



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on March 14, 2013

Intellectuals and Race: Part III

The desire of intellectuals for some grand theory that will explain complex patterns with some solitary and simple factor has produced many ideas that do not stand up under scrutiny, but which have nevertheless had widespread acceptance — and sometimes catastrophic consequences — in countries around the world.

The theory of genetic determinism which dominated the early 20th century led to many harmful consequences, ranging from racial segregation and discrimination up to and including the Holocaust. The currently prevailing theory is that malice of one sort or another explains group differences in outcomes. Whether the lethal results of this theory would add up to as many murders as in the Holocaust is a question whose answer would require a detailed study of the history of lethal outbursts against groups hated for their success.

These would include murderous mob violence against the Jews in Europe, the Chinese in Southeast Asia, the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, and the Ibos in Nigeria, among others. Class-based mass slaughters of the successful would range from Stalin's extermination of the kulaks in the Soviet Union to Pol Pot's wiping out of at least a quarter of the population of Cambodia for the crime of being educated middle class people, as evidenced by even such tenuous signs as wearing glasses.

Minorities who have been more successful than the general population have been the least likely to have gotten ahead by discriminating against politically dominant majorities. Yet it is precisely such minorities who have attracted the most mass violence over the centuries and in countries around the world.

All the blacks lynched in the entire history of the United States would not add up to as many murders as those committed in one year by mobs against the Jews in Europe, the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire or the Chinese in Southeast Asia.

What is there about group success that inflames mobs in such disparate times and places, not to mention mass-murdering governments in Nazi Germany or the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia? We can speculate about the reasons but there is no escaping the reality.

Groups that lag behind have often blamed their lags on wrong-doing by groups that are more successful. Since sainthood is not common in any branch of the human race, there is seldom a lack of sins to cite, including haughtiness by those who happen to be on top for the moment. But the real question is whether these sins — real or imagined — are actually the reason for different levels of achievement.





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Intellectuals, whom we might expect to counter mass hysteria with rational analysis, have all too often been in the vanguard of those promoting envy and resentment of the successful.

This has been especially true of people with degrees but without any economically meaningful skills that would create the kinds of rewards they expected or felt entitled to.

Such people have been prominent as both leaders and followers of groups promoting anti-Semitic policies in Europe between the two World Wars, tribalism in Africa and changing Sri Lanka from a country once renowned for its intergroup harmony to a nation that descended into ethnic violence and then a decades-long civil war with unspeakable atrocities.

Such intellectuals have inflamed group against group, promoting discrimination and/or physical violence in such disparate countries as India, Hungary, Nigeria, Czechoslovakia and Canada.

Both the intellectuals' theory of genetic determinism as the reason for group differences in outcomes and their opposite theory of discrimination as the reason have created racial and ethnic polarization. So has the idea that it must be one or the other.

The false dichotomy that it must be one or the other leaves more successful groups with a choice between arrogance and guilt. It leaves less successful groups with the choice of believing that they are inherently inferior for all time or else that they are victims of the unconscionable malice of others.

When innumerable factors make equal outcomes virtually impossible, reducing those factors to genes or malice is a formula for needless and dangerous polarization, whose consequences have often been written in blood across the pages of history.

Thomas Sowell is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305. His website is www.tsowell.com. To find out more about Thomas Sowell and read features by other Creators Syndicate columnists and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate Web page at www.creators.com.

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