

## Oral history revisited

Portelli, Alessandro (1997) **The Battle of Valle Giulia. Oral History and the Art of Dialogue**, University of Wisconsin Press, London.

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Oral history strives to be situated between the profane and the mundane: history versus personal experience, intellectual community versus grassroots movement. Oral historians collect and interpret accounts of historical events experienced by eyewitnesses. Thereby they seek to answer the double-edged question:

- A. What role does a person play in history?
- B. What role does history play in the person's life?

Oral history does not seek a positivist explanation to this question. Where cognitive science might construe history in terms of e.g. flash bulb memory, whereby subjects for instance are asked: "what did you do on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September?" the oral historian wants to be like the curious son asking: "dad, what did you do during the war?" Thus in oral history the main focus is neither on famous people's biographies and mental makeup (psychobiography) nor on formulating a theory of memory. Oral history deals with the same issue as theories of situated cognition (e.g. Lave, 1988) namely: "just plain folks". But, where situated cognition extends its lenses to cover everyday living, oral history deals with the not so everyday (yet far from uncommon) phenomenon of people caught in the maelstrom of history. Thus in seeking to deal neither with abstract historical forces nor empty concretisations, oral history focuses on the fine texture of history: The sweeping socio-economic forces raging in people's lives as wars are waged, peasant revolts crushed or student movements die out.

The book takes its title *The Battle of Valle Giulia* from an Italian student protest movement of 1968, where the students fought the police in the streets of Rome. This was also the starting point for Portelli's career as an oral historian. He would, together with his mentor Bosio, head to the streets, as one of the organizers of demonstrations against the police, and record everything: The sound and the fury. In the chapter dealing with this event, as well as the chapters on Italian steelworkers, Kentucky coal miners, the Italian resistance fighting the Nazis, the author preserves the voices while at the same time giving his subjective interpretations.

It is perhaps the subjective or participatory aspect of oral history, which (until recently) has alienated it from history as an academic discipline. Or it is a consequence of oral history

questioning the dominant narrative in history? As an example of this could be mentioned the story about how the Nazis crushed an Italian village with 335 inhabitants on 24 March 1944. This incident and story was often construed as a consequence of the provocations of the Antifascist rebellions, thus leading to retaliation. But Portelli shows that in fact the retaliation was used as an excuse, and the decision had been taken independently. This story points to the influence of oral history on academic history.

Yet oral history seems to have fought long to become recognized by the academic world. Portelli repeatedly names fellow scholars who have not gained tenure at university due to their affiliation with oral history. The point is that the relatively slow institutionalisation of oral history could well account for the undaunted approach of this book. Whether Portelli is discussing ethics of qualitative research or oral history or the significance of the student movement for today, he manages to give a thick description. This uniqueness of oral history stems largely from the fact that it connects with grass roots movements, which is evident in Portelli's own life.

Portelli (who was born during the second world war) was active on the far left wing in Italy. But, as he explains in the book, he grew discontent with the way Marxist concepts such as "class" or "masses" were used to explain basically everything. He wanted to know how these abstractions work in the lives of individuals: Who are these individuals becoming workers or fascists? As such it could seem that Portelli's inspiration is Gramscian, but what does that mean, anyway? No, it makes more sense to say that here is an undaunted approach to the meaning carried by foremost antifascist resistance, antiracist confrontation and student movement. Portelli seems personally engaged in getting things straight in order to improve human conditions on a societal, communal and personal level. This requires that the interviewer is not neutral. What does Portelli have to say about doing qualitative research? It all boils down to, he says, "doing the right thing", "minding your manners". You do not go to somebody's house armed with questions and shoot at the inhabitants like a machine gun, but you engage in a conversation. Oral history is thus all about interpretation and action not technique. On the other hand interpretation and narrative do not take overhand. Thus Portelli denies the "post-modern euphoria". Portelli in a sense describes a political project aimed for instance at documenting the less than flattering role of the Catholic Church (in Italy) in political discrimination.

There has perhaps been a snobbish tendency within academia to romanticise "der Mann" and thus come to terms with the distance to the mundane that it itself helps to purport. This is not overly present in this book since Portelli's project seems both to be to give the silenced a voice through academic channels (books, articles, conference papers) and to document what we think happened. The transgression of the mundane and profane makes this book different from textbooks on qualitative research. In this book there are no illustrations or gimmicks, yet the account is more vivid than many a lifeless, academic treatise: Portelli gets to where the action is.

This is not said to place oral history on a pedestal. Obviously it is not new to emphasise the importance of interpretation over objective detachment of the researcher. But the strengths of this book are as its narrative sophistication and straightforwardness. It is not a standard book on doing oral history as yet another qualitative method. If one is looking for more standard introductions to the field, Richard Cándida Smith's (2001) discussion of analytic strategies in oral history interviews can for instance be recommended. But reading Portelli gives a sense that oral history has adhered more to its grass roots' concerns with human conditions than many other strands within qualitative research. There are analyses in the book that could have been given more weight. To mention one: The relationship between a (supposedly eternal) human tradition of narrating about transpersonal events transforming our lives and proper history. Furthermore the book does not manage to give a systematic theoretical framework linking history with personal life (and with psychological processes). For instance it could be attempted to try to combine the theoretical rigor of sociocultural theory (e.g. Chaiklin, Hedegaard, Jensen, 1999) with oral history. Thus Portelli's theoretical framework of distinguishing between an institutional, communal and personal level of analysis lends itself to a Vygotskian reading. Many people would argue against this point since oral history is not – and should not be - some kind of cultural psychology. But this misses the point about a genuine concern for the human condition, which is praiseworthy for any (good) human science. But these last remarks do not take anything away from oral history with its tradition of dialogic discourse developing from what the writer hears, what he writes, and what we read. Bottom line: This book can be highly recommended.

***Literature:***

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