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Cuestiones éticas en archivos de historia oral

Ethical Issues in Oral History Archives

CHAIR
Tamara Kennelly [US]

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Malin Thor Tureby [Sweden]:
“(Re)using archived interviews: A discussion about representation, public discourses and private memories.”

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Maija Runcis [Sweden]:
“The ethical and contextual issues on revisiting oral history collections in Riga, Latvia.”

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Piyusha Chatterjee [India]:
“Lost narratives in institutional oral histories: A window to a larger World.”
(Re)using archived interviews: A discussion about representation, public discourses and private memories.

Malin Thor Tureby
(Sweden):

Abstract: In this paper I want to reflect the problems and possibilities of (re)using archived interviews that are collected at a specific time and with a specific purpose. In an on-going research project I investigate negotiations of how national, local, gendered and religious identities interplay with one another in the formation of identities in Sweden both in different social and historical contexts and in local communities. Using written and oral narrative sources from and about "Swedish Jews", the project’s overriding aim is to analyse how relations of power and concepts of normality integrate into the understanding of self-identities, others’ identities and (self)positioning in different contexts and times. The “Jew” has been a crucial category and even a stereotype in the formation of different Swedish national identities in different social contexts over time. I want to analyse how a marginalized group like the Swedish Jews are negotiating their own identities and communities by othering and marginalizing or including other Jewish groups over time. I do this by examining how the Swedish Jewish refugee activities have been narrated in different materials, situations and contexts over the period 1933–2015.

In this paper I work with interviews from the collection “Jewish memories” at the archive of the Nordic Museum in Sweden. During the years 1994–1998 the museum collected autobiographical material [interviews and written life stories] from Jews in Sweden. Based on a small study of a sample of interviews from the collection, I want to reflect the problems and possibilities of (re)using archived interviews that are collected at a specific time and with a specific purpose, in a new project of knowledge. I am interested in the new empirical knowledge that we can get from this collection about “Swedish Jewish” refugee activities and on how “Swedish Jews” received and perceived Jewish refugees in the 1930’s and 1940’s. However, I also want to investigate how “Jewish refugees” and “Swedish Jews” are remembered and narrated in the interviews collected and created for the collection in the 1990’s. In my analysis of the interviews I will therefore focus on both the content: What do the interviewees narrate about (the 1930’s and 1940’s)? and the construction/interaction: How is “Jewish memories” constructed and preserved in the collection and negotiated in the interviews and how do the interaction and communication between the interviewee and the interviewer create different types of representations or narratives about "Jewish memories"? I will also discuss methodological challenges on (re)presenting selves and others, both how this (re)presentation is done in archives/collections/interviews as well as in the scientific narratives and texts we construct and write as (oral) historians from our research, (re)uses and analysis of oral sources in collections/archives.
The ethical and contextual issues on revisiting oral history collections in Riga, Latvia.

Maija Runcis
(Sweden):

Resumen: Mi investigación se ocupa de las instituciones formales e informales de la política de vivienda en Riga durante la era soviética 1945-1989. Trato de analizar cómo se formulan y aplican en Riga dentro de sus diferentes contextos históricos y sociales las políticas locales relativas a la distribución, la asignación y la mejora de las condiciones de vida. El estudio está situado en el campo más amplio de la regulación de la vivienda soviéticas, y tiene en cuenta a los ciudadanos individuales "y las familias las prácticas informales de resolver sus propios problemas de vivienda. Con el fin de poner de relieve los diferentes componentes del marco institucional de la política de vivienda Soviética, el estudio se centra en las normas legales, el cumplimiento, la organización y las normas de comportamiento entre los diferentes grupos e individuos. Legislación soviética estableció muchas normas diferentes cuando se trata de la distribución, la reparación y el uso del parque de viviendas socialista. Sin embargo, fue principalmente instituciones informales y agencias destinadas a mejorar las condiciones de vida que se emplearon en realidad.

Uno de los mayores desafíos para mí, como un investigador sueco, en la realización de investigaciones sobre las políticas de vivienda en el archivo del Estado soviético en Letonia es mi falta de conocimiento de cómo el sistema soviético funcionó sobre una base diaria y cómo la vida cotidiana estaba dominado por la ideología comunista. El tema de la confianza en la validez de las fuentes se ha planteado en mi trabajo, y me han indicado que existe un nivel de desconfianza entre los usuarios del archivo y los historiadores orales, lo que refleja su propio pensamiento sobre la naturaleza de la historia soviética y la antigua dirección comunista. Desde este punto de vista, las cuestiones éticas se vuelven aún más importantes. Al mostrar el conocimiento de estas cuestiones, la reutilización de las colecciones de historia oral se hace posible tanto para los estudios empíricos sencillos y para analizar los patrones culturales evidentes en los relatos archivados.

Abstract: My research deals with formal and informal institutions of housing policy in Riga during the Soviet era from 1945 to 1989. I seek to analyse how local policies concerning the distribution, allocation and improvement of living conditions were formulated and implemented in Riga within its different historical and social contexts. The study is situated in the broader field of Soviet housing regulations, and takes into account individual citizens’ and families’ informal practices of resolving their own housing problems. In order to highlight the different components of the institutional framework of Soviet housing policy, the study focuses on legal regulations, enforcement, organisation and norms of behaviour among different groups and individuals. Soviet legislation established many different regulations when it came to the distribution, reparation and use of the socialist housing stock. However, it was mainly informal institutions and agency aimed at improving living conditions that were actually employed.

One of the greatest challenges to me, as a Swedish researcher, in conducting research on housing policies in the Soviet State archive in Latvia is my lack of knowledge of how the Soviet system functioned on a daily basis and how everyday life was dominated by
communist ideology. The issue of trust in the validity of sources has been raised in my paper, and I have indicated that a level of distrust exists amongst archive users and oral historians, reflecting their own thinking about the nature of Soviet history and the former communist leadership. From this point of view, ethical issues become even more important. By showing awareness of these issues, the reuse of oral history collections becomes possible both for straightforward empirical studies and for analysing the cultural patterns evident in the archived narratives.
My research deals with formal and informal institutions of housing policy in Riga during the Soviet era from 1945 to 1989. I seek to analyse how local policies concerning the distribution, allocation and improvement of living conditions were formulated and implemented in the city of Riga within its different historical and social contexts. The study is situated in the broader field of Soviet housing regulations, and takes into account individual citizens’ and families’ informal practices of resolving their own housing problems. In order to highlight the different components of the institutional framework of Soviet housing policy, the study focuses on legal regulations, enforcement, organisation and norms of behaviour among different groups and individuals. Soviet legislation established many different regulations when it came to the distribution, reparation and use of the socialist housing stock. However, it was mainly informal institutions and agency (such as, for example, networks, blat or bribes, complaints, etc.) aimed at improving living conditions that were actually employed. The question here is: What kind of informal institutions did this agency create?

The empirical data in my research is taken from archival documents held at the State Archive in Riga and from ‘Life Story’ narratives collected by researchers from the Association of Oral History in Latvia (LNOH). In accordance with the different types of source material, analysis is conducted on two levels. The first level concerns formal institutions. In this case I focus on legislation and printed regulations concerning housing, at the central level of the Soviet state as well as on the local level. Examples here include the articulated norms concerning individual living space, how the conditions for diminishing individual and family space were formulated, and so on. The second level of the analysis concerns informal institutions and agency. In this case I use oral history sources to study informal strategies that individuals (agents) employed in order to improve their living conditions, protect their family space from intrusion of tenants they did not know, or to acquire new apartments. At a later stage in this project, I will analyse letters (published and preserved in the archives) as well as published memoirs.

This paper deals with the ethical issues arising from the use and reuse of archival and oral history sources in academic history, using my own research on the nationalisation of private housing in Soviet Latvia as a case study. The outline here will be on re-contextualisation and reuse of archived sources and interviews. The questions here are: Is it possible to reuse oral sources with new intentions and research questions than those asked for many years ago? Is it possible to trace informal agency in housing in the Soviet Latvian State archive?

To my research I need both the official history of housing policy, but I also need a counter narrative, an informal (hi)story of housing allocation and so forth. There are many reasons to look at both the official history in archives and the “unofficial”. The first one is that I am not sure how to interpret the archival sources I come across and if I can trust them. The second one is that Latvians have a collective experience of occupation and repression. The common experiences today are a significant component of the Latvian identity, which makes their life stories to counter narratives of the official Soviet history. The discrepancy between the documents in State Archives and the Latvian life story collections offers a lot of challenges and possibilities to my research questions and method.

The Soviet Latvian State archive offers fruitful possibilities for conducting research on the normative rules and laws of the Soviet era. It provides plenty of information about how the Soviet political system was created and shaped by ideology, but less about how it functioned in practice. The archives alone, therefore, cannot serve to capture a comprehensive image of housing and everyday life. Studying informal institutions (networks, bribes, relations), I need both archival sources, such as letters and complaints to the authorities, as well as the interviews I conducted myself, and the oral history sources created by other researchers. However, the use and reuse of oral sources raises ethical questions and has to be problematised.

The scepticism that oral history has encountered among many historians is based on its apparent social invisibility. History ‘from below’ is a challenge to traditional history ‘from above’, giving voice to unheard and silenced social groups, which mostly have left no trace in archival records. As researchers, we have
no access to the reality of past events, but only to documents, stories and memories. In oral history, both factual information and the meanings attributed to the past by the people who have lived through it are of equal importance, and both are constructed through emotional, rhetorical production by the authors of life stories.

According to a postmodernist view, all archives are social creations in the sense that they are a product of human society. For this reason they should not be interpreted as ‘falsifications’, but as active resources, the interpretation of which can change along with the relations of power and political conflicts in a given society. Their origins lie in the social values of the rulers and governments and the individuals who establish and maintain them. These underlying political and cultural frameworks are central to understanding the nature of archives as institutions and as places of social memory. Interpreting archival sources you have to be aware of the political and social context - what has been left out and what has been included in the archives, and by whom. By asking different research questions historians can reuse the same archival sources from different angles. Recycling archival sources for new research purposes makes history more exciting because of new perspectives and the complexity in history. Historians can reuse archival sources without respect of other historians. However, they must be careful not to reproduce the official version of history within the archives when reusing archival sources.

From an ethical point of view, even the reuse of public archival documents needs to be considered carefully. The Soviet archives mostly contain the holdings of official public bodies, but these documents also contain mention of a great many personal names and information about individuals who today, in post-Soviet society, might be completely opposed to the idea of being reminded about their Soviet past. In a post-Soviet context, when political conflicts are still on-going between different ethnic groups, and the sensitive issue of who was a perpetrator and who was a victim during the Soviet era is repeatedly raised, the publishing of names from archives is particularly sensitive. Archival documents have been used in political accusations directed at and from nationalists and communists both in newspapers and in other publications. Other potential conflicts are those caused when collective memories associated with memorials or commemorations diverge from what the archival sources convey.

In Latvia, life stories have come to occupy an important space and place in ‘the nation’s social life after the renewal of Latvian independence’. During the Soviet era, people never completely trusted Soviet institutions. Conversely, the regime did not trust the people and the archives were closed to the public. Oral history has become a crucial source of material and research method when describing how Latvians experienced the Soviet era in post-war Latvia. In this way, oral history has become a counter narrative to official Soviet history.

I have used archived interviews conducted by researchers from the Association of Oral History in Latvia, ‘Life Story’ (LNOH). There are different approaches taken by researchers in reusing oral history sources and many of them have stressed the importance of archived contexts. Oral historian Malin Thor Tureby argues that reusing interviews needs more than archived contexts. The researcher has to have open ears ‘to hear the voices’ of the creators of the oral history archive [the collection of interviews]. In reusing interviews we also need tools and methods for interpreting the tacit narrative within the process of creating interview collections. Following this, I discuss here the ethical and contextual issues of revisiting the oral history collections in Riga.

The primary goal of the Association is to document as many accounts as possible of the everyday life of Latvia’s inhabitants during the complex and shifting circumstances of the twentieth century. This is being done by recording events from the point of view of the participants themselves.

The Oral Historian Joanna Bornat states that oral historians usually place great importance on ‘the nature of their interview, /.../ its sensitivity and an implied intimacy without which an interviewee might not feel free to talk or divulge their experiences’. Interviewers have to familiarise themselves with the context of the respondent’s life in order to understand the narrative. The most successful oral history interviews are
conducted without any distance, but rather with a continuing sense of partnership and shared endeavour. The anthropologist Vieda Skultans stresses the importance of the interviewer’s own personal history and cultural baggage in relation to the interviewee, and that the knowledge we obtain from others is thus necessarily perspectival. The collected interviews in Riga are created in free conversations without any standards imposed by quantitative research and questionnaires, and they are conducted in mostly informal environments, in which the interviewees talk about familiar situations and their lives in familiar terms. As a re-user, however, I do not know anything about the familial relationships or anything about the interviewer, because this information is missing from the collection.

In a way, the life stories in the Latvian collection differ somehow from other qualitative data produced by oral historians, since the collections are mostly not only an outcome of another researcher’s previous research, but rather consist of material that has been collected specifically for the national Latvian Oral History for the sake of future researchers. Their sense of ‘ownership’ in the LNOH project is not as strong as if they had been the main researchers in a specific, topic-driven research project. Despite the weak sense of ‘ownership’, the interviewer nevertheless tries to create an informal environment and a free-flowing conversation, and thereby become closer to the narrator. To me this context is somewhat self-contradictory, as it seeks to create intimacy in an interview situation when the interviewee knows that it is future researchers who are anticipated to be the users of these narratives. This means that the informants providing their personal life stories do so with the knowledge that it could be made public in the future. This necessarily raises the question: what kinds of silences do these narratives contain?

When reusing interviews made by other researchers, the personal perspective and the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee are partly invisible. The absence of described relationships and contexts or of a careful presentation of the interviewer attached to the transcript makes reuse much more difficult. As a re-user of oral history, I need to pay attention both to my own and to the interviewers’ cultural and biographical backgrounds. I also need to be aware of the multiple contexts of the interview, how and when it was created, by whom and where. Is it possible to explore memories, narratives and history by reusing oral history without knowing the narrator? How can I, a researcher at a distance, understand the meaning of the narratives, told many years ago by people unknown to me? Is it possible to ‘hear’ the tacit narrative?

With this in mind, I outline here the specific problems I have experienced in reusing collected oral history sources in Latvia from the 1990s. The primary purpose for reusing oral history in my research is empirical: I want to know what people have told in their life stories, or if they have told anything about housing allocation and their social conditions during the Soviet era. This analysis can provide further knowledge of informal institutions, as well as cultural patterns and social behaviour in the Soviet. A secondary goal is to analyse how native Latvians and Russian-speaking inhabitants narrated their experience of allocated accommodation and their general living conditions when they were interviewed in the 1990ies, at a time when the future was insecure for many of them. Such an analysis reveals information about the different strategies and cultural differences employed by varied categories of people, as well as about the relationship between the interviewer (native Latvian) and the interviewees (Russian-speaking inhabitants).

**REFLECTIONS:**

One of the greatest challenges to me, as a Swedish researcher, in conducting research on housing policies in the Soviet State archive in Latvia is my lack of knowledge of how the Soviet system functioned on a daily basis and how everyday life was dominated by communist ideology. The issue of trust in the validity of sources has been raised in this paper, and I have indicated that a level of distrust exists amongst archive users (historians) and oral historians, reflecting their own thinking about the nature of Soviet history and the former communist leadership. From this point of view, ethical issues become even more important. Transparency and contextualisation of the source material is one way of dealing with these ethical issues. Anonymising personal data is another way. By showing awareness of these issues, the reuse of oral history collections becomes possible both for straightforward empirical studies and for analysing the cultural patterns evident in the archived narratives.
Lost narratives in institutional oral histories: A window to a larger World.

Piyusha Chatterjee
(India):

Resumen: Este documento se centrará en los elementos de las historias orales de archivo que se ignoran en el marco de la historia oral institucional. La Comisión estudiará las entrevistas de historia oral en los archivos del Instituto Indio de Gestión de Calcuta (IIMC), que es una de las primeras instituciones de educación de gestión en la India después de la independencia. Nuestro centro, el Centro de Historia Pública, llevado a cabo más de setenta entrevistas multisesión con sus profesores anteriores y actuales y antiguos alumnos para configurar los archivos de IIMC. Se utilizó el enfoque de historia de vida de las entrevistas de historia oral que registraron recuerdos personales de los individuos no sólo de la institución, sino también sobre sus vidas. IIMC ha creado un libro que conmemora el viaje de su institución para sus celebraciones de cincuenta años de estas historias orales. Pero a medida que mi análisis de estas historias orales archivadas demostrará que estas entrevistas tienen un mayor número de relatos que parecen ser ignorado dentro de los marcos institucionales. Estos relatos se refieren a los recuerdos de la persona de los acontecimientos históricos más grandes que tuvieron lugar durante su vida. Estos relatos, que a menudo no son de interés para los investigadores que buscan en la historia de la institución, por lo tanto, son “ignoradas” o “perdido” cuando nos centramos en la historia institucional. Sin embargo, estos relatos se refieren al individuo a su contexto social e histórico y se conectan con los acontecimientos históricos más grandes que dieron forma a su mundo. Me centraré en algunos de estos relatos “perdidos” para ilustrar la forma en que tienen una vida propia más allá de los archivos institucionales. Estas narraciones, argumento, sirven al propósito real de la historia oral, centrándose en los eventos.

Abstract: This paper will focus on elements of archival oral histories that are ignored within the framework of institutional oral history. It will examine the oral history interviews in the archives of the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta (IIMC), which is one of the first management education institutions in post-independent India. Our centre, the Centre for Public History, conducted over seventy multi-session interviews with its previous and present faculty, and alumni to set up the archives of IIMC. We used the life story approach to oral history interviews which recorded the individuals’ personal remembrances not just about the institution but also about their lives. IIMC created a book commemorating their institution’s journey for their fifty-year celebrations out of these oral histories. But as my analysis of these archival oral histories will demonstrate, these interviews possess a larger set of narratives that seem to get ignored within institutional frameworks. These narratives relate to the individual’s memories of larger historical events that unfolded during their lifetimes. Such narratives, which often are not of interest to researchers looking at the institute’s history, are therefore “ignored” or “lost” when we focus on institutional history. However, these narratives relate the individual to his or her social and historical context and connect with larger historical events that shaped their world. I will focus on some of these “lost” narratives to illustrate how they have a life of their own beyond the institutional archives. These narratives, I argue, serve the real purpose of oral history by focussing on what events mean to people and how events shape people’s lives.
Oral histories in an institution’s archives are both an addition to the history of an institution and a counter-point to that history. Being recordings of people’s remembrances, they deal not just with the individual’s relationship to the institution but also with the individual’s life, of which the institution is only one part. The life story interviews in the archives provide a more complex narrative of the past; on the one hand bringing out the relationship between public events and private lives and, on the other hand, tracing the influence of these public events and private lives on the life of an institution. Oral histories, therefore, explain the dialogic relationship between people and institutions – where people, with their different social, economic, educational and cultural backgrounds mould themselves and to a great extent mould their institutions to fit in and become a part of the whole.

But the narratives related to an individual’s memories of larger historical events that unfolded during his or her lifetime are often not of interest to researchers looking at the institute’s history. Such narratives get pushed out of the framework of institutional history for two reasons. One, they are very personal in nature and therefore not reflective of the institution. Two, they may be unreliable in terms of factuality. They get “ignored” or “lost” because of their little or no relevance to the institution. However, these narratives relate the individual to his or her social and historical context and connect with larger historical events that shaped their world. This paper focuses on some of these “lost” narratives, which do not fit into the framework of institutional history, and shows how they have a life of their own beyond the institutional archives and become a window to a larger world.

This paper looks at the Oral History Archives of the Indian Institute of Management in Kolkata to demonstrate that such a bank of oral histories covers a much wider set of subjects, shedding light on the lives of the common people, which get ignored in the mainstream historical telling of the past. The Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, (IIM-C) was the first national management institution to be set up in India. On its fiftieth year, the Institute invited the Centre for Public History at Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology in Bangalore, to set up its oral history archives among other things. Over seventy multi-session interviews were done as part of the project with the present and past faculty, alumni, employees, and others associated with the Institute in different ways.

Since the life story approach of the interviews allowed for the lives of these people to be recorded in much greater detail than is usual for institutional histories to have, the archives contains a history that is much larger than that of the institution itself. It adds a new dimension to and an understanding of history of the institution while also translating the meaning and relationship of some historical events to people’s lives and, therefore, that of the Institute’s. The oral history interviews, therefore, puts the power in the hands of the people to tell the history of an institution and also that of the period in a manner that they think fit. Oral histories of institutions – contradictory to the general belief that they are elitist and therefore don’t serve the real purpose of doing oral history – help in reconstructing the past through people’s voices, allowing for scope to draw out the meaning of various events and incidents that chequer an institution’s past while also bringing forth the nuances of approaching history through people’s eyes. In the case of IIM-C Archives, what is most interesting is that there is a wealth of stories about life in the early and mid-twentieth century, during or just after the colonial period in Kolkata that are not available in official documents of that period. And the subjective nature of the memories, which is criticised as being a problem of using oral history, in fact becomes the strength, revealing how people relate to their past and to historical events.

This means that the oral source in the archives, therefore, need not be treated like just another source of information to put together the history of an institution. Luisa Passerini writes, “What attracts me is memory’s insistence on creating a history of itself, which is much less and perhaps somewhat more than a social history.”1 The memories I have chosen to present in this paper may or may not contain facts about

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an event but they show the underlying relationship between the individual and the event and how it is a process of negotiation between the two that creates history.

Some excerpts of oral histories from the IIM-C Archives have been quoted in this paper to demonstrate how remembrances can draw out the relationship between the past and the present, while also illustrating the negotiations between public events and private lives, which define the past for people. The oral histories of different people whose lives may or may not have overlapped at IIM-C, therefore, do not necessarily talk about the same period but they illustrate the people’s relationship to the past and its meaning to them.

I agree with Michael Frisch in A Shared Authority where he says that interpreting oral histories allow a “direct window on the feelings and, in some senses, on the meaning of past experience”. He calls it the ‘Anti History’ approach because it reads the oral histories in a manner that the focus is more on the experience and the meaning of historical events than on establishing new facts or validating pre-existing facts. So, this window to the world outside the four walls of the institution is really an effort to understand the meaning of public events in people’s lives and not to search for any new set of facts to add to the history of that period.

To begin with are excerpts on Kolkata during the 1940s. The interviewee, Nikhil Barat, spent his childhood in the city, then under colonial rule, and talks about the impact of World War II and the Bengal famine of 1943. It is an evidence of how people reacted to hunger caused by a man-made famine created to meet the needs of an England at war and the rebellion against the colonial rule.

Nikhil Barat’s remembrance is about a city that emptied out due to the threat of bombing, affecting the lives and the livelihood of people in various ways. Almost two hundred years of colonial rule had left the economy of the state in a shambles and the start of another war, where Britain was to play a significant role and therefore needed all the resources it could garner from wherever, had only worsened the situation. Barat documents the life people led during those days, uncertain of the future and the struggle for a respectable life in the city.

Nikhil Barat:  I was a reasonably good student and got a high first division. Then real disaster struck. World War II had started and there was an exodus from Calcutta. Most of the students that my father had went away, out of Calcutta, to the suburbs and it was a really difficult time for the family. Father was really under stress and so we – my brother who was two years younger than me and I – went job hunting. We could not get anything at that point of time because we were too young. So I continued with my inter-science and we told our younger brother that he must do well in the examination. The problem was that he loved sports, but he was not a very good student. But that shock changed him and we both took up jobs.

While the War took away his father’s livelihood, it pushed the family into hard times. The reflection illustrates how World War II, which was being fought elsewhere in the world, shaped their lives and, therefore, has a direct relevance to his life history. While he points out what good had come off the outward movement of the people from Kolkata that was otherwise a very densely populated city, he also betrays the unease of the Bengali middle-class with the Anglo-Indian community. The degeneration of the image of the city and the Anglo-Indian community in people’s eyes brings out the fissures in the Bengali society and their perception of each other. Poverty had driven people to the streets to beg and find other ways of income, like prostitution.
Nikhil Barat: We, who stayed back in Calcutta, enjoyed it tremendously. No crowd, no jhaagda [fights], no golmaal [chaos]. Things were alright except for the induction of American soldiers around Calcutta in bases and Calcutta was modified as an R&R [rest and recuperation centre]. And in the rest and recuperation centres, you know what happens....

There was a lot of money in New Market, a lot of parties, and that really hit the moral fibre of the Anglo-Indian society. That really was the start of the decay of Anglo-Indians. Otherwise, the Anglo-Indian society in Calcutta played a remarkable role in keeping the style, prestige, everything that was there. It was very good. We had a lot of Anglo-Indian friends and Jewish and Armenians; they are all gone, finished.... Calcutta then was a very neat, clean city; very disciplined, very enjoyable except in the Maidan area, which was given to the R&R [centre], and we were not permitted to go there. No Indian would go there. Who would bother? We stayed in our area and enjoyed....

Close on the heels of the influx of soldiers to the city looking for rest and recuperation was the famine of 1943, which further decimated the political will of of the Indian people. His recollection of the situation is vivid in its description of the feeling of helplessness and pathos around him, which obviously affected his studies. The remembrance, though subjective in nature and conveying his experiences and perception of those times, clearly draws out how the world wars changed people’s perception of space in the city. Maidan, which was an open space in the heart of the city where people went for leisurely walks and fresh air⁴, was no longer a place where the educated and the cultured would go for amusement. Since 1920s, the military had taken over the space and it was largely used for their recreation, which came with its set of problems about moral and immoral activities. Also, Kolkata, which had had a fairly integrated society with different communities living together in harmony, suddenly saw a sharpening of differences. The War is clearly seen as to have brought a disruption in Kolkata’s normal way of life.

Nikhil Barat: Then in 1943, the famine struck, which, as you know, is being acknowledged now as man-made. You must have read about the silent war, Churchill’s book and other things. These are all facts. At that point of time, I still remember, at noon when we sat down for lunch, Maa bhaat debe [Mother, will you give me some rice?] was the resounding voice that was going around in Kolkata. People with small babies tucked in came for whatever you could give. So we did not even like to have food. The food was all given out. As you know, morality was absolutely down, especially in that area, and we were forbidden to venture into that area that is now New Market and Chowringhee. It was bad, really bad. But that is how life goes on. It went on. In 1943, I could not attend college.

Another interviewee, who became the director of IIM-C, remembers being a student in a newly independent India. He joined the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, in 1952. Housed in a building that was a notorious prison during the colonial rule, it was the first Indian Institute of Technology set up in the country with the hopes of grooming the engineers who would build the new India.

Subir Chowdhury: We were attending classes in that Hijli Jail where all the freedom fighters were kept. That was our classroom. But it was a classroom. So the feeling of building India, to do something for this country, was very much in the blood. After all we suffered a lot due to the Partition of the country, and though it was happy on one side, it was unhappy on the other side and all had this thought that we have to do something for the country.

Since the act of remembering involves a process of recollection of the past in the present, which also means it is an interpretation of the past. He is looking back on his life and putting it into a nationalist framework – whether the framework is imposed at that time or later is a question that makes oral history so interesting. The added layer of nationalism to his education is perhaps an afterthought by which he explains the significance of what it meant to be a student during that time.

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⁴ De, Sarmistha and Bidisha Chakraborty; Maidan: The Open Space in History; Social Scientist Vol. 38; No.1/2; Jan-Feb, 2010
Subir Chowdhury: I was born in Dhaka. That was 1935. And it was in this Dhaka University environment that I was growing till that abrupt break-up of the country took place in 1947. And we moved to this part of Bengal. We then settled down in Calcutta.... I did my intermediate from Presidency College. Thereafter, I switched. It was primarily due to the Dhaka connections because Dr Jnan Ghosh was the first director of IIT Kharagpur, the first IIT. I joined in 1952. Ours was the second batch. Kharagpur was a wonderful experience. I would never really have found education so enjoyable if I didn’t go to Kharagpur and this was the first experiment in the country with a semester system. And because it was outside the university system – the university system will not allow such an experiment – so the teacher had full responsibility. He used to draw up the curriculum. He used to set the question paper, assign marks, and 40 per cent of the marks were for continuous evaluation of projects. And there was a joy in learning while doing. It started in the morning at seven and so everybody was on their toes and there was huge, massive transition in bicycles from the hostels to the academic block, and then up to eleven. And then from 11 am to 1.30 PM, there would be a recess and again the cycle movements; teachers and students all moving in cycles....

Other interviews reveal a further change in the mind-set of the people in the third decade after India’s independence. With a changing economic, social and political background, the concerns were different in the 1960s. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s interview records how the business school’s syllabus was influenced by the faculty who identified with the Left.

Dipesh Chakrabarty: When I joined, I discovered the humanities and the social sciences in the very first year, in the compulsory subjects. I didn’t have Barun De in my first year. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya taught that year the compulsory history course. I didn’t take to history in his class, but I liked him. History was one option that was opening up, but something I loved discovering was social psychology and the behavioural sciences, organisational behaviour. And the winds of the Sixties had gone through the American business schools as well. So actually, business school literature on the softer sides, like behavioural science, organisational behaviour, had taken on a lot of Marxist and quasi-Marxist critiques of alienation of capitalist production into the syllabus. It was here that I read, for the first time, Marx’s Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts as classroom texts. Erich Fromm was part of the course. Carl Rodgers, who came out of the T-Group movement in America, had a very important book called Making Persons of Non-Persons or something like that, which was an important book.

Dipesh Chakrabarty is a well-known historian and the recollection is revealing because while IIM-C would be expected to groom future managers and entrepreneurs, here is someone who is crediting the Institute for leading him into labour history. This obviously does not fit in with is the “stereotype” of what characterises a management institute.

Barun De, a well-known economic historian who passed away recently and was faculty at IIM-C, reflects on the changes in the management discourse since the time he started teaching at IIM-C. His memory here is more a critical reflection on what comprised management education in India then, which adds a
new layer to the meaning of the oral history. It is no longer just a recollection of what things were like then; it is also an interpretation of the past through his eyes, those eyes that had seen many more worlds since the early IIM-C days. In other words, his experiences in later life have influenced the way he revisited his past and, therefore, talked about it.

**Barun De:** Actually, IIM Kolkata today, frankly I know nothing about it beyond those big buildings. It’s not that I know anything about management any more but what I could talk to you about is those ten years, forty years ago, when we saw management as something which was integral to governance. We thought that management would be something that would inform not just governance but entrepreneurship and also the administration of public enterprise. We were rather narrow in those days, we didn’t think of enterprise as private enterprise. We should have, probably, given the way the world has moved. But that was a generation, post-war, we’d grown up seeing controls and we were not free of the hangover of the control systems that had been set up during the Second World War. So, to us, management, even in the Fifties, when we were being educated, and the Sixties, when we had just started off teaching, meant something which would regulate initiatives and maintain a balance as fine as possible between private self-interest and public good. That, roughly, was our definition of management in those days. I’m sure it isn’t any more but that’s another matter.

Dipesh Chakrabarty also reflects on how it changed him. Barun De was his teacher and the larger construct about what management meant in the 1950s and the choice of topics discussed had an impact on him. The remembrances illustrate the shift in the understanding about management, while also giving an idea of how there is a complex relationship between the private and the public and the life of an institution.

**Dipesh Chakraborty:** In my second year, Barun De came back, but he had no compulsory courses to offer. He was teaching history to the students who were then in first year. But people said, “You must do a course with Barun De.” So I did a couple of courses with him. One was, I think, on Industrial Revolution; a comparative study of industrialisation. I think the other one was called “Problems in the history of Indian industrialisation” and the focus was labour. And that really was the beginnings of my interest in labour as a historical subject. But he was teaching a course in which he was focusing on labour as a question of industrialisation.

But as I want to point out in this paper, these interviews are repositories of the past and a variety of subjects. Dipesh Chakrabarty not only talks about how IIM-C veered him towards history, he also shares his experiences of being part of a communist movement and then moving away from it. These are accounts of an individual’s journey through Kolkata of 1960s and 1970s and bear little relevance to the Institute’s history. Though they are “lost” in the framework of institutional history, they are interesting records of the times, giving voice to people who have lived through those times and witnessed some of the historical events, either directly or indirectly.

The Naxalite movement is traced back to a peasant uprising in Naxalbari, a village in the state of West Bengal, and a series of incidents of violence in the state led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist). In 1970, at the turn of the decade, the movement had engulfed the city of Kolkata with the students and academics taking an active interest in fuelling the movement and carrying it forward. The students and teachers came out in support of the movement and the result was a very violent period in the history of Kolkata, complete with killings and destruction of public property. The movement, however, soon lost some of its supporters, especially when the CPI(M) decided to join a coalition government in the state. Also, the deaths and the sheer brutality of the episodes had discouraged many from extending their support to the cause.

Dipesh Chakrabarty’s interview articulates a middle-class boy’s dilemma and his disenchantment with the Left movement after being a part of it and his subsequent joining of IIM-C as a student and later as a fellow. He remembers 1967 and the events of the following years that led to his loss of faith in the Party.
It reveals how private life negotiates public events and the past is, therefore, a personal experience of that event. When he talks about the disillusionment, it is not just a critique of the world that he had decided to walk away from, it is also a critical reflection on why he chose to move away and what did it mean for him to leave the movement and join IIM-C. Demonstrating the complexity of narratives in oral history interviews, it shows how a public event influences his life and also how his private life makes him view that particular event.

Dipesh Chakrabarty: I was about to finish my BSc degree in physics but I’d spent most of my undergraduate years being involved in the beginnings of what became the Naxalite movement. And when I finished my BSc degree, I’d already dropped out of the movement. I had a year of intense involvement – must have been 1966-1967 – leading to a big strike at Presidency College. And at the end of that involvement, there were beginnings of, rumblings of, disaffection amongst Presidency College students and our leaders about the bureaucratic nature of the CPI(M), the party....

That disaffection with the party snowballed into a process that eventually led to a rift with the party and the formation of the breakaway group CPI(ML). But my own personal trajectory from the end of the strike to the beginning of the Naxalite movement was one filled with dilemmas and doubts about my own capacity to leave my middle-class life and go into a village or work with peasants, which is what my friends said we should do. When the strike ended, our leader of that time said to me, “Why don’t you now move out of home and give up your middle-class life and live with us?” And I had already seen how they lived. They use to be chased by the police, they didn’t know where their second meal was going to come from, they used to sleep at one person’s place one night, a second person’s place another night, and I got frightened. I actually said to these people, “Sorry, I can’t do it; I love my middle-class life too much to be able to do it.” And on the grounds of Presidency College, I still remember, there was a meeting of some sixty-seventy members of the students’ federation, at which a resolution was passed condemning my attitude. Overnight, I lost half of my closest friends who stopped talking to me.

The remembrance of this disenchantment with the communist party as a part of his life story bears a lot of significance. It gives a first-hand account of what caused the loss of support base of the movement among the middle-class Bengalis, giving an inverted view of incidents unfolding as history in Kolkata then. While these were exciting times to grow up in, there was also this pressure of finding employment and earning a living. The city, trying to rebuild itself after the colonial rule that had killed its economy, did not offer much in terms of job opportunities. The society was torn between idealism and pragmatism with the middle-class trying to balance itself between the two. It could not afford to leave behind the concerns of earning a comfortable life and set on a journey of political and social idealism. The result was often confusion and a dilemma.

The process of recollection, during an oral history interview, is also sometimes a way of coming to terms with one’s past that has not been revisited or articulated for various reasons. It allows for space to think through and reflect on incidents, and the re-telling of these stories becomes a way of understanding the past from another perspective.

In the following excerpts, the revisiting of the past is also a movement forward. The admission of unease with the political movement, the choice of joining IIM-C as a student of management and the drift towards history as a discipline reveals the connections between these apparently varied things and is also a process of reconciliation with his past.

Dipesh Chakrabarty: One person who was older than me, a Naxalite leader – quite a well-known leader actually – I ran into him a few days after the incident and he spat in my direction, asking the friend I was with, “Where did you pick up this piece of rubbish from?” The problem was that I wasn’t angry with them. I was hurt but not angry for I used to agree with his judgement. I saw myself as a
failure, belonging to the rubbish-heap of history. There was a lot of self-doubt and self-disgust. But at the same time, I couldn’t say that the self-disgust was strong enough to make a revolutionary out of me....

In those days, a starting salary of twelve hundred rupees was a lot for a Bengali middle-class imagination. So he said, “The moment you get out of your training – management training – look at *The Statesman*, big ads in boxes [for] management trainee, and you start on twelve hundred rupees.” ... I was a more self-divided, conflicted person. My image was very much that of a middle-class Calcutta boy who’s grown up in the sixties. The only skyscraper so to speak in town was Jeevan Deep, the LIC building on Chowranghee Street that looks out on the Maidan. And Jeevan Deep used to figure in Bangla novels written by Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay and other people in *Desh* as a sign of the good life the corporate world offered to those on high salaries.... Anyway, I took the exam, I got admitted and I came here, and IIM changed my life.

Through his remembrances, he also recollects what the Institute stood for in the outside world. He articulates not only what people thought about the Institute, but also the expectations and aspirations of the middle-class Bengalis who looked to the Institute as a haven that would save them from their constant worries about making enough money to live a comfortable life.

Dipesh Chakrabarty: You know, if you come from a middle-class Bengali family, your parents – my generation – would have grown up during the Depression and after. For them, the son securing a job would have been a very important thing. I came from a middle-class Bengali family, not rich at all. No cars. And mostly very lower middle-class relatives. So your parents are always thinking that they have to go and be a supplicant to somebody to find their son a job. So my father was happy that I had gotten into something without his having to humiliate himself in any way and IIM was an extremely upbeat place. In the mid- or late-sixties in India, to know that you might get a job as soon as you walked out of this place, while the rest of India doesn’t. That was a huge privilege.

In these extracts, it is perhaps not possible to put a finger on any fact or figure but they can be read if subjectivity is not written off as a whim or without any logic. As Alessandro Portelli puts it, “They may be less tangible and universal and those of hard facts, but they can be reconstructed by means of the appropriate scientific tools – which include an open mind and a willing imagination.” If read with an open mind – which is to not be restricted by the search for the universal – such oral histories can provide a more complex understanding of History, where the public and the private are intertwined and in constant negotiation.

My interest in engaging with the IIM-C Oral History Archives has been to understand how the larger political events not just shaped the lives of the people in Kolkata, but also what the relationship was between the two. The paper focuses on some oral history accounts that reflect the shifting sensibilities of the Bengali middle-class with changing political, social and economic life of the city. These narratives are also "lost" in the context of IIM-C’s history as they have no direct relevance to the institution but provide a deeper understanding of a larger context but they help us focus on the frameworks within which the middle-class articulated their hopes and aspirations. These frameworks though considered subjective and belonging to individuals – point towards ways in which we might complicate our notions of what institutional history is all about. Perhaps these “lost” narratives hold the key to understanding the relationship between individual recollection and collective memory. The complexities of memory and the negotiations between the personal and the political are the dimensions that one has to manoeuvre in interpreting oral histories to gain an understanding of people’s perception of the past.

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5 Portelli, Alessandro; *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*; State University of New York; 1991; p. ix