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The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Political Action

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We all know about the very physical legacy of Franklin Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA): Dealey Plaza in Dallas, the Fort Peck dam in Montana, LaGuardia Airport in New York City, Griffith Observatory in Los Angeles, the Merritt Parkway in Connecticut, Midway Airport in Chicago, the River Walk in San Antonio, and over 100,000 roads and bridges, waterworks, schools, libraries, hospitals, post offices, dormitories, auditoriums, stadiums, and recreational facilities in towns and cities across the nation. But most of us don't know about the cultural legacy: the American Guides, a series of travel-cum-local-color books, one for each state, penned by unemployed writers around the country. It is this cultural legacy that Wendy Griswold investigates in *American Guides: The Federal Writers' Project and the Casting of American Culture*.

The arts project was the first one proposed by the WPA. It focused on finding employment for creative people in four fields: art, music, drama, and writing. In the face of intense criticism and contestation among

American Guides: The Federal Writers' Project and the Casting of American Culture, by **Wendy Griswold**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. 361 pp. \$35.00 paper. ISBN: 9780226357836.

writers' associations, the architects of the WPA's writers' project chose a seemingly innocuous task for writers to tackle: develop travel guides to the 48 states, two territories (Alaska and Puerto Rico), and several cities. To explain how this came about, Griswold guides us through a history of the WPA, putting it in context with other state and federal relief programs, and then dissects the seven-year (1936 to 1943) life of the writers' project in particular. To ground these developments in their cultural context, she tours the history of guidebooks, starting with antiquity and continuing up to the twentieth century. She next explores the history of travel, tourism, and vacations.

In the heart of the book, Griswold describes the writing, editing, and publishing process in detail; dissects the guides and assesses their likely readers; analyzes the authors and the literary works highlighted in the Guides' literature essays; and charts their impact on Americans' views of culture in general and literature in particular. There was constant tension between central and state control over hiring, writing output, and publishing, which played out in the face of threatened funding cuts and layoffs, as well as in negative comments in newspapers. There was also tension between the need to provide jobs in all states, regardless of the number of unemployed writers, and the fact that most writers were concentrated in a few cities, specifically New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.

In an average year, the project employed 4,500 to 5,200 writers, with each state office having a staff of about 100 writers. These included such notables as John Cheever, Zora Neale Hurston, and Studs Terkel, but most were unknowns who remained unknowns. Indeed, in places far from the centers of cultural production, many were not even professional writers. Staff would gather information from newspaper archives, interview locals, travel and see the sites, draw maps, and suggest travel routes. They sent field notes to the state office, where more experienced writers and editors would transform them into copy. In turn, state offices sent material to the central (Washington, D.C.) office for review, often incurring harsh rebukes about poor quality or inappropriate focus.

Revisions could take many rounds—something that reverberates with sociologists trying to get papers published in academic journals. The D.C. office pushed for standardization; the state offices resisted, but ultimately had to comply. Tensions rose between D.C. staff and state directors over the content of guides—for example, state directors wanted literature essays to focus on books written by people from their state and about their state, while D.C. staff wanted to balance quality and local flavor. This was a critical issue, because those who would review the Guides were familiar

with literature—indeed, members of the literati—far more than they were with other states' history, economy, geography, sites, and travel routes. Therefore, reviews of the Guides would depend heavily on reviewers' responses to the literature essays.

The first state Guides appeared early in 1937, the last in 1942. The project yielded some 600 publications (including items that were mimeographed instead of printed), in the form of Guides, city and county histories, school pamphlets, and children's books. In addition, project staff took on myriad library projects. Pushed by the D.C. office, most state Guides had five sections: general information (short), calendar of events (also short), essays (typically on nature, history, the economy, and culture; on average almost one-fourth of the guide, although this varied across state Guides), tours (about half), and cities (about one-fourth). All contained photos and maps. Some Guides also contained information on parks and wilderness areas. Interestingly, Guides offered extremely limited information about where travelers could eat or sleep. These were door-stoppers: the typical state Guide was over 500 pages long. Because these guidebooks contained both travel route information and historical and cultural reference information, they were geared toward two different audiences: readers (students and adults interested in America) and travelers.

As befits a book about regionalism and print culture, Griswold demonstrates consistently and clearly how the decision to publish one Guide for each state (along with Guides for the Alaska and Puerto Rico territories, plus D.C. and New York City) effectively "cast American literature into state-shaped molds" (p. 176). Authors were identified by the state where they were born, wrote about, or lived for some period; and their literary output was identified as being from and about that state, or related in some indirect way to that state's literary culture. The distribution of authors is right-skewed. Of the 2,785 authors mentioned by name, the vast majority were mentioned by a single state Guide (2,375, or 85.3 percent) or two states' Guides (278, or 10.0 percent). But on the right tail of this distribution, a tiny

fraction of authors was mentioned in five or more states' Guides (34, or 1.2 percent). Two authors—Washington Irving and Mark Twain—were mentioned in a whopping 12 states' Guides.

Griswold's analysis of the set of writers mentioned in the Guides reveals three biases: literary, which was seen in selection of the critical canon (e.g., Twain and Irving); political, which was seen in the dismissal or absence of authors who were perceived as conservative (e.g., Edith Wharton); and gender, which was seen in the neglect of female writers, even when they were highly lauded and their works were best sellers (e.g., Pearl S. Buck). Her demographic analysis, which encompasses gender, race/ethnicity, time (date of birth), location (place of birth and whether or not the Guide was for a state with a publishing center), and genre and is laid out in a series of cross-tabulations in an appendix, reinforces this conclusion.

Griswold goes much further than merely providing an insightful description and critical analysis of the Guides. In the last section of the book, she demonstrates what Merton (1936) described as "the unanticipated consequences of purposive social action" as she demonstrates how and why the Guides, the creation of a political program designed to give unemployed writers jobs, altered Americans' understandings of their native literature. In doing so, she returns to an age-old question in media studies about media's effects on society (see, e.g., Neuman 2016).

The book's great strengths are Griswold's clear writing, the ever-logical thrust of her analysis, and her ingenuity in finding data to test her arguments. (I especially appreciated her effort, as part of the analysis of whether the state Guides were actually used by travelers on the road in their cars or readers at home or in the library, to figure out how easily the Guides and other travel books would fit into the glove boxes of 1930s cars.) She is always on point, always providing both raw data and deep analytical reflection on the geography of literary production and reception; and those reflections are always directed toward testing her arguments.

The findings in this book offer cultural and historical sociologists a compelling example

of how cultural change occurs through unexpected impositions from outside the cultural sphere. In this case, political considerations—the need to get support from state representatives and senators in D.C. as well as local (state-level) officials and local media—led to the Guides being "cast" in state-shaped molds. That decision had decisive impacts on the "cast" of literary characters profiled in the Guides and in the way literature was perceived. Invoking ideas from field theory (Fligstein and McAdam 2012), Griswold's analysis demonstrates clearly the impact of one field of contention (politics) on another (literature).

Let me comment on what may seem like a minor point, but one that is worth raising and praising: Griswold uses footnotes rather than endnotes, which makes it so much easier for readers to track her arguments and sources. This is an obvious indicator of a scholar who seeks to communicate clearly with her audience, and this audience member, at least, greatly appreciates it.

While the book is excellent in many respects, I have (of course) a couple of issues to raise. First and most generally, I lament the downplaying of the other contents of the Guides. In particular, I would have liked to see her analyze in depth the other essays, which generally covered nature, history, culture, and economic development. Doing so would have given us new insights into regionalism by allowing us to see how writers in one state described their state to their fellow inhabitants and, more importantly, to people in other states. A sentiment analysis of these essays would have been especially helpful, as I expect it would not only reveal the states' diverse physical characteristics but also would reflect the widely varied religious roots of their cultures. If culture serves as a tool for action and reflection (Swidler 1986), then it should shape the way Guides described states in general, not just their literary histories. This is important because Griswold's own analysis reveals that the Guides were used for decades by students and other researchers; indeed, they continue to be used today. Those readers do not focus solely on the literature essays, but instead read more widely about history, economy, geography, culture, and politics.

An analysis of the Guides' other essays would be a great project for a doctoral student.

Second, although Griswold analyzes each dimension of the authors mentioned in the state Guides thoroughly, she does not really use all the tools available to consider how these dimensions are interrelated. I'm thinking here about applying log-linear analysis to the main categorical variables: location, gender, genre, time, and birthplace. (Alas, there are too few African American, Asian, Native American, or Hispanic authors mentioned by the Guides to be able to analyze race/ethnicity this way.) Such an approach would have offered a more parsimonious way to tease out the interactions in these data.

But these are minor complaints. Griswold has, as in her other books and her many articles, given us a readable, interesting, and enlightening work of cultural sociology. This insightful and intriguing book is a fine example of "old-fashioned" textual analysis. As such, it is a lovely complement to the "newfangled" computer-assisted text analysis that has begun to capture sociologists' attention (e.g., DiMaggio, Nag, and Blei

2013; Bail 2015). This book would be a fine addition to any cultural sociologist's library and would be useful in undergraduate and graduate courses in cultural and historical sociology alike.

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