

The New Criterion

Books

October 2005

Missed opportunities

by [Mark Bauerlein](#)

On Jonathan Kozol's *The shame of the nation*.

Early in this survey of inequities in the public school system, Jonathan Kozol reveals why he went into the field of education. It was not a love of math and science, a desire to implant cultural legacies in young minds, or an interest in child development. It was the murder of three civil rights volunteers in Mississippi in 1964. When the news broke, Kozol dropped out of graduate school, drove to a black neighborhood in Boston, and “signed up to be a reading teacher in a freedom school.”

Forty years later, the fervor of that commitment and the injustice at its root suffuse every page of *The Shame of the Nation*. For decades, Kozol has toured inner-city schools, interviewed students, teachers, and administrators, and recorded his impressions in acclaimed books. In this one, too, we read about crumbling facilities, rat-infested classrooms, dangerous schoolyards, demoralized instructors, and principals harassed to produce better results. Sixth-graders send him letters pleading, “I wish that this school was the most beautiful school in the whole why [sic] world.” Sophomores and juniors rue the dead-end routine of their school day, then weep. Teachers whisper to him how much they loathe the pedagogy they must practice.

A simple description of these conditions is enough to rouse the blood. But Kozol has a larger aim. There is a distressing factor in the catastrophe: these schools are populated almost entirely by black and Hispanic students. In fact, the segregation of white and minority students is as widespread today as it was just after the Civic Rights Act passed, and the trend is worsening. To Kozol, “it is the same old ballgame” as the Jim Crow South, with Hispanics and poor Asians added to the oppressed. We are witnessing “the restoration of apartheid.”

This is a severe accusation with a heavy burden of proof. Apartheid isn't just an upsurge of racist episodes—it is a system. And if one proposes a “restoration” in process, then a fact-filled legal, demographic, and economic investigation should follow.

You won't find it in this book, though. For all its 388 pages, *The Shame of the Nation* has little in-depth analysis. Kozol provides numbers on per-student funding, he mentions legal decisions, and he describes urban school curricula. He lets children and teachers speak, and he cites education stories from *The New York Times*. But he doesn't explain the why or the how of funding discrepancies, deteriorating buildings, and low achievement. Kozol presents his chapters as if they were an exposé of school conditions, but it is easy to portray those conditions. Last year I observed music classes in a D.C. elementary school and noted the same dingy corridors, rusty chain link fences, and a lockdown atmosphere. The disturbing signs make for poignant prose, but they render a deeper inquiry all the more necessary.

Why not dig further? Because Kozol already knows the cause of today's apartheid: a long-term, thinly concealed conspiracy of whites to keep black and brown kids away from their own. Parent groups, conservative reformers, and compliant politicians cast minority children into walled-off schools whose decrepit habitat and drill-and-kill teaching brutalize them into acquiescence. As Kozol puts it, "young middle-class white families have successfully been pressuring their school boards to carve out almost entirely separate provinces of education."

This is another serious charge, and one expects Kozol to pinpoint culprits and detail their shenanigans. Again, the book fails to deliver. The instances given are either irrelevant or inconclusive. Many white parents raise private funds for schools their children attend—no racism there. Some inner-city principals have a boot camp mentality, yes, but that's a way to deal with violence and truancy, not a keep-the-race-down tactic. A judge in Seattle rules illegal a "tie breaker" admissions policy (if white and black applicants have similar records, preference goes to the latter), and yet the subsequent falloff in minority enrollment, which Kozol deplors, proves that the policy was an unconstitutional quota system.

The only plausible example of racist activity is a campaign to keep students in a minority district in Long Island from transferring to schools in white districts. Here, too, the case is unclear. The parent group explicitly disavowed racial motives and underscored the violence, crime, and drugs among the target students. Uncharitable, yes, and possibly racist, but if this affair is the best evidence for white conspiracy ...

Ambiguous facts are no sticking point, however, when the moral poles are so set. Indignation, not evidence, fuels Kozol's interpretations, and whenever a white suburbanite (not to mention a conservative) pops up, his spite leaks through. When minority kids start the day chanting, "If it is to be, it's up to me,"

politically conservative white people visiting these schools often seem to be almost too gratified to hear black and Hispanic children speaking in these terms. If it's up to "them," the message seems to be, it isn't up to "us."

While progressive reformers are rightly indignant, across the aisle stand "some very angry and impatient education figures such as William Bennett." Because George Bush's education program allows students in failing schools to transfer only to other schools within the same district, not to white schools in other districts, it is nothing more than "a bit of teasing rhetoric."

Kozol wraps every example in the worst construction, and he allows no conservatives or suburban whites to step up and defend themselves. Indeed, it appears that Kozol has never sat down with one of them to hear their side. Instead, *The Shame of the Nation* presents one figure after another to echo the imputations. A fifteen-year-old Harlem student tells Kozol that "people in New York" would be "relieved" if she and her friends went away, or just died. Columbia education professor Thomas Sobol mutters, "I'm aware that I could never prove that race is at the heart of this... . But I've felt it for so long, and seen it operating for so long, I know it's true." Former school chancellor Rudy Crew is convinced that the harsh criticism he received "had been tinged with racial condescension." Gary Orfield of the Civil Rights Project says that the State of Missouri, "beginning under former Governor John Ashcroft, has opposed the integration program [in St. Louis]. It works, so it will be killed." Roger Wilkins, now a professor at George Mason University, laments, "When you walk into the centers of white dominance, no matter what you've done in life, you feel like an outsider." Kozol takes this litany of complaints at face value. Indeed, he builds his case on it.

This is the pitfall of a moral passion that hasn't changed in forty years. Today's education system is fraught with financial, ideological, infrastructural, and labor problems. Kozol converts them into a drama of oppressors and victims. When the victims speak—Kozol terms the children "pure

witnesses”—they bear the force of justice. Privileged whites and conservatives aren’t even granted a good intention. Kozol’s book will no doubt be received as another heartrending exposé. If we want solutions to the deficiencies in our schools, though, partisan resentments and cheap insinuations won’t help.

Mark Bauerlein is a professor of English at Emory University.

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 24 October 2005, on page 77

Copyright © 2008 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/missed-opportunities-1372>