

Memory: a source for the left-hand.

Literature and research experiences on oral sources and oral archives*

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This paper deals with interview as a research tool for historians. Someone once said we are living in a society based on the interview: a huge number of interviews are held everyday, everywhere and with everybody, in the most different situations – from job interviews to marketing researches, from talk shows to police interviews. According to some studies, 90% of the research programs in social sciences use interviews². They appear to be the most used tool in order to gather information. However, very few of these interviews aim to historical research. Quoting an American specialist in oral history, we can say that the interviews conceived as oral sources have a particular “sense of purpose”, because they are conceived “for the record, for the ages, for scholars”³.

I started working on historical research in 1990s, and in that time I also started working on oral sources. I was never involved in the times of radical issues, the 1970s, nor have I ever had an anti-elitist feeling. Since my first experiences, happened almost by chance, I held about 100 interviews and read or listened to much more.

Even if I didn't want to, it would be quite difficult for me not to be influenced in my opinion by my discipline and my knowledge of economic theories as well as by sociology, ethnography, cultural studies, literary critics, and psychoanalysis. I do not agree with the deconstructionist and extremist opinion, according to which texts eat up persons, whose identity breaks into pieces, and truth has got innumerable meanings. I rather agree with an idea of “critical realism”⁴, which tries to keep the liberating issues of the large debate of recent years, without falling into scepticism, which happened sometimes.

* A previous version of this paper was published in «Imprese e storia», n. 29, gennaio-giugno 2004, pp. 101-146. There, the second paragraph did not appear, while the fifth one has been shortened here.

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² D. Silverman, 1993; R. Bichi, 2002.

³ R. Grele, 1989, p. ix

⁴ According to the meaning explained and suggested by C. Aull Davies, 1999. In R. Bates *et al.*, 1998 you can find an analysis of the achievability of an effective convergence between analytic and narrative style, according to methodological individualism and concerning issues of great significance for economic history as well: “our approach occupies a complex middle ground between nomotetic and ideographic reasoning”, p.12. This appears

Like anybody working on oral sources, I know the “uneasy feeling of being swallowed up by the source” and of loosing “the historian’s privilege to act as an omniscient narrator”⁵. These words belong to Giovanni Contini, and I agree with him when he says that it would be wrong to assume that oral sources can only be read “against the grain”. On the contrary, I think that an oral source, like any other, is often rich in factual information⁶. I don’t think I could interview anybody if I didn’t believe that every bio is unique, precise, and profound, and that “each person is loyal to himself and shows it through the duration and power of memory”⁷. In my opinion, each person takes shape and changes in time and due to life fortunes, including defeat, disproportion in strength and fallibility, and he/she can keep distance from his/her thoughts, as well as from his/her feelings and wishes⁸. I also think I would be less interested in interviewing if I weren’t myself involved in oral history as well, “not because of its reliability, but because of the frequent and rich gaps and stories that are the expression of the assessing features of the telling, and of judgement, dream, and work”⁹; and it would be the same if I didn’t believe that no autobiography can be ethically neutral: every story is partly description, partly explanation, and partly prescription, and the autobiographical story in particular, because of its peculiar pact with the truth¹⁰, is based on cause reasoning, appreciation, assessment, and approving, justifying or condemning opinions at the same time¹¹. I think I would have chosen a different kind of job if I hadn’t believed that working halfway between biographical and historical time is possible, and that a historian can and must take something out of an autobiographical oral source. Like I said in the title, maybe with the right half of the brain as well¹².

This paper has got a limited aim I want to declare right at the beginning: either it will point out some “human flesh” to the smell of the “fairy tales ogre” (I’m quoting here Marc Bloch and identifying the business historian with the ogre), or, at least, it will suggest some observations on a new (?) erudite technique. As a matter of fact, I need to tell my opinion about the basic issue of oral history as well: is it really a self-standing field of social research, i.e. a process of making history starting from oral sources? Or is it rather a methodology, a technique, an “auxiliary discipline” concerning a particular kind of primary evidence? For several reasons I agree with the last opinion.

The plan of this paper is conceived as follows: the second paragraph describes and discusses the French case of contemporary testimonies collection; the third paragraph suggests some observations on the typical features of oral sources, with reference to the current scientific literature; the fourth concerns methodological issues; the fifth contains a digression on

to be a real effort to allow “analytics” and “continentals” to dialogue with each other (P.A. Toninelli, 1999). About the narrative turn in historiography as a whole, see J. Topolski, 1994; Id., 1997, and K. Jenkins, 1997.

⁵ G. Contini, 1980, p. 287.

⁶ G. Contini, 2003, p. 34.

⁷ I am quoting from Pulcini, 2003, p. xvi, but I am also referring to R. Braidotti, 2003, and A. Cavarero, 1997.

⁸ I am speaking of taking a critical position towards the “first person authority” about attitudes like belief, wish, intention, delight, surprise, regret, pride, and knowing, remembering, noticing that things went a certain way. “When a person says he/she believes, hopes, wishes or wants something, we assume he/she is not wrong – we don’t assume it, on the contrary, when he/she refers to other mental statuses [to the second or third person]”. D. Donaldson, 2003, p.3.

⁹ A. Portelli, 1985, p. 18.

¹⁰ P. Lejeune, 1986.

¹¹ P. Ricoeur, 1993; S. Bok, 2000.

¹² I am actually paraphrasing J. Bruner, 1990.

memory epistemology, with reference to the current debate on this subject; the sixth describes some research experiences, in order to state which is the contribution of oral sources and to what kind of analysis are they aimed; the last paragraph discusses the role of witness in connection with the profile of the researcher and suggests some observations taking from oral sources to oral archives. Some short final observations, then, go back to this introduction.

Debts and models: oral archives, l'exception française

As I said already, I have been working almost full-time on oral sources – gathered within different collective projects¹³ – for several years now. I state it here in order to declare right now my debts rather than to show my credentials. Nowadays, whoever works on oral sources and archives can count on a recent reference book that was really missed before, despite the huge bibliography available on such subjects, especially in English and about methodology¹⁴ – but this is a basic book because it is complete, articulate, rich in appendixes and apparatuses. I'm talking of the big monograph *L'historien, l'archiviste et le magnétophone*¹⁵, written by Florence Descamps, maître de conference at the Ecole pratique des hautes études, and published in 2001. This “véritable bible en 900 pages”¹⁶ I will refer to in this paragraph, contains the outcomes of the author's seminars and of her 10-years-long job as the person in charge of the Secrétariat scientifique du Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière¹⁷ in Paris.

The works of this Comité, founded in Summer 1987 at the French Ministry of Finance, started at the beginning of 1988. Its aim was to create a series of oral archives, under the auspices of the Ministry itself. The main features of the first stage of the Comité's job are clearly explained in the opening speech held by Edouard Balladur, in those days the Minister of Finance: “Le ministère a su accueillir des personnalités éminentes qui se sont identifiées à son activité et dont les noms reconnus constituent autant de références. La possibilité de recueillir, au cours d'entretiens préparés, les souvenirs de ces fonctionnaires qui ont participé directement aux *événements majeurs* de la vie économique du pays constitue une chance unique de mener une recherche originale, directement avec les acteurs de la notre histoire récente. C'est un capital inestimable, qui doit être sauvegardé et qui constitue le *complément*

¹³ I carried out several project on behalf of Centro per la cultura d'impresa. The first one concerned Milan Stock Exchange after the Second World War, with special reference to the trading mechanisms of the parterre; a second one concerned mould industries, with the patronage of Unione nazionale produttori stampi e attrezzature di precisione; a third one concerned the Milanese entrepreneur Giannino Bassetti, on behalf of the Giannino Bassetti Foundation; a fourth one concerned the memory of work at Olivetti from 1950s on, with the patronage of the Adriano Olivetti Foundation and under guidance of Francesco Novara and Renato Rozzi, former persons in charge of the Psychological Centre of Olivetti. A further project, started in 2003 and still in progress, concerns technical cultures of working at Ferrovie dello Stato and was patronized by the Direzione generale di gruppo per le risorse umane di Ferrovie dello Stato (cfr. R. Garruccio, 2003b).

¹⁴ I am going to mention here only the most common and quoted manuals: R. Perks, A. Thompson, 1998; A. Portelli, 1997; D.K Dunaway, W. Baum, 1996²; D. Ritchie, 1995; V. Raleigh Yow, 1994; W. Baum, 1991²; R. Grele, 1991²; M. Frisch, 1990; P. Thompson, 1988; A. Seldon, J. Pappworth, 1983.

¹⁵ F. Descamps, 2001.

¹⁶ G. Elgey, 2002, p. 91.

¹⁷ F. Descamps, 1991. The President is the Minister of Economy, Finance and Industry; the Vice-president is Maurice Lévy-Leboyer; members of the scientific committee are, among others, Luis Bergeron, Eric Bussièrre, François Caron, Patrick Fridenson, Michel Margairaz, Alain Plessis, Guy Thuiller; for more information about the Comité (mission, activity, members) see. <http://www.finances.gouv.fr/DICOM/chef/misschef/htm>

naturel et enrichissant des archives écrites"¹⁸. An elitist perspective, a point of view "from above", and the ancillary role of the source are the main issues of this program, apparently quite far from the first model that had been followed until then. This model, dating back to the difficult beginning of the rising of interest in oral archives in France, was set by the experience of the Comité pour l'Histoire de la Sécurité Sociale, founded in 1973 by the Ministry of Social affairs and entrusted to Guy Thuiller, one of the earliest theorists of oral archives in France, who belonged to the school of the Annales and, together with Philippe Joutard, had followed the steps of Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre rather than of Fernand Braudel¹⁹.

Thuiller was the first one who spoke of oral archives and rejected the idea of an oral archive à part entière. His opinion was to some extent near to the earlier and pioneering experience of the Oral History Office of the Columbia University²⁰, and to some extent quite far from it. He didn't agree with the idea of a systematic debriefing of the main protagonists of national elites (the so-called movers and shakers) before they died, but he did agree with the need of enhancing testimonies, that have to be gathered within focused research projects and made available to a wider public than just the scholar who gathered them. Assisting Thuiller there was Dominique Aron-Schnapper, a sociologist and pupil of Pierre Bourdieu, with whom she later clashed. In the years 1975-79, the work of the Comité took to the creation of one among the biggest collections of oral archives in France, and in the following years Schnapper gave an account of this experience in some papers that are still nowadays a guide for those working in this field²¹.

The French committees for ministerial history were a cultural innovation of the second half of 1970s: this is when oral archives were mentioned for the first time (we will see further on what was meant by this phrase), together with the idea of oral archives engineering, i.e. the chain of the operations needed in order to create and make available to historians this new kind of archive²². Training, rationalisation, and enhancing in the activity of testimonies collection from an historiographic point of view: these are the three main guidelines according to which this cultural movement acted, anticipating of about ten years the large debate on memory started in the late 1980s and still lasting, whose issues were gradually accepted by the movement itself. The meaning of the phrase "oral archive" is ambiguous: Georgette Elgey, appointed by the Prime minister in 2001 within the Conseil économique et social, suggests that it refers to "les témoignages recueillis dans un but de documentation scientifique et/ou dans un souci patrimonial", and then says: "de toute évidence, ces témoignages oraux ne peuvent être assimilés ni aux archives audiovisuelles ni aux archives sonores. D'abord parce qu'ils sont rassemblés hors de toute préoccupation de publication ou de diffusion médiatique. Ensuite parce que, contrairement aux archives sonores et/ou audiovisuelles, dont la production systématique est induite organiquement par une activité publique, comme il en est de toute archives, il ont leur finalité propre"²³. Oral archives are

¹⁸ Édouard Balladur's speech was held on February 17th, 1988, and is reported verbatim in F. Decamps, 1991, p. 511

¹⁹ G. Thuiller, J. Caritey, 1988; P. Joutard, 1986; "Braudel ne parle jamais de la mémoire dans son modèle d'explication de l'histoire", J. Le Goff, 1999, p. 249.

²⁰ For more information about OHRO see: <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/1web/indiv/oral/about.html> and OHRO, 1992

²¹ See D. Aron-Schnapper, 1980.

²² For a list of French projects see C. de Tourtier-Bonazzi, 1990

²³ G. Elgey, 2002, p. 87.

then defined as a systematic collection of récits de vie, not necessarily ordered for an immediate exploitation, and are opposed to oral sources as collected within a pre-set research or issue, be it a dissertation or a scientific paper²⁴.

Moving from this definition, both Descamps and Elgey talk of oral archives as of an “exception française”, equally far from the two main approaches distinguishing many international projects of testimonies gathering: one, paying attention to elites and leaders, with a point of view “from above”; the other, taking into consideration the “forgotten by history”, with a point of view “from below”. These approaches also classify testimonies into “immediate” and “looking back”. As historians, we basically deal with the latter kind, but in France a great attention was often paid also to the first one. In 1982, Elgey, who had worked in the 1960s at a monumental research on the history of the fourth Republic, was given charge by President Mitterrand of gathering every day and for future memory from the main members of his Cabinet their testimonies about the issues they were dealing with²⁵. "L'importance des ces témoignages est évidente. Enregistré 'à chaud' ils échappent, dans la mesure du possible, aux phénomènes de reconstruction de la mémoire, liés à tout témoignage ultérieur, quelle que soit la bonne foi du témoin".

Since 1980s, the French experience on oral archives has been stressing the clear difference between memory and history: an oral testimony is no history, it is a record. A recorded interview or life-telling is the current memory of the person speaking, it is the immediate representation of his/her feelings towards an experience, not the experience itself.

History making needs processing and analysis, starting from the records: when records are as subjective as oral memories, history making really needs the objectivity assured by traditional critical methods, the so-called “positivist” methods of critics of the records and of records production and interpretation.

Oral archives shouldn't be focused on one single issue, they should be as open as possible, in order to offer a wide range of information. Neither should they be focused on a single kind of actors, in order to gather a wide range of points of view, both from above and from below.

In the 1990s, the scenario opened up and French archives made one significant step, as we can read in the statement by the new Minister of Finance in June 1990 during the 3rd plenum meeting of the Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière: "Je suis persuadé que la constitution d'archives orales est un supplément d'expression qui va nous aider à faire vivre et à éclairer les sources écrites, et à renforcer notre mémoire financière et économique. Je souhaite pour ma part que l'équipe d'historiens archivistes en place puisse enrichir ce fonds d'archives orales d'un volet concernant l'histoire interne de notre ministère. Je vois plusieurs avantages à cette collecte de documents: elle apportera des éléments pour l'histoire de la Fonction publique et sur un plan intérieur, elle nous permettra de faire une étude de ce ministère dans ses différentes composantes et catégories de personnel: peut-être nous donnerait-elle aussi des éléments susceptibles de confirmer l'idée selon laquelle l'ensemble du personnel appartient à une même communauté administrative et j'espère que cette identité en sortira renforcé"²⁶. These words showed that two different attitudes had started converging: on the one hand, the ministerial and administrative point of view, providing a significant contribution in terms of material, logistic, financial and organizational resources;

²⁴ F. Descamps, 1991, p. 514.

²⁵ «Ces 'archives orales' doivent rester incommunicables à tous, jusqu'à l'ouverture des archives présidentielles, auxquelles elles doivent être jointes», G. Elgey, 2002, p. 91.

²⁶ Quoted in F. Descamps, 2001, p. 512-513.

on the other hand, the academic point of view, involving institutions such as IHTP²⁷ and well-known scholars in economic history. This meant that the usage of oral sources obtained a scientific legitimisation. The process leading to this outcome had begun ten years before, when Jean Bouvier, at the University of Paris I, started a discussion on some issues concerning the economic politics following World War II with some top level State officials who had played a main role in those choices. Afterwards, it had been carried on by Michel Margairaz, who had followed Bouvier's tracks and organized in 1988 a meeting called *Pierre Mendès France et l'économie*, inviting many of the people who used to be very close to Mendès France. Thereafter, the process was sealed by Maurice Lévy-Leboyer, who joined the project of the Comité and was appointed vice-president of it²⁸. These intertwining interests are vital for the Committee's job, because they make possible for it not to work just for university research, and to bring public administration near to a cognitive undertaking.

This obviously short and lacking excursus on French oral archives basically aims to introduce some comments about the role of testimonies and its recent changes. In the next chapter, I am going to deal with them as an oral source, by reminding some well-known issues and suggesting some hopefully new ones.

Preliminary notes: why are oral sources different?

As paradoxical as it may sound, it was often noticed that the peculiarity of oral sources doesn't concern their being oral. There are written sources containing "hints of orality", and they actually are just transcriptions of a spoken testimony²⁹.

Scholars agree that an oral sources has got the following specific features:

- it is asked for by historians, i.e. it is artificial, variable, partial
- it is doubtlessly a source for contemporary history, but it is also a contemporary source itself: this means it is contemporary to the research work rather than to the researched event, like traditional sources. An oral source is a record of the present concerning a subject of the past and connecting present and past: the oral source takes shape from this connection and from the gap resulting from it. The work on oral sources is then based on the triangle present time-past time-time gone by. This triangle (see Agustin's idea of "triple present"³⁰) builds memory (i.e., the act of recalling), and a specific idea of memory not as just a storage, but rather as a continuous re-processing of the past³¹

²⁷ L'Institut d'Histoire du temps présent was founded in 1978 and directed until 1991 by François Bédarida, a scholar in contemporary history very close to Paul Ricoeur. It has been the French leader of the campaign for the use of oral sources in the historical research (mainly in the field of political history), as shown by several *Cahiers* and monographic bulletins published on this subject by IHTP during 20 years. See F. Descamps, 2001, pp. 136 ff.

²⁸ As the Vice-president, Lévi-Leboyer insists that the interviewees must allow their interviews to be immediately made available to scholars through a written consent. Saying so, he stresses one of the advantages of oral collections, i.e. the chance of shorten the long times prescribed by the law about documents protection. See F. Descamps, 2001, p. 14. The first editorial outcome of such effort can be found in Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière, 2001. Here you can find some of the récits resulted by the invitation made by the Minister in 1993 to retired manager to take part in a competition called 'Mémoire du Trésor Publique' writing down their professional memories.

²⁹ L. Passerini, 1988 and 1989.

³⁰ D. Iannotta, 2002³, p. 54.

³¹ We must admit that, if we base oral sources collection on this concept of memory, we also apply a research method that excludes the possibility of repeating exactly a research – and therefore, validation and assessment

- it is a source collecting a testimony on a voluntary basis (like Marc Bloch³² used to say), but it can also offer spontaneous and chance information, that the researcher didn't expect to collect nor the interviewee meant to offer³³. This happens also because control is instinctively lower on spoken words than on written ones³⁴. But it is also a signal that the memory of single people interacts with what Halbwachs used to call "the social frames of memory" and with collective memory³⁵
- it is a target-oriented source in a narrative form, and narrative asks for a causal coherence to past and is a tool of the need for unity and coherence of the subject³⁶. Being a requested autobiography, the oral source represents the subject through narration. From this point of view, the oral sources seen as a *récit de vie* are different from other kinds of written self-narrations, like letters or diaries, where the daily notes don't necessarily follow the principle of continuity but can remain isolated and sporadic³⁷.

The cultural psychologist Jacob Bruner, very quoted by organizational scholars concerned with the narrative turn, tried to answer the question why people choose narrative form to tell their life, "why not images, lists of dates and places, [of] names and features of friends and enemies? Why this apparently innate inclination towards story-telling?"³⁸ In other words, why do we represent ourselves through narrative "so naturally that even our identity seems a product of our telling?" Bruner's answer focuses on the structure of Self: a teleological Self, sensitive to obstacles, selective, able to modify its aspirations and reference groups in time, extensible and craving for coherence. Narration offers to such Self a "ready and flexible tool to deal with the unsure outcomes of our projects and expectations"³⁹. This is a further example of the above mentioned triangle of past, present and future, recently described by Paul Ricoeur⁴⁰: if an autobiography is a narrative act of the present, that organizes the experience with reference to the intentionality of actions, and reconstructs the past with reference to the future, "il faut d'abord contrôler la mémoire spontanée, passionnée, affectivement sélective, par l'histoire qui, condite selon les règles du métier et de l'honnêteté, rectifie la mémoire tout en s'enrichissant de son impulsion. [...] Mais, plus peut-être encore que l'histoire, la mémoire requiert une morale et des valeurs. Là où le passé montre le hasard ou les nécessités, l'avenir fait appel à la volonté, à cette part de libre arbitre qui est en nous.

are quite weak points of it. The same interview cannot be repeated twice. About unrepeatability of the spoken language and its prosodic (or supersegmentary) features like accent, tone, intonation, rhythm, a.s.o., see A. Bernardelli, R. Pellerey, 1999, p. 57.

³² M. Bloch, 1981⁸, p. 67.

³³ A. Portelli, 1991

³⁴ W. Ong, 1986; J.D. Niles, 1999; J. Goody, 2000.

³⁵ M Halbwachs, 1987; Id. 1997; P. Jedlowski, 2001. The issue of the possibility of applying individual memory structures to collective memory frames is an interdisciplinary link between historical psychology and cultural studies. About this matter, see N. Pethes, J. Ruchatz, 2002; A. Assmann, 2002.

³⁶ Pierre Bourdieu used to call this unity 'l'illusion biographique'; P. Bourdieu, 1986.

³⁷ About private letters and diaries as historical sources see M.L. Betri, D. Maldini Chiarito, 2000 e Idd. 2002.

³⁸ J. Bruner, 2002, p. 31; see also Id. 1992; B. Czarniawska, 1999 and 2000; R. Atkinson, 2002; in general, see C. Piccardo, A. Benozzo, 1996.

³⁹ J. Bruner, 2002, p. 71, 79.

⁴⁰ P. Ricoeur, 1986-1988; Id., 2002³; Id. 2003. It was not by chance that the most recent thinking of Ricoeur was among the main reference points for Carlo Ginzburg in his speech *On Globalization and Memory*, which opened the works of the XIII International Congress of the International Oral History Association, Rome, June 23-26, 2004.

Au sein des collectivités et des solidarités, l'individu – trop négligé par Braudel – doit assumer sa responsabilité⁴¹.

A constructed evidence: engineering of the oral sources

An exhaustive discussion on oral sources should consider at least three issues: source history, source methodology, and memory epistemology.

In this paper, I'm not going to discuss the first issue despite its importance: readers can refer to the wide bibliography concerning the fortunes of oral sources in different times and places, in their usage, in their seasons and in the different interpretations of them given by different national schools⁴².

The second issue includes all the procedural matters that define source engineering and the chain of operations needed in order to correctly produce the source. This chain starts from designing: identification of the object of the research; check of the possibility of studying it (also) through oral sources; project planning, with reference to the literature available and to written records. The chain then goes on with the selection of the interviewers and their training on the specific kind of interview chosen; the construction of specific thematic guidelines; the selection of the interviewees – the latter step preludes to the following process of source criticism and cross-control of the testimonies.

The concept of research of concordances would ask that the gathered testimonies as a whole should offer independent points of view. This doesn't happen always: often, despite the researcher's efforts, the group of the interviewees takes the shape of a "snowball", like people working on qualitative researches know well. But once again, Marc Bloch's teaching helps us: when sources agree too much, their reliability can be called into question, but historians can draw some information from this situation as well. The stage of interaction with interviewees can also include: a "field diary" and some "back-talks" about the times between the first interview and the last one, in order to assess intermediate outcomes and temporary thesis, on which the previous work had been based, by comparing them with those deriving from the interviews themselves; financial and technical issues; transcription criteria; backups of the original testimonies, to guarantee their duration in time; description and writing of finding aids making future usage easier; last, but not least, requirements for the communicability of the testimony itself⁴³.

Also some issues concerning the use of video instead of just audio-recording are of basic importance in order to define procedures: this is due to an increasing "neutrality" of the video-camera, that nowadays does not embarrass the interviewee like it used to do – however, no more than an audio-recorder. Images are richer in information about the interviewee (his house, office, workshop). They can record him/her showing or commenting something (pictures, projects, documents, prototypes) and his/her body language while describing, explaining or speaking (an ironical accent contradicting the literal meaning of the words, for instance). Images stress the retrospective feature of the record and the conditions in which it

⁴¹ J. Le Goff, 1999.

⁴² D. Bigazzi 2000, D.K. Dunaway and K. Baum, 1996², containing a contribution by Portelli on the Italian case; about the Italian history of oral sources see C. Bermanni, 1999, and Id. 2001.

⁴³ V. Zeno-Zencovich 2003, A. Mulè 2003

was produced. They also make testimonies more interesting and increase the chance for oral sources to be enhanced and exploited for cultural and institutional purposes⁴⁴.

Lastly, I am going to say something about the third issue I mentioned above, i.e. the epistemological matters concerning memory. The question we should answer is: what can we learn, if anything, through oral sources?

We have to deal with the scepticism, suspicion and reticence toward oral sources of those historians who stress their limitations, imperfection and partiality. It is not enough to just say that some of the limitations blamed on oral sources can be ascribed to other kinds of records as well (and, as this subject has been dealt with way too much, I am not going to discuss it further here⁴⁵). Oral sources do have these evident limitations, especially when (but also although) we work with the methods of the *recit de vie* and biographical interview in depth. This is a kind of non-structured or semi-structured personalized interview based on open questions and on a systematic reference to the interviewee's words by the interviewer, who has to avoid self-answering questions: "il vaut mieux insister sur le rôle personnel de l'interviewé, sur son action et opinion personnelles que de le laisser partir sur des considérations générales et évasives, auxquelles la reconstruction a posteriori se mêle forcément; les questions clefs sont: 'où étiez-vous? qui étiez-vous? que faisez-vous? que pensiez-vous? à tel moment, à telle date, dans tel lieu? et pourquoi?'"⁴⁶. An interview is a matter of sensitivity and balance between intrusiveness and discretion, precision and superficiality. However, it will never be exhaustive, detailed, or systematic. Researchers studying a source of this kind will always miss the question that wasn't asked, the subject that wasn't discussed. Like said again by Descamps, when working on oral sources you cannot expect too much: they have strict boundaries and should not be asked for something they can't offer, like precise technical details or dates. They provide a different kind of information.

In order to better exploit these records for historical research, to reduce their unreliability and to increase their value, we should first of all enforce some corrective methods, as far as both source construction (research planning, interviewees' selection, choice of the type of interview and of the further steps of text processing from transcription to description) and source criticism and analysis are concerned. This method isn't new, as said already, and it owes a lot to traditional positivist teachings⁴⁷, referring to which Lawrence Stone once said, talking about the historians of his own generations, "with some notable exceptions, we did not at all resemble the troglodytes that we are often accused of being"⁴⁸. The steps to be followed are: first of all, an external criticism assessing the genuinity of the oral source, based on a specific procedure concerning both the delivery of the text and the making available of the record to scholars, either on paper, audio, or video media. While delivering the text, the researcher should point out and correct mistakes in dates, names and places made by the

⁴⁴ According to some studies, while the average attention span to just the sound of a voice lasts about 7 minutes, when images come with the voice, it grows up to about 45 minutes, cfr. F. Descamps 2001; M. Negri, 2003.

⁴⁵ L. Passerini, 1988, and Id. 1989.

⁴⁶ F. Descamps, 1991, p. 521. About the several possible labels that can be given to the same kind of interview and about its description, see R. Bichi, 2002; R. Atkinson, 2002; D. Bertaux, 1999; A. Blanchet, 1997; J-C. Kauffmann, 1996. It is well known that the usage of the life-history approach in the field of social research was introduced by Thomas and Znaniecki.

⁴⁷ The lesson of F. Melis 1985 is still valuable. See also, for his opening to oral sources, G. Galasso, 2000.

⁴⁸ Stone's polemic words were published for the first time in 1991 in "Past and Present", and now in K. Jenkins, 1997, p. 256.

witness. While making available the record, he must make sure that the following standard questions are answered: who is speaking? To whom? Where? How long? How? Why? What does he/she say? The apparatuses concerning the source engineering are therefore of basic importance, because they help getting to know the scientific project that took to its gathering, the questions faced while defining it, and the methodological choices made. The researcher or the work group producing the source should also put at disposal all the tools that might be helpful for a philological criticism of its content, as well as for the knowledge of the context in which it was produced. Those materials (descriptive files, minutes, personal notes, other documents obtained from the interviewee) should be a further guarantee of record correctness and genuinity, of processing accuracy and of comprehensibility (and availability) of the oral source also for other researchers than those who produced it.

There is also an equally important process of internal criticism, focused on testimony interpretation rather than description and on the person of the witness and his/her reliability rather than on the record. This process concerns memory and language: its coherence, its style, its vocabulary, its rhythm, and its narrative form.

Researchers are always aware that a testimony on a voluntary basis can contain either unconscious mistakes or lies on purpose. Nevertheless, they should never forget that their job consists in two different tasks. The first one concerns source production: the detailed interview is a kind of talk that does not allow direct questioning, but aims to let the interviewee's "story of life and work" emerge. And, in order to reach this aim, it has to be a talk that temporarily avoids the argumentative-confutative mode of communication – otherwise, it is not to be expected that the interviewee can be at ease telling his/her story and sharing his/her knowledge and values: "According my experience, when you interview somebody, you usually don't contradict him/her, because it is not convenient to do it. You rather try to build a relationship that is not based on conflict"⁴⁹. Italian scholars of oral history have been studying the unbalanced relationship between interviewer and interviewee since 1960s, and they eventually stated that we shouldn't act as if this imbalance, also in terms of power and knowledge, did not exist, but we should make it a trading good⁵⁰. Alessandro Portelli offers a good example of this: "What do you do when interviewing somebody? You open a space, you create a chance of listening and offer to listen. This happens because you have your targets and you want to know something. The problem is that what you want to know, what the interviewee assumes you want to know, and what he/she thinks he/she should say, are not the same"⁵¹. According to Portelli, two issues are needed for an interview to be constructive: somebody willing to talk about himself, and somebody willing to listen to his/her words. This cannot be pretended, because it is part of our job. Later, a different job awaits the historian. The document analysis, in fact, is something different: the researcher should now give up the attitude of "suspending his incredulity" and apply the critical doubt⁵². The reasons concerning psychology or suitability that influence the reliability of the witness should now be assessed, and a series of questions should be answered, that are as obvious as those concerning the external criticism of the document, but not as easy to be answered: has

⁴⁹ G. Contini, 2003, p. 33; cfr. R. Madera, 2003.

⁵⁰ This asymmetry can favour either the interviewer or the interviewee. About the latter case, see S. Cohen, 1999; H. Chamboredon *et al.*, 1994; R.T. Thomas, 1993.

⁵¹ A. Portelli, 2003, pp. 46-47; M. Sclavi, 2000.

⁵² For this reason, sometimes the interviewer cannot analyse the source himself. See R. Garruccio, G. Maifreda, 2004.

the witness any reason to lie? Is he/she forced to? Which kind of bias (ideological, doctrinal, political, philosophical matters, or just individual or collective vanity) is he/she influenced by? Is there any reason why he/she should be obliging towards the interviewer or the institution carrying out the research? It should also be assessed whether the interviewee's words are based on the direct observation and knowledge of facts and events (with reference to the difference, also from the legal point of view, between a declaration out of one's own knowledge and *de relato*); whether the observation was correct; and whether the features of the facts allow mistakes or lies. Actually, this process is an automatic mode of reasoning for the historian. However, once assessed the truthfulness and reliability of the testimony, we who work with oral history have learned by Marc Bloch that also mistakes and lies are significant, and that a witness can be a witness "despite himself". From here on, the historian builds a "second degree questioning" that, according to Bloch, takes him from the world of facts to that of the "phenomena of consciousness", representations, mental tools, symbolic features that are called into question by memory. The source criticism, then, appears to be the most effective answer to the limitations and fragility of contemporary testimonies: "la constitution d'archives orales enseigne la modestie: modestie des résultats, modestie de l'accouchement des esprits, modestie des nos connaissances, modestie de notre compréhension du réel, modestie des nos interprétations"⁵³.

The debate about memory, "this perplexing faculty"

Memory was always a subject of scientific research and fiction. During the last ten years, it also became the subject of a very intense theoretical debate and of a wide scientific literature in several disciplines: as a matter of fact, the word "memory" bears different meanings. It wouldn't be possible to set out the whole debate here, but it cannot be neglected either: these chapters, actually, always refer to it more or less clearly. I don't think the interest in memory can be labelled as just a matter of fashion, because it has been lasting for years now, and always spreading. However, this interest might be partially due to the historical moment – a time when different issues concerning how the living memory of eyewitnesses becomes a heritage for the future have gained significance. The matter is made more complex by many issues that are typical of our times: globalisation (globalisation seems to have caused past to be more malleable because of the increased flow of capitals, goods, and people all around the world, and to have produced a huge amount of micro-narratives and paradoxical "nostalgia without memory"⁵⁴), development of artificial intelligence, new trends in cognitive sciences and neurosciences⁵⁵. Moreover, as recently stated by a neurobiologist, "the sense of confidence, even arrogance, amongst the industrial world's neuroscientific community is tangible. Around 25.000 researchers meet each year at the annual jamboree of the American society for neuroscience: our recondite research field [memory and consciousness] has become a big business for pharmaceutical companies and putative genetic engineers"⁵⁶. Again, the issue of memory plasticity is linked to post-modern epistemology and deconstructionist theories, but the debate about usage of testimonies had also more practical outcomes: for instance, the American debate about false memory and pseudo-memories,

⁵³ F. Descamps, 1991 p. 530.

⁵⁴ A. Appaduraj, 2001, p. 48; M. Magatti, C. Giaccardi, 2001.

⁵⁵ A. Assmann, 2002, p. 15.

⁵⁶ S.P.R. Rose, 1998, p. 135.

started in the 1990s and still going on, had also legal consequences⁵⁷. This is not so far from what happened in Italy: 1989 reform of the penal procedure code introduced the so-called adversary trial and accepted the oral testimony as declarative evidence. This probative function, rather than the cognitive one, changed trial procedures and made the issue of the reliability of eyewitnesses significant even in the domestic milieu. As a consequence, new popular researches on memory and on methods of questioning by committing magistrates⁵⁸ were published. They deal with models worked out both by cognitive psychologists for sane people and by neuro-psychologists for patients with a cerebral damage⁵⁹. These studies remind us that the content of a testimony is influenced by the interaction of three features: the content of memories, the content of the events told by the witness, and the process of retrieving what he means to tell, and how he means to do it: "what we remember is intimately linked to how we remember"⁶⁰.

The issue of reliability and accuracy of testimonies and of balancing credulity and suspect makes the historical research somehow similar to an investigation. We should recall Marc Bloch's words on this matter: "even most naive detectives know they should never fully trust their witness, although they often seem to forget to put this theoretical rule into practice. Equally, we realized a long time ago we should never trust blindly historical testimonies [...] However, programmatic scepticism isn't more effective or profitable than credulity, to which it is often linked in simple minded people"⁶¹.

Bloch's words well summarize the current opposition between two different attitudes towards memory and testimonies⁶². The first sees memory as a limitation and deals with it focusing on its failings and malfunctions, such as mistakes, inaccuracy, gaps, but also on the influence the significance of an event has on the ability of remembering it⁶³. The other sees memory as a capability and achievement that allows starting from the contents of a memory and getting to its sense and meaning⁶⁴. According to the latter opinion, memory has got a preservative function as well: it does not preserve past, but a material track of it, a "physical, cerebral, cortical footprint neuroscience is currently dealing with"⁶⁵. Neurosciences, however, got to agree with philosophy, enhancing Plato's intuition, explained in Theaetetus - where memory is described as a wax bar to be impressed -, and solving the apparent paradox of memory as stated by Ricoeur in his last papers, i.e. the paradox of the "presence of the absent": while a track, a footprint or a time mark are present, what happened before is absent. Memory, therefore, can aim to be loyal to the past. "The commitment of memory to truth should be acknowledged before blaming its pathological dysfunctions and physiological weakness. We

⁵⁷ A. Assmann, 2002, p. 296, note 44; L. Terr, 1994. In such climate in 1996 James Ellroy published his memories, *My Dark Places*, to which refers Leanore Terr as well.

⁵⁸ G. Mazzoni, 2003, as of the cognitive interview. These issues were the subject of the seminary *L'uso giudiziario della testimonianza (The legal usage of testimony)* held at Milan Chamber of Commerce and organized by Centro per la cultura d'impresa; Milan, November 3rd, 2003.

⁵⁹ A. Treves, 1998; C. Papagno, 2003.

⁶⁰ P. Fara, K. Patterson, 1998, p. 1.

⁶¹ M. Bloch, 1981⁸, p. 81.

⁶² P. Montesperelli, 2003.

⁶³ Here we must remind that deep cognitive studies were carried out. Among others, see those of Loftus and of U. Neisser in 1970s and 1980s. For further bibliography, see C. Papagno, 2003 and T. Giani Gallino, 2004.

⁶⁴ The boundary is never so clear: see the studies (and the popular works) of Daniel Schacter: D.L. Schacter, E. Scarry, 2001, D.L. Schacter, 2001, Id. 2002. See also P. Rossi, 2001.

⁶⁵ P. Ricoeur, 2003, p. 26; S.P.R. Rose 1998; T. Sejnowski 1998; V. S. Ramachandran, 2000.

can't count on anything better than memory in order to state that something happened even before we declare we remember it did. False testimonies can be detected only through a critic job opposing more reliable witnesses to those suspected to be lying. A testimony is the core issue of memory becoming history"⁶⁶. According to Ricoeur again, the message contained in a testimony sounds like this: "I was there", "Believe me", "If you don't trust me, ask somebody else". It is then open to criticism through comparison with other testimonies and/or written records (i.e., if we speak of business, balance sheets, minutes of meetings and boards of directors, flowcharts, service orders, memos, letters, studies and researches, and literature as well). This means it is open to history seen as the science of track keeping: "et que fait l'histoire par rapport à la mémoire? Elle l'élargit dans l'espace, elle l'élargit dans les temps, elle l'élargit aussi dans ses thèmes, dans ses objets"⁶⁷.

Our memory works through the interaction of multiple mnemonic systems that are anatomically and functionally different⁶⁸. According to recent studies, memory is basically an associative activity concerning different mental functions: information acquisition (coding), information keeping (storing), information recalling (retrieving), and, eventually, consolidation of these three functions⁶⁹. So we have good theoretical reasons not to trust the eyewitness of a bank robbery and to trust, on the other hand, a mafia criminal turned police informer. The words of the first witness concern short-term memory, those of the second one concern long-term memory (and this is probably the most significant difference assessed by researchers). Long-term memory is then divided into declarative and explicit memory on the one hand, and non-declarative and implicit memory on the other hand. Together, they form the autobiographical memory, where things are forgotten because of "tracks fading", interference, or "recalling of other tracks contrasting with each other."⁷⁰

Added value of the oral sources: which contribution and to which levels of analysis?

While discussing this issue, I am going to refer to both available literature and my own experience, with examples I expect to be very effective. Actually, "if we consider [...] languages, attitudes, symbols, behaviours, reciprocal acknowledgments, we obviously find out different customs, but also surprising parallels and agreements"⁷¹ concerning the issue of durability, i.e. of continuity and change.

The issues where oral sources give their most relevant and less replaceable contribution, if compared with other kinds of sources, are description and assessment of the significance given by the actors to their actions. But we should not forget that the functioning of autobiographical memory implies two more side-aspects: the "memory of memories"

⁶⁶ P. Ricoeur, 2003, p. 37.

⁶⁷ P. Ricoeur, 1999, p. 31

⁶⁸ The concept of memory as a set of different systems was suggested by Endel Tulving in the early 1970s, and then enhanced by several experimentations and theoretical studies aimed to understand its anatomical basis and neural elements. See E. Tulving, 1994.

⁶⁹ M. Solms, O. Turnbull, 2004, pp. 159 ff.

⁷⁰ C. Papagno, 2003, p. 77. Both C. Papagno, 2003 and G. Mazzoni, 2003 mention the intuitive effectiveness of the recent movie by Christopher Nolan, *Memento*, for the understanding of this issue.

⁷¹ D. Bigazzi, 2001, p. 194.

(memories belonging to other people who told them to the actor) and the eterobiographical memory (somebody's memory about someone else).⁷²

Let's begin with the first of the two above-mentioned issues. A description within an oral source can be sharp, detailed, concrete, and dynamic. It can describe a milieu: space, actors, and relationships among actors and among different aspects of the life of the actors themselves. An oral testimony can link very different features of a witness' life: work, family, political or associational commitment, different memberships.

Description is obviously far more objective than representation and interpretation, but it does not necessarily concern only material objects. A description can refer to a space, to places a.s.o. For instance, stockbrokers and stockbroker's agents of Milan Stock Exchange, when describing the parterre of Palazzo Mezzanotte in piazza degli Affari, describe the corbeilles, their place among them and between them, and the desks near to the enclosure bordering the trading floor, that were their offices while trading. The space description does not refer only to its physical features, quite obvious and known (chairs, desks, boards, phones, hall stands), but also to the organizational code ruling collective dynamics that eventually take to price assessing and stock trading. Stockbrokers and stockbroker's agents describe how and through which architectural elements and furniture the space is delimited (for instance, where is the boundary between in and out, or between high and low, i.e. the spatial distinction between parterre and mezzanine floor); which places are accessible only to dealers acting as public officers; and how and where customers commission stockbrokers to act and stockbrokers pass the commission on to open outcry agents.⁷³

If we consider declarative memory, an oral testimony has further strong points, concerning for instance the description of the working tools and the worker's attitude towards them. Some examples can better explain this issue. The first one reports the words of a former toolmaker at Olivetti who talks (using the present tense) about the factory in the 1960s.

Il reparto degli alesatori era il massimo della meccanica di precisione. Lavoravo all'alesatrice. Un'alesatrice fa tantissime operazioni; banalizzando: si tratta di un trapano verticale, c'è una testa portautensili con cui si alesano dei fori, si possono tracciare delle figure, dei profili, con delle punte di diamante, su parti che poi vanno rettificare, si traccia il profilo dei particolari. [...] La punta di diamante, una lima diamantata, che deve incidere, fare la tracciatura, deve ruotare dentro due millesimi; questa punta va lavorata fino a quando non gira perfettamente; la punta va affilata con una macchina (un'affilatrice particolare, di precisione) che affila fino a spaccare la linea e tutto deve essere preciso. Questo tipo di lavoro è bellissimo: vale cento volte il lavoro del tornio, perché è la precisione assoluta. In tutta l'Olivetti siamo in venti che facciamo questo tipo di lavoro. [...] Se il lavoro doveva essere preciso, doveva essere preciso anche tutto il resto. La base materiale che determinava il nostro modo di pensare determinava anche il nostro rapporto con il lavoro, con quel tipo di lavoro, e non solo negli attrezzaggi. L'Olivetti era una fabbrica di meccanica fine, non c'erano produzioni grossolane, era tutto nel campo di centesimi, al massimo di decimi, di millimetro. L'Olivetti non era la Fiat, era una fabbrica di precisione: i 2500 pezzi che c'erano dentro l'MC24 erano tutti concatenati, il martelletto alla fine doveva battere rispondendo all'ordine che veniva impresso sul tasto⁷⁴.

⁷² T. Giani Gallino, 2004; for a biography based on eterobiographical memories: R. Garruccio, G. Maifreda, 2004.

⁷³ R. Eugeni, N. Satta, 2004.

⁷⁴ Interview by Roberta Garruccio to Cleto Cossavella (Borgofranco, 1942), Borgofranco di Ivrea, November 21st, 2001. MC24 was the mechanical calculator of the series Divisumma, whose production started in 1946 and whose commercial success was great. In the texts of the interviews, we chose to keep the original language.

Here, the feeling of belonging to an aristocracy is conveyed by the hyperbole at present tense: “there’s just twenty of us making this job”- in a time when the company employed about 25,000 people in Italy only.

The second witness is the engineer who, on behalf of Fiat Ferroviaria, designed the “variable trim system” for the train model known as “Pendolino”. Here he talks about his experience at Ferrovie dello Stato in 1930s:

Nella locomotiva a vapore, che significativamente veniva chiamata “la macchina” (era la macchina per antonomasia), tutto, il fuoco, il vapore, la spinta dei cilindri, la trasmissione alle ruote, era evidente e misurabile, ed ogni anormalità era immediatamente comprensibile nelle sue origini e nelle sue conseguenze. [...] Uno dei punti più delicati, era la piastra tubiera che unisce il forno a tutto il fascio dei tubi. Se le varie parti del forno non si scaldavano in modo uniforme, la piastra era soggetta a sollecitazioni molto alte e si poteva allentare. Il *maestro* se la guardava di tanto in tanto con premura e trepidazione, contento di vederla asciutta a tutti i risvolti dei tubi, ma se c’era una piccola perdita lo scriveva subito sul libro delle riparazioni; mi ricordo di avere letto: “Tubo, etc...: si vede una *lacrima*”. Ed è questa un’espressione che la dice lunga su quella che mi piace chiamare “l’umanità della locomotiva a vapore”⁷⁵.

A third example concerns a manager in charge of Milan Central Station at the time of the interview. He recalls the beginning of his career in 1950s, and here is his description of a feature of the work market:

[Feci il mio tirocinio pratico a Marcaria, una stazione sul tratto Cremona-Mantova, per poi prendere l’abilitazione che potesse immettermi nei ruoli delle Ferrovie]. E questo avvenne, in maniera che oggi appare certamente un po’ bizzarra, in virtù di una legge, ereditata dal fascismo, che istituiva il ruolo dei cosiddetti “assuntori”. Questa legge stabiliva che si potesse assegnare una piccola stazione a una persona, la quale doveva possedere determinati requisiti, anche fisici, verificati dall’ispettorato sanitario FS, e che doveva sapere fare un po’ tutto: vendere i biglietti, controllare i passaggi a livello, conoscere la regolamentazione, insomma amministrare l’intera operatività della stazione. Di fatto tutto questo era quasi a gestione familiare, generalmente la famiglia del responsabile della stazione; questi faceva lavorare la moglie, il figlio, la cognata, la sorella... insomma la stazione la prendeva in appalto. Sono dettagli che colpiscono, oggi che si parla tanto di riforma del mercato del lavoro, e che vale la pena di ricordare. Allora lo stipendio andava al titolare di questa assegnazione di stazione, di quest’appalto diciamo così, con una quota parte per quanti dovevano essere i collaboratori necessari a coprire l’intero arco di servizio. Alcune regole naturalmente c’erano: agli assuntori veniva data una paga che prevedeva un aumento del 24 per cento a copertura degli eventuali giorni di riposo. “Eventuali” non a caso, perché appunto si trattava di una eventualità, non erano stabiliti. Se qualcuno degli addetti doveva restare a casa un giorno, doveva cercarsi un sostituto all’intero di una rosa di nominativi di persone abilitate, quindi comunque riconosciute dalle ferrovie. Questa giornata di lavoro il primo la pagava al secondo di tasca propria, pescandola da quel 24%. Non stiamo parlando del medioevo, siamo alla fine del 1958⁷⁶.

Such different points of view from people with different positions and education, and referring to different moments of the 20th century, are available material for historians to exploit them. They concern one’s own work experience, perception of the factory, everyday relation to machines and affective anthropomorphisation of them. They also concern technique and its individual autonomy (see for instance the toolmaker’s testimony about his work as compared and opposite to that of assembly), the “tear” of the tubesheet, or the

⁷⁵ Interview by Roberta Garruccio to Franco Di Majo (Torino, 1909), Torino, October 17th, 2002.

⁷⁶ Interview by Roberta Garruccio to Giacomo Destefani (Mantova, 1944; manager of the Direzione compartimentale movimento di Milano per RFI), Milano, June 24th, 2003

“atypical” kinds of work. “It is empirical material drawn from vocabulary, slang, metaphors – a quite dangerous empirical material in this step, I fear, because it could take to a deconstructionist kind of historiography that breaks reality into pieces and puts them together again in a creative way, loosing the historical perspective”⁷⁷. We still have to learn this lesson. Description, as said already, often concerns gestures as well. Recurring examples of this are researches concerning craftsmanship, where the chain of gestures is the main capital. Such operational sequences do not come from a single person’s fantasy, but are a collective creation inherited from a past far away, of which standard paper archives never bear witness – they are “arts of making” that never actually get to be expressed by words⁷⁸. Gestures description is a main contribution of oral sources – as a matter of fact, in workshops such sequences were a just practical activity, without written or even verbal instructions. Hence the sentence “steal trough the eyes”, referred to how young people used to learn the skills from their teacher observing him over and over and practicing gestures that were never explained because they were just made. “Nowadays, the eye of a video-camera replaces that of the apprentice [...] disclosing the logics of such sequences and the correspondences between different fields”⁷⁹, and so it accomplishes what 18th century Encyclopaedists, who had been trying to obtain verbal descriptions of working procedures, were not able to accomplish – i.e., recording gestures and rhythms. Today’s knowledge about memory functioning can explain why they could never accomplish that task: it was due to the existence of the different systems of memory mentioned above. Among them, “procedural memory” concerns skills and know-how learned in the past – and it is as silent as such knowledge itself.

The ability of recalling and explain a certain set of actions refers to a different system, the so-called “semantic memory”. It concerns words, concepts, and features and reciprocal factors of them, and allows us to retrieve our general knowledge about the world⁸⁰.

The same kind of problem has to be faced when collecting stories from entrepreneurs whose origins are to be found in the job of the toolmaker or craftsman. I’m referring in particular to the stories told by some entrepreneurs in mould business. This is a “flexible specialisation for mass production” (a mould is often a unique piece realized to produce millions of other pieces) and in Italy it concerns over 2,000 companies, usually started in the times of reconstruction or during 1970s’ production decentralisation. Such small companies, currently employing 25,000 people and with sales for about 3 billions euros, derive directly from tool making, but their invested capital and interest in training are a major factor of change within the sector.

Ho fatto l’avviamento professionale. [Ho cominciato a lavorare come dipendente nel 1947 presso una delle poche ditte che a Milano producevano stampi per materie termoplastiche.] Mentre lavoravo andavo la sera alla Scuola del Castello, che allora era la scuola del disegno ornamentale. Allora per fare gli stampi, bisognava avere attitudini di incisori, perché l’acciaio si scavava non solo con le macchine, ma quasi a mano, come per fare una scultura. Oggi se avessimo qui un incisore non sapremmo cosa fargli fare.

Una fresatrice, un tornio, una limatrice e tante ore di lavoro. Il primo anno è il più duro perché c’è l’avviamento e non si porta a casa niente. Difatti ero abbastanza demoralizzato. Mi vestivo da vecchio

⁷⁷ D. Bigazzi 2001, 194.

⁷⁸ M. de Certeau, 2001.

⁷⁹ Sovrintendenza archivistica della Toscana, *Archeologia della mano. Per un archivio del gesto artigiano tradizionale*, video-documentary, Firenze, 1995; G. Contini, A. Martini, 1993, pp. 35 ss.

⁸⁰ T. Giani Gallino 2003, M. Polany, 1990.

perché avevo 18 anni ed ero troppo giovane [per avere credibilità]. Mi ricordo la santa donna della casa di ringhiera dove stavo io che faceva l'occhiellaia, che era un mestiere che si faceva in casa, [mi diceva]: "Anch'io quando ho cominciato a fare questo lavoro per un anno non ho preso niente"⁸¹

The origin as a craftsman is not only recalled, but also proudly stressed.

Ogni attrezzatura lavora a proprio modo: [...] io dico sempre che siamo degli artigiani. Noi non siamo degli industriali. È un po' l'origine del nostro lavoro. Non posso far del marketing, non posso fare delle grandi strategie. Siamo dei terzisti con tanta tecnologia. Ma ci stiamo spostando verso i servizi, perché questi clienti più diventano grossi più si impoveriscono di intelligenza, e allora diventa importante riuscire ad aiutarli e dire: Beh, facciamo un po' di co-progettazione. *Simultaneous engineering*. È una gran bella parola. Non l'ho mai vista funzionare, però ci si tende⁸².

And it is present along the whole company history, through generations, and in the impact with market choices, with decisions concerning investments and, as a consequence, with technology.

Something similar also happens when job features are not so obvious. I'm referring for instance to the job of the stockbroker and especially to the stockbroker's agent, to the world of stockbrokers and their actually corporative structure. The channels of stockbroker's agents recruiting have not changed until middle 1980s, i.e. until the times of investments funds and widening and transformation of trading. Recruitment still works on a personal or even local basis ("ci trovavano all'oratorio di Bresso, sapevano che eravamo dei bravi ragazzi, allora quando entravi, se c'era bisogno di un qualche fattorino, lo chiedevano a te di presentarglielo [...] Si diceva: a Bress se pianten i patat e vegnen sü i procuratur"⁸³), but 1985 great change in stock exchange widened its perspectives, because all at once the market asked for a great amount of new employees in the open outcry trading and for new skills. As a consequence, a new generation of stockbroker's agents grew up, made of people who were graduated in Economy at Milan Universities and /or had taken a master abroad, instead of having learned their job on field. Therefore, they were much more adaptable than the seniors. The interview planning allowed these two generations to talk about their coexistence in the parterre – about 1,000 people met everyday at Palazzo Mezzanotte. Actually, although such coexistence did not last very long, it proved to be very difficult, and some of the non-written rules of correctness that used to regulate relations among colleagues were eventually cancelled. The interviews, held by means of a video camera, also stressed the significance of gestural and body language in the job at the open outcry room– not such an obvious feature of it. As a matter of fact, the job of the open outcry agent, like the one of the craftsman, once used to be based rather on a practical apprenticeship than on the study of financial systems, and the language of trading used to be made of gestures and words, and to be acted through hands, body and voice⁸⁴. Actually, the whole open outcry communication consists of complex

⁸¹ Interview by Roberta Garruccio to Tarcisio Ghilardi, Ghilardi Stampi, Cologno Monzese, May 21st, 2001, now in G. Contini, C. Lussana, 2003, p. 120.

⁸² Interview by Fabio Lavista to Antonio Caraffini, Oltrona di Gavirate (Varese), December 21st, 2001, ib. p. 80.

⁸³ Interview by Roberta Garruccio to Paolo Basilio (stockbroker's agent; Bresso, 1928), Milano, October 21th, 1999; like the further interviews concerning the Stock Exchange, it can be found in R. Garruccio, 2005.

⁸⁴ The scholar of psychophonetic Ivan Fónagy speaks of "verbal gestuality", a sentence that appears to be really suitable if referred to the interaction in the parterre.

expressive combinations, “a volte solo gestuali, più raramente solo verbali, [...] nella maggior parte dei casi gestuo-verbali” (“sometimes only gestural combinations, less often only verbal combinations [...], usually gestural and verbal ones”), mainly in order to overcome the noise of the trading floor, “tumulto di voci, rumori, odori, smorfie, gesti e pantomime all’interno del quale (e mai a prescindere dal quale) l’operatore esperto sa individuare e operare tracciati, simulazioni, andamenti, racconti”⁸⁵ (a chaos made of voices, noises, faces, gestures and pantomimes, from which a skilled operator can draw and manage tracks, simulations, trends, stories), a noise that some people compare to that of a suq or of Piombino fish market.

The stock exchange language consists of a set of signals based on several specific parameters: the movement of hand, palm, fingers, wrist, and arm conveyed the kinesic message – often with help of the voice (“le grida”). The syntax of it was quite articulate: numerical signs referred to quantities, alphabetical and transpositive ones to bonds of quoted companies and their different kinds (standard, privileged, or savings bonds). More complex gestures defined the main actions of the agent (to purchase, to sell, to approve, to transfer) or the market situation (there is money/there is not, bonds rising, decreasing, open, closed). In parterre, gestures also concerned strategies of deception, simulation and dissimulation, that neither the manuals studied by post-war brokers nor the habits and customs collections could ever teach. Nowadays, trading has moved to the telematic market, and many of those who used to live their life in Piazza degli Affari experienced the feeling of “lack and loss” that Vladimir Propp described as “narratogenic”⁸⁶ in his well-known studies on folklore. So, the protagonists of the trading floor are willing to tell the interviewer for instance about the “tolerance of violation”, allowed despite the principles of stock trading, based on a “monopolio legale riconosciuto a un numero ristretto di agenti di cambio motivato dall’intento di garantire la buona fede e la trasparenza dei prezzi ufficiali”⁸⁷. Stockbrokers and stockbroker’s agents talk about the lack of competition among Italian business and its consequence on the inner life of the stock exchange – but their job was even less competitive than that. They describe stock exchange as a “bowl”, a “puddle”, a “spoon of water” if compared to the sea of the perfect auction market, and many of them also describe how it could be easily manipulated: “era come tirare un sasso in uno stagno: ogni operazione creava un movimento concentrico che si allarga lentamente finendo per coinvolgere anche gli operatori più marginali; capitava di fare operazioni (per esempio l’acquisto di 500.000 Snia Viscosa nel durante) che determinavano un’ondata di espansione i cui effetti talvolta si proiettavano anche nei giorni successivi”.⁸⁸ Here I think our witness refers to something more and different than just the tricks of the trade, made of specific skills and guile⁸⁹. The financier Francesco Micheli, who worked at the stock exchange for a while in the 60s, says it was “a gang with its leaders ” (also revealing

⁸⁵ R. Eugeni, N. Satta 2004, p. 73 e p. 78 The work by Eugeni and Satta exploited the archive of stories of work at Stock Exchange collected by Centro per la cultura d’impresa, increasing it through some further interviews specifically concerning gestuality in the parterre and comparing them with the pictures of the parterre held by the Historical archive of the “Corriere della Sera”. R. Eugeni, N. Satta 2004, p. 73 e p. 78

⁸⁶ The sentence “situation of lack and loss” isn’t just a turn of phrase: in the milieu of the Stock Exchange, suicide was committed by more than one stockbroker’s agent who was expelled from the parterre after 1991 reform and had great problems in getting used to work with a monitor. See Ehrenberg, 1999. The mention of the well-known studies on folklore by Vladjmir Propp is in J Bruner, 1992, p. 90.

⁸⁷ L. De Matteo, 1999, p. 483.

⁸⁸ Interview by Roberta Garruccio to Tito Rainis (stockbroker’s agent, Milano, 1945), Milano, November 15th, 1999.

⁸⁹ D. Bigazzi 2001, pp. 197-198.

who they were), and so he stresses the lack of a major feature of a real market, i.e. the presence of people with different trading perspectives in the trading place. For a long time, the “gang” has been aiming to the same targets, colluding rather than competing. The process of change started in the middle 80s, and was concluded by the reform of January 1991 that took to 1995 end of the screamed stock trade.

As far as actors and their relationships are concerned, oral sources describe reference groups, *éminences grises*, actual organizations as opposite to formal ones, maps of the power coming from experience as opposite to that coming from position (which belonged to negotiators, an aristocracy that has been ruling the stock exchange for generations). But, in the first place, oral sources open a new perspective on people’s strategies: they don’t focus just on actions, but on calculations behind them, on perspective and proactive reasoning, and, quoting Descamps again, on «what in the past was expected for the future». This means they don’t focus just on decisions, but on how the actors got to take those decisions, or at least on how they legitimate and rationalize them looking back, through the intersection of times I mentioned before, and including in the process also the aspects of resistance to the change typical of any organization, as well as the disguised strategies deriving from it⁹⁰.

A common interest links the information obtained by this research concerning Milan Stock Exchange and its ideal model – a research in organizational ethnography carried out at Wall Street Stock Exchange: «an interest in the relationship between the traders pursuit of their own interest and the nature of restraint in the marketplace. To understand the differences in the relationship that exist among these markets»⁹¹. In order to do that, we must analyse the strategies they apply, the rules they set (and violate), and the formal and informal structures they create.

Also knowledge and skills are among the favourite subjects of description. They are told in stories concerning the times of apprenticeship, the relations towards mentors, the training process, and the human resources management systems: the interviewee tells us how he/she “learned how to learn” and how he/she fulfilled the need of permanent training during his career.

But major organizations sometimes allow to follow paths and make experiences that are quite autarchic, for instance as of human resources management. Here are the words of a manager of a major public institution about his role in 1960s, when he was in charge of Milan Central Station and of its 1,300 employees:

I meccanismi per motivare le persone non sono poi cambiati granché. Anni fa spesi una fortuna di tasca mia per comprami tutto quello che usciva sulle tecniche di Mbo, *Management by objectives*, credo di essere stato uno dei migliori clienti di Franco Angeli e altri editori simili. Secondo me noi non siamo ancora riusciti a trovare un equilibrio tra il bastone e la carota, tra quello che ti chiedo e il premio che ti posso dare. Com’è che si fa a premiare? Tiri fuori qualcuno da in mezzo al mucchio, lo tiri fuori anche in barba agli attacchi sindacali che ti becchi, sulla base dell’idea che te ne sei fatto, delle risposte che lui ha dato nei momenti critici, e te lo tiri dietro nella graduatoria delle promozioni il più possibile. I tempi però sono lunghi, talvolta ci si impiega qualche anno per fare arrivare un segnale tangibile ad una persona, ma non tutti sono disposti ad aspettare e alla lunga mollano⁹².

⁹⁰ This is the reason why in our interview collection we enclosed among the questions to be asked to the interviewee also one question concerning his/her opinion about the process that took to the reform introduced by the law n. 1/1991.

⁹¹ M. Abolafia, 1996, p. 3; see also C. Courtney, P. Thompson, 1996; E. Hertz, 1998.

⁹² Interview by Roberta Garruccio to Giuseppe De Stefani (manager of the Direzione compartimentale movimento di Milano per RFI), Milano, June 24th, 2003.

Description also concerns information, seen as both a resource and a tool of power and knowledge: the interviewee explains how you get to it – through proximity, contagion, adaptation -, who produces it and how, to whom and through which ways it is conveyed, and who remains out of it.

I would like to underline the significance of this element within the research carried out at Milan Stock Exchange, especially as far as the usage of privileged information in stock trading is concerned. It is well known that in Italy insider trading was legally disciplined only in the early 1990s, right before the above-mentioned radical changes in this field. According to basically all agents, in the times that were the subject of this research, from 1945 on, there were many sources of information available, but the insider was the “salt of the stock exchange”. On the other hand, a stockbroker says: "Storie di *insider* ce ne sarebbero tante Ma attenzione: l'informazione di *insider* serviva, serviva avere l'informazione magari proprio nel momento in cui tutti la aspettavano, ma è solo nel momento in cui ce l'hanno anche gli altri che il mercato si muove in una certa direzione e in cui uno ne approfitta. Avere delle informazioni che non vengono divulgate, perché le società allora non dicevano niente, molto spesso non serviva affatto"⁹³.

As stated by Michael Abolafia in his ethnographic research at Wall Street, what makes the difference is not whether your information is correct, but if other people understand it the same way you did. A trader at NYSE effectively summarizes: "a lot of smart people don't do very well at trading because they know what information means. When you trade you need to know what people think the information means. You don't have to be smart, you have to be perceptive. You have to have a sense of what motivate people – to be a good listener to what people think"⁹⁴.

As said before, a second, much more evasive field where oral sources are of great help is that of the meaning given to actions and events by the actors themselves. It concerns something different from the heritage of technical, economic and organizational skills: it concerns the basic values that govern behaviours⁹⁵. Here, witnesses don't talk about “how” anymore – actually, “how” and “why” become a single issue, and witnesses refer to their values and beliefs, and so they work out and give meaning to what they say – a meaning according to the enterprise, the organization, and the actors themselves. So, oral sources not only reveal the presence of plural cultures within a single organization (a knowledge universe is a complex, multistructured and multifunctional system), but they also stress that such plural cultures are based on segmented memories and on a variety of subcultures. Each of them implies at different levels of depth the activity of declarative memory of the semantic type, the one that gives a content to the experience and organizes it, i.e. that appoints, names, classifies, assesses, judges, and orders. Self-narrations are made of declarative, semantic, and autobiographical memory.

Memory also has different outcomes as of its “social frames”: this proves the significance of the issue of enterprise as a plural subject – an issue that has gained importance again within the current discussion about the stakeholders theory. The memory of a technician is not the same as that of a worker, and the memory of a manager is not the same as that of a member of

⁹³ Interview by Fabio Tamburini to Gianluigi Milla (stockbroker, Milano, 1938), Milano, October 14th, 1999.

⁹⁴ M. Abolafia, 1996, p. 24.

⁹⁵ G. Sapelli, 1989, p 14.

the managerial staff, as well as the memory of a stockbroker's agent is not the same as that of a stockbroker. For this reason, oral archives concerning major organizations should not consider only the alternative between a point of view "from above" or "from below". They should rather make an effort to single out the several perspectives present in organizations and to compare them in order to highlight them rather than to reduce their value: "par le simple effet de contraposition ce que resulte de l'affrontement des visions du monde différentes ou antagonistes: c'est à dire, en certain cas, *le tragique* qui naît de l'affrontement, sans concession ni compromis possible, de points de vue incompatibles, parce que également fondés en raison sociale"⁹⁶.

In my foreword, I said I believe biographical and historical time can meet. I think the research on Olivetti can offer a good example of this: by now, it collects about 30 autobiographical memoirs concerning a period going from 1950s, the glorious era of mechanical production, through the time of organizational change and reconversion to IT, until nowadays, when, in 2003, the Olivetti bond was symbolically cancelled from the list of quoted companies.

The meeting point of informative, rhetoric and persuasive issues is quite clear. The story told by Olivetti people is also epic: actions serve a noble cause; the main subject is an outstanding man, Adriano, and the exaltation of the hero as an exceptional model; the space is an ethic one; the relation between milieu and way of living of men is a conquest; reason fights against several antagonists⁹⁷.

The relation between testimony and researcher can assume several aspects, and needs to be continuously monitored, because the witness is also a stakeholder (often being at stake a whole life spent within a company), and the researcher has to accept the legitimate right of him to memory and identity – a right that can conflict with the basic requests of the job of the historian. A great task of discussing oral sources, then, is to set rules that can help coping with such potential conflict. In the following chapter, I am going to discuss the influence of this on the work through interviews, and I hope my point of view won't be just the expression of my own feeling.

The new interest in oral sources

Several signs suggest a new interest in oral sources, that look like a kind of source with a variable fortune rather than a new one.

The existence of a demand concerning oral sources is quite evident. It has at least three aspects⁹⁸.

In the first place, the demand concerns method. This is evident in researches carried out in the field of contemporary history - here, scholars often collect different kinds of oral sources and use them in their historical analysis -, and in the students' work for their dissertations. Such use is fine and valuable, but often it lacks proper critical treatment: notes, if at all present, are imprecise; methodological apparatuses are lacking; the bibliography is neglected. According to me, there is a lack of method also in those studies where the interviewee is just a means to get information – he/she just singles out and reports facts, and helps understanding them, but not even his/her name is mentioned.

Often, interviews aren't recorded. Sometimes, the recording is considered sole property of the researcher, and just short passages of it are quoted or paraphrased, only as far as they can help

⁹⁶ P. Bourdieu, 1993, p. 13.

⁹⁷ P. Zumthor, 1983.

⁹⁸ F. Descamps, 2001.

to prove the thesis of the research. In such methods there are two aspects I disapprove: firstly, the basically “illustrative” usage of assumptions worked out with no reference to the evidence, or even before its collection; in the second, but not lesser place, the idea of the source like something “private”, an idea that hinders its preservation and doesn’t allow scientific community to refer to that source again. The lack of shared research protocols and the superfluous and unjustified usage of anonymity (with sentences like “according to a person who knows about it...”) are clear signs of negligence⁹⁹.

In the second place, the demand concerns epistemological clarity. It comes mainly from the scientific community – scholars appear to accept oral sources, but remain suspicious both from the theoretical point of view (and this is an old matter) and from the practical one, because they feel such sources can’t be correctly exploited in the historical field. The reasons for this attitude date quite a while ago: on the one hand, oral sources are contemporary and move from present to past, looking back, and therefore, according to their opponents, they are anachronistic and teleological; on the other hand, memory was often blamed for its unreliability, and its mistakes due to omission or commission were as clearly described by the cognitive sciences as they can be experienced by any of us. Among the several gaps of memory, its feature of being chronophagous is the least welcome to historians, but it also gives origin to those multi-temporal levels and differentiated chronologies that are strong points of the oral sources. Moreover, oral sources aren’t representative, because they are partial, fragmentary, heterogeneous; they cannot be generalized (like always in qualitative research); they are subjective and virtually unverifiable; they are affected because requested and prepared – therefore, people often seem to pose while giving their testimony; last, but not least, they are really difficult to exploit – it often takes hours and hours to listen to them, with no aid from any search engine at all. The consequence of this long list of reasons against oral sources is that they are not much used, or they are used with just an illustrative purpose, through short quotations. The modest usage of them, in turn, supports the idea that they are no serious sources.

In the third place, a social demand raised in the last years and concerns collection and preservation of 20th century testimonies by institutions and enterprises, which often need help in planning their collections of life’s stories, as shown by the experience of the French ministerial committees. Such commitment involves local governments¹⁰⁰, well-known historical associations, and the most different organizations, as well as institutions and enterprises, including important financial and banking companies¹⁰¹. This new attitude is

⁹⁹ For a critical survey see D. Bigazzi, 2000; recent examples of best practices are those of G. Pedrocco, 2000, and S. Ruju, 2003, who distinguishes between different kinds of interviews according to different targets.

¹⁰⁰ See for instance the historiographical work by John Foot on behalf of Comune di Pero; J. Foot, 2002.

¹⁰¹ An outstanding initiative is that of the Service des archives historiques of the Crédit Lyonnais, managed by Roger Nougaret and Bernard Desjardins: it concerns the collection of oral testimonies (especially by bank managers and managerial staff) from 1990 on; in the same year, the Service des archives historiques de Paribas was founded and started a collection of interviews managed by Pierre de Longuemar (P. de Longuemar, 1998). As early as 1961, also World Bank Group approved a project of systematic interviews aimed to create an "institutional memory for archival and research purposes". The project was carried out by Brookings Institution and Columbia University (OHRO) and it has been continued in the years from 1993 to 1998 with the title Oral History Program Interviews Series. Both Paribas and World Bank obtained a lot of material for their historical monographs from these projects. French saving banks were among the leaders of the movement for the creation of oral archives: this happened also because in the last ten years they had to undergo a strong concentration

linked to the evolution of social research from 1970s on: the market of qualitative research has spread to non-academic sectors because of a greater differentiation within the society, and because “our practices include more and more often information concerning how social actions are built”¹⁰². How does this new social demand appear and how can it be explained? From 1980s on, several different spurs have been converging in a new and specific direction. Because of the process started in order to manage the new global demand, many companies had to face new missions, new problems of identity, corporate culture, and networking. Further issues are also to be considered, such as: the questions raised by new generations about the great splits of the 20th century; the quest for identity of several groups that feel underrepresented within collective national entities – a quest that caused new issues, like advocacy or affirmative action, to be created; some judicial episodes, like the great trials held in France against Nazis criminals, the idea, and sometimes the imposition, of an alleged “duty of memory” and the importance acknowledged to the emotions linked to experienced and listened matters¹⁰³: the model offered by some huge recent initiatives, like the establishment of the ‘Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation’ collecting testimonies from tens of thousands of lager survivors all over the world. Such a great interest in testimonies, raised between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, made Annette Wieviorka talk of the “coming of the witness era”¹⁰⁴. In 1995 the survivor Primo Levi said that “many of us felt that an interview was an unique and memorable chance, something we were looking forward to since we had been freed and that would give sense to our liberation”¹⁰⁵. But, after a while, he gave up going in schools to testify his experience because “his experience as a deportee couldn’t offer any answer to the questions people asked. Not all the witnesses, however, who are also men and women and therefore vain, are as strict as he Primo Levi was”¹⁰⁶. Wieviorka states that a huge amount of testimonies about Shoah has been produced, and no historical event raised such a great interest towards memory ever – not even World War I with the first mass testimonies. But then she confirms that there is a gap between the certainty of the experienced event and the critical questions suggested by other sources, and between the legitimisation coming from the immediate strength of the past and the one coming from the historical method, whose task is also to preserve history from banalisation. So she raises the matter of the difficult balance – or even of the real tension – between interviewer and interviewee. “When dealing with a deportee’s testimony, the historian is in a quite difficult position. As stated by Pierre Laborie, his/her job is that of a “spoilsport of memories”. But how can he act like this when dealing with a real person? The pain emerging from the survivor’s story affects him. Although he/she is conscious that he/she has got knowledge and that the witness is not telling the truth, he/she feels totally powerless. He/she knows any life story is constructed, but he/she also knows that such construction/reconstruction is the armour and spine of the present life. This is an almost unsolvable dilemma”¹⁰⁷.

process. The interviews collection was coordinated by Jean Borenstein on behalf of the Association pur l’histoire des Casses d’épargne. See F. Descamps, 2001, pp. 215-216.

¹⁰² A. Melucci, 1999; p. 12.

¹⁰³ Within organizational studies, this approach was followed also by phenomenological and cognivistic theories, basically thanks to the work of Karl Weick. See also the recent attempt to go beyond this approach in M.C. Moldoveanu, N. Noria 2002

¹⁰⁴ A. Wieviorka, 1998.

¹⁰⁵ P. Levi, 1995, p. 75 quoted by A. Wieviorka, 1998, p. 137.

¹⁰⁶ *Ib.* p. 145.

¹⁰⁷ *Ib.* p.141-142

The extremely tragic case of Shoah testimonies compels us to reconsider any interview and to realize that, according to its historical task, it must focus on the witness, whose speech has got a value in itself – the value of truth – and whose rights are set by the rules concerning his/her testimony (the right to change, censor, destroy the text, or ask for its anonymity) – but this all means he/she might conflict with the historian¹⁰⁸. Right because of such potential conflict between historian and witness, and between history and commission, and because of such claims by the witness, somebody talked about “history under surveillance”¹⁰⁹. As a matter of fact, the coming of the witness era had immediate consequences on the role of documents and on the practice of research, and, despite any linguistic or narrative turn, it presented a new, radical positivist fascination.

Once more, the core question concerns how to re-balance the relation between historian and witness and between history and memory: Florence Descamps answers to it according to oral archives supporters. Through oral archives, the tension between historian and witness is reduced by the presence of a third subject – the interviewer (Descamps calls him *l'archiviste oral*) or the researcher who collects the testimony, along with the customer institution. Thanks to this intermediary the historian, although working on sources produced by somebody else and therefore missing the chance to direct them, achieves a wider freedom from the customer's surveillance in terms of assessment, comparison and connection. Oral archives also separate the times of research and collection, and allow the source to cool down before being used. Oral archives, then, don't aim to collect great illustrative testimonies, but follow a serial logic and a perspective from below that require a wider collection, or at least corpuses that make testimonies more representative if not more complete, and shared protocols (for instance according to generational, professional or role groups, or to specific subjects – but avoiding polarization). Oral archives introduce a testimony pact and some contractual duties fixing the terms of testimony communication and considering the three partners involved – witness¹¹⁰, interviewer and producer (the institution promoting the research job). Oral archives imply a physical place where to preserve and consult materials and where patrons can count on adequate finding aids¹¹¹.

Several questions that I couldn't even mention remain still unsolved: the need for financial resources in order to be able to afford research expenses (for technical equipment, materials, and transcriptions – that, although criticized, are still a basic tool); the long spans of time needed in order to carry out the job – often one single project takes years to be carried out; further unsolved legal issues concerning the public usage of testimonies – with reference to the copyright, i.e. to the protection of the researcher collecting the source, as well as to the discipline of privacy of both witness and third party mentioned; the problem of archival procedures to be applied to such records; the problem of tools and technologies for sound and image preservation.

¹⁰⁸ F. Descamps, 2002.

¹⁰⁹ M. Ferro, 1985.

¹¹⁰ I learned to my cost that it is important to spend some time explaining to the interviewee the details of the cognitive and conservative targets of the request of an interview, but I also use to ask for the consent to make available the text deriving from the interview even before the interview itself.

¹¹¹ F. Descamps, 2002. The success of the oral archives model wasn't free from critics and second thoughts, especially among the Columbian scholars between 1960s and 1970s. They remarked that «the accent upon collections development and processing rather immediate use led to a passivity toward theorizing about what it is the oral historian does when conducting an interview», and they also brought into question the *top-down* approach of OHRO collections; see OHRO, 1992, pp. 4-5.

Conclusions

According to me, the work with oral sources allows improving historical research with some ideas of post-modernist critics, without accepting at all its sceptical and self-centred point of view. I believe in a realistic perspective (there are ideas, but there is reality as well and not only the escape in interpretations) beyond positivism and its hermeneutic contrary. Actually, if positivism neglects the interdependence between subject and object of knowledge, hermeneutics maintains that one cannot even exist without the other: "reflexivity concerns social research at any level, but it is not the target of a research, it is a tool"¹¹².

Researchers through and about oral sources should also take a further precaution: in oral sources collection, the relation between actor and context gets quite difficult and concrete when interviewees read and assess the research job based on their interviews. Ethnographic and sociologic researchers always refer to two different kinds of audience: the scientific community of the peers, and the people involved in the research. This second kind of audience should not be despised because it plays a main role in research assessment, blaming or approving its methodology, its validation, and its outcomes. The readers who were also the subject of the research will assess it according to their personal experience and knowledge of the research field rather than to its internal coherence and correspondence between claims and evidence. They are a very important target of the job of the historian, but not the only one. This remark shows once again that researchers working on oral sources must cope with a series of tensions and mediations as well as efforts to make one's own experience coherent – and I believe this is really peculiar of this way of making history compared to others.

There is one more thing to be said: when enterprises or institutions themselves promote the collection of testimonies about their past and their corporate culture, they exploit the typical feature of oral history "to customize evidence by the careful crafting of questions and its emphasis on all groups within a population or organization, from the lowest to the highest"¹¹³, and raise once again the old question of company histories¹¹⁴ and their commission. "Does he who pays the piper call the tune?". The answer is: "sometimes, he does". Nevertheless, researchers and archivists should feel responsible for setting and defending the scientific standards of the project as of interviewees' selection, questions to be asked, place where to hold the interviews, clarity of the terms of interviews communicability, preservation and availability to scholars. This invitation also implies an educational target: "as producers of interview materials, oral historians must constantly seek to educate corporate sponsors to the need and nature of high standards for oral history in business history"¹¹⁵.

¹¹² C. Aull Davies, 1999.

¹¹³ C. Ryant, 1988, p. 560

¹¹⁴ G. Jones, 1998.

¹¹⁵ C. Ryant, 1988, p. 565.