

Good Old Wine, New Bottle

by Lawrence E. Harrison

Thomas Sowell has for more than fifteen years been among America's most politically incorrect — and influential — economists, importantly because of his belief that culture is a major factor in explaining why some national, ethnic, or racial groups do better than others, also because he is a black conservative. In *Migrations and Cultures — A World View*, recently published by Basic Books, Sowell stresses that some cultures are more progress-prone than others and that multiculturalism and affirmative action work against progress and unity in the United States.

Readers of *Ethnic America* (1981), *The Economics and Politics of Race* (1983), and *Race and Culture* (1985), are going to encounter a lot of familiar material in *Migrations and Cultures*. Sowell focuses on the performance of six immigrant groups —

Lawrence Harrison is an associate at the Center for International Affairs at Harvard University. He is the author of *Underdevelopment Is a State of Mind — the Latin American Case; Who Prospers? — How Cultural Values Shape Economic and Political Success; and the forthcoming The Pan-American Dream — Culture and Community* (Basic Books).

Germans, Japanese, Italians, Chinese, Jews, and East Indians — in destination countries all over the world. (All but the East Indians were the subject of chapters in *Ethnic America*.) His conclusion is that the success and prosperity of these groups in very different settings — for example, the Germans in Russia, Brazil, the United States, and Australia — is chiefly the consequence of cultural factors such as work ethic, frugality, emphasis on education, discipline, and sense of

Migrations and Cultures

By Thomas Sowell
New York:
BasicBooks 1996
516 pages. \$30.00.



community, factors that also importantly explain why, using the same example, Germany itself is so prosperous.

That parallel also works well for Japan and at least the north of Italy, less well for China (although its post-Mao economic performance is surely consistent with the astonishing achievements of the overseas Chinese), and not well at all for India. But Sowell documents the importance of tracing whence within India came the immigrants to East Africa, Malaysia, the United States, Trinidad, etc., concluding that those who were successful in India, like the Gujaratis, are those who have been most successful abroad.

The chapter on the Italians examines the striking differences between the achievements of the northern and southern Italians both at home and overseas and is particularly relevant for the United States today because the southern Italians have followed a path similar to that of the Latin Americans, and particularly Mexicans, who constitute the majority of legal and illegal immigrants into the United States in recent decades. The southern Italians and the Mexicans have not attached priority to education — school dropout rates for both have been high — and they have tended to remain in the blue collar class, in sharp contrast with the Germans, Chinese, Japanese, Jews, and East Indians, all of whom have valued education highly and have moved rapidly into the professions and business. Sowell points out that at the peak, Italians accounted for 1.5 percent of the American population. Today, Latin Americans account for almost 10 percent, Mexicans for almost 5 percent.

The chapter on Italy also underscores a gap in Sowell's scholarship that may result in the incorrect impression that what he is saying is being said for the first time. *Migrations and Cultures* contains 2,371 footnotes. But Sowell ignores some of the most important books that address the matters of principal concern to him. Religion is a key source of values in his argument, but Max Weber's name does not appear in the text. Nor does Edward Banfield and his *The Moral Basis*

of a *Backward Society*, a seminal cultural interpretation of southern Italy's backwardness (it is mentioned in a footnote). Nor does Robert Putnam's recent *Making Democracy Work*, a comprehensive examination of the differences between Italy's north and south with a strong message about the importance of culture.

After tracing the histories of the six ethnic groups, Sowell presents a set of conclusions several of which imply new or changed policies for the United States. His overarching conclusion is that "each group has its own cultural pattern — and ... these patterns do not disappear upon crossing a border or an ocean. Nor are these patterns always coextensive with national or racial groups. Among migrants from India, for example, Tamils have not had the same experience, either at home or abroad, as Gujaratis. Southern Italians have differed from northern Italians ... the skills, habits, and values which constitute the cultural endowment of a people usually play a powerful role in shaping the kinds of outcomes experienced by that people."

He argues, as I have, that cultural relativism is wholly inconsistent with the reality that some cultures produce more well-being and justice than others. He describes the idea that all cultures are essentially equal as "at best, a polite evasion of otherwise embarrassing differences in performance and, at worst, a distraction from the task of acquiring the requisite human capital behind other people's good fortune, instead of resenting that good fortune and attributing it to 'exploitation' of those who had

precious little to exploit." Moreover, "Skills have never been evenly or randomly distributed, whether between ethnic groups, nations, or civilizations," which is relevant to Sowell's strong opposition to affirmative action. "Therefore academic standards, employment standards, and other criteria can no longer be dismissed as arbitrary impositions of barriers with 'disparate impact' by races, class, gender, or other social groupings."

Sowell goes on to argue, as I did in *Who Prospers?* that the disparities in well-being between blacks and whites in contemporary America are more the consequence of cultural problems than of discrimination. His tracing of the intensely discriminatory treatment of Chinese and Japanese immigrants in the United States serves as a backdrop for their high levels of achievement in the absence of political favors or preferential treatment, in contrast with the emphasis by many contemporary black leaders on such preferences. He reinforces his argument with some telling data: "Black American married couples with college degrees [are] at the same income level as white American married couples with college degrees. Even a quarter of a century earlier, black males raised in homes with books and library cards were at the same income levels as white males raised in homes with similar advantages and similar education."

Sowell thus rejects the categories of "haves" and "have-nots" in favor of "doers" and "do-nots," and some cultures encourage "doing" more than others. When immigrants from a passive culture move to a country of dy-

namic culture, "they gain a higher standard of living and a wider cultural exposure which they come to value and embrace." The multiculturalism that encourages the perpetuation of the values of passive cultures is thus contrary to the interests of both the immigrants and the new host society. Particularly inappropriate and costly are affirmative action programs for immigrants "set up ostensibly to remedy historic wrongs that occurred before contemporary immigrants arrived."

A disappointing aspect of *Migrations and Cultures* is Sowell's failure to address the broad issue of immigration. He does not discuss the impact of high immigration. He does not discuss the impact of high immigration levels, and particularly of uneducated, unskilled immigrants, on the prospects of poor citizens, on our population growth rate, on the environment. His treatment of the six ethnic groups may leave the impression that all immigrant groups can make it in the United States — and be a net asset for the nation — if we facilitate their acculturation to America rather than perpetuate their original cultures through multiculturalist policies and affirmative action. But the main current of the book drives home the idea that some cultures are more progress-prone than others and that some immigrant groups do better than others.

The need for disaggregation by ethnicity or national origin of the immigration flow is an important contribution to the immigration debate. Disaggregation will help to explain Francis Fukuyama's pro-immigration stance (Japanese immigrants

have done extremely well in America) in contrast to the anxious stance of Richard Estrada (Mexican immigrants have *not* done very well). And Sowell correctly defines the dilemma with which his analysis leaves us: "... domestic ideological agendas may make it impossible to be selective in admitting immigrants from different nations, leaving as alternatives only loss of control of the border or restrictive policies toward immigrants in general." Probably the best that can be realistically sought is a new policy that stresses the skills, education, and financial resources of immigrants. □