

**Exhibition** November 16, 2022 - 27 February 27, 2023

Sabatini Building, Floor 3

# Documentary Genealogies

## Photography 1848-1917



Frederic Ballell, *La Rambla. Enllustrador de sabates* (La Rambla. Shoeshiner), 1907-1908. © Arxiu Fotogràfic de Barcelona

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This exhibition presents a specific cartography within the set of practices that André Rouillé termed “the empire of photography”: the new visual regime created by the rise of photography in the bourgeois, industrial, and colonial cultural system in the mid-nineteenth century. Within this new visual regime, the exhibit traces the appearance and early evolution of the representations of subaltern subjectivities: hired-hands, beggars, workers, the unemployed, slaves, prison inmates, the sick, the ill and so on. The representation of the working classes will be the emancipatory impulse for the rise of documentary discourse in the 1920s, but it appears early on as an accidental or marginal interruption, a presence running against the grain in images that have another intention altogether.

## 1848

The historical narrative begins with the earliest photographic images of a revolution, namely the European revolutionary cycle of 1848. Contemporary historiography cites this “Springtime of the Peoples” as the moment when the proletariat acquired class consciousness, and as the starting point of working-class political struggles. A contradictory starting point, indeed. In January 1848, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels released *The Communist Manifesto* with the famous diagnosis that the specter of communism was haunting Europe—to be confirmed a month later with the uprisings in Paris. However, shortly after in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), Marx would offer a critical interpretation of 1848 as a parody of the 1789 French Revolution: great world-historic events happen twice, first as tragedy, then as farce.

## Image of the People

Beginning in the 1850s, photographic campaigns documenting national monuments, such as the Heliographic Mission in France, were one of the defining drives behind the rise of the “empire of photography”. The Heliographic Mission is a paradigm of how the discourse of national historic monuments was instrumental for the ideology of the nation-state and for nationalist discourses throughout Europe. Several European countries launched their own such campaigns, the pioneer in Spain being Charles Clifford. Clifford retraced Queen Isabella II’s travels in album form, which constitute the earliest photographic statement on the Spanish nation and its heritage. However, the bourgeois nationalist ideology underlying these campaigns and albums was countered by the appearance



Eugène Atget, *Sur les quais - La sieste* (On the Banks - The Nap), 1904. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

of certain figures of alterity around the periphery of these images: servants in palaces, the Roma in the Alhambra, small trade and work scenes, beggars, and picturesque street characters who appear spontaneously alongside the architecture.

### **The Other Half**

A second catalyst for the “empire of photography” was the spatial reorganization of historic urban centers according to the logic and demands of industrialization. The expansions and reforms, undertaken around 1860 in cities such as Paris, Vienna, Barcelona, and Madrid, gave rise to photography campaigns of both the old streets and medieval city walls that were being demolished, as well as of the new avenues and urban infrastructure. Most emblematic of this process was Charles Marville’s

documentation of Georges-Eugène Haussmann’s renovation of Paris, which also included images of construction workers and laborers.

As a counterpoint to these photographs of grand urban redevelopments, we find the first images of the urban proletariat. In the New York of the 1880s, muckraking journalist Jacob Riis photographed the miserable conditions of the Lower East Side working-class tenements. He used the images as slides in his public lectures and published the foundational book *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). With a similar focus and use at public slide lectures, in 1904 Hermann Drawe photographed the Viennese underworld of vagrants and the poor, in collaboration with journalist Emil Kläger. Their reportage was also published as a book. The turn-of-the-century urban

peripheries, the *terrains vagues* created by the razing of the old city walls, and their poor inhabitants, or subproletarians, were photographed by Eugène Atget in Paris, by Heinrich Zille in Berlin, and by Ferdinand Ritter von Staudenheim in Vienna.

## Men at Work

The promotion of the new industrial processes, and the grand feats of engineering and infrastructure—another facet of the mid-nineteenth-century construction of the modern nation-state—were also the target of the nascent photographic visual regime. World's fairs were the mass events that closely followed and helped spread industrialization. They were also a means for photography to burst into the public sphere. The Great Exhibition of 1851 in London was, in this sense, a key moment. In Spain, Charles Clifford was once again a pioneer, documenting such works as the Isabella II Canal—inaugurated in 1858 to definitely solve the issue of Madrid's water supply. It is also in this context that the first images of factory labor and industrial workers appeared. The 1890 photographic studies of workers and machinery in the Krupp steelworks in Essen are possibly the pioneering images of the kind. They laid the basis for the most influential iconographies of industrial labor of the twentieth century.

Forced labor was often employed in the grand infrastructure projects, which attests to how industrial capitalism prospered upon the radical exploitation of the working class. In fact, some images of public works and penal colonies may easily be mistaken for one another. In the daguerreotypes of the works led by



Unknown artist, *Work scenes from the Krupp Works at Essen: wheel tire transport*, October 28, 1899.  
© Historisches Archiv Krupp, Essen

engineer Lucio del Valle, a pioneer in Spain for photographic documentation of public works, we see prison laborers in chains. Convicts and enslaved laborers are to be found, as well, in images of railroad construction and other work sites during the Civil War period in the United States, and also at the turn of the century in the mines of the Russian penal colony on Sakhalin Island. As part of his production for the Fortieth Parallel Survey, Timothy O'Sullivan reported underground mining using an innovative system of lighting. It is interesting to relate these images to the enigmatic scenes of the Paris catacombs taken by Nadar, souvenirs from a hellish underworld.

## The Body and the Archive

Another subtext in photography's rise during the colonial era is its inscription





Bronisław Malinowski. *The tatasoria on the beach of Kaulukuba: stepping the masts and getting the sails ready for the run*, plate from *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. © LSE Library, The British Library of Political and Economic Science

in modern technologies of social discipline and governance. Photography as a technology of industrialization was part of a new episteme in the natural and social sciences, and contributed to a new archival unconscious that was symptomatic of the hegemony of positivism. While photography in service of geological exploration had its early golden age in the surveys of the US Western territories that began in the late 1860s after the Civil War. The first such survey was of the Fortieth Parallel, led by geologist Clarence King, with Timothy O'Sullivan as lead photographer.

The immense encyclopedic catalog of human races by German photographer Carl Dammann, published from 1874 onward, is one of the great monuments to the aspirations of positivism in the study of human diversity. Photography

changed the methodology of the human sciences. Another example is the art historian Aby Warburg's study of Hopi Indians in the US southwest in 1895, which he thought of as a journey into the ancient pagan world and led to a famous slide conference in 1923. The trip and conference were instrumental for the emergence of Warburg's iconological method, which would change the historiography of art by introducing a cultural or anthropological approach. However, it was the work on the Trobriand Islands, by Bronisław Malinowski and his collaborators around 1900, when the use of photography in fieldwork would finally reach maturity. A series of the Trobriand people photographs would later be published, in 1922, in a book that would be essential for modern ethnography, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*.

The expansion of anthropological uses of photography in the last decades of the nineteenth century ran parallel to its rise in the medical and judiciary practices. The Civil War in the US yielded a notable corpus of anatomical photographs and various catalogs of the wounded, amputees, and deceased. In Europe, Nadar had already carried out some photographic experiments on medical issues around 1860, such as his research on “hermaphroditism.” Yet the great pioneer of photography in medical experimentation would be neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, who studied the then so-called hysteria in women and other neuropsychiatric pathologies

in the Parisian Hospital de Pitié-Salpêtrière, beginning in the 1870s. His illustrated publications from the following decade had a huge influence on modern neurology. These practices emerged at the same time as the judiciary and police use of photography, and the standardization of modern methods of photographic identification, based on the work of Alphonse Bertillon in France, Cesare Lombroso in Italy, and Francis Galton in England. Just as medical photography is inextricable from discourses on health versus pathology or on deviations from the norm, police photography produces typologies of criminal and deviant personalities.



Unknown artist, *Barricade de la rue de la Roquette, place de la Bastille* (Barricade at Rue de la Roquette, Place de la Bastille), from *Album de photographies et d'articles de journaux sur la guerre Franco prussienne et la Commune de Paris 1870-1871*, March 18, 1871.

## Revolution

The 1871 Paris Commune stands as a foundational experiment in working class self-government. It would become a legendary reference for the political culture of the workers' movement. The Commune was also the first event to generate an extensive photographic market of a revolution, one which grew from the seeds of the 1848 Parisian daguerreotypes. As a consequence, a visual grammar for the future of revolutionary iconography was set—even if the multiple images of the uprising, produced industrially as albums and souvenirs, had in fact a counterrevolutionary focus. The visual catalog of the barricades, the destruction of monuments such as the Vendôme Column, and the burning of major institutional buildings such as the Paris city hall creates a dystopian, undisciplined image of the city in ruins—as corresponds to the time of uncertainty following the dissolution of the established governmental order.

## Social Photography

Following the different revolutionary outbursts and the organization of the workers' movement throughout the nineteenth century, some improvements

in social rights came about, as well as new public policies to ease the living conditions of the working class within a fledgling welfare state. Lewis Hine was a pioneer in the articulation of photography and social reform politics. Begun in 1907, his photographic work for the National Child Labor Committee «(NCLC)» makes him a founding figure.

Lewis Hine was a professor of photography at the Ethical Culture School in New York City. One of his students was Paul Strand, rendered the founder of photographic modernism because of his work begun in 1916. Influenced by the reception in New York of the Paris pictorial avant-garde, Strand published two portfolios in the modernist magazine *Camera Work* (1916 and 1917), jointly shaping a sort of manifesto for the future of photography. The 1930s were a time of ideological awakening for Strand, and he would become involved with the Photo League, the New York branch of the international Worker's Photography Movement. His role as a link between an era that was coming to an end and another that was about to begin make him both the symbol and the most significant symptom of the ambiguity between factuality and idealization that the documentary idea will carry throughout twentieth-century photography.



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