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# PRACTICES OF USING INTERVIEWS IN HISTORY OF CONTEMPORARY ECONOMICS: A BRIEF SURVEY

BY

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# Practices of Using Interviews in History of Contemporary Economics: A Brief Survey

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the similarities and differences in the plurality of practices regarding the use of interviews by historians of economics – i.e., either the use of someone else's interviews as sources or the use of interviews conducted by the historian for her or his work.

**Keywords:** history of economics, history of economic thought, historiography, oral history, interviews

**JEL:** B00, B20, B29, B30, B40

## Introduction

The oral face-to-face interview is commonly used, and its methodology discussed, across the social sciences. A quick search for the use of such interviews by historians of economics – conducted either by the author or by someone else – reveals over a hundred papers and a dozen books over the last forty years<sup>2</sup>. This short paper highlights the diversity and evolution of these practices with respect to one historiographical theme: that the research project for which the

<sup>1</sup>Correspondence may be addressed to [jullien.dorian@gmail.com](mailto:jullien.dorian@gmail.com). I thank participants to the Max Weber seminar, the Historiography of Contemporary Economics seminar and the Center for the History of Political Economy lunch seminar who have offered many useful oral comments. I also thank Till Düppe, Tiago Mata, Verena Halsmayer and Nicolas Brisset for useful written comments.

<sup>2</sup> The quick search consisted in searching for the keywords “interview”, “conversation” and “personal communication” and their French equivalents in several history of economics journals and then reading the paper to figure out whether the keywords were indeed used in the sense of an oral face-to-face exchange. The companion chapter briefly touches on the practices of purely written interviews that are much more common among historians of contemporary economics (e.g., e-mail exchanges).

historian is using interviews might be perceived by some scientists as involving a *potential* threat to their scientific reputation or even to the scientific legitimacy of their discipline<sup>3</sup>.

### **Economists and policy-making**

In 1978, A. W. Coats encouraged historians of economics to study the role of practicing economists in policy-making institutions. He argued that “special attention must be given to the opportunity, at least for recent periods, to interview economists about their working experiences” (Coats, 1978, 313). His main justification for the use of interviews was that they allow one to get information that could not otherwise be obtained from written documents due to confidentiality restrictions (*ibid*). In a yet earlier paper, Coats acknowledged “many government officials who have traced [such] documents” and “a number of valuable interviews with senior agricultural economists in Whitehall and in the Universities” (1976, 381). Coats used the documents – which do not seem to be confidential – explicitly (383) to argue that the U.K's Ministry of Agriculture shaped British agricultural economics as a professional sub-field. However, the interviews were neither cited nor mentioned anywhere in the paper (besides the acknowledgment footnote). Coats briefly gave voice to an interviewee in another paper on the role of economists in the British Government to illustrate an argument: “a lone economist has been imported into a department because a minister or senior official had the vague notion that it might be helpful “to have a tame pundit around the place.” [fn57: “This is an actual quotation from an interview”]” (1981b, 391). This paper was part of a special issue of *History of Political Economy* responding to Coats's 1978 call, in which issue five papers (including Coats's) out of ten used interviews. The interviewees in Ambirajan (1981), Haddad (1981) and Petridis (1981) were anonymous and are barely given voices. Instead, their interviews were mentioned either to give general impressions from the field, to better interpret statistical data or to fill some gaps in these data. By contrast, William Barber (1981) used an

<sup>3</sup>See especially de Chadarevian (1997), Gaudillère (2007) and Hoddeson (2006) for the historians of science and Weintraub (2007), Cherrier (2011) and Düppe and Weintraub (2014) for the historians of economics. The companion chapter (Jullien, 2018) to this short paper devotes more space to other disciplines (especially to oral history) and the differences across them regarding the use of interviews.

interview from the oral history project on President Truman, from the Truman Library, to provide an anecdotal illustration of politicians' tactics to make economists' reports sound less neutral and more in agreement with the Administration's line: "Murphy [Legal Counsel to Truman] has observed that "we found out along about midnight that Dr. Nourse [first president of the *Council of Economic Advisers*] would begin to agree to anything. So we'd do most of the work after midnight." Oral History Interview with Charles S. Murphy, Harry S. Truman Library, p. 122." (1981, 523). In Coats's volume, interviews are a means to understand how elites make decisions which impact economics or involve economists.

The interaction between the political and the scientific domains is a research theme that can easily generate a perceived threat to scientific credit and legitimacy (see, e.g., Gaudillère, 1997, 122-124). Here the anonymity of the interview citations, their scarce use, and the use of interviews conducted by other scholars might mitigate this potentially perceived threat. Yet it can be argued that the way by which such potentially perceived threat is most reduced is by the very research goal behind the use of interviews. With the exception of Coats (1977), the goal is to understand conflicts between economists in policy-making institutions and other politicians. Hence economists are not interviewed *qua* academic economists, which blocks potential threats to their scientific credibility. Note also that, the interview process tends to lead to other non-classified documents and to information not present in any written sources (Hoddeson 2006, 187; Weintraub 2007, 5)<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup>The only case of a non-anonymous interviewee is Barber using an interview done by professional oral historians who tend to follow some rules (see Oral History Association, 2009) that historians of economics often implicitly break. For instance, interviewees should not as far as possible be anonymous. But here it can be argued that the status of the interviewees with respect to the object of study is likely to warrant anonymity for oral historians as well. A rule that is more clearly broken here is that oral sources need to be institutionally archived to get the status of sources, i.e., available to other historians for eventual verification or further developments. Despite the "professionalization" of interview practices by the historians of economics discussed at the end of this paper (who apply more scholarly standards), none of them complies fully with the Oral History Association's standards.

## **Economists and their academic work**

A radically different practice of interviewing economists was introduced in a book by Arjo Klammer (1983). His interviewees were not anonymous (e.g., Robert Lucas, Thomas Sargent), and their voices constitute the core of the book as full chapters are transcripts of the interviews. They were interviewed as economists *qua* academic economists. Klammer used interviews as a mean to push economists into an argument to observe how economists verbally behave in controversies. His working hypothesis was that economists' political beliefs partly influenced their academic work. This can obviously generate a perceived threat to the scientific reputation of macroeconomists or to the scientific legitimacy of macroeconomics because the ideal of a value-free science is usually part of the historical narrative self-produced by most economists including most of Klammer's interviewees (see, e.g., Lucas, 52 or Sargent, 80). Klammer managed that potentially perceived threat most of the time by introducing counter arguments as expressed by other economists and by directly asking political questions as soon as the state of the conversation warranted it (usually at the end).

A number of historians have used interviews in a similar spirit as Klammer's. Esther-Mirjam Sent (1998) and Verena Halsmayer (2014) illustrate two variants to Klammer's use of interviews, which are more collaborative with the interviewees. Sent (1998, chap.6) introduces the purpose of the interviews to her interviewee (Sargent) as an opportunity to respond to the methodological and historical points she made in the preceding chapters. The threat to scientific legitimacy is here tempered by the historian's being upfront about it and open to dialogue. Halsmayer (2014) conducted an interview with Robert Solow while she was working on methodological and historical dimensions of his modeling practice. Without publishing the transcript, Solow's retrospective description of his practice as "engineer in the design sense" (231) opened the door for further interpretations by Halsmayer. The collaboration takes a very scholarly form here as Solow provided comments on an earlier draft of her paper (2014, 229).

One can interpret the publications of interview transcripts in Klammer's template as a step toward an oral history of economics. Oral historians usually do not consider interviews conducted

for historical purposes to be proper oral history until the audio recordings and transcripts are indexed, if possible with meta-data about the context of the interview, so that they become sources that others can check or even use (Oral History Association 2009). That interviews can be made public diminishes the chances that the historian will get information that the scientist would be reluctant to put in print. The problem is reinforced by the fact that original transcripts are usually edited by interviewees before being archived or published (Weintraub 2007, 3). Ensuring anonymity may meliorate part of the problem, but some historians of economics have argued against the value of this approach because not knowing who speaks prevents the reader from assessing the reliability of the speech (Tribe 2011, 621).

### **The careers and lives of economists**

Another motif in interviewing economists emerged at the end of the 1980s with historians focusing more on the historical context in which economists lived their lives than on their academic work *per se*. An early instance of this practice was Earlene Craver's (1986) historical account of the intellectual milieu of economists in Vienna from the 1920s to their emigration in the 1930s. Her account was based on interviews with twelve economists (e.g., Friedrich Hayek, Oscar Morgenstern) and two mathematicians (Franz Alt and Karl Menger) who took part in this emigration<sup>5</sup>. Craver used the interviewees' voices to give vivid illustrations of how scholars judged each other on personal and intellectual dimensions, of the institutional locations of various communities, and of experiences of anti-Semitism. In another fashion, E. Roy Weintraub conducted an interview with Gérard Debreu in 1992 which he used in subsequent publications on the history of mathematical economics. In these uses, the voice of Debreu recounting moments of his education is given equal footing to the one of Weintraub commenting on it (2002, 115-117). The interview, which is fully transcribed (ibid, 125-154)<sup>6</sup>, focused on the role of mathematics through Debreu's

<sup>5</sup>Most of Craver's interviews were conducted by her and/or her husband Axel Leijonhufvud as part of an oral history project at the UCLA. Some transcripts are available on-line (see for instance Hayek's transcript: <https://archive.org/details/nobelprizewinnin00haye> last consulted on 06/12/17).

<sup>6</sup>The tape is also archived in Weintraub's paper at the Rubenstein Library of Duke University.

education and professional career. It also delivered information about other people and institutions as Weintraub probed in that direction when possible. Till Düppe (2012) complemented this approach with information about Debreu's personal life and subjectivity, notably obtained by interviewing acquaintances of Debreu, including his widow and his daughter. Düppe and Weintraub (2014) showed how such information can further our understanding of the history of general equilibrium theory.

None of the historians of economics discussed so far has reflected on the specificity of constructing and using oral sources. By contrast, Tiago Mata (2005, Appendix) reflected on the sixteen interviews he conducted with radical economists as part of his work on the social context that shaped the emergence of radical economics. He explained, for instance, why he chose an interviewing method from oral history, how he had to tailor a semi-structured guide for the single two hour sessions and how he made summary transcripts (instead of full ones) that helped him get a better understanding of his historical object. Ross Emmett (2007) gives details on the process of his oral history project on Chicago economics. He explained, for instance, how he sent questions in advance to the interviewees and how he selected unknown interviewees to get multiple perspectives on Chicago economic department. Finally, Andrej Svorenčík (2015, Appendix) discussed how he managed his relations with more than fifty experimental economists (i.e., his interviewees) in order to avoid having his own historical biases influence not only the interviews but also the history of experimental economics he wrote partly based on them. He emphasized how the issue of trust was crucial in even the tiniest interactions he had with his interviewees before, during and after the interviews. This was of specific importance in his case because the other goals of these interactions were to convince experimental economists to deposit their papers in archives and to gather materials in view of a subsequent witness seminar (see Svorenčík and Maas 2016; Maas, this volume).

In these contributions, the voices of the interviewees are used as means to place scientific achievements in a broader context, thereby enriching their meaning. The potentially perceived threat to scientific credit and legitimacy is generally managed by putting biographical questions in



the center of the interviews and by then using the interviews in conjunction with other sources, especially written archival records.

## Conclusion

The new generation of historians of economics tend to engage in a collaborative spirit with their interviewees and to reflect on their own practices regarding the construction and use of oral sources. Beyond the limited subset of issues briefly discussed here, a key one is the coordination on standards of sharing recordings and transcripts through the establishment of a bank of interviews. This is done by the American Institute of Physics, which has a large and institutionalized oral history project<sup>7</sup>. Perhaps a similar initiative between historians of economics and economists would help better manage the potentially perceived threat to scientific credit and legitimacy involved in the process of an interview.

## Contributor's note

Dorian Jullien is a post-doctoral fellow at the Center for the History of Political Economy, Duke University.

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<sup>7</sup>See <https://www.aip.org/history-programs/niels-bohr-library/oral-histories> last consulted on 06/13/17

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