



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on May 31, 2011

## Seductive Beliefs

One of the painfully revealing episodes in Barack Obama's book *Dreams From My Father* describes his early experience listening to a sermon by the Reverend Jeremiah Wright. Among the things said in that sermon was that "white folks' greed runs a world in need." Obama was literally moved to tears by that sermon.

This sermon may have been like a revelation to Barack Obama but its explanation of economic and other differences was among the oldest — and most factually discredited — explanations of such difference among all sorts of peoples in all sorts of places. Yet it is an explanation that has long been politically seductive, in countries around the world.



What could be more emotionally satisfying than seeing others who have done better in the world as the villains responsible for your not having done as well? It is the ideal political explanation, from the standpoint of mass appeal, whether or not it makes any sense otherwise.

That has been the politically preferred explanation for economic differences between the Malay majority and the more prosperous Chinese minority in Malaysia, or between the Gentile majority and the Jewish minority in various countries in Europe between the two World Wars.

At various other times and places, it has been the preferred explanation for the economic differences between the Sinhalese and the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka, the Africans and the Lebanese in Sierra Leone, the Czechs and the Germans in Bohemia, and numerous other groups in countries around the world.

The idea that the rich have gotten rich by making the poor poor has been an ideological theme that has played well in Third World countries, to explain why they lag so far behind the West.

None of this was original with Jeremiah Wright. All he added was his own colorful gutter style of expressing it, which so captivated the man who is now President of the United States.

There is obviously something there with very deep emotional appeal. Moreover, because nothing is easier to find than sins among human beings, there will never be a lack of evil deeds to make that explanation seem plausible.

Because the Western culture has been ascendant in the world in recent centuries, the image of rich white people and poor non-white people has made a deep impression, whether in theories of racial superiority — which were big among "progressives" in the early 20th century — or in theories of exploitation among "progressives" later on.

In a wider view of history, however, it becomes clear that, for centuries before the European ascendancy, Europe lagged far behind China in many achievements. Since neither of them changed



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much genetically between those times and the later rise of Europe, it is hard to reconcile this role reversal with racial theories.

More important, the Chinese were not to blame for Europe's problems — which would not be solved until the Europeans themselves finally got their own act together, instead of blaming others. If they had listened to people like Jeremiah Wright, Europe might still be in the Dark Ages.

It is hard to reconcile "exploitation" theories with the facts. While there have been conquered peoples made poorer by their conquerors, especially by Spanish conquerors in the Western Hemisphere, in general most poor countries were poor for reasons that existed before the conquerors arrived. Some Third World countries are poorer today than they were when they were ruled by Western countries, generations ago.

False theories are not just an intellectual problem to be discussed around a seminar table in some ivy-covered building. When millions of people believe those theories, including people in high places, with the fate of nations in their hands, that is a serious and potentially disastrous fact of life.

Despite a carefully choreographed image of affability and cool, Barack Obama's decisions and appointments as President betray an alienation from the values and the people of this country that are too disturbing to be answered by showing his birth certificate.

Too many of his appointees exhibit a similar alienation, including Attorney General Eric Holder, under whom the Department of Justice could more accurately be described as the Department. of Payback.

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