

Thomas Sowell: Monument to Intelligent Insight

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By John Dale Dunn

BROWNWOOD, Texas—Thomas Sowell is an American literary and philosophical icon—a prolific genius who has graced us with his presence and his extraordinary essays, books and lectures for more than 50 years. Consider that his career as a writer and public intellectual was delayed by a tumultuous youth and service in the Marines, so he didn’t even get started on his life’s work as a remarkable economist, philosopher and social scientist until he was almost 30.

My personal appreciation of Thomas Sowell began at least 30 years ago when I realized any adult American is obligated to understand economics, and Thomas Sowell was an education on economics. But then he became an education on so many other areas of importance that I began to wonder: How is this man so good at what he does?

New biography

When I saw that Jason Riley had composed a biography with Sowell’s cooperation, a biography that is comprehensive and intelligent in scope and content, I was compelled to tell American Thinker readers that it will not only be salutary and enlightening to read the biography, to know of Thomas Sowell, but the biography will also give you a well-developed exposure to the Sowell oeuvre of more than 40 books, along with an excellent narrative of Sowell’s life and career.

Mr. Riley, a conservative commentator and columnist for *The Wall Street Journal* and fellow at the Manhattan Institute, summarizes the life and times of Dr. Sowell, but focuses on his literary and intellectual achievements, how others assessed his work and why he is a monument to effective intellectual inquiry—a man whose whole life has been about the search for truth and insights into the nature of the human experience.

I was attracted more than three decades ago to Sowell because he uses economic analysis as a jumping-off point for his far-ranging scholarship in the social and political sciences. He is a master of economics, but also has become such a respected intellect because he has expanded his scholarship to intellectual history and social science using the University of Chicago economics empirical approach—gather and analyze the pertinent evidence if you want to answer the questions.

Economics as a foundation

Sowell benefits from the fact that economics provides important reliable information (evidence) about human behavior. Economics provides good social-science metrics. The great Austrian school free-markets economist Ludwig von Mises titled his master work *Human Action* for a reason.

Thomas Sowell used his superior and thorough economics knowledge and research to range far and wide in the social sciences and become one of the great social scientists and philosophers of his time—not just an accomplished economist. It is impossible for me to adequately describe Sowell's achievements here, but the Riley biography is more than adequate. It is brilliant. Mr. Riley has functioned in the same role, in a way, as Sam Johnson's famous biographer James Boswell. Sowell's wonderful story deserves a good biographer.

Bullheaded youth

Sowell was the fifth child born of a widow in Gastonia, N.C., in 1939, raised by his great-aunt, who moved to Harlem when Sowell was 9. He was smart enough to be admitted to the academically very selective Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan (alma mater of four Nobel laureates), but dropped out after one year at age 16 because of behavioral problems—a bullheadedness that would be a valuable characteristic in his adult life.

At that point he was also estranged from his great-aunt, so he lived in a homeless-boys' shelter and worked various jobs. He became a marine during the Korean War at age 21 as a pistol instructor and completed high school, entered Howard University in D.C. after the war, grabbing an iron hold on academics, matriculating later at Harvard, then Columbia, and finally a Ph.D. at the University of Chicago.

His teaching career spanned the 1960s and '70s at Rutgers, Howard, Cornell, Brandeis, and a 10-year stint at UCLA from 1970 to 1980. Since then he has been at the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, where he has been one of their most prolific, prominent and recognized fellows, writing books and columns but also making public appearances as an advocate or subject of interviews advocating his opinion on matters of policy and economics.

Action and achievements

The book by Mr. Riley romps along because Sowell's life is full of action and achievements. The subjects that best summarize Sowell's professional inquiries are listed below.

- Economic theory and economics issues—distribution of values, impact of government policies and the realities of economics that should not be sacrificed on crackpot ideas driven by intellectuals.
- Race and ethnic-minority problems with a focus on inequalities and discrimination as well as the effect of quotas and affirmative action, again with a liberal dose of criticism of social scientists who hold inane and, in many cases, destructive theories.

- Intellectual history and history of ideas (philosophy) as played out in the political arena with a generous effort to the mind-set of intellectuals and how they try to dominate society.
- A focus on ethnic cultures, strengths, weaknesses, inequalities between and within groups that create strife and polarization but also drive counter-productive policymaking that actually increases strife and conflict.
- Pedagogy, learning and language development and a deep dive into the ethnic/racial IQ debate as well as the mistake of affirmative-action quotas in higher education and forced busing in primary and secondary education while ignoring the decline of the education establishment into progressive nonsense.

Free-market economic theory

Sowell was influenced by Friedrich Hayek in many ways, and he adopted the free-market economic theory of cumulative economic knowledge as the basis for his dissection of the matter of political actions and political theory—after he gave up his Marxist ways.

The theme of *Knowledge and Decisions* can be stated as: The cumulative knowledge of society is often more likely to be correct than the theories of intellectuals and political actors, who are perversely motivated by a desire for power and control. Sowell's concerns were to warn of the tyranny of the power-hungry elites. The idea itself is simple. He already had determined that knowledge is radically dispersed among millions of human beings who are ignorant of others' tiny fragments of knowledge.

Hayek criticized the enthusiasm for central economic planning, an incredibly stupid idea that reinforced the oligarchs' sense that they should make the big decisions on economic matters, not the market itself. This insanity was inherent to Marxist ideas and agendas that were spreading from the Soviet Union throughout Europe. Sowell captured the stupidity when he opened his book *Knowledge and Decisions*: "Ideas are everywhere, but knowledge is rare."

Sowell provides a panoramic view of how the world works that will inform any careful reader's thinking on just about everything.

Data, evidence, methods

Sowell's many books on racial issues are focused on empirical analysis and not sloganeering and noisy rhetoric. A student of Stigler and Freidman and influenced by Hayek, Sowell eschews rhetoric and focuses on what they always emphasized at University of Chicago—the data, the evidence, empiric methods.

Related to the race and inequality issues as well as the discrimination against minorities around the world are his trilogy on migrations and migrant minorities—just another angle that strengthens his position as a level-headed scientifically driven researcher who debunks bad ideas regularly and displays insights that are critical to intelligent analysis.

Traveled the world

In matters of ethnic differences and ethnic migrations Sowell did his homework and traveled the world twice to study minorities in other countries. His ethnic studies are on display in his work on other subjects, but his focus on minorities, affirmative action and the experience of minorities in other cultures is found in books on policies around the world, minorities in America and other countries, the particular experiences of minorities in America.

Many years ago, he wrote a trilogy on migrations and migrants—some people would consider that a career—he did it just so he could pursue his ambition to inform and educate and maybe stop harmful policies that set back things for society and the targeted minority.

He didn't stop at discrimination. He provided an excellent analysis of the harmful effects of affirmative action and quota policies or special favoritism.

Just as a prize for reading Sowell you learn things you may never have known otherwise—how Chinese mainlander migrants to other countries have a remarkable record of achievement and prosperity. Sowell shows that it's the culture of the minority that determines success, and policies intended to provide social justice are sometimes poorly conceived and executed.

Master of plain talk

Some people wonder why people like to read Sowell's writings. I believe it is because he uses examples and plain talk that will elevate your thinking but not put you down. Sowell believes that wisdom is all around us and he is, in practice and theory, very leery of intellectual pretensions, so he writes so that a truck driver can get it. I liked that the first time I read him—talk plain. If you can't explain your theory to a bus driver, you don't understand your theory (that's borrowed from the great Physics Nobel Laureate Richard Feynman).

As an example of why Sowell is so interesting and readable, he asserts in a book that there are basically two types of people—and two attitudes that result in two people similarly informed and well intentioned would always be on opposite sides. He wrote that fundamentally different visions of human nature divide people.

- There is the "constrained" tragic vision that humans are imperfect.
- There is the flawed and the "unconstrained" feel-good utopian vision that is based on the perfectibility of man and the victory of good intentions.

The politics and attitudes of people divide that way and are the motives we see in the American Constitution of 1787 as opposed to the French constitution of 1793.

Political philosophy

The three books on ideas and political philosophy use this basic premise to explain real-world politics and government and approaches to economic and social problems.

- *A Conflict of Visions* sets out the theory, begins with a series of chapters describing this underlying theory and then shifts to chapters showing the realities and the consequences.
- *The Vision of the Anointed* deals with the unrestrained mind-set that poisons the intellectual and political elites who think they are smart enough to actually direct societies to produce a utopia. Sowell pulls no punches taking down the elites/oligarchs/intellectuals and how they are tyrants in waiting.
- The last book in the trilogy *The Quest for Cosmic Justice*, explains the trap that “social justice” advocates have laid for society, and he expresses his concerns and contempt for the utopian social scientists who want to impose their will on society and who will create an Orwellian nightmare.

Researcher and analyst

Sowell’s analyses of so many problems have been more lucid and cogent than most of the so-called public intellectuals in America. That is because he is, first of all, a serious researcher and, second, a disciplined analyst. Most of what he has said in the past three decades completely discredits the claims of current noisy and popular blowhards. Decades ago Thomas Sowell was debunking popular ridiculous arguments that are now found in the popular progressive publications and media outlets.

Knowledge and Decisions, along with so many other books by Sowell, exposed the inanity of so many contemporary “experts” long before they wore long pants. More than 30 years ago I read *A Conflict of Visions* that exposed the poseur intellectuals and their silly ideas before they had a chance to articulate them. Thomas Sowell is head and shoulders above the intellectuals of this society in the past century. No one comes close.

As he would say: Look at the evidence. I recommend that you read the brilliant biography by Mr. Riley.