

15. THE LITTLE VOICE INSIDE YOUR HEAD: NUIJTEN, INTROSPECTION AND POLITICAL AGENCY

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The enduring voice is often not the loudest. In a time when it seems that public debates consist increasingly of shouting matches between those who purposely do not want to understand each other², it is important to look for and listen to those voices that go against the grain, go unheard and actually have meaningful things to say. Monique Nuijten has been attentive to such voices and has herself been such a voice for a long time. In her work, she has been able to combine these gifts with sharp theoretical interventions to create an enduring legacy in political anthropology, urban studies and development sociology. This short essay will not be able to do justice to or give a comprehensive overview of this legacy. Rather, it aims to highlight what I believe are just some of the key theoretical, methodological and personal implications of Nuijten's attention to multitudes of different voices and how this helped her become such an important voice in her own right.

Monique Nuijten's interests in rural development are extremely broad. She has written on urban activism, legal pluralism, state bureaucracy, citizenship, corruption, food, imperialism, break-dancing and much more. Her work has been influenced by the

² Including on social media: the tweets of one 'PARTICULARLY OBNOXIOUS' world 'leader' come to mind immediately.

actor-oriented Wageningen development sociology, but never followed any ‘party-line’. Nuijten is far too much of a free-thinker for that, especially given her consistent focus on being attentive to contradictions, tensions and using these to pursue novel theoretical avenues. Yet, throughout her different studies and field sites in Mexico, Brazil and Spain, I believe that two central pillars helped her navigate her diverse interests and develop several distinctive theoretical and methodological insights: introspection and political agency.

Starting with the latter, Nuijten’s work centralises the agency of all subjects in her studies, but always in overlapping political contexts. With this I believe she means two things: first and foremost, that agents are always political subjects with interests, doubts, fears and desires but also, second, that agents always act within broader political contexts, from global hegemonic structures and development contexts to organisations and their bureaucracies. An illustrative intervention is Nuijten’s astute article ‘Between Fear and Fantasy: Governmentality and the Working of Power in Mexico’, where she shows in ethnographic detail how both peasants and bureaucrats are part of, and indeed caught in, the interplay between the tension-ridden demands of formalised procedures and personalised relations. And it is precisely in this interplay that power expresses itself, according to Nuijten: it binds these actors together and leads them to develop strategies to cope with, change or resist this course of power. It is here that the relationality of power in Nuijten’s thinking becomes especially apparent, something that she later conceptualised through the innovative term ‘force fields’ (Nuijten, 2005).

Trying to understand bounded dynamics and agential expressions in complex force fields has distinct methodological challenges, which Nuijten tackled through a combination of long-term ethnographic engagement and continuous inter-personal introspection. Following anthropological custom, for Nuijten there is no ‘objective’ positionality of the researcher. And it is here where the combination of political agency and introspection becomes particularly fascinating: as Nuijten builds up her familiarity of empirical force fields, she allows her own political agency to come to the fore in order to deepen her understanding. What I have in mind is how Nuijten describes what happened when she became more familiar with her interviewees and started to have more ‘critical dialogues’ with them, instead of formal interviews: ‘I challenged people on certain ideas they held and deliberately confronted them with what I saw as contradictions in their statements and actions’ (Nuijten, 2003: 23). She later reiterated this point methodologically: ‘challenging people on certain ideas they hold and deliberately confront them with contradictions in their statements and actions can lead to important insights. It can be interesting to see how the research population reacts to the researcher’s theories and doubts and to exchange personal views on the matter’ (Nuijten, 2005: 11).

Importantly, what is ‘interesting’ here goes not only for the researcher, but also the research subject: critical reflection becomes iterative such that the researcher herself changes the force fields she tries to understand. Nuijten has consistently shown this to be a critical part of her research practices, most recently through her engagement with

the Platform of Mortgage Victims (PAH) in Spain, whose often unheard voices she listened to, tried to understand and amplified through a booklet she shared generously with PAH members and allowed her to build enduring relationships. Hence, I would argue that Nuijten's research strategy is inherently personal as well: the way that Nuijten operates intellectually is to build up critical conversations and webs of meaning around things that truly matter *with* people rather than *around* people. One of the effects this strategy has for the people engaged in her research but also those reading her work, is that her theoretical and scholarly contributions combined with her personal approach have a tendency to become the proverbial 'little voice inside your head'; a voice that recurs, and helps to provide introspection, direction and understanding.

I have personally benefitted tremendously from Nuijten's insights, both academically and personally. Academically, I used her concept of 'force field' to understand both how power acts, but also how to approach power methodologically. Her concept was at the basis of the methodology for my Veni application and was instrumental in obtaining and implementing the project. Monique Nuijten was also one of the people who convinced me to apply for the professor and chair position of the Development and Change group at Wageningen University. I was hesitant at first, but Monique's belief in me and the chance to work more closely with her was one of the things that convinced me to go for it. Once in the position, I relied a lot on her guidance, collegiality and her reflections to navigate the 'force field' of the department within the broader university and to help pursue what was needed for the group and its individual staff members. Her active involvement in all facets of the group provided important bearings. In the office, too, she had a keen knack for unheard voices and things that needed to be heard by me or others. What often happened was that I was at work in my office and I heard a knock on the door. Monique would come in and ask to speak about something she noticed, heard or found important. This happened very regularly, and I remember those moment with great fondness, as Monique never came for trivial things: these were things she felt I needed to know. And nearly always, I came to agree fully.

I relied on and appreciated Monique's engagement and wisdom a lot when she was with us full-time but realised this even more when she suddenly had to stop working after the news of her brain cancer broke in the first week of 2018. I acutely felt Monique's absence; not only were we all shocked and worried about her, I immediately felt the absence of her intellectual and personal presence, and the way this helped me – and I suspect most of us in the group – to see things more clearly, to have to face my contradictions and be attentive to the voices that were not sufficiently heard. I still sometimes sit in the office thinking what Monique would say, or what voices she believes I should pay more attention to.

Referring to Monique Nuijten's contributions as 'a little voice in your head' perhaps sounds slightly belittling to some, as though Nuijten's voice was 'little'. But I want to argue it means exactly the opposite. One of the things Monique taught us is that it is the marginal, 'little' or unheard voices that you need to pay attention to, that you must take seriously. And I think she is right: you often forget the loud, annoying voices that

have little meaningful to say, but you remember those voices that become part of your unconscious; that speak to you even when you're not necessarily paying attention to them; that become truly meaningful in many different ways. Monique Nuijten is such a voice, one that will endure for a very long time.

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