Black and White Photography as Theorizing: Seeing What the Eye Cannot See

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

"… I don't see horrible things. I see reality."[3]

INTRODUCTION

In this exploration of Sebastião Salgado's work, I speak as a sociologist and social theorist who has researched some of the conditions that Salgado captures in his photography. This is my point of entry and my foothold for navigating Salgado's photography.[4] My point of entry is not the expert literature on Salgado's work nor is it the critical literature on photography.

From that perspective, I want to experiment with the thesis that black and white photography of actual settings creates distance and thereby unsettles meaning. It is not simply about the image but also about the nonimage—all the other presences that hover in a sort of penumbra around the image. We cannot see these presences with our eyes. However, we can see them theoretically. In contrast, color photography of actual settings overwhelms with its specificity and leaves little room for distance and thereby for theory. It seems to me that Salgado's photography allows us to see something that is actively (not casually) obscured by the brilliance, richness, and specificity of a color photograph of the same subjects⁄objects.

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[2] See Carr (2011) for details of the session. For other essays from the session, see Gold (2011), Kay (2011), Rudel (2011), and Wolford (2011).
[3] Sebastião Salgado, Interview by Audrey Singer, *Contexts*.
[4] The references to research and findings all come from Sassen (2008).

I could not engage in this experiment without the essays by my colleagues on the panel with their detailed accounts about Salgado's trajectory as a photographer (Kay, 2011), the new direction represented by his current project *Genesis* (Rudel, 2011), his critical involvement very early on in the Sem Terra movement in Brazil (Wolford, 2011), and, more generally, on the relationship between documentary photography and sociology (Gold, 2011).

Building on these accounts, I want to explore particular ways in which Salgado's photography produces knowledge beyond the actual visual content in his photographs, and in this sense his photography is heuristic—it produces knowledge about more than what the photograph's content itself captures visually, but it does so through the photograph itself. This is also a way of sorting what Salgado himself refers to as universalism, and Tamara Kay describes as ''Family of Man'' values. "Salgado's images cover the 'Family of Man' gamut, depicting people working, building, loving, warring, playing, celebrating, and grieving—without invoking stereotypes" (2011:X). **1**

I do this through several propositions that reconceptualize this "universalism" by making it not an attribute but a working methodology and theorization that becomes a lens onto a larger reality.

BEYOND SOCIAL EXCLUSIONS: NEW LOGICS OF EXPULSION

With the onset of the neoliberal global project in the 1980s, there has been a sharp growth in the numbers of people who have been ''expulsed,'' numbers far larger than the newly ''incorporated'' middle classes of countries such as India and China. I use the term ''expulsed'' to describe a diversity of conditions: the growing numbers of the abjectly poor, of the displaced in poor countries who are warehoused in formal and informal refugee camps, of the minoritized and persecuted in rich countries who are warehoused in prisons, of workers whose bodies are destroyed on the job and rendered useless at far too young an age, able-bodied surplus populations warehoused in ghettoes and slums. I add to this the repositioning as *land* for sale on the global market of what had been constructed as national sovereign territory. This is land in Africa, Central Asia, and Latin America that is being bought by rich investors and rich governments to grow food, to access underground water tables, and to access minerals and metals.

My argument is that this massive expulsion is actually signaling a deeper systemic transformation that has been documented in bits and pieces but not quite narrated as an overarching dynamic that is taking us into a new phase of global capitalism.

I find in Salgado's photography the capacity to show the multisited global presence of a vast array of logics of expulsion. He finds the articulation between the particularity of the local event in his photo with a larger process that engenders it. Salgado writes, "I believe that some answers must exist, that humanity is capable of understanding, even controlling, the political,

economic, and social forces that we have set loose across the globe. … Are we to do nothing in the face of the steady deterioration of our habitat, whether in cities or in nature? Are we to remain indifferent as the values of rich and poor countries alike deepen the divisions in our societies? We cannot" (Salgado, 2000:14).

Migration

Salgado's photography contains a range of spaces that are neither national nor global, which allow for a recurrence of themes (struggles, sufferings, humanities) that he then thinks of as universalisms. But in fact this photography illuminates foundational dynamics taking place today that can be understood in framings other than universalisms, including, as Galeano (1990:11) puts it, horizontal solidarities.

> Coming from a country with all these social issues and social problems, and a country that was emerging as a market, urbanizing, and with all these conflicts, its likely the only thing possible for me as a photographer in the beginning was social photography, because my life was a social issue. For my entire life, I have worked only on social issues until now with the *Genesis* project, where I am working on environmental issues, which in the end are social issues." (From interview with Audrey Singer)

WHEN TIME AND TERRITORY SEEP OUT OF THE CAGES OF NATION-STATES

At its most foundational, I see Salgado's photography as capturing worlds that become visible when we break the conceptual and operational cages into which territory and time have been pushed over the last few centuries by the project of making nation-states built on voracious corporate capitalisms. I see this also as feeding his political engagement with his subjects' struggles and sufferings across the world, beyond any particular nation-state. At the same time, I am not sure I would use the term he himself uses—universalism—to describe this. Each is sited/situated even as this siting takes place across the most diverse places worldwide.

This project of nation-state building standardized, bureaucratized, and nationalized time and territory, though never succeeding completely. For centuries, national states worked at nationalizing territory, identity, security, power, rights—all the key elements of social and political existence. When the national state is the dominant format, the overarching dynamic is centripetal: the center grasps most of what there is to be had. Those nationalizing dynamics assembled the pieces of what we now experience as the national and, too often, the "natural."

What happens outside the borders of territorial states—whether the impoverished terrains of former empires or the earth's poles—was and

continues to be written out of history. Salgado's photography breaks these cages open; his aim is to recover the universal.

In fact, it is also capturing what is still not completely recognized. Current unsettlements are breaking the cages into which territory and time have been pushed over the last few centuries. The global climate crisis is partly what was exported out of these cages into a *putative* no-man's land as part of the making of capitalism. But such a no-man's land does not exist. It is actually the atmosphere that surrounds us, or poor people and poor areas of the global South, or the disadvantaged in the rich countries who have been far more exposed to toxicity than the privileged. The glaciers, once remote and immobile, are now at our door in liquid form. The multitudes of disadvantaged are becoming actors on a global stage. Neither the glaciers nor these multitudes can be kept in that putative no-man's land upon which powerful shapers of this economy thought they could rely.

Today's catastrophic conditions—the melting of the glaciers, the radicalness of today's poverty, the violence of extreme economic inequality, the genocidal character of more and more wars—are often seen as a new era. But it seems to me they are not. On the contrary, they have long been part of that putative no-man's land that absorbed the costs of making nation-states and capitalism, and much of Salgado's photography captures precisely this. His photographs narrate the current condition in a far more encompassing manner than standard narratives about nation-states and globalization.

These conditions have existed for a long time, but today they are crossing new thresholds and, crucially, they become legible as the cages of the national begin to fall apart and reveal the landscapes of devastation on which they were built. "Our over-cantilevered bridge cannot cope with the warming waters below" (Hilary Koob-Sassen, Serpentine Manifesto, London October 2008).

Salgado's *Genesis* project took him a long distance to find a territory that was beyond that *putative* no-man's land, a territory where a complex biosphere can still be found and a part of our mankind that has not been flattened by oppression and consumerism. In Salgado's words (2010), "*Genesis* is an attempt to portray the beauty and the majesty of regions that are still in a pristine condition." Rudel's (2011) essay describes this search for such a territory and people.

WHEN POWERLESSNESS BECOMES COMPLEX

As territory and time seep out of the old nation-state cages they begin to constitute a proliferation of partial, often highly specialized, assemblages of bits of territory, authority, and rights once firmly ensconced in national institutional frames, including oppressive forms of capitalism. Thus his early work with the Sem Terra movement and the resulting book *Terra* is one instance of

territory and time seeping out of the cages of the national—territory becomes land and the short timeframes of capitalism becomes decades of struggle.

These often thick, subnational settings are building blocks for new global geographies. These globalities do not run through supranational institutions that take out that thickness and generalize across differences. They resonate with Nicolas Bourriaud's notion of an alter-modernity that "arises out of planetary negotiations, discussions between agents from different cultures" (from Tate Britain 2009 Triennale, London).

Building on the above, I find in what Salgado refers to as universalism a localism marked by immobilities, and I do not see this as a contradiction. Once territory and time seep out of the cages of the national, the immobile can be global actors—their bodies do not cross the borders of national states, but that does not preclude them from being part of global subjectivities and politics.

Under these conditions powerlessness can become complex and thereby contain the possibility of a politics, of making the political, even if there is no empowerment. I use this notion here to distinguish it from empower-ment—powerlessness can be complex even if there is no empowerment. The long struggle by the Sem Terra and their politics of claim-making made their powerlessness complex: they did not ask simply for "a bit more … more wages, more help" from the state. They wanted their land returned. They were making history, whether they got the land or not. (Instituto Terra 2010; Salgado 1990)

Salgado is a participant in the making of these histories. The photography in *Workers: An Archeology of the Industrial Age* (1993) and *Migrations* (2000) entailed time with workers and migrants in dozens of countries. As he tells us in the interview with Audrey Singer:

> I have never done my photography alone. When I did completely social photography, for example, in refugee camps, I did not go there, take my pictures and leave. I worked with UNICEF, with Doctors without Borders, with Save the Children and with a group of institutions. I went there with them. We all worked together, we all lived together, I gave my pictures to them. They gave me information. I worked within the system.

This case serves to illustrate the way Salgado's photography of thick, localized realities is a sort of universal through recurrence rather than some floating signifier. It shows us that the spaces and times of the "universal" can contain thick immobilities. The long period of time that Salgado spent with the subjects of his diverse photographic projects is itself a concrete instance of these thick immobilities: he spent 15 months in Africa's Sahel region to work on the famine, six years documenting the lives and struggles of workers around the world, and eight years on the *Genesis* project.

Today there are nomadisms not predicated on geographic mobility. We need to dislodge mobility and globality from the entrapment of geographical movement, especially when the latter becomes a logic for domination, as in the camps of displaced people, or refugees flow, or migrant workers. There are new mobilities, such that those unable or unwilling to "travel" can nonetheless

experience themselves as part of larger worlds marked by recurrence of meanings, struggles, imaginaries in multiple other locations (including many where geographic immobility is the norm). These are mobilities that contribute to "make" participation and to make horizontal globalities that do not need to go through vertical and centralizing institutions. The Sem Terra gaining the right to land and the peoples of *Genesis*, each are an instance of this new mobility and globality that connects to others even as there is no geographic movement.

> When you see a picture like those that I am taking, you see that this is *your* planet, *your* Amazon … Papua New Guinea is *yours*, Antarctica is *your*s, the United States is *my* planet. I am part of it. … Everyone knows this now. That means what I will show is our heritage and we need to be concerned with it—I do not believe when people see this they will see it as very far away." (Interview with Audrey Singer, 2010)

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