

Documenting "The Other Half": The Social Reform Photography of Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine

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The Social Reform Photography of Jacob Riis

Jacob Riis, a police reporter whose work appeared in several New York newspapers, documented the living and working conditions of the poor. Through articles, books, photography, and lantern-slide lectures, Riis served as a mediator between working-class, middle-class, and upper-class citizens.

Improving City Conditions

Riis argued for better housing, adequate lighting and sanitation, and the construction of city parks and playgrounds. He portrayed middle-class and upper-class citizens as benefactors and encouraged them to take an active role in defining and shaping their communities. Riis believed that charitable citizens would help the poor when they saw for themselves how "the other half" lived.

According to historian Robert Bremner:

"The reformers' problem was to rouse the public from its lethargy, make consciences uneasy, and stir genial good will into enthusiasm for social betterment. Their first step was to lay bare the responsibility of the community for needless suffering." [11]

Nurture, Not Nature

Critics of charities argued that poverty was the result of individual or moral weakness; therefore, the poor could not be helped through charitable donations. Gilded Age reformers like Riis believed that poverty was the result of environmental conditions; thus, reform efforts could help the poor.

Speaking at an 1895 lecture at the Labors of the Tenement House Chapter of the King's Daughters, Riis stated:

"The reason charity has been discredited is because it has worked with the broken fragments, the drunken and the shiftless, helping as it could, mourning that such things must be, but never asking the reason why or knowing anything of the honest, thrifty poor who live lives of heroism such as we cannot live." [12]



Jacob Riis, c. 1912

Riis believed that moral citizens, regardless of their economic status, should be given a chance to improve their lives. Like Riis himself, given that chance, many could rise out of poverty and into the ranks of the middle class.

Riis chose to work with middle-class and upper-class philanthropists to bring about reform. He believed that private wealth could help transform the slums into better places to live. "I am a believer in organized, systematic charity upon the evidence of my senses," Riis wrote in his autobiography. [13]

Analysis of Riis Photographs

Jacob Riis' ideological views are evident in his photographs.

Appealing to the Victorian Conscience

Riis believed that environmental changes could improve the lives of the numerous unincorporated city residents that had recently arrived from other countries. Riis attempted to incorporate these citizens by appealing to the Victorian desire for cleanliness and social order.

Neighborhoods

In his photographs, Riis showed that the unincorporated could be dangerous; that their abodes were dirty; that neighborhood streets were crime-ridden. By appealing to the consciences and fears of middle-class and upper-class city residents, Riis helped initiate reform efforts.

Riis' photographs had a certain shock value. He looked for images that would have a strong effect on his viewers—dirty children on the streets, men living in dumps and cellars.



Mothers and Children

Riis's photographs challenged Victorian notions of mothers and children. One of his photographs shows a mother with her naked children standing on a rooftop. In others, children play out on the streets unattended. These photographs contrasted sharply with images of children in late-nineteenth-century America.



Dwellings

Riis's photographs also challenged Victorian notions of the home. In one photograph, a tenement family makes cigars at the table. In another, a man sits down to a solitary meal in a coal cellar.



In addition to people, Riis photographed empty barracks and dilapidated housing.



De-Emphasizing the Individual

He often de-emphasized the individual in favor of the total setting. Accordingly, he photographed many of his subjects at a distance to show them in their squalid surroundings.



It was not Riis's custom to provide the names of his subjects. When he did provide identifying material, it was often condescending. Such commentary revealed Riis's own ambivalence to his subject matter. Like many middle-class Americans, Riis disapproved of immorality and disorder, and he found both in the neighborhoods in which he worked. Riis's lack of experience as a photographer sometimes worked to his advantage. His blurred, half-lit images both fascinated and frightened his audiences.