

A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles. By Thomas Sowell.
New York: William Morrow, 1987.

Thomas Sowell has achieved an enviable reputation in many different areas of economics. His many works on the economics of immigration, culminating in *Ethnic America*, have won him an eminent place in this field. His *Knowledge and Decisions* applies in a comprehensive way the insights of Friedrich A. Hayek to a vast number of social phenomena. As if this were not enough, Sowell has also published widely in the history of economic thought.

It is with no little anticipation, then, that one turns to Sowell's venture into the history of ideas. Will the insight and imagination displayed in his previous work enable him to contribute a new way of looking at intellectual history? Admittedly, perusal of his *Marxism: Philosophy and Economics* dims one's enthusiasm. That book offered little but a tired rehash of elementary Marxist economics, presented as a major piece of scholarship.¹ Further, except for in the final chapter Sowell manifested a surprising sympathy for Marxism.

Sowell has made the work of analysis of his book as straightforward as possible, since he has carefully constructed it around a central thesis which the title adumbrates. What does Sowell mean by a vision? He informs us that "a vision is a sense of *causation*." It is more like a hunch or a "gut feeling" than it is like an exercise in logical or factual verification. "These things come later, and feed on the raw material provided by the vision" (p. 16). The "hunches" that Sowell concerns himself with do not primarily involve moral judgments. "People with the same moral values readily reach different political conclusions. ... Labeling beliefs 'value premises' can readily become one more means by which conclusions insulate themselves from confrontation with evidence or logic" (p. 217).

Before plunging into Sowell's distinction between "constrained" and "unconstrained" visions, the principal subject of the book, a pause over "vision" seems necessary. Sowell may mean by this an innocuous truism: theorists rarely arrive at a total system at once but rather extend and shape an initial conjecture as evidence turns up and as

¹In support of my assessment, see the review by David Ramsay Steele in *International Philosophical Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (June 1986): 201-03.

consequences of their initial insight occur to them. Even interpreted this way, Sowell's explanation of "vision" can be challenged, as he seems later in the book to rule out, without consideration, the development of a theory by a priori reasoning, in the style of Mises's praxeology, instead of by empirical testing.

But this issue hardly concerns him, and it would be wrong to read too much into his brief remarks about method. The controversial part of his remarks arises from the fact that, as the citation above shows, he almost certainly intends more by the use of "vision" than the commonplace that theorists begin from conjectures. He offers no evidence whatever that any theorist has in fact begun from a "gut feeling" about social causation. He also gives no support for his view that moral judgments are not part of the visions from which theories start.

To avert misunderstanding, I do not claim that it is false that theories stem from visions of Sowell's sort. He may well be right; as guesses go, his seems better than many. But this is just the point. In the absence of evidence as to how particular thinkers have arrived at their theories, Sowell's "visions" are just a shot in the dark. Even if one finds the two types of visions into which Sowell divides theories of society to be a dichotomy of surpassing excellence, this would in itself indicate a fact about theories that already exist. To say that theories can be grouped in a certain way tells us nothing about how the theories came into existence.

Another instance of Sowell's penchant for confusing conjecture with historical fact occurs, ironically enough, in a section of Chapter 9 entitled "Paradigms and Evidence." To illustrate the danger that one's vision may lead to refusal to acknowledge evidence that falsifies a theory, Sowell instances the case of the British psychologist Cyril Burt. Since Burt's death, examination of his use of statistics in his studies of mental ability has strongly suggested that he "faked" some of the data.

Concerning Burt's misuse of data, Sowell remarks: "The issue here is not heredity versus environment but evidence versus visions. Clearly, Burt [sic] had little to gain personally from falsifying the data. In fact, he had much to lose, including a reputation and a painful setback for the cause he espoused. That he would risk such a gamble is one measure of his commitment to his vision ... Sir Cyril Burt [sic] thus represented one extreme in the relationship of evidence to visions—the total subordination of evidence to conclusions based on a vision or the theories derived from it" (pp. 207-08).

Sowell's conjecture about the reasons for Burt's misuse of data may be correct. But Sowell offers no evidence whatever on the matter. Has Sowell done any research on Burt? Has he as much as opened any biographical studies of Burt? Has he considered other hypotheses, e.g., "kinks" in Burt's personality? Somehow Sowell just *knows* what happened. Incidentally, Sowell states that eventually, even

Burt's supporter Arthur Jensen had to admit that Burt's statistics were unacceptable. In point of fact, Jensen was one of the first to call attention to the difficulty. But perhaps Sowell's vision has transmitted Jensen's thoughts to him as well as Burt's.

Sowell's reason for excluding moral judgments from his visions seems unconvincing. Granted that there are "visions," will not their contents depend very much on the idiosyncracies of individual theorists? Why should one exclude someone's development of a theory because of a "gut feeling" about morality? No doubt Sowell is right that people with different moral views often have similar policy conclusions. But is this always the case? People who believe that certain ethnic groups ought to be killed sometimes have quite different policy conclusions from those who do not share this position.

Suppose, however, that people's moral views *never* determine their policy conclusions. It still does not follow that moral judgments cannot form part of the initial vision from which a theory begins. Perhaps, on the implausible assumption stated, moral judgments "drop out" at some point. This once more appears entirely a question of "what makes people tick."

Regardless of whether anyone has ever had a close encounter of the Sowell kind, his visions can, as suggested earlier, be looked at as ways of classifying actually existing theories. Sowell contends that social theories fall into two main kinds: "constrained" and "unconstrained" visions.

One further preliminary matter needs to be addressed before we at last examine the visions. Sowell, in accord with his views about the limited role of value judgments in social science, maintains that his two visions are, as a matter of fact, a useful tool for analyzing social theories. His statement of the two visions does not express a value preference of his own; in particular, in his presentation he does not argue that the constrained vision is correct. Sowell has reacted with sharpness to reviewers who take him to be praising one vision while condemning the other, and his grievance has considerable merit. Examination of Sowell's other work will disclose without difficulty that Sowell is a prime instance of the constrained vision. But it hardly follows from this that his present book is a work of advocacy rather than neutral assessment. There is, however, excuse for the reviewers, as we shall later see.

What, then, are the two visions? Our author places prime emphasis on the attitude toward human nature characteristic of each one. The two visions differ mainly over what human beings can become, not what they now are like. "In the unconstrained vision, human nature is itself a variable and in fact the central variable to be changed" (p. 87). People may *now* be as selfish and shortsighted as you please; but given the "right" conditions, usually involving direction by an elite, a veritable metamorphosis will occur. Persons will now work happily together in harmony: all *will be* for the best in this best of all possible worlds. A

change in human nature, one assumes, means that human beings will acquire traits they do not now have. Unfortunately, Sowell does not offer a definition of "human nature." The problems this omission generates will be discussed below.

The constrained vision looks at human beings as basically unalterable in their nature. Adam Smith, a key exponent of this outlook believed that "moral or socially beneficial behavior could be evoked from man only by incentives ..." (p. 23). Rather than a futile attempt to make people "better" than nature has designed them, one can accomplish more by acknowledging the limits within which people function.

Together with contrasting approaches to human nature goes differing concepts of reason. For the unconstrained vision, reason is a direct and explicit matter. If one desires social change, the agenda is clear: one must devise a suitable plan, and carry it out. Explicit principles are the order of the day, rather than reliance on custom. If the usual way of doing things fails at the bar of reason, away with it.

The proponent of constraint rejects this fast and furious policy. He does not deny the value of what Sowell terms "articulate reason" when social conditions allow exactly formulated measures. But much of the operation of society takes place by means of customary rules that cannot be fully specified. Too much information exists for any person or group to have at their conscious command. Instead, one needs to rely on "the unintended consequences of human action" which will succeed in generating an order beyond the capacity of anyone to grasp in comprehensive fashion. The free market stands as the foremost example of a "spontaneous order." The task of the government, in this view, lies rather in providing a general framework of rules which permits unplanned social institutions to function than in enacting plans of its own.

The position just sketched will be familiar to anyone who has encountered the works of Friedrich Hayek; and the frequent references the book contains to him lead one strongly to suspect that Hayek is the principal model of the person of constrained vision. Since Sowell's main work of theory, *Knowledge and Decisions*, sedulously follows in Hayek's footsteps, perhaps our author should not protest too loudly when reviewers of *A Conflict of Visions* ascribe to him the identical constrained view he has elsewhere explicitly taken over as his own.

Again following Hayek, Sowell maintains that the constrained vision offers little scope for the application of moral theory. It displays but slight concern for moral rights when these do not operate for the general benefit. People cannot "stand on their rights" if doing so proves overly inconvenient to society. Law concerns itself with what works best in general and often cannot be fine tuned to handle claims that particular persons have been unjustly treated. "This is a process conception of rights—the legal ability of people to carry on certain

processes without regard to the desirability of the particular results ... " (pp. 185-86).

In brief, the constrained vision stresses the "primacy of social interests over those of the individual ... " (p. 187). By contrast, unconstrained visionaries place much more emphasis on what is right, apart from its social consequences. To a holder of this view, e.g., someone does not lose his right to free speech even if his exercise of that right is liable to foment disorder. Rights arise not from their usefulness as a tool to oil the social mechanism; they are owed to their possessors. It is morally wrong to refuse them their due recognition. Similarly, if an unconstrained visionary thinks that the poor ought to receive welfare, he will tend to regard this as a matter of justice. Like John Rawls, he will endorse a moral theory obligating people to transfer income to the needy. The person of constraint will tend to eschew altogether arguments based purely on moral theory. In his view, the working of society allows no room for these speculative ventures to operate. This attitude receives its clearest encapsulation in the title of the second volume of Hayek's *Law, Legislation, and Liberty: The Mirage of Social Justice*.

To reiterate an earlier point, the differing importance each vision accords to moral theory does *not* indicate conflicting value judgments. Quite the contrary, the advocate of constrained vision shares the same desires to aid the needy of his more freewheeling opposite number. It is not that he is an Ebenezer Scrooge disdaining any concern for the unfortunate. Rather, he believes that the spontaneous order of the market best helps the poor. The concept of "social justice" leads exactly to the abstract rationalism he wishes to confine within rigid limits.

Sowell includes substantially more in the book, including an application of his social visions to various policy issues and a discussion of evidence. But what has been said so far gives enough of a basis for an analysis of his thesis.

The difficulties begin with the first of the characteristics of the visions, i.e., each one's attitude toward human nature. Many people have thought that changes in institutions can produce radical changes in people's behavior, but it is not clear that this involves belief in a change in human nature. Instead, it may be that the same human nature is held to be capable of quite different forms of life under various conditions.

If, like Shelley, one believes that "Power, like a desolating pestilence, pollutes whate'er it touches; / And obedience, bane of all freedom, virtue, justice, truth, / Makes slaves of men; / And of the human frame, a mechanized automaton," one may think that the abolition of government will have beneficial effects. But these need not come about through changes in human nature: philosophical anarchism of Shelley's

kind may be based on liberating potential held already present in human beings.

I do not argue that Sowell incorrectly attributes to anyone in particular a belief that human nature is alterable. Rather, he fails altogether to draw the distinction just mentioned, making his analysis of the unconstrained visionaries difficult to assess. Even if one takes William Godwin, the ubiquitous example Sowell offers of someone whose vision was stratospherically unconstrained, one still wishes to ask: did Godwin think that the abolition of government and of false doctrines of morality would change human nature? It is not clear that he did. In a passage that Sowell cites, Godwin advocates attempting to appeal to "the generous and magnanimous sentiments of our natures" (pp. 2-5, quoting Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*). This hardly supports the view that Godwin wished to alter human nature. Here he seems to be saying that treatment of a certain kind will elicit a response from traits already present.

Admittedly, some passages in Godwin require considerable straining if one denies that Godwin did indeed contemplate a change in human nature. When, for example, he speculates that the future may bring an end to death, one can but gape in astonishment. But, once more, the point at issue is not whether Sowell has rightly or wrongly appraised Godwin; it is that he does not distinguish changes in human nature from changes in the environment which manifest traits that people have now. For a change in human nature, certain traits *not* currently present would have to emerge.

In defense of Sowell, it might be argued that we have been making too heavy weather of a distinction of minor importance. Is not the vital core of Sowell's argument that some theorists believe that people will always be largely self interested, with at most a tincture of altruism; while others think that in changed circumstances people can become devoted to one another's welfare? As Marx put the latter viewpoint, in a "higher stage" of socialism, "the free development of each will be the condition for the free development of all."

Here, as it seems to me, the suggested difference does not do quite the job Sowell has in mind for it. Presumably, the difference between what the two visions expect from human beings is supposed to emerge in action. The day when "the secrets of all hearts shall be revealed" does not, after all, belong to *human* history. If behavior, then, is the visible manifestation of what traits people have, does not the distinction Sowell has in mind reduce to one between those who expect different conditions to bring about substantial changes in human action and those who deny this?

The difficulty for Sowell, if he accepts this reconstruction of his distinction, is that many advocates of the constrained vision come down on the wrong side. Persons who criticize unconstrained visionaries

usually think that their radical plans for a new social order will worsen things. If, instead, one supports institutions that accord with human nature as it actually is, they think that much better results will ensue. If, e.g., one relies on the market to channel self-interested businessmen to fulfill the preferences of consumers, success appears far more likely than if one attempts a Procrustean policy of remolding people. No doubt; but looked at from an external point of view, *both* "constrained" and "unconstrained" visionaries believe that institutional change will make a vast difference to the sort of behavior prevalent in society. Once one puts some pressure on the idea of a change in human nature, the difference between the visions, as Sowell presents them, seems entirely a matter of varying approaches to policy and morality. The alleged difference in views on human nature "does no work"; it adds nothing to the visions.

Sowell might try to escape this argument by strengthening the view of human nature characteristic of the constrained vision. On the revised view, "constraint" would *really* mean constraint. A proponent of this version of the position would claim that little or no change in the condition of society is possible, regardless of what people do. We are just "stuck with" human beings as they are and that is that. A new problem arises here, however. On what grounds can the policies of the unconstrained vision be opposed? True, they will leave human nature as it is, but so will everything else. Why is any policy better or worse than another, if none affects the way people act?

Perhaps Sowell's best chance for escape is to attribute to the constrained vision the view that things can get worse than they now are but not much better. This gives both a reason to oppose certain measures—they will cause harm—yet at the same time the "not much better" provision distinguishes the position from its rival vision. The obvious difficulty here is that of the baseline. Worse or better than what? The economic system now prevalent in the United States? But do not those who fall within the constrained camp often think that some economic changes produce a great improvement? Hayek himself hardly takes the line, "Capitalism is the best we can hope for, and it is not very good."

Sowell's analysis of reason also gets him into some dubious areas. As he presents matters, advocates of the constrained point of view favor the market system. Those in the enemy camp find the market's reliance on inarticulate reason uncongenial. Favoring explicit planning as they do, they naturally incline to support central direction. Here Sowell's portrayal fits perfectly, if his aim is to sum up in brief the essential doctrines professed by F. A. Hayek. If, as seems apparently the case, he has a more ambitious goal and wishes to characterize major approaches to society in a way that "cuts at the joints," the analysis Sowell offers is more open to objection. Many free market

advocates think that people can consciously decide to establish a market society. Although of course the market itself operates without central planning, it by no means follows that establishing a market order requires that one rely on a supposed "inarticulate reason." To think otherwise is to adopt a too exclusively Hayekian outlook. Ludwig von Mises, Hayek's teacher, was much more "rationalistic" than Hayek. Yet, contrary to what Sowell's classification system would lead one to expect, Mises more strongly supported reliance on the market than Hayek does. The nineteenth-century Continental liberals, whom Hayek spurns as overly rationalistic, again were firm defenders of the market—the prime example, in Sowell's opinion, of a constrained social policy. To avert a possible misunderstanding, Sowell does *not* say that all on the constrained vision team must support the free market. Marx, whose vision Sowell thinks was in good part constrained, of course did not. Nevertheless, the free market is supposed to be a prime instance of a social institution that operates by inarticulate reason. As such, it fits into the constrained model.

In brief, my criticism is that both constrained and unconstrained figures have defended an institution Sowell thinks a criterion for one (but not the other) of the visions. Another criticism arises when one looks at a different connection, that supposedly present between emphasis on process and a pessimistic view of human beings. Thomas Hobbes certainly qualifies as taking a low view of human nature: to him, the dominant passion controlling human beings was the fear of violent death. Much controversial ink has been spilled over the issue of whether he was a psychological egoist; but even if he was not, there is little place in his system for actions done out of regard for others. Nevertheless, Hobbes's account of the origins of the state falls squarely within the "constructivist rationalist" camp. Thus, a strong "constrained" position on one issue combines with an equally powerful "unconstrained" account of another.

Many of the nineteenth-century classical liberals painted glowing pictures of the future of society that placed them outside the bounds of the constrained. But just what in their opinion would lead to such happy results was complete reliance on the market mechanism. Their adherence to a constrained theory of how society works led them directly to an unconstrained picture of human potential. Had Sowell examined the *Economic Harmonies* of Bastiat, instead of concentrating with such singleminded attention on William Godwin, his vision might have had quite other contents.

The examples just given cannot be dismissed as aberrations. What is supposed to be the logical connection between a pessimistic view of human beings and a reliance on process as opposed to "articulate reason?" The two areas appear entirely distinct. Someone with a pessimistic position, e.g., will not think that people can achieve ver-

nuch of value; but this does not tell us the role he accords to articulate reason. Similarly, an optimist will adopt a roseate view of whatever he thinks the best method of running society.

Perhaps the relation between the two areas is supposed to be this. If someone takes a "low" view of human beings, he will not rate highly their reasoning ability. Thus, he will fear to place much confidence in planning and will think reliance on custom and institutions which have arisen through evolution to be essential. Further, he will be very dubious of the *bona fides* of social reformers who promise wonders if power is handed to them. His suspicions will extend to self-anointed Platonic guardians as well. A pessimist will indeed be skeptical about abstract reason and its acolytes, but the conclusion that he will seek refuge in "inarticulate reason" does not follow. He may think that owing to the defects of human beings, however bad the results of planning, this is still "the best we've got." Once more, one's assessment of the best method of dealing with social problems is distinct from how much success one thinks it possible for human beings to attain. (For the past few paragraphs, I have put to one side the criticisms advanced against Sowell's account of human nature and assumed that we know in a rough-and-ready way what he has in mind.)

Although I have directed some criticism toward Sowell's account of the constrained attitude to reason, his presentation of the way the market works has considerable importance. Many social theorists ignore the "economic point of view." They fail to realize that the choice of one goal entails costs elsewhere and that not all "good things" can be achieved at once. Sowell's brief presentation of the free market may give some of them pause, should they chance to come upon it.

Our evaluation of Sowell's remarks on morality must be much more "constrained" in its enthusiasm. Sowell deprecates the importance of "value preferences": as he sees it, people have quite similar preferences but differ sharply on the best means to achieve their goals.

Sowell radically underestimates the significance of differences in moral outlook. Some people, e.g., presented with the elementary argument that shows why minimum wages will result in unemployment, will continue to support this measure. Unemployment of some may help particular groups to raise their income, and these latter may not care about the ill effects on others.

Nor are cases of conflict restricted to clashes between morality and "selfishness." Ronald Dworkin, a leading political and legal philosopher, favors egalitarianism even though it may involve some degree of lessened economic efficiency. To a large extent, Dworkin would concede to Sowell the importance of the market. He would demur from the "constrained vision" view that since "everyone" wants prosperity, considerations of justice must "get out of the way" if they interfere with the processes by which society operates.

Although Dworkin's substantive account of justice seems to me wrong his view that morality is relevant to social theory makes much more sense than the view Sowell attributes to the constrained visionaries.

It may well be true that most people want an efficient economy but it is a far cry from this to thinking that morality has nothing to do with the market. For one thing, how can one acceptably delimit the property rights people possess without reference to rights? The constrained visionary, as Sowell presents him, would no doubt reply that people should simply accept whatever system of property evolution has been served up to them. But why should they? Their doing so surely is not needed for the working of the market, since the market can operate with any generally acceptable scheme of rights. Why then need anyone who acknowledges the importance of the market avoid the notion of justice? Of course, some theories of justice are inimical to the market order, such as Rawls's system as usually interpreted. But even the constrained visionary and his ventriloquist Sowell should be aware that other moral theories support the free market. What is wrong with libertarian natural rights?

The argument is not altered if one takes account of Hume's point that since any private property system is better than none, people ought to avoid changing a conventionally established system lest they bring about disorder. The effects of particular changes are an empirical matter: will *any* alteration of what exists upset everything? How much disorder one is willing to tolerate, if necessary, to institute a morally appropriate system seems a matter for discussion, not one to be settled by reference to a spurious dichotomy of types of vision.

Once more, then, the items in Sowell's visions manifest no coherence. Someone who favors the free market need not adopt the moral skepticism that Sowell thinks appropriate to someone of constrained vision. Unless, like Sowell and his mentor Hayek, one is already a moral skeptic, one will not at all find that the operation of the market makes nugatory appeals to moral theory. Even if one thinks that social reason is largely inarticulate, moral theory can still remain. Why cannot a moral theory operate by inarticulate means? (I do not myself favor this approach but wish only to appoint that Sowell's presentation of inarticulate reason leaves it open to acceptance.)

A defender of Sowell might contend that we have misunderstood the point of his visions. He need not be taken as claiming that the various points of each vision are logically connected. Rather, the visions are a useful tool in looking at intellectual history: many thinkers can in fact be grouped in the way Sowell has set forward. Nor is the value of the scheme much affected by the fact that some thinkers—Sowell instance: Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill—do not fall completely within either of the categories. No system of classification is perfect.

It seems to me wrong to say that Sowell thinks it a pure matter

of fact that the elements of each vision go together, just as it happens to be the case that no state of the United States has the letter "Q" in its name. On the contrary, Sowell thinks that the positions included in his visions *do* fit together, and it is this claim I have been principally concerned to challenge.

Considered just as a method of classification, little can be said apart from a detailed consideration of its application to particular theorists. One more general problem with the scheme, however, is that few important writers seem to fit comfortably within the unconstrained camp. Sowell continually has to discuss Godwin—an underestimated but not *that* significant a figure—in order to have a case of someone who fits this side of his system.

Sowell's unconstrained vision accurately characterizes a number of twentieth-century "leftists" whom he mentions, such as Gunnar Myrdal. But apart from passing mention of Condorcet, Fourier, Paine, etc., he does not discuss any supposedly unconstrained visionary who lived before the twentieth century except Godwin. The only major contemporary theorist he deals with in this group is John Rawls; and Sowell grievously misunderstands him. Sowell thinks that Rawls's theory of justice uses abstract principles to ride roughshod over the processes by which the market functions efficiently. Contrary to Sowell, Rawls's difference principle does make provision for economic efficiency, since inequalities that are to the benefit of the worst-off are allowed. Someone who agrees with Sowell that the free market works to the advantage of the poor need have no trouble with the difference principle. Rawls himself does not share this view of the free market, but this is a factual issue, not an issue of the theory itself. Hayek thinks Rawls's theory largely compatible with his own views. Nothing in the preceding remarks is intended as an endorsement of Rawls's theory; but even a wrong theory does not justify the use of bad arguments to criticize it.

Further, if in fact the elements of Sowell's visions do not fit together logically, it may be that his system "works" only to the extent that it is parasitic on divisions of genuine intellectual importance. Two that come to mind are that between supporters and opponents of the free market and another between moral skeptics and "cognitivists." Also, though even a good classification will not fit everyone, even a useless scheme will fit *some* people.

Like all of Sowell's books, *A Conflict of Visions* is composed in a style that is easy to read, if at times boring in its unvarying and nondescript tone. Unlike much of his previous work, it is lacking in intellectual substance.

David Gordon
The Ludwig von Mises Institute