

## Postulates of the Oral History Center For Latin America

BY JAMES W. WILKIE

Oral history is not new and tape recorded interviews have been used effectively by many investigators, but perhaps the presentation of a rationale for the expansion of oral history's uses may offer a small contribution to the development of an old research tool. Our goal is to suggest a hypothesis for the historian's role in questioning national leaders on social, economic, and political themes in order to understand comparatively the units and nature of twentieth-century history in a cultural region of the world. The Oral History Center for Latin America was established January 1, 1966, at the Ohio State University for the purpose of putting this rationale into practice.

### *Background of the Center*

The basis of the Oral History Center for Latin America is an oral archive of the Mexican Revolution from 1910 to the present. This archive has been recorded, necessarily in Spanish, since 1963. Initially, twenty-seven persons representing all major ideologies in the Revolution were interviewed, including, for example, Vicente Lombardo Toledano, a Marxist leader on the left, and Salvador Abascal, a founder of the fascist-oriented Sinarquista movement on the right. In addition, such men as David Alfaro Siqueiros and Carlos Fuentes have discussed their concepts of art and literature which have been formed by Mexico's fifty years of institutionalized revolution.

The difficulties seemed enormous when James F. King of the Department of History at the University of California, Berkeley, suggested that the writer might take advantage of his background in Mexico to carry out oral interviews in much the same manner that Hubert Howe Bancroft had recorded history, the principal difference being that material would be tape recorded instead of copied by hand. Who would be willing to put his words into a record which could not be "misquoted?"

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\* This paper was prepared with the collaboration of Albert L. Michaels (Department of History, the State University of New York, Buffalo) and was edited by Edna M. Wilkie (Department of History, the Ohio State University) and Lyle C. Brown (Department of Political Science, Baylor University). It was presented by Prof. Michaels to the session on oral history at the meeting of the Western History Association in El Paso, Texas, October 13, 1966. Gratitude is here acknowledged to these scholars for their participation in the Center's work in Mexico. Thanks is due also to Philip C. Brooks (Director, Harry S Truman Library) for suggestions which led to some revision for publication.

It was obvious at the outset that mere recording of memoirs would not suffice and that cross-examination would be the key to any undertaking in oral history. Thus it was with some skepticism that the writer and his Guatemalan wife, Edna, began an attempt to record Mexican leaders. Actually, we soon found that oral history, in which the historian confronts the historical figure, was the long-sought way to get at many questions which had gone unanswered. We presented the recordings in the following terms: "If only we had the voices of such great leaders as Plato, Cortés, Napoleon, and Lincoln on tape explaining their lives, we could hear their firsthand statements about the past without the distortions and miscomprehensions of intervening times."

Mexicans immediately saw the logic of making statements for posterity, especially when we insisted that we sought neither to glorify nor to denigrate their historical actions. While we offered to let them present their views, we also noted that we would stimulate discussion so as to cover embarrassing incidents and contradictions which autobiography often ignores. It took time to perfect our technique, for previously we had found that historical figures generally refused to answer questions when naively approached with such an inquiry as "How do you explain your actions of July 27, 1934?" We could sense them thinking, "How can I explain my actions of one day? My life is complex and what happened in a moment in time is incomprehensible to any one who does not really know me. Besides, these foreigners probably neither understand Mexican culture nor the nuances of the Spanish language. Even if I had time to try to explain, I would be misunderstood or misquoted." However, as the oral history program got underway, usually Mexico's historical figures readily acceded to recorded interviews because they did not want their views omitted from a comprehensive historical archive. These men voiced regret that autobiography has not been a traditional form of expression in Latin America; and they agreed that without personal accounts of history the historian is seriously handicapped. Apparently a lack of time and a distaste for raising old issues has been a significant factor in impeding autobiographical writings. Biography has been almost useless as a method of examination into the lives of leaders because generally it has taken a polemical form which assumes that the subject is either god or devil. Oral history offered a balance mainly because it was neither egotistically prepared nor problematically developed by polemicists. As more and more historical figures became convinced of the importance of our work, the tape recordings began to grow. The 250 hours of interviews recorded in Mexico will result in some 4000 pages of typescript when transcription is complete.

Extension of the oral history program was institutionalized with the writer's appointment as assistant professor of history in the Ohio State University. Formal organization of the Oral History Center for Latin

America, supported by \$60,000 from Alumni Contributions to the Development Fund of the Ohio State University, has presented an opportunity to continue work in Mexico as well as to make comparative studies in other countries. Since we initially began work on the meaning of revolution in Mexico, it seemed logical to apply our experience to other instances of violent social change in Latin America. In view of the influence of the Mexican Revolution, especially in agrarian reform, on the Bolivian and Cuban revolutions, our expansion has been directed to recording in these latter two countries in order to offer an example of thematic investigation which may be pursued in a general examination of Latin American culture. In June of this year the Center began research on the course and outcomes of the Bolivian Revolution from 1952 to 1964. We have recently completed recording thirty-five hours of interviews with Dr. Victor Paz Estenssoro, the principal leader of the revolution during its twelve years of existence, and we believe this document to be a significant contribution to the study of history. We are presently preparing to begin work with Fidel Castro on the nature and goals of the Cuban Revolution. The program of the Center is rooted in the following assumptions.

#### *Eight Postulates*

First, it is the duty of the historian as social scientist in the contemporary era to take part in the selection of historical documents to be preserved for the future. New approaches are needed to cope with the data and knowledge which threaten to engulf scholarship.

Second, the historian has an opportunity to develop oral history as a method of assembling data which will enable him to cut incisively through great amounts of extraneous material. The historian, or a social scientist interested in an historical approach, can confront historical figures and tape record his encounters, thus preserving the viewpoint of the past as it is scrutinized by the scholar. Furthermore, he has the opportunity to introduce similar abstract concepts into every discussion in order to formulate a unique primary source.

Third, important documents can effectively be built around oral memoirs of men who have led or opposed national movements which have so influenced our twentieth century. Biography is united with autobiography and a chronological thread allows comment upon social, economic, and political development in epochs or in cultures which investigators can fathom only with difficulty. Several disciplines have used oral history to record the chronicle of the common man but few have confronted his leaders with probing questions about the past. Apparently such neglect has resulted from the fear that intensive questioning might somehow seem to impugn the integrity of the historical personage or prevent a relaxed and frank discussion.

Fourth, a sociology of knowledge will emerge as the historian asks similar questions of leaders who represent ideologies composing the whole political spectrum. As in a court of law, testimony may be taken in an attempt to register facts and interpretation for the official record. While we must recognize that we shall never find the whole truth, we are able to record knowledge upon which representatives of major groups in society have acted and to determine which leaders have worked with the most accurate information at a given moment in time. Essentially, we are interested in comparing men's lives to see how the process of national history develops, and we must remember that what men think happens is often as important as what actually happens.

Fifth, in order to develop comparative lives and to arrive at the sociology of knowledge which has been so well postulated by Karl Mannheim, we may conveniently begin research in a readily identifiable cultural region of the world such as Latin America. An overall theme, "social change and the conflict between personalism and ideology in Latin America" will give coherence in undertaking to test method in twenty countries. Thereby we can investigate specifically how men grow up in different yet similar national states, why they become involved in politics, and how they interpret their role in the trajectory of history. Social scientists have talked extensively about the role of personalism as the motor of Latin American politics; but while Latin Americans recognize this aspect of their culture, they also argue that ideology plays an important function in their lives. How do personalism and ideology fit into the picture of extreme national and international movements in twentieth-century Latin America? Also, we are interested in the question, "does Latin America exist?" Or to what degree do its leaders believe it to exist? The comparative study of the lives of Latin American leaders, utilizing oral history techniques, gives a concrete method with which to analyze such complex and important problems. Since the method proposed here helps us to know Latin America, perhaps it might be used to good advantage by scholars in delving into the history of other cultural areas of the world.

Sixth, the development of oral history adds a humanistic as well as a socially scientific dimension to the scholar's kit of tools. By retaining the individual element in the recording of history, we not only attempt to examine biases of both historian and historical figure, but we attempt to capture personal equations and shadings of history which give balance and perspective to impersonal investigation.

Seventh, a data bank storing the taped encounters will offer scholars a central place for research utilizing a new type of primary source material on Latin America. In order to expand the collection, the Center will encourage and support scholars competent in a particular area of study or in the history of a country to use oral history in their own re-

search into the contemporary epoch. Oral history is no substitute for investigation of archive materials, newspapers, or statistical data, for example; it is built upon these types of research and is only one more approach which can help us to understand the past and the present. The scholar who contributes his valuable time to the Center's endeavor will enjoy, of course, all rights to use the material as he sees fit; his only obligation, in return for financial support, being to present the original tapes to the Center. If the scholar does not publish the material during his lifetime, publication rights revert to the Center. Providing that the historical figure has placed no time limitations on the use of his oral memoirs, each scholar's materials will be opened within a reasonable time after transcription to facilitate research by the scholarly profession, with the usual condition that proper citation be made of the materials and that the scholar's approval be obtained for all quotations.

Eighth, there is an urgency in expanding the work of the Center, for it is still possible to record a rather complete oral history of the twentieth century. Though the influential generation of the first years after 1900 is gone, some members of the group which was to succeed it are still available to tell us about those times. Two major figures in the Mexican Revolution, General Juan Andreu Almazán and Ramón Beteta, died only months after recording their memoirs with the Center. The Oral History Center is currently working in several countries to compare various approaches to social change, but this is only a beginning. Many countries remain, with Puerto Rico as a possible historical contrast.

#### *The Method*

Interviews to record oral memoirs are conducted so as to correspond chronologically with the historical figure's life. We develop inquiry spontaneously in order to avoid use of the impersonal questionnaire which so antagonizes most Latin Americans. We know the general questions we want to ask, as well as particular questions about personal and national history; and we simply check them off as they are answered in the course of the interviews. Every man likes to talk about his early years and memories of childhood; here is the key not only to an understanding of his formative years but also to accustoming him to questions and discussion. If in talking about his life or school days, for example, our historical figure should get excited and jump into the future to treat outcomes, we let him talk. In this manner we see how he relates ideas together and how his mind works. We can always return to the chronology for the thread of his life story.

The meeting of the historian and his subject often becomes a test of will as to who will direct the interview. A man who has led people may resent being the subject of a scholarly investigator, and he will try to bend the interviewer as he has tried to bend his associates; he is not

passive or he would not have been able to direct society in his particular field of endeavor. Naturally, the historian, who has often led a passive life of research and writing, may find himself in a new and difficult situation as he wrestles intellectually with his historical figure. He must neither let him capture control of the interview nor must he direct the recordings to prove selectively a predetermined view. As historian he must ultimately guide the course of the confrontation in order to pose all of the questions and to probe all of the concepts which need to be included, but he must remember that the historical personage takes for granted a different set of assumptions, especially in cross-cultural meetings, and that the interview must not be conducted in a rigid manner or else disparate views will not be discussed. Also, debates cannot always profitably be pushed very far when the historical character resists or refuses to answer a compromising question. At this point the historian must shift his line of inquiry, postponing offensive questions until another opportunity arises to approach them from a less controversial angle. As he examines the consequences of earlier actions, it is a simple matter to return to motives and causes because the concept of flashing backward and forward in time is well established.

The role of the historian is to stimulate a historical conscience in his subject and to prod his man into talking about a number of concepts which generally are of more interest to academicians than to men of action. He must ask, for example, does a leader change psychologically as he gains more and more power? What prompted his great success in such fields as politics or business? Does he have a vision of his country's past and future or is he acting in a series of accidental circumstances? What were the turning points in his personal history and in his country's history? Who are his heroes and his villains? What, in his view, is the basis of social organization. What motivates man?

The historian must also go into detail about specific actions concerning a particular historical event. Often, questions are self-generating as men of opposing or allied groups tell their views. One person attributes an action to another, and we can question the latter personage later. The oral historian can move between groups to discuss issues where the participant in history, caught up in the passion of the past, is limited as to whom he can or will speak.

As listener and recorder of history, the historian is in a good position to hear all sides of a question. Each side is grateful for the opportunity to present its case; and each man feels that if he can only be heard, he will be believed. This is quite an important factor in Latin America where men who are out of power or who are in official disfavor are frequently denied access to publication. Oral history offers the historical figure an opportunity for his statement to remain on record forever with correct pause, intonation and emphasis. Since so many govern-

ments subsidize and influence publishing policy, as well as severely limit the circulation of unfriendly printed matter, a kind of official history has grown up for each epoch in much of Latin America. This is not to say that opposition works do not get published, but that the bulk of printed material is favorable to the government. To the unwary historian who samples published materials, the sheer weight of the officially approved accounts leads him to accept propaganda as truth. A means of redressing this balance is to insure that all groups are recorded with a full statement in direct confrontation with the historian.

Since the oral historian's role is not only to listen but to stimulate his historical personage, he may begin to worry about his own image in history. Anyone wanting to hear the men of the past will have to hear the historian, who may be tempted to appear in a favorable light himself. This means, of course, the end to any real confrontation, for the historian must assume different positions for the sake of argument. He must see his role as changing to match the situation, and only if he succeeds as the devil's advocate against the historical actor will the confrontation be useful to the future.

There are many paths conversation can take at any given juncture, and the investigator must be quick to select the right one and skilfully return to the others. For this reason it can be helpful to bring several scholars together to conduct interviews in order to increase the possibility that important points are not omitted. As hard as he tries, the historian can never cover all of the material which should be developed analytically. The best he can do is to try to ask sophisticated questions, knowing full well that a student of the future will lament that he missed many key elements. Nevertheless, the recorded sessions offer more to history than does either autobiography or biography alone; and we can look upon the oral history confrontation as an improvement in method, not as any final answer to understanding the past.

Since the historical figure may feel that he has been slighted in the recordings due to the very nature of conversation in which false starts are made, ideas are lost or changed in the course of sentence structure, and facts are unremembered, it is necessary to allow him to add notes which clarify or conclude poorly developed ideas. If the spoken thought is not clear when transcribed, we permit minor editing only as long as meaning is not changed.

Dialogue between historian and personage appears in its totality, for if the former's participation were left out of the transcript or published versions, the latter's statements would be incomprehensible. The personage, in discussing historical concepts about his life and times, has a chance to refute scholarly interpretation as well as to try to sharpen it. The historian thus plays an important role in setting up historical interpretation for comment by historical participants. Where Oscar

Lewis, a distinguished cultural anthropologist, has effectively left his participation out of tape recordings in Mexico in order to portray the drama of poor rural and urban family life over a fifteen year period, we began to record dialogues analyzing the lives of the leaders of the Revolutionary Family and its opponents over a period of fifty years. Lewis was interested in the effects of the Revolution on the people; we are interested in what the leaders have tried to do for the people and how they have set about their task. We can only hope that our investigation will prove as rewarding for understanding the elite sphere of life as Lewis' pioneering work has been in understanding some aspects of the lives of the masses.

Needless to say, the program envisioned here requires a special brand of historian. He must be a specialist, and he cannot be an investigator for the United States government. If we are to avoid any suspicion that the program is engaged in intelligence work, we must obtain the cooperation of our best Latin Americanists in many fields which take a historical approach in order to prevent problems which could very well harm the academic profession itself. We can avoid many difficulties by discussing the present and future only at the conclusion of the interviewing process.

The academic profession should cooperatively determine the persons and themes to be recorded and the priorities to be established. It is obvious that teams of untrained interviewers sent into the field would get nowhere. Holders of the doctorate or doctoral candidates, however, have opportunities to make practical contributions by using oral history as part of their research. It is the economic historian, for example, who can sit down with leaders and discuss statistical patterns in their programs. If we discuss such things as numbers, which may be interpreted differently by historian and historical actor, we can make an attempt to unite the humanities and social sciences in natural manner.

The concept of the Center is not to create an academic bureaucracy staffed by a new class of administrators, but to facilitate the use of the oral history technique and provide a bank where Latin American oral documents can be stored and made available to scholars. We cannot expect to take time out of the busy academician's life solely to work with oral history, but we can encourage him to conduct oral history as an expanded dimension of his own studies. In this manner we can record history which ordinarily might be lost as well as provide tapes of leaders spontaneously reflecting on their experience. We want to know what knowledge a man has at his command without recourse to advisors and notes, for men make most decisions in the light of their own knowledge and based upon their own attitudes.

Probably one of the most important things the Center can do is to provide a central source on the attitudes of leaders in the twenty coun-



tries which can be researched by innumerable types of social scientists and humanists. Skeptics may claim that men only tell lies for the record, but we must also recall that men lie to themselves. Most men justify their lives, and we are interested in hearing how they do it. Also, men look at the past through rose-colored glasses, and it is our duty to jar them to reality by producing exact quotes which refute current views in order to get at their positions in the past. If we can understand attitudes, we can better understand why men have acted. In such a light there are few heroes and villains in history.

The original tape recorded interviews must be saved. Though the transcript has great value, the serious scholar must also consult original sources. Who would write a biography of his man without, if possible, listening to his voice and manner as he speaks from day to day? Oral history is not written history, for the latter is organized and goes from point to point logically. Oral history is often disorganized, but we must know that side of man, too. The transcription can give us the gist of a man's ideas, but in the long run the proof and source is the tape. This is where controversy and debate can be resolved as we hear how the man actually stated his case with his own emphasis. We must make a plea for saving the tape, for it is sad to note that several of the major pioneering programs in oral history research have failed to save the original tape, often on the grounds that it is expensive or that a transcript is equally valid. Also, some scholars feel that if the transcript is edited by the historical personage, the unedited tape must be erased because it does not agree with the polished manuscript. None of these reasons, however, are valid in light of the historical need to preserve the voices of the past so that future generations may come to know better the thoughts of influential men. Naturally, man speaks differently than he writes, and some changes will have to be made to transcribe the spoken word. Thus, both the tape and the transcript have their own value. We have yet to meet a historical figure who has a fixation that the tape and transcript must be exactly the same. It is obvious that the intonation and emphasis of the spoken word require great skill in transcribing in order to capture meaning. Most historical figures feel that their own voice does a better job in preserving meaning than does a transcript of their words. They recognize that the transcript provides an edited key, with notes, to assure that the tape is not misunderstood. We must add that if oral history is to exist, it must exist in fact and not in fiction.

The Hispanic Foundation of the Library of Congress has preserved tapes in recording Latin American poets and writers reading selections of their works, but it has not been able to discuss the author's purposes and goals with him. Political problems would arise if a dependency of the United States government were to ask questions about an author's

motives. Certainly the Hispanic Foundation has provided an important service to scholars, but another type of oral history also needs to be recorded by the academic profession—a type that analyzes the author's intent and ideals.

### Conclusion

Confrontation of historian and historical figure for the purpose of creating an oral history document is based upon the experience of earlier oral history programs. The rationale for action suggested above is in reality a synthesis of many methods found effective in different types of oral history projects, and it is offered in this light. We believe that the work of the Oral History Center for Latin America is realistically conceived, but we need the help of scholars who are qualified to enter into ambitious projects of the Center.

"Oral history" is in some ways, an unsatisfactory name for the work described above, but it has been accepted by those of us who use its techniques. Many scholars blink in wonder at what the term might mean, and it is usually necessary to state that we are engaged in a non-Freudian branch of oral history. Often we must dissuade colleagues from sending our mail to the College of Dentistry. Despite the problem of terminology, use of oral history is gaining rapid acceptance in the United States. Even some of the most skeptical academicians, who used to maintain that oral history is not really history because it is not based upon written documents, must finally grant that if oral history be transcribed, it takes a written form and therefore must be history after all.

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