

Laura Mitchison

On the Record CIC, United Kingdom

Metaphorical Narratives & Oral Traditions of 'Tyburnites' at Speakers' Corner

Every Sunday, 'a cannonade of voices' rises from the oldest outdoor public speaking site in London: Speakers' Corner. Orators declaim from raised platforms, while the crowd heckles and cheers below, or dissolves into their own debates on the fringes.

Apocryphally, this tradition stems from the last speeches of 'malefactors' condemned to hang at Tyburn. The right to free speech was not granted in law; it was taken by nineteenth century agitators acting (like metaphorists) 'as if' such a right existed.

This illustrated paper stages a conversation between oral histories with 'Tyburnites' and post-anarchist philosophy, mindful of Shopes' warning against forcing real lives to fit theory. It focuses on six diverse people – all marked by war – who complicated expectations of individualistic 'manstories' (Mary Gergen) and the media image of a ranting ideologue. I pay attention to the narrative and gestures of their 'behind the scenes' oral histories (conducted by On the Record), as well as their public personas at Speakers' Corner. Each uses unique metaphors to describe their connections with others, but the choice to side-step straightforward representation and bring new realities to language unites them. As they suspend the denotative function of language, so their stories suspend the conventional goals of political communication and education. Their narratives embrace drifting and contingency as they oscillate between potentialities. Together, they reveal Speakers' Corner to be a community of process, without any conditions of belonging.

This public speaking tradition is transmitted by people tinkering with old rituals and genres; disregarding their authority but keeping their aesthetic form. For example, secular interviewees borrow the shape of Biblical conversion and pilgrimage stories to underline the unsettlement of identity and time that takes place at Speakers' Corner. Even the chosen nickname, 'Tyburnite', lifts the ritual of state violence into the common process of experimentation.

Tshepo Moloji

Wits History Workshop, South Africa

Unspoken narratives: Vincent Tshabalala's struggle against apartheid

Available literature on the histories of liberation struggle in South Africa has tended to focus mainly on national leaders within the opposition movements against apartheid and downplayed the vital role played by the low-level leaders. The story of Vincent Tshabalala, former chairman of the Alexandra branch of the Congress of South African Student Congress, an underground operative, and a trained uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK, ANC's military wing) soldier, demonstrates the rarely discussed contribution such leaders made towards the demise of the National Party regime and apartheid. It is through oral history narratives that we begin to understand and appreciate the significant role these leaders played in the liberation struggle in South Africa. However, these narratives tend to only glorify these leaders and their role and downplay their weaknesses and mistakes when executing their assignments. This is particularly so if the leader died as a hero. In this paper, I will demonstrate that all the people I interviewed – 30 in all – about Tshabalala avoided to discuss the obvious mistakes committed by Tshabalala and the ANC, which caused his death in 1985 following a shoot-out with the South African Police. Tshabalala, after receiving military training in Angola, returned to Alexandra where he was known and there "unknowingly" worked with a police spy, which exposed him to the security personnel. I will argue that the people whom I interviewed about Tshabalala, more than 30 years after his death, are attempting to achieve two things. First, to preserve the grand narrative that the ANC and its military wing, MK, were superior and not prone to making political mistakes. And secondly, they are attempting to cushion Tshabalala's legacy.

Niels Rebetz

University of Fribourg, Switzerland

How narration reveals sense of legitimacy. Swiss military refusers and conscientious objectors recounting their experience (1960-1996)

In empirical research, encountering a distance between the results expected and the results achieved is commonplace. This has been happening in an ongoing, Oral History research on Swiss military refusers and conscientious objectors, in which I conduct interviews with men who refused to serve in the national army between the 1960s and the mid-1990s. During those, I have noticed that the interviewees often remembered little about the trial they had to face, while I had expected that this extraordinary experience would be a significant part of their narratives. Furthermore, I have noted that all the while, they spoke at length about their motivations to refuse the military service and other subjects which were not directly linked to their refusal.

Therefore, in this paper I will discuss the structure of personal narratives and the underlying issues it reveals. In the case study considered here, my hypothesis is that there is a correlation between the structure of the narratives and a sense of legitimation. This is perceptible through an analysis of the space, accuracy, and position of every element within the narration. When interviewees feel legitimate, such as when accounting for their decision to refuse the military service, they are more willing to speak, and they remember better these parts of their story than others in which they didn't feel legitimate (such as the account of their time in the front of military judges). Legitimation issues also have an impact on the interviewee's memory.

Furthermore, being aware of this implies an adaptation of the interviewing process. In this case study, this means both a regular adaptation of the interview guide (inductive method) and giving space for the interviewees to discuss subjects which are a priori not linked to the refusal of the military service, but which indirectly reveal their sense of legitimacy.

Vidhi Agrawal

Birla Institute of Technology and Science, India

Chronicles of Conscientisation: the significance of Jan Sunwai as a mode of political communication in Rajasthan, India

The study employs Oral History to explore the transformative role of Jan Sunwai among marginalized people (peasants, women, Dalit) in the villages of central Rajasthan, India in the 1990s. A Jan Sunwai is a free, transparent and predominantly oral mode of communication between the people and the officers of the State – elected representatives and bureaucrats. At Jan Sunwai, people expressed their grievances, panchayat accounts were socially audited, information about welfare schemes was shared, and people were apprised of their rights.

The respondents recount their experiences of engaging with the government in the 1990s, when decentralization through Panchayati Raj Institutions was introduced under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, 1993. For the first time at Jan Sunwai in Kot Kirana on 02nd December 1994, the details of public expenditure were read openly by the members of Mazdoor Kisaan Shakti Sangthan – a non-party political organization of peasants and farmers in Rajasthan. Villagers were aghast at the ghost entries in the muster rolls and exaggerated bills for materials that were (never) used. Women, too, spoke-up from behind the veil against the state officers.

Four similar hearings were held in Bhim, Vijaypura, Jawaja, and Thana. This triggered the demand for the Right to Information legislation, eventually enacted in June 2005. The Jan Sunwai has also been institutionalized as the process for Social Audit under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Guarantee Act.

Respondents' narratives of courage, resistance, and solidarity reflect the significance of Jan Sunwai in overcoming the fear of the State. People could access the 'political spaces,' engage with the government staff on equal terms, and help one another with administrative procedures. Their stories reflect their journey from a state of helplessness to that of freedom, and conscientization that to claim their rightful place in the democracy, they have to speak-up and participate actively.

Muhammad Thalal

Centre for the History of Violence, University of Newcastle, Australia

Memory of the Aceh Conflict, 1976-2005: Multidimensionality of the Conflict in Survivor Narratives

This paper explores Acehnese people's personal and collective memories of the armed conflict between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM, Gerakan Aceh Merdeka) and the Government of Indonesia, 1976-2005. Based on interviews I have conducted with ordinary villagers, I argue that memories of violence continue to have profound effects on ordinary people's lives. However, the effects differ significantly from person to person depending not only on their personal experiences but also on their gender and generation. Whereas men who experienced the conflict still express emotions such as anger, fear, and regret as well as curiosity, women who were caught up in the conflict tend to assert their ability to move on by accepting what happened to them as part of God-given destiny. Young men and women, however, who observed violence in their childhood or lost their loved ones in the conflict, tend to harbour deep resentments and a strong sense of revenge. Based on such findings, I argue that memories are more than passive recollections of past events: people interpret their experiences differently depending on their gender and age cohort. Overall, the Aceh experience confirms the importance of memory studies because remembering and interpreting past events influences people's identities, their world outlook, and their behaviour. The way in which people recall collectively and individually the traumatic recent past of Aceh, could well determine and indicate how they will act politically in the near future.