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**AGCA THE GOD**  
Alexander  
Cockburn

**PRIVATE  
PRISONS:  
THE DOWNSIDE**  
Craig Becker  
Amy Dru  
Stanley

**CORPORATE  
CRIME (II):  
PROPOSALS**  
Mark Green  
John F. Berry

**FAITH, HOPE &  
GRACE PALEY**  
Carol Sternhell

**FALLEN STARR**  
Jim Sleeper

**'LAST LOOK'**  
Mindy Aloff

## The Apple Polisher

JIM SLEEPER

THE RISE AND FALL OF NEW YORK CITY. By Roger Starr. Basic Books. 258 pp. \$17.95.

Ever since he panned Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* in *The Village Voice* twenty-three years ago, Roger Starr has been the kind of public figure New York City's housing activists love to hate. He has often invited that hatred, delivering himself of dyspeptic observations about an ill-mannered populace whose selfishness and myopia he blames for the disaffection of major investors and hence for New York City's fall from civic grace.

Not surprisingly, a small army of hecklers, effigy-burners, muckrakers and pamphleteers has dogged Starr's footsteps up the slopes of capitalist apologetics to its summit on the tenth floor of *The New York Times*, where since 1977 he has written most of the editorials on local housing, economic development and elections (he is the arbiter of the paper's endorsements for the City Council, State Legislature and Congress). "Twinkle, twinkle, Roger Starr, tell us how your profits are," chanted one group of picketing tenants in 1974 when, as Abe Beame's housing commissioner, Starr released a study showing that landlords' costs had outstripped their incomes from publicly-regulated rents. In a characteristic response, Starr felt moved to tell a *Times* reporter that "as a young radical I used to prattle about human rights versus property rights. It's not so easy, I've discovered, to make the distinction."

Such sophistry from someone who'd never known privation enraged the Metropolitan Council on Housing, which demanded that Starr resign. "Where res-

ignation is concerned," he wrote the group's chair, Jane Benedict, "I am indeed resigned to receiving telegrams from the Met Council." But part of him loved it. Like Mayor Edward Koch, Starr seldom passes up an opportunity to flail the ghosts of liberalism past. His has to be one of the longest-running political sideshows in town.

More often, however, Starr delivers in the cooler language of policy intellection what Koch acts out in the vaudeville of electoral politics. *The Rise and Fall of New York City* is a disappointing book, but it articulates better than *Mayor* the assumptions about growth, equity and the legitimate exercise of urban power that run the city and that guide the *Times's* editorial page in its positions on the Koch administration. Partly for that reason, Roger Starr has more to teach us than Ed Koch does.

Unlike the Mayor, Starr wears his capitalism as comfortably as an old tweed coat. He salts his discourse with homespun anecdotes drawn from his enormous knowledge of the city's history to illustrate his belief that free enterprise and the urban promise are inseparable, so long as their occasionally rocky relationship is mediated by statesmen of tact and urbanity.

He tells us that courting capital requires well-mannered city officials and good workers; that it requires such legal bribes for investors as generous zoning and tax concessions; that those and other social costs of private ventures must be artfully marketed to restive taxpayers; and, most important of all, that the city needs the provisional dictatorship of visionaries like Robert Moses, who forced open the city to an automobile age that would otherwise have passed it by. That there is no Robert Moses today is one of Starr's great regrets.

These are not new themes. They have appeared in Starr's earlier books on housing and the urban environment and in his *Times* editorials, which seem to

*Jim Sleeper researched Roger Starr's life and work as a Charles Revson Fellow at Columbia University in 1983.*

have been recycled for this book. But Starr is now 67, and *Rise and Fall* also reads like an elegy, an effort to transcend journalism and lay claim to New York as Gibbon did to Rome. We are in fifth-century Rome; democracy has become a riot of bread and circuses, sustained by elites who'd rather pander than build. Roger Starr stands alone on the bridge of the ship, a watchman in the twilight of entrepreneurial glory:

Above all, the city government could have avoided arousing in its citizens false hopes of frozen rents, and the false belief that government can accomplish miracles of egalitarianism through government repeal of economic activity.

Because the government did arouse false hopes,

the city faces a future in which it does not have the political support to hold off demands that it cannot meet with the means it expects to have. . . . The only question will be whether a new leadership will emerge, making the rise and fall of the city a cyclical process as regular as the tides, or whether New York has had one rise and is having but one fall.

For Starr that question has but one answer.

It is as easy to refute Starr's analysis as it is to disdain him for his description of Marx in *The American Spectator* as "a coarse, self-congratulatory, improvident, faithless, petty, tyrannical, ugly man." Yet I am moved by the disillusionment of Starr and the other postwar developer-statesmen who staked their careers, with an almost religious passion, on the notion that New York's curmudgeonly builders would coordinate their investments with the enlightened public policy of a provident national government.

Shaken by the Depression and World War II but buoyed by the possibilities of the New Deal and the unexpected resiliency of the postwar boom, Starr and his cohorts at the Citizens' Housing and Planning Council, where he was executive director for fifteen years, believed in economic growth, big government, even big unions—all sparked to excellence, of course, by civic-minded, integration-oriented capitalist visionaries like themselves. Their faith was betrayed in the halls of Congress and corporate boardrooms and not in the communities where Starr fought his battles with recalcitrant activists, but

that seems lost on him—even now. Still, we would do well to listen to his complaints.

It is too easy to forget that Starr was an early and consistent champion of the city's extraordinary public housing system and that, even while promoting urban renewal against the protestations of Jane Jacobs and her neighbors in the West Village of the early 1960s, he was also defending that same program against charges of creeping socialism by suburban real-estate interests. Jacobs was right to warn that "cataclysmic" infusions of government-backed redevelopment would irreparably damage the fabric of neighborhood life, but Starr's prophecy that in rejecting public planning the Village left itself open to the speculative updrafts of private planners has also proved correct.

Of course, the planning Starr championed wasn't genuinely public. As urban analyst Paul Du Brul has put it, the Citizens' Housing and Planning Council "gave a veneer of social concern to the classically political builders who made vast fortunes on public housing and Mitchell-Lama [middle-income] projects." When a "reformed" public sector in the late 1960s began to block Starr's capitalist visionaries in the name of "advocacy planning," he turned against it. *Rise and Fall* rests on the assumption that liberal politicians, anxious to please obstreperous community groups, hinder capitalist development without demonstrating even the intention of delivering anything else; they leave us with the worst of both worlds.

The left might agree, drawing the lesson that "reform" is not enough. Since Starr despairs of revolution, he wishes reformers wouldn't raise expectations in the first place. His book is a catalogue of their illusions. More subtly, I think, it is a catalogue of his own, which are intelligible only if we know something about who he is.

Starr was born in 1918, the only child of a family located midway between the city's mercantile German-Jewish community of "Our Crowd" and the great Eastern European Jewish proletariat of the Lower East Side. Although Starr's father, Frederick, was born in Russia in 1879, he came to America early enough to earn a B.A. from City College in 1899. By 1910, Frederick Starr was shipping sand and gravel to the fledgling Russian Jewish builders who put up vast stretches of multifamily dwellings in the

Bronx and Brooklyn in the 1920s. (As housing commissioner, his son Roger presided over the abandonment of these same buildings, calling for "planned shrinkage" of the city.) Starr's childhood was comfortable. Through his father's business he came to know the city as few of his kind could. At large in a world of boats and construction, he learned which of the city's inlets were tidal and which fresh; where the hulls of old boats lay buried; where the striped bass spawned and how to fish for them; where the ash from Brooklyn's coal-fired boilers was dumped; how the economics of a tenement was inscribed on the backside of the janitor's wife as she scrubbed down the stairs in exchange for their lodgings.

Starr's New York was also a city of panoramas. From the decks of his father's barges he glided past the sweltering masses crammed along the shore—the contrast reminiscent of *Dead End*, Sidney Kingsley's haunting 1935 drama of waterfront squalor and adjacent wealth, which Starr cites in *The Rise and Fall of New York City*.

Starr knew the city well, but at some remove, and his distance from it increased when he was sent off to the Lawrenceville School at 15. Lawrenceville's Spartan regimen may have made many an adolescence miserable but it also marked its survivors for distinction, implanting in them an indestructible if perverse nostalgia for its torments, along with a proclivity to raise families not at home to Jewish callers.

Starr swallowed his injuries there and at Yale, where he was automatically excluded from fraternities and exclusive senior societies. Pre-eminent among his classmates was William Bundy, whose forbidding features, even at 18, seemed to embody the stern visage of American power and its determination to surmount the challenges of the 1930s. As class president, Bundy was ably assisted by Cy (Spider) Vance, Sargent Shriver and William Scranton, whom Starr defeated in a spelling bee to win, "for his orthographic excellence, a kindly pat on the head," according to the class book.

They were all great good fellows, knights-errant of a commodious American capitalism; but a pat on the head is not to be confused with the tap on the shoulder that would have ushered Starr into Scranton's senior society, Berzelius, or into Bundy's Skull and Bones. "As chairman of *The Lit* [the Yale

undergraduate literary magazine], Roger could have been expected to be elected to a senior society," Richard Ellman recalls. "I remember being with him on Tap Day when he was overlooked. With a part of one's mind, one despised the senior societies, but there was of course another part, longing for acceptance and recognition. In general, Jewish students at Yale did not feel at home."

But Starr took the harness and bit, except in one regard: his short stories, published in *The Lit*, dealt with the poignancy of encounters across class and racial lines. In one of them, a youth working on a barge for the summer watches two white workers betray a black crewmate called the Coon by reporting his occasional drunkenness. As the broken black man steps off the barge onto the launch that will carry him off to unemployment, the white workers affect innocent regret. But "the kid," fond of the Coon, tosses stones angrily into the water. "At least I should have shaken his hand," he muses, walking to the stern of the boat, where he finds the man's fishing pole and one last bait clam in the bucket. Baiting the hook, he thinks, "Coon had to get fired so's I can fish. I'm fishin' with the Coon's left eye."

Another story concerns Kristalnacht, that terrible evening in 1938, Starr's junior year, when the Nazis first set loose their thugs to smash the windows of Jewish shops and homes. In the story, two college boys leaving New York for New Haven witness an inexplicable beating on Park Avenue of a group of unknown men, perhaps radical workers, by police detectives wielding blackjacks. The boys hurry to their car and speed north in silence. Over the car radio an announcer reports the terrible events in Berlin, and the two shaken students feel like accomplices. Finally, the narrator's friend breaks the unbearable tension, bursting out, "We should go back." The driver agrees, and his agreement keeps echoing unspoken in his head, even as he steps on the accelerator, unable to turn back.

This is not the writing of a Jew trying to pass. Nor is the story of the kid on the barge the work of an arrivé. The tales make no concessions to the predictable interests and prejudices of a Yale audience. Nor do they ape the

proletarian literature of the time. In each story, moral perceptions are sharpened to a point of personal honor, yet the protagonist is unable to throw himself into the breach. There is always a distance, sometimes excruciating but apparently unbridgeable.

Two years out of Yale, something in Starr had changed. He made a bold, perhaps self-promoting gesture by releasing to the daily newspaper *PM* a copy of a letter he'd written his draft board. *PM* ran a large picture of Starr, seated confidently in his family's study, over the headline, "Park Ave. Youth Ready to Fight . . . If They'll Put Him in a Negro Unit."

"I am convinced," Starr told *PM*, "that Negro segregation in the armed forces and the anti-Negro policies of many of our defense manufacturers question the sincerity of our talk of democracy and threaten the efficiency of our entire defense effort." Starr "has led a pretty comfortable life," *PM* advised its readers, "but he is aware that not all Americans have been as fortunate."

One evening not long after the *PM* story ran, Starr's doorbell was rung unexpectedly by Vito Marcantonio, the popular Communist Congressman from East Harlem. Marcantonio asked him to address an interracial rally uptown. Starr declined, and after some polite conversation the Congressman left. Starr did join the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, hosting interracial meetings on the somewhat tautological assumption that segregation persisted because "Negro and white people did not meet each other very often." The gatherings were "dull as dishwater," he would later recall, "embarrassing to all present, and did nothing to solve the problem of segregation in the United States Army."

War service in the Office of Strategic Services, an "Our Crowd" marriage and a stint running his father's barge and contracting business changed Starr further. The next significant reference to him in a newspaper was a half-page *World-Telegram* spread in 1947 titled "Starr's Colorful Apartment True Harlequintessence." Their Tudor City penthouse, decorated by Alban Conway, boasted a studio living room with twenty-foot ceilings and long windows framing a magnificent midtown view.

At his wife's family's summer home in Westport, Starr fished, played tennis, dabbled in Connecticut real estate and was drawn into some of his first serious conversations about housing with Richard Goldwater, a fellow Yale man and a founder of the Association for Middle Income Housing with Fiorello LaGuardia's former budget director, Bill Reid.

The challenge of developing workable low- and moderate-income housing fired Starr's imagination. Before long the Citizens' Housing and Planning Council would become his graduate school, professional career and spiritual home. Truly a council of the city's housing elders and developer-statesmen, C.H.P.C. nurtured and challenged Starr as nothing had before, combining access to New York's own capitalist knights-errant with an opportunity to pursue the social goals of his youth.

The council's vision of a slumless city has been dashed, in no small part because too many men like Starr consumed themselves fighting the wrong enemies—the Jane Jacobses, Metropolitan Councils and minority squatters, instead of the Senator Bilbos, home builders' lobbies and speculators. An astute critic of the symptoms of civic decline, Starr has become obscurantist about the causes, the power relationships of investment and technology, that squeeze ordinary New Yorkers. Silent in the 1930s about his own treatment at Yale but vocal about the mistreatment of blacks, he now writes in *Commentary* about his old college classmates' indifference to the fate of the Jews in those years and, while acknowledging blacks' historic suffering, says little about their current problems except to attribute them to the unruliness of single-parent families.

Yet I cannot help thinking about the kid on the barge, the boys in that car on Kristalnacht and the harness and bit of old Yale; about the displacement of the injuries of a young man and the betrayals, from above, of a young housing advocate's crusade. Perhaps it has all been too much to acknowledge, and perhaps that is why such an interesting man has written such a gloomy, maundering book. □