

afterword

In his "Preamble" introducing photographs by Walker Evans of rural families affected by the US dust bowl farming crisis in 1936, published as 'Let Us Now Praise Famous Men', James Agee wrote *"I spoke of this piece of work we were doing as "curious." I had better amplify this. It seems to me curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying, that it could occur to an association of human beings drawn together through need or chance and for profit into a company, an organ of journalism, to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of those lives before another group of human beings, in the name of science, of "honest journalism" (whatever that paradox may mean), of humanity, of social fearlessness, for money, and for a reputation of crusading and for unbiased which, when skillfully enough qualified, is exchangeable at any bank for money (and in politics, for votes, job patronage, abelincolnism, etc); and that these people could be capable of meditating this prospect without the slightest doubt of their qualification to do an "honest" piece of work, and with a conscience better than clear, and in the virtual certitude of almost unanimous public approval.....All of this, I repeat, seems to me to be curious, obscene, terrifying, and unfathomably mysterious."*

I also worked as a photo-journalist and many of the photographs in 'How We Are' were taken for newspapers and magazines but I was in fact a spy, looking for things that I could personally recognise as significant and for which I would also search out subjects of my own. A few of the people photographed knew why I was taking the pictures but were never allowed to edit them so could not know precisely what they were agreeing to, which had to be a matter of trust. Consequently, I had at least a moral obligation to act in good faith - not to ridicule or show disrespect and I was pleased when the critic John Berger wrote in his introduction to my book that - *"There is not a person in this book whose presence has not been respected, who has been caricatured, whose view of himself has been violated."*

I do not use captions, not even when or where photographs were taken, and this has been criticised for being unhelpful to an understanding of the work. And yet that information is, for me, irrelevant to a proper understanding of the content in my photographs. I want people to think about the significance of what's going on in the pictures, not worry about when or where they were taken or, in any precise sense, what my intentions were. The only assistance that I offer is the context of other photographs in any sequence that may suggest connections between the events shown and could be helpful in an understanding of either the individual images or the sequence as a whole - but which is not intended to be prescriptive. I cannot determine or control how work that is the public domain might be understood or used in the future but would share Agee and Evan's assertion in 'Let Us Now Praise Famous Men' that applies equally to my work - *"Of any attempt on the part of the publishers, or others, to disguise or in any other way to ingratiate this volume, the authors must express their regret, their intense disapproval, and, as observers awaiting new contributions to their subject, their complaisance."*

I still believe that using people in the way that I have in my photographs is morally questionable and can only justify the intrusion into their lives by restricting use of the images to a context that I can control. They are my photographs and I must justify any crossing of moral lines by presenting them in as appropriate a context as I can, but this does not include encouraging them to be seen as 'art'.

Again to quote Agee - *"Above all else: in God's name don't think of it as Art. Every fury on earth has been absorbed in time, as art, or as religion, or as authority in one form or another. The deadliest blow the enemy of the human soul can strike is to do fury honor. Swift, Blake, Beethoven, Christ, Joyce, Kafka, name me a one who has not been thus castrated. Official acceptance is the one unmistakable symptom that salvation is beaten again, and is the one surest sign of fatal misunderstanding, and is the kiss of Judas."*

Photographs are photographs.