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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

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Thomas Sowell, *Inside American Education: The Decline, The Deception, The Dogmas*

Thomas French, *South of Heaven: Welcome to High School at the End of the Twentieth Century*

Considerable controversy has attached itself to the current condition of America's public schools. From the Bush administration's America 2000 initiative which proposed bringing every child to school ready to learn to Massachusetts' recently enacted Educational Reform Act which overhauls the Commonwealth's public school administration and funding, those concerned with how well the schools are preparing students for life in the 21st century have come forward to analyze, criticize, theorize, and proselytize the local public school. In this spirit, I thought this review might place a well-written and insightful conservative indictment of American schools, Thomas Sowell's *Inside American Education*, alongside Thomas French's *South of Heaven*, his interesting and entertaining account of a year spent within Florida's Largo High. The obvious question: to what extent do the criticisms of and prescriptions for American education have any pertinence to what actually transpires within the schools?

Sowell's *Inside American Education* enumerates public education's short-

comings. He decries the erosion of educational standards evidenced in the 'dumbing down' of texts and the diluting of the core curriculum with non-academic subjects like sex education, environmental studies, or courses with world-saving agendas. Sowell heaps scorn on schools of education for attracting the least academically qualified students and offering them intellectually disreputable courses. He points to union rules that function only to protect incompetent teachers by means of an "iron-clad tenure system" and government regulations that aggrandize an already bloated educational bureaucracy. Sowell refuses to attribute these problems to changes in school populations, which is to say increased numbers of minorities, arguing instead that the schools have become the site of an ideological conflict.

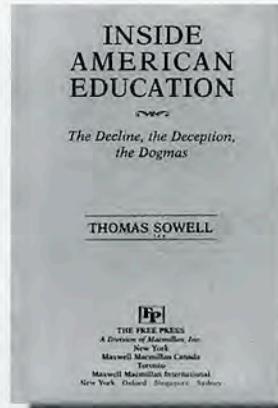
Sowell titles his third chapter, "Classroom Brainwashing", and in it condemns programs designed to change student attitudes, programs which, he claims, "typically originate with psychologists or psychological gurus who package programs for use in schools" (56) and which "attempt to re-model the values, beliefs, and attitudes of school children" (66). Such programs, argues Sowell, reveal a "pervasive pattern of undermining parents" (67) who represent the "conduit for the distilled experience of others in earlier generations. . .experiences distilled into a way of life by adults" (67). By offering "examples of alternative values in differing cultures," these attitude-changing programs make "values in general seem like arbitrary choices" (68). "All societies which have survived," claims Sowell, "have had some particular set of values, some core of right and wrong" (68). Sowell criticizes sex education programs developed and promoted by pharmaceutical companies; driver education courses supplied

by automobile companies; Planned Parenthood's "population-repression ideology"; and *Man: A Course of Study*, apparently a multicultural curriculum.

Sowell's polemic extends to what he calls the "assorted dogmas" that have become entrenched in the public schools. Multicultural education, has never demonstrated, Sowell claims, that its goals are plausible; multiculturalism's "ideological component. . .can be summarized as a cultural relativism which finds the prominence of Western civilization in the

world or in the schools intolerable" (71). Bilingual education, Sowell argues, has had no effect other than creating an educational bureaucracy whose "relentless drive [is] to maintain and expand enrollment in bilingual programs at all costs" (80). Sensitivity education Sowell views as possessing no "ideological point" other than depicting ethnic and racial minorities as "victims of whites, and their economic, educational, or other problems as being due to that victimization" (83). Sowell, dismisses the movement aimed toward educating the whole person through a child-centered curriculum. Such an issues-oriented curriculum, Sowell claims, appear like attempts to teach "calculus to people who have not yet learned arithmetic, or surgery to people lacking the rudiments of anatomy and hygiene. Worse, it is teaching them to go ahead and perform surgery, without worrying about boring details" (95). Sowell concludes that the public schools are not teaching students, but using them as laboratory animals for social experiments.

Sowell devotes several chapters to the decline of American higher education before announcing that American education is bankrupt. "Attitudes wholly antithetical to the intellectual



development of students flourish in elementary and secondary schools across the country, and are gaining more and more of a foothold in even our elite colleges” (286). Insufficient funding isn’t the problem but money misspent on bureaucracy rather than classrooms. Poor teachers are a problem, principally because of the “painful shallowness” of education school curricula. Regulations and red tape, tenure and unions keep schools from fulfilling their primary obligation — to educate the young. Yet, after all his indignation over how American school children are being hoodwinked, manipulated, and short-changed by their schools, Sowell leaves unanswered a fundamental question: what should they be taught?

Thomas French, reporter for the *St. Petersburg Times*, spent a school year at Largo High trying to answer this question. He chose Largo because it was “home of all sorts of students, white and black, from affluent neighborhoods and poor neighborhoods and everything in between” (6). The result of his researches is *South of Heaven: Welcome to High School at the End of the Twentieth Century*. French immediately informs his readers that “of the hundreds of kids I met, a surprising number were dealing with problems so gut-wrenching that it was hard to understand how they made it out of bed in the morning, much less came to school. . . . These students were under siege, fighting to hang on amid the destruction of their families, their neighborhoods, everything around them, and as I sat in class, listening to them tell the secret stories of their lives, it seemed sometimes that the entire world outside must be crumbling” (xi). French makes clear that for many students school is the only fixed and stable institution they know and that they attend, not so much to learn as to escape destructive pressures. His representa-

tive students pose different problems. Christine (or YY as she’s known to her school friends) is a super-achieving honors student headed for college; Mike, smart but defiant and disruptive, is filled with rage at his father who deserted the family; Jaimee wanders the school corridors like a shadow, unable to concentrate on any activity; Andrea is trying to be herself and accepted by both black and white student cliques; and John, a gifted athlete, attempts to achieve in school and stay clear from neighborhood drug dealers. Some of these teenagers are teachable, others not, but Largo has no choice but to deal with them all.

For the academically lost and under-achieving, the actual and potential dropouts, Largo runs a state and federally funded GOALS program whose foundation idea “is simple. Take a bunch of kids who should be making it but aren’t. Kids whose standardized test scores show they’ve got the brains, but whose behavior and grades and family histories make it clear that they’re on the way to dropping out. Put them in smaller classrooms — no more than eighteen kids per instructor, which is half the ratio you’ll find in many regular classrooms — and give them specially trained teachers who’ll be tough enough and creative enough to figure out a way to pierce the students’ armor of anger and indifference” (17). With dedicated teachers, Largo operates its GOALS program in a separate wing of the school known as the ‘pod.’ Mike and Jaimee participate, but, while the program has its successes, it mostly serves as an expensive babysitting exercise where totally lost children at least confront an adult who tries to care. For reasons that have very little to do with

the school and much to do with the home and the distractions of contemporary American life, the GOALS students cannot hope to begin their school day ready to learn. Through the GOALS program, Largo High assembles a series of parent workshops, opportunities

for parents to hear a different speaker each week who “tries to enlighten parents on what’s happening in the lives of their children” (132). The school presents sessions on drugs and alcohol, family communication and family dynamics, and satanism and cults. Over 200 at-risk students are enrolled in the GOALS program. The parent

workshops draw at most two parents a session.

These students, even the good ones, do not come from Sowell’s families where parents serve as conduits for the distilled wisdom of earlier generations. They are angry, usually at divorced parents who are neglecting them; confused, usually about where and how best to invest one’s time; and self-absorbed, usually in visions of self-loathing and pity. I need hardly add that a pervasive media saturation of music, TV, and video simultaneously fuels and feeds on this anger, confusion, and self-absorption.

Conservatives can fulminate all they want about the shortcomings of America’s schools. The fact is the schools are doing their level best to provide some point of fixed reference in many students’ lives while at the same time acting as the agents of worthwhile and necessary social change. Yet, as *South of Heaven* makes clear, we may still be headed east of Eden to the land of Nod.

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