

NIJMEGEN, A WRITTEN ACCOUNT

Sofia QUAGLIA

(Università degli Studi di Milano)

Right at the start of our era, around 100AD, Nijmegen was founded by the Romans as a *Castrum Legionari* due to its quite strategic location used to defend the river Waal. Nijmegen was further funded during the reign of Augustus and renamed *Ulpia Noviomagus Batavorum*. The town transformed in this time, from a lowly army barracks, to a bustling market city. In its long history as the oldest city in the Netherlands, it has seen itself change hands many times, from once being under the rule of the Charlemagne Empire to being a Nazi occupied town during World War II, that was almost completely destroyed when bombed by allied forces.

Nowadays, Nijmegen's history is still reflected in this old town. Each layer of it is worn like a badge of pride. However, there is a dichotomy to this town, brought about by its inhabitants. Its purpose nowadays, primarily as a university town, has attracted a much younger and more energetic demographic. An old city with a young vibe. The oldest parts of the town are home to affordable restaurants and cafes packed with freshmen, expressing themselves freely through the very coffee they drink. Vibrant and spirited, it plays host to gatherings of students and societies (groups of students with common interests) at events such as concerts, beach parties and barbecues. In August, around late evening, immense groups of students can be seen cycling and singing together on the way to such events. In fact, the bicycle itself is the cornerstone of the student experience in Nijmegen, a shining symbol of student life. You are initiated into this city by means of the bicycle.

September arrives and with it the beginning of the academic year. It feels like the entire city is attending classes. There is an eeriness that sweeps over the town as coffeeshops are replaced by libraries, social gatherings are replaced by study groups, parties are replaced by team sports. Nonetheless, those expressive coffees remain. In Italy, it is very stereotypical that the day traditionally revolves around mealtime, yet, in Nijmegen the day revolves around college. When leaving for class in the morning, you meet all the same people that were, only a few weeks ago, on the way to nightclubs and

events. Now, they are up at the crack of dawn, causing a literal traffic jam of bikes, on the streets of this old town.

Radboud University has its campus located about twenty minutes (by bike, of course) outside of the old district. It is the most well renowned institution in both Nijmegen and in all of the Netherlands. I had a period of study here as an Erasmus student during part of my two-year master's in philosophy program in the University of Milan. What follows is an account of my academic experiences at Radboud during the months of August 2019 to January 2020.

On my first day of University, I was invited to the department of the faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious study to meet the head of the department as well as other staff members of the faculty including lecturers and postgrads. I immediately felt the difference in the relationship that would be experienced here between student and teacher. It was much more informal, relaxed, and horizontal in its structure as opposed to the more hierarchical structures I was used to. Even though the master's programmes in Radboud are organised into extremely strict and predetermined pathways of study, I was fortunate enough to be able to participate in classes from each of these different pathways. This was to enable my academic profile at Radboud to mirror my plan of study at UNIMI.

When classes started, the taster I had of Radboud and how it differed from my university back home, became highlighted further. Firstly, when receiving the timetable of lessons, it was clear that each class had only one lecture of around three hours, per week. These lessons took place in classrooms and lecture halls that hosted a maximum of fifteen students at a time. The classes, I myself, attended had no more than half this capacity for any given lesson. In stark contrast to UNIMI, where lessons take place in auditoriums packed with students and where, if you are late, you are designated a pleasant space on the floor rather than a seat. The programmes of the courses contained much less material than I was used to. The literature was not composed of the works of any one author but instead was a series of extracts from certain authors and papers summarizing an author's entire collection of work. (For example, papers that had titles such as: "What Immanuel Kant meant when he wrote the Critique"). Lectures revolved around a discussion, helmed by the lecturer, on these sorts of papers, read in our own time without any further explanation in class.

My reason for going on an Erasmus was to experience another way of learning Philosophy. I wished to learn how to discuss, write, present, and express my educated and philosophical thoughts and arguments in proper, scientific and academic English. Something I had not yet had the opportunity to do in Milan. Utilitarian purposes by all means. I achieved these goals via the techniques of teaching used in Radboud, which

rigorously embedded, in me, the ways of how to express myself in these new mediums. I was required, on a weekly basis, to produce formal papers and popularizing articles on topics covered in class. I was instructed to present certain arguments or theses, either sustaining or debating them, both orally amongst peers and in more formal manners through exhibitions such as Ted Talks. I learned the importance of being understood and knowing my audience. Formulating an idea or thought that can not only be expressed to a highly educated professional but understood and learned by a broader group of people. To sum it up, in Milan when something is not understood what is perceived to be lacking is knowledge on the pupils' part. However, in Nijmegen if you are misunderstood (which happened so often to me) the blame rests squarely on the shoulders of the speaker for not being clear enough with their explanation of a topic.

This brings us to the fact that topics covered in this system are much more simplified and lowered down to a layman's understanding. This is down to two simple facts. Firstly, lecturers do not explicitly teach, they conduct and lead debates, which are, secondly; autonomously formulated, prepared, and analysed solely by the students. This surprised me in two ways, it showed me that the analysis of the student had the same weight and importance as the professors. It also made me realize that I myself, have ideas and opinions that when composed in a proper way can have an impact and spark thought and discussion something I never experienced in Milan, as speaking out against the teachings of a much more experienced, educated and renowned scholar is not practiced or encouraged. To me personally, this behaviour was not impulsive or natural to begin with and I had to learn it through my time in Radboud (a literal necessity as twenty percent of the grade for the course was awarded for such participation in class).

Going to Radboud was to me, an occasion to start to prepare myself for being a philosophy major in an international context. Since the language and teaching methodologies are very much sided with analytical philosophy juxtaposed to my continental background. I concluded my last semester of master at UNIMI and there I realised how much I missed the content being fully explained and analysed in its broader entirety. Now, going into the final year of my masters and currently in the process of writing my thesis, I have really grown to understand how much I learned throughout my Erasmus experience and how it impacted my way of thinking.

Overall, this experience abroad, in such a varying academic system to my own, gave me a new perspective on how I would like to combine certain aspects from both approaches in my future endeavours in philosophy. Not only this, but as any experience abroad, it gave me a whole new outlook, a different viewpoint on how teaching, learning and research can be approached.