

Jacob Riis: Journalism and Urban Policy

An immigrant who sought to make New York City a better place for all, journalist Jacob Riis relentlessly exposed injustice, corruption, and degradation, setting an example in journalism that remains uncomfortably hard to follow to this day.

URBAN DEBATE IS SO many-sided that the variety of experts contributing to it is constantly increasing. Architects, planners, engineers, hygienists, sociologists, historians, statisticians, lawyers, economists, and even the spiritual leaders of communities all have well-established roles, while the physical environment steadily reveals new areas of impact requiring specialized scientific study. In this growing domain of specialists, it is useful to acknowledge a contribution to urban discourse whose value arises largely from the fact that it is not specialized: journalism. In urban affairs, few journalists have contributed as much as has Jacob Riis.

Riis was active in the late 1900s and early 20th century. He belonged to a media culture that is remote from that of today not only in time, but also psychologically. Judged by today's conventions, he appears not merely antiquated, but politically incorrect—a walking embodiment of racial and gender prejudices.

Yet, his pavement-pounding investigations were rooted in a hands-on style of idealistic journalism that continues to challenge latter-day journalists who have electronic access to libraries of information at their desks.

Riis was born in Denmark in 1849 and arrived in the United States in 1870—part of a vast influx of population into America's cities. New York City was then the home to throngs of immigrants who desperately sought employment, lived in squalor, were prepared to work for whatever they could get, were despised for being foreign even while their labor was exploited, and went in fear of authorities who often brutalized them.

Riis became one of the teeming alien multitudes eking out a living in Gotham's wretched tenements. Out of this firsthand experience of

struggle and oppressive conditions arose a compassionate vision of humanity that shaped his career.

Riis learned fast and worked hard. After earning his keep in various ways, he landed a series of jobs as a reporter with the *New York Evening Sun*, *Brooklyn News*, and *New York Tribune*. His assignments took him back into the streets and alleys he already knew well, but his new vantage point allowed him to look at the dramas and tragedies of the streets no longer as a powerless participant, but as an observer who was at once sympathetic and professional. This world of slums was hideous to behold—and the rich and the well-connected preferred to remain oblivious to it. Riis resolved to make them aware of it.

He did this by combining a sound journalistic principle—the power of a well-chosen picture—with the opportunities offered by the rapidly advancing craft of photography. Just as the journalists of today take full advantage of the technologies of film and the Internet, Riis seized on a brand new development of his time—flash photography—which he used to introduce to newspaper and book audiences a new sweep of images that took them to places they had never been, and in some cases, had known nothing about.

Attracting attention with a moving series of photographs that presented the stark realities of slum life to a public that was both fascinated and horrified by them, Riis published a collection of these photographs as a book *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). The volume

came into the hands of New York's police commissioner, who was so aghast by what he saw that he decided to shut down the official poorhouses, administered by the police themselves, which were



among the scenes of degradation exposed in Riis's work. The commissioner struck up a long-lasting friendship with Riis, who produced a book about him in later years. The commissioner's name was Theodore Roosevelt.

Riis published a total of 13 books, including *The Children of the Poor* (1892); *Out of Mulberry Street* (1896); *A Ten Years' War* (1900); an autobiography, *The Making of an American* (1901); *The Battle with the Slum* (1902); *Children of the Tenements* (1902); and *Theodore Roosevelt, the Citizen* (1904).

Both the influence and the limitations of Riis's work are illustrated by his mentorship of a younger crusading journalist, Lincoln Steffens (1866–1936). Riis initiated Steffens

into investigative reporting and introduced him to the shady underworld of graft in turn-of-the-century New York, with its under-the-table networking among local politicians, businesspeople, and racketeers. Working the territory Riis had opened up, Steffens went on to become a pioneering exposé journalist of the early 20th century, helping to create this genre of newspaper work in its modern form. He laid bare the enormous scope of corruption not only in New York, but also in other cities like Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia. His 1904 book *The Shame of the Cities*, detailing the cynical control of urban politics by deep-pocketed interests, struck a nerve in American culture, and aroused wide interest, making Steffens a nationally sought-after speaker.

Steffens was one of three key writers who spearheaded the turn-of-the-century emergence of modern investigative journalism at *McClure's Magazine*. The other two were Ida Tarbell (1857–1944), whose 1904 book *The History of the Standard Oil Company* placed fifth in the 1999 *New York Times* list of the top 100 works of 20th-century American journalism; and Ray Stannard Baker (1870–1946), whose book *Following the Color Line* (1908) broke new ground in its examination of race relations in America.

At least some reforms, such as those of Theodore Roosevelt, were directly triggered by the sense of public outrage kindled by Riis's provocative photographs. Tarbell's writing spurred the federal government to act against the Standard Oil Trust, forcing it to unbundle its mighty web of incestuous interests. The journalistic 1906 novel *The Jungle*, by Upton Sinclair (1878–1968), contained sickening descriptions of the Chicago meat packing industry that caused a public furor, helping to bring about legislation to raise the hygiene standards of food producers.

However, public indignation has limited momentum. Despite Riis's

disclosures, New York City's tenement life continued into succeeding generations, and the campaigns of Steffens did not prevent the bribery of local government from soaring to ever greater levels of magnitude and brazenness. According to biographer John Kobler (*Capone*, 1971,) organized crime wielded such power over local government by 1928 that the president of the Chicago Crime Commission, Frank Loesch, had to visit gangster Al Capone personally, cap in hand, to petition him to permit a peaceful election. Loesch recorded that "Capone ran the city. His hand reached into every department of the city and county government." And while the gory, sensationalist scenes in *The Jungle* contributed to the passage of food production regulations, Sinclair was greatly disappointed by the absence of similar public outrage about his book's description of the poor conditions of meat industry workers.

Baker became President Woodrow Wilson's press secretary, immersing himself in Wilson's internationalist philosophy and eventually producing a multivolume biography of the president, part of which received the Pulitzer Prize. Steffens looked for inspiration to the Mexican and Russian revolutions, countries to which he traveled to study. Sinclair was a socialist. Tarbell admired Mussolini, whom she interviewed in a favorable light; she declined to participate in a campaign against U.S. participation in World War I; and to the embarrassment of many modern feminists (and somewhat paradoxically, in view of her own great professional gifts and public contribution) she opposed the right to vote for women, whose domestic duties she thought of paramount importance. Riis's very real sympathies for the downtrodden tended, disconcertingly to our present-day sensibility, to be reserved only for certain ethnic groups.

This list of seemingly unrelated attributes tells us two noteworthy

things that all of these notable journalists had in common. First, each recognized that whatever is bad or good in local government stems from a larger set of beliefs: a preferred way of life and system of values related to the entire conduct of our society and its place in the world. Second, these journalists were all highly individual. They had sprawling minds, with interests roving over immense territories—especially with respect to urban journalism.

Notably, some of the greatest figures in 20th-century urban thought, like Jane Jacobs and Lewis Mumford, have been journalists and urban amateurs, in the best sense, while many of the urban books that have attracted wide attention in recent years, such as those of Joel Garreau and James Kunstler, are similarly journalistic and unspecialized.

The voices of journalism today have changed. They now include television, radio talk shows, and the Internet. Theodore Roosevelt coined the term “muckrake” to denote the kind of journalism the early pioneers had introduced. Today’s muckraking, however, has acquired a new, very different meaning. The radio performer whose chief aim is not to expose injustice, but to expand his revenue-creating audience by uttering the most shocking statements he can conceive, has little in common with Riis and his colleagues; nor have the paparazzi whose business is to invade privacy purely for its own sake; nor the television personality whose stock in trade is not to disclose instructive new facts, but to insult those whose politics he dislikes. Unlike much current journalism, Riis, Steffens, Tarbell, and Baker acted out of a principled desire to improve the quality of community life rather than to dismantle civility and destroy the dignity of public discourse.

If we have lost something of the crusading idealism of those early journalists, we nevertheless remain permanently influenced by their work.

This influence can be seen today in films like *Michael Clayton*, a tale of corrupt corporate lawyers who are descendants of those against whom Steffens campaigned, and *There Will Be Blood*, which is partly derived from a work by Upton Sinclair.

However, Hollywood, which so powerfully dominates our media culture, has as its first priority the manufacture of entertainment rather than enlightenment, and the studios and filmmakers deliver to audiences what they believe audiences want and find titillating, rather than what they should know of value. Thus, it seems unrealistic and perhaps unfair to expect the commercial film industry to follow in the footsteps of the likes of Riis and Steffens.

The most powerful purveyor of truth to the public—at least truth about the things that matter in our own communities—may still be the lone journalist who takes the trouble to find out the facts and to put them down plainly and simply, one after another, until someone takes notice. In other words, we still have much to learn from Riis and those who knew him.

One final point binds Riis and his generation to the world today, despite the century that separates the two. That is the fact that in Riis's era, there were difficulties in assimilating, or failing to assimilate, immigrants—a fact that remains true today. The misery that Riis exposed was that of immigrants struggling to build decent lives for themselves in cities. Riis himself began as one of those immigrants. But when he died in 1914, Riis already had enjoyed President Theodore Roosevelt's praise as "the best American I ever knew." **UL**

N. J. SLABBERT is U.S. representative of the Belgium-based Truman Group, which focuses on geopolitical and economic analysis for business and government leaders.