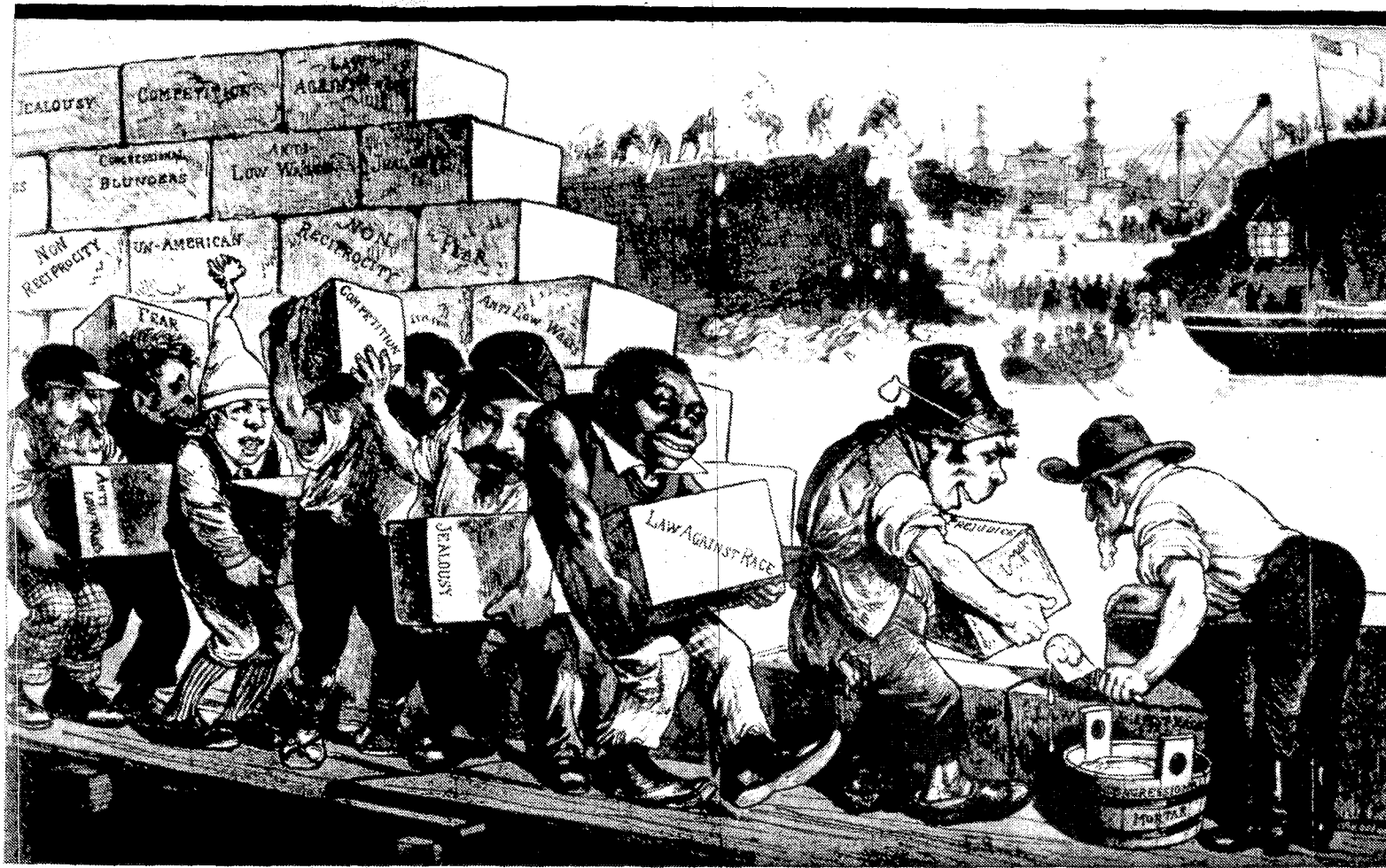


## IN PRINT



Sowell seems to forget that Chinese were prohibited entry to the U.S. when citing statistics from the 1880s.

## Ethnic America

By Thomas Sowell

Basic Books, 353 pp., \$16.95

By Ronald Takaki

Sowell's historical study is mainly a prescription for the present. *Ethnic America* is intended to describe the "progress" of ethnic groups, particularly Jews and Asian Americans, in order to delineate what has worked and to instruct ethnic groups still striving toward success in how they should behave and what values they must internalize to be assimilated into the middle class.

Discontented racial minorities, Sowell warns, should avoid the "confrontationist" methods of "militant" blacks. They should instead follow the example of the Japanese, whose "quiet persistence" has enabled them to rise from the internment camps of World War II to a family income status 32 percent above the national average in 1969. Discontented racial minorities, Sowell advises, should also shun reliance on government intervention and welfare.

How seriously we should consider Sowell's prescription should depend on our assessment of the seriousness of his scholarship. His sources are secondary, many of them based on other secondary works. His chapters on different ethnic groups frequently read like travelogues or passages from an encyclopedia. Though he has chapters on Americans from Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America, Sowell completely ignores Americans from America—the Native Americans. But perhaps Native American readers will consider themselves fortunate to have been left out. Sowell revives lurid and sensational images of Chinatown as he describes the "tong wars," the "hatchet men" and the "hordes" from Hong Kong. Sowell transforms the Japanese American concentration camp experience of World War II into an event that had a "positive effect," emancipating the Nisei or second generation from the "old bonds of a narrow

ethnic world." In the camps, Nisei were allowed to work in a wider range of employment than in civilian life, and their resettlement in eastern and midwestern areas gave them new "opportunities" to pursue new fields. "In this regard," Sowell remarks, "many Japanese Americans themselves—including Senator S.I. Hayakawa—have credited the internment experience with improving their long-run mobility."

But Hayakawa, born in Canada and living in Chicago in 1942, was not interned. Little wonder he has frivolously called the years behind barbed wire a "vacation." This kind of carelessness sometimes leads Sowell to make astonishing statements. For example, he observes that "the number of Chinese leaving the U.S. was greater than the

number coming in" during the 1880s. But such a development could hardly be unexpected. After all, the Chinese Exclusion Act, passed in 1882, closed the gates to Chinese immigration. Elsewhere Sowell, trying to illustrate Japanese American assimilationist tendencies, notes that "all Japanese" neighborhoods have become virtually non-existent or "unusual" in the continental U.S. But such a residential pattern should surprise no one. The forced evacuation of 110,000 Japanese Americans from the West Coast during World War II had destroyed their communities.

Sowell's imprecise statistical analysis is even more difficult to explain. For instance, Sowell compares the incomes of Puerto Rican families headed by males in the 25 to 34-year-old bracket

with the incomes of "families of other Americans of the same description," showing that the income of such Puerto Rican families is 96 percent of the other families, and that Puerto Rican "progress" has taken place. But two-thirds of the Puerto Rican population lives in New York City where both family incomes and the cost of living are higher than the national average. Similarly, Sowell announces that Japanese American families earn 32 percent more than the average family. But he overlooks two crucial features. More Japanese American families have two or more income earners than the average and they are concentrated in urban areas in Hawaii and California, states with above-average incomes and costs of living. Moreover, single-income Japanese American male-headed families in 1970 earned only 84 percent of the national average where the family head had four years of college.

Even where Sowell's statistical analysis is accurate, his interpretation is open to question. According to Sowell, statistically, women of the less successful groups—blacks, Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans—have more children than women of

the groups that have made it socially and economically. What does this finding mean? Here Sowell tritely quips: "The rich get richer, and the poor have children." But is a high fertility rate an effect or cause of poverty? Historically a high fertility rate for Japanese Americans contributed to the economic advancement of many of them. The birth rate of the early immigrant Japanese American population was four times greater than the rate of white Americans. Many Japanese American families relied on the labor of their children to help cultivate farms and operate small businesses.

Like neo-conservative scholars led by Nathan Glazer, Sowell argues that the experiences of white ethnic groups and racial minorities were differences in degree rather than kind. But the reality of American racism raises serious doubts about such an argument.

Only blacks were enslaved, only Chinese were singled out for exclusion, only Native Americans were removed to reservations, and only Japanese Americans (not Italian Americans or German Americans) were placed in concentration camps. This difference between the "ethnic" and "racial" experiences can be clearly discerned in the Naturalization Law of 1790. Curiously, Sowell does not even mention this law, which remained in effect until 1952 and which reserved naturalized citizenship for "whites" only.

To read Sowell's "history" is to be given the impression that Jews were shopkeepers, Chinese were laundrymen, and Japanese were gardeners, or to be told that the "successful" ethnic groups made it through enterprise. But this ignores the fact that most of the members of these groups were laborers, not petty capitalists, and that many of their most important struggles—the organization of labor unions such as the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union in New York and the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's Union in Hawaii—were collective and political. To accept Sowell's prescription for ethnic progress in the '80s is to ask racial minorities that have not yet succeeded to strive for entry into a world that no longer exists—a shopkeeper economy of individual enterprise and opportunity where "sweat" and even "cleanliness" could be turned into "capital."

Ronald Takaki, who teaches ethnic studies at the University of California, Berkeley, is the author of *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th Century America*.

## HISTORY

## The illusion of ethnic equality

## LITERATURE

## The enigma of C.L.R. James

C.L.R. James: His Life and Work

Paul Buhle, Editor

Urgent Tasks, Summer 1981, \$4 P.O. Box 8493, Chicago IL 60680

By Jeff Beneke

"One great book should be enough for a lifetime," wrote historian Eugene Genovese recently on the writings of C.L.R. James, author of the widely acclaimed *The Black Jacobins* (1938). Genovese's qualified dismissal, even if easily challenged, is understandable. This "one great book" has, until recently, been the only book by James

available to a wide audience.

Nothing better illustrates the enigmatic character of James than this volume of personal reminiscences, political and literary applications, reviews and interviews. The contributors are a solid group of scholars, comrades, friends, students and admirers who collectively demonstrate the formidable influence that C.L.R. James has had on several generations of intellectuals and militants. Yet the forum, a little known publication called *Urgent Tasks* ("journal of the revolutionary left," for those who are there but didn't know it), reflects James' continued

marginalization.

This volume draws a portrait of one of the most remarkable literary and political figures of the 20th Century. The late Walter Rodney, who took to heart the "blend of committed scholarship and activism" that he commends in James, considers *A History of Negro Revolt* (1939) to be "a front-runner in the field of African studies devoted to African liberation." His only novel, *Minty Alley* (1936), established James as "a major forerunner of the Caribbean literary movement in English," notes D. Elliott Parris. Many would agree with David Roediger that *Marin-*

ers, *Renegades and Castaways* (1953), a wonderful study of Melville, is "a minor classic." *The Life of Captain Cipriani* (1932) was perhaps the first clear statement on West Indian independence, while *Beyond a Boundary* (1963) is a pathbreaking study of popular culture and the vicissitudes of work and play, as demonstrated in Sylvia Wynter's contribution.

James' writings of the '30s, '40s and '50s contain surprisingly contemporary themes. *The Black Jacobins*, among other works, deals in part with what more recent social historians have "discovered"—the vital historical force of the "inarticulate," those mass directors of history who left behind little in the way of the written tracts and diplomatic feats. The many leftists and cultural historians in-

Continued on page 15



On the same weekend that the World's Fair opened in Knoxville, Tenn., the 13th Annual New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, or Jazzfest, kicked off its two-week program. Its opening Sunday drew more than 95,000 people, easily outdrawing the World's Fair opening day—and for good reason. No other outdoor festival in the U.S. attracts such a broad cross-section of participants and patrons.

The Jazzfest is unique, drawing on a wealth of local and national musicians, cooks and craftspeople as well as international bands. Three quarters of the musicians, nearly all the cooks and at least 40 percent of the craftspeople are locals.

The Jazzfest places a strong emphasis on the diverse cultures found in Louisiana. Probably no other American city has such a wide range of musical cultures side by side, influenced by an influencing each other. Produced by jazz impresario George Wein, the Jazzfest presents jazz, blues, cajun, r&b (rhythm and blues), country and Latin music.

The predominant music, jazz, ranges from traditional New Orleans marching brass band music to the new musical styles some call avant-garde. Blues artists range from nationally-known B.B. King through legendary regional artists such as piano-playing blues singer Roosevelt "The Honeydipper" Sykes to young country blues apprentices, many of them white.

Cajun music includes traditional fiddle and accordion-led bands, contemporary cajun using electric instruments and blends of r&b and rock and the volatile black cajun music called zydeco. R&b features mainly New Orleans artists such as Fats Domino, Aaron Neville and Ir-



## The sounds of many cultures



Riverboat ride headliner Rita Marley (above, center); the dance group Voodoo Macumba (above); B.B. King (right).

ma Thomas, considered founding figures of the genre. (In the '50s New Orleans was the hottest r&b city in the U.S.) Country music participants at the Jazzfest annually include winners of state fiddling competitions.

Much of Louisiana was once under Spanish rule, and has a legacy of Latin culture. As the most active seaport in the country, the "Crescent City" is also a major central and South American connection. And its large Hispanic population supports Latin bands and orchestras that perform at the Jazzfest.

The musical essence of the Jazzfest is the "Great Black Music," especially traditional jazz and gospel. In the jazz tent old masters such as banjoist, gui-

tarist, composer and singer Danny Barker with his partner, vocalist Blue Lu Barker, and his band, the Jazzhounds, present traditional New Orleans jazz. The Jazzfest also features young innovators such as sensational 20-year-old trumpeter Wynton Marselis, whose band includes his 21-year-old brother Branford on saxophone. The Marselis brothers are the sons of New Orleans pianist and music professor Ellis Marselis. This year the Tulane Hot Jazz Classic, under the direction of the Tulane University Jazz Archive, concentrated on the traditional jazz music of New Orleans and featured a series of special programs.

The gospel tent features the best of local gospel choirs and soloists. Indicative of its popularity, there are more gospel groups than any other genre. Traditional jazz parades featuring marching brass bands, tradi-

tional black marching clubs and "second liners" (people who dance alongside and behind the band) winds its way once a day through the throng of fans. The black Mardi Gras Indians, resplendent in handcrafted, brightly-colored costumes featuring feathered headdresses, are another unique expression of New Orleans black culture.

Traditional foods and crafts are also a major attraction of the Jazzfest.

### Black voices heard.

The Jazzfest's cultural diversity and strengths are no happy accident. Community participation was fought for and won. Sponsored by the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation and for the last 10 years supported in part by the Schlitz Brewing Co., the Jazzfest traditionally did not include many blacks in decision-making, even though many of

the performers were black.

But four years ago black residents, myself included, organized an Afro-American Jazzfest Coalition, and we threatened a black boycott of the festival. Negotiations resulted not only in more blacks on the Foundation board but also in the creation of a black-controlled area called Koindu (a place of exchange) at the fairgrounds.

The Koindu area has since become the most visible addition to the Jazzfest. It consists of one stage and about a dozen crafts booths. The stage presents music, poetry, dance and drill teams, all of which previously had not been included. The crafts, besides jewelry and leatherwork by Afro-American craftspeople, include paintings, Haitian sculpture and baskets, African sculpture, tie-dye clothing and musical instruments.

The crafts became a major bone of contention. Some Jazzfest board members contended

that only crafts made by the people displaying them should be included. A few were contemptuous of the quality of the crafts. Behind these arguments were cultural conflicts concerning the nature of art. Coalition members refused to debate the merits of the Afro-American crafts, and suggested that only the Koindu people should decide which crafts could be displayed. The Koindu board eventually opened the crafts space strictly on a first come first serve basis.

Two leading local artists, Douglas Redd and Lucien Barian, designed the Koindu area. Using a horseshoe shape they modeled it on traditional West African villages. Koindu has become not only a place to enjoy black-oriented performance and to purchase African-derived crafts, but a meeting place.

Another major point of contention has been what to do with money made from the Jazzfest, which in the last few years has finally turned a significant profit. The Coalition prodded the Foundation to give community grants and that approach was tried one year with mixed results. Last year the Board sponsored a free one-weekend mini-music festival, despite objections by Jazzfest producer Wein (who is not on the board). The free music festival proved a big local hit.

Although some criticized this year's night lineup for being too bland, this year's festival, thanks in part to excellent weather, financially was one of the most successful Jazzfests ever. Again this year the Foundation board will have to decide how to give back the profits generated from America's most distinctive outdoor music festival.

Kalamu ya Salaam is the editor of Black Collegian magazine and a board member of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation.



Steve Kogan