

IMPRINTS

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"Public Policy and Some Personal Reminiscences by Thomas Sowell, Senior Fellow, Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace

Preview: *In a series of fascinating personal observations, world-renowned economist Thomas Sowell talks about the failure of central planners and social engineers to improve the lot of blacks in America. He contrasts that failure with the success of blacks who have regarded hard work and determination rather than entitlements and victimhood as the key to getting ahead. He describes a bygone era in Harlem, but makes it clear that the values that inspired this era live on. Dr. Sowell's remarks were delivered during Hillsdale's Shavano Institute for National Leadership 10 year anniversary gala in Colorado Springs this past January.*

ere is a story, which I hope is apocryphal, that the French police were chasing a criminal who fled into a building in Paris. Their first thought was that they would surround the building. But then they realized that the building was so large, and had so many exits, that they didn't have enough policemen on the scene to do that. So they surrounded the building next door, which was smaller and had fewer exits.

Much of the academic research in the social sciences follows exactly this pattern of reasoning.

Often we don't have information on the variables that matter, so we surround other variables, using statistics that the Census Bureau, or the Congressional Budget Office, or someone else has supplied to us. Last year, for example, both the media and the politicians seized upon statistics which showed that blacks received less prenatal care, and had higher infant mortality rates, than whites. The obvious answer was more government spending on prenatal care. Yet the very same study showed that Mexican Americans received even less pre-



natal care than blacks and had slightly *lower* infant mortality rates than whites.

Prenatal care was the building next door.

Recently, looking back over my life while writing some autobiographical sketches, I realized that the variables which economists and sociologists can measure are not the variables that matter. Sometimes friends and colleagues, at gatherings like this, introduce me as someone who came out of Harlem and went on to the Ivy League (and, better yet, the University of Chicago). But this presents as unique something that was far from unique.

It was not the norm for people in Harlem to go on to college, but neither was it unique—not among the kids who grew up in Harlem in the 1940s, as I did. I am neither the best-known nor the most prosperous person to come out of the same neighborhood during the same era. Nor were all the others basketball players.

All of the places where I lived while growing up in Harlem were within a ten-block radius of

145th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue. Within that same radius lived a boyhood friend named Eddie Mapp, who is today dean of one of the colleges in New York City. In a building on the corner of 145th Street and St. Nicholas lived another boy, named Leonti Thompson, who was not a friend of mine—I can recall the teacher having to separate us when we were fighting in class—but Leonti grew up to become a psychiatrist, owned property in California's Napa Valley, and is today retired and living overseas, while I still have to work for a living. In the same building as Leonti lived an older boy who also did well and who made a name for himself—Harry Belafonte.

Within the same ten-block radius, at the same time, another fellow grew up to make money and a name—James Baldwin. Someone else who went to college within this same ten-block radius, though he lived elsewhere, was a young man named Colin Powell.

Were all these simply rare individuals? Perhaps, but it is also true that more black males passed the difficult entrance examination for Stuyvesant High School in 1938 than in 1983, even though the black population of New York was much smaller in 1938. As for the masses of students in the Harlem public schools at that time, their test scores were lower than those of students in affluent neighborhoods, but not dramatically lower like today, and they were very similar to the test scores of white students in other working class neighborhoods, such as on the lower east side of Manhattan. During some years, the kids in Harlem scored higher than the kids on the lower east side, and in other years the kids on the lower east side might nose them out. But they were both in the same league.

Ability grouping was very common in the Harlem schools in those days, as it was throughout the system. A Harlem youngster who was in the top-ability class at his grade

level received a solid education that would allow him to go on and compete with anybody, anywhere. It is somewhat embarrassing today when people praise me for having gone through the Harlem schools and then on to Harvard. I did not go through the Harlem schools of today—and would be lucky to get into any college if I did.

What is relevant to public policy is that none of the educational success of the past was a result of the kinds of policies and programs that are today being actively promoted in Washington or in the media. That is, we had none of the so-called "prerequisites" for quality education.

We did not, for example, have racially integrated student bodies. Nor did we have racial role models: Virtually all the teachers were white. I was taught more about a Dutchman named Peter Stuyvesant than about Frederick Douglass or W.E.B. DuBois. There was no "community input" It is also very doubtful that we had "adequate funding," since there never seems to be any in education. Those things are all like the building next door.

Certainly we did not have small classes and there were no teacher's aides. More importantly, there were no security guards. I was 42 years old when I first saw a security guard in a public school. Today, there are national conventions of public school security guards.

No one asked us if we preferred innovative and "exciting" teaching, rather than "rote memory." The Bible says: "By their fruits ye shall know them." In the educational literature of today, it is "by their excitement ye shall know them." When they proclaim a new program to be "exciting," people who ask, "Does it work?" are regarded as party poopers.

Back in the Harlem of the 1940s, no one asked if our homes were broken or bent. We did

Thomas Sowell is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace and is the author of such well-known books as *Classical Economics Reconsidered* (Princeton University Press, 1974), *Knowledge and Decisions* (Basic Books, 1980), *Markets and Minorities* (Basic Books, 1981), *Ethnic America* (Basic Books, 1981), *A Conflict of Visions* (William Morrow & Company, 1987), *Compassion Versus Guilt* (William Morrow & Company, 1989), and *Preferential Policies: An International Perspective* (William Morrow & Company, 1990). Nobel economists F. A. Hayek and Milton Friedman have called his work "brilliant"; *Forbes* has called him one of the greatest economists writing today. **A**

not sit around in circles unburdening our psyches, nor would anyone have dreamed of calling a teacher by her first name. No one asked what my sexual preferences were—nor would I have known what the question meant if they had.

I was very fortunate to have gone through that good fortune has benefitted me the rest of my life. It was one of many pieces of good for-all-white institution. As the neighborhood changed, tune which I could not fully appreciate until years later. But my good fortune did not consist in the kinds of things being promoted today, or the kinds of things that can be measured in statistics of economists or sociologists. If I had been raised in a home with twice the



money and half

kids in the bottom classes? And even

though that will take care of itself over time, won't you get a lot of flack during the transition?"

His reply was: "You just take the flack."

That is not an attitude you find among most public school administrators. One of the great contrasts between the schools of the past and the

schools of today

I speak from some experience, because I was one of the mischievous kids who ran afoul of that discipline, though not in anything like the ways kids get into trouble today.

When my eighth-grade teacher discovered a prank in the classroom, she said "Oh, if I ever

find out who did this, Sowell..."

On one of the many afternoons when I was kept after school, Miss Karoff said sarcastically, "Well, here we are again, Sowell, just the two of us."

"Good grief, Miss Karoff, " I said, "if we keep staying in after school together all the time, people will begin to talk."

Without even looking up from her paperwork, she replied, "We'll just have to learn to live with the scandal."

Today, punishing a student, much less suspending him, can literally be a federal case. Recently, in East Palo Alto, a ghetto not far from Stanford University, there was a legal challenge to the suspension of a student who kicked a teacher in the groin. The student had legal counsel supplied by the Stanford law school, which runs a project in East Palo Alto. Apparently Stanford thinks that they are helping the residents of East Palo Alto by keeping hoodlums in their schools, so that the other children there can't learn.

Isn't it a shame that blacks don't have enough money to be able to hire attorneys to go over into white neighborhoods and create lawsuits to keep white hoodlums in school, so that the people at Stanford and similar places

attention, there is no question that I would have been much worse off.

Another piece of good fortune was meeting the kid named Eddie Mapp, whom I mentioned earlier. He came from a family with more of an educational background than mine, and he was more sophisticated about education and culture. He took me to a public library for the first time, and I can still recall the great difficulty I had understanding why we were in this building with all these books, when I had no money to buy books.

Part of my good fortune consisted of the family that I grew up in—and part of the ill fortune of today's students consists of the systematic undermining of families, and of the traditional values that parents try to pass on. Nowhere is this undermining of parents and parental values more pervasive and systematic than in the public schools. You would simply have to read the textbooks, or see the movies shown in schools, to understand what a betrayal is going on behind the backs of parents and the public.

Where I have been able to find schools with the kind of academic quality once taken for granted, they have seldom had the "prerequisites" listed by the education establishment. One of these schools, which I researched some

could understand the consequences of what they are doing?

The great tragedy of contemporary American education is that actual consequences mean far less than prevailing myths. These myths and illusions cover many areas, including the role of teachers and the relationships between students and teachers.

My great mentor, the late George Stigler at the University of Chicago, was not one of those who shared these illusions. When someone mentioned to him the legendary image of Mark Hopkins

sitting on a log, talking to a student on the other end, Stigler said: "Sometimes you could do just as well sitting on the student and talking to the log." The "self-esteem" dogma, so much in vogue in education today, never seemed to be one of Stigler's guiding principles. Anyone who crossed swords with George Stigler, whether in a classroom or otherwise, was unlikely to have his self-esteem raised. As for the warm and close relationship between student and teacher, Stigler once said of his own mentor, Jacob Viner: "I never threw my arms around Jacob Viner; he would have killed me if I'd tried." And I never threw my arms around George Stigler for exactly the same reason.

There are those who believe that evaluating the quality of a teacher means having someone sitting in the classroom, observing what is going on, and then writing up a report after-ward. Many would apply this procedure all the way up to the college level. From my own experience, I think this is both a mistaken and a dangerous idea.

. What goes on in a classroom is neither the sum total of teaching nor even the most

important part of teaching. Certainly during my own teaching career; at least half the work of a course consisted of preparing the course, and all of that took place before the first student showed up.

One of my teachers in college, Professor Arthur Smithies, never would have passed the classroom examination test. Smithies used to sort of drift into the classroom, almost as if he had meant to go somewhere else and had taken the wrong turn. He would wander

around the room, look out the window, and become fascinated by the traffic in Harvard Square. Then, being a polite fellow, he would realize that we were still there, and turn to say something to us. Students thought he was a terrible teacher. But, in fact, his course shaped my whole career.

Professor Smithies taught the history of economic thought, and through him I became interested in that subject which became my professional specialization in economics. It was through Smithies' course that I first learned of George Stigler. After reading an article by Stigler among the assignments in that course I resolved that I would study under him in graduate school.

Had you observed Stigler himself in class, he was much better than Arthur Smithies. But I am sure that there would be other teachers whom you could not have distinguished from

George Stigler in the classroom—except by the *substance* of what he said. Only if you could understand and appreciate his substance would you realize that here was one of the great minds of our time.

Education professors may believe that there is such a thing as teaching independently of what is being taught, but that is one of the reasons our schools are so bad. The notion that some college dean, especially from one of those large universities with 20,000 or 30,000 stu-

dents, could sit in classrooms with professors from 30 or 40 different disciplines and form any intelligent idea of what they were saying in substance—such a notion boggles the mind.

I had another reminder of my good fortune a few years ago, when my niece confessed to me that she had harbored a number of resentments over the years. One thing that provoked her resentment was when her father and I would talk about the old days when I was growing up, and all the things we did together, sane and insane. What made her resentful was that he never did any of those things with her. Her resentments were also on behalf of her brother, as well as herself. Her father, she said, "treated you better than he treated his own son." When I thought about it, I realized that she was probably right. The reason was simple: I happened to come along earlier, at a time when her parents were a couple of carefree

Price

young people with two salaries and no children, and with lots of time, much of it given to me.

This good fortune, like so many of the factors that go into shaping people's lives, consisted of things which are utterly uncontrollable by the government, or by any other human institution. Had I been born five years earlier or five years later, there is no question that I would have been worse off. If you looked at the kinds of statistical indices used by economists and sociologists, my niece came from a better environment than I did, but it was not an environment that was able to offer her as much as my environment offered me.

The whole notion that you can equalize opportunity in the things that matter is utopian. Some years ago, there was a study of National Merit Scholarship finalists broken down by the size of the family they came from, from two-child families to five-child families. In each family size, the first-born became a National Merit finalist more often than all the other children put together. Here we are talking about children born of the same parents and raised under the same roof. Yet even though heredity and environment, as those terms are conventionally defined, have both been held constant, nevertheless here is a major disparity in outcomes.

Clearly, conventional statistics do not measure what really matters, nor are policy-makers who rely on such statistics able to do much more than surround the building next door. 4

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