

ILLITERATE AMERICA

Jonathan Kozol

New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1985.

ILLITERACY: A NATIONAL DILEMMA

David Harman

New York: Cambridge, The Adult Education Company, 1987.

These two recent US books begin with grand ideological and policy questions: Why don't we get on with it and create a more literate and just society? Can illiteracy be eradicated? Why does it seem intractable? These ideological questions point to the social practices of literacy--its uses in context, its development as related to other kinds of development. Neither author takes these questions far enough.

Jonathan Kozol's book, the earlier and the more challenging of the two, first urges the "plight" and the cost of illiteracy--the alarming statistics and heartrending tales that are designed to win wide support for the literacy cause. He claims sixty million illiterates in the US. Although he doesn't explain how, he attributes \$20 billion in costs (industrial accidents and errors, welfare and unemployment insurance, prisons) to their inability to read and write.

He piles on descriptions of the plight of illiterates, in a plea for sympathy and constructive rage. They are, he says, excluded, enslaved, unaware, intimidated, immobilized, half-citizens living in misery, humiliation, subjugation and fear. He recitates the usual "cannots" and more--from bafflement at menus and hospital admission forms, to the inability "to see historic precedent" for economic exclusion, and to make "suffering believable, by the use of written words" (170).

Kozol says that existing programs mostly serve "those already on the edge of functional effectiveness," not "the truly oppressed" (44). He advocates a campaign (in prose that some find inspiring, but I find bombastic and often imprecise). It will be a "passionate endeavour," beyond functional literacy, a "struggle rooted in politicized and grass-roots mobilization" (49). Subjugated people, he says, will not make "substantial gains in literacy skills if those skills are not directly linked to other areas of need and if those links do not consist of energizing words that can legitimize an often unacknowledged sense of rage" (48).

His attractive vision includes thousands of community programs, with "foot-workers," to recruiting people to plan and participate in programs;

literacy on the agenda of grass-roots groups; circles of six or seven learners with a literacy worker (a student, retired person, or community member). In one of the strongest chapters in the book, he urges the use of learners' stories, "oral history," as primers. These, he says, will be "at once a chronicle of longings and a history of secret grief."

In all this, the key words are morality, passion, rage, denunciation. Kozol does not ask how the *moral* effort of a literacy campaign could be embedded *organizationally* in changing society. "Action" seldom appears in Kozol's text, and "organization" never. He writes, for example, that we should seek in literacy work for "instruments of moral leverage . . . to examine the political determinants of subjugation; . . . and, by virtue of reflection and examination, first to denounce and finally to transform" (92). The nexus between denouncing and transforming does not attract Kozol's interest.

He says that oral history will, and should, contain "dangerous" words--words that "take on emotional intensity" or have "passionate potential" (136). He thinks of the danger in emotion and passion, good humanistic stuff--not of the danger that the oppressed might organize to become masters of their own destiny. This peculiar silence must be part of the wide political attractiveness of Kozol's book.

Kozol intends a wide appeal. He lodges his cause in the American longing for both unmatched prosperity and world moral leadership: "I do not believe that an illiterate society--one third illiterate in verbal and numerate respects, the other two thirds literate too often in the least compassionate and most destructive ways--can hope to prosper or compete in economic terms, prevail in moral terms, or hold a promising beacon to the wretched of the earth in any terms at all, until we are prepared to launch an all-out battle with the enervating adversary that resides in our own atrophied imagination" (78-9).

The last page of his book declares, "Illiteracy, when widely recognized and fully understood, may represent the one important social, class and pedagogic issue of our times on which the liberal, the radical, and the informed conservative can stand on common ground . . ." (199). But what kind of "common ground" is it? How can he have us imagine a cause both angry and political, and yet unifying nearly everyone? Various silences allow this, and numerous unasked and unanswered questions. For example: Kozol says that Americans are "surrounded and conditioned by the print reality . . . whose skilled practitioners control the chief determinants of their existence." How will those who benefit from this control react to a vastly enlarged literacy?

He complains that, "A nation that is drowning in the presence of false language cannot differentiate between decision and mechanical response" (181). He even explains that, "Skills divorced from earnest applications, efficacy divorced from ethics, competence divided from compassion, no longer define a literate adult in an endangered decade. They represent instead the definition of a garrulous efficiency in service of a self-destructive goal of global domination" (190). How will the agents and beneficiaries of global domination be won to the passionate crusade?

He coolly observes, "Both the number and the visibility of functional and marginal illiterates are now significantly greater than a decade back and will be still greater in another ten or fifteen years," as stiffened tracking patterns increase schooling inequalities and dropout rates (58). How will the forces behind this increasing illiteracy be undone?

On all these questions, Kozol is silent.

He is likewise silent about the societal process that continues to create a surplus population, with no place in the labour market and "no need" for literacy. He embeds his argument clearly in the racial politics of the US; but not in its class politics.

Our present literacy is deeply embedded in the ways that our society is managed, both in the development and propagation of its dominant ideas, and in the routines of its administration. Kozol does not give any sustained account of literacy as a tool of domination, although he does intersperse remarks. But his idealism lets him avoid asking how our present literacy (and illiteracy) are embedded in our present social organization, or how a new literacy might emerge with a new social organization.

Kozol can avoid these difficult questions about literacy as a social practice, because his ultimate conception of literacy leaves them behind. He offers this "quintessential definition of a literate human being: one soul, reaching out of the loneliness of the human condition, to find--through love--another" (162). In his peroration, Kozol confesses, "I do not believe that we have any choice but to be loyal to our own most stirring moment of transcendence." His vision of literacy *is*, ultimately, transcendent. Putting it into this world is work he leaves to the rest of us.

His jeremiad reads best if approached not for an analysis that can inform action, but for the engaging man that has written it, and for a reminder of

the moral urgency that should *underlie* a serious examination of literacy and literacy work.

In David Harman's eyes, transcendent vision is just overblown rhetoric.

Harman opposes the idea of a campaign. His central theme is that literacy is historically an unbeatable enemy, and "as people everywhere strive to achieve fully literate societies, their efforts seem to be perpetually obstructed" (2).

His argument shows the common sense and humanitarianism that one would expect from his earlier work with Carman St. John Hunter. He reminds us that the common claims that literacy work produces economic and political participation, "attribute to literacy powers that it unfortunately does not have. Neither labor market participation nor 'good citizenship' are necessarily contingent upon reading and writing abilities" (33-4). Certification counts more than literacy in the labour market, and unemployment "is caused by economic conditions, not by educational gaps" (34).

He points out that literacy is not just a matter of improving the schools, or getting dedicated volunteers out there working. He says, "Attempts to teach literacy without due regard for the values and motives of the learners are doomed to failure" (2). "Literacy itself cannot be forced upon people" (72). Programs that work well are shaped by learners' own needs to meet the literacy demands of their environments.

There is a darker side to Harman's common sense and humanitarianism. His concept of literacy is idealist and psychological--about "values" and "consciousness." He warns that, "More than a set of skills, literacy is a value" (11). He juxtaposes a "set of skills" not to a "set of social practices," but to "a value."

This idealism shows up dramatically in his decidedly up-beat history of literacy. In a kind of *nice* anthropology, he notes that literacy develops when people want to "record law and lore for transmission to their progeny . . . preserve their cultures and heritages" (14). As an afterthought, he adds that "of course" literacy extends over space as well as time, and "made it possible for people to govern large tracts of land (sic--not people)--to create and administer large empires" (15).

In the middle (for Harman, dark) ages, Church and secular elites saw literacy as a danger to their hegemony. Then came Protestantism and the printing press, and "Throughout the past four centuries emphasis on liberation and human rights had been coupled with a strong conviction that education and literacy ought to be universal and avidly pursued" (18). "The position that literacy in the hands of the masses posed a potential danger and that, therefore, it should be restricted to certain ruling groups was firmly replaced with an ideal of a fully literate populace. The acquisition of schooling and literacy were henceforth deemed human rights to be avidly pursued. Governments were charged with--and generally accepted--that mandate" (21).

Harman's view neatly skips over the regulative side of literacy, in favour of its liberating side. And in a subjectless history of liberating convictions and ideals, the question arises why literacy remains an unbeatable enemy. Answer: the "values" of communities, who somehow do not buy into the ideal that governments have for them.

Here Harman's Whig history meets his good common sense and his opposition to a literacy campaign. Individuals will acquire literacy when they "recognize that their abilities are below those that are normative" in their communities. When individuals are in "communities in which literacy is not expected and its existence not rewarded . . . it is the community that must become literacy conscious and establish a definition of expectation for its members" (10). He even offers a concept of "cultural illiteracy"--not being ignorant of culture, but being part of a culture that does not "value" literacy. So the task becomes "instilling reading consciousness" (53).

With a psychological conception of literacy, Harman cannot criticize the social production of texts. So he is left with blaming "community" when literacy does not take. This has its most painful twist in his account of public schools. There are, he says, "supportive" communities (involved, both assisting and censuring the schools); and "nonsupportive" communities (that regard education as important, but do not intervene) (49). Kozol, and current sociology of education, see these as class relations, involving the limited resources and skill of some parents, and the resistance of schools to them. For Harman, it is good and bad "values." Of course, Harman's concept of "community" predictably slides into that of "family" (50-1), but enough said. Deprivation theories have found a new formulation in adult education.

At the very best his approach is quiescent: ". . . people will actively seek and attain those literacy levels that are dictated by their environments" (9). So people actively seek to meet demands that they

passively accept. Definitionally, he says, we should "locate problems where they exist" (44). This does not mean where people are excluded from the relations organized through literacy, or where they want to create new forms of literacy to change their communities, but only where there is some "dissonance" between individual skill and given social demand.

Eventually Harman "happily" contradicts his whole argument, and says, "A strategy based on the needs of people--as they themselves perceive them--can transform the vision of universal literacy into reality" (73).

Harman also has a grand vision. "Literacy is freedom. Literacy makes it possible for people to determine for themselves what they wish to know, and in what depth . . ." (93). (It is a fine sentiment; never mind that his whole argument about when people are "accessible" to literacy teaching assumes that illiterates already determine what they wish to know.)

"Far from being an anachronism, literacy remains one of humanity's finest and most important inventions, irreplaceable despite all the technological advances of our time. Without it we would remain in a state of subjugation, subject to the whims of the few who are literate. With it we are liberated, free, independent" (94). (Never mind, again, that none of his accounts of community "values" or "consciousness" are about breaking free from subjugation.)

In their different ways both Kozol and Harman are liberal and humanitarian. They both respect and focus on "community" (Kozol wants to enliven the poor and illiterate to moral protest, Harman to instil literacy consciousness in them). Both have visions of literacy as conveying higher "values."

In criticizing both, I do not urge adding conservative and/or radical ideologies of literacy to their liberal ideologies--though all these will certainly appear. It would be more fruitful to hold off on the ideologizing, and look at how literacy actually works, to develop a conception of literacy not as a set of ideals (morals, passions, consciousness and values) but as a set of practices (uses and relations).

A Canadian account of literacy might just help to do this. In the tradition of Innis and McLuhan, it could be more cognizant of the embeddedness of communications--thus of literacy and textuality--in the exercise of power. And a Canadian account would be marginal to the difficulties of political clarity at the centre of empire. It would not assume, with Kozol, that the moral awakening of the powers that be will liberate the subjugated, or, with Harman, that literacy is pure and simple

the modern liberating ideal. A modest and descriptive Canadian account might begin not with grand ideological issues, but with the experiences of illiterates and of learners and workers in literacy programs.

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