Interview with Jan Willem Duyvendak (University of Amsterdam)

Conducted by Alejandro Miranda on 13 September 2017

Jan Willem Duyvendak is Distinguished Research Professor of Sociology at the University of Amsterdam, after he had been director of the Verwey-Jonker Research Institute for Social Issues (1999-2003) and Professor of Community Development at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. His research currently focuses on the transformation of the welfare state, belonging and 'feeling at home', and nativism.

Alejandro Miranda: What does home mean to you in light of your work and disciplinary approach?

Jan Willem Duyvendak: I came across two strands of studies, we were working on the welfare state and its restructuring (and there home is a very dominant category). At the same time I got into research on integration of migrants, migration and therefore the debate on national identities, and the framing of the nation in terms of home was very dominant too. So for me the object of research came out from interviews, discourse analysis and text analysis.

With my colleagues I have been working on the experience of being naive (autochthonous) in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and very mixed neighbourhoods, but what I really wanted to do is not only looking into the experience of migrants – that is very important, I really like your research – but as I explained before, I think looking at the experience of natives is very important as well, or those who consider themselves as natives but are perhaps less mobile. There are a lot of assumptions about that category, but anyway, I think it's important. I did interview quite some natives, eventually the book I wrote in 2011, which deals with the politics of home because I got more and more impressed and irritated by the fact that politicians and social professionals had many ideas about how people should belong. And I was wondering why is the State interfering in our emotional lives — even though I know that not all emotions are necessarily private. But in relation to feeling at home, for me at least, it is quite strange that policy makers frame this as official policy goals. These are important object for political sociologists to deal with, and the part on the natives is still somewhat in the book, but more and more I started to analyse the political text and the political leaders and the opinion makers and so on and so forth. There home became important in my scholarly work because in the field that was popping up dominantly and I started to think 'who is researching emotions'? And emotions in sociology still are somewhat, I would say… it's developing very quickly but there is still a lot to do. When I started, I looked at Arlie Hochschild's work on

the sociology of emotions, it was not a very developed field. The emotions that I studied, feeling at home and belonging, was not very important either, so there is a lot of work to do. I really welcome that Paolo is working in this ERC. It's mostly in western Europe that the study of home is developing, and then for whatever reason in the UK is not that strong. In the Netherlands we do what we can and now Italy, but is still rather weak. In the US it's not really developing. So if we ask about our disciplinary approach, in my book I tried to analyse what is there in disciplines like social geography or social psychology. As a sociologist, I think that we need qualitative approach, ethnographies, a sense of what people do, but I'm very much multi-methods, and it's very important to combine observations with interviews, and also surveys. Having different sources is important to analyse, unpack and deconstruct. So many people use the notion of home in an unreflexive way, including scholars, that is an enormous task to help people to be more reflexive with what they do and not to take for granted what they say. So if we ask about how you feel at home, that's not very helpful. In my research I learnt to ask 'when you don't feel at home' and what is it that you don't feel at home. That's of course only the start. I did interviews in different places, with different people and I wasn't that satisfied, to be honest, because people take for granted what home means. We also did focus groups, but before you get people to speak to each other and to understand that perhaps they have different meanings by what they say. I don't know if focus groups is a good idea. It might be useful to help them at the start by explicitly saying 'listen, you don't take anything for granted'.

AM: What are the most relevant empirical and methodological challenges that you identify in researching home as a public and political phenomenon?

JWD: Methodologically speaking is not self-evident because people use it in an unreflexive way, so you have all the things about – not necessarily a silent emotion, because that's one of the problems, there are many emotions – and people are not very eloquent in describing their emotions, so you have to do far more, to look at the practices, you have to observe and look at what you think they are experiencing when they feel at home. But there are more serious problems because it's unreflexive and for many people is positive, or it's very hard for them to admit that is not something positive. So you ask about home, but feeling at home seems to be really positive. Sometimes when you pose questions in the right way there might be an opening from people to start speaking about dark sides of home, but you really have to push — you really should do that. I think it's very important. Also because it has become such a politicised concept in the sense that it is an absolutely positive term in the political debate, in the public debate. But one needs to admit the exclusionary side of it. I'm not sure why so few people seem to be aware of the exclusionary side of this emotion, because it's not such an exceptional finding. But there is something about the term that almost everyone thinks that it is an inclusive emotion. And sometimes to colleagues and sometimes politicians, you have to explicitly say that whenever you use home, and you try to use it as an inclusionary term, you have the best intentions to include many groups or many people, or everybody in the neighbourhood or the city. But what do you think is the performative effect of using the term for those who feel marginalised? For those who feel insecure, for those who feel that have

lost their home, and particularly for those who consider themselves 'natives'? Aren't you reinforcing whatever kind of xenophobic sentiments? And that's what I find very difficult: not because they have to listen to us, scholars, but it is not easy to mirror our results. They don't recognise our results. When I say that we over-emphasise that the effect might be that some people feel excluded or will be excluded by others they don't get it. So there is something about the non-understanding of this emotion.

There is something about the Dutch perhaps, or something about the language, they mean something like 'people should feel part of society', but being part of society is something very different than experiencing an emotion like feeling at home. So they mean something like 'everybody should belong and has the right to be part of the society', and then there is no necessarily a zero-sum competition. That is the thing about this emotion: it is often misunderstood in practice. Now, depending who you are interviewing or who you observe, when you really push people, think about what really feeling at home is because the superficial thing is that you can share with others, but what is the deep feeling at home? So push for understanding. And then also people in interviews at a certain moment have a click and say 'yeah, I lived there, it was familiar, but i wasn't really feeling at home…', so it's not that I want them to have my definition, but I really think that familiarity is not feeling at home, it is a condition, but it's not sufficient to feel at home. In the case of politicians it's even more difficult, we shouldn't think that politicians intentionally over-use it to discriminate. A lot of politicians and social workers use it with the best intentions. Some populist politicians perhaps use it to persuade others.

AM: Our project is framed around processes of home-making in relation to contemporary migrant trajectories. What do you think this approach can add to the field of migration and social integration?

JWD: There is some literature on diaspora, or about people creating their homes referring to groups that are rather well settled. But it would be very important to also look at those who are not settled, to look at homemaking practices without assuming that they already have a home. I have a student who was researching home-making practices in asylum seekers centres. One of her interesting findings is that people from Syria who were almost certain that they can stay in the Netherlands, so they get a permit, were very much involved in home-making practices. But those who were really insecure whether they can stay or not were not investing much in that centre. So if they know they can stay, they also invest in the asylum seeker's centre. They, compared to the others, do something out of that place, while the others are much more preoccupied with their own situation.

AM: so, home-making practices are a form of investment, emotional, material and temporal investment…

JWD: yes, the thing is that you get more energetic and more creative as well. It's not that they were more or less educated. There is a temporal dimension: if they know they can stay in

the country of arrival, that circumstance immediately changes their day to day experience in the same context. We should look at the future, not in the sense of how home provides hope, but rather as the ways in which hope makes you care for your home. Hope informs home. Syrians assumed that there was a future and that created a less competitive environment, it changed everything. This temporal perspective is very important. There are sometimes reasons to think that the material is also very important, that is looking at home in its material dimensions. It may appear that if the material context is fine, people develop homey feelings. Still, material contexts do not have a meaning by themselves. There are meanings, of course, but they are produced, meanings are given to those things. And it's similar with the senses – emphasising the senses should be also thought as social phenomena, as something that is done collectively.

AM: Considering the role that multiple scales and facets of home play in your theoretical approach, what are the most relevant methodological suggestions that you can give us, and what challenges do you identify in researching interrelated processes at various scales?

JWD: To be self critical, and also critical to some of our previous discussions, the feeling at home does travel from home to neighbourhood, city, nation. But I sometimes too easily assume that the meaning of home is stable, and of course that is not necessarily the case. I think that within the same country and the same language the meaning of home is not necessarily the same. If we want to look at these multiple layers, we should investigate how the meaning of home changes when it travels to other scales. Once I interviewed somebody from the greens and he was very angry, he said 'listen, I do speak the language of home, but home means a home with various different rooms, that's what home is about.' But that is just one type of family home, while it's actually an open metaphor. The greens not only say that everyone should feel at home, but also have a bit of a nativist discourse by referring to those undocumented migrants who are sent back to their countries of origin as people who are also 'rooted' and feel at home here, so they should be welcomed. My point here is that we should be aware that there are many different understandings of what home is and, therefore, its political dimensions vary substantially. It is very different to talk about belonging to a place than elaborating discourses on integration and homogeneity. Still, feeling at home is used in both cases. I have two comments here: home can have more meanings that just the kinship home and it might be that these different meanings of home come out when they travel to various levels. Left-wing politicians often have the best intentions when they speak a language that they think it's inclusionary. But one of the difficulties is that there are not many inclusionary notions in practice of home, home-making and feeling at home.

AM: What kind of strategies would you suggest for grasping the multiple dichotomies underpinning home-making practices, such as mobility and stasis, material and symbolic, past and future, locality and multiple scales?

JWD: We discussed some of them, perhaps not the mobility and stasis. I do agree with Stef Jansen that if you look at migrants, particularly people who are very mobile or displaced and not just citizens, perhaps one emphasises migrants' side. So we shouldn't speak about non-mobile people, there are degrees of mobility and there are options, whether one is displaced or going on holidays. Because when we speak the language of very mobile people, we easily fall into the argument of the non-mobile who vote for a populist. And if you look actually at how mobile are those considered as locals, they actually travel far more than many others. They are not victims of globalisation. The thesis of a student exemplifies this as it looks at autochtonie in Amsterdam's social housing neighbourhoods. There are people fighting against the demolition of their social housing and they were voting for the populist party, which is surprising because this party was in favour of the demolition. The thing was, they pay about 200 euros for their place because it's social housing, and they are not willing to pay more because they travel three times a year. So they portray themselves as losers and betrayed by the left-wing political parties. Not all of them, I shouldn't generalise either, but indeed, the dichotomy between mobile migrants and non-mobile natives as opposed to each other doesn't work. Therefore we should also correct ourselves because it's far more nuanced. I agree, mobility and stasis is far more complex.

Regarding the material and symbolic, I do think that we should think about the material as also symbolic.

And about past and future, we have said a lot about nostalgia already during the seminar, but now we added the role of the future. I think that temporal dimensions deserve much more attention, especially in relation to the point we already talked about: it's not about how home makes hope possible, but how hope makes home possible.

Most literature on migration and home has to do with debates of integration: migrants having several homes, not being loyal to their home, disturbing the feeling of home of the natives, and so on. The debate has become extremely focused on the national. But it is perhaps a good moment to shift to local practices. Migrants are part of discourse analysis all the time, and rightly so because they are bashed all the time by populists, but that is not the full story. Migrants still have to live, they have home-making practices, so socioeconomically speaking many of them are integrating. Many have higher levels of education, many have better jobs. Many others are entrepreneurial as well, but perhaps because they have to.

Going back to the concept of home, the notion has become so popular in politics that I see it as sticky idea, it gets attached to other realms. And of course home has not the same meanings and mechanisms at other levels, which is definitely a question of empirical analysis. In saying this, we should look at the specificity of home in each case. While it is necessary to investigate the domestic environment, I think we should go well beyond that in a careful way by not looking at every phenomenon as an expression of home.