

■ Die International Oral History Association

Annette Leo, Franka Maubach (Hg.), Den Unterdrückten eine Stimme geben? Die International Oral History Association zwischen politischer Bewegung und wissenschaftlichem Netzwerk, Göttingen (Wallstein) 2013, 378 S., 8 Abb., 34,90 €

This volume is the outcome of an experiment in postgraduate research training initiated by Lutz Niethammer in 2006: a group of doctor-

al students developing their personal dissertation projects under the thematic umbrella »Erinnerung–Macht–Geschichte« (EMG) was tasked with carrying out a collective oral history of the first twenty years of the International Oral History Association (IOHA). Strictly speaking, the two decades between 1976 and 1996 constitute the pre-history of the IOHA. It was only at its 1996 conference that the organisation adopted a formal constitution, but it is one of the many paradoxes of the development of this pioneer enterprise that its founding members had increasingly been behaving like the executive committee of an association and had been wrestling with the principle of a formal constitution for a decade. This development took place over the course and through the organisation of a series of international conferences. A further paradox (though also evidence of the successful establishment of oral history within global scholarship) lies in the fact that by 1996 the membership of the Association had become truly international. The original core members – Paul Thompson, the group's key entrepreneur and facilitator, Ron Grele, Alessandro Portelli, Daniel Bertaux, Luisa Passerini, Lutz Niethammer and Mercedes Vilanova – were all Western European or Anglo-American, as were most of a second generation who became involved in the association in the 1980s. By 1996 studies of and by people from the former socialist states and from outside of Europe had taken on such a significant role, both numerically and conceptually, that the first chairmanship went not to Thompson but to the Spanish Mercedes Vilanova as (another paradox) perceived challenger to the North Atlantic hegemony. One of the surprising bits of information in a book full of fascinating insights is that the founding of the European Social Science History Conference was in part a result of the flight of Europeanists from the IOHA.

The EMG project involved 35 interviews with activists and members of the IOHA and with other individuals active in oral history during the 1970s and 1980s, and the authors also draw on textual material and correspon-

dence in (mainly) private archives as well as published autobiographical writing by their subjects. Five of the chapters in the volume are by graduate students who took part in the project: Maya Finnberg analyses the biographies and career paths that led the core group of intellectuals to their engagement in oral history and in the association. Christian König adds depth to the biographical dimension in his study of the founder group as a *Freundschaftsnetzwerk*. Julie Boekhoff traces the development from friendship group to network to association, simultaneously an organisational history and the history of personal interactions and shifting life and career choices. Agnès Arp's theme is internationality, at once a constitutive feature of the oral history project and, as noted above, a challenge to its foundational cohesion, while Silvia Musso's exploration of the IOHA as a laboratory for interdisciplinarity also gives significant emphasis to the fact that transnational conversations were from the start necessarily cross-disciplinary because of the differences among country-specific approaches.

These chapters are framed by essays by the editors – senior members of the project who also took part in some of the interviews – and by Lutz Niethammer. Annette Leo provides a summary introduction and a chapter about the students' experiences of »interviewing the interviewer«. Franka Maubach offers a critical reflection on the notion of giving voice to the oppressed in the context of an account of oral historians' developing understanding of the nature of language and silence. And Lutz Niethammer concludes with a wide-ranging afterword that begins by explaining why the experiment that he initiated turned out to be »promotionsandragogisch« ein Fehler« (which will evoke a wry smile of recognition in any *Doktorvater* or *Doktormutter*) and ends with a thoughtful analysis of biographical and autobiographical writings on/by historians.

Like any volume of essays, the book has some unevenness. It's not surprising that there is a good deal of repetition and overlap between the respective chapters (particularly the ones that focus on organisational structures

and history), though this has been managed well by the editors and speaks for the character of the volume as the outcome of cooperation and conversations among the authors. The present reviewer, not an oral historian, found it in many respects a book for insiders. It would perhaps be flying in the face of the history of the movement to ask: So what is oral history? – since one message that emerges clearly is that the answer to that question has been debated continuously since the 1970s (or conscientiously evaded, as in the Italian and Spanish preference for the term »oral sources«). But when it comes to talking about how oral historians work there is a kind of presumption that there is no need for explanation (or even of the lack of need for explanation). Thus the life-history interview is plausibly invoked as the defining feature of oral history (in contradistinction to the for-the-record interview with politicians or other elite figures pioneered in the United States – and here the fact that it is the life of subaltern subjects that is being explored is of course equally important to the definition of oral history). But we also learn that leading proponents and whole national traditions of oral history don't use the life-history approach. And more generally, given that method (however eclectic) does emerge as the common denominator, it would have served the purposes of the volume and the project well had we heard as much about the every day practices of the craft as we do about the significance of the intersubjective moment in the interview space. The question of craft is reflected in a rather disheartening (if fascinating) way in Annette Leo's chapter, which reports how some of the interviewees of the older generation treated their own interviews as occasions to give lessons in technique to their younger colleagues. Franka Maubach comes closest to an anatomy of method in her analysis of the way in which oral historians' understanding of the power and appropriate »uses« of language evolved, crucially facilitated by Luisa Passerini's 1979 call for a more critical approach to speech and silence (published in *History Workshop Journal* as »Work Ideology and Consensus under Ital-

ian Fascism«). Maubach brings to a point the evidence presented in other chapters that this key element of shared method was central to the way in which the IOHA itself developed: The close attention to the subjects' words as spoken (like the privileged status of the interview scene itself) challenges not only recovery and transmission but also the possibility of adequate translation; this fuelled fierce debates within the Association about which should be its »official« languages (and more specifically how to handle multi-lingual meetings), debates which in turn reflected a real contest for acknowledgement and power between the North Atlantic-European core group and the growing body of scholars from (especially) Latin America.

Two technical aspects which feature, as it were, in subordinate clauses, would have merited explication and critical unpacking both in conversation with practitioners and in presentation to readers: One is the work of oral historians in developing common practices of recording, transcribing and (above all) archiving interviews, which has implications for understandings of the status of orality and intersubjectivity, for the authority of the historian and for the institutional position of oral history. The other is the apparent consensus that the availability of portable voice recorders was itself a significant driver in the development of the field; on the one hand this makes perfect sense intuitively, and on the other it leaves us wondering what ethnographers and *Volkskundler* had been doing for the previous two centuries.

That said, this reviewer *is* of the generation of social historians whose history is being written here (in IOHA terms, the second generation), and I found much to recognise and much to learn in the picture that the authors give us of the making of the oral history movement as a generational experience as well as the patterns of intergenerational transmission. Most of the members of the first, or core generation had been formed by experiences (direct or indirect) of war and dictatorship but had also benefited from new opportunities to study and to travel

in (and out of) a reconstructed Europe. (The exceptions here were the British and American members, Paul Thompson and Ron Grele.) When they first came together to discuss the historical method which each had been exploring in their respective contexts they recognised themselves in each other, and this was what made them friends as well as colleagues. It comes as no surprise that what brought most of them to oral history was a conjuncture of personal and/or professional crisis, political engagement in forms of left-wing or radical democratic politics, and changes in the social and political scene that challenged revolutionary optimism.

What emerges from the interviews, though, is the variety of ways in which their subjects – each in her or his national and personal context – interprets the power of the method. There are different accounts of the »before and after« of their discovery of oral history, of the implications and impact of the intersubjective moment, and of how they came to understand themselves and their interlocutors as political actors and as classed subjects (less often gendered – gender is invoked here mainly in connection with the careers inside and outside the IOHA of Luisa Passerini and Mercedes Vilanova). For example, where we have long understood »den Unterdrückten eine Stimme geben« as the core political programme not only of oral history but of all social history after E. P. Thompson, here we find (notably among male Italian members of the collective) a sense that coming to know the oppressed face-to-face and actually *listening* to them confirmed their growing distance from the available forms of political activism. Accordingly one question raised by the volume is whether the transformative power that a particular method can have at a particular moment is transmissible at all, and what remains of the method if it isn't. This question is addressed at some points in the volume, often indirectly in association with the discussion of a perceived loss of dynamism and *Verwissenschaftlichung* in the 1990s. It is the real stuff of conversations between academic generations. In this volume, the exchanges re-

corded in the individual chapters, along with the contrapuntal deployment of the perspectives of the young project members and the project leaders/editors make for an illuminating and thought-provoking book.

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