

## ORAL HISTORY AS A METHOD FOR HISTORICAL RESEARCH

This paper discusses oral history as a method of historical research especially for the history of state socialism. There is not in the intention of this paper to outline a full argument about oral history. The focus is on oral history as a method of research, intertwined with considerations about memory under state socialism, as a final argument for using oral history in the reconstruction of the past. This paper advocates the potentialities of oral history method, without pledging for oral history as the *only* research method available.

A simple definition states that "oral history collects spoken memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through interviews"<sup>1</sup>. This is a rather functional definition, referring to the methods used by oral history. Paul Thompson provides another definition, stating the role of oral history in reshaping the actual historiographical approach because "it can be a means for transforming both the content and the purpose of history. It can be used to change the focus of history itself, and open new area of inquiry"<sup>2</sup>. Jan Vansina calls oral history "immediate history", because it interviews participants at an event, using as sources reminiscence, hearsay, eyewitness accounts<sup>3</sup>. A further delimitation is necessary in defining oral history, that between "oral tradition" and "personal reminiscence", as Gwyn Priss states. Oral tradition is "oral testimony transmitted verbally from one generation to the next, or more", and "personal reminiscence" is "oral evidence specific to the life experiences of informant", that is not passed from one generation to another<sup>4</sup>. In short, this "personal reminiscence" is also called "oral history" or, as Anthony Seldon does, "interview". To sum up, oral history appears as a particular method of investigation through interviewing living documents, i. e. witnesses, about recent events.

One of the most important problems risen by the development of the method of "oral history" is that of its relevance, i. e. the potentialities, the possible gains for historiographical approach through oral history. Alessandro Portelli gives an insight account about oral history as research methodology, stating that oral history "tells us less about *events* than about their *meaning*". One of the most important is the possibility to "correct other sources"<sup>5</sup>, to bring a supplement of information besides writing arguments. But here appears another actual problem of using oral history as a method. There are the issues of the "reliability" and "credibility" of oral sources and, in a broader perspective, the confrontation between document or "literate history" and the "spoken document", or "the new history". Oral history or the use of oral sources appears as "a reaction against the traditional paradigm or the 'Rankean history'" and from this confrontation a definition of new history can be stated.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, New York, Twayne Publishers, 1995, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past. Oral History*, 2nd edition, Oxford, Oxford Press University, 1988, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, London: James Currey Ltd, 1985, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Jan Vansina quoted in Gwyn Priss, *Oral History*, in *New perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991, p. 120.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

New history is not concerned with politics or events; it is not a narration of the events, but an analysis of structure. It is not a view from above, but a view from below, of the "ordinary people and their experience of social change". Furthermore, new history's greatest provocation is that it uses not only "official documents" but also a vast amount of evidence, including oral sources<sup>6</sup>. This shift makes oral history a main method of inquiry into the past. Moreover, the actual perception of history as not being just "objective" or, in Ranke's words, "what it really happened", but as "cultural relativism", brings oral history into the forefront of the historical methods. This "cultural relativism" means that present day historians distrust the myth of stating the "reality" of the past as a main goal of writing history. That is, the acceptance of relativism of acknowledgement, in the sense that "our minds do not reflect reality directly. We perceive the world only through a network of connections, schemata and stereotypes, a network which varies from one culture to another". In short, this means a new approach for reconstructing history, not through simple and "objective" narration of events, but through displaying opposite views. That is, in Burke's words, the ideal of "heteroglossia"<sup>7</sup>.

Oral history introduces, through its methods of interpretation, the value of divergent opinions. Taking into account the historian's concern for historical truth, divergent opinions offer a different view of historical truth. The reality is reconstructing through these different opinions. The method employed consists in collecting and interpreting "errors". Criticism of oral history method uses this collection of errors as its main argument to refute the value of oral history as a method of historical research. The main objections refer to human memory particularities and to the representativeness of the interviewees.

The critics of oral history consider human memory being subjective. Not only because "people remember what they *think* is important", but also because human memory has its specific biological limits<sup>8</sup>. First, the critics argue that sometimes people remember what did not happen, including others' experience in their personal experience. Second, chronological references are considered inaccurate because of the so-called "telescoping memory", i.e. the wrong chronological references to certain events. The conclusion of these critics of oral history is that the testimonies, being inaccurate, have no value for historical inquiry. Moreover, the process of recalling is thought to be influenced by the interviewer and the interview-situation, because in different situations and towards different interviewers, the same interviewee says different things.

This criticism is made from the point of view of searching the "truth" and the "accuracy" in writing history, that is advocating history as a narration of data that can be verified by written documents. The arguments of "document-driven historians" refer mainly to the precision in form and in chronology offered by written documents and the possibility to verify the accuracy of a document appealing to another documents<sup>9</sup>. Oral history has none of these qualities. But neither is this its goal. Oral history offers another opportunity, that is not available for written sources. This is the opportunity to consider "the special value which they (i. e. the facts from oral sources)

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Burke, *Overture: the New History, its Past and its Future*. In Burke, p. 2-5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ritchie, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Pris, p. 119.

have as subjective, spoken testimony"<sup>10</sup>. The criticism does not consider the main idea of oral history. This idea is that through oral testimonies, facts and events are no longer data, embedded in a written document, but they acquire a "social meaning" because "all history depends ultimately by its social purpose"<sup>11</sup>. This imposes the need not only to narrate an event, but to analyse and to interpret the social accounts, to find their meanings<sup>12</sup>. This interpretation urges historians to analyse the structures that lay behind the personal reminiscence or the individual perception of an event. Oral history offers for study just this divergence between a recorded event and its oral testimony or the divergence between oral testimonies of the same event. Revealing the differences of perceptions, oral history introduces the preoccupation for community's perceptions of history. History becomes "more democratic"<sup>13</sup>. In the same time, it offers the possibility to complete the information that written sources retained inaccurately or incompletely. This completion of data is made in the same time with the introduction of a multiple perspective, because the interviewees will not speak in the same way about the same event. Introducing personal events and personal considerations in their stories, they could highlight an event from different and unexpected angles. This ultimately means that historians have the chance to come out of this "narrow circle circumscribed by their own culture"<sup>14</sup>, multiplying the perspectives and the diversity of historical interpretations. The historian has the chance to look at an event through several perspectives that belongs to different people with different life experiences. The interpretation will gain in depth and complexity, and the goal of historical writing becomes larger.

Once the field of oral history and its utility in contemporary historical research established, it is necessary to discuss the practical problems of methodology. In other words, to discuss the steps required to put in practice the ideal of a history-writing relied upon oral sources. Accepting that oral sources reveal people's "models" of reality, what they believe that happened in the past, the historian's inquiry has to be directed to the interpretation of these models. Because, as Thompson states, "History is not about events, or structures, or patterns of behaviour, but also about *how these are experienced and remembered in the imagination*. And one part of history, what people imagined happened, and also what they believe might happen - their imagination of an alternative past, and so, an alternative present - may be as crucial as what happened"<sup>15</sup>. Or, in Alessandro Portelli's words, "The first thing that makes oral history different is that it tells us less about *events* than about their *meaning*"<sup>16</sup>. In short, a historical analysis should be applied to the content of the interview, to the shape of memories, looking for an explanation for the past from the point of view of witnesses' manifold perceptions. This aim of revealing the sources of misinterpretation or memory's fallacy is the core idea of oral history method. The reason is that through this analysis a broader picture of the past is provided. Related to this is

<sup>10</sup> Thompson, p. 101.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Tonkin, *History and Myth of Realism*. In *The Myth We Live by*, 2nd edition Paul Thompson and Raphael Samuel, ed. London, Routledge, 1993, p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> Thompson, p. 109.

<sup>14</sup> Prig, p. 137.

<sup>15</sup> Thompson, p. 139.

<sup>16</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*, Albany, 1991, p. 50.

interpreting the silence, i. e., the events that are not mentioned in an interview. In other words, the use of oral history is to reveal the informants hide an event, as well as what event they hide, for interpreting their attitude towards the remembered past<sup>17</sup>.

In short, there are four main advantages of using oral history method. The first advantage consists in its capacity of providing extra-information, especially for contemporary events, because the archives are still inaccessible. The second is the possibility to supplement information from writing sources, either by filling the gaps in the documentation, or by enlarging the area of inquiry, bringing new perspectives of research. The third advantage is the possibility to identify other sources of documentation, accidentally mentioned by interviewees. Finally, through analysis of the oral material, this could reveal assumptions, i. e. the motives lying behind documents, and some aspects that could not be registered in the official written transcripts<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, the oral sources have their accuracy, meaning that invention of interpretation is censored by the living presence of the testimony. Their ultimate advantage lies in the broader perspective imposed, because through the process of remembering, the recalls are linked with the present, are embedded in a written form, and therefore, preserved and saved.

The interpretation of oral sources uses some special rules. First, and the most important, is to "cross-check" with other sources, to discover the divergences between written and oral sources, with the goal to interpret these divergences. Moreover, an interview should be treated as a part of a wider context, connected with other testimonies. Also, the testimony should be placed in the special social context of the interviewee. This means that an interpretation must refer to the particularities of the interviewee, race, gender, social stratum or cultural background. As it will be argued further, these differences among interviewees highlight the different structure of memory for different people. Making a connection between the perception of the past and the individual background it is possible to enlarge the historical inquiry, as Thompson said, sometimes bringing unexpected perspectives of interpretations<sup>19</sup>. To sum up, it requires, mainly, not to limit to the story itself, to the anecdotal, but to see further and beyond the words, to search for structures and hidden assumptions.

In this process of looking for a structure, memory and its special qualities play a crucial role. An individual memory is not a singular thing, although it is unique. But very often, it relies on values accepted by the community, on "myth" that gives to the individual the feeling of belonging to his/her community. Therefore, in an oral interview, two strata may be identified. The first is the strata of common shared interpretation of the past. The second is constituted by individuals' experiences and interpretations of the past. There is no gap, and these strata are intermingled. But these interpretations are still influenced by two different approaches to the past. One is the "nostalgic" approach, a glorification of the "good old days", especially by a hidden comparison with the present situation. The other is forgetting, or "amnesia", either individual or collective, a reaction provoked mainly by the experiences perceived as unpleasant or as a trauma. These particularities of both the individual and collective memory have special significance when oral history is used as a method in researching the recent past of a totalitarian regime.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> Seldon, p. 4-5.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 240-243.

Oral history works with memory, individual as well as collective. Its importance in historical inquiry upon communism is due to the special condition of the individual and collective memory in a totalitarian regime. These considerations are complicated when the research is focused upon a minority living in a totalitarian regime.

The condition of memory in a totalitarian regime is a special one. A divergence occurs mainly between state-sponsored memory of the past, or the official view of the past, and the individual perception. There is a relation of power, as the state forces the individual and the collective memory to accept the official view, imposing a compulsory forgetting of the previous or alternate visions and memories. Nevertheless, this process of forgetting is not complete. It supposes two forms of resistance. The task of preserving the collective memory is transferred to some individuals that embedded the collective memory in an autobiographical account, filtering it through their own, individual memory. This means that the illiterate memories become literate. Once written, these filtered memories of the community are again embedded in the collective memory, but bearing the specific changes due to their process of literacy, of transforming in a personal narrative. This is the mechanism of the dissent literature and its influence upon collective and individual memory that was the subject of the compulsory erasing of the past. These changes in memories are proved through oral history interviews, when the interviewees include, as their own memories, experiences and considerations that belong to a dissent writer<sup>20</sup>. Making interviews about the events of November 1990, Andrew Lass concludes that some events were overlapped by external interpretations, made by radio broadcasts or by direct participants. Direct experiences were replaced by others' evidence. A similar process occurs when collective or individual memories are repressed by a totalitarian state. Because of the compulsory process of forgetting, the individual recollects later his memories from the dissent literature, from those who write to preserve these memories, but filtered through their individual experience. The interviewees make an appeal to this "literate" authority to legitimate their recollections. From this point of view, oral history methodology is the unique method that can prove this reintegration of the past in the collective or individual memory. This "hermeneutic reinsertion of a written point of view into an illiterate person's oral testimony" has its particular significance as an identification with a dissent point of view<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, dissenters' perceptions of the past are not equal, but rely on different paradigms. As a whole, memory of an oppressing past is either transformed in a reason for fighting and resistance, or it is assumed as a personal guilt and transformed in a recognition of one self's faults and contribution to the totalitarian system of repression<sup>22</sup>. The choice one makes between these two "paradigms" must be considered from the point of view of one's attitude towards a totalitarian regime. That is why oral history interview is especially important in dismantling one's perception of the past.

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<sup>20</sup> Andrew Lass, *From Memory to History. The Events of November Dis/membered*. In *Memory, History, and Opposition Under State Socialism*, ed. Rubie S. Watson, Santa Fe, School of American Research Press, 1994, p. 89-104.

<sup>21</sup> Priz, p. 132.

<sup>22</sup> These are the two memory paradigms identified by Richard S. Esbenshade: "Kundera paradigm" (memory as revenge, as accusation and resistance against the process of compulsory forgetting) and Konrad's paradigm, memory as assuming past faults, and one's condition as a participant. Richard S. Esbenshade, *Remembering to Forget. Memory, History, National Identity in Postwar East-central Europe*. In *Representations*, 49, Winter 1995, p. 72-96.

This relationship between the state and individual is a relationship between subordinates and those who dominate. This produces two types of discourse: a public one, according to the official standards; and a hidden one, disguised in attitudes and special language, as tricks or rumours. Investigation on this particular form of resistance or "political disguise", is possible only by employing oral history methods, through interviewing and identifying the stereotypes used in a "public transcript", i. e. the discourse made for officials. This proves an alternative to the official history created by a totalitarian state. As in a communist society, the literate or written version of memory is monopolised by the state, leaving to the subordinates the unique possibility of oral expression. Consequently, a special and underground oral resistance will occur, taking forms of disguise, or "hidden transcripts". The opposition is not directly expressed, but hidden beyond rumour, gossip, grumbling, euphemism, and so on, all of them providing anonymity for the subordinate<sup>23</sup>.

The same relationship pattern, subordinates/those who dominates exists for an ethnic minority living in a communist regime. An ethnic community develops its own tactics of disguise, double oriented. Firstly, it targets the dominant state, secondly, the majority who the state pretends to represent. Through oral inquiry, this stereotypes of minority's discourse, constructed as an art of disguise the resistance towards state repression, could be revealed. As the official documents bear exclusively the official view, because of the state censorship, oral history methods are the unique source to recover the perception of history from a subordinate point of view, to reconstruct it. It provides extra-information about banished subjects. For instance, such a banished subject was the illegal emigration from Romania to Hungary. This event can be constructed mainly on oral sources. Moreover, using the same example, oral history interviewers could explain the motives of emigration, the motives of taking a risk and doing a forbidden thing. Related, this could offer the Hungarian community perception of its situation in Romania during Communism, reconstructing a past that was ignored or altered by the official accounts. Memories of this community should confront memories of the Romanian witnesses to view the differences between these two methods of reconstructing the past as two techniques of political disguise. However, as Arthur Hansen warns, an ethnic community should not be considered homogenous, but heterogeneous, paying attention to "age, generation, class, gender and ideological divisions within them, if we want to gain a more complex sense of past reality"<sup>24</sup>.

Oral history, as working with both individual and collective memory, is considered as a method of historical inquiry not only for providing not-recorded data, but also for analysing the specific conceptions of a subordinated group about their identity and their place in history. In a totalitarian society the literacy of memory is seized by the state, representing its versions of the past, and this version of memory is used to erase any other counter-memories. Consequently, only illiterate memory is available for subordinated groups, for disguise an opposition against the state monopoly on memory. This illiteracy of the memories allows oral history as a method

<sup>23</sup> James S. Scott, *Domination and Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*, Yale University Press, 1990, p. 139-152.

<sup>24</sup> Arthur A. Hansen, *A Riot of Voices: Racial And Ethnic Variables in Interactive Oral History Interviewing*. In *Interactive Oral History Interviewing*, ed. Eva M. McMahan and Kim Lacy Rogers, p. 107-140, Hillsdale, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 1994, p. 136-137.

of researching the history of communism. But the oral sources do not provide only supplementary data, but also informants' variants of the past, their interpretation of their historical past, and therefore, insights of their subjectivity. And "Subjectivity is as much the business of history as are the more visible 'facts'. What informants believe is indeed a historical *fact* (that is, the fact that they believe it), as much as what really happened"<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Portelli, p. 50.