

Jacob Riis's Compassion for the Genuine Worker

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In the later half of the nineteenth century, the growing pains of American industrialization and urbanization were in full force in New York City. The extremely affluent and much of the middle class distanced themselves from the pain and attempted to focus solely on the growth. The laboring class, made up largely of immigrants and native minorities, were left to bear the brunt of the pain. Jacob Riis, an immigrant himself, maneuvered his way into the center of the rift and planted himself there, where he would eventually serve as a bridge between the destitute and the financially comfortable. The words and images that formed Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* were his platform for reform. Several forces were certainly at play during the creation, production, and revelation of Riis's work; however, a compassion for people genuinely striving to improve, or at least survive, their lives in the tenements of New York was the central motivation that led Riis to publish the book.

From the beginning of his book, Riis informs his audience that the world they are about to step into is harsh and oppressive. He straightforwardly provides statistics about death rates from diseases that spread easily and widely because of the overcrowded tenements.<sup>1</sup> Then he presents the tenants in a frightening manner, but one that would satisfy a middle-class American's ideas of status, calling them a "Nemesis, a proletariat ready and able to avenge the wrongs of their crowds."<sup>2</sup> These people in the tenements are a "queer conglomerate mass of heterogeneous elements" who do not conform to the standards of the average American.<sup>3</sup> Unity and organization, in Riis's thoughts, represent health and safety. Masses of foreigners with their own cultures and languages piled atop each other is chaos, as his audience would surely agree. Yet Riis is purposeful about separating people's intent from their situation: "The poorest

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<sup>1</sup> Riis, 65.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 74.

immigrant comes here with the purpose and ambition to better himself, and given half a chance, might be reasonably expected to make the most of it.”<sup>4</sup> These immigrants are people just like the members of his audience, people working to provide for their families and establish themselves financially. The difference is that these people are exploited because of their lack of knowledge about the English language, which they have no time to learn.<sup>5</sup> This is the baseline for Riis, though he diverges occasionally, that he returns to again and again.

As he delves into his tour of distinctive immigrant cultures, though often critical and inundated with racial stereotypes, Riis is purposeful about searching out and expounding upon both the favorable and unfavorable qualities of each group. As David Leviatin notes, the Chinese have the least hope of redemption in Riis’s thoughts.<sup>6</sup> In the midst of his almost complete condemnation of Chinese men, though, Riis stretches himself to suggest that perhaps there is one possible hope for them—their wives.<sup>7</sup> This suggestion fits well into Riis’s belief system, which seems to follow the British rule of settlement in North America, which was to bring the whole family and find a place to make a stable home. He continues his pattern of pulling out the good and bad within different cultures throughout his book, and in general can find a way to respect any group if they in some way demonstrate the capability and will power to work. For Riis, working builds self-respect, and self-respect enables people to overcome oppressive circumstances, or at least it should.

Riis is aware of the depravity created through the tenement system, and he utilizes the disappointing stories he has acquired to insure that his audience faces the real depth and darkness of the situation. For instance, he mentions two women given the opportunity to move to a more

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 131.

spacious and healthier home and workplace, who returned to New York because they had grown comfortable in their constant working, and could not adapt to a life with more rest.<sup>8</sup> Riis then embarks on missions to expose all of the corruption and cowardice behind saloons, gangs, baby-farms, and paupers. The paupers are contemptible people in Riis's opinion, and this is reflected in his visual representation of them. While the majority of his illustrations reveal the face of the subject, the paupers' faces are blurred.<sup>9</sup> They put on an act to glean money from overly generous people, so Riis decides not to let their true faces show in his book. Riis is especially fervent about how utterly wrong it is that children are extorted in these manipulative schemes. The proper treatment of children is an important indicator of a healthy society. Despite the rough circumstances, Riis praises even the "Street Arab[s]" for being "bright and sharp" with a "sturdy independence, love of freedom and absolute self-reliance," which enable them to seek out opportunities for growth that older generations cannot.<sup>10</sup> When this opportunity is squandered through abuse and neglect, a great injustice is done.

In addition to his compassion for children, Riis demonstrates a sincere and adept understanding of the problem with unequal wages for women. They, young girls to old women, are working the same hours and many of the same jobs as men, but they are paid significantly less money. Prostitution hangs over young women like a dark shadow, always there to offer better wages than some women can make doing honest work.<sup>11</sup> Riis deliberately extols the women who refrain from falling that low, and calls the working women of New York "brave, virtuous, and true."<sup>12</sup> He also praises the women working from "Five Points Mission and the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 195–196.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 228.

Five Points House of Industry” for their abundant charity towards children.<sup>13</sup> Near the end of the book he names a woman, Miss Ellen Collins, as being at the forefront of improving the corrupt system of tenement ownership.<sup>14</sup> She makes just enough profit to sustain her business without extorting and trapping her tenants; in other words, she sustains her place in society by helping others realize their place.

The example of Miss Ellen Collins fits well into Riis’s own story because it demonstrates the overall message of his document: helping others become independent through good business practices is a practical way to solve the tenement problem.<sup>15</sup> Leviatin notes that the promulgation of *How the Other Half Lives* was certainly lucrative for Riis, a man seeking to establish himself in the middle class.<sup>16</sup> From Riis’s standpoint, this does not lessen in any way his honest compassion for the poor, but rather emphasizes that he has followed his own suggestions about gaining wealth and they are proving effective. He ingratiated himself into the American system, and now he is in a position to inform the people he sees as having the most potential to help—the middle class—about a pressing need in society.

Riis, as he claimed about the tenants in his book, was a man formed by his environment. He believed diligent work should receive just reward, not just in a spiritual sense, but in tangible and financial senses as well. Though his writing contains oversimplifications and gross racial stereotypes, it also draws out some uniquely wonderful characteristics held by the immigrants who came to America to earn a living. Overall, Riis saw people as people. Man and woman alike, all had shortcomings and all had virtues. His call to action to the middle class is tailored to his audience in most particular ways. If he had listed statistics about poverty and tenement rates

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 4–5.

compared to wages, it would have hardly made an impact. So instead he pulled his audience in with personal testimonies, narrative stories, and vivid depictions of the world of the Other Half. Once they were thoroughly held by the story, he gave them practical advice about how to help.

Bibliography

Riis, Jacob A. *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York: With Related Documents*. 2nd ed. The Bedford series in history and culture. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011.