



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on November 22, 2016

Backward-looking “Progressives”

People who call themselves “progressives” claim to be forward-looking, but a remarkable amount of the things they say and do are based on looking backward.

One of the maddening aspects of the thinking, or non-thinking, on the political left is their failure to understand that there is nothing they can do about the past. Whether people on the left are talking about college admissions or criminal justice, or many other decisions, they go on and on about how some people were born with lesser chances in life than other people.



Whoever doubted it? But, once someone who has grown up is being judged by a college admissions committee or by a court of criminal justice, there is nothing that can be done about their childhood. Other institutions can deal with today’s children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and should, but the past is irrevocable. Even where there are no economic differences among various families in which children are raised, there are still major differences in the circumstances into which people are born, even within the same family, which affect their chances in later life as adults.

For example, among children of the same parents, raised under the same roof, the first born, as a group, have done better than their later siblings, whether measured by IQ tests or by becoming National Merit Scholarship finalists or by various other achievements.

The only child has also done better, on average, than children who have siblings. The advantage of the first born may well be due to the fact that he or she was an only child for some time, perhaps for several formative years.

By the time people have grown up and apply to college, all that is history. Nothing that a college admissions committee can do will change anything about their childhoods. The only things these committees’ decisions can affect are the present and the future. This is not rocket science.

Nevertheless, there are people who urge college admissions committees to let disadvantaged students be admitted with lower test scores or other academic indicators.

Those who say such things seldom even attempt to see what the actual consequences of such policies have been. The prevailing preconceptions — sometimes called what “everybody knows” — are sufficient for them.

Factual studies show that admitting students to institutions whose standards they do not meet often leads to needless academic failures, even among students with above average ability, who could have succeeded at other institutions whose standards they do meet.

The most comprehensive of these studies of Americans is the book *Mismatch* by Sander and Taylor. Similar results in other countries are cited in my own book, *Affirmative Action Around the World*.

When it comes to criminal justice, there is much the same kind of preoccupation on the left with the



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past that cannot be changed. Murderers may in some cases have had unhappy childhoods, but there is absolutely nothing that anybody can do to change their childhoods after they are adults.

The most that can be done is to keep murderers from committing more murders, and to deter others from committing murder. People on the left who want to give murderers “another chance” are gambling with the lives of innocent people. That is one of many other examples of the cruel consequences of seemingly compassionate decisions and policies. Ironically, people on the left who are preoccupied with the presumably unhappy childhoods of murderers, which they can do nothing about, seldom show similar concern about the present and future unhappy childhoods of the orphans of people who have been murdered.

Such inconsistencies are not peculiar to our time, though they seem to be more pervasive today. But the left has been trying, for more than 200 years, to mitigate or eliminate punishments in general, and capital punishment in particular. What is peculiar to our time is the degree to which the views of the left have become laws and policies.

A long overdue backlash against those views has begun in some Western nations, of which the recent election results in the United States are just one symptom. How all this will end is by no means clear. Just as the past cannot be changed, so the future cannot be predicted with certainty.

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