

# Research in Submissive Mode



Miguel A. García

Music and sound phenomena are the objects of study of diverse research areas. Among those with the biggest institutional presence and bibliographic production, we can find historic musicology, ethnomusicology, popular music studies, sound studies, sociology of music, psychology of music, and philosophy of music.<sup>1</sup> In several aspects, the limits between these areas are permeable: often, two or more of them are dealt with by the same researcher, are aligned behind the same theory, or coexist under the same event, institution, or publication. However, all of them show clearly defined limits. Their specificities are based on the kind of music and sound manifestations which they deal with, on the theories and methods they employ, and on the types and degrees of institutionality they have been able to consolidate along their histories.

Despite their specificities, contrasts, and coincidences, those areas do not create a regular and discreet scenario. This is due to the presence of a geopolitical factor which generates inequality and, consequently, establishes different conformations of the same area. I am referring to the existence of what might be called “international division of academic work”.<sup>2</sup> The thinking of Malayan sociologist Syed Farid Alatas may help understand this idea. In his article “Academy Dependency and the Global Division of Labor in the Social Sciences” (2003), Alatas argues that within the framework of an “academic neo-colonialism”, a group of countries led by the USA, Great Britain and France –Germany could also be added– influences the production and flow of knowledge in a monopolistic way by means of the generation of a great mass of research products

<sup>1</sup> Although not in an exclusive way, other research areas such as acoustics, archival science, folklore, and literature, share the same objects of study with them

<sup>2</sup> I have presented part of these ideas at the ICTM/IMS Joint Roundtable, “Disciplinary identity issues and ICTM - IMS dialogues”, held during the celebration of the 46th ICTM Conference (Lisbon, 23-07-2022).

spread through peer-reviewed papers, and the production of recognition and prestige both within as well as beyond their borders.

Such distribution establishes the conditions for a handful of countries to control resources and generate theories and methods, and for many others to adopt those theories and methods to produce case studies. This generates inequalities within each of the areas of study, giving rise, for example, to several types of ethnomusicology. When these areas are developed in the North, they tend to be more theoretical, proactive, and independent, whereas when they do so in the global South, they tend to be less theoretical, less proactive, and less independent. The situation shows many aspects and it is possible to easily find counterexamples of what I have just outlined –the theorization which the Argentine ethnomusicologist Carlos Vega does in his book *Panorama de la música popular argentina* (1944) is clearly one of them. However, the presence of counterexamples is not enough to deny the existence of a force which determines the general conditions for the praxis of the Humanities and of the Social Sciences.

Perhaps one of the least evident derivations but, undoubtedly, most worrying of these inequalities, is the way in which we employ the theories generated in the most reputed centres. Research on music and sound often resort to theories coined in other disciplines. Interdisciplinary practice is a healthy one as it opens dialogue between disciplines and, in turn, gives the possibility of seeing the same phenomenon from different angles. However, there is an extremely sensitive aspect in this matter: How do we use these theories?, how critical or uncritical are we with them?, do we make a superficial or exhaustive use of them? At least, in the Latin American and Caribbean environment –although I suspect this is also valid for other geographies–, a significant part of research makes an uncritical and superficial use of such theories. If we take a look at the titles of conferences, seminars, articles, books and papers of the last decades, we find the frequent use of concepts such as those of phenomenology, performance, sustainability, feminism, queer, intersectionality, colonialism, coloniality, collaboration, social responsibility and others. Nowadays, the presence of some of them is diminishing, as is the case of that of phenomenology, whereas that of others seems to be increasing, as those of colonialism and coloniality. Most of these concepts belong to well defined theories which have apologists and detractors, and which have gained prestige by their own merits or by the sole fact of having been coined or enunciated in the North.

Although very consistent and inspiring research is done around those concepts, at the same time a mass of work can be seen which mentions

them lightly, or employs them uncritically or submissively. On occasions, these uses reflect the intention of being politically correct, which consists in projecting an image of support to the ideological tendency dominant in the academic environment –coinciding or not with what the person doing so really thinks-, or for the purpose of demonstrating competence in the discursive fashions of the moment. In both cases, some degree of submission or reverence is present before the theoretical guidelines established by prestigious centres and, at times, an opportunist attitude as well.

It is not a matter of a priori rejecting every theory or concept coming from the North, but of questioning the preconceived character of its authority and reputation. The overnight conversion to a theory, or its uncritical or superficial appropriation, is the opposite of the scrutinizing observation which all research must be based on. In order to break the place which the international distribution of academic work assigns to the above mentioned areas in the global South, it is necessary to generalize and sharpen the critical mechanism. This will allow detecting those inequalities generated in the academic niche in which we inhabit, cast suspicion on the seducing impression of theories, and question the role which compels us to produce only case studies.

## Bibliography

---

- » Alatas S. F. (2003). Academy Dependency and the Global Division of Labor in the Social Sciences. *Current Sociology*, 51, 1-15.
- » Vega, C. (1944). *Panorama de la música popular argentina*. Buenos Aires: Losada.