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## Clio, can you hear us? Oral sources and archives for historical research: the Italian case

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The historiographical legitimacy of oral history has yet to be recognised in Italian academia. Scholars of contemporary history rarely use this methodology, and existing oral archives are overlooked by the very researchers who should be consulting them. Recent histories of the Italian Republic written by Italian authors neither draw on oral sources nor cite the historiography that has employed them. There are also no Italian books that systematically use oral sources to analyse the country's long-term social history, and even when ego-documents are used in Italian historiography, 'autobiographical writings' (e.g. letters, diaries, memoirs) are considered much more legitimate than oral sources. There are at least three possible explanations for this situation. Firstly, sound studies have barely developed in Italian historiography, and many contemporary historians tend to prioritise institutional political history over social history and the history of collective subjects (women, workers, suburbs). Secondly, there is a problem relating to the preservation of oral history archives, which are difficult to access and do not have the tools to facilitate their use, such as catalogues, indexes, files and transcripts. Thirdly, there is a lack of proven and shared experience in the historiographical reuse of archival oral sources, that is, interviews conducted in the past with individuals and social groups who are no longer available.

**Key words:** oral sources, sound studies, oral archives, historiography, reuse

Oral history is still struggling to gain legitimacy in Italian academia.<sup>1</sup> Scholars of contemporary history rarely use this methodology, and existing oral archives

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<sup>1</sup> Drawing on historiography from the last ten years, this article aims to provide an update on the optimistic assessment made in 2014 by Andrea Brazzoduro and Alessandro Casellato, *Introduzione alla sezione monografica, Oltre il magnetofono. Fonti orali, storiografia, generazioni*, "Italia contemporanea", 2014, 275, pp. 215–216. It builds on and further develops the article 'História oral na Itália: trajetórias e desafios' published in the journal *História oral* (vol. 26, n. 3, 2023). I am grateful for the hospitality offered to me in 2023 by the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul in Porto Alegre, and for the valuable conversations with Carla Simone Rodeghero and other Brazilian historians I met during those months. Discussions with colleagues from the Department of Humanities at Ca' Foscari, the Italian Oral History Association (Associazione Italiana di Storia Orale, AISO) and the editorial staff

are ignored by the very researchers who should be consulting them. Recent histories of the Italian Republic written by Italian authors do not draw on oral sources, nor do they cite the historiography that has employed them.<sup>2</sup> Even the most creative and methodologically sensitive historians rarely take oral history into account. For instance, in his book on ‘writing the past in the first person’, Enzo Traverso explores the relationship between history and subjectivity without ever mentioning oral history.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, *Lessico della storia culturale* (Lexicon of Cultural History), edited by Alberto Banti, Vinzia Fiorino and Carlotta Sorba, pays no attention to sound, orality, oral history or its practitioners.<sup>4</sup> Two recent publications by Francesco Benigno and Carlo Greppi on historical memory and history ‘from below’ are no different.<sup>5</sup>

Conversely, works by anglophone authors on contemporary Italian history make extensive use of oral history, either directly or indirectly.<sup>6</sup> This is particularly noticeable if we look at British historiography. While there are no Italian books that systematically use oral sources to analyse the country’s long-term social history, this approach is evident in the writings of Joanna Bourke, Selina Todd or Jon Lawrence.<sup>7</sup> The gap is also considerable if we look at Latin

of *Il de Martino*. *Storie voci suoni* were equally important. In particular, I wish to thank Bruno Bonomo, Silvia Calamai, Virginia Niri, Mariamargherita Scotti, Francesca Socrate and Giulia Zitelli Conti, who read an early draft of this text. However, they bear no responsibility for any shortcomings it may contain. All web pages cited in the notes were last consulted on 16 December 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Umberto Gentiloni Silveri, *Storia dell’Italia contemporanea 1943-2023*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2024; Miguel Gotor, *Generazione Settanta. Storia del decennio più lungo del secolo breve 1966-1982*, Turin, Einaudi, 2022; Paolo Soddu, *La via italiana alla democrazia. Storia della Repubblica 1946-2013*, Rome-Bari, Laterza 2017; Agostino Giovagnoli, *La Repubblica degli italiani. 1946-2016*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Enzo Traverso, *La tirannide dell’io. Scrivere il passato in prima persona*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Alberto Banti, Vinzia Fiorino, Carlotta Sorba (eds.), *Lessico della storia culturale*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2023. On the links between oral history and cultural history, see Luisa Passerini, *La storia culturale: nuova disciplina o approccio transdisciplinare?*, in *L’intellettuale militante. Scritti per Mario Isnenghi*, Portogruaro (Ve), Nuova Dimensione, 2008, pp. 285–287.

<sup>5</sup> Francesco Benigno, *La storia al tempo dell’oggi*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2024; Carlo Greppi, *Storie che non fanno la Storia*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> According to John Foot, ‘the success of Paul Ginsborg’s *History of Contemporary Italy* is partly due to its confident and imaginative marshalling of oral material collected and written up by others.’ John Foot, *Words, songs and books. Oral history in Italy. A review and discussion*, “*Journal of Modern Italian Studies*”, 1998, vol. 3, n. 2, pp. 164–174 (cited at p. 164). Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy. Society and Politics 1943-1988*, London, Penguin, 1990; David Forgacs, Stephen Gundle, *Mass culture and Italian society from fascism to the cold war*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2007; David Forgacs, *Italy’s Margins. Social Exclusion and Nation Formation since 1861*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014; John Foot, *The archipelago. Italy since 1945*, London, Bloomsbury, 2018. Another valuable publication — albeit based on written sources — is Christopher Duggan, *Fascist voices. An intimate history of Mussolini’s Italy*, London, The Bodley Head, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain 1890-1960. Gender, class and ethnicity*, London and New York, Routledge, 1994; Selina Todd, *The People. The Rise and*  
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American historiography.<sup>8</sup> In Brazil, for example, most studies on the dictatorship that followed the 1964 coup build on oral sources or, at least, engage with the historiography that has used them.<sup>9</sup> Oral sources are even more prevalent in cultural histories of indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, women and LGBTQ+ communities, social movements, labour, migration and urban societies.<sup>10</sup> In 2024, the Brazilian oral history association counted 77 ‘oral history collectives’ in the country, both inside and outside universities.<sup>11</sup>

Paradoxically, Italian oral history enjoys great international prestige. Alessandro Portelli and Luisa Passerini, for example, have been called ‘auctoritates’ at meetings of the International Oral History Association. On these occasions, people are always incredulous when they learn that Italian universities offer only a handful of oral history courses.<sup>12</sup> Equally surprising is the fact that oral history thrives in Italian society, despite not receiving recognition from academics; associations, local institutions and independent researchers conduct campaigns to collect interviews and life stories. Today, these efforts are often conducted under the banner of public history, but usually in a naive and superficial way, without the necessary tools for proper interpretation and the cautionary measures required to produce a historical source.<sup>13</sup>

In this article, I will describe the causes and implications of this paradox, trying to avoid the stance adopted by some ‘oralists’ regarding academic historiography and vice versa.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the acknowledgement of the ‘diversity of oral history’ should not stop us from exploring its relationship with historiography as a scientific discipline that aims to expand and revisit knowledge according to shared procedures, the first of which is the public discussion of sources. Bruno Bonomo recently pointed out that there is still ‘an unresolved

*Fall of the Working Class 1910-2010*, London, John Murray, 2014; Jon Lawrence *Me, Me, Me? Individualism and the Search for Community in Post-War England*, Oxford, OUP, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Camillo Robertini, *La storia orale in America Latina*, “Passato e presente”, 2016, n. 99, pp. 133–148.

<sup>9</sup> Jorge Ferreira, Lucilia de Almeida Neves Delgado, *O Brasil Republicano. O tempo do regime autoritário: Vol. 4: Ditadura militar e redemocratização. Quarta República (1964–1985)*, Rio de Janeiro, Civilização Brasileira, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> On the links between cultural history and oral history in Brazil, see Sandra Jatahy Pesavento, *História & História Cultural*, Autêntica, Belo Horizonte, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> [www.historiaoral.org.br/conteudo/view?ID\\_CONTEUDO=540](http://www.historiaoral.org.br/conteudo/view?ID_CONTEUDO=540).

<sup>12</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *Italian Oral History. Roots of a Paradox*, in David K. Dunawat, Willa K. Baum (eds.), *Oral history. An interdisciplinary anthology*, Walnut Creek, Altamira Press, 1996, pp. 391–416.

<sup>13</sup> *history. An interdisciplinary anthology*, Walnut Creek, Altamira Press, 1996, pp. 391–416.

AISO is engaged in the difficult task of mediating between the two spheres, as demonstrated by its newsletter, ‘Storia orale. Notiziario dell’Aiso’: <https://www.aisoitalia.org/notiziario>.

<sup>14</sup> Andreas Iacarella, *La storia raccontata. Intervista a Cesare Bermani*, “Pandora Rivista”, 2 September 2024, [www.pandorarivista.it/articoli/la-storia-raccontata-intervista-a-cesare-bermani/](http://www.pandorarivista.it/articoli/la-storia-raccontata-intervista-a-cesare-bermani/); Andrea Bottalico, Sara Zanisi, *Il tempo della storia. Una conversazione con Cesare Bermani*, Officina Primo Maggio, no. 4, December 2021, [www.officinaprimomaggio.eu/il-tempo-della-storia-una-conversazione-con-cesare-bermani/](http://www.officinaprimomaggio.eu/il-tempo-della-storia-una-conversazione-con-cesare-bermani/).

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issue concerning the relationship between history, memory and subjectivity, as well as the use of oral sources — one that we may have prematurely deemed resolved'.<sup>15</sup> I fully agree with this assertion and intend to continue along these lines, paying particular attention to the relationship between historical research and oral history archives.

### Oral sources in the historian's workshop

The fact that many Italian historians of the contemporary age are unfamiliar with oral sources could be attributed to their research practices and the different skills that these require. For those accustomed to working in archives and libraries or — increasingly — accessing digital databases and collections, the idea of interviewing people to produce oral sources may be a daunting prospect. It requires a willingness to leave the office and visit places that can be uncomfortable, as well as the ability to engage in dialogue with strangers who often belong to different social classes, speak differently from historians and rarely answer questions in the way that historians would like.<sup>16</sup>

Next, the interviews need to be edited. This is very demanding and, above all, time-consuming. Thus, transcribing an interview — a necessary step in the critical analysis of the source — takes at least three times as long as recording it (e.g. one hour of interview requires three hours of transcription), and even longer if the conversation is in a language other than (standard) Italian. Although automatic speech recognition tools now facilitate this part of the process, transcription calls for careful examination given that the transition from speech to writing cannot be delegated to a machine. Indeed, it also requires interpretation and recognition of suprasegmental features or non-verbal elements of communication, such as tone, accent, pauses and gestures, expressions and mimicry.<sup>17</sup> Liaising with interviewees is equally challenging. It begins before the interview and continues through subsequent stages, up to and even beyond the publication of the research results. More importantly, the need to mediate between the expectations and requests of witnesses, who are essential collaborators in the research, is dictated by both ethical and legal considerations; historians working with written documents are not used to performing

<sup>15</sup> Bruno Bonomo, *Storia, memoria, soggettività, fonti orali: un nodo non sciolto?*, "Meridiana", 2023, n. 106, pp. 253–265.

<sup>16</sup> Antonio Canovi, *Peripatetici. Dove il camminare è l'indizio, ma anche il fatto*, in Stefano Bartolini (ed.), *Camminare la storia*, "Farestoria. Società e storia pubblica", 2023, a. IV, n. 1, pp. 17–37. Miriam Hermeto, Ricardo Santhiago (eds.), *Entrevistas imprevistas. Surpresa e criatividade em história oral*, Letra e Voz, São Paulo, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Francesca Di Meo, Roberta Garruccio, Francesca Socrate (eds.), *Scrivere (quasi) la stessa cosa. La trascrizione come atto interpretativo nella pratica della storia orale*, Florence, EditPress, 2022.



such mediation, which requires time, energy and a certain amount of patience. This might explain why there is a gradient linked to age and academic career. In fact, young people, students and doctoral researchers are more likely to use this type of methodology, while its practice decreases with age and higher academic positions.<sup>18</sup>

The reasons for the limited use of oral sources in Italian academia are not only practical, but also theoretical. Unlike other sources, oral sources cannot be ‘found’ and used; they must be produced depending on the research being conducted.<sup>19</sup> While most social scientists (anthropologists, linguists, statisticians, economists) see the possibility to control the creation of data and produce it according to protocols that are functional to specific research questions as a guarantee of the scientific validity of their work,<sup>20</sup> historians regard this as a violation of professional ethics. For them, documents should be stored in archives and then examined, interpreted and purged of interpolations and distortions.

In Italy, the debate about the legitimacy and specificity of oral sources in historiography has been going on for almost half a century, although it often seems that one must start all over again.<sup>21</sup> Suffice it to say that it has contributed to the epistemological renewal of historiography as a whole. For example, it has acknowledged memory as both a source and an object of historical study, and recognised that subjectivity cannot be ignored — not even in archival research. It has also opened up to entirely new fields of research that would otherwise have remained unexplored (or considered unexplorable), such as studies on social groups unable to create archives, indigenous communities, queer and crip studies, and so on.<sup>22</sup> Yet oral sources have always been part of

<sup>18</sup> There are exceptions, such as Francesca Socrate, who began practising oral history methodology after working mainly with printed and archival sources ([www.aisoitalia.org/francesca-socrate-2/](http://www.aisoitalia.org/francesca-socrate-2/)).

<sup>19</sup> Giovanni Contini, *Storia orale*, in *Enciclopedia Italiana. VII Appendice*, Rome, Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana, 2007: [www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/storia-orale\\_\(Enciclopedia-Italiana\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/storia-orale_(Enciclopedia-Italiana)/).

<sup>20</sup> Giovanni Favero, *Sul metodo storico e le scienze sociali: per una microstoria applicata*, in Daniele Andreozzi (ed.), *Quantità/qualità. La storia tra sguardi micro e generalizzazioni*, Palermo, New Digital Press, 2017, p. 60, who cites Michael Rowlinson, John Hasard, Stephanie Decker (eds.), *Research strategies for organizational history: a dialogue between historical theory and organization theory*, “Academy of Management Review”, 2014, vol. 39, n. 3, pp. 250–274.

<sup>21</sup> Luisa Passerini, *Sull’utilità e il danno delle fonti orali per la storia*, in Ead. (ed.), *Storia orale. Vita quotidiana e cultura materiale delle classi subalterne*, Turin, Rosenberg & Sellier, 1978, pp. VII–XLIV; A. Portelli, *Sulla diversità della storia orale*, cit.

<sup>22</sup> Gabriella Gribaudi, *La memoria, i traumi, la storia. La guerra e le catastrofi nel Novecento*, Rome, Viella, 2020; Luisa Passerini, *Storia e soggettività. Le fonti orali, la memoria*, Florence, La Nuova Italia, 1985; Natalie Zemon Davies. *La passione della storia. Un dialogo con Denis Crouzet*, Rome, Viella, 2007. On the subjectivity of women historians, see the forthcoming book by Adelisa Malena and Tiziana Noce, *Per caso o per passione. Le*

the processes of producing and transmitting knowledge about the past.<sup>23</sup> Think of Herodotus, an oral historian of sorts who listened to stories and recorded them in his books.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Thucydides was a contemporary historian who gave credit to direct witnesses, that is, people who knew things because they had seen them.<sup>25</sup> In the nineteenth century, Heinrich Schliemann managed to find the buried city of Troy because he believed in the historical accuracy of the Homeric texts, which are transcriptions of mythical stories that had been passed down orally for a long time.<sup>26</sup>

Even today, many oral testimonies (literally stories that are heard) preserved in archives are used for historiographical research, sometimes suggesting its interpretative keys, although they are almost never mentioned.<sup>27</sup> At other times, though, historians claim to have conducted interviews in order to reconstruct contexts and networks of relationships, but they do not use them openly in their research outputs. Marta Margotti, for example, admits that ‘they remained in my head’, although she keeps them in her research archive in dozens of neatly organised and transcribed audio cassettes.<sup>28</sup> ‘We know that they were actually fundamental to my work,’ Mariamargherita Scotti observed in her biography of Giovanni Pirelli, apologising to her witnesses for not giving space to their interviews, except in the last paragraph of the book, in memory of the ‘polyphonic biography’ that the ‘inextricable web of stories’ had initially inspired her to write.<sup>29</sup> It is clear that combining oral sources and written documents within the same historiographical discourse is complicated, as if they could not be measured against each other.

*storiche si raccontano fra autobiografia ed ego-storia*, Viella, edited by Andrea Giardina and Raffaella Sarti, to be published in the conference proceedings of *Ego-storiche. Percorsi di ricerca e narrazioni di sé*, organised by the Italian Society of Women Historians and the Central Council for Historical Studies in Rome on 15 and 16 December 2022. On crip studies, see Virginia Niri, *Disabilità migranti: quali fonti per la ricerca?* Community archives, *fonti orali ed emersioni narrative*, “Il de Martino”, 2024, n. 36, pp. 173–195.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Thompson and Joanna Bornat, *The voice of the past. Oral history*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017 (1st ed. 1978), pp. 23–52.

<sup>24</sup> Piero Brunello, *Lettera a Erodoto*, in Id., *Dubbi sull’esistenza di Mestre. Esercizi di storia urbana*, Verona, Cierre, 2023, pp. 25–27; Giorgia Proietti, *Erodoto storico orale. Una lettura alla luce degli studi socio-antropologici sulla tradizione orale*, “Il de Martino”, 2023, n. 35, pp. 15–26.

<sup>25</sup> Tucidide, *Le guerre del Peloponneso*, I, 21–22.

<sup>26</sup> On this controversial case, see Donald F. Easton, *Heinrich Schliemann: Hero or Fraud?*, “The Classical World”, 1998, vol. 91, n. 5, pp. 335–343.

<sup>27</sup> The theme of the invisibility of the historian’s subjectivity, memory and the oral exchange with their interlocutor, which are all heuristic resources for research, deserves a separate analysis.

<sup>28</sup> Citation taken from Margotti’s contribution to a debate at the conference *Dissenso e istanze di cambiamento nel mondo cattolico del postconcilio*, Bergamo, 2 March 2024, published on the YouTube channel of the Serughetti La Porta Foundation, available at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=YESJH6jIbes](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YESJH6jIbes) (1:39.00–1:41:00).

<sup>29</sup> Mariamargherita Scotti, *Vita di Giovanni Pirelli. Tra cultura e impegno militante*, Rome, Donzelli, 2018, pp. X and 265.

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During the nineteenth century, oral sources were marginalised in the historian's workshop. The critical-philological method became dominant, giving historiography a scientific appearance and placing archival, documentary and official sources at the top of the hierarchy. It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that oral sources were re-evaluated, as it dawned on historians that the critical-philological method could also be applied to them. A decisive moment was the invention of instruments capable of recording and reproducing the voice, which made it possible to record stories and testimonies and listen to them at a later stage. This allowed historians (but also ethnographers and linguists) to do their work with greater precision and reliability. When, in the mid-twentieth century, the magnetophone and other recording devices replaced the phonograph and gramophone, the practice of collecting and using oral sources became widespread. At the same time, people became more aware of their unique characteristics.<sup>30</sup>

Nowadays, oral sources are used in many different ways, and not just in historiography. From the outset, they have transcended disciplinary boundaries, engaging in particularly intense exchanges with disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and linguistics. Key figures include Alberto Mario Cirese, Aurora Milillo, Giulio Angioni, Pietro Clemente, Luisa Orrù, Gianni Dore, Franco Ferrarotti, Maria Immacolata Macioti, Tullio Telmon and Glauco Sanga.<sup>31</sup> In addition, they have been used experimentally by writers (Nanni Balestrini), musicians (Luigi Nono), art critics (Carla Lonzi), radio authors (Andrea Camilleri), playwrights (Giuliano Scabia), educators (Danilo Dolci) and activists (such as those linked to the *Quaderni Rossi* magazine and the *Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano*). More recently, the 'digital revolution' has made it possible to explore new ways of expressing and promoting oral

<sup>30</sup> Gianni Bosio, *Elogio del magnetofono. Chiarimento alla descrizione dei materiali su nastro del Fondo Ida Pellegrini*, in *L'intellettuale rovesciato. Interventi e ricerche sulla emergenza d'interesse verso le forme di espressione e di organizzazione "spontanee" nel mondo popolare e proletario*, Edizioni del Gallo, Milan 1967, pp. 170–172. Patrick Urru discusses the great philological and archival attention given to sound documents by Gianni Bosio and the founders of the Ernesto de Martino Institute in his doctoral thesis, *Racconti di vita da una terra di confine. Valorizzazione dell'Archivio orale della Biblioteca Provinciale Italiana "Claudia Augusta" di Bolzano: le videointerviste del progetto Verba manent (2003-2007)*, University of Trento, 2021/2022, pp. 119–121.

<sup>31</sup> An in-depth account of their careers and bibliographies goes beyond the scope of this article. For more information, see the two special issues of *La Ricerca folklorica*, titled *Autobiografia dell'antropologia italiana* (2017, n. 72 and 2018, n. 73). For more information on the initial stages of interdisciplinary dialogue with anthropology around oral sources, see at least *Tradizioni orali non cantate*, a catalogue published in 1975 by the Discoteca di Stato, edited by Alberto Mario Cirese and Liliana Serafini with the initial collaboration of Aurora Milillo; the proceedings of an international conference held in Bologna in 1976, *Fonti orali. Antropologia e storia* (edited by Bernardo Bernardi, Carlo Poni, Alessandro Triulzi, Milan, Angeli, 1978); and a recollection by Pietro Clemente, *L'archivio di Luisa Orrù e il tempo delle polifonie orali*, "Lares", 2018, n. 1, pp. 67–78.

sources, for example in podcasts, videos, art installations and museum exhibitions.<sup>32</sup>

Oral sources have also been used in various ways within the field of historiography, and the following examples show that there is no standard methodology for oral history. Bruno Bonomo has made a distinction between a ‘weak use’ and a ‘strong use’ of oral sources: in the first case, they are used to supplement other documents, fill gaps or add information; in the second case, the historiographical interpretation emphasises the unique aspects of oral testimonies, which relate to issues of subjectivity and memory.<sup>33</sup> Gabriella Gribaudo has compared official narratives and local memories by combining oral and archival sources, thus considering both ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ perspectives.<sup>34</sup> Alessandro Portelli has developed a technique of assembling oral sources that enhances their intrinsic expressive power.<sup>35</sup> Manlio Calegari has deconstructed them for use in his own historiographical writing,<sup>36</sup> and Francesca Socrate has used computational linguistics to analyse a large corpus of interviews.<sup>37</sup> Finally, Gribaudo edits an editorial series focusing entirely on oral history, which is characterised by the variety of ways in which oral sources are used, as well as by the themes and writing styles.<sup>38</sup>

Lastly, it is worth mentioning Sergio Luzzatto, a historian who specialised in the modern age. He experimented with various forms of oral sources when he began studying the history of the twentieth century. Thus, he has written an entire book — cautiously described as a ‘non-history book’ — based on interviews with a con man and serial thief who provided unverifiable accounts but opened a window onto a piece of recent history that would otherwise have remained inaccessible.<sup>39</sup> In two works on events related to terrorism, he complemented the results of extensive documentary research

<sup>32</sup> It is worth mentioning the podcasts produced for the Rai Radio 3 programme *Tre Soldi* by Marcello Anselmo and Renato Rinaldi. The former has a solid background as a historian, while the latter comes from the theatre but has produced several audio documentaries based on oral archives. In 2022, artist Lena Herzog created an installation (‘Immersive Oratorio’) on endangered languages entitled ‘Last Whispers’, based on recordings of speeches, sounds and songs; the Museo audiovisivo della Resistenza in Fosdinovo is entirely based on oral sources, and the M9 Museum of the 20th Century in Mestre uses them in some of its installations.

<sup>33</sup> Bruno Bonomo, ‘Fonti orali e storia orale nella recente storiografia italiana’, presentation at the AISO members’ meeting, 17 April 2014, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=VC5fxbFRzFs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VC5fxbFRzFs).

<sup>34</sup> Gabriella Gribaudo, *Guerra totale. Tra bombe alleate e violenza nazista*, Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 2005; Ead. (ed.), *Terra bruciata. Le stragi naziste sul fronte meridionale*, Naples, L’ancora del Mediterraneo, 2003.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Alessandro Portelli, *La città dell’acciaio. Due secoli di storia operaia*, Rome, Donzelli, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Manlio Calegari, *La sega di Hitler. Storie di strani soldati (1944-1945)*, Florence, EditPress, 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Francesca Socrate, *Sessantotto. Due generazioni*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> [www.editpress.it/collana/storia-orale/](http://www.editpress.it/collana/storia-orale/).

<sup>39</sup> Sergio Luzzatto, *Max Fox o le relazioni pericolose*, Turin, Einaudi, 2019, p. 249.



with those obtained through meetings, interviews and conversations with direct witnesses.<sup>40</sup> And for the book *Primo Levi e i suoi compagni* (Primo Levi and his companions), he found conclusive evidence — the key document for his entire research — in an interview that he could never have conducted himself. It was recorded more than forty years earlier ‘by a pioneer of Holocaust oral history’ and is preserved in an oral archive.<sup>41</sup>

## Oral archives, voice archives

Oral archives are an additional tool in the historian’s workshop. They are similar to the tools historians are used to dealing with, as they do not require the effort of an interview, but are already available in documentation centres and sometimes even accessible online, such as the Voice/Video Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive at the University of Michigan, where Luzzatto found the above-mentioned interview.

An oral archive is an archive containing oral sources. As is well known, an archive can refer to both a collection of documents and the place or location where they are kept. The first oral archives emerged in the early twentieth century, following the spread of ‘phonographic ethnography’, which aimed to document the voices, languages and musical traditions of non-European peoples and minorities within colonial empires and nation states.<sup>42</sup> They grew considerably during the First World War, when teams of linguists and ethnomusicologists in German and Austrian prison camps made thousands of recordings of the voices of soldiers from different backgrounds, including those from non-European countries, who had been enlisted in the entente armies. The first Italian oral archives were thus created during the war, but they have only been rediscovered and studied in recent years.<sup>43</sup> Since then, sound recording technologies and methods have advanced and become more widespread.

There are three ways in which an oral archive can take shape. First of all, it can be the product of speech recordings made for communication or docu-

<sup>40</sup> Id., *Giù in mezzo agli uomini. Vita e morte di Guido Rossa*, Turin, Einaudi, 2021; Id., *Dolore e furore. Una storia delle Brigate rosse*, Turin, Einaudi, 2023.

<sup>41</sup> Id., *Primo Levi e i suoi compagni. Tra storia e letteratura*, Rome, Donzelli, 2024, p. 26.

<sup>42</sup> Brian Hochman, *Savage Preservation. The Ethnographic Origins of Modern Media Technology*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2014, pp. 73–114; Henry Reese, “The World Wanderings of a Voice”. *Exhibiting the Cylinder Phonograph in Australasia*, in Joy Damousi, Paula Hamilton (eds.), *A Cultural History of Sound, memory and the Sense*, New York and London, Routledge, 2017, pp. 25–39.

<sup>43</sup> Serenella Baggio (ed.), *Voci di prigionieri italiani della Prima guerra mondiale*, Florence, Edizioni della Crusca, 2023; Ignazio Macchiarella, Emilio Tamburrini (eds.), *Le voci ritrovate. Canti e narrazioni di prigionieri italiani della Grande Guerra negli archivi sonori di Berlino*, Udine, Nota, 2018.

mentation purposes. For example, answering machines and — today — smart-phones are oral archives that store voice messages,<sup>44</sup> as are the many home archives containing audio cassettes produced in a family context or received as audio letters.<sup>45</sup> Radio archives are, of course, essentially oral archives, where sound documents are created and used primarily as working tools. The archive of Radio Radicale is a good example, but there are also many sound archives of local radio stations, both active and defunct.<sup>46</sup> Then there are police and court archives, which contain wiretap and court recordings; what until a few decades ago were ‘archive voices’ (transcripts of interrogations, trial reports and other types of transcribed oral material) are now ‘voice archives’. While historians of the ancient, medieval and modern periods have long developed criteria for analysing and conducting in-depth studies of the various indirect oral traditions in written documents, contemporary historians have only recently started to engage with archival sound sources.<sup>47</sup>

However, when we talk about oral sources, we usually mean recorded interviews with narrators, informants and witnesses. This is the second type of oral archive. It is the result of field research conducted in various disciplines

<sup>44</sup> The Sonic Memorial Project collects voice messages left on answering machines by people who were trapped in the Twin Towers after the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001: David Hendy, *Noise. A human history of sound & listening*, London, Profile Books Ltd., 2014, pp. 254–255.

<sup>45</sup> On the practice of exchanging audio letters, see Aleksej Kalc, «Semo stadi sai contenti di sentir le vostre voci». *Emigrazione e comunicazione: il caso di una famiglia triestina emigrata in Australia*, “Qualestoria. Rivista di storia contemporanea”, 2007, a. XXXV, n. 1, pp. 13–36; Samuele Sottoriva, *Un filo d’oro con Vicenza: l’Ente Vicentini nel Mondo e i suoi circoli all’estero*, “Quaderni Veneti”, 2024, 12, pp. 83–116; Cristiano Barducci, *La grande famiglia*, Original Rai Play Sound podcast, 2024, [www.raiplaysound.it/programmi/lagrandefamiglia](http://www.raiplaysound.it/programmi/lagrandefamiglia). On the circulation of audio cassettes as a counterhegemonic practice, see Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape. Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2009; Ann Komaromi, *The Voices of Samizdat and Magnitizdat*, in Mark Lipovetsky et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Soviet Underground Culture*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024, pp. 186–205.

<sup>46</sup> Dimitri Brunetti, Diego Robotti, Elisa Salvalaggio (eds.), *Documenti sonori. Voce, suono, musica in archivi e raccolte*, Turin, Centro studi piemontesi, 2021; Mavis Toffoletto, *Ascoltare la storia. L’Archivio sonoro di Radio radicale*, “Contemporanea”, 2000, vol. 3, n. 1, pp. 189–196; Piero Cavallari, Antonella Fischetti (eds.), *L’Italia combatte. La voce della Resistenza da Radio Bari*, Rome, Odradek, 2020. On the sound archive of Radio Onda Rossa, see: <https://tiraccontolastoria.cultura.gov.it/index.php?page=Browse.Collection&id=rora3acollection>.

<sup>47</sup> Several examples of ‘archive voices’ can be found in Adelisa Malena, *The sound of silence. Spunti per un dialogo attraverso i secoli*, in Alessandro Casellato (ed.), *Buone pratiche per la storia orale. Guida all’uso*, Florence, Editpress, 2021, pp. 155–182; Maurizio Bettini, *Roma, città della parola. Oralità, memoria, diritto, religione, poesia*, Turin, Einaudi, 2022; Arlette Farge, *Essai sur une histoire des voix au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Bayard, 2009. The fact that oral history resonates more strongly among those who study periods other than the contemporary one seems to be confirmed by an editorial series of Officina Libraria called Stories, which recently republished Luisa Passerini’s seminal work on Turin 40 years after it was first published (*Torino operaia e fascismo. Una storia orale*, Turin, Einaudi, 1984) along with other ‘classics’ by Chiara Frugoni, Carlo Ginzburg and Natalie Zemon Davies.

and using various methodologies (e.g. history, linguistics, anthropology, sociology, ethnomusicology, etc.), in which spoken (or sung) data is recorded at the request or on the initiative of researchers. Hence, it is a research archive: the remains of a research project beyond the publications that have been produced from it.<sup>48</sup>

The third type of oral archives does not originate from a specific research project, but from a desire to preserve a memory, to document a historical presence or to produce sources for future historians. An Italian example is the Memory Archive of the Centre of Contemporary Jewish Documentation in Milan, which began collecting oral sources in the early 1980s. It produced the first audio interviews with Holocaust survivors, followed by filmed interviews.<sup>49</sup> Archives, libraries and museums acquire and sometimes create their own collections of interviews in order to supplement or complete existing collections.<sup>50</sup> In a similar vein, companies, associations and institutions have conducted interviews with their managers, employees and activists to document those activities of internal history that are not ‘spontaneously’ deposited in archives.<sup>51</sup> For example, ten oral history programmes are preserved in the European Union’s historical archives, which were created to preserve the voices of European politicians and officials.<sup>52</sup> These so-called collecting archives contain oral sources that mostly take the form of recorded life stories.

Oral autobiographies have a distinctive feature that sets them apart from written ones: they are prompted, guided and take the form of a dialogue. In other words, they are the result of a request and an encounter, rather than an individual decision to produce something in an intimate setting. They may concern both key figures in historical events and ordinary citizens who have had no public relevance and who would probably not have left any written record of themselves.

In this context, it is worth mentioning the term archival activism, which has been in circulation for some years now. It implies that archivists and documentation professionals take on an active and political role in the collection, management and dissemination of historical information and documents.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>48</sup> See Silvia Calamai, Alessandro Casellato, Antonio Fanelli (eds.), *Archivi di ricerca. Antropologia, linguistica, storia orale*, special issue of “La ricerca folklorica”, 2025, n. 80 (forthcoming).

<sup>49</sup> [www.cdec.it/la-raccolta-di-testimonianze-orali-e-la-produzione-del-documentario-memoria/](http://www.cdec.it/la-raccolta-di-testimonianze-orali-e-la-produzione-del-documentario-memoria/).

<sup>50</sup> Ellen D. Swain, *Oral History in the Archives. Its Documentary Role in the Twenty-First Century*, in “The American Archivist”, 2003, vol. 66, n. 1, pp. 139–158.

<sup>51</sup> Giovanni Agostini, Andrea Giorgi, Leonardo Mineo (eds.), *La memoria dell’Università. Fonti orali per la storia dell’Università di Trento (1962-1972)*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2014; Roberta Garruccio, *Voci del lavoro. Dagli anni Settanta a oggi, globalizzazione e cambiamenti in una fabbrica Pirelli*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2012.

<sup>52</sup> [www.eui.eu/Documents/web2021/archivi-storici-dell-unione-europea.pdf](http://www.eui.eu/Documents/web2021/archivi-storici-dell-unione-europea.pdf).

<sup>53</sup> Cassie Findlay, *Archival Activism*, “Archives and Manuscripts”, 2016, vol. 44, n. 3, pp. 155–159.

Archival activism is based on the idea that archives are not just neutral spaces for preserving history, but rather active contributors to the construction of memory and society, which can be used as tools for social change.<sup>54</sup> This is no novelty. The Ernesto de Martino Institute, for example, was founded in 1966 as a political archive ‘for the critical knowledge and alternative presence of the popular and proletarian world’.<sup>55</sup> ‘Activist archivists’ try to give voice to marginalised social groups and neglected historical narratives. They collaborate with local communities and activist groups to enable them to participate actively in the preservation and management of their historical documents. They also work to ensure wider and more transparent access to documents, seeking to break down the barriers that limit access to traditional archives.<sup>56</sup>

Likewise, historians are personally involved in building archives of the present and, at the same time, providing counter-information and reporting on humanitarian, social or environmental emergencies. Two very similar examples are the Archive of Migrant Memories and Ithaca. Founded in 2007 in Rome and chaired by Alessandro Triulzi, the former is an independent archive created to collect oral sources that will help future historians understand what is happening between Africa and the Mediterranean. The latter is a more recent project directed by Maria Chiara Rioli, which aims to create a digital ‘Super Archive’ in which to collect and disseminate historical narratives on migration.<sup>57</sup> In 2018, Triulzi said that ‘[w]hen we hold Europe and Italy to account for what is happening in the Mediterranean’, we will need these voices, not the transcripts, minutes or any other official document produced by institutions or large international organisations (all of which,

<sup>54</sup> Linda Giuva, Stefano Vitali, Isabella Zanni Rosiello, *Il potere degli archivi. Usi del passato e difesa dei diritti nella società contemporanea*, Milan, Bruno Mondadori, 2007; Randall C. Jimerson, *Archives Power. Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice*, Chicago, Society of American Archivists, 2009.

<sup>55</sup> Antonio Fanelli, *L'Istituto Ernesto de Martino: un laboratorio politico sulle culture popolari e la storia orale*, “Passato e presente”, 2021, n. 113, pp. 135–144; Mariamargherita Scotti, *Carte dischi nastri. L'Istituto Ernesto de Martino: un archivio sonoro dell'anticolonialismo*, “Zapruder”, 2025, n. 66, pp. 122–136.

<sup>56</sup> Two examples of ‘community archives’ resulting from AISO projects are the Pilastro neighbourhood of Bologna and the Sanità district of Naples: Giulia Zitelli Conti, “Ti do il tiro”. *Storia orale e public history nel rione Pilastro*, in Paolo Bertella Farnetti, Cecilia Dau Novelli (eds.), *La storia liberata. Nuovi sentieri di ricerca*, Milan, Mimesis, 2020, pp. 63–85; Antonio Canovi, Hilde Merini, Daniele Valisena (eds.), *A futura memoria. Storie e paesaggi del Rione Sanità*, Milan, Mimesis, 2024. See also Stefania Voli, Ludovico Virtù, *Collective memory and trans history in the Italian context. Archival practices and the creation of the first trans archive in Italy*, “Memory Studies”, 2023, vol. 16, n. 1, pp. 113–125; Virginia Niri, *Voci d'archivio. La storia pubblica incontra il '68*, Genoa, Genova University Press, 2018.

<sup>57</sup> <https://ithacahorizon.eu/superarchive/>; Alessandro Triulzi, *Archiviare il presente. L'autonarrazione dei migranti come fonte*, in Daniele Salerno, Patrizia Violi (eds.), *Stranieri nel ricordo. Verso una memoria pubblica delle migrazioni*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2020, pp. 41–62; Maria Chiara Rioli, *L'archivio Mediterraneo. Documentare le migrazioni contemporanee*, Rome, Carocci, 2021.



incidentally, are transcribed in Italian and not in the language in which people spoke).<sup>58</sup>

## Writing history (also) with one's ears

Triulzi's almost prophetic words highlight the unique value of oral archives for future historians, but they also help us to understand what we are missing — as present-day historians — when we do not use oral sources to better understand past events. Firstly, there is the sound dimension ('these voices, not the transcripts'). Modern Western societies are 'scopocentric' (dominated by the visual order<sup>59</sup>), which is one reason why 'sound archives are underrepresented in academic research, teaching and collective memory'.<sup>60</sup> The limited use of oral sources by historians can, therefore, be partly explained by the lack of development of sound studies in Italian historiography.<sup>61</sup> Listening to documents is not a habit for the followers of Clio. In fact, there is only one Italian book dedicated to the history of the soundscape in the contemporary era, but even that relies entirely on written sources,<sup>62</sup> and there is no social (or political) history of the voice in the twentieth century, despite this being the only period for which primary sound sources are available.<sup>63</sup>

Triulzi invites us to distinguish between recorded voices, transcripts and — even more so — minutes. It seems that contemporary historians sometimes forget that the minutes of meetings, assemblies or interrogations — which they use as primary sources for their research — are actually transcribed oral sources that have inevitably undergone processes of translation and distortion over which they, as historians, have no control. Furthermore, immigration testimonies recorded in an official context (i.e. in front of a government official)

<sup>58</sup> Recording of a presentation by Triulzi during the debate at the conference 'L'era del testimone? Testimoni, testimonianze nella storia, nelle transizioni, nei tribunali', Naples 8–9 March 2018, available at: <https://pric.unive.it/progetti/archivio-fonti-orali/home>.

<sup>59</sup> Bruce Johnson, *Sound studies today. Where are we going?*, in J. Damousi, P. Hamilton (eds.), *A cultural history of sound* cit., p. 10.

<sup>60</sup> Tanya Clement, *Dissonant Records. Close Listening to Literary Archives*, Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2024, p. xi.

<sup>61</sup> Daniele Cal, *Sound Studies and History. A Possible Meeting Point?*, "Contemporanea", 2024, n. 4, pp. 681–692. The bibliography is exclusively in English, with only one Italian study: Simone Caputo, Franco Piperno, Emanuele Senici (eds.), *Music, Space and Identity in Italian Urban Soundscapes circa 1550-1860*, New York-London, Routledge, 2023.

<sup>62</sup> Stefano Pivato, *Il secolo del rumore. Il paesaggio sonoro nel Novecento*, Bologna, il Mulino 2009.

<sup>63</sup> One exception is an issue of *Genesis* edited Sandra Cavallo and Nelly Valsangiacomo, *Dare un corpo alla voce* (2020, a. XIX, n. 2), in particular the introduction by Valsangiacomo: *Traiettorie della vocalità* (pp. 5–19). On the ancient world, see: Sabina Crippa, *La voce. Sonorità e pensiero alle origini della cultura europea*, Milan, Unicopli, 2015; Maurizio Bettini, *Voci. Antropologia sonora del mondo antico*, Turin, Einaudi, 2008.

are not necessarily more truthful than those given in the context of an independent, activist association. Similarly, testimonies given in the heat of the moment are not always more accurate or complete than those given months or years later. After all, a traumatic experience may require not only time to be processed and recounted, but also narrative forms other than factual accounts (e.g. dreams, myths, drawings or performances<sup>64</sup>).

Like most written documents, official reports are the end result of complex processes that preceded them and took place mainly through informal relations and oral exchanges. The latter are crucial to understanding how institutions work and how decisions are made, but they rarely leave a documentary trace. This is particularly true for the history of organisations such as political parties, companies and trade unions. However, political and trade union historians seldom seek to understand these aspects of their subjects' history, which is only possible if one examines the protagonists' accounts (oral sources) and reads written sources indirectly, obliquely and 'against the grain'.<sup>65</sup> Instead, business historians such as Duccio Bigazzi and Roberta Garruccio have been moving in this direction for some time,<sup>66</sup> as has the Central Institute for Archives. It hosts a collection of video interviews with professionals, managers and ministry officials (and other witnesses) on its 'Ti racconto la storia' (I'll tell you the story) website. These are presented as 'special historiographical sources, belonging to the category of "ego-documents" or "narratives of the self"', which suggests to historians a further field of investigation that oral sources can shed light on: the social production of the self, even within institutions and professions.<sup>67</sup>

Using oral sources to study the ruling classes (e.g. high-level politicians, military leaders, entrepreneurs, bankers, intellectuals and government officials) is common practice in many countries, including the United States and Brazil. In fact, the 'oral history of the elite' has produced important oral archives that have set a precedent. They were created in the belief that they would provide access to first-hand accounts of important decisions, political or economic

<sup>64</sup> See the project (and related publications) directed by Luisa Passerini, *BABE. Bodies across borders: Oral and visual memory in Europe and beyond*: [www.eui.eu/research-hub?id=bodies-across-borders-oral-and-visual-memory-in-europe-and-beyond-babe](http://www.eui.eu/research-hub?id=bodies-across-borders-oral-and-visual-memory-in-europe-and-beyond-babe). A perfect cinematic representation of the complexity of memory and the narration of a traumatic experience of emigration is the film *Life of Pi* (2012, dir. Ang Lee).

<sup>65</sup> On this topic, see Alessandro Casellato, Gilda Zazzara, *Renzo e i suoi compagni. Microstoria sindacale del Veneto*, Rome, Donzelli, 2022; Stefano Bartolini, *La storia orale e il lavoro: un terreno fertile*, in Id. (ed.), *LabOral. Storia orale, lavoro e public history*, Florence, EditPress, 2022, pp. 13–52.

<sup>66</sup> Roberta Garruccio, *Memoria: una fonte per la mano sinistra. Letteratura ed esperienze di ricerca su fonti e archivi orali*, "Imprese e storia", 2004, n. 29, pp. 101–146.

<sup>67</sup> <https://tiraccontolastoria.cultura.gov.it/index.php?page=Home&lang=it>. See Mary Fulbrook, Ulinka Rublack, *In Relation. The "social self" and Ego-Documents*, "German History", 2010, 28/3, pp. 263–27.

formation processes and the internal dynamics of institutions, which are often not officially documented.<sup>68</sup>

We know that oral history research in Italy has mainly focused on other collective and individual subjects: workers, social movements, geographical and social peripheries, and the individual members of these groups, who have experienced and negotiated the margins of their freedom. I believe that Italy's deafness to oral history is also a consequence of a broader waning interest in these subjects as active participants in the historical process, coupled with the difficulty of fitting them into historiographical overviews that combine political and social dimensions and the tendency to study them — at best — as separate and ultimately subordinate entities. Even during the centenary of the foundation of the Italian Communist Party and the thirtieth anniversary of its dissolution, the focus has returned almost exclusively to the biographies of its leaders; no attempt has been made to commemorate the millions of militants who were the party's true originality, because they made its deep roots in Italian society possible.<sup>69</sup> Over the last 30 years, it seems that political history has followed the example of political parties, closing itself off in institutional settings, struggling to recognise social actors, abandoning the suburbs and refusing to listen. As a result, it no longer knows how to speak except to its own kind.

### The historiographical 'reuse' of oral archives

Oral sources and written first-person sources (i.e. diaries, letters and autobiographies of ordinary people) have had different roles in Italian historiography, despite entering the scientific debate almost simultaneously as a result of the same movement of social advancement and recognition of subordinate subjects. Thus, while scholars of popular writings established their field during the

<sup>68</sup> See the Oral History Research Office founded in 1948 at Columbia University and the Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação de História Contemporânea do Brasil established in 1973 at the Fundação Getúlio Vargas. On a similar project attempted in Italy in the 1980s, see Patrick Urru, *Storia orale delle élite. Intervista a Maria Grazia Melchionni*, 'Storia orale. Notiziario dell'Aiso', n. 15, 2022: [www.aisoitalia.org/storia-orale-elite-intervista-melchionni/](http://www.aisoitalia.org/storia-orale-elite-intervista-melchionni/).

<sup>69</sup> Giulia Bassi, *Veniamo da lontano, andiamo lontano. Gli studi nel centenario della fondazione del Partito comunista italiano*, "Contemporanea", 2023, n. 2, pp. 313–330. There are some exceptions, such as Alessandro Portelli's *Dal rosso al nero. La svolta a destra di una città operaia*, Rome, Donzelli, 2023, and *Antropologia del Pci*, a collection edited by Antonio Fanelli, Giovanni Pizza, Pino Schirripa, "La ricerca folklorica", 78, 2023, pp. 3–168. See also Alfredo Mignini, Enrico Pontieri, *Qualcosa di meglio. Biografia partigiana di Otello Palmieri*, Bologna, Pendragon, 2019; Antonio Fanelli, *Carlèn l'orologiaio. Vita di Gian Carlo Negretti: la Resistenza, il Pci e l'artigianato in Emilia-Romagna*, Bologna il Mulino, 2019. It is also worth mentioning Dario De Jaco and Viola Lapicciarella's *Il Partito comunista e Napoli nel racconto di Renzo Lapicciarella a Ermanno Rea*, Turin, Zamorani, 2024, based on audio cassettes with conversations recorded by Ermanno Rea in preparation for *Mistero napoletano*, Turin, Einaudi, 1995.

1980s, with the National Federation of Popular Writing Archives being founded in 1987,<sup>70</sup> oral historians were either unable or unwilling to do the same. For instance, the magazine *Fonti orali*, promoted by Luisa Passerini and Daniele Jalla as a means of connecting oral historians across the country, ceased publication in 1987; the Italian Oral History Association was only founded in 2006 and has no headquarters. In the field of oral sources, there is nothing in Italy similar to what Pieve Santo Stefano, Trento or Genoa represent for autobiographical writings, that is, genuine institutionalised and public archives, where documents produced in different places and at different times can be deposited (and consulted).<sup>71</sup> Finally, the limited use of oral sources in Italian historiography is also a consequence of the conditions in which the archives are kept: scattered, difficult to access and without tools to facilitate their use, such as catalogues, indexes, files and transcripts.

Today, anyone who has recorded interviews in Italy has nowhere to securely store the tapes or digital files in a way that is both protected and accessible to others. Most oral history collections are kept in the homes of those who produced them, or in small, poorly equipped research centres, such as those affiliated with the network of institutes for the history of the Resistance. Universities have also not equipped themselves to preserve and make accessible what are now called ‘intermediate research products’, such as interviews. Much has been lost. In recent years, various entities have been addressing this issue by trying to identify preservation and processing techniques that fit the new digital context, as well as tackling complex legal and technological issues. It is not yet possible to provide an overview, which would merely be a long list of initiatives, projects and working groups (and failures) that do not currently constitute a comprehensive plan.<sup>72</sup> I would just like to mention one important methodological acquisition that is now widely accepted. Oral archives are complex products in which the sound source (recording) is organically linked to other documents that have been created during the research (consent forms, notes, files, photographs, transcripts) and which ‘contain the informa-

<sup>70</sup> A recent assessment is provided in Patrizia Gabrielli (ed.) *La storia e i soggetti. La “gente comune”, il dibattito storiografico e gli archivi in Italia*, “Revista de Historiografía”, 2022, n. 37, pp. 8–126 and in Camillo Brezzi, Patrizia Gabrielli, *La forza delle memorie. L’Archivio dei diari di Pieve Santo Stefano*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2023.

<sup>71</sup> There are a few exceptions, but none of them are able to establish themselves as national references in the same way as the archives of popular writings mentioned here: the Central Institute for Sound and Audiovisual Heritage (formerly the Discoteca di Stato), the Archive of Ethnography and Social History of the Lombardy Region, the Ernesto de Martino Institute, the Gianni Bosio Society, the Vera Nocentini Foundation and others of local interest.

<sup>72</sup> The Permanent roundtable for oral sources (founded in 2019) has published a handbook for the treatment of oral sources, the *Vademecum per il trattamento delle fonti orali* (Rome, Ministero della cultura. Direzione generale archivi, 2023). The PRIN 2022 research project *Roads to Oral Archives Development and Sustainability* (ROADS) is dedicated to the recovery, preservation and scientific reuse of oral archives produced in the past in Italian universities: <https://csc.dei.unipd.it/roads-project/index.html>.



tion necessary to understand the communicative events [the interviews], the protagonists of these events and their mutual relationships'.<sup>73</sup> These accompanying documents are all fundamental and should not be kept separated from the recording, as they enable a more critical and insightful interpretation that acknowledges the context in which they were created, which will also be useful for future historians who may come across them in an archive.

I will end this article with a reflection precisely on the theme of the historiographical reuse of oral sources, that is, the reuse of previously collected interviews in new studies or to answer new research questions. This is an almost unknown practice in Italy, where it is still difficult to access interviews conducted by others with people and social groups that are no longer around, despite 70 years of oral history research. There have been some attempts to restudy the archives of Duccio Bigazzi and Nuto Revelli, which are available to researchers thanks to the excellent management of two private foundations that have taken care of the scholars' material legacy by digitising it, cataloguing it and opening it up for consultation.<sup>74</sup> Other research is underway on interviews recorded in the 1970s and 1980s by Anna Maria Bruzzone, a historian who has written important studies on women partisans, psychiatric internment and the deportation of women during the Second World War. The material history of this oral archive is so unique and exemplary that it deserves to be discussed in detail.

A school teacher by profession, a historian by passion, Bruzzone also stood out for her civic engagement; she was active in cultural associations in Turin throughout the 1970s and the 1980s. When she passed away in 2015 at the age of 90, she had been out of the public eye for many years, but the news of her death reached Silvia Calamai, a linguist at the University of Siena who had spent years preserving oral archives in Tuscany. Calamai searched for Bruzzone's relatives and managed to track down a niece, asking her if the audio cassettes recorded by her aunt were still preserved. They had remained in her home in Turin just as she had left them: neatly organised by topic, with her transcripts and the essential information needed to contextualise the audio document. A negotiation process began (not unlike the one required for an interview), and Bruzzone's sound archive, consisting of 75 audio cassettes and accompanying documents, was eventually entrusted to the University of Siena.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Permanent roundtable for oral sources, *Vademecum* cit., p. 27.

<sup>74</sup> Sara Zanisi, *Il Portello. Voci dalla fabbrica. Le interviste di Duccio Bigazzi in Alfa Romeo*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2017; Armelle Girinon, "Il parto? Sulla paglia, un lenzuolo sotto e le bestie accanto". *Les récits d'accouchement dans L'anello forte de Nuto Revelli, "Italie"*, 2023, n. 27, 337–360. At the time of writing this article, Ninon Chevrier Chevrier was working on a doctoral thesis at the Ecole Normale Supérieure de Lyon, titled *Recueillir et transcrire la voix des paysannes: méthodologie du recueil de témoignages féminins chez Nuto Revelli*.

<sup>75</sup> Silvia Calamai, *Ritrovare voci, ascoltare persone: introduzione alle interviste*, in Ead. (ed.), *Me ne scappo, me ne vengo, vado via. Voci dall'ospedale neuropsichiatrico di Arezzo raccolte da Anna Maria Bruzzone*, Milan, Mimesis, 2022, pp. 11–27.

The recordings began a new life after they left Bruzzone's family attic. They were digitised and described, and they can now be studied using methodologies and research questions different from those for which they were originally created.<sup>76</sup> For example, sociolinguists can trace the remains of a language that has now been largely transformed, while phoneticians are capable of picking up aspects of speech that no one else would notice and linking them to the biography and body of the speakers and their social contexts. Instead, computational linguists can deduce the emotional impact associated with the memory of specific traumatic situations by studying their rhythm and breathing.<sup>77</sup>

However, a voice archive also enables more personalised learning and transformative experiences, as happened to university student Rosa Marzano, who was able to fulfil her dream of meeting Bruzzone. Having read her books and listened to her interviews, which revealed the historian's voice and delicate approach to vulnerable witnesses, Marzano sought her own oral history 'teacher' in that archive. She then set out to reconstruct her biography and research, her female and feminist networks, and her collaborations with other women and women historians from Piedmont, such as Rachele Farina, Lidia Beccaria Rolfi and Anna Bravo, as well as the friendly and political dimension that nourished their interactions.<sup>78</sup>

Furthermore, thanks to Bruzzone's audio recordings, we can now hear Elvira's voice describing her internment in a mental hospital in a podcast on the history of Arezzo's psychiatric hospital. The words are the same as those published in the book *Ci chiamavano matti* (They called us mad), but hearing them brings out their meaning more effectively.<sup>79</sup>

There are several possible reasons for delaying or refusing to deposit interviews in a public archive: psychological obstacles, such as documents bearing traces of the misunderstandings, difficulties and mistakes of those who

<sup>76</sup> Collection "Anna Maria Bruzzone's Ravensbrück Interviews", The Language Archive, <https://hdl.handle.net/1839/e24ae5a4-be49-4c31-a7b8-b0c9ed84029e>.

<sup>77</sup> Almila Akdag Salah, Albert Ali Salah, Heysem Kaya, Metehan Doyran, Evrim Kavcar, *The sound of silence. Breathing analysis for finding traces of trauma and depression in oral history archives*, "Digital Scholarship in the Humanities", 2021, vol. 36, n. 2, pp. ii2–ii8.

<sup>78</sup> Rosa Marzano, *Amicizia, femminismo e storia orale: uno studio su Anna Maria Bruzzone*, "Il de Martino", 2023, n. 36, pp. 99–105. On Anna Bravo, see the essays and recollections dedicated to her in *Genesis* (2020, a. XIX, n. 1), especially Bruno Bonomo, *Anna Bravo e le fonti orali: un lungo percorso di ricerca, un patrimonio da coltivare*, ivi, pp. 123–127. See also the recent republication of Luisa Passerini, *Storie di donne e femministe*, Turin, Rosenberg & Sellier, 2024 (1st ed. 1991).

<sup>79</sup> *Storie dai tetti rossi* (Stories from the red roofs) is a seven-part podcast produced in 2021 by RadioFly and available on Spotify, Spreaker and Podchaser. Anna Maria Bruzzone, *Ci chiamavano matti. Voci dal manicomio (1968-1979)*, edited by Marica Setaro and Silvia Calamai, Milan, Il Saggiatore, 2021 (1st ed. Ead, *Ci chiamavano matti. Voci da un ospedale psichiatrico*, Turin, Einaudi, 1979, with an extensive introduction by Bruzzone not included in the new edition).

produced them;<sup>80</sup> ethical reasons, given that they are sometimes very personal conversations arising from relationships of trust that cannot be transferred to third parties; and legal motivations, related to the protection of personal data. It is also a matter of common sense: why trust a public archive or a university, given the way they have treated oral archives in the past?<sup>81</sup> But there are many reasons that should convince historians otherwise. Interviews are shared and intersubjective documents, which do not belong exclusively to the researcher who requested and recorded them. Furthermore, they were granted to the researcher precisely to contribute to research and, ultimately, to leave a testimony of oneself in history. Also, if the researcher is an employee of an institution, such as a university, the latter has the right to receive a copy of what was produced. Next, oral sources are internal documents of the research itself, allowing it to be validated and its purpose, turning points, decisions and hypotheses — whether confirmed or discarded — to be retraced. For this reason, they can also be valuable material for the history of the studies and intellectuals who were involved in them. Finally, they are unique and irreplaceable records of the lives of individuals and social groups that are often no longer available. They are therefore valuable, if not indispensable, for future scholars who will no longer have direct access to these realities.

Raphael Samuel once wrote that '[h]istorians in the future will bring fresh interests to bear upon the materials we collect; they will be asking different questions and seeking different answers. And the more successful we are in executing our own research tasks, the more likely it is that their work will diverge from our own.'<sup>82</sup> Archiving, that is, preserving and making the record accessible in an appropriate way, should be part and parcel of the professional ethics of any scholar, but it also represents a pact of solidarity between generations of researchers — the foundation of a scientific community.<sup>83</sup>

Historian Manlio Calegari has raised more radical objections, questioning the very usefulness of leaving his research archive on the Genoese partisans to others. How can anyone truly understand the interviews he conducted for 20 years without having taken part in them, without having contributed to the building of a relationship of trust and even friendship, hence not knowing everything that the interviewees and interviewer had in common, which is

<sup>80</sup> See the conference proceedings *Imparare dagli errori. Difficoltà, complicazioni, ripensamenti nella storia orale*, "Acta Histriae", 2023, vol. 31, n. 3, pp. 363–522: <https://zdjp.si/it/acta-histriae-31-2023-3/>.

<sup>81</sup> An emblematic case is that described by Giovanni Rinaldi, who — together with Paola Sobrero — recorded numerous oral sources in Puglia in the 1970s: see Giorgia Gallo, *La storia orale di... Giovanni Rinaldi, Foggia*, "Storia orale. Notiziario dell'Aiso", n. 7, February–April 2020, [www.aisoitalia.org/la-storia-orale-di-giovanni-rinaldi-foggia/#\\_ftn5](http://www.aisoitalia.org/la-storia-orale-di-giovanni-rinaldi-foggia/#_ftn5).

<sup>82</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Perils of the Transcript*, "Oral History", 1972, vol. 1, n. 2, pp. 19–22.

<sup>83</sup> This is also what AISO's 'Good Practices for Oral History' suggest: [www.aisoitalia.org/buone-pratiche/](http://www.aisoitalia.org/buone-pratiche/).

precisely why it was *not* said or recorded?<sup>84</sup> These are epistemological questions that touch on one of the defining features of oral sources, which are greatly influenced by the context, the historical and even biological moment of the speaker and the presence of the person asking the questions. Oral sources are not data that can always be extracted from a repository in the same way. They are the result of at least two processes: memory (oriented towards the present) and dialogue (in which it is the listener that guides the narrative). In other words, they are intersubjective, relational and open-ended sources.<sup>85</sup> Recordings are traces of a journey that transforms the subjects during the interview process, in which memories are repositioned, narratives evolve and even the questions asked by the researcher can change, especially if the interviews are prolonged or repeated over time, as in Calegari's case. Finding them fixed on magnetic tape or in an audio file, or perhaps transcribed in a text, gives the illusion of objectivity, but without a thorough understanding of the context and process in which they were formed, they are very difficult to interpret.

## Conclusion

The questions raised in this article have been addressed by scholars from the Italian Oral History Association and the National institute Ferruccio Parri,<sup>86</sup> who tested them against an important theme in national history: the anti-fascist Resistance. A conference held in Padua in May 2025 offered an opportunity to relaunch the relationship between 'general' historiography and research more attentive to oral sources. It did so both by investigating the contribution — extensive and essential, in my opinion — that the latter have made to understanding aspects of the history, lived experience and memory of the war fought between 1943 and 1945, and by recognising that oral history research on the Resistance has helped to refine the theoretical and methodological tools of those who work with oral sources in other fields as well.

A more experimental session is planned for the future, namely an empirical verification of the possibility of scientifically re-examining archival oral sources on the Resistance. This implies testing the two opposing theses of Santo Peli and Fabio Dei. The former has argued that partisan anthropology

<sup>84</sup> Manlio Calegari, *Tra detto e non detto: l'ultimo partigiano. Con un questionario e un post-scriptum*, published on the blog storiAmestre, 10 November 2013: <https://storiamestre.it/ultimopartigiano/>.

<sup>85</sup> On the various implications of the link between oral history and intersubjectivity, see Luisa Passerini, *Memoria e utopia. Il primato dell'intersoggettività*, Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 2003; Adriana Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti. Filosofia della narrazione*, Rome, Castelvechi, 2022 (1st ed. Milan, Feltrinelli, 1997).

<sup>86</sup> Bruno Bonomo, Alessandro Casellato, Greta Fedele, Filippo Focardi, Metella Montanari, Sara Zanisi and Giulia Zitelli Conti.



can only be studied by listening again to the interviews collected by institutes for the history of the Resistance over several decades. The latter has written that these interviews are largely useless because they are almost always rhetorical reworkings of canonised memories.<sup>87</sup> However, even if this were the case, there will still be ways to explore the multiple levels at which these voice archives can be studied: by listening again to the subjects who were at the centre of the investigations at the time; by asking new questions that historiography has brought to the fore, or that other disciplines — such as linguistics — can advance; by studying how the social frameworks of memory have changed, when it is possible to listen to different interviews with the same people or communities but recorded at different times, or when it is possible to compare them with other narratives produced outside those contexts; and by studying the research itself, as well as the people who wanted, imagined and conducted it, with different intentions and questions, and in different periods.

Finally, there will be an opportunity to listen to the voices that will find — and already have found — a second life beyond historiography: in the public arena, on the airwaves and online, in education and art. Who knows? Perhaps Clio will be listening.

*Translated by Andrea Hajek*

<sup>87</sup> Santo Peli, *Memorie partigiane, storie della Resistenza, identità nazionale: intersezioni*, in Filippo Focardi (ed.), *Le vittime italiane del nazifascismo. Le memorie dei sopravvissuti tra testimonianza e ricerca storica*, Rome, Viella, 2021, pp. 239–252; Fabio Dei, *Un monumento della memoria. Memoria scritta e orale sulla Resistenza*, “Primapersona”, 2005, n. 15, pp. 49–54.

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