

A Dialogical Relationship. An Approach to Oral History

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1. Oral sources and oral history

The phrase *oral history* is a common abbreviation for what we might describe, more articulately, as *the use of oral sources in history or the social sciences*.¹ In its most elementary form, the *oral narratives and testimony* which constitute oral history are but an additional tool in the historian's panoply of sources, and are therefore subject to the same critical scrutiny as all other sources, in order to ascertain their reliability and their usefulness. From this point of view, we distinguish the oral *source* from the oral *tradition*: the latter is made up of verbal constructs that are formalized, transmitted, shared, whereas the historian's oral sources are individual, informal, dialogic narratives created in the encounter between the historian and the narrator. Of course, these narratives may incorporate traditional materials, and oral historians may also avail themselves of oral traditions. However, it is best to keep the two concepts distinct: not all that is oral is traditional.

However, when we speak of *oral history* we also mean something more specific. Rather than an additional, often secondary tool in the historian's panoply, oral sources are used as the axis of another type of historical work, in which questions of memory, narrative, subjectivity, dialogue shape the historian's very agenda. When this is the case, the critical use of oral sources requires specific approaches and procedures, adequate to their specific nature and form.

As opposed to the majority of historical documents, in fact, oral sources are not *found*, but *co-created* by the historian. They would not exist in this form without the presence, and stimulation, the active role of the historian in the field interview. Oral sources are generated in a dialogic exchange – an *interview* -- literally a looking at each other, an exchange of gazes. In this exchange questions and answers do not necessarily go in one direction only. The historian's agenda must meet the agenda of the narrator; what the historian wishes to know may not necessarily coincide with what the narrator wishes to tell. As a consequence, the whole agenda of the research may be radically revised.

For instance, when I started a project on the history of the labor movement from 1949 to 1953 in Terni, an industrial town in Central Italy, many narrators insisted in connecting the events I was interested in to the long-term history of their families and their town. Though this was not what I was originally looking for, I revised my project, and gained a great deal by it. Eventually, I ended up writing a history of the town from 1831 to 1985.²

Oral history, then, is primarily a *listening art*. Even when the dialogue stays within the original agenda, historians may not always be aware that certain questions need to be asked. Often, indeed, the most important information lies outside what both the historian and the narrator think of as historically relevant. For instance: I recently carried out a project on the memory of Nazi massacre perpetrated in Rome in 1944, known as the massacre of the Fosse Ardeatine. 335 men were executed in retaliation for a partisan action that killed a number of German soldiers in the center of Rome. Beyond the reconstruction of the events, I wanted to understand how the survivors, especially women, had lived with the loss and the memory, how they had made lives for themselves with this pain their souls afterwards. It was only by accident, however, and when I thought that the interview was over, that I stumbled into one of the most painful memories.

I had been interviewing Ms. Ada Pignotti, who was 23 when her husband and three other relatives were killed by the Nazis at the Fosse Ardeatine. She had told me about those days, and then about her life ever since. We both thought the interview was over, that all that needed to be said had been said and I had no more questions. However, we chatted on – and I left the tape running – as she told me about her protracted, humiliating struggle with bureaucracy in order to receive the small pension to which she was entitled as a victim. Then, almost incidentally, she said: “And wherever you'd go, they knew that I had lost my

husband, I and the others, the other women – and they all tried, wanted, tried to give you a line, a talk all of their own, because – who knows: you had to be at their disposal. You were a woman, you had no husband anymore, so you could very well ...”³ Pain, loss, poverty – these were themes to be expected. What I did not expect was this insult, almost unspeakable (as the narrator’s reticence shows), an insult for which she didn’t even have a word – sexual harassment – at the time.

Fortunately, I had left the tape running. Though I thought the interview was over, I knew that the art of listening includes respect; and you don’t show respect by turning the tape recorder off, as if to announce to your interviewee that from now on you are no longer interested in what she may have to say. Thus, the unexpected theme of harassment came into my research, and later on I was able to find confirmation in other interviews. No one had talked about it before; even the widows had hardly discussed it among themselves. It was too private to mention in public and, most importantly, until recently neither historians nor the women themselves were aware that this, too, was history. The assumption was that the historical event was the massacre; the survivors were supposed to be interesting only as witnesses to it, but their own lives were irrelevant. And, of course, women’s history and the history of sexuality were not considered of historical significance when these elderly ladies studied history in school.

Oral history, however, is not only about the event. It is about the place and meaning of the event within the lives of the tellers; which is why, in order to understand the meaning of two days in 1944, I had to go back and forward two or three generations, from 1870 to 1999.

2. Relationship: dialogue

All of this means that oral history is a listening art, and an art based on a set of relationships:

- the relationship between interviewees and interviewers (dialogue);
- the relationship between the time in which the dialogue takes place, and the historical time discussed in the interview (memory);
- the relationship between the public and the private sphere, between autobiography and history – between, we might say, History and story;
- the relationship between the orality of the source and the writing of the historian.

Let us begin with the first of these relationships – dialogue. A young scholar who was interviewing women who had breast cancer surgery once told me this story. She was talking to an elderly, recently widowed lady, who had spoken at length about many things but had carefully avoided the theme of the interview. The lady’s desire to protect her intimacy crossed the researcher’s desire to know about her experience, so she wouldn’t talk about it. Yet, her own need for human contact, so all-important for a person who has been left alone, made her want to continue to conversation, so she talked of other things. Only incidentally (and this time with the tape recorder off) the young researcher mentioned that she, too, had had surgery for breast cancer. Right there, the relationship changed: “so you’re one of us”, the lady said. Authority, always implicit in an interview situation, also shifted: rather than feeling that she was under the researcher’s scrutinizing gaze, the lady felt that her age placed her now in a position of authority – “but you’re only a child!”, she said. It was then that the definition of interview as mutual exchange of gazes was radically revised and literalized, as the two women bared their breasts and compared their scars.⁴

“You are one of us / you are only a child” – the interview is based on a common ground that makes dialogue possible, but also on a difference that makes it meaningful. It would be a mistake to assume that only similarity allows interviewees to express themselves, that only similarity establishes the “trust” on which dialogue is founded. By definition, in fact, an exchange of knowledge has a meaning only if this knowledge is not previously shared – if, that is, between the subjects involved there exists a meaningful difference and one of them is in a learning situation.

For instance, in a project I coordinated in 1990, a group of my students and I were collecting interviews on the historical memory of the students in my department, in order to explore the cultural and political roots of a nation-wide student movement. We soon realized that the fact that both the interviewers and the interviewees were students, and involved in the movement, ultimately paralyzed the dialogue: “Why are you asking me about this? You’re supposed to know it already!” Also, the fact that their own peers took upon themselves a role of authority as interviewers seemed to some students an undue assertion of authority. On the other hand, when the interviewers were done by me, the hierarchical difference between me as a professor and them as students was less a problem for the interviewees than an opportunity to explain certain things to someone, a professor, who didn’t know them (“You professors don’t know a thing about what’s on the students’ minds!”). Thus, my difference, and the fact that I was in a position of learning from them reversed our usual authority roles and made the conversation meaningful.⁵

Perhaps the most important lesson I received in field work was when a black, working-class, American woman told me – a white, middle-class, European male – “I don’t trust you” – and then went on for two hours, telling stories that implicitly explained why she didn’t.⁶ Common ground makes communication possible, but difference makes it meaningful. Common ground does not have to mean a shared identity but must rather depend on a shared will to listen to and accept each other critically. In this case, the possibility of dialogue was established initially both by the fact that I had been introduced by trusted friends from the Highlander Center. It was confirmed by the first question asked in the conversation – not by me, but by the lady’s husband, a preacher, union organizer, and former coal miner. As I have already pointed out, questions are not a one-way thing. He opened the conversation by asking me a question: “Are you in the United Mine Workers?” When I explained that I was not in the UMWA, but was a member of the teachers’ union back home, then the interview could begin. Finally, what enabled the interview to go on was the fact that I asked no probing, indiscreet questions. I mostly listened to what they had to say. They could see that I was not studying them, but learning from them.

Another example. The same people from Highlander who had introduced me to this black couple who later suggested I also interview Annie Napier, a disabled miner’s wife in Harlan, Kentucky. I called her, and she told me to come over. Then – as she revealed several years later – she called her sister and asked her, “What shall we do?” They finally reached the following conclusion: “If he ain’t too stuck up, we’ll talk to him.” It was only years later that I thought of asking her, “How did you know I wasn’t too stuck up?” And she said: “You came into the house and didn’t look for a clean place to set your butt on.” Which also suggests another thing: there is no one-way relationship between the observer and the observed. The observed also observes us, and judges us from behaviors of which we are not even aware (like the farmer in Tuscany who deduced my political leanings from the fact that, as he explained to a friend, “He didn’t ask me about priests.” Sometimes, it’s the questions we *don’t* ask that open up the dialogue).

In other words: it is the historian’s openness to listening and to dialogue, and the respect for the narrators, that establishes a mutual acceptance based on difference and thus opens up the narrative space for the interviewee to go into. On the other hand, it is the interviewee’s willingness to talk and open up to some degree that enables the historians to do their work. And the historians’ openness about themselves and the purpose of their work is a crucial factor in creating this space.

3. Relationships: the public and the private

Let us go on to another form of relationship, that between the public and the private sphere. One reason why the story of sexual harassment to the widows of the Fosse Ardeatine massacre had never been told before was that it was thought of as a personal matter, of no historical interest. Indeed, we would have looked in vain for its traces in public archives or court records.

Oral sources, then, help us question the boundary between what is of concern to history and what it not. On the one hand, both parties are caught in a grid of pre-established categories of relevance. Historians often do not know that there are unforeseen areas of experience that they ought to explore; narrators may not always be aware of the historical relevance of their personal experience. They may wish to guard them as too intimate to be revealed, or may be reluctant to discuss things that are important to them lest they be dismissed by the historian as irrelevant. This is why “I have nothing to say” or “What do you want me to say?” are such common beginnings in interviews. Even persons who have much to say, and may be anxious to say it, may be worried that their precious narrative may not be recognized, may not be “History” as they have been taught to define it.

In fact, the shifting and elusive boundary between History and stories is one of the relationships that make oral history meaningful. Ultimately, oral history is about the historical significance of personal experience on the one hand, and the personal impact of historical matters on the other. The hard core of oral history lies exactly at this point, where history breaks into private lives (for instance: when war breaks into domestic space in the shape of a bomb dropped from an airplane) or when private lives are drawn into history (for instance: the experience of the trenches in World War I, the experience of Italian troops in Russian campaign in World War II...).

Yet, after listening to so many war narratives by men, I wondered: is there a comparable women’s narrative about personal encounters with the public sphere? When I was working on the project on Terni, I did my own transcribing, which was hard and grueling work. Thus, I used to skip certain sections of the interviews which I thought I would not use in the book. After a while, I realized that the narratives I skipped fell mainly into two categories: men’s war stories, and women’s hospital tales, most specifically tales about assisting relatives in hospitals. War stories seemed too common, and not “local” enough; hospital tales seemed private, not “political” and not local. But the fact that these were the stories I was ignoring drew my attention to their analogies. I realized that the confrontation with death and suffering that took place in war for men also took place in hospitals for women; also, both the war stories and the hospital narratives were about the experience in which respectively men and women leave home to enter the public sphere and confront the State, authority, bureaucracy, technology, science. Just as men told stories about confronting the brass and proving that they knew more than the officers, likewise women relished narratives in which they put those big doctors in their place and corrected their errors. In other words, women’s hospital narratives were the equivalent of men’s war tales: stories about the encounter of private persons with the public sphere (it all comes together, of course, in the stories of war nurses, as in Vietnam).

The difference, of course, lies in the fact that, while the historical significance of the war experience is generally recognized, the women’s hospital narrative has been generally neglected by historian and confined to a merely private and familiar sphere. By insisting on telling these stories, the women narrators forced me to stop and listen and to recognize how important they were.

In other words, oral history allows us to access the historicity of private lives – but, most importantly, it forces to redefine our pre-conceived notion of the geography of public and private space and their relationship.

4. Relationships: memory

From the point of view of traditional, more methodologically conservative historians, the most important objection to oral sources concerned their reliability: one cannot rely on oral narratives because memory and subjectivity tend to “distort” the facts.

In the first place, this is not always the case – also, how can we be sure that equally serious distortions are not to be found also in more established documentary sources? Thus, as with all other sources, the task of the historian lies in cross-checking the information, checking each narrative against other narratives and other kinds of sources.

In the second place, and most importantly, the most critically advanced and methodologically aware work in oral history has turned the question upon its head: what makes oral sources important and fascinating is precisely the fact that they do not passively record the facts, but elaborate upon them and create meaning through the labor of memory and the filter of language. Which is why I, personally, tend to avoid the use of terms such as “testimony” and “witness”, and prefer to speak of “narratives” and “narrators”, “stories” and “story-tellers” or, in fact, “history tellers”.⁷

When we work with oral sources, then, we must chart a complex path covering three distinct but interconnected levels: a fact of the past, the historical event; a fact of the present, the narrative we hear; and a long-lasting, fluid relationship, the interplay between these two facts. Thus, the work of the oral historian includes:

- historiography in its traditional meaning (reconstructing past events);
- anthropology, cultural analysis, textual criticism (interpreting the interview);
- and the space in between (how do those events produce this memory and this narrative).

Oral history, then, is history of events, history of memory, and history and interpretation of events through memory. Memory, in fact, is not a mere depository of information, but rather an ongoing process of elaboration and re\construction of meaning. At this time, when the very meaning of Italian democracy undergoes a drastic right-wing revision based on debunking the foundational narrative of anti-Fascist Resistance, the history of memory is at least as important and as necessary as the history of the events.

Indeed, events are recognized as such, and become sites of meaning, primarily through the work of personal and public memory, which select certain events out of the shapeless array of everyday happenings, and endow them with meaning. Interrogating the wrong memory, especially when it is so widely shared, is a way of interrogating the meaning of the remembered event. In order to do this interpretive work on false narratives, we must be able to prove that they are indeed false. Thus, the oral historian’s work includes a careful check of the facts to the best of our abilities, so that we may distinguish between factually reliable narratives, which are the majority, and the significant cases of creative error and myth. Only after we have done this work, by cross-checking false memories with the reconstruction of the events, we are able to gauge their impact – as in the case of the Fosse Ardeatine massacre and its background - in social imagination and in the contemporary political arena. At this point, even error, invention, misunderstanding, even lies, especially when they are socially widespread, become precious symptoms of such important historical processes as memory and desire.

5. Narrative responsibility

Just like memory, the narrative itself is not a fixed text and depository of information, but rather a process and a performance. As Walter J. Ong writes, orality does not generate texts⁸, but *performances*: in orality, we are not dealing with finished discourse but with discourse in the making (indeed, *dialogic* discourse in the making). Thus, when we talk of oral history we ought to think in terms of verbs rather than nouns – *remembering* rather than *memory*; *telling* rather than *tale*. In this way, we can think of oral sources as something happening in the present, rather than just as a testimony of the past.

Most importantly, when we look at the act of speech, rather than at its outcome, we realize that remembering and telling are indeed influenced by the historical context and by the social frameworks of memory⁹, but they are also filtered by individual responsibility. The place where memory is elaborated is the individual’s mind, and the way we access it is the individual narrative. Therefore, narrators take a responsibility upon themselves, each time they tell their history. We must always remember this: just as the narrator has a

responsibility to tell, the historian has a responsibility to open up a narrative space by listening actively to what the narrator has to tell.

6. Relationships: orality and writing

The form of the oral history document is one of performance and dialogue; the form of the historian's work is that of a written, monologic essay. When we present the results of an oral history project, then, we must take care to leave at least a trace of the oral, narrative, dialogic origin of the materials we work with. This is why, beyond a matter of documentary accuracy, oral historians quote their sources and use montage to a much wider extent than other historians, anthropologists, sociologists.

By quoting our narrators at length, we also achieve another result: that of retaining at least some of the complex polysemy of oral story-telling. On the one hand, by preserving, as much as it is possible in writing, the vernacular, colloquial language in which the stories are often told, we insist that the meaning of an event cannot be separated from the language in which it is remembered and narrated. On the other hand, the narrative form always contains more layers of meaning, more directions of interpretation than a logical, rational analysis. Although we do not refrain from advancing hypotheses and suggesting interpretations, we are aware of the fact that the material we present can always be read in a number of different ways. Indeed, it has often been the case that other readers, or the narrators themselves, saw in my own books undercurrents of meaning and webs of connections which I had not intentionally put there, and of which I had not been aware myself.

Orality, then, is not just the vehicle of information but also a component of its meaning. The dialogic and narrative form of oral sources culminate in the density and complexity of language itself. The very tones and accents of the oral discourse convey the history and identity of the speakers, and transmit meanings well beyond the speakers' conscious intention.

7. Conclusions

Now, the important thing about the dialogic nature of oral history work is that it does not end with the interview, or even with the publication, but must find ways of being useful to the individuals and the communities involved. This is the process that goes under the generic labels of "restitution" and "dissemination".

Restitution, of course, begins with the interview itself – in the first place, at least returning a copy of the tape to the interviewee, or to the family. In the past, this was not always easy. On the one hand, duplicating was not an easy process before the availability of electronic tools. Most importantly, often our interviewees, especially in rural environments, did not own a tape or cassette recorder and were unable to listen to the tapes. They, however, accepted them gladly, both as a token of our good will, and as something to pass on to the younger generations. More recently, especially since we have been able to put the catalogue of our archive on the web, we have received requests from family member, especially grandchildren, of our interviewees of the '60s and '70s, and were glad to be able to return copies of the recordings to them. In this way, we help create stores for family memories.

Things become more complicated when it comes to restitution to the community, because it involves locating an institution, an organization, that can be identified as active in and representative of, the community. While we have done our best to locate copies of the tapes in local libraries and archives, this was not always the best solution, as the collections remained largely unused.

We had better luck with schools, not so much in terms of depositing the material, as of teaching classes on our research on the community's history and culture. This work often resulted in an increased awareness of cultural identity and of projects that the young people could carry out themselves. An even more effective form of restitution was in terms of music, theatre, media. I remember a wonderful evening in which we went back to Arrone, a town where I had collected many songs of anti-fascism and union struggle, and presented a program based on those very songs. The very fact that a group of professional musicians from Rome had found those songs important enough to learn and sing them was a revelation to the community that had been taking them for granted. More recently, the Circolo Bosio has produced a series of multimedia documents (DVD, CD-Rom) that have been distributed to schools and libraries in local

communities (Terni, Tivoli, Valmontone, Monterotondo) and have become important teaching tools. An interesting case was the CD-Rom we produced in 2003, to commemorate the 50 years since the mass layoffs at the Terni steel works: as it came out exactly at the time of another wave of mass layoffs, we gave out dozens of copies to the workers on the picket lines at the factory, and it became an instant organizing tool.

Another thing we should keep in mind is that by “community” we may not necessarily mean a geographic community, but also a community of feeling and action. This is the case of the “alternative globalization” movement that staged the mass protests at Genoa in 2001 (culminating with the death of a young demonstrator). We have carried out an oral history project on those events, and produced a number of home-made audio CDs that were both distributed among the movement, and sold to finance the cost of legal defence in a number of court cases that followed the protest. In this case, we may also notice that, since the project was carried out mainly by young researchers who were themselves part of the movement, it is the “community” itself that produces the research and its results.

Another case is my research on the massacre of the Fosse Ardeatine. The episode had been cloaked in a cloud of false narratives and legends that were offensive both to the Resistance, and to the victims themselves. The most important aspect of “restitution” was the kind of historical rectification and recognition that the book granted to the “communities” of the partisans and to the survivors. Because the book was (relatively) successful, they felt that they had been vindicated, and that their voices had been articulated so that they could no longer be ignored. The book was published in 1999; since then, I have been involved in at least 150 events with partisans and survivors, in schools, meetings, festivals, telling the story along with them. The book has also been used as a teaching tool in many schools.

This experience suggests that “restitution” is a somewhat inadequate label. The historian/activist contribution to those “communities” is, in fact, not just the collection of the stories and songs. Nor is it just to return the knowledge to the community (which, by definition, already possess it, since that’s where it comes from in the first place). Rather, the historian/activist’s contribution to the community is an elaboration and articulation of the community’s knowledge, and the spreading of this knowledge beyond the community’s boundaries.

Thus, the most important contribution I feel I have made to the communities has been, often, the fact that my work made their knowledge available to artists that told their story all over the country. Ascanio Celestini has presented a one-man performance on the Fosse Ardeatine in hundreds of venues all over Italy; singer Giovanna Marini (Italy’s finest musician) wrote, performed and recorded a ballad based on the narratives in my book. In other words, the non-academic uses of the book not only returned the pride and identity to the partisans and survivors, but restored an awareness of these events and their meaning to a broad national community.

This, of course, is only one – though possibly the most significant – example of a non-academic use of oral history. After all, the cultural/activist tradition with which I identify myself – that of the Istituto de Martino, the Circolo Gianni Bosio, the Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano - has been active entirely outside the academy (my own academic position has nothing to do with oral history and folk music). Our purpose has been, from the beginning, to document the musical and historical knowledge of the urban and rural working classes in order to develop forms of communication – concerts, recordings, teach-ins, theatre, radio programs as well as books and articles – that would reinforce working people’s sense of identity and cohesion and articulate their ideals and grievances.

The synthesis of this approach is that we need to combine the best of activist involvement with people and communities, with the best of the “academic” methodology, so that the dialogic result of our work we produce jointly will not be a mere mirroring of what the community already knows, but a further articulation of this knowledge, and its inclusion in a broader cultural dialogue. After all, what makes Terni steel workers proud and aware of their heritage is less the fact that I returned the tapes of their interviews. Instead, because my book based on their stories is a textbook in a number of universities in the United States and elsewhere, their experience and their words are now part of an international historical record from which they had been excluded before.

Finally, a dialogue reflects on both sides. An interview is primarily a learning situation for the interviewer, especially if the motivation is (broadly) political. It is hard for me to pinpoint ways in which doing oral history and collecting folk songs has changed me: I have been doing this for thirty-five years, and I guess I can say that most of who and what I am is a result of this work. Perhaps, the most important thing I

have learned is the art of listening and respecting the agendas and priorities of other people. I hope I have been able to apply this lesson, to some extent at least, not only in oral history work but also in my own life.

¹ Gianni Bosio, "Fonti orali e storiografia," in *L'intellettuale rovesciato* (Milan: Edizioni Bella Ciao, 1975), pp. 263-68.

² Alessandro Portelli, *Biografia di una città. Storia e racconto: Terni 1831-1985* (Torino: Einaudi, 1985). For more introductory readings on oral history, see Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford University Press, 1988); *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 1998); *Oral History. An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, second edition, Altamira Press (Walnut Creek - London), 1996, ed. by David Dunaway e Willa K. Baum; the journal *Historia, Antropología y Fuente Oral*, published in Barcelona, Spain.

³ In Alessandro Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out*, New York: Palgrave 2003, p. 219).

⁴ The research was never published; for reasons of privacy, I cannot supply the names of the persons involved.

⁵ Micaela Arcidiacono et al., *L'aeroplano e le stelle. Storia orale di una realtà studentesca* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 1994).

⁶ A. Portelli, "There's Always Goin' Be a Line: History-Telling as a Multivocal Art", in *The Battle of Valle Giulia. Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: Wisconsin University >Press, 1997), pp. 24-39.

⁷ See Alessandro Portelli, "Oral History as Genre" and "There's Always Goin' Be a Line: History-Telling as a Multivocal Art", in *The Battle of Valle Giulia. Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: Wisconsin University >Press, 1997), pp. 3-39.

⁸ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), pp. 10-15.

⁹ Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968).