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Representative democracy from inside. Characteristics of the Finnish veteran MPs' oral history interviews

Dear Colleagues!

SLIDE 2. My paper is an overview of the collection of interviews with the former Finnish MPs. The collection has been going on at the Library of Finnish Parliament for over 25 years. Originally, the initiative to collect OH knowledge of the former parliamentarians was made by Professor Marjatta Hietala who had found her inspiration from the papers that were presented at the XV congress of the ICHS in Bucharest 1980. Today Marjatta is the president of the International Committee of Historians and the oral history archive that she started consists of 380 transcribed interviews whose average length is nearly 6 hours. To my knowledge, the collection is unique in Europe – but hardly comparable to the long oral history traditions and collections at the US Senate or at the Parliament of Australia. In Europe, interviews with the British parliamentarians have been going on since 2010. The parliament of Sweden has maintained a smaller scale interview project with their MPs since the late 1990s.

SLIDE 3. The Finnish parliament's institutional motive to sponsor the collection of OH has been to archive the voices of the most experienced parliamentarians. Though an alternative approach to history of representative democracy is saved the parliament institution also aims at dealing with, even controlling the interpretations of the past. Simultaneously, a retrospect life-span interview provides an institutional support service for identity building for the retired MPs. Their reactions to interview requests that are institutionally guaranteed are usually very favourable. When the continuation of the long interview collection has been at stake a couple of times, the sitting MPs or the veteran parliamentarians themselves have managed to carry on the collection with the support from the historians' society.

The academic historians have been contributing to the OH project with the former MPs from the very beginning. The scientific motive of the Finnish Historical Society to suggest the launching of a project officially to the parliament was to collect unique research material for the scholars that study contemporary history of representative democracy. Since the use of the interview materials is restricted to scientific purposes, the scholars have had an exclusive right to draw conclusions from the OH materials. As a researcher that maintains and develops the collection, I have a dual role of a perpetuating state official and a historian that aims at developing representative democracy by criticising the parliament institution I am working in.

In the Finnish political system, the MPs are in a key role in between the people and the political elite. The collection of interviews does not fulfil the criterion that is usually given to oral history projects. It does not represent history from below, neither has it given voice to the groups that are silenced or neglected in history

writing. However, my paper suggests that rather than labelling the ex-MPs' interviews as elite oral history from above it would be more useful to utilize them for clarifying the concept of political elite. There is no better source for studying everyday life of the MPs, networks of political power or national political culture, for example, than these interviews with the former decision-makers.

The value of our collection depends on how it is used. In relation to the potential of the interview collection, too few scholars have used it as research material and in a too cursory manner, usually as complementary source for biographies and histories of political parties. The most ambitious project has been the Parliament of Finland centennial that includes a couple of long descriptive articles that are based on OH materials. However, the great majority of the other contributing historians did not use the interviews at all. Either the contents of the interviews of the former MPs were not interesting enough as such or OH knowledge is still undervalued as research material by the Finnish historians.

SLIDE 4. To sum up, there are several advantages in our interview collection for the scholars. The collection is a massive storage of personal reminiscences by the former MPs that have played key roles in developing Finnish democracy. Their insiders' view cannot be reached with official written parliamentary documents. All the audio tapes and files of the interviews have been transcribed to texts with the tables of contents. The digitalisation of the old tape recordings took place in 2012. The systemically compiled collection of interviews has been a professional project from the very beginning. It has been supervised by specialist of contemporary history and most of the 18 interviewers have been professional historians as well. The established semi-structured interview questionnaire makes comparison between the interview contents possible. The cross-checking with other sources is possible, since the MPs produce lots of written sources during their lives.

Of the limitations and problems we have faced could be mentioned the language barrier. All the interviews are conducted either in Finnish or in Swedish. The amount of the OH material can also be considered a problem: how can a single scholar manage with 60 000 transcribed pages or 2000 hours of interview recordings? One reason for the scholars' limited interest in the interview materials could also be the production of OH sources without accurate research questions. Though the interview questionnaire is made all-inclusive how can we know what are the relevant research questions for the future historians? The questionnaire's emphasis is on life history approach, starting from the family and childhood, school, education and professional career towards activism in political parties. Though the interviews concentrate on the interviewees' years in politics and at the parliament their later career after the retirement is also updated until the present.

SLIDE 5. In Finland, the conducting of interviews has since the 1980s been established as a relevant method of gaining inside information that complements the more traditional sources in historical studies. Too often, however, the impact of the OH interviews is marginal and the historical studies cannot be called oral histories that would stress the truth of the interviewee and ask why he or she is remembering in a certain way – instead of seeking oral testimonies of certain historical processes.

We don't have an academic school of oral historians in Finland, or a special OH journal, but rather a couple of individuals that share the interest to OH with the ethnologists and social scientists. Systematic use of interviews and their analysis as the main method of a historical study is actually uncommon. The first dissertation in the field of history that was based mostly on interview material – a study of rural childhood – was approved in 2004.

However, there are positive signs regarding oral history in Finland. The Finnish Oral History Network, founded in 2003, unites the scholars that are active in OH. The majority of the members are not historians but scholars of cultural studies or ethnology. The FOHN has organized 6 international seminars every other year in Finland –The multidisciplinary approach of the FOHN is naturally strength, but still I'm a little bit worried about the Finnish academic historians' lacking interest on OH, of which my own paper is a telling example. We have collected exceptional amount of interview with the former politicians but they should be much more used by the historians.

Finally, a few words about the non-academic field of OH

Despite the fact that conducting of an interview and sharing it is easier than ever, the technological development has not produced more OH in Finland. There are some local OH projects that collect histories of ordinary people of certain towns or areas. Usually the internet-based projects share written reminiscences, photos and maps.

We don't have an OH movement that would utilize interviews in popularising contemporary history in education, not to talk about educational OH centres that are more common in the US. This fact is surprising, since according to the recent study by Pilvi Torsti history consciousness is relatively strong in Finland, even compared to US, Canada and Australia where a similar history survey has been made. Torsti describes Finland a true "history nation" that, I would add, has not yet recognized the potential of OH.

Thank you!