



The seduction of criticism and the sustainability of knowledge

Miguel A. García

At the core of social science and the humanities, criticism dwells dressed in the clothes of “Marxism”, “criticism theory”, “reflexivity”, “postmodern criticism”, the “decolonial turn”, and in many others which emerge and fade away, or which transform themselves and reverberate with tenacity or lassitude. In all its forms, criticism works in three dimensions: it seduces the cognoscent subject, disarticulates knowledge itself and makes knowledge something sustainable. *El oído pensante* convokes seduced researchers. They are found in all areas of knowledge which are interested in music and its subjects. Among those areas, anthropology and ethnomusicology seem to be the most inclined to criticism. There are several reasons to explain that insurgent condition, the most evident and defining ones among them being the confrontation with the otherness and the constant and essential openness into other disciplines. Confrontation with the otherness enriches us through amazement and destabilization; openness to other disciplines does so by means of diversity and dialogue. This openness has been the condition of possibility for the existence of ethnomusicology itself; or ethnomusicologies, if for a moment we want to put aside the arrogance of the singular and use the plural to recognize that on the other side of the abyssal line, of the wall, of the mainstream, of the ocean or of the imagination, there are and there have been other disciplinary trajectories. The consent by ethnomusicologies to other disciplines has been marked by the acceptance of several inputs –physics, evolutionism, the ethnographic method, the concepts of “performance”, “globalization”, “world music”, “soundscape”, “being-in-the-world”, “experience”, etc. Whereas all of them, in many hands, have renovated the air and reactivated suspicion and love towards old concepts and procedures; in a few they seem to have been useful only to feed certain academic snobbism. The last great acquisition of ethnomusicology which rules in this part of the world is the concept of “sustainability”. It is to the various facets that the use of this concept presents in ethnomusicological circles that the *VI Encontro da Associação Brasileira de Etnomusicologia* (João Pessoa, Brasil, 27-31 May 2013) was dedicated. At this meeting, the strategies were mainly discussed to guarantee the sustainability of the musical practices whose very existence is believed to be threatened, and the responsibility that researchers, institutions and those involved in the musical activities have in that crusade. However, in one of the sessions the discussion took a different direction and the concept was questioned with regard to the viability and vitality of knowledge.

How productive is the concept of sustainability in order to think of the generation and reproduction of knowledge of musical practices and their subjects? Can we look, and look at



ourselves, through a concept which is lambasted by institutions and discourses of an assistentialistic hue which want to be “politically correct” by helping poor countries? Are we willing to use a concept which has a leading role within the ecology and economic, energetic and touristic development projects? Undoubtedly, it is worth trying to appropriate the concept of sustainability. If the transposition of any concept from a field to another requires semantic adjustment, the adjustment can never be complete; if it were, what would be transposed would be a signifier and not a concept. If the exogenous concept were completely stripped of meaning, its incorporation would not make any sense, and it would be more honest and productive from a heuristic point of view to coin a new one. When transposing a concept, some minimal meaning is always preserved. The minimal meaning that the concept of sustainability maintains when being appropriated by ethnomusicologies can be summarized by two terms: diversity and balance. It can also be expressed in a less succinct way: balanced (and sustainable) coexistence of different resources.

Then, what properties and requirements should knowledge have in order to be sustainable? Without further delay, it could be said that for knowledge to acquire sustainability, it must be viable, have vitality, have cohesion, celebrate dissent and potentiate dialogue. Two kinds of requirements, a material one and an epistemological one, allow these properties to have real existence. In the first one, we find the existence of state agencies and private companies interested in investing in teaching, research and diffusion, different writing supports –books, journals, discussion lists, etc.–, internet, the articulation of different diffusion channels –online and offline–, free access –in terms of a way to have access to information and to a dispute space around the notions of rights and property–, legislation which regulates access to the internet, practices which decentralize information, ways to evaluate and maximize visibility and accessibility, etc. Something not less important should be included on this list: the illegal practices to have access to the internet. Thanks to the illegal downloading of software, books, music files and other resources carried out in wide areas of our planet, not only are the members of the American intelligence services, as well as those agencies which protect private property in its cybernetic version, kept busy, but the generation and reproduction of knowledge in those same areas is made possible. Those practices, which to some extent manage to neutralize the forces which design a dystopian scenario of access to knowledge, paradoxically, also seem to be essential for the generation and reproduction of knowledge in the areas ruled by law. Many times, the books, articles, dissertations and multimedia productions of our American, English, German and French colleagues, as well as those from other countries, from where access to knowledge is legislated with greater zeal, can only be accessible to African, Asian and South American colleagues through illegal downloading. That is to say, the ‘legal centers’ finds their consumers in the ‘illegal periphery’. Many times, also, the former have access to the raw materials for their research –for example, copies of recordings produced by local companies– through some level of contravention or favored by the legal vacuum which some states present. The reader is left to further consider these polemics.

As it has been said above, sustainability of knowledge also requires our productions to embrace a particular epistemological perspective. For knowledge to be viable, vigorous,

cohesive, tolerant and dialogic, we need to have an abundance of texts which transcend the descriptive level and prioritize reflection over concepts and methods, which establish dialogues with the discipline's canons and with other areas of knowledge, which visibilize the methods of observation and analysis and/or which question the forms of representation. This type of texts generates a convergence point of researchers interested in the most diverse subjects and geographical areas; they are texts which give rise to a sort of "customs-free zone of knowledge", where case studies meet together and converse. Summarizing, sustainable knowledge is that which has discursivity, which becomes an interpersonal and interinstitutional net, which doubts and is critical at the same time, and which circulates in such a fluid manner that on its march, it sometimes loses its authorship references. And again we come back to criticism, or, better said, to the seduction of criticism, as it can only be expressed by researchers who feel seduced by it. This second issue of *El oído pensante* brings together authors who, in article, interview or review format, do a critical reading of the phenomena they analyze, and even of their own approaches, thus helping this area of knowledge to continue being sustainable.