

# The Left and the Masses

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**By Thomas Sowell**

STANFORD, Calif.—The greatest moral claim of the political left is that they are for the masses in general and the poor in particular. That is also their greatest fraud. It even fools many leftists themselves.

One of the most recent efforts of the left is the spread of laws and policies that forbid employers from asking job applicants whether they have been arrested or imprisoned. This is said to be to help ex-cons get a job after they have served their time, and ex-cons are often either poor or black, or both.

First of all, many of the left’s policies to help blacks are disproportionately aimed at helping those blacks who have done the wrong thing—and whose victims are disproportionately those blacks who have been trying to do the right thing. In the case of this ban on asking job applicants whether they have criminal backgrounds, the only criterion seems to be whether it sounds good or makes the left feel good about themselves.

Hard evidence as to what actual consequences to expect beforehand, or hard evidence as to its actual consequences afterwards, seems to have had very little role in this political crusade.

An empirical study some years ago examined the hiring practices of companies that did a background check on all the employees they hired. It found that such companies hired more blacks than companies which did not follow that unusual practice.

Why? This goes back to decision-making by human beings in general, with many kinds of decisions in general. Since we seldom have all the facts, we are often forced to rely on generalizing when making our decisions.

Many employers, aware of higher rates of imprisonment among blacks, are less likely to hire blacks whose individual backgrounds are unknown to them. But those particular employers who investigate everyone’s background before hiring them do not have to rely on such generalizations.

The fact that these latter kinds of employers hired more blacks suggests that racial animosity is not the key factor, since blacks are still blacks, whether they have a criminal past or not. But the political left is so heavily invested in blaming racism that mere facts are unlikely to change their minds.

Just as those on the left were not moved by hard evidence before they promoted laws and policies that forbade employers to ask about job applicants' criminal records, so they have remained unmoved by more recent studies showing that the hiring of blacks has been reduced in the wake of such laws and policies.

Moreover, the left is so invested in the idea that they are helping the disadvantaged that they seldom bother to check the actual consequences of what they are doing, whether that is something as specific as banning questions about criminal behavior or something as general as promoting the welfare state.

In the vision of the left, the welfare state is supposed to be a step forward, in the direction of "social justice." Tons of painful evidence, from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, that the welfare state has in fact been a step backward toward barbarism—among low-income whites in England and ghetto blacks in the United States—does not make a dent in the beliefs of the left.

The left's infatuation with minimum wage laws has likewise been impervious to factual evidence that the spread and escalation of minimum wages have been followed by far higher rates of unemployment among young blacks, to levels some multiple of what they were before—and to a racial gap in unemployment among the young that is likewise some multiple of what it was before.

Those who doubt this need only turn to the data on page 42 of "Race and Economics" by Walter Williams, or to the diagram on page 98 of "The Unheavenly City," written by Edward Banfield back in 1968. The facts have been available for a long time.

Surely the intelligentsia of the left have access to empirical evidence and the wit to understand such evidence. But the real question is whether they have the stomach to face the prospect that their crusades have hurt the very people they claim to be helping.

Examining hard evidence would mean gambling a whole vision of the world—and of their own role in that world—on a single throw of the dice, which is what looking at hard evidence amounts to. The path of least resistance is to continue going through life feeling good about themselves, while leaving havoc in their wake.

## **Part II**

It is never easy to tell what people's motives are. But, when the political left proclaims their devotion to improving the lives of others in general, and of the poor in particular, we can at least get some clues from the way they go about it.

One of the first things the left does is take away the right of other people to make their own choices.

For example, under current California law, Hispanic school children cannot be taught in Spanish if their parents want them taught in English. Like parents in other immigrant groups before them, Hispanic parents tend to want their children to learn English, so that those children will have more opportunities when they become adults in an English-speaking country.

But the left in general, and Hispanic activists in particular, have fought against leaving Hispanic parents with that choice. At the heart of the left's vision of the world—and of themselves—is that they know better what is good for other people. This means that the left sees itself as having both a right and a duty to take away other people's options.

This issue was fought out 18 years ago, in a California referendum on so-called "bilingual education," which in practice meant largely teaching Hispanic school children in Spanish. All the forces of political correctness, including the media and the educational establishment, argued in favor of teaching those children in Spanish, even when their parents wanted them taught in English.

Despite a barrage of propaganda from the media and other organs of the left, a majority of California voters sided with Hispanic parents, and passed a law forbidding schools from imposing Spanish on children whose parents wanted them taught in English.

But the left never gives up on their pet notions. This year there is a new proposition on the California ballot—Proposition 58, very misleadingly phrased—that would take that choice away from parents, and let schools impose teaching in Spanish to Hispanic children, whether the parents want it or not.

The Spanish language issue in the schools is just one example of the left's vision, which applies to many other issues.

There is the same dogged resistance on the left to allowing black parents to choose to have their children educated in charter schools that are part of the public school system, but are not subject to all the bureaucratic rules that lead to such bad results in other public schools.

Many years ago, in a debate on William F. Buckley's program "Firing Line," I was told by a left-wing lawyer that black parents without a good education themselves could not make wise choices for their children's education.

But hard evidence says otherwise. There are whole chains of charter schools, such as the KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) schools and the Success Academy schools, where ghetto kids have academic achievements equal to those of children in affluent suburbs—and sometimes higher achievements.

Many of these charter schools are located in the very same buildings in ghetto neighborhoods where children in the regular public schools are failing miserably. Black parents who enroll their children in charter schools have apparently made better choices than the know-it-alls on the left.

Meanwhile, black children by the tens of thousands in New York alone are on waiting lists for charter schools because politicians, beholden to teachers' unions for money and votes, fight against the expansion of charter schools. Not all charter schools are successful. But at least unsuccessful charter schools can be shut down, while other failing public schools keep right on failing.

When it comes to crime and violence, the political left, including much of the media, are having a great time demonizing the police. Blacks are the biggest

victims of the sharp upturn in murders that has followed. But, yet again, hard evidence carries very little weight when the left is feeling good about themselves, while leaving havoc in their wake.

The absurdity to which this kind of media frenzy about the police can lead is shown by the fact that a black policeman in Charlotte, North Carolina, shooting a black suspect who had a gun, has been blown up into a racial issue across the nation. Have we become so gullible that we are so easily manipulated and stampeded?

### Part III

Claiming the role of champions of the masses is something the political left has been doing ever since there has been a political left—which is to say, ever since the late 18th century, when people with such views sat on the left side of the French National Assembly.

Like so much that is claimed by the left, their compassion for the masses has seldom been subjected to any factual test. Both their words and their deeds reveal their low opinion of the people they claim to be championing.

When Barack Obama referred to ordinary working people as people who are “bitter,” and who “cling to guns or religion,” that was not just a peculiarity of Obama. He was part of a centuries-long tradition on the left.

No one so epitomized the 18th century left as Jean Jacques Rousseau, who likened the masses to “a stupid, pusillanimous invalid.” In the 19th century, Karl Marx said, “The working class is revolutionary or it is nothing”—in other words, millions of human beings mattered only if they carried out his vision.

Fabian socialist George Bernard Shaw included the working class among the “detestable” people who “have no right to live.” He added: “I should despair if I did not know that they will all die presently, and that there is no need on earth why they should be replaced by people like themselves.”

It sounds very much like Hillary Clinton’s view of the “deplorables” who support her opponent, or Bill Clinton’s characterization of the same people as “standard rednecks.”

What role is there for the masses in the vision of the left?

One role is to provide a moral basis for the left to claim power, as defenders of the downtrodden. No secular doctrine has so swept across the world so swiftly, and with such widespread political impact as Marxism in the 20th century. Its central premise is that the workers are poor because their employers have exploited them.

That was not a hypothesis to be tested but an axiom to be accepted as sacred dogma. Nowhere in the three volumes of Marx’s classic “Capital” was there the slightest attempt to test that belief empirically.

It would not be difficult to put the Marxian exploitation thesis to a test. If capitalists’ exploitation of the workers is what makes them poor, then in countries run by Marxists, the workers should have a higher standard of living than in countries with a capitalist economic system.

But among the many Communist countries that emerged around the world in the 20th century, there has not been a single one where the workers' standard of living has been as high as that of working people in the United States.

The political left in general has been able to claim that they have more compassion for the less fortunate, and to depict their opponents as lacking in compassion for others. For none of these assertions have they felt a need to offer hard evidence.

Such evidence as exists contradicts those assertions. An empirical study titled "Who Really Cares" by Arthur C. Brooks found that conservatives donate a higher percentage of their incomes to philanthropic causes, as well as more hours of their time as volunteers, and they donate far more blood.

Another study showed that President Ronald Reagan donated a higher percentage of his income to philanthropic causes than such liberal icons as President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Senator Ted Kennedy.

What may be more remarkable than these findings is that the left was able to get away with asserting the opposite for years, without evidence being asked for or given.

What is also remarkable is the extent to which the left's preservation of their own self-flattering vision is defended at virtually all costs—with both facts and thoughts to the contrary being dismissed, rather than answered, using such words and phrases as "stereotypes," "blaming the victim" or "racism."

People with a different vision of the world are not answered but characterized—as people needing to have their consciousness raised or as people who "just don't get it."

The near-monopoly of the left in academia allows such evasions to pass muster. But it cheats students out of practice in confronting opposing views on innumerable subjects, which they will have to do after they leave the insulated confines of academia.