

Dorothea Lange: The Depression, the Government, and the Photographs

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In response to the Great Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt created the New Deal to provide economic relief for various labor sectors, including farmers with large and small land holdings, migrant laborers, and sharecroppers. In order to understand the extensive financial affliction the farmers and migrant laborer experienced, the government set up an administrative extension to record the landscape of the nation through written and visual documentation. Photographer Dorothea Lange, working with the Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration from 1935 to 1939, recorded the physical burdens and the psychological effects of the Depression within the lives of small farmers and laborers. The government's use of Lange's photographs remains controversial. Were these images propaganda to gain support for government programs? Or did the documentation serve as evidence of need?

Agricultural reform was a priority when Roosevelt took office in 1933. The administration, after meeting and negotiating with farmers and government organizations, quickly created the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA). The AAA plan of subsidizing producers and controlling the market of farm commodities inevitably benefited only farmers with large land holdings. The AAA left small farmers, tenant laborers, and migrant workers to fend for themselves.

To counter the worsening economic situation, Roosevelt also created the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) in 1933. Through a provision of federal funding, state organizations distributed monetary relief to distressed rural families and unemployed urban workers. In most cases, however, the state disbursement of relief funds led to disastrous results and did not meet long term needs. The task of alleviating desperate conditions proved too large for FERA and its subsidiary organization, the Division of Rural Rehabilitation and Stranded Populations, to handle.

In 1935, recognizing the need for greater cohesion of agrarian assistance, President Roosevelt and his reformers created a separate organization outside of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and FERA to focus on the issue of resettlement within rural and suburban communities. This agency, the Resettlement Administration (RA, renamed the Farm Security Administration, FSA, in 1937), provided low interest loans and promoted better agricultural practices such as soil conservation and farming cooperatives. It also had a strong political function. Combining altruism with political recognition, the Resettlement Administration "would dramatize the Roosevelt administration's current efforts.... [I]t would help to improve [Roosevelt's] posture in preparation for the re-election campaign of 1936." Roosevelt appointed Rexford G. Tugwell, the Undersecretary of the Department of Agriculture, as the chief administrator of the RA. Tugwell knew the RA needed a permanent outlet to explain and develop its initiatives to the American public. He hired Roy E. Stryker to direct the Photographic Section of the RA's Information Department. Through the use of photography, the nation would see the conditions in different areas of the United States and would also see the efforts of the government to solve the crisis. Stryker directed photographers, including Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, and Ben Shahn, to document the rural American scene, displaying its economic and social problems, and providing visual evidence of the RA's relief efforts. Giving the photographers leeway, Stryker "encourage[d] them to interpret these stricken lives with artistry, drama, and compassion." This essay focuses on the work of Dorothea Lange.

Dorothea Lange was interested in humans and the environment. Born in 1895, in Hoboken, New Jersey, Lange experienced two life-changing crises that would develop her fervor to assist others. First, polio at the age of 7 left her with a lifelong limp. Second, when she was 12, her father abandoned the family and left them with many financial burdens. Through the emotional strains of her disability and desertion, Lange identified and communicated with the outsider and his feelings of isolation and frustration. She received training in New York with apprenticeship opportunities in commercial portrait studios, and in 1918 she decided to move to San Francisco to open her own studio. During the early 1930s she noticed evidence of the economic depression in the streets of San Francisco, and began documenting it for the State Emergency Relief Administration. In August of 1935, the RA hired Lange. Tugwell discovered a file on California migrant workers, compiled for the SERA by Lange and her husband, economist Paul Taylor, and brought it to the attention of Stryker. Inside the file were several photographs taken by Lange of urban poverty and agricultural despair on the west coast, which essentially captured the visual purpose of the RA and FSA.

Impressed by her work, Stryker asked her to begin taking photographs of the people and land for the purpose of

historical documentation.

Stryker and Lange had an unstable working relationship. Problems began with Lange's insistence on living and working out of California instead of moving to Washington, D.C. This decision frustrated "Stryker's efforts to centralize administrative control of the project." Dorothea Lange traveled anywhere the government asked her to go, but her work reflected her argument for living in the west. Staying in California gave her the ability to develop a more personal relationship with the relief clients than as a government official from Washington D.C. Lange discovered the necessary information to complete her photographic and written documentation by means of talking to and sharing the economic woes of Americans. Conducting fieldwork allowed Lange the opportunity to incorporate her objectives with those of the government.

Also, the issue of the legal possession of negatives and prints arose between Lange and Stryker. Lange felt strongly about maintaining personal control of the process and production of the negatives. She needed to have access to the photographs for purposes of providing information to local FSA offices and also for reports and exhibits she produced. Lange eventually convinced Stryker to partly fund the use of a darkroom at Berkeley. Stryker allowed her to develop her film with one stipulation; she had to promise to give the department the original negatives and prints. He wanted to have the negatives available within a central file; for the file was to be available for "users of various sorts [the media] ...and the pictures would serve their various perspectives, it was hoped, [to] cast a favorable light on the agency." The government also contended that the negatives belonged to them since they funded the photographers by means of film, earned wages, and travel expenses. As a result of Lange's stubbornness on this issue, on two occasions she was dropped from the payroll and was asked only to "provide negatives on a *per diem* basis." Control ultimately became the issue with all of the photographers working for the RA/FSA.

Lange used local California newspapers to reach the affected communities. The photographs, as stated earlier, were meant to be historical documents of the rural American scene, but in an interview with Richard Doud, Lange acknowledged the government's exploitative intentions of documenting America during the economic and social depression. Lange took the opportunity to use her talents to reach and assist the migrant workers, farmers, and families in need of government relief. She did not resent her work being used for propaganda purposes because she also had similar goals. In another interview concerning her continued work with the government, Lange stated,

Everything is propaganda for what you believe in.... I don't see that it could be otherwise. The harder and more deeply you believe in anything, the more in a sense you're a propagandist. Conviction, propaganda, faith. I don't know, I never have been able to come to the conclusion that that's a bad word.

She believed that her work would function for the purpose of government assistance to the relief clients. Yet her photographs did not reflect the government assistance given to all of the designated clients.

Dorothea Lange formed informal relationships with the individuals as she documented their stories. She would often approach the families explaining who she was and whom she represented, asking if she could photograph them. If they refused she would put the camera away and ask later. Each photograph had a complete story that she not only captured on film, but also documented through a spoken, and later written, dialogue between herself and the relief client. According to Keith Davis,

Her photographs are at once bluntly factual and deeply sympathetic. While Lange recorded innumerable scenes of destitution, she consistently evoked the resilience, faith, and determination of her subjects. As a result, her photographs celebrate the strength required to carry millions of people through this long, frightening chapter in the nation's history.

Dorothea Lange captured the anguish of many Americans who felt trapped by forces beyond their control. These economic and social constraints challenged Lange, just as they challenged the government to assist in funding desperate conditions. One of the best and widely recognized examples of visible constraints is the depiction of the "Migrant Mother" in *Destitute Pea Pickers in California*, February 1936 (fig. 1.1)

Fig. 1.1.

While Dorothea Lange was on assignment, she passed a pea pickers' camp and decided to stop and interview some of the workers. According to Lange's personal account,

I saw and approached a hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was 32. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in the lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and she thought that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me.

Some critics of Lange's work believe she posed the families to generate the desired effect. Some critics, such as James Curtis, indicate that she created the scene for "Migrant Mother."

Lange had the youngsters place their heads on their mother's shoulders, but turn their backs to the camera to avoid any problem of competing countenances and any exchanged glances that might produce unwanted effects. Again Migrant Mother looks away from the camera, but this time she is directed by Lange to bring her right hand to her face.

Although Curtis tries to present his case as he dissects each of the photographs, he fails to provide documentation to prove his theory. Dorothea Lange never staged her photographs, believing the depictions needed to reflect the actual truth.

Much of Lange's documentary work has been questioned as to motive and purpose. She was often criticized for "spending time and federal money in a constant search for only one side of American Life—the 'human erosion.'" In 1939, Lange and her husband wrote *An American Exodus*, which explicitly demands a call for action against the erosion and waste of life in the South. In the foreword of *An American Exodus*, Taylor describes the photo-documentary as a record of life as families migrate westward to escape the ominous Dust Bowl.

Our work has produced the book, but in the situations which we describe are living participants who can speak. Many whom we met in the field vaguely regarded conversation with us as an opportunity to tell what they are up against to their government and to their county-men at large. So far as possible we have let them speak to you face to face. Here we pass on what we have seen and learned from many miles of countryside of the shocks which are unsettling them.

Rural poverty was stagnant in the South and middle states. Thousands of farm families were uprooted in order to survive. Between July 1, 1935 and March 31, 1938, more than 250,000 unemployed migrant workers moved to California. Migrant farm labor programs were established within the RA/FSA, which essentially moved the people from one area of the country to another with provisional work camps as their home. Lange's photographs reflect this

great migration as they searched for the government's promised rehabilitation. Some of her most poignant depictions
childresscountytexas.gif

of farmers and their land are preserved within the Dust Bowl series of 1937-38.

Fig. 1.2

Just like the problems created by the AAA, many landowners in Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Kansas, were forced to dismiss the tenant farmers and sharecroppers who worked upon their land. Conditions within the South were deplorable. West Texas land was unproductive because of the dust storms, lack of rain, and the economic depression. In *Power Farming Displaces Tenants...*, Childress County, Texas, June 1938 (Fig. 1.2), Lange's caption reads, "Tractors replace not only the mules, but people. They cultivate to the very door of the houses of those whom they replace." The farmers had nothing in their fields. The barren land had been cultivated in every cardinal direction with the hope of fruitful production. The tractors, many funded by government provisions, made the work of tenants and sharecroppers obsolete. Without work, many farm families from the Dust Bowl area were forced to leave their land and migrate westward.

Lange photographed many similar situations like the *Tractored Out* scene in order to depict the nation-wide phenomenon. In another depiction from the Texas Panhandle, she showed tenants holding out until the very end. In the photograph, *Former Texas Tenant Farmers displaced from their land by power farming*, Sunday morning, May 1937, five men, standing in front of a worn building, face the sun as Lange gathers visual and spoken information about their situation. Her designated caption for this photograph states, "All displaced tenant farmers. The oldest 33. All native Americans, none able to vote because of Texas poll tax. All on WPA. They support an average of four persons each on \$22.80 a month. [tenants response to their situation] 'Where we gonna go?,' 'How we gonna get there?,' 'What we gonna do?,' 'Who we gonna fight?,' 'If we fight, what we gotta whip?'" This photograph is one of two versions of the men. The second version, *Six Tenant Farmers Without Farms*, June 1937, includes a little man standing in the far right, wearing dark clothes with his hands behind his back. In his essay "Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor," John Szarkowski states,

In the *Five Farmer* version—the one Lange and Taylor used in their own book *An American Exodus*—each of the five would score well in a John Wayne look-alike contest; they are all big, strong, handsome, square-jawed men who fit perfectly our inherited notion of the representative white male Texan...., [but] to us the picture is more interesting with the sixth farmer because it is more complex and less like a political speech, but in 1938 it was *meant* to be like a political speech.

The depictions were powerful in visual and written context. Many times, neither Stryker nor the administration would use photographs that reflected Lange's political statements in the publications. Instead, the RA/FSA chose to display depictions that evoked sympathy, which inevitably led to the public's support of the government's programs.

The RA/FSA created the Information Department to disseminate collected data for the purpose of Congressional appropriations to rural communities. The administration also had the intention of informing and conjuring up public support for the program as well as for the government by means of printed materials. "The published materials were addressed not to the people of the small towns, the editors of rural journals, or the political people in rural county courthouses, but rather to the presumably more literate and sophisticated people in the cities and among academic audiences, and to the editors of slick national publications." These popular publications were not widely read by the communities that received government assistance. The effort of reaching diverse audiences to explain the functions of the RA/FSA cannot be accounted for within the farming communities. The government used these large publications to sensationalize their supporting role of rehabilitation. The government exploited the photographs as propaganda tools to generate support from wealthier Americans. The pictures used could evoke sympathy, but what were the visible effects of the propaganda among the affluent classes? If the purpose was to inform, then why were publications for the agricultural sector left out? Unfortunately, without valid documentation, no one will know the extent to which the publications affected America. According to Naomi Rosenblum,

The FSA images were considered truthful expression by some viewers and socialistic propaganda by others, who mistook the emphasis on social issues for socialism itself, but there is little doubt that at the time both the consciousness of those portrayed and the consciences of more affluent Americans were affected.

Perhaps the government's attempt to rally support for this New Deal program went astray.

The government's rehabilitation and resettlement policies bypassed the needs of the very poorest farmers and tenants and helped only those who met certain economic, essentially racial, requirements. The hardest hit by the RA/FSA's discrimination were Southern African American farmers and sharecroppers. At that time, their low economic and social status deemed them ineligible for tenant purchase loans. The FSA selected clients whom they thought could repay loans in a timely manner; therefore, the selection procedure was essentially racially biased. Additionally, the government had difficulties in finding adequate settlements due to local racial discrimination against African American families. Only a fraction of the "South's sharecropper and tenant population would ever be helped, and even then this assistance would not be enough to bring most of them out of a depressed and generally degraded condition in both the Delta and the Black Belt." Even though the goals of the RA/FSA were to assist Americans in their fight against the Depression, the agencies discriminated against the black population because they did not meet the "standards" of assistance.

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Fig. 1.3

Dorothea Lange's photographs did not discriminate. Disregarding race, she captured the frustration, the distrust, and ultimately the erosion of humanity in America. Many of the black tenant farmers were forced to stay in the area in order to survive. In the photograph, *Hoe Culture in the South. Near Eutaw, Alabama, July 1936* (Fig. 1.3), a family depends upon the land in order to make ends meet each year. According to Lange's caption, "Negro tenant family farms this field. There are five children, ages 7 to 14, all of whom work. The family earns about \$150 a year. Just barely living—older children plowing, cultivating, younger children hoeing, 'chopping.'" Sharecropping and tenancy in the Delta region was the livelihood of many before the Depression struck. Machines replaced many farmers. Paul Taylor explains in *An American Exodus*, "mechanization accelerates the process, for one man with tractor and four-row tillage equipment can do the work of eight mules and eight Negroes." People everywhere were being replaced by technology. The work of a man no longer was worth as much, especially during a time of economic turmoil. Mobile labor became a continuous pattern. Not only were the laborers on the road looking for work, but there was also an increase in faster moving machines replacing them.

The rehabilitation of rural families was the designated function of the Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration. In order to provide relief the government, as in past relief attempts, set up land and housing opportunities for destitute farm families. In 1935, Rexford Tugwell and his administration experimented with several building techniques. The first few rehabilitation-housing efforts were constructed from heavy prefabricated slabs of concrete or seventeen-inch earthen walls: neither functioned as viable material for long-term purposes. Under the FSA, "experiments were made in all-steel and in cotton-duck construction." Rapid prefabrication of frame constructed homes led to lower construction costs. The buildings, however, were required to meet high standards for basic human needs: all houses were to contain inside toilets, baths, electric wiring, and some furnishings. In 1937 the standard house design was reorganized in order to cut unnecessary costs. The administration limited building costs in

the South to \$1,200 and in the North \$2,100, with respect to the different climates. With new limits, some of the houses were smaller and did not contain all of the required necessities. Although the expenses for the housing project totaled well over one billion dollars, the RA/FSA took pride in assisting over one million relief clients.

Lange, nonetheless, continued documenting the rural landscapes and continued to emphasize the need for rehabilitation. On occasion, Stryker would give Lange assignments to document the government projects, such as the migratory work camps or rehabilitation housing, in order to display the successes of the RA/FSA.

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Fig. 1.4

Dorothea Lange documented much of the permanent and impermanent housing while on assignment. In, *Washington, Yakima Valley, near Wapato*, August 1939 (fig. 1.4), Lange captures a brief moment when a child reflects upon the living conditions provided by the government. A quote from the child (Lois Adolf Houle) fifty years later explained a portion of her story.

Back on the Colorado plains it was terrible. We survived there as long as we possibly could. But we had dust storms and droughts—the wind would come and pick up our crops and just absolutely destroy them.... My dad's sister was out here already, and she wrote back saying this was the land of milk and honey. I guess we were doomed to come to the state of Washington.... [W]e had to go on relief. We got food and sometimes clothes.

The family was only one of the thousands that received relief from the government. In the photograph, *Migrant Worker Camp, Eloy, Arizona*, November 1940, small, unadorned houses reflect the standard appearance of the prefabricated government dwellings found throughout America. Conditions did not necessarily improve with financial assistance. Many who received aid were never able to pull themselves out of economic distress, even after the Depression.

During Lange's tenure with the RA/FSA, the administration had many financial battles with its employees. Karin Ohrn notes, "Lange's work with the FSA was irregular; she was terminated twice during the four-year period, and occasionally she worked part time.... [W]hen she was paid a salary, it was often less than the other photographers." In 1939, Dorothea Lange's employment with the FSA was terminated due to a major budget cut and her tumultuous relationship with Stryker and the other administrators. Dorothea Lange was an independent photographer who documented what she thought reflected the landscape of America. Her depictions were truthful and would never alter the facts. She noticed and documented the inner strength of people who were struggling with economic, social, and emotional circumstances. She became one of the "key architects in shaping our vision of the human costs of the Dust Bowl and the Depression." The photographs depicted the problems the government wanted to solve.

The Resettlement Administration and Farm Security Administration utilized Dorothea Lange's photographs as leverage to increase support for its work. The depictions were found in popular publications, which essentially sensationalized the government's role in rural rehabilitation. Surprisingly, the farming communities themselves were not the target audience of the publications and support from rural communities fell wayside. Lange, however, attempted to gain local support by providing newspapers with photographs and brief explanations of the documents.

Through her recorded visual evidence of isolation, despair, and destitution, Lange was an activist who desired to reach and assist the migrant workers, farmers, and the families in need of government relief. Propaganda was only a means to an end.