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BOOKS AND CULTURE

## An Independent Mind

Thomas Sowell's prodigious intellect has long been at odds with intellectuals.

Daniel J. Mahoney

June 18, 2010

### *Intellectuals and Society*, by Thomas Sowell (Basic Books, 416 pp., \$29.95)

Thomas Sowell occupies a unique place in American intellectual life, at the intersection of economics, social science, and public philosophy, even as he writes a lively syndicated column. He is equally at home discoursing on "Say's Law" (or the Law of Market) and exposing divisive and counterproductive affirmative-action programs. He is also among this nation's most prominent black conservatives, which suggests a certain independence of mind and spirit. That independence, along with truly prodigious learning, is amply on display in his latest book.

*Intellectuals and Society* is something of a summa of Sowell's concerns over the last 40 years. It builds upon the "informal trilogy"—*A Conflict of Visions*, *The Vision of the Anointed*, and *The Quest for Cosmic Justice*—in which he first examined the conflict between a "constrained" vision of politics and social change and a vision of society by which intellectuals ("the anointed") seek permanent "solutions" to social and national problems. Modern intellectuals, Sowell writes, have a "vision of themselves as a self-appointed vanguard, leading towards a better world." Unlike advocates of the more conservative, constrained vision, this intellectual vanguard tends to take the "benefits of civilization for granted." The "vision of the anointed" lacks respect for the wisdom inherent in experience and common opinion. Its practitioners value abstractions—dreams for a peaceful, egalitarian world where conflicts have been overcome—over the "tacit knowledge" available to the parent, the consumer, the entrepreneur, and the citizen.

Sowell vigorously defends wisdom—practical reason—against an abstract rationalism that values ideas over the experience of actual human beings. Intellectuals, he argues, are particularly suspicious of the ties ordinary men and women feel to family, religion, and country. They look down upon “objective reality and objective criteria” in the social sciences, art, music, and philosophy. Their “systems” tend to be self-referential and lack accountability in the external world.

Not surprisingly, *Intellectuals and Society* has occasioned some virulently hostile reviews. In *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Russell Jacoby [mocked](#) what he called Sowell’s “Vince Lombardi Interpretation of Ideas”—judging ideas not by their complexity or novelty, but by how they work in “the field.” Strangely, he criticizes Sowell for dodging difficult contemporary issues such as the financial crisis, though Sowell has written a [best-selling book](#) on the subject. At the same time, he accuses Sowell of being “simplistic,” a rhetorical tactic that Sowell himself highlights as a particularly disingenuous way of evading ideological disputes. More distressingly, attempting to ridicule Sowell’s practical focus, Jacoby suggests that both Nazism and Stalinism “worked” for a time, too—as if totalitarianism ever created anything like a viable social order.

Alan Wolfe’s [critique](#) at “The Book”—the *New Republic*’s online review section—is even more lamentable. He addresses none of Sowell’s arguments. He accuses Sowell of ignoring a few thinkers whom he in fact cites. He denounces Sowell as a “joyless mind” whose animating impulse is a “hatred of ideas.” But Sowell’s book is precisely a *defense* of ideas against ideology. Wolfe thus makes a mockery of the book’s central argument.

Sowell, it’s true, denies being an intellectual, and we must take him at his word. He renews the critique of “literary politics” first limned by Edmund Burke in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and Alexis de Tocqueville in *The Old Regime and the Revolution*. Burke and Tocqueville both observed a new intellectual type: thinkers inebriated by revolution and the dream of a radically new social order, and dismissive of the inherited wisdom of the past. Burke and Tocqueville didn’t hesitate to denounce injustice when they saw it, whether British oppression of Indians and the Irish or chattel slavery in America. But their critiques drew on the best traditions of Western civilization. They avoided the “rationalist” illusion that the world could be created anew. In this spirit, Sowell refuses to judge ideas by their supposed good intentions, but rather by their effects on human beings.

Sowell appreciates that some men of intellect do respect traditional wisdom and resist the temptation to put themselves on a higher plane than the rest of humanity. In his preface, he cites intellectual giants such as Milton Friedman and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, both atypical of the thinkers of their time. Like James Q. Wilson, the distinguished criminologist and political scientist whom he admires, Sowell “theorizes” in a way that defends sound practice against bad theory. But he never finds a name for the mixture of modesty, empiricism, anti-utopianism, and respect for the “tacit knowledge” of ordinary people that his book so richly embodies. He acknowledges the need to reconnect intellect with practical reason, but he provides no designation for such prudence. He thus leaves himself vulnerable to the charge that he opposes the intellectual life *per se*. But only an ideologue could confuse Sowell’s social vision, rooted as it is in ideas and respect for the inherent diversity of human experience, with anti-intellectualism.

The power of Sowell’s book owes to its concreteness. Sowell moves deftly back and forth from empirical evidence to a form of social philosophizing rooted in respect for “unforgiving reality,” a reality “to which we must all adjust, because it is not going to adjust to us.” He has an enviable gift for showing that many of our social problems arise from the differences between “the theories of intellectuals and the realities of the world.” When confronted by these differences, many intellectuals conclude that it’s the *world* that is “wrong and needs changing.”

Among twentieth-century intellectuals, this tendency often led to a shameless indulgence toward the totalitarianisms of Left and Right. This betrayal of intellectual and political liberty, which Sowell depressingly chronicles, often takes more benign forms—like basing political analysis on clichés that misrepresent reality. Sowell shows, for instance, how debates about income distribution in the United States have been distorted by a preoccupation with statistical categories. Journalists and academics alike endlessly repeat that the rich are getting richer while the poor are getting poorer. What these discussions ignore is that people move with some frequency from category to category over time. Only 5 percent of Americans who were in the bottom quintile of income earners in 1975 were still there in 1991. Only 25 percent of the “super-rich” in 1996 (the top 1/100th of 1 percent of income earners) remained in that category in 2005. Over half of the poor earning at or near the minimum wage are between the ages of 16 and 24. As Sowell wryly notes, “these individuals cannot *remain* from 16 to 24 years of age indefinitely, though that age category can of course continue indefinitely, providing many intellectuals with data to fit their preconceptions.” Abstract talk about “inequities” in income distribution presupposes a social problem, where strictly

speaking one may not exist at all. Sowell's analysis helps us understand why intellectuals so often call for government to promote economic redistribution. When voters in heartland states such as Kansas resist such calls, intellectuals of a certain stripe predictably accuse them of "false consciousness," of misunderstanding their "class interest," and of being fixated on guns and religion.

In a splendid chapter, "Optimal Reality in the Media and the Academy," Sowell chronicles the willingness of journalists and academics to filter reality in ways that make it much harder to distinguish fact from fiction. Sometimes they simply suppress facts. Sowell discusses the infamous example of the *New York Times* correspondent Walter Duranty, who expressly denied what he knew to be the truth—that millions of people had died in the Ukraine and southern Russia in the early 1930s as a result of a government-created famine. Thankfully, the English journalist Malcolm Muggeridge exposed Duranty's deceits in his 1933 novel, *Winter in Moscow*. Sometimes these intellectuals invent fictitious characters out of whole cloth, as in the do-nothing Herbert Hoover of popular legend or the media transformation of Clarence Thomas, a gregarious and public-spirited man who gives dozens of speeches a year, into a "recluse." Others are all too ready to believe accusations by the [Tawana Brawleys](#) of the world (or the accusers in the Duke lacrosse rape case) when the precious ideological categories of "race" and "gender" are at stake. Sowell asks not for superhuman "neutrality" from journalists, but rather for intellectual honesty and an elementary respect for facts.

The book's highlight may be the two sizeable chapters that Sowell devotes to "Intellectuals and War." The progressive intellectuals of the first part of the twentieth century initially welcomed war as a source of social cohesion and as a way of overcoming what they saw as the pernicious individualism of American life. But going from one extreme to the other, these disillusioned [Wilsonians](#) converted to pacifism and cosmopolitanism in the interwar period. They heaped invective on anyone who was sensitive to the dangers presented by Adolf Hitler. They found enemies in "war" and "arms races" in the abstract, not specific regimes committed to the destruction of a liberal international order. Patriotism and national honor became suspect for many intellectuals long afterward. Sowell's treatment of intellectuals and war is marred only by his failure to confront an ideological current at work in some conservative circles over the last decade and a half. The Right's emphasis on "global democratization" owed more to Wilsonian progressivism than to prudent, tough-minded conservatism. As the historian Michael Burleigh has argued, the view that "it is always 1938" is deeply

problematic. But Sowell's Churchillian realism captures the principled middle ground between pacifist illusion and democratic euphoria.

Even sympathetic readers will not agree with all of Sowell's judgments. But this learned and thoughtful book demonstrates what its author has in mind when he calls for a humane reintegration of intellect, wisdom, and respect for the stubborn realities that constitute our world.

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*Daniel J. Mahoney is chair and professor of political science at Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts. His latest book, **The Conservative Foundations of the Liberal Order: Defending Democracy Against Its Modern Enemies and Immoderate Friends**, will be published by ISI Books at the end of 2010.*

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