

Recovering, Remembering, Denouncing, Keeping the Memory of the Past Updated

Oral History in Latin America and the Caribbean

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For our peoples, the testimonial rescue runs parallel to our histories; be it by means of the oral tradition which Prehispanic cultures preserved from generation to generation until our days, reminding us of the magic magnitude of our inherited past; be it due to the commendable and untiring task of the conquest chroniclers that, beginning with Fray Bernadino de Sahagun, in the territory that today is Mexico, took upon themselves to write and understand the natives, learning from their own telling the experience of the clash, the encounter and the later medley that was the Spanish conquest. Finally, from that former inheritance which has gone through the colonial effort (Seventeenth and Nineteenth Centuries) of memoirs, diaries and volumes of letters, right in the Twentieth Century a need reaches our times, which is by all means unpostponable; a necessity to rescue and preserve experiences, of the mind and of the expression of daily happening which, put into tape and eventually transcribed, strengthens and consolidates our sense of belonging and identity.

Because, as happened in the past with oral tradition, the concern of Latin American and Caribbean oral history seems to center and focus fundamentally in the scope of that which is social, since it rescues that which is the everyday thing, the transcendental, the historical fact expressed by word of mouth, in the style of its various protagonists; the very universe that builds diverse histories, finally integrating them into only one, in which its makers, plain men and women, are recognized.

It is worth insisting that from a methodological perspective, the social scientists, upon reconstructing our America's history, have not circumscribed themselves to the traditional bibliohemerographic materials and documents, but have resorted also to the testimony obtained through interviews, surveys, questionnaires, life histories after the style of anthropological works or, more formally, through oral history. At times they have looked for the unknown or they have corroborated already known information. They have verified or amended history when weaving the leading yarn of the social process beginning with those who have lived, known preterite actions or meditated over them.

Perhaps oral history development in our part of the Continent is more identified with that which is performed by the Europeans (Italians and English) who clearly channel the rescue of life histories towards the purpose of social history.

Paradoxically, we did not echo that which is near to us, and that to which influence we should supposedly be more susceptible, that of the United States of America. It is an oral history, maybe more mechanistic, more utilitarian, more on the road to the creation, preservation and accumulation of testimonial archives, in which the interview *know-how* acquires outstanding dimensions. It is true that in an analysis from a bird's eye view, we can observe in the works carried out in the USA, trends that fluctuate between projects on relevant political figures and the rescue of personal experiences of minority communities: Blacks, Hispanics, Jews, Poles, etc. On countless occasions, the interview is an end in itself; maybe part of a larger project in some foundation or presidential library or university files.

A truly multinational effort to modernize the ancient custom of the chroniclers was generated in the 60s, and it is possible that Mexico may have been the pioneer country, although not the only one.¹ Groups and institutions propounded the use of oral history as a necessity in the task of the social sciences. It was not easy to penetrate fields that had been almost taken over by the anthropologists.

It took the oral history interview a long time to be understood, respected and taken advantage of. Today it is commonplace: courses, seminars, projects and institutions testify on the development of that which we insisted upon defining as a methodology and not a mere technique, because it deals with one element, a cultural output that may help analysis and interpretation.²

Likewise, and probably due to the nature of our Latin American realities, the comings and goings of "caudillos", the military coups, the dictatorships and the constant violation of human rights, the work and product of oral history acquire a fundamental dimension, that of its denouncement nature. There are many untold or destroyed histories that must be told and reconstructed of so many Latin American peoples, committed to democracy and social justice, whose recollections must not be forgotten.

Also, all and each one of our countries have different and unique pasts to be preserved; undoubtedly the peculiarities of the oral history of Latin America are due to these.

We have pointed out the possibility that Mexico may be the pioneer country with some efforts in the 60's, besides those accomplished here by Northamericans such as the wellknown Oscar Lewis. It was Mexico that in 1972 organized the first formal project with the "Archivo de la Palabra" of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia. Systematically, work was begun on the revolutionaries of 1910, on the development of public education (emphasizing the experiment of the socialist education of the '30s), on the growth of the film industry; also on the history of

¹ Eugenia Meyer, "Oral History in Mexico and Latin America", *Oral History Review* New York, Oral History Association (July 1965). "Oral History in Latin America", *International Journal of Oral History*, Connecticut, Meckler Publishing, (1980) Vol. 1. 1

² Eugenia Meyer, "Comunicación y Liberación tareas de la historia", *Revista Santiago*. Santiago de Cuba (Diciembre de 1983) No. 52 p. 61-67.

medicine, of the Spanish refugees, and on regional history projects in the Northwest, the West and the Southeast.³

After some time those who integrated the "Archivo de la Palabra" began to question and formulate thoughts of methodological order. They initiated seminars for diffusion and formation, thus propitiating a real flow of private and institutional projects: the worker's movement history, the farmers' struggles, the indigenous risings, the religious movements, the regional development, oil workers, fishermen, electricity workers, urban movements, etc.

One might conclude that oral history is common practice and an essential instrument in all social science work in Mexico. There is not the possibility here to make specific reference, let alone just mentioning the enormous quantity of publications that are the product of oral history: articles, essays, books; be it by using the transcriptions *per se*, be it integrating them in analytical and interpretative forms, but above all as a way of rescue and reappraisal in the popular mind. It is in this last possibility where even today one finds the most important vein. There is a resurgence of the interest for that which is an everyday event, the ordinary, the processes, facing the ancient elitist trends, more concerned with political history and the remembrances of events.

But besides the academic scope, oral history has a popular usage with two fundamental streams. On the one hand, it is the production of testimonial books such as those of Elena Poniatowska: *La noche de Tlatelolco and Hasta no verte Jesús mío*.⁴ And on the other hand, the series *Testimonios para la historia del cine mexicano*⁵ and that of *Palabras del exilio. Contribución a la historia de los refugiados españoles en México*.⁶ On the other hand, it is fundamental matter for the assemblage of historical museums, assuming they must "communicate". The information provided in the interviews of oral history has significantly served in the reconstructions of historical processes and in the illustration of life styles from different times and circumstances.⁷

In the beginning of the discipline in the academic field was difficult and had multiple slips on facing and confronting the traditional orthodoxy of universities and research centers, the significant changes and the conquered spaces must be recognized. Perhaps from this comes the interest that was soon manifested by

³ Vid *Catálogo del Archivo de la Palabra*, México, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Luis Mora.

⁴ Elena Poniatowska, *La noche de Tlatelolco*, México, Ediciones Era, 1971. *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, México. Ediciones Era, 1978.

⁵ Eugenia Meyer, et. al. *Testimonios para la historia del cine mexicano*. México, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Dirección General de Cinematografía, 1975-1976 (Cuadernos de la Cinemateca, Vols. 1-VII).

⁶ María Soledad Alonso, et. al. *Palabras del Exilio, Contribución a la historia de los refugiados en México*. México, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Secretaría de Educación Pública. Librería Madero, (4 vols.) 1980, 1982, 1985, 1988.

⁷ Eugenia Meyer (ed.), *La lucha obrera en Cananea, 1906*. México, Secretaría de Educación Pública, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1980. *Museo histórico de la Revolución en el estado de Chihuahua*, México, Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional, Secretaría de Educación Pública, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1982. *Y nos fuimos a la Revolución*. México, Departamento del Distrito Federal, Instituto de Investigaciones, Dr. José María Luis Mora, 1985.

other countries, with the consequent search of exchange, the proliferation of methodology seminars and the emergence of countless institutional and private projects.

After two workshops, one in Brazil and another one in Venezuela in 1976 and 1977 respectively, we started to gather materials for a project catalogue of oral history in Latin America and the Caribbean that, with the sponsorship on UNESCO, was possible to achieve in 1984.⁸

This first listing gives an account of the work accomplished in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Cuba, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, Puerto Rico and Venezuela; also, mention is made of the works on "chicanos" and those of Northamericans done in Latin America. This forerunner effort has already been overtaken by an infinity of new works from the above-mentioned countries and from Costa Rica, Columbia, Uruguay, Chile, El Salvador and Honduras.

The trend, in its great majority, except in cases like that of Brazil where Aspasia Camargo⁹ and her team have carried out a project on political elites, is markedly inclined toward the disinherited, toward the marginal populations in the rural areas and the cities and, consequently, oral history identifies itself to a great extent, as an instrument of social denouncement; such is the case of Puerto Rico to which one must add the ingredient of separatism and nationalism; or else that of Nicaragua, where the project of oral history ran parallel to the literacy campaign, soon after the Sandinista triumph; likewise, too, that of Cuba, where, besides various official projects, competences and prizes have been established, such as the international one for the testimony of the "Casa de las Américas". The resulting oral history literature ravel roads that go from the *Biografía del cimarrón*¹⁰ by Cuban Miguel Barnet, passing through the works of the Venezuelan Agustín Blanco Muñoz on political movements,¹¹ through the stimulating medley of texts and images of the Argentinians Elizabeth Jelin, Pablo Vila and Alicia D'Amico¹² in their analysis of the popular urban sectors of Argentina, or else the first results of the Nicaraguan effort in its Instituto de Estudio des Sandinismo: "y se armó la runga..."¹³ until reaching the studies on exiled Latin Americans such as the Brazi-

⁸ Vid. Eugenia Meyer, Ximena Sepúlveda, *Catálogos de Proyectos de historia Oral en América Latina y el Caribe*, México, Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Luis Mora, 1988 (manuscrito).

⁹ Vid. *Programa de Historia Oral. Catálogo de Departamentos*, Centro de Pesquisa e Documentacao de História Contemporanea do Brasil. Instituto de Directo Publico e Ciencia Política Fundacao Getulio Vargas, Editora Fundacao Getulio Vargas, 1981.

¹⁰ Miguel Barnet, *Biografía de un Cimarrón*. México Siglo XXI, 1974.

¹¹ Agustín Blanco Muñoz, *La lucha armada; hablan 5 jefes*. Caracas, Venezuela, Universidad de Venezuela, Expediente, 1980. *La Conspiración Cívico-Militar, Habla el "Guairazo", "Barcelonazo", "Caruparazo y Portenazo"*. Caracas, Venezuela, Universidad Central de Venezuela, Expediente, 1981.

¹² Elizabeth Jelin et. al., *Podría ser yo. Los sectores populares urbanos en imagen y palabra*, Buenos Aires, Argentina, Ediciones de la Flor, S.R.L., CEDES, 1987.

¹³ Instituto de Estudio del Sandinismo, *Y se armó la runga...! Testimonios de la irresurrección Popular Sandinista en Masaya*, Nicaragua, Editorial Nueva Nuropea, 1982.

lians, Uruguayans. In brief, a large group of testimonies that in fact constitute the essence of the historical study of our times.¹⁴

In countries such as Mexico, Brazil and Costa Rica,¹⁵ journals, seminar proceedings and articles have been produced that tend to direct and enrich a particular bibliography on oral history. Most significant is the effort put forth by the Mexican journal *Secuencia*¹⁶ as well as that of the UNESCO regional office of culture for Latin America and the Caribbean, with headquarters in Havana, Cuba, which has just been edited: *Oralidad*,¹⁷ in which articles appear of Venezuelan, Jamaican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Guatemalan, Peruvian and Colombian authors.

In the fall of 1988, Mexico hosted the Primer Encuentro de Historiadores Orales de América Latina y España (First Encounter of Oral Historians from Latin America and Spain), as the result of the Spanish-speaking participants' collective concern of having its own forum, at the international meeting in Oxford 1987. Entitled *De cara a la historia popular*¹⁸ (*Facing Popular History*) there were three simultaneous sessions: "Fuentes orales e historia popular" ("Oral Sources and Popular History"); "De la gente sin historia" ("Of People without History"); and "Metodología y práctica de la historia oral" ("Oral History Methods and Practice"). There were about 150 researchers who attended from twelve countries: Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Cuba, Spain, United States, Guatemala, Japan, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Venezuela and Uruguay. Papers were presented in the "Fuentes orales e historia popular" session on different topics; a sample of the diversity in the interests of the social scientists and the variety of the human groups as well as the historical aspects that are manifested in oral testimony. Their analyses allowed reaching consensus, created controversy and left doubts open for discussion.

The participants coincided in that oral history is at the same time source and method to learn the point of view of the history actors in their ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity, since the expression channels of the marginal groups or of the "people without history" are fundamentally oral. Therefore, saving them in testimonial form avoids the irreparable loss of such information and, at the same time, humanizes history, makes it live, social and dynamic.

There was talk too on the interrelation between oral sources and written ones, which on complementing themselves, allow for the scientific usage of testimonies

¹⁴ Elizabeth Burgos Debray, *Mi nombre es Rigoberta Menchu*, México, Siglo XXI, Editores 1983. Albertina de Olivera, Costa, et. al., *Memorias do exílio, Depoimentos*. Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, Paz e Terra, 1980. Vol. II. Ana Gutiérrez, *Se necesita muchacha*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1983. Hugo Neira Samarez, *Huillca, habla un campesino peruano*, La Habana, Cuba. Premio Testimonio Casa de las Américas. 1979.

¹⁵ Vid. Juan Rafael Quesada Camacho (ed.), *Primer Seminario de Tradición e historia Oral*. San José, Costa Rica, Universidad de Costa Rica, 1988.

¹⁶ Vid. Eva Salgado, "Fragmentos de historia popular, Seminario. Revista Americana de Ciencias Sociales. México, Instituto de Investigaciones, Dr. José María Luis Mora, 1985. Vols. 2,3,4.

¹⁷ *Oralidad, Anuario para el Rescate de la tradición oral de América Latina*. La Habana, Cuba, ORCALC, 1988.

¹⁸ All the first encounter materials can be found for consultation at the Biblioteca del Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Luis Mora. México.

through dialogue between both, in which one makes the richness and the lacks of the other one stand out.

For the most part, the papers in this session presented concrete results of oral history chores, which permit giving their history back to the people. There was talk, for example, of establishing a programme on agrarian history and popular education; on oral sources linked to the creation of a new type of dynamic museum; of popular education and concientization, which elevate the participation of society in the rescue and conservation of its cultural patrimony; on the production of documentaries on different agrarian struggles and their diffusion through videotestimony; of the elaboration of documents that gather the social experience of different areas, when the only source is the oral testimony, and on the elaboration of illiterate peoples' literature, concretely in the case of Chiapas' tzotzil groups, that "learned to read learning to write books". In general, concern became obvious for making a means and not an end of oral history, for making it become a valuable mechanism within the wider concept that responds to the name of popular history. In the four tables that integrated the sessions "De la gente sin historia", the fundamental topics were four: minorities (Puerto Ricans in Boston, Jews in Mexico City and Mexican indigenous groups); women (of diverse occupation and class farmers, homemakers, professionals, high-classed, middle-classed, low-classed); workers of different nationality (Brazilians, Uruguayans, Mexicans), of different trade (textiles, rubber, mining, meat workers); popular imagination, that is, oral tradition in Veracruz, Yucatan and the "cristera" zone.

Spaces that had been forgotten by traditional historiography were covered. The resource of oral history allowed for the listing of the Chiapas indigenous voices that told of the "pain of poverty", or that of the Guanajuato miner who gathered courage to go down into the mine by getting himself drunk, or that of the women of the revolutionaries of Morelos, disdained by their spouses when these learned that, during their absence, they had been raped.

Many matters were rescued that referred to the daily life of man and society, in the family, at work, in the neighborhood, at school, in recreation, in the union, in times of health and in times of illness, in revolutionary times and in peace time. In short, oral history placed us in direct contact with individuals and social sectors that had been ignored for a long time. At the same time, it gave "meat and blood" to a history that can be rigid, cardboard-stiff and, why not? boring. Problems were discussed to which, at the moment, a definite solution could not be found. One was what to do so as not to reproduce or reinforce the speeches of the dominating groups. Another one was related to the difference, between tradition and oral history; there was discussion on whether one term encloses the other one, and whether each one has different themes and objectives. The last problem was in relation to the aim of oral history: Is it done for pleasure? For rescuing the unknown? For giving facts another approach? For giving known figures a new color? For helping with the democratization of a group or society? Perhaps it deals with all the preceding, but it also clarifies and understands past events; the "hidden" makers of history may thus acquire conscience of their reality and improve it; thus they stop

being "the people without history" or, better yet, as was suggested at the end of the debate the "people without authenticity".

Several general conclusions were reached in the third session "Metodología y práctica de la historia oral". Oral history can be established in all population sectors, beginning with the illiterate and ending with the elites: intellectuals, politicians, business men, university men. It was shown how it can be applied to social groups or concrete individuals, and what limitations, failures or successes it may present. The importance of topic selection was pointed out, and these were very different: economic, social, political, etc. aspects, whose common denominator is the eagerness to rebuild the past, beginning with the very protagonists. Also, the significance of the questionnaire used to carry out the oral history interviews, was touched upon, and how to formulate it better so that, without being rigid, it may make allowance for guiding. It was considered that, though oral testimony has an intrinsic value, it must face, analyze, compare, criticize itself against other written or oral sources so it can acquire a new magnitude. Lastly, theoretical aspects were also dealt with; for example, the relation between oral history with other disciplines, or the use and abuse that has been made of the same.

The Puerto Rican representatives offered themselves to organize a new encounter for 1990.

Perhaps the struggle to obtain a place and a space for oral history has been won in other countries. It must be recognized that due to the nature of our peoples' verbality, the idea of testimonial rescue, safeguard and conservation is, as a last resort, the task of strengthening a historical memory which, in spite of circumstances, catastrophes and myths, it has made itself present at all times, in all circumstances.