

PLACING OUR ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS IN CONTEXT

Alvin Finkel

Oral history interviews provide an important corrective to institutional tendencies (archival collections, newspapers, parliamentary records, etc.) to bury the voices of working-class people and diverse communities. The stories of the vast majority of people would not be told if oral histories were not collected.

Oral histories provide both individuals and groups opportunities to tell their stories, often many years after the fact, in their own words and with their own emphases. But an individual oral history, much like an archival document, needs to be understood critically. Each person has biases that make it difficult to assess particular statements and even overall accounts as objective truth without any other information to put the interview and its various claims in context.

An advantage of an oral history over a document produced in the middle of a particular event, is that the speaker will have had the opportunity to reflect on that event and place it in a broad context. The disadvantage of that process is that memory is fickle, and people often confuse the facts or reinterpret them, often unconsciously, in terms of later events and in terms of their reflections on the original events.

We present interviews in the words of our interviewees. That does not mean that we, as an organization, support their views or indeed their claims of basic facts. But we do believe that much is to be learned from listening to or reading the voices of a variety of actors involved in a particular event or community.

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