

# REFLECTIONS ON THE USE OF INTERVIEWS AS PRIMARY SOURCES

BY ROBERT J. ALEXANDER

*Over the forty years he has spent at Rutgers and in the twenty-seven books he has written during that time, Professor of Economics Robert J. Alexander has been an active practitioner of the art of interviewing. He has made available in the Department of Special Collections the extensive records of his activities, principally in the area of Latin-American politics, though he has also worked in some aspects of European history as well. Thus his reflections on the way in which information gleaned from interviews subsequently becomes source material stem from a time when the use of the term "oral history" had yet to be introduced.*

FOR MORE than forty-five years I have been interviewing people and taking notes on what they told me. Rutgers University Library has the results of these discussions in the form of notes on interviews with between 11,000 and 12,000 different people, so some comments on these notes and how they were collected may be of interest to the readers of the publication of the Rutgers Libraries.

My principal field of research during my forty years at Rutgers has been the economic development, politics and history of Latin America—which I define broadly as all of the Western Hemisphere south of the United States. For thirty-five years after 1946, I visited some part of the area every year. My visits were under a variety of different auspices. During the 1950's and early 1960's, I travelled widely and frequently for the American Federation of Labor and AFL/CIO, to keep them informed about trade union and other developments in the region. On other occasions, I had grants, from the State Department and GI Bill of Rights, the Ford Foundation and the Rutgers University Research Council, which facilitated my voyaging; I have served as a consultant on several occasions for the Agency for International Development (AID) and its predecessors, with them paying the costs of my travels. On unfortunately too many occasions, I have had to finance these myself.

Spain has been another focus of my researches. I was part of a U.S. government economic mission to that country in 1951, and on two subsequent occasions went back there in connection with a long-standing research project on the role of the Anarchists in the Spanish Civil War.

Finally, the international radical movement, particularly the dissident Right and Left Oppositions to the Stalinist Comintern and its successors, have also been a focus of my research interest. I have made trips to Europe seeking information on these matters, and have also investigated them extensively in this country.

In all of these voyagings, talking to people has been one of my major tasks. The kind of people I have interviewed or talked with or listened to have included politicians, trade union officials, businessmen, scholars, religious leaders, "foreign observers" (including diplomats and others), and such common folk as taxi drivers, maids or other employees of hotels, and others whom I'd meet more or less casually.

Finally, for over thirty years I have belonged to the Council on Foreign Relations. It is an organization which brings before its members the widest range of politicians, statesmen and others, from all over the world. Although talks given before the Council are "off the record" and "unattributable," I nonetheless took notes on those I heard, and these notes contain much valuable information which can be used, even if not attributable to its source.

I have made wide use of this "interview" material in my own published research. This includes, to date, twenty-seven books and hundreds of articles, both "scholarly" and otherwise.

Naturally, trying to "pump" as many people as I have, I have had a number of interesting experiences. Most of my interviewing has been in Latin America, and although I have had occasion to meet with many people who were "anti-Yankee" by conviction, on only a few occasions have I encountered people who were unwilling to talk to me.

One such case was a minor Communist trade union official in Guatemala during the period that the Communists controlled the labor movement there and the pro-Communist administration of Colonel Jacobo Arbenz was in power. That official informed me that he "did not talk with Yankee imperialists," and I had no alternative but to leave. The irony of this situation was that at that same time I had quite friendly relations with the two top Communist leaders of the Guatemalan labor movement, Victor Manuel Gutierrez and Carlos Manuel Pellecer, who were quite willing to talk with me. I had a similar experience with one Peronista trade union leader during the Peron dictatorship, although all of the other trade union officials of the time were perfectly willing to talk with me, whether or not they had anything of consequence to tell me.

Somewhat different was my experience with Chilean ex-President Arturo Alessandri, who was probably the most important Chilean political leader of the first half of the 20th Century. I had met him early in 1947 through the intervention of his son, Jorge Alessandri, then the manager of the country's principal paper manufacturing concern, and later president himself. However, Don Arturo still was suspicious of this Yankee interrogator. After a few questions, he rather belligerently asked me what it was that I wanted. I then presented him a letter of introduction, written in

English, from the Economics Department of Columbia University—I was collecting material for my Ph.D. thesis there at the time. After reading this, President Alessandri was quite cordial. I've always suspected that his change in attitude came because he was flattered that I took for granted that he could read English.

Still different was an interview that I had with the manager of one of Chile's major industries. As I began to question him, he was clearly unfriendly, and finally suggested that we end the interview. But I had gotten to see him through an introduction from the secretary of the National Association of Industries, and when I then suggested that I would report back to the secretary that the man was unwilling to talk with me, he suddenly softened, and from then on was willing to tell me virtually anything that I wanted to know.

It took me a decade or more to develop a technique for this kind of research. However, I have never used a tape recorder or similar device for interviewing. It has always seemed to me that such an instrument would interfere with the willingness of people to converse freely. Insofar as possible, I've tried to have all discussions as informal and as near to simple conversations as possible.

Over the years, I have simply talked with the persons involved. After leaving their presence, I have then taken preliminary notes in a kind of *sui generis* short-hand, consisting of all sorts of abbreviations which only I (or my wife) could probably understand. Then, as soon as I have been able to get to my typewriter, I have expanded these notes, in a kind of stream-of-consciousness process.

The only exception to this method has involved situations in which an "interview" has actually dealt with something which the subject has said in a public meeting, where he/she was not talking specifically to me. In those cases, unless there is present an audience which might think it suspicious for one to be taking notes on what was being said, it is possible to take down the details of what the person has been talking about on the spot.

It might appear that one would miss a good deal of what was said in conversations recorded in the way that I have usually done it. However, it is true in the case of most interviews that one goes into them with a general idea of the major things that one wants to find out about from the person with whom one is going to talk. Also, a conversation usually centers on a limited number of subjects, and one can more or less easily arrange one's thoughts and memories around these subjects. Furthermore, after a certain amount of experience, one develops a certain ability to keep in mind the major things which one has talked about.

Information gathered from interviews has certain limitations. For one thing, people's memory of past events is sometimes limited and mistaken. Furthermore, in talking to someone about what he/she has done—or is doing—one has to run the risk that that person may well shade the truth to his/her own advantage.

One therefore has to be cautious about such material. Whenever possible, I have tried to check what one person has told me with what someone else, who may have a rather different axe to grind, has said, and then have tried to draw my own conclusions from the evidence, if the two sources are in conflict. However, in this respect, oral testimony is not much different from written material; in writing about what has happened, people are not likely to be more impartial than they are in conversation; and even official documents can sometimes be purposely designed to present a particular point of view, which is not necessarily entirely truthful, or may present the truth as seen from the particular point of view.

In this regard, I particularly remember an interview which I had with ex-President Juan Domingo Peron of Argentina. I had gotten my interview with him, in Madrid, on the basis of having written a book about him, and so I presumed that he would presume that I knew something about his regime. But I was disappointed with him during the interview. The truth is that President Peron lied to me on a number of points, and I knew that he was lying. For instance, he told me that his regime had never suppressed the Socialist daily newspaper *La Vanguardia*, which was literally true in the sense that he had never officially proscribed it—but he had had his government find “health code” violations in any printing establishment that dared to print the paper. He offered other prevarications which also reduced his reliability as a witness to history.

However, interviews of this kind also may have certain advantages. Particularly if the person involved is talking long after the event, when the partisanship involved has somewhat abated, he/she may in fact present a more considered view than testimony contemporary to the event in question might provide.

The status of oral sources has risen in recent years. Although I have used evidence from my interviews in my books for at least thirty years, respectable scholarly publications were long reticent about accepting such material as legitimate “scholarly” evidence. I had an experience with this at least three decades ago. One of the most respectable economics scholarly periodicals turned down an article which I submitted to them in the mid-1950's, on the grounds that it was based largely on interviews. The subject was the unionization of Latin American rural workers, a matter about

which virtually nothing had been written at that time. I had collected a good deal of information on the subject from conversations with rural union leaders, and this was embodied in the article in question. The irony, of course, was that if I or someone else had had the same information published in some "non-scholarly" periodicals, and I had cited that material in the article, that article would probably have been quite acceptable in the "scholarly" journal involved. Fortunately, things have changed since then, and oral source material is more respected.

Oral source material is a relatively new tool of scholarly research. It is one which has much to recommend it. One who uses it has the feeling that he/she is in close personal touch with what has actually happened, that one has talked with those who were participants in more or less important events. It puts one in personal touch with history. Perhaps this can be best illustrated by a personal experience. When I was still in my mid-teens, in 1935, I met a distant relative who was then 93 years of age. The only thing I really remember about that "interview" was the fact that he, in his youth, had known someone who had participated as a drummer boy in the American Revolution. Thus, I had known someone who had known someone who had participated in the Revolutionary War. This could not help but give me the feeling that I had had a real personal contact with history. To a greater or less degree, all oral sources give one the same contacts with the past.