

Above The Battle: The Price We Pay

By James A. Sleeper

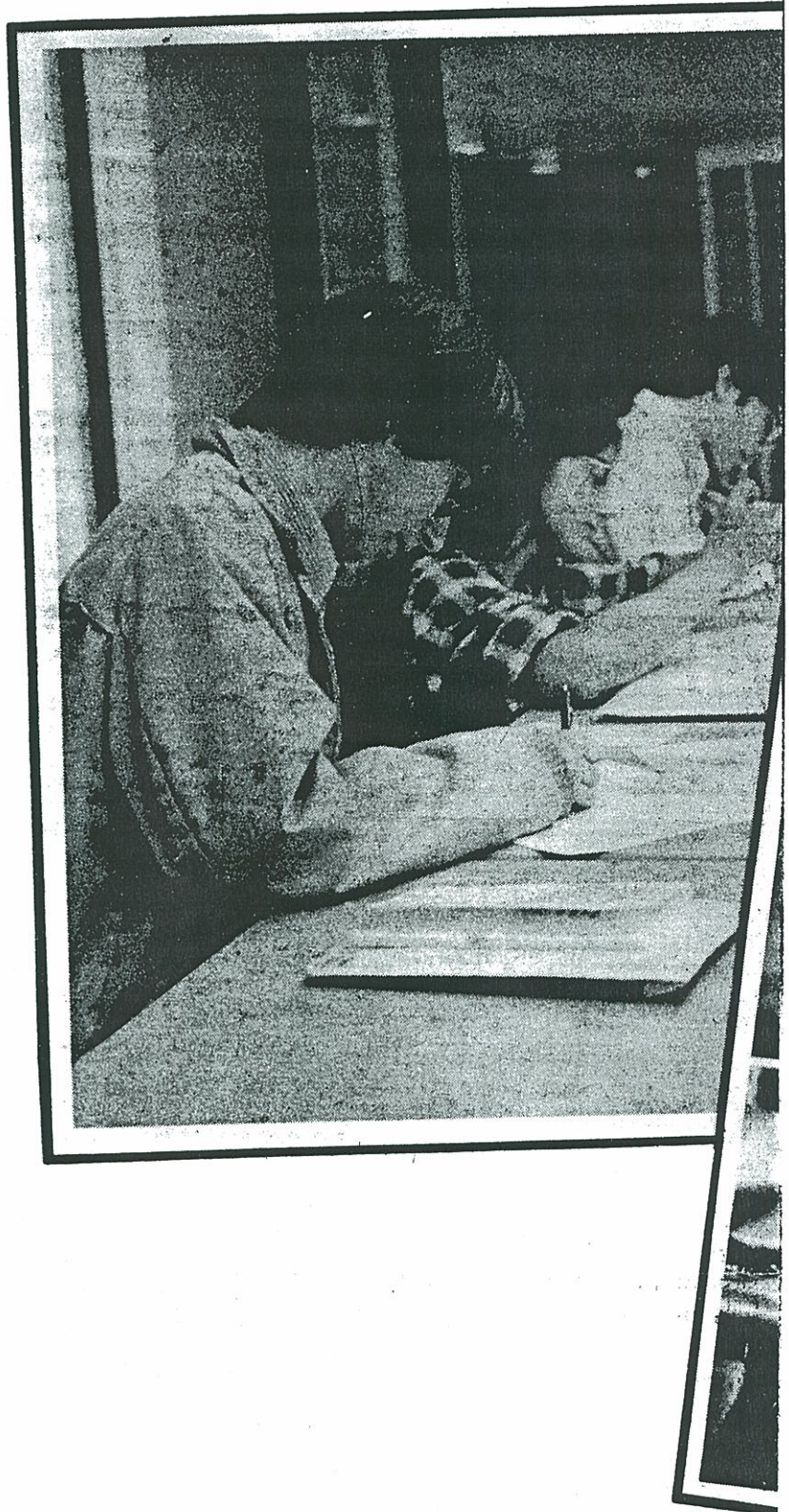
One watched the lives [white people] led and the excuses they gave themselves, and if a white man was really in trouble, it was to the Negro's door that he came...The Negro came to the white man for five dollars or a letter to the judge; the white man came to the Negro for love. But he was not often able to give what he came seeking; he had too much to lose. And the Negro knew this. When one knows this about a man, it is impossible for one to hate him, but unless he becomes a man—becomes equal—it is also impossible to love him. Ultimately, one tends to avoid him...

—James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

To put it mildly, the thirty-odd white, middle-aged working men in my class at the Veterans' Division of Newbury Junior College did not agree. "He's a bitter man!" "A Communist!" "A fag" they'd cried when I'd read them the excerpt in our classroom at St. Mary's High School in Central Square, and for a while their venom threatened to dissolve fragile bonds of trust built with their Harvard graduate-student teacher over six short weeks.

Baldwin had moved me too, but differently, and as the epithets flew I was getting hot under the collar. I was ready to let fly, to call them names, and the strength of my feeling surprised me. Too much was at stake; I held back, took to the board, talked about racism and capitalism, tried to get them to stay with the possibility that black working people raising families have hopes and fears like their own. And when Baldwin spoke at Quincy House later that month I challenged them to confront two of their demons—blacks and Harvard—face to face. The undertaking thrust me instantly into a social "no-man's land" and taught me something about what it is like to be raised comfortably "above the battle" in an America where working whites and blacks are fighting it out.

* * *



Money had brought our class together; I'm paid by Newbury, while the Veteran's Administration pays the students' tuition and an additional cash stipend for regular attendance. Most of the men are in school primarily for the extra cash—an inauspicious beginning I felt sure we'd transcend as the group took on a life of its own.

"The purpose of this course," I said on opening night, "isn't to 'teach' you academic sociology. Our society is in turmoil—some would say falling apart—and yet most sociologists seem to be trying to keep abreast of the action as if they were referees in a fast sport. History doesn't have any referees; everyone is a player. It doesn't have fixed rules, so Nixon's football analogies don't really hold. You have to learn to call the shots for yourselves. Social scientists may help, but ultimately they can't do it for you. There's already a lot of knowledge in this room, about working, about raising families, about the armed forces—knowledge I don't have. But it won't do you much good unless you bring it out, find its main themes together, and begin to explain why things are as they are. I see this class as a good chance to do that; let me pick somebody at random and we'll give it a try."

They shifted uncomfortably as my gaze rested on one of the younger men. "Would you tell me your name, sir, and describe the kind of work you do?"

Larry was scared, but now the heat was off everyone else; a buddy quipped, "He don't do nothin' much at work!" and we all laughed. As Larry offered a short, self-deprecating sketch of his stock-sorting job at the Finast warehouse in Somerville, I realized that most of the men hadn't been in a classroom for years. I felt presumptuous; these were adult lives I was confronting, not data, and their faces told me more than I wanted to know as glimmers of interest struggled across features usually stolid, blown out, confused, or pugnacious because of the Blackboard, the Teacher, the Drill Sergeant, the Foreman. For me, that night the niceties of clinical description blurred into the broad strokes of oppression.

But the features were thawing, and others joined in. When six had spoken of their jobs, I asked, "Has anyone noticed a difference between the comments of the older men and those of the younger ones?"

"Yeah, us older guys are prouder of our work."

"That's just 'cause you bastards 've got seniority!"

"Naw, listen—when a guy learned to work twenty years ago he picked up different values than today, right?"

Agreement was unanimous that times have changed; the men told me and each other about changes in unions and production which have undermined pride in work. "And that," I said almost triumphantly, "is the start of real sociology. Now perhaps we can compare that with what other observers have said, and ask how things might be changed."

I was happy, yet haunted by premonitions of difficulty which took shape the following week as the inevitable testing began. Men twenty years my senior approached me with pointless jokes about decorum, schoolboy excuses about absence, and fears of their ability to give me "what you want." These charades wouldn't help us to face our real differences, and that was precisely their point—to protect us from the embarrassment of assuming equality and then having to confront the sociological truth.

The truth emerged anyway in essays they wrote about their jobs. A man's fifty years would flow by on two sides of a page:

When I was in the warehouse I'd be in work early just to be with the guys, now I'm always late. Everybody's uptight, the bosses don't even trust one another, they go through the motions, but you can see it, there's less freedom and the atmosphere stinks. In a way I feel sorry for these poor slob...I'm just bidding my time hoping and praying I can retire in another seven years, I sure hope so.

Looking back to my high school years I kick myself for not following my baseball career. I was pretty good, at sixteen I was playing semi pro-ball. I loved the game, but I missed the boat between working and running around with the wrong kids. I had no one to confide in, me coming from a poor family, we all had to work, and that was the important thing at the time.

When I retire all I want to do is fish, take in professional sports, and do a little traveling me and my wife enjoying life they way it was meant to be, together.

Another student, a father of five who works at Western Electric, wrote of a buddy who turned against his former co-workers after he'd been promoted to supervisor. The student had taken him aside to say, "Look Jerry, you're just hurting yourself, you're acting like an asshole," and for his trouble was reported to the office for insubordination.

We'd go for beers after class. Frank's paratroop outfit had been awakened one night in 1958, herded onto planes, and flown over Berlin. "They were going to throw us to the Russian invasion as a token resistance."

"My God, Frank! What did it feel like circling Berlin just knowing that?"

"I'll tell you," he said, screwing his eyebrows hilariously and puckering his lips as we emptied the pitcher. "I cried. All I could think was, 'Poor me, Poor me!'" He nodded his head slowly as I mimicked him, eyeball to eyeball.

"Half the guys on the plane were crying. And, man, when they told us we were turning back, everybody started throwing up. I mean, we were so happy!"

And so were we. But could I tell Frank I'd been a Conscientious Objector?

* * *

In class I spoke about the alienation of work under capitalism, and its perpetuation through excessive consumption and addictions and anti-social escapes. I explained how we export the worst of the exploitation to foreign workers, citing what happens in Puerto Rico and Taiwan (and, in the past, Shanghai, Havana, and Saigon). I described Latin American peasants who get a few cents a day growing coffee, yet have to buy their wheat from us; we keep governments in power there which force them to plant only coffee, so we can get it cheaply and control the wheat market. I spoke of guerrillas who want to overthrow those governments and our corporate influence, and showed how, if they succeed, the corporations will squeeze workers tighter here at home. "Either they put you in uniform and send you off to prop up dictatorships, or they take it out on your hide back here. Profit's the goal, not your well-being; the two don't go together as well as we've been told."

The men got angry, some of them at me. "If you're going to pull down the American flag, do it gently, mister," growled one, "'cause some of the men who died for it were my buddies."

I caught my breath audibly. "Look, a lot of things I say in here were painful for me to discover. I never had your experiences, but it's partly the things you've all been telling me that have led me to share what I honestly think, based on my own limited experience and reading. It isn't easy for me to say I think we're in for hard times, and that a lot of those men who died for the flag have been 'had'."

"Jimmy," a guy called from the back, "I want to ask you something. You study these things, right? Okay. Do you think about this stuff twenty-four hours a day? I mean, why do you do it?"

I wanted badly to answer but didn't know how. "Sure, I guess I think about society a lot. Our backgrounds were different. It's a bad analogy, but when I was in high school and we went out for Phys Ed, I saw from the way some

of the guys could handle the ball that they did it all the time, on their own. I guess when we went back inside to Social Studies, and I made comments there, some of the guys must've felt the same about me. I had different things encouraged in me; I had some advantages because though my father started poor, and worked his ass off, he wound up employing people—well, people like you. I'm still learning where that got me, and what the price was. It's sort of like, we have to know how and why we've become so different."

Some nights I'd sit back, hands behind my head, and just listen. Other nights I'd push the men to keep looking at some contradiction they'd stumbled upon, holding both sides in tension until something changed. Still there were barriers between us, and the strongest to surface that autumn in Boston was racism.

What can I say? Sledzy arguments, innuendos, inflated anecdotes—and legitimate complaints about abuses in preferential hiring and busing. Racial tensions had increased, I argued, because of scarce jobs and deteriorating schools for both black and white working class families. Our economy has always permitted blacks some exit from chronic unemployment in times of plenty, but it has found them easiest to fire when times are hard. If blacks refuse to bear the brunt of the current depression, they become scapegoats for white workers unwilling to share it. That keeps the heat off employers and the upper class. Take away racism, "heroic" wars and pacification programs like welfare or unemployment compensation, and the corporate profit system has to admit it can't make room for everyone; then it must resort to outright repression, using techniques and technology developed since the sixties to cope with future uprisings.

That made some sense to the men but it hurt, and seemed to them, ironically, to come from "ultra-liberal" Harvard. Baldwin spoke to "Harvard types" too, didn't he? I felt angry and isolated—from the class, because, despite my sympathy with the men, I couldn't stomach the bitter mistrust and racism; and from "liberal" (really "corporate") Harvard where I'd never felt at home. As I left St. Mary's one night, a police siren warbled and the ground

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beneath me seemed to swim. Is there no peace?

Of course, I reflected bitterly, I could "stabilize" my relationship to students like these simply by trading upon my assets and employing or managing them, learning the habits and subtleties of command; their racism need not concern me. My present teaching is impotent, naive; why beat my head against the wall?

The question never really deserved an answer; when I saw that Baldwin was coming to Harvard, I decided on a field

trip instead of a retreat. I considered my worst fears: we might find an effete writer regaling black undergraduates whom my students would think had edged out their own kids to get to Harvard. Worse, the Harvard audience might greet the men with raised eyebrows, even with a conjecture that Buildings and Grounds had turned out for the evening. But it was an opportunity, a risk the men would never take outside our class. I suggested a vote, everyone abiding by the outcome.

My fears came down to earth in group

discussion. Most of these life-long Boston-area residents had never seen Harvard, and wanted to leave St. Mary's for an evening. Those who were strongly opposed had little to say; I asked for the "yes" votes first to spare them embarrassment, and they frowned at the floor as a large majority of the hands went up. But they earned my respect by showing on the night of the trip.

"What does it cost to go here, Jimmy?" they asked as we strolled around the Yard. "How smart d'ya have to be?" They were my guests now, and I was almost embarrassed as we wound through the campus toward Quincy House, looking through windows at undergraduates sprawled on leather couches set against "real" oak paneling hung with oil portraits.

Four hundred and fifty people had come

to hear Baldwin, about eighty per cent of them black. The feeling was lively and warm, but my students at first sat quite stiffly. Soon a small, grinning figure was leaning over the podium talking to us. I glanced at my "guests" again and knew that a lot was now in Baldwin's hands.

He said the American Dream is over. He said we had all better know our pasts, and learn the truth about American history, because if we can't face that much about ourselves, we'll never know one another for real. He said we have to be honest for the sake of our children—"a-a-all our children," he repeated, smiling warmly around the room. He said black people have lived with suffering before, and so have something to teach the rest of America in the years ahead.

Later that night I sat quietly at 33 Dunster with a few of my students. Most had heard him with respect, some with faces I hadn't seen before. One said it was "nothing new;" another admitted he'd felt "like a mouse set into a box with a cat" but had warmed considerably during the talk; another said his mind "had been blown." "You know," Dan mused as I walked him to the bus, "I've missed out on a lot. I'm the same age as you, but I never had this college life. I wish I had time to sit and talk these things over with people, know what I mean? I learned a lot tonight, but these people at Harvard kinda scare me, y'know?"

We stood on the curb, hands jammed into our pockets, staring at our feet pawing the ground. Then he went home to East Somerville, to his wife and three kids and a quality control job at Polaroid; I turned back into the Yard, where the lamplight of a hundred thousand campus and suburban bedrooms revealed the faces of young dreamers staring into books or at cracks in the ceiling, heads encased in

earphones, wired to their stereos in a kind of emotional intravenous.

* * *

Do you ever wonder why we have been imported to this enclave surrounded by clusters of old three-deckers and empty lots where our age-mates, back from the service, are pounding the pavements, where young women strangely haggard work the night shift and Dunkin Donuts, where men with lunchpails punch in at Finast and Fenton Shoe, where old women on their way to our dining halls slip off gaseous buses onto the ice before dawn? What are we doing here? How shall we live? Are we somehow part of their burden? Will we always stand over against them?

Pitting working-class whites against blacks keeps the "white heat" off us, but it keeps a lot of the warmth away as well. That absence of social peace—however "refined," however accepted—is hurting us more than we know: those at the top, for all their sophistication, become wedding-cake figures, deprived and innocent of the world around them; those in the middle barter themselves daily, hustling and striving and somehow always missing the point. Baldwin says that blacks still "free" of those maladies become not only victims of whites' hatred and fear, but, ironically, furtively, sources of the love they inhibit among themselves.

Two nights after his words first focused the confrontation between my students and me—two nights, into "no-man's land"—I dreamed I went to the elderly black woman who came each week to clean my childhood home, and we embraced and wept together for the sadness of an affluent family in the suburbs. That won't get me very far with most blacks, and Dan and the rest of the class will probably never hear about it.

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