

Dorothea Lange and the Limits of the Liberal Narrative: A Review Essay

by
Jon Lauck



Dorothea Lange in 1936

The most traumatic era in the history of the United States, with the exception of the Civil War, is still the 1930s. During that decade, the Great Depression impoverished and uprooted millions of Americans, including many farmers hit by drought on the Great Plains and tracted out by mechanization in the South. The experience of these rural refugees was photographed by the New Deal's Farm Security Administration, which produced images that still define the cultural landscape of the Great Plains. FSA photographers took as many as 272,000 photos, including many by Dorothea Lange, perhaps the agency's most memorable employee. Lange is most famous for taking the photograph of Florence Thompson, the Oklahoma farmer whose worried and frazzled image became the iconic "Migrant Mother." Lange's life is again examined in Linda Gordon's widely-praised biography *Dorothea Lange*, which won the *Los Angeles Times*' Book Prize for Biography and the Bancroft Prize and was named one of the "100 Notable Books of 2009" by *The New York Times*.¹ Despite this praise, *Dorothea Lange* suffers from its adherence to what might be called the Liberal Narrative, or the tendency to construe events in the light most favorable to the New Deal and its supporters, including Lange, and to willingly disregard the tenets of objectivity and photographic authenticity.

The central problem of *Dorothea Lange* is its failure to adequately come to terms with the instrumentalist nature of Lange's photographic output. For example, despite the FSA's professed goal of objectively

Jon K. Lauck was born on a farm near Madison, South Dakota and received his Ph.D. in economic history from the University of Iowa and his law degree from the University of Minnesota. Lauck is the author of *American Agriculture and the Problem of Monopoly* (University of Nebraska Press, 2000), *Daschle v. Thune: Anatomy of a High Plains Senate Race* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), and *Prairie Republic: The Political Culture of Dakota Territory, 1879-1889* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2010) and co-author and co-editor of *The Plains Political Tradition: Essays on South Dakota Political Culture* (South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2011).

collecting evidence of the Depression's effects on rural America, Lange's "Migrant Mother" photo was staged. Before capturing the final iconic image that she sought, Lange took several photos and "asked the mother and children to move into several different positions" and asked the two children in the photo "to turn their faces away from the camera." (237) In addition to being staged, Thompson said that Lange "had guaranteed that the photograph would not be published" and felt "humiliated" when it became a national icon. (241-42) Instead of collecting dust in a government archive and preserving Thompson's privacy, "Migrant Mother" became, according to one account, the most reproduced photograph in the world.²

The staging of the "Migrant Mother" photo contradicted the stated mission of the FSA. The head of the FSA, Roy Stryker, defended his agency's photos "by insisting on their truth." (239) Stryker promoted FSA photographs as "empirical" and "scientific" data akin to admissible evidence in a court trial. (240) Stryker emphasized that the "photographs were truthful, accurate records of actual events, people, and places, and that they were unadorned and unmanipulated" and thereby acceptable for government use.³ Stryker's insistence on the objectivity of his agency's photography triggered political recriminations when FSA photo manipulation was revealed. Stryker did not help his cause when he at first denied that the "Migrant Mother" photo was staged. (239)

Despite the FSA's stated commitment to honest and objective documentation, Gordon notes that Stryker demanded certain photos from his photographers, "even if staged," as he wrote. (239) Instead of objecting to Stryker's endorsement and encouragement of photographic manipulation, however, Gordon is either indifferent to such criticism or satisfied with the final results of such efforts. She is not bothered by the criticism of the staging of FSA photographs and defends the FSA's and Lange's work. Gordon dismisses the critics' "concept of truth" as "ideological" and insists that Lange acted appropriately because she sought "to provoke deeper questions." (240) Gordon says that "Lange managed photographic scenes so as to expose truths not readily accessible." (240) Gordon sees a "qualitative difference" between Lange and others who doctored photographs and fictionalized captions because her editing was "aimed to produce more beautiful and more respectful images, never to fabricate or sensationalize." (281) For



Dorothea Lange took six photos that day, the last being the famous Migrant Mother. These are the other five photos.

Gordon, the actual authenticity of the FSA photographs is less important than the effectiveness of the message they communicate.

Lange's FSA photographs in support of the New Deal, which brought her fame and made her the subject of dozens of studies, elicit an odd and misleading preliminary declaration from Gordon. Despite strong evidence to the contrary, Gordon concludes that it is a mistake "to see Lange's photography as politically instrumental." (xv) Gordon's pronouncement serves as a strange pre-buttal given the chronology that follows and sounds a note of defensiveness, signaling a consciousness of the potential damage that evidence of photographic manipulation can cause. Gordon's claim notwithstanding, Lange's work was most certainly designed to advance the ends of the New Deal, a goal that constitutes the most basic meaning of instrumentality. The New Deal economist Paul Taylor, who hired Lange to take photographs to advance his political work and became Lange's second husband, did not think his research required a "disinterested perspective" and thought the "point of social research was to make things better." (145) Contradicting her conclusion denying Lange's instrumentalism, Gordon later concedes that Taylor's "interest in photography was instrumental" and served as a method of "documenting wrongdoing." (156)

Gordon's avoidance of the obvious instrumentalism of Lange's photographs is surely linked to lingering sensitivities about the charges of the FSA's critics, who raised doubts about the authenticity of some FSA photographs. Despite wanting to avoid giving credence to Lange's critics, Gordon is hard-pressed to avoid the obvious conclusion. Lange's photographic work is variously described as providing "political ammunition" (217) and performing "political work" (218). In addition to her management of the series of "Migrant Mother" photographs, Gordon admits that Lange also "posed" the subjects in photographs of a New Deal farm cooperative. (277) Gordon also notes that another apparently fruitful FSA program "made Dorothea and [Taylor] comfortable creating propaganda for the FSA when asked." (268) Throughout her book, Gordon also notes the influence of Lange's early work positioning clients in her photography studio on her later FSA assignments.

Lange's photographs were in keeping with the general thrust of the FSA, whose photographs, although denied publicly, were specifically

designed to be instrumental. The FSA photography project was organized by the Columbia University economist Rexford Tugwell, derided as "Rex the Red" in the 1930s, who hired his student Roy Stryker to manage the effort.⁴ Tugwell, an original member of FDR's "brains trust," was arguably the most controversial intellectual working for the New Deal, but Gordon largely overlooks Tugwell's role in orchestrating the FSA's photography program.⁵ Despite many vigorous defenses of the FSA's dedication to realism, authenticity, and objectivity, Stryker was well aware of the FSA's political goals. Stryker "had to require his photographers to produce many overtly propagandistic and evidentiary images" and fired those who would not follow orders. Stryker, Gordon notes, "was quite prepared to serve his employers at the expense of photographic integrity or artistic sensibility." (204) Gordon does not discuss their grand plans in detail, but Tugwell and Stryker "were steeped thoroughly in John Dewey's progressive instrumentalism" and sought to use photographs of poor farmers as "symbols or tools, images that reformers could exploit to obtain the world of their ideals."⁶ Discussing Tugwell's political agenda and Stryker's implementation of it, however, would have conflicted with Gordon's denial of Lange's instrumentalism.

Despite the obvious political objectives of the FSA, Gordon resists straightforward conclusions about the FSA's work. She prefers to view "documentary" work as "both revealing the truth and promoting social justice." (xvi) Gordon believes Lange was capable of simultaneously "stitching together...objective reporting and propagandistic advocacy." (233) Gordon generally dismisses the "always unproductive debate about authenticity and inauthenticity in photography." (120) Some of the problems in Gordon's book can be traced to her difficulty recognizing or admitting the friction between "authenticity" and "propagandistic advocacy."

This basic confusion extends to Lange's own perceptions of her work. Sometimes, Lange insisted that a photographer was "a witness... not a propagandist or an advertiser," but at other times "Lange defended propaganda." (408) Lange wanted to be seen as an "artist" at the end of her life, but she knew, ultimately, that she had been paid by the government to produce photos that advanced the government's policies. Lange "balked at an instrumental, reform-minded vision"

for her photographic show at the Museum of Modern Art at end of her life because at that time she sought “artistic acclaim.” (410) Lange’s photos, once deemed objective evidence by the FSA, were later presented as “art.” Lange’s method had not changed, Gordon says, only her “articulation” of what she was doing, a rhetorical transformation that leaves far too much unsaid about the legitimacy of Lange’s and the FSA’s early claims of objectivity. (352) At the end of her life, despite her earlier denials and the public posture of the FSA as a disinterested collector of objective evidence, Lange was less defensive about the criticism of her work as propaganda, perhaps because she no longer was forced to maintain the fiction of objectivity as she was in the 1930s: “Everything is propaganda for what you believe in, actually, isn’t it? Yes, it is....Conviction, propaganda, faith. I don’t know, I never have been able to come to the conclusion that that’s a bad word.”⁷

Gordon does not quote Lange’s refusal to see “propaganda” as a “bad word” and largely avoids a direct response to the propaganda charge, but it was a critical question for the FSA documentary project, its photographers, and the politics of the 1930s generally. FSA photographer Walker Evans, according to William Stott, believed that “documentary” meant “that the reality treated is in no way tampered with.” The “alteration or manipulation of the facts, for propaganda or other reasons,” broke the rules of the documentary tradition. Evans said it was a “direct violation of our tenets,” even though he was a frequent violator.⁸ Evans’ public commitment to purity echoed the stated policy of the FSA and reveals why the flaunting of such conventions was so alarming, especially in the 1930s. George Orwell, who is curiously absent from Gordon’s book, famously and sincerely grappled with the problem of government propaganda efforts in the 1930s and 1940s. Gordon strangely finds the similarity of FSA, Soviet, and Nazi propaganda “confounding,” but such parallels would hardly have been a surprise to Orwell. (220) The failure to fully recognize such parallels and the genuine fears they generated reveals one of Gordon’s interpretative blind spots.⁹

Other scholars have been less hesitant to address the propaganda question. In Bill Ganzel’s study of FSA photography, he concludes that at “its heart, this was an effort in propaganda.”¹⁰ In John Raeburn’s study of 1930s photography, he explains that the FSA’s “impetus was

propagandistic” and that the FSA “never shed its initial purpose,” despite its “disingenuous” denials.¹¹ Michael Carlebach, noting Stryker’s deliberate misrepresentation of the purposes of the FSA project, explains that “he steered clear of admitting that he was distributing propaganda. Documentary sounded better.”¹² Stryker “refused to acknowledge his role as propagandist for the New Deal” because such an admission “would have jeopardized the work” of the FSA.¹³ Despite his denials, political posturing, and insistence that his agency was producing “accurate, truthful, unmanipulated slices of life,” Carlebach concludes, “Stryker did produce propaganda.”¹⁴ In her comparative study of Soviet and FSA photography, Leah Bendavid-Val says both projects were supposed to “serve a social and political purpose.”¹⁵ Bendavid-Val, although less direct than Ganzel, Raeburn, and Carlebach, reaches the understated but correct conclusion that the FSA’s staging of photographs “calls into question the assumed superior documentary authenticity of the candid picture.”¹⁶

In an older but classic treatment, John Garraty also discussed the FSA propaganda question in his comparison of New Deal and Nazi economic policies. While careful to delineate the major differences with the Nazi propaganda machine, Garraty found that “under the New Deal the government undertook efforts unprecedented in peacetime to sell its policies to the public.”¹⁷ Garraty notes that in our celebration of the aesthetics of the photographs of Lange and others that “we tend to forget that they were a form of official advertising” promoting the New Deal.¹⁸ FDR’s embrace of propaganda, along with his “casting aside of precedent,” his “removal of traditional restraints on the power of the state,” and his calls for greater executive powers are what worried New Deal critics.¹⁹ The propaganda question was part of a larger constellation of worries about the abuse of political power during the New Deal.

Members of the general public and FSA photographers themselves, as Walker Evans’ public statements suggest, were also alert to the propaganda problem. Some of the people who viewed the photos of the FSA at the First International Photographic Exposition in New York in 1939 described them as “magnificent propaganda” and “subversive propaganda” designed to “create a false impression” and one noted that “there are plenty of farmers in the U.S.A. who don’t look like that.”²⁰ Decades after the New Deal, FSA photographer Marion Post Wolcott

also bluntly admitted that the FSA photos were “propaganda,” but “good propaganda” for a cause which she “believed in.”²¹

Lange herself could be sensitive to the problem of propaganda when she wanted to be. By some amazing turn of events, which Gordon cannot explain, the U.S. Army hired Lange to take photographs of the Japanese internment during World War II. While Lange contentedly “accepted the censorship” that accompanied her FSA work, Gordon is impressed at her “resistance” to the constraints that accompanied her work photographing the internment. (316) In contrast to the purported truth-seeking of the FSA and its pursuit of the enlightened goal of social justice, Gordon highlights how the Army would “orchestrate news,” “manage news releases,” hire loyalists, and employ public relations experts. (318) Gordon explains that Lange did not simply accept the “good war” interpretation of World War II and that she deliberately made her photos of the war effort “complicated.” (333) In Gordon’s book, the implications of manipulation and propaganda are clear for the Army, but are largely overlooked for the FSA.

Gordon admits, however, that both history and photography can be “shaped” by one’s political “point of view.” (xvii) In various places, Gordon demonstrates that Lange’s political commitments were unambiguous. She sympathized with Sacco and Vanzetti, was “disgusted” by the “pro-business conservatism” of the 1920s (84), and supported and donated to the “radical Photo League” (119), which included “many Communists.” (358) Lange was attracted to the socialist and communist candidates for president in 1932, but also favored FDR, in part due to his similar struggle with polio. (113-14) Lange was invited to meetings of the Communist Party, which she saw as led by the “best people,” but Gordon thinks that her first husband Maynard Dixon’s resistance and more importantly her own unwillingness to be a joiner caused her not to enlist. (127) A review of the source Gordon cites, however, indicates that Lange said she had “many encounters” with Communists, that the only reason she did not join was Dixon’s opposition, and that she thought joining may have been the “right thing to do in those days.”²² Lange worked with the liberal historian Mary Beard in an attempt to convince Eleanor Roosevelt to promote Lange’s book *American Exodus* (FSA employees were also instructed by Roy Stryker to read the Beards’ *History of the United States*, which emphasized class conflict).²³ Lange

supported the political campaigns of Helen Gahagan Douglas (355) and shared her “politically left-wing” doctor, who had served with the left in the Spanish Civil War, with Frida Kahlo, wife of the Communist painter Diego Rivera. (96) When Lange moved to Berkeley with her second husband, Paul Taylor, it was dominated by “left-wing” activists and, according to Henry May, the “[c]ampus political argument was carried on between New Dealers on one side and Marxists on the other.” (187) Lange, in short, was immersed in the politics of the left during the 1930s.²⁴

Ansel Adams’ comments about Lange also reveal her political commitments. Adams and Lange “quarreled all their lives” (337), but he was also very supportive of her and consistently promoted her work. Adams, however, did not share Lange’s politics during the 1930s and he thought Lange and her circle were “very party line.” Adams was not sure if Lange “leaned to Leninism or Trotskyism,” but he thought she had a “very strong dedication” to leftist “orthodoxy.” (338) Adams was angry at how the left manipulated and stained the image of the United States and how the left purposefully ignored the “real beauty and power of the land and the real people inhabiting it.” (338) Adams’ comments are additionally striking because he was far from being a political conservative. Adams was an ardent promoter of environmentalism, served on the board of the Sierra Club for 37 years, supported the Democratic Party, and vigorously criticized Republican public land policies.²⁵ Early in his career, Adams embraced a pure aestheticism unencumbered politics, but later came to appreciate the political power of art. But even he thought Lange was extreme.

Although not addressed by Gordon, Ansel Adams’ views also speak to the distinction between authenticity and propaganda. At the beginning of his career, Adams was a photographic purist and more dedicated to capturing the natural world on film and less interested in political messages. As Jonathan Spaulding has explained, Adams and his allies were eclipsed by photographers such as Lange, who were guided by “social commitment and political activism” and sought a “usable past” to advance their causes.²⁶ Adams respected these documentary photographers, but he objected to the use of their photos for, as he said, “propaganda.”²⁷ In 1934, Adams wrote to the famous photographer Alfred Stieglitz that “I’ll be damned if I can see the real *rightness* of

being expected to mix political economy and emotion *for a purpose*...I do not like being *expected* to produce propaganda."²⁸

Adams did not object to "sociological" photography, or the use of photographs to document the lived experiences of people, which is certainly an honorable pursuit. What Adams objected to was overt "propaganda," the manipulation of images to excite social passions and advance specific political ends.²⁹ For not supporting the political causes of the 1930s, Adams said he was "charged with inhumanity" and was "one who will be liquidated when the 'great day' comes."³⁰ Adams' allusion to the "liquidation" of dissent is a reminder of the intensity of the politics of the 1930s, when many of the activists on the left in Lange's California saw the state as fascistic.³¹ It speaks to what William Stott calls the "fanaticism of the time."³² During the Depression, activists on the left, led by members of the Communist Party, expected intellectuals and artists to adhere to and advance the party line.³³

Gordon does not focus on Adams' doubts about Lange's politics and, due to her sympathy for Lange's work, she is generally dismissive of the New Deal's critics, again revealing an interpretive blind spot. Opponents are lumped and labeled and their arguments and objections are not explained. The New Deal and its documentarians are described as being stymied by a "Red-baiting hysteria," (124) "corporate offensives," (133) the "anti-Roosevelt press," (239) and "conservative journalists" (358). They were under "constant political attack from the Right," (171) subject to "political attack from the Right," (195) and a "victim of conservative attacks." (347) Gordon gives no quarter to possibly legitimate objections to government funding of propaganda. Lange herself sneers at the "tyranny of little men" who questioned the FSA's budget. (296) The rethinking of the wisdom of the New Deal which has spawned nationally best-selling books of late are ignored by Gordon.³⁴ The New Deal is assumed to be wise and progressive and criticism of the New Deal is treated as baseless. Gordon's understanding of the New Deal seems trapped in 1965. While Gordon should not be expected to fully re-litigate the various policies of the New Deal in her book, ignoring well-known and alternative views of the New Deal is a major oversight. These new views would have thrown additional and revealing light on Lange's work promoting the New Deal.

Gordon also fails to treat the origins of the Cold War seriously. She

only uses it as a bookend, the beginning of a dark age which "squeezed artists and intellectuals." (346) The "hopefulness of the New Deal" was killed by "McCarthyist repression," which caused the "country's political decline" after World War II. (345) The 1930s was a "heroic, democratic moment," but the 1950s was "self-interested and frightened," (400) frozen by a "political chill" and a "repressive mood." (346) During these years, the "twirling noose of the anti-Communist frenzy swung closer and closer" to Lange and Taylor (355) and "frightened [Lange] at every level—physical, emotional, political." (364) Lange and Taylor were facing the "hot breath of the witch-hunting monster." (404)

Gordon completely omits the recent literature on the early Cold War based on research in Soviet archives, ignores the concerns of many liberal anti-communists, and fails to discern any legitimacy to the threats posed by the Soviet Union.³⁵ Gordon only mentions the Soviets as "actively supporting independence movements in Africa and denouncing the treatment of African Americans" (403) and she criticizes the United States for protecting its "anti-Communist allies no matter corrupt, brutal, and antidemocratic." (384) The unwillingness to contextualize the Cold War and acknowledge the military and ideological threats posed by the Soviet Union and the actual evidence of attempted communist subversion within the United States results in a one-sided caricature of early Cold War culture and politics. Such a treatment underscores Ansel Adams' concerns with the "party line" nature of Lange's politics, a concern similarly applicable to Gordon's treatment of the political dynamics at work during Lange's career.

Gordon's favorable treatment of Lange's politics and her political battles is in part explained by Gordon's admiration for Lange's personal story. Gordon gives a sympathetic treatment of Lange's childhood in Hoboken, New Jersey, where she was abandoned by her father, mistreated by her snobbish mother, who was active in progressive politics, and abused by her grandmother. In Lange's decision to pursue photography in New York City, Gordon finds evidence of her "protofeminism." (32) Lange sought out "Bohemian urban subcultures," first in New York City and then, after an adventure with one of her friends, in San Francisco. (38) Gordon interprets Lange's independence, careerism, and counter-cultural tendencies and her expulsion from the Episcopal home for working girls in San Francisco (for smoking) as part of her emergence

as one of the “new women” of the age. (39-40) When Lange opened her own studio in San Francisco and married the painter Maynard Dixon, who was fascinated by Indian culture, the couple became “bohemian royalty” in San Francisco. (75) Lange’s friends and patrons in California were unified in their “love for the arts, cosmopolitan tastes, freedom in moving about the city, liberal sexual standards, appreciation of foreign cultures, and, frequently, leftist politics.” (54)

Gordon’s fondness for Lange’s personal story is fused with her attraction to Lange’s politics. In keeping with Lange, Gordon views the New Deal as the “whole country’s giant forward stride.” (105) Gordon admits that she shares Lange’s politics and that the themes of Lange’s life “resonated with my concerns” (xix) and “fit my historical work.” (xvi) In her early career, Gordon went far beyond supporting the liberal politics of the 1930s and was active in the New Left, which saw the New Dealers as reactive.³⁶ Gordon was dedicated to Marxism, feminism, the anti-Vietnam war movement, and the causes of the New Left and, similar to Lange’s photographic work, her historical work was premised on its “political necessity” and “social usefulness.” Gordon was, she said, committed to “making my work politically useful.”³⁷ Instrumentalism, in other words, has long been a major component of her approach to history.

At times, Gordon can be sensitive to her own fondness for Lange and her appreciation of Lange’s achievements. Gordon worries that she has been “too cool” in her treatment of the topic and admits that when presenting the details of Lange’s personal life to audiences it “changes radically how they think of Lange.” (111) Gordon’s awareness of the difficulties of treating this material is admirable, and leaves one wishing she could have similarly treated other matters in her book. In the end, she raises no serious doubts about Lange’s life “beyond limits” and is generally appreciative of her careerism, political commitment, and bohemianism, despite the apparent family consequences.

Although it does not alter her conclusion, Gordon does include many uncomplimentary details of Lange’s complex family life. Lange fought with Dixon’s daughter Consie, who claimed that Lange struck her. (82) Consie later took up with radical artists and became a bitter and dysfunctional alcoholic. (186) Consie refused to attend the memorial service for Lange when she died. When Lange decided to divorce

Consie’s father and marry Paul Taylor, Lange’s friends and children fought her decision. (172) When Taylor divorced his wife Katharine to marry Lange, Katharine became “psychotic,” was institutionalized, and then started a love affair with Dixon. (173) Lange “could fly into rages” at her children and step-children and she battered them. (180) One of the children described this as the “wrath of Dorothea” and even Lange admitted that “sometimes I am possessed by the devil.” (181) Taylor defended Lange’s “wrath.” When one child criticized Lange, Taylor threw him down a flight of stairs. (182) All of the children were variously “placed out” with other families and institutions and separated from each other. (173) Her sons never forgave Lange and one of her grandchildren described Lange’s treatment of her children as “monstrous.” (111) Lange’s son Daniel Dixon became a delinquent, lived in slums, stole from the family, was generally dysfunctional, and was recommended for institutionalization. Taylor pushed Daniel into the military to force discipline upon the young man, but he ended up in the stockade for being “repeatedly AWOL.” (309) When Dixon died, Daniel called Lange and coldly said “Dad’s dead” and hung up. (349) Lange’s stepson Ross Taylor started drinking, having affairs, suffered from manic depression, and died in 1964 at the age of 41 of a mix of alcohol and drugs. (414) Lange’s brother Martin, who had “absorbed her politics,” was also caught embezzling from the California unemployment bureau and sent to jail. (310)

Gordon also reveals Lange’s prickly personality and egotism. Lange was “not always easy to get along with” (89) and she “blew up at small infractions.” (414) Lange had affairs and her “irritability and controllingness” hurt her marriages and children. (90) Lange’s brother called her “awfully hard to get along with.” (115) Lange’s FSA colleague, John Collier Jr., the son of FDR’s head of Bureau of Indian Affairs, saw her as “pretty self-centered, and little bit selfish, and indulgent.” (115) Due to fears of having additional family burdens, Lange traveled to Seattle to have two abortions, but Gordon oddly omits this fact, despite her noted expertise in the history of gender and birth control.³⁸ The difficulties of dealing with Lange did not go unnoticed at the FSA, where Lange demanded special treatment, treated office staff poorly, and was a self-promoter. (287) The FSA office staff “perceived her as a diva.” (290) Gordon balances these unflattering details by

noting Lange's work to support her family, especially when married to Dixon, by highlighting her professional achievements, by explaining the differing attitudes toward child rearing at the time, by detailing Lange's many health problems, and by emphasizing her warmth toward her grandchildren later in life.

Gordon's efforts to present Lange's positive characteristics along with admitting her anger and vanity is an attempt to establish a balanced portrait, but she too often favors Lange and construes matters in Lange's favor. In the case of Migrant Mother Florence Thompson, for example, Gordon finds the mother's claims that Lange had promised never to publish the photographs "dubious." (241) But Thompson's claim seems entirely plausible given Lange's skill at "palaver" and cajoling subjects into allowing themselves to be photographed, her strong desire to capture powerful images (she proved correct given the reception and subsequent fame of the Migrant Mother photograph), and her goal of advancing the cause of the New Deal. Gordon goes so far as to dismiss Thompson's claim that the "well-dressed" Lange approached her tent in "a shiny new car" by arguing that Lange's car could not have been shiny given the dusty fields. (242) This generous reading of the circumstantial evidence in Lange's favor stems, in part, from Gordon's attraction to Lange and serves as a cautionary note about Gordon's sympathy toward Lange and Lange's political goals.

While Gordon treats Lange favorably overall, she can be selective in her praise for Lange's photographs. Gordon generally defends Lange's photographs of the poor during the Great Depression and her efforts to advance the cause of the New Deal, but some of Lange's other photos are viewed with suspicion. Gordon, for example, seems to doubt Lange's attraction to Midwestern rural life, the image of which guided Lange's criticism of other agricultural sectors. Both Lange and Taylor were passionate about the distinction between Midwestern and California agriculture. Taylor was born in Iowa and believed in the strength of its tradition of decentralized, small-scale, yeoman agriculture and strongly influenced Lange toward this point of view. While respectful of Lange's other inclinations, Gordon has little patience for Lange's attraction to the rural Midwest. Such views are ascribed to the "Depression-era nostalgia for a rural and small-town world" (351) and Lange's and Taylor's "romance with small-town community," (336) which resulted

in the "romantic, even saccharine images [Lange] occasionally made of family farmers." (215) Such characterizations provide a glimpse into Gordon's mindset, in which Lange's liberal cosmopolitanism and support for the New Deal is welcomed but Lange's gravitation toward rural and small town life in the Midwest, which was less desperate and more conservative, seems foreign and implausible.

Lange's respect for rural traditions and her fears about their passing presents one of the more interesting sub-themes of her life. She consistently worried about the social upheavals endured by uprooted and displaced farmers and migratory workers. (335) These concerns were linked to "Taylor's family-farm romance and Lange's unease with the anomie of cities" (367) and her general "anxiety about urban life." (418) Gordon's treatment of these critical insights is, unfortunately, quite cursory and generally dismissive of Lange's sentiments. Gordon worries that "nostalgia" began to "pervade" Lange's work in the 1950s, adding that it "was nostalgia for an imaginary past, of course." (367) It was not imaginary for Taylor, who understood that past from his Iowa childhood, and the social and psychic consequences of dislocation were not foreign to Lange, who saw them in the field.³⁹ When Lange traveled to County Clare, Ireland and photographed "Irish peasants as stable and happy," (371) Gordon sees Lange as lost in a fog of "pastoral romance." (372) Gordon views Lange's celebration of rural life and culture in Ireland as "blarney" and, more generally, is hostile to the "false ideology about family life." (362) While Gordon treats bohemianism and 1930s leftism positively and without skepticism, Lange's concerns about the passing of American rural and small town life and the implications of urban anomie are treated with derision and doubt. One senses that Gordon's own urban cosmopolitan liberalism, which attracts her to elements of Lange's life, causes her to overlook one of Lange's essential insights, which she rejects as foolish and odd sentimentality.

Lange's and Taylor's dedication to promoting rural life went far beyond the sentimental, however. In addition to photographing displaced farmers and generally promoting favorable federal farm policies, Lange supported Taylor's "land reform" plans. Land reform, also called "agrarian reform," was intended to promote a broader distribution of land among individual farmers.⁴⁰ Gordon says that land reform failed in the United States during the 1930s (384), but in fact it was never

seriously developed as a federal policy goal. Most of American farming was still dominated by family farms with the exception of places such as California, which made the most immediate impression on Lange. After World War II, Taylor traveled the world promoting land reform in countries where land holdings were highly concentrated. Taylor's international land reform agenda "flowed from his commitment to small farms as part of the ground of American democracy." (385) This sensibility, which is so foreign to Gordon, still resonates in the Midwest and on the Great Plains.⁴¹

Lange's dedication to chronicling rural life, her concerns about the social costs of urban growth, and her advocacy of land reform is that much more surprising, and worthy of comment, given her own inexperience with farming and her cosmopolitan tastes. When the Depression started, few would have predicted that Lange would become known as a photographer of "western rural and farm life." (119) Lange said that when she started her documentary work she "didn't know a mule from tractor." (157) She adored San Francisco's "European-style café life," (186) loved to go shopping, liked "fine" things, fancied wearing berets and ethnic clothes, and was self-conscious about and dedicated to the "look she had created for herself in the 1920s." (183) She even "dressed eccentrically" when photographing deep in Mississippi, which surely complicated her field work. (276) Lange was thrilled about attending the Academy Awards in 1957 with her cousin Hope Lange, who had been nominated for her role in "Peyton Place," and was "captivated" by President Kennedy's "new cultural style—chamber music and French food in the White House, among other signs of elite taste." (403) Lange's feelings toward rural America are sincere, but they were also probably driven by her interest in the unfamiliar or, in her view, exotic. Taylor shared a similar attraction and liked to have foreign professors dress in their "traditional native costumes" at holiday parties. (184)

While Gordon is focused, to a great extent, on Lange's biography and this choice of focus should be respected, the central importance of Lange to American culture and politics lies in her work for the FSA and in the larger debate that work generated. By not focusing on the FSA's promise not to manipulate photographs, Gordon skirts a critical issue, and the basis of the complaints from the FSA's critics. The FSA's deviation from its stated mission and the overall question

of propaganda should have been given a more complete treatment by Gordon. This topic is more thoroughly explored in William Stott's 1973 book *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. Stott emphasizes the popular meaning of "documentary" as "presenting facts objectively and without editorializing and inserting fictional matter" and how Americans in the 1930s strongly objected to propagandizing.⁴² This objection explains Stryker's public emphasis on the honesty of the FSA photographs. "Truth," Stryker said, "is the objective of the documentary attitude." (14) Despite Stryker's claims, Stott is forthright about the problem of FSA propaganda, explaining that "there is bias in most photographs, especially documentary photographs."⁴³ Stott notes that "most artists of the time accepted the communist dictum that 'Art Is a Weapon!'"⁴⁴ Stott sees "no point scanting the fact that the documentary literature characteristic of the thirties was propaganda, not art."⁴⁵ But he also offers additional layers of detail. Stott deems information based on facts and overt sources as "white propaganda," lies and deliberate misrepresentation as "black propaganda," and mixed versions as "gray propaganda."⁴⁶ While Lange is certainly not guilty of black propaganda and her photographs contained some ambiguity, Stott concludes that Lange's photographs were "also calculated to make her point."⁴⁷ "Lange's way of propaganda," Stott says, was less manipulative than others.⁴⁸

The photography of the FSA has also been expertly analyzed by James Curtis in *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, a book that Gordon gives short shrift. Curtis emphasizes that Stryker and his staff defined "FSA photographs as objective documents, taken solely 'for the record.'"⁴⁹ Contrary to the claims of the FSA's supporters, the FSA photos were "not the result of clinical, photographic field work," but were "deliberate, calculated, and highly stylized."⁵⁰ "Like many documentary photographers," Curtis notes, Lange similarly "thought of herself as a clinical observer committed to a direct, unmanipulated recording of contemporary events."⁵¹ On the door of her darkroom, Lange displayed a quotation from Francis Bacon about the nobility of the "contemplation of things as they are; Without substitution or imposture; Without error or confusion."⁵² Despite these commitments, Curtis explains that during the "Migrant Mother" photographs Lange "moved confidently in arranging her compositions" because she "knew

the image that she wanted, knew what to feature and what to leave out."⁵³ A final "alteration" to the "Migrant Mother" photograph, which Stryker objected to, "removed Migrant Mother further from the realm of reality toward that of universal symbolism."⁵⁴

Curtis also focuses on Arthur Rothstein's rearranging of a cow skull in South Dakota, where Rothstein was sent by the FSA in May 1936 to take drought photographs. Curtis notes that Rothstein was conforming to his FSA orders that "photographs should include evidence of land misuse and mismanagement" and that "Rothstein had been on the lookout for cattle skeletons."⁵⁵ Rothstein's photographs, moreover, were designed to provide support for New Deal programs during FDR's trip to North Dakota during the 1936 campaign season. "Brainstruster" Rexford Tugwell himself conducted the advance work for the trip. When the *Fargo Evening Forum* exposed Rothstein's manipulation of the cow skull, neither Tugwell nor Rothstein were "prepared for the thunderous controversy that greeted them in the Dakotas."⁵⁶ When criticizing Rothstein's misleading images, the *Evening Forum* said that there "never was a year that this scene couldn't be produced in North Dakota, even in years when rainfall levels were far above normal."⁵⁷ The *Detroit Free Press* headline read "Another Fake Traced to Doctor Tugwell's Propagandists."⁵⁸ In the wake of the dispute, Stryker's assistant told Rothstein: "if you have that goddam skull, hide it for Christ's sake."⁵⁹ Curtis notes that Rothstein's photographs were forever "tinged with controversy," but says that Rothstein may have been held less individually culpable for such a scandal if it had been known that Walker Evans' photos "also depended on manipulation" or that Lange also "posed her subjects."⁶⁰ Curtis argues that Stryker did not want to fire Rothstein because it would lend "credence to the charges that the [FSA] practiced photographic fakery."⁶¹ Lange later recalled about the skull controversy: "People laugh at it now. We laugh at it when we get together, but it wasn't funny then."⁶² The manipulation of the skull photos was not "funny" in the 1930s because it contradicted the professed mission of the FSA to be objective, opened it to legitimate charges of fraud, and thereby put the agency at political risk.

Curtis also argues that Rothstein's skull photographs were influenced by the completion of Pare Lorentz's Tugwell-commissioned film "The Plow that Broke the Plains," which included images of "bleaching cattle

bones" and used "props" and "actors."⁶³ In March 1936, the film was shown at the White House to FDR, who, after the viewing, "took Lorentz aside and told him how much he had enjoyed the film."⁶⁴ Because of FDR's appreciation of the film and because Stryker knew that the "President's endorsement would generate widespread publicity that might be used to promote the efforts of his own agency," Stryker sent Rothstein to the Dakotas to take photographs to show what his agency was doing to address the drought.⁶⁵ Stryker sent Rothstein because he was the photographer "most likely to follow instructions and to produce the kind of photographs" necessary.⁶⁶

The results of Rothstein's trip also include his photograph "Fleeing a Dust Storm," the "most memorable icon" of the Dust Bowl.⁶⁷ Like Lange's "Migrant Mother" photograph, Curtis notes, "Rothstein claimed that he came upon his subjects *by accident*."⁶⁸ "Fleeing a Dust Storm," along with Lange's "Migrant Mother," became "a dominant symbol of rural suffering and exodus from the Dust Bowl."⁶⁹ Both images, however, were a "product of a deliberate experimentation and close cooperation between the photographer and his subjects, not unlike the relationship between a film director and his actors."⁷⁰ "Contrary to his later denials that he did not stage *Fleeing a Dust Storm*," Curtis explains, "Rothstein not only directed his subjects but walked the farmer through at least this one practice frame and perhaps more."⁷¹ He also chose to include the farmer's shed in his photograph, instead of his house, which was too big to portray rural desperation. The shed, however, would show the "poverty of the farm more clearly."⁷² Curtis also believes that Rothstein was accompanied by a New Deal official while taking the photographs and that local farmers "would not resist the visit of a photographer who came in the company of their government benefactor."⁷³ In short, Curtis notes, Rothstein "knew precisely the kind of picture that he wanted and proceeded to work with the farmer until he achieved the desired results."⁷⁴

Curtis's emphasis on the influence of Lorentz's film "The Plow that Broke the Plains" on Rothstein's photographs is additionally instructive. The historian John E. Miller notes that Dorothea Lange helped Lorentz finish the film, which Gordon does not mention.⁷⁵ Lorentz said his mission was to "dig out the facts" and "present them truthfully," but Miller concludes that the film was not a "full and balanced portrayal

of reality” and concludes that the filmmakers “discovered what they were looking for.”⁷⁶ Unlike Gordon’s treatment of dissent, Miller fully considers the views of those in one state, South Dakota, who objected to the film, finding that their criticisms “contained a considerable amount of truth.”⁷⁷ South Dakota newspapers conveyed the objections. The *Webster Reporter and Farmer* called the film “propaganda” and a “libel on the Dakotas.”⁷⁸ The *Brookings Press* said that the New Dealers sought out “some freakish, desolate, weird effect of the drought, then they photograph it.”⁷⁹ The *Brookings Press* said the film was designed to “stick the poisoned arrow of devilish propaganda deep into the heart of the reputation of a great population in distress.”⁸⁰ South Dakota newspaper publisher J.B. Hipple called the film a “cleverly staged picture conceived by politicians for political purposes.”⁸¹ Freshman South Dakota Congressman Karl Mundt said that the people of his part of the country were “not the short-sighted soil wreckers and crude ground hogs described by this infamous picture.”⁸² South Dakotans, Miller says, “correctly argued that the movie served propagandistic purposes.”⁸³

Despite the popular denunciation of Lorentz’s Dust Bowl film, reviewers “showered almost unanimous praise upon it and its thirty-year-old director.”⁸⁴ Similarly, the film historians who appreciated the artistry of the film “overlooked the criticisms made by the people who lived in the area being depicted.”⁸⁵ Miller notes that artistic standards “possess small capacity for judging truthfulness. But for South Dakota residents and their neighbors that was the basic point.”⁸⁶ While the truthfulness of the film was critical to South Dakotans, who were being depicted, it was less important to Lorentz, who declared in 1940 that “Good art is good propaganda.”⁸⁷

Understanding the objections of people in the Dakotas to the manipulation of the skull photographs and Lorentz’s Dust Bowl film amplifies the problems with Gordon’s book. They are a reminder of the salience of the truth v. propaganda distinction that Gordon slights but that was central to the politics of the 1930s. They also help to explain the ground-level details that triggered criticism of the New Deal, which Gordon ignores. The popular opposition to the use of taxpayer dollars for New Deal propaganda, which is the reason why the FSA consistently argued that it was simply producing objective evidence, deserves much

more attention than Gordon gives. The national controversy over the Rothstein skull photographs in South Dakota, for example, only warrants one sentence in Gordon’s book even though it speaks directly to the fundamental problems of the FSA project that made Lange famous. Lorentz’s famous film is not mentioned at all.

The reviews of Gordon’s book in liberal-leaning publications have also missed the significance of the propaganda issue. A *Newsweek* reviewer called book “excellent” and noted how “FDR’s critics slammed” the FSA photographs, but does not explain why. A *Los Angeles Times* reviewer agrees with Gordon, without considering the complexity of the question, that Lange is not a “simple propagandist,” but is also annoyed at “Gordon’s irritating tendency to view Lange through a politically correct lens.” The *New York Times* had David Oshinsky, a well-known historian of McCarthy and communism, review the book, and he praised it as an “elegant biography” but ignores the propaganda question. Jonathan Raban, writing in the *New York Review*, notes that the FSA photographers were “unabashed propagandists” and that the FSA had a “propagandist mission,” but does not note the FSA’s denial of these claims during the 1930s. Raban is generally positive about “Gordon’s substantial, cradle-to-grave biography” and is more interested in Lange’s connections to the pastoral tradition in literature. In the *New Republic*, Christopher Benfey deems Gordon’s book a “feminist biography,” speculates on Lange’s attraction to women, emphasizes Lange’s strong connections to the Jewish community in San Francisco, and criticizes Gordon’s inability to describe Lange’s photographs and her aesthetic sensibility. Benfey does not focus on the propaganda question. In the *American Prospect*, Jackson Lears generally praises Gordon’s book, laments the “money-worship of our own time” in contrast to the emphasis on the plight of the poor during the Depression, and notes how “Lange came to define documentary photography as political advocacy,” but does not explain how this contradicted the stated goals of the FSA.⁸⁸

Although Gordon and her reviewers miss the critical importance of the larger question of power – the government’s use of its authority and tax dollars to fund propaganda to support its policies – Gordon does address smaller questions of power. Lange, for example, would tell her photographic subjects that she worked for the President of the United States and that her photos were designed to promote New Deal programs,

surely a posture designed to elicit cooperation. (213) According to one account not cited by Gordon, Lange would begin taking photographs by saying "I'm from the government. What's going on here?"⁸⁹ Gordon wonders if some of Lange's FSA photos were strong because of the "helplessness of the subjects. Poor farmers were, to a degree, captive subjects, living exposed lives with little privacy, often deferential toward elites." (331) Another episode, which Gordon does not include in her book, also makes the point. When taking photographs for a magazine piece about the work of a public defender's office, Lange had to take the police with her to find a "big, black homosexual" in San Francisco and explain to him that she was using a photo of him. Lange said it "finally came round that if it was for the general welfare, he was all for the general welfare" and then she laughed.⁹⁰ When considering the scene of a fancy bohemian woman from Berkeley holding government credentials out interacting with the rural poor, Gordon acknowledges the "inequality of the transaction" and the titillation that Lange's photographs ultimately provided to their viewers. Gordon obliquely concedes that these "problems are not easily avoided," but believes they were compensated for by the charitable contributions her photographs generated. (232)

But Lange's most famous subject would not agree. Migrant Mother Florence Thompson felt "humiliated" by her experience with Lange and, in the late 1970s, she was living in a trailer park in California and still bitter and seeking compensation. (242-43) In a similar set of circumstances, which Gordon does not include in her book, the three Alabama sharecropping families photographed by FSA photographer Walker Evans for his book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* rebelled against their portrayal. In 1980, Howell Raines, then *The New York Times* bureau chief in Atlanta, contacted these families and recounted their "fury and humiliation" at their treatment by the New Deal photographer. They had agreed to allow Evans to take photographs of their homes only after he promised that the photographs would never be seen in the South, an agreement similar to what Florence Thompson described as her arrangement with Lange. When the photographs were widely circulated the Alabama families were "mad as hell," felt their families had been scandalized, and wanted to sue to Evans, who they came to "despise."⁹¹ The cases of Florence Thompson and the Alabama

sharecroppers produced sad long-term results. Despite this rather jarring legacy, only partially reviewed in Gordon's accounting, Lange did not have "ethical doubts" about her photos. She "never worried about potential harm to subjects." (243)

A more complete accounting of such harms and of the FSA scandals more generally would have more brightly illuminated the perils of photographic instrumentalism. Lange's "palaver" with her photographic subjects, designed to produce useful photographs, takes on added meaning when these subjects' sense of injustice and betrayal are considered, when the FSA's relation to the propaganda debates of the 1930s are weighed, and when the critics of the FSA are actually given a voice. These added factors also touch on what the political scientist Gerard Alexander calls the problem of "liberal condescension."⁹² The self-described "radical intellectual" Paula Rabinowitz, who forthrightly says that the "FSA was political and instrumental" and designed to "create striking images, icons that could enter and alter cultural memory," also says that the effort drew upon the "powers and pleasures of looking at others" and was thereby compromised by "voyeurism" and "class domination."⁹³ The image of New Yorkers and San Franciscans traipsing through the poor outback, ogling the natives, and looking for useful photographs to promote their politics and their careers should give pause. The Alabama sharecroppers scandalized by a FSA photographer thought he was "out simply to make money and embarrass the state of Alabama."⁹⁴ In the rituals of celebration that often greet the work of FSA photographers, the voices of the dissenters should be included and, as Lange once said, "given tongue."⁹⁵ These voices should be heard and the implicit power relations at work in taking photographs understood when considering Lange's photographs, especially given her emergence as a "much-esteemed photography doyenne." (349)

Lange's notable standing in American cultural history and the need to faithfully come to terms with her legacy and that of the FSA more generally certainly warrants another book about her life. Gordon's treatment, however, suffers from her general adherence to the Liberal Narrative in which the New Deal is only noble, its propaganda is harmless or not considered propaganda at all, and its opponents are reactionary fools or oppressors. In the Liberal Narrative, the FSA is praiseworthy and figures such as Dorothea Lange are heroines for reinforcing and

bolstering the narrative, despite their claims to objectivity. In the Liberal Narrative, critics who exposed FSA photograph manipulation are adhering to a flawed “concept of truth” which is “ideological.” The critics, in other words, are not sufficiently obedient to the strictures of the Liberal Narrative and are therefore engaged in an “unproductive debate.” The Liberal Narrative at work in Gordon’s book excludes serious consideration of New Deal propaganda (unless it is from the Army), the Cold War is only about the oppression of artists, dissenting scholarship is ignored, and inconvenient and embarrassing facts are not included or treated dismissively. In the Liberal Narrative, positive views of the rural Midwest, which, despite her own distance from it, Dorothea Lange came to embrace, are rejected as “romantic,” “nostalgic,” and “saccharine.”

The FSA embraced the documentary form that, as William Stott notes, “is the basis of ‘instrumental history’ of the kind that social activists like Howard Zinn seek.”⁹⁶ Indeed, the first endorsement provided for Gordon’s book is from Zinn, who died just after publication of Gordon’s book and was remembered for using history to promote activism on the left.⁹⁷ Such instrumentalism is what animated criticism of the FSA during the 1930s and the parallel prejudices of the Liberal Narrative are what generate criticism of the history profession in the present. The Liberal Narrative is now solidly entrenched, however, as symbolized by the historical profession’s recent endorsement of Gordon’s book with the awarding of the Bancroft Prize and, more generally, the publicity and praise it has received from liberal media outlets. The angle of vision on the past provided by the Liberal Narrative can be a useful point of view, but its dominance, and its tendency to exclude other points of view, is cause for concern, in part because it can undermine our ability to understand American history.

In the end, Gordon sees Lange as “a photographer of democracy, and for democracy” (xiiv) and as “America’s preeminent photographer of democracy” (423) and believes that “Lange’s photographs will always evoke the best of American democracy.” (430) But Lange’s photographs, when fully considered in light of all the evidence not included in the Liberal Narrative embraced by Gordon, should also raise doubts about their production and their effect on the workings of democracy. Historians should be more sensitive to how propaganda can

distort the democratic process and be quick to expose it, even when it jeopardizes the standing of their favored historical actors. Orwell, who had a nose for the problem of propaganda, wisely warned us to combat the “smelly little orthodoxies” that stymie open democratic debate, which should include the dominant narrative conventions extant in contemporary historiography.⁹⁸ Lange also endorsed greater scrutiny of dominant modes of thought and angles of vision and saw great progress if “we could dare look at ourselves.”⁹⁹ This includes daring to examine the Liberal Narrative at work in Gordon’s book about Dorothea Lange, who did more than perhaps any other person to establish the iconic images of the Great Plains.

NOTES

- 1 Linda Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits* (New York, W.W. Norton, 2009). The book was also awarded the National Arts Club Prize for Arts Writing and the WILLA Award and was shortlisted for the Cundill International Prize for History. To avoid excessive footnotes, references to Gordon's book will be cited in the text.
- 2 Anne Whiston Spirn, *Daring to Look: Dorothea Lange's Photographs & Reports from the Field* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2008), 15.
- 3 Michael L. Carlebach, "Documentary and Propaganda: The Photographs of the Farm Security Administration," *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* vol. 8 (Spring 1988), 9.
- 4 Michael V. Namorato, *Rexford G. Tugwell: A Biography* (New York, Praeger, 1988), 2.
- 5 Tugwell, who taught economics at Columbia, was tapped to join FDR's "brains trust" by fellow Columbia professor Raymond Moley. Tugwell believed that the traditional form of private capitalism was obsolete and that the economy should be planned by the national government. Moley, who later broke with the New Deal, said that Tugwell's thinking "closely resembled that of the British socialists who as time went on submerged their socialism under the guise of national planning." Namorato, *Rexford G. Tugwell*, 3, 60, 62. After several battles within the Roosevelt administration's Department of Agriculture, in 1935 Tugwell was appointed head of the newly-created Resettlement Administration, which later became the FSA. Roosevelt called the RA "one of my pet children." John A. Garraty, "The New Deal, National Socialism, and the Great Depression," *American Historical Review* vol. 78 (October 1973), 920. To publicize the work of the RA, Tugwell created what he "euphemistically named the 'Historical Section,'" which hired Lange. Bill Ganzel, *Dust Bowl Descent* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 6. Tugwell hired Lee Pressman to serve as general counsel for the RA. Pressman and Alger Hiss had been serving as lawyers for the USDA until they were fired in early 1935, infuriating Tugwell. Both Pressman and Hiss were later revealed to be communists, which Gordon does not mention. Pressman and Tugwell both supported Henry Wallace's bid for president in 1948 on the Progressive Party ticket, but Tugwell thought that the "party, led by Lee Pressman, acted like a Communist cell." Namorato, *Rexford G. Tugwell*, 86-87, 111, 153; Bernard Sternsher, *Rexford Tugwell and the New Deal* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1964), 364.
- 6 David P. Peeler, "Deconstructing American Photographs," *American Quarterly* vol. 42, no. 3 (September 1990), 508-9; Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York, Knopf, 1968), 90. On Tugwell's call to liberate Americans from the "deadweight of outworn ideas and obsolete institutions," see Andrew Hemingway, "Cultural Democracy by Default: The Politics of the New Deal Arts Programs," *Oxford Art Journal* vol. 30, no. 2 (2007), 273. On the instrumentalism of historians, see J.R. Pole, *Paths to the American Past* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1979), 250-70.
- 7 Suzanne B. Riess interview with Dorothea Lange, July 3, 1968, Regional Oral History Office, University of California-Berkeley, 181. On the "incompatibility" of "art" and "propaganda," see John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2006), 145.
- 8 William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1973), 269.
- 9 Stott notes that during the 1930s the "Fascists and the Soviets had given propaganda a bad name by praising it and by exploiting it in gross and deceptive forms." Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 22. On the similarities between FSA and Soviet photography, see Leah Bendavid-Val, *Propaganda & Dreams: Photographing the 1930s in the USSR and the US* (Zurich and New York, Edition Stemmler, 1999). For a comparison of New Deal and Nazi propaganda, see Garraty, "The New Deal, National Socialism, and the Great Depression," 925-933.
- 10 Ganzel, *Dust Bowl Descent*, 6.
- 11 Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution*, 145, 149.
- 12 Carlebach, "Documentary and Propaganda," 20.
- 13 Carlebach, "Documentary and Propaganda," 10.
- 14 Carlebach, "Documentary and Propaganda," 6.
- 15 Bendavid-Val, *Propaganda & Dreams*, 75.
- 16 Bendavid-Val, *Propaganda & Dreams*, 75.
- 17 Garraty, "The New Deal, National Socialism, and the Great Depression," 925.
- 18 Garraty, "The New Deal, National Socialism, and the Great Depression," 931. Michael Carlebach also notes that the "political images of the FSA are often ignored." Carlebach, "Documentary and Propaganda," 9.
- 19 Garraty, "The New Deal, National Socialism, and the Great Depression," 932.

- 20 Robert L. Stevens and Jared A. Fogel, "Images of the Great Depression: A Photographic Essay," *OAH Magazine of History* vol. 16, no. 1 (Fall 2001), 11.
- 21 Wolcott was quoted in 1965. Stu Cohen, *The Likes of Us: America in the Eyes of the Farm Security Administration* (Boston, David R. Godine, 2009), xxv.
- 22 Suzanne B. Riess interview with Dorothea Lange, July 3, 1968, Regional Oral History Office, University of California-Berkeley, 151-52.
- 23 On Charles Beard's interpretation of American history and the search for a "usable past," see Jon Lauck, "The Old Roots of the New West: Howard Lamar and the Intellectual Origins of *Dakota Territory*," *Western Historical Quarterly* vol. 39 (Autumn 2008), 265-66, 278.
- 24 Peter Bacon Hales describes Lange as "probably the most politically radical photographer next to Ben Sahn," another FSA photographer. Cohen, *The Likes of Us*, xxi. "Sahn's politics were everywhere in his work. He worked with Diego Rivera in New York, and his socialist and even communist leanings were quite evident in the art he produced, to the extent that Mora and Hill note, 'Ben Sahn...and many other artists were espousing a political radicalism that often verged on Marxism.'" Stevens and Fogel, "Images of the Great Depression," 13, quoting Gilles Mora and John T. Hill, *Walker Evans: The Hungry Eye* (New York, Harry Abrams Press, 1993), 132.
- 25 David P. Peeler, "The Art of Disengagement: Edward Weston and Ansel Adams," *Journal of American Studies* vol. 27, no. 3 (December 1993), 331.
- 26 Jonathan Spaulding, "The Natural Scene and the Social Good: The Artistic Education of Ansel Adams," *Pacific Historical Review* vol. 60, no. 1 (February 1991), 22.
- 27 Spaulding, "The Natural Scene and the Social Good," 25.
- 28 Spaulding, "The Natural Scene and the Social Good," 26.
- 29 Spaulding, "The Natural Scene and the Social Good," 26.
- 30 Spaulding, "The Natural Scene and the Social Good," 26.
- 31 Daniel Geary, "Carey McWilliams and Antifascism, 1934-1943," *Journal of American History* vol. 90, no. 3 (December 2003), 912-934.
- 32 Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 189.
- 33 Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York, Harper & Row, 1973), 169-180.
- 34 Amity Shlaes, *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression* (New York, Harper Perennial, 2009); Amity Shlaes (Author) > Burton Find all the books, read about the author, and more. W. Folsom, Jr., *New Deal or Raw Deal?: How FDR's Economic Legacy Has Damaged America* (New York, Threshold Editions, 2009); Jonah Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left from Mussolini to the Politics of Change* (New York, Broadway, 2009); Jim Powell, *FDR's Folly: How Roosevelt and His New Deal Prolonged the Great Depression* (New York, Three Rivers Press, 2004).
- 35 Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Fridrikh Igorevich Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1995); John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1998); Richard Gid Powers, *Not Without Honor: The History of American Anticommunism* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998); Allen Weinstein and Alexander Vassiliev, *The Haunted Wood: Soviet Espionage in America--The Stalin Era* (New York, Modern Library, 2000); John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000).
- 36 Jonathan M. Wiener, "Radical Historians and the Crisis in American History, 1959-1980," *Journal of American History* vol. 76, no. 2 (September 1989), 426.
- 37 Radical Historians Organization, *Visions of History* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1983), 73-94; Neil Jumonville, *Henry Steele Commager, Midcentury Liberalism, and the History of the Present* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 226.
- 38 Milton Meltzer, *Dorothea Lange: A Photographer's Life* (Syracuse, New York, Syracuse University Press, 2000), 125-26; James Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1989), 53. Gordon does note that the FSA cooperated with Margaret Sanger to provide birth control. (195)
- 39 Nineteenth century soldiers from rural America were observed to be particularly nostalgic, pining for the "old homestead," an indication of the genuineness of Taylor's attitudes. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, Basic Books, 2001), 6.
- 40 On the land reform issue in the postwar United States, see Jon K. Lauck, *American Agriculture and the Problem of Monopoly: The Political Economy of Grain Belt Farming, 1953-1980* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 30-31.

- 41 Mary Neth, "Seeing the Midwest with Peripheral Vision: Identities, Narratives, and Region," in *The Identity of the American Midwest: Essays on Regional History* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2001), 47. Neth specifically points to the regionalist inclinations of Taylor. Neth, "Seeing the Midwest with Peripheral Vision," 212, n. 62.
- 42 Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 5-6, 22.
- 43 Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 32.
- 44 Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 24.
- 45 Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 25.
- 46 Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 23.
- 47 Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 229.
- 48 Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 231.
- 49 James Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1989), 10.
- 50 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 5.
- 51 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 47.
- 52 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 47.
- 53 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 53.
- 54 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 67.
- 55 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 71-72.
- 56 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 75.
- 57 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 75.
- 58 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 76. FDR's political managers were also intent on "having Tugwell kept silent and out of the [1936 presidential] campaign." Namorato, *Rexford G. Tugwell*, 8, fn 12, 117.
- 59 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 75.
- 60 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 76. After the Rothstein scandal, John Raeburn notes, the FSA also promoted its work as artistic instead of relying on "merely their fidelity to an ideal of objective depiction." Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution*, 169.
- 61 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 17. Stott also deemed the skull photos "intentionally deceptive." Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 61. Another staging by Rothstein is discussed in Cohen, *The Likes of Us*, xiii.
- 62 Suzanne B. Riess interview with Dorothea Lange, July 3, 1968, Regional Oral History Office, University of California-Berkeley, 171.

- 63 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 76-77. Lorentz was a film critic who wrote a pro-FDR book that led Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace to introduce him to Tugwell. Robert L. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 24-25.
- 64 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 77. Vernon Carstensen's papers at the University of Washington include a manuscript entitled "The Plow that Broke the Plains: A Film Legacy of the Great Depression." See also Carstensen, "The Plow that Broke the Plains," *Westerners' Brand Book* vol. 27, no. 9 (November 1970), 65-66.
- 65 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 78.
- 66 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 78.
- 67 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 77.
- 68 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 78 (emphasis added).
- 69 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 78.
- 70 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 81.
- 71 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 87.
- 72 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 87.
- 73 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 88.
- 74 Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, 129, fn 25.
- 75 John E. Miller, "Two Visions of the Great Plains: The Plow That Broke the Plains and South Dakotans' Reactions to It," *Upper Midwest History* vol. 2 (1982), 4. In the film, Miller notes in keeping with Curtis, the "skulls of animals lie about on the baked earth." Miller, "Two Visions of the Great Plains," 3. Lange joined Lorentz "along U.S. Highway 99, helping to line up migrant families so that his cameraman could film them." Meltzer, *Dorothea Lange*, 105. Anne Whiston Spirn also notes that Stryker once urged Lange to work with Lorentz. *Daring to Look*, 33. See also Daniel J. Leab, "Pare Lorentz and American Government Film Production," *Midcontinent American Studies Journal* vol. 6, no. 1 (Spring 1965), 41-51.
- 76 Miller, "Two Visions of the Great Plains," 2, 4. For a systematic rejection of Lorentz's claim that the plows of prairie farmers caused the Dust Bowl, see Geoff Cunfer, "Scaling the Dust Bowl," in Anne Kelly Knowles (ed), *Placing History: How Maps, Spatial Data, and GIS Are Changing Historical Scholarship* (Redlands, California, ESRI Press, 2008), 95-121. Cunfer concluded that "government propagandists exploited the dust storms to build support for [the] new agencies" of the New Deal. Cunfer,

"Scaling the Dust Bowl," 117. Cunfer views the "declensionist" narrative of the Dust Bowl embraced by the New Dealers as "ideologically driven" and lacking "rigorous empirical analysis." Cunfer, *On the Great Plains: Agriculture and Environment* (College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 10, 148, 156. See also James C. Malin, "Ecology and History," *Scientific Monthly* vol. 70, no. 5 (May 1950), 297; James C. Malin, "Space and History: Reflections on the Closed-Space Doctrines of Turner and Mackinder and the Challenge of Those Ideas by the Air Age," Part 2, *Agricultural History* vol. 18, no. 3 (April 1944), 120; Interview with James C. Malin, April 13 and 15 and December 2, 1972, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University, 61, 108-9; Allan G. Bogue, "Tilling Agricultural History with Paul Wallace Gates and James C. Malin," *Agricultural History* vol. 80, no. 4 (Autumn 2006), 450.

77 Miller, "Two Visions of the Great Plains," 5.

78 Miller, "Two Visions of the Great Plains," 3.

79 Miller, "Two Visions of the Great Plains," 3.

80 Miller, "Two Visions of the Great Plains," 4.

81 Miller, "Two Visions of the Great Plains," 4.

82 Miller, "Two Visions of the Great Plains," 9.

83 Miller, "Two Visions of the Great Plains," 10. John Garraty cites both "The Plow that Broke the Plains" and Dorothea Lange's photos in his comparison of the New Deal and National Socialist propaganda policies with due allowance for the obviously critical distinctions. Garraty, "The New Deal, National Socialism, and the Great Depression," 931. Miller also notes that Lorentz was "able to sign up Ralph Steiner, Paul Strand, and Leo Hurwitz, who all had experience in documentary film production and were reportedly influenced by work being done by Soviet film makers." Miller, "Two Visions of the Great Plains," 2. Strand and Hurwitz wanted to make the film's message even stronger, insisting it "be all about human greed and how lousy our social system was." Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film*, 31.

84 Miller, "Two Visions of the Great Plains," 1.

85 Miller, "Two Visions of the Great Plains," 10.

86 Miller, "Two Visions of the Great Plains," 10.

87 Miller, "Two Visions of the Great Plains," 2.

88 Julia Baird, "Seeing Dignity in Poverty," *Newsweek*, November 16, 2009; Wendy Smith review, *Los Angeles Times*, November 1, 2009; David Oshinsky, "Picturing the Depression," *New York Times*, October 25, 2009; Jonathan Raban, "American Pastoral," *New York Review*, November 19, 2009; Christopher Benfey, "The Hunger Artists," *New Republic*, December 2, 2009; Jackson Lears, "Hard Times Revisited," *American Prospect*, December 2009.

89 Spirn, *Daring to Look*, 21.

90 Suzanne B. Riess interview with Dorothea Lange, July 3, 1968, Regional Oral History Office, University of California-Berkeley, 183.

91 Howell Raines, "Let Us Now Revisit Famous Folk," *New York Times Magazine*, May 25, 1980; Cohen, *The Likes of Us*, xix.

92 Gerard Alexander, "Why are liberals so condescending?" *Washington Post*, February 7, 2010.

93 Paula Rabinowitz, "Voyeurism and Class Consciousness: James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*," *Cultural Critique* no. 21 (Spring 1992), 143-45, 153.

94 Howell Raines, "Let Us Now Revisit Famous Folk," *New York Times Magazine*, May 25, 1980.

95 Spirn, *Daring to Look*, 58.

96 Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 57.

97 Mark Feeney and Bryan Marquard, "Howard Zinn, historian who challenged status quo, dies at 87," *Boston Globe*, January 27, 2010; Howard Powell, "Howard Zinn, Historian, Dies at 87," *New York Times*, January 28, 2010. The *Times* described Zinn as "[p]roudly, unabashedly radical."

98 Orwell quoted in Christopher Hitchens, "Prophet with a Typewriter," *Wilson Quarterly* vol. 24, no. 4 (Autumn 2000), 125.

99 Spirn, *Daring to Look*, 8.