

The Immortal Sowell

Sowell's analyses of social and political issues are more sophisticated and acute than those of just about everyone who writes on the same topics today.

by [Charles Murray](#) <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/the-immortal-sowell/>

In a reasonable world, Thomas Sowell's life would be celebrated in the same way we honor Frederick Douglass, George Washington Carver, and Marian Anderson—as a black hero, born into a genuinely systemically racist America, who not only endured but prevailed.

Sowell was born in North Carolina in 1930 to a recently widowed mother who already had four children and hadn't the resources to care for another. He was raised by a great aunt and her adult children. By the time Sowell was nine, the family had relocated from Charlotte to New York City's Harlem, the beginning of a decade of chaotic home life and learning to live in America's most famous black ghetto.

Harlem life for children and adolescents was often combative, but so was Sowell. With his peers, he didn't start fights but usually did well when they broke out. His autobiography, *A Personal Odyssey* (2000), gives the impression that in school he was the ideal student when a subject engaged him, a bad one when it didn't, and had what are now called “conduct issues” with teachers who didn't earn his respect. By 16, he was a high-school dropout. By 17, he and his aunt were so alienated that a family court agreed to let him live on his own. He worked for the next two years at a variety of jobs—a Western Union messenger, a helper in machine shops, eventually a civil service clerk, until the Korean War and the draft intervened.

But even during his turbulent adolescence, Sowell had shown that he was remarkable. The high school he dropped out of was Stuyvesant, where admission required a stratospheric score on New York City's test of academic ability. After his stint in the Marines, Sowell began to make good on his potential, first in night classes at Howard University, then at Harvard, Columbia, and the University of Chicago. By the early 1970s he was a rising academic star. By the 1980s, he was producing some of the nation's most important works of social science. His rise had nothing to do with preferential treatment for African Americans in the post-1964 environment and everything to do with his extraordinary intellect combined with his apparently limitless capacity for work. “The word ‘genius’ is thrown around so much that it's becoming meaningless,” said Milton Friedman, not a man who praised lightly. “But nevertheless I think Tom Sowell is close to being one.”

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Jason Riley, a columnist at the *Wall Street Journal* and author of *Please Stop Helping Us: How Liberals Make It Harder for Blacks to Succeed* (2014), outlines Sowell's personal history in his new biography, *Maverick*, but does not dwell on it. Instead, Riley decided to give readers an overview of Sowell's thought. It was a formidable task. I counted 36 book titles in his *Wikipedia* bibliography, and that total doesn't include collections of essays and revisions of earlier books. His work has touched on virtually every important social and economic policy issue of our era. How does one summarize it without either oversimplifying Sowell's contributions or losing the reader's attention? It can be done, Riley demonstrates, with clean prose and a journalistic narrative. *Maverick* is a pleasure to read.

Diverse as Sowell's topics have been, most of them may be grouped under three headings: race, political philosophy, and economic theory.

Sowell's dozen books about race and ethnicity are completely unlike recent best-sellers such as Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015) and Ibram Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist* (2019).

Relentlessly empirical, disdaining rhetorical appeals to his personal experience as a black man, Sowell pioneered data-driven, dispassionate policy analysis of racial issues, beginning with *Race and Economics* (1975), *Ethnic America* (1981), and *The Economics and Politics of Race* (1983). Other black scholars such as Roland Fryer, Jr., Glenn Loury, John McWhorter, Shelby Steele, Walter Williams, William Julius

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Wilson, and Riley himself have subsequently followed his lead, but Sowell's work covers a broader range of issues, in more exhaustive detail, than anyone else's.

Consider the experience of minorities in America. Sowell's *Ethnic America* has long, separate chapters on the experience of the Irish, Germans, Jews, Italians, Chinese, Japanese, Puerto Ricans, and Mexicans, as well as Africans. Or there's Sowell's treatment of affirmative action. He first wrote a synthetic analysis of the international experience in *Preferential Policies* (1990), then returned 14 years later with *Affirmative Action Around the World*, containing full-blown separate analyses of affirmative action in India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, and the United States.

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Sowell sees his books on race and ethnicity as the product of his obligation as a black scholar confronted with destructive racial policies. Riley rightly gives the most space to what Sowell himself sees as his more important achievement—his contributions to political philosophy and to economic theory.

Sowell's thinking on political philosophy is contained in three books that constitute an informal trilogy: *A Conflict of Visions* (1987), *The Vision of the Anointed* (1995), and *The Quest for Cosmic Justice* (1999). As Sowell described it to Riley, he sought to explain “[w]hy two people similarly well informed and similarly well-meaning will reach opposite conclusions, not just on a given issue but a whole range of issues.” Sowell's answer is that they have fundamentally different visions of human nature, which he divides into the “constrained” or “tragic” vision (humans are intrinsically flawed), and the “unconstrained” or “utopian” vision (humans and their institutions are perfectible). It's an old conflict, going back at least to Immanuel Kant versus Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 18th century, and one that shaped the different sensibilities behind the American Constitution of 1787 and the French Constitution of 1793. In Supreme Court jurisprudence, it is reflected in the difference between Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., who saw his job as ensuring “that the game is played according to the rules whether I like them or not,” and Earl Warren, who was given to interrupting attorneys appearing before the Supreme Court with questions about whether their position was right or good regardless of what the law might be.

A Conflict of Visions begins with a series of chapters describing this underlying theory and then shifts to chapters describing applications to real-world political, economic, and social controversies. It amounts to a unified theory of political differences that has as much explanatory power in 2022 as it had in 1987. The next volume in the trilogy, *The Vision of the Anointed*, linked the theory in *A Conflict of Visions* to the pernicious influence of intellectual and political elites. The latter's subtitle, *Self-Congratulation as a Basis for Social Policy*, conveys both Sowell's thesis and his undisguised contempt for the elites that he goes on to eviscerate. The final volume, *The Quest for Cosmic Justice*, criticized the social justice movement that was already invading American social science departments and now dominates them.

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Sowell's contribution to political theory is the book that I, along with many others, consider to be his masterpiece, *Knowledge and Decisions* (1980). It is based on Friedrich Hayek's concept of decentralized knowledge that he introduced in a three-page essay, “The Use of Knowledge in Society” (1945).

The idea itself is simple. Knowledge is radically dispersed among millions of human beings who are ignorant of others' tiny fragments of knowledge. Hayek was criticizing the enthusiasm for central economic planning that was spreading from the Soviet Union throughout Europe. He used the example of the price of tin to illustrate how a multitude of economic actors reveal a shortage in tin through the price mechanism far more quickly than central planners can match. Leonard Read later expressed the same underlying idea in an essay known to almost all classical liberals, “I, Pencil” (1958): the knowledge required to make a pencil is so varied that no individual knows how to do it. Sowell at once distilled and expanded upon this concept with his brilliant opening sentence of *Knowledge and Decisions*: “Ideas are everywhere, but knowledge is rare.”

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The concept of decentralized knowledge is intuitively persuasive in the same way that Adam Smith was intuitively persuasive when he wrote, “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.” Sowell’s *Knowledge and Decisions* does for Hayek’s concept what *Wealth of Nations* did for Smith’s concept of the invisible hand. The parallels are striking, not only in purpose but in the way that Smith and Sowell chose to go about their tasks, with dense material about the underlying theory made accessible to the general reader through the generous use of real-world illustrations and thought experiments.

Knowledge and Decisions ranges far beyond economics. Sowell sees the relevant units for decision-making as including families, religions, political parties, and all the other little platoons that generate knowledge. He devotes three chapters to discussing trade-offs in different types of decisions. The book includes detailed examinations of historical trends in law and politics as well as economics. Sowell’s examples are incredibly rich, filled with what one economist called “metaphors in technicolor.” Readers who see themselves as classical liberals cannot fully understand why their worldview is valid, and the depth and range of ways in which it is valid, until they have read *Knowledge and Decisions*. Readers who see themselves as traditional conservatives—or, for that matter, traditional liberals—will also do themselves a favor by reading it. Sowell provides a panoramic view of how the world works that will inform any careful reader’s thinking on just about everything.

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One measure of Riley’s success is that I finished *Maverick* inspired to read Sowell’s books that I had missed and to reread some of the ones I thought I already knew. And that, I hope, will be *Maverick*’s impact on others as well: to get people in the 2020s and beyond to read Sowell. He has so much to teach to a new generation—and most emphatically, to the generation that is redefining the American Right.

Maverick is also an overdue tribute to Sowell’s stature. Christopher DeMuth, my former boss at the American Enterprise Institute, remarked to Riley that “the one black person I know who’s really been a victim of racial discrimination may be Tom Sowell.... If he were a Jewish white guy at the University of Chicago, he’d be better recognized for what he is, which is one of the greatest living economists.”

I would go further. When researching *Losing Ground* in the early 1980s, I was startled to discover that 19th-century thinkers had analyzed the moral hazards of welfare with far greater sophistication than the public intellectuals of my era. In 2021, reminded by *Maverick* of all that Sowell has accomplished, I had a parallel reaction: Sowell’s analyses of a host of social and political issues are more sophisticated and acute than those of just about everyone who writes on the same topics today. As far as I can tell, every argument that one might make against the positions of Ta-Nehisi Coates and Ibram Kendi had already been laid out by Sowell by the mid-1970s, and no one since has described them better. Forty-two years ago, *Knowledge and Decisions* provided a deeper analysis of the dysfunction of modern welfare states and administrative states than anything in the contemporary debate. Thirty-five years ago, *A Conflict of Visions* identified the dynamics that drive today’s political polarization. With *Maverick*, Jason Riley makes the case for what I consider to be the core truth about Thomas Sowell’s legacy. He would be seen as one of a handful of seminal intellectuals of the last half-century—in a reasonable world.

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