

## The Politics of the Documentary

Photographing 'the Other Half' for Vanity Fair and the Democratic Party

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# The Politics of the Documentary

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*The author wishes to thank Larry Fink for his accessibility, patience, and generosity, without which this article could never have been written.*

- 1 The birth of a social documentary tradition of American photography is generally associated with the publication, in 1890, of Jacob Riis's book *How the Other Half Lives*. In a text that blended 'slumming,' social activism, and sensationalism, the Danish-American reformer invited the reader to explore the immigrant neighborhoods of New York's Lower East Side. Riis's work derived its effectiveness from a first-person narrative that combined a flair for the telling anecdote with the appeal of the adventure story, moralistic condescension with righteous indignation, and statistical data with folksy common sense. It was also supported by a series of remarkable illustrations, since the former journalist had also picked up a camera and, for the cause, done duty as a photographer. Projected as magic lantern slides or reprinted in various periodicals, his photographs of 'the other half' helped to turn him into one of the most celebrated social reformers of his day and into the tutelary (albeit sometimes controversial) figure of a specifically American brand of socially engaged photography.
- 2 It was this canonical example that Howard Dean – then a popular candidate for the Democratic Party presidential nomination for the elections of 2004 – sought to renew, more than a century later, with the help of the monthly magazine *Vanity Fair*, a luxurious publication that for several months had been seeking to identify itself as the official organ of elite liberal opposition to the first Bush administration. In December 2003, the magazine published an article combining photographs by Larry Fink with a text by Howard Dean under a title directly inspired by Riis's work: 'How the Poor Live Now.'<sup>1</sup> At a moment when organized opposition to the Iraq war was still in an embryonic state,<sup>2</sup> this critique of the Republican administration's economic policies promised to be a potentially winning electoral strategy, a reprise of that adopted by Bill Clinton in 1992.<sup>3</sup>

- 3 This tactic, however, did not succeed in making Howard Dean the 2004 Democratic presidential candidate. The failure of this nonconformist candidate, a pioneer in the area of conducting electoral campaigns on the Internet, is now a political footnote,<sup>4</sup> but the article 'How the Poor Live Now' retains a certain interest for what it reveals about the American documentary tradition, its possible decline since the end of the twentieth century and its relationship to political discourse. In many respects, it represents a missed opportunity to become better acquainted with that 'other half' whose fate Dean and *Vanity Fair* sought to explore through the medium of Larry Fink's images. A careful examination of the article and the editorial project on which it is based will enable us to better understand why this project had such difficulty in reviving the photographic and journalistic genre established by Riis. It is not so much that the model had lost its relevance, as that the magazine's editorial and iconographic choices undermined its coherence. One of the problems for *Vanity Fair*, a stylish and expensive magazine, was that it wished to talk about poverty without offending against 'good taste' – such are the requirements of an electoral campaign. This impossible compromise was achieved at the expense of Fink's work, as demonstrated by a number of unpublished images that the photographer produced for the occasion, which *Vanity Fair* did not keep, and which I propose to examine here.

## A Genre in Decline?

- 4 While Riis may be regarded as one of photography's pioneers, his work as a journalist and reformer found expression in a number of publications typical of his times. He appears as a transitional figure between the philanthropic tradition of the nineteenth century and the so-called 'progressive' era rooted in the modern social sciences. *Scribner's Magazine*, in which Riis published a first version of *How the Other Half Lives*,<sup>5</sup> was still strongly marked by the models of journalism and reform characteristic of the century then ending. Founded by the editor Charles Scribner in 1887, this magazine stood in a tradition of generalist publications with literary pretensions that were aimed at a relatively affluent and educated readership. Scientific popularization, history, and politics figured prominently among its themes. In competition with well-established rivals like *Harper's Weekly*, the new magazine was distinguished by its ability to '[deal] with popular topics in a literary way,'<sup>6</sup> as well as by its high-quality illustrations: five years after its inception, roughly two thirds of the weekly magazine's images were halftone engravings.<sup>7</sup>
- 5 This was not yet the case in 1889 for the roughly twenty illustrations that accompanied Riis's first article. In it, the reader was introduced to street children, ethnic neighborhoods, and, above all, those famous windowless apartments, or tenements, that were full to overflowing with New York's immigrants. A number of these images 'from photographs' have since become 'classics' and are frequently reproduced, among them 'In the Home of an Italian Rag-Picker' and 'Five Cents a Spot' (page 650).
- 6 The response to 'How the Other Half Lives' was so overwhelming that Riis decided to turn it into a book, which then went through four editions in eleven years, and turned him into one of the most influential actors in the public debate.<sup>8</sup> For some twenty years, he continued to publish in illustrated magazines, like *Century* (the successor to *Scribner's Monthly*) and *The Outlook*. The latter magazine, at which Theodore Roosevelt – a friend of Riis's and former president of the United States – took over as editor in chief

in 1909, saw itself as a forum for the ideas of the new century's progressive movement; to mark this change of era, *The Outlook* had even been renamed in 1893: previously it had been called *Christian Union*. In *The Outlook*, America and its problems were seen through the prism of the emerging social sciences. The new experts who expressed themselves in its pages advocated a systematic reorganization of the 'machinery' of society in the interests of greater democratic transparency.

- 7 While Riis was skeptical about this development, he anticipated certain of its aspects, particularly the combined use of science and images in the service of a reformist discourse. With the advent of progressivism, American social photography ceased to be a moral crusade reported by the press, and instead became incorporated into large-scale, institutionalized rhetorical and visual strategies that drew upon the research of the social sciences. The images of Lewis Hine at the beginning of the century, those of Dorothea Lange during the Great Depression and those of Danny Lyon during the civil rights movement of the 1960s are inseparable from those machines for producing images and meaning that were, respectively, the Child Labor Committee, the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).
- 8 Since the 1980s, the famous 'conservative revolution' and the development of the American media have altered the environment in which such projects are carried out. It is not that the subjects of poverty and exclusion are neglected by photographers, but rather that their images are no longer framed within a coherent reformist discourse that defines their meaning. The debate on social exclusion has not died out, but the photographers' contribution to it seems more scattered and fragmented, as if Riis's individual form of engagement had once again become the norm. In 1985, another Danish immigrant took up the charge: Jacob Holdt's *American Pictures* offered a grim account of the lives of America's victims of social exclusion in a book that was published at his own expense.<sup>9</sup> Two years later, the doctor Larry Brown illustrated his work *Living Hungry in America* with images provided by Steve Haines, a newspaper photographer for the *Providence Journal*.<sup>10</sup> That same year, Eugene Richards published *Below the Line: Living Poor in America*<sup>11</sup> (though it was based on a commission from the Consumers League). In 1991, Jim Hubbard photographed the homeless in *American Refugees*.<sup>12</sup>
- 9 While it is still too soon to draw any definitive conclusions regarding this relatively recent period, these few examples do not seem to point to the existence of any general movement, any overarching strategy for using images. As ambitious as they may be, these projects are too scattered to be assimilated into the genre's renewal. Surely, this has to do with the fact that such documentary projects are now undertaken by those opposed to the administrations in power (and this despite the interlude of the Clinton presidency). In this context, when a Democratic candidate like Howard Dean turned to documentary photography (Larry Fink) and the illustrated press (*Vanity Fair*) to develop a political discourse on poverty, it was easy to regard it as a gesture that might restore the aura of the tradition Riis had established.

## An American Face

- 10 A weekly magazine founded in England in 1868 and taken over in 1913 by Condé Montrose Nast, *Vanity Fair* enjoyed its first heyday in the United States in the 1920s

before ceasing publication in 1936. Its most prominent photographer at the time was Edward Steichen.<sup>13</sup> It was then relaunched in March 1983, in the midst of the Reagan years. The first issue of the new formula set the tone for the years to follow: incisive and literary 'new journalism' (Gore Vidal), sophisticated photographs (Richard Avedon), and income guaranteed by the hundreds of pages of advertisements purchased by the biggest names in fashion and luxury goods. This latter characteristic clearly represented a major difference between the new *Vanity Fair* and the great illustrated magazines of the nineteenth century which were still largely financed by their readers. In 2003, *Vanity Fair* had a circulation in the United States of 1.1 million, putting it in sixty-eighth place in terms of magazine sales, somewhere between *Vogue* (another jewel of the Condé Nast empire) and *The New Yorker*, to cite just two prestigious and influential titles.

- 11 For more than twenty years now, *Vanity Fair* has steered a paradoxical editorial course between swooning portraits of Hollywood icons, brilliant analyses of American political life, and lengthy investigative articles on forgotten conflicts in Africa and Eastern Europe. In 2003, at the dawn of the U.S. intervention in Iraq, the magazine adopted a posture of direct opposition to George Bush's policies, a position expressed in Graydon Carter's editorials.<sup>14</sup> This highly unexpected act of political engagement effectively confirmed an editorial realignment that had begun with the attacks of September 11, 2001. Even if Hollywood actresses continued to dominate the monthly magazine's cover, American and international current events once again became an important subject in its pages.<sup>15</sup>
- 12 In this context, the platform offered to Howard Dean in December 2003 was entirely consistent with a clear editorial policy. The idea was to support the campaign of an emerging national candidate who seemed capable of upsetting the established parameters of American political life. Atypical and pugnacious, Howard Dean was a doctor by training and often described as a 'progressive' candidate,<sup>16</sup> a label intended to distinguish him from the 'apparatchiks' of the Democratic Party establishment. Eager to appear close to the most ordinary Americans (closer, at least, than his rival, John Kerry), Dean had reacted in these terms to the release of the official figures on economic and social inequalities three months earlier:  

'Poverty in America has risen for a second straight year ... Poverty has risen and incomes have fallen each year of the Bush administration ... Instead of working to create shared prosperity for all, this administration and the right-wing ideologues that surround it continue to pursue a narrow agenda designed to help their friends, while leaving the rest of America behind.'<sup>17</sup>
- 13 Dean's article for *Vanity Fair* repeated these figures, combining them with biographical elements in an effort to suggest that contact with those left behind by society had played an important role in shaping his personal trajectory.
- 14 For the images, the magazine naturally turned to Larry Fink, a former student of Lisette Model at the New School for Social Research in New York, who was under annual contract to Condé Nast. When asked about his political convictions, the photographer made no secret of his leftist sympathies and described himself as a product of the 'liberal' tradition of the 1960s: 'I have been involved with civil rights, the peace movement, and the Attica brothers (my sister was the principle lawyer on the case).<sup>18</sup> I have been teaching for forty years toward inferentially political ends.'<sup>19</sup>

- 15 In *Social Graces*, first published in 1984, Fink had already sought to portray the division of Reagan-era America into two unequal 'halves': his photographs of the posh and glittering parties of the New York elites had their pendant in the intimate and sometimes disturbing portraits of his neighbors in Martins Creek, a rural area of Pennsylvania. At the end of *Social Graces*, Fink looked back on his training as a photographer in order, in a sense, to define its utopian dimension: 'Like many others in photojournalism in the sixties, I was hungry for immediate social change.'<sup>20</sup> However, the book – which was republished in 2001 – owed as much to the documentary school of the 1970s as it did to the 'classical' American tradition of the FSA or even that of the 1960s. It is surely no coincidence that the chapter 'Mondanités/Des gens ordinaires' ('High Society/Ordinary People') in the recent book on 1970s American photography edited by Anne Biroleau seems to have been inspired by the structure of *Social Graces*, from which a number of its images are drawn.<sup>21</sup> One gets the sense that Fink was equally fascinated by the modest Sabatine family and by New York high society. The book concludes with a reflection on the photographer's position *between* these two worlds, in both of which he is equally alien. *Social Graces* was not an activist book but a reflection on the place of the documentary gaze. In this sense – and despite the superficial technical and aesthetic similarities between them (particularly their use of flash) – Fink is at the opposite end of the spectrum from Riis, and his work is an indication of just how far photography has traveled since Riis's day, marked as it is by doubts regarding photography's fitness as an instrument of social transformation.
- 16 Nevertheless, Fink's political sympathies and the character of *Social Graces* justified the general tendency to attach the 'documentary' label to his work, despite his varied activities in the worlds of fashion and advertising.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, this very diversity of interests is precisely what makes him a 'social photographer' with a place in the pages of a magazine as elitist as *Vanity Fair*, whose relatively limited readership is predominantly affluent, cultivated, and urban. The project *Forbidden Pictures*, which was almost contemporaneous with 'How the Poor Live Now,' is a perfect illustration of the circuitous paths traveled by Fink's political work.
- 17 Shortly after September 11, 2001, one of his fashion photo-essays was rejected by the *New York Times Magazine*. Fink had taken the opportunity to photograph a double of George Bush in images inspired by the work of Otto Dix and Max Beckmann. For him, it was a matter of using this commission to depict the atmosphere of corruption that, in his view, had been hanging over the country since the highly controversial elections of November 2000.<sup>23</sup> Clearly, it was the attack on the World Trade Center that made these photographs 'unpublishable' at a moment when the nation was closing ranks around its president. Thus, it was not until March 2004 and the controversy ignited by the new security legislation (the Patriot Act) and the Iraq war that Fink's images resurfaced in an exhibition at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania entitled *The Forbidden Pictures*. It was, of course, Graydon Carter who wrote the preface for the catalogue.<sup>24</sup>
- 18 Thus, the choice of Fink for 'How the Poor Live Now' was rooted in a logic that went well beyond his contractual tie with the magazine. His convictions were supposed to permit the construction of a credible and sufficiently appalling representation of the poverty 'made in the USA' under the leadership of the Republicans. And yet the article had great difficulty achieving the coherence that its genesis seemed to augur.
- 19 Dean's text was essentially based on two ingredients: first, the official statistics that had already served as the basis for his press release of September 2003; and second,

autobiographical elements whose aim was to establish that his knowledge of poverty was based on personal as well as professional experience. Without going so far as to claim that he himself had experienced poverty, Dean sought to present himself as a man who grew up in touch with the 'other half.' New York City became paradigmatic for that real America where all social classes lived side by side. The article's first paragraph set the tone for this brief tale of initiation:

'Growing up in New York City, I was acutely aware of those around me. The city has a particular closeness that makes it impossible to shield oneself from social inequality; some of America's richest and poorest families live literally within blocks of one another. As a child, I often rode the Lexington Avenue subway, studying the faces of the working-class adults who commuted down from Spanish Harlem and the Bronx. They sometimes had their children in tow, and it did not take a great leap of imagination to envision trading places with one of them. Even at that young age, it was obvious to me that there was very little separating us, other than a few subway stops and circumstances of birth.'<sup>25</sup>

- 20 This lead-in is followed by a short autobiographical narrative in which Dean recounts the death of his brother in Laos, a brief stint teaching in a disadvantaged neighborhood of New Haven, and his decision to leave Wall Street for medical school, with its string of rotations in the psychiatric departments of Bronx hospitals. Looking back, the author is horrified to see how the efforts of Kennedy and Johnson have been reduced to nothing by the reactionary policies of the Republican administrations that followed them. A commentary on the official U.S. poverty figures prompts a reflection on the need for national solidarity, which according to Dean is the only thing that will enable the country to avoid the further widening of the gulf between the 'two halves' of American society. Ultimately, the narrative of lived experience, the emphasis on professional competence (specifically on Dean's credentials as a doctor), and the discussion of the responsibility of the national community are modernized forms of characteristic features of a specifically 'progressive' vision close to that of the early twentieth century.
- 21 This pattern is further reinforced as Dean goes on to highlight the threat of downward mobility hanging over the middle class, who are regarded precisely as the guarantors of the ideals of equality and solidarity on which American identity is based. And here statistics point to spreading poverty, weakened families, and the inevitability of exclusion.<sup>26</sup> In this context, Dean suggests, the poor are not so much the 'other half' as simply average Americans. The article's opening lines recall those children of the Bronx in whose faces Dean had seemed to see his own reflection; half a century later, all or almost all Americans recognize in the features of the poorest among them the marks of the fate that also threatens them. 'The face of poverty is rural, it is urban, it is black, white, Hispanic, male, female, young, and old. It is an American face.'<sup>27</sup>
- 22 Thus, it is poverty that now defines the United States. In order to lend form to this diagnosis, *Vanity Fair* turned to a manner of photography that came from the most classical American tradition, that of the FSA: portraits of individuals from all over the country were supposed to come together to form an image of the nation's identity. Every man and woman who posed for Larry Fink was expected to express the condition of America as a whole, including both its current economic difficulties as well as its timeless grandeur. In order to achieve this, two 'visible' characteristics were kept carefully in balance: on the one hand, ethnicity; on the other, the family structures



highlighted by the photographs. It is precisely these editorial choices that explain the project's relative failure.

## The Neutralization of the Ethnic Factor

- 23 Because Dean's text emphasized the widespread nature of poverty, *Vanity Fair's* editors attempted to reflect this diversity in their choice of 'illustrations.' If the caption of the first photograph is to be believed, Larry Fink's reporting for the article took him to the twelve American states with the highest poverty rate, from New Mexico to Virginia and from Texas to Washington DC. This trip was a way of assembling a kind of representative sampling of the various facets of social exclusion while also assessing the extent of the problem. This geographic parameter was coupled with an effort to reflect the variety of the ethnic and cultural groups affected by poverty. And here, the logic governing the relative representations of the various communities involved seems especially arbitrary. To the extent that one can judge on the basis of photographs alone – with additional help from the last names of those photographed – the distribution seems to be the following: the first image depicts a Navajo 'Indian' family; there are three photographs of subjects with Hispanic-sounding names, although one of them – Melvin Jesus – was probably also partly Indian; two portraits of African-American families and two images of 'white' families rounded out the article's illustrations.
- 24 This distribution raises a number of obvious issues. First of all, the Asian community is completely missing from the sample, just as it was in Dean's text. Second – and if we assume that Melvin Jesus was a native American – this series of photographs is based on a relationship of perfect parity among the four communities involved. This numerical equality is completely at odds with the figures from the U.S. Census Bureau that Dean, nonetheless, liked to cite in support of his thesis. All ethnic groups were *not* affected equally by poverty – far from it. This face of the America of the socially excluded was thus a fiction, implausible from a statistical perspective, however understandable it may have been from a political one. It was surely a question of avoiding stigmatizing a particular ethnic group (one thinks of African Americans), while at the same time preserving a relatively conventional sampling that more or less corresponds to general expectations regarding images of poverty in the United States.
- 25 Sometimes described as a 'model minority,' Asians are still a virtually unexplored continent of American social photography. The Indian family implicitly appeals to the nation's guilty conscience. The 'hillbillies' of West Virginia are the quintessential 'poor whites.' Finally, the black and Hispanic communities are the expected components of the picture, but they were deliberately underrepresented as compared to the poverty rate that actually affected them. It should also be noted that the images devoted to them were the smallest of all the article's illustrations. Moreover, the two photographs of black families were printed on separate pages (pages 198 and 203); the same is true of the two images of Hispanics. In contrast to the layout of the photographs taken in West Virginia (which are printed all together on page 204), there was no visual group impression, no *effet de masse* for the two minorities most often mentioned in traditional discussions of poverty. Finally, it should also be noted that, according to Larry Fink, he himself submitted a series of photographs that opened with portraits of African-American families in the slums of Brooklyn; in the end, they were not even accepted for publication.<sup>28</sup>



- 26 Here we see how the series of illustrations visually echoes the leitmotif of Dean's text. The phenomenon of exclusion is shorn of any racial or ethnic connotation and extended to all the components of the American mosaic. The 'other half,' about which Riis was so concerned, is here more suggestive of a *quatre-quarts*\*, the proportions of whose various ingredients are carefully calibrated. Balanced in this way, the image of exclusion was familiar enough to be credible while also suggesting an unexpected model of what might be called the 'equality of *lack of opportunity*,' or misfortune, among the various components of society. *Vanity Fair* thus carefully avoided focusing its treatment on any one group in particular. This editorial decision was confirmed by the strategies used for representing the family. When these images are compared to other examples from Larry Fink's work, it is clear that the visual construction proposed in this article was strongly conditioned by a desire to send a message concerning the damage done to 'ordinary citizens.'

## Poor Families, Model Families

- 27 Since the 1980s at least, the image of poverty has been distorted by simplistic clichés like that of the so called 'welfare queens,' caricatures of young single mothers, immature and generally black, who are accused of capitalizing on their pregnancy and youth to live at society's expense. The notion of a culture of dependency born of public assistance doled out indiscriminately by an overly generous welfare state is one of the factors behind the abandonment of principles well-established during the 1960s, principles that have since been replaced by a philosophy linking welfare payments with the obligation to work ('workfare').<sup>29</sup> There is no question but that the notion of welfare queens, which is associated with images of pregnant teenage girls, has helped turn single mothers in African-American neighborhoods not only into the archetypal face of poverty but also, more insidiously, into that of idleness and immorality. These 'bad mothers,' who 'sin' and then turn to the state for help, imperil the entire foundation of 'family values' on which American society is based.<sup>30</sup>
- 28 This view is exemplified by a 1987 article from *Fortune* magazine entitled 'America's Underclass: What to Do?'<sup>31</sup> The text of this article is illustrated almost exclusively by photographs of African Americans from poor neighborhoods of Chicago, Washington DC, Houston, Dade County, and New York. Of the ten photographs that accompany the article, only two are of young women whose features suggest that they may be (at least partially) Hispanic, although it isn't possible to be sure. Thus, the geographic diversity of the visual sample is undermined by its almost total ethnic uniformity.
- 29 Moreover, two of the photographs, taken by Mary Ellen Mark, depict young 'unworthy' mothers. The first one, whose caption reads 'Expectant mother, 16, with her 13-month-old son, in Houston,' shows a teenage girl, with a childlike face, lying on a couch. Her thirteen-month-old son has laid his head on her bare, rounded belly.<sup>32</sup> This sixteen-year-old 'expectant mother' at least has the merit of knowing where her child is, unlike the mother pictured a few pages later beside a little bed that is empty except for a few stuffed animals. Here the caption takes an even more disapproving tone: 'Manhattan chronic drug user who isn't sure where her baby lives now.'<sup>33</sup> Whatever the photographer's original intention may have been, the layout of the images, their captions, and the text that surrounds them leave little doubt regarding the threat

posed by this African-American 'underclass.' On page after page, the reader is bombarded with alarmist subheadings: 'these are the problems that can reach out and grab the larger society, literally, by the throat' (page 131, next to a photograph of a little girl); 'in ghettos like New York's central Harlem, 80 percent of all black babies are illegitimate' (page 132, above the photograph of the young expectant mother); 'if an income is the consequence of having a baby, why should underclass women worry about getting pregnant?' (page 84). The moral connotation of the word 'illegitimate'; the metaphor of a society grabbed 'by the throat,' suddenly taken literally; the condemnation of motherhood as a way of avoiding work – the photographed black body serves as a prop or exhibit for a discourse on 'deviance.'<sup>34</sup>

30 In 'How the Poor Live Now,' *Vanity Fair* avoided precisely this pitfall by presenting an eminently positive image of single mothers. The article endeavored to depict the phenomenon as extending beyond the black community. For example, it combined the portrait of Maria Hilda Sanchez and her child – Hispanics living in Texas – with that of Stacy McCormick, an African-American mother living at a social center with her son. Both of these images feature women who appear to be in their thirties: these single mothers have succeeded in preserving the semblance of a family unit, thus demonstrating their strength of character in the face of living conditions described as precarious. In both of these cases, the women involved have only had one child (a sign of their sense of responsibility) and they have been capable of raising it. They both deserve the title of 'Mother Courage,' as the caption that accompanies the two photographs explicitly emphasized.<sup>35</sup> Although they are single, their sons live at home and are shown in sullen poses that are precisely indications of their *normalcy*. Hunched up in a corner or sitting on the front steps, pointedly ignoring the photographer or glowering at him defiantly, these two adolescents strike adolescent poses. They don't like to have their picture taken; they only agree to do so against their will. As pictured here, their relationships with their mothers oscillate between affection and rebellion, closeness and the desire for independence. The effect is to create a sense of complicity between the mothers in the photographs and the mothers who are likely to see them in the pages of *Vanity Fair*. Adolescent crises are not unique to any one socioeconomic class. Once again, the aim is to create the conditions for an act of identification, rather than to visualize the marks of a difference.

31 This was a deliberate choice. It owed nothing to the photographer and everything to the editorial line of *Vanity Fair* and the rhetoric of Dean's campaign. Larry Fink readily admitted that 'the images that were published were not at all the ones that I chose for myself,'<sup>36</sup> and an examination of the images not accepted by the magazine is highly revealing. These rejected photographs present more confusing tableaux, more problematic representations. Thus, this portrait of a young woman lying on her bed in a residential home and clasping a teddy bear in her arms may have seemed likely to evoke the stereotype of the immaturity and 'natural' idleness frequently ascribed to the African-American woman. Even more disturbing is this image of what seems, at least, to be a little girl and her grandmother sitting on a bed in the midst of an indescribable chaos: the old woman is on the telephone; the door of the room is open onto a hallway in which a third person can be made out. There is nothing reassuring about this tableau, except perhaps the bond between the two principal figures. Needless to say, there is no paternal figure to be seen. The viewer is left to wonder if it might not be possible to clean the room up just a little bit, and to speculate about the layout of the apartment (is there another room? Is the door always open? Are the people walking by

in the hallway members of the family? Does the child have her own bed?). In other words, the image offers none of the reassuring indices that would turn the old woman into one of those stately and smiling black 'mamas' who sustain the familiar stereotypes of the African-American matriarchy in the tradition of *Gone With the Wind*.<sup>37</sup>

- 32 Larry Fink produced even more disturbing images, like these interlaced patterns of fragmented bodies or strollers plunged in darkness: they didn't find favor with the editors of *Vanity Fair* either. Their 'message' was confusing. Their aesthetic, marked by off-center compositions and the harsh light of the flash, only served to reinforce the cramped and claustrophobic character of the environment they presented. The magazine preferred to use images that were more 'legible' and less ambiguous, images lit by natural light that located their subjects outdoors, in the open air. None of the images in 'How the Poor Live Now' provided a clear picture of the situation in the urban ghettos. And while Stacy McCormick may have been photographed in Washington DC, she is pictured on the porch of a house, not in her room at the social center where she lives.
- 33 The remaining images of families were all constructed in a similar manner, according to a traditional model that seemed threatened by contemporary America. At the beginning of the article, a photograph of three generations of Navajos seemed to suggest bygone values of community and solidarity. In the foreground is an eighty-nine-year-old grandmother with a piercing gaze; at the back of the room, a man is working; in the middle, we see a child in the arms of its mother, who is wearing a T-shirt with the word 'action' printed on it. Another example is an African-American family from Mississippi, which brings together a relatively elderly couple and a little girl on a bicycle. The man's nickname is 'T-Model,' a reference to the great age of the Ford Motor Company and another homage to a timeless and unchanging America. Occasionally, the page layout even put together families out of random, unrelated individuals. For example, the two photographs taken in West Virginia juxtapose a single, middle-aged man and a mother of young twins (page 204). Taken separately, these images are studies in loneliness and isolation. Taken together, they suggest the hope for a reconstructed, albeit incongruous, family unit.
- 34 These family portraits were unexpected, but they did not provoke anxiety or unease. They are very rarely off-center. Their subjects are all relaxed, with the sole exception of the pouting adolescents mentioned above. Despite the portrait of Angela McGinnis and her twins, in which one of the children is 'decapitated' by the upper edge of the frame, the compositions are crystal clear. There are no images of crisis, no dysfunctional or even unconventional families, nothing that resembled Larry Fink's own photographs in *Social Graces*. To verify this, one need only compare the images published in *Vanity Fair* to photographs like Pat Sabatine's *11th Birthday*, a crowded and enigmatic image constructed around the figure of a (quite unmaternal) mother, in which the young Pat is strangely absent from her own birthday party.

## The Mask of Poverty

- 35 Right from the very first caption proposed by *Vanity Fair*, the tone was set. The task is 'to nobly render America's impoverished.'<sup>38</sup> This laudable intention was shared by Fink himself, who aligned himself with the choice of these terms and distanced himself from the more radical aesthetic of some of his colleagues: 'I didn't want to make pictures of

destitution. I wanted to show people who still had an alternative. I didn't want to do like Eugene Richards, picture no-hope junkies. These pictures are as sad as can be.<sup>39</sup> But this seemingly one-dimensional outlook must be qualified. While Fink sometimes speaks of the dignity and compassion that he seeks to convey in his images, he also refers to amusement, surprise, and anger: 'I like people. I even like Americans ... I'm aghast but I can understand their needs and fears ... They can be stupid, but the heart is pumping.'<sup>40</sup>

- 36 The combined efforts of Howard Dean and the managing editor of *Vanity Fair* resulted in the neutralization of this amazement. Only the glossiest photographs were retained. The humanist and unifying discourse won out over the representation constructed by the photographs, and the selection of the images smoothed away the problems of class and race. The conflict and psychological and social alienation that Fink conveyed on other occasions have disappeared. In *Social Graces*, the boundary between empathy and consternation was fragile and imprecise. The portrait was also the site of a confrontation. In 'How the Poor Live Now,' this instability was replaced by a more reassuring stereotype, that of the poor's 'nobility,' a symmetrical reflection of the magazine's own purity of intention: 'all the people knew what I was up to - I had to persuade many of them that *Vanity Fair* was doing a noble thing.'<sup>41</sup>
- 37 This predetermined harmony between the dignity of the underprivileged and the humanism of the prism through which they were seen sapped the representation of its reality, since the only usable images were those that corresponded to an idealized 'American face.' A project managed from behind the scenes by the editor in chief of *Vanity Fair* (Howard Dean was not the first author envisaged for the article, and he had no contact with Fink while the latter was doing his reporting), the article failed to develop any true 'social' dimension, since it almost completely effaced the experience of difference.
- 38 'The faces on these pages come from communities across America,' wrote Dean in conclusion, and he appeals to his fellow citizens to 'focus on the faces behind the statistics.'<sup>42</sup> The illustrations, however, reduce those faces to a collection of reassuring masks. And this short final paragraph - the text's only reference to the images that accompany it - does little to persuade the reader that Dean had ever seen these American faces anywhere but in photographs.
- 39 By contrast, the bombast and inconsistencies of the prose of *How the Other Half Lives*, its wholesale judgments, seem to echo the tactlessness of Riis's photographs, in which the crudeness of the flash is untroubled by scruples or misgivings of any kind. This legacy can still be seen in the Fink of *Social Graces*, in which the image was a somewhat more merciless revealer of the confusion of the world, whether among the snobs of New York City or among Pennsylvania's farmers. It disappears, however, in an editorial project that may have been put together a little bit too hastily by Graydon Carter and Howard Dean and that doesn't include any flash photographs. Paradoxically, the clear conscience as staged by *Vanity Fair* lost in acuity what it sought to gain in consideration for its subjects. Obviously, it was not a matter of arguing for a brand of social photography that would ratchet up fear of that 'other half' whose case it sought to plead. Nonetheless, it is regrettable that when one encounters poverty in the glossy pages of the official organ of the clear conscience of the liberal elite, it isn't just a little bit more frightening. Despite themselves, the dignified and slightly passive Americans

seen in the pages of *Vanity Fair* played right into the hands of a presidential candidate, as if they had been carefully 'cast' for a televised campaign ad.

- 40 Five years later, the Obama phenomenon has enabled *Vanity Fair* and Larry Fink to rediscover a terrain that is conducive to a more fruitful and coherent collaboration. Young, charismatic, and a powerful speaker, the newly elected Democratic president has risen in a matter of just a few months to the status of a 'post-racial' icon. The almost irrational enthusiasm of liberal America for this 'man of destiny' has provided Graydon Carter with an opportunity to reconcile his editorial engagement with *Vanity Fair's* taste for glamour: not since John Fitzgerald Kennedy, whose legend still regularly provides material for the magazine's pages, have the Democrats been able to unite behind such a 'glamorous' candidate. Amid the popular euphoria that constantly threatened to engulf the then future president,<sup>43</sup> Larry Fink is able to give free reign to his taste for democratic disorder. Above the enthusiastic melee that Obama already seems eager to escape, the photographer has regained the almost incredulous point of view that has constituted the special appeal of his images for more than twenty years – that of a troubled and benevolent witness to America's fevers and frenzies. In retrospect, the overly rigid and well-established conventions of the documentary tradition to which 'How the Poor Live Now' reduced his work, now seem to be an isolated episode in *Vanity Fair's* photographic treatment of social and political issues.

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## NOTES

1. Riis himself may have been inspired by *How the Poor Live*, an English work by George R. SIMS (1883). Since the publication of *How the Other Half Lives*, variations on its title have become commonplace. For example, in March 2003 alone, sociologists Roger WALDINGER and Michael LICHTER published *How the Other Half Works: Immigration and the Social Organization of Labor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), while *The Nation*, in its issue of March 17, published an article entitled 'How the Other Half Still Lives' in which Jack NEWFIELD followed in Riis's footsteps (<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20030317/newfield> (accessed March 27, 2004)).
2. It is worth recalling that on December 14, President Bush was able to present the arrest of Saddam Hussein as a success.
3. 'It's the economy, stupid!' remains one of the most famous campaign slogans in the history of American politics, since the relatively unexpected defeat of George H.W. Bush just shortly after the conclusion of a seemingly popular first Gulf War had largely turned on economic issues.
4. Today Dean is still the chairman of his party's National Committee.
5. Jacob A. RIIS, 'How the Other Half Lives,' *Scribner's Magazine* 6, no. 6 (December 1889): 643–63.
6. John TEBBEL, *The American Magazine: A Compact History* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1969), 128.
7. *Ibid.*, 202.
8. David E. SHI, *Facing Facts: Realism in American Thought and Culture, 1850–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
9. Jacob HOLDT, *American Pictures: A Personal Journey through the American Underclass* (Copenhagen: American Pictures Foundation, 1985).

10. Larry BROWN, *Living Hungry in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1987).
11. Eugene RICHARDS, *Below the Line: Living Poor in America* (Mount Vernon, NY: Consumers Union, 1987).
12. Jim HUBBARD, *American Refugees* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
13. John RAEURN, *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 61–79.
14. The following year, CARTER also published a virulent pamphlet entitled *What We've Lost: How the Bush Administration Has Curtailed Our Freedoms, Mortgaged Our Economy, Ravaged Our Environment, and Damaged Our Standing in the World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux).
15. Bree NORDENSON, 'Vanity Fire,' *Columbia Journalism Review* 45, no. 5 (January/February 2007): 41–46.
16. See the glowing assessment of his campaign in an interview published in *The Progressive*. By this time, Dean had endorsed the candidacy of John Kerry. 'Howard Dean, Interview by Matthew Rothschild,' *The Progressive*, June 2004, 37–40.
17. Press release, Federal Document Clearing House, Inc., September 26, 2003.
18. On September 9, 1971, more than a thousand inmates of the Attica Correctional Facility in New York state took about fifty guards hostage in a bid to obtain an improvement in their conditions of detention. The intervention of the security forces left thirty-nine dead. In 2000, the courts awarded twelve million dollars in damages and interest to Attica's prisoners and their lawyers, chief among whom was Liz Fink.
19. Larry FINK, email message to the author, October 26, 2004.
20. Larry FINK, *Social Graces* (New York: Powerhouse, 2001 [New York: Aperture, 1984]), 117. See also Henri BÉHAR, 'Des images pour changer le monde,' *Le Monde*, July 1, 1993: 28.
21. Anne BIROLEAU, ed., *70' – La photographie américaine* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2008), 127–58.
22. Les K RANTZ, *American Photographers: An Illustrated Who's Who among Leading Contemporary Americans, Facts on File* (New York: Oxford, 1989), 86.
23. George W. Bush was elected with fewer popular votes than his opponent, Al Gore, thanks to the mechanics of the Electoral College system. By deciding to validate the questionable results of the state of Florida, the Supreme Court put an end to the Democrat Party's attempt to challenge them, without, however, deciding the underlying issue.
24. Larry FINK, *The Forbidden Pictures* (New York: Powerhouse, 2004).
25. Howard DEAN, 'How the Poor Live Now,' *Vanity Fair*, no. 520 (December 2003): 196.
26. '[Poverty] seemed not to spare those who worked the longest or labored the hardest, and there was certainly no guarantee of escape, regardless of dedication or force of will.' *Ibid.*, 198.
27. *Ibid.*, 204.
28. Larry FINK, telephone conversation with the author, November 2, 2004. We will come back to a few of these images later on.
29. Sheldon H. DANZINGER and Robert H. HAVEMAN, *Understanding Poverty* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2001), 141–43, 229–77.
30. Vivyan ADAIR, *From Good Ma to Welfare Queen: A Genealogy of the Poor Woman in American Literature, Photography, and Culture* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 2–31.
31. Myron MAGNET, 'America's Underclass: What to Do?,' *Fortune* 115, no. 10 (May 11, 1987): 130–50.
32. *Ibid.*, 132.
33. *Ibid.*, 144.
34. For another analysis – more subjective, it seems to me – of the stigmatization of the black woman's body in documentary photography, see Paul A. ROGERS, 'Hard Core Poverty,' in *Picturing*

Us: African American Identity in Photography, ed. Deborah WILLIS, 158–68 (New York: The New Press, 1994).

35. Howard DEAN, 'How the Poor Live Now' (note 25), 198.

36. Larry FINK, email message to the author, October 6, 2004.

37. Vivyan ADAIR, From Good Ma to Welfare Queen (note 30), 21.

38. Howard DEAN, 'How the Poor Live Now' (note 25), 196.

39. Larry FINK, telephone conversation with the author, November 2, 2004. Eugene Richards's work deserves a more nuanced assessment, particularly in view of photo-essays like 'The Story of Cadillac Man and the Land of the Lost Souls,' *Esquire* 143, no. 5 (May 2005): 135–41.

40. Larry FINK, telephone conversation with the author, November 2, 2004.

41. Larry FINK, email to the author, October 26, 2004.

42. Howard DEAN, 'How the Poor Live Now' (note 25), 206.

43. All of these images may be viewed online at [http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2008/05/obama\\_slideshow200805](http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2008/05/obama_slideshow200805) (accessed February 4, 2009).

## ABSTRACTS

In December 2003, Howard Dean, a candidate for the Democratic Party nomination in the American presidential elections, wrote an article for the magazine *Vanity Fair* on the growth of social inequality under the Republican administration of George W. Bush. By calling his article 'How the Poor Live Now' and pairing it with a series of photographs by Larry Fink that were taken for the occasion, Dean and Graydon Carter, the magazine's editor in chief, implicitly placed themselves in the tradition of Jacob A. Riis's famous work, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), which is regarded as the first American example of the use of photography for the purpose of social reform. The project, however, was not successful in reviving this documentary model due to its insufficient political cohesion. The editorial and electoral pressures under which the article was operating led to a conventional and almost disembodied representation of poverty. A comparison between the photographs accepted by *Vanity Fair* and certain other, more complex images that were ultimately rejected by the magazine makes it possible to investigate the limits in contexts like this faced by the genre of social documentary.

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