Photography as Social Conscience

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In almost 200 years since the invention of photography there have been many photographers who have used their camera to draw attention to aspects of society which are unjust, shameful, discriminatory or harmful to the health and happiness of certain groups of people. They have used their art to expose horrors prevalent in areas including, for example, child labour and child neglect, homelessness, degrading poverty, hazardous working conditions, environmental pollution, war crimes and other crimes against humanity… the list is a very long one.

This kind of photography is part of *documentary photography* and is often — but not always — the mission of photojournalists. Whatever the subject of such photos, they were always shocking and appalling. For example, I can remember the horror I felt when I first saw the photo *Tomoko Uemura in her Bath* by the famous Magnum/*Life* Magazine photographer, W. Eugene Smith. First published in 1971, it shows Toko's mother bathing her daughter who was born blind, deaf and deformed as were many others in the small fishing village of Minamata after a chemical company dumped mercury into the local water supply.

W. Eugene Smith: "*Tomoko Uemura in her Bath*," 1971.

Life Magazine and especially the Magnum photographers whose photos were published in it, brought to its readers images to prick the social conscience long before TV and programs like *4 Corners* existed to expose the iniquities and injustices of our world. To take another, pre-TV example, here is a photo by the woman who was described by other photographers as "always in the right place at the right time"… Margaret Bourke-White.

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Margaret Bourke-White: The American Way, 1937

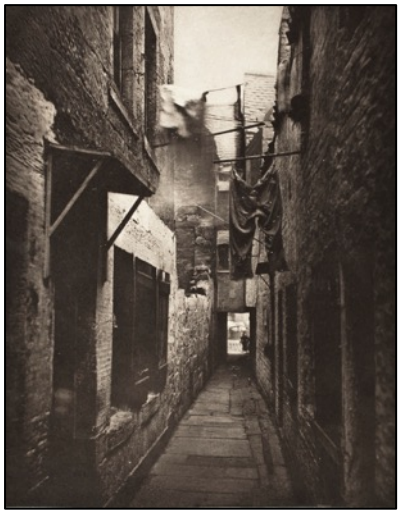
Often said to be a photo of a bread-line during the Great Depression, this actually showed homeless victims of a flood in Louisville in 1937.

Another image by Margaret Bourke-White is this famous one of the relief of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp by Allied forces in 1945. She took many other images that day of far more gruesome impact.

These three examples demonstrate, I think, the power of the camera as a tool for arousing public interest and concern and indeed, stimulating social action. But these are only fairly recent examples of photography as social conscience. This kind of documentary evidence of social problems has a long history beginning in Great Britain. British photographers led the way because that country was in the forefront of the Industrial Revolution which, like the impact of technology to-day, resulted in huge "disruption": millions of people moved from the rural countryside to the cities which were growing too fast to accommodate them; traditional crafts and other jobs disappeared almost overnight; poverty and unemployment were rife; there was vastly inadequate Health and Safety in the cotton mills, children

pulled carts in the mines, prostitution was often the only way women could survive…

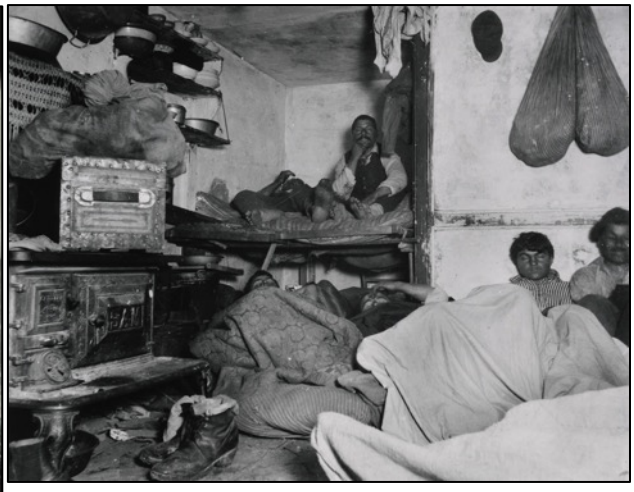
Although he was not a photographer himself, the co-founder of *Punch Magazine*, Henry Mahew, was one of the early publishers drawing attention to the troubles of the poor. His articles published in 1851 as a book *London Labour and the London Poor*, was a ground-breaking survey of poverty in London of the time. It was illustrated by woodcuts based on Daguerrotypes taken by Richard Beard who has remained famous for so litigiously protecting his license granted to him by Daguerre himself that in the process, he held up the development of photography in England and in the Colonies for years.



A pioneer of the documentary *genre* was the Scottish photographer Thomas Annan (1829–1887). His photographs published in *Photographs of the Old Closes and Streets of Glasgow, 1868-77* documented the slum areas of Glasgow.

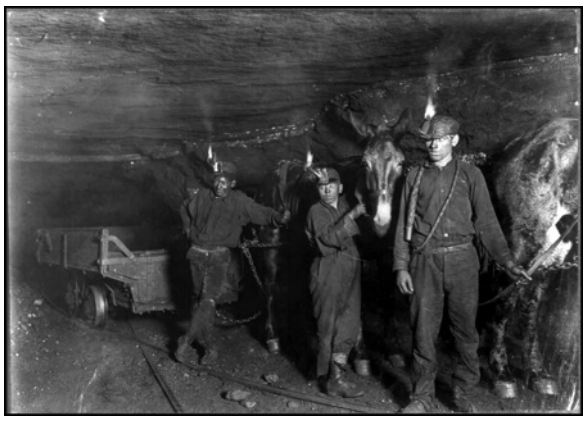
Thomas Annan: Close No. 101, High Street Back alley in Glasgow, 1871

In the USA there were two photographers who remain famous for their early attempts at social reform by publishing their images of the exploited and homeless. The first of these was a Danish immigrant, Jacob Riis. In 1890 Riis published a collection of photographs called *How the Other Half Lives - Studies among the Tenements of New York.* Famously he used a "detective camera" — one of those very small cameras which were the forerunners of the more recent 16mm *Minox* — to document the squalid conditions under which the poor of New York were living. These were later used in newspaper articles "muckraking" (as it was called) bringing these conditions to the attention of the comfortable middle- and upper-classes and agitating for social reform.

Jacob_Riis: (l) *Bandit's Roost*; (r) *Lodgers in a Crowded Bayard Street Tenement*

Lewis Wickes Hine (1874 –1940) was a professor of sociology as well as a photographer. He was hired in 1908 by the National Child Labor Committee to document child labour in the USA.

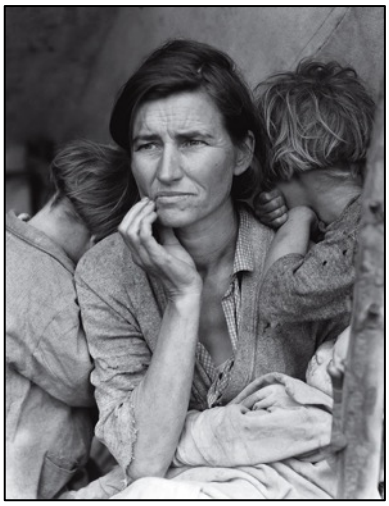



Lewis Wicks Hines: (l) *Photo of child coal miners in West Virginia* (1908); (r) *Child labor in Indiana glassworks.*

Later in the 20th Century, another American photographer became world-renowned for her depiction of the dispossessed and disadvantaged during the era of the Dust Bowl, the New Deal and the Great Depression. Dorothea Lange is best-known for her iconic image *Migrant Mother.*

Notes published by MoMA Learning, tell the story of this famous photo:[1]

[1] https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/dorothea-lange-migrant-mother-nipomo-california-1936/

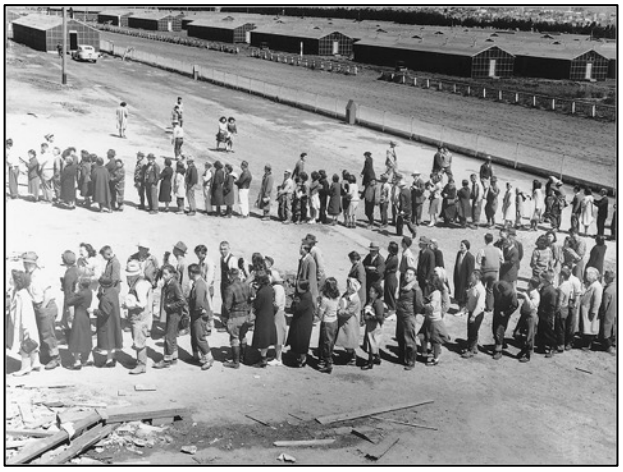


Dorothea Lange took this photograph in 1936, while employed by the U.S. government's Farm Security Administration (FSA) program, formed during the Great Depression to raise awareness of and provide aid to impoverished farmers. In Nipomo, California, Lange came across Florence Owens Thompson and her children in a camp filled with field workers whose livelihoods were devastated by the failure of the pea crops. Recalling her encounter with Thompson years later, she said, "I saw and approached the 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." One photograph from that shoot, now known as Migrant Mother, was widely circulated to magazines and newspapers and became a symbol of the plight of migrant farm workers during the Great Depression.

Migrant Mother has become so iconic that in 1998 a US postage stamp was issued depicting Lange's image…

Dorothea Lange: *White Angel Breadline, San Francisco.*

Lange is also well-known for her depiction of two other notable events in American history, the Great Depression and the Internment of Japanese American Citizens in 1942. So sensitive was the US government on the subject that the internment photos were censored and not seen until long after the end of the Second World War.

Two of Dorothea Lange's Censored Photographs of the Japanese American Internment

Although not an uncommon injustice done in the name of national security, the internment of American Japanese — when it came to light — resonated with an even more horrendous event in the history of war and the 20th Century, the Holocaust and in particular, photos of the Warsaw Ghetto. On August 2, 1942 David Graber and Nahum Grzywacz buried 10 metal boxes in the basement of a school in Nowolipki Street. The boxes were dug up four years later and found to contain 35,000 items collected by a group of 50 people which documented the Nazi terror. Only three of those 50 people survived the death camps.

Social conscience in time of war

We have all lived through the major part of the most war-torn century in all of history and doubtless we all have our memories of images of war which meant the most to us. I have only a few memories of the Second World War… I guess it all meant very little to me as a 5-year-old….

Roger Fenton: Soldiers during the Crimean War

The first major war to be fought since the invention of photography was of course the

Crimean War of 1853 to 1856 in which an alliance of the Ottoman Turks, Britain, France and Sardinia defeated a Russian incursion into Ottoman territory. This was the time of the Charge of the Light Brigade when wars were still fought by men dressed in bright red tunics and no matter how terrible the battlefield, back home the public considered it all a heroic and glorious tradition.

The Crimean War was covered by the first photojournalist, Roger Fenton who later became the first secretary of the Photographic Society — later, the Royal Photographic Society. His photos, although now valued historic documents, did little to show the brutal truth of war. At the time, his images were published only as engravings.

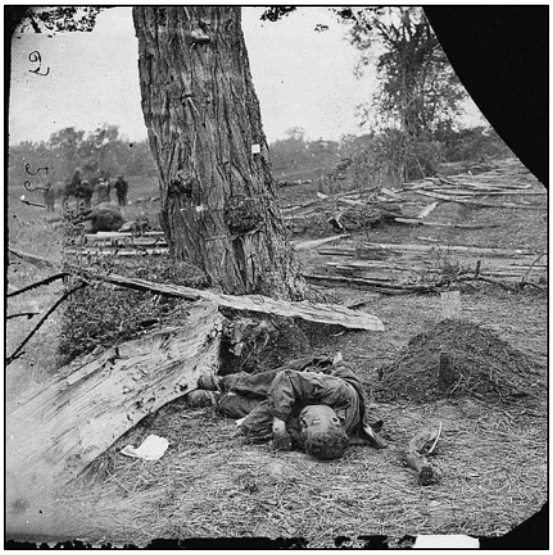
The American Civil War, 1861 –1865

Only 5 years after the end of the Crimean War, the American Civil War broke out. We all know the ostensible justification — to end slavery in the South — but what most people don't realise is that this was the first of the modern wars in that it used the technology of the Industrial Revolution to kill human beings. It was also the first war which showed its brutality to the general public and by doing so, helped turn the tide of public opinion.

Mathew Brady was an early pioneer of photography in America. In 1861, President Lincoln gave him permission to take a travelling darkroom and to document the war, such darkrooms being essential since this was still in the wet plate era. While we acknowledge Brady's part in the documentation of the War, he rarely visited the battlefields himself but instead contracted a number of young photographers to do the actual field work while he himself remained in his studios in New York City and Washington[2]. In 1862, Brady opened an exhibition of war photos in his New York Gallery titled *The Dead of Antietam*. These showed a shocked public in graphic detail the dead and unburied on the battlefield after the engagement had ended.

[2] In his defence, it is claimed his eyesight was failing him and so he could not continue to work in the field.

I have seen most of the photos shown in Brady's grisly exhibition, but one in particular stands out for me: it shows the unburied body of a Confederate soldier alongside the grave of a Republican… it seems enmity extended even after death.



Alexander Gardner: unburied Confederate, buried Republican soldiers.

The Vietnam War, 1955-1975

A century later, another war brought home to us the awful facts of life and death on the battlefields, not only in exhibitions but with the invention of television, even into our living rooms on a daily — and more commonly, nightly — basis. This was the Vietnam War which ran for twenty years from 1955 to 1975. Although there was public protest from the very beginning, two events supercharged public opinion against the war. One, as we well know here in Australia, was the "Draft" of young men to go "all the way with LBJ" as one headline said at the time. Another was a particular photo of a young girl (Kim Phúc) running, naked, for her life after her village had been napalmed by the South Vietnam Air Force[3]. This, perhaps more than any other of

[3] Taken by Associated Press photographer Nick Ut, 1978

the thousands of images we saw in those 20 years brought home to us that the Vietnamese were people too, not just "gooks", and that napalm, aerial strafing and bombing, and the use of defoliants were all *de facto* if not *de jure* crimes against humanity.

Another image with great public impact, especially in the United States where it won the 1971 Pulitzer Prize, was John Paul Filo's photograph of Mary Ann Vecchio weeping over the body of 20 year-old student, Jeffrey Glenn Miller who was shot by a Ohio National Guardsman at Kent State University while protesting the Vietnam War. Mary Ann Vecchio was only 14 years old at the time and was not a student, but had run away from home. John Filo was a photojournalism student at Kent State who was working in the student photo lab, heard the shots outside and ran out, taking his camera with him.

John Paul Filo: Kent State, May 4, 1970[4]

Interestingly, a cropped version of the photo was first published showing only the central figures, but a later edition had had the black fence post air-brushed out. As photographers, we can see the reason this would have been done but the "censorship" caused a huge outcry and a protest of its own.

Another notable image shot during the Vietnam conflict was by one of the very few female photojournalists to work there, Catherine Leroy.

Catherine Leroy: U.S. Marine corpsman Vernon Wike during the battle for Hill 881, 1968

It shows a young US Marine corpsman, Vernon Wike, holding his dead comrade in his arms during the battle for Hill 881 near Khe Sanh … The anguish on the young man's face not only screams its anti-war message at you but raises the photo into the realms of the metaphysical.

[4] www.learnhistory.org.uk/vietnam/opposition.htm

The Second Iraq War, 2003-2011

Like the Vietnam War, the two wars in Iraq, especially the second prosecuted in this Century, were transported into our homes via television but, remembering the influence this had on public protest during the Vietnam conflict, officials tried as hard as they could to show us only the images they thought fit. On one occasion, however, several images, one especially, of prisoners of war being tortured in the Abu Ghraib prison escaped the control of the generals in charge. The most horrifying — and hence the most influential — was the image of a man, apparently wired to the mains, standing precariously on a box, arms akimbo and a bag over his head. He had been told he would be elocuted if he moved… To my mind, this photograph is the 21st Century version of both the Crucifixion and *Ecce Homo*[5]. This overwhelming picture was not taken by a professional photographer but by a sadistic soldier wanting war souvenirs. However, this and the other photographs taken at the time shocked the world, hardened public opinion against the War in Iraq and against the Bush administration and most decidedly, were turned into political propaganda.

In this long, dark litany of horrors, there is one other war-time image I need to show. This was taken back in the days of the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939. This almost forgotten war attracted idealistic young men and some women to join in the fight on the side of the Republicans against the conservative forces lead eventually by General Francisco Franco.

Robert Capa: *The Falling Soldier*

It was there that the young Robert Capa, who would go on to be one of the foremost photojournalists of the 20th Century, first made his name. On that occasion it was a photo generally called *The Falling Soldier*. It shows a soldier at the moment a bullet strikes his head….

[5] *Ecce Homo* – "Behold the Man", the words spoken by Pontius Pilate as he publicly displayed the bound and beaten Jesus with a crown of thorns on his head. There are many paintings on this topic but I am most familiar with the 1570 work of that name in the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga in Lisbon. To me, this is a painting of a man resigned to the abuse and humiliation humans inflict on each other.

Another image of our time was the young student defying the tanks in Tiananmen Square during the Democracy Movement in 1989. While the Movement was rapidly smothered in China itself, here in Australia, only 16 years after the White Australia Policy was legally abolished, the television coverage and the often republished still photos of the young man's defiance inspired Australians and especially the Prime Minister — Bob Hawke immediately decreed that Chinese students in Australia who could be endangered if they went home would be allowed to remain in Australia. In all, 42,000 permanent resident visas were granted.

Richard Drew: *The Falling Man 9/11 2001.*

In recent times it has been photos of terrorist acts which have perhaps most galvanised public opinion but I don't propose here to re-show images of beheadings and other atrocities. Instead I want to show a photo which perhaps was not seen much in Australia but certainly caused strong reactions in America after 911. Called *The Falling Man,* it was taken by photographer, Richard Drew. It is a picture of a man falling to his death after jumping from the burning North Tower of the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001. It was initially published in newspapers all over the world and then disappeared from public view, the publishers being castigated for exploiting a man's death. Yet, the question remained: who was The Falling Man? Five years after his death, he was identified as Jonathan Briley, a 43-year-old man who worked in a restaurant at the top of the north tower.[6] However, the controversy continues, often elevating Briley's fall to a metaphysical level, coupling his fall with The Fall of Man.

More recently, we have seen countless images of the war against ISIS and the plight of Syrian refugees. Of all the photos of refugees, the one which upset me the most was taken by Turkish journalist Nilüfer Demir of the tiny

[6] http://www.victoriataft.com/2006/03/update-with-pdb-link-identity-of-911.html

body of 3 year old refugee, Aylan Kurdi lying still and alone on a beach near the resort of Bodrum. Accompanying this photo were others showing a grim-faced Turkish policeman carrying the little body away from the beach… Although there were accusations that charities were using these photos to raise funds, Nick Logan of *Global News* argued on 4 September 2015 that "Photojournalists sometimes capture images so powerful the public and policymakers can't ignore what the pictures show."

Even more recently, we have seen another photo of refugees who drowned, in this case when trying to enter the US. The *Guardian*[7] newspaper said of this:

The grim reality of the migration crisis unfolding on America's southern border has been captured in photographs showing the lifeless bodies of a Salvadoran father and his daughter who drowned as they attempted to cross the Rio Grande into Texas. …. The UN refugee agency compared the photograph to the 2015 image of the three-year-old Syrian boy Alan Kurdi who drowned off the Greek island of Kos – although it remains to be seen if it will have the same impact on America's fierce immigration debate.

This has been a long and dark slide-show of troubling images, not all of which will strike home as strongly to each of us individually as they will to others. As always, personal relevance is an important factor in understanding a photograph. A photo of particular relevance to me is one

[7] Guardian (Australian edition) for Thu 27 Jun 2019

showing Princess Diana shaking hands with an HIV/AIDS patient. The fact she was not wearing gloves made the headlines because it showed that she at least was not afraid of catching HIV/AIDS by physical contact.

I first learned about AIDS in 1983 in Germany where I saw the headlines in *Der Spiegel.* In gay venues back then, the question everyone asked a foreigner was "Are you American?" because the belief was this was an American disease. Back in Australia, the TV ad *The Grim Reaper* to a large extent backfired because it not only had the effect of seeming to justify homophobia but also of reinforcing the fear everyone felt because no one knew how the virus was transmitted — for a time it was thought it might be carried, like Malaria, by mosquitos. We also feared it might be possible to pass it on by kissing or by any other kind of contact… All we knew was that there was no cure and that a diagnosis was a death sentence.

I did the first AIDS counselling in Australia. The terrified young men who came to see me were not only afraid of dying but also feeling horribly alienated from everyone around them. No one — friends, parents, workmates, let alone strangers — knew if it was safe to sit near someone in the bus, kiss your loved ones, even shake hands… As one of those young men said, "I am an untouchable". Princess Di, in her wisdom, knew better and showed the world with one small gesture, but that was in 1991, almost a decade after men first began falling sick. That was a long time to wait before even a princess could feel safe enough to touch a man's hand….
