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Dislocations: Transatlantic Perspectives on Postnational American Studies

Reading Transatlantic Sites: The Italians in New York

William Boelhower
University of Padua, Italy

> The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.
> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

To begin, let us consider a series of photographs from various online archives that portray Italian immigrant life in New York City around the end of the nineteenth century.[i] Most of these images can now be found in Jacob Riis's famous book *How the Other Half Lives* which was first published in 1890, but it is the idea of the archive, rather than a volume of photographs, that interests me. These early pictures of the Italian colony are especially valuable because they were taken in the very years when such a thing as Little Italy was coming into being in the lower end of Manhattan. So while I am interested in empirically correlating *these* first images with the taking hold of a specific *ethnos*, I am equally concerned with the broader implications of using such photographic archives for studying cultural sites within the cosmopolitan spaces of first modernism. So far scholars have undertheorized their use. How, therefore, might an essentially topological investigation of a site like Little Italy, with the pertinent archival material calling for a *mathesis singularis*, help to enrich the way we analyze culture in a postnational context. This is the larger question I would like to address.

The first photo is by Lewis Hine and presents a family group, a mother with her three young children. The caption reads: "Looking for lost baggage, Ellis Island, 1905." Nobody in the picture is smiling for the camera; they are looking straight at it, from within the fortified space of the family. The mother in particular seems preoccupied, and they all seem diffident, perhaps even slightly intimidated. Note how the little girl in the foreground is seeking the protection of her older brother. As the name on the suitcase suggests, they are peasants from southern Italy, poor but well-dressed. The mother's blouse has a colorful decorative motif and the girls' bright dresses are certainly their best. The boy is wearing a tie and a cap. The mother has a scarf around her head – a characteristic sign that signals to the visitor to Lower Manhattan that he or she is entering the Italian quarter. Stuck conspicuously in the boy's hat band is an identification tag that probably indicates the family's destination. The boy is by now a little man, as his decision to shoulder the sack suggests, and he will soon go to work with *papà* who is surely waiting for them outside the gate.

The photograph nicely portrays the status and the condition of Italian immigration at the beginning of the twentieth century. By 1905 Italians were not so warmly welcomed in the United States. They were considered illiterate, transient, without skills, unwilling to learn English, and, worst of all, members of an inferior race. They were also considered politically immature, with little knowledge of how democracy worked. They bowed their heads to the Black Hand and were all too faithful to their *padroni*. But above all, they were not adapting to American life, they were not assimilating. They preferred to cling to their urban neighborhoods where they could enjoy the company of their fellow *paesani*.

The family in Lewis Hine's photograph literally bore the marks of what it meant to be a foreigner or *foranus*: namely, he or she who comes from outside (Benveniste 1, 240-42). In 1890 the Italians made up a mere 2.6% of the population of New York, most of them were concentrated in the district of Mulberry, below 14th street in Lower Manhattan. Why Mulberry? That is where the factories were, and living nearby one could walk to work. By the beginning of the first World War, there were around one million and a half Italians in the United States, with 370,000 in New York City (Baily 9) – enough to create a Little Italy.

The next two photographs are from Jacob Riis's book *How the Other Half Lives*, which I mentioned above. The first is accompanied by the caption "In the home of an Italian rag-picker, Jersey Street," the

second by "Lodgers in a crowded Bayard Street tenement – 'five cents a post.'" Apparently, images like these both shocked and fascinated at the same time, as Riis, for that matter, wanted them to (Gandal 64-5; Sante ix-xxii). And he could count on the new photographic technology to spectacularize the locally infamous Mulberry Bend, the site of Little Italy. Reviewing Riis's book for the *Chicago Times*, a critic noted that it was "a gallery of pictures, each one reeling with horror of its own kind" (qtd in Gandal 65). It is easy to imagine why the book was an instant success, given the effect and the novelty of the photographs.

Above all, the images offered a direct and immediate experience of the place and the exotic types captured by the camera. They transported the viewer to the scene itself, where one became an intimate witness, indignant perhaps but also unable to turn away. At first sight, they seemed to present bare reality, so self-evident and powerful that no further explanation was needed. In fact, the idea of beginning with an archive of photographs signifies for me the choice of a method or, more simply, an absorbed attempt to cross the founding and originary site of an *ethnos* – the Little Italy of Mulberry Street – at the very moment of its taking place. As such, the archive presents us with a geobiography of this site: the detailed mise-en-scene of a people in a cityscape upon which is stamped the seal of its unique festive habitus.

As Alan Trachtenberg points out in an essay on Lewis Hine, "Photographs presumably do not lie." Even if he hastens to add, "Yet, presented differently, in a different frame of reference, they might lead to other interpretations" (127). Tied in with Riis's social reformism, for example, the photographs served above all as accusatory evidence, and in his day they were accepted as such. As Riis knew very well, his photographs had the power to bring theory down to experience and to show effectively how the two could form a seamless argument.

Let us now consider the photographs themselves. While the image of the mother with her child seems too obviously staged – why is her gaze tilted upward, towards the ceiling, rather than on her infant? – the next one with the men crowded into a tenement flat – apparently thirteen in all – seems to be an "action picture" (Alland 30). Almost certainly, Riis took this shot during one of his customary midnight raids. He and a policeman or two would knock on the door of a tenement flat like the one in this picture, ready to break in if it was not opened immediately. Looking at the men in the photograph, some with their eyes barely open and others too tired to open them at all, we can see that they were surprised in their sleep and that Riis shot the scene on the spur of the moment, relying on the new "flashlight" technique (Sante xvii).

Even today, both images are admittedly eloquent. But in what sense? In *How the Other Half Lives* Riis did not trust them to speak for themselves. On the contrary, he had a very precise agenda that drew upon the tradition of "Charity writing" (Gandal 29), which he converted into something else. His pictures and their accompanying text amounted to something much richer, which scholar Keith Gandal calls an "ethnography of poverty" (3-9). Whether this is actually so, we shall see shortly. For the immediate purposes of this essay, it is worth noting that in his attempt to shed light on the mysteries of Mulberry Street, Riis dedicated not one but several chapters of his book to the Italian colony, the most sharply focused and dramatic one being "The Bend" (in the heart of Little Italy).

But we should not lose sight of a crucial fact that emerges from the accompanying narrative of *How the Other Half Lives*. Riis is thoroughly rooted in, if not blinded by, Protestant culture; he does not show any understanding of the popular Catholicism of the Italian colony. The photograph of the ragpicker's wife and child exposes the family's destitute condition as she sits surrounded by an aura of despair (note the gesture of sufferance she makes with her eyes) in a room stripped of all amenities. Intent on portraying the family's abject poverty, the photo apparently has little else to say. The walls and the floor are stained and naked. The room seems to engulf her, its actual dimensions leave little space to move around in. There is no furniture to speak of, and the mattress tied up in a bundle on the barrel behind her suggests that, come nightfall, somebody will sleep in that room – the kitchen or, more simply, a utility room.

The sense of this scene and of the one with the male lodgers caught in their sleep is clearly spelled out in the text that glosses the photographs (56-9). These Italians live like beasts, in the midst of dirt, and in overcrowded and promiscuous conditions. And in 1890 Riis could prop his argument up with the ideology of social and environmental determinism, according to which the physical order was a metonymy of the moral order. Dirty clothes were the sign of spotted souls; the clutter and disorder of a tenement flat pointed to the moral chaos of its occupants. Such was the intended meaning of Riis's photographs, as his own reading of them bears out. For above all else, Riis wanted to change things – for example, enforce law and order, prevent overcrowding, create a building code that would insist on more light and better sanitary conditions, and knock down a few dilapidated tenement buildings in order to create a park with

trees and benches. Ultimately, of course, his photographic exposés could not but put wind in the sails of those who were intent on narrowing the golden gate of Ellis Island.

The sacred cause of the various nativist movements in the first decades of the twentieth century was that of restricting the influx of the “new immigrant,” those who came from south and eastern Europe. By converting this restriction policy into law, the old and still-powerful Anglo-Saxon ruling class hoped to influence the future racial composition of the American population (Higham 95-6, 317-23). In his reformist zeal, Riis himself was not above making racist observations when speaking of the Bend, “that foul core of New York’s slums” (48). In his view the Italians – almost entirely concentrated in Little Italy – were together with the Polish Jews “the lowest of the whites” (Riis 116). At the end of the chapter the author concludes with a brutal metaphor, “The Italian is gay, lighthearted and if his fur is not stroked the wrong way, inoffensive as a child” (47).

If there is an ethnography of the poor in *How the Other Half Lives*, then Riis has achieved it by sparing himself, which, in the opinion of Clifford Geertz, is the one gift the anthropologist must proffer in order to keep his self-respect (2000, 33). The point here is that it is impossible to understand another point of view without in some way identifying with it. As observations like the above suggest, Riis evidently lacked empathy. And as Geertz says in his important essay “Thinking as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of Anthropological Fieldwork in the New States,” “to judge without understanding constitutes an offense against morality” (2000, 40).

Riis’s lapidary observations, so blue-eyed and tough, are not at all atypical for the times. But what Riis now adds is hard evidence, namely the photographs, and who could refute them? One of his pictures was worth more than a thousand words and this he knew from experience. He even built his career on them. Nevertheless, Riis still wanted to control the voyeuristic allure that inevitably informed his photographs, as if he had understood all along that his images, no matter what he meant them to be, truly did not lie.

As a matter of fact, they are much richer in ethnographic information than his policing narrative would have us believe. It is well-known that Riis’s images served his reformist campaign well. But if we look at them from the viewpoint of the Bend itself, these same images begin to betray a larger sphere of allegiance characterized by the spirit and flow of gifts. This we can verify in Riis’s central chapter on the Italians, “The Bend.” Here his narrative tour not only elaborates but also exposes the ethnopathic distance between the photographs themselves and his narrative attempt to imbue them with a heightened moralistic ideology. So that in the final count the pictures prove to be much closer to a total experience of the place than he himself could have imagined.

As the opening photograph of “The Bend” suggests, Riis seems cartographically in control of the situation, but his written account insinuates a doubt: “What a bird’s-eye view of ‘The Bend’ would be like is a matter of bewildering conjecture” (49). In the photo we are given a perspective of Little Italy from above, as if the shot were taken from the roof of a tenement building. Riis begins by introducing a point of view that will match the nomothetic aloofness of his conceptual field, and this choice of position allows him, as photographer, to control the teeming realities of the Bend from a distance. By roosting above the scene, he is able to detach himself from it, as if he were a bird. Subsequently, in his walking tour through the Bend Riis will also personally test “matter[s] of bewildering conjecture,” although the very notion of “shooting” his way through it means that he will keep his distance from what the laws of Italian immigrant hospitality would consider strictly *cosa nostra*.

The detachment that Riis wears as he sets out into the Bend largely depends on the distance that separates his conceptual field from the pullulating life that he is about to study. This separation can serve as a convenient measure for construing the degree to which Riis’s ideological stance influenced the results of his excursion. In effect, he is more interested in evaluating than in understanding. Nevertheless, he does not want to deflate his adventure before it gets underway. The photographer as hero was a feasible scenario for him to toy with. Probably with some such script in mind, he foresees that his task will not be easy when he anticipates, “The entire district is a maze of narrow, often unsuspected passage-ways... for there is scarce a lot that has not two, three, or four tenements upon it, swarming with unwholesome crowds” (49). Regardless of the opening tenement-roof view, therefore, one can easily get lost there. Thus begins the battle in Riis between the photographs and his narrative line, between the site-rich images and his “author-saturated text” (Geertz 1988, 141).

Standing at the corner of Bayard Street and assuming the role of a “curious wanderer” (49), Riis is now ready to turn into Mulberry Street and begin his adventure: “[T]he moment he turns the corner the scene changes abruptly” (50). Once again, his adventure will also be a methodological one, given the kind of scene that opens before his eyes. For the scene itself is already theory, requiring of the outsider a

mathesis singularis. In other words, Riis is about to enter the world of one of his photographs where the scenography of a total social fact – in which everything speaks – awaits him. And what scene appears before his eyes? It could not be more exemplary for our deconstructive purposes: “Before him lies spread out what might better be the market-place in some town in Southern Italy than a street in New York” (50). So it will be the “dramatism” (the word is Kenneth Burke’s via Geertz [Inglis 9]) of the market, and not the buildings, that will capture Riis’s attention.

The market in Little Italy, we can imagine, was a noisy, lively, and complex affair, with an *agon* all of its own. It had its ritual actors and actresses and all kinds of bizarre little scenes. There was bartering, friendly bickering, exaggerated politeness, some trickery, and all kinds of artful face-to-face transactions. What to an outsider might have seemed like an exemplary instance of barely concealed chaos actually represented the invisible order of an immigrant community and its daily practices. The market was the heart of the Bend. It was here, if anywhere, that one could get a sense of how life was lived there. In short, it was the fundamental and defining reality of Little Italy. Certainly, the locus where Italian custom, local law, the practice of everyday life, and community all came together to form a unique ethnoscape. As Riis himself explains to his reader, the site best presents itself through the activities of the crowd, and the preferred place of the latter is naturally the street, where it can display itself and perform according to its age-old script.

Riis’s opening observation sounds the right note. The space of Little Italy that interests us is not physical space. Not the rundown tenements and back alleys. A standard map of Manhattan from the 1890s would show very well where the Italians of New York had chosen to settle. Nor is it the strictly economic space of the market that can explain to us the deep structures of the Italian colony’s collective existence. If it was above all the restricted economy, of money and capitalistic exchange, that were to occupy our attention, we would very likely end up confirming the evolutionary theory of modernism according to which places like Little Italy represented a throwback to traditional, premodern society (Bech 6). In effect, the economic space of Little Italy raises more questions than it answers.

Thanks to recent studies by historians like Sam Baily (1999) and Frederick Binder and David Reimers (1995), we know that the wages of Italian families were among the lowest in the city, well below what was considered essential for a normal life. Few were the families that succeeded in making what was considered a living wage. Riis had every right to denounce the sordid consequences of such apparent misery. But it is precisely this bleak picture that leads us to cry miracle, for 58% of the Italian households reported a budget surplus (Baily 110). Among the various ethnic groups in New York, the Italians had the highest percentage with a surplus of any other ethnic group studied.

In other words, the economic space of the Italian colony is not able to explain how a people hardly able to scratch out a bare living could produce a surplus. As I have already suggested above, the answer is inscribed in the space that existed right under Riis’s nose: namely, the space (and the spirit) of the market where all of the community’s goods flow. Here, however, when we speak of investment, we are no longer speaking in terms of the restricted economy. Rather, we are speaking about the way things – under the rubric of *cosa nostra*, our things – move within a general economy where life itself, in all of its myriad aspects, is the central resource.

If we now go back to the first images of Hine and Riis that we looked at earlier, we can also see other, simpler truths. In Hine’s photograph of the family looking for lost luggage at Ellis Island, the mother is probably dressed in her best blouse because she was scared of dying at sea. If she was going to take the risk of crossing the ocean, then she would also prepare herself for the worst and God’s will be done. As for the boy, his uniform-suit suggests that he has gone to a school, most likely a religious *collegio*, where he would have learned a trade. He would also have learned to read and write.

And what about Riis’s photograph of the ragpicker’s wife sitting with a child in her arms and her eyes on the ceiling? Iconographically, it surely alludes to the archetypal image of the *pietà*, which in turn celebrates the symbolic order of sacrifice. The mother and child suggest that even in a humble ragpicker’s house we can witness the religious reenactment of a total giving of self. In the context of the Bend, this act of giving belongs to the communal ambience of the general economy more than to a form of exchange that measures wealth exclusively in terms of money. So the photograph, it seems, is either culturally rich or merely an outraged representation of extreme poverty, depending on whether one is inside or outside the culture of *cosa nostra*.

Then there is that flashpoint photograph of men caught in their sleep and piled on top of each other in an overcrowded tenement flat. Beyond the obvious wretchedness of the scene, what better proof is there of the existence of values such as solidarity and reciprocity than this exhibit of what still goes by the name of

l'arte dell'arrangiarsi or creative coping. Italian immigrants came to America in small groups, generally from the same village, and usually related to each other by blood. The room is certainly not the equivalent of Stephen Crane's flophouse explored in "An Experiment of Misery." Here the social ties are thick and the informal obligations strict as law. Italians took care of their own; not to do so would have been to lose face. If it represents anything for the cultural insider, it is as the paradigm of a strongly ethical sphere. But none of this is actually visible in the picture.

But I am running ahead of myself. Let us go back again to the point where Riis is on the verge of crossing over into the world of Little Italy, where the form of the crowd takes on the informal dimensions of a typical market day in southern Italy. Naturally, in this vortex scripted as an ordinary day at the market the people are exchanging not only – nor even above all – money, but something much more elusive and ineluctable, like life itself. That is, the market is composed of all those services and offices that range from job offers and apartment renting to letter-writing and the exchange of all kinds of information. It handles identifiable goods with fixed prices as well as others that are not only hard to price but also to categorize. Of course, the market also includes such obvious things as bread, meat, greens, clothes, and general goods of all kinds, things you would expect to find in a street market run by immigrants.

In short, the Mulberry Street market represents not only the place but also the symbolic order of an *ethnos*. What Riis did not understand is that this general order, with its "spectrum of reciprocities" (Davis 5), really existed, an order that converted the market into a model for and a model of a way of life capable of deflecting the indifference of a city that did not respect the fundamental laws of hospitality. The street is social space at its best, and for Riis the Bend must have seemed all street: "When the sun shines the entire population seeks the street, carrying on its household work, its bargaining, its love-making on street or sidewalk, or idling there when it has nothing better to do..." (50).

And there, on the border of the street, Riis begins to note things. For example, he sees a row of women sitting along the curb, each wearing a strange cloth about her head, young and old alike, and identifies this article as a stigma of their servitude, to be worn as long they live. What are they doing? Later he will write, they are "haggling over baskets of frowsy weeds, some sort of salad probably, stale tomatoes, and oranges not above suspicion" (50). Probably Riis is already suffering from a slight case of agoraphobia, having warned us earlier that he would betimes test the Bend's bewilderments. At any rate, he does not seem to know or appreciate what we have since upgraded as the mediterranean diet.

He also notes that the counters of the market stands are dirty and seem to be made up of things put together on the spur of the moment; that the carts of the street-vendors are lined up on both sides of the street (see photo), creating "a perpetual market doing a very lively trade in its own queer staples, found nowhere on American ground save in the 'Bend'" (50). Next Riis sees two old women selling bread in the form of wreathes which they keep in dirty bags of bed-tick. In his disgust, Riis turns up his nose, thereby missing an important aspect of the market. No attentive ethnographic tour of Mulberry Street would want to miss identifying the village from which the stale-bread vendors came. As for Riis, after snapping his photograph, he quickly passes on, eager now to examine a fish vendor's stand, a butcher's – you can imagine what he has to say here – and then a tobacco vendor's, which among other things harbors the statue of an unknown saint.

At this point Riis also notes that there is not a shop or stand along the way that does not have its patron saint. He does not mention that in Italy every town and city has its founding saint and protector. The authority and prestige of cities are built on the gift rhythms of such patronage, and religious and civic feastdays are annually held in honor of them. Given the importance of saints in the immigrant gift economy, it is not unlikely that territorial divisions in Little Italy were marked by these very statues that Riis lumps together in passing. Perhaps he even asked himself, what does religion have to do with the marketplace? He was sufficiently struck by the altar in honor of Saint Rocco to snap a photograph of it for his book. From this image we can calculate that Riis visited Little Italy towards the end of summer because the feast of Saint Rocco is held on August 16.

Saint Rocco had a special significance for the Italians of Mulberry Street (Brown 38, 52). He had a centuries-old reputation of being able to cure those who suffered from the same illnesses that inflicted the Bend: tuberculosis, pneumonia, diptheria, and scarlet fever. His feastday and many other less important ones were an essential part of the general economy of the colony. Nine years later, in 1899, Riis would again turn his attention to the cult of saints in Little Italy and write about Italian feastdays for *The Century Magazine*. On this occasion in 1890, however, only the photograph remains to document his interest in Saint Rocco. It is unlikely that he understood the special significance this saint had in the Bend or he would have spent a word or two in explanation.

Next, in the door of a shop Riis sees a string of sausages which are “big, awkward... [and] anything but appetizing...” (51). When the customers enter the shop, they brush up against them. At this point poor Riis seems truly to have lost his immunity, for he confesses, “What they are I never had the courage to ask” (51). But as if this were not enough, the next scene astonishes him even more: “Down the street comes a file of women carrying enormous bundles of fire-wood on their heads, loads of decaying vegetables from the market wagons in their aprons, and each a baby at the breast supported by a sort of sling...” (51). For our sober reporter these things represent an overload of signs. How is it possible that these women can do so many different things at once – carry huge bundles of wood and loads of greens, while also nursing a child.

But Riis does not pause to ponder. He sticks to the narrative task of description in order to get the picture down in words; he insinuates but does not judge. Riis observes other things, other scenes, but always with the same naiveté and inability to understand. He looks but does not see. For that matter, not even the historians and scholars of the Italian American *archivium* seem interested in investigating the site-rich photographs recounting the colony’s founding.

To conclude, what exactly is it that Riis does not see as he tours the Bend? Above all, he does not see what is publicly manifest: the infraordinary scenes of the market which he not only narrates but also photographs; scenes of exemplary behavior that only make sense when embedded in the gift economy with its peculiar rhythms, flow, sensibility, and needs. More specifically, the market of Little Italy is essentially about the vernacular circuit of giving, receiving, and reciprocating. It is not the market understood as abstract exchange but the market as social drama, where the actors and actresses are occupied not only in the business of physical survival but also in the cultural work of living together, sustained by the ontological order of “being-with” (Esposito 107-10).

It is the meaning of this “being-with” that produces another mode of seeing and living in the world that Riis could not grasp. He could not because, like most members of the predominantly Protestant culture of his time, he had become exempt from the *munus* of the gift economy. He is not at all an individual-in-relation. As the political scientist Roberto Esposito explains, *communitas* “refers back... to an externalization of existence... like the emission of the subject from itself” (108). Riis, it seems to me, has gone in the opposite direction, that which leads to internalization and, in Esposito’s words, to “the immunitary drift” (107). In short, we can say of our photographer of Mulberry Street that he basically entered in relation with the Italian immigrants in the form of dissociation (Esposito 107).

In conclusion, the vital force of Little Italy is based on face-to-face transactions, on direct, personal contact. In Riis’s photographs, such contact converts the Bend into a strategic and critical space. Those who lived there had to be wide awake and ready for anything. It was important to be able to improvise. On the other hand, the market and the neighborhood formed a whole, as did the street and the tenements. In this dynamic but also holistic space the local people recognized each other, exchanged news, asked for and received credit based on their reputation, and renegotiated their prestige and authority on a daily basis. In brief, if Riis’s photographs not only have sense but also sought to make sense of the Bend, it is because Mulberry Street and its gift economy offered a different kind of sovereignty; not that which stands for the *nomos* of political democracy but that which expresses the ethos of an immigrant community. It is this elusive thing which continues to remain the rather exclusive property of *cosa nostra*, a symbolic order that needs to be taken into account when we try to define the benefits of cultural democracy within the paradigm shift of postnationalist modernity.

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Endnotes

[i] See The Jacob A. Riis Collection at The Museum of the City of New York (www.mcny.org). Also see the images from the exhibition titled A Century Apart: Images of Spirit and Struggle, Jacob Riis and Five Contemporary Photographers, also on The Museum of New York website. Relevent images may also be viewed in Douglas Tallack, 'The Rhetoric of Space: Jacob Riis and New York City's Lower Esat Side' in *City Sites: Multimedia Essays on New York and Chicago, 1870s-1930s: An Electronic Book* (www.citysites.org.uk). The Lewis Hine image may be viewed in the Photography Collections Online of George Eastman House: International Museum of Photography and Film (www.geh.org).