

# How the clever people manage our lives

*Their schemes may not work, but mere evidence is hardly their concern*

**THE VISION OF THE ANOINTED: Self-congratulation as a Basis for Social Policy**

By Thomas Sowell

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The American economist Thomas Sowell is my favourite author; I await a new book of his as eagerly as mystery fans anticipate another yarn from John Grisham. Unlike Mr. Grisham's contrived plots, however, Mr. Sowell's penetrating insights into the ideological landscape never grow tiresome.

His latest is a comprehensive look at "the vision of the anointed," which includes socialism, interventionist liberalism, feminism, environmentalism, secular humanism, and assorted other phantoms of modern social consciousness. In his analysis, all forms of this vision reflect the anthropomorphic error of believing that human society is a field of "problems" crying out for rational "solutions."

The "anointed" emphasize the articulated rationality of intellectuals, which they possess in abundance, and denigrate the less articulate rationality of ordinary people, which is embedded in customs, traditions, and systemic processes such as market exchange. Feeling themselves possessed of extraordinary insight and moral rectitude, the anoint-

*"Statistics on unequal outcomes become automatic indictments of "society." There is much discussion of the haves and the have-nots, but very little discussion of the doers and the do-nots, those who contribute and those who merely take."*

ed plunge confidently, even recklessly, into vast, rationally designed programs of "social change." They particularly love to work on captive audiences, such as businessmen entangled in webs of regulation, or children held hostage in the public schools.

To the vision of the anointed author Sowell opposes the "tragic vision" of philosophers such as David Hume, Adam Smith, Edmund Burke and, most recent, Nobel laureate Friedrich Hayek. These great thinkers understood that society is, in Hayek's description, a spontaneous order not under anyone's design or control. Thus it cannot

be a field of problems awaiting solutions. Although some social arrangements are better than others, all carry a price tag and involve trade-offs; improvement in one area may cause deterioration in another. Because of the inherent complexity of this self-generating order, simplistic reform plans go awry. In order not to wreck society, decisions must come through systemic processes that encourage each of us to act upon what bits of insight and information we possess, while allowing others to react freely to our initiatives even as we react to theirs.

Mr. Sowell mercilessly catalogues the follies of the anointed in contemporary America. He shows how their repeated crusades in public policy tend to follow the same pattern: proclaiming that some well-known aspect of the human condition, such as poverty, constitutes a crisis; introducing "solutions," such as more generous welfare benefits, which demonstrably make the situation worse; denouncing all criticism as simplistic; and then moving onto a new crisis, which, as often as not, is largely caused by the "solutions" to the old crisis.

Of particular interest is his keen analysis of the thought patterns of the anointed. There is, for example, their propensity to interpret all opposition as not only mistaken but immoral—"mean-spirited," as they say on the CBC, the spiritual lifeline of the Canadian anointed. There is also their adoption as "mascots" of criminals, vagrants (rebaptized as the "homeless"), drug addicts, promiscuous homosexuals, and other deviants whom normal people avoid because of the costs they impose on others. The anointed, by contrast, celebrate their own insight and compassion by announcing that such social deviants are victims of an oppressive society.

Since part of my job is teaching statistics to aspiring political scientists, I was particularly taken with Mr. Sowell's chapter on how the anointed abuse social science evidence. A couple of instances will suffice. One is the "residual fallacy," in which the unexplained variance in regression equations is

arbitrarily attributed to "discrimination," as in the so-called "gender gap" between men's and women's employment earnings. Another is the fallacy of "changing assortments," in which ratios are made out of variably defined numerators and denominators—e.g. by using family income statistics to prove that poverty is growing without noting that average family size has been shrinking. The anointed can thereby condemn the "failure" of the market economy even though personal income has been steadily growing.

Also entertaining is the Sowell portrait gallery of "mistaken messiahs" John Kenneth Galbraith, Paul Ehrlich and Ralph Nader,

the falsehood of whose diagnoses and predictions has been repeatedly demonstrated. Mr. Galbraith claimed that American corporations were impregnable just before world competition devastated heavy industries such as steel and automobiles. Mr. Ehrlich predicted mass starvation just before the green revolution multiplied the world's food supply, virtually ending famine except in countries beset by civil war or totalitarian mismanagement. Mr.

Nader launched his "unsafe at any speed" crusade against the Corvair even though experts applauded the increased safety of its rear-engine design. But their reputations continue undiminished among the anointed, to whom self-righteousness matters more than mere evidence.

As a black conservative thinker, Thomas Sowell is very prominent in the United States, but not as well known in Canada as he deserves to be. Readers who can't find this book locally can order it from Laissez Faire Books, 942 Howard St, San Francisco, CA 94103. It's worth getting on their mailing list in any event. They carry, at reduced prices, a wide assortment of both classic and recent conservative books that are often hard to find in Canada.

—Tom Flanagan  
Professor Flanagan teaches political science at the University of Calgary



Author Sowell: Never tiresome.