

The necessary discomfort of the field researcher

INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTIAN RINAUDO

Sociologist, lecturer at the University of Nice Côte d'Azur, researcher at the Migration and Society Research Unit, Christian Rinaudo is a field scientist, and specialist in popular musical culture, particularly Latin American. In an interview with Switch (on Paper), he talks about his research work, between data production and the “restless mind”, personal engagement and immersive analysis of the situations of artists in exile.

Switch (on Paper): Your thinking focuses in particular on the conditions under which social scientists collect their data. You say, for example, that “research has to get out of the library just as the artist has to get out of the studio” and it is important to you that this “field practice” be effectively “returned to the field”.

Christian Rinaudo: Getting out of the library to study social phenomena in vivo is an approach that lies at the very foundation of the social sciences and sociology as an academic discipline. As from the early 20th century, the American sociologist Robert E. Park invited his students at the University of Chicago to go out of the library to work on “first-hand data”. He advocated, for example, visiting the city slums and residential areas that middle-class youngsters entering higher education were not accustomed to seeing. This allowed sociology to distance itself from speculative syntheses on society in general and to develop a more inductive analytical approach based on “fieldwork”. The notion of “fieldwork”, derived from the expression “going out into the field”, has proved a useful metaphor for taking social science out of libraries and from using second-hand data. The same has been true for the painter who had to leave the studio, or the journalist who once described the world from the palaces of the Republic from which he drew his information. In each of these cases, the idea that data had to be “collected on the spot” became the norm. Sociologists, like painters or journalists, had to put their boots on and immerse themselves in the world.

A third stage was added to the process of knowledge production: the idea that this production could be “returned to the field” - no longer “brought back from it”, but “returned to it” - in the form of a “restitution”.

This third stage represents a real advance over the practices of “looting the field” that I have personally observed in my research in Latin America. There, as everywhere else in the world, many researchers travelled to faraway places to “collect data”, then returned to their country, usually to the United States or Europe, exploited these data and used them for scientific publications that remained inaccessible to the people they met in the field. The

practice of restitution, i.e. presenting respondents with the results of the research carried out, was in this respect an important step forward for the ethics of social science research. Men and women around the world who are willing to be taken as objects of research must have the right to know what the researchers who came into their lives have produced as a result of this encounter.

Switch (on Paper): You also say that “data is not given but produced”. What is the nuance? Should we speak of “research” or “investigation”?

C.R.: What I mean by this is that, however useful and necessary it may have been, the field metaphor needs to be analysed today. In reality, the idea that we collect data like flowers in a field, to make beautiful bouquets, according to scientific (in the academic world) or aesthetic (in the art world) criteria, present them in lovely vases and hand them over to the actors in the field, does not really hold up. So, we have to ask ourselves what we are doing when we claim to “go out into the field”, “do fieldwork”, “collect field data”. Claiming to collect data would presuppose that they are already there, like things in the world, like flowers in nature... But data are not “given” but “produced” by researchers in their relationship to their object of investigation. What they produce is not obtained in spite of their presence in the field, but because of that very presence.

This idea was notably illustrated in a drawing by Gary Larson published in 1984 showing anthropologists approaching huts supposedly cut off from any contact with civilization and whose inhabitants hasten to conform to the stereotypical representations of researchers. The drawing suggests that these groups are well aware of the value of presenting themselves as “primitive” people. Far from being a collection of data that is already there, the work of social science research would, on the contrary, consist in building a particular relationship with the respondents from which the researcher produces his or her data.

According to this line of thinking, the investigation is a moment of research, that of meeting and exchanging with the respondents, and the research work proceeds through writing and discussion in the academic world.

Switch (on Paper): You’re working on the jarocho music of the Sotavento in Mexico. How did this research on very popular expressions come about and what of its content?

C.R.: I first spent three years working in and on the city of Veracruz, Mexico, between 2007 and 2010. I was interested in the concrete forms in the city, following the national policy centred on the memory of slavery and the revitalization of African cultural heritage, officially proclaimed as the “third root of Mexican mestizaje (race mixing)”. By placing particular emphasis on the Caribbean roots of local popular culture and the influence of the “third root of mestizaje”, this action contributed to the transition from the historical period from the 1930s to the 1960s, characterized by the negation of African heritage, to another period

in which the “African root of mestizaje” was henceforth part of the representation of local identity. And it is particularly in relation to music and the discourse of musicians that this African heritage was publicly expressed, especially through two distinct musical sources: “Afro-Caribbean music” that has circulated since the nineteenth century between Cuba and the city of Veracruz, and the “son jarocho”, a musical practice of oral tradition originating in the south of the state of Veracruz, considered to be specific to the black and mulatto populations. I was therefore interested in the whitening of the son jarocho, that is to say the progressive erasing of the African heritage of this music, and then in its de-whitening, that is to say the revaluation of its triple heritage, Spanish, indigenous and African, between the 20th and 21st centuries.

After these stays in Mexico, I devoted my research to the transnational circulation of the son jarocho and its establishment in the United States and then in Europe, seeking to examine the effects of the circulation of this practice and its practitioners on the processes of defining it as “African” music, resulting from “mestizaje”.

Switch (on Paper): You often speak of “social counter-distinction”. What exactly does this consist of? Does it have anything to do with the principles of “distinction” of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu?

C.R.: Yes, the notion of social counter-distinction refers directly to Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of phenomena of social distinction, i.e. the maintenance by the dominant class of a symbolic distance, expressed by differences in tastes and values, from the popular and dominated class.

In the context of my work on “Afro-Caribbean” popular music in Veracruz, what I have called social counter-distinction refers to the behaviour of young musicians who play in the evening in the city squares and of those who come to the squares to dance the son montuno, of Cuban origin. In their relationship to the body, the way they move, and the way they dress, the dancers stage a form of identity expression that does not involve “being black”, but the voluntary and explicit sharing of certain elements of an “Afro culture” whose codes can be publicly interpreted. It is not about defining oneself as “black” but of dancing certain rhythmic sequences by exaggerating the gestures and choreographic movements of “Afro” dance, of sharing with others the music and gestures identified as “black” in order to transform them into signs. Signs of a working-class, migrant culture, different from that of the dominant class. Signs that are not only part of a “popular” culture, but of a way of life that is distant from the normative frameworks set by the local “polite society”. Signs, in other words, of non-alignment with the “polite” people who frequent certain trendy bars and speak in the Spanish way to accentuate social distinction. Signs that, by adopting the sexually explicit body movements of African dance, mark a departure from what are also called “decent” people, one of whose characteristics is precisely to demonstrate the moral distance with “ordinary” people and to erase anything that might appear as a sign of African-ness in the way they present themselves to others.

Switch (on Paper): You also say that the restitution of research is “a stage of the work and not its final rendering” because “the effects of restitution” must be part of the research process. The idea is appealing, but how can it be applied to researchers faced with the constraints and academic schedules of restitution?

C.R.: In any research, there is the temporality imposed by the research institutions and the temporality that the researcher sets for himself or herself to determine whether the work is finished and can be the subject of academic publication. These two timeframes rarely coincide in reality. We must therefore learn to deal with them.

In my opinion, whatever the academic constraints, restitution to the “actors in the field” is an important moment in the research work. It often contributes to revealing the choices that were made in the early stages of the investigation and which can give rise to misunderstandings, incomprehension and even tension between those who, as a result of these choices, found themselves at the centre of the sociological viewpoint and those who were marginalized from it. “Restitution” therefore does not simply “restore”, it transforms a methodological and analytical choice into an interpretation of the social world that legitimizes certain aspects or actors, and erases others.

Coming back to the example of my work in Veracruz, by choosing to work on a group of street musicians rather than on a better established, more recognised group, and by emphasising through this group the notion of social distinction/counter-distinction, it was possible to bring out elements of the reality of the world studied until then, that were voluntarily or involuntarily ignored by the social actors. The choices made can thus be discussed and rejected. Categories of analysis, such as social counter-distinction, can be re-appropriated by the actors. This is why “restitution” is only one stage of the fieldwork and not the final result. The analysis of restitution and the effects it produces is part of the final analysis.

Switch (on Paper): You refer to science “not in spite of the uncertainty about the subjects in the investigative relationship, but because of it”. Should we see in this reflection a principle of falsification as formulated by the Austrian epistemologist Karl Popper: any scientific truth is true only if it can be falsified?

C.R.: The principle of falsification is at the heart of the scientific method and there is no question of calling it into question. Rather, the focus here is on the different ways in which the investigator-respondent relationship is conceived in the social sciences and how uncertainty in this relationship, which is at the heart of the production of scientific knowledge, may or may not be taken into account.

Initially, when the social sciences stopped using only second-hand data to produce their own field surveys, they tried to remove uncertainty by conceiving the empirical approach from the perspective of the neutrality of the investigator, implying that the investigator should ideally cancel himself or herself out as such. Although unattainable, this neutrality

of interactions during the investigation came to be considered as a research standard, the condition for collecting the “true” word of the actors. The investigator’s know-how was supposed to reside in their ability to neutralize their own personality and become a reflection of the speaker. “Conducting science” was therefore tantamount to not being interested in the effects of the investigative situation.

Later on, a new norm emerged of “conducting science” despite the uncertainty. In other words, it was a matter of taking uncertainty into account in order to better limit its effects. On one hand, this meant putting oneself in the subject’s shoes in order to understand “ his or her “ world and not “the” world, for example, analysing delinquency “from the offender’s point of view”, based on the categories that seemed most relevant to the people studied and not on the abstract categories of sociological theories. On the other hand, this requires controlling the effects produced by the investigative relationship: avoiding “imposing problems” on respondents or asymmetry in the investigative relationship linked to the social distance between investigator and respondent.

A third posture is to “conduct science” with uncertainty. Acknowledging that any solicitation procedure will have an effect on respondents and their discourse, this approach seeks to examine these effects, not to assess how this would alter the experienced reality, but to make the data more intelligible. This is tantamount to fully assuming the “lost innocence of anthropology” referred to by French anthropologist Didier Fassin: “A restless mind could be the most creative and honest posture, far from the certainties of an anthropology that has often believed it knows for itself and in lieu of others....”

Switch (on Paper): In support of your comments, you quote a passage from the book *An Ethnologist in Morocco* by the American Paul Rabinow, who admits the uneasiness he felt during his investigation about his interlocutor Malik: “... made me wonder whether there had ever been any effective communication and understanding between us? [...] A vast gulf lay between us and could never be bridged.”

C.R.: One way of assuming this “lost innocence of anthropology” is to account for the discomfort of working in the field. This notion of discomfort has appeared gradually, both in the presentation of the ethnographer’s methodological approach and in the choice of writing style. By taking into account his own uncertainty as a subject, the ethnographer frees himself from realistic narratives as found in classical anthropology to reveal the researcher’s experience in the field, which, in the form of confession, mentions his own difficulties, doubts, emotions, and even the impasses of his research. It is in this spirit that Paul Rabinow participates in this observation of a difficult, biased relationship to the other, often at the origin of an uneasiness that has hitherto remained silent in ethnographic texts. In this passage and throughout the story, he exposes the feeling of unease that dominates his relationship with Malik, his informant.

Switch (on Paper): At the University of the Côte d'Azur, you have a research program called Creation in Migration. What exactly does it consist of and how did it come about?

C.R.: Creation in Migration is a research program funded by the IDEX of the University of the Côte d'Azur in which researchers from several laboratories participate. It is based on a two-fold observation, well established in the specialized literature on migration, according to which, on one hand, in the context of the contemporary transformation of creation linked to the mobility of people and cultural practices, the times and spaces of artistic work (artistic creation) are increasingly structured by the mobility of actors. On the other hand, the local organization of art worlds is becoming trans-nationalized, giving rise to configurations of actors and migratory paths that constantly defy borders. This program focuses on the configuration of places of creation, on artists and the networks they weave between them in a territory defined by its local specificities and its transnational openings, on the characteristics of creation when it is the work of people or artistic circles in circulation (migrant artists, exiles, refugees); but this programme also studies initiatives seeking to support and welcome migrant artists in response to what the media refer to as the “migrant crisis” in Europe.

Switch (on Paper): Returning to the methods of investigation mentioned above, how can we investigate these uprooted artists when most of them have lost their citizen rights and are seeking more to survive than to create?

C.R.: The issue is indeed complex and delicate. Observations of the impact of fleeing on the careers of artists, particularly threatened by the fact that they show through their art what is disturbing in their country, have led to facilities in recent years to host uprooted artists. This is notably the case of the Atelier des artistes en exil (Agency of Artists in Exile) inaugurated in 2017 in Paris, designed as a place where artists can continue to practice their art, but also as a place of information and reception. This structure offers both administrative support for applications for asylum or residence permits, finding accommodation, access to employment and care, learning French, as well as professional support enabling artists to continue to work in exile (access to workplaces, putting them in touch with producers, booking agencies, cultural and artistic structures, distribution agencies, etc.).

This is where my work is being conducted, based on a voluntary commitment to serve the artists hosted in this structure. It is by offering my know-how to help overcome the difficulties encountered in daily life and work that the investigation can be carried out. It deals with the condition of the artist in exile, which means the will to express oneself as an individual and as a representative of the culture of one's country, as well as commitment to other artists living in similar situations, but also about moments of despair, even depression. Here again, rather than claiming to know in lieu of others, it is about creating the conditions

to offer one's knowledge and know-how while trying to understand a few elements of what constitutes the world of the artist in a situation of uprootedness.

Switch (on Paper): Some artists still manage to produce because the visual arts community has totally appropriated the migratory phenomena. For better or for worse. For better, because artists from migrant backgrounds need to be able to express themselves. For worse, because this interest in uprooted artists casts a favourable light on the commercial art market, which issues reflections, often superficial, only to seduce art critics or collectors. Has this ambivalence been addressed in the research work of the program?

C.R.: Not only is it being addressed, it is at the heart of our research! In 2015-2016, French and British artists mobilized to denounce the unhealthy and undignified conditions in which migrants were living in the "Calais jungle". Following the "Appel de Calais" launched by a group of filmmakers and signed by 800 artists and personalities, collectives such as Art in the jungle were formed, organising "art trails" in the heart of the refugee living space, revealing artists in exile such as Alpha Diagne and his "blue house", which has become a symbol of this capacity for aesthetic re-appropriation of a place, despite the humiliation of poverty, racism and exile.

But in Calais, as in other refugee camps around the world, many artists, anxious to maintain their celebrity, to expand their international reach and their standing on the art market, have appropriated the refugee crisis, for better or for worse, from naïve awareness to exploitation.

Today, as a result of the mediatization around art in refugee camps, artists in exile tend to be regarded by public authorities and the Western public as that extra touch of appeal for all other migrants, as more respectable figures of exile, of measurable value and about whom it is fashionable to speak. And the risk, of course, is to forget that the difficulties encountered by artists are no different from those of others who have been forced to leave their country.

From this point of view, a festival such as Visions of exile, organized each year by the Agency of artists in exile is there to remind us that refugees are first and foremost survivors and that the first thing to do is to reach out to them. As the organizers of this festival, Judith Depaule and Ariel Cypel, wrote in the editorial of the third edition of the festival, "Exile is paradoxical, both loss and liberation, between pain and emancipation." This is precisely where my research work will continue in the coming months.

Translation by Angela Kent