



The voice of the past: oral history

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BOOK REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

The voice of the past: oral history (4th edn), by Paul Thompson with Joanna Bornat, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017, 484 pp., £29.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-933546-6

The first edition of *Voice of the Past* (1978) soon became the 'go to' text for the young field of oral history. Despite the natural limits to any attempt to survey oral history at that time and Thompson's heavy concentration on work being done in social history, particularly in the U.K., with a nod to North America, the book was the starting point for the wider discussion of the practice. Also, since the last four chapters devoted substantial attention to the actual work of mounting a project, interviewing and the processing and presentation of the results of the interviews, it became a guidebook and basic 'how to' manual for beginners. Over the years, succeeding editions (1988 and 2000) extended the discussion of oral history and in major ways increased the coverage of an ever-expanding field and thus, 'Voice' retained its status as the basic introductory text in oral history, and the most widely cited work in the field.

None of the points I am about to make should take away from the achievement of this edition. When I first heard that there was to be a revision I said to myself, and others, that it could not be done. In the almost 40 years since the initial publication, the field has expanded in such proportions as to make a one volume introduction to the wide variety of the practice an impossible task. The number of books and articles published now, in any one year, by historians of all stripes using oral history interviews as a base for interpretation is simply beyond the possibility of being noted by, let alone read for, any one compilation. Community and public history projects of widely distinct aims and ambitions must now number in the hundreds, if not thousands. The growth of interest internationally has been phenomenal, including the founding of an international organization. Oral history activity and publications in ancillary, and often new, fields, such as narrative medicine, gerontology, memory studies, the history of gender provide testimony to the expansion of the practice. Video and film presentations, and now digital story telling have become a common part of the world of oral history. As a capstone, in 2015 the Nobel Prize in literature was awarded to an 'oral history', and more recently American P.E.N. announced a yearly five-figure dollar award for a non-academic 'oral history'.

Oral histories fill our library shelves and the cloud, and are part of the cultural furniture of the literate classes worldwide. In short it is a growth industry. That Thompson and Bornat have been able, with limits which will be noted, to encompass so much of the field in an almost encyclopaedic manner is stunning. That they have been able to place that wide range of production into the framework of its interpretative power as well almost boggles the imagination.

The encyclopaedic aims of the authors, the attempt to survey the whole field, takes many forms: bringing us up to date on what has been produced since the last edition, exploring new media usages, tracing out the international dimensions of oral history, a new special chapter on theory contributed by Lynn Abrams and an update on the intricacies of the practice such as archiving and processing. There are many courses in this dinner. Probably too many for any one review but I think we can isolate a few major issues that will provide us a kind of periscope from which to view the fullness of the text and some of its methodological claims and problems, some quite new, some long-standing.

In the first sentence of the preface to this edition, the authors note how the book 'caught the spirit of the idealism of the oral history movement at a time of hope'. This is a new description of the practice. In neither of the first two editions did Thompson describe oral history as a 'movement' and in the preface to the third edition, it was a term used solely to describe the interdisciplinary character of oral history. To be sure the term was used by many commentators at the time of the publication of the first edition, and some sense of the movement idealism that Thompson and Bornat note can be found in

the recent German oral history of the contacts behind the formation of an international community of oral historians (Leo & Maubach, 2013), but this is a new narrative and posture for *The Voice of the Past*.

In what now feels as a different age, the term ‘movement’ was used consciously to draw attention to the ways in which new left historians were using oral history. Our work was seen broadly as a method to document the lives of those who had been ignored by traditional and ‘mainstream’ historiography: members of the working class, African-Americans, women, ethnic minorities, non-heterosexuals, etc. Behind that commitment was a belief that oral history was a way to discuss consciousness, in some cases, it was argued that in oral history interviewing one saw consciousness emerging. Oral history was also seen as a movement of those whose aim was to transform the practice of history, to give history as a community and public mission. From study to activity. Despite the fact that in many different countries oral history was being collected and used in very traditional ways to document the lives of ‘men of affairs’ and decision-makers, those involved in forging an international perspective on oral history, prime among them, Thompson, formed a movement. Although he did not use the term until recently, his work was always, as he said, socialist inspired.

It is clear from this edition that all over the world one finds oral historians uncovering the history and inner lives of scorned populations, political rebels and outcasts and documenting the ways in which international capital rests upon systems of inequality and oppression. It is also clear that in many areas of the world oral history is still seen as a way to move beyond a morbid and sterile historical practice. But, as herein explicated with great precision, oral history has also been domesticated. The very growth and diversity of the field catalogued by Thompson and Bornat undermines prior claims to movement status.

This is important given the expansion of work in so-called ‘oral history’. Our obligation now is to explain difference rather than to seek comradeship. The narrative of movement, even if it did not encompass all practitioners did offer access to a community at a time when oral history was still a fringe activity. When dozens of universities offer undergraduate and graduate courses and training, when dozens of institutes and conferences and publications provide fora to those who now consciously call themselves ‘oral historians’ that is no longer the case. Thompson and Bornat catalogue work being done in pedagogy, community, health, theatre, in the design of web pages. They note what they call ‘parallel strands’: visual media, public history, narrative and memory studies, autobiography, life writing. All of this activity is, of course, the construction of a usable past, but can all of this still be bundled together in one set of protocols for one community of scholarship? Can we lump together interviewing on research projects and interviewing in therapeutic situations? Do the same issues lay at the heart of all the various ambitions implied by the above listing? Can we squeeze all of these activities into the same vocabulary, the same language of motive, when there are radically different aims among oral historians using different forms and media? I am sure that somewhat similar comments will be offered by those much more familiar with oral history practices internationally, and the digital world, than I am. If the joy of this edition is its encyclopaedic ambition, its problems are the result of that same ambition.

When Thompson first published ‘Voice’ he was roundly criticized, particularly by the Popular Memory Group at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, for the positivism of his approach to oral history (Johnson & McLennan, 1982). By this they meant his concentration on validity, reliability, ‘objectivity’ and empirical explanation. Thompson’s response was to include two new chapters in the second edition ‘Memory and the Self’ (mostly, psychology) and ‘Interpretation: The Meaning of History’ (mostly how to analyse testimony in terms of its accuracy, and a recognition of the oral history as a source for cultural analysis), and, then later, in the third edition, a brief discussion of oral history as a genre and the issue of narration. In this edition, two sections of the work speak more or less directly to those issues: an expanded chapter on Interpretation and a special chapter contributed by Lynn Abrams on oral history theory.

I have long felt that Thompson’s more traditional chapter on evidence is at war with his socialist historical practice with its focus on community history and participatory engagement; a practice that needs a much deeper cultural understanding of the democracy of shared historical construction and interpretation than can be achieved by a misplaced worry about validity and reliability and the

accuracy of both memory and historical imagination. This ‘war’ is most evident, I think if one contrasts the optimism of the chapters on community practice and the defensive posture assumed in an only slightly altered chapter on evidence.

This edition moves our discussion in the right direction but it is hindered by the theoretical apparatus behind this vision of evidence. Abrams’ chapter is a good stab but as I noted in a previous review (Grele, 2011), her theoretical analysis tends toward middle level theory. Her brief intervention here (pp. 132–139) aims at a bit more complex considerations but still does not come to grips with the field work experience of the co-construction of a history – the interaction of the cultural discourses of both participants to the conversation – and the special nature of the document that is produced. This said one has to recognize the wide disparity between Abrams’ view of the interview and Thompson’s more traditional stance.

This being said, it must be recognized that Thompson (and now Thompson and Bornat) in offering a survey of the field always noted work in oral history that drew its inspiration from a perspective that was in rebellion against the questions that were central to more instrumental impulses. In this edition that tradition continues. Thus, it is possible for the reader to become familiar with alternative methodologies. There are contradictions in ‘Voice’ but they are not hidden, simply not explored. With this caveat *The Voice of the Past* as the ‘go to’ text deserves its reputation. In spite of lingering questions of theory and method, the book remains a basis from which a broadly understood overview of the field is possible.

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When I was a history graduate student in the 1980s, writing a dissertation that depended upon triangulating oral, literary and visual sources, Paul Thompson’s *The Voice of the Past*, the first edition of which came out in 1978, was one of a handful of books that guided how I conceptualized the relationship of different expressive forms as distinct, contrasting types of evidence. Thompson’s book went well beyond the important but limited practical questions that oral history manuals published then typically addressed, but it was not as theoretically driven as Ronald Grele’s *Envelopes of Sound* or Luisa Passerini’s *Fascism in Popular Memory*. The conceptual richness of Thompson’s book grew from his experiences as a scholar relying on interviews to develop new interpretations of the past. Thompson’s previous book *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (1975) provided a practical example of how a structured set of interviews led him to rethink the social transformations the United Kingdom underwent in the early twentieth century. Neither a practical manual nor a theoretical exploration, *Voice of the Past* offered instead a manifesto for insurgent scholars aiming to expand the practice of history by including voices, topics and concerns then still typically excluded from most national histories. Thompson showed how to counter the prejudice widespread in the academy that oral history interviews were unreliable, trivial and incompatible with rigorous scholarship. Thompson answered these charges systematically in his review of how to plan, execute, preserve and analyse interviews. The

chapter on evidence in particular offered practical, common-sense insights into how to sift through the varied, contradictory, often confusing types of information found in oral accounts and distil the information most relevant to crafting a compelling interpretation of the past. At the same time, he demonstrated that other types of sources long deemed 'objective' had their own biases and contradictions for which many times oral sources offered the needed corrective.

At the time, the kind of work that Thompson and others were doing in oral history exposed the limitations of much of what I was learning in graduate seminars. But I had to wonder how a method could generate a movement as radical and transformative as its advocates claimed? Certainly not in the way that feminist, Afro-centric, Latino, queer and environmentalist scholars were creating new, autonomous bodies of scholarship exposing the biases inherent to how all academic disciplines framed priorities and evaluated work. Still, 'oral history' did feel, thanks to the examples provided by Paul Thompson, Ronald Grele, Luisa Passerini, Alessandro Portelli and many others to involve much more than simply 'interviewing', even much more than listening to people and taking their testimony as serious evidence. Meetings in North America, Europe and Latin America that I attended were in fact gatherings of activists – many though not all dedicated to the study of labour, race, gender and sexuality. The range of topics addressed in meetings was broad, and participants came from every academic discipline, as well as from museums, parks and public history projects. Added into the mix was a small but important group of community-based activists asserting their own interpretations of their communities' histories independent of what academic scholars had to say. The movement was international. Comparing experiences, practices and publications from other parts of the world almost always was a major takeaway of oral history meetings. What united everyone was the conviction that bringing the subjects of history back into the narration of history, transforming them from objectivized subjects of study into phenomenological subjects knowing the world in precise, unique ways was necessary for knowledge to generate social change. That oral history was literally all over the place, applicable to every aspect of the relatively recent past, proved that it was a method based in a universal human condition potentially able to transcend the fragmentation inherent to the nation state and the corresponding division of learning into professional specializations accompanying the institution of the modern research university.

The fourth edition of Paul Thompson's long classic work has been thoroughly revised to present a veteran's assessment of what oral history as a global 'movement' has produced over the four decades since the first edition appeared. Thompson begins his story with a survey of historical, sociological, cultural and political writing that relied on oral testimony. This section of the book, dipping into antiquity but largely focused on the last five hundred years, establishes that what is currently known as 'oral history' (a term that became common only in the 1940s) has roots as deep and prestigious as archival historical research. He discusses many important figures that collected personal testimony in order to complicate understanding of the past. The predecessors to oral history include Beatrice Webb in England, James Stuart in South Africa, Jules Michelet in France, Kunio Yanagita in Japan, and the sociologists working with Robert E. Park who pioneered qualitative interviewing at the University of Chicago. There are many others Thompson resurrects, sometimes all too briefly. The historical survey establishes that the use of interviews to expand the historical record was international virtually from the beginning and that the turn to interviewing often challenged official rhetoric that obfuscated the difficult realities of labour relations, racial division, and colonial domination. The goals, as Thompson emphasizes, were often political, but never simply political. Writers who collected and interpreted personal recollections sought to establish a fuller, more accurate record. Professionalization of oral historical research during the twentieth century led to increased reflection on practice and efforts to recognize and correct for bias, with a hope that verifiable accounts of what had happened empowered movements seeking social justice in the face of entrenched political and economic power. Thompson moves from historical foundations into detailed consideration of oral history practice in every part of the globe and in most of the disciplines and fields where interviewing is now important for contemporary scholarship. The scope is well beyond the capabilities of any one person, even a scholar as deeply engaged with the promotion of oral history as Thompson has been for all of his adult life.

That said, the book recounts many successes and establishes the importance of oral sources for many topics, while providing judicious critiques of efforts that Thompson believes were not as strong as they could have been. The ambitious scope of the new edition led Thompson to recruit two collaborators, Joanna Bornat, for many years the editor of *Oral History*, the journal of the Oral History Society in the United Kingdom; and Lynn Abrams, a historian teaching at the University of Glasgow, who contributed a chapter on recent theoretical debates in the oral history field. Abrams's chapter complements a chapter that Thompson wrote on new understandings of memory and identity and their implications for interview analysis.

Despite the contributions of two collaborators, in many ways, the book reads as an intellectual autobiography. The interpretations Thompson offers often draw from personal knowledge and, on occasion, are idiosyncratically selective. The range of material covered is well beyond the grasp of any single individual, even one who has been at the centre of oral history work internationally, who was the founding editor of the British journal *Oral History* and of fourteen books documenting in different ways the global dimensions of oral history. If any single person could have a synoptic vision of oral history work, it would be Paul Thompson, who has developed over many years of rigorous work deep personal connections with practitioners virtually everywhere. Still at times, Thompson's personal involvements take him in misleading directions. The discussion of oral history and testimonio in Latin America, struck me as weak overall. This section of the book would have benefited from consideration of John Beverley's controversial but also germinal writing on the topic, work that is unaccountably missing from Thompson's lengthy bibliography, perhaps because Beverley was never part of the 'oral history movement', but came from another strand of academic activism. Thompson's discussion of oral history in Brazil lacks the intellectual and political richness that readers of Portuguese can find in Ricardo Santhiago's detailed and beautifully argued examination, *Método, metodologia, campo: A trajetória intelectual da história oral no Brasil (Method, Methodology, Field: The Intellectual Trajectory of Oral History in Brazil)*, 2013).

One of the many strengths of the new edition of *Voice of the Past* is the widened global perspective of Thompson's survey, but readers should remember that for all the information found in the book, for every project and author mentioned there are many others not covered but equally important. A full history of oral history as a method is yet to be written because it will require first in-depth studies for each country as well as for every discipline where interviewing has become important. After that painstaking work, done by specialists of those countries and from those fields, a new account synthesizing oral history as a global practice but transcending the limitations of personal experience will be possible. For the time being, the perspectives of the veterans of the oral history movement remain precious as a record of a new field emerging, struggling against considerable opposition as well as institutional inertia to establish itself.

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I had the good fortune to work at the University of Essex with Paul Thompson for almost three decades, yet I don't think I ever told him that a memorable experience in my undergraduate career at Oxford University had been to hear him and Thea Vigne talk about oral history in about 1972. I was active in the Radical History group, a group in revolt against the dullness and conservatism of the BA in Modern History syllabus at that time. So part of what we did was to educate ourselves by inviting speakers we knew were doing path-breaking historical research to talk to us. I vividly recall the way in which these two pioneers of oral history conveyed the radical potential of this way of doing history. It made a powerful impression; and although I never went on to use oral history in my own research,

their insistence on the value of studying the lives of ordinary people – and of involving them in that study – inspired my interest in doing research on the Russian Revolution ‘from below’. *The Voice of the Past* appeared just after I joined the University of Essex and it quickly established itself as the standard text for the burgeoning practitioners of the new discipline. This new fourth edition, co-authored with Joanna Bornat, reflects the extraordinary flowering that oral history has undergone in the last 40 years. Thematically, the book ranges well beyond the history of subordinate social groups who were the prime concern of oral history in its early days, to discuss interviewing politicians, corporate executives, army generals and the like. Geographically, the new edition has long since lost its primary focus on Britain and ranges confidently across six continents. Methodologically, the new edition offers lucid accounts of the debates generated by the practice of oral history, from early ones to do with reliability and typicality of evidence, to later engagements with memory, narrative and forms of storytelling, to more practical considerations concerning the interaction of interviewer and interviewee. The discussion of these methodological issues should be read by historians of all stripes, since they touch on fundamental issues about history writing and the epistemological status of the past.

The fourth edition continues to be suffused by the original inspiration that lay behind oral history, namely its potential to make history more democratic: to ‘give back to the people who made and experience history, through their own words, a central place’ (p. 3). The geographical reach of the new edition demonstrates that this democratizing impulse has remained central to oral history as it has spread across the globe, helping to weaken dictatorships and to publicize massive suffering that such regimes suppress. I applaud this wholeheartedly. Yet as one who works on the history of Communist societies – mainly, the Soviet Union and China – I feel that the uses of oral history and life writing have played a more complex, ambivalent, sometimes even a reactionary role than is reflected in the new edition. And I wish briefly to review some of the ambivalences that pertain to oral testimony in both Communist dictatorships and post-Communist democracies – none of which goes entirely unnoticed in the volume.

Notwithstanding their collectivist ethos, Communist societies laid great emphasis on the ideological transformation of the individual citizen. Pressure to raise one’s political consciousness and thereby demonstrate one’s loyalty to the regime was fairly constant (though much less intense in the later years of Communist societies). It was central, too, to influencing one’s chances of social mobility and, in the darkest times, one’s chances of physical survival. To a considerable degree, the demonstration of political consciousness rested on one’s ability to tell one’s life story in a manner that accorded with approved ideological canons. In the Soviet Union under Stalin biographical writing fell into roughly three types: personal diaries, in which individuals engaged in ‘work on the self’ in an effort to align their lives with (or to distance them from) the Communist project; biographies that individuals had to write if they were to achieve some upward social mobility by getting into higher education, into the party or into a government job; and narratives – often paradoxically labelled ‘self-criticism’ – that individuals composed when they became the objects of criticism from their work group or party cell, narratives that were usually delivered in face-to-face meetings (Hellbeck, 2009; Studer, 2008). Sheila Fitzpatrick has written about the practices of dissimulation and unmasking that were a central feature of such life writing, motivated by individuals’ desire to hide problematic class backgrounds or cover up political errors (2005). (Incidentally, there is only one reference to respondents lying in the index of the fourth edition.) More broadly, historians have emphasized how biographical narratives were shaped by official discourse and day-to-day power relations and how they had consequential effects for individual and social identity (such as Stephen Kotkin’s influential notion of learning to ‘speak Bolshevik’, 1995), while leaving a certain space for strategic manoeuvre. In China, rituals of ‘speaking bitterness’ were a part of land reform and the most abject members of the community were trained by incoming work teams to tell their life stories in terms of class, exploitation and the horrors of the ‘old society’: terms that were by no means familiar to them. Subsequently, in 1950s China, far more than in Stalinist Russia, rituals of denunciation of, and self-criticism by those with politically problematic backgrounds became brutally familiar; and village and workplace authorities regularly wheeled out

the same hapless individuals for a drubbing when they perceived apparent inconsistencies or evasions in the latest version of their biography.¹

Given this intensely politicized conception of the life story, it is no surprise that the end of Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (and with the onset of the reform era in China from 1978) saw oral history become a vehicle through which individuals could tell uncensored versions of their life stories, challenge the previously hegemonic narrative and speak about events that the Communist regimes had denied or distorted. In China during the 1980s, there was a flood of autobiographical writing in fictional and memoir form by those who had suffered under the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). This enabled individuals to articulate their personal suffering within a larger frame of meaning (so-called ‘scar literature’ was one influential form), but one was that was not too discrepant from the official condemnation of this decade as ‘ten years of turbulence’. In recent times, there has been far less official encouragement to write about the Cultural Revolution – it runs the risk of being seen as what Xi Jinping calls the ‘negation’ of the first 30 years of Communist rule – and one consequence has been the appearance of a number of underground journals and online platforms that encourage people to write about their experiences in an unbuttoned fashion, including owning up to violence that they themselves may have committed. The retired film historian, Wu Di, who co-edits the journal, *Remembrance*, nevertheless comments on the fear, shame, suspicion, resentment, envy and desire to please that he regularly encounters when interviewing people about their Cultural Revolution experiences (2005). In contrast to the 1980s, the tendency now is for public memory of the Cultural Revolution to be more pluralistic, with some who were young Red Guards at the time insisting that this was a liberating time for them, thereby provoking fierce polemic on the internet (Zhong, Zheng, & Bai, 2001). Far more taboo as a subject of remembrance has been the famine caused by the Great Leap Forward from 1958 to 1961, which killed around 30 million people. Oral historians, in alliance with colleagues who were able to work in archives that are now less open than they were in the early 2000s, helped uncover a traumatic experience that was occluded in official propaganda, referred to euphemistically as the ‘three years of natural disaster’ (Thaxton, 2008; Xun, 2014).²

Such work is broadly in line with the democratizing potential of oral history emphasized in the fourth edition, but it is clear that even in post-Communist times oral testimony about the Communist past remains permeated by the now superannuated Communist narrative in it shapes both the form and content of what is remembered, even where the individual is negatively disposed towards the former regime. Gail Hershatter explores the experience of elderly rural women in China in the 1950s and shows how their intimate memories are sewn into a gendered collective memory that is framed by Maoist ideals, such as that of the model woman worker, and by official milestones such as land reform or the Great Leap Forward (2011). Similarly, the 80 workers interviewed by Ching Kwan Lee in the rustbelt northeastern city of Liaoning show no desire to go back to the Maoist past, yet they constantly refer to it when discussing the present, and their memories of it are framed in terms central to the hegemonic discourse of the time, including issues such as equality, job security, the slogan of workers as masters of the enterprise (2007).

The conceptual approach of most studies of Communist and post-Communist societies has been to engage with memory, rather than oral history per se. Oral history, of course, has played a huge part in shaping social memory – and key works are referenced in the fourth edition – yet memory is a wider category than oral history, which embraces film, photographs, buildings, museums, pilgrimage sites, forms of material culture and so on. This broader approach has produced some interesting work on Communist and post-Communist sites of memory. One of the most moving studies is Jun Jing’s *Temple of Memories*, which shows how in the reform era villagers in Gansu province built a Confucian temple and reconstructed relevant ritual texts, genealogies and popular versions of local history. This served to buttress the cult to the locally dominant Kong lineage (the lineage of Confucius himself), and links to the party-state, but it also opened up spaces in which the cult could be challenged through deviant practices such as spirit possession (Jing, 1996). Such non-Western cases of memory politics alert us to ways in which understandings of memory are culturally shaped: certainly, there is linguistic and cultural overlap with the English term, but classical Chinese distinguished between *jiyi* (記憶), which

denoted the capacity to recall a previous experience, and *jixing* (記性), which denoted the capacity to memorize large amounts of information, a skill that was vital to passing the civil service examinations (Wooldridge, 2015). This skill went into abeyance when the examinations were abolished prior to the overthrow of the Qing dynasty in 1911, but some memory politics currently underway express a nostalgia for the loss of historical knowledge and moral insight that are believed to have been transmitted by this traditional conception of memory.

When the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe fell in 1989, oral history was instrumentalized – often with state backing as in Poland and Hungary – and used as a way to recover what had been repressed in the nation's past by Communism. There was a purposeful drive to recovering a history of resistance on the part of citizens, especially of a nationalist kind, and to give voice to dissidents and to those who had quietly refused to compromise with the old regime, whether for political, religious or ethnic reasons. Such post-Communist uses of oral history have tended to valorize subject positions, such as victim, resister or collaborator, and to marginalize those of working people and other subordinate social groups, who enjoyed a somewhat exalted symbolic status in Communist ideology (although continuing interest in the experience of women is something of an exception to this rule) (Mark, 2010). Even when the impulse behind oral history projects has been less obviously political, the interest of historians in exploring aspects of daily life that were partially hidden under Communism, or about which it was difficult to speak, such as material shortages, informal economies, family life, sexual practices, domestic violence and so on, has often had unintended ideological effects. Getting people to speak about these things has hugely widened the historical canvas, and revealed much about the strategies of accommodation, acquiescence and appropriation deployed by ordinary people to make daily life bearable. However, their testimony has sometimes served to present the sphere of private life as beyond the reach of the state and a realm of freedom that would eventually prove stronger than Communist power (Apor, 2007). More generally, the suddenness of the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe made interviewees acutely aware of the need to tell their stories in ways that were in accord with the newly dominant liberal or nationalist narratives. So they tended to skate over instances of accommodation with, or success within the Communist order, highlighting small acts of resistance, all the time stressing continuity in their lives and thus avoiding appearing to be people who had opportunistically tacked with the prevailing political wind (Andrle, 2000). In other words, the values of liberal democracy or nationalism have continued to shape the form and content of what is remembered even in the now more open societies of Eastern Europe. The point is not to deny that oral history has served as a democratizing force – especially, insofar as it creates a more differentiated picture of society – but it is to complicate our sense of what giving back a voice to ordinary people may mean and to caution against too romantic a conception of oral history.

Notes

1. For an astonishing account of successive denunciations of a young worker activist, a suspect because of his pre-revolutionary connections with secret societies, who is finally revealed as homosexual, see Kuisong, 2015.
2. It is the Chinese journalist Yang Jisheng who deserves most credit for excavating the scale and lineaments of this catastrophe (2013).

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