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Counterpoint. The history of oral history according to Damian Gocół: *Damian Gocół, Historia mówiona: geneza, rozwój, koncepcje* (Oral history: genesis, development, concepts), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2023, pp. 109

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Already in the introduction to his work, Damian Gocół very aptly – following Alessandro Portelli – refers to the concept of counterpoint in trying to justify the coexistence of many concepts of oral history. Counterpoint in music is a compositional technique that involves the simultaneous juxtaposition of several melodic lines according to specific tonal, harmonic and rhythmic principles in polyphonic works. In film studies, it is an aesthetic concept of the early sound cinema period treating sound as a new element of editing and an independent component of the visual image capable of enriching the methods of influencing the viewer. When writing about oral history, the author refers to the definition of counterpoint, because – in his opinion – the multiplicity and diversity of approaches do not lead to cacophony but allow many different stories about the past to resonate harmoniously in parallel but still remain at some distance from each other.

There is no single concept of oral history. We can argue whether it is a research method, a research technique or the practice of collecting sources. We can also ask ourselves questions about the origins of oral history. Although oral history has long since gained institutionalised status, scholars, often associated within one research group, still differ in their understanding of the goals of oral history research and methods. It is also particularly interesting to look at discussions about the social role of oral history and the ethics of researchers and documentarians practising oral history.

Above all, it should be noted that Damian Gocół is the first to undertake the task of conducting a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of oral history as a research practice. This is the first work of this kind on the Polish reading market and therefore extremely necessary to fill the gap in oral history education, primarily at the academic level in Poland.

Although the first attempts to periodise the stages of oral history development were made by, among others, Paul Thompson, Don Ritchie and Alistair Thompson,[1] this work currently under review is one that is intended as a script for students. The author has included an extensive list of literature on the subject, assigned to each of the delineated periods in the history of this research practice; this will serve as a valuable guide for further searches conducted by readers of the study.

1 See P. Thompson, *Historians and Oral History*, in: *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, Oxford 2000, pp. 25–82; D.A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, New York 2003, pp. 19–46; A. Thomson, *Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History*, "The Oral History Review", vol. 34 (2007), no. 1, pp. 49–70.

It is also worth noting that the Lublin researcher is extremely meticulous in his selection of terminology and consistently uses the term oral history specialist, avoiding dividing people practising oral history into researchers, documentarians or journalists. In this way, the study also remains beyond any disciplinary divisions within oral history.

The book consists of an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion. In the first chapter, the author introduces the reader to the definition of oral history as a research practice. In the next three chapters, the author performs his own periodisation, distinguishing three key periods for the development of oral history. Damian Gocół believes that essentially in the process of oral history becoming an independent discipline, we should distinguish the archival period (the 1940s–1960s), social period (the 1960s–1980s) and textological period (from the 1980s onwards). The research, social and cultural concepts that prevailed in each of these periods developed in individual countries with different intensity and met with different levels of interest, which is why chronology in this division plays a secondary role (p. 16). For the author, the driving force for changes in oral history is the attempt to define oral history in the humanities and social sciences, and he ultimately perceives it as a new way of learning about the culture, social life and past of communities previously omitted from mainstream research.

The archival period is the time when various definitions of oral history were developed, the first research and documentation centres were created, and the three most important stages of an oral history specialist's work were defined. According to Gocół, on the academic level during this period, the approach to non-academic practices was quite relaxed. Oral history was primarily associated with testimonies, their collection, documentation and storage. There was no need to separate research practices from social activism in oral history. Oral histories were present in research and media coverage. This was also a period in which discussions on the essence of oral history were dominated by the topic of transcribing oral history sources. Oral history specialists were interested in whether untranscribed recordings could be considered a legitimate source or whether only a transcription could represent such a source (pp. 18–19). The heroes were representatives of the elite and the stories concerned exceptional experiences (p. 20).

In the 1960s, significant changes took place in the Western oral history community due to the need for the young generation of oral history specialists to confront the knowledge acquired from their predecessors with the ideas of the leftist movements that were gaining popularity at that time. It was then that young progressive researchers began to look for interlocutors among representatives of excluded groups and those deprived of their recorded history. The elitist nature of the first oral history projects was also criticised (p. 51). During this period, according to Damian Gocół, the need to redefine the relationship between oral history and the disciplines dealing with folklore and tradition came to be felt.

The actions of left-wing activists also led to a different perception of the category of the narrator of oral texts about the past (p. 57). Marta Kurkowska-Budzan made similar observations years ago, emphasising that in the second half of the 1970s, with the collapse of the ideal of "scientific" history, voices were raised criticising the ability of historiography in general to obtain true knowledge about the past. In such an interpretation, the interlocutor in oral history also ceases to be an informant.[2]

In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a dynamic development of oral history. However, representatives of various academic disciplines together with journalists and social activists practising oral history had in common only a similar method of obtaining narratives, while they were used for completely different purposes. There were also disputes about the credibility of the spoken source. While in the archival period it had been necessary to convince the researcher of the witness's credibility, in the following decades of the social period, according to Damian Gocół, this topic withdrew into the background.

With this linguistic breakthrough and postmodern doubts, alternative proposals for practising history appeared, including new ideas for oral history.[3] At the same time, it also had an impact on science, culture and the media, although discussion about the social role of oral history among Western oral history specialists dominated reflection on this research practice (p. 65).

The third and last period in the periodisation created by Damian Gocół is the textological period, which is characterised by the independence of theoretical reflection from any close connection between *oral history* and historiography and an increase in interest in this practice by representatives of other disciplines. In the period in question, the key element is not to verify the truthfulness of the testimony, but to learn about the interlocutor's individual experience of the past through the testimony (p. 68). In the textological period, due to the fact that the research interests of oral history specialists moved from the reconstruction of past events towards the reconstruction of individual and collective memory, open interviews became more popular. The interlocutor is no longer questioned but is allowed to tell a free narrative, at least in the first part of the conversation. However, in a qualitative sense, new narrative material requires new methods of both conducting interviews and analysing the resulting material (p. 74). Damian Gocół also rightly notices that in the textological period, the focus on building the text as a conceptual layer resulted in a search for inspiration and solutions in various academic disciplines. In-depth research on oral history texts has been developed using methods from linguistic and cultural sciences, sociology

2 M. Kurkowska-Budzan, *Informator, świadek historii, narrator – kilka wątków epistemologicznych i etycznych oral history*, "Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej", vol. 1 (2011), p. 16.

3 *Ibidem*.

and psychology. The asymmetric transfer of conceptual apparatus and research methods from other disciplines has resulted in significant methodological differences between individual research centres (p. 75). The author reviews the most important works in this period, citing not only monographs based on oral history created at that time, but also presenting a wide range of researchers who have produced theoretical reflections on the development of oral history.

Undoubtedly, the author selects the examples to be discussed in an interdisciplinary way, which is a positive aspect of the monograph. It is written in the belief that oral history has become independent as a research practice and has its own conceptual apparatus, methods and ways of analysing narratives. The author set himself the task of essentially describing the path that oral history has taken to become an independent research practice.

It is worth appreciating the contribution of Damian Gocół's work to reflect on the stages of the development of oral history in Poland, which was included in the third chapter of the work (pp. 79–87). The author-linguist's comments on the works of historians practising oral history using ethnolinguistic methods are particularly valuable. However, the author misses another proposed research method within oral history that has been extremely valuable for historians; that is the "historical interview."[4]

It is worth emphasising that in his way of understanding the first stages of the development of oral history, the author is greatly influenced by the reflections of Ronald Grele, who was one of the first to publish a similar reflection in the English literature on the subject. While Grele distinguished two motives, i.e. the transformation of oral history (starting from the source of information to the creation and interpretation of texts) and the change in the position of the oral historian/interviewer from an engaged observer who wants to be objective into an active participant in the process. However, in Gocół's study the latter motive is not reflected upon.

In his considerations, Damian Gocół does not refer directly to the work of the Australian precursor of oral history, the above-mentioned Alister Thomson, but he reflects deeply on his proposed periodisation of oral history into four paradigms.[5] In his essay, the Australian oral historian reviewed the most important events in the history of oral history (until 2007) and distinguished the following four paradigms: 1. the paradigm of theory and practice (the post-war renaissance of memory as a source of "the history of ordinary people"); 2. the paradigm for the development of a "post-positivist" approach to memory and intersubjectivism (1970s); 3. the paradigm of change in the perception of the role of oral historians

4 M. Kurkowska-Budzan, E. Soroko, M. Stasiak, *Wywiad historyczny. Propozycja metody badawczej*, "Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej", vol. 11 (2021), pp. 8–36.

5 A. Thomson, *op. cit.*, pp. 49–70.

as documentalists and researchers (since the late 1980s); and 4. the paradigm of the digital revolution at the turn of the 1990s and 2000s. Alister Thompson also distinguished four breakthrough moments that became the driving force behind these changes. However, Damian Gocół only mentions the advent of digital oral history, referring to Thomson's work (p. 90). Meanwhile, from today's perspective and given the level of advancement in the implementation of digital technologies in oral history, Thomson's work on paradigmatic changes seems to be outdated.[6]

In addition, both Ronald Grele and Alister Thomson do not consider the period called textological by Gocoł to be uniform and instead identify its sub-stages: the intersubjective turn, the narrative turn and the internationalisation of oral history.[7]

To sum up, Damian Gocół's book fills a gap in the literature on the subject, primarily in the context of the strengths and weaknesses of the interdisciplinarity of oral history, because the examples of the effects of incorporating conceptual apparatus from other disciplines analysed by the author allow reflection on possible directions of development of oral history, for example in Poland. However, for academic teaching, the value of this position cannot be overestimated for Polish-speaking students. At the same time, it is worth expressing the hope that the reflections presented by Damian Gocół in his book will be published in English as an enrichment of English-language literature about oral history and an impulse for further analysis of its roots.

6 D.A. Boyd, M.A. Larson (eds.), *Oral History and Digital Humanities: Voice, Access, and Engagement*, New York 2014.

7 See *ibidem*; R.J. Grele, *op. cit.*, pp. 51–116.