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# On Soft Determinism & Ambivalent Appeasement

Thomas Sowell: *Ethnic America: A History*; Basic Books; New York.

Anne Wortham: *The Other Side of Racism: A Philosophical Study of Black Race Consciousness*; Ohio State University Press; Columbus, Ohio.

by John C. Caiazza

In the political and ideological climate which currently surrounds the issue of ethnicity in America, this book is a bombshell. The issues of race, discrimination and welfare have become so highly charged politically and emotionally, with so much at stake in benefits from the government and, no less importantly, in prestige and self-respect, that Sowell's attempt merely to tell the truth has had an explosive effect. The reason is not hard to find.

"Ethnic America," as Sowell calls it, has been an experiment in which men and women of every race and continent have tried to live together as Americans while retaining certain portions of their pre-American heritage. Despite persecutions, slavery, race riots, Jim Crow laws, ethnic and religious discrimination and outright warfare against the Indian tribes, America is the most successful multiethnic nation in the world. Sowell writes: "The peopling of America is one of the great dramas in all of human history." Indeed, one notices that foreign criticism of America's racial problems tends to cease in those nations which have acquired a race problem of their own, as in England, India or Uganda.

Tolerance of other peoples, their mores, attitudes and lifestyles, is, in fact, more pronounced in the United States than in most other nations, and

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for good reason, for mutual forbearance is a necessity if we are to live together peaceably and to prosper as a nation. However, the mutual respect which America fosters among its diverse ethnic groups can be extended too far, namely when academicians, politicians and government officials refuse to recognize that any unique characteristic distinguishes groups from one another, especially if it is at all negative.

While it is frequently necessary to overlook such differences, to make allowances for them or to look at them in a benign light, denying such characteristics lends an air of hypocrisy to the acts and statements of public officials. Furthermore, it leads to the assumption that since there are no substantive differences among us as groups, then the only reason for differences in economic success or social status is discrimination, be it intentional or "structural." This encourages an inquisitorial attitude among public officials, who try to ferret out injustices where none visibly exist, and who seek to equalize the conditions of groups which are not equal—in educational attainment or acculturation—to the demands of urban living. Finally, it leads to the establishment of a doctrine of official "truth": that American society is inherently unjust and the American people inherently racist. It is this perverted "truth" which Sowell has dramatically exposed and that exposure has caused a fierce reaction against him and his book.

Ironically, Sowell's style is so low-key, with none of Moynihan's dash on the same (or any other) topic, that some of the controversial points in the study may be lost. Therefore, some of them are worth listing, even though Sowell has argued for many of them in such other of his works as *Race and Economics*. (1) Ethnicity and race are legitimate categories by which to attempt to understand social behavior; (2) ethnic groups have progressed in America

in a constant and roughly comparable manner; (3) education is a result, not a cause, of ethnic economic progress; (4) I.Q. level is culturally determined, i.e. an ethnic group's average I.Q. tends to test higher over time like other indices of socioeconomic acculturation; (5) politics is not the best avenue of advance for ethnic groups, since those which have chosen this route have progressed more slowly than those which have neglected it; (6) welfare benefits have impeded rather than aided the progress of those groups at the bottom of the ladder; (7) culture—not wealth, education or genetic inheritance—is the key influence on an ethnic group's success in America; (8) all ethnic groups have been subject to discrimination but have overcome it; and (9) blacks and Hispanics need no special attention in order to progress as other ethnic groups have. All of these points contravene one accepted opinion or another and, taken together, indicate that a policy of "benign neglect" would be the best policy for our judges, bureaucrats and politicians to follow in matters of ethnicity and race.

A book of this sort raises so many issues that one cannot possibly comment on all of Sowell's points. However, one thing worthy of further comment, and one which is likely to get lost in all the fireworks that this book has already set off, is that it is undergirded by certain critical scientific assumptions. Sowell's book, while subtitled "A History," is also a sociological analysis, which means that the first premise of his study is a form of cultural determinism. That is, in common with most social scientists, Sowell finds it necessary to use a cause-and-effect relationship to explain human behavior. Because he is a sociologist and not, for example, a Freudian psychologist, his concept of determinism is one in which human behavior is influenced (though not controlled, it is important

to note, because Sowell's is a "soft" determinism) by the social whole of which he is a member, in this case his ethnic group. For example, if a man is of Italian extraction, according to Sowell, it is likely that he shares the behavioral characteristics of Italians as a group, e.g. he is devoted to his family, a wine-drinker but not an alcoholic, etc.

Cultural determinism allows Sowell to explain ethnic behavior as the result of two forces: first, the cultural heritage

ences as well, which Sowell does skillfully, with insight and compassion.

For the point surely is not to list gleefully the derogatory points of various ethnic groups, as if in reading Sowell, we were being allowed to liberate some dark impulse within ourselves. By placing individuating characteristics of ethnic groups in an historical context, Sowell is able to explain, as well as point out, both the positive and negative character-

cynical governments. Thus they have, as a *cultural* rather than as a strictly religious or genetic inheritance, a sympathy for the underdog based on historical fact: a tolerant or liberal central authority has been better for them than an intolerant or illiberal one. We can speculate that, in effect, when a Jewish radical agitates against a policy of the U.S. government, he is acting the same way his grandfather acted toward the czar.

The Irish proclivity for machine politics, replete with patronage and favoritism, and based on an exchange of personal loyalties, is well known. The last of the old-time, big-city mayors in this tradition is barely five years in his grave, and his power was not only regional but national; Republican partisans still accuse Richard Daley of stealing the 1960 Presidential election for another Irishman, John Kennedy. Yet once we recognize this fact, an explanation of it is not hard to find, as Sowell points out, in the three centuries that Ireland suffered under the oppression of the English. During that time, all the official apparatus that ruled Ireland, including the established church, was that of an alien power imposed for the advantage of the oppressors and against the will of the native population. Life went on for the Irish only under cover, as it were, for outside the network of formal legitimacy, they had to install their own unofficial network based not on legally enforceable agreements and responsibilities, but on loyalty to their heritage, the Roman Catholic Church and to each other. Politics for the Irish in Ireland was personal and explicitly nonofficial, an attitude which they imported with them to America. Surely it was not difficult for an Irishman who landed in Boston to identify the old ruling families of that city, who, after all, were of English descent, with their oppressors back home.

Unlike either the Jews or the Irish, the Italians in America have not been prominent in politics, either ideologically as have the Jews or pragmatically as have the Irish. Italians are known, however,

"[*Ethnic America*] is fiction without a plot."

—*The Nation*

"On the whole [Sowell's] book might have benefited from more moralizing and less pragmatism."

—*Newsweek*

"'Ethnic America' is a book that uses history to promote a conservative ideology."

—*New York Times Book Review*

that ethnic groups bring with them, and second, the new conditions that such groups face in America. Thus, he points out that the Jews brought with them an urban heritage which aided them in settling into the cities, whereas groups such as the Irish, Mexicans and Italians, whose heritage was agricultural, had a great deal more difficulty in being assimilated. The same difficulty, according to Sowell, presently afflicts those blacks who have migrated from the farmlands of the South to the cities of the North. If the comparison is valid, then the progress of ghetto blacks is about the same as that of previous immigrants who came from an agricultural background, although they, of course, came from overseas and not from another part of America. The utility of this kind of comparison is that it highlights the commonality of the responses of various groups to the conditions in which they lived in America, and the commonly negative response that they met with from "native" Americans, often members of groups who had lived in the same manner and in the same slums a generation before. Such comparisons allow one to examine differ-

istics of different groups. A good example can be found in the political attitudes of various groups; for purposes of illustration we can take the Jews, the Irish and the Italians. The Jews as a group have long been known for their attachment to left-wing politics, and Sowell quotes the scholar who said that while, "... only five percent of Jews were radicals, fifty percent of radicals were Jews." Now a great deal of intellectual energy has been spent trying to avoid or explain the fact (and we may take it as a fact) that Jews have a higher than average tendency to participate in liberal or radical causes. The usual explanation is that the messianism and zeal of the Jewish religion has been secularized into political utopianism. What is largely overlooked in this account is that the Jewish religion has long since lost its messianism and that a good part of its zeal has been transferred to the cause of Israel. Sowell, however, provides us with a less-strained explanation, namely that during the many centuries that they lived in Europe and Russia, the Jewish people existed as a persecuted minority and were often used as scapegoats by

for other activities which might seem to compensate for the lack of political activity—namely, organized crime and reliance on the nuclear family. Indeed, the two seem to reinforce each other and to intermingle, a fact fixed indelibly in the national consciousness by the two *Godfather* films. The Mafia, however, though present in southern Italy, was not, Sowell maintains, something the Italians brought with them, for when they arrived in America it was their “turn” to take over organized crime, succeeding the Jews and the Irish who had by then taken up less aggressive pursuits. The arrival of prohibition made organized racketeering much bigger than it had been previously. Further, as Sowell points out, the intense family loyalties and relative freedom from alcoholism of Italians aided their survival in the violent and competitive business of selling illegal whiskey. Yet the point here is not so much that America provided a grim opportunity in which the traditional Italian sense of family made them successful, but rather that this same sense of family had political effects as well. Italian reliance on the family is typical mainly of southern Italians, for whom this was a form of protection against both their own nobility and the waves of invaders who overran that area continually for many centuries. These people were mostly peasants completely dependent on and subject to whatever external power was in charge. Loyalty to the family also proscribes giving loyalty to any group or organization outside the family, including the civil government and the Church. Carried to America, a pattern emerges in which Italians rely less on government, civic organizations or public welfare than other groups; this has made them less prominent in politics, both civil and ecclesiastical, than in proportion to their numbers.

A general pattern emerges, when comparing the Jews, the Irish and the Italians, in which previous cultural conditioning influences their reaction to

conditions in America. At the same time, Sowell also shows the differences among the reactions of each of these groups as a result of specific characteristics of their heritage. Of course, Sowell doesn’t completely explain the differences in the “old country” patterns of culture themselves, i.e. how the Jews, Irish and Italians originally got that way. For instance, why did continued oppression force the Irish closer to Catholicism and the southern Italians away from it? Sowell makes a stab at it but it is not very convincing. This is a chicken-and-egg question, however, for no determinism, even a soft one like Sowell’s, can ever completely explain the complexities of human behavior.

One last point about Sowell’s book itself: it takes its place in a phalanx of new and important scholarly works by conservative authors, and it is this intellectual effort which may be the basis for an enduring conservative politics. Whatever happens to the Reagan administration, this body of work, now prominently including Sowell’s, will remain to provide the basis for a new and more realistic understanding of social reality.

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How happy will integrationists be when they read Anne Wortham’s *The Other Side of Racism*? After all, if we cannot rest until we have representation of minority people in the professions, business and academe equal to their proportions in the general population, then the same expectation ought to apply to ideology and politics as well. Indeed, some civil-rights spokesmen have encouraged black participation in the Republican Party, although I suspect they would rather advise others to be Republicans than to do so themselves. As we extend this expectation, there ought to be not only black liberals and socialists, but also black conservatives and, dare we say it, black libertarians. In Anne Wortham we have a black writer who is also, as this well-argued book testifies, a libertarian. She has drunk deeply at

the well of Ayn Rand and Nathaniel Branden and has applied their theories to an analysis of the psychology of the civil-rights movement. Yet when integrationists read this book, they will not be happy; indeed, they will be angry as hell.

Not that all their anger will be unjustified, for libertarianism has tremendous weaknesses as well as strengths when applied to a subject as intransigent and complex as race. The peculiar character of the libertarian approach is to emphasize the nature and status of the individual at the expense of the role society plays in the establishment of our values, nature and behavior. As one would expect, Ms. Wortham’s book concentrates on individual psychology by providing the reader with profiles of five types of race-conscious blacks. These profiles take up about half the book and include portraits of “The Conventional Integrationist,” “The Power-seeking Nationalist,” “The Spiritual Separatist,” “The Independent Militant” and “The Ambivalent Appeaser.” The discussions in this section are frequently brilliant, with their clear and unflinching analyses of, for example, how guilt is used to manipulate the response of white society to the advantage of blacks. Less coherent, however, is Ms. Wortham’s venture into sociological theory—which frequently degenerates into jargon, as in her tedious attempt to connect Branden’s theory of self-esteem with Reisman’s treatment of marginal character. This book vividly illustrates the respective strengths and weaknesses of libertarianism when applied to America’s race problem.

On the positive side, *The Other Side of Racism* presents a good argument that white discrimination against blacks has its corresponding vice in the Federal government’s affirmative-action programs, which discriminate against whites on behalf of blacks. The point that affirmative action and white racism are two sides of the same coin is not new, but Ms. Wortham makes it more provocatively than most. The contradictions of the black-pride movement,



which Ms. Wortham calls "spiritual separatism," are revealed, as in the case where blacks assert the superiority of black culture while at the same time contending that they deserve compensatory treatment because they have been victimized by white society. Ms. Wortham also points out that many blacks and members of ethnic groups inflate their own sense of self-esteem and hide their individual inadequacies by identifying themselves solely as members of their race, religion or culture.

But here lies the rub, for Ms. Wortham, good libertarian that she is, assumes that an individual's self-worth comes only from his own efforts, not from his identification with a social collective. Thus she condemns as weakness any attempt by blacks to take pride in themselves simply as blacks. No doubt such an effort may be subject to all the pathological weaknesses Miss Wortham discovers there—the contradictions, self-deceptions, hidden weaknesses, bluster and intimidation—but surely it is, basically, a healthy thing. Her strictures against black pride and other black responses to living in a white society say as much about her libertarian bias as they do about the realities of the black situation.

Libertarianism brings to an analysis

of race and other social problems a rationalistic egoism which portrays the individual not only as being capable of directing his own destiny, but as being responsible for the very circumstances which influence and sometimes direct individual behavior. Thus, it is no excuse to say that someone cannot help himself, for libertarians say in effect that a person's attitude defines social reality. They refuse to recognize that our human natures are as much social as individual. For we really cannot direct our own destinies to the extent that one of Ayn Rand's fictional heroes can, nor are we permitted (by moral laws with far more legitimacy than those of the state) to make up our own set of values as the libertarians assert. What we are really free to do is to recognize an objective morality and purpose which exist beyond our desires and wills and not to erect such a reality on our own. The application of the libertarian point of view to the race problem finally has a weird conclusion, for Ms. Wortham comes very close to blaming the evil of racism on its victims (significantly she denies the concept of original sin). Speaking of a victim of discrimination, she says, "[h]is sense of inferiority existed *before* discrimination occurred, and it is his sense of inferiority that al-

lows discrimination or antipathy to have such a debilitating effect on him . . . his actual feelings of inferiority are always self-imposed."

She argues, in effect, that the victims of racism become its victims only because they allow themselves to be affected by the attitude of others—as if it were possible not to be! And, again, she refuses to admit the legitimacy of black pride on the principle that what an individual has not made by his own efforts, he is not logically entitled to as a source of self-esteem. Yet, why not? Why is pride of family, or nation, or culture or, yes, even race, illegitimate except on the basis of that theory of rational egoism that denies to man both his social reality and his intuitions of value that cannot always be fully articulated? The great failure of libertarianism in treating the race problem is twofold: it denies that racism is an evil that actually affects unwilling victims, and it refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of racial (and ethnic) identity. The great strength of the libertarian position lies in its exposure of the injustice inherent in the affirmative-action policies of the Federal government.

But even in its analysis of affirmative action there is a difficulty in the libertarianism espoused by Ms. Wortham, for this philosophy claims that the sole function of the state is to protect the sovereign rights of individuals. But in order to do this the state must promulgate laws which encourage us to respect each other's rights. This is the dilemma of the libertarian, for the protection of rights implies what he sees as an unacceptable intrusion of state power over the individual, inasmuch as the state must try to influence people to act and think in a certain way. That is why the Founding Fathers encouraged free expression of religion and why America has a stake in the establishment of racial amity, harmony and justice. Despite the insights it offers, libertarianism has only a limited contribution to make toward the achievement of this goal. □

## LIBERAL CULTURE

### *The Gist of Deviation*

The *Village Voice* of November 25-December 1, 1981, offers a striking example of how a dead writer is, by nature, unable to say, "Wait a minute . . . that's not what I had in mind . . ." New York City Council president Carol Bellamy read a passage from *Intruder in the Dust*:

Some things you must always be unable to bear. Injustice and outrage and dishonor and shame. No matter how young you are or how old you have got. Not for kudos and not for



money in the bank, neither. Just refuse to bear them.

This was supposed to mean that William Faulkner urged all of us to accord homosexuals the right to tutor little boys in the New York public schools and serve as cops in order to protect S&M bars. □

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## Curricula of Malice and Mistake

David E. Shi: *Matthew Josephson, Bourgeois Bohemian*; Yale University Press; New Haven, Connecticut.

Bertram D. Wolfe: *A Life in Two Centuries*; Stein & Day Publishers; New York.

by Paul Gottfried

Of these two biographies one shows, although unwittingly, the cruelty of being afflicted by the divine curse of madness, while the other demonstrates the possibility of redemption for at least the fortunate few. The eulogistic study of the career of Matthew Josephson gives evidence of a deluded life untouched by lucid moments, except for a short time spent on Wall Street. Throughout most of his eighty years Josephson combined a sybaritic, wildly adulterous existence (made possible by shrewd investments on the stock market) with literary and financial support for the Communist Party and its numerous satellite organizations. An undaunted fellow traveller, he would certainly qualify even in death for a Lillian Hellman Award for American Citizenship. One of Shi's final tributes to Josephson is that this old-fashioned radical easily found his way into the New Left. Always contemptuous of "anti-Communists on the Left," he considered George McGovern a fitting embodiment of his own political ideals. One gets the impression that the Nixon victory in 1972 helped edge Josephson over the brink. If so, he left many others, possessed of less elegance but more stridency, to fill his shoes.

A major problem with Shi's biography, other than its cloying praise of the subject, is its neglect of serious questions concerning Josephson's development. Why would a man of afflu-

ence turn with loathing against that society which allowed him both to prosper and to criticize it? To cite McCarthyism, as Shi does, as the reason for Josephson's political stance is to place the cart before the horse. Like Lillian Hellman, Josephson had been apologizing for the Soviet Union, while denouncing its American critics, long before the junior Senator from Wisconsin had achieved political notoriety. More to the point, why did Josephson differ from other former communists who, generally appalled by Soviet butchery, recognized that their god had failed? Why did he spend his later life, after having formally abjured the Party, blasting leftist intellectuals who criticized Soviet Russia or who praised the United States?

The autobiography of Bertram Wolfe is both more informative and less sentimental. Wolfe devotes most of his voluminous memoirs to discussing his activities as a communist: his attraction to the Party in the aftermath of the First World War (after having opposed America's entry into it), his journalistic activities as a Party member in the 20's and his gradual defection, starting in 1929, as the result of Stalin's attempted suppression of his own subgroup within the American Communist Party. Wolfe and his friends followed a maverick radical, Jay Lovestone, who advocated more American control over their Party organization. The story of the Lovestoneites, some of whom, like Wolfe, had to flee for their lives from Russia, is probably the most interesting section of the autobiography. Not only does it show the crisis of faith through which genuinely decent, if deluded, men had to pass before recognizing the evil of Soviet communism; it also depicts the peculiarly American character of the young communists, mostly of German and Russian Jewish extraction, who took their case for a more decentralized Party organization to Moscow. Wolfe

records their profound shock as they encountered the Soviet system at work, as they heard the peremptory judgment made by the leader of world communism amidst his cheering underlings and as they experienced the use of intimidation afterwards to enforce Stalin's decisions. That some Lovestoneites yielded to these pressures is entirely understandable. That others chose to resist indicated their courage, although even the anti-Stalinist Lovestoneites, it should be noted, did not grasp at once the full evil of the Soviet system.

In my opinion, Wolfe remains far easier to respect as a communist than Josephson as a bourgeois bohemian. One may, of course, object that I am making this judgment while being aware of the ultimate positions toward which both figures moved. While I am liable to this charge, I would, nonetheless, assert that there are significant personal differences among various radicals. Some may indeed appeal more than others even to those who reject their ideological premises. Wolfe gives me the impression of being someone who entered, actually co-founded, the American Communist Party in 1919 out of genuine, though misguided, moral concern. Like some others growing to manhood during the First World War, he opposed that bloody struggle, which he correctly considered an act of civilizational suicide. He joined the Party because, unlike Wilson and his government, Lenin did oppose the War, although Wolfe failed to understand that the communists did not take their anti-war stand out of pacifist sentiment or reverence for the "Old Europe." The communists in fact set out to overthrow Western societies by turning workers against their governments and their countrymen. Despite his naiveté, Wolfe joined the communists as a man with honorable goals, and he showed his allegiance through years of arduous serv-

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