

Political Volatility and Historical Accounts: Tiptoeing through Contested Ground

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During the past several years, I have been gathering material on various aspects of the political history of the United Jewish People's Order (UJPO), from its inception in 1945 to the present. Linking together Jewish left-wing alternatives to the democratic-socialist Workmen's Circle in four major cities (Toronto, Montreal, Winnipeg and Vancouver), the UJPO functioned primarily as a fraternal society. In its heyday during the 1940s and 1950s, it provided sickness and burial benefits, impressive cultural programmes, secular Yiddish schools and summer camps. These are all much attenuated now, with the exception of the burial benefits.

As a strongly leftist, or "progressive" organization, UJPO throughout its history has been perched on the margins of the established Canadian Jewish community—at times being treated as a pariah either because of its association with the international Communist movement,¹ or because of its lukewarm attitude towards Zionism. To this day, they are denied membership in the Canadian Jewish Congress—the umbrella structure for organized Canadian Jewry.

From the beginning of my research in 1989, I have taken great care regarding the sensitivities of both present and past members, and the accounts which they have furnished. I was alerted to this need the very first time I entered the UJPO office in Toronto for a general "How do you do? I'm interested in UJPO, and would like to study its history." More exactly, I was put on probation by the office manager. When I commented that I had read Erna Paris's book *Jews*, she abruptly warned, "I hope you're going to write a fairer history of the organization than Erna did!"²

Researchers taking the first tentative steps into a new field situation will surely recognize that flash of confusion and rising alarm. I had admired Paris's monograph as an accurate and sympathetic portrait of the Jewish Left in Canada. Later, moments after leaving the office, I hurried to the car, surreptitiously fished *Jews* from my briefcase, and anxiously began skimming. What was *wrong* with the book? What had I missed? What was so offensive? (Not until I was quite advanced

into the fieldwork, and had been exposed to a good number of members, did I really understand what had provoked that sharp response. It was prompted by the author's dismissive tone, treating the UJPO's tattered and aging membership as having no present political significance.)

For the most part, my experiences on the UJPO project have been very positive. Informants have been quite welcoming, often expressing the view that their contributions have been neglected by previous research, and consequently eager to have their story told "properly." Though I did not grow up a child of the movement, I have let the members know that I was reared with a socialist orientation, and that some of my family had belonged to UJPO in both Toronto and Vancouver. This seems to have put the members at ease with me, and most of their accounts have been rendered with candour and detail. In a few cases, I have encountered evasiveness, unwillingness to "find the time" for interviews, or undisguised suspicion regarding research by an outsider. It is this minority of difficult cases that I want to discuss.

All oral history projects directly confront problems of validity and reliability. People's accounts and recollections as data for research interpretation inevitably raise questions concerning accuracy. Is the subject's account "true"? In what senses? How does memory falter, filter, selectively repress, omit or inflate details, reshape events and relationships? Even in the fullest and most certain cases, with the most balanced interview subjects, these methodological questions are at the centre of oral history research.

Such problems are sharply increased in politically sensitive or highly charged histories involving radical parties and movements which were marginalized and treated with contempt or hostility by mainstream society. The more intense the official suspicion of the movements and their members, the more exacting the effort required to decode historical accounts, since in most cases political sensitivities and battles are not neatly sealed off in the past, but continue to smoulder into the present,

sometimes bursting into flame through the subject's re-telling.

This is familiar terrain to those working in oral history. Old grudges, poor memories and bad memories, exaggerated indignities and victories, are the stuff of personal accounts. Political histories provide their own particular wrinkles. One obvious case in which this occurs concerns contested historical accounts, in which political competitors strive to achieve the upper hand in defining history. The struggle here is over whose history will prevail: will it be the dominant culture, the powerful interests as usual? Or will the marginal voices, the dissenting minority, be able to put their own stamp on historical events?

By definition, radical political movements stand in opposition to mainstream versions of reality and history. The Popular Memory Group at the Birmingham School for Contemporary Cultural Studies has explained the social production of popular memory as resulting largely from the relationship to "official" power. As they put it:

Dominant memory is produced in the course of [these] struggles and is always open to contestation.... Certain representations achieve centrality and luxuriate grandly; others are marginalized or excluded or reworked... the criteria of success here are [not] those of truth: dominant representations may be those that are most ideological, most obviously conforming to the flattened stereotypes of myth.

Historical constructions are most obviously public when linked to central state institutions. (Popular Memory group 207-8)

Whenever we deal with inflamed political situations—e.g., the pacifist movements during both World Wars, the Vietnam War years and the seething anti-war opposition, various social movements of the 1960s, the feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s—we encounter drastically different versions of history, each emphasizing its own legitimacy, centrality, and importance. In values-oriented social movements there is a tendency to see one's own investments and efforts as having had an impact on the times—if not actually shaping them—rather than being an historical irrelevance. Of course, in many of these narratives the significance attributed by the subject to his or her role can be debatable. Kim Lacy Rogers has remarked, "Interpretation by others will almost invariably contradict the essence of an actor's vision of himself/herself as a maker of history" (169). I would add that, in my own experience, this is almost always so when oral histories are being gathered from people who participated in movements such as the Communist

Party of Canada, which by definition was committed to a radical transformation of the world, and whose members shared that view of their involvement. The transformative effect of the interview itself has been noted by Rogers, who writes, "In the interview, personal, political, and historical experience become fused into a narrative that became a monument to this best, most essential self. Remembering became an act of identification with social transformation" (168-69).

I want to discuss in this paper a rather different matter—not simply disputes over historical authority. Certain types of politically volatile history depart from these more usual issues in that the researcher is confronted with deliberate concealment or disingenuous accounts, in which the habits and tactics of a lifetime of political vulnerability and paranoia are spontaneously triggered. The research interview is experienced by the subject as potentially threatening, calling into play the wiles and techniques by which the subject has survived previous political dangers. Even in situations in which the subjects' reason tells them that full disclosure will in all likelihood bring no harm, residual political training and caution intrude. As a result, answers, accounts, historical memories are shaped towards what the subject has always known as protective. Researchers may be aware of this dimension even as the telling proceeds; or perhaps only later, in comparing various contradictory accounts, may discover that they have been provided with a "tailored" version. In either case, attention must be paid to understanding the meaning of this behaviour, rather than succumbing to automatic annoyance at being "lied to," or resentment that the research subject did not extend trust and cooperation, instead choosing to manipulate the situation for "self-serving" or partisan reasons.

Putting it somewhat differently, the subject refuses to play under conditions set by the researcher, but rather responds to a set of stimuli apparently outside of the immediate situation. The field worker should seize upon this behaviour as a key datum. What might have been regarded as the subject's untrustworthiness or obstinacy can now be seen as having consistent meaning: it reveals one important technique by which members of a suspect organization preserved themselves in a malevolent political environment. To what extent these manoeuvres and dissimulations were actually necessary for survival during the Cold War, and to what extent they constituted paranoia or melodramatic definitions by members, is really a research question which can be understood only within the historical context of the narrators' times and experiences.

This is a theme Allesandro Portelli returns to repeatedly in his subtle methodological discussion in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*.³ Portelli

regards memory as being “not a passive repository of facts, but an active process of creation,” and addresses the problematics of the oral reconstruction of political history (52). The following passage deals directly with the matter:

Changes which may have subsequently taken place in the narrators’ personal subjective consciousness or in their socio-economic standing, may affect, if not the actual recounting of prior events, at least the evaluation and the “coloring” of the story. Several people are reticent, for instance, when it comes to describing illegal forms of struggle. . . . This does not mean that they do not remember them clearly, but that there has been a change in their political opinions, personal circumstances, or in their party’s line. Acts considered legitimate and even normal or necessary in the past may be therefore now viewed as unacceptable and literally cast out of the tradition. In these cases, the most precious information may lie in what the informants *hide*, and in the fact that they *do* hide it, rather than in what they *tell* (52–53).

In less politicized historical reconstructions, the researcher attempts to weave together various partial accounts, or memories from different locations within the culture or social structure. In volatile political histories, this problem is compounded by the fact that, for many of the figures, the political struggles and debates are experienced as a continuing reality.⁴ Evidence, balanced recollection, is sometimes still sacrificed to the need to score hits on now doddering, or even long departed, political opponents. The value of recording interviews with more partisan members is not because of the fullness or objectivity of their accounts—but precisely because they are skewed, providing a wonderful insight into the texture and views of the lived political context.

Radical political movements derive much of their meaning from continual tests of doctrinal loyalty of their membership—what is now sometimes misleadingly termed “political correctness”—as well as from the political need to assess the trustworthiness of those around them. These practices continue to be employed by some who see themselves as ideological stalwarts. It’s in this context that they throw out challenges to those doing research.

Occasionally the temptation arises to challenge an account; even to enter into debate with an especially provocative or tendentious informant. I have had to work hard to avoid this pitfall, but have found that a small amount of discreet nudging, sometimes through offering alternative, dissenting accounts, was

occasionally helpful in clarifying the informant’s position. I’ve tried to use this confrontational method sparingly, and only when it seemed to have clear methodological utility, rather than to impose my own alternative construction or political ideology upon a person being interviewed—i.e., to “correct” the subject’s views or accounts, or to “win” an argument.⁵

There is a natural tendency to fasten upon those figures who have mellowed with age, or who seem less engaged and more able to provide objective accounts. And of course, there is no gainsaying this advantage. Methodologically, however, being mindful of the particular qualities of highly partisan informants enables us to more fully utilize their accounts, instead of simply dismissing them as not worth the trouble because they are unreliable or provide “distorted” information.

When I began my research, Gorbachev had just initiated the period of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the Soviet Union. Rapidly following these Soviet reforms, the international Communist movement fell into confusion, ideological and organizational disarray, and finally disintegration and dissolution. All of these changes were mirrored in the reactions of former and even then-present Party members. They no longer knew where they stood: the eternal verities were called into question; life-long commitments now seemed misplaced. The pain was evident in some of the older members I spoke with; they struggled to rationalize their years of involvement, often putting it in terms of the former good struggles they had joined, during more idealistic times. While the rest of society was oblivious to fascism, to racism, to unfair labour practices, they marched in demonstrations and handed out leaflets on street corners. Others, who had left UJPO many years back, nevertheless emphasized the Order’s worthwhile contributions. In the words of one former leader, “We were members of the Party, but we were also members of an organization. We did something, we created. We weren’t just stooges.”⁶

Still other informants who had long since abandoned the Party, had no sympathy for the Soviet Union, or who had even rejected socialist principles, voiced palpable satisfaction that their apostasy was historically vindicated. One said, “What we fought for was all the things Gorbachev is saying now.”⁷

With the waning of the Cold War in 1990 and 1991, almost all of the informants became more relaxed and open about past events. For some, who in 1989 were still concealing their own Party memberships or connections, or who discreetly omitted that information when talking about other members, the fear of discovery now eased. The threat that they would be defined as subversives, and thus discredited in their present activities—part and parcel of Cold War doctrine—no longer existed. One former member mentioned the

continuing Party membership of a comrade from his days in UJPO, then asked that I make no mention of this in my work, since her present high-profile position in the community would be compromised.⁸

Secretiveness had been built into the Communist Party and its so-called “mass organizations” (the allied unions and political organizations such as UJPO, with their CP-oriented leadership). The vast majority of cloaked Party memberships or sympathies were spurred by fears that societal retribution would follow discovery: dismissal from jobs; loss of business; police surveillance and harassment. All this was no longer necessary, at least for the traditional reasons. Former members were now sometimes abashed at their naiveté, but with the Soviet Union and international communism a spent force, expected no dire consequences from revelations of involvement.

With the diminished threats of the Cold War, Soviet-directed communism, and its ancillary supportive organizations, membership in UJPO was no longer politically hot. In some ways this makes the research project easier, but also, ironically, less interesting. The challenge of developing rapport with informants, persuading them to replace guarded responses with fuller accounts, is not so great. The principal reason for this is that the information itself has lost symbolic value, as the importance of the battles themselves has dissolved. From being a volatile, charged situation, the research project has transformed into a more normal political/historical reconstruction. This has its own fascinations, of course. But the bite, the edge of political danger, is now gone—and with it, some of the distinctive flavour of the movement.

Notes

1. For a good part of its existence, up to 1959, it would appear that the UJPO leadership had a heavy overlapping affiliation with the Communist Party of Canada, while the general membership contained only a small minority of Party people. But by all accounts, this was not a point of division or dispute within the Order; everybody in UJPO knew about and endorsed the “progressive” politics.
However, it might also be noted here that the pro-Soviet sympathies of UJPO not only served to exclude the organization from the Jewish mainstream, but also ensured marginalization within the general political culture. The social democratic left also shunned UJPO as being either a Communist front organization or else uncritically justifying all of Moscow’s actions and points of view.
2. Author’s field notes, 27 May, 1988, Toronto, Ontario.
3. See chapters 2 and 3 in particular.
4. In his research on the United Electrical Workers during the Cold War years, James Turk described a similar phenomenon: “The left-right struggle in the UE was carried on with the earnestness of most political battles in the cold war years. Both sides fought with deadly seriousness. . . . Although the end of the struggle forced protagonists to find some means of accommodation, the differences are close to the surface and most relationships that exist among persons on different sides in 1950 remain fragile at best. . . . Since everything is seen in black and white terms, people are concerned with the interviewer’s ‘side’” (24).
5. I shouldn’t leave the impression that all the political sparring is conducted in a grimly serious atmosphere. Quite to the contrary, for many members and ex-members political argument is an enjoyable recreational exercise. This cultural style is expressed both within their own circles, as well as with outsiders.
6. Author’s taped interview, 1 December, 1989, Toronto, Ontario.
7. Author’s taped interview, 20 December, 1989, Toronto, Ontario.
8. Author’s written interview notes, 12 March, 1990, Vancouver, B.C. The powerful incentive to conceal “subversive” political affiliations is nicely captured by Carl Bernstein in his book, *Loyalties: A Son’s Memoir*. Dancing around the issue of his earlier Communist Party membership, Bernstein’s father urges his writer son: “Why not say...it’s pretty simple, Carl—...that I was part of a force. And I was in the labor movement and I said everything that I wanted to say without revealing my political affiliations. Because if I had revealed my political affiliations I’d lose my effectiveness—and that still goes today... . And what I accomplished in those days is going to be demeaned...to be undone. What was my purpose, my *real* purpose? people are going to ask” (80–81).

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