

The Lenses of History

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

History can be complex and multi-sided, requiring students to view the past in multiple ways. This is especially true of American history. Historians can apply a number of “lenses” when interpreting and narrating the past, including lenses of race, class, and gender. We will use an example from the history of the Great Depression to learn how these lenses work.

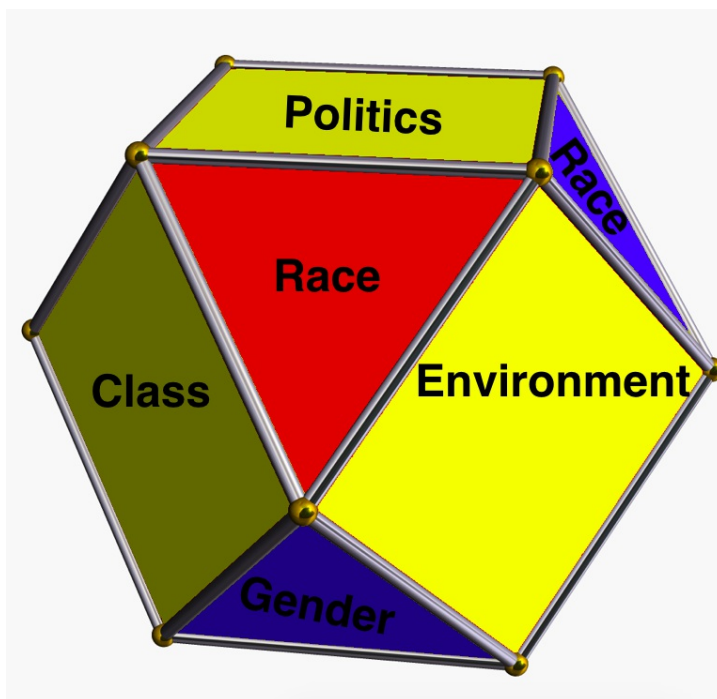
This tutorial examines the ways that historians interpret the past, in five parts:

1. The Lens as a Metaphor for History

There is no single, correct way to view and interpret the past, including the past of the United States. When historians approach a broad topic like the history of the United States, they often ask questions based on the Five Ws and the Five Cs:

- Who (or what) should I focus on?
- What are the most important events in U.S. history? What are their causes?
- Why are certain events, people, or places emphasized more than others?
- How are certain events, people, or places connected?

These questions are sometimes difficult to answer and can lead historical inquiry down a variety of paths. For this reason, it's helpful to think of the historian trying to capture the past, like a photographer trying to capture an image. Like a photographer, the historian can use a variety of lenses that influence the picture of the past being created.



Another way to think about the **historical lens** is to image a multi-sided geometric shape similar to a diamond or a tetrahedron, like the image above. In the middle of this shape is the historical document, event, person, or place that the historian is studying. Depending on which side of the tetrahedron the historian is on, his or her interpretation of that document, event, person, or place will change.



TERM TO KNOW

Historical Lens

The analytical approach that a historian uses when interpreting, and creating narratives about the past.

Even though your interpretation of the past will shift, depending on the lens you use (i.e., your perspective), all lenses are connected and part of the same pattern—history. There is no set number of perspectives to take. Historians constantly develop new questions, approaches, and methods to evaluate past events, adding to the number of historical lenses.

For example, historians traditionally applied lenses of politics and economics to examine military conflicts, elections, and industrialization. With the rise of social history during the mid-20th century, new generations of historians applied lenses of race, class, and gender to examine the experiences of everyday people. In light of current debates about the environment and sexuality, a number of contemporary historians are asking new questions and using new analytical approaches to uncover stories, individuals, relationships, and events that previous historians ignored.

Throughout this course, you will use a number of the lenses mentioned above. In this tutorial, however, we will examine the ways that historians apply the lenses of class, race, and gender to an iconic image associated with the Great Depression.

2. Migrant Mother

During the mid-1930s, the United States was in the middle of the most significant economic crisis in American history: the Great Depression. The crisis affected millions of Americans from all walks of life.

In urban areas, workers lost their jobs and homes. In rural areas, widespread declines in crop prices and environmental calamities such as the Dust Bowl meant that many farmers could not earn enough money to pay their mortgages. Many of them lost their farms through foreclosure. The country's most vulnerable populations, such as children and the elderly, and those subject to discrimination, African Americans and women, were among the hardest hit.

In 1935, the Resettlement Administration (a federal agency later known as the Farm Security Administration) hired a number of photographers. Their job was to document the toll that the Great Depression had taken on the most vulnerable. Dorothea Lange was among the photographers who were hired.

In March of 1936, Lange was in the town of Nipomo, California.

Freezing weather had destroyed the local pea crop and left a number of workers, many of whom had migrated to California from elsewhere in the United States, without jobs. Lange photographed a woman whose expression exemplified what many Americans felt about the Great Depression.

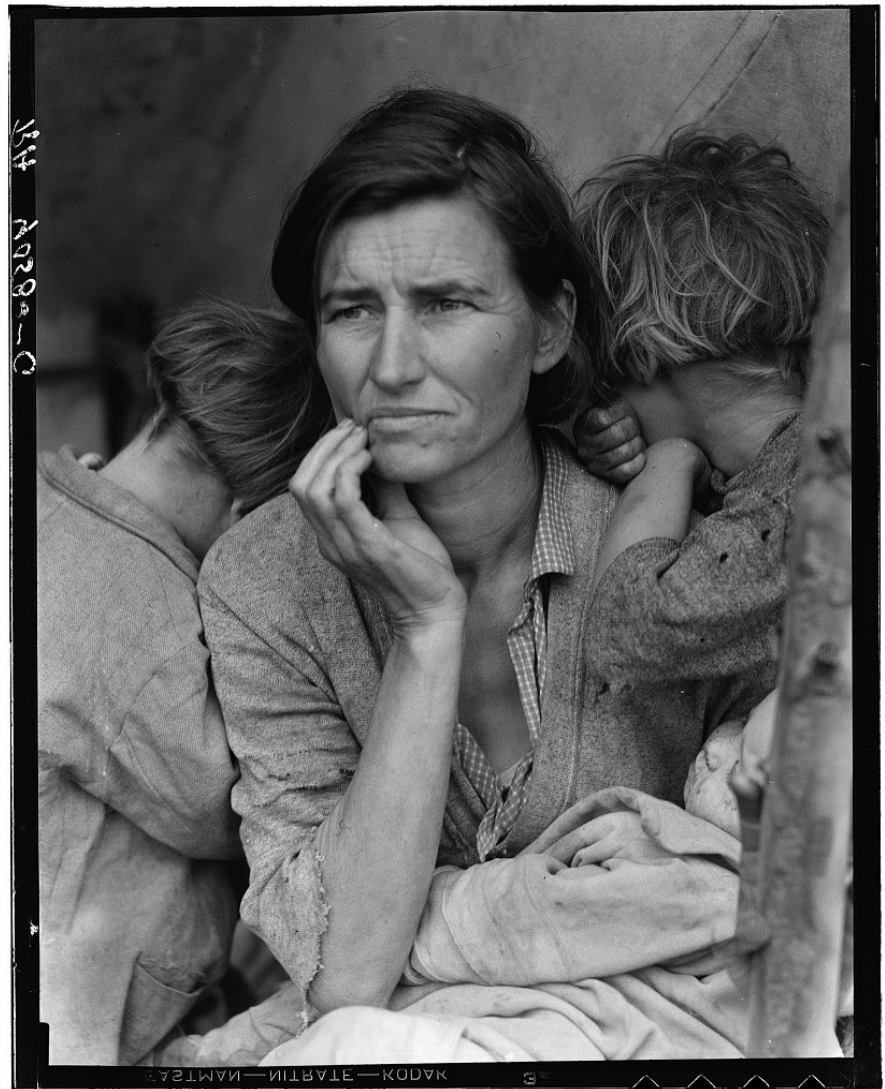
Lange's description of the photograph was straightforward: "Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California." However, when the photograph was published and circulated throughout the country, it acquired a new title—"Migrant Mother"—and took on a life of its own. The photograph represented millions of Americans who had fallen victim to the Great Depression and who struggled to survive chronic unemployment, malnutrition, or sickness.

As historians, how should we interpret this photograph? We can apply a number of lenses to this historical artifact and to the Great Depression.



DID YOU KNOW

Although Lange photographed and conversed with the woman depicted in "Migrant Mother," she did not identify her. The woman was later identified as Florence Thompson.



3. Class and the Great Depression

One way to interpret the history of the Great Depression is to think about and analyze it through the lens of **class**. Class refers to the structuring of human society in terms of economic position and status. To view the Great Depression through the lens of class, you would examine the economic systems that defined and, in certain respects, limited the opportunities and experiences of the “Migrant Mother” and her children.



TERM TO KNOW

Class

The structuring of human society in terms of economic position and status.

During the Great Depression, the economic system under which all Americans lived was **capitalism**.



TERM TO KNOW

Capitalism

An economic system based on the investment and accumulation of capital to facilitate the production and exchange of goods through market, price-driven relations.

Individualism and competition are core values in a capitalist society. Market transactions are assumed to occur between individuals who work with their own interests in mind. Profit is a primary motivator in a capitalist society.

The fundamental relationship in a capitalist society is between capital and labor. Capitalists own or oversee the means of production, including land, facilities, tools, and (most importantly) labor. Capitalists use the output of production to produce more capital, including reinvestment in the means of production (i.e., purchasing new equipment or buying more land), and paying laborers. In theory, all laborers have the opportunity to accumulate wealth and become capitalists.

The Great Depression shook the confidence of many Americans in capitalism. As capitalists reduced their operations and workers lost their jobs, many families emptied their savings accounts and redeemed insurance policies (if they had them). Charities and religious organizations offered food and shelter, but their resources were limited. Breadlines and soup kitchens, unemployment and homelessness, and guilt and despair became commonplace throughout the United States.

Florence Thompson, the subject of the “Migrant Mother” photograph, moved her family to the farm fields outside of Nipomo, California, in search of work. However, farm owners in the area were unable to provide jobs due to poor crop prices or environmental problems such as freezes or drought. This left Thompson’s family with few survival options. As Dorothea Lange recollected, Thompson had recently sold the tires from the family car to purchase food.

When viewing the photograph of the “Migrant Mother,” historians who apply the lens of class would conclude that Thompson and her children were forced into economic distress by market forces that were beyond their control.

4. Race and the Great Depression

The lens of class, used to consider the experiences of the “Migrant Mother” is only one of the lenses used to interpret the past. Historians have also turned to the lens of **race** to better understand U.S. history, including the Great Depression. Race is a concept that has shifted and changed its meaning over time. For our purposes, we define race as follows:



Race

The classification of humans into groups based on skin color or other physical characteristics. The Great Depression affected White and Black Americans differently. A number of historians have argued that the Great Depression hit African Americans particularly hard. Subject to persistent racial discrimination, they fared worse than their hard-hit White counterparts. In the South, as cotton prices plummeted, White farm owners laid off or evicted Black agricultural laborers and tenant farmers. In cities, where unemployment was rampant, some White business owners conspired to fire Black American workers and give their jobs to White laborers.



Farm Security Administration photograph by Russell Lee, titled “Negro and White man sitting on curb talking, Muskogee, Oklahoma,” taken in July 1939.

Photographs such as the one above, which shows a Black man and a White man talking while sitting on a curb in Muskogee, Oklahoma, in 1939, were rare. Many who chronicled the hardships of the Great Depression ignored the experiences of African Americans in favor of those of Whites. The thousands of farmers from the Southern Great Plains known as “Okies,” who fled the Dust Bowl in search of opportunity in California, symbolized the hardships of the Great Depression. Most articles, books, and photographs that described the Okie migration, including Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother” photograph and John Steinbeck’s novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, focused on the experiences of White Americans.

The audience for these works was overwhelmingly White. A photograph of a helpless mother holding her children, alongside many other images or descriptions of homeless families living in tents or cars while looking for work, elicited sympathetic reactions from White Americans, as well as from federal officials in the

Farm Security Administration (who oversaw assistance programs for migrant agricultural laborers).

When examining the “Migrant Mother” photograph, historians who applied the lens of race would find it significant that Dorothea Lange photographed Florence Thompson instead of a Black woman. Digging deeper, we find that this choice of subject reflected a larger trend: a focus on the experiences of White Americans at the expense of African Americans and other racial minorities. In viewing the Great Depression in this way, historians argue that race and class are part of the same history. Although millions of Americans were affected by the Great Depression, racial discrimination and bias were important factors that contributed to how an individual experienced the crisis.

5. Gender and the Great Depression

Historians have also used the **gender** lens when attempting to understand the past. This term refers to the social and/or cultural vision of what it means to be male or female.



TERM TO KNOW

Gender

The social and/or cultural vision of what it means to be male or female.

Like race, differences in gender helped to determine how individuals were affected by the Great Depression. As a result of beliefs about appropriate gender roles, working women often lost their jobs before men did. Traditional definitions of “family” also influenced the ways in which businesses and the government focused relief efforts. During the early years of the Depression, some businesses and federal job programs limited hiring to “heads of household”—men—to encourage women to remain at home. For women who found jobs, wage discrimination was rampant.



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Photograph of Dust Bowl refugees near Bakersfield, California, taken by Dorothea Lange in November 1935.

The photographs of Dorothea Lange and others who worked for the Farm Security Administration focused on the experiences of women and families. They did so with their White audience in mind, hoping to mobilize popular support for federal relief efforts. Most Americans were unaware of the conditions in which women like Florence Thompson and her children lived in migrant labor camps. Families, with men at work and women at home caring for children, were supposed to be the foundation of a stable American society. Images like “Migrant Mother,” revealed how the Great Depression had disrupted and divided American families.

The Farm Security Administration’s photography campaign provided employment for Dorothea Lange and a handful of other female photographers. Other federal relief agencies provided similar opportunities for women. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) hired a number of women, including widows, single women, and the wives of disabled husbands.

Examination of “Migrant Mother” through the lenses of class, race, and gender results in a more comprehensive view of the ways in which Americans experienced the Great Depression. It also teaches an important lesson about bias and objectivity in primary sources. By applying these lenses, historians can gain an understanding of Dorothea Lange’s motivations, as well as arrive at conclusions on how audiences reacted to the image. “Migrant Mother” is not an objective primary source, but it tells historians much about how Americans experienced the Great Depression. By applying certain lenses while viewing it, this photograph stimulates broader historical conversations about the impact of the Great Depression on American society.



THINK ABOUT IT

1. In addition to “Migrant Mother,” this tutorial includes other photographs from the Great Depression. How can you apply the lenses of class, race, and gender to those photographs?
2. Can you think of three major events in American history to which you can apply the lenses of class, race, and gender?



SUMMARY

The historian’s practice involves the use of multiple lenses to analyze the past. There are varied and unique perspectives on the past, perspectives that are almost always interconnected. For example, historians have interpreted the “Migrant Mother” image from the Great Depression using the lenses of class, race, and gender.

When historians apply historical lenses to their subjects, our understanding of the past becomes richer and more complex. When reading future tutorials, think about race, class, gender, and other historical lenses that historians have applied to the past. How have these lenses influenced our interpretation of American history?

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- [Negro and white man sitting on curb talking \(1939\)](#) | Author: Lee, R | License: Public Domain
- [Squatters along highway near Bakersfield, California \(1935\)](#) | Author: Lange, D | License: Public Domain
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