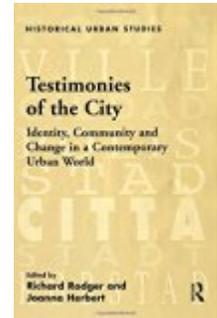




Richard Rodger, Joanna Herbert, eds.. *Testimonies of the City: Identity, Community and Change in a Contemporary Urban World*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. xix + 276 pp. \$99.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7546-5560-2.



Reviewed by Gergely Baics

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Ashgate has published another volume in its Historical Urban Studies series under general editors Jean-Luc Pinol and Richard Rodger. *Testimonies of the City*, edited by Richard Rodger and Joanna Herbert, is a thematically organized collection, probing the role of oral testimony in contemporary urban history. The editors extend the traditional thematic organization of the series into the methodological realm, connecting the interrogation of oral sources with empirical research based in urban case studies.

In a thought-provoking introduction, Rodger and Herbert try to quell historians' conventional skepticism about oral sources. They assert oral history is an invaluable method to produce "new insights into conceptualizing and comprehending the contemporary city" (p. 19). Using evidence from historiography and the volume's contributions, they argue that oral testimonies are uniquely suited to study the city as experienced. Moreover, oral interviews fill in historical gaps, offer alternative interpretations, and give voice to marginalized groups, challenging "the categories and assumptions of official history" (p. 7). These

claims are based on an insightful review of the oral historian's enterprise. Building on Alessandro Portelli's legacy, the editors show how the oral historical process—from the generation of sources, to their content, form, and interpretation—offers a wealth of otherwise inaccessible insights to historians.[1]

The editors rightly point to the malleability and richness of oral testimonies and historians' perplexing reluctance to use them. However, the question is not the value of oral testimonies for history in general, but whether or not they are particularly suitable for studying the urban environment. In other words, the relationship between oral history as a methodology and urban history as a specific field is at stake in the volume. The editors persuasively show how oral testimonies shed unique light onto the urban experience. But to fully acknowledge the specificity of the city, the editors should have pushed the question one step further. Should urban historians depend more on oral history than scholars in other fields? Or, in order to uncover the lived experiences of recent history, do most historians need to

turn to oral accounts? And if the urban experience is unique in this regard, what are the specific conditions of urban life that make it imperative for urban historians to draw on oral sources?

Testimonies of the City contains eleven case studies from cities across Europe and the Americas and a variety of disciplines, organized into four themes. Part 1, titled "Social Identities," contains three contributions. Ronnie Johnston and Arthur McIvor study the work experience in Glasgow's heavy industries from the 1930s to the present. Based on workers' oral testimonies, depicting their grim but formative work environment that fostered a cult of masculinity and the ideal of the "hard man," the authors conclude that the human body needs to be placed at the center of urban history to address how workplace affects the well-being of city dwellers. Using life interviews, Eszter Zsófia Tóth studies the experience of unskilled women workers in socialist Hungary. She finds that these women structure their life stories around three major themes--workplace relations, material conditions, and their flats--testifying to their multiple identities as workers, consumers, and neighbors. Sándor Horváth traces how the social identities of youth gangs in the 1960s and 1970s were constructed both by members and the larger society. Through archival research, including oral testimonies generated by the police, he skillfully shows how Hungarian hippies turned a particular tree into a symbolic meeting place to express their alternative identity.

Part 2, titled "Community, Neighborhood, and Daily Life," opens with a study by Valentina Gulin Zrni? on community formation in one of Zagreb's housing estates built in the 1950s. Based on long-term fieldwork and interviews with residents, she persuasively argues that through shared experience a sense of community developed in the allegedly impersonal and standardized landscape of a socialist housing project. Leen Beyers interrogates oral testimonies both as descriptions and ways of narrating the past to explore how ethnic,

social, and spatial boundaries of neighborhood life evolved in the Limburg mining towns over three waves of immigration during the twentieth century. Finally, Carolina Varlet reconstructs the rhythms, rituals, and routines of daily life in Paris during the 1920s and 1930s based on hundreds of testimonies written by Parisians in 1993 and 1994 in response to a public call to document quotidian urban life in the interwar years.

While regionally the most sweeping, the third part, titled "Responses to Urban Change," is the most cohesive of the sections. Using interviews with architects, planners, historians, and curators and archival evidence, Maria Raluca Popa convincingly rewrites Bucharest's transformation in the 1980s. Challenging the traditional explanation that the transformation was single-handedly orchestrated by the dictator Nicolai Ceausescu, she interprets the process as a socialist response to prewar ideas of urban planning negotiated between technical experts and party leaders within the power configurations of a dictatorship. Verônica Sales Pereira uses oral testimonies of local residents to recover three crucial moments in the collective memory of São Paulo's once vibrant working-class Brás district, where repeated failures of urban renewal since 1976 have left open scars, emptiness, and nostalgia in the urban landscape. Finally, Ruth Wallach closes the section with an intriguing study of how oral and archival evidence is utilized in two public art projects in Los Angeles--"Remembering Old Little Tokyo" (1996) by Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, and May Sun's "Listening for the Trains to Come" (1992)--to commemorate the history of Japanese Americans between 1890 and 1945, and of Chinese Americans from the 1870s to the 1920s.

The final part, "Migration and Methods," consist of two methodological papers. First, Wladimir Fischer presents the contours of his oral history project aimed at recovering the breadth of experiences of Yugoslavian immigrants in Vienna since the 1960s. Oral testimonies, he argues, are the

only means to compensate for the astonishing absence of migrants in Viennese historiography. Last, Joanna Herbert discusses the methodological and ethical dilemmas that arose when, as a white female researcher, she conducted life-story interviews with South Asian immigrants in Leicester. She concludes that the challenges that cross-cultural interviews pose at the interviewing and interpretation process are surmountable, and the method can generate new insights about the migration experience.

The greatest strengths of the individual papers are the depth of their methodological insights and the quality of their research. The authors construct and present their methods with intellectual rigor and honesty. One should feel satisfied to read the volume as a testimony to oral history, as every bit of the oral historical enterprise is scrutinized—most openly in the papers of Johnston and McIvor, Tóth, Popa, Fischer, and Wallach. Moreover, the authors do not shy away from asserting controversial methodological claims. For example, Zrni? posits her native familiarity with the local culture as an advantage for her research, Beyers makes the case for discourse analysis to interrogate oral testimonies, while Herbert openly questions her own position within the cross-cultural interview process. At every point, the reader feels drawn into intriguing methodological debates, and can decide whether to agree or to take issue with the author's specific stand on them.

There is, however, one major omission as concerns methodology: archival methods and their relation to oral history are taken for granted. This raises two issues. First, if oral testimonies are mediated by archives, their access, analysis, and interpretation are important.[2] For example, Horváth missed the occasion to directly address the methodological questions at stake when using oral testimonies generated by hostile agencies and held in archives. If these interviews are treated as oral history, how should one account for their me-

diated nature? Second, except for Popa, the authors do not directly address how oral sources relate to more conventional or archival sources. This is especially unfortunate in Varlet's case, where respondents wrote in free-form about their daily experience of the city, and their testimonies were complemented by a series of interviews. Varlet does not distinguish between the written and oral accounts, despite the unique possibility these sources offer to examine how form determines content.

The richness of oral testimonies to illuminate the city as experienced makes rewarding reading. My second comment concerns neither the scope nor the quality of the papers, but that the primacy given to methodology at times jeopardizes the focus on the city. Especially when the subject is migration, the papers tend not to address the urban. In the last part, Vienna and Leicester are treated merely as background to methodological issues of migration history. And while Beyers discusses how to analyze oral accounts to reveal the ethnic, social, and spatial boundaries of neighborhood life, she does not consider how the specific urban environment of small Belgian mining towns has shaped the very same social processes. Urban history constructs the city as a unit of analysis: not merely as a sight, but as a process that shapes the larger social world. Insofar as historians study phenomena in the city without addressing how the urban variable matters, they do not fully exploit the interpretive potential of urban history.

These points are not meant to question the relevance and quality of the volume as whole or the individual papers. They rather illustrate how ambitious it is for the contributors to engage with both oral history and urban history. Moreover, despite the broad regional and disciplinary scope of the papers, questions of methodology are always at the forefront. Unlike most edited volumes, in this case not only the editors, but also the authors have reflected on each others' work, which enhances the persuasiveness of the book. In short,

Testimonies of the City is a welcome addition that speaks not only to urban historians, but to scholars across the humanities and social sciences who are concerned with historiography and methodology. It does not serve as an ideal text for undergraduate education, but it does succeed in raising important questions to a broad professional audience about how oral testimony can invigorate urban history.

Notes

[1]. Alessandro Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History," *History Workshop Journal* 12 (1981): 96-107; Alessandro Portelli, "Oral History as a Genre," in *Narrative and Genre*, ed. Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson (London: Routledge, 1997), 23-45.

[2]. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

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