

# Economic Photography

## Economics

Economics is an alienated discipline. Like capital, people's everyday experience of the economic, is taken from them, and re-appear in abstract form as unconnected -- even as a threat. Unfortunately this has been as true of Marxist economics as of the mainstream. It too has lost touch with the experienced. Capital, the wage relation, the law of value, -- like utility, investment, and the balance of payments -- are like characters in a pageant -- to be observed not engaged with.

Part of the problem is the abstraction. Marx starts *Capital* with the following sentence "The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails presents itself as 'an immense accumulation of commodities', its unit being a single commodity." This, he says, his analysis starts with the commodity since that is how capital is immediately experienced. He starts therefore with appearances, and seeks to understand what lies behind those appearances, in order to better explain them. Yet it would be hard to find an opening sentence which is more unrepentantly abstract. It has required political educators to draw the link between the everyday experience of workers and Marx's law of value.

Another problem is what practically follows from economics as we know it. Market economics has an ideological purpose -- to persuade people that they should support policies which allow the free play of markets. It is not by and large geared to helping people in their daily lives. Shopkeepers often know more about markets than do economists. Some business executives may gain from estimating the shape of a demand curve, but it is paradoxically state policies rather than private practises at which market economics -- from Adam Smith to Milton Friedman -- is primarily aimed. Similarly with Keynesian (or more generally macro) economics. The money supply, the interest rate, taxation, the balance of payments, or the consumption function are all aggregate relevant for those few who determine government economic policy, and wield the national levers of power. Even left economic policy -- promoting exchange controls, nationalisation or central planning, similarly assumed the control of the national state, and channels our action into Labour Party resolutions, transitional demands -- or more generally collective political action geared to state power.

The exceptions to all this are the newspaper columns and TV programmes aimed at those with capital -- or as conventional economics puts it 'savings'. There is a flood of information and advice to the small investor -- about unit trusts, shares, government bonds, antiques -- to guide them in their individual actions. This is the financial side of economics, focussed on the individual and his or her interests. For the rest, we remain spectators to the modern drama of

the economy -- describing it as dismal, sordid, immoral, yet at the same time recognising its necessity as the foundation of our daily lives.

What is required is to reconnect economics with a broader lived experience. For all those aspects of our lives which can be properly included under the heading 'economic' -- from our lives at home, to the journey to work, the times we work, the kind of work we do, the way our work is organised, the pay we receive, the goods we produce, what kind of social services we receive, how we shop or go on holiday -- all these need not be accepted but are subject to a common understanding and a collective change. If we are to re-assert a democratic control over the economy, then we will understand what forces are at work in shaping these experiences, and we will have to find ways of influencing them which do not only depend on the construction of careful coalitions, and changes in state power, but are open to groups of us acting on our own. A progressive economics must redefine the scope of the economic beyond the isolated experiences of the individual facing the market, to the social experience of work, and home, of the economy of the state, as well as that of co-operative and 'voluntary' endeavour. It must link back to everyday experience, and help to explain it, as well as point to new forms of common action. In doing so it will generate not only a new micro economics, but a new macro one, and we hope a new politics as well. It was the late 19th century 'marginal' economists who so reduced economics to its current narrow scope and focus. A new economics must restore the connection between the material and the social, as between the individual and the collective, as between the concrete and the abstract.

## Photography

One possible starting point is photography. For photography is above all the art of appearances. As John Berger puts it, photographs are quotations from appearances. They also offer not a story -- like a film -- nor an interpretation -- like a painting -- nor a set of moral choices -- like a nineteenth century novel, but rather a means to reflect on the actual, to be reminded of change and the discontinuity of time, and to be encouraged to take action to influence that change.

The force of a photograph suggests John Berger is the fact that what is portrayed actually happened. That force is what leads advertising and propaganda to simulate events which are then photographed, to give the imagined or the desired the false aura that they actually happened, and could happen again if the observer so wishes. They try to channel hope, by making the imagined more real. The same could be said of political hopes -- what is called the propaganda of practise. To show that what could happen has happened, and to show it through the immediacy of the photo is more powerful than the words of a programmes. It confirms possibility. It brings a possibility from the realm of the imagined into the hope territory of common sense. This is why a picture is worth a thousand words.

John Berger and Jean Mohr said that while films point to the future -- to the unfolding of a story -- photos point to the past, to memory. Between the moment of the photo and the time it is looked at lies an abyss. Groups of photos therefore are not the adequate means for telling a story, nor event for putting in sequence. Rather they can evoke the pattern of memory, and the fluidity of our thoughts. They need not -- indeed should not -- follow a linear argument, the insistent lines of reason. Rather they should be seen as a patchwork of association, a kaleidoscope, or dream. Just as one's thoughts roam freely, bouncing from one association to another, retracing their steps, repeating, then glancing off afresh, so should photos. They work in a circle rather than as a line, in a tracery, like Virginia Woolf's prose stream of consciousness.

If we look at Berger and Mohr's long sequence in "Ways of Telling" there is some patterns -- of the farm, and the city and back to the farm; but this is constantly interrupted by contrasts, flash forwards, flashbacks, sidesteps; there is a regular repetition of some photos just as we find certain thoughts and images return to us. These returns are sometimes enlargements, as though we have decided to look more closely at some image close to us. They break the continuity of time and invite a discovery of depth.

Association and depth: these are two of the features of photography. Let us think a little more about their connection. In psychoanalysis, association is a way of reaching down into the sub-conscious, that great subaqueous part of the iceberg of our being which we can never see or think about directly. In our dreams, or through our associations we can imagine what lies there -- but like Marx's value -- we can never be sure, save through the results of our actions. So association is linked to depth. Does not language work in the same way: similes help one see something differently by contrasting it to something else. It enriches the associations stimulated by the word. We see it differently, more richly, as the result of juxtaposition, of its links to other things, it dissolves the [idolisation](#) of the thing and the word. It offers the possibility of contradiction, of movement. It turns our perceptions from passive to active. It helps us to live.

Consider the point through its weak form -- the cliché. There are similes which are clichés -- not useless, but crutches to help us through. My love is like a red, red rose. Clichés, like traditions, were yesterday's revolutions. Beethoven's Fifth -- now categorised by the record shops as 'easy listening' was once revolutionary. So was Chaucer's use of words of colour, or descriptions of springtime, in the age before electric lights. In photos there are also clichés -- for unemployment read the dole queue, for labour read the march with banners. These photos are different if you were there and recognise the people, but in a national paper they are a visual cliché.

Association and cliché have link to John Berger's idea of ambiguity. He says that photos are ambiguous. For most people, the moment that is shown in a photo could be of many things, and have many meanings. In other words it could have many associations. He shows the picture of a man with a horse, and contrasts our reaction to it if we see it as the picture of a murderer, a lover, a horse dealer, or the last of the mounted police. The caption anchors the association, or a contrasted picture, or both. For example, the picture of the old man with his horse contrasted with a picture of that man when a boy. The picture of a downland field taken in different

seasons. Benjamin says that all photos demand a caption. We might put it more generally: they all demand a dialectic; some anchoring of the associations; some indication of the juxtaposition. It might be present in a single uncaptioned photo: the skinhead, hunched up, with big boots and in tears; or the contrast between the Etonian and the working class boy in rags at the ticket barrier. It might be in contrast photos or in the contrast -- or explanation -- of the caption.

When we were making Brighton on the Rocks, we had a long discussion about how to portray unemployment. We decided on a picture of men digging on the beach, which on its own was little different to the apparent activity of the baby sitting with its bucket and spade on the beach. The caption explained that the men were in fact unemployed, and were digging for bait to add to their unemployment benefit. This avoided the cliché of the dole queue. It asked those who saw it and who were not unemployed to imagine what being unemployed must actually be like; it encouraged us to look more closely at things which all of us who live in Brighton must have seen many times without understanding its significance. In this sense we should understand the idea of depth not vertically but as in a picture -- horizontally, going away from us.

This helps us to understand another characteristic of photographs -- the invitation to explore. Where as the artist asks questions of what he or she is painting, and puts the answers down in the picture, with photos the questions are asked by those looking at the picture. The point about ambiguity suggests that some of the questions are about meaning, about association. Who is that person and what are they doing. Who are they like. Do I know them. But as part of this, we are looking closely at the picture, and as with Antonioni's film, *Blow Up*, even the photographer may see things of which he or she was not aware when taking the photo. We are encouraged to observe. This is in contrast to films, where the movement leaves us not time to enquire. It is even in contrast to newspapers and books, where the mass of material and the number of pictures, encourages us to skim. For example, I found reading 'Another Way of Telling' meant that I did not look so closely at the photos or pause so long on single sentences as I did when the authors presented a few of the ideas, and examples of the photographs on their television series. In this they re-organised the timing of the film to ensure that we did dwell on photos and single lines. In this sense it was more like reading aloud, collectively. It also showed how the maker of a film disciplines the timing in which a film is viewed -- a timing which in striking contrast to the Ways of Telling series, does not usually allow reflection.

Photos in this sense are an active medium. They demand or encourage the imagination of the viewer. They are often most fruitful when seen and discussed together with others, like when we talk about our family albums or holiday photos.

Photos then pose questions; they suggest connections; they surprise; they highlight tension; like the dramatic figure of death in the pageant plays they remind us of mortality; and of change; they allow us to experience the reality of the 'other' -- they make real what may only be general, or put another way, they are resolutely particular. One word on the last of these. Most of us live in separate boxes or as Beckett might have it, dustbins. The inside of our particular box is the world of common sense, of the mundane and the ordinary. How can I as a teacher, imagine

what it is like to get up every morning at 5.00 to clean offices, or work as a soldier in Ulster, or as an accountant or an engine driver. A common politics needs a coalition of understanding, a sympathy of the concrete diversities of peoples lives -- of being gay for example, or being black. Autobiographies are one way of connecting our boxes -- such as those produced by the Worker writers movement. Photos with their captions are another, and even more important, the making and publishing of photos.

## Economic Photography

One of the messages from all that John Berger and Jean Mohr have written -- and photographed -- is the irreducibility of the particular, of lived experience, of individual life; and at the same time the insistence on the social meaning of that experience, the general that is always in the shadow of the particular, and the political joining of the two -- that any control and democratic making of one's life implies both an individual and a social creativity, a personal and a political action, and a politics which recognises at its centre point the unity of the two.

This is the kind of unity which is our goal in economics. So like Marx we should start with appearances -- but not by talking about them abstractly, but through photographing them. Why could not an introductory economic course start with a photographic project, in which we take an immediate part of economic life -- it might be a local industry, or the local education system, or the domestic economy of a neighbourhood. We would discuss the nature of these economies as a necessary step to thinking about how to approach the question of the photographs; as with the Rocks book, the discussion of the project with those involved in the particular economies -- the rubbish collectors, and bus drivers, or the teachers in a nursery school -- showed how powerful photography was as a means of political discussion and common enquiry and not merely a form of political discussion and common enquiry and not merely a form of representation. So was the choosing of the photos, and the 'use' of the photos -- in the book, or as a poster, or as a photograph at home.

And in parallel with the photos we would have to research our captions; should not all text be seen as a caption to our photographs, an explanation of the quotations from appearances?

As we found with Rocks, the examination of the particular, the rooting of our discussion in the concrete of experience rather than the abstractions of value and the balance of payments, also led to a concrete politics -- of what we could do. Between the concreteness of experience, of appearance, of the moment, of the photo, and the concrete demand, or proposal for common action, there is a thread which does have to run through the abstract. The fate of a factory cannot be discussed without an understanding of value, or competition, or labour and capital, of crisis, and restructuring, but the abstractions appear under the discipline of the concrete. They are there on sufferance in as much as they enlighten the concrete, and if they cannot enlighten

or cannot be understood then the bridge between experience and practise has to be knocked down and rebuilt.

If this kind of economics could spread as a practise (not a discipline), it would form as it were a multitude of streams, tributaries which would flow into one another -- connecting in a sector, or a place, or across countries: for the realities of economics are international as well as personal, are sectoral as well as spatial, and our aim is somehow to form that range and reality through a gathering of common experience which has been spun into those connections. And in spinning the economic connections we would also be spinning the political ones -- and from it produce a political fabric which has the texture and diversity, that has been swamped and eroded by alienated economics that has until now prevailed.

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Photography.

Association.

Depth.

Questioning: observation.

Ambiguity.

Active not passive.

Contradiction/dialectic.

Time and change

Alternatives.

Making hope immediate: concretising hope. Rendering hope possible.



