

Thomas Sowell: Common Sense in a Senseless World

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By Art Carden

BIRMINGHAM, Ala.—If I were to rank post–World War II public intellectuals and social theorists, the Hoover Institution’s Thomas Sowell would take the top spot. There could be a real debate about who is No. 2, but it would take place a long way from the top of the mountain, where Sowell would sit alone.

Sowell is a brilliant economist and a beautiful writer who believes, above all, that we can’t have a serious discussion if we don’t get the theory straight and the facts right. The Free to Choose Network has made Sowell even more accessible with its film *Thomas Sowell: Common Sense in a Senseless World*. The film is hosted by Manhattan Institute senior fellow, *Wall Street Journal* columnist and Sowell biographer Jason Riley, whose book *Maverick: A Biography of Thomas Sowell* is slated to appear in Ma—and it pairs well with Coleman Hughes’ article on Sowell in the Summer 2020 issue of *City Journal*.

Sowell is part of a venerable tradition of Marxists and socialists who have become free-market enthusiasts. Friedrich Hayek discarded his socialism under the tutelage of Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Weiser. James M. Buchanan became “a zealous advocate of the market order” after taking Frank Knight’s course at the University of Chicago. Playing chess with Don Gorman and learning price theory from him helped cure Douglass North. Deirdre McCloskey went from Marxist/“Joan Baez socialist” to run-of-the-mill Keynesian to convinced capitalist the more she studied, learned about and taught economics.

Sowell’s journey is a bit more complicated. He argues that he first became an adherent of Marxism because it seems to explain things, and indeed he retained his Marxism even after taking Milton Friedman’s course at the University of Chicago. He appreciated Friedman’s class, however, because it showed that economics was “a full-contact sport.” He dropped his Marxism not because of Friedman’s class but because of his experience working with the U.S. Department of Labor, studying minimum wages and finding that learning whether minimum wages actually *worked* or not was a secondary consideration. When Peter Robinson asked what led him to leave Marxism behind on *Uncommon Knowledge*, he simply replied “facts.”

Host Riley emphasizes four of Sowell's virtues.

- The first was his uncompromising intellectual honesty.

Sowell follows the theory and the evidence wherever they lead, no matter how politically unpopular. In the film, Steven Pinker describes him as "fearless." Sowell is unimpressed with the presumption that any discrepancy between a group's representation in the general population and its representation in occupations, educational outcomes, crime statistics and so on is the product of unique oppression and disadvantage.

He explains this most recently in his book *Discrimination and Disparities* ("Revised and Enlarged" edition of 2019): People have oppressed, enslaved and slaughtered one another for as long as there have been people, and I suspect he would agree with his Hoover Institution colleague Niall Ferguson that imperialism was the "least original thing" Europeans did after they arrived in the Americas. In a host of books, including his "culture" trilogy—*Race and Culture*, *Migrations and Cultures* and *Conquests and Cultures* and his book *Affirmative Action Around the World*—Sowell explains how people have abused one another across time and space and explains why differences we see today are not necessarily evidence of unique malfeasance.

- Second, Sowell is the economist's economist in that he emphasizes incentives and tradeoffs and carries them as far as they will take him.

This is clear from his 1980 *Knowledge and Decisions* as well as his *Basic Economics* and similar works, but it pervades the rest of his work as well. As he has written and said: "There are no solutions. There are only trade-offs."

- Third, Sowell emphasizes human capital and argues that it—not the kinds of things one might hope for after listening to John Lennon sing *Imagine*—is what explains success and failure in the world.

In a variety of places, he explains how all-black Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C., was a temple of intellectual excellence that produced a host of graduates who became the "first black person to" achieve this or that extraordinary thing. Dunbar students outperformed their white counterparts even under official discrimination and in the face of far more overt racism than people encounter today. Sowell opposes affirmative-action programs because they are, as he argues, beset by "the soft bigotry of low expectations."

- Fourth, Riley points to Sowell's respect for "social processes and existing institutions."

There is wisdom, Sowell argues, in tradition: For better or for worse, we have the institutions we have because, at some point in the past, they solved an important problem. I'm reminded of G.K. Chesterton's metaphor of the fence: If you come across a fence that doesn't look like it's serving any purpose, make every effort to find out what it is doing there and what problem it solves before tearing it down. *Knowledge and Decisions*, for Sowell, was a book-length meditation on Friedrich Hayek's "The Use of Knowledge in Society,"

and throughout his work Sowell has worked to isolate and understand the institutions and social processes that make it possible for us to use others' knowledge effectively.

In the film, Larry Elder describes Sowell as the "greatest contemporary living philosopher and notes that he causes people to "rethink their assumptions." Rethinking and questioning our assumptions has long been en vogue in the academy, and, if you really listen to what he has to say, few scholars will make you rethink your assumptions like Sowell will. If you're looking for a one-hour introduction to one of the great minds of the last century, *Common Sense in a Senseless World* is exactly that.