



## Book review: 'Lewis Hine as Social Critic'

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**Press-Register Correspondent**

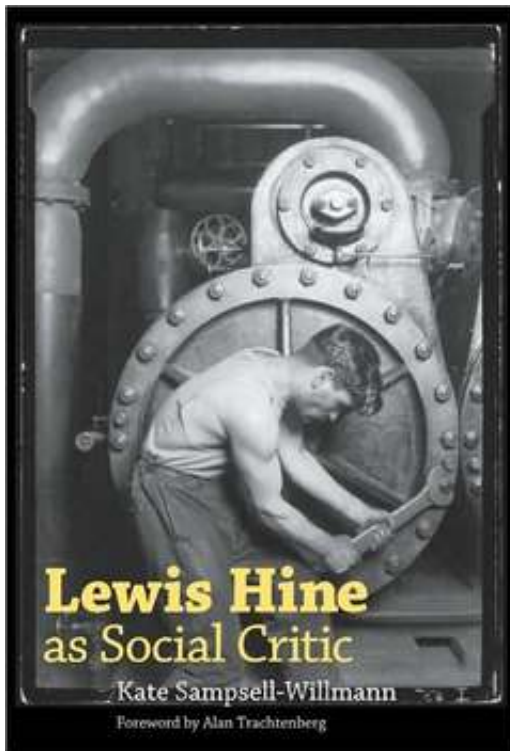


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**Archives**Photographer Lewis Hine made several trips to the Gulf Coast. This 1914 image shows Ferris, a barefoot seven-year-old newsboy for the Mobile Item. "There are still too many of these little ones in the larger cities," Hine wrote.**Lewis Hine as Social Critic** By Kate Sampsell-Willmann (University Press of Mississippi, \$50)

*Reviewed by SCOTTY E. KIRKLAND, Special to the Press-Register*

Lewis Hine is widely regarded as the founder of documentary photography. For decades, Hine used his camera to provide a visual representation of some of America's most pressing social issues. His haunting photos of abhorrent child labor practices throughout the country compelled many philanthropists and liberal politicians into action. His compassionate "work portraits" helped humanize industry in the midst of increasing mechanization of American labor.



In her new book, "Lewis Hine as Social Critic," Georgetown University assistant professor Kate Sampsell-Willmann shows that Hine and documentary photographers like him were social critics who used their considerable artistic talents to propel a certain political viewpoint. In her careful re-creation of Hine and his work, Sampsell-Willmann places the photographer at the center of the core causes of the Progressive Era: expanding access to education, improving overall working conditions, abolishing child labor, etc.

The author draws from a wealth of knowledge on the social critics of the early 20th century. Based on a thorough analysis of Hine's photographs and personal correspondence, the author constructs an involved portrait of the photographer. Hine becomes a crucial part in a long line of American intellectuals like Walt Whitman, William James and John Dewey.

The author traces Hine's progressive thread throughout his various positions for much of the book. As director of information for the National Child Labor Committee, Hine traveled throughout the country photographing young workers. One of the photos in the book depicts a group of "shrimp pickers" from Biloxi, Miss. The children — all between the ages of five and eight years old — stare curiously into Hine's camera. They are dirty, tired and barefoot. It's strange to see children so young in such grown-up situations, especially almost a century after the photo was taken. The message of Hine's child labor photographs, according to Sampsell-Willmann, is one of "innocence threatened." Yet Hine's work with the NCLC went beyond photography. He sought out mill owners and factory supervisors and asked them, on the record, about the conditions in their facilities. His ability to contrast these statements with his own images makes his work all the more important.

Hine's commitment to photographing America's working class never wavered throughout his career. Sampsell-Willmann writes that Hine identified with the mechanics, mill workers and farmers he photographed. The book is spattered with some of Hine's best "work portraits." Two of these images stand out as excellent examples of Hine's work. "Powerhouse Mechanic" is a profile image of a muscled worker tightening a bolt on a large machine,

taken in 1920. Another, more descriptive image is "The Mechanic in his Shrine," taken in 1924. In this photograph, a worker sits in the middle of a large turbine. Both pictures clearly demonstrate that, in spite of rapid mechanization, the worker was still central to American industry. Such images demonstrate Hine's lifelong admiration for the American worker.

Sampsell-Willmann's book is the first full-length treatment of Lewis Hine, and her careful analysis of his career was sorely needed. However, the book contains only scattered biographical material on the photographer. Despite this omission the book is compelling and has broad ramifications on how we see the work of other photographers. Local readers, for example, might be prompted to re-examine some of the more familiar images from two of Mobile's most celebrated photographers, Erik Overbey and William Wilson, for more than simply their aesthetic value.

The Lewis Hine that emerges from "Lewis Hine as Social Critic" was a very important figure in the intellectual history of the early 20th century. Hine himself seemed to acknowledge that he was part of a broader group of social critics. "If I could tell this story in words," he wrote in 1922, "I wouldn't need to lug a camera."

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