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Moyer, E.

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## City & Society

### Buying Time in a Prosperous Land: Some musings on human-viral relations from the streets of Amsterdam

Eileen Moyer, University of Amsterdam

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Walking along the Amstel River toward the old center of Amsterdam one encounters a larger than life statue of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Dutch philosopher, Baruch Spinoza. Erected to celebrate the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth year, it sits upon a pedestal with the citation: *Het doel van de staat is vrijhied*, or “the purpose of the state is freedom.” Wearing a cloak dotted with sparrows and ring-necked parakeets, which sculptor Nicolas Dings tells us are meant to invoke thoughts of cultural diversity and tolerance toward migrants, the beatific Spinoza compels me to slow my pace and reflect on the ways that our understandings of freedom, nature, the state, and (in)tolerance are playing out in times of COVID-19.

The aspirational placement of the statue just across from City Hall seems intent on reminding city dwellers of the importance of freedom in Dutch imaginaries of *samenleving*, perhaps best translated as “our way of life.” The unfolding epidemic creates a moment to rethink the purpose of state and the value of good governance in shaping our way of life.

The Netherlands has been criticized by some neighboring states, and indeed some citizens,

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for refusing to institute strict stay at home orders, close its borders or airports, and for allowing many businesses to continue operating under social distancing guidelines. Yet, as someone who deeply enjoys her morning walks, I cannot help but feel grateful to live in a city where personal freedom is complexly interwoven with personal responsibility and civic duty, and where the social contract and social safety nets remain somewhat intact.



Image 1: Nicolas Dings' statue of Spinoza. This part of the city is usually bustling with local and tourist activity. Two Amsterdam police make their way toward an entrance to

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Waterlooplein market on a Monday morning to ensure that new spatial regulations are being followed.

In recent weeks, my daily walks have provided opportunities to observe the city in a new light, to witness the ways that nature and culture are entangled, and appreciate the audacity of building a city below sea level, as well as the great care required by humans to keep it livable. Freed from the need to dodge bikers or push through crowds of selfie-sticked tourists, I find myself gaping at the beauty of the city's canal houses and public buildings, reminded of the centuries of prosperity and privilege accumulated in this former swampland. That this well-managed prosperity gives us a competitive advantage in comparison to other countries as we play wait and see with a virus other is viscerally felt by me as I follow the epidemic response in the United States, the country where I was born.





Image 2: Man, child and pigeons dancing in the sun on Dam Square with a shuttered Madam Tussaud in the background. The hand-made heart betwixt the wax Harry Potter and someone I take to be Rembrandt is inscribed the word *coronahelden*, or Corona Heroes, an acknowledgement of appreciation for health care workers in line with the national campaign, #mijnhartvoordezorg.

Similar to the “invasive” ring-necked parakeets celebrated on Spinoza’s robe, who presumably escaped or were set free from Amsterdam cages to make their homes in the

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city's trees, the virus other that has come to town is also seen as an invader. Every day, we are invited, encouraged, cajoled and admonished by the state, businesses, our employers, friends, and strangers encountered on the streets to come together to defeat the city's most recent invader. We have been informed that the goal is to slow the spread of a virus that will eventually come to live inside of up to 60% of us and, that by limiting our movement around the city to essential trips and a bit of daily exercise, we can prevent the public health system from being overwhelmed and ensure that all of those requiring advanced medical care will be able to receive it. Health workers are routinely compared to warriors in a battle, and personal protective equipment to battle armor.



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Image 3: *Zorg Goed voor Elkaar/Take Good Care of One Another*. Like the Carre Theater, originally built to house a circus, all city cultural institutions have been closed since early March. Many have quickly worked to make material free online to allow people with sufficient streaming capacity to fill their days at home with performances, books and films, while the better funded ones have draped their facades with screen-printed messages meant to inspire.





Image 4: *Dank, Helden/Thanks heroes*. Sign hung on a fence outside the Oosterpark, across from the entrance to Onze Lieve Vrouwe Hospital. As in many places around the world, the areas outside of hospitals have become shrines where offering of thanks are made to underpaid essential health workers.

As someone who has done research related to HIV for more than 25 years, I'm struck by the familiarity of these warlike metaphors and am tempted to dismiss them for their lack of originality, but Spinoza inspires me to think more deeply about the things that parakeets and viruses and migrants might have in common. Like me, Spinoza was a first-generation migrant. When I came to The Netherlands 20 years ago, the first person who interviewed

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me for my work visa scoffed at my nervousness, telling me that as an educated person from a Western land, I was the kind of immigrant they were looking for. Fleeing the persecution of Jews in Spain, Spinoza came to Amsterdam with his educated and wealthy parents, who were welcomed at a time when the city opened its doors to those willing to invest their capital in the city's booming Golden Age economy.

The city, celebrated for its tolerance and pragmatism, has long profited from and “put up with” (a more accurate translation of the Dutch word for tolerance) outsiders willing to invest in building Amsterdam's wealth and reputation. Characterizing the virus as coming from “outside” has become a matter of course over the last months: the Chinese tried to link it to African Pangolins, while some Americans stubbornly refer to it as a Chinese virus, and my friends in Zanzibar describe it as a white people disease. While simultaneously denouncing and invoking the trope of Covid-19 as a Chinese virus, Dutch authorities congratulate themselves for recognizing the virus as global.





Image 5: Ring-necked parakeets encountered on an early morning walk while listening to a podcast about Covid-19. Moments after taking this photo, the parrots spread their wings and aggressively flew in my direction, presumably to protect nests that I failed to spot. They may be migrants to the city, but it's quickly become their home.

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Yet the truth is, like the parakeets of Amsterdam, that the virus could not have gotten here on its own: it required help from people to move about, to help it jump species, cross borders and find ideal hosts. Like migrants and pet parakeets, the virus is happiest when it finds an ideal host, and in the case of Covid-19, the ideal host is one that doesn't exhibit too many symptoms and is willing to abandon newly imposed social norms by continuing to shake unwashed hands, cavort freely in public spaces, and transgress the 1.5 meter bubbles we have been asked to inhabit.



Image 6: City-sponsored campaign to encourage social distancing. Many of the signs link social distancing to keeping one's relatives (mothers, grandfathers, aunts) out of the "IC" or the intensive care unit. This has resulted in what is now being called the "*anderhalve meter-maatschappij*," or one-and-a-half-meter-society, a form of spatial management that



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permits people to move freely about the city as long as they respect the social distancing guidelines.



Image 7: *Oma and opa, we missen jullie/Grandma and Grandpa, we miss you!* Good citizens have been advised to not visit with extended family and friends, especially elderly and people with pre-existing conditions that are likely to make them more vulnerable to developing a severe response to Covid-19. Early indications are that this is resulting in what is being referred to as an epidemic of loneliness. More recently, it has become known that efforts to isolate elderly people in their (care) homes has been less effective than



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expected, since the (home) health care workers who tend to them have not been provided with sufficient personal protective equipment.



Image 8: Sidewalk drawing of a corona virus the phrase, *Dit is de grootste stomste corona*, or this is the biggest, stupidest corona.

Amsterdammers take pride in their paradoxical reputation as anarchic Calvinists. People who visit the city complain loudly about crowded public spaces and the seeming refusal of Amsterdam bikers and boaters to adhere to established rules. Driving or parking a motor



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vehicle in the city requires both quick wit and deep pockets. As the daughter of a trucker, my deepest respect has long gone to delivery drivers who navigate the city’s narrow streets, which are generally clogged with irreverent bikers and clueless tourists. Walking the city nowadays, I can’t help but notice that these “essential” workers seem to be delighted by the emptiness, taking time to smile and wave as they deliver groceries to those opting to avoid crowded stores and takeaway meals to those striving to support local restaurants.



Image 9: Grocery store delivery man, double parked as per usual, but without the usual traffic pile up. New guidelines have also been put in place to protect delivery driver. They now only deliver to the doorstep and require “contactless” payment.



Image 10: A food delivery bike breezes through an intersection during the dinner rush. Restaurants have been closed to customers since early March, but many kitchens remain open and Amsterdammers are encouraged to support local eateries by ordering delivery or takeaway. All transactions are now cashless.

In an attempt to control the everyday anarchy of grocery shopping, the state issued guidelines that require businesses to police the behavior of their customers by limiting the number of shoppers in the store at any given time and enforcing social distancing. Failure



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to do so can lead to a 4000 euro fine. The result has been the emergence of increasingly sophisticated spatial infrastructures to permit the orderly flow of clients everywhere.



Image 11: Customer waiting outside a pop-up bakery that only allows one customer to enter at a time. The organic bakery made most of its money supplying restaurants. In a show of solidarity, the ArtKitchen gallery, agreed to allow the bakery to sell its fresh baked bread from its shop. You can see the art of Hugo Kaagman, an artist represented by the gallery to the left and right. The door on the right invites us to Resist Corona and is emblazoned with horseshoe bats and a scary looking nurse. The Covid-19 virus is presumed to have originated in horseshoe bats.



Image 12: At the entrance to a grocery store, customers are prevented from taking their own cart and encouraged to wash their hands before and after a visit to the shop. Employees regulate the number of people in the store by limiting the number of available carts. Each person is required to take a cart and to stay with their cart the whole time to facilitate social distancing. Customers are advised to use the self-checkout when possible and discouraged from paying with cash. Plastic dividers have been erected between checkout clerks and customers, and receipts are no longer issued. Store employees wear vests with the regulations emblazoned on the back and bottles of cleaner to wipe down carts and screens in between customers.





Image 13: Amsterdam Coffee shops, where marijuana is sold, remain open for business, but only offer takeaway services and limit the number of customers permitted inside.





Image 14: As spring approaches, the flower stalls are overflowing. Even here, we see customers lining up, following the social distancing guidelines posted on the propped-up blackboard.



Image 15: Even homeless shelters adhere to social distancing guidelines. People wait 1.5 meters apart from one another for the daily opening of this shelter which provides meals to those in need.

As I write this essay, the city of Amsterdam is three weeks into a period of what is described in the Netherlands as “Intelligent Lockdown,” which we are told is based on the best science available. We are regularly treated to informed updates and occasional scolding from the Dutch Prime Minister and invited to observe parliamentary debates and technical briefings related to the national response. Even if that response has been far from perfect, one feels a certain sense of trust toward those in charge. With modesty, we are reminded

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that the government must make decisions with imperfect knowledge and in a world where medical supply chains have already been heavily compromised.

As the warm spring days lengthen and people get restless, it is proving more difficult to keep people inside. Last month was the sunniest March on record, and nothing is more Dutch than basking in the sun of a sidewalk café at the first sign of warmth. Unarmed police mill about on foot and bike, reminding people to keep sufficient distance between them and checking identification to confirm that those breaking the rules are from the same household. We have been told that we are “buying time” for the public health services, a seemingly reasonable option in this prosperous land. Although the science is now being questioned, we have also been told that a “side effect” of the Dutch approach will be a slow growing herd immunity, which may allow the country to “return to normal” more quickly than in places like China that have chosen for a total lockdown.

It also seems that we are “biding” our time, slowly learning how to live with this novel virus and contemplating possibilities of a new normal after Covid-19. It is common these days in the city to hear people linking viral outbreaks to a loss of biodiversity and celebrating the low levels of pollution that have resulted from the lockdown. Without cafes, people are flocking to parks and riversides to chat and enjoy a bit of nature. Many say that there are more birds in the city this year and that the flowers are lasting longer on the trees. Are the birds louder we ask, or is it just the absence of traffic that allows us to hear their songs? We may eventually come to see that like migrants and ring-necked parakeets, our



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lives have been enriched in some ways as a consequence of our entanglement with this virus other.



Image 16: With all fitness studios closed, people have moved their workouts to outdoor spaces.



Image 17: Park benches seem to serve as the perfect meter of social distance these days, as elderly urban dwellers characteristically ignore pleas to stay inside and choose instead to venture out to meet up with friends in city parks.





Image 17: Along the Amstel River, a youthful crowd gathers in clusters of three to enjoy a Palm Sunday sunset in the company of water fowl.