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The Case of a Black Conservative

Thomas Sowell: Talent and Tragedy

Though blacks have felt they were under assault since July 4, 1776, they have also felt most of the time that progress, however slow and uneven, was inevitable. Next to Reconstruction, the period of greatest black optimism began with FDR's inauguration and ended with Nixon's. The highlight of this period was Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, for it was Johnson who decided that the federal government should play an active role in behalf of black interests.

The recent election of Ronald Reagan and the growing influence of conservatism have reinforced the feeling that black progress is a notion that has come and gone. The priorities of the Reagan's administration are such that concern for society's least well-off, white and black, is somewhere near the bottom of his list. The chaotic response of the traditional black political leadership is largely a result of never before having had to confront an Administration so "impartially" disinterested in the plight of blacks. Ironically, black leaders had assumed the permanence of the welfare state and as such were perhaps the truest adherents to the "End of Ideology" thesis.

A few blacks, however, have surfaced as defenders of Reagan's free-market capitalism. The most prominent is Thomas Sowell, a disciple of his former teacher, Milton Friedman, formerly of UCLA but now housed at the conservative think tank the Hoover Institute. Of the blacks around Reagan, Sowell is the most interesting. He is the author of two studies on the history of economic thought and of numerous studies on American ethnicity. Recently he has written an ambitious attempt at conservative social theorizing, *Knowledge and*

Decision. The cause of Sowell's rise to prominence is not, however, to be found in his books.

Sowell is an opponent of school busing, Affirmative Action, the minimum wage, rent control, and numerous other social-welfare programs that, he argues, create barriers to black social mobility and induce blacks to think they cannot succeed on their own merits. Sowell believes that the path to a long-run solution to black America's ills depends on the ability of blacks to obtain private-sector jobs in a stable economy. This was, as Sowell argued in *Race and Economics*, the only way white immigrant ethnic groups ultimately succeeded. We are told, in effect, that those who were unable to compete with whites undermined black interests by establishing racial quotas that "guaranteed" equal rewards for lesser achievements—and in doing so were encouraged by well-intentioned white liberals who at heart didn't believe that blacks could compete with whites. Furthermore, quota programs make it increasingly difficult for those blacks who are capable of succeeding on their own to take whole-hearted credit for their achievements; Affirmative Action has undermined the moral autonomy of black America.

More crucial to Sowell's argument than the psychological impact of Affirmative Action are its negative economic consequences. Sowell is the consummate free-market economist. Anything that does not allow the marketplace to function as it would "naturally," he views as detrimental to black people. Sowell assumes, much like Marx, that capitalists are governed by a single motive, the maximization of profit. Capitalists would be ready to hire anyone who is both productive and willing to work for the

lowest possible wage. A self-interested capitalist, all things considered, will be indifferent to the race and sex of his employees. If blacks were willing to work for lower wages than whites, the true capitalist would have a factory full of black employees.

But the minimum wage, Sowell argues, eliminates the bargaining power of unemployed black workers by denying them the chance to work at lower wages than whites. Furthermore, it lowers the capitalists' profit margin, causing them to expand less and that, of course, results in fewer jobs. Who loses? The unemployed black! Sowell shows in *Race and Economics* that industries whose profit margins have been government-regulated, such as the telephone company, have a far worse record of hiring blacks even in unskilled areas (for instance, operators) than unregulated companies.

Rent control, according to Sowell, also works to the detriment of poor blacks. Rent control forces owners to rent at lower prices than they could demand if rents were left to "supply vs. demand." At lower prices, there is likely to be more demand for housing than can be supplied. Housing shortages for Sowell are, therefore, not shortages per se but shortages caused by an overload of demand at a certain price level. Had landlords been able to charge the market value for their housing, there would be no shortage. Why? Well, at the lower rents imposed by law, many people who normally would have lived with others rented their own apartments, many got apartments larger than they could have afforded otherwise, and many who no longer needed their large apartments had little economic incentive to give them up in order to save rent. Consequently there is not enough housing for the poor. The solution: the free market!

Busing, we are told, is another liberal policy that works to the detriment of poor blacks. Why not improve the schools in black communities? There is no intrinsic reason why black schools in black neighborhoods cannot be first-rate. In two articles in the *Public Interest*, entitled, "Black Excellence: The Case of Dunbar High School" and "Patterns of Black Excellence," Sowell offered examples of predominantly black high schools, private and public, that nurtured academic achievement. Dunbar

High School in Washington, D.C. is recognized for its extraordinary role in developing many luminaries of the black intelligentsia. Further, Sowell argues, polls show that neither blacks nor whites want busing. Why then do we have it? Because of antidemocratic liberal courts, well-intentioned but racist white liberals who don't believe in black excellence, and black interest groups, particularly the NAACP. The solution? Give parents educational vouchers that can be used to pay for private schools and "public" ones. The ensuing competition between schools will increase the quality of all. Without such a voucher program, we are doomed to the continual decline of public education for the poor and the increased privatization of education for the middle classes.

The list of controversial positions enunciated by Sowell is seemingly endless. In many instances, however, all that is novel about Sowell is that *he has applied free-market analyses to issues that conservative economists have ignored*. Yet there is something peculiar about this black economist who, though less than original in thought, is willing, boldly and publicly, to violate ethnic positions.

The impact of racism on the lives of black Americans is far too complex to be addressed properly in this essay. Yet we can probably agree that its primary impact on black Americans has been to deny them access to crucial, material necessities. Growing up poor in the South and later in Harlem, Sowell confronted this fundamental meaning of American racism. However, a secondary impact of racism—but one of primary concern here—is the way in which it affects psychologically and culturally the black individual. Insofar as racism inhibits the fulfillment of talent and desire, it prevents blacks from fully participating in the modern world. Blacks have not been allowed to complete Tönnies's journey from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*. Consequently blacks are in many ways a less modern people than whites. My mother's generation intuitively understood this. They called it "our lack of exposure." Though many racist laws have been eradicated, the lack of money and jobs in a capitalist marketplace has prevented us from moderniz-

ing further. Ironically, our inability to diversify has produced a cultural lag that views diversity as less than virtuous.

The typical black reaction to Thomas Sowell is a reflection of our premodern selves. Blacks cannot cope with him because his ideas lie outside our normal ethnic parameters. Since he is conservative, we want to question his "blackness." However, the fact that he grew up poor in Harlem and never finished high school only serves to confuse us, for we can't get rid of him by labeling him an "oreo" or "bourgeois." *But, I ask rhetorically, is there any rational ground for arguing that a person can't be both black and conservative?*

When the Reagan transition team leaked news that it was considering Sowell for a cabinet post, Thomas I. Atkins, general counsel of the NAACP, stated,

We would view with considerable concern the appointment of Tom Sowell to HUD or, for that matter, to any other cabinet position . . . He would play the same kind of role that historically the house niggers played for the plantation owners. He could mete out the straight discipline. No matter how inhumanely administered, it would be presumed more acceptable because the hands of the disciplinarian are black.

It is now clear that Reagan was so thoroughly unconcerned about the response of black America to his domestic cutbacks that he didn't even attempt to use a "house nigger." Nevertheless, Sowell did not back off from Atkins's attack. He responded,

I think the NAACP are the classic house niggers. Their support comes from the white liberals . . . and they are constantly taking positions the very opposite of the black community on crime, on quotas, on busing . . .

Yet the reaction to Sowell was not surprising, for nowhere does our premodern attitude linger more than in our inability to grasp the complex interrelationship between a black intellectual and the broader ethnic group. Even the term intellectual is misunderstood in black America. Many blacks who are themselves intellectuals hesitate to use the term, for it carries connotations of elitism. The reasons for this are many, but most lead back to our old nemesis, *American racism*. Except for rare

occasions, blacks have been forced to view education as a means to economic mobility. Neither the Enlightenment nor Matthew Arnold's notion of realizing our higher humanity have found much acceptance in educated black circles. The person who entertains ideas only for their practical utility is not an intellectual, for somewhere in intellectual minds there is a belief in the virtue of knowledge for knowledge's sake. Most blacks have, however, been forced to think of ideas in a utilitarian manner, for education had to be seen as a means to an end: survival.

There have been historical moments when clusters of blacks ventured into the intellectual realm. Witness those blacks we might call the "turn of the century" generation. This generation produced such figures as Carter G. Woodson, the father of black history; Allison Davis (co-author of *Deep South and Children of Bondage*); Horace Mann Bond (*Negro Education in Alabama: A Study in Cotton and Steel*); Charles Johnson (*Shadow of the Plantation and Growing Up in the Black Belt*); E. Franklin Frazier (*Negro Youth at the Crossroads and The Negro Family in the United States and The Black Bourgeoisie*); W. E. B. DuBois (*The Philadelphia Negro*); Rayford Logan and Charles Wesley (historians); Alain Locke, Arthur P. Davis, and Sterling Brown; Charles Drew, the discoverer of blood plasma; and Ralph Bunche (*The Political Status of the Negro in the Age of FDR*).

Except for a few like Allison Davis who taught at the University of Chicago, these black scholars spent virtually their entire academic lives relegated to black institutions. After having attended elite graduate schools, they were forced to teach at academically inferior black colleges while their white graduate-school peers enjoyed the prestige, intellectual status, and research facilities of elite white institutions. Yet some of these black scholars produced first-rate scholarship. In 1948, E. Franklin Frazier was elected president of the American Sociological Association, the profession's highest honor awarded for contributions to the discipline, by white sociologists who could not find room for him at their institutions. That many of this generation died in bitterness or spent their waning years as alco-

holics is hardly surprising. Frazier, I've been told, had the unique ability to use humor as a buffer. If so, it was a cheap ticket to sanity.

It wouldn't be until late in their lives that some of these black intellectuals began to receive appointments at white universities: St. Clair Drake at Roosevelt University and later Stanford; J. Saunders Redding at George Washington and Cornell; John Hope Franklin at Brooklyn College and the University of Chicago; Kenneth B. Clark and John A. Davis at CCNY; Ira Reid at Haverford; L. D. Reddick at Temple. Several, like historian Benjamin Quarles of Morgan State College and the classicist Frank Snowden, were undoubtedly offered jobs at white institutions but chose to remain at black colleges. My hunch is that they felt that, "If you didn't want me then, I don't want you now."

Sowell came to intellectual maturity under the influence of this generation of black scholars. Few current black writers celebrate their achievements or refer to their works more often than he. What must have impressed him was their individual initiative and ultimate success in the face of far greater obstacles than confront blacks now. Perhaps he thought he would be part of a new generation that would continue this legacy. But then came the '60s and the era of black militancy.

The impact of this militancy must now be considered by even the most sympathetic observer as ambiguous. One obvious benefit can be seen in the increased presence of black students and faculty on white campuses. If pressure had not been placed on elite colleges, we cannot be sure that the exclusion of blacks from the academy would ever have ended. Yet the "instant" quantitative inclusion of blacks in white academia may well have undermined long-run qualitative performance.

Sowell was teaching at Cornell when *the event* occurred. In April 1969 protesting black students occupied a university building and subsequently armed themselves. On front pages all around the nation we saw the photographs of stern-faced young blacks leaving the occupied buildings with rifles held high and ammunition belts draped across their chests in

the style of Pancho Villa. Harry Edwards, who was at Cornell at the time, later explained that the students armed themselves in fear of attack by armed white students. An unarmed group of white jocks had attacked the black students earlier and threatened to return armed. The explanation seems plausible.

Edwards, who later rose to prominence as an interpreter of black militancy, saw these events as a generally positive assertion of black consciousness. In a rather silly polemic, *Black Students*, he argued that there were basically five types of black students on white campuses: (1) the radical activist; (2) the militant; (3) the revolutionary; (4) the anomic activist; and (5) the conforming Negro.

Edwards claimed that "the conforming Negro" was the only student concerned with academic achievement. The "revolutionary" black student, we were told, didn't care about established educational criteria. "Graduation from college for him means little." This sort of romantic anti-intellectualism must be taken into account in considering Sowell's refusal to align himself with the black student movement.

Sowell himself was never predisposed to supporting black student militancy. But many black intellectuals who were sympathetic to the cause were unable to close ranks with a movement that denigrated intellectual values, even though numerous white leftist intellectuals rushed to endorse the cause. These white intellectuals were able to be politically chic while continuing their own scholarly pursuits. Years later these same white intellectuals would participate in the denial of tenure to black academic activists who had practiced, in the name of "the revolution," what the white left had preached—"the committed black intellectual was not to be found in the library, but in the streets." This capricious attitude of the white leftist intelligentsia toward the black intelligentsia generated a disdain for the white left that remains to this day.

As for Edwards's revolutionary black students, one can only guess what has become of these degreeless revolutionaries in the aftermath of a revolution that never left the printed page. The notion that intuition derived from oppression gave blacks a sufficient understand-

ing of the nature of authority in the most advanced capitalist country was unforgivably ignorant. As with the Panthers, such ignorance would cost many their lives.

Edwards was but one of many who tinkered with this view, elevating the thoughtless act over the thoughtful pause. He worked himself into a professorship at Berkeley. I say this not to disparage him; for unlike Edwards I write with a ten-year hindsight. Furthermore, one doesn't play one-upmanship on issues "settled" through lives lost, jail sentences, and personal disorders. Yet mistakes that aren't confronted are bound to be repeated.

Sowell, on the other hand, was less concerned about the militancy of black Cornell students than with the response of the Cornell administration. He argued that Cornell valued campus tranquillity over everything else, and in yielding to the demands of black students essentially reneged on its responsibility to educate them. This was demonstrated in the establishment of special programs for black students—programs less rigorous than the regular curriculum. Sowell argued that if black students couldn't be expected to perform on the same level as their white peers, they shouldn't be admitted. Instead of going to Cornell, these students should be educated in state universities where they could compete more comfortably. It was, he argued, only reasonable to assume that racism had had some impact upon the precollege preparation of black students. What Edwards perceived as a growing commitment on the part of black students to the black community was interpreted by Sowell and his friend Martin Kilson of Harvard University as a cathartic cop-out from the anxieties of having to compete academically.

Sowell and Kilson were subsequently attacked for their defense of traditional (read, white) academic standards. They were called elitists and branded in many black circles as reactionary, though one doesn't quite know what a left/right dichotomy had to do with academic achievement.

If we truthfully analyze what it was that drew black students to elite white institutions, we would have to confess that they were attracted by rather orthodox perceptions of the utility of a Harvard or Yale degree. What these

black students really wanted was the legitimacy that an Ivy League degree offered in the outside (read, white) world. Yes, they would be responsible elites but elites nevertheless. As time has shown, they have kept their allegiance to elitism but narrowed their definition of whom they are responsible to. Not only have former white radicals like Rennie Davis and Jerry Rubin discovered that the way to change America is through security stocks, but former black militants like Thomas Jones, who once headed the Black Liberation Front at Cornell, have found "a third way," venture capital. (*U.S. News and World Report*, 1/19/81).

One had to be on an Ivy League campus in the late '60s and early '70s to really be aware of how many black students thought of themselves as radical. Rites of initiation usually included nothing more than having read a little of Fanon, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and all of Malcolm's autobiography. One had taped to one's dorm walls posters of Malcolm's pointed finger, Angela D's thin face and big Afro, Huey Newton sitting in a bamboo chair with a spear in his hand.

Most would listen to pop black music but rarely to the blues. Curiously, jazz, though popular, was rarely understood as the serious music it is. I would later discover a few who were conscientious students of jazz but wouldn't listen to Getz or Bill Evans for they had "taken our blues and gone." There were tolerated variations on these standards. Certain things, however, could not be tolerated, such as a head without an Afro or a non-Platonic relationship with "the oppressor or his woman."

Scale's *Seize The Time*, H. Rap Brown's *Die Nigger Die*, Cleaver's *Soul On Ice*, and the cultural nationalist writings of Ron Karenga and Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) were supposed to be to us what Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?* had been to earlier generations of American leftists. Coming on the heels of that generation of authentic social activists who had formed SNCC, etc., we had, true to our American selves, merely purchased, rather than earned, our revolutionary status.

It is easy to sound self-righteous writing from Yale graduate school ten years later. As an undergraduate at Harvard I had been one of Edwards's "conforming Negro" students, insofar as I valued academic learning. Yet, I took the militancy of my black peers quite seriously, for though I did not participate in most of the black student militancy at Harvard, I too was subject to the feeling that something, somewhere, was about to occur. My problem now is that with increased learning my vision has become much more *radical* while those old college radicals, who should today be my allies, now ask me to meet them for dinner in restaurants I cannot afford.

Phony "radicalism" wasn't the only problematic aspect of black militancy on white campuses. As Edwards indicated, the movement elevated the activist over the scholar. Consequently one was apt to feel more guilt over being uninvolved in a big-brother program than over not receiving an A in macroeconomics. The prevailing argument was that we were on white campuses only because of those black people who died in the streets. Since activism brought us here, we certainly couldn't be nonactivists while we were here. To be a scholar was "bourgeois"; demonstrating was much more cathartic. Yet one of the most insistent demands echoed nationally by black students was for black studies departments, which were to be staffed by blacks who had been sufficiently bourgeois to have acquired the necessary academic credentials.

Again, as irony would have it, the black studies departments, which were seen by black students as a radical change, merely played into the hands of white academia's refusal to perceive the study of black life and art as legitimate. It was far easier for universities to establish Afro-American studies departments than to place blacks in traditional academic disciplines. Nor was this the only tragedy. Black studies departments in numerous instances facilitated the hiring of black faculty who would not have qualified for the job had their scholarly work been the primary criteria. Except for Sowell and Kilson, few people were willing to discuss this aspect of the black studies phenomenon. Whites feared being called racist and black faculty stood to benefit.

The attempt by black academicians to create black sociology, black psychology, black theology, etc., can be seen as a rather shrewd way of cornering an academic market for themselves by eliminating whites from job competition. Yet those who called for the "Death of White Sociology" never supplied an intellectual defense for their demand. In fact, one wonders if they understood the magnitude of the task. The creation of a black psychology, theology, or sociology necessitated more than merely asserting its existence or renaming established taxonomic classifications.

It is crucial to remember just how thoroughly anti-intellectual the black power movement and its spinoffs really were. Like previous political movements that attempted to politicize an intellectual and aesthetic realm, the black power movement spawned polemics in the name of social science, and propaganda in the name of the arts. There was a great deal of talk about challenging white America's interpretation of black life and history, but when it came to actually enduring the grind of scholarly research, it was Herbert Gutman who "refuted" Moynihan (and thus Frazier); Michel Fabre, a white French academic, and Irene Gendzier, a white American social scientist, wrote definitive biographies of Richard Wright and Frantz Fanon; and Piven and Cloward, white sociologists, substantiated the claim that welfare had been a means of "regulating the poor."

One may argue, justifiably, that in criticizing academically inferior black studies departments and their instructors, Sowell and Kilson presented an overly idealized conception of academic competence within white academia. Without a doubt, there are numerous white academic charlatans. But why, Sowell has asked, should we justify our norm on the basis of the lowest common denominator in white academia? Furthermore, I have often wondered, unlike Sowell, why it is that we defend mediocre black academicians when there is still discrimination against qualified blacks, as shown by the Berkeley English Department's denial of tenure to the gifted black writer Ishmael Reed. Finally, when Afro-American studies departments are taken seriously by universities, the students, and the black faculty

themselves, there is no reason why these departments cannot be competent—as in the case of Afro-American studies at Yale University.

In assessing the response of liberal white academics to second-class black studies departments, it has often been suggested that they were expressing either guilt or racism. My hunch, however, is that their response can be read as a manifestation of a wider problem. The interaction between white liberal-leftists and black intellectuals has been such that the terms of acceptable discourse were dictated by blacks. Why? Because blacks have historically been able to monopolize the *status of victim* within liberal circles. Consequently, when blacks claimed that traditional standards of academic rigor did not apply to them, numerous white liberals acquiesced. There were exceptions, such as Irving Howe, Philip Rahv, Martin Duberman, Eugene Genovese, and Philip Rieff. However, the brunt of defending academic rigor for blacks fell on the shoulders of those blacks, like Kilson and Sowell, who were bold and responsible enough to accept this burden. Ralph Ellison and J. Saunders Redding, among others, played the same role in artistic circles.

Yet when Kilson and Sowell began to attack anti-intellectualism among blacks on white campuses, the liberal-left intellectual establishment did not come to their defense. Sowell must have thought that he would receive support from the white intellectual establishment in defending academic standards, but none was forthcoming. The liberal intellectual establishment decided that they would rather be popular than educate black students.

The only intellectual community that stood by Kilson and Sowell was that of the conservative intellectuals. Here Sowell had found allies. Though he had been an apostle of Milton Friedman since his days in graduate school, the issue of black students at elite white institutions would ultimately cause him to be politicized and place him in the camp of conservative politics. Kilson, on the other hand, had always been at least a liberal, and something more. Moreover, he could not fit in with the *Commentary* crowd for, unlike Sowell, he was

a consistent opponent of ethnic parochialism, even when it concerned Jewish or other brands of ethnocentrism. Sowell was willing to ignore the white ethnic parochialism of a Michael Novak or Norman Podhoretz, provided they were willing to support his assaults on ethnic parochialism among blacks. Sowell's need for group support as opposed to Kilson's individualism doesn't, however, adequately explain their divergence. *Sowell, unlike Kilson, sought power.*

But Thomas Sowell is no "house nigger." That he and any other blacks who attempt critically to analyze intraethnic issues are subject to this charge reflects our inability to tolerate diversity. Furthermore, in a round-about way, it is racist, for it assumes that blacks who think "differently" are not asserting their autonomy but merely acting as an intermediary for some white interest. In the case of Sowell, his conservatism predates his association with Reagan and is, in fact, more sophisticated than Reagan's. However, because of his ambitions, Sowell is willing to be associated with the intellectually disreputable conservatism of the Reagan presidency. Association with power is a heady tonic that can conceal intellectual ambivalence; nuances of thought become constrained by realizable policy alternatives. As Noam Chomsky pointed out in his critique of intellectuals who served in the Kennedy administration, once affiliated with power an intellectual inevitably abdicates his responsibility to "tell the truth." Yet as anyone who has been associated with power realizes, only those who don't enter the fray can stand back, criticize, and appear pure. Thus when all things are considered, I would rather have had an Arthur Schlesinger advising President Kennedy than some bureaucratic insider who felt no inner tension. And I would rather see Sowell advising Reagan than a member of the Moral Majority.

I don't have the access to the depths of Sowell's mind to tell me exactly what he thinks about the Reagan presidency. As far as I can tell, he is strongly concerned with the problems of those black Americans who are not, by any definition, "making it." He certainly spends enough time writing about free-market solutions to problems confronting the poor blacks.

We may disagree with his prescriptions, but that he is *concerned* we cannot doubt.

I would suggest, moreover, that Sowell's rhetoric not be taken at face value. Much of it is hype used to legitimate himself. Sowell certainly realizes that as a black conservative he is somewhat of an anomaly. He realizes that American conservatism has often been awash in outright racism. Consequently, he must legitimate himself to conservatives while working in behalf of black interests and must legitimate himself among blacks while working in behalf of conservative interests. As a result, he has created a right-wing "populist" political style. There is no American conservative today who claims to speak in behalf of the black lower classes as energetically as Sowell. In addition, Sowell attacks the black middle classes, which are, ironically, the only strata among blacks who could remotely believe they would benefit from the policies Sowell advocates.

Insofar as blacks overwhelmingly supported Carter, Sowell must attempt to maneuver within an Administration that doesn't see itself as politically beholden to the black community. The task is certainly difficult and probably impossible. Nevertheless, the criticism showered upon Sowell by certain black leaders because of his affiliation with Reagan is somewhat specious. Need we ask the congressional Black Caucus, Andy Young, Pat Harris, and the NAACP why needy blacks indeed received so little from the Carter administration, when black people were so largely responsible for electing Carter? If they couldn't shape policies benefiting blacks within what they packaged as a sympathetic Administration, how can they attack those blacks who are linked to an Administration that owes its election to every American voting group except blacks?

At best, the Sowell's in the Reagan camp could be innovative policy-makers around issues concerning black America. At worst, they could do nothing. My hunch is that they will fall decidedly closer to the latter. That is, they will, at best and only occasionally, minimize regression on policies benefiting the black lower class. The black middle class will also suffer insofar as Reagan cutbacks in federal outlays will hurt them disproportionately. The

black middle class depends a great deal on public-sector jobs often located in civil-rights-enforcement bureaucracies vulnerable to "efficiency" cutbacks. The black upper middle class and business sector had previously thought that they would prosper under Reagan as they had under Nixon and Ford but to their horror, Reagan, unlike his Republican predecessors, eliminated their disproportionate (read, Affirmative Action) access to small government contracts. Given his own anti-Affirmative Action stance, Sowell could only endorse this change in policy, and so brought about a split within the black Reaganite camp that has yet to be mended.

If Reagan had wanted to legitimate himself in the black community, indeed, the last person he would have called on is Thomas Sowell. Sowell has a tendency to flaunt his ego. When he is attacked by blacks, he lashes back in the most emotive way. Shortly after Reagan's inauguration, Sowell instigated the most politically mindless attack on black middle-class leaders since the tirades of the late George Schuyler. In a two-part piece in the *Washington Post* entitled "Blacker Than Thou" (2/13/81 and 2/14), Sowell, for reasons that have baffled even his black GOP peers, attacked Andy Young and other prominent blacks for being light-skinned haters of their dark-skinned brothers and sisters. They were, he argued, part of a long tradition that held that light-skinned blacks had more in common with whites than with darker members of their ethnic group. Second, Sowell argued that because he and his friend Walter Williams (another black free-market conservative economist in Reagan's camp) had grown up in the ghettos, they were more authentic spokesmen for blacks than such people as Pat Harris, who had grown up middle-class.

One can only wonder why Sowell would write such things. He should certainly have realized that the task of implementing his policies could only be enhanced by the support of the traditional black political leadership, even though it is heavily Democratic. His interest and theirs coincide more often than they conflict. So why this foolishness? My guess is that Sowell suffers from a love-hate relationship with the black middle class. He wants to

be accepted into their ranks and celebrated, but feels angry because he has not yet been.

Like any intellectual grasping for power, Sowell is not unwilling to shape his arguments to fit the moment's political needs. In attacking light-skinned blacks for what he claims is their superiority complex, Sowell has shown that he is in many ways out of touch with black people. Intraethnic color hatred is not one of black America's main problems today, for reasons that have much to do with the black nationalist movements of the '60s. Sowell writes as if this were 1944. In addition, whenever Sowell attacks light-skinned DuBois *et al.*, he conveniently forgets that these are the same people he previously celebrated as scholarly achievers. And the pre-1954 (Brown decision) Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C., the prime example of Sowell's "Black Excellence" thesis, was overwhelmingly composed of students from stable middle- and working-class families. Thus Dunbar has little value in attempting to pose alternatives to ghetto education today.

Sowell's advocacy of an educational voucher system as a possible cure to the problems of inner-city black education is somewhat pathetic. In this system, the government would place a predetermined amount of money in the hands of any American parent who chose to send a child to a private school, and would thereby save an equal amount by not having to educate these children in the public school system. Numerous private schools, established to lure away students, would compete with the public schools. The competition, according to Sowell, would raise the quality of education. Innovative teachers with their own educational ideas would sprout everywhere.

The scenario appears attractive until one perceives the hidden ramifications. Sowell's free-market ideas don't allow him to advocate a price ceiling on the tuition that these new private schools could charge black parents with vouchers. Consequently the best private schools would continue to remain beyond the financial reach of the urban poor. A hierarchy of private schools would come into existence based on the financial status of the parents. And existing private schools would have an

incentive to raise their tuitions by the exact amount of the government-distributed voucher. Sowell seems to forget that much of the reason behind the flight of middle-class kids from the public schools was to get away from the poor, undereducated black child. Certainly we are not naïve enough to believe that these kids will be allowed into predominantly middle-class private schools simply because they could now afford the tuition. The task of educating the poor, inner-city black child will still remain with the public school system, only now he will "contaminate" fewer others, and there will be even less money for the job.

Sowell's concern with economic efficiency allows him to justify his lack of empathy for those black children who, for whatever reason, would remain in the public schools once the educational voucher system was instituted. We are to assume that their parents would simply not be concerned about their education. Their children are headed for jail anyway. Why then concern ourselves with their education? The shrewdness of the voucher system is that it would partially subsidize the private-school education of the middle classes, for which now they receive nothing. Any proposed solution to the problem of educationally deprived children that pretends to bypass the need to spend disproportionately in their behalf is a sham.

Busing, Sowell tells us, should be abolished since polls show that neither blacks nor whites want it. The notion that blacks support it has been created by black interest groups like the NAACP. Sowell argues that the court's intervention in this issue is evidence of how liberals have distorted the role of the courts in a democratic society. This antibusing argument is so contrived that even Sowell's most sympathetic readers must question his integrity. Since when does a conservative like Sowell, with his commitment to a political and economic elite, want to imply that polls should control or seriously influence the formulation of policy? Sowell certainly wouldn't turn to the polls to determine whether EXXON should be nationalized. Can it be that Sowell does not realize that had the Supreme Court not intervened in 1954, he too might still be riding in the back of the bus? Most deplorable is Sowell's unwillingness to mention cases, as in Boston, where the court

ordered busing only because the Irish-American judge found discriminatory practices in the operation of the Irish-American controlled Boston School Committee. The notion that the judge merely intervened to seat sandy-haired Sue next to big Bo Willie in order to insure the melting pot is beyond credence.

Sowell's argument about the free market as a cure to racism hardly merits serious attention. If Sowell were right, how could we explain the existence of racism in private industry? Furthermore, the federal government, the most regulated entity in America, has been the best hirer of blacks. Herein lies a problem that ultimately makes much of what Sowell says about ethnicity overly simple-minded. Sowell, an economist by training, does not grasp the social-psychological aspects of culture, particularly American culture. His books about ethnicity are essentially compilations of raw economic data, one-dimensionally posed in behalf of an economic theory that works only on the printed page. Thus Sowell is all too baffled in attempting to explain the racism of capitalists, given the fact that racism often hurts their profit margins. Sowell's arguments would seem more valid if people ceased to be human.

Sowell's arguments about lowering the minimum wage and ending rent control show the lack of a humane vision in regard to the least advantaged. Sophisticated free-market economists are at least willing to admit that rent control and the minimum wage address real problems caused by the workings of the free-market economy. But Sowell is unwilling even to admit the existence of the problems. The minimum wage gives some measure of security, however small, to the most exploitable and exploited sectors of society. If one cannot subsist on wages earned at the workplace, why continue to work? As for rent control, Sowell's concern about the flooding of the housing market because of the "artificially induced" prices sidesteps the more crucial discussion of the quality of the housing offered. He tells us that there is no housing shortage. So what? There is a shortage of good housing for people with modest incomes.

Unfortunately Sowell is too blinded by eco-

nomie dogma to realize that social-welfare measures were not altruistic liberal inventions but responses pressed on the government by the populace. In effect, the populace was responding to structural constrictions of the prewelfare-state, free-market economy. Ironically, if American society had evolved according to Sowell's free-market vision, we might have heard Marx's footsteps. Sowell's free-market dogmas are grounded in a 19th-century economic theory that if actualized would necessitate a 20th-century authoritarianism. In the absence of an economically satisfied working class living under some measure of government-insured social security (such as unemployment compensation, welfare), how will national stability be maintained in periods of economic troubles? *What Sowell refuses to tell us is that, in the absence of an economically interventionist state, we will have an interventionist state politically.*

The market, for Sowell, assumes implicit moral authority over the distribution of goods in the society: the people who don't make it become those who shouldn't. It's a neo-Social Darwinist vision. Any economist who operates under the vision that Sowell entertains cannot honestly claim that the system, once implemented, will benefit the poor. Regardless of how it works in practice, which will be less ideal than the theory asserts, the poor are not the beneficiaries in the theory itself. It's alright for Sowell to be a conservative economist but, please, no more of this nonsense about helping the black poor. One should, however, recognize that Social Darwinists do offer a solution to the problem of poverty. Their solution is an exercise in triage: let poor people die out.

Sowell's arguments concerning the reaction of blacks to Affirmative Action are also misinformed, though not dishonest. As far as I know, blacks who have been aided by Affirmative Action don't feel any less proud of their achievements than anyone else. I was admitted into Harvard College under what was certainly an Affirmative Action program. I neither lose sleep over it nor gaze upon my diploma with any embarrassment. Regardless of how I got in, I had to pass the same courses as everyone else in order to get out. Yet as I approach the academic job market, I must confess that my

less-than-stellar graduate-school transcript has me worried that I might get a job that I would not have gotten had I been white. Does Sowell think that thousands of Irish-Americans feel less respectful about their social mobility in an urban America where the Irish-dominated political machines have disproportionately placed them on city payrolls? Do WASPS in firms that don't hire Jews, and Jews in firms that don't hire Italian-Americans, and all of these in firms that don't hire blacks feel less secure about their achievements? We are not a meritocratic people and don't pretend to be, that is, until we want to block someone else's access to our status.

Perhaps the most fascinating of all of Sowell's arguments is the one claiming that he is, in fact, the true black because he grew up in Harlem amid rats and with unsoled shoes, while those blacks who grew up in middle-class Washington, D.C. are mere pretenders. Sounds familiar? This argument is a carbon copy of a '60s argument and reflects now what it did then, an inability of blacks to cope with inner diversity. Sowell is as guilty of this effort to reinstitute tribalism as any black writing today. This isn't surprising, for though Sowell appears to possess a complex identity by virtue of his deviant stance, he is in fact the quintessential parochial American intellectual.

Within the conservative intellectual community, he has been offered and willingly accepted the monopoly on discourse pertaining to blacks. This community grants Sowell the right to claim a peculiar access (denied to whites by birthright) to hidden ethnic truths. Consequently, when debating white liberals on Milton Friedman's television show, Sowell often assumes a "what can you, a white person, tell me, a black, about blacks" posture. Besides the fact that the posture is premodern in its defense of ascriptive insights, and thoroughly anti-intellectual, a similar stance taken by black nationalists in the '60s was vehemently attacked by the same conservatives who now endorse it in Sowell. Clearly they need a black to broaden their appeal.

With the rise of the neoconservatives, Jews finally obtained prominence within the ranks of

the politicized conservative intellectual community. In many cases these Jewish converts, like Irving Kristol, relinquished their scholarly ambitions in order to pursue the writing of pop-market polemics. In so doing they helped to make conservative inroads into a segment of society that had historically viewed conservatism as less than sensitive to their concerns, if not outright anti-Semitic. Blacks, therefore, became the last beachhead in the new pluralism. Yet Sowell's main function does not lie in the conversion of blacks. *Sowell increases the attractiveness of conservatism to moderate whites who heretofore may have deemed it too insensitive to black concerns.*

Why does Sowell allow himself to be "used" in this manner? The notion that he is being used or even its reverse notion, that he is using conservatives, both derive from an assumption that Sowell's belief in conservative ideals is less than authentic. We cannot make that assumption. Those who do are in most cases parochial blacks or white liberal intellectuals unwilling to grant autonomy to a black intellectual. This does not, however, prevent us from discussing the benefits that have accrued to Sowell as a result of his ties to the conservative community. Sowell has stumbled upon the ultimate black mechanism for personal socioeconomic mobility. He has become the "anti-Affirmative Action" *Affirmative Action black.*

Shrewd blacks have always know that the way to diffuse white skepticism about their qualifications in this era of Affirmative Action is to assume a posture of righteous indignation to what they claim is Affirmative Action's insult to their character and intelligence. Having done so, whites will offer prominence to these anti-Affirmative Action blacks in the hope that they will function as antidotes for the pro-Affirmative Action black crowd. They become, in effect, Affirmative Action cases within the anti-Affirmative Action lobby. It is the only variant of Affirmative Action free of negative stigma: Sowell has played this hand magnificently.

There have always been numerous critics of Sowell within the black intellectual community, but they have neither the intellectual status nor the necessary access to the media to effectively confront him. Many black intellec-

tuals, stunned by this Reagan-in-blackface, are able only to muster intellectualized primal screams. Still others are wondering how they too might corner a piece of the market Sowell has so deftly tapped. In only one instance have I seen a conservative white intellectual scornfully raise the issue of Sowell's preferential treatment. In a review of Sowell's book *Ethnic America* in *Psychology Today* (9/81), sociologist Andrew Greeley, a supporter of many of Sowell's controversial policy positions, concluded:

I doubt that Basic Books would have published such a sloppy work if Sowell were not a prominent black conservative. The same book would have been rejected out of hand if a white author had presented it. Thomas Sowell is being patronized by the same double standards that he so categorically rejects.

Greeley's attack on Sowell is instructive on several counts. First, it is not true that *Ethnic America* would not have been published had it been written by a white author, provided, that is, the white author commanded the attention of the book-buying market to the degree Sowell does. Second, Sowell's *Ethnic America* is no more intellectually vacant than much of the nonsense Greeley has had published (for instance, *Why Can't They Be Like Us?*). It seems rather clear that Greeley is upset not by Sowell's kind of scholarship but by the fact that Sowell has moved him out of the pop-white ethnic-studies market. Sowell has taken over the fiefdom previously ruled by Greeley and Michael Novak (*The Rise of the Unmelt-able Ethnics*).

The hilarious aspect of this is that Sowell has done so by writing books that celebrate the achievements of white ethnics to an extent unrivaled by anyone, including Greeley and Novak. Thus in his review of Sowell's book Greeley, of all people, finds it necessary to inform Sowell that the Irish immigrants had some problems and failures in coping with their new existence in America. In offering a counterpoint to black failure, Sowell constructs white ethnic success stories that sometimes evade fact. Such works may not succeed in making Sowell respected within the scholarly community, but they have succeeded admirably outside it.

The tragedy of Thomas Sowell is, in many respects, the tragedy of Afro-American intellectuals. Like most black intellectuals, he has been unable to creatively cope with the historic context in which he finds himself, that of being both black and American. However, to consciously accept this duality is an immense burden. The path is a lonely one, for it demands that one live on the boundary between one's particularistic self and one's universal self. It requires critical distance from black ethnicity without succumbing to assimilation. One must critically confront Western culture, and white America in particular, without falling into a romantic celebration of "blackness." Most black intellectuals are able critically to analyze white America and the West but are unable to confront black pathologies. Blacks become the angelic oppressed, and in the process are removed from any responsibility for their failures. Sowell has ventured along a less traveled path. He dissects black issues without ever casting a critical eye upon the limitations of white society. White America for Sowell becomes a given, a goal to be emulated. The two camps attack each other viciously. Both are equally limited.

Except for its creative potential, the inducements to live a "dual-consciousness" life are slim. By definition they displace a comfortable relation with any intellectual or political group except perhaps with those that are also trying to live an ethnically marginal existence. Few are able to do so successfully.

Though W. E. B. DuBois eloquently wrote about the duality of consciousness within ethnic pariahs in his *Souls of Black Folk*, he was unable to live it. Witness the vacillations displayed in his inability to emotionally confront the fact that the two "free" black nations of his time, Liberia and Haiti, were among the most repressive in the world. When DuBois did obtain a critical, less emotional perspective on blacks, he did so from the most intellectually uncritical position offered by the white intellectual community, the post-Stalin Communist party. That he was unable ever to acquire a stable intellectual outlook that would have allowed him to critically venture into both worlds is perhaps the one failure of his intellectual life.

Religions, sacred or secular, elitist or mass-based, Marxist or free-market, are more often than not the opiate of the mind. The truly innovative thinkers are usually found among the “homeless.” Celebrity status and mass-media popularity are usually not enjoyed by these rare individuals. Neither is conducive to the life of the mind. Nor is the thirst for power.

As a self-professed Christian socialist, I disagree with most of the policies that Sowell advocates. If it were true that Reagan’s policies would help the black poor, I would still be opposed to Ronnie, for my universal self would shudder at his visions for Latin America, Africa, and Europe. Unlike Sowell, I won’t allow my ethnicity to compartmentalize my mind ethically.

To many of the problems confronting black America I have no answers. Those that I do have seem unlikely soon to be implemented. Unlike some of my leftist peers, I can’t yield to an apocalyptic belief that a socialist revolution,

whatever that is, would solve all, or even most, problems. It was Sowell’s inability to accept the political limitations of the intellectual life that led him into active politics. This journey is all too common among intellectual members of “oppressed” ethnic groups. In the last two decades the perceived need to be immediately relevant politically has devastated the black intellectual class. If it is true that there is an inverse correlation between the pop-market political appeal of one’s work and its profundity, Sowell might as well write fairy tales. Political “relevance” has inspired propaganda.

In the meantime, and it may be forever, I must endure the anxieties, false hopes, and real despairs of our problematic existence as blacks in America and as humans in the world. Sowell, I choose to believe, should do likewise. Leave home, Tom. Both of me need you. . . . □

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