

Chapter 7

LIVING AND RESEARCHING THE *ORQUESTRA GERAÇÃO*

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No *one* has ever devised a *method* for detaching the scholar from the *circumstances of life*, from the fact of his *involvement* (*conscious* or *unconscious*) with a *class*, a *set of beliefs*, a *social position*, or from the *mere activity* of being a *member* of a society. (Said, 1978: 18)

After I was presented with this challenge – to reflect on the dualism of my work in *Orquestra Geração* – I discuss here some of the points that emerge from my views as a researcher and my experiences as a coordinator of two project nuclei.

In 2007, I decided to focus my Anthropology undergraduate degree thesis on analysis of both Venezuela's System of Youth and Children's Orchestras and the equivalent Portuguese system, the *Orquestra Geração* (OG), at that time only recently launched. At the time, the thesis project came in for some scepticism from some professors and colleagues who, among other issues, pointed to the fact that this was neither a “classic” Anthropology subject nor did it comply with the presuppositions of a dissertation. However, I was determined to explore this topic not only because it greatly interested me but also because other issues connected with the research project were beginning to raise my concerns. One of those issues stemmed from the distance I felt separating theoretical production in Anthropology from the specific cultural practices prevailing.

While, on the one hand, anthropological study seemed to supply fundamental tools to understanding the world, questioning dogmas and deconstructing crystallized worlds, on the other hand, the debates triggered seemed enclosed within the academic world, especially when compared with the other social sciences fields. Despite these reflections, I perceived anthropological work as political *per se* and this dimension should reflect in its relationship with specific social problems. This did not mean, however, that I wanted to take the path of applied anthropology. What I instead

wished was to approach this subject as a central area of cultural critique (Marcus & Fischer, 1999), and as such, fundamental to understanding of the world.

After completing my undergraduate studies, in 2008, on the request of the OG board, I wrote a report about their activities in Escola Miguel Torga (Amadora). That same year, I also wrote an article about this project for the *Revista da Associação Portuguesa de Educação Musical* (Caldas, 2008). In 2009, I eventually joined the OG project, coordinating two of the nucleuses that would begin their activities in that academic year.

From that moment onwards, the OG project has occupied a central place in my professional life, in some way shifting academic life into the background. It was also during this period that I joined the project research team for “Promoting social inclusion through engagement with music – the *Orquestra Geração* Project”, financed by the FCT – the Foundation of Science and Technology and located at CIPEM – Research Centre in Psychology of Music and Music Education, at Porto Polytechnic.

Although exchanges and dialogues among the various different viewpoints summoned by the OG project and CIPEM research were expected, my attitude towards each field developed in a relatively distanced manner. If, on the one hand, it seems evident that both dimensions require different approaches, on the other hand, the frequent dialogue between them also seems inevitable considering how permeable their activity cycles are. It is precisely through this dialogue that some questions arise, questions that I reflect on here to provide my contribution to the debate on cultural programs related to art education and social intervention from both the academic and professional points of view.

This analysis incorporates a clearly biased and subjective perspective but nevertheless still remains reflective and always aware of that same subjectivity.

The various *insiders* and *outsiders*⁶⁴ to researching and experiencing the *Orquestra Geração*

Perhaps because my professional pathway began in academic research, it was

⁶⁴ Cf. Deutsh (1981) “We are all multiple insiders and outsiders”.

particularly alarming to realize, as I joined the OG project, that some of the great pillars of critical anthropological analysis would develop new nuances when confronted with specific field work issues. Thus, if field work, as a primary tool of anthropological work, questions the researchers themselves, the demands, difficulties and challenges of working in social projects increase the convergent and divergent aspects between field practices and academic work.

My relationship with the OG developed in three directions: as an employee, as a researcher and as an informer for the research project that led to this book. Thus, in addition to my *insider/outsider* point of view, a third category appeared in which I am myself an object of observation while mediating the information circulating between the OG and the research team for this study.

When compared to my other points of observation and speech enunciation, this third position calls for a particularly intense effort because describing facts about the OG always gets mediated by an awareness of speech reception and analysis. While this analysis may be perceived as resulting from the excessive interference of subjectiveness in the research data, on the other hand, this might constitute the most productive and reflective point of view for both the OG project and the research. In fact, the position of an informer, implicated in the research and analysis process, calls for an immediate confrontation between the data and the viewpoints of the rest of the research team, which, in turn, consists of various academic, cultural, political and along with so many other dimensions. Being aware of this confrontation requires a more reflective and elaborated display of the data, based on its multidimensionality. The reflection and results of the immediate confrontation subjacent to this process, impacted both on research development and the field work, which became enriched by the multi-dimension debate.

In this context, the conflicts that my position's duality (or multiplicity) might eventually give rise to, seemed to make less sense, and, on the contrary, resulting in critical knowledge. It remains clear, however, that the theoretical baggage permanently questions the professional practice and vice versa and the management of these processes is anything but linear.

The dilemmas emerging out of this management process are accentuated by the fact that this is clearly a social inclusion project, adding a concrete dimension of responsibility towards the communities worked with. In addition, such management is based on the awareness that the social inclusion concept is itself profoundly complex and derives from the relationship between the various instances that constitute the political, social, economic and cultural systems in which individuals live.

There are many examples of agreement and disagreement between experience and research within the OG context and the uniting these dimensions is neither always immediate nor peaceful. However, this is not an exceptional situation as no individual has a defined and stable identity and frequently finds him/herself having to manage his/her multiple and uncertain relationships.

Agreements and disagreements between research and cultural practice

The perception of my position's many-sided nature occurs sporadically during my work and mostly appearing when certain constraints (language, human resources, materials) hinder the effective transmission of theory to field work, when trying to solve a certain problem. Often, the support framework for a student project performance or behaviour fails to take into consideration the complexity of contexts, journeys and identities surrounding the child and able to interfere with the desired approach. This simplification of the problems identified may result from limitations to teacher training⁶⁵ and the absence of tools for conducting this analysis, which for example happens with the frequent association of certain social and individual behaviours to ethno-cultural backgrounds, often losing sight of how socio-economic contexts constitute facets of identity construction. On these occasions the alarm sounds, warning as to the dangers of excessive cultural relativism and, as in many other circumstances, recalls the importance of going back to concepts such as social

⁶⁵It is important to note that practically every *Orquestra Geração* professional is trained in music although the project has also recently been able to collaborate with a psychologist, and occasionally reaches out to school (or other entities) professionals that may be relevant to resolving or understanding a certain problem or situation.

class, a notion often disregarded by some contemporary fields of cultural analysis in favour of a wider concept of culture⁶⁶.

Furthermore, the timings of professional practices do not always prove favourable to a profound and systematic analysis of the deeply rooted problems found within a community. The circumstantial constraints usually call for quick and immediate responses to certain problems. The activity schedule, the fact that one deals with so many children simultaneously, the lack of human resources for solving problems across their different dimensions, and even the fact that responses to many situations depend on matters reaching far beyond the abilities and experiences of those involved, require approaches more closely focused on synchronicity between theory and practice than any solution that completely fulfils both demands.

The reverse also happens – when practice questions theory. One particularly clear example stems from the difficulties involved in setting out an appropriate project evaluation methodology. Quantitative analysis of the project's impact on the field is that usually required, mostly by funders who need factual instruments to justify investing in the OG program. This also happens frequently with entities managing public funds and so project success needs measuring and confirming. In this context, the field work (*insider*) interconnects with the research work (*outsider*). On the one hand, I assume that an evaluation study of an imminently social project should incorporate a solid qualitative analysis component that fits in with the quantitative component. On the other hand, daily confrontation with the project's multiple effects on students, often coming from social backgrounds with seemingly impenetrable complexities, makes it difficult to guarantee any such tool is capable of measuring this level of intervention.

It is in the daily and intense contact with students and their families that the project's effects become more noticeable while nearly impossible to quantify them in any systematic way. This became clear to me at a concert by one of the nuclei I work with, in a small, local parish venue. The day had sped by with all the haste of

⁶⁶ Although analysis of the cultural rights and affiliations is fundamental to academic work and political intervention in contemporary democratic societies, indicating the sedimentation of what Tourraine (2005) has called a cultural paradigm, it is equally important not to excessively celebrate the power of culture in individual processes of social negotiation to the detriment of the dominant role played by economic and political asymmetries (Yúdice, 2003).

preparations. With efforts from parents, students and teachers, the room was decorated, tables filled with cakes for the children and more than 200 people attended and applauded the student performance enthusiastically. During the usual concert presentations, I found myself saying, faced by the participants' enthusiasm and the anthropologist's perplexity, that the biggest indicator of project success is perhaps a room like that one.

It is equally evident, however, that the dividing line between the emotions resulting from the work invested in the community and the way this might serve as an evaluation indicator for a certain program is not always clear.

The academic work certainly does not end, however, in the impact assessment questions, as shown by the CIPEM study that attempts to answer questions from a predominantly investigative point of view. These differences in perspective are not always clear to those involved in social projects. In fact, throughout this journey, it seemed to me that the professional eagerness to obtain answers to so many questions, created strong expectations concerning the applicability of the studies produced and their scope for serving as assessment tools for achieving the goals outlined.

In this regard, practice often questions the relevance of the knowledge accumulated, when I myself did not know what to do with my knowledge of the contexts I was working in. It seemed to me that this knowledge did not benefit the specific questions of students or their families, their behavioural problems, attitudes, issues I needed immediate tools for. The anguish of seeing the community intervention tools running out (as well as the means to come up with those tools) is a frequent feeling that spoils the willingness to transfer academic work to social action.

This search for definite solutions to the problems mentioned was largely present during the visit OG coordinators made to Venezuela in November 2013. Knowing beforehand that it would be difficult to directly transpose the Venezuelan field intervention methods to the Portuguese reality, due to the differences between the two contexts, it proved extremely interesting to enter into contact with the model inspiring the OG and tempting to think I might find answers to many of my questions, both as a coordinator and as a researcher. The experience, however, had an ambiguous impact. As much as there was a lot of emotion, enthusiasm and reinforced desire to

implement the Venezuelan model in Portugal, there was also some scepticism regarding the limitations of this methodology as it was presented to us. However, it is interesting to note that the hypercritical academic mind coexisted side by side with an emotional surrender to what I saw and lived in those ten days we spent visiting the Venezuelan nucleuses. In fact, the countless notes I took during that time reflect more of my excited search for ideas and solutions to take back to Portugal rather than a journal of impartial analysis. The critical viewpoints and scepticism emerging in the notes were random and confused and only became more consistent over time and as the debates and discussions went on.

This more sensible analysis that eventually took place ended up closing a cycle when it comes to some of the main questions about how to act in the field and how to connect musical practice to the project's social quality, in a dialogue between research and practice. By realizing how important the social and political contexts are to the implementation of *El Sistema* (ES) in Venezuela, it seemed clear that there was a long way to go in adapting this methodology to the Portuguese reality. Key logistical issues such as working hours, human resources and material conditions, relationships between the ES and the Venezuelan Conservatory, as well as the unconditional and continuous financial and symbolic support of the government are some of the core issues that simply cannot be directly transposed to the OG and require a differing methodological and ideological stance to the ES.

Perhaps it was during debates about possible adaptations to the Portuguese context that my training in social sciences proved most present, requiring impartial analysis of the ES, especially its uncritical subordination to the government, the extremely dominant and hierarchical organizational structure and the ES relevance in the children's schooling schedules.

The reflection on how important the particularities of communities and territories are whenever implementing social and educational projects surpasses any question specifically regarding just the ES and is also relevant to approaches to the various territories in which the OG operates. This represents one aspect where the social sciences may make important contributions, providing localized and extensive analysis of the particularities each context so as to develop appropriate strategies for

field intervention.

Although the baselines the OG is structured around extend into its various nuclei, the fact that it is a social inclusion project calls for a certain flexibility when it comes to incorporating specific approaches to specifically different realities.

Concluding Thoughts

The reflexive and multi-perspective analysis that prompted this chapter proved an exercise full of difficulties and interrogations that will, for the most part, go unwritten and unanswered. The questions raised so far are perhaps those that stood out most greatly throughout these seven years of working in the *Orquestra Geração* with many others still underlying.

Through this experience, it once again became clear to me how important it is to include a subjective perspective in the research and analysis process and how necessary this is to methodologically confronting professional practices with the critical eye of research in order to recreate field intervention strategies.

In addition to the fundamental multidimensionality of the OG researcher or participant, it is also important to understand that the usage of cultural tools can never be homogeneous. They entail different applications that depend on the countless subjects and contexts involved. This is particularly noticeable in the identities of the various researchers that have been already involved with the OG, and who inevitably carry the weight of their academic training, often preventing the OG from gaining its own voice and identity. However, and unlike what one might deduce from those who belittle the ES⁶⁷, the communities themselves are made of individuals who actively absorb cultural objects and, depending on the multidimensionality of their identities, make them their own.

It is by understanding the OG's complexities, through the methods applied to the different socioeconomic realities encountered, including the limitations of its field of activity due to financial constraints, that the foundations for a consistent analysis of its identity and, eventually, a closer assessment of its effects, emerges. Therefore, I

⁶⁷ See Baker's 2014 and 2015 works.

believe that the discrepancy between the data gathered through the assessment system methodologies and empirical confrontation with the countless victories of the day to day work, as well as the probability of only being able to successfully measure the effects over the long run, may only be properly mitigated by long term, in-depth ethnography, involving active field work. In turn, the disagreement between the goals of other OG focused studies and the expectations created by the participants in this project, should make academia question the lack of dialogue it establishes with the broader society causing an impenetrable and ambiguous relationship.

Finally, the key word of this reflection should be multidimensionality as this not only highlights the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to analysing the OG but also the synergies among the institutions intervening in the field, mobilizing academic and professional resources for a successful social inclusion.

Working to produce critical knowledge on the various dimensions implied or concealed by access to culture would represent one of the main contributions of research on cultural projects, especially those that, like the OG, deploy an artistic means of expression for particularly social purposes. I believe that it is in this joint work that this methodology may reveal itself as fully anti-structural and nurturing the liminal spaces (Turner, 1998) in which social transformations can occur.

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