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Gilded Age New York as Seen by Famous Contemporaries

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Abstract The paper deals with the perception of turn-of-the-twentieth-century-New York City by two outstanding New Yorkers of that time—Theodore Roosevelt and Jacob Riis. Both made their mark in the history of the city. For both of them New York was a launch pad for their careers. Roosevelt and Riis completed comprehensive research works on the history of contemporary New York. The paper analyses their major works: Roosevelt's "New York: a sketch of the city's social, political, and commercial progress from the first Dutch settlement to recent times" and Riis' "*How the Other Half Lives."*

Keywords Jacob Riis, New York, working classes

New York City has always held a special place among American cities. A gateway to the USA, a dominant urban center since 1800, the embodiment of modernity at the turn of the twentieth century, the city has attracted one of the largest populations in the world. New York's economic institutions eclipsed domestic competitors by the early nineteenth century and foreign competitors after the First World War.

One of the most dramatic and eventful periods of the city's history was the turn of the twentieth century. By that time, New York ranked first in the country by every important measure—from population to industrial output to bank deposits to wholesale trade**.** Besides, New York was the national headquarters for the modern business structure—the corporation. These achievements were hugely impressive since New York was not a national or even a state capital. However, the transformation of New York into business haven came at a severe price. The living conditions of the working classes were appalling.

The fame and shame of the nineteenth-century metropolis were memorialized by a number of contemporaries, both American and foreign. This paper is an attempt to examine the perception of turn-of-the-century-New York by two outstanding New Yorkers of that time—Theodore Roosevelt and Jacob Riis.

New York was an important city in the political career of Theodore Roosevelt. Many of his progressive reforms were tested there before being carried out nation-

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wide. He spared no effort to cure the city from social ills. New York was a very special place for Roosevelt, which is clear from his autobiography. Besides, he completed a comprehensive historical research of the city. His work "New York: a sketch of the city's social, political, and commercial progress from the first Dutch settlement to recent times" came out in 1906.[1] The focus of the book is on the early history of the city. The contemporary period is covered concisely in the last chapter of the book. The author admitted that he had to content himself with "barely touching on the social and political problems of the present day; for to deal with these at any length would turn the volume into a tract instead of a history."[2]

Featuring turn-of-the-century New York, Theodore Roosevelt emphasizes its considerable territorial expansion, as well as a huge growth of both population and wealth. In 1860 New York had over eight hundred thousand inhabitants while by 1890 its population had nearly doubled, amounting to 3 million. The growth of the city kept pace with the growth of its economic power: "The city is one of the two or three greatest commercial and manufacturing centers of the world."[3]

Another distinctive feature of the city was its cosmopolitan character. Modern historians recognize that by 1860 New York became the most polyglot metropolis on the globe, with nearly half of Manhattan's population being foreign-born. In this respect New York was different to early modern London and Paris, which were enormous but homogeneous. In contrast, New York was at different times the largest Irish, Jewish, Italian, and black African city in the world.[4]

In his research Roosevelt describes the city as a cultural melting pot. "At the present time four-fifths of New York's population is of foreign birth or parentage," he says. Roosevelt analyzes the changes in the character of the immigration population of the city. In 1860 the Irish formed three-fifths of the foreign-born population. Thirty years later Germans, Italians, Poles, Bohemians, Russian Jews, and Hungarians made up a majority among immigrants. He expresses concern about the fact that americanization of immigrant groups was not going as fast as it should be.[5]

Speaking of the political life in the city, Roosevelt does not cover up the fact that it was stained by political corruption, fraud and stock-swindling. He writes about wars that the stock-speculators of Wall Street waged with one another and continual fights for the control of railway systems and stock markets. Those activities "barely missed being criminal." He says that incredible sums of money were stolen, especially in the construction of the new Court House. Yet, his conclusion sounds optimistic: "for the last twenty years our politics have been better and purer."[6]

On the whole, the Roosevelt's picture of New York looks bright and rosy. The author draws attention to positive aspects. The most visible achievement is urban development. Roosevelt proudly describes dramatic improvement in architecture as a result of a steady increase in material prosperity of the city. He points out some new imposing buildings which the city can be proud of, as well as feats of engineering like the bridge across the East River completed in 1883, or the Riverside Drive—"one of the most striking roads or streets of which any city can boast." The landmark of the

[1] Roosevelt Theodore. 1906. New York: A sketch of the city's social, political, and commercial progress from the first Dutch settlement to recent times. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. ON-LINE ED.:Published August 2000 by Bartleby.com <http://www.bartleby.com/171/>
[2] Ibidem <http://www.bartleby.com/171/14.html>
[3] Roosevelt Theodore. Op.cit. <http://www.bartleby.com/171/14.html>
[4] Gilfoyle T. J. America's heart // The Atlantic Monthly, 1999, February.
[5] Roosevelt Theodore. Op.cit. <http://www.bartleby.com/171/14.html>
[6] Ibidem.

city is Central Park, while many other parks are being planned and laid out beyond where the town has as yet been built up.[7]

Another positive trend is an increase in the number of public buildings such as hospitals, many of which were well-equipped and managed; and the numerous Lodging Houses, Night Schools, Working-Girls' Clubs and the like. Roosevelt sees it as the evidence of the growth of "civic spirit" and of a desire for a life "with higher possibilities than money-making." The public buildings show, he says, that many New Yorkers are aware of their responsibilities, and are actively striving to help their less fortunate fellows.[8]

Roosevelt claims that charitableness and generosity are typical of New Yorkers. The citizens are keenly sensitive to any disaster. A blizzard in Dakota, an earthquake in South Carolina, a flood in Pennsylvania,—after such catastrophe hundreds of thousands dollars are raised in New York at a day's notice, for the relief of the sufferers. On the other hand, Roosevelt acknowledges, it is a difficult matter to raise money for a monument or a work of art.

Giving an account of the city's cultural life, Roosevelt concedes that in art, music and literature "much remains to be wished for." Yet, something has already been done. The building of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, of the American Museum of Natural History, of the Metropolitan Opera House, the change of Columbia College into a University—all this shows a tendency to make the city more attractive to people of culture. As well as that, there is a growth of literary and dramatic clubs, such as the *Century* and the *Players*. The illustrated monthly magazines—the *Century, Scribner's,* and *Harper's*—occupy an entirely original position of a very high order in periodical literature.

Comparing New York with European capitals such as London, Paris, Vienna or Berlin, Roosevelt concedes that there is no chance for his city to rise to similar position of leadership among American cities. Unlike Europe, America lacks a tendency towards centralization. In the United States there are ten or a dozen cities each of which stands as the social and commercial, though rarely as the political, capital of a district as large as an average European country. No one of them occupies a merely provincial position as compared with any other. Thus, Roosevelt concludes, there is no chance for New York City to take an unquestioned leadership in all respects. Nevertheless, its life is so intense and so varied, and so full of manifold possibilities, that it has a special fascination for ambitious men of every kind, whether they are well off, or whether they have yet their fortunes to make. New York City opens to all of them boundless opportunities to achieve their ambitions provided they have a strong character and "can swim in troubled waters." Weaklings have small chance to survive against the turbulent tide of the city life.

Summarizing, Roosevelt comes to the conclusion: "We are better, not worse off, than we were a generation ago."[9] The sons and grandsons of the immigrants of fifty years back have become good Americans, and have prospered in the material well-being. Although there are still social evils such as corruption and immorality in commerce and social life, honesty and moral cleanliness are the rule and under the laws order is well preserved, and all men are kept secure in the possession of life, liberty, and property.

[7] Roosevelt Theodore. Op.cit. <http://www.bartleby.com/171/14.html>
[8] Ibidem.
[9] Roosevelt Theodore. Op.cit. <http://www.bartleby.com/171/14.html>

Roosevelt does not pay much attention to the life of the lower classes. He just makes a remark that there is no reason to suppose that the condition of the working classes as a whole has grown worse. He confesses, though, that there are enormous bodies of them whose condition is certainly very bad. Speaking about social ills Roosevelt displays unflagging optimism and confidence that they will be corrected. "There are grave social dangers and evils to meet, but there are plenty of earnest men and women who devote their minds and energies to meeting them,"[10] he says.

The life of the working classes in New York at the turn of the century was exposed by another famous New Yorker Jacob Riis. A pioneer of investigative reporting and documentary photojournalism, Jacob Riis revealed the horrible conditions in which the lower classes of New York City lived.

Riis's works are a valuable primary source for a historian as they are based on the evidence of an eyewitness. In 1870-s–1880-s, Riis was a police reporter for the *New York Tribune* and the *New York Evening Sun*. He worked in the most crime-ridden and impoverished district of the city—Lower East Side. The reporting job gave him an opportunity to witness everyday life of the poor in the city slums. Each day he traveled through the neighborhood, witnessing firsthand the cramped, dirty quarters and inadequate sanitation. He was one of the first Americans to use flash powder, which enabled him to take photographs at night and indoors. The innovation allowed him to take pictures of the interiors of shoddy tenement housing and helped him to capture the hardships faced by the poor. He shot the down-and-out occupants of darkened basements and Chinatown opium dens, his subjects caught unaware. Riis allowed New Yorkers to witness, as if firsthand, the overcrowding he caught in the cellars and flophouses, the tenement rooms where sleeping bodies were stacked on top of each other, the dingy corners that had been turned into sweatshops. He brought the light of a new medium to bear on a netherworld that had never been photographically recorded.

In 1888 the *New York Sun* published Riis's essay "Flashes from the Slums: Pictures Taken in Dark Places by the Lightning Process," and in 1889 *Scribner's Magazine* published his photographic essay on city life.

In 1890 Riis expanded his essays to create a book *How the Other Half Lives.*[11] The publication drew a wide response. The images of extreme poverty shocked the New York middle and upper classes, political and business elite.

Riis's work brought him to the attention of one particularly important New Yorker, Theodore Roosevelt, who served as president of the New York Board of Police Commissioners from 1895 to 1897. In his "Autobiography" Roosevelt acknowledged that Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* was to him "both enlightenment and an inspiration," for which he was deeply grateful. Roosevelt confessed that he was highly impressed by the book. "Jacob Riis had drawn an indictment of the things that were wrong, pitifully and dreadfully wrong, with the tenement homes and the tenement lives of our wage-workers. In his book he had pointed out how the city government, and especially those connected with the departments of police and health, could aid in remedying some of the wrongs"[12], Roosevelt wrote.

Later, Theodore Roosevelt recalled that after reading the book he was so deeply moved by Riis's sense of justice that he decided to meet the author. Explaining his

[10] Ibidem.

[11] Riis Jacob A. 1890. How the other half lives. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. <http://www.cis.yale.edu/amstud/inforev/riis/title.html.>

[12] Roosevelt, Theodore. 1913. An Autobiography. New York: Macmillan,; ON-LINE ED.: Published 1999 by Bartleby.com < http://www.bartleby.com/55/6.html>

intention, he wrote, “As President of the Police Board and a member of the Health Board … I felt that with Jacob Riis’ guidance I would be able to put a goodly number of his principles into actual effect. He and I looked at life and its problems from substantially the same standpoint. Our ideals and principles and purposes, and our beliefs as to the methods necessary to realize them, were alike.” Roosevelt and Riis met and became fast friends. Their lifelong friendship grew over the years. Both left warm reminiscences about each other in their autobiographical works. Roosevelt called Riis “the best American I ever knew.”[13] Riis wrote a biography of his famous friend.[14]

Explaining the title and the topic of his book, Riis wrote in the introduction to *How the Other Half Lives*: "Long ago it was said that ‘one half of the world does not know how the other half lives.’ That was true then. It did not know because it did not care. The half that was on top cared little for the struggles, and less for the fate, of those who were underneath, so long as it was able to hold them there and keep its own seat." Riis wrote his book in order to call attention to the deplorable living conditions of majority of New York City’s residents. Employing narrative, reportage, social statistics and the latest advances in flash photography, Riis shed light on the horrific living conditions of New York’s vast population of poor immigrants.

The title of the work was an understatement. The author must have been well aware that the poor he chronicled accounted for more than three-quarters of New York’s population. In other words, the “other half” in New York City had become the other three-quarters, with 1.2 million impoverished people living in slums.

Riis’ *How the Other Half Lives* is a multidimensional research. It represents comprehensive examination of wide range of the city’s issues such as women and children’s labour, crime, pauperism, begging, violence, alcoholism, to mention but a few. He focuses attention on living conditions of working classes, particularly so called «tenements», or “tenant houses”—barrackslike buildings. Unlike an apartment house or an apartment building, that type of rental housing was specially constructed for low-income families so that they could share space and expenses. That meant that a one-family apartment was occupied by a few families plus a number of paying boarders. J. Riis gives the following description of a typical tenement: “It is generally a brick building from four to six stories, frequently with a store on the first floor; four families occupy each floor, and a set of rooms consists of one or two dark closets, used as bedrooms, with a living room twelve feet by ten. The staircase is too often a dark well in the centre of the house; each family is separated form the other by partitions.”[15]

Inside tenant houses living conditions were intolerable. The rooms were dark, cramped, and poorly ventilated. Interior rooms either had no windows at all or opened onto narrow shafts that bred vermin and rotten odors. Some tenements lacked indoor plumbing; others offered only a single tap to be shared by many families. The only source of heat was coal-burning stoves. J. Riis describes the grim details of tenement life: “…the hall is dark and you might stumble over the children pitching pennies back there. Not that it would hurt them; kicks and cuffs are their daily diet… All the fresh air that ever enters these stairs comes from the hall-door that is forever slamming, and from the windows of dark bedrooms. The sinks are in the hallway, that all the tenants may have access—and all be poisoned alike by their summer stenches…

[13] Ibid., < http://www.bartleby.com/55/3.html>
[14] Riis Jacob A. 1904. Theodore Roosevelt, the Citizen. New York: the Outlook Co.
[15] Riis Jacob A. 1890. <http://www.cis.yale.edu/amstud/inforev/riis/chap2.html#para4>

The gap between dingy brick-walls is the yard. That strip of smoke-colored sky up there is the heaven of these people."[16]

Such type of housing resulted into unprecedented overcrowding. In statistical appendix to his book Riis provides official figures that show extremely high population density in working class neighborhoods.[17] He illustrates the statistics with his own descriptions and photographs. For instance, he refers to the sanitary police report counting 101 adult and 91 children in a Crosby Street house, one of twins, built together. In the other building there were 89 children, a total of 180 for two tenements. This convincing statistics is followed by another example. A midnight police inspection in Mulberry Street found a hundred and fifty "lodgers" sleeping on filthy floors in two buildings.[18]

The accuracy of Riis' accounts is corroborated by recent researchers. According to Norton, in 1893, New York City's immigrant-packed Lower East Side had one of the highest population densities in the world: 702 people per acre.[19] According to another contemporary source, 2.5 million New Yorkers lived in 430,000 tenements in the late nineteenth century.[20]

The overcrowding, together with unsanitary conditions, made communicable diseases widespread. Typhus, diarrhea, cholera and tuberculosis were rife even after public health measures had been taken. The city authorities tried to regulate tenements through building codes. The Tenement-House Act of 1867 was "the first step toward remedial legislation," in Riis' words.[21] Under the act, each sleeping room should be ventilated by a transom to another room. The act also required a single toilet for every twenty occupants. The standards were not very high. In spite of this, the local authorities achieved only modest success in enforcement of those lenient requirements. The landlords were reluctant to obey the law since the obedience would lower their profits. Riis bitterly stated: "Little improvement was apparent" as the new tenements, that were recently built, were "as badly planned as the old, with dark and unhealthy rooms, often over wet cellars where extreme overcrowding is permitted."[22] To support his claim Riis referred to an opinion of a well-known physician, "If we could see the air breathed by these poor creatures in their tenements, it would show itself to be fouler than the mud of the gutters."[23]

A good barometer of general sanitary condition is infant mortality compared with the whole number of deaths, maintained Riis. In slums it was much higher than in well-off neighbourhoods. For example, in the Bend, which Riis called "foul core of New York's slums," the Tenement House Commission counted 155 deaths of children in a specimen year (1882). Their percentage of the total mortality in the block was 68.28, while for the whole city the proportion was only 46.20. The general death-rate in slums was also higher than in the city. In 1888 the general death-rate for the whole city was 26.27, whereas in Baxter Street it was 32.24 and in Mulberry Street it was even higher—38.05. "These figures speak for themselves," concluded J.Riis.[24]

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[16] Ibid., <http://www.cis.yale.edu/amstud/inforev/riis/chap4.html#para17>
[17] Ibid., < http://www.cis.yale.edu/amstud/inforev/riis/appendix.html>
[18] Riis Jacob A. 1890. <http://www.cis.yale.edu/amstud/inforev/riis/chap2.html#para7>
[19] Norton M.B., Katzman D.M., Escott P.D. 1986. A people and a nation. A history of the United States. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, p.518.
[20] Gruver R.B. 1985. An American history. New York:Alfred A.Knopf, p.530.
[21] Riis Jacob A. 1890. <http://www.cis.yale.edu/amstud/inforev/riis/chap2.html#para1>
[22] Ibid., <http://www.cis.yale.edu/amstud/inforev/riis/chap2.html#para2>
[23] Ibidem.
[24] Ibid., http://www.cis.yale.edu/amstud/inforev/riis/chap6.html#para6

Another urgent problem of the slums was alcoholism. The chapter in which Riis examines the issue is titled "The Reign of Rum." The opening remark of the chapter reveals Riis' dry sense of humour. He assumes that an old saying "Where God builds a church the devil builds next door a saloon" had lost its point in New York. In the area below Fourteenth Street, where half of the tenement population lived, the author counted 4,065 saloons and only 111 churches, chapels, and places of worship of every kind. "Either the devil was on the ground first, or he has been doing a good deal more in the way of building," summarized Riis. Uptown the account stood a little better, but far from being rosy: there were ten saloons to every church.[25] "One may walk many miles through the homes of the poor searching vainly for an open reading-room, a cheerful coffee-house, a decent club that is not a cloak for the traffic in rum. The dramshop yawns at every step, the poor man's club, his forum and his haven of rest," he wrote.[26]

One of Riis' major concerns was children living in tenements. What training did they receive or did not receive? What instincts did they inherit and absorb in their growing up? The reader could find easily the answer to these questions in the description of a typical tenement in the Sixth Ward. It figured in the official reports as "an out-and-out hog-pen," that had a record of one hundred and two arrests in four years among its four hundred and seventy-eight tenants, fifty-seven of them for drunken and disorderly conduct. Riis did not have information about the number of children living in the tenement, but according to the official report, only seven in the whole house attended school. "The rest gathered all the instruction they received running for beer for their elders," remarked Riis. Once, an official came upon four boys drinking beer in the hallway. Riis ironically assumed that they were really good boys as they offered the inspector some beer.[27]

Riis does not examine in detail the issue of education of the working class children. He just describes a couple of scenes he witnessed. Once he watched two youngsters in a Mulberry Street yard chalking on the fence their first lesson in writing. The boys wrote: "Keeb of te Grass." Riis wondered where they saw the grass since "there was not a green sod within a quarter of a mile."[28]

It's doubtful that school made a difference in training and upbringing. Children did not seem to get a lot out of school. For example, a survey of students of a downtown public school showed that out of forty-eight boys twenty had never seen the Brooklyn Bridge—a symbol of cutting edge technology of that time—although it was situated within five minutes' walk; only three out of forty-eight pupils had been in Central Park; fifteen had ever ridden in a horse-car. All training they receive children picked up in the street with its dirt and mud. That was the bitter conclusion Riis reached.[29]

Describing appalling living conditions of working classes and problems relating to that, Riis posed a series of urgent, often implicit, questions to himself and his readers. What is the structural relationship between persistent poverty and new immigrants? How does environment shape 'character'? What are the proper roles of government, public philanthropy, and religion in reform efforts? These questions remain apt today. That's why Riis' book did not fall into oblivion unlike many other political essays. Since its first publication in 1890, Riis' *How the Other Half Lives* has been

[25] Riis Jacob A. 1890. <http://www.cis.yale.edu/amstud/inforev/riis/chap18.html#para1>
[26] Ibid., <http://www.cis.yale.edu/amstud/inforev/riis/chap18.html#para2>
[27] Ibid., <http://www.cis.yale.edu/amstud/inforev/riis/chap15.html#para1>
[28] Ibid., < http://www.cis.yale.edu/amstud/inforev/riis/chap15.html#para3>
[29] Riis Jacob A. 1890.< /www.cis.yale.edu/amstud/inforev/riis/chap15.html#para1>

reprinted countless times. It also has been included into the collection of the Open Online library of Harvard University[30] and Yale University. (The Yale University online version is used by the author of this article).

A new surge of interest in Riis' works was brought about by centenary celebration of a benchmark in the city's history, namely consolidation of "the City of Greater New York" in 1898.[31] Ten years after the celebration, the publication of "Rediscovering Jacob Riis: Exposure Journalism and Photography in Turn-of-the-Century New York" by B. Yochelson, D. Czitrom caused lively public discussion.[32] It seems that every generation of Americans needs to rediscover Jacob Riis for itself.

Jacob Riis was curtain that social problems are solvable. The key to success was to unite efforts of local authorities, business community, public organizations and city dwellers. In this respect Riis and Roosevelt held similar views. Like many other progressive era reformers they were optimistic. They were sure that social ills could be cured.

[30] Riis Jacob A. 1890. How the other half lives. New York: Charles Scribner's sons. <http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/immigration/outsidelink.html/http:/nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:880973>

[31] In 1898 three parts of the city and nearly forty municipalities were consolidated to create today's five-borough Greater New York City. – T.P.

[32] Yochelson B., Czitrom D. , 2008. Rediscovering Jacob Riis: Exposure Journalism and Photography in Turn-of-the-Century New York: New Press; Power M. The other half // New York Times, May,25, 2008; Roberts S. Witness to the poor, and the grand ship undone // New York Times, March, 9, 2008; Chan S. Revisiting the other half of Jacob Riis // New York Times, February, 9, 2008; Klinkenborg V. Recovering the complex legacy of the photographer Jacob Riis // New York Times, February, 12, 2008.