

*Race and Culture: A World View*, Thomas Sowell

Another wonderful book by Thomas Sowell.

If I were writing a book about race and culture, I would start with definitions of those terms and build on them. In a sense, Sowell does that in this book, but he does so by saying that he's not going to provide precise definitions. Serious scholars have made the effort at definition but the terms remain fuzzy. For one reason, race and culture are always changing, and for another, any particular race or culture may have multiple (even conflicting) branches and there may never be general agreement what should be included. Instead, when he uses those terms, he means the imprecise common usage. I'm not sure the question of definitions can be that easily finessed, but it's not clear to me that these imprecise social categories by which we try to understand the social world can ever be articulated with precision. They are fuzzy concepts to which we try to apply rigorous reason and sometimes the results seem clarifying, other times not. We would like to achieve scientific precision in social matters, but the subject-matter may not be amenable, and we can only do our best, even if that seems second best. In the result, the value of this book is full vindication of Sowell's strategy not to get bogged down in definitions.

Sowell provides no clear definition of race or culture nor does he provide particular examples. He doesn't say, for example, here is Culture A with attributes X,Y, Z, which lead to this or that, and here is Culture B with attributes M,N,R etc. There's nothing like that. It's not clear what attributes or characteristics are properly called cultural or racial or whatever else. Instead of describing particular cultures, Sowell provides a million examples of how different cultures confront one another. One way cultures confront one another is by immigration: a number of immigrants from one culture immigrate into another and form a minority, what might be called a subculture. If the character of the immigrants (or their descendants) in their new society resembles the character of the society from which they immigrated, that suggests the hypothesis that the features of resemblance are cultural or racial. It might be nice to "prove" that there are such things as cultural or racial characteristics but Sowell offers no proof and none is essential for Sowell because the people themselves (the immigrants and the society of which the immigrants are a minority) understand their overall social structure to be composed of cultures and races, and if we want to understand their society, we need to understand how they themselves think of it. The concepts by which people understand their society are important features of that society whether or not those concepts are valid or fuzzy. And Sowell demonstrates time and time again how the factual incorrectness of one culture's understanding of another serves to provide an advantage to one group or another or particular individuals within that society.

Sowell's "World View" seems to include the entire range of human history that is accessible to scholars. Patterns emerge that are wondrous to behold but could never be deduced from underlying principles, not least because we haven't discerned underlying principles yet. We're like biologists of Darwin's era scouring the world cataloging what appear to be different species and when the catalogue gets big enough, organizational biological principles can be hypothesized. Cultural anthropology is the academic field that seeks to catalogue the world's societies analogous to early biologists. Cultural anthropologists

have made a genuine effort to be open-minded and “objective” in their observations; at least that’s my impression. Academic cultural anthropologists are an elite even within the most advanced societies that sponsor their field of study, whereas the societies that they study are often the most primitive. And so to achieve objective observation, it’s important for an anthropologist not to condescend contemptuously to the societies they study; condescension and contempt might corrupt their objectivity. Whether it’s because anthropologists make an effort to avoid condescension to legitimize their objectivity or for some other the reason, a kind of “cultural relativism” is now prevalent. It’s one thing to say that an individual’s beliefs and practices should be understood based on that person’s own culture (that, it seems to me is a reasonable approach to understand individuals); however, it does not follow that all societies are equal by some kind of moral or objective standard. Nevertheless, this kind of egalitarian social relativism is now the default common norm which Sowell rejects.

If Sowell seems like Charles Darwin cataloging the species before identifying organizing principles, Sowell’s species are not just different societies, but societies in which different cultures confront one another and in which the features of that confrontation are understood in terms of race and culture. It’s the confrontation of different cultures that are understood within those societies as confrontations of culture and race that are the phenomena that Sowell catalogues and tries to understand. I’m guessing that he initially tried to understand American black/white relations, but to do that he had to understand the larger context of racial and cultural relations in general, a huge undertaking of scholarship.

As I said, Sowell rejects egalitarian social relativism. Instead, Sowell ranks societies according to their degree of “advancement”, with primitive “backward” societies at the bottom and the most advanced at the top. Sowell provides no precise measurement of advancement or what a unit of measurement might be, but cultural advancement includes technologies, art forms, science, organization and all the features we, in the most advanced cultures, admire, respect, and appreciate. I suppose it’s theoretically possible for an isolated society to develop these advanced features on its own, but a major theme running through the book is that the most important characteristic of any culture is its propensity or inclination and ability to adopt, to its own advantage, cultural advances that were developed elsewhere. And so, the most advanced societies are those which have contact with many others – more contact means more opportunity to identify and incorporate advances developed initially by those others. Some societies are geographically isolated (e.g., societies in remote islands or isolated mountains) and those societies will hardly advance at all during periods of isolation, but some are isolated by cultural choice, e.g., China was once the most advanced society in the world but chose isolation and, in the result, China stagnated to the point of backwardness compared to the West European cultures which were actively engaged with other societies by strategic choice.

Progress, which I suppose we should call the advancement of mankind, happens culture by culture, but the result is the emergence of a universal or cosmopolitan culture at least in the limited area of science and reason (and I would add commerce). The development of this cosmopolitan culture was not smooth or well-received or appreciated; rather, it may be more accurate to say that it met resistance and opposition with every advance.

Copernicus, Galileo, Harvey, Darwin, and Einstein, among others, had to run a gauntlet of criticism and hostility for upsetting or destroying the familiar world inside people's minds. But once they succeeded in supplanting the old mental world with a new one, this new vision became that of educated people far beyond the confines of European civilization. At least a portion of every society became part of a worldwide culture. Race and culture were by no means always co-extensive before, but they became progressively less so as the modern culture spread across the Earth.

Although the modern culture began in European society, it was initially as antithetical to the beliefs of that society as to any other. It was cosmopolitan also in its elements – its mathematical foundations in a numbering system from India, in knowledge of optics and astronomy from the Mediterranean world, in the very paper on which this was written, from China. To say that the modern vision or culture first developed in Europe is no more than to acknowledge its historical origins. To do so is not to be Euro-centric about a common culture of the modern era.

The bulk of the book consists of examples of cultural confrontation which were understood by participants as phenomena of race and culture. In most cases, that understanding involved gross distortions of both the history and the morality of the situation, and often those distortions were promulgated (if not created) by individual leaders for their own personal advantage to the detriment of the large numbers of people affected. This is another recurrent theme in the book: the misalignment between (1) motivation and incentive of individuals (particularly individuals who purport to be "leaders" of a cultural group), and (2) the welfare of the group itself. An example of that distortion of history and misalignment of individual incentive is a (perhaps "the") prevalent American understanding of American slavery.

The staggering sweep of slavery over thousands of years, and the enormous variety of forms it assumed at different times and places, are almost as remarkable as the scant amount of moral concern it aroused until the late eighteenth century in Britain and the United States. How and why this particular juncture in history produced a moral revulsion against slavery is much less clear than the confluence of circumstances which permitted this moral revulsion to drive a policy which resulted in the stamping out of slavery across most of the planet in a period of a century and a half. The mobilization of this moral concern into a political force that was both powerful and tenacious was historic in its consequences because of the military predominance of the countries in which these anti-slavery movements developed. More specifically, it was European imperialism which stamped out slavery over most of the world. Even in parts of the world which retained their independence or autonomy, the indelible stigma that slavery acquired in European eyes made abolition a policy to be pursued for the sake of national respectability, even in societies which had no strong feelings against slavery itself.

The irony of our times is that the destruction of slavery around the world, which some once considered the supreme moral act in history, is little known and less discussed among intellectuals in either Western or non-Western countries, while the enslavement of Africans by Europeans is treated as unique – and due to unique moral deficiencies in the West. Moreover, what is and is not considered to be a legacy of slavery is too often determined by what advances the ideological vision of today, rather than what accords with the record of history.

Attempts to explain the choice of which peoples to enslave, or the treatment of those already enslaved, on racial or other ideological grounds fail to account for the racially indiscriminate enslavement of whatever peoples were available for capture at particular places and times in history. It was not a change in ideology but such historical developments as the growth of powerful nations and empires which successfully removed various peoples in Europe and Asia from the ranks of those whom it was feasible to enslave. Africa south of the Sahara remained vulnerable longer and its peoples paid a terrible price as a result, though other peoples in isolated and vulnerable backwaters in Asia continued to pay a similarly terrible price, long after the descendants of African slaves were emancipated in the Western Hemisphere.

Slavery and racial ideologies have indeed been related in many societies around the world, but to say that slavery was based on race is to put the cart before the horse. Where those who were enslaved were of a different race, that race has been despised, whether in Western or non-Western societies, and whether the slave or the slave owner had a lighter complexion.

The attitude that American whites should feel guilty for the historic slavery of blacks by whites, or that American blacks today should resent that slave history (under the current moniker of “woke”), derives from distortions of history and morality that serve the personal ambitions of present cultural leaders to the detriment of whites and blacks alike.

Sid Barnett, Sept. 2022