TERMS

PART 2

WINTER 2024

Depression

Andrée Lévesque
The Economic Depression of the 30s in Montreal. A Somber Decade

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Having previously explored the concepts of 'vulnerability,' 'service,' and 'investment' in its prior editions, the *Terms* program is dedicating the year 2023-2024 to the examination of the word 'depression,' with the aim of transcending the commonly psychological and pathological interpretation prevalent in everyday language.

Derived from the Latin word '*deprimere*,' the word 'depression' traces its origins to the realm of physics, invoking the concept of compressing or applying downward pressure, and by extension, its outcomes: a sinking, an inclination, a retreat, or the formation of a hollow. Depression can be seen as the impression resulting from the interplay of forces, something that yields and flexes under the influence of weight, pressure, intrusion, or gravity. Over time, this term has found diverse applications across various domains, including geology (referring to topographic or oceanic basins), meteorology (indicating low atmospheric pressure), economics (characterizing prolonged economic recession), medicine, and psychology (describing complex mood disorders and medical conditions).

This second part of the series contemplates the concept of depression within the context of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Andrée Lévesque, a professor in the Department of History at McGill University, offers an in-depth analysis of the extent of the economic crisis in Montreal, exploring its effects on the labor market, living conditions, and social stability. Following her essay is a series of five photographs by Canadian artist Margaret Watkins (1884-1969) documenting the streets of London, UK, and its inhabitants during her visit in the early 1930s. The issue concludes with a second text by Debra Antoncic, an art historian, curator, and Director of the Riverbrink Art Museum, examining Watkins's perspective on this city, with a particular emphasis on what her photographs reveal about the experience of the Great Depression.

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The Great Depression, that desperate and dismal period, was forever etched in the minds of those who lived through it between 1930 and 1939. As a historian, my reflections on this traumatic period of the twentieth century are mostly concerned with Montreal, where the economic collapse was most strongly felt.

Harry Mayerovitch, *L'Œuvre de la soupe*, c. 1935, Oil on wood fiber panel, 29 x 61 cm.

Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Gift of the artist (1996.92) © Estate of Harry Mayerovitch. Photo: MNBAQ, Denis Legendre.

The clichéd image of a paunchy businessman jumping off a building after losing everything in the Stock Market Crash is the antithesis of a painting by Montreal artist Harry Mayerovitch (1910–2004) titled *L'Œuvre de la soupe*, in which men line up in the snow for their daily ration. Between these two extremes is a

multi-tiered pyramid that illustrates increasing levels of poverty, with the most destitute—those living below the poverty line—at its wide base. The lower a family's rank on the pyramid, the more deeply a convulsing economy will affect them, as was certainly the case between 1930 and 1932.

In that profit-driven, speculation-based economy, the collapse was even more dramatic than the peak was high. On Black Thursday, October 24, 1929, the New York Stock Exchange crashed: stocks no longer sold, speculators couldn't repay their debts, large businesses declared bankruptcy. A few days later, the Montreal Stock Exchange experienced the same scenario.

Compared to Toronto and Vancouver, Montreal, with its population of one million including its suburbs, was a poor city even at the end of the 1920s, when an exuberant decade of burgeoning economic growth begat the moniker "the Roaring Twenties." Factories then ran at full capacity, construction projects interrupted the landscape at every turn, housing mushroomed, and for the upper classes, profits reached never-before-seen heights. Montreal's working class, however, remained the poorest in Canada. In fact, the crisis only exacerbated

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1. Leonard C. Marsh, *Canadians In and Out of Work: A Survey of Economic Classes and Their Relations to the Labour Market*, McGill Social Research Series, nº 9, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1940), 120. David Lewis and Frank Scott, *Un Canada nouveau : vue d'ensemble de l'historique et de la politique du mouvement C.C.F.*, (Montreal: Éditions Bernard Valiquette, 1944), 88. Andrée Lévesque, *Virage à gauche interdit. Les communistes, les socialistes et leurs ennemis au Québec 1929-1939*, (Montreal: Boréal Express, 1984), 22-24.

2. Paul-André Linteau, *Histoire de Montréal*, (Montreal: Boréal, 2017), 375. There is no exact date on the number of unemployed. The rate of unemployed unionised workers is unreliable as only 12% of workers belonged to unions. Lévesque, *Virage à gauche*, 18.

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an already well-established economic inferiority. In Montreal in 1931, 48% of primary household wage-earners earned less than $1,000 a year, the minimum required to maintain a decent standard of living. Two years later, 52% earned less than $850 a year.[1] The first indication of this major slump was a rise in unemployment that affected between one third and one quarter of the work force.[2] Most of these people were from working-class and racialized neighbourhoods, for instance the largely Black community of Little Burgundy, where 80% of United Church members were unemployed.[3]

The consequences of this work shortage rippled across all areas of life, not only affecting access to food and housing, but also stressing human relationships. A 1935 study estimated that 18,000 people lived in approximately 3,000 slums, many of which had dirt floors, were overrun with vermin, had no sanitary facilities, and inadequate light. One quarter of lodgings had fewer than one room per person (15.5% in Toronto).[4] Evictions were common for people who could no longer afford to pay rent. Given the dearth of jobs and adequate housing, marriages were postponed and many couples tried to delay having more children.[5]

3. James L. Torczyner and Sharon Springer, *The Evolution of the Black Community of Montreal: Change and Challenge*, Montreal, McGill School of Social Work, in McGill Consortium for Ethnicity and Strategic Social Planning, Black Communities Demographic Project, 2001, 9. www.mcgill.ca/mchrat/files/mchrat/BlackDemographicStudy2001.PDF There are no studies that specifically look at racialized communities during the economic Depression.

4. A. E. Grauer, *Hygiène publique. Étude préparée pour la Commission royale des relations entre le Dominion et les provinces*, (Ottawa: Imprimerie du roi, 1939), 73. Lévesque, *Virage à gauche interdit*, 25.

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Without calling into question the capitalist model itself, some economists saw the Great Depression as just another temporary cycle. But this proved to be wrong, and the Depression persisted despite fluctuations during the period until World War II. For other economists, this was evidence of the pathology of a free market that cannot regulate itself. No politician, except for the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation party members of Parliament, questioned capitalism. For workers, the situation only confirmed the greed of companies that favoured profit over everything.

While executives ramped up international meetings and discussed tariffs and deflation, ordinary people were coerced into adopting survival strategies that varied depending on occupation, social status, and ethnic background. While my intent is not to present an analysis of Montreal's diverse cultural communities, it goes without saying that racialized groups, who by and large had the most precarious jobs, were on average more affected than the rest of the population, while Montrealers of British descent fared much better in general.

Families that suffered a drop in income developed many strategies for survival. Historian Denyse Baillargeon

5. Even though the sale of contraceptives was illegal in Canada and the Catholic church was opposed to birth control, birth rates fell during the Great Depression. The fertility rate, that is the number of children per 1,000 births, dropped by 12% in the 1930s. Jacques Henripin, *Tendances et facteurs de la fécondité au Canada*, (Ottawa: Bureau federal de la statistique, 1968), 21.

6. Denyse Baillargeon, *Ménagères au temps de la Crise*, (Montreal: Éditions du remue-ménage, 1991), 213-226.

7. Sylvie Halpern, *Le Chaînon. La maison de Montréal*, (Montreal: Éditions internationales Stanké, 1998).

8. Andrée Lévesque, *La Norme et les déviantes. Des femmes au Québec pendant l'entre-deux-guerres*, (Montreal: Éditions du remue-ménage, 1989), 56.

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demonstrated that, at an individual level, working-class families relied more on their extended families and neighbours.[6] They turned to Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish religious charities, while other charitable organizations like the Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul and the Negro Community Association intervened to meet people's immediate needs. Reluctantly, some of the unemployed relied on soup kitchens, and while the neediest men could find a bed at the Meurling Refuge, women went to Le Chaînon for shelter.[7] To increase their chances of finding work, men could learn a trade at the YMCA, and women could take cooking, sewing, or home economics classes at the YWCA.[8] Approximately 60% of women learned to be housekeepers. At a time when they were already being accused of taking jobs away from men, training women in the trades was out of the question.

To do more than just scrape by, the most radical citizens decided to organize collectively. Periods of unemployment made negotiating labour power more difficult and strikes were uncommon. Men joined unemployment organizations and called for higher welfare benefits.[9] Women also took to the streets. On June 17, 1937, around fifty women went to City Hall demanding bread,

9. For more on unemployed activists, see Benoit Marsan, «'L'heure des pétitions est passée, il faut des actes': les sans-travail et la protestation au Québec durant l'entre-deux-guerres (1919-1939)," Dissertation, Université du Québec à Montréal, PhD in History, 2021.

10. *Le Canada*, June 18, 1937, 16 (our translation).

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in particular for those who had been denied public assistance, such as prisoners' spouses, single mothers, and concubines. The following day, the daily newspaper *Le Canada* reported that "yesterday afternoon, City Hall was the scene of such unsightly activity that we cannot in all decency provide a detailed account of events."[10]

Public demonstrators called for immediate aid, while others pushed further to demand economic reform and stronger State intervention. As unemployment insurance and public health insurance were non-existent, the federal, provincial, and municipal governments united their efforts to create public works and distribute "direct relief." Montreal improved its parks, built the Chalet du Mont-Royal at the summit of Mount Royal, constructed tunnels and viaducts, planted trees and installed public urinals.

The poorest people managed to survive through "direct relief." The allocated funds covered the bare minimum, with little to nothing left over for "luxury items" such as cosmetics, razor blades, or electric bulbs. And should the husband squander these funds before even making it home, his wife would have to find other ways to feed the family.

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While this tremendous distress gave way to protests, it also caused a soul-searching society to turn in on itself. Both progressive reform movements and exclusive nationalism began to emerge, the latter wasting no time blaming the lack of jobs on immigration. Some turned to the Communist Party, while others joined fascist and anti-Semitic groups, although this never led to the rise to power of far-left or far-right political parties, as it did in some European countries.

Faced with thousands of idle young men, who began to be viewed as a threat to the social order, the federal government opened a series of unemployment relief camps for single men, under the direction of the Department of National Defence. Inaugurated in 1932, the Valcartier camp offered shelter, food, clothing, and 20 cents a day in exchange for labour, which was put towards public works. By creating voluntary internment camps for young men, government leaders hoped to preserve jobs for family men, rid cities of homeless people, relieve pressure on social services, and protect the social order. But increased public pressure and the On-to-Ottawa Trek in 1935 forced the new Liberal government to abolish the camps that same year.

The Great Depression had a traumatic effect on an entire generation, although people's experiences of it varied according to their financial means and social class. For a decade, thousands of people devoted their entire efforts to daily survival. For many, the Depression brought greater awareness and a reassessment of the economic order. For others, namely the middle and upper economic classes, it provoked nationalist tendencies and exclusionary behaviour. In any case, the Great Depression paved the way to an increased role of the State in the economy, greater protection for workers, and the emergence of a welfare state at the end of the Second World War.

—Translated by Jo-Anne Balcaen

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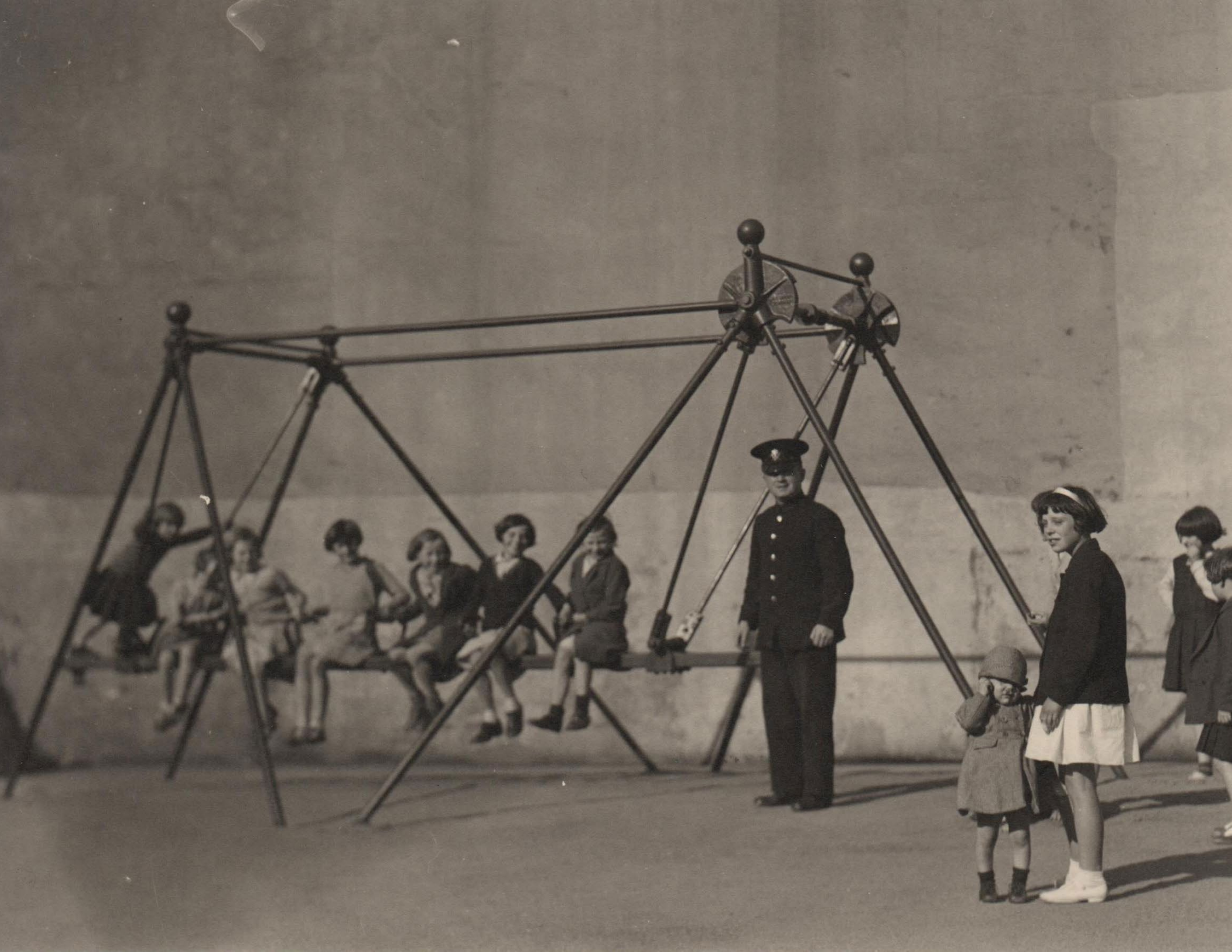
Margaret Watkins Selection from the *London Photographs*




UNDERGROUND
CITY & SOUTH LONDON RY
KINGS CROSS STATION

Photographs by Margaret Watkins, in order of appearance:
Playing in the Park, London, c. 1930.
King's Cross Underground Station, London, c. 1930.
Perambulating in Kensington Gardens, London, c. 1930.
Flower Seller on the Steps, London, c. 1930.
Stopping for a Chat, London, c. 1930.

Debra Antoncic *A Street Photographer: Margaret Watkins in Depression-Era London*

When does a recession become a depression? At what point does a simple depression evolve into the Great Depression? Were the effects immediately apparent, or was the experience gradual, a dawning realization that things were not improving? While the crash came suddenly, recovery was slow and uneven. And throughout, authorities feared civil unrest, sedition, and potential revolution.

The photographs Canadian-born artist Margaret Watkins took on her visit to London in the early 1930s are not obviously Depression-era photographs. They are not the familiar images of rural poverty in the southern United States, or of breadlines or hunger marches. Having only recently arrived in Scotland from many years in New York before embarking on the trip to London and the continent a few months later, Watkins took up the role of flâneuse, the street photographer capturing images of the city and its inhabitants. The relative newcomer photographed shop windows, pedestrians, and other touristic sights of the city. What do these images tell us of the experience of the Depression, or the Great Slump, as it was known in Britain?[1]

1. John Maynard Keynes, *The Great Slump of 1930* (London, The Nation & Athenæum, 20 and 27 Dec. 1930; Project Gutenberg, November 12, 2008), www.gutenberg.ca/ebooks/keynes-slump/keynes-slump-00-h.html.

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A Street Photographer: Margaret Watkins in Depression-Era London

One possible answer can be found in a sense of loneliness and isolation conveyed in the photographs. These characteristics are not exclusive to economic depression but are often linked to financial hardship and poverty. Separated from her community in New York, looking to resume her career in art photography, and running low on funds, Watkins sought new subjects on the streets of London.[2] The resulting images have the rich dark tones and soft grays of pictorialism, with a soft focus and an emphasis on light and shadow. But the photographer remains at a distance, from the well-dressed ladies in *Stopping for a Chat* and the cluster of women with unwieldy prams in *Perambulating in Kensington Gardens*. In the latter photograph, the carriages form a physical barrier to the viewer, blocking off any opportunity to join a conversation. The Albert Memorial in the background is a ghostly presence, and streets and squares in other photographs in this series are shrouded in fog, which has the effect of further isolating the flâneuse.

In contrast to this suggestion of loneliness, the city provided Watkins with a diverse and lively array of subjects for experimentation. She admitted to having over-indulged, overspending on film and developing

2. Mary O'Connor and Katherine Tweedie, *Seduced by Modernity* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2007), 166.

before returning to what she envisioned was her temporary home with relatives in Glasgow.[3] Watkins captured the ornate metalwork of the entrance to *King's Cross Underground Station*, and the emphatic lines of the playground equipment in *Playing in the Park*. These images attest to her eye for the formal characteristics of architectural elements and structures within scenes of the city. Objects had been the focus of her career in advertising and art photography in New York, and Watkins had recently expanded her oeuvre to the industrial landscape and street photography. Her facility with still-life is apparent in *Flower Seller on the Steps*, where the buds and the woven basket captured in light and shadow become the focus, rather than the figure of the flower seller. But the middle-class consumer of photographs and commercial products was suffering under Depression-era job losses and fiscal volatility, which affected the market for work in advertising and her experimental design. Where did that leave the artist?

While Watkins travelled to various European cities, the magnitude and far-reaching consequences of the crisis may not have been apparent. As the English economist John Maynard Keynes described, "[t]he world has been

3. O'Connor and Tweedie, *Seduced by Modernity*, 175.

slow to realize that we are living this year in the shadow of one of the greatest economic catastrophes of modern history."[4] The effects of the Depression were uneven, and London was less affected than Scotland, particularly Glasgow, with its reliance on heavy industry and shipbuilding. The United Kingdom as a whole had been slow to recover from the First World War, and did not enjoy the boom times of the 1920s to the same degree as in North America generally and New York specifically. Instead, the UK suffered economic stagnation, characterized by slow growth, high unemployment, and deflation.[5] In other words, the impact of the Depression may have been less obvious to the casual observer. But Keynes and others warned that the crisis was fertile soil for popular uprising and political agitations. The consequences of high unemployment were severe poverty and growing social unrest.

Viewed in this context, the male figures in uniform captured in two of the London photographs suggest an uneasy, watchful presence. In *King's Cross Underground Station*, a figure who appears to be the classic London 'bobby' assumes a strong and stable pose as he surveys the square. Is that a crowd of protesters in the background or

4. Keynes, *The Great Slump of 1930*.

5. Richard Overy, *The Twilight Years: The Paradox of Britain Between the Wars* (London: Penguin Books ebook, 2010), 108.

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an innocent street scene? In *Playing in the Park*, a man in uniform is positioned alongside children at play, framed by the diagonal lines of the playground equipment. The figure looks out at the photographer with a strong direct gaze. Hunger marches were not uncommon, yet these children appear healthy and well-cared for, if under a vigilant male gaze.

In fact, the visible signs of the Depression, of homelessness, poverty, or hunger, are absent from these photographs. There was little in the way of relief or benefits to alleviate conditions in the UK at the time, but Watkins' view of the city is far from bleak. Unemployment was high and bank failures were another source of worry in the early 1930s, but Watkins provided an aesthetic, rather than realist, treatment of the city.

Watkins was not alone in this pursuit of a more hopeful view. In the United States, Berenice Abbott began to photograph the streets and buildings of New York upon her return from France in 1928, ultimately producing *Changing New York (1935-39)* with financial support from the Federal Art Project. Abbott's images provide a dynamic view of the city as it transformed, suggesting a continuum of active growth. Old buildings

were gone but the city Abbott documented appears timeless, an entity that has endured and will thrive into the future.[6] And photographers working for the Works Progress Administration were often required to present a positive outlook while documenting lives of Americans during the Depression. This censorship was imposed because to reveal the full extent of economic hardship would suggest capitalism had failed.[7]

In their 2007 biography of the artist, Mary O'Connor and Katherine Tweedie have described Watkins's experience of environments as being "informed by a social conscience and, arguably, a socialist viewpoint."[8] Watkins visited the Soviet Union in 1933 but it does not appear, however, that the visit was prompted by sympathy for the socialist cause. Instead, she had been impressed by the Soviet Presentation at the 1928 Pressa Fair in Cologne (while dismissive of the United States as a "monument to complacent prosperity"), and admired the innovations in photography on display.[9] The USSR tour appears to have been prompted by technical interests and curiosity, a desire for travel, rather than a political viewpoint.

Like many others, Watkins may not have recognized the severity of the Depression at the outset nor

6. Berenice Abbott, *Changing New York* (New York: Dutton, 1939).

7. Naomi Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography*, 4th ed. (London and New York: Abbeville Press, 2007), 369.

8. O'Connor and Tweedie, *Seduced by Modernity*, 201.

9. Watkins notes 1928, quoted in O'Connor and Tweedie, *Seduced by Modernity*, 172.

understood the lasting impact it would have on her life and career. The Depression meant poverty and hunger for many, with lives and careers and education cut short. Watkins lost the opportunity for a fresh start to her artistic career in Europe and even the possibility of a return to North America. Defeated by the loss, Watkins stopped taking photographs and packed her work away, never looking at them again. Perhaps it was simply too painful.

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TERMS

DEPRESSION
PART 2

WINTER 2024

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How does a term circulate through society, and how does its dissemination within contemporary discourse inform us about the way that society thinks about itself? By what means do certain words instill themselves in language and the public sphere to the point of becoming commonplace? *Terms* is an online discursive and artistic program that individually unpacks a series of broad and polysemous terms that are commonly employed to address a range of sociopolitical issues in contemporary society. While some words acquire multiple definitions the more they are used, they also often tend to become generalized and run the risk of having their meaning become diluted, confused, or unclear over time. Nevertheless, their continued presence in our vocabulary requires careful attention and analysis as to their etymological value, their semantic density, and their use across and beyond disciplinary boundaries.

For each selected term, a researcher from outside the visual arts publishes a text that examines it in its many variants, tensions, and ambiguities through the specific lens of their field of activity. The word is then considered by pairing it with a resonating artwork shared on the Gallery's website. In turn, a writer from the cultural sector uses this same work as the starting point for a second text that draws from the first and from beyond to probe aspects of the term in its various dimensions.