

MAKING SENSE OF THE SHOP:
HOW THE ETHNIC HALF WORKS

By the 1890s, the tenement house had become all but synonymous with the foreign-born, whether in a backyards section of a company town or the “Jewtown” of a metropolis such as New York City, to use the photographer and reporter Jacob Riis’s phrase.²³ Whatever the ethnics’ vicissitudes at the lowest end of the job (or criminality) market, their tenement stasis was not perceived as stability, fostering habits of cleanliness and order, but instead as cause for perennial criticism of the intemperance and immorality, infection and crime pervading their terrain. As

waves of new immigrants arrived, they occupied an underclass habitat perceived, in the words of Riis's 1890 watershed text, as the place where the other half lives. The slum revision of the American work ethic required that urban immigrants live in the mire, close to the job supply on docks, in warehouses and factories, and on business streets, crowding in an unprecedented density in American cities. By 1890, to cite a prime example, New York City's thirty-five thousand tenements contained an overwhelming number of the total population of a million and a half.²⁴ To influential cultural commentators like Riis, Jewish, Slavic, and Italian strategies for survival had little in common with the craft-based self-reliance still invoked by Gompers or the strike-torn industrial unions in their negotiations and confrontations with corporate expansionism.²⁵

In their unfamiliar customs, unsanitary lifestyles, and frequent association with criminality, immigrants occupied the urban terrain in ways that pointed to the cultural crisis of the acculturation experience.²⁶

Only decades after this oppressive labor space was born did American culture christen it the sweatshop. Now Riis's alarming photographs and essays, in which workers' sweaty bodies and communal dirt were sites of contagion as much as the shop itself, made it possible for anyone from sanitary inspectors to middle-class curiosity seekers to probe the relation of sweaty ethnic shop workers to the garments and cleanliness of the mainstream.

THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF DIRT:
THE CLASSIC SWEATSHOP

As part of the larger reform effort attendant on the late-nineteenth-century discovery of poverty, muckraking the sweatshop coincided with an expanded movement in public health and urban reform to uncover, unearth, and clean up the social structures causing these conditions.³⁸ The images of the photographer's light and the policeman's lantern shining into the urban blackness recur often in the tenement literature of the decade.³⁹ Images of dirt and darkness inform this investigative shift from "individual surveillance to consideration of environmental and social causes of poverty."⁴⁰ Increasingly, government authorities "turned to regulatory measures: paving, draining, ventilating, and disinfecting public space."⁴¹

This is not to deny the strides in public health achieved by the Sanitary Control Board and allied organizations and the effectiveness of their antitubercular campaigns. It is rather to assert that in uncovering literal filth, particularly among the largest population of garment workers—East European Jews and their first-generation children—these public health agents stigmatized not only the sweated space, which often doubled as a worker's home or as a boarding house, but also the workers themselves. Indeed, commentators often dwell more on the sweat than

on the shop, with what historian Alain Corbin calls “olfactory vigilance.”⁴² Whereas mid-century iconography had focused on the wraith-like bodies and yellowed faces of the underclass Walking Dead, now it was workers’ bodies, assumed to be unclean and grotesque, that offended the middle-class observers who toured, surveyed, and investigated the urban landscape for municipal and religious authorities. One historian of the public bath movement, in pointing out that by 1897 almost two-thirds of New York City’s public bath houses were Jewish, notes that the linkage of Jewish garment workers with poor personal and home cleanliness was more controversial than it appeared.⁴³

Historian Alan Kraut’s medical epistemology of the perceived ethnic menace to health, particularly from the tubercular Jewish tailor, points out how widespread was the assumption that sinister and unsanitary ethnics carried disease along with their dirt. Beneath the surface compassion, middle-class authors were convinced that “a man cannot truly respect himself who is dirty.”⁴⁴ Florence Kelley was appalled at ethnic labor’s seeming indifference to infestation. After some verbal shudders at sour smells, greasy bodies, and grimy work clothes, she avers: “The whole dwelling was crawling with vermin, and the capes were not free from it.”⁴⁵ Kelley, it should be remembered, was a crusader for consumer change and advocated boycotts of sweated goods, as did many period reformers. But along with her horror of clothing that crawled with vermin seemed to be the equal repugnance toward unsanitary ethnics carrying disease into the very mainstream of cape-wearing society.⁴⁶

It is no accident that the implicit nativism and anti-Semitism of the hygiene campaign was given force by the concomitant shift from drawing to photographs, the invention of artificial lighting, and even the proliferation of glass windows, all of which revealed the dirty bodies of the “submerged tenth” and their children. Before the 1890s, even noted academic artists like Kenyon Cox had smoothed out poverty’s rougher edges in illustrations.⁴⁷ Riis’s ethnic vignettes in his *Scribner’s* pieces—the genesis of *How the Other Half Lives*—as well as in the first book-length version, were also accompanied by drawings. These visual companions of Riis’s melodramatic and sentimental prose made the scene far less forbidding. Joining child laborers and gnarled seamstresses, figures of desperadoes and destitute mothers are nevertheless rounded and healthy, and

one is caught up in the narrative of the drawing as a piece of exotic slumming whose shock value has been sanitized for entertainment.

But the cumbersome cameras that penetrated the dark corners of late-nineteenth-century cellars and attics were beginning to document a special kind of visual field. Slums were already perceived in less enlightened quarters as human zoos. Because the poor were so often at home doing piecework, the clarity of these documentary photographs set off nativist fears. Riis had been on the cutting edge in his photographs of sweatshops and other tenement spaces and streets as early as 1888 in a series of lantern-slide lectures on "New York City's Slum Life."⁴⁸ Only in the 1890s, a new era in which metropolitan dailies hired staff cameramen, did Riis publish his own surveillance photography, and not until 1900 did *How the Other Half Lives* feature photos rather than illustrations.⁴⁹

Sweatshop photography issued from Riis's work as a police reporter as well as from his tours with his amanuensis Roger S. Tracy, a sanitary inspector.⁵⁰ The Riis sweatshop photos are extraordinary on a number of counts.⁵¹ But one of the most salient is the sense they convey of people who have been reduced by, and become a part of, their squalid surroundings. It is not difficult to see the elision of person and place that, in essence, blames the victim. Riis's picture of humanity reduced by the very inability to get clean reinforced the day's medical nostrum: "In proportion as the body is kept cleanly, are the moral faculties elevated, and the tendency to commit crimes diminished."⁵²