40. THE PLEASURE OF NARRATING LIVES: MONIQUE AS A PASSIONATE ETHNOGRAPHER

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Those who know her will ascertain that Monique's passion for anthropology is driven by a fascination in finding precise answers to a set of recurrent questions. In this essay I provide examples of her passion for research. I concentrate on our shared (life) experiences and her early field work in the Pyrenees and Mexico.

Monique and I became close friends in 1985 when we both were student assistants at the Department of Non-Western Agrarian Sociology, chaired by Professor Norman Long. Unimaginable now, she was very shy in public. In class and in seminars, she rarely spoke. Yet, she was an excellent presenter; passionate and sharp. That was striking for many, like me, who knew her to be a very sociable person. I remember that she managed to obtain permission to borrow as many as 20 books from the library at a time. Her student room was piled high with books, most of which were ethnographies, devoured for possible cases and explanations.

Monique's reputation as a promising scholar began with her early research in the Spanish Pyrenees on transhumance shepherds which she did for her BSc degree. Together with Willemien Brooijmans, she set out to document the summer travels of shepherds to higher grounds (the two would accompany shepherds for days in pursuit of this story). She recounted the solitude of these men, some of whom would never find a life partner in villages that were being abandoned, as young women relocated

to the city in search of work. Monique gathered extensive data on the multi-layered agricultural strategies and the complexity of property relations in the region. Strikingly, some families were becoming quite wealthy buying land as well as houses in the village, which begged the question: what for? If there seemed to be no future in the village, then why were some families buying up property? Men accumulated capital with a view to getting a spouse, but found it difficult to start a family. Migrant women lived afar, but maintained close relationships with the village. Households were fragmented and yet there was a strong sense of commonality.

One of the questions Monique raised was whether this phenomenon was an inexorable effect of modernisation. No, was her answer, drawing on Long's concept of differential responses to change. Incorporation theory was popular at the time, but she was critical of it and preferred to look at the relationship between the local and the global from a historical perspective. What fascinated her was the ability of people to partake in different worlds (e.g. the village in the Pyrenees, the city) and fields of activity (e.g. pastoralism, agriculture, commerce). The dynamics of village life, migration, shifts in property relations, and the historical relationship between the local and wider power fields was what sparked her interest.

Norman Long was impressed by her work, in particular the detail with which she documented and analysed different fields of activity. Her approach to research fit snugly with the Manchester School tradition: looking at processes as multifarious and non-linear, a strong interest in unexpected responses, the contingency of everyday life, and the making of local worlds. Giddens' structuration theory was popular at the time, but Monique was doubtful about its capacity to bridge the agency/structure divide. She actively participated in the development of the actor-oriented approach, but she was not a follower, as she had her doubts about the agentive capacities of actors to shape their lives in all circumstances and moments. At the same time, she had a keen interest in organisation theory, legal anthropology and the ethnographic case study method.

In 1987 Monique started doing her MSc field research in Mexico, following her previous interests in the Pyrenees. This was a part of Norman's project on irrigation and planned intervention in Western Jalisco, Mexico, in two valleys where sugar cane and agro-export production for the USA (including marihuana) were very strong. Western Jalisco is the typical cowboy (*ranchero*) area as depicted in Mexican films, characterised by deep Catholicism, conservatism, individualism, ruggedness and a good deal of racism against indigenous people. Monique went to live in the village of Lagunillas in the house of one of the founding families of the *ejido* (a communal form of smallholder agriculture). This was a typical transnational family, involved in maize production for local markets, cane production for the national sugar market, and illegal migration to the USA (where half of the village lived).

In doing research, Monique took on the role of a daughter in the family, following the same rules as other unmarried daughters. There was a lot of bantering, gossip, and partying (at the bullfights), especially during the dry season when labour requirements

are low. But Monique also visited the fields (which was uncommon for a young woman), and she wrote down everything she observed about the extended family. She started looking at the family as a field of activity shaped by a conservative ideology that did not correspond to the practice of everyday decision-making (we referred to this as 'cognitive dissonance' at the time, before poststructuralist discourse theory). Notably, Monique's 'village mother' came from a traditional family and was very well-connected. She had a strong character and was instrumental in the family decision to migrate to Los Angeles; an unexpected and sudden decision that fascinated Monique.

Monique's MSc research was highly ambitious. Again, she was interested in differential forms of integration in wider fields of activity, and thus, the history of migration, differential responses to change, and the contingency of decision-making. She traced the history of these activity fields which extended into the USA. One question that obsessed her was why so many men chose for temporary migration, and then returned to the village to grow maize; a crop that was not profitable. What was it that motivated them to engage, yearly, in these forms of illegal migration? Women, on the contrary, adapted more easily to the way of life in the USA. There was much demand for their work in the service sector and they enjoyed the conveniences of city life.

Strikingly, Monique did not find feminist theory very convincing for her research, especially the critique of patriarchy as a dominant structure of domination. Patriarchy, in her view, was highly flawed and inconsistent, even ideologically. Younger generations of men were unable to be reliable providers like their predecessors. The result was an increase in masculine violence, including domestic abuse. Worse than the symbolic violence of the family patriarch, was the pathetic, but very real violence of men frustrated by the empowerment of women due to migration. The resentment triggered by these changes spurred more violence against women when drug gangs came to dominate the area.

Yet, Monique was very interested in gender dynamics at the village level: contrasting the performance of machismo to the increased role of women in decision-making processes. She had a couple of male key informants, whose intelligence she appreciated. One of her favourite informants was Javier[17], an *ejidatario* (member of the ejido) who never migrated to the USA, and who cherished maize agriculture. He did not belong to one of the founding, powerful families and avoided local *ejido* politics and disputes. His two daughters had moved to the city of Guadalajara and he did not have heirs interested in his land. So, he knew that he belonged to the last generation of traditional farmers in the village and he accepted that as a matter of fact. The future, he said, belonged to the youth and especially women.

[17] Not his real name; he appears on the front cover with Monique and his wife.

So, Monique sympathised with the fate of men, their solitude, their impotence, in a violent and *machista* world, while remaining highly interested in the silent power of women who were gaining increasing control over their sons and daughters through migration. At the same time, she was weary of overly romantic analyses. She was a realist, always attentive to the local worlds and frames of interpretation of the people she studied, and to the role of larger structural forces that divided families and communities and that imposed new forms of violence on the poor, especially women and the younger generations.

Back in the Netherlands in 1990, Monique started working on a PhD research proposal, taking as her topic the *ejido* as a land-holding institution. At the time there was much talk about the privatisation and liberalisation policies of the *ejido*. As Mexico prepared to enter the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1991, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari declared the end of *ejid*o land distribution and allowed existing *ejidos* to rent out and sell land, thus ending land reform in Mexico. This was a highly ideological topic, and many predicted that this was the death knell for smallholder farming in Mexico. Surprisingly, people in Lagunillas were far less impressed by the possible impacts of these policies than academics. They welcomed these changes as a recognition of how things actually worked. Monique's research proposal (later published in Norman and Ann Long's edited volume *Battlefields of Knowledge*, 1992), set out to study these policies by inquiring into the history and dynamics of property relations.

She started her proposal with an anecdote concerning her search for a formal document: a list of *ejidatarios* with an official map of their belongings. After pursuing the *ejido* commissioner for months, he invited Monique for a soft drink and started to describe every ejido properties, detailing the borders. He did this by rote. The point was that there was no map. That was the moment she learnt that *ejidatario* smallholders did not read official maps, yet they produced detailed mental relational maps that combined local knowledge about family inheritance with the physical boundaries of plots.

Back in Lagunillas, Monique started elaborating genealogies of land. She did that through a combination of archival research and oral histories. Central in her research were issues of sale, renting and inheritance, in relation with changes in the *ejido* law and shifting family dynamics in the village. She showed that property was encumbered by different sets of claims and expectations. Inheriting land implied retaining a close relationship with the village, something that was difficult to sustain by migrants. Would the liberalisation of the *ejido* law lead to further land concentration by *caciques* (strongmen) supported by private capital? Her research showed that there had always been a market of land in the village, but that market forces had always been mitigated by the existence of normative frameworks – *de facto* a kind of non-state law – that regulated land transactions. Further, the dominance of local strongmen was in true decline, given the increasing importance of transnational livelihoods.

While doing research on the workings of the agrarian bureaucracy Monique realised the opaque and speculative character of the force-fields in which *ejidatarios* operated. She explored the case of a large plot that had never been distributed (and was still in the hands of private landholders), which included accompanying a commission of *ejidatarios* as they sought justice through numerous state offices. This quest inspired her to delve more deeply into the workings of bureaucracy as a machine devoid of any kind of formal rationality

Monique also became interested in corruption; not in formal terms as the abuse of bureaucratic power, but in its performance, its pleasurable and speculative side. She argued that the discourse of corruption enables state subjects to engage in spectacular imaginations of the state. In doing so she engaged with the bureaucrats' discourse, imagination and performance of corruption. For engineers in the agrarian bureaucracy it was acceptable to be a little corrupt, but they criticised colleagues who were 'very corrupt', thus constructing moral criteria for dealing with *ejidatarios*. Migrants from Lagunillas complained that there was no freedom in the USA, as you cannot negotiate situations with police, thus constructing an image of the state there as being overly repressive and intolerant. Corruption in her work is thus performative, it provides possibilities for imagination and is enjoyable.

She applied this perspective to the analysis of conflicts and disputes that were never resolved, and hence brought forward an idea of the state as an opaque and aloof apparatus bolstered by the fiction that there is a central locus of power where decisions are made. This led her to analyse the workings of the state bureaucracy as a hope-generating machine; an apparatus that promises rules and closure, but in fact, operates and rules through procrastination and inefficiency, converting agentive citizens into patients of the state.

Norman, her supervisor, was initially doubtful about her approach which he saw as a flirtation with semiotics (the science of signs), and thus implicitly a structuralist deviation. Yet, he did propose the thesis for a *cum laude*. Two renowned Latin Americanists were on the committee: Gavin Smith and John Gledhill. I remember that John, who is stingy with praise, was deeply impressed by the quality of the ethnography. Interestingly, the defence revolved very much around ethnographic issues with Gavin asking detailed questions about several characters in the ethnography before formulating a theoretical question.

In the *judicium* (assessment) Norman announced that she was indeed granted a *cum laude*. This was completely out of the blue for Monique – no one had informed her beforehand that it was even a possibility. Yet, it was hardly surprising as she had achieved a *cum laude* for all of her graduations.

In 1994 I got a job at the Colegio de Michoacán and we moved with our twin daughters to Zamora. Shortly after, the department of anthropology appointed her as a research fellow. I remember José (Pepe) Lameira, one of the luminary anthropologists of

COLMICH telling me how impressed he was by this young, charming woman and her analytical capacities and passion when talking about her research, and the *ejido* in particular. Pepe commended the courage of young foreign researchers who were not afraid to live in distant and insecure rural areas and (to our amusement) commented that she did it all with a delightful French accent! Curiously, Monique became known there as a sort of post-modernist, as she did not believe in the grand narratives of progress and revolution. She found it a funny characterisation as she was absolutely not interested in this kind of debate. What interested her was the fate of ordinary people; their intimate, little worlds, their hopes and disappointments. She had little faith in the prospect of grand ideas or designs for changing the world.

We see a consistent pattern in Monique's ethnographic perspective. It is about people and their construction of intimate, yet unbounded, worlds. She is quite pessimistic about notions such as progress or development, but also about the capacity of people to shape their own lives in a strategic, intentional way. She has been interested in the imaginary, spectacular side of power, its labyrinthine and opaque features. Social process for her was always incomplete and unfinished. As she liked to say to students: 'never look for closure when writing an ethnographic case study. You never know how the story may shift in surprisingly unexpected ways later.'

What, then, makes Monique a great anthropologist in a neoliberal academic environment where ethnography is increasingly under threat. Theories surge and decline, and although always conceptually solid, Monique was never married to a particular theory, school, or thinker. Although interested in gender dynamics she never abided with feminist theory. Although critical of development interventions and the hubris of modernist aspirations to change people's worlds she never adhered to a post-development perspective. Although always on the side of ordinary people and attentive to their capacity to shape their worlds, she avoided the romanticism of resistance, and the entrepreneurialism of actor-oriented approaches. She was acutely aware of the risks, injustice and humiliations inflicted on the powerless. Although she was highly impressed by poststructuralist theory, she never adhered to fashionable ideas of disciplinary power or biopolitics. Although interested in the performative and imaginary side of power, she never indulged in Lacanian theories on enjoyment and desire. Neither was she interested in fashionable theories of transgression.

Monique is conceptually eclectic, always drawing on contemporary ethnographic debates. She draws inspiration from literature, and 'personal interest stories'. Reading her work gives the reader a sense of how people manage their lives, including the way in which imagination and story-telling shape organizing practices. Emanating from her writing are the strong relationships established with people among whom she did fieldwork, the pleasure she derived from telling their stories, and the ways she made their happiness and suffering her own. It is this strong commitment to the fate of common people and her capacity to theorise it that makes her work important and long lasting. Not only because she did contribute to the shaping of a disciplinary field,

but also because future generations – especially in the South – will be able to identify with the characters in her ethnographies.

I end this essay with immense gratitude and appreciation to a wonderful researcher and companion.

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