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PRESS PHOTOGRAPHY AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON
AND AN OBJECT OF SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

I

The subject of our analysis will be journalistic photography produced for newspapers and periodicals. At the beginning I have to point out that I'm aware that by regarding press photography as a form of propaganda I do not discover America. My intention is to delineate the theoretical cognitive consequences of that thesis. Before I try to do that, let me define some basic concepts.

According to M. Szulcowski propaganda is an "intentional, persuasive influence exerted on a group with the purpose of causing desirable behavioral reactions through the modeling of human attitudes"¹. It follows from the above definition that the social significance of propaganda consists in motivating people to action, forming their attitudes towards life and giving them directions as to how to evaluate facts².

Therefore, one of the elements of the theoretical model of analysis of press photography (as a form of propaganda) has to be a category which we shall define as "the change of the state of consciousness caused in the receivers by the photographs presented to them". The reporting press photography (called "press photography" here) can be identified as the reporting photography which gets published in newspapers, periodicals or is made for them. I stressed "the reporting press photography" in order to contrast it

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¹ M. S z u l c o w s k i, Propaganda polityczna, KiW, Warszawa 1975, p. 53.

² Ibidem, p. 45-46.

with other types of photographs which are often published in the press, such as: advertisements, portraits, or photographs of landscapes. They are not the object of analysis in this paper. Out of many different areas of photography, reporting photography is distinguished by its subject and by its strict technical rules - which have to be obeyed during the work of photographing (including the rules of behavior obeyed by the photographer himself).

The subjects reporting photography are people as members of the society: their interactions with other people, their influence on their environment (physical and biological), its results, and the social effects of catastrophes and natural calamities (such as floods, hurricanes, droughts, the eruptions of volcanos, fires and so on). Shortly speaking, if photography as a way of registering reality is a language, then the set of photographs of which the press photography is made up may be compared to a collection of stories about human actions - a collection published in the press or created for publishing. The fact that photography is treated here as a form of propaganda (in the sense of the word defined above) seems to lead us to an analysis of its influence on the state of social consciousness and to an analysis of these features of photos (both essential and formal) which determine that influence. Nevertheless such analysis would hardly provide an answer to the question: "what is the press photography and how does it work as a social phenomenon?". It would merely answer the question about the social effects of the published photographs.

I believe deeply that it is impossible to give an account of the press photography that would not run into false simplifications unless we previously construct a theoretical model for the analysis of that phenomenon.

The first and necessary requirement of such a model is to identify press photography as a separate subject of analysis, then - to put it in such (arbitrarily established) limits as it seems necessary and helpful for the attainment of the research goals. The second requirement is to formulate hypotheses concerning the mutual relations among different elements of the model. Let us assume that press photography as a whole has the following aspects:

- 1) the authors of the shots, who independently interpret reality and shape the market for photography - despite the fact that they are subjected to various kind of pressures,

2) persons who select photographs, i.e., editors and censors whose choice of photos is determined by what is offered to them,

3) the receivers of the photos without whom press photography would not make any sense.

What ultimately gets published is a result of the compromise between aims and interests of those three groups. When we want to correctly evaluate the level of photography in a given country we ought to take into account the influence of all these three elements. Otherwise our results will be far from being true.

For instance, the responsibility for the decline of the Polish press photography in the recent years is usually put on the "selective sieves", that is editorial offices and censorship. According to the common view our photographers are excellent, no worse than the best ones in the world but there are no columns where they could present their talents. I hate to admit that the view is false. This opinion can be proved through the analysis of the photo market. In order to make such analysis we do not have to survey the archives. It is enough to take a look at the results of the World Press Photo Competition. Polish photographers take part in that competition, but they do not win any prizes. Needless to say, every author sends in his best works and does not have to take censorship into account. Still, even the boldest report from Poland (e.g. "Minus one" - a photoreport on abortion made by H. Musiałówna and sent in for the competition) never goes beyond the moral issues. The reason for this should be looked for not so much in the external limitations as in the photographers themselves - in their attitudes towards social reality and in their sensitivity to moral issues. An interesting political photoreport will never be made by a photographer, even the most competent one, who does not have any political views. Likewise an interesting report on social problems will never be made by a person whose own ideal of social order is not dear to him. Polish photographers do have certain views on moral issues, therefore they mainly explore that field. The decline of Polish photo-report is revealed in the poverty of the photo market. A change in the influence of the "selective sieves" is not sufficient for the improvement of the situation. On the other hand, it is true that monotonous editorial orders combined with the monopolistic position of editors considerably limit the area explored by photographers - reducing it to

what is considered acceptable at a given point of time (usually, moral issues are considered acceptable). In reality, we observe an interdependence of different phenomena. As was suggested earlier the above diagnosis cannot be made however unless we adopt a model of analysis.

The framework of analysis offered by us so far is not sufficient for the purpose of empirical analysis; it is too general.

II

If we want to make it more adequate we have to increase its complexity. In order to make our reasoning as clear as possible, let us assume that each element of the model is an independent entity and describe it separately.

The photo market

We assume that the photo market is the total number of photographs offered to editors and fulfilling the technical requirements for publication. This definition needs slight modification.

As a matter of fact not all publishable photos get submitted to editors. On the basis of their previous experience the "deliverers" of photos may think that even interesting pictures presenting some topic will not get published and therefore they do not offer them to editors. However, the editors are not only "passive" receivers; they can always let the photographers know that they need photos on a special topic which previously was a taboo. As a result the market is supplied with new, previously unknown photographs.

It is important to keep in mind that there always exists the potential photo market ready to turn into actual market (as it was defined earlier). Therefore the photo market can be defined as the total number of publishable report photographs, made in a given period.

The sociological analysis of press photography cannot be restricted to mere description of the photo market, that is to the description of the subject matter of the photos - which are submitted to press editors. The photo market is an expression of the

photographers' consciousness which ought to be analyzed by the sociologist. Therefore, the sociologist should not merely list the topics. Through the analysis of the photo market and through the comparison of that market with our knowledge about reality we ought to try to answer the following questions: Firstly, what criteria of interpretation of the reality were employed by the authors of the photographs? What was their real (really employed) hierarchy of values? Secondly, we ought to ask: why did they employ those particular criteria; for what reason did they photograph such and such events, and some other ones?

It is impossible to answer the above questions without analyzing "the state of consciousness" of the author of the photos. We assume that "humanistic facts" (such as the creation of photo-reports) can be regarded as the response of an individual subject to a life situation; the response aiming at the modification of the given situation in the direction favorable to the aspiration of the subject. We also accept the old-fashioned axion according to which every man has the free will which allows him to evaluate events and form his own attitude towards them.

Therefore we cannot agree with the hypothesis, according to which the photographer: 1) simply fulfills the requirements of his employers, 2) his choice of the topic is determined by the expected profits (obtained through selling the photos) or by the facility of the topic.

In some situations photographers take pictures even though they know that due to the topic the photos will not be published; they often take photographs despite the fact that they are forbidden to do that.

"We know two pictures of SS general Kutschera's funeral. All inhabitants of the houses located along the road where the funeral procession was passing, got previously driven out and all discovered witnesses were under penalty of death. There were hold photographers in the capital, who did not fear to risk their lives, in order to make a documentary photograph³ - writes Wacław Żdżarski in "The History of Warsaw Photography".

Their own independence, with regard to the topic is stressed by the photographers themselves.

³ W. Ż d ż a r s k i, Historia fotografii warszawskiej, PWN, Warszawa 1974, p. 232-233.

"As a professional I know that some things won't sell, nobody will buy them, but still I register them on the film"⁴. - says Stefan Figlarowicz.

"Baturó prizes higher [...] all the aggressive American school. He explains: I make a photoreport, because I think something is wrong, because I want to fight it"⁵.

The photographer usually to talk his readers into something and to talk them out of something. He wants his readers to look at the world from his point of view. The question is: what is important to him and what is his point of view.

We therefore think the following thesis to be true: the major factor influencing the shape of the photo market is the consciousness of the photographers and not the "selective sieves" or the demand.

This does not mean that the question: "what determines that consciousness" can be avoided. Still, it protects as against naive simplifications. We are far from ignoring the demand. Even though the lack of demand cannot stop the photographers from registering events of special importance, it determines the subject matter of everyday production, which is done for a living.

The "selective sieves"

It would go beyond the scope of this paper to describe exactly how the "selective sieves" work and what determines the criteria for the selection of photographs - as they are applied in practice. As a result of such pedantry press photography would disappear from the field of our analysis. From our point of view it is important to analyze the criteria of selection - as they are applied in the photo market. We analyze the works, comparing the submitted ones (i.e. the "official" part of the photo market) with those which got published. The criteria of identification can be divided into two groups: criteria concerning the topics of the photos (i.e., their essential features) and criteria concerning formal features. The goal of the analysis of this element is to answer the follo-

⁴ S. Figlarowicz, Notować na błonie, "Kontrasty" 1974, no. 4, p. 61.

⁵ G. Nawrocki, Obiektyw w oku, "Kontrasty" 1977, no. 4, p. 35.

wing question: what criteria are applied in the process of selecting photos for the purpose of publishing? And to what extent the applied rules of selection are socially approved? The question "why do they?" goes beyond the scope of our considerations. We focus on the "selective sieves" because of their relations with the other elements: the photo market - on the one hand, and the consciousness of the receivers, on the other.

In the description of the "selective sieves" it's worth-while to take into consideration the proportion between the number of photos submitted to the publisher and the number of photos which can be actually published. For example, in Poland, in the second half of the seventies there were six periodicals publishing photo-reports. Thus, it was possible to publish six photoreports (about 50 photos) weekly. It may be interesting to note, that in comparison with the supply of photos that number was quite sufficient. Only the actually published photos reach the public and give the press photography its social meaning.

The change in the state of consciousness of the receivers

The claim that the perception of photoreports published in the papers has an impact on human consciousness has never been empirically proven but it is commonly considered true. There are various reasons why it is impossible to test on a large scale the impact of photographs on human consciousness. First, the same pictures have different impact on the consciousness of different people. The impact depends on the level of their education and culture, on the current mood on the attitude towards the periodical where the photos were published, on the very circumstances of perception (on the bus or at home, after dinner etc.). It also depends on the values, views and the personal experience (which determine the capacity for empathy) of the receivers.

The second reason why it is impossible to determine the impact of the photos on the consciousness of the receivers is the fact that they are just one out of many "cultural products" with which the modern man gets in touch. It is impossible to analyse the impact of each of those "cultural products" separately because of their considerable diversity.

It is feasible to propose a "minimal program" - within which we could show the impact of photos on the human consciousness by

making the following experiment. A group of people chosen for the experiment would be shown photos on a certain topic whereas another group, the so called "control group" would not be shown them. Obviously, an earlier test would have shown an identical attitude of both groups towards the given fact. After the experiment we ought to repeat the test and compare its results with the original results.

Despite such difficulties the social importance of some events is so great that the impact of photographs of those events is simply evident (e.g. the first visit of Pope John Paul II to Poland or the events in the spring of 1981).

There are other interesting problems related to the perception of photographs. They can be expressed in the form of the following questions: What kinds of photographs have impact on people? What do people like to look at and why do they like it? What do they look at unwillingly? What seems shocking or disgusting to them?

III

At the end we ought to ask how the outlined model can be applied. In my opinion, two types of application are possible. First, keeping in mind the model as a whole, we can describe each of its elements separately: e.g. the photo market, the subject matter of the published photos, and finally their social reception. In such case it is particularly important to examine their historical evolution. Second, we could apply the model as a whole to account for particular phenomena. It might be especially useful for the analysis of particularly important moments in social life.

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FOTOGRAFIA PRASOWA JAKO ZJAWISKO SPOŁECZNE I PRZEDMIOT BADAŃ SOCJOLOGICZNEGO

Autor kreśli zasady analizy fotografii prasowej jako zjawiska społecznego, uwikłanego w kontekst instytucjonalny, zwracając uwagę na społeczne mechanizmy wytwarzania, selekcji i publikacji fotografii prasowej. Część druga artykułu zawiera model analizy wpływu fotografii prasowej na postawy odbiorców.