



Why the Poor Don't Soak the Rich

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Why the poor don't soak the rich

To ask why there is so much inequality in modern-day democracies is to ask a loaded question.¹ Why should we expect there to be less?

Such an expectation was nevertheless widely shared in the nineteenth century, both among conservatives who feared the economic implications of democracy and among socialists who welcomed democracy precisely because of its apparent economic implications. The Left and Right agreed: if majority rule and universal suffrage were introduced into a society marked by massive inequality, then most voters, being relatively poor, would inevitably favor taxing the rich and transferring the proceeds downward. I will call this the *redistributive thesis*.

This is one thesis that history has roundly refuted. Although there have been redistributive eras in capitalist democracies since the advent of a universal franchise, there has been no systematic relationship between democracy and downward redistribution – not even a detectable relationship between the expansions of the franchise and episodes of downward redistribution.²

Indeed, expanding the franchise has sometimes been accompanied by regressive redistribution. In the United States, economic inequality rose sharply between the early 1970s and the mid-1990s, despite the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the lowering of the voting age to eighteen in 1971. Similarly, in the post-communist world, the advent

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1 An expanded version of this essay, including extensive discussion of the literature on which it is based, can be found at <<http://pantheon.yale.edu/~ianshap/papers.htm>>.

2 Inequality in the United States remained comparatively stable throughout the nineteenth century and only began to drop in the 1930s; yet during this period a number of voting reforms expanding the franchise were enacted. See Jeffrey G. Williamson and Peter H. Lindert, *American Inequality: A Macroeconomic History* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 62–63; and Michael Levin, *The Spectre of Democracy* (Hampshire, U.K.: Macmillan, 1992), 3–9.

of democracy has been accompanied by the ostentatious growth of inequality. No doubt these developments owe at least as much to the introduction of capitalism as they do to democracy. Still, if the redistributive thesis is of interest, it must surely predict that a representative democracy will reverse – or at least retard – the regressive implications of market capitalism. Yet in practice, democracies often seem willing to tolerate growing inequality.

There are several ways that social scientists have tried to explain this apparent anomaly. A number of them have pointed to the logic of democracy, the logic of capitalism, and the ways in which they interact. Such analysts argue that the propensity to demand downward redistribution would be realized were it not for unexpected dynamics unleashed by the institutions of democracy and capitalism and their interaction.

My purpose here is not to criticize this kind of institutional account, but rather to raise doubts about some assumptions behind it. No doubt part of the intuitive plausibility of the redistributive thesis is that it seems supported by a number of common assumptions about human psychology. If individuals in general were rational in the pursuit of self-interest, or rational in their pursuit of class interests, then we would expect most people in a democracy to support downward redistribution – if not to the point of perfect economic equality, then at least to something a lot closer to it than what we now have.

The expectation that democracies will redistribute downward is often motivated by the observation of poverty amid opulence. It seems reasonable to anticipate that the greater the manifest opulence of the few, the stronger will be the redistributive pressure from below.

Paradoxically, however, something closer to the opposite may often be the case.

Why this discrepancy? An important part of the answer, I think, lies in exposing a number of dubious assumptions about human psychology. Those who adhere to the redistributive thesis, be they Marxist, liberal, or conservative, usually assume that people in general keep themselves well informed about their place in the distribution of income and wealth, that the poor and middle classes compare themselves to the wealthy when thinking about what is feasible or just, and that those toward the bottom of the income distribution are like coiled springs – were it not for various external forces that are pressing them down, they would leap into action and demand a greater share of the economic pie.

Every one of these assumptions is questionable – and every one of them deserves to be questioned.

Aspirations do not form in vacuums. People must be able to picture realistically the goods for which they will strive. If the gap between where a person is and where he or she might hope to be is too great, certain goods are likely to seem out of reach – and hence outside the range of realistic aspirations. There thus arises the possibility of an *empathy gulf*, a situation in which people who are situated in one stratum of society may find it literally impossible to imagine the goods pursued by those in another.

When levels of inequality are extremely high, such an empathy gulf might actually dampen redistributive demands from the very poor. An extreme example will make this point. In modern-day Cape Town, it is common for domestic cleaners who live in squatters' camps to work for ten dollars a day cleaning half-million dollar houses, where the cars in

the garages cost many multiples of their expected lifetime earnings. It may just be impossible for the cleaners to picture themselves ever owning such a car, let alone the houses in which their owners live. You can see yourself stepping unaided over a puddle or a stream, perhaps even swimming a river, but not swimming the Atlantic ocean.

By the same token, those who are very rich may find it impossible to picture themselves ever becoming poor. To the degree that willingness to tolerate downward redistribution is part of the worry “there but for the grace of God go I,” the worry has to be credible. If you are rich and the gap between you and the poor you see around you is so vast that no calamity you can imagine befalling you will put you into their circumstances, then any prudential reasons you might have for improving their lot disappear. Presumably this is one reason why most people can tune out panhandlers and street people and acquiesce in the demonization of the underclass. The mighty may fall into destitution in Zola’s novels – but no one who reads Zola in modern-day America really expects that such things could happen to them.

The more extreme the income inequality, the greater the psychic distance between the have-nots and the haves. Beyond certain thresholds that would have to be determined empirically, inequality may be expected to spawn empathy gulfs that dampen demands for change from below and reinforce the complacency of those who are rich. If the conditions for revolutionary social change are absent, and if a democratic order is seen as fundamentally legitimate, then the very existence of a vast gulf between rich and poor may very well reinforce the inegalitarian status quo. People will be more likely to blame others who are close to themselves in the

social order for their plight rather than the wealthy, who seem unimaginably far away. This may fuel characteristic types of conflict among different groups and classes toward the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum, but it is unlikely to have much effect on the overall distribution of income and wealth.

The existence of empathy gulfs complements other possibilities that have been suggested to explain why voters would not make the kinds of egalitarian demands predicted by the redistributive thesis. An older sociology literature that runs from Max Weber to Frank Parkin suggests that in market systems most people think there is less inequality than there actually is, and that their relative position is better than it actually is. There is also an economics literature that seeks to explain people’s apparently irrational beliefs about the prospects for their own upward mobility, and there is empirical research in social psychology that supports the notion that in formally egalitarian systems people opt for individual advancement rather than collective action to improve their circumstances.

In the United States, at least, although people might be egalitarian in many facets of social life, they tend to accept economic outcomes as legitimate unless they seem to be both procedurally and substantively unfair. But this seldom happens, because the market is widely believed to be a fair distributive instrument. Jennifer Hochschild’s 1995 study, *Facing up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*, revealed a remarkably widespread endorsement of the idea that “skill rather than need should determine wages,” and that “America should promote equal opportunity for all” rather than “equal outcomes.” Overwhelming majorities from different occupational, racial, and politi-

cal groups endorsed this ideology.

To be sure, not everyone believes in the justness of capitalism or the American Dream. Hochschild herself notes that a subset of the population is estranged from it. Because desolation and apathy are unlikely to coexist with ambition and determination for success, it seems clear that differently situated poor people have different beliefs and aspirations. It may be that those who could organize for redistributive politics are insufficiently disaffected to do so, while those who are sufficiently disaffected are incapable of organizing.

Like empathy gulfs, what some psychologists call *framing effects* also shape what people see as pertinent political alternatives. Here the concern is not with the goods people might in principle, or on reflection, imagine themselves deciding to pursue, but rather with what they actually focus on when making a particular decision.

In 1984, Ronald Reagan ran for reelection by asking a pointed question: "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" This directed people to think about a bundle of goods represented by their disposable income, and to ask whether their stock of it had increased. This is a self-referential comparison: it requires no attention to what others have.

Research shows that people often think largely in self-referential terms. Moreover, when they do compare themselves to others, it is generally to people who are situated like themselves. Workers do not compare themselves to their bosses in assessing their circumstances. They do not compare themselves to the rich, but rather to workers like themselves.

Yet even if most workers understand their own interest in such narrow terms,

it still seems to follow that workers pursuing the interests they do share will, sooner or later, support a redistribution of wealth – this, after all, was a part of what Karl Marx expected to happen under capitalism. To explain why this does not happen, we should attend to a variety of other factors.

For example, one reason workers might not press for redistribution stems from *backward-looking framing effects*, a phrase meant to capture the reactive character of much human behavior. After all, the query "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" directs attention to the past – with the implication that the alternative to the present is not progress, but backsliding. Once a marginal advance has occurred, there is always the possibility of losing it.

People who are surprised that there are not more demands for downward redistribution tend to work on the assumption that those near the bottom of the economic distribution think they have nothing to lose. This may be true for a handful of people, but certainly not for most – and definitely not for most modern-day workers. In many circumstances, voters may decide that things could well get worse – particularly if things have been worse in the recent past.

What may be called *inward-looking framing effects* also shape the decisions that people routinely make. Rallying grassroots supporters for the Million Man March in October of 1995, Louis Farrakhan insisted that the time had come for the dispossessed in the black community to draw on their own resources and bootstrap themselves out of poverty. His message was unequivocal: forget the inequality out there and focus on yourself. When people internalize ideologies of this kind, they will not demand redistribution through public

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institutions. Instead, they will blame themselves for their circumstances and accept that they should look inward when trying to improve them. Inward-looking framing effects are likely significant in accounting for the dearth of redistributive demands in the United States, given the power of bootstrapping ideologies here. Whether the inward-looking focus is on the self or on a comparatively dispossessed group, it is significantly not on the larger society and its distribution of goods and opportunities.

Even individuals who are fully aware of the real dimensions of economic inequality sometimes decide that they have other priorities that are more important than trying to redress perceived economic injustice. Some people may be more concerned about their status or dignity than about income and wealth. In contemporary South Africa, for instance, the abolition of second-class citizenship since the democratic transition in 1994 has produced a tangible new noneconomic good: the dignity that comes with the act of voting. In such circumstances, the mere right to vote may well dampen popular concern with the continuing existence of economic inequality.

Even in the United States, economic issues must vie for attention with concerns about status and recognition. Part of the appeal of ethnic and other forms of identity politics in countries like ours comes from the persistence of status inequalities. By focusing on issues of status and dignity, social movements sometimes draw attention away from more purely economic concerns.

Downward-looking framing effects draw attention away from redistribution in still another way: by directing attention to those less fortunate in the social order. The existence of the very poor can seem frightening to those just above

them in the social order in at least three ways: they might be thought to threaten violence, they might be believed to be the cause of tax burdens to fund welfare demands, and the possibility of unemployment might conjure up the possibility of plunging into their ranks.

Fear of the marauding rabble of dispossessed poor has existed for centuries. Rather than disappearing in capitalist democracies like the United States, this fear seems to have taken on a *petit bourgeois* form. Among those in the middle class and especially the lower middle class the fear takes the form of an antipathy toward those who are below them. There is even a tendency for those in the upper reaches of the lower class to distance themselves from the lower reaches, identifying instead with middle-class norms.

At the same time, a good deal of electoral politics in a modern democracy revolves around reinforcing stereotyped images of the underclass in ways that foment tensions between working-class and upper-middle-class Americans. Much of the trench warfare around affirmative action, for instance, is about promotions in the police department, the post office, and the fire department. It has little impact on people who live in Scarsdale or on the structure of income distribution. This is why political commentator Michael Lind can write of a white upper middle class, whose members support racial preferences and multiculturalism from which they are largely immune, that they “live right and think left” by looking askance at lower-middle-class opposition to their preferred policies. Though Lind perhaps exaggerates when he argues that affirmative action is the result of a divide-and-conquer conspiracy, he is surely right about its effects: keeping America’s middle and lower classes squabbling among

themselves feeds racism and destroys what otherwise might be natural political alliances in a campaign for redistributive change.

Downward-looking framing effects are sustained by demonizing those at or near the bottom of the social order. Hatred of welfare stems from the perception that most recipients are undeserving. Media portrayals of the very poor as disproportionately black and lazy reinforce this perception – as does the act of criminalizing the poor. The vast numbers of poor people who currently are housed in American prisons constitute a manifestly demonized group – even though the overwhelming majority of these prisoners have in fact committed no violent crime.³

Finally, perceptions of political alternatives are often shaped by *anecdotal distractions*. In *Albion's Fatal Tree*, historian Douglas Hay tells the story of an eighteenth-century criminal law that operated almost exclusively in the interests of propertied elites, but by means of which even noblemen were occasionally subjected to extreme forms of punishment – even the death penalty – for relatively minor offenses against property. Hay argues that such token but spectacular punishments meted out to aristocrats were meant to instill awe for the legal order that protected the propertied

classes. What better way to get the poor to think that the law is not the instrument of the rich than to have it so visibly enforced against a member of the nobility?

Anecdotal distractions need not be directed only at the rich: lurid stories about “welfare queens” driving Cadillacs draw attention away from the law-abiding behavior of most welfare recipients. Horatio Alger stories work in the same way, as Ronald Reagan well understood (“What I want to see above all is that this country remains a country where someone can always get rich”). When politicians visibly single out individuals who have moved from welfare to work or otherwise triumphed over adversity, they exhibit their understanding of the power of anecdotal distractions. The man in the street does not ask questions about random sampling or selecting on the dependent variable.

I have discussed so far the psychological implications of empathy gulfs and of various kinds of framing effects. In addition, sheer geographical distance – *physical gulfs* – may also attenuate redistributive demands. One might think of this as another kind of framing effect: out of sight, out of mind. But it is both more and less than this.

Physical gulfs can be more than framing effects in that segregation of the have-nots from the haves in capitalist democracies is real and increasing. The starkest illustration of this in the United States is the middle-class dash from cities to suburbs that took off a generation ago and is now culminating in enclave living. As recently as 1960, gated communities numbered in the hundreds and were for the elderly and the super-rich. By 1997, there were as many as twenty thousand gated communities in the country, consisting of more than

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³ For data on the explosive growth of incarceration in the United States (which has transformed the United States from a country that incarcerated around one hundred per one hundred thousand between World War II and 1970 to one that incarcerated over four hundred per one hundred thousand by the mid-1990s), see John Irwin and James Austin, *It's About Time: America's Imprisonment Binge* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1997), 1–3. Almost three-quarters of those incarcerated have not committed violent offenses of any kind; convictions for drug possession or trafficking account for the great majority of the increase. *Ibid.*, 19–61.

three million housing units, at least a third of which were middle-class, and a growing number of which were working-class in composition. These numbers greatly understate the reality of enclave living, since many country towns (often functional suburbs) can for all practical purposes be inaccessible to inner-city residents.

The net effect is the rise of what Douglas Rae has called a “segmented democracy.”⁴ Freedom of movement lives cheek by jowl with effective segregation by race and class. In America today, this segregation is in many respects as onerous as it was in South Africa under apartheid. Movement by poor black and brown people from the inner cities into middle- and upper-class neighborhoods is not a practical option, given the realities of transportation and local policing practices.

Spatial segregation also means that the middle and upper classes restrict their urban life to business districts and daylight hours, a trend that is greatly enhanced by the flexibility to work from home afforded by the Internet. And those who live in refurbished parts of inner cities have enclaves of their own. Their daily paths from guarded apartment buildings to work, gyms, and upscale restaurants enables them to minimize their contact with anyone who is disturbingly different from themselves. In this way, the physical gulfs of a segmented democracy reinforce the

empathy gulfs already discussed.

Yet physical gulfs amount to less than a framing effect, in the television age, in that “out of sight” is not – strictly speaking – “out of mind.” The paradox is that despite the geographic reality of physical segmentation, the have-nots are not ignorant of what the haves have. Tocqueville said that the poor knuckle under in aristocracies because they are ignorant of comfort: “they despair of getting it and they do not know enough about it to want it.” The implied suggestion is that, were it available, such knowledge would become the engine of redistributive demands. Yet despite the fact that people are bombarded with images of how the other half (or, more accurately, the other 2 percent) lives, these images produce scant interest in economic equity. Knowledge by acquaintance is more important, it seems, than knowledge by television. This is consistent with the research suggesting that what people learn through the media is not a substitute for everyday proximity in shaping their aspirations.

It also suggests that a perverse dynamic may be at work as well. If *de jure* segregation, such as the Group Areas Act that launched South Africa’s residential segregation in 1950, or the Jim Crow laws that prevailed in the southern United States until the 1960s, eventually provokes collective resistance, then simply removing the legal prohibitions may well destroy the will to act collectively – leaving *de facto* segregation unchanged. As long as they are free and equal under the law, individuals will generally aspire toward individual economic mobility – even if the odds of success are negligible. The contemporary United States provides anecdotal evidence in support of this contention, and so does post-apartheid South Africa.

4 Douglas Rae, “Democratic Liberty and Tyrannies of Place,” in Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordón, eds., *Democracy’s Edges* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 165–192. See also Thomas J. Sugrue, “The Structures of Urban Poverty: The Reorganization of Space and Work in Three Periods of American History,” in Michael Katz, ed., *The Underclass Debate* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

This last point may recall Karl Marx's famous critique of the ways in which a democratic constitution formally committed to the rights of man and citizen may distort perceptions of injustice, and so blunt demands for social change. For Marx, democracy was an engine of false consciousness. But Marx suffered from his own form of false consciousness. His version of the redistributive thesis depended on a crude picture of a society increasingly polarized into two separate and highly unequal classes: a tiny ruling class, and a vast working class whose members were barely scraping by. A few from the middle classes might join the ruling class, but most others, he argued, would fall down into the proletariat as capitalism advanced.

Part of Marx's failure here was conceptual. His theory of exploitation moves illicitly between the claim that the relative immiseration of the proletariat will increase (which follows analytically from his theory of exploitation) to the claim that their absolute immiseration will also increase (which does not follow). The rate of Marxian exploitation can increase while wages remain constant or even rise. Another part of Marx's failure was empirical. In all capitalist democracies, a relatively affluent middle class, far from disappearing, has flourished, in part by including many people Marx would have classified as workers: they must sell their labor-power to others in order to survive, yet they live considerably above mere subsistence. Such people are unlikely to respond to Marx's famous battle cry that they have "nothing to lose but their chains."

Marxian political economists have sometimes claimed that this is a transient state of affairs: working-class discontent is bought off through welfare states that will eventually succumb to

fiscal crises, after which contradictions will inexorably surface, leading finally to two-class polarization.

In fact, a more complex class dynamic might be stable for reasons that are quite distinct from any of the considerations about reference groups, knowledge, beliefs, framing effects, and empathy and physical gulfs that I have already adduced. Even in a world of fully informed self-interested rational actors, it is far from clear that a middle-class voter, though relatively disadvantaged compared to the rich, would support a policy of economic redistribution.

Take the case of South Africa today. At the moment, there is not significant pressure for downward redistribution from the grassroots of the ruling African National Congress Party in South Africa – in part because of the extreme character of the economic inequality that currently prevails. An increase in taxes for even the top 20 percent of the population would entail an increase in taxes for much of the black working class – so they have self-interested reasons to oppose it. Even if they did support redistribution, it would scarcely be to those at the bottom of the economic order in a country where at least a third of the black population is unemployed.

This confirms the importance of looking seriously into the counterintuitive possibility that the more unequal the distribution, the harder it may be to mobilize lower-middle- and working-class support for redistribution downward – certainly for redistribution to those at the bottom.

In one attempt to model the implications of this type of social situation, Fredrich Breyer and Heinrich W. Ursprung have shown formally that above-average income earners are in a position to bribe the small segment of voters whose incomes fall between the

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median and the mean to resist the temptation of confiscatory taxation.⁵ In another article, James M. Snyder and Gerald H. Kramer have argued that a majority of middle- and upper-income taxpayers might support a relatively progressive income tax – but only if it reduced their tax burden at the expense of the poor.⁶ The more wealth a tiny minority has, the easier it is to co-opt middle-class voters through marginal tax cuts, middle-class tax benefits such as home interest mortgage deductions, and subsidies for their children's higher education. The members of this middle group may well be more concerned about what they stand to lose from an aggressive system of progressive taxation than attracted to the uncertain benefits of allying with those below them in order to soak the rich.

As I have noted briefly in relation to the United States, and as others have detailed more systematically in connection with other countries, distributive politics have moved in different directions at different times in different democratic systems. Some of the factors adduced here apply generally, but some do not.

This can scarcely be surprising. The psychology of citizens is but one of a host of factors that influence the evolving structure of inequality in capitalist democracies. It may also be that democracies do redistribute downward sometimes, but that capitalist economies pro-

duce inequality at a faster rate than the political process can attenuate it. If so, a definitive evaluation of the redistributive thesis may prove elusive.

The past thirty years have been a period of unusually regressive redistribution in the United States. This suggests that we should look to historically contingent factors to account for it in addition to considering the ongoing obstacles to progressive redistribution that I have described. Among those mentioned here, two candidates are the advent of segmented democracy and the massive increase in the rate of incarceration for nonviolent crimes. Other dynamics I have mentioned may also have been involved, such as the paradoxical ways in which massive inequality may make downward redistribution more difficult once certain thresholds have been passed. Perhaps these developments are causally implicated in the upward redistribution we have seen in the United States in recent decades; perhaps they are consequences of it.

In any event, other factors have been involved as well. One such is doubtless *Buckley v. Valeo*. This 1976 Supreme Court decision ushered in an era of limitless spending in political campaigns, loading the dice more heavily than before in favor of those with money. Particularly in an inquiry that aspires to be sensitive to the consequences of incomplete information, cognitive limitations, and framing effects, some attention to how and why issues are put in front of people is in order.

Another likely cause of the recent dearth of demands for downward redistribution derives from the changing beliefs of the elite. In the era from the New Deal through the Great Society, many American political and economic elites embraced a Keynesian worldview. Among its implications was the belief

5 Friedrich Breyer and Heinrich W. Ursprung, "Are the Rich Too Rich to be Expropriated?: Economic Power and Feasibility of Constitutional Limits to Redistribution," *Public Choice* 94 (1/2) (1998): 135–156.

6 James M. Snyder and Gerald H. Kramer, "Fairness, Self-interest, and the Politics of the Progressive Income Tax," *Journal of Public Economics* 36 (1988): 197–230.

that capitalism could conceivably fall apart, and that spending by government to stimulate demand at the bottom of the economy was needed to stave off this possibility. That fear is much less prevalent among elites today. There is, moreover, no longer a threatening alternative system on offer from the Soviet Union, eliminating a very good ulterior motive for the haves to worry about the have-nots. The potential of these developments to reinforce empathy gulfs and downward-looking framing effects is obvious.

These observations suggest that we are unlikely to be able to formulate any simple theory about how the politics of redistribution work out in a modern-day democracy. Rather, particular episodes will call for historically grounded explanations. This is not to say that adding to our understanding of the general dynamics addressed here is a waste of time. These dynamics alert us to distributive psychologies and subjective logics that can play themselves out in democratic politics, even if they must be triggered by historically specific events and institutional dynamics.

This raises, and settles, a second issue. Although many of the considerations identified here are mutually complementary, some live in tension with one another. Most obviously, the appeal to the widespread belief in the American Dream and the possibility of upward mobility stand in stark contrast to my discussion of empathy gulfs in accounting for the failure of the redistributive thesis. Perhaps this tension can be resolved by exploring the possibility that even when the poor expect to get rich, they understand this possibility in a modest way that is compatible with the persistence of empathy gulfs.⁷ Then again, perhaps the tension cannot be resolved. There is no reason to suppose

that a single explanation can be given for why the redistributive thesis fails. It seems likely to me that the possibilities of redistributive politics are differently limited in different circumstances, in which case the search for a general explanation will be chimerical.

A final point concerns my proclivity in this essay to reach for South African examples to illuminate distributive politics in the United States. As a white South African who is now a citizen of the United States, I have long been fascinated by the ways in which Americans view political events in my former homeland. In the 1970s and 1980s, South Africa was widely depicted as the embodiment of political evil by American liberals, socialists, and even many conservatives, and it became a focus of intense protest. Campaigns for divestment and, eventually, for sanctions were successful in much of the Western world. In the United States, campus demonstrations and other public pressure forced universities and pension funds to divest their South African holdings. Corporations found doing business in South Africa to be increasingly costly, and in 1986 even a recalcitrant Reagan administration was unable to muster enough support to sustain its veto of bipartisan sanctions legislation in Congress. The anti-apartheid movement resonated across a broad swath of opinion as a locus for judgments about regimes

7 Jonathan Kozol quotes a teacher in the South Bronx: "Many of the ambitions of children ... are locked in at a level that suburban kids would scorn. It's as if the very possibilities of life have been scaled back. Boys who are doing well in school will tell me, 'I would like to be a sanitation man.' I have to guard my words and not say anything to indicate my sense of disappointment. In this neighborhood, a sanitation job is something to be longed for." Kozol, *Amazing Grace* (New York: Crown, 1995), 125.

that should be seen as beyond the pale. This is perplexing, because on most measures of human-rights abuses and political killings, South Africa probably did not rank among the top twenty most repressive regimes in the world during this period. It suggests that, whatever the American reaction tells us about apartheid, it is also revealing of America's own political culture. Perhaps the shrill and self-righteous character of much of the American anti-apartheid movement had a good deal to do with a reluctance to peer into the mirror and face an uncomfortably similar reality at home.