

BOOK REVIEW

SOCIAL JUSTICE FALLACIES

THOMAS SOWELL

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At the heart of *Social Justice Fallacies* is an internal refutation of the verdicts of Progressives on the moral status of inequalities between the races, sexes, and classes. Following from this is a criticism of the state interventions proposed to correct these inequalities. Sowell considers three themes throughout the book to make his case: the unchosen background of people, the different tastes of people, and the responses which people make to Progressive policies to “fix” inequalities. By showing how a majority of the inequality between groups is due to these three factors, he defeats the central idea of the social justice movement; namely, that “disparities are evidence or proof of the effects of such human vices as exploitation and discrimination” (2). This is a good book grounded in plenty of empirical evidence and solid arguments. I will now summarize its three themes, outline its secondary concerns, and offer minor criticism toward the end.

Sowell begins his book with the implicit assumption (which he does not believe) that everyone is equal in their natural capacities

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and in their tastes (which he does not believe) and proceeds to point to all the unchosen background conditions which ensure inequality, showing that “human vices have no monopoly as causes of economic and other disparities” (2). For instance, brewing has been going on in Germany since Roman times, which has partly contributed to those of German ancestry having created most of the leading beer brands in the United States. This is not because of a brewing gene; rather, it is due to accumulated knowledge being passed down the generations, which, all else being equal, inspires a disproportionate number of Germans to go into the industry.

Upbringing is relevant too. While it may be thought that children brought up by the same parents will, in the aggregate, be of the same intelligence due to having the same upbringing, even this is not the case. The firstborn have “higher average IQs, a higher rate of college completion, and are over-represented among most high achievers in a variety of endeavors” (9). All else being equal, and with the assumption that these indicators cause higher earnings, the natural conclusion is that races which have a greater number of children on average will have lower earnings compared to races which have fewer children on average. The same reasoning applies to age. It should be no surprise that Mexican Americans, with an average age of twenty-eight, have lower incomes than Japanese Americans, with an average age of fifty-two. The book is packed full of examples of unchosen background conditions which have significantly contributed to inequality between groups, from the fertility of the soil in Europe versus in Africa to the level of honesty within societies.

Sowell pushes his reasoning into the arena of heated debate concerning the causes of poverty among black communities too. An arresting fact which strikes against the Progressive idea the poverty of blacks is due to racism is this: since 1994 the poverty rate among black married couples has never been higher than 10 percent, while since 1959 the national poverty rate has never been as low as 10 percent. Sowell asks the rhetorical question: “If black family poverty is caused by ‘systemic racism’ do racists make an exception for blacks who are married?” (24). Against this reasoning the Progressive is known to claim that single parenthood is a legacy of slavery, hence the root of black poverty remains exploitation. Sowell points to two facts to rebut this argument. First, a majority of black children were raised in married families for a hundred

years after slavery was abolished, and it was only in the 1960s, with the vast expansion of the welfare state, that there was a significant expansion in the number of black children born outside of wedlock, alongside a similar trend among whites. Indeed, by the end of the twentieth century, 68.7 percent of births among black mothers were to the unmarried. Second, Sowell notes many European countries in the twenty-first century have at least 40 percent of births to unmarried women too, yet have no legacy of slavery. "But they have expanded welfare states" (29), he dryly remarks.

In addressing the theme of taste, or, differing preferences in lifestyle, Sowell gives a number of examples showing that it is varying preferences and not wrongdoing which mainly leads to the large differences between the sexes concerning incomes. When Progressives lament the underrepresentation of women in Silicon Valley, with its high demand for engineering skills, especially computer software engineering, they fail to point out that women hold fewer than 30 percent of the college and postgraduate degrees in engineering. The same reasoning applies across wider society too. In 2019 there "were 15 million more male, full-time, year-round workers than female, full-time, year-round workers" (6) due to, among other things, women taking time out of the workplace to raise children, often going part-time afterwards. To the chagrin of Progressives, Sowell cites data showing that since 1971, single women in their thirties who have worked continuously since leaving school have earned "slightly more than men of the same description" (7). Sexism is clearly not the main reason for income inequality between the sexes.

In the third and fourth chapters of the book, Sowell addresses how implementing the vision of social justice often leads to greater inequality or impoverishment, hence defeating the very point of social justice itself. In particular, Sowell addresses a number of policies, such as capping interest on payday loans, rent controls, and the minimum wage, which are rooted in an opposition to exploitation. Sowell repeats the often-mentioned fact the minimum wage has put many of the poorest people out of work or stopped them from entering the workforce altogether. What I found especially interesting, though, is his analysis of how the minimum wage has damaged the prospects of blacks the most. Although the federal minimum wage law has been in place since 1938, it was nullified

by inflation throughout the 1940s, meaning that by the early 1950s there was no effective minimum wage in existence. Starting in the same decade, though, the minimum wage was increased to the extent that it became “effective” in the latter decades of the twentieth century. The inevitable occurred: In 1948 unemployment among black and white male teenagers above sixteen was about 10 percent; indeed, there was less than a 1 percent difference between racial groups. However, “in the later decades of that century, the annual unemployment rate of black male teenagers never fell below 20 percent” (59). Crucially for Sowell’s thesis, teenage unemployment for blacks was significantly higher than it was for whites, “exceeding two-to-one” (59) in a number of years.

Sowell argues that the reason for this disparity is that while the minimum wage is effective, the surplus of workers for jobs makes discrimination potentially costless; for example, a black person may be turned down and easily replaced by a white candidate. In contrast, employers in a free market for labor who discriminate would have to “pay more to attract additional other qualified applicants to replace them, or else work existing employees overtime, at higher overtime rates of pay—costing the employer money in either case” (60), the result being that businesses seeking profit will not usually discriminate. If racism were a major cause of black youth unemployment today, as some advocates of social justice contend, you would expect there to have been a far larger disparity between the unemployment rates of blacks and whites in the overtly racist 1950s, yet the data shows the very opposite, pointing to the minimum wage as the best explanation for the current predicament.

Beyond showing how the verdicts and proposals of Progressives are flawed on their own grounds, Sowell takes the general attitude of this group to task, finding it to be highly dogmatic too. In the best section of the whole book, titled “Genetic Determinism” (29–47), Sowell draws a compelling comparison between the Progressives of the early twentieth century and those of the late twentieth century in regard to their explanations for the root cause of the differences between the races. Essentially, just as Progressives of the early twentieth century saw inequalities between the races and immediately attributed them to genetic determinism, Progressives of the late twentieth century saw inequalities between the races and

immediately attributed them to racial discrimination. As Sowell writes: "The conclusions were different, but the way evidence was used and the way contrary views and contrary evidence were disregarded, was very similar." (30).

Sowell begins the section by showing that the evidence used by the early Progressives to support genetic determinism simply did not support their line of thinking, and could have been known not to at the time. A major piece of evidence used to support genetic determinism was the mental test results from soldiers enrolled in the First World War, which "showed that black soldiers as a whole scored lower than white soldiers as a whole" (30). This was taken by Progressives such as Madison Grant and Carl Brigham "as irrefutable evidence that genetic determinism was a proven fact" (30). Yet Sowell offers at least three explanations which undermine this simple extrapolation. First, education was a confounding factor; indeed, if genetics was the major factor, why did black soldiers from Ohio, Illinois, and New York outscore white soldiers from Georgia, Kentucky, and Mississippi? "People's genes do not change when they cross a state line . . . [but] some states do have better schools than others" (31). Social isolation among blacks was a second explanation for the difference; indeed, "White people living in canal boat communities in Britain . . . [received] IQ test scores similar to those of black Americans" (32). Sowell also cites the army tests which showed that Northern blacks scored slight better than recently arrived immigrants from Europe, supporting the social isolation explanation—the immigrants' lower scores were due, presumably, to their greater isolation. Upbringing was a third factor; one study, admittedly from 1976, found that black children raised by white parents "had significantly higher average IQs than other black children, and IQs slightly above the national average" (33).

After relaying this reasoning, Sowell evidences the great number of Progressives who really believed in this genetic determinism. They ranged from figures such as Woodrow Wilson and Edward A. Ross to Richard Ely and John Maynard Keynes, the last of whom helped set up the eugenics society at Cambridge. Many scholars of the time advocated for "the worst" to be isolated or sterilized on the basis of genetic determinism (35). In discussing the Progressivism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Sowell cites a number of inequalities between blacks and whites, such as their respective

rates of being fired in a recession, access to mortgages, and school punishment, and finds that the jumped-to explanation of racial discrimination as the major cause of the differences is simply not plausible. In both periods of time “the utter certainty [Progressives had] in their conclusions” is shown to be totally unwarranted (30).

Sowell makes a solid case against both sets of Progressives; nonetheless, I believe he overeggs the pudding in his refutation of genetic determinism. He does this by claiming that “implicit in the early twentieth-century Progressivism . . . [was the assumption that] there was a genetically determined ceiling on the intelligence of some groups” (43) and arguing that the Flynn effect, which shows global IQ to have risen substantially over the last couple of generations, has dealt the ceiling hypothesis “a decisive blow” (42). Yet the assumption of the ceiling hypothesis need not be implicit within genetic determinism. For a genetic determinist may view the intelligence of the races as elastic bands which respond to external forces, thus accommodating the Flynn effect while still arguing that the nature of the elastic band (e.g., how thick it is unstretched) itself largely dictates how much it can stretch relative to others when the same force is applied. Such reasoning would still support Progressives’ wishing to exclude the “lesser races” from the population to stop them from lowering its IQ.

In sum, *Social Justice Fallacies* is a very good book. It is not groundbreaking in any way, and many of its points will have been heard before. Nonetheless, the extensive research which has gone into it ensures that these points are made with renewed robustness. As a work taking on the woke on their own grounds, it is sure to prove an invaluable resource to libertarians and conservatives in these increasingly tense times between the races, sexes, and classes; I would definitely recommend reading it.