

Waging a Visual War on Poverty: President Lyndon B. Johnson in Appalachia

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ABSTRACT: The article investigates how press photographs shaped poverty discourses in the historical context of the War on Poverty. Using a picture of President Lyndon B. Johnson and a presumably poor woman as a case study, it examines how iconographic elements and the visualized rhetorical pattern of the American jeremiad serve to situate the poor within dominant middle-class ideologies.

KEYWORDS: Visual Rhetoric; War on Poverty; Lyndon B. Johnson; Photojournalism; Appalachia

1 Introduction: Visual Strategies in the War on Poverty

Despite the fact that most U.S. citizens were enjoying unprecedented wealth in the 1950s and 1960s, a national focus on the poor could equally be detected. From the late 1950s onwards, the United States saw the publication of a tremendous amount of books on the topic. The probably best known among them, Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (1962) and its long and favorable review by Dwight MacDonal in the *New Yorker* (1963) sparked what James Patterson called "a rediscovery of poverty in America" (*America's Struggle* 97). This rediscovery is reflected not only in the publication of books, but also in the wide-spread circulation of photographs that, just like the written texts, took part in the negotiation of poverty discourses. President Johnson, for example, used the rhetorical power of photographs circulated in the press to shape how Americans perceived poor people as well as himself and his antipoverty programs.

Already in 1951, Edward Steichen had noted the increasing influence of photojournalism on the public opinion in his foreword to *Memorable Life Photographs*: "Photographic journalism is generally accepted as an authoritative source of visual information about our times. It now regularly reaches audiences all over the world on a scale unheard of a decade or two ago. It is becoming a new force in the molding of public opinion, and explaining man to man" (qtd. in Bezner 11). Steichen captured the tension between the "truth claim" (Stange) and the ensuing credibility of photographs on the one hand and their social, political, and cultural constructedness on the other. This is why Hariman and Lucaites call photojournalism "the perfect ideological practice: while it seems to present objects as they are in the world, it places those objects within a system of social relationships and constitutes the viewer as a

subject within that system” (2). Since these social relationships are “arbitrary, asymmetrical relations of power” but “made to appear natural,” they can be called ideological (2). If, however, we consider them ideological tools that use visual strategies to achieve certain rhetorical goals, we need to take into account the historical and political discourses they were embedded in at the time of their publication. Similarly, Maren Stange postulates that we “consider these images as signs and symbols that operate within the shifting bounds of cultural discourses, their meanings constructed not simply by the shutter’s momentary opening but by the ongoing and ever-changing processes of their distribution and reception.” Stressing the particularity of these discourses, Reynolds states that “the photograph, by itself, presents only possibilities of meaning, yielding specific semantic outcomes through its placement within particular discourse systems” (6). This means that photographs, as instances of political communication, unfold their rhetorical power in the framework of their historical and political context as well as in the context of U.S.-American pictorial and rhetorical traditions.

One political context in which photography has played an important role is the debate about poverty. Social documentary photography has been flourishing since the late nineteenth century, owing to photographers such as Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, and Dorothea Lange. It is based on the idea that it is necessary to go beyond the anonymity of facts and statistics to make people identify with and support the poor. Many documentary photographers assumed that photography makes it possible to capture “the uncontrolled reality before the lens” (Stange), which is why they used the medium to present dire realities to large, primarily white, middle-class publics, mostly aiming at reform. President Lyndon B. Johnson equally believed in the power of photographs to make people aware of the problem of poverty. He was convinced that Americans had to *see* those suffering from poverty in order to *feel* for them (Duganne 60-65). His administration therefore sponsored a photography exhibition called *Profile of Poverty* (1965)¹ and Johnson himself initiated the publication of a book named *This America: A Portrait of a Nation* (1966), which also deals prominently with poverty, combining photographs by Ken Heyman and excerpts from speeches by Johnson. In addition, Johnson, together with his wife and his daughter, undertook two trips to Appala-

¹ For more information on the exhibition see Erina Duganne’s *The Self in Black and White* (2010).

chia, one of the poorest regions of the United States, in order to meet and be photographed with poor people². In contrast to the goals of the majority of documentary photographers, however, Johnson not only aimed at making poverty visible but at promoting the political programs of his administration and himself³. In a 1965 memorandum, Johnson thus stressed the double goal of photographs: “Photography can show with peculiar power that government is personal, [and] that we are concerned with human beings, not statistics” (qtd. in Duganne 63-64). The pictures taken on his poverty trips therefore not only represent the poverty that still existed in the midst of a presumably ‘affluent society’ but also the U.S. government, embodied by the ‘first citizen,’ his wife, and his daughter, facing poor people and trying to understand and help them⁴.



Fig. 1. President Johnson visits Tom Fletcher and his family in Inez, Kentucky. Cecil Stoughton, April 24, 1964. Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

² On April 24, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson embarked on his first poverty trip, together with his wife Lady Bird Johnson. On the second trip, on May 7, 1964, Johnson was accompanied by his daughter Lynda. Mrs. Johnson also visited Appalachia by herself on May 21, 1964.

³ When looking at the pictures taken on the poverty trips, one should not forget that Johnson was hoping to win the presidential election in November 1964.

⁴ A similar pattern can be observed in *Profile of Poverty* and *This America*.



Fig. 2. President Johnson with William David and Doris Mills Marlow and two of their seven children in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. Cecil Stoughton, May 7, 1964. Lyndon B. Johnson Library.⁵

The dual visual strategy bears a close resemblance to the American jeremiad. Offering ideological affirmation despite momentary crises and disappointments, this rhetorical pattern has been highly influential in U.S.-American cultural history (Hebel 332). Sacvan Bercovitch describes the political sermons called ‘jeremiads’ in Puritan New England as “the Puritans’ cries of declension and doom [,which] were part of a strategy designed to revitalize the errand” (xiv), thus referring to the idea of the Puritan ‘errand’ into the ‘wilderness’ to form a model society in the ‘New World.’ American jeremiads, a form that developed its distinct features in the first decade of Puritan settlement in America, castigate their listeners for their sins and evils. Yet, according to Bercovitch, the clergy were not simply castigating, they also did “attest to an unanswering faith in the errand” (6). American jeremiads were thus based on the assumption that God punished the Puritans not because their cause was lost but, on the contrary, because he wanted to correct his people in order to save it (7).

⁵ Image detail chosen by the author.

Although American jeremiads depict the present in dark colors, their core, for Bercovitch, is not despair but the hope that the errand will be fulfilled through a return to the basic principles of the Puritan faith. As Bercovitch argues, the pattern has been secularized and thus extended from the affirmation of Puritan ideals to American ideologies at large. Similarly to the jeremiad, the photographs taken on President Johnson's poverty trips make visible the poverty that still existed in the so-called affluent society and that prevented the United States from the fulfillment of its promises and, at the same time, offer a way out that will reaffirm U.S.-American ideologies and bring the country closer to the fulfillment of its "mission" (Bercovitch 11) to form an exemplary society. This society will offer everyone the opportunity to live well and will at the same time shame others, i.e. communists, into repentance. Using one photograph as a case study, I will therefore argue that the purposeful use of American cultural iconography and the rhetorical pattern of a jeremiad are combined into a narrative of poverty that promotes the integration of the poor into mainstream U.S. ideologies through the War on Poverty programs.

2 Poverty Discourses in the 1960s

The meaning created by iconographic and rhetorical strategies intersects in various ways with the historical and political context. Attitudes toward the poor clearly influence the creation of photographic depictions of poverty. At the same time, the photographs created on the poverty trips, for example, had a decisive influence on the public image of America's poor at the time. The poverty discourses of the 1960s were, among others, significantly shaped and reflected by John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* (1958). In the book, Galbraith diagnosed the persistence of poverty despite a generally high level of affluence in the United States. He argued that "increased output" (323) had ended mass poverty, reducing it from the "problem of a majority to that of a minority" (323). This development, according to Galbraith, changed the character of poverty as well as political attitudes toward it. In his work, we can observe two basic assumptions that were wide-spread at the time and that would influence social critics and policy-makers in the 1960s: first, that it was now possible to abolish poverty altogether; second that the persistence of poverty in the United States was immoral and un-American.

The first assumption is based on an unprecedented economic optimism, which led many to believe that “a wealthy country like the United States could afford to abolish destitution” (Patterson, *America’s Struggle* 110). According to James Patterson, “it appeared to experts that the country possessed the means, and economists the tools, to do it” (*America’s Struggle* 111). In a similar vein, Michael Harrington claimed in 1962: “The means are at hand to fulfill the age-old dream: poverty can now be abolished” (174). This belief can be understood in the political context of the Cold War, which is often described as, among others, a competition between two systems or, as President Harry S. Truman put it in 1947, two “alternative ways of life.” Truman, as many other politicians at the time, assumed that “economic stability” and material security were a prerequisite for political stability. In addition, Cold War political thought entailed the assumption that the eradication of poverty would be a litmus test in the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. For example, Sargent Shriver, who would become director of the newly formed Office of Economic Opportunity later that year, challenged the Soviet Union to join a race for the elimination of poverty in early 1964: “They [the Soviets] claim their system can do more to advance the welfare of the people than ours—that communism alone can meet the needs of the poor. [...] We challenge Khrushchev to a race—not a race to see who can build bigger bombs or field larger armies—but a race to see who can build the first society without poverty, a society in which all have the full rewards of their ability” (qtd. in Ayres).

The second assumption that Galbraith makes and that many after him have taken up is based on the first assumption. It is the idea “that poverty was both anomalous and immoral in such an affluent society; indeed it was fundamentally un-American” (Patterson, *America’s Struggle* 111). Galbraith argues that, as long as poverty was a majority phenomenon, societies could not afford to provide a minimum standard for all their poor. However, “[a]n affluent society has no similar excuse for such rigor. It can use the forthright remedy of providing for those in want. [...] [I]t has no high philosophical justification for callousness” (329-30). Consequently, he calls the persistence of poverty in the United States “a disgrace” (333).

In addition, discussions about poverty in the 1960s were shaped by ideas that had pervaded poverty discourses for centuries. In “American Attitudes toward the Poor,” Neil Betten juxtaposes two basic conflicting rhetorics of poverty, distinguishing between a “hostile” and an

“environmental” view. The hostile view assumes that the causes of poverty lie in the flawed character of the poor themselves (3), which means that the poor are poor because they are lazy, shiftless, or immoral. Since these attitudes are diametrically opposed to core American ideas of the Protestant work ethic, people and social groups so classified were often considered as ‘undeserving’ of help. By contrast, the environmental view attributes the causes of poverty to forces that are beyond the control of the individual, such as social and economic factors (4). As Cara Finnegan observes and as we will also see in the following, these two views have always been “intertwined with one another” in complex ways: “both of them mutually and simultaneously influenced attitudes about poverty” (10-11).

Throughout the 1960s, these views equally coexisted and intermingled. Patterson remarks on the role of these two attitudes in American culture in the 1960s: “The philanthropic impulse had always coexisted uneasily with the work ethic, as had the vague distinctions between the deserving and the undeserving poor. The polls of the 1960s merely revealed the continuing power of these unquantifiable, often contradictory values” (*America’s Struggle* 108). Structuralists, like Gunnar Myrdal, tended to describe poverty as an economic condition caused by the lack of opportunities (Patterson 112). At the same time, the 1960s saw the rise of the concept of a ‘culture of poverty,’ a term which had been coined in the 1950s by the anthropologist Oscar Lewis. Lewis’s discriminating and overgeneralizing stance was soon proven to be wrong (Patterson 118-20). However, the focus on the psychological effects of poverty and an understanding that poverty could become a self-perpetuating vicious cycle lingered on in the 1960s. The idea of a ‘culture of poverty’ was, for example, taken up and adapted in Harrington’s *The Other America*. Stressing the psychological effects of poverty, he states that “poverty in America forms a culture, a way of life and feeling” (159-60). Although Harrington also focuses on negative behavioral and emotional patterns among the poor, he, in contrast to Lewis, makes sure to link their causes and their perpetuation to structural aspects: “The drunkenness, the unstable marriages, the violence of the other America are not simply facts about individuals. They are the description of an entire group in the society who react this way because of the conditions under which they live” (Harrington 162). Harrington’s passionate emphasis on the psychological effects of poverty sparked considerable interest in the topic by scholars.

These ideas were widely circulated at the time and they led different people to varying attitudes toward the poor. Many social activists and politicians were motivated by the psychological definition of poverty in their attempts to alleviate poverty and break through the “vicious circle” (Harrington 15) of poverty. However, the same idea was often reinterpreted by conservatives, who argued that “[i]f poverty was rooted in the very culture of many low-income Americans, [...] then it was foolish for policy-makers to think they could do much about it” (Patterson, *Grand Expectations* 537). According to Patterson, the majority of middle-class Americans seemed to endorse hostile views of welfare, worrying about illegitimacy rates and family breakup (*America’s Struggle* 99-106). Popular views on the problem also seemed to be concerned with the ethnic dimension of poverty. According to Patterson, “by the early 1960s the stereotype was likely to evoke visions of ‘hard core’ black welfare mothers with hordes of illegitimate children” (*America’s Struggle* 107)⁶. Since Lyndon B. Johnson wanted to have a broad majority for his War on Poverty programs, he needed to improve the public image of the poor. America’s poor had to be depicted not as irrevocably caught in a vicious cycle of delinquency, drug abuse, family breakups, illegitimate children and, in the end, dependence on the government, but rather as independent and moral people ‘deserving’ of government support.

3 Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty

The increasing concern of the public with the problem of poverty did not evade policy-makers. During his presidency, John F. Kennedy mounted a handful of laws against poverty and in autumn 1963, briefly before his death, he approved a comprehensive anti-poverty program (Stricker 48). On November 23, 1963, his first full day as President, Lyndon B. Johnson was informed about the program by Walter W. Heller, who had been in charge of the plans under Kennedy. Johnson told him to “move full speed ahead” (qtd. in Gelfand 127-28). On January 8, 1964, barely two months after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared “unconditional war on poverty in America” in his State of the Union address. The choice of wording expresses the immensity of the promises that

⁶Patterson stresses the fact that “the focus on a ‘hard core’ welfare population of undeserving poor was distorted. Many of the long-term relievers were in families with a disabled father or widowed mother, and 50 percent of families on welfare were off the rolls within two years” (*America’s Struggle* 108).

were made on the outset of the War on Poverty. In the speech, Johnson gave voice to the same optimism that Galbraith advocated in his book: “We shall not rest until that war is won. The richest Nation on earth can afford to win it.” And, testifying to the moral obligation that this power supposedly entailed, he added: “We cannot afford to lose it.” In a private conversation with an aide in 1964, Johnson voiced this same conviction in a more colloquial manner: “I’m sick of all the people who talk about the things we can’t do. [...] Hell, we’re the richest country in the world, the most powerful. We can do it all” (qtd. in Patterson, *Grand Expectations* 531).

Yet, Johnson’s ideas on *how* the problem was to be solved differed significantly from Galbraith’s suggestions⁷. Aiming at consensus, not “political shockwaves” (Gelfand 142), the Johnson administration avoided programs that would most likely have spurred conservative criticism. Approaches that included alterations to the basic socioeconomic framework of the country, such as the redistribution of goods or income transfer, did not receive serious consideration from the President and his top aides. They were too easily associated with communist ideas to be politically acceptable in a Cold War context. Economist Robert Lampman, for example, claimed that terms like “inequality” and “redistribution of income and wealth” would have to be avoided in order to make the program acceptable (Stricker 49). Instead, the War on Poverty took a direction that was in line with traditional and dominant U.S.-American ideals, reaffirming American ideologies and distancing the United States from its communist antagonists. Based on conceptions of poverty as a vicious cycle, the planners of the War on Poverty assumed that the government needed to provide the poor, and particularly the children of the poor, with opportunities “to improve their position and become part of the coveted mainstream, as exemplified in the model of the two-parent, middle-class nuclear family” (Duganne 69). Most War on Poverty programs, such as Head Start and Job Corps, therefore focused on education, training, and the notion of equal opportunity. The poor “would be offered the chance to fulfill the American dream” (Gelfand 142). The War on Poverty was thus constructed as “a hand up, not a handout” (Stricker 49).

⁷ Nevertheless, Galbraith approved of the preparations for the War on Poverty in a letter to the President on February 27, 1964, calling them “a good start” (WHCF, Office Files of Bill Moyers, Box 39, LBJ Library).

Critics agree that, although poverty rates did decline sharply, the War on Poverty could not but fall short of its enormous promises. Yet, they also agree that the program accomplished one goal: It lifted “poverty from benign neglect to a place on the public agenda,” preparing Congress to accept other programs helping the poor and making public officials a little more responsive to the newly articulated demands of the poor (Patterson, *America’s Struggle* 149). This is due to Johnson’s tireless public and visual campaigns. While he was not deeply interested in bureaucratic details of the program, he saw his function as “primarily evangelical, converting the public to his mission of eradicating poverty” (Gelfand 131). In his assessment of the War on Poverty, Mark Gelfand states: “Only one point is certain: Johnson had driven the poverty issue indelibly into the national consciousness. The country might not eliminate the problem, but it could not forget one was there” (133-34). The widespread public attention to poverty in the 1960s was to a large extent due to the powerful photographic depictions of poverty created by the Johnson administration.

4 Waging a Visual War on Poverty: President Lyndon B. Johnson in Appalachia

4.1 “Cries of declension and doom?” Picturing Poverty in the Affluent Society

On May 7, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson, accompanied by his daughter Lynda Bird, took his second poverty trip to six different states in two days. They covered 2,500 miles in 31 hours, rushing through numerous towns and cities. Nevertheless, their trip was thoroughly planned and staged. Children were let out of school to receive the President and his daughter, oat was prematurely harvested to provide a landing pad for Johnson’s helicopters, and several poor families were chosen to meet the President (“The Presidency: The American Dream”). The office files of Bill Moyers, special assistant to the President, reveal further efforts. A two-page fact sheet about the Marlow family, which even includes personal information such as their nick names and the mischief some of the kids had done, indicates that the choice of the people who were to meet the President received serious consideration. In addition, each stop was “designed to point up specific parts of of [sic] the Appalachia and Poverty bills” (Office Files of Bill Moyers). At the office of the Department of Employment Security in Cumberland, Maryland, Johnson met Mrs. Mary Mallow, a thirty-year-old mother

of three, whose husband was unemployed (“Plaza Crowd Responds to LBJ Remarks”). A photographer from United Press International⁸ took a picture of Johnson talking with Mallow while she was holding her 6-months-old son John on her lap (fig. 3). Often in a slightly cropped version, the photograph was widely published in local and national newspapers⁹. The caption reads: “5/7/64—CUMBERLAND, MD.: ‘My husband is out of work,’ Mrs. Mary Mallow holding her 6-month-old son John tells President Johnson who toys with the baby’s hand at Cumberland Unemployment Office 5/7. The President is making a tour of the poverty-stricken Appalachia region.” This was also the written information that accompanied the picture in most newspaper articles.



Fig. 3. President Johnson with Mrs. Mary Mallow and her 6-months-old son John in Cumberland, MD.
Unknown photographer, May 7, 1964.
Courtesy United Press International.

Like this, the picture, together with the corresponding textual and contextual information, suggests that America is falling short of its promises, denouncing the U.S. in a manner similar

⁸ His name is unknown to United Press International (private conversation).

⁹ Fig. 3 shows an uncropped version of the photograph with lines indicating how it was mostly cropped.

to the jeremiad. Yet, whereas the first part of a jeremiad is supposed to “castigat[e] the evils of the time” (Bercovitch 6), this picture does not confront the mainly middle-class audience with unsettling physical signs of poverty as they sometimes appear in social documentary photography, for example by Jacob Riis or the *FSA* photographers. Mary Mallow does not wear ragged clothes, nor does she seem to be dominated by a filthy environment like tenements or a factory, let alone slums. It can further be assumed that the Johnson administration gave concrete instructions on what people and homes were supposed to look like when the President arrived. In a newspaper interview, Mrs. Doris Mills Marlow claims that she had been requested to have fresh laundry drying in the garden (Akers 20). Other newspaper articles favorably mention the fact that the family had scrubbed their place for three days before the arrival of the President (“The Presidency: When Patriotism and Politics Coincide”). These instructions reveal how the photographs were consciously constructed in order to present a favorable image of the poor. Disheveled looks and run-down surroundings might have invoked conservative responses to poverty, which argued that government interference could not overcome the permanent and self-perpetuating character flaws that were inherent to the poor. By contrast, as we can see in fig. 4, Mary Mallow was dressed-up for the occasion, wearing white high heels and a pink dress. She seems to respect middle-class norms of behavior such as a neat appearance, devoted care of her children, and esteem for the President. The picture is thus assembled to avoid ‘othering’ attitudes to poverty or to construct the ‘poor’ subject as ‘other’ (Lemke 101)¹⁰. Instead, it enables an identification of the white middle class with the people in the picture. Mary Mallow could be a member of the middle class.

¹⁰ In “Facing Poverty,” Sieglinde Lemke stresses that many “well-meaning” documentary photographers represent the poor as ‘other’ by “visually emphasizing depravity,” thus “evok[ing] fear or disgust in the (middle-class) viewer” (101).



Fig. 4. President Johnson speaks with employment security client Mary Mallow and her three children in the Department of Employment Security, Cumberland, Maryland. Cecil Stoughton, May 7, 1964. Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Instead, the notion that something is wrong, that America is falling short if its promises, is expressed using an ideal and an iconographic tradition that middle America would surely be able to relate to: the American family. Brian Black claims that “[i]f any decade has come to symbolize the traditional family, it is the 1950s.” The stereotypical ideal persisted into the 1960s and acquired political connotations in that the perfect family was considered “one of the primary demonstrations of the strength of democracy and capitalism, [and thus] American ideals were formed as never before. Any deviations from the ordinary were considered volatile leanings toward communism” (Black). It is a clear deviation from this ideal that Mary Mallow and her 6-months-old son John are depicted without husband and father, visually violating the ideal of the American nuclear family. This visual lack is further emphasized in the written texts that accompanied the photograph. All the newspaper articles stress the

reason for the absence of the father: He is unemployed, which means he is unable to fulfill his role as the provider for the family. None of the articles gives further explanations.

However, it can be inferred from the context, such as Johnson's speeches, that it is a lack of opportunity that deprived Mr. Mallow of his role as the provider for the family and Mrs. Mallow of her role as nurturing mother and angel of the house. The photograph thus follows the conventional lines of gender by what Hariman and Lucaites in another context have described as "keeping maternal concern separate from economic resources" (58), claiming that a precarious lifestyle threatens traditional family roles and thus American ideals. As a threat to American ideals was at the time often associated with communism as a representation of the social and political other, the image of this lone woman thus reminds the viewer of a two-fold hazard to American ideals: Poverty is represented as threatening the nuclear family as well as the superiority of U.S.-American democratic capitalism in providing opportunity to all citizens.

A look at underlying traditions of Christian iconography reveals more layers of meaning within the photograph. Mrs. Mary Mallow, the loving but helpless mother with an innocent child in her arms, bears a strong analogy to depictions of the Christian Madonna. The photograph connects the sufferings of Mary Mallow, who carries the same first name as the Madonna, to Christian notions of the sufferings of the Virgin Mary along the life and death of her son Jesus. The photograph might implicitly appeal to the majority of the viewers' Christian background and remind them of their duties as Christians and Americans. That is, not only social but also religious ideals are used to make an emotive appeal to the viewer.

The widely reproduced Madonna iconography, however, does not only have religious connotations in the U.S.-American visual archive. As Hariman and Lucaites argue, it had been secularized by social reform photography (57). Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (fig. 5) probably is the most famous example of this "iconography of liberal reform," as Wendy Kozol calls it. Similar to the photograph of Mary Mallow, *Migrant Mother* makes use of the Madonna iconography to address the issue of poverty. An analysis of the parallels between these images provides further insights into the way this iconography is transformed and re-signified in different contexts. According to Hariman and Lucaites, *Migrant Mother* has become *the* "icon of poverty" in U.S.-American culture (65). The photograph has come to not

only symbolize the camp of pea pickers in California where it was taken, or the Great Depression, but it signifies poverty and destitution in general. Thus, by the 1960s, the originally religiously motivated Madonna iconography had acquired a distinct secular meaning. It evokes the paralyzing effects of destitution, calling on the viewer to end the suffering. This process of signification works along the lines of traditional gender roles. This holds true for both photographs, *Migrant Mother* and Mary Mallow. However, the absence of the husband-provider is filled differently in the two photographs. In the *Migrant Mother*, the mother's line of gaze, the main vector in the composition, is aimed at a point outside the picture frame. Hariman and Lucaites claim that "the photograph interpellates the viewer in the position of the absent father. The viewer, though out of the picture, has the capacity for action identified with the paternal role" (58), "any response to and change in that condition must come from outside the frame" (60). A similar vector can be found in the gaze of Mary Mallow's baby. The child figures prominently in the photograph and he is the only participant who looks in the direction of the viewers, drawing them into the picture. Similarly to the *Migrant Mother*, he gazes sadly at a point outside the picture frame, his hand apparently reaching out for something. As Hariman and Lucaites argue, "the dramatic enactment of specific positioning, postures, and gestures that communicate emotional reactions instantly [...] both display[s] and create[s] interactions that become circuits for emotional exchange" (36). The figure of little John thus creates an interaction with the viewer, which most likely excites emotions of compassion or even responsibility or guilt in the viewer. Little John's mother, however, is not gazing into the distance in search of support. She finds a provider within the frame of the photograph. On the left-hand side of the picture, which is set off the right-hand side by a vertical line evoked by the people in the background, we see a roadmap towards the "revitalization of the errand" (Bercovitch xiv), with President Johnson visually completing the family iconography.

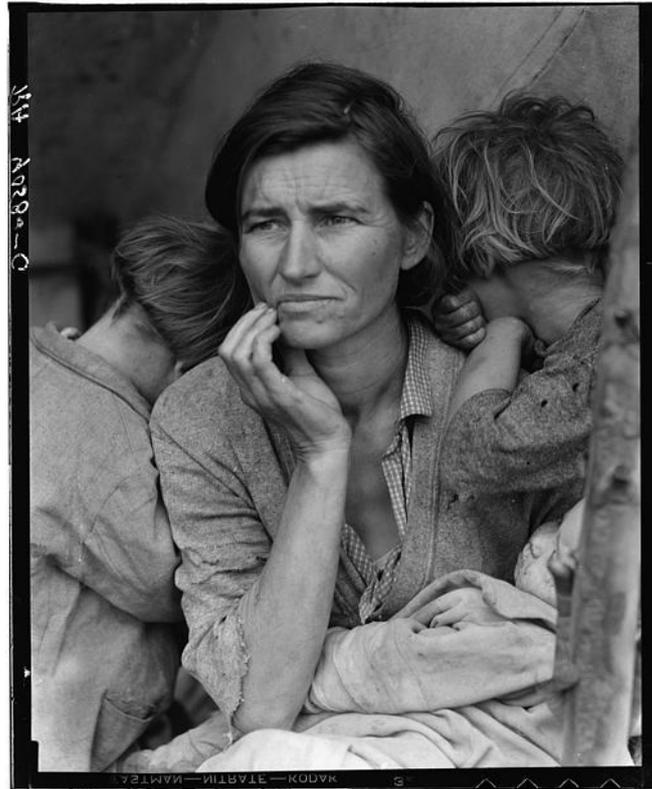


Fig. 5. *Migrant Mother*, Dorothea Lange (1936).
Library of Congress.

4.2 “Revitalize the errand”: Picturing the Way Out of Poverty

While the ‘Migrant Mother’ seems to be waiting for help from outside the picture frame, the photograph of Mary Mallow contains elements promising salvation within the picture frame. The figure of Lyndon B. Johnson epitomizes help in two ways: First, Johnson stands for the government he is heading. Second, his personal biography represents the American Dream.

His posture, the direction he is looking in, and his closeness to Mary Mallow suggest that his government does not ignore the poor, but rather turns towards them and their children in order to help them. However, the government will not (re-)distribute money or goods but opportunities to make people help themselves and thus make welfare unnecessary. This can be considered as a profoundly American idea, which is “rooted in a tradition dating to Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence” (Patterson, *Grand Expectations* 535) and clearly opposed to communist ideas. The idea of a ‘hand up, not a handout’ is suggested by the composition of the photograph. It can, for example, be traced in the main vector of the visual, which is the line of gaze between the two interacting participants, Johnson and Mallow. Johnson is seated slightly higher than Mallow, so that she has to look up to him.

However, the difference in height is not so large that it disrupts the connection and nearness between them. If she seizes her opportunities she could be able to meet him on equal footing. This is further emphasized by Johnson's hand, which is placed near little John, so that he can seize it. The President thus seems to reach out to the future generation in order to offer it a 'hand up.' Emphasizing in a quasi-jeremiadic manner the need for improvement in the future, Johnson stated: "It is not the pinch of suffering, the agony of uncertainty that the adults are now feeling that count the most—it is the heritage our children must anticipate" ("Plaza Crowd Responds to LBJ Remarks" 18). For the 'hand up' strategy to succeed, however, the willingness of the government to provide opportunity is not enough. The poor need to possess the ability to seize their opportunities and thus make their American dream come true in a self-determined way. This idea also figures in the photograph. Therefore, the solution to the problem of poverty lies not only in the figure of the President offering a hand up, but also in Mary Mallow and her son. The fact that these two figures represent middle class ideologies, such as the adherence to the ideal of the nuclear family and respect not only for the President but also for traditional gender roles, makes it seem likely that she and her family can be situated within the American mainstream. Consequently, American ideologies would be reaffirmed in the future despite current shortcomings.

Johnson epitomizes help in yet another way. On his trips, he repeatedly referred to his own biography to construct himself as a self-made man and model to other poor citizens. In his conversations with the people he met, which were thoroughly documented in the newspaper articles accompanying the picture, he mentioned anecdotes about his childhood in Texas, telling people, for example, how his fingers got sore from milking cows ("The Presidency: When Patriotism and Politics Coincide"). When in Cumberland, he declared: "I know what poverty means to people. I have been unemployed. I have shined shoes and worked on a highway crew for a dollar a day. This has taught me some of the meaning of poverty" ("Excerpt from President's Speech"). However, in the pictures he looks far from poor. Johnson thus constructs the narrative of his life along the lines of the jeremiadic pattern of the American Dream: Through hard work and by seizing the opportunities the United States offered to him, Johnson made his way up from poverty to financial security and agency. Johnson's own life story is thus used to lend authenticity to the ideologies that are the foundation of his War on Poverty campaign. The 'first citizen's' biography thus resonates in the

photograph, constructing a model and inspiration for all other citizens. The present situation may be desperate, but there still is hope for the future if we stick to our ideals—the classic pattern of the American jeremiad.

5 Concluding Remarks

The photograph of President Johnson and Mrs. Mary Mallow derives its political and cultural forces from the U.S.-American iconographies, ideals, and rhetorical patterns it is anchored in. The rhetoric of the jeremiad resonates in the dual pattern of the photograph: On the one hand, the U.S. society is criticized for falling short of its promise of opportunity for all, leaving mothers and children unprotected. On the other hand, the hope for a better future, embodied by the figure of the President, his biography, and the government he represents, by far outweighs the “cries of declension and doom.” Like this, this and other photographs from the same time period promote the integration of the poor into mainstream U.S. ideologies through the War on Poverty programs.

These visual strategies are typical for the government photographs created on the poverty trips and for the book *This America*. All of the pictures represent U.S.-American poverty in different, often subtle, ways. Owing to the historical context as well as the political purposes of the photographs, they avoid physical signs of poverty as well as allusions to the consequences of racism and discrimination. Johnson’s poverty trips did not take him to the ghettos of the big cities, but to Appalachia, which is associated with myths of whiteness and core U.S.-American ideals of the Jeffersonian, self-sufficient, and independent farmer. Stricker states in *Why America Lost the War on Poverty*: “President Johnson advertised the program as lily-white by touring the Midwest and Appalachia” (51). In its rurality, the setting in many of the photographs reminds of some of the most iconic depictions of poverty in the United States, such as the photographs of the *Farm Security Administration* in the 1930s. The images thus echo the traditions of social reform photography. At the same time, they radiate the hope and optimism of the United States on the outset of the War on Poverty, not yet shaken by the escalation of the Vietnam War abroad and urban riots at home.

As U.S.-American photographs, these pictures function within the “shifting bounds” of U.S.-American cultural discourses (Stange). As a powerful means of political communication, they

illustrate how photographs can be “realizations and instantiations of ideology” (Kress and van der Leeuwen 14) that serve political purposes. Although the War on Poverty may not have led the United States to the fulfillment of its errand, i.e. the eradication of poverty, it spurred fruitful discussions that would have a revitalizing impact on American images of the poor.

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