

ONE WRITER'S BATTLES

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November 10, 1996 at 11:00 PM

Thomas Sowell, syndicated columnist and fount of books, has written another one: *Migrations and Cultures*, his thirty-first. It is the first volume of a planned trilogy on the subject of race and the movement of peoples. For at least twenty-five years, Sowell has been one of the foremost controversialists in America, and he shows no signs of slowing down.

Opinion on him is rarely lukewarm. Said NAACP general counsel Thomas Atkins, when Sowell was rumored for a position in the Reagan cabinet, "He would play the same kind of role which historically the house niggers played for the plantation owners." Wrote columnist Carl Rowan, "Vidkun Quisling, in his collaboration with the Nazis, surely did not do as much damage to Norwegians as Sowell is doing to the most helpless of black Americans."

Sowell himself is no wallflower. Under attack from Prof. Lani Guinier, he says, "I don't need some half-white woman from Martha's Vineyard telling me about being black." And he dismisses Prof. Cornel West with, "He seems so transparently a hustler."

In his later work, starting with *A Conflict of Visions* and continuing with *The Vision of the Anointed*, Sowell has begun to take on the very tenets of liberalism. He understands the appeal of utopianism to the intelligentsia, and it alarms him: "It is not hard to

understand why anyone would prefer to live in this kind of world, rather than in a world

of inherently constrained options, tragic choices, and variably incremental trade-offs, rather than categorical and emotionally satisfying 'solutions.' The only question is whether it is within our power to choose between these alternative worlds -- ultimately, whether reality is optional."

The reality for Sowell is that he was born to a poor, lightly educated family and dropped out of high school at 17. He might easily sell himself as a bootstraps paragon -- eventually, he earned a Ph.D. in economics at the University of Chicago -- but he declines to use his background to enhance the credibility of his scholarly and political conclusions. His parents' appreciation of education was critical: "When I entered the seventh grade, it was a big deal. No one else in my family had ever been that far."

Sowell describes his first visit to a library. His friend Eddie was a well-bred boy from the West Indies -- "The sort of boy I was always supposed to be like and was always falling short of matching" -- and it was he who introduced young Sowell to the public library. "And here I am, nine years old. I have never been in a library; I have not heard of a library. I am in this room with all these books and have no idea why I'm here, because I have no money to buy books. And Eddie very patiently explains to me -- several times -- how a library works. And that was a turning point in my life." In that day, says Sowell, an education was obtainable by those who desired one. "It's not just nostalgia," he insists. "I have the statistics from schools in Harlem. They always used to be on the same general plane with the schools on the Lower East Side. You didn't have the situation you have now where a dozen black schools are in the bottom 1 percent."

And his own story is not unusual, he contends. He once heard from a reader -- a black lawyer -- who reported that out of his tenement came a doctor, another lawyer, a priest, and a college president. But today, when the situation for black young people is more dire, as Sowell notes, black leaders persist in calling for more of the same policies. Jesse

Jackson and Cornel West, for example, vehemently defend affirmative action. Ellis Cose attends to the plight of the black middle class in his *Rage of a Privileged Class: Why are Middle-Class Blacks Angry? Why Should America Care?* But Sowell can't get too exercised about middle-class rage: "Having grown up in poverty, it's very hard for me to get worked up over the problems of affluent people -- no matter what color they may be."

Sowell, now 66, grew into his current intellectual stature slowly. As a young man, he never had time for "navel-gazing and hand-wringing," because he was too busy trying to earn a living. "I left home when I was 17 and discovered to my surprise that there was no enormous demand for a black highschool dropout with no skills and no experience. I also discovered that landladies wanted rent every week. They were not interested in what kind of childhood I might or might not have had." Sowell rejects the substitution of personal reflection for intellectual substance: "When I hear these young people talk about how they're trying to find themselves, I say, 'You know, when I was your age, I was trying to find the rent.' I've never had a period of my life when I had the luxury of sitting around and nursing my neuroses."

So Sowell, like many others of his generation, seized what opportunities there were. He joined the Marine Corps, then went to Howard University on the GI Bill. He transferred to Harvard, from which he was graduated *magna cum laude*. Then came Chicago, where he studied with free-market masters Milton Friedman and George Stigler. But at that point, Sowell was still a Marxist -- which a stint with the Department of Labor was soon to cure. His research into the basic mechanisms of the sugar market made him skeptical of the ability of Marxism to account for human behavior. Sowell says it's easy to understand why socialism appeals to so many: "It has fewer requirements. It doesn't take much to believe in social justice."

Sowell favors looking at things as they are, while taking into account circumstance and

nuance. Says Glenn Loury, who followed Sowell's lonely path as a black intellectual critical of the black establishment, "He's not just a black person who wasn't afraid to go where no one else had been able to go; Sowell has worked on creating a theoretical template for a new framework" -- a framework that asks for empirical evidence instead of assumption or emotion. Sowell admits to being a conservative in the accepted sense, but believes that political discourse would be clearer if the label disappeared. "The conception of a conservative is someone who either wants to preserve the status quo or to go back to some status quo ante. And I don't want to do either."

What pervades all of Sowell's writings is the stubborn doubt that human beings can significantly alter the order of things. In fact, he says, "There are no solutions to problems." History can "get depressing, because it makes you realize how long people have been the way they are. It doesn't lead you to hope for any great wonders in the next administration, no matter whose it is."

With Sowell -- a blunt, exacting trafficker in ideas -- what you see is what you get. His prickly, forceful personality is unsuited for the compromises of politics. As a true intellectual, he refuses to play the part of a cultural demagogue or an establishment operative. He writes in *A Conflict of Visions*, "Where intellectuals have played a role in history, it has not been so much by whispering words of advice into the ears of political overlords as by contributing to the vast and powerful currents of conception and misconception that sweep human action along."

Indeed, much of the ideology Sowell has fought against is now being swept back. Affirmative action, for instance, faces many legal and legislative challenges. In a *New York Times* review of *The Vision of the Anointed*, Richard Epstein asks critically whether

Sowell is "seeking to slay a dragon already dead." If the anointed dragon of liberal excess

is in fact dead, it is in part from the deft thrusts of Thomas Sowell's sharp sword.

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