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EMPIRE CITY

NEW YORK THROUGH
THE CENTURIES

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*Boodling, Bigotry, and Cosmopolitanism:
The Transformation of a Civic Culture,
from Dissent, Jim Sleeper (fall 1987)*

Jim Sleeper grew up in Springfield, Massachusetts—"the northernmost city where one could buy each day's *New York Times* in the 1950's"—and encountered the crusading liberal *New York Post* of that time through his Aunt Leah Wechsler Sleeper, a cousin of its editor James Wechsler. On graduating Yale and earning a doctorate from Harvard, Sleeper packed a rental van and moved to central Brooklyn in 1977, feeling, "unaccountably . . . that a very large part of me felt as if I had lived in it all my life."

For five years he was a journalist in poor, nonwhite Brooklyn neighborhoods, writing for local weeklies and the *Village Voice* and *Dissent*. In *The Closest of Strangers* (1990), he foretold the implosion of the city's liberalism on misguided racial policies, and, during the tumultuous 1993 mayoral campaign when Rudolph Giuliani defeated the city's first African American mayor, David Dinkins, Sleeper's thrice-weekly *Daily News* column was required reading for other journalists and politicians. "New York's irrepressible idea," he reminded *News* readers the day after Dinkins's defeat, "means knowing that . . . you can rise above anything in your past that has made you small. You can join great, trans-ethnic movements for social justice or pour your gifts of imagination into an urban experiment E. B. White called 'cosmopolitan, mighty, and unparalleled.' Becoming an American means leaving your old neighborhood and finding the world. And the City of New York is your stairway to the stars."

LIKE the mountains that labored and brought forth a mouse, the ongoing eruptions of charges against New York City officials for bribery, extortion, and racketeering over the past two years have brought forth two quips.

The first belongs to Murray Kempton, long-suffering watchman of the city's civic virtue. Remarking the frequency with which Mayor Ed Koch stood

before the City Hall press corps last year saying, “I am shocked” by some revelation of corruption, Kempton discovered that the great seal of the City of New York bears no motto and proposed that whatever is Latin for “I am shocked” be promptly affixed, in backhanded tribute to the deep public apathy that has itself become an aspect of the corruption.

The second came from journalist Sidney Zion. Watching U.S. Attorney Rudolph Giuliani in titanic struggle with defense counsel Thomas Puccio at the trial of Bronx boss Stanley Friedman, Zion noted that, for the first time in anyone’s memory, “all the defendants are Jewish and all the lawyers are Italian.” This inversion of “natural” order was soon righted with the indictments of former Transportation Commissioner Anthony Ameruso, former Brooklyn Democratic boss Meade Esposito, and Representative Mario Biaggi; but that left undisturbed an irony in a mayoral administration that had come to power pledged to purge minority “poverty pimps” allegedly coddled by its predecessors: with the exception of indicted Representative Robert Garcia, all the major malefactors in the recent probes are white.

The racial and ethnic role reversals anticipated in Zion’s quip may help explain the seemingly invincible public indifference implicit in Kempton’s. New Yorkers of all races seem to sense that, on the other side of the current upheavals, the city’s once-vibrant, predominantly white ethnic and proletarian political culture—progenitor of the New Deal, the 1939 World’s Fair, Hollywood, the interracial Brooklyn Dodgers, municipal unions, myriad bohémias, and even the early Levittowns prototypical of the suburban American Dream—will lie dead or dying. The city is in the grip of demographic and economic sea changes, deeper than the fiscal and political cycles noted by some observers, that could make the New York of 1995 unrecognizable to keepers of the civic flame ignited by Al Smith and Fiorello H. La Guardia. If the scandals arouse little outrage, it is not only because they partake of the spirit of the times on Wall Street and in the White House, but because they are part of an old local order’s melancholy, long withdrawing roar.

In its place must come a new political culture responsive to the burgeoning, unfocused vitality of aliens—the bearers of a black, Latin, and Asian cosmopolis emerging from a hundred immigrant streams deluging the city at levels unprecedented since the 1920s. That tide has been slow gathering strength partly because of its own mind-boggling diversity. After all the talk about a “majority-minority” city that became less than half white at some point during the mid-1980s, New York is only slowly coming to realize that, unlike predominantly black Atlanta or Detroit, it will never, ever have an ethnic or racial majority. A third of its 1.9 million blacks are Caribbeans

whose experiences and agendas mesh imperfectly with those of native American blacks; a varied Asian population of 350,000 is expected to grow 150 percent by 1995 with revolution in Korea and the defenestration of Hong Kong; nearly a million Puerto Ricans have been joined by almost as many other Hispanics, including Dominicans, Cubans, and South Americans. This Asian and Hispanic growth seems to be holding blacks’ own slower expansion to under 30 percent of the whole, while even the city’s white population has been augmented in recent years by 200,000 Russian Jews, Israelis, Poles, Italians, Irish, and Greeks, to say nothing of the young professionals, managers, artists, and activists from the American heartland.

As important as the diversity of these 2.5 million newcomers is the brevity of their time in New York. Most are not English-speaking citizens, let alone registered voters. Scrambling for shelter, taxi medallions, and career training of every sort, they haven’t yet constituted themselves politically. Asians make up 25 percent of the city’s elite public Stuyvesant High School, but as a substitute teacher there for a few days in 1983 I couldn’t make them stop studying chemistry in a class on American labor history. Recently off the boat from Hong Kong or Seoul, they seemed to have had their fill of history and to be intent on rocketing themselves out of its tragedies as scientists or computer magnates. Who could blame them? Not every young Jew who warmed a seat here before them and whose parents labored in sweatshops as do theirs was inclined to build the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union. But then, enough young Jews were indeed so inclined that one can’t help wondering how the differences in culture and historical expectation now visible in the schools will shape the city’s future. It is too soon to know. There may be one or two more Jewish mayors, and after that this American world city will be read only by those unafraid to look into dark young faces.

There is, for some, a certain romance to the prospect. Think of New York as a great human heart which draws into itself those immigrant bloodstreams and, after working its strange alchemy, pumps them back out again across America and the world bearing athletes, impresarios, engineers. The city has done this uncomplainingly for so much of the country for so long that one in eight Americans can trace family ties to Brooklyn alone. A question posed by the old order’s decay is whether New York’s great heart can keep beating. Uncertainty about the answer may be all the newcomers have in common.

Here the romance of immigration sometimes fades for liberals as much as xenophobes: it is noted that blacks resent Korean merchants, or that Russians are as racist as American “rednecks,” or that many Chinese won’t join

unions. Racial succession in labor organizations, boardrooms, nonprofit organizations, and political offices has been erratic, at best; the ominous language of separatism is more prevalent than that of liberal pluralism, let alone proletarian solidarity. Where is the new La Guardia, himself not only Italian and Jewish but Spanish-speaking, whose passionate leadership helped fuse new New Yorkers into a polis? Where are the touchstones and training grounds for such leadership and a citizenry responsive to it?

These questions are complicated by an erosion in the status of cities themselves as foci of national cultural and political concern and as centers of locally committed wealth. What is the political meaning of a city when increasingly fluid market forces move capital and leadership cadres worldwide at whim? Since its earliest days as a Dutch-run, polyglot trading port, New York has always been a conduit for such forces and populations; but even the maintenance of a conduit would seem to require some political consensus, some ability to influence or make claims upon new configurations of technology, investment, employment, consumption, demographics, and immigration. To say nothing of a federal urban policy whose ignorance and bad faith regarding New York's mission have been appalling, the more so when compared to the resources other nations lavish on their premier cities. Who can reconstitute the New York conduit on terms America can support?

White Rage

As these questions lie unanswered in the interregnum between the old order and the new, confusion about the meaning of civic responsibility and belonging is evident in other racial role reversals, not only in the corruption dramas but also in the streets, where an impressive number of last year's rioters were white. In Howard Beach just before Christmas 1986, bat-wielding whites attacked three blacks, one of them killed as he fled into the path of an oncoming car. That horror recalled one four years earlier when whites pummeled to death a black transit worker coming off his shift. "I love you, Mom!" cried one assailant as the jury convicted him of "manslaughter-two" in that incident. None of his sobbing neighbors, who'd backed Koch in part because of his support for the death penalty, could be heard calling for a murder conviction.

Bernhard Goetz came to trial this year for gunning down four black youths who he said had menaced him on an IRT train, paralyzing one of them from the waist down for life by shooting the youth a second time after saying, "You don't look so bad, here's another." Goetz's victims were found

to have police rap sheets as long as their arms, except for the one who will never walk again and whose own father was murdered years earlier while trying to wrest his taxi from a thief. The brutal strangling of young Jennifer Levin in the summer of 1986 prompted her uncle to pronounce New York "a social experiment that has failed," an observation that assumed an interesting aspect when the killer turned out to be Levin's white preppie escort, Robert Chambers.

New York's Year of White Crime continued in The Bronx, a borough half-leveled in the 1970s by tax write-off and arson-for-insurance scams perpetrated upon hapless welfare tenants by a cabal of sociopathic white real estate agents and slumlords. Hispanic entrepreneur John Mariotta became so successful a minority defense contractor, lionized by Ronald Reagan, that he sought help with his booming business from former presidential counsel James E. Jenkins, former White House communications director Lyn Nofziger, and other well-connected white professionals, some of whom fired him, took over his stock rights, and ran his company, Wedtech, into the ground along with the jobs of more than 1,000 workers.

That was child's play beside the romplings downtown of Ivan Boesky and kindred spirits, who sent tremors through the edifice of finance capital, which only recently had been extended out into the Hudson on landfill dumped there as if in arrant mockery of all the square footage and infrastructure abandoned in the Bronx and on Main Streets all over the country whose assets had been liquidated by the arbitrageurs. Meanwhile, a professor of ethics at New York University's Business School told the MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour that 80 percent of his students chose, in a simulation of corporate decision making, to fight the FDA rather than stop marketing a drug known to have killed twenty-two people. As more of the city's "elite" work force engages in the manipulation of words and symbols that consolidate corporate power, abstracted from the rewards and constraints of union and neighborhood roots, the social and political basis for La Guardia's vision of a just, integrated city dissolves.

In a purely tactical sense, public silence about corruption suggests that whites, who still dominate established politics and media, are themselves immobilized by the charges. It is hard to champion capital punishment for murderers and long sentences for boodlers when the boy next door is a candidate for death row and the avuncular clubhouse captain down the block is sweating a subpoena from the grand jury.

But that silence also reflects an embitterment, beyond words, of white ethnics suddenly marginal to civic cultures they struggled hard to make their

own. Expressions of moral outrage assume a consensus that has been violated but to which one can still appeal. For whites who think such a consensus has unraveled, and who felt their claims upon it tenuous in the first place, outrage gives way to simple rage—to street violence and lawless plunder of the commonweal. The decay of white ethnic political culture reflects not just demographic change, but also the conviction of many white New Yorkers that the rules have been changed against them.

Overall, it isn't minorities they're losing ground to—Boesky and the yuppie managerial class come to mind. But try to tell that to people driven out of "the old neighborhood" by muggings and decay. The connections they make between racial change, rising crime, and their plummeting property values are empirically valid and seared into personal experience. The fact that racism itself, including the machinations of unscrupulous white brokers, helps make self-fulfilling prophecies of such fears seem beside the point to people trapped by the consequences.

To them, the real municipal scandal isn't the fixing of government contracts but the unchecked rise of street crime and social and physical disintegration among encroaching poor minorities, as well as the rigid, often naïve illogic of redistribution imposed on them by liberal jurisprudence and politicians like John Lindsay, who, they feel, preferred to spend their taxes on siting public housing in their areas rather than on police. Such impositions seem extortions of gains they've won by following the disciplines of an upward mobility that many of them were willing to share with minorities, until they began to believe that minorities preferred a "free ride" from liberals.

That these "extortions" reached their peak in the mid-1970s, just as inflation and urban disinvestment were undermining their own upward mobility, only compounded their desperation. What Jonathan Rieder, the sympathetic ethnographer of Brooklyn's white-working-class Canarsie, calls "indignation, an emotion born of the perception of injustice," lay at the heart of their transformation. Even now—and the Italian and Jewish lower-middle-class residents of places like Canarsie are furious at us for not understanding this—what distinguishes their rage from the reactionary ideologies or blood racism of the Nazis or the Klan is its focus against specific, wrenching interventions in their neighborhood turf. The perceptions of injustice fueling their indignation may not always be accurate, but neither are the values they believe to be under assault always invalid.

Since the mid-1970s, then, there has been a decay in the city's white-working-class idiom, from one that could express its grievances in tart humor, irony,

and flashing insight into one of sullen, evasive rationalization for attacks on blacks. Compared to that, the transmutation of Jackie Gleason's Ralph Kramden, the garrulous, decent "Big Mouth," into Carroll O'Connor's Archie Bunker, quiver of barbed retorts, was a triumph of human spirit.

By contrast, the new silence is so eerie, so ominous that I was almost relieved to hear it broken on a Brooklyn street one recent warm summer dusk by a bloodied, hard-muscled Italian teenager who came tearing down the block and spun around to face his black pursuers from the safety of the sidewalk counter of a pizzeria where some of his buddies worked. The black youths faded back into a deepening pool of shadows down the block as the boy's white-clad pizza parlor friends stepped wordlessly into the street, brandishing bats. The veins in his neck throbbed as, finding his breath, he cried out to the blacks in a register so deep from the gut it seemed to tap a bottomless hurt more startling than his anger.

"You *muh-tha* . . . *fuck-in'* . . . *nig-guhs*. You're *all shit! Eh-very one-a'yous!* They otta *ship* yous *all back!*" He doubled over, gasping for air, hands on his knees, then straightened up, not satisfied. "I don' care, I tell ya da *trut'*. I wish *eh-very one-a'yous* was *dead*. You ruin *eh-very fuck-in' thing*," he moaned in a despair so deep it riveted everyone on the street. "*I spit* on ya *muh-thas*," he shrieked, "I wish you was *nev-veh ee-ven born!*"

Black Rage

What startles about the white youth's rage is its utter conviction that blacks "ruin" the social compact, as if white ethnic organized crime and "machine" corruption hadn't also diminished every benign form of citizenship by making force and fraud the never-distant arbiters of social order. However exalted La Guardia's notions of justice and community, millions of New Yorkers have always passed their lives in complex webs of complicity with enemies of liberal virtue. It wasn't only the orthodox Marxist left that considered bourgeois citizenship a sham and organized violence the reality; the harsh logic of protected group "turf," both geographically in neighborhoods and economically in industry and bureaucracies, always shaped the contours of liberal citizenship in New York.

Even so, if one measure of civility is the degree to which force and fraud are kept at bay in the calculations of daily life, then New York is a place less civilized today than it was in the 1950s and early 1960s, though not, perhaps, in earlier times. Some would argue that even La Guardia managed to construe liberal institutions not as bourgeois heavens of meaningless "rights"

but, in today's parlance, as a "level playing field" where ordinary people might mobilize against greed and reactionary nationalisms. It's that sense of engagement and dialogue across racial and ethnic lines that seems to have diminished.

What the recent racial role reversals in courts and streets suggest is that, if we except the crimes committed by young males, most blacks have kept La Guardia's faith better than whites, whether it be in the courageous, sometimes heartbreaking simplicity of elderly churchgoers and civil rights marchers or the sophisticated electoral decisions of black voters who have supported worthy white incumbents against facile black challengers when it seemed to them appropriate to do so. Blacks came to New York in large numbers after the war seeking jobs, not welfare, so much so that Irving Kristol, inventor of the insidious little *mot* that a neoconservative is a liberal who's been mugged by reality, wrote in a 1958 Sunday *New York Times Magazine* essay that blacks would in the course of another generation assimilate, like all other groups, to the blessings of economic security and citizenship. One may even say that, in the immediate postwar years, white migration to suburbia wasn't so much a "flight" from minority crime and decay as a response to the lure of privately marketed, publicly subsidized greener pastures.

As the middle-class tax base slipped and jobs left New York for the Sunbelt, however, minorities—last hired, first fired—bore the brunt of a downward spiral of unemployment, shrinking tax revenues, curtailed services based on those revenues, along with increased dependency on the curtailed services. It's important to make distinctions: black women benefited more than black men from the new service economy; more whites lost jobs than blacks. Still, indicators of social distress—infant mortality, welfare dependency, truancy, alcoholism, drug addiction, crime, housing abandonment—began edging upward among blacks, both absolutely and in comparison to whites.

Nor, when all is said and done, can the role of unemployment and discrimination in deepening that suffering be overemphasized. When the full history of the agony of the South Bronx and central Brooklyn in the 1970s is written, the pathologies of "multi-problem" speculators and other, mostly white, schemers will assume greater prominence alongside the pathologies of the large welfare families who were the ultimate victims of bank redlining, blockbusting, and mortgage insurance scams. And not only the minority poor: the true Job of neighborhood racial change in New York is the black lower-middle-class family that scrimps to buy a home in a predominantly

white area only to find its own arrival used by brokers as a signal to disinvest, prompting general white flight.

All of this leads to a black embitterment and to black defection from civic consensus, a defection evident since the 1968 "community control" battles in the schools not only among poor but also among middle-class blacks. Some of the latter could be found in 1984 applauding Louis Farrakhan at Madison Square Garden and in 1987 cheering Alton Maddox, Jr. at a "blacks only" rally at a public high school in the wake of the Howard Beach incident. According to Nat Hentoff, the New York Civil Liberties Union was at first confused about how to respond to the use of a public school building for a racially exclusive meeting; the progressive civic culture of the past has been routed as whites embrace varieties of privatization and so feel disarmed when blacks indulge in separatist gestures.

What models of empowered, integrated citizenship might bridge the gaps in communication and trust, avoiding both doomed black separatism and terminal white cynicism? As always, in a nation virtually tone-deaf to either side in the tragedy of urban polarization, we find ourselves grasping at straws.

A New Cosmopolitanism?

On a freshly fenced ballfield in Brooklyn's devastated Brownsville section in October 1982, gaily colored banners mark off a milling throng of 8,000 American and West Indian blacks, Hispanics, and a small minority of whites by congregations: Lutheran Church of the Risen Christ, Community Baptist, Our Lady of Consolation, R.C., and so on. Their umbrella group, East Brooklyn Churches (EBC), is breaking ground for 1,000 single family homes it's building with an ingenious package of subsidies on fifteen abandoned blocks delivered free by the city. Half the buyers—nurses, paralegals, teachers' aides, transit workers—have come from the neighboring high-rise public housing projects, bearing small nest eggs they'd dreamed of investing in their community.

The new "Nehemiah" housing, now almost completed, was named for the biblical prophet who convinced his despondent neighbors to rebuild Jerusalem's battered walls. It represents a triumph of urban republican virtue across years of patient community organizing by East Brooklyn Churches. EBC representatives stunned the local political establishment by handing the Brooklyn borough president their resignations from do-nothing community boards and demanding a meeting with his shadow boss, the county Democratic party leader, to talk about city services. EBC registered 10,000 new

voters, 70 percent of them black, without once using slogans about black power or anyone's time having come. It also doubled local turnout in the November 1984 presidential elections.

"Contrary to common opinion," cries the Rev. Johnny Ray Youngblood at the rally, "we are not a 'grassroots' organization. Grass roots grow in *smooth* soil. Grass roots are *shallow* roots!" His incantatory power catches his listeners, summoning their strength and spontaneous "Amen." "*Our* roots are *deep* roots!" ("Aw-right!" "Praise God!") "Our roots have fought for existence in the shattered glass of East New York and the blasted brick of Brownsville! And so we say to you, Mayor Koch, We Love New York! And we say to you, Council President Bellamy"—the crowd joining him now, on its feet, thundering, "WE LOVE NEW YORK!," shifting the emphasis gradually to "WE," as in "Listen to us: *WE* Love New York!"

The mostly white dais is stunned. The bishop of Brooklyn is blinking back tears. Here, in 1968, watching people pick their way to the elevated IRT past rows of abandoned buildings and over rubble-strewn lots prowled by wild dogs, visiting Boston Mayor Kevin White made the *Times's* Quote of the Day by sputtering that he'd just seen "the beginning of the end of our civilization." In 1975, with virtually nothing left standing but public housing, the then city-housing commissioner Roger Starr proposed "planned shrinkage" of the area—the calculated withdrawal of services and resettlement of population. Then in 1979, EBC began building a "power organization" and turned the city fathers' assumptions upside down. In hundreds of house meeting and lay leadership training sessions run by the late Saul Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), EBC studied the structure of local power. It began simply, with winnable goals: new street signs, cleanups of local food stores under polite but daunting threats of boycott; crackdowns by the district attorney on local "smoke shops."

The group's growing clout caught the attention of its national parent church bodies, which together contributed almost \$9 million for the Nehemiah project. The city donated the land and a \$10,000 federal Community Development subsidy to write down the purchase price of each house. The state provided low-interest mortgages. But the initiative and ownership is EBC's—and its individual buyers', whose probity and discipline have made local bankers, contractors, politicians, and bureaucrats seem predatory by comparison; often it was only the bishop of Brooklyn who helped EBC embarrass or intimidate local elites into doing their civic duty.

Now, at the rally, the mayor leads the crowd in a dramatic countdown and a bulldozer roars, opening the earth for the homes. Huddled at the edge

of the crowd are a couple hundred dazed-looking middle-aged whites who might have stepped out of Archie Bunker's neighborhood—and who, in fact, have come by bus from "his" area of Queens. They are members of the Queens Citizens Organization (QCO), another IAF affiliate. QCO's president Pat Ottinger takes the mike and cries, "Our trip to Brooklyn today has reinforced our belief that there is no boundary between us. We are all one neighborhood, one great city. Your struggles are our struggles! Your heartaches are our heartaches! Your victories are our victories!"

The crowd roars back its welcome. The Queens visitors loosen up, smile, wave. The elected officials, accustomed to shuttling two-faced back and forth across the color line, are visibly impressed. "Two years ago," Ottinger later confides, "you couldn't have gotten my neighbors here in a tank."

The EBC effort—doggedly interracial yet almost Jeffersonian in its community-based well-springs of virtue and power—is but a straw in the wind. There are others: replicable models of public/private sector collaboration, "learning curves" shared now by varied actors involved in neighborhood change—the lenders, developers, brokers, residents, planners, and media image makers and interpreters who for so long have worked at cross-purposes to make a wasteland of urban promise. The contradictions in their interest cannot be glossed over, yet the lesson of community organizing is that they can be negotiated. There are the beginnings of constructive racial succession in the leadership of unions like AFSCME and the ILGWU. Even the oftnoted mismatch between new white collar jobs and an unprepared populace may not be as stark as it seems, because of unanticipated economic developments and new cultural resources among immigrants.

But none of these encouraging developments, and not even all of them together, yet herald a new civic culture. What the Queens visitors to Brownsville experienced would have to happen to tens of thousands more like them to change a city the size of New York; and any viable new politics would have to acknowledge and somehow address some white ethnic grievances, if only because their anguish resonates so deeply throughout the powerful suburbs and the larger national culture upon whose solicitous regard the health of the city depends. Even those New Yorkers who've all too easily dispersed to suburbia carry within them pockets of civic loss and longing, and are slow to understand how something like the EBC rally in Brownsville can contribute to restoring their souls.

What's worth remarking about that event is that 8,000 mostly black and Hispanic poor people instructed white officials and onlookers in the rebuilding of civic consensus and a decent America. *That* kind of racial role reversal

is part of the new tide that must gather strength. The city is blessed with two and a half million newcomers innocent of its recent mistake and ancient feuds, and another two million "outsiders" uninitiated into its subtler corruptions and cynicisms. Even thousands of young white Americans from the Heartland keep bypassing Manhattan for outermost Brooklyn and kindred locations to cast their fates with the urban struggle. "New York is the most fatally fascinating thing in America," wrote James Weldon Johnson at the turn of the century; "She sits like a witch at the gate of the country." She still does. An embodiment of our worst fears about ourselves, but also of our deepest strengths, New York offers abundant instruction to a nation becoming as diverse and interdependent as the city herself. Merely coming to know her better would constitute a reasonable return on the investment the nation ought to make in her future.