

## The International Oral History Association and the new tendencies in the field of oral history

Marieta de Moraes Ferreira

### The creation of the IOHA

This text has a dual purpose: to pay tribute to Alexander von Plato and to contribute to expanding knowledge about the history of the international oral history movement. We propose to follow the institutionalization process of oral history, which was fully consolidated in 1996 with the creation of the International Oral History Association (IOHA). The basic idea is to analyze the impact of the new organization on the growth and diversification of this research field and to reflect on and assess its role. We start from the principle that IOHA has not only been a means of renovating and stimulating oral history but also a channel for the emergence of new challenges and paths to be followed.

Alexander von Plato contributed significantly to the creation and consolidation of the International Oral History Organization, not only through the contribution of works that deepened the methodological debate in the area but also through the institutional support he provided and which guaranteed the survival of IOHA in its early stages.

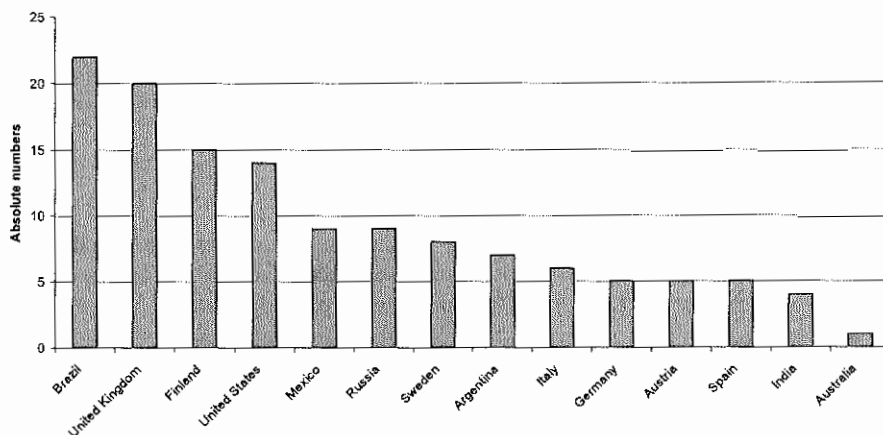
In 1996 the IX International Oral History Conference took place in Gothenburg, Sweden, indicating new trends and new political articulations under way. The increasing number of participants and the strong presence of Latin Americans, especially Brazilians, pushed for a larger participation in the new organization that was to be created. The Gothenburg meeting<sup>1</sup> accepted 164 papers,<sup>2</sup> 22 of which were from Brazilians, 20 were British and 15 Finnish.

---

1 IX International Oral History Conference, 'Communicating Experience,' Sweden, 1996.

2 All information on the number and institutional origin of the participants were obtained from the proceedings of the events that took place between 1993 and 2004. The 1994 venue (New York) did not have proceedings. The data on the conference in Australia was obtained from the event's official website, accessed on June 20, 2006: <http://www.une.edu.au/ioha2006/conference%20program.html>.

**Graph 1**  
**IX International Oral History Conference**  
**Countries with the largest number of accepted papers - Sweden,**  
**1996**



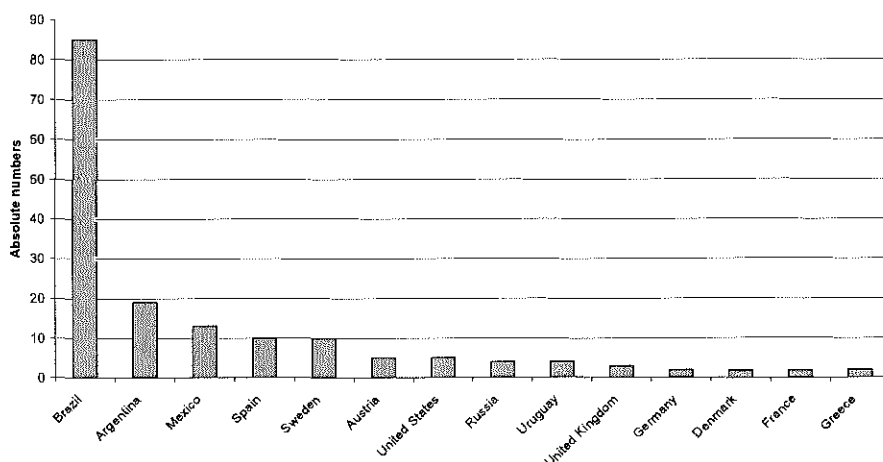
At the end of the meeting the International Oral History Association was founded, and its first president, Mercedes Vilanova, was elected, Alexander von Plato was treasurer. Brazil was chosen as the conference's next venue, to take place in Rio de Janeiro in 1998. The approved statute defined the representation by continent, the meetings' periodicity and continental rotation and the establishment of Spanish, besides English, as the association's official language. With IOHA's foundation, the process of institutionalizing the oral history movement was consolidated, opening the path for a wider map of the meetings. The geographic limitation of the Europe-USA axis, birth-place of oral history and therefore the area of the first meetings, restricted the participation of researchers from Asia, Africa, Oceania and Latin America. It was this perception, as well as a larger institutionalization, that allowed the territorial expansion of the meetings and the democratization of this field of work. Von Plato was a strong voice to support these new ideas. During the 10 following years IOHA kept the commitment of alternating host countries and/or continents for its international meetings. It organized conferences in Turkey, South Africa, Italy and, in 2006, in Australia.<sup>3</sup>

The proceedings of the X. International Conference<sup>4</sup> in Rio de Janeiro, the first meeting outside Europe and the US and after IOHA's creation, already allow us to see the transformations.

3 1996 Gothenburg, Sweden; 1998 Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; 2000 Istanbul, Turkey; 2002 Pietermaritzburg, South Africa; 2004 Rome, Italy; 2006 Sydney, Australia.

4 'Oral History: Challenges for the 21st Century,' Brazil, 1998.

**Graph 2**  
**X International Oral History Conference**  
**Countries with the largest number of accepted papers - Brazil, 1998**



There were 179 papers, 124 of which were Latin American: 85 from Brazil, 19 from Argentina and 13 from Mexico. These numbers show that the international conferences stimulate the participation of the local communities, producing new projects and studies and taking part of the international debate. The host cities and countries can become new oral history centers. On the other hand, the contact with new regional topics also enriched the foreign researchers' experience, increasing interchanges. In this special case, the equal status given to Spanish and English certainly was an extraordinary incentive for the Latin Americans.

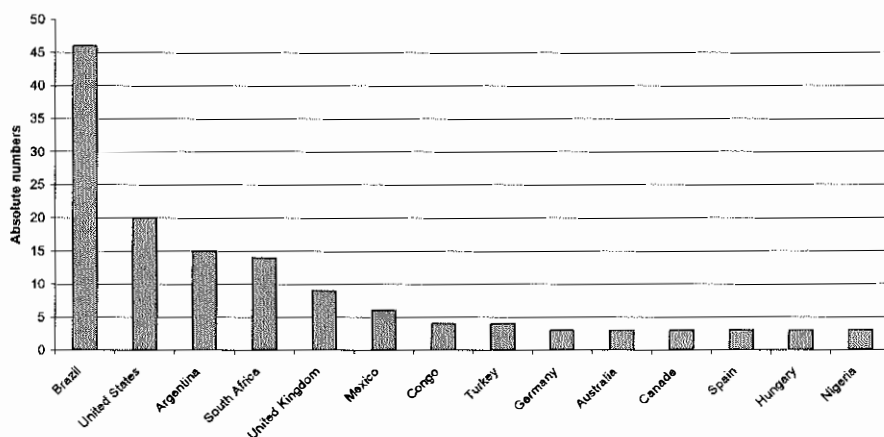
The XI Conference,<sup>5</sup> in Istanbul, confirms the growing number of supporters that oral history has gained through the years. The 2002 meeting had 214 papers. However, the proceedings do not reveal from where the participants are, therefore compromising the analysis of the origin of the institutions.

The move to South Africa for the XII Conference, although with a smaller number of participants, with 154 papers<sup>6</sup> – 46 of which from Brazil, 20 from the US, 15 from Argentina, followed closely by South Africa with 14 papers –, had the important sense of promoting the inclusion of the African countries into the international oral history network. After this event, South Africa, for example, that before 2002 had little representation on international congresses, had its researchers present at IOHA's conferences.

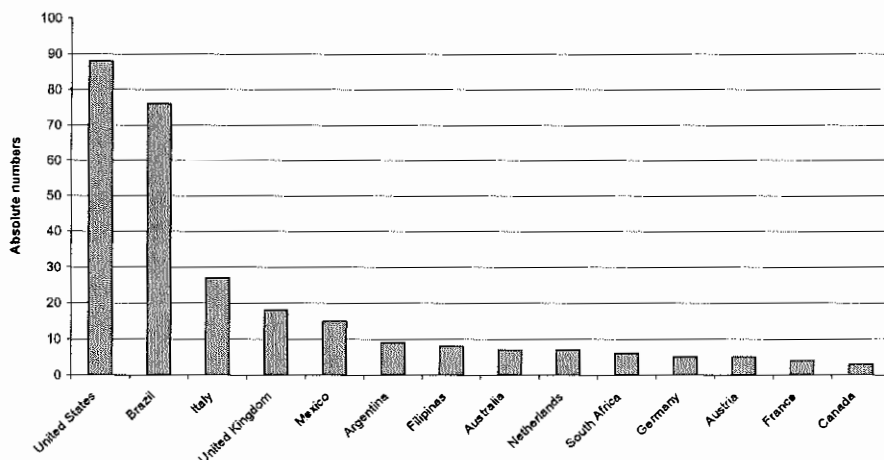
5 'Crossroads of History: Experience, Memory, Orality,' Turkey, 2000.

6 'The Power of Oral History: Memory, Healing and Development,' South Africa, 2002.

**Graph 3**  
**XII International Oral History Conference**  
**Countries with the largest number of accepted papers - South Africa, 2002**



**Graph 4**  
**XIII International Oral History Conference**  
**Countries with the largest number of accepted papers - Italy, 2004**



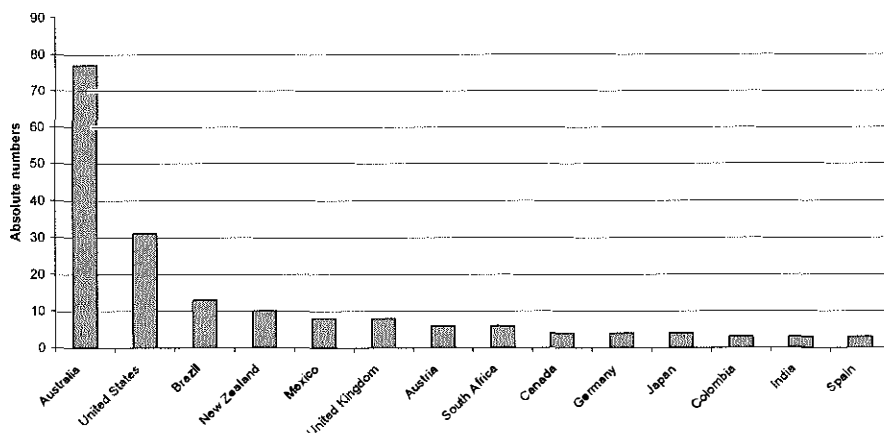
The XIII meeting, in Rome,<sup>7</sup> indicates an impressive increase in the number of papers (302) and confirms the diversification of the participants' countries of origin. The

<sup>7</sup> 'Memory and Globalization,' Italy, 2004. (CD).

countries with the largest number of participants were the USA (79 papers), Brazil (73), Great Britain and Italy (17 papers each).

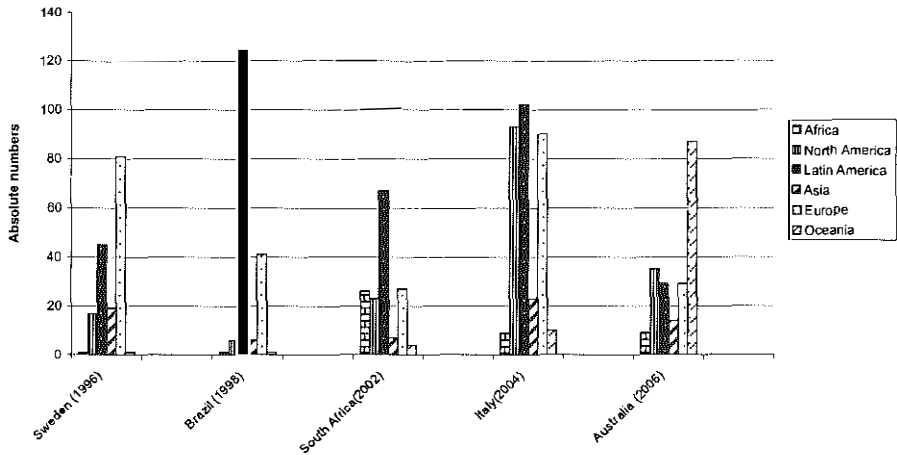
The XIV International Conference, taking place in Australia in 2006, has also the merit of stimulating oral history researches in Oceania. It has 203 papers,<sup>8</sup> 60 of which come from Australia, 30 from the US and 17 from Brazil. Once more, the geographic move may be considered an incentive for local groups to increase their participation, either because of facility brought by the proximity, or due to more dynamic research networks and the possibility of publishing papers in the international circuit.

**Graph 5**  
**XIV International Oral History Conference**  
**Countries with the largest number of accepted papers - Australia,**  
**2006**



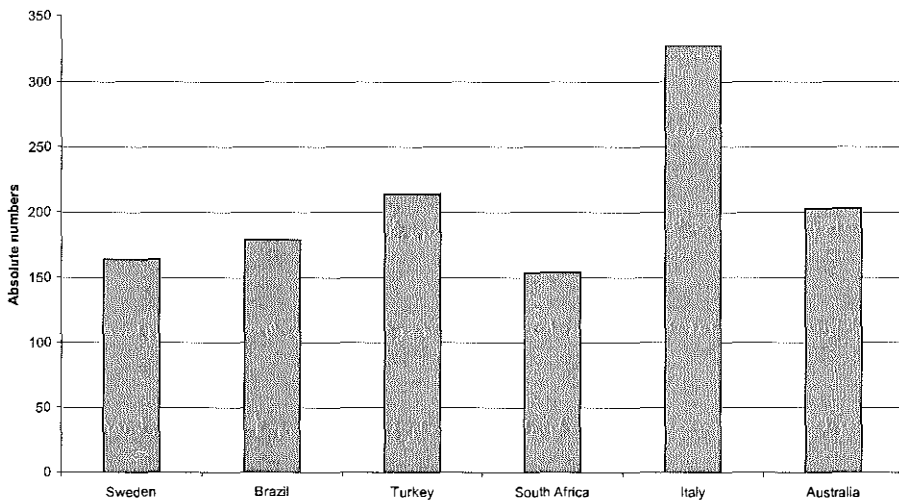
<sup>8</sup> Research made at the event's website, accessed on June 26, 2006: <http://129.180.101.119/fmi/iwp/cgi?-db=IOHA2006DB&-loadframes>.

**Graph 6**  
**Papers presented by continent, IOHA (1996-2006)**



Graph 7 shows us how in the course of these 10 years the number of participants has increased and how IOHA has extended its area of influence, organizing international conferences in five countries on different continents: Brazil, Turkey, South Africa, Italy, and Australia.

**Graph 7**  
**Number of accepted papers, IOHA (1996-2006)**



### **The diversification of topics**

The change in venues is followed by a diversification of topics, an effect that is caused in part by the development of regional topics. Although the working groups depend on the organizing committees, in the course of IOHA's 10 years papers have tended to verticalize the subjects, with a significant sectoralization of the multiple topics.

#### *Working Groups in %*

##### **Siena (1993)**

Generations	10,3
Migration	15,5
Gender	18,6
Processes of Identity Construction	22,7
Contexts and forms of cultural differences	33,0

##### **Sweden (1996)**

Archives and audio-visual techniques	4,3
Education	4,9
Health and caring	6,7
Working Lives	7,3
Local Identities: Continuity and change	7,9
Folklore, popular customs, and religion	9,1
War, violence and nationalism; oppression and protest	10,4
Method and Theory	11,0
Migration and ethnic identity	12,2
Peoples's History: political and popular movements	12,8
Family, generations and relationships	13,4

##### **Brazil (1998)**

Ethnicity and Representation	2,8
Oral Tradition, Art and Ethnicity Identity	2,8
Image and Memory	2,8
Oral History and Social Changes	2,8
Every day life and work	3,4
Politics and Labor	3,4
Trajectories of intellectuals	3,4

Violence, politics and labor	3,4
Violence and Politics	3,4
Identity and Work	3,4
Identity, Work and Migration	3,4
Oral History: National Experience	3,4
Interdisciplinarity: crossroads	3,4
Religion and Identity	3,4
Authoritarianism and Militancy	3,9
Life stories and subjectivity	3,9
Memory, narrative and construction of subjectivity	3,9
Urban Space	3,9
Archives and Museums	3,9
Oral History and communal memory	3,9
Popular Memory	3,9
Memory and Politics (I e II)	6,2
Ethnicity (I e II)	7,3
Gender and Identity (I e II)	7,3
Memory and Education (I e II)	7,3

##### **Turkey (2000)**

Community Projects	2,0
Teaching Oral History	4,0
Experienced History	5,1
Virtual Oral History	6,6
Methodological and ethical issues	7,6
Remembering Conflicts	13,6
Crossroads of continents	18,7
Remembering the 20th century, imagining the 21st century	20,2
The millenium	22,2

##### **South Africa (2002)**

Famine	1,3
--------	-----

Development	1,9	Life Styles: (Consumer Cultures, Tourism)	2,4
Digitisation	2,6	Methodology (1, 2)	2,4
Environment	2,6	Music (1, 2)	2,4
Media	3,2	Repression (1, 2)	2,4
Methodological Issues	3,9	Rural Workers and Society (1, 2)	2,4
Preservation and dissemination	3,9	Health and Healing (1, 2)	2,8
Sickness and Disability	3,9	Politics (1, 2)	2,8
Warfare	4,5	Narrative (1, 2, 3)	3,4
Land	5,2	Religion (1, 2, 3)	3,7
Workers	5,2	Movements (1, 2, 3)	4,0
Gender	5,8	War	4,0
Towns	7,1	Memory (1, 2, 3), Memory of memory	4,6
Teaching and learning	7,8	Workers	4,6
Migration	9,7	Cities (1, 2, 3)	4,9
Religion	9,7	Local/Regional/Global Relationships	5,8
Trauma, memory and reconciliation	9,7	Italian Diaspora; Jewish Diaspora	6,4
Ethnicity and Identity	11,7	Migrations (1, 2, 3, 4, 5); Migrations in Brazil (1, 2)	8,3
<b>Italy (2004)</b>		Gender	10,1
History and the memory of the past	0,9	<b>Australia (2006)</b>	
Reconjuring the muse: memory through the machine	0,9	Island stories	2,5
Arts	1,2	No information available	3,0
Experiential Authority, History and Power	1,2	Fire and water	3,4
Historia oral y procesos regionales en Brasil	1,2	Places and buildings	3,4
Oral History, Digital Technologies, and New Media	1,2	Healing memories	3,9
Palestine	1,2	Sharing and passing on beliefs	3,9
Resources and environment	1,2	Stories in translation	5,9
Folklore and Modernity	1,5	Political pasts	6,4
Land and memory in Brazil	1,5	Pleasures of memory	6,9
Traveling Identities: Women, Bodies and Memory	1,5	Talking to ourselves	6,9
Families and Generations	1,8	Teaching and learning	8,4
Elites (1, 2)	2,1	Memory and trauma	9,9
Archives; Archives of repression	2,4	Archiving memory	15,8
Education (1, 2)	2,4	Memory and community	19,7

A look at the increasing diversification of subjects in the different meetings, shown by the tables above, indicates the topics of education, immigration, trauma, archives and



patrimony, among many others that have become permanent and dominant throughout the years.

### **Concluding remarks**

An account of IOHA's performance during these 10 years allows us to say that it has made an important journey, increasing the number of participants, diversifying topics and approaches at oral history, assuring a prolific coexistence of perspectives that are more orientated towards studies of social intervention, policies and strictly academic projects.

Ten years after the creation of IOHA we may safely say that much success has been achieved, mainly through the incorporation of new regions and researchers into our activities. With the inclusion of debates from new countries, peoples and forgotten social segments we have witnessed the emergence of new topics and problems.

This expansion, which underlines the power of oral history, does however create new problems and challenges which we can group into two different, albeit interrelated categories.

It is important to maintain the commitment of oral history as a movement to denouncing social problems through which various social groups can make their voices heard as an instrument to construct their identities and political achievements. At the same time, oral history needs to be committed to ensuring academic quality and scientific research by carrying out research projects that include cross-checking with other sources in the preparation of hypotheses and analysis of material. From this perspective, critical and arms-length treatment becomes necessary, not only to signal the distortion of narratives of past reality, but also to interpret this reality. As a result, making oral history, either for militant or academic purposes, does not mean going out with a tape recorder, recording narratives and then simply publishing the material compiled. Oral history implies research, method, critical analysis and reflection on the material obtained from interviews.

Alexander von Plato's role in guaranteeing that IOHA has become a space for methodological and theoretical debates was an extremely significant contribution in encouraging the development of new research and dealing with the challenges of understanding the globalized world in the twenty-first century.