From oral history to a so-called "ideology of testimony": autopsy of a step backwards

It is true that oral history, although included to the world of academic research for about thirty years, was and remains a suspicious field. It has had to battle quite fiercely to receive its letter of accreditation, and despite often-deceptive appearances, such a battle is never truly over. In reality, whether we like it or not, the very existence of oral history never ceased to be a problem for proper scientific history, which set the rules in the last quarter of the 19th century. That is nothing surprising and I would not have even considered studying such a trivial issue if the recent development of the phenomenon in France had not come as a sort of challenge to those interested in and instructed by oral history. This paper was inspired by the fact that one sometimes has to justify or even defend oneself, in 2014, in France, for using oral historical sources: sometimes even, whoever collects and uses oral testimonies is harshly accused of "scientific populism", the equivalent to being excommunicated. But this was not always the case. I would like to take this opportunity to think about the development of oral history and recall the obstacles it has overcome on one hand, analyze what happened to it in France since the end of the 1970's on the other hand, and finally, come back on the issues caused by the use of testimonies – problems which have been talked over and over, but are always presented or understood as new.

The emergence of oral history in the world of academics

Whether its inventor was Allan Nevis in Columbia in 1948[1], Antoine Court (1695-1760) in the Cevennes[2], Spanish priest Bernardino de Sahagun in Mexico (1499?-1590)[3], Winslow C. Watson (1803-1884) in 1863[4] or possibly Samuel Johnson in 1773[5], oral history as we understand

[1] Editorial : « Allan Nevins and Oral History », *International Journal of Oral History*, vol. 9, n° 1, February 1988.
[2] Joutard Ph., *La Légende des Camisards. Une sensibilité au passé*, Gallimard, 1977, p. 150.
[3] Eva Salgado Andrade, « Oral History in Mexico », *International Journal of Oral History*, vol. 9, n° 3, November 1988, pp. 215-220.
[4] Morrissey Ch.T., "Why Call It "Oral History"? Searching for Early Usage of a Generic Term", *Oral History Review* (1980) 8 (1): pp. 20-48.
[5] Thompson P., "The Development of Oral History in Britain", *Oral History. An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, edited by David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum, 2nd edition, AltaMira, 1996, p. 352.

it today took off at the turn of the 1960's/70's: 1967 saw the creation of the *Oral History Association* in the USA, and 1973 the birth of the *Oral History Society* in Great-Britain. The same took place in Canada in 1974 and in Australia in 1975. Around the same time, similar initiatives were being implemented in Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Denmark, West Germany, the Netherlands, India, Ireland, Israel, etc. The first international conference about oral history took place in 1978 in Essex, England, and in 1980, the *International Journal of Oral History* was founded. The method related to oral history even found a place at the renowned University of Oxford in 1988.

Everywhere, the trend met with the counter-indications and skepticism of university historians, for whom written sources had to be the basis of any serious study[6]. In the US, in Mexico[7], in the United-Kingdom[8], in Italy[9], such tension expressed the difficulty for institutionalized, labelled, university historiography, to accept oral history. As a consequence, supporters of oral history were often ostracized to the margins of institutions, as was the case for example in Italy[10] and in the United States of America[11]. Such prejudices were partly explained by the disciplinary habit of conceiving the nature of history as a model of scientism and distance. Besides, the history of present times was not yet very respected, a fact that Charles Morrissey, an important figure of oral history in the US, summed up quite clearly in a few words: "The more recent you are, the less professional you are because you're within living memory[12]." In other respects, oral history in the 1960's and 70's, although its modern version was created under the

---

[6] See, for example, Grele R.J., "Directions for Oral History in the United States", *Oral History. An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, edited by David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum, 2nd edition, AltaMira, 1996, pp. 62-84 : "As American academic historians attempted to professionalize themselves and make their study more "scientific" in the last decades of the nineteenth century, their view of their task was increasingly a view which limited them to the study of written records. This bias, as well as the research seminar and the definition of the historian as a holder of a Ph.D., they imported from Germany. Thus armed they set out to develop a new kind of history in which oral recollections would play no role." p. 63.

[7] Meyer E., "Oral History in Mexico and Latin America", *Oral History Review 4*, 1976, pp. 56-61.

[8] Thompson P., "The Development of Oral History in Britain", *Oral History. An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, edited by David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum, 2nd edition, AltaMira, 1996, pp. 351-362.

[9] Portelli A., "Oral History in Italy", *Oral History. An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, edited by David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum, 2nd edition, AltaMira, 1996, pp. 391-416.

[10] Though highly respected as oral historians, Alessandro Portelli and Luisa Passerini held positions in the Acamedic Italian field that were those of outsiders in some way.

[11] Grele R.J., "Directions for Oral History in the United States", p. 64, underlines that « these early programs were not located within departments of history but usually within libraries or archival depositories. Thus they had little effect on the training of historians, or on historiographical practice. »

[12] An Interview with Charles T. Morrissey, by Tracy E. K'Meyer, *Oral History Review* 24/2 Winter 1997, pp. 77-78.

guise of better understanding by the elite[13], was still associated with progressive political and ideological opinions[14] and therefore tended to give precedence to the testimony of those who were not usually allowed to express themselves.

The conjugated effects of those various factors meant that oral history had trouble coming into existence and affirming its legitimacy. Its partisans therefore formed a national but also an international community. This sort of brotherhood showed an "extraordinary collegiality[15]," which had Charles Morrissey state that the annual gathering of oral history specialists in the US was nothing like that of the *American Historical Association* "where everybody looks like they were cut from the same cookie cutter, standing in the lobby, wearing the same type of suits. With oral history, the folklorist wants to argue with the historian or the linguist on the meaning of the evidence or the value of subjective evidence and so forth.[16]" At the beginning of the movement, everything happened in a very informal manner, "in the best open-minded sense of pursuing something professionally. The informality of the meetings; the bonfire on the beach at Pacific Grove[17]" which Morrissey evoked nostalgically in retrospect.

Basically, the reservations voiced against the use of oral sources forced their partisans to seriously ponder on the arguments that were being raised against them. It is striking to notice that they integrated the difficulties of the approach they had chosen very early on. As early as 1972, Barbara Tuchman, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, warned against the trivia that an inordinate and zealous use of oral testimonies was likely to garner[18]: was it really worth expending so much effort to uncover common places? In 1979, Patrick O'Farell felt that oral history was moving into

---

[13] As soon as 1938, in *The Gateway to History*, Allan Nevins put a plea to collect testimonies of "men once prominent in politics, in business, in the professions, and in other fields; information that every obituary column shows to be perishing." And, as a matter of fact, « on May 18, 1948, Nevins and his graduate student, a doctoral student named Dean Albertson, went to 120 East 75th Street in Manhattan to interview George McAneny, a New York banker and civic leader. » Cf. *International Journal of Oral History*, vol. 9, n° 1, February 1988, editorial : Allan Nevins and Oral History, p. 3.

[14] A political liberal, Louis « Studs » Terkel (1912-2008), who had been part of the « Federal Writers Project » during the New Deal, had a great infuence on oral history in the US. In the United Kingdom, Paul Thompson, whose *Voice of the Past* published in 1978 gave strength to a history seen from below, embodied this current too.

[15] An Interview with Charles T. Morrissey, by Tracy E. K'Meyer, *Oral History Review* 26/1 Winter-Spring 1999, pp. 85-104, p. 91.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 91.

[17] *Ibid., p. 91*.

[18] Tuchman B., « Distinguishing the Significant from the Insignificant », *Radcliffe Quarterly* 56 (October 1972), repris dans *Oral History. An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum (dir.), 2nd edition, AltaMira, 1996, pp. 94-98.

"the world of image, selective memory, later overlays and utter subjectivity .... And where will it lead us? Not into history, but into myth[19]."

The case of France: from questioning oral history to the very question of oral history

At a time when oral history was generally thought of in a number of countries as a new resource, sometimes even a cure-all, France was welcoming the movement and the trend to the point where Daniel Bertaux could genuinely believe that 1980 would probably see the end of the "prehistory of oral history in France[20]," that is the lifting of what was *de facto* a ban, observed rigorously. "History as a discipline is intimately linked to the written form: as a science, it has been designed from the criticism of oral tradition, which explains the spontaneous wariness of many historians when it comes to oral sources[21]," Philippe Joutard wrote. This classically trained historian, author of a 1977 book about the essential addition oral tradition can bring to the understanding of a phenomenon on the long term[22], composed after an oral survey about the memory of the Camisards War started a decade earlier in the Cévennes, lacked conviction when he tried his luck on the subject. "Nothing" he wrote "led me to start that work, all the more so because it was about oral tradition, something that I didn't believe existed in our long since literate countries, or even held any historical interest[23]." And yet he added, "From the very first day, I understood that I would not stop any time soon and that it would change my entire work completely[24]." As a matter of fact, his master-piece was published at the exact time when oral history was starting to work its way up in France.

Recognition took place at the newly established *Institute for the History of Present Times* (*Institut d'Histoire du Temps Présent*, IHTP). In June 1980, the crème de la crème of researchers who had dealt with the question of oral testimonies in history, sociology, anthropology or

---

[19] O'Farrell P., « Oral history: facts and fiction », *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, 1982–83, no. 5, pp. 3–9.

[20] Bertaux D., « L'Histoire Orale en France : Fin de la Préhistoire », *International Journal of Oral History*, vol. 2, n° 2, June 1981, p. 121.

[21] Joutard Ph., *Histoire et mémoires, conflits et alliance*, La Découverte, 2013, pp. 16-17.

[22] Joutard Ph., *La Légende des Camisards, op. cit.*

[23] Joutard Ph., *Histoire et mémoires.…*, p. 137.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 137.

political science was brought together in a panel: amongst others, François Bédarida, Daniel Bertaux, Jean-Claude Bouvier, Philippe Joutard, Marie-Claire Lavabre, Philippe Lejeune, Yves Lequin, Jacques Ozouf, Mona Ozouf, Gérard Namer, Luisa Passerini, Jean-Noël Pelen, Jean Peneff, François Portet, Antoine Prost, Nicole Racine, Madeleine Reberioux, René Rémond, Jean-Pierre Rioux, Dominique Schnapper, Paul Thompson, Lucette Valensi, Dominique Veillon, Danièle Voldman[25]. This meeting about the "problems of method in oral history" had been prepared with a series of small working groups since November 1979 and the atmosphere was very positive, even enthusiastic.

Those dynamics carried on since in 1982, the IHTP – whose chairman François Bédarida felt it was his duty to help give birth to this new practice[26] – published an index of researchers who specialized in oral history, added ad hoc publications to its personal library, and organized the 5th international colloquium on oral history in September in association with the *Centre for the Research and Study of Oral History and local languages* (*Centre de Recherche et d'Etude sur l'Histoire Orale et les Parlers régionaux*) in Aix. There, Dominique Schnapper made herself the voice of discord by asking "impertinent questions to 'oral historians'[27]." Familiar as she was with the method of interviews, she was radically against the idea of oral history being considered a new discipline, since its basis, the endeavour to understand and make something intelligible, was no different from so-called traditional history. Her diagnosis was as follows: "In France, where we don't have an equivalent to traditional English historians, where historians are more familiar with humanities, the battle was won even before it was fought[28]."

Such optimism – which relied on the idea that "oral history" lied within the general scope of broadening the "horizon of historians" and as a consequence, didn't deserve to be overly criticised or honoured – was contradicted by reality. That became apparent on the occasion of the second colloquium organised by the IHTP on June 20th, 1986. Evoking the dissemination of oral history, Jean-Pierre Rioux was paying tribute to "the constant critical and friendly help offered to the researchers of the IHTP, from Aix to Lille, from Göttingen to Turin, from Rome or

---

[25] *Problèmes de méthode en histoire orale*, table ronde, 20 juin 1980, IHTP, 1981.

[26] « The Struggle for a History without Adjectives: A Note on Using Oral Sources in Spain », Mercedes Vilanova, *The Oral History Review*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer, 1997), p. 83.

[27] Schnapper D., « Questions impertinentes aux "historiens oraux" », *Commentaire*, n° 23, 1983, pp. 655-660.

[28] *Ibid*., p. 660.

Barcelona, from the rue Saint-Guillaume[29] to California, without forgetting the honourable French sub-prefectures where it was a pleasure to talk with a few fervent groups who, as they say, 'travel around[30]'." Without prejudice to how said fervent groups received this expression of gratitude, it is interesting to notice that their mention preceded the realisation that oral history had become "banal": "We shall need, I believe, to thoroughly debate the happy consequence of those pioneer's efforts, but also the weariness that spread the wave. Banal, non-spoken or indifferent, oral history could very well establish itself as the humble servant of perennial historical science, become an ancillary science that would barely speak louder than others[31]." Next followed the question: "Should we sadly agree that there is not much left to say about oral history? Dispossessed, recycled, its dream to establish 'another' kind of history broken, it would be put down on the shelf of technical accessories needed to create sources, with storekeepers in grey uniforms[32]."

The 1986 colloquium's agenda gave precedence to discussions about the subjects of "operative oral history, and no longer to an adolescent method still in search of its identity and legitimisation[33]." In his conclusions, François Bédarida expressed his reservations regarding oral history:

"We have to go back to the subject of history. Is everything built around micro-history and macro-history? Yes, history is polyphonic and in multi-dimensional. Yes, there is a plurality of temporalities. But it is quite obvious that any historian establishes hierarchies and that he has to admit that, to acknowledge them clearly. To follow a hierarchy in which micro-history comes before macro-history is absolutely fine, as long as it has been clearly established […]. It is one way to make history. It is perfectly legitimate, as long as it has been acknowledged that it is given precedence, within that hierarchy, over another conception which was in use until then.

One can also embrace a different conception, which is to say that all new approaches are productive, rich in suggestions, that they give history a remarkable dimension. […] But we can however think […] that as far as dates are concerned, one such as 1933, which put the fate of hundreds and hundreds of millions of men along with the future of humanity into peril, is more important than knowing how the Germans perceived their war. That is another approach and

[29] The address of Sciences Po in Paris.
[30] Questions à l'histoire orale. Table ronde du 20 juin 1986, *Cahiers de l'IHTP*, n° 4, juin 1987, p. 5.
[31] *Ibid.*, p. 6.
[32] *Ibid.*, p. 6.
[33] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

another field of interpretation, but we can consider that in the end, that history, however richer it is made by the intervention of the other, is the most important in the eyes of historians. It is a matter of hierarchy, of clearly established and acknowledged hierarchy[34]."

The fact is that the way oral history was apprehended had seriously evolved in the space of six years. Maybe that distance was a consequence of Daniel Cordier's conference, given on June 9th, 1983 in the great amphitheatre of the Sorbonne University with the help of the IHTP. That conference about Jean Moulin and the National Council of the Resistance had caused a stir because the story it told through archives personally and exclusively held by Cordier, did not coincide with the memories of the Resistants who attended. Eugène Claudius-Petit, Henri Noguères, Christian Pineau and Jean-Pierre Levy, former leaders of **Resistance movements**, declared that Cordier's intervention didn't describe the Resistance they had lived. The latter defended himself, stating for instance during the debate: "I know, of course, what Jean Moulin thought of the Front National, but my testimony has no particular value. As a consequence, we have to refer to the documents[35]." In reality, the conference and following debates established a radical opposition between the written archives and the survivor's testimonies. It was not word against word but archives against word.

With that episode in mind, the IHTP's change of direction regarding oral history is probably easier to explain. The tempestuous 1983 meeting at La Sorbonne had left its marks. And incidentally, Daniel Cordier had taken part in the previously mentioned 1986 colloquium. He had spoken to acknowledge that testimonies had "a certain merit, an aesthetic merit. Because all of a sudden, somebody talks, and through 20, 30, 40 years, the past comes up in as fresh as it possibly could. Whether the past described is exact or not is unimportant, it's the sound of the voice that matters[36]." However, in the same discourse, he strongly reaffirmed that it was "absolutely necessary to undertake serious work against those sources[37]" because they didn't reflect the reality at all: "in order to write history, we must first and foremost rely on documents[38]." In his conclusion, François Bédarida insisted on the importance of Daniel Cordier's intervention: "Daniel Cordier's intervention is absolutely essential as it re-establishes our starting point: the

---

[34] *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.
[35] *Jean Moulin et le Conseil National de la Résistance*, IHTP, 1983, p. 53.
[36] Questions à l'histoire orale. Table ronde du 20 juin 1986, *Cahiers de l'IHTP*, n° 4, juin 1987, p. 73-74.
[37] *Ibid.*, p. 74.
[38] *Ibid.*, p. 104.

subjects of history. The Resistance, which, for lack of documents, was considered a chosen field of oral history, appears on the contrary – according to him – to be the place where written history triumphs: that is a reversal of prospects[39]."

Indeed, in 1992, the IHTP published the results of its practices under a title phrased as a question: "The voice of truth? Historical research and oral sources[40]." In her foreword, Danièle Voldman remarked that the opinions of researchers diverged on that particular chapter in a research unit that was otherwise quite cohesive. The enthusiasm of the early 1980's had made way for great caution, and instead of the "synthesis of knowledge acquired through research in the field of oral history" required by the Research and Innovation Unit (*Direction de la recherche et de l'innovation*) of the Ministry of Infrastructures – which had commissioned the publication – the lab offered a polyphonic synthesis which was neither a defence nor an illustration of oral history.

Why focus this study on the IHTP and on the evolution of oral history shown through its publications? Because as the crucible of the use of oral sources in France[41], this lab evolved in a way that reflected the dominant attitude gradually adopted in that field. If the use of testimonies is nowadays included in a number of studies dedicated to the history of the present, the idea of a new way of writing history – which then corresponded to the name oral history – has disappeared.

At the same time, witnesses were looked upon with more and more reluctance. Sometimes, the suspicion held against them even resulted to a radical questioning of anything they were saying, forgetting or keeping silent, of the successive and sometimes contradictory versions of their memories. Such was the case in May 1997 when the Aubrac couple, looking to nullify suspicions of treason caused by a book directly inspired by the reconstruction of charges attributed to Klaus Barbie, commissioned historians[42] to take part to a round table where all questions could be asked. This painful and unproductive session turned into a very tense confrontation that had more in common with a police or legal procedure than with an exchange between historians and actors as witnesses. On that occasion, the witnesses were in a way symbolically put to death.

---

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 104.

[40] *Les Cahiers de l'IHTP*, n° 21, novembre 1992, Danièle Voldman, ed.

[41] See Philippe Joutard, *Histoire et mémoires…*, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-148.

[42] All of them Parisians and members or collaborators of the IHTP.

From questioning oral history to denouncing the "ideology of testimony"

The ultimate stage of this process of relegating oral sources to the margins of historical practice can be found under the pen of Henry Rousso. In his 2012 book, this former chairman of the IHTP studied the question of testimony in the writing of history. That in itself had no other interest besides presenting the opinion of one historian's amongst others, someone who by the way had never even worked directly from oral sources. But implicitly, it really raised a key issue: the role of testimony in the framework established by the methodical school, and more widely by so-called scientific history since the second half of the 19th century. For that reason, it is worth looking at in more detail.

Rousso first disproved the relevance of a dichotomy between historians and witnesses, basing his reflexion on the case of Daniel Cordier, secretary of Jean Moulin in the Resistance, who, after becoming his former boss's biographer, proved himself to be radically against the use of testimonies and in favour of history being developed solely on the basis of written archives. Although Daniel Cordier's position was very characteristic[43], Rousso's argument regarding that point is interesting in the sense that it is precisely in his role as a historian that Cordier objected to the use of witnesses. Besides, the actor/witness sometimes revealed himself under the pen of the historian, for example when he told of the arrest of Caluire on June 21st 1943: "Amongst the various testimonies of the same actor, I adopted the version that seemed the most compatible with my own experience of the Resistance. We had a way of being and living which guided me in my choice of such or such version[44].' In other words, Cordier the actor/witness can legitimately come to the help of Cordier the historian when, like for the arrest of Jean Moulin in Caluire on June 21st 1943, it is particularly difficult to clarify the truth. There is a contradiction here that no one was in a hurry to point out, let alone comment on… A contradiction which is even more aggravated by what Cordier wrote in *Alias Caracalla*, a hybrid book in which he mingled memories with facts solidly anchored in written sources: "I got so scared by the vehemence of

[43] « The more testimonies, the less verity », Daniel Cordier, *Jean Moulin. La République des catacombes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999, p. 431.
[44] *Ibid.*, p. 433.

this monologue that it remained inscribed in my memory, almost word for word. I am aware that diarists always fall victim to this naive belief. It is true for some dialogues that I give back as they come, where I am certain of the general meaning but naturally not of the precise form. But there is often the odd sentence that I do not doubt – although I may be wrong – was pronounced precisely a certain way. Such is the case for the latter[45]." Besides, careful study of Cordier's work shows he tends to rely on the very testimonies that he denied on principle. There are some cases – not only in the field of the history of the Resistance – where using oral sources turns out to be necessary, or to use a better word, irreplaceable.

But let's go back to Rousso's statements. On the issue of witness accounts, he observed that "the academic world has split in two, with one part developing a veritable ideology of the witness account which magnifies the witness and the victim, sanctifies their word…[46]" Let us pass on this clear-cut dichotomy between two sides that Rousso created and opposed in a rather caricatural manner when we would have trouble finding in the works. What we see here is a well-known criticism, one that consists in pointing out the absence of critical distance, what we sometimes call a lack of objectivity: that criticism is the basis of the suspicion in which we hold what can be called – for lack of a better word – oral history. But Rousso didn't simply go over old ground, he went further, stating that the tendency to call onto witnesses doesn't just imply taking them at their word but also develops "a veritable ideology of the witness account which magnifies the witness and the victim, sanctifies their words and affects a false humility towards them. In my opinion this masks an academic populism the purpose of which – as with all populisms – is not to defend the cause of those who have been forgotten by history but to speak, and speak loudly, in their place[47]." As a result, Rousso's criticism of witness accounts slowly turns into a disapproval of the process of exploiting testimonies. Under his pen, using a witness account would amount to exploiting it.

In doing so, Rousso covered a broad range as his statements referred to "some recent historiographical quarrels, particularly in France, about the attitude of the soldiers of the Great War, about the heroization of the Resistance, about the magnitude of colonization that remains overlooked and its link to the question of immigration." He understood the position of those who use witness accounts as the implementation of an "ideology of witness accounts which presents

[45] Daniel Cordier, *Alias Caracalla*, Paris, Gallimard, 2009, note 1, p. 387 ; reasserted pp. 704 et 888.
[46] Henry Rousso, *La dernière catastrophe. L'histoire, le présent, le contemporain*, Paris, Gallimard, 2012, p. 254.
[47] *Ibid.*, p. 254.

itself as the avatar of an ideological radical movement that has lost its traditional historical references and is now looking for the new unfortunate souls of the world…[48]". The disappointed orphans of a left wing that saw the Berlin wall crumble and their hopes and landmarks with it would apparently be looking for the new unfortunate souls of the world. Rousso then explained his own opinion: "I believe that real respect owed by a historian to a witness, or rather to an actor of history, is to acknowledge them face to face in a friendly dialog or a debate, which doesn't involve any lack of respect for who they were in the past yet still allows the complete freedom to criticize their interpretation of history, including their own history.[49]"

The problem with such an attack is that it doesn't rely on any precise references; one would have liked the terrible trap pointed out by the author to be illustrated by an example… In short, there would be two schools; on the one hand, the "fanatics of emotional fusion[50]" with the witnesses, whose motivations would be political and not scientific, and on the other hand, the noble souls who, without prejudice to constant respect of the witnesses, would not fear to contradict them. The fracture between both camps is clear and leaves no room for subtlety. However, it just so happens that subtlety is absolutely paramount when it comes to defining a problem encountered by every historian who tries to use witnesses.

Indeed, some publications may sometimes repeat the words of a past long forgone without any critical material[51]. It is an option, and not necessarily an unproductive one, but it isn't the one chosen by historians who belong to the camps Rousso described without naming. Caricaturing an opposition between enamoured zealots and critical users of witness accounts, he built a frame that disqualified the former automatically. But in every country on the planet, partisans of the use of witness accounts, precisely because they know exactly what counter-arguments they will be faced with, and even more so because they are aware of how difficult their chosen practice is, take tremendous care to assess the quality of the accounts they use. As a result, they would put themselves without hesitation in the position that Rousso presents as his own, which is in fact the very basis of any scientific practice. None of the historians thus criticized would base their studies on a sanctified reproduction of accounts that wouldn't have been closely evaluated. No one ignores the existence of written sources. Paying attention to what the actors have thought –

---

[48] *Ibid.*, p. 255.
[49] *Ibid.*, p. 255.
[50] Pierre Bourdieu (dir.), *La misère du monde*, Paris, Seuil, 1993, p. 903.
[51] It is the life history genre which holds an important position in the world of publishing.

and think they have thought – does not imply in any way that existing written sources (if any) should be overlooked.

But the concept – if I may call it so – of "scientific populism" is interesting in the sense that whether we like it or not, it points to the core of the debate, which is fundamental in every way and reminds us of what François Bédarida was saying in 1986 already. It's about the opposition between a so-called scientific approach of history and another approach, more intimate, more personal, between pure discipline and the emotional, biased practice of history.

An endless, unproductive scholastic feud

This debate isn't specifically Gallocentric. Nowhere has it ever been as clearly set out as in the *International journal of oral history* in 1985[52], when the wind was changing direction in France. Paul Thompson, Luisa Passerini, Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame and Alessandro Portelli[53] replied to a particularly well-argued article by Louise A. Tilly defending the classical conception of history[54]. These exchanges prove the depth of reflection behind the defenders of oral sources. For an anecdote, we could mention Alessandro Portelli's flowery reply to Louise A. Tilly's criticism: "you don't ask sprinter Carl Lewis to beat the world record in high-jump…" In the end, the stakeholders of oral history explain that their practice allowed them to measure the difference between facts and representations, and therefore to be aware of the role played by representations. The consequence for them is a kind of relativism that they could apply to any attempt at writing history. They are therefore more likely to give precedence to interpretations over explanations. Rather than believing in objective structures, they believe in actions moved by human subjectivity, by the role played by the actors on the social scene, etc. The question asked, in the end, is to figure out what to do with the things that contradict the scientific analyses we have built. In a 1997 article published in the *Oral History Review*, significantly entitled "Do I Like Them Too Much?", Valerie Yow illustrated this axis of defence and reflection by

[52] *International journal of oral history*, vol. 6, n°1, février 1985.

[53] « Between Social Scientists : Responses to Louise A. Tilly », pp. 19-39.

[54] « People's History and Social Science History », pp. 5-18 : « The genius of social science history is twofold. First, its central method - collective biography of one kind or another - preserves individual while variability identifying dominant social patterns. Second, its focus on social relationships rather than psychological states remains our surest guarantee of reconstructing how ordinary people of the past lived out their days and made the choices that cumulate into history. Social science history, properly conceived, is the ultimate people's history. »

mentioning elements that the analysis of a traditional approach would not take into account: "They were, as anthropologist Paul Rabinow has described them, 'corridor talk' – the remarks you made about your reactions to your research while you were standing with a colleague in the corridor. You were about to go into the room where you would discuss the really important research matters[55]."

That is what separates oral history from so-called "scientific populism" and allows us to highlight that the change of point of view made necessary by a regular, reasoned, critical relationship with witnesses causes us to question our own practice, to wonder what writing means, what register to choose in order to be in line with the subject of our study[56]. Such an exercise in humility also offers the advantage to go beyond the beautiful yet fallacious symmetry between invariable written sources on one hand and fleeting, crumbling oral accounts on the other. Alessandro Portelli was right to argue that "'wrong' statements are still psychologically 'true' and that this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts[57]."

At the same time, in his response to Louise A. Tilly, Alessandro Portelli took a position opposing two types of history both irreducible to one another, two parallel disciplines which, like sprinting and jumping, coexist on the stadium without ever competing against one another. But in my opinion, if historians had to be compared to athletes, they would ideally be decathletes, a rare species capable of speed, power, stamina, sudden bursts of energy, etc. Such athletes always have one or two weaknesses that they relentlessly try to overcome, all the while knowing they will have to work with their flaws. Rather than the cleft and ideologically marked idea of the historian's universe split between top down and bottom up or between scientists and militants, with the inevitable patronization that it implies, we could dream of conciliating two approaches that at first appear hardly compatible.

Incidentally, Alessandro Portelli himself highlighted that "orality and writing, for many centuries now, have not existed separately: if many written sources are based on orality, modern

---

[55] Valerie Yow, "Do I Like Them Too Much?" : Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa, *Oral History Review* 24/1 (Summer 1997), pp. 55-56.

[56] See Mercedes Vilanova, « À la recherche des majorités invisibles, un parcours espagnol du second 20ème siècle », *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 1997, n° 55, p. 136 : « Oral sources crush the protected loneliness of archives, the closed world of written truth, a static vision of the historian. Many previous concepts, elaborated with difficulty through bibliographical study, shattered. »

[57] Alessandro Portelli, « What Makes Oral History Different », first published 1979, in *The Oral History Reader*, edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, second edition, Routledge, 2006, p. 68.

orality itself is saturated with writing.[58]" And then, we can also think of Philippe Joutard's work, whether it was produced collectively[59] or by him alone. His studies unveil incredibly complex issues while making them intelligible, a phenomenon derived from his constant to-and-fro between oral and written sources. It is quite surprising, over 35 years after the publication of *La Légende des Camisards*, subtitled *Une sensibilité au passé*, (Legends of the Camisards – Sensitivity to the Past) that we still have to demonstrate tirelessly what that book established with such force: "As the only way, originally, to express popular admiration for ancestors who gave modest farmers their confidence back, oral tradition is the main reason for the increase of books on the question in the Cévennes. But the literature thus formed nourishes in turn oral tradition, although belittling it in the same breath. Yet the latter has managed to stay alive up until now, thanks to its transmission within the narrow frame of the family. Nowadays, it finds itself less threatened by the scorn or lack of interest of scholars than by the dislocation of traditional regional structures, the abandonment of the traditional *mas* house and the distancing of familiar landscapes which were its most solid support[60]." Joutard concludes: "Such popular culture influences scholastic culture: scholars don't always obey the commandments of 'science' and more often than we think, they would like to find the stories of their childhood again[61]."

Everything is right there: the subtle interactions between written and verbal accounts, the dialectic that opposes and unites them all at the same time, the lesson in humility taught by the practice of tradition or of oral sources, the discovery of the limits of a reassuring, yet questionable science. Did Philippe Joutard give the witnesses the right to speak only to snatch it away and conceal his purpose? The **irrelevance** of such a question can only be fully understood after (re)reading him. The truth is Philippe Joutard, with his pilgrim's cross, pacing throughout the length and breadth of his field of investigation, listening to the witnesses of a story long past, put himself in the perfect position to unveil the "hidden transcripts" uncovered by James C. Scott from his anthropological survey of Malaysian villages[62]. A frame of understanding designed from the top may well be clear and reassuring, but it won't resist the complexity revealed by a thorough practice of oral sources. That is a fact where no populism,

---

[58] Alessandro Portelli, art. cit. *supra*.

[59] Joutard Ph., Poujol J., Cabanel P., *Cévennes. Terre de Refuge, 1940-1944*, Presses du Languedoc/Club cévenol, 1987.

[60] Joutard Ph., *La Légende des Camisards*, op. cit., p. 347.

[61] *Ibid.*, p. 356.

[62] Scott J.C., *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*, Yale University Press, 1990.

scientific or other, has a place. On the contrary, it brings to our awareness that former actors who become witnesses have a lot to say that we must listen to very closely: what is thereby lost in clarity will be made up for in subtlety.

Laurent Douzou

Acknowledgements : Mathieu Franks, Sonia Izrar.

Abstract: The very existence of oral history never ceased to be a problem for proper scientific history. One sometimes has to defend oneself, in 2014, in France, for using oral historical sources: sometimes even, whoever collects and uses oral testimonies is harshly accused of "scientific populism", the equivalent to being excommunicated. This paper takes this opportunity to think about the development of oral history and recall the obstacles it has overcome on one hand, analyse what happened to it in France since the end of the 1970's on the other hand, and finally, come back on the issues caused by the use of testimonies – problems which have been talked over and over, but are always presented or understood as new.

Keywords : Historiography – Struggle between proper scientific history and oral history – Place of oral history in France.