



# Interview with Paul Thompson<sup>1</sup>

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**Sílvia Correia:** Good morning to all, I have the great honour to present Prof. Paul Thompson, one of the most known experts in oral history. When I first started to do oral history, one of the first books that I worked on was Paul Thompson's *The Voice of the Past*.<sup>2</sup> So, today we have this great honour to talk to him and ask a few questions and all the doubts that we have about oral history, or his academic history.

**Paul Thompson:** I want to talk to you about the development of oral history in more recent years and I am basing that on the four years of work which I have done to produce a new edition of my book, *The Voice of the Past*. The first edition came out in 1978 and, like the present book, was a combination of ideas: the philosophy of oral history and also the practice of it. But this first edition was based on the experience of a small number of English-speaking people. I think the biggest difference is that not only this book is much "fatter", thicker, but it is based on reading hundreds of new books using oral history, looking at websites, listening to audio tours, and also participating in oral histories community, so a great deal of new experiences is embedded into it. And the most fundamental change is that it has become part of an international movement.

The number of new books being published in oral history is very striking. I would say that there are perhaps a hundred new books in English every year and obviously many more in other languages. So I draw on that experience and try to show where oral history can make new contributions to history, but I also continue to carry out oral history myself and

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2237-101X02004001>

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Thompson is a historian and a sociologist, who has pioneered the development of oral history as a research methodology. He is founding editor of the journal *Oral History* and founder of the National Life Stories at the British Library in London. He is author of *The Edwardians* (1975), *The Voice of the Past* (1978), *Living the Fishing* (1983), *The Myths We Live By* (1990), *City Lives* (1996), *Pathways to Social Class* (1998), and *Jamaican Hands across the Atlantic* (2006). In June 2018, Thompson has been at PPGHIS / UFRJ and, after a lecture, he answered questions from professors and students of the program. The event was recorded, transcribed by Daniel Dutra, edited and now published by TOPOI. We thank Matthias Assunção and Lise Sedrez for the collaboration throughout the entire process, as well as their participation in the editing process of the transcribed text. In addition to Assunção and Sedrez, Sílvia Correia, Luiza Larangeira and Henrique Gusmão participated in the work of adapting the text to this version published here.

<sup>2</sup> THOMPSON, Paul. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978. The last reprint of this book, revised and expanded, came out in 2017 by the same publisher.

this varies from participation in community projects to recording the life stories of more distinguished people — for instance, famous anthropologists and sociologists.

Nevertheless, the heart of oral history and its core mission remains little changed, still central to all this activity. By that I mean the art of listening to people, which is different from a form of interviews where it is all laid out in boxes and you tick one or another, or the typical media interview, where the interviewer keeps interrupting and asking leading questions. With an oral history interview, the great art is to learn not to say much yourself, to learn to give space for the person you are interviewing to express his or her experience, but at the same time not to forget what you want to know, what your theme is. So, it is a combination, a reflexive combination of two approaches.

I think when oral history was first developing, it was more focused on getting factual evidence about the past and then very soon that was challenged and the whole nature of memory has remained a central issue. But the key developments happened quite a long time ago, and it was essentially the recognition that an interview is not just an interview about the past, but it is a dialogue between the past and the present. So, you might say there are three people in the interview. One is yourself as the interviewer, then there is the person from the past whose memories are being given, but also at the same time there is the reflection by that person on their own past. So there is this double strength in oral history.

That key feature of oral history has been more and more explored in terms of particular contexts. For instance, what is the impact of trauma on memory? Often it silences people altogether. Another very important possibility is the invention of memories. People fantasize about their own past. A very striking example of this is given by Alessandro Portelli,<sup>3</sup> from Rome. It was he who formulated this idea of how we understand the oral history interview, and it was based particularly on his own work in the armament manufactory town of Terni, in central Italy.

He carried out many interviews there, and I think this is the first point in trying to unravel what is in interviews. It is much more difficult if you have one lone interview. It is much better if you have several and you can make comparisons. Much of the information he collected was very straightforward, but one thing he noticed was that a small number of people confused events. There were many struggles between the workers and the employers, who were the State (the State owned this factory). In one of these struggles a worker was killed. A minority of workers, but a significant number, confused the situation in which this

<sup>3</sup> Alessandro Portelli is Professor of American Literature at the Faculty of Human Sciences at La Sapienza University (Rome/Italy). He is the author of important studies on oral history, like: PORTELLO, Alessandro. *Biografia di una città: storia o racconto: terni 1830-1985*. Torino: Einaudi, 1985; \_\_\_\_\_. *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. Albany: State University of NY Press, 1991; \_\_\_\_\_. *The Text and the Voice: Writing, Speaking and Democracy in American Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994; \_\_\_\_\_. *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997; \_\_\_\_\_. *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

happened, because in fact it was about whether Italy should or should not join NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization). But this minority said that it was a dispute between the workers and the State, because they remembered that it was the dominant issue in strikes during those years. You wouldn't understand that there was a retrospective change in their memories unless you had a group of interviews to provide a context.

There was another single interview by an old man who had fought as a partisan. He was a very convinced communist and he believed that it was a mistake for the Communist Party to come out of the mountains and say "we will fight democratic elections, we won't carry on fighting in the mountains for the conquest of Italy, we will try to do that through democratic elections." But this man thought that was a terrible mistake. He told in his story of how he had met the leader of the Italian Communist Party, and he said to him, at the meeting, — he said he was quoting a phrase of Karl Marx — "when the thrush is on the wing, is the moment to shoot". He said, "You should have gone on shooting at this point." Now, in fact, he never met Togliatti, the leader of the Communist Party. He was too insignificant to have this conversation. And in any case that particular phrase is not from Marx, it is a central Italian peasant proverb which he had incorporated into his political thinking. So, it is a very good instance of how through an interview you can trace consciousness developing in this man and how he fuses his peasant background with his more recent communist commitment.

Oral history is not a separate discipline. It is a method, it is an approach, which can be used in different ways. Thus it can be combined with quantitative sociological work. So if you have a cohort study, a study of a whole group of people born in the same year, and you can have a sample of ten thousand or more people, and you can return to reinterview, say, every seven or fifteen years, and in the reinterview one element can be an oral history section. Then you combine the two types of material. That is a very fruitful approach, which is being used for example by Glenn Elder<sup>4</sup> in United States. It is not common in Britain, unfortunately.

On the other hand, you can mix oral history with anthropological approaches, watching, looking what is happening, participating in what is happening. I've done that often. When I studied fishing communities, I went out on the fishing boats. When I more recently have been working with artists, I've been watching what they were doing as well as listening to what they say they are doing. So those are important possibilities. It is a broad approach which can be applied in many other ways. You can also combine oral history with geography. It can be used in social work and also in the sphere of health. So, it is very diverse in its possibilities.

The greatest strength of oral history remains in bringing into our accounts of the past also the voices of people who are not prominent in the documentary records: that is, women rather

<sup>4</sup> Glen Elder is Professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina. He is the author of an important book about childhood: ELDER, Glen. *Children of the Great Depression: Social Change in Life Experience*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.

than men, peasants and workers rather than employers, children rather than adults, and so on. I am certainly not saying that those are the only people to interview, indeed my own recent work has been mainly in recording artists and pioneering social researchers. But it is most often the hidden voices who bring new perspectives to our understandings of recent history.

One recent example of outstanding oral history work which opens frontiers is the work of Svetlana Alexievich, who was recently awarded the Nobel Prize for her oral history work. I read several of her books, but the outstanding ones, I think, are first *The Unwomanly Face of War*,<sup>5</sup> about the memories of women in the Second World War. The idea of getting women's story of war when most stories of war are men's stories about battles, produces a much more complex story, in which the women do fight, and it matters to them, but they are also all the time concerned with other aspects of life. And the other one is *Voices from Chernobyl*,<sup>6</sup> about the victims of environmental disaster. Those are very notable new fronts for historians.

Then, the next sort of perspective is the hidden spheres of life, those areas of life which are not in the documents. For instance, with work, immerse occupations as a culture of work, which is quite different from the kind of economical records which are kept. I did a project on car workers where people talked to me about all the things they did in the assembly line workshop, not only working in cars, doing small things like turning a screw again and again, but they were also playing chess with each other, writing poems, catching rabbits and cooking them. Many things going on in the workshop.

The most important of the hidden spheres is family relationships, because this is true to almost every interview you do. There is a hidden story about the family life, particularly about childhood, because people are more reluctant to talk about their adult family lives, especially if they had several wives or husbands.

And I think the third way is how oral history, particularly the kind of oral history where you do a full life story, which is what I practice myself, that connects different aspects of people's lives. For instance, in my most recent work on artists in a small community, I found that, when the parents or grandparents are also artists, very frequently there are other terrible, painful stories of family life, madness, or incest, or suicide. This is very striking in these interviews.

I think another very important area is about migrants and refugees. I think it is not enough to just interview people as they arrive at a new country. I am not against that, I think it is important to do that, but it is also very important to wait and do further interviews when people's lives have gone on, to see whether they have been able to adapt or not to the situation in the new country where they arrived.

<sup>5</sup> ALEXIEVICH, Svetlana. *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2018. This is the first full uncensored edition, with a brilliant new introduction.

<sup>6</sup> ALEXIEVICH, Svetlana. *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*. New York: Picador, 2005.

Those are things which are relatively constant. But if we look at the changes, the first one I would emphasize is that audio-visual recording has developed so strongly. That is part of a wider cultural development and it brings challenges as well as potential. The early oral history was carried out at a time when radio was at its peak, the focus was on sound. The kind of interview I described to you is one which is rather relaxed. It is very good for audio. Now, if you always film people, there are some consequences. One is that there is a team of people involved. It is very difficult to do high quality audio-visual work on your own, so you need a team. You usually bring people into your studio. You can go to them, but then you have to set up their home like a studio. So, it is no longer informal, it is a very high-pressure situation.

Another thing is the impact of this technology and added cost in your choice of people for recording. I have found it when I have done television work that usually you have to give extra care to the appearance of the person and whether they are charismatic or not, whether they say their words in an audio-visual way which is effective. So that you end up with a much smaller number of people to choose from. I think the solution is to do both kinds of work, audio-visual and pure audio, in the same project, but there is a tendency of oral historians to either do one kind or another.

The other big change is that oral history is now part of an enormous wave of autobiographical activity. A lot of it is actually in written format on the internet, but much is also in oral form. There are lots of ways in which this is used, with Facebook, Twitter, and so on. Oral historians need to situate themselves within this new material. The possibilities for autobiographical work are extraordinary. Nowadays, there is even a program by which you can organize it so that, after you have died, messages are sent out to family and friends at regular intervals in your own voice. If you pay it now, but I think the messages may go on forever.

So how do we deal with that? I think here the solution again is partly you go with the times but partly you keep your own methods. In other words, oral historians have developed new ways of using material. Digital storytelling is a good example of that. That is really based on the idea of producing small audio clips. That can be very effective on websites, and so on. But I think it is really important not to lose sight of the in-depth possibilities of a focused piece of oral history research, which is best published in a thesis or a book. That is where we advance knowledge. We don't really advance knowledge through audio clips. We maybe draw people's attention to some aspects of history, but we are not creating new interpretations of history.

The biggest change though, and a change to which I devoted a whole new chapter, is the present day global diversity of oral history. Oral history activity goes right around the world now, but it takes different forms in different situations. Let me just try to explain some of these differences. First of all, there are societies where oral tradition has been passed down through to the culture, and there are also societies in which there are minorities who have their oral traditions or their invented traditions. This is a form of history which has been very important in colonial countries. For instance, in Britain we had, until the 1960s, a

colonial research council. Anthropologists were sent out to colonies, advised by some local colonial representatives, and then their findings fed back into the system, so they were part of the governmental system. Since independence, that obviously has ceased and nowadays oral history work in such countries is typically based on NGOs.

The central issue earlier was to understand local forms of religion and kin systems in order to control colonial subjects or internal minorities. Today the big public issue is to get oral tradition recognized as legal evidence as part of the struggle to maintain the rights of indigenous peoples. So, for instance, in Canada, United States, Australia, also in Brazil, and particularly in Spanish-speaking Latin America, this has resulted in a particular kind of collective oral life story. The best-known of all is *I, Rigoberta Menchú*,<sup>7</sup> which is the autobiography of a Guatemalan peasant woman who was fighting in the civil war. This was recorded by a Venezuelan anthropologist and very much criticized because Rigoberta included in her own life story events which happened in the community which she knew about but she didn't directly observe. But that is typical of this form. You have to understand that it is what this form is about, it is part of that struggle, and it is presenting the key events in that struggle.

And you find that there is also the invention of traditions in Brazil, for instance, in the “favelas” of Recife, where new traditions were invented to create a local history. For example, the fishermen in “Brasília Teimosa”<sup>8</sup> who, squatted in the harbour, created their story of how it was their land, and eventually got recognized by the mayor. Now their neighbourhood is rather attractive, with nice little brick houses, trees, and so on, and that was all backed up by this invented myth. When I visited the school, I was shown the booklet by oral historian Ana Dourado through which they learnt about the creation of their neighbourhood. So, these life story forms are linked but somewhat different. That is the first type I would pick out.

The second context is countries in which the past is a matter of disputation, anger and sometimes mediation. Thus, oral history was very slow to develop in Japan, partly because there was such a conflict about the national history, and this is still symbolized by the contrast between the Peace Museum in Hiroshima and the War Museum in Tokyo. There is oral history now in Japan, but it came very late. Of course, the most famous example of mediation is the truth commissions, the best-known being in South Africa. Because the proceedings were broadcast on television, and watched by millions, this resulted in extraordinarily dramatic over the meanings of the South African past.

There may also be consequences for professional oral historians and social researchers from this type of context. Thus in Germany there is an interesting special type of oral history, which was developed to deal with the problem that younger researchers felt little em-

<sup>7</sup> MENCHU, Rigoberta. *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. New York: Verso, 1987. Recorded by Elizabeth Burgos in Paris.

<sup>8</sup> “Brasília Teimosa” is a famous “favela” in Recife.

pathy with the older generation, most of whom had at least in the formal sense been Nazis — they belonged to the Hitler youth, for instance. So, a form of oral history was developed where you start by saying “Can you tell me the story of your life?”; and then you just let that flow out. And when that story stops — which is sometimes quite shortly, although sometimes it goes on a longer time — you can question about that. Then it is only in the third phase that you can ask a very difficult question, like “Do you remember any Jewish neighbours?”, “Do you know what happened then?”, or “Where was your father in 1944?”. It is a very interesting practice.

I would also like to talk about countries of secrecy and control. I am thinking in particular of Russia and China. In Russia, a culture of secrecy resulted from the Revolution because you could be denounced if your grandfather was a kulak or Jewish. So, people became very reluctant to talk about their family stories. Also, there was a great deal of forgery of official documents. When I first went to Russia, people said to me that the oral stories usually are more credible than the official document. There is a brilliant book by Orlando Figes called *The Whisperers*,<sup>9</sup> which tells in detail the stories of several families. It is a huge book. There is a woman who appears in the beginning and in the ending called Antonina Golovina. She was branded as a class enemy because her family had a kulak peasant origin, big peasants, and she was exiled to Siberia as a girl, but she created false papers and succeeded in becoming a physiologist. She never told her husband that she had been in exile in a Gulag. At the same time, her husband never told her about the arrest of his parents until the 1990s, when the culture began to change. And she says to Orlando Figes: “All my documents were false. I was horrified of being stopped by the police along the street. My passport was full of stamps and signatures, all being forged.” That is a very different situation for doing oral history work. In Russia, when the climate changed, in the 1990, the possibilities opened up, people were talking a lot. Now people are more cautious again — so...

The last example is China, where the whole scene is dominated by the government’s policies. They have had several phases where oral history was actively encouraged: factory histories, village histories, and so on... And then it would close down, so it goes back and forward.

People seem willing to speak in China. I don’t think this is the problem, but what happened recently is very striking. There is a new phase of oral history there. When I spoke there in 2016, I found that lots of students were interested in oral history and enthusiastic for it. The government puts big money into film-based oral history with large teams. I was very impressed by the quality of what they were doing, but then I realized that the themes were terribly limited. They were all safe themes: stories of wars, the Chinese side of a war, stories of crops, stories about film stars, and so on. They were all very safe topics. The more contentious areas of Chinese history were avoided. Even the Cultural Revolution. I think the key reason is that people working with oral history in China feel it is necessary to protect

<sup>9</sup> FIGES, Orlando. *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin’s Russia*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007.

themselves from the kind of persecution that goes on if you step out of line. I could give you several examples of people who have done oral history, like Sang Ye,<sup>10</sup> a pioneering oral historian since the 1980s, who was forced to leave China. There was Zhou Qing, who set up an independent Museum of Oral History in Beijing and was put in prison. There is Liao Yiwu<sup>11</sup> who has been producing rather eccentric images of Chinese people, which the government doesn't want. It doesn't approve oral history books that don't have hard straight workers, rather than eccentric people, criminal people, who are trafficking women, for instance. They don't want that kind of material published. If you include that, you get persecuted. The security services bought a flat next to the flat of Yang Weidong, who had interviewed several hundred intellectuals, including some dissidents, many of his tapes were confiscated, and all his books were banned. He was completely suffocated in that kind of way. So here we find the contemporary martyrs of oral history.

I am very happy to discuss what I have said, and invite you to give me some of your own experiences.

**Mathias Assunção:** Just to add on what you already told us, I think it would be nice for the people here to hear a bit more about your experience in working with the Jamaican diaspora, because I think that diasporic experiences of families across the Atlantic are very relevant for Brazilians' own historical experience. I think everybody here would like to hear just a little bit about that experience, because you have so many different studies, but I think that one particularly from my point of view would be very relevant to Brazilians.

**Paul Thompson:** That is a book called *Jamaican Hands across the Atlantic*,<sup>12</sup> which I did with my wife Elaine Bauer, who is Jamaican. In each family we started with one interview, in either Britain or North America, and then we looked for relatives in the other countries and in Jamaica. What we discovered was how people nowadays stay in contact. That is the most impressive thing. That is a big change, because in the past, if you were a poor migrant, you disappeared from the family, unless you returned, and usually the poorer ones did not return. But the present situation is that many more people are returning, building houses in Jamaica and keeping in contact with their families. So, that was, in a way, the most important element in the book. But also, through interviewing them and their Jamaican relatives we created an oral history of Jamaica — of the family in Jamaica, the extended family, which is so important. In Jamaica that's a very different kind of family, it's a family in which the women play a particularly strong role, a role related to the economic control of the family. That goes back to

<sup>10</sup> SANG, Ye. *Chinese Lives*. London: Macmillan, 1987.

<sup>11</sup> LIAO, Yiwu, *The Corpse Walker: Real Life Stories, China from the Bottom Up*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> BAUER, Elaine; THOMPSON, Paul. *Jamaican Hands across the Atlantic*. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2006.

slavery, interestingly, because in the Caribbean — well, in Jamaica, anyway — the slaves were given their own little bit of land, and they had to grow their own food, and the women used to sell the products from the land. So, now, if you go to the market, if it is still a food market, it is mainly the women who do the selling. It is very interesting, in that way.

Also, the experience of doing the interviews was very appealing. It is different in different societies. In Scotland, when I was interviewing in the fishing communities, at the end of the interviews there would be offered whisky. The consequence of that was that if you were doing series of interviews, you ran out of energy rather quickly. But in Jamaica and in England, without inviting us, our Jamaican interviewees cooked wonderful meals for us after the interviews, so it was also a tremendous social experience.

**Andrea Casa Nova:** I have two small questions. Last time I met you, almost 15 years ago in Minas Gerais, you were talking about the difference between interviewing a fisherman and a capitalist, as a banker, so I would like to hear a little bit more about this kind of difference, because I interview both workers and intellectuals, and for me it is a challenge to work with high society levels, intellectuals. I would just like to listen a little bit more about this.

The other question is about space and memory. How is memory impacted through space?

**Paul Thompson:** When you say space, do you mean...?

**Andrea Casa Nova:** I think about the transformation of urban aspects and how it impacts the way people remember. I am thinking, for instance, about the cases of gentrification in several cities around the world, and how that changes the way people remember their own memories or other memories. I would like to extend that to the question of remembering and place, because the connection between the interviewees and the place of belonging affects the way they are going to remember things.

**Paul Thompson:** As far as urban space is concerned, I think people do have very clear memories of change. Maybe it is the changing social class of local people, maybe it is a different group of migrants moving into an area. I don't think there is any problem in collecting that kind of information. You can also look at space in terms of gender: there are areas which are women's space or men's space, for example.

Obviously in a work like the one I was describing with Jamaican migrants, the issue of space and memory is taking place in different context. Because they've moved, their memories are somehow different from the ones of the people who have stayed. I am not saying totally different, but movement affects memory. Yes, space is very important, I completely agree. And in the way you said it is a research project rather than a possible answer for me.

I think that your first question is particularly important for practice in oral history.

What happens if you want to interview somebody who is very confident, successful, usually male, for example, a business entrepreneur, or a politician, do you interview this person by the same way? I would say that you do have to change your style. The first thing is: you have to be much better prepared, because they are used to giving people an account which is full of deliberate tricks in it, they present themselves as well as they can. At a certain point, you must be willing not to challenge them head on, that is very dangerous, but to ask questions which show that you know more than they perhaps realize. If you fail to do that, then you are not going to get a good interview at all.

I think challenging is important. Sometimes the same person goes as two interviewers. One of them has thought up a few key questions to throw in at a certain moment to be more challenging. A politician's whole life is about answering questions, they are tough, you shouldn't be frightened at asking them penetrating questions. As for ordinary people you're really aiming more at being softer, encouraging them, and not challenging. If you challenge them too much you make them stop wanting to answer. So, it is a very important difference, I would say.

**Laiz Corrêa da Silva:** I am a Master's student in this program (PPGHIS), and my questions relate to the responsibility of oral historians when they're working with sensitive themes. I work for the Truth Commission and Human Rights, here, in Rio de Janeiro, and my work is mostly connected with the victims of police violence. In most cases, they are mothers whose sons — mostly sons — have been killed by Rio de Janeiro's police. In this project, these victims come up to the university and they have their life stories recorded. So, we let them speak, but mostly we probe stories about the violence they suffer and the situations in which their children have been killed. We would like to create a kind of archive, a collection, a fund with all these stories. But it may be a problem, because several of these women still live in the places where these children have been killed and they have been threatened by the police themselves. How do you deal with these things? Should we release everything? Could we release some of these texts from these archives later on, when the process has been finished? How much can you actually intervene in the interview, like editing, suppressing names, protecting the subjects?

**Paul Thompson:** I think you do have an obligation to protect the people you interviewed. There are various possibilities. One is to close the interview, so other people can't access it, but then the trouble is that it ceases to be useful as a source of evidence. It is difficult to find a solution. There is the possibility of changing names. But the more you change the interview, the more you distort the evidence, so these are difficult decisions to make.

I think it is important always to have the agreement of the people you interview. I think that is the ethical necessity, especially in these situations. I would not want to put people at risk with my interview, I wouldn't want to do that. Maybe, quite often, the best solution is to

edit the interview and cut out some of the problematic parts. I don't have direct experience with this. In the work I do, one of the recurring problems — which happens every now and then — is that people talk to me about other members of their family in ways which would be very damaging. I decided the best thing is just to remove that from the interview.

**André Vargas:** I am also a Master's student in our program. I have two very different questions to you.

The first one is based on the work about whole life stories, full life stories, taking for example the "Museu da Pessoa" (Museum of the Person), in São Paulo, and the project, National Life Stories, in London, which have gathered a lot of materials like that. The point is: how can you work with this raw material? How can you make sense of this material? In which ways can you think a historian should approach it? That would be question number 1.

The second question refers to your experience in this project with Jamaican families, especially in the way it relates to the point of view of Great Britain. How this project has unearthed discussion in terms of colonialism, and race, in these diasporic experiences, particularly now when you have an entire generation that was called to work in Great Britain and not given the papers, and after forty years in Great Britain they are sent back. What was your experience with the colonial and race experience of Jamaicans in Great Britain?

**Paul Thompson:** I don't think it is fundamentally any different to work with oral history. If you have a transcript, if you got the people's words, it is the same kind of process as if you had a lot of letters. The actual way of evaluating evidence is slightly different, but if we are talking about creating an interpretation, you don't have to be a different kind of historian in that way. It seems to me it is very similar.

As regards the whole source of the history of race relations in Britain, I would say that there has been for a long time a very strong tendency to try to present the British experience in a positive way. I did not realize myself the extent to which this was being done. When I was younger, we were brought up to believe that the British empire brought benefits to colonies. It wasn't just about exploiting people, they got education, water supplies, and so on.

Also, the whole story about slavery and the abolition of slavery was taught in schools as an idealistic campaign against slavery and it wasn't analysed really in terms of exploitation. Eric Williams,<sup>13</sup> a politician, was the first person who showed the campaign to end the slave trade actually benefited Britain. There has recently been a new look on the actual moment of the end of slavery, because this was always presented as a magnificent piece of generosity, but actually what happened was that slave owners were given a very large compensation and nothing at all was given to the slaves. Particularly in Jamaica, nothing was given to the slaves. So, there was a very distorted history.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Williams was Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago. He is the author of: WILLIAMS, Eric. *Capitalism & Slavery*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1994.

In a recent book by Ian Cobain, called *The History Thieves*,<sup>14</sup> he shows how, in the post war years, as each colony became independent, there was a systematic attempt to reshape the documents. As each colony was made independent, in turn equipment was sent out to burn documents which had undesirable images of British rule. They also sent out big boxes which could be sent to the bottom of the sea. So they got rid of a lot of document evidence in that way. But there were some potentially damaging files which they felt ought to be kept, so they created a secret archive in Britain which wasn't in any of the catalogues. This was a huge archive, we are talking about miles of shelves, and this has really emerged through oral history projects on Mau Mau,<sup>15</sup> where the judges eventually forced the government officials to release the papers which had been kept secretly, and they then proved that they have been tortured and that there was this kind of persecution of Mau Mau people. It was a clear case in which for decades the oral evidence was closer to the truth than the available records. So, it is not a good story at all.

Recently, the people who went to help rebuild the British economy, came as British subjects, and when they came they didn't need visas. The law was changed in the 1970s due to racist opposition to Asian refugees from East Africa, who were suffering persecution by new black rulers. As a result, their existing British citizenship was removed, and they had to apply to be reinstated. I think it is true that they did not understand, and they came from a culture which was basically an oral culture, where land, for instance, was handed down in families orally. There were no written documents, so why should they think about these things? Years later the politics had changed. The current Prime Minister was Home Secretary and was trying to reduce immigration, deliberately creating a hostile culture in the Home Office, and this is one of the consequences. I think it is very shocking. The whole story of BREXIT makes it far worse. We are in a situation, now, in Britain, where, after a long time when the racist propaganda was not acceptable, it is becoming more and more common. I think it is a very shocking situation, and it is secretly backed by this present Prime Minister, so that would be my view on it.

**André Vargas:** But, in your work with Jamaican families, have you seen this kind of colonial relationships and race conflicts situations?

**Paul Thompson:** They talked about race conflict and some of them emphasised that, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. On the other hand, I was particularly struck by people who had been more successful being crucially helped by an English teacher at school. They had a different kind of perspective. They see their own integration into British societies in their lives. So, it really differs depending on what happened to them.

<sup>14</sup> COBAIN, Ian. *The History Thieves: Secrets, Lies and the Shaping of a Modern Nation*. London: Portobello Books, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> An anti-European secret society in colonial Kenya.

It is perhaps worth mentioning about this situation in Britain today that there is a very high rate of mixed marriage between Jamaicans and white English people. I think that in the youngest group, half of the Jamaican men and a third of the Jamaican women have got a white partner. This is a total contrast with what you find with the Middle Eastern people, Muslims, also Hindus, or Sikhs, they are very little into mixed marriage. It is presented as if it is a religious issue, but actually, really, it is a culture they are talking about. With them, the women either have to accept arranged marriage to somebody in their own group, or they risk very severe treatment by their families, including sometimes the killing by the family of the daughter. So, there are very different experiences, but one thing which is parallel is the way that younger people have been using education. Not so much, I would say, the Jamaican males, but the Jamaican females are very successful in terms of working in Britain. So it is a very complicated kind of picture.

**Sílvia Correia:** Do you believe that oral history is just a methodology, or does it still have a political work to do in the future?

**Paul Thompson:** I don't think that oral history is going to totally change the future of any country, but it makes a contribution, certainly. I think that is especially true in a local context. If you have an oral history project, it creates more of a sense of particular identity and it does support campaigning on particular issues. We were much more hopeful, it is true... We hoped to change the whole society when we started, but you need to have this kind of idealism to achieve small results.

