Books

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SAVAGE INEQUALITIES:
CHILDREN IN AMERICA’S SCHOOLS
by Jonathan Kozol

Reading this book filled me with violent, clashing emotions: outrage, frustration, depression, and in some respects skepticism bordering on cynicism, all so intermingled that it has taken me several weeks to begin to sort them out. Kozol is an adept reporter and a powerful writer whose prose can speak straight to the heart. In particular, the words of the urban children and educators interviewed in Savage Inequalities have stayed persistently at the front of my mind.

Kozol’s message is a dramatic and important one: that the method America uses to fund public education has created massive inequalities between the richest and poorest schools in our country; that savage damage is being done daily to children in the poorest schools, which are mostly black and urban; that true school desegregation does not exist and in fact schools are now more segregated than they were before Brown vs. Board of Education, the historic 1954 Supreme Court decision that declared segregated schools to be “inherently unequal” and therefore unconstitutional; that all legal and political efforts to equalize this situation have been thwarted by Americans whose children stand to gain a competitive edge from the inequities promoted by the present system; and that the existence of such a situation is basically incompatible with the stated and historic aims of our nation.

Kozol makes his case by visiting some of the poorest urban school districts in the country, and documenting their inadequacies. He visits buildings and converses with students, teachers, administrators, and community leaders. He then conducts similar visits to some of the whitest, most suburban, highest-funded school districts, and draws detailed, compelling comparisons that graphically reveal both “savage inequalities” and the attitudes behind them.

In this way he pairs East St. Louis, Illinois and Chicago’s North Lawndale section with affluent New Trier; Detroit, Michigan with nearby suburbs Grosse Pointe, Bloomfield Hills, and Birmingham; Camden, New Jersey with Cherry Hills and Princeton; New York City’s South Bronx with nearby Riverdale and Rye; Washington D.C. with Montgomery County; and San Antonio’s Edgewood section with wealthy Alamo Hills.

In East St. Louis, Illinois, “the most distressed small city in America,” 98% of the population is African-American, there is no regular trash collection, the air is filled with chemical pollutants, raw sewage backs up into homes and schools, children are chronically undernourished, temperatures in classrooms soar over 100 degrees in summer and fall to near freezing in winter, and textbooks are old or nonexistent. When aid is requested, the governor “tells the press that he will not pour money into East St. Louis to solve long term problems. East St. Louis residents, he says, must help themselves. ‘There is money in the community.’ the governor insists. ‘It’s just not being spent for what it should be spent for’” (p. 24).

Further north, Kozol drives the streets of Chicago’s North Lawndale section with Reverend Jim Wofif, who tells him as they pass Jumbo Liquors, where “A menacing group of teen-age boys is standing on the corner of the lot where Dr. (Martin Luther) King lived with his family.”
“There are good people in this neighborhood, determined and persistent and strong-minded people who have character...” The children have “beautiful sweet natures... as if they are refined by their adversity. But you cannot sentimentalize. The odds they face are hellish and, for many, many people... life here is simply unendurable” (p. 43).

The schools these children attend are desperately inadequate, and only 38% graduate from high school. One boy at Du Sable High tells Kozol, “We’ve been in this class a whole semester, and they still can’t find us a teacher.” A teacher at Bowen High School says that in order to save the cost of teachers, students have two or three “study halls” a day where “Not much studying goes on,... I let the students play cards... I figure they might get some math skills out of it.” The Lathrop Elementary School has been for 21 years without a school library. Kozol quotes one of Chicago’s aldermen, “Nobody in his right mind would send (his) kids to public school” (p. 53).

In contrast, Kozol’s visit to wealthy, suburban, New Trier in Illinois, reveals “Remarkable and well-rewarded teachers, thoughtful counseling from well-prepared advisors,” small classes, up-to-date textbooks and curriculum materials, and a library with 60,000 volumes.

The difference, Kozol argues, is money, not educational background of parents, not willingness to sacrifice for a child’s education. In fact, because their property is worth so much less, and because urban areas contain so many more tax-free institutions such as hospitals, universities, and museums which serve the whole geographical area around them, “very poor communities place high priority on education, and they often tax themselves at higher rates than do the very affluent communities. But, even if they tax themselves at several times the rate of an extremely wealthy district, they are likely to end up with far less money for each child in their schools” (p. 55).

Attempts to develop equalizing formulas at the state and federal levels have failed, and have in fact produced the opposite effect in many cases, increasing the gap between rich and poor districts. Likewise, recent court decisions suggest that legal remedies are important to change the situation. Kozol details a class action suit filed by parents in East Orange, Camden, Irvington, and Jersey City, New Jersey, claiming that the state operated two separate and unequal public education systems. The Rodriguez case in San Antonio also sought a desegregation remedy. Both were won by the plaintiffs but resulted in no real change. Kozol also discusses Miliken v. Bradley, a Michigan case that resulted in a ruling ordering a metropolitan desegregation plan for the Detroit area, but which was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Thus after documenting massive inequities in heartbreaking detail, Kozol provides evidence that all existing legal remedies have been a failure. Here, the book stops. No recommendations are made, no historical or policy analysis is conducted, there is no call to action, no strategies for reform are suggested.

In this respect Savage Inequalities is quite different from other important books in the current wave of narrative and analysis on issues of race, class, and income in our society, books such as Nicholas Lemann’s The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America (New York: Knopf, 1991), Studs Terkel’s Race: How Blacks and Whites Think and Feel About the American Obsession (New York: New Press, 1992), and Andrew Hacker’s Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal (New York: Scribner’s, 1992). In contrast, Kozol seems to feel that presenting an outrage and documenting the current legal impasse is enough. This was the beginning of my discomfort with Savage Inequalities.

When the immediate dramatic impact of the book began to dim, and I began to reflect rather
than react, my discomfort grew. In choosing to organize his treatment of the subject in a strictly polarized way (black-white, rich-poor, urban-suburban, good-bad), Kozol’s account gains great force, simplicity, and dramatic clarity. Piling example on painful example in city after city, Kozol creates a visceral, immediate case that simultaneously numbs the reader’s sensitivities and provokes outrage. It’s clear that what is happening is morally wrong, and probably, under existing law, unconstitutional.

However, in choosing to tell his story in this polarized way, Kozol has also sacrificed a great deal. Though his point is basically a moral one—a great wrong is being committed and we need to do something about it—it is one whose solution requires not just sensitivity and a capacity for moral outrage, but clear thinking, the ability to analyze complex social and political issues that intersect with social morality, an appreciation of successful steps, however small and slow they may be, that have been taken to address these problems, and above all a moral, political, and legislative conceptual framework that will allow diverse groups of people to come together to find a solution, rather than to be pitted against each other.

In these areas Kozol’s treatment is not nearly as strong as might be wished. He is much more effective at dramatizing concrete situations in which he perceives a clear right and wrong, and in which he is providing sensitive voice to innocent victims oppressed by a powerful, insensitive system, than he is at writing about either ideas or complex realities. In order to tell his story with maximum force, he consistently ignores or alters realities, both large and small, which if allowed accurate weight would inconveniently muddy the clarity of his overall design.

In narrating the insensitivity of the establishment in Chicago, for instance, Kozol tells us that “after doing a superb job of describing the inequities that faced Chicago’s school children,” the Chicago Tribune “instead of proposing answers to the problems stemming from the short funding that it had so candidly described, … now backed off and made a recommendation that did not apply directly to the public schools at all.” The Tribune’s recommendation was for “a major expansion of early childhood programs” (pp. 78-79). Yet a mere ten pages later, Kozol reports a conversation with James Carter, principal of P.S. 79 in New York City, which contains this exchange: “I asked him how much difference preschool makes. ‘Those who get it do appreciably better. I can’t overestimate its impact . . .’” (p. 89).

He later interviews Ruthie Green-Brown, principal of Camden H.S., who tells him: “President Bush . . . mentions pre-school education — early childhood. Where is the money? We have children coming to kindergarten or to first grade who are starting out three years delayed in their development. They have had no preschool. Only a minute number of our kids have had a chance at Head Start. This is the most significant thing that you can do to help an urban child if your goal is to include that urban child in America” (p. 142).

In Kozol’s eyes, when suggested by the Chicago Tribune, heavy investment in early childhood programs is “backing off” from the real issues and “does not apply directly to the public schools at all.” Yet when urban principals suggest it, it is a strategy to be embraced. This kind of pre-deciding who the good guys and bad guys are, and then accepting or dismissing ideas according to who says them, rather than whether they are valid or not, is a consistent failure of the book.

It might be argued that this is a quibble about details in light of the overall aims of the book. However, the same type of distortion-by-polarization occurs at more significant levels. Kozol’s view seems almost obsessively black-white, despite the fact that the overall ethnic/racial/linguistic makeup of urban schools is much more diverse. He has by design selected schools which have huge percentages of African-American stu-
dents, where he could have just as easily selected schools with majority Hispanic populations or with mixed Hispanic, African-American, and Asian student bodies. Even when Hispanic students are present, he seems not to see them. New York’s P.S. 79, he tells us, is “29 percent black, 70 percent Hispanic.” Yet one of his searching questions to P.S. 79’s principal is, “Will white children and black children ever go to school together in New York?” (pp. 89-90).

To me, the book began to seem an extremely dramatic exposition of a position whose essential truth the author had decided on beforehand. Inconvenient details of fact get ignored or bent for the sake of this overall truth. School districts and court decisions which, although not entirely successful, are working examples of a moral and legal commitment to school desegregation, such as Boston’s METCO program, the St. Louis metropolitan desegregation program, and the recent policy in Palm Beach, Florida to promote residential desegregation in order to get at a root cause of school desegregation, are never mentioned. This is especially significant since metropolitan desegregation in St. Louis is only five minutes across the bridge from East St. Louis, and the METCO program, which is more than twenty years old, is a voluntary urban-suburban program practically in the author’s back yard.

In a similar way, school systems which are poor and urban, but have little or no African-American student population, are effectively ignored, and the voices of parents in the African-American community are also never heard. We hear Kozol speaking for their children instead, sometimes in words that border on patronizing. I suspect that one thing parents might have told him would have been that though they wanted equal opportunity for their children, they did not necessarily define that as being like middle class, white, suburban America—that aspiring to equality did not mean aspiring to be like New Trier, Grosse Point, or Cherry Hill.

I worry most that Kozol’s approach, though highly dramatic, is finally ineffective. For those who are not familiar with urban schools it will certainly open their eyes; for those who are, it will rekindle their commitment. He has produced a significant work, and he has dared to think the unthinkable — what would it take to make schools really equal. But he has done it in a way that further separates the very groups that need to come together to address this issue.

Throughout the 1980s schools all over the country, in many types of communities, have been experiencing the conditions Kozol describes. Thousands of communities have seen class sizes go up, materials budgets shrink or disappear, teachers’ positions eliminated, in-school violence rise, building maintenance dangerously deferred, and curriculum offerings severely curtailed. Yes, the problems are worse in the very poorest schools, and yes, race is a central issue. But there is at least as much reason for urban, suburban, and rural schools to make common cause on the need for adequate school funding as there is for them to see each other as race and class rivals. It is now clear that the redistribution of wealth in the eighties was a simple, frightening phenomenon — the very rich got even richer, and everyone else got a lot poorer. In fact, a full three-quarters of the national gain in pre-tax income between 1977 and 1989 went to the top 5% of American families, those earning over $310,000 per year. Over the same period, the bottom 40% of American families actually saw their incomes decline. (Income statistics are from the New York Times, March 5, 1992, front page.) The bulk of the children in this country go to inadequately funded schools, and if there is to be a change in the way schools are funded, and the amount of money put into our schools is to begin to approach adequacy, then coalitions of people with diverse backgrounds working together will accomplish the change.

I hope that Savage Inequalities does not finally have an effect on readers that is exactly contrary to what is needed to make change. Because it relies for its power on the emotions it evokes, because it offers no suggestions for action, because it simpli-
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fies the complex realities of urban schools, and because it ignores the attempts at equity and reform which do exist, it may elicit a cycle of responses that follows a predictable pattern: shock, outrage, frustration, discouragement, a sense of impotence to make change, and finally a turning away with the unspoken “I feel terrible about these poor, black children. Thank God my kids don’t go to schools like that.”

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Denny T. Wolfe

GRAMMAR GRAMS II
by Stephen K. Tollefson
Harper Collins Publishers, 1992

Stephen K. Tollefson, Edwin Newman, and John Warriner — I’d love to see the three of them sit down with Dick Cavett on his old show. Newman would insist that the English language has gone somewhere in a hand-basket. And, after a little more haranguing by Newman, Cavett would turn to Tollefson and Warriner with, “Well, gentlemen, you’ve heard Ed’s indictment. What about it? How can we rescue English? Or, can we?”

John Warriner might say something like, “Dick, of course Ed’s right. And if teachers in schools would deliberately drill students with the exercises in my series, English Grammar and Composition, we could see a change for the better in the ways people talk and write. For example, in my twelfth grade book (p.177), I show why one would never say ‘The reason is because …’ I say, ‘In a sentence beginning, The reason is ..., the clause following the verb is a noun clause used as a predicate nominative. A noun clause may begin with that but not with because, which usually introduces an adverb clause. (For example), The reason she refused to go was that (not because) she had no money.’ So you see, Dick, if one knows how to analyze language, by knowing and applying the language of grammar, one could learn to speak and write completely.”


“Hey, let’s not be so uptight about all this. Kids just need straight advice about language. John just said how he tries to help through this series. Let me tell you how I deal with the ‘reason is because’ question. In Grammar Grams II (p.13), I try to de-mystify the problem. I say, ‘Don’t use because after the phrase the reason is: The reason she likes Ladysmith Black Mambazo is because they harmonize well.’ Not only is this much more complex than it needs to be, it is also redundant. A clause beginning with because is a reason, so we’re saying it twice. Say either, ‘The reason she likes Ladysmith Black Mambazo is that they harmonize well, or, She likes Ladysmith Black Mambazo because they harmonize well.’ See what I mean?”

I think Tollefson would come out the winner by the end of the show, although Newman and Warriner would probably go away convinced that his Grammar Grams II is just “too cute.” They would think that learning how to use language “correctly” needs to be more painful and serious than Tollefson makes it. Cavett would probably invite Tollefson over to watch Monday Night Football.

Grammar Grams II is a useful little book, only sixty-five pages, including an index. I didn’t see Grammar Grams I, but now I have to have it. This book, Grammar Grams II, is organized as a collection of one-page “grams” on various aspects of language usage and advice to speakers and writers of English. The one-page treatments are grouped into thirteen “volumes,” with titles like Hors d’Oeuvres, Rebel Without a Clause, Fun, Fun, Fun, and Games, Tests, and Trivia. One of the many qualities that sets this little book apart from the others like it is its good cheer and lightheartedness. The very first grammar gram in the book,