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Editorial

The last issue of *Words and Silences* (Vol. 1, No. 1, June 2002) initiated a new series of our journal because it integrated in a bilingual presentation the previously separate English and Spanish editions. The aim remains: to facilitate the exchange of ideas and work experiences among the international community of oral historians. Former editors of the journal went a long way in fulfilling this purpose.

We asked contributors to this issue to send short essays reflecting on the political intentions behind their oral history research. We also received three lengthier texts that focus more generally on certain questions of politics in oral history. The reader will undoubtedly find multiple connections between the articles, as well as provocative invitations to polemics.

A recurrent topic is the relationship between producers and consumers of oral history. The form and content of this relationship varies in the concrete experiences portrayed in the short articles. Martínez describes a tenuous link mediated by government agencies interested in grounding empirically their efforts in social engineering. Pensado and De Garay find almost casually or accidentally an audience ready to make use of their researches. By contrast, Camarena and Aversa and Browarnik describe work experiences which in fact seek out either a close relationship or the integration of users as producers of oral history. Ap-

proaching the topic from a more general perspective, Sebe argues that producers and users should belong to the same community of identity and interests, so that oral history may serve as the field of inquiry within which goals and strategies for political action are defined.

The relationship between production and use implies also a discussion of distribution or access to oral history. Most authors devote at least some attention to this question and it is clear that different intentions lead in different directions. When work is bound to the political demands of a given community there is an immediate link between the creation and use of oral histories. That link is absent when the purpose of research is to produce oral sources for creating a collection whose future users are indeterminate. Schwarzstein, Tébar, Baena, Fernández and Garulli tell of experiences geared to the collection and preservation of the memory of important clandestine political movements and activists. Interviewing participants is essential to retrieving that memory and, as researchers found, in unveiling connections that would otherwise remain invisible. Is there a debate about intentions and purposes or rather about how different intentions may lead to complementary objectives?

There is a difference in how the short essays view today the issue of politics and oral history. In the past, a look at making and using oral history would have led into an examination of the politics of the practice of oral history. But for these authors politics comes not from within practice but from the demands of the social situation surrounding the oral historian.

In the essays by Camarena, Pensado and Martínez, politics is injected into research by those who ask for the intervention of oral historians because they think they can use politically the results

of searching into memory and history. Dibwe instead poses the problem of how changing political contexts alter public memory and hence the private recollections that may be safely expressed, in turn adding difficulties to the work of interviewing. A somewhat similar situation surprised De Garay when she stumbled against the different views an architect, an historian and a judge have on the evidence from memory. Aversa and Brownik, and to some extent Camarena, wonder about the pertinence and validity of introducing or seeking out reflections on the past when current needs press for attention and solution. In this sense they come closer to older preoccupations about the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, between history, memory and present experience, which suggests that these topics are neither easy nor solved in practice. Schwarzstein in particular, as well as Garulli and Tebar, consider these questions more fully. And indeed all the essays touch upon questions of practice but do not make them their central focus. In these essays politics bursts into practice with all its demands, knots, tangles and risks.

And perhaps this affords a perspective to understand the imbalance in the geographical representation of the authors, most of them Latin Americans. Perhaps there is nothing new to say about older discussions, mostly held in Europe and the United States. Work there seems now to be directed to problems of identity and cultural recognition within democratic regimes. Problems and intentions might then be of a more practical and "assistentialist" nature. Latin America continues to be a space for utopia, for thinking about the ever far-away relatively just society and fearing the fracture of the ever fragile present. Politics there jumps at you as soon as you open your eyes. (This speculation of course does not hold for

colleagues from Africa, Asia or Australia; perhaps the call for papers was little-known there.)

An essay by Carlos Fuentes, *Is the novel dead?*, comes to mind. The author takes us back to the mid-20th century, when he started writing and felt the pressure to conform to any of three excluding alternatives. He should subordinate his fiction to some or another ideology, to frivolous marketing or to pessimistic nihilism. Searching for a different path, Fuentes found a question: what could the novel say that was not already being said elsewhere? As time went on he found many answers but still considered the question to be more interesting. What then may oral history say that is not already being said elsewhere?

The essays here exemplify that search. The longer texts offer some answers. Von Plato presents an excellent work of political oral history, underlining precisely that evidence in oral sources not only fills gaps but makes intelligible the written sources and the political disputes over memory. Sebe engages in a theoretical discussion which critically overviews the place of oral history inside and outside academia to then suggest that oral his-

tory maybe a discipline for the political battles of the present. Schwarzstein closely examines the virtues, difficulties and limitations of a project to create a collection that preserves the memory of a violent, traumatic and important political period in the recent history of Argentina. We publish this last piece for its own merits but also as a tribute to Dora's memory, whom we will miss.

The last section, on projects and archives, reports on problems encountered in the work of collecting, preserving and publicizing oral sources for a social history of labor in the collections of Comisiones Obreras in Asturias and Andalucía, in Spain. We hope that in time this section will be important for oral historians who want to share thoughts on specific problems and solutions tried, successfully or not.

Readers of this issue perhaps will like to become contributors to the next and join the International Oral History Association. Visit our website for information: www.ioha.fgv.br

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