

## Entrevista

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# Oral history research in Italy: An interview with Giovanni Contini<sup>1</sup>

Pesquisas com história oral na Itália: uma entrevista com Giovanni Contini

Luciane Sgarbi S. Grazziotin<sup>2</sup>

lsgarbi@unisinos.br

Giovanni Contini<sup>3</sup>

gcontinib@tin.it

## Introduction

This interview was granted to me by professor and researcher Giovanni Contini during the Seminário Internazionale “Tra gli angoli della memoria: riflessioni metodologiche ed esperienze di ricerca di storia orale in ambito storico-educativo”, which took place at the University of Molise, Campobasso – Italy. On this occasion, we participated in the same round table. In this interview, Professor Giovanni Contini, one of the precursors of oral memory studies in Italy, makes a retrospect of the advances and limits of Oral History in the course of his career and of the possibilities of research agenda concerning this methodology for the next decades.

Giovanni Contini was a member of *King's College* (Cambridge) in the early Eighties. From 1984 to 2014, he directed the “audiovisual archives” of the Archive Supervision in Toscana (Italy). Since 1992, he has represented Italy at the Committee for Oral Tradition of the International Council of Archives. Since 2001, he has served at the Italian Committee of UNESCO for the preservation of intangible heritage. He is the director of the History and Memory series and has published more than one hundred essays on agrarian history, as well as history of industrial relations, social history, verbal history and historical anthropology. In recent years, he has been involved with history and memory, in particular with investigations concerning slaughters of civilians in World War II. His distinguished writings have been published in Italian and foreign journals. The monographs that he wrote include: *Memoria e storia, Santa Croce sull'Arno: Biografie di imprenditori; Vivere di coltelli: Per una storia dell'artigianato dei ferri taglienti a Scarperia* (with L. Ardiccioni); *Verba Manent: L'uso Delle Fonti Orali Per La Storia Contemporanea* (with A. Martini); *La memoria divisa; La forma e le cose: Mestiere e impresa nella costruzione degli stampi* (with Carolina Lussana); *Una storia in Maremma; Aristocrazia Contadina: Sulla Complessità Della Società Mezzadrile: Fattoria, Famiglie, Individui*. In 2002, he was a visiting professor at the University of Tokyo. From 2002 to 2004, he participated, on behalf of the

<sup>1</sup> The interview took place at University of Molise, in Campobasso (Italy), on July 14th, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos. Av. Unisinos, 950, Cristo Rei, 93022-750, São Leopoldo, RS, Brasil.

<sup>3</sup> Giovanni Contini was fellow at King's College, Cambridge (1981-1984) and directed the audiovisual archives section of the Archival Superintendency for Tuscany (1984-2014). He taught at the Faculty of Humanities, La Sapienza University, Rome (2005-2012) and was a visiting professor at the University of Tokyo, Komaba (April-August 2002). He was Regents' fellow of UCLA (November 2006). In 2016, he was a visiting professor, in the program ACCESS Europe, at the Amsterdam School of Heritage and Memory Studies (ASHMS).

Ministry of Heritage and Culture, in research activities related with the Shoah Foundation, Los Angeles. In 2006, he earned a Regents Fellowship at the University of California (UCLA) and was invited to lecture at the University of Keio, Tokyo. In 2007, he organized the international conference “The war of Japan and Italy”. In 2009, he organized the conference “Mining and miners: the European memory”. From 2006 to 2012, he gave the lecture “Contemporary and Archive History” at the Faculty of Arts of University La Sapienza, in Rome. In 2013, he gave a lecture at UCLA entitled “The memory of the Italian deportation”; and, in 2014, he gave a series of lectures in Japan. In 2016, he was a visiting professor at the University of Amsterdam, within the Access Europe program. Since 2012, he is president of AISO (Italian Society of Oral History).

The conversation with professor Giovanni, as well as the consequent interview, was unique, due to the challenges concerning language proficiency: professor Giovanni speaks Italian and English, whereas I speak Portuguese and Spanish. Although this situation was not an impediment for an informal conversation, since talking in Italian was manageable, it was an obstacle for the interview. For this reason, the conversation was mediated by Professor Alberto Barausse, coordinator of the Seminar that I previously mentioned. Professor Alberto is Italian and has lived in Brazil for some years; therefore, he speaks Portuguese fluently. That way, as I presented the script and the objectives of the conversation, as well as the focus of the approach that particularly interested me, professor Barausse translated it to Italian and I, within the limits of my communicative skills, interacted with them and wrote down the information that I considered essential. Therefore, there was no recording: the conversation was registered only through my written notes. In summary, our conversation occurred, basically, in two languages, Italian and Portuguese. After checking my notes and highlighting the main aspects of the conversation, an English version of the questions was sent to professor Giovanni, who, in order to best systematize his ideas, answered them in written English. This was a request he made. When the final version was concluded, I resent the material to professor Giovanni. Before submitting the publication to this journal, the material was analyzed by an English proofreader. The chance to carry out this interview and to get to know professor Giovanni and his investigations was an emblematic moment for me, since, as a researcher, I have been working with Oral History. The aspects concerning oral memory, first person narratives, and statements made through the voice of citizens often forgotten by History constitute me as a researcher and are part of my academic trajectory. Professor Giovanni's

works are not translated in Brazil; his research, books and articles rarely circulate in our academic context. My period of post-doctorate scholarship in Spain and the subsequent interaction with professor Barausse's research group in Italy enabled this interlocution, which, in fact, was a chance to broaden my perspectives with respect to the use of Oral History as a methodology. In this fragment, I share some of professor Giovanni's ideas that I considered relevant to Oral History researchers, which justifies the importance of this publication.

**Luciane Grazziotin (LG):** I would like to start this interview with your personal memories: how did you discover and get interested in Oral History?

**Giovanni Contini (GC):** Actually, I started to use the tape recorder before knowing that there was something called Oral History! I was studying the industrial workers during the Fifties. They had been defeated; many militants had been sacked while in the Italian factories there was a profound technological transformation. And yet in the factory newspapers it was said that capitalism had entered a period of irreversible crisis. I was very curious to know how the actual workers in flesh and bone, inside the factories, could handle that cognitive dissonance: the factory newspapers that spoke of crisis, the daily experience that underlined an impetuous capitalist development. This is the first reason why I started to conduct interviews. My witnesses were not too old; we were in the 1980s and so the temporal distance that separated us from the 1950s was about thirty years. There was also a second reason that led me to interview these people: in the factory newspapers I could read technical details about production tools and production operations. But I did not know anything about lathes and cutters. I knew even less about how those tools were to be used.

But then I began to be interested not only in the information that I obtained from the interviews I was doing, but in the interview itself. It became more and more evident that this kind of research was quite different from the traditional historical way of researching, using written sources. At that time, I had in front of me workers in flesh and bone; often they did not understand my questions, but often they told me things about subjects of which I had not even suspected the existence. It was at this point that I read “On the peculiarities of Oral History”, by Sandro Portelli. So I met him, and I realized that I had made Oral History research, me too...

**LG:** Along your research path, which themes drew your attention the most? Which ones did you have the chance to work with?

**GC:** Well, this is quite a difficult question since I've been studying with oral history so many subjects: peasants, industrial workers, miners, quarrymen, fishermen, artisans, industrialists, victims of fascist and Nazi violence during the war, survivors from the extermination camps... If I must choose, I can say that what I was and still am mostly interested in is the way we can collect useful information from the gap between what the majority of a community thinks and says about their past and what, presumably, "really happened". If, for instance, the inhabitants of a village specialized in producing pocket knives, in Scarperia (near Florence), say that their craft entered a period of crisis because their fellow citizens didn't manage to trust each other, but you can establish that this is not true, then that "lie" itself becomes a tool to discover important aspects of the cultural life of that community. The knife makers, actually, did try several times to build up a cooperative able to buy the raw material (iron and horn) and to sell the final result of the artisans' craft, the knives. In so doing they showed that they were able to trust each other, and not just once. Actually their lack of success was the result of other causes: their technical equipment was too simple since they had only an anvil and a forge. Their craftsmanship was very ancient, dating back to the Middle Ages. As a consequence, a very conservative working culture was formed; their leaders prevented the smallest innovation, while in other areas knife manufacturers were innovating technology and could produce at lower costs. So young people wanted to escape from the family workshop preferring to use their superb skills in metal working factories of Florence. There was one last reason to explain the crisis of "sharp edges" handicraft: the legal measures that limited the length of the knife blade. But as I said, in Scarperia, the crisis was only explained by the lack of mutual trust among craftsmen.

It is interesting to consider another village, Santa Croce sull'Arno, near Pisa, where leather and cowhide were produced since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even in this village, after World War II craftsmanship had developed in a prodigious way; the success was explained only as the result of a good moral quality of the inhabitants, who would always be ready to trust one another. And yet even this explanation is false, from a factual point of view. There are indeed many episodes that show a low level of confidence among the inhabitants. And even there, the real explanation lies in a series of external causes: the fact that in Santa Croce there was an industrial district, that is, many small artisans who could join in to cooperate when the orders were too big for each of them; and the fact that the leather market, with ups and downs, has been growing over the decades after the war.

There are two similar explanations of an opposite destiny, then. Both explanations are not "true", but both are extremely important because they allow us to throw light on a fundamental aspect of the craftsmen in the two villages. They were too ignorant to understand the action of the external constraints on the village economy, so they could only concentrate on the aspects they could control, the behavior of their fellow citizens.

In Italy, in 1944, there were many massacres of civilians; they were mostly peasants who lived in areas where the Resistance was active. The survivors of the massacres often explain them as caused by the action of the partisans; they come to the point of saying that they could pardon the perpetrators, the Germans, but never the partisans. Even in this case the explanation is not "true": the massacres were part of a preventive fight against partisans. The Germans wanted to prevent a relationship between the Resistance and the populations. And indeed it was a winning strategy: in the areas affected by the massacre the partisans were completely isolated from the peasants; the peasants were fundamental to their survival but, terrified by the killings, after the massacres they refused any help to the Resistance fighters. Even in this case, a wrong explanation tells us a lot about the peasants, even today continue to believe that explanation is true. Their world was very small; they could not understand the decision-making procedures, often criminal, of the Nazi army. But, most importantly, this false accusation allows us to better understand the relationship between peasants and partisans, then, in 1944. In fact, after the war, a legend has been created, accepted by many historians as well. According to this legend, the peasants would always and in any case have helped the partisans. In fact, the deep hostility of the peasants towards the partisans in the slaughter areas helps us falsify this anachronism. And it also helps us understanding how the relationship between peasants and partisans was ambiguous, even if the former aided the latter (not always). But often it was a help given to young armed men, without enthusiasm, or the partisans were helped for religious reasons ("Give Drink to the Thirsty, Feed the Hungry"). Sometimes the same people who had assisted the partisans at first ended up betraying them later. Certainly the peasants at the time of the events had not developed that democratic consciousness and that anti-fascism that came only after the war. The unjust and false accusations to the partisans, therefore, serve to restore a more credible historiographical picture. At the same time, they show us the heroism of the young people who chose the Resistance, since they did not find themselves in the condition of the "fish in the water". On the contrary, they were fighting in a dangerous, uncertain and often traitorous context.

**LG:** Were there any authors in particular who influenced your historiographical background or your interest in Oral History?

**GC:** Sandro Portelli, as I said. Then Nuto Revelli, although I never met him personally. Ron Grele, Paul Thompson. More recently, I greatly appreciated the work of Manlio Calegari, who lives and works in Genoa, who has developed a very interesting kind of Oral History. He interviews the same witnesses many many times, then often writes the story of the research, rather than quote the transcribed words of the witnesses.

**LG:** You have innumerable publications, including books and articles in academic journals. Which ones would you emphasize and why?

**GC:** Well, I would say *La memoria divisa*, a 1997 book dedicated to the oral memory of the massacre of Civitella in Val di Chiana, Tuscany. It was an important book because it opened up a new research path about the Nazi-fascist massacres in Italy. With that book I won the 1997 prize of the Italian Society for the Study of Contemporary History (SISSCO). The book sold well, although it is now out of print. Then another book is *Aristocrazia contadina*, the long history (since 1700) of a peasant family of sharecroppers. Then I can remember an essay in English, “The Local World View: Social Change and Memory in Three Tuscan Communes”, which was published in *Pathways to Social Class: A Qualitative Approach to Social Mobility* (1997). The essay deals with the story of Santa Croce and Scarperia. The comparison was extended to the memory of the Nazi massacres in “Epifanie della memoria collettiva”, published in *Brianza e Lecchese – Parimoni culturali, ricerche storiche e memorie collettive* (2004).

**LG:** In 2006, you won a prize, the University of California (UCLA) Regents Fellowship. Could you tell us more about it?

**GC:** It was not a prize, but an important Fellowship. I was able to spend some time in UCLA, meeting interesting scholars and giving seminars, mostly about World War II and the civilian massacres, or about the Shoah and its memory. In Los Angeles, before the Regents Fellowship, I had been studying at the Shoah Foundation for nearly nine months. I was interested in the interviews with Italian survivors.

**LG:** You were a visiting professor at the University of Keio in Tokyo, right? How was the experience in the Japanese context, with respect to Oral History research?

**GC:** It was not Keio, it was Tokyo University, Komaba. It was a very interesting experience since my

students were extremely talented and often made very interesting and very useful comments on my lectures. However, when I was in Japan, I was impressed by the little development of Oral History in that country. A paradox, if you think that much of the technical equipment used by us oral historians is of Japanese manufacture. Then a friend, the historian Takao Matzumura, pointed out that the reason why that happened was connected to the Japanese war crimes during the war.

In 2007, with Takao, we organized in Florence, Italy, an international conference about Italian and Japanese war crimes during WWII. It came out that the majority of Japanese historians did not want to study war crimes committed by the Japanese Army, and on the other hand that Japanese readers did not like to buy books about those crimes. In Japan, the attitude we call “revisionism” is widespread. They tend to deny the historical reality because it is terrible and embarrassing. The brave Japanese historians who study this subject are isolated; they often receive threats from ultra-nationalists.

**LG:** If you had to present an overview of your career, which contributions would you highlight?

**GC:** As I said, I think that the most interesting results of my work are related to memory as a historical source, both as a factual source of information and as an indirect source, which informs us also when it distorts the past reality.

**LG:** How would you evaluate the current context of Oral History in Italy?

**GC:** Quite an interesting situation. Many different researches, often dealing with poorly studied subjects: for example, the oral history of the landscape and through the landscape. On this theme, AISO (Italian Association of Oral History) has just organized an interesting school in Corleone, Sicily, in April/May. I think in the future we will see a great development of Oral History using video recording, even though I think we have thought too little about this issue. When we began to use the recorded voice, there were important theoretical contributions related to the difference between orality and writing, on the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, on the usefulness of understanding and using the “false” memories, etc. It seems to me that when we started using the video, we did so without much discussion, but there are problems in the use of video, and of course besides the difficulties there are great potentialities as well; and those problems are to be discussed. Finally, I think that now in Italy we must discuss the relationship between Oral History and Public History.

**LG:** To conclude this interview, I would like to ask you about the future of Oral History: what could be the research agenda for the next decade? Which research perspectives and themes should be more deeply investigated?

**GC:** Well, it is always difficult to predict the future. I think that for sure we will see movies made with an “oral history” sensitivity. By this, I mean: films that will attach great importance to the spoken word; that will be able to put in relation and in contrast different interviews or different parts of the same interview, in order to bring out the ability of false news to provide real information, as I explained earlier. We will have to find the way for a best use of the so-called “visual language” to get more information. Since that language can be ambiguous and ambivalent, we must learn how to use its polysemicity to add clarity and not take it away from our work. I realize this is difficult, but I think that to focus on the problems we face is a first step to be able to resolve them. Digita il testo o l'indirizzo di un sito web oppure traduci un documento.

For sure there will be new subjects – the oral history of the landscape, for instance, as I said. Finally I think that the “ordinary” use of Oral History, so to speak, will continue to grow. By that I mean that the tendency to use interviews in widely broadcast television programs will continue, and the use of non-problematic interviews in many public history projects will continue too. I think it will be necessary to make it clear to these users that the interview is not at all a simple practice, because it hides many pitfalls along with many valuable information, which, however, we must be able to see, because it is not always immediately evident. Of course I do not think that this “education for complexity” will become effective starting from theoretical speculations. Methodological reflection will have to allow us to produce convincing film results. And only the latter, perhaps, will have a positive influence on public history practitioners.

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