

Oral History in Latin America

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This presentation discusses the relationship between history, oral history, and oral history in Latin America. It discusses whether Oral History is a specific field of historical studies, or a tool for the researcher. At the same time it considers if Oral History in Latin America has a specificity or not, and whether it constitutes a field in and of itself.

Many years ago I shared a round table with the Nigerian historian Okun Udet Uya. When I mentioned that I dealt in oral history he smiled and I asked him why. He mentioned that he did not do either Oral History or Written History, since as an African and as an Historian, he knew it was almost impossible to “do History” only with documents. African history was, necessarily, filled with oral sources since colonialism had eliminated many of the written records of societies such as Timbuktu or the Empire of Mali. It seemed a really interesting point that highlighted the fact that the difference between oral and written history is a construction of the Modern Era.

At the same time, subjects such as memory and historical remembrance are linked to cultural patterns, traditions, and structures of determined societies. As James K. Lowen¹ pointed out, only Westerners divide human beings in living and dead. Other societies, as some African ones, divide them in three: the living, the sashas, and the zamanis. The sasha are not entirely dead, since they live on in the memories of those who knew them, who can remember and evoke their physiognomy in art, and bring them to the present in anecdotes and stories. When the last person who met an ancestor dies, the ancestor leaves the sasha to become a zamani, dead.

Both Okun Uya’s appreciation as well as the distinction between ancestors seem important to me to reflect on oral history in Latin American societies. Even more so, since I feel that historical tools and fields are really inseparable from History’s “essence.” By “essence” I am referring to the means and ends of our profession. E.H. Carr pointed out: “The function of the historian is neither to love the past nor to emancipate himself from the past, but to master and understand it as the key to the understanding of the present.”² Or as Lucien Febvre pointed out: it is “a need of humanity ... that permits us to understand present times and live

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¹ James K. Lowen, *Lies my Teacher Told Me* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 239-241.

² E.H. Carr, *¿Qué es la historia?* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1981), 34.

them.”³ Thus, every History and every historical study remits us to a perception of the present and the society in which it is grounded, no matter what period of history might be its focus.

Oral History has a long tradition in Latin America harking back to the creation of the Sound Archive of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) in Mexico, in 1956. This project was the necessary precedent for the INAH’s Archivo de la Palabra (Word Archive) established in 1972. It was the INAH that recovered the most complete set of testimonies from survivors of the Mexican Revolution. From then on Mexican oral historians labored to establish different collections including those on Spanish Republican Exiles, on Latin American Exiles, and on Traditions and culture in Mexico.

The Mexican experience sparked a series of projects throughout Latin America. The Instituto Di Tella, in Argentina, started its own archive on labor leaders in the 1970s, and expanded its holdings throughout the 1980s. In Brazil, the Fundação Getulio Vargas established an oral history archive in the CPDOC. In the 1980s and 1990s many Latin American institutions turned to oral history to enrich their historical holdings and delve into complex processes with limited available written sources. Some of these included: over five thousand interviews on the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua; the Cuban Project on Women; Guatemala’s project on victims of repression; several Chilean, Colombian, and Argentine projects on human rights, labor, and militancy. By 1988 these developments came together in the First Conference of Oral Historians that took place in Mexico City. Over the past fifteen years the field has grown significantly. Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Nicaragua have organized national associations for Oral History that hold regular conferences and publish journals. In 2010 the different Latin American national associations and many universities and institutions set up RELAHO, the Latin America Oral History Network (www.relaho.org), as a clearing house of information and exchange for oral historians throughout the continent. Taking a cursory look at the RELAHO web page one can see that Oral History in Latin America is a growing field of study encompassing academics and non-academics, historical research and recovering local traditions and folklore; it is used in fostering teaching and in prompting student participation in education; it involves neighborhood groups and “memory committees.”

The rapid growth of the field has also brought forth the question “Is there such a thing as Latin American Oral History?” For Okun Udet Uya there seemed to be no frontier between oral and written sources. And this came from the specificity of the Nigerian historical processes. How about for Latin America? Is there specificity in its historical process that can lead to a specific field in Oral

³ Lucien Febvre, *Combates por la historia* (Barcelona: Ariel Quincenal, 1974), 21.

History? The “essence” of Oral History as “Latin American” is at least debatable. Or at least it is as debatable as the existence of Latin America itself as a unique and homogeneous historical process. In reality, and without becoming involved in a lengthy and complex discussion, the concept of Latin America came into being as a counterpoint to Europe and the United States. As such the unifying elements would be derived from colonialism and imperialism. These are not just theoretical or political concepts, but rather they are an attempt to define an existing oppressive relationship. This is why the possibility of comparative history between the historical processes of imperial nations and those of the oppressed have always been difficult; not impossible, but difficult. It is logical to assume that if there is such a thing as Latin American history, then its “essence” has to derive from a specific historical process forged in the relationship with Europe and the United States. As such, and insofar as Oral History, whose main object of study is subjectivity, is a part of historical studies, then it should also have a specific Latin American “essence” derived from this historical process.

If this is so then, necessarily, the practice of Oral History must be different in Latin America. Even in the case of societies that have been deeply marked by colonialism and imperialism, such as Africa and Asia, their specificity gives historical studies certain concrete characteristics. My friend and colleague, the Mexican historian Gerardo Necochea Gracia, has pointed out that “in terms of techniques and method there is nothing that distinguishes Latin American oral historians from colleagues in other latitudes.” I do not agree. It is notable how oral history manuals and guides written by First World colleagues have few uses, at least in Argentina, since they are based on practices and experiences of studying developed societies.

In the Argentine case, the problems of “doing” oral history are linked to the issues derived from repression and dictatorial regimes. To ask an interviewee for their written authorization automatically implies that you enter into a cone of doubts as to what the historian is going to do with the interview. Self-censorship on both sides, as survival techniques when faced by cruel repressive governments, has become deeply ingrained in the testimonies, the memory, and the subjectivity of the participants. The techniques to evoke a remembrance or to achieve a response are not (and neither can they be) the same as in societies whose repressive levels are lower. At the same time, the possibility that what a participant declares in an interview can be used towards ends never imagined by the historian is an ethical and practical problem that is not dealt with in any manual written by Europeans or North Americans. In my case I have been cited in three different trials (and luckily for me, never called to testify) by public prosecutors interested in using my interviews as proofs of former guerrillas’ crimes against humanity. What do you do in these cases? What does one do when faced with the possibility that what an interviewee said in confidence without

considering the possible consequences might be used against him or her? If a member of the guerrilla, in the interview, states that he/she executed someone, what does the historian do? Does he/she modify the testimony erasing that part or should it be preserved exposing the former guerrilla to the consequences? And then, is the preserved testimony hidden, is it published, is it of public access? How about the real names of those we interview? Are they public or do we use pseudonyms? A former guerrilla might be an extreme example, but how about labor or civil rights activists whose actions might often be considered illegal? Once we have constructed the interview, the use we make of it is guided by what criteria? How do sociocultural issues of class, race, and gender influence the construction of a testimony? How does the interviewer's own subjectivity or prejudices impinge as, for instance, when a white, male, middle-class professor interviews a female Native American? For instance, I did a whole series of interviews with members of the Iron Guard, an extreme right wing Peronist organization. They were clearly the least successful of all the projects I have done. I had problems in understanding their imagery, and was incapable of appreciating that the fact that they were willing to talk to a "red" implied a decision to make their story known to me. The fact that Ronald Grele, Paul Thompson, Daniel Bertaux, Philippe Joutard, and many other colleagues have not considered these issues in the interesting, otherwise useful, and well written Oral History texts, implies that they never had to face any of these problems.

These are some issues; others come from Latin American reality itself, and a historian, especially an oral historian, has to deal with them. We regard European and U.S. archives with deep envy. They are well organized, kept, and taken care of. This implies that there are moneys and that the State and its dominant sectors value historical memory as a contribution to building a determined consensus and hegemony. It is not the same in our case. A crucial issue for a Latin American oral historian is this: should my interviews be placed in archives accessible to the public? What does that mean and what does it imply? In addition, in societies where corruption has imbued most State institutions, what can one do to preserve those memories? How do we prevent those archives from being sold overseas, or destroyed when inconvenient to the powers that be, or that they be sold as discarded paper and tapes? Argentina's Ministry of Labor archives are burned every ten years because "we have nowhere to keep them" (and, I would say, because working class history is not something that our ruling class wants to preserve).

To sum up, the ethics, politics, "essence," and thus the practice of History are derived from the reality of the historian. This takes us to an issue where Gerardo Necochea is absolutely correct. Though I am of the opinion that Oral History in and of itself is not subversive or democratic, since these characteristics emerge from the uses given it by the historian, I must also admit a Latin American

characteristic. Gerardo has pointed out that “we are interested in subjects, themes, and problems that are in general left out of conventional histories and document repositories.” This is absolutely true. Oral History in Latin America tends to reclaim and place people at the center of history, the “masses” whose contribution to historical processes has been ignored or censored by official histories. As such our oral history tends to be “the history of those without a voice” (in the sense that their feelings and actions are not recorded by documents and archives except in a very secondary fashion).

This has also led to a search for new theoretical frameworks to interpret our sources. Or rather, we have returned to old/new theories. Some of us ground our interpretations in the thought-provoking work of Maurice Halbwachs, Paul Ricoeur, or Reinhard Kosselleck. Myself, and several others, prefer to delve into cultural theory as developed by British Marxism, specifically Raymond Williams, Raphael Samuel, E.P. Thompson, and Victor Kiernan. This is not from any kind of an ideological preference for Marxism (though in some cases this is so), but rather that their interpretative models and definitions seem more plastic and applicable to the phenomena we have to analyze. After all it was Eric Hobsbawm who revolutionized Latin American history with his studies of *Primitive Rebels* and *Bandits*.⁴ And nothing contributed to our rethinking approaches to historical processes as E.P. Thompson’s *Customs in Common*⁵ or *Folklore, History, and Anthropology*.⁶ Hobsbawm and Thompson led us to seek theoretical models more useful to the processes we wanted to analyze, and eventually to rediscover Raymond Williams, especially his wonderful essay “Culture is Ordinary.”⁷ The broadening of horizons permitted us to reconsider complex phenomena such as Argentine Peronism, Brazilian Vargasismo, or Mexican Cardenismo. This came together with the fact that several of us, such as Gerardo Necochea or myself, studied with Herbert Gutman, David Montgomery, and Bruce Laurie in the United States. British and American Marxists are all deceptively simple, and grounded in lots of field research, and were thinking of possible readers as being educated but non-academic (just think that in writing the *Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson was thinking of adult education readers). Many Latin American oral historians are also thinking of audiences beyond academe; and many come to the use of oral sources after reaching dead ends in their field work.

⁴ E.J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels. Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: The Norton Library, 1965 (orig. 1959)); E.J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969).

⁵ E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common. Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1991).

⁶ E.P. Thompson, “Folclor, antropología e historia social,” in E.P. Thompson, *Historia Social y Antropología* (México: Instituto Mora, 1994).

⁷ Raymond Williams, “Culture is ordinary,” in Williams, *Resources of Hope* (London: Verso Books, 1989. Orig. 1958).

All of the above comes into play when dealing with memory, culture, and oral sources. This means that, within the field of Oral History in Latin America, there is a fascinating dialogue between different interpretations, and interpretative frameworks. Still, the formal debate that might permit/foster a new synthesis is something we still owe ourselves. Our Brazilian colleague, Robson Laverdi, began it with a piece on Raymond Williams and Oral History, published in *Words and Silences*, the online journal of the International Oral History Association (IOHA).⁸ The response was good though it did not, as of yet, generate an articulate response. Another debate we owe ourselves is one on the ethics of the oral historian. This is increasingly a problem, and perhaps should merit some sort of guidelines or review board. There are all sorts of problems that arise from the increased uses of oral sources with regard to ownership, restrictions, and dangers.

Perhaps due to its heterogeneity, Oral History has been and pretends to be a result of a move towards progressive change in social sciences centered on collective memories, both social and individual. In this sense it attempts to contribute, in some measure, to developing practitioners who will influence the future while generating a democratic, plural, and fairer society. The utilization of oral testimonies to reconstruct the past is as old as history itself. This characteristic forces the Latin American oral historian not only to return to the common person as subject and protagonist of history but also to take conscience that the task of the historian is a collective product between the technician (historian) and he/she/them as subjects. It is the dialogue between them (just like what should be the constant dialogue with a written document) the historian changes, modifies, and the resulting history becomes richer and more complex. By incorporating subjectivity as a central aspect of the historical process, the historian is forced to democratize his/her practices and its “essence,” in the sense that History is once more guided by the government of the *demos*. This “essence” is nourished by that *demos* and thus, if the *demos* has been forged in a Latin American historical process, it cannot be the same as that of other latitudes and other processes.

Of course, this does not mean that all oral history is “good” history. A colleague insists that “anyone can do Oral History” if only one dares. This is not true. An Oral History project has rules, criteria, and its own techniques. Not every interview is a source for Oral History otherwise any journalist interviewing people for a newspaper or a TV program can be considered an oral historian. What is true is that Oral History does question the feudal limits established by academe between disciplines and between the professional and the non-

⁸ Robson Laverdi, “Raymond Williams y la historia oral: relaciones sociales constitutivas,” *Words and Silences/Palabras y silencios*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Oct. 2011), online at <http://wordsandsilences.org/index.php/ws/article/view/9>

professional, in that it recognizes that a historical study cannot be done without the active participation of the subjects.

In this sense, Oral History has a certain “militant” quality. There is no contradiction between this quality and scientific history. Just like there is good and poorly done militant history there is also good and poor academic history. Both have an implicit political viewpoint, and none is neutral. Oral History contributes by making overt the connections between ethics, responsibility, and the practice of the historian in that both, protagonists and consumers of this type of history, are common people. This is a challenge that energizes Latin American Oral Historians, and that underlies the exponential growth of the field.