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PHOTOGRAPHY AS A MEDIUM AND TOOL FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

When American photographer Dorothea Lange took a photo of "Migrant Mother" during the Great Depression in the USA, she contributed to an immediate support for the affected farmers. The objective of the paper is to analyse social/sociological photography and appeal to changes in society that could be achieved, as well as to map similar initiatives around the world and in Slovakia.

Keywords: *Bán, Dmitrijev, FSA, Koudelka, Lange, Riis, Salgado, social photography, sociological photography, Štreit*.

Introduction

Through digitalization, photography has become an even more available medium than it was before, and, it is now an everyday part of our lives, whether through media or social networks inundated with aesthetic and perfect photographs. However, many of us still do not comprehend what photography is and has been capable of, the power this tool holds, as it is able to not only promote, sell, or capture pretty memories, but can also influence, transform the society and its development, hold up a mirror to it, be both its critic and proponent. Or, it can also be an efficient instrument of propaganda even today, as it is so simple to manipulate photography. It is very easy to capture and display nice moments of our lives, but it is important to remember those, who have not been as lucky as we are, and, therefore, photographs by humanist authors with social conscience can be that voice which draws attention to the disadvantaged or forgotten.

Briefly about the Origins of Social Photography

The second half of the 19th century was a very fruitful period, as regards the documentation of lower segments of society. In his artwork, Italian photographer C. Ponti captures Venice, its streets and lives of the lower classes, street peddlers and beggars (Hlaváč 1974: 14). In England, in his work Street Life in London from 1877, the author J. Thomson captures day-to-day life and work of people in the streets of London outskirts as a reportage. Country life in Northeast England and everything it comprises, from fishing to agriculture, is documented by F. M. Sutcliffe (Mrázková 1985: 56). So far, all of these are just documentary works, some with a character of reportage, by different authors from different countries, which were not deliberately aiming at social photography or portrayal of the topic of human work. At the end of the 19th century and at the turn of the centuries, which,

according to Hlaváč, is considered the realistic period of photography, authors such as P. A. Emerson start to emerge (Hlaváč 1974: 14). Emerson's photography philosophy differed from the others by its naturalism and, in his opinion, photography should faithfully reproduce what is seen by human eyes, without retouching, modifications or combination of photographs. He regards spontaneity, naturalness, and authenticity as the fundamental values of photography. He carries this philosophy over into his work and records the country and daily lives of people in Norfolk for the purpose of ethnological study which he publishes in the work "Life and Landscape on the Norfolk Broads" from 1886 (Mrázková 1985: 34). At the turn of the centuries, when the social differences in the two world powers – one capitalist, the other socialist, are increasing, social photography and its voice are also rising.

Danish photographer J. A. Riis is among the first photographers who have demonstrated how powerful the instrument of photography can be. He photographed East Side streets in New York with an aim to draw attention of the society to the inhumane conditions that immigrants live in. In his photographic work and articles, he demonstrated the poor living conditions, criminality, and diseases that affected this segment of New York society. Jacob Riis himself was one of the millions of immigrants who had moved to America at the turn of centuries in search of a better life but had ended at the edge of life instead. After seven years, he had found a permanent job as a journalist and focused his work on this part of society that he experienced himself and needed to raise awareness of. Riis was also a pioneer in photography using artificial light which he saw as an opportunity to dramatize the statement of his photography. In photographing night streets, he had assistants helping him with illumination by igniting magnesium powder. "*His photography became a conscience of the society. Its power does not lie only in the fact that it informs, it also brings evidence and impacts emotions*" (Mrázková 1985: 66-67). His photographic work, also noticed by the US president Theodore Roosevelt, brought a new face to the New York East Side area in the form of parks and housing for immigrants (Anonym 2021).

At the other side of the world, in Tzarist Russia, photographer Maxim P. Dmitrijev calls for help for the poor through his socially critical work (Mrázková 1985: 57). The 1890s in the Upper Volga Region around Nizhny Novgorod were affected by drought that caused poverty, hunger, and consequently, disease-afflicted people, who the tsarist government showed no interest in. Originally a portrait photographer, working in Novgorod

atelier, sets out to photograph this desolate land, starving people and cattle, and its shacks with an intention to appeal to society and to find help. Despite censorship, thanks to Russian intelligence, reporters, and writers, he is able to publish this authentic documentary anonymously in a magazine and a book under the title "The Barren Year 1891 – 1892 in the Nizhny Novgorod Region", urging the society to put pressure on the government (Mrázková 1985: 60-61). Similarly to J. Riis, his activities were successful at drawing attention to the social problem, raising society's awareness and its willingness to help. His work had, thus, led to an organization of material support for the region from the citizens, and later also from the tzarist government, which had ignored the problem at first (Hlaváč 1987: 162).

Another milestone of social photography is the photographic work of the American sociologist Lewis W. Hine, who had contributed to the transformation of child labour laws (Hlaváč 1974: 14). His first known photographs come from New York Harbor, where he photographs arriving ships full of immigrants searching for new life in a free country. It is here that Hine realizes how powerful photography is by being able to say a thousand words. However, from 1908, he focuses on a slightly different, not very popular topic of child labour. On five thousand photographs taken within thirteen years, he captures children and their work in factories, mines, mills, glass factories, plantations, and fields. "*Although regulations on child labour already existed at the time, they had not been respected, because children could be paid less than adults*" (Mrázková 1985: 68). Hine felt a need to document and publicly present this fact and that is why he started to work for National Child Labor Committee. But it was not easy, as he often had to carry out his photographic and sociologic activities in disguise, e.g., as an inspector or insurance salesman. His harsh or rough photographs, in which the working children often look straight into the lens, oftentimes said more and resonated in the society much stronger than any article written before. He composes the shots in a way that captures the environment in which the children work as truthfully as possible (Mrázková 1985: 69). After his work was published in progressive magazines, government was put under enormous public pressure to set minimum age requirements for working. Through his photography, Hine has, thus, contributed to the cessation of the use of child labour in America and the return of many children to schools (Halliday 2020).

At this time, photography gains momentum and popularity and becomes an increasingly used medium in press and a weapon in the fight against injustice. Thanks to the aforementioned authors, the world got to see

the power the photography has to influence the society and its development. Hidden potential of photography as a trustworthy medium had been found also by representatives of countries that saw an opportunity to use photography as an instrument of agitation and promotion of their political or ideological interests in the society (Mrázková 1985: 118). According to historians, the shortcomings of Tzarist empire, such as poor economic situation, casualties of war, poverty, and hunger, started to manifest themselves during the First World War. This led to the fall of the Tzarist government, the Great October Revolution, and the consequent civil war that the Bolsheviks supressed successfully (Anonym 2017). During this time, usage of photography had taken on a new dimension. It was meant to inform, agitate, and teach the uneducated society in a comprehensible, persuasive, and authentic way. "*And thus, for the first time, photography in Soviet Russia becomes an instrument of a programmed, centrally controlled, and didactically focused propaganda and agitation*" (Hlaváč 1974: 14). However, there had been a lack of photographers at the time, as most had fled abroad or stopped photographing because of the changes in the system and entrepreneurship. Therefore, the Russian government decided to recruit new photographers from among common people, such as workers, peasants, or miners. Shortly after the October Revolution when Bolsheviks came to power, they established a cinema-photo department alongside the State Committee for People's Education, and one year later also the Higher Institute of Photography, which were intended to train new cadres of working-class photographers, and it was also the first school in Europe to teach all genres of photography. In the 1920s, working people and construction of the country became the main topics of photography in the Soviet Union. In this period, social photography becomes socialist and acquires an educational-propagandistic character (Hlaváč 1974: 14). At first, in larger cities, thematic photographs had been hung as image newspapers into "agit displays", shown at exhibitions of proletarian photography, and published as albums (Mrázková 1985: 118). Later, after the improvement in economic situation in the Union's second decennium, magazines and weeklies such as Ogoňok, Sovetskoje foto a fotograf start to emerge, and an agency Sojuz Foto is established. According to Mrázková, in all of these, "*photography becomes an image language of magazines"* (Mrázková 1985: 119). In 1930, magazine SSSR na stroike (USSR in Construction) is established with an aim to inform Soviet people about the development of construction in the country according to the first five-year plan. The magazine also played its propagandistic role abroad, as it had been published

in different languages (Mrázková 1985: 119). "*From the beginning of the 1930s, Soviet authors had been bringing photographic stories about the construction in their homeland, about the transformation of Soviet worker's life-style, and developing industrialization in the excellently edited magazine SSSR na sroike, founded by M. Gorky, or in youth illustrated magazine Ogoňok. Although painful, it was a birth of something new and hopeful, and a Soviet photographer reported about it with committed engagement*" (Hlaváč 1974: 9).

In Germany, a magazine with a topic of working-class photography entitled Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung (AIZ) was established as early as 1921. Magazine's content consisted of reportages of working-class environment and political development in the country supplemented by authentic photographs. In 1926, under the AIZ, magazine Der Arbeiter-Fotograf (Worker-Photographer) started to be published and reached 7000 printed copies in 1929. The magazine also contributed to the development of the German Association of Worker-Photographers which had 1480 members at the time. In the 1930s, similar associations and left-wing movements also emerged in the nearby countries affected by the crisis. At the time, Hungarian worker-photographers published their works in magazine Munka. An association of worker-photographers, called Szociofotó, is also established by artist and poet Lajos Kassák (Mrázková 1985: 119). Left-wing photographic movement of the same name Sociofoto is established also in Slovakia as an alliance of communist propagandists led by Irena Blühová and Barbora Zsigmondiová and Friends of Nature association (Hlaváč 1989: 168). Majority of the associations, groups or unions of social and socialist photography remained active until 1938, when political situation changed mainly in Germany and Hitler came to power.

The Wall Street Crash from the 24th October 1929 constituted a catastrophe for the American society and economic crisis for the whole world. In 1932, there were as many as 15 million unemployed people in the United States. President Hoover was unable to improve the economic situation and, therefore, Roosevelt takes over the office in 1933 (Medveďová 2017). President Roosevelt adopts measures to revive the economy known as the New Deal. This new system had also its opponents and, therefore, Roosevelt's government establishes groups of photographers with an aim to document the hard living conditions on American farmers in order to gain support for his economic reforms. Later, in 1937, this project was renamed Farm Security Administration (FSA). The large number of authors involved in the project comprised prominent personalities such as Arthur Rothstein,

Walker Evans, Russell Lee, Marion Post Wolcott, Jack Delano, John Vachon, and Dorothea Lange. It was the portrait by Lange entitled "Migrant Mother" from 1936 that became the icon of the Great Depression in America. During this period, until the World War Two, the FSA team managed to create approximately two hundred and fifty thousand photographs, which shows the scale and magnificence of this sociological project that is considered the largest photo-documentary project thus far (Mrázková 1985: 57).

Contemporary World and Slovak Social Photography

Within the whole history, the period considered contemporary history is the period after the World War Two. During this post-war period, an agency Magnum Photos has been established as a consequence of the World War Two. The agency was founded in 1947 by photographers Robert Capa, David Seymour, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and George Rodger. Its objective was to associate socially committed photographers with humanist values from around the world, to provide them with freedom for their work, and, through its members' work, to present visual testimonies of society's problems to the world (Greenberg 2013).

The most famous Czech photographer of global significance from the Magnum Photos agency, who has dedicated his work to the criticism of society and its problems, is Josef Koudelka. He became renowned for his photographs from the protests against Warsaw Pact troops invasion of Prague in 1968, which had gone around the world media through Magnum Photos agency. They were signed by a pseudonym "P.P.", Prague Photographer, because of fear of possible persecution. In 1968, due to the unfreedom and fear, Josef Koudelka emigrated and later obtained asylum in Great Britain, which allowed him to travel around Europe and continue his previous work (Anonym 2017). Before the occupation, he had focused his attention on photographing the Roma. In times when there is a growing number of expressions and crimes based on hatred of the Roma and Sinti community, Koudelka's work provides an alternative to simplified, polarizing, and racially stereotypical media images of the Roma. In 1974, he became a member of Magnum Photos and, a year later, he published a book "Gypsies", where he presented his emotional photographs from Roma settlements supplemented by factual texts by a social anthropologist (Bayryamali 2020). His last large contemporary photographic work (2008 – 2012) is a panoramic series from the Israeli-Palestinian border area, which has also been published as a book entitled "The Wall". In the Holy Land, he photographed two nations divided by a barrier built by Israel on the west

bank of Jordan. In this barrier, Koudelka sees an absurdity and also an analogy to his own experience with life behind Iron Curtain in the CSSR (Smyth 2019).

Simon Norfolk, born in Nigeria, is also one of the renowned contemporary photographers. He aims his work at landscape photography in different war zones, such as Bosna, Liberia, Afghanistan, and Iraq, where he documents destroyed cities and countries affected by fighting. Norfolk has created a collection of works showing ruins that were left in the wake of conflicts in these countries. Despite his aesthetic photographs, he is a critic of conflicts and captures ruins of buildings as metaphors for human foolishness and pride. He is well-known for his book on Afghanistan, published in 2002, in which he documented a devasted country strewn with remains of buildings (Anonym 2021).

Another one of the significant contemporary social-documentary photographers is Sebastiao Salgado. Salgado has focused his work on global issues, such as violence, hunger, migration, and inequality. He spent most of his photographic career in South America, Africa, and Central Europe, where he aimed his attention at people living in disadvantaged conditions or without home. In the 1970s, Salgado photographed a wide scale of topics including the famine in Niger and the civil war in Mozambique. He also became a member of prestigious agency Magnum Photos in 1979. He attempted to create larger social-documentary projects, the most significant being the series "Workers" and "Terra: Struggle of the Landless". In these, he concentrated on impoverished workers at a gold mine in Brazil. Salgado's work is driven by his empathy and compassion for the photographed social groups (Anonym 2021). In one of his last artworks entitled "Exodus", he addresses a massive movement of refugees from around the world. This six-year project points out millions of people that have been forced to leave their homes because of poverty, war, and repressions (Anonym 2021).

Andrej Bán is a Slovak documentary photographer and reporter who constitutes an integral part of contemporary social photography. He is known for his long-term projects, in which he focuses on conflict zones in various parts of the world, especially in the Balkans. He has photographed in several crisis areas, such as war-afflicted Kosovo, Israel, Georgia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Ukraine, Haiti after the earthquake in 2010, or refugee crisis in the Mediterranean. "*He is interested in an in-depth look at the causes of conflicts, as well as the difficult situation of the victims of wars or natural disasters over a longer period, while they are trying to return back to normal life*" (Anonym 2021). As a photographer with humanist

approach and social conscience, he participates in humanitarian aid and help for people he photographs, who have found themselves in a crisis situation. During the Kosovo War in 1999, with other journalists, he has cofounded an organization that helps local inhabitants affected by war named People in Need which he had also run for several years. He also addresses social problems in Slovakia, and, in recent years, has brought several reportages from Eastern Slovakia, in which he points out the faulty system of agricultural subsidies and its consequences for local farmers and the whole Slovak agriculture (Ryba 2020).

Another recent project worth mentioning is a project by two social photographers – Czech author Jindřich Štreit and Slovak author Peter Lančarič, who have documented families taking care of their relatives in vigil coma. Afterwards, they held a travelling exhibition in several Czech and Slovak cities under the name "Držme spolu" (Let's Stick Together). The objective of the project was "*to demonstrate the deficiency of the social and healthcare system in Slovakia and to connect people in a very difficult life situation needing help with experts and politicians"* (TASR 2018). Besides pointing out the issue of patients with vigil coma diagnosis, it was also a charity event, and, therefore, artist Ašot Haas donated one of his artworks to an auction, the proceeds of which were used to support patients in vigil coma (Anonym 2021). Official opening of the charity vernissage took place at the Bratislava Castle and was attended by prominent personalities from the fields of medicine, science, art, and politics from Slovakia and abroad.

Instead of a Conclusion

We have learnt from history and theory that photography as a powerful tool of social criticism has accompanied every single period or event, from the times of its invention, through film until current digital age. Photography is an authentic reflection of its time, both its proponent and critic, and it is very important for each period of time to have its critic and for every disadvantaged or vulnerable social group to have a voice that draws attention to its problems. In the current world of internet and social media, photography as a medium is even more available to the masses and can spread even faster. Therefore, we can state that photography is now even more social that ever before and is a fast and efficient communication instrument not only for commercial purposes, but also for public

presentation of social issues.

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