

ARTICLE

# The Politics of Documentary Photography: Three Theoretical Perspectives

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(Received 25 June 2018; revised 23 November 2018; accepted 13 December 2018;  
first published online 21 March 2019)

## Abstract

Photographers are often inspired by politics but can they influence it? Drawing on the study of public policy and the history of photography, this article considers three ways in which documentary photographers enter the policy process. It considers the photographer as: a bureaucrat working within government networks to achieve individual and institutional aims; an advocate working with like-minded actors to advance shared political beliefs; an expert working within an epistemic community driven by a shared policy enterprise. These roles highlight the institutional channels through which photographers seek and sometimes secure political change and the contradictions and constraints they face in so doing. These contrasting perspectives are discussed with reference to the work of canonical and contemporary photographers engaged in national and international politics from 1890 to today.

**Keywords:** documentary photography; politics; history of photography

In September 2015, Nilüfer Demir photographed the body of Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old boy who drowned off the coast of Turkey as his family fled the war in Syria. Within 12 hours, a selection of Demir's images had been viewed more than 20 million times on Twitter (Vis and Goriunova 2015), piling pressure on politicians to act (Tharoor 2015). After seeing the photos, French President François Hollande phoned his Turkish counterpart Recep Erdoğan to broker a European response to the refugee crisis (*Daily Sabah* with Agencies 2015). The following day, UK Prime Minister David Cameron announced plans to resettle 20,000 of the most vulnerable refugees from Syria by 2020, having previously promised to take only 'several hundred' (Home Office 2017: 4).<sup>1</sup> In Canada, Prime Minister Stephen Harper's tearful but defensive reaction to Demir's photographs may have helped to propel Justin Trudeau to power weeks later (Pammett and Dornan 2016). Such reactions hint at the political power of photographers and yet they invite the question of why this image by this photographer at this time resonated as much as it did.

The political impact of photography depends on how images and those who take them interact with the political process. As David D. Perlmutter (1998) argues, we often assume, without supporting evidence, that photographs affect politicians and the public in the same way that they have affected us. This can be seen in overblown claims that Nik Ut's iconic image of a young girl fleeing a napalm strike altered the course of the Vietnam War (Wollacott 2000).<sup>2</sup> Historians of photography swing from optimism to pessimism over the idea of photography as a force for positive political change. Susan Sontag (2004: 12) is at her ambivalent best when she writes: 'Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge.' Photographs may be ... instruments of the imagination, tools for morals', replies Alex Danchev (2009: 39). In spite of their differing views, both authors see the photographer as operating at one remove from politics. Their appraisal of Don McCullin's work is remarkably similar in this respect, with Sontag (2015: 28) describing the war photographer as an 'impassioned witness, bringing back his news from hell' and Danchev (2009: 36) seeing him/her as capturing and conveying what political actors (in this case, soldiers) cannot. Many contemporary scholars of photography have a similar view, as in Christopher Carter's (2015) depiction of photographs as rhetorical devices which, through their depiction of social class and spaces, can expose contradictions in the capitalist system. Politics, from this viewpoint, is an amorphous realm that the photographer can observe but not enter.

Where are the people who do politics in these accounts? Where are the institutions in which they operate? Can photographers gain access to these institutions and influence those who control the levers of power? How, if at all, can photographers bring attention to issues that politicians would not otherwise address? Political science is well placed to address such questions but comparatively few scholars in this field have taken an interest in photographs and those who take them. Danchev's wide-ranging discussions of art and politics (see also Danchev and Lisle 2009) are among the few exceptions. David Campbell (2003) also uses war photography to show how the political power of images depends on intertextual context and the committed politics of the photographer. Roland Bleiker and Amy Kay (2007) argue that a humanist approach to photography can raise awareness of, but also blunt responses to, societal challenges using the portrayal of HIV/AIDS in Africa as a case study. James Johnson (2011) suggests that documentary photography can direct attention away from the suffering of individuals to the populations or 'aggregates' that they represent. And yet, Emma Hutchison, Roland Bleiker and David Campbell (2014) warn that the depiction of migrants in groups lends itself to the framing of migration as a security challenge rather than a humanitarian one. Insightful though these studies are, they invite further reflections on the institutions through which politics play out and the role that photographers potentially play within this process.

The focus of this investigation is on documentary photography, which, broadly speaking, deploys visual documents of events, places, objects and persons to demonstrate the need for social change (Schulz 2006). Other genres of photography, including photojournalism and war photography, are set to one side for simplicity's sake, even though the boundaries between them and documentary photography are often blurred (Becker 1995). The analysis that follows draws general conclusions

from the work of classic and contemporary documentary photographers engaged in national and international politics from 1890 to today, including Activestills, Giles Duley, Walker Evans, Lewis Hine, Dorothea Lange, Susan Meiselas, Pete Souza, Jacob Riis, Arthur Rothstein and Sebastião Salgado.

Rather than offering a single theoretical take, this article draws on different theoretical perspectives to conceptualize three ways in which photographers enter the political process. This categorization does not exhaust the political roles that photographers potentially play and nor is it applied to anything more than a sample of documentary photography, but it allows us to identify in a more systematic and generalizable way the channels through which photographers seek to influence politics and the contradictions and constraints they encounter as a result. The first perspective sees the photographer as a bureaucrat who can play a powerful role in articulating the aims and effects of public administrations. In this role, the photographer faces frustrations, compromise and competition, all of which sit uneasily with the sense of autonomy that is so important to documentary photography. The second views the photographer as an activist working with like-minded actors to uphold shared values. Here the photographer must confront awkward questions over their right to advocate on behalf of their subjects. The third sees the photographer as an expert working with other specialists to develop arguments and evidence in support of social change. Such efforts can bring significant influence but they must address concerns over the photographer's credibility, independence and impartiality.

Taken together, these perspectives show that photographers influence politics not simply through the power of their images but through their ability to navigate complex policy processes. Opportunities for political engagement, moreover, vary over time. Bureaucracies are less welcoming to documentary photographers than they once were, it is concluded, while photographers' claims to expertise face periodic challenges. Documentary photography, in contrast, occupies a crucial place in evolving efforts at transnational advocacy. The golden age of progressive photography may be over but a new generation of activists is working with photographers and photography for social change.

### Three theoretical perspectives

Three caveats and a word on methodology are warranted at this juncture. First, not all documentary photographers are interested in politics and those that are do not necessarily seek to influence politics directly. For instance, Diane Arbus's grotesque images of society's marginalized raise political questions and yet reject the idea of progressive photography (Coleman 2000). Second, documentary photography must contend with what Judith Goldman (1974: 30) called 'the gap between intention and effect'. The political impact of a photograph may be quite different from what the photographer intended and such impacts vary between individuals and groups over space and time.<sup>3</sup> The rapid reaction to Nilüfer Demir's photo of Alan Kurdi exemplifies the power of viral images in the age of social media.<sup>4</sup> And yet, Demir had been photographing border crossings in this region for more than a decade before this image broke through (Griggs 2015). Third, some forms of political photography are not captured in this article, as in the role of citizen and non-citizen photographers (Azoulay 2008). In this sense, the theoretical

perspectives considered are a starting point for thinking more systematically about the relationship between politics and photography. No photographs are reproduced in this article. This is consistent with James Johnson (2011), who in turn cites the textual tradition of photographic analysis favoured by Sontag (2004). Links to photographs are nonetheless provided, where possible.

### **Photographers as bureaucrats**

Andrew Parsons, a British photographer, came to public prominence in 2006 when he photographed David Cameron driving a dog-sled over a melting glacier to highlight the politician's concerns over global warming (Wintour 2006).<sup>5</sup> Four years later, Cameron appointed Parsons as a civil servant. The controversy over this decision was curious as the British government has hired photographers since the Victorian era, as in Thomas Bigg's appointment in 1855 as Government Photographer to the Bombay Presidency (Hannavy 2008). Today, photographers are employed by public administrations worldwide. No high-level handshake or meeting is overlooked or un-tweeted.

Instances in which documentary photographers are employed by governments to do documentary photography are rarer. The Historical Section of the United States Resettlement Administration – later the Farm Security Administration – provides the best-known historical example. Established in 1935, the Resettlement Administration was a government agency set up by Franklin D. Roosevelt to administer programmes and policies to address urban and rural poverty and miscellaneous environmental objectives during the Great Depression. The Historical Section hired some of the country's leading documentary photographers with the aim 'not only [of] keeping a record of the administration's projects, but also [of] perpetuating photographically certain aspects of the American scene which may prove incalculable in time to come' (US Resettlement Administration 1935: 97). Over the next decade, these photographers took some of the best-known images not only of the Great Depression but in the history of documentary photography.

The Historical Section has been criticized for being self-serving and partisan (Carlebach 1988), but such charges merely underline photographers' power to document the aims and effects of public administrations. Public reaction to the Historical Section's photo exhibitions was mixed, exemplifying the gap between the intention of the photographers and the impact of their work. Some politicians, rather than being spurred to action, moved to suppress photographs of their districts (Curtis 1989). And yet, there is little doubt that the photographs reached a broader public than purely textual reports or press releases could have done. The Historical Section distributed nearly 1,000 images per month to publications such as *Survey Graphic* and *Life*, which were sympathetic to the aims of the Roosevelt administration, as well as providing more than 5,000 prints for government publications. Mary Beadle's (2006: 76) claim that today's welfare policies in the US trace their origins to such images is overblown but the Historical Section's photographers certainly played a part in sustaining one of Roosevelt's most controversial policies.

The goals and purposes of bureaucratic organizations, as B. Guy Peters (2014: 163) tells us, are determined by officials who sometimes lose sight of their political

masters' aims. This tendency can be seen in the work of Arthur Rothstein, the first photographer recruited to the Historical Section. Rothstein's early fieldwork rested uneasily with the aims of the Resettlement Administration. The assignment in question documented Appalachian communities being moved to make way for Shenandoah National Park,<sup>6</sup> the government acting in this case as the displacer and in some cases the incarcerator of people rather than their defender (Currell 2017).

Unintended consequences are a common feature of bureaucracies, and the Historical Section was not immune to this phenomenon. This is evidenced by the furor created over Rothstein's *The Skull* (1936), a photograph of a steer skull against an arid background taken in the South Dakota Badlands (Huang 1999).<sup>7</sup> Rothstein probably saw *The Skull* as a contribution to the Roosevelt administration's efforts to tackle drought conditions in the region, but it undermined government policy and the reputation of the Historical Section. The problem was that the photo was staged by Rothstein, who shot the skull in several locations. 'It's a Fake' responded the *Fargo Forum* (Hurley 1972: 88).

Bureaucrats are subject to institutional constraints designed to prevent drift (McCubbins et al. 1987). While such constraints can keep officials in check, they stifle creativity and for the individuals concerned they can become what Bruce Adams (1984) describes as one of the great 'frustrations of public service'. The photographers of the Historical Section faced no shortage of constraints and their fair share of frustrations. Roy Stryker, the Historical Section's head, provided his photographers with detailed briefings on the economic, social and political conditions they were likely to encounter in the field and even shooting scripts (Hurley 1972: 56). Those who did not meet the standards expected were reprimanded by Stryker and in some cases transferred from the Historical Section, as in the case of Theodor Jung (Hurley 1972: 78). Perhaps the most serious creative constraint on photographers was the expectation that photographs be processed in Washington, approved by Stryker, as director, and their negatives stored in the Historical Section archive. Some photographers worked within these constraints, as Rothstein did, but others chafed against them, as did Walker Evans, who took a leave of absence from the Historical Section to shoot *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* for *Fortune* (Agee and Evans 1939). The result was a landmark work of documentary photography which would almost certainly not have been permissible under Stryker's charge, however much bureaucratic leeway the head of the Historical Section afforded Evans. A case in point is *Bud Fields and his Family at Home* (1936), a photograph of an impoverished sharecropper and his family.<sup>8</sup> The family's dirty clothes and feet and their blank expressions contrast with the pensive determination of Florence Thompson in Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1936), the latter showing a poor but resolute woman comforting her distressed children in what became the Historical Section's best-known image.<sup>9</sup>

In the end, the most consequential bureaucratic battle occurred not between Stryker and the photographers who worked under him but between the Historical Section and other parts of government. Stryker won a number of important early battles, including convincing the head of the Resettlement Administration to put all matters relating to photography under the Historical Section's control, a move that brought resources and the arrival of Walker Evans and Ben Shahn from

other parts of the agency (Hurley 1972: 46). Beneficial too was the Resettlement Administration's absorption into the US Department of Agriculture, a move that loosened bureaucratic and budget constraints on the Historical Section. Ultimately, Stryker and his photographers were overtaken by bureaucratic forces empowered by the outbreak of World War II. In 1942, the Historical Section was absorbed into the Office of War Information, greatly reducing Stryker's influence and the importance attached within the section to documentary photography. Before he stepped down, Stryker circumvented plans to destroy the Historical Section's archive by arranging for the transfer of its 130,000 photographs to the Library of Congress (Hurley 1972: 168).

Documentary photography on the scale of the Historical Section would never flourish again within US bureaucratic structures. The closest comparator is Documerica, a photographic project run by the US Environmental Protection Agency that started in 1972 and to which Arthur Rothstein served as a consultant.<sup>10</sup> Although it produced more than 20,000 images by politically minded photographers such as Arthur Tress and Ken Heyman, Documerica achieved nowhere near the same success as the Historical Section. Whereas the latter wrestled with bureaucratic politics, the former succumbed to them, ceasing its activities in 1977 after budget cuts made it impossible to hire any photographers (Shubinski 2009: 3).

Today, there are numerous examples of photographers working as bureaucrats but governments' preoccupation with 'image control' provides fewer opportunities for documentary photographers to flourish in this environment. Perhaps the most high-profile bureaucratic position in political photography is the post of official White House photographer. For the most part, presidential photographers are content – or constrained – to reproduce stock images of life in the White House. Telephone conversations are a recurring motif in photographs of John F. Kennedy – as in Jacques Lowe's *Lumumba* (1961),<sup>11</sup> which recorded Kennedy's reaction to hearing the news by telephone that Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba had been assassinated – and they have helped to forge the president's reputation as a leader at the centre of world events. So much so, in fact, that it is now standard operating procedure during international crises for governments to publish photographs of prime ministers and presidents calling other world leaders. If the message of such photographs is that events are in hand then the myth is that policy is made by, and between, heads of state or government with little need for advisers, experts and, it would seem, operational decisions. That this myth is wearing thin is suggested by the derision that greeted UK Prime Minister David Cameron's 'selfie' of his stern-faced conversation with Barack Obama over Ukraine in March 2014 (Haynes 2014).

The power imbalance between presidential photographers and presidents clearly constrains the former. Chief Official White House Photographer Shealah Craighead was criticized for releasing no photographs during the first 50 days of the Trump presidency and, when her first batch of images was released, of portraying the president, his family and staff in a way that was stiff, staged and remote (O'Kane 2017). Trump, it later transpired, had chosen to keep photos of himself with family and friends for his private archive (Flock 2017), preferring perhaps to be the sole star of his political reality show.



But bureaucratic photographers can evade, whether intentionally or not, the tightest of institutional constraints. *The Situation Room* (2011), a photograph by Craighead's predecessor, Pete Souza, shows Barack Obama and key advisers monitoring the raid on Osama Bin Laden's compound.<sup>12</sup> 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).

Today, international public administrations provide the most nourishing bureaucratic environment for documentary photographers, perhaps, because international organizations face a significant 'knowledge gap' (Dellmuth 2016). A case in point is the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which is a prolific commissioner and producer of images of migrants. Since its foundation in 1950, the UNHCR has used images of refugees to draw attention to the plight of displaced people, albeit in ways that sometimes undermine its bureaucratic imperatives. 'By the end of the 1970s', Heather L. Johnson (2011: 1026) notes, 'the image of the refugee had begun to shift from the political individual fleeing the Soviet bloc to masses from the global South', with the latter adding to the sense that Europe was being overwhelmed by migration. A more recent project, UNHCR Tracks, challenges this tendency by providing images and long-form reports of people fleeing war or persecution.<sup>13</sup> UNHCR's Refugees Media is more traditional in this respect but it provides a useful way to counteract the polarizing portrayal of migrants in the media. Images from this archive are made available to journalists free of charge, sometimes within minutes of their being filed in the field (Laurent 2015).<sup>14</sup> Media outlets that want such images are bound to use them accurately and on stories related to UNHCR-supported projects, thus allowing a modicum of bureaucratic oversight over the photographic representation of migrants. Documentary photographers who engage with the UNHCR in this way receive not only assignments that are lengthy by today's limited standards (Laurent 2015) but also significant creative leeway. They 'gave me the greatest brief a photographer can be given: "Follow your heart"', said Giles Duley of his work with the UNHCR on the European refugee crisis, a collaboration that produced *I Can Only Tell You What My Eyes See* (Duley 2017), a collection of photographs that stand out for their individual and family portraits of refugees (Wadi 2017).

### **Photographers as advocates**

Although the idea of photographer as advocate recalls Cornell Capa's concept of the concerned photographer, Capa's vision was essentially a personal rather than a political one. He had in mind photographs 'in which genuine human feeling predominates over commercial cynicism or disinterested formalism' (Capa and Edelson 1972). The photographer as advocate looks to the wider role played by documentary photographers in advocacy networks, which bring together individuals from trade unions, churches, governments and international organizations among other groups to pursue political aims that they cannot achieve alone. What distinguishes advocacy networks from economic or expert networks, Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998: 1) suggest, is the 'centrality of principled ideas and values in motivating their formation'. This emphasis on ideas over interests also

distinguishes advocacy networks from bureaucratic networks, with the latter treating participants in the policy process as being driven by individual or institutional self-interest (Keck and Sikkink 1998: 9).

Jacob Riis, who has been described as America's first documentary photographer (Szasz and Bogardus 1974), provides a classic example of the photographer as advocate. *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), in particular, exemplifies how photographers working outside government and government officials can make common cause (Riis 1890). The book's 100 photos of slum conditions in New York City are widely viewed as a catalyst for social reform in the US and beyond (Szasz and Bogardus 1974: 41).<sup>15</sup> But can we really say, as Michelle Bogre has argued, that Riis 'proved the potency of activist photography to persuade viewers and legislators through graphic, direct imagery of real conditions?' (Bogre 2012: 31). Powerful though Riis's photographs are, there is a danger of exaggerating their influence during a period in which progressive politics and politicians flourished (Nugent 2009). To the extent that Riis influenced this political movement – and its influences were manifold – it was by harnessing the power of advocacy networks.

The most important alliance Riis formed was with Theodore Roosevelt. In 1890, Roosevelt, then a New York City police commissioner, arrived in Riis's office and announced that he had read *How the Other Half Lives* and 'was here to help' (Riis 1901: 328). 'No one ever helped as he did', Riis noted. 'For two years we were brothers in Mulberry Street' (Riis 1901: 328). An example of the Riis–Roosevelt relationship can be seen in the city's policy on police lodgings. In the late 19th century, the police provided a range of social services, including temporary housing for the homeless and destitute. Riis had used police lodgings when he first arrived in the US, and his experience convinced him that the abolition of such accommodation was a key priority for social reform. Later Riis took Roosevelt on a night visit to the same police lodgings and recounted his story. 'I will smash them tomorrow', replied Roosevelt, who subsequently closed all police lodgings in the city (Riis 1901: 249).

Lewis Hine's work with the US National Child Labor Committee offers another classic example of photographers working in advocacy networks. Established in 1904, the committee brought together an eclectic array of clergymen, politicians, academics and activists with a shared belief in 'promoting the rights, awareness, dignity, well-being and education of children and youth as they relate to work and working'.<sup>16</sup> As a salaried employee of the National Child Labor Committee, Hine had a strong self-interest in advancing its cause, a fact that sits uneasily with conceptions of him as an advocate driven by principled beliefs. But the personal risks that Hine took on his photographic assignments for the committee suggest otherwise. Those who ran factories were often opposed to the aims of the National Child Labor Committee and so Hine chose to pose as an insurance agent, bible salesman or fire inspector. This speaks to a major difference between bureaucratic and advocacy networks. Whereas the former, by definition, trade on their insider access, the latter are often forced to work outside established power structures to advance their cause. In this sense, Hine's photographs can be viewed as a form of 'information politics' designed to draw attention to issues not otherwise in the public domain (Keck and Sikkink 1998: 16).

Successful advocacy depends not only on information politics, Keck and Sikkink (1998: 16) contend, but also on the politics of symbolism and leverage. Hine was



scrupulous about the accuracy of his photographs, arguing against the retouching and faking of images, but he accepted concerns over the photographer's capacity to convey the truth. 'Photographs may not lie', he contended, but 'liars may photograph' (Hine 1909). Hine's response to such concerns was two-fold and not entirely consistent. As a social scientist, he argued that 'several hundred photos ... backed with records of observations, conversations, names and addresses' made it impossible to deny the existence of child labour (Hine 1909: 357). As an artist, he looked beyond photography's claims to truth to its deeper symbolism when he wrote: 'Whether it be a painting or a photograph, the picture is a symbol that brings one immediately into close touch with reality ... In fact, it is often more effective than the reality would have been, because, in the picture, the non-essential and conflicting interests have been eliminated' (Hine 1909: 357).

Leverage politics describes the efforts of advocacy networks to persuade those who are in power to further the political causes of the network (Keck and Sikkink 1998: 16). For all his efforts at information and symbolic politics, Hine played little discernible role in such activities. Unlike Jacob Riis, he enjoyed few personal connections with high-level policymakers. Instead, it fell to other members of the National Child Labor Committee to leverage the support of policymakers, as in the campaign to establish a federal Children's Bureau. A report on the history of this bureau, published in 1937, emphasizes the advocacy efforts of committee members, such as Edward Devine, rather than Hine (US Department of Labor 1937). This is not to diminish the importance of Hine's photography but it does call for a reevaluation of the role he played in realizing social reforms.

Among contemporary documentary photographers, few can claim to have shaped political outcomes more than Susan Meiselas. Having made her name photographing women who performed striptease in small US carnivals, Meiselas travelled to Cuba in 1978 to begin a radically different series of documentary projects on Latin America. In El Salvador she photographed the exhumation of four American missionaries from Maryknoll who had been tortured, raped and killed by members of the military.<sup>17</sup> Locals were aware of these events but Meiselas, and other journalists present, broke the story in the international media. Meiselas's photographs added to pressure on the US government, which temporarily suspended aid to El Salvador, and on the Salvadoran military to investigate the atrocity (Danner 1994). A year later, Meiselas documented the El Mozote Massacre, which saw roughly 800 villagers killed by the American-trained Salvadoran army.<sup>18</sup> Her pictures made the front page of the *New York Times* and were used as evidence in a Congressional debate about aid to El Salvador. A decade later, four national guardsmen and their superior officer were convicted of murder. No arrests were made in relation to El Mozote but a Truth Commission accepted that there was 'full proof' that the event had taken place (Betancur et al. 1993: 111). Meiselas herself gave testimony to this body.

Meiselas's work in Latin America played out on two levels. She was there as a photojournalist dependent on the sporadic support of newspapers and magazines to cover expenses and purchase her photographs. At the same time, she was drawn, as a documentary photographer, into the long-term efforts of transnational advocacy networks committed to the idea of human rights in Latin America. These networks encompassed social movements in the region, organizations such as

Amnesty International and US pressure groups, including Artists Call Against US Intervention in Central America. During this period Meiselas also engaged with photographic networks. Meiselas co-edited *El Salvador, Work of 30 Photographers* to highlight US involvement in this country's civil war (Meiselas et al. 1983). The book included images by Eugene Richards, Eli Reed, James Nachtwey and John Hoagland; Hoagland's contribution and that of two others were posthumous, these photographers having lost their lives at the hands of Salvadoran soldiers. In *Chile from Within*, Meiselas collaborated with a group of Chilean photographers who recorded human rights abuses committed by the Pinochet regime (Meiselas et al. 1990).

Meiselas's (1998) involvement with international advocacy networks deepened further with *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History*. This documentary project arose from an invitation by 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. This was Meiselas's most explicit involvement in advocacy politics. Human Rights Watch's aim was to gather evidence of human rights abuses by Iraqi forces through an international team of photographers, lawyers, forensic anthropologists, geographers, ballistics and firearms analysts and local contacts. Their collective efforts produced more than 100 pages of detailed evidence, analysis that played a significant role in raising awareness of the Anfal campaign (Human Rights Watch 1993). Meiselas's photographs featured prominently in the report and they would eventually be used as evidence in the trial of Saddam Hussein (Bui 2008). In reflecting on her work, Meiselas defends the political influence of documentary photography while making it clear that such influence depends on collaboration between the photographer and other actors:

I don't go into the field as an advocate. I go into the field to make a discovery. I don't start with the mission, I start with what is going on, the question: What is going on? What I can see? What can I show and convey through the photographs? And then its with whom can I partner if that seems appropriate for that work to have an additional life, which could be a life of advocacy or life tied to an issue targeted in a very particular way whether it is to policymakers or to a public.<sup>19</sup>

NGO-centric networks, of the kind that Susan Meiselas has worked so closely with, embody an approach that W. Lance Bennett (2005) describes as first-generation transnational activism. Second-generation transnational activism is altogether more flexible, Bennett suggests. Such flexibility extends to the principled beliefs that bind political actors together, their lack of hierarchical structure and their reliance on social media to inform members and inspire public protests. What role documentary photography might play in this second generation remains to be seen. Some commentators see new possibilities: David Levi Strauss contrasts mainstream media's slow response to Occupy Wall Street (OWS) – a form of second-generation transnational activism par excellence – with the millions of images of this movement made by 'professional journalists, amateurs and tourists, and the OWS legions themselves' (Levi Strauss 2014: 179). 'The next revolution will

not only be televised; it will be instantly disseminated far and wide on stationary and mobile devices', he writes (Levi Strauss 2014: 178–9).

And yet, as Bennett argues, the unanswered question for second-generation activists – and by extension documentary photographers – is whether political influence persists when public protests disband. It remains to be seen what this new generation of activists can achieve but early signs suggest that documentary photography has a crucial role to play. A case in point concerns photography of Black Lives Matter, another exemplar of second-generation activism. A prominent image in this regard is Jonathan Bachman's *Unrest in Baton Rouge* (2016), which shows armour-clad officers from Louisiana State Police running towards an unarmed and preternaturally calm protestor, Ieshia Evans.<sup>20</sup> The speed with which new and old media picked up on this photograph and hailed it as iconic speaks to the political potential of the photograph in the viral age.

Advocacy networks can be politically effective under certain conditions, but are they ever legitimate? Scholars such as Keck and Sikkink take the legitimacy of such networks for granted but, as Alan Hudson (2001) notes, these groups face serious problems in justifying their right to advocate for particular causes on behalf of others. Such problems are acute in relation to political photography. Jacob Riis has been criticized for marginalizing those people whom he purported to help by reinforcing the otherness of New York's slum-dwellers (Twigg 1992). Worse still, Didier Aubert (2009: 10) suggests, is Riis's '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'. Lewis Hine has, likewise, been criticized for his portrayal of child labourers as unnamed victims that serve as political and social archetypes rather than individuals in need of support (Dimock 1993: 41). Jonathan Bachman's right as a white freelance photographer covering his first political protest to represent Black Lives Matter is also open to question. Susan Meiselas acknowledges the contradictions that surround the photographer as advocate when she says of her early work in Latin America: 'At one point ... someone confronted me with a bullet made in the U.S.A. and asked me what I was doing there, which side was I on. It went beyond the question of "Why am I taking photographs?" or "Who am I taking pictures for?" It was a pivotal moment' (Meiselas 1998).

Meiselas's response to these questions – that she had a responsibility as a US citizen to look at 'American power relations' (Jobey 2008) – is not entirely convincing because it fails to acknowledge that she, as an American photographer, is part of this power relationship. More promising, in this respect, is Meiselas's project *Reframing History*, in which she returned to Nicaragua after 25 years to seek out the people she had photographed and to display her images as murals in the communities in which they were taken.<sup>21</sup> A similar attempt to legitimate documentary photography can be seen 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 Vered Maimon and Shiraz Grinbaum (2016: 33) refer to as 'visual activism'. This 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).<sup>22</sup>

### **Photographers as experts**

Experts play a visible if contested role in politics through their 'authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge' (Haas 1992). Can photographers be considered part of such epistemic communities? The idea of photographers as experts is perhaps the most difficult to square with documentary photography. None of the photographers whose work we have discussed in detail so far can claim deep expertise of the political phenomenon they sought to capture: Jacob Riis joined bureaucratic networks because he lacked an understanding of social policy; Roy Stryker briefed members of the Historical Section before they went into the field because many lacked a basic understanding of the US agricultural sector; Susan Meiselas's most influential documentary projects began, by her own admission, without clear expectations of what she might find. Other photographers can more plausibly be considered as seeking to influence politics through their participation in expert networks. Dorothea Lange and Sebastião Salgado are representative in this regard.

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. Lange had no formal training as an economist or, it would seem, much interest in the subject matter until the Great Depression. Having run a portrait studio in San Francisco, Lange turned to documentary photography in the 1930s to record the devastating economic conditions around her. An early photograph in this project, *White Angel Breadline* (1933),<sup>23</sup> which pre-dates her work for the Historical Section, featured in a photography exhibition attended by Paul Schuster Taylor. Professor of Economics at the University of California Berkeley, Taylor was a leading authority on migration who had included his own photographs in his monograph *Mexican Labor in the United States* (Taylor 1932). Seeing scope for collaboration, Taylor hired Lange as a member of his research team for a project on migrant labourers funded by the California State Emergency Relief Administration.

Lange and Taylor, who married in 1935, advanced a joint research agenda that encompassed both economics and photography. Taylor accompanied Lange on several of her field trips for the Historical Section, which she joined in the second half of 1935, and she cites her husband as a key influence on her work. Lange, in turn, made a significant contribution to Taylor's research on the economics of migration. This collaboration culminated in the publication of *An American Exodus* (Lange and Taylor 1939). Rightly remembered as a major work of documentary photography, it was not intended as such. 'This is neither a book of photographs nor an illustrated book, in the traditional sense', wrote Lange and Taylor. 'We use the camera as a tool of research' (Lange and Taylor 1939).

For Haas (1992: 3), four types of shared belief bind members of an epistemic community together: normative beliefs, policy enterprise, causal ideas and notions of validity. Normative beliefs and policy enterprise are clearly discernible in

*American Exodus*, a work motivated by the authors' shared commitment to progressive politics and their specific belief in the need for government intervention to alleviate the plight of migrant workers. So too are causal ideas and notions of validity. In *American Exodus*, Lange and Taylor sought not only to document but also to diagnose mass migration in the US in the 1930s. Their diagnosis highlights the impact of technology, industrial collapse and societal change as the principal driving factors of this phenomenon. Lange's photographs serve as visual hypotheses by contrasting the 'hoe culture' in the Old South with 'plantation under the machine'. These hypotheses were not strikingly original but Lange and Taylor's interrogation of their validity using photographic techniques broke new ground. The use of photography as a research method was a recurring interest of labour economists in the 1930s; Roy Stryker and Rexford Tugwell had first worked together at Columbia on *American Economic Life*, an economics textbook that incorporated photographs. Whereas Stryker and Tugwell's experiments with photography as research petered out (Hurley 1972: 27), it flourished with *American Exodus*. Economists and political scientists were not much impressed with Lange and Taylor's research method but the book influenced a future generation of scholars to explore the link between the sociological and the visual (Becker 1974). Today, visual sociology is a thriving field with its own journal, academic society and degree programmes dedicated to the visual study of society (Harper 2012).

How much Dorothea Lange's photography influenced politics is difficult to say. For one thing, it is not easy to disentangle the impact of her work with Taylor from that of the epistemic community of progressive labour economists to which they belonged. Epistemic communities, moreover, do not always succeed because policymakers' openness to expertise varies over time and across issue area. Lange's work certainly got a hearing from policymakers; she herself suggested that the research arising from the California State Emergency Relief Administration project served as inspiration for the establishing of the Resettlement Administration (Riess 1968). Perhaps it still resonates. Lange's photography featured prominently in coverage of the global financial crisis, policy responses to which sought, with varying degrees of success, to learn from the Great Depression. There might just be trace elements of *White Angel Breadline* (1933) in US Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner's self-justification over the handling of the 2007–8 global financial crisis: 'But we did do the essential thing, which was to prevent another Great Depression, with its decade of shantytowns and bread lines. We put out the financial fire, not because we wanted to protect the bankers, but because we wanted to prevent mass unemployment' (Geithner 2014).

Contemporary documentary photographers are uneasy with truth claims and, in the age of digital photography, more 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.<sup>24</sup> Today, Sebastião Salgado comes closest to the idea of the photographer as expert. Trained as an economist in his native Brazil and later France, Salgado took up photography in 1970 when recuperating from illness and began small reportage projects during his doctoral studies. A year later, he moved to London to work for the International Coffee Organization, where he collaborated with officials from the World Bank and the

United Nations Organization for Food and Agriculture (FAO) on development projects in Africa (Salgado 2014: 34). Salgado took photographs on work visits to Africa and, in 1973, he left the International Coffee Organization to become a full-time photographer. Of this decision, Salgado would later write: 'During my journeys to Rwanda, Burundi, Zaire, Kenya and Uganda, I realized that the photos I was taking made me much happier than the reports that I had to write on my return' (Salgado 2014: 37). But there was more to this decision than the personal satisfaction derived from taking photographs. 'My training as an economist', Salgado wrote, 'has enabled me to convert this pleasure of the moment into [photographic] projects that are more long-term' (Salgado 2014: 41).

Economic ideas permeate many of Salgado's projects. For *Sahel, l'homme en détresse* (1986), he worked with Médecins Sans Frontières to document poverty, famine and migration in Mali, Ethiopia, Chad and Sudan (Salgado et al. 1986). *Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age* (Salgado 1993) was a more explicitly economic project still. The book 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. An extraordinary feat of documentary photography – it took Salgado six years to complete 40 reportages in 25 countries – the book nonetheless lacks the economic rigour of *American Exodus*. But *Workers* can still be read as a work of comparative political economy in which Salgado seeks not only to document but also to understand the impact of industrial change on workers across the world. Whilst Lange and Taylor combined images and textual analysis, the photographs in *Workers* come without captions, and yet Salgado's work is no less replete with visual hypotheses. One such concerns the globalization of supply chains, a key issue in contemporary economic research which the book explores through its juxtaposition of ship-building in Poland and France with ship-breaking in Bangladesh to recycle precious metals (Salgado 1993: 72).

Thinking about photographers as experts allows us to understand the channels through which some photographers seek to influence politics. It also exposes such photographers to debates about the politics of expertise. Critics of the epistemic communities approach question whether experts' claims to knowledge can be authoritative when they are driven by normative beliefs and policy aims. Is there not a danger, as Lawrence Susskind (1994) puts it, of turning experts into 'expert witnesses'? Such concerns are valid in relation to Salgado's (2015) project *The Scent of a Dream: Travels in the World of Coffee*. With this book, which documents coffee production worldwide, Salgado returns to the issues he explored as an economist for the International Coffee Organization. In his earlier role, Salgado had considered how the liberalization and modernization of coffee production could benefit workers in developing economies. A similar idea prevails in *The Scent of a Dream*, with its images of proud and empowered coffee workers in China, Colombia, Guatemala, Ethiopia, India, Brazil and Costa Rica. Consistent though Salgado is on these points, he is open to criticism for his partnership on this project with Illy, a coffee producer that is committed to higher wages for coffee producers but opposed to fair trade certification (Dato 2014). This was not the first occasion on which Salgado faced such charges. In 2011, an exhibition of his work on global environmental issues at the Natural History Museum in London was sponsored by a Brazilian mining company that has been criticized for its contempt for the



environment and human rights (Haines 2013). ‘The problem is not the oil companies or mining companies, but the system of life we’ve created’, replied Salgado (Haines 2013), thus underlining rather than addressing concerns over the credibility, independence and impartiality of the photographer as expert.

Dorothea Lange is not immune from such criticism. *Migrant Mother* (1936) was to a certain degree staged as well as being used without the consent of its primary subject Florence Owens Thompson (Lauck 2015). That said, Lange’s later work for the War Relocation Authority demonstrated her fierce independence as a documentary photographer. A critic of internment, Lange nonetheless agreed to document Japanese-American internment camps and, in spite of considerable interference from the US military, produced a rich account of one of the most controversial policies enacted by the US government. The photos gained limited traction at the time but came to prominence in *Executive Order 9066*, an exhibition of Lange’s work and that of other War Relocation Authority photographers organized by the California Historical Society in 1972. The exhibition toured the US, raising awareness of internment and efforts to seek redress for it. Four years later President Gerald Ford acknowledged mistakes made by the Roosevelt administration, paving the way for the reparations granted to interned Japanese Americans in 1988.


## Conclusion

Photographers can both communicate and ‘prick the conscience’, giving them significant sway in the political domain, argues Alex Danchev (2009: 38). But photographers do not seek only political influence by conveying information and eliciting moral responses from those who view their work in galleries or the media. They can be participants in politics – not just observers of it – and their reach depends in such cases on their ability to navigate the constraints and contradictions that accompany this political process. Drawing insights from public policy and the history of photography, this article has sought a more systemic understanding of the conditions under which photographers can influence politics. The three perspectives considered are not exhaustive, nor is the survey of classic and contemporary works of documentary photography. But the conclusions drawn provide general insights into and invite further reflection on the institutional context in which politically minded photographers operate.

The photographer as bureaucrat works within government networks to articulate the aims and effects of government policy and must overcome inter-institutional struggles to succeed in this role. The photographer as advocate must decide with whom to partner to promote social change and what role images can play in the politics of information, symbolism, leverage and accountability. The photographer as expert must engage with actors from other disciplines to produce evidence and analysis in support of or against specific policies. Entry into these arenas comes at a price. Bureaucracies provide photographers with unrivalled access and resources but they can be stifling. The photographer as advocate must defend his or her legitimate right to advocate on behalf of others. Epistemic communities can tarnish the independence, impartiality and credibility of photographers who join them.

Can photographers influence politics? Taken together, the three perspectives set out in this article offer 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 the unintended consequences of bureaucratic activities or concerns over the legitimacy of activists and the credibility of experts. Not all arenas, finally, are equally inviting to photographers at all times. Public administrations afford fewer opportunities for documentary photographers these days, with the exception of international organizations such as the United Nations. Dorothea Lange's vision of photography as a conventional research method did not come to pass, although the emergence of visual sociology as a subfield suggests that it might yet do so (Harper 2012). The contradictions of political advocacy are not easily resolved but strategies are available to bring photographers closer to the people that they seek to represent. 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 political scientists to think of the diverse and influential roles that photographers can and do play in these communities.

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**Acknowledgements.** A previous version of this article was presented at the Photography in Academic Research conference at University College London in September 2016. Thanks to Marcel Reyes-Cortez and other conference participants for their insights and to two anonymous referees for helpful comments. This article would not have been possible without the encouragement of Carlos Reyes-Manzo. Any errors that remain are my own.

## Notes

- 1 As of March 2017, the UK had resettled around 7,000 people from Syria, calling into question its commitment to a target that was low to begin with (Home Office 2017: 4).
- 2 Image available at <http://100photos.time.com/photos/nick-ut-terror-war>.
- 3 On the wider question of how social psychology shapes individuals' responses to political images, see Rosenberg et al. (1991).
- 4 The ability of viral images to shape policy is one successor to the CNN effect, a term coined in the 1990s to describe new pressures placed on government from 24-hour news coverage of conflict and humanitarian crises (Gilboa et al. 2016: 670).
- 5 Image available at [www.theguardian.com/politics/2006/apr/21/uk.conservatives](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2006/apr/21/uk.conservatives).
- 6 See, for example, *Virgie Corbin, Blue Ridge Mountain Girl. This girl who is about sixteen has the mentality of a child of seven. She has never advanced beyond the second grade, Shenandoah National Park, Virginia* (1935). Image available at [www.loc.gov/item/2017721455](http://www.loc.gov/item/2017721455).
- 7 Image available at [www.moma.org/collection/works/45296](http://www.moma.org/collection/works/45296).
- 8 Image available at [www.loc.gov/resource/fsa.8c52407](http://www.loc.gov/resource/fsa.8c52407).
- 9 Image available at <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/fsa.8b29516>.
- 10 Selected images available at [www.archives.gov/research/environment/documerica-highlights.html](http://www.archives.gov/research/environment/documerica-highlights.html).
- 11 Image available at [www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/photography-blog/2013/sep/27/john-f-kennedy-jacques-lowie-photography](http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/photography-blog/2013/sep/27/john-f-kennedy-jacques-lowie-photography).
- 12 Image available at <http://100photos.time.com/photos/pete-souza-situation-room>.
- 13 See [tracks.unhcr.org](http://tracks.unhcr.org).
- 14 See [www.unhcr.org/uk/media-centre.html](http://www.unhcr.org/uk/media-centre.html).
- 15 For selected images, see [www.icp.org/browse/archive/constituents/jacob-riis](http://www.icp.org/browse/archive/constituents/jacob-riis).
- 16 See [www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/nclc/background.html](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/nclc/background.html).
- 17 Images available at [www.susanmeiselas.com/latin-america/el-salvador/#id=maryknoll](http://www.susanmeiselas.com/latin-america/el-salvador/#id=maryknoll).
- 18 Images available at [www.susanmeiselas.com/latin-america/el-salvador/#id=](http://www.susanmeiselas.com/latin-america/el-salvador/#id=).

- 19 Open Society Foundations, Expanding the Circle: The Engaged Photographer, 2010. Available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5wTr0taLJ8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5wTr0taLJ8).
- 20 Image available at [www.jonathanbachmanphotography.com/portfolio](http://www.jonathanbachmanphotography.com/portfolio).
- 21 See [www.susanmeiselas.com/latin-america/nicaragua/#id=reframing-history](http://www.susanmeiselas.com/latin-america/nicaragua/#id=reframing-history).
- 22 Images available at [www.plutobooks.com/blog/grenfell-tower-photo-diary-activestills](http://www.plutobooks.com/blog/grenfell-tower-photo-diary-activestills).
- 23 Images available at [www.sfmoma.org/artwork/63.19.126](http://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/63.19.126).
- 24 See, for example, [www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/267214](http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/267214).

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**Cite this article:** Hodson D (2021). The Politics of Documentary Photography: Three Theoretical Perspectives. *Government and Opposition: An International Journal of Comparative Politics* 56, 20–38. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2019.3>