Responding to a Problem: A W.P.A. for Ph.Ds?

By Kevin Mattson

That a crisis exists in the production of humanities Ph.D.s hardly seems worth restating. With the widespread use of adjunct professors and overworked graduate students, fewer and fewer Ph.Ds are finding full-time gainful employment.

We have all heard the stories of part-time professors rushing from campus to campus, hoping to paste together a living. Few of them have health care benefits; rarely do they receive administrative or institutional support, let alone offices. With 60 percent of college teaching in this country done off the tenure track, the word "crisis" hardly seems an overstatement.

There's now a union movement swelling around these issues. Graduate student teachers and adjunct faculty are starting to fight back. In doing so, they define teaching, researching, and writing as forms of cultural work.

This might not seem so significant, but it challenges some preconceived notions and stereotypes of academics as overfed, underworked individuals incapable of understanding the realities of most working Americans.

Academic labor organizing is premised on the fact that white-collar, highly educated people can be exploited just like other workers. A poster from the graduate student organizing drive at Yale University a few years back showed a harried graduate student huddled over a stack of exam papers. She sweats and thinks to herself: "This isn't work, this isn't work, this isn't…" We all know, of course, that it is.

As someone inspired both by this new labor movement and by history—what I went to graduate school to learn—I am reminded of the Great Depression, a time when America's overall labor crisis and the drive to organize for union membership reached their greatest heights.

In retrospect, what seems remarkable about the New Deal's response to unemployment is not

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just its support of labor organizing—the famous Wagner Act of 1935—but its broad support of cultural workers through public relief.

I believe that—in addition to organizing—we must think about a wider variety of public responses to the mounting academic labor crisis. To do so, I suggest we explore the concept of what I will call *public cultural work* and some of the possibilities offered by history.

I should caution: What I discuss here is more a "thought exercise" than a public policy statement. I will not be outlining what exactly needs to be done but suggesting how we should be thinking about our contemporary situation in light of history.

By the beginning of the 20th century, many writers were already realizing how similar they were to other American workers. Due to the advent of steam-and electric-powered presses and the growth of a national market, magazines and newspapers grew in circulation during the early 20th century. The writer became less inspired by a romantic calling and more by the demands of businessmen concerned with the bottom line.

As the historian Christopher Wilson explains, the early 20th century saw an increase in "high-risk promotion, larger circulation, more advertising, and more promotion" at newspapers and magazines.[1] Writers had become workers, churning out words and articles the way those in factories churned out clothes or other commodities.

When the Depression hit in the 1930s, things, of course, turned much worse for writers. There was little work to be found. A range of organizations—some communist-influenced, others not—started to organize for public relief.

On the left, there was the Writers Union and the Unemployed Writers Association, while in the center was the Authors Guild. All of of these organizations agreed that something must be done to employ writers and to provide them with fair wages. Out of these demands arose the idea that public cultural work served an important role in a democracy.

By the mid 1930s, with President Roosevelt's New Deal flourishing, the federal government responded to the overall crisis of unemployment by creating the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

Under the leadership of Harold Ickes, the WPA workers wound up, as one historian points out, building "more than 20,000 playgrounds, schools, hospitals, and airfields."[2]

This was a bold move by the government, premised as it was on the idea that work could be centered around not just private profit but *public* benefits. After all, those

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parks and playgrounds were to be used by the public for community activities and nourishment.

The *cultural* meaning of work changed because of this; work could now be seen as a collective act committed to building a public realm. As Harry Boyte and Nancy Kari point out, the New Deal established an "interplay between the activity of tens of millions of citizens and government agencies and initiatives" and thereby "generated a sense of powerful partnership, and the feeling that the nation was gaining control over its collective destiny."[3] The idea of public work was central to this national recovery.

Writers got special relief in the form of the Federal Writers' Project (1935-1943). As Henry Alsberg, the leader of this initiative, explained, the government had decided to "care for the large number of destitute writers who were fighting off starvation throughout the country."[4] In return for support, writers were expected to work on projects that could be of use to fellow citizens: Writing was to have a civic function.

The FWP became famous for producing state and city guidebooks. These works provided insight into cultural traditions in different states and regions. They had practical uses—telling a reader, for instance, where a famous landmark could be found—and could also be seen as literary works that tried to explain what local regions contributed to the wider values and culture of America.

The cultural critic Lewis Mumford called these guidebooks "the first attempt, on a comprehensive scale, to make the country itself worthily known to Americans."[5] The guidebooks stood as a prime example of public cultural work—the sort that benefited a wide cross-section of American citizens.

Work on the guidebooks also led to a general interest in folklore and history at the FWP. One FWP, book, *The Negro of Virginia,* became, in the words of Jerre Mangione, "a gold mine of black history and folklore which is widely regarded as a classic of its kind."

The FWP encouraged writers to explore folklore and regional historical traditions by interviewing local citizens. These interviews led to publications accessible to wide numbers of American readers.

As Mangione points out, this interest in folklore rescued it from "the academically embalmed atmosphere in which it had long been contained" and brought it "to a large audience that was hungry for the kind of Americana which reflected the nation's varied personality."[6] It also showed that writers and researchers could fill a public role in creating a democratic culture.

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So why isn't an institution like the FWP still with us today? For numerous reasons, key among them the rise of the Cold War. The FWP—along with federal government support for the visual and performing arts—was killed in the 1940s when certain Congressmen accused the project of being communist-inspired. The accusations were false, but they stuck.

It also seemed that, since America pulled itself out of the depression, largely due to World War II, there was less need for federal support of cultural work.

Even without these factors, though, there were some internal tensions within the FWP before it came under attack. For example, it was not clear if the program was intended to create good writing or simply provide work for unemployed writers—a question John Steinbeck once posed sharply.[7] There was another tension: Was this writing supposed to celebrate America as it was or criticize the nation's shortcomings?

These sorts of tensions certainly created problems for the program. Nonetheless, for a brief moment, the program had achieved some major accomplishments in putting writers back to work, forging something of a democratic culture, and pioneering the idea of public cultural work.

The idea that cultural production was a form of democratic public work did not die out when Congress killed the FWP. Certainly there was prosperity in the postwar world—a prosperity that writers shared in by finding gainful employment at magazines and other institutions—but there were other troublesome tendencies for cultural workers.

During the 1950s, numerous writers expressed alienation from public life. Sometimes the complaints were directed at a rising conformity among Americans; at other times, towards the rise of a consumer mass culture that seemed hollow and fake.

C. Wright Mills, a radical social critic, did the most to spell out the reasons for many cultural workers' anxiety.

During the 1950s, Mills began to ponder how intellectuals' alienation might be related to the "cultural apparatus," which he defined as:

> the organizations and milieux in which artistic, intellectual, and scientific work goes on, and of the means by which such work is made available to circles, publics, and masses.

Thus, the cultural apparatus could be described as the means by which information is "produced and distributed… and consumed." Mills explained, "It contains an elaborate

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set of institutions: of schools and theaters, newspapers and census bureaus, studios, laboratories, museums, little magazines, radio networks."

These institutions, Mills argued, separated the intellectual from his or her audience. "Others who own and operate the mass media stand between us [intellectuals] and our potential publics." This was the source of the intellectual's or cultural workman's generalized alienation during the 1950s as Mills saw it.[8]

Mills had personal experiences with what could be called intellectual proletarianization—the turning of intellectuals into slavish dependents on the cultural apparatus. He always felt that Columbia University, where he taught, never gave him the support he deserved. His private papers include numerous letters between him and deans at Columbia complaining about feeling alienated from the institution.

Mills's experience with publishers produced the same sort of animosity. At one point, he explained to a friend that he felt like "a slave to Prentice Hall."

Mills admitted that, since he was unwilling to bend on many issues related to the cultural apparatus, his work was meant for "intimate publics, especially today when the mass public is exploited and ruined by the competition of debasing products of the mind."

The only response Mills formulated for this gloomy scenario was for intellectuals to reappropriate the cultural apparatus. Intellectuals, Mills argued, should "use" the means of the cultural apparatus "as we think they ought to be used... We should write and speak for these media on our own terms or not at all."

Mills doled out the same advice to professors in academia: "I grow weary of complaining professors in America who allow themselves to be exploited—turned into tired and routine people, or into effective entertainers—rather than demand that staffs be enlarged sufficiently to enable men and women to be properly educated, and educators to control the serious work they have to do."

To explain the reasoning behind his call to cultural independence, Mills used the principle of "craftsmanship" as it applied to intellectual production—the term itself was most fully developed and used earlier by Thorstein Veblen. The independent craftsperson produced things independently, finding pride in that sort of working environment. Mills described "craftsmanship" as "the central experience of the unalienated human being and the very root of free human development."[9]

His concern with the status of

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cultural work and the centralization of the cultural apparatus had an important impact on the New Left of the 1960s. Other intellectuals who thought about the meanings of a New Left, like Paul Goodman, also grappled with the limitations of the cultural apparatus.[10]

Most importantly here, Mills's arguments showed that more was needed than just the market if Americans expected to create a democratic culture open to diverse viewpoints and debate. But Mills believed that intellectuals and scholars, on their own, could do something about these problems, and probably for this reason, he never proposed something like the FWP for his own day and age. But he did make clear that the idea of cultural work and its implications had staying power even after the era of the New Deal passed.

One of the key intellectuals influenced by Mills was William Appleman Williams. Williams was a historian most known for his penetrating critique of "American empire" and his influence on a new generation of New Left historians.

In 1979, long after the New Left had faded into oblivion, Williams became president of the Organization of American Historians. He noticed fewer and fewer Ph.D.s finding jobs. He also realized that the federal government was fast destroying documents that had historical significance.

Williams suggested that the government employ Ph.D.s to work on preserving documents. As Williams's biographers, Paul Buhle and Edward Rice-Maximin, point out, "In effect, Williams wanted a historians' version of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration…"[11] Williams's idea never came to fruition—he tried to obtain grants but failed. But what it represented was the rebirth of an old idea in a new context.

From 1979 to the present, much more so than during the time Mills wrote, academia serves as one of the few places where cultural work is nurtured.

Some social critics complain about this, seeing academic specialization as depleting a supply of "public intellectuals." But the reality is that with the increasing commercialization of other realms of popular culture, academia seems one of the few places where a new generation can find ways to pursue cultural work.

But academia is failing to provide secure venues for its younger members. Today, the idea of cultural work informs labor organizing. And it seems an opportune moment to renew the idea of cultural work and think through what William Appleman Williams only started to suggest. Today, we need a WPA for

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humanities Ph.D.s more than ever.

What type of useful work might unemployed or underemployed Ph.D.s actually do and what would a WPA for humanities Ph.D.s actually look like?

Following Mills's thinking, such an effort must facilitate interaction between intellectuals and scholars and a wider public—in the process, creating a democratic culture.

Williams's suggestion about working on document preservation seems only a starting point. English and history Ph.D.s could work with high school teachers to improve outdated textbooks and curricula. Historians could do interviews with residents in nursing homes—providing the elderly a chance to intermingle with a younger generation while also giving young historians access to important information.

There could be a whole host of community-education projects that young Ph.D.s could initiate. They could, for example, help organize and teach community education programs for disadvantaged adults—the Clemente Course in the Humanities is one such program. Historians could work with local librarians to put on community exhibits, reconnecting academia to local civic institutions in the process. These are just a few of the things that could be done.[12]

These things get little mention today because our contemporary political discourse has shifted hard and fast to the right. The idea that state or national government could step in to help a portion of the population who is finding it hard to find gainful employment seems destined for the dustbin of history.

The New Deal, we are told, is over. It was a lot easier during the Great Depression to justify anything like a WPA or FWP. Back then, the idea that government could help make up for the weaknesses of the market was a much more popular idea.

Today we need to reassert the idea of public work's relevance to a democratic society. We need to make clear that American culture cannot thrive when it relies solely on an entertainment industry. We need to renew the idea that culture is made through the local and public activities of citizens.

None of this will be easy because of the dominance of what I would call "market think," but also because of the demise of cultural nationalism.

Clearly, the FWP guidebooks were based on the idea that Americans shared a common culture. Many today would deny that such a common culture exists. Others would argue that academicians are far too contrarian to be at all interested in creating a common civic culture.

What would have to be renewed

to make the idea of a WPA work is a sense that rights and responsibilities need to be balanced. If we are to provide resources to underemployed academics, then we must expect their work will help nurture goods that are valuable to the public.

Their work would have to make a contribution to civic and community life. On the other hand, we would have to respect the idea of academic freedom. As with other governmental programs, a WPA for Ph.D.s would demand difficult balancing acts.

With these difficulties in mind, we should not forget the very real problem that informs the idea of a WPA for Ph.D.s—academic unemployment. There is a whole new generation of scholars not able to find meaningful work.

I am convinced that something should be done for them and that we could expect in return for their efforts a richer civic culture. I believe this because it has been done in the past, albeit sporadically and in very different contexts.

What I offer here is merely a thought-exercise—some reflections on history and ruminations on the present. We may very well never witness a WPA for Ph.D.s. But I think our country would be much better off if we tried our best to get there. ■

Endnotes:

[1] Wilson, pp. 18, 49.

[2] McElvaine, p. 265.

[3] Boyte and Kari, p. 106.

[4] Alsberg quoted in Mangione, p. 97.

[5] Mumford quoted in Mangione, p. 216.

[6] Mangione, pp. 259, 277.

[7] See Alexander, p. 204.

[8] All of this draws from Mattson, forthcoming. See also Denning.

[9] Mattson, forthcoming.

[10] Mattson, forthcoming.

[11] Buhle and Rice-Maximin, p. 226

[12] I am indebted to Zimmerman for some of these ideas.

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