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The School Of Hard Knocks

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CITY ON A HILL: Testing the American Dream at City College, by James Traub. Addison-Wesley, 371 pp., \$ 25.

IN "CITY ON A HILL," James Traub has produced a sensitive and empathetic examination of today's City College and the immense educational tragedy that the City University of New York has become.

Traub captures the complexity of CUNY - the vast system that administers 20 colleges attended by more than 200,000 students - with a richness that other educational commentators and critics can only covet. His moving account of the internal life of City College - once the jewel in CUNY's crown and still a bellwether for its policies - is rooted in months of daily on-campus conversations with students and staff members that no other outsider has duplicated. The remarkable breadth of his chronicle exceeds even the personal experience of most City College professors and all CUNY administrators.

CUNY's recent travails have generated heated debate in several journals and newspapers, but Traub - a New Yorker writer and author of a book on the Wedtech scandal - grasps the painful contradictions of CCNY students' and staffers' lives with a frank sophistication that ought to - but may not - impress even CUNY insiders.

The great difficulty in writing or speaking honestly about CUNY's troubles is captured perfectly by Frank Hernandez, a City College student who upbraided Traub for an innocuous 1993 article in The New York Observer: "I'm sick of people criticizing City College. This is my degree I'm thinking about, and I'm seeing it get devalued every time another article appears."

Many City College students appreciate that their degrees have been most devalued by the rhetorical antics of infamous black studies professor Leonard Jeffries, but the moral tension is acute: how can one publicly attack CUNY's bloated administrative bureaucracy, and its hundreds of indolent, burned-out professors, without principally harming CUNY's educationally and economically vulnerable students rather than those whose guaranteed paychecks give them carte blanche to disserve a wonderful - but often woefully unprepared - student body?

Anyone daring to address CUNY's real exigencies has to face that question, and Traub's quiet courage likely will attract agitated attacks from CUNY loyalists desperately seeking to circle the remaining wagons of an institution that scorns external criticism by clinging to what Traub calls "a romanticized self-image."

Appropriately cynical New Yorkers perhaps can grasp better than readers anywhere else in America how CUNY must be understood first and foremost as a municipal bureaucracy, not an institution of higher education, for as with other urban agencies, CUNY exists not to provide an education to its students but to ensure well-paid jobs for its thousands of firmly tenured employees.

Too many commentators wrongly insist that CUNY's tragedy is rooted in the 1969 advent of what's inaccurately termed "open admissions," which was precipitated by student demonstrations and campus turmoil that year; instead, as Traub appreciates, CUNY's problems - like many of New York City's - stem from the still-accelerating decline of the city's public schools.

Thus, CUNY is to a significant degree the municipal victim of a far worse educational tragedy but, as Traub explains in sometimes painful detail, too many CUNY staffers insist on denying how dire the university's situation is. "By what sort of mental alchemy can we justify our silence?" one still-struggling City College veteran asks an affable - and now comfortably retired - administrator. "We can do all the finger-pointing at the high schools," that instructor tells Traub, but "the problem is, we're doing the same thing."

Traub captures the aspirational beauty of City College's student body in ways that rosy-eyed celebrants of the "old" and predominantly Jewish CCNY sometimes only grudgingly acknowledge. He also captures City College's internal complexity, terming it "a strangely hybrid institution" that "may very well [be] getting worse and better at the same time," for in some of "its uppermost reaches an old-fashioned rigor" still benefits the best of City's students.

Traub describes how CCNY and CUNY's greatest educational problems - and most fearsome failure rates - are concentrated in their introductory and remedial programs. Are remedial students largely ineducable? Of course not. Are many of them ineducable in an institution where too many staffers treat students with what Traub memorably calls "the cruelty of the burned-out case?" Yes.

As more of City's oldest teachers retire, the quality of instruction may incrementally improve; a young new philosophy professor pointedly tells Traub, "We have a sense of standards which the people who have been here twenty years don't have. It's so important for students to see that."

Is CUNY savable? Of course, because the energy of its students and some of its teachers and counselors can be - and sometimes is - a remarkable human force. But is CUNY savable under any politically imaginable changes in today's New York? No, because the changes that would be required - breaking faculty and staff tenure and sacking hundreds of burned-out professors and bureaucrats - unfortunately are politically impossible.

Who are the victims? "The greatest victims," Traub insightfully suggests, may be "the students in the middle," whom an "intellectually lively atmosphere" might galvanize and who would benefit the most from an energetic and committed faculty.

But the victims are not the historians and administrators who'll leap to denounce James Traub's supposed political perfidy. The victims are CUNY's students - and, for better or worse, many of them know it. And for those who don't, or don't want to, "City on a Hill" signals that CUNY's conspiracy of silence is over.

Newsday photo by Dick Kraus- Student demonstrations in 1969 led to the creation of City College's open admissions policy