

A chronical reference in history research “Collective Memory”: “Past, present and future of the encounter corridor on memory”¹

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Abstract

There are many data used in historical research studies which are preserved in the forms of documents, records, almanacs, journals and memoirs that shed light on events or help us understand them from various aspects. On the other hand, verbal resources, the witnesses of the period from past to date, are first-hand documents of such kind, but are different in that they were not recorded. The objective of this study is to draw attention to the contribution of verbal sources and memory studies which can present more humane, or “realistic” aspect of the issues scrutinized in history studies. Hence, as the subject of history, verbal sources will be recorded under the name of social memory and put under protection. By this means, the historian will look out for history’s retrospective marks, therefore the other half of history that completes the other part of it. In this sense, the study aims at revealing the need for developing historical research studies from this aspect.

Keywords: History, Memory, Collective Memory, Oral History

1. Introduction

It is the oral history that compiles the memory of the community. By means of oral history studies, the historian makes the field work and tries to establish a relation between the time, space and the people of the events to be able to observe it from different perspectives. The historian shuttles between the time and the space in the history based on the values and the facts of the period that the anachronism of the event points out thus, he tries to understand by linking the events. The oral sources, which are regarded as the witnesses of the period in the mentioned history studies, constitute a social memory over the time. This memory can provide an important perspective for the subject by determining various point of views for the occurrence and the development processes of the events. Since history studies have been neglected for a long time or as they have been considered unavailable for methodological studies, have in this respect been bereft and weakened to a certain extent. The aim of this study is to reveal this deficiency and to explain the need of oral history studies to be carried out by specific methodological methods.

2. A chronical reference “Memory”

Oral history is one of the research techniques used by many disciplines that focus on human beings such as anthropology, sociology, ethnology, history etc. Oral history consists of information based on testimonies and observations made in the past. It allows the ordinary people to

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narrate the past, which they have shaped, by their own observations. In this context, the past that is hidden in the memory of the society contributes significantly to the elucidation of a historical process. Therefore, it allows the past to be passed down. In this respect, "Oral history is as old as history. The *first* existing type of history is oral history" (Thompson 1999:199). At this point, the history of Herodotus is only one of the oral history studies that writes the verbal expressions. Oral history studies can also be carried out by technical benchmarking methods. These studies not only complete historical researches from certain aspects, but also they preserve the history by recording the memory of the community. Therefore the memory of the community can elucidate a long period of the history that can be distinguished by the event, time, space and geography.

How and by which stages did the need to record the memory or the social memory come about? We can examine the subject by seeking for an answer to this question. In the process of transition from the *king-state* to the *nation-state*, the discipline of history has faced to the national histories by leaving the understanding of chronicler that justifies the ruler. It has evolved into the form of archivalism based on empiricism that searches the real story of the past by explaining today through Ranke's question of "what has really happened" and that enables to make reasonable choices for the future. The purpose of purifying the history from the speculations resulted in writing praises to the new sovereign of the era, the "nations", thus distracting history from the scientific expectations. In Ranke's understanding of the history, the archives need to be the reference to the historians just like physicists study in the laboratory. This kind of understanding of history, as Burke said, has also raised the claim of science based on the authenticity of the documents. Showing the reason that the historian could not work without a document, it is denied that the historian could examine people and society without being alienated to the "field"(Tokmak 2016:84 - Tosh 1997).

According to Michelet who is contemporary of Ranke, the task of history is to reveal the great events of the national tradition through rigorous research. This ambivalent situation in the nation-state process has started a clash of ideas between Ranke and Michelet. Therefore, the old tension between unique and many, specific and universal has become an important criterion in the emergence of the new understanding of history. This new understanding of history considers the relationship between human and the environment as the relation between the historian and his subject. In this understanding, historian is neither a weak slave nor a master of the facts (Tokmak 2016:83-98).

In oral history studies, the memory is usually considered as an individual faculty. On the other hand, there are some philosophers who believe that there is a collective memory or a social memory. Paul Connerton says that he agreed with this idea belong to them. However, responding to the question of where this phenomenon, the social memory, can be confronted in its most important form of functionality, he adds that he could also think of breaking up with them. According to him, in this respect, how the human groups maintain and preserve the memory should be studied. According to Paul Conneron, related to the memory itself, it can be said that today's experience is based on our knowledge of the past to a great extent. We live in today's world, in the context of the past events that we have not experienced, and the past objects that we have not perceived, by linking causality with past events and objects (Connerton 1999:9). Therefore, it shows that we live the present time in line with one of the various past experiences to which we can link. In this case, we face with the difficulty of extracting the past from the present. This difficulty does not arise only due to the tendency of today's agents to influence our memories of

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the past, it is also due to the tendency of past agents to influence or distort present experiences. With all these difficulties, re-reading the past and present with the background of the society, that is, the things accumulated in the memory, will enable us to read historical events within the framework of different perspectives.

We must state that the social memory, in the best way, is different from a more specific practice that can be called as the reconstruction of history. The knowledge about all the past human activities can only be gained by using the traces left by them. Whether they are the bones buried in Roman trenches or a pile of stone remains of a Norman tower, or a word existing in a Greek inscription that reveals a tradition by its form or use, or it is in the form of a narrative written by the witnesses of a scene, they are the traces that the historian mentions. They are the sensed marks of a phenomenon that cannot be accessed directly (Connerton 1999:25- Burke 2007:21).

In academic studies on history, not only the archive documents but also the verbal interviews on history allow us to reveal the spirit of the period in the most real way. In other words, oral history "includes life into history, thus broadens its scope. It chooses its protagonist from not only among the leaders, but also among the people who made up the majority and have not been known until now (Thompson 1999:18- Truesdell :11). "In this respect, oral history is like the first watering in the plantation, it gives life to historical documents and it makes them talk. According to that, the method in such studies is to implement semi-structured interviews or interviews in a framework of identified topics and certain questions. At this point interviews are held with the relevant oral sources. These interviews should be done by going to the places where the oral sources are more frequent. The interviews should be held in a natural environment during field study. The obtained data is recorded. These records can be preserved in various forms of the media, such as written, audio and visual. The obtained data are analyzed by comparing them with the other sources in the scope of the subject or subjects to be examined in the study.

According to Michelet, oral history is "the *national tradition* circulating from mouth to mouth by all the people, peasants, townspeople, old men and women, and even children, and that we can hear when we enter into a village coffee shop in the evening, or it is a national tradition that we can learn while chatting with a random person about rain, seasons, then the cost of food and then the emperor's time (Michelet 1837:549- Thompson 1999:19). When we examine the definitions in the literature related to oral history, it can be said that the common emphasis was made on "compiling of the past from the memory of the ordinary people". Thus, it can be said that all the approaches in history studies they converge on the aim and effort to trace the history through all kinds of narratives that are detailed by the tracks of the past and to see the future as well as the present time from a wider perspective.¹

Despite all these approaches, because some narratives are articulated with popular cultures, we confront with the history studies that are made through these narratives, as a populist and the other side of the reality. Although this is a methodological problem of history, it is one of the

¹ "Whereas Halbwachs used the term 'collective memory', the term of cultural memory is preferred also by some philosophers. historians and social scientists mostly use the term 'social memory'. These differences mainly derive from approaches which are used by scholars. For instance, Halbwachs chose an approach based on sociological categories – family, class, religion. 'cultural memory' come to the subject with a strong interest in recollection, repression and the subconscious, sometimes informed by psychoanalytical thought, and trace these in literary and visual sources." TILL, 2006 <https://academic.oup.com/hwj/article/62/1/325/582883/Memory-Studies>

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important discussions that constitute the basis of our work. Therefore, the events should be examined through only their occurrence without concerning the articulation to the popular culture. In this respect, it should be essential to give more importance on oral history studies than before in the scientific studies that can clarify the recent history of the historical events. Therefore, the history will preserve the oral resources and hence memory of society, which are the subject of the history and constitute the social memory.

Oral history can be expressed as a method of collecting and preserving historical data through interviews with people who have been involved in important events and lives in the past. Therefore the data belonging to a period can be recorded and preserved by oral history studies. In other words, the oral history reveals the past time's other face which is not seen on the mirror. So, the oral source is an interdisciplinary approach that compiles the data in memories about the past.

In this respect, the process of World War II can be considered to have particular influence. It seems that the importance of post-war social history studies have increased and the oral history studies that elucidate this field have gained momentum. These studies have also drawn attention to the need of "field studies" for urban history studies by localizing them in the framework of academic methods. By compiling the life experience of a particular event or period with a national or local perspective, the oral history aims to convert the history from being a field of abstraction without human beings into a humane form enriched by different life experiences and narratives.

3. Collective memory and oral history

Applying oral history even when documents and findings are found to be sufficient, is like putting the another part of the puzzle that is not seen on the table in the examined historical event or period, or rather, it facilitates to reveal the other side of the past and the human sensitivity that cannot be accessed. This preserves a part of the society with their memories and their accumulated narratives some of which have been brought from the past. Collective memory is an important resource that is constituted by the memories quoted from oral resources. From this point of view, collective memory and oral history is an important research method that supports and enriches historical researches by different perspectives.

So that, the oral history method will sometimes facilitate the historian to access the time and space in which the historian cannot even imagine to go, in other words, it will provide the historian with the opportunity to track the history (Sarı 2006). In this respect, the historian, who shuttles between the time and the space, tries to relate the events and to reveal the other aspects of the history. Oral history studies remove the distances through narratives and can renew the spaces by means of memory, so it emerges as a strong link between the time and space. Therefore these studies are the unique parts of the community memory.

It could be argued that oral history has different epistemological and ontological stand points. It is influenced by social constructivism which accepts that the reality is made up by individuals perceptions and interactions. It puts the human being in the centre of the world and tries to understand the social world in the eye of people. In this sense, human being is an actor to produce meanings. Since there are various meanings, because it depends on numbers of people and their social environments, it is possible to observe different version of the reality (Denzin and Lincoln 2008; Hawing 1999: 2-5). Oral history allows us to hear these differences.

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Oral history, particularly in the historical research, is a fundamental source that expands to the future. That means the recovery of the social memory that is about to be lost in our lives, in other words it means the recovery of a certain part of the community's history. Listening to the voice of the past in the memories and tracing it will make the historian have unexpected journeys and meet with the testimony of the history.

Oral history studies are carried out in the field to support the data and documents obtained from the archives and literature with a different aspect. In this study, it is aimed to reveal the contribution of the oral history studies to the historical researches. The community memory has lots of data to elucidate the recent history, therefore, the study aims to emphasize the importance of recording and preserving the collective memory as an important reference for interpreting the present and future. Generally, oral history is a research method that contributes to the construction of the histories of the communities through extracting and interpreting the personal testimonies and lives of a specific period from the depths of the memory. So it attracts attention as a field that has gained increasing importance in recent years in Turkish historiography. Containing original information not usually included in official documents, oral history is used as a means of direct access to the information that we cannot be obtained from other sources of social, cultural, economic, political context related to that period, by meeting with those who have witnessed the events of the period they lived. So, it is a complementary history method for the documents that the historians generally based on (Çakmak 2010:731).

Oral history also varies in the terms of the subjects it guides. It focuses on the issues such as gender, minorities, migration processes, local history, political history, social traumas, etc. Rather, it tries to make the silenced and marginalized groups (women, homosexuals, minorities, immigrants, etc.) talk. Oral history interviews give narrators the opportunity to tell their stories in their own words. At this point, "oral history can make a significant contribution to (written) history to examine the events that led to discussions and/or that are ignored". In other words, oral history is a valuable means for lighting the dark points of the history (Neyzi 2011:10).

Oral history studies are the processes of interpreting the past. In this process, oral history selects the distinguished and ordinary people who are involved in past events and combines them with history. Thus, a link between history and the ordinary segment of the society is established. At the end of this process which adds something new to the history, the unprecedented periods of change in the past are interpreted directly by the people who lived these changes and these are recorded to be used in the future. History, either in its writing or in its presentation, gains great benefits by focusing every kind of person (Çakmak 2010 :732-Gülbenkıyan Komisyonu 1996).

While the history is being interpreted by using all the seen and presented documents, some details might be missed. These missed points can be detailed by transferring the data through the human memory or all the unseen aspects can be revealed starkly. Considering all these benefits, the oral source is important, but it must be criticized by its all aspects.

Regarding to the social memory, according to Assmann, there is an alliance between power and memory to the social memory. Power is a strong stimulus for remembering. In acephalous societies, "the knowledge of history ... rarely passes down a few generations, and then the traces disappear in an uncertain "legendary" past in which all the events are assumed to occur in the same period. What happens in this situation is called as "floating void" by Jan Vansina. The living memories of the living people (for a period of about eighty years) really emerge as a universal

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common memory in "oral history" studies. The "floating void" is the gap between the living memories of the living people and sacred narratives of the "origin". The alliance between power and memory has also a prospective aspect. The rulers not only want to capture the past but also the future, they want to be remembered, they make things that will make them unforgettable. They strive to make these actions narrated, musically processed, eternalized in monuments, or at least archived. The power gives himself retrospective legitimacy and prospective eternity (Assmann 2001:73).

According to Neyzi, memory studies, and thus oral history, examine the individual and social recall (and forgetting) processes in the most general sense. Although the recent scientific studies on brain has revealed how the individual memory operates, the empirical studies on this issue is still going on. The most important finding of these studies is that the recall process is not operated like a conservation system or a computer. The individual simply does not access the data stored in the past at the moment of recall. The data in the memory is recreated by blending with the characteristics of the moment of recall. In this respect to examine the memory, it is necessary to consider not only the past but also the current context and the relationship between them. Examining the recall process also requires the awareness of the forgetting process. The human brain has to forget the vast majority of the experiences thus, the recall is a selection from the experiences lived (Neyzi 2014:2).

As Leyla Neyzi quoted from Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar in her study titled *Recalling and Forgetting in Istanbul "Individual, Memory and Belonging" (İstanbul'da Hatırlamak ve Unutmak "Birey, Bellek ve Aidiyet")* published by the *Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları*: "The essential heritage for us is neither at the past nor in the West; it is in our life that seems like a tangled ball of string. According to this, oral history is the type of history that is established around the people. It is a discipline that takes the life into history and gives the history back to the people in their own words. While giving them the history, it also guides them to save the future.

While researching memory, social scientists particularly focus on the social context that also covers the individual. How we remember the past is closely related to history that has been thought to us at school and the oral and written culture that has been transferred to us through our family and social circle and the media such as television, movies, newspapers, magazines and internet. Memory studies particularly examine the intersection of the individual and the social one. Individual life story narratives (oral history) trace the memory in the fields such as autobiography, biography, popular culture, media, art, architecture, space, objects, body (Neyzi 2014: 2- Ritchie 2003). Therefore, the historians are expected to trace the social memory in the subject areas, to see or understood the history in general and at a certain scale. This effort can contribute to the understanding of historical events in all aspects, as well as in a more general framework by adding different perspectives to the issues.

According to Paul Thompson, the widespread use of the term oral history is new, but its past is as old as the history. It is the first type of history. But in the mid-19th century, the French Professor Jules Michelet, from College de France and Sorbonne École Normale, explains that written documents are only one of many sources in his work titled *History of French Revolution (l'Histoire de la Révolution Française)*. And also, he did not neglect to benefit from his own memory. According to him, oral tradition is national tradition. For this approach which is exceptional in its period, Professor James Westfall Thompson (1942) commented as "This is a strange

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method of collecting historical data" in his work titled *History of Historical Writing*. While the oral history lost its reputation that it has before, Jan Vansina (1965) classified oral history tradition into categories at his work *Oral Tradition* (Thompson 1999:19-20- Jenkins 1997). He has added value to it by a strong framework. Sometimes neglected and sometimes ignored casual life details in the course of historical events will be revealed. In addition to the details that can present limited perspectives in the light of the written historical data, we believe that social memory, as a document of missed data, can fill this void (Sever 2008).

4. Conclusion

Academic history studies have been examining the social memory and recall in-depth increasingly in recent years. Social memory has been drawing attention as an essential source for new research fields such as urban history studies and urban memory. According to Assmann, recall should be criticized in social memory studies. For him, recall is a demonstrative action. Although the concept of "interpreting" has lost favor in the context of history, it is still valid today. However, it should be noted that the recall process is not related to history. A historian professor, should not be expected "to feel the recalling, to comprehend it, and to interpret the history". According to Assmann, this does not change the fact that it continues without interruption. This is not the job of the historian, but a function of social memory (Assmann 2001:79-Ersoy 2004). From this point of view, when the social memory, which can also be regarded as the bearer and actor of the oral culture, is examined thoroughly, it will allow the historical events to be seen with a broader perspective by considering humane aspects of everyday life. This need in history studies cannot be met by the data that are extracted from archives and other literature. This situation, reveals the need of oral history studies and the preservation of the social memory clearly (Iggers 2000-Tuncay 1993).

Oral historians, most of whom have been trained as historians, have gradually established their own academic field. Oral historians who uphold that archive study method in history discipline is not sufficient to examine the relatively weak segment of the society such as women, minorities, and immigrants. Oral historians argue that the individuals can also be involved in the history by listening to their life experiences in their own words. It can be said that the memory issue has been examined widely in social sciences since the development of oral history. An important development that has given momentum to the field of memory studies is the increasing interest in the identity and the past related to it in recent years. This interest is closely related to the discussions about postmodernity experience. Recent studies on this issue have been increasing in terms of both the quality and the quantity.

Although memory studies have gained momentum after the World War II in the world, they have increased in Turkey only after the efforts in 1990s. The scientist who developed the first modern methodology on oral history in 1948 is Allan Nevins, who compiled the life stories of the important figures who took part in American history (Güçlü 2013:3- Kyvıg & Marty 2000). Oral history studies that began to increase in the near term in Turkey, began to cover the field of memory studies in 2000s. In Turkey, especially the Economic and Social History Foundation (Ekonomik ve Toplumsal Tarih Vakfı) has played an important role in the recognition of oral history. The foundation that prepared an oral history archive in early 1990s, has started projects, given trainings, organized conferences, made publications, exhibitions and documentaries. Various non-governmental organizations have also started oral history projects. History Foundation

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(Tarih Vakfı), Ottoman Bank Museum (Osmanlı Bankası Müzesi) and Anatolia Culture (Anadolu Kültür) are among these organizations (Neyzi 2014:3). It seems that in recent years, an importance has been given with an increasing momentum to oral history and social memory studies that try to meticulously meet the needs of academic studies both in Turkey and in the world. Because social memory and oral history have an indispensable influence in understanding historical events in such academic studies. It can be said that it has begun to take its place as a chronic reference which can be processed by criticizing its own methods (Öztürk 2010- Öztürkmen 2002).

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