Photographs of the Great Depression:
Dorothea Lange’s Invention of American Cultural Memory

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Abstract

This dissertation will argue that the photographs taken by American photographer Dorothea Lange during the Great Depression have played a significant part in the construction of American cultural memory and the reaffirmation of a collective American identity. To illustrate this role, the dissertation will show that Lange’s photographs have shifted in meaning from being a mere political tool in order to gain support for the democratic party, and as documents of social issues, toward serving as agents in constructing a cultural memory and solidifying an American collective identity. In American cultural memory, the photographs have become a representation of the Great Depression, whereby the Great Depression represents an American identity, of overcoming crisis and hardship on an individual and national level. Examples of how the photographs of Lange were received during different periods will demonstrate this claim. First, the period of their making in the 1930s, during which they were first used as a political tool but when popular reception was minimal. Secondly, the 1960s, the period in which they were utilized to battle new social issues and inspired a popular reception in which they represented American unity and survivor mentality. Thirdly, the post 1990s, the period in which Lange’s photos have become a part of American cultural heritage through institutionalization.
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The photographer is not simply the person who records the past, but the one who invents it.
-Susan Sontag (On Photography)

Introduction

Poverty and social deprivation are ingredients of a never-ending story that continues
to fascinate us all, and a problem to which there appears to be no definite solution.
Nevertheless, many have attempted to solve this unsolvable issue. In American
history, the Great Depression of the 1930s witnessed this effort on a grand scale. It
was a period marked by poverty of staggering proportions and even the federal
government of the United States changed its political course drastically in order to
battle the high unemployment rate and the rapidly growing number of citizens living
below the poverty line. The Roosevelt Administration invented the New Deal, a
political attack on unemployment and the crushed economic system. In order to make
this political agenda better known among the American public, the Roosevelt
Administration created the Farm Security Administration (FSA)\(^1\). One of the tools of
the FSA was a group of documentary photographers. Their job was to study and
capture the social and economic condition of the American agricultural workers.\(^2\)

   Especially in the southern states, such as Oklahoma, the depression hit hard.
Dust storms, caused by drought and years of excessive farming, swept over the land,
resulting in an agricultural hell for the farming communities of the south. Cotton

ceased to be king in those areas, and so a massive flow of migrants packed up all their belongings and decided to move west, to California. One of the photographers of the FSA, Dorothea Lange, captured their dismal journey with her camera.

Today, her photographs are some of the most well known in American history and for many Americans the images Lange recorded are a representation of the Great Depression era. This poses an interesting question. Many articles and books have been written on Dorothea Lange, her photographs and her work for the FSA, but hardly any have been able to answer the question why Lange’s photographs are engrained in the American cultural memory of the Great Depression. This dissertation will argue that the photographs taken by American photographer Dorothea Lange during the Great Depression, have shifted in meaning through ideological practice by the American people, from being a mere political tool of the FSA in order to gain support for the democratic party, toward serving as agents in constructing a cultural collective memory and solidifying an American collective identity. This shift in meaning is a natural one, seeing as the force of time always changes the perception of the public.

At the heart of this paper however, is what caused this shift.

In the 1930s, Lange’s photographs were created as documents of social issues, but became agents when they were, actively, utilized to encourage the American middle class to support the New Deal ideals. The Roosevelt Administration did not shy away from using photographic propaganda to ensure this support to facilitate economic upward mobility for the poverty-stricken migrants of the American south. After World War II, with the distance of time, the context in which Lange’s photographs were viewed changed. As a result, their reception altered according to the preconceived notions of that period. This dissertation will demonstrate that in American cultural memory, the photographs have become a representation of the
Great Depression through ideological practice in Ideological State Apparatuses, whereby the Great Depression represents an American identity, of overcoming crisis and hardship, not only on an individual but also on a national level. Examples of how Lange’s photographs functioned and were received at different periods will demonstrate how they gained this value.

In order to grasp the impact of photographs on the American cultural memory of the Great Depression, one must first investigate what cultural memory entails. Thus, the first chapter will recapitulate what different theorists have argued about the relationship between photography, history and cultural memory. What is cultural memory, how does it differ from collective memory and which prerequisites in any given society ensure the construction of a cultural memory? The chapter will then narrow this rather general notion of cultural memory down to the topic of this dissertation: the photographs of Dorothea Lange as carriers of cultural memory. How are media forms such as film, music and photography, able to be carriers of cultural memory and how do they influence the way a society views a certain historical period? More specifically, the question will be raised how the era of the Great Depression has been represented through those media forms and why photographs have a stronger impact than other representations on the public’s long term cultural memory. The last part of this chapter will elaborate on how the American public uses photographs to construct images of the past and of itself.

The second chapter will focus specifically on Dorothea Lange and her work for the Farm Security Administration during the 1930s, especially how she became involved with the plight of the migrant workers of the American South who went to California. It will also describe what Lange’s photographs portray and how the goals
of the Roosevelt administration are evident in the photographs. The chapter will conclude with the public reception of Lange’s photos during the 1930s.

The third chapter will explain why the 1960s was a period in which new meanings and greater value was attributed to Lange’s photographs. Photographers utilized the photographs again on a political level as inspiration on how to document poverty. The use was focused on gaining support for the government’s “War on Poverty,” during the Johnson administration. This chapter will also clarify how the photos entered public consciousness during this era. This occurred not necessarily because of a political agenda, but due to different factors present in society at that time: a sense of longing for the past, dramatic changes in American society, and the threat of war. It was during this period that the photos became a part of American cultural memory and collective identity of American unity and survivor mentality. Further, this chapter will deal with the importance of Ideological State Apparatuses such as the educational and political apparatuses as major forces in constructing this American cultural memory of the Great Depression with Lange’s photographs. The chapter will show how exhibitions in major American cities played a significant role in the wider circulation of Lange’s pictures and how this affected their position in the cultural memory of the Great Depression.

The final chapter will describe how the meaning of Lange’s photos has changed since the 1960s and what caused these changes. Additionally, it will discuss how the photos have remained part of American cultural memory through institutionalization. Their use in the educational field, museums and even commodity products such as postage stamps guaranteed this continuation. These different technologies of memory have ensured that Lange’s photos have continued to function as a representation of the Great Depression era. Especially the educational field or, the
Educational State Apparatus helped to institutionalize this representation. Ultimately, the photographs reinforced a sense of collective American identity where overcoming crisis and hardship on an individual and national level plays a central role.

Although each historical period of reception discussed in this dissertation is of importance and will be elaborately discussed, my main assertion throughout is that Lange’s photographs do not merely document the past, but reinvent it in the sense that their significance and meanings have been revised by the American public according to the ideologies of the time in which they are viewed.
Chapter One: Cultural Memory and Photography

The first to coin the term cultural memory was Jan Assmann, who based his theory on the works of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. Halbwachs’s most profound work, *The Collective Memory*, would lay the foundation for many theorists in developing the theory of cultural memory. Halbwachs was the first to pose the question how individuals in a given society as a collective form a picture of past events, or periods in history, through images of the present.

According to Halbwachs, the theory of collective memory is based on the notion that individuals and their memories cannot be separated from their existence within society. Isolated memories of individuals cannot evolve, outside of the realm of society. The recollections of individuals are always, inextricably intertwined with the memories of others. In fact, he argued that we recall our memories, *because* we are inspired by others to do so. Our memories complement each other, in particular when we deem ourselves part of the same social group. This argument about collective memory would then indicate that one’s memory is not a fixed entity, not biologically determined, but socially constructed and alterable through the passage of time. Also, how a social group creates a reconstructed image of the past is in accordance with the dominant ideas of society at a certain time.3

The memories we preserve, “are continually reproduced; through them, as by continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated.”4 That is, a person has memories of the Great Depression for example, shared by others in the same social group, and through the reproduction of this memory of a common past, this particular individual has a clearer sense of who he or she is within that given society. One feels more connected to a specific social group, because of that common past, a common

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4 Ibid., 47.
past in which shared values, ideas, practices, ideals etc. binds one to that group on a
social level. An example of this would be the memories of former migrant workers
from Oklahoma who would share their stories with the second generation. The
dominant ideas and values present in those memories and thus of that social group, are
reproduced and continue to be part of the collective memory of that particular group.

A sense of nostalgia is involved in the creation of a collective memory. Rather
painful experiences of say loss of loved ones or poverty, but not necessarily from
one’s own “episodic” memory, are suppressed and the more joyful memories are
remembered or even completely fabricated.\(^5,6\) Halbwachs calls this phenomenon an
“illusionary appearance of the past.”\(^7\) He continues by arguing that as one grows
older, a new sense of one’s limitations emerges, limitations not present during
childhood or early adulthood. This new awareness sparks the reflective longing for the
past and not only a yearning for one’s individual past and youth, but also the desire to
recapture the experiences of a social group or entire society. Moreover, Halbwachs
argued, this image of the past, which one keeps reproducing, is a mere instrument to
break away from present day society.\(^8\) This is not to say that every individual is
desperately looking for a way out of contemporary reality, but the evils of present day
society do not seem to exist in such a prominent way in the image one has of the past.
Therefore, a longing for the past can surface and affect the collective memory. A
prettier picture than “the truth,” if there is such a thing, can manifest itself in the
collective memory. Dorothea Lange’s photographs for example triggered certain
American idealistic values such as the vitality of a nation, the industrious character of

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\(^5\) Episodic memory is part of the personal memory. It deals with specific events, places and people in
the life of an individual.
\(^6\) Andrew M. Colman, “Episodic Memory,” Oxford University Press,
\(^7\) Levine, ed. On Collective Memory, 48-49.
\(^8\) Ibid., 49.
the “real American” and the warm family life on the farm. These idealistic images can easily block out the more painful images in one’s mind. Even though the poverty is evident in the photographs, one focuses now on the generalized picture, full of nostalgia, because of our distance from that era. Generalized thinking, gradually replaces the more specific memories.

Another theorist, Jan Assmann, built upon the works of Halbwachs and coined the more contemporary term “cultural memory.” The next question would be, as one might expect, what makes cultural memory different from collective memory? As Assmann stated in his article “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” Halbwachs was revolutionary in his thinking about a collective memory when he argued that the formation of a collective memory was a product of social processes in society, a cultural process, and not, as thought before, “a result of phylogenetic evolution.”

What and who we are, and to which social group we feel we belong, are not sustained through some natural force, but instead we cultivate a consciousness and an image of ourselves, and the society to which we belong through socialization. Again, the collective memory is not a static given, something identically reproduced, but flexible. Moreover, Assmann argued that as human beings, a species opposed to the animal kingdom, we create cultural memories as a means to secure our subsistence. For it is the only way to pass on our way of living and our modes of production, to speak in Marxist terms. Only collective views and experiences relating our society can ensure this survival, passed on from generation to generation. These thoughts instruct us how to behave and experience the world, i.e. to function as members of a collective, a society.

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10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 126.
To make matters even more complex, Assmann makes a distinction within cultural memory, namely between culture and communicative memory. The latter is the creation of memory, mediated in a social context, through the communication between individuals on a daily basis. This does not imply that an individual only feels connected to one social group. All individuals feel connected to multiple groups and thus various different communicative memories take shape. Thus, communicative memory entails the day-to-day communiqué that takes place within a social group: the family, the community, political parties, the state etc. All the individuals of the group share particular characteristics, and a sense of unity through a joint image of the past. This concept is significant for the research into the issue of how photographs can influence the cultural memory and identity of a nation such as the United States, because photographs are one of the most influential carriers of those images of the past. One looks at a photograph and sees a reality, the way “it really was.”

There is, however, one thing which places a limit on the communicative memory, and that is time, or to state it more bluntly, death. The communicative memory does not survive past a number of generations, since the communicative memory only bases its existence on the everyday socializing and sharing of memories between individuals. Assmann went further in his theory than Halbwachs, who never investigated beyond the realm of communicative memory. Assmann argued that after the temporal era of oral communication, a new form of memory emerges. The memories individuals shared with one another do not simply vanish, but remain intact, albeit alterable, and affect individuals and social groups in their behavior, their way of thinking and their way of life. This is what he labeled the cultural memory. Assmann states, “Just as the communicative memory is characterized by its proximity to the
everyday, cultural memory is characterized by its distance from the everyday.”\textsuperscript{12} Furthermore, Assmann argued that a cultural memory is a fixed point in time, certain memorable events or specific periods in the history of, for example, a nation. The Great Depression of the 1930s in the United States is a perfect example of such a fixed point in time. Even though the depression spans more than a decade, the stable factor is in the term “the Great Depression,” as if it is one single moment in history.

In order to remember those specific moments in history, a society implements different tools. These tools are what Assman has labeled “figures of memory.”\textsuperscript{13} Photographs, monuments, poetry, holidays but also traditions and cultural practices, are only a few examples of the tools that embody characteristics of those moments in history. They symbolize certain values, ideals, and nostalgic feelings, but because individuals always remember collectively, these attributed meanings shape the image of a collective past for an entire social group, or even a nation. Photographs are, as a figure of memory, a tool to examine and remember the past, to gain access to those “islands of time.”\textsuperscript{14} The rather vague notion of the Great Depression for example, is one of those islands of time.

Not only do photographs, and other carriers of cultural knowledge, serve the purpose of developing a cultural memory, but it is “upon such collective knowledge, for the most part (but not exclusively) of the past, [that] each group bases its awareness of unity and particularity.”\textsuperscript{15} Thus, a sense of national identity is derived from a shared past, shared memories and experiences. In addition, each society uses different technologies of memory to form that self-image. This paper will support the idea that in twentieth-century America, the photograph was one of the most influential

\textsuperscript{12} Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” 127-29.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 129.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 132.
carriers of cultural memory. There are, of course, other carriers or technologies of memory, such as film, text and music. To omit those media forms would fail to give a more complete picture of the impact photography had as opposed to those other media forms. Thus, a short description of the art types that covered the trials and tribulations of the 1930s is in order.

Novels, for example, have always played a pivotal role in the development of a cultural memory of the United States. No one can deny the power of the written word throughout American history within which novelists, poets and the press have entered the public sphere, affecting society. Famous writers like Stephen Crane and Upton Sinclair, and poets like Walt Whitman and E.E. Cummings were able to do just that. Until the mid-nineteenth century, texts were perhaps the only media form that could sway an entire nation: until photography. The most popular novel of the 1930s, Pulitzer Prize winner *The Grapes of Wrath*, about a migrant family from Oklahoma that moved to California during the Great Depression, is a good example of such a carrier of memory. Yet, the ideas conveyed in texts materialize through photographs. Through the photographic image, the “true” image takes shape of what it must have been like to live during that very moment, in which the story takes place.

Music about the Great Depression was also popular during the 1930s. Famous folk singer Peter Seeger wrote numerous songs on the plight of the poor that suffered from the Great Depression. Songs like “Seven Cent Cotton, Forty Cent Meat,” and “I Don’t Want Your Millions Mister,” 16,17 dealt with the issues faced by the poor farmers’ communities of America. The title of “Seven Cent Cotton, Forty Cent Meat” has inequality written all over it. The song portrays the issue of low wages for strenuous work, for which many Americans were unable to purchase the nutrition

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17 Pete Seeger, “Prestige/Folklore Years, Vol. 4: Singing out Loud” (Prestige/Folklore, 1994), 16.
needed to live on, such as meat and vegetables. A shocking testimonial and something that would probably have influenced the public on an emotional level back in the 30s and 40s. Today, however, the cotton-picking days are over and hardly anyone can relate to those lyrics anymore. Many lyrics deal with very specific events, circumstances, people and places. They tell a very specific story, whereas photographs do not deal so much with specifics, but their focus is more on the general picture. One might see the photograph of “Migrant Mother,” but there is no additional story. The story is what we have to create in our own minds. Usually that story revolves around generalized terms such as poverty, deprivation, loneliness, desperation, hunger etc. Therefore, perhaps the deeper message of poverty in songs can still affect one, but the mental image is gone, except through the photographs of that era. Therefore, the music has not lost its power, but it needs a medium like the photograph to complement it. Without it, it loses a great amount of emotional impact and consequently its effect on the cultural memory.

Finally, there is another important carrier of memory: film. In the early twentieth century, this was a revolutionary new media form with a tremendous influence worldwide. Yet, even films like The Grapes of Wrath, based on the homonymous novel by John Steinbeck, no longer have the sociological impact it had when it was first unleashed on the American public. Even though nominated for an Oscar for Best Film in 1941, most Americans are more likely to have read the novel than to have seen the film.18 Perhaps the film, like music, does not possess the timelessness that photographs do. Perhaps Susan Sontag explained it better when she argued that films and television light up a screen flash and flicker for thirty minutes to an hour, and then stop, whereas the image within the photograph is “also an object,

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lightweight, cheap to produce, easy to carry about, accumulate, store.”19 It is a figure of memory that lasts. It is timeless and does not show the context of the time when it was taken, as prominently as film does.

Susan Sontag attempted to clear up the mystery of what sets photographs apart from other technologies of memory and what gives them the additional credibility of “truth.” According to Sontag, the photograph, unlike other forms of art, appears to be free from subjectivity on the artist’s part. Photographs do not show the involvement and creativity of the artist, nor do they show any obvious objectives, if the artist had any to begin with. To a certain extent, “they owe their existence to a loose cooperation (quasi-magical, quasi-accidental) between photographer and subject – mediated by an ever simpler and more automated machine, which is tireless, and which even when capricious can produce a result that is interesting and never entirely wrong.”20 In short, photographs appear, as separate objects, completely free from artist intervention. The image remains captured by history, as if frozen in time, untouched and unaltered.

In the past, photographs have often been used as a political tool to bring about social change in society whereby biased views were not evaded. American photographers created images of not only admirable circumstances and people, but precisely for the above-mentioned reason: to disclose social issues that needed to be addressed, tackled and repaired. Solutions needed to be found for specific problems in society.21 Sontag argued that in American culture, social change is the more common component in society than social situations that remain unchanged.

Still, photographs are works of art, whichever way we look at them, but up until the 1940s, photography had not yet acquired the label of fine art. Critics viewed it as

20 Ibid., 53.
21 Ibid., 63.
simply a reproduction of reality, a copy of what was right in front of us, not original in
the artistic sense. Nevertheless, photographers of the early twentieth century tended to
dispute this argument and argued that it “was a vanguard revolt against ordinary
standards of seeing, no less worthy an art than painting.”

Nonetheless, photographs are products, made by someone and for certain reasons.
Yet, this is not what draws us to them. Their appeal, Sontag argues, lies in the fact that
they appear as if they possess the characteristic of a newly found object, accidental
pieces of history that dropped out of the sky and into our welcoming lap. The fine line
between a work of art, and what Sontag calls “the magic of the real,” is almost
indistinguishable. Moreover, novels and films claim to possess the label of art, a
product of the creativity of an artist, “not a representation of what appears to be ‘the
real.’” Photographs do encompass that power. Alan Trachtenberg argues that the
strength of the photographic image as cultural memory comes from a deeply rooted
conviction that the bare essence of memory exists in every photograph. The
photograph confirms for us what memory is. This notion supposes that, even though a
photographic image shows us a myriad of things through artistic presentation, the
main thing it represents is a remnant of “something that once existed before a lens. By
reflex alone photographs produce memory.”

Another significant theorist in the field of photography, Roland Barthes, in his
famous work Camera Lucida, distinguished two main characteristics of photographs
that attract us to them. He labeled them the studium and the punctum. The studium is
that part of the photograph, which appeals to us culturally. It is that part of an image,
one recognizes immediately, because of one’s cultural identity. Barthes argued that “it

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22 Sontag, On Photography, 126.
23 Ibid., 67.
is by *studium* that I am interested in so many photographs, whether I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scenes: for it is culturally that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions.”25 Thus, an American might find a different *studium* in a picture than a European; what we find it represents, depends on our cultural identity. What the American public sees in Dorothea Lange’s photographs is thus culturally determined; they represent the familiar, and the things one wishes to see.

The second aspect of the photograph that Barthes observed was what he called the *punctum*. It is a detail in the photograph, which appeals to us personally, as individuals. It touches us and we start to love a particular picture. As Barthes argued, the *studium* is about *liking* a photograph, the *punctum* deals with a deeper emotional response to an image. Additionally, the *punctum* of an image is never an implementation of ideas by the photographer, because one can identify the *punctum* only on an individual level.26 Thus, in this paper the focus will be mostly on what Barthes has labeled the *studium*, because it deals with collective, cultural meanings and receptions of photographs instead of the particular, the *punctum*.

Thus, this chapter has shown that especially photography is a strong carrier of cultural memory for it possesses a certain aura of “truth.” The photograph shows the facts of life at it was at a particular moment in time, a frozen piece of history. Thus, the photograph is reliable and trustworthy, even if in reality, it is not. For this reason, photographs have always been great tools for altering, maintaining or forming a certain vision of the “truth” by politics, the educational system, the church etc. And because photographs appear free from any form of intervention or manipulation, they can be used and their meanings revised repeatedly.

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26 Ibid., 27.
The notion that we, as spectators, attribute culturally determined meanings to photographs raises the question what force is at work in society that determines those meanings we see in pictures. I will argue in this essay that especially for the 1960s period, which will be discussed in chapter three, the Althusserian theory on Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) can explain the retrospective view of that time. A time in which Lange’s photographs came to represent not only the Great Depression but also American values and ideals present in the dominant ideology. In order to examine the effect of Dorothea Lange’s photographs on American cultural memory, an elaborate examination of the historical background of the photographs is necessary. Therefore, chapter two will be a detailed description of the period of the 1930s in which Lange “captured” the Great Depression on photographic film.
Chapter Two: Dorothea Lange, the FSA and the Great Depression Era

The Great Depression, surely depressing in every sense of the word, led toward the decision of the American government to make a slight shift to the political left. After years of rather irresponsible banking, the economic downfall of 1929 threw the United States, and consequently the rest of the world into a depression that would last – in the United States at least – for a decade. In order to battle unemployment, poverty and the total collapse of the economic system, the Roosevelt Administration devised a political program called The New Deal. This program was revolutionary by American standards, because it endorsed government involvement on a national level and on a scale that the United States had not seen before.27

The Great Depression hit all layers of the American people, but in particular the rural population of the United States. As a part of the Department of Agriculture, the Resettlement Administration was burdened with the enormous task of relocating those rural families that had become destitute and landless, into government-planned communities.28 These small communities, or colonies as they were labeled, would provide for thousands of families in southern states like Arkansas and Tennessee, where they would be tenants of the land they lived on and would work toward actually owning the farm and the land. For the Resettlement Administration, the ideal of the family-farm was the dominant force of their policy and the main objective was to materialize this ideal into “programs of resettlement and loans to farm families” all over the United States.29 However, for many rural families, such projects would be out of their reach due to the strict requirements and the limited number of resettlement programs. These were not the only factors obstructing the resettlement policy. On the plains of Oklahoma in particular, an area destroyed by sand storms, farming was no

27 Kennedy, Freedom from Fear: The American People in the Great Depression, 363-64.
29 Ibid., 700.
longer possible. This ecological situation forced the farmers off their land and as a result, a massive flow of migrants went on the road to California, in search for work.

As part of the “frontier myth,” the west had always drawn Americans, and during this time of depression, the image of vast amounts of land in California came to symbolize a chance to acquire some land for self-subsistence. However, during the 1920s and 30s, in the area known as the “west,” an agricultural system of wage labor developed. Private ownership of enormous plots of land had resulted in this system and during the Great Depression industrialized farming gave landowners a monopolist position, because of the high unemployment rate among agricultural workers.\(^{30}\) The enormous influx of migrant workers only reinforced this situation. In all the other parts of the country, agricultural employment relations existed only on a small scale. In the north and Midwest, the family farm dominated, whereas in the south a system of sharecropping had developed because of the slave labor system. The third system, a system of tenant farming, dominated the southern plains.

In 1937, a few years after the height of the Great Depression, the Resettlement Administration became the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Resettlement seemed too socialist to American legislators and thus a name change was the result. The FSA was an independent agency within the New Deal and its purpose was to somehow include the farm communities into the working class of America, and not portray them as a separate entity. This venture was first, and foremost a political campaign to rally support for its employer: the Roosevelt Administration. The FSA was to produce a more all-encompassing picture of American farmers, meaning a more humane one, back to the yeoman farmer ideal, even though the agricultural

The American public was to see these destitute farmers in light of the frontier myth: as adventurous heroes, forced west to challenge all the struggles of contemporary life such as unemployment and homelessness, but coming out stronger in the end. Thus, they would come to symbolize American values such as individualism, progress and success.

The photography section of the FSA, led by Roy Stryker, was instructed to capture the essence of the political and economical struggle of America’s farmers and depict the racial system in which the farmers were forced to operate. More specifically, the photographs were to ennoble the poor farmers. According to historian Linda Gordon, “The [FSA] 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.”

One of the most influential photographers of the FSA was Dorothea Lange. Primarily a portrait photographer, Lange occupied herself with photographing the well-to-do in San Francisco in the early 1930s, before she became involved with the plight of those hit by the Great Depression. One day in 1935, she decided to leave the safe environment of the rich, and step out into the streets to capture what the economic depression was doing to the American people. One of those early shots entitled “White Angel Bread Line,” became one of her most famous. Her decision to photograph the poor of San Francisco sprang from both a political and artistic conviction. She wanted to reinvent and rediscover herself as an artist. Moreover, the

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fact that she only worked for money started to bother her. An intense desire grew to create something with more meaning.\textsuperscript{35}

In 1934, an Oakland gallery exhibited Lange’s photos of the 1934 San Francisco general strike.\textsuperscript{36} The next year, Paul Taylor, former economics teacher at Berkeley University, took note of these exhibited photographs. Taylor had acquired the position of field director for rural rehabilitation for the California Emergency Relief Administration in 1935, and was highly impressed with Lange’s work. He contacted a magazine called \textit{Survey Graphic} and opted to have Lange’s pictures published. This magazine dealt with social issues of the time and according to Lange, it was “more a social welfare magazine, [than…] connected with settlement houses and social welfare problems.”\textsuperscript{37}

Lange’s photographs were considered helpful for the objectives of the magazine, and thus a series of photographs were published in 1935.\textsuperscript{38} The same year, the FSA officially hired Lange as field investigator photographer. Taylor wanted Lange to show to the American people, in photographs, what “the real conditions were like” among California’s agricultural workers.\textsuperscript{39} While photographing these wage laborers, Lange made the social discovery of the enormous invasion of migrant workers from the Dust Bowl area. This discovery would have a tremendous impact on her work and consequently on the work of the FSA.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{36} Kennedy, \textit{Freedom from Fear: The American People in the Great Depression}, 215.
\textsuperscript{37} Doud, “Dorothea Lange Interview.”
\textsuperscript{38} Spirn, \textit{Daring to Look: Dorothea Lange’s Photographs and Reports from the Field}, 17.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} Doud, “Dorothea Lange Interview.”
In order to achieve the main objective of the FSA, to rally support for the New Deal program among the American public, farmers and farmer migrants’ portrayals in FSA photographs should show the hard working American, a picture that coincided with the early American notion of the yeoman farmer ideal as the pillar of the American republic. The American public was to feel pity for these destitute farmers but the photographs should not show the farmers as helpless and needy. The American public was to see them as hard working Americans who deserved to enjoy the same standard of living as themselves.

The goals of the Roosevelt administration and the policy of the FSA are quite evident in Lange’s photos. The personal trauma and hardship the agricultural community of the United States had to endure had to be shown in a humane, non-condescending way. Yet, the main objective was to evoke sympathy and pity with photographs that literally showed the distressful circumstances. Sentimentality in photographs, using images of women (and men as well) with children in particular, was the key to FSA success. The American public was to feel for them, i.e. have an emotional response to the photographs. This is mainly why Lange, as a portrait photographer to begin with, did not set out merely to photograph the circumstances or just the people, but the two combined in order to convey a certain atmosphere, i.e. a frame of mind of the subjects photographed.

Figure 1 is a good example of such an image. The man, the Mexican migrant worker as identified in the original caption, posed in front of his hut, holding a baby. The central focus of this photograph however, is not the man or the baby, but it is the hut. Their housing situation, if one could call it that much, is perfectly centered in the photograph, as if to draw the attention of the spectator to the poor living conditions.

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and their obvious need for the help of FSA resettlement programs and government loans. Another notable characteristic of the photo is the car, which is only partly in the image. One could argue that the car *is* still in the photograph when it could easily been left out to present an even more desperate picture. Yet, the car might symbolize the ennobling factor the FSA wanted to show in their photographs of the hope or optimism that someday these people might be able to move on to better places.


Whereas the focus in Figure 1 is mainly on the poor living conditions among the many displaced migrants, Figure 2 highlights the personal aspect of the Dust Bowl migrants’ story. In this photograph the focal point is the mother, and in particular her facial expressions which suggest that she is troubled and contemplating her options. Yet, even though she looks old for her age, her facial features are aesthetically pleasing and more importantly, the photograph presents her as a caring mother. The
children hide their faces behind their mother, seeking her maternal protection and comfort. One could also read into this the collective shame they feel as a family, being photographed in such a fragile and susceptible state.

*Midweek Pictorial* published the “Migrant Mother” photograph for the first time in their November issue of 1936; along with an article entitled rather suggestively, “Look In Her Eyes!” The original caption in this article describes exactly how the image was to be viewed by the American public:

Lange’s photograph recalls religious images of the Madonna and Child, but also expresses Depression era values. The children on either side turn away, symbolically ashamed of their wretchedness. The mother’s careworn face, her tattered clothes, and the dirty baby near her breast indicate extreme distress, deserving of compassion. Yet her expression hints at a determination to persevere hard times.43

Again, the desperation and poverty is the fundamental pitch in this photograph and article, but combined with another factor that needed promoting, that of the dignity and resilience of the American people as a collective. Her “deserving of compassion” clearly represents the FSA goal to evoke sympathy among the American people for these Dust Bowl migrants and to convince them into continuing to support the New Deal.

Even though Lange worked mostly in California for the FSA, some of her photographs that dealt with the racial issue in agricultural labor relations were taken in southern states like Mississippi. Figure 3 displays the goal of the FSA to examine “the social and economic relations of American agricultural labor [and] to illustrate the racial system in which it operated – a system it also reinforced.”44 The original caption of the photograph, taken in 1936, states “Plantation Owner - Mississippi

Delta, near Clarksdale, Mississippi.” 45 The plantation owner shown in this image rests his leg on the bumper of his car, with a self-satisfied nonchalance, while the African Americans, purposely positioned in the background look submissive and appear to be waiting for orders. These characteristics of the photograph indicate the still existing presence of the white man’s dominance over his African American laborers, three quarters of a century after the abolishment of slavery. Curiously enough, for publication, the photograph was cropped to show only the plantation owner and not his black laborers, portraying the main character of the photograph as a “symbol of salt-of-the-earth pioneer Americanism.” 46


46 Ibid., 719.
Photographs like figure 3 did not dominate her collection of images, which dealt with labor relations in the southern states. Mostly, her aim was to show all “races” as ordinary American farmers, as is evident in figure 4, a collection of photographs taken to show the multicultural side of American agriculture and perhaps the American idea of the United States as a melting pot. In her original caption she argues, “all races serve the crops in California.” This caption is a rather peculiar one, since only one image actually shows laborers working in the fields in this collection of four. The caption thus merely suggests that these men were laborers, which as viewer and reader, one is expected to accept as truth. Placing a human face on a collective of “races” and “laborers” by photographing people up close was Lange’s distinctive style.

Also, the image in combination with the caption, points out yet again the collectiveness of the rural problem but also stipulating that all ethnic groups are part of the hard working population of the United States and deserving of resettlement and
employment, because the Great Depression was a crisis for which they were not to blame, nor a situation to overcome without assistance from the federal government.

Figure 4: "All races serve the crops in California." 1935. Photo by Dorothea Lange. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USZ62-137429

As far as the circulation of the photographs is concerned, numerous magazines, government publications and newspapers published Lange’s photographs during the 1930s. The FSA launched a massive publicity effort to make the photographs known among the American public. In 1935 and 1936, U.S. Camera put many photographs from Stryker’s photography department on display during their annual exposition. Lange’s photograph “Migrant Mother” was requested to be part of
that exhibit. In *An American Exodus*, a book written by Lange and Paul Taylor in 1939, a large collection of Lange’s photographs were also published. The preface to *An American Exodus* elaborates on what Lange’s photographs showed:

Rural families rendered landless and homeless by mechanized agriculture, their plight aggravated by drought, their exodus to California, and their transformation from independent owners and tenant farmers into agricultural laborers for hire.⁴⁷

This preface is a short abstract of what story Lange’s photographs were supposed to tell and in a nutshell it contained the most significant part of the FSA goals: to glorify the yeoman farmer ideal as the best solution for America’s social issue of mechanized agriculture and the massive flow of unemployed migrants.

In a 1939 review of *An American Exodus*, Eleanor Roosevelt commented on the publication of the book in her newspaper column called *My Day*. She argued that Lange’s photos and the book itself show the American people “what life means to some of our citizens.”⁴⁸ Thus, Roosevelt affirmed the importance of Lange’s photographs as documents of social issues. That same year, the weekly magazine *The New Yorker* reviewed Lange’s book and concluded that it was “a superb documentary analysis of human erosion.”⁴⁹ Yet, even with these high appraisals, an *American Exodus* did not gain much public acknowledgement or fame. This outcome was mainly caused by the publication of John Steinbeck’s bestselling-novel *The Grapes of Wrath* and the film version made in 1940. Steinbeck had been greatly influenced by Lange’s images while gathering ideas for the novel and John Ford, producer of the movie, was evidently influenced as well. Moreover, by 1940, a year after publication of *An American Exodus*, the public’s interests had shifted because of the start of

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⁴⁷ Spirn, *Daring to Look: Dorothea Lange’s Photographs and Reports from the Field*, 30.
⁴⁸ Ibid., 36.
⁴⁹ Ibid.
World War II in 1939. These three developments overshadowed the impact the book and Lange’s photographs were able to have during the 1930s.\(^{50}\)

In addition, the photographs had in the end, very little influence on legislation despite the fact that the FSA used substantial means to circulate the photographs among the public. The target group of U.S. legislators did not come to see the exhibits, nor did the subjects of the photographs: the farmers. Nevertheless, the FSA department photographers did make a name for themselves as great social observers.\(^{51}\)

This generalized term, social observers, meant that in the long run the impact of the work of Lange and other FSA photographers did not remain minimal. Immediate social and economic change for destitute farmers may not have been achieved during this time, but the photographs did accomplish one major goal of the FSA, namely to incorporate the plight of America’s farmers into the minds of many urban Americans. In major metropolitan areas such as Boston, New York and Los Angeles, influential people came to view exhibits by Stryker’s outfit. For many, the photographs made by the FSA meant a first glimpse at the life of rural America and the socio-economic situation of its inhabitants.

Particularly influential was the International Photographic Exhibition in early 1938 in New York City. Well-known and respected art critic for the Springfield, Massachusetts Sunday Union and Republican, Elizabeth McCausland, praised the photos in her review of the exhibit, stating that:

> In these photographs we might see also (if we were completely honest and fearless intellectually) the faces of ourselves. For, if the past decade has taught us no other thing, it has showed that the vaunted economic security of the

\(^{50}\) Spirn, Daring to Look: Dorothea Lange’s Photographs and Reports from the Field, 36.

prosperous citizen is no more secure than the marginal life of the depressed millions.\textsuperscript{52}

After a few very successful weeks, the New York Museum of Modern Art had decided to show the FSA part of the exhibit all over the United States, which meant national exposure for Lange’s photographs.\textsuperscript{53}

Overall, the FSA photography undertaking had been successful in achieving its goals to paint a picture of rural America during the Great Depression and show to the American people how this economic crisis affected the rural population. The popularity of some of the photographs, like Lange’s “Migrant Mother,” John Steinbeck’s novel \textit{The Grapes of Wrath}, and the widespread national publicity these publications received had another impact. It created a collective memory of the Great Depression as being mainly a rural depression. Due to the rural focus of FSA photographers, for many Americans the agricultural crisis came to represent the Great Depression.\textsuperscript{54} Identification with the rural workers, as Americans, meant for the public, recognition of being part of the same group, thus, creating a cultural memory of the Great Depression and its rural dramas, as being a national memory. The formation of this American cultural memory happens when “our memories complement each other; in particular when we deem ourselves part of the same social group.”\textsuperscript{55} One may live in an urban area during the 1930s, but through FSA photographs, one can identify with and feel sympathy for rural America, because Lange’s photographs depict the subjects as “true” Americans and thus part of the same social group.

\textsuperscript{52} Hurley, \textit{Portrait of a Decade}, 132-33.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 36.
\textsuperscript{54} Gordon, “Dorothea Lange: Photographer as Agricultural Sociologist,” 700.
\textsuperscript{55} Levine, ed. \textit{On Collective Memory}, 38.
As mentioned before, World War II put an end to the large stream of publicity for rural issues in the United States, and attention shifted toward economic progress and the war effort. Nonetheless, after the war and the following decade of great prosperity and wealth, a new era emerged in the 1960s in which social concerns in particular, came to play a major role in American politics, popular culture and society as a whole. Lange’s photographs, now historical documents, no longer functioned merely as evidence of social issues of the 1930s, but gained a different meaning and function in the 1960s.
Chapter Three: Social Struggle and Dorothea Lange’s Photographs in the 1960s

During and in the years following World War II, Dorothea Lange’s photographs of the Great Depression era received minimal public attention. Domestic issues such as land reform, resettlement and poverty among the rural population, which her photographs brought to the public’s attention during the depression years, seemed forgotten. At least, they seemed like problems from the distant past that no longer required immediate attention. In fact, the Farm Security Administration was terminated, including its photographic section.56 A label, The Great Depression, had been stamped on the era of the thirties, and looking back was not something the American people ever cared to do.

That progressive, forward-looking mode of America changed entirely during the 1960s, a time in which the socio-political situation called for reminiscing of times gone by. The decade of the 1950s had been a rather peaceful one, domestically speaking. Technological progress and a considerable growth of general wealth, in particular for Mr. and Mrs. Average, had been the dominating tone of the fifties. Industry and science became the number one priority for American society. This was the field where most Americans now made their living. Those who supported themselves in agriculture downsized from twenty percent in 1940, to twelve percent in 1950 and down to only eight percent in 1960.57

The industrialization of agriculture, which had set in during the Great Depression, exploded to never before seen proportions during the 1950s, due to the technological advancements of the day. The transformation of small family-farms into bigger more profitable businesses, with the use of new machinery for picking cotton and other

harvesting, had a lasting impact on especially southern agriculture. Gradually, machines, all under the flag of “innovation,” replaced the workers. This new development had another drastic effect, a racial one. Many blacks in the southern states made their living in the sharecropping business, in particular cotton farming. By 1960, more than ninety percent of all the cotton was harvested mechanically. This not only drove white tenants off the land, but even more so, the blacks. They sought new jobs in the cities of the north.58

The federal government boosted short-term prosperity of the 1950s and early sixties by means of easy credit loans and socio-economic programs. Commodity products such as cars and television sets were purchased en masse and the gross national product grew from $295 billion to $526 billion between 1950 and 1960. All layers of American society seemed to benefit from this newly found prosperity, and especially middle-class America was on the rise. This rapid increase of white middle-class America led to massive migration from the farms to the big cities, and from the big cities to suburbia. The Federal Housing Administration, providing affordable homes for many American families, supported these suburban projects. By 1960, a quarter of a million Americans had moved to the suburbs.

Not only did the government occupy itself with massive housing projects, but also with the construction of freeways, connecting the big cities to the new suburban living areas.59 All these improvements also had a downside. The outflow of, mostly educated, people from the inner cities to the suburbs led to bankruptcy for small businesses in the downtowns of major American metropolises. As a result, these downtowns turned into “impersonal centers of business dominated by sleek, unornamented skyscrapers, modernist towers of flat glass facades exposing interior

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59 Ibid., 835.
Those Americans who could not move to the suburbs, usually the economically underprivileged, a large amount of them part of an ethnic minority, remained in the inner cities while the jobs for the uneducated disappeared to the suburbs. The result was a major growth of unemployment and an increase in the number of Americans living below the poverty line. Domestically, this meant drastic changes in American society. Technology and science were booming, cities were expanding and the century old picture of a “rural” America was slowly vanishing.

Yet, the sixties were a turbulent time on so many other different levels. The domestic façade of prosperity was hardly a reflection of the brewing political developments on an international level between the United States, its western “allies” in Europe and the communist Soviet Union. The new American way of living, that is, a society in which commodity consumption came to construct one’s identity as an American, was threatened by the communist way of thinking.61

As mentioned, the Cold War conflicts between the Soviet Union and the western world escalated to the point where both sides were caught up in what seemed like an everlasting arms race. Fear played an important part in this Cold War and especially the deeply rooted dread in America of an ideology which opposed American values and ideals in every possible way: communism. It was this fear of communism which, as one of the major motives, incited the United States to take part in conflicts in Korea in the mid-fifties and eventually in Vietnam in the sixties. Principally, the latter would spark protest by the American people and drive a wedge between the young and older generation. The young, college-attending, public of America questioned American ideals such as work ethic and individualism during the mid-1960s. Taboos about sex and drugs were put to the test and “make love, not war” became their philosophy.

60 Maier, Inventing America: A History of the United States, 836.
61 Ibid., 827.
“countercultural rebellion,” opposed every hegemonic ideal in the United States. An especially troubling situation was the American mingling in Vietnamese affairs. By 1968, this particular war had already cost thousands of American lives and the dominant opinion in American society about the Vietnam War was disapproval. The fact that this war was the first war in history to be shown on American television added to this sentiment.

All these issues together: poverty, war abroad, communist threat and a new generation gone wild, called for immediate action by the Federal Government. In 1964, a year after Lyndon B. Johnson had taken office, he declared “unconditional war on poverty in America.” His War on Poverty legislation resulted in the adoption of the Economic Opportunity Act and the Community Action Program by U.S. Congress. These had both been designed to inspire young Americans to continue school, and to create an environment for the poor to participate in “devising and running the antipoverty effort.” Another endeavor by Johnson was his vision for a Great Society, a policy devised as a reaction to the growing desire of the American public for a sense of community and a less consumerist society in which material ownership had come to define American identity.

This is not to say that every American supported these new developments in American society. That is never the case. However, the dominant sentiment in America at the time was one of community hunger and worry about the social implications a decade of material prosperity had brought forth. The “old-fashioned” photograph functioned as one of the figures of memory to bring back those days when all seemed a bit less complicated.

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63 Ibid., 866.
64 Ibid.
The fight against poverty in America, a war that was killing thousands of young American men, the divided political and social view between the young and older generation and the civil rights movements, caused tremendous social upheaval in all layers of American society. A sense of longing for the past emerged along with the dominant belief that all was better in the past. How does this tie in with the photographs Dorothea Lange took in the 1930s? According to Walter Benjamin, the photograph uses the past as subject during times of change, “making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing.”

The turmoil of the 60s sparked this need for a nostalgic review of the past and the disappearing ideal of America as a community-based, agricultural nation. Susan Sontag argues in her acclaimed book *On Photography* that:

Socially concerned photographers assume that their work can convey some kind of stable meaning, can reveal truth. But partly because the photograph is, always, an object in a context, this meaning is bound to drain away; that is, the context which shapes whatever immediate – in particular, political – uses the photograph may have is inevitably succeeded by contexts in which such uses are weakened and become progressively less relevant. One of the central characteristics of photography is that process by which original uses are modified, eventually supplanted by subsequent uses – most notably, by the discourse of art into which any photograph can be absorbed.

This argument illustrates how photographs – in general – change in use due to the passage of time and “according to the context in which [they are] seen.” The specific circumstances, in which the photographs were taken, the context, vanish and

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66 Ibid., 106.
67 Ibid.
are altered as new contexts materialize. Photographs, mediated through time, take on different, adapted uses according to the newly emerged circumstances.

Dorothea Lange’s photographs of the migrants of the Dust Bowl disaster – and others – portrayed specific socio-political details of the Great Depression era within that particular context, and were utilized as propagandist political tools for the New Deal policies. Due to the passing of time, the original use is modified, altered into a more generalized image of the past in line with the new use in the 1960s. In the 1960s, because of the above-mentioned causes for national distress and social turmoil, the photographs taken by Lange of those struck by the Great Depression acquired a nostalgia value and became symbols of American ideals like the survivor mentality and a longing for a past in which the American people fought together against poverty.

Yet, in this era, the photographs were still employed on some level for political purposes. The process of depoliticization, as Sontag describes, had not been “completed.” In the post 1980s period, the period discussed in the following chapter, the photographs become more depoliticized and come to contain even more simplified symbolism. It is then that it reaches a status of a timeless and iconic image.

How then, specifically speaking, were Lange’s photos utilized and received in the 1960s? In addition, how and in what ways did they become part of American cultural memory? Lange’s photographs, such as “Migrant Mother,” were used by many a photographer in order to capture the heart of poverty. In an interview, conducted in 1964, Lange complains about this new development as she states that:

Young photographers are jumping onto civil rights and it's a bandwagon, like jumping onto the bandwagon. And poverty. That is the big thing everybody's photographing now, it's almost a new style because the
President's program [Lyndon B. Johnson’s “war on poverty”] to abolish poverty. All the young photographers are coming to me—“how do you photograph poverty now?” You know it's pathetic.68

Many of the answers to these questions can be traced back to the dissatisfaction about the present time— the 1960s that is—and the theory that this discontent “expressed itself as a longing for another world.”69 That other world is in this case the 1930s, in which severe problems were at hand, but to the American public in the 1960s, these problems seemed marginal and most of all: conquered by the American people as a collective. However, that nostalgic sense of admiration and longing, also created a desire to use Lange’s photographs to show 1960s issues. Moreover, this is where her photographs become part of the American cultural memory. As Alan Trachtenberg argues, “they [photographs] become cultural memory only by deliberate acts of will and purpose”70 Thus, this would indicate that the intentional use of Dorothea Lange’s photographs by 1960s social- and political-minded photographers, as the example of how to portray poverty, is proof that the photos have become part of American cultural memory. A great deal of credibility, attributed to Lange’s photographs, meant a continuation of use of the photographs in American culture.

Not only were Lange’s 1930s photographs functional in portraying poverty, they also served another new and prominent political concern of the 60s: the African American civil rights cause. With Lange’s photographs of African Americans shown in renowned art exhibits during the middle of the decade, a different and more dignified view for the 1960s on African Americans was now widely seen. Lange had photographed African Americans during the Great Depression as hard working farmers, alongside white farmers in the same poverty-stricken position.

68 Doud, “Dorothea Lange Interview.”
69 Sontag, On Photography, 80.
Figure 1, for example, shows such a photograph in which— as the original caption reads—“sharecroppers' families gathering needs for their 4th of July celebration, whites and blacks together,” in Mississippi, July 1934. Even though racial division and discrimination of African-Americans in American society was still very much present during the Great Depression, the photos Lange took appear to show otherwise. Thus, “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.” Furthermore, the significance of the children in Figure 5 is that of innocence and mutual respect shown by the youth of America during the 1930s. Apparently, these children have no problem whatsoever to share their family dinner with each other, regardless of race or background. And even though Lange purposely grouped them according to race, this does not have an overwhelming impact on the photograph. The children look rather similar in appearance, all barefoot with an expression on their faces which might suggest that they have no clue why someone is photographing this ordinary event. All in all, a perfect picture and most likely a confrontational one for racially divided America of the 1960s. These images of men and children working together, side by side, regardless of race, wakened feelings of unity and a sense of longing for the 1930s during those years in which different ethnic groups in America fought for their place in society during the 1960s. After all, photographs seemingly do not lie: they appear as the “truth,” and evoke the idea that in the past, all was better.

Throughout the sixties, the photographs of the Great Depression era gradually gained the stature of American icons. This did not happen overnight obviously and thus a further look into what started the retrospective view on Lange’s old photographs is necessary. In 1960, Lange worked on a program called “Death of a Valley,” published in the popular photography magazine *Aperture*. Following this publication, which apparently piqued the interest of renowned museums, the accompanying photo essay was exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Art. The focus of this essay was the devastation of the Berryessa Valley due to the construction of a dam. The photographers working alongside Lange on the project wanted to draw notice to “the price of progress, in a society willing to sacrifice ecology for the sake of consumerism.”  

Gradually, the public started to take notice of Lange’s previous work. Her book *An American Exodus*, a photographic documentary, which was a major flop during the Great Depression itself, had now reached “the status of a recognized classic” by the mid-sixties. American journalists and eventually the American public came to view Lange’s work “as a classic.” The book had gained a standing of cultural importance, of significance to American history. The success of Lange’s old photographs continued as the New York Museum of Modern Art decided to exhibit some of her Great Depression work in 1966.

In 1968, three years after Lange’s death, the University of California published an article called “Dorothea Lange: The Making of a Documentary Photographer,” along with an interview conducted with Lange only a few years prior to her death. As a retrospection of her work for the FSA and her influence on American society, the article argues that:

Her great photographs of the depression still carry residual truth that moves us as no rudimentary "social realism" can, truth sometimes as terrible as the parched and blowing earth, but as magnificent as the mother who, in the midst of tragedy as overwhelming as any Greek scene of terror and pity, clasps her children to her, and with superb humanity confronts the fates. The heroic scale of such photographs is the scale of man facing forces beyond his individual control. What deepens the tragic irony is Dorothea's awareness, implicit in all of her work, that together we need not be at the mercy of negative forces which human reason can not only bring under control, but turn into a positive direction that could lead us to a new society altogether.  

73 Borhan, *Dorothea Lange: The Heart and Mind of a Photographer*, 156.
This quote illustrates the sixties sentiment that in Lange’s photographs one can find the true American spirit of heroism and overcoming tragedy through unity.

That brings us to the last part of how Lange’s photographs were utilized through ideological practice in American society during the 1960s and ultimately became part of American cultural memory. In order for them – the photographs – to obtain such a status that the public can construct an image of the past through them and derive a sense of identity from them, there must be a stronger force than just an image with a meaning. The fact that these photographs have acquired such a status that they can represent – for the American people – the “true” image of, for example, the American survivor spirit, indicates that a binding factor is at work.

Louis Althusser used the example of religious interpellation to clarify how individuals freely adopt ideological ideas when he argued that individuals, through a material body – the bible – become subjects through interpellation, subordinate to that higher Subject, God. The subject freely submits to the religious ideology materialized in the bible and thus submits to that higher power. That higher power can also be the State, the repressive apparatus which keeps all the subjects properly in line as “good subjects.” Aside from this repressive state apparatus, there exists also an ideological state apparatus. This force is more subtle, not directly visible like the repressive state apparatuses and uses ideology to control its subjects. According to Althusser, the dominant ideologies of the dominant class in a society are “realized in institutions, in their rituals and their practices, in the ISA’s.”75 In contemporary capitalist societies, there are dominantly seven Ideological State Apparatuses. Specifically: the educational apparatus, the religious apparatus, the family apparatus, the political apparatus, the trade-union apparatus, the communications apparatus [and] the

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‘cultural’ apparatus.”76 Their main objective is to reproduce the relations of production, which for the ruling class, is the ultimate goal. However, dominant ideologies do not emerge out of thin air and they do not continue to exist without struggle. More importantly, “in a class society the relations of production are relations of exploitation, and therefore relations between antagonist classes.”77 And so every once in a while these opposing classes clash on a major scale. As an example, Althusser mentions the “the ‘crisis’ of the educational ISA in every capitalist country today [the 1960s].”78

Eventually however, hegemony is preserved. Antonio Gramsci argued that a class society is unable to function without that balance, which is to say that for a society to continue the reproduction of the relations of production, it needs some sort of social unity. More importantly, it is in the interest of the dominant class to have that social harmony. In his critical review of Gramsci’s theory on hegemony, Luis Pozo argues in his article “The Roots of Hegemony,” that class rule is legitimized in modern society through what he calls “mechanisms of class accommodation.” These mechanisms of class accommodation refer to:

the myths of community and inclusive (id) entities shaped by the systemic power of ruling classes. Aimed at de-classing social consciousness, preventing class unity and obscuring subordinate classes' interest in an independent politics, the effect of these identities is to render the reality of class divisions politically irrelevant by stressing the allegedly fundamental, 'organic' unity of dominant and dominated.79

77 Ibid., 32.
78 Ibid., 33.
In addition, Pozo argues that these mechanisms are characterized by arranged ethics that fix collective thought and understanding by inclusion of people in a fictive community, not to be confused with an unreal or false one, “in the name of an ideologically and culturally constructed identification.” Moreover, this identity demands moral precedence and exclusive devotion. If we are to argue that the United States is one of those modern class societies, then we can identify the mechanisms at work in the name of ideology. Love for the American nation and all the general ideals that have come to define it, overshadow class struggles and thus de-class social consciousness.

The collective ideals, proclaimed to be seen in Lange’s photographs during the 1960s, were used in the different ISA’s in the superstructure of American society, such as the political Ideological State Apparatus and the ‘cultural’ Ideological State Apparatus. The different views on Lange’s photographs were plentiful, and in the sixties, predominantly about opportunism, optimism, perseverance, individualism and most of all: the unity of the American nation. Lange’s photographs functioned as figures of memory, or if one can call them that, figures of ideology, that is, a sign with cultural meaning, attributed to the photographs through social interaction between individuals in the same culture. As a subject in a modern day class society, one recognizes the studium in those photographs, which is part of the dominant ideology, and one finds it valuable, truthful and ‘natural.’ Thus, the reproduction of the dominant ideology and memory of the Great Depression is secured through the attributed meaning given to Lange’s photographs.

The article “Dorothea Lange: The Making of a Documentary Photographer,” clearly refers to those generalized attributed meanings in Lange’s photographs. The

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author, Suzanne Riess, noticeably interprets and remembers the photographs as iconic and noteworthy as she argues that they embody signs of the ideal mother and the strength individuals possess to overcome “negative forces.” Moreover, the article argues that the human beings and their reasoning capacity can turn tragedy into something constructive, preferably a positive view on society and thus the ability to change it. 81 These are the “residual truths” Lange supposedly photographed, not the specifics of the Great Depression, the statistics, but the ideals and values one wishes to see in the photographs that have been passed on to the next generation.

In conclusion, social political issues of the 1960s evoked a desire among Americans to look back on times gone by and struggles which had been overcome. The Great Depression was the most recent struggle on American soil and thus photographs materialized American ideals and a collective convincingness that the American nation can overcome any crisis.

The next chapter will prove that roughly from the 1980s onward, the position of Lange’s photographs as contributing cultural artifacts in American culture and cultural memory was firmly secured, the educational Ideological State Apparatus also ‘adopted’ Lange’s photographs and the art of photography in general as their figure of ideology.

Chapter Four: Institutionalization and Commodification of Dorothea Lange’s Great Depression Photographs Post 1980

In the previous chapters, the thirties and sixties were the focal point of this thesis. The last chapter will deal with the period from the 1980s onward. The period of the 1980s is noted for a strong revival of republican conservatism and patriotism in the United States. Laissez-faire was the way to success and government interference, a very unpopular term in American culture, was “not done.” President Ronald Reagan and his republican party took laissez-faire to the extreme. Reagonomics was the result, a disastrous policy of tax cuts, the “trickle down” theory and New Federalism with measures to ensure the shrinking of federal government influence and passing on many responsibilities to the individual states.82

Not only political and economic conservatism was at its peak, also American patriotism celebrated a major comeback. The guilt and trauma of the Vietnam War, which had been a prominent sentiment during the 1970s, was ignored in popular culture in the 1980s. The main characters in television shows like “The A-Team” and the “Rambo” movies were Vietnam veterans, but now portrayed as heroes, a stark contrast to the reception the real veterans received upon their arrival home. A search for American heroes in the past and present was peaking along with a desire to restore American honor. Yet again, reflection on American achievements in the past became fashionable.

In the eighties, republican conservatism was the dominant political and social attitude in the United States, which also saw fit to use Lange’s photographs, albeit in a different fashion than previous decades. As argued before, photographs do not speak on their own, but only within a certain context to a specific individual or group. As

Walter Werner argues that “meanings become contingent, multiple and shift over time. Never is there just one intrinsic meaning "hidden" in a picture, waiting to be correctly uncovered through the authority of expertise. There will always be a surplus of meanings, something more that can be said across time, place and viewers.”

Thus, it is not surprising that the political right also saw their political and societal views represented in Lange’s work. In particular, “Migrant Mother” became the symbol of American values and patriotism. It was during this era that “Migrant Mother,” and subsequently other images by Lange, became iconic images.

This is evident in many different publications and handlings of the image during the early eighties. The American Library of Congress started using the “Migrant Mother” photograph as the image for their section of “digital collections” of “prints and photographs” in their catalogue for “American Memory.” Moreover, in 1979, the identity of the woman photographed in the famous image, was revealed as Florence Owens Thompson, and in 1983 she made headlines again when she was dying of cancer and needed a few thousand dollars a week to be nursed. Her son, Troy Owens, contacted the San José Mercury News which subsequently published an article entitled “‘Migrant Mother’ Now Lies Dying: Subject of Photo Racked by Cancer,” with a plea to the American public. The New York newspaper, the Democrat and Chronicle, also published an article, with the title: “A Haunting Symbol of the Depression Struggles for Her Life, Pleads For Help.” This article and even just the title alone clearly conveys the eighties sentiment of viewing Florence Thompson and her photograph as American icons. As a result, Americans nationwide donated thousands of dollars to Florence Thompson, which clearly indicates that the American people remained fascinated with the heroine of the photograph. Furthermore, the

Library of Congress continues to mentions these articles as useful publications about “Migrant Mother.”

Even though popular opinion praised the “Migrant Mother” photograph as being one of the greatest photographs ever taken, Florence Thompson herself was never pleased with the image and had felt exploited by Lange. The main reason was that she never received a copy of the photograph nor any financial compensation after the photograph had become so well known. In addition, she argued that Lange had told a factually incorrect story, invented to dramatize Thompson’s life for the sake of propaganda. A good example of this dramatization is the fact that Thompson and her children were not typical Dust Bowl immigrants, but Lange simply assumed they were and consequently, so did the American people. Thompson was born in Oklahoma, on tribal land of the Cherokee Nation, but she and her husband moved to California in the 1920s. Another detail which Lange included in her notes was that the family had just sold their tires to buy food, which according to Thompson’s son, was a complete fabrication. Ultimately, whether or not Lange wrote fiction about Thompson’s family is irrelevant to the impact it had on American cultural memory. She had photographed the “ideal victim” and this is how the American public still views Florence Thompson, despite the factual flaws.

In the previous chapter, the political Ideological State Apparatus played a pivotal role in forming the meaning attributed to Lange’s photographs during the 1960s. However, after this period, another Ideological State Apparatus takes on the dominant role in modern capitalist society. Althusser argues that “the Ideological State Apparatus which has been installed in the dominant position in mature capitalist

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social formations as a result of a violent political and ideological class struggle against the old dominant Ideological State Apparatus, is the educational ideological apparatus.” 86 This is not to say that the political State Apparatus has lost its influence. On the contrary, it is still very powerful and all the Ideological State Apparatuses together work toward the same goal: the reproduction of the relations of production i.e. the relations of exploitation within modern capitalist societies, such as the United States. However, according to Althusser, since the 1970s, the School has taken over the dominant position among all the Ideological State Apparatuses from the Church. Althusser uses the example in his essay of the societal and educational crisis of the 1960s as the main cause for the emergence of the educational Ideological State Apparatus as the dominant one when he argues that:

The Church has been replaced today in its role as the dominant Ideological State Apparatus by the School. It is coupled with the Family just as the Church was once coupled with the Family. We can now claim that the unprecedentedly deep crisis which is now [during the late sixties] shaking the education system of so many States across the globe, often in conjunction with a crisis (already proclaimed in the Communist Manifesto) shaking the family system, takes on a political meaning, given that the School (and the School/Family couple) constitutes the dominant Ideological State Apparatus, the Apparatus playing a determinant part in the reproduction of the relations of production of a mode of production threatened in its existence by the world class struggle. 87

In the 1980s, this ideological state apparatus, the School, started to materialize the ideals and values transmitted through Great Depression images by Lange. High

87 Ibid., 16-18.
schools, Universities and museums, such as the famous Getty museum in Los Angeles, produced a myriad amount of educational material. The Getty Museum for example, devised educational products called “The Dorothea Lange Curriculum” and educationally-oriented exhibitions. The current curriculum of the Getty Museum on Dorothea Lange and the Great Depression consists of many different assignments for junior and high school students, challenging them, among other things, to ask “questions about what they see so that they can understand the message the artist is trying to communicate.” Quite a presupposing demand, since the assumption is that an artist has a message to communicate. “Understand is the keyword here, for it assumes that something is to be learned from these photographs about American history. Thus the students are not allowed to simply view Lange’s photographs as documents of economic deprivation, but they embody meaning which the student is to “understand” and accept as the truth. One of the learning objectives is also quite conspicuous. The students are asked to “use their own observations to actively construct meaning about objects and to explore concepts about art and culture.” Again, “Migrant Mother” poses in this particular publication as the front image for educational material.88

Another educational institute, The National Art Education Association, used Lange’s material in 1995 for instructional purposes with a Christian based short story from 1982 as introduction, written about the “Migrant Mother” image. Again, as in the more recent Getty material, students are first asked to find “meaning and relevance” in the photograph. The historical background is of secondary relevance and more importantly, this educational material again uses the dramatized story Lange invented. Florence Thompson’s version is again not the historical narrative of choice in this material.

Another striking comment in this source is the way in which the teacher is supposed to instruct the students how to engage the material. They are advised to “specify that you [the teacher] want the students only to identify those things with which they could all agree and to hold interpretive and judgmental statements until later in the discussion.” Thus, the students are supposed to find the studium in the photograph, which appeals to them individually, but only if everyone recognizes that same meaning in the photograph. Students ought to recognize the “true” meaning of the photograph, that of American heroism and resolve and accept the collective notion that this particular portrait is one of great historical importance to American culture. Thus, through all this material, the idea of the “Migrant Mother” image as an impressive social observation, and of Lange as a photographer of great cultural importance and stature, is reaffirmed during the 1980s and 1990s.

The ever-growing focus since the 1980s on the visual, instead of literature, especially among young people, was another major development that also influenced the popularity of the photograph as a figure of memory. Through visual images, especially through portraits of people, one remembers more vividly and thus the photographs have more impact. Especially the “Migrant Mother” image gained national fame and wide public acclaim as an American iconic image. A touched up version of the photograph was issued in 1998 as a 32-cent U.S. Postal Service stamp. The reason for this issuing was the Celebrate the Century series in which “Migrant Mother” represented the 1930s era. As a side note on the stamp, it states: “America Survives the Depression.” The focus is evidently not on the hardship, poverty and hopelessness of the Great Depression, but on the determination of the American nation in overcoming the crisis and this was and still is the main reception of the

90 Werner, “Reading Pictures of People,” 216.
photograph. The postage stamp was certainly a great way to reach a widespread audience. Not only stamps were used to spread the image, also coffee mugs, mother’s day cards and posters.⁹¹ All these forms of use of Lange’s photographs in educational material and commodity products suggest a prominent position in the cultural memory of many Americans.

In conclusion, the desire to reinforce a collective American identity and an American cultural memory of the Great Depression resulted in the materialization of American ideals seen in Lange’s photographs in the educational field, museums and even commodity products such as postage stamps, from the 1980s onward. This guaranteed a continuation of photography in general as an important tool in the reinforcement of American cultural memory of the Great Depression era. The different technologies of memory used over the decades have made certain that Lange’s photos have continued to function as a representation of the Great Depression era. Furthermore, the continuing existence of that representation reinforced an American collective identity of overcoming crisis and hardship through individual and community effort. As Walter Werner argues, “many portraits, such as Dorothea Lange's “Migrant Mother,” became famous over time by taking on broad cultural meanings that transcend the individuals [in the photograph]. Iconic images point to something much bigger than themselves. They become symbols for ideas, values, events, places, time periods or institutions.”⁹² In other words, Lange’s photographs, in particular the “Migrant Mother” image, and the American values and ideals one thinks they represent, have become institutionalized in American society i.e. embedded within American cultural memory.

⁹² Werner, “Reading Pictures of People,” 222.
“Migrant Mother” was not the only Great Depression photograph by Lange, which gained public appraisal. Unquestionably, the “White Angel Breadline” (Figure 6) image is a very famous image, and one of Lange’s very first as a socially observing photographer. Evidently early on, Lange’s focus was on portrait photography and the expressions of people and their surroundings. This particular image shows a rather hopeless looking, older man, with his back to the rest of the crowd, as if far away in thought. He awaits a meal at the San Francisco soup kitchen in 1934.

The photograph called “Toward Los Angeles” (Figure 7), has also come to symbolize many American ideas and values. The latter has a strong appeal because of the road sign, which says rather insensitively, “next time, try the train, relax,” If the people in the photograph have any options. Yet the photograph does not try to convey the message that they need help. They seem to manage just fine on their own.

Those two photographs are great examples of hopeless situations, but reception over the past eighty years has altered their use and interpretation from mere political tool to show everyday suffering during the Great Depression, into messages of hope and American pride. Nevertheless, the “Migrant Mother” image has been the one which accrued the most attention, commercial exploitation, public acknowledgement and review.

Figure 6: “White Angel Breadline.” 1934. *Photo by Dorothea Lange, Courtesy of The Dorothea Lange Collection, Oakland Museum of California, City of Oakland.*

Figure 7: “Toward Los Angeles, California.” March 1937. *Photo by Dorothea Lange, Courtesy Library of Congress LC-USZC4-8174.*
Conclusion

This thesis has proposed the argument that photographs, and in this particular case those taken by Dorothea Lange during the period known as the Great Depression, have been subject to changing interpretations throughout the twentieth century. Lange’s photographs, however, have not only remained a present force in American culture, but have become an important part of American cultural memory. Iconic images as they are now called, that represent essential American values and ideas of survival and national resolve during lean times. Dorothea Lange’s images appealed to a wide public during the years after World War II in particular.

The 1960s was a period in which the reception of Lange’s photographs was at its peak. The social troubles of the times created a sense of nostalgia and longing for the past. According to many Americans, this ideal image of the past had been captured on film by Lange. The meaning of the photographs during this period shifted from being mere political tools and social observations of poverty, rural needs and well-needed government action, into the “right” example of how to portray poverty in the 1960s. In addition, the images had by then gained the stature of valuable attributes to the history of the American nation and all its positive aspects. The idea of the hard-working American farmer, at the mercy of natures’ violent surprises, but resilient enough to overcome these misfortunes, was the dominant meaning seen in Lange’s photographs during the 1960s, and those ideas have survived till the present day. The public interpreted the images in this way because of the hegemonic idea of the American nation. A distance in time is needed for this mediation of ideas to take place. At the ongoing moment of production in the 1930s, the public could not view the photographs in a past context as it was the “present” at the time. In the 1960s, and beyond, the images lost their original context and new meanings of the images.
emerged due to societal developments and the gradual change of the ideological framework of the society one lives in.

After a period of less exposure, Lange’s photographs made a major comeback in the 1980s. The reception of the photographs remained the same as in the 1960s but their use now expanded to the educational field. From the 1980s onward, Lange’s images of the Great Depression were implemented in educational material for the purpose of teaching the young generation about the Great Depression. Entire handbooks were dedicated to one image in particular: “Migrant Mother.” An amazing amount of generalized ideals were, and are, supposed to be found in that one single photograph. Not only the educational field has accepted the photographs of Lange as invaluable images, the commercial field also noticed the possibilities of Lange’s photos. Commodity products such as stamps, coffee mugs and greeting cards have been widely promoted and sold.

After examining the different periods of the twentieth century, the question arises what the significance will be of Lange’s photographs, photography in general and cultural memory in the future. In the last decade or so, the field of cultural memory studies has come to embrace the idea that photographs have had a tremendous impact on the formation of cultural memory. A myriad of articles have acknowledged that fact and the significance of photography to cultural memory has become a new development in cultural memory studies. Alan Trachtenberg discusses his theory on photography and cultural memory in light of the new digital age in his essay “Through a Glass, Darkly: Photography and Cultural Memory,” when he argues that society is losing the old paper photograph to the digital process of the constant production of replicas where there is no longer an “original.” Not a new theory, however, given the fact that Walter Benjamin already wrote about the reproduction of
art and its consequences in his article “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in 1935, in which he used photography as the primary example. Through this development of constant reproduction one loses the idea that photographs “answer to the need for at least an illusion of memory.” The newly accepted theory is now that photographs can also be “false” due to constant digital reproduction and manipulation. This argument illustrates the problem of today's delicate situation of the relationship between the photograph and cultural memory. New technologies question the traditional view of the photograph as an "original" tie to the past. Replication and manipulation of the photograph now create skepticism about the purity of the photograph as a representation of a common past. Thus it is all the more significant for the field of cultural memory studies, to explore the old fashioned paper photograph and how it affected the cultural memory of a nation.

It will be interesting to see if the digital time we live in now, completely crushes our faith in what a photograph can mean to a society, individuals and the identity one draws from it. The digital age does not mean the extinction of the photograph. On the contrary, the vast collection of digital photographs of for example the American Library of Congress and many other governmental institutions worldwide will become more important in the future. Nevertheless, what will be most salient is how we will view those copies of copies, in the form of a file on a computer rather than materialized as physically tangible objects, and the value we attribute to them. The modern age will radically change our collective familiarity with the photograph and impact the theoretical perception of photographs and photography as carriers of memory. This modern development can also have the effect that old photographs become even more important, and gain larger-than-life value especially

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95 Ibid., 113.
96 Ibid., 114.
since the photographic image has been one of the central figures of memory since the
first photograph was taken in 1823, in constructing our image of the world and of
ourselves. 97 To those who still believe that the paper photograph is a representation of
the "real world," the old photographs taken during hallmark periods of the twentieth
century will become ever more precious.98

97 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 86.
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