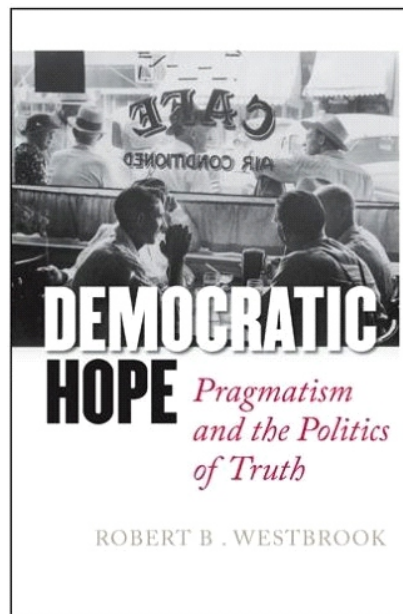


**Picturing the Public In Black and White:**  
**Working Notes Inspired by Robert Westbrook**  
*Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Hope*

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It is a pleasure to take part in this discussion my colleague Robb Westbrook's work. What I know about pragmatism derives, in large measure from having sat in on his graduate seminar of the topic not once, but twice over the years that we have both been in Rochester.



My remarks are less “about” his book, than about what his book has prompted me to think about. Indeed, I will not get very far into the book at all. I will start by noting the cover photograph. I then will come around after a photographic detour to take you as far as page five of the book.

The cover photograph is by Russell Lee, taken on assignment for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and clearly is intended to illustrate the theme of the title. It depicts two groups, one inside a café, the other outside, visible through the front window. Both groups are relaxed, talking, clearly familiar with one another. In some sense, it seems obvious that this image is meant to summarize the themes of community and deliberative politics that run through the book. The primary difference between the groups is that those outside the café are wearing hats while those gathered around the table inside are with, one exception, are not. Hats are going to be a large part of my subject.

Consider this series of pictures, also produced for the FSA, this time by photographer and artist Ben Shahn. The “Political Forum” series depicts a group of farm hands, on the cusp between outdoors and indoors, washing up for dinner and, according to Shahn, engaged in specifically political discussion. One might imagine that this is just the sort of “free give-and-take” grounded in “community as a fact” that Dewey (1927, 148-9) saw as prerequisite to the emergence of a genuine public under contemporary conditions. In that sense these images amplify the cover photo on Robb’s book. This becomes clear when we notice that the men in Shahn’s images too wear hats, only they have removed them and hung on them on tree branches or piled them on fence posts. In this respect the men he depicts apparently are typical. As Geoff Dyer has recently suggested, photographs of the period reveal the symbolic importance of hats.

“Everyone wore hats back in the 1920s and 1930s, or all the men did anyway. The hat was a fact of life. ... Before the crash, hats are a sign of American affluence and democracy. The men are brimful of hope and expectation” (Dyer 2005, 104-5).

Such democratic hope and expectation did not survive the pressures created by severe economic dislocation, however.



Ben Shahn - Central Ohio 1938 "Political Forum Before Dinner"



Ben Shahn - Central Ohio, 1938 "Political Forum Before Dinner"



Ben Shahn - Central Ohio 1938 "Political Forum Before Dinner"

Consider in that respect two more pictures both taken in San Francisco in the mid 1930s. Dyer invokes both of these images to substantiate his claim that “in the documentary photography of the period the hat serves to personalize the human costs of impersonal economic forces.” He also uses them to illustrate breakdown, or perhaps worse, the complete absence of solidarity in the face of economic hardship.



Dorothea Lange - San Francisco, 1933  
“White Angel Bread Line”



Hansel Mieth - San Francisco, 1934 “Outstretched Hands”

As Dyer indicates, in Lange’s well-known portrait:

Most of the crowd have their backs to the camera. The man in the center has turned away, has, so to speak, turned his back on any idea of collective action, preferring instead to face the Langean truth of stoic resignation. This is not the only way he is singled out: his fedora is in far worse shape than that of anyone else’s in the picture. He is like a premonition of what is to come. By the end of the decade everyone else will have followed his example of battered resilience (Dyer 2005, 105)

The Mieth image, by contrast, shows the aggregate predicament that such individualism can generate as men desperate for employment struggle among themselves for the chance to work on the San Francisco waterfront. Dewey would be unsurprised. For though they are subject to the

enduring, indirect consequences of interactions to which they are not themselves party, these men and the other unemployed, while they constitute a “public” do so only in an “inchoate” and disorganized fashion.

Arguably, then, Lange and Mieth capture the failure or breakdown of “community as a fact.” But hats also provide symbolic markers of the horrific “successes” of such community. Compare their images looking down on the tops of mens’ hats to the next two photographs. These, taken from a similar angle, also show a group of men, all, or nearly all wearing hats, all preoccupied in the public square, as intent, perhaps more so, as the men vying for jobs on the San Francisco waterfront. The first of these images provides the endpapers for *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photographs in America*. Originally a picture postcard, it depicts some of the 15,000 mostly male spectators at the lynching of Jesse Washington in the center of Waco, Texas.



The Lynching of Jesse Washington - Waco, Texas, 1916

The second image, also initially a postcard, calls to mind Dyers' description of Lange's bread line portrait. Once again a single man has turned his back on the action. What are to make of this? Is he simply scanning the crowd for family and friends? Has he, helpless to alter the course of events, turned away in horror from *this* manifestation of collective action? What, in either case, would it be like to experience the brutal torture and murder of Jesse Washington as he did? I will return to these questions in a moment for they raise other more general queries about pragmatism and its theory of mind. I want here to bring my photographic detour to a close. The point? Mostly to show how easy it is to get, by a sequence of fairly short steps, from Russell Lee's image of "democratic hope" to images of savagery that invite revulsion and despair.



The Lynching of Jesse Washington - Waco, Texas, 1916

One way to approach the transition I want to make here is to consider Danielle Allen's *Talking to Strangers*, an extended reflection on democratic citizenship that starts from a photograph. This image shows Elizabeth Eckford, one of the students who sought to desegregate

Central High School in Little Rock in September 1957, cursed and harassed by a white mob after having been turned away by the National Guard.



Allen uses the image and several others from this episode to make a simple point: the photographs revealed the “skeletal structure of the public sphere” central to American democracy. They prompted viewers to revise the way they “imagine their political world.” As Allen suggests:

The photo forced a choice on its U.S. viewers, and its power to engage the imagination lay in this. The picture simultaneously recorded a nightmarish version of a town meeting and, by presenting to a broad public the visible structure of segregation, elicited throughout the citizenry an epiphanic awareness of the inner workings of public life and made those mechanics the subject of debate (Allen 2004, 3-6).

One could argue that the lynching photographs collected and circulated in recent years as part of the *Without Sanctuary* exhibition aim at something quite similar. The pictures I include above, too, depict an especially gruesome town meeting. The questions I raise regarding the man with his back to the crowd are those that the photographs lead viewers to imagine. And that, finally, leads my discussion back to *Democratic Hope*.

On page five Robb quotes a phrase Dewey used to characterize standard epistemological debates between philosophical idealists and realists. Dewey insists that those preoccupied by such philosophical problems are animated by a “kodak fixation” that “refracts and perverts” our views about knowledge, truth and belief (Dewey 1908, 126). I do not aim to take up Dewey’s views on those matters. Instead, I want to thank Robb for bringing it to my attention because it helps clear up a perplexity.

It turns out that Dewey only very rarely so much as mentions photography. The word and its cognates appears at most a handful of times in his voluminous collected writings. (I have searched the electronic edition!) This has struck me as odd for several reasons. Clearly, Dewey wrote during periods when photography was establishing itself in various realms - art and social reform to take two - that preoccupied Dewey. Moreover, while politically Dewey (1927) complained that the public was in eclipse largely because it could not identify or recognize itself or perceive how the pressures of large scale social and economic transformations bring it into being, photographers like Lewis Hine, Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Russell Lee, Hansel Mieth, Gordon Parks, Ben Shahn and many others were actively depicting the consequences of those transformations. The same could be said, perversely, of the many less renowned photographers who made and circulated pictures of lynching. The citation to Dewey helped me understand why he - and other, more recent pragmatists - more or less completely neglect a technology that, given their political aims, they might find valuable.

Pragmatism is driven by a concern for the ways that erroneous views about knowledge, truth and belief interfere with social and political life. This is true at least from Dewey and his criticism of the “spectator notion of knowledge” through Richard Rorty’s insistence that

pragmatists are united most importantly by shared “anti-representationalist” commitments (Dewey 1917, 65; Rorty, 1998). I suspect that these views have made pragmatists skeptical about photography. I want to suggest in closing that such skepticism is misplaced and that it arises because pragmatists acquiesce to a faulty understanding of photography, one that, indeed, recapitulates the spectator view of knowledge against which they rightly object.

Much contemporary discussion of photography starts with an object - “the photograph” - rather than with activity, with “photography” as a technology we use to generate images for various purposes. A pragmatist will quickly see that the common way of approaching the subject immediately generates “philosophical” problems. It encourages us to worry about the relation of image to object, and to essentialize on side or the other of that dichotomy. Pragmatists ought to find more congenial the view, articulated at length by Patrick Maynard (1997), that photography is a technology (or set of technologies) for marking surfaces, thereby creating images. This changes the subject, prompting us to attend to the more practical questions, “why do we make photographs?” and “what do we use images for”?

Answers to such queries will be context dependent. Reconsider the images I have reproduced or discussed in this paper. What did photographers (Lee, Lange, Shahn) working for the FSA make images for? Where their purposes identical to those of the government agency for which they worked? For what purpose did Hansel Mieth, a recent European immigrant, make images? What did the purveyors of picture postcards depicting lynching aim to accomplish? How about James Allen, the man who has collected those postcards and coordinated an exhibition of them? What of Will Counts, the photojournalist who recorded the sufferings of Elizabeth Eckford?

A pragmatist surely could proliferate questions such as this about specific individuals, but she would almost as surely not find that exercise terribly useful. She also would likely raise more general questions regarding the uses of photography. One answer to such general inquiries might be: “Most of all, photography is probably an instrument for showing things, a device for displaying them” (Stahel 2003, 8). And that, in turn, raises the further question - what is the point of showing things? The answers here might well be quite various. But if we think of photography as a technology, we can see that, like other technologies it enhances our powers and capacities, in particular our ability to envision or imagine (Maynard 1997). This suggestion refines our understanding of the “epistemology” of photography, disengaging it from spectatorship, insisting instead that this technology allows us to imagine and to do so reflexively, that is, to imagine both unrealized possibilities and actual but unfamiliar states of the world and, simultaneously, to see ourselves doing so.

Here we can see that showing or depicting things is not the same as representing them.

“[D]epictive perception ... involves a complicity that mere representation does not: that is, participation through reflexive imagining about our own perceptual activities ... When we look at a picture depictively - for example, a photographic picture of something - we imagine our own actual looking, and that is an aspect of our action that we may find fulfilling, enjoyable, uninteresting, unpleasant, distasteful. This is what makes a picture graphic.” (Maynard, 1997, 109).

Photography on this instrumental view enters into social and political action. It enables us, as Maynard observes, to “amplify” our own imagination and “incite” the imaginings of others among other things. In that way it might prove useful in the task of coordinating a public.

Throughout *The Public and Its Problems* Dewey repeatedly asserts that an organized, articulate public can emerge only when its members *perceive* the indirect, persistent important

consequences that generate their common interests (Dewey 1927, 34,39126,31,188). He famously insists that the precondition for this to occur is for the results of social inquiry to find an effective place in political debate and argument. That, in turn, demands not just methodical investigation and unfettered communication but artistic presentation (Dewey 1927 183-4). Yet, at the very end Dewey also insists at the very end, that the perception of common interests must be somehow auditory rather than merely visual: “Vision is a spectator: hearing is a participator” (Dewey 1927, 219). If my speculations here are correct, Dewey (and other pragmatists who follow his lead) is wrong to draw so stark a distinction.

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