

# Part I

## Memory, History, and Cultural Authority

### Headnotes

The Introduction above has, in some detail, located the contents and thematic focus of each section's essays within the broader argument of the book. The prefatory notes in the sections, therefore, can serve a narrower and more informal end: they discuss the background, origin, and publishing history of the section's individual essays. Rather than having such information precede individual selections, I have grouped these headnotes by section, in order to suggest the broader processes of which the individual essays, responding to very specific assignments or experiences, are particular examples. So that the notes may also smoothly read as a narrative, detailed citations, acknowledgments, and republication permissions, as appropriate, will be found in a separate section covering all the essays in the volume.

The first essay in this collection was also my first encounter with some of the issues raised by oral history. As noted in the Introduction, it originated in a collective project in the American Studies Program at SUNY-Buffalo, in the early 1970s. A group of our ambitious graduate students had secured what seemed like secure start-up funds (these turned out to be wrap-up funds as well) for a journal of cultural studies, each issue of which was to have a specific theme or focus that would individually and in sum come to express the critical, cross-cultural approach then under development in our program. The counter-cultural founders somewhat playfully called the journal *Red Buffalo*—a defiantly nonacademic name that was also deliberately ambiguous, suggesting both a left political orientation and an interest in Native American perspectives on culture, history, and environment. Both dimensions were prominent in the program, the latter in a then-nascent Native American Studies component whose work, in fact, provided the basis for the first thematic issue of *Red Buffalo*.

For the second issue, the editorial collective decided on oral history. The method was already central to the department's work, there being considerable interest in oral history's capacity to generate alternative visions of American history and culture and to serve as a source for change, especially from the perspective of minorities and women. At the same time, there was also considerable interest, including but not limited to the Native Americans, in the role of oral tradition in traditional cultures as a source of stability and resistance to change imposed from the outside, or from the top down.

The implicit tension between oral history as a source of change and oral tradition as a source of resistance to change did not go unnoticed in the editing of the collection, which grew into a book-length double issue. Beginning to work through this tension provided much of what was instructive in the experience, and what is energetic and interesting in the results. Indeed, we discovered unsuspected complexity even in the notion of oral history as a liberating vision "from the bottom up." The editors had commissioned a friend in the Midwest to write a long introduction to the volume, but when it arrived they found themselves in profound disagreement with what seemed his romantic assumption that the "voice of the people" would in and of itself be a radical force for liberation. We ended up publishing two introductions—the submitted text and an opposing one by the editors. Although this debate was joined in the somewhat arcane language of left theory of consciousness, the issues involved were, in fact, anything but parochial, and struggling with them brought us all to a new appreciation of the complexity of oral history documents as cultural artifacts. My own essay's reading of *Hard Times* emerges from this context, and may usefully be read against it.

Published in 1972, the entire *Red Buffalo* oral history issue received gratifying notice, a sign of how inadequately a burgeoning interest in oral history nationwide had been met by focused critical reflection. The work even developed a kind of underground mystique, largely because occasional citations referred a growing number of readers curious about oral history to a mysterious-sounding journal people had neither heard of nor knew where to find. In any event, my own essay ascended from the underground when it was republished in the then-annual *Oral History Review*, journal of the Oral History Association, in 1979. It is reprinted here, as it was then, in its original form.

The second essay, initially drafted in 1979-80, deals with some of the same issues in a much broader frame, both in terms of the documents considered and the patterns in American history and culture to which they are seen as relevant. This work also had a somewhat unusual origin, as noted in the essay's footnotes: in 1979, the unconventional SUNY-Buffalo law school had, for its annual Mitchell Lectures, invited not some jurist or legal scholar, but

rather the eminent documentary filmmaker Marcel Ophuls, who was to come not for the usual formal speech, but rather for a week's residence during which his complex films would be screened and he would be available for ongoing discussions with students and faculty. I was asked to join a panel discussion focused on his remarkable film about the meaning of Nuremberg in history, *The Memory of Justice*.

The remarks prepared for that occasion grew into this essay, which concerns the particular problem of the "memory" of Vietnam and the larger relationship between memory and history, in an American culture in which this relationship is, I argue, especially problematic. The essay was developed in this extended form for a 1981 issue of the *Radical History Review* focused on public history, and it was slightly revised when that volume, much expanded, appeared as *Presenting the Past*, a 1986 Temple University Press book edited by Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig that is the most comprehensive and critical exploration yet available of the many dimensions of public history.

The final essay in the section has perhaps the most unusual background and is certainly the most curious in the context of this book. It is based on responses my students have made over the last decade to a kind of free-association quiz designed to reveal the "image" of American history they bring into my survey-course classroom. I have been working over this material for quite a while now, first as a kind of pedagogic gimmick and then, as the data became more compelling, as a way of teasing out some broader curiosities in the results. The exercise has ended up turning centrally on the role of history and memory in popular culture and public discourse.

I first wrote up some of the results as a conference paper for the 1983 annual meeting of the American Studies Association in Philadelphia—a session on "civil religion" needed another paper, and this proved a helpful framework for thinking about the pantheon of heroes and heroines that had been revealed in my students' quiz responses. Several years later, with increasingly striking data accumulating almost every semester in the interim, I received a call for papers for the 1987 Sixth International Oral History Conference held at Oxford University around the theme of "Myth and Collective Memory." Both theme and occasion enticed me to push the analysis another notch, because my material addressed these concerns quite naturally.

Finally, as I began preparing the still-unpublished paper for this book, the explosion of the national debate about cultural illiteracy, education, and the future of American culture (what William Greider, in a review mentioned in the footnotes, calls the "Bloom and Doom" School) helped me see at last what this essay was really all about, and how it could engage concerns far beyond the classroom context. The wider debate also increased the willing-

ness of others to take this unusual material seriously, I'm glad to say: a chance to present the work to a remarkable interdisciplinary conference in 1988 joining historians and psychologists who study memory, sponsored by Baylor University's Institute for Oral History, accelerated the crystallization process. The current version of the essay is only slightly modified from the one delivered there. And finally, at more or less the same time, the completed essay was polished and updated for its appearance in the Spring, 1989 issue of the *Journal of American History*, a thematic issue focused on History and Memory. These connections encourage me in the belief that I was not being self-indulgent to think that such an idiosyncratic exercise might help to frame and engage some of the issues raised in my other essays on oral and public history, and so fit well in this collection.

# Chapter 1

## Oral History and *Hard Times*: A Review Essay

Studs Terkel's book, *Hard Times*, is subtitled *An Oral History of the Great Depression*, and it offers a good base for exploring a number of problems inherent in doing, reading, and thinking about oral history, and for understanding why these problems matter. It is, perhaps, appropriate to the topic to begin with some comments about this paper's own genesis and history.

*Hard Times* is a massive compilation of more than 150 self-portraits of American lives—culled from hundreds more—centered on the experience of the 1930s. The interviews were conducted, edited, and arranged by Studs Terkel, the remarkable Chicago radio personality whose special gift for getting all sorts of people to talk about themselves was so profoundly demonstrated in *Division Street: America*. The people of *Hard Times* range widely, from New Deal officials and famous businessmen and artists to anonymous farmers, workers, and plain people. Terkel also includes a number of interviews with young people who can, of course, only talk about the Depression in terms of what they have read or been told, and who therefore enable us to see the book's topic in terms of received memory as well as given. To read through the enormous range of personality and experience presented in the book is to encounter, in a sort of multimedia exposure, the depth and drama of life in the Depression. As has virtually every other reader, I found it moving, poignant, intense, human, and instructive.

Shortly after a first reading, I noticed that the cover of my paperback edition said, in a blurb from *Newsweek*, "It will resurrect your faith in all of us to read this book." The inside front cover, quoting *Saturday Review*, called the book "A huge anthem in praise of the American Spirit." These intrigued me considerably, because I found the book more depressing than anything else in its overall implications. It had all the moving force of life, I felt, which is why it could so profoundly suggest the Depression's destructive impact on the lives people lived, the personalities that emerged, and on the abilities

individuals retained to understand what was happening to them. Rather than “resurrecting my faith in all of us,” the book seemed to show why Americans find it so hard to examine their culture and institutions critically, even when massive breakdowns make such examination imperative. And it seemed an anthem in praise of the American Spirit only in the sense of showing the tremendous self-preservative power of a threatened culture, as revealed in and through people whose experiences posed fundamental threats to the society’s premises. Perhaps I should not have been surprised at the book’s inspiring such different readings, but the contrast suggested that something more was at work than simply a difference of politics or perspective. I went back to the book, and to the full reviews, in order to see whether they contained more fundamental questions, questions about what oral history has to teach and about how, as a particular form of history, it can be read or misread.

The text of reviews in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Saturday Review*, the *New Yorker*, the *Nation*, and the *New York Review of Books* indicates the paperback blurbs were not unrepresentative. With only two exceptions, which I address shortly, the critics saw the vitality and struggle and life so apparent in the interviews as emblematic of America itself; they located the book’s inspirational quality in the “startling decency” of its people, and the capacity of their comments to connect us with deep cultural sources of redemptive, transcending energy. In the *New Yorker*, for example, L. E. Sissman calls *Hard Times* “a folk-song composed by American voices to celebrate and commemorate the 1930’s,” a song which has its center in “a sense of solidarity in adversity, a willingness to reach out to others, an ability to see others not as households of accreted possessions but as naked human beings. In the birth of that paradoxical nation was the rebirth of some elemental historical principles: truth, justice, and equality.”

Beyond the repeated litany of inspiration, one is struck by how the reviewers so inspired seem to share a particular notion of the nature of the book, almost apart from its contents and meaning. In the first place, they treat the interviews as reflecting a distant and discrete historical phenomenon, as being literally evidential of the 1930s, with the critic’s job being the provision of a contrastive, contemporary perspective. This explains why the particular atmosphere of 1970 figures so centrally in the reviews. The fragment from Henry Resnick’s piece in the *Saturday Review*, quoted earlier, reads in full: “Americans have little reason to be proud of their country these days, but in *Hard Times* Studs Terkel has given us what amounts to a huge anthem in praise of the American Spirit. [It has] an almost mythic quality.” Faced with “the hopelessness and squalor of contemporary life,” he said, we need the book to “put us back in touch with our elemental humanity.” The sources of this need are suggested by the way the critics generally understood Terkel’s conversations with young people. Rather than taking these as illustrating the complex

process of historical memory and generational transfer, they saw them only as revealing the character of the young people themselves. Writing in a year of protest, of Kent State and Cambodia, Geoffrey Wolf in *Newsweek* thus discovered the “startling decency” of Terkel’s people in relation to the arrogance and insensitivity he reads in contemporary youth, and he observed acutely that “memory is long, but curiosity is not.”

There are other senses in which the critical comments imply a common view of *Hard Times* and, by extension, oral history. It is revealing, for example, to observe that critics so concerned with the relevance of the book for the present generally ignore the fact that the interviews were conducted only recently; the people who spoke to Terkel so movingly of the past were also trying to live in and understand the 1960s. Thus the basic historicity of the interviews—the degree to which they involve historical statements rather than, or in addition to, historical evidence—was barely alluded to in the reviews being considered. In fact, rather than exploring the oral testimonies as forms of history the tendency was to perceive them as something of a counterhistorical way of understanding the past. The critics described the book in terms of literature rather than history, comparing it frequently to Oscar Lewis and Truman Capote. Resnick’s article even saw Terkel as challenging the hegemony of history as a form of knowledge, predicting that “dedication to the truth as fact will be supported by more and more historians as the fundamentals of historiography encounter increasing threats in the form of books like *Hard Times*.”

The critics, this suggests, understood the book as history mainly in the sense of telling it “like it was.” “As history the book may be weak on the why,” observed *Time*, “but it can hardly be matched by any scholarly work in giving a sense of what it was like at that time.” Thus oral history enables us to see history, according to this view, as more or less direct and unmediated experience, rather than as the abstracted and ordered rendering of objective historical intelligence.

Two reviews in the batch did not share this notion of oral history, and significantly, these were the only two that did not find the book a confirmation and celebration of the American spirit and character. In the *New Yorker*, Murray Kempton focused on the variable relation people could have to their own experience in the past—“who noticed what was happening and who didn’t”—and what has happened to this sense over time. Exploring the gap between what was felt and what was said in the interview, he sought to locate the controlling level of experience where many levels exist simultaneously and are selectively remembered. He concluded that the Depression “did not teach us what it should have . . . there is a gaiety in these recollections which ought to have been more transfiguring yet wasn’t,” and he tried to explore why. Nelson Algren, writing in *The Nation*, looked even more closely at the speak-

ers themselves, rather than at the content of their recollections, and concluded that “the author has provided us with a definitive report on the psychological recoil of a generation that suffered a failure of nerve.”

The contrast among the reviews confirmed for me the notion that reading oral history depends, more than in most historical writing, on the deeper assumptions one has about the nature of the evidence and the form. Because most of the critics seem at least partially to have misconstrued *Hard Times* owing to an uncritical approach to the book’s method, it appeared that one good way to get more deeply into the book might be to look at its historical nature, rather than its content per se. Therefore, I propose to use *Hard Times* as a way of demonstrating the need for a more self-conscious and reflective sense of the nature of oral history, what it has to teach, and what questions the reader is obligated to bring to it. That this perspective leads to a more critically analytic view of cultural processes than does one which sees oral history as direct experience is, I hope to show, far from coincidental.

The discussion so far would reduce to a simple truism were it not for a compelling paradox: oral history is of such self-evident importance and interest that it has proven difficult for people to take it very seriously. By this I mean that those interested in history, culture, and politics have responded so intuitively to recent work in oral history that they have not generally stopped to think about what it is, on levels beyond the obvious, that makes it so worth pursuing. In part, this is because proponents of oral history, particularly in America, are somewhat a prisoner of its own methodological past.

In quasi-formal terms, American oral history came into its own through Allan Nevins’s project at Columbia University, the main focus of which was on political and diplomatic history, and the main work of which was the “debriefing” of the Great Men before they passed on. Its nature was explicitly archival, informational, and elitist. This work has profoundly shaped recent interest in oral history, although in a largely negative and reactive way: critics saw the focus on great decisionmakers as a part of the traditional bias toward the articulate and powerful, and calls for history “from the bottom up” found a swift focus in oral history, a form that seemed to fit the object of transcending evidential biases that sustained the elitist perspective. However, while the bottom-up approach seems to promise generically different insights for oral history—by exploring, for example, common shared experiences in preference to individualized and unique actions—these have not yet generated a really clear sense of any special nature and role for oral history. To the extent that oral history has produced such a sense, it has come in work on traditional and folk societies and centers on a view of oral tradition as a distinct type of historical thinking and transference. But in Western society, where culture is so penetrated by literacy, communication, and self-consciousness as to make such notions of oral tradition of dubious

application, oral history has not gone much beyond the traditional focus of historical work.

Accordingly, most of us have casually assumed that oral history does one of two things, or perhaps both. First, it functions as a source of historical information and insights, to be used, in traditional ways, in the formulation of historical generalizations and narratives. In this sense, the oral method and the interest in the inarticulate do swing the flashlight of history into a significant, much neglected, and previously unknowable corner of the attic, but they still assume a more traditional sense of the object and nature of explanation. On the other hand, oral history can be understood as a way of bypassing historical interpretation itself, avoiding all the attendant elitist and contextual dangers. It seems to provide a way to communicate with the past more directly, to be presented with a somehow purer image of direct experience.

The prevailing choices can thus be concisely understood as that of "more history" or, in that special sense, "no history." It is risky to associate these leanings with particular positions of other spectrums: Allan Nevins and Staughton Lynd, for example, share the sense of the informational and archival purposes of oral history, while, as we have just seen, conservative journalists are just as likely to take the "pure experience" position as are radicals who might more usually be expected to endorse it as a way of demystifying and reclaiming from historians the experience of the people. In any event, "more" or "no" history seem to represent the poles between which the common notion of oral history hangs in a state of vagueness. Having said this, I wish to return to *Hard Times*, because in spite of its friendly critics, I think it can be seen as outlining a way to transcend these categories, and a way to discover the role for oral history in modern society.

Studs Terkel suggests this in the book's first sentence. "This is a memory book, rather than one of hard fact and precise statistic," he writes. In prefatory notes, he muses more personally on this theme: the book is "about Time as well as a time," he says: "heroes and dragons of a long-gone day were old men, some vigorous, some weary, when I last saw them. Some have died." And in the introduction he quotes Steinbeck's Pa Joad as saying "He's tellin' the truth, awright. The truth for him. He wasn't makin' nothin' up." Adds Terkel, referring to the people of *Hard Times*, "in their rememberings are their truths." From the start, then, Terkel distances the book from the kinds of oral history discussed so far. Were we searching either for information or a pure sense of how it "really" was, both the intense subjectivity of his form and the thirty-year lag would disqualify the interviews from being taken seriously.

But Terkel is clearly not apologizing; rather, he is suggesting that these factors are the strength and uniqueness of the book, in that they force us to look at what the interviews actually represent, rather than at what they can not claim to be. In these terms, the question of memory—personal and histor-

ical, individual, and generational—moves to center stage as the object, not merely the method, of oral history. The questions that emerge can be thought of in the following general forms, focused on process and change: What happens to experience on the way to becoming memory? What happens to experience on the way to becoming history? As an era of intense collective experience recedes into the past, what is the relationship of memory to historical generalization? These questions, so basic to thinking about how culture and individuality interact over time, are the sort of questions that oral history is peculiarly, perhaps uniquely, able to penetrate.

The best way to show this is to indicate how many different things are going on in the book, how many different methods the interviews suggest for studying how experience, memory, and history act on lives over time. In somewhat schematic form, the interviews with young people can represent one end of the spectrum of possibilities: here, the Depression takes the form of pure and abstracted memory, wildly subjective and selective. An interview with Christopher Lasch holds down the other end, for he speaks as the abstracted voice of professional history, generalizing with calm confidence and cool breadth about the painful experience bubbling through the surrounding pages. Pure memory, then, with all its faults, and pure history, with all its limitations. All the other interviews lie somewhere between, and accordingly require the most careful reading.

To this end, I suggest three questions that can help in exploring the complexity of the interviews. What sort of person is speaking? What sort of thing is he or she talking about? What sort of statements about it are being made? The range of possible answers to each of these can serve as axes for mapping the territory between the poles, for sensing the possible combinations in which people relate and integrate the dimensions of past and present experience.

Who is speaking? Intuitively, most of us are primarily sensitive to the social class or status of the speaker, particularly if our interest is in oral history's ability to work from the bottom up. Perhaps more important, however, is the way the speaker functioned historically, in relation to the overall experience with which the book is concerned. Some of Terkel's people speak of private and anonymous lives, historical in their generality rather than their particularity. Others, however, were more precisely "actors" in historically visible forums, and their subjectivity thus has important public and self-conscious dimensions. Generally, this spectrum of private and public experience and subjectivity parallels the spectrum of power and position, but with important exceptions: rich people who lived quite privately and unselfconsciously; labor organizers, workingmen, and a remarkable revivalist preacher whose proletarian experience is rooted to a major extent in a public dimension well beyond their own subjectivity.

What is being talked about? Responses can be crudely sorted out according to the way they deal with things actually experienced as opposed to things observed at some remove, or experienced in only the most general terms. What this implies is a more complicated spectrum of particularity and generality, ranging from detailed anecdotal reporting of personal incidents, to the abstracted discussion of general conditions and experiences. In these terms, the interviews show no categorical relationship to the social nature of the speakers—powerful politicians are as likely to give a heavily anecdotal account as are barely literate workers to generalize freely about “how it was” at some time, and vice versa. Interviews with two psychiatrists show in a different way what this concern means. One looks back and discusses his practice, his problems, his professional activity, and his personal perspective as seen through his work. The other discusses the psychic patterns he found himself facing in his patients and generalizes about their significance. Both interviews offer insights into the men and the Depression, yet they are quite different examples of the “evidence” oral history can produce, and they need to be understood, qualified, and digested in different ways.

What are they saying about it? This has to do with the sorts of statements people make; it seems to me the most problematic and yet the most crucial category. At what distance, in what ways, for what reasons, and in what patterns do people generalize, explain, and interpret experience? What cultural and historical categories do individuals use to help understand and present a view of experience? How are we to understand the variable weave of pure recall and reflective synthesis—historical statements as well as historical information—that characterize almost all of the interviews? All these may sound like very abstract matters, but together with the other questions I think they form the core of Terkel’s “memory book,” and lie close to the source of its enormous energy. By showing people trying to make sense of their lives at a variety of points in time and in a variety of ways, by opening this individual process to view, the oral history reveals patterns and choices that, taken together, begin to define the reinforcing and screening apparatus of the general culture, and the ways in which it encourages us to digest experience.

The perspective afforded by the questions I have suggested helps clarify the substantive lessons of the book, and Terkel notes some of these explicitly. (It is again significant to note that his own clues were apparently uninteresting to critics who had little sensitivity to the complexity of his method.) Despite the systemic and general nature of the Depression—more precisely because of it, of course—people tended to view their problems in atomized, alienating ways. Shame, a sense of personal failure, unavoidable obsession with personal concerns, paralytic insecurity in several dimensions—all these are repeatedly described as the predominant personal responses. Translated somewhat, this can be understood as the perception of collective, historical experi-

ence in the form of idiosyncratic personal experience, with all the attendant psychic scarring, searing memory, and sense of crushing responsibility. Anyone who has wondered why the Depression crisis did not produce more focused critiques of American capitalism and culture, more sustained efforts to see fundamental structural change, will find more evidence in the interior of these testimonies than in any other source I know. By seeing people turn history into biographical memory, general into particular, we see how they tried to retain deeper validation of their life and society, and how they deferred the deeper cultural judgment implied by the Depression crisis.

The interviews also show these dynamics remaining central to the way the people live with their history over time. The further the generalizations are located from the crisis itself—people reflecting about it, rather than remembering how they thought about it themselves—the greater the tendency to present the past experience in a variety of romanticized modes. Having never been well-connected with the history, memory continues to function as a creator of distance, not merely as an expression of it. The interviews with youth show this most directly, for their hazy sense of the Depression owes much to what their parents have not remembered and have not told them. But far more than fading memory is involved here. As many of the young people say, and as most of the interviews confirm, current realities have affected the transferal process crucially, just as they influenced the views of the journalists discussed earlier. Contemporary pressures and sensitivities encourage people to screen their memories in a selective, protective, and above all didactic fashion. Sometimes this comes across as a moving tribute to the pain of living, sometimes as a desperate weapon in what has been called “the shootout at generation gap.” But whatever their tone, and whatever their limits as history in traditional terms, these responses are fascinating in what they reveal about historical memory patterns as cultural documents themselves.

Contemporary contexts, in this sense, operate as a sort of rearguard attack on the structure of memory, and the needs of validation begin to work in a way paradoxically inverse to their effects on the understanding of initial experience. Failure forced people to reduce general experiences to personal terms, the intense pain thereby sheltering them from deeper, more profoundly threatening historical truths; survival, however, seems to encourage them to elevate personal and biographical generalization into historical terms, at once a self-validating message and a culturally validating legacy for the next generation. The “real” history has thus been doubly filtered by time and subsequent experience before it reaches Terkel’s tape recorder, and the contradictions of the culture are thus doubly masked.

These comments just begin to suggest ways in which the interviews can be studied for insights into cultural and historical processes. The crucial point

is the centrality of the dimension these questions locate, to the understanding of oral history, particularly in a self-conscious advanced society. Rather than the “more history” or the “no history” discussed earlier, this approach promises unique insights that are profoundly historical in a somewhat special sense. By studying how experience, memory, and history become combined in and digested by people who are the bearers of their own history and that of their culture, oral history opens up a powerful perspective; it encourages us to stand somewhat outside of cultural forms in order to observe their workings. Thus it permits us to track the elusive beasts of consciousness and culture in a way impossible to do within, and this, I think, is at the heart of the variant readings of *Hard Times* with which this chapter began.

To develop this critical perspective, to look for significance on this level of oral history, is to argue that the medium of the retrospective biography is in some ways its message. But only implicitly. Perhaps the greatest danger in modern historical studies is the fascination with new methodology, which makes exciting new forms of evidence seem to exhibit self-evident and unequivocal significance. More careful work in most areas, however, quickly shows that the questions to be asked are by no means obvious, the uses of the materials by no means self-evident, and the results to be obtained by no means necessarily meaningful. What matters, rather, are the insights and questions that the historian brings. The same is just beginning to be realized about oral history. Although it is so tempting to take historical testimony to be history itself, a tendency reinforced by the discomfort intellectuals feel at being intellectuals, the very documents of oral history really suggest a very different lesson. To the extent that *Hard Times* is any example, the interviews are nearly unanimous in showing the selective, synthetic, and generalizing nature of historical memory itself. And far from being restricted to the historian's study, these capacities are shown to be not only present, but central in the way we all order our experience and understand the meaning of our lives. There seems to be no reason why, in order to decipher the meaning of memory, historians should feel uncomfortable about applying the same reflective, generalizing intelligence to the documents of oral history.