

ACRPS Conference Announcement

Oral History: Concepts, Methods, and Research Agendas in the Arab Context

Theoretical Background

In recent decades, many ideas and conceptual frameworks have appeared in an effort to theorize oral history: its nature, its emergence, its role, and its value in terms of both the epistemological evolution of the science of history and an expansion of history's function to cover all aspects of human knowledge and reveal the "unsaid," the "marginalized," and the "subaltern" in the social and human life.

The Definition and Origins of Oral History

Some claim that all histories in the world, including the history of Europe as it was written by historians, from Herodotus to Voltaire and Michelet, were mainly oral histories that were later recorded. Written history was not founded as a science or as an academic discipline until well into the 19th century.

Additionally, the beginnings of the science of history among Arabs were oral, with history transmitted through verbal communication and chains of chroniclers. Even during the phase of written chronicles and historical recording, oral testimonies remained an important and essential source of historical knowledge among Arab historians, from al-Yaqubi to al-Jabarti, including those who worked on maps, travel stories, and geography. This is especially true in the works of the famed Arab geographer al-Masudi, who is perceived by some contemporary academics as a proto-ethnographer, collecting his information and material from listening, remarking, discussing, and interviewing.

The New Problematic of Oral History

Since the 1970s, the main research problem regarding oral history has been focused on questions that go beyond the emergence of oral history, its sources, and its usage in historical writing. Despite the agreement among all schools of historical writing, from the days of the German historian Von Ranke, such usages have been, and remain, essential for the primacy of the "written document," seen as the depository of historical knowledge. "If the document is lost, history is lost"; this was a commonly repeated refrain by successive generations of classically trained historians.

On the other hand, there are a number of contemporary questions regarding oral history, first formulated in the West after the Second World War. Often, those who suffered, were exiled,

or who resisted power are deprived of a written history. Who historicizes for these people without a history? How does one historicize their experiences?

Following the Second World War, the oral testimonies of people in Europe and the US, populations who had lived through the war, with its battles, tragedies, farces, sufferings, and heroisms, were collected. These testimonies were either archived and documented—in order to be used by later generations of professional historians—or immediately published in the form of memoirs, novels, stories, and films.

In Third World countries, during the era of national independence in the 1960s and 1970s, oral testimonies were employed as a source of information, political revelations, scandals, and mobilization, in addition to conventional historical writing. Within the national liberation struggles against colonialism, oral histories played an essential role in shaping collective memory and national identity in the face of attempts to dilute and eradicate national consciousness. Oral history was also employed in order to provide history for those suffering under occupation.

Beginning in the 1970s, however, the underpinnings of academic history, anchored in yellowing books, old archives, and closed libraries, began to unravel, and oral history began to penetrate the gates of the science of history, which viewed itself as a strictly academic discipline. Oral history became recognized as one of the sources of historical writing that complements other facets of history. It should be mentioned that the normative schools of history were extremely late in catching up to the methods of new history. When new historians opened up to the social sciences and the humanities—especially to ethnology, psychoanalysis, and linguistics—during the 20th century, beginning with the founders of the annals school and through the 1980s, pioneering works of history appeared. These works, by historians such as Aries, Foucault, Pierre Nora, and Jacques Le Goff, combined various disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities in an organic manner, all of which was led by the discipline of history.

Under the influence of structuralist ethnology, which relied on observation, open interviews, and listening to the discourse of the “other,” oral history became a source for the study of the countryside, villages, peasants, workers, the disabled, women, children, blacks, immigrants, marginalized neighborhoods in cities, and so on. As such, a new body of history was formed, which was termed “ethno-history” by some, since the study of history and ethnology were combined for the study of groups, identities, and memories. Oral history is the main tool for this type of investigation as it is best fit to express suppressed ideas, repressed emotions, and positions that are banned or combated by the dominant way of thinking or the official history.

In the West, the debate and practices surrounding oral history have engendered two distinct currents. On one hand, they produced academic archiving and documentation, where oral testimonies are collected in order to be used later by professional historians in universities,

libraries, and academic departments as part of official recorded history, or as records chronicling important figures or witnesses to historical events. On the other, they have given rise to a movement toward direct and activist social knowledge in which the oral testimony has a revealing role and function, not only in the discipline of history, but also in the sociology of knowledge, the sociology of culture, and political sociology. This movement includes some of the works of Pierre Bourdieu, and has its roots in Europe during the student protest movements in the late 1960s, seeing as the protests also critiqued the isolationist and elitist academic programs and the dominant discourse, both of which denied the voices of minorities, subaltern groups, and women.

The Problematic of Oral History in the Arab Context

In the Arab world, oral history remains virtually non-existent in our academic and cultural circles. While oral history registers a shy presence in some activist literature, its role remains secondary and extremely limited. The case of Palestine may be an exception: forms of oral history in Palestine exist as the manifestations of a resistant identity that refuses to disappear in the face of the Judaization of Palestine. Thus, memory and collective memory in Palestine were transformed into a memory factory for the production of different imageries that aid the Palestinian collectivity in surviving and persisting: the land, the earth, the tree, the neighborhood, the home, the songs and lullabies, dance, figures and heroes, images and stories, and so on. All of these elements are recounted as part of a history that can only be manifested as an oral testimony that helps, in the age of the internet and audiovisual technologies, redraw a reality and a history that are under constant attack by the “victors”.

Furthermore, oral history has acquired a new importance in the ongoing Arab revolutions. Despite the modern media’s coverage and the role of new communication technologies that are able to transmit many images and dialogues, many of those who participated in the revolutions—and perhaps the real agents of these events—remained on the margins of the media and the modern means of communication; in other words, they remained anonymous and their voices were absent from the media scene. Such voices could reveal something different or something added to the narratives that were written and produced by the media and other means of communication.

The Conference Agenda: Themes and sub-themes

The Concepts, Methods, and Tools of Oral History

Within this theme, there are a variety of topics that will be covered, such as:

- Defining oral history’s emergence on the international and Arab academic scenes and its usages throughout contemporary history;
- Ancient Arab usages of oral history to transmit histories and the limitations of this method as a historical source (e.g., the possibility of alteration, the effect of value judgments, and other limitations from the perspective of methodology);

- The credibility of oral testimony as a historical document in direct history (live history);
- To what extent does oral testimony represent memory (individual or collective) versus the historical event; in other words, what is the difference between the ethnological-anthropological method and the historical method?;
- Subjectivity and objectivity in the oral testimony, and the dialectic relationship between the interviewer and the interview and the necessary objective conditions for the interview;
- The use of oral testimony as a tool of academic archiving and documentation in universities and research centers versus its use as a method to reveal the unspoken and the hidden or obfuscated facts;
- Oral history and its effects on journalism and live history; and
- The types of visual media and the patterns of social communication online, and their roles in archiving oral history.

Oral History in the Applied Sciences: The study of examples and cases through testimonies

There are a variety of ways to study oral history through the various applied sciences. Below is a breakdown of the various fields covered in this conference:

Socio-cultural history—the dialectic relationship between memory and history

- Individual and collective memory in terms of identity and the homeland (individual and collective experiences and experiments);
- Undocumented art and other forms of creativity, such as professional biographies of writers, pedagogues, and the founders of schools, universities, and libraries;
- The impact of modernity on a rural society, on a tribe, or Sufi order: the study of examples through oral testimonies, for the purpose or reconstructing an undocumented social history;
- Arab communities in Europe, the Americas, and other countries; and
- Ethnicities and languages whose histories have not been written.

Political history

- Witness testimonies from those who have lived through wars, revolutions, coup d'états, and national liberation movements in Arab countries. Testimonies from occupied Palestine;
- Testimonies from the ongoing Arab revolutions and the political transformations that accompanied them or were caused by them; and
- Testimonies on the mutual awareness between Arabs and their neighbors: Turkey, Iran, and Africa (the image of the Other).

These testimonies should be cited in the research papers that are presented, within a historical perspective that stresses the importance of oral testimonies in historicizing for forgotten events or for collective memory.

Economic history

- The experiences of businessmen and entrepreneurs;
- Capitalizing on traditional economic sectors: agriculture, artisanal occupations, etc.; and
- The history of notable institutions in the national economies.

New Approaches toward Unique Subjects

With people having their own unique histories, we would like to highlight how different people and groups of people affect history. The following list is not exhaustive:

- Working women
- Rural and peasant women
- Work and workers
- Unions and institutions
- Children and childhood
- Disability and the disabled
- Patients, sickness, and the hospital
- Prisoners and the prison
- Love and emotions
- Death: imageries, traditions, and institutions