

## *Poverty in 19th Century New York*

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EMILY A. SINIARD

Department of English, Southern New Hampshire University

This article examines Jacob Riis fight against the unruly poverty in the New York slums of the 19<sup>th</sup> century using a new technique of photography. Through the technique of amateur photography, wealthier citizens of New York saw what shape “the other half” or the less wealthy lived, mostly immigrants from Europe once arriving to America looking for their promised work and wealth.

This article examines Riis’ analysis of each subculture among the immigrants and his somewhat racists comments about them, even though he was an immigrant himself. The article also examines how Jacob Riis captures the photographs that changed New York and poverty in America, but his commentary in his book *How the Other Half Lives* fails to give dialogue from the other half itself and their outlook on their lives. This shortcoming left readers with a one-sided story, and much to be desired from only seeing the photographs. Jacob Riis’ overarching feat of heroism is how he inspired change among New York and America, not only for the poor, but for sanitation in cities and slums during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the future.

**Keywords.** photography, Jacob Riis, New York poverty, *How the Other Half Lives*

Este artigo aborda a luta de Jacob Riis contra a pobreza que grassava desenfreada nos bairros mais degradados da Nova Iorque do século XIX, por meio da sua exposição com recurso a uma nova técnica de fotografia. Através da técnica da fotografia amadora, os cidadãos mais abastados de Nova Iorque puderam testemunhar as condições de vida dos menos ricos, "a outra metade", na sua maioria, imigrantes oriundos da Europa que tinham chegado à América em busca do trabalho e riqueza prometidos.

Este artigo debruça-se sobre a análise levada a cabo por Riis das subculturas que elencou entre os imigrantes e sobre os comentários de pendor algo racista que, a propósito, formulou, não obstante ele próprio ter sido imigrante. O artigo também examina o modo como Jacob Riis captou as fotografias que transformaram Nova Iorque e a pobreza na América, ainda que o seu comentário, na obra *How the Other Half Lives*, falhe em dar a voz à "outra metade" e em revelar a sua perspetiva sobre as suas vidas. Esta lacuna apresentou aos leitores uma história unilateral, deixando muito a desejar além da mera visualização das fotografias. A grande façanha heróica de Jacob Riis reside, efetivamente, na forma como inspirou a mudança em Nova Iorque e na América, não apenas no que respeita às condições de vida dos pobres, mas também em matérias de saneamento nas cidades e bairros desfavorecidos, para o século XIX e para o futuro.

Este artigo analisa a luta de Jacob Riis contra a pobreza que grassava desenfreada nos bairros mais degradados da Nova Iorque do século XIX, por meio da sua exposição com recurso a uma nova técnica de fotografia. Através da técnica da fotografia amadora, os cidadãos mais abastados de Nova Iorque puderam testemunhar as condições de vida dos menos ricos, "a outra metade", na sua maioria, imigrantes oriundos da Europa que tinham chegado à América em busca do trabalho e riqueza prometidos.

**Palavras-chave.** fotografia, Jacob Riis, pobreza em Nova Iorque, *How the Other Half Lives*



Jacob Riis was a realism author most known for his text *How the Other Half Lives* featuring photographs of the tenement systems and slums of New York City. Although these slums were not a new sighting for the citizens of the time or America, Riis wanted a better life for those who had to live this way. Various authors wrote about the same topic previously, but were ignored, until Riis found a new medium of amateur photography to capture the public's attention. Through pictures the world could see first-hand the life of not only immigrants to America, but anyone who was forced to live in extreme poverty or wretched conditions. There was little food, little to no pay or jobs, but rampant disease. Those factors did not stop the never-ending population of homeless and starving children from increasing, men trying to feed their growing families, and women trying to house as many people in a tiny square room as possible. Riis saw these conditions breaking the future generations of Americans, so he rallied for a change. Riis argued that unsanitary living conditions and extreme poverty in the slums of New York were degrading the city's image and potential, causing the reformer to photograph and journalize a realism text, therefore showing his disapproval with the non-assimilating and seemingly happy immigrants living under these unfit conditions.

Jacob Riis was an immigrant himself, and therefore wanted a better life for those who did not find the American dream. He also wanted immigrants to assimilate into American life, so he was angry at those who chose not to. Coming to America from Denmark, Riis quickly escaped the slum life in the 1870s when he arrived on the boat, although he was a tramp for a while (Miller, 2015). Freeman

(2019) described the name of “tramp” of the people or immigrants who work and move with the railroads, sometimes looking for work and always looking for food. While roaming the Northern states carrying on various jobs, Riis discovered the cruelty of the police station lodgings (Miller, 2015). These lodgings were for anyone without a place to stay, or for those that were arrested. Often times overcrowded lodging houses were broken up due to rules and regulations of how many people could crowd them at one time. The owners would stuff as many people as possible into a small room just for an extra penny, dime, or nickel and not care for their safety. The tenement design was the same, except whole families lived here and paid over-exhausting rent without updates to their homes by the landlords. In the dead of New York City winter, a small fire was not always enough to keep a body alive, but more joyous than a Christmas gift to a child. When Riis saw that America, the land of promise and dreams, was a reality of poverty for those who could not outsmart their landlords and the system, he vowed to make a change.

Readers of the modern-day might be surprised to learn that the slums and tenements of New York City were built to be nicer than they appeared or ended up by the time they were torn down. Author Stephen Miller (2015) wrote that Gotham Court was created to be a model tenement among the rest, but soon became just as bad as the others with overcrowding, filth, poverty, and crime (Miller, 2015: 76). So, what is it either about the slums, New York, or the people that lived there that made these places so bad or attracted the worst kind of inhabitants? The wealthy citizens left these houses empty, and they were bought to be turned into tenement systems for the overcrowding from the influx of immigration (*How the Other Half Lives*, 1892: 57). The immigrants that arrived, much like Riis’ arrival in America, were looking for work and did not have much income. They needed to stay near their work, but Manhattan is bound by rivers, so it could not expand. Housing buildings could go up in levels or crush families into more tiny spaces. That was the creation of the tenements, and later on the skyscrapers of the New York skyline (*Ibidem*: 58).



Image 1. Jacob Riis. *Tenement Yard*, Lower East New York, [1890]. Silver gelatin on baryta. Preus Museum (NMFF.002171).

An example of the crowded, filthy tenement system and the harsh conditions that immigrants were left to live in (Riis, s.d.a).

The idea of the new immigrants, and the working class, living near their jobs was a wonderful idea to save money, until the landlords wanted to charge interest on the houses, therefore getting rich while the inhabitants of the tenements started to slip into poverty as wages lowered with the economy during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (*Ibidem*: 59). Low wages, high rent, and unsatisfactory housing for winter and summer in New York, along with new immigrants that did not understand capitalism and shady businessmen, the same pattern of poverty became the way of life. The easiest way of escaping this lifestyle was to live among your own people. Therefore, the immigrants created their own lifestyle instead of assimilating into American life.

When walking into the slums and streets of New York, you could see every type of immigrant that Riis labels in his book. There are Italians, Chinese, Germans, Jews, and so on. They live on different streets and all have a different culture. Riis knew that they would not necessarily show their culture in all its actuality to him outright, especially when he was holding a camera. Riis chose to follow the police when they broke up street fights, or followed new leads for cases and catch the news that way. He also went out and looked for stories instead of waiting at the police department for news to come in (Miller, 2015: 76). Riis covered the busiest areas in the slums and sometimes got into trouble with gang members, or into the middle of fights himself. He wanted to be involved so that the public knew just how bad the slums were.

When Riis would walk the streets, he saw the good and the bad. He saw the different cultures and how they made the melting pot of America, but he also saw the death, disease, and poverty. Diana Wall (1999) wrote an article examining the structure of the working class in New York. It happens that the working class was invented by the immigrants that came to America to find jobs (Wall, 1999: 103). In 1855, 630,000 foreign-born people were part of the New York population and the biggest part of these were manual laborers. Several studies have been committed and the results show that the working-class wages paid were too low to support a family

(*Ibidem*: 104). In this case, children were not sent to school when they were old enough to work, but were sent to the streets. Sometimes children who were without parents, or have lost track of their parents, were homeless and lived in the streets left on their own to survive (Rivlin & Manzo, 1988: 26-27). More and more families started immigrating to the United States as disasters like the Irish Potato Famine or future wars put fear in the hearts of other countries and their populations. In this case, more adult workers came and the need for children workers disappeared (*Ibidem*: 28). However, rent and wages did not change, neither did interest charged or the need for food. Families would eat food out of the garbage or in the streets to survive. Rodents and disease were present in the slums at every corner and the money for medicine was scant. Life in the slums was hitting rock bottom and there did not appear to be any hope, although the influx of immigrants never ceased.

The New York slum, and other slums in neighboring cities, were not a new factor in American life, especially to those who only “heard” about them and never seen them with their eyes. Newspapers like *The Boston Olive Branch, Advocate and Guardian*, and *The Episcopal Recorder* told the stories of the poor in their respective locations, and urged the wealthier classes to donate or do their Christian duties. *The Boston Olive Branch* even labeled New York a “wicked city”, but went on to tell the heart wrenching tale of a newborn that was hours old with a jobless father, mother, and a sibling who is excited over a small stick to warm his feet (*Immortality and Poverty in New York City*, 1852). *Advocate and Guardian* tries to inflict the passion of Riis writing, but doesn’t include pictures, which is their downfall. The newspaper tells the facts of family life in poverty in the tenements, but features on one family in a small room without food and full of sickness (*Poverty in New York*, 1853). *The Episcopal Recorder* leads readers to follow their Christian duties when it details children helping to feed their sick parents or children being shipped out West to live and work because they do not have parents (*Poverty and Heathenism in New York*, 1860). The overarching image and problem in each of these documents from

the nineteenth century is that they name the issue, but they do not tell citizens who can help, how to help. They also seem to be blaming the immigrants for their faults and failures by their article's titles. They are not alone in their efforts, as Riis placed some of the blame at times on the immigrants as well without providing a way for them to escape their plight.

Even though citizens were seeing the slum issue by the number of homeless children or the amount of disease, the true problem of the slums was not appearing as Riis would have liked and he also blamed ignorance on the public (Szasz, 1974: 421). Riis wanted the problem known, but also fixed! He did not find that a sanitation crew driving through the streets of the slums was enough because the immigrants would be right back to eat garbage once the city inspectors were gone. Riis decided to try and do something about the “social questions” and “the problem areas” because he knew that environment affected the success or failure of a person's future (Riis, 2009: 413, 436). Riis started to fix the slums by describing the men, women, and children who lived on the inside.

First, Riis used words. He started by going down each street and trying to explain it geographically. «According to Riis, the worse place on the Lower East Side is a section of Mulberry Street called the Mulberry Bend, which is ‘within hail of the old depravity of the Five Points» (Miller, 2015: 86). This quote was explaining just how bad Riis saw the slums. There were not “bad streets” because they were all bad, but some sections were deadlier than others. You would be more likely killed, robbed, or not returned at certain points in the slums. This was the public view of them as well. When Riis dug deeper, he saw that every street had a culture and every immigrant had a story. However, Riis did not care too much for stories, he wanted only the facts.

The slums were divided as so: Irish on West side and Mulberry Street, German on East side, French on Bleecker Street and South Fifth Ave., Little Italy of Harlem on East of Second Ave., Old Africa on Thompson Street, and last the Russian and





Image 2. Jacob Riis, Richard Hoe Lawrence & Henry G. Piffard. *Bandits' Roost*, New York, 1887-1888. Modern gelatin printing on paper [duplicates]. Museum of the City of New York (90.13.4.104, 90.13.4.105).

Bandits' Roost on Mulberry Bend, which is known for gangs and robbery, is an example of the high rent and low wages paid by Italian immigrants (Riis, n.d.c).

Polish Jew was the district between Rivington and Division Streets East of the Bowery (Riis, 2009: 22-23). The older immigrants who came before these settlements were also part of those who were responsible for the high rents and low wages. Riis states that the «Irishman's revenge is complete» because he now runs the tenement system, a revenge for when the Irish were pushed out of New York for being the new immigrant decades before (*Ibidem*: 20). Riis speaks of each ethnicity and culture differently. Some are easier to rent to than others, but some are not as smart and pay higher rents. It is the combination of these all these people packed into a small area that is a problem. Weinstein (2002) argued that the slums would not have been an issue if they were spread out geographically, but it was the fact that the immigrants were basically on top of each other that created the bad image of poverty and disease in New York (Weinstein, 2002: 199-200). However, even if the

immigrant population were spread throughout the city and mingled with the wealthy, poverty would still exist among them. The poverty is part of what Riis was trying to exterminate because poverty brings on disease and bad living conditions. Although Riis worked to free the poverty in New York, critics found his writings and methods racist at best, causing his text to seem heartless or stereotypical in the eyes of some readers.

Jacob Riis did not always have the best flow to his writing. When trying to expand upon the differences in races, cultures, and ethnic groups upon neighboring streets, he used words like “foul”, “queer”, “almond eyes”, and words that would be considered rude in modern times to describe a person with a heart (Riis, 2009: 52-58). Various critics found this language to be insulting and almost to the point of a racial slur when read in context of his text. Edward O’Donnell (2004) argued that if readers only looked at the words of Riis, they could hear the racism and stated that Riis uses the «white ethnic narrative of immigration» (O’Donnell, 2004: 12). However, Cindy Weinstein explained that Riis uses stereotypes to fit statistical analysis instead of being racist (Weinstein, 2002: 196). Riis was arguing for the immigrant man as a whole regardless of the color of his skin when he fought for them, especially when he wrote out of 609 tenements on the latest census, only 24 were decent to live in, but all were occupied in The Bend (Riis, 2009: 29-38). This statistic shows that the landlords of The Bend were taking advantage of the renters. Although Riis did believe that the Chinese had “ulterior motives” and stood against their opium abuse, along with the fact that they brought in white younger women instead of their own race to their drug addictions, he still called them “clean”, a hard compliment to get in the slums (*Ibidem*: 52-58). He did say that they could be rude at times though, but gave them credit for speaking English. Even though the Italians made less trouble as renters, Riis argues they are filthy because they eat meals over “the dump” when the sanitary police are not looking. He had the worst to say about the Italians because they bring their culture into America and expected America to

change, plus they did not want to learn English even though they were great tenants. The Germans wanted to learn English and assimilate, and the Polish Jew had to wait until they could use the investment of learning English, but they still considered it. Overall, Riis did not consider the immigrant race worth remaining in America if they were not going to assimilate (*Ibidem*: 24-28).

Unfortunately, the American citizens and the citizens of New York had heard the same cries of the slum people before. Riis would need something new to pull at their heart strings. Even though Riis had the words for his text, he went into a hobby of amateur photography that abled him to create the realism aspect in photographs. Now Riis had something that other authors did not - proof in the pictures. Reality in photographs usually is something that melts one's heart more than words, as it did for the wealthy citizens of New York.

The photographs were often time took early in the morning when Riis knew that the tenement houses or the public housing would be packed to their max. He also followed the police on raids because he was sure to catch an unsightly scene that the public would not like - either unneeded force of the police or dirty and overpacked tenements (Carter, 2008: 124). At times, Riis also had to make deals with the landlords because they knew he was out to make a change. They wanted to continue to receive the high rates of interest and rent (*Ibidem*). Finally, Riis did get enough photographs to start showing them and published his text *How the Other Half Lives*. With this text came positive and negative feedback, even among modern day readers.

At the time, the text itself did cause change, but the photographs are what caused people to come see for themselves. Riis delivered his first lecture on January 26, 1988, with one newspaper viewer calling the images “shocking” (Miller, 2015: 88). These photographs were of the immigrants and overcrowding that Riis saw in the slums. Some of the photographs were original in their nature like the “Old House on a Bleecker Street back lot” because it showed the before version of the

tenement system and poor housing (Riis, 2009: 9). This old house was falling apart but would continue to be added to for several families to live in and high rent to be charged with interest. Photographs like the “Pietro learning to write: Jersey Street” were more acceptable to Riis because this showed assimilation into the American way of life (*Ibidem*: 27). Riis finds time to photograph many police lodging houses that he tries later to shut down and succeeds. This could be how he is using propaganda of the crowds at night to show how full they can truly get.

Photographs of “Bottle Alley” show it full of garbage, usually where immigrants eat, and children play (*Ibidem*: 34). Riis photographs many homeless children or several families working in small spaces to make a nickel. One of his famous photographs, “Two Typical Rogues”, is a line up type of photograph of men that are likely to turn into criminals or gang members. Critics like Weinstein saw this as stereotyping the immigrants by already calling them criminals from their environment before giving them a chance to grow up by the way he presented them in the photographs (Weinstein, 2002: 210). Weinstein went on to say that he continues to stereotype immigrants when he cannot photograph the difference between a gang or a pile of tin cans in “The Short Tail Gang” (See *Image 3*), but this could also be the way that Riis is trying to assimilate the immigrants into America (*Ibidem*: 209). While Riis is trying to “assimilate” through his photographs, critics are commenting that he is leaving out the man behind the photos.

Various critics are seeing that Riis is trying too hard to beat America into the immigrants, especially if they are choosing not to assimilate to the American way of life themselves. Critics like Weinstein say that Riis shows racism in the way that he only took photographs and labeled/wrote the text himself (*Ibidem*: 212). He did not ask for the immigrant’s opinion or thoughts. We do not know their thoughts or feelings. Weinstein goes on to claim that Riis is wanting to exterminate each racial ethnic group one by one and make them all American (*Ibidem*: 211). In doing this, he is taking out their old way of life and pointing out what was wrong with how they



Image 3. Jacob Riis. *“The Short Tail gang” under the pier at the foot of Jackson Street, New York, [1890].* Silver gelatin on baryta. Preus Museum (NMFF.003390).

The “Short Tail Gang” which is part of Riis (s.d.b) stereotypical behavior of his writing about immigrants and their lack of assimilation in America.

were living in America. He did not offer many positives that they brought to America or that America could take from their culture, but expected the immigrants to drop everything and change. Lastly, Weinstein considered Riis' statement that «American stock dying out for want of children» (*Ibidem*: 212). In this statement, Riis is exclaiming that the children growing up in the slums are either not of the culture he sees fit for America or not growing up in the proper environment. This environment he worked to change, but he was upset that the children were not assimilating either. Although to be fair, if these families lived among other families in the American culture, they might have had more opportunities to assimilate.

Important people like Theodore Roosevelt came to work with Riis on the issues in the slums. Roosevelt was working to make changes in the public and government before becoming president. After Roosevelt read Riis' text and saw the photographs, he came looking for Riis and said he had “come to help” (Miller, 2015: 77). As Riis worked with Roosevelt, the future president had an impression to use the government to elect more social reform. The nation would see this also in his presidency with the national parks and into the Great Depression. Riis' life was also marked as an “immigrant success story” by Miller, and he fought to have other success stories in New York and the United States out of poverty (*Ibidem*). Not only did he find a friend in the future president, but he achieved some of his long-term goals before his death in New York!

The tenement system of New York eventually was slowly remodeled or torn down. In replacing the houses, New York saw the development of parks and “green spaces” that would help with population control by putting space in between people (Carter, 2008: 120). However, Riis did not consider where the people that were out of housing would go, work, live, or how they would eat (*Ibidem*: 138). No longer was New York becoming a “pale reflection” of Europe, but it started to grow again in a different way (Szasz, 1974: 424). Mulberry Bend was completely demolished and turned into a park called Columbia Park (Miller, 2015: 92). This park is almost as

popular as Central Park in New York. Riis was also responsible for making safe drinking water assessible to all through making the watershed problem in New York known to the public government (Szasz, 1974: 410). Clean water was not a problem that is mentioned often in American history, but as indoor plumbing became popular it makes sense that the poorest population would be the ones that would not be able to afford it. Lastly, Riis fought for better playgrounds for children (*Ibidem*: 411). Immigrants of the slums and their children were used to playing in the streets and on garbage dumps. Although this was easy to find suitable food, this was a carrier of disease and injury. Clean and safe playgrounds would provide a pshycological factor to a childhood that created a positive effect. This positive effect would create a good memory growing up, and a safe place in the neighborhood. With one safe place, the community would possibly be inspired to keep building new safe and clean places.

As readers of Jacob Riis' text *How the Other Half Lives* come to find, he fought for the environments that were full of disease and poverty. He argued that immigrants would not have lived there, or humans in general, if it was not absolutely necessary (Miller, 2015: 85). Although through the textual evidence of his book, it is hard to find that he is fighting for the poor because he is describing the filth of the slums. He is also describing the different cultures and why he is for or against them. Once he took up amateur photography though, he could show the world why New York needed to change. After he accomplished some of his goals in New York, he went to other parts of America hoping to have the same affect. Riis will forever be known as the man who photographed immigrants in the New York slums, but he was a reformer for the environment a human was made to live and grow in for their future. He was also a realist author and photographer that used the here and now to bring the wealthier and higher-class members of society into the darkest and dirtiest pits of the cities to bring change in their neighbors.

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