The Oral History of the Left in the United States: A Survey and Interpretation

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The Left has been a controversial subject in United States history and seems certain to remain one. It has long been treated by mainstream scholars as of marginal relevance, or as a potentially conspiratorial fifth column allied to a totalitarian foreign power. More recently, however, its historical reputation has been noticeably rehabilitated. For scholars writing during the most conservative era in the recent American past, radicalism has come to occupy a special niche as the historical location of an unfulfilled promise, home territory of idealists acting with wide and generally positive impact upon important social movements.

Those two large contrasting historiographical views may disguise more than they reveal about the problematic quality of the experiences and the consciousness of participants themselves. Surveying the unparalleled vigor of youthful American capitalism, Karl Marx admitted that in the United States "the antitheses of bourgeois society appear only as vanishing moments."[1] So it has often seemed, even to close observers of the Left. Socialists, anarchists, Communists, and unaffiliated rebels pursuing a cooperative society have at times flourished in an enormous variety of milieus. Able to rally populations far larger than their own immediate circles, they have rarely been able to translate the aroused energies into substantial, lasting institutional forms. During the "vanishing moments," whatever their span, visions of alternative ways of life and thought become real (if not necessarily precise) to millions. In the aftermath, as ostracism and often legal repression suffuse the political survivors with a sense of futility, the prospect for meaningful change seems never to have existed at all—until another generation rises up, scarcely conscious of its predecessors but full of marked similarities to them.

Oral history would appear a natural approach to the conceptual problems of such a subject. So much of the day-to-day radical experience never reached print in the

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[1] Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London, 1973), 884. For further rumination on this point, see Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Left* (London, 1987), esp. 9–17.

Paul Buhle interviewing Rev. Don Chase, a Christian socialist who protested against United States intervention in Nicaragua in 1926, for the Oral History of the American Left, Tamiment Library, New York University. Photograph by Richard Bermack, © 1984.

commercial or even the Left press, so much was disguised with an ideological overlay, that interviewers create essential kinds of evidence. Probing consciousness along with factual recollection, oral historians also turn up a crucial psychological factor: the anticipation of the ultimate arrival of the cooperative society in the United States, an expectation that set radicals off from other Americans and thereby shaped the commitment of the activist community. We are reminded, as Mikhail Bakhtin would say, of the multiple possibilities at given moments of history. Thereby, we enter the America seen through radicals' eyes.[2]

The best histories of American radicals already had a similar shape before the appearance of the oral historians. Indeed, some of the most popular literary documents from late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social movements are heavily anecdotal autobiographies. Oscar Ameringer's *If You Don't Weaken*, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's *The Rebel Girl*, and W. E. B. Du Bois's various studies in self-interpretation all capture the inner narrative of radicals who see the subtleties and contradictions of life on the left. Similarly, some of the earliest formal historians of the Left, themselves generally veteran activist-intellectuals, drew much evidence

[2] See, for example, Mikhail Bakhtin, "Extracts from 'Notes' (1970–1971)," in *Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on His Work*, ed. Gary Saul Morson, (Chicago, 1986), 179–82.

and insight from talks with old-timers. The more systematic historical accounts of socialism and communism, which began to appear in the conservative 1950s, shared little of the earlier, benign characterization of the Left and very infrequently put that new and clumsy device, the tape recorder, to use. Yet those Cold War studies incorporated some interviews, generally as an adjunct to correspondence with former leading leftists.[3]

Oral history of the Left formally commenced with tapings of individual prominent figures—the counterparts of business or government leaders—by the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University during the 1950s and early 1960s. That early, cautious step was of particular importance as a bridge to the scholarly projects of younger historians then in graduate training. Themselves often fresh from the campus excitement of the 1960s, many determined to transfer some of their political commitment from the nonstop activism of those feverish years to radical scholarship. Such activist-scholars "discovered" oral history almost as if it had been waiting patiently for them to broaden the subject matter and to infuse their own spirit into it. Oral history has turned out to be one of the primary methods by which Marx's "vanishing moments" can be demonstrated, the proof of a shadow tradition in the American past.

Dozens of fieldworkers came individually to similar research conclusions: they needed to supplement written sources and to meet the old-timers still around. Informed by scholarly dialogue across the "blurred boundaries" of eroding disciplines, they ruminated about the implications of oral history. A contemporary scholarly emphasis on culture (defined, *à la* Sidney W. Mintz, in the anthropological sense of conceptual tools), rather than institutions and leaders, encouraged their efforts to discover the secrets of the "ordinary" radical's day-to-day experience. The explosion of historical film making (most notably the production of *Union Maids*, among Left documentaries, and later in the commercial world, *Reds*) meanwhile affirmed the presence of a public deeply interested in the results of oral history.[4]

The appearance in the 1970s of Theodore Rosengarten's *All God's Dangers* and Nell Irvin Painter's *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson* both dramatized these efforts and brought together a number of convergent elements. Ned Cobb, a black member of the Communist-led Share Croppers Union, gave Rosengarten a life history that pivoted around a depression-era shoot-out with authorities. Hosea Hudson provided Painter the distinctly different, yet related, tale of a southern black Communist leader in wide-ranging activities during the 1930s and 1940s. These remark-

[3] Oscar Ameringer, *If You Don't Weaken* (New York, 1940); Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *The Rebel Girl: An Autobiography, My First Life (1900–1926)* (New York, 1973); W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois* (New York, 1968). For the best of the early scholarly efforts, with limitations due to a single-minded concentration on the maneuvers of Communist leadership, domestic and international, to the virtual exclusion of ordinary Communists' or sympathizers' social status, attitudes, and complex roles in American life, see Theodore Draper, *Roots of American Communism* (New York, 1957); and Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York, 1960).

[4] Betty Yorburg, who donated her large file of interviews to the Oral History Research Office, Butler Library, Columbia University, was apparently the earliest scholar to tape a variety of figures. Clifford Geertz, "Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought," *American Scholar*, 49 (Oct. 1980), 165–79.

able volumes not only made new sense of the Left in southern history but also made new sense of black history and of Communist history in the United States. Rosengarten and Painter descended from the heights of the notable subjects, the vaunted theoretical debates, and the authors' own strategic value judgments that had characterized most earlier work about the Left to the level where radical movements made contact with ordinary people. From that experiential point, oral history of the Left could go in a dozen different directions.[5]

As it did. Oral historians proceeded toward discrete demographic communities (ethnic, regional, or racial), political tendencies (anarchist, socialist, Communist, or Trotskyist), and labor and social organizations (industrial unions, Left fraternal bodies, and summer camps to name only a few). The topical approach opened up hitherto obscure corners to close scrutiny. It also invited unanticipated levels of complexity, such as the stubborn determination of many veteran militants to submerge their historic Left identities in the more acceptable public crusades of their heroic era.

The new oral historians, in short, found both rich historical opportunities and much difficult work ahead of them. Most of the current collections bearing on the Left, characteristically decentralized and dependent more on individual researchers and their predilections than on institutional support and central archives, began to be assembled.

The Oral History of the American Left (OHAL), New York University, largest of the oral history archives devoted specifically to radicalism, was established in 1976. Operating within the Tamiment Library (institutional descendant of the socialist Rand School and veritable museum of radical memory), OHAL holds an extremely diverse collection emphasizing such topical areas as Jewish radicalism, Left culture, and Trotskyism. Depending largely upon volunteer help and contributions of interviews in order to accomplish a great deal on slight funding, it consists of approximately six hundred interviews (nearly a quarter fully or partially transcribed) including documentary film interviews and audio outtakes (by-products of film making).[6]

No other major collection specializes in the Left as such. Indeed, only a few of the interviews described below are likely to be designated foremost in terms of "Left," "radical," "anarchist," "socialist," or "Communist" activities. The vast majority tend to be described primarily in the framework of "activism" in various social causes, with Left affiliations secondary to interviewer and interviewee alike. Nevertheless, more than a dozen oral history archives include significant Left materials. A few specialized Left collections, as noted, are substantially one-interviewer affairs, frequently still located in private hands. In all, these represent a large if in-

[5] Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York, 1974); Nell Irvin Painter, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979).

[6] See Jonathan Bloom and Paul Buhle, eds., *Guide to the Oral History of the American Left* (New York, 1984). Jon Bloom, as coordinator, Dan Georgakas as film consultant, Ruth F. Prago as staff member and interviewer, and the late Bea Lemisch as interviewer have been instrumental to the success of the Oral History of the American Left (OHAL). For information, write: Oral History of the American Left, Tamiment Collection, Bobst Library, New York University, New York, NY 10012.

choate body of material, reflecting not only the recovered radical past but also the intellectual framework of the current generation of radical scholars. Inevitably of varying quality, the interviews are rich with detail; they also reveal an intergenerational dialogue about the unresolved questions of the American Left.

Any brief survey of Left holdings in oral history collections threatens to flatten out the contours that are the most endearing quality of oral history interviews. We nevertheless find some common traits emerging from the growing body of interviews.

Immigrants, for the most part Europeans who arrived in the United States between 1910 and about 1940, provided the most stable population (and especially the most stable working-class population) within the Left. So little has been known until quite recently about their radicalism, so much has remained locked up in non-English-language sources unconsulted by social historians, that interviews supply basic information about radical activity as well as more subtle individual or collective perceptions. Such interviews also provide specific histories of neighborhoods, of industries and their labor movements, of folk culture and cultural retention across generations. Together, they offer a saga missing from earlier immigrant histories and histories of the Left—but one vitally embedded in European-American immigrant life. Such oral histories are a core element of the OHAL collection in particular.

Representative men and women from the surviving institutions of the Jewish, Finnish, Slovenian, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Japanese, Scandinavian, Polish, Croatian, Spanish-Cuban, and Portuguese Left—across the spectrum of anarchist, socialist, and Communist attachments—gave interviews about both personal experiences and group activities. Most respondents sound, to one degree or another, like Jewish fraternalist and sometime neighborhood leader Nina Goldstein: "Our dreams in Europe were that America was the golden land, [but] here I felt there was nothing but struggle."[7] They recall the excitement of institution building, the fervency of antifascism, the disappointments and despair of mass assimilation, McCarthyism, and disillusionment with idyllic visions of the Soviet Union, their memories closing with the warmth of collective commitment persisting into ripe old age. Interviewees also generally relate a continuing, sometimes troubled but always vital, linkage between their political activities in the United States and the status of the homeland. In articulating the homeland's interest they claimed, often quite persuasively, to represent the heart of their particular diaspora.

The struggle was never merely economic. In impassioned tones aimed pointedly at the interviewer, immigrant radicals explained a struggle little known to the outside world, the collective efforts to preserve language and cultural customs in their

[7] Nina Goldstein interview by Bea Lemisch, March 19, 1980, Oral History of the American Left. The term "Spanish-Cuban" indicates both the often radicalized Spanish workers who migrated to the United States via Cuba and a radical population in Ybor City, Florida, composed of Spanish and Cuban immigrants and their mixed descendants.

own lives and to leave a cultural legacy for future generations. That struggle, they insisted, provided a critical subtext to Left political involvement. Members of choirs, officials of summer camps and theatrical groups, editors of what were almost certainly the final radical expressions within the particular language subcultures frequently describe the battles against hegemonic American society (and sometimes against assimilationist tendencies within the Left) for precious cultural space.

Each group has its own distinctive features, historical significance, and self-consciousness of such cultural questions. Contrasting interviews therefore provide much testimony on the linguistic, cultural, and geopolitical sources of ethnic radicalism's strength and tenacity. If, for instance, the Left Portuguese Americans or radical Cuban Americans have generally eluded historical study and demand oral history to substantiate their former existence, the much-recorded radical Finns have compulsively documented the institutional-political background against which their unique "hall culture"—of cultural, political, and social activities centered in the fraternal hall—can be delineated. Socialist Slovenian or Croatian immigrants and their second- or third-generation descendants reveal unique adaptations to the leisure pursuits of members (such as the Slovenians' extensive recreation grounds with facilities for music and culture or Croatians' maintenance of national *tamburitza* orchestras with frequent appearances in ethnic communities) and to close cultural ties with Yugoslavia through group tours and cultural delegations.[8]

One especially important group experience best demonstrates a general paradigm. Jews—by dint of immigration size, of heritage, and of a language imperiled across the globe—managed to elaborate a rather large radical world-within-a-world, however small by American national standards. Jewish (including Yiddish-language) taped material understandably forms the largest single bloc of Left oral histories, with well over a hundred interviews by various hands in nearly a dozen different collections besides OHAL. At the same time, since written materials on much of Jewish American life are so abundant, it seems remarkable that central questions of immigrant radicalism have *not* been delved into thoroughly. The internal conflicts between Left assimilationists and anti-assimilationists loom especially large here, moreover cutting across the otherwise ideologically divided Jewish-Left political spectrum. The strategic and ethical dilemmas of Left group activity amid upward mobility, and the shifting definitions of the Left in white-collar, professional, and small business milieus, all become pronounced issues for discussion with the interviewer. Interviews with the Jewish Left tend, further, to overflow into other areas of radical experiences, including union activism, neighborhood mobilization, alternatives to public primary education, and the charged relations with the African-American community.[9]

[8] There are two interviews with Spanish-Cuban and Portuguese radicals at OHAL. Interviews with Minnesota's Finnish radicals are numerous in OHAL but more prominently in the Project on 20th-Century Radicalism, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul. On Slovenian and Croatian immigrant radicals, see OHAL holdings. Among the interviews with representatives of other ethnic radical groups at OHAL, those with Italians, Hungarians, Lithuanians, and Poles are especially valuable.

[9] Interviews with a variety of Communists, labor Zionists, Yiddish anarchists and others are available in the Oral History of the American Left and in the Labor Oral History Project Archives, Roosevelt University, Chicago, Illinois.

We find the most salient contrast within Left oral histories by turning from Jewish to African-American materials. Here the experiences related to interviewers pose a much more diffuse set of historical questions, and the rapidly accumulating scholarship has already relied heavily on oral sources. Within African-American life, the Left experience (and especially the institution-building experience) has been more concealed than within immigrant life, and its qualities and importance have been especially elusive. But the historical centrality of black social movements to American life at large suggests that African-American radicalism plays a crucial role in the deep continuity of civil rights and Black Power (or for that matter, Jesse Jackson's presidential campaigns) with the legacies of slave resistance, Radical Reconstruction, and Populism.

The oral history record, even in its preliminary state, undermines the caricatures created, respectively, by Cold War liberal (or conservative) and Communist historians of ignorant Negro dupes or of selfless militants willing to do anything for their white comrades. Interviews by a number of fieldworkers reveal, for example, that the Communist party during the 1930s and 1940s often meant vastly more to African Americans than even desperately needed economic relief, civil rights, and social justice. Many blacks found in the party a means to achieve dignity and importance by assuming local leadership positions and an opportunity for the education long denied them in the United States. Thus black Birmingham activist John Garner explained why he joined the Communist party during the 1930s: "I looked for the higher side, and when I get a lesson, I didn't forget it. Education only means quick thinking."[10]

The complexity of the Communist party's interracialism is particularly striking, the revelation of its inner secrets dependent very largely on oral history. Certainly, white arrogance and paternalism existed within Communist circles, but so did genuine interracial friendship. Interaction between individuals manifested itself in a variety of ways and was mediated by a number of different factors. Interracial sexual relationships provide one potentially explosive example rarely discussed in the *Daily Worker* and its socialist, Trotskyist, and other radical counterparts. The persistence of black nationalism raises other sensitive points. Several interviews with legendary leader "Queen Mother" Audley Moore suggest that the Communist party in Harlem led dramatic struggles for immediate improvements but constrained expressions of racial consciousness. George Edwards, a former Plains states regional organizer, similarly insists that race dignity within the Left meant, to him, continuing the inspiration of Garveyite black nationalist traditions *within* the Communist party: "Garveyism was always on my mind." Other, very different examples of complex dy-

[10] John Garner interview by Cliff Kuhn, July 20, 1984, Working Lives Collection (Archives of American Minority Cultures, Main Library, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa). Other extensive interviews with African Americans close to or members of the Communist movement during the thirties and forties are in the OHAL; in the Southern Oral History Program, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; and in the Civil Rights Documentation Project, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C. For the last, see Vincent J. Browne and Norma O. Leonard, eds., *Bibliography of Holdings of the Civil Rights Documentation Project* (Washington, 1974). Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Documenting Diversity: The Southern Experience," *Oral History Review*, 4 (1976), 19–28, discusses some of the interviews with southern socialists.

namics among radicals (and liberals) in the South from the 1930s through the 1970s also defy simplification. Some especially valuable examples can be found in the conversations of such independent Left activists as Carl and Anne Braden and in the Highlander Folk School tapes in various locations.[11]

Recent studies of the civil rights movement and the southern origins of the New Left point up the northern, urban biases of published history of the American Left. The hazards to individuals publically revealing their radical affiliations in the South from the 1920s to the 1950s were of course very real: at the least, political isolation, and at the most, beatings, imprisonment, or death. But understandable caution inadvertently muddied the historical record. A growing body of interviews with southern socialists and Communists has shown to what degree Left activity laid the foundations for the struggles of the 1950s and beyond. In the recent documentary film, *Our Land, Too*, in oral history transcriptions contained in the microfilmed Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) papers and in separate interviews with activist-leaders H. L. Mitchell and Clay East among others, the successes and travails of organizing in the socialist-led STFU of the 1930s–1940s are recalled in great detail. Experiences of southern Communists, especially in Alabama and North Carolina, are richly documented in the Southern Oral History Program (SOHP) of the University of North Carolina. Thanks to Nell Irvin Painter, the Southern Oral History Program has the interviews she conducted with the onetime Birmingham Left leader, Hosea Hudson, and his surviving allies and comrades. The SOHP also includes interviews with radical southern women who came of age after World War I and revolted against the pedestal, renouncing privilege for lives of interracial activism. Emory University's Robert W. Woodruff Library (Atlanta, Georgia) contains a large corpus of extensive interviews conducted by Patricia Sullivan in the course of her research on the Progressive party in the South, touching on the activities and eventual repression of mostly independent southern radicals, such as Palmer Weber, from the heady days of the late 1930s and early war years to the baldly racist red scare of the postwar period.[12]

[11] See Audley Moore interview by Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Aug. 6, 1978, Black Women Oral History Project (Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Mass.); Moore interview by Gilkes, Aug. 8, 1978, *ibid.*; and Audley Moore interview by Ruth F. Prago, Dec. 23, 1981, Oral History of the American Left. George Edwards interview by Buhle, Nov. 4, 1983, *ibid.* Carl and Anne Braden interviews can be found in the Southern Conference Educational Fund Papers (Oral History Office, State Historical Society of Wisonsin, Madison); and at the Oral History Research Office, Columbia University. Highlander Folk School interviews can be found at the Highlander's own archive, New Market, Tennessee; at OHAL; and at the Southern Oral History Program (SOHP), which holds interviews with many southern white radicals, including Paul Green, Broadus Mitchell and Junius Scales, as well as Myles Horton of Highlander.

[12] Information on the valuable film, *Our Land, Too* (Kudzu Productions, 1988), and the Southern Tenant Farmers Union Papers, including a number of transcribed interviews, can be had from the Historic Southern Tenant Farmers Union, 3766 S. Court St., Mongomery, AL 36105. For important interviews with H. L. Mitchell, see "The Reminiscences of H. L. Mitchell: Interview Conducted by Donald F. Shaughnessy," 1957 (Oral History Research Office, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York, N.Y.); and "The Early Life of H. L. Mitchell—Co-Founder, Southern Tenant Farmers' Union: Interview Conducted by Bell Wiley," 1972, *ibid.* The SOHP also contains interviews with Southern Tenant Farmers' Union leaders. See especially Clay East interview by Sue Thrasher, Sept. 20, 1973, Southern Oral History Program.

Interviews with members of other minorities involved in Left activities from the 1920s to the 1950s remain, by contrast, very scarce. Some documentation of Filipino and Japanese Left activity (generally described as labor activity), primarily in agricultural and maritime trades and often as interpreted by white Marxist allies, exists. Chicano and Mexican-American labor radicalism, until recently taped mainly in its agricultural aspects, has been documented by a small number of scholars. Specific Left organizations, such as the Spanish Speaking People's Congress and Left unions such as the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers and the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America, offer researchers ample opportunities to demonstrate the generally hidden role of the Left.[13]

Interviews with radical women tell a story well documented but still peripheral to the main body of the existing *written* history of the Left. Often more candid than interviews with men, they present a remarkable view of the frequent tensions between political commitments and personal life. Among the various holdings, Sherna Gluck's Feminist History Research Project, concentrating upon women in the California Left, is the outstanding single example. OHAL's interviews, conducted in part for the 1983 documentary radio series, "Grandma Was an Activist," also provide useful insights. Often, as in the case of the distinguished Harlem cultural activist Louise Thompson Patterson, the seeming triumph of individual will over difficult conditions highlights an interview. More often, especially among the rank and file, we hear of overwhelming challenges to women's sustained public involvement—and particularly to collective female involvement—in relation to family obligations.[14]

Oral history faces different challenges in the areas of Left history *most* familiar to the popular reader. Here, Left experiences and commitments have often been subsumed under the more acceptable labels of idealism or advanced liberalism. Al-

[13] See for instance Karl Yoneda interview by Buhle, Jan. 7, 1983, Oral History of the American Left. Several interviews at the Oral History Collection, University of Hawaii, Manoa, Honolulu, refer cautiously to the role of Asian-American activists and the Left. Unfortunately, the extensive interviews with International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) militants, conducted by the ILWU staff and housed at the ILWU's San Francisco headquarters, are now closed to the public. Of Mexican-American interviews, the most clearly related to the Left are those with former leaders of the Spanish Speaking People's Congress, conducted by Mario Garcia, Chicano Studies Department, University of California, Santa Barbara. He will soon release them to an archive. On Communists and agricultural workers' strikes from the 1920s to the 1950s, see "Tradition: Chains Have Bound Us," Dorothy Healey interviews by Joel Gardner, 1972, 1973, 1974 (Oral History Project, University of California, Los Angeles). Related papers are in Dorothy Healey Papers (Department of Special Collections, University Research Library, *ibid.*). Defense work by the Left in the "Sleepy Lagoon" case of the 1940s—involving a legal assault on the Los Angeles Mexican-American community in the guise of a murder investigation and prosecution—is detailed in "The Education of Alice McGrath," Alice McGrath interviews by Michael Balter, 1984, 1985 (Oral History Project, *ibid.*). Related papers are in Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, Los Angeles, Papers, 1942–1945 (Department of Special Collections, *ibid.*).

[14] For a list of holdings, contact the Feminist History Research Project, PO Box 1156, Topanga, CA 90290. The four-part program "Grandma Was an Activist," has aired recurrently on New York station WBAI, 1983 to the present. Note especially Louise Thompson Patterson interview by Ruth Prago, Nov. 16, 1981, Oral History of the American Left. It contrasts with numerous rank-and-file interviews in OHAL and a significant number of similar women's interviews at the Project on 20th-Century Radicalism, Minnesota Historical Society. The Southern Oral History Program has fascinating interviews with Left women activists, but like those at the Columbia Oral History Research Office, they tend to be leaders.

ternatively, the noted events and famed personalities of a time overwhelm the subtleties and the difficulties of the time's Left actors. Accounts of the labor movement, intellectual tendencies, the role of left-wing celebrities such as Hollywood writers or stars, and the still recent story of the New Left thus risk conflating the personal and the public and reiterating the accepted wisdom as the final word. Recent oral history seeks in part to challenge truisms the Left has maintained about itself, but also it seeks to effect a public history of American society that emphatically includes the Left.

These two latter aims do not necessarily coincide. Indeed, here more than elsewhere the old problems of personal security (against the efforts of government, business, and private groups to identify and isolate radicals) return in recollection, sometimes with a vengeance. Left self-identification becomes guarded, out of old habits, and political differences within the Left tend to be pushed out of sight. Interviewers may innocently collude with styles of self-repression in order to obtain the most presentable story, or simply to maintain a primary focus on colorful events and personalities rather than problems and contradictions. From the standpoint of social history, such a focus can be altogether legitimate; as *Left* history, it frequently leaves out main parts of the interviewee's own story.

The most thoroughly documented and discussed area is trade-union history. Among the numerous but widely scattered interviews with unionists, discussion of the Left takes a distant secondary role to the discussion of the immediate cause of activity. "I guess you don't bring up the discussion of socialism when you are trying to help people get an introduction to trade unionism," Slovak-American organizer-activist Rose Podmaka said in a typical reflection.[15] Left unionists, interviewed about a wide variety of industries and political circumstances, comment largely on success in their given tasks, on conflicts with other union factions, and on the McCarthy-era waves of repression. Discussion of a more directly political nature often employs a sort of code comprehensible only to fellow leftists.[16]

Historical accounts of specific political campaigns of the Left freqeuntly bear similar symptoms. The "cause," memorable enough to die for, is described retrospectively in relation to many personal and community commitments, but more rarely to socialism or communism. Among such "causes," none rivals the Spanish civil war and in particular, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Its veterans' stories are

[15] Rose Podmaka interview by Prago, Jan. 22, 1979, Oral History of the American Left.

[16] This is most notably so with the Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan; the interviews there include many with Left veterans who failed to identify themselves as such. The same is true for interviews with ILWU militants in the Oral History Collection, University of Hawaii, Manoa, and for most of those with National Maritime Union veterans in the Marine Workers Historical Collection at Tamiment. Among interviews that explicate labor links with the Left (and feuding among Left groups within unions), see the over two dozen interviews with militants of the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers and United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America in Department of Labor Studies, Oral History Project, Pennsylvania State University, University Park. For a partial listing, see Alice Hoffman et. al., *The Pennsylvania State University Oral History Projects* (University, Pa., 1985). In OHAL's collection are extensive tapings of Paul Andreas Rasmussen, Stanley Weir, and Alice Dodge Wolfson, all articulate opponents of Communist party labor practices.

available in many hours of tape (now housed at Brandeis University) and a notable film, *The Good Fight*.[17]

The generalization that interviewees veer away from avowed Left attachments and problems is somewhat less true of the regional oral history work done most thoroughly in Minnesota, but also in southern California, Wisconsin, Rhode Island, and elsewhere. The particular qualities of the local Left and its relationship to other local movements come through dense discussions of such particulars as Farmer-Labor or other third-party efforts, civil liberties struggles, union organizing, and peace campaigns. Like ethnic radicals, regional-minded militants often discuss their frustration at the perceived inabilities of national Left leadership to understand their unique situations and possibilities presented by them. Christian socialists such as the Bay Area pastor Don Chase received scarce intellectual acknowledgment in the Left from the 1920s to the 1970s but played an influential role as supporters of Left-led labor and social movements in many localities.[18]

Yet other difficulties are present in interviews with Left intellectuals. Accessibility remains a major problem. Innumerable interviews done for books and essays are held in private hands and mostly unavailable. Substantial public holdings of interviews with figures including Communists, socialists, anarchists, and New Leftists of many varieties can be found at OHAL, Columbia, and other locations.[19] Left in-

[17] *The Good Fight*, produced by the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Project, 1985. See box 11, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives (Goldfarb Library, Brandeis University, Waltham, Mass.) Recent videotaping of Abraham Lincoln Brigade veterans, covering experiences after their activity in Spain, makes up in part for the absence of earlier discussion about the Left. This video component will be available to scholars in 1990.

[18] The Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, Los Angeles (6120 S. Vermont Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90044) has an unusual audio and audio-video collection of more than a thousand hours (including tapes of local radio and television shows made with longtime area Left leaders) made by the library's late founder, Emil Freed. The Regional Oral History Office, at the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley also has a few local interviews, as does the Oral History Project, University of California, Los Angeles; the Rhode Island Labor History Collection, Rhode Island Historical Society Library, Providence; the Oral History Office, State Historical Society of Wisconsin; Oral History Department, Idaho Historical Society, Boise; and the Oral History Office, Montana Historical Society, Helena. A rich source for early Chicago radicalism is the Labor Oral History Project at Roosevelt University. On socialism in Vermont, see the lengthy John Lawson interview by Alice Hoffman, Aug. 6 and 7, 1977 (Department of Labor Studies, Oral History Project, Pennsylvania State University). On socialism in St. Louis, see several interviews in Oral History Project, Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri-Columbia, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia. The Project on 20th-Century Radicalism, Minnesota Historical Society, holds by far the largest number of interviews and is most active in gathering new regionally oriented interviews.

Christian socialists have not been taped in great numbers, but interviews with several may be found at OHAL. Of particular interest is the interview with an activist in the protests against United States intervention in Nicaragua in 1926, and minister to a San Francisco parish during the turbulent 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s: Rev. Don Chase interview by Buhle, Nov. 5, 1983, Oral History of the American Left. An interview of great interest with two Christian socialists has been published; see Mark Naison, "Claude and Joyce Williams: Pilgrims of Justice," *Southern Exposure*, 1 (Winter 1974), 38–50. Claude Williams was a major leader of sharecroppers and propounder of Left theology in the 1930s.

[19] See, James T. Farrell interview by Alan Wald, Aug. 23, 1976, Oral History of the American Left; Leslie Fiedler interview by Wald, May 28, 1981, *ibid.* (usable only with permission of interviewer, English Department, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109). Other interviews of intellectuals at OHAL include ones with Meridel LeSueur, Paul Sweezy and Harry Magdoff, Malcolm Cowley, Daniel Berrigan, and C. L. R. James. George Abbott White's extensive interviews with colleagues, friends, and critics of political activist and critic F. O. Matthiessen are available for public use upon request to White at the Matthiessen Room, Eliot House, C-11, Harvard University. Columbia has perhaps the largest archive of noted intellectuals, liberal-radical and Left.

tellectuals, like intellectuals in general, are notorious for their precise self-presentation, their ordering of past experiences around a present perspective. Less public or less prestigious intellectuals, from regional bases, ethnic groups, or the sports sections of the left-wing newpapers, tend to be rather more candid about their own uncertainties.

Among intellectuals directly active in Left politics, no other group represents the concentrated energy or apparent single-mindedness of Trotskyists, and none is so overrepresented for its size. OHAL possesses the largest single Trotskyist collection, including the proceedings and edited transcripts of a reunion held in 1983 by more than one hundred members of the Workers party (a 1940s Trotskyist group known for its outstanding intellectual members and sympathizers, including Irving Howe, Dwight Macdonald, Saul Bellow, Richard Hofstadter, and Harvey Swados). Many other Trotskyist interviews are in scattered locations, most often within collections on labor or student movements, sometimes in ones on peace, legal defense, or other topics.[20]

Radical intellectuals active in the arts, especially popular arts, have only begun to tell their political story. Novelists are widely represented in collections, James T. Farrell and Myra Page among them, and poets such as Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Tom McGrath only slightly less so. Dancers, actors, screenwriters, and others also have an abundant documentation, from the Yiddish Left avant-garde and Communist theatrical groups of the 1920s–1930s to Hollywood notables. Most interviewees, if not all, reflect on the complexities of mixing technique and politics. A significant number, such as modern dancer Jane Dudley, finally ruminate that good art requires an autonomy that political activists often seem unable to comprehend, and that among artists a balance of "a thinking person . . . and . . . an imaginative kind of person [able] to find a way of dealing with these issues in a dance form, in an art form" is rare.[21] Historians with special areas of knowledge in film, fiction, the plastic arts, and other areas are needed to help interviewees wrestle with their experience of the tensions between art and social commitment.

No less than formal arts, leisure and sports offer significant problems and possibilities to the oral historian. The book-length treatment of former *Daily Worker*

[20] Paul Buhle, ed., *The Legacy of the Workers' Party, 1940–1949: Recollections and Reflections* (New York, 1985). Alan Wald has the greatest number of interviews not now open for public use. OHAL's collection includes a cross-section of Trotskyists active from the 1930s to the 1980s, with special concentrations on subtopics such as the "Johnson-Forest Tendency" (a small group with intellectual leaders such as C. L. R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Grace Lee Boggs).

[21] Jane Dudley interview by Richard Wormser, 1981, Oral History of the American Left. Joel Saxe has assembled a formidable collection of interviews, mostly videotapes, of theatrical Leftists connected with the English-language and Yiddish-language stage in the 1930s. They will be donated to OHAL in 1990. OHAL interviews of interest are with *Masses* artist Hugo Gellert, popular Left-labor cartoonist Fred Wright, Left film activist Tom Brandon, and documentary maker Harvey Richards, Industrial Workers of the World poet Carlos Cortez, folk singer Pete Seeger, literary critic Annette Rubinstein, and dance choreographer Edith Segal. The University of California, Los Angeles, has recently launched (with the encouragement and assistance of professor Gerda Lerner) a major project interviewing Hollywood victims of the blacklist, including many of the creative intellectuals of the 1930s–1950s film community. A very few interviews with blacklistees already exist in Oral History Project, University of California, Los Angeles.

sports editor Lester Rodney, for instance, demonstrates the multiple points of contact between the Left and popular working-class life through the class and racial dimensions of professional and amateur sports. On a smaller scale, tapes documenting summer recreational and hiking camps from the 1920s to the present supply glimpses of radicals' upbringing, leisure family life, and ecological premonitions.[22]

In approaching the New Left as a subject for oral history, "culture" ceases to be secondary, and the problems culture poses for the social movement evidently cease to be politically marginal. The resulting self-consciousness on the part of interviewer and interviewee is fraught with implications. The New Left—notably the first movement that has been largely self-interviewed, in a generational sense, its members notoriously educated and articulate almost to a painful degree—came of age and almost immediately drew widespread scholarly scrutiny, sympathetic and hostile, on campuses of the 1960s. As early as 1970, fieldwork began in earnest. Film treatments—documentary and Hollywood version alike—shortly appeared and have continued in waves, with such notable contributions as *The War At Home*, a documentary about the anti–Vietnam War movement in Madison, Wisconsin. The earliest interviews of New Left activists touched on other constituencies largely in passing; later, retrospective interviews took up wider areas. The documentation of the civil rights/New left connection, available at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center among other places, highlights a variety of radicals, from those on the fringes of the Democratic party to those who became radical black nationalists—seen through the prism, not of the New Left, but of civil rights. The remarkable origins of the women's liberation movement in activists' lives were soon traced by Sara Evans. Local interviewing projects have since been established, perhaps the most intensive one on Ann Arbor, now housed at the University of Michigan.[23] The Columbia Oral History project on the New Left, the only major ongoing effort, has given careful attention to the less documented campus circumstances of minority and other students ignored by the 1960s media blitz on the white middle-class rebels.

[22] "Baseball and Social Conscience: Lester Rodney Interviewed by Paul Buhle and Michael Fermanowsky," 1984, transcript available from the Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles. In the OHAL collections, see also, for instance, interview collections on the Reynolds Hills hiking club and Nature Friends, and interviews relating to Camp Kinderland, International Workers Order fraternal life in various states, the leisure activities of the Allerton Avenue (Bronx) Co-ops, the "hall life" of the Finnish-American Left, and the musical activities of Croatians. Joel Saxe's extensive interviews with singers and tapings of Jewish choral activities will be available in OHAL in 1990.

[23] One of the earliest collections of interviews with the New Left, by James P. O'Brien, can be found at the Wisconsin State Historical Society Oral History office. The relationship between civil rights and the Left, a crucible for the New Left, was explored in early interviews with Julian Mayfield and Mae Mallory among others for the Civil Rights Documentation Project at Howard University's Moorland-Spingarn Research Center. That project also contains rich material on the otherwise underdocumented Black Power phase of the New Left era, including interviews with Black Panther leaders and with 1960s African-American Trotskyist leaders obliquely involved (but close observers of) the vital black nationalism/New Left engagement. See especially the interviews with Barbara Arthur, Paul Boutelle, Clifton DeBerry, C. L. R. James, Conrad Lynn, Derrick Morrison, and Ernie Allen. Of other specific New Left collections, the most extensive local project was the Contemporary History Project directed in Ann Arbor by Bret Eynon, between 1977 and 1982, including 175 local observers, activists, and opponents of the antiwar movement. Of women's liberation movement projects, Sara Evans's own oral history research will soon be accessible at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

A unique set of considerations apply to New Left interviews. Only in the recent past, if at all, has the interviewing of the New Left begun to conquer (or successfully manage) what may be described as the "Big Chill" phenomenon: the sense that time has stood still since roughly 1970. Scholarly works remain relatively few in number, arguably because no subsequent experiences—for the scholars as well as the interviewees—shed happy light on the disappointed hopes of the 1960s generation. Mixed nostalgia and regret (not for abandoned commitments so much as for a movement to be committed *to*) cloud many interviews. The unanswered questions remained substantial and disquieting. Some of the best interviews, conducted by younger researchers or in less-remembered sites, have begun to pose new sets of questions, and to probe complexities last seen in New Left–generation interviewers' dialogue with earlier generations.[24]

A larger moral can surely be found here. Oral history, by its nature "dialogical," has effectively traced the American Left generations from the immigrant and black ghettoes of the turn of the century to the great labor and social movements of the 1930s–1950s through to the civil rights and student movements of the 1960s and early 1970s, has pinpointed information hitherto unavailable and documented varieties of consciousness. It has abundantly demonstrated the role of ordinary activists and strongly suggested the feet of clay of many Left leaders. It has only begun efforts to come to grips with the full historical significance of this gathered material for American history at large, a monumental task that scholars of all kinds now must share. The oral history of the American Left, in raising key questions of consciousness and self-consciousness in history, meets a profession moving swiftly toward similar goals. The work of the interviewers and of those who make use of the interviews has, then, just *reached* its true beginning point.

[24] The Columbia University Student Movements of the 1960s project, directed by Left oral history pioneer, Ron Grele, and the volume emanating from his work among others is especially noteworthy in having squarely met and largely surmounted these formidable difficulties. See Ronald Fraser et al., ed., *1968: A Student Generation in Revolt* (New York, 1988).