

Photography as a Tool for Social Change

Jacob A. Riis was a Danish-American social reformer and documentary photographer. Born in Ribe, Denmark, he immigrated to the US when he was twenty-one. One of millions of people who arrived in the US in the decades after the Civil War, Riis soon experienced the dire living conditions on the Lower East Side of New York City. People were crammed into small and filthy tenement rooms, struggling to make enough money for food. Riis did not escape such conditions; though he worked for many years as a carpenter, he struggled financially. A stroke of good luck led him to a job as a writer with the New York News Association, choosing to write about the poverty experienced by immigrants who came to the US seeking a better life.

After a few years, Riis searched for a better way to show the destitution he saw every day in the city. Photography was a possibility, but it was not yet possible to capture images in the very dark corners of buildings, basements, and alleys that he frequented. When he learned that someone had invented a way to use a flashlight while taking pictures, he befriended a few photographers, and together they began taking photos in the slums. His images drew enough attention that the city made some significant changes that resulted in improved conditions.



Jacob A. Riis, *Lodgers in a Crowded Bayard Street Tenement—Five Cents a Spot*, 1889



Jacob A. Riis, *Sewing pants for the Sweater's in Gotham Court*, c. 1895



Jacob A. Riis, *Bandits' Roost*, 59 1/2 Mulberry Street, 1888



Dorothea Lange, Near Buckeye, Maricopa County, Arizona. Migrant [African-American] cotton picker and her baby, 1940



Dorothea Lange, Near Coolidge on Highway 87, Pinal County, Arizona; migratory white cotton pickers stopped by engine trouble alongside the road, 1940



Dorothea Lange, Age 70, she came from near Greeley, Nebraska, with sister age 65, nephew age 30, and brother age 68, 1940

Dorothea Lange was a documentary photographer committed to the power of pictures to effect social change. At the beginning of her career, she operated a portrait studio in San Francisco, but soon she began taking her camera outside to photograph people going about their daily routines. This was the era of the Great Depression, and she found it important to record the lives of those who were struggling just to stay alive.

For the next fifteen years or so, Lange worked in various capacities for the US government. She traveled extensively for the Farm Security Administration, photographing migrant farm workers. In the early 1940s she photographed Japanese-Americans who were held in internment camps in

western and southern states. In 1954 she was hired by *LIFE*, and from 1958 until her death in 1965 she traveled throughout Asia, South America, and the Middle East as a freelance photographer.

Dorothea Lange's work made a difference. It broadly informed people about events and living conditions in unseen places. It influenced social attitudes and political action, including garnering support for the government's New Deal programs. Her work had a monumental impact upon the craft of documentary photography and photojournalism, transforming it into a tool for social change while showing courage for the task and respect for her subjects.



Dorothea Lange, Near Buckeye, Maricopa County, Arizona. Child of [African-American] cotton pickers in grower's camp, 1940

image credits



Lewis Hine, *Immigrant Family in the Baggage Room of Ellis Island*, 1905

Lewis Hine was a sociologist, photographer, and teacher. While teaching at the Ethical Culture School in New York City, he used photography as an educational medium, taking his classes to Ellis Island, where he made over two hundred photographs between 1904 and 1909. He soon realized that photography could be used to foster social reform. In 1908 Hine became the photographer for the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC), documenting child labor practices in various parts of the country. His work brought the realities of child labor to light, and the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 eventually brought child labor to an end. For the rest of his career, Hine focused on making photographs of both male and female laborers in many different capacities. He is particularly well known for a series of images taken of workers building the Empire State Building.



Lewis Hine, *Young Doffers in the Elk Cotton Mills, Fayetteville, Tennessee*, 1910



Lewis Hine, *Man with Amputated Arm*, c. 1910