

THE (CLOSEST OF STRANGERS)



LIBERALISM AND
THE POLITICS OF
RACE IN NEW YORK

JIM SLEEPER

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**Liberalism and the Politics
of Race in New York**

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The Negroes of this country may never be able to rise to power, but they are very well placed indeed to precipitate chaos and ring down the curtain on the American dream.

—JAMES BALDWIN, *The Fire Next Time*

He was grave and silent, and then he said sombrely, I have one great fear in my heart, that one day when [whites] are turned to loving, they will find that we are turned to hating.

—ALAN PATON, *Cry, the Beloved Country*

How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! How is she become as a widow! She that was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces, how is she become tributary! She weepeth sore in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks; among all her lovers she hath none to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they are become her enemies.

—The Book of Lamentations

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Dedication and Acknowledgments

I dedicate this book to the children of New York City and to all New Yorkers who manage every day to overcome the obstacles discussed here—without the benefit of this type of discussion. Much of what's best and much of what's most painful about race relations in New York is unspoken or spoken sideways, with a wink, a nod, a shrug. That is not as it should be; there are too many things we need to tell one another and our children in order to help the city find a clearer voice in the years ahead. I hope this book will contribute something to such an effort.

Some of my material was gathered originally with the steady encouragement and inspiration of Irving Howe, who, as editor of *Dissent* magazine, has published a dozen of my essays on New York City politics and race relations since 1980, culminating in a special fall 1987 issue of *Dissent*, which I edited, "In Search of New York," republished by Transaction Books. When Peter Steinfels was editor of *Commonweal*, he, too, gave me invaluable opportunities to develop my ideas in print.

A Charles Revson Fellowship at Columbia University in 1982–83 let me read some New York City history, and I am grateful to Eli Evans, a historian and president of the foundation, and Eli Ginzberg, a distinguished economist and director of the fellows program, for their support. The immediate impetus for this book came from a discussion with Nicholas Von Hoffman, who helped me sharpen my ideas in conversation and encouraged me to hammer out a proposal.

My colleagues at *New York Newsday* have given me a wonderful community and a treasure trove of lore and understanding of the city. My editors, Anthony Marro, Jim Klurfeld, Tom Plate (now editorial-page editor of the *Los Angeles Times*), and Ben Gerson made possible a three-month leave in the midst of a very busy year; as editor of the New York Viewpoints section of the paper, Ben has been a brilliant and gracious interlocutor in our many workaday conversations as we've edited opinion essays touching the subject of this book. Special thanks, too, to my *Newsday* colleagues Christine Baird, Nina Bernstein, Joe Dolman, Jim Dwyer, Merle English, Josh Friedman, Mitch Gelman, Rita Giordano, Ron Howell, Leonard Levitt, Bob Liff, Michael Powell, Manuel Perez-Rivas, Sydney Schanberg, Ernest Tollerson, and Karen Van Rossem for their thoughts, their encouragement, and their help.

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Many of the people who gave of their time and archives are quoted or credited in the book itself; those who appear briefly or not at all but to whom I feel a special debt include Frank Arricale, Charles Bagli, Andrew Cooper, Mario Cuomo, Robert Fitch, Eric Foner, Mike Gecan, Lou Gordon, Roger Green, Cheryl Greenberg, Jerry Hudson, David R. Jones, Francine Justa, Martin Kilson, William Kornblum, Irving Levine, Amanda McMurray, Deborah Meier, Nicolaus Mills, Jim Miskiewicz, Joshua Muravchik, Mark Naison, Morris Renek, Jonathan Rieder, Jim Rooney, Gasper Signorelli, Roger Starr, David Trager, Mildred Tudy, Gus Tyler, David Unger, the Reverend Johnny Ray Youngblood, and Jitu Weusi.

These people and many others I spoke with showed me that growing always means stumbling toward truths intuited but unproven and that dignity, especially in encounters across race lines, has something to do with how you handle yourself without adequate information, analysis—and protection. Naturally, then, while I couldn't have written this book without them, they aren't going to stand with me in everything I say. The risk, like the debt, is mine.

Finally, I thank my wife, Rachel Gorlin, and my editor at W. W. Norton & Company, Gerald Howard, two children of the city who, in their different ways, have been the anchors of my life and work.

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Introduction

Into the Abyss

One of the more candid observations by a public official about life in New York at the end of the 1980s came not from Mayor Edward Koch but from the city's often less than candid comptroller, Harrison J. Goldin, during a televised Democratic mayoral primary debate in August 1989. Maybe Goldin's abysmally low standing in the polls and the prospect of imminent retirement from politics had loosened his tongue; or maybe he couldn't resist the chance to score a quick point off his nemesis, Koch. Whatever the reason, when the mayor remarked, "Almost everyone wants to come to New York . . . to visit, but more likely to live," Goldin departed from the campaign norm to say something that rang absolutely if leadenly true:

Ed, I think that we're not going to save New York until we get a mayor who recognizes that there are an awful lot of people who want to leave here, who would leave here if they could. We need a mayor who would acknowledge that, because that's what it's going to take to begin to improve the

quality of life. That's why businesses aren't coming to New York. That's why businesses are leaving New York. Because of the crime situation. Because of the public schools' deterioration. Because you can't find an affordable apartment. . . .

On its face, Goldin's evocation of a city in which many feel trapped and others are held only by slender threads that are snapping one by one each day offered nothing new. New York has always been a crowded, messy conduit, a place people pass through as immigrants on their way to the rest of America or as aspirants to nationwide celebrity and clout that transcend the city itself. Since its founding in 1625 as a Dutch-run, polyglot port, millions of its residents have been transients bearing burdens self-imposed by migration, idealism, or pathology—conditions that, for a while, at least, wouldn't let them live anywhere else. With always inadequate assistance from New York's public and private institutions and plenty of discrimination from those who ran them, each wave of newcomers has gotten its feet on ground, learned American rules, and won a brief ascendancy in the city's civic, commercial, and cultural life. Then it has spread out across the country and the world, bearing athletes, impresarios, engineers, political leaders—new Americans.

The only thing constant in the city itself has been this relentless churning of populations, of real estate, of public and private endeavors of every kind, and, with it, the uniquely gritty, vibrant, and dense life that both enchants and revolts its visitors. But New Yorkers themselves couldn't sustain the shocks of their own diversity and intensity without hammering out at least some provisional folkways. These have generally included a rough but ready tolerance, indispensable to survival, and an admiration, even a thirst, for excellence, everybody's ticket out of the maelstrom. Each reigning ethnic or interest group in the city's history has tried to impress these and other, sometimes contradictory, values on new arrivals through local authorities—the neighborhood cop, teacher, politician, shopkeeper, activist, social worker—who have often been resented but just as often been decisive in molding the next generation of New Yorkers. When they have managed to teach tolerance and excellence, the city has disgorged both believers in democracy and new elites into the nation's bloodstream and the world's.