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# RAYMOND WILLIAMS AND ORAL HISTORY: CONSTITUTIVE SOCIAL RELATIONS

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*In most description and analysis, culture and society are expressed in an habitual past tense. The strongest barrier to the recognition of human cultural activity is this immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products.*

Raymond Williams, 1977. (2000, p. 150)

The purpose of this discussion is to introduce some elements pertaining to the thought of the English literary critic Raymond Williams (1921-1988) into the field of contemporary oral history.<sup>1</sup> His contribution to the academic world appeared at the same time as historians and social scientists experimented with oral history. Williams, in fact, began writing in the 1950s, at a time when oral historians in Europe, the United States and Mexico started using the newly invented audio tape recorder k7. At the peak of the author's intellectual maturity, in the 1970s, the theories and techniques of oral history had spread wide and there was active exchange of ideas among practitioners all over the world. From 1970 to 2000, Williams' cultural theory greatly contributed to the development of social history, a field already using oral history (hereafter OH).

Raymond Williams, as far as we know, did not leave any writings specifically on OH as a method for producing knowledge in the social sciences, despite his spectacular intellectual production in

the field of cultural criticism, today known as cultural theory. All the same, we may still adopt numberless contributions of the author, as of so many others of his generation, like Richard Hoggart (1918-) and Edward P. Thompson (1924-1993), who were profoundly committed to a practical notion of culture, to making social experience ordinary, or as it is usually expressed, "a whole way of life." The authors of the English New Left did offer many rich perceptions for social history—where we place our own reflections—thus revitalizing contemporary historical writing.

The wide movement initiated by Williams' cultural theory, and by other writers and historians who felt part of this intellectual project, started in 1958 with the manifesto *Culture is ordinary*.<sup>2</sup> He published *Culture and society* in the same year, considered by many to be the first in a series of books on cultural criticism. The next step in his project came with the publishing of *The long revolution*, in 1961, conceived as a continuation to *Culture and society*, according to the author. Other important books had ample re-

<sup>1</sup> This article was written while enrolled in the Post-Graduate Program in History at the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC), and holding a scholarship from the Programa de Fomento del PTI C&T/FPTI-BR.

<sup>2</sup> Maria Elisa Cevalco, *Para ler Raymond Williams*, Rio de Janeiro, Paz e Terra, 2001.

percussions in theoretical terms: *The country and the city*, in 1973; *Marxism and literature*, in 1977; in 1981, *Culture* and in 1989, *Resources of hope*.<sup>3</sup>

Several authors have used OH in the last decades for the production of knowledge, particularly in the field of social history, being responsible for the incorporation of vigorous impressions on understanding and intervening in historical reality. The effort made here to relate the contributions of Raymond Williams to the field of OH practice does not pretend to be conclusive. We have done our best to point out connections and facts. Williams' intellectual positions on Marxism and the debates on OH methodology articulate in a peculiar complicity, breathing life into research projects and problems, opening possibilities for concrete social and political transformation of practice both in and out of academia.

It may be necessary to understand first that connections between Williams and OH are placed in the context of discussions and movements that already took place in the practice of social history. We still see, on the one hand, an amplified game of the discursive relations that claim paternity of cultural studies for Williams, thus engaging in a marketing effort to have his positions accepted in the present academic scenario. Even if well-intentioned, this road may subvert sharp political definitions about cultural criticism developed by the author within the Marxist field, a privileged space where he situated himself and marked his difference. On the other hand, it is necessary to consider that OH, partially created in the contemporary context, presents itself as a rich and active camp for interpreting social practice in various reflexive spaces even if also marked by debates and by diverse and at times contradictory projects and interests. Beyond the common tendency to be fashionable and other ways of marketing culture

present in academic practice, it is necessary to avoid an involvement devoid of politics as it occurs in one or the other universe in dispute. We may say, then, that the reflexive approach outlined here is nurtured by an effort to understand firmly, in tune with the efforts that constitute oral history and the ongoing appropriations of Raymond Williams. Considering the wider field of social history where we stand, we expect to create an OH committed to social change, just as Pablo Pozzi suggests:

[...] it is not just a matter of doing interviews and telling stories, it is rather a matter of expressing complex questions arising from the real experience of people. The purpose always was to rescue live memory so that future generations could construct their future. Good oral history, based on individual experiences, is a way for any ordinary person to feel identified, to learn from other experiences, so he may use that knowledge to think his own reality anew.<sup>4</sup>

Taking Williams' contributions as a point of departure, a web of associations centered on social history may interest academics committed to both researching and acting on the social reality in which they participate. The decisive framework to understand and ground a discussion with Williams implies a political change signaled by the author in *Culture is ordinary*. In clearer terms, according to the book's central idea, if culture is ordinary in the lives of individuals, then OH is engaged in an important constitutive social practice of that move toward understanding culture as ordinary. That is, *pari passu*, ordinary life as it happens and oral history as it studies ordinary life are reasons enough to get involved in this field. After accepting the ordinary character of culture inherent in social life and that we are all indistinctly producers of culture, thus taking OH as a constitutive practice of it, new possibilities appear to understand and ad-

3 "Culture is ordinary", in *Conviction*, ed, Norman Mackenzie, London, MacGibbon and Kee, 1958, pp. 74-92; *Culture and society 1780-1950*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1958; *The long revolution*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1961; *The country and the city*, London, Chato and Windus, 1973; *Culture*, London, Fontana Paperbacks, 1981; *Resources of hope*, London, Verso, 1988.

4 Pablo Pozzi, "Historia social, historia militante: ¿un producto colectivo?" *Historia & Perspectivas*, No. 40, January - June, 2009, pp. 90-91, in <http://www.historiaperspectivas.inhis.ufu.br/viewarticle.php?id=211&layout=abstract>; consulted on March 27, 2010.

vance multiple alternative meanings that spring from social interaction.

The rejection of oral history as a legitimate dialogic method to produce historical sources must be seen, in light of Williams' view on culture, as a political position that rejects not the nature of the oral source as the empty vestige of past reality but rather rejects the social contours amalgamated in its practice. Even if not espoused publically, such a view of OH in the end reinforces the notion that culture is the social practice of the few, or to put it differently, hierarchical. It is in this sense that we want to make clear that OH may gain in many ways from this understanding of ordinary culture, being of course cautious of the populist trap of "giving voice to the Other". It is necessary to perceive, within ordinary culture, the tensions and interests that shape everyday interrelationships, as well as the practice of OH, and make possible the encounter of people who are different and in most cases unequal. To sum up: the view that OH is a practice outside the ordinary dynamic of culture leads to reinforcing an elitist and hierarchical postulate for the analysis of social life over time. This does not mean that oral history practice is exempt from internal contradictions and antagonisms, since it is after all a social construction.

One of the most relevant discussions for OH is undoubtedly that of language as socially constituted practical consciousness. Williams, in *Marxism and literature*, engaged in debate with students of language, addressing the complexity of the concept of language, which together with culture and literature, formed the basic axes of the intellectual project undertaken in that work. Many considered that Williams fully developed his arguments in that book. Williams' discussion of language seems like a dialogue with authors from different times and places: Plato (427-347 B.C.), Vico (1688-1744), Herder (1744-1803), Marx (1818-1883), Engels (1820-1895), Saussure (1857-1913), Volosinov (1895-1936), Vygotsky (1896-1934) and Chomsky (1928), among others. One of his central concerns was to elevate analytical concepts to the category of historical problems.

While discussing those authors and their specific

temporal concerns, Williams focused on what became a particular concern with overcoming common notions of language as "reflection" or "expression" of reality. During the course of that specific discussion on language, Williams correctly noted that Marxism, the camp he situated himself in, had contributed little and had for the most part reinforced those notions he considered paralyzing. Language, thus, was not excluded from his observation on the density of history. The author pondered accordingly that

[...] a definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world. The received major categories—'world', 'reality', 'nature', 'human'—may be counterposed or related to the category 'language', but it is now a commonplace to observe that all categories, including the category 'language', are themselves constructions in language, and can thus only with an effort, and within a particular system of thought, be separated from language for relational inquiry. (*ML*, p. 21)

Williams thought that two historical questions about language should be of interest to Marxism:

Language as *activity* and the *history* of language. According to his criticism, those questions should be combined and reassessed since "in different ways, and with significant practical results, each position transformed those habitual conceptions of language which depended on and supported relatively static ways of thinking about human beings in the world" (*ML*, p. 21).

Those distinct but connected analytical spheres, in Williams view, could not forgo an evaluation of their political meanings and uses, mainly in relation to the fixed meanings that permeated the historical doings of real social subjects who motivated his *intellectual project*. We may derive from this the importance of his contributions to the present practice of OH. Its method grows out of perceiving language as the creation of meanings that are alive and acting through time and not merely as a means to tell what happened in the past. The narrative elaborated through this method does not appear solely as the product of a social experience locked in the past but also as fully acting in the present. When two or more people find themselves in-

volved in this practice, there is not just one plausible verbal reproduction of the past. We have instead a linguistic interaction or tension brought on by certain present or future social dynamics, related to the problem or hypotheses that motivated the interview in the first place. This could be one of the important contributions from Williams, since it would push OH to move in the opposite direction to the facile historiographical practice of congealing past meanings in the past summoned by OH.

One crucial concern in Williams' reflections is to think language as an historical practice that constitutes reality. It was from this critical position within Marxism that he highlighted his proposals against the fixed forms of thinking known as objectivist, formalist and determinist, since they reduced the comprehensive possibilities of thinking language as a conscious activity over time.

In wider terms, Williams criticized Saussure for employing a formal system founded on established basic laws for describing linguistic operations. His well-grounded critique of Saussure also included an "ironic" criticism of orthodox Marxism, intent as it was (and still is) in following the inalterable laws of change governing "systemic practice". He pointed out, for this reason, that this included "the assertion of a controlling 'social' system which is a priori inaccessible to 'individual' acts of will and intelligence" (*ML*, p. 28). He complained, that is, that history in its specific, active and relational sense disappeared from the description of a fundamental activity such as language. He thus returns to the materialism of Marx and Engels to discuss language as an activity of *practical consciousness*. He never tired of expressing his preoccupation about the risk of separating "consciousness" from "reality", an idea found in the formal study of language based on renewed idealist principles.

*Marxism and literature* paid special attention to the conceptual discussion of *signs* in Volosinov. Williams thought that signs as such only exist when posited in an actual social relation. He emphasized this in his critique of formalism:

The usable sign—the fusion of formal element and meaning—is a product of this continuing speech activity between real individuals who are in some

continuing social relationship. The 'sign' is in this sense their product, but not simply their past product, as in the reified accounts of an 'always-given' language system (*ML*, p. 37).

Williams' cultural theory discussed linguistic signs in terms of their unceasingly changing social relations. Aside from the academic formalism with which oral history at times approaches signs, and the politics involved, the practice itself of OH may be affected by the essentialism of matters contained and rectified in recomposed pasts. It is not uncommon to have oral testimonies marshaled in the interest of essentialist interpretations of the past: "this is the way it was!" We should note that signs are the aspect of the variety of meanings and values that matters to OH, since signs assert subjective meaning materially constituted in language through the form of oral testimony.

Oral testimony does not enclose or limit the force of political meanings in action and continually derived from this constitutive act of OH. Language, as it materializes through dialogue in an interview, resorts to formal elements while creating an alternative activity in which concrete individuals engage socially as interviewer and interviewee. The semiotic aspects constitutive of language, when devoid of their problematic historicity, may function as a simplistic reproduction of testimonial references. In this case, they may work to stabilize conflicts and tensions that prompted the act of recording the testimony, or as it is commonly the case, to keep the historian's act of interpretation within the confines of the foregone past. Instead, we need to take into account the force of the active and changing subjective meanings impressed in the concrete reality described in OH. As Williams wrote, there is a historical dynamic of language in which

[...] the real communicative 'products' which are usable signs are, on the contrary, living evidence of a continuing social process, into which individuals are born and within which they are shaped, but to which they then also actively contribute, in a continuing process. This is at once their socialization and their individuation: the connected aspects of a single process which the

alternative theories of 'system' and 'expression' had divided and dissociated (*ML*, p. 37).

Individuation and socialization are inseparable spheres of the social experience shaping language, also present in the production and interpretation of oral testimonies resulting from OH interviews. When one regards the practice of OH as an "expression" or a "reflection" of social reality, a closed "system" of already existing signs, then one tends to reproduce a notion of language centered on the individual testimony and separated from the corroborating systemic dynamics of society. By bringing to light the value of the interaction between the individual and society, as Williams well understood, we come to an observation that may be important for oral historians. Even though the testimony recorded during an interview is oral, it is not just the composite of individual words but it is also produced by related trajectories simultaneous to the actual historical process that constituted personal individuality, as well as by the social networks that shape culture, in the wider sense of an individual who participates socially. This insight affords a perception of the interviewee as a historical subject who produces his own personal references, while immersed in systems of signification and other socially conceived symbols. Consequently, according to Williams:

We then find not a reified 'language' and 'society' but an active *social language*. Nor (to glance back at positivist and orthodox materialist theory) is this language a simple 'reflection' or 'expression' of 'material reality'. What we have, rather, is a grasping of this reality through language, which as practical consciousness is saturated by and saturates all social activity, including productive activity (*ML*, p. 37).

The production of oral testimonies may not be understood as perceptions imprisoned in the moment when the interview occurs, a point in time when two individuals meet moved by a common purpose. We may say that the language employed, in its constitutive form as oral testimony, is the result of the complex interaction of the connected universes of the individual and the social, as much for the interviewer as for the interviewee. In the end, that encounter becomes itself history encompassing the production and the later interpretation of the

oral narrative. Under these terms, although the interview moves according to a set of practices made of simultaneous gesture and sound, the starting point for constructing the testimony is the individuality of the narrator immersed in a whole social process. As Williams observed:

And, since grasping is social and continuous (as distinct from the abstract encounters of 'man' and 'his world', or 'consciousness' and 'reality', or 'language' and 'material existence'), it occurs within an active and changing society.... Or to put it more directly, language is the articulation of this active and changing experience; a dynamic and articulated social *presence* in the world (*ML*, pp. 37-38).

In his dialogue with linguistics, Williams considered the fact that language is made in a specific mode of articulation. He did not discard the formal aspects that Volosinov thought worthy but did express the need to understand them in terms of their relations.

A physical sound, like many other natural elements, may be made into a sign, but its distinction, Volosinov argued, is always evident: 'a sign does not simply exist as part of a reality—it reflects and refracts another reality'. What distinguishes it as a sign, indeed what made it a sign, is in this sense a formal process: a specific articulation of a meaning (*ML*, p. 38).

And then he took this idea further:

Signification, the social creation of meanings through the use of formal signs, is then a practical material activity; it is indeed, literally, a means of production. It is a specific form of that practical consciousness which is inseparable from all social material activity. It is not, as formalism would make it, and as the idealist theory of expression had from the beginning assumed, an operation of and within 'consciousness', which then becomes a state or a process separated, *a priori*, from social material activity. It is, on the contrary, at once a distinctive material process—the making of signs—and, in the central quality of its distinctiveness as practical consciousness, is involved from the beginning in all other human social and material activity (*ML*, p. 38).

What then may we learn from this discussion of signs that is useful for OH? First, it is import-

ant to say that Williams had no intention to invalidate or deny the existence of signs. On the contrary, he saw them as part of a subjective process acting materially. In this way, the production of oral testimony occurs as the interviewee articulates the production and the use of signs. The interviewer does likewise, introducing the signs produced and used by his socially constituted system of values. Williams explains this interaction in the following manner:

Thus in addition to its social and material existence between actual individuals, the sign is also part of a verbally constituted consciousness which allows individuals to use signs of their own initiative, whether in acts of social communication or in practices which, not being *manifestly* social, can be interpreted as personal or private (*ML*, p. 40).

Williams, although in passing, also referred to Chomsky's linguistics. He accepted that this variant of linguistic thought had taken an important step toward understanding language, mainly because it accepted the possibility and the fact of individual initiative and creative practice, previously excluded from objectivist systems of linguistic thought. But he did not think Chomsky had overcome the main problems he was criticizing.

But at the same time this conception stresses deep structures of language formation which are certainly incompatible with ordinary social and historical accounts of the origin and development of language. An emphasis on deep constitutive structures, at an evolutionary rather than a historical level, can of course be reconciled with the view of language as a constitutive human faculty: exerting pressures and setting limits, in determinate ways, to human development itself (*ML*, p. 43).

Williams always saw language as a force active in the constitution of historical subjects. There is a determined mode in which language tends to exert pressure and set limits in a democratic practice of OH. This interaction shows us not the extent to which an individual's testimony is invalidated because of how he uses words and gestures but the potentially alternative set of individual and social meanings and values that surface during the interview. Instead of solely searching for what discursive strategies are employed and how, articulated

language as practical consciousness needs to be apprehended as the widened possibility to understand pressures and other limitations impressed in the tone of discourse. This is so in relation to what is said about the past in the present and in relation to how language in its subjective form (but objective at the same time) articulates pressures and intervenes concretely at the specific moment of the interview.

This is also clear in the possible and the unimaginable uses of oral testimony to affirm an individual story in the time and place where it is enunciated, for the social group he represents or pretends to represent. The permanent social character of oral testimony stands out, because the problem consists not only of listening to what the interviewee is saying, but above all, of understanding how the whole of lived social relations in the present culture act in the course of the interview and beyond. We may add that the interviewer brings precepts and socially shaped values that act in the production of the testimony. One may also perceive the political force behind that social relation prompted by the researcher, who interacts and pressures from a position of power as researcher and intellectual. Just as an interviewee dialogues or interacts with his group or social class, he dialogues and interacts with another group or class that he sees represented in the figure of the interviewer, and vice versa. In this sense, to quote Williams once again:

Thus we can add to the necessary definition of the biological faculty of language as *constitutive* an equally necessary definition of language development—at once individual and social—as historically and socially *constituting*. What we can then define is a dialectical process: the *changing practical consciousness of human beings*, in which both the evolutionary and the historical processes can be given full weight, but also within which they can be distinguished, in the complex variations of actual language use (*ML*, pp.43-44).

Before his discussion on language took form in *Marxism and literature*, Williams had summarized a number of his arguments about what he considered a "creative mind" in *The long revolu-*

tion. By then he was already mainly speaking about the political meaning of art production and the role of the artist engaged in a “creative act”. It is interesting to point out a set of meanings regarding that which constitutes more generally a creative act and not just in art, which oral historians may find useful in relation to oral testimonies. According to Williams:

We learn to see a thing by learning to describe it; this is the normal process of perception, which can only be seen as complete when we have interpreted the incoming sensory information either by a known configuration or rule, or by some new configuration which we can try to learn as a new rule.... We have many ways of describing, both by learned rules—conventional descriptions—and by certain kinds of response, in gesture, language, image, which we often literally feel ourselves creating as we struggle to describe certain new information for which the conventional descriptions are inadequate.<sup>5</sup>

Oral testimony describes the past in relation to both present and future reality. Perhaps we could develop our discussion by resorting to the same terms elaborated by Williams to discuss art and gain insights into the practice of OH.

The description made by an interviewee is not that of an experience already formally elaborated. It is rather a testimony made at the time of the interview. In other words, oral testimony is not what happened but a narrative plot resulting from socially accepted conventions on description, created for that moment with a specific leading force. Despite conventions and other shared structures of meaning, producing a story during the interview is a unique experience, always taking place in a moment of immersion in specific alternative meanings. An interpretation of OH should not just fix attention on correlating and describing a preexisting social configuration or on formal reiteration of the public memory of groups or social classes referred to throughout the testimony. Above all, interpretation should recognize the force of the specific and subjective historical meanings that emerge amidst a

sea of available conventional symbols and formulas that shape the story. That should direct our attention to understanding the forceful processes of description involved in the production of oral testimony. In other words, one thing is to understand subjectivity as mere “reflex” or “expression” of reality, and quite another is to perceive it as a potentially alternative practice in confrontation with dominant conventions.

There can be no separation, in this view, between ‘content’ and ‘form’, because finding the form is literally finding the content—this is what is meant by the activity we have called ‘describing’. It is, in the first instance, to every man, a matter of urgent personal importance to ‘describe’ his experience, because this is literally a remaking of himself, a creative change in his personal organization, to include and control the experience (*LR*, p. 42).

It is interesting for the debates on OH, to point out the need for paying attention not precisely to the “content” of conventional descriptions with which interviewees perceive and act in the social reality around them. Rather, attention should go to the “form” in which the interviewees constitute themselves as historical subjects, between formally constrained social relations and those articulated in them and in language that are potentially subjective. As Williams states, no testimony of constitutive social experience will be solely and exclusively a space of mere reiteration. In social life, lived activities in the form of *ordinary* culture are not the result of class or group positions that are immovable; they result from interactions about the form of conflictive values, interests and feelings. Williams summarized it thus:

Instead of thinking of ‘society’ as a single and uniform object, we look at actual groups and the relationships between them. Since these relationships can be not only those of cooperation but also of tension and conflict, the individual with his sense of particular directions finds material in the alternative directions of his society making it possible for him to express variant growth in social terms (*LR*, p. 101).

When a historian interviews people for an OH

<sup>5</sup> *The long revolution*, Harmondsworth, Pelican, 1965, pp. 39-40; subsequent citations identified in the text as *LR* and page number.



project, he poses problems that encompass the whole society but are drawn from situations shaped by his own specific questions and emblems. One of the more important contributions attributed to Williams may be the way of articulating that understanding. He always took the opportunity to question the way in which society was understood as one abstract and unified block. Part of that critique was directed at his Marxist colleagues, who were preoccupied with systemic analysis of reality. More than that, in a different order of things, he always called for attention to the political problem of translating those totalizing horizons into social terms. His contribution to cultural theory emphasized the active and specific value of culture as a changing social practice and not as if it were a given and finished society, as it was commonly thought in his intellectual milieu.

Williams, within the debates on cultural criticism, always refused to consider the object as a totality in itself and instead placed it in relation to specific human activities in time, and thus in relation to a social totality. To put it more simply, the author did not seek to critically apprehend society as an already constituted block but as a set of specific social relations, therefore historical, interrelated as *structures of feeling*. This theoretical contribution, perhaps the best known in the present, opens impressive sensibilities for the practitioners of OH. For this reason, it is useful to quote extensively from the argument given by the author:

What is defensible as a procedure in conscious history, where on certain assumptions many actions can be definitively taken as having ended, is habitually projected, not only into the always moving substance of the past, but into contemporary life, in which relationships, institutions and formations in which we are still actively involved are converted, by this procedural mode, into formed wholes rather than forming and formative processes. Analysis is then centred on relations between these produced institutions, formations, and experiences, so that now, as in that produced past, only the fixed explicit forms exist, and living presence is always, by definition, receding (*ML*, 128).

In *Marxism and literature*, Williams expounded with propriety and noteworthy intellectual maturity

his theoretical posture on language as practical consciousness. His thoughtful effort granted great importance to a critique of those comprehensive arguments about the past that are characterized as closed systems, based on previously formed totalities rather than forming and formative. The risk of such a formulation in these systems lies precisely in presupposing the totality before its social presence is experienced by concrete men and women.

It is necessary to go past this theoretical discussion in order to think of the methodological horizons a *structure of feelings* opens for OH. Quite often we assume there are fixed patterns in OH to recount a totality seen in itself. Do we not often use oral testimony to simply ratify an already worked out analysis? To what extent do we take the stories told by different individuals as proof of a previously established comprehensive order? According to Williams:

When we begin to grasp the dominance of this procedure, to look into its centre and if possible past its edges, we can understand, in new ways, that separation of the social from the personal which is so powerful and directive a cultural mode. If the social is always past, in the sense that it is always formed, we have indeed to find another terms for the undeniable experience of the present: not only the temporal present, the realization of this and this instant, but the specificity of present being, the inalienably physical, within which we may indeed discern and acknowledge institutions, formations, positions, but not always as fixed products, defining products (*ML*, p. 128).

Williams is particularly helpful for questioning our understanding of what is social and what is individual and how both are implicated in our OH practice. Are we not prone to naturalize testimonies as reflecting the past rather than understanding them as active and changing language? If language is practical and changing consciousness, as Williams asserts, why do we still articulate a separation between social and personal in what constitutes oral testimony? Then, why do we understand what is social as an articulation of the past and what is individual as a spasm of life entangled in the systemic force of

the social? How do we place an individual's understanding as a constitutive act of his testimony in the historical present? Could it be that testimony given in the present time about the past and the present is an active political connection essential to understanding the persistent leading role of the subjects we research? William expresses a comprehensive questioning aimed in that direction:

And then if the social is the fixed and explicit—the known relationships, institutions, formations, positions—all that is present and moving, all that escapes or seems to escape from the fixed and the explicit and the known, is grasped and defined as the personal: this, here, now, alive, active, 'subjective' (*ML*, p. 128).

In terms of this interpretation if the social world is fixed and explicit, a given reality, then all that escapes from that arena would by default belong to what is individual or personal. Having embarked on that direction, and according to Williams' questioning, are we not holding two different criteria for our analysis and practice of OH? If we take what is social to be a fixed abstraction, and on the opposite end, what is individual to be subjective activity mechanically dependent on the social, then do we not understand oral testimony to be a reflex of reality? Our questioning does not stop there:

The methodological consequence of such a definition, however, is that the specific qualitative changes are not *assumed* to be epiphenomena of changed institutions, formations, and beliefs, or merely secondary evidence of changed social and economic relations between and within classes. At the same time they are from the beginning taken as *social* experience, rather than as 'personal' experience or as the merely superficial or incidental 'small change' of society (*ML*, p. 131).

This quote supports our argument about how to analyze oral histories. An individual testimony, as we have argued, will never be an eminently personal document. In terms of that discussion, we also conclude that oral testimonies

They are social in two ways that distinguish them from reduced senses of the social as the institutional and the formal: first, in that they are *changes of presence* (while they are being lived this is obvious; when they have been lived it is still their substantial characteristic); second, in that although they are

emergent or pre-emergent, they do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action (*ML*, pp. 131-132).

We may consider then that the story that results from an oral history interview conducted in the present cannot be limited or related to a social abstraction and closed in itself. Who is interested in a closed society? Even though produced under the formalities of an OH project, oral testimony would be, as Williams put it, a "social experience in solution" (*ML*, p. 133). To use clearer terms:

Such changes can be defined as changes in structures of feeling. The term is difficult, but 'feeling' is chosen to emphasize a distinction from more formal concepts of 'world-view' or 'ideology'. It is not only that we must go beyond formally held and systematic beliefs, though of course we have always to include them. It is that we are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations between these and formal or systematic beliefs are in practice variable (including historically variable), over a range from formal assent with private dissent to the more nuanced interaction between selected and interpreted beliefs and acted and justified experiences (*ML*, p. 132).

The notion of *structure of feelings* has become Williams' most important theoretical contribution. It has also been considered by many as the notion most adequate for practicing OH. The author had already expressed his concern over possible misunderstandings or improprieties arising from the term. Consequently, he endeavored for a clearer and specific formulation:

An alternative definition would be structure of experience: in one sense the better and wider word, but with the difficulty that one of its senses has that past tense which is the most important obstacle to recognition of the area of social experience which is being defined. We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feelings against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind,

in a living and interrelating continuity (*ML*, p. 132).

We know that Williams did not have oral history in mind when he put forth the notion of structure of feelings. Yet, this historical category offers an array of possibilities for both the production and the interpretation of oral testimonies.

The author's preoccupation with capturing the continuous and active interrelations of social experience over time is moving. In this case we could take OH to be the language of practical consciousness produced from the specific and interrelated structures of feelings. The different modalities of OH, considering the wide diversity in practice and commitment each evinces in both academic and social life, since they are inseparable, all could profit from these ideas before tagging labels such as thematic, life story, biography, institutional and so on. The separation between the social and the individual, as we have argued here, is above all an active construction in a political sense, acting on the historical process of which we are a part. It is not just a methodological operation, but basically it is a political position on the separation of the multiple relations that are constitutive of social reality over time. We assume this understanding to mean that OH, in so far as it deals with structures of feelings, may decisively move toward reuniting those separ-

ated strands of historical social process.

Starting from Williams considerations, we are invited to perceive oral testimonies produced in our practice as social experiences in continuous transformation. Structure of feelings is, as the author claims, one of the ways of tying loose ends in historical reality, as a challenge that subsists in our own constitutive social experience. From this perspective, we have no reason to consider OH anymore as just an alternative method but as an active and transformative practice in our own time and social existence. To consider it just method would strip it from its most important meaning: historical understanding as a way to feel actual human existence and doings. Doing so will lead us to conclude that there is a more insightful way to think the concrete relation between Williams and OH than the scattered clues that we could put together here.

*[Translation from the Spanish version by Gerardo Necochea G.]*

