

David Frum

THE MOST OVERRATED BOOK OF THE YEAR

Bronx cheers to conservatives who've been heaping praise on Jim Sleeper's socialistic *The Closest of Strangers*.

"The cause of bad writing," H. L. Mencken once told a professor who'd been incautious enough to ask, "is, as often said, bad thinking. But what isn't said enough is that the cause of bad thinking is stupidity."

As usual, Mencken was not being entirely fair. For many people, writing is as treacherous as mounting an inflatable pool toy: just as they get one leg wrapped around the thing, it shoots out from underneath them. That's poor Jim Sleeper's problem. In *The Closest of Strangers*, his much-praised book about New York's racial troubles, he can never quite make his words do what he wants them to.¹ Every time he seems at last about to get a grip on them, they capsize him. He re-emerges, sentences later, blowing water out his nose, looking ridiculous.

New Yorkers, in Sleeperese, aren't cosmopolitan or tolerant; they are "marked so indelibly by the vigors and ironies of this difficult passage that one can never be quite comfortable in one's old tribe or parochial faith." Black nationalists are not separating themselves from the rest of America; they are "withdraw[ing] at least provisionally into communal and personal inner journeys in order to reclaim themselves and redefine their terms of entry." Church-going blacks who build their own houses are not merely decent citizens; they are, "though sometimes brusque and formulaic," "dialectical in a way ideologues with all the answers never can be."

What seems to prevent Sleeper from expressing himself straightforwardly is his nervous suspicion that his ideas will sound commonplace unless decorated with big dollops of verbal goo. He was too fearful. *The Closest of Strangers*

has won the praise of people whose tastes don't usually agree. Its dustjacket carries a glowing blurb from neoconservative writer Diane Ravitch. Scott McConnell, an editorialist for the *New York Post*, commended the book in *Commentary*. NY, the Manhattan Institute's excellent new quarterly, has reprinted a chapter.

At the same time, Pulitzer Prize-winner J. Anthony Lukas, than whom nobody is more Politically Correct, received the book with wary applause in the *New York Times Book Review*. Wrapped around Ravitch's blurb are those of Shelby Steele, arch-liberal columnist Sydney Schanberg, and Randall Kennedy, the editor of the new black academic quarterly *Reconstruction*.

The thesis that has so pleased both right and left goes roughly as follows: White racism is not in fact entirely to blame for the poverty and degradation of black New York, and much of what gets condemned as white racism is in fact a normal reaction to behavior by underclass blacks that is intolerable by any standard. Therefore, middle-class New Yorkers of all colors must struggle together against the real threats to the city—uncontrolled corporate investment and disinvestment, real estate speculation, and insufficient federal funds.

Sleeper's conservative readers seem to have decided that an attack on black radicalism by a member of the *Newsday* editorial board who once wrote for the *Village Voice* and *Dissent* is such a stupendous event that it deserves all the encouragement it can get, even if the attack is scalped from twenty-year-old issues of the *Public Interest*. It's rather like the reaction of a Canadian friend of mine when told that a witticism attributed to a nineteenth-century politician in the *Oxford Book of Canadian Political Anecdotes* was, in fact, plagiarized from Charles James Fox: "Well, John A. MacDonald may not have been

the first person to say it, but he was the first Canadian to say it."

But I fear that the conservative critics of Sleeper's book are miscalculating its likely effect—an effect that it is now more likely to have because of their too-hasty applause. Sleeper's analysis won't do much good, and his recommendations—which the municipal authorities are more likely to heed—could cause much harm.

What most fundamentally threatens the stability of New York's neighborhoods, Sleeper believes, is not crime, disorder, and taxes, but gentrification. Here's a little glimpse of Sleeperism, in an anecdote he tells of an Italian neighborhood on Carroll Street, on the edge of Brooklyn's Park Slope. Throughout the 1970s, the neighborhood had been threatened by criminals from a nearby slum tenement. Rising property values closed the tenement in 1981. That victory did little good, though, for "what [the tenement] hadn't managed to do, the yuppies were accomplishing":

Anna Bruno had raised her kids in a rented apartment on the block and would look out at the world from a pillow propped on the sill of her ground-floor window, cursing the Puerto Rican kids on their go-carts. Then a renovator bought Anna's building and told her she'd have to move. . . .

Anna had to move to Florida to live with her daughter. She was stoic about it until her last morning on the block, when the movers arrived; then the dam of her dignity burst, and she hobbled up and down the street, weeping on the necks of her friends. A few forlorn letters from Florida—"There's nothing to do here. I'm all alone"—and then, back in the old neighborhood for a visit at Christmas, she keeled over onto a friend's linoleum floor and died.

But why couldn't Mrs. Bruno have moved a couple of blocks away? Although visitors who spend their time touring the city's posh neighborhoods might find this hard to believe, New York is not a very crowded place. Every New York borough except Staten Island is home to fewer people today than it was in 1960. Brooklyn alone has lost 1.5

million residents over the past thirty years. To the north, south, and west of Mrs. Bruno's old house are huge, depopulated stretches of ground. Why couldn't she settle there? The answer, as anybody who lives in Brooklyn knows, is crime: her neighborhood was one of the very few areas in central Brooklyn where an old woman can walk around the block with some feeling of safety.

But that's not Sleeper's answer. Capitalism killed Mrs. Bruno. Capitalism tosses old ladies out of their homes; "capitalism . . . corrodes the fabric of community life." Because of capitalism, New York is in the grip of a ruthless real estate industry that unfeelingly shoves the old and infirm out of the way in order to make a buck:

What causes all this churning, sometimes more brutal than benign? Most obvious is the city's ever-changing demography, people of wildly divergent lineage pouring in and out, seeking opportunity and freedom. They are responding, in turn, to ever-changing configurations of capital, technology, and culture—of the non-spatial networks I've mentioned. But a more intimate yet often invisible cause of neighborhood churning is a real-estate industry that is to New York City what big oil has been to Houston, a remarkable agglomeration of bankers, investors, developers, builders, owners, managers, and brokers who speculate frenetically on the sites of the great enterprises and headquarters and on the neighborhoods where their owners, managers, workers, clients, and customers might live.

These key players in the real-estate game have a culture and sub-cultures all their own; they sluice the currents of neighborhood investment and disinvestment that are so swift and unsparing. As they try to profit from various communities' emergence, stabilization, upgrading or decline, they stamp the perceptions and preferences of New Yorkers, whose standing in the real-estate market is determined by income and tastes derivative of their relationships to the larger, nonspatial networks of the city.

The solution, Sleeper believes, is to control that arrogant "sluicing" in the interests of neighborhood preservation. Sleeper quotes New York's onetime pub-

¹*The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York*, by Jim Sleeper, W. W. Norton, \$19.95.

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lic housing chief, Roger Starr, as worrying in 1959 about the city's "enemy"—its "internal forces of self-destruction." But Sleeper replies, "Perhaps the 'enemy's' lair really lay closer to home, in the hardheaded calculation of slum realtors and developers, calculations that could be upset only by galloping socialism or a full-employment economy." About the form that the solution should take, Sleeper is characteristically murky: he has nothing more specific to say than that there ought to be "some way for cities to influence or make claims upon new configurations of technology, investment, employment, consumption, demographics." You get the idea.

So does the present municipal administration. The Koch administration had many faults—very, very many—but it did at least understand that the business of American cities is business. Fifty years ago, New York's leading businesses were light manufacturing, shipbuilding and ship repair, entertainment, loading and unloading boats, and railroad-ing. Today they are finance, advertising, publishing, entertainment, and design. New industries need new kinds of buildings, and attract new kinds of workers who need new kinds of homes. The Koch administration by and large permitted those new buildings and new homes to be built. Not everybody liked the change. The new high-rises on the Upper East Side blocked the views of the residents of Park Avenue. Office development choked the midtown streets with traffic. And the city's new residents showed a dismaying lack of respect for its traditional customs: yuppies who rented 1,000-square-foot boxes in the sky for \$2,400 a month found it hard to understand why prominent critics of the "Greed Decade" were able to live in five rent-controlled bedrooms overlooking Central Park for half that sum.

As it happened, no action of Dinkins's was needed to stop the Koch real estate boom. Still, he and his supporters stand vigilant to prevent its return. It is this determination—and not any tendency in the mayor toward bravery in the face of the Sharptons and Daughtrys and Maddoxes of New York—that Sleeper's book will reinforce, if it has any impact on New York politics at all.

Sleeper is articulating a wish that is about all the politics that New York's white left still has: the wish to turn New York into a brownstone Venice, where communities go on living where they always have, as they always have, protected from the chaotic impact of change.

I remember once reading about the daughter of a rich New Yorker of the early nineteenth century. She had been born in 1837 in a house near Battery

Park. Four years later, the family moved to Fourth Street, near Washington Square, and soon afterward, to Greenwich Street in what's now called Tribeca. But "the neighborhood changed rapidly and most of our

friends . . . the Grahams, Townsends, deForests, Berghs, Kips, Kerries, LeRoys, Wilmerdings, Whitneys, and others of the old New York families . . . moved away. We remained here until we were surrounded by immigrant

boarding houses, and then went uptown to live." All this by the age of 16.

If this unceasing motion is to stop—if new yuppie migrants are to cease displacing old Italian migrants—so too must the commercial and industrial

GIVE US THIS DAY OUR *DAILY NEWS*.

Unlike almost everyone I know in New York, I am a loyal fan of the *Daily News*, New York's largest tabloid. Like all great art, it offers a simple reflection of the world. I read the *New York Times*, I know what's going on in Islamabad. I read the *Daily News*, I know what's going on outside my doorstep. And now the *News* is on strike—not just any strike, but one of those passion plays in which New Yorkers routinely destroy their best institutions. If you think living in New York is tough, try doing it without the *Daily News*.

To the New Yorker, there are only three points on the moral compass: (1) the Vietnam War, (2) the civil rights movement, and (3) the good old days of the 1930s, when, as one veteran recently put it, "you could smell revolution on the streets of New York."

Just the other night, for example, I passed a candlelight vigil of people protesting our involvement in the Middle East. Fair enough. But were they holding up signs saying "Hands Off Saddam" or "Kuwait Is Not Worth American Lives"? No, they were singing old civil rights songs. A middle-class New Yorker can't even go out and express his opinion without pretending to be someone else.

Because each new event fits so casually into the coordinates, the *Daily News* strike has been easy to pigeon-hole. It is, of course, a conflict between "the bosses" and "the workers." Never mind that the striking Teamster drivers make up to \$100,000 a year, often without even working a full week. Never mind that the paper is so hamstrung with work rules that bundles must often be tied by one union, untied, and then retied by another. Never mind that its parent company, the *Chicago Tribune*, has lost \$110 million in the last ten years and announced on January 17 that it will close down if it can't find a buyer.

We are New Yorkers, brave and true, supporters of every social welfare program known to mankind. Because our hearts are in the right place, somebody must come in and subsidize us for all the extravagances we create. Thus, writing in the *New York Times*, James Wieghart, who served as editor of the *News* from 1982 to 1984, concluded that the only solution was for some-

body in New York—"with deep pockets"—to buy the paper and subsidize it.

Only a few weeks later, the *Times* opened up another series of editorials called "America's Duty to New York," in which it attributes New York's troubles to "massive Federal unfairness" and whines that "the rest of the country refuses to pay its fair share."

The *News* strike was not two weeks old when striking workers and their supporters were addressed at a street rally in front of the *News*'s 42nd Street building by the leading representatives of church and state, Governor Mario Cuomo and John Cardinal O'Connor. By the time the rally was held, the unions had already torched several delivery trucks. They have since burned down a half-dozen stores.

For the governor, this was an easy one. "You are striking for all of us," he told the union throng. Never mind that, at the very moment he spoke, upstate prison workers were protesting in the streets over Governor Cuomo's own efforts to fire people in order to salvage the mess he has made of the state budget (deficit \$4 billion and counting). Cardinal O'Connor's presence was more interesting. The Cardinal is quite upset because the *News* has hired unemployed and homeless people to hawk the paper on the streets. To the Cardinal, this constituted "exploitation of the homeless" and "unfair labor practice."

Which raises an interesting point. As the *News* itself has repeatedly noted, the unions have become utterly unrepresentative of the population of New York. They are father-and-son unions, 99 percent white and mostly made up of people who have long since moved to the suburbs. Although the *News* has far exceeded the *Times* and the *Post* in putting blacks on the editorial staff (Bob Herbert and Earl Caldwell, New York's only black columnists, have both refused to strike at the *News*), union policies have forced it to go on hiring the sons and nephews and cousins and grandsons of the people who worked for it forty years ago.

The men who are hawking the *News* on the streets and subways today are virtually all black. In fact, it is the first time I have ever seen black men mo-

nopolize any sort of occupational "concession" in New York. The other day I chatted with the man who sells the *News* at the 14th Street subway stop. He is a literate middle-aged man who makes \$40 a day selling the *News* and works evenings doing research for a lawyer uptown. I asked him if he had ever applied for a job at the *News* before the strike. "No," he said, "they've got a very powerful union up there and it's very rough to get in. Many apply, but few are chosen."

Of course, none of this makes any difference to liberal New Yorkers, always living in the past. As I approached my hawk on the subway platform the other day, a little old lady in front of me was buying the paper. When I stepped up to buy mine, a tall, skinny Greenwich Village-type kid with wire-rim glasses pushed between us and shouted, "The *Daily News* is on strike!" I bought my paper, and glanced up the stairs, only to see him shoving the little old lady into a wall. I couldn't get through the crowds to catch up with him, but I promise, if I see him again I'm going to loosen one of his teeth.

The thought of living in New York without the *News* scares me to death. It is, quite simply, "The Voice of the People"—at least, of the people I want to know. The letters to the editor in the *News* are pure gold. "In America you can choose your own destiny." "Why do subway clerks sit there counting change while fifteen people are waiting on line to buy tokens?" "Thanks to the people in the local fire house for bringing my kids Christmas presents."

The people who write for, and read, the *Times*, on the other hand, make your skin crawl. Over the past three years, the *Times* has printed two op-ed page submissions in which readers apologized for being mugged. Both said they understood their attackers' feelings perfectly, felt sorry for them, and only wished they could have done more to help.

Would you want to wake up every morning with the thought of having to share breakfast with these people?

—William Tucker

(Mr. Tucker, TAS's New York correspondent, is a writer for Forbes.)