

Robert New State, A. (1982). Classic Essay on
Photography. Leek's Island Books; New Haven, CT.

Social Photography (1909)

Lewis W. Hine (1874-1940)

While his contemporaries in the Photo-Secession wrestled with questions of "art," Lewis Hine explored the possibilities of photography with another intention in mind: to show or "document" conditions of life among America's working classes. After a brief career as a teacher in the school of the Ethical Cultural Society in New York (where Paul Strand was among his students), Hine became a full-time working photographer. Caught up in the atmosphere of social reform in the Progressive Era, he associated with reform groups devoted to improving housing and working conditions in American cities and factories. His earliest pictures date from about 1905, when he began to photograph immigrants at Ellis Island. For the reform journal *The Survey*, he photographed slums in Washington, D.C., and in 1907 contributed photographs of steel workers, their places of work, their homes and neighborhoods, for the Pittsburgh Survey — a pioneering multivolume study of a typical industrial city. But his best known and most effective pictures of these years were of child laborers in many industries across the country. As staff photographer for the National Child Labor Committee, Hine traveled tens of thousands of miles, gathering visual evidence of violations of child labor laws, often under trying circumstances. In the 1920s Hine focused chiefly on adult industrial workers, emphasizing the skill and courage of industrial "men at work," including the "skylacks" who built the Empire State Building. In the 1930s he worked for several government agencies, notably the Tennessee Valley Authority and the National Research Project of the Works Progress Administration.

Although Hine followed in the steps of Jacob Riis, the crusading newspaper reporter who made shocking photographs of slum conditions in New York in the 1890s, he developed a style and an approach to photography quite distinct from that of Riis. Hine's aim was not so much to shock a passive audience into fear and indignation; instead, he wished to show working people in their environments in a more detached and objective manner. Social photography was for him an educational process: a picture was a piece of evidence, a record of social injustice, but also of individual human beings surviving with dignity in intolerable conditions. More than anyone else in his generation, Hine shaped a style for engaged, sympathetic social documentary photography, and thus provided a model for the famous Farm Security Administration project of the 1930s.

For a moment, now, let us suppose that we as a body were working, against bitter opposition, for better conditions in the street trades of a certain state. In the heat of the conflict we have enlisted the services of a sympathetic photographer.

He has recorded some typical and appealing scenes in the life of the newsboy and his co-workers.

They show little chaps six years old selling until late at night; little girls exposed to public life with its temptations and dangers; school children starting out at 5 a.m. to peddle and going again after school and all day Saturday and Sunday; evening scenes where the little fellows work late in and out of the saloons, learning the best way to get extra money from the drunks, and where they vary the monotony between hard-luck stories by pitching pennies, far into the night hours.

We might not agree as to their exact use, but surely we would not stand in the way if it were proposed that we launch them into every possible channel of publicity in our appeal for public sympathy.

Long ago the business man settled, in the affirmative, the question, "Does Advertising Pay?" and the present status was well expressed in Collier's Weekly not long ago: "To the range of advertising there is no limit, and where all are tooting the loud bazoo, the problem of any one making himself heard is no slight one. Advertising is art; it is literature; it is invention. Failure is its one cardinal sin." Now, the social worker, with the most human, living material as his stock in trade, is still going through the old steps of doubt and conviction. But they must end one way, for the public will know what its servants are doing, and it is for these Servants of the Common Good to educate and direct public opinion. We are only beginning to realize the innumerable methods of reaching this great public.

I wonder, sometimes, what an enterprising manufacturer would do if his wares, instead of being inanimate things, were the problems and activities of life itself, with all their possibilities of human appeal. Would he not grasp eagerly at such opportunities to play upon the sympathies of his customers as are afforded by the camera.

Take the photograph of a tiny spinner in a Carolina cotton mill. As it is, it makes an appeal. Reinforce it with one of those

social pen-pictures of Buga's in which he says, "The ideal of oppression was realized by this dismal servitude. When they find themselves in such condition at the dawn of existence — so young, so feeble, struggling among men — what passes in these souls fresh from God? But while they are children they escape because they are little. The smallest hole saves them. When they are men, the millstone of our social system comes in contact with them and grinds them."

With a picture thus sympathetically interpreted, what a lever we have for the social uplift.

The photograph of an adolescent, a weed-like youth, who has been doffing for eight years in another mill, carries its own lesson.

Now, let us take a glance under Brooklyn Bridge at 3 a.m. on a cold, snowy night. While these boys we see there wait, huddled, yet alert, for a customer, we might pause to ask where lies the power in a picture. Whether it be a painting or a photograph, the picture is a symbol that brings one immediately into close touch with reality. It speaks a language learned early in the race and in the individual — witness the ancient picture writers and the child of today absorbed in his picture book. For us older children, the picture continues to tell a story packed into the most condensed and vital form. 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. The picture is the language of all nationalities and all ages. The increase, during recent years, of illustrations in newspapers, books, exhibits and the like gives ample evidence of this.

The photograph has an added realism of its own; it has an inherent attraction not found in other forms of illustration. For this reason the average person believes implicitly that the photograph cannot falsify. Of course, you and I know that this unbounded faith in the integrity of the photograph is often rudely shaken, for, while photographs may not lie, liars may photograph. It becomes necessary, then, in our revelation of the truth, to see to it that the camera we depend upon contracts no bad habits.

Not long ago, a leader in social work, who had previously told me that photographs had been faked so much they were of no

use to the work, assured Editor Kellogg that the photographs of child labor in the Carolinas would stand as evidence in any court of law.

Moral: Despise not the camera, even though yellow-photography does exist.

With several hundred photos like those which I have shown, backed with records of observations, conversations, names and addresses, are we not better able to refute those who, either optimistically or hypocritically, spread the news that there is no child labor in New England?

Perhaps you are weary of child labor pictures. Well, so are the rest of us, but we propose to make you and the whole country so sick and tired of the whole business that when the time for action comes, child-labor pictures will be records of the past.

The artist, Burne-Jones, once said he should never be able to paint again if he saw much of those hopeless lives that have no remedy. What a selfish, cowardly attitude!

How different is the stand taken by Hugo, that the great social peril is darkness and ignorance. "What then," he says, "is required? Light! Light in floods!"

The dictum, then, of the social worker is "Let there be light;" and in this campaign for light we have for our advance agent the light writer — the photographer.

This is the era of the specialist. Curtis, Burton Holmes, Stoddard and others have done much along special lines of social photography. The greatest advance in social work is to be made by the popularizing of camera work, so these records may be made by those who are in the thick of the battle. It is not a difficult proposition. In every group of workers there is sure to be one at least who is interested in the camera. If you can decide that photography would be a good thing for you, get a camera, set aside a small appropriation and some definite time for the staff photographer, go after the matter with a sympathetic enthusiasm (for camera work without enthusiasm is like a picnic in the rain). The local photographer (unless he is a rare one) cannot do much for you. Fight it out yourself, for better little technique and much sympathy than the reverse. Returns? Of course they will follow. Ask Mrs. Rogers, of Indianapolis, whose plea for bath suits (on the screen) was a real factor in procuring them. Ask Mr. Weller, of Pittsburgh, one of the pioneers in social photography.

At the close of the Round Table which follows this talk, I shall be glad to meet those of you who are interested in the question of enlarging your scope in camera work. If a camera club could be the outcome, so much the better.

Apart from the charitable or pathological phases of social work, what a field for photographic art lies untouched in the industrial world.

There is urgent need for the intelligent interpretation of the world's workers, not only for the people of today, but for future ages.

Years ago, George Eliot suggested the need for the social photographer in these words:

"All honor and reverence to the divine beauty of form," says George Eliot (Adam Bede). "Let us cultivate it to the utmost in men, women and children, in our gardens, in our houses; but let us love that other beauty, too, which lies in no secret of proportion, but in the secret of deep human sympathy.

"Paint us an angel, if you can, with floating violet robe and a face paled by the celestial light; paint us a Madonna turning her mild face upward, and opening her arms to welcome the divine glory, but do not impose on us any esthetic rules which shall banish from the reign of art those old women with work-worn hands scraping carrots, those heavy clowns taking holiday in a dingy pothouse, those rounded backs and weather-beaten faces that have bent over the spade and done the rough work of the world, those homes with their tin pans, their brown pitchers, their rough curs and their clusters of onions.

"It is needful we should remember their existence, else we may happen to leave them out of our religion and philosophy, and frame lofty theories which only fit a world of extremes. Therefore, let art always remind us of them; therefore, let us always have men ready to give the loving pains of life to the faithful representing of commonplace things, men who see beauty in the commonplace things, and delight in showing how kindly the light of heaven falls on them."