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Marchers in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn in May protested the killing of Yusuf Hawkins by a group of white youths

New York City: Can It Work Again?

THE CLOSEST OF STRANGERS
Liberalism and the Politics
Of Race in New York
By Jim Sleeper
Norton. 345 pp. \$21.95

By David J. Garrow

JIM SLEEPER'S clear-eyed and often depressing account of New York City's racial politics over the last several decades is an honest and courageous book, one certain to make waves both in the Big Apple and in civil rights circles nationwide. Sleeper, a white, Jewish, 43-year-old editor at New York Newsday, describes himself as "a citizen of a city with which I have fallen in and out of love several times since my first infatuation with it in the late 1960s." More significant, at least in light of a public opinion poll earlier this year which revealed that a majority of New Yorkers would like to move out of the city, Sleeper is a certifiable member of what may be New York's least recognized and most rapidly shrinking minority: those residents who have a visceral, emotional dedication to the city and to the hope for greater racial harmony in its economically uncertain future.

Sleeper's two principal targets are the con-artist black activists—personified by former FBI informant Al Sharpton and Brooklyn hoodlum Sonny Carson—who have offered New York a steady diet of racial hate, and "the left-liberal pieties about race" that have oftentimes inhibited both black and white progressives from acknowledging and disavowing the underside of what purports to be present-day civil rights leadership. Sleeper is no neo-conservative or even neo-liberal; his liberal orientation is manifest in many previous writings for publications such as the Nation and the Village Voice and by his membership on the editorial board of Dissent, the democratic left's premier journal. Hence his indictment of black activists and white apologists who practice "a politics of pure resentment" is both all the more telling and all the more likely to be heatedly resented by those whom he critiques.

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There is no gainsaying the often abysmal quality of recent black activism in New York, highlighted most notoriously by the fraudulent conduct of Sharpton and attorneys Alton Maddox and C. Vernon Mason in the Tawana Brawley hoax. Even newly elected Mayor David N. Dinkins, whose entire public career reflects the traditional racial pluralism of New York's Democratic Party establishment, has been hesitant to frontally attack the anti-Asian economic boycotts led by Sonny Carson. Most recently, the coverage accorded this summer's Central Park jogger trial by New York's oldest black newspaper, the Amsterdam News, has exhibited a racist misogyny rivaling the worst lyrics of such rap music groups as 2 Live Crew and the Geto Boys.

Sleeper readily acknowledges that anti-black "racism in the city" is pervasive and routine," but nonetheless emphasizes that black activists' disinterest in "race-transcendent standards of public truth" simply stokes racial parochialism and antipathy while greatly undermining serious interracial efforts to tackle the city's most fundamental problem, jobs—particularly quality blue-collar jobs for men of color. Sleeper justly praises the little-publicized neighborhood organizing and community development efforts of Alinsky-style groups such as East Brooklyn Congregations, which focus on housing and education rather than the rhetoric of racial victimization, and he repeatedly expresses dismay that such interracial strivings receive less public attention than the destructive antics of a Sharpton. "What has become unusual and unexpected under the pressure of daily stories about mayhem and recrimination is racial comity," as reactive dynamics rooted in the criminal horrors of the Howard Beach assault, the Yusuf Hawkins murder and the Central Park "wilding" spin into a descending spiral that many political and religious leaders would rather avoid than confront.

Sleeper worries about "a city whose great heart is faltering" on account of racial animus, but his larger concern about the present-day politics of race transcends his New York focus. At the end he expresses regret for so many "dispiriting images of black leaders behaving badly," but he reiterates that a "purely symbolic politics of

communal and personal posturing only dooms its practitioners to impotence, and to others' condescension." Already that politics has resulted in what Sleeper terms "the waning of black moral influence upon the larger society," but the consequences of a "politics of paroxysm, grievance and conspiracy" reach well beyond that. "We cannot . . . hope to overcome economic injustice" and America's growing economic divisions, Sleeper writes, "if we tolerate a racial politics that resorts to lies, grandiose distortions, vilification of innocent parties, intimidation of independents with legitimate differences of opinion or dehumanization of opponents." That moral applies just as much to Washington or Chicago or Detroit as to New York.

OTHER commentators before Sleeper have asked, particularly in the Brawley hoax, why so few New York leaders "challenged the venom and the lies," but too great a preoccupation with the shortcomings and evasions of public officials distracts attention from the rapidly growing number of journalists and academic analysts, more often black than white, who, like Sleeper, have dispensed with the hoary pieties and insist that tough questions and honest answers will contribute far more to the political and economic advancement of black America than close-minded repetition of traditional shibboleths.

Washington readers recognize such bylines as Juan Williams and Courtland Milloy, while newspapers in New York and Chicago offer Sheryl McCarthy and Clarence Page. From academia come progressive yet tough-minded voices such as William Julius Wilson, Raudall Kennedy and Shelby Steele. Just as Virginia Gov. L. Douglas Wilder, Mississippi Rep. Mike Espy and Missouri Rep. Alan Wheat represent a new and forward-looking generation of black elected officials, so too is there rapidly emerging a new cohort of frank but liberal commentators on race. Jim Sleeper is an important contributor to this burgeoning change, and *The Closest of Strangers* represents a valuable and thought-provoking analysis of America's oldest and toughest domestic challenge.