

Conference Report

5th Biennial Conference of the Brazilian Oral History Association's South Section in Marechal Cândido Rondon, Paraná, 25-28 May 2009

Meri Frotscher, UNIOESTE and Alexander Freund, University of Winnipeg

The South Region of the Brazilian Oral History Association (Associação Brasileira de História Oral, ABHO) held its fifth biennial meeting at the campus of the Universidade Estadual do Oeste do Paraná (UNIOESTE) in the city of Marechal Cândido Rondon in the Brazilian province of Paraná. Under the theme “Inequalities and Differences,” seventy-four researchers presented their projects. The presenters addressed themes such as: “identities, ethnicities, and differences,” “gender, feminism, and sexuality,” “remembering, narrative, and discourses,” “memory and cultural heritage,” “narratives and cultural practices,” “city and memory,” “oral history and education,” “workers and work,” “state and power,” and “science and health.”



Pictures from the conference (photos: Various photographers)

This was the largest gathering of ABHO's Southern Section so far, and the first time it was able to receive substantial federal funding. Four hundred people had registered to attend the lectures and other events, including four workshops, four keynote addresses, and six roundtables. This was the first conference to accept papers only from scholars who were at least at the graduate level.

The four keynote speakers addressed issues of meaning, memory, experience, and historiography. All four keynote addresses were preceded by regional musicians' performances, ranging from a youth choir and a big band to classical and folk guitarists. Marcos Alvito (Fluminense Federal University), an anthropologist, presented three case studies. In his story of eventually becoming a fish merchant, the interviewee presented himself both as a "self-made man" and as someone deeply involved in a network of solidarity. A nun told of her experience of epiphany and conversion to an evangelical faith that recalled the story of Martin Luther's epiphany but also that of born-again Christians. Finally, the oral tradition of slaves in Brazil was shaped by references to African and Brazilian religious and mythical tales that outsiders find difficult to understand and therefore tend to discard. Throughout his presentation, Alvito argued that it was important to pay attention to the multiple and diverse meanings of words in people's stories.

Alexander Freund (University of Winnipeg, Canada) presented a case study of a three-generational family interview with a German-Canadian family whose grandmother had lived through the Third Reich. In their communally crafted family memory of the Nazi past, the family members told a comforting and comfortable story about the grandmother's and great-grandfather's involvement in Nazi society. Freund argued that the concept of "communicative memory" (Jan and Aleida Assmann, Harald Welzer) is a useful concept in the analysis of family memories.

Pablo Pozzi (University of Buenos Aires) analyzed memory and politicization in the narratives of politically militant Argentinean workers (1955-1976) and showed their politicization was shaped more by their life experiences than their intellectual learning processes. He noted that their narrative form differed significantly from that of other social classes, particularly in their use of images, their emphasis, and the structuring of their explanations.

"Historiography and Oral History: Inequalities and Differences" was the topic of the address by Regina B. Guimarães Neto (Pernambuco Federal University). She linked theoretical questions of contemporary historiography with the challenges of oral history. Her research looks at the migration of impoverished "Nordestinos" between 1920 and ca. 1940, who in their search for work began to settle the then hardly accessible Amazon region. She followed this process through oral history interviews and compares her results, which document the

migrants' everyday life, with a regional historiography that depicts this region as backward and violent but neglects the living conditions of its inhabitants.



Conference Organizers: (standing from left to right:) German Sterling, Emilio Gonzalez, Marcos Alvito, Geni R. Duarte, Méri Frotscher, Marcos Montysuma, Danusa Guimarães da Silva, Pablo Pozzi, Márcia Rodrigues, Thiago Reisdorfer, Jefferson Ribas, Fabiana Marreto. (sitting from left to right:) Reginaldo da Silva, Robson Laverdi, Franciele Araújo, Rudy Vencatto (photo: M. Frotscher)

The conference allowed for an intensive exchange of experiences and research approaches, be it through working groups or round tables. In the following, the most important contributions of the six round tables are sketched.

Participants of the round table “theoretical and methodological perspective of oral history” included Antonio Montenegro (Pernambuco Federal University), Pablo Pozzi (University of Buenos Aires), and Marcos Freire Montysuma (Santa Catarina Federal University). Montenegro analyzed the difference between journalistic discourse and oral tradition using the case study of Queen Elizabeth’s visit to Brazil in 1968. During this event, the population of the city of Recife was restricted in its freedom of movement, some were even denied entry. Montenegro showed that the Queen’s visit was remembered positively even by those who had been officially excluded, but had been perceived differently by the city’s population, depending on their expectations and socio-cultural background.

Pablo Pozzi emphasized the importance in historical research to include other forms of contemporary documents such as sayings, poetry, and humour in order to better understand the meanings of contemporary political processes. Using the case of an interview about the role of a right-wing party in Argentina, he demonstrated the discrepancy between, on the one hand side, the interviewer’s academic and theoretical knowledge and, on the other hand side, the interviewee’s life experiences and memories. The dialogue between the interview partners became possible and fruitful only after their political differences had been clarified. Marcos Montysuma reminded us in his use of interviews with labour union leaders in Amazonia of the ethical and social responsibility of researching and working with oral history. For him, feedback for the interviewees through the

recordings and research findings is an adequate and important way of complying with this responsibility.

At another round table, Joana Maria Pedro (Santa Catarina Federal University), Roseli Boschilia (Paraná Federal University), and Benito Schmidt (Rio Grande do Sul Federal University) discussed the connections between memory, subjectivity and oral history. Joana Pedro described her project about feminism in Brazil and Chile. She showed the development of her interviewees as feminists, noted that their militancy formed their subjectivities and how they emphasized their newly won feminist identities. Roseli Boschilia talked about the context of memory and subjectivity using the case study of Portuguese migrants, who as children had come to Curitiba (Brazil) at the turn from the 19th to the 20th century; she demonstrated the importance of paying attention to each interviewee's emphasis in their narrative style. For Benito Schmidt, oral history is a useful tool to show that subjectivity is constructed and historically contingent. He pleaded for historians to use the concept of subjectivity not in any vague way but rather as a theoretical technical term.

Davi F. Schreiner (UNIOESTE), Monica Gatica (Patagonia Federal University, Argentina), and Pablo A. Vommaro (University of Buenos Aires) discussed the particular usefulness of oral history as a methodology for studies of social movements. Davi Schreiner worked with narratives and presentations of inhabitants of rural settlements of the MST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra - Movement of Landless Farm Workers, the most important movement of the landless in Brazil) in Paraná. He analyzed their environment, their means of production and perspectives and how they constructed new subjectivities through their experiences. The description of their situation of economic insecurity and poverty shows the many strategies of organizing everyday life, developing a society of equals but also, in contradiction to these goals, practices that deny other subjectivities. For Monica Gatica, the analysis of acts of collective and individual agents and of the tension between objective and subjective conditions allowed her to see the construction of different identities that developed during struggles. Thus, oral history also allowed a differentiation of the individual members of these social movements. Pablo Vommaro spoke about the landless workers' occupation and organization of urban settlements in the city of Quilmes, Argentina. He showed how they formed networks of solidarity but also suppressed opposition and conflict among themselves. He stated that this diversity of contrary opinions and ideas could be a positive element in the potential building of new social movements.

The "Possibilities of Oral History in the Development of School Projects" was the topic of the presentation by Bibiana Andrea Pivetta (Institute of Education, Rosario, Argentina), Geni Rosa Duarte, and Paulo Koling (both UNIOESTE). Bibiana Pivetta presented the experiences of the "Proyeto

Aboriginen,” which over the last five years has successfully been working for indigenous integration in the schools of the province of Santa Fe, Argentina. Using oral history and working with museums and other institutions, the project researches indigenous people’s migrations between provinces in Argentina as well as between Argentina and other South American countries as well as the migrants’ living and working conditions. Geni Duarte and Paulo Koling, the coordinators of a project Universidade Sem Fronteiras (University Without Borders), generated by schools in the small communities of Paraná, spoke about the conflicts around land distribution that developed in the struggles between the property accumulation and oppositional movements fighting for land. Geni Duarte worked with the oral testimonies of land workers who had been forcibly relocated because of the construction of a dam. She thus documented and analyzed their involuntary migration, their mobilization in the struggle for their rights, and their state controlled re-settlement and linked this to the teaching of regional history in local schools. Paulo Koling showed how an MST leader assassinated in 1993 was portrayed in interviews with long-term residents and those newly settled by the MST. He showed that this part of local history is ignored and pleaded for an integration of problems such as these social conflicts into the history curricula.



Conference Organizers and Guests: (from left to right:) Méri Frotscher, Alexander Freund, Valdemir Sonda, Marcos Alvito, Robson Laverdi, Marcos Nestor Stein (photo: unknown)

Marcos Alvito (Fluminense Federal University), Luis Felipe Falcão (Santa Catarina State University), and Robson Laverdi (UNIOESTE) participated in the round table “Cities, Oral History, and Differences.” Marcos Alvito juxtaposed the press image of a drug dealer in a *favela* (shantytown) in Rio de Janeiro and the

drug dealer's own statements. He was depicted as abnormal, pathological, exotic, and owner of a "harem" with thirty women. He himself explained in the interview that the women's children would help build a dense network that would strengthen his position as "chief." Alvito used this example to problematize the perspective of the "Other" - the poor, the *favela* dweller, the black, the homosexual, etc. - constructed by a prejudiced press that finds it attractive and profitable to report about marginal groups. Luis Felipe Falcão worked with the city of Florianópolis, which has gone through an intense process of urbanization in the last few decades. This urbanization has not, however, pushed aside the notion of a smaller, manageable town. He analyzed the memories of public figures whose nostalgic image of the city continue to shape the contemporary view and depiction of the city. Robson Laverdi spoke about young homosexuals from rural communities and their integration in cities. Analysing an interview with a young, unskilled worker who did not hide his homosexuality he showed the socio-cultural tension of adjusting to the new environment.

The topic "Migration, Identity and Difference: Approaches and Possibilities of Oral History," was discussed at the round table of Alexander Freund, Marcos Nestor Stein, and Meri Frotscher, both from UNIOESTE. Alexander Freund argued for the use of oral history as a strategic concept for analyzing collective memory in migration research. He demonstrated how oral testimonies are excellent sources for examining how immigrants and their descendants deal with the collective memories of their new homelands. Marcos Stein analyzed migration memories of the so called Danube Swabians who emigrated to Paraná in 1951 as a result of the Second World War. He showed that oral testimonies report, at least in part, collective memories that have been constructed and disseminated through publications and "sites of memories" such as the local museum; nevertheless, the individual fates did not fit the homogenous narrative about the group's past. Méri Frotscher discussed memories of Brazilian temporary labour migrants who were recruited through the official Swiss agricultural agency for farms in Switzerland. Interviews show how their hybrid identities, determined by elements of the countries of origin and destination, are "updated" through the new migration experiences. The interviewees emphasized their German heritage and that they were good workers. With this ethnic border they kept themselves apart from other workers: in Switzerland, from workers of other nationalities, in Brazil, from workers of other regions.

As had been the case at previous conference, graduate students offered mini workshops. This gave undergraduate students the opportunity to further discuss the theory and method of oral history. The topics of the five workshops included:

- "Memory, Subjectivity, and Oral History," run by Cezar Karpinski (Santa Catarina Federal University);

- “Methodological Possibilities of Oral History in Migration Research,” offered by Claudirene Aparecida de Paula and Beatriz Medeiros de Melo (São Carlos Federal University);
- “Memories, Narratives, and Popular Music,” by Geni Rosa Duarte (UNIOESTE) and Emilio Gonzalez (Paraná Technical Federal University);
- “Culture, Spatiality, and Oral History,” by Jiani Fernando Langaro (Paraná Technical Federal University) and Jorge Pagliarini (Unimeo-Paraná).
- “Memories and Politics During Brazil’s Re-democratization,” by Pablo F. Andrade (Rio de Janeiro Federal University) and Márcio F. Ananias Vilela (Pernambuco Federal University).

Although by name only a regional conference, this fifth ABHO-South Section conference was attended by a large number of researchers from different regions in Brazil and from other countries. Altogether there were guests from thirty different universities. The success of this conference pays tribute to the significance of oral history in today’s Brazil.

The participation of international researchers allowed not only for an exchange of experiences and discussions about oral history, but led to the planning of further activities such as the exchange and close cooperation between UNIOESTE and the University of Buenos Aires. The conference papers will be published on a CD-ROM and a book (in Portuguese and Spanish) with expanded versions of the round table contributions is planned.