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Interview Analysis

I interviewed **Edmund Burke, III**, professor, presidential chair and director at the Center for World Studies in the History Department at the UCSC.

I got interested in his research after reading his book *Struggle and Survival in the Modern Middle East* (ed. with D. Yaghoubian) which is a collection of biographies of people's lives in the Middle East. He has partitioned the book into three parts: Pre-colonial Lives, Colonial Lives and Contemporary Lives.

What follows is a recollection of our conversation (this is me paraphrasing and summarizing here, as I did not record our conversation).



How do you make people realize that their "lived history" is as important if not more important than "institutionalized history" and give them agency to tell their story?

You just need to stick around long enough and there are two possibilities that can occur: they either think you are crazy and just dismiss you or they finally take you seriously and tell you their story.

How do you challenge the "just-so history" to use your words?

By collecting oral histories! When you listen to people's memories of their past, it is very different than looking at official documents coming from the political elite, which makes history seem to be a result of larger forces that flesh-and-blood individuals who can affect their own life chances.

How important is context in regards to the biographies?

You will notice that I spent a lot of time putting together introductory paragraphs to each of the stories in my book. It is very important as there is no way of understanding the biography unless you have a backdrop to place the story within it.

How did you choose whom to interview? What was the process of selection? Did you have in mind a certain distribution of nationality, religion, gender, or class? (p.8 you mention "typical individuals", but typical of what?)

I had created a network of academics around the area and have relied on them to relay interesting people who could be representative of their country but also of the era they are talking about.

Yes, there are no typical individuals, just people with interesting lives that can tell us more about the time they lived in, that will give you a human dimension to history.

What was the method followed to not reinforce the existing stereotypes?

The book showed how non-elite people managed their lives, often in the face of extreme hardship and oppression. When people talk about their lives from their own perspective, you get to the closest representation of themselves.

How do you allow for the people telling their stories to reflect different periods of history. To clarify, when a specific historic event is over, people become more aware of different interpretations than when they were living through that period of time, so how do you make them go back to that lived time, as opposed to the many interpretations that came after the fact?

I did not get to ask this question :(

Conclusion

Oral histories are a critical component of understanding our past. Terry Burke, gives value to ordinary people's stories and biographies and gives a human dimension to history. This offers a different view than the ordinary institutionalized histories we get from official documents from governments as well as interviews with politicians. I now find that oral histories are a necessity to understand a history of people. This discussion has also led me to insist on adding context to the histories I will collect.