



Written by [William P. Hoar](#) on August 9, 2022

Published in the August 29, 2022 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 38, No. 16

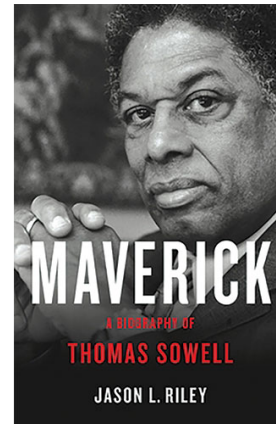
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## Appreciating the Works of Thomas Sowell

### ***Maverick: A Biography of Thomas***

**Sowell**, by Jason L. Riley, Basic Books: New York, 2021, 304 pages, hardcover.

In this account of the works of renowned conservative economist Thomas Sowell, author Jason Riley undertakes a monumental task. This volume is, as Riley notes, “primarily an intellectual biography,” and not an analysis of Sowell’s life. While not ignoring the target’s personal history, the emphasis is on the scholar’s extensive *oeuvre*. And the written output of Sowell, now age 92, has been diverse and protracted — including 36 books (not counting 10 bound collections of his writings and updated editions of his books). The 36th, published when Sowell was 90, was his fifth since the economist turned 80.



As Jason Riley commented in a speech earlier this year, “That’s not bad for a black orphan from the Jim Crow South who was born into extreme poverty during the Great Depression, never finished high school, didn’t earn a college degree until he was 28 [following service in the U.S. Marines during the Korean War], and didn’t write his first book until he was 40.”

Jason Riley is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and a columnist for *The Wall Street Journal* (where he first met Sowell in the mid-1990s, when the economist was on a book tour). Riley is also the author of several previous books, including *Please Stop Helping Us: How Liberals Make It Harder for Blacks to Succeed*. He has interviewed Sowell numerous times over the years; in *Maverick*, Riley also draws from recollections of Sowell’s colleagues and friends, many of whom are listed on the lengthy and impressive “acknowledgments” page.

Fans of Sowell should be pleased with his treatment here; those who have not cracked open his longer works now have a roadmap. While there are a few places in this volume where it is unclear whose “voice” is on display, Riley generally succeeds in one of his major goals: As often as possible, as he explains, “I let Sowell make his arguments in his own voice, since one could hardly improve on it.”

## From Political Philosophy to Economic Inequality

Though Sowell is probably known best for examining topics with a racial angle, the majority of his volumes concentrate otherwise. As Riley mentions, Sowell is most proud of his books on social theory and the history of ideas — naming *A Conflict of Visions*, published in 1987, as his overall favorite. (Sowell later told a television interviewer that book is “more mine than anything else. In other words, it doesn’t build upon a theory that anyone else has, or anything that’s already out there in the literature.”)



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As it happens, this reviewer has this one on his shelves, and was curious to go back and recall what caught his attention when it was published. It turns out that what he specifically highlighted at the time still holds well — especially in the “Visions of Equality” chapter. The divergent views that Sowell discusses are, on the one hand, the constrained or tragic view of human nature, and, on the other hand, the unconstrained or utopian view. As Sowell puts it:

Like freedom and justice, equality is a *process* characteristic in the constrained vision and a *result* characteristic in the unconstrained vision.

From Edmund Burke in the eighteenth century to Friedrich Hayek in the twentieth century, the constrained vision has seen equality in terms of processes. In Burke’s words, “all men have equal rights; but not to equal things.” Alexander Hamilton likewise considered “all men” to be “entitled to a parity of privileges” though he expected that economic inequality “would exist as long as liberty existed.” [Emphasis in original.]

In his exposition, Sowell also cites Milton Friedman (a mentor of his at the University of Chicago) as an example of the constrained vision. In Friedman’s words: “A society that puts equality — in the sense of equality of outcome — ahead of freedom will end up with neither equality nor freedom.” On the utopian side, Sowell cites, among others, Fabian Socialist George Bernard Shaw, while noting that even Shaw “ridiculed formal equality of opportunity.”

The causes of inequality, as recounted in *Maverick*, drew Sowell’s curiosity from a young age. Indeed, he identified himself as a Marxist throughout his 20s. Distinguished “Chicago school” mentors — Friedman and George Stigler — earned praise from Sowell for not trying to convert him to their political views. Both of those Nobel Prize winners, we learn, later signed a foundation grant recommendation that led to Sowell’s becoming a senior fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution (where he remains today). According to the longtime head of the foundation, their letter acknowledged that Sowell is “a socialist, but he’s too smart to remain one too long.”

He did indeed grow up. Sowell left his official academic teaching career in 1980 when he joined Hoover. In an interview with Riley in 2015, Sowell remarked that he had “studiously avoided entanglements with colleges” for the previous 35 years — saying that “the most intolerant places you can be these days is the academic campus.”

## ***N.Y. Times* Looks the Other Way**

As Sowell’s reputation grew, one favorite tactic of his philosophical opponents was to ignore him, not refute him. It is sometimes said that silence is the surest way to hide ignorance. And while that axiom may well apply to many people, one would think that to be a bad business model for, say, a major newspaper.

But as the vaunted “newspaper of record,” *The New York Times* often has ulterior, ideological reasons for what it covers and what it disregards. Riley reports, in a *Maverick* footnote, that the *Times* (“for whatever reason”) stopped reviewing Sowell’s books in 2000; he has since published 18 books, including two on that paper’s own bestseller list.

Younger people these days, writes Riley, are “more likely to discover Sowell online.” That could well be true. Still, one hopes that newcomers will dive deeper than a few tweets. In any case, Riley is spot-on in



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saying that Sowell's writing — wherever it appears — is “lucid and precise and confident.”



Thomas Sowell

## Culture Does Matter

Over the years, some have nitpicked that Sowell hasn't supplied enough “solutions” to the problems he identifies. Sowell doesn't buy that. In his words (from the preface of *Race and Culture*, 1994): “There is seldom a shortage of people willing to draw up blueprints for salvation. What is important is that such people and those who judge their proposition both understand what they are talking about.”

Facts are important to the economist, who puts some noses out of joint when uncomfortable truths bump into their pet theories. For instance, he looked back (in a 2002 work) to see, among other concerns, the extent that black Americans had lifted themselves by their bootstraps, as opposed to (as left-wingers insist) being rescued by big-government programs. Observes Sowell:

As of 1940, 87 percent of black families lived below the poverty line. This fell to 47 percent by 1960, without any major federal legislation on civil rights and before the rise and expansion of the welfare state under the Great Society programs of President Lyndon Johnson.

This era begat “affirmative action” and beyond. And, as Riley recounts, just as Sowell “had feared, the push for *equal* treatment soon gave way to demands for quotas, set-asides, and other forms of *special* treatment.” (Emphasis in original.)

In Riley's discussion of Sowell's legacy with colleagues and admirers, and with Sowell himself, one name that frequently came up was George Schuyler's. He was, as described in *Maverick*, a “political conservative and fierce anti-Communist who also wrote satirical novels and cultural criticism. He published regularly in H.L. Mencken's influential *American Mercury* magazine.” Indeed, Riley terms Schuyler (who died in 1977) “the black maverick of his day.” Veteran readers of this magazine may also recall Schuyler's pieces from our predecessor publications *American Opinion* and *The Review of the News*. Sowell has written that Schuyler was perhaps “the first black conservative” and “one of the best.”



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Writing about racial and cultural matters involves maneuvering on a tricky battlefield, and Sowell's critics have tried to use distorted interpretations of his work against him. Sowell still calls it as he sees it.

Here's an example. Progressives, as Riley acknowledges, disdain what they call "cultural appropriation" when it is just the borrowing needed for human progress. For his part, Sowell says he has not been insisting that culture explains everything, but he does say that he rejects the "a priori dogma that all cultures are equal."

Here's a relevant excerpt from *Race and Culture*: "Whatever the nature of cultural competition, whether it is warfare or international trade, scientific breakthroughs or the spread of popular music, competition means winners and losers.... Those who deplore such things are also deploring the very process of cultural diffusion by which the human race has advanced for thousands of years."

In a similar vein, Sowell has pointed out the obvious: "Intergroup differences have been the rule, not the exception, in countries around the world and through centuries of history." Turn on the TV, Sowell comments, and watch a professional basketball game, and you will "see the races are not evenly or randomly represented in this sport."

Along the way, Riley constructs a convincing case that the breadth and depth of Sowell's erudition "makes the label 'black conservative,' however the term is defined, far too limiting."

One of the key reasons that Riley wanted to write this book, as he explained at a Hillsdale College National Leadership Seminar in February, is that Thomas Sowell's

scholarship remains relevant to our policy debates today. We're still talking about economic inequality, affirmative action, social justice, critical race theory, slavery reparations, the efficacy of minimum wage laws, and the pros and cons of immigration, all of which Sowell's writing have addressed. Frankly, I find it depressing that so many people today know of names like Ta-Nehisi Coates, Ibram Kendi, and Nikole Hannah-Jones — but not Thomas Sowell. His scholarship runs circles around those individuals. And it's not just the volume of his writings, it's also the range and depth and rigor of his analysis.

We're thankful that the author fashioned this admirable volume — and for Sowell, who serves as a reminder that great minds have purposes, while others have wishes.



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