

Dorothea Lange: The Photographer as Agricultural Sociologist

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To a startling degree, popular understanding of the Great Depression of the 1930s derives from visual images, and among them, Dorothea Lange’s are the most influential. Although many do not know her name, her photographs live in the subconscious of virtually anyone in the United States who has any concept of that economic disaster. Her pictures exerted great force in their own time, helping shape 1930s and 1940s Popular Front representational and artistic sensibility, because the Farm Security Administration (FSA), her employer, distributed the photographs aggressively through the mass media. If you watch the film *The Grapes of Wrath* with a collection of her photographs next to you, you will see the influence.¹ Lange’s commitment to making her photography speak to matters of injustice was hardly unique—thousands of artists, writers, dancers, and actors were trying to connect with the vibrant grass-roots social movements of the time. They formed a cultural wing of the Popular Front, a politics of liberal-Left unity in support of the New Deal.

The FSA photography project aimed to examine systematically the social and economic relations of American agricultural labor. Yet none of the scholarship about that unique visual project has made farm workers central to its analysis. One consequence of the omission has been underestimating the policy specificity of the FSA’s and Lange’s exposé. We understand her work, and that of the whole FSA photography project, differently if we see it as a contested part of New Deal farm policy. Putting Lange’s photography back into that context makes the sharpness of its critical edge more apparent. FSA photography was a political campaign. The FSA was at the left edge of the Department of Agriculture, and its photography project was at the left edge of the FSA. The photographers not only challenged an entire agricultural political economy, but tried also to illustrate the racial system in which it operated—a system it also reinforced. Some politicians and scholars had censured southern racism, but no prominent racial liberals addressed the more complex

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¹ Her most famous picture, often known as “Migrant Mother,” had, by the late 1960s, been used in approximately ten thousand published items, resulting in millions of copies, in the estimation of *Popular Photography* magazine. Howard M. Levin and Katherine Northrup, *Dorothea Lange: Farm Security Administration Photographs, 1935–1939* (2 vols., Glencoe, 1980), I, 42. *The Grapes of Wrath*, dir. John Ford (Twentieth Century–Fox, 1940).

but equally unjust race relations in the West. Since most people of color in the western United States at that time lived in rural areas, the Department of Agriculture's photography project provided a unique opportunity to make them visible to urbanites and non-westerners. Even the gender relations revealed among these photographic subjects were less conventional than mainstream discourse would suggest.

Among documentary photographers, Dorothea Lange was exemplary in both meanings of the word: her work exemplified a prevailing style and, as a premier practitioner of that style, influenced it. Her progressive commitment was at once typical for cultural front documentarists and also unusually targeted, because she was promoting specific New Deal policies.² She eventually received great acclaim (most of it, unfortunately, posthumous) as a master art photographer; but the agricultural reform to which she was so passionately committed did not (and perhaps could not) materialize. Her photography thus also exposes the limitations of even a notably progressive part of the New Deal's agricultural policy.

That Lange, a city-born (Hoboken) city dweller (San Francisco), became an ace documentary photographer through her work on rural America did not make her unique among FSA photographers. They were mainly of northern urban background, a remarkable proportion of them Jewish (five of the eleven major photographers).³ But their origins may have been a strength as well as a weakness. Because they saw rural society with eyes unhabituated to agricultural vistas, they took nothing for granted, and because they needed to learn, they were better able to teach others. Lange executed the FSA's assignment more thoroughly than any other individual photographer—because she traveled to more regions than did the others, because she was married to and often traveled with Paul Taylor, an agriculture expert and FSA insider, and above all because she was based in California, which represented in many ways the future of American agriculture.

To simplify a complex map, four systems of agricultural labor relations prevailed in the United States: family farming in the North and Midwest, sharecropping in the South, tenant farming on the southern plains, and migrant wage labor in the West. In all regions agriculture was moving toward industrial-scale production with absentee ownership, but in each region the transformation began from a different starting point and proceeded at a different velocity. Family farming, the American ideal, never dominated in the Southeast, the semiarid southern plains, or California. In the Southeast, slavery had built a plantation economy, which then adapted to a technically "free" labor force by compelling ex-slaves and many poor whites to become sharecroppers. In the dry southern

² Michael Denning used the term "cultural front" to identify the arts production characteristic of the Popular Front political alliance of the late 1930s and early 1940s. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1997). Popular Front, in turn, named a particular strategy dictated in 1935 by the Comintern to Communist parties throughout the world, directing them to seek alliance with other parties of the Left. But in the United States a popular movement toward liberal-Left unity in support of the New Deal preceded the Communist party strategy by several years. This Popular Front was a movement, not an organization, and as a result it was complex, heterogeneous, and often internally conflicted, but that did not make it less influential.

³ Arthur Rothstein, Carl Mydans, Ben Shahn, Jack Delano, and Edwin Rosskam are the five major Jewish photographers. Also Jewish were Esther Bubley, Louise Rosskam, Charles Fenno Jacobs, Arthur Siegel, and Howard Liberman. All the major photographers were formed as adults through urban experience: Dorothea Lange in New York and San Francisco; John Collier Jr. and Russell Lee in San Francisco; Walker Evans, Arthur Rothstein, Ben Shahn, and Marion Post Wolcott in New York and Paris; Carl Mydans in Boston and New York; and Jack Delano in Philadelphia. Unlike the photographers, many key Farm Security Administration (FSA) administrators were southern: Will Alexander and C. B. Baldwin, for example.

plains, land speculation had escalated land prices, forcing many smallholders into debt and then foreclosure; small farms remained, but increasingly land was owned by big lenders and worked by tenants. In California Mexican ranchers were the original agriculturists. But in the early twentieth century, federal funds imported water for irrigation and drained marshlands, thereby subsidizing an agricultural economy dominated by big-business growers dependent on migrant farm workers—mainly people of color and often of foreign birth.⁴ Lange was the only FSA photographer to cover all three non-family farm regions, and as a result she documented both the most “backward” and the most “advanced” agricultural labor relations.

It was a conjuncture of American political structure and key individuals that made rural America the focus of the biggest-ever government photography project. As a result, America’s images of the depression are more rural than they otherwise would have been. But the rural focus was consistent with New Deal politics. Some of the most progressive New Dealers were located in the FSA. The agricultural sociologist Jess Gilbert has shown that they divided roughly into two groups: agrarian intellectuals who maintained their faith in the family-farm ideal and urban liberals who favored a more planned agricultural economy. By the early 1930s the protracted agricultural depression had moved the problem of farm tenancy to the top of both groups’ agendas. Calling on a rhetoric derived from Jeffersonianism, Populism, and utopian communitarianism, which co-existed uneasily with a statist commitment to economic planning, they aspired to nothing less than serious land reform—that, if fulfilled, would have amounted to the New Deal’s most fundamental redistribution of power and wealth.⁵

But in the FSA, the family-farm ideal dominated, operationalized through programs of resettlement and loans to farm families. The FSA sought political support for this redistributionist agenda through a populist nationalism characteristic of Popular Front sensibility. I use the term “populist nationalism” in a generic sense, of opposing political domination by big business or other elites. Its sense of “the people” privileged town and country as opposed to city folk, and its nationalism identified those folk as the quintessential citizens. American nationalism in this period often manifested itself through rural and small-town imagery, however outdated, and this imagery skewed Americans’ understanding of their actually existing polity and society as well as their future.⁶ The FSA’s photography project was supposed to promote not only Department of Agriculture programs but also

⁴ Sharecropping is, of course, a form of tenancy, and there were hundreds, if not thousands, of different tenancy arrangements, but in general there was more sharecropping in the Southeast and more share or rent tenancy in the plains. Tenancy contracts ranged in their requirements, and plains tenants on average had more rights and economic chances than southern tenants, and southern whites more than southern blacks. See Jonathan M. Wiener, “Class Structure and Economic Development in the American South, 1865–1955,” *American Historical Review*, 84 (Oct. 1979), 970–92; Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana, 1985); Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920–1960* (Baton Rouge, 1987).

⁵ My interpretation of the FSA is indebted both to Jess Gilbert’s scholarship and to conversations with him. Jess Gilbert, “Eastern Urban Liberals and Midwestern Agrarian Intellectuals: Two Group Portraits of Progressives in the New Deal Department of Agriculture,” *Agricultural History*, 74 (Spring 2000), 162–80; Jess Gilbert and Alice O’Connor, “Leaving the Land Behind: Struggles for Land Reform in U.S. Federal Policy, 1933–1965,” in *Who Owns America? Social Conflict over Property Rights*, ed. Harvey M. Jacobs (Madison, 1998), 114–30; Jess Gilbert and Steve Brown, “Alternative Land Reform Proposals in the 1930s: The Nashville Agrarians and the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union,” *Agricultural History*, 55 (Oct. 1981), 351–69. My interpretation is also indebted to Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill, 1968).

⁶ See Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington, 1991). Although she does not consider photography, Melosh subjects other images of farm families in New Deal-era murals to a gender analysis that fits FSA photography.

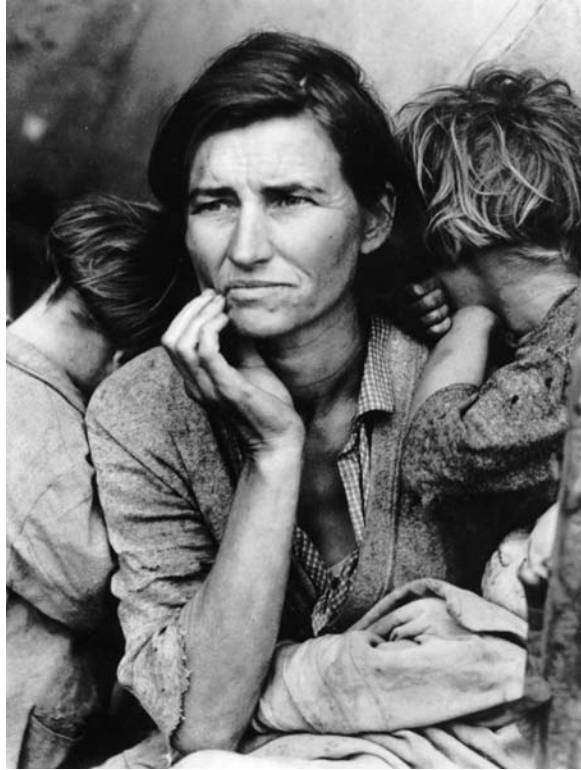


Figure 1. “Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California.” Feb. 1936. Photo by Dorothea Lange. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-T01-009058-C DLC.

a New Deal vision for rural America, a difficult assignment because of the incoherence of that vision. The project reaffirmed family-farm ideology through its frequently romantic, picturesque approach to a “simple” and community-spirited rural life and its condemnation of plantation and industrial agriculture. Lange’s husband, Paul Taylor—who got her the FSA job—was one of the agrarian intellectuals and a believer in family farming despite his intimate knowledge of California’s industrial agriculture and the overwhelming political power of its captains.

Examining Lange’s work with an agricultural emphasis also challenges some of the appraisals of her photography. The extraordinary popularity of some of her photographs has decontextualized and universalized them, categorized them as art, and thereby diverted attention from their almost social-scientific significance. Partly because of the iconization of her “Migrant Mother” photograph, she became identified above all with the story of white Okies, driven from the dust bowl into California, their image fixed textually by John Steinbeck’s best-selling *Grapes of Wrath*.⁷ (See figure 1. All images are accompanied by Lange’s original caption, except figure 8.) In fact, she worked least in the drought area and more in California and the Southeast.

⁷ Oddly enough, “Migrant Mother” has come to stand in for urban as well as rural depression victims. Michele L. Landis, “Fate, Responsibility, and ‘Natural’ Disaster Relief: Narrating the American Welfare State,” *Law and Society Review*, 33 (no. 2, 1999), 308. John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York, 1939).

Lange's project has also been veiled by gendered clichés. Critics have often read the strong emotional content of her work as instinctive, in a way said to be characteristic of female sensibility. A "natural" feminine intuitiveness underlay her photography in these accounts. "Dorothea Lange lived instinctively . . . photographed spontaneously. . . ." ⁸ At other times she is described as a piece of white photosensitive paper or "like an unexposed film," onto which light and shadow marked impressions.⁹ Her photographs consist disproportionately of portraits, a form often described as particularly feminine, consistent with the observation that women are uniquely interested in personality and private emotions. Her FSA colleague Edwin Rosskam called her "a kind of a saint."¹⁰ The critic George Elliott expressed the common imagining of female artists as passively receptive: "For an artist like Dorothea Lange the making of a great, perfect, anonymous image is a trick of grace, about which she can do little beyond making herself available for that gift of grace."¹¹

These gendered and insulting assessments of Lange's photography inform the frequent criticism of her work as sentimental. William Stott, Maren Stange, and Jacqueline Ellis, for example, make that critique. That she showed people who worked with—and lived off—the earth rather than in factories or offices no doubt contributed to the whiff of sentimentality—even though one aim of her work was to falsify a sentimental view of farming. Critics, moreover, commonly associate sentimentality with maternalism particularly, making it a female foible. The *Aperture* review of her 1966 Museum of Modern Art show attributed her success to her "maternal concern for things of this world" and to "creating universal forms of human feeling through an instinctive artist's awareness."¹² Lange's boss at the FSA, Roy Stryker, referred to her not only as a mother but as a matriarch.¹³ Many photographers shared a conservative view of the proper division of labor in photography. Walker Evans, for example, talked of "photographing babies" as a synonym for selling out artistic integrity.¹⁴ But the tendency toward sentimentality in FSA photography derived from the agency's drive to ennoble the poor and downtrodden and was evident in photographs by both men and women.

Of course, there were gendered sources of Lange's photography—how could there not be? But femininity is no more instinctive or "natural" than masculinity. Lange, far from passively receptive, was an assertive visual intellectual, superbly disciplined and self-conscious, working systematically to develop a photography that could be maximally communicative and revealing. To do this, she acquired considerable knowledge about agricultural labor.

⁸ Christopher Cox, introduction to *Dorothea Lange*, by Dorothea Lange (New York, 1981), 5.

⁹ Weston Naef interview by Therese Heyman, in *Dorothea Lange: Photographs from the J. Paul Getty Museum*, ed. Judith Keller (Los Angeles, 2002), 101.

¹⁰ Edwin Rosskam and Louise Rosskam interview by Richard K. Doud, Aug. 3, 1965, transcript, pp. 30–31 (Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.).

¹¹ Museum of Modern Art, *Dorothea Lange* (New York, 1977), 7.

¹² William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York, 1973). Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890–1950* (Cambridge, Eng., 1989). Jacqueline Ellis, *Silent Witnesses: Representations of Working-Class Women in the United States* (Bowling Green, 1998). *Aperture* review quoted in Catherine L. Preston, "In Retrospect: The Construction and Communication of a National Visual Memory" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1995), 264–65.

¹³ Ben Shahn quotation from Ben Shahn interview by Richard K. Doud, Aug. 3, 1965, transcript, p. 13 (Archives of American Art); Roy Stryker interview by Doud, Oct. 17, 1963, transcript, p. 8, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Shahn interview, 23–24.

The FSA, first called the Resettlement Administration, was created in April 1935 as an autonomous New Deal agency, a countermove to a purge of progressives from the Department of Agriculture. In initiating the agency, Rexford Tugwell, as undersecretary of agriculture, was attempting to treat agricultural laborers as a part of America's working class.¹⁵ The Department of Agriculture never had a division devoted to labor—a much-repeated joke in the FSA was that the department knew how many hogs there were in the United States but not how many farm workers—and had long been dominated by large farm owners.¹⁶ So Tugwell hired photography enthusiast Roy Stryker to create a more inclusive image of American farmers. Stryker assembled a group of photographers who collectively combined excellent photography with passionate democratic sympathies and then allowed them considerable latitude with their cameras. The project created a visual encyclopedia not only of the depression's rural devastation but also of rural work and life. It ultimately produced several hundred thousand photographs, until the project was abolished in 1942.¹⁷

Although neither Tugwell nor Stryker intended it, the FSA photography project sometimes appears as one of several federally funded arts projects, and this context has veiled its focus on agriculture. It is true that it shared with other New Deal arts a populist nationalist style and content, including an emphasis on the rural and the representational. Modernism, that quintessentially urban European import, was discouraged, although photographers in particular, Lange included, experimented with it. Abstract art was forbidden. Americanization reached even the Museum of Modern Art, where Holger Cahill took over temporarily from Alfred H. Barr Jr. in 1932 and began to show American art; Lincoln Kirstein curated an exhibit of murals, some of which enraged the trustees. That orientation also appeared in the rustic regionalism so evident in paintings, notably murals, and in the Works Progress Administration—produced local guides. The New Deal arts projects aimed in part to reverse the draining of cultural resources to big cities and decrease the resultant alienation of the artist from the “people,” who presumably lived in smaller population centers. “We on the project no longer work . . . isolated from society,” one artist proclaimed. “We have a client. Our client is the American people.” But that artist was Girolamo Piccoli, an urban immigrant. His words symbolized the unresolved tensions packed into New Deal nationalism about what Americanness was, and they remind us that much of the New Deal romance with farms and small towns was an urban product.¹⁸

FSA photographers overcame that romanticism to some degree as a result of Stryker's insistence that they learn about American agriculture. He fed them reading assignments,

¹⁵ The Resettlement Administration was transferred to the Department of Agriculture and renamed FSA in 1937. The photography project was transferred to the Office of War Information in 1942. For simplicity's sake, in this article I refer to all three avatars as FSA. On the creation of the FSA, see Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 81–83.

¹⁶ Rosskam and Rosskam interview; Calvin Benham Baldwin interview by Doud, Feb. 25, 1965, transcript (microfilm: reel 3418) (Archives of American Art).

¹⁷ Lange's papers in the Oakland Museum also include approximately forty thousand negatives, and negatives from her work for other government agencies are housed in the National Archives.

¹⁸ There was one Works Progress Administration guide for each of the forty-eight states plus volumes for Alaska, Puerto Rico, New England, the Minnesota Arrowhead country, but only four urban locations—Erie, Pennsylvania, New Orleans, Louisiana, New York City, and Cincinnati, Ohio. Girolamo Piccoli quoted in Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge, Eng., 1995), 58.

statistics, and lectures, orienting them to rural poverty and crisis, not rustic beauty or bucolic peace.

Dorothea Lange found her way to documentary photography on her own. Born in 1895 into a middle-class family in Hoboken, New Jersey, she migrated to San Francisco where, from 1918 to 1935, she earned a living for herself and her family as a portrait photographer. Her romantic, flattering, individualizing, and slightly unconventional portraits drew a prosperous, elite, high-culture clientele. Married to a leading West Coast painter, Maynard Dixon, she socialized in bohemian artistic circles. Her crowd was what we would today call socially liberal, but not attuned to politics. That began to change as the depression deepened, social protest movements grew, and the art market plunged, leaving many artists penniless. She grew impatient simultaneously with her demanding husband and her confinement to her portrait studio. This restlessness, coupled with the depression decline in her business, sent her out to the streets of San Francisco to photograph what was happening: homeless men sleeping on park benches, crowds lining up at relief stations, strikers and the unemployed demonstrating and sometimes even battling the police. Paul Taylor, an agricultural economist at the University of California, Berkeley, saw her photographs and employed her for the California State Emergency Relief Administration in 1935, then made sure that her photographs were noticed in Washington, D.C. When Stryker saw them, he recognized their power and immediately hired her. The most experienced of the FSA photographers and the only one who did not work out of the Washington, D.C., office, she continued to live in California.¹⁹

She divorced Dixon and married Paul Taylor in 1935, and in all her work from then on, her photographic sensibility and strategy were indebted to his political-intellectual approach. Taylor had studied labor economics under John Commons at the University of Wisconsin and connected with Paul Kellogg and other Progressive Era social reformers at Hull House. In the tradition of Florence Kelley and Sophonisba Breckinridge, he combined rigorous research with public advocacy. He devoted himself in the 1920s to studying Mexican immigration and labor in the United States, the first Anglo scholar to do so.²⁰ As much an ethnographer as an economist, he talked with, listened to, and even photographed his subjects, while also collecting data about their immigration and work histories. He communicated to Lange his quintessentially Progressive faith that uncovering facts would produce good, or at least better, policy. He believed that the state ought to regulate the labor market and that policy should be made by well-educated, well-informed, objective experts. Since Taylor believed that his duties as a social scientist included advocacy as well as investigation, he also believed, as did many other Progressive reformers, that research should be packaged and presented so as to reach a broad public. He understood just what Roy Stryker was trying to do. So he devised a research plan that

¹⁹ Linda Gordon and Gary Y. Okiihiro, eds., *Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment* (New York, 2005), 5–45; Dorothea Lange, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dorothea_Lange (Sept. 13, 2006).

²⁰ For a biographical sketch of Paul Taylor, see *American National Biography*, Supplement 2, s.v. "Taylor, Paul Schuster." Also available by subscription at *American National Biography Online*, <http://www.anb.org/>. Taylor's were "the most sensitive and penetrating studies of evolving Mexican American–Mexican immigrant relationships," according to David Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley, 1995), 64.

enabled him to travel with Lange, interviewing, explaining, taking his own notes, and pointing out photographic subjects.

Lange's photographic trajectory metaphorically reversed the historical trajectory of American agriculture. She began in 1935 in California, where mechanization and industrial agriculture were most developed, then traveled to the southern plains where many tenant farmers and remaining smallholders were being devastated, and moved from there to the southeastern states where agriculture remained most primitive and the labor system was at least as brutal as that in California's fields.

The fundamental, irreducible problem of labor supply for California's agribusiness was that huge inputs of workers were needed for short spells of time—typically at harvest—while for most of the year only a tiny fraction of that labor force could do the necessary labor. For example, in 1935, growers required 198,000 hands in September but 46,000 in January. In the fruit business the imbalance was twice as bad: 130,000 needed at peak, 16,000 at trough.²¹ Thus migratory farm labor seemed essential. Farm workers traveled throughout the state following the various harvest seasons and remained unemployed for months at a time.

As Lange began to document that system, her first reaction was horror. "They were . . . camped in an open field, without shelter of any kind. Mother pregnant, with 5 starving children. They were eating green onions, raw, and that was all they had."²² Her photographs show her response. Their tents, lean-tos, and shacks are put together with old canvas, gunny sacks, cardboard or wooden boxes, scraps of linoleum and sheet metal. The Mexican workers have woven brush, palm, and other plant material to make *jacales* (huts), and these often provided better cover than the Anglos' improvisations. The main furniture is wooden boxes. There are of course no floors, no insulation, no screens, no toilets. As these agricultural valleys have little tree cover, there is no way to relieve oneself discreetly, and there is human excrement in what are effectively backyards. Nearby, children play in mud and women take water for cooking and washing from rain puddles and irrigation ditches. Slightly older children work in the fields, others loiter, depressed, without shoes, others sleep under rags on filthy mattresses or on the ground.

Lange's objective was not only to document poverty but to show also the agricultural *system* from which it grew. She used the rhythm of the plowed ruts and ridges and the rows of plants to increase visually the size of the fields in her shots. She included tiny, far-off farm workers, mules, and tractors in those shots to indicate the scale of the farms. She showed the impersonality of those enterprises where workers never met the boss and did not know many of their co-workers.²³

²¹ The uneven demand for labor was much greater in California than in, for example, the Southeast, because California's relative freedom from weeds and pests meant that its farms needed less labor before harvest time. State Relief Administration of California, *Migratory Labor in California* (San Francisco, 1936), 8.

²² Dorothea Lange, field notes, Dorothea Lange Archive (Oakland Museum, Oakland, Calif.).

²³ For example, Dorothea Lange, "Salinas Valley, California. Large Scale, Commercial Agriculture," Feb. 1939, photograph, LC-USF347-018899-E, FSA-OWI Collection (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.); Dorothea Lange, "Salinas Valley, California. Filipino Boys Thinning Lettuce," Feb. 1939, photograph, LC-USF347-019432, *ibid.* The Library of Congress uses a variety of numbering systems; this article uses the system at the following Web site: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Prints and Photographs Online Catalog: Searching FSA/Office of War Information (owi) Black-and-White Negatives, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/pp/fsaquery.html>.



Figure 2. "Filipinos Cutting Lettuce. Salinas, California." June 1935. *Photo by Dorothea Lange. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF347-000826-D.*

At the heart of her California studies was field labor. She illustrated *how* workers grew California's crops. She made 177 photographs documenting the production of cotton, 171 of peas, 54 of carrots, 32 of potatoes, 41 of lettuce, 9 of beans, 7 of wheat, 7 of cauliflower, 9 of cattle ranching—and those numbers are underestimates.²⁴ A great proportion of the work she illustrated was stoop labor. In those photographs, people are bent over picking cotton, pulling carrots, digging potatoes, thinning lettuce, cutting cabbage and cauliflower. Their bodies are part of the earth, their faces hidden from view by their focus on the ground and the hats they wear to ward off the stinging, dizzying sun and heat. Lange was fascinated by the composition of those vistas, and many of those photographs are beautiful abstractions: the curvature of the upside-down Us of the human bodies standing in the seemingly endless rows of plants, silhouetted against the immense sky. At other times she symbolized labor with images of carrying. She showed workers dragging cotton sacks, lugging bushel baskets, wooden crates, armloads of tied carrots. Their bodies lean far off center to manage the weight.²⁵ (See figures 2 and 3.)

²⁴ The number of photographs is an underestimate because inferior and near-duplicate shots are not easily accessible in the Library of Congress collection, and, given the enormous number of photographs, my search could only bring up those photographs that had the name of the crop in the caption or title.

²⁵ For the most famous example of a photograph that shows stoop labor, see figure 2. For an example of a photograph that shows carrying, see Dorothea Lange, "Picker carrying peas to the weighmaster. Near Santa Clara, California," April 1937, photograph, LC-USF34-016470-E, FSA-OWI Collection.



Figure 3. “Child of impoverished Negro tenant family working on farm. Alabama.” July 1936. Photo by Dorothea Lange. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-009261-E.

She constructs a visual narrative that takes us to a moment when class conflict becomes visible: weighing. The two sets of interests are, by definition, opposed. The workers want the highest possible weight for what they have picked, the managers the lowest. All parties are watching each other and the scale intently. Sometimes the workers as well as the weighmasters are writing—the former on much-used scraps of paper, the latter in account books.²⁶

The photos also raised questions about *who* was working. She made pointed images of whole families, including children and old people, doing heavy work. Her captions identify some subjects as grandmothers, lest there be any ambiguity about their ages. Those pictures prompted furious letters of denial, as when a county probation officer claimed that one of Lange’s photographs, of a child with a cotton sack waiting to go to work at 7:00 a.m., could not have been made during the school term.²⁷

²⁶ For examples of photographs that show weighing, see Dorothea Lange, “Small Cotton Farm, Kern County, California,” photograph, Nov. 1938, LC-USF347-018639-C, FSA-OWI Collection; Dorothea Lange, “Weighing in Cotton, Southern San Joaquin Valley, California,” photograph, Nov. 1936, LC-USF347-009965-C, *ibid.*; Dorothea Lange, “Weighing in Cotton, Southern San Joaquin Valley, California,” photograph, Nov. 1936, LC-USF347-009960-C, *ibid.*

²⁷ C. M. Johnson to Rep. Toland, May 2, 1940, box 9, Paul S. Taylor Papers (Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley).

But she also knew that the farm workers suffered less from overwork than from not enough work. Their problem was that growers preferred four hundred pickers working for five days to one hundred working for twenty days, so jobs were brief. Growers deliberately recruited too many workers, both to keep wages low and to guarantee a speedy harvest, without which a farm could suffer substantial loss. Despite growers' denials, Department of Agriculture data show that California agriculture had an oversupply of labor in all but three months from 1921 to 1940.²⁸ Another influence was mechanization, and she documented its uneven development in California. At the same time, in different places in the state, mules and tractors were pulling plows. She photographed other forms of rationalization, finding visual metaphors for the vertical integration big growers were introducing—for example, packing vegetables and fruits right in the fields rather than carting them to packing houses or sheds, and producing their own crates from their own timber land and lumber mills. In the Soviet Union at this time, social realist photographers and artists were making images of heroic, monumental peasants, female as well as male, mounted on tractors and even combines. In Lange's pictures the machines dwarf the drivers. She saw tractors as part of the problem, not the solution. This orientation showed despite FSA pressure to take a more positive approach—after all, the machines had often been paid for by the Department of Agriculture.²⁹

The main FSA strategy, helping farm tenants become owners, made no sense in California, and Paul Taylor knew it, despite his loyalty to family farms. The farm workers' plight had convinced him that the first step in remedying workers' misery had to be housing. In 1935 this itinerant population had two options for shelter: Some large growers maintained camps with one-room cabins, a water pump, and outhouses shared by scores if not hundreds—renting for \$4 to \$8 a month. (Wages were typically \$1.50 a day or 15 cents an hour, and, of course, the workers were paid only when they worked.)³⁰ Or the migrants could join squatters' camps with no facilities at all. In neither situation did the migrants have access to schools, medical care, legal services, suffrage, or postal services. They had been excluded from the two pieces of New Deal legislation most important for workers: the 1935 Social Security Act and National Labor Relations Act, and in 1938 they would be excluded from the Fair Labor Standards Act. This lack of protection made them particularly vulnerable because workers who camped on growers' land could be evicted (not to mention worse retaliation) at the first sign of organizing or holding out for better wages. Without minimally adequate and secure shelter, other forms of help could be delivered. So Taylor had recruited Lange to help build the case for federal camps for migrant farm workers. Taylor and Harry Drobisch, director of California's Rural Rehabilitation Division, believed that housing for transient workers could enable further government provision of medical, sanitation, educational, and nutritional resources.³¹

²⁸ Senate Committee on Education and Labor, Subcommittee on Senate Resolution 266, *Violations of Free Speech and Rights of Labor*, report prepared by Robert M. LaFollette Jr., Elbert D. Thomas, and David I. Walsh, 74 Cong., 1 sess., March 13, 1941, vol. 47, serial 17305, quoted in Lamar B. Jones, "Labor and Management in California Agriculture, 1864–1964," *Labor History*, 11 (Winter 1970), 36.

²⁹ Alan L. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode, "An Overview of the History of California Agriculture," Working Paper 89, 1997, pp. 27–30 (Agricultural History Center, University of California, Davis). Landis, "Fate, Responsibility, and 'Natural' Disaster Relief," 306. In 1929, tractors were twenty times more likely to be used on California farms than on Mississippi farms. Olmstead and Rhode, "Overview of the History of California Agriculture," 10.

³⁰ Harvey M. Coverley, field representative, California Farm Debt Adjustment Committee, report, March 7, 1935, folder 24, box 14, Taylor Papers.

³¹ On the camps-for-fieldworkers projects, see correspondence among Taylor, Frederick Soule, Jonathan Garst, and Harry Drobisch, cartons 7 and 14, Taylor Papers.

When California officials rejected the camp idea, dominated as they were by the big growers, Taylor looked to the FSA for funding; but his FSA superiors argued that such camps would not advance fundamental reform of agricultural labor relations and would amount to a government subsidy for the large employers. Taylor and Drobisch knew both claims were true, but to them, on the ground, the immediate priority had to be alleviating suffering. So Taylor set about creating documentation that would change the FSA's mind, and his strategy included using scores of Lange's photographs.

Taylor's reports snared a quick \$20,000 to build two FSA camps. Taylor wanted them put up fast, before the big growers had time to organize an opposition, so he got directly involved, choosing the sites and appointing the staffs. Over the next few years, Lange made scores of photographs of these camps and their residents. The facilities that created the greatest delight were the baths and showers. When someone noted that one new resident took three baths in one day, she replied only, "If you had had to go without a bath as long as I have. . . ." One observer saw a woman just arrived in a camp who "stood under the shower all afternoon, crying, drying herself, and going back into the shower."³² But Taylor never got the funding to extend the program enough to meet the tremendous need, as he also failed in his later efforts to get protection for agricultural workers. Although he still hoped that the FSA's resettlement and loan programs might help tenants and possibly farm wage workers buy land and become independent small farmers, he surely knew that nothing like that would happen soon in California.

Indeed, Taylor, and Lange with him, fell victim to one of the occupational hazards of reformers and especially government insiders: becoming so engrossed in fighting for their one small project that they lost the distance from which they could have seen how puny it was. They had to work so hard to establish their small camp program that they became proud of limited, even insignificant, achievements and pushed out of mind the overall balance sheet. For example, between 1937 and 1939 the total number of FSA farm-purchase loans was only 6,094. In Texas, out of 15,000 applications, only 537 received loans. In Virginia, a total of 41 loans were made.³³ By 1942 the FSA was running only 89 camps. In other words, FSA programs served only a small fraction of those in need. *Survey Graphic* solicited an article on the camps from Taylor, but when he sent it in, the editors found it "superficial and too rosy—a look at a few small spots where a little something has been done; but it disregards the big problem." They posed the obvious tough question that Taylor avoided: "To what extent are government toilets etc a subsidy of the large fruit and vegetable interests?" On the other hand, the pride and optimism that led to the fantasy that they were making a dent in the problem was also what kept Lange and Taylor going, and Paul Taylor continued to support farm workers' struggles until the day he died in 1983.³⁴

³² First quotation from Eric Thomsen, speech, Jan. 29, 1937, folder 15, box 4, Farm Security Administration Papers (Bancroft Library); second quotation from Randall Jarrell, interviewer and editor, "Helen Hosmer: A Radical Critic of California Agribusiness in the 1930s," typescript, 1992, p. 43 (Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles).

³³ On the FSA loans, see Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley, 1997), 181; and Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 58.

³⁴ VW to BA, memo, June 23, 1936, and n.d., Kellogg Folder, Correspondence File, Taylor Papers. For example, Taylor was still sending money and lending his name to the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union in 1981. Taylor to Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, Oct. 2, 1981, folder 3, box 11, *ibid.*

As Lange and Taylor traveled California's roads, they saw the influx of refugees from the dust bowl before it became national news. So in 1936 they headed to the affected area. Taylor became a leading New Deal expert on the Okie migration, "a churning documentary engine producing facts and statistics regarding the catastrophe," as the California historian Kevin Starr put it. Taylor was also offering a narrative of its roots.³⁵ His explanation, of course, was one that fit his politics: progressive in his reliance on expert knowledge, New Deal in his commitment to removing land from cultivation and promoting federal investment in soil conservation, pro-family farming in his condemnation of government subsidies to large-scale industrial agriculture. Lange tried to render that explanation visual.

Taylor traced the dust bowl to the 1870s, when white settlers began to erode the "bison ecology" that had sustained the Plains Indians. Ignoring the semiarid conditions of the southern plains—the region received between half and one-third as much rain as did midwestern farmland—settlers moved in, established homesteads, and plowed the earth. They uprooted the prairie grasses that held down the dry soil. Heavy rains in the 1880s fostered the delusion that plowing the land actually increased the rainfall (the slogan "rain follows the plow" gained support even among scientists). Realty and railroad companies promoting settlement advertised an allegedly inexhaustible shallow underground water belt that could be tapped and claimed that proper plowing would prevent evaporation. In fact, new methods of plowing made matters worse. Earlier farmers, practicing what was then called dryland farming, had used lister plows, which centered a furrow so that the loosened earth fell symmetrically to both sides and left untilled ridges as barriers to wind. When farmers sought greater productivity, they switched to faster one-way disc plows, which used a set of parallel sharp disks to pulverize clumps and turned all the soil to one side. These one-way plows could handle heavy stubble and hard sun-baked soil, and as mechanization advanced, they could be fitted with attachments for seeding. But they left a finer surface layer, more vulnerable to the wind.

Soon, family farms were losing out to large-scale commercial farms worked by tenants. As farm sizes grew, it became cost-effective to mechanize. When the depression lowered farm prices, owners responded by further mechanizing and displacing tenants. Owners became tenants, tenants became day laborers.³⁶

So the 1930s droughts, the worst in U.S. history, found the earth of the southern plains defenseless against wind. Here is Paul Taylor, writing in his unique voice as a humanist economist with a visual imagination nurtured by Lange:

Like fresh sores which open by over-irritation of the skin and close under the growth of protective cover, dust bowls form and heal. Dust is not new on the Great Plains, but never . . . has it been so pervasive and so destructive. Dried by years of drought and pulverized by machine-drawn gang disk plows, the soil was literally thrown to the winds which whipped it in clouds across the country. . . . They loosened the hold

³⁵ Kevin Starr, *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California* (New York, 1996), 233. Brad D. Lookingbill, *Dust Bowl, USA: Depression America and the Ecological Imagination, 1929–1941* (Athens, Ohio, 2001), 32.

³⁶ John Opie, "Moral Geography in High Plains History," *Geographical Review*, 88 (April 1998), 246–47; Lookingbill, *Dust Bowl, USA*, 12, 17–18. Paul S. Taylor, "'What Shall We Do with Them?' Address to Commonwealth Club of California, April 15, 1938," in *On the Ground in the Thirties*, by Paul S. Taylor (Salt Lake City, 1983); Paul S. Taylor, "Refugee Labor Migration to California, 1937" [April 1939], *ibid.*

of settlers on the land, and like particles of dust drove them rolling down ribbons of highway.³⁷

One can arrange Lange's dust bowl photographs according to Taylor's ecological story. First comes the earth itself. She captured a few dust storms, but these images are not as powerful as those of dust bowl refugees, not even as powerful as verbal descriptions, perhaps because the swirling dust makes the photographs seem merely fuzzy. She got better effect from images of the dunes of dust, the drifts covering fences, farm equipment, storage cellars, even the first-floor windows of houses. Then she shows us the cause: in the vast deserted plowed fields where once prairie grass grew and now nothing grows; or in the matter-of-fact shots of men on tractors, plowing yet again despite the years of failure.

A second visual theme in her photographs, desertion, begins with the parched fields, naked and exposed, deserted by all vegetation. Then the pictures move on to human desertion. There are numerous abandoned farmhouses, rusting plows, isolated relics of human society. There are the vacant town squares, the wide midwestern main streets nearly empty of vehicles, the stores boarded up or with broken windows. What she could not show was that many farm workers had been driven out, not by drought, but by eviction. The same forces that created the dust bowl led to widespread evictions of tenants, encouraged by the Agricultural Adjustment Administration's payments to growers to reduce their acreage and to mechanize. Many of those moving west were leaving the cities and towns where they had moved after losing their farms in the 1920s; now the drought and continued mechanization pulled down town as well as farm economies.³⁸

Then there is Lange's depression specialty: dejected men. (See figure 4.) Here she is supplementing Taylor's account with a gender story. Everywhere are idle groups of men in conversation—the drought area consists of small towns where people know each other. The men appear by the sides of the empty, silent main streets. They are all thin. Some stand, some squat, some lean on cars. Some are in overalls but many in “better” trousers, clothes for going to town, because there is no farm work for them to do. They all wear hats, some of straw, some fedoras, some cowboy hats. Many attend morning movies because there is nothing else to do. There are no women, an absence that tells another part of the gender story: when there is neither farm work nor jobs for the men, and they while away the time in town with each other, the women are working hard, even harder than ever: trying to keep homes, bodies, clothing, food and water clean; trying to put together meals with little food in the larder or money in the coffee can; trying to keep animals alive and to give human spirits a cushion against crippling depression. Lange is showing us how gender systems transform under environmental and economic pressure. This was risky photography, and many other documentary photographers concentrated on the elderly, because images of idle able-bodied men could be read as lazy, malingering men lacking in work ethic.³⁹

Next, these “Okie” families become migrants—and they are overwhelmingly families, not single men, indicating the permanence of their move. There are several visual tropes

³⁷ Dorothea Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor, *American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (New York, 1939), 102.

³⁸ Taylor, “What Shall We Do with Them?”; Taylor, “Refugee Labor Migration to California, 1937”; James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York, 1989), 13–17.

³⁹ This point is made by Colleen McDannell, *Picturing Faith: Photography and the Great Depression* (New Haven, 2004), 38.



Figure 4. "Waiting for the semimonthly relief checks at Calipatria, Imperial Valley, California. Typical story: fifteen years ago they owned farms in Oklahoma. Lost them through foreclosure when cotten prices fell after the war. Became tenants and sharecroppers. With the drought and dust they came West, 1934–1937. Never before left the county where they were born. Now although in California over a year they haven't been continuously resident in any single county long enough to become a legal resident. Reason: migratory agricultural laborers." March 1937. *Photo by Dorothea Lange. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-016271-C DLC.*



Figure 5. “Missouri family of five, seven months from the drought area. ‘Broke, baby sick, car trouble.’ U.S. 99 near Tracy, California.” Feb. 1937. *Photo by Dorothea Lange.* Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-T01-016452-E.

in the classic Lange photographs of the Okie drought refugees: distance shots of auto caravans (as they stopped, because Lange’s film speed could not catch them in motion), the passengers in their ragged clothes standing or sitting outside the hot cars as they wait—for water, for a repair, for a used auto part; close-ups of how the jalopies are packed—household belongings tied to or hanging from every surface of the car. Sometimes the vehicles are small pickup trucks with homemade canvas roofs sheltering the people in the back—hence the title Taylor used in an article, “Again the Covered Wagon.” Other images focus on the families themselves—the new pioneers, Lange and Taylor wanted to suggest. The migrants in her photographs are not paupers but resourceful, hard-working people.⁴⁰ Their trips may not be quite as dangerous as those of the previous century, but they are extremely arduous. The men are haggard, not only worried but sometimes a bit glassy-eyed, possibly on the edge of cracking; they may well be suffering from dehydration or heat-stroke. (It was usually summer when Lange was on the road in the drought areas.) The men are always driving. Women, children, and elderly folk crowd in elsewhere, many of

⁴⁰ For a useful contrast, compare Lange’s portraits to those by Walker Evans or by Margaret Bourke-White in Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (New York, 1937). Paul S. Taylor, “Again the Covered Wagon,” *Survey Graphic*, 24 (July 1935), 348–51.

them holding babies, many feeding babies with bottle or breast. The children have dirty faces, legs, feet, and clothing.

Then the families camp, often right on the side of the road. Lange meant these images to support the FSA program of providing government camps for the migrants. We see how hard and ingeniously the migrants work to create living space: shelter from a canvas strung to trees, open fires or small stoves, improvised cooking systems, multitasking vessels used for cooking, dish washing, clothes washing, bathing. Once camped, the women are at the family center, working and directing the work of others. Men and older boys may be absent on errands or looking for work. Occasionally, only children are in the camp, perhaps because adults and youth have found work and are in the fields. The older children look after younger children. Everyone's clothing is ragged and dirty; it is hard enough to get water to drink, let alone to wash.

In early 1936 the Los Angeles chief of police ordered that the migrants be turned back at the state line—an unconstitutional action by an official with no legal jurisdiction outside Los Angeles. Nevertheless, his staff operated this “bum blockade” for two months before a court stopped it. However preposterous this escapade, Los Angeles had a justifiable grievance: migrant farm workers' only chance at relief was to get to a city, but President Roosevelt had suspended federal relief funds in 1935, just as the Okie migration intensified. The migrants were largely farmers, but the Department of Agriculture had nothing to offer them. Lange tried to photograph the blockade but did not succeed in making it visual, so she relied on words. “They won't go,” Lange wrote in one of her captions, quoting a case worker in Imperial County charged with trying to send the transients back to where they came from, “until they get so hungry that there's nothing else for them to do. They won't go—not twenty-five percent will go.”⁴¹

In the summers of 1936, 1937, 1938, and 1939, Lange and Taylor worked together in every southern state except Kentucky and West Virginia. Here, too, they were discovering a poverty remote from their experience. Her photography was once again systematic and argumentative. As in the drought area, she covered environmental misuse, but not only by farmers. We see not only huge gullies with tree roots exposed by soil erosion but also abuses by lumber companies, such as one thirty-seven-mile swath of cutover with no replanting whatsoever, and the resultant unemployment of 3,000 men and devastation of lumber-mill towns.⁴² Here she emphasized *lack* of mechanization among other forms of backwardness: wagons and plows pulled by mules, oxen, men and boys, and lack of basic services—mail delivery, schools, stores—particularly for blacks. If the major masculinity theme of the drought area was dejection, in the South it was sweat-drenched labor.

Her captions specified economic relations. She notes the many ways that planters and managers cheated. She explains crop liens, debt peonage, and low wages—\$1 a day for hoeing cotton 6:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. There is no free market in labor. The plantations did little to mechanize because the extremely low-wage economy gave planters no incentive to increase productivity. So Lange is more sympathetic to tractors here: “One man and a

⁴¹ Paul Taylor, “Migratory Farm Labor in the United States,” *Monthly Labor Review*, 44 (March, 1937), 537–49. Leonard Joseph Leader, *Los Angeles and the Great Depression* (New York, 1991).

⁴² For example, see Dorothea Lange, “Tractor on the Aldridge Plantation, Mississippi,” photograph, June 1937, LC-USF347-017099-C, FSA-OWI Collection.



Figure 6. “Double log cabin of Negro share tenants who raise tobacco. Family of eight has been on this place six or seven years. Person County, North Carolina.” July 1939. *Photo by Dorothea Lange. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-020029-C.*

four-row cultivator does the work of eight men and eight mules under the one man-one mule system which is still common.” But she does remind us that mechanization constituted a kind of shock-therapy primitive accumulation, with the hundreds of thousands of evictions that resulted: “This man was a tenant on the same farm for eighteen years. He has six children. This year he was forced into status of day laborer on the same farm. The farm owner employed twenty-three tenant families last year. This year, the same acreage, using tractors, requires seven families.”⁴³ The evictions not only left people homeless but also deprived them of vegetable gardens, wood gathering, and hunting and fishing rights on which they had depended for sustenance, much as many Europeans were deprived during the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century enclosure movement. Her photographs show tobacco or cotton growing literally up to the front door of tenants’ houses.

Lange documented housing, although only from the outside. (She rarely used flashbulbs, because she did not like their effect on her subjects.⁴⁴) These photographs revealed appalling inequalities. It was only in the South that she ventured to photograph the prosperous; she made pictures of grand plantation houses, some in decay and some still shining with wealth. But her photographs of poor people’s housing were by no means all images of wretchedness. Like every other FSA photographer, she made some Walker Ev-

⁴³ Dorothea Lange, “This Man Was a Tenant on the Same Farm for Eighteen Years . . . Ellis County, Texas,” photograph, June 1937, LC-USF347-017152-C, *ibid.*

⁴⁴ Dorothea Lange interview by Doud, May 22, 1964, transcript, p. 15 (Archives of American Art).

ans-like photographs of vernacular architecture, often with the obvious purpose of showing the care and skill some croppers and occasional small farm owners, black and white, used in building and caring for their homes. At other times disrepair and disorder dominate the pictures. The same range did not characterize her portraits: she made only flattering, dignifying photographs of subjects. This was of course her studio-learned skill, but it also expressed her democratic, Popular Front politics—ennobling the poor.

For three southern agricultural products—cotton, tobacco, and turpentine—Lange tried to illustrate the entire labor process, attempting to communicate respect for the labor and skill of the farm workers. One eight hundred-word caption instructed the reader in tobacco growing, from priming to firing the barns.

Subject: Putting in Tobacco:

This process is also known as “saving” tobacco; the word “priming” is also sometimes applied to the entire process, although strictly this term describes the actual removal of the leaves from the plant. The process is also known as “curing tobacco,” although here again this term applies strictly only to one particular part of the process.

1. “PRIMING.” Beginning at the bottom of the plant, the leaves are stripped; usually two or three bottom leaves are removed at one priming. Only the ripe leaves are primed, and ripeness is determined by the color of the leaf. When ripe, the leaves are pale yellow in color, although they are often difficult to distinguish from the green leaves. Hence the job of priming is something of an art, which is left to the men of the family or to those “women folks” who are skilled at it. In the field picture, the men are priming for the second time, the “first primings,” or sand leaves, having been removed. Note the method of removing the leaves, the manner in which they are held, and the care which is exercised to prevent bruising or breaking. [a list of 11 negatives follows]

2. “SLIDING TOBACCO TO THE BARN.” The primings are transported to the barns, where they will be tied or strung, in the “slide” (also called sled). Note construction of the slide-frame of wooden strips, on a pair of wooden runners. The body of the slide is made of Guano sacks, and the entire structure is narrow enough to run between the rows of tobacco without breaking the leaves. In this instance two slides are in use; while one load of tobacco is being strung, the other slide is sent to the field for another load. [5 negatives]

3. “STRINGING THE TOBACCO.” At the barn, the tobacco is strung on sticks by the women and children, and those men who are not required in the field. The sticks are of pine, four feet long. The string is fastened at one end, and the leaves of tobacco in bunches of three or four, are strung on the stick alternately on each side. Note the notched “horses” for holding the sticks while stringing. When a stick is filled with tobacco, it is removed from the horse and piled in front of the barn, where it remains until put up in the barn. Sometimes shelters are provided to keep the sun from the tobacco, after it is strung, since very hot sun will burn the tobacco. In this case two people are stringing, one of them an expert negro boy, and two or three people are “handing the primings” to the stringer. [12 negatives]

4. “PUTTING IN THE TOBACCO.” At noon, after the last slide of the morning has come from the field, the tobacco which has been strung is hung from the barn. The barns are of four or five “rooms” (a room is the space between the tier poles; the barn in the picture is a four room barn, and will hold about 600 sticks of tobacco). Two men go up on the tier poles, and the tobacco is handed up to them. One room

is filled at a time. In the barn picture, several people's tobacco is being put in together; there are, in addition to the second primings mentioned, some first primings from another field. These are much inferior in quality to the second primings, and are covered with sand--hence the term "sand leaves." [7 negatives]

5. "FIRING THE BARN." When the barn is filled, the tobacco is allowed to hang for several hours, sometimes over night, until the leaves are thoroughly wilted. Fires are then built in the furnaces, and the process of curing begins. The heat is kept at ninety degrees until the tobacco is "yellowed" then is gradually raised until all of the leaf except the stem is cured, when the final stage, "killing out," is reached. The heat is usually raised rapidly until it reaches 190 or 200 degrees. Curing takes about three days and three nights, although under certain circumstances it may take longer. After the tobacco is cured, it is allowed to hang in the curing barn until it "comes in order"—absorbs enough moisture so that it can be handled without breaking—when it is taken down and packed in the pack house. Here it remains until it is stripped out. It is usually taken up and repacked once, so that it will not become excessively moist and mould. [5 negatives]⁴⁵

These short essays sought to defetishize agricultural commodities, revealing them as products of human labor, but they were never published.

Everywhere in the South Lange tried to illustrate aspects of the racial system, not only the segregation, labor market discrimination, and dual wage scale, but also the interracial intimacies characteristic of the Jim Crow system: "The three year old white girl at intervals slapped and switched the little Negro girl about her age and once called her a damn fool; but between these outbursts the children played together peaceably." She listened to white croppers complaining about the blacks and to blacks telling her how they managed the whites: "We know our white folks and just what to say to please them."⁴⁶

When Lange first entered the South she was struck by its lack of forward motion. As her son Daniel Dixon summarized:

Up until then, most of her work had been done in areas where Depression had shaken apart any form of social order. But in the South, a social order remained, and it held so tenaciously to those who lived under it that in order to photograph the people she discovered that she had to photograph the order as well. "I couldn't pry the two apart. . . . Earlier, I'd gotten at people through the ways they'd been torn loose, but now I had to get at them through the ways they were bound up."⁴⁷

But soon she came to see disruption here, too. She documented the eviction of croppers and their transformation into day laborers, visible in the men waiting on urban street corners for work and in the truckloads of workers being ferried to and from distant fields. Florida in particular began to look like California. Southern growers who were now relying on wage labor quickly adopted the California plan of recruiting more workers than they needed in order to be assured of reliable cheap labor.⁴⁸ Moreover, the Agricultural Adjustment Act was speeding up those tendencies: more and more southern farmland

⁴⁵ Dorothea Lange, "General Caption #6," July 7, 1939, Shoofly, Granville County, N.C., file 3167B, Southern Historical Collection (University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill).

⁴⁶ Dorothea Lange, "General Caption #7," *ibid.* Caption to Dorothea Lange, "Negro on the Aldridge Plantation, Mississippi," photograph, June 1937, LC-USF347-017137-C, FSA-OWI Collection.

⁴⁷ Daniel Dixon quoted in Levin and Northrup, *Dorothea Lange*, I, 39.

⁴⁸ For an example of over-recruiting in the Southeast, see Terrell Cline (FSA, Belle Glade, Fla.) to John Beecher (FSA, Birmingham, Ala.), May 14, 1939, copy, Miscellaneous Material, vol. 1, Lange Archive.

came into the hands of absentee corporations; plantations were expanding in size; and large efficiency-minded owners brought in tractors and wage laborers to replace mules and tenants.⁴⁹

Lange and Taylor wanted their joint work to educate Americans about agricultural labor, but they operated within constraints. Some they resisted successfully, some unsuccessfully, and to some they capitulated. The FSA photographers, for example, were assigned “shooting scripts” by Stryker, and while he was always clear that the photographers should improvise and photograph opportunistically, they nevertheless tried to comply with his requests, such as this one:

I. Production of foods . . . a. Packaging and processing . . . b. Picking, hauling, sorting, preparing, drying, canning, packaging, loading for shipping c. Field operations—planting; cultivation; spraying d. Dramatic pictures of fields, show “pattern” of the country; get feeling of the productive earth, boundless acres. e. Warehouses filled with food, raw and processed, cans, boxes, bags, etc.⁵⁰

By the late 1930s political attacks on the FSA forced Stryker to ask his photographers to quit focusing on poor people and the depression and instead get “pictures of men, women and children who appear as if they really believed in the U.S. . . . Too many in our file now paint the U.S. as an old person’s home . . . everyone is too old to work and too malnourished to care . . . We particularly need . . . More contented-looking couples—woman sewing, man reading; sitting on porch; working in garden.” By that time war threatened, and Stryker felt that Adolf Hitler was “at our doorstep.”⁵¹ Most of the photographers, including Lange, complied.

Lange and Taylor also wanted their visual and textual “research findings” to tell a story—that is, to communicate historical change. Ultimately, they jointly produced a book, *American Exodus* (1940), for which Taylor wrote a capsule history of the three modes of agriculture that Lange had photographed. Presenting a historical analysis through still photographs alone was not easy. If Lange had had her way, the FSA would have distributed not single photographs but photo essays, to show instability and transformation. But the FSA had a far more instrumental goal in distributing photographs—developing popular support for its programs—and a narrower and shallower understanding of what photographs should communicate.⁵²

Attempting to control the meanings of her pictures, Lange wrote long, informative captions for the photographs. She said that she learned this from Taylor, who not only collected data from his subjects but also interviewed them and wrote down what they said. She rejected the picture-is-worth-a-thousand-words idea and believed instead that documentary photographs usually remained ambiguous if not accompanied by words. She wanted to *fix* the meanings of photographs. Stryker understood his project as collecting photographic evidence, so even before he saw Lange’s work he had already asked

⁴⁹ For example, life insurance companies and banks owned 30% of southern cotton land in 1934; in the cotton belt, 60–70% of land was not owned by farm operators. Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 168–77.

⁵⁰ Stryker’s “script” quoted in Thomas H. Garver, ed., *Just before the War: Urban America from 1935 to 1941 as Seen by Photographers of the Farm Security Administration* (New York, 1968), n.p.

⁵¹ E. Roy Stryker, *In This Proud Land: America 1935–1943 as Seen in the FSA Photographs* (Greenwich, 1973), 188.

⁵² Lange and Taylor, *American Exodus*. The FSA claimed that its distribution apparatus was effective. In the first six months of 1936, the still-fledgling agency counted 1,255 pictures published in newspapers, 541 in magazines, and 1,202 in exhibits. Inter-office memo, June 16, 1936, FSA microfilm, Library of Congress.

his photographers to provide detailed identifications—who, when, where—with each picture. Soon Lange became his master captioner, and he taught his other photographers by using hers as models. Although her captions were not usually as lengthy as the one printed above—that was what she called a “general caption,” attached to a group of photographs—they typically provided brief life histories of her subjects and/or economic data about their changing experiences of landownership, earnings, and standard of living. She was attempting to connect personal experience with vast historical processes, to create photographic microhistories. She did not want her photographs to become iconic; she meant them as documents about specific social, economic, and political contexts. Her use of captions, both to delimit and to expand the meaning of her photographs, parallels her labor to control the images themselves, not only by cropping and framing, as all photographers do, but also by asking subjects to move, coaxing them to animation through conversation, and incorporating detail to communicate social context.

But the photographs were usually published without captions. Sometimes the FSA staff edited and bowdlerized her words. In this caption, for example, one phrase was struck out by the FSA: “Old Negro-~~the kind the planters like~~. He hoes, picks cotton, and is full of good humor.”⁵³ She hated the way her photograph known as “Migrant Mother” was removed from its context and turned into a universal image of motherhood. Her famous plantation-owner picture provides a vivid example of this ambiguity and deracination: Her photograph’s visual structure replicates the social-economic structure—the relations of power and deference on a southern plantation. But Archibald MacLeish took it, cropped it, and used it in his book *Land of the Free* (1938), turning the white man into a symbol of salt-of-the-earth pioneer Americanism.⁵⁴ (See figures 7 and 8.)

Even before she joined the FSA, Lange’s photographic method was conducive to representing historical change on the microhistorical level. To illustrate with a comparison: Walker Evans would line up his subjects and hold them still, as in an old-fashioned portrait studio; his subjects appear timeless, often intense, but rarely active. His many close-ups of vernacular architecture intensified the stability of his oeuvre. Lange wanted her subjects in motion. Ironically, her method in the field derived precisely from her long experience as a portrait photographer to the elite and high-cultured. She employed two approaches: either she conversed with her subjects until they fell into their natural posture and gesture, or she took so long to set up her equipment that they forgot her and returned to what they had been doing. She could not, of course, actually capture movement because her film was not fast enough, but she could capture the eloquence of bodily expression. She individuated subjects as much through bodies as faces. Despite the heavy, repetitious movements of field labor, her subjects often seemed unsettled, uncertain, disrupted, deracinated, and this was exactly what she wanted to communicate about the agricultural political economy.

Some of the FSA’s most successful photographs, judging from their staying power, resulted from photographers’ straying from instructions—those regarding gender, for example. Although almost every New Deal policy rested on family wage assumptions—that men should be able to support wives and children single-handedly, and that wives should

⁵³ I have compared the original caption in Lange’s own hand to the caption attached to the photograph in the Library of Congress; Dorothea Lange, “Old Negro, He Hoes, Picks Cotton and Is Full of Good Humor,” June 1939, photograph, LC-USF34-017079-C, FSA-OWI Collection. Her handwritten captions are in Lange Archive.

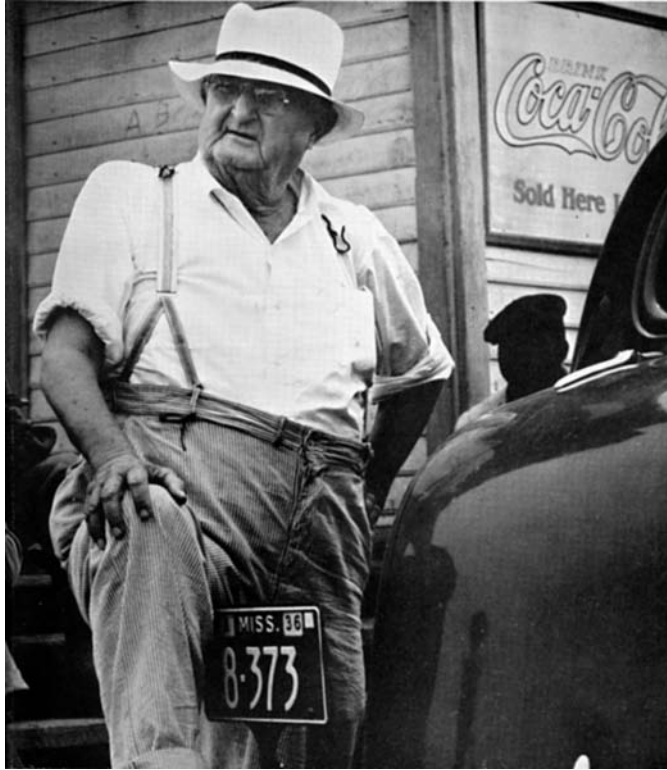
⁵⁴ Archibald MacLeish, *Land of the Free* (New York, 1938), 7.



Figure 7. "Plantation owner. Mississippi Delta, near Clarksdale, Mississippi." June 1936. Photo by Dorothea Lange. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-T01-009599-C DLC. Figure 8, on the facing page, shows the same image as cropped by Archibald MacLeish. Reprinted from Archibald MacLeish, *Land of the Free* (New York, 1938), 7.

not be employed—and aimed to strengthen the male breadwinner family. The usual Popular Front artistic icons stereotyped women as helpmates and earth mothers. Lange, along with the later FSA photographer Esther Bubley, visualized women as independent, to the degree that her work could be considered proto-feminist. Again the rural subject matter was partly responsible, because a sexual division of labor was less fixed among farm-working people. Lange's work shows women at hard labor almost as often as men. Her depression women were sharply etched—often thin, often delicate, always tough. She did love maternal images, but she often presented fatherless mother-child units, decentering the marital couple as family core. The photography critic Sally Stein has pointed out how often Lange's work also focused on fathers with children, another common aspect of rural life, though rarely noticed. Softened images of men characterized her work generally, as if she were finding the positive side of male helplessness and disempowerment. Lange rose to the challenge of presenting idle, unemployed men as worried and despondent, yet manly nonetheless.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ By far, the most important and compelling analysis regarding Lange's focus on bodies is Sally Stein, "Peculiar Grace: Dorothea Lange and the Testimony of the Body," in *Dorothea Lange: A Visual Life*, ed. Elizabeth Partridge (Washington, 1994), 57–89. On gendered New Deal policy assumptions and Popular Front stereotypes, see Me-



Lange's opposition to racism, by contrast, was more than "proto." It was conscious, considered, and consistent. She made more pictures of people of color—31 percent of her total output—than did any other FSA photographer until Gordon Parks joined the group.⁵⁶ And FSA photographers produced more images of people of color than New Deal arts workers in general. Here too Lange's perspective grew from her agricultural assignment and its location: had she been focusing on industrial workers and the urban poor, or had she been working in the East, she would have not have seen racial diversity as she did. Lange was the first Anglo photographer to include people of Mexican, Filipino, Japanese, and Chinese origin in her portrait of America. Lange and Taylor's first 1935 report on the need for federal camps for farm workers depicted those who needed and deserved government action as people of color: thirteen photographs featured Mexicans or other people of color, seven featured people who could possibly be white.⁵⁷ (All the people were attractive.) Lange's field notes from 1935 frequently feature conversations with Mexican workers. She

losh, *Engendering Culture*. For a work that examines a similar artistic challenge—constructing war memorials that neither glorify war nor dishonor those who fought—see, George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York, 1990).

⁵⁶ Nicholas Natanson, *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography* (Knoxville, 1992), 61–62, 72. Gordon Parks was not originally hired by the agency: he used a Rosenwald Foundation fellowship to serve as an intern under Stryker. Stryker's shop was by no means free of racism: Stryker had been reluctant to bring in Parks even as an intern, and FSA darkroom workers did not want to process film for him.

⁵⁷ My categorization of the people in these photographs is based on appearance, when it provides clear identification, but also on clothing and the types of shacks built by the workers—for example, Mexicans often built huts of cactus, branches, and palms. State Emergency Relief Administration report, March 1935, Taylor Papers.



Figure 9. "Cotton worker in Sunday clothes. Near Blytheville, Arkansas." June 1937. *Photo by Dorothea Lange. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-017363-C.*

noted with relish that one old picker had fought against Emperor Maximilian. Even when her notes do not indicate ethnicity, it is often clear that she is interviewing and photographing Mexicans: In Calexico, California, at the Mexican border, she was told, "I don't like you make the picture because we have shame thees house." "These are the forgotten men, women and children of rural California but on these people the crops of California depend," she and Taylor wrote.⁵⁸ In the South she made dozens of compelling, close-up portraits of African Americans, portraits that exhibit three qualities that Lange always loved in her subjects—bodily grace, contemplative demeanor, and social connectedness.

Her photographs drew farm workers of color into citizenship, an effect that rested in part on lingering associations of citizenship with the land. She photographed African Americans with the same visual tropes she used with whites, representing them as equally hardy salt-of-the-earth farmers—part of the American yeomanry.⁵⁹ Her subjects displayed citizenly competence and dignity. Her focus on citizenship fit a much-criticized FSA policy of paying poll taxes for the southern poor; as the FSA director C. B. Baldwin explained, "we took the position that a person couldn't be a good citizen without being a voter."⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Dorothea Lange's field notes, n.d., Lange Archive.

⁵⁹ Charles Alan Watkins, "The Blurred Image: Documentary Photography and the Depression South" (Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 1982), 323.

⁶⁰ Baldwin interview.



Figure 10. “Member of the Delta cooperative farm at Hillhouse, Mississippi.” June 1937. Photo by Dorothea Lange. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-017299-C.

Her subjects are thoughtful, deliberative, even cerebral. She gives them *gravitas* by lighting them well, by shooting from below, by waiting for their thoughtful moments. And she used verbal evidence when she could. She copied into her notebook the words of a female farm worker, “I want to go back to Mexico but my children say, No we all born here we belong in this country. We don’t go.” She captioned one lovely portrait of father and baby, “Future voter & his Mexican father.”⁶¹

With respect to race, the FSA hobbled Lange more than in any other dimension. Its instruction was clear: no violation of southern racial codes. No photographs of blacks and whites in social contact, no references to racial oppression, no images of racial inequality or abuse of blacks. The sexual division of labor in which women could be full-time housewives was reserved for whites. Heroic workers had to be white, which was to say, “typical Americans.” Lange and the other female FSA photographer who worked in the rural South, Marion Post Wolcott, faced a further obstacle to illustrating the southern system honestly: that any discussion with or even proximity to a white woman created an acute danger for a black man.⁶²

Most of the FSA photographers, Lange included, violated FSA racial strictures at times. In urban scenes they showed “whites only” signs or African Americans giving way to

⁶¹ Quotation from caption to photograph RA 825B, Lange Archive.

⁶² E. Jack Hurley, *Marion Post Wolcott: A Photographic Journey* (Albuquerque, 1989).

whites on the sidewalk. The sidewalk scenes skirted close to the taboo against showing blacks and whites together. Lange also violated that prohibition by showing the racial intimacy that constituted the reverse face of the southern racial system. She could not, of course, capture the many interracial sexual relationships, both free and coerced, that flourished in the South. But she showed children playing and bonding across racial lines, white and black farm workers relaxing at stores, and, above all, she emphasized the similarities among black and white sharecroppers. But the photographers' very desire to respect African Americans led them—Lange included—to represent white and black tenants' living and working conditions as identical, which was not the case. This practice exemplifies how equal treatment of unequals reproduces inequality. It matched, for example, the FSA's loan policy, in which blacks had to meet the same requirements as whites, even though the Jim Crow economy made blacks poorer.

Emphasizing white-black commonality was a deliberate, systematic refrain for the FSA. Yet for Lange and Taylor, avoiding a focus on racism was not entirely an externally imposed stricture, because in many ways it fit their analysis of the South. To recent historians any conception of the pre-civil rights South, its main feature appears as racism. But of the 1930s, even to antiracists such as Lange and Taylor, other aspects of the southern political economy seemed at least equally fundamental. Progressives in the Department of Agriculture, several of whom were southerners, saw the problem of farm tenancy as fundamental to all aspects of the South: economic backwardness, cultural backwardness, undemocratic government, as well as racism. And most Department of Agriculture people were far more concerned with white sharecroppers than with black. In 1935 nearly half of all U.S. farmers were landless.⁶³ The analysis that economic exploitation underlay racism reflected not only the agriculture experts' primary concern with land tenure, but more broadly, a tendency toward denial of northern racism that characterized northern liberals. At a time when 75 percent of African Americans lived in the southeastern states, it was easier than it is today to see racism as a southern problem. The East Coast-centered approach of most agricultural policy makers reinforced that illusion because it hid western growers' equal dependence on workers of color.

Then too, Lange's photographs of people of color were far less often distributed than those of whites. The FSA's first *Annual Report*, for 1935–1936, a glossy 173-page book with approximately fifty photographs, contained not one of a person of color. The historian Nicholas Natanson, who studied race in New Deal imagery, has provided extensive evidence and analysis of that exclusionary policy. FSA images did not include chain gangs, child labor, inferior black public facilities such as schools or health care institutions. The first FSA traveling exhibit omitted all images of blacks except for one Lange portrait sanitized of its context and caption, and even that brought objection from the Texas FSA office: “even a Spanish-American farmer's picture would not be popular in West Texas.” A mural in New York City's Grand Central Terminal put together by the FSA's Ed Rosskam out of twenty FSA photographs showed not one black face, although it was mounted by a black assistant.⁶⁴ Even when Florence Loeb Kellogg of *Survey Graphic* specifically asked the FSA for photographs showing racial diversity, she did not get them. So nervous was the FSA in its later years that Stryker went to great effort to hide the fact that Richard Wright

⁶³ On the number of landless farmers in 1935, see Gilbert and Brown, “Alternative Land Reform Proposals in the 1930s,” 355.

⁶⁴ Natanson, *Black Image in the New Deal*, 215–23, esp. 220.

used FSA photographs to illustrate his *12 Million Black Voices* (even though it was Rosskam who originated the project and recruited Wright for it in 1941).⁶⁵

Lange made no recorded protest against the strategy of valorizing the poor by distributing primarily pictures of whites, and I would guess that she accepted it, as did so many New Deal progressives, including Will Alexander, the head of the FSA and a veteran leader of the southern interracial movement. It probably seemed to her parallel to the strategy of valorizing the poor by making them handsome. Stryker, Lange, and Taylor believed that the FSA survived only through racial compromises, which were not limited to the Southeast. Not only were the FSA camps for migrant farm workers—the first federal public housing—segregated; often there were no camps at all for people of color. One historian suggested that the FSA concentrated on blond-haired children. Yet, Nicholas Natanson, strongly critical of visual images of blacks in the New Deal, calculated that the FSA did better than any other government arts program in providing positive images of blacks. In the FSA's whole photographic collection, blacks constituted 10 percent of subjects—although a much lower percentage of what the FSA distributed.⁶⁶

But even bracketing the external constraints, Lange's attempt to create not only inclusive, but specifically anti-racist photography was less successful. She consistently tried to use visual relationships to show social and economic ones. She made a few pictures of "bad guys": the plantation owner, the crude southern overseer, the California sheriff's thug. But they were mostly agents, not authors, of racism—or of class relations, for that matter—as a structure. In her photographs she was rarely able to make spatial relations metaphoric of power relations, and when she did they were not readable as such without captions. I have asked many people to interpret the photograph reproduced here as figure 11, but no one catches its subject—a farmer vainly trying to persuade Department of Agriculture agents to grant a loan. She tried, as always, to add text to specify what she meant. She often quoted her subjects about racism, but their comments were never published with her photographs. For example, "Hours are nothing to us. You can't industrialize farming. We in Mississippi know how to treat our niggers."⁶⁷

Lange made several attempts to photograph organized protest—the San Francisco longshore and general strike of 1934, the 1938 lettuce workers' strike, even secret meetings of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union. Some of these efforts yielded fine photographs, but none that delivered the feel of collective resistance. During the 1930s California experienced episodes of the most intense class conflict in U.S. history, often called war in the fields. California's big growers used every available means of law, violence, and intimidation to prevent farm-worker unionization. Lange's portraits of individual leaders and militants in these struggles, such as Tom Mooney and H. L. Mitchell of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, are vibrantly sympathetic. But, on the whole, these photographs are among her weakest. No doubt it was difficult to get close to the action.⁶⁸ Sym-

⁶⁵ On Florence Loeb Kellogg's request, see Cara A. Finnegan, *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs* (Washington, 2003), 74. On Stryker and Richard Wright's use of FSA photographs, see Clara Wakeham to Jack Delano, April 3, 1941 (microfilm: reel 1), Roy Stryker Papers (microfilm copy in Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.). Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (New York, 1941).

⁶⁶ Landis, "Fate, Responsibility, and 'Natural' Disaster Relief," 307; Natanson, 66–67.

⁶⁷ Dorothea Lange, "A Tractor Pioneer of the Mississippi Delta," June 1937, photograph, LC-USF347-017138-C, FSA-OWI Collection.

⁶⁸ In fairness, I would add that most photographers did not even attempt photographs of organized protest. Sally Stein, "Starting from Pictorialism: Notable Continuities in the Modernization of California Photography," in *Capturing Light: Masterpieces of California Photography, 1850 to the Present*, ed. Drew Heath Johnson (Oakland, 2001).



Figure 11. "Dairy Coop Officials." 1935. *Photo by Dorothea Lange. Courtesy Oakland Museum of California, The Dorothea Lange Collection, A67.137.35132.1.*

pathetic photographers such as Lange may have shied away from exposing the strikers' violence or even the chanting and shouting that often renders faces as distorted. Nicholas Natanson wrote (of another photographer), "an angry camera becomes a demeaning camera."⁶⁹ Moreover, the Popular Front and the New Deal emphasized unity, not conflict, albeit for different reasons: the former to create the largest possible coalition against Nazism, the latter to get its agenda through Congress. After 1935, even the Communist party withdrew its active support of farm workers.

I suspect that Lange was uncomfortable with overt class conflict, and Taylor strengthened that political temperament. Their goal—government camps for migratory workers—required soft-pedaling conflicts of interest. Conscious of the big growers' power and fearful of what he saw as Communist exploitation of workers, Taylor consistently argued that government camps would benefit everyone by eliminating "labor strife." He supported his argument by quoting both sides: "Marysville grower: 'Give them good places to camp and you'll never have a strike.' Marysville fruit picker: 'If folks has a decent place to live and can git work there won't be no reason to strike.'" The camps would remedy "the menace of the existing situation to health, morals and industrial peace."⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Natanson, *Black Image in the New Deal*, 26.

⁷⁰ Taylor, "Operation of camps for migrants in California agriculture," memo, Aug. 3, 1935, box 1, I. W. Wood Papers (Bancroft Library).

Lange condemned without reservation the conditions in which farm workers had to work and live, but she was willing to produce photographic advertisements for FSA projects. There was an aroma of rescue mission in the way she and Taylor fought for the camps. Still, that mission was also a utopian aspiration—to provide the free space and minimally decent living conditions that could allow the farm workers to become citizens, not so much legally but civilly; that is, to become people with rights. Carol Shloss argues for that side of their vision of the camps: “in a world where the state has become a private police state, the only freedom is to be found in enclosure, in space that protects people from the vigilance of those who want to frighten them into quietness and submission.” Other scholars, however, have noted the controlling as well as the protecting aspect of these camps. The geographer Don Mitchell compares camp “democracy” to the exercise of student government in high schools—the managers always retained ultimate control. Yet Associated Farmers, the organization big growers formed to stop farm-worker organizing, never stopped trying to force the feds to close the camps.⁷¹ That hostility can serve as a reminder that the war in the fields was not exclusively a two-sided struggle and that some in the FSA were trying to erode the growers’ tyranny over migrant workers. But the camps could never have done more than relieve symptoms; and they served only a fraction of the farm workers who needed them.

This essay is a byproduct of my work on a biography of Lange. In undertaking that project, I did not imagine that I would have to educate myself (however inadequately) about depression-era agriculture. It is Lange’s work that forced those lessons upon me. She fought for her entire documentary career to prevent her photographs from becoming decontextualized and universalized. She was continually infuriated that her boss would not allow her to retain her own negatives and supply photographs directly to publications, so as to group and caption them in an attempt to control their meaning. Because of that frustration, she tried in her later years to concentrate on photo essays, with which she could tell a story. But she could not get most of them published, so her work continues to leak out today almost exclusively as single, captionless photographs. In October 2005 her photograph of men at a soup kitchen sold at auction for \$822,400, at that time the second-highest price ever paid for a photograph.⁷² Lange would have enjoyed the money (she earned very little in her lifetime) and the fame (she was underrecognized in her lifetime), but she would certainly have questioned what it meant that a photograph of hungry men had become a luxury commodity.

⁷¹ Carol Shloss, *In Visible Light: Photography and the American Writer, 1840–1940* (New York, 1987), 224. Don Mitchell, *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape* (Minneapolis, 1996), 186. John Steinbeck described Associated Farmers thus: “Associated Farmers, which presumes to speak for the farms of California and which is made up of such earth-stained toilers as chain banks, public utilities, railroad companies and those huge corporations called land companies.” John Steinbeck, “Starvation under the Orange Trees,” *Monterey Trader*, April 15, 1938.

⁷² “Art Market Watch,” *artnet Magazine*, Oct. 14, 2005, <http://www.artnet.com/magazine/news/artmarketwatch/artmarketwatch10-14-05.asp>.