

Occupy the American Historical Association: Demand a WPA Federal Writers' Project

As part of his program to deal with America's economic catastrophe, economist Robert Reich has proposed a revival of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration and Civilian Conservation Corps. Reich is hardly alone in putting forth such notions—I advocated a new WPA Federal Writers' Project ("History is Worth Fighting for, But Where is the AHA?")—and it is so obvious an idea that it can hardly be called ingenious. But the American Historical Association has responded to such ideas with lectures urging us to get real: AHA President Anthony T. Grafton and Executive Director Jim Grossman have written in the AHA magazine *Perspectives* that their goal is limited "to train[ing] fewer historians or to find[ing] a more diverse array of employment opportunities...," and they present us with what they themselves deem "a very modest proposal." They want to limit the AHA's activities to "working within an existing framework" and functioning as a "clearinghouse." Mired in the "pragmatic" politics of the Obama era, which have gotten us into the deep hole that we are in, the AHA has not begun to face the reality of the crisis in history.

Historians of the future will look back on this period in the way that we now see the reassuring words offered in the early stages of the Great Depression. What can they have been thinking, these historians of the future will ask. What planet were they on? With commendable intentions, the best the AHA has thus far come up with is an exhortation to prepare graduate students, fewer in number, for careers outside of academe. They seem to want to challenge a hierarchical

academic culture which ranks non-academic employment of historians as merely a "Plan B." This is a worthy endeavor. But as a solution to the problem, it is peeing in the wind: finding it cruel to prepare students for academic jobs which do not exist, they seek to prepare them for non-academic jobs which also do not exist. The economic collapse that limits employment in academe also limits employment in museums, archives, editorial fields, governments on all levels, and private corporations. So, although we should certainly support the upsetting of traditional snobberies which see academe as the only place for historians, it's cruel to urge graduate students to look for non-academic jobs which exist in fewer and fewer numbers. In short, what has been proposed by the AHA is deck-chair stuff, while the society and the profession steam ahead towards the iceberg.

Perhaps these issues will come to a head at the annual meeting of the AHA in Chicago, January 5-8, 2012. But the weighty program booklet which members have received shows almost no indication that it is a time of crisis. Just about all the AHA has come up with is to cut back, suggesting that "American research universities are overproducing overspecialized Ph.Ds for the existing market." (For a presentation of such accommodationist thinking as somehow heroic, see "More Universities Break the Taboo and Talk to PhDs About Jobs Outside Academe"). In the meantime, the organization's president, Anthony Grafton, has recently written "Our Universities: Why Are They Failing?" in the *New York Review of Books*, with hardly a word about the role of the collapse of public funding for higher education. (Jesus, just take a look at the wreckage of the University of California—and the wonderful rising student protests, which provide such a contrast to the AHA's passivity.) When I pointed out the crisis and proposed a Federal Writers' Project, the AHA replied that it was unrealistic. This supposedly pragmatic centrism, which deems reasonable solutions to hideous problems to be utopian, is a sad mark of

the Obama era, a time when many liberal intellectuals are reverting to the conservatism of what was called end of ideology.

We need a concrete program to face the crisis in history. As a limited, practical and pragmatic solution for a significant piece of the problem, we need a Federal Writers' Project. The WPA's FWP (1935-1943) employed 6,600 people, and employment was its primary purpose. They came from a variety of fields, including but not limited to history. The FWP's historical product was simply magnificent: the classic American Guide Series of the forty-eight states; the slave narrative collection, consisting of more than 10,000 pages of interviews with former slaves; and the Historical Records Survey. The AHA should call for a new federally-funded Federal Writers' Project, adapted to the changed times, needs and technologies of today. (The original was great, but not beyond criticism and improvement.) This idea has been kicking around in, around, and in spite of, the AHA at least since the 1970s, when what was then also described as an "oversupply" of PhDs led to calls to shut down the innovative new PhD programs (e.g. Northern Illinois University). The answer that bubbled up from the debate at the time was that history is a positive good, important for society and civilization, and so the way forward was to expand employment rather than to cut back. This is truer than ever today—and history, with its reasoned understanding of causality, is more important than ever at a time when irrationality is rampant in the society and in its leadership.

Implementation

The American Historical Association has a duty to see the crisis and to devise concrete plans to deal with it. Between now and the opening of the annual meeting, the AHA's Council should endorse the need for a Federal Writers' Project. (Try a conference call, folks.) It should implement this at the meeting itself with an emergency plenary session to announce

this endorsement and to present for discussion by the membership a rough and preliminary description of such a program. It should publicize this and move towards drafting legislation. And it should begin the important work of collaboration on this with other relevant professional societies—including in particular the Organization of American Historians. The times are too serious to allow further evasion of the grim reality. The AHA was chartered by Congress to promote history. Let's do it.

Note: My earlier essay, "History is Worth Fighting For," was accepted by the AHA's *Perspectives On History* for publication (albeit as a letter to the editor). It has not yet been published, while the magazine has moved ahead and published Grafton and Grossman's "Plan C" (November 2011).

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