

REVIEWS

Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything, by Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner. New York: HarperCollins, 2005, 242 pp., \$25.95 hardbound.

Seth Forman

Nineteenth-century British critic Thomas Carlyle called economics the “dismal” science because it seemed to him hopelessly entangled in the morose subjects of poverty and destitution. The moniker still fits. Despite the rise in living standards, economics has failed—“dismally,” perhaps—to pass the most basic test for any scientific discipline: predictability. Economists are consistently duped—sometimes humiliatingly so—by economic events. The stock market rise of the late 1990s defied prediction, as did its fall. Every catastrophe forecast by U.S. economists over the last five years, from the perennially imminent “housing bust” and five-dollar-a-barrel gasoline, to the crash of the dollar and the flight of foreign capital, has failed to materialize. As late as 1989, one year before the collapse of the Soviet Union, MIT economist Lester Thurow famously mused, “Today the Soviet Union is a country whose economic achievements bear comparison with those of the United States.”

Thus, in 1974 when the Swedish socialist Gunnar Myrdal shared the Nobel Prize in economics with Austrian free market guru Friedrich Von Hayek, economics became, in the words of one critic, “the only field in which two people can share a Nobel Prize for saying opposite things.” Steven D. Levitt, a Uni-

versity of Chicago economist and co-author with journalist Stephen J. Dubner of the best-selling book *Freakonomics*, has given new meaning to this notion. Dr. Levitt—the winner of the John Bates Clark Medal for the best American economist under 40—is being rumored as a future Nobel Prize winner, apparently for saying opposite things all by himself.

On the one hand, Levitt contends that access to legalized abortion after 1973 is the primary cause of the famous drop in crime during the 1990s. Levitt maintains that the Supreme Court’s decision in *Roe v. Wade* reduced the total number of unwanted births among poor, unmarried women, those at greatest risk of producing the 15- to 24-year-old criminals of the 1990s. On the other hand, Levitt also claims that when all other factors are controlled for, single motherhood, fatherlessness, and divorce have no impact on academic outcomes in children. So, to simplify, Levitt would have us believe that when it comes to determining whether a young boy grows up to steal, mug, rape, and murder, the presence of a mother and father is a crucial factor. However, when it comes to ensuring that the same young boy does his math homework, the presence of two parents is inconsequential.

Levitt’s work suffers from a problem endemic to several academic social science disciplines: a preoccupation with quantitative methods, which many practitioners believe gives these disciplines a scholarly imprimatur on a par with the natural sciences. Social problems often involve hard-to-measure non-rational factors such as love, hate, depression, spirituality, ego, pride, nationalism, big-

otry, identity, and character. But in their quest for scientific vindication, the social sciences have churned out a generation of statistical geniuses who are ill equipped to collect and evaluate both quantitative and qualitative data, some of which are not readily available in pre-digitized databases. Levitt appears to be one of them.

To be sure, Levitt cleverly illustrates the power of statistical methods to debunk conventional wisdom and reveal the incentives underlying social behavior. Using multiple regression, Levitt is able to show that teachers in schools with “high stakes” testing have found innovative ways to cheat; that women who use online dating services claim having blond hair even when they don’t; and that sumo wrestler’s have developed a sophisticated method of fixing matches.

But it is the two findings concerning family structure that have set the chattering classes ablaze, and it is not hard to figure out why. If these findings are true, it represents an irretrievable loss for the right in America’s ongoing culture wars. If easier access to abortion has reduced antisocial behavior, and broken families don’t influence academic outcomes, the political arguments for abortion restriction and the privileged status of traditional families largely unravels.

Falling Crime and Abortion

No public policy success over the past decade has given conservatives more occasion to cheer than the drop in reported crime. According to their narrative, crime rates reached a peak in the late 1980s and early 1990s as the liberal law enforcement policies of an earlier generation came home to roost. Mayor

Rudy Giuliani of New York City led the law enforcement revolution by instituting “Broken Windows” policing, which prosecuted “victimless crimes” like jumping subway turnstiles and public urination in the belief that this would discourage more serious crime. The results were nothing short of astounding. Rates of violent crime plummeted, reaching levels not seen since the 1950s. The trend has continued into the 2000s. Violent crimes in 2004 were down 4.7 percent since 2000. In 2005, New York City is on track to chalk up its lowest homicide total in 40 years, around 450 deaths. In 1990, there were 2,245. Now Levitt weighs in to say that police methods in fact had little to do with the crime drop. “Those who wish to credit Giuliani with the crime drop may still do so,” the authors write, “but there is frighteningly little evidence that his strategy was the crime panacea that he and the media deemed it.” Levitt estimates that longer prison sentences, the decline of the crack epidemic, and larger numbers of police together account for about 50 percent of the drop in crime.

But the greatest single cause of the decline in the crime rate of the 1990s was that there were fewer men from the demographic group that was most likely to turn to crime—the grown-up, unwanted children of poor, unmarried mothers. There were fewer of these people because poor women had access to cheap, legalized abortion after 1973. Therefore, “In the early 1990s, just as the first cohort of children born after *Roe v. Wade* was hitting its late teen years . . . the rate of crime began to fall. . . . Legalized abortion led to less unwantedness; unwantedness leads to high crime; legal-

ized abortion, therefore, led to less crime.”

The problems with this thesis are glaring. There were many, many more babies born to poor, unwed mothers *after Roe* than *before Roe*. Data from the Centers for Disease Control show that for the ten years between 1963 and 1973 there were 3.7 million children born to unwed mothers, compared to 6.5 million between 1974 and 1984, a 76 percent increase. The illegitimacy ratio for the United States—the percentage of live births that occur to single women—reached 25 percent in 1988, from 4 percent in the early 1950s, and has stabilized at the 2003 peak of 35 percent. The black illegitimacy ratio was 68 percent in 2003. Levitt does a marvelous job in *Freakonomics* of explaining the concept of correlation to a lay audience, but he doesn't discuss why abortions and out-of-wedlock births seem to have moved together in the same direction.

Instead, Levitt stakes his thesis on the idea that the “unwantedness” of children born out-of-wedlock is the principal risk factor for criminal behavior: children of poor, unwed mothers born after *Roe* were “wanted” because they weren't aborted, and therefore more competently raised by their mothers. Children born to the same type of women before *Roe* were “unwanted” because they could not be easily aborted, and were therefore neglected in some socially damaging way.

This thesis raises two important questions. First, why did poor, unwed women seemingly “want” so many more babies after 1973 than before? Secondly, is Levitt right to assume that giving birth to a child out-of-wedlock when an abor-

tion is available means that the child is “wanted” in a way that translates into the ability to raise it properly?

Levitt's silence on these questions is deafening, but there are several possible, somewhat interrelated answers to them, all of which throw Levitt's findings into serious doubt.

One possibility is that poor, unmarried women gave birth to more babies after 1973 because they were heavily impacted by the cultural changes stemming from the 1960s which extolled sexual liberation and destigmatized out-of-wedlock childbirth—changes that were in some ways symbolized by the *Roe* decision. The availability of legal abortion might have provided a sense of security for women (and men), who became more lax about sexual intercourse and contraception as a result. Isn't it possible that poor, unwed mothers had both more abortions and more births simply because they had more sex with more partners (aborting some pregnancies while carrying others to term)?

Another possibility is that poor, single women began to rely more heavily on the emotional fulfillment derived from child rearing as marriage for them became less likely. Steven Sailer, a critic of Levitt, argues that *Roe* largely finished off the traditional shotgun wedding by persuading the impregnating boyfriend that he has no moral duty to marry his mate, since she was free to get an abortion. Data from the Centers for Disease Control backs this observation. A CDC report found that “Among women aged 15–29 years conceiving a first birth before marriage during 1970–74, nearly half (49 percent) married before the child was born. By 1975–79 the propor-

tion marrying before the birth of the child fell to 32 percent, and it has declined to 23 percent in 1990–94.”

It is indeed curious that Levitt chooses to focus on the decision to abort a pregnancy as his primary measure of child unwantedness, rather than the absence of a procreating father. After all, isn't the absence of one parent a strong indicator of “unwantedness?” A virtual mountain of research has found fatherlessness to be the basic criminal risk factor for poor young men. To cite just one study, M. Anne Hill and June O'Neil of Baruch College, in a 1996 report prepared for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, found that almost 70 percent of juveniles incarcerated in state reform institutions come from homes with no father or without natural parents. Most gang members, 60 percent of rapists, and 75 percent of teenage homicide perpetrators come from single-parent homes.

Levitt would answer, of course, that the drop in crime rates during a period when a greater number of fatherless young men reached their peak criminal years is proof that single motherhood by itself is not the primary causal factor for criminal behavior. But the number of reported crimes does not by any means measure the full extent of criminal behavior in a society. In fact, the astronomical growth in fatherlessness after 1973 appears to have increased criminality, not reduced it. The number of reported crimes has surely dropped since the early 1990s, but the number of people engaged in criminal activity—specifically the number of people serving time in United States jails and prisons—has ex-

ploded, from 329,821 in 1980 to 2,135,901 in 2004, a more than 500 percent increase. To paraphrase Charles Murray, the W.H. Brady Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, if you doubt that criminality has increased since the 1980s, imagine the crime rate tomorrow if today we released 1.8 million people from our jails and prisons. Murray insists that the increase in the number of births to single mothers amidst a regime of tougher law enforcement and sentencing policies has resulted in a curious paradox: falling crime rates and a growing number of criminal perpetrators.

Higher rates of criminality and imprisonment, along with a decreasing sense of paternal responsibility among poor males, has led to a vicious cycle. Knowing that husbands are harder to come by in a post-*Roe* world, poor, often desperate young females carry their pregnancies to term, if only to secure for themselves a social status that is now less likely to be conferred by marriage. A fascinating new study entitled *Promises I Can Keep* by sociologists Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas, based on five years of interviews with black, white, and Latino women in the poorest neighborhoods of Camden, NJ, and Philadelphia, PA, finds that poor women are more likely than middle-class women to view motherhood as a means to obtain an enduring human connection and a valuable social role in a world where those things are hard to come by.¹

Is this the kind of “wantedness” that Levitt believes has resulted in lower crime rates? Levitt demonstrates an alarming disregard for a vast body of

evidence indicating that those women who are the least well-equipped to care for a child properly are often the same women who possess the most intense desire to have them.

Human behavior is much more than just the rational response to external stimuli such as laws and economic incentives. The decision to abort a pregnancy is an infinitely complicated one, and cannot be assumed to represent "unwantedness" for the narrow purposes of statistical manipulation. Social scientists like Levitt do a great disservice when they fail to address the role of human values, beliefs, and emotions in determining social phenomena. It is not credible to argue that crime dropped in the 1990s because poor, unwed mothers had access to legal abortion beginning in 1973, without offering a credible explanation as to why the number of total births to poor, unwed mothers should have exploded after 1973.

Academic Achievement and Two Parents

Nor does it seem credible to argue, as Levitt does, that having two parents around doesn't matter much in terms of academic outcomes. Levitt bases this conclusion on his analysis of data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS), which tracked the academic progress of 20,000 students from kindergarten through fifth grade in the 1990s. Levitt finds that what matters most in academic outcomes is not *what* parents do, but *who* parents are: "Parents who are well educated, successful, and healthy tend to have children who test well in school; but it doesn't seem to

much matter whether a child is trotted off to museums or spanked or sent to Head Start or frequently read to or plopped in front of the television."

This shouldn't surprise anyone nearly as much as Levitt seems to think it should. Children generally adopt the same attitudes toward school, work, family, and career as their parents. But it contradicts Levitt's findings that intact families don't matter. According to Levitt, "whether a child's family is intact doesn't seem to matter . . . family structure has little impact on a child's personality, it does not seem to affect his academic abilities either." But if it matters so much *who* parents are, wouldn't it follow that having both parents around is important? What good is having a father who is "well educated, successful, and healthy" if a child never meets him? Levitt is a statistical whiz kid, but seems to have lost site of basic logic.

Levitt's findings also fly in the face of much previous research. Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur authored a groundbreaking study in 1994 entitled *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*. Based on four national surveys, McLanahan and Sandefur control for every variable imaginable, including several that Levitt did not control for: the length of time a child has spent in a single-parent household, the gender of the custodial parent, whether parents were married at the child's birth, parent remarriage, the presence of a grandmother in the household, and age at time of parent breakup. The authors concluded that children in single-parent families do worse on all measures of potential success than do

children in two-parent households of comparable socioeconomic status. Income alone was not decisive.²

As is the case with the decision to have an abortion, academic achievement seems to owe much to certain difficult-to-measure factors—specifically, “noncognitive” traits like patience, perseverance, congeniality, and trust. These traits are rarely measured by standardized tests and, despite being lauded in the *New York Times Magazine* as “one of the most creative people in economics and maybe in all social science,” Levitt shows little interest in digging any further than those tests.

Luckily, Nobel Prize winning economist James Heckman did. Heckman and Pedro Carneiro examined the income of high school dropouts who obtained a General Equivalency Diploma (GED), on the hunch that these test takers were smart enough to pass an equivalency exam, but lacked the perseverance to graduate from high school. The GED test is a second-chance program that administers a battery of cognitive tests to self-selected high school dropouts to determine if their academic attainment is equivalent to that of high school graduates. Sure enough, Heckman and Carneiro found that dropouts who get GEDs are smarter than other high school dropouts as measured by standard tests of cognitive ability. But when cognitive ability is controlled for, GED recipients actually have lower hourly earnings in the work world compared to other high school dropouts and high school graduates. “Inadvertently, the GED has become a test that separates bright but nonpersistent and undisciplined dropouts from other dropouts.

... The performance of GED recipients compared to that of both high school dropouts of the same ability and high school graduates demonstrates the importance of noncognitive skills in economic life.”

These findings make lots of sense. Good study habits are defined by patience, perseverance, and discipline. Similarly, criminal behavior is defined by the absence of such habits. The processes by which these traits are inculcated in children are not easily identified and probably vary widely. But it is hard to think of anything that requires more of these noncognitive skills than a successful marriage. It seems unlikely that, all other things being equal, the sacrifice, self-denial, and commitment exhibited on a daily basis by two parents wouldn't provide a child with significant life advantages.

These noncognitive traits are essential to success in school and in life. It is troubling that a social scientist of Levitt's stature can make such declarative statements about the causes of crime and academic success without addressing them. Non-experts should use the following rule of thumb when reading *Freakonomics* and other similar social science tracts: if an academic study runs counter to something you know from your own experience to be true, that so defies common sense and basic intuition as to be unbelievable, the study is probably wrong.

Notes

1. Kathryn Edin, Maria Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage* (University of California Press: 2005).
2. Sarah McLanahan, Gary Sandefur, *Grow-*

ing Up With a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

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The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America, by Jonathan Kozol. New York: Crown Publishers, 404 pp., \$25.00 hardbound.

Sandra Stotsky

Court-ordered busing to integrate Boston's public schools began in 1974. At the time, the schools enrolled about 94,000 students. As white and black middle-class parents fled the public schools or continued their migration to the suburbs, the public school population shrank to less than 60,000. Simultaneously, busing costs rose, reaching \$20 million or more annually.¹ In his epilogue to the 1985 edition of *Death at an Early Age*, the book that catapulted Jonathan Kozol to national prominence in 1967, Kozol denounced the city's schools for their continuing failure to educate its children: "The Boston School Committee, since expanded and reconstituted, now includes two highly vocal and politically sophisticated blacks. They supervise a system that, despite the greatest efforts of some excellent educators, has continued to turn out successive generations of the unskilled, unemployable, and undefended" (237).

With such an indictment, one might expect Kozol to have set forth a careful critique of busing to achieve integration in one of the many books he has written since 1967. One might especially expect some ideas on how to turn around a system of public education with such dismal results for low-income children despite regularly increasing federal funding for precisely this population since passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965. Yet, one looks in vain to find a focused or coherent discussion of this central question in any of the books Kozol has written. Indeed, the thrust of most of his books is that our schools are hopeless and our whole system of public education a hoax, perpetrated by a moneyed elite who send their children to the Phillips Academies in Exeter and Andover.

In *The Night Is Dark and I Am Far from Home* (1975), Kozol argued that American schools are a consumer fraud, offering indoctrination rather than education. The chief function of the school reform literature is "to make the prison cells more pleasant—and the bars less visible."

Children of the Revolution: A Yankee Teacher in the Cuban Schools (1978) continues this metaphorical image. Kozol has nothing but superlatives for Martinez Villena, a technical high school for 1,200 non-university bound boys and girls, and he glowingly describes the Lenin School in Havana, a high school for the university-bound, commenting that "I did not at any time while I was in this school experience that sense of anguish, as of reliving a bad dream, that hits me almost every time I walk into the

hallways and begin to breathe the smell of chalk dust and dead air of almost any secondary school in the United States" (187).

His indictment of public education was scathing in *On Being a Teacher* (1981), an effort to inspire teachers to mobilize for a revolution inside the schools. An "archaic and dehumanizing institution," he describes it. While "students reside within this house of lies for only twelve years at a stretch," "their teachers often are condemned to a life sentence" (3).

Not only was public education a disgrace, so, too, was the extent of adult illiteracy in this country—over one-third of the population, according to *Prisoners of Silence: Breaking the Bonds of Adult Illiteracy in the United States* (1980) and *Illiterate America* (1985). Charging that this situation was not an unwanted one, and that the United States could not serve as a model for any nation on any issue until it addressed all its own problems successfully (a utopian criterion that effectively eliminates any possibility for national redemption), Kozol proposed a war on illiteracy cast as a war against injustice, to be led by those in the illiterates' communities—"bootstrap mobilization"—with literacy programs relevant to their lives. We see here the influence of his friendship with Paulo Freire, one of the most influential educators of the twentieth century despite the absence of studies attesting to the educational effectiveness of his ideas.²

Interestingly, in Kozol's Afterword to *Illiterate America*, he offered useful ruminations on various issues in public education, such as his suggestion that "schools of education ought to be progressively drawn back, if not absorbed

entirely, into schools of liberal arts," with "scarcely more than one-semester periods of on-site preparation in the classroom" (215). But Kozol did not go beyond rhetoric and anecdote here or elsewhere to develop his ideas in a way that might guide policymakers in furthering genuine reform.

By the time he wrote *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (1991), Kozol had drastically altered the object of his condemnation. It was no longer all public schools, just those attended by poor children. Public education might still be an "archaic and dehumanizing institution," but defaming the totality of public education would no longer suit the story that he now wanted to tell—"the lifelong deformation of poor children by their own society and government" (191). In this book, Kozol took up the banner against often blighted urban schools with lower teachers' salaries and higher teacher turnover rates than surrounding suburban schools.

Kozol followed up *Savage Inequalities* with *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation* (1995), a book featuring stories that attested to the resilience of children in these urban schools despite their frequently appalling physical and educational conditions and despite the medical and social problems of the neighborhoods in which they live—a result, he charged, of this society's social policies. In *Ordinary Resurrections: Children in the Years of Hope* (2000), he decided to alter the bleak and depressing portrait of urban education in earlier books. Perhaps under pressure from his editors or fans, Kozol talked about a few decent schools in the South

Bronx for poor children. However, readers learn nothing about how these children fared academically, or what their teachers did in their classrooms to boost their achievement, and one begins to sense that the programs and conditions that foster the academic growth of low-income children are of much less interest to him than whipping his countrymen's consciences.

This impression solidifies after a reading of Kozol's latest book, which is based on his visits to 60 schools in 11 states since 2000. A return to the strident and incessant moralizing of his earlier works, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (2005) beats the drum for three major public policies: massive (but voluntary) cross-district busing, to be stimulated by financial incentives to "white" suburban school districts; universal pre-school for needy children; and smaller classes for them—the kind of things money can buy. No strings are attached to any of these policies—Kozol is opposed to accountability. His chief target is what he calls the resegregation of the public schools, a term designed to obliterate the differences between *de jure* segregation in the South before the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and the demographic realities of the public school population in our major cities. His evocation of former South African educational policies in the book's subtitle is yet another attempt to arouse the energies of a younger generation of "revolutionaries."

Whether the three policies he urges while recounting his talks with children, parents, and others would in fact im-

prove black achievement, or how they best could, is never discussed. Nor does Kozol accompany his advocacy of costly educational programs with empirical data on *their* costs and a clear-eyed analysis of the complexities of these programs. His typically narrative mode of reportage conveniently does not facilitate these kinds of analyses.

A reasonable case can be made in theory for pre-school for low-income children, for smaller class size for them in the primary grades, and for more voluntary programs, like Boston's METCO, that send them to suburban schools.³ But anyone seriously proposing mandatory pre-school for poor children as a way to forestall later academic difficulties would explore the long-standing and still unresolved controversy over the curriculum of pre-school programs, the problems in upgrading the quality of their current teachers and in recruiting enough well-trained teachers, and the reasons for the lack of long-term academic benefits from these programs for poor children. Anyone seriously proposing smaller classes would not fail to note that they make a difference only in the primary grades and with experienced teachers (hence the failure of California's experiment in reduced class size) and would comment on such complexities as where well-trained teachers can come from. Finally, anyone today seriously proposing massive busing programs to increase the academic achievement of black and Hispanic youngsters would explain why they mostly failed to do so; discuss the self-selection factor in programs like METCO; examine the growing insistence by black and white urban parents on neighborhood schools

and not simply dismiss the phenomenon as politically and racially motivated; and justify the amount of money spent on busing instead of on teachers' salaries or something clearly related to educational achievement. That Kozol does none of this suggests that his argument for massive cross-district busing for purposes of integration is little more than an attempt to re-establish moral high ground when there is nothing to salvage from the failed ideas of educational justice-seekers.

Kozol is still back in that Boston classroom in 1964, energized by the Civil Rights movement and outraged by the inadequacies of his students' education. But, despite his urging, in the Afterword to *Illiterate America*, of a "realistic synthesis of needed skills and humane applications" (211), as well as a more recent expression of interest in having all students read works connected to "our literary or moral heritage,"⁴ Kozol cannot move out of the dead-end he created for himself. He hitched his philosophical and pedagogical wagon to the wrong educational stars decades ago.

For example, he lauds Deborah Meier's educational ideas throughout his book, acknowledging in an endnote his visits during 2002 and 2003 to the Mission Hill School in Boston, a small pilot school she organized and ran for about six years, with just the mix of students he wants. Yet, we read no stories from its classrooms. Perhaps he found out that student scores on the only external measure of accountability required of the school have been abysmal, in mathematics especially.⁵ Not surprisingly, Meier is as shrill in her denunciation of state assessments and No Child

Left Behind as Kozol is, implying in her own recent book that low student scores might be attributable to a state testing system that was "antithetical to everything Mission Hill represented in terms of both curriculum and pedagogy" (38).⁶

Why did he not visit some inner-city Catholic schools and reflect on why black and Hispanic students (who comprise just about all their students today) do much better than their peers in inner-city public schools, despite manifestly poorer resources and teachers with lower salaries?⁷ Why did he not visit the KIPP school in the South Bronx and ponder over the success of its almost all-black student body with a traditional curriculum?⁸ Perhaps because these schools do not subscribe to a "progressive" pedagogy and, instead, try to give their students access to the "majority culture" through their curricula and the classroom and school norms they establish—something Kozol claims he supports and thinks integration would achieve.

And culture does matter. Shaker Heights, Ohio, is an upper-middle-class school system with a student body that is half black and half white and still showing striking racial differences in academic achievement after several decades. The system has established after-school tutoring centers, an extra half-hour of daily instruction for kindergartners scoring poorly on reading readiness, after-school study circles to expand black participation in Advanced Placement courses, and summer enrichment programs for black students.⁹ While progress has been made, black students' SAT scores are on average 246

points lower than those of white students. It is not irrelevant that 60 percent of the black students in Shaker Heights come from single-parent homes, compared to 10 percent of the white students, and that black students, nationally, watch twice as much TV as white students. Surely these (and other) cultural factors deserve discussion. But not a word from Kozol about the cultural factors that contribute to the “gap” or stories about schools like those in Shaker Heights.

Kozol has acquired hundreds of thousands of fans over the years, as evidenced by the sales of his books. It is not clear what influence he has had on public policy, but it is likely that he has influenced teachers—negatively. According to a study of course syllabi in a variety of education schools in the early 2000s, *Savage Inequalities* is one of the two most frequently assigned books.¹⁰ Kozol’s writings may well have helped to encourage several generations of urban teachers to spend more class time denouncing social injustice than teaching academic subject matter and helping to give their students access to the majority culture.

Ironically, *The Shame of the Nation* may well succeed *Savage Inequalities* as required reading in education schools in part because Kozol has chosen to wade into the reading “wars” in it, supporting “balanced literacy,” the evidence-lite reading pedagogy also known as “whole language,” that has dominated teacher education and most public schools for decades. Although the average level of reading achievement for both white and black students in this country has been stalled during these same decades and leaves much to be desired, as the results

from the National Assessment of Educational Progress regularly indicate, Kozol dismisses the reading pedagogy that is supported by a large body of credible research as a “rote and drill, stimulus-response curriculum.”¹¹

Jonathan Kozol is a very confused thinker. He spent over half of his professional life denigrating public education, yet wants to integrate poor children within its framework. He sees public schools as houses of lies, yet wants to give poor children access to the majority culture in them. He went to the Newton Public Schools and Harvard College, the best education that money could buy. If he believes that the majority culture is worth acquiring, why doesn’t he tell teachers what to aim for? Given his academic background, can he not see that the major impediment to black achievement today is the barely concealed assumption by schools of education and leading “progressive” educators that black students are incapable of learning the same curriculum that Asian and white students can learn—and that he learned—and need to be kept busy with a self-chosen, haphazard curriculum that de-emphasizes teaching, skills, and academic achievement?

Notes

1. Matthew Richer, “Boston’s Busing Massacre,” *Policy Review* (1998): 92.
2. For a critical evaluation of Freire-inspired programs in the United States and Puerto Rico, see <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/dissent/documents/Facundo/Facundo.html>
3. The METCO program is a voluntary integration program funded by the Massachusetts legislature that enables children from a racially imbalanced urban school district to attend another school district. In its 36-year history, over 5000 students

- have graduated from suburban Boston METCO districts.
4. In an interview published in the September 1998 edition of the *Council Chronicle*, a newsletter of the National Council of Teachers of English, Kozol decries the absence in inner city schools of "genuine literature" by such authors as Willa Cather, Edgar Allan Poe, John Donne, and Walt Whitman. One wonders if he ever inquired of NCTE officials if they recommend these authors to English teachers in urban schools.
 5. For example, according to Massachusetts Department of Education statistics, in 2002, 6 of the school's 13 sixth graders failed; in 2005 (a year after Meier left the school), 9 of its 17 sixth graders failed (www.doe.mass.edu). For the school's scores in all subjects on all state assessments in recent years, readers can consult the school profile that Great Schools, Inc. has made available on the Internet. http://www.greatschools.net/modperl/browse_school/ma/342/
 6. Deborah Meier, *In Schools We Trust: Creating Communities of Learning in an Era of Testing and Standardization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).
 7. According to a 2005 report by the National Council on Education Statistics on student achievement in private schools, using NAEP data from 2000 to 2005, "Hispanic students in Catholic schools scored higher on average than public school students in every subject and grade where the sample size was sufficient to produce a reliable estimate. Black students in Catholic schools had higher average scores than Black students in public schools in all subjects and grades, except in grade 4 mathematics and grade 4 writing, where the apparent differences were not statistically significant" (12).
 8. Educational Policy Institute, *Focus on Results: An Academic Impact Analysis of the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP)*. A research paper prepared for the KIPP Foundation, August 2005.
 9. Michael Winerip, "How One Suburb's Black Students Gain," *New York Times*, On Education, 14 December 2005.
 10. David Steiner, with Susan Rozen, "Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers: An Analysis of Syllabi from a Sample of America's Schools of Education," in *A Qualified Teacher in Every Classroom? Appraising Old Answers and New Ideas*, ed. F. Hess, A. Rotherham, and K. Walsh (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2004), 119-148.
 11. Jonathan Kozol, "Segregated Schools: Shame of The City," *Gotham Gazette*, 16 January 2006; <http://www.gothamgazette.com/article/feature-commentary/20060116/202/1718>
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- Sandra Stotsky, former senior associate commissioner in the Massachusetts Department of Education, is now an independent consultant and researcher in education. She directs a We the People summer institute at Boston University, co-sponsored by the Lincoln and Therese Filene Foundation and the Center for Civic Education in Calabasas, California.*