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# In Defense of Oral History: Evidence from the Mercosur Case

Gian Luca Gardini

**Abstract:** This article makes a case in defense of oral history in the study of political science and international relations. The existing literature has scrutinized the technical aspects and appropriate use of oral material. This article focuses on the circumstances under which oral history may be an indispensable method of scholarly investigation: first, when written primary sources are not readily available; second, when an investigation targets complex and secret high-level negotiations; and third, when the main research concern is the human agent's perspective and ideational factors. The article first addresses the issue of the reliability and rigor of oral history as compared to written sources and then concentrates on the creation of Mercosur as an example of the validity of oral history under the three circumstances identified. The conclusion proposes a revival of a more historical approach to political studies.

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**Keywords:** Argentina, Brazil, oral history, elite history, Mercosur

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# 1 Introduction

This article has one simple and straightforward objective: to make a case in defense of the use of oral history in the study of political science and international relations. Oral history and the use of interview are currently “one of the most, if not the most, commonly used research tool[s] in [...] political science” (Morris 2009: 209). However, the literature on how to research elites is quite limited (Morris 2009: 9; Burnham et al. 2004). Furthermore, traditionally oral history has largely been used to uncover the stories of those neglected by grand history, and consequently has itself been too often considered a marginal method of exploring the high echelons of international politics. The available literature has tended to concentrate on technicalities, strategies and access channels regarding how to interview elites (Hertz and Imber 1995; Aberbach and Rockman 2002) or on the reliability and use of oral material (Berry 2002; Lilleker 2004). What has remained relatively underexplored is the question of the circumstances under which oral history may be especially useful and insightful. This article intends to contribute to addressing this gap by analyzing three conditions or circumstances under which oral history can be a particularly appropriate method to investigate behind the scenes of major historical and political processes: when written sources are absent; when sensitive, complex negotiations are conducted secretly; and when ideational factors or the perspective of the human agent is central to the investigation.

The focus and perspective of this article are twofold. One purpose is to examine how, under the three identified circumstances, oral history is a useful or even indispensable research method. The second aim is to show that oral history has the potential to stimulate a collaborative effort between scholars and policymakers to answer questions relevant to historians, political scientists, IR scholars and practitioners alike. One of the key purposes of international politics is to improve our understanding of foreign policy decision-making, and oral history can contribute to the dialogue between scholarship and practice to shed light on the circumstances, modalities, constraints and motives affecting policy choices (Wohlforth 2003).

The mission here is not to dissect methodological turns and debates in IR theory and political science as such. Neither is it to discuss the appropriateness of specific methods to approaching specific issues or research questions. In the first case, much has been written and discussed (Der Derian 1995; Smith, Booth, and Zalewski 1996; Hollis and Smith 1990; Brady and Collier 2004; Doyle and Ikenberry 1997; Della Porta and Keating 2008). Ultimately, the discussion on method is still ongoing and, given its very nature, constantly evolving. Also, it may be a bad sign for a subject when debate over method, although important, overshadows that over substance

(Bull 1995: 205). Regarding the second point, it is acknowledged that positions on and choices of method, methodology, epistemology and ontology are interrelated, and that each component plays a role in determining the end product of the research process (Grix 2004; Carlsnaes 2002). Methods are neutral only in principle; in practice they privilege different types and sets of data and are conducive to different interpretations (Sarantakos 2005).

The article makes a logical argument with empirical illustrations. The selected case study focuses on incipient regional integration in South America and the formation of the Common Market of the South (Mercosur – Mercado Común del Sur).<sup>1</sup> This approach raises three issues, the first regarding a working definition of regional integration, the second assessing the validity of a case-study approach, and the third examining the comparative dimension of this investigation and its method. The existing literature has proposed a variety of definitions and understandings of the term “regional integration.” For some, integration strictly refers to “the development of supranational forms of authoritative allocation and conflict resolution” (Schmitter 1991: 91). Others understand integration as “specific policy decisions by governments designed to reduce or remove barriers to mutual exchange of goods, service, capital, and people” (Hurrell 1995: 43). More recently, emphasis has been placed on how regional integration is characterized by multidimensionality, complexity, fluidity, non-conformity and by the fact that it involves a variety of state and non-state actors (Soderbaum 2003: 1–2). The operational definition adopted here is the one provided by Olivier Dabène with specific reference to Latin America, where regional integration is defined as “a historical process of increased levels of interaction between political units (sub-national, national, or transnational), provided by actors sharing common ideas, setting objectives, and defining methods to achieve them” (Dabène 2009: 10).

The second issue concerns the use of a single case study. Social scientists have considered case study a weak method, but this criticism is unfair (Van Evera 1997: 50–51; Gerring 2004: 341). Cases have a number of strengths: they allow scholars to make a number of valuable observations on the independent and dependent variable (Van Evera 1997; Ragin 2004), have high conceptual validity, foster new hypotheses, allow us to examine causal mechanisms, and address causal complexity (George and Bennett 2004: 19; Munck 2004). Even if it is acknowledged that in principle case study cannot be generalized to other cases, it is also understood that transposition of findings from one case to other cases is possible if the case study tests a

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1 The Common Market of the South is the regional integration scheme grouping Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay since 1991. Venezuela signed the accession protocol in 2006 but its ratification is still pending.

theory (Van Evera 1997: 53). As a corollary, I argue that when a case study underlines and/or validates the circumstances under which a research method is particularly useful, those same circumstances may be present and/or repeatable in other cases as well. This would extend the validity of that case study to other cases in terms of research method. This view is complemented by the observation that within-case analysis is useful in terms of temporal sequence, causal mechanisms and explanation of change (Munck 2004). These are precisely some of the issues examined in this article. The combination of these arguments fully justifies the choice of the Mercosur single case. More broadly, it has been noted that social science research methods are entering a new phase of development conducive to cross-method collaboration and multi-method work (George and Bennett 2004: 3). This is entirely consistent with one of the arguments pursued here – namely, that oral history may be an indispensable complement to, and not a replacement for, other sources and methods.

The third issue covers the comparative dimension inherent to this case study. Regional integration *per se* involves more than one country. This article is also about the similarities and differences Argentina and Brazil displayed in dealing with the issue of the formation of Mercosur. In other words, the case study is also an exercise in comparative foreign policy analysis. Interviews helped identify key parameters by which to compare the two countries' predispositions and policy processes vis-à-vis integration. Equally important, interviews themselves offered a probing test for the validation of those parameters. The debate about the essence of comparative politics has indeed reached a consensus, at least on the centrality of the method (the *how*) in the study of political phenomena (Rose and MacKenzie 1991; Mair 1996). That is to say that emphasis is placed on the identification of common concepts to assess similarities and differences among countries. Oral material helps not only to identify but also to test common concepts or parameters for comparison. This argument is applicable to virtually all politics sub-disciplines, a point to which I will return in the next section.

The article is structured as follows. It first explains the oral history approach pursued here. Then issues of the reliability and rigor of oral history are addressed and compared to the use of written sources. The empirical part concentrates on the creation of Mercosur, a case study where the lack of written primary sources, the complexity of inter-bureaucratic bargaining, and the role of human agents and their beliefs are simultaneously present. I do this in order to argue that oral history is a useful and appropriate way to explore events and issues characterized by these three features. It is not suggested that oral history ought to be employed to explore any and all cases

of incipient regional integration. The conclusion proposes a revival of a more historical method in the study of international relations.

## 2 Explaining the Oral History Approach of this Article

Oral history is a helpful and reliable method of scholarly investigation and may be even indispensable under three circumstances, which may or may not occur during the investigation: First, when written primary sources are not readily available, oral history may prove itself to be indispensable in exploring and reconstructing events and their sequencing and thus in making sense of them and attempting to theorize about them. Second, when an investigation specifically targets high-level, sensitive political and diplomatic negotiations, written documents rarely capture the complexity and all the nuances of these events. The testimony of those directly involved becomes essential. Written documents are an outcome but do not necessarily reflect the process behind such events. Third, when the main objective of scholarly research is to ascertain the impact of the human agent and ideational factors on policy outcomes, no one is in a better position to describe the underpinning rationale of the political choices under inquiry than the protagonists themselves. The extent to which we can trust them is a different question, one that will be discussed in the following section.

The availability of written primary documents should not be taken for granted, even in an era of registers and records such as ours. For example, if a given investigation targets recent events or highly sensitive policies – such as security – diplomatic documents may be under embargo for a long time. Alternatively, these sources may contain a large number of omissions. Also, it is not unlikely that written diplomatic documents may simply not exist. Many crucial political meetings and negotiations, domestically and internationally, take place in a very closed-off context, or through non-institutionalized channels, or in oral form only. In a number of countries, especially in the developing world, diplomatic archives may not exist in the same form as in most countries in Europe and North America. Archives may be a recent creation, may not be accessible to the public, may be very poorly maintained and organized, or may be subject to very long embargoes. In some cases, diplomatic documents may be lost or purposefully made to disappear.

Under such circumstances, recourse to sources other than written primary ones is a necessity. The voices and views of those involved in the events under investigation may be much more revealing than newspapers, journals and magazines, and other written secondary sources. Oral history offers the scholar the opportunity to ask direct questions. Whereas in jour-

nals and other written secondary sources, answers to research questions may be indirect or hidden between the lines and intermingled in more complex issues or broader topics, interviews give the scholar a chance to ask targeted questions. Of course, the reliability of the interviewee's account and the interpretations of the interviewer have to be scrutinized. Yet this is true for any source in academic investigation. This is not a constitutive feature, even less a weakness, of oral history in particular.

The second situation in which oral history may prove itself invaluable is in research on complex negotiations, such as bureaucratic and political bargaining: the so-called "governmental politics paradigm" (Allison and Zelikow 1999). Internationally, diplomatic transactions may be secret or very private, and the precise roles and positions of those involved tend to remain obscure. Domestically, the power relationship between organs of the state, officials at different levels, the prime minister and ministers, and parties within a coalition is rarely accurately reflected in either diplomatic documents or constitutional and legal provisions. Practice is different from theory. Sometimes, even when a certain act falls within the competences of a given state organ, that organ may have been prompted to act by another organ, or the final content of the act may be the result of a long debate and thus may be quite different from the proponents' earlier drafts. Oral history helps scholars reconstruct these informal aspects of negotiations, to grasp unofficial relations between powers, people and their networks.

The third situation in which oral history may be the most adequate tool of scholarly inquiry concerns the study of ideational forces and the agent's impact on policy outcomes. The role of ideas, personal experiences and beliefs is rarely captured by diplomatic documents or treaties. If one accepts that history is made by individuals within the constraints of their structural context, one should also accept that the ideas and beliefs individuals carry with them impact policy outcomes (Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin 1962). Oral history has the potential to shed significant light on events and their underpinning reasons and rationales, and may help scholars in their assessment of the role of both individuals and their ideational drives in major historical and political events.

While this article takes an essentially IR perspective, its oral history approach is suitable for other politics sub-disciplines and interests too. First, to compensate for the scarcity of written sources on the inner workings of the U.S. presidency, which relates to a core political science subject such as government studies, the Miller Center at the University of Virginia has established the Presidential Oral History Project that has resulted in highly respected publications based on recorded interviews (Riley 2009). Second, the usefulness of oral history when examining domestic bureaucratic politics

is demonstrated by recent work in the area of party politics and power dynamics within the ANC in South Africa (Johnson 2010). Third, in the study of the human factor, oral testimony can be usefully applied to political psychology and compared leadership analysis, as attempted by an interesting work on Salazar and Caetano in Portugal (Cardoso Reis 2005). Back to the Latin American focus, the Oral History Program of the Getúlio Vargas Foundation in Brazil covers a range of topics from propaganda and the history of science to urbanization and social care, showcasing the eclectic and varied possibilities that oral history offers.

### 3 The Reliability of Oral History As Compared to Other Sources

Most of the objections to the use of oral history in the study of international relations and high-level diplomacy are based on the supposed flaws in terms of reliability of oral material. Common arguments target forgetfulness, reticence of narrators, inaccuracy of human memory, and intrusion of subjective or social biases. However, this criticism tends to overlook the problems of accuracy faced by historians who use written testimony, and also ignores a growing literature on the analysis of oral testimony for historical purposes (Grele 1998; Thompson 2000).

#### 3.1 Forgetfulness

The problem of distance from events does exist, but it also exists for written sources, which are often drafted some time after the events and by non-participants. This is often the case not only with written secondary sources but also with primary sources. Indeed, written documents do not always reflect the real positions of their signatories. For example,

in government circles in Washington it is standard operating procedure that an important letter may be the work of many individuals except the one who signs it (Hoffmann 1996: 91).

My personal experience as a practitioner of EU affairs in Brussels suggests that this is also the case in the European Union. Additionally, very few crucial negotiations are recorded on tape, and minutes of important meetings are often drafted at a later stage on the basis of notes taken by secretaries or clerical staff. They might forget or leave out some important aspects or significant details, and may not have a proper grasp of the issues under discussion. Oral sources, in comparison, may compensate for chronological distance with a much closer personal involvement (Portelli 1998: 68). The

time gap between the event and its narration or analysis is inevitable. Time distance is not a limitation *per se* and could even be regarded as an asset as it might allow space for detached reflection and pondered analysis.

## 3.2 Reticence

Similar arguments can be put forward to counter criticism to oral history based on the reticence of narrators. Reticence might or might not be the result of second thoughts and convenience. Omissions can be as effective as explicit distortions of events and circumstances. But is this not as true for written primary documents and other secondary sources as it is for interviews? A high-level diplomatic correspondence may omit remarks that would embarrass the recipient and the sender's entourage. By the same token, the content of an interview may be influenced by similar considerations. From a different perspective, the reticence of an interviewee may lead to incomplete or partial narrations but so may also the non-availability of key written documents or their partial classification. The responsibility to solve and evaluate these issues lies with the historian, who is as decisive in producing good historical work as are his or her sources.

## 3.3 Inaccuracy

The charge of inaccuracy of human memory shares many traits, and consequently many counterarguments, with the allegation of forgetfulness. However, while forgetfulness seems to be essentially about omissions and blanks, inaccuracy instead concerns the incorrect accounting of events and circumstances, be this deliberate or not. In both cases written sources are not free from this problem either. Deliberate omissions and even deception may occur. Oral and written testimony alike may be used to advance a prejudged argument, to discredit opponents, to redeem or justify oneself, or to praise or downplay someone's deeds. Or they can be used to offer a genuine reading, even a very personal one, of events and circumstances, to clarify one's position and that of others. Ultimately, a value- and knowledge-based assessment of any source has to be conducted by the user of that source.

A key role is therefore played by the historian, who must establish a relationship of mutual trust and respect with the interviewee. By the same token, readership has to establish a relation of trust and confidence with the author, who is ultimately responsible for the selection of sources, be these oral or written, and for judging their reliability. Apart from any consideration of the existence of a scientific and objective social science, there is no history without a historian and no analysis without an analyst. It does not matter how accurate this mediation might be – the fact remains that media-

tion between the event and the public is inescapable. Whatever portion of historical reality is offered to the public is an interpretation of that reality, largely based on the choice of the historical source and the use made of it by the mediator.

Let us turn now to cases where inaccuracy occurs due to remembering incorrectly, genuinely misperceiving, or simply having a poor understanding/knowledge. Does this potential flaw concern oral history only? Does it invariably invalidate the oral material collected? Is there no remedy or tool that oral historians can use to manage this problem? One of the most powerful and influential accounts of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis is Robert Kennedy's *Thirteen Days*, his memoir of those events. The book is based on his hands-on experience in government and his direct participation in the events, including some crucial secret negotiations to strike a deal with the Soviets. Kennedy's account is breathtaking and an invaluable source of information for historians and political scientists alike. Yet, Robert Kennedy recalls a statement – “Mr. President, you are in a pretty bad fix” – that he attributed to General David M. Shoup, chief of the U.S. Navy (Kennedy 1999: 29). Later, when the Kennedy Tapes<sup>2</sup> were disclosed to the public, they revealed that the statement had actually been made by General Curtis LeMay, chief of staff of the U.S. Air Force (May and Zelikow 2002: 117). Does this little incongruence invalidate Robert Kennedy's account and its thoughtful considerations? Certainly not. Minor discrepancies cannot invalidate the whole content and overall significance of the source. This leads to two further remarks: 1) It is hard to understand why written memoirs are given so much more credit than interviews, as they may suffer from the same bias. 2) What occurred in Robert Kennedy's book may have occurred in a written ambassadorial briefing, in a presidential letter, or in an interview with that ambassador or president. The weight, implications and consequences of such inaccuracies are for the historian to evaluate and eventually condone or condemn.

An alternative reading of minor inaccuracies is to consider them part of the historical fact. Minor discrepancies on specific places, dates or people may occasionally occur, but oral history is more concerned with meaning than with events as such. Alessandro Portelli, convener of the 2004 Oral History World Conference, argues that

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2 President John F. Kennedy secretly recorded the meetings of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (Ex-Com), a restricted group of advisors selected by the president himself to assist him in the management of the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962.

subjectivity is as much the business of history as are the more visible “facts.” What informants believe is indeed a historical *fact* [...], as much as what really happened (Portelli 1998: 67).

A minimalist conclusion on this point would suggest that minor factual inaccuracies do not invalidate the whole meaning and value of the material. A maximalist interpretation might go as far as arguing that inaccuracies can uncover caveats about perceptions and convictions, which may even have had an impact on policy outcomes. The minimalist position is to be preferred.

### 3.4 Intrusion

A fourth line of argumentation against the use of oral history in the study of top political decisions and negotiations concentrates on subjective or social biases that may affect the informant’s account. While this is a real problem, written sources are not exempt from similar issues. In addition, it can be argued that it might be easier to detect warning signals during an interview than in static and fixed written sources. During an interview these caveats may be tackled and eventually corrected through conversation and additional questions for clarification. There is no opportunity to do that when examining a document, and this cannot be rectified. Interviews with the drafter of a document may even help to interpret obscure or unclear provisions of a document, as will be shown in the case study.

Subjective and social biases affect all kinds of sources and scholarly work at two levels. First, the source, be it an interview or a written document, is produced by people who live in a certain historical and social context and who bring with them values, ideas and worldviews. The structure, content and objectives of the source will reflect to a greater or lesser extent the background and views of its producer(s), and this is precisely why the historian is interested in that source. At a different level, the interpretation of the sources – what actually appears in the final scholarly outcome – is the result of the work of the historian, who also lives in a specific historical and social context. This will influence the historian’s values, ideas and worldviews and also his or her approach and attitude towards the source and the period and people that produced it. This is an inescapable aspect of the process for both written and oral sources.

### 3.5 Remedies

Now, what can the oral historian do to minimize potential distortions and inaccuracies? The answer is probably not dissimilar to the one given to

scholars who use written sources. Professional accuracy and integrity are essential qualities for any good scholar. In terms of accuracy, it is wise to use multiple sources and to do so properly, following established good scholarly practice. The validity of an interview can be checked in terms of its consistency with other interviews and sources, and the degree to which the interviewee is representative of a wider social group (Lummis 1998). If possible, oral material has to be tested against written primary documents, journalistic reports of the time, memoirs, and other secondary sources. Furthermore, one interview is rarely significant. Interviews have to be cross-checked with one another. For instance, if a scholar interviews representatives of two or more delegations to a diplomatic meeting, comparing the accounts of the members of the same delegation or juxtaposing the accounts of members of different delegations to assess common and different positions, shared and contrasting expectations, and so on, is highly recommended (and can prove quite interesting). How one chooses interviewees is equally important, as the choice of interviewees as a sample must have a coherence and a logic behind it. They cannot be chosen randomly, or simply according to availability. Clear criteria need to be established. For instance, all the interviewees attended the same summit, or were part of the same organization, or held homologous functions – say foreign ministers – so it is possible to draw a picture of the different views, or the common ones, on a certain topic. It is crucial to clarify the rationale behind the choice of the interviewees and how their views can contribute to the research objective(s).

Regarding integrity, the scholar ought to be intellectually honest and ought not to distort or misuse sources purposefully for his or her own personal or research objectives. But who is the guardian of the writer's accuracy and probity? On one hand, readers have to trust the author to a certain extent – there must be a relationship of confidence between reader and writer. On the other hand, almost all academic work is subject to peer review, which should provide, at least in principle, an independent and competent safeguarding instrument. Ultimately, professional integrity ought to be based on personal decency and self-respect. The knowledge, sensitivity and sensibility of the author ought to be the best guarantees for the quality of his or her work.

Overall, it is not claimed here that oral history is better than other sources or that it can replace them. What is argued is that oral history can be an effective complement to other type of sources with which it shares a number of strengths and weaknesses. Under certain circumstances, oral history may actually be particularly useful: it can increase the value and credibility of other sources, it can contribute to the interpretation of other sources, and it can shed light on events for which other sources are not

readily available. Ultimately, oral history is an instrument, and its good and proper use depends on who handles it and how. Surely, oral history can be effectively applied to social history as well as to the study of high-level political processes, to the study of the marginalized and neglected as well as to those elites who supposedly shape and direct “grand history.”

## 4 The Foundation of Mercosur

My own research on the creation of Mercosur provides an ideal case and opportunity to apply and further discuss these methodological issues and to demonstrate the usefulness of oral history to investigate elite decision-making. My objective was twofold: First, priority was given to the accurate reconstruction of Argentine–Brazilian diplomatic relations and complex negotiations in the formative years of Mercosur (1985–91). For this specific topic, no detailed and comprehensive political analysis or historical account existed. Second, I had a special interest in the role of some of the key protagonists and their ideational drives. In particular, I was interested in the relationship between the presidents of Argentina and Brazil and their foreign policy teams, specifically the role of the presidents and their personal views on regional integration.

The return of Argentina and Brazil to democracy in the mid-1980s marked the commitment to integration in the Southern Cone of Latin America as a milestone of foreign policy in both countries. After a wary bilateral relationship during most of the 1970s, Argentine–Brazilian diplomatic rapprochement started towards the end of that decade under military regimes in both countries. With the resolution of the long quarrel over the use of the water resources of the Paraná River in 1979 and the 1980 nuclear agreements, the two military governments initiated a process of political and economic cooperation. However, during the military period no attempt at integration was made (Saraiva Guerreiro 2003; Camillión 2003). The real turn from cooperation towards integration happened with the return of Argentina to democracy, when the Alfonsín administration discussed with still authoritarian (but soon to be democratic) Brazil the possibilities for economic integration (Saraiva Guerreiro 1992: 114). With the re-establishment of the democratic dyad, concrete plans and proposals for integration were elaborated, resulting in the commitment to integration announced at the November 1985 Iguazú Summit (Gardini 2005).

The integration process was formally launched and pursued at the bilateral level first and then extended to neighboring countries. In November 1985, Argentina and Brazil announced the intention to integrate their economies. In July 1986, they formalized the commitment with their first integra-

tion agreement: the Programa de Integración y Cooperación Económica (PICE). In 1988, The Treaty of Integration, Friendship and Cooperation introduced the creation of a common market as the final objective of the integration exercise but did not set any concrete provision for its achievement. In 1990 Argentina and Brazil created their bilateral common market and the 1991 Treaty of Asunción extended it to Paraguay and Uruguay. For the sake of the argument pursued here, the analysis of the case study concentrates on the period 1985–88.

The discussion proceeds as follows: First I will show how the scarcity of written primary material in the early phases of Argentine–Brazilian negotiations (1985–88) made recourse to oral history a “successful necessity.” Second I will demonstrate how oral history helped reconstruct crucial and complex, secret interstate negotiations with particular reference to the discussions leading to the first integration agreement of July 1986. I will also elucidate how oral history proved a very useful instrument for the correct interpretation of primary sources such as the 1988 Treaty of Integration. Third and finally, I will invoke oral history to shed significant light on the role of particular individuals and their ideas and beliefs in the construction of Mercosur.

## 4.1 The Use of Oral History

This research project has large recourse both to written primary documents hitherto unexamined and to fresh interview material. Diplomatic documents were mainly sourced from the archives of the Brazilian Foreign Ministry, Itamaraty, and the Federal Congress in Brasília. However, written primary sources on Argentine–Brazilian integration are not readily available or easily accessible. Reportedly, there is no documentation of the early negotiation process “but its own outcome, which includes the protocols and the [1986 Buenos Aires] agreement” (Campbell 2003). Ninety percent of the negotiations under investigation were conducted orally only and without a set agenda (Ferrari Etcheberry 2003; Pinheiro Guimarães 2003). Additionally, in Buenos Aires there is no archive on Argentine–Brazilian negotiations for integration, and at that time, reportedly there was not even a classification system for diplomatic documents (Russell 2003; Ferrari Etcheberry 2003). Finally, many of the documents that do exist are still classified, and those already declassified are often characterized by a number of omissions on the most sensitive topics.

Over sixty interviews were conducted with key Argentine and Brazilian politicians, diplomats, entrepreneurs, and academics. To ensure the validity and reliability of the oral material, all the interviews have been cross-checked with one another and tested against available written diplomatic documents,

along with journalistic reports and other secondary sources. The interviewees were carefully selected for their direct role in the events narrated and for the key positions they held in their respective countries at the time of the events. The sample can be regarded as representative of the Argentine and Brazilian elites directly engaged in the integration process, especially if one considers that perhaps no more than one hundred people played a direct role in the earliest phase of Argentine–Brazilian negotiations. Interviews were conducted according to a semi-structured scheme of questions to allow the interviewees to speak freely while at the same time keeping discussion focused. Consistent concepts and views were expressed by respondents belonging to the same (or homologous) institutions or social and political circles in the two countries. Many perceptions – although of varying degree and intensity – were shared across the border. There was significant consistency between the oral statements and the available diplomatic documents and other secondary sources. A few sporadic inaccuracies about dates or places emerged, but their relevance to the overall meaning and purpose of the investigation was negligible.

The use of non-written sources was therefore as much a deliberate choice as a necessity due to *raison de force majeure*. Given the restricted access to primary written material and the very nature of this investigation – based as it must be on value-based preferences and political bargaining – it is hard to avoid agreeing with Allison and Zelikow, who remarked that

information about the details of differences in perceptions and priorities within a government on a particular issue is rarely available within a short time. [...] Accurate accounts of the bargaining that yielded a resolution of the issue are rarer still. Documents often do not capture this kind of information, since they themselves are often resultants. Much information must be gleaned from the participants themselves (Allison and Zelikow 1999: 312).

## 4.2 Oral Sources, High-level Secret Negotiations, Complex Bureaucratic Bargaining and Historical Reconstruction

How does one reconstruct the secret negotiations that followed the November 1985 announcement of Argentine and Brazilian commitment to bilateral integration and that led to the signature of the PICE in July 1986? How does one find out who took part in top secret meetings? What was discussed in secluded venues? And how does one overcome the lack of written minutes or other material about those meetings, which by explicit acknowledgement of the key protagonists were secret, conducted orally

only, and without a set agenda? Twenty years after those events, some of the key protagonists agreed to tell their version of what actually happened during those crucial six months.

Efforts to implement the political directions outlined at the Iguazú Summit in November 1985 started as early as the beginning of 1986. Argentine Secretary of Industry and Trade Roberto Lavagna explained:

The whole negotiation was done through informal meetings; a topic of this nature, which was highly strategic and which was to be handled directly by the presidents, would not be resolved within a commission. The real negotiations were done through confidential channels (Lavagna 2003).

Several brainstorming meetings were then conducted very privately and informally between small unofficial delegations. Results were then discussed during three plenary sessions, held between April and June 1986, and attended by delegations of some thirty people per side. These three secret, high-level summits were the key forums to shape the structure of the integration agreement that the Argentine and Brazilian presidents eventually signed in July 1986.

The first of these sessions took place on 5 April in Los Nogales, a farmhouse in the hamlet of Don Torcuato, not far from Buenos Aires. The date and venue attest to the confidential and informal nature of the gathering. It was over a weekend, so the massive absence of top officials from their government offices remained unnoticed by the press. High-level officials from both governments took part in the assembly, but no ministers were present. Also, instructions received from higher political levels were extremely limited, and some of the delegates were working together for the first time, even within the same delegation. José Tavares de Araujo, a member of the Brazilian delegation, pointed out that he had not received any particular instructions. Moreover, he recalled that the night before the meeting, the head of the Brazilian delegation, Francisco Thompson Flores, addressed the delegates saying that they were embarking on a new adventure, the results of which were unknown, but he felt they were going to change the course of events. Thompson Flores recommended his colleagues be very open-minded (Tavares de Araujo 2003). The meeting turned out to be a preliminary exchange of ideas. The only clear thing was the goal: integration. The rest was very spontaneous; ideas and proposals flowed and there was no set agenda.

At first, the Brazilians reiterated their major interest in the import of food and oil and in the export of manufactured goods (Bruno 2003; Campbell 2003; Nofal 2003; Fendt 2003). The initial idea the Argentine delegation put forward was a free trade area targeting all sectors, but the Brazilians

were not in favor of a general agreement (Nofal 2003). As a consequence, discussion shifted towards a sectoral approach, and the first agreement was reached on a system of protocols, which, although excluding a massive opening, was suitable for later upgrade and expansion (Bruno 2003). Since Brazil was disposed to liberalize the capital goods sector, as it felt its industry was competitive, the Argentine delegation assessed this option and concluded that a two-way opening could be a fair deal. Argentina would increase its imports of Brazilian machinery, but it could also count on some competitive advantages, such as the high quality of its own labor force and batch production. Within the same sector, each country could specialize in the production of specific items: the idea of economic complementation was emerging. Finally, from the institutional point of view, José Tavares de Araujo recalled that it was decided in Don Torcuato that the integration scheme would not have supranational institutions. This was deemed appropriate for the level of political and economic development in Argentina and Brazil and did not exclude the use of other instruments such as development agencies to move the process ahead (Tavares de Araujo 2003).

The second plenary meeting was held in the secluded venue of Itaipava, not far from Rio de Janeiro, on 3 May, with the same format and informality as in Don Torcuato. After one month's reflection (since the previous meeting) on the respective positions and proposals, the first sketches of the agreement were drafted (Lavagna 2003; Pinheiro Guimarães 2003). Discussion was resumed on capital goods and extended to the protocol on wheat. Negotiations went into more depth and detail, and some rules and principles were established, such as the format of protocols and annexes. Also, the emergence of, and possible solutions to, prospective problems deriving from integration were tackled. In particular, entrepreneurial clashes in the capital goods sector along with the opposition of the southern states of Brazil to the wheat protocol were anticipated. The third plenary session was organized in Buenos Aires on 20 June to ratify and finalize the agreements reached during the previous months. On 29 July 1986, in Buenos Aires, Presidents Alfonsín of Argentina and Sarney of Brazil signed the bilateral PICE.

Oral history can also contribute to explaining and interpreting historical events that may remain obscure as well as written documents subject to different interpretations in secondary sources. For instance, a set of three misinterpretations, or oversimplifications, has arisen in the literature about the actual creation of the Argentine–Brazilian (and then Mercosur) common market and its time frame. The first is the claim that the 1988 Treaty of Integration provides for the formation of a common market. The second maintains that the alleged common market was to be in place within ten

years of the signature of the 1988 treaty. The third misunderstanding, as a consequence of the second, claims that Presidents Menem and Collor (who respectively replaced Alfonsín and Sarney in 1989 and 1990), when signing the 1990 Buenos Aires Act, merely reduced the ten-year time frame down to five years (*La Nación* 1988 and 1990; *Istoé* 1988; *Ambito Financiero* 1987; *La Razón* 1987; Moniz Bandeira 1993; Aldaco and Hunt 1991).

The interpretations suggested here, based on both the accurate legal analysis of the text of the treaty and interviews with those who conceived of and drafted the 1988 treaty, instead maintain, first, that the 1988 treaty provided for the creation of a free trade area while the common market remained a long term project; second, that the alleged common market was not to come into force within ten years but that initiatives for its gradual realization were to be begun ten years after the signature of the 1988 treaty; and third, that Presidents Menem and Collor did indeed reduce the period for the creation of a common market, but from a period of time indefinitely longer than ten years down to a specific deadline of five.

The text of the 1988 Treaty of Integration, Cooperation and Development is sufficiently clear. However, some commentators and scholars were misled. The voices of those who drafted the treaty help erase any possible doubts (Pinheiro Guimarães 2003; Nofal 2003; Campbell, Rozember, and Svarzman 1999; Lavagna 1998). On the Argentine side, Beatriz Nofal, at that time undersecretary of Industrial Development, who personally contributed to drafting several sections, recalled that she canceled from the draft proposal any mention of a common external tariff, because there were strong doubts about the capacity and will of the two countries to harmonize their trade policies (Nofal 2003). On the Brazilian side, Ambassador Thompson Flores, head of the Itamaraty negotiators, recalled that the achievement of the common market was a dream for both countries. However, pragmatism indicated that the first reasonable step was to open up the borders. It was necessary to begin with a cautious opening as a sudden undertaking could have awakened the mistrust of the military and caused negative repercussions on the economy (Thompson Flores 2004). Ambassador Samuel Pinheiro Guimarães, who personally contributed to the drafting, defined the treaty as “cautious, much more cautious than the Mercosur Treaty” (Pinheiro Guimarães 2003).

### 4.3 Oral History, the Human Agent and Ideational Factors

The Argentine–Brazilian bilateral integration and, later, Mercosur were clearly governmental exercises in which the role of the presidents was so funda-

mental that they must be marked as presidential processes (Malamud 2005). However, a few points are underexplored in the literature, and little or no help is provided by primary written documents. For instance, how could the relationship between the presidents and their foreign ministers be characterized? Were the presidents the drivers and intellectual fathers of the integration process or were they decisive as implementing agents and supporters of the ideas and agendas conceived of and drafted by their foreign relations teams? Were their backgrounds, values and worldviews somehow relevant to and influential in the construction of integration?

On the Argentine side, President Alfonsín had made rapprochement with Brazil one of the pillars of his foreign policy, and he entrusted Foreign Minister Dante Caputo with the implementation of this visionary idea. Caputo was not only the main ideologist of Alfonsín's electoral campaign but also a close friend of the president and one of the most influential voices in the strategic direction of the government. As Caputo was the one who conceptualized and designed Argentine foreign policy, he also has to be largely credited for the idea of integration with Brazil (Campbell 2003; Bruno 2003; Ferrari Etcheberry 2003). Argentine Secretary of External Relations Jorge Sabato pointed out that Caputo repeatedly stressed that political cooperation and economic integration with Brazil were key factors in the creation of a democratic community in the Southern Cone (Sabato in Fournier 1996: 102).

On the Brazilian side, the situation was slightly more complicated, as President Sarney was sworn in under exceptional circumstances due to the sudden illness and subsequent death of President-elect Tancredo Neves on the eve of his inauguration. There are two interesting aspects about the role of José Sarney in the integration process: The first is to what extent Sarney brought his own ideas to integration and to what degree he instead simply followed the foreign policy platform designed by Neves. The second point concerns Sarney's relationship with Itamaraty and his autonomy in shaping integration.

Let us begin with the first issue. There are good reasons to assume that a project of economic integration with Argentina had already been envisaged under Neves. In February 1985, during his visit to Buenos Aires as president-elect, he had had the opportunity to converse twice with Alfonsín. In the press conference, Neves briefly commented that Latin American integration had to be pursued within the framework of the Latin American Integration Association (*La Nación* 1985). However, when pressed by the journalists' questions, Neves and Caputo conceded that something was actually-already going on. Neves declared that integration with Argentina would be a priority for his government and admitted, "We want specific agreements"

(*La Nación* 1985: 8). Furthermore, Dante Caputo revealed: “We are thinking about the mechanisms to make bilateral trade more dynamic, and that is why this meeting is very important” (*La Nación* 1985: 8). This was an almost explicit admission that talks were already in progress; concrete mechanisms were under consideration; and the two presidents were closely following these negotiations and had discussed them with one another. However, Ambassador Ricupero, who was present at the meeting as an advisor to President-elect Neves, proposed a more cautious reading of that conversation. He maintained that integration was debated only in broad terms of closer trade and political relations. It would be an exaggeration, he added, to understand the discussion on integration in that context as an assessment of specific economic or legal schemes (Ricupero 2004). Although more circumspect, this evaluation is not incompatible with the argument that there was an ongoing search for practical solutions. Instead, it adds credibility to the fact that, at this stage, the idea of integration was still diffuse and unstructured, and the highest political authorities agreed on exploring concrete mechanisms to implement close economic cooperation.

The established fact that Neves had somehow planned to develop a bilateral trade scheme, or was perfectly aware that Itamaraty was doing so, does not exclude the original contribution of President Sarney to the integration process. Sergio Danese, a member of the team of presidential advisors, would later maintain that, when Sarney took office, he did not have a set foreign policy program and had not discussed the subject with Neves (Danese 1999). However, although it is true that foreign policy was not a priority in Neves’ platform, it appears unlikely that he would have neglected to inform his vice-president about such an important issue. In fact, Alberto Ferrari Etcheberry, who was special advisor to President Alfonsín, confided that Sarney personally told him that he had been informed by Neves about the conversation the latter had had with Alfonsín in February 1985 regarding integration plans (Ferrari Etcheberry 2003). Moreover, José Tavares de Araujo formed the impression that the original motion came from Neves, who discussed it with his vice-president (Tavares de Araujo 2003). Ambassador Ricupero, who was a political advisor to President-elect Neves and continued as a special advisor to President Sarney, reconciled the two positions, commenting that whereas Sarney was aware of Neves’ guidelines for foreign policy, the latter had had no time to elaborate a specific plan of integration (Ricupero 2004).

Personalities who were both close to Sarney and directly involved in the integration process did not hesitate to acknowledge his conceptual and practical contribution to integration, and stressed his independence from Neves’ legacy (Castro Neves 2003; Flecha de Lima 2003). Whereas Sarney kept the

chancellor Neves had indicated he would appoint, Olavo Setubal, for almost one year and Neves' chief international politics advisor, Rubens Ricupero, for almost three years, Sarney was also an innovator. In fact, it is possible that in the wake of recently reacquired democracy, Sarney took the initiative to inform Alfonsín that democratic Brazil was ready to follow up the informal diplomatic talks on integration that had already taken place (Ricupero 2004; Rezende Martins 2003). Finally, Sarney tried to regain a central role in foreign policy for the presidency by establishing a formal Diplomatic Consulting Unit within the presidency.

Sarney himself, reportedly, provided an interesting explanation about his freedom of action in foreign policy (Botafogo Gonçalves 2003). When, in 1984, he joined the opposition party, Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB), Ulysses Guimarães, one of the charismatic leaders of the PMDB, convinced the party to accept Sarney as its vice-presidential candidate in order to gain the support of the military sector. However, this step was undertaken reluctantly given Sarney's past militancy in the military party Partido Democrático Social (PDS), and Guimarães and the PMDB exercised a sort of control upon Sarney on almost every important political decision. Yet foreign policy was of little interest to Guimarães, while Sarney felt at ease and free from control in this field, in which he had a personal interest and about which he had his own ideas (Botafogo Gonçalves 2003).

Sarney's contribution to integration emerges when his relations with Itamaraty are closely analyzed. When he took office, talks between Argentina and Brazil had already started but must still have been at a very early stage. It is very likely that the president "was able to sense what was happening" and that Itamaraty briefed the new president on the strategy of the talks and their current state (Castro Neves 2003). It is also very likely that Sarney had his own idea of how to conduct foreign policy and of the role to be scripted for Argentina. President Sarney's intuition found theoretical rationalization and practical systematization in the work and visions developed at Itamaraty. On one hand, the president, prompted by Itamaraty, gave impulse to the process, blessing the advance of his foreign service, sponsoring the idea among ministerial cabinets, and bringing the discussion to the highest level. On the other hand, Itamaraty received from the president further political direction and was instructed to foster integration. Indeed, Sarney took several personal initiatives to encourage the process and was personally involved in the design of the integrationist project, to which he gave full commitment and support.

## 5 Conclusion

The case study has confirmed that oral history offers “new insight into the interplay of personalities and events, and in some cases a valuable new factual record” in the investigation of elites’ political histories (Perks 1992: 5). The creation of the Argentine–Brazilian integration as a prologue to Mercosur was characterized by the scarce availability of written primary sources. Oral material drawn from conversations with the key protagonists provided an indispensable source of information. The careful examination of the interviews against one another as well as against other written primary and secondary sources indicates a high degree of consistency and therefore reliability of the material. The voices of those directly involved in the formation of Mercosur allowed for the investigation of complex political bargaining and the reconstruction of the sequence, content, features and significance of secret diplomatic negotiations. Those oral testimonies also proved to be invaluable in studying the role of key players and the location of their ideational drivers in such a defining historical and political moment for South America as the creation of Mercosur.

Furthermore, oral history establishes and fosters a constructive dialogue between academia and practice. Academics learn details and gain insight from the very protagonists of the events they study. Practitioners may also learn additional information about the events they contributed to shaping, such as the motives or constraints of other participants that might have been undisclosed at the time of events. The combination of the knowledge and perspective of both academics and policymakers in the context of the interaction and dialogue of the interview process contributes to a better understanding of foreign policymaking and the dynamics of high-level negotiations. This results in more accurate empirical accounts as well as more solid and convincing theoretical arguments.

This article has not only discussed the usefulness of oral history in the study of political science – and more specifically international relations and high-level diplomatic negotiations – but it has moreover consistently adopted a historical approach to the study of international relations. In historical methodology, empirical and theoretical analyses are complementary, but historical verification is the prior basis for any speculation and theorization. This research started from historical observation and then tried to make sense of it – not from a predetermined theory or hypothesis to be tested on a case study, chosen either randomly or purposefully to fit the theory. In an historical approach, theory infrequently assumes the form of general propositions about state behavior or international politics, but is instead more humble and confines itself to the explanation of specific and limited – geographically or temporally – events and circumstances.

As Hedley Bull observed, history may not be sufficient to understand international relations but cannot be overlooked for at least four reasons (Bull 1995): First, certain political situations are not merely illustrations of general patterns but genuinely singular events. Second, any international situation is located in time, and to understand it the scholar must place it within a sequence of events. Third, the quality, techniques and canons of judgment of diplomatic history as a discipline are often less obscure and controversial than those of theoretical studies. Fourth, history itself is the primary material for the social sciences, which have a history themselves and emerge within a defined historical context.

Following this approach, diplomatic investigation was conducted through a combination of both written documents and extensive interview material. Oral history proved to be a satisfactory method for the study of elite history and high-level diplomacy. Richard Neustadt, a pioneer in this method, concluded the following:

If I were forced to choose between documents on the one hand, and late, limited, partial interviews with some of the principal participants on the other, I would be forced to discard the documents (Neustadt 1999: 132).

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### **En defensa de la historia oral: evidencia del caso de Mercosur**

**Resumen:** Este artículo argumenta en favor del uso de la historia oral como método de estudio de las relaciones internacionales y de las ciencias políticas. La literatura académica se ha centrado en las cuestiones más técnicas de las entrevistas y en el uso apropiado de este método. El foco innovador del artículo analiza las circunstancias en que la historia oral puede representar una herramienta indispensable para la investigación académica: primero, cuando las fuentes escritas no están disponibles; segundo, cuando se investigan negociaciones reservadas y complejas de alto nivel; tercero, cuando el interés principal de la investigación es la perspectiva del agente y los factores ideacionales. En primer lugar, el artículo discute la confiabilidad y el rigor de la historia oral en comparación con las fuentes escritas. Luego, el análisis se centra en el caso de estudio de la creación de Mercosur, usado como ejemplo de la validez de la historia oral bajo las tres circunstancias identificadas. La conclusión propone un uso más amplio del enfoque histórico en el estudio de las disciplinas políticas.

**Palabras clave:** Argentina, Brasil, historia oral, historia de las elites, Mercosur