Savage Inequalities

Jonathan Kozol’s article *Savage Inequalities* is nearly twenty-five years old and yet is still unfortunately incredibly relevant. Great disparities in the educational opportunities of various socioeconomic demographics are starkly illustrated through his investigational studies. Kozol extensively researched many schools across the United States, but in this excerpt two particular school districts were compared; the gross contrast of East St. Louis, one of the most impoverished small cities in the country, to Rye, an affluent suburb of New York City, may be extreme but reveals deep flaws all over and across our nation’s educational system.

The East St. Louis history class of long-time civil rights activist Ira Solomon is apparently the highlight of the entire school, yet it reflects much of the social disintegration of the town itself. In 1991 he had already taught there for nearly thirty years, with a passion for serving the underprivileged. Four of his students that year were pregnant, and with so few life prospects, they saw having a baby as a logical thing to do with no other joy or work in sight. Only fifty-five percent of seniors graduate, and only twenty to thirty percent of those go on to college or higher education, with a similar number joining the military.

The statistics are grim, but the underlying reasons behind the inequality seem to be lost on the students in the affluent Rye school district. One student named Jennifer, who was familiar with poverty having grown up in the Bronx but moved to Rye for a better life and education, seemed to think that there would be no hope in integrating the poorer kids “of color” into Rye, and that the dysfunctions associated with poverty would follow them and bring everyone in Rye down. She did not seem to have much sympathy for those she says are “in hell” in the Bronx schools, though she herself managed to get out. She did not want to see any of the precious tax money her school now enjoys to go toward the impoverished schools because she saw no personal gain from it. She exclaimed that the people stuck in “hell” must not really want an education or a good life for themselves, so why should anyone waste energy or money on them. Many students far more removed from these issues than Jennifer, shared her sentiments on the matter, adding to the stereotype that people in poverty are too lazy to get out of it.

The privileged kids of Rye, NY have likely never seen anything like the nightmarish decay of East St. Louis, where thousands of gallons of raw sewage flood the grounds, and many of the buildings are abandoned and in disrepair. The school has no resources, not even water in many cases and is unsanitary to the point of being a health hazard, with a high percentage of kids getting asthma or other ailments from the filth, sewage, and pollution from the multi-billion dollar corporations who have chemical plants there, Pfizer and Monsanto. It is a bleak dystopian landscape that screams of the neglect and exploitation of people that are considered to be expendable, and earns an apt comparison to the poverty-stricken South African apartheid-era shantytown of Soweto. Not only are the facilities of the school entirely lacking, broken, or outdated by a half-century (literally) but the staff is short or non-existent, the regulars over-worked and many positions filled by a revolving door of substitute teachers who have no investment in any given class. Rye, in contrast houses its schools in sturdy historic east coast architectural landmarks, which are restored when needed and well kept at all times. Beyond the higher number of tax dollars, the parents and community are able to raise additional funds for the school to be full of all the resources and educational tools to allow their students to flourish. They have smaller classrooms and a full, highly qualified staff providing every academic resource and accouterment possible, gearing them for higher education and armed to succeed.

Things have changed in the last twenty years, some areas just following the same trajectory of decay and others transforming entirely. Unfortunately though, rather than a transformation happening for the people of a distressed area, it seems to be more of a shuffling around of income levels, with moneyed folks returned to some desirable or trendy parts of the major inner cities. Instead of that return bringing tax dollars to improve the schools for the current residents, the impoverished residents are instead priced out of their own homes and schools.

I worked in a parking lot in downtown Minneapolis in 1991, and I remember picking up a pamphlet flying around on the blustery concrete after a convention of some sort had left the area. In it was an illustrated entreaty for anyone with common sense to hurry up and get on the soon-to-be-protected (environmentally and otherwise) upwardly-mobile-good-credit-having economic wagon (now!) or be left behind to rot with the poor. It detailed a plan to allow ghettos and the people in them to “kill themselves off” by the sheer inertia of economic segregation, and to create bubbles of protected utopia for the few and elite. I remember thinking they must have been a bunch of weirdoes, but sadly have witnessed essentially that very thing happening before my eyes over the course of more than twenty years. Now, if you have no credit or bad credit you are nearly paralyzed economically, the middle class is disappearing, and the wage gap increases every year, while inflation sky-rockets through any ceiling and human jobs disappear as technology increases. Environmental problems such as Katrina, disproportionately affect people in poverty and benefit those in power. I think that the savage inequality has gotten even more brutal, and the savages are the sociopathic “1%” who clearly have no intention of human, socioeconomic, or educational equality, ever.