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REVIEW

# **Intellectuals and Society,** by Thomas Sowell. New York: Basic Books, 2009, 416 pp., $29.95 hardbound.

## Caution: Intellectuals at Work

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Economics is the most reductionist of the social sciences, *homo economicus* being a pureblood creature of loss and gain. Prices soar or plummet, busts follow booms, markets are made and unmade all according to the single-minded pursuit of pelf. Strangely, such stripped down modeling of human behavior works pretty well, at least when compared to the more cumbrous system-building efforts of related disciplines—so much so that one variant of political science, rational choice theory, has chosen to run off with much of economics' conceptual wardrobe.

But the general caution is not to take parsimony too far, that humanity fully clothed in its psychology, sociality, and culture cuts too resplendent a figure to be dealt with *simpliciter*. Outside of economics, scholarly wisdom tends toward motivational complexity.

One scholar, however, who has repeatedly demonstrated the clarifying potential of thinking economically about issues as far from the field's normal purview as affirmative action and ethnic conflict is Thomas Sowell. Sowell pulls this off because he has no embarrassment in recognizing that even where self-interest is tallied in terms of authority and prestige instead of dollars and cents, it is still a central spring of human action and hence of enormous explanatory force. He also brings to bear a breadth of historical knowledge that allows him to keep his arguments from seeming unduly schematic or artificially abstracted from reality's rough and tumble. One comes away from reading Sowell with a sense of having encountered the kind of analytic incisiveness and depth that was practiced by the best thinkers of the Enlightenment, men like Adam Smith, or the triune authors of the *Federalist Papers*, who both read the human heart and knew the human story.

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It goes without saying that a mental appetite like Sowell's moves toward the treatment of capacious subjects, the big ideas of his latest work, *Intellectuals and Society*, being the fruit of asking an unusually large question: how do intellectuals gain status and power in contemporary society? His unflattering answers, accompanied by reviews of the way intellectuals as a class have mischievously positioned themselves with respect to a variety of twentieth-century domestic and foreign policy issues, constitute the book's gravamen.

Although some of it covers ground already traversed in Sowell's earlier *Conflict of Visions* (Basic Books, 2002), *Intellectuals and Society* is mainly concerned with why intellectuals have gravitated toward utopian visions of social reconstruction and how, ever so often, these have resulted in misconceived policies and, occasionally, vast human tragedy. Part of Sowell's diagnosis resides in what he sees as a peculiarly intellectual shortcoming, the failure of the cerebrally gifted to understand that while their *per capita* comprehension exceeds that of the average individual, what they know is still only a paltry fraction of the total knowledge diffused throughout society. This Hayekian insight, to be sure, has not been vouchsafed to most of the rest of mankind either; yet, even without the benefit of Austrian economic theory, a reasonable sense of modesty might still get someone to something like the same conclusion. Unfortunately, intellectuals are especially prone to caste vanity, their vested interest in social centrality encouraging a pretension to great sweeps of understanding. As dealers in visions, they naturally aspire to grandeur.

And here arises another pathology, the tendency of intellectuals to pontificate on all and sundry instead of sticking to the lasts of their ostensible specialties. On this topic, Sowell quotes a colleague of John Maynard Keynes:

> He held forth on a great range of topics, on some of which he was thoroughly expert, but on others of which he may have derived his views from a few pages of a book at which he had happened to glance. The air of authority was the same in both cases. (12)

Sowell defines what he means by an intellectual rather precisely. Intellectuals are people who deal primarily with ideas. They are thus to be distinguished from persons of intellect engaged with practical problems, a category that includes scientists, engineers, technicians, physicians, business executives, and the like. Such individuals have

their ideas regularly tested by reality, often through very short feedback loops that register the most manifest consequences. Intellectuals, by contrast, are likelier to inhabit self-contained worlds of words, where cleverness trumps wisdom and independent minds find safety by running in herds.

The larger portion of *Intellectuals and Society* is a detailed account of where the consensus of the intelligentsia has gone badly astray—undermining of the concept of law, appeasing totalitarians, eroding incentives to individual self-improvement, weakening law enforcement, and fragmenting national unity. (He rather memorably identifies this result as "creating tribes out of nations.") For Sowell, intellectuals have increasingly come to see much of the law, the marketplace, and the nation-state as a tangle of ills into which mankind has stupidly stumbled, and from which it now requires rescue by those blessed with superabundant intelligence and compassion. This, needless to say, is a reading of recent history and current politics, which—though generally on the button for me—will not receive universal approbation. But Sowell is never a man to pull his punches.

He doesn't solely find the failings of intellectuals in the conclusions they tend to reach, but in their rhetorical stratagems as well. Fortified by an elite climate of opinion their own verbal artifice has contrived, intellectuals feel free to dismiss their critics as simple-minded, bigoted, or nostalgic for a foolishly idealized past—devices to avoid real argument and inconvenient facts. Far from being defenders of reasoned discourse, presumably their stock and trade, intellectuals do much to debase it.

Obviously, some intellectuals manage to escape these pitfalls. Sowell himself, for example, is one, as are a goodly number of other dissenters from what he calls "the vision of the anointed." Even Lord Keynes, though a malefactor in many respects, has several animadversions against intellectual folly cited approvingly. Given the dysfunction of the intellectual realm and the perverse incentives and lack of anchoring that mark it, whence does this considerable intellectual counterculture—which Thomas Sowell adorns—derive? Under what conditions do intellectuals come to criticize the excesses of the intellectual vocation, or better yet, perform the larger task of inquiry productively? It's a pity that there's no real consideration of this question in *Intellectuals and Society*, not only because Sowell's penetration would have provided very interesting and useful answers, but also to relieve the

gloom likely to otherwise settle over sympathetic readers.

Would the answers, were they to come, simply be negative? Sowell contends that intellectuals have risen in influence as they've risen in number, a reflection of the growth in education, communications, literacy, and intellectual freedom. To what extent, if any, can or should these defining dimensions of modern life be curtailed? Or is the challenge a matter of tying intellectuals in some way more organically to the rest of the culture, whether in the marketplace or the sphere of worldly experience from which the intellectual career has become detached? It would be good to know the author's thoughts.

Sowell contrasts the "vision of the anointed" with the "tragic vision," one that finds the roots of human misfortune not in ill-designed institutions to be set aright by untrammeled reason, but in the inherent fallibilities of human nature only mitigated through painful, largely disaggregated, trial and error. Perhaps he hints that the true intellectual vocation, as much else, begins in a lack of presumption—with a Yin to temper the Yang or, to call upon Greek sagacity, with an urge to do no harm. It's intriguing in this respect how Sowell describes "the right," not as a particular set of doctrines, but as all those outlooks and interests opposed to "the left," whose embrace of collectivism and egalitarianism is solidly doctrinaire. Sowell's own camp, first and foremost, is known by what it's against.

Sowell is a fiercely polemical writer, yet one whose clear, straightforward prose illumines everything it touches. He's as honest and valuable an intellectual as America will ever produce. If the force of an example is needed to improve the breed, he's it.