

Common Sense on Race and Culture

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Race and Culture: A World View

By Thomas Sowell
Basic Books, xvi + 331 pages, \$25

FEW SUBJECTS are so controversial—and so burdened with myths, ideological agendas, and bad thinking—as race. Drawing on decades of research, reflection, and travel, Thomas Sowell, who is black, mounts a thoughtful and provocative challenge to many “dogmas of so-called ‘social science,’ as well as many underlying assumptions about racial issues and cultural differences.”

Dissenting from the prevailing view that groups’ conduct and destiny are environmentally determined, Sowell sees groups as possessing “their own internal cultural patterns, antedating the environment in which they currently find themselves, and transcending the beliefs, biases, and decisions of others.” Examination of a group’s performance in one society may support environmental determinism, but this is a shallow view; when we broaden our field of vision to encompass the whole world, cultural influence becomes a more plausible explanation, since a given group manifests the same behavior regardless of location.

Being an economist, Sowell focuses on the economic aspects of culture: skills, work habits, and attitudes toward business and education. Except as regards intelligence, he defines “race” as a social, not a biological, classification.

Significantly, he uses “worldview” to indicate that he is using evidence from around the globe, not offering a philosophy to explain the world. Intensely empirical, Sowell does not filter facts through a philosophical prism. What he does do is tackle vexing, even explosive, issues with a disciplined mind, scrupulously free of cant and in-

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tolerant humbug. Eschewing prescriptions, he argues that “what is most needed is an understanding of existing realities, the history from which the present evolved, and the enduring principles constraining our options for the future.” The result is a highly informative work distinguished by breadth of learning and common sense.

Recognizing the importance of beliefs, Sowell notes that

Cultures differ not only in their accomplishments but also in the attitudes which shape those accomplishments. These attitudes are much more related to economic outcomes, for example, than are such much-routed ‘objective conditions’ as initial wealth or natural resources.

Attitudes toward education, business, and labor, especially “menial” labor, are crucial for economic performance, and here groups manifest great differences. Minority groups in a wide variety of settings, such as Chinese in the Third World and Protestants in Northern Ireland, provide disproportionate numbers of students in the hard sciences, while other groups shy away from these subjects in favor of easier ones. Hispanic élites have long disdained commerce and industry; the Japanese and the Germans manifest a colossal capacity for work; and while many groups spurn menial labor, the Japanese, though prosperous, neither stigmatize such work nor import foreigners to do it.

While he rejects environmental *determinism*, Sowell gives environmental *influence* its due. Geography retarded development in Africa but furthered it in Europe, through the absence and presence, respectively, of navigable rivers. Conquest, too, had enormous impact, destroying the cultural insularity of the subjugated peoples, diffusing the conquerors’ cultures, and redistributing populations. Economic progress reached conquered peoples, at considerable cost (sometimes, near-extermi-

nation); some conquerors were biologically absorbed by native populations; others, e.g., the Spanish and the Ottoman Turks, had their disdain of economic achievement only worsened by military success.

Political institutions influence groups, too. Depending on the incentives they create, law and order, democracy, and political parties can have either positive or negative effects. Far from being liberating, a breakdown of law and order usually hurts vulnerable minorities the worst. Whether democracy is good for minorities depends on the nature of political parties; democracy featuring race-based parties, for example, the post-Civil War South, encourages racist oppression. Parties with multiracial appeals, however, can ease divisiveness.

Sowell is especially strong and convincing regarding race and economics—a topic which has long occupied his thought and effort. The differing economic performance of groups reflects their cultural differences. The varied treatment of different groups in housing, employment, and so on, which accurately reflects the differences—e.g., paying low wages for lower productivity, or charging higher interest rates to members of groups which are worse risks—is not wrong. But if it springs from antipathy instead, not only is it wrong, but competition penalizes it. Racist cartels set up in the post-Civil War South and in California to limit minority earnings collapsed because, in undervaluing minority workers’ productivity, they gave individual white employers an incentive to cheat and pay minorities more. “Being wrong may be a free good for intellectuals, judges, or the media, but not for economic transactors competing in the marketplace.”

Over and over, Sowell’s common sense, careful distinctions, and stress on costs and benefits puncture emotional dogmatism. For example, while some see housing segregation as an evil, Sowell argues convincingly that *voluntary* residential segregation benefits: it enables members of an ethnic group facing a language barrier to share information and help each other, whereas randomly located, they’d be helpless.

Immigration becoming increasingly controversial, Sowell’s levelheaded treatment of it is welcome. Immigration’s economic impact is more complicated than charges of job displacement

suggest. The presence of welfare benefits drives the wages needed to accept employment higher than they would be otherwise. Hence "it may well be true that immigrants take jobs that natives reject *at existing low wage levels*" (his italics), and that immigration may pose a hidden cost to taxpayers of supporting more native workers in idleness, with the cost worsening the more generous the benefits are. Also, the much-maligned behaviors of Jews, Chinese, Koreans and other "middleman minorities"—thrift, calculation, clannishness, and so on—are due to the economics of small retail business, not to group character or to immigration.

With a true scholar's passion for truth, Sowell gives ideological thinking short shrift. He shows how "ideology can turn facts and morals upside down" and blasts "double standards and selective indignation" regarding Western imperialism and slavery. Today's language of discourse on race is "less suited for clarification than for preventing consideration of factors embarrassing to those who hold a particular ideological vision," using emotionally loaded words such as "advantage," "privilege," "opportunity," and "access" to describe empirical facts. Once used to mean belief in innate racial superiority or inferiority, the word "racism" has been so twisted as to be almost meaningless, and to stifle critical judgment:

those particular groups whose historic treatment is part of a general ideological indictment of Western civilization cannot be criticized in any way without risking the charge of "racism." Conversely, verbal (or even physical) assaults originating *within* such groups are often exempted from condemnation as racism—sometimes by an explicit redefinition which requires *power* as an essential ingredient in racism, so that blacks, for example, cannot be called racists in American society. If this kind of reasoning were followed consistently, then Hitler could not have been considered a racist when he was an isolated street-corner rabble-rouser, but only after he became chancellor of Germany.

As for race and intelligence, intergroup differences in IQ persist, but scores for American Italians, Poles, and Jews rose for decades, indicating that environment is also a factor. And de-

spite charges of test bias against minorities, tests actually tend to predict higher future performance for low-scoring minorities than they achieve;

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and whatever their shortcomings, tests predict better than alternative measures of ability. As Sowell dryly notes: "Assessing the prospects of human beings has never been a science. Nor is politicizing it likely to add to its precision."

However, mental tests don't capture all aspects of intelligence. Being an outstanding basketball player entails outperforming opponents at split-second decision-making under stress.

Is it coincidence that the fields dominated by black Americans—basketball, jazz, running backs in football—all have this improvisational decision-making, with numerous factors being decided in an instant under emotional pressure? Perhaps—and perhaps not. Whether it is genetic or a cultural style is even more problematical.

In an illuminating exposition of the economics of slavery, Sowell reveals that the treatment slaves got varied with the work they did: unskilled, menial laborers were closely supervised and treated strictly, while domestic and skilled workers were given considerable freedom and economic incentives. Moreover, Ottoman treatment of black slaves was often worse than their treatment by Europeans. And in discussing slavery's worldwide demise, he gives the credit where it belongs—to Georgian and Victorian England—and fires another broadside at ideological distortions of history:

At the heart of that story was the West's ending of slavery in its own domains within a century and main-

taining pressure on other nations for even longer to stamp out this practice. Instead, the West has been singled out as peculiarly culpable for a worldwide evil . . . when in fact its only real uniqueness was in ultimately opposing and destroying this evil. Yet intellectuals have engaged in desperate attempts to discredit or downgrade the West's long moral crusade which ultimately destroyed slavery. These attempts have ranged from crude dogmatism about Western "economic interests" behind the abolition of slavery to elusive insinuations along the same lines.

History supports neither racists nor cultural relativists who assert that all cultures are equal:

A history which spans thousands of years, encompassing the rise and fall of empires and of peoples, makes it difficult—if not impossible—to believe in the permanent superiority of any race or culture. Equally, such a history—full of cultural diffusions, transfers, imitations, influences, and inspirations from one society to another—makes it hard to believe that all the different ways of meeting human needs are equally effective, when those involved have gone to so much trouble to seek better ways of doing things from other lands and other peoples.

And while history teems with frustrating wrongs, "that is no justification for taking out those frustrations on living human beings—or for generating new strife by creating privileges for those who are contemporary reminders of historical guilt."

It speaks volumes about modern intellectual discourse that these things need saying. May Sowell's wise counsel prevail.

For such a valuable work, *Race and Culture* was not served by its editors. It reads as a series of unrelated chapters, not an organic whole. A final chapter tying it together and stating overall conclusions would have greatly strengthened it. The lack of integration coupled with a slack hand and unwatchful eye in copy editing produced much repetition.

But *Race and Culture's* merits tower above its shortcomings. Brave enough to explode myths and state unflattering truths, Sowell has produced a magnificent exercise in intellectual honesty when honesty is increasingly rare. May it reach the wide readership it deserves. ♣