

## ORAL HISTORY IN ETHNIC STUDIES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

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**RÉSUMÉ:** Les projets d'histoire orale constituent aujourd'hui une source importante de renseignements pour les ethnies. La documentation sur ce sujet est rare et l'immigrant se raconte plus spontanément de façon verbale. L'interview aura d'autant plus de succès si l'intervieweur agit en qualité de "participant-observateur" du groupe qu'il étudie. Il arrive que certains informateurs manifestent une gêne à se confier à un magnétophone; il est alors souhaitable de prendre des notes pour ne pas risquer la perte irrémédiable du témoignage. Pour valoriser au maximum le projet d'histoire orale et favoriser l'usage des renseignements recueillis, des transcriptions auraient avantage à être préparées.

L'éducation en général, mais particulièrement les Etudes canadiennes, sont potentiellement une source considérable pour l'histoire orale. L'histoire orale pourrait être en usage dans les écoles pour documenter des cas type d'immigrants et pour aider les minorités ethniques à mieux comprendre les deux peuples fondateurs et à mieux se connaître entre elles. Ceci aurait également comme résultat de promouvoir la conscience nationale.

### Outline of the Study

What I propose to do in this paper is to present the use I have made of oral history in my doctoral work within the realm of ethnic studies and then to discuss at some length the implications of this for education. First I will outline the nature and parameters of my study, then go on to speak of my use of oral history and lastly discuss the study's educational relevance.

Basically, my work is an attempt to examine the process of immigration as exemplified by Southern Italians moving to North America between 1880 and World War II. More specifically, it is my purpose to present a case study of chain migration; the case study focusing on immigrants from South-western Cosenza province within the region of Calabria, the southernmost part of the Italian peninsula. By "chain migration", I mean here the same migratory form as defined by the MacDonalds:

Chain migration can be defined as that movement in which prospective migrants learn of opportunities, are provided with transportation, and have initial accommodation and employment arranged by means of primary social relationships with previous migrants. 1

This mode of migration, via informal and personal contacts between men, is in contradistinction to impersonally sponsored or encouraged immigration, either governmental or private. Though immigration to the United States was more of a chain than of a formally organized type this was less true for Canada. Here, the colonial tie saw official government sponsorship of immigration take place in Britain and in

the Dominion. Also, the official encouragement of American and Eastern European settlers and the efforts of railroads and land companies added to the importance of organized immigration. As far as Southern Italy was concerned, although some private organization of immigration was present, primarily by shipping companies, by far the movement of men occurred through informal chains of personal contact, usually of a kinship or paesano (fellow-villager) type. Such distinctions regarding type of migration matter for they determine the kinds of people the immigration stream is composed of, the nature of their settlement and their subsequent integration. One important task I believe my case study will accomplish is to detail how informal ties were actually operationalized and how they affected such aspects of the migration process.

### The Use of Oral History

Having briefly outlined the nature of my thesis, I would like to now discuss my utilization of oral history. But first, I believe I should clarify the way in which I am employing the concept of "oral history".

It seems to me that there are basically two ways in which the term oral history is currently used. In its broadest and popular sense it is used to mean almost any recording of peoples' memories dealing with the past. In this context oral history ranges from recorded radio interviews to popular recollections of historical events, such as Broadfoot's or Terkel's books, to recent papers by academics which often are little more than hastily assembled transcripts of portions of taped interviews with scant analysis or interpretation given by the author. Now I do not want to be overly critical of non-academic practitioners of this type of oral history who make little claim to be doing scholarly work, but it seems to me that the characterization given this work by Evans, which he terms "instant history" is essentially correct. To quote Evans, such oral history is composed of:

historical facts taken from older generations with little historical underpinning from other sources, little attempt being made to relate these facts to the historical context of informants, to their place in...time and its continuity with a long past.<sup>2</sup>

What is implicit in this popular sense of oral history, and which I find particularly damaging, is that oral history is in some way a compartment of history parallel to economic, political or social history and that like these fields it is a type of repository for a certain body of knowledge. No doubt this view is partly a result of the very expression "oral history" which is actually a misnomer. I believe that things would have been much clearer in both the popular and academic mind if we had ignored this catchy American phrase and stuck with the older British practice of speaking of oral evidence or the oral tradition as the case might be. But since the term has been adopted both in Canada and in Britain itself it seems we can do little but make the best of it.

At any rate, it is as synonymous with traditional British practice that is the second way in which the term oral history is used and ought to be used when we speak of it as a scholarly exercise. From this view oral history is really a type of umbrella heading referring to three separate identities. It can refer to a technique of history, which as such, can be used in any historical field though it is most frequently used in, and most appropriate to, social history. Secondly, oral history can refer to a type of historical source which like any historical evidence must be subjected to the normal rules governing historical data: to be aware of bias, to look for internal consistency, and most important to seek confirmation in other sources. Thirdly, the term oral history is used to denote oral tradition as opposed

to eyewitness reports or oral testimony. As Vansina points out oral tradition is "oral testimony transmitted verbally, from one generation to the next or more."<sup>3</sup>

Now that I have outlined the complexities involved in the use of the term oral history let me clarify that the sense in which I employ it is primarily as an historical source and secondarily as a technique of gathering data.

My decision to use oral testimony was mainly the result of the fact that the study I wanted to do could not be adequately approached solely through written sources. This was true for two reasons. First, I was primarily concerned with getting a view of the migration process from the experience of the immigrants themselves. Since the immigrants were on the whole illiterate, letters or memoirs could not fill this gap. In short, to get the view from the "inside" required interviewing. Secondly, the level of the study, as a micro study of village migration was not conducive, especially regarding the North American side of the experience, to the utilization of written sources. North American sources saw Southern Italian immigrants as a homogeneous mass and whatever material exists usually treats them in the aggregate, not as more specific entities.

Once collected the oral testimony provided me with a body of facts and perceptions which were used to expand on, confirm, or qualify existing written sources impinging on the parameters of the study. In this way one of my main concerns - to link the personal histories of the informants to the wide social history of which they were a part - was made possible.

One of the main problems involved in my use of oral history and which I would like to share with you had to do with my choice of what group of villagers to interview. I could either study the paesani group I was born into - whose population in Toronto numbered several hundred - or I could go outside it. Although the option of studying my own group was well received by my colleagues and advisors I personally had serious doubts about it. I feared that both my professional interest and person would be regarded as filiopietistic, parochial and opportunistic, especially since some of my informants or contacts would invariably be kin or friends. As a counter-part to this, I had doubts about my personal capacity to rise above filiopietism and parochialism. I recognized the danger that studying one's own ethnic group involved emotional ties, whether negative or positive, that could colour one's vision of his subject. I also had doubts regarding whether it was ethically right to use personal relationships for information in an endeavour that, from the stance of professional aspirations, was opportunistic. I questioned whether my probing might not be seen by the paesani as self-serving and jeopardize my relationships with them.

On the other hand, I also realized that my study provided the villagers with an opportunity to tell their story of immigration rather than have it written without them. And obviously studying these people with whom I was familiar would hold some real, objective advantages. It was undeniable that I would be provided with a ready pool of informants and contacts. Furthermore, the relationship of trust, which so many investigators of Southern Italian peasants or peasant-immigrants found difficult to establish, was already operative and would facilitate easy and open communication. But foremost amongst the advantages considered was the fact that I was familiar with the local dialect and idioms of the paesani whereas I was not with those of other groups of villagers. Hence, I would be able to carry out my case study with the detail of local experience and colouring otherwise not possible. On the importance of such detailed language familiarity, Juliani who studied Italian immigrants in Philadelphia wrote that his field experience indicated the:

appropriateness and usefulness of being able to meet foreign-born informants in and on their own linguistic terms. Particularly in eliciting emotions feelings and attitudes; intimate and subjective details of personal lives; and the individual "colour" of human experiences, the first language of informants remains the indispensable instrument of transmission. The situation for me could have been much better in this regard, if Italian, particularly the various regional dialects could have been used, both to facilitate clearer communication as well as better validating the ethnic claims of the interviewer.<sup>4</sup>

Related to this, as anthropologists have long recognized and sociologists like William Fette Whyte have confirmed,<sup>5</sup> in studying any ethnocultural group or community there is no substitute for becoming part of the group. In my case, I did not have to worry about becoming part of the group; I already was, if not centrally, at least peripherally part of it. I believed my familiarity with its norms, its folk knowledge and its aspirations would give me a "feel" for it; that is, an intuitive sense of plausible hypotheses worth pursuing, of how to pose questions, and of when to check testimony that did not ring true.

At any rate, faced with this choice I finally decided to take the risk and attempt a study of this group I was part of. The weight of advantages, the encouragement of colleagues and advisors and my own personal thirst to know something of my past tipped the scales in favour of this choice. But here I would like to venture a word of caution to anyone contemplating that in pursuing such a course, the investigator may find a relatively easy way out of a difficult and time consuming methodological problem. I can only say that in my experience such an assumption is ill-founded for whatever time and effort one may gain utilizing contacts he is naturally familiar with, he will make up for, or exceed, in the difficult attempt to emotionally and psychologically distance himself from the subject he is understandably attached to. And this "distancing" the student must do if his subject is to be studied with any degree of objectivity and respect; otherwise the result will be the filiopietism and bias that are the prime threats to ethnic studies undertaken by indigenous investigators.

Regarding my actual experience interviewing I do not think it is necessary to go into the mechanics of my recording and precessing of the tapes. Such information is well dealt with in the numerous guides now available on the issue such as the Provincial Archives of British Columbia's A Guide to Aural History Research. However, I do want to mention briefly a few points regarding this experience. First, I found it very useful to involve myself as a type of "participant observer" in the Italian immigrant community of Toronto correlative with my conducting of the oral interviews. This involvement took place on two levels. I worked within the wider Italian community, though mostly with Southern Italians, in the capacity of a community worker over several months. This experience provided an immediate sense of the problems and frustrations of immigrant life, the nature of which had changed little from the early decades of the century. It also allowed me to familiarize myself with the contours of the numerous Italian neighbourhoods of the city. I became familiar with their various social clubs, religious feasts, and local leaders. I also came to appreciate the wide diversity of this polyglot that camouflaged itself as the "Italian community" and which outsiders erroneously viewed as a more or less homogeneous mass. Experiencing this sometimes confusing diversity confirmed my suspicion that if the immigration process was to be comprehensively dissected it would have to be at the local,

that is the Italian paese, level.

The second manner in which I acted as a participant observer, and already touched upon, was precisely on this local scale. A conscious effort was made to involve myself as much as possible in the social life of the villagers I had chosen to study. Here it was possible to observe a system of rights and obligations harking back to past village life. The mutual visiting of kin and neighbour, exchanges of goods and services and family relations - all of which had important implications for understanding the immigrant experience could be observed. Also, I became much more cognizant of social patterns as manifested at weddings, baptisms and religious feste. This field material was then compared to the anthropological and sociological studies of Southern Italian peasants and immigrants to gain an analytical framework from which to view my subject.

Since these were contemporary observations they could not be taken as evidence applicable to the early decades under study. Rather, this material acted as a sort of backdrop, as it were, and additional intuitive check, to the evidence explicitly considered. Also, in conjunction with the oral reports of the immigrants' past experience, it helped to bring to life the testimony of informants.

The second point I wanted to make in connection with the collection of oral testimony has to do with the fact that many of the interviews were not recorded on tape but rather written up from notes or memory. Approximately 30% of my data was of this form and although I preferred tape, this was not always possible. A few informants felt uncomfortable or objected to the use of a tape-recorder in which case it was advisable to omit its use so that the conversation could proceed as freely as possible. More frequently, these non-taped interviews took place in a social setting, a dinner for example, where tape-recording would have been inappropriate if not actually offensive.

I mention this because it seems to me that for some practitioners of oral history undue emphasis is often put on the technology and hardware of recording rather than on the oral testimony itself. Obviously, it is best to use a tape recorder; but where this is impossible or unadvisable it should not deter the investigator from collecting oral evidence without it. And indeed, as Evans points out there may even be some benefits in not using a tape recorder. Referring to his research in the English countryside before the widespread availability of portable tape recorders, he writes:

In a sense, I was fortunate that I did not have use of a tape recorder at this period. The slow process of note taking, of later writing up the notes in full, of frequently returning to the... informant - to check up on a word or an historical technique in farming compelled me to think about what I was trying to do.<sup>6</sup>

In short, it seems that a simple rule of thumb that could be applicable here with respect to oral history is one similar to that I have heard governing the use of quantitative evidence in history "when it is possible to record, do so; when not, make the best of it."

Be that as it may, the last point I want to make is that in my experience once tapes have been collected it is difficult to make full use of them unless the interviews are transcribed. I found that to simply listen to the tapes or make brief notes,

in the long-run, proved futile. During the processing of an interview it was often impossible to fully follow the twists and turns of the conversation as the informant moved back and forth from themes and sub-themes unless the tape was in written form. Then the internal logic of what was being said was much easier to follow. Furthermore, it would often only become evident during the actual writing process when the evidence was starting to take coherent shape that a seemingly inconsequential piece of tape was important or even suitable as a quote. For these reasons, then, it was found advisable to take the extra time and transcribe the tapes. Here again I raise the matter because much has been said about the value of listening to a tape; that it provides us with the inflections and emotions of the informant useful in helping the investigator analyze his data. This is undoubtedly true, and hence the value of oral history data banks becomes obvious. But I believe it is equally important to pay attention to the transcription of the tapes if their optimal use is to be obtained.

### Implications for Education

At this point we have come to the last section of my paper. What is the relationship between the utilization of oral history in ethnic studies and education. First of all, I think we can safely say that ethnic studies, to the extent that it is an historical exercise, can be placed within the realm of social history; that is, history from below, the history of everyday life and of society. Oral history as a technique and a source is pre-eminently suited for the development of knowledge within social history generally and ethnic history specifically. Now all of these areas are recent developments. As Hobsbawn points out, social history did not really gain serious credibility as a compartment of history until the 1950's. At least this was true in Europe and the United States.<sup>7</sup> In Canada, on the other hand, where history has been dominated by biography, political history and the view from above, as late as 1975, the Symons report lamented the lack of Canadian social history courses, and by extension, the lack of research in this field.<sup>8</sup> Put simply the areas of social history, ethnic studies, and oral history as a means to their study are all wide open in Canada. Research in these areas cannot but help fill a large gap in our knowledge and in so doing contribute to the dissemination of education in these fields.

Intimately related to this, the whole endeavour to understand ourselves as a people has until quite recently been tragically ignored within Canadian education. Both Hodgetts in looking at elementary and secondary education and again Symons in examining higher education have levelled severe criticism at the state of Canadian studies in this country.<sup>9</sup> The Symons report concluded in part:

The commission's inquiries made clear that the state of both teaching and research in the various fields of study relating to Canada and Canadian universities leaves a great deal to be desired...Too often the content of curriculum reflects little awareness of the major problems and opportunities that confront us as a society, nor does it give adequate recognition to the need to examine the particular history, institutions and circumstances of this society. In many disciplines the university curriculum is not sufficiently attuned to the Canadian context in which it is being taught.<sup>10</sup>

More specifically, referring to ethnic studies as a field that can contribute much to our understanding of ourselves, the report states:

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Canada is unique in the extent and nature of its ethnic diversity. Given the important role that cultural pluralism has played, and continues to play, in Canadian affairs, it should be clear that ethnic studies have a vital contribution to make to the knowledge and understanding of Canada. Yet, as the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism has observed, 'the vast opportunities for research that our population provides have hardly been touched.' Similarly, the curriculum of our educational system at all levels, still shows little recognition of the multicultural character of Canada.11

Here, also, in the endeavour for national self-knowledge (as with the field of social history) we have plenty of work to do, both in terms of the basic research that has to be done and in the development of curriculum from this research. And, here also oral history can facilitate the fulfilling of this not only as a research strategy and source but also as a basic curriculum tool. For example, no one as far as I know has yet taken the trouble to put together an educational kit of immigrant oral histories for dissemination in our schools - a simple exercise perhaps, but one that would go some distance in bringing the reality of Canada's ethnic diversity into the classroom. Additionally, taped interviews could be an important source for the development of textbooks and other written materials.

Further, ethnic studies and oral history have direct educational implications for the whole field of immigrant education. If the education of immigrant children is to be put on a level approaching that of native-born children, then educators must have some knowledge of the past of the immigrants they deal with, of the nature of their communities and their aspirations. And, indeed, this is also true of the education of Canadian-born children of ethnic minority status. It would be well, for example, for teachers working in schools composed predominantly of Ukrainian-Canadians to know something of the history and culture of this group in Canada. This is especially true in the case of ethnic minorities whose backgrounds differ significantly from that of the Canadian mainstream. I am thinking here particularly of South and East European minorities whose peasant, pre-industrial backgrounds are frequently a source of contrast, if not friction, with the societal mainstream often even after several generations. This is one implication of the work of Covello, the American sociologist who studied Italo-American school children in New York in the 1940's and who was instrumental in developing the concept of the "community-centered school".

In sum, in this whole area of immigrant and minority education, ethnic studies aided by oral history has an important role to play, both in terms of developing curriculum for our ethnic minorities and in sensitizing the people who teach them. And these remarks I believe are equally applicable to the realm of adult immigrant education, which though often ignored, is an experience a great many immigrants have gone through in courses ranging from language training to professional upgrading.

Lastly, studies of ethnic minorities can play the important role, indirectly if not directly, of facilitating the intergration of immigrant and ethnic groups into Canadian society. To document a group's immigration to Canada and its history and contribution in the New World is to give that group a sense of rootedness in Canada it would otherwise lack for to quote Toynbee's dictum "history books not only tell history, they make it." Such studies can help minorities view themselves as an integral part of Canada - as multiculturalism tells us they are - with their own

traditions and past in this nation. For while not as distant or voluminous as the past of Canada's founding peoples, almost all Canadian minorities do have a history in Canada and this should be told. In so doing these minorities gain a sense of belonging in Canada that cannot be attained any other way.

Equally significant such work in ethnic studies and oral history could play the important general educational role of helping to explain the ethos of ethnic minorities to the founding cultures as well as helping these "third force" minorities understand each other. Although I am cognizant of the objection that this effort, rather than contributing to the integration of Canadian society, could lead to its balkanization, I tend to see the field of ethnic studies more in the image of bridge building than in the image of fence building. In short, I believe that ethnic studies, if pursued with integrity and not filiopietism, is an advancement of knowledge, not a travesty of it.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. John S. MacDonald and Leatrice D. MacDonald, "Chain Migration, Ethnic Neighbourhood Formation, and Social Networks," An Urban World, ed. Charles Tilly (Boston, 1974), p. 227.
2. George Ewart Evans, "I am a Tape Recorder: Oral History," Encounter, Vol. 47 no. 5 (November, 1975), p. 72.
3. Jan Vansina, "Once Upon a Time: Oral Traditions as History in Africa," Historical Studies Today, eds. Felix Gilbert & Stephen R. Graubard (New York, 1972), p. 415.
4. Richard N. Juliani, "Field Research in the Study of Ethnic Communities: The Italians of Philadelphia," unpublished paper.
5. William Foote Whyte, Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum (Chicago, 1954).
6. Evans, "I am a Tape Recorder," p. 70.
7. E.J. Hobsbawm, "From Social History to the History of Society," Historical Studies Today, pp. 1-6.
8. T.H.B. Symons, Association of Universities & Colleges of Canada, To Know Ourselves: The Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies, vol. 1 (Ottawa, 1968), p. 62.
9. A.B. Hodgetts, What Culture? What Heritage?: A Study of Civic Education in Canada, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education Curriculum Series, no. 5 (Toronto, 1968); Symons, To Know Ourselves.
10. Symons, To Know Ourselves, pp. 127-28.
11. Leonard Covello, The Social Background of the Italo-American School Child: A Study of the Southern Italian Family Mores and their Effect on the School Situation in Italy and America (Leiden, Nether., 1967), p. 414ff.