

Oral history for reconstructing the past



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Oral history has a fairly chequered reputation within the historical scholarly tradition. The idea of memory as a useful historical source took a long time to establish itself and even then continued to be regarded with contempt by many academics. This question is borne out of that past, but bears little relevance to the current historical understanding of memory, oral history and its usefulness in our scholarship. The question is also ambiguous, for example what exactly does 'reliable' or 'reconstructing the past' mean? In terms of oral history reliability has been defined as the "consistency with which an individual will tell the same story about the same events on a number of different occasions." [1] However the question implies a comparative with documentary sources, so this definition cannot stand. It seems a better definition will allude to the use of the source in order to better 'reconstruct the past.' Reconstructing the past is an exercise in futility, but that does not preclude the admirable nature of the attempt, for the purpose of this essay, it seems prudent to accept this as the craft and goal of the historian, although there is another debate there. This essay will argue that oral history is as reliable for reconstructing the past as documentary sources, but differently reliable. There are areas in which it provides a fuller version of the history than a documentary source ever could, but also vice-versa. Oral history is a very specific type of source that requires specific methods of use. Good oral historical scholarship will always be required and through this, many of the accusations of unreliability can be avoided. The embedded subjective or collective meaning, far from being an unacademic hindrance, is actually an excellent source of historical data. It allows us to study not only the past, but our relationship with the past and how that changes over time. The institutionalised scholarly snobbery towards

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oral history should be discontinued and instead, its possibilities fully embraced. Firstly this essay will describe why oral history has come to be seen as useful and discuss whether these are the most appropriate and reliable uses for it. Secondly it will discuss some of the techniques already used by oral historians to limit unreliability and evaluate how successful these are. Lastly it will address some of the accusations levelled at oral history and attempt to show their inaccuracy or insufficient basis to render all of oral history, unreliable.

The current vogue for oral history is borne out of a mid-20th century ambition to rewrite history ‘from below.’ This is a very important part of how oral history can help us ‘reconstruct the past’ however to say oral history has the ability to rewrite history is a gross overstatement. History written from documents is at the mercy of those who create/compile the archival record. While the famous phrase suggests history is written by the winners, generally it is written from the perspective of the rich, the powerful, Thomas Carlyle’s “Great Men.”[2] While the influences of the masses can be studied through the effect on the political or diplomatic history, their individual, social and class histories are often unavailable in textual documents. Often the members of those classes were illiterate and had no means of documentation. Oral History became the great vanguard of the social historians, attempting to rewrite history from the position of those previously down-trodden and ignored by academic historical scholarship, not out of spite, but from a paucity of resources. Sometimes even the middle class[3] could be grouped under this ‘previously ignored’ heading. This tends to explain why the majority of oral history resides in areas where there is a

lack of written or archival sources.[4]This is obviously an area in which whole areas of the past have been ignored in our reconstruction and can now be elucidated. However this is not tantamount to a ‘rewriting’ of history from below, it is an addition to the historical canon, not a reversal. As stated by David Henige, ‘real value of oral history is its power to lead us towards a truer understanding of the past...light on distortions and gaps in official records.’[5]This is not the only useful area for oral history, as will be discussed later it is the dichotomy or similarity between oral and archival sources that will lead to a better understanding of ‘the past.’ While the outcome of oral history is quite clearly useful, the oral sources themselves also serve a direct purpose, which differentiates them from archival sources and perhaps, elevates them.

Oral sources general produce interviews that are a conversational narrative that can be shaped while in progress or revisited later in order to create evidence. This is a fundamental benefit of oral history that must be taken into account when assessing its reliability. Oral sources are, in the main, interviews. These are not only malleable in and of themselves, but repeatable. Both of those characteristics increase their reliability in the sense that questions can be approached multiple times within one interview through different viewpoints, or repeated over a series of interviews. This conversational narrative is what sets oral history apart from the documents because it is interactive. A document can only say the words on that singular page, but an oral source can be moulded and approached from different directions, in order to receive the fullest version of events. The historian must always understand that the interview is itself comprised of a series of

structures, but not those derived from the narrow conventions of written history.[6]The historian-interviewer is an integral part of the source and as long as that is always acknowledged and understood it does not detract from the source as of use. Interviews and oral sources also provide for a far deeper sub-textual understanding than archival, written sources. While we could discuss provenance, the reasoning, audience and intention behind a written source an oral source provides all that, but plenty of alternative information too. One good example is Luisa Passerini's understanding of silence. She completed many interviews with Italians after the end of world war two and found that the period 1925-39 was basically absent from all of their memories. The collective memory had silenced the events. To her, this told just as much as a factual recount of the era. It seems plain that when reading into oral sources the expression, dialect, inflection and tone all add a layer of understanding. This is a fundamental method in which oral history is important and worthwhile, because of the differences between this type of source and the documentary source. It also provides a method with which to improve reliability through repetition but also through self-awareness that the historian-interviewer is part of the process in creating the source.

Oral historians are generally now aware of their duty to ensure the reliability of their oral sources and have developed techniques to answer some of the challenges put to them. The first and most important technique is simply using the documentary evidence to supplement the knowledge in oral sources. This happens in two ways: as part of the interviewers technique, knowing the history and being able to determine when oral sources are mistaken and whether any benefit will be gained from informing them and

secondly symptomatic reading with written sources after the oral source is created, assessing the similarities and differences. The second technique is an oft-debated topic. The traditional academic line of argument suggests that the a priori written source is correct due to its repeated use of evidence and that the oral source has been tainted by the vagaries of memory and as such is useless. In fact the debate is false, oral sources can help provide corroborating evidence for a written source, but far more interesting and historically valuable is the differences between the documentary record and oral sources. A great example is Alessandro Portelli's investigation into Luigi Trastulli's death in Terni, Italy 1949[7]. He knew from the documents the event occurred in 1949, but the popular memory insisted it was 1953 around the local steel factory redundancies. While this is not enlightening in the direct sense of the date of Trastulli's death, it tells us more about the popular memory, how it relates to events and how the population related to the death of Trastulli. This is symptomatic of oral history, it often can be read to induce insights, oversights or answers to questions not even asked in the interview.

The Portelli example also alludes to another charge laid against oral sources for being unreliable, the idea of changing memory. The traditional argument attests that because memory changes, it is inherently unreliable. This is simply an extension of the book snobbery exhibited by historians who are not versed in the study of oral history. The changing of memory actually adds increasing depth to the source, allowing a further level of understanding. Memories change because there is a dynamic relationship between the informant and their own historical consciousness, that is, the

paradigm through which they view history. Analysing the change in memory actually tells us how the subject viewed the event at two points in time and allows us to evaluate why the event was important enough to be in their memory, but to change. This is clearly strength in oral history, rather than a weakness.

So far oral history has been defended from the more traditional critiques from the scholarly ranks, however there are more nuanced critiques and questions that perhaps have more merit. The first of these is the failure of oral historians to ascribe to fully professional levels of scholarship. Henige makes the argument that Oral Historians feel too much affinity with their sources, because they broadly created them. Grele agrees and makes the analytical jump to realising that “ few oral historians are forced to submit their work to public criticism.”[8]This is a significant problem for the usefulness and reliability of oral history. The historical profession is only partly new research; revision and re-revision of analysis through debate and scholarly criticism are necessary scholarly pursuits. They lead us to a better reconstruction of the past. Oral historians have been guilty of cutting themselves out of that conversation by not fully allowing sources to be critiqued. This is a powerful critique about the reliability and usefulness of oral sources. However the Henige book was written in 1982, technology has advanced since that time. It is far even to digitally record video and store it safely in multiple places. Only 20 years ago sources created ‘ in the field’ were far more difficult to transport and keep. It also speaks to the continuing professionalization of history; any contemporary, reasonable oral historian should want to be part of the debate and as such would make their sources

available. A linked critique is that in a variety of cases only transcripts, or edited transcripts exist to critique from. As already described, oral history relies on much more than simply words and as such, transcripts cannot be considered oral sources, just as dictated Edwardian letters are documentary sources, not oral.[9]The historians Cutler and Bension[10]argue on this point quite directly, Cutler asserting that a transcript is a raw material similar to any other source, but Benison talks of the interview being an autobiographical memoir that serves as a first interpretation. It seems (as I have written it) that both have confused the interview and the transcript, lending credence to the view that there is a significant difference between them.

Perhaps one of the view, legitimate criticisms of oral history lies in the process of interviewing itself. While there are techniques to limit their input, the historian is a complicit part of the creation of the oral source. It is not simply enough to recognise this when it can have profound outcomes on the representation of said source. The historian-interviewer asks the questions and determines the focus of an interview. Already the source is being shaped into evidence, rather simply existing as what E. H. Carr would call a historical fact. The endemic assertion of the historian-interviewer is even deeper than their input into the live interviewing process. The selection of interviewees fundamentally affects the results in oral sources. While sociological techniques can be used to attempt to randomize this, unless everyone involved in an incident is interviewed then there is always some element left out, or some bias left in. Even more so than this, historians will select interviewee's based on their conception of history, their selection of whom is

important and what is not. They search for evidence based on how they conceive the historical process, they may be representative statistically, but they would still fall foul of this point.[11]