

Rolf Lindner

## **To see oneself in the other fellow's place\***

Urban Reportage, the Chicago School and the New York Photo League<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract:* "To get news so completely and to report it so humanly that the reader will see himself in the other fellow's place" – this aim was how the American publicist Lincoln Steffens saw the true ideal of journalism. What urban reportage around 1900, the early ethnographic studies of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology and the camera work of the New York Photo League had in common was the idea of providing insight into other lifeworlds so that the audience can feel empathy with others. In this way the aesthetic function of the media, as formulated by the social philosopher George Herbert Mead, could be fulfilled: To stimulate communitarization by conveying the experiences of others.

*Keywords:* urban reportage, aesthetic experience, urban ethnography, street photography, humanity of method

The aim that literary reportage around 1900, Chicago urban ethnography in the 1920s and the street photography of the New York Photo League in the 1930s and 1940s all had in common was to convey an aesthetic, i.e. sensual experience of urban life in all its variety. By showing life as lived, reporters, sociologists and photographers each tried to convey to their audiences, insights into other lifeworlds as a basis for understanding them, so they could put themselves in another person's place. Of these three movements, the work of the Photo League, which oriented itself according to the agenda of the Chicago School, has, so far, been largely ignored in the discourse concerning urban anthropology. This is surprising because the members of the Photo League did not only produce a socially involved photographic ethnography of New York, analogous to the example of the Chicago School; they went even further than the Chicago sociologists by reflecting the urban situation by means of street photography and making the interactivity of the urban perspective the subject of their photographic work.

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## Urban reportage

The “world of strangers,” as Lyn Lofland (1973) defined the metropolis, positively invited research. It produced a new vocational type, as Robert Park (1967 [1925]), the founder of the Chicago School termed it, in the shape of the reporter who acted as a kind of urban scout in the metropolitan context for his readers. In the eyes of the great naturalistic author Theodore Dreiser (1922), who, like many of his literary contemporaries, began his career as a newspaper reporter, the great thing about the metropolis was its diversity. With their descriptions of the city, portrayals of urban institutions and occupations, and stories of ethnic districts and their inhabitants, the reports inspired by this variety offered their readers a substitute for the lack of their own experience. In this way, they provided what the social philosopher George Herbert Mead (1926) called the “aesthetic experience”; in other words, the reports helped to bring people together in such a way that it became possible for them “to put themselves in each other’s places” and “to participate in each other’s minds” (Mead 1926: 389). It was the reporters who told their readers about the glamour and misery of the metropolis. It was they who reported from inside the world of the sweatshops, the slaughterhouses and the factories; they introduced their readers to the world of the grand hotels, the department stores and the vaudeville theaters; they scouted out tenement blocks and wandered through red-light districts; and it was they who went on trips “Around the World in New York” – the title of a series of articles by Konrad Bercovici (1924) that appeared in *Century Magazine* in 1924. He guided his readers through Little Italy, Chinatown, the Syrian quarter, Harlem, the Balkan areas and into the German quarter, among others. As scouts, the reporters developed research techniques that corresponded to the image of the explorer as well as the altered conditions in the metropolitan world: Observation and interview, onsite investigation and undercover research. The metropolis released the art of observation; it made it both possible and necessary. Only in this art did the role of the observer become possible ‘as’ a role; only here did the opportunity exist to slip into various roles and to temporarily assume different identities. Just like ethnologists exploring foreign cultures, the urban reporters had their sources – the janitor, the hotel porter, the bartender – and their ‘native’ informers in the ethnic quarters. Just like covered participant observers, they assumed roles as unemployed people and apartment hunters, as workers and sales assistants, as beggars and lunatics, to provide their readers with insights into strange work and lifeworlds and into the working methods of modern institutions. A surprising number of such role-playing reports were produced by women in the 1880s. The best-known of them was Elizabeth Cochrane, who became the uncrowned queen of the genre under the pseudonym “Nelly Bly.” Cochrane developed the investigative report based on undercover observation to a supreme degree. She feigned madness, had it officially certified and had herself admitted to the notorious lunatic asylum on Blackwell’s Island (“Ten Days in

a Madhouse" was the title of the report); she had herself arrested in order to get into a women's prison and report about the conditions there; she claimed to be sick and went to the hospital for the poor to examine the medical treatment provided there; and she worked, among other jobs, as a housemaid and in department stores to describe the working conditions. The latter was a topic that Frances Donovan ("The Saleslady") returned to about forty years later within the framework of Chicago Ethnography (Lindner 1990). However fragmentarily, the reporters conveyed to their readers the inside views of strange lifeworlds. They provided them with knowledge and encouraged tolerance by showing them unknown phenomena (a service in a synagogue, a patronal festival in Little Italy, high mass in the basilica in Polish Town). The detailed descriptions of locations were not merely ornamentation, not merely evidence that the author had really 'been there,' but also an opening up of the metropolitan area that the readers could follow. In this way, the authors acted as tourist guides. The series of articles "Around the World in New York" contains, for example, the sentence: "Take the Sixth Avenue Elevated at Forty-Second Street, and in a few minutes you are in Rector Street; walk a block westward to Washington Street, and you are in Syria" (Bercovici 1924: 348). In this way, the reporters helped make the metropolis a "structure of diverse lifeworlds and forms of culture" (Korff 1987: 645). Many of the studies published in the golden age of urban reportage around 1900 also appeared in book form, beginning with Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives* (1889; still reprinted today), through Lincoln Steffens' muckraking article *The Shame of the Cities*, to Konrad Bercovici's *Around the World in New York* – clearly a strategy on the part of the publishers involved to double their earnings, but also evidence that these reports were not only of ephemeral interest. One particularly striking example is a series of articles by Hutchins Hapgood (1967 [1902]), which appeared, among other places, in the *Commercial Advertiser* and was published in book form in 1902 under the title *The Spirit of the Ghetto*. For the eminent historian Moses Rischin (1967), who edited a new edition of this series of articles for Harvard University Press, this book was the first authentic study of the inner life of an American immigrant community from the pen of an outsider: "More especially, it is a superb portrait of the emergent golden age of the Lower East Side, when a new region of heart and mind was introduced into the American consciousness" (Rischin 1967: viif.). Hapgood was one of the young generation of Harvard graduates who, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, entered the world of newspapers searching for a new form of literary journalism that fulfilled an aesthetic function – as George Herbert Mead (1926) expressed it. The literary journalism that Lincoln Steffens propagated as editor of the *Commercial Advertiser* corresponds perfectly to Mead's model: "... [I]t is scientifically and artistically the true ideal for an artist and for a newspaper: To get the news so completely and to report it so humanly that the reader will see himself in the other fellow's place" (Steffens 1931: 317). Hapgood, who was a

reporter for the *Commercial Advertiser*, followed the ideal sketched by Steffens in all his (Hapgood's) writings. Hapgood made his position clear in a preface to the book edition of his articles about Jewish New York:

I was led to spend much time in certain poor resorts of Yiddish New York not through motives either philanthropic or sociological, but simply by virtue of the charm I felt in men and things there. East Canal Street and the Bowery have interested me more than Broadway and Fifth Avenue. Why, the reader may learn from the present volume – which is an attempt made by a “Gentile” to report sympathetically on the character, lives and pursuits of certain east-side Jews whom he has been in relations of considerable intimacy. (Hapgood 1967: 5)

If we can believe his source, Abraham Cahan<sup>2</sup>, the publisher of the most famous Jewish daily newspaper the *Jewish Daily Forward*, he succeeded admirably in this, since for Cahan, Hapgood was the only gentile who understood the spirit of the ghetto. What Hapgood expresses in his preface is a perspective of comprehension based on understanding and empathy – a perspective that the Chicago School of Urban Sociology was the first to attempt to utilize scientifically. The first chapter (“The Old and the New”) is particularly impressive, containing his descriptions of the Orthodox Jewish way of life in Russia and Galicia and its gradual disintegration in America. His comments about the second generation are especially remarkable: He presents the special situation of the young people, who alternated between love of their parents and embarrassment about their appearance, linguistic deficits, ignorance and awkwardness. Hapgood attempted to identify the influences that affected the second generation and shaped them in a specific way. On the one hand, there was the Orthodox Jewish environment of their parents’ home, which insisted on strict adherence to the traditional way of life; on the other hand, there was the American school they had to go to, which not only taught the youngsters a language that their parents could only speak poorly or not at all, but also exposed them to influences that were unknown or irrelevant to their parents’ generation. “He (the young) achieves a growing comprehension and sympathy with the independent, free, rather sceptical spirit of the American boy; he rapidly imbibes ideas about social equality and contempt for authority, and tends to prefer Sherlock Holmes to Abraham as hero” (Hapgood 1967: 24). Rischin, in his introduction, compares Hapgood’s study to Jakob Riis’ *How the Other Half Lives*. This study is a comprehensive portrayal, based on reportage material, of the living conditions in the slum districts of New York, in which Riis concentrates, among other places, on the Lower East Side, inhabited by Jewish immigrants mainly from Galicia and Russia. He calls this area “Jewtown.” In Rischin’s opinion, there is a world of difference between Riis’ “Jewtown” and

2 In his travel diary, Robert Park said of Cahan that he “probably produced the best newspaper that was ever published” (REPA 4:7). Park comments in detail on Cahan and the *Jewish Daily Forward* in his study about the immigrant press (Park 1970).

Hapgood's "Ghetto," although they both describe the same location. The difference derives from the contrasting perspectives from which the two authors perceive the lifeworld of the eastern Jewish immigrants. Rischin sees the moralizing tone in Riis, who sympathized with the reforming tendencies of the Charity Organization Society, as an echo of the endeavors to proselytize the immigrants, an aspect that Hapgood also refers to indirectly when he emphasizes in his preface that he was not guided by philanthropic motives. As Rischin put it: "Where Riis sought to cleanse the ghettos if not to level them entire, Hapgood saw the East Side as a source for counter reform in the greater America" (Rischin 1967: xxiii). This alternative view of society stood in opposition to a way of thinking and acting shaped purely by the profit motive, which did not allow for individual character and contained no organ for the variety of human existence. In this way, Hapgood proved himself to be one of the cultural dissidents who, towards the end of the 19th century, turned to journalism as a realm of experience. Journalism became a *technique de dépaysement* for these dissidents. Their preference for people on the fringes of society or outside it is directly related to their alienation from their original Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture. As Skotheim wrote in his introduction to Hapgood's autobiography: "Bored by what they perceived as the artificiality of the life of the middle classes, the young intellectuals were attracted by what their families and society were not" (Skotheim 1971: xix). Those who turned to the metropolitan press as a realm of experience were protesting, in the first place, against what the philosopher George Santayana (1967) termed the "genteel tradition," a tradition of nice pretense and social complacency, which stood in exemplary fashion for the divide between intellectual life and all authentic standards of reality. This protest explains what Rischin in his eulogy for Hapgood called the "humanity of his method" (Rischin 1967: xxx), his capacity for empathy, which summoned up the 'spirit' of the ghetto before the eyes of his readers.

### Urban ethnography

I have made it clear elsewhere that urban reportage was a role model for the urban research carried out by the Department of Sociology at Chicago University in the 1920s and 1930s (Lindner 1990). This is not surprising when we recall that the *spiritus rector* of urban sociology, Robert Ezra Park, worked as a reporter and city editor in Chicago, Detroit, New York and other major American cities for almost twelve years before opting for an academic career. Contemporary colleagues in his field, who favored quantitative social research as the scientific ideal, viewed this relationship critically; they dismissed Chicago sociology as a "journalistic school of sociology" and as "journalism in disguise." In an attempt to conceal this relationship for reasons of prestige, Park, at first, argued in favor of cultural anthropology as model; he emphasized in his key article "The City" that the same method that anthropologists, such as Boas and Lowie, used when exploring the ways of life of

the Native Americans could be fruitfully applied to investigations of the customs, religious beliefs and social practices of the inhabitants of Little Italy and the “more sophisticated folkways” of the inhabitants of Greenwich Village (Park 1967 [1925]: 3). There is no doubt that such a methodological proximity exists. However, the fundamental influence of contemporary journalism still remains. Only in his old age did Park make it clear to what extent he had drawn from his experiences as a reporter and city editor when formulating his program:

In the article about the city I leaned rather heavily on the information I had acquired as a reporter regarding the city. Later on, as it fell to my lot to direct the research work of an increasing number of graduate students, I found my experience as a city editor in directing a reportorial staff had stood me in good stead. (Kurtz 1982: 338)

Park imagined that students should become “reporters in depth to enter as fully as possible into the social worlds they studied, participating in them sufficiently to understand the attitudes and values of these worlds” (Matthews 1977: 108). This seems to me to be nothing other than the “humanity of method” of which Moses Rischin spoke. However, for this to be successful, the students first had to discard their “college notions of virtue and charity” (Dreiser 1922), because they hindered real empathy with the subjects of their research and, therefore, understanding of their behavior and way of life. When Park emphasized that his experiences as a city editor had been helpful when instructing his students, he meant, above all, the adoption of the journalistic assignment system, i.e. the allocation of specific topics or beats, which was common practice in contemporary journalism when working with cub reporters. Particular topics were handed out for the term papers in Chicago; exemplarily “Describe the typical day of a department store salesgirl,” or “What happens in the lobby of a grand hotel?” or “The occupation of a bartender.” These term papers were then presented in class and discussed. What does the instructor think of them? “Remarkable stuff” or “It’s no news,” which, according to former students, was the worst verdict that Park could deliver. Just as the cub reporters in Park’s day learned their trade ‘on the job,’ so did the fledgling Chicago sociologists ‘by doing.’ That was also true of a remarkable school of photography: The New York Photo League.

### **Street photography**

The Photo League developed in 1936 out of the Workers Film and Photo League, a part of Workers International Relief, and was dissolved in 1951 after being black-listed as an allegedly subversive organization by the House Un-American Activities Committee. Some of its members – including Sid Grossman, one of the founders of the League – were members of the Communist Party for a time. The Photo League consisted of a group of young photographers, predominantly from the Jewish quarter of New York, who had made it their mission to explore life in the neighborhoods

by means of photography, adopting the Chicago ethnographers' phrase: "life as it is lived." "In insisting that 'the student learns by doing'" (Klein 2011: 13), the progressive method of training that, in the view of one of its members, Hal Greenwald, was the distinguishing feature of the League, the students of the photo school attached to the League were sent out on trips of exploration, just as Park had done. According to students, Park told them to "go into the district," "get the feeling" and "become acquainted with people" (Lindner 1990: 118), instructions which seem to me to apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the training at the New York Photo School as well, since both its head, Sid Grossman, and Park were concerned with teaching the art of seeing, without blinkers (Park) and without conventions (Grossman). The students seem to have succeeded in carrying out these (implicit) instructions if we look at work like *Elks Parade* by 19-year-old Jack Manning or *Coney Island Embrace* by 20-year-old Morris Engel, the latter, an early masterpiece definitely comparable to Doisneau's *Le baiser de l'hôtel de ville*. "They are not looking at some distant foreign culture and its people. Instead they turn their lens on their own streets they walk and the familiar strangers they have come to know in their own city. They are doing a kind of ethnography at home" (Levitt 2008: 119). There is no better way of expressing the proximity to the Chicago ethnographers.

As Deborah Dash Moore (2014) states in her essay about the New York Photo League, its agenda oriented itself according to the sociological investigations deriving from Chicago, with Louis Wirth's study *The Ghetto* (1956) playing a special role because of its Jewish background. However, the League itself had an interest in being sociologically relevant because it hoped that it could contribute with its works to communal self-awareness, a form of community organizing as conceived by the Chicago sociologist Saul Alinsky around 1940. This included presenting the works locally as feedback to the community, affording the opportunity to modify the forthcoming official exhibition. Organizing exhibitions and lectures was generally part not only of the photography students' training, but also of the educational work of the League. The sites that attracted the New York photographers resembled those of the Chicago urban sociologists: Lower East Side as a Jewish district, Little Italy with its patronal festivals and Coney Island as the leisure and amusement destination of the metropolis. In the first few years, the work was divided up into so-called "Feature Groups" around particular projects. There was, for example, a project *Portrait of a Tenement*, which was to provide a picture of life in a New York tenement, a project about the Bowery (*The Dead End*), at that time the street of social outcasts, a Chelsea project, and the biggest project, stretching over four years: *The Harlem Document*.

With its eight focal points – work, health, accommodation, religion, leisure, society, youth and crime – the Harlem project was a genuine social survey, a research construct that was not typical of the classic ethnographically oriented Chicago stud-

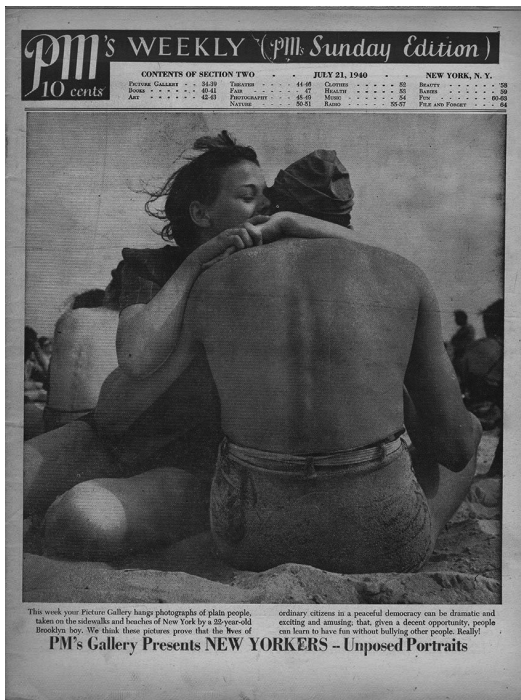


Figure:  
Morris Engel,  
Coney Island Embrace, 1938

ies. It is likely that when they conceived it, the project group were guided by Robert and Helen Lynd's *Middletown* study, whose restudy (*Middletown in Transition*) was published in 1937, around the time of the Harlem project, and whose areas of investigation (Getting a Living, Making a Home, Training the Young, Spending Leisure, Religion and Keeping Healthy) were identical to those of the *Harlem Document*. However, following the social survey, problem-oriented and focusing on social policies, involved the danger of concentrating exclusively on the deficits of the area under investigation, so that the inhabitants appear one-sided as the victims of external circumstances. And this is how a large number of the visitors to a preview exhibition in the YMCA in Harlem saw it. Entries in the comments book regretted that only the shabby sides of Harlem were depicted. "What about the intellectual and cultural side?" one of the visitors asked (Berger 2013: 31). This question was more than justified in view of the significance of the so-called Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, a movement of Afro-American writers and artists who made Harlem the mecca of the New Negro.<sup>3</sup> The picture painted by the feature group was not at all that of a mecca,

3 *Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro* (Locke 1925a) was the title of a special issue of the magazine *Survey Graphic* in March 1925 about the Harlem Renaissance with contributions from protagonists of the movement, such as Alain Locke and the anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits. Locke was also the publisher of the anthology *The New Negro* (1925b), in which, among others, Zora Neale



a place of pilgrimage, but of a dystopia, a community in peril (Berger 2011). This can be seen most strikingly in the only contemporary publication by the Harlem project, a six-page essay in the magazine *Look*<sup>4</sup> in May 1940, whose title *244,000 Native Sons* clearly echoed Richard Wright's (1940) novel *Native Son*, published in the same year. It was, above all, the text by the young Afro-American sociologist Michael Carter (1940) in which the photos were embedded that dictated an interpretation of the photos that dramatized the conditions in Harlem. The captions, for example, turned typical Harlem boys into "delinquents in the making" (modeled on Bigger Thomas, a figure in Wright's novel) and the inhabitants of a tenement who had congregated on the fire escapes and were clearly following the Elks Parade with enthusiasm into evidence of the catastrophic housing conditions in the tenements. We can see here in a striking, almost bizarre way what happens when photographs are adduced to illustrate sociological theses, since – as far as we know – the group's photos covered a wide range of cultural and social activities in the community, but, as the principle of selection was primarily to document the precarious living conditions, they were not included in the photographic essay. The book project was subsequently abandoned. More than forty years later, Aaron Siskind, the head of the project, published a revised version entitled *Harlem Document Photographs 1932–1940; Aaron Siskind* (Banks 1981). The book is far removed from the original concept, with impressionistic photographic essays and without sociological statistics and sober chapter headings. Instead there are interviews and street verses collected in the 1930s by the Afro-American writer Ralph Ellison. In his consideration of the project, Maurice Berger writes:

This artful remake of the *Document* positions Harlem as a place of hope and possibility – a neighborhood, to quote the venerated African American photographer Gordon Parks in the book's foreword, "where loftier dreams were fostered; where now and then some of those dreams were realized." (Berger 2011: 33f.)

Siskind's remake consisted, above all, of no longer using photographs to illustrate reports, a constriction of the photographic work that had already led to the breaking away of the Photo League from the Workers Film and Photo League. Instead, he allowed the photos to speak for themselves and to confer on them an aesthetic quality which made the city of New York and its inhabitants their protagonists.

Hurston and Langston Hughes were also involved. The term "new negro" was used to describe a new urban type, metropolitan and sophisticated, and as the pattern for a new black identity designed to replace the regressive model of the servile 'old negro' from the Jim Crow south.

4 It is a remarkable coincidence that the League was founded at the time when illustrated magazines such as *Life* and *Look* sprang up. Thus, publication organs were available for the young photographers, although the most important publication for the members of the League was the short-lived magazine *PM* (an abbreviation for *Photo Magazine*), a socially committed tabloid that printed full-page photos. Engel's *Coney Island Embrace* appeared on the cover of the weekend supplement of the issue of July 21, 1940 (cf. Lesy 2011).

We could also speak of a transition from a sociological photographic practice to an ethnographic one. The League focused in the 1940s on what Mason Klein (2011) described so neatly as the “promise of the street”: As a multi-faceted action space for children and young people, as a place for the meeting and recreation of adults, with a view of what Moore describes as “gendered street geometries”: “Men own the streets; women share the stoops” (Moore 2008: 95). “The Photo League students take their camera anywhere; they often push the process to technical limits,” wrote the art historian Beaumont Newhall, the first curator of the photographic department of MOMA, in a 1948 review of a double exhibition of works by students of the League and of the Department of Photography at the California School of Fine Arts. “All of them feel people more strongly than nature [the latter was the favorite photographic motif of the Californian students, R.L.]; they want to tell us about New York and some of the people who live there” (Klein 2011: 12). William Klein, a late arrival at the Photo League, ‘essentialized’ this difference when he distinguished between two types of photography: “Jewish” and “goyish,” saying that Jewish photographers were attracted more to people as motifs, whereas non-Jewish photographers focused on photos of nature (Klein 2011:12). Mason Klein, the co-publisher of *The Radical Camera*, a documentation about the Photo League, also saw New York Jews as privileged observers of urban life:

Moreover, in 1940 – when two million of the seven million New York residents were Jewish, according to later estimates – the ability to study the insular life of neighborhoods and to observe urban spaces was what Jews, perhaps better than any other segment of the population at that time, were equipped to do. (Klein 2011: 12)

“To tell us about New York and its people” can, with justification, describe the ethnographic dimension of the work of the Photo League, which immediately made it the first/principal representative of the New York School of Photography, whose subject was the city itself.<sup>5</sup> Among the stories which the members of the League told with their cameras were children playing on the streets (often taken in high-angle shots), the patronal festivals in the Italian quarter (including, for example, the *Mulberry Street* series by Sid Grossman) and, above all, the amusements on Coney Island, photos which make the people in them visible as self-assured actors in front of the camera (brilliantly captured in Grossman’s photo on the dust jacket of the documentation about the Photo League).

Here, as in other photos by members of the league, the city is clearly seen as a stage for self-presentation, thus, simultaneously, displaying the interactive

5 The informal name “New York School of Photography” describes photographers such as Bruce Davidson, Robert Frank, William Klein, Helen Levitt and Gary Winogrand. Of the members of the League, Sid Grossman, Sy Kattleson and Lisette Model are also included in this ‘school.’ For Deborah Dash Moore, the League was, as it were, the preparatory school of the New York School of Photography.

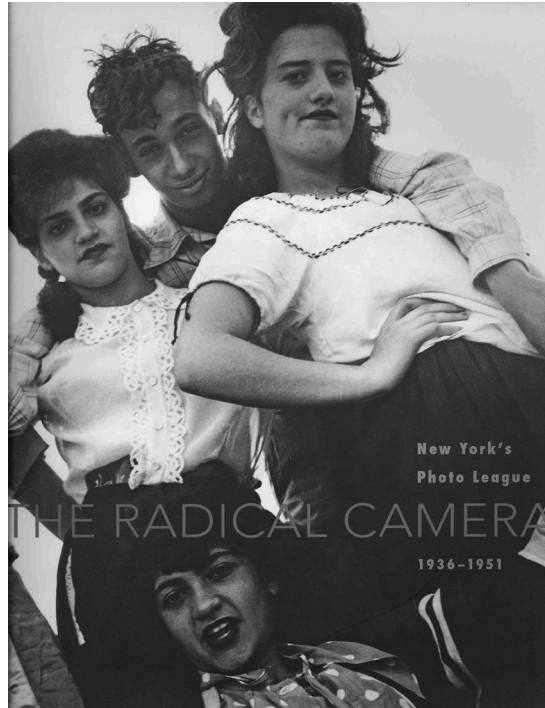


Figure:  
Sid Grossman, Coney Island, 1947

character of the photographic situation. The attempts by the members of League to reflect the urban situation itself by means of street photography are of particular urban anthropological interest. Among them are, above all, works by the Austrian photographer Lisette Model, who fled to New York in 1938. She processed her experiences with life in the metropolis in her early photo series *Reflections* (from 1939 onwards) and *Running Legs* (from 1940 onwards) and, from our point of view, in this way, contributes to a visual anthropology of the city in which the city is not only the locus, but also the focus of research (Hannerz 1980: 3). We can see an iconic translation of the simultaneity of the metropolitan mode of perception in the reflections of the shop windows. "The inclusion of the reflected images on the glass panes of the shop windows gave the photographs a multi-layered structure, which rather seemed to reflect the overwhelming and confusing impressions in the streets of New York," is how Monika Faber interpreted the picture. "We see the exterior and interior of the shops at the same time and permeating each other; what we can only experience consecutively is in this way expressed simultaneously" (Faber 2000: 20). In the same way, the photos of the series *Running Legs* are evidence of how the newcomer experienced the metropolis: As a city in motion, characterized by passers-by hastening towards their destinations, evidently without paying attention to their surroundings. The photos show us, quite literally, the dynamic and transient quality

of the metropolis and have – as Faber emphasizes – a quasi-cinematographic quality. Works whose subject is the interactive nature of urban looking<sup>6</sup> penetrate to the core of photographic practice (and, simultaneously, to a theory of interaction inspired by Chicago), because seeing and being seen represents the essence of the metropolitan mode of perception. Perhaps the Photo League's greatest achievement is that the photographers did not operate secretly but saw themselves from the first as part of the interactions they presented: "They themselves are players in the urban scenes they create in their work" (Levitt 2008: 118). In his "*Exkurs über die Soziologie der Sinne*," Georg Simmel had seen a crucial aspect of metropolitan sociology in the "boundless domination of sight over the hearing of other people" and, at the same time, emphasized that people looking at each other is "the most direct and purest interrelationship" (Simmel 1983: 484). Representatives of the Photo League made the mutual relationship of seeing and being seen the subject of their photos and, in this way, literally made visible what the ethnopsychanalyst Georges Devereux claimed was the basic characteristic of all behavioral science: The "actual or potential reciprocity of observation between observer and observed" (Devereux 1976: 42). While Sol Libsohn, for example, was carrying out his assignment to capture typical urban situations photographically, he observed people who were observing something and was himself observed in the process. Deborah Dash Moore made this reciprocity of looking the subject of her in-depth interpretation of Sol Libsohn's photo *Hester Street*.

In Libsohn's photo the kinetics of looking turn on multiple pivots. The eccentric orbits of his characters, ours as well, are anchored by the only figure wholly in focus, an older woman with arms folded protectively across her flower print homedress. She alone looks upstream to our right. Of three women only she has planted herself at the edge of the flow of the street. Street activity draws parallel looks from the gallery; but one guy has had enough. Libsohn records the effect of his intrusion on our behalf. The price of admission: we get nailed by converging stares. That boy up close: maybe he's got a word for Libsohn. The man to our right glances sharply at us from under his hat, giving as good as he gets. A couple of steps down from the sidewalk on the left, someone looks dead at us; and in turn the intensity of his glare draws a glance from a passer-by. Eventually we notice the eyes on the optometrist's sign staring unblinkingly, promoting vision itself. And beneath one eye, the Hebrew letters advertising to Jewish customers remind us that this is a Jewish neighbourhood. If we look hard enough, behind the sign, in shadow, a child, pressing face and hand against a window, peers out toward the street and the photographer. The subject of Libsohn's photo is the interactivity of urban looking itself. (Moore 2008: 92–93)

6 In this way, Erving Goffman's sociological reflections on face-to-face interaction (Goffman 2009: 31f.) are anticipated photo-'graphically' by works of the Photo League.



Figure: Sol Libsohn, Hester Street, 1945. From: *The Radical Camera*. New York's Photo League 1936–1951. Edited by Mason Klein and Catherine Evans, New York 2012, p. 162

*Hester Street*<sup>7</sup> can be seen as an excellent example of the representatives of the Photo League combining the depiction of mundane life in the big city with reflection about its 'rules': "[L]ooking as part of the fabric of urban life" (Moore 2014). Seeing and being seen – the interactivity of looks is the ineluctable precondition for every act of observation, whether in ethnographic fieldwork or in photographic research. Only when the observer realizes "that he is caught up in the very web of social interaction which he observes, analyzes and reports" (Hughes 1971: 505), is it possible to transcend mere documentation and achieve mutual understanding between researcher and researched. George Herbert Mead had picked up John Dewey's term "shared experience" in his reflections on aesthetic experience and stressed that "(e)very invention that brings men closer together, so that they realize their interde-

7 The title of the photo evidently refers to a long photographic tradition of depicting the Lower East Side. But whereas practically all other photos of Hester Street show an apparently chaotic collection of people with their handcars, Libsohn's motif is an urban situation *par excellence*. In this way, he unintentionally provides us with an example of the view of the city as the focus, not the locus, of research.

pendence, and increase their shared experience, which makes it more possible for them to put themselves in each other's place, every form of communication which enables them to participate in each other's minds" contributes to understanding oneself as a part of the community. (Mead 1926: 389). "To see himself in the other fellow's place" – this ideal of successful research ought to apply not only to the recipient of the report, but also to its transmitter. For Lisette Model, a prominent member of the Photo League, the act of taking a photograph was an opportunity to become involved with the lives of other people and, at the same time, to increase self-awareness. This is surely what is meant by humanity of method.

## Source

REPA Robert E. Park – Addenda. Joseph Regenstein Library. Special Collections Department, University of Chicago. The first figure behind the source abbreviation refers to the box, the second to the folder.

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