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The Federal Writers' Project and the Creation of Hegemony

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On the surface, the products of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) were to be used to reassure an anxious public that the programs of Roosevelt's New Deal could provide security and resolve the American political, economic, and ideological conflicts of the 1930s. The writers were populists, appealing to the American people through the publishing of life histories, folklore, and guides to America. By their Federal charter, the Federal Writers' Project was to create a popular consensus that would steer the American public towards an acceptance of the New Deal. However, the workers of the Federal Writers' Project subverted these orders and took it upon themselves to create a mythic past, an American social democratic utopia.

The Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration was approved for government monies in June of 1935. The Federal Writers produced the American Guides, a classic series of state guidebooks, which offer a unique sampling of the United States and remain the project's best known undertaking. In its waning years, the project also recorded the life histories of more than 10,000 Americans. These publications express the project's concern with the direction America was taking both abroad and locally.

The products of the Federal Writers Project, specifically the American Guide series, were a significant literary social force that redefined who Americans were in the period between the two World Wars. The images they provided helped guide America away from the fascism that swept across Europe in the same period. The Arts project used less than seven percent of the WPA's budget but was able to bring about what Fortune magazine called "A sort of cultural revolution in America" (Stott 103). The WPA was there to document American life and to create a new American mythology. They prepared studies like *The Negroes of Nebraska*, and *The Armenians of Massachusetts*, and recorded the life histories of the American working class. In a country starved for reassurance in the grips of the Great Depression, the American Guide series of the Federal Writers' Project was supposed to work as a reminder of why Americans must stick by Roosevelt's New Deal democracy. The writers of the guides put a twist on their assignment, however, and were actually espousing social democracy. The guides would also be used to further the cultural hegemony that was developing as a result of the widespread, widely read products of the FWP.

The American Guide project was announced publicly on Monday, October 28, 1935. Katherine Kellock, Tour Editor of the FWP and one of the progenitors of the American Guide Series, told the FWP writers to refer to texts like Beards' Rise of American Civilization, which she felt to be an example of writing that fulfilled what she saw as the guides' purpose: "to educate Americans for an evaluation of their own civilization" (Penkower 25). Henry Alsberg, director of the FWP, said of the occasion, "The purpose of the American Guide is to assemble all the data that some 125,000,000 inhabitants possess about their country, boil it down to . . . convenient size . . . and put it into the hands of people who don't realize wonders exist at their own door" (Penkower 25). Alsberg believed the Guides should encompass an appreciation of American history and culture as a way of preserving the traditions that created democracy, as well as serving as actual travel aids (McDonald 665). In justifying the guide series to Congress he remarked, "One cannot simply pick at random a trolley line or subway and expect to be carried into new and pleasing scenes. One must be guided in choosing his line of transportation" (Penkower 143). Indeed, the FWP was guiding Americans in more than their selection of mass transit; it was also enforcing their own ideology. Even the word "guide" functions as both a noun and a verb. These WPA publications function as both a guide to America and a guide on how to be an American.

Although several strictly historical accounts of the FWP exist, there has been no attempt to view it through a theoretical lens. In some cases, examinations which viewed the project as more than quaint Americana have met outright hostility, especially in the field of Oral History, as a perusal of the discipline's journals can prove. It is not surprising to realize that no significant studies of the cultural and national politics of

identity embedded within the writings of the Federal Writers' Project exist. It has become a fact that American interwar propaganda has received comparatively little study as opposed to the more intensive forays into the cultural products of the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and Fascist Italy. It is perhaps this silence that speaks the loudest.

The texts created by the Federal Writers' Project can be seen in many ways: pre-war anti-fascist propaganda, facetious Americanism, New Deal busy work, or perhaps most aptly, as a politicized documentary of the times with a social democratic slant. Although guidebooks are not usually considered as belonging to the genre of documentary, these texts qualify as documentaries because they provide both factual information and humanistic emotion. William Stott, in his book, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, expands the idea of documentary past the conventional idea of the National Geographic film or New York Times journalism to include all "human documents": photos, folklore, films, poems, everything created to explain the human condition. Documentaries, Stott says, are the presentations of texts in such a way they are seen as credible by a consensus of people. This consensus was what the FWP was seeking both through its federal mission and its own subversive mission. Their varied products: essays, guidebooks, oral history, and creative writing, qualify as documentary because it is the appearance of fact or the widespread acceptance of a text as fact that matters in the definition of documentary. This documentary ideal can be inserted into any medium or genre (Stott 14). The documentary fact gains more credence by the presentation of it in an authoritative form; for example, a book, film, or newspaper, rather than the untrustworthy oral medium. A fact in the documentary sense, specifically in the case of the Federal Writers, is taking a disputed disjointed, phonocentric history and turning it into an acceptable, ordered, written history.

Through the creation of documentary fact, the FWP was clearly seeking to establish a hegemony from the bottom up. First they had themselves established as an authority by merit of the Federal recognition, monies, and charter which specified that they were to teach Americans about America. Second they set about re-writing history, capturing the stories of the worker and presenting it as a documentary expression that would hopefully lead to the establishment of a social democratic hegemony.

The idea of the FWP products as erased documentary suggests an interpretation of the FWP American Guide series as a failed attempt at the creation of hegemony. Jonathon Harris suggests the presence of an attempt at hegemonic creation within the Federal Art Project (FAP) based on the writings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci in this interwar period and elaborated on in the 1960s and 1970s by the Greek Marxist Nicos Poulantzas. Hegemony, as defined by Gramsci, is the social and political identity as constructed and maintained by the combined power of a particular class. The construction of the national-popular was key: ". . . the particular form in which the hegemonic ethnic-political element presents itself in the life of the State and the country is ' patriotism' and 'nationalism' which is 'popular religion' that is to say, it is the link by means of which the unity of leaders and led is effected" (Gramsci, in Mouffe, 194).

One of the main missions of the FWP was to take the previously unrecorded oral history of outsiders, that is, those of the working class and of races other than white, and turn that spoken language into written language. In so doing, they lent respectability and import. It is vital to understand that this attempt to create hegemony was foremost in the minds of the FWP. With the erasure of the FWP as documentation comes the erasure of a certain group's culture which in turn gaps the collective memory. In this respect, Gramsci is important for us today because we face not "the problem of a cultural and anthropologic reality, but the survival of a cultural and anthropological reality" (Mouffe 60) become very important. Because American cultural diversity has been largely reduced to quaintness in the interest of a nationally homogeneous culture, I think it is also important to emphasize that Gramsci's *Osservazioni sul folclore* has contributed to establishing oral history as the products of cultures to be studied in the attempt to reconstruct these cultures as ones which are oppositional and subaltern. In this aspect, Luigi Lombardi Satriani is a most important contemporary scholar is who has extended the Gramscian base into a consideration of folklore as a "culture of contestation." By taking the folklore of the people, adding their particular political agenda, and raising it to the level of the facts found in history books, the FWP was lending governmental authority to the establishment and continuation of the worker, the black, the Indian: American cultures of contestation.

The battle between the ownership of folklore that the FWP expressed so eloquently in its life histories and state guides is still being fought today. In the late twentieth century, however, the battle has become even more subtle. Without a Federally sponsored program to define Americanism, we turn away from the term "folklore" and to the words "popular memory," although they mean much the same thing. Folklore functioned as reminders and warnings as well as codes of instruction the same way popular memory would function today if it were allowed to. Michel Foucault argues that the greatest battle today is being fought over popular memory. Like Gramsci, Foucault writes that even when separated from the

apparatuses that build, record, and make history real, common people still record their history one way or another.

There exists establishment history and what Foucault terms a "popular memory." "It's an actual fact that people - I'm talking about those who are barred from writing, from producing their books themselves, from drawing up their historical accounts, that these people nevertheless do have a way of recording history, or remembering it, of keeping it fresh and using it (95). Foucault goes on to explain that he believes that in the contemporary era, a "whole number of apparatuses have been set up (popular literature, cheap books and the stuff that's taught in school as well) to obstruct the flow of this popular memory" (94). It is my belief that the Federal Writers, through the establishment and acceptance of these documentary expressions of American cultures of contestation, were able to capture and create an American popular memory from the commoners and transpose these thoughts into writing.

To further their hegemonic ends, the FWP could not have chosen a better propaganda tool. As war clouds gathered, reviewers lauded the guidebooks as restorers of pride in the states and nation. After the Oklahoma guide, The WPA Guide to 1930s Oklahoma was published in 1941, the series won plaudits as one of the best peace time efforts to unite the populace (Penkower 220). Because the publications were travel guides, people were less likely to be turned off by the persuasive and instructional tone. What was published and was blue-penciled out (i.e., the editorial and ideological processes of inclusion and exclusion) provide a guide not only to the state in question, but to a state of mind as well.

Most of the strictly historical accounts of the WPA are squeamish about suggesting that there was any sort of popular movement being defined in the Guides. William McDonald, in his meticulously researched *Federal Relief and the Arts*, is no exception. In fact, McDonald goes so far as to say that the "national scope and special character" of the Guides that Alsberg mentioned again and again was "simply the fact that it called for a guide in every state," a brushing over of the facts if there ever was one, and clearly the sort of erasure that has constantly buried the FWP's true contribution to the nation (684).

Although often accused of slip-shod organization, the FWP actually had very specific rules for organizing and writing the guides. These rules assured that the guides would all carry the same Social Democratic thrust. The flow of copy was labyrinthine. Manuscripts were routed from the individual writer in the state project to the checker whose duty was to note the arrival of the unproofed copy and be responsible for its whereabouts while it was in Washington DC. From the checker, the article was passed to the reviewer: Cronyn, before he was fired early in his career, and Alsberg the rest of the time. After it received the reviewer's okay, it went back to the state office to the checker to the general editor to the field editor. It was within this circuitous route that author attributability was erased and unity of mission was achieved. McDonald insists that the federal reviewer's job was to give the work only a "cursory" glance. However, he later goes on to quote Stella Hanau, who worked at the Federal FWP offices, as saying that the reviewer, " . . . read the cities [city guides within state guides] completely and the essays completely, and made suggestions and criticisms . . . Very often if you wrote an essay that wasn't right (emphasis mine) he'd say, 'Why don't you start with this?'" (670).

Clearly these are more than cursory glances. McDonald claims that this multiple checking system was to ensure "accuracy and literary style" (669), yet as a whole, the Guides are wildly inaccurate; distances are off by miles, buildings are attributed to the wrong architects, entire towns are misplaced, and mistakes in punctuation and spelling run rampant. It is my belief that the "multiple checking" system was not to ensure grammatical correctness, but political correctness.

Indeed, Alsberg's assistant George Cronyn ran into trouble after admitting to the state offices, via memo, that he was uncomfortable with establishing himself or the Federal office of the FWP as final authority, "In regard to final authority no one in the organization can be granted such power. I do not myself exercise it, nor does anyone else. I must feel free to modify and delete many items of criticism that I feel are unwise as part of our general policy. Especially, in connection with every comment, from archaeology to tours, phrases implying reproof or condescension have been and will be modified. We will continue to offer advice but will not issue orders, except in a general way" (McDonald 670). As this came in direct contrast to what Alsberg believed, Cronyn was relieved of his duties. In their quest for a new hegemony, the series relied on comments of "reproof."

The issue of race consciousness is handled with a less than subtle touch in the American Guides. In the introduction to the South Carolina guide, note is made of the fact that consideration was given to a separate "Negro Guide Book" (xiii). The suggestion of segregated, separate but unequal, American guidebooks suited the temper of many, especially in the South. The distribution and percentage of black workers on a state-to-state basis was scattered. The greatest number of black federal writers worked in the New York City, Illinois and Louisiana projects where they had been assigned to prepare histories of

their race in those states. However, Indiana had only one Black writer as did Rhode Island and Nevada. Iowa employed two African-American writers while Oregon and Connecticut each had one.

This lack of African-American input is noticeable. Many of the Philadelphia Guide's comments about Black Pennsylvanians suggested that the work was written with preconceived notions about Black life. This was prominently displayed in the section on Voodoo religion and its practices. The guide described the " 'black art' shop with its gruesome tidbits: snakes, frogs, scorpions, potent herbs, mummies reputed to be many thousands of years old, and books of instruction in magic." It pointed out that "some few Negro folk still patronize the medicine man, who, posing as a licensed spiritualist, performs his secret rites and works charms for those who can pay" (Penkower 69). This reflected a racial bias that, according to its federal charter, the WPA was supposed to avoid. No other ethnic groups were described in such a negative fashion, including the various religious sects of the Pennsylvania Germans, who were presented as quaint with their severe clothing and strict adherence to Sunday worship.

Most of this can be laid at the feet of the interviewers. The same documentary process which enabled them to insert their ideology into the guides sometimes worked against their overall goal. The interviewers were for the most part untrained, but they were given general instructions which included not influencing the viewpoint of the informant, withholding their own view of slavery , and recording all stories "as nearly word-for-word as possible," but to avoid dialect spelling where it would confuse the reader. The interviews were recorded in the interviewer's handwriting, not via tape recorder, and later were typewritten (Soapes 33). The language representation may have come out of " . . . the dominant culture's ignorance about African-American and slave culture" (Young 56).
Compounding the problem was that many of the white FWP interviewers, ignorant in the ways of collecting oral histories, exercised white privilege in their interactions with the ex-slaves and were often blatantly condescending toward them. White interviewers referred to the ex-slave women and men as "Aunty," "Uncle," or "Mammy," thereby perpetuating plantation dynamics. The ex-slaves, in turn, referred to their interviewees as "Maser," "Mistress," or even "lil Missy," all names intrinsically tied to the institution of slavery. Even worse, white interviewers openly referred to the Blacks as "darkies" or even "niggers" during the interviewing process. Mrs. William Holmes of Mississippi wrote of one of her interviewees, "Adam Singleton is so black, he shines; all his teeth are gone. He looks more like an ape than any darky I've visited yet" (Rawick 2120).

Nowhere was this ignorance more pronounced than in the WPA treatment of the Negro dialect or that which can be called the Black English vernacular. The WPA interviewers were given a standard dialect form to use. The form's purpose was based on the belief that all Southern Blacks spoke exactly the same. In effect this weakened the interview because the voices melded into one and squelching individualism. Many times the interviewer asked questions and wrote the answers down in the sketchiest detail, then later filled in the form using the "acceptable dialect". In fact, there are many examples of Black people who spoke Standard English having dialect attributed to them (David and Gates 88). So by putting everything into the dialect sponsored and endorsed by the FWP, they could create a sort of meta-working class Negro. In doing this, though, they lost much of the individuality of the people.

The portrayal of women in the guides is problematic as well. Many times in the Federal Writers' texts, women are mentioned only when they are furthering a radical political cause, or when they show up as wives or daughters, mothers or whores. The Croton-on-Hudson chapter of the New York guidebook leaves out huge segments of women's contribution. New York's women rate only the description of the upstate community inhabited by "Edna St. Vincent Millay . . . Doris Stevens . . . and Mabel Dodge . . . [who were] causing considerable excitement among the natives as it was reported that the women wore shorts, smoked cigarettes and took sun baths" (Hobson 224). Although it's tongue-in-cheek in its description and tweaking of middle-class mores, there's no discussion of the situation of the average woman that led shorts, smokes, and sun-lit snoozes to become shocking. It is one thing to say that history tends to remember those who make records and quite another to gloss over women completely in a guide that, in the words of Grace Overmenyer, was supposed to be a "sort of road map for the cultural rediscovery of America from within" (Stott 110).

Despite these drawbacks, it is proved time and time again that the writers of the guides were pushing for class solidarity. This push is clearly reflected in the series. *South Carolina: The Guide to the Palmetto State* was written with the idea that the "Old South" needed to be shucked off and that the emergent South would need to destroy class differences. At the same time the guide needed to keep in mind the memory of economic slavery for both Blacks and whites. In a 1937 editorial report, as retold in the introduction of *Guide to the Palmetto State*, the South Carolina state staff was told the term "The War for Southern Independence" had no historical authority. In the same report, they were criticized for the use of class distinctions that are evident in the essay on the fine arts. Singled out was the use of such terms as

"aristocracy," "higher castes of society," and "working classes." The report noted that such social distinctions were out of place in a publication sponsored by the federal government (ix). Simply mentioning these terms showed that America, as it stood, was not an egalitarian democracy. It showed that people were starving while others got rich, that people had kept slaves miserably to improve their own social and economic standing. Writing these things down was an admission that the system had problems and needed to be fixed.

However, the class issue continued to be a sticking point for the Guide writers. On one hand, to further their message of peaceful and gradual change, they needed to point out the mistakes and problems of the past. On the other, their federal charter demanded that they tell the American public that our system worked in the past, it was working now (albeit with a minor glitch -- the Great Depression) and would continue to work in the future. In the case of South Carolina, the writers would not budge. Mabel Montgomery replied on behalf of South Carolina, "We admit to the above position because the aristocratic ideal and class consciousness have been characteristic of the State whether obvious or not, whether discernable or not -- a picture of the past in South Carolina, particularly in the arts, is both incomplete and inaccurate without each reference" (vii).

To the writers of the FWP, both the past and the future were hypotheses. They saw the beginnings of an erasure and homogenization of certain groups of Americans. Their intent, through the massive documentation of these Americans was to persuade the United States onto a different political path than the one on which it was headed. These men and women, both documentators and documented, are basically unknown today. Many historians who, at first glance, would seem to have more invested in the reemergence of the guides than literary scholars, are content to see them as nostalgic, but harmless, snapshots of the time period. November 10-16 of 1941 was declared "American Guide Week" by the White House in honor of the completion of the last publication of the Federal Writers' Project (Mangione 351). By the time World War II began in 1941, the FWP was, for all intents and purposes, dead. It limped along with some effort to endear itself to the hawkish moods of Congress by suggesting that there could be some sort of work for them if funds were allocated. They were not. It is interesting to imagine what tact the writers would have taken had they been sponsored during the war. There was a proposal that the FWP should "assist in gathering information for use in preparation of releases for magazines and newspapers . . . [and] prepare military histories of states"(McDonald 689). With the controversy surrounding the literature they had produced up to that point, it is doubtful that they really felt funding would be achieved.

America has a rich, radical literary past. It has been effectively erased from popular memory for a number of reasons, most of them ideological. The WPA Guides, which exploited many of the ideas which would influence literary criticism: the tension between the spoken and written word, the authority of the written word as document and the creation or fabrication of "fact", is a part of that erased literary tradition. In addition, the guides are uniquely American in that they make an appeal to individuality while emphasizing a common Social Democratic tradition as well as a Utopian future. The guides are a valuable key or entry point to that radical literary history. The reclamation of these voices and this literature is an important and long term project.

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