



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 35
Issue 2 June

Article 6

2008

Documentary Photography in American Social Welfare History: 1897-1943

Peter Szto
University of Nebraska, Omaha

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social History Commons, Social Welfare Commons, and the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Szto, Peter (2008) "Documentary Photography in American Social Welfare History: 1897-1943," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 35: Iss. 2, Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3333>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol35/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

Documentary Photography in American Social Welfare History: 1897-1943

PETER SZTO

University of Nebraska at Omaha
School of Social Work

This is a study of documentary photography in American social welfare history. The study examines the emergence of photography as a tool of social policy, and in particular, key practitioners who shaped the perception of American social welfare. Within the social welfare literature, this topic is largely unexamined yet invaluable to an understanding of American social welfare. Photography performed a highly instrumental role by providing visual evidence as an innovative way of seeing and analyzing social problems. This image-based approach to social welfare analysis influenced how society viewed itself and the social environment. The goal of this study is to understand this influence by exploring the emergence of documentary photography and the practice of documentary photography as a tool of social welfare policy.

Key words: social welfare policy, documentary photography, visual evidence

Introduction

The aim of this study is to examine the role of documentary photography in American social welfare history. Special attention is paid to the role documentary photography played in the perception of social problems. According to John Berger (1972), the advent of photography introduced a new way of

Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare, June 2008, Volume XXXV, Number 2

seeing the social world. This new way of seeing, however, has been largely overlooked in the social welfare literature. Jussim (1984) interprets this shortcoming because "the literature of photography contains far more about the chronological history of 'documentary' than about how documentary photography succeeds in persuading, how the photographs manage to influence public opinion" (p. 103). Although the literature on the history of photography is extensive, few have examined photography's social welfare role. This role is examined here by looking at early practitioners who used photography to affect social change, i.e., *Charities and the Commons*, *Survey Graphics*, Paul Kellogg, Lewis Hine, and Roy Stryker of the Farm Security Administration (FSA). More specifically, the documentary approach is analyzed in terms of photography's persuasive and propagandistic qualities. No one photograph or individual photographer singularly altered American social welfare history; instead, the collective and accumulated affect of documentary photography shaped social welfare provision. The field of social welfare and the profession of social work stand to gain from this study by understanding more keenly the relationship between documentary photography and American social welfare history.

The adage "seeing is believing" was tested *writ large* during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in America. Rapid urbanization and rampant industrialization were wreaking economic and social havoc on millions of Americans. The social effect of this phenomenon created an experiential and perceptual chasm among citizens. Was it possible for rich and poor to see how the other half lived? Was it possible to bridge the perceptual gap dividing America's haves and have nots? The responsibility for making plain America's deepening economic inequality primarily fell on individuals adept at exposing hidden American lives. The "sober chronicling of the external world" (McCausland, 1939, ¶2) was no easy feat, but was important enough for some to passionately pursue the documentary approach.

Photography and the Documentary Approach

The advent of photography and documentary photography in 1839 were complimentary dimensions of the same invention. Joseph-Nicephore Niepce and Louis-Jacques-Mande Daguerre in France, and William Henry Fox Talbot in England, simultaneously invented photography but in two different countries. The inventors discovered that mixing just the right amount of chemicals with just the right amount of light could record striking images of reality. The earliest photographic images were called daguerreotypes and were true-to-life in every imaginable way. Unlike anything witnessed before, the photochemical process made possible the uncanny ability to “write with light” with disbelieving accuracy. Alan Trachtenberg (1989) described photography’s accuracy as “a tool for making a past suitable for the future” (p. xiv). The capacity to record spread quickly as an innovative tool to document everyday events with persuasive authenticity. Even though the earliest daguerreotypes depicted reality in fuzzy shades of gray, and some were barely discernable, viewers intuitively grasped that what they were looking at was dissimilar to prior media, e.g., paintings or illustrations:

...all the minutest indentations and divisions of the ground, or the building, the goods lying on the wharf, even the small stones under the water at the edge of the stream, and the different degrees of transparency given to the water, were all shown with the most incredible accuracy. (Newhall, 1978, p. 17)

Noted historian of photography, Beaumont Newhall (1978), once described photography’s ability to authenticate reality as a “mirror with a memory” (p. 17). This ability to record reality inspired many to pick up the camera to document the world about them. By mid-nineteenth century, people were documenting their social environments the world over (Howe, 2004).

It was not enough though to simply take photographs—photographers wanted to display and disseminate their images as well. By the late nineteenth-century, national magazines, professional journals, and gazettes provided an outlet to

showcase photographs. In particular, western culture's acceptance of visual imagery allowed journals devoted exclusively to photography to emerge. For example, *The British Journal of Photography* was a leading magazine that provided the latest information on photographic invention, technological advice, equipment reviews, happenings within photographic society, and a forum in which to debate photography. According to Grow (2002), the earliest magazines emerged in the mid-1700s and privileged words over images. By the late 1800s, professional illustrations had come into vogue to supplement the almost exclusive reliance on text. Seeing the advantages of using images, newspaper and journal editors began combining image with text as a means to bear "faithful witness" to events (Newhall, 1978).

Prior to the advent of photography, social critics had relied on the perspicuity of words to describe and analyze social problems. If and when print media did report on social issues, graphs and drawings were used to supplement words rather than replace them. *Harper's Weekly*, the *Daily Graphic*, and *Charities and the Commons* often used drawings of tenement housing and lower-class life to illustrate the bleakness of slum life. The illustrations had high visual impact and had a powerful effect on readers (Bremner, 1992). The visual information provided a fuller understanding of dire social conditions which words alone could not convey.

Combining text and image attracted social welfare leaders who were bent on communicating social problems to a mass audience. As early as 1833, institutional and legislative bodies were already using pamphlets and annual reports to talk about social problems. Axinn & Stern (1997) report how pamphleteer Mathew Carey wrote emphatically describing the virtues of private philanthropy to combat poverty (p. 50). The pamphlet was a strategic means—using words—to describe extant poverty. The addition of images to words, however, provided America's charity movement an innovative tool to affect social change. This was especially true in order to break out of a pietistic framework that dominated social welfare. Social worker Robert Hunter argued in 1904 for "liberation from a moralistic approach" (Baldwin, 1968) to social problems. Leaders in the pursuit of Progressive ideals desired an objective and rational

approach to social problems. Conceptualizing social problems based on empirical evidence, rather than in moral and religious categories, positioned photography to affect change because of its straightforward and truth-telling qualities.

The term *documentary* was first coined in 1926 when Scottish filmmaker John Grierson (1898-1972) applied the word to describe moving pictures. Although writing a film review of *Moana*, for the *New York Sun* (Rosler, 1989; Tucker, 1984), Grierson's usage of documentation served a "larger purpose than a simple recording of reality" (Tucker, 1984, p. 41). Grierson was, in fact, defining a novel approach to seeing. To document meant "a desire to make a drama out of the ordinary...a desire to bring the citizen's eye in from the ends of the earth to the story, his own story, of what was happening under his nose" (Grierson Trust, ¶1). Documentation was about immediacy—it was about giving one's full attention to the existential moment. Grierson's films, "Drifters" (1929) and "Night Mail" (1936) exemplified his own approach to earn him the honorific "father of documentary."

Grierson's perspective on documentary is relevant to still photography in how he viewed film as other than a fine art. He believed the function of film was to "educate and persuade" the public about social issues (Tucker, 1984, p. 41). He felt America's artistic community over-romanticized life by portraying it in too detached a manner. Grierson instead sought to show life in its plainest of terms:

...the recording and interpretation of fact was a new instrument of public influence which might increase experience and bring the new world of our citizenship into the imagination. It promised us the power of making drama from our daily lives and poetry from our problems. (Newhall, 1978, p. 144)

Grierson wanted nothing less than to infiltrate people's minds with stark images of reality. Most importantly, he found in the documentary approach a way to directly connect the human experience with personal compassion. Stott (1973) understood this personal dimension in defining documentary as "the communication, not of imagined things, but of real things

only" (p. xi). He believed, "A document, when human, is the opposite of the official kind; it is not objective but thoroughly personal" (p. 7).

The psychological link between the human experience and personal compassion provided a motive for many to practice the documentary approach. When people saw for themselves the camera's faithful recording of reality, they too, wanted to document their everyday situations. The December 1839 issue of *The Knickerbocker* sums up the allure of documentary photography:

We have seen the views taken in Paris by the 'Daguerreotype,' and have no hesitation in avowing, that they are the most remarkable objects of curiosity and admiration, in the arts, that we ever beheld. Their exquisite perfection almost transcends the bounds of sober relief. (Leggat, 1995, ¶1)

Interestingly, the camera's ability to elicit an emotive connection between image and viewer was remarkably similar to how the human mind perceived and recorded events. Unlike the camera, the mind used words to mediate and interpret events. Words unfortunately were inherently risky, arbitrary, and open to manipulation. This arbitrary nature of words afforded the mind broad interpretive license to construct abstract meaning from words—and not always in harmony with the original meaning. Photographs, on the other hand, did not rely on the mediation of words but rather relied directly on the image of reality itself. Documentary photographs, moreover, were unadorned and straightforward representations of reality. Umberto Eco (1982) describes this hermeneutical advantage as an "iconic sign" (p. 32), suggesting that a photograph's "natural resemblance of an image is to the reality it represents" (p. 32). This capacity to more closely approximate reality gave the photograph its persuasive edge in documenting everyday phenomena.

Context and the Documentary Approach: The Progressive Era (1890-1920)

Development of the documentary approach did not happen

in a cultural and political vacuum. The context in which the documentary approach gained influence is important to appreciate the photograph's persuasive and propagandistic qualities. For example, the Progressive Era (1890-1920) increasingly embraced science as the basis for social reform and solving social problems. Traditional forms of charitable relief were seen as inefficient and overly moralistic (Wenocur & Reisch, 2002). Progressives valued "social invention, believed in the authority of the expert, and possessed an interest in the communicative potential of visual explanation" (Finnegan, 2003, ¶13). Until the late nineteenth century, traditional charitable relief was exclusively motivated by religious underpinnings, i.e., helping orphans, widows and the disabled (Katz, 1969). In 1877, America's first Charity Organization Society (COS) was established in Buffalo, New York. The COS model focused on solving an individual's personal problems through organized charitable relief—or social casework. The approach assumed that help needed to involve more than mere alms-giving. The goal of COS was to instill self-reliance and individual social responsibility through a scientific approach to relief. In 1874 the National Conference of Charities and Corrections (NCCC) was held as the nation's first gathering of like-minded "social work" practitioners committed to applying a scientific and rational approach to social problems.

Having an informed public was vital for the COS movement to fulfill its mission. "Friendly visitors" informed by the latest research in academic psychology and sociology would provide a clear missional advantage to COS. Towards this end, in 1891 the New York Charity Organization Society established *Charities Review*, a journal that provided "advice and analyses" on a wide variety of social welfare issues (Finnegan, 2003, ¶2). The journal ascribed to high academic standards and narrowly focused on outlining bureaucratic solutions to intractable social problems. Its goal was to influence national social policy on the efficient delivery of charitable relief. According to Finnegan (2003), social welfare journals were a strategic outlet "for progressive thought and had substantial influence on public policy in their own time."

In 1897, leading social welfare author and expert, Edward T. Devine, created the journal *Charities* to directly compete

with *Charities Review*. To promote cooperation rather than competition, the two journals joined forces in 1901 under the title *Charities*. The new journal emphasized helping the poor by studying conditions that created poverty. It believed disseminating irrefutable social facts was strategic to advance efficiency in the delivery of services. The journal hoped to promote a national dialogue on service delivery grounded in scientific evidence. The strategy worked. Axinn and Stern (1997) describe how a March 1906 article on Washington DC, "Neglected Neighborhoods in the Alleys, Shacks and Tenements of the National Capitol," prompted a similar investigation in Pittsburgh (p. 140). As a sign of further cooperation, in 1909 the two major social work methods, "scientific charity" and the "settlement house" movement, came together to establish *Charities and the Commons*, with Edward Devine as its editor. Armed with in-depth scientific analysis of social conditions, the new journal set out to inform an already well-trained cadre of friendly visitors.

In 1912, Paul U. Kellogg became editor of *Charities and the Commons*. Kellogg renamed the journal *The Survey*, to reflect an emphasis on scientific research. While directing the Pittsburgh Survey project between 1907 and 1908, Kellogg had become convinced of a rational approach to social research. The project was the first of its kind to apply survey research methods on a large scale to study the effects of industrialization on a major American city (Axinn & Levin, 1997). The project taught him the persuasive power of brute facts to influence perception of social problems. Inspired by the success of the Pittsburgh project, Kellogg pursued an editorial vision using visual evidence to understand social problems. He self-consciously combined words with photographs to expose the harsh realities of social life. *The Survey* became the "leading social work journal" (Spartacus, 2006, ¶3) of the time, publishing innovative social analysis in a scholarly format. Its aim was to provide scientific evidence "as an investigator and interpreter of the objective conditions of life and labor and as a chronicler of undertakings to improve them" (Chambers, 1971, p. 53).

In the fall of 1921, Kellogg expanded his editorial vision by creating a companion journal to the *Survey* called *Survey Graphic*. The difference between the two journals was the

latter's emphasis on "the graphic depiction of social facts" (Finnegan, 2003, ¶16). According to Finnegan (2003), "Visual representation served as one way through which Kellogg sought to translate expert information for public consumption" (¶16). Kellogg wanted to reach an audience beyond professional social workers to "provoke citizens everywhere into an awareness of new programs for social reform (Finnegan, 2003, ¶9). He wanted common folk "to see for themselves the necessity for particular changes" (Finnegan, 2003, ¶9) using "charts, graphs, illustrations, cartoons and photographs" (Finnegan, 2003, ¶10). Kellogg was an intellectually devout social progressive who believed in the social benefits of technology. His commitment to the image made *Survey Graphic* visually appealing and much more accessible to the general public. In fact, *Survey Graphic* was the first non-governmental entity to publish government FSA photographs about rural poverty to influence public opinion (Finnegan, 2003, ¶24). The public took notice. By the early 1930s, subscriptions were a respectable 25,000 (Finnegan, 2003, ¶19). By the mid-1930s, the journal claimed to have developed a new "visual language" using text and image to describe America's social problems (Finnegan, 2003, ¶16).

Kellogg's vision, unfortunately, did not sit well with all sectors of society, e.g., America's social elite. For Kellogg to substantially affect social change he needed the trust and influence of the ruling upper class. The challenge was to be forthright yet discreet enough to overcome the elite's deep-seated disdain towards the lower-classes. Although the elite were curious about poverty, they wanted their curiosities quenched without having to leave the comfort of their homes. Writers thus took great pains to describe poverty in honest detail and presented destitution in such a way that it did not require direct contact except by way of imagination. Illustrations of poverty were therefore, more often than not, sanitized to mollify upper-class subscribers. Ironically, the descriptions of poverty were so vivid that they stirred the public's imagination to unintentionally spawn a literary movement which attracted socially conscious photographers and filmmakers alike.

Lewis W. Hine and the Documentary Approach

Lewis Wickes Hine (1874-1940) was among the earliest to practice documentary photography in a compelling way. His work was akin to social work advocacy compared to his predecessors Jacob Riis and Mathew Brady. Trachtenberg (1989) refers to Hine's photography as social work because he "based his conception of photography as social work on an aesthetic theory" (p. 168). His photographs documented a nation preoccupied with production and wealth at the expense of child labor, immigration and rapid urbanization. Born in 1874 in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, Hine picked up his first camera in 1904 to put his "beliefs to work" (p. 193). He believed in "change, experiment, and freedom" (p. 168) and in using his camera to affect social change. Committed to Progressive ideals of social reform, Hine called his own work "social photography" (Stange, 1989, p. 54) because he believed "photographic social work" (Trachtenberg, 1989, p. 166) was the best strategy to influence social reform. His goal was to influence public opinion in order to induce corrections to a flawed system gone amok.

Before practicing documentary photography on a full-time basis, Hine studied pedagogy and sociology. In 1900, he enrolled at the University of Chicago to study educational theory. After a year of study, his professor, Frank E. Manny, invited him to move to New York City. Manny had been appointed director of the progressive-leaning Ethical Culture School (ECS) and wanted Hine to teach with him there. Hine obliged Manny and began teaching nature studies at ECS. On his own time, he enrolled and graduated with a degree in education from New York University (NYU). After graduation, he then enrolled at Columbia University to study graduate-level sociology. In 1905, he graduated from Columbia with a "master pedagogy degree" (Stange, 1989, p. 52).

Manny taught Hine to respect the dignity and worth of immigrants. Manny felt America's newest immigrants deserved the same respect the Puritans received in the seventeenth century. Hine took this teaching to heart and brought ECS students to Ellis Island to experience immigrant life first-hand. The face-to-face contact made poverty much more real for Hine and his students. The visits inspired Hine to become

involved with immigration politics and to photograph their lives to "allow for an expression of individual qualities that lifts the portraits to a realm beyond mere depiction of immigrant 'types'" (Stange, 1992, p. 52). Hine was determined not to reinforce old clichés nor exploit immigrant stereotypes through his photography.

By 1906, Hine had become restless in his career and was anxious to engage in more direct forms of social work. He left ECS in 1908 and contracted work on a free-lance basis with the National Child Labor Committee [NCLC] (Trachtenberg, 1989). The work with NCLC was strategic, since it was "one of the major social work organizations" (p. 171) of the time. NCLC provided Hine the opportunity to pursue social work ideals using documentary photography on a full-time basis.

In 1907, his freelance work was published in two National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) leaflets, and in the same year he contributed two articles to *Charities and the Commons*. By 1908 he had published at least seven articles on photography, teaching and social work (Stange, 1989, p. 52). Hine photographed extensively for the NCLC, earning a national reputation as "perhaps the most successful social welfare photographer" (Photocollect, ¶5).

In the fall of 1907, Paul Kellogg hired Hine for three months to document the *Pittsburgh Survey* project. Hine accepted the free-lance job but was unsatisfied with only one line of work. With the Pittsburgh project completed, in 1908 he signed-on with *Charities and the Commons* as a staff photographer. Kellogg (1937), coincidentally, was its editor. He saw in Hine that rare talent to realize his editorial vision of combining word and image to document:

We chronicle developments...pool experiment and experience...afford a forum for free discussion...carry forward swift first hand investigations with a procedure comparable to that of scientific research...interpret the findings of others...employ photographs, maps, charts, the arts in gaining a hearing from two to twenty times that of formal books and reports. (p. 677)

Hine's position at *Charities and the Commons* was cause for

pride. He placed an ad in a local newspaper to show off his social work credentials and documentary photography skills:

...an experienced photographer who is in touch with social work, has joined the staff of *Charities and the Commons* to offer graphic representation of conditions and methods of work, through pictures for exhibits, reports, folders, magazines and newspapers articles, and lantern slides. (Trachtenberg, 1989, p. 197)

Charities and the Commons assigned Hine to travel the country photographing children working in cruel factory conditions. He described his young subjects as "human documents" because he saw in them the failures of an economic system which dehumanized its citizens for the sake of profit. Newhall (1978) said of Hine that "his photographs were powerful and readily grasped criticism of the impact of an economic system on the lives of underprivileged and exploited classes" (p. 142). Hine's photographs of children were widely published to influence the passage of major social legislation protecting children. Passage of the Child Labor Act of 1916 established a minimum hiring age of fourteen wherever non-agricultural goods were involved and destined for interstate commerce or export. The same year, Congress also passed the Keating-Owens Act, legislation that placed restrictions on employing children less than fourteen years of age in factories and shops. Owen Lovejoy, Chairman of the NCLC, believed Hine's social photography was critical to the advancement of child welfare. "The work Hine did for this reform was more responsible than all other efforts in bringing the need to public attention" (Spartacus Educational, 2006, ¶5). Hine understood the persuasive power of the documentary approach to educate and solve social problems. He used photography "to pose the question, to imply a situation for which some other medium might be needed to provide the answer" (Jussim, 1984, p. 112). Indeed, Hine's social photography helped persuade Congress to stop the exploitation of child labor.

The emerging profession of social work also appreciated Hine's social photography. In 1909, the National Conference of Charity and Correction invited Hine to present a paper at

its national meeting. His paper, "Social Photography: How the Camera May Help in the Social Uplift," argued that social photography must be brutally honest in order to "stand as evidence in any court of law." Hine pursued and produced photographs to adhere to the highest scientific standards of credible evidence. He photographed to document the "panorama of social facts" (Jussim, 1984, p. 195) in a scientific, rational, and systematic fashion. He believed photography:

...enlarged the reformist idea of the social survey to embrace the *process* of communication itself, inventing presentational forms through which social information might become the viewer's own concrete experience... visual facts as the occasion for awakening the viewer's awareness of and imaginative empathy with the pictured others, and thus the viewer's own social being. (p. 203)

For Hine, documentary photography was a scientific method as well as a social act. Picture-taking involved more than merely recording factual content, or social events—it was an interactive process where "the social act lay in the communication" (p. 203).

The New Deal and the Documentary Approach

In response to the failed policies of President Herbert Hoover, presidential candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) promised a "new deal" for the American people—that is, an activist government in matters of social welfare provision. FDR campaigned to mobilize federal resources to stabilize America's crippled economy. To do this, he organized a "brain trust" of academic advisors and charged them with the task of developing economic recovery policies. After winning the presidency in 1933, Roosevelt's brain trust produced a blistering array of legislative proposals in the first 100 days called the First New Deal.

For the first time in the nation's history, the federal government initiated a broad range of relief legislation for its citizens. The legislative goal was to insure the social security of every working American by way of relief, recovery and reform. Broad

public support came early for the First New Deal (1933-34), but by 1935 political resistance emerged, raising questions about future legislative approval. A long-term strategy thus became critical to persuade reluctant decision-makers of the necessity of government action to advance social well-being. In other words, the use of propaganda was raised in and around 1935 as the appropriate means to persuade a reluctant Congress. Carlebach (1988) argues that propaganda was "the original dissemination of information and ideas for the purpose of influencing attitudes and behaviors vital to the proper functioning of democracy" (p. 11). In this sense, the New Deal photographers were, in the best sense of the word, propagandists for the government.

Despite the legislative success of FDR's first 100 days, as early as 1934, heated resistance challenged the new legislation. Critics were both for and against the New Deal legislation. Some questioned the constitutional legitimacy of the New Deal, asking whether government had the authority to reduce unemployment and induce economic recovery. Others, like the Workers Alliance of America, felt FDR's government did not go far enough and demanded even bolder and more dynamic government action. The most organized opposition to the New Deal was the American Liberty League. A bipartisan group, it sought "to combat radicalism, preserve property rights, [and] uphold and preserve the Constitution" (McElvaine, 2000, p. 59). Although very vocal and politically powerful, in the end, the opposition could not block FDR from initiating a second New Deal in the spring of 1935. FDR well understood the political risks he was taking and sought to galvanize public support. He believed an informed public was advantageous and necessary to support further government action. His strategy to gain broad support involved employing the social sciences, i.e., documentary photography, to bear witness to America's hidden inequalities. "In order to convince the American people and the Congress of the need for reform, especially in the agricultural sector, still photographs that describe the deplorable conditions in the countryside were produced and disseminated" (Carlebach, 1988, p. 8). Credible visual evidence was deemed strategic to persuade a reluctant Congress.

FDR's first 100 days demonstrated the power of

social legislation to combat poverty. Institutionalizing government relief would be his next social welfare policy challenge. One weapon FDR devised was establishment of the Resettlement Administration (RA). Organized in May 1935 in the Department of Agriculture, FDR appointed Rexford W. Tugwell as its first leader. Tugwell was an original member of FDR's brain trust culled from Columbia University's economics department. Tugwell had convinced FDR to view government in an instrumentalist way, that is, to use government to actualize Progressive social ideals. For example, a central part of Tugwell's plan was for the government to relocate poor families into planned communities. Tugwell believed the function of government was to care for its citizens when the invisible hand of the economy could no longer meet basic human needs. To insure public support of this view of government, Tugwell created an Information Division (ID) for public relations purposes. He deemed it important to control the gathering and dissemination of information to sustain New Deal initiatives. An Historical Section was thus created as a subdivision within ID and Roy E. Stryker was hired as its director. Stryker was a former student and collaborator of Tugwell's at Columbia University. At Columbia, they had worked well together on several projects using photography to illustrate economic conditions. Tugwell's goal was to forestall criticism through a robust public relations strategy. Stryker's goal was to produce irrefutable "photographic and sociological documentation of the work of the RA" (Walker Evans Project, 2006, ¶3). He wanted nothing less than "to inform, persuade, and act as catalyst to reform" (Carlebach, 1988, p. 8).

Despite FDR's support, the RA drew intense political fire for allegedly being too utopian and unrealistically socialistic. Reacting to the political backlash and fallout, Tugwell reluctantly resigned in early 1937. FDR responded to the embattled agency by transforming it into the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Congress officially sanctioned the FSA in 1937, although it had actually been operating under executive order since 1935. Ever mindful of public opinion, the administration "wasted no time in launching an ambitious public information program designed to propagate the faith of the new agency and its prophet" (Baldwin, 1968, p. 117). Under

the capable leadership of Will W. Alexander, the FSA refocused its energies to alleviating rural poverty.

Anxious to demonstrate the importance of FSA, Stryker immediately organized a cadre of accomplished photographers to document the social impact of the Great Depression. Between 1935 and 1943, a dozen or so government-hired photographers fanned out across America to photograph reality in the service of social legislation. Stryker instructed his photographers to document the human spirit, despite the travails of the Great Depression. Cognizant of the cultural shift unfolding from a reading-oriented society towards visual literacy, Stryker set out to take advantage of the pictorial magazines *Life* and *Look* to communicate the federal response to poverty. In addition, the social work journals *Survey* and *Survey Graphic* became instrumental in educating the public about New Deal projects. For example, the 1940 issue of *Survey Graphic* extolled the virtues of the New Deal, particularly its use of documentary photographs by including an essay by Hartly Howe entitled "You Have Seen Their Pictures," on the FSA photographs (Finnegan, 2003, ¶24).

A major benefit of the FSA photographs was how they challenged the public's perception of America's social well-being. Photographs of rural poverty entered the American consciousness to positively alter social and political misperceptions of New Deal initiatives. When the FSA documentary project finally ended, an unprecedented 270,000 photographs had been taken of rural poverty. The start of World War II diverted the nation's attention away from domestic problems and onto world affairs. The priority of war compelled FDR in 1943 to replace the FSA project with the Office of War Information, forcing Stryker to disband his cadre of documentary photographers.

The Documentary Approach: Propaganda or Persuasion?

Is the documentary approach propaganda or persuasion? The answer to this question is significant to appreciate photography's role in American social welfare history. Tucker (1984) argues that photographers self-consciously attempt "to reveal operative social forces, but to also suggest ways

to deal with them. They were, quite frankly and forthrightly, propagandists" (p. 42). Is it true that Hine, Kellogg and Stryker were propagandists, or were they agents of persuasion? The conclusion drawn here is that the documentary approach was both propaganda and persuasion. To pre-judge propaganda as inherently immoral fails to appreciate its positive value to gather and disseminate credible information. Although it was certainly the case that fascist regimes had corrupted the democratic benefit of propaganda by misusing information during the 1930s, not all information rises to the level of propaganda. Carlebach (1988) argues that "Propaganda becomes intrinsically suspect only when it is, by law, the only information permitted, and when its purpose is to deceive rather than to educate" (p. 11). Perhaps Edward Steichen says it best: "Pictures in themselves are very rarely propaganda. It is the use that is made of pictures that makes them propaganda" (p. 24). Hine and Kellogg certainly distanced themselves from the disreputable connotation associated with propaganda. Their work with non-governmental agencies was vital in persuading the American public to acknowledge the country's hidden social problems. Their role was strategically used to persuade the government of the existence of problems it somehow could not see on its own.

Social welfare historian Robert Bremner (1956) believes documentary photography in the 1920s and 1930s played a positive role in shaping American social welfare. The public's yearning for visual evidence led many to develop an implicit trust in documentary photography. Public trust was necessary for documentary photography to inform and persuade:

As the images began to make their way into the public domain via the wire services, magazine articles, traveling exhibitions, and government brochures and handouts, the public began to respond favorably to the photographs and, more importantly, to express their support for at least some of the RA's programs. 'The pictures were working.' (Carlebach, 1988, p. 19)

In conclusion, the challenge for social workers using the documentary approach today is to discern how best to control the social meaning of an image. William Stott (1984) observed

that “the heart of documentary is not style or medium, but always content” (p. 30). Implicit in Stott’s view is the notion that propaganda was an act of revolution and photography merely personal expression. Documentary work is unavoidably personal and inextricably expresses an aesthetic perspective. Underscoring the subjective and activist role of documentary photography, Sekula (1989) asserts photographs are not value neutral, but how they are displayed informs their social meaning. Curtis (1989) supports this perspective and goes on to suggest that “a photograph has no inherent or intrinsic meaning—only an assigned meaning” (p. ix). Hine understood well this challenge of advocacy in the pursuit of social justice, “If I could tell the story in words, I wouldn’t need to lug a camera” (Walker Evans Project, 2006).

References

- Axinn, J. & Levin, H. (1997). *Social welfare: A history of the American response to need*. Fourth Edition. New York: Longman.
- Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of seeing*. New York: Viking Penguin.
- Burgin, V. (Ed.). (1984). *Thinking photography*. London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd.
- Baldwin, S. (1968). *Poverty and politics: The rise and decline of the Farm Security Administration*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Bremner, R. (1956). *The discovery of poverty in the United States*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Carlebach, M. L. (1988). Documentary and propaganda: The photographs of the Farm Security Administration. *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, 8, pp. 6-25.
- Chambers, C. (1971). *Paul U. Kellogg and the Survey: Voices for social welfare and social justice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Collier, J., & Collier, M. (1986). *Visual anthropology: Photography as a research method*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Curtis, J. (1989) *Mind’s eye, mind’s truth: FSA photography reconsidered*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Daniel, P., Foresta, M. A., Stange, M. & Stein, S. (Eds.). (1987). *Official image: New Deal photography*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.

- Eco, U. (1982). Critique of the image. In V. Burgin, (Ed.), *Thinking photography* (pp. 32-38). London: Macmillan.
- Evans, W. (1973). *Photographs for the Farm Security Administration 1935-1938*. New York: De Capo Press.
- Featherstone, D., (Ed.). (1984). *Observations: Essays on documentary photography*. Carmel, California: Friends of Photography.
- Finnegan, C. (2003). *Social welfare and visual politics: The story of Survey Graphic*. Retrieved from <http://newdeal.feri.org/sg/>
- Grieson, J. (2006). *Grieson Trust*. Retrieved from http://www.griesontrust.org/john_grieson.htm
- Grow, G. (2002). Magazine covers and cover lines: An illustrated history. *Journal of Magazine and New Media Research*, (4)2.
- Guimond, J. (1991). *American photography and the American dream*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Hagen, C. (1985). *American photographers of the Depression: Farm Security Administration photographs 1935-1942*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Howe, K. S. (2004). *First seen: Portraits of the world's peoples, 1840-1880*. Santa Barbara: Third Millennium Publishing.
- Jussim, E. (1984). *Propaganda and persuasion*. Observations: Essays on Documentary Photography. Untitled 35. Carmel, CA: The Friends of Photography.
- Katz, M. (1996). *In the shadow of the poorhouse: A social history of welfare in America* (rev. ed.). New York: Basic Books.
- Kellogg, P. U. (1937). Twenty-fifth anniversary issue, *Survey Graphic*, 26, December.
- Leggat, R. (1995). *A history of photography: The daguerreotype*. Retrieved on (need date) from <http://www.rleggat.com/photohistory/history/daguerro.htm>
- Newhall, B. (1978). *The history of photography*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.
- McCausland, E. (1939). *Documentary photography*. Photo Notes. New York: Photo League. Retrieved on Oct. 13, 2006 from <http://newdeal.feri.org/pn/pn139.htm>.
- McElvaine, R. S. (2000). *The depression and New Deal: A history in documents*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Photocollect, (1995). Lewis Hine. Retrieved from <http://www.photocollect.com/bios/hine.html>
- Rosler, M. (1989). *In, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography) in the contest of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Sekula, A. (1984). *Photography against the grain: Essays and photo works: 1973-1983*. Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design.
- Spartacus Educational. (2006). *Lewis Hine*. Retrieved June 30, 2006 from <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/IRhine.htm>.

- Stange, M. (1992). *Symbols of ideal life: Social documentary photography in America 1890-1950*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Stott, W. (1973). *Documentary expression and thirties America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Trachtenberg, A. (1989). *Reading American photographs: Images as history—Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Trattner, W. I. (1999). *From poor law to welfare state: A history of social welfare in America* (Sixth Ed.). New York: The Free Press.
- Tucker, A. W. (1984). *Photographic facts and thirties America, Observations: Essays on Documentary Photography*. Untitled 35. Carmel, CA: The Friends of Photography.
- Tugwell, R., Munro, T. & Stryker, R. (1930). *American economic life and the means of its improvement*. New York: Harcourt, Brace.
- Walker Evans Project. (2006). *Chronology of the Farm Security Administration*. Retrieved June 28, 2006 from <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug97/fsabio.html>
- Walker Evans Project. (2006). *Photography as a research method*. Retrieved Oct. 20, 2004 from <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/fsa/tool.html>
- Wenocur, S. & Reisch, M. (2002). *From charity to enterprise: The development of American social work in a market economy*. Champagne, IL: University of Illinois Press.