

NOVEMBER 17, 1972

FREE

Reviewed by DENNIS ACKERMAN, ROGER LEWIN & JERRY SHAPIRO

Jonathan Kozol has written a political essay and primer on what he considers to be free schools. If you are interested in working (1) outside public education, (2) outside the white man's counter-culture, (3) inside the cities, (4) with the poor, the black, and the dispossessed, (5) in the smallest possible group; and if you are interested in understanding some of the legalities and finances of small schools, then *Free Schools* could be very useful.

At least fifty percent of the book is devoted to the legal and financial aspects of free schools, and the author includes as an appendix a listing of the best source materials in those areas. The other half of the book attempts to attribute a clear ethical priority to the confrontation of the misery of the ghetto. The harassment by the public institutions and by the wealthy, the higher mortality rates and the fight for physical survival are all emotionally described. Of the dynamics of human relations, the complexities of learning and teaching, the fragility of hopes and the persistence of needs, Kozol has very little to say. He makes an easy case against social injustice but is repeatedly vague in providing images to describe what action, in fact, can be initiated by any sizeable group in this country.

When speaking of black liberation and self-determination in public education, Kozol states that "there cannot be much serious role for white men and white women in the genesis of these operations." Why is genesis so different in these small counter-culture schools in black neighbourhoods? How does Mr. Kozol explain *his* role? What action can be taken to let blacks help themselves? Why doesn't Mr. Kozol help the blacks to write about the free school experience? How many small schools will, or can, the cities support realistically in the next few years? These are some of the questions left unanswered. Basically, the author refuses to become entangled in the real complexities that all small schools must face. For example, it seems inadequate to advocate strident political doctrines as a response to building inspectors; in some cities, like ours, they have turned out to be helpful allies. Theory and procedure derived from angry slogans can be disservices in many instances.

There are many contradictions in the author's style that confuse us. He states that publicity should be avoided. Yet on page after page he blasts city officials and landlords by name. If those people seek revenge in Boston, it will not be Mr. Kozol whose survival is in danger, but the people he is helping. He also maintains that viable situations are the small and personal ones. Yet he writes books for the masses and converses with many free schools in the country through one-night stands and prolific letter writing. He states that his approach will raise money for the poor, but what if these schools become *fashionable* in the future? Are gifts from Jonathan Kozol and the Ford Foundation the key to economic independence for the free school of the future? What is the role of "outsiders" in relation to the "poor, black, and dispossessed"? How does one avert creating new master-slave relationships?

There are many contradictions, paradoxes, points of confusion and false assumptions in this deeply-felt book, where issues are painted only in black and white. The most striking paradox encountered is the possibility that *Free Schools* may become a hindrance politically, socially, and intellectually to the very people Jonathan Kozol is addressing.

Joel Denker and Steve Bhaerman's autobiographical confession is unsatisfactory and unbelievable. A good portion of *No Particular Place to Go* concerns itself with the interactions of a learning commune which the authors began in 1969 and left in 1971. They point out some of the problems encountered while running their commune; they mention the difficulties of attendance, of continuity of learning, of group learning versus individual learning, etc. They do not, however, reveal how to initiate positive processes to deal with the problems of a day school or a commune.

Many of the descriptions of their experience only serve to confuse the reader or to place in doubt the authors' credibility. One example is Joel Denker's description of how the school very righteously removed "a cancer" from its midst by adhering to the beauty of love and other related emotions, instead of allowing the school to become involved in the dangers of psychology, extended dialogue, and reason.

The cancer, Arthur, called a meeting, invited a friend who was a psychologist, and drew up an ultimatum concerning his continued participation in the commune. Arthur was having trouble coping with the group's lack of responsibility (cleaning, etc.). Denker was outraged by these actions and refused to attend the meeting. He then wrote his own paper (ultimatum?) which declared ultimatums to be unethical. Arthur backed down a little and sent the psychologist home. At the next meeting, Joel and a student appeared in costume and armed with malt liquor. After a tense half hour of discussion with the enemy, Arthur lost control of himself and precipitated a situation where he and several students embraced, laughed and cried, effectively ending the meeting.

We do not believe this is love, as Denker would have the reader believe, but more a crude and exploitative defense against anxiety. Denker's procedures are certainly striking, but we believe, perhaps naively, that adolescents should be helped to move in the direction of adult and/or rational behavior; rather than infantile and/or irrational behavior. Denker seems excellent at exacerbating the frenzy of adolescence. The students he used for his own needs were never given the chance in his presence to slow down. Therefore, he could not help them to reflect on what they considered fantasy and reality in order to establish their own pace and style. When he decided to abandon the school, he left in a hurry. If there was a school or any person depending on him, his behavior certainly revealed how much he cared. One reason we are being so severe with Joel Denker is because he has written a book about free schools after demonstrating that he did not understand or care enough to "make a viable free school."

We felt much more sympathy for Steve Bhaerman's plight. He seems to have been far more honestly uncomfortable with himself, the myriad problems of those around him, and the complexities inherent in the forms of seduction that he observed. He admitted to being an adolescent among adolescents. We have the impression that his work has changed him. He seems to have left it, not because he was denied illicit satisfactions, but because a certain nausea and self-knowledge moved him to seek out the next step. It is possible that a different

community with more mature people might have provided Steve with the possibility of remaining and growing.

To those who know very little about free schools, we should say directly that we consider the book to be more deception than exposition. We also feel that there is no adequate balance in the book to illustrate the positive aspects of these small independent schools. For those of us who have been involved with alternative schools in the past few years, this book can serve as a constant reminder of the thin line between a step forward and a step backward, between a constructive process and simple chaos.

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