

## Review

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Gerardo Necochea Gracia and Antonio Torres Montenegro, comps. *Caminos de historia y memoria en América Latina*. Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi/RELAHO, 2011. 320 pp. ISBN 978-950-793-109-3 (available online at <http://www.relaho.org/documentos/adjuntados/article/74/caminos.pdf>)

This new publication by the Latin American Network for Oral History (RELAHO) is a compilation of twenty articles by Mexican, Brazilian, Argentinean, Colombian, Chilean, Nicaraguan, and Panamanian authors. The authors explore oral history from different perspectives and in a wide variety of subjects. The authors' idea is to show the reader that the spoken word is an effective means of bringing alive historical accounts which would otherwise remain undiscovered, many being hidden in traditional legend.

The potential of oral history in this context is demonstrated in the pages of this volume as a fresh way of interpreting the past, allowing us to observe both that which endures and that which changes over time. Furthermore, this compilation of life histories and oral traditions gives us the opportunity to link individual stories with certain social groups with which we, as researchers, are deeply familiar.

It is appropriate to recognize this book as an accurate reflection of the first steps that RELAHO is taking with regard to the articulation and exchange of research. As such, it has the virtue of presenting a significant amount of work developed throughout Latin America, which allows us access to experiences with which we would otherwise remain unfamiliar. The purpose of these articles, however, may be less clear, because there is no introduction or conclusion that connects them or gives them a shared dialogue or a sense of unity. This, I suppose, is a task left to the reader.

In addition, chapters are presented randomly, without a clear order, whether thematic, chronological, or spatial. This would involve the application of more or less arbitrary judgments, but would also require criteria to give order to the different sections. So, for example, papers on militancy are intertwined in some cases with gender perspectives or social class relations; some stories take place in rural areas, others in small or large cities; yet others speak of migration processes. For this review I will change the order in which the articles appear in the book, trying to discuss their points from a thematic perspective.

There are chapters that deal with the residents of neighbourhoods, like that by Liliana Barela who is pondering the construction of meaning and collective identities around middle-class neighbourhoods in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Similarly, the work of Mario Camarena Ocampo explores the neighbourhood of La Fama Montañesa of Mexico, connecting it with the

Laura Ortiz, "Review: *Caminos de historia y memoria en América latina* by Necochea and Torres," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 32 (2012), Edición Especial/Special Issue "Historia Oral en América Latina/Oral History in Latin America" 1

local history of the textile factory located within it, and focusing especially on workers and ways of relating to their union leaders. On the other hand, the work of Collective Oral History of Colombia examines the creation of a new neighbourhood in New Chile Bogota as a struggle for housing and popular education, a struggle which was not without conflict due to the involvement of groups from different localities. Other articles present research about workers from different rural places; for example, Marcela Camargo Rios analyzes the development of the life of a rural unionist from Panama, rethinking the political relations of the rural community to which she belongs and the factors that caused her union to become militant. Regina Beatriz Guimarães Nieto writes on the same theme, exploring the episodes of violence embedded in the memory of the impoverished workers of the Brazilian Amazon which took place during the controversial process of re-territorialisation. Marcos Montysuma, incorporating a gender perspective, investigates the everyday life of rubber-tappers in Xapuri-Acre, Brazil, to record the different perceptions of the different genders in their cultural practices designed to sustain the environmental resources of the Amazon forest.

Linked to gender, but with regard to urban spaces, Robson Laverdi has produced an excellent work about young homosexuals from the west of Parana State, Brazil. He relates three testimonies in order to recount the male homosexual experience, permeated by values and cultural meanings. Continuing from a gender perspective, but discussing the issue of militancy, we have stories written by Joana Maria Pedro, Patricia Pensado Leglise, and Jilma Romero Arrechavala.

Joana questions the feelings generated by the identification with feminism in Brazilian women's stories covering the period 1964-1985. Pensado and Romero investigate the factors that led women towards the militant left: Pensado considers and compares five interviews with women from different Latin American countries. Romero relates experiences of three women from the National Liberation Front of Nicaragua. The prevailing concern of these essays is how women's perceptions contribute to the story of different revolutionary processes and anti-dictatorial struggles in Latin America.

The works of Mariana Mastrángelo, Pablo Pozzi, Alberto del Castillo Troncoso, Igor Donoso Goicovic, and Ruben Kotler are based on the experiences of activists in different regions. Mariana analyses the memories of Communists to recognize, in the language of class and the structure of sensibilities, the characteristic features of left-wing working-class culture in the Argentine interior in 1930 and 1940. With the same approach as Mastrangelo, Pozzi analyses the songs in Argentina's recent protest movements and their cultural significance in the context of the leftist, labour and environmental populist movements. From another angle, del Castillo recounts the memories of photographers and contrasts stories about the Mexican student movement of 1968, while Igor Goicovic follows the path of a Chilean militant from the MIR (the Revolutionary Left Movement of Chile),

his childhood, activism, imprisonment, and exile – to suggest some identifying features of revolutionary militants. Exploring a more recent period, Kotler recounts the memories of members of the human rights movement in Tucuman, Argentina. Making a novel connection between the traumatic past that led to the last dictatorship and, following the return of democracy, the present local political reality, Kotler analyses the conflicts between the principles of “memory, truth, and justice” for the missing persons and official policy of denial imposed by the Bussismo – the political movement led by the former governor of Tucumán Province, General Antonio Domingo Bussi.

Although up to the present, much of Oral History in Latin America talks about stories of marginalised, excluded, and politically persecuted persons, others do indeed look at social problems from another angle. In this volume, Graciela de Garay presents a paper on the career of an architect who was academically trained in France and brought a modernistic discourse to the aesthetics of Mexican architecture.

In another chapter written about the look of the political and cultural colonialism imposed by the Catholic Church, Torres Montenegro reflects through the memories of five European priests who immigrated to Brazil to combat spiritualism and communism.

Although all the work refer to oral sources, few propose in-depth discussions of theoretical or methodological issues in relation to oral history. There are three exceptions: the chapter written by Cristina Viano and the two chapters written by Gerardo Necochea Gracia. Viano examines the links between oral history and recent history in Argentina as a meeting place between the “academy” and active social experience that allows historians to question the social function of knowledge and make a political commitment to its practice.

Gerardo Necochea, in one of his chapters, draws attention to the importance of recognizing the historical context in which the narrative is limited in the context of giving testimony, but also the context of the situation in which it operates as an interview. In the other chapter – the first and, in my opinion, the most important chapter of the book – Necochea discusses the existence of oral history in Latin America. Necochea posits that the existence of a Latin American Oral History cannot be derived from an essentialist perspective, but rather by observing its practice in the region. In this sense, it is possible to investigate and compare common issues, analyzing the singularities in a context that makes sense of generalities. But also, says Necochea, there are shared political purposes for studying subjects that are absent from official histories, in order to democratize the production, themes, and subjects who developed new interpretations of the history of our continent.

Although it seems a truism, this discussion is far from over. A survey of this volume suggests a series of ideas that might contribute to the debate. There are at least two conceptual interconnecting stories: one of them is the connection between memory and the notion of experience, focused mainly on

subjects with which we build stories but including, as a novelty, the researcher as part of that experience.

Another notion that runs through these chapters is the historical development of culture as collective and popular culture in terms of the writings of Raymond Williams. A cultural construction that is founded precisely on those experiences that are shared and transmitted in the life histories of subaltern groups, workers, peasants, leftists, workers, immigrants, poor women, residents of neighborhoods, homosexuals – in short, ordinary men and women and movements that are fighting for their rights and having a collective identity from below.

These two notions, though not limited to Latin America, may be useful to anchor the debate about the existence of oral history practices rooted in Latin American culture and society and constitutive of our research practices.