

Thomas Sowell and Walter Williams are two Black American Conservative economists who have studied minorities, women and the poor. (Their line of argument, based on the fastidious collection and evaluation of data, is that the evils of racism, discrimination and poverty are least where markets are most free, and are in general made worse by government intervention.) The line is singularly unpopular with those American Liberals employed providing government aid.

In the United States, where, as Bernard Shaw's Professor Pickering observed, the English language has not been used for years, a 'liberal' sees a big role for government. We might call an American Liberal a Socialist. Whereas, so far as I can translate American, the term 'conservative' covers everyone from an individualist to a reactionary traditionalist. Sowell and Williams are individualists more or less in the mould of nineteenth century English Liberalism. (Life would be simpler if important words had but one meaning.)

Sowell and Williams don't fit American Liberals' model of the world. Members of an oppressed class are not expected to be conservative, even though surveys of American opinion reveal that blacks often hold some very pro market views. Sowell and Williams do not condone discrimination and do care about minorities but their hard look at the facts undermines the rationale for much government intervention, casts doubt on the motives of the interveners and produces evidence that discrimination is actually made worse by governments.

Sowell writes, "When the Campbell soup company tells us how great it is to have soup for lunch, we tend to take it with a grain of salt. Yet when educators tell us the very same things about their products we seem to think they are public spirited citizens trying nobly to solve our social problems." There is a myth in the USA that Jewish immigrants rose to affluence because of the advantages of education, but Sowell points out that Jewish immigrants rose to prosperity first and then afforded to send their children to college. He draws Americans' attention to Japanese farmers on the West Coast, who hardly spoke any English but none-the-less rose to affluence and then educated the next generation. All very inconvenient stuff for educators.

Political reform is often credited with eliminating the need for people to wear rags at a time when, just incidently, the gross product rose five or six times, Singer invented the sewing machine, and sweat shops produced garments people could afford. Sowell doubts that the great improvement was brought about because legislators became too noble to allow rags. These are inconvenient enough arguments for labour unions but his case against the minimum wage is devastating: "Improving the lot of the poor, means enabling them to move up the ladder, but they have to get on the ladder before they can move up. The minimum wage law prevents that. It is playing double or nothing with someone else's life.... It is probably the most harmful single piece of legislation on the books, as far as blacks are concerned..."

Sowell denies that modern, enlightened campaigns against sexual discrimination have improved the chances of women of gaining higher education. "The proportions of Ph.D.s, of M.D.s, of lawyers, of chemists, of economists who were female was much higher decades ago than it was in 1960. If you go back to 1905, the proportion of females in Who's Who was higher than it was in 1950." Changes in marriage patterns seem to provide a likely explanation of the decline in the proportion of women in positions of preferment. "In most of the data, the real difference is not between men and women; it is between married women and all other persons.... When we look at academic women who never married they earn more then academic men who never married." While married men earn more than unmarried men, because income is a team effort and of course there is likely to be a greater need for income justifying a greater effort. This is inconvenient stuff for women's libbers.

Affirmative Action policies encourage USA employers to hire and promote proportionate numbers of various minority groups. All the groups that are included for preferential treatment under affirmative action add up to two thirds of American work-age population so it might now be more simple, and more honest, to talk about discrimination against the remaining third. Sowell says "One of

that there is very little empirical

evidence that it has benefited blacks or women. Further there is reason to believe that it has been counterproductive.".... ("Affirmative action has created an incentive not to hire these various groups.") And "If a kid graduates first in his class at Harvard, he is still thought of as someone who got his degree because of affirmative action."

Sowell rejects racism utterly but concludes that its worst excesses are caused by governments, and that what blacks need are not more regulations but more opportunities. People who suffer prejudice, whether they be a minority like American blacks, or a majority like South African blacks, suffer worst when market choice is overridden.

It was the rise of the blacks in South African industry which led to the rise of the Nationalist Party and to apartheid. The colour bar in South Africa, as in Australia, was introduced with the support of the left wing unions. White miners refused to work with black so the employers, under pressure to produce, replaced white miners with black until compelled by law to limit black employment. The Nationalists in South Africa, a traditionally anti-market party, refer to the advancement of blacks as one of the abuses of capitalism ! (An abuse overlooked by Jane Fonda.)

In the USA in the thirties, blacks were eliminated from the navy and were not much employed in academia or bureaucracy, so that fewer were in government employment than before the first world war. Meanwhile private industry employed blacks, - presumably because competitive firms cannot afford to overlook the best employees whatever their skin colour.

Sowell insists that he does not have faith in the market but evidence about the market, which places it in a much better light than governments. Perhaps we should not expect paid 'do gooders' to treat that evidence dispassionately, but neither should we take their assessment more seriously than we take Campbell's soup advertisements.