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# NOTES

## A STOP SIGN AT THE INTERSECTION OF HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY: ILLUSTRATING MILLS'S IMAGINATION WITH DEPRESSION-ERA PHOTOGRAPHS\*

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THERE IS DISAGREEMENT about whether there is or should be a set of universal goals for undergraduate sociology courses (Guppy and Arai 1994; Wagenaar 1991). However, faculty tend to agree that one of the primary purposes of these courses is to promote the development of what Mills (1959) called the sociological imagination (Davis 1993; Olzak 1981). Accordingly, a wide range of methods have been used to help students build a perspective akin to Mills's "imagination." Methods described in the literature on teaching sociology include the use of film (Prendergrast 1986; Valdez and Halley 1999), music (Ahlkvist 1999; Martinez 1994), fiction (Hendershott and Wright 1993; Lena and London 1979; Sullivan 1982), poetry (Miley 1988; Moran 1999), games (Strauss 1986), and museum field trips (King 1992). Although there are a wide range of techniques available to teach Mills's perspective, photography has been largely unexplored as a resource (Barthel 1987).

Sociologists' lack of interest in photographs stems, at least in part, from the tendency to identify photography with art as opposed to science. Barthel notes: "Any reluctance to use this valuable resource must be traced...to sociology's alliance with the sciences over the humanities" (1987:21).

Stasz adds historical perspective by pointing out how photographs became a "potential source of embarrassment for a young field struggling to prove itself as a 'rational' discipline" (Stasz 1979:134). Despite the apparent contrast between the goals of art and science, Becker addresses the perception of difference between sociology and photography by proposing that "the overlap and continuity between the aims of social science and art are, in the case of photography, particularly obvious" (1981:9). He suggests that "the two enterprises are confounded in ways that cannot be unmixed. However uneasy it may make everyone involved" (Becker 1981:9).

In this paper, I describe a visual and historical technique for introducing students to the sociological imagination. The method is based on the use of photographs by Walker Evans, one member of a team of photographers commissioned by the U.S. Farm Securities Administration to make a record of individual and community life in the aftermath of the 1929 stock market crash. I describe my use of the photographs and offer results from a survey designed to measure students' reactions to the images. In the end, I propose that depression-era photographs provide students with a visual counterpart to the perspective Mills suggests in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959).

### PHOTOGRAPHY AS AN EDUCATIONAL MEDIUM

There is a long-standing, but unstable, relationship between the fields of sociology and photography (Becker 1974; Stasz 1979; Wagner 1979). Stasz points out that if you "pull a turn-of-the-century volume of the

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*American Journal of Sociology* off the shelf, blow off the dust, and open it up, you will find something virtually unseen in sociology journals of recent decades—photographs” (1979:121). In documenting the history of visual sociology, Stasz focused on the *Journal*, and found that “between 1896 and 1916 thirty-one articles used 244 photographs as illustrations and evidence” (1979:121). Today, photographs are as unseen in social science journals as they were in the late 1970s when Stasz was writing on the subject; the only difference is that the length of time since sociologists distanced themselves from photography has lengthened to more than half a century.

Of course, photographs are a less than ideal means for discovering social facts or documenting broad social patterns; nonetheless, when those facts and patterns have been determined by other methods, photographs have the favorable quality of bringing those patterns to life in a visual form. “Photographs scream ‘We are real!’ ‘We live!’ tugging on sentiments and emotion” (Stasz 1979:134). Even though it is the affective and subjective nature of photographs that makes sociologists unlikely to use them in other areas of their work, it is these characteristics that make visual images an outstanding teaching resource. Not surprisingly, most undergraduate texts are filled with photographs, although pictures are entirely absent from the professional publications the texts rely upon. In a sample of 45 introductory textbooks published between 1982 and 1994, Hall found 1,357 photographs dealing with the subject of poverty alone (Hall 2000).

At some level, instructors, textbook authors, and publishers all tacitly acknowledge the ability of photographs to convey ideas. As Hraba et al. explain: “Facts and figures...are often necessary, but show only sociological dimensions separated from the human drama. That drama needs to be in the classroom so that the significance of social forces for peoples’ lives can be better appreciated” (1980:124). Commenting on the specific advantages that photographs bring to

the teaching of sociology, Wagner further notes:

Photographs which are used in social science teaching cut two ways. As visual illustration they can assist instructors in making a more powerful presentation of their argument and textual material. As visual stimulation, on the other hand, they can turn a passive student audience into active and critical analysts. (1979:19)

It is the ability of photographs to serve as a common point of reference that originally attracted me to photography as an educational medium, although as Wagner suggests, photographs also hold the potential for generating dialogue among students as visual images are open to a range of interpretations.

#### MILLS’S “IMAGINATION” AND DEPRESSION-ERA PHOTOGRAPHS

In the summer of 2000 I decided to make the economic depression of the 1930s, one of the great structural transformations of U.S. history, part of a lower division social problems course. In this case, I took a cue directly from Mills, who was quick to point out that “In the thirties there was little doubt...there was an economic issue which was also a pack of personal troubles. The values threatened were plain to see...the structural contradictions that threatened them seemed plain...it was a political age” (Mills 1959:11-12). In the second week of my social problems course, students read a brief overview of Mills’s work and the first eight pages of *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). The objective of this assignment is for students to develop an understanding of what Mills termed the “intersection of history and biography” (Mills 1959:7); my goal is to help students start seeing the relationship between individual lives and the larger forces of politics and economics. Given Mills’s direct reference to the depression of the 1930s, photographs from the era seemed like a logical way to help students see, in a literal sense, how individual biographies are

tied to the forces of history.

Fortunately, the social and economic conditions of the Great Depression are both well documented. During the 1930s and early 1940s, notable photographers like Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, and Russell Lee were all commissioned by the U.S. Farm Security Administration to record the far-reaching effects of the economic downturn. "From 1933 to 1943 photographers were engaged by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) to photograph all phases of rural America in an effort to help fight the depression and to educate the American public about the problem" (Norman 1991: 194). In other words: "Evans...and others made it their business to record the poverty and hard times of depression America," and unlike other purely aesthetic projects, their work was "very much informed by social science theories" (Becker 1974:4).

Even though the work of the FSA photographers is remarkably consistent with respect to quality, Walker Evans is said to stand out among noteworthy contemporaries (Sontag 1973). In *The Human Image: Sociology and Photography*, Horowitz writes: "To sociologists who take pictures...Evans must rank on the same level as Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Emile Durkheim; and for all I know—somewhat higher" (1976:7). My use of depression-era photographs began with a set of images Evans created for the volume *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Agee and Evans 1939). I made 35mm slides of the photographs. In my experience, nothing quite matches the clarity and visual impact of a 35mm slide presentation, though today it is possible to project digital images on a large screen with comparable quality.

A digital collection of Evans's work and that of several other FSA photographers can be accessed online at the United States Library of Congress' *American Memories* Web site (U.S. Library of Congress 1998). The Library of Congress also hosts a broad Internet-based collection of depression-era photographs at the Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Collec-

tion's Web site (U.S. Library of Congress, Special Collections 2000). Images on the sites can be downloaded and a formal reproduction service is also available. Costs for reproductions vary, but there are no copyright fees for U.S.-based educators. The federal government commissioned the work; therefore, the images are public property (see archival sources for additional collections of depression-era photographs).

### PRESENTING PHOTOGRAPHS IN CLASS

I began using slides of Evans's work as part of a pilot project by presenting them to a single section of a social problems class in the summer of 2000. I let my own aesthetic sense guide my choice of photographs, but I also employed the goal of illustrating Mills's sociological imagination in selecting images. In all, I chose 26 photographs out of the 61 appearing in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Agee and Evans 1939) to present to students.

I started by walking the class through the slides one by one, offering my interpretation of each photograph. I did not assign any depression-era readings or historical accounts of the period prior to the presentation, assuming students could rely at least in part on the stock of knowledge they brought with them to class. During the slide show I offered a brief history of the 1929 stock market crash and its consequences, but I also encouraged students to add to the discussion with either historical facts or interpretations of the photographs.

Overall, the slide presentation went smoothly, although I noticed there were a limited number of students participating in the discussion. On the whole, I felt that students were comfortable enough in class to speak their minds, but clearly only a small group of students contributed to the conversation. In addition, the commentary covered a wide range of topics. Some students were forthcoming with comments, but the discussion drifted in and out of relevance to Mills's central ideas.

When we finished, I spoke candidly with students about the educational value of the photographs. I asked if the images and our discussion improved their understanding of Mills. The feedback I received was positive; there was unanimous agreement that the slides helped illustrate Mills's perspective. Even so, I remained concerned about the small number of students participating and the unfocused nature of the discussion.

The following semester I prepared to use the slides in two sections of a social problems course (56 students in one section and 42 in the other). The classes were held in a tiered auditorium well-equipped for slide presentations. Given the overall success of the pilot project, I was confident the images had potential for generating a meaningful discussion of Mills's ideas. Still, I speculated that the problem of limited participation would be worse in a large auditorium, and I wanted to make sure that most if not all students took part in the discussion. I began looking for a way to ensure that students would stay engaged in both the interpretation of the slides and the conversation that followed. I found a strategy in the literature on art education.

In the field of art education, David Perkins stands out as a substantial contributor. As co-director of Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Perkins has consistently been at the forefront of efforts to advance the understanding of teaching and learning processes. Perkins' *The Intelligent Eye: Learning to Think by Looking at Art* (1994) is most germane to educators looking for ways to make better use of visual imagery in the classroom. The book serves as a guide to both the procedures and rationale for incorporating visual images and critical conversations into courses across the disciplines.

The core ideas in Perkins' work parallel Mills's (especially insofar as human development is a steady concern). Mills (1959) often wrote in terms of developing a "quality of mind;" of that quality, certainly an "intelligent eye" is an integral part (Perkins 1994). Sociology is a paradigmatic

science, as much a way of seeing as it is a cumulative body of knowledge (Hughes 1971). Perkins draws a connection between the processes of thinking and seeing by suggesting that "The looking we do should be thought through, and thoughtful looking is a way to make thinking better" (Perkins 1994:3).

Perkins' most basic advice for creating an environment where students can develop a thoughtful approach to analyzing visual material is to allow them adequate time. Even if it means literally holding up a stop sign in class, his best suggestion is to allow students to take the time necessary to honestly investigate an image. Perkins assumes, and I agree, that "To think better, people need to develop general commitments and strategies toward giving thinking more time" (Perkins 1994:4). For my purpose, giving students time to think meant improving their thought processes and interpretations. Equally important, having time to think also held the promise of increasing the likelihood that students would contribute their thoughts to a discussion.

In the fall of 2000, using Perkins' work as a model, I decided to do more than merely ask students to look passively at the pictures I presented. We viewed all 26 slides as before, but this time I chose an image for students to focus on specifically, and I also developed a set of questions to guide them through the process of interpretation. I wanted students to have both an organized way to think about the photograph and a place to record their thoughts. I chose one image from among those I pre-selected (See Appendix A), and I created a set of guiding questions (see Appendix B) based on materials developed as part of *Project Engage: Exploring Intellectual Access Through Personal Connection*, funded by the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum (Lang and Fischer 1996).

I placed the slide I wanted students to spend extra time interpreting at the end of the presentation. When we reached the slide, I asked students to stop, relax, focus their attention on the image, and write answers to

the set of questions I provided. They took approximately 10 minutes to make their observations. When it looked like most were finished, I issued an open invitation for students to share their views. The results in both sections of the course were lively, thoughtful conversations. We discussed the private and personal aspects of the depression; we talked about the biographies of individual Americans, and how they were shaped by the historic changes taking place in the 1930s. Then the conversation moved to the larger consequences of the economic downturn as we talked about the profoundly public and social nature of the problems people faced.

When I gave students time to think, a framework for interpreting, and a place to record their thoughts, they were much more likely to participate in the class discussion. Perhaps more important, the subject of the conversations remained consistent with the goals of the course. From what I gathered during this exercise, each element seemed critical to increasing the number of participants and improving the quality of the dialogue. However, other methods of engaging students in a discussion of visual material have also been tested. For example, Wagner has students begin their interpretations in small groups before convening the entire class. He notes of one such activity:

I quickly divided the class into small groups for five to ten minutes worth of discussion, and insisted that everyone in each group be given the chance to say anything he or she wanted to about the photographs. Having made a place in this fashion for the most personal of responses, we were then able to undertake a more collective discussion of the images and their relationship to the topics we were investigating in the course. (1979:191)

Whichever method an instructor finds appropriate, the most important elements of an exercise in visual interpretation are: (1) ensuring that students have the time necessary to think rigorously about the images, and (2) allowing students to practice their interpretation either on paper or with a small

group before the conversation returns to the class as a whole.

### STUDENT REACTIONS

I surveyed students immediately after the slide presentations and our subsequent conversations. The survey instrument included five questions on the value of using photographs to learn about the sociological imagination and one open-ended question in which I asked students to describe the most important thing they learned during the exercise. In all, I collected 162 surveys from students in four sections of social problems during the 2000/2001 academic year. The responses to the first five questions on the survey were generally positive (see Table).

Students' responses to the open-ended questions were also informative. When asked to describe the most important thing they learned during the activity, students responded with comments like:

I learned to what extent peoples' lives can be affected by larger social forces like the economy.

Severe economic depression affects everyone in the family and society, not just the traditional worker.

Everything that happens to people is not private; people are shaped by patterns they don't even see.

No matter who you are or what your social standing is, we are all affected by society.

It is not always people who change society. At times, society changes people.

Although the evaluation of the activity was quite positive, and I was pleased with the learning that students reported to have taken place, one shortcoming of the data is the fact that it was drawn from an attitudinal survey as opposed to a more rigorous performance measure. From the standpoint of student satisfaction, I can say with confidence that depression-era photographs are a desirable

**Table. Student Perceptions of Depression-Era Photographs, 2000-2001**

Looking at Photographs of America During the Depression	Mean	Percent "Agree" or "Strongly Agree"	N of Evaluation
...helped me see the relationship between individuals and society.	4.00	85.80	162
...helped me understand how large social forces affect individuals.	4.22	90.00	160
...helped me understand what C. Wright Mills meant by the "intersection of history and biography."	3.90	72.67	161
...made it easy for me to imagine how my own life is shaped by social institutions like the family, education, and economics.	4.08	83.85	161
...allowed me to use the "sociological imagination."	3.92	77.02	161

*Note:* Perceptions range from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

way to augment a discussion of Mills's work and thought. However, a more difficult question remains unanswered: did this activity have the effect of making students more likely to use the sociological perspective on their own, outside the classroom? That is a question that deserves further research, both in the context of this activity and others like it.

### CONCLUSION

There is evidence to suggest that the sociological perspective is more necessary to student development today than at any other point in U.S. history. Commenting on the Annual Freshman Survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, Alex Kellogg reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that "[P]olitical engagement among first-year students has reached an all-time low, even though it typically jumps in election years" (2001:A47). He adds: "Only 28 percent of entering college students reported an interest in 'keeping up to date with political affairs,' the lowest level since the survey was established, in 1966" (2001:A47). It is unsettling to know that entering freshmen are not interested in pub-

lic affairs, but it is worse that they tend not to talk about public life: Kellogg notes that only "16.4 percent reported discussing politics" at some point in the past year (2001:A47).

Should we expect more? I think Mills would probably say no; our students are ordinary men and women. Their thoughts and habits are "bounded by the private affairs in which they live...limited to the close-up scenes of job, family, neighborhood" (Mills 1959:3). Here at the dawn of a new millennium, students are presented with an historic bombardment of issues and obligations. Teaching sociologists have perhaps never faced a greater challenge to promoting the sociological imagination or passing on the legacy of C. Wright Mills. Therefore, the time is right to explore creative means to help students develop the capacity to see, discuss, and eventually solve the "problems of biography, of history and their intersections within...society" (Mills 1959:6). From what I have gathered, depression-era photographs provide important imagery for students beginning to develop a sociological eye. Further research may shed light on the question of whether or not they use that eye to see outside the classroom.

## APPENDIX A.



Evans, Walker. 1939. Untitled. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, edited by James Agee and Walker Evans. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.

## APPENDIX B. GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR IN-CLASS ACTIVITY

1. What do I see in this photograph?  
(List everything you can observe in this photograph. Do not forget to look for details.)
2. What do I think or feel about this photograph?  
(What would you do if you were "in" the photograph? How would you feel? What mood does the picture seem to have? And so on...)
3. Ask yourself some questions about this photograph:  
What does this photograph say about American society in the 1930s?  
How does this period differ from the present period of U.S. history?  
What does this image say about the men and women who live in 1930s America?

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