

The Continuing Importance of Thomas Sowell

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By Jason L. Riley

HILLSDALE, Mich.—When I was researching my biography of economist Thomas Sowell, I kept coming across Sowell’s own descriptions of scholars he admired, and I was often struck by how well those descriptions applied to Sowell himself.

Eulogizing Stigler

For example, after the death of Nobel Prize-winning economist George Stigler, who was one of Sowell’s professors at the University of Chicago, Sowell wrote:

“In a world of self-promoting academics, coining buzzwords and aligning themselves on the side of the angels of the moment, George Stigler epitomized a rare integrity as well as a rare intellect. He jumped on no bandwagons, beat no drums for causes, created no personal cult. He did the work of a scholar and a teacher—both superbly—and found that sufficient. If you wanted to learn, and above all if you wanted to learn how to think—how to avoid the vague words, fuzzy thoughts, or maudlin sentiments that cloud over reality—then Stigler was your man.”

Describing Friedman

And here is Sowell describing another of his professors at Chicago, Milton Friedman:

“[He] was one of the very few intellectuals with both genius and common sense. He could express himself at the highest analytical levels to his fellow economists in academic publications and still write popular books . . . that could be understood by people who knew nothing about economics.”

I’m hard-pressed to come up with better ways than those to describe Thomas Sowell. When I think about his scholarship, that’s what comes to mind: intellectual integrity, analytical rigor, respect for evidence, skepticism toward the kind of fashionable thinking that comes and goes. And then there’s the clarity. Column after column, book after book, written in plain English for general public consumption.

Publishing career spanning six decades

In 2020, at the age of 90, Sowell published his 36th book, *Charter Schools and Their Enemies*. I hope he's not done writing books, but if he is you could hardly find a more suitable swan song for a publishing career that has now spanned six decades.

Sowell's first two books were scholarly. But his third book, published in 1972—the semiautobiographical *Black Education: Myths and Tragedies*—was written for the general public. It grew out of a long article on college admissions standards for black students that he wrote for *The New York Times Magazine* in 1970.

Discussion about education

And it begins with a recounting of his own education—first at segregated schools in North Carolina, where he was born, and later at integrated schools in New York City's Harlem neighborhood, where he was raised.

The topic of education is one that Sowell has returned to repeatedly over the decades. In the preface to *Charter Schools and Their Enemies*, he describes a conversation he had in the early 1970s with Irving Kristol, the editor of *Public Interest*.

Kristol asked Sowell what could be done to create high-quality schools for blacks, and Sowell replied that such schools already existed and had for generations.

Kristol asked Sowell to write about these schools, and a 1974 issue of *Public Interest* featured an essay by Sowell on the history of all-black Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C., which had not only outperformed its local white counterparts but had repeatedly equaled or exceeded national norms on standardized tests throughout the first half of the 20th century.

From 1870 to 1955, Sowell wrote, “most of Dunbar's graduates went on to college, even though most Americans—white or black—did not.” Two years later, in the same publication, he wrote a second article on successful black elementary and high schools throughout the country.

Inner-city charter schools

In a sense, today's public charter schools, which often have predominantly low-income black and Hispanic student bodies, are successors to the high-achieving black schools that Sowell researched more than 40 years ago. And, as he points out, these charter schools are not simply doing a better job than traditional public schools with the same demographic groups.

In many cases, inner-city charter-school students are outperforming their peers in the wealthiest and whitest suburban school districts in the country.

In New York City, for example, the Success Academy charter schools have effectively closed the academic achievement gap between black and white students.

Sowell writes: “The educational success of these charter schools undermines theories of genetic determinism, claims of cultural bias in the tests, assertions that racial ‘integration’ is necessary for blacks to reach educational parity, and presumptions that income differences are among the ‘root causes’ of educational differences.”

Sowell goes on to say that the last claim, about poverty, “has been used for decades to absolve traditional public schools of any responsibility for educational failures in low-income minority communities.”

Charter schools work

Charter schools don’t have such vocal and passionate enemies because they don’t work, but because they do. Therefore they pose a threat to the education status quo.

They threaten the current power balance that allows the interests of adults who run public education to come before what’s best for students. Bad schools stay open because those schools still provide good jobs for adults. Whether the children are learning or not is a secondary concern at best.

As Sowell writes: “Schools exist for the education of children. Schools do not exist to provide ironclad jobs for teachers, billions of dollars in union dues for teachers’ unions, monopolies for educational bureaucracies, a guaranteed market for [graduates of] teachers’ colleges, or a captive audience for indoctrinators.”

Politicians moved sharply left

In recent years, charter school opponents have made headway. Limits have been placed on how many can open and where they can be located.

Bill Clinton and Barack Obama both supported charter schools, but Democrats have moved sharply to the left on education, and the Biden administration is far more skeptical of charters. All of which makes Sowell’s book as timely as anything he’s ever written.

Sowell’s scholarship

One of the reasons I wanted to write this biography is because so much of Sowell’s scholarship remains relevant to our policy debates today. We’re still talking about economic inequality, affirmative action, social justice, critical race theory, slavery reparations, the efficacy of minimum-wage laws and the pros and cons of immigration, all of which Sowell’s writings have addressed.

Frankly, I find it depressing that so many people today know names like Ta-Nehisi Coates, Ibram Kendi, and Nikole Hannah-Jones—but not Thomas Sowell.

His scholarship runs circles around those individuals. And it’s not just the volume of his writings, it’s also the range and depth and rigor of his analysis.

He anticipated and refuted many of their arguments decades ago, in some cases before the people making them today were even born.

Freedom, equality and justice

To the extent that Sowell is known, it’s mostly for his writings on racial controversies. But most of his books are not on racial themes, and Sowell would have distinguished himself as a first-rate scholar even if he’d never written a single word about race.

Sowell says his favorite of his own books is *A Conflict of Visions*, in which he tries to explain what drives our ideological disputes about freedom, equality, and justice. He traces these divergent “visions,” or views of human nature, back at least two centuries, to thinkers like William Godwin, Immanuel Kant, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, down through John Rawls and today’s social justice advocates.

Conflicting visions

- The conflicting visions he describes in the book are the constrained or tragic view of human nature and the unconstrained or utopian view.
- People with a more-constrained view of the human condition see mankind as hopelessly flawed. They see inherent limits to human betterment. We might want to end war or poverty or racism, they say, but that’s probably not going to happen. Therefore, our focus should be on putting in place institutions and processes that help society deal with problems we’re never going to eradicate.
- On the other side you have the unconstrained or utopian view of human nature, which rejects the idea that there are limits to what humans can achieve. This is the belief that nothing is unattainable and no trade-offs are necessary.

According to this perspective, by utilizing the proper amount of reason and willpower, we can not only manage problems like war, poverty and racism, but solve them entirely.

Opposite conclusions

Depending on which view they embrace, Sowell explains why two people, similarly well informed and similarly well meaning, will reach opposite conclusions on a whole range of issues including taxes, rent control, school choice, military spending and judicial activism.

- When Kant said that from the “crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made,” he was exhibiting the constrained view.
- When Rousseau said that “man is born free but everywhere is in chains,” he was voicing the unconstrained view.
- When Oliver Wendell Holmes said his job as a judge was to make sure the game is played according to the rules, whether he liked them or not, it was a constrained view.
- When Earl Warren said his job as a judge was to do what he thinks is right, regardless of the law, it was an unconstrained view. This is the philosophical framework that explains Sowell’s writings on almost any topic.

Opposed affirmative action

Beginning in the 1970s, Sowell turned his attention to racial controversies. He did so, he says, out of a sense of duty. There were things that needed to be said and too few others who were willing to say them. Sowell’s criticisms of the direction of the civil-rights movement at the time eventually got him “canceled,” to use today’s term.

Black elites in particular wanted nothing to do with him because he opposed affirmative action, and they convinced others in the mainstream media not to take his views seriously or turn to him for a black point of view on issues of the day.

Focusing on white racism doesn't help

Sowell has long argued that the problems blacks face today involve far more than what whites have done to them in the past. It's no mystery why black activists want to keep the focus on white racism. It helps them raise money and stay relevant.

And it's no mystery why politicians use the same tactics—it helps them win votes. But Sowell argued that it's not at all clear that focusing on white racism is helping the black underclass.

You can spend all day, every day pointing out the moral failings of other people, groups, institutions and society in general. The question is whether that helps the people who most need help.

Many of today's activists go about their business with the assumption that the only real problem facing the black underclass is white racism. A good example of this is the recent focus on policing in black communities.

- Do racist cops exist? Absolutely.
- Do some cops abuse their authority? Of course.
- But are poor black communities as violent as they are because of bad cops? Will reducing police resources improve the situation?

Look at the facts

According to the *Chicago Sun-Times* there were 492 homicides in Chicago in 2019, and only three of them involved police. So, if police use of lethal force is a problem in Chicago, it's clearly a secondary problem.

Young black men in Chicago or Baltimore or St. Louis may indeed leave the house each morning worried about getting shot—but not by police.

Don't defund the police

Last year, there was a ballot measure put to voters in Minneapolis, where George Floyd was killed, that would have defunded the police. Not only was it defeated, it was most strongly opposed by black residents in high-crime areas. And the black residents of Minneapolis are not outliers. They're typical.

In a Gallup poll released in 2020, 81 percent of blacks nationwide said they wanted police presence in their neighborhood to remain the same or to increase.

Another Gallup poll released a year earlier asked black and Hispanic residents of low-income neighborhoods in particular about policing. Fifty-nine percent of both black and Hispanic respondents said they wanted police to spend *more* time in their communities.

In a poll from 2015, the year after Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Mo., a majority of black respondents said that police treat them fairly, and far more blacks than whites, by a two-to-one margin, said they “want a greater police presence in their local neighborhoods.”

Nor is this a recent phenomenon.

In a 1993 Gallup poll, 82 percent of black respondents said the criminal justice system doesn’t treat criminals harshly enough, 75 percent of blacks wanted more cops on the streets, and 68 percent said we ought to build more prisons so that longer sentences can be given.

Efforts to defund the police are being pushed by activists and liberal elites who claim to be speaking on behalf of low-income minorities. But they are mostly speaking for themselves.

This is something Sowell pointed out a long time ago.

Reflecting the majority view

Sowell would often be asked how it felt to go against the grain of so many other blacks.

He would inevitably correct the premise of the question. “You don’t mean I go against the grain of most blacks,” he would respond.

“You mean I go against the grain of most black intellectuals, most black elites. But black intellectuals don’t represent most blacks any more than white intellectuals represent most whites.”

The elites don’t reflect the majority

This continues to be the case today.

- Most blacks, for example, support voter-ID laws and school choice, while most black elites—academics, the NAACP, Black Lives Matter activists, etc.—oppose those things.

- Conversely, most blacks oppose racial preferences in college admissions and, as noted, oppose defunding the police, while black elites are in favor of those things.

Sowell pointed out these disparities decades ago, and they’ve only grown since then. His writings on intellectual history have stressed, time and again, that intellectuals are a special-interest group. They have their own self-serving agenda and their own priorities and ought to be understood as such.

Liberal elites control narrative

- Liberal elites control the media, by and large.
- They control academia.
- They run the foundations that hand out intellectual awards and prizes.

Sowell has refused to play footsie with them, refused to pull his punches. And it has cost him in terms of prestige and notoriety. He’s paid a price. It’s one reason he’s not as well known as the individuals I mentioned earlier.

I often tell people that if you think Ta-Nehisi Coates and Nikole Hannah-Jones represent the views of most black people, you need to get to know more black people.

Published 36th book

Sowell is now 91 years old. The book he published last year was his 36th, and his fifth since turning 80.

That's not too bad for a black orphan from the Jim Crow South who was born into extreme poverty during the Great Depression, never finished high school, didn't earn a college degree until he was 28, and didn't write his first book until he was 40.

Honest intellectual

But, even aside from that impressive personal journey, Sowell is a rare species. He's an honest intellectual. He's someone who has consistently sought out the truth, regardless of whether it made him popular.

He has been willing to follow the facts and evidence wherever they lead, even when they lead to politically incorrect results. It's not something that ought to distinguish you as a scholar, but these days it does.

Think about the current debate that we're having over critical race theory. These ideas were once relegated to college seminars. Now they are entering our workplaces through diversity training.

Absurd ideas about slavery

And they are entering our elementary schools through *The New York Times* 1619 Project, which attempts to put the institution of slavery at the center of America's founding. That's absurd.

Slavery existed for thousands of years, in societies all over the world and long before the founding of the United States. More African slaves were sent to the Islamic world than were ever sent to the Americas. Slavery still exists today in Sudan and Nigeria.

Notice emancipation

What makes America unique is not slavery. It's emancipation. It's how fast we went from slavery to Martin Luther King to a black president.

The economic and social progress of black Americans in only a few generations is something unmatched in recorded history.

Slavery did not build nations

The argument that America became prosperous due to slavery is also unsupported by the facts, as Sowell has pointed out.

Individual slave owners certainly prospered, but that's different from saying the country benefited.

In fact, the regions of the country that had slavery were the poorest regions, both during slavery and afterward.

Similarly, in Brazil, which imported far more slaves than the U.S. did, the regions where slavery was concentrated were the poorest regions, both during slavery and afterward.

Eastern Europe, to look at another example, had slavery far longer than Western Europe—yet Western Europe has always been richer.

Millions more African slaves were sent to Northern Africa and the Middle East than came to the West.

If slave labor produces economic prosperity, why did those regions remain so poor for so long? And later, when the Middle East did start to become wealthier, it wasn't due to slavery—it was due to the discovery of oil.

Numerous groups fought slavery

In another 1619 Project essay, the author writes: "For the most part, black Americans fought back alone."

- This breathtakingly ignorant assertion simply writes out of history the role of many.
- The Quakers and others in the 18th century.
- The role of the abolitionists and the newly formed Republican party in the run-up to the Civil War and Reconstruction.
- The role of the NAACP, which was cofounded by whites and blacks together in the early 1900s.
- It also ignores the role of nonblacks in the civil-rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, which was propelled by alliances with whites, Jews, Catholics and others who fought against racial discrimination.

Promoting racial tension

But to take issue with the 1619 Project on these grounds is almost beside the point. The Project's whole purpose is to present slavery as an all-purpose explanation for racial inequality today.

- The argument is that blacks lag in academic performance because of slavery and Jim Crow.
- They lag in employment because of slavery and Jim Crow.
- They lag in incomes and home-ownership and all the rest because of this awful history.
- This is part of an ongoing attempt by the political left to blame the past actions of whites for the current problems of blacks.

Downplaying personal responsibility

Ultimately, it's an attempt to downplay the role of culture and personal responsibility in driving social inequality.

- Blacks are blameless, whites are evil.
- Whites who reject this narrative are labeled as racists.
- Blacks who reject it are dismissed as dupes or opportunists.

Serious historians

The real facts about slavery are well known among serious historians. But where are these serious historians right now?

A few have come forward, people like Gordon Wood and James McPherson. But why so few?

Why isn't the head of every history department at every major university pushing back against this 1619 Project nonsense?

The nation's top scholars ought to be falling over one another denouncing it. Why have so many been so quiet?

There have been countless books written by serious scholars about our nation's founding, and none of those books have been written by Nikole Hannah-Jones.

Thomas Sowell was not afraid

Why are serious historians so afraid to take on a journalist who has never written a book or even an academic paper about anything—let alone about the history of slavery?

- The reason they are so afraid is because taking her on is politically incorrect.
- They will be called racist and sexist.
- It might damage their academic careers.
- This is the sort of intellectual cowardice that makes Sowell's life and work unique. This is what distinguishes his scholarship: courage. Sowell wasn't afraid.

It's the sort of thing that ought to be commonplace among scholars and intellectuals—and journalists, for that matter—but clearly it is not.

Sowell has spent a career putting truth above popularity. We need a hundred more just like him.