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What Do The World and People Deserve?

Len Bernstein

One of the most useful men ever, and an inspiration to photographers is Jacob Riis, the social reformer, news reporter, and photographer who lived from 1849 to 1914, and whose work brought greater justice to the lives of so many people living in New York City and elsewhere. His passionate belief in their dignity and what was due them as human beings is embodied in his writings and photographs which show the struggle to survive under a brutal economic system: whole families laboring for pennies a day in tenement sweatshops; men and women seeking to dull their pain in saloons; the lowliness and savoir faire of gangs in their hideouts; children forced to live in the streets.

The work of Riis had power to encourage new laws for basic human needs because he had a large desire to be affected by the feelings of people. A colleague of his gave this description of "Jake" Riis at work reporting on a disaster on a New York City street:

> I looked up the block and saw Jake standing on a doorstep—just standing. He was listening to the moans of the crowd as the sounds moved up and down the street. The moans of those poor people made his story.[1]

I came to see how the writings of Jacob Riis, his photographs, and the choices he made in his life, could be of deep use to me and every person today, through my study of the philosophy of Aesthetic Realism, founded in 1941 by Eli Siegel: "The world, art and self explain each other" Mr. Siegel stated, "each is the aesthetic oneness of opposites."[2] In this great principle he shows that the meaning of art for our lives is grander, more practical than any other critic ever imagined; and because it provides the basis for seeing what every person has in common, it is the means of giving humanity the justice it deserves.

Mr. Siegel also made clear for the first time that "the greatest danger or temptation of man"[3] is contempt, described by him as the "disposition in every person to think he will be for himself by making less of the outside world."[4] Contempt is the cause of all cruelty from a sarcastic remark, to a racial epithet, to the economic slavery that Riis despised and tried to end through his courageous work. It is the difference between what a person or thing deserves, and what we choose to give it, and can take many forms. How many persons, like myself, have arrogantly felt that whatever thought we bestow on others is

more than sufficient? This is the ugly state of mind that made me cold and lonely, ashamed because I knew I was mean to people. As an historian of photography, and as a man, I love Eli Siegel and for enabling me to be a proud critic of my own contempt—making me a kinder, deeper person; better able to do justice to the art I care for so much, photography.

We fight either in behalf of the world or against it: Riis' early years

Jacob Riis was born in Ribe, Denmark to Niels and Carolina Riis and, early, he met the world as both kind and harsh. Jacob loved to read—Charles Dickens and James Fenimore Cooper were among his favorite authors. And he liked playing with his friends and his dog, Othello. But there was also tragedy in his home. When Jacob was 11, his younger brother drowned and Jacob never forgot the vivid memory of his mother, at dinner time, gazing with tears in her eyes at her child's empty chair. It was hard for the family to make ends meet and his father held two jobs, as a schoolmaster and editor of the town newspaper, yet no stranger ever went hungry from their door.

"The work of Riis had power to encourage new laws for basic human needs because he had a large desire to be affected by the feelings of people"

Young Jacob had a sense that one's own hardship should be used to be kind. At age 12, receiving a Christmas gift of money—so precious and scant—he gave it to a poor family living in a tenement in Ribe. He also began what he described as an "unending warfare"[5] with the nests of rats in the open sewer under his home. I learned from Aesthetic Realism we will do battle either in behalf of justice, or see the world as an opponent we have to conquer and withdraw from. Jacob wanted to fight to make the world more beautiful. But he also had another purpose in fighting that troubled him. His father could be overly stern and, like most children, Jacob did not know how to give form to criticisms he had of his parents and an often puzzling world. He himself had a quick temper and took pride in disrupting the school where his father taught. Years after he said: "I don't know what a devil was in me that I could not do my father the joy to be diligent."[6]

I remember how, as a boy, when I would sulk and my father tried to cheer me up, I struggled to keep a grim face—and when, despite myself, he made me laugh, I was furious. I began to learn in Aesthetic Realism consultations that I wanted to use my father, Milton Bernstein, to be in a fight with the world and have contempt for it. As I quote now from a consultation I had in 1976, in which my father was a guest, I am a son thankful beyond words to Eli Siegel and Aesthetic Realism for giving us the kind education that Niels and Jacob Riis wanted. The consultation trio *The Kindest Art* explained:

> *Consultants:* Every father and son have been <u>against</u> each other and <u>for</u> each other. A beginning is to see where father and son have the same questions. (To Milton Bernstein) What would you say was your biggest mistake?
>
> *Milton Bernstein:* I refused to listen; if nobody agreed with me, they were wrong.

Consultants: Do you think that your son has any qualities like that?

Milton Bernstein: Yes, he wouldn't listen.

"We were learning how we were the same and different, for and against each other, and this was in behalf of seeing all people with greater fairness"

And they asked this crucial question: "Do you think we can use another person's being against us, or *thinking* they are against us, to be against the whole world?" "Yes, I do," my father answered. And they explained: "That is the chief thing we have tried to change in your son's mind—we've tried to encourage him not to use you against the whole world." As my father listened to these questions and spoke thoughtfully about himself, I felt a care and respect for him that was new. This consultation marked a turning point in both our lives. We were learning how we were the same and different, for and against each other, and this was in behalf of seeing all people with greater fairness.

All art is against injustice

From the age of 16, Jacob Riis was deeply affected by Elisabeth Gortz, a young girl from a wealthy family in his hometown. Her parents disapproved of Jacob and when he asked to marry her, Elisabeth, herself uncertain, declined. Determined to win her hand, Riis, at age 21, came to America with the hope of making his fortune. But he was not prepared for what he met when he arrived in New York City. It was 1870, America was in the grip of a depression, and thousands were homeless and without jobs. For three years he suffered poverty, and was many times near starvation. One cold, stormy night, in desperation, as he sat by a river's edge, he thought of taking his life. It was at that moment, he writes in his autobiography, *The Making of An American,* that a stray dog that had befriended him "crept upon my knees and licked my face...and the love of the faithful little beast thawed the icicles in my heart."[7] Jacob Riis was to use this dog, who had him want to live, to have a beautiful anger with injustice.

Later that same night Riis took refuge in the only shelter available to him, one of the infamous police lodging houses where crime and vice flourished. Years later in an article for the *Tribune*, he gave this heart-rending third-person account of how, as he slept on a bare plank of wood, he was robbed of a

> little gold locket he wore around his neck, the last link with better days....He went up and complained to the sergeant at the desk and the sergeant ordered him to be kicked out in the street as a liar, if not a thief. How should a tramp boy have come honestly by a gold locket? The doorman put him out as he was bidden, and when the little dog showed his teeth a policeman seized it and clubbed it to death there on the step.[8]

Riis felt driven to get revenge, and when, years later, he became a reporter with influence and power, he said the "biggest fight"[9] of his life was whether or not he should learn the identity of this sergeant and destroy his career. But Jacob Riis felt his anger with the cruelty he endured was too personal and it made him dislike himself. He wrote: "Speak

not to me of the sweetness of revenge! Of all unhappy mortals the vengeful man must be the most wretched."[10] He made a choice he was proud of, and for which history admires him. He chose not to learn the sergeant's name, declaring "I would kill the abuse, not the man who was but the instrument and the victim of it."[11] Inspired by Riis, Theodore Roosevelt, then president of New York City's police board, closed down the police lodging houses in 1896, paving the way for more humane shelters. Riis often concluded the lectures for social reform he gave throughout the country, with the grateful, triumphant statement: "My dog did not die unavenged!"[12]

It was in 1878 that Riis began working for the New York *Tribune* as a police reporter. His beat was Police Headquarters, Mulberry Street, infamous for New York City's worst slums and tenement buildings. For the next decade the written word was his weapon against injustice, until one morning in 1887, reading his newspaper at the breakfast table he came upon a brief mention of the German invention of magnesium flash. He realized he now had a powerful new ally in his fight to shed light on the suffering of Americans, that "the darkest corner might be photographed that way."[13] The photographs he made were printed as half-tones or used as the basis for engravings, to illustrate his newspaper articles and books. In 1890 his landmark work, *How The Other Half Lives,* was published; it was then that Theodore Roosevelt, moved by Riis' passion for justice, sought him out, and they became fast friends.

"Every day, for almost 40 years, Jacob Riis saw the deprivation wreaked upon the men, women and children, the little babies of this city"

With the aid of Roosevelt, who became Governor of New York, and others, Riis fought for housing laws that literally saved thousands of lives. In New York City tenements in the 1880s, people died from disease because contractors, hungry for profit, refused to install sanitation pipes. In the sweltering heat of summer, babies died because there was no fresh air in the windowless inner apartments. Building codes were ignored and landlords built stairs of wood, turning these structures into fire traps. It was, Jacob Riis wrote, "premeditated murder as large-scale economic speculation."[14]

Eli Siegel saw it is contempt that makes for the profit system with its disregard for human life. He also explained this tremendous fact: all art is against injustice because its purpose is to show the full meaning and value of a person or thing. He writes in his essay, *Art As Ethics:*

> The artist...abandons his acquisitive, protective, grudging self to see reality more courageously, generously, fully than usual. Art is an original way of doing justice to things. The artist then wants to see sincerely, as something deserves.[15]

The "acquisitive, protective, grudging self" which is the cold heart of profit economics, is powerfully criticized in Jacob Riis' photograph "Dens of Death" (ca. 1898) taken on Baxter Street in the lower East Side of Manhattan.

***Dens of Death*, Mulberry Bend, circa 1898. Museum of the City of New York, The Jacob A. Riis Collection, #J.**

Riis shows these buildings heavy with weariness with their sloping, sagging lines. Perhaps he thought, "These buildings, like the people living in them, have endured something awful." The buildings tightly pressed together, and the disorder of the foreground, give a sense of stultifying congestion. Yet in the background is a more orderly tenement with even rows of windows and bright clotheslines and, above, the open sky and air that was denied to people. The contrast between foreground and background makes for a fierce indictment of these inhuman conditions.

Photographs, such as this one, might be lost to us today if not for Alexander Alland, a photographer who embarked on a five-year search for the missing original glass plate negatives of Riis after reading his autobiography. Thankfully, Alland's quest ended with their discovery in 1946 in the attic of the old family house in Brooklyn, which had been sold and was about to be torn down. They are now in the safekeeping of the Museum of the City of New York.

Giving the world what it deserves makes us courageous

Among the 30,000 books in the Eli Siegel Collection in New York City, there is a copy of Jacob Riis' autobiography. In it, Mr. Siegel wrote these two notes: "1. Things to fight. 2. How everything is fighting." I believe that in these two phrases, Eli Siegel is pointing to a central question in the life of Jacob Riis, useful to every person: As we see conflict in the world, are we going to fight to make things more beautiful or have contempt for them?

Like many people, the crime and misfortune I heard and read about met a hope in me to be disgusted and have contempt. I wanted to feel that others were beneath me, lacked my "sensitivity," my "depth." When I was 19, I felt the only way to be safe would be to build a cabin in the woods and have nothing to do with people. Fortunately for me, Aesthetic Realism explained that my snobbish superiority was the cause of my growing fearfulness and nervousness. I was saved from a confined, unhappy life through learning that the one way to be at ease in the world is to want to know it and be just to it.

Every day, for almost 40 years, Jacob Riis saw the deprivation wreaked upon the men, women and children, the little babies of this city. The brutality he witnessed would have called to the desire in any person to harden himself to the feelings of others, and where he gave in to this contempt it made him unjust, and hurt his work. In his well known picture "Five Cents a Spot" (ca. 1889) we see some composition in this painfully overcrowded scene, but missing is the compassionate way of seeing people conveyed with the technical beauty that so often distinguishes Riis' work.

Five Cents a Spot, Lodgers in Bayard Street **Tenement, circa 1889. Museum of the City of New York, Jacob A. Riis Collection, #165.**

People sit or lie with their eyes closed, or squinting; faces are distorted and shown from disrespectful angles. They are placed leadenly within congested surroundings and do not look like thinking, feeling people. Jacob Riis could use flash powder to light scenes masterfully, but here the tones are both washed out and harsh.

This next photograph, however, is courageous and grandly successful.

***Bandits' Roost*, 59 1/2 Mulberry Street, circa 1890. Museum of the City of New York, Jacob A. Riis Collection, #101.**

"Bandits' Roost" (1888) at 59 1/2 Mulberry Street, was a refuge for criminals and considered the most dangerous place in New York City. The language of contempt says "These people are different from me and what is different is unfriendly, inferior, without value!" But Jacob Riis, the artist, shows they have in them the structure of all reality—a oneness of opposites. Just as we can be suspicious and welcoming, so can the people in this photograph. For example, three women lean with varying degrees of assertion from the windows on the right; directly below them are two men partially facing us, giving us appraising looks from under their hat brims. On the two porches, men and women stand formally or lounge at their ease. And if you look into the depth of the alley, you will see others standing casually, kneeling, or peeking out through the slats of the porch on the right. The perspective lines of this picture create an X that joins the foreground and background, expanding and contracting, the way the self does. There is a transcendent, almost religious quality as the luminous alley floor merges with the hazy brightness of the laundry above. We see light and dark, high and low, hope and despair—opposites in us all, made one.

Ownership in economics and in love

Jacob Riis, at 25, proposed marriage in a letter to Elisabeth Gortz in Denmark. I was moved to learn that in her reply accepting, she wrote, "We will strive together for all that is noble and good"[16] and she did encourage her husband in his work. Elisabeth brought repose to Jacob's turbulent nature and for their 25 years of marriage, until her death, she was known to him as "Lammet," the Danish word for lamb. But the man who fiercely opposed owning and cruelly managing the lives of people in economics, needed to understand this desire in himself as a husband. In "Elisabeth Tells Her Story," a chapter from *The Making of An American,* his wife writes courageously about herself until, after several pages, Riis squashes her expression, writing:

> I cut the rest of it off, because I am the editor and want to begin again here myself, and what is the use of being an editor unless you can cut "copy"? Also, it is not good for woman to allow her to say too much.[17]

I have the honor to study in professional classes taught by the Aesthetic Realism Chairman of Education, Ellen Reiss, where I am learning that justice to reality, trying to be fair to what is not ourselves, makes for the pride and happiness every person desires. In one class discussion, Miss Reiss asked me questions in behalf of my marriage and self-respect. I was troubled—and my wife Harriet was too—by the way I would so often call her "honey," sometimes three or four times in a single minute. And a surprising thing was that it very often happened when I wasn't feeling just affectionate, but was annoyed and even angry. Miss Reiss asked: "Why do you think it is wise, as Hamlet said to Ophelia, to 'nickname God's creatures'?"[18] "It shows warmth," I answered, and then added, "Well, it is a little gushy. I guess it's not respectful."

> *Ellen Reiss:* That's the main thing—is it respectful? We're talking about something that goes on in thousands of homes. One can [respectfully] use terminology that's tender and playful. But two people can despise each other even as they call each other "snooks". Do you think these names are a substitute for love? You make a lot of a person while really saying that person belongs only to you.

I am so grateful to Miss Reiss. The education I am getting has made me kinder, and able to have true passion and greater respect for my dear wife of 26 years. Harriet strengthens me, including with her criticism, which has made my perception deeper about everything—from an ordinary conversation, to the lives of people in history.

Aesthetic Realism shows that every art form can teach us to see others rightly—those close to us and also distant. In his 1970 lecture *What Has the Past Gone For?* Mr. Siegel explains:

> Literature has constantly gone for giving a self to people who weren't usually seen as having one. The whole history of literature is about man's wanting to be seen fairly by others and to see others with the fullness of meaning they may have.[19]

I have read many of the short stories of Jacob Riis which, based closely on his newspaper articles, show the feelings of people deeply. One of these stories is titled *The Kid.* The Kid is tough. He has just been arrested for beating two policemen with their own clubs. Accompanying the police as they march this young man to jail, Jacob Riis sees the Kid is not only hardened, but brave and tender as well, when he risks his life to save a little child. He writes movingly:

> It all happened so quickly....A sudden start, a leap...and the Kid had wrenched himself loose...and then I saw—the whole street saw—a child, a toddling baby, in the middle of the railroad track, right in front of the coming car....A scream rose wild and piercing above the tumult; men struggled with a frantic woman on the curb, and turned their heads away—
>
> And then there stood the Kid, with the child in his arms, unhurt. I see him now, as he set it down, gently as any woman, trying with lingering touch to unclasp the grip of the baby hand upon his rough finger. I see the hard look coming back into his face as the policeman...twisted the nipper on his wrist, with a half-uncertain aside to me, "Them toughs there ain't no depending on, nohow." Sullen, defiant, planning vengeance, I see him led away to jail. Ruffian and thief! The police blotter said so.[20]

Does the world deserve to be gone toward or away from?

"There is," Mr. Siegel explains, "a deep and 'dialectic' duality facing every human being, which can be put this way: How is he to be entirely himself, and yet be fair to that world which he does not see as himself?"[21] There was a warfare in Jacob Riis between feeling the way "to be entirely himself" was to know and be useful to people, and feeling he had to withdraw from a world he saw as senseless and ugly. He wrote of the home he built for his own family in the peaceful suburbs of Long Island: "The very lights of the city were shut out. So was the slum, and I could sleep."[22] I believe these two directions in him, of advance and retreat, came to a frightening impasse one day in 1890 when he found himself standing on a friend's doorstep, unable to remember his own name until he looked in his wallet and found his calling card. "After that," he wrote, "I was haunted by a feeling that I would lose myself altogether."[23] In his autobiography Riis attributes this occurrence to fatigue but I believe he was unconsciously criticizing himself, saying, "Jacob Riis, if you try to lessen the very thing that makes you who you are—your relation to the world—you won't recognize yourself!"

"I believe he was unconsciously criticizing himself, saying, 'Jacob Riis, if you try to lessen the very thing that makes you who you are—your relation to the world—you won't recognize yourself!'"

In his photograph "Minding the Baby" (ca. 1898), I think Jacob Riis was dealing with this human debate: "Should I hate the world or care for it, go toward it or away from it?"

***Minding the Baby*, circa 1898. Museum of the City of New York, Jacob A. Riis Collection, #FF**

The older girl's eyes look critically out as her cheek rests tenderly against the baby's round head. The angle of the molding to the right of the girl's face adds force to her piercing look, while the baby appears dazed and withdrawn. The barrel to the left has roundness like the baby, and the metal straps encircling it are like the arms of the older girl encircling the infant. Is reality, through Jacob Riis, telling us: "If you can clasp your arms around a dear, rotund being and see that what you are hugging is related to what is distant from you, can it make things more bearable: does it show the world has a structure that is kind?"

Jacob Riis knew the injustice he saw was perpetuated by the press of his day, and he despised their brutal coldness. He wrote:

> Every once in a while I am asked why I became a newspaper man. For one thing, because there were writers of such trash, who, themselves comfortably lodged, have not red blood enough in their veins to feel for those to whom everything is denied.[24]

For centuries, people have been forced to live in darkness without the knowledge their minds need; to endure profit-based economics which deny them food and shelter, the very quality of life every human being deserves. We all have a right to lives with dignity and self-respect—and to understand the forces that hinder that. Through the Aesthetic Realism of Eli Siegel this, at last, is possible!

NOTES

1. Louise Ware, *Jacob A. Riis, Police Reporter, Reformer, Useful Citizen* (New York and London: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1938), 82.
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3. Eli Siegel, "Aesthetic Realism: A Tripartite Study," *The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known,* no. 247, (21 December 1977), col. 2.
4. Siegel, *Self and World,* 15.
5. Jacob A. Riis, *The Making of An American,* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1970), 5-6.
6. *ibid.,* 310.
7. *ibid.,* 44.
8. Alexander Alland, *Jacob A. Riis, Photographer & Citizen* (New York: Aperture, 1974), 33.
9. Riis, 148.
10. *ibid.*
11. *ibid.,* 149
12. Ware, 25.
13. Riis, 173.
14. Rune Hassner, *Jacob A. Riis, Social Reporter with Camera* (Trydells tryckeri, Laholm, 1987), 6.
15. Eli Siegel, "Art As Ethics," *The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known,* no. 738 (27 May 1987), col. 2-6.
16. Riis, 282-83.
17. *ibid.,* 106.
18. *Shakespeare's Tragedy of Hamlet,* ed. by William J. Rolfe (Harper & Brothers, 1898), 98.
19. Eli Siegel, *Goodbye Profit System: Update* (New York: Definition Press, 1982), 115.
20. Jacob A. Riis, *Children of the Tenements* (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1903), 94-95.
21. Siegel, *Self and World,* 91.
22. Riis, *The Making of An American,* 183.
23. *ibid.,* 197.
24. *ibid.,* 42.

About the author:

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