

# **Searching, Finding, Understanding, Acting**

## **1. Researchers and citizens .:**

We define ourselves as researchers and citizens. We wish to contribute to the understanding and explanations of the contemporary world, near us, as well as far apart. We wish to enter a dialogue with all actors of society by discussing this knowledge with them and thereby enriching this dialogue. We endeavour to detect early signals and to bring emerging issues to the fore. We believe that the critical assessment of the objects we study as well as our own practices can have far reaching repercussions. We are living in a society in which reflection has become a productive force for every one of us.

We are approaching problems and social challenges with particular attention to space, not only because space matters but because exploring the spatial dimension of the social provides remarkable insights into contemporary dynamics as a whole. We also think that the future has to turn into a permanent state of questioning, a profound need of a democratic and developed society when taking strategic decisions.

The main purpose of scientific knowledge to elucidate affirmations and imaginaries as this will broaden the freedom of citizens to transform reality. We are producers and consumers of theoretical, technological knowledge and practical know-how.

## **2. Truth is our horizon .:**

Epistemologically we are both constructivists and realists: one does not go without the other. The real does not only encompass the material, in effect less and less so. The mental world of ideas, discourses, imaginaries, expectations, plans forms part of it and does not consist solely of candour and illusion. The sciences, technologies, techniques, philosophy, the arts, all products of the mind, are contributing tools to comprehend the real more effectively. We have to construct statements on realities which, in one way or another, have been constructed themselves; this is what constitutes the work on truth attributed to us.

We rebel against the politicians who practise 'post-truth' shamelessly. Neither do we identify with the researchers who claim to belong to 'post-modernism', who affirm that science is only a matter of opinion, of allegiances or institutions, who are fixated on scientists' profiles instead of being interested in their propositions. Doubt constitutes permanent hygiene for research, whilst suspicion is inopportune for the free production of knowledge. The distinction between the two is never easy, yet it is always necessary.

Truth is not behind a curtain awaiting to be drawn; it is the temporary result of an invention and a project, always different depending on changing contexts and evolving knowledge. While firmly rejecting the metaphysic of truth, supposedly always ready and waiting to be unveiled, we do not reject truth as an ideal. Society counts on us to tell them truths and sometimes truths that are disturbing. Truth is our craft, our responsibility, regardless of what it could cost us. Renouncing it would mean tearing up the contract which binds us to our contemporaries.

Nevertheless, researchers have in no way a monopoly of truth. Our handling of truth is always to take into consideration current statements, to discuss them and to validate or refute them. We have to accept all the differences and to take advantage of them to evolve in a common and shared,

intelligible and transformable world. This presupposes to pay attention to what everybody is saying, regardless of their origin, social position or status.

### **3.The reconstructive moment is essential .:**

We aim simultaneously at consistency and relevance to trace the internal contradictions of a theory and to get unsettled by reality. This openness of mind consists also of taking ideas of other actors seriously, including ordinary individuals, by recognising their qualities of argumentation and by appreciating their indeterminacy and contradictions as a resource. The objective is to try to comprehend the entirety of these ideas with all their differences and divergences as one movement. This is the reconstructive moment of knowledge which appears absolutely essential to us. Thus we consider that it is useful to attribute a proper place to the regimes of truth other than that of science.

### **4.A single social science .:**

We are placing ourselves at the heart of a post-disciplinary science of the social enriched by other types of knowledge, the mathematical sciences, the natural sciences, engineering, philosophy, and the arts. We think that social reality is complex, even hyper-complex, but also thinkable, intelligible. All rigorous qualitative and quantitative methods are welcome, and we intend to bridge the fatal chasm between the different cultures of cognition. We aim at measuring everything that can be measured, but also to take into account what cannot be measured, such as the uniqueness of individuals, events or places. A major challenge of researching the social world is precisely to position cognitively and rigorously what is measurable and what is unmeasurable.

The tension between the empirical and theoretical worlds can be approached from case studies, monographs and comparative research, as well as from a framework of axioms, models, and comprehensive theories. We judge practical experimentation as promising, although it has remained rightly or wrongly the poor relative among the social sciences.

Together with others, Chôros works towards the emergence of a unified social science, capable of creating a dialogue between economics and sociology, political science and geography, law and history, psychology and linguistics, and any other useful combination of fields of knowledge on problems and challenges where society expects them.

### **5.Every social fact is total .:**

It is not possible to escape the complexity of the social, yet it is possible to aim at a simple approach to it, albeit without seeking to reduce it. This social world forms a whole, society, but its components – individuals, collectivities, organisations, institutions, everything that constitutes sociality – have also its specificities and their logics cannot be ignored. The social world speaks thus about incessant iterations between actors and environments. Among them, individuals with their cognitive competences and their lifespan strategic choices have made a deafening entrance onto the social stage. However, the irruption of individuality does not mean the eradication of society. Quite the reverse. Faced with the communal model more individual means more society and vice versa. What is certain is that each social fact is a total fact and it is an illusion to pretend to escape the process of theorising, even when one deals with specific objects of study.

Thus the encompassing and the encompassed are profoundly intertwined. The social is operating as a system, but its human and, to a lesser extent, non-human components (objects, natural worlds) enjoy a certain level of autonomy and capabilities of changing the framework which includes them.

Trying to achieve clarity among these permanent, sometimes cooperative, sometimes conflictual tensions between the wholes and the parts constitutes a major challenge for the comprehension of the social.

## **Inhabiting, Being Inhabited**

### **6. Inhabiting: an encounter between actors and spatial environments .:**

We have learnt the importance of representing space as a transversal dimension which makes sense in society as a whole. It is not a simple projection of something else. It is not a special case. We are taking space seriously. Space is made up of material, immaterial, and mental distances. Exploring the infinite diversity of conceptions and practices of distance is an efficient way of reading the complexity of social worlds. The spatial dimension of the social is dividing into space – i.e. into spatial environments and spatiality – the spatial acting of actors and of other operators (agents, objects).

Inhabiting is what unites the effort of knowing with the political stakes regarding space. Inhabiting is to seek a meeting point, always fragile, between the logic of action and that of the environment. Actors can be crushed by a violent or hostile environment, but they can also destroy an environment if they neglect its vulnerability. Inhabiting is thus always being inhabited by the space one inhabits as well. Furthermore, inhabiting is cohabiting, as each action here has a collective incidence, and is almost always societal. Approaching the world from inhabiting is leading from the outset to the relation between freedom and responsibility.

### **7. The urban: the natural environment of humanity .:**

First and foremost, urbanisation, urbanity and urbanism are organising the contemporary inhabiting. The urban has become the most ‘natural’ environment, meaning the most obvious and the most powerful for humanity with the city at its core, more than ever its most visible feature. The urban world must not be seen negatively from a rural point of view, but more as a type of society belonging to a particular civilisation. The city in itself is a spatial choice which generates diverse and enormous spatial challenges: the public realm, mobility, gradients and models of urbanity, ethics and aesthetics of the urban.

The analysis of the urban phenomenon takes place at all scales, as in-depth explorations of pedestrian metrics and the relation between bodies in public spaces, as well as a global approach to urban networks considered as the basic frames of the contemporary world. Chôros studies all aspects of urbanity at all latitudes, by means of theoretical modelling as well as comprehensive surveys of daily life in cities.

### **8. The human is mobile .:**

Moreover, the urban involves mobilities. Access to mobilities becomes generalised, in other words mobilities are multiplying, differentiating, and finally combining, participating in the whole through thousand channels, reinforcing the freedom of everyone to choose their own places they inhabit, separately from each other. The rural era, conceived as rooted in a unique and sacred soil, is coming to an end, including where it has been most predominant, in Europe and in Asia.

All today's inhabitants of specific places are involved in movement. They are reconnecting with societies which have never been rural and have always been mobile. Tourism is not only an industry of displacement to different locations, but more generally a connection with otherness, possible with all spaces, including the most familiar ones among them. From now on the global citizens offer their hand to their ancestors who for millennia have been making new places by creating or transforming them, and who bequeathed us with this available and accessible diversity. The mobility of humans, things and ideas converts every place into an embodiment of all the other ones. Thus the mobilities of every one imply those of all the others, including of those who seem immobile: at present inhabiting a place is inhabiting the World. While political challenges are essential albeit mainly ignored, demographic models of use to mobile societies are as yet to be invented.

## **9.A global society is emerging .:**

Space is also globalisation: Europe and all the emerging new spaces, due to their very existence are redesigning all the other maps. In particular, the World is a singular spatial reality in more than one way, not least because it is the ultimate top rank which affects all other ranks while being affected by them; also because the World is unique and the exclusive place of human existence; also because it is constructed by being simultaneously thought, discussed, sometimes desired, sometimes shamed by the humans. We are following each new event, thereby positioning the idea of a global society into the public landscape with all the freedoms and responsibilities this implies at that scale. Ecological awareness is initially constructed at this scale. Therefore the challenges linked to Earth as nature are also organising themselves mostly at this scale, alongside development and peace. At this stage of globalisation the missing (or possibly variegated) link to the political preserves the lag between problems and solutions. This confused transition often borrows surprising ways. The history of the political invention at the global scale deserves attention, however this would require abandoning a narrow culturalist, geopolitical, or economic vision to attribute the unexpected 'new' the opportunity to influence one's thinking.

## **10.Digital worlds create a globally networked place .:**

Space is also digital: a collection of resources as well as a frame of action. The rapid evolution of the digital requires analysis without underestimating its extraordinary power of transformation, nor overestimating its novelty. Approaching the internet as a space, treating it as a global networked place connected to other digital and non-digital spaces contributes incontestable efficiency to the analysis of this reality, totally new as well as entirely incorporated in the general history of societies. The digital is permanently reshuffling and redistributing the cards of intermediation. A libertarian perspective could perceive this as a radical movement of 'dis-intermediation'; however this is not what is happening: what is moving instead are chains of interaction. Ordinary individuals have never had such direct access to a large amount of activities and services but, neither have such powerful and unmissable actors come to life over such a short period of time.

The digital environments are major components, simultaneously a cause and a consequence of globalisation and, in particular, of a global civil society. They makes the increase of spatial freedoms for the actors much more visible, but they also reveals the spectacular resistance to them by nation-states, as well as the ethical, political, and legal deficits of a global society in the making.

The digital tools also encourage alternative ways of conducting research. Big data are an opportunity for neo-positivist reductionism. Accordingly, the very idea of theory would have become obsolete, and by producing and managing algorithms the information technologists would no longer have any use for theory to think the real. Yet, the exact opposite is the case. As never

before, the exponential growth of empirical information requires problematisation, hypotheses and methods, in other words the construction of a cognitive recording methodology complementary to the data. Thus, new promising perspectives for research could emerge to fill the gaps of the statistical instruments of the State and to explore particular realities as such, without trying to crush them with averages.

## **11.Nature is a social environment .:**

Nature distinguishes itself from the bio-physical worlds in that it concerns humanity, and that humanity transforms it. Our relation to nature merits to be apprehended from a spatial perspective. Natural environments are specific social environments, driven by physical or biological logics, but in terms of social realities they have a history and a future which depend increasingly on humans.

Humans possess two natural envelopes, their bodies and the Earth. These environments constitute specific layers of the inhabited space which interact with other layers. The World and the Earth occupy the same area and this confers an imposing responsibility on humanity. As for the body, it cannot be totally separated from the 'me' which in itself is not a simple extension of the body. Ecological awareness and its consequences led to major political debates, because the desirable models of nature are also models of society which contain major spatial dimensions (urbanity, mobility, relations with space).

## **12.Maps create new spaces .:**

Maps, and beyond that all spatial languages generate other cognitive spaces which resonate with the spatiality of the world and assist in representing its complexity. We consider it crucial to achieve a 'cartographic turn'. This renewal of the languages is visualising information and knowledge to level up with the contemporary theories of the social, as well as the challenges of today.

A map is not only a visualisation of data but a complex and open language. It can become an instrument of thinking capable to apprehend certain realities more clearly and rapidly. This is the case, for example, of contemporary cartographic history, able to represent the content and dynamic of political space which has been undergoing a fundamental transformation since the beginning of the 1990s in the West. Chôros endeavours to bring about the connection between the production of new maps and the reflection on cartographical languages.

## **13.Space is creative transversality .:**

Beyond its own challenges the spatial dimension of the social contributes undeniably to raising consciousness about certain emerging realities: the public goods, the challenges of equality and justice, the ethics with a usefully visible geographic component. By studying individuals as geographic beings, with their body, their movement, their multi-scalar and multi-metrical practices and their spatial capital we hope to contribute to a renewal of the sciences of the psyche currently torn between incomplete and reductionist paradigms. We wish to accelerate the coming of trans-disciplinarity by diversifying the teams working on different types of projects to connect theoretical research of all the sciences, all types of technologies with the world of the arts and even the techniques adopted by ordinary inhabitants.

## **Present Futures**

### **14.The future is a public good .:**

Where are we, when are we? 'It was better before' prospers. Despite its limitations nostalgia resists as agent of comparison between the present and the past. Europe is lacking a future and that is weakening it in a very tangible present.

Never has there been a time with so many projects by individuals, collectivities and societies, but their convergence, their coherence and public debates to make them happen are mainly absent. Yet, memorising the past is not a mechanistic sign of a society essentially turned towards what no longer exists.

Attributing value to memory can equally be a sign of a society in transformation. Revisiting the past in memory can also form part of the renewal of a modernising regime, meaning the reinvention of the relation between the future and the present. By recording what in their eyes has past, the actors do not only deal with history. They contribute to identifying what is contemporary and to reconstruct the measures of time. With globalisation the immense constellation of places which is constituting the geographic culture of humanity is being turned into heritage and becomes the raw material for foresight works.

Turning the past into heritage is not necessarily negative, provided it is combined with a benevolent expectation of the future. Yet, in a world of cultured and reflecting actors the future is not simply announcing itself, it is constructed through dialogue between desires and confrontation with expectations. It is the result of a synthetic intentionality of a whole society as well as the result of multiple actions by individuals or collectivities. In this sense it is a public good.

### **15.Most of the time, and at best, predictions can only reproduce the past .:**

Predictions are efficient when the processes which produced the present are still at work. This is a typical problem of blind and lazy use of mass information without problematising social change. Their level of predictability is weak. Aiming to obtain transformations from conjecture – sometimes substantial ones that we are as yet barely noticing – is defying the mechanistic extension of linear, logistical, exponential or cyclical projections.

Thus, the effects of ecological awareness, well and truly manifest at present despite being a very recent representation of nature, could not be predicted by solely deriving them from what existed. It was necessary to discern the long-range history of the idea of nature – often in the background but never absent – and to pay attention to the rising importance of environmental concerns, still confused but very present in the nineteen seventies in the West. Similarly, simply listening to expectations and intended actions of African girls instead of lazily copying European history would have allowed a better forecast of the spectacular fall in fertility rates we are experiencing today.

### **16.Daring disruptive futures .:**

How to build a vision which helps citizens to imagine possible futures and, among them, desirable ones? This would require considering the possibility of radical changes and to anticipate irruptions by daring to imagine very different worlds from those of today. 'Fiction-society' should be much

more imaginative than popular science-fiction literature and films which often associate improbable technological fantasies with a static or even archaic representation of the social world.

Chôros adopts an inter- and transdisciplinary approach, both theoretical and experimental, which uses unstructured interviews as well as data modelling. Simulations of a future radically different from the present is doubly useful. Firstly, it can cast clarity on the challenges of conceivable changes. Secondly it can test the availability of contemporary actors for such changes, and thus measure the level of dynamic unbalance existing in society today by detecting signs which may appear weak initially.

## **17.Let's listen to the present to talk about the future .:**

The most effective conjecture of the future is the one which does not mistake the present and integrates projects and visions in it. A contemporary approach of the future is one which listens to the predictions of actors instead of pronouncing technocratic prophecies which will never materialise. Such a 'foresight of the present' has three types of temporalities as its raw material: the real – settled, memorised and instituted; the actual – emerging from the instant; and the virtual – bearing potentials without revealing which ones will become real. In everyday life each point of view of social realities interacts inexorably with the other two. The challenge here is to be able to distinguish in the actual – most easily grasped and measured – what is inscribed in the real and what is designing the virtual. The simplest way of achieving this is to listen to how individuals perceive the present and desire to maintain or to change it. These actors have little power and do not always agree with each other, but they are powerful when they converge. Their intentions and their claims already are and will increasingly be the principal propulsive force of the future becoming. The range of their desires can give a concrete, otherwise inept, sense to the timeline.

## **Action Researchers**

## **18.Knowing through all languages .:**

There exist many languages of knowledge. The best way to use their resources is to disentangle them. Some languages, such as the oral and the written languages are common to all activities and narratives, Others have been confined to specific sectors and tasks. For that reason, Chôros welcomes specialists who use different types of written, oral, audio-visual languages and more. Certain modes of communication, such as 'massive open online courses' (moocs) combine techniques with pre-existing languages. In other cases disjunctions are more apparent. Being neither fiction nor journalistic documentary, scientific films form a new departure. Hybridisation between the arts and the sciences are on the increase and aesthetic projects which have penetrated society like never before are distinguishing themselves less and less from the work of researchers. The arts and the sciences appear increasingly as two complementary sides of cognitive action.

Chôros is particularly interested in non-verbal languages because they present a different way of speaking and thinking, still little explored by the sciences and therefore capable of stimulating innovation.

## **19.A civic science treats citizens as citizens .:**

Let's start from our work as cognitive actors and progress towards the political and the aesthetic. We are not researchers who engage in, or fall into the political, even less researchers who disguise their political positions in a scientific vocabulary. We are researchers in real life who are trying to contribute to creating the conditions for society to get a better grasp of itself.

Understanding the world constitutes evidently an asset to act; as knowledge producers this gives us responsibilities. We are not experts but action researchers. We do not aim to state what needs to be done or what needs to be avoided. We would prefer to be catalysts of freedoms, catalysts in the sense of wanting to become dispensable, akin to a chemical reaction. We refute the idea that researchers should measure the level of 'acceptability' by society of measures decided by others. It is not the role of 'the knowing' but of citizens to decide. We only wish to assist them to enrich and clarify their points of view, to relativise objects through comparisons with other situations and to revisit challenges by changing perspectives. We are not saying 'you cannot do that', but rather 'Is this what you want to do?' Our way of making models of urbanity or conceptions of nature more explicit which are competing on the ideas market is to show to what extent they are compatible with each other and what strategic choices they require.

## **20. We are optimistic because we are realistic .:**

The political component of our project is thus both optimistic and realistic, optimistic because it is realistic. Our measured optimism rests on the observation that it is possible to put in place devices which enable political society to create coherence with the expectations of civil society. Weakening intrinsic incompatibilities between the expectations of different actors on the one hand and those of society as a whole on the other hand makes the success of such a process more probable.

Contrary to the many discourses of experts who adopt an overhanging position we are not putting ourselves in a perspective of inevitability and stride to escape it. This is because we believe in the usefulness of long-range controversies, disputations, translations and counter-powers. We also believe that the work of a researcher consists of presenting what exists together with existing alternatives. Conversely, we warn about the risks of responding to imperatives of the moment (inequalities, retrenchments into identification, terrorism, environmental risks...) by giving in to the diktat of urgency. Those who say 'it is time to act' are nearly always right, those who say 'there is no time left to discuss' are almost always wrong.

As citizen-researchers we do not present a 'political agenda' but a problematisation of challenges in order to provide a better readability of debates and more degrees of freedom for those who will deliberate. We are situating ourselves in the progressive perspective of the Enlightenment which we consider still valid today. It is summed up in the proposition of Immanuel Kant, written in 1783: "The Enlightenment consists, for the humans, to leave the state of dependence for which they are responsible themselves". What this sentence means is first that change is possible and it is up to the humans – every one of them – as well as society as a whole which they all form together – to imagine and to decide which direction they want to take. It is also up to them to decide how to act so that this newly acquired autonomy will enable them to advance towards something better for everyone and for all. We consider that emancipation, enfranchisement, freeing ourselves from all the imposed allegiances, the construction of the capacity to invent one's own existence in a dynamic cohabitation with other existences is more than ever a pertinent road map. This formulation also opens up the question of what aims to achieve. What are we doing as inhabitants-citizens of this World which is our only asset? What are we going to do with this new freedom?

The answer is not yet inscribed in the world in which we are living, and which is in fact composite, ambiguous, and cannot simply be brushed aside. This answer has to be invented, day by day. The ideologies which reduce political projects to mere resistance against a united conspiracy of all the



powerful are impoverishing the debate because they make believe that the conservation of what exists could be a positive project. With Umberto Eco we consider the world as a “benevolent enigma”. This world asks difficult questions, sometimes painful ones, but solutions exist as seeds in the thoughts and actions of our fellow citizens. The dynamic of contemporary urbanism shows what is possible. It is thus time to abandon the illusionary myth of being the author of a city and imagine ourselves instead as a specific actor among other actors. It works!

Our approach to the political expresses itself in terms of questions. Is it possible to construct political justice at all scales? Build a European territory? Create a more open, safe and democratic digital world? Can a global society emerge from autonomous individuals, reversible collectivities, federated societies? It is up to everyone and to all, to you and to us among them to respond.?