EXCHANGE.

FORUMS, NOT SHOW TRIALS

New York City

Nation reviewer Haywood Burns, president of the Nation Institute, has drowned Jim Sleeper's brave and eloquent book The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York in deception ("Apology for Archie," Dec. 3, 1990). Sleeper, we learn, is a big fan of Ed Koch. He opposes the principle of one person, one vote. He thinks the civil rights movement is responsible for today's urban problems. He even denies that institutional racism exists. Sure, and I'm Queen Cleopatra of the Egyptians.

Come on! Does anyone think that if Sleeper had written such a David Duke-type tract, The Nation would have bothered to assign it? Does The Nation debate with The Klansman? Burns simply puts a hood over the entire book. We never learn its subject—New York's flawed but uncommon interracial cultural and political tradition and its collapse; its argument—the need for the left to base its actions on truths that can travel across interethnic and interracial boundaries; or that a section of the book criticizes what the author believes is The Nation's longstanding patronization and contempt for African-Americans, going back to the 1930s.

It's almost as if we were back in the 1930s. The institutional arrangements put in place to advance blacks since the civil rights revolution cannot be criticized today any more than those designed to help workers after the Soviet revolution. Point out that a new class has benefited at the expense of the intended beneficiaries, and your criticism is automatically assimilated to the destructive attacks of racists and counterrevolutionaries.

This utterly cynical school of criticism justifies distortions and deceptions as necessary for preserving the gains of the revolution. It might concede that some honest critics are trying to strengthen the left through their criticism. But the critics' evident courage and credentials make it all the more necessary to destroy their reputations. Objectively, the argument runs, all criticism plays into the hands of enemies and has the same destructive effect. Well, lack of criticism has its effect too. And now there is no socialism in the Soviet Union left to criticize.

The same mentality that once refused to distinguish between a Sakharov and a Solzhenitsyn now reduces The Closest of Strangers to an apologia for Archie Bunker. Can't we ever learn? Instead of staging literary show trials with Beria-like prosecutors such as Burns, The Nation should be strengthening our movement by sponsoring forums about books like The Closest of Strangers. How about it? Bob Fitch

FORECLOSED DEBATE

New York City

I'd be surprised if some Nation readers aren't wondering whether I'm really as bigoted as Haywood Burns reports in his review of The Closest of Strangers. Have I spent thirteen years accumulating what he calls "a wealth of experience . . . as an organizer, public servant and journalist" on the left, only to produce a "naive," "mean spirited" book "full of racial insults," such as using "the term 'Negro' to describe Americans of African descent"? Can it really be that Sleeper "either does not appreciate the full meaning of racism or he is so mired in it that he is incapable of separating himself from it"? Worse yet, do I really like Ed Koch?

Or might it be that our terms of racial discourse are getting a much-needed overhaul; that The Closest of Strangers is part of that effort; and that Burns, scrambling to defend the old orthodoxy, sees only darkness in the dawning? His review is more crudely reductionist than any others (see especially Salim Muwakkil's, in the December 12 In These Times; and more are coming). I'll send them all to anyone who writes to me at 225 E. 14th Street, Apt. 2B, New York, NY 10003, to show that, in trying to anathematize me, Burns has merely isolated himself.

He tries to foreclose debate with cheap shots. I use "Negro" sixteen times in 345 pages, always in historical context, e.g.: "Ever since the left and the Negro first met over battered tin coffee pots in the city's cold basements during the Depression, their destinies have been woven together more tightly than many black leaders would like. Perhaps the time has come for white leftists, too, to reassert the relationship." That slavery was a "variant" of other exploitation is Carey McWilliams's thesis; I agree with McWilliams in context but write often of America's special debt to blacks. My point about white ethnics isn't that they've made "more sacrifices" than liberals; it's that they've had bad experiences that any serious politics must take into account.

As for Burns's claim that I agree with whites who see more bad than good in blacks, read page 130 and learn about Burns's scholarship. On Koch, read pages 108-15, including Burns's citation, and pity Burns.

His other complaints, too, are wrenchingly out of context, though I do think Jitu Weusi, whom I portray at length as an honorable man, is "badly confused" about nationalism and socialism; I'd be amused to hear Burns argue otherwise. Nor does Burns tell you that he himself is in my book, in an anecdote unflattering to the City University of New York Law School, of which he is dean; or that I don't just "slam" The Nation but critique its racial coverage across a whole chapter. Why so shoddy and duplicitous a review?

It's tempting to mimic Burns's cagey "either/or" formulations: Either he has no intelligence or he has no integrity. But mainly I think he's angry. He's made a career of trading deftly on the proposition, familiar to Nation readers, that blacks' unique experience in America equips them to lead social-change movements; that their grievances are loose threads that, when pulled, unravel the whole fabric of oppression and lies. When I deny that racism nourishes great insights in its victims with anything like the regularity of leftist deference to black "leaders," Burns thinks he hears an ancient enemy. Even after the tank demagogy in the Tawana Brawley and Central Park jogger cases, he hears "racial insults" only from me (but can't say what they are).

I do excoriate some black protest leaders and their apologists of all colors because I'm convinced that a politics based on dramatizing racial grievances hasn't the ghost of a chance in America. Nor can elaborately extrapolated legal assaults on an ever more elastically defined racism ever dissolve racism. They'll do what Burns's review does: expand the meaning of racism to encompass not only every truly aggrieved but misguided soul who voted for John Silber but also even me—and, in so doing, constrict and catechize the ranks of the racially correct until they become an elite—Burns's "true proponents of racial justice."

The left can do better, as I show with Harlem's "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign of the 1930s and today's Hospital Workers' Union in New York. Nobody funds such approaches, of course; they don't offer comfortable careers. What offends Burns, both a law school dean and a self-proclaimed agnostic on the question of whether Tawana Brawley was raped, is my refusal to make the

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buppies is that each bears the distinct markings of individual history. While these eight may drink at the same club, it's clear that geography, gender, class, education and even birth-rank in family sharply delineate what each feels entitled to pursue.

It's also a play that can't decide on its genre, sometimes looking like naturalism, sometimes cabaret. But the production's slow moments are redeemed by Jack Landron, who brings a Shakespearean clown's double-talking grace to the role of Kevin, a first-generation professional trying desperately not to screw up.

MUSIC NOTE.

GENE SANTORO

Charles Mingus's Epitaph

Charles Mingus's musical ambitions and abilities were as prodigious and far-reaching as his other appetites. An avid student of European composers like Debussy and Bartok, he also saw himself as the heir of Jelly Roll Morton and Duke Ellington. One central concern of those two giants was the relationship between composition and improvisation, the dialectical motor that powers jazz. How to reconcile soloing with the more expansive structures made possible by a big band became a subject Mingus explored as well. He opened the territory for later investigators like Muhal Richard Abrams, John Carter, Henry Threadgill, David Murray and Wayne Horvitz.

Epitaph is one of Mingus's major statements on the matter. The ambitious piece—with a score for a thirty-piece orchestra 500 pages (and nearly 4,000 measures) long—was rediscovered only in 1985 by the composer's widow, Sue Graham Mingus, and musicologist Andrew Homzy. Homzy pasted the yellowing fragments together, in some cases bar number by bar number; then critic-composer-musicologist Gunther Schuller, a longtime friend and professional associate of Mingus, adapted the results.

In June 1989, nearly thirty years after it was written and a decade after its composer's death, Epitaph debuted to a sold-out Alice Tully Hall. (There was a botched attempt to play and record it at Town Hall in October 1962, but due to time constraints and poor planning the performance was a fiasco and the United Artists album that resulted was mangled.) Several months later, the two-CD Epitaph (Columbia), a recording of the Lincoln Center set, was released, with a forty-four-page booklet of exhaustively detailed notes by Homzy and Schuller.

Conducted by Schuller, the orchestra boasts all-stars like trumpeters Randy Brecker and Wynton Marsalis, altoists Bobby Watson and John Handy, tenorman George Adams, trombonist Britt Woodman and pianists Sir Roland Hanna and John Hicks. They tear into Epitaph's eighteen sections with an appropriately fierce vengeance—although had Mingus been at Lincoln Center, he might well have infuriated the participants (and goosed the proceedings) into an even feistier mode.

The music demands every bit of the players' considerable drive and talent. It's difficult, at times almost inchoate, partly because of Epitaph's sheer magnitude and many shifts. It's also rewarding: Its riotous gargantuan sweep scrambles gutbucket blues and sanctified church, Morton and Ellington and Monk, Stravinsky and Bartok and Tin Pan Alley.

In classic Mingus fashion, perspectives multiply as styles careen across Epitaph's sprawl—from ominously mournful ballads to grungy up-tempo stomps to classically organized set pieces. Sometimes the ensemble work, which is usually taut, floats with the lush and gradually unfurling harmonies that mark Mingus's introspective side. At other times the band explodes into strutting and swelling, the edge-of-cacophony exuberance that's also quintessential Mingus. Solos, both scored and improvised, sometimes take center stage and sometimes just flicker at the ensemble's edges. Even a casual listener has to be staggered by the music's range and power.

Bravo, the cable TV channel, taped the two-hour-plus concert, and scheduled it to be shown in its entirety on January 18 and 27. Check your local listings for exact air times.

EXCHANGE.

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customary obsequies to such hypocrisy and to his sentimentalism about "those who have tried hardest to alleviate [the black poor's] pain." The gasps of incredulity punctuating his review aren't about my being mired in racism; they're the protestations of a man being stripped of his own racial specialness and the intricate structure of moral exemptions within which he and others have taken refuge from political reality. It is they who've let "the black poor" down with a politics that has become a moral and strategic disaster. The Closest of Strangers is a wake-up call.

Jim Sleeper

BURNS REPLIES

New York City

My response to Bob Fitch: Your Highness, there is nothing in my review to suggest that I feel the "civil rights revolution" is beyond criticism. However, those who do criticize, Jim Sleeper included, are not beyond a critique of their critique. A forum for forums might be a good idea—as I indicated in my review, Sleeper probably has a lot to offer. Be forewarned though: If he starts talking about "Negroes" or does a 1990s version of an Amos 'n' Andy caricature of black speech with some made-up quotes, I, for one, will not suffer in silence.

George Scialabba's summary of that portion of Jim Sleeper's argument he chooses to summarize (and it is the major part) is balanced and fair. If he rereads my review I think he will find that I address all those issues—perhaps not with the "evidence and nuance" that he would prefer, but then, since he appears to be fair, I am sure he would acknowledge the difference between a book review and a book for these purposes.

It is not that I missed Sleeper's point. It is that I disagree with it, and by extension with Scialabba's excellent summary. To wit: Legal structures are not "behind the back" of the electorate. They are part and parcel of our democratic system, and Americans have always taken great interest in what their courts were doing (hardly "out of public view"). Scialabba might want to revisit Tocqueville's Democracy in America on this point. Further, the contests are not between "legal and other appetites" so much as between those who discriminate and those who are discriminated against—"class" actions usually on behalf of the racial minorities, women and the poor. Also, it is simply bad history to assert that effectual and enduring racial victories can be won only by "interracial electoral majorities." Many enduring and effectual victories have been won in other areas, and electoral majorities are often unreliable guarantors of minority rights (see Tocqueville again on the tyranny of the majority). That is why we have a Constitution and a Bill of Rights—and why we all should be leery of subjecting them to a plebiscite.

As far as too great a reliance being placed upon "a rhetoric of grievance and victimization," who is to tell a victim how much it hurts, when to scream and in what way? Surely Scialabba might find some better explanations as to why we have not reached common ground than that of the discriminated-against crying out against their discrimination.

Try white racism, for example. Sleeper and Scialabba both slide right on by it with not much of a nod. My review did not doubt the
"centrality and significance" of Sleeper's argument about the "relationship between political strategy and political culture." My quarrel with him was the extent to which he makes these concerns central, while taking so little account of the virulence and the persistence of white racism as a form of social pathology. We cannot come to true common ground as long as Sleeper, Scalabba and so much of white America are unprepared to make this a central issue and a political concern. Articulating it is at least as important a job for black and white leaders as the one Scalabba has assigned to them. In fact, and I hope he would agree, it is part of it.

As for Jim Sleeper, I did say he had a wealth of experience. I never placed him on the left, however, and would never do so with anyone of his racial views. My purpose in describing his analysis was not, as he would have it, to "anathematize" or isolate him but rather to let potential readers know exactly where he stands—which unfortunately does not isolate him but rather places him squarely in the middle of a host of "ancient enemies" who have long blamed black people for their own victimization and attacked liberal and left efforts at its alleviation.

On the "Negro" question, Sleeper really just doesn't get it. His excuse for using the term is that in a big book he used it only sixteen times. We should be grateful it was not seventeen? Once was one too many. As to limiting its use to its "historical context," Sleeper is uncharacteristically unclear as to what he means. We can all hope that he is not suggesting we go back to calling racial and ethnic groups what they were called at earlier points in history when discussing those periods.

Sleeper concedes, as he must, that although he attributes to Carey McWilliams the argument that slavery was just another variant of the economic exploitation experienced by countless whites, he wholly adopts that argument in his book and proceeds from it. He must, therefore, bear the weight of my criticism of that analysis. Similarly, by making a blanket charge that his positions have been "wrenched hideously out of context," Sleeper attempts to escape from direct engagement of the specifics of my critique. If I have mischaracterized his position on affirmative action; one person, one vote; full due-process rights for recipients of public housing or public education; the role of public defenders; or any other substantive issue, he should say so. On reread Sleeper comes off no better on those (and other) topics than he did the first time around.

As to references to me in the book, they were not mentioned because they were not worth mentioning. In the anecdote concerning CUNY Law School the only reference to me is as the designated recipient of recommendations from a student committee concerning a public interest lawyer award to be made at graduation exercises. Furthermore, even assuming the truth of Sleeper's account, it is at least highly debatable if his anecdote is "unflattering" to CUNY Law School, since it concerns a discussion within the graduating class as to whether C. Vernon Mason should receive the award from the class. The proposition was eventually voted down. From all he has said, I am sure Sleeper does not quarrel with the result and associates himself with the views of the majority of students involved. The second, and unrelated, reference is to an account of a racial incident I witnessed in which a white gang attacked, as Sleeper recounts it, "some black men"—actually it was a lone black youth, but in a single review, working within The Nation's word limitations, I hardly thought it necessary to inform the readers of this reference or to make this (or other) relatively minor correction.

I will comment neither on Sleeper's integrity nor his intellect, but I cannot ignore his hyperbole. He knows full well that there was nothing in my review, or that I have otherwise said, to suggest that I believe Jim Sleeper is the only one in New York to engage in racial insults and name calling. The practice is one I have condemned all my adult life. My point simply was that he does engage in racial insults and name calling. At least some of the gases he detected in my review were because I had thought and hoped he was better than that. My biggest gases arising from his response to my review come from the astounding statements he makes concerning "legal assaults on an ever more elastically defined racism" and the futility in America of a politics based on "dramatizing racial grievances." As to the first, Sleeper should know that the problem today in the legal realm is that the courts are giving an ever more restrictive definition of racial discrimination and increasing the difficulty of proving it. The definitive problem here is not that the civil rights advocates' definition is too broad; it is that the conservative courts are making it too narrow.

As to the politics of dramatization of racial grievances not standing a "ghost of a chance in America," did Sleeper sleep through the civil rights movement? It was precisely through this means that an entire society was changed. If it now refuses to change even more, this may be more a commentary on the society than on its critics. Whether America will respond or not, good and decent people of whatever hue must continue to cry out. Racism just won't go away. It cannot be papered over. It must be exposed and eradicated.

As should be clear from my review, I do not disagree with the community-organizing, co-alition-building tactics that Sleeper advocates. Where we sharply differ, however, is over his negative view of the continuing importance and efficacy of publicly confronting racism and the full use of available legal tools to excise it from the body politic.

In the end I see both the darkness and the light, but "darkness" apparently has a different meaning for me than it does for Jim Sleeper.

Haywood Burns

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