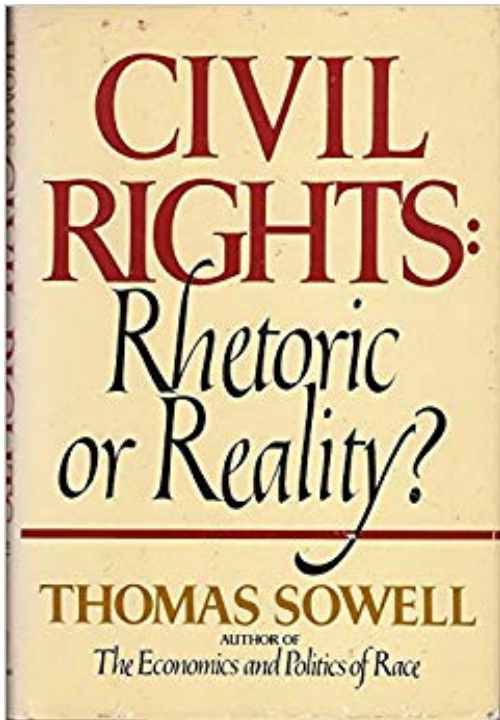


Civil rights: Rhetoric or reality? *by* Thomas Sowell



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It is now more than three decades since the historic Supreme Court decision on desegregation, *Brown v. Board of Education*. Thomas Sowell takes a tough, factual look at what has actually happened over these decades -- as distinguished from the hopes with which they began or the rhetoric with which they continue, Who has gained and who has lost? Which of the assumptions behind the civil rights revolution have stood the test of time and which have proven to be mistaken or even catastrophic to those who were supposed to be helped?



Reviews of the [Civil rights: Rhetoric or reality?](#) *by* Thomas Sowell

Flathan

An easy read full of important arguments, though it seemed to rush from one topic to the next without going into real depth on each. The reason became obvious when I started my next Sowell book (*The Economics and Politics of Race*) and found whole large sections identical. *Economics and Politics* includes all the material (as far as I can tell) in *Civil Rights*, covered in more depth, along with an extensive systematic history of many immigrant groups all over the world, which is barely touched on in *Civil Rights*.

Civil Rights pares this down to a volume handy for controversy and quick reading, but for me cuts the most fascinating part of *Economics and Politics* in the process. Still 4 stars, because what's left still excels for this more limited purpose.

Gaudiker

Thomas Sowell is a true intellectual who thoroughly researches his work and writes with true moral courage. Recently some news commentators have written about the suppression of free speech and discussion in America. This work, composed in the 1980s, is an extremely academic version of that idea. I have read one other work by Mr. Sowell and find his work extremely educational and illuminating. This work is not lengthy and is well worth a careful read. It is not necessarily a "light read", but it is nonetheless very "readable". I feel it is as much a study as a read. It is heavily foot noted and I gained much by also studying the foot notes. When studied, as opposed to being simply read, it becomes almost a college course in itself.

RuTGamer

If you just read one book by Thomas Sowell, then read this. It is a short 140 pages, but still sustains the case that "There is neither evidence nor pretense of evidence for the proposition that all groups are prepared to make the same sacrifices to achieve the same ends." In other words: culture matters.

Sowell begins by documenting the differences in outcomes between cultural groups. Chinese only make up five percent of the population of Malaysia, but they are about twice as wealthy as Malaysians (page 20). Furthermore, Chinese have achieved this despite being the victims of institutional discrimination that is actually written into the Malaysian Constitution. The Malaysian government also has an affirmative action program comparable to what we have in America. But after a decade there has been no effect; Chinese still are about twice as wealthy (page 111). You cannot attribute this to under enforcement since Malays make up the vast majority of the population and the Chinese are only a small minority.

The success of the Chinese is no accident. They work hard. In the lower classes, Chinese did most of the work in mining and industrial occupations. They were later imported to South Africa to do similar work, but were then expelled because white workers could not compete. Most rickshaw pullers in Siam were Chinese because the Siamese would not stoop to doing that work. In Bangkok the Chinese were known for waking the earliest and working the longest hours. In the United States, Chinese workers did much of the railroad construction; it is rough, physical work that Whites typically refused (page 27). At the higher socioeconomic classes, Chinese are disproportionately likely to engage in fields with rigorous mathematical demands such as engineering and the hard sciences. Chinese outnumber Malays eight to one in science and fifteen to one in engineering. Similar patterns are found in the United States.

This pattern is not unique to the Chinese. Jews have outperformed the native populations just about everywhere. This is also true of Armenians in the Middle East and Africa, and Italians in Argentina (page 20), and German farmers in the United States (page 47). (In *Race and Culture: A World View* Sowell provides many other examples such as the Gujaratis from India).

Sowell then concentrates on the role of blacks in the United States. The "equality of opportunity" civil rights movement (not to be confused with "equality of outcomes" movement that employees income redistribution) has been meaningful and profound. For example, college educated black males with six years of work experience have seen their earnings rise from 75% of whites to 98% of whites (page 52). In 1969, the economist Richard Freeman examined black and white homes with comparable rates of library cards and magazines, as well as for comparable schooling, and found no difference in earnings (page 80). This was before programs like affirmative action were put into place. In 1984, blacks of West Indian descent earn 94% of what whites make, compared to 62% for blacks as a whole (page 77). This is hard to reconcile with racism; a racist does not care about the about the cultural background of someone with dark skin. In a similar vein, married, two-income black couples make slightly more than comparable white couples (page 52). College educated black males with six years of work experience make 98% of what comparable whites make.

The "equality of outcomes" civil rights movement has not been effective. From 1969 to 1984, earnings for Puerto-Ricans, Mexicans-Americans, and blacks all slightly declined (page 51).

Another section of the book focuses on civil rights for women. At the time the book's publishing in 1984, women only made 59% of what men made. But that pay gap does not withstand scrutiny. Never-married women made 91% of what comparable never-married men made (page 92). And the remaining nine percent difference should not be put on discrimination because at higher levels of education women are less likely to pursue high paying technical careers in engineering and the sciences. At lower levels women are less likely to pursue (or be physically suited to) high paying work in construction, mining, and other physically demanding fields. Finally, single women who become mothers will have to make tradeoffs at work that will affect their earnings. This is shown by the fact that even in 1971, women who stayed single into their 30's and worked continuously had higher incomes than comparable men (page 93). The conclusion is that marriage allows men to work hard because their wives take on a disproportionate share of the housework and childrearing. But marriage and childrearing causes women to work less. Even when women reenter the workforce, their skills have become partially obsolete, and thus they receive lower pay.

Finally, it should be noted that racism without institutional oppression is self-defeating. Racist attitudes in the early 20th century caused Japanese to get lower pay than whites. But as it became clear that the Japanese worked harder, that trend actually reversed and Japanese became more highly paid than whites (page 114). Paying whites more money put farmers with white workers at a competitive disadvantage. It was either hire Japanese, or go out of business. The bidding war for Japanese labor stopped when Japanese were paid their fair wage - more than whites. When profits collide with racism, profits usually win. This is why racists usually seek to put their attitudes into law. That way you can stop people from backsliding and paying Japanese more money to lure them away from their current job. The same principle applies to discrimination against women. Hiring men would nearly double the cost of labor. Someone who is either less sexist (or more profit-driven) could make a killing by hiring women at almost half the price. Paying men above and beyond their market rate is the fast track to bankruptcy.

Another book that I would recommend is *The Marriage Problem: How Our Culture Has Weakened Families* by James Q. Wilson. It directly tackles the research showing the primary cause of poverty is the breakdown of marriage. Also consider *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*

Akinohn

In the days following 9/11, after the initial shock and anger, I found myself spending hours on the internet trying to figure out who Al Qaeda were and what would motivate such a hideous attack on innocent Americans. Why?!

What does this have to do with Thomas Sowell and Civil Rights? Well, although I am neither a Democrat nor a liberal, politically speaking, my opinion of Senator Obama was that maybe he was a candidate who deserved consideration over the alternatives of Clinton or McCain. But then came the revelation that Senator Obama was a 20-year congregant and an apparent friend and admirer of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright. And once again, I found myself surprised and completely baffled, asking myself "why"-- why would Sen. Obama, apparently in the main stream of current American politics (or any reasonable American of any race) find the hate-filled racial rhetoric of Rev. Wright a source of inspiration, spiritual, social or otherwise?

One of Thomas Sowell's more recent columns on the topic of race led me to the purchase his book. Written more than 20 years ago, Sowell's insights into the Civil Rights movement of the 60's, and its mutation from the ideal of "equal opportunity" to the social and racial politics of the present seem to resonate. After reading "Civil Rights", I believe Thomas Sowell clearly knows and also forcefully and logically explains, better than any other authority I have found, the "why" of our current social and racial politics.

Read and draw your own conclusions. I believe it will be well worth the time, irrespective of one's race and politics.

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