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Conference report  
Associazione italiana di storia orale (Aiso)

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The first conference of the Associazione italiana di storia orale (Aiso) was held in Rome on the 16th and 17th March 2007. Aiso was formed in 2006 following discussion at the biennial conference of the International Oral History Association (IOHA) in Rome in 2004: despite the international reputation of Italian oral historians such as Luisa Passerini and Alessandro Portelli, a national association had never previously been firmly established, and it was felt that this was long overdue. The Casa della Memoria e della Storia, opened in 2006 as an initiative of Rome's Department for Culture, has provided a home for Aiso alongside other organisations, and was also the venue for this well-attended conference. The main room was generally packed with participants, and it was fortunate that a good video link had been arranged to additional seating in the foyer area.

The organizers of this first conference pulled together a very full two-day programme from which one could get a sense of the wide range of oral history-based activity currently being undertaken in Italy. While a significant amount of work was presented which was based in Rome and the Lazio region, we also heard about projects based in Sardinia, Sicily, the Veneto, Friuli, Tuscany, Naples, and with Italy's minority ethnic groups. Most presentations dealt with projects centred on specific communities, but some dealt directly with resources and methodology. On both days the morning and afternoon speaker sessions were separated by sessions for the presentation of audiovisual work. Contributions also ranged in approach from the more strictly 'historical' to the more interpretative and representational. Because of the fullness of the programme it would be difficult to present every offering here: if I omit discussion of particular presentations this in no way represents a judgment on their value, but reflects my own particular interests and personal journey through the programme. Rather than provide an account of the conference in its programme order, I am going to deal with the material in themes: perspectives on oral history and its development as an approach, resources and their use, and community-based projects.

## Perspectives on Oral History

In view of the IOHA's encouragement for the establishment of the new association, it was fitting that the opening presentation should be given by *Alistair Thomson* of the University of Sussex (England), current IOHA President. Thomson's paper, a version of which is published in the Spring 2007 issue of the *Oral History Review*, presented an overview of the development of oral history in terms of a series of broad phases distinguished, he suggests, by paradigm shifts in theory and practice. Contemporary oral history has its genesis in the decades after World War Two in a renewed enthusiasm for oral testimony as a means of telling the 'people's history', assisted by wider availability of recording equipment. A second phase, from the late 1970s, is characterized by what Thomson describes as 'post-positivist' approaches: criticisms of oral history's validity are addressed by development of a more sophisticated understanding of the particular nature of its 'truths', and in fact by embracing its subjectivity. The following decade turns attention to the role of the interviewer and the nature of the interview, analysing the factors and processes which together generate the 'oral source'. A fourth phase is triggered in the 1990s by the innovations of the digital revolution which open up access to the recorded material and switch attention from the written transcript back to the audio/audiovisual source. Across these phases, particular themes can also be identified such as the increasing interdisciplinarity of approaches to the interview and its interpretation.

In drawing the first day to a close, Aiso's President *Gabriella Gribaudo* drew attention to the different perspectives in evidence at the conference, suggesting that one of the functions that Aiso can usefully have is to encourage exchange between disciplines. After Thomson's address, participants had heard from the sociologist *Antonella Spanò* about research methodologies which employ biographical methods, analysing and distinguishing between an individual's 'narrated life

story' and their 'experienced life history'. Spanò's presentation, with its different frame of reference and use of a vocabulary alien to much of the audience, was perhaps uncomfortable listening for oral historians whose aims and ethical framework tend to be somewhat different. However, it was also interesting for its exposition of, for example, approaches to interviewing as developed within a different discipline, and for the thoughts it generated on people's ownership of their own life stories.

The second day of the conference started on the terrace with an informal concert of popular song from a group led by *Sara Modigliani*, and then formal proceedings were opened by *Alessandro Portelli*. Portelli's paper presented the oral history project in Harlan County, Kentucky (USA) that he started in 1973 and which is still ongoing. Over the years Portelli has seen this former coalmining country transformed from a stronghold of the American labour movement, celebrating its identity in song, to an area of social fragmentation and unemployment and a testing ground for painkilling medication, contributing to widespread drug dependence. Portelli discussed the loss of local pride and collective memory when a community's resistance is broken and its identity lost, and the potential healing powers of the rediscovery of a community's history through theatre and other means. This study is notable for the length of time of Portelli's relationship with this area and for the perspective that this involvement gives, potentially enabling a community to re-connect with its forgotten strengths.

Portelli is one of ten oral historians interviewed for a new book, *Il microfono rovesciato*, which was the subject of the presentation by its editor, *Alessandro Casellato*, that followed. As an adjunct to this, *Irene Rosati* spoke briefly about her particular experience of interviewing Portelli. This project creates an oral history of oral history, putting at the other end of the microphone those who normally interview. Casellato's view is that while this discipline now seems to have acquired a degree of academic respectability, being taught as a specialist course at Venice for example, it is not something that can just be picked up by reading a manual. Instead, it is a craft that must be learnt in the doing and by watching the masters at work. This is borne out in the accounts of their personal journeys in this field by Portelli, Gribaudo, Cesare Bermani, Luisa Passerini and other interviewees.

Some of the contributions to the conference seemed to be striving for a certain sort of historical truth but to fall within what one might call 'representation'. *Ascanio Celestini* offered some thoughts about the distance that is required to interpret events with a sense of perspective, and spoke about his approach to understanding people's experiences, for example with regard to the psychiatric system, and way of arriving at a story that can be told. Actors *Francesco Basso* and *Sara Celegghin* presented extracts from a theatrical piece representing the lives of *braccianti* in the Padova area, developed from the research of Elisabetta Novello (see below). While these representations are perhaps more 'art' than 'history', they have a validity of their own and demonstrate the range of outcomes that may result from working with oral sources.

## Resources

A number of presentations discussed the use of particular resources. *Enrico Grammaroli* of the *Archivio Sonoro Franco Coggiola*, the sound archive of the Circolo Gianni Bosio now based at the Casa della Memoria e della Storia, talked about the nature of a sound recording and what it captures. He covered the conservation and organizational issues, including digitization and indexation of the archive, and also discussed collaborative work on the construction of montages of sounds and voices from the recordings made by the Circolo since 1967.

*Massimo Pistacchi*, Director of the *Discoteca di Stato*, discussed the issues for this resource which was founded in 1928 with the initial aim of conserving recordings of poets, generals and statesmen. Its interests were subsequently broadened to include all musical recordings made, as well as collections of ethnographic and linguistic interest. The collections expanded rapidly between the

1960s and the early 1980s, creating problems of organization and accessibility. From 2005, work has been under way to digitize 300,000 recordings.

Another resource presented was the photographic archive of ATAC, the agency responsible for transport in Rome, which holds some 50,000 images. For the most part these date from the 1920s onwards but stretch back to 1890, and have now been digitized and re-catalogued. Together with the administrative records of the agency, including its employment records, they reflect the history of Rome as well as of ATAC. The archive was allowed to speak for itself in a video presentation of selected images, demonstrating its richness and historical span.

*Sergio Pelliccioni* presented the work of the *Archivio della Memoria di Roma*, a project that started in 2002 and now represents a substantial collection. 600 interviews have been recorded, working in collaboration with schools, thousands of photographs collected, twenty videos made and four publications issued, but the project is now struggling financially to keep going. An extract from the video 'Voci di guerra e di mestieri' was shown in one of the projection sessions. This production is part of the second phase of a longer-term project and draws on fifty interviews in five locations across Lazio to portray the history, traditions and transformation of the region.

## Community-based projects

There were reports from a range of projects in specific communities, some concluded and some ongoing. *Alessandro Triulzi* gave an account of the history of the improvised community of people mainly from Eritrea, Ethiopia and the Darfur region of Sudan in warehouse space at the Tiburtina station, dubbed 'Hotel Africa' by journalists and covered in a superficial manner in the press. Triulzi raised a series of issues for people working with the history of insecure migrant communities: the difficulty of creating an environment within which a relationship of trust can be established between interviewee and interviewer, the danger for the interviewee of deviating from the narrative that must be offered to the authorities in order to minimise the risks of expulsion, and the problems of how best to conserve these stories, including the choice of language, given that they are a part of Italy's history as well as that of their places of origin. *Francesca Decimo* discussed the evolution of her work interviewing Moroccan and Somali women between 1994 and 2003, in Naples and Bologna. Contact with these groups forced her to re-examine her suppositions and modify her approach, drawing back from her initial desire to explore gender inequalities which had proved an impediment to understanding these women's lives in their own terms.

Publications from the *Archivio Storico della Comunità Ebraica di Roma* (ASCER) were introduced by *Silvia Haia Antonucci*. These include an analysis of the effects of the racial laws of 1938 on the economic activity of Italy's Jewish population, a study of the deportation of 16th October 1943, and a history of the Jewish community in the post-war years. Antonucci's presentation raised issues about the tension between the pursuit of a full historical record and the distressing nature of traumatic memories. Related issues were raised in the paper by *Caterina Di Pasquale*, one of a team working under Pietro Clemente on a project financed by the Tuscan regional government. This looked at five sites of massacres in 1944 including Sant'Anna di Stazzema, where 560 men, women and children were killed by SS troops. The phenomenon of 'divided memory' was encountered in all these locations, and in Sant'Anna the development of relationships with survivors and relatives of the victims required great sensitivity because of their resentment that their traumatic losses had effectively been ignored for 50 years.

*Giuseppina Incalza* presented work on the many ordinary people who were sent into internal exile between 1926 and 1943 by the regime, for between one and ten years, to guard against their potential negative influence on their own communities. In total some 16,000 orders were made; Incalza's research has focussed on the province of Rome, where nearly 1,500 people were sent

away, and places interviews with these alongside the official documentation of committee decisions.

The audience seemed to respond with particular enthusiasm to some of the video presentations in the projection sessions that punctuated each day. Here the material came alive and one could see directly the methodology in action. The film made by *Stefania Ficacci* and others in Tivoli, looking back to Liberation and before, juxtaposed the opinions and understandings (or misunderstandings) of young people with the accounts of those who lived through Fascism and the war years. This was also interesting for the style of filming which acknowledged the inter-subjectivity of the interview process, showing the presence of interviewers rather than editing them out. Extracts from another film, by *Massimiliano Cera* and *Luca Ricciardi*, evoked the experiences of the residents of Cisterna di Latina in January 1944 by going back with people to the caves where they had taken refuge from the Allied bombing raids. This film also had some interesting camerawork, making the filming process explicit by panning back to show a second camera in position, and like the Tivoli film used music on the soundtrack to heighten particular moments.

*Francesco Di Bartolo* and other students of Salvatore Lupo gave a presentation and showed part of a video which dealt with the deaths of 11 people at Portella della Ginestra in Sicily on May 1<sup>st</sup> 1947, when the crowd was fired on by Salvatore Giuliano's men during the demonstrations by agricultural workers for land reform and celebrations of recent electoral success. Interviews were shown with relatives of both one of Giuliano's men and one of the victims, the advantages of the visual record being amply demonstrated in the capturing of head movements, gestures, facial expressions and 'illustrated' silences. This work attempts to put this outbreak of violence into a social and political context, above all relating it to the effective absence of the State as a real institution in post-war Sicily.

A contrasting example of post-war conflict was seen in the video extract and presentation by *Anna Di Gianantonio* and others on Monfalcone in Venezia Giulia, an area relatively untouched by the atrocities associated with the *foibe* but nevertheless having complex ethnic, social and political divisions. The work explores problematic issues regarding senses of belonging and identity, national aspirations, and the meaning of 'Liberation'.

The many identities of Rome were the subject of *Lidia Piccioni's* paper, and have been the interest of an inter-disciplinary group of geographers and anthropologists whose concern is to draw together the human and architectural aspects of the city's history. According to Piccioni, Rome is paradoxically under-studied in view of the enormous amount of archival material available and needing conservation. While a typology of three broad groupings of urban areas can be proposed that relates successive phases of urbanisation, residents of all these areas identify themselves as having been 'i pionieri' as the city expanded into the country. Three areas of the Roman periphery have been the location of research presented by *Maria Immacolata Maciotti*, who touched on the difficulty of interpreting nostalgia for past times in the *borgate* when people may also be mourning their lost youth. This project, started in 2006, is now working across the three locations on themes which include work, education, and political activity.

The paper by *Tommaso Baris* looked at industrial action in the province of Frosinone, and in particular analysed the circumstances which led to one worker's death during strike action being all but forgotten, while another worker's death is still well remembered. The subjective nature of memory was underlined by *Giovanni Contini*, who presented an analysis of the contrasting collective self-images constructed in the Tuscan villages of Santa Croce sull'Arno and Scarperia. These had experienced, respectively, post-war prosperity and decline. In both cases, historical context and external factors are consistently undervalued so that the villages' differing fortunes come to be explained by their residents principally with reference to characterizations of the essential nature of local people, either as resourceful and worthy or as mistrustful and undeserving.

Contrasting work in the areas of Padova and Vicenza was presented by *David Celetti* and *Elisabetta Novello*, who also introduced the first issue of *Memoria/Memorie*, the re-launched review

of Padova's Centro Studi Ettore Lucini which aims to give pride of place to oral history. Celetti discussed the interviews with small-scale industrial entrepreneurs to portray the development of private and family firms in and around Vicenza since the war, while Novello reported on the study of Federbraccianti which had been commissioned by CGIL. Interviews from this were then drawn on to create a theatrical performance conveying the uncertain existence and political engagement of agricultural labourers in the post-war period (see above).

*Antonio Caiafa's* evocative film of families engaged in the small-scale industry of glovemaking in the Sanità district of Naples, partly subtitled, provided an excellent example of how to convey a wider story with a narrow focus on individual situations.

The final presentation of the conference was given by *Antonietta Podda*, who used extracts from audio recordings to illustrate discussion of her project on life and work in the mining communities of southern Sardinia. The mines drew migrant workers from all over Italy, and Podda likened the overwhelming presence of the mining company, which managed the workers' accommodation as well as the industry, to Goffman's concept of the 'total institution'.

In conclusion, this was a conference with rich and varied content. It was acknowledged that the opportunity for more reflection and discussion had to some extent been sacrificed in the interests of hearing a full range of presentations, and the conference would perhaps have been better held together by a plenary session to both draw it to a close and indicate the way forward. However, there was much stimulating material for the many who attended, and the event should be judged a success.