



Questions about the Crisis and Ourselves

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A recent debate invites us to revise the effects of the financial and social crisis which affects many countries today on the disciplines interested in sound practices. This debate, impetuous in ethnomusicology and extensible to other disciplines, can be oriented from a handful of questions: Is the crisis a new scenario to think and write about sound practices? What kind of crisis are we talking about? Who defines it? Is its definition functional to the device which wants to reproduce a unidirectional thought and action habitat which goes from the center to the margins? Is it a crisis of the observer or of the observed? Is it possible to find in it a new validation of the ethnomusicological knowledge and of the discipline itself?

Timothy Rice (2014) suggests that in the last 15 years ethnomusicology has responded to the crisis by studying music in connection with wars, forced migrations, violence, poverty, diseases and other tragedies. This thematic reorientation, which Rice places within an “ethnomusicology in times (and places) of trouble”, shows that the experience of a crisis which spreads throughout various geographies has given rise to a more committed and sensitive ethnomusicology: a crisis ethnomusicology. With this, Rice partially responds to the first question: the crisis is in effect a scenario which favors a new behavior of ethnomusicologists. It must also be added that the crisis works by trimming budgets, positions, publications, scientific meetings and many other research and teaching activities.

At this point it is necessary to remark that the crisis does not equally affect those centers which provide and administrate the ethnomusicological canon and others which largely operate replicating or questioning the knowledge emanating from them. The crisis manifests itself unevenly, more severely among those people and institutions with fewer resources. However, this statement must be nuanced if we consider those South American countries which have managed to lessen the effects of such crisis through the application of redistributive policies oriented to social inclusion and to commercial, financial and monetary autonomy. Another difference must be highlighted: particularly in some central countries we must add to the financial crisis and its dramatic social consequences a feeling of threat, vilely fed by powers with territorial and commercial appetite, which stir up the fear of an attack, a pandemic coming from ‘another race’, ‘uncontrolled’ immigration, etc. Given this situation, it is to be supposed that, if the crisis manifests itself with so much diversity, the consequences which it has on the local developments of our disciplines will also be diverse. Perhaps the moment has come to ask ourselves about the character that a new type of meeting will have: a meeting between an observer from an impoverished rich society and an observed from a poor society which has been



able to significantly improve its living conditions.

A question closely related to the ones mentioned before remains to be reflected upon: Is it possible to find in the crisis itself a validation of our work? For some researchers this seems to be a passable road. The ethnomusicology with roots in Central Europe (positioned in both sides of the ocean) has always been obsessed with finding a reason to make something necessary and important of its endeavors¹. There followed discourses trying to validate, according to the case, the discipline and its objects of study: “the study of the music of the ‘primitive’ may reveal our musical past”, “musical research opens doors to understand societies in a way no other can do”, “music is one of the most important expressions of the peoples”, “music is an expression present in every culture”, etc². These ideas, expressed explicitly or implicitly at different moments along more than a century of institutional history, are symptoms of an attitude that may be characterized as ‘musicocentered’. It is an instance of reductionism which seeks to center the object of study in order to center the discipline and finally center the researcher as subject. Here we have a quasi narcissistic circle: the object is important, then, the discipline which studies it and the expert working with its tools are important too. Finally, that “important” expert can only select equally “important” objects for his study³. This is neither new nor exclusive of this area of study; many disciplines try to understand the world overvaluing their limited explanatory frameworks.

Today some ethnomusicologists have begun the search for a new validation of knowledge in the crisis itself. For this purpose they try to demonstrate that they can do something to counterbalance its adverse effects –and even the devastating effects proper of the working of capitalism. To that end they stress the participative, collaborative and supposedly non-hierarchical and sustainable aspects of their research –which was done several years before by anthropology. Undoubtedly, this is good. However, it poses a risk: the return to musicocentrism. Let’s resort to an imaginary example which may work as a hyperbole for some projects being implemented. Let’s suppose somebody decides to carry out some musical research in a South American prison and that one of its objectives is to contribute to improve the living conditions of the prison population and to facilitate their reintegration in society once their sentence has been served. A debate with no concessions about this research should start by answering the following questions: Are there not any more effective disciplines to change this situation other than ethnomusicology? If so, would doing ethnomusicology not become something frivolous and superfluous in the face of the dramatic situation which those people in prison experience? (I challenge the reader to transfer these questions to current research which has people at some sort of risk as its beneficiaries).

With a view to the present state of the discipline, the answers to these questions seem to lead to two alternatives: we either abandon the idea of changing something or we move

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1. That is why many colleagues have expressed their pleasure about the recognition that this discipline has received in the hands of many renown *outsiders* such as Ruth Finnegan (1999) y Nicholas Cook (2008).
 2. When the validity of the discipline has been threatened, discourses have arisen which tried to restore it. For a recent case, see Guilbault (2014).
 3. One of the few criticisms to this model is made by Deborah Wong (2014) around the concept of power.

discipline. What I mean is that there is no room to validate ethnomusicology for something which it cannot do or which it does in a deficient way. In any case, it is more honest to look for the importance of the knowledge generated somewhere else. Taking this concern to a bigger scenario of crisis we arrive at the same crossroads: the more aware we become of the harmfulness of the crisis on the most vulnerable population, the bigger our understanding of the low capacity of ethnomusicology to intervene against inequalities and other injustices.

However, the fact that today the potential of the discipline to generate a transformation, whether social or of another sort, is low or null, does not mean that in the future this situation will remain the same. For this reason it is legitimate to continue exploring new perspectives in search for an ethnomusicology more sensitive to social issues and effective for their transformation. Independently of the final result, this search will serve to confront a solipsistic impulse of the discipline which, sheltering behind the prefix 'auto' and the superabundance of first person personal pronouns, wants to celebrate an only subject: the researcher.

References

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