A WPA for History: Occupy the American Historical Association

written by Jesse Lemisch | January 24, 2012

[*Partly in response to my calls to the American Historical Association to deal with the jobs crisis in the field, AHA President Tony Grafton organized on short notice a special session at the 126th Annual Meeting of the organization in Chicago on January 6, 2012. The session, entitled "Jobs for Historians: Approaching the Crisis from the Demand Side," was well-attended, with about 250 people in the Sheraton Chicago's Ballroom VI. Grafton chaired, and I was one of four speakers. What follows is a slightly longer version of the talk than I was able to give within the session's time limits. (My presentation may be seen on video here).*]

First, my thanks to the AHA and to Tony Grafton for recognizing the gravity of the crisis and setting up this session on short notice. This responsiveness contrasts with the honcho I know at the National History Center in Washington who floored me with his perception of the urgency of the jobs crisis by saying that this is definitely something that the AHA should look into—in 2013!

I want the AHA, and its sister organizations, like the Organization of American Historians, to work now, rapidly and effectively, for a new Works Progress Administration, as well as for increased funding for higher education, which is falling apart—consider as one example the University of California [For one of many accounts, see "State Cuts Fuel California Protests," *Nature,* December 8 2011. Anthony Grafton's good piece, ""Our Universities: Why Are They Failing?" (*New York Review of Books,* November 24, 2011) nonetheless says hardly a word about the role of the collapse of public funding.] We need government funding for students and faculty, just as if this were a civilized country. The Thatcherite two-party consensus is at war with the very idea of public funding. Faculty are being cut, and young historians' students lives are poor, brutish, and endlessly migratory as they travel across the country, trying to put together enough teaching gigs to live on. While we should of course rid ourselves of ancient hierarchies and snobberies about non-academic employment, as Tony Grafton and Jim Grossman have wisely proposed in articles in the AHA's magazine, it's a dead end to tell graduate students who can't find work in academe to find it *outside* academe—where there are no jobs either. We need to *create* jobs, not to parsimoniously redistribute pieces of the shrinking pie. As Thomas Frank puts it in the December *Harper's,* calling, as I do, for a new WPA ["More Government, Please!"] "if we are so concerned about job creation, why not just create jobs?" In advocating this, Frank joins growing ranks, including former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich in *The Nation* and others. A WPA: what an obvious idea!

I live in Manhattan, a few miles north of Zuccotti Park. For all of us, myself included, the Occupy movement has expanded our notion of the possible. But what is called "pragmatism" in the Obama era has infected the thinking of liberal intellectuals, among whom an updated version of End of Ideology pervades, with its dismissal of the obviously necessary as somehow utopian. "Now we are here," say Grafton and Grossman, and, "The reality is what it is." I hear in this echoes of Margaret Thatcher's "There is No Alternative." *Why* accommodate to the unacceptable and accept the current banker-dictated immiseration as somehow necessary and god-given? It's just dead wrong that the AHA should respond to a proposal for a WPA with archaic arguments that we should work "within an existing framework" and function only as a "clearinghouse." It's working within existing frameworks that got us into the hole that we're in, and we're getting deeper and deeper into that hole. We're losing a generation of historians. It's time to say, "enough is enough; expand, don't contract." Where will the money come from? Easy: tax the 1%, and corporate thieves like GE which pay zero corporate

taxes. [For discussion, see the *Atlantic*, here.] We must get over what Wright Mills called "crackpot realism," see clearly what's going on and think clearly about how to fix it. Don't tell people who can't find jobs in academe to look for other jobs outside academe that also don't exist. It's *utopian,* for instance, to urge them to find jobs in government unless we oppose the *shrinking* of government. Might as well tell them to look for jobs as Santa's elves.

(Another example of the limited qualify of AHA's ideas of how political change comes about: executive director Jim Grossman tells me that the way to increase public funding is by "increasing the presence of historians in positions of influence" [email to JL 12/26/11, quoted with permission]. There's an old-fashioned top-down pre-Occupy model of political change for you.)

According to Grossman [December 16], there are congressional cutbacks in process for NEH, NHPRC and other History-related programs, including, Teaching American History and Title VI/Fulbright-Hays. Writing letters to our congresspeople is ineffectual in the face of the loony bipartisan budget-cutting mania, and I hear echoes of Grafton and Grossman's title—"a very modest proposal"—in the kind of thinking that leads the National Coalition for History (of which the AHA is a member) to call a $2 million budget cut for the National Historical Publications and Records Commission a "victory" since the House Appropriations Committee had originally proposed a much larger cut. [The National Coalition for History gives a fuller summary.] Oh my God: Oliver Twist has asked for more! "Submit to the market," is in effect what these people are saying.

A long history in radical caucuses has instructed me in the differences between asking our professional associations to take political as opposed to professional stands. This isn't 1969; I'm not asking the AHA to oppose the war in Vietnam but simply to fight for the narrower but worthy goal of keeping our profession alive. If anything, my proposal can be attacked from the left as merely defending a guild interest. Along with academic freedom struggles, this is the most totally and clearly professional goal that I've ever fought for. Congress chartered the AHA in 1889 to **promote** History. That's what it should do.

Despite Grafton and Grossman's insistence that we get real and abandon utopianism, the things that they propose founder on the rocks of the reality of reduced budgets everyplace: the economic collapse that limits employment in academe also limits employment in museums, archives, editorial fields, government on all levels, and private corporations. So, preparing graduate students for jobs in non academic fields sounds nice, but it will take years to have whatever impact it might have, and the grad students don't have the time: it's deck-chair stuff, while the society and the profession steam towards the iceberg.

Consider the employment situation in two areas that G and G pose as alternatives: museums and archives.

Tony Grafton has a lively piece on historians working in museums in the latest issue of AHA's *Perspectives on History.* But at the back of the book, there are ads for 76 jobs, of which only *one* is non-academic. Some clearinghouse! The person who is the subject of his article on historians in museums has a *temporary* two-year position in a museum, and the article ends somewhat anti-climactically, "Let's hope more institutions find ways to give early-career scholars a taste of public history." This is pious—I almost said pie in the sky—at a time when, speaking of art museums, *Notion's Capitol* reports that "unlike other museums around the country…, one museum [in New York] is hiring"—seeking women at $10 per hour to sleep as part of an exhibition.

Or, consider jobs in archives, another of Grafton and Grossman's major models:

William and Mary College's apprenticeships in museum and archival management, which they

cite as exemplary, have, they acknowledge, "disappeared for budgetary reasons," and it's hard to imagine states hiring more archivists as state budgets collapse. Wisconsin? California? Are you kidding?

So, in the face of all these failures of supposedly practical alternatives to academic jobs, I'm asking for a new WPA. Liberalism in the Obama era is so decayed that it takes a radical to speak up for simple liberal values. I don't share the nostalgia for the New Deal which is rampant in a left that has forgotten the word "socialism." I'm sure that in 1935 I would have had a critique from the left of the inadequacy of the New Deal. So my proposal for a WPA is, within the spectrum of possibilities, quite a moderate one, and should get the support of other professional organizations and individuals, left and right.

What was the New Deal Federal Writers' Project? It lasted from 1935 to 1943, and, with employment as its purpose, provided jobs for some 7535 people [Petra Schindler-Carter's 1996 dissertation "Vintage Snapshots: The Fabrication of a Nation in the WPA American Guide Series"], only some of whom were historians. In History, WPA gave us such landmark projects as the 10,000 pages of interviews with former slaves in the Slave Narratives Collection, the fifty-three volumes of the American Guide Series, and the Historical Records Survey. Of course these things were flawed—consider the Popular Frontism of the state guides, or the artifacts corrupting the interviews with former slaves, as well as outright censorship by some state editors. [For specifics on the latter point, I am indebted to Ken Lawrence, co-editor, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Supplement, Series I,* Volume VI, *Mississippi Narratives* (1977), lxix ff. For the complete work, see George Rawick's monumental *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (41 volumes).] All this means is that, with that experience behind us, we can design better things.

Well, what would a new WPA look like? Tom Frank suggests that we should be sending the unemployed "into the nation's libraries to scan old newspapers and periodicals and make these universally available online." Good—but we can go beyond that to a general program to digitize and make available on line all sorts of local records, census data, etc.

I have been impressed by the beauty and value of what's come through in my thoroughly unscientific sampling of people outside of my usual frame of reference; I've found universal enthusiasm and numerous concrete proposals. We need a new WPA Federal Writers' Project, adapted to the changed times, needs and technologies of today. And with newer technologies, including digitization and the web, just imagine what we can do in making sources available and accessible. And that would provide valuable work for hundreds of historians.

I asked my friend Herbert S. Klein of Stanford, historian of slavery and of Latin America and of the demographic history of the U.S., what he would like to see a new WPA produce. Quantitatively oriented, he pointed me to the work of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure and to Cambridge historians Wrigley and Schofield's *The Population History of England, 1541-1871: A Reconstruction,* which is based on registers of baptisms, births and marriages in 404 parishes. Claire Jarvis, the Leicester geographer, writes of "family reconstitution" of 19th century English rural communities, "ranging from age at marriage and fertility measures to infant and child mortality rates—can be extracted …documents such as tax assessments and poor relief records are linked to the family reconstitution forms." Klein bemoaned the lack of something like this for the U.S. which would have facilitated his work on his *Population History of the United States*.

James Oberly of the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire asks, "what about digitizing microfilmed records of federal agencies for other than genealogical purposes?" For instance, he cites FBI's 1000 reels of "Old German" files consisting of some 400,000 investigations during 1917-1919. Or, consider scanning all the Chicago immigrant newspapers so that they could be

"available in full-text searching," with the non-English materials run "through Google Translator for rough English translations…Much as WPA workers scoured … courthouses in the 1930s making inventories of county records," says Oberle, "two thousand or so 21st century public historians could scan the platbooks and parcel transaction histories stored in each county courthouse to provide the raw materials for the study of the private ownership of land in rural America."

Another noted historian of slavery came up with thrilling ideas: analysis of plantation records in regard to slave families, births and deaths; economic organization of the plantations, production, technologies. Record linkage to allow study of migration locally and westward through individual names in census records, presumably with such records put in electronically searchable form. Height and weight records of prisoners and soldiers; disease and class in hospital and prison records; records for the study of businesses. All in all, says Herb Klein, there's "no lack of employment for several hundred historians."

I should also note that although much of the excitement that I have heard has come from demographically-oriented historians, the sources that they are interested in can be used for reconstructing the lives and even biographies of ordinary people. I have done some of this manually, tracing one Revolutionary War veteran's migrations in the early 19th century using in part the local records assembled in microfilm by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. And for the living, a new WPA could undertake projects in oral history of the scope of the Slave Narratives.

(A word about Ancestor.com, which boasts, "only a few years ago one had to go through huge numbers of library records, micro films [sic], government files and cemetery ledgers in order to trace ones ancestors and build a family tree. Today your ancestors may be just a mouse click away… Download Original Historical Documents." Ann Gordon, who is editor of the Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony at Rutgers, has called my attention to the fact that "we've let a for-profit corporation take over vast amounts of the nation's local public records…You need a subscription to Ancestry to access some of the records of California created and preserved with taxpayers' money…")

Well, how would we get this new WPA? Let me say in regard to implementation that the AHA would hardly be alone in seeking this, and might in fact arrive after the train has left the station, jam-packed with linguists, writers and others. AHA should begin now the important work of collaborating with other relevant professional societies, including the Society of American Archivists, American Studies Association, Association for Documentary Editing, and the Organization of American Historians, as well as the Modern Language Association. Obviously this is of interest beyond the AHA. I ask the AHA to endorse the idea, draw up a draft of legislation, announce the plan and its endorsement, and reach out to the other organizations and work with those in Congress who support History. **Since this is an emergency, these things should be begun right now**, when the Council meets on Sunday (January 8). Perhaps a WPA could be added to John Conyers's Full Employment Bill HR 5204, though it needs to be its own program. And we should also consider the Congressional Progressive Caucus's bill that would "authorize the creation of several 'corps' that will quickly offer jobs to unemployed people." [Without efforts by historians, such well-intentioned legislators will not think of jobs for historians.] Or a WPA might even be established by Executive Order by the President [as proposed by George Fish, "Open Programmatic Proposal to the Broad U.S. Left for Directly Dealing with the Present Unemployment Crisis," *New Politics,* February 3, 2011].

History is worth fighting for. So, in conclusion, I salute the Occupy movement and urge us to emulate them in bringing sanity back into the U.S. mainstream. History, with its reasoned understanding of causality, is more important than ever at a time when irrationality is rampant in public discourse. Finally, there is a moral commandment. We must get real, get serious and obey the

sacred commandment that we take care of our young. Let’s do it!

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Epilogue: after the AHA

Seemingly in response to my earlier articles and those of others, the AHA set up on short notice a session at the annual meeting in which I delivered a shortened version of the above paper. This session seemed in anticipation a generous and open act, but now that it’s over it seems to me that it was, as we used to say, a shuck and a jive. AHA presented the session as an opportunity for the organization to listen (cf. Hillary Clinton’s "listening tour" before her run for the Senate a few years back), but in fact what was heard was, with the exception of my paper, a rehearsal of the points that Grafton and Grossman wanted made, adding up to calls for cultural changes within the profession but not in the least dealing with the jobs catastrophe (which one panelist forthrightly called a "depression"). (For a short account of the session, see Daniel Hertz, "What to Do About Historians’ Job Crisis," *In These Times,* January 9, 2012.) With all this taking place at the Sheraton Hotel, a few miles away from Harpo Studios, where the Oprah show came from, I was struck by the similarities. When the massive catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina hit, Oprah called for private charity, faith, hope and self-esteem. Just like G and G’s call for an end to snobbery about non-academic employment, these things are all benign. But urging people to look for jobs where no jobs exist (museums, archives, etc.) is finally unrealistic, obfuscating and even heartless, certainly a non-solution and an evasion, as I pointed out at the end of the session. We might as well tell graduate students, in Joanne Landy’s words, to look for jobs as Santa’s elves. There was no answer to my question to the panel, "Where will the jobs come from?" Certainly not from the "cultural shift" that one panelist advocated, a sort of turning inward a la Oprah.

I was especially dismayed by the conservative rant—no, I guess it was a liberal rant (the two are sometimes indistinguishable these days)—from panelist Professor Lynn Hunt of UCLA, a former AHA President. She saw nothing but good in the AHA’s role, for which she flacked shamelessly, and in yet another of those get-real moments which we hear so often and so haughtily delivered in the time of Obama, she informed us that it was foolish to expect the American people to tax themselves for benign social goals like a WPA (see the video of her talk). I found this display of Liberal Rage particularly striking at a time when it’s widely agreed that the Occupy movement is forcing into public discourse issues to which the two parties have been utterly blind and opening new possibilities that politicians like New York’s Governor Cuomo are bending with, albeit so far only rhetorically. The times they may be a changin', and the AHA hasn't yet heard the news.

After the session, I was accosted by the same honcho from the National History Center who had earlier urged consideration of the jobs crisis by the AHA—in 2013! He led, in that same get-real mode, with condescension and ridicule: "Jesse, I think there is something to the program that you seek, but you should not imagine that the AHA will take on the State for such a thing."

Others historians of standing (who are liberals but not radicals) responded, as I had, that a WPA program was totally obvious, hardly a contest for State power, and should be non-controversial. These historians could not make sense of the AHA’s passivity. (I now think that AHA’s leadership places the survival of the profession second to the tenacity, even fanaticism, with which they hold to the Obama-esque ideology that calls itself "pragmatism." It's a kind of suicide.)

On a personal note, the reaction that I most enjoyed was that of a graduate student who prefers to remain anonymous. She commented, "for an old dude, you really can kick ass." I hope others will join me in further ass-kicking on behalf of a new WPA.

—January 9, 2012

UPDATE January 21, 2012

After the above was completed, new information came in that the reader should have in hand, since it calls into question the whole position that the AHA has taken previously. At the heart of what Grafton and Grossman have been seeking is a claim of anti-hierarchalism: in order to deal with the job crisis, they want to change the culture of the profession so that non-academic work will no longer be seen as "plan B," but will rather be given dignity and respect equal to that of traditional scholarship and teaching. But in fact, the argument is a stalking horse for a new hierarchy in which PhDs from elite institutions will get what will still be seen as the real jobs as scholars, and the academic proletariat will have to settle for non-academic jobs.

Grafton (University of Chicago AB 1971, AM 1972, PhD 1975) is one of four contributors (three of whom, including Grafton, hold named chairs) to "How Can We Better Prepare PhD Students for Nonacademic Careers?" *University of Chicago Magazine,* January-February 2012. Grafton argues, as he has previously, for preparing history graduate students for careers outside academe. But he also stresses his agreement with Chicago sociology professor Andrew Abbott, who believes that "we should not at all modify our teaching, our aspirations, and our emphases. We are in the business of perpetuating critical scholarship… we should teach to the top of the market." Grafton states in response: "I agree with Andy that we have to keep the knowledge machine rolling, and that **elite departments should be teaching people to join that machine at the top...** [emphasis added].

The translation is clear: the graduates of elite departments should keep the knowledge machine rolling (wow!) as critical scholars, and doors should also be opened to bring PhDs into what Grafton calls "government, policy think tanks, foundations, and other employers that also form part of the knowledge machine…" Grafton and Grossman's seeming quest for equality turns out to be a reinforced two-tier class system in job placement.

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Grafton, Grossman and Lemisch: the debate up to now

The above discussion began with an article by the president and executive director of the American Historical Association: Anthony T. Grafton and Jim Grossman, "No More Plan B: A Very Modest Proposal for Graduate Programs in History," in *Perspectives on History*, October 2011. The same authors followed up with "Plan B: The Debate Continues…", and subsequently they wrote "Plan C?" in *Perspectives on History*, November 2011.

Lemisch disputed Grafton and Grossman in a series of articles: "History is Worth Fighting For: Where is the AHA?" in *Perspectives on History* December 2011 (published earlier on the History News Network: 11/7/11); a rebuttal to Grafton and Grossman's "Plan B": The Debate Continues" (also published earlier on HNN). And finally, leading up to the AHA's annual meeting, Lemisch wrote "Occupy the American Historical Association: Demand a WPA Federal Writers' Project" for the History News Network, on Truthout and on Portside.

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