Oral History Review Advance Access published August 16, 2012

The Persistence of Silence after Dictatorships

Laura Benadiba

Abstract: This article describes the Argentina–Catalonia Project, a collaborative secondary school oral history project based in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Tarragona, Spain. The purpose of the project is to engage high school students in an exploration of the persistence of silence that exists in contemporary Argentina and Spain concerning the impact of dictatorship on everyday life. Toward this end, students both conduct interviews and undertake analysis of them. The persistence of silence is examined from the testimonies of those who lived through the dictatorial regimes, and the process of engaging students in the recovery of the past is explored in depth.

Key words: Argentina, dictatorships, pedagogy, secondary education, silence, Spain

> *A people "forgets" when the generation in possession of the past fails to transmit it to the next one, or when the latter rejects what has been handed down or, in turn, ceases to transmit it. . . . However, the principle remains the same: a people cannot "forget" what it has not previously received.*[1]

Introduction

Those of us with several years of experience in the classroom know that school is not only a fundamental space where specific knowledge is transmitted but also the place where the young can build up their identity, including through doing research

I would like to thank the El Morell High School students, as well as my colleague and friend Professor Tomás Biosca Esteve, for their commitment and cooperation with the ArCa project from the onset and throughout these last seven years. I would also like to thank ORT High School, especially the students who participated in this project, as well the institution itself, for allowing us to develop these collaborative experiences.

[1] Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Reflexiones sobre el olvido* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Nueva Visión, 1989), 17–18.

doi:10.1093/ohr/ohs068
The Oral History Review

on the recent past. Teachers are expected to convey a certain range of content contained in the official syllabus for each course and subject. However, there also exists a hidden curriculum.[2] Unlike the formal, official, and written curriculum, a hidden curriculum represents the values, standpoints, and outlooks that can be transmitted to students. To help them understand the recent past, oral history is an ideal methodological practice, since it empowers children to retrieve their family and community history and strike up a fruitful conversation with their elders. This can be very meaningful as it enlarges the historical awareness of students, due to the perception that the past is a component of their own present. Oral history is a key tool to introduce students to a history they can comprehend and relate to.

When, within the frame of the Argentina–Catalonia (ArCa) Project, described in more detail below, we set out to research the persistence of silence after the dictatorships in Spain and Argentina, we expected to learn how those times were remembered and the extent to which their influence was still present in both societies.[3] Such influence would also be perceived through the silent spells and the occasional forgetfulness in the testimonies of the people who had lived through those historical processes. Thus, our main goal did not consist in reconstructing the history of the Spanish and Argentinean dictatorships with our students but in analyzing resounding silence and memorable oblivion. As Philippe Joutard has pointed out, "the true basis of memory lies not in remembrance, but in oblivion. Memory is primarily constituted by whatever it rejects, because it finds it insignificant or, perhaps, too significant."[4]

Since the times when both countries returned to democracy, the analysis of the dictatorial processes, as conducted by researchers, has been thorough and comprehensive. However, several aspects of life under the dictatorships have not been thoroughly explored. One example is everyday life: what it was like to go to school, the effect that was felt at the office or in family relations. Oral history allows us to penetrate daily life and "to ask ourselves how come the horror and terror eventually turned into an everyday experience, which practices, feelings and imagery gave shape to and supported it, when it started and when this continuity was interrupted, and whether there is continuity, discontinuity and rupture in the subjects' memories between past and present."[5]

[2] Elizabeth Jelin and Federico Guillermo Lorenz (comp.), *Educación y memoria. La escuela elabora el pasado* (Madrid: Siglo XXI de España editores. Siglo XXI de Argentina editores, 2004), 4.

[3] Franco's Rule (1939–75), following the Spanish Civil War, was a military national-fascist regime led by Francisco Franco Bahamonde. National Reorganization Process is the name given to the military-civic dictatorship in Argentina (1976–83), following the coup d'etat against the constitutional government of the followers of Juan Domingo Perôn. Both dictatorships led to numerous violations of human rights.

[4] Philippe Joutard, "Tendremos la valentía de ser historiadores y no memorialistas?" *Voces Recobradas* 6 (1999): 3.

[5] Laura Benadiba and Daniel Plotinsky, "Vivir en Dictadura. La historia oral y la enseñanza del pasado reciente" (paper presented at the XI University Interschools Seminar, History Department, Tucumán, September, 19–21, 2007).

The ArCa project

Conceived with the aim of analyzing how the silence imposed by dictatorships in Argentina and Spain persists in collective memory, the ArCa Project, initiated in 2005, introduces high school students to the methodology of oral history. The project takes place at the ORT Technical School in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and at El Morell High School Institute in Catalonia, Spain, in Social Studies classes with students between the ages of fourteen and sixteen. ORT Technical School is a high school institution in Buenos Aires, with a population of 2500 students. El Morell is a high school institute in Tarragona with 330 students. The teachers responsible for this project are Laura Benadiba (ORT) and Tomás Biosca Esteve (El Morell).

Having agreed on the aim of the project, we went on to design a work plan that would enable both educational centers to act in a coordinated manner, so as to make the most from work conducted separately. A first hurdle to overcome was the fact that the school year starts and ends at different times in the southern and northern hemispheres. It was determined that ORT would take the lead and start to elaborate its part of the project in 2005–2006, whereas El Morell would join in later, during the 2006–2007 school year. Therefore, the ArCa Project was initially expected to cover two entire school years to complete one cycle. Fifty students were trained at ORT, whereas fifteen were trained in Catalonia. Fifteen interviews, all of them videotaped, were conducted in Argentina, and another eight were audiotaped in Catalonia.

The selection of the primary topics to be discussed in the interviews arose from our observation that the silence the dictatorial states had imposed through different methodologies, such as terror and censorship, still manifests itself in everyday lives. Therefore, interview questions dealt mainly with ordinary topics that common people might feel familiar with and might be willing to discuss. Examples of topics included the following: school experience (what it was like to go to school, how discipline was maintained), educational practices (whether dictatorial periods were studied at school, or simply overlooked), sex (whether there was sex education at school or at home), customs and festivities (what was celebrated and what it meant for them as members of a community), and school commemorations (how national holidays were celebrated at school). In practice, this previously prepared questionnaire was rarely followed to the letter, since most of the times the discussion followed its own course.

Our next priority was to establish a coordination mechanism that would facilitate the different phases in each of our educational centers. The solution lay in the use of IT resources, especially the Internet. Thanks to IT, we have been able to communicate at all times to clear up questions and share the progress obtained on both sides of the Atlantic. Both teachers and students have used IT resources on a regular basis to share information, present reports, and exchange files. The use of new technologies, however, was not limited to electronic mail.

On November 20, 2006, following completion of the first phase of the project by ORT students, a videoconference was held between Buenos Aires and Tarragona. The students were most enthusiastic, and they expressed how significant it had been to participate in a project of this kind. A second videoconference was held on June 12, 2007, once El Morell High School had completed the second phase.[6] Both videoconferences, taped in DVD format, became part of the archive at both centers and are intended to be used as reference material for new students joining the oral history project.

In the meantime, students responded just as enthusiastically to another proposal: creating a blog (http://arcatalunya.blogspot.com/) through which they introduce themselves, their school, and the oral history work they conduct within the ArCa Project. The ultimate goal is to create a virtual journal, in a continuous process of elaboration and improvement based on students' contributions, which will allow anyone to join in the debate on the recovery of historical memory.[7]

Argentina

Once the interview stage had been completed, it was time to move on to the second stage, in which students would analyze the interviews they themselves had conducted at ORT. We started by encouraging students to "read" the interviews by themselves. To that end, we gave them only one instruction: to observe the manner in which interviewees recalled their memories, paying special attention to their gestures, their silences, and the venue selected to conduct the interview. Interviews within the ORT phase of the project were filmed, rather than audiotaped, thus allowing for analysis of body language. Two testimonies have been selected for presentation in this section.

When our body recalls: José Finkelstein

José was a student at ORT in the 1970s and is at present employed at the school in the audiovisual department. His long, three-day, videotaped interview, conducted in 2006, included a tour around the school.[8] As he walked with the students, guiding them through the premises, José started his account by pointing out the differences and similarities with the past. He recalled, "Right here, where this office stands now, there was a . . . ," or "This auditorium looks the

[6] This videoconference can be viewed at http://campus.almagro.ort.edu.ar/cienciassociales/historiaoral/noticia/117540/el-arca-como-resultado-de-una-trabajo-virtual-colaborativo

[7] For updates on the ArCa project, please visit http://campus.almagro.ort.edu.ar/cienciassociales/historiaoral

[8] José Finkelstein, interview by ORT students, videotaped recording, April 9, 2006, Buenos Aires, Argentina. For this and all subsequent citations to ArCa Project interviews, the students' names have been withheld, as they were minors and permission to include their names for publication was not obtained.

same," or "There used to be more outdoor spaces." He put his heart and soul into the description of the school spaces during the dictatorial rule, an attitude which evidenced a sense of belonging to the institution that, in turn, inspired involvement from the three student interviewers.

There was a point in the walking tour when José stopped to tell them an anecdote. Pointing at the library, he indicated that there used to be a patio there where school ceremonies were held: "In the '70s, we used to have commemorative celebrations on the very same day, so we students had to show up on the exact date of the celebration [unlike now, when a non-working holiday is awarded typically on the previous or following Monday]. So, if July 9th, Independence Day in Argentina, was a Tuesday, you had to show up on the very July 9th. I remember that in 1977, the school, as it was different from other schools [for cultivating a non-conventional approach to long established educational customs], instead of holding a formal ceremony, decided to bring in the [lowering his voice] Cuarteto Zupay [a vocal and instrumental quartet that was banned by the dictatorship]. So we, only 16 years old then, got to listen to the Cuarteto Zupay here at school, can you imagine it? We are talking about a time during the Dictatorial Rule. The Cuarteto Zupay played right here for the students who had come to school that day for the commemoration of our national anniversary." As *Cuarteto Zupay* was then a proscribed band, no school records were kept of such a live performance, except in the memories of those who attended it.

In the analysis phase, this excerpt of the testimony triggered a debate among students about censorship of cultural expression, and they came to realize that ordinary school life in the times of dictatorship took different shapes, that it was perceived differently in different educational institutions, that some suffered more the effects of the Dictatorial Rule than others. In short, they came to realize that life under the dictatorship was not black or white; there was a grey area which would allow, for instance, for the live performance of a band, blacklisted and censored by the Dictatorial Rule, which advocated against the violation of human rights. All of this at the school they themselves belong to. Furthermore, the students were able to witness how the tone of Jose's voice went down to a whisper when his account touched on sensitive topics, such as violations of the arbitrary rules imposed by the state. Some aspects of the dictatorship still persist even now, decades after these events, for these ordinary protagonists of recent history.

Feeling a part of history: Adrián Merajver

Adrián's interview, unlike most conducted for the project, was done at his request.[9] After taking part in the videoconferences of the ArCa project as a

[9] Adrián Merajver, interview by ORT students, videotaped recording, June 26, 2006, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

technician, Adrián felt deeply moved by the commitment shown by the students to learning about the past of their country, which, in turn, is a part of his own past.

The core of Adrián's account consisted of his experience as a political militant during the latest Dictatorial Rule (1976–1983).[10] Although interview questions were not strictly related to his political activity, the interviewee directed his recollections toward that specific end. For instance, when a student inquired into his family, after mentioning its members, Adrián explained, "Actually, the relation with my family was good. Somehow I felt supported in what I did. I never needed to conceal from them my political affiliation, nor my militancy. Never did I find any hurdles, or discouragement, on the part of my family due to my political activity. I felt supported in my militancy." Despite the student's attempt to proceed with his questionnaire to the letter, Adrián ended up imposing his own agenda, retelling his experience as a militant. Interestingly, this ultimately helped the student relax and adapt the questions to the needs of the interviewee.

Adrián also mentioned the torture he was subject to when he was apprehended by the paramilitary, without specifying to the students the procedures used on him. "There are two things which allow me to stand in front of the camera and tell you this without fear or shame. Well, the first one is that, even though I was busted and tortured, I never gave away any name. Nobody has had to suffer imprisonment or torture because of me revealing a name, and that allows me to walk with my head held high. I have harmed no one in this way. But I think that there are people who did, who couldn't stand the torture and accused others and gave away names." Not even once, perhaps out of militant self-discipline, did he specify the kind of torture he had been subjected to. Similarly, throughout his account he failed to identify his political affiliation to a proscribed organization (*Montoneros*) by its name, a name that even now, almost four decades later, most people refrain from uttering out loud and that is mostly alluded to with evasive language and indirect references. So in the presence of another instance of a self-imposed silence transcending to our present, the students were able to acknowledge and record more evidence of the persistence of silence, long after the country had returned to democracy.

When asked about his daughters, Adrián answered, "I have three daughters, aged 27, 19 and 17. I guess they are more like the typical youths of today,

[10] Although Adrian never referred to his political affiliation by its name, from his ideology students were able to acknowledge that he sympathized with one of the then many revolutionary organizations, chief among them *Montoneros*, a group of far-left Perón followers which resorted to kidnappings and bombings to pursue its goals, and which would then be subject to harsh repressive and retaliatory measures enforced by the military, the police, and the right-wing paramilitary squads. The extent of Adrián's involvement in political activity during a time of escalating violence is also unclear to the interviewers, as he chose to reveal only certain details of his militancy, thus imposing a self-censored silence on aspects that are particularly sensitive to him.

introverted. They seem to care about their own interests and the rest is none of their business. I wouldn't say they are anything like me at that time, with everything I experienced then. At the age of 22, I could say that I had political awareness. I was a militant. I had a formation, a certain reading, an intention, which I don't think they have at all. Although I tell them about it, I don't see them interested at all. And it seems to me that society is somehow responsible for their disinterest." This passage in particular touched the sensibility of the students, as it called into question the commitment of the present generation to the ideals their elders were defending in their time. It made them wonder whether they themselves would look away from commitment to a cause (as Adrián's daughters do), or whether they would be brave enough to stand up for their own beliefs and get involved in political life. The answer was soon to arrive as, at the end of the interview Adrián, thankful and satisfied, expressed, "It is said that history is written by the victors. But this type of projects allows the participants of history, who did not always win, to have a say in this history. And to be heard." The students' participation as interviewers in an oral history project was being recognized by the interviewee as a sure sign of involvement with their historical reality, an incentive that reassured and encouraged the students to continue to pursue projects that require reflection on our recent past and, in doing so, an understanding of our present.

Catalonia

Students at El Morell High School similarly undertook an analysis of the interviews, although in their case it was of audiotaped, not videotaped, interviews. A number of interview excerpts have been selected for presentation in this section, and they exhibit characteristics similar to those observed at ORT school, as students sought to understand everyday life under dictatorship. These excerpts concern the intertwining nature of several aspects of everyday life: traditions and customs, religious festivities and the role of the Church, and sexuality.

Traditions and customs: Josep Vallès Badia and Ezequiel Peñaranda Moratalla

One conclusion that students arrived at is that traditions and customs constitute an important source of information from which they can infer the persistence of silence and forgetfulness with respect to dictatorships. This is illustrated by an excerpt from the interview with Josep Vallès Badia, in which he elaborated on the following definition of "tradition": "It's something that has always been done the same way, on the same date or at the same time, within the family, the village or the community. In the past,'customs' were more widely celebrated

than now. They are becoming less and less important. Nowadays the pace of modern life does not allow for things like that. Maybe it's because everybody worked in the village then, or in the countryside. Now, with jobs in the industries you just don't have time."[11] Similarly, Ezequiel Peñaranda Moratalla reflected, "Festivities have changed a great deal, they are not always the same, not for the people. But for me they do remain the same because I continue to be the same. I am the same guy and I don't change the customs. I'm the same as ever."[12] The "customs" that these interviewees referred to are certain religious celebrations included in the Catholic Liturgical Calendar (St. Anthony's, Easter, Corpus Christi, among others). All of the interviewees recalled these festivities as an essential part of their lives, pointing to the significance that they had for the population and, lastly, regretting their disappearance. The time being evoked with longing melancholy corresponds to that of Franco's Rule (1939–1975). Although not overtly manifested, these accounts indicate that the Church played an important part in bringing the community together through those religious festivities. In a time of rigidity and silence, traditions and customs were a clear outlet for rural people's need to socialize and bond.

The role of the Church: Natàlia Ódena Boix

When students asked about the role of the Church as an institution during Franco's Rule, they noticed that respondents became insecure and gave evasive answers. An accomplice to the dictatorship, the Church's influence extended to private life in different forms of moral repression. The students were able to observe that even today, more than thirty years after the end of the regime, elderly people became diffident when the subject came up and were unwilling to discuss the repressive nature of the Church's role at the time. It must be borne in mind that education in Spain, unlike in Argentina, has been mainly religious and, perhaps due to rural backwardness, it was hard for interviewees to assess and discuss the influence of the Church openly. However, when the students invited them to reminisce about their everyday country life, they were able to point to religious festivities as one of the factors leading to the unity of the community. This characteristic in the recollections evidences a revalorization of the direct relations which developed with the Church. The selective character of memory allows them to vindicate themselves as members of one (though today inexistent) community. As Natàlia Ódena Boix stated, "In the past you knew everybody, you went out in the street to talk to your neighbors, to get some

[11] Josep Vallès Badia, interview by Tomás Biosca Esteve and El Morell students, audiotaped recording, April 29, 2007, Vilallonga del Camp, Catalonia, Spain.

[12] Ezequiel Peñaranda Moratalla, interview by Tomás Biosca Esteve and El Morell students, audiotaped recording, May 15, 2007, Constantí, Catalonia, Spain.

fresh air, as there was no TV, and nowadays you may not see your next door neighbor in two full months. This is a shame. Life has evolved with computers and cell phones. There is no face to face relationship with the neighbors."[13] These interviewees have chosen to recall, most surely unconsciously, the feeling of community and union among the villagers that was fostered by the Church, with no reference made to its repressive nature.

Sexuality: Natàlia Ôdena Boix, Marga Cabrerizo Cabrerizo, Dora Cabré Colet

Sex was yet another topic that was regarded as taboo during Franco's Rule. When asked to recall topics they would never talk about at home, and amid laughter, which even made the interviewer giggle, Natàlia Ôdena Boix exclaimed without hesitation: "About sex! None of it! Don't, my dear, don't you laugh! It was taboo! No! We had none of it, at least in my home. My sister, who got married before me, could have explained something to me. But, she wouldn't!"[14] As Marga Cabrerizo Cabrerizo simply put it, "The topic of sex was untouchable. Neither at school nor with our parents was there any education on that subject."[15] Through Dora Cabré Colet's account students found an especially paradigmatic example of this silence. Throughout the interview she was able to recount her memories with a wealth of detail. However, her attitude changed when the students asked her about extramarital relations and whether she knew someone who had maintained them. She appeared uneasy, reserved, and hesitant, adopting a defensive attitude. After a long silence, she started, "Oh, Man! Maybe I do, but these are things that I won't talk about."[16] In the times of Franco, marriage was a religious institution, divorce had been abolished, and only the wealthy could afford annulments from Rome. As a result, the Church was vigilant of chastity, and sex outside marriage was punished with social rejection. However, there may have been an additional reason for Dora's unwillingness to discuss sex: one of the interviewers was her own granddaughter, which made it uncomfortable for Dora to touch on the subject.

Drawing on these accounts, students were able to analyze how influential the dictatorship was in the interviewees' childhoods and the extent to which this influence still persists. They noticed that even now, thirty-five years after the

[13] Natàlia Ôdena Boix, interview by Tomás Biosca Esteve and El Morell students, audiotaped recording, June 6, 2007, Catalonia, Spain.

[14] Natàlia Ôdena Boix interview.

[15] Marga Cabrerizo Cabrerizo, interview by Tomás Biosca Esteve and El Morell high school students, audiotaped recording, May 23, 2007, Catalonia, Spain.

[16] Dora Cabré Colet, interview by Tomás Biosca Esteve and El Morell students, audiotaped recording, May 16, 2007, Villalonga del Camp, Catalonia, Spain.

return to democracy, most people, and especially those in rural settings, are unable to rid themselves of old fears in order to discuss sex outside marriage, criticize the Church's complicity with the regime, and the like. Much to the contrary, and owing to the selective character of memory, they continue to uphold the Church as an institution that was fully committed to maintaining unity in the community in times of hardship. They thus remain incapable of observing reality from a more critical perspective, a clear sign of the pervasive and persistent nature of the silence imposed on collective memory during dictatorships.

Conclusions

The ArCa Project has allowed us, as teachers, to draw conclusions about the adoption of oral history methodology in the high school classroom and curriculum. The construction and utilization of oral sources with adolescents has clearly been significant and beneficial. Along with an understanding of the persistence of silence under dictatorships, students derive additional important knowledge and skills.

Oral history provides students with primary sources of their own regional history, a heritage that exists in their own, their neighbors', and their relatives' homes. By having direct access to these sources, they are stimulated to build a local memory without losing sight of its links with national history. Thus, "oral history at school helps us bridge the gap between the academic world and the community: it brings history to their home, as it connects the classroom and the textbook with the daily life of the community in which the student lives."[17] History should encourage students to create a critical awareness of their social environment. But this is only possible if we adopt a methodology that promotes the integration of knowledge and a connection between research and teaching, on the one hand, and between the school and the community, on the other.

Oral history also offers an opportunity to recompose intergenerational ties. The interviews bring different generations together, strengthening bonds that have tended to loosen over time, while also contributing to students' identities, as they establish an open dialog with the past. Parents, grandparents, uncles, and aunts become relevant informants. They can prove that their relatives, ordinary men and women, made history, just as they themselves are constructing it. Oral history helps effect a change in their communication with elders, which is both an educational and a social value.

Moreover, students in the ArCa Project have shown sensitivity, commitment, and respect toward other viewpoints. They are able to understand that

[17] Thad Sitton, George L. Mehaffy, and O.L. Davis Jr., *Historia oral. Una guía para profesores (y otras personas)* (México: Fondo de Cultura Econômica, 1983), 20.

the protagonists may have different views on the same historical event, and they learn to respect those opinions. The process of constructing oral sources brings about a strong sensitivity, because they create knowledge from the direct testimonies of the actors of the historical process under study. As a result, they assume a commitment to the project with greater responsibility.

Oral history also allows students to be the scholars, creating historical knowledge. When students conduct an interview, they create a historical source and they thereby adopt the role of historian. They become familiar with the raw material historians use and they soon start to understand the nature of all kinds of historical sources. They recreate history with voices and protagonists that traditional sources tend to ignore. Equally important is the fact that conducting fieldwork and transcribing and editing interviews trains students in research tasks. There is still a conception that historical research is a scholar's task with hardly any involvement with the object of study. When we examine teachers' practices, we still find that traditional methods, whereby knowledge is memorized rather than constructed, still prevail. Oral history helps us break with those methods, as it favors participation and the creation of sources that foster the appropriation of historical knowledge. And it is precisely at this point that fieldwork ultimately leads them to "living history itself." This contribution of oral history has been widely acknowledged: "The most important argument about the value of oral history in the classroom is that such projects are actually real: they 'make' something. They produce tangible outcomes with personal and social value and this, more than anything else, explains their particular potential to promote motivation and enthusiasm in the students."[18]

We strongly believe that sharing this kind of project and encouraging other teachers to, in turn, transmit their experiences to others can contribute to promoting the utilization of oral history methodology. When more and more of us have noticed the changes brought about in our students, in the community, and even in ourselves, we will be contributing to an awakening in society of the need to recover the past, a past that comes to life in an oral history interview.

Laura Benadiba, a historian specializing in the methodology of oral history, has been a history teacher at ORT Technical School (Buenos Aires, Argentina) since 1990, where she also directs the Oral History Program. She also presides over the oral history association "Otras Memorias" (www.otrasmemorias.com.ar). Her many papers on oral history have been published in books, journals, and on the web, and she has published twelve textbooks on oral history. The ArCa project was awarded Third Prize, the Leandro Colomer Award 2006/2007, from the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona. E-mail: lbenadiba@yahoo.com.ar.

[18] Sitten et al., *Historia oral*, 29.