

OHMAR **Newsletter**

Volume XIII, Number 1

Spring, 1990

NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL LIBRARY HOSTS OHMAR SPRING MEETING

OHMAR's 1990 Spring Conference is scheduled for Friday, May 11, at the National Agricultural Library in Beltsville, MD. The program is being planned by Terri Schorzman, Program Manager, Smithsonian Videohistory Program. Alan Fusonie, Historian and Head of Special Collections at NAL, is handling Local Arrangements. Registration, with coffee, begins at 8 a.m. Because of limited seating in the meeting room and a catered lunch, pre-registration is urged.

Elinor DesVerney Sinnette, Chief Librarian, Moorland-Spangarn Center, Howard University, will be the keynote speaker. Dr. Sinnette is the author of *Arthur Alfonso Schomburg: Black Bibliophile and Collector*, jointly published in 1989 by the New York Public Library and Wayne State University Press. A former staff member of the New York Public Library, Dr. Sinnette, whose doctorate is from the Columbia University School of Library Service, has instructed librarians from Harlem to Nigeria and Kenya and served as a consultant to UNESCO. While continuing her research on other black bibliophiles, Dr. Sinnette is actively involved in promoting the academic and other scholarly applications of oral history.

An longtime active OHMAR member, she has served on its Nominating Committee, as chair of the Membership Committee and a frequent panelist at OHMAR and OHA conferences.

Following Dr. Sinnette's remarks, the morning session will discuss organizing an oral history project, with panelists Stacy Flaherty, Modern Advertising History Project, Archives Center, National Museum of American History; Fern Ingersoll, Washington Press Club Foundation Oral History Project; and Chuck Hill, Project Hope Archives.

The brief business meeting will be followed by a catered box lunch and a demonstration of the laser disk information retrieval system at NAL.

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Past President

David Seaman, University of Evansville

1989-1990 Nominating Committee

Marie Allen
NARS

Ann Morin
Washington, DC

Terri Schorzman
Smithsonian Institution

Andor Skotnes
Columbia University

OHMAR Directory

Available at Spring Meeting

The 1990 OHMAR Directory of Members is being prepared for distribution at the Spring Meeting in May by Vice President Michael Everman and Treasurer John Schuchman. The new Directory replaces that of 1986. 🍏

FROM THE EDITOR

Whether the product is an article, a book, a letter to Aunt Lucy or a newsletter column, every writer wonders, "Will anyone ever read this?" Or are these words, so thoughtfully chosen and assembled, cast into outer darkness, never to reach anyone in the intended audience?

Recipients of this newsletter, with enough time and interest to read its contents, will enjoy a challenging article by Andor Skotnes, of Columbia University's Oral History Research Office. His article, "Oral History and Marxism," was presented at OHA's 1989 National Conference in Galveston last October. Your editor immediately approached him with the invitation to allow the OHMAR Newsletter to publish this work, which invitation he graciously accepted.

In the same conference session, Wulf Halbach, of West Germany, presented a paper which he is also permitting us to publish. Because of the length of the two articles and also because each one deserves

your concentrated attention, Halbach's article will appear in the newsletter's next issue.

When I heard these two papers presented in Galveston, I was struck by their provocative ideas and their somewhat contradictory points of view and conclusions. By presenting them to you for your thoughtful consideration and comment, I hope to learn if there is anyone out there reading the *OHMAR Newsletter* and, if so, how you react to these challenging ideas. Where better to enjoy a spirited dialogue than in an oral history publication? I'll make room in my mailbox (crowded with bills, catalogues, and junk mail) for your responsible--and I hope legible--remarks.

Martha Ross

Editor 🍏

Editor's Note: The *OHMAR Newsletter* is privileged to present the following article, presented at the OHA Conference in Galveston in October, 1989. We anticipate publishing in a future issue a second paper presented at the same session, by Wulf Halbach, Federal Republic of Germany. Responsible comments will be welcomed.

MARXISM AND ORAL HISTORY

Andor Skotnes
Oral History Research Office
Columbia University

The social movements of the 1960s and early 70s, among their many effects, stimulated a great intellectual opening in U. S. culture. Space to think and create, so restricted during the Cold War of the late 40s and 50s, was again expanded. The distance between social thought in the colleges and mass political movements was narrowed, partly because colleges themselves became arenas of political struggle, and partly because of the power of mass movements--particularly the Black liberation movement--off campus. Questions unasked for years about the character of power, racism, sexism and class privilege were asked, and orthodoxies were challenged. Interdisciplinary interest was stimulated as historians began reading economics, sociologists began discussing history, and literary critics began thinking about anthropology. New interdisciplinary areas of study were fought for and established in the academy: Black studies, women's studies, and various Third World studies. In this context, sometimes in the foreground, sometimes in the background, sometimes in combination with Black liberation or feminist ideology, sometimes not, the Marxism was resurrected. In fact, it is arguable that the rediscovered Marxist historical tradition--a broad, sometime internally contradictory tradition--did much

to give the new radical intellectual culture direction and coherence.

It is important to note, though, that, despite the interdisciplinary impulse, various disciplines and fields drew on the Marxist tradition in different ways. Radical economics, for example, reestablished Marxism as its basic paradigm, drew deeply on the Marxist classics, and instituted detailed empirical studies at the same time it debated the most general theoretical questions. My impression is that in most of the official social sciences, radicals attempted a similar dialogue, at both the empirical and theoretical levels, with the Marxist tradition. Even in psychology, general questions, such as the classical debate on the relationship of Freudianism to Marxism, received serious attention.

Radicalism in the discipline of history, however, took a somewhat different direction. In history, attention focused on detailed studies in areas that were of concern to Marxism, especially at that historical moment: foreign relations, Third World societies, and increasingly on "history from the bottom up" of oppressed groups in the U. S. In these studies concepts were borrowed from the Marxist tradition--class, imperialism, the state. But for the most part, Marxist concepts were borrowed eclectically, studies were overwhelmingly empirical, and seldom were questions of general theory debated. Indeed, while many radical historians would admit to being Marxists, in contrast to the official social sciences, their work was seldom in an explicitly Marxist discourse.

I personally was deeply affected by the movements of the sixties, and as these movements declined, I was drawn to the study of history because it seemed that as activists we had lacked historical perspective, and I was drawn to Marxism because of its explanatory power. I was from the beginning uncomfortable with the empiricism of radical history--again, its

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Oral History and Marxism *(continued)*

trapped in a cycle of show-and-tell and mutual appreciation, where scholars from different disciplines explain how they each use oral history, we all show our interest, then we all pretty much go on as before. The walls between the disciplines are not really breached; we all just peek over them at each other.

Granted that overcoming disciplinary boundaries is a difficult task, but the solution is not simply just to work harder. Rather, we need to mount a sustained critique of disciplines as they now exist. And to do that we have to have an alternative vision of how the study of social reality should be organized. This is where the Marxist theoretical tradition comes in, for as Perry Anderson has pointed out, despite all the sophisticated social theories running around (especially the posts: post-Marxism, post-structuralism, post-modernism), only the Marxist tradition aspires to a totalistic theory of society and history which recognizes both the relative autonomy of various aspects of the social whole--the economy, politics, culture--and their ultimate, complex unity. Only Marxism is truly integrative. Not that Marxism has established a completed historical-theoretical framework in this regard--it hasn't. Not that Marxists don't have massive disagreements among themselves over how the social whole is structured--they do. Nonetheless, at a minimum, Marxism provides a basic stance toward social reality from which a critique of the ossified barriers between disciplines can be mounted to the general

benefit of oral historians, among others.

There is more thought to the question of making oral history truly interdisciplinary. For one thing, we as oral history practitioners will have to become more self-conscious about exactly what oral history is. It is very difficult to systematically build a dialogue with a variety of disciplines unless you are clear on the character of your field vis-à-vis those disciplines. The

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problem I am raising is, of course, what is oral history? There has been no end of discussion of this question, but this discussion has been inconclusive and has suffered from a tendency, arising from the enthusiasm oral historians have for their practice, to exaggerate the character of oral history.

For example, one often hears, sometimes in off-hand remarks, oral history defined as an art, a full-blown discipline, or a fundamental methodology. One oral historian, who is clearly part of the progressive wing of oral history, has recently attempted to argue that oral history is an art comparable to photography, where the artist expresses him or herself through the medium of human subjects. Missing the rather authoritarian implications of this notion, this author also ignores the fact that people do not value oral histories primarily as an aesthetic experience, but for insight and data into the past--and the present--derived principally from the interviewee. No matter how much skill oral history requires, it is not an art (though, of course, oral history interviews may be resources for artistic productions, such as theatrical plays or novels, but that is a different question.)

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Oral History and Marxism *(continued)*

documents. Rather it is because oral history allows extended expositions of an individual's thoughts and perceptions, and these can be probed and deepened through interaction with the interviewer. It produces a richer document containing more levels and facets of consciousness than most other research techniques. To put it differently, because the interviewer/researcher participates in the creation of the document, the document can, depending on the approach of the interviewer, bear evidence of the impact of greater range of external factors-- economic, political, and ideological-- on the life and thought of the interviewee than, say, a simple first person narrative would.

Much good work has been done by oral history practitioners on subjectivity. One especially thinks of the Europeans such as Bertaux, Portelli, Passerini, but also North Americans such as Grele, Frisch, and Gluck. Passarini, in particular, has added to our understanding of what is needed in this regard with her call some years ago for a science of subjectivity. The truth is, though, this science has not advanced very far. And the problem is that it may now be advancing in the wrong direction. A number of oral historians who are interested in subjectivity seem to be drawn more and more to various post-structuralist theories, especially literary theories, that get caught up in analyzing subjectivity entirely in terms of itself--in studying level after level of representation, in minutely "deconstructing" "texts" and "narratives" without reference to the outside world. For others who are not

so deeply caught up in post-structuralist theories, these theories are nonetheless becoming the de facto framework within which they work. At worst, these theories propose that it is impossible to know anything of the world apart from what we think of it, that all we can know is representations, signs. They are classically idealist. But even when they don't go this far, they seem to have an enormous tendency to ignore the economic, political and cultural forces that condition the processes of subjectivity. A related concern in this regard is the focus now being placed on the study of memory. (This concern was recently raised by Ron Grele.) Of course, the term memory is not clearly defined and is used in many ways. But the more memory is defined as the object of study, the more people talk about becoming historians of memory, the more it sounds like they regard the processes of memory as internal to themselves and isolated from the outside world.

To be clear, I am not opposed to the complex analysis of ideology and subjectivity, nor am I opposed to the notion that it has internal causality--a history of its own. Various post-structuralist analyses seem to be very helpful in conceptualizing facets

of ideology. However, unless such analyses occur within the framework of a theory that recognizes the dialectical interconnectedness of all social reality, they will be tragically flawed. As I have argued above, I believe Marxism--and Marxism alone--attempts to develop such a framework. But beyond the broad theoretical framework that Marxism offers, the Marxist

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**OHMAR
Treasurer's Report
1988-1989**

Starting Balance, November 14, 1988 \$2124.74

Activity since last report

Income

<u>Conference*</u>	<u>Membership</u>	<u>Interest</u>	<u>Contributions</u>
1333	435	117.80	34
Subtotals 1333	435	117.80	34

Income Total \$1919.80

Expenses**

<u>Conference</u>	<u>Newsletter</u>	<u>Postage</u>	<u>Reimbursement</u>	<u>Bank</u>
\$929.28	1061.82	270	173.25	13
\$929.28	1061.82	270	173.25	13

Expense Total \$2447.35

Net Change (\$527.55)

Current Balance (Columbia First S & L) \$1597.19

Respectfully submitted,

John S. Schuchman, Treasurer

* OHMAR did not sponsor a conference in the fall of 1988.

** Our former printer still has not billed OHMAR for printing expenses of the Fall 1988 Newsletter (approximately \$300).

Contact John Schuchman, Gallaudet University, Washington, DC 20002, with questions or corrections.