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WHAT MAKES ORAL HISTORY DIFFERENT

This article, first published in 1979, challenged oral history's critics head-on by arguing that 'what makes oral history different' – orality, narrative form, subjectivity, the 'different credibility' of memory, and the relationship between interviewer and interviewee – should be considered as strengths rather than as weaknesses, a resource rather than a problem. Alessandro Portelli holds a Chair in American Literature at the University of Rome. Reprinted by permission from *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* by Alessandro Portelli, the State University of New York Press © 1991. State University of New York. All rights reserved. A first version, 'Sulla specificità della storia orale', appeared in *Primo Maggio* (Milano, Italy), 1979, vol. 13, pp. 54–60, reprinted as 'On the peculiarities of oral history' in *History Workshop Journal*, 1981, no. 12, pp. 96–107.

'Yes,' said Mrs. Oliver, 'and then when they come to talk about it a long time afterwards, they've got the solution for it which they've made up themselves. That isn't awfully helpful, is it?' 'It is helpful,' said Poirot . . . 'It's important to know certain facts which have lingered in people's memories although they may not know exactly what the fact was, why it happened or what led to it. But they might easily know something that we do not know and that we have no means of learning. So there have been memories leading to theories.'

Agatha Christie, *Elephants Can Remember*

His historical researches, however, did not lie so much among books as among men; for the former are lamentably scanty on his favorite topics; whereas he found the old burghers, and still more their wives, rich in that legendary lore, so invaluable to true history. Whenever, therefore, he happened upon a genuine Dutch family, snugly shut up in its

low-roofed farmhouse, under a spreading sycamore, he looked upon it as a little clasped volume of black-letter and studied it with the zeal of a book-worm.

Washington Irving, 'Rip Van Winkle'

Memories leading to theories

ASPECTER IS HAUNTING THE HALLS of the academy: the specter of oral history. The Italian intellectual community, always suspicious of news from outside and yet so subservient to 'foreign discoveries' – hastened to cut oral history down to size before even trying to understand what it is and how to use it. The method used has been that of charging oral history with pretensions it does not have, in order to set everybody's mind at ease by refuting them. For instance, *La Repubblica*, the most intellectually and internationally oriented of Italian dailies rushed to dismiss 'descriptions "from below" and the artificial packages of "oral history" where things are supposed to move and talk by themselves', without even stopping to notice that it is not things, but people (albeit people often considered no more than 'things') that oral history expects to 'move and talk by themselves'.¹

There seems to be a fear that once the floodgates of orality are opened, writing (and rationality along with it) will be swept out as if by a spontaneous uncontrollable mass of fluid, amorphous material. But this attitude blinds us to the fact that our awe of writing has distorted our perception of language and communication to the point where we no longer understand either orality or the nature of writing itself. As a matter of fact, written and oral sources are not mutually exclusive. They have common as well as autonomous characteristics, and specific functions which only either one can fill (or which one set of sources fills better than the other). Therefore, they require different specific interpretative instruments. But the undervaluing and the overvaluing of oral sources end up by cancelling out specific qualities, turning these sources either into mere supports for traditional written sources, or into an illusory cure for all ills. This chapter will attempt to suggest some of the ways in which oral history is intrinsically different, and therefore specifically useful.

The orality of oral sources

Oral sources are oral sources. Scholars are willing to admit that the actual document is the recorded tape; but almost all go on to work on the transcripts, and it is only transcripts that are published.² Occasionally, tapes are actually destroyed: a symbolic case of the destruction of the spoken word.

The transcript turns aural objects into visual ones, which inevitably implies changes and interpretation. The different efficacy of recordings, as compared to transcripts – for classroom purposes, for instance – can only be appreciated by direct experience. This is one reason why I believe it is unnecessary to give excessive attention to the quest for new and closer methods of transcription. Expecting the transcript to replace the tape for scientific purposes is equivalent to doing art criticism

on reproductions, or literary criticism on translations. The most literal translation is hardly ever the best, and a truly faithful translation always implies a certain amount of invention. The same may be true for transcription of oral sources.

The disregard of the orality of oral sources has a direct bearing on interpretative theory. The first aspect which is usually stressed is origin: oral sources give us information about illiterate people or social groups whose written history is either missing or distorted. Another aspect concerns content: the daily life and material culture of these people and groups. However, these are not specific to oral sources. Emigrants' letters, for instance, have the same origin and content, but are written. On the other hand, many oral history projects have collected interviews with members of social groups who use writing, and have been concerned with topics usually covered by the standard written archival material. Therefore, origin and content are not sufficient to distinguish oral sources from the range of sources used by social history in general; thus, many theories of oral history are, in fact, theories of social history as a whole.³

In the search for a distinguishing factor, we must therefore turn in the first place to form. We hardly need repeat here that writing represents language almost exclusively by means of segmentary traits (graphemes, syllables, words, and sentences). But language is also composed of another set of traits, which cannot be contained within a single segment but which are also bearers of meaning. The tone and volume range and the rhythm of popular speech carry implicit meaning and social connotations which are not reproducible in writing — unless, and then in inadequate and hardly accessible form, as musical notation.⁴ The same statement may have quite contradictory meanings, according to the speaker's intonation, which cannot be represented objectively in the transcript, but only approximately described in the transcriber's own words.

In order to make the transcript readable, it is usually necessary to insert punctuation marks, which are always the more-or-less arbitrary addition of the transcriber. Punctuation indicates pauses distributed according to grammatical rules: each mark has a conventional place, meaning, and length. These hardly ever coincide with the rhythms and pauses of the speaking subject, and therefore end up by confining speech within grammatical and logical rules which it does not necessarily follow. The exact length and position of the pause has an important function in the understanding of the meaning of speech. Regular grammatical pauses tend to organize what is said around a basically expository and referential pattern, whereas pauses of irregular length and position accentuate the emotional content, and very heavy rhythmic pauses recall the style of epic narratives. Many narrators switch from one type of rhythm to another within the same interview, as their attitude toward the subjects under discussion changes. Of course, this can only be perceived by listening, not by reading.

A similar point can be made concerning the velocity of speech and its changes during the interview. There are no fixed interpretative rules: slowing down may mean greater emphasis as well as greater difficulty, and acceleration may show a wish to glide over certain points, as well as a greater familiarity or ease. In all cases, the analysis of changes in velocity must be combined with rhythm analysis. Changes are, however, the norm in speech, while regularity is the norm in writing (printing most of all) and the presumed norm of reading: variations are introduced by the reader, not by the text itself.

This is not a question of philological purity. Traits which cannot be contained within segments are the site (not exclusive, but very important) of essential narrative functions: they reveal the narrators' emotions, their participation in the story, and the way the story affected them. This often involves attitudes which speakers may not be able (or willing) to express otherwise, or elements which are not fully within their control. By abolishing these traits, we flatten the emotional content of speech down to the supposed equanimity and objectivity of the written document. This is even more true when folk informants are involved: they may be poor in vocabulary but are often richer in range of tone, volume and intonation than middle-class speakers who have learned to imitate in speech the monotone of writing.⁵

Oral history as narrative

Oral historical sources are *narrative* sources. Therefore the analysis of oral history materials must avail itself of some of the general categories developed by narrative theory in literature and folklore. This is as true of testimony given in free interviews as of the more formally organized materials of folklore.

For example, some narratives contain substantial shifts in the 'velocity' of narration, that is, in the ratio between the duration of the events described and the duration of the narration. An informant may recount in a few words experiences which lasted a long time, or dwell at length on brief episodes. These oscillations are significant, although we cannot establish a general norm of interpretation: dwelling on an episode may be a way of stressing its importance, but also a strategy to distract attentions from other more delicate points. In all cases, there is a relationship between the velocity of the narrative and the meaning of the narrator. The same can be said of other categories among those elaborated by Gérard Genette, such as 'distance' or 'perspective', which define the position of the narrator toward the story.⁶

Oral sources from nonhegemonic classes are linked to the tradition of the folk narrative. In this tradition distinctions between narrative genres are perceived differently than in the written tradition of the educated classes. This is true of the generic distinction between 'factual' and 'artistic' narratives, between 'events' and feeling or imagination. While the perception of an account as 'true' is relevant as much to legend as to personal experience and historical memory, there are no formal oral genres specifically destined to transmit historical information; historical, poetical, and legendary narratives often become inextricably mixed up.⁷ The result is narrative in which the boundary between what takes place outside the narrator and what happens inside, between what concerns the individual and what concerns the group, may become more elusive than in established written genres, so that personal 'truth' may coincide with shared 'imagination'.

Each of these factors can be revealed by formal and stylistic factors. The greater or lesser presence of formalized materials (proverbs, songs, formulas, and stereotypes) may measure the degree in which a collective viewpoint exists within an individual's narrative. These shifts between standard language and dialect are often a sign of the kind of the control which speakers have over the narrative.

A typical recurring structure is that in which standard language is used overall, while dialect crops up in digressions or single anecdotes, coinciding with a more

personal involvement of the narrator or (as when the occurrences of dialect coincide with formalized language) the intrusion of collective memory. On the other hand, standard language may emerge in a dialect narrative when it deals with themes more closely connected with the public sphere, such as politics. Again, this may mean both a more or less conscious degree of estrangement, or a process of 'conquest' of a more 'educated' form of expression beginning with participation in politics.⁸ Conversely, the dialectization of technical terms may be a sign of the vitality of traditional speech and of the way in which speakers endeavor to broaden the expressive range of their culture.

Events and meaning

The first thing that makes oral history different, therefore, is that it tells us less about events than about their meaning. This does not imply that oral history has no factual validity. Interviews often reveal unknown events or unknown aspects of the nonhegemonic classes. From this point of view, the only problem posed by oral sources is that of verification (to which I will return in the next section).

But the unique and precious element which oral sources force upon the historian and which no other sources possess in equal measure is the speaker's subjectivity. If the approach to research is broad and articulated enough, a cross section of the subjectivity of a group or class may emerge. Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did. Oral sources may not add much to what we know, for instance, of the material cost of a strike to the workers involved, but they tell us a good deal about its psychological costs. Borrowing a literary category from the Russian formalists, we might say that oral sources, especially from nonhegemonic groups, are a very useful integration of other sources as far as the *fabula* — the logical causal sequence of the story — goes; but they become unique and necessary because of their *plot* — the way in which the story materials are arranged by narrators in order to tell the story.⁹ The organization of the narrative reveals a great deal of the speakers' relationships to their history.

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. When workers in Terni misplace a crucial event of their history (the killing of Luigi Trastulli) from one date and context to another, this does not cast doubts on the actual chronology, but it does force us to arrange our interpretation of an entire phase of the town's history. When an old rank-and-file leader, also in Terni, dreams up a story about how he almost got the Communist Party to reverse its strategy after World War II, we do not revise our reconstructions of political debates within the Left, but learn the extent of the actual cost of certain decisions to those rank-and-file activists who had to bury into their subconscious their needs and desires for revolution. When we discover that similar stories are told in other parts of the country, we recognize the half-formed legendary complex in which the 'semile rambblings' of a disappointed old man reveal much about his party's history that is untold in the lengthy and lucid memoirs of its official leaders.¹⁰

Should we believe oral sources?

Oral sources are credible but with a *different* credibility. The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge. Therefore, there are no 'false' oral sources. Once we have checked their factual credibility with all the established criteria of philological criticism and factual verification which are required by all types of sources anyway, the diversity of oral history consists in the fact that 'wrong' statements are still psychologically 'true' and that this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts.

Of course, this does not mean that we accept the dominant prejudice which sees factual credibility as a monopoly of written documents. Very often, written documents are only the uncontrolled transmission of unidentified oral sources (as in the case of the report on Trastulli's death, which begins: 'According to verbal information taken . . .'). The passage from these oral 'ur-sources' to the written document is often the result of processes which have no scientific credibility and are frequently heavy with class bias. In trial records (at least in Italy, where no legal value is accorded to the tape recorder or shorthand transcripts), what goes on record is not the words actually spoken by the witnesses, but a summary dictated by the judge to the clerk. The distortion inherent in such procedure is beyond assessment, especially when the speakers originally expressed themselves in dialect. Yet, many historians who turn up their noses at oral sources accept these legal transcripts with no questions asked. In a lesser measure (thanks to the frequent use of shorthand) this applies to parliamentary records, minutes of meetings and conventions, and interviews reported in newspapers: all sources which are legitimately and widely used in standard historical research.

A by-product of this prejudice is the insistence that oral sources are distant from events, and therefore undergo the distortion of faulty memory. Indeed, this problem exists for many written documents, which are usually written some time after the event to which they refer, and often by nonparticipants. Oral sources might compensate chronological distance with a much closer personal involvement. While written memoirs of politicians or labor leaders are usually credited until proven to be in error, they are as distant from some aspects of the event which they relate as are many oral history interviews, and only hide their dependence on time by assuming the immutable form of a 'text'. On the other hand, oral narrators have within their culture certain aids to memory. Many stories are told over and over, or discussed with members of the community; formalized narrative, even meter, may help preserve a textual version of an event.

In fact, one should not forget that oral informants may also be literate. Tiberio Ducci, a former leader of the farm workers' league in Genzano, in the Roman hills, may be atypical: in addition to remembering his own experience, he had also researched the local archives. But many informants read books and newspapers, listen to the radio and TV, hear sermons and political speeches, and keep diaries, letters, clippings, and photograph albums. Orality and writing, for many centuries now, have not existed separately: if many written sources are based on orality, modern orality itself is saturated with writing.

But what is really important is that memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings. Thus, the specific utility of oral

sources for the historian lies, not so much in their ability to preserve the past, as in the very changes wrought by memory. These changes reveal the narrators' effort to make sense of the past and to give a form to their lives, and set the interview and the narrative in their historical context.

Changes which may have subsequently taken place in the narrators' personal subjective consciousness or in their socio-economic standing, may affect, if not the actual recounting of prior events, at least the valuation and the 'coloring' of the story. Several people are reticent, for instance, when it comes to describing illegal forms of struggle, such as sabotage. This does not mean that they do not remember them clearly, but that there has been a change in their political opinions, personal circumstances, or in their party's line. Acts considered legitimate and even normal or necessary in the past may be therefore now viewed as unacceptable and literally cast out of the tradition. In these cases, the most precious information may lie in what the informants *hide*, and in the fact that they *do* hide it, rather than in what they *tell*.

Often, however, narrators are capable of reconstructing their past attitudes even when they no longer coincide with present ones. This is the case with the Terni factory workers who admit that violent reprisals against the executives responsible for mass layoffs in 1953 may have been counterproductive, but yet reconstruct with great lucidity why they seemed useful and sensible at the time. In one of the most important oral testimonies of our time, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, the narrator describes very vividly how his mind worked before he reached his present awareness, and then judges his own past self by the standards of his present political and religious consciousness. If the interview is conducted skillfully and its purposes are clear to the narrators, it is not impossible for them to make a distinction between present and past self, and to objectify the past self as other than the present one. In these cases - Malcolm X again is typical - irony is the major narrative mode: two different ethical (or political, or religious) and narrative standards interfere and overlap, and their tension shapes the telling of the story.

On the other hand, we may also come across narrators whose consciousness seems to have been arrested at climactic moments of their personal experience: certain Resistance fighters, or war veterans; and perhaps certain student militants of the 1960s. Often, these individuals are wholly absorbed by the totality of the historical event of which they were part, and their account assumes the cadences and wording of *epic*. The distinction between an ironic or an epic style implies a distinction between historical perspectives, which ought to be taken into consideration in our interpretation of the testimony.

Objectivity

Oral sources are not *objective*. This of course applies to every source, though the holiness of writing often leads us to forget it. But the inherent nonobjectivity of oral sources lies in specific intrinsic characteristics, the most important being that they are *artificial, variable, and partial*.

Alex Haley's introduction to *Autobiography of Malcolm X* describes how Malcolm shifted his narrative approach not spontaneously, but because the interviewer's questioning led him away from the exclusively public and official image of himself and

of the Nation of Islam which he was trying to project. This illustrates the fact that the documents of oral history are always the result of a relationship, of a shared project in which both the interviewer and the interviewee are involved together not necessarily in harmony. Written documents are fixed; they exist whether we are aware of them or not, and do not change once we have found them. Oral testimony is only a potential resource until the researcher calls it into existence. The condition for the existence of the written source is emission; for oral sources, transmission: a difference similar to that described by Roman Jakobson and Pi Bogatyrev between the creative processes of folklore and those of literature. The content of the written source is independent of the researcher's need; hypotheses; it is a stable text, which we can only interpret. The content of oral sources, on the other hand, depends largely on what the interviewer puts into it in terms of questions, dialogue, and personal relationship.

It is the researcher who decides that there will be an interview in the first place. Researchers often introduce specific distortions: informants tell them what they believe they want to be told and thus reveal who they think the researcher is. On the other hand, rigidly structured interviews may exclude elements whose existence or relevance were previously unknown to the interviewer and not contemplated in the question schedule. Such interviews tend to confirm the historian's previous frame of reference.

The first requirement, therefore, is that the researcher 'accept' the informant and give priority to what she or he wishes to tell, rather than what the researcher wants to hear, saving any unanswered questions for later or for another interview. Communications always work both ways. The interviewees are always, though perhaps unobtrusively, studying the interviewers who 'study' them. Historians may as well recognize this fact and make the best of its advantages, rather than try to eliminate it for the sake of an impossible (and perhaps undesirable) neutrality.

The final result of the interview is the product of both the narrator and the researcher. When interviews, as is often the case, are arranged for publication or entirely the interviewer's voice, a subtle distortion takes place: the text given in the answers without the questions, giving the impression that a given narrator always says the same things, no matter what the circumstances - in other words, an impression that a speaking person is as stable and repetitive as a written document. When the researcher's voice is cut out, the narrator's voice is distorted.

Oral testimony, in fact, is never the same twice. This is a characteristic of oral communication, but is especially true of relatively unstructured forms, such as autobiographical or historical statements given in an interview. Even the same interviewer gets different versions from the same narrator at different times. As the two subjects come to know each other better, the narrator's 'vigilance' may attenuate. Class subordination - trying to identify with what the narrator thinks is the interviewer's interest - may be replaced by more independence or by a better understanding of the purposes of the interview. Or a previous interview may have simply awakened memories which are then told in later meetings.

The fact that interviews with the same person may be continued indefinitely leads us to the question of the inherent incompleteness of oral sources. It is impossible to exhaust the entire memory of a single informant; the data extracted with each interview are always the result of a selection produced by the mutual relationship. Historical research with oral sources therefore always has to

unfinished nature of a work in progress. In order to go through all the possible oral sources for the Terni strikes of 1949 to 1953, one ought to interview in depth several thousand people; any sample would only be as reliable as the sampling methods used, and could never guarantee against leaving out 'quality' narrators whose testimony alone might be worth ten statistically selected ones.

The unfinishedness of oral sources affects all other sources. Given that no research (concerning a historical time for which living memories are available) is complete unless it has exhausted oral as well as written sources, and that oral sources are inexhaustible, the ideal goal of going through 'all' possible sources becomes impossible. Historical work using oral sources is unfinished because of the nature of the sources; historical work excluding oral sources (where available) is incomplete by definition.

Who speaks in oral history?

Oral history is not where the working classes speak for themselves. The contrary statement, of course, would not be entirely unfounded: the recounting of a strike through the words and memories of workers rather than those of the police and the (often unfriendly) press obviously helps (though not automatically) to balance a distortion implicit in those sources. Oral sources are a necessary (not a sufficient) condition for a history of the nonhegemonic classes; they are less necessary (though by no means useless) for the history of the ruling classes, who have had control over writing and leave behind a much more abundant written record.

Nevertheless, the control of historical discourse remains firmly in the hands of the historian. It is the historian who selects the people who will be interviewed; who contributes to the shaping of the testimony by asking the questions and reacting to the answers; and who gives the testimony its final published shape and context (if only in terms of montage and transcription). Even accepting that the working class speaks through oral history, it is clear that the class does not speak in the abstract, but speaks to the historian, with the historian and, inasmuch as the material is published, through the historian.

Indeed, things may also be the other way around. The historian may validate his or her discourse by 'ventriloquizing' it through the narrator's testimony. So far from disappearing in the objectivity of the sources, the historian remains important at least as a partner in dialogue, often as a 'stage director' of the interview, or as an 'organizer' of the testimony. Instead of discovering sources, oral historians partly create them. Far from becoming mere mouthpieces for the working class, oral historians may be using other people's words, but are still responsible for the overall discourse.

Much more than written documents, which frequently carry the impersonal aura of the institutions by which they are issued – even though, of course, they are composed by individuals, of whom we often know little or nothing – oral sources involve the entire account in their own subjectivity. Alongside the first person narrative of the interviewee stands the first person of the historian, without whom there would be no interview. Both the informant's and the historian's discourse are in narrative form, which is much less frequently the case with archival documents. Informants are historians, after a fashion; and the historian is, in certain ways, a part of the source.

Traditional writers of history present themselves usually in the role of what literary theory would describe as an 'omniscient narrator'. They give a third-person account of events of which they were not a part, and which they dominate entirely and from above (above the consciousness of the participants themselves). They appear to be impartial and detached, never entering the narrative except to give comments aside, after the manner of some nineteenth-century novelists. Oral history changes the writing of history much as the modern novel transformed the writing of literary fiction: the most important change is that the narrator is now pulled into the narrative and becomes a party of the story.

This is not just a grammatical shift from the third to the first person, but a whole new narrative attitude. The narrator is now one of the characters, and the *telling* of the story is part of the story being told. This implicitly indicates a much deeper political and personal involvement than that of the external narrator. Writing radical oral history, then, is not a matter of ideology, of subjective sides-taking, or of choosing one set of sources instead of another. It is, rather, inherent in the historian's presence in the story, in the assumption of responsibility which inscribes her or him in the account and reveals historiography as an autonomous act of narration. Political choices become less visible and vocal, but more basic.

The myth that the historian as a subject might disappear in the objective truth of working-class sources was part of a view of political militancy as the annihilation of all subjective roles into that of the full-time activist, and as absorption into an abstract working class. This resulted in an ironical similarity to the traditional attitude which saw historians as not subjectively involved in the history which they were writing. Oral historians appear to yield to other subjects of discourse, but, in fact, the historian becomes less and less of a 'go-between' from the working class to the reader, and more and more of a protagonist.

In the writing of history, as in literature, the act of focusing on the function of the narrator causes this function to be fragmented. In a novel such as Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, the character/narrator Marlow can recount only what he himself has seen and heard; in order to tell the 'whole story', he is forced to take several other 'informants' into his tale. The same thing happens to historians working with oral sources. On explicitly entering the story, historians must allow the sources to enter the tale with their autonomous discourse.

Oral history has no unified subject; it is told from a multitude of points of view, and the impartiality traditionally claimed by historians is replaced by the partiality of the narrator. 'Partiality' here stands for both 'unfinishedness' and for 'taking sides': oral history can never be told without taking sides, since the 'sides' exist inside the telling. And, no matter what their personal histories and beliefs may be, historians and 'sources' are hardly ever on the same 'side'. The confrontation of their different partialities – confrontation as 'conflict', and confrontation as 'search for unity' – is one of the things which make oral history interesting.

Notes

- 1 B. Placido in *La Repubblica*, 3 October 1978.
- 2 One Italian exception is the Istituto Ernesto De Martino, an independent radical research organization based in Milan, which has published 'sound archives' on

long-playing records since the mid-1960s — without anyone in the cultural establishment noticing: see F. Coggola, 'L'attività dell'Istituto Ernesto de Martino', in D. Carpitella (ed.), *L'etnomusicologia in Italia*, Palermo: Flaccovio, 1975, pp. 265–270.

- 3 L. Passerini, 'Sull'utilità e il danno delle fonti orali per la storia'. Introduction to Passerini (ed.), *Storia Orale. Vita quotidiana e cultura materiale delle classi subalterne*, Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1978, discusses the relationship of oral history and social history.
- 4 On musical notation as reproduction of speech sounds, see G. Marini, 'Musica popolare e parlato popolare urbano', in Circolo Gianni Bosio (ed.), *I giorni, canzoni*, Milano: Mazzotta, 1978, pp. 33–34. A. Lomax, *Folk Song Styles and Culture*, 1968, Washington DC: American Association for the Advancement of Sciences, 1968, Publication no. 88, discusses electronic representation of vocal styles.
- 5 See W. Labov, 'The logic of non-standard English', in L. Kampf and P. Lauter (eds), *The Politics of Literature*, New York: Random House, 1970, pp. 194–244, on the expressive qualities of non-standard speech.
- 6 In this article, I use these terms as defined and used by G. Gennete, *Figures III*, Paris: Seuil, 1972.
- 7 On genre distinctions in folk and oral narrative, see D. Ben-Amos, 'Categories analytiques et genres populaires', *Poétique*, 1974, no. 19, pp. 268–293; and J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, [1961], 1973.
- 8 For instance, G. Bordoni, Communist activist from Rome, talked about family and community mainly in dialect, but shifted briefly to a more standardized form of Italian whenever he wanted to reaffirm his allegiance to the party. The shift showed that, although he accepted the party's decisions, they remained other than his direct experience. His recurring idiom was 'There's nothing you can do about it.' See Circolo Gianni Bosio, *I giorni cantati*, pp. 58–66.
- 9 On fabula and plot see B. Tomaševski, 'Šjužetnoe postroenie', in *Teorija literatury Poetika*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1928; Italian trans., 'La costruzione dell' intreccio', in T. Todorov (ed.), *I formalisti russi*, Torino: Einaudi, 1968, published as *Théorie de la littérature*, Paris: Seuil, 1965.
- 10 These stories are discussed in chapters 1 and 6 of A. Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991.
- 11 R. Jakobson and P. Bogatyrev, 'Le folklore forme spécifique de creation', in R. Jakobson, *Questions de poétique*, Paris: Seuil, 1973, pp. 59–72.

Popular Memory Group

POPULAR MEMORY

Theory, politics, method

In the early 1980s the Popular Memory Group at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham (England) highlighted the political possibilities and contradictions for radical oral history projects. In this extract the Group argue that this radical potential is often undermined by superficial understandings of connections in oral testimony between individual and social memory and between past and present, and by the unequal relationships between professional historians and other participants in oral history projects. Extracted with permission from R. Johnson et al. (eds), *Making Histories: Studies in History-writing and Politics*, London: Hutchinson, 1982, pp. 206–220.

Must become historians of the present too.

(Communist Party Historians' Group Minutes,
8 April 1956)

IN THIS ARTICLE we explore an approach to history-writing which involves becoming 'historians of the present too'. It is important to us to 'explore'. We do not have a completed project in 'popular memory' to report. These discussions and develop discussions which were intended as an initial clarification summarize and develop discussions which were intended as an initial clarification. These discussions had three main starting-points. First, we were interested in limits and contradictions of academic history where links were attempted between a popular socialist or feminist politics. Our main example here was 'oral history practice that seemed nearest to our own preoccupations. Second, we were attracted to projects which moved in the direction indicated by these initial criticisms. I included experiments in popular autobiography and in community-based history but also some critical developments with a base in cultural studies or academic historiography. Third, we tried [...] to relate problems of history-writing to abstract debates which suggested possible clarifications.

What do we mean, then, by 'popular memory'? We give our own provisional answers in the first part of this essay. We define popular memory first as an