

From the intimate circle to globalized oral history

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In what now seems a bygone golden age many of us argued that the role of oral history was to revolutionize the study of history by bringing heretofore neglected populations into that study and by recognizing their abilities to formulate their own histories. Despite what are now seen as glaring contradictions, enchanted by the insight that the interviews we gathered, and the people we talked to, told us more than simply information about the past, we began to argue that they were richer than repositories of information or archival documents, they were texts themselves.

As part of a long struggle to come to grips with the complexity and often contradictory and conflicting heart of the conversations we create in our fieldwork, we have now broadened our concerns to issues of remembering, narration, trauma, community, collective consciousness, myth, ideology, identity and other aspects of subjectivity.

In this flowering of concerns we have, however, often forgotten that our task is still history, the understanding of the past, even as we recognize that the boundaries between past and present are fluid and even nonexistent.

Our task is not to focus our contribution upon what we can tell others about our work, but rather what can they tell us about our work. It is still to revolutionize the study of history by understanding, through those we talk with, the possible varieties of

being in the world and being involved in the creation of a usable past. Our new charge is to understand the international dimensions of that revolution.

Unfortunately no one has yet sought to undertake an oral history of the international oral history movement, although several presentations at this meeting hint at the possible future of the undertaking. Such a task is not as much of an exercise in navel gazing as it might at first glance seem. In an age of the internationalization or globalization of just about everything, not enough attention has been paid to the internationalization of intellectual and disciplinary life. The oral history movement offers an arena of modest enough size to insure completion of the project, and the international movement is of recent enough origin that most of those involved, the key players, with the tragic exceptions of Raphael Samuel, Karl Ryant and Dora Schwarzstein are still alive to tell the story. Until that time we will have to settle for piecemeal surveys in the hope that they will contextualize whatever generalizations we make about our own history.

The internationalization of the world of oral history, it strikes me, has had three phases, and is on the verge of a fourth. Interestingly enough I find the same kind of periodization in the abstract that Al Thomson has offered here, although, as will be evident, I will define these periods somewhat differently. In the first stage, individuals, in particular Louis Starr in the Uni-

ted States and Paul Thompson and Raphael Samuel in the UK extended personal contacts into patterns of international connectedness. In the second, in a series of meetings such as Essex and Amsterdam, an informal community of oral historians was established mainly among New Leftists in the United States and Europe who had turned to oral history in the hopes of forging a new political understanding of subjectivity. In the third stage that community was expanded to embrace practitioners in other areas of the world, particularly Latin America, a turning point being reached in 1993 in New York and in the formation of the international association. The fourth stage, in which we are now entering, is the world of globalization and it is an open question as to whether or not the oral history movement will be able to embrace this world and rethink what it is we do in the so called post colonialist world.

In talking about the international development of oral history we are not talking about the growth of oral history in different parts of the world. We are talking about how oral historians in different parts of the world discovered one another. In the earliest days of the practice this was done by personal contacts, as I noted, especially those of Louis Starr, Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson. Starr, because he headed the first and largest oral history office in the United States was in a position to exert influence on a broad range of arenas, and he did so in a variety of ways to bring to the attention of oral historians in the United States the work of non-Americans. Within the American Oral History Association he was a firm supporter of expanding the area of the OHA to Canada and Mexico. Through his influence on the editorial board of the *Oral History Review* he opened its pages to a series of articles on oral history in other nations such as Australia and the Soviet Union. Through his influence with American foundations he urged support for efforts in Latin America, especially Brazil, and Indonesia. If my memory serves me correctly he was an early American

traveler to England to a meeting of the British Oral History Society where he met Thompson and they became immediate enemies. It was Starr who selected the American representative to the first International Historical conference featuring a section on oral history, was held in, I believe, Bucharest. In addition he hosted any number of oral historians from around the world when they came to New York, among them Mercedes Vilanova, Lutz Neithammer, and Annamarie Troeger. And, just last night I learned that there was a direct connection between Australian historians who had visited Columbia and Starr who then encouraged Hazel de Berg to undertake her initial efforts in recording the memories of Australians for the National Library of Australia.

In England, with the founding of the History Workshop collective Raphael Samuel and his comrades in their drive to build a socialist history played a key role in bringing to a larger audience work being done in oral history in Great Britain and in other nations of Europe. If I am not mistaken I believe that the History Workshop Journal published the first English language essays in oral history by Alessandro Portelli and Luisa Passerini. But, the key role was played by Thompson. From the first founding of *Oral History* in 1971-72, Thompson as editor ran an article in every issue on oral history in various parts of the world. Through his connections to sociologists engaged in life review methods he mobilized a wide range of contacts. He also traveled extensively throughout Europe, Africa and North and South America. Through his friendship with South African social historians he brought to the attention of many the work then being done by those who later would lead the field there. Most importantly he played a key role in organizing the first four international meetings of oral historians from many nations (Turin, Essex, Amsterdam, Aix en Provence). The second of these meetings in Essex marked a turning point in the history of oral history internationally. Elsewhere I have

described this transformation of the international oral history movement in some detail, and others have also spent some time outlining its origins and meaning, so here I will only suggest some of the features of this stage of the movement. Firstly, as noted, these meetings created a community among oral historians by bringing together practitioners who had been working in near isolation in their own countries, who now found a similarity of interests. Many were veterans of the new left who had extended their interest in questions of consciousness and subjectivity to their oral history fieldwork. This meant an interest in issues of ideology, memory, and, most importantly, in following Bakhtine, issues of text. Thus the major tension to which much attention was devoted was the transformation of the interview from a document to a text. In addition there was a decided interest in using oral history as a method for the recuperation of the history of those whose history had not been included in traditional forms of historiography: members of the working class, women, blacks, oppressed minorities, etc. The dominant discourse of the group was a discourse framed within the traditions of Marxism and the Euro-Atlantic left that emphasized the centrality of the world of production. The commonality of this language and its meaning can be found in most of the articles on oral history published in the *History Workshop Journal* and then in the *International Journal of Oral History*, which was founded after the Essex meeting. This commonality reached across disciplines and interests. Indeed, many of those who were involved in these years were academics who had relatively tense relations within their own disciplines or non-academics and community historians, especially in England and the United States. Oral history became their intellectual community.

Over the next seven or eight years, this community was in important ways expended enormously. The meeting in Barcelona and the founding by Mercedes Vilanova of *Historia y Fuente Oral*, and the decision to

make Spanish an official language of the conferences brought to these conferences large numbers of Latin American oral historians, especially from Brazil, Mexico and Argentina. The work of Lutz Neithammer and his colleagues, and the contacts of Thompson and Daniel Bertaux were instrumental in attracting Eastern European and Soviet, later Russian, fieldworkers in both history and sociology. In addition the first Australians, South Africans, and Asians began to appear at conferences, culminating in the New York conference of 1993. This growth led to a number of suggestions that some more or less formal arrangement be devised, if only for the very practical purposes of organizing the increasingly large and complicated conferences which were now being held on a more or less regular basis. My recollection is that the first time the suggestion of a formal organization be formed was made by Paul Thompson in Aix-en-Provence but was opposed by many—in particular I remember the reactions of myself and Mercedes—on the grounds that such a move would destroy the intimate community that the oral history movement represented. Thus it was not until the meeting in Goteberg in 1996 that the IOHA was founded, marking the third stage of the history of the movement.

To be sure there were more substantial reasons for the formation of a formal organization. Some continuity, it was felt, was necessary if the movement was to grow and serve its new constituency. A dues paying organization would, it was believed, be able to begin to undertake the initial expenses of a conference or support a newsletter maintaining contacts among a much larger group than a friendship network. It was also clear that as the initial generation of Essex and Amsterdam moved on intellectually or became more involved in careers etc., that a new leadership was needed. To many of us it was an organic evolution. The time had come for more formal arrangements and a more expansive and less Eurocentric community. This ex-

pansion is clearly represented in the conferences since that date. Aside from Rome, all of them have been in newer areas of growth: Brazil, South Africa, Turkey, and now, Australia.

Equally significant, I think, was the expansion of the horizons of oral historians between Essex and Goteburg. Initial work in oral history moved between two poles: collecting memories around, or publishing monographs dealing with, politics in the broadest sense of public policy, and collecting interviews and publishing monographs in the new social history. Despite the differences in interests both were informed by and conceptualized within a common industrialized world in which relations of class, race and gender intersected with each other and became public issues. Slowly but surely the interest in subjectivity and oral history projects and publications concentrating upon particular communities began to speak to a world of multiple differences, identity politics, a different autobiographical practice, trauma, disrupted memory, and forms of repression. Most clearly seen in projects on the Holocaust but also in projects in the post-colonial non-European world, and projects directed at questions of human rights and reparations. As oral history expanded its geographic range it also expanded its intellectual range but this was something new. The gap between history and therapy narrowed. Many projects were not projects mounted twenty years after events but projects mounted while events were still happening. This was a new and many times uncomfortable role for oral historians.

As is clear, from a glance at the programs for the past three or four conferences, one can see a deep

fracture in an otherwise and heretofore almost seamless web bounded by issues of class and formulated in a traditional European language of class and class motive. And this is the fourth and newest stage of our international movement. There is not enough time to go into detail, so just let me toss off a few ideas or concepts to illustrate our new world: multiple colonization of women, blacks, gays, etc. Masculine studies, queer studies, whiteness studies, provincializing Europe, marginal and minoritized discourse, repressed narrative structures, hybridity, heteroglossia, diasporic identities. Undermining the western I. The next stage of oral history is not, in my view, the digital age—that is just the media. The next stage is the focus on globalization and the forms of oppression introduced by the structures of that formation and to demystify what seems to be an act of nature.

Afterthought:

In a different context, Orlando Paterson talking about the enslavement of Africans in the Nineteenth Century has developed a concept of 'social death'. It seems clear to me that one of the most oppressive aspects of the current ideology of globalization is the relegation of millions of people to social death; people disappear, they are obliterated, their lives consigned to a place beyond memory. They are instructed that they have no right to know what they know. That is our challenge—oral history is an important method of countering a social death. That is how we will understand our past and present.