

ORAL HISTORY IN BRASIL: an assessment

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1. Endeavoring to open a new field of research

This overview of the development of the oral history field in Brasil analyzes the different approaches used in the area, discusses its major topics of interest, and traces the organizational and historical paths of the country's most important oral history programs.

Brasil's first systematic experiences in the field of oral history date to 1975, when Mexican and US specialists offered courses at Rio de Janeiro's Fundação Getulio Vargas.¹ Based on the syllabus of Columbia University's Oral History Program, these courses introduced and discussed guidelines to the oral history method. Classes were aimed at a specific public, including professors and researchers in the areas of history and the social sciences, linked to a number of different institutions.²

This initiative resulted in the emergence of Brasil's first two oral history programs, one created at the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina and the other - named the Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação de História Contemporânea do Brasil (CPDOC, Center for Research and Documentation in Contemporary Brazilian History) - at Rio de Janeiro's Fundação Getulio Vargas. Both programs targeted the study of regional politics and of Brazil's political elites.

Although prior to this time it was already relatively common for Brazilian social scientists to rely on oral interviews as a source of research information, their basic concern was not, the production of documents originating from a relationship between a deponent and a researcher, mediated by a tape recorder. What was novel about the creation of these oral history programs at CPDOC and at the UFSC's History Department was that their specific objective was precisely to amass archives of oral testimonies on the life history of members of Brasil's political elite.

Back then, this new field of work sparked little interest, and in some cases even met with strong resistance. Nevertheless, it would eventually gain firm footing thanks to the opening of new research centers and graduate programs at Brazilian universities.³

Although Brasil was then under authoritarian military rule, the 1970s represented an important moment in the inauguration both of graduate courses as well as of research and documentation centers outside of universities, a situation that made space for the introduction of new research practices. Up until then, both history and social science studies of Brasil took the form of essays, supported by few or no primary sources and scant theoretical references.

University courses concentrated on the study of Colonial Brazil or nineteenth-century Brazilian history, extending only up to the Revolution of 1930 during the republican period, while research into topics, in contemporary Brazilian history was extremely rare. With few exceptions, the investigation and study of Brazilian society and its history did not find a forum at universities, which were concerned much more with training teachers than with training historians or social scientists.⁴

This picture changed thanks largely to the Federal Government's adoption of a national scientific and technological policy, under which it awarded due recognition to the so-called human and social sciences and began directing more significant funding their way. Particularly as of 1976, the social sciences began to enjoy the support of the Fundo Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico, which fostered substantial growth in the area and, above all, made its institutionalization possible.⁵

This support was simultaneously reinforced by the Ministry of Education and Culture's new national culture policy. By providing for university participation in the collection of materials for archives of historical value, this policy encouraged the appearance of documentation and research centers linked to federal institutions of higher learning.

These changes in the realm of Federal Government scientific policy did not, however, have any immediate effects on the expansion of oral history programs themselves. The dawning of the 1980s brought no notable differences, save creation of two new programs in the Northeast, specifically, in the states of Pernambuco and Bahia. Foreign specialists also offered a second course, this time at the Universidade de Brasília, under the coordination of Prof William Moss, then director of the John Kennedy Library.

While high overhead costs discouraged establishment of new oral history programs within the institutional area, and even hampered expansion and maintenance of existing programs, this methodological tool proved more accessible to individual researchers. Use of the oral history method thus increased considerably during the period, as the number of researchers grew and new objects and topics of research were incorporated.

In the academic world, the decade of the '80s saw the consolidation of a number of graduate programs in history and the social sciences and a concomitant burgeoning of masters and doctoral theses. Young independent researchers began to conduct research through oral history, exploring such novel issues as the study of the Brazilian working class and the history of neighborhoods, minorities, and discriminated groups such as blacks and women. This trend, new to Brazil, made it possible to obtain more accurate knowledge of less advantaged segments of society. Two important points should nonetheless be underscored: these individual endeavors to collect oral testimonies resulted in extreme decentralization of information, and all too often; this material ended up completely lost or destroyed.

Moreover, even though this late-1970s expansion in use of the oral history method was basically restricted to university professors and students, it was accompanied by no

consistent methodological debate, nor were the oral interviews in most cases conducted in accordance with the strict criteria demanded by oral history methodology.

In 1983, the Bahia State Secretary of Culture's Fundação Cultural da Bahia, in conjunction with the Universidade Federal da Bahia's Graduate Program in Social Sciences, organized an Oral History Seminar in the city of Salvador. The event was intended to promote greater access to information on methods and techniques applicable in the gathering, archiving, and criticism of oral testimonies and to provide an opportunity for joint reflection on this history research tool. Intentions were also to lay the groundwork for ongoing scientific and institutional exchange between research centers and researchers.⁶

All evidence indicates, however, that these pioneering proposals failed to become a reality and the seminar in no way altered the prevailing picture; efforts to produce research based on oral testimonies were to remain dispersed. The situation was aggravated by the absence of any policy on how official archives should handle and preserve oral sources (see table).

2. Democracy and Oral History

The latter half of the 1980s brought a new impetus in the opening of institutional programs. The combined effect of the demise of the military regime and the process of redemocratization; the 1988 enactment of a new Constitution; the 1989 commemoration of the centennial of the Proclamation of the Republic; and the holding of the first presidential elections by direct vote in more than twenty years was to stimulate the creation of new oral history programs. A desire to assess the nation's political life and pinpoint the obstacles preventing the bulk of the Brazilian population from enjoying full citizenship rights motivated the opening of new documentation and research centers and fomented those already in existence (see table).

With most of these new centers springing up within universities, their strategies were defined according to a diverse range of research lines, which resulted in a profusion of topics and procedures of approach. The centers' holdings usually included archive and library documents, collected in accordance with no pre-established guidelines and most often duplicating material already found at the archives of other institutions. Specific oral history programs, on the other hand, were focused on lines of interviews that would recover local or institutional history and also on absorbing testimonies already gathered as part of thesis research or other university work.

On the other hand, it was characteristic for research centers located outside of university institutions to establish a more restricted definition of what line its collection was to take, that is, to what historical period or specific topic it would be dedicated. By thus targeting a certain object of interest, these centers focused on amassing entire archives rather than merely collecting scattered documents and could serve a broader community of users. At this type of research center, oral history programs constitute just one of a range of activities.

Although a number of important oral history programs were set up during the latter half of the 1980s at research centers outside universities - such as Rio Grande do Sul

state's Jewish Memory Program, part of the Fundação Marc Chagal, or the Fundação Osvaldo Cruz's Health Memory program -- in numeric terms university programs clearly continued to predominate.

In parallel with these developments, and likewise outside the academic realm, large state-owned enterprises and governmental agencies also began displaying an interest in collecting oral testimonies and thereby constructing archives that would recover their institutional memories. The most important example was the 1986 creation of the Brazilian Electricity Memory Center, set up by the federally owned electrical utility, Eletrobrás, which opened a new field of work in oral history.⁷ Other institutions, such as the state oil concern, Petrobrás; Brasil's Banco Central; and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, also became interested in this type of project, but in most cases rather than creating their own programs, they contracted specialized institutions to undertake the work. CPDOC and the Fundação Joaquim Nabuco benefited from such requests for assistance, as they applied the funds obtained under these service contracts to expanding and reinforcing their own internal programs.

Although this growth both in documentation and research centers linked to universities and also in cultural bodies tied to city or state governments or public companies represented a boost to the field, it still cannot be said that this period brought the full expansion and recognition of oral history.

True enough, the number of researchers relying on this tool was growing substantially, and their results were applied to further research. However, consistent discussion of methodological questions was still very limited. The topic was not absorbed as part of graduate program studies or in social science or history courses. Already accustomed to applying interview techniques, those in the social sciences were unconcerned with participating in a broader discussion of the documental aspects of the oral history method. For their part, historians also displayed little interest in the area, consonant with their traditional resistance to the use of oral sources and with their tendency to focus in large part on topics dating to a more distant past.

For this reason, the fields of history and social sciences did not systematically include the topic in debates held as part of colloquiums, seminars, or meetings, nor did the subject draw enough interest on its own to become the object of specialized events. Moreover, the concrete product of many of the programs that were created consisted merely of a few hours of recorded interviews, with no real chances that the material would be properly preserved or disseminated.

It should not be overlooked, however, that some oral history programs attained greater success; these served as models and advanced use of the method through the promotion of courses and organization of debates, as was the case of CPDOC. But such efforts were for the most part aimed at a relatively limited public.

Two sorts of problems should be underscored in terms of the actual use of material then being gathered through the oral history method: (1) analytical limitations and (2) difficulties regarding preservation, including therein the question of policy vis-à-vis user access to documentation.

In relation to the first problem, it can be affirmed that with rare exceptions collected interviews were merely published in whole or in part or else constituted supplementary information sources in research not dedicated to oral history as such. Published works thus did not give due attention to a systematic analysis of the uses and limits of oral history and ignored discussion of relevant methodological questions.

The matter of how to deal with gathered materials still stands as a major challenge. There are no general procedures for locating, selecting, gathering, or filing the oral testimonies that are scattered across Brasil, a country of continental proportions. So far archivists, including institutions such as the National Archives and state-level archives themselves, have intervened little in policymaking regarding the preservation of oral documentation. Some oral history centers have sought to disseminate information on their holdings by publishing catalogs and manuals, but in numerical terms such initiatives are as yet insignificant.⁸

3. The 1990s: On the Road to Institutionalization

The 1990s inaugurated a new phase in the development of the oral history field in Brasil, which finally gained full recognition and is now on its way to institutionalization.

Although Brasil's 1st Oral History Seminar had taken place in Bahia in 1983, its results were so widely ignored that precisely ten years later, in 1993, when a new event was planned for São Paulo, its organizers entitled their initiative the 1st National Oral History Meeting, so thoroughly unaware were they of the first event.

Leaving aside the issue of just where Brasil's first national meeting in the oral history field took place, it should be stressed that even though the 1993 São Paulo meeting similarly received little coverage, it did open a new phase in exchange efforts between oral history programs around the country and brought to the surface a sharp interest in the creation of a Brazilian oral history association.

A total of twenty-five papers were presented at the event, attended by one hundred and twenty-three individuals representing some thirty institutions. The most important deliberation to come out of the meeting was the decision to move towards the foundation of a Brazilian oral history association. During the following year, this proposal would be disseminated and a list would be compiled of researchers and institutions working in the field. A second national meeting was to be held one year later.⁹

As of 1993, for the first time, Brasil's main academic events in history and social sciences began to dedicate space on their agendas to courses, conferences, round-tables, and work groups devoted to oral history. Specific regional events were held as well, including the Brasília Meeting on Oral History and Documentation.¹⁰

These efforts to instigate greater participation and to broaden debate culminated in the 2nd National Oral History Meeting, held in April 1994 at CPDOC/FGV, in Rio de Janeiro. An evaluation of the event's activities can be used to paint a picture of the status of oral history in Brasil today. Two hundred and fifty researchers from sixty private and public institutions from all states of the country registered for the meeting (representing universities, museums, research centers, unions, etc.). A total of sixty

papers were presented at the seven different work groups: methodological issues; oral tradition and ethnicity; institutions; elites and the military; gender; labor, workers, and their organizations; and establishing oral history collections and archive policy.¹¹

Data from the event indicate that Brasil's oral history field is virtually dominated by the academic community, with union groups, neighborhood associations, research groups, corporations, and even individual archivists accounting for only a minor share of participants. Of those who presented papers, 62% held doctoral degrees; 34%, masters degrees; and 3.7%, bachelors degrees.

A turnaround in educational background could be detected at the second national conference. During the 1980s, most of those exploring the area had been social scientists, Mereas 51 % of those attending the 1994 meeting were historians; social scientists followed, accounting for 34%; education and letters, 3.7%; and, lastly, nursing, psychology, and public health, 1.8% each.

A change could also be detected in research topics. Studies on disadvantaged sectors no longer predominated, contrary to the tendency prevailing in Brasil and most of Latin America during the 1980s. Although the study of minorities and disadvantaged groups is a tradition in the oral history field, Brasil's second national meeting left it clear that there is growing room for the investigation of relatively unexplored topics, such as intellectual history, bureaucrats, the armed forces, and institutional history.

Another important fruit of the second meeting was creation of the Associação Brasileira de História Oral (Brazilian Oral History Association), which encompasses programs and institutions operating in the field. The questions that held center stage during debates were what term to employ in naming the new organization -- oral history or oral documentation? -- and what organizational format the body should take. Underlying this apparently formal controversy regarding proper designation lay a deeper, conceptual disagreement regarding method. Proponents of the denomination "oral documentation" were for the most part historians who alleged that a testimony only gains full meaning when confronted with a written document, and hence their objection to the term "oral history." Their intent was to criticize the notion that oral history is another history, one with aspirations of becoming a specific discipline. The other side argued that the term "oral documentation" is an overly broad designation that can be applied to any oral testimony, which becomes tantamount to disregarding or diminishing the specificities of oral history testimonies. In the end, the term "oral history" was approved.

The second question was whether the new association should comprise institutional programs or individual researchers. Despite resistance and opposition, those from institutional oral history programs saw their point of view voted through. Their argument was that only by drawing together institutional programs could the effective functioning of the fledgling organization be guaranteed, given Brasil's scarce, resources and weak organizational tradition.

These positive results notwithstanding, the debate is not over, and whether this model will indeed eventually prevail only the actual consolidation of the Associação Brasileira de História Oral can tell.

In conclusion, the field of oral history is undergoing steady expansion and enjoying academic recognition in Brasil today. The road has been opened to new research and institutional exchange.

Table: **The Creation of Oral History Programs in Brasil**

Date created	Name of program	Institution
1975	Oral History Program	Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação de História Contemporânea do Brasil/Fundação Getulio Vargas
1975	Oral history laboratory	Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina
1979	Joaquim Nabuco Foundation	Ministry of Culture
1980	Sociology Department	Universidade de São Paulo
1982	Laboratory of Oral History and Iconography	Universidade Federal Fluminense
1983	Bahian Cultural Foundation	Bahia State Secretary of Culture
1983	Center for Oral Documentation	Universidade Federal do Ceará
1983	Center for Oral History and Ongoing Documentation	Universidade Federal da Bahia
1986	The Oral History of Gas Program	Cia. Estadual de Gás de São Paulo
1986	Ongoing Oral History Program	Public Archives of the Federal District
1986	Jewish Memory Program	Instituto Cultural Judaico Marc Chagal
1986	Oral History Program	Fundação Osvaldo Cruz
1986	Center for Document Sources	Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto
1986	Oral History Laboratory	CIVIU/Unicamp
1986	Brazilian Electricity Memory Center	Eletrobrás
1986	Euclides Aranha Center for Oral History Studies	Universidade do Estado da Bahia
1986	Memory: History of Aeronautics	Ministry of the Air Force
1986	Women's Memory	Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul
1986	History Studies Center	Museu da República
1986	Memory of São Paulo's Popular Carnival	Centro de Estudos Rurais e Urbanos de São Paulo
1986	Social Research Laboratory	Institute of Philosophy and the Social Sciences
1986	NUHCIS	Universidade Federal de Uberlândia

1987	Interdisciplinary Center for Contemporary Studies	Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro
1987	Interviews and Testimonies: History of Electricity	
1988	Imperial Museum Memory	Fundação Nacional Pró-Memória
1989	Creation of Sources for the Study of Nursing	Ana Nery Nursing School, UFRJ
1989	Logical Dialects Studies Center (CEDAC)	Universidade Federal do Acre
1989	Memory and History of Social Movements	São Paulo Municipal Secretary of Professional Culture
1989	Center for Oral History and Documentation	Faculdade Marechal Rondon
1989	Spoken Memory in the Itajaí Valley	Fundação Blumenau (Santa Catarina)
1989	Oral History Archive	Universidade de Caxias do Sul
1989	Memories of Labor and of Belém	Universidade Federal do Pará
1989	Minas Gerais Politics and Society	Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais
1989	The Church and Social Movements	Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo
1989	São Paulo Museum of Image and Sound	São Paulo State Secretary of Culture
1990	Projeto de História Oral	Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais
1990	History and Memory	Centro de Doc. Infor. de História da Universidade Federal do Acre
1990	Oral History Program	Memory Center - Senai/SP
1992	Center for Studies and Documentation	Universidade Federal da Bahia
1993	Tradition and Orality	Universidade Estadual de Feira de Santana - Bahia
1993	Oral History Program	Fundação Casa Jorge Amado - Bahia
1993	History and Memory	Universidade Estadual de Santa Cruz - Bahia
1993	System for Surveillance of Violence against Children and Teens	Bahia State Secretary of Justice
1993	An Oral History Research Proposal	Universidade Federal de Rondônia
1994	Study and Research of Popular Literature	Universidade Federal da Bahia

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Notes

² Ph.D. in Social History - Coordinator of the Oral History Program of the Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação de História Contemporânea do Brasil, Fundação Getúlio Vargas; Associate Professor, Department of History, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro - and President of the Associação Brasileira de História Oral (Brazilian Oral History Association)

¹ Eugenia Meyer (Mexican), James Wilkie (California), and George Philip Browne (New Jersey)

² Carlos Humberto P. Correa, "O documento de história oral como fonte histórica, uma experiência brasileira", Master's thesis, Universidade de Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, Brasil, 1977.

³ Aspásia Camargo, "Elaboración de la historia oral en Brasil," *Secuencia - Revista de Ciências Sociais* (Mexico) p. 114-22 (April 1986). Marieta de Moraes Ferreira (coord), *Entre-vistas: abordagens e usos da história oral*, Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 1994.

⁴ Alzira Alves de Abreu, "CPDOC 20 anos", *Estudos Históricos* (Rio de Janeiro) 13.- 1-20 (1994).

⁵ Regina da Luz Moreira, "Brazilianistas, historiografia e centos de documentação". *Estudos Históricos* (Rio de Janeiro) 5: 66-74 (1990).

⁶ Program from the Oral History Seminar, on file at CPDOC/FGV, Rio de Janeiro.

⁷ Oral history program of the Electricity Memory Center, *Catálogo de Depoimentos*, Centro de Memória da Eletricidade do Brasil, Rio de Janeiro, 1990.

⁸ Oral history catalog, Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, 1977; catalog of testimonies, Oral History Program, Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação de História Contemporânea do Brasil (CPDOC/FGV), 1981; Imigração judaica no Rio Grande do Sul, História de vida," Instituto Cultural Marc Chagal, Rio Grande do Sul, 1989; "Memória da Assistência Médica da Previdência Social no Brasil," catalog of testimonies, Casa Osvaldo Cruz, Rio de Janeiro, 1989- "Memória de história oral," catalog of testimonies, Ceará, NÜDOC, 1987; Manguinhos, collection of testimonies, Rio de Janeiro, Casa Osvaldo Cruz, 1991; Verena Alberti, *História oral - a experiência do CPDOC*, Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 1990.

⁹ Report on the list National Oral History Meeting, prepared by Alice Beatriz Lang, São Paulo, CERU/SP, 1993, mimeo. The meeting was organized by USP and PUC, São Paulo.

¹⁰ See agenda for the 17th National Meeting of ANPUH, São Paulo, June 1993; National Symposium of the SBPC (Brazilian Society for the Progress of Science), Recife, 1993; and the 16th and 17th National Meetings of ANPOCS, 1992 and 1993, Minas Gerais.

¹¹ 2nd National Oral History Meeting, oral documentation and multidisciplinaryism, Livro de Resumos, Rio de Janeiro: CPDOC, 1994. The event was sponsored by the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro - the Fundação Getúlio Vargas's CPDOC, Casa Osvaldo Cruz, and the Universidade Federal Fluminense.