



Building Solidarity with Subjects and Audience in Sociology and Documentary Photography

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This article is part of a panel discussion addressing the sociological relevance of Sebastião Salgado's work as well as documentary photography in general.²

KEY WORDS: audience; documentation; photography; social issues; sociological perspective; visual sociology.

INTRODUCTION

Susan Sontag (1977) famously argued that photographs alone do little to generate social action. Dorothea Lange's images of Japanese internment camps during World War II, she noted, did nothing to spark an outcry because the public supported the war and did not frame internment as a human rights violation at the time. It was not until the political context changed after the Vietnam War that Lange's photographs began to support a new framing of the internment. Sontag concluded that photos cannot create a moral position, but can reinforce and help build nascent ones.

Although the difficulty of controlling all the variables that could affect outcomes makes it almost impossible to measure the direct effects of photographs on generating social action, we have ample examples of how visual images inform public opinion and support political and social movements: Mathew Brady's photo of Abraham Lincoln (credited with helping change the outcome of an election), John Thomson's photos of London poverty, William Henry Jackson's photos of national parks, Jacob Riis's images of New York slums, Lewis Hine's photos of child laborers, the Farm Security Administration photos of poverty during the Depression, *Jet* Magazine's photos of Emmett Till, W. Eugene Smith's photos of victims of mercury poisoning in Minimata, images of body bags returning from Vietnam (in contrast to Iraq

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² See Carr (2011) for details of the session. For other essays from the session, see Gold (2011), Rudel (2011), Sassen (2011), and Wolford (2011).

and Afghanistan), and snapshots from Abu Ghraib.³ Sebastião Salgado's photographs of famine in Africa, landless movements in Brazil, and genocide in Rwanda, among many others—continue documentarians' long tradition of building an informed and concerned audience.

As the American Sociological Association honors Sebastião Salgado with the Excellence in the Reporting of Social Issues Award, we should consider what sociologists can learn from documentarians such as Salgado about building solidarity with their audiences. Although sociologists and documentarians build solidarity with their subjects (a key area of methodological convergence), as a discipline sociology has an underdeveloped relationship and level of engagement with its audience. I locate this divergence between the disciplines in their different goals, and suggest that by building solidarity with their audiences sociologists could expand the potential power and reach of their work.

METHODOLOGICAL CONVERGENCE: BUILDING SOLIDARITY WITH SUBJECTS

Although Sebastião Salgado has mastered the craft of photography to create an important and critically acclaimed body of work, he considers himself a social documentarian rather than an artist. Salgado is unique because he approaches photography ethnographically, conceives of his multiyear projects analytically, and creates books and exhibits to educate a mass public audience about social problems without minimizing their complexity. Salgado therefore promotes a broad vision of sociology by disseminating a sociological perspective on the issues he analyzes visually.

The Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano noted that “Salgado photographs from inside, in solidarity” (Galeano, 1990:11). He means that Salgado, like an ethnographer, builds a relationship with his subjects and nurtures an empathy that allows him both privileged access and treasured invisibility. Salgado is committed to an ethnographic approach that prioritizes a deep embeddedness in the communities in which he works. To create a permanent record of the famine in the Sahel region of Africa, he remained in the field for 15 months. He spent six years documenting workers' lives and struggles around the world. The *Genesis* project that focuses on natural environments has taken eight years to complete. While in the field, he lives with his subjects, eats with them, celebrates with them. As he explains: “You don't go to do one picture. You go to build a story ... I go to stay inside my story, to try to understand what's going on, to be close to the people I photograph, and to create a flow of information that we can use to communicate something” (Light, 2000:112–113).

As a result of his approach, Salgado's images cover the “Family of Man” gamut, depicting people working, building, loving, warring, playing, celebrating, and grieving—without invoking stereotypes. Salgado gives his subjects

³ See Rothstein (1986) for a discussion of some of these examples.

voice with his images while tapping into a universal visual patois, exposing the insufficiencies and particularities of spoken language. For example, in a 1997 photo, a young girl sits with knees to her chest delicately displaying a photograph—a portrait of a man—between her fingers. She gazes steadily at the camera, purposeful and insistent.⁴ Next to her, an older woman, possibly her mother, carefully balances two similar portraits on her knees. She avoids the lens, staring at the floor, her face a mixture of sadness and resignation. We do not need to know that the women are Kurdish to understand that the men—husbands, fathers, and sons—are missing. They are the photographs within the photograph, embodying in their haunting absence/presence Bourdieu's notion that photography is an index of integration, particularly within a family or community. Photography, spontaneous and highly personal, is simultaneously all social. By allowing his subjects to communicate with the world, Salgado exploits the social functions of photography.

Galeano contrasts Salgado's practice of embeddedness from that of a casual photographer: "Consumer-society photographers approach but do not enter. In hurried visits to scenes of despair or violence, they climb out of the plane or helicopters, press the shutter release, explode the flash: they shoot and run. They have looked without seeing and their images say nothing" (Galeano, 1990:11). A similar comparison could be drawn between sociologists and casual observers (or consumer-society journalists, to extend Galeano's idea). While the latter assess and run, sociologists stay and observe. They, too, spend long protracted periods in the field getting to know their subjects, trying to understand local customs and context. They ponder alternative explanations, contemplate the process of "knowing" and interpreting their data, and even grapple with the effects their very presence has on their subjects. Sociologists worry about reifying differences and try to undermine processes of othering. They attempt to give their subjects voice and to present them in their full and often unlovely humanity. Indeed, the sociological canon is filled with their voices: Tally, Doc, Slim, and many others. Like Salgado, sociologists strive for a kind of solidarity with their subjects. This convergence occurs because documentarians and sociologists are driven by a common methodological goal: to provide an analysis unsullied by bias, politics, or self-interest.

DIVERGENCE OF GOALS: BUILDING SOLIDARITY WITH AUDIENCES

Although sociologists and documentarians recognize the value of building solidarity with their subjects, they have very different relationships with their audiences. Sociologists' primary audience is other scholars. Many are therefore relatively detached from or unaware of larger audiences. Documentarians, in

⁴ Photo appears on pages 100–101 of *Migrations*. Links to all photographs referenced in this article can be found at www.tamarakay.com.

contrast, are highly attuned to theirs. They are never their own audience. This different relationship to audience stems, at least in part, from the divergent goals of the two disciplines. The goal of a sociologist is to create knowledge, to be the objective scientific observer. Sociologists use evidence and provide data that may undermine a stereotype, unhinge a myth, or simply present a new or fuller understanding of a problem. Durkheim, for example, notably revealed that suicide does not always reflect individual pathology but can result from larger structural dislocations. His work enlightens, suggesting solutions or policy corrections. Durkheim, however, does not call us to action.

The goal of the documentarian, in contrast, is to create a normative shift: to invoke a visceral emotional reaction—outrage, shame, sadness—that compels, motivates, and obligates a larger audience to act. Documentarians consciously create calls to action. Salgado clearly and unequivocally articulates this goal. In his introduction to *Migrations*, he ponders if it is “enough simply to be informed? Are we condemned to be largely spectators? Can we affect the course of events? I have no answers, but I believe that some answers must exist, that humanity is capable of understanding, even controlling, the political, economic, and social forces that we have set loose across the globe. Can we claim ‘compassion fatigue’ when we show no sign of consumption fatigue? Are we to do nothing in the face of the steady deterioration of our habitat, whether in cities or in nature? Are we to remain indifferent as the values of rich and poor countries alike deepen the divisions in our societies? We cannot” (Salgado, 2000:14). Salgado wants his photographs to have an impact on the world and therefore acknowledges that as a documentarian: “You photograph with all your ideology” (Light, 2000:108).

If your mission is to call to action, you must recognize and engage those you are calling: your audience. Salgado does this in a variety of ways, from the way he composes, shoots, and edits his photographs to the way he distributes, presents, and uses them. Salgado walks the fine line between content and form by creating photographs both dramatic and meaningful that command attention yet do not distract from their very serious subjects, all of which are also of concern to sociologists—human rights, labor exploitation, migration, poverty, and inequality, among many others. The beauty of his work has generated criticism (tapping into debates that emerged in the 1930s among German Marxists such as Adorno and Lukács) that such aesthetically pleasing images anaesthetize their viewers rather than motivate them to act (Levi Strauss, 2003:5–6).

I would argue the opposite: the beauty and haunting mystery of Salgado’s images actually draw viewers in, and once there, help forge a solidaristic bond between them and his subjects. We do not turn away from Salgado’s photographs, we seek to engage them. One of his most iconic and arresting images captures a dispute between workers and military police at the Serra Pelada mine in Brazil (1986).⁵ The image is indisputably stunning. Surrounded by an

⁵ “Dispute among the workers of the Serra Pelada gold mine and a member of the military police from the state of Pará, Brazil, 1986.” Photo appears on page 10 of *An Uncertain Grace*.

anxious crowd of mine workers, and bracing himself against the treacherous slope, a muddied worker grabs the butt of a police officer's gun with his right hand and with his left covers his heart. The image, taken slightly downhill from the two locked in precarious confrontation, creates solidarity; the viewer is part of the crowd, one of the workers. Salgado not only invites us in, but also creates a place for us, making us a comrade, *compañero*. The viewer does not simply look but is forced to participate from within the photograph, bracing the earth as if she, too, were about to slip down the muddy slope. Salgado's ability to create solidarity with his audience gives his photos an urgent intensity and simultaneously upends the power dynamics between viewer and subject.

CONNECTING LOCAL AND GLOBAL ISSUES AND AUDIENCES

The way Salgado presents social issues to his audience also helps nurture solidarity by weaving a visual and empirical strand of commonality that shatters the divide between viewer and subject. Salgado is a master at making connections between the individual and collective for his audience. The Sahel photos tell stories of individual lives torn asunder, of profound personal loss, and yet, simultaneously, the ravaging of communities, regions, nations, and continents by famine. Similarly, Salgado demonstrates that migrations, whatever their cause, tear apart individual families and leave rural wastelands in their wake. Salgado uncovers the universal in the particular and the particular in the universal.

By revealing the scale of social issues, Salgado connects local calamities to their global sources, or documents their effects in multiple localities. For example, he illuminates how industrialization in Europe contributes to famine in Africa, and how consumption in the West puts workers at risk in developing countries. He thereby develops a connection between subject and audience; the viewer recognizes how (presumably his or her own) local behavior, lifestyle, consumption, markets, organizations, states, and the like have effects and change destinies across the globe. Yet instead of nurturing a collective paralyzing shame in the face of complicity, Salgado nurtures a transnational solidarity—calling his audience to collective action and remedy. In *Genesis*, Salgado employs an ingenious counterintuitive approach: rather than compile a visual catalogue of environmental degradation around the world, he presents the pristine magnificence of the natural environment. Each photograph is a reflection of and a homage to preservation, a reminder to a transnational audience of what so easily can disappear.

Although Salgado allows his viewers to do the visual work, by including text and sociological analyses in each of his books and exhibits, he provides a broader context for his audience to understand and more fully appreciate the issues. The text reinforces and expands on the visual message. *Workers: An Archeology of the Industrial Age* (1993) and *Migrations* (2000), for example,

each brings together images from dozens of countries that speak to the universal social dilemmas of labor and urban migration, respectively. Dense mini-catalogues packed with explanatory text and statistics accompany each primary book of photographs, encouraging the reader to engage them simultaneously.

Distributing his photographs in bound collections, Salgado attempts to limit misinterpretation and misrepresentation—each image is viewed not alone, but in context with others. The photographs are captioned rather than titled: “The refugee camp of Bati. The people in the area have scouted out the arrival of food and first aid. They travel in great numbers, at times from very far away, in order to get rations that often end up being quite meager. Ethiopia. 1984,” and “The boias frias (those who eat cold) in a plantation of sugarcane that is to be used for the production of alcohol. The alcohol, in turn, is used to power cars. Brazil, 1987.”⁶ A single image may be only a moment, a person, a location. A book or an exhibit, however, is a story, a fuller depiction, an issue in all its scope.

BUILDING AUDIENCE NETWORKS

Salgado is not content to simply nurture solidarity with a passive audience. He seeks to create an active audience by building networks around the issues he analyzes. He therefore always works collaboratively with organizations engaged on the ground, creating a triumvirate of subject, organizational partner, and audience. This strategy allows him to access particular communities, tap into organizations’ existing constituencies, and expand his own audience. For the Sahel project, Salgado worked with Doctors Without Borders and donated the proceeds of his books to the organization. He collaborated with an organization to create a print advertising campaign to raise money for Cambodian children victimized by land mines. His photographs told the story, and the donations they generated built a factory in Cambodia that produced artificial limbs for children.

For *The End of Polio* (2003), he documented the global effort to eradicate the disease, working with the World Health Organization and UNICEF, among many other organizations. After working on *Terra* (1997), about the landless movement in Brazil, Salgado and his wife created a nonprofit environmental organization called Instituto Terra and worked to restore and protect part of Brazil’s Atlantic forest. Their efforts paid off in 1998 when the land was deemed a nature preserve. Salgado’s efforts to build a committed audience using a dense network of organizational ties reflect his larger belief that “solidarity, horizontal, helps” (Galeano, 1990:11).

⁶ In *An Uncertain Grace*. Captions on pages 154 and 152, respectively.

AUDIENCE-BUILDING LESSONS FOR SOCIOLOGY

Sociologists pioneered how to build solidarity with their subjects. As a discipline, however, sociology has an underdeveloped relationship and level of engagement with its audience. The recent emphasis on public sociology emerges in large part from a collective failure to build solidarity with our audience and to expand it beyond its narrow boundaries. It is important to emphasize, however, that sociologists do not have to change their primary goal—producing rigorous research and creating knowledge—in order to build solidarity with broader audiences and benefit from their active engagement with sociological ideas.

Although we may not all aspire to sound the clarion call to action, most of us hope that those involved in creating public policy and generating social action would find our work useful, enlightening, and, in some cases, galvanizing. Many of us would even wish that our work could help reframe key debates and undermine popular stereotypes and misconceptions. We can start by following Salgado's lead to link local and global issues and work with organizations to build audience networks. We can also make our work more accessible by innovating new outlets for it across media platforms and inundating the web and blogosphere with our research.

There is tremendous untapped potential in building solidarity with our audiences. If we actively engage audiences that already crave more sophisticated analyses and nurture new ones to appreciate more thoughtful insights on the myriad social issues we examine, from immigration and racism to market regulation and human rights, we can significantly increase the relevance, reach, and impact of our work. Perhaps, like Sebastião Salgado, we can build a more concerned audience that, better informed, may sound the clarion call.

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