

# HOUSING REFORM AND THE GHETTO LAW IN THE TIME OF COVID

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## ABSTRACT:

This short personal essay considers the principles behind housing reform in New York at the turn of the last century in light of the controversies around the ghetto law in contemporary Denmark. I take the example of documentary journalist and reformer Jacob Riis, who photographed housing conditions in immigrant neighborhoods on the Lower East Side in New York at the turn of the twentieth century, as a case study for considering the ways that race informed—and continues to inform—ideals around urban planning. Conversely, I also consider contemporary controversies around the ghetto law, and activism by community members as a way of rethinking a research approach to historical urban reforms.

## KEYWORDS:

Urban reform; New York City; nineteenth-century studies; Jacob Riis; Copenhagen; Danish politics

The first few pages of Jacob Riis's bestselling exposé of New York City's late-nineteenth century tenement housing *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) are fixated on contamination: the way that crime, poverty, and disease spill out into wealthier and whiter districts of Manhattan, the way that the tenements themselves "are the hot-beds of the epidemics that carry death to rich and poor alike."<sup>1</sup> In Riis's birthplace of Denmark, a similar language is part of today's conversation around low-income districts of primarily first, second or third-generation immigrants, which, in the words of former Danish prime minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen, "reach out their tentacles onto the streets."<sup>2</sup>

I began to work on a project about Riis and housing reform in the middle of Denmark's March Covid lockdown, when current prime minister Mette Frederiksen's efforts to contain the actual epidemic by an early and almost complete lockdown were being lauded in the international media. At the same time, her government was leading a fight against Rasmussen's more abstract tentacular contagion, as some of the first residents who were

evicted under Denmark's so-called "ghetto law" filed lawsuits challenging the legislation as discriminatory. The government has, since 2010, been annually updating a "ghetto list" of districts that fulfill a checklist of criteria, including low median income, low education level, and high unemployment rate. But for any district to be considered a "ghetto" at all, it must meet a basic ethnic criterion: 50% or more inhabitants from a non-Western background. Once districts have been classed as ghettos for five years in a row, residents within these areas are subject to doubled penalties for certain crimes, as well as mandates for integration such as the requirement to place children in Danish childcare at one year of age, and the government enforces residential integration with a mandate that no more than 40% of the housing in these districts be publicly owned, razing or selling buildings to private developers and evicting tenants without a guarantee of providing housing of equal quality or affordability.

During the weeks of spring lockdown, I read housing reports from both Riis's time and my own, while also looking for a new apartment in Copenhagen's increasingly inflated rental market. In the strange space of social quarantine, where time both conflates and expands, the distinctions between history and present seemed flexible. In "The Mixed Crowd," a chapter in *How the Other Half Lives*, Riis describes what he calls an Arab community as "soiled by a dirty stain, spreading rapidly like a splash of ink on a sheet of blotting paper," and "the Russian and Polish Jew" as "having overrun the district [...] to the point of suffocation."<sup>3</sup> Rasmussen famously called the Danish districts that his policies targeted "holes in the map of Denmark,"<sup>4</sup> and critics of the policy have often misquoted, or purposely distorted the phrase as "black holes in the map of Denmark." At a recent demonstration against the law in Copenhagen, speakers cited this phrase repeatedly, rather than the more blatantly offensive "ghetto." And for good reason, maybe: the words have the same doubleness in Danish as in English, connoting both simple black stains and cosmic vacuums that implode any matter that enters their periphery. Black holes are, like Riis's dark ink splashes, threatening because they spread, but also because what they spread is so profoundly unseen, unknown, and to the eyes of those describing it, empty.

For a moment in August, epidemic and ethnic contagion overlapped explicitly, when the predominantly Somali district of Gellerup, outside of Aarhus, registered markedly high rates of Covid. "It's not being taken seriously [by the inhabitants]," said

the former leader of the Danish People's Party, who called for a curfew on "ghettos" with high infection rates.<sup>5</sup>

In October, I went to the new Jacob Riis museum in his hometown of Ribe. It's in his childhood home, well-funded and with modern video projections, but still at its core a house museum of a local boy done good. There's a video on the top floor that tells the story of Riis's life. At one point, the actor who plays Riis stands in a green space in the middle of the city, and says in Danish-accented English, "This used to be the worst tenement in New York. Now it's a park." He stretches out his arms expansively, gesturing across what was Mulberry Bend, the housing block that Riis, with the help of then-police commissioner Theodore Roosevelt, succeeded in getting the city to raze after passing stricter building regulations for housing safety.<sup>6</sup>

The museum and most of the scholarship on Riis and the era's housing reform assumes that this razing was a good thing. So did I, until recently enough that I don't have anything concrete to replace that conviction with. The story of tenement reform tells us that the buildings were unsafe, overcrowded, a dangerous breeding ground for cholera and other diseases. To make matters worse, they were expensive, owned by landlords who charged exploitatively high rents from those New Yorkers—mostly recent migrants from Europe and African Americans who had moved north with the Great Migration—who had few other options.

But doubt about the ethics of nineteenth-century reform movements is easily fed by political language around the Danish ghetto law, which has a similarly vague outline of a convincing narrative. Integration as a goal is benevolent if unclear, especially when areas are "parallel societies," in the language of Danish politicians, and as Rasmussen put it in 2019, "a large group of children grow up in an environment where mother and father are out of work, criminality is an everyday occurrence, and which dictates and darkens the perspectives on equality, liberality, and freedom."<sup>7</sup> There is little real evidence in Denmark of the type of social isolation that is fundamental to the idea of the parallel society, where poverty and crime are intergenerational. But Rasmussen's language of childhood and environment eerily echoes the language of the social reformers of Riis's time, who working from understanding of heredity that fell somewhere between Lamarck's and Darwin's theories of evolution, believed that certain impressionable people, especially children, could be influenced for good or evil by their environments in ways that would imprint onto their biology and could be passed onto future

generations. This belief, a precursor to the eugenics movements of the twentieth century, resulted in mass efforts of what Kyla Schuller calls “biophilanthropy,” in which children were removed from poor immigrant neighborhoods and families to improve their chances of becoming optimal American citizens.<sup>8</sup> Though a very different form of migration is at play in the ghetto law, Rasmussen’s focus on the potential dangers of the parent, and the mandate to remove infants into public childcare institutions as early as possible echoes the idea that a break with the foreign habits of family are part of what underlie the law’s understanding of assimilation.

In Rasmussen’s 2018 New Year’s talk announcing the new restrictions of the ghetto law, he opens with an anecdote about meeting two teenage girls from Bangladesh who tell him about their struggles with forced marriage, violence, and discrimination against women. It is in this conversation with two young foreign visitors that the former prime minister anchors his determination to break down the “counterculture” of the immigrant districts and to defend “Danish values”—not in a conversation with inhabitants of the Danish neighborhoods themselves. The tenants’ lawsuits against the government are attempts to establish a dialogue after the fact, and their willingness to go to court is the strongest argument against the undesirability of these districts.

This question of dialogue brings me back to Riis and Mulberry Bend. Did the residents want to leave? Did they have a part in advocating for reform, or did they resist it? Where did they go? These are simple questions—shockingly simple ones—that the scholarship on Riis or on housing reform generally does not ask. Given the politics of archives, which tend to favor the reformer who writes books over the ordinary citizen about whom books are written, and the limitations of textual history, they are questions that may be more difficult to answer than we would hope. But they are questions that at the very least still need asking, in academic spaces as well as more public ones, if nothing else to begin to break down the mythologies of top-down reform and individual Great Men or Women that very clearly still circulate in our political lives today.

In the film about Riis’s life, in the Riis Museum, he’s the only actor. The inhabitants of the tenements appear in reproductions of his photographs, silent and surprised looking. To capture the living conditions of the buildings as they really were, Riis and other photographers broke into tenement apartments in the middle of the night, lit flash chemicals in a frying pan, and fled

after taking a photograph, often before the subjects were fully awake. In one of Riis's best-known photographs, men huddle in cots, evenly lit but with their eyes still closed.

I'm also an immigrant to Denmark, although not the kind that legislation targets. The child of two ethnically Danish parents, I was born in the US, not far from Riis's Lower East Side, and have always also had Danish citizenship. But my immigrant childhood in the US would raise several red flags under the ghetto law. I was kept at home with my brother and sister until kindergarten, and none of us spoke any English until we were four or five. My mother didn't work, always spoke Danish with us, and didn't apply for citizenship until she had been in the country for almost forty years. When I started school, my first friends also didn't speak English. You intuitively find your own, and sometimes your own are just the other people who also aren't. Was this a parallel society? When I was a teenager, I joked that I had grown up in a Danish ghetto of New Jersey. The joke, which of course was not funny, was that no one would ever call it that.

In Denmark, I'm still the immigrant who never gets asked where they're from. But I'm also the immigrant who has moved six times in the six years that I have lived here, shuttled by a rental market that is saturated with foreigners, students, and those who can't afford to buy, or some overlapping combination of those categories.

In my lockdown housing search, I ended up finding a rental in Frederiksberg, a posh and mostly white neighborhood in central Copenhagen, far from what anyone would call a ghetto, although socio-economically homogenous. I found it through friends of friends, which is how everything happens in Copenhagen. My street, Forhåbningsholms Allé, translates from antiquated Danish to something like "Isle of Anticipation's Avenue," and is named after the largest villa on the street. The villa was owned by the merchant who from 1765 to 1785 had a monopoly on the Danish slave trade between Ghana and the Danish West Indies, another black hole in Denmark's global map, but one that politicians are less likely to bring up.<sup>9</sup> That's another issue, and it's also not.

In November, an anonymous group of artists staged a filmed "happening" at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in which they dismantled a plaster cast of the school's founder, King Frederik the Fifth, from its placement in the reception room, and tipped it in the harbor in protest of the continued place of the colonial past within and without the institution. (Frederik purchased the Danish West Indies from the Danish West Indian

Company in 1754, the same year that he founded the Art Academy in Copenhagen). Much of the media conversation was predictably trite, and immediately personal, directed against the department chair who took formal responsibility for the act. But in the end, the act did start a conversation, and as was arguably always the point, the best contributions were more interesting than the happening itself. One opinion piece, by the Danish author Jonas Eika, points to the Academy's official statement, that the bust "was made in a context in which it was normal that the king was authoritarian, and in which the slave trade existed" as an apparently pragmatic normalization of violence and discrimination against non-whites, that far from being relegated to a remote historical corner, echoes through contemporary discussions around the refugee crisis and the "ghetto law."<sup>10</sup> Reading this, I think about the time loop of lockdown, its more expansive sense of present and history, how the demonstrations and the monument topplings this spring and summer in the US and England bloomed out of a frustration with the inequalities that Covid had laid bare, but also importantly from this, the loop of history, the sense of the past as a continuum of the present in our own expanded presents.

There's a text panel at the end of the Riis museum titled "Criticism of Riis." It states that Riis's writings are sometimes criticized for their stereotypical representations of different immigrant and racial groups, but that such representations were a part of the common contemporary discourse. The subtext of this statement, like the Academy's statement, is that some language and events are irrelevant in their commonness.

Riis's stereotypes are very common—the stingy Jews, the warm-blooded Italians, the opium-addicted Chinese—but their triteness, rather than making them irrelevant is what makes them history, and what makes the ethics and motivations behind Riis's arguments legible. Housing reformers before and during Riis's time relied on such stereotypes to illustrate what they saw as essential genetic differences between ethnic groups, and these stereotypes illustrated the theory that some races were older than others, and therefore less capable of flexible assimilation to the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture. Riis donated the proceeds of some of his lectures on the tenements to the Children's Aid Society, which in the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth sent a hundred thousand immigrant children to be raised by and work for rural white families, with the express goal of such racial assimilation. Children of all races were believed to be more genetically flexible than adults. Riis, like many reformers,

was especially interested in the fates of children, and this was a strategic, rather than merely sentimental interest.<sup>11</sup>

Assimilation, integration, and Americanization have this history of scientific racism built into them. This history doesn't become irrelevant because it's widespread, just as the Danish history of colonization isn't moot because other countries were also colonizers. Assimilation is an American history, but it's also a European one. The public housing that is under threat now in Denmark came out of nineteenth century agitation for better workers' housing that overlapped with housing reform in New York. The "orphan trains" of immigrant children sent to be raised by white rural families in Riis's time have their twentieth century equivalent in the Danish experiment of sending Greenlandic children to Denmark for reeducation and sometimes adoption in the 1950s. And when the government mandates that an area needs to include more than fifty percent whites to be safe, and that immigrants need to send their children to institutions as infants to learn Danish language and culture, this history does not seem much like history at all.

In early December, Mette Frederiksen wrote an official letter of apology to each of the surviving six Greenlanders who in 1951 were part of the group of 22 children sent by the Danish government to Denmark as a social experiment in developing a Danish-speaking Greenlandic elite. The premise of the experiment was that immersion in Danish language and culture—and distance from their own families and culture—would spur their education and development, benefitting Greenlandic society on their return. The experiment, which included placement in foster families throughout Denmark, was intended to span under two years, but many of the children never returned to their families again, and far from becoming local leaders, suffered severe social and cultural setbacks. In her apology letter, Frederiksen writes, "The thought that you were a part of an experiment with such significant human costs touches me deeply. Even though the experiment you were a part of apparently happened with good intentions, it was—as I see it—an unreasonable and heartless treatment. It was not you, your rights, or your situation, that were the most important. It was the adults' needs."<sup>12</sup> In addition to the official apology, the government is considered providing monetary compensation to the survivors, now in their seventies or eighties.

The ghetto law has been called "Denmark's largest social experiment," threatening in its early stage to uproot 11,000 Danes.

Frederiksen calls the ghetto law, “one of the best agreements made in Parliament.”<sup>13</sup>

The house that I moved into during spring lockdown is also home to a small film and photo museum, which houses a two-hundred-year-old magic lantern, the early form of slide projector that Riis used to give his first lectures on the tenements that were the source for his writing in *How the Other Half Lives*.<sup>14</sup> I’m working there now, through Denmark’s second lockdown. With the long winter ahead, this time loop promises to stretch further than the first.



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