

Can Photographers Influence Politics?

Written by Dermot Hodson

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DERMOT HODSON, SEP 1 2019

When US Vice President Mike Pence visited Texas in July to address criticisms of migrant detention facilities, he insisted that authorities were 'providing care that every American would be proud of' (Vigdor 2019). But press-pool images of men packed behind fences and the Vice President's own face showed a different picture and added to the pressure on the Trump administration (Klein and Brown 2019). The political influence of photography is the subject of longstanding debate. An image of atrocity can serve as a 'call for peace' or 'a cry for revenge', argued the writer and activist Susan Sontag (2004: 12). Alex Danchev (2009: 39), a scholar of politics and art, was more optimistic, seeing photographs as 'instruments of the imagination, tools for morals'. In spite of their differences, Sontag and Danchev saw photographers as witnesses of politics. This idea of bearing witness (see Light 2010) can help to understand the role of war photographers and photojournalists, for example, but what about photographers who play more direct roles in the political process? Documentary photographers, in particular, participate in politics in a variety of ways, including as bureaucrats, advocates and experts.

There is a long tradition of documentary photographers working within public administrations. Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1936) – probably the best-known image of the Great Depression – was taken for the Historical Section of FDR's Farm Security Administration. Like all bureaucrats, Lange faced institutional constraints and her fair share of frustrations. While she learned to navigate public institutions, others chafed against them. A case in point is Walker Evans, who took leave from the Historical Section to make *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men for Fortune* (Agee and Evans 1939). The book's images of impoverished sharecroppers with dirty clothes and blank expressions contrast with the pensive determination of Florence Thompson in Lange's *Migrant Mother*. Evans' image cast a cooler eye on FDR's policies and it would almost certainly not have been approved by the Historical Section.

Today, there are numerous examples of photographers working as bureaucrats but governments' preoccupation with 'image control' provides fewer opportunities for self-expression. Nevertheless, bureaucratic photographers can evade, whether intentionally or not, the tightest of institutional constraints. Pete Souza's *The Situation Room* (2011), showed Barack Obama and key advisors monitoring the raid on Osama Bin Laden's compound. Most of those gathered around the table were well known, but a partial glimpse of an unnamed CIA operative provided more information than the photographer or White House may have intended (Miller 2011).

The photographer as advocate must decide with whom to partner with to promote social change and what role images can play in, what Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998) call, the politics of information, symbolism, leverage and accountability. Jacob Riis campaigned for social reform in 1890s New York by taking photographs of slum conditions. He also partnered with Police Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt, who was driven to action by Riis's images. Riis took Roosevelt to police lodgings, which provided squalid conditions for the city's destitute. 'I will smash them tomorrow', was Roosevelt's response (Riis 1901: 249).

Among contemporary documentary photographers, few can claim to have shaped political outcomes more than Susan Meiselas, whose images of the 1981 El Mozote Massacre were examined by the United States Congress and the Truth Commission for El Salvador. In the 1990s, Meiselas worked with Human Rights Watch to photograph evidence of the Anfal campaign in which a reported 100,000 Kurdish civilians were murdered by members of Saddam Hussein's regime. Meiselas's photographs featured prominently in Human Rights Watch's report on this issue as well as being used as evidence in the trial of Saddam Hussein (Bui 2008).

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The photographer who engages in advocacy faces questions over whether they can influence politics but also over whether they should. Aubert (2009: 10) criticises Riis for his 'utter lack of concern for the privacy of the immigrant workers and families he claims to be interested in, and his unfortunate tendency to set tenement flats on fire with his flashlight'. Susan Meiselas acknowledges the contradictions of a US citizen photographing the effects of US-made bullets in Latin America (Meiselas 1998).

A recent attempt to rethink the legitimacy of documentary photography can be found in the work of Activestills, a collective of Israeli, Palestinian and international photographers established in 2005 to protest against oppression, racism and violations of freedom. Attempting to go beyond the media and other traditional vehicles for photography, Activestills combines traditional reportage with street exhibitions and, what Maimon and Grinbaum (2016: 33) refer to as, 'visual activism'.

Activestills' approach to activism sees photographers as part of the communities that they represent and is perhaps best encapsulated by the title of Basel Alyazouri's (2016) essay *Learning to Photograph While Running*. Now international in its scope, Activestills' powerful photo diary of London's Grenfell Tower fire and the protests that followed illustrate the enduring ability of documentary photographers to raise awareness of, and advocate for, social issues (Ziv 2017).

The photographer as expert engages with actors from other disciplines to produce evidence and analysis in support of or against specific policies. These epistemic communities (Haas 1992) can tarnish the independence, impartiality and credibility of photographers who join them.

As a member of the Historical Section, Dorothea Lange fits the frame of photographer as bureaucrat. But her work can also be viewed as part of an epistemic community composed chiefly of progressive economists. She and her husband, Paul Schuster Taylor, a labour economist, documented migrant labour in California in the 1930s in *An American Exodus*. 'This is neither a book of photographs nor an illustrated book, in the traditional sense', wrote Lange and Taylor of their *An American Exodus*. We use the camera as a tool of research' (Lange and Taylor 1939).

Contemporary documentary photographers are uneasy with truth claims and, in the age of digital photography, vulnerable to accusations of fakery. For these reasons, perhaps, postmodern documentarians challenge the epistemic underpinnings of their own work, as in Sherrie Levine's *After Walker Evans* in which she re-photographed Evan's iconic Depression-era images.

Today, Sebastião Salgado comes closest to the idea of the photographer as expert. Trained as an economist in his native Brazil and later France before working on development issues with the International Coffee Organization. Salgado soon left to become a full-time photographer but economic ideas permeate many of his photographic projects.

Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age (1993) is structured like an economic report, each chapter focused on a different sector in a different country, including sugarcane in Brazil, titanium and magnesium in Kazakhstan and oil in Kuwait (Salgado 1993). It can be read as a work of comparative political economy in which Salgado seeks not only to document but also understand the impact of industrial change on workers across the world.

Is there not a danger, as Lawrence Susskind (1994) puts it, of turning experts into 'expert witnesses'? Photographers as experts face such challenges, as in 2011, when Salgado's exhibition on global environmental issues at the Natural History Museum in London was sponsored by a Brazilian mining company (Haines 2013). 'The problem is not the oil companies or mining companies, but the system of life we've created' was Salgado's unsatisfactory answer (Haines 2013).

Can photographers directly influence politics? The answer is a qualified 'yes'. This qualification depends, in part, on the ability of photographers to harness the power of bureaucracies, advocacy networks and epistemic communities to which they sometimes belong. It also depends on the extent to which photographers can manage the contradictions inherent in the political process, be it those created by bureaucratic constraints, concerns over the

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legitimacy of activists and the credibility of experts.

None of this suggests that photographers will not find their work 'blown by the whims and loyalties of diverse communities', as Sontag (2004: 35) puts it. But it encourages scholars engaged in the emerging field of global visual politics (Bleiker 2018) to think of the diverse and sometimes influential roles that photographers can and do play in these policy communities.

Notes

This post draws on his article 'The Politics of Documentary Photography: Three Theoretical Perspectives' in *Government and Opposition*.

Further Reading

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