

# A Challenge to Liberalism

WSJ  
9/16/80  
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Affirmative action and quotas, school integration and busing, "fair" minimum wages and a broad welfare system are policies that have been adopted out of a desire to reduce economic and social differences among Americans. Economist Thomas Sowell has done two extraordinary things: He has insisted on asking whether these policies actually help minorities and he has answered that they absolutely have not.

During the past 10 years Mr. Sowell's articles and books have established his reputation as a first-rate economist and as one of the leaders of a small group of black intellectuals who are beginning seriously to challenge traditional liberal approaches to minority issues.

## High School Dropout

It's not a role one might have picked for the 50-year-old Mr. Sowell. He was born in Gastonia, N.C., and became a high school dropout in Harlem. He delivered groceries and Western Union messages to earn money. After serving as a Marine, he went first to Howard University and then completed his undergraduate studies at Harvard under the GI Bill. He was a Marxist in college and didn't change his ideological stripes until he studied for his economics Ph.D. at the University of Chicago under George Stigler and Milton Friedman. After serving on the faculties at Cornell and UCLA, he recently joined the Hoover Institution, a prestigious organization located at Stanford University that is a center of conservative thought.

Mr. Sowell speaks and writes out of bitterness—aimed not at the racists he was born among in the South or at the conditions he and his family faced in Harlem—but at what he considers ill-conceived government policies that have had the effect of retarding the development of blacks and other minorities. What especially outrages him is that many of these programs are based on the assumption that blacks are unable to achieve incomes and occupations comparable to what other ethnic groups before them have achieved.

He has, for example, long opposed preferential treatment for minorities in his own field, academia. He was the only black professor at Cornell for much of the time during the late 1960s guns-on-campus revolt led by black revolutionaries and supported by many white liberals who demanded such things as establishment of a black studies program. As Mr. Sowell later wrote, he left Cornell because of the attitude there that allowed the "establishment of an academically autonomous, racially separatist, black studies institution on campus, specializing in ideology and sociopolitical conditioning rather than in education."

His mixture of outrage, impatience and straightforwardness has gained him a reputation for being brusque and at times downright hostile, a militancy whose effect is enhanced by his sharp physical features. He is perhaps best known to the public for his dramatic performance in the discussions following Milton Friedman's PBS series, "Free To Choose." In one segment, Mr. Sowell was obviously angered by statements made by white, liberal political scientist Frances Piven and accused her of making false assumptions about what blacks thought about forced equality of result rather than equal opportunity as an ideal.

"Black people have never supported, for example, affirmative action, quotas,

anything of that sort," Mr. Sowell asserted. "It is not a question of what black people chose to do. It's what you chose to put in the mouths of black people."

Mr. Sowell's most recent book, "Knowledge and Decisions," combines the work he has done in fields as diverse as education, ethnicity, IQ score differentials and economics to form a model approach to decision-making.

There are two frequent confusions in making a decision, argues Mr. Sowell. The first comes because all decisions involve choosing among alternatives constrained by scarcity; the idea of "trade-offs" must become more naturally a part of our decisions, he argues. "The rhetorical denial or

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evasion of trade-offs," warns Mr. Sowell, "has occurred across the social or political spectrum. Social values in general are incrementally variable; neither safety, diversity, rational articulation, nor morality is a 'good thing' to have more of, without limits. All are subject to diminishing returns, and ultimately negative returns."

The second confusion arises by concentrating on "society" as some sort of unitary institution, rather than on the "market." The market is described by Mr. Sowell as allowing the "option for each individual to choose among numerous existing institutions, or to fashion new arrangements suited to his own situation and taste." Much more dangerous than relying on this marketplace is what Mr. Sowell describes as the "Godlike approach to social policy," which ignores both diversity and the costs of finding consensus."

The second half of the book applies this analysis to current issues in economics, law and politics. The basic argument is one that followers of Mr. Sowell's work will find familiar but clearly made. In all three areas, the "locus of decision-making has drifted away from the individual, the family, and voluntary associations of various sorts, and toward government." In addition, within government decision-making has moved increasingly away from elected officials to insulated institutions such as administrative agencies and the appointed judiciary.

Among the areas Mr. Sowell discusses in depth is affirmative action; he notes that the "ineffective record of 'affirmative action' policies is in sharp contrast with the record of 'equal opportunity' laws in the years immediately preceding."

Mr. Sowell blames both well-intentioned bureaucrats and civil rights leaders for the move toward preferential treatment for minorities, including quotas. He is particularly upset by what he considers the current unrepresentative nature of leading black organizations.

"Civil rights groups over the years have been enormously valuable, but like all institutions they have diminishing returns and even negative returns to those they claim to represent," says Mr. Sowell. "The NAACP and the Urban League have little to gain by allowing people to go out and achieve their own success, independent of programs like affirmative action."

Not surprisingly, leaders of civil rights

organizations take offense at this argument. "I vehemently disagree with Mr. Sowell's notion of the world," said NAACP Executive Director Benjamin Hooks. "It's a bankrupt, hackneyed and unrealistic idea that we should go back to the 19th Century idea of everyone pulling by his own bootstraps without any help. We say it doesn't make any sense to starve to death while the private sector is deciding how and when to hire us."

Mr. Sowell makes a powerful appeal for not treating blacks differently from other Americans in a book he is preparing. Tentatively titled "Ethnic America," the book, to be published in June, 1981, by Basic Books, is a scholarly view of the history of the Irish, Italians, Chinese, Japanese, blacks, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans in what he calls the "American mosaic." He argues that factors such as age, location, time of arrival in the U.S. and the skills and culture with which groups arrived played a large part in determining how later generations fared in terms of income, occupation, unemployment, education, family size and IQ score.

One of the significant contributions Mr. Sowell makes toward the study of ethnic groups is his breaking down of broad ethnic and racial groups into historically relevant subgroups. He discusses, for example, the different backgrounds and rates of progress of German vs. Eastern European Jews, Southern vs. Northern Italians, and Hong Kong Chinese vs. other Southern Chinese. He considers three groups of blacks: those who descend either from slaves freed by the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation or the Thirteenth Amendment, the half-million previously freed "free persons of color," or immigrants from the West Indies.

## Economically Advanced

His section on the history of the West Indians, who by the second generation had higher incomes than Anglo-Saxons, shows how much more economically advanced this group is than blacks descended from slaves freed one generation later than the West Indians.

"These differences," writes Mr. Sowell, "provide some clues as to how much of the situation of American Negroes in general can be attributed to color prejudice by whites and how much to cultural patterns among blacks." He notes that West Indian blacks even in slavery were responsible for feeding themselves and thus "had the kind of incentives and experience common in a market economy but denied American slaves for two centuries."

Mr. Sowell estimates that because of the massive migration to Northern cities in the first half of this century, most "blacks today are only in the second generation in the urban world in which they live," making them in that sense about where the Irish were 100 years ago.

The lesson Mr. Sowell derives from this study is that different cultures have had complexly different ways of dealing with the new life in America. Groups that have been free to progress within the context of their heritage have been successful and many now fare better than Anglo-Saxons. Mr. Sowell blames forced mixing of students in public schools, neighborhoods artificially integrated through public housing projects and minimum wage laws that make it difficult to find jobs for many of the special problems that blacks now face.

Mr. Sowell's approach to remedying their situation is clear in his definition of freedom that concludes "Knowledge and Decisions": "It is, above all, the right of ordinary people to find elbow room for themselves and a refuge from the rampaging presumptions of their 'betters.'"

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