



JACOB RIIS

FROM *How the Other Half Lives* (1890)

Following the Civil War, a massive economic boom spurred explosive urban growth as foreign immigrants and rural Americans poured into great industrial cities to fulfill a growing demand for factory labor. Jacob Riis (1849–1914) was a New York City journalist who documented the poverty and exploitation that so often resulted. Riis, a native of Denmark who emigrated to America in 1870, experienced years of hardship and even homelessness until landing a position as a police reporter for the New York Tribune, one of the city's largest-circulation daily newspapers, in 1877. For the next two decades, Riis was based in an office on Mulberry Street on Manhattan's Lower East Side, in proximity to some of the city's worst slums. In the late 1880s Riis trained himself in new flash photographic methods that allowed him to capture images in dark alleys and tenement-house interiors. This greatly enhanced his reportage of urban pathologies and helped bring him to the attention of municipal reformers like Theodore Roosevelt.

In 1890 Riis published *How the Other Half Lives*, his best-known book. In its exposure of social problems and its advocacy for reform, the book exemplifies the journalism of emerging progressivism. What follows are two short chapters and two photos that are representative of Riis's work. Examine them for what they reveal about the underside of America's spectacular growth in the Gilded Age.

From Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), 48–54, 263–67.

THE ITALIAN IN NEW YORK.

Certainly a picturesque, if not very tidy, element has been added to the population in the "assisted" Italian immigrant who claims so large a share of public attention, partly because he keeps coming at such a tremendous rate, but chiefly because he elects to stay in New York, or near enough for it to serve as his base of operations, and here promptly reproduces conditions of destitution and disorder which, set in the frame-work of Mediterranean exuberance, are the delight of the artist, but in a matter-of-fact American community become its danger and reproach. The reproduction is made easier in New York because he finds the material ready to hand in the worst of the slum tenements; but even



Tenement life in New York City. Riis photographed these lodgers in a Bayard Street tenement in 1889. Museum of the City of New York / Bridgeman Art Library.

where it is not he soon reduces what he does find to his own level, if allowed to follow his natural bent.¹ The Italian comes in at the bottom, and in the generation that came over the sea he stays there. In the slums he is welcomed as a tenant who "makes less trouble" than the contentious Irishman or the order-loving German, that is to say: is content to live in a pig-sty and submits to robbery at the hands of the rent-collector without murmur. Yet this very tractability makes of him in good hands, when firmly and intelligently managed, a really desirable tenant. But it is not his good fortune often to fall in with other hospitality upon his coming than that which brought him here for its own profit, and has no idea of letting go its grip upon him as long as there is a cent to be made out of him.

Recent Congressional inquiries have shown the nature of the "assistance" he receives from greedy steamship agents and "bankers," who persuade him by false promises to mortgage his home, his few belongings, and his wages for months to

1. The process can be observed in the Italian tenements in Harlem (Little Italy), which, since their occupation by these people, have been gradually sinking to the slum level. [Unless otherwise indicated, footnotes are those of the author.]

come for a ticket to the land where plenty of work is to be had at princely wages. The padrone—the “banker” is nothing else—having made his ten per cent. out of him en route, receives him at the landing and turns him to double account as a wage-earner and a rent-payer. In each of these rôles he is made to yield a profit to his unscrupulous countryman, whom he trusts implicitly with the instinct of utter helplessness. The man is so ignorant that, as one of the sharpers who prey upon him put it once, it “would be downright sinful not to take him in.” His ignorance and unconquerable suspicion of strangers dig the pit into which he falls. He not only knows no word of English, but he does not know enough to learn. Rarely only can he write his own language. Unlike the German, who begins learning English the day he lands as a matter of duty, or the Polish Jew, who takes it up as soon as he is able as an investment, the Italian learns slowly, if at all. Even his boy, born here, often speaks his native tongue indifferently. He is forced, therefore, to have constant recourse to the middle-man, who makes him pay handsomely at every turn. He hires him out to the railroad contractor, receiving a commission from the employer as well as from the laborer, and repeats the performance monthly, or as often as he can have him dismissed. In the city he contracts for his lodging, subletting to him space in the vilest tenements at extortionate rents, and sets an example that does not lack imitators. The “princely wages” have vanished with his coming, and in their place hardships and a dollar a day, behest² with the padrone’s merciless mortgage, confront him. Bred to even worse fare, he takes both as a matter of course, and, applying the maxim that it is not what one makes but what he saves that makes him rich, manages to turn the very dirt of the streets into a hoard of gold, with which he either returns to his Southern home,³ or brings over his family to join in his work and in his fortunes the next season.

The discovery was made by earlier explorers that there is money in New York’s ash-barrel,⁴ but it was left to the genius of the padrone to develop the full resources of the mine that has become the exclusive preserve of the Italian immigrant. Only a few years ago, when rag-picking was carried on in a desultory and irresponsible sort of way, the city hired gangs of men to trim the ash-scows before they were sent out to sea. The trimming consisted in levelling out the dirt as it was dumped from the carts, so that the scow might be evenly loaded. The men were paid a dollar and a half a day, kept what they found that was worth having, and allowed the swarms of Italians who hung about the dumps to do the heavy work for them, letting them have their pick of the loads for their trouble. To-day Italians contract for the work, paying large sums to be permitted to do it. The city received not less than \$80,000 last year for the sale of this privilege to the contractors, who in addition have to pay gangs of their countrymen for sorting out the bones, rags, tin cans

2. Burdened. [Ed.]

3. Most Italian immigrants hailed from Southern Italian locales such as Naples, Calabria, or Sicily. [Ed.]

4. Garbage can. [Ed.]



Bandits' Roost. An alley at 59 Mulberry Street in New York City photographed by Riis in 1887.

Granger Collection.

and other waste that are found in the ashes and form the staples of their trade and their sources of revenue. The effect has been vastly to increase the power of the padrone, or his ally, the contractor, by giving him exclusive control of the one industry in which the Italian was formerly an independent "dealer," and reducing him literally to the plane of the dump. Whenever the back of the sanitary police is turned, he will make his home in the filthy burrows where he works by day, sleeping and eating his meals under the dump, on the edge of slimy depths and amid surroundings full of unutterable horror. The city did not bargain to house, though it is content to board, him so long as he can make the ash-barrels yield the food to keep him alive, and a vigorous campaign is carried on at intervals against these unlicensed dump settlements; but the temptation of having to pay no rent is too strong, and they are driven from one dump only to find lodgement under another a few blocks farther up or down the river. The fiercest warfare is waged over the patronage of the dumps by rival factions represented by opposing contractors, and it has happened that the defeated party has endeavored to capture by strategy what he failed to carry by assault. It augurs unsuspected adaptability in the Italian to our system of self-government that these rivalries have more than once been suspected of being behind the sharpening of city ordinances, that were

apparently made in good faith to prevent meddling with the refuse in the ash-barrels or in transit.

Did the Italian always adapt himself as readily to the operation of the civil law as to the manipulation of political "pull" on occasion, he would save himself a good deal of unnecessary trouble. Ordinarily he is easily enough governed by authority—always excepting Sunday, when he settles down to a game of cards and lets loose all his bad passions. Like the Chinese, the Italian is a born gambler. His soul is in the game from the moment the cards are on the table, and very frequently his knife is in it too before the game is ended. No Sunday has passed in New York since "the Bend"⁵ became a suburb of Naples without one or more of these murderous affrays coming to the notice of the police. As a rule that happens only when the man the game went against is either dead or so badly wounded as to require instant surgical help. As to the other, unless he be caught red-handed, the chances that the police will ever get him are slim indeed. The wounded man can seldom be persuaded to betray him. He wards off all inquiries with a wicked "I fix him myself," and there the matter rests until he either dies or recovers. If the latter, the community hears after a while of another Italian affray, a man stabbed in a quarrel, dead or dying, and the police know that "he" has been fixed, and the account squared.

With all his conspicuous faults, the swarthy Italian immigrant has his redeeming traits. He is as honest as he is hot-headed. There are no Italian burglars in the Rogues' Gallery;⁶ the ex-brigand toils peacefully with pickaxe and shovel on American ground. His boy occasionally shows, as a pick-pocket, the results of his training with the toughs of the Sixth Ward slums. The only criminal business to which the father occasionally lends his hand, outside of murder, is a bunco game, of which his confiding countrymen, returning with their hoard to their native land, are the victims. The women are faithful wives and devoted mothers. Their vivid and picturesque costumes lend a tinge of color to the otherwise dull monotony of the slums they inhabit. The Italian is gay, lighthearted and, if his fur is not stroked the wrong way, inoffensive as a child. His worst offence is that he keeps the stale-beer dives. Where his headquarters is, in the Mulberry Street Bend, these vile dens flourish and gather about them all the wrecks, the utterly wretched, the hopelessly lost, on the lowest slope of depraved humanity. And out of their misery he makes a profit.

THE MAN WITH THE KNIFE.

A MAN stood at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Fourteenth Street the other day, looking gloomily at the carriages that rolled by, carrying the wealth and fashion

5. A section of Mulberry Street, once dominated by the Irish, which by 1890 had become largely Italian. [Ed.]

6. Police collection of photographs of criminals, used for identification. [Ed.]

of the avenues to and from the big stores down town. He was poor, and hungry, and ragged. This thought was in his mind: "They behind their well-fed teams have no thought for the morrow; they know hunger only by name, and ride down to spend in an hour's shopping what would keep me and my little ones from want a whole year." There rose up before him the picture of those little ones crying for bread around the cold and cheerless hearth—then he sprang into the throng and slashed about him with a knife, blindly seeking to kill, to revenge.

The man was arrested, of course, and locked up. Today he is probably in a mad-house, forgotten. And the carriages roll by to and from the big stores with their gay throng of shoppers. The world forgets easily, too easily, what it does not like to remember.

Nevertheless the man and his knife had a mission. They spoke in their ignorant, impatient way the warning one of the most conservative, dispassionate of public bodies had sounded only a little while before: "Our only fear is that reform may come in a burst of public indignation destructive to property and to good morals."⁷ They represented one solution of the problem of ignorant poverty versus ignorant wealth that has come down to us unsolved, the danger-cry of which we have lately heard in the shout that never should have been raised on American soil—the shout of "the masses against the classes"—the solution of violence.

There is another solution, that of justice. The choice is between the two. Which shall it be?

"Well!" say some well-meaning people; "we don't see the need of putting it in that way. We have been down among the tenements, looked them over. There are a good many people there; they are not comfortable, perhaps. What would you have? They are poor. And their houses are not such hovels as we have seen and read of in the slums of the Old World. They are decent in comparison. Why, some of them have brown-stone fronts. You will own at least that they make a decent show."

Yes! that is true. The worst tenements in New York do not, as a rule, *look bad*. Neither Hell's Kitchen, nor Murderers' Row bears its true character stamped on the front. They are not quite old enough, perhaps. The same is true of their tenants. The New York tough may be ready to kill where his London brother would do little more than scowl; yet, as a general thing he is less repulsively brutal in looks. Here again the reason may be the same: the breed is not so old. A few generations more in the slums, and all that will be changed. To get at the pregnant facts of tenement-house life one must look beneath the surface. Many an apple has a fair skin and a rotten core. There is a much better argument for the tenements in the assurance of the Registrar of Vital Statistics that the death-rate of these houses has of late been brought below the general death-rate of the city, and that it is lowest in the biggest houses. This means two things: one, that the almost

7. Forty-fourth Annual Report of the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor. 1887.

exclusive attention given to the tenements by the sanitary authorities in twenty years has borne some fruit, and that the newer tenements are better than the old—there is some hope in that; the other, that the whole strain of tenement-house dwellers has been bred down to the conditions under which it exists, that the struggle with corruption has begotten the power to resist it. This is a familiar law of nature, necessary to its first and strongest impulse of self-preservation. To a certain extent, we are all creatures of the conditions that surround us, physically and morally. But is the knowledge reassuring? In the light of what we have seen, does not the question arise: what sort of creature, then, this of the tenement? I tried to draw his likeness from observation in telling the story of the "tough." Has it nothing to suggest the man with the knife?

I will go further. I am not willing even to admit it to be an unqualified advantage that our New York tenements have less of the slum look than those of older cities. It helps to delay the recognition of their true character on the part of the well-meaning, but uninstructed, who are always in the majority.

The "dangerous classes" of New York long ago compelled recognition. They are dangerous less because of their own crimes than because of the criminal ignorance of those who are not of their kind. The danger to society comes not from the poverty of the tenements, but from the ill-spent wealth that reared them, that it might earn a usurious interest from a class from which "nothing else was expected." That was the broad foundation laid down, and the edifice built upon it corresponds to the groundwork. That this is well understood on the "unsafe" side of the line that separates the rich from the poor, much better than by those who have all the advantages of discriminating education, is good cause for disquietude. In it a keen foresight may again dimly discern the shadow of the man with the knife.

Two years ago a great meeting was held at Chickering Hall—I have spoken of it before—a meeting that discussed for days and nights the question how to banish this spectre; how to lay hold with good influences of this enormous mass of more than a million people, who were drifting away faster and faster from the safe moorings of the old faith. Clergymen and laymen from all the Protestant denominations took part in the discussion; nor was a good word forgotten for the brethren of the other great Christian fold⁸ who labor among the poor. Much was said that was good and true, and ways were found of reaching the spiritual needs of the tenement population that promise success. But at no time throughout the conference was the real key-note of the situation so boldly struck as has been done by a few far-seeing business men, who had listened to the cry of that Christian builder: "How shall the love of God be understood by those who have been nurtured in sight only of the greed of man?" Their practical programme of "Philanthropy and five per cent." has set examples in tenement building that show,

8. Roman Catholics. [Ed.]

though they are yet few and scattered, what may in time be accomplished even with such poor opportunities as New York offers to-day of undoing the old wrong. This is the gospel of justice, the solution that must be sought as the one alternative to the man with the knife.

"Are you not looking too much to the material condition of these people," said a good minister to me after a lecture in a Harlem church last winter, "and forgetting the inner man?" I told him, "No! for you cannot expect to find an inner man to appeal to in the worst tenement-house surroundings. You must first put the man where he can respect himself. To reverse the argument of the apple: you cannot expect to find a sound core in a rotten fruit."

Study Questions

1. In the first photograph, what is most significant about the living conditions depicted? What would you guess to be the occupations or the ethnicity of the men pictured?
2. What are the most revealing details of urban life captured in the second photo? What seems to be the attitude of the people photographed toward the picture taker?
3. What warning did "the man with the knife" (the subject of one of the last chapters in Riis's book) represent to New York society? Why did Riis note that his offense occurred on Fifth Avenue? What does Riis put forward as solutions to the dangerous conditions growing in the city?
4. What ethnic stereotypes does Riis employ in describing Italians and other immigrant New Yorkers? How might Riis's own ethnic identity be a source of his bias toward Italians especially? In what ways does he view them sympathetically?
5. Compare and contrast the social and economic divisions of Jacob Riis's era to those of the United States in the twenty-first century. What has or has not fundamentally changed?
6. In your judgment, is it Riis's photos or his writings that most effectively promote his objective of urban reform? To what degree did he bring different or similar skills to both these areas of his work?