make a ‘home away from home’ are placed in an ever-expanding context (cf. Hannerz, 2002). This process helps the young students reimagine their place in their world and may even prompt some of them to start seeing themselves as European citizens or even cosmopolitans.

I had the chance to participate in several trips in Sweden. On one of them I went with two friends (both former Erasmus students) on a mini cruise to Finland; a popular journey among many Erasmus students. We went by boat and were away for three days and two nights. These boats were called ‘love boats’ by some Erasmus students since many of the passengers, Swedes as well as tourists, saw them as nothing more than sexual mating grounds, at least so the saying goes. And truly the partying, drinking and dancing on board is intense and thus conducive to such activities. While on board with my friends we were incessantly talking, fooling around and drinking. At night we dressed up and visited the dance floor. There was hardly any sleep involved.

However, more solemn trips were also undertaken. On one such I went with Simon to Sandhamn, an island of the Stockholm archipelago. During the trip we took it easy and spent a lot of time conversing. We had a nice lunch and went swimming in one of the many beautiful bays. After that we had coffee and ice cream. It was a wonderful Swedish summer day. Since the island was also visited by tourists, both from Sweden and abroad, we shared our space and experience with them. Simon and I actually shared company with a group of foreign tourists. At other times, however, socializing with tourists could be more strained. The exchange students tended to see themselves as more eclectic and discerning than the average tourist and thus often resented their ‘degrading’ presence. There was often a latent antagonism between them.
My friend Nico was also travelling a lot. One day while I was drinking coffee with Benjamin, a close friend of his, we had an interesting conversation. I informed him that Nico and Fernando were planning to go to Copenhagen. He reacted by saying, 'It is a little bit bizarre with Nico’s travel plans. First he said he would go to Amsterdam, Munich and Hamburg by train or whatever but now he has changed his mind. Well, anyway, I don’t really understand him. He spends a lot of money on travel, that’s for sure! He saves money all the time in order to be able to travel and sometimes doesn’t even have money left over for a cup of coffee.' I replied, 'He must have been afflicted by the travel bug.' So he doesn’t even afford himself bread and salt. That’s extreme.' Benjamin laughed and continued, 'Yes, not even bread and salt. If I were in his shoes I would travel a bit less and have some money for coffee or lunch. That’s more decent. If you travel less you also have the opportunity to get to know your host better.'

This travelling of the Erasmus students can be quite relentless. Many students go on trips out of sheer group pressure or existential insecurity and later regret it. One day while I was talking to Nico he complained about the fact that nobody wanted to accompany him and that he had to do everything on his own. Then he told me that he had taken a small trip to Estonia. A French student he knew was going there with some friends and she had invited him to join them. Desperate to travel as he was, he joined them. However, he spent most of his time alone on the boat since he did not know them well enough to socialise with them. He went on land and made a small tour through town, also alone. He liked the trip, but was not overly satisfied with the experience. Like many other Erasmus students he had high expectations of fun but this particular trip did not measure up to them.

The constant travelling puts a heavy monetary pressure on the youngsters, a cost that the Erasmus grant does not cover. Thus, many students save money for extended periods—living frugally during the time—or request additional money transfers from their parents in order to afford their rather costly habits. Sometimes this travelling is resented by their parents back home. Even though travelling has become cheaper in many ways, the costs involved are still considerable. One student I knew had travelled on his own for two weeks through Finland and Sweden and spent a total of twelve thousand crowns, which is a substantial sum for a student. After his trip he had to rest, save money and catch up with his studies. He kept a low profile for quite some time after that.

This travelling, though at times extreme, afforded the students practical ‘training’ in intercultural communication and learning. Furthermore, these travels occasioned a fair amount of personal reflection as to the student’s place in the world and the world’s place in their life. Given that most students reported positive experiences from their travels it is reasonable to assume that some of them may have acquired a more cosmopolitan outlook on the world, or at least started on a course of cosmopolitan apprenticeship. In this, the Erasmus students are part of a wider cultural process. In the words of Ulf Hannerz (2005: 207):

There would seem to be good reason to believe that in the contemporary period, the social bases of cosmopolitanism are expanding. A larger and more varied set of people in the world have important cross-border involvements and experiences of cultural diversity. Even though mobility, again, is perhaps not a sufficient condition for cosmopolitan attitudes, it may matter that labor migration, tourism, backpacking, pilgrimages and student exchanges take people out of their local habitats.

One way to conceptualise the influence of travelling is to see it as a kind of ritual process that marks out groups of persons in relation to the wider community and ascribes them with particular psychological attributes and social status. According to this view, vacations or

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7 I actually borrowed the term ‘travel bug’ form Murphy-Lejeune (2002: 56).
educational travels can be seen as modern equivalents of the annual festivals and pilgrimages of traditional and archaic societies. These travels lift people out of their ordinary preoccupations, freeing them from social roles and habits of thought, and give them the freedom, if ever so briefly, to reimagine and refashion their lives according to more creative and personal lines (Stronza, 2001; Wallace, 2005). In doing so, tourism ushers its participants into a liminal time/space and can even create an ‘antistructure’, a socially prescribed but potentially transformative escape from the shackles of social structure (Turner, 1969).

A related aspect, drawing on Emile Durkeim’s (1895) concept of collective representations, is that travels helps to build and maintain important social representations. Through the collective reverence to touristic ‘totems’ and the performance of collective ‘pilgrimages’, travel puts the spotlight on select areas of social life and endows group members with a unifying set of symbols (e.g., guidebooks, landmarks, souvenirs). In doing so, it strengthens the ties between society’s members, potentially leading to the emergence of a civic mentality and forms of political action. A good case in point is the way ecotourism has managed to mobilise consumer support and public opinion in the refashioning of leisure activities in a more environmentally sustainable way (McGehee, 2001; Stronza, 2001; Wallace, 2005).

The Erasmus Programme ties in with both of these theoretical perspectives on travel. On the one hand, it has many of the traits of a liminal experience, something which gives it both a communitarian and emancipatory character while on the other hand it produces a rich yield of representations related to transnationality and cultural encounters. Further, both of these processes seem to work in tandem in fostering a common European identity and refashioning the historical representation of Europe (a continent of divisive and war-mongering nation-states) into a more cosmopolitan one.

**Commercial interests**

The Erasmus students have a genuine interest in travel. What could be more natural for young people, full of energy and spontaneity, than to travel around and see the world with their own eyes? This spontaneity and will to see the world, however, is also commercially exploited by organised travel agencies. I first became aware of this aspect of their social life via the Student Union and its two exchange coordinators. I had asked them to put me on their mailing lists and sign me up for their newsletter. As a result of this connection I became the recipient of the same information as that going out to the exchange students. But what I got was not just well-intentioned information. I was also flooded by emails and newscasts announcing or advertising various travelling activities. This electronic petty trading surprised me. What was this all about?

Quickly I began to see the outlines of a commercial system. On one side there was the strong drive of the youngsters to travel and on the other a travel industry more than willing to take advantage of them. The Student Union’s exchange coordinators, functioning as catalysts, put these parts into contact and helped make business possible. Every week there were calls for excursions, plans for weekend trips, alluring offers from travel agencies for cruises in the Baltic Sea, retailing of unused tickets and other travel related advertising. Because of this deluge of travel communications the other topics relayed via the Student Union were almost drowned out. I would dare say that around sixty percent of the communications contained in this mailing list, which is supposed to offer all-round assistance and service to the visiting students, was about travel in one way or other. This is a very interesting difference from the email traffic I encountered in Athens (see previous discussion). Here is a sample of subject lines from my email archive:

- Re: University of Helsinki SAILING trip + Krakow.
- Re: to all Uppsala travellers
It seems that somehow commercial interests had managed to develop joint interests with the Student Union and the Student Office and entered into a kind of symbiotic relationship with them. The Student Union not only did not mind this but seemed to gladly cooperate and contribute. To my knowledge there were no open financial transactions between them, only the silent complicity of cooperation, but the relationship still allowed the covert commoditization of the students’ travel activities. No doubt it also accentuated the young students’ curiosity and wanderlust.

This commercial involvement also had another implication. It had a coordinating effect on the life of the Erasmus students. These travel agencies promulgated a number of social representations—like having fun, seeing places, experiencing love—and invited the Erasmus students to join their cause. The Erasmus students, in turn, were more than willing to unite under the auspices of any cause provided as long as it was fun. As a result, a well-organised circuit of student travellers emerged over Sweden and the Baltic, moving around considerable numbers of exchange students. This situation reminded me of Viviana Zelizer’s (1999: 198) claim that ‘In an age of diversity, it seems, commonality can be found only at the mall’. Consuming travel experiences united the otherwise heterogeneous Erasmus students in a common endeavour.

The situation also reminded me of the fact that Sweden has a pretty long history as a touristic nation and that Swedes generally like to travel. Travel is a highly valued social good for the Swedes. Perhaps this was an attempt to treat the student visitors the same; an act of generosity. This treat also had some pedagogical undercurrents. In the act of being treated to the best opportunities available the visiting students were also instructed by their hosts about the virtues of travel, if ever so covertly.

In Athens, too, the Erasmus students were keen on travelling around the country and experiencing its history and culture, and living the adventure of travelling in foreign lands. Still, as far as I could see the incidence of travel was more modest than in Sweden. This may have to do with a number of factors. For one thing, Greeks have only comparatively recently discovered the pleasures of international tourism. Thus, travelling is not surrounded with the same positive ‘mythology’ as in more classic touristic nations (touristic in the sense of systematically sending out travellers that is). Besides that, studies in Greece are generally considered a very serious business, at least that is the official ideology (Benincasa, 1997). As such, studies are not supposed to be accompanied by pleasanties like travels or parties; at least not during the regular semester.

Another factor that may have moderated the urge to travel is the fact that in Greece the students were not as systematically targeted by direct commercials from various travel agencies. In Stockholm the good organization of the university was ‘infiltrated’ by the interests of middle range travel agencies and used to shower the students with advertisements and summoning calls. In Athens most of the emails that were sent out from the various independent student associations or that were to be found on student mailing lists were not about travel. Travel was not an important theme at all in these communications. The most common emails were about finding residential accommodation.

Even in Athens, however, some travel agencies seemed to specialise in the student population. Their fanciful adverts could be seen on the billboards of most university areas and they even sometimes organised on-site sales of travel packages (the ones I witnessed, believe it or not, were about winter sport resorts). However, these agencies did not seem to specialise in
the Erasmus students but were more interested in the Greek student population. The Erasmus students that I talked to were not even aware of their presence.

In Athens most of the trips and excursions of the Erasmus students, as far I could see, were undertaken within the country and did not extend to neighbouring countries or more faraway destinations. They travelled to the Greek islands or made excursions to Thessalonica or to Mount Olympus. In Stockholm I would say that at least half the trips were to the neighbouring Scandinavian and Baltic countries. Actually, the norm was that that in Stockholm you ‘failed’ as an Erasmus if you did not manage to visit Copenhagen or Riga. This was not so in Greece. Not making it to Istanbul or Sophia was not important at all. This difference probably had to do with the fact that in Greece international travel is still a bit more expensive than in Sweden; it is also not tailored to the needs of the younger generation the way it is in Sweden. This makes it both less attractive and affordable.

New friendships

As suggested by the previous sections, Erasmus students are eager to make friends. Their liminal status fuels their curiosity and playfulness while their existential precariousness feeds their need for social reassurance. This combination of motives provides the necessary impetus to meet people from other countries and get acquainted. In comparison to the local student population, Erasmus students generally exhibited higher degrees of social cohesion and solidarity in their various preoccupations. Local students can always resort to the comforts of their private lives—families, relatives, old friends and so on—and thus avoid opening up to each other. Not so with exchange students. Even if the Erasmus students started out as a group of strangers, for example on their way to some night club, they usually ended up as a warm fellowship of friends.

This finding is well in line with research on friendship relationships. According to Dorothy Jerrome (1984: 698) friendship is a voluntary relationship that flourishes, and assumes special importance, in conditions of relative rolelessness. Even though this influential rendition has been criticised for being overly ‘romantic’ and not giving due credit to structural and cultural forces (see Amit-Talai, 1995) it is, nonetheless, very apt for the case of the Erasmus students. The life of the Erasmus students is, indeed, characterised by a high level of rolelessness and liminality.

There were even relationships that developed into long-term transnational commitments. The experience of Amelia from Greece and Benjamin from Germany is a case in point. They met while being Erasmus students in Stockholm and quickly became friends. After the end of the programme they visited each other in their respective home countries and eventually became romantically involved. A few years after my fieldwork they visited Stockholm again, during a rainy autumn, and upon arrival they gave me a call. With my umbrella in hand I hurried away to meet them after work. There were warm greetings, and many hugs, as well as some half-embarrassed smiles. As it turned out, Amelia and Benjamin had married, Amelia had moved to Germany, and they were now expecting their first child. During our cheerful reminiscing the Erasmus Programme, with all it meant and all it offered, was the natural backdrop to our conversation. However, while talking to them this time I sensed a genuine shift in their beliefs and attitudes. Their previous, more stereotypic, views of national culture had changed into a deeper understanding of the intricacies of cultural complexity and international relations. Their personal history, illustrating in vivo the acquired virtues of cross-cultural communication and peaceful cohabitation, was also a highly tangible proof of the ongoing Europeanization process.

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8 This definition makes me, inadvertently, think of Talcott Parsons’s (1942) description of the stage of adolescence as the ‘roleless role’.
Friends on visit

Another aspect of Erasmus sociality was that the students often had visitors from other countries. The most common case was that their parents or siblings visited them for a time. It was also common to get visits from girlfriends and boyfriends. These visits were so common in the Erasmus circuit that they substantially affected its whole life cycle. Although basically a private matter, the fact that there were so many students simultaneously receiving guests made it a public matter as well. These visits necessitated a number of changes in the lives of the Erasmus students. Generally, during that period the students retreated from many of their usual activities—studies, partying, hanging out on campus—and spent most of their time taking care of their guests. This usually included arranging some sort of accommodation for the guests, feeding them, taking them on guided tours, and the like.

One night the Scandinavian group I belonged to was going out to a ‘skyladiko club’ (a kind of hard-core bouzouki club). We all gathered in the home of Marit and Hilde. The two Norwegian girls’ home had become something of our preferred hang-out by then. I arrived in time and was met by the girls. There was wine on offer and I immediately poured a glass before taking a seat in the girl’s living room. Soon Martha arrived with her guests. She had two friends of hers on visit. They had come to Athens for the weekend. We all started talking and mingling in a relaxed atmosphere. One of her friends was from Croatia but studying as a foreign student in Göteborg. The other friend was from Sweden and had her boyfriend with her, who was French. This was really a multinational group of friends, with Martha herself being half Swedish and half Greek. During the following discussions it turned out that these four people had known each other for a long time and had travelled together extensively. Martha and her two friends had been to Australia as exchange students together and had visited France as well for some reason. They were a cosmopolitan band of friends.

Another interesting feature of this practice was that a number of students seemed to be slightly annoyed and even threatened by the inflow of visitors, whether that be a visiting partner or some family member. They often complained about the visits and openly ventilated scenarios of how to avoid them. This was a clear instance of cultural intimacy: the self-humbling and ironical expression of aspects of social identity which could invite the scorn of outsiders, but that nevertheless provided insiders with a sense of pride, understanding and self-reflexive reassurance. By identifying personal with cultural privacy cultural intimacy creates ‘spaces for the acceptable display of emotion and for release from formal social constraints’ (Herzfeld, 2005: 90).

One day I went to lunch with Nico and a Swiss friend of his, Pierre. At some point Pierre got a text message which seemed to freak him out; it was as if he had seen a ghost. He uttered some confused sounds and looked at us with vacant eyes. We asked him what the matter was. He told us that he had gotten a message from his mother that told him that she was on her way to Sweden, today, and that he should go and fetch her from the airport. She was to land in just two hours. He was really shocked. We laughed and started joking with him. I told him that he should hurry to the airport if he wanted to be there in time. Nico told him that he should go home first and take down all the posters with naked girls that adorned his student room. He did not seem to appreciate our jokes; actually, he seemed genuinely distressed. He ‘fought’ back the idea and boldly claimed that he had no intention of spending his weekend with his mother. He was actually semi-serious about it and his tone of voice evidenced a heavy arrogance on his side; he resented his mother’s presence and saw her as a nuisance. At some point both me and Nico became a little bit annoyed by his rather spoiled attitude. Nico started telling him that in Greece most students live with their parents for quite some time and many find that quite pleasant. I concurred. Still, most of our comments fell on deaf ears. Pierre was totally encapsulated in his resistance to the visit.
I could partly understand him. The shock of an unexpected guest can be tough on everyone. At some point we shifted gears and tried to comfort him. We said that it might be quite nice having her around for the weekend, that there was a bright side to everything. I told him, jokingly, that he could let her clean and cook for him and Nico jumped in and added that ‘if it was my mother the first thing she would do irrespective of anything would be to go to the supermarket and come back with two bags full of grocery and household stuff’. Pierre somehow lit up and said ‘Maybe I might get her to buy me the jacket I want’.

According to my experience, there are two main reasons for the student’s reaction: the very strong social cohesion of the Erasmus group and their exuberant way of life. The social cohesion among the Erasmus students reaches extraordinary levels and thus has an almost addictive quality on the student’s mentality. This makes any external disturbance of it feel like an unwelcome break. Thus, the parents or partners on visit constitute a kind of destabilizing ‘abstinence’ which can be quite hard to bear. They take the student away from the warm bosom of the Erasmus community and interrupt the rhythm of daily activities. This does not mean that the students do not want to have visits; it only implies that such visits stir up mixed emotions.

Similarly, the exuberant lifestyle of the Erasmus students—constant partying, travelling, excessive drinking—is probably something that the students would like to keep to themselves. Sharing it with parents or partners may not always be a good idea. For long periods the students live in a kind of secure ‘enclave’ where they do not have to share their special lifestyle and its secrets with any outside people. Andres, a Spanish student who visited Stockholm, put his finger on a particular aspect of this phenomenon, the sexual promiscuity of the students:

Andres: It has been incredible. After this year I will not trust a girl in my life. Almost everyone was unfaithful.
Ioannis: Swedish girls or Erasmus girls?
Andres: No, no, no. Erasmus girls. Swedish girls are unfaithful as well; they drink a lot. One of the things I’ve learned is that everyone is unfaithful. I met people that had been together with their partners for many years and here they became unfaithful.
Ioannis: So they come here and become unfaithful?
Andres: No. They don’t come here thinking about being unfaithful. But it happens here.
Ioannis: I understand. There are a lot of sexual activities among the Erasmus?
Andres: Yeah. The first semester it was a lot of sex. Now it is different.

Hence, if a parent or partner comes for a visit the receiving student may be placed in a dire straight. He or she now has to take care of them all the while keeping personal cravings and secrets hidden from view. Such a balancing act, of course, creates a measure of stress and as result can lead to resentment on the part of the students.

Finally, another version of this visiting practice is that many Erasmus students themselves go away to visit friends, both during their Erasmus period and after its formal completion. Naturally their exchange experience gives them the opportunity to meet a lot of people from all over the world. The students seem to like and cherish this opportunity. They also take advantage of it. Thus, they often visit friends or acquaintances in an act of generalised reciprocity; having visited a friend they take on the obligation to host him in return. This visiting sometimes takes on the character of veritable international tours. The operation of this principle helps unite the geographically dispersed Erasmus communities into an elaborate network of sociocultural exchange. These crisscrossing travel networks are, in my opinion, one of the most tangible effects of the Erasmus Programme, and a clear instance of *cosmopolitanism in the making*.9

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9 Needless to say that, as a social anthropologist, and despite significant differences, I could not but think of the Melanesian Kula ring (Malinowski, 1917; Mauss, 1922)! Like the Kula-ring the travels of the Erasmus students—with their long-distance travels, near-ceremonial reunion meetings, and reciprocal obligations—helps create and
Nico, for example, told me that before returning to Greece he would go to Germany, via a short stay in Copenhagen, to visit Benjamin and Johan. From there he would go to Paris, and from there to Spain to visit some Greek friends. He would return to Greece together with some girls from Greece, whom he did not know, who would also be visiting the same friends in Spain. He said that he would need to request extra money from ‘Daddy’. Being an Erasmus and living the experience to the full—travelling and partying full-time—obviously requires stable finances and is not something for those with small wallets. Nico then added that some friends of his, from his department, would come to Sweden next semester. He said he would give them my contact information. In this regard, the Erasmus Programme seems to set off a number of chain reactions spanning over several countries and different social circles. Here the Erasmus Programme really makes a difference; it facilitates the mobility of young people in Europe. This effect is well in line with the original intention of the founders of the programme.

This reciprocal hosting of friends, a kind of *touring culture* (Rojek & Urry, 1997), afforded them a rudimentary intercultural training. At the same time the strong social cohesion and emerging identity of the Erasmus group gave these activities a deeper, emotionally more nourishing, meaning than is usually the case in other types of international encounters. We could therefore assume that these meetings had a powerful impact on the young students’ personal identities and worldview, possibly influencing them in a more cosmopolitan or Europhile direction.

Before leaving this subject, we ought to mention that Erasmus students also like to talk about parties and travel. Thus, beside their physical reality, these two activities were also a large part of their everyday discourse. Even more so, they were clearly interconnected in the minds of the students who saw them as integrated elements in a border-crossing and culturally enriching experience. Not surprisingly, these two activities form a central part of the student’s self-representation. The Erasmus students both see themselves, and can be seen, as part of a ‘touring culture of fun’. In this respect the Erasmus students remind us of classical tourists who also conflate these two concepts, albeit in a slightly different way (Rojek & Urry, 1997; Urry, 2002a).

A marginal social position

Travellers face a wide variety of circumstances and entertain a multitude of thoughts and feelings. For those who choose to settle in a foreign country, like for example foreign aid workers or exchange students, there is an added existential dimension: the plight of the stranger/foreigner (Simmel, 1950). This state of being—living in a place that is linguistically and socially different form ones customary habitat—is characterised by a common underlying logic that goes beyond the specifics of one’s personal background and unique itinerary. It can, therefore, help us conceptualise the life situation of the Erasmus students in a useful way. What are the consequences of a prolonged stay abroad? How do the students experience it?

As discussed previously, a stay abroad for an extended period of time, even if it does not lead to culture shock, may introduce a form of *disorientation*. This is especially the case when people travel to culturally and linguistically different countries. A number of reactions follow in the wake of such dislocation. On the one hand, there is a disenchantment with one’s original cultural endowment, resulting from its decreased applicability in the foreign context; on the other there is an insecurity concerning one’s current standing, resulting from an inadequate socialization in the new system. This predicament interrupts many of ones established habits of

unify a sociocultural realm, that of the Erasmus network, within which further, and less regulated, exchanges of ideas and values may take place.

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thought and action giving rise to new experiences and, occasionally, even altered states of consciousness (Hoffman, 1999: 50; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002).

Thus, after the initial period of enthusiasm, a kind of honeymoon common to all foreign travellers, many Erasmus students start to feel a bit insecure and alone. They realise that their immediate future will not only be a period of fun and pleasure but also one of tribulation and anguish. This feeling, though apparently troubling, has a quite positive effect on most students since it sensitises them to the realities of a foreign stay and confers to them the intellectual and physical readiness needed to survive in a new environment. This insecurity usually abates after a couple of weeks and is replaced by an increased curiosity about the country and its people. Helen, the Greek law student, remembers that her first time in Stockholm was characterised precisely by this precarious and marginal status:

Also when you are somewhere alone, totally alone—and most of us went to a foreign country where we knew nobody, beside the university milieu—it unavoidably generates a kind of stress; going away to a totally foreign country, a perfect stranger among strangers. By necessity then you say ‘I am alone and must survive’. In the beginning there was some stress concerning how the country would turn out, whether one would manage to integrate with the population and the student community, all this, if it will be more difficult or more easy than at home, how the people will treat one. There are also all these myths, especially about Sweden, that people are very cold, very closed and so… But entering the spirit, and of course there was also the joy of learning something new. I felt the stress slowly abating and to the surface came feelings like for example a curiosity to learn more about the country and the people, learn more about people of other nationalities and in the end, of course, you don’t want to leave. For no reason.

Periods of disorientation and insecurity, even though their severity decreases with time, have a tendency to recur; they are actually the steady companion of every stay abroad. More than two months after our first encounter Nico and I were once again sitting at Café 3:an at Stockholm University, sipping coffee. By now Nico was comfortable in his new home and had had plenty of, as he called them, unforgettable experiences. However, he was once again experiencing some discomfort. He was not sure whether he was doing the right thing with his studies: he felt underemployed and was thinking about taking some extra courses, and he also felt a bit lonely and deserted, because many of the people comprising his former ‘gang’ had unexpectedly scattered. He was a guy in need of consolation.

The ‘student strangers’, to borrow a phrase from Elisabeth Murphy-Lejeune, are, at least initially, stuck in a position between proximity and distance. They are in contact with a group of natives and request full membership but are seldom granted such. Thus, they are close by but not inside. Conversely their relationship to their home culture, where they once were members, is altered and the distance from it, both physical and psychological, steadily increases. Thus, they are far away but still connected (Simmel, 1950; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). Victor Turner (1969: 95) coined the term liminality to describe this kind of situation:

The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (‘threshold people’) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial.

This existential predicament is well documented in communities of refugees, migrant workers and expatriates but can also be found in long term travellers like backpackers, au pairs, and exchange students. A feeling of being adrift, of floating around without a stable anchor, is an unmistakable characteristic of this condition. On a more positive note, it can be thought of as
an experimental playing ground, or a psychosocial moratorium, where time and space is offered for activities other than the usual ones, from personal self-renewal to urban gentrification (Wulff, 1992; Elsrud, 2001; Galani-Moutafi, 2001; Malet Calvo, 2017). Mark, a former corridor mate of mine and an Erasmus to Italy, described it this way when I asked him to characterise life abroad: ‘I suppose it was the fact that you don’t have so many stable reference points in your life’.

This feeling is inherent in the Erasmus experience. Among other things, it is also upheld by the constant coming and going of Erasmus students. While I was sitting at Coffee by George with Fernando, my Italian informant, we stumbled on this issue. He had been to a party the previous Friday and I was asking him to tell me about it. I was expecting some juicy details but got a more serious account. He said it was ok but that he would miss his Canadian friend. The party was obviously some sort of farewell party for this girl. She was a former exchange student who had stayed for more studies at Linköping University, and also found a Swedish boyfriend. The result of all this was that she decided to settle down in Sweden. She had been here for three years and Fernando had actually met her for the first time when he visited his friend in Uppsala (three years ago). Now she was going away to Canada for a half a year for work. He said that it was nice to have her around because, although she was a former exchange student, she was more of a ‘normal Swede’ to him and also good for practicing English with. With her he got the chance to meet other people beyond the usual Erasmus folks, such as ordinary Swedes, or to go to places other than the usual student places, like downtown clubs and bars. On Friday, for example, they had gone to some bars in Södermalm that he liked.

Her departure would now create a void in the social fabric of Fernando’s life. He was going to miss her, he said. He felt that after her departure he would be forced to socialise only with exchange students and mostly Italians for that matter. He did not seem to fully appreciate the company of other Italians. He said ‘I always met with the Italians; it is difficult to leave the group’. His tone of voice, however, did not seem to attach any special emotional weight to this statement. I suspected, therefore, it was more of a lip-service produced in order to ameliorate his feelings of abandonment. Such opinions are quite common among the Erasmus, especially among the more ambitious ones, but they seldom have a significant impact on their daily life. I did not doubt he wanted to meet Swedish people but, from what I knew, he really liked the company of his Italian friends as well.

**Perturbations of the self**

This marginal position of the stranger also affects the students’ biographical status; the way they look at themselves and the way other people view them. Most travellers, when they arrive at a foreign place, cannot be recognised in any of the conventional categories of the local culture that give meaning and content to a person’s existence. They often fall into the ‘empty’ category of non-member or alien. The visitor, thus, becomes just an appearance; a wanderer with an uncertain itinerary and unclear motives. Their past becomes invisible, their present becomes inflated, and their future uncertain.

This situation creates a disruption in the traveller’s sense of temporal coherence. There are two aspects to this transformation. On the diachronic level time becomes punctuated as events are no longer linked to each other in a meaningful and ordered way; instead each moment becomes an adventure, each encounter has to be negotiated on a fresh basis (including verbal communication), and the future horizon becomes ‘clouded’. On the synchronic level the traveller experiences a difficulty in retaining a sense of selfhood as time-lags and discrepancies accumulate between biographical moments; the lack of anchoring routines and personal relationships ‘emancipates’ the self to such a degree that it can give rise to feelings of
depersonalization and alienation. Murphy-Lejeune (2002: 18) describes some of the consequences of these altered forms of consciousness:

In the transition, strangers discover a new facet of time: precariousness. Indeed, the new universe does not necessarily present itself as other than ephemeral and provisional. In this context, the ephemerality of encounters and conversations takes on a crucial role. Strangers are infinitely sensitive to the richness of a fleeting temporality where one becomes a navigator ‘who is in between others, separated by the translucent wall of potential conversation; of otherness lying in wait’ (Harman, op. cit.: 7). Experiences of mobility belong to the domain of precariousness, with the collective experience of migrations in the background. But more than mere stage settings, they produce new behavioural languages, new repertoires (Joseph, 1984).

My German informant Simon became acutely aware of this predicament at some point. Although he was very enthusiastic about his trip to Sweden, and enjoyed the first weeks, he soon learned—the hard way, as it turned out—that a stay abroad comes with strings attached. Both his sense of self and his daily rhythm were perturbed by living in a foreign city and as a result of this he often felt depressed and frustrated. What seemed to annoy him most was the fact that he was not seen as the special kind of person he was but was rather ignored and bypassed. In return he saw many Swedes as unfriendly and strange. Similarly, he often was amazed by the actions of his fellow Erasmus students. Though not representative of the wider Erasmus community, his views are indicative of the potential troubles of living abroad. Many other students feel this way as well, but somehow dodge the worst repercussions of this emotional upset. Simon could not.

Simon: They look often so unfriendly and nervous in the tube, and in most cases they listen to the music and just look at the floor. I mean, the people are much more…

Ioannis: When they sit in the tube?

Simon: In the tube or when they walk in the street. For example when I walk here from the university campus to my student residence, I mean, I know so many people because I have even studied with them in the same group, but usually they don’t even look at me. And I think that’s a difference, but I am not sure if it has to do with Sweden or the big town here. I can’t say… Well, when I recognised it in the beginning I got very sad and I felt lonely. I even interpreted the signals in the wrong way and thought that the people had something against me and would think bad things about me. The village where I was brought up had 2000 inhabitants and you said hello to everybody, so I was very disturbed that the people didn’t do so and I thought they didn’t like me; but of course it was too strong a reaction and now I have found my place and I get along a bit better. We also sit together and talk, now. But I was very frustrated for some time.

Eventually, Simon became more accustomed to this situation. However, he never fully accepted it and often felt a need to discuss it. The way of life of the Erasmus students epitomises big-city life and as such is not suitable for everyone. Especially for people with a rural mind-set and a need for durable relationships, this lifestyle can be a real nuisance and a potential hazard. As several researchers have shown (Lifton, 1993; Bauman, 1998; Sennett, 1998), this way of life has increasingly become mainstreamed, even canonised, in large parts of the world, making it more difficult to notice and criticise. Nevertheless, it is not a universal state of being but rather the result of a particular twist in the developmental trajectory of the post-industrial Western world brought about by particular political and economic decisions.
The pain of separation: end of the sojourn

The final part of the life-cycle of the Erasmus students is their return home. When their period abroad was completed it was time to pack their belongings, terminate their engagements in the host country and leave for home. Interestingly, this part of being an Erasmus student was very seldom discussed by the students themselves. Nevertheless, most students had to face this reality.

I remember a day, late in May, when I met Benjamin for a coffee. It was sunny and warm so we took our coffee outdoors to enjoy the fresh air. He was very moody and seemed quite unhappy. When I asked him what the matter was, he opened his heart and a flood of emotions poured out. He was feeling quite alone as most of his Erasmus friends had returned home; apparently living in Sweden without them was not much fun. He was also worried about his own homecoming: all the things he had to do, new arrangements to be made, finding his place again in his old circle of friends. Of course, I tried to comfort him as best I could. I told him that he could try to maintain contact with his former friends. He seemed to like the idea. He said that he would definitely try to do so since these people had meant so much to him. They had an indisputable place in his heart.

As can be seen from the above example homecoming was for many students a rather upsetting event, and for several reasons. Leaving their friends behind naturally generated a level of sadness and discomfort for many of them. At the same time, returning home meant abandoning—partly, if not totally—the way of life of the Erasmus students, a lifestyle that many students had come to cherish. Finally, for many students, especially those from southern Europe, homecoming also implied a ‘crash-landing’ into reality. Upon return a veritable juggernaut of untaken examinations awaited many of them and made their life difficult. As one Greek girl who had been to Paris put it, ‘One semester abroad left me behind a whole year. That is the other side of the Erasmus programme’.

Group dynamics and temporal development

As time passes the spontaneous acquaintances and friendships of the Erasmus students transform into the workings of a social group. This process is partly fuelled by their peculiar social status. As newcomers to a foreign land they were often insecure and lonely, and hence, in need of good company. Without it many students would have difficulties solving basic everyday tasks, such as applying for a residence permit, finding a flat, finding medical care, or borrowing money. Helen remembers that

at the same time we felt a bit alienated, not in any bad sense, but we were strangers in a foreign country, and therefore our motto was ‘let’s unite a little’. But I don’t think it was compulsive.
With some we socialised more, with some less. So the fact that we were Erasmus was only an excuse for meeting.

The resultant groups, both in Stockholm and Athens, showed a high degree of cohesiveness and solidarity. Jennifer, the administrator from Södertörn University College, was well aware of this social trend:

Well, as far as I can see, they are a pretty tight group. They socialise a lot with each other, they have a lot of activities together, they go on trips together, they party together, they study together . . . Of course when there are more than a hundred people, all cannot socialise with each other all the time, but still, pretty large groups form and socialise. And they go downtown sometimes, and sometimes they are here.
As a result of this many of the students I met were proud bearers of a collective identity. As Helen from Greece put it, ‘Generally, I must say that there was a coordination and understanding between us, in the sense that we were Erasmus, and declared it!’ This self-categorization as an Erasmus student was a central process in the emergence of the Erasmus identity. It was not only a personal view enriching the student’s sense of self, but also an intersubjective stance constitutive of their group.

Conformity pressures

There is a flipside to the high levels of social cohesion and solidarity in the Erasmus communities. The peer pressure to socialise with other Erasmus students and express feelings of belonging is both high and constant. The case of Katrine is instructive in this regard. She was a German student who did not want to socialise too much with the other Erasmus students. Her mother was Swedish and perhaps as a result of this she had a keen interest in meeting local people and living a more ordinary Swedish life. However, as she told me in our interview, she met resistance from her fellow Erasmus students:

Since I haven’t been so much with the Solna students lately I hear from them all the time: ‘Oh, where are you?’ or ‘You are not with us.’ So it’s negative if an Erasmus student doesn’t attend or mix so much with other Erasmus students. So it’s expected that you are partying with them. It’s a little bit of a group demand.

Other students had similar experiences. Juliet, whom we met previously, was a girl from Slovenia who had come to study in Sweden with high hopes and ambitions. She told me that when she first came to Stockholm she was not interested in socialising with the Erasmus students; she was more interested in meeting with Swedish people and getting in touch with the surrounding society. In addition, she wanted to seriously pursue a number of projects and interests, both academic and others. Thus, in the beginning she did not really have much contact with them, even though she lived in the Erasmus enclave of Solna Cabins. She stubbornly stayed away from parties and dinners, even though she felt the pressure to participate, and kept pretty much to herself.

Soon, however, she had to reconsider her initial position. The fact that she had not reached out enough to the other students had made her feel a little bit awkward. At first she could effectively maintain this feeling of ‘aloofness’. As time passed, though, a gnawing feeling grew. She felt increasingly uncomfortable, actually a bit ashamed, because some of the other Erasmus students had invited her over and treated her well but she had not reciprocated. Therefore, she now felt the need to make a generous gesture towards these people and make amends. She needed company after all.

The tipping point in her personal struggle was that at some point she got sick and had to stay in bed for several days. That incident made her feel vulnerable and insecure. Living as she did in Solna Cabins, in a cabin of her own in the middle of a freezing winter, she feared that if something bad happened, nobody would come to her rescue; she hardly knew anyone and she would have to scream really loud to be heard by those in the next cabin. That frightened her. Thus, after she recovered from her illness, she changed her tactic. She started socializing a bit more with the Erasmus students, at least her neighbours, as a security measure. Despite this alarming experience Juliet retained much of her determination to stay away from the ‘Erasmus trap’ and get to know the Swedes; and she really made it in the end (if that is to be seen as a cherished goal). But as is obvious, there was a price tag to it. There is a cost to self-reliance. Generally reaching out to the natives and engaging with them constructively is quite a hard business for most Erasmus students.
Juliet’s acceptance of this fact also meant that she did internalise an important part of the ‘Erasmus ideology’. As shown previously, the social life of the Erasmus students is full of spontaneous or organised meetings with other people. Such meetings, mostly between students, take place all the time and include coffee breaks, common dinners, partying, meetings in the dorms, excursions, and the like. For days and weeks without an end these activities go on and on and on, sometimes pushing the students dangerously close to physical exhaustion and social malaise. These regular activities are actually emblematic of the group and constitute another of its cherished social representations.

A world of its own

As can be seen from the previous descriptions, the collective tendencies of the Erasmus students are both marked and extensive. They are actually easily noticeable to everyone who has spent even a small amount of time on campus and felt its ‘pulse’. The group has a strong hold on its members and straying away is not an easy business. This has also been noticed by other researchers of the Erasmus Programme. According to Murphy-Lejeune (2002: 186), this group dynamic encloses the students ‘into an arrangement which produces segregation from others and categorization into a group to the detriment of personal identification’.

Furthermore, at least in the case of Stockholm, these tendencies are reinforced by the residential situation that we mentioned in the previous chapter. Even in Athens, where the chances to get in touch with the locals are much higher, the tendency is basically the same. In the end, these collective tendencies of the Erasmus students lead them to become an effectively self-absorbed and self-referential group. This is reflected in my conversation with Juliet, my Slovenian informant:

**Juliet:** These circles become really ‘worlds for themselves’; Erasmus people stick together and natives stick together…

**Ioannis:** You mean that they are a world of their own? The Erasmus students?

**Juliet:** Yes, yes. When I came here, I actually wanted to be in Sweden. So, I didn’t want to really connect to the Erasmus too much. But, after all, I discovered that I had to. I mean, it’s good to know people that you live with, you know, especially your neighbors and so on.

This group dynamic also implies that the Erasmus students seek out the company of native people, students or not, to a much lesser extent. Most of my informants had no local friends whatsoever, and besides the occasional socializing in the dormitories or classrooms, they hardly ever got in touch with ordinary Swedish or Greek people. Usually this did not happen intentionally—many of them professed an interest in meeting the locals—but the result was nevertheless the same. Similar processes have been observed in other cities (Malet Calvo, 2017). As noticed by Murphy-Lejeune (2002: 171-172),

The scarcity of invitations to native homes . . . draws attention to the eccentric social position in which most foreign students find themselves. Sharing a meal, which is regarded in many European cultures as an important socialization event, is prohibited to student travellers, particularly when their mode of entry precludes sharing a professional context with natives [like, for example, teacher apprentices].

This is not an unexpected finding. Wherever and whenever group dynamics develop there is a high probability that exclusive and even separatist behaviours will appear (Strauss, 1982, 84; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Though not inevitable, such tendencies—expressing deeply human proclivities as they do—are hard to avoid. In any case, most Erasmus students are not able to
avoid them despite the best intentions. Not even the ‘intercultural training’ they received in Stockholm, during the Introduction Week, was to much avail.

Relations and representations in time and space

In many ways the above picture is quite surprising. The ‘Erasmus’ is, after all, an a priori given formal category, with given rights and obligations, managed through the concerted efforts of a series of national and international bureaucrats. Many formal categories, despite the best of intentions, never manage to gather enough ‘life-blood’ to become living communities and, thus remain within the confines of formality. This, however, is not the case with the Erasmus groups. To the contrary, the students seem to embrace their newfound status. How can we better understand this character of the Erasmus group and their representations of self and other? What is the cause of their intense social solidarity and exclusivity? And do they retain these characteristics even after the end of the session, or is there some change in their sense of belonging? Below I offer a more comprehensive analysis of these questions. In my view, the social life of the Erasmus students can be divided into a hot phase, which takes place during the session, and a cold phase, which takes place after the session.

We have seen repeatedly throughout this text that the social life of the Erasmus students is very rich and intense; it involves unusual levels of license and indulgence and often a touch of emancipation as well. All of this contributes to making the Erasmus session highly consequential and memorable. This is how Franz, an Erasmus student from Germany, remembers it:

Ioannis: Could you perhaps describe student life among the Erasmus students a little bit more?
Franz: Lovely. Well, where should I start. You met a lot of people in the first, let’s say, four weeks. It’s like having a party every day; no sleep and stuff like that. You’re really motivated to study; so you study, and party, but no sleep. All kinds of exchanges took place in these four weeks. It was really impressive.
Ioannis: Was it like that just in the beginning or did it continue?
Franz: In a way if you compare it to usual, normal, students here, I would say it has continued like this because everybody understands that this Erasmus year is not just about studying. I would say the main issue is to meet new people.

For many students unaccustomed to such a lifestyle, this constitutes something of a cognitive shock. The fact that the Erasmus students lack a ‘normal life’—with the stabilizing influence of age-old habits and commitments and the moderating effect of multiple group loyalties—makes them extra susceptible to this effect. This sets the stage for a particular way of thinking and relating. The emotionality and uniqueness of such activities creates a rupture in the normal routines and restrictions of everyday life, as well as a temporary surge of excitement and enthusiasm. This experience directly engages the student’s body and soul and brings them into a kind of psychosomatic resonance with each other (cf. Hervik, 1994).

According to anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse (1995, 2004), experiences such as those of the Erasmus students are stored in memory as episodic memories; vivid pictures of events replete with contextual and personal details. Following this, the collective existence of the group is represented in the minds of the students as unique and person-centred cognitive schemas. They see themselves as an experiential community, the unique product of distinct individual efforts coinciding in time and space. Such a social representation of the group fosters a particularistic thinking: we are unique individuals, the others are different, all people should

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For details see Strauss & Quinn (1997) and Anderson (2009).
be treated individually. The solidarity within such groups is based on personal requirements; each person within the group is assumed to have different needs and is, therefore, treated individually (see also Tsoukalas, 2007).

The exclusivity of Erasmus communities, however, is not only the result of a particular cognitive adjustment, but also the result of a particular network constellation. The fact that Erasmus students develop such strong ties to each other—ties of dependence, friendship, love—has a social inbreeding and isolating effect of its own. As Mark Granovetter (1973, 1983) has shown such relationships tend to ‘lock’ people into small circles of friends and hinder their contact with the larger society (see also Lubbers et al., 2007). Consequently, groups that show a very high incidence of strong ties run the risk of remaining isolated even when many similar groups share the same territory and could, at least in principle, interact with them and even merge into larger group formations. In line with this, Erasmus networks can be hard for outsiders to penetrate, and the students tend to live in self-contained enclaves with limited contact with local society or other classes of visitors (e.g., PhD students, au pairs). Most of the time this is not a conscious choice by the students; it just happens. Especially in big universities with generous curricular provisions and student residential areas, this segregation can be quite marked (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002: 161-187). Thomas, a student from Scotland, concurred:

I think that, because the Erasmus students are all experiencing something new together, there is a tendency for them to stick together in a group. You don’t meet as many Swedish people as you do other Erasmus students. In general you socialise with the other foreign students. That is also helped if you are doing international classes; you are likely to be in a class full of international students as well, so you are more likely to meet them.

Taken together these two processes nurture the social identity formation of the Erasmus students; an identity with signs of an emerging cosmopolitanism. So, even though the Erasmus students may have relatively limited contact with local society, the cultural diversity of the group is so high as to allow friendship and trust to develop across national and ethnic demarcations and these ‘changes in the borders of private solidarities (cross-neighbourhood, cross-town, cross-national relations) may have an impact on the feelings of belonging, on the borders of public solidarities (city, nation, transnational identities)’ (de Federico de la Rúa, 2001: 9).

For the local students, however, the situation is quite different. Their academic preoccupations are of a more repetitive kind (lectures, seminars); they are dominated by standard verbal communications (instruction letters, hand-outs); take place in formal environments (classrooms, lecture halls); and are predicated on social relations that may be somewhat anonymous. Simon, the German Erasmus student, when talking about the classes he attended at Stockholm University, corroborated this picture: ‘I think it is very anonymous. I mean you go there, have your classes and after that you go home. So I mean it’s not even usual that you talk to each other in the breaks’. Their extracurricular preoccupations are also of a more mundane character replete as they are with habitual and menial activities (work, housekeeping) and familiar environments. Being ‘squeezed’ between the requirements of these two spheres of life, local students are, most of the time, unable to generate higher levels of social spontaneity and usually remain trapped within the confines of regularity. Victoria, the exchange coordinator at Stockholm University and a former Erasmus student, admitted that although she missed the lifestyle of the Erasmus students, her settled way of life meant that ‘I don’t do [it] at all in my life here, even if it were possible’.

Once again Harvey Whitehouse (1995, 2004) tells us that such experiences are predominantly stored in memory as semantic memories; abstract categories that enter into
logical relationships with each other. As a result of this, the collective life of the students is represented in their minds as general cognitive schemas. This, of course, influences their rudimentary self-perception. They see themselves as the category of “students at the university”, an imagined community consisting of a mixture of mostly unspecified and imaginary persons (cf. Anderson, 1983). This is a conceptual formation rather than a group whose existence and presence is clearly felt by the senses. Following this the solidarity within the group is based on assumed similarity; everybody within the group is assumed to have the same needs and is, therefore, allotted a standard ration of support (see also Tsoukalas, 2007). Such groups, however, often rely on the use of root metaphors—the allusion to more immediate and embodied forms of community—in order to legitimise their claims to power and authenticity (Turner, 1974; Herzfeld, 2005). These two modes of being in a group, a spontaneous and embodied fellowship of friends versus a formal and imagined community, although quite distinct, should preferably be seen as ideal types (Benedict, 1934; Weber, 1968; Whitehouse, 1995, 2004). In reality they overlap and mix with each other and may have several intermediate forms. Many students I talked to were also aware of them, implicitly if not always explicitly. While I was talking to Natalie, a Greek student who went to Holland and was now engaged in a volunteer association helping visiting students in Athens, she remembered a particular incident that illustrated this divergence.

Natalie: Can I say something here? I actually happened to have a bad experience in my Erasmus. Objectively bad. I mean, we had made an excursion to Amsterdam and I had a lot of money with me, which was stupid of me, and somebody stole my bag. And it was not just a bag. I had all my stuff there, my camera, many papers, money, my Greek mobile, my German mobile; almost everything. There I realised, since it was shocking to lose everything, how important the Erasmus was because though it could not undo the bad experience, it managed to ameliorate it. If the same thing had happened to me in Athens it would have taken me a lot of time to recover... But there, seeing how much everybody in your company cared and tried to make you feel better, knowing that you were in a foreign country and not with your parents or relatives, was almost a moving experience.

Ioannis: So there was solidarity and a comradeship?

Natalie: Yes, enormous solidarity. Enormous. If anything bad happened, not related to the Erasmus, it was something unequivocally bad.

11 For details see Ellis & Young (1988), Christianson (1992) and Anderson (2009).
12 A fictive example could perhaps illustrate this point. A student that for years has had routine lectures at some university hurries to the lecture hall. As usual, a teacher, standing by the blackboard and looking over the audience, has already started his lecture. A lot of students sit quietly and listen. He take his seat by their side. If this particular lecture does not significantly differ from earlier ones, he will probably have a hard time remembering anything unique about it. He may ’recollect’ that at the usual time he slipped into the classroom. If he habitually recognises some students, he will claim that they probably were present at this particular lecture too. But he will not be sure. If he is creatively inclined and has the gift of gab he will still offer a persuasive account. But this account will be based solely on an amalgamation of impressions from anonymous faces that perhaps never were present in the room, but which his reconstructive memory shuffled out to populate the interiors of the hall according to a totally imaginary scheme.
13 We should not forget that such perceptions are also fostered by the university administration that forms the organisational backbone of this category. According to their formalistic view, all students belong to the big ‘family’ of university students, have equal rights and should be treated accordingly. This inclusive ideology guides the treatment of the university students as a cadre. This standard treatment also affects the Erasmus students, but given the fact that they develop into a very cohesive group and self-organise effectively they quickly ‘grow’ their own norms and attitudes as well. These are far less inclusive than those of the university administration.
14 Metaphors transfer the knowledge and competence inherent in a given domain of cognition (e.g., family relations) to an unrelated domain (e.g., political rhetoric). Despite this, metaphors should not be seen as deceptive linguistic devices; they are, as often as not, vehicles of valuable knowledge. Actually, a large body of human knowledge is predicated on such metaphors (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).
Ioannis: Was this solidarity and comradeship mainly emanating from the other Erasmus students or also from the university officials?

Natalie: I can say that it did not come from the officials. Because, for example, I also lost the keys to my house and I had to pay hundred Euros in order for them to change the lockers. I tried to explain to them that in my condition I could not muster that amount, since I had lost so much money, almost all of my grant. But they didn’t understand. Neither did my home university. I came back a little earlier, for other reasons, since I had to participate in some exams, and told them what happened, but they didn’t help me. They didn’t show lenience. I had to return the amount of the grant not used and I had to do it before the given deadline. They didn’t say ‘never mind, we understand what happened’.

Finally, these divergent modes of being are also sensitive to environmental factors and tend to change over time. For example, Erasmus students become local students upon return to their home country. The provisional character of the Erasmus experience forces us to take a longer perspective, since meaning is ‘connected with the consummation of a process . . . The meaning of any given factor in a process cannot be assessed until the whole process is past . . . In other words, meaning is retrospective and discovered by the selection action of reflexive attention’ (Turner, 1988: 97). We therefore have to briefly look at the experiences of the students when they have returned home.

Homecoming: the swing of the pendulum

The termination of the Erasmus session marks the starting signal for an intensive round of social and personal readjustment for the young students. The students now enter the cold phase of their social life. Besides the many practicalities they have to tackle back home (such as resuming their studies) there is also the sadness of breaking up from friends and the existential insecurity of unclear career prospects. Many students told me that this was a difficult period: they longed for their Erasmus lifestyle and had problems resuming their former lives as national citizens and local students. There are several layers to this process.

An important aspect of this readjustment is the renewed routinisation and nationalisation of their everyday life, a fact that is at odds with their previous experiences as Erasmus students (cf. discussion above). As the students slip into a more mundane existence, resuming old roles and habits, and leaving behind the exuberant lifestyle and strong cohesion of their former communities, their previous preoccupations start to appear in a different light and call for a different understanding. The students can now think more reflexively about what has happened and its potential implications. A number of questions are actualised by this predicament: Is it possible to experience the ‘spirit’ of the Erasmus with other people? Can I live a cosmopolitan life at home? In this contemplative condition, many former Erasmus students try to remain loyal to the spirit of the Erasmus period while at the same time re-appropriating the privileges of a more settled lifestyle.

In parallel with this process the character of the student’s engagement with the Erasmus network changes, becoming more selective and utilitarian. Most of their contacts with other Erasmus students are now ‘pruned’ away leaving a select few with whom they interact less.

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15 This heading is an allusion to a paper written by Ernest Gellner (1968) called ‘A pendulum swing theory of Islam’. In it he describes an oscillatory social process (going from charismatic groups to bureaucratic structures and back again) that helps explain the alternation of ruling dynasties in medieval Islam. The theory touches on a number of interesting topics and is very elegant. The theory is also interesting for another reason. Although flagrantly anti-psychological, it has served as an important inspiration for a number of cognitive anthropologists (e.g., Whitehouse, 1995). The irony of fate . . .
compulsively and on an intermittent basis; a ‘distillate’ of European friends. These ties, although considerably weaker than their previous ones, extend beyond intimate circles of friends and establish a rich and expansive meshwork of relations connecting people and groups across Europe, a network of *weak ties* (Granovetter 1973, 1983). Several students I knew of retained such contacts and used them for a variety of purposes, from information sharing to career development. Anna, a former Erasmus student now engaged in the voluntary association Esperasmus who catered to the needs of Erasmus in Greece, gave a very informative description of the process:

**Ioannis:** The contacts that the Erasmus establishes here in Athens, among themselves but also with Greek students, do they remain after they have returned to their home countries?

**Anna:** I believe, both from my own experience and discussions I’ve had, that you can’t keep all the contacts. But some of them remain. These I think remain for a long time, because you have shared something very special with them. I believe it and I have also seen it.

**Ioannis:** You said before that you yourself had visited a friend in Italy recently.

**Anna:** Yes, and a year ago I had also . . . well, let me explain it to you. I returned from my own Erasmus stay three years ago and in this period my German friends have visited me, I have been to visit my friends in Spain, they have come here, and recently I went to Italy, to see two people that had been Erasmus here.

**Ioannis:** Very interesting.

**Anna:** And this happens generally, not only in my case.

**Ioannis:** So you have made some trips, have visited them, they have visited you?

**Anna:** Which I perhaps would not have done if it wasn’t for these people.

**Ioannis:** How else do you communicate?

**Anna:** With mails, phone calls sometimes, messaging with the mobiles, letters. Yes, there is contact.

**Ioannis:** Do you think these contacts are important for you? Or for the other Erasmus?

**Anna:** Very important.

**Ioannis:** In what sense? Could you elaborate?

**Anna:** Not in a self-interested way like, ‘Oh nice, I will have a place to stay at if I go to Spain’, not like that. Instead I consider it really very beautiful to be able to share some things with other humans in other countries. And anyhow I can’t really give you an explanation of the beauty of it.

**Ioannis:** Are these contacts useful from a professional perspective?

**Anna:** That too. Yes, I happened to help my Spanish friend who wanted to find a job in Greece. She didn’t manage in the end but that’s another story. Do you want specific examples?

**Ioannis:** Yes.

**Anna:** Another Spanish girl, a friend of a friend, was looking for an apartment to stay in during the Olympics and I helped them to find one, for example. So it’s useful in this sense too, but also generally. Although it is harder to explain the general charm of it. Also...I forgot what I wanted to say.

**Ioannis:** Well you can say it if it comes back to you.

**Anna:** Now I’ve got it. Shall I say it?

**Ioannis:** Yes please.

**Anna:** I consider the following to be very important. For example, some days ago there was in Madrid that terrorist act and directly I called my friends in Spain to see how they were doing. I mean, when something happens somewhere, although it happens far away from you, you cannot remain indifferent and think, ‘so what, it didn’t happen in my country’ but you have connected with specific people and this automatically makes you care about the rest of Europe. And this is very important.

**Ioannis:** Very interesting.

**Anna:** And also . . . I was called by my German friend, together with whom I did my Erasmus in Holland, because she could not get in touch with our Spanish friend and check if he’s all...
right. Or in a similar case I was called by another girl about Jose, a Spaniard who was an Erasmus in Athens, if I had news from him and was he ok. Because they were friends.

**Ioannis:** So some contacts are retained.

**Anna:** There is a real interest. It is not superficial.

The combined effect of these two processes (routinization, weak ties) eventually leads to a cognitive reorientation, a swing of the pendulum, from the workings of a spontaneous and embodied fellowship of friends to something more akin to an association of alumni. The former Erasmus students try to fit their experiences into general cognitive schemas and increasingly resort to a universalistic thinking as they ponder the nature of their community and their place in the world. Their self-perception and social representation, hence, begins to broaden and widen, becoming increasingly inclusive and formal in character, until it starts to resemble that of an imagined community (which is, cognitively speaking, just a well-entrenched semantic category). In such a wider conception of belongingness, all people, not only Erasmus students, can be united by bonds of mutual recognition and fraternity; gone is the group’s formerly exclusive character.

As Benedict Anderson has shown (1983: 5-6), all large-scale communities are imagined ‘because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’. Such imagined communities, however, depend on root metaphors to give them emotional vitality and motivational force, like, for instance, the ‘tribe’ or the ‘family’ standing in as substitutes for the nation state. In the case of the Erasmus students, their session abroad, with its rich harvest of social relations and personal experiences, functions as the root metaphor supporting their new sense of community. Further, as we have seen, this root metaphor is periodically reinvigorated by reunion meetings, visiting friends, or other collective trivia. Hence, with the consummation of the Erasmus process, and as a result of an embodied dialectic, a more mature sense of cosmopolitan identity emerges than during the session itself.

**Concluding remarks**

The Erasmus period can be seen as a learning experience for the young students. During this period the Erasmus students experiment with new social roles, learn new skills, and connect themselves to wide-ranging networks of other exchange students and local inhabitants. An important aspect of this experience is their exploration of the host country and its culture, both geographically and culturally.

As soon as the Erasmus students have settled into the new country, they start developing their distinctive lifestyle. This lifestyle is, above all, characterised by a rich extracurricular and leisure life. Erasmus students have a great interest in various forms of merrymaking—partying, sightseeing, dining, dating—and engage in them heartily. They also like to travel, both within and outside the country, and do so extensively. Part of this travelling is spontaneous and self-organised, while part of it is organised by small-scale travelling agencies which seem to have developed a symbiotic relationship with the Erasmus circuit. Many of these activities take place betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by organised society, and are hence characterised by a high degree of liminality and precariousness.

This combined situation creates a powerful group dynamism which results in the formation of distinct and cohesive Erasmus communities. These communities can be seen as new and dynamic life worlds in the midst of the European educational system. Erasmus students identify strongly with their group and are proud bearers of its collective identity. As a result of this Erasmus communities tend to be rather exclusive and difficult to penetrate for outsiders; they
are, in many ways, self-contained worlds (cf. Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). After the end of the Erasmus Programme, the ‘spirit’ of the Erasmus is periodically rekindled by reunion meetings and career-motivated relocations. This second form of relating allows a more inclusive and mature sense of identity to develop, one which builds on true curiosity for and contact with local society and its people. As a result, an imagined community of cosmopolitans emerges.

There is a flip side to the coin, however. From arrival and early accommodation to closure and homecoming, the life of the Erasmus students is characterised by a high degree of novelty and uncertainty. As several scholars have shown, such a way of life, if left unchecked, can create a measure of social anomy and alienation (Lifton, 1993; Bauman, 1998; Sennett, 1998). Even though most Erasmus students enjoyed their stay abroad, some of them did suffer from mild discomforts. The most common complaints were those of stress, language frustration, exhaustion, and loneliness.

Overall, however, the Erasmus period is a very constructive and enjoyable period in the young students’ lives. Using the vocabulary of Dorinne Kondo (1990), we could say that through their membership and participation in new groups the students were ‘crafting selves’, fashioning new and more adaptive social identities and behavioural repertoires. Or in the words of Martin, a Swedish exchange student who went to Italy, ‘A feeling of freedom, kind of. It’s like . . . you have the experience of choosing yourself which identity you want to have’. Much of this identity work moved in a distinctly cosmopolitan direction.

Having had a thorough look at the social and cultural life of the Erasmus students, it is now time to have a look at their communicative and discursive practices. What do they talk about? What occupies their minds? How do they articulate their concerns? What forms of cross-cultural communication do they employ? And how do they perceive themselves?
Communication

As we saw in previous chapters, the Erasmus group has a very rich extracurricular life. They are engaged in various forms of socializing—meeting, mingling, dating, and so on—and are immersed in rich networks of intercultural and multilingual communication. There is hardly a boring moment when one is around them! This communication is actually a distinguishing feature of the Erasmus students. As such it deserves a separate treatment. Such a treatment is also called for because of theoretical reasons. In recent decades a focus on language and communication use has become an increasingly popular perspective in the social sciences. It is believed that various aspects of language use—like professional jargon, rhetorical strategies, political discourses—have an important influence on the norms and attitudes of group members and help engender, and occasionally also destabilise, particular power structures and social hierarchies (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Giles & Coupland, 1991; Bignell, 1997; Bruner, 2002).

Communication, more generally, is also a driving force of change in established social structures and norms (Habermas, 1979). By motivating and coordinating the behaviour of individuals, communication can allow new forms of understanding and learning to develop, thus leading to significant transformations in community, identity, and knowledgeable skill (Rogoff, 1995). This transformative potential also follows from the fact that language is the main vehicle for the dialectical process, which is even difficult to conceptualise non-verbally, by way of which seemingly contradictory elements in life, art and science can be juxtaposed, contradicted, and reconciled (Schnitker & Emmons, 2013). As we have seen previously this transformation is part of what it means to be an Erasmus student.

We also need to look at the modern communication technologies that the Erasmus students preferentially employ in their social intercourse. They provide an important infrastructure for the students in their strivings to keep up to date with events around them, to keep in touch with friends and relatives, and to explore the surrounding society. Such technologies, according to several authors, have had a profound impact on our way of life, leading to both new forms of social relations and new kinds of social representations (Miller & Slater, 2001; Robertson, 2012). Could it be that, in the spirit of ‘the medium is the message’, cosmopolitanism is becoming an increasingly normative experience in our interconnected world as a result of young people’s ever-expanding use of communication technologies? Or is it that Europeanization is tacitly taking place amidst this avalanche of technological innovations? There is, certainly, much pointing in this direction.

My ambition with this chapter, however, is not to offer a communication study proper but, rather, to present some general findings and reflections as they pertain to the subject matter. Thus, in what follows I will try to highlight some aspects of the communication patterns of the Erasmus students, their narrative conventions and their use of information technology and media preferences.

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1 Despite this popularity, discourse theory continues to be a controversial topic. In particular, the extreme constructivism and logocentrism found in certain strands of it (e.g., Foucauldian discourse theory) have attracted considerable criticism (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Mandler, 2004).
The communication practices of the Erasmus students

The Erasmus students live in a complex world of communication. Their ideas are suspended in personal networks of signification as well as wider discursive practices, not to mention circumstantial exchanges and mediated communications, which makes studying them a real challenge. I believe that in order to be fruitful we need to look more closely into their life world, their emerging social relationships and sense of community, with an eye to their particular language use and narrative production.

In this regard two circumstances stand out and have a guiding influence on their communicative practices. The first, as we saw in the previous chapter, is related to the social precariousness and structural liminality of the students’ stay abroad. The second relates to the near constant dialectical process they are engaged in, a process that forces them to renegotiate and reconceptualise the received wisdom of their national heritage. Most importantly, these two processes, which will be described below, interact and synergise in powerful ways.

Even though most of their communication takes place in a foreign language (English), and the students’ proficiency tends to be lower than that of native speakers, it is still possible to discern rather well-formed instances of typical communication patterns. Perhaps the only kind of communication type that did not figure prominently in my material was that of slang, an otherwise common occurrence in youth cultures studies (cf. Gelder, 2005).

Spontaneous communication

The discussions of the Erasmus students are circumscribed by a unique combination of factors. Many of the students are newly arrived and burdened with urgent tasks: finding a place to stay, paying bills, getting money from their banks, doing paperwork, and so on. Others are lonely and in need of company. And, of course, there is the youthful curiosity and sexual urge typical of this age, pushing and pulling the students into action in unpredictable ways. To this must be added the temporary disorientation following a visit abroad and the inconvenience of communicating in a foreign language. As a result of this, many of the exchanges between the students are, at least initially, quite circumstantial and tentative. The following discussion with Anna, a Greek former Erasmus student, illustrates this point:

**Anna:** A characteristic example of the Erasmus programme, in general, is that the first evening when I came to my house and after having entered the common space, I met a Chinese girl and a Norwegian girl, who also had just arrived. We were all shy and didn’t dare to go down and then came a Spanish guy, who later became a great friend, and said, ‘Ok, I am Rodrigo and I am from here’, pointing his finger on the map [she laughs]. This was the climate that prevailed.

**Ioannis:** So there was a spontaneous communication, from what I understand, and there were no problems.

**Anna:** Yes, because there are very good intentions.

As indicated by the excerpt, when communication does ‘break through’, it is characterised by an open attitude and a communicative flexibility—what Jürgen Habermas (1979: 120) has called undistorted communication. Such spontaneous communication has a dual function. On the one hand, it helps the students release some of the tension created by the high amounts of novelty and uncertainty in their lives. On the other hand, it promotes a cooperative understanding of the situation which functions as a foundational act upon which unconventional forms of community (or life-worlds) can emerge. In the words of Murphy-Lejeune (2002: 201):
In a context more ephemeral than others, travellers have to forego the idea of a welding sociability, the ideal of a transparency in social links. Instead, they are in a position to appraise the symbolic interval which separates them from others and the importance of the interaction context. The quality of the performance is visible in the travellers’ capacity to appreciate social links in their lightness, in the fluidity of co-presence and conversation... Learning precariousness, they have the freedom to engage lightly in social relationships where everything is played in the instant of conversation rather than in a substantive fusion. In order to think of social relationships in this way, an approach which pays heed to the most minute detail in a life, a situation, an interactional space, a moment, a particular figure, is required.

This particular kind of relating—heavily imbued with a sense of immediacy and improvisation—was very common among the Erasmus students and facilitated the emergence of a number of new dispositions and attitudes, among them that of cosmopolitanism.

**Small talk**

While in Athens I often visited the student restaurant of the Athens School of Economics. I used to meet many of my informants and friends there. The food was not bad either, and it was almost for free. After the meal we used to trudge out to the yard and have a friendly chat under the warming Mediterranean sun. It was a pleasant little tradition that established itself spontaneously and which suited me well. While standing there we chatted and gossiped about various topics. These chats were quite short since many of the students had afternoon classes to attend and, hence, had to leave shortly. These discussions had a distinct character in that they included an inordinate amount of small talk, replete with greeting phrases, standard questions, verbal puns and other platitudes.

This was not an isolated occurrence. Often when I met an Erasmus student, whether in Stockholm or Athens, the conversation would unavoidably drift towards standard topics and phrases and away from the prospect of treating any subject seriously. Serious discussions did, of course, occur but they seemed to be confined to a less public and more mysterious time and space: perhaps at home, in the dorms or by the bedside, students entered into the solemn and contemplative mode necessary for such activities.

Despite its seemingly trivial nature, small talk has important functions: it ‘lubricates’ social interactions, it is a bonding ritual, it is a strategy for managing interpersonal distance and it is a device for exploring and categorizing each other’s social position. It is found at the boundaries of interactions and between activities (Laver, 1975; Holmes 2000). The Erasmus students, being newcomers to the country and unacquainted with each other, find it both convenient and expedient to resort to this type of talk, especially in the initial phases of their stay. This tendency is reinforced by the strong social dynamism, which takes the spotlight off the person, as well as the high membership turnover which characterises their communities. It is, therefore, not strange that many of their verbal exchanges have the character of ‘surface communication’.

Actually, some of the students seemed to be aware of this. Simon, for example, found this kind of communication too shallow and rude for his taste and, therefore, preferred the company of other people over that of the Erasmus students. Because of his choice and general character, he was not well received by the rest of the Erasmus students and had to go his own way. This situation of being a double stranger gives his judgment a more ‘objective’ character well worth quoting at length.

Ioannis: I was wondering, have you noticed what the Erasmus students usually talk about? I mean, do they have any specific topics or things that they talk about... What are they interested in, and what are they thinking about, what are they doing?
Simon: You don’t talk that deep because you also don’t know the people that much and you also know so many different students. You see them all the time, for example at the parties, that you sometimes even talk to people whose names you don’t know, and the problem is the talks are usually very . . . For example, ‘How are you?’, ‘What’s your name?’, ‘How old are you?’ ‘The weather is quite nice right now, isn’t it?’ I mean it becomes a very boring form of conversation; when you do it all the time. Sometimes it’s also in another way, but in most cases you talk like this and that’s a bit . . .

Ioannis: The conversations and the topics are kind of trivial and stereotyped?
Simon: Yeah, yeah. I mean sometimes the people show to you that they are very bored about these questions. I mean I also do it, as I also ask always these questions when I want to start a discussion because, I mean, what else can you do . . . When you go to a party here in Allhuset it can happen that in half an hour you met five people and they all ask you the same questions. That can really get very boring.

This amount of small talk functions as a very specific discursive marker that separates the Erasmus students from the local population. Local students, of course, also use small talk but they are not bound by it; if they want to they can skip it and either ignore each other or enter more thorough discussions. The Erasmus students have trouble with this. It is not difficult to understand why. For one thing, they cannot ignore each other since they are the only company they have and, for another, it is not really easy to enter serious discussions with temporary acquaintances, and in a foreign language at that. The social underpinnings of their interaction, for better or worse, is much more ephemeral and precarious than is usually the case.

For this same reason the students who succeed in going beyond this surface communication seem to get a minor ‘epiphany’; they are reminded of the fact that relationships can also be of a different kind than those prevalent in the Erasmus community. Juliet, one of my main informants, was especially happy when she found ‘some contacts that are good. That are not just contacts between foreigners and very polite natives, but you know, we can talk about things we are interested in.’ Perhaps this is also an issue of personal interest and ambition. Juliet was a very determined and ambitious girl. She wanted to avoid the Erasmus community as much as possible and instead seriously pursue a number of academic and personal interests. She also wanted to be in contact with Swedes. This is not usually the case with most Erasmus students who just seem content with socializing with other Erasmus students. This tendency for small talk has also been noticed in comparative groups of young travellers, like backpackers. In one such study conducted by Laurie Murphy (2001: 56), the topic of ‘Get bored with same old chitchat, superficial talk’ was ranked as the fifth most popular topic of discussion among backpackers.

Gossip and information sharing

A large number of the discussions carried out by the Erasmus students were about travelling and partying. Especially after the first weeks, when airing national stereotypes and making social comparisons predominated, talking about these twin topics became their discursive ‘bread and butter’. Every day, and on every meeting, we would discuss the merry happenings of the last days and plan for the fun to come.

This was a typical discursive practice that, at least partly, separated the Erasmus students from the local students. While ordinary students talk about a range of topics—which usually includes serious mention of studies and career development—the Erasmus students spent an inordinate amount of time talking about parties and travel and only touch on other subjects occasionally. They seemed to have an insatiable hunger to ventilate these topics. This talking was basically of three kinds—social commentary, information sharing, and planning—and constituted something of their dominant, everyday parlance.
The first kind was a sort of *gossiping* where the students commented the latest ‘happenings’ and tried to unearth personal details. Incidents, relationships, mishaps, adventures and anecdotes from the nocturnal and travelling life of the Erasmus were thus systematically and eagerly ventilated by the curious students. Sexual and erotic relationships were an especially favoured topic of discussion. As in many other contexts, those highly active in those fields ran the risk of ridicule and castigation. In one of the gatherings mentioned above (the one before visiting the skyladiko club) the girls in our company started talking about the erotic and sexual life of some of their fellow Erasmus students. More precisely, they were commenting on the sexual promiscuity of their friends. The language was quite derogatory. Talking about a Dutch girl that we all knew, Martha said: ‘Well, she has slept with almost everyone. How does she manage to keep track of all the names and phone numbers?’ Apparently, they were looking down on some girls and boys who were too ‘loose’ or desperate. This was a clear instance of social commentary and social control within the Erasmus community. One could suspect that more tangible pressure was also exerted on these persons, on some level, but it was difficult for me to ascertain exactly where and how that happened.

Another part of these discussions had the character of information sharing. For the students it was imperative to learn about the parties and travels to come and to prepare for them; they were often overzealous about it. Hence, during coffee breaks *rumours* were often discussed in an attempt to ‘take the pulse’ of the community and ‘fish around’ for prospective events and happenings. Many of the plans entertained by students or groups within the community were often rudimentary or secret and had therefore to be carefully extracted by those interested. If not, they would ‘miss the next train’. There was actually some strategic concealment and deceit going on here – with students trying to gain as much as possible for themselves or their group, while keeping out unwelcome guests or intruders—which gave this information sharing a more competitive edge and controversial character. There were, after all, some minor divisions in the larger community with certain students or subgroups not wanting the company of others.

Both gossiping and rumours are well-known phenomena in the ethnographic literature (Gluckman, 1963; Wilson, 1974; White, 2000) and have also attracted attention in other fields of study (Noon & Delbridge, 1993; DiFonzo, 2006). Such activities are especially common in novel urban settings where newcomers have to quickly choose suitable courses of action on the basis of limited information (Mitchell, 1969). By commenting, disputing, comparing, and judging this corpus of oral material the students tried to bring some order to their newfound world and situate themselves and their friends in a rudimentary social and moral landscape. In doing so they also mark out the borders of their social solidarity; those who were concerned about the group’s common destiny and regularly talked about it became its core members.

Another kind of discussion was planning talks prior to launching some excursion or going to some party. The students would often meet in some strategic place—the campus cafeterias in Stockholm and the downtown bars in Athens—and discuss with their friends about the details of the coming event. Time schedules were synchronised, money matters settled, friends notified, the proper apparel chosen and of they went on some travelling expedition or all-night-long feasting. These planning sessions were often very short with an average length of no more than a couple of hours. Erasmus students tend to be very spontaneous. Longer trips usually demanded a bit more time, but not significantly more. Even long trips could be decided ‘on the fly’ with students leaving in a rush and fitting their entire travel outfits in a plastic bag!

While in Athens I took active part in the discussions around one such excursion. My Scandinavian group had decided to go for a weekend trip to Thessalonica. Martha called me one day and told me of their plans. She sounded very excited but also a bit wary about the various ‘organizational’ details that had to be quickly settled. Martha said that they were thinking of renting a big car (something like a van) and driving up all the way. There they would
stay at a friend of hers who had promised to host them for the weekend. Of course, I told her it was a great idea. This was on Wednesday.

Over the next couple of days an intensive telephone contact ensued. Martha, who was something of the informal leader of the group, called around to check with the rest of the group to make sure everything was all right. Some of the students had classes until Friday evening. Thus, the departure had to be adjusted for them if they were to follow. Similarly, arrangements had to be made with some car rental service in order to get a car in time. Of course, there was also the financial side of it. Money had to be gathered and pooled together. Given that we did not always agree on all relevant issues, a fair amount of negotiations also had to be squeezed in. We were in a hurry and the cellulares went hot. We all did our best and Martha was great as our ‘manager’.

Social comparisons

As should be evident by now the Erasmus students are a thoroughly multi-national assembly. Even though they often resort to the company of their compatriots they still spend a large amount of time socializing with people from other nationalities or ethnic groups. Apparently, this is much fun and much appreciated by the majority of students. They seem to have a genuine curiosity for each other, both personally and socially. Even in my Scandinavian group, which was comparatively homogenous, three different nationalities were represented, and four different languages were spoken.

Once I was at a dinner with my Scandinavian group. The two Norwegian girls, who lived in a rather fashionable house in central Athens, had invited the rest of us for food and drink and were also expecting a contingent of Spanish Erasmus students later on (they could not make it in time for the ordinary appointment). During the evening we talked and joked a lot. We also compared a lot. For example, we talked about the IKEA furniture in the room and this occasioned a comparison between the Greek and Swedish sense of design and décor. We arrived at the conclusion that the Greeks liked kitschy stuff while the Swedes preferred more simple and modernist designs. Food also surfaced in our comparisons. Jacob asked me if the food they saw at the various restaurants and taverns was real Greek home fare. I told him it was not. The food there was mostly grilled food and so not really representative of home-cooked meals. The soups and the stews typical of Greek cuisine were conspicuously lacking in those places. He could try and find them elsewhere even though it was kind of difficult. I gave him some advice. While we were talking about food and IKEA, the Swedes told me that they were missing Swedish food. Jacob said that he especially missed knäckebröd (a kind of crisp bread). Greek bread could not satisfy his particular taste. Some of the youngsters had even been to IKEA in order to enjoy the Swedish meals available there, as well as to shop at the Swedish shop. I said that I missed Swedish food as well.

This seemed to be another habit of the Erasmus students. There were a lot of social comparisons present in their discussions, most of them focusing on national or ethnic traits. The students I followed were almost incessantly involved in making national and ethnic comparisons with each other. Many of the students seemed to like this topic and indulged in it heartily. Undoubtedly, this was for many of them fuelled by a sincere curiosity about the other nationalities represented and led to a quite significant accumulation of cross-cultural knowledge. Hence many Erasmus students learned dances from other countries (e.g., salsa, flamenco) or adopted foreign birthday traditions (e.g., the Mexican piñata).

However, these discussions also had a more parochial character. Often involving collective remembrance and group competitions, they were geared towards boosting the status of one’s own group. In the most extreme cases this trend could lead to a collective enactment of ‘symbolic ethnicity’ (cf. Wulff, 1992; Herzfelt, 2005). A typical example of such a comparative
'game' was the communal dinners mentioned earlier. If one national group organised a communal dinner, then the others had to counter with a dinner of their own.

Such comparisons were also reassuring for the students on a more personal level. Insecure as many of them were, the opportunity to engage in select national comparisons—where their own country usually came out ‘victorious’—was a quick and effective way to boost their self-confidence and soothe their fears. They basked in their countries’ reflected glory for a moment and felt better afterwards. Even those who seemed to dislike this habit and actively tried to shield themselves from it were often ‘sucked into’ this dominant discursive current. Many times when I followed a group of students, the conversation would slowly, and almost unwittingly, drift into this topic. This situation had also struck some of the administrators working with the students. Victoria remembers:

. . . between exchange students the discussions are very much like ‘It is like this in my country’, ‘Aha, how is it in your country?’, ‘And this is how Swedes do it’ . . . Even if they get away and learn to think more openly—think more internationally, become positive to other cultures—I notice that one never is so strongly linked to one’s home country as when away from it. One becomes a bit of a representative.

Even though the extent of national comparisons was a bit surprising for me, the phenomenon per se is not. Social comparisons are to be expected in the context of group interactions and are also reflected in the choice of speech type (Holy and Stuchlik, 1983; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Giles & Coupland, 1991). Once again there is evidence for this from studies of comparable groups. In Laurie Murphy’s (2001: 56) study of backpacker interactions the topic of ‘Home, nationality differences/comparisons’ was the second most popular topic of discussion, second only to ‘Places they have been/are going to’.

Talking stereotypes . . .

What did the students find out from the many social comparisons they made? Often what they already knew. In other words, there were a lot of preconceived notions to be found in the conversations of the Erasmus students. A classic example, pertinent to our case, is that ‘Swedish women are tall, blond and sexy’, in all probability a legacy of the many good-looking Swedish actresses who have beautified the movie screens with their presence (Anita Ekberg, for example). A number of male students from southern Europe had such a picture in their heads and used it in their interactions with other students. Some of them were actually on a hunt for such a woman.

One of my informants was one of them. Fernando turned up one night at Allhuset. He told everyone that he had met his second mentor. He had taken a second one since he was disappointed by the first one. I already knew the reason for his disappointment: he did not find the first girl beautiful enough! To his detriment the second turned out to be even less attractive. He was disappointed. He said that in Italy people think that Swedish women are very beautiful. However, for some reason, his mentors did not live up to his expectations. ‘When will I meet a pretty Swedish girl?’ he exclaimed in despair. He claimed that his bad luck defied the laws of probability. How could both of them turn out unattractive? After that he went on and gave us a short lecture on the nationality rankings of female beauty prevalent in Italian society. Highest in this ranking were Danish women. They were considered the most beautiful. Swedish women came second. However, Scandinavian women in general were considered among the most

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2 The student union of Stockholm University had instituted a system whereby every Erasmus student was given the opportunity to get a mentor, a local student who could help the visiting student explore the local culture and its inhabitants.
The young students resorted to these stereotypes as a way of structuring their often-confusing experiences and conferring a measure of intelligibility and familiarity to their activities (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002: 12, 158). As studies have shown, life in novel urban settings, where personal and historical interpretations are difficult to make, tends to promote categorical thinking and the use of generalizations (Mitchell, 1969; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Likewise, such encounters promote certain types of language use, for example, standard greeting phrases and small talk (Giles & Coupland, 1991). Still, as evidenced by the reaction of the Finnish girl, such characterizations can be contested. According to Michael Herzfeld (2005: 74-75) such contestation disturbs the synchronic order of things by restoring to it a sense of historical contingency, reminding us that the signs whereby we convey “self-evident truths” have histories of their own, and suggesting that the underlying self-evidence does also . . . by focusing on the constructedness of their factuality, one can challenge their legitimacy, opposing analytic tactics to the official strategy of essentialism.

Analytically these contestations can be conceived as a dialectical process wherein the students try to reconcile disparate and contradictory elements in their social relationships and national heritage. After each statement (thesis) a contradictory statement (antithesis) is presented, and from their contrast a conciliatory statement (synthesis) emerges (Schnitker & Emmons, 2013). Iterated over successive social encounters, this dialectical process can promote the evolution of new collective understandings, understandings that move in a decidedly more cosmopolitan direction.

...and performing them

At the previously mentioned dinner held by the Norwegian girls’ house, the arrival of the Spanish people occasioned a number of interesting observations. The Spaniards were loud and burlesque. They shouted out various slogans and cheered each other on. Upon their entering, the decibel level in the room was appreciably magnified and an intense mingling took over. I saw that they had a shopping trolley with them, probably found on some deserted street corner, fully loaded with bottles of cheap wine, Fanta bottles, fruit juice and a big bag of ice. The ‘party animals’ were here . . . and now we had everything needed for the customary sangria.

The whole scene was hilarious and the Spanish people, three guys and a girl, definitely seemed to play a well-rehearsed and contradictory elements in their social relationships and national heritage. After each statement (thesis) a contradictory statement (antithesis) is presented, and from their contrast a conciliatory statement (synthesis) emerges (Schnitker & Emmons, 2013). Iterated over successive social encounters, this dialectical process can promote the evolution of new collective understandings, understandings that move in a decidedly more cosmopolitan direction.

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The whole scene was hilarious and the Spanish people, three guys and a girl, definitely seemed to play a well-rehearsed, if mostly unconscious, national script; they were performing the hot-tempered and life-indulging ‘Latin personality’. The ensuing interaction and communication was characterized by a distinctively Spanish flavour, and thus, nationalized. In this enactment exaggeration and praise of various national traits played an important role. The Scandinavian hosts were a bit surprised by this display of Spanish extravaganza but soon started playing along by becoming louder and using various Spanish words. This was a clear instance of speech convergence (Giles & Coupland, 1991).

Later on, however, this group encounter made some of the national comparisons, which had already been occurring, more competitive in nature. The Norwegian girls had gone to great lengths to make the gathering, and especially the serving of the food, as memorable as possible. One of the guys told us that in Spain dinners were much messier; Spanish people had much worse table manners than other Europeans. ‘We just throw everything up on the table and eat from the same plate’, he said in order to illustrate his point. The Norwegian girls tried to take it
as a compliment but, of course, also got his slightly derisive hint. One of the girls seemed quite irritated on her way back to the kitchen. The whole incident was pregnant with moral connotations.

Before the arrival of the Spaniards, crude stereotypes did not surface in the discussions of the Scandinavian group. Then there was no salient group division and no concomitant polarization of opinions. We were among ourselves, undisturbed and unthreatened. But with the mixing of the two groups, a salient intergroup border had appeared and was operating in full force (Barth, 1969; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). As a result of this emerging tension the initial speech convergence gave way to instances of speech divergence (Giles & Coupland, 1991); the Scandinavians became more Scandinavian in their speech style and in that way distanced themselves from their Spanish friends.

While thinking about this incident I remembered some discussions I had had with my wife. She also thought Greeks were lacking in table manners and generally had their meals in a very unceremonial manner. She was right, to some extent. Still, such observations, when communicated in an intergroup context, can be used as weapons of ridicule and exclusion. Michael Herzfeld (2005: 79, 81) has described this moral nexus succinctly:

Ultimately, the language of national or ethnic identity is indeed a language of morality. It is an encoded discourse about inclusion and exclusion. Like all such systems, it is subject to manipulation in everyday speech . . . Terms of this kind conflate social identity with morality by implying that similar principles of morality apply to all of the discriminations made, regardless of the level at which they are made: outsiders remain inferior to insiders in any sense . . . The use of moral-value terms represents social diagnoses of where the boundaries lie. Like all diagnoses, these are open to dispute.

One way of understanding this exchange is through the concept of cultural intimacy. Cultural intimacy as a concept stands for those aspects of a social identity which may attract public criticism, even scorn, but are nevertheless used to provide insiders with a sense of mutual understanding and comfort, even pride (Herzfeld, 2005). Cultural intimacy is closely related to the phenomenon of impression management (Goffman, 1959) and helps us understand how groups of people choose to present themselves publicly/internationally as opposed to how they understand themselves privately/domestically. During the Erasmus period these borders seem to shift. While previously cultural intimacy may have been experienced primarily at the level of the family or peer group it is now experienced at the level of the nation or ethnic group. This new level of cultural intimacy may help explain the frequent incidence of national stereotypes among the Erasmus students (like the one about the table manners).

Despite these tendencies toward stereotyping and polarization, they seemed to enjoy each other’s company. There was actually an incipient division of labour between the various nationalities involved. Some of the Scandinavians seemed to appreciate this role that the Spaniards played as ‘party engines’ and gladly went along. One of the girls even told me she longed for them to come and ‘ignite’ the party. As a result of this the Spaniards, who were not necessarily like that on a personal level, were reinforced by the reception they received and strengthened in their performance.³ The Scandinavians, on the other hand, periodically reverted to a ‘cooler’ style of interaction, usually by switching language to Swedish and having some low-profile conversation. This division of labour added some extra ‘spice’ to the evening.⁴

³ One of them, which I knew a bit, was otherwise a rather thoughtful and shy guy.
⁴ Such tendencies have also been observed among other young people. They can be seen, not least, in the interaction between various categories of travellers—like tourists and backpackers. Their desire to separate themselves from the ‘others’ is an important element in their collective action and colours many of their preoccupations and interactions. Such intergroup relations are usually coupled with derogatory stereotypes of the ‘others’ and severe competition for resources. The markers of identity that are set up to effect the separation of the groups can be
Interestingly, such stereotypes are not only entertained by the students but are also exhibited by many of them to come to the surface. During the special dinner offered to the exchange students—a celebratory and ceremonial event—the vice-chancellor of Stockholm University inserted a rather interesting anecdote to her welcoming speech. She told a funny story about how the reserved character of many Swedes sometimes could give way to an unexpected explosion of extroversion. Swedes were like a ketchup bottle: in the beginning it doesn’t give you anything no matter how much you squeeze and shake, but after a while and suddenly it says SPLASH and gives you all it has, for better or worse. So patience was seen as a virtue when travelling abroad and meeting foreign people.

During that same dinner and shortly after we had eaten pytt-i-panna (a Swedish national dish) another interesting situation occurred. We were told that we were now going to have a session of group singing (allsång); a cherished Swedish tradition. We were given a paper with some lyrics and soon we were all following the lead singer with the microphone. The hall was slowly filled with a ceremonial atmosphere resembling that of a football game or a political rally. The song was periodically punctured by applauses, cheers and giggling. After the group singing we were divided into national groups that one after the other sang ‘Brother Jacob’ in their respective language. Of course, only the numerically big languages were scheduled to appear (as evident by the paper with the lyrics), but a Finnish group also found its way to the microphone, as well as a single Bulgarian girl who sang a peculiar, and rather impressive, vocal piece which was obviously not ‘Brother Jacob’.

During all this the atmosphere became progressively more charged and the various nationalities started to emerge forcefully from the previously rather homogenised crowd. The applauses and cheers, now also accompanied by rhythmic stomping, became louder and more concentrated. Some of the participants clearly wanted to distinguish themselves from the amorphous mass of students by forming ‘national groups’ and cheering for their respective ‘troops’. A competitive and communicative extravaganza unfolded before my eyes. I was inadvertently reminded of football games and hooliganism.

Part of this social posturing is undeniably directed outwards; it is a signalling to friends and foes and an affirmation of familiar ties and conventional wisdom. However, part of this performative ethnicity also has an inward effect in that it feeds back on each individual’s psychological sensibilities and personal values. As a result of this, many long-term travellers experience a thorough, if temporary, boost of their ethnic or national consciousness. This effect is strengthened by the fact that travellers are often treated by the local population as just that—ambassadors of their respective countries (Wulff, 1992; Galani-Moutafi, 2001; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Oborune, 2010). For many students this is a dramatic experience that ‘pushes’ them into a prolonged round of self-reflective thinking. This is how Peter Hervik (1994: 96-97) describes the intricate relationship between embodiment and reflexivity as it pertains to cultural encounters:

A reflexivity in the ‘world’ can be acquired through shared social experience based on involvement with others in everyday contexts of practical action . . . Reflexivity is not exclusively a process of language and it is at best insufficient to treat reflexivity as an individual conscious activity. Reflexivity does not rise from painstaking generalizations from one’s own first-hand experiences, but from the combination of one’s own experiences and images presented in stories, myths, accounts and vicarious experience . . . Through shared social experience of people’s lives, thoughts and sufferings, we gain insight into the collective beliefs stored in cultural models. Sharing life and thoughts with people in common experience

anything from special clothes or hairstyles, to eating habits, to tattoos and body piercing (Elsrud, 2001; Galani-Moutafi, 2001).
is a question not of native substitution, but of mismatching categories, ‘the experience of relativism not as a form of anti-objectivity but as our only mode to objectivization’ (Ardener, 1989: 212-21). In this process a space is created where shared reflexivity becomes an essential tool for gaining cultural knowledge.

Reflexivity and categorization go hand in hand: not as a result of reflexivity and language in themselves, but as a consequence of the embodied prototypes and cultural models. Categorization is an ordering device for both inner understanding and social interaction. Categories might be applied for real-world experience, or in presupposed, simplified worlds, but once established their significance and adequacy are reflected upon.

Despite their conservative appearance such instances of cultural intimacy and symbolic ethnicity also open up, if ever so subtly, the possibility of a re-conceptualization and re-negotiation of the received wisdom of national traditions and ethnic identities (which otherwise would only figure as the banal backdrop to everyday life; cf. Billig, 1995). They therefore constitute, in an ironic way, an opportunity for increased cosmopolitanism. As shown previously, such a dialectical process—going from thesis through antithesis to synthesis—is a hallmark of the Erasmus experience and one of the main skills the young students train for in their cosmopolitan apprenticeship.

Narratives of self and other

Many of the discursive practices of the Erasmus students are related to their very salient group membership; a membership with both formal and informal ramifications. New group affiliations can be expressed in various ways—for example, through dress code, dialect, behavioural preferences—but importantly also in the narratives produced by the actors, usually to account for their new experiences (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Elsrud, 2001; Galani-Mutafi, 2001; Gelder, 2005). These stories are not only for the ears of the listeners though; they are equally geared towards helping their narrators mentally organise their experiences. By ordering experiences in a chronological fashion and embedding them in a storyline they secure a measure of intelligibility and continuity for their trajectory through time and space. Much of this work, however, is not done ex nihilo but follows well-established social conventions. According to Elsrud (2001: 600):

. . . the traveler does not begin narrating without some sort of manuscript. In order to make sense of acts and tales—one’s own or others”—the individual depends upon narrative-structures (Gergen and Gergen, 1986; Murray, 1989). The acts and tales of travel, like the symbols used in language, require a common meaning in order to be understood. They would say nothing (or something completely different from the expression) to the actor or the spectator, had they not been products of commonly shared manuscripts. These manuscripts, or rather ‘grand narratives of traveling’, work as systems of beliefs which unite people in some sort of common understanding about reality. They structure and define knowledge through their success in making real what is really biased.

There are a number of well-established narrative templates in the West available for travellers to use in their self-understanding and self-presentation (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Urry, 2002b). Examples of such ready-made templates are the ‘fun and pleasure narrative’ common among mass tourists, the ‘adventure narrative’ common among backpackers, the ‘missionary narrative’ found among aid workers, and the ‘do-it-yourself narrative’ common among international careerists.

Erasmus students also engaged in this narrative activity. Their meaning making was driven by different experiences and adaptive processes and was concentrated in three different time points in the temporal trajectory of the Erasmus Programme. The first experience that prompted
them to produce elaborate narratives was the feeling of uncertainty and lack of information characteristic of the first days of the programme. This was also a period saturated with messages and images coming from the official propaganda of the European Union and the local university administrations. These early narratives can therefore be seen as ‘working hypotheses’ or ‘forecasts’ made up of rumours, gossip and formal lore whose function was to help the students understand and navigate their new sociocultural terrain.

Later on, however, the need for such narratives faded into the background as the students were ‘swept away’ by the intense social life of the Erasmus community (see previous chapter), a life whose physical immediacy and intuitive meaningfulness was so great as to make narration quite unnecessary. During this ‘hot phase’ of the Erasmus period, the communicative practices of the students were more instrumental and performative in character (as opposed to reflective and narrative) and circled around the urgent needs of their emerging life world.

Close to the end of the Erasmus period, when the students prepared for their return home, narrative activity was rekindled. At this point the students attempted to achieve academic and psychological closure for their period abroad and this process prompted a recapitulation and retelling of their experiences in the form of autobiographical narratives. Once I went to a party in Kungsbacka. It was a typical student party, actually a birthday party, with most of the students gathered in the kitchen talking over some coffee or beer. The usual snacks were served, and due to the special occasion, a birthday cake as well. This party was obviously not going to turn ‘wild’; it was more of a cocktail party. Hence, it was a good opportunity for some conversational interviewing. I had Nico with me so naturally I turned to him. Since the end was approaching for his stay in Sweden, he was in a rather mellow mood and had a need to talk. I asked him some questions. The following short dialogue shows some elements from the narrative patterns mentioned above. For example, the wish to return to the place one has visited and the personal revelation (eye-opener) themes are reminiscent of adventure narratives while the panegyric elements at the end are a testimony of the influence of EU rhetoric.

Ioannis: How do you feel now that you will soon leave for Greece?
Nico: I feel bad. It is tough but I try to fight back. Anyway, I will come back.
Ioannis: You can come back for a post-graduate year.
Nico: Yes, that’s highly possible, and Sweden is a prime candidate since I’ve already been here. I even have gotten a Swedish language course certificate!
Ioannis: That is really impressive, man!
Nico: Having been here I think it will be easier to come back for a post-graduate or something. I have good grades from Greece and next year I think I will even improve them so I don’t think it will be hard getting admitted to a Swedish University.
Ioannis: Do you feel more European now that you have been an Erasmus?
Nico: Yes I do. I even feel like a carrier of the European spirit; a propagator of the European idea. Several friends I’ve talked with feel the same. The experience has been an eye-opener for me!
Ioannis: Ok, I see.
Nico: We are the future Europeans; people who have travelled, been around, and tried things out. Not like my father who only knew his village and the suburb of Athens where our home lies. I think that was also the intention behind the establishment of the Erasmus Programme; to create the new Europeans.

The final occasion for the production and deployment of elaborate narratives was after the completion of the programme. Here the underlying cause relates to the peculiarities of human memory. It is inevitable that the recollection of events past gradually fades from memory. Sometimes, for example after a cognitive shock, this forgetting can be even more marked and
However, far from being detrimental, such selective forgetting may have constructive and far-reaching consequences. One consequence is that it prompts into action the imaginative faculties of people, another is that it facilitates the process of joint meaning making. This is how Benedict Anderson (1983: 204-205) describes this process:

All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives. After experiencing the physiological and emotional changes produced by puberty, it is impossible to ‘remember’ the consciousness of childhood. How many thousands of days passed between infancy and early adulthood vanish beyond direct recall! How strange it is to need another’s help to learn that this naked baby in the yellowed photograph, sprawled happily on rug or cot, is you... Out of this estrangement comes a conception of personhood, identity (yes, you and that naked baby are identical) which, because it cannot be ‘remembered’, must be narrated... As with modern persons, so it is with nations. Awareness of being imbedded in secular, serial time, with all its implications of continuity, yet of ‘forgetting’ the experience of this continuity—product of the ruptures of the late eighteenth century—engenders the need for a narrative ‘identity’.

Many former Erasmus students were affected by a similar process. Their experiences while abroad often resulted in profound changes in their consciousness and this led to a characteristic ‘amnesia’ vis-à-vis their national ways. Hence, upon return to their home country many of them felt estranged from their former lives and communities (see previous chapter), and this feeling prompted the need to re-imagine and re-present their place in the world. As hinted to by Benedict Anderson (1983) this is done through narrative accounts which try to reconcile, to identify, the ‘before’ and ‘after’. Such narratives were often shared and elaborated between the former Erasmus students, for example during their reunion meetings. This process of social construction eventually subsumes various discontents and disjointments of the actual historical events (the ‘ruptures’ alluded to in the quote above) under the auspices of a higher order conception or cause, a collective grand narrative. In Athens I met Anna, a former Erasmus student, who was still engaged in the Erasmus network. Her narrative, typical of Erasmus students, was full of stories of personal development and cross-cultural encounters; it also showed clear signs of an attempt to reconcile the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of the Erasmus experience with the help of a grand narrative:

Ioannis: I would like to ask for your opinion on the Erasmus programme in general. What is your opinion about the students, the programme, the life they have here?

Anna: What can I say... what can I say! (she burst out). I only have the best to say. But I suppose you want me to be more specific.

Ioannis: Not necessarily. Just start with something.

Anna: Generally about the Erasmus programme? Well that it is a unique opportunity to expand your mind, get to know people from other countries, to realise that you are not the centre of it, that there is more than Greece, a whole Europe. I don’t know... I really became a new person after the Erasmus.

Ioannis: You have told me a lot of interesting stuff. A general question again. What do you believe is the goal of the Erasmus programme and what goals has it already achieved?

Anna: I don’t know why it was established by the European Union but what matters for me, what it achieves, is that it brings, truly and really, the peoples of Europe closer to each other, and shapes a European consciousness. Before the Erasmus you mainly function as a Greek, you don’t think so much outside your borders, but after that, suddenly, a whole new world

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5 The Erasmus Programme is a good case in point. For many students the experiences offered during the programme are so novel and intense that they amount to a cognitive shock (see previous chapter).
opens up before you and you function primarily as a European citizen, striving for the best of Europe as a whole, and only secondarily with your national identity.

**Ioannis:** And you think this mobility of students within the European Union contributes to this goal? Either generally or specifically?

**Anna:** Enormously! Enormously, tremendously. I consider that it contributes enormously and especially now while we are young and our personalities are under construction. That’s why a lot of Erasmus, when they finish, realise that they don’t want to stay in their native country anymore. Doubts start to operate in their minds: ‘I don’t have to live in Greece just because I was born here. I could as well stay somewhere else. At least give it a try’.

As can be seen from the examples above, the fact that the experiences of the Erasmus students are rooted in a politically motivated project gives their narratives an added twist; their narratives are not clear-cut instances of travelling lore, but rather, they mix many of the established narrative genres and supplement them with elements from the educational and political domain. Thus, the Erasmus students usually resort to a combination of the ‘do-it-yourself’ and the ‘adventure narrative’ in their discursive productions but intermix them with elements from the European Union’s political rhetoric (e.g. panegyric statements). This political rhetoric actually functions as a grand narrative that ‘frames’ the rest of their discursive productions. Another such grand narrative, that has become increasingly available to students in the Western world, is the cosmopolitan one. Both of these grand narratives rely for their meaningfulness and persuasiveness, like so many other collective representations, on the presence of a root metaphor; in this particular case the root metaphor that animates them is that of the fellowship of the Erasmus, the tightly knit group that gives meaning to the bigger ‘us’ (a kind of neo-tribe; more on this later).

As shown in the first chapter, the dissemination of the European idea and the creation of a European identity are two central goals of the European Commission’s work in the cultural domain (Bellier & Wilson, 2000; Shore, 2000). The fact that these goals are echoed in the narratives of many Erasmus students shows that they have already been achieved to a certain degree. This achievement is the more impressive as the students generally had a hypotonic interest in matters pertaining to the European unification process. It also shows that the students need a certain distance from the events and happenings of the Erasmus Programme, particularly from its ‘hot phase’, in order to be able to process their experiences and collect their thoughts about it. Given this distance they seem able to produce rather well-formed discourses about its ultimate meaning, discourses that are well in line with some of the official goals and declarations of the European Union. Hence, there is a confluence of the bottom-up and top-down processes of ideological production.

**Information technology and media preferences**

As mentioned earlier, the community of Erasmus students encompasses a large number of languages and even more local idioms. If one decided to make a momentary recording of some typical Erasmus venue one would capture a veritable pandemonium of dialects and languages.

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6 Talking about matters pertaining to the European unification process, and even less so taking an active political stance, was not a common occurrence among the Erasmus students. When talking to each other, in coffee shops or communal dinners, Erasmus students usually preferred other topics of discussion (for example, partying and travel). When they did talk about the unification process it was almost always in the form of a casual joke or a pretentious exclamation. The only exception to this, as hinted above, was the narratives constructed during the beginning and end of the Erasmus period.

7 In this regard it is important to remember that one of the original goals of the Erasmus Programme was to improve language skills among the young populations of Europe. And, true enough, a number of Erasmus students had
Thus, it is of some interest to see how they communicate with each other and coordinate their social activities. Related to this question is the issue of their relations to their home country. Erasmus students, after all, need to maintain some sort of contact with their ‘base camp’ and this necessitates various practical arrangements. We must, therefore, take a closer look at the Erasmus student’s communication patterns and their use of communication technologies.

Nowadays we are so accustomed to internet access and multimodal telecommunications that we easily forget that their presence has not been a given since ‘time immemorial’. When I conducted my fieldwork in 2005 the media landscape was quite different. There was, for instance, no Facebook or Twitter, and Google was just one of many search engines. Mobile phones were also much more primitive and, other than sending and receiving text messages easily, conferred few advantages besides their mobility (they were also quite expensive to buy and operate).

Yet, even then, the Erasmus students had a knack for new communication technologies. One of the things I remember from my first encounters with them is that they were on the lookout for innovative, and cheap, telephone services. Helen, my contact from Greece, used to go out to one of the outdoor telephone booths and make several calls each afternoon. The fact that she went outside, in the freezing cold, to make these calls struck me as noteworthy. The rest of us waited inside, in the warmth of the student dormitory, for her to come back. The reasons for her actions soon dawned on me. Back in that time (yes, it feels distant!) the charge for calling with a mobile phone was much higher than the charge for calling with a regular phone, and therefore, many students preferred the telephone booth over their own mobile when making lengthy phone calls. To make it even more economic many Erasmus students used to buy special telephone cards that offered them the opportunity to make international calls at discounted prices.

Just a couple of years later, with the advent of cheap mobile telephony, mobile phones became the preferred means of communication in the Erasmus community. As soon as the students arrived at the host country, they quickly acquired local mobile phones, or local sim-cards, and started calling around. Likewise, text messages were regularly used to exchange information or set dates. This activity was so regular that it could actually be seen as a minor rite of passage of the Erasmus students (van Gennep, 1960); the change of mobile phone or sim-card symbolised their transfer from the old land to the new one. After these initial arrangements the students became ‘accessible’.

Another expression of this communicative urge was that most students either had laptops with them or quickly bought such from the local market. Those who could not afford such purchases relied on the public computer facilities offered by the university. These facilities, as mentioned earlier, were some of the most frequented places on campus and a natural meeting ground for the newly arrived students. They formed part of the students’ ‘living room’, so to speak. One of the first things the students did upon arriving to their host country was to seek out computer access and get on-line.

Taken as a whole, most of these communications were within the student community. As for the students’ contacts with their home country—friends, relatives, partners and so on—they were rather sparse. Most of them were totally absorbed by the intensive social life of the Erasmus community and seldom ‘strayed away’. This was an unexpected finding at odds with what is the case among other groups of foreign residents, such as Trinidadian expatriates or Tamil refugees, who carefully tend to their old-time contacts (Cohen, 1997; Fuglerud, 1999;
Miller & Slater, 2001). For the Erasmus students the contacts with their home country were intensive only in the beginning and near the end of the stay. In between, the students were quite oblivious to the situation at home and only informed themselves occasionally by some email, phone call or newspaper reading on the internet:

**Juliet:** In the beginning, the first months when I came here they [the contacts] were really strong, strong—we wrote to each other all the time.

**Ioannis:** Letters or emails?

**Juliet:** Emails.

**Ioannis:** Emails. To your father, mother, sister or . . . ?

**Juliet:** Friends.

**Ioannis:** Ok.

**Juliet:** Even my father wrote to me! Yes.

**Ioannis:** Your father wrote to you. For the first time?

**Juliet:** He is not really into this writing but now that I came here we wrote to each other. But now I was into this exam and I didn’t go to the internet so much and all the people got used to it; that I am not there anymore. So we don’t really get in touch so often anymore.

**Ioannis:** It has become less?

**Juliet:** Yes, it has become less.

The Erasmus students, thus, form a part of the larger culture of juvenile media consumption. As many writers have shown, young people of today tend to make frequent and creative use of the new communication technologies in order to further their personal and social needs (Miller & Slater, 2001). They may use them in order to stay in touch with friends and relatives, to find mates and sexual liaisons, or simply for recreational purposes. They also use them for more tricky businesses, such as settling disputes, coordinating complex activities across time and space, or negotiating political and economic issues. The internet especially, with its multimodal way of functioning, offers plentiful opportunities for such mediated communications.

In this regard, it is important to mention that there existed an important difference between Stockholm and Athens. In Stockholm, access to high-standard computer facilities was abundant and unimpaired while in Athens the existing computer facilities were fewer in number and more difficult to use. For instance, in the Athens Polytechnic the computer room was often crowded and the allotted time for each user was limited. This, of course, made for some differences in the communicative experience of the Erasmus students. Surfing on the internet for hours seems to have been a rarer occurrence in Athens; the computers were usually put to more time-efficient use. Hence, the students in Athens had to be more creative in finding the computer access they needed and had to rely more heavily on commercial solutions.

This difference in the availability of public computer facilities should not only be seen as a reflection of the two countries’ unequal technological standard. Although new technologies offer new possibilities for social organization and action, they are more often than not used in line with well-established traditions and habits (Miller & Slater, 2001; Horst & Miller, 2006: 6-7). Hence, the historical suspicion of Greeks toward the public sector (Herzfeld, 1992; Putnam et al., 1994) goes hand-in-hand with the relatively low supply of public computer facilities in Athens, whereas the high supply of computer facilities in Stockholm goes hand-in-hand with the Swedish people’s reliance upon public service. Thus, access to new gizmos does not necessarily imply original or revolutionary uses.

*The case of Euronews*

The well-organised communal living of the Erasmus students in Stockholm also allowed for a special kind of media consumption. Already while being a student I had noticed that the
Erasmus students, at least in Lappis where I lived, had the habit of watching Euronews systematically. Even more so, this habit was at times also adopted by the local students (a double cosmopolitan gain?). In every dormitory with more than a couple of exchange students this channel enjoyed considerable popularity. Especially in the mornings and afternoons, when the students gathered in the kitchen to prepare their meals, or during their weekend leisure, it was customary to follow its broadcasts. Euronews was like the open fire in a mountain cabin; a requisite part of the interiors.

This habit was partly the result of clever social engineering by the European Union and its ‘thinking head’, the European Commission. The European Commission had for a long time applauded the activities of this channel and beginning on February 21st, 2005, it contracted its services for a ‘mission of European information’ (European Commission, 2007). Henceforth, Euronews became a channel that openly propagated the merits and virtues of the European Union. The channel tries, as well as it can, to present a fair mixture of news and entertainment from all corners of Europe. There are programmes dedicated to the various member states and some of the broadcasts are in native language. Given that most of its broadcasts are in English it is possible for people with different national backgrounds to watch it.

Even though most Erasmus students were oblivious to the political intentions of Euronews and its patrons, they nevertheless seemed to prefer its services over those of other channels. Actually, I would go as far as to claim that back then (the second half of the 1990s and the first years of the new millennium) watching Euronews was one of the communal ‘traditions’ of the Erasmus students. Other ‘traditions’, as we saw earlier, were going to the Wednesday pub or meeting up in the computer rooms.

Recently this habit seems to have abated in favour of more diverse media consumption patterns. In Solna Cabins, the area most strongly associated with exchange students, Euronews was not frequently watched. This change of habits may reflect varying preferences within the Erasmus community, but it may also be the result of more circumstantial factors such as which cable-TV supplier is available in a certain area. Nevertheless, media consumption was still quite transnational even though, naturally, it was tilted in favour of nationally based broadcasts. On the whole the English-speaking channels predominated, but there were also some French, German and Swedish channels that were being watched.

Since the students appreciated each other’s company they often ended up watching each other’s national TV broadcasts. Given that most of these students would, under normal circumstances, never watch German or Swedish programmes, doing so constituted a kind of multicultural gain, if ever so small. Through these foreign channels the students got valuable glimpses into each other’s cultures, and slowly got used to the richness and diversity of an increasingly interconnected world. This socializing around the ‘TV cabin’, above and beyond linguistic barriers and national peculiarities, made them receptive to influences from other cultures and instilled a sense of common destiny, of becoming European.

This situation, though coloured by the special requirements and predicaments of the Erasmus experience, is not really unique to exchange students. As many researchers have pointed out, media consumption is nowadays thoroughly transnational in most parts of the world, and there is even evidence that it is increasingly becoming propagandistic of a new civic mentality; an imagined community of cosmopolitans (Robertson, 2012). In their empirical survey, looking for potential cultures of cosmopolitanism, Bronislaw Szerszynski and John Urry (2002: 467) lend support to the increasing incidence of a ‘banal globalism’:

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8 According to this contract the channel will receive 5 million Euros of funding each year and in return has to produce material relevant to, and propagandistic of, the European Union and its unification process (at least 10% of its production must be of this kind).
Thus there is much global imagery on contemporary TV, both directly of the globe and indirectly through images of exemplary ‘global’ individuals and peoples and through various iconic places, peoples and animals. The media frequently uses techniques by which different places and people are framed as representing, or speaking on behalf of, the one earth. And we explored the production, circulation and reception of ‘banal globalism’ beyond the televisual genres usually regarded as of ‘civic’ significance, including advertisements, logos, music video, and soap operas (Szerszynski and Toogood, 2000; Meijer, 1998). The global is thus ‘ready-to-hand’, a backcloth to a world of exceptional co-presence. As well as the ubiquitous TV (1 billion world-wide), PCs, planes, mobiles and modems enable people to straddle that globe, circling it with bodies, messages, bits of information and images that pass over and beyond horizons (see Franklin, Lury and Stacey, 2000).

Although this development may not always do justice to the world’s sociopolitical complexity (Merskin, 2004), it nonetheless signifies an important change in attitude. It marks an increased interest in the world’s cultural diversity. The familiarization with other cultures afforded by such mediated communications may be superficial at first, but over time and repeated exposures, it has an undeniable influence on the dispositions and self-representations of its receivers. Erasmus students, as we have seen, entertain a number of representations related to intercultural contact and cross-border travelling. Moreover, the Erasmus students seem to go beyond this banal globalism and instead embody and practice a form of rudimentary cosmopolitanism (with an occasional tinge of Europeanism).

Concluding remarks

In this chapter I have showcased some of the language uses and narrative forms at the disposal of the Erasmus students. Erasmus students seem to be very fond of small talk, and engage in it heartily, both during the initial phase of their stay abroad and thereafter. Such relatively unconditional forms of communication can, under the right circumstances, give rise to new *life worlds*, the rudiments around which new social groups and communities can grow (Habermas, 1979).

As soon as the first Erasmus communities have formed, however, we also find evidence of more socially structured communications. For example, there is an existence of rumours and gossip among the Erasmus students. Such forms of talk have both positive and negative functions. The positive function relates to the information sharing and group bonding that takes place in the context of various social activities. The negative function relates to the social control and personal stigmatization that may follow in the wake structural relations within groups.

A typical communicative practice of the Erasmus students was to engage in social comparisons between various national attributes. In this regard, the students seemed to have an almost insatiable hunger for such comparative exercises. These comparisons, and the performative enactments that often accompanied them, had a dual function. On the one hand, they boosted the *cultural intimacy* of many students, and hence strengthened their resolve in the face of cultural and communicative adversity (Herzfeld, 2005). In extreme cases they could lead to outright stereotyping of non-nationals, a well-known phenomenon from the field of group studies (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). On the other hand, they were the raw material in an elaborate *dialectical process* that invited a search for similarities between national traits and traditions (‘we do it this way, how do you do it?’) which, when found, were quickly used as foundational social acts upon which transnational fellowships often emerged. Some of these spontaneous fellowships later developed into more permanent friendships and subgroupings.
In their efforts to communicate with each other and mark their turf in the context of the wider university life, the Erasmus students also rely heavily on modern information technology. Both mobile telephony and digital computers are used as means to seek out and uphold contact, and coordinate action with other Erasmus students. In Stockholm the Erasmus students even had a Euro-propagandistic TV channel at their disposal, Euronews. This channel, pre-installed in many student dormitories, was frequently watched by the exchange students.

Finally, although the present study is rather limited in its discursive ambitions, it did manage to find examples of well-known types of narratives. Several students, for example, fashioned autobiographical narratives out of their experiences as exchange students. In so doing, they usually followed some of the established narrative conventions of the West, for example the ‘adventure narrative’ or the ‘do-it-yourself narrative’. According to my experience elaborate narratives were mostly produced at three time points in the temporal trajectory of the Erasmus Programme: during the first days, close to its termination, and when the students were back in their home countries (with the two later forms playing a dominant role). Perhaps when the alarm of student life had settled and they entered a more contemplative mode it was easier to reconnect to the formal framework of the programme which had, after all, been there all along. In such instances of after-the-fact reminiscence, the discussion of various issues pertaining to the European unification process could be more thorough and balanced. Such stories were often told to me spontaneously in an attempt to sum up the experiences—often of considerable emotional import—that the Erasmus period had occasioned. Most interesting, perhaps, was the presence of direct references to the European unification process in the narrative constructions of the Erasmus students.

In many ways the communicative practices of the Erasmus students are a means to an end. Through exploring new communicative avenues, or rediscovering old ones, the students try to grapple with their position in a relatively unfamiliar environment and try to find ways of dealing with social and cultural complexity. The intensified self-reflexivity occasioned by this has a profound influence on their development and often leads to the crafting of new selves, selves better suited to the exigencies of transnational society and the demands of youth culture (Kondo, 1990; Gelder, 2005). In the long run such adaptive responses result in a better understanding and tolerance for the ‘other’ and represent a form of nascent cosmopolitanism (Hannerz, 1996).

Now that we have a good picture of the Erasmus students social and communicative life it is time to turn our attention to some overarching questions. What is the place of the Erasmus students in the larger context of transnational mobility? What are the effects of flexible work forms and time-space compression on their academic and extracurricular life? Are the Erasmus students becoming more adept at handling intercultural communication and cultural complexity? Do they become more critical of their national heritage and, as a consequence, more accepting of alternative lifestyles? Does the Erasmus period offer them any competitive advantages? Are the effects of the programme enduring or just a fashionable trend?
Now that we have had a closer look at the social and cultural life of the Erasmus student group, it is time to place it in a wider context and see how it relates to the phenomenon of globalisation, the increasingly important economy of transnational flows of people, goods, ideas and values. One of the most tangible consequences of these increased flows is that people nowadays have first-hand experience of the world’s cultural diversity. How is this diversity managed by the Erasmus students? Do Erasmus students react to it with cosmopolitan openness and discernment or with parochialism and defensiveness? And what role do the local inhabitants and their culture play in this scenario?

The Erasmus Programme is by definition related to travel. The student exchange period starts and ends with a physical journey, and in between there is room for even more travel. It is, therefore, important to have a look at the various forms this travelling takes, its relationship to other forms of travel (Urry, 2002a), and how it influences the experience of being an Erasmus student. Also, how much of this travelling survives the student years, to become an ordinary part of their emerging adulthood, as opposed to a fleeting preoccupation of their youth?

Related to the question of mobility is temporality. A mobile way of life, with frequent travels and relocations, places different demands on the management of time than staying put, and this calls for certain practical and social rearrangements. In particular, several authors have shown that our increasingly mobile and networked way of life is predicated on a different sense of temporality (Bauman, 1998; Sennett, 1998; Czarniawska, 2004), and that this new sense functions as both an organising and segregating principle of modern life. In light of this, it is interesting to look at what potential consequences this situation has for the Erasmus students.

Finally, it is interesting to speculate about the future consequences, both personal and social, of the Erasmus Programme. How are the student’s perspectives on the world and on themselves affected by their border-crossing and multi-local experiences? Does the Erasmus Programme promote the development of creolisation or cosmopolitanisation, as observed among other youth cultures (Hannerz, 1996; Sansone, 1995), or are its effects negligible in this respect? Does it indeed facilitate language learning and career development (the original goals of the programme)? Also, does it create a European consciousness, as some authors have proposed (Shore, 2000)?

The global (student) village

Today large numbers of people are constantly moving around the world—tourists, politicians, businessmen, artists—this being simultaneously both a cause and an effect of our increasingly interconnect world (Appadurai, 1996; Bauman, 1998). At the same time, this voluntary flow of people, usually from the West to the rest of the world, is supplemented by a stream of people moving in the opposite direction and under less glamorous pretexts: migrants, refugees and expatriates (Bauman, 1998). The combined effect of these processes has been that most people in the world today have become more or less accustomed to international travel and intercultural contacts (Hannerz, 1996; Urry, 2002a). We seem to live in a global village.

Of course, this situation also affects the lives of young people. The following vignette illustrates this point. Juliet, whom we have met before, had come to Sweden from Slovenia to study politics. Even though she had not travelled extensively before, she knew a lot of things...
about Sweden through her contacts, as well as from the media and through books and magazines. She even had some special interests which she wanted to pursue while in Sweden, like Swedish design. Thus, her coming to Sweden was motivated by both academic and extracurricular interests. Juliet was also very wary of falling into the Erasmus ‘trap’; ending up socialising with Erasmus students only. She therefore tried actively to meet local people and keep away from the student exchange venues. She was very keen to get to know Sweden and its inhabitants.

After two months Juliet had to return to Slovenia to attend to some private business. As a tennis instructor she had to attend a tournament where one of her trainees participated. She packed her stuff anew and went back to coach her student. Thus, she temporarily left her life as an Erasmus student in Sweden to become an international tennis coach. This was something that she wanted to do, and looked forward to, despite the fact that she was neither especially wealthy nor particularly experienced in international travel. Thus, from a Slovenian university student she became a European exchange student in Stockholm and from a European exchange student she turned into an international tennis coach. Over a period of no more than five months she relocated three times (this excludes the many smaller travels she undertook in between). As far as I could see she was completely at ease with these relocations.

Juliet’s case exemplifies how unproblematic it is for many Erasmus students to traverse geographical distances and switch cultural spheres. Moving over national borders, and temporarily relocating in a foreign country, has nowadays become a common, almost banal, occurrence. For the young urban populations of today this worldliness, this cosmopolitanism, is their preferred mode of being; the patriotic attachment to a bounded piece of land, which was its historical predecessor, is becoming increasingly foreign to them.

Village factions

This situation, however, does not mean that national and cultural distinctions have been eradicated. The global village, as it turns out, has village fractions. For this reason, Juliet’s illustrative case history notwithstanding, it is important to have a closer look at the relational patterns of the Erasmus students in order to understand their place, and agency, in an increasingly interconnected world. As discussed in previous chapters, the Erasmus students tend to form cohesive groups with rather marked ‘isolationist’ tendencies. These tendencies mainly show themselves in their reluctance to befriend local students and the challenges they encounter with regard to engaging with local society in a sustained way. Still, the internal diversity of the Erasmus community offered ample opportunities for transnational contact and cross-cultural communication. Helen, a Greek student who visited Stockholm, gave a succinct description of this situation:

Well, there was indeed this phenomenon. In particular the Italians went with other Italians. Of course, there was also the issue of whether there were many of them from the same nationality. I mean, the Italians were in higher numbers than the rest of us so, unavoidably, they had to socialise with each other. There was of course also the issue of language. It is not easy twenty-four hours a day to speak English or German or some other language. You want to speak your own language, that’s for sure. I mean, it is a different kind of communication to speak in your own language. But this doesn’t mean anything. I believe that all of us wanted to escape from the narrow confines of our nationality. I remember that I socialised a lot with Spanish people, Dutch people, French people, Belgian people.

From this quote we see that the degree to which students preferred the company of their compatriots, and ended up in monolingual national groups, was mostly affected by the population distribution in the wider Erasmus group. Hence, the tendency to coalesce into compatriot groupings was most marked with students form the big nations.
Several other researchers have come to similar conclusions with regard to the relational patterns of the Erasmus students. In her sociometric study of Erasmus students, Ainhoa de Federico de la Rúa (2001: 12-13, 2003) found that 37 per cent of friends were of the same nationality, 43 per cent were other European exchange students, 17 per cent were local students and 3 per cent had other non-European nationalities. These proportions are in clear dissonance with the population distribution at the host university (92 per cent local students, 6,2 per cent non-European students, 1,4 per cent European exchange students) and show that the Erasmus students have very specific, non-random, relational preferences. Similarity of status—being an exchange student or compatriot—is the most important factor in friendship choice (see also Van Mol & Michielsen, 2014). Murphy-Lejeune (2002), in her study of the Erasmus students, came to a similar conclusion, while Maiworm et al (1991: 59-60) tell us that many of the Erasmus students who stayed for a longer period were ‘critical about the assistance provided in getting to know the host country culture and society’. These findings are also in line with my own observations and surveys.

This outcome can be understood in several ways. There is, to begin with, the issue of different interests and priorities. As shown previously, Erasmus students do not always give coursework and career building their due diligence. Instead, they are more interested in extracurricular and recreational activities which they seek out with great enthusiasm and determination. In doing so, however, they lose valuable opportunities to socialise with local students who are often less inclined to engage in such activities (Van Mol & Michielsen, 2014). Here it should be mentioned that the local population also contributed to this situation. Local students are not always willing to or capable of engaging the Erasmus students in meaningful and sustained interaction and this is, of course, noticed by both parties involved. Anna, a former Erasmus student who now worked for a student association in Greece, was well aware of this situation:

As with every country where you go as an Erasmus student, once again both from personal experience and from what we’ve heard, it is somehow typical that the locals, due to their preoccupations and worries, studies, or work, they usually don’t have the time or interest to engage with something so much ‘outside’. Unless you have yourself been an Erasmus, in which case you seek it out.

There is also evidence of such processes from other youth studies. Thus, we know that tourists often have limited contact with the local population while backpackers and au pairs often avoid contact with tourists. These separations, however, are mitigated by a process of contestation and negotiation—which takes place both between and within groups as well as between and within individuals—and this makes for the emergence of interesting middle grounds, like the emergence of ‘backpacker tourism’ (Wulff, 1992; Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995; Galani-Moutafi, 2001; Laurie Murphy, 2001; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002).

The survey I conducted was a classical friendship survey (see Scott, 2005). It was conducted electronically and only required a few minutes to complete. In it I asked the Erasmus students to nominate their three closest friends as well as to supply some demographic information about them (national, residential, administrative and educational status). Following that, and using a ‘snowball’ sampling technique, the survey went on and asked the friends about their friends and so on, as long as the chain kept expanding. The survey was well received in Stockholm. However, the survey was not well received by the Erasmus students in Athens. The biggest hurdle was probably the issue of internet access, which was not as good in Athens as in Stockholm. Thus, the students hesitated to ‘waste’ their precious internet time on issues of minor importance. Even though it was small, this survey gave very valuable information about the Erasmus population at Stockholm University (similar results could not be obtained from Athens).

Although the results were not fully analysed for this thesis, preliminary analyses point in the same direction as the mentioned studies. For example, looking into the administrative status of the students (Erasmus/non-Erasmus), my results show that out of 64 students surveyed 40 (62,5 %) were fellow Erasmus students while 24 (37,5 %) were non-Erasmus.
The migratory status of Erasmus students—especially of those staying for longer periods—also contributes to this outcome. The dissolution of their national life worlds unavoidably opens them up to new experiences. This existential predicament motivates the students to make new acquaintances and coalesce into circles of friends in search of alternative life worlds. However, it also sensitises them to the politics of belonging and, as several authors have shown, such politics can go ‘both ways’; it can both increase understanding and cooperation with other people, and close ranks around the remnants of an in-group’s cultural intimacy (Eriksen, 2001; Herzfeld, 2005; Yuval-Davies, 2011). The result ultimately hangs on the intricate balance between structural (e.g., group affiliation, status, power resources) and communicative factors (e.g., rhetoric, impression management) and how they play out in a given situation. In the case of the Erasmus students, this politics of belonging, more often than not, leads to a desperate clinging together with those ‘closest at hand’, which is either compatriot students or fellow Erasmus students. Erasmus students, hence, quickly become finicky about company and may distance themselves from the host population. This trend is also related to the fact that the Erasmus group has a very high membership turnover; new students arrive all the time and need to be accommodated by their peers, and this creates both a sense of practical urgency and a sense of numerical self-sufficiency. As a result of this the Erasmus group never ‘settles’, but rather is in a state of perpetual group formation; a highly dynamic and attractive state.

In Stockholm these tendencies were reinforced by a strong residential compartmentalisation. Exchange students were routinely allocated to a number of distinct areas and this administrative practice, its benign intentions notwithstanding, raised barriers in their contact with local society. As Helen told me in our interview, ‘Most of us lived in the same area, I mean in adjacent rooms, so the contact was almost everyday’. This fact added a sense of immediacy and genuineness to their interactions, almost like camping together, but also had a social inbreeding effect, what Murphy-Lejeune (2002: 187) has called the ‘double fencing’ phenomenon: students were set apart from non-students and exchange students from local students.4

Interestingly, this practice also created some divisions within the Erasmus community at large. Thus, people from Lappis had fewer contacts with people from Kungshamra than from their own area, and both of these areas had even fewer contacts with the student population of the Solna Cabins area. As my informant Nico said when we visited some Erasmus acquaintances in Lappis, ‘We just don’t meet so often. They live here, I live in Kungshamra, so we just met at the Allhuset and I’ve stopped going there anyway’. The students from Solna Cabins were the most physically isolated, and therefore, the most cohesive group.

These exclusive tendencies of the Erasmus students were also fuelled by their formal group status. From the beginning the Erasmus students had a label attached to them and enjoyed relatively special living and study conditions. Such a formal group status establishes, by definition, formal intergroup relationships. Relationships of this kind are known to accentuate categorical thinking, especially in novel urban settings where other interpretations of the situation, like historical or personal ones, are not as salient.5 This means that visitors in a foreign

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4 Such structural segregation and social ‘inbreeding’ have also been observed in other areas; for example, the labour market (see Granovetter, 1973).

5 Clyde Mitchell made a still useful classification of the ways people perceive and evaluate social relationships into three separate orders. First there is the structural order in which the behaviour of people is interpreted in terms of the action appropriate to their formal status, position, or role in some organised setting, such as in a factory, a family, a voluntary association, a trade union or a political party. Then there is the categorical order in which the behaviour of people, especially in unstructured situations, is interpreted with the help of a number of social stereotypes. Such stereotypes are usually drawn from the domains of ethnicity, religion, class and/or race. Finally, there is the personal order in which the behaviour of people, either in structured or unstructured situations, is interpreted with the help of their personal relationships. Here kinship structure, friendship networks, and elite cliques are the preferred criteria (Mitchell, 1969: 9-10).
country can resort to a stereotypic perception of the locals—that of ‘we’ against ‘them’—and end up engaging in shallow formalistic relationships with them; for reasons of cognitive convenience, if nothing else. This holds true both between visitors and locals and between various categories of visitors (Mitchell, 1969; Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

Categorisations, however, are not carved in stone. They are embedded in wider classificatory systems as well as discursive power relations and these ultimately influence the contextual meaning and emotional valence of any given categorisation (Holy and Stuchlik, 1983; Durand & Paolella, 2013; Glynn & Chad, 2013). As these classificatory systems and discursive power relations are amenable to change so are the frames through which categories are understood and the way they are used in inter- and intragroup relationships. Eventually this process leads to the reformulation of old categories and the formation of new ones. In the words of Michael Herzfeldt (2005: 91):

Clearly, people do not think, act, or speak exactly as the schematized ideologies of statism would prefer. Nevertheless, they do continue to serve their national entities with great loyalty and to move within the legal and political frameworks that the latter provide. By questioning the naturalization of culture in statist ideologies as well as the concomitant reification of nature, we can perhaps begin to understand how sensitive actors can negotiate the tensions of social identity and daily life within the turbulent context of the modern nation-state, and how they can be fiercely patriotic and just as fiercely rebellious at one and the same time. This perspective represents an epistemological militant middle ground; it entails recognizing agency rather than surrendering to either regress or reification.

Mehmet, the Turkish doctoral student I met in Athens, nicely illustrates this complex interplay of cognitive, social and cultural factors. Although he was a highly intelligent and sensitive person, he too relied on categorical thinking. One day we were sitting in a fashionable coffee shop (incidentally called ‘Ethnikon’ and next to the Greek Parliament), discussing various topics. At some point he said that Greeks seemed to have shallower relationships with each other than Turks, and that he therefore had not managed to get close to them. The statement was placed in the context of the relationships engendered by the Erasmus Programme, but I could not help but suspect that it was also influenced by the particular history of Greek-Turkish relationships, and hence, pregnant with ideological and nationalist connotations. I therefore countered by asking him if he had had any sustained contact with Greek people. After a minor negotiation between us he admitted that he did not know much about Greek people. ‘The problem is that the Erasmus don’t really get to know the locals. I for example only know German people!’ Our discussion continued for a while, and by the time we parted company, I had the feeling that he had realised his misjudgement and changed his opinion.

The implication of the above discussion is that cultural differences tend to persist, and are occasionally accentuated, despite interethnic contact and interdependence between groups. This phenomenon is well attested in much of the literature dealing with issues of group relations, ethnicity, migration and intercultural contact (Barth, 1969; Hogg & Abrams, 1988), and has even been reported in recent studies of world attitudes (Norris & Inglehart, 2012). Fredrik Barth (1969: 9-10) identified some of the principles involved in this phenomenon:

Though the naive assumption that each tribe and people has maintained its culture through a bellicose ignorance of its neighbours is no longer entertained, the simplistic view that geographical and social isolation have been the critical factors in sustaining cultural diversity persists. An empirical investigation of the character of ethnic boundaries, as documented in the following essays, produces two discoveries which are hardly unexpected, but which demonstrate the inadequacy of this view. First, it is clear that boundaries persist despite a flow of personnel across them. In other words, categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact and information, but do entail social processes of exclusion and
incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories. Secondly, one finds that stable, persisting, and often vitally important social relations are maintained across such boundaries, and are frequently based precisely on the dichotomized ethnic statuses. In other words, ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of social interaction and acceptance, but are quite to the contrary often the very foundations on which embracing social systems are built. Interaction in such a social system does not lead to its liquidation through change and acculturation; cultural differences can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence.

The life of the Erasmus students is hence characterised by a strong duality. Erasmus students profess a strong interest to get to know their host country and its inhabitants but, more often than not, fall disappointingly short of this noble intention. Most of them are not well acquainted, and in all likelihood poorly integrated, with local society, and instead spend most of their time abroad in the comfort and reassurance offered by the Erasmus group. Internally, however, the Erasmus students enjoy the cultural diversity afforded them by the exchange programme as evidenced by their strong social cohesion and the establishment of transnational friendships. This social cohesion, and the cultural intimacy it spawns (Herzfeldt, 2005), is actually the main reason for this low level of contact with local society as it turns them into a rather self-absorbed group. Still, in the longer run, the students’ feelings of belonging and the borders of their public solidarities are changed as a result of their experiences, moving away from the prerogatives of statist ideologies towards a more cosmopolitan direction.

Touring Culture

In an earlier chapter it was mentioned that the Erasmus students were approached by small-to-middle-range tourist agencies and offered travel packages to various destinations. Most of them took the bait, and thus they travelled. Typical examples, in the case of Stockholm, were weekend trips to the Baltic countries. Given that most of these destinations were within easy reach, and relatively inexpensive, many students visited them all: Riga, Helsinki and Copenhagen (Oslo was for some reason less popular). In particular, the trip to Helsinki with the big ferry boats—the so-called love boats—was a classic. Hardly any Erasmus student who visited Stockholm abstained from going. Erasmus students in Athens made trips to the Greek islands and the countryside. Islands like Mykonos, Paros and Santorini were often chosen, while sites like Mount Olympus, Meteora, and Thessalonica were the mainland favourites.

I personally made a trip on one of the love boats together with two masters’ students from Greece. Like most other passengers, we could not resist the licentious atmosphere of the boat and engaged in the usual activities: partying, drinking and mingling. But, between our trips to the dance floor and bouts of drinking, I also managed to have some serious conversations with these two Erasmus students. We talked about being a student in a foreign country, their future career plans as well the challenges of integrating into local society. We even touched upon some issues pertaining to the European unification process.

The Erasmus students were not foreign to the lures of ordinary tourism either. Consequently, they occasionally indulged in typically touristic preoccupations like sightseeing, metropolitan shopping, or holiday vacations. For many Erasmus students this tourist gaze (Urry, 2002a) was part and parcel of the typical Erasmus experience. In this regard, some of the newly emerged low-budget carriers like Ryan Air played an important role. Suddenly, flying to London or Madrid was not a prohibitively expensive venture; it was within easy reach even for the wallets of young exchange students.
The Erasmus students, though, were more discerning and finicky than the average mass tourist and were generally weary of falling into touristic ‘traps’. Hence, they often avoided places and ventures typical of the mass tourist, such as guided tours, holiday resorts and the like, preferring instead to get to know the country and its people on their own. Most of the time they had previous knowledge of the country they visited as well as a number of friends who could host them. Usually the Erasmus students travelled in small bands of friends and had a predilection for visiting other university cities. In this sense, they had more in common with travelling groups such as backpackers or international aid workers.

Near the end of their stay abroad, and after they have amassed a considerable amount of contacts, many Erasmus students commence on a veritable ‘Grand Tour’ of Europe. They start to visit each other, often with the pretense of saying a last farewell, and in the process establish a circuit of crisscrossing itineraries and destinations. My Erasmus friend Nico was part of this touring culture (Rojek & Urry, 1997). After saving money for a whole semester—a difficult thing to do for a young man with minimal income—he embarked on his planned and long sought-after sojourn. During that tour, which took him almost a month, he visited some friends of his in different European countries and teamed up with some other Greeks for the final return home. After the end of this roundabout he was completely broke. One could claim that through this peculiar kind of ‘homecoming’ he made a last, rather utopian, attempt to resist the shackles of ordinariness that awaited him at home.

The Erasmus students are thus part of a larger flow of people across national borders, that of tourist, migrants, businessmen, artists, and intellectuals. Long-distance tourism, in particular, may have served as a ready-made model to emulate, at least with regard to the extracurricular aspects of the programme. This is not surprising, as tourism has in many ways preceded the more recent communication and technology driven globalisation and has already undergone several well-delimited transformations. One such transformation is that tourism has gone from being simply an act of touring to other cultures to nowadays also being a ‘touring culture’. Another transformation is that the attitude associated with it, the ‘tourist gaze’, has spilled over to the general population and become a generalised trait of modern citizens; people are nowadays tourists much of the time, whether they like it or not (Rojek & Urry, 1997; Bauman, 1998; Urry, 2002a). The Erasmus students offer illustrious examples of both processes.

The reunion meeting

A particular aspect of this ‘touring culture’ is the reunion meeting, a congregation of former Erasmus students at some select destination. During my time with the Erasmus students I had the privilege to take part in such meetings several times. For instance, I vividly remember when two former Erasmus students from Spain came back to Sweden. The girls were coming just in time for the University’s spring festival. When the news of their return reached us, an air of enthusiasm rapidly spread in our circle of friends. The expectations of a merry reunion skyrocketed; we had missed them so much, we were going to meet again, we were going to have so much fun. A friend of mine took on the responsibility of hosting them in her student room and managed many of the early contacts with them. Soon after their landing at the airport a welcoming dinner was quickly planned and decided upon.

The next day the whole ‘gang’ gathered in a student room at Lappis. After the initial hugs and exclamations, we sat down a started chatting over some drinks. The room soon overflowed with laughter and friendly devotion. There was so much ground to be covered, and so many emotions to be squeezed into a short time, that we didn’t know where to start and how to go about it. We eventually enjoyed a good dinner and went on to playing some music and relaxing on the sofas. But, despite this positive atmosphere, something was different from before. Our educational and personal trajectories had diverged considerably and this distanciation showed
itself in an almost disturbing way. Some conversations became a bit hurried, others fell into unexpected stalemates and we even experienced a few moments of embarrassing silence.

The next day the Spanish girls wanted to have some more ‘serious’ party activities. We were all in for a crazy night. During the day we hung out in the festival area at the university campus. However, the Swedish weather was not on our side. Rain and cold made our stay at the beer booths less of a success than we had hoped for. And the crowds of people we were hoping for where conspicuously lacking. We decided to skip the upcoming concert. Still, we did our best and tried to have fun. For the night we decided to go to a fashionable downtown club.

When we got together for the night the weather had gotten worse and the rain was pouring down. We hurried to the club and started waiting in line. The clock was at half-past eleven and we had not yet been allowed in. The girls, who apparently had forgotten some of the particulars of Swedish nightlife, were a bit surprised by this. I personally started to freeze and felt my irritation rising. I longed to go home. When we finally got in, I was exhausted and after half an hour I ‘threw in the towel’ and decided to go home. I was followed by another friend. On my way out I could see, in the countenance of the Spanish girls, that their positive expectations had been thwarted by our departure. They had hoped for more on our part.

In general, a reunion meeting takes place several months after a group of students have finished their stay abroad and it is an attempt to rekindle their former relationship and reaffirm their future bonds. The students prepare the event through emails and long-distance calls, sometimes several months in advance. This communication and coordination is not really premeditated—it is rather spontaneous and emergent—and thus demands several months in order to come to full fruition. This is understandable given that most students are engaged in more mundane activities, like studying, working, or spending time with family, and have neither the time nor the energy to actively prepare and pursue such leisure activities. Still, many of them want to and they keep the door open for any eventuality. When most are on board the event commences.

When the time for the reunion meeting has finally come the students usually congregate in some European city and stay there for a couple of days. They often stay at the same hotel or youth hostel so that they can have unhindered and unlimited access to each other. Thus, they become, once again, a touring culture: Erasmus on tour. During the day they go shopping, sightseeing, and lunching while at night they engage in non-stop partying, their favourite activity. This is a joyous time when they rekindle and celebrate their old-time friendship. Many of the activities they stage have the character of re-enactments of the activities they used to do while they were Erasmus students.

These meetings can be seen as a kind of social drama, ritual re-enactments, intended to recreate the state of mind and the emotions they had experienced while being exchange students (cf. Turner, 1988). As shown above, these attempts are not always successful—since you can never cross the same river twice, as the saying goes—but still, they are successful enough to make the students want to plan and implement future reunions. The Student Union’s exchange coordinator in Stockholm, who both worked with the students and had a personal relationship with some of them, summarises this situation nicely:

**Victoria:** When saying goodbye the idea behind it is that one should keep the contact and try to socialise. This is due to the fact that life during the exchange period was very intense, often in very close physical proximity, like for example, in Lappis. But it is easier said than done. The group I have talked a lot about have been very successful in keeping the contact and have meetings in different places once every half-year.

**Ioannis:** Somewhere in the world.

**Victoria:** No, they are mainly Europeans in this group. There is a Canadian girl also. So they meet in various places every half-year and spend a week there, in some city, stay in a hotel,
go out and socialise exactly as they did before. And then they go home again. This is the kind of contact one can have when living so far apart. Then there are those who send the occasional mail from time to time. It depends on how close a friendship one has.

Ioannis: Yes, of course. Do you think money issues play a role?

Victoria: Of course it does.

Ioannis: The issue of what resources they have. I mean if they meet every half-year . . . you don’t have to be rich to do it, but if one also has other duties or other trips to be made for other purposes . . . I mean it costs quite a lot. Is this group of students more affluent?

Victoria: No, I don’t think this issue is implicated. But they are all of them still students, or pursuing further education, and thus none of them is stuck with rigid working hours. And then they can do this very much thanks to airlines like Ryan Air or other low-budget travel agencies; so it doesn’t cost so much. Then they often stay at each other’s places or find some cheap hotel. So I don’t think it requires any special income; not within Europe.

Ioannis: So it is not necessarily income dependent? Requiring special economic means?

Victoria: No, not that I know of. I don’t think they go to every meeting, but rather the people attending varies. It can be too expensive to go every time; perhaps. But I think they get away with it quite cheaply anyway. No I don’t think it matters.

The Erasmus students who go to such reunion meetings have discovered that the mailing lists offered by the university administrations—and which remain open to them even when they have returned home—are very helpful in organising the coming event. Thus, they use them regularly to communicate and coordinate their joint efforts. In so doing, they inadvertently also affect the lives of future generations of Erasmus students—those who come after them—as well as the lives of the administrators who provide and service the lists. Jennifer, the administrator at Södertörns University College, told me that

I am listed in some mailing lists and, for example, the whole autumn I got emails where all those who were here during the autumn term emailed each other and told ‘Now I am doing this’, ‘How are you?’, ‘Where are you?’, ‘Shall we meet?’ and then people answered them. I mean, not everyone, but many . . . These emails I find very funny; that they go out to everybody and they keep an eye on each other.

This ‘voice from the past’, echoing through cyberspace, is of course noticed by the newbies, who thereby get an indirect instruction in the way of life of the Erasmus. When they read the messages on the mailing list they see how the previous batch of exchange students conduct themselves. This, of course, stands as a possible model for their own behaviour. Even though the written messages are reformulated every semester, to better suit the current needs, a number of themes recur; for instance, partying and travelling. In the long run this activity constitutes a form of ‘written tradition’ that passes from generation to generation and structures the communal life of the European exchange students. This form of organisation, though clearly facilitated by the university administrations, is basically of the students’ own making. It establishes a tacit path dependency that upholds the Erasmus network across the countries of the European Union. Similar processes have been reported among other young travellers, such as au-pairs and language-learning students (Wulff, 1992; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002).

Once again we see the crucial role played by the new communication technologies in the organisation of the social life of young people (Miller & Slater, 2001; Horst & Miller, 2006). With the help of the internet and low-budget airlines, the Erasmus students manage to stage illustrious reunion meetings all over Europe and keep their newfound community alive despite both physical and economic obstacles.
The ‘travel bug’

However, this lifestyle—replete with mediated communications and frequent relocations—can have a negative side as well. As Bauman (1998) has pointed out, modern life has an unsettling quality, which leads to restlessness and insecurity, and this can give many people a hard time staying put. While ‘moving on’ momentarily relieves one of this gnawing feeling, the basic existential problem remains. Even the administrators at the universities seem to have gotten this ‘travel bug’ (at least in Stockholm); a non-trivial sign of how far this influence has reached. Victoria, the exchange coordinator at the Student Union, is a case in point. Before becoming a coordinator, she was herself an exchange student fully engaged in the international travel circuit.

**Victoria:** I personally had a very positive experience and will go away again this autumn. Because after my first stay abroad, in 1999, I was at home for a year and then I went away as an Erasmus student, was home for a year after that, then I went away as a free-mover for one more year, and now I will go away on a scholarship. So I think that you experience something that was a lot of fun and you get almost a bit restless when you get back home. And I think many . . . I think there are more people who have started living in this way than people who think, ‘God, it was awful living in a foreign country. I will never do it again’.

**Ioannis:** That was very interesting. But it seems that you also have gotten stuck in this lifestyle. Or have you chosen this lifestyle?

**Victoria:** Hum (confirmatory). And it was just by a coincidence, actually. Because after high school I didn’t really know what to do. I had gotten a slight interest in learning Italian; we happen to have relatives in Italy, and I followed a friend who was going to Italy anyway. And that’s when it all began. So it was nothing I had planned for many years; I just kind of slipped in on a banana skin. I developed a taste for it and have continued. I have chosen what to study thereafter.

**Ioannis:** So you have combined pleasure with business?

**Victoria:** Yes.

**Ioannis:** That’s good.

**Victoria:** Yes, I think so too.

**Ioannis:** Yes, it is good when it works out.

As indicated by the quote, young people, in their efforts to fashion an adult life and further their careers, increasingly have to come to terms with this kind of transnational mobility. Balancing the needs of a stable home base with the needs of a more mobile life is not an easy task, but nonetheless, one that they are increasingly required to develop and master. Especially for exchange students this ‘balancing act’ is a prerequisite for their educational career. As with all balancing acts, though, there is a risk of losing one’s balance.6

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6 Novelist Penelope Lively (1993: 2-3) succinctly describes this perplexing nexus of media bombardment, time/space compression, and compassion fatigue by letting us glimpse into the everyday life of one of her protagonists:

He is in London, on a May morning of the late twentieth century, but is also in many other places, and at other times. He twitches the knob of his radio: New York speaks to him, five hours ago, is superseded by Australia tomorrow and presently by India this evening. He learns of events that have not yet taken place, of deaths that have not yet occurred. He is . . . an English architect stuck in a traffic jam, a person of no great significance, and yet omniscient. For him, the world no longer turns; there is no day or night, everything and everywhere are instantaneous . . . He is told so much, and from so many sources, that he has learned to disregard, to let information filter through the mind and vanish, leaving impressions—a phrase, a fact, an image . . . He is an intelligent man, a man of compassion, but he can hear of a massacre on the other side of the globe and wonder as he listens if he remembered to switch on his answering machine. He is aware of this, and is disturbed.
According to Robert Lifton (1993) this fluidity and multifacetedness, what he has called the *protean self*, is a characteristic of our times. It enables us to engage in continuous exploration and personal experimentation, thus increasing our chances of success in an ever-changing world, but at the price of an increasing existential restlessness. Similarly, Richard Sennett (1998) claims that the conditions of time in the new capitalism have created a conflict between character and experience, with the experience of disjointed time threatening to destroy people’s ability to form coherent autobiographical narratives. Various degrees of exhaustion and alienation can, consequently, result from such a busy way of life. People, after all, only possess limited resources, both psychologically and socially speaking, and stretching those out over the whole globe and engaging them indiscriminately, in the fancy of the moment, can be a bad idea. We are, in all likelihood, not well equipped for such a kind of living.

Although such problems are not common among the Erasmus students they do occur (the Erasmus students are, after all, quite busy international folks). My German friend Simon, for example, often complained that he felt rootless and could not really enjoy his life as an exchange student. He actually developed a minor distaste for big city life, which he saw as superficial and irritating. Furthermore, he saw the Erasmus students as mindlessly immersed in this urban and mobile way of life. This made him dislike them. He saw them as shallow and confused. I quote at length from my interview with him:

Simon: The even more grievous problem was that I started to think, ‘Where do I belong to?’ You more and more lose your feeling of being at home anywhere. Now it has been four years since I moved out from my parents and I’ve lived in so many towns and now even in a foreign country so it’s really . . . That was a bit of a problem. Yes.

Ioannis: And you were thinking of it recently and got kind of anxious, or what?

Simon: Exactly! The last days I was very nervous. But I mean it’s always . . . you have to get through it. I think it’s normal. Most Erasmus students have such crises in-between.

Ioannis: What is this crisis about? Is it that you think of your place in the world, where you belong, and kind of become a bit uncertain of your place in the world?

Simon: Yes. I think because I also have moved several times here in Stockholm I just developed the feeling or the wish to stay somewhere a longer time. For example, to get real friendships again. I mean that is also a bit of a problem when you move so often. You often lose most of your friends at home. But for example, here in Stockholm when you just stay for one year, you don’t find the same adequate friendships. It’s more of a very open and informal relationship you usually have. Especially between exchange students, I mean. There is so much informality; I mean you usually don’t take the time to go out and to talk to each other, but everything is fast and very spontaneous—made by text messages—and you also don’t have real engagements over longer periods of time.

Ioannis: Ok, that’s very interesting. So this spontaneity and informality can be too much some times?

Simon: It really can be too much! I mean it’s my opinion, but for example, when we had these coffee breaks in my corridor it often happens that you start to talk to some person and then he starts to text a message or call someone on his mobile and you nearly don’t talk to him more. I mean it can also be that he wants to show in that way that he is not interested in you. I mean you don’t know.

Ioannis: All right. That’s interesting. But somehow you seem to have adapted and learned a little bit about this new country.

Simon: Yes, of course. I mean, I can live here and so on. But on the other hand, an exchange here should really be half a year or one year, not longer, because it is a special year. I mean you don’t have, for example, the same daily rhythm you have when you normally study. I mean, it’s also a bit of a problem that you only have lectures late in the afternoon and then
Furthermore, Simon was also terrified of his return to Germany, and all the things he had to do, all the stress, and all the mishaps he feared would befall him. Besides that, when back in Germany he would soon have to change university as well, another new move. Thus, there was one move from Sweden to Germany and one move from a German city to another one, a series of moves he considered a bit too straining. In this regard he really envied the peace of mind of his parents—well rooted as they were in their rural town—and resented many aspects of his current life situation. He had himself grown up in that small town and had very fond childhood memories from there. He often used to tell me about them. His life there seemed to be of an almost ‘organic’ kind, replete with the Gemeinschaft of face-to-face contacts and meaningful relationships to significant others (Tönnies, 1957). Here in Stockholm, a big city, he felt quite lost. Even though Simon represented a minority view, experiences like his do occur. There are reasons to believe that not ‘all roads lead to Rome’. The reality of rural life is even today quite different from that of urban city life, and many people still grow up far from the busy streets of international metropoles. This endows them with different background experiences and frames of reference and can make permanent relocations, even under the auspices of a generous educational programme, deeply felt and potentially disturbing.

With the passage of time Simon became more accustomed to this way of life. Still, time could not make everything right, as his account suggests. Time was actually part of the problem. Urban life is fast-paced and its constant swirl affects everyone. But for some city dwellers temporal precariousness is even more marked; for Erasmus students, time seems to ‘fly’ away. Their lifestyle makes them rush away into the future with hardly a minute’s notice and with many of their belongings squeezed into a plastic bag. Thus, many of them are perennially ‘stuck’ in the vicissitudes of here-and-now.

This situation also relates to the Erasmus students’ social status. Most of them occupy a marginal social position in the sense that they live ‘betwixt and between’ the established social divisions of the host society (Turner, 1969); a position akin to that of a ‘stranger’ (Simmel, 1950; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). They have a temporary status in the host society, a relatively unstructured daily life and a fairly secluded existence. On the positive side, this gives them a privileged viewpoint which can result in a creative reappraisal of their national belonging and social identity. However, as we saw above, such a lifestyle, though exhilarating at times, can lead to shallow and ephemeral social relationships and various degrees of exhaustion (Lifton, 1993; Sennett, 1998). Stable and meaningful social relationships are hard to build without a past history and a future horizon.

Living in time

During her stay in Stockholm Juliet once travelled back to her home country, Slovenia. At Stansted Airport in England, a third country, she met an old-time friend that she had not been able to see for a long time. They were both stunned by the fact that an airport, of all places in the world, was the place for their new encounter. Still, in the bustle and buzz of this international environment—the pinnacle of an interconnected world—the two friends found each other and quickly updated their relationship. This friend, who had been an Erasmus student herself, even found the time to give Juliet some advice as to how she should handle her new life situation and the mixed emotions it gave rise to. This quick meeting was, as Juliet told me later, important for her as it helped her resolve some personal issues that had been bothering her. She was happy that they had this little conversation. In a small world every second counts!
The biography of Juliet's friend is interesting in itself. This Slovenian girl studied as an exchange student in Denmark. After finishing her studies in Slovenia, she decided to go to Denmark to do a master's degree. While there she met a Swedish boy and they became a couple. Following that she moved to Sweden and searched for a job. She stayed there for half a year. Since she couldn't find a job she moved to England, though her boyfriend remained in Sweden. During the time they were apart they used every available means of mediated communication to stay in touch: letters, emails, text messages, phone calls, and so forth. Given the richness and reach of these means, their contact was both dense and multifaceted. This made it much easier for both of them to live outside their native countries, and in different ones from each other, at that. Given their life paths and the communicative means at their disposal, it was a natural choice for both of them.

Later on in the semester, this same friend of Juliet visited her in Stockholm. Her boyfriend had come as well. One morning Juliet called me and asked me if I wanted to join them for coffee. Soon we were all sitting at Coffee by George, one of the more fashionable coffee shops on the university campus. We sat there for almost an hour and talked about various things. Of course, the usual topics of discussion surfaced: national comparisons, travel plans, and so on. The young couple was going to make some sightseeing trips while in Sweden and Juliet was planning on accompanying them on some of them.

This short story illustrates how ordinary and commonplace transnational travel and multi-local dwelling has become for many young people of today. None of the parties involved found this noteworthy or remarkable. For them this way of life was natural and, apparently, a lot of fun. Their brief encounters also evidenced a renewed importance of time as an organising principle of social life. The apparent urgency and circumstantiality of their encounter did not prevent them from engaging in meaningful social intercourse. Moreover, they did so, showing little, if any, concern for issues relating to place or location. And this stance is, in my opinion, representative of the larger student exchange population. However, just a couple of generations back in time, and especially in Slovenia, such patterns of mobility and dwelling were almost unheard of and usually the grim lot of refugees and immigrants.

According to Zygmunt Bauman (1998) this 'touristification of experience' has led many people to become spiritual travellers, being permanently set adrift. We surf on the internet or zap through the channels of our TV and in the act of doing so transcend physical boundaries of time and space with a facility unimaginable a couple of generations ago. Time and space are neatly compressed in the service of our sensation-seeking fervour, but somehow, we never manage to stay long enough in any one place to be more than occasional visitors, appreciative but restless drifters. The more we travel the harder it is to stay put. Consequently, the only instance where we experience a sense of immobility, is when we are surrounded by motion, but motion that we have caught up with. Only this relative sense of immobility can be handled by modern people, with true immobility being too scary to bear, a synonym of defeat and death. This peculiar urge to move on, hopefully to greener pastures, is one of the most distinctive characteristics of our time, according to Bauman. Nowadays most parts of the world, with the exception of the most underdeveloped areas (not countries), are affected by it.

Even though the above picture is a bit exaggerated it nevertheless captures some central dimensions of life as an Erasmus student. My informant Nico, for instance, constantly wanted to travel, to such a degree that even some of his closest friends could not stand it and complained about his 'obsession'. However, when constantly on the move—more often than not rushing ahead—space loses some of its importance and time becomes all the more important. Having the right resources to handle time is, therefore, increasingly becoming a new status marker, separating those that belong to the privileged 'first world' from the rest.

Although the Erasmus students cannot be equated with the mobile elite alluded to above, they are nonetheless part of this trend. This new value of time is also reinforced by the special
plight of the stranger/foreigner. As mentioned previously, people who are new to a place tend to feel an *inflated presence*. The novelty and urgency of their situation forces them to focus on the minutiae of ongoing interactions at the expense of other relevant aspects of the situation. As a result, the peculiarities of their place of residence often fade into the background; most Erasmus students, for instance, live in happy oblivion of such facts (neighbourhood history, local politics, and the like). This existential predicament is also reinforced by their reception by the local population: to them, they are very often just a stereotyped appearance with no historical depth and an uncertain future horizon; a semiotically undecipherable presence which elicits a superficial reaction.

The most striking manifestation of this new situation is the Erasmus students’ fascination with social events. For instance, when the students heard of some upcoming holiday they would get completely absorbed by the details of the impending event. Time was punctured and the monotony of chronological time was suspended by the positive expectation of an exuberant happening. These events became focal nodes in a barrage of planning, time-monitoring, and network mobilisation that helped materialise the Erasmus student’s latent community. Subsequently, they also became ‘building blocks’ for their social representations and autobiographical narratives. Hence, for Erasmus students ‘time may become a substitute for space as the basis for social relations’ (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002: 15).

One afternoon while sitting in Café 3:an at Stockholm University with my friend Nico we started discussing what was going to happen during *Walpurgis Night*, a traditional holiday in Sweden. Later on, we were joined by Benjamin and Amelia. Plans were quickly made and revised, and various student friends were counted in and out of our travelling fellowship. There was an unmistakable excitement in the air; we spoke of all the fun we were going to have, all the parties we were going to go to, and how drunk people would become afterwards. In the end we decided to go to Uppsala; a well-known university city and a classical destination for this celebration.

Despite the fact that I had taken part in such celebrations before, with my Swedish friends, the interest of the Erasmus students surprised me; it reached exhilarating levels and seemed almost like a life-and-death matter. Their preoccupation was fuelled by their immoderate expectations about the event (which in turn was fuelled by their lack of local knowledge about it) and the lack of daily routines that could steer their motivation into more productive enterprises; they were free to indulge their sensation-seeking in the here-and-now. Going out to this event was the only thing many of them talked about. It was a *contagious* topic of discussion that had afflicted the whole Erasmus population.

Similar processes have been reported from other contexts. Barbara Czarniawska (2004) notes that in many modern, network-based organisations, alternative time perceptions and work processes are emerging. In her study of city officials and project managers, she realised that many of their central activities ‘took place out of time’, not timed according to the dictates of chronological time and hosted in predetermined locales, but happening in a temporarily emergent and spatially distributed way. She called this more punctured time dimension *kairotic* time; a word denoting the ‘right time’ for something to happen.

…and out of time

Erasmus students have a special relationship to time. They have an entry date into the country—which effectively commences their period as exchange students—and a usually predetermined exit date which puts an end to their sojourn. During this relatively limited time span they must settle, adjust, study, socialise, and enjoy themselves, as well as prepare for their return home. This packed schedule, of course, creates a sense of urgency. For Erasmus students, time is a resource in short supply. Although most students did not object to this hectic lifestyle, and some
of them actually enjoyed it, this constant time pressure necessitated various adjustments to their personal and social life.

While in Athens I personally experienced this sense of urgency. At one time, my Scandinavian group had decided to go for a weekend trip to Thessalonica. Martha called me one day and told me of their plans. She sounded very excited but also a bit wary about the various organizational details that had to be quickly settled. Martha said that they were thinking of renting a big car (like a van) and driving up all the way. There they would stay at a friend of hers who had promised to host them for the weekend. Of course, I told her it was a great idea. This was on Wednesday.

Over the next couple of days an intensive telephone contact ensued. Martha, who was something of the informal leader of the group, called around to check with the rest of the group to make sure everything was all right. Some of the students had classes until Friday evening. Thus, the departure had to be adjusted for them if they were to come. Similarly, arrangements had to be made with a car rental agency in order to get a car in time. Of course, there was also the financial side of it. Money had to be gathered and pooled together. Given that we did not always agree on all relevant issues, a fair amount of negotiations also had to be squeezed in. We were in a hurry and the mobiles went hot. We all did our best and Martha was great as our ‘manager’. In the end a number of students agreed on the details and the trip commenced.

According to Sarason et al (1977), ‘limited resources’ can have an interesting influence on the form and content of social life. In their study of an educational network they found that the understaffing of various task groups could, under certain circumstances, increase the motivation and solidarity of their members (the opposite of what would be expected). Their argument also applies to other resources, like for example time, necessary for the performance of various tasks or social functions.7

Concurring with this view, I believe that the constant time pressure has a dual influence on the social life of the Erasmus students. On the one hand, it seems to function as a sorting mechanism that excludes all those who cannot keep up the pace. It was usually loosely affiliated people like local students or foreign masters’ students who, due to their rigid schedules and irrevocable commitments, could not allow themselves to ‘drift with the wind’, and hence were left out. Mehmet, whom I also met in Athens, pointed out that, ‘If I was 22 it would be ok, but I am too old for this kind of thing’. On the other hand, this sense of urgency increased the conformity and solidarity of the remaining members. By accentuating the value of the here-and-now and the immediate needs of the group it motivated many students to put in the extra effort necessary to retain their good standing in the group. This made the distinction between insiders and outsiders of the community clearer: those who feel ‘Erasmus’ at heart hang in, the rest drop out. Thus, once again, circumstances seem to reinforce the exclusivity of the Erasmus group.

As other anthropologists have shown (Fabian, 1983), albeit in the context of different studies, time is a crucial parameter of social and intellectual life and can have profound and differential implications for the parties involved. In the context of transnational mobility and flexible work forms, time management has assumed a new significance and now functions as an important organising principle of social relationships (Lifton, 1993; Bauman, 1998; Sennett, 1998; Czarniawska, 2004). The ability to handle such temporal precariousness, especially in the fast-paced urban metropoles of the world, has become part of the cosmopolitan repertoire. The Erasmus students are part of this development.

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7 Even severe adversity can play a positive role in promoting group unity (see Janis, 1982).
Apprentice cosmopolitans

In general, being abroad means that one has the opportunity to practice a number of skills that are not an ordinary part of one’s everyday life. For many Erasmus students this is the first time they live on their own, outside the confines of their family. The number of new skills they practice can therefore have an impressive range: from foreign language skills and financial management, to cooking and laundry skills, to general social skills like handling interpersonal relationships and staving off loneliness. Further, the Erasmus period occasions a massive amount of cultural contact. The students living abroad are forced by the circumstances to cohabitate and communicate with their hosts as well as with a number of other foreign people. This contact, though at times cumbersome for the inexperienced students, contributes to opening their eyes to the cultural diversity within Europe and starts them on a journey of cultural exploration and personal development.

The acquisition of such skills is part of the ‘secondary socialisation’ of young people into adult life. By way of socialisation outside of the family unit, students increase their self-reliance and autonomy while at the same time expanding their moral and political universe (Wulff, 1992; Galani-Moutafi, 2001; Gard-McGehee, 2002; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). For the European Union this secondary socialisation has also offered a favourable vehicle for the propagation of the European idea, the breeding of a new type of citizen and the building a new kind of Europe (Bellier & Wilson, 2000; Shore, 2000; Papatsiba, 2006).

When I talked with my informants and asked for their opinion, the Erasmus Programme was, for many of them, synonymous with cultural contact. This common construal of their experience, a typical instance of a social representation, was a clear sign of being an Erasmus student. Although most students have had similar experiences before, the intensity of cultural contact was new for them. Nico offers a beautiful illustration of this view. While having a drink with some friends downtown, at the beginning of the semester, he euphorically exclaimed, ‘The Erasmus Programme is great! Meeting all these people and seeing different places. Look here at our company. We are Greeks, Estonians, Lithuanians, Finnish, German. It is incredible. It brings people together.’

According to a number of scholars, such cultural contact could potentially lead to the development of a cosmopolitan attitude and more hybridised social identities (Hannerz, 1996; Caglar, 1997; Pieterse, 2001; Vertovec & Cohen, 2002). The Erasmus Programme resonates well with this general trend. Most Erasmus students saw cultural contact as something important and appreciated it for its own sake. They had a genuine interest in learning about the ways of the ‘other’ and even try out various typical behaviours. Not surprisingly, several students told me that they were deeply changed by their experiences abroad; usually they claimed that they became more open-minded, tolerant and self-critical. Martin, the Swedish student who visited Rome, reflected in these terms. His story is indicative of the range of learning experiences available to most Erasmus students and the potential long-term effects of the programme.

Ioannis: Could you say that you have been changed by this experience? By being an Erasmus in Italy?
Martin: Yes, I think so. I think I have a better self-knowledge now . . . At least better self-confidence in case I’d have to work on the continent, towards other countries. And so I feel that I have learned much. I thought I was immune towards culture clashes, but it turned out to be wrong. I thought I knew more about other cultures than I actually knew. Now at least I feel that I have learned a lot about various countries and, thus, feel more of a European, more international.
Ioannis: So, you mean that what has changed is your attitude towards other cultures?
Martin: My knowledge would be more correct. I feel more secure and can understand.
Ioannis: So, your knowledge has changed?
Martin: Before, I experienced Spaniards in a particular way, but now with my new knowledge, since I came to know many of them, I can look away from their peculiar culture and discover how they are as individuals. Since I understand their culture a little better, I don’t just see them as representatives of other cultures but as individuals. And I react in a similar manner to other nationalities. So I have a better self-confidence in that way, I know more, I can understand them better.

Ioannis: Have you learned anything practical? That you can use?

Martin: In my studies?

Ioannis: Well, yes, in your studies but also new behaviors and habits that you have acquired.

Martin: Well, language skills. I have improved both my English and my Italian. What more? And I also learned about the subject I studied. That’s what I can remember.

Ioannis: Do you think the changes you have mentioned, new knowledge and a more open attitude, will last, or will you soon forget everything and go back to your old self?

Martin: Well, behaviorally I think I was more relaxed in Italy. A friend of mine who had been in Scotland said that after two weeks at home you are back in the old usual, as tense and nervous as ever. And that was completely true. After a week, I too thought it was annoying with people talking in the subway. So in that way, behaviorally, I regressed a little. But when it comes to knowledge, I still feel that my self-confidence is there. But the details of my behavior have not changed. If I sat in a dinner with a bunch of Portuguese then it would come back to me, but not in the street here in Sweden. I have not become an Italian on the street.

Ioannis: That is very interesting. You mean that behaviorally you regress after a while to being more of a Swede. But you have still changed a little and carry with you the knowledge that you can be different. Or?

Martin: Yes.

Ioannis: You can go back to being a little different? If it is needed?

Martin: Yes. When I put my foot down in an Italian airport again, then!

Ioannis: Then it is reactivated?

Martin: I think so.

Similar opinions were expressed to me by other former exchange students. They seem to form a rather unanimous choir of collective reminiscences surrounding the Erasmus session. For many former Erasmus students, the effects of the programme seem to have been incorporated into their social identities and autobiographical narratives. Sophia, a top-ranking national official of the Greek Erasmus Programme, concurs with this view. Though her talk was well-rehearsed, and slightly propagandistic of the programme, it offers a good summation of the Erasmus experience, and is therefore worth quoting at length:

Ioannis: You said that the students who return home only have positive things to report. Could you develop this statement? Which are the positive things that the students encounter, that they experience? According to their own opinions, but also according to your opinion?

Sophia: I will first talk about their opinions. According to their own view their education gains an added European dimension. They enter an environment with many students from different European countries, they enter a new circle of friends, they meet new people, they meet different teachers than the usual ones, they are taught in a foreign language, they enter libraries, computer rooms and student unions other than their own, unfamiliar ones. All this gives them the opportunity to judge and compare; see the pros and cons.

Ioannis: They also gather some experience I suppose? Some new abilities and skills?

Sophia: Their experience is very much enriched and their skills and competences are augmented, always to the better. Of course, there are also negative experiences, but these too contribute to increase the student’s comprehensive and judgmental abilities. Further, their social incorporation in a different environment is an added positive factor for the students and my personal opinion is that the students who return are much more mature than before. This is due to the fact that they encounter difficult circumstances on their own and find solutions to their problems without the support of the mother or father or sister or friend or whatever.
Ioannis: You said that there are also some negative experiences. Could you give some examples?

Sophia: The negative experiences for the students consist usually of the housing problem. Either the housing they find is not what they expected, or the rent is very high and they hardly manage economically. Of course, the mobility grant they receive from the EU via the National Grant Institute covers approximately fifty per cent of their costs of living abroad, from what we have seen until now. But we must consider the fact that in many countries of the EU the rents are extremely high, and this of course creates major difficulties for the students. Another problem is the language issue. Because we should not forget that we are a Mediterranean people, our students are accustomed to the climate, the conditions, and the lifestyle we have here, and especially when visiting the Scandinavian countries they encounter, in the beginning at least, problems of social adaptation. But after a while they adjust and manage to function.

Ioannis: In general, would you say that the positive effects of the programme outweigh the negative ones?

Sophia: Yes, they are much stronger than the negative ones and that is the reason for the constant increase in student mobility.

As indicated by the quotes above there is also something else—apart from practical learning and self-reliance—to be gained from travelling abroad. Travel in general, but especially as an educational activity, is within the Western world a well-established and cherished institution and those who partake of it tend to improve, in the long run if not immediately, their societal standing (Rojek & Urry, 1997; Urry, 2002a; Börjesson, 2005). International travel, hence, confers an added value.

This rather elusive quality may be seen as a sort of cultural capital in Pierre Bourdieu’s sense (1986, 1990). It signifies a kind of refinement and sophistication that accrues to group members as they learn and master socially valued skills, especially those associated with the educational system, an asset which they can trade in for more material goods. As a function of their upbringing, education, and economic standing, people have differing amounts of cultural capital. However, even those who start out from a disadvantaged position have the opportunity, via future experiences, to increase their various forms of capital. The Erasmus Programme represents such an opportunity. Sophia was very well aware of this dimension:

Sophia: They are affected a lot. I will give you an example. Some days ago there was an event at our university, initiated by a teacher, to start an alumni club for our graduated students. I was invited and there I saw that among the participants, a large amount, around sixty percent, were old Erasmus students. Those Greek Erasmus students were today all managers, executives, public officials, all with very good positions, language skills, and postgraduate studies. They recognised me after all these years and told me 'you cannot imagine how much our lives have benefited from the Erasmus period, which we will never forget, and how important a role it played on our CVs and with our employers when they saw that we had spent an Erasmus period abroad'.

For some categories of professionals—for example, art students, language teachers or foreign aid workers—travels to select destinations are actually imperative since they are a formal requirement of their training. An aspiring artist who has not been to Paris or New York can be seen as lacking in his field-specific education. Similarly, an aid worker who has never been to a site of destruction or famine, but only worked behind a desk, is often considered as deficient in his real-world training (Wulff, 1992, 1995a,b; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). Acquiring such cultural capital is, therefore, not only a matter of becoming more at ‘home in the world’, but
also of becoming more ‘at home at home’. Training to become a cosmopolitan is very much a domestic affair.

Not surprisingly, this importance is beginning to show in the educational choices of many pupils and their parents. Several studies have shown that ‘cosmopolitan training’ in the above sense is increasingly incorporated by educational systems as a desirable disposition while simultaneously being unequally distributed to different groups on the basis of their geographical location and pre-existing social and economic capital. This educational institutionalisation transforms cosmopolitanism from a mere personal choice or group inclination into an educational requirement, a valuable asset necessary for career development and professional distinction (Igarashi & Saito, 2014). Still, however, personal choice plays an important role in the level of cosmopolitan capital that is finally attained. In particular, the choices and ambitions of parents seem to have a greater importance than their class position (Weenick, 2008).

The Erasmus Programme is part of this educational transformation. As several researchers have shown, it has a positive effect on the student’s social capital and career opportunities (Maiworm & Teichler, 1996). Despite these positive effects, however, the end result of such student mobility cannot be taken for granted. Some studies, for example, have shown that the programme seems to have reached a point of diminishing returns; with the internalization of education becoming the norm, rather than the exception, the added value of an Erasmus sojourn on career development is not as dramatic as it was in the early days (Janson et al., 2009: 8). Further, the ambitions of the European Union notwithstanding, socioeconomic background still seems to exert an important and limiting influence on the recruitment to the programme as well as its final outcome (Ballatore, 2011; Ballatore & Ferede, 2013). International travel may lead to the development of a cosmopolitan attitude—a form of cultural capital oppositional to nationalism and parochialism—but personal initiative and open-mindedness are still instrumental for its final fruition.

Concluding remarks

The Erasmus students live in a transnational world. Like many other people of today they feel a diminishing attachment to their local milieu and a faltering loyalty to their national heritage, and instead seek personal fulfilment and social acceptance through contact with foreign places and cultures. More importantly, they seem to live in a transnational community even when they do not travel: the imagined and mediated community of a global ecumene. The experiences engendered by these cross-border contacts raise the possibility that a new attitude towards national sovereignty and cultural diversity may be in the making. Scholars such as Ulf Hannerz (1996) and Ulrich Beck (2002) have reasoned that such a process may eventually lead to an increased incidence of cultural connoisseurship and civic cosmopolitanism.

The Erasmus students are avid travellers, both within and outside the host country. They usually travel in small groups and rely on low-budget travel agencies. One interesting case of travelling is the farewell tour: towards the end of their study period abroad, many students embark on a longer journey across Europe visiting old friends along the way. Another typical travelling project is the reunion meeting: after the conclusion of their Erasmus period, a group of friends decide to meet up again in some European city. Taken together, many of the travelling

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8 Cosmopolitanism is also a force in the current restructuring of urban landscapes due to gentrification and marketing processes. This is so because cosmopolitanism is increasingly becoming an attractive lifestyle (Malet Calvo, 2017).
preoccupations of the Erasmus students form the contours of a touring culture (Rojek & Urry, 1997), a culture of cosmopolitanism.

Despite this general trend, many parochial elements survive. Thus, both in Stockholm and Athens, the Erasmus students are relatively isolated from the local inhabitants and their culture. To a certain degree this situation is consciously chosen by the students, reflecting different priorities and interests than the local inhabitants. Part of it, however, is the result of well-known and unconscious group dynamics, as well as the unavoidable politics of belonging (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Yuval-Davies, 2011). In this regard, the administrative separation of the Erasmus students and their residential segregation (particularly in Stockholm) seems to establish an important path dependency and steers their identity formation in a highly distinctive direction, towards subgrouping and group differentiation (cf. Strauss, 1982, 1984).

Many of the preoccupations of the Erasmus students are predicated on a fast-paced, flexible, and networked way of life. According to several authors (Lifton, 1993; Bauman, 1998; Sennett, 1998) this way of life epitomises the postmodern world. The Erasmus students, being part of this world, have to develop a number of new skills in time management and mediated forms of communication in order to thrive in their new environment. They do this with a clearly cosmopolitan tinge to it, an important observation as the postmodern state does not necessarily preclude either nationalism or regionalism. This learning, as I have attempted to show throughout this text, is an inherent part of their cosmopolitan apprenticeship. The ability to handle these new challenges serves both as a recruitment qualification and a distinctive mark of a ‘true’ Erasmus student. Those exchange students who cannot handle this pressure—usually people with long-term commitments like marriage or post-graduate studies—are either left out of the community or pushed into a more marginal position.
Conclusion

The aim of this study has been to investigate the Erasmus Programme in two European cities, Stockholm and Athens. I have been especially interested in the experiential, relational and communicational dimensions of their stay abroad and used participant observation and interviews in order to try to identify and analyse significant aspects of their life and culture. Through the pages of this book I have shown how the Erasmus session is for many students a passage into adulthood during which they acquire necessary adult skills; how they manage to familiarise themselves with the new sociocultural environment; and how they eventually develop their own brand of social life with communal dinners, processions through town, repeated travels and intensive partying. The high levels of novelty, spontaneity, and liminality inherent in the Erasmus session also motivate them to experiment with new social roles and representations, and to develop a more encompassing, potentially cosmopolitan, worldview. I have also shown that the different circumstances in the receiving cities (such as residential accommodations, EU-grants, administrative traditions) have a certain influence on the way the programme is practically realised, although this does not substantially alter the programme’s general character. For many Erasmus students according to their own accounts, this time is the most exciting and memorable period of their lives, an indication of the deep impact it has on their personality and self-representation.

Although most students are generally not well integrated in the host country, the Erasmus Programme nonetheless offers a thorough training in handling the cultural diversity and local variations that can be found within the boundaries of the European Union. Such a secondary socialization was actually part of the original intention behind the programme (Papatsiba, 2006: 99). Through personal experiences as well as socialization into an extant youth culture, the students test the limits of their personal competence and expand their social horizons. This training is of a clearly transnational and multicultural character, and therefore cannot be subsumed under labels such as ‘internationalism’, ‘interculturalism’ or the like. It is, rather, a form of apprentice cosmopolitanism.

In this last chapter I will recapitulate some of the main findings of the study and also discuss them in the light of some theoretical perspectives current in the social sciences. This discussion will further our understanding of the experiences engendered within the Erasmus Programme, as well as highlight some of their potential ramifications.

Serendipity strikes: the decentring of the local

Many of the particular objectives of the Erasmus Programme, like increasing student mobility and facilitating educational cooperation, are undergirded by a more general goal, namely familiarization with the cultural and linguistic diversity of the European continent. This familiarization is intended to be achieved through contact with the host society and its native people. In other words, this part of the programme has a clear focus on the local.

As we have seen, however, the conditions of the Erasmus Programme in several European cities work against this professed goal. One way of explaining this rather counterintuitive
finding is by looking into some of the unintended consequences of the programme. Following Robert Merton’s (1936) analysis, we can see this ‘pinball effect’ as the result of two interconnected processes. The first process relates to the well-intended and generous provisions offered to incoming students by both the European Union and many university administrations (most relevant in the case of Stockholm University): separate grants, separate residential areas, separate classes, separate entertainment venues. Despite the best of intentions, these provisions often contribute to the ‘double-fencing’ that keeps many Erasmus students apart from the local society (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002: 161, 187); this was most clearly seen in the residential segregation of the Erasmus students in Stockholm.

The second process is less obvious but more insidious. The original thinking behind the Erasmus Programme may have been something like this: if we send out exchange students to other countries they will learn about those countries’ customs and languages and this will facilitate educational and administrative cooperation between the nations of Europe. This prediction probably holds true if the number of students sent out is relatively small. But if enough exchange students are sent out, then they change the circumstances for the learning process, by creating a novel multicultural environment, and this may counteract the predicted outcome. The massive success of the Erasmus Programme may have done just that. In many university cities there are so many incoming exchange students that they constitute ‘a world of its own’, thus making focused and sustained learning about the host country quite difficult.

These two processes taken together lead to a decentring of the local and a compensatory increase in the significance of the global (the translocal and transnational). This is a further unintentional consequence of the Erasmus Programme. The separation and exclusiveness of the Erasmus students creates a psychologically nourishing and socially attractive community, a ‘home away from home’, in which they can feel relatively safe and comfortable. In this vibrant community the young apprentices struggle to ‘make a living’ while at the same time learning about each other’s countries and cultures, but not through the preconceived notions of national ideology or local patriotism but through a more open-minded cosmopolitan approach. As Ulf Hannerz (2002) has said, home should not only be understood in a proximate sense, as a sociogeographic rootedness, but also in a distal sense, as an intense affiliation with an imaginary locality (i.e., cosmopolis) believed to offer better conditions for self-realization. This serendipitous development sets the stage for much of the Erasmus student’s subsequent social life.

Performativity and life worlds

Given the inherent liminality of the Erasmus period it is tempting to see it as a rite of passage, and even envisage it as having three distinct stages: separation, transition, and reincorporation

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1 It is perhaps to such unintended consequences that Bernd Wächter (Janson et al., 2009: 7) is referring to in his introduction to a recent study of the effects of the Erasmus Programme:

   The overriding tendency of the findings is one of continuity, despite the revolutionary fervour of the reforms of the mid-1990s. It almost appears as if the programme has a will of its own, which gently resists or cushions off initiatives aimed at massive change, be they inspired or misinformed.

2 Merton (1936) called this process the imperious immediacy of interest, allowing well-intended pursuits to blind us to the consequences of our actions (e.g., spoiling the child).

3 Merton (1936) called this process basic values but it is nowadays mostly remembered as the self-defeating prediction: a forecasted development changes the course of history thereby negating itself; for example, the overpopulation-starvation prediction (which never materialised in the scale predicted).
Since the Erasmus students are often stuck ‘betwixt and between’ established positions in society they are afforded the opportunity to communicate and socialize in novel and improvised ways. This introduces a significant element of performativity in the social life of the Erasmus students.

Many Erasmus students, especially those from southern Europe, have limited linguistic skills (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Van Mol & Michielsen, 2014). This, of course, is problematic when you live in a foreign country and have to communicate on a daily basis in the native language or the generally accepted lingua franca. It adds to the burden of living in a foreign country and creates a certain amount of alienation. As many commentators have pointed out, ‘real dislocation, the loss of all familiar external and internal parameters, is not glamorous’ (Hoffman, 1999: 50). Despite this, Erasmus students do not generally shy away from their group and seek out the company of their compatriots, at least not to the same degree as many other groups of travellers (immigrants, refugees, expatriates). This situation has some counterintuitive effects.

Faced with this predicament the students must also rely on other means of communication besides verbal language in their attempts to understand each other and coordinate their common life. Gestures, body language, metaphors and speech acts all come to the fore and help the young students interpret and organise their newfound reality. Helen remembers that living in Sweden tested her old habits to the limit and made her adopt more unconventional ways:

**Ioannis:** How would you characterise these abilities?

**Helen:** Well, independence and communication. More communication, and with people of different nationalities, with different ways of thinking which makes it necessary for you to become more flexible, that is, you try to find more common ground and leave behind incongruences since otherwise you cannot communicate. Also when you are somewhere alone, totally alone—and most of us went to a foreign country were we knew nobody, beside the university milieu—it unavoidably generates a kind of stress . . . But entering the spirit, and of course there was also the joy of learning something new, I felt the stress slowly abating and feelings came to the surface, like for example, a curiosity to learn more about the country and the people, learn more about people of other nationalities, and in the end, of course, you don’t want to leave. For no reason.

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4 There is undoubtedly some merit to this view—certainly as a metaphor—but it is also connected to several problems. The main problem is that the Erasmus experience is prolonged and complex, while traditional rituals are relatively short and simple. Another problem has to do with the initial conditions (national discourses, educational systems, etc.) and final outcomes (social recognition, career prospects, etc.) of the programme which vary substantially across countries and students, in contrast to traditional rituals which exhibit a high degree of uniformity in these respects. These differences, and several others, make it difficult to uphold any formal similarity between the two phenomena. I have, therefore, opted for using a related concept throughout this last chapter, that of performativity.

5 In this regard it is important to remember that one of the central concerns of the Erasmus Programme is to improve language skills among the young populations of Europe. And, true enough, a number of Erasmus students had chosen their specific travel destination with the specific aim in mind of improving their language proficiency. For the majority of Erasmus students, however, foreign language acquisition was not an issue and the only parlance they used, beside their mother tongue, was English. English is the undisputed lingua franca in the social life of the Erasmus students. Some French students resented this trend and made stubborn attempts to resist it in the beginning, only to give in to the overwhelming pressure after a while.

6 Of course, Erasmus students are also involved in a host of conventional performances (see chapter on discursive practices). There is actually an economy of performative actions, spanning the whole gamut from spontaneous to conventional, the detailed elucidation of which could be the subject of a separate dissertation.
Learning in novel circumstances and with limited formal instruction, as in some forms of educational travel, often takes the form of a *skilled improvisation* with the social, material and experiential resources at hand (Lave, 1993; Griffith & Marion, 2018).[^8] Under such circumstances meaning is collaboratively "created by the interaction between an intending and an interpreting actor and by the alternation of roles between them, and the force of a performative utterance lies in the immediacy of the situation" (Herzfeld, 2005: 74-75). This flexible way of acting and the search for common ground (intersubjectivity) can easily give rise to spontaneous symbolic practices. I especially remember a party I attended in Athens. Most of the participants were Erasmus students but there was also a considerable number of Greek students. The students mingled and talked with each other the whole night. Beneath the often tentative conversations I could discern a genuine interest to get closer to each other, both physically and emotionally; the students wanted to break the ice and bridge the gap. Still, the two categories—Greek and Erasmus students—remained separate for quite some time.[^9] At some point three of the Greek girls seated themselves on the balcony floor forming sort of a ring. The Greek boys joined them. Then two Spanish girls, the unofficial hosts, joined them too. Soon more students of various nationalities joined the ring. Cigarettes and a bottle of wine were passed around the circle. Through this performance words became superfluous. The ring had a clear symbolic meaning and a strong emotional impact; they were all bonded together.[^10]

According to Jürgen Habermas' (1979) theory of *communicative action*, the interaction of performative expressions (speech acts), pragmatics (the contextual determination of meaning) and psychological maturation leads to the development of a subjective life world; a direct social engagement in which the participants have a personal responsibility to reach a consensual understanding of the situation. Given time and iteration this process gives rise to normative structures and moral principles that structure the life of a group of people. For Habermas (1979: 85-86) this process also has a propaedeutic value:

> We are supposing here that the youth has acquired the important distinction between norms, on the one hand, and principles according to which we can generate norms, on the other—and thus the ability to judge according to principles. He takes into account that traditionally settled forms of life can prove to be mere conventions, to be irrational. Thus he has to retract his ego

[^8]: This view of the learning process has some similarities to Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977: 11) theory of practice. Behaviour resulting from the tension between people’s socially structured dispositions and available opportunities for change, between structure and agency, has the character of a *regulated improvisation*. This implies that in every new situation a person encounters, which can resemble earlier ones, his actions will neither be totally free and innovative nor totally mechanical and repetitive. Instead people have schemas that are transferable to a variety of situations which guide and constrain their actions (Strauss & Quinn, 1997). The activated schemas, a kind of mental and behavioural templates, signal a basic pattern which should be followed in order for a given situation/relationship to be meaningful. This basic pattern is then, in action, elaborated with more improvisational and creative elements. These innovative elements can temporarily overshadow the habitual ways of being. In so doing they infuse a person’s life with a sense of renewal and emancipation; a seed of change has been planted.

[^9]: Here I want to mention that according to my experience, whenever Erasmus students and local students met it was almost always the former who dictated the conditions. Actually, local students, if allowed entrance at all, were always a well-checked minority. Through its size and well-formed character, the Erasmus group controlled the situation. Similarly, those local students who liked to socialise with Erasmus students had to adapt their behaviour to their special ways and play along. This also implied that they had to become more expressive and gestural in their communication.

[^10]: Such behaviour can of course also be observed among local students. However, among Erasmus students these symbolic elements play a much more important role. For one thing, this has to do with the language issue mentioned above. Local students have the privilege of unhindered communication with each other in their mother tongue, which limits the need to use other communicative means such as gestures, ritualizations, and the like. Further, their ordinary lives—with their ingrained daily routines and dominant behavioural patterns—has a very firm grip over their social activities, even during leisure time, and thus hinders them from resorting to such novel and unexpected ways of acting. Even when they exhibit such alternative ways of communication they are not imbued with the same emotional import as among the Erasmus students.
behind the line of all particular roles and norms and stabilize it only through the abstract
ability to present himself credibly in any situation as someone who can satisfy the
requirements of consistency even in the face of incompatible role expectations and in the
passage through a sequence of contradictory periods of life. Role identity is replaced by ego
identity; actors meet as individuals across, so to speak, the objective contexts of their lives.

Communicative action, hence, coordinates behaviour towards social integration and solidarity
and in so doing both creates and renews cultural knowledge and social identities. The Erasmus
students are a wonderful illustration of this process. Their special life circumstances potentiate
the process of communicative action and give rise to a distinct life world. The process starts
immediately upon arrival and develops quickly into a comprehensive network of mutual
recognition, information sharing, practical assistance, and emotional support.

The dynamism inherent in these group formations, as well as their rapid social
differentiation, further accentuates the performative elements mentioned above (symbolism,
impression management, social experimentation). Here it is also important to mention that the
provisions of the Erasmus Programme also contribute to the development of this special
situation. The Erasmus Programme offers a generous and safe ‘stage’ on which these social acts
can be performed and evaluated. It is reasonable to assume that a more competitive and
uncertain environment—like the one regularly faced by refugees or migrant workers—would
not have promoted the same levels of social spontaneity and cultural exploration.

Although adaptive to a certain degree, this open attitude is not uncomplicated, as it often
conflicts with other relevant definitions of the situation, and can therefore only be used in a
context-dependent manner; as an improvised performance. This is how Ian Woodward and
Zlatko Skrbis (2012: 136) describe this particular stance as it relates to cosmopolitanism:

The implication of this context dependency is that openness has a performative dimension, it
must be brought into social frames by actors who mobilize particular ways of seeing, which
elevate openness as a relevant and operational schema or discourse . . . Thus, openness is
neither a universal concept, nor necessarily more or less ubiquitous. It is more of a strategy,
resource or frame for managing meaning in settings infused by different types of individuals
and groups. Openness is not the same thing for every person, nor is it the same for each person
across particular settings. It may rest on similar conceptual dimensions, such as curiosity for
example, though its objects can be diverse. This means that researchers must look not to
absolute expressions of openness, but to its performance, effervescence and manifestation
across a diversity of settings by a range of citizens.

The Erasmus students exhibit such strategic performativity. During my study I witnessed many
Erasmus students trying to reformulate their national traits and traditions in order to be better
able to use them in their ongoing interactions with other Erasmus students or the host
population. Those aspects of their national traditions which they believed were not usable or
attractive in the new context were played down or concealed while those aspects which were
deemed useful and attractive were accentuated and preferred in their ongoing interactions. This
process—dialectical in the domain of discourse and performative in the domain of social
action—was for many Erasmus students an inherent part of their transnational sojourn and
resulted in profound revisions of their self-image and their social representations, often in a
more cosmopolitan direction.

There is also a temporal dimension in this performativity. In the beginning of the Erasmus
session the students often act as representatives of their home countries, but gradually become
more and more detached from it as the Erasmus group develops its own culture. Near the end
of the Erasmus session, and especially during the reunion meetings, the ‘love and pride’ they
feel is far less towards their national traditions and more towards an imagined supranational
community, perhaps towards a new Europe or the global ecumene. This performative perspective helps explain why the Erasmus students are so enthusiastic over the prospects of cultural contact but cautious not to fall prey to various forms of social regimentation (appropriating national attributes and customs, making long-term commitments, etc.). As *apprentice cosmopolitans* the Erasmus students are more intent on fashioning their own kind of community than on familiarising or integrating themselves with the national traditions of the host country.¹¹

Before leaving this topic, it is worth mentioning that this performative stance, although heavily accentuated by the peculiarities of the programme, is not unique to the Erasmus students. Almost half a century ago sociologist Herbert Gans (1979) claimed that performative ethnicity, what he called *symbolic ethnicity*, would soon be the only kind of ethnicity exhibited by third generation ethnics in urban America. According to this line of thought, as the functions of ethnic cultures diminish and personal choice and identity politics dominate an increasingly complex society, ethnicity takes on a performative rather than instrumental role in people’s lives; it becomes more of a leisure-time activity and loses its importance in earning a living or regulating family life. Such performances rely heavily on the manipulation of symbols that are ‘abstracted from that culture and pulled out of its original moorings, so to speak, to become stand-ins for it’ (Gans, 1979: 9). Further, such symbols ‘must be visible and clear in meaning to large numbers . . . and they must be easily expressed and felt, without requiring undue interference in other aspects of life’ (ibid). The end result is ‘a nostalgic allegiance . . . a love for and pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior’ (ibid).

**Youth culture and leisure**

A number of scholars have pointed to the dynamic processes taking place in the intersection of youth culture and leisure (Frith, 1980; Sansone, 1995), processes which seem to have intensified in the wake of urbanization and globalization (Hannerz, 1996). This dynamism, a form of *social innovation*, incubates a number of interesting developments.¹² Livio Sansone (1995: 125), talking about Surinamese youth in Amsterdam, puts it in a nutshell:

> Youth culture and the arena of leisure time have been favourable vehicles for the redefinition of the ethnicity of lower-class Creole young men. Throughout the subcultures and styles sketched here ethnicity changes meaning and becomes more complex and extrovert.

The Erasmus students, with their exuberant lifestyle, strong social cohesion and self-conscious celebration fit into this picture. Both within the university and outside of it, the students spend a lot of time doing non-routine and recreational activities like hanging out, roaming the streets, partying, and travelling. Far away from the supervision of adult society, with its well-established and mentally blunting routines, they have the opportunity to indulge their curiosity and the time to reflect on their lives. At the same time, the Erasmus Programme calls for a rapid acclimatization into a multicultural environment and provokes a re-evaluation of the merits and virtues of their national heritage. This combined situation results in an emancipatory process

¹¹ This finicky stance, a form of individualism, is actually well in line with the logic of late 20th century capitalism, where product diversification and individualised consumption are recognizable leitmotifs (see Appadurai, 1996; Bauman, 1998; Urry 2002a; Micheletti, 2003).

¹² This is, in many ways, a domain of existence comparable to that in which traditional initiation rites take place (cf. van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969).
that sets them loose from the shackles of family traditions and social conventions (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Van Mol & Michielsen, 2014).

The Erasmus students may therefore be seen as an emergent subworld or subculture (Strauss, 1982, 1984; Gelder, 2007). At some point they diverged from the ‘mother world’ of university students—forming their own subgroup—and since then have been grappling with issues of standard setting, value embodiment and boundary control; all requisite preoccupations of a newly formed group. Moreover, given their high membership turnover, Erasmus communities seem to be in a state of perpetual group formation, a kind of social germ line, ever emergent and re-forming. This dynamism reinforces the ‘separatist’ tendencies mentioned throughout this text.

Because of this type of sociality, Erasmus students can also be seen as a neo-tribe. According to Michel Maffesoli (1996) postmodern society is increasingly characterised by loose group formations that emerge spontaneously within mass society. These neo-tribes differ from traditional subgroups in that they are not necessarily oppositional to or subversive of mainstream culture, but rather crystallise on the basis of collective sentiments and common aesthetics in order to satisfy local and ephemeral needs. They mainly cater to their members’ emotional needs and function through ritual displays and role experimentation. In the case of the Erasmus students, as we have seen, this self-organization revolves around a number of well-defined elements: travel, partying, and cultural experimentation.

A learning experience

The Erasmus Programme is, no doubt, a learning experience. By way of its well-organised and well-received nature it has become an almost required rite of passage that helps initiate new generations of students into an educational and cultural process which, besides furthering their professional careers, also transforms their social identity. However, since learning is a complex phenomenon, we have to specify in greater detail what types of learning are implied if we are to evaluate it fairly.

One way is to see the session as an instance of intercultural learning; learning about the language and customs of another nation or ethnic group. If we chose to see it this way the yield of the Erasmus Programme is, unfortunately, rather meagre. Similar conclusions have been reached by other scholars (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). The main reason for this is the limited contact of the Erasmus students with local society. This lack is most clearly seen by the fact that hardly any Erasmus students I knew of had any local friends; even fewer of them had ever been invited to a Swedish home or partaken of a Swedish family dinner. Thus, very few students go beyond a basic level of cultural adaptation and develop any degree of proficiency in the local culture. According to Murphy-Lejeune (2002: 165):

The special position of strangers at the periphery of society means that the social learning situations available to them are limited. In other words, the sample of social situations on which strangers rest their learning is restricted. It could be assumed that the more diverse the

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13 As far as I can see the Erasmus students have all the characteristics of a true subculture, according to Gelder’s (2007) definition: they have a negative attitude towards work (idle, hedonistic, etc.), they have a negative or ambivalent relationship to class (an egalitarian stance), they are bound to particular territories (campus, dormitories, etc.), they show a movement out of the family and into non-domestic forms of belonging, they have a predilection for excess and exaggeration (as opposed to constraint and moderation), and they refuse the banalities of ordinary life and mass culture.

14 There are other categories of young travellers who fare better in this regard. Examples, known from the literature, are au-pairs, foreign-aid workers, and language-learning students (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002).
social situations they find themselves in and the closer their contacts with natives, the more student travelers will have the opportunity to diversify and refine their learning. Observation is an activity in which any foreigner can engage unilaterally during a period abroad. By contrast, situations which allow participation and communication in the native scene are less easily accessible. Yet, adopting the role of participant may reduce considerably socio-cultural distance between natives and students.

But there is another way to see the Erasmus experience. More than learning factual bits and pieces about other cultures, or acquiring behavioural repertoires for use in foreign lands, the experience is about gaining entrance into a cosmopolitan way of life (and here their separation from the host society works to their advantage). The students enter as peripheral participants but with legitimate claims to advance in stages and gain full access to its community of practice. As is common in other apprenticeships there is little explicit instruction or formal evaluation involved and the students are instead expected to develop their mastery and transform their identities by practicing what they are supposed to learn. Their participation is, however, guided by available role models (actual or mediated) and more experienced peers (cf. Lave, 1991; Rogoff, 1995; Wacquant, 2015; Griffith & Marion, 2018). Helen’s closing words about the Erasmus Programme illustrate this more encompassing learning process, an initiation into a new way of life:

Helen: The only thing I would like to add is that it gave me, how can I say it . . . I felt the need to . . . well, afterwards Greece seemed a little small for me—in the sense that I would like to live abroad. In other words, it opened up a door: the desire or the need to be abroad. To live there. For little or long, I don’t know.

Ioannis: It gave you an appetite?

Helen: Yes, a desire, that still hasn’t abated, to live abroad.

Ioannis: At the same time, from what you said, it helped you to reconsider some of your views about Greece. You said Greece seemed small afterwards.

Helen: Yes, it seemed small. Some Greek attitudes and habits we would be better without.

Through their experiences the Erasmus students get valuable training in the reality of living in an increasingly interconnected world. They familiarise themselves with the cultural diversity of the world, learn to navigate complex geocultural terrains, develop a more critical attitude towards ethnic and national identities, and learn to negotiate cross-cutting memberships and loyalties. Perhaps as a continuation of their apprenticeship, and given their special experiences abroad, they may eventually reach a satisfactory level of intercultural competence. In any case, there is good reason to believe that those who have partaken of the Erasmus Programme will have a greater willingness, and no doubt competence, to live their lives as ‘citizens of the world’.

Curtain call

Two of the original objectives of the European Union in instituting the Erasmus Programme were to increase educational cooperation and student mobility. Another motive behind the programme has been to foster a common European identity. My discussion has shown that these objectives have been reached to various degrees. Most importantly for our purposes, however, the Erasmus Programme contributes to the popularization and cultural thickening of cosmopolitanism which until quite recently was an elite phenomenon; educational travel within Europe is now within easy reach for all but the lowest income classes. It does so both by increasing the incidence of transnational encounters and by improving the quality of the
encounters (by promoting cultural exploration, intensifying intercultural communication, equalizing academic opportunities, furthering career prospects, and so on). This increases the attractiveness and viability of the cosmopolitan outlook and makes its spread and consolidation more likely. Further, by partaking in a community of practice, it also gives more ‘flesh and blood’ to the idea of a culturally unified Europe, an idea which until quite recently was only a bureaucratic fantasy. This homogenizing and equalizing influence has been decisive for the countries of southern Europe in particular. In the long run these developments, if strengthened by further curricular and political conversions, could help transform the ‘unified educational market’, an important achievement of the European Union’s educational policy, into the workings of a truly cosmopolitan democracy (cf. Archibugi, 2004).

In this, the Erasmus Programme is the medium which is the message, a message more urgent than ever before. By the re-establishment of undistorted communication and intersubjective understanding it ‘reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalised social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties’ (Turner, 1969: 96). The revelation of a global ecumene.
Sammanfattning på svenska

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