Interview

Eugenia Meyer

Buenos Aires, 8 September 2012. Transcription and Translation: Catalina Arica.

Marieta de Moraes Ferreira (MM)*

Eugenia Meyer, historiadora mexicana, é neta de imigrantes russos e poloneses e filha de Gregorio Walerstein, renomado produtor de cinema mexicano. Estudou na Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico (UNAM), onde é catedrática desde 1963 e, desde 2009, a primeira mulher nomeada Professora Emérita do Colégio de História. Doutorou-se em 1968, mesmo ano do Massacre de Tlatelolco, tendo se envolvido ativamente no movimento estudantil mexicano. Foi a primeira mulher a assumir a cátedra de História da Mexican Revolution em universitys de seu país, além de ter sido membro de um núcleo de história oral formado exclusivamente por mulheres – o que lhes trouxe diversos obstáculos. É assessora do Projeto de História Oral no Escritório Regional de Cultura para América Latina e Caribe da Unesco. Publicou diversos trabalhos no campo da história oral, historiografia e história do México, com destaque para o período revolucionário do início do século XX. Desde 1988 faz parte do Sistema Nacional de Investigadores do Conselho

Eugenia Meyer, a Mexican historian, is the granddaughter of Russian and Polish immigrants and the daughter of Gregorio Walerstein, a renowned Mexican cinema producer. She studied at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico (UNAM), where she has held a chair since 1963 and in 2009 became the first woman to be nominated as Professor Emeritus in the College of History. She completed her doctorate in 1968, the same year as the Tlatelolco Massacre, having been actively involved in the Mexican student movement. She was the first woman to assume the Chair of the History of the Mexican Revolution in a Mexican university, as well as having been a member of the oral history group consisting solely of women – which involved confronting various obstacles. She is an adviser to the Oral History Project in Unesco's Regional Office of Culture for Latin America and the Caribbean. She has published various papers in the field of oral history, historiography and the history of Mexico, especially the revolutionary period at the beginning of the twentieth century. Since

*Associate Professor, Instituto de História, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) and Executive Director of Editora FGV. Rua Jornalista Orlando Dantas, 37 – Botafogo. 22231-010 Rio de Janeiro – RJ – Brasil. marieta@fgv.br

Nacional para a Ciência e a Tecnologia de seu país. Em 1998 recebeu o prêmio Universidad Nacional em "Docência em Humanidades". Em 2012 a Academia de História de Cuba nomeou-a correspondente acadêmica estrangeira, e a Rede Latino-americana de História Oral (Relaho) acaba de instituir um prêmio bianual com seu nome para os melhores artigos, teses e livros de história oral sobre a América Latina.

1988 she has been part of the National System of Researchers of the National Council for Science and Technology of Mexico. In 1998 she received the Universidad Nacional award for Teaching in the Humanities. In 2012 the Academy of history of Cuba nominated her as a foreign academic correspondent, and the Latin American Oral History Network (Relaho) has just created a bi-annual award with her name for the best articles, theses and books about Latin American oral history.

MM: Eugenia, this interview is for Revista Brasileira de História. We would like to talk with you about your trajectory, the beginning of your career, your family background, and your professional education.

I come from a family with three children. I am the middle child, the sandwich. My parents studied at Universidad Nacional de Mexico, and took part in important student movements, such as the *Autonomia Universitária* in the 1930s. For my parents, university education was very important. At the beginning I wanted to study to become a children's criminal lawyer, but at the time I also planned to marry. It was very complicated, because my fiancé said that the career of a children's criminal lawyer was not a profession for a woman, going to the courts...

MM: Did you have to give up?

And by elimination I chose history.

MM: You were born in Mexico City?

I was born in Mexico City. My mother and my maternal grandparents came from Russia. My paternal grandparents came from Poland and went first to Chile, with the idea of migrating to the United States. However, the frontiers were closed to migrants, so they ended up in Mexico. My father was born in Mexico – I am the second generation born here –, and I believe that

this also determined the attitude and the disposition of my father: very nationalist, very interested that his children learn to love the country where they were born. My father was born during the Mexican Revolution, on the day they killed Madero, on 22 January 1913. His parents had travelled to Chihuahua, in the north, where Francisco Villa's rebellion had taken place, afterwards they went to Guadalajara, in the west where the religious rebellion, a reactionary movement, had taken place. In my infancy mentions of the Revolution and contemporary history were constant. Perhaps this determined that what interested me in history was Contemporary Mexico.

MM: Did you have a religious background?

None. My grandparents on both sides were immigrant Jews, my maternal grandmother, for example, was a Menshevik socialist. I think that my paternal grandparents did not practice religion. Furthermore, there were few possibilities, since there are almost no synagogues in Mexico. Currently there are 40,000 Jews in a population of 110 million. What I do think was very clear in my education was that Judaism was not for us a religion.

MM: A culture…?

It is a culture, a way of living, a philosophical concept, ethical. It is a philosophy of life.

MM: I understand. I have many friends in Brazil with a similar position.

And I was educated in a lay school. Afterwards I was sent to a Jewish college for a while. I was totally lost, but when I entered university I realized that my place was, 'here and now.' I was much more interested in what was happening with my country, etc. I understand this because, as I am an atheist, I assume that my culture has Jewish roots.

MM: Your parents went to university. When? For what profession?

My father studied accounting and afterwards economics, but he never finished. He was in the first generation of economics, which did not finish, and consisted only of socialists. My mother studied what at the time was called Philosophy and Letters, which is Literature.

MM: Your mother worked?

No, my mother never graduated. My father followed a career for a while, he was a teacher and also gave private classes, but during the War, a friend suggested to him that they make a film, as an adventure. He made a film which turned out very bad – they did not have a cent –, but he fell in love with it, left everything and dedicated himself to becoming a cinema producer.

MM: Ah, fantastic!

My father was perhaps the most important Mexican cinema producer during those fundamental years in the twentieth century. The golden age of Mexican cinema. He made 270 films, because he produced, write the scripts... He lived in an environment absolutely forbidden to us, because my mother was against any contact between us and film production...

MM: However, it did have some sort of influence on your education, did it not?

A great influence, from the part of my father. I wrote an *Oral History of Mexican Cinema*.

MM: What year did you enter university?

In 1958. At that time the bachelor's degree was not three years long like it is now. In Mexico we have pre-school, afterwards six years of basic education, three of secondary education, and afterwards three years for a degree. At that time it was two years. I entered in 1958, And I got married the same year. You could study more subjects, the programs were different, and this allowed me finish the course early. I finished the course in accordance with the curriculum in November 1960, and my son was born in January 1961.

MM: You got a Bachelor's Degree in History?

No, I did a Licentiate in History. A year after I finished I handed in a monograph. At that time there was no concept of masters, nor of doctorates.

MM: In Brazil it was the same.

I passed for the doctorate. I was the youngest to finish the licentiate and I finished my doctorate at the age of 28.

MM: What was the theme of your research?

I always had the idea of working with Contemporary History in Mexico, which was a problem, as it continues to be today. Because this idea of a woman interested in the Mexican Revolution – I was the first woman to give classes about the Mexican Revolution in university – led me to fight many battles until I understood that my students could write dissertations about the recent history of Mexico and that we, historians, also work with the present.

MM: When did you start to give classes in university?

I finished my doctorate in 1968, but I was already teaching at an undergraduate level then. At that time it was possible to teach in one place and to have a research position in another. So, I started to work in 1965 in the National Institute of Anthropology and History. There I basically did a doctoral dissertation about the US historiography of the Revolution. It took a while before I could teach disciplines about what interested me, the Mexican Revolution. Initially I gave a discipline which consisted of comments about texts. Afterwards, I went to post-graduate seminars.

MM: What was the atmosphere like in university in the 1960s? Was there much political activity?

Yes, there was. First there was the 1968 movement, which was the Tlatelolco Massacre and all of this is part of my work.

MM: Could you tell us a little about this event?

Yes. I was finishing my doctorate and I was still very young. The movement happened in a plural manner, and I participated in all of it. I was not there on the day of the Tlatelolco Massacre, 2 October, because I had a miscarriage, so I stayed home. My husband photographed the entire movement. He was also not there on 2 October. It was by chance that we were not there...

MM: 2 October 1968...

The Tlatelolco Massacre, a students' movement which was influenced by the repercussion of the French movement.

MM: In Brazil we also had this, in 1968 there was great political activity among students.

There is a 'before' and an 'after' in 1968 in institutional life. The students perceived many things. Since then I have worked in the university. At the beginning I only gave classes, but I also worked in the Institute of Anthropology. It was there that I created the first Archive of the Word, with Alicia Olivera, and I remained there for many years...

MM: Alicia Bonfil?

Yes, Alicia Olivera Sedano de Bonfil, who died three months ago. We began the Oral History Project in the Institute of Anthropology. At the beginning it was very difficult. People laughed at us: "This does not make," or "Oral History is to do with Freud or Dentistry?" And since there were only women in the group, it was more complicated. Rapidly we began to develop important projects, and it was then that we took the decision to start to create a type of network in Latin America. I went to Brazil for a course in Oral History in Fundação Getulio Vargas. I was in Venezuela and in other countries to create the first projects, and I continued in the Institute of Anthropology until 1982. At that time I had already created a Department of Contemporary Studies, which in essence was Oral History. There we carried out projects about the History of the Revolution, the History of Mexican Cinema, the Contemporary History of Mexico, projects about Spanish exile...

MM: And how was this choice of Oral History? How did that start in your life?

I had wanted to find testimonies about the Mexican Revolution, and in the University of Mexico there was nothing...

MM: In Latin America Oral History did not exist. There was a line of anthropologists who did interviews...

I was interested in working with an obscure period of Mexican History, which is the time of Victoriano Huerta, which represents a reaction to the Mexican Revolution in 1913, 1914. There were still some people alive.

MM: Was this research for your doctorate?

No. It was for something I would do afterwards. I thought that it was interesting to work with these themes because I am in favor of the 'history of the opposing side,' a history that is not institutionalized, which is not official. Because there exist many versions of everything that happened, isn't that right? I was going to look for witnesses from this period. There were still some living and, even better, a person who was already 90, living in San Antonio, Texas, but who would give me an interview. In an American hearing aid magazine I read that there existed an Oral History Association in the United States, and that they were holding a congress. So I went to Bloomington, Indiana, for the first congress. I knew nothing.

MM: This was when?

It was at the beginning of the 1970s. Of course it was very interesting. There was everything there. There were housewives who had done an oral history project of their community. There were projects such as 'By Myself I Am A Book,' a whole series of things. The approximation from the ideological point of view did not satisfy me, but it was my first meeting with it.

MM: Of course. And at that moment there was an approach to oral history which defined itself as activist, revolutionary, was there not?

In the US not so much. The following year, or two years later, I entered in contact and went to meetings, one in Oxford, another in Essex. I met Paul Thompson, Luiza Paserini and Mercedes Vilanova – the Europeans –, and obviously discovered that was something I felt much to be much closer to what I liked to do. It involved without a doubt working with the question of the subordinate classes. However, what *récit de vie* was has to be distinguished, the way Berteau and others who were not historians worked, with which we had a common interest. I was much closer to the thought of the Annales School, and we had to create procedures and to develop a very important task of methodological adaptation to the Mexican environment, and I dare I say it, the Latin-American. I should also say that this led me to a theme which has interested me a lot: how to transmit or return to the people the history we rescue? One way of doing this is the construction of museums. For this reason I have dedicated myself to making many museums in Mexico,

because none had been created for many reasons. I have opened four or five historical museums, some national, others regional, where Oral History was very important. Nowadays we go to modern museums in Europe about the Holocaust and they all have Oral History.

MM: It is true. Oral History has been incorporated into many museums...

But at the time, it was not used.

MM: And do you continue to teach the Contemporary History of Mexico?

Yes, and I was able to introduce some Oral History courses and seminars. Afterwards they asked me, following a long strike, to design a course for the licentiate called "New Sources for a New History," where I worked with Oral History, different types of witnesses, *récit de vie*, life histories, photography, cinema and literature, integrating everything. After this the president of the Republic nominated me director of an institution which still did not exist, the Mora Institute.

MM: When was this?

I arrived in 1983 to create the institute. I was charged with constructing the building. So I did a project about Latin America, another about Mexico, another about the History of the United States, a series of projects, we developed regional histories. We created a splendid library in the new building. After this I went to do something which had little to do with Oral History – I was director of cultural publications of my country for five years.

MM: A new challenge... We have a somewhat similar history. Currently I am the director of publications of Fundação Getulio Vargas, a very different type of work, very interesting...

Yes, but I never moved away from my origins. I never stopped giving classes.

MM: Ah, me too. I think it is very important to maintain the link with the classroom.

After this experience, I decided I would not return to a bureaucratic position. I was originally connected to the Institute of Anthropology. I left there

without retiring in 1994, and asked to work solely in the university, giving exams, doing everything once again.

MM: In UNAM?

Yes, in UNAM. And in this period I created a small company called El Taller de Clío, where we would do cultural projects, museums, CDs, books, but as an independent company.

MM: Do you currently work with this?

No, I have already stopped it.

MM: Let us go back and do a quick tour ... You gave classes in secondary school?

In the preparatory course, the *bachillerato*, where I was a teacher for five years. The *bachillerato* is part of the university system, because we follow the French system, the *baccalauréat*. I was a teacher in the 'preparatory service.'

MM: What exactly is the bachillerato in Mexico?

It is the final three years before entering university. We have primary, six years; secondary, three years; and the preparatory, three years, which is the *bachillerato*. I was a teacher there since 1960. I was in the second year of the course, and I was much younger than many of my students. It was a fundamental experience in my life.

MM: The bachillerato is part of the university?

It is part of the university system, yes. They recognize my time in the university since the moment I started to give classes in the *bachillerato*, in the preparatory. And I was a teacher there for five years. I gave classes in World History, which was a great courses, ranging from the French Revolution to the present day. And afterwards I also taught the History of Mexico. In 1962, 1963, I also started to give classes in the so-called 'Schools for Foreigners,' Summer courses in English, but this did not count on the curriculum.

MM: At this stage did you have any research experience?

I was a research assistant for various professors. I worked on the university's History Yearbook, especially for two professors who were very important in my education. 1968 was very interesting: at the peak of the student movement one of the professors who I knew very well – who held the chair of the Mexican Revolution – had a very peculiar situation: one semester he would teach the Mexican Revolution, and in the other the Italian Renaissance. The old idea of universal culture. He told me to call him and said: "I am leaving the university – he was very conservative – because I do not agree with what is happening." In the middle of the 1968 movement. "If you want, I will leave my courses for you." It was everything I wanted. I wanted to be the professor of the Mexican Revolution and I did not have to do a public contest. I answered "Of course," but he did not tell me that I would be giving the Italian Renaissance that semester.

MM: So you had to start teaching the Renaissance!

A course on the Italian Renaissance! Imagine, working with Burckhardt and all of that. After doing the exams, I ended up as chair of the Mexican Revolution. I think it is important to highlight a type of small revolution or rebellion, because until then no woman had been charged with teaching the Mexican Revolution at the university level, much less teaching the Mexican Revolution in its social aspects and its mentalities.

MM: At this moment were you close to the Annales historians, with the history of mentalities? What were your professors of History like?

I was educated under Historicism.

MM: In Brazil, the education was like this too.

Historicism with enormous influence of Heidegger. I should also mention that various of my professors were exiled Spaniards who arrived in Mexico due to the Spanish Civil War. They were more open people. I think most important historian who taught the Philosophy of History in Mexico was Edmundo O'Gorman, who was my principal professor. He gave sensational classes: Philosophy of History, Theory of History. He was the creator of

things such as the Invention of America, Fundamentals for the History of America... He wrote a book called *Crisis y Porvenir de la Ciencia Histórica*, criticizing Collingwood. He was a fascinating person... This academic relationship was extremely important. O'Gorman was such an important person for me, that I have recently written a book-text about his work. He has a text called "Ghosts of contemporary historiography." It is a very short text, almost as if it were his will, where he defends an unpredictable history, full of fantasy and imagination. I wrote this book-text and gave it the title of *Imprevisibles Historias en torno a la Obra y Legado de Edmundo O'Gorman* [Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 2009].

In addition to him, I had another professor who was also not related to the *Annales* because he arrived in Mexico at that time. His name is Juan Antonio Ortega y Medina, a Spanish historian, who became a historian in Mexico. He was a master. I was his assistant and he insisted that I take over his courses, but he taught a course about the Spanish Empire, and also worked with a very interesting subject, Protestantism, and Puritan Evangelization in the United States, in New England. But these themes were of no interest to me. So, I helped in his research seminars. These are the two men who trained me.

MM: But if the professors who were most important to you did not have any connection with the Annales, how did you get close to the French historians?

I think it was through Marc Bloch. I began to read Bloch and Febvre's texts and realized that they were much closer to what interested me. These works seems to be a type of great revolution against the ideas of Ranke that History had to be only what had happened – objectivity, impartiality. This type of history did not interest me. In their different stages, the Annales School and the concept of New History were determinant for me.

MM: In the development of your concept of history were Marxist authors of no importance?

Yes. Obviously I had to read Marx, which was expected. Afterwards, I was very influenced by some historians who worked in Mexico and who were of a Marxist origin: Friedrich Katz, John Womack, Eric Hobsbawm – who worked with bandits in Mexico – they were all socialists. I was very close to the Cuban process, which I found fascinating, wonderful, etc.

Since the first time I went to Cuba in 1976, I had a romance with Cuba which lasted 18, 20 years. And a great deception afterwards. It was when I read the book about Cuban women, which was a long time put aside, but finally published. I think that the end of the Cuban process is very sad. There exist a series of Cuban historic problems and errors, but also on the part of the Americans. If the United States had not set up the blockade, everything would have been different...

MM: And how did your relationship start with Cuba?

There was a great influence on the part of my father. As I have already said, I wrote an *Oral History of Mexican Cinema*. During the Second World War, Mexico developed an enormous cinematographic industry. Under President Miguel Alemán a company was created to distribute Mexican cinema to Latin America. A company called Películas Mexicanas was set up and my father was sent by the government all over Latin America, where film distributors were created.

MM: Really. Mexican cinema was of great importance in Latin America. Was your father politically involved? Was he a person of the left?

My father would say: "a Marxist at 18 or 20, everybody is." But he was a close friend to many political activists who were persecuted for a long time, especially two of them, who were writers. My father's situation was much better than theirs... He was not involved in a party, but helped. My mother, no. Her mother, curiously, was a Menshevik and a supporter of the Bund – the Jews who did not agree with Zionism. She was a type of Clara Zetkin or Rosa Luxembrugo, but she was not a political activist.

MM: And you, were you politically active?

No, not in any party. There was none I liked. Worse: I am profoundly disappointed with them all. Perhaps I was closest to the Communist Party, but found it so dogmatic... In Mexico, it was profoundly dogmatic. I think that deep down, I have an Anarchist heart, which does not allow me be an activist in a party. But I believe that I have been an activist as a historian about the causes which seemed fundamental to me.

MM: Returning to your relationship with Cuba, how did the contact occur, your possibility of going to Cuba and developing the project?

Do not forget that Fidel Castro was in Mexico, and it was in Mexico where the Revolution started. And a family story says that Fidel Castro lived in Mexico, where he worked as an extra in the cinema.

I was the director of Contemporary Studies of the Institute of Anthropology, where I developed projects. We were very involved in the Spanish exile project, the first project in the world about Spanish exiles. Now, with the famous Law of Memory, agreements and have been signed and our materials are now in Spain. The Director of the Institute of Anthropology, who considered himself progressive, called me and said: "I have been invited to go to Cuba by the Ministry of Advanced Education, but I cannot go. Would you like to go?" I replied: "Of course!" When I arrived in Cuba I had a type of personal crisis, because I perceived I was experiencing – at the end of 1976 – the process of the Cuban Revolution, but in a very distant manner. I was very young and said this in the book about Cuban women. I can say that I arrived there and realized that while Fidel was fighting in the Sierra Maestra, with Che and all of them, I was at 15 year old parties, with dances and waltzes. All this bourgeois stuff and the music of the Platters, *Only you*...

I went through a profound crisis and got very involved. I went 18 times to Cuba in a 10 year period, and I got involved in the Casa de las Américas, which was the cultural center, with the people at Icae, which was the cinema. I was even a jury member for the Casa de las Américas award. I was very happy, thinking about living in Cuba. I decided to create a project to go there more frequently and to have more options. In 1979 I started the project about Cuban Women, and it received support from the Federation of Cuban Women. Vilma Espín, the wife of Raúl Castro, helped me a lot, and gave me total freedom. I chose some women I wanted to interview and she suggested some others. I recorded eight interviews with women who were between 27, 28, and 80.

MM: And what was the core of the project? Was it the memory of the Revolution, or the impact of the Revolution on their lives? What was your final evaluation? Were they disappointed with the Revolution?

At that moment I did not understand. I said that everything as wonderful, etc. Recording their lives was very interesting for me. I felt something that

I had always said should not happen, I got involved with everything. There were moments when I literally needed to stop the interview to cry with emotion. I also discovered that interviews can be a process of catharsis for the interviewees, a liberation. The most important case for me was of a woman who had been tortured. When she told me of the torture – she had never told anyone –, she was very tired and said to me: "Girl, pass me a little coffee." It was her house, and so I told her: "Let's stop." That night I was not able to sleep, I was so anguished. The following day I saw here and she told me: "I want you to know, Eugenia, that I never told anyone the complete story of my life." "Can I use it?" "You can use it however you want. But I want to tell you that telling the story took an enormous weight from me, a huge stone, and I feel totally liberated."

At this time I was very involved, as an activist, with political prisoners in Uruguay... I was working in an association, and by chance there arrived in Mexico a Uruguayan communist doctor who had been arrested in Punta de Rieles. Her name was Ofelia Fernandez, and I thought it would be interesting to record her life story as a denunciation. We did a wonderful interview, published in Oxford, and I discovered that Oral History can also be used as an instrument of denunciation.

MM: Undoubtedly! But let us go back a little because I also have an objective as an interviewer. I think it is important from your point of view, to show that Oral History can be an instrument of denunciation, that it can be an instrument of political action. And I am totally in agreement that a determined group can work with Oral History to denounce determined situations and use this for a party or political purpose.

There exist other reasons.

MM: Perfectly. Writing a dissertation in university is different. How to you see working with Oral History in the academic space?

I think you cannot do a dissertation with Oral History alone. I argue that Oral History is a method, not a technique, and I know that not everyone would agree. However, Oral History does not replace archives, nor documentary material. The heuristic work of the historian includes Oral History for Contemporary History, but it is necessary to analyze the Oral History material

like the interpretation of all other material is analyzed. For this reason, when someone asks "Why can I not do a dissertation just in Oral History?", I answer that it is because Oral History is not isolated. You cannot interview someone if you do not know his history, his surrounds, the social conditions, the context. This has to be done with rigor.

MM: Exactly. The lack of rigor leads many people to say that "Oral History is very limited."

But I also imagine that you agree with me that all history is subjective and partial. And it is subjective and partial from the moment you choose the theme.

MM: The period, the sources. And when you start to read the sources, you are already making a selection. One subject when I always discuss with my students are the minutes of meetings, or even the minutes of the national congress. In these minutes, when people want to speak about the most confidential things, they say: "Turn off the recorder, I do not want this in the minutes." Minutes are written documents, which we use and which are totally partial, fragmented.

I am sure that if you had interviewed me 20 years ago, certainly I would have said different things. Nor do I think that Oral History is a panacea, a utopia which can resolve everything. Not at all. I think there is a series of limitations. I do not believe, for example, in collective Oral History. I do not think that four people can interview me...

MM: I also think this…

Nor do I think that I can interview four people at the same time. I do not like to Oral History with cameras, unless I am paying attention to the camera, the recorder and what the person being interviewed is saying... A third person is an audience. And the subject of the interview is attentive to your reactions and those of the other person as well.

MM: A different dynamic is created. And this new dynamic needs to be analyzed.

I think so. The methodology of Oral History is totally different from the methods or techniques used by anthropologists, journalists, sociologists...

MM: I also think so. And principally because Oral History has this vocation, what we can say 'creating archives.'

Exactly. And permitting plural voices. When we gave the first course in Oral History in Brazil, in Fundação Getulio Vargas in 1975, James Wilkie and his wife took part. He was one of those who thought that you could set yourself up in someone's house for a month and record. He is still alive, he is a US historian married with a Guatemalan. For him the concept of Oral History, in a very American manner, is something very utilitarian and pragmatic. He and his wife interviewed a politician. I, for example, think that interviewing a politician or public person is a waste of time, because they have a constructed discourse. It is very difficult for them to change. The subjective part, the intimate, is very difficult to be captured. And they are people who construct their own image, with what they want to be known about them...

MM: But I think that popular political leaders also have a constructed discourse.

Yes, I agree. But I, for example, if I had to work with people involved with a strike, I would not start with the union leader. I think it would be much more interesting to talk with the workers, because then, you could dismember what is the individual discourse from the imposed discourse.

MM: It's true. But I think that even with the leaders, who have a more constructed discourse, it is possible to capture certain information. For example, the political strategies which were adopted.

Yes, and for this a lot of practice is needed.

MM: Great knowledge is needed to ask the specific and proper questions.

Of course, because what you have to do, is to catch them hoping, but for this great *expertise* is needed.

MM: People think that Oral History is something very simple... Turn on a recorder and everything is ok.

For this reason I say that it is necessary to prepare the new generations. Offering courses in methodology, tell them what they can and cannot do, the

type of interviews that exist, how you should do it, how to make the base questionnaire, how rights should be assigned, all these things. For the young people it is very important to hear past experiences.

MM: At the moment what is your research theme?

I am doing a large research project about the history of childhood in Mexico. This is a subject which interests me a lot. It is part of the discipline which has almost not been dealt with in Latin America: the history of childhood. I am also very busy working with Memory and Forgetting, based not just on Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora, but also on the new concept of 'assassins of memory,' the question of forgetting. All of these seem very important subjects for Oral History.

MM: Undoubtedly the question of forgetting is very important for Oral History.

Obligatory forgetting, voluntary forgetting. It is a subject, a central theme for Oral History. The new generations are not seeing this. They are very concerned with interview techniques and projects involving political activism – *favelas*, popular movements, etc.

MM: In Brazil it is a little different... Because Oral History in Brazil very much grew and developed in the university. Initially there was very strong resistance to Contemporary History, Recent History and Oral History. But in the 1980s the newer universities –for example in the new states, and the states furthest away (such as Roraima, Acre and Tocantins), whose undergraduate and master's courses are much more recent – were much more open to the use of Oral History. Currently, even the most traditional universities such as mine, the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), are increasingly including History of the Present Time and Oral History. Post-graduate programs have many students doing their master's and doctorates using Oral History – but not just Oral History, working with other sources, theoretically reflecting. By the way, was your doctoral dissertation about Oral History?

No, not at all. It was about the US Historiography of the 1910 Revolution. In the 1960s, following the Cuban Revolution, the Mexican Revolution became the preferred theme of the US, because they were very frightened. This was because it was the first great social revolution of the twentieth century. A

democratic bourgeois revolution with a social purpose. The US then created, as part of the Alliance for Progress, many research centers about the History of Latin America, and principally about Mexico.

I studied how the US had seen since 1908 the process of revolution. How they had seen it, condemned it, supported it, until the arrival of the history professionals. The great books about the most important men in the Revolution – Zapata, Villa, etc. – were written by foreigners and not by Mexicans.

MM: Yes. Historiography is a very rich theme and one which interests me a lot.

I am a professor of historiography seminars. But now I change every semester. I am able to choose my post-graduate seminars. One semester, for example, I give History and Literature. Another semester I work with the Cult of Commemorations, and now I am working with Memory and Forgetting. I also work with the cinematic uses of history – like fiction films which are determinant for the formation of historical knowledge.

MM: What would you like to say to young Brazilian history students?

I would say that history is an adventure, and that we have to take risks. At times, we have to jump into the unknown, into the void. The only form of doing this is to have solid theoretical, methodological knowledge. I do not think that it is necessary to place labels, 'I am a historicist,' 'I am a Marxist,' this no. But it is necessary to know the outlines, to have theoretical support, and thereby support what is being worked with. I think that history is always present. We are history. History is always being built and I believe that it is important to fight for the present history.

MM: I agree. Thank you very much for the interview.

Interview received on 20 May 2013. Approved on 27 May 2013.