

4 Movement without aim

Methodological and theoretical problems in oral history

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During the past ten years the collection of oral testimony as an ancillary technique of historical study has expanded rapidly. Both in terms of number of persons interviewed and number of projects established, the growth of what is rather loosely called 'oral history' has been steadily accelerating.¹ So too has its reputation, if the report of the American Historical Association committee on the state of the AHA and its recommendations are taken as an example of opinion in the profession at large.² Despite this growth and the evidence that more and more historians are using the oral history interview in their own work, there has been little serious discussion of oral history by historians. The dominant tendency has been to be overly enthusiastic in public print, and deeply suspicious in private conversation. Neither attitude speaks directly to the issues which should be raised by the use of oral interviewing for historical purposes.

Examples of the historian's enthusiasm for oral history abound. Typical of this reaction were the reviews of Studs Terkel's *Hard Times* and Professor T. Harry Williams' biography of Huey Long.³ The praise of such works, while in many ways justified, also contains a lack of perspective because, as Michael Frisch notes in the most thoughtful review of *Hard Times* that I have found, 'oral history is of such self-evident importance and interest that it has proven difficult for people to take it seriously'. By this Frisch means

that those interested in history, culture and politics have responded so intuitively to recent work in oral history that they have not generally stopped to think about what it is, on levels beyond the obvious, that makes it so worth pursuing.⁴

Despite this uncritical acceptance of the results of the use of oral testimony, there is evidence of skepticism about and doubt and distrust of oral history among professional historians – those paid to write and teach history. Surfacing only occasionally, these doubts are institutionalized within

the profession in the organization and conventions of our practice. Few history departments either teach or encourage field work in oral interviewing or oral history. Few departments are willing to accept either the financial or intellectual responsibilities of oral history projects. More telling is the fact that while the collection and editing of manuscripts or personal correspondence has long been considered a legitimate task both for Ph.D. candidates and established scholars, no history department that I know of would grant a doctorate to one of its students in return for the submission of a set of thoroughly documented and well-conducted oral histories, and few historians would receive wide applause for the publication of carefully edited interviews such as is regularly done in other disciplines. In short, what the profession is saying is that oral history is not a respected practice of history.

This attitude is neither new nor unique. In a period of declining job opportunities, historians have taken a very limited view of their professional domain. 'Had Clio's inspiration been sufficient, we would have now but one social scientific discipline. Its name would be history.'⁵ This has not, however, been the case. Historians have allowed the training of librarians, archivists, and bibliographers to pass by default to others. And so it has been with oral history – snubbed by the profession, oral historians have, for the most part, turned to librarians and archivists for support and sustenance. They, in turn, have been much more hospitable,⁶ thus of course reinforcing the suspicions of most historians who, with the best intentions in the world, cannot conceive of librarians and archivists as significant initiators of serious scholarship.

Some of the professional historians' doubts about oral history do surface occasionally when historians are called upon to evaluate such works as the interviews of historians conducted by Professors Garraty and Cantor.⁷ These criticisms are however usually too gentlemanly and rarely ask questions about the methodological limits of oral history, even where one would expect it. Professors Cantor and Garraty, in their interviews, have shown little regard for the interviewing techniques developed by other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, folklore, or even of industrial relations. They and others do tend to ask the same ill prepared and badly formulated questions with surprising regularity. As for *Hard Times*, one must question the editing techniques used by Terkel, his cryptic questions and the nature of the historical memories of his informants. As Terkel himself notes, his work is not history but memory, and he is searching not for fact, but the truth behind the fact. Such distinctions raise serious theoretical problems which have not, in the main, been addressed by professional historians. There are also major questions to be raised about such works as that of Professor Williams, which rely so heavily upon documents which will be unavailable for alternative readings by other scholars for years to come.

To be fair, it must be noted that among a few historians, serious concern about these issues has been raised. William Cutler of Temple University has been particularly articulate in warning oral historians about the vagaries of

memory and in questioning some of our basic assumptions about the effect of cultural milieu and other influences on the validity of oral testimony.⁸ Charles Morrissey, Gould Colman and Saul Benison have continually accented the need for scholarly standards for oral history and have raised other serious methodological questions.⁹

Despite these warnings and the public approval given to them, oral history has in a large part remained cursed, in the words of Gershon Legman's critique of folklore, with an 'endless doodling with insignificant forms and [an] ignorance of meaning to the people who transmit material'.¹⁰ The quality of oral history interviews varies too widely, as even a cursory examination of the now available Columbia University Oral History Office materials reveals (although this harsh criticism must be tempered by a reminder that Columbia is one of the few oral history projects which has attempted to make its interviews widely available). Few oral historians are forced to submit their work to public criticism. Many interviewees are poorly trained and far too many are willing to settle for journalistic standards of usefulness. In many projects, much too little time is devoted to the research necessary to prepare for an interview. Oral historians are still prone to rush out and ask how it happened without spending the arduous months plowing through related written materials. Worse yet, their sponsors often encourage this attitude and practice. There is much room for speculation about the reliability of the products of such activities.

In this situation, the professional historian has had little to offer in the way of constructive criticism. Eight years ago, Donald Swain noted the 'need for . . . greater attention to the problems of oral history on the part of practicing historians'.¹¹ Little has been done to answer that need. As noted earlier, historians have not raised the pertinent historiographical questions about oral history when dealing with major works using the technique. In most cases, they have simply turned their responsibilities over to others and hoped for the best, and when they have offered criticism or comment, their remarks have usually been informed by a myopic paper or book fetishism, inadequate definitions of their own standards of judgement, and a hostility towards and reluctance to understand other social science disciplines.¹²

Generally the criticisms that have so far been leveled at oral history can be classified into three categories; interviewing, research standards for preparation, and questions of historical methodology. The oral historian should be able to deal with the first set of these criticisms rather easily, for there is an already adequate bibliography and an already existent body of knowledge concerning interviewing and questioning techniques available to those interested.¹³ While much of the literature may not prepare the interviewer for the almost confessional nature and the various other responses engendered in the open interview, as Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb note,¹⁴ there is no reason why an interviewer, if well prepared, cannot gain control over these techniques.

The second category of problems, those centering on research standards,

can be met most forcibly simply by insisting that the highest standards of research and training be expected of oral historians. These are problems faced by all historians and the same canons of practice should apply. Sources should be checked, documentation should be provided, evidence must be weighed carefully. In this sense, oral history interviewing does not represent any major deviation from the methodology of other forms of historical research. There is no other solution to this problem, 'except in the exercise of that personal judgement which the historian has to apply to any source of information'.¹⁵ To insure such practice, those historians called upon to review works based on oral histories should insist on a review of the interviews used for documentation.

Questions of method cannot be dismissed so easily. As the most cogent critics have noted, there are real and serious issues to be faced by the practitioners of oral history. Many of these issues are not, however, those specifically noted by historians. When historians claim that oral history interviewees are not statistically representative of the population at large or any particular segment of it,¹⁶ they raise a false issue and thereby obscure a much deeper problem. Interviewees are selected, not because they present some abstract statistical norm, but because they typify historical processes. Thus, the questions to be asked concern the historian's concept of a historical process (i.e.: his own conception of history) and the relevance of the information garnered to that particular process. The real issues are historiographical, not statistical.

Another erroneous caveat of the profession concerns the primacy of written testimony to oral testimony. Oral history, runs the typical argument, 'cannot rank with an authentic diary, with a contemporary stock report, or with an eyewitness account transcribed on the day of the event'. But, we are told, 'it is probably to be ranked above contemporary hearsay evidence'.¹⁷ Not only does this criticism ignore the problems of accuracy faced by historians who use written testimony; it ignores a growing literature on the analysis of oral testimony for historical purposes.¹⁸ The usefulness of any source depends upon the information one is looking for, or the questions one seeks to answer. It is quite possible to argue, as Ruth Finnegan has, that oral testimony or 'literature' has its own characteristics and is not to be understood by the application of literary standards of judgement.¹⁹ In some cases, oral testimony can be more full and accurate than written testimony. For, as Plato noted in regard to works of art, and by extension written documents, 'You would think they were speaking as if they were intelligent, but if you ask them about what they are saying and want to learn [more], they just go on saying one and the same thing forever'.²⁰ Thus criticisms of oral testimony often miss their mark because they fail to realize that to seriously critique any form, it is necessary to understand precisely what it is one is about to evaluate.

The same qualifications must be applied to those criticisms which question the accuracy of memory or the intrusion of subjective or social biases.²¹ It all depends upon the questions one is seeking to answer. A linguist searching for the linguistic range, context and style of the language of ethnic Americans, is

interested in a different kind of accuracy than that of a historian.²² So too health researchers or those interested in sexual behavior.²³ Obviously, the careful interviewer does try, as Cutler suggests, to overcome these problems, yet it should be understood that not all the historical uses of information are covered by the conventional questions of historians.²⁴

Important as many of these questions may be, they are still simply questions of method and depend in large part upon a theoretical frame of reference for their meaning and for their answers, and it is at this level that the lack of serious analysis of oral history interviews has had its most deleterious effects. The sad condition of our theoretical knowledge about oral history, and the lack of serious efforts to think through exactly what an oral interview is or should be, how it is to be analyzed, or for what purposes, has resulted in a situation of endless activity without goal or meaning. As a result, oral history has not become a tool for a serious analysis of the culture. It has continued as a movement without aim, with all the attendant problems of such a situation.

The two most significant debates over the nature of oral history are those articulated by Cutler and Benison, and Staughton Lynd and Jesse Lemisch. Since all four have at least tried to grapple with the larger theoretical and historiographical questions raised by interviewing, it is proper here to note the issues they raise. In the first case, Cutler argues that an oral history interview as it exists in final form – a transcript – is 'raw material similar to any other source'.²⁵ Benison, however, has argued that an oral history is an autobiographical memoir and, duly noting the creative role of the historian-interviewer, sees it as 'a first interpretation, filtered through a particular individual experience at a particular moment of time'. It is, he argues, a first ordering, 'a beginning of interpretation although not an end'.²⁶ In the second debate, Lynd has argued that oral history is history itself, in the form of an articulating consciousness. Impressed with the very real opportunities offered by oral history for the history of the 'inarticulate', and by the dynamic of the interview situation, he has called for a new, radical use for oral history. In answer, Lemisch takes a more traditional view of an oral history interview as a limited document upon which is constructed a new historical synthesis.²⁷

Neither of these discussions has, however, resulted in any serious reformulation of the thinking about oral history among oral historians themselves or others in the profession. Both discussions also center upon a number of questionable assumptions which so far have not been challenged. Cutler and Lemisch, in their view of oral history interviews as sources and documents, seem to have confused these interviews, which are a form of oral testimony, with written manuscript sources. Unlike these traditional sources, oral history interviews are constructed, for better or for worse, by the active intervention of the historian. They are a collective creation and inevitably carry within themselves a pre-existent historical ordering, selection and interpretation. Unlike letters, records, archival materials or other manuscript

sources, they are created after the fact, by historians – thus they are very singular documents indeed.

On the other hand, while Benison and Lynd recognize the active role of the historian-interviewer, their analyses suffer from differing, albeit equally limited frames of reference. Benison, as articulate and creative as is his analysis of oral history, is still reluctant to see the interviews as end products complete unto themselves.²⁸ Still bound by the book fetishism of historical study, Benison does not tell us why the written narrative of a historian with proper footnotes to his interview ranks higher in accuracy or interpretation than the interviews themselves. It may be that, even admitting the excellence of the biography of Huey Long, or the sometimes useful commentary in *The Hidden Injuries of Class* and other works using oral histories, in the long run the interviews themselves will prove much more useful to scholars than the texts grafted upon them.

This is, of course, the most useful of Lynd's insights but unfortunately, by stressing the consciousness-raising potential of the interview, he seems to have confused the moment of presentation with the material presented, and history as process with history as study, discipline or cognitive action. In addition, there would seem to be wide theoretical gaps between interviewing, consciousness and 'praxis' which, for a Marxist especially, have to be articulated more precisely.

For all these reasons, these debates and discussions, while worthwhile and refreshing, have not begun to yield the kind of theoretical introspection which oral history needs. Such introspection must begin with the object at hand – the interview as an end product – what it is and what it should be, for it is only in this framework that we can begin to discuss what kinds of information we are getting, what is it that structures an interview, and how it should be conducted. To initiate a tentative discussion of these points is the aim of the rest of this chapter.

The first question which must be asked, before we can begin the kind of analysis oral history needs, concerns the nature of the end product which is created by the oral historian and his subject – the interview. For reasons already noted, the final product of oral history is not a monograph or historical narrative based upon interviews as sources. The interviews may be used for such work, but all the prideful boasting about how many historians use our work for their own publications should not obscure the fact that the focus of oral history is to record as complete an interview as possible – an interview which contains, within itself, its own system of structures, not a system derived from the narrow conventions of written history.

If this is the case, and I strongly believe it is, we must then try to define rather precisely what the form of the completed interview is. For reasons which Professor Tedlock has already explained, the final form of the interview is not a transcript, no matter how beautifully typed or indexed. Neither is it, except in the most limited of mechanical aspects, a tape, for the tape is simply a reproduction of the verbal (or visual and verbal, if videotape is

used) aspects of a particular set of structures or patterns, behind which exists some human relationship.

Given the active participation of the historian-interviewer, even if that participation consists of only a series of gestures or grunts, and given the logical form imposed by all verbal communication, the interview can only be described as a conversational narrative: conversational because of the relationship of interviewer and interviewee, and narrative because of the relation of exposition – the telling of a tale.²⁹

These narratives, while some may be constructed as chronological tales of personal remembrances of events, are not autobiographies, biographies or memories.³⁰ The recorded conversations of oral history, it must be repeated, are joint activities, organized and informed by the historical perspectives of both participants and therefore, as Professor Jan Vansina pointed out to me in an earlier conversation in regard to Alex Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, they are not really autobiographies. No matter what the construction of the narrative, the product we create is a conversational narrative and can only be understood by understanding the various relationships contained within this structure.³¹

The relationships in an oral history interview (conversational narrative) are of three types or sets, one internal and two external.³² The first unites each element, word or sign to all of the others in the interview. It relates the words to one another to create a whole. It is the linguistic, grammatical, and literary structure of the interview, and while mainly the object so far of a formal linguistic analysis, if read properly, this relationship provides one of the most exciting methods of analysis possible in oral history.³³

The second set of relationships is that which is created by the interaction of the interviewer and interviewee. Again, as psychologists, sociologists and especially those, like Erving Goffman, who are interested in small group interaction have shown, these relations are also highly structured, and if analyzed properly can add wide dimensions to our understanding of exactly what kind of communication is taking place within the interview and what meaning is being conveyed.³⁴ Contained within this relationship are those aspects of the interview which can be classified as performance. Since the interview is not created as a literary product is created, alone and as a result of reflective action, it cannot be divorced from the circumstances of its creation, which of necessity is one of audience participation and face to face confrontation.³⁵ To analyze an oral interview properly as a conversational narrative, we must combine an analysis of the social and psychological relationships between the participants, and their appropriateness to the occasion, with our historical analysis.

The third set of relationships present in the interview is more abstract, less studied, and therefore more elusive to define, although of far more importance to us as historians. When we interview someone, he not only speaks to himself and to the interviewer, but he also speaks through the interviewer to the larger community and its history as he views it. This is a dialogue, the

exact nature of which is difficult to define. There are seemingly two relationships contained in one – that between the informant and the historian, and that between the informant and his own historical consciousness.

The first of these relations is in large measure engendered by the historian, for it is his curiosity, not that of the historical actor, which both the questions and the explanations seek to justify. In most cases the informant has acted as if his views of historical processes were a given reality in his world, and he has not thought them out until faced with the necessity to do so by the interviewer.³⁶ The relation that thus emerges is both relative and equivalent. It is relative in that the informant's view of history (its use, its structure, a system of cause, etc.) are developed only in relation to the historian's view of that process, while the historian's organization of his questions (the structure of the interview) is in turn developed in response to the answers of the interviewee. Each view is thus a standard of reference for the other. The relationship is also equivalent in the sense that when it is finally articulated, the questions, asked and unasked, and the answers given, form an historical view equal to and independent of that of the historian.

The second relation, that of the informant to what he or she views as the history of the community, is probably the most clearly articulated aspect of the interview and also the most difficult to grasp, for it is only one part of a much broader cultural vision and cognitive structure, and demands a very special type of reading to analyze. To read the narrative properly, to discover this relation and the cultural vision which informs it, we must give the interviewer the same kind of reading which Jacques Lacan has given to Freud or which Louis Althusser has given to Marx,³⁷ a method of reading Althusser terms 'symptomatic'.

While few of us or our interviewees, will create narratives or analyses as rich, as complex, or as theoretically sophisticated as those of Freud or Marx, our interviews, as I have tried to show, are far more complex than we usually assume. If read properly, they do reveal to us hidden levels of discourse – the search for which is the aim of symptomatic reading.³⁸ If read (or really listened to) again and again, not just for facts and comments, but also, as Althusser suggests, for insight and oversights, for the combination of vision and nonvision, and especially for answers to questions which were never asked, we should be able to isolate and describe the problematic which informs the particular interview.

It is at the level of this problematic – the theoretical or ideological context within which words and phrases, and the presence or absence of certain problems and concepts is found³⁹ – that we find the synthesis of all of the various structural relationships of the interview, as well as the particular relation of the individual to his vision of history. What we are here discussing is not simply a *Weltanschauung*, but a structural field in which men live their history and which guides their practice or action. Within this problematic, a view of history plays a key role, and provides for the oral historian a crucial tool of both creation and analysis.

In one of the most profound and important essays in American historiography, Warren Susman has brilliantly outlined how, '[t]he idea of history itself, special kinds of historical studies and various attitudes towards history always play – whether intelligently conceived or not – a major role within a culture'. What we call a 'worldview' [substitute problematic]. Susman argues, 'always contains a more or less specific view of the nature of history', and 'attitudes towards the past frequently become facts of profound consequences for the culture itself'.⁴⁶

Noting that 'the idea of history itself belongs to a special kind of social and cultural organization', what we usually call 'contract societies', in which the social order must be explained, rationalized or reasonably ordered, Susman argues that 'it is history which can [most] reasonably explain the origin, the nature and the function of various institutions and their interaction. History seems able to point the direction in which a dynamic society is moving. It brings order out of the disordered array of the consequences of change itself'.⁴⁷

To history, over which no one person or group has a monopoly, Susman contrasts societies in which myth predominates, status societies, where the 'world view' is dominated by deeply believed myths whose articulation is usually the prerogative of a special class of people, usually priests.⁴⁸ Myth, with its utopian vision, its sacerdotal nature, its elements of authority in answer to ignorance, doubt or disbelief, functions as a cohesive element in a society, in contrast to history which, because it explains the past in order to offer ways to change the future and serves as the basis of political philosophy, becomes an ideological tool to alter the social order. Thus while actual consequences follow from each view of the world it is history, in its most ideological form, which offers a plan for social action.

As Susman notes, the historical vision of the past does not replace a mythic vision; rather, in historical societies they exist in dialectical tension with one another and by combination and interaction, they produce a variety of historical visions. These, as Susman demonstrates in American historiography, can become the basis for a morphology of historical thought;⁴⁹ a morphology which in turn becomes an accurate gauge of the tendencies of social integration or differentiation in the culture itself, and an index of the potency or impotency of the institutions of that society to further the cultural vision of the masses of people in the society.

All of this is important to the historian, and especially to the oral historian because this analysis allows us to focus our interviews upon the crucial element of the cognitive thought of the member of the culture with whom we are particularly concerned. We can thus use the idea of history and its relation to myth and ideology as the central aim of our interviews to grasp the deeper problematic of the interviewee. To do this, however, we must first recognize the crucial role played by ideologies in modern society, and develop a methodology for the analysis of the structure and function of ideology.

An ideology is more than simply a political program. As discussed by

Susman and defined by Althusser, it is ideology which structures the consciousness of individuals and their conceptions of their relations to the conditions of existence, and which governs their actions and practices through an array of apparatuses such as the family, the church, trade unions, systems of communication as well as modes of conduct and behavior. It is the basic conceptualization of the relations of a class-based society.⁴⁴ It is therefore crucial to an understanding of the dynamics of the culture – learned patterns of behavior.

The key to the understanding of the function of ideology lies in the concept of 'hegemony' as developed by Antonio Gramsci⁴⁵ for it is through hegemony – the 'spontaneous loyalty that any dominant social group obtains from the masses by virtue of its intellectual prestige and its supposedly superior function in the world of production'⁴⁶ – that ideology attains its importance as a mechanism of class rule and finds expression in popular beliefs.⁴⁷ With a broad definition of ideology, and a proper understanding of the theory of hegemony, its limits, and the roles played by a view of historical change in the development of an ideology, the oral historian should be able to synthesize his analyses of the three sets of relations contained in the interview, for the socio or paralinguistic structure, patterns of behavior and theory of history are all united within the concept of ideology.

Earlier in this volume (*Envelopes of Sound*, Chapter II) Alice Kessler Harris noted her experiences in interviewing women who had migrated to the United States, and the contradiction between their actions within their families and their discussion of changing family patterns. Buried beneath this contradiction is a deeper structure of historical cognition which proclaims the necessity of progress in history and the participation of the immigrant in that progress. Thus history and myth have been synthesized into a dynamic view of life which if analyzed with care can explain many, if not most, of the tensions of immigrant life in America. In cases such as this, by concentrating our interviews on a series of questions aimed at the articulation by the interviewee of his views of historical change, causality, the evolution of institutions, and his view of the way in which the past has been ordered and rationalized, and upon which the future predicted, we can begin to explain the particular ideological context of the interview. We can also understand how and to what degree our informants have accepted the hegemonic view of the culture – in this case the idea of progress.

Such a use of the idea of history to gain an understanding of ideology and thus an understanding of the dynamics of the history of the culture is, of course, not limited to oral history. The special methods of oral history do, however, make such a procedure especially useful in structuring and analyzing our interviews.

Oral history, almost alone among the various practices of historiography is heavily dependent upon fieldwork, which means that not only can we come back again and again to our sources and ask them to tell us more, but we can also explore the varieties of historical visions in far greater detail and amid

radically changing historical conditions. Indeed, just as in the case mentioned above, it is the interviewing experience itself which can reveal the contradiction between ideology, myth and reality. By careful observation and understanding of this experience we can add a depth to our historical understanding which is never revealed in the written record.

Also, alone among our peers our documents exist in the realm of sound and vision as well as printed record. If carefully prepared and symptomatically read we should be able to bring to our historical study the powerful analytical tools of more advanced disciplines such as linguistics and anthropology. There would seem to be no theoretical reason why historical documents of this type cannot be subject to the same type of analysis given to other interviews in other professions.

To do this, however, we need a larger and more general concept of historical cognition, because without some larger context within which to place the information we gather, and the various aspects of the interview – linguistic, performatory, and cognitive – which will synthesize these structures, we risk not only the possibility of misunderstanding what is happening in the interview, but also of misunderstanding what is being said and why. It is only the larger context which makes the information conveyed in an interview unambiguous.

Also, if we fail to see our interviewees as bearers of a culture and thus people with their own view of the past, be it formed as part of a hegemonic ideology, or in opposition to that ideology, or as some combination of myth and ideology, or even a secret history, we will, because the information must be structured, infuse our own vision of the past into the interview. Such a situation is exactly what we do not want to do. Our aim is to bring to conscious articulation the ideological problematic of the interviewee, to reveal the cultural context in which information is being conveyed, and to thus transform an individual story into a cultural narrative, and thereby, to more fully understand what happened in the past. While this can only be done through the interplay of the various conceptions of the past held by both the interviewer and the interviewee, the particular present ideological conceptions of the interviewer should not structure that articulation.⁴⁸

Concentration upon the interplay of ideology and various conceptions of history is also of special importance to the oral historian because such a methodology is what distinguishes him from other field workers who use interviews, such as psychologists, anthropologists and folklorists. As historians we are trained to understand and analyze the varieties of historical thought and their cultural context, and thus oral history interviewing is simply an extension of that training into the field.⁴⁹

This view of the role of ideology in uniting the various structural elements of the oral history interview also provides oral historians with a method of dealing with the vexing problem of historical memory. Our problem, as anyone who has done extensive interviewing will readily admit, is not, except in odd cases, the problem of forgetfulness but rather the problem of being

overwhelmed with reminiscences and memories flowing in uninterrupted and seemingly unrelated fashion.⁵⁰ If we view memory as one form or vehicle of historical cognition and if we examine our interviews carefully for a view of the problematic which informs these memories, we can begin to grasp the deeper structures which organize this seemingly unorganized flow of words, and then so direct our questioning and other responses to develop as full an interview as possible.

Finally, as field workers we should, in general, hold to the view that 'the methods of collecting which are to be most encouraged are those which will supply the greatest amount of reliable information', in the sense of providing a systematic view of the creative activities of mankind.⁵¹ That systematic view, in many cases, can only be developed by the oral historian because the past, as it has existed, has never asked the pertinent questions about its own systematic view of the world – i.e., its own ideology and its own myth.

Such a view of the role of oral history – the search for the ideological and mythic matrix of the cultural consciousness of the society through the development of the idea of history – should not be taken to imply that the oral historian is now free to ignore the written records of facts and events in order to fly with the winds of grand theory. Rather it should be a call for oral historians to realize the potential of their work, and to take it seriously enough to become even more rigorous in their use of materials. Both theory and rigorous practice are necessary if oral history is, in the words of Henry Glassie, to contribute to 'a revolution in diachronic theorizing and to the development of an understanding of what people really did in the past'.⁵²

NOTES

- 1 The most current survey, G. Shumway, *Oral History in the United States: A Directory*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1970, lists 230 projects. Since this compilation is already out of date the figure is probably closer to 450.
- 2 American Historical Association, *Newsletter*, 1972, vol. X, no. 5, p. 21.
- 3 See especially R. Rhodes's review of 'Hard Times', *New York Times Book Review*, April 19, 1970, p. 1, and G.B. Tindall's review of 'Huey Long', *American Historical Review*, 1970, vol. 75, p. 1792.
- 4 M. Frisch, 'Oral history and *Hard Times*: a review essay', *Red Buffalo*, n.d., nos. 2 and 3.
- 5 H. Glassie, 'A folkloristic thought on the promise of oral history', *Selections from the Fifth and Sixth National Colloquia on Oral History*, New York, Oral History Association, 1971, p. 54.
- 6 O.W. Bombard, 'A new measure of things past', *American Archivist*, 1955, vol. 18, p. 156. A.R. Stephens, 'Oral history and archives', *Texas Librarian*, 1967, vol. 29, pp. 203–214. M.J. Zachert, 'The implication of oral history for librarians', *College and Research Libraries*, 1968, vol. 29, pp. 101–103. Some have even argued that oral history is too important to leave to historians: see R.A. Bartlett, 'Some thoughts after the Third National Colloquium on Oral History', *The Journal of Library History*, 1969, vol. 4, pp. 169–172 and D.B. Nunn, Jr., 'The library and oral history', *California Librarian*, 1961, vol. 22, pp. 139–144.

- 7 See especially Peter Gay's discussion of N.F. Cantor, *Perspectives on the European Past: Conversations With Historians*, in *American Historical Review*, 1972, vol. 77, no. 5, pp. 1404-1405.
- 8 W.W. Cutler III, 'Accuracy in oral interviewing', *Historical Methods Newsletter*, 1970, no. 3, pp. 1-7.
- 9 C.T. Morrissey, 'On oral history interviewing', in L.A. Dexter (ed.), *Elite and Specialized Interviewing*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1970, pp. 109-118. G. Colman, 'A call for more systematic procedures', *American Archivist*, 1965, vol. 28, no. 1, pp. 79-83. S. Benison, 'Reflections on oral history', *American Archivist*, 1965, vol. 28, no. 1, pp. 71-77.
- 10 As quoted in K.S. Goldstein, *A Guide for Field Workers in Folklore*, London, Herbert Jenkins, 1964, fn. p. 6.
- 11 D.C. Swain, 'Problems for practitioners of oral history', *American Archivist*, 1965, vol. 28, no. 1, p. 64.
- 12 Professor Gay discusses *Conversations with Historians* as textbook supplement or rival. Susanne Paul of the New York Women's Collective criticizes oral history as being 'elitist' without defining that term, and without any realization that even interviews with members of the working class if done from a certain ideological stance are 'elitist'. Remarks at the Sixth Annual Colloquia on Oral History. See also, 'Is oral history really worthwhile?', in C. Lord (ed.), *Ideas In Conflict: A Colloquium on Certain Problems in Historical Society Work in the United States and Canada*, Harrisburg, Pa., American Association for State and Local History, 1958.
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- 40 W. I. Susman, 'History and the American intellectual: uses of a usable past', *American Quarterly*, 1964, vol. 16, part 2, p. 243.
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- 45 A. Gramsci, *The Modern Prince and Other Essays*, New York, International Publishers, 1959.
- 46 J. Cammett, *Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1967, pp. 204–206.
- 47 A.S. Kraditor, 'American radical historians and their heritage', *Past and Present*, 1972, no. 56, p. 139.
- 48 It is exactly this lack of context which mars such works as *Huey Long*. See R.G. Sherrill's review in *The Nation*, November 3, 1969, p. 209.
- 49 This is not to imply that the analysis of ideology cannot be united with the formal analysis of culture as used in other disciplines. See especially M. Godelier, 'Système, structure et contradiction dans "Le Capital"', *Les Temps Modernes*, 1966, vol. 22, pp. 828–865. See also Piaget, *Structuralism*, pp. 120–134, and the remarkable tour de force of Anthony Wilden in Lacan's *The Language of the Self*, pp. 302–311.
- 50 Cutler, 'Accuracy in oral interviewing', pp. 2–4, cites evidence of forgetfulness, but the studies upon which this judgment is based, as well as others in the field of memory, are so narrowly 'experimental' or behavioral that they tell us little about the actual functioning of historical memory. For example, see the reports in D. A. Norman (ed.), *Memory and Attention: An Introduction to Human Information Processing*, New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1968. For a more complex discussion of oral history and memory see Frisch, 'Oral history and *Hard Times*', pp. 288–231.
- 51 Goldstein, *A Guide for Field Workers in Folklore*, p. 5.
- 52 Glassie, 'A folkloristic thought on the promise of oral history', p. 57.

5 Work ideology and consensus under Italian fascism

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Oral history has until recently been engaged in two major battles with the established tradition of historiography. The first of these of course has been the struggle to ensure acceptance of the validity of oral sources for European history, and to accord them the same importance as other sources. Among the gains on this front one might mention the critique undertaken of other sources,¹ not to speak of a series of works of oral history which have at least demonstrated the equal worth of oral and other sources. The second is the attempt to widen the horizons of historical research, whether in the sense of including new spheres of reality (such as daily life, and the experiences of oppressed and subordinate social strata), or that of amplifying and clarifying the political aims and objectives within historical writing.² These battles have by no means been won as yet, and much remains to be done in developing existing initiatives. However in these two fields the direction of oral historical research is clear, and the debate is well advanced.

These developments of oral history, and our awareness of its shortcomings – by no means few – require us to undertake the task of redefining our aims. Amongst the gravest of the inadequacies of oral history, I would suggest, is the tendency to transform the writing of history into a form of populism – that is, to replace certain of the essential tenets of scholarship with facile democratisation, and an open mind with demagogy. Such an approach runs the risk of constructing oral history as merely an alternative ghetto, where at last the oppressed may be allowed to speak. In order to counteract this tendency towards a complacent populism (and the simple description which appears to be intrinsic to it), we must elaborate ways of using oral sources which take account of two interrelated requirements. First, we have thus far made a predominantly factual use of oral sources, and have been concerned in particular with such spheres as methods of work, relationships between parents and children, and the experience of community life. This is indeed not far removed from the use customarily made of most other sources. This is not enough. We cannot afford to lose sight of the peculiar specificity of oral material, and we have to develop conceptual approaches – and indeed insist upon that type of analysis – which can succeed in drawing out their full