

Thinking critically about historical sources: the case of Jacob Riis's *How The Other Half Lives* and how it depicts late 19th century immigrants. From an interview with NYU Professor Hasia Diner, a leading historian of immigration. Interview conducted by Robert Cohen, June 23, 2010

Q. Robert Cohen: Since Jacob Riis books book *How The Other Half Lives* and his photographs of immigrants in industrial America are so widely used by teachers can you give us your views on how to contextualize them and how to approach them as sources for the teaching of immigration history?

Hasia Diner: "I think Riis and his photographs are interesting . We look back on them and see them as almost voyeuristic. He was kind of peaking into the lives of the other half. The narrative which goes with the pictures indicates that the immigrants have no resources of their own, that they are just these downtrodden, pathetic, oppressed blank slates. And that unless someone comes in to rescue them they're going to all end up alcoholics and diseased, all be buried in potters' fields, the children will be abandoned, they'll become criminals. The immigrants can provide nothing for themselves. And Riis paid not attention whatsoever to immigrant organizations, to family support groups. In fact, the vast majority of immigrants didn't end up in potters' fields. When they were buried they were buried in the [cemeteries of the] churches and the synagogues that they belonged to or of the voluntary societies that they created. They joined labor unions. Neighbors supported each other. There were family institutions. Riis couldn't see that at all. The photographs [Riis took] were not intended for us - although they're great as teaching tools. They were intended to awaken the conscience of the other half, the "better half" and to help them see the responsibility they had for the downtrodden. And so when he staged them he did so in order to maximize the pathos.

Q. Could you explain this? You're using the word "staged", and I think that is really important.

Hasia Diner: In some cases he actually asked people to pose in certain ways. They weren't candid. And in other cases his own photographs had much more in them than ended up in his lectures, articles, and the book. He cropped them to take out those elements in the photographs that showed the kind of resilience, cleanliness, the resources that the immigrants had. He wanted them to be in dark, dank spaces, the implication being that these spaces were dirty, that you couldn't breath. So that the pictures are set up in order that you the viewer - the viewer being a middle class New Yorker in 1890 living in a comfortable place with air and a servant who comes in and cleans up after you, to prick their conscience. So Riis has gotten in the last 20 years negative treatment by historians because of his voyeurism, and because of his seeking out the most prurient, and telling the most extreme, stories of depravity. I think if you put him in his context he looks different.

Q. He's trying to rouse people's social conscience.

Hasia Diner: The conscience might not be pricked so sharply if he said "These immigrants are really poor and they live in pretty bad conditions but interestingly the housewives wash the floors every day, they're so eager to have the apartment clean, that neighbors are always helping each other out, that immigrants create mutual aid societies to help each other, that their churches and other religious institutions are extremely important moral, economic, cultural resources." So [if he depicted all this he'd have undermined his effectiveness as a reformer because if given that information his readers might ask] " Why should I bother then as a middle class New Yorker to feel badly for them? They're doing ok." We have no way of knowing if he even saw [all this political/historical agency on the part of the new immigrants]. He didn't look for those and eliminate them. He was just not aware that they

existed.

Q. In teaching students to critically read the Riis photos as historical sources rather than as an objective window onto the immigrant experience how might teachers find sources to contrast with these grim Riis photos depicting helpless, downtrodden, immigrant victims?

Hasia Diner: Immigrant letters are important sources. Like any sources they're complicated. We can't know if the immigrant writer censored him or her self not wanting his family back home to know that America wasn't quite as fabulous as they had hoped it would be. We can't know. But keeping that in mind in most cases these letters tell a story of the achievement of goals - the goals may have been modest from the point of view of the American middle class, but they weren't modest in terms of the immigrants and the people that they left behind. So that's one way to think about a counter to Riis.

The other counter to Riis is that all these immigrants who are populating the world that he documented were sending money back home. So the book [*How the Other Half Lives*] comes out in 1890. He includes the Irish among his "problem" groups, you know hopeless - alcoholics, criminals. In the late 1870s a study was done in Ireland that said that 1/3 of all the money circulating in Ireland came from immigrants in the United States. So that meant that these women and men working in the United States - and I am not denying that these were low paying, terrible jobs by the standards of what a middle class person would want - that these people could not only feed, clothe, and shelter themselves but they could send money to their families back home. So that tells us a great deal about the promise of the migration. There have been at least two studies that have been done on the Emigrant Savings Bank, which was started by Irish Immigrants partly as an institution to be able to send that money home. The two people who have written about it found that tens of thousands of Irish in New York had savings accounts. For Italian immigrants, who were thought to have relatively low rates of economic mobility the fairly rapid process by which they become home-owners, that they buy houses in more outlying areas of the cities, part of their goal [was] that they wanted to have a plot so they could garden. There is a study done of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, these were Slavic workers that worked in the iron mills, people who earned a pittance under terrible conditions, in less than a generation become homeowners.

Q. Is there any kind of collection of letters or some other sources that teachers could use to counter Riis since Riis is so accessible, with his photos in most textbooks?

Hasia Diner: There are a number of letter collections, the most famous one - which somebody could look at and abstract - is two volumes, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. There was a sociologist W. I. Thomas, who taught at the University of Chicago in the teens and 1920s, and he did some volunteer work at Hull House (and teachers can discuss Hull House). And so he was actually walking through the Hull House neighborhood, cutting through an alley, and in the trash he saw this huge stack of letters, paper all bundled together being thrown away. He had no idea what they were, but on a gander picked them up, he took them, and he had a colleague at the University of Chicago named Florian Znaniecki, a Polish sociologist. Znaniecki told him these are letters that came from Poland to the United States. So they then went to Poland and tracked down many of the letters on the other side. And so there is this very nice letter collection called *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. And it's very interesting about the bonds that are kept up. a graphic way of seeing how they bonds [between family members on both sides of the Atlantic] are kept up.

And the constancy of the migration. Sometimes the letter would come from Poland saying "harvest time is coming. Come home for a few weeks to help. You know your brother is sick." And they acknowledge the money. "Thank you for the money. We can really use it. Your sister wants to get married and we need to pay for her dowry."

Kirby Miller has a number of Irish letter collections. Even before Miller there was a historian named Arnold Schreier, who has a great collection of Irish letters. These young women who are working as domestic servants are writing home and saying "I have beautiful clothes," "I eat well," "My life is really great."

Q. Are there any photo collections that teachers could use to counter Riis' grim visual depiction of immigrant life?

Hasia Diner: I think that's great. For example the immigrant newspapers ran photographs. You could probably find them in photo books on the Irish in America, the Italians in America. Many of those books come from community sources. And so there'd be pictures in there of an Italian restaurant or the meeting of [an immigrant] society, a banquet of the society, photographs of families.

Q. Are there actually people smiling?

Hasia Diner: Oh yes absolutely. It's actually very interesting. There are great immigrant photographs. I think though that for people then photography was new enough that they probably got pretty serious [when they were being photographed and so tended not to smile in the shots] because it was an awesome thing to get your picture taken. But I think that looking through those collections would be very interesting. The *Jewish Daily Forward*, their Sunday paper always had lots of photographs. And one of the things that was fantastic was that once an entire family was re-created in the United States, that is first the father would come and then the older children, then the mother and the younger children, and then siblings, and in some cases the elderly parents would all join them. And when they had what they considered a complete family they'd go and get a picture taken. In a way it was a kind of a statement that "We made it! We're here.!" I have one of my family from the mid-1920s when they all showed up. And people would send these photographs, [some] are in the *Forward*, so that was a very common photograph to show. If those first immigrants had come and hated it, felt that they were living in these horrendous conditions would they have logically paid for the rest of their family to come over? And then have these pictures taken with such pride.

Q. Yes I have those pictures from my family too. They're dressed up really well. Very different than Riis. It might be interesting with students to see if they have such photos in their own families. Their grandparents might have them.

Hasia Diner: So remember that this is really early. So 1890 in the history of photography that's pretty early. You know during the New Deal the Farm Security Administration did all of these wonderful photographs. There is one wonderful photograph of an African American woman feeding her chickens. And when the photographer came and said "I want to take your picture," she insisted on going back in the house and getting dressed up. And in the picture, and again this is a poor southern black farm woman, she is wearing pearls feeding her chicken. "I'm not going to let anybody take my picture [unless I am dressed well]." So photographs are something people took very seriously. It's not like now where we take a thousand a minute and put them on Facebook.

Q. So that's something for teachers and students to be conscious of too that when they look at a picture taken by Riis - as they interrogate this sources - that they are looking at a stage in the history of photography.

Hasia Diner: Exactly

Q. All of this critical thinking about Riis' photos seems very novel because his grim shots of immigrant life have been so canonized, appearing almost universally in US history textbooks, that the tendency is to view them as an objective view, a window on to exactly the way life as for immigrants rather than as a source that reflects his own assumptions and that needs to be assessed critically.

Hasia Diner: I think it's very important to balance it [*How The Other Half Lives*] with other sources. Riis writes in 1890. So the Irish migration has been going on since the 1840s. And the Italian, Jewish, Bohemian, was ongoing. So if things were in fact as horrible as he said for the masses of immigrants then how does one explain that the migration continues another 30 years? And had immigration restriction not been put in place it [mass immigration to the US] would have gone on. It only picked up in pace [after Riis' book came out]. I think the heaviest decade was 1900-1914. And it got larger and larger, so these were people who had some choices. These were not involuntary immigrants.

Q. And methodologically the lesson might be from teaching this is that you are teaching students that they have to think critically about the sources they're looking at. That they don't only look at once source, that they need to have other sources to contextualize it and interrogate it. This whole process is about what historians do, which is think critically about what you are reading and placing sources into a larger context to capture the complexity of the past.