The Map is not the Territory

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Introduction

Photography is an information-gathering medium. As a medium, its relationship to the world is unique since it is a light-tracing of some thing onto light-sensitive emulsion. As such, it purports to have an evidential aspect that painting cannot claim. This ontological argument from the optical-chemical nature of the photograph has been dubbed the "visual model of photographic process" in an essay by Joel Snyder and Neil Allen, which de-bunks naive assumptions concerning the medium's supposed lack of visual syntax. Despite Snyder's and Allen's arguments, the photograph is still perceived by many people as having access to some privileged form of truth, to being itself 'transparent'. The photograph's assumed objectivity is why it can stand as evidence in a court of law, why military reconnaissance relies upon it, and why pornographers ply their trade with the camera. The photographic image, then, still entails problems and issues pertaining to knowledge theory, or what philosophers call epistemology. One philosopher, George Santayana, declaimed in a talk given to the Harvard Camera Club:

> **Here is an art that truly imitates the given nature ...The virtue of photography is to preserve the visible semblance of interesting things so that the memory of them may be fixed or accurately restored.**[1]

The genre of photography known as "social documentary," or "concerned photography," fore-grounds the photograph's function as tool in gathering knowledge about the world and its inhabitants. It usually accomplishes this by means of the environmental study and the portrait. The photo-document is supposed to show things as they really are. During the time when photographs were reproduced in illustrated newspapers by engraving alone, the engraving itself was considered truthful, evidence based upon the camera-image. For instance, in the February issue of *Afterimage*, Jan Zita Grover, in a study of the Civil War as illustrated in the press, dredges out a quote from *Harper's Weekly*, June 17, 1864 concerning engravings picturing the ill-treatment of Union prisoners-of-war:

> **Evidence of the inhuman treatment of our prisoners by the Confederate authorities at Richmond continue to multiply. We give on the preceding page two illustrations which afford indubitable proof on this point. These illustrations are made from photographs in the United States General Hospital ...The pictures ...are not fancy sketches from descriptions; they are photographs from life ...and a thousand-fold more impressive than any description, they tell the terrible truth.**

Such an assumption of the truthfulness of observation is relied upon and used by the photographer and believed by many viewers.

In this paper I will look at the 'limit positions' around which more specific theories of knowledge cluster and how these three main positions relate to various modes of approach in the making of a photographic social document. This will help us to better understand the nature of the social documentary photograph, to make judgments concerning the relative truth value of those documents, and to answer to what extent we can credit that genre with access to the complexities of social reality.

Currently there are three main approaches to the social document:

1. **Traditional humanistic documentary—established during the late nineteenth century.**
2. **Marxist realist political critique—which came to its own during the Twenties with photomontage and has since developed additional visual/verbal strategies in its campaign to de-bunk capitalism, and**
3. **Postmodernist textual critique—whic is a fairly recent application of poststructural theorizing to the deconstruction of prevailing ideologies.**

I will match up each of these different ways of photographically coding social reality with what I take to be their three corresponding epistemological 'limit positions'. Each of the following three epistemological positions—empiricism, Marxist realism, and conventionalism—embraces other related philosophical theories, but for the purposes of my argument we need not go into more detail.

I will emphasize the latter two epistemologies, critiquing conventionalism for its self-referentiality, for mistaking the map for the territory. I will suggest the fruitfulness of a photographic practice rooted in a Marxist-realist theory of knowledge as better able to explain social reality, drawing out its deeper structures.

Traditional Social Documentary

Traditional humanistic social documentary, Marxist political documentary, and postmodernism all rest on differing bedrocks of assumed beliefs concerning the nature of reality (the territory) and the photograph (the map).[2] As such, their understanding of the relationship between territory and map, the explanation, will be quite different. These different underlying premises correspond to the epistemological limit positions of empiricism, Marxist realism, and conventionalism, respectively.

In traditional "concerned photography", it is assumed that there is a real world which is independent of consciousness and theory and which is accessible through sense-experience. Assumed as well is the existence of a receptive subject, a sort of tabula rasa upon which sense data impinges—much the way light acts on a light sensitive photo-

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graphic emulsion. Humanistic documentary demands of its practitioners an effacement of self in relation to the world. To such thinking, it is axiomatic that knowledge about our territory is *out there* already, waiting for us to map it onto the surface of language or image. This surface is assumed to be flat and to nearly match point for point with the territory it describes. I say nearly because documentary photographers were aware that something of reality always escaped the camera's eye. The visual image is necessary, but not sufficient to map the territory. For instance, of his photograph, "The Short Tail Gang" (1874), Jacob Riis observed:

> **It is a bad picture, but it is not nearly so bad as the place. Dock rats, those, drinking beer under a dump. That is their business by day, drinking beer, loafing around, seeing what they can pick up. At night they come out and sneak along the waterfront ...It happens every day, especially in the summertime, that a body floats ashore with pockets turned inside out ...These are the fellows who start out with the idea that the world owes them a living, and that they are going to collect it as easily as they can ...**[1]

Language here fills in the gaps between the photograph and the thing-itself.

The validation of knowledge within an empiricist epistemology, then, is based upon the correspondence between two realms, between the territory and the map, between the world of events, objects, and relationships and its re-presentation in coded form. Consequently, "concerned photography" by the likes of Lewis Hine, W. Eugene Smith, or Roy DeCarava purports to depict what-is based upon the photographic map as an analog for the territory, as the representation of universal truths. Yet as Riis' commentary on his own photograph indicates, language could be used to anchor and expand the visual information in the photograph, although preferably the image should never merely illustrate the words. The image must be capable of standing alone on its own merits: such is the primacy given to the visual information in traditional documentary. Language works more as a verbal aside in traditional documentary than as an integral part of the artwork, as it is in much Marxist and postmodernist social critique.

Like empirical observation, the traditional photo-document suggests a methodology of detached, objective date gathering. The photographic 'window' is then assumed to be transparent, the photographer concealing the optico-chemical sutures involved in the photographic process. The surface of the photographic print is simultaneously posited and neutralized, invisible and at the same time a necessary condition for visibility. This manner of photographing, linguists would say, is in the 'enunciative mode' in which events seem to narrate themselves. In other words, the traditional photo-documentary image incorporates within it a negation-structure that suppresses all marks of emission and reception, that is, represses the ideological and syntactical aspects of the photograph. Edward Weston was aware of this ideological and esthetic component unique to photographic representation:

> **The photographer's power lies in his ability to re-create his subject in terms of its basic reality, and present this re-creation in such a form that the spectator feels that he is seeing not just a symbol for the object but the thing itself revealed for the first time.**[4]

Interestingly, this structure can be further understood in light of Freud's hypothesis that all negation is actually a disguised or displaced form of affirmation. For instance, when a patient say, "You ask me who this person in my dream was. Well, it certainly wasn't my father," Freud amends this to read: "So it was his father."[5] Both the Marxist and postmodernist critique of the traditional photo-document play Freud to the humanistic approach to social commentary, an approach more interested in evoking pity than in encouraging resistance from the people photographed. These latter two modes of approach to social critique make the point that since photography deals only with surface appearances—and surfaces more often than not obscure rather than reveal the complex network of social relations behind them—it is inherently incapable of expressing these relationships hidden under the social topsoil.

Postmodernism

So-called postmodernists—such as Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, Cecil Abish, Vicki Alexander and, in some of their works, Robert Heinecken and Douglas Huebler—make visible the sutures holding together the contradictions in our dominant representational systems.

Barbara Kruger
"Your moments of joy have the precision of
military strategy"

Douglas Huebler
no title

They would be sympathetic to the notion of a "limitless realism" as espoused by Marxist estheticians Roger Garaudy and Ernst Fischer, maintaining that a changing reality demands a changing of the conventions of realism in art. They also know that an ideologically neutral mapping of social reality cannot, as the humanists claim, be accomplished. They've witnessed how easily earlier documentary has been appropriated for reactionary purposes through re-contextualization. They've seen how little real change has come about through the sympathetic visioning of the socially-disadvantaged. James Curtis and Sheila Grannen, in an essay on Walker Evans' documentary labors in Hale County, Alabama during the summer of 1936, make the point:

> **Like so many well-intentioned government reformers of the 1930s, he wanted to show that, although the sharecroppers needed help, they were not helpless. He sensed that his fellow Americans would respond more sympathetically to a positive portrayal of tenant life than to a morbid curiosity with dirt, disease, or suffering... he tried to show how they created a world of order in the midst of poverty... Sadly, the tenants may not have shared this vision or appreciated its intent. Where Walker Evans pictured hope, they knew despair. Where he saw beauty in the reflection of light on the faded oilcoth, they saw the ravages of time. As Mrs. Burroughs [one of the tenants] once said [in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men] 'Oh, I do hate this house so bad! Seems like they ain't nothing in the whole world I can do to make it pretty.'[6]**

Today it is not unusual for corporations to hire fine art photographers to shoot the pictures for their annual reports, thereby estheticizing, warming up, the cold equations of Reaganomics, producing their version of *Let Us Now Praise Rich Men.*

The philosophical underpinnings of postmodernism are to be found within an extension of the rationalist critique of empiricism into a deeper subjectivist position akin to Thomas Kuhn's notion of knowledge production as a function of paradigms, to Jacques Derrida's post-structural critique of the logocentric distinction between the sensible and the intelligible, between materiality and ideality, to Brecht's notion of alienation-effect as a device foregrounding the syntax of representation, to the neo-Freudianism of Jacques Lacan's theory of subject formation, and to the revised Marxism of Louis Althusser, in which culture is no longer a reflection of the means of production, but a material practice itself. Such an epistemological position British sociologist Terry Lovell has termed conventionalism, a knowledge system that collapses empiricism's opposition between two incommensurable, interrelated levels: Mind and Nature.[7] This puts an end to the philosophical troubles engendered by Cartesian Dualism, but extends the old rationalist critique of empiricism into new heights of subjectivism and relativism.

Critics of empiricism, the rationalists, held that knowledge is not a passive reflection of the real world (as many lay people still think documentary photography is), but something actively constructed through the use of mental constructs or conventions, such as concepts, theories, and syntax. Basically this is the Kantian notion of prior or innate intuitions (like 'space' and 'time') upon which the possibility of all knowledge is based. These intuitions organize sense data into meaningful wholes, while stressing the subjective dimension of knowledge production. Conventionalism reduces the territory to the map. The truth criterion becomes not one of correspondence between our signs and their referents, but one of intertextuality, the internal coherence between signs and the unlimited referral of sign-to-sign within the map itself. Foucault, in his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, has succinctly summed up this approach: "I would like to show that discourse is not a slender surface of contact, or confrontation, between a reality and a parallel."[8] All that remains of the territory (what Western philosophical tradition has termed *presence*) are the maps, that is, texts referring to other texts. Here it is no longer possible to refer to objects existing outside of discourse as the measure of the validity of that discourse. On the contrary, in the absence of such extra-discursive territories, the entities specified in discourse must be referred to solely in and through forms of discourse itself. Meaning arises from a sign's place within a system of signs. In effect, this epistemology makes the map (language and/or image) the only reality, or reality the function of visual/verbal discourse. This is why the postmodernists have restricted their social critique to the level of ideological

production, a level which they perceive as now operating side-by-side with, but independently of, economic production. The term "culture-industry", coined by T.W. Adorno, and given further status and autonomy by Louis Althusser, Paul Hirst and Barry Hindess, attests to their belief in the productive nature of the consciousness industry. Traditional Marxism's concern with the economic roots of cultural production, in which the cultural superstructure is viewed as a reflection of the deeper base of economic productions, is modified so as not to favor the priority of the economic level over the cultural. This breaks with the dualism between theory and practice, between ideas and material production as assumed in traditional Marxism. From this postmodernist perspective, knowledge is the end product of a specific practice; it is not something inscribed in the real and abstracted from it through experience, as in traditional documentary.

In the work of the postmodernists, especially as seen in Barbara Kruger's word/image combinations, the tactic is not to confront the dominant ideology or discourse with the objects of another discourse, but to subject that discourse to an immanent critique, seeking its internal inconsistencies and contradictions. The negation-structure of the discourse is foregrounded and de-bunked. This process of ideological deconstruction, objectified in Kruger's art, is discussed by curator Connie Fitzsimons in her introductory essay to a show at the Long Beach Museum of Art titled *Comment*. Let me quote Ms. Fitzsimons on this point at length, for therein we can see the scope and expectations of a postmodernist critique of discourse:

> In Barbara Kruger's work, *Your moments of joy have the precision of military strategy*, the declarative statement, fragmented and set in large blocks of type, works with an image of a militant fist raising a torch to invest the work with assaultive, accusative and confrontive connotations... Declarative statements function to make assertions about the world; in this way they are about the world; in this way they are authoritative and judgemental. In Kruger's work that condition is intensified to a state of provocation where it functions as a social sign during the instance of discourse. The pronoun, 'Your',

> second person personal and possessive, operates as a 'shifter' between a singular and plural context and functions to displace the referent... During the instant of discourse, the authoritative assertion is reiterated by the reader who may choose to come to terms with it resolving the contradictory terms in an effort to affirm, negate or dismiss as nonsensical. In this way Kruger's work catalyzes a shifting of discourse... Kruger's use of contradictory terms in [her artwork] exposes the strategies and tactics of formal logic as instruments of power deployed in the pursuit of an illusory truth.[9]

And Kruger herself, in the same exhibition flyer, has commented:

> I see my work as a series of attempts to ruin certain representations, to displace the subject and to welcome a female spectator into the audience of men.[10]

In these excerpts we find a very formal, internal type of analysis of discourse, the kind we would expect from a knowledge system that has dismantled the base/superstructure distinction of traditional Marxist epistemology in favor of a conventionalist perspective. We also find in the above quotes, especially Kruger's, an interest in foregrounding the target of ideology, the Self, as a psycho-social construction. This is where the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan enter and lend support to the conventionalist theory of knowledge. Althusser, by the way, draws extensively upon Lacan's notion of ego formation to support his theory of ideology. For Lacan, the Self is not the unitary ego of the Cartesian *Cogito ergo sum*. That sense of a unitary Self is, according to Lacan, an illusion, an effect of ideology; rather, the subject only exists as if it were a unitary subject. It is actually a misrecognized Self formed from an idealized image which it forms of itself in the mirror of the idealized Other, be that one's family, Big Brother, or cultural forms of reflection like film, television, and literature. Herbert Marcuse succinctly states the role of ideology in subject formation and the result

of such socialization:

> **In its idea of personality affirmative culture reproduces and glorifies individuals' social isolation and impoverishment.**[11]

Insofar as cultural forms seem to offer mirrors to the Self, in which the Self can misrecognize itself, social reality, and its place within that reality, those cultural forms belong to the level of ideological practice within social formation. In particular, it is narrative, realist forms of representation that, it is held, play the mirror and so operate to produce the illusion of individualism and autonomy in our society.[12] Hence, postmodernism's preoccupation with deconstructing those forms of representation.

Marxist Realism

The third method of social documentary—as practiced by photographers like Marshall Mayer, Steve Cagan, Fred Lonidier, Connie Hatch, Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula, Victor Burgin, Carole Conde and Karl Beveridge—is rooted in a Marxist realism that assumes a territory independent of its map, knowable not only in its surface appearances, but also down to its underlying social forces. The assumptions here are not like traditional documentary, with its belief in a near one-to-one correspondence between photograph and reality. It is understood here that a documentary style is an artistically reproduced picture of objective life and social conditions. As the social document is not identical to real life itself, it incorporates elements of conventionality, but doesn't belabor the point like the postmodernists. In addition, while a social document is being apprehended, it is, as it were, being supplemented by the imagination of the reader/viewer. The correspondence of the social document to reality is, then, more complex than usually understood in traditional social documentary, but not merely tautological as in the postmodernist perspective. After all, Marx had pointed out that the difficulties accompanying cognition (and something that had to be accounted for in a realist form of knowledge) was precisely the fact that the essence of a phenomenon is not to be found upon its surface. The task of this realist probing is to produce knowledge of that real territory and not simply elegant and internally consistent maps which refer endlessly inwards toward discourse alone. Realism's criterion of truth synthesizes conventionalism's notion of internal coherence and empiricism's notion of external correspondence. Not being a naive realism, however, the territory to which the map corresponds is not identical to the empirical world, the world as it exists to our simple observations. The map, coded into verbal/visual syntheses, relates to the subterranean levels of the territory, while the territory is the range of social ills brought about by the existence of an exploitative economic structure. I stress *economic* here because unlike their postmodernist contemporaries, these artists do not stop their critique at the level of representational ideology alone, but dig down to the economic roots of the exploitations in our current social reality. In approach, these artists are true to Marx's and Engels' thinking in *The German Ideology* where, in a famous passage, the authors state that culture can have no genuine autonomy or history of its own:

> **We do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined or conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process... Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.**[13]

In contrast, the idealist epistemology of postmodernism assumes the primacy of the text, of consciousness, in determining our reality. The social relations of production are largely ignored. They cannot be read off from the text, nor from its mode of consumption either, yet those relations are important in fully understanding ideological practice, something postmodernists say they are concerned with.[14] The mass media and art (texts frequently de-bunked by postmodernists) are social phenomena. They are produced and consumed within particular social relations, and have particular social consequences, facts not overtly dealt with in postmodernist textual critiques. In contradistinction, the Marxist realist political artist attempts to generate awareness of the societal context of cultural production. Again, a quote from *The German Ideology*:

> **Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-**
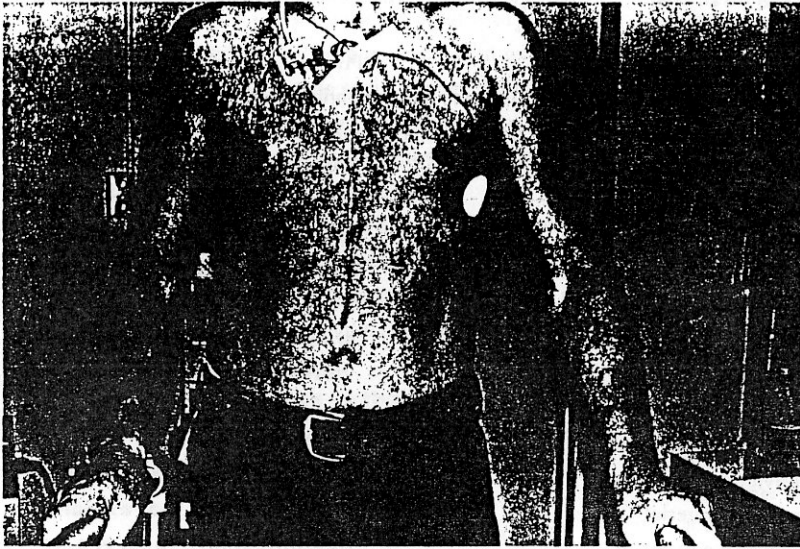
"The company that I'd worked for is noted for the amount of heart attacks in their people... I have known in the past four years of one heart attack death and about seven heart attacks had open-heart surgeries from this particular company."

Fred Lonidier
"Manufacturing Engineer's Heart," from *The Health and Safety Game*
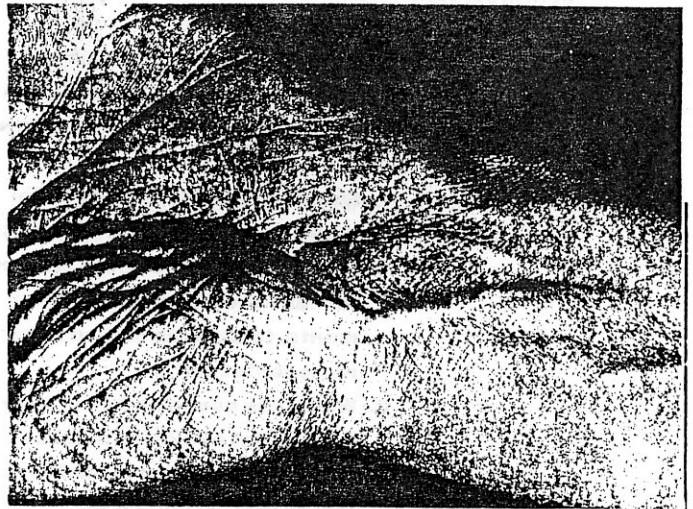
"I wouldn't say that they would take and explain to workers that there is a chance of them catching brucellosis and what to look for once you got sick. I don't think they would do that. I doubt if any employer would because you wouldn't have nobody working for them."

Fred Lonidier
"Meat Inspector's Disease," from *The Health and Safety Game*

down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-processes as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.[15]

Marxist realism counters this inversion of the actual socio-economic situation as it exists *out there* in a territory distinct from its map. This sort of engaged social documentary—many of these artists collaborate with labor unions—is far removed from the safe academicism of postmodernist critique, an academicism that conveniently forgets that there are two basic elements linking materialism to correct social theory: a concern with human happiness and the conviction that it can be attained only through a transformation of the material conditions of existence. An internal critique of the forms of representation in the mass media can point out certain means of social control at work in our society, but it can't generate any real political or economic power. Artists such as Marshall Mayer are attempting a much deeper critique of the forces at work in our society with the hopes that real economic and political change will be stimulated by their artmaking.

This type of social documentary asks provocative questions concerning the role of the artist, his or her relationship to the subject, and the demands of audience. For instance:

1. **Should the artist work in collaboration with his or her subjects?**
2. **Might the artist not train workers to make their own social documents, to become skilled at self-representation?**
3. **Would the cause be better served if the artist exhibited in labor unions or in lobbies of businesses, rather than within an art context?**
4. **Should the artist compete with the modern consciousness industry, using the latest technologies and mass distribution?**

These artists see the power of communication as the cumulative result of the entire process of production: the social document and its distribution. They explore what kind of collaboration can exist between photographer and photographed that will ensure that the person behind the camera is not appropriating the identity of the person in front of the lens.[16]

Political photographer Fred Lonidier has, since the late Seventies, been working in collaboration with labor unions. Comments Lonidier:

...if unions are receptive to certain cultural content in art form and resources are set aside for their production and distribution, then it follows that artists should be encouraged to make works that are relevant to labor.[17]

...a consistent presence of an alternative art that explores, examines, critiques, or celebrates being a worker and union member would be of immense value...[18]

Several years ago Lonidier began documenting the problems encountered by employees either injured on the job or suffering a job-related disease. Of this project, titled *The Health and Safety Game*, Lonidier confesses that it was his "first effort to bridge the diverse audiences of high art and organized labor."[19] The artwork consisted of a series of photograph-text combinations. The images were clinically detached, objective. Often close-up, no faces were visible, no identities were given, as many of these patients were still involved in legal proceedings. A heading stated the patient's health problem, while the caption beneath was a brief quote from the patient. For example, under the photograph labelled "Office Worker's Nerves," the patient explained:

She didn't give me the forms because she didn't want her record to look bad. It was for her own future promotion.[20]

This artwork acknowledges the need to go beyond the level of appearances. The photographs show merely an area of human flesh, but the verbal accompaniment defines the disease or injury, while the patient's statements indict management's callousness. The social critique here is of a much deeper and more practical nature than that carried on by the postmodernists, for it reaches into social relationships that hide behind the 'glad hand' of the corporate bureaucratic system. It assumes real flesh-and-blood actors on the stage of

life, in a society increasingly oblivious to human suffering, not just an attack on the signs of a society aglut with pernicious representations. Exhibition of such issue-charged works has, I think, more potential to initiate social change than the textual critiques of the postmodernists, while its visual rhetoric and verbal anchorage prevent it from being appropriated for purely esthetic or reactionary reasons.

I'll conclude with a listing of problems that Lonidier sees as vital for political artists to address, confirming that this mode of documentary tackles what it considers to be real issues within the real world. Lonidier says photgraphers might conduct:

1. **Attacks on the reduction of the standard of living, including wage freezes and cuts, benefit reductions, and inflation;**
2. **Attacks on the opponents of unions, including legislative constraints, bad press, right-wing groups, and union busting;**
3. **Studies of working conditions, including speed-ups, harassment, occupational disease and injury, seniority changes, and arbitrary promotions;**
4. **Attacks on threats to social services, including reductions in social security, worker's compensation, unemployment benefits, the minimum wage, and welfare;**
5. **Attacks on unemployment, including plant closings and runaway shops;**
6. **Investigations into the problem of undocumented workers, and finally**
7. **A consciousness-raising concerning labor history itself, a text repressed by capitalist society, a text that postmodernist critique has failed to address.**[21]

In this mode of approach, territory remains distinct from its map, while exuding a hopefulness for a better life in some future condition of society.

Endnotes

[1] George Santayana, "The Photograph and the Mental Image," *Photography in Print*, ed. Vicki Goldberg (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981), p.260.

[2] I am indebted to Alfred Korzybski for the terms "territory" and "map".

[3] Riis, quoted in Alexander Alland, Sr., *Jacob A. Riis* (New York: Aperture, 1974), p.158.

[4] Edward Weston, "What is Photographic Beauty," *Photographers on Photography*, ed. Nathan Lyons (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p.154.

[5] Craig Owens, "Representation, Appropriation and Power," *Art in America*, (May 1982), p.17.

[6] James C. Curtis & Sheila Grannen, "Let us Now Appraise Famous Photographs: Walker Evans and Documentary Photograph," in *Winterthur Portfolio*, 15:1, Spring 1980, p.23. Quote from Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, on p.210 of that text.

[7] Terry Lovell, *Pictures of Reality* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), p.14.

[8] Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1976), p.48.

[9] Connie Fitzsimons, "Introduction," *Comment* (Long Beach: Long Beach Museum of Art, 1983), unpaginated.

Remainder of endnotes were not printed due to editorial error

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