

Nov-2005

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Recommended Citation

Pojmann, Wendy (2005). Oral History, Identity, and the Italian Women's Movement in the Future of the Contemporary Past. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 7(2), 191-201.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol7/iss2/13>

Oral History, Identity, and the Italian Women's Movement in the Future of the Contemporary Past

By Wendy Pojmann¹

Abstract

In this essay, I reflect on the use of oral history and participant observation as tools for researchers of the contemporary past. I want to argue that these approaches must, as Nietzsche has stated, "serve life" by pushing traditional guidelines and by considering the rich cultural fabrics not recorded in oral or written form. Feminist scholars must experiment with methodologies that allow them to consider identities by continually reflecting on their own. But, they should neither become trapped by the narrow definitions of identity politics nor indulge solely in personal exploration.

I first discuss briefly the relationship of oral history to feminism and postmodernism and examine the role of meta-narratives in framing research questions. I then draw on my study of the women's movement in Italy and consider how, in the process of conducting research, I was influenced by written narratives, oral accounts, participant observations, and casual exchanges.

Keywords: oral history, feminism, Italy

Introduction

Nietzsche insisted that history should be in the service of life (Nietzsche 1980). Feminist oral historians have served women by keeping alive stories that might otherwise be lost. Postmodernists serve to remind us that the role of personal experience should not be discounted in favor of serving abstract concepts like objectivity. This essay is an attempt to reflect on my position as a historian who struggles with feminism, postmodernism, and oral history but at the same recognizes the power and potential of each in serving life through the telling of stories from the contemporary past. In my effort to practice a feminist methodology of contemporary history, I will try to make connections among personal experience, currents in feminist and postmodern oral history, and my research on women's associations in Italy. The careful modeling of histories that serve life and serve women requires active engagement with the sorts of questions that might too easily be discarded when confronting the recent past. I begin with questions of interdisciplinarity and feminist methodologies. I then apply these queries to my interpretation of the contemporary women's movement in Italy and reflect on the influence of non-traditional sources and identity on the outcome of my work.

The impact of Nietzsche and postmodernism on my training and research means that I cannot easily place myself in a neat category called 'historian' and perform a function that dates to the beginning of the written word. I do, however, feel compelled to position myself in relation to my work in an attempt to understand the future meaning of my efforts. Does my identity change as I conduct research? Am I in fact a historian, a

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sociologist, or a philosopher? Have I transcended categorization? Methodological questions are not always appealing when first becoming excited about a topic, but I ask how I am to undertake the project at hand – a study of women’s associations in post-World War II Italy that encompasses three generations of women, two political points of view that have been battling for dominance for years, a major world religion, and a country that is often characterized too easily as ‘turbulent.’ More importantly, how can I understand my research subjects – primarily women who are still alive – from my perspective as an ‘outsider’ Italophile? An interdisciplinary approach to this contemporary problem seems the only valid one. As a historian, I consider the broader context and look to the written record. As a philosopher, I read the literature of these women and attempt to understand who they are and what motivates them. As a sociologist, I interview women, act as a participant observer, and attempt to grasp group dynamics and relationships.

One technique that allows for a multidisciplinary feminist approach and makes use of the contemporary advantage of having living subjects is oral history. As feminist scholars and oral historians, Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, have pointed out, the primary task of the oral historian has been that of turning into written form stories that are told orally (Berger Gluck and Patai 1991). The tradition of passing down stories from generation to generation has existed since before the written word, but the resurgence of oral history in the 1960s coincides with an interest in telling the stories of marginal people, of people whose stories had been discounted because not preserved in pen and ink. To that aim, the Oral History Association, founded in 1966, ‘seeks to bring together all persons interested in oral history as a way of collecting and interpreting human memories to foster knowledge and human dignity’ (Oral History Association 2002).

Many historians do not have the single goal of producing written documents, however. What most historians concerned with the oral record actually utilize are oral narratives, or ‘the material gathered in the oral history process’ (Berger Gluck and Patai 1991: 4). Historians may conduct their own interviews or they may use the transcripts of those produced by oral historians as additional sources. An oral account can offer a counter-perspective or corroboration to other materials. In this case, it serves very much in same way as the written record. Offering the voices of the obscured, the marginalized, ‘the invisible participants’ to the historical record is important work, but unless the oral histories of these groups are approached from non-traditional research methodologies, they ultimately provide only a wider range of information. The records do not necessarily contribute to new evaluative strategies nor do they deepen comprehension of the past.

Experienced practitioners of feminist oral history have shown that simply telling more women’s stories is not, in fact, sufficient to overturn gender-biased research that continues to value the spoken words of men that are corroborated in written form over the spoken-only discourse of women (Berger Gluck and Patai 1991). Berger Gluck, for example, has been a central force in the Oral History Association and has challenged male-dominated standards of conducting oral history while demonstrating how this sort of research can result in new levels of understanding. She has been involved in oral history since it first emerged in the United States and Great Britain as a recognized academic discipline. At the time, women’s historians were searching for new ways of telling women’s stories and they found oral accounts to be an important contribution to their work of ‘adding’ women to the universal male narrative. When the ‘add women and

stir' approach was challenged, oral history offered a means of communication by women, about women, and for women, independent of male meta-narratives (Armitage *et al.* 2002).

As they developed new methodological approaches that favored the telling of stories from the starting point of women's experience, feminists researchers began to question whether existing conceptualizations of subjectivity were flawed (Harding 1987). Rather than approaching women as objects of research, was it not more feminist to see women as the subjects of their own stories? For oral history, this meant that the interviewers were confronted with the idea that they were not necessarily the sole authors of the texts they were producing. Instead, the women being interviewed were co-participants in the research process. The interviewer and interviewee were both active subjects who engaged in an exchange of subjectivities. The terms interviewer and interviewee did not become obsolete, however, but some questioned if they were skewing the results and perpetuating the myth of authorship. Ritchie insists that although the Oral History Association has chosen to retain the use of the terms interviewer and interviewee, 'an oral history is a joint product, shaped by both parties.' Without directly challenging the subjectivity of the interviewee, Ritchie recognizes that it is the oral historian 'who schedules, prepares for, conducts, processes and interprets the interview (Ritchie 2003: 30).' There is not equal power. The historian's name is ultimately credited. Moreover, feminist methodologies that purport woman-centeredness or make claims about women's fundamental equality have largely been superseded. The challenge of postmodernism is partially responsible for pushing feminist oral history in new directions.

Postmodern theories, although not completely embraced, have tested the notion of getting at the truth of history and view historical narratives as social constructs driven by power structures and not as the individual or combined truths of active subjects. Feminist oral historians have applied postmodernism to their work by examining some of the underlying principles of oral history. For example, to suggest that the interviewer and interviewee are equal contributors to the oral history process is to deny the complexity of power relations in any exchange of words. It is not a question of who sets up the interview, however, but of how power operates in the telling of women's stories. Having 'insider' or 'outsider' status; noting differences of class, race, and education; or simply demonstrating a particular personality each shape the relationship between the oral historian and her subjects. Moreover, feminist oral historians who reflect seriously on postmodern critiques must consider the possibility that women's words do not guarantee access to women's minds. Oral histories may actually invent, rather than represent, women's histories (Chanfrault-Duchet 1991; Stacey 1991). The relationship between feminism and postmodernism has not always been simple or straightforward, however (Hartsock 1989; Hoff 1994). This is in part because postmodern historians reject the search for a truth of the past. Feminists, on the other hand, have clear goals that sometimes necessitate a search for truths. I would argue that the impasse created in the crossing of feminist and postmodern methodologies has in some ways been bridged or at least confronted effectively in the work of oral historians who engage with the contemporary past in live interviews.

The postmodern turn has helped feminist oral historians to consider more carefully identities based on differences such as class and race in order to better understand how meanings of gender operate (Patai 1991). There can be gaps, though,

between even the most carefully thought out theoretical approaches and their application in research. The value of oral history and its ability to confront the recent past is important here. This is because the interview itself reveals assumptions based on subject identities and serves to break down hegemonic categories. An interesting example of this comes from a study by Chase and Bell on women superintendents in public schools (Chase and Bell 1994). They discovered that despite confronting directly methodological issues around questions of gender, race, and ethnicity that it was only in the process of interviewing that they were able to recognize some of the flaws in their approach, which had aimed at making women the subjects of their own stories. Instead, subjectivity was often marred by subjection as "women interwove stories about active subjectivity, about making a difference in their social worlds, with stories about subjection to various gendered, racial, and ethnic inequalities (65)." Chase and Bell had assumed the interviewees would tell their stories around experiences of gender. This was because Chase and Bell were self-described feminists and had formed their interview questions around that primary identity. The subsequent breakdown of subjectivity that was made apparent during the interviews led to the sort of moment Jenkins must have had in mind when he stated that history must be 'forged in conflict.'

My personal recognition of conflicted identities and underlying assumptions emerged as I began to read the work of oral history pioneer and Italian feminist, Luisa Passerini. Her *Autobiography of a Generation, 1968* is a compelling account of personal narratives (Passerini 1996). Passerini explores her life through her relationship to her career as a historian and employs oral history as a means for finding common threads among stories, including her own. Rightly, oral historians and feminist researchers alike have hailed Passerini's book, and it was certainly a model for my research. But, I found myself twice removed from her work; I am not Italian, and I was not there. Passerini is a voice for her generation. I am not. I fell in love with a country and wanted to know more about it. I began to call myself a feminist and wondered why we never heard about the Italian women's movement in America. I then discovered that there were numerous studies of Italian women and that many fascinating stories had yet to be told. My identity appeared to have little in common with that of Passerini and the women she interviewed, but I yearned to know more about them.

As a white, western woman with a doctorate, I did share common elements with the women I interviewed and spent time getting to know. I had to recognize, however, that even shared aspects of identity do not automatically grant insight or compensate for factors like nationality and generation. When I read Marina Piazza's, *Le Trentenni* I was struck by the issues raised by my Italian contemporaries (Piazza 2003). These were women looking for a new identity, one not inevitably shared with previous generations. The oral narratives recorded in the text did not provide clarity though for my research on women's associations. I had to leave my generation behind for the moment. No, I thought, I cannot become Passerini, but I am not limited to telling stories about female Gen-Xers working in professional careers. Instead, I had to be aware of how my identity influenced the narratives I was constructing and reflect upon how I was influenced by those already circulating. Could my 'outsider' status be reconciled with my passion for Italian history and desire to know much more about the lives of Italian women in the contemporary past? How could my oral narratives tell their stories without erasing mine?

As Passerini has made evident, the experience of the interview changes with time. While in the process of conducting an interview, the interviewer may be preoccupied with asking questions, with trying to focus energy on items she wants to emerge, on making the subject comfortable, on whether or not the tape is running out, on bad lighting or a multitude of other issues. Yes, immediate attention is directed towards the words of the interviewee, but it may not be until a second or third listen that the interviewer really listens to the words and tries to construct something from them. Just as when reading transcripts, documents, other texts, the oral historian is constantly interpreting and re-interpreting the past. As I have already stated, recorded interviews form a part of the historical record just as written materials do. The interpretative framework of the historian then informs her oral histories. Perhaps the aspects of identity I did not share with the women I was studying could lead me to uncover something they had not pursued. This is when I began to realize that my feminist approach meant recognizing that I wanted to put women and their accomplishments at the center of my narrative. The influence of postmodernism turned into a reflection on the Italian feminist meta-narrative and its firm grip on my comprehension of the truth. I had, in fact, come to accept as truth the story told by Passerini and her contemporaries about the Italian women's movement. It was not until I began to practice the feminist methodologies of interviewing women, acting as a participant observer in their groups, and engaging in casual conversation with them that I began to reconsider my assumptions. Without these tools of contemporary history, written sources alone would not have led me to the same conclusions.

The meta-narrative of the Italian women's movement has constructed a story in which the women of the Italian Resistance are seen as the leaders of a movement for women's emancipation, or for social and political rights. What is called a feminist movement, a movement for the liberation of women, is said to have emerged with the women of Passerini's generation (Birnbaum 1986; Adler Hellman 1987; Pieroni Bortolotti 1987). The workers' and students' movements of 1968 were the impetus for the creation of small feminist groups that were often connected to a neighborhood, a city, or a region. These groups still form the core of the Italian feminist movement, and as Bono and Kemp have rightly pointed out, feminism in Italy is not primarily located in Academe as it is in the United States and Great Britain (Bono and Kemp 1993).

Gender studies is a very new field in Italian universities (Mantini 2000). Keeping this in mind, I listened to and read accounts of the differences between women's emancipation and liberation in Italy. 'We had seats. They met in houses. We had an explicit hierarchy. They met in equal groups. We came out of the Resistance. They came out of '68' (Chiurlo 1992: 41). The language is certainly clear. Therefore, I did not see any immediate need to challenge the dominant narrative, especially since it was the one being offered by the women participants. They have communicated this story orally and have preserved its telling in written accounts. They repeated the same story to me.

My initial research also tended to support this perspective. After all, the women of the Resistance formed large women's associations that were modeled on male organizations such as political parties and trade unions. The *Unione donne italiane* (UDI) represented women on the political Left, while the *Centro italiano femminile* (CIF) appealed especially to more politically conservative Catholic women. Confronted with new ways of practicing politics by the smaller groups of the late 1960s, these large women's associations were forced to re-think their structures and modus operandi. The

break-up of the UDI in 1982 signaled the demise of one generation in favor of another (Author 2005).

This is the accepted narrative of the Italian women's movement. Yet, as I began to re-read my sources and interview more women, I became dissatisfied with this account. There was something almost too easy and congenial in the telling of this story, even if notice was taken of the emotional hardships faced by the Resistance women who founded these organizations. But, the anger, remorse, or frustration seemed to stem from a recognition that there was a breakdown in the organizations' relationship with Italian politics rather than from strained ties to other women. The UDI was critical of the Communist Party's lack of commitment to women's causes, especially the very divisive abortion issue. The CIF criticized the increasing secularization of society and the increased attention on individual desires rather than on community service. In other words, the new feminist groups were not necessarily at fault. They were acting where women's organizations had failed. They were assuming responsibility from ineffective and outdated organizations. After all, feminists, too, had experienced male-dominance first-hand within the extra-parliamentary groups. Male leaders often assigned less active tasks to women. Women lamented that they had become *angeli dei ciclostili* (angels of the mimeograph machine) on which they printed flyers and manifestos. Women with feminist ideals discovered that extra-parliamentary was not always enough. Perhaps separatism could be more effective. The large women's associations were autonomous, but they had to operate in the male-dominated political sphere. It may be that some shared experience of frustration with male standards made the Resistance women sympathetic to feminist groups and led them to accept the feminist narrative.

One aspect of my research that presented numerous obstacles was that of including the story of the *Centro italiano femminile* in my account. The story I wanted to tell seemed to take a dualistic character despite a common origin. The CIF and the UDI both claimed an origin in the Resistance. Both associations contributed to re-building Italy after World War II and to ensuring women's presence within society and the law. But, when reflecting on my interviews, I sometimes favored one group over the other. The women of the CIF had gone relatively unnoticed or purposely discounted by the Italian feminists. If the feminists already shared little connection with the women of the UDI, they had even less in common with the women of the CIF. The CIF women were Catholics; they were Christian Democrats. The CIF women were women on the Right. How could they possibly share a history with leftist extra-parliamentary women? They certainly could not share one with the UDI and the Communists even if both sides had fought in the Resistance and then had fought for women's suffrage.

The Left/Right split in Italian politics was often a point of frustration for me. As Di Scala has pointed out, many scholars of Italian history, especially those of Italian nationality, find that their interpretations of the past must line up neatly on one side or the other (Di Scala 1998). This leaves little room for veering from accepted narratives or for suggesting that not every history of Italy must be from a Communist or Catholic perspective. This solid divisionary line has been a constant presence within the women's movement. Despite the fact that the UDI and the CIF had struggled for many of the same goals, they failed to recognize their shared calling. Sometimes, I cheered for the CIF and favored this organization simply because it seemed wrong to ignore women who were not on the accepted side of women's rights. In the discourse of defining feminism or feminist

history, I wanted to resist the easy binary opposition of the CIF versus the UDI as that of non-feminist versus feminist. I, too, eventually came to see these organizations as very separate entities but not because of the feminist meta-narrative. Arguably my 'outsider' status helped keep me from becoming a mouthpiece for just one political point of view.

Instead, I began to look at the organizations of the Resistance women and question if they could have done things differently, if perhaps their histories did not need to be obscured by what came afterwards and the labels placed on them. Historians are forever debating the 'what ifs' of the past. I was no different. After all, along with securing women's suffrage, women's protection in the workplace and providing Italian families with social services, associations like the UDI and the CIF were the driving force behind much pro-woman and pro-family legislation in post-WWII Italy. Women such as Nilde Iotti and Alda Miceli worked with the Church, with the parties, and with the trade unions to give women a voice. They earned this duty and right by fighting fascism side-by-side with men. How could the '68 generation not recognize their accomplishments? How could they promote a radical departure from traditional ways of doing politics without recognizing what they were overturning?

As I have already implied, narratives about the past are not the past; they give it meaning. Power makes some meanings dominant. Yet, as Jenkins points out, the word and the world do largely correspond even if words establish 'regimes of truth' (Jenkins 1991: 31-32). Italy's feminist groups certainly seized power from the older women's associations and have re-written narratives of the women's movement. The '68 generation is now in charge, in fact. The World War II generation is slowly passing. The women of '68 are the tenured professors, museum curators, head librarians, and best-selling authors. They are the historians who are publishing work on the feminist movement, hosting conferences, and discussing differences among leading Italian feminist theorists with those in other western countries and the third world. The women of '68 work hard to preserve the future of their contemporary past. I had to recognize the influence of their carefully constructed discourse on my research and think about its possible underlying aims.

A fundamental goal of feminist collectives was that of educating women about themselves, an area where Italian schools, parties, unions, and the Church had failed. But, the women's groups also began to document their own histories. Women's bookstores, archives, and research centers catalog the materials of the feminist groups and make them available to the public. Interestingly, many of these women's centers began preserving material from the on-set of the feminist movement. Some have truly impressive facilities, which amazed me coming from the framework of American university and research libraries. I was accustomed to visiting the HQs or searching for small collections of Italian feminist publications in some of the largest libraries in the US, like the New York Public Library. A friend introduced me to the *DonnaWomanFemme* archive in Rome and the *Associazione Orlando* in Bologna. These centers and others offer vast collections for anyone studying the Italian feminist movement and women in Italian history as well as a myriad of other woman-related subjects. Here were collections of more than 30,000 titles pertaining to women in spaces created by women for women.

Instead, the women of the Resistance did not always take the 'preserve as you go along' approach to documenting their histories. I was surprised, in fact, to learn that the Roman UDI was just beginning a systematic cataloging of material when I visited for the

first time in 1996. I had to go to Ferrara to visit the regional UDI archive for my research. Ferrara was one of the few UDI chapters to stay very active after the organization's division. Financial assistance from a strong, local Communist Party and trade unions helped to make that possible. In Ferrara, the former UDI leaders emphasized their link to the Resistance and to their long history of accomplishments. They told me in detail about their plans for the upcoming *l'otto marzo* celebration, the historical women's day. The women of the Ferrara UDI had a manifesto of demands, were distributing the traditional yellow mimosa flower, and were rejecting the modern-day 'girls' night out' festivities.

In Rome, the UDI was searching to regain its identity as the leading women's organization. The publication of their 50 year old *Noi Donne* still served as a key tie to the past and as a tool of the UDI. But, the Virginia Woolf Center and *Casa delle donne* had become more visible. Many former UDI women were now members of these other organizations, and I encountered them frequently. Others had put their UDI pasts behind them and were more interested in family and daily life than in current feminist events. I met with them in their homes or at the women's centers. I sometimes found it ironic that the women of the Resistance would write memoirs but look at me quizzically when I asked about their experiences (Viviani 1994). They were always gracious but cautious. Why would a young American woman want to know about them? Many of these women have, in some ways, rescinded power to the dominant generation and appeared uncomfortable responding to questions that might overemphasize the importance of their organizations in the present. But, then who were their books for? Was their intention to share their stories with the younger generation? I sometimes had the impression that these women were maintaining bonds with one another, the way war veterans often do, rather than trying to bring new faces to the cause. This was not always the case though, and some women pointed out that it was important to keep their stories alive for future Italians. There was a hint of nationalism. This was a part of Italian history. Maybe it was the part of me that is American that puzzled them. Perhaps the fact that I not lived through the war also led them to the conclusion that I could not fully comprehend their personal and organizational histories.

When I asked the women of the CIF for archived material, they took me to a cold room where they had shelved all the copies of their publications, *Bollettino di Attivita del Centro Italiano Femminile* and *Cronache e Opinioni*. 'No one goes down there anymore,' they told me. I wondered why not? Upstairs the women of the CIF were preparing for a conference. It seemed, in fact, that they were always preparing for a conference or a retreat or a guest speaker. No one had time to look through old publications. Their president was charged with preserving the organization's history. Like the women of the UDI, the women of the CIF seemed bemused by my interest in their organization. But, this did not prevent them from inviting me to the many events they were planning. The women of both organizations always invited and welcomed my active participation.

I was forced again to reflect on my position as a participant observer and feminist oral historian. I was a foreign woman from another generation researching not in a large, state archive where a disinterested clerk brings a pile of manuscripts or microfilm and you painstakingly look through the material, hoping for a new lead. Instead, I was working in the living centers of contemporary organizations where the women had a past, present, and future and where I was sometimes an oddity, sometimes a welcome listener, and always a potential recruit. Our conversations were not one-sided. Through our

dialogue, the women learned about me as well, but I generally opted to remain vague about my political affiliations, religious beliefs, and social agenda. I did not want to alienate anyone nor encourage too many inquiries. Some women made assumptions about me anyway, usually along the lines of my political views. Since the United States was not exactly sympathetic to Communism, I could not be too far on the Left. The women of the UDI held on to Cold War mentalities, but the women of the CIF were disinterested in my connections to American policy asking instead if I was Catholic. All of these experiences stayed with me as I painstakingly attempted to reconcile them with my written sources.

This process of reconciliation has led me to the conclusion that the experience of the interview should not be forgotten in favor of the text that emerges. There is some debate in women's oral history about the possible trap of 'academic self-absorption' in the interpretation of interviews, but I maintain that the question of the identity and experience of the researcher cannot simply be relegated to a secondary status (Armitage and Berger Gluck 1998: 76). For example, in her interview of a poor Brazilian woman named Teresa, Patai focused on the fact of being offered food by a woman who appeared herself undernourished (Patai 1991). Patai entered Teresa's home to interview her about her experiences as a domestic worker but left thinking about the discrepancies between the two women. This clearly influenced her interpretation and subsequent writing on the interview. A similar experience left an impression on me. In Ferrara, I shared a meal with the president of the UDI center and her family. I was struck by the presence of the elderly mother, with whom I could not communicate easily as she spoke the local dialect and very little Italian. She was of a previous generation still and embodied the regionalism so prevalent in Italian life. She had never met an American and was very curious about me. I wondered though what her story could tell me about the Resistance women? Which narrative did she adopt in the telling of her daughter's commitment to women and the nation of Italy? Regretfully, I never got to ask, but her heavily lined face and small, bright eyes lingered in my thoughts. Her story was never recorded. It never became a written text. In the future of the past, there is no account of our lunch together. As I filtered out the afternoon coffee and the space heater, and a walk around the piazza, was I not filtering out the very cultural fabric I was drawn to in the first place? Was I too concerned with the historians who would be looking for the crux of the argument and not for the 'fluff?'. Who cares what you had for breakfast. What did she tell you about the debate over salaries for housewives?

So, where does all of this leave me and my oral histories? What does my future hold as I study the recent past? The challenge of finding a methodology that allows me to practice a feminist oral history aware of the influence of postmodernism continues to confront me. I want to re-interpret words, meanings, and experiences in the hope of serving someone's life. At the same time, I know I cannot assume the identity of Luisa Passerini nor necessarily approach oral history as autobiographical moments spliced with participant accounts. Perhaps I can though embrace contemporary history and the many tools it offers and allow a multitude of experiences and identities to enter my lived research world. It is only then that I can make claims about the past.

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