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National Review

May 6, 2013, ISSUE

Clear Thinking on Race

Intellectuals and Race, by Thomas Sowell (Basic, 192 pp., \$25.99)

By Abigail Thernstrom

This book is a wonderful spin-off from Thomas Sowell's magnificent 2009 volume *Intellectuals and Society*. For those who want a short introduction to Sowell-think, this small book is a perfect place to start. His main message — amply illustrated — is that, on the subject of race, intellectuals are useless. Indeed, they don't even ask the right questions. Thus, they're woefully lost when it comes to analyzing America's most important domestic issue: the status of blacks and the state of race relations. Of course his point about lame-brained intellectuals extends far beyond their writings on race. Indeed, his book is a primer on rigorous thinking about social and economic issues in general, here and abroad.

“There is no subject that is more in need of dispassionate analysis, careful factual research and a fearless and honest discussion than is race,” Sowell writes. Precisely those qualities are exceedingly hard to find in the mass media, or in academic and popular writing. His book is a gold mine of invaluable insights; he is the teacher most of us never had and badly needed — indeed, still need.

Two very important cases involving race are before the U.S. Supreme Court this term. The Court's woolly thinking is a minor thread in the tale that Sowell tells, but it is not a minor American institution, and the opinions of the justices shape our seemingly never ending debate on race. *Intellectuals and Race* should be mandatory reading for those who hand down wisdom from their high judicial perch.

Too often the arguments of at least some on the bench are full of gaping holes. Take *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Court's most important decision in the 20th century. Sowell does not discuss it, but the Court's unanimous opinion was a mess. With its reliance on the results of an experiment involving black children who showed a preference for white over black dolls, it barely qualified as constitutional reasoning. Let's leave the Constitution aside: What was the evidence that black children, as a consequence of segregation, acquired “a feeling of inferiority . . . unlikely ever to be undone”? Or that their preference for the white dolls was a sign of low esteem? The doll study had numerous flaws, including the sample size and lack of a control group. But, most important, a study by the same researcher, Kenneth Clark, found that black children in a northern state without segregated schools were even more likely to prefer the white doll than those in the Jim Crow South.

Evidentiary problems are high on the list of things that rightly infuriate Sowell. Got evidence? Most often the answer is no.

But who needs hard evidence when the story is always the same? What accounts for the residential clustering of black families (mislabeled “segregation”)? White racism. The disproportionately high rates of black students disciplined for disruptive behavior in schools? Racism. Too many black youngsters who are academically behind their white and Asian peers? Racism. In 1981 the New York Times ran an editorial arguing that black unemployment rates and every other “index of misery” shows the degree to which “the devastating effects of racism “ linger on. Sowell responds, “only the fact that the intelligentsia tend to make racism the default setting for explaining adverse conditions among blacks enables such statements . . . to pass muster without the slightest demand for either evidence or analysis.”

Sowell asks obvious historical questions whose absence in mainstream discourse should put the intelligentsia to shame. Did the “devastating” and “lingering” effects of racism explain the black riots in Detroit and elsewhere in the mid-1960’s? That is the conventional wisdom and it’s not right. Was the Motor City in fact a City of Black Rage? Sowell points to some “inconvenient but inescapable facts of history.” Among them: the poverty rate in Detroit before the riots was half that of blacks nationwide; black home ownership rates among the city’s blacks was the highest in the nation; the black unemployment rate in Motor City was lower than that of whites nationwide.

There were other inconvenient facts Sowell could have cited, absent space constraints: Jerome Cavanagh, the mayor, was a committed liberal, credited by the MSM for much racial progress in race relations; the city contained a large, affluent, and growing black middle class; if black fury was directed at white oppressors, it was passing strange that rioters did not especially target white –owned shops or restaurants. As one scholar wrote in 1996, the riots “remain “one of the most enigmatic social phenomena in American history.”

Ghettos are generally assumed to be a fact of black urban life, but they came and went and came again. In the last decade of the nineteenth century residential segregation eased, but restrictions on black housing choices soon reappeared. “Do the racial predispositions of white people just come and go unpredictably?” Sowell asks. The mass migration of millions of blacks out of the South early in the twentieth century affected white racial attitudes, he argues. The massive migration “not only greatly multiplied the black populations living in many Northern cities, the newcomers were seen by both the pre-existing black populations and the white populations of these cities as creating greatly increased social problems such as crime, violence, and offensive behavior in general.” In other words, there went the neighborhood, and the new arrivals found themselves unwelcome.

The racial setbacks of the early twentieth century thus grew out of a cultural clash between newcomers and old-timers. The role of cultural differences as they have affected the status of blacks is of particular interest to Sowell. Such cultural clashes are hardly

unusual; he gives numerous examples of such tensions around the world. In the American context, putting aside the history of blacks, he could have pointed, for instance, to the dismay with which German Jews of high social status greeted Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe.

Cultures are not easily discarded; they're part of the baggage people carry when they migrate across land and sea. Thus, the immediate circumstances of southern Italian and Jewish school children towards the end of the 19th century in New York's Lower East Side were similar, but "each trailed the long shadow of the cultural history and tradition in which they were raised, and those histories and traditions were very different." By the mid-1960s, only half of all blacks still lived in the South, but many features of southern culture lived on as part of the black identity. "Cultures – whole ways of life – do not simply evaporate when conditions change . . . Long-standing and deep-seated cultural differences can become cultural barriers." Sowell quotes the American historian, Oscar Handlin, who put the point succinctly: "Men are not blank tablets upon which the environment inscribes a culture which can readily be erased to make way for a new inscription."

Groups with different cultural baggage make for different likely outcomes. "Any serious study of racial and ethnic groups, whether in a given society or in a wide variety of societies in countries around the world, repeatedly encounters the inescapable fact of large and numerous disparities among these groups, whether in income, education, crime rates, IQs or many other things," Sowell writes. And yet disparities "are treated as oddities that need explaining, *no matter how common such supposed oddities are in countries around the world* or in how many centuries they have been common."

Disparities are not odd; they are a fundamental fact of life in every multiethnic or multi-racial society. Disparities are not odd; they are a fundamental fact of life in every multiethnic or multiracial society. The Obama administration believes that the numbers all by themselves tell a tale of discrimination. And thus disparate impact lawsuits have become a favorite means to enforce civil rights statutes. In February, the Department of Housing and Urban Development issued regulations interpreting the 1968 Fair Housing Act to prohibit policies that disproportionately affect blacks and Hispanics. Racially imbalanced results are also cited in suits challenging school discipline practices; "too many" black students are being suspended, although (an inconvenient fact) disruptive students stop others from learning.

In reading Sowell's work, I searched almost entirely in vain, for arguments with which I could disagree. It was a fruitless search with only one exception. His reading of Gunnar Myrdal's classic 1944 study, *An American Dilemma*, is slightly different than mine. Sowell sees Myrdal's monumental work as a "turning point in thinking about race among the intelligentsia." In Myrdal's view, as Sowell summarizes it, socioeconomic differences between races were traceable to the warped minds of whites. It was the beginning of the blame whitey mantra.

That is certainly Myrdal's central thesis. The "Negro problem," as he saw it, was basically a white problem. "The Negro's entire life" is a reaction to pressures generated by white society, he argued. But the Swedish economist was a little more generous towards whites than Sowell implies. He believed America was not racist to the core. It was a country "continuously struggling for its soul," as he put it in a separate book. "The moral pulse beats much more strongly in the American civilization" than in most of Europe. Racism is un-American, he believed; Americans were a decent people who had allowed horrible things to happen. But most whites had a racial conscience to which blacks could successfully appeal – a conviction that made *An American Dilemma* the main source of ammunition when the NAACP argued *Brown v. Board of Education*.

I didn't think I would learn much from Sowell's wonderful little book, having slogged through the literature on race since I was born – or at least it feels like it has been that long. But I did. Most NR readers will not have been masochistically race-obsessed for years, but this book's tough questions and clear-eyed answers should make them even more disgusted with America's anti-intellectual intelligentsia than they probably already are. *Intellectuals and Race* is a feast of hard thinking about America's ongoing racial agony.

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