

Coping with Contingency: Remarks on Historical Work and Working Historians¹

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I) Casting a Wider Net

I wish to begin by citing from an article in the news-magazine *Perspectives* published by the American Historical Association this past April. The article is by Ramona Houston, an American historian, a self-described activist scholar and entrepreneur. In her article, Houston lauds a number of skills and qualifications that can make historians ‘marketable’ to prospective employers.²

“We possess exceptional *reading and writing* skills

Our *critical thinking skills* are top-notch. We know how to evaluate and analyze information. We have the keen ability to understand ideas, issues, challenges, and relationships in their complexity.

We know how to conduct comprehensive *research*. We know how to find, collect, organize, and analyze information from a variety of sources. Furthermore, we know how to take that information and synthesize it in a way that makes sense.

We are effective in *communication and persuasion*. As historians, we know how to explain ideas clearly and concisely. We also know how to make a case and substantiate it with compelling evidence.

We possess *intellectual curiosity*, which inspires us to understand issues in their historical context. We ask critical questions that lead us to the hows and whys of a situation. We have the strong inclination to examine the reasons beneath an issue.

We are effective *problem solvers*. Because we evaluate the facts and perspectives on *all sides of an issue*, we know how to address complex challenges. We know that solutions evolve when we acknowledge and address the various components of an issue.

We are meticulous *record keepers*. We understand the importance of documentation and preserving records. We value the written word. We are *wordsmiths*. We understand that

¹ This is a slightly revised version of the original manuscript presented at the ISHA conference.

² www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/april-2016/casting-a-wider-net-history-phds-change-your-perspective.

words have power and that words matter, and we use them skillfully.

We are *independent and self-disciplined* workers. There is no need to micromanage us! We know how to manage a project and get the job done.

We are excellent *strategists*. Because we understand that a *decision may have multiple impacts*, we consider and evaluate all options. We are shrewd and tactical in our efforts to develop a plan of action to reach a goal.”

Houston goes on to note that as an historian “you have a number of marketable skills and abilities that can complement, develop, and enhance any sector or work environment. Government, corporations, nonprofits – your career options are wider than you think! In fact, I wholeheartedly believe that because of our strengths, individuals with a PhD in history *need* to be present in *every* sector of our society.”

And more: “On a spiritual level, living a fulfilling, prosperous, and abundant life is a personal responsibility and journey. No one but *you* has the power to make you happy; therefore, *you* must embrace your power and make decisions that will create your ideal life. You must chart your own course, one designed *by* you and *for* you.”

In closing, Houston calls on students of history to “broaden your vision Once you change your perspective, you will discover that an immense number of unexplored lands and uncharted territories are just waiting for you.”

This is all very motivational. It sounds wonderfully empowering. And some part of me actually agrees with it. Houston exudes an air of confidence that seems compelling. You can easily imagine, in your mind’s eye, the job-interview situation in which these assets are presented to prospective employers. Or perhaps a phone conversations with concerned parents wondering *what in God’s name* you’re going to do with a degree in history.

To believe that studying history can be so empowering and that it prepares us to contribute to “*every* sector of our society” is a truly remarkable claim. And I guess I’ll leave it others to judge the claim’s accuracy.³ But what I also find noteworthy about Houston’s article is that it seems to be

³ It’s worth noting, however, that Houston’s claims aren’t really specifically historical. They could apply just as well to all of the humanities and, for the most part, they simply point to good working practices and applied

strikingly at odds with the experiences of many history graduates – anxious graduates, tentative graduates, insecure, and self-doubting graduates. Houston is silent about the vacuous uncertainties, daunting complexities, and seeming randomness facing many recent history graduates as they seek to chart their future career paths. Is “changing their perspective” – as Houston recommends – really going to allay the many concerns of those graduates?

Nevertheless and aptly, it seems to me, Houston’s article also speaks to the question of how and where we “cast our net”. And the notion of casting one’s net gets to the idea I wish to focus on today – the idea of contingency and its place in the work we do as historians and in the careers we try to build for ourselves.

II) Definitions: Career and Contingency

To get us into the material I will begin – very conventionally and briefly – with two definitions, both taken from the Oxford English Dictionary. The first is “career”:

“A course of professional life or employment, which affords opportunity for progress or advancement”

“A person’s course or progress through life ... especially when publicly conspicuous, or abounding in remarkable incidents”

But if we move back further into the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the meaning of “career” becomes – to my mind – a bit clearer and more insightful:

“The course over which any person or thing passes; road, path, way”

“The ground on which a race is run; also, the space within the barrier at a tournament”

“**The short turning of a nimble horse, now this way, now that way.**”

reasoning. Houston doesn’t really talk about what specifically *historical* contribution we can make. And because she doesn’t, it’s much harder to sustain the claim that “every sector” of society “needs” historians; indeed, the claim reeks of professional overreach. *Of course* there are employment “sectors” where historians can contribute meaningfully. But I for one suspect that we frankly *don’t* need an historian on every street-corner to shepherd us through our daily lives and our decision-making processes.

This focus on agility is especially apparent if we turn to the verb tense:

“To take a short gallop, to ‘pass a career’; to charge (at a tournament); **to turn this way and that in running (said of a horse).**”

I find these older definitions more satisfying because they evoke something that isn’t necessarily planned, but rather almost arbitrary, nimble, and chance-like – turning this way and that – in the context of a competition. In that sense they retain the notion contingency that later, more ‘modern’ definitions seem to have lost. These definitions remind us that our career is *also* a practice. A career is not only something that we *have*, it’s something that we *do*. And if careers are something we *do*, we should more often be asking *how we do them?* Today I want to suggest that there are some parallels between the work historians *do* and the careers they pursue, between historians *doing history* and them *doing their careers*.

The second definition is also worth calling to mind, namely “contingency”, which is defined as:

“A condition of being liable to happen or not in the future; uncertainty of occurrence or incidence”

“The ... occurrence of anything without pre-ordination; chance; fortuitousness

“The condition of being free from predetermining necessity in regard to existence or action hence, the being open to the play of chance, or of free will”

“The quality or condition of being subject to chance or change, or of being at the mercy of accidents”

“A chance occurrence; an event the occurrence of which could not have been, or was not, foreseen; an accident, a casualty”

“An event conceived or contemplated as of possible occurrence in the future”

III) Helga Nowotny’s *The Cunning of Uncertainty*

To start thinking about careers and contingency, I wish to draw on a recent book by Helga Nowotny

entitled *The Cunning of Uncertainty*.⁴ I intend to use several key concepts of the book as a jumping-off point for my own thoughts about contingency and its relationship to both the work we do as historians and the careers we build.

Nowotny is professor emerita in the social sciences at the technical university in Zurich and former president of the European Research Council. I'm not going to try and do full justice to her book; it's very wide-ranging. And she is much more interested than I am in the role of science in society, scientific innovation, research management, and in decision-making processes inside large organizational structures. But Nowotny deals with three interesting ideas that, for my purposes, are heuristically helpful and that merit closer attention: 1) uncertainty, 2) complexity, and 3) randomness.

a) The Cunning of Uncertainty

Nowotny's book is about uncertainty and some of the ways we try to cope with it. Certainly the largest and entirely inexhaustible reservoir of uncertainty is the future. And throughout the ages, people have tried to "tame the future" by devising means of predicting its course. Nowotny describes the uncertainty embedded in the future as being "cunning" and "subversive" because it:

- 1) opens spaces and facilitates alternative options;
- 2) permits boundary crossings and ambiguities;
- 3) undermines what is taken for granted and calculated by design;
- 4) suspends everyday routines and helps us prepare us for surprises;
- 5) challenges us "to see that, whatever situation we face, it could be otherwise" and "nudges" us to "to adopt another point of view, be it only for the sake of play with the imagination."⁵

Significantly, uncertainty also comes with a promise, the promise of contingency, i.e. the promise that things can be otherwise. Nowotny sees uncertainty not as something to be feared, but as something to be grasped as an opportunity. And learning to cope with uncertainty is, according to Nowotny, "one of [our] the most precious cultural resources"⁶

⁴ Helga Nowotny, *The Cunning of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xiii.

I think Nowotny is right about this. Learning to manage our expectations, our hopes, and our fears is an important achievement.⁷ And if this seminar helps us in learning to better to cope with uncertainty, in learning to manage our expectations, hopes, and fears, then I think the organizers can call it a success.

Almost in passing, Nowotny goes on to note that – like all knowledge – uncertainty is always also *situated in a specific historical and cultural context*. And so in order to cope with uncertainty, one needs always to put that “uncertainty into context”.⁸

This remark got me thinking about historians and whether in fact they contextualize uncertainty? Do we – or how do we – take uncertainty into account in our narratives? It struck me that – as working historians – we are generally inclined to discount uncertainty, to remove it from the lives of our historical protagonists, and to ignore or downplay the contingencies that they faced.⁹

On the one hand, this is understandable, because we ‘know’ how things are going to turn out. We know that Poland will be invaded and Martin Luther King assassinated. But on the other hand it’s important to recognize an important paradox of historical work: and that is that historians are not only *more* knowledgeable, but also *less* knowledgeable than the historical actors they study. Obviously, historians can never fully know the quotidian perspectives and motivations of the people they study. But its not just the historical details and facts, its also the presence of uncertainties and contingencies in those lives that we find difficult to grasp. Not least because we know how things *turn out*, the arc of our historical narratives tend *blend out* the surprises and *crowd out* the contingencies that actually informed their lives. Too often our histories tame the unanticipated and spoil the surprises in the lives of the people we study. We too often fail to contextualize their uncertainties, to recognize that they too lived contingent lives, and to understand that they had strategies for coping with their contingencies.

For the most part, historians shy away from contingency, from the notion that things could have be otherwise. We yearn instead for causes; we yearn for explanation, understanding, and meaning.

⁷ In the face of uncertainty, much depends on “how one adjusts mind and behavior”. Ibid., 36.

⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁹ Of course there are exceptions, for example a number of studies about the history of the future.

Counter-factual histories are taboo: We've been taught not to indulge in the thousands of 'what-if-histories' that our imaginations can conjure up. And indeed, there are good reasons not to let contingency lead us too far astray from 'real' events. But while this may be right and proper for *professionals*, I'm less sure that it is for *working practitioners* (and job-seekers). It seems to me that as practicing historians, who are engaged with our sources, part of our job is to account for the 'horizons of uncertainty'¹⁰ of our historical actors and reflect on how they influence behavior and decisions. To ignore this, is to shortchange contingency in our narratives. And it also reflects an impoverishment of our historical imaginations.

But, and this is my point, this impoverishment afflicts not only our historical imagination, but also our imagination when it comes to our own future career paths.

b) The Embarrassment of Complexity

Another source of uncertainty – besides the future – is complexity. In her book Nowotny talks about what she calls the “embarrassment of complexity”: we have reams of information and data at our disposal and lots of gadgets that help us deal with it, but our systems have become so complex that the data is hard to interpret; the embarrassment of complexity is the “feeling of not being in control when circumstances indicate that one should be.” And so for example: “Coping with one kind of uncertainty at one level may lead to a different kind of uncertainty emerging at another”; and reducing complexity has always been recognized as a “way of coping with uncertainty. Unable to face the complexity that surrounds them, people take refuge in what is familiar.”¹¹

All of this seems perfectly common-sensical. Obviously, complexity is something that working historians deal with all the time. They are confronted with massive amounts of material / sources / information that they must cull through and attempt to organize. This is self-evident.

But the point I want to make is slightly different; and that point is that complexity (and for that matter uncertainty) has an important role to play in *how we are trained* as historians. Nowotny's book reminded me about how reducing complexity plays a role in our own education and training.

¹⁰ Reinhard Koselleck's “Horizon of expectation” [*Erwartungshorizont*] is too limited to grasp uncertainty and its effects. A ‘horizon of uncertainty’ will involve more than just expectations and is certainly more diffuse and harder to grasp.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 133 and 140.

To explain what I mean, I must briefly digress into my own field of research, the history of psychiatry. When I was in graduate school, I read a book by a psychiatrist named Donald Light entitled *Becoming Psychiatrists: The Professional Transformation of Self* (1980).¹² The book is a study about a psychiatric training program in the United States (University Psychiatric Center, Boston, MA). It's about how becoming a professional involves the acculturation and adoption of certain methodological standards; its about the accommodation, assimilation, incorporation of professional norms. What Light studied was how professional values, attitudes, and practices were impressed upon young, early career psychiatrists. What he found was that, in their practical training, young psychiatrists were generally assigned the sickest and most challenging patients; patients that frustrated and stymied students' desire to intervene and to cure. On the most difficult wards of the hospital, Light described students facing an overwhelmingly complex array of uncertainties. Young trainees were essentially thrown into the deep end of the pool to see whether they would sink or swim.

Light wrote about how trainee's anxieties were caused by responsibility for patients *plus* the added uncertainty that comes with dealing with the especially difficult and complex cases. He described how high levels of stress and anxiety resulted in a sense of loss of control that shakes trainees' sense of self.¹³

But he went on to stress that this loss of control was a teaching moment, a didactic opportunity. The maximization of anxiety, complexity, uncertainty made students susceptible to new professional values and mores.¹⁴ Physical and moral exhaustion paved the way to a transformation of identity: day-to-day pressures worked to re-socialize them; anxiety bred tendencies toward closure; students grasped for nearest model, the nearest working practice that would restore a semblance of order. Some students broke out, refusing to accept this transformation of self. But many others adopted the standards and working practices that were on offer.¹⁵

¹² Donald Light, *Becoming Psychiatrists: The Professional Transformation of Self* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980).

¹³ Ironically in the case of psychiatry, this sort of mimics the patients they are treating.

¹⁴ Light describes various accompanying tribal rituals: little ceremonies of degradation, praise and criticism, shame and denigration, competition between students; etc.

¹⁵ There is price to be paid: students move away from being advocates of the patient and toward being technicians and practitioners; Light laments a premature closure of numerous issues that are full of ambiguity.

Summarizing the process of professional socialization, Light wrote: “certain aspects of a person’s identity and life patterns are broken down (de-socialized) so that a new identity can be built up. While the person actively participates in the process and to some degree negotiates the terms of his or her new identity, this activity serves more to co-opt the person into using the concepts, values, and language of those in power [... and intensifying the trainees’] commitment to the professional community.”¹⁶

I first read Donald Light’s book when I was in graduate school. I was stressed-out, overworked, underpaid. I had dubious career prospects. I was living in uncertainty! I was being put through the ringer, being placed in impossible situations, having to read, write, teach, etc. with deadlines that always seemed to be just around the corner or even yesterday.¹⁷

And so when I read Light’s book, it dawned on me that – in some measure – what he described about psychiatric training programs also applied to historians. I was being, if you will, “stress tested” in order to re-cast my identity, to reconstitute my sense of self, to get me to the point of saying, “Yes, I’m an historian” and having it actually mean something. The complex, pressure cooker environment of graduate school was used as a (didactic) tool of professionalization, as tool in the revaluation of my identity and my self-awareness.

Now I don’t mean to suggest that the process/transformation is quite a dramatic for historians as it is for psychiatrists. Peoples lives and well-being don’t usually hang in the balance based on the choices that historians make. But there is a similar transformation involved in becoming and working as a professional historian. And that transformation often relies on putting people in situations of overwhelming complexity.

I need to emphasize that the transformation of self has productive and destructive sides to it. My point is that training is not necessarily a benign and peaceful process: it can be psychologically violent and can elicit resistance to the inculcation of professional norms and standards; but it can *also* produce really good historians and really great works of history.

¹⁶ Light, 327.

¹⁷ In graduate studies there exists a pervasive culture of being swamped with work. One of the taboos of this culture is to admit that you have spare time.

Rightly enough, history departments are in the business of producing professional historians. We just need to be more clear-sighted about the fact that our training programs are not just *creating* professionals, but also *destroying* amateurs. And this is a problem – not least when it comes to issues of career diversity and public outreach.

c) *The Gift of Randomness*

Because our modern world has become so complex and difficult to negotiate, Nowotny argues that we should embrace what she calls the “gift of randomness”. She cites numerous examples in which randomness plays a role in our lives – for example, the outcome of soccer matches, genetics, feverish anticipation of Christmas presents. She argues that appealing to randomness and letting chance decide (flipping coin, betting) can be helpful, because chance can serve as an arbiter in the face of overwhelming complexity. It can bring relief from the burdens of responsibility for decisions about things we can’t (or at least feel that we can’t) fully understand. Insofar as randomness is a response to overwhelming complexity, it even “protects our freedom of will”.¹⁸

Nowotny goes on to argue that embracing the gift of randomness takes courage, but that it also imparts strength. To be lucky brings with it the humbling realization that one could have ended up the other, wrong side (For the fans of the Matrix films, we can always have chosen the other blue pill rather than the red one); embracing randomness transcends human action, planning, and strategic thinking; using randomness to embrace uncertainty acknowledges the power of uncertainty “beyond human capabilities”; thriving on what Nowotny calls the “cusp of uncertainty” can “bring forth the potential to transcend human ... limitations” ; it can push us to greater achievement.¹⁹

And so embracing randomness can be a virtue. It can serve as a reminder of the importance of chance; and it can help us appreciate that chance sometimes trumps merit, skill, and judgment and makes them irrelevant.²⁰ Trusting in chance (in the flip of a coin) can also serve as an honest admission that reason, rationality, and judgment have their *limits* and can take us only so far. And at

¹⁸ Nowotny, 150.

¹⁹ And so the realization that something could be otherwise is not just potentially overwhelming, but also opens a range of options that can be experienced as beneficial and even liberating. Cf. Nowotny, 165.

²⁰ I’m drawing here on the BBC World Service radio program “The Inquiry” and a report presented by Michael Blastland in September 2016 entitled “What’s the Point of Lotteries” (www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p046z7fg). The report draws on the work of Peter Stone, *The Luck of the Draw: The Role of Lotteries in Decision-Making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

times, embracing chance might even be better option than accepting dubious rationalizations.

Historians don't generally like randomness. More often than not their work involves explaining it away. But historians too can potentially benefit from greater appreciation of randomness. It can encourage us to reflect upon and even accept that there are limits to historical explanation; it can imbue us with a greater sense of humility about the explanations they offer; and randomness and chance can even be used to screen-out partiality, interest, and bias.

A greater appreciation of the importance of randomness poses great challenges for institutions like history departments. Can or should we build curricula in history that embrace randomness? What would our histories look like if they embraced randomness? And should students be advised that randomness can be productive strategy as they chart their professional careers?²¹

To briefly summarize before moving on: The main observation I'd like to make is that the challenges we face in our own lives when it comes to making career decisions in the face of uncertainty, complexity, and randomness are challenges that we also face as historians when we work with our sources and when we draft our narratives. The reality is that "career paths are winding and bumpy for all sorts of personal and professional reasons, and like the ... narratives historians learn to construct, their arcs and turning points are often most visible only at the end."²²

Obviously, however, the stakes are entirely different: failing to appreciate uncertainty, complexity, and randomness in our sources will simply produce – at worst – poorer histories. But failing to appreciate them in our lives has some rather more problematic consequences, because they can have us sleeping under the bridge at night and dining out at the salvation army soup kitchen. An attempt to make sure that doesn't happen is currently being undertaken by the American Historical Association through its Career Diversity Initiative.

IV) Career Diversity Initiative of the American Historical Association

²¹ To return to Ramona Houston's article that I mentioned at the outset, how and where we "cast our net" is partly about embracing this randomness.

²² www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/september-2016/debunking-five-myths-about-career-diversity-for-historians.

Girded with these concepts (career, contingency, uncertainty, complexity, randomness), I'd like now to pivot radically to a specific example to illustrate one ongoing effort at coping with contingency. And that example is the Career Diversity Initiative, which over the past five years or so has been promoted by American Historical Association.

a) No More Plan B

In 2011, in an article entitled “No More Plan B: A Very Modest Proposal for Graduate Programs in History”²³, the president and executive director of the American Historical Association (Anthony Grafton and James Grossman) initiated a wide-ranging discussion about career diversity within the historical profession. They began by noting the ironic fact that, although graduate study in history had never been more diverse and open to new ways of thinking and working, never more innovative in terms of topics and methods, when it came to thinking about student's careers, this diversity and openness quickly evaporated. The gold-standard of a tenure-track teaching position continued to mesmerize the imagination of history departments.

If nothing else, however, the reverberations from the economic crisis of 2007/8 were forcing a re-think as job-openings plummeted by nearly 30%. And there was no sign of the crisis going away: “As public contributions to higher education shrink, state budgets contract, and a lagging economy takes its toll on endowments and family incomes, there is little reason to expect the demand for tenure-track faculty to expand.” Increasingly, the long-cherished ideal of training students to fill academic posts was becoming not just untenable, but an egregious disservice to students. The profession had for too long and unnecessarily narrowed the horizons of their students' future careers.

But if graduate programs could no longer – in good conscience – continue business as usual what was the alternative? Grafton and Grossman argued that students needed to be told *from the outset* that studying history opens a “broad range of doors”. They went on to list “a dizzying array of positions [that recent graduates held] outside the academy: members of congress and the armed forces, museum curators, archivists, historians in national parks, investment bankers, international business consultants, high school teachers, community college teachers, foundation officers, editors,

²³ www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/october-2011/no-more-plan-b.

journalists, and policy analysts at think tanks.”

And so the idea that history prepared one primarily to teach in a college or university was, as they put it, “as contingent as any other” notion of career development. The key would be “to make clear to students entering programs in history that we are offering them education that we believe in, not just as reproductions of ourselves, but also as contributors to public culture and even the private sector.”

Promising students so many open doors, however, would demand a significant broadening of the academic curricula, as well as sustained efforts to ensure that students remained “attuned to the full range of opportunities that their work opens”. Their suggestion was greater diversification: additional classes, internships, and workshops – like this Seminar – “that explore the world of work, [bringing] in speakers from government and other areas where many historians find jobs, and [mobilizing] their networks of contacts as advisers for their students.”

b) AHA Career Diversity Initiative

What Grafton and Grossman called a “modest proposal” in 2011 soon burgeoned into a major initiative of the American Historical Association.²⁴ Initially funded by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in 2012,²⁵ the initiative is composed of several related and mutually reinforcing components distributed across the country:

The Association’s Deputy Director Robert Townsend began an in-depth quantitative and qualitative research on the career paths of PhDs to date, including alumni of programs that had attempted earlier to broaden career options for graduate students in the humanities. The AHA organized systematic efforts to gather the perspectives of key groups within and beyond its memberships on the obstacles and opportunities involved in moving beyond

²⁴ Cf. www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/career-diversity-for-historians/about-career-diversity. On the initial announcement of the initiative in early 2013, see www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2013/new-aha-initiatives-will-examine-teaching-and-learning-career-paths: “The AHA is especially—but not exclusively—interested in careers that enable historians to mobilize their graduate training for jobs that do not necessarily involve history work per se.” Cf. also the discussions at the New Orleans annual meeting cited at www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/march-2013/broadening-the-horizon-for-humanities-phds.

²⁵ To be precise, parallel grants from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to the AHA and the Modern Language Association.

conceptions of non-academic careers as merely “Plan B.” And the AHA followed up on this research by organizing a series of high-level discussions with employers in a spectrum of non-profit, for-profit, and government organizations.

While exploring the possibilities of widening career choices beyond the academy, the AHA [also began exploring projects ...] that enhanced PhD recipients’ qualifications for employment within the academy. With the help of additional outside funding, the American Historical Association assembled a team of leading experts in history teaching and historical thinking, and to explore ways to more effectively integrate the scholarship on teaching and learning into graduate history education.²⁶

The primary goal of the initiative is to widen “the presence and influence of [historians and] humanistic thinking in business, government, and nonprofits. Implicit assumptions about historical context inform thousands of decisions made every day in nearly every institutional context, and [...] a substantial proportion of those decisions are made without recognition of those historical assumptions, and certainly with very little actual historical knowledge.”²⁷ In this vein, the project also aims to forge connections among historians in the professoriate, higher education administration, cultural institutions and other nonprofits, government, public education, and the private sector. In addition, it seeks to “address the disparities between graduate student expectations for a career in academia and eventual career outcomes.”²⁸

c) Early results: The Many Careers of History PhDs

To date, the initiative has resulted in a number of findings that I would like to share with you. As part of its career diversity initiative, the AHA sponsored an extensive survey about academic careers in history. The study was entitled “The Many Careers of History PhDs” and tracked the current

²⁶ Cf. www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/career-diversity-for-historians/about-career-diversity.

²⁷ www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2014/career-diversitys-time-has-come. See likewise: www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2014/career-diversity-for-historians. In the words of one commentator, Grafton’s and Grossman’s “No Plan B” has since “re-framed the discussion of PhD education and supported the work of graduate students, faculty members, and historians in all professions to demonstrate the full value of historical work at the doctoral level.”

²⁸ www.neh.gov/news/press-release/2015-10-21. Also: “These grants will allow colleges and universities to plan for major changes to PhD programs and then implement programmatic initiatives that will transform understanding of what it means to be a humanities scholar.”

employment of some 2,500 of the roughly 11,000 people who had received a history doctorates between 1998 and 2009.²⁹ The study produced reams of statistics about career outcomes: about jobs inside the academy, outside the academy, areas of specialization, shifts in part-time vs. full-time employment, gender distributions, job mobility, etc. I won't bore you with the numbers.

In general, the authors of the report found a remarkably “diverse array of career outcome”. In what they described as the “ecology of the history profession”, they found a broad range of careers outside the university. As a result, they argued that both students and history departments needed to recognize more clearly the “versatility of a history education” and that history degrees could be – and are being – leveraged into meaningful careers outside the university.

*d) The Four (later Five) Skills*³⁰

During the first phase of the initiative the AHA organized focus groups³¹ that brought together potential employers, university faculty and administrators, graduate students, and history alumni working outside the academy. One of the aims of these groups involved “identifying skills historians should possess upon entering the job market and emphasizing the importance of marketing these skills to employers.” The focus groups helped identify to five key skills needed to enhance graduate curricula in history and connect it to diverse careers:

- 1) **Communication:** Students must be required to practice communicating their knowledge and research to a *wide range of audiences* using a variety of media;
- 2) **Collaboration:** Curricula must provide intellectually relevant opportunities for students to work collaboratively toward common goals with others, both *within and beyond their discipline*—including disciplines outside the humanities;

²⁹ Cf. L. Maren Wood and Robert B. Townsend, *The Many Careers of History PhDs: A Study of Job Outcomes* (Washington DC: American Historical Association, 2013). From their analysis, the authors reached some unsettling conclusions – conclusions that underscore the issue of uncertainty and contingency. Their findings suggested that “a wide variety of variables come into play in the match between a specific candidate and the available jobs in any given year (or years) on the job market. Earning a PhD from a particular institution or in particular field of specialization neither guarantees success nor proves an insurmountable barrier to securing a tenured faculty position.”

³⁰ Cf. www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/career-diversity-for-historians/career-diversity-resources/five-skills.

³¹ Cf. www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/september-2013/the-aha-mellon-career-diversity-project-recent-accomplishments-and-next-steps; www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2014/career-diversity-time-has-come; www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2014/career-diversity-for-historians.

3) **Quantitative literacy:** Programs cannot neglect quantitative literacy, i.e. *ability to work with numbers*. Graduates who lack a basic quantitative literacy were disadvantaged in their careers;

4) **Intellectual self-confidence:** Graduate education should instill in students the *intellectual confidence to venture beyond their comfort zones*, whether intellectual, cultural, or institutional.

Further discussions led to the isolation of a fifth skill:

5) **Digital literacy and engagement:** Digital literacy involves “recognizing the *value of social media*, blogging, and other online platforms for exchanging ideas with others in [the] field.”

The AHA was eager to emphasize that these skills were dual-use skills: The same skills that open new opportunities to students outside the university can also “enhance the professionalization of students who go into faculty positions ... Professors with these skills will be better teachers, and more responsible citizens of an institution and practitioners of a discipline.”

e) Phase II

Beginning 2014 a phase II expansion of the initiative was announced.³² Funding to extend the initiative came from the Andrew W. Mellon and other foundations, which awarded the American Historical Association grants to support initiatives to broaden the career employment options that students commonly imagine for themselves and aspire to.³³ In this vein, the AHA is currently further developing and expanding a several programs related to career diversity, including:³⁴

1) Virtual Mentors program called Career Contacts³⁵ in which a graduate student interested

³² Cf. www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2014/career-diversity-for-historians.

³³ Funding has also come from the Lumina Foundation, the Teagle Foundation (cf. www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/april-2016/graduate-education-reconsidered), and most recently from the National Endowment for the Humanities “Next Generation PhD” program (cf. blog.historians.org/2016/08/next-generation-phds/).

³⁴ Cf. www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2014/career-diversity-time-has-come.

³⁵ Cf. www.historians.org/aha-career-contacts.

in a particular line of work can be matched up with a history PhD who has volunteered to communicate with students about occupational pathways. The service involves one-time informational interviews. The AHA is building a database of mentors designed to help participants learn from the experience of others who trained as historians and followed their interests into a range of different positions.

2) Expansion of the video series *What I Do: Historians Talk About Their Work*.³⁶ The series which features brief interviews showcasing the actual work of history graduates employed outside the university; what their work-day looks like; how their career paths evolved; what advice they have for early career development.

3) A new series in the news-magazine *Perspectives on History* called *Career Paths*. The series has historians looking back at their career trajectories and discussing the way history has shaped their professional development.

4) Furthermore, other online and print resources are being developed that explore alternate curricula and professional possibilities.

5) Sessions and workshops at the annual meetings designed to help graduate students broaden their career horizons. The so-called Career Fair³⁷ provides the opportunity to speak with government, non-profit, and for-profit employers. One booth, called “Ask an Assistant Professor” was said to have been swamped with inquiries.

6) Online community spaces to foster discussion and feedback on the issues central to the initiative. Although some forums already exist – such as Versatile PhD, Academia.edu, and the “Vitae” section of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* – they are not discipline-specific, which is key to the productive exchange of ideas and resources.³⁸

Also resources for history departments:

7) A so-called ‘Speakers’ Bureau’ for history departments to provide assistance in planning professionalization workshops and courses. The bureau makes referrals to departments and, if necessary, pays the travel expenses to send speakers to schools;

8) A competitive grant for individual departments of up to \$4,000 for innovative projects relating to this career diversity;

³⁶ Cf. www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/career-diversity-for-historians/career-diversity-resources/what-i-do-historians-talk-about-their-work.

³⁷ Cf. www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/february-2016/a-conversational-shift-career-diversity-flourishes-at-the-2016-annual-meeting.

³⁸ Cf. twitter.com/hashtag/AHACareerDiversity.

9) Ongoing research on the career destinations of history PhD, including an online Alumni-Tracking Service for departments to gather data about the careers of their alumni. By publishing this data on a department-by-department basis, the AHA hopes to encourage direct comparisons across institutions.³⁹

10) Meetings for directors of graduate programs to report on the initiative and facilitate exchange of ideas and experiences.

f) Pilot Projects and Conferences

The Career Diversity initiative also supports four pilot projects at PhD-granting universities—UCLA, Columbia University (History in Action), the University of Chicago (Making History Work), and the University of New Mexico”. The projects are designed to “explore the culture and practice of graduate education.”⁴⁰ At the University of Chicago the pilot project called “Making History Work” involves, for example, workshops on “writing for nonacademic audiences” and “career development” issues. The Chicago project promotes outreach programs that facilitate “local public history internships.” These pilot projects have built networks with other units within their institutions: career development offices, centers for teaching and learning, graduate student resource centers. By last count, the pilot programs have funded some 20 graduate student projects.⁴¹

The pilot projects have also organized several regional conferences: “What Use Is History? Scholarship, Skills, Careers” at University of New Mexico (February 2015);⁴² “History in Action: Historical Thinking in Public Life” at Columbia University (March 2015);⁴³ “The Futures of History” at the University of California, Los Angeles (February 2016); “High-Stakes History: The Many Conversations of History” at Columbia University (January 2016)⁴⁴

³⁹ This service was introduced in March 2014 as a “service for departments interested in where their graduates have found careers within and beyond the academy.” For \$7 per graduate and a minimum search period of 10 years, departments will receive a report about employment sectors and industries for each PhD graduate, including the name of the employer and current job title. Cf. www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2014/career-diversity-for-historians.

⁴⁰ www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/september-2015/qanda-with-lindsey-martin-and-jennifer-mcpherson.

⁴¹ Cf. www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2015/career-diversity-for-historians-year-in-review.

⁴² Cf. www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/april-2015/lets-put-history-everywhere.

⁴³ Cf. www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2015/history-in-action.

⁴⁴ Cf. www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/march-2016/the-work-of-historians-lessons-on-networking-stories-and-perished-parrots-at-columbia.

g) *Myths of Career Diversity*

The initiative has not been without its **critics**, many of whom worry about an erosion of professional standards. In response to critics, supporters of the initiative have recently stressed that Career Diversity is not just about shifting emphasis away from tenure-track, research-focused positions, but also about imagining—and creating—a “new map” of career options.⁴⁵ In the most recent September issue of the AHA’s news magazine *Perspectives*, advocates of the initiative have sought to debunk what they call several “myths of career diversity”. Those myths include that:

- 1) Career Diversity is a public history initiative (i.e. that it is of concern only to “applied history”, i.e. to museum curators, archivists, or historians in the federal government (*Response*: The initiative’s sponsors stress that only about 25% of historians working outside the academy are employed in the field of public history.);
- 2) Career Diversity is only about jobs outside the academy (*Response*: “History PhDs also work in non-faculty positions in higher education, from development offices and public relations to student affairs and various academic institutes.”);
- 3) Career Diversity is an either/or proposition: useful for those who don’t want to be a professor, but otherwise a distraction from academic work (*Response*: The five skills outlined by the initiative are also useful for academic careers.);
- 4) Career Diversity is important only to graduate students and job seekers (*Response*: The initiative is far more: it seeks to reform graduate education and maximize the influence of historians and historical thinking in public discourse.);
- 5) Career Diversity seeks to instrumentalize the PhD and make it merely a vocational degree (*Response*: It is the existing narrow perspective on training university professors that is, in fact, vocational; the career diversity initiative seeks to broaden career horizons rather than narrow them; the criticism has some merit, but it “suffers from misplaced nostalgia.”).

The critical question, however, is whether all of these initiatives will end up helping? Will they contribute to an expansion of career outcomes without compromising professional standards? At this juncture, it is simply too early and impossible to say. But feedback from the “Career Fair”

⁴⁵ www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/september-2016/debunking-five-myths-about-career-diversity-for-historians.

suggests that “Cultural institutions, start-ups, and nonprofits “seemed to garner the most interest and sustained enthusiasm from job seekers”; and one organizer even diagnosed a “sea change” in job seekers interests.⁴⁶

V) The German Historical Association (*Deutscher Historikerverband*)

As far as I can tell, there is nothing remotely comparable to the AHA’s Career Diversity Initiative in Germany, at least not under the auspices of the main professional organization for historians, the *Verband der Historiker und Historikerinnen in Deutschland*. The organization’s mission statement points to effort at lobbying government officials and informing them of the “dangers that result from short-changing the future prospects of young professionals.”⁴⁷ Beyond its lobbying efforts, the *Verband* also awards two prizes to young historians (Carl Erdmann and Hedwig Hinze Prizes), organizes a *Doktorandenforum* in which students can apply to have a poster about their dissertation published, and it sponsors a database that students can use to announce current projects or successfully completed doctoral theses.

In 2012 the association also sponsored a study on the situation of early career historians.⁴⁸ The study was based on federal statistics and an online-survey of about 530 historians about the career paths of history graduates. It analyzed the situation and prospects of early career historians, and in particular the impact of large research structures (*Exzellenzcluster, Graduiertenkollegs, Sonderforschungsbereiche*) on academic careers. The study’s findings were sobering. In particular, it found that large portions of trained and qualified history students still fail to receive permanent academic positions. The study also pointed to an important structural problem, largely specific to Germany, namely the relatively late decision about the success or failure of an academic career. Whereas elsewhere this decision is usually made at the PhD stage, in Germany this delay made “alternative careers almost impossible.” As a result, academic careers in history are “high risk careers” with “few viable exit options”.

⁴⁶ www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/february-2016/a-conversational-shift-career-diversity-flourishes-at-the-2016-annual-meeting.

⁴⁷ www.historikerverband.de/nachwuchs.html.

⁴⁸ Andreas Eckert, Nora Hilgert, and Ulrike Lindner, *Die Situation des wissenschaftlichen Nachwuchses in der Geschichtswissenschaft 2012* (Frankfurt: Verband der Historiker und Historikerinnen Deutschlands, 2012). The report is available online at www.historikerverband.de/nachwuchs/nachwuchs-umfrage.html.

Over all the study found little fundamental change in career patterns since an early study in 2002. And in terms of career diversity, the result was a mixed bag. On the one hand, the study cited a trend toward coupling of academic positions with the acquisition of external funding. This practice had heightened competition for research grants and curtailed alternative “project careers”, which had traditionally been fairly common in Germany. The study did however find some expanded career diversity (mostly attributable to temporary or part-time positions in connection with large research projects and to cut-backs in traditional mid-level university posts). But the study’s authors assessed this as a worrisome and negative development.

The study was not really prescriptive: it announced no programs or initiatives designed to address the challenges facing early career historians. In terms of alternatives, the report cited only one “exit option”, namely: emigration to the United States or Great Britain. The study called for education policy in Germany to “invest more heavily” in “planable careers” rather than in additional temporary positions and large research projects. It called for more tenure-track options and permanent, full-time positions.

For all of its efforts to assess and promote the careers of young historians, it is clear that Germany’s preeminent professional organization – for whatever reasons – doesn’t see the need for anything like the AHA’s Career Diversity Initiative. The *Verband* does some limited things to promote *career* development, but as far as I can tell it does nothing at all to promote *career diversity*. I’m sure there are other mid-level institutional initiatives (practica, professorial-networks, etc.) and perhaps some supra-level programs (national funding agencies and foundations, etc.) or transnational efforts (like ISHA and this seminar). But certainly at the very top of the historical profession in Germany there is little in the way of guidance or leadership when it comes to career diversity. Why that may be the case (in Germany and perhaps elsewhere in Europe?) could be a topic for discussion in the seminar’s workshops. What are professional organizations of historians doing to support and promote career diversity? And is it enough?

VI. Conclusion

I hope these remarks have provided some food for thought and raised a few issues that can enliven

the workshop discussions. I have not been arguing that everything is contingent; nor that we should put our full faith and trust in randomness. We can do a lot to ensure that the “net we cast” is a good and a strong one. But what I have been arguing is that a greater appreciation of contingency can help us both to write better histories and to better manage the hopes, fears, and expectations we have for our careers.

I wish you the best of good luck with this seminar. I trust that your discussions will revel in contingency and perhaps even a bit of randomness. May those discussions be open-ended and fully aware that things can always be ‘otherwise’.