

ORAL HISTORY IN THE UNITED STATES

by Ronald J. Grele

Contrairement à la tendance homogène des autres pays, l'histoire orale aux Etats-Unis s'est développée en plusieurs tendances et orientations. Par exemple, il y a aux Etats-Unis ceux qui font usage de l'histoire orale comme d'un supplément archivistique aux données historiques, et ceux pour qui l'histoire orale est un moyen de stimuler la conscience historique. Qui plus est, il existe des traditions distinctes et bien établies pour les interviews destinées à l'élite et ceux destinés à la masse. Or, il y a une singulière carence au niveau du dialogue entre les deux tendances en vue d'une critique de l'histoire orale elle-même. Récemment, Lawrence Goodwyn avançait l'idée que l'histoire orale n'a de fonction légitime que si elle a comme conséquence directe la publication de la recherche à laquelle elle se rattaché. Sans cette fin ultime, l'histoire orale est trop coûteuse et irrégulière pour être une fonction valable. Bien que l'auteur considère comme étroite cette critique, elle mène néanmoins à un débat dont la conséquence directe pourrait être l'établissement de normes universelles pour l'histoire orale. Ce débat aurait aussi comme avantage de clarifier l'approche américaine à l'histoire orale.

From a limited North American perspective oral history activities in the United States have a somewhat unique history and thus a somewhat unique form when compared to activities elsewhere. Unlike the development of oral history in Great Britain where the major focus has been working class and social history, and unlike oral history in Scandinavia which draws upon a long and rich tradition of ethnographic study, there is no one major focus or one major tradition in the United States. There are, in fact, many different strands, colors, threads and textures in the warp and woof of American oral history. Despite this variety it is possible to develop a brief taxonomy of American oral history, with the caveat that, like all taxonomies, not everything fits neatly and cleanly within the categories constructed.

In general, one can discern at least two major tendencies, each with its own set of conflicting goals, aims and imperatives and in turn its own methods. The first tradition, for lack of a better description, is the more or less populist tradition harking back to the Federal Writer's Project life histories and slave narratives - a tradition which, of course, has deeper roots in the life history collections of early American sociology and even the histories of Herodotus. The second tradition is the tradition of 19th century empirical historiography which seeks to examine events and personalities not from a life history approach but, by and large, centering upon discrete events and the biographies of the famous in order to understand power and to ask questions about the use of power. The roots of this tradition, of course, are found in Von Ranke and Thucydides.

Each tendency has its own forms. The first taking its cue from social history with a small "s" uses open questioning and long disquisitions. The second, with a more traditionally defined historical research purpose use a far more focused form of interviewing and like the Columbia Oral History project is basically concerned with discrete histories of discrete units of the institutional apparatus of the culture.

The traditional way of viewing these tendencies is to categorize them as elitist and non-elitist. The time has come however to end that sterile debate and find other terms. As should be obvious by now, elitism depends not upon who one interviews but the vision of culture and change over time which the interviewer brings to the interview. It is quite possible to interview and collect data from the working class and present it in such a way that one shows how important an elite is to the cultural formations of that class and how limited the realm of choice and strategy is in the working class community. It is equally possible to interview the rich and powerful from a more critical perspective which de-mystifies their claims to hegemony within the culture.

There are, however, very real differences between these tendencies which are to be found in the ways in which projects are designed, questions posed and information used. There are also significant differences in the analysis of data and differing answers to methodological questions such as representativeness of testimony, the selectivity of memory, the complementarity of oral and written materials and the ways in which one constructs generalizations from one's data. For instance if one is interested in interviewing around the historical experiences of members of the Italian-American community in order to reconstruct the internal life of that community, one's potential world of interviewees numbers at least ten million people. If, however, one seeks to study the internal history of the Rockefeller Foundation or the United Automobile Worker's Union at a given point in time, one's world is exhausted after perhaps, 100 or 200 interviews. If we can interview everyone still living who was involved in a particular event we have only minor problems with the representativeness of our sources or their experiences. Also, for example, constructing questions from personal correspondence as contrasted to census data poses very different questions of historical imagination and demands very different approaches to data.

To complicate matters each of these tendencies contains within itself different, and oft-times, conflicting aims. There is, at least in the United States, an archival wing or orientation and a more or less activist wing or orientation in each tradition. Many working class and local history projects such as that conducted by the City College of New York, the WPA Slave narratives, the Oral History of the American Left, the University of North Carolina and our current multi-ethnic project at the New Jersey Historical Commission are seeking primarily to document the past, to gather materials for future researchers, to collect data. Other projects such as the community history projects in Pennsylvania, the Baltimore Voices project, many projects with senior citizens and many union projects seek to use oral histories to encourage community organization, to raise historical consciousness, to act as therapy, or like the British History Workshop movement, to combine research and political involvement on the part of both scholars and laymen.

The same dichotomy is found in more focused projects. On the one hand projects such as that at Columbia, The Regional Oral History Office at the University of California at Berkeley, the presidential libraries and the Steelworkers project at Penn State are, in essence archival projects. On the other hand, especially with the growth of the public history movement, there are projects centered mainly in governmental and private agencies which seek to use the oral history interview as a method of not only understanding, but also, of influencing governmental and other policy decisions. Thus, for example, historians have conducted interviews in California in order to understand past water policy in order to shape tomorrow's water policy. The clearest statement of this merger is Charles Morrissey's recent article in the Oral History Review on the potential usefulness of oral history for policy making at the Ford Foundation.

Again, each of these different imperatives demands a different approach to the interview, a different set of methodological considerations, a different view of one's respondents and, indeed, a different view of history.

Obviously what I have here outlined is too schematic. Between these polarities and exhibiting a wide variety of combinations and permutations are literally thousands of projects in universities, local historical agencies, public libraries, government agencies, schools, etc., each exhibiting its own slightly different method of using oral history. In addition there are other thousands of independent researchers, journalists, writers and social critics with their individual approaches to oral history. While I think I could categorize most of these, it is important to bear in mind that beyond a certain point such a procedure becomes meaningless, especially when one realizes that the goal of many oral history projects is not the study of change over time but a rich educational experience, therapy, inter-generational understanding, or publication and presentation.

Given this heterogeneity it is surprising how little debate over what we are doing has emerged in the literature or among oral historians. There has been a rash of how-to manuals directed at librarians and archivists, some of them, such as From Tape To Type by Cullom Davis et al of surprising quality. We also have had a number of high quality sessions and presentations and workshops for people working in archival oral history projects. Also recently there have appeared a few manuals such as Workingwomen Roots for use by people collecting life histories or working in the field of family history, although the best publications continue to be the testimonies themselves. In addition a number of superlative studies in working class history using oral history have been written. But, by and large there has been nothing (save one article by Sidney Mintz and a few articles in the field of gerontology) since the 1920s on the method of the collection of life histories. The focused archival projects have concentrated upon the public presentation of testimony; a not unexpected result given their different orientations. But between all four types of activity there has been little dialogue.

The most exciting dialogue has, in fact, come from the academy. Lawrence Goodwyn, in particular, has been highly critical of the whole archival tendency in American Oral History (although seeing more value, as one would expect, in the collection of life histories). In a mixture of populism and traditional historical concern for high research standards, Goodwyn has raised fundamental questions about the nature of historical interviewing abstracted from particular research concerns. Questions which to now have not been answered.

Because of the importance of Goodwyn's critique of American practice, it might be useful to spend some time on it to put it into perspective. Essentially the criticism takes two forms: firstly, that archival oral history is simply too expensive in terms of money and time for what is produced and secondly; that as an intellectual errand it is a bit preposterous for an interviewer to second guess researchers of the future and to expect to create useful documents when that act of creation has no relation to one's own scholarly productions. In short, Goodwyn argues that the only real use of oral history is interviewing for one's own particular research leading to publication of more or less monographic or analytic historical narratives.

The points of criticism, it seems to me, are well taken. The conclusion, however, is bothersome. Surely American practice which emphasizes so heavily the necessity of beautifully bound and letter perfect transcripts with all the attendant costs often misses the point that an interview, as an historical document, is ultimately to be judged on its contribution to our knowledge about how things happened in the past and that the particular form of transcription is really a secondary concern. Equally surely such a tendency, in that its high cost closes avenues of investigation, prevents worthwhile projects from being started and influences what is and is not studied, becomes an important question in the political economy of knowledge and must be faced by all of us who are concerned about the uses of a usable past. If only the rich are able to do oral history we are all in trouble.

Goodwyn's second point also raises serious intellectual and political questions. Are documents created by almost nameless staff interviewers as useful as those created by an historian for his own research and publication? Who is the mythical audience for whom archivists and life history collectors are working? Is the archivist-interviewer as knowledgeable or as committed to the end product as the engaged historian? And finally, because all history is infused with political questions can we accept the archivist-collector's claims to be an unbiased observer simply filling in the gaps in the record?

I really have no answers to these questions to give here. I only know that I have problems with Goodwyn's answers. Firstly I find it a bit unsharing. Interviews done by historians limited to their particular questions simply leave out too much that others of us might want to know. In this case we have to ask questions about how we make our products public knowledge. Also this source monopoly, the usual practice in many professions of simply squirrelling away one's tapes and never allowing them to be seen or used by others, is not a model which strikes me as one we should emulate. Most historical documents, the richest of them, are useful because they can be looked at by many scholars in many ways. Finally, to truly understand the testimony of an oral history we need as full a context as possible which often means interviewing off the topic, following tangents, and collecting testimony beyond our immediate concerns.

Doubts about specific answers to general questions are not really answers, but they are the beginnings of a dialogue which if pursued will hopefully broaden our vision of our work and add to the debate now occurring over the question of standards in oral history in the United States - a debate worth mentioning.

In response to the various criticisms leveled at oral history, there is a growing consensus on the need for standards. Funding agencies seem less and less willing to fund any and all oral history projects. To be selective they need and are seeking guidance. The Oral History Association after many years of debate has finally devised a set of standards for practitioners. While still heavily archival in its thrust, this statement does raise ethical and scholarly questions as well. Also, as more and more academically trained working class historians begin to use oral history, our debates have been enriched. The work of Michael Frisch, Peter Friedlander and Tamara Hareven comes to mind. In addition our broadening international contacts, the work of Paul Thompson, the Canadian and Latin American oral historians and such journals as the IJOH will hopefully bring to our awareness our need for theoretical introspection - especially when dealing with life histories.

While there is, at this moment, no American oral history movement in the sense of a group of people in agreement on conceptual matters, hopefully the debates over standards will at least set the terms of the debate we have so long deferred.