

Race and Agency in Thomas Sowell

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*Revisiting the African
American Liberal
Integrationist Experience*

By

Sami C. Nighaoui

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PREFACE

The “Unite the Right rally” (more commonly known as the “Charlottesville rally”) of 2017 set off a strong wave of concerns among local and national political elites along the liberal-conservative ideological continuum that racial comity was potentially at stake. But the response of the official representatives of the conservatives in power came late, and too soft to reflect any genuine concern over the ever increasing ethnic and racial tensions, or what could possibly be described as America’s enduring scourge. The far-right white supremacist demonstration had veered into violent confrontations with liberal counter-protestors, causing serious injuries and one death among marchers from both camps. The liberal Integrationist thrust, heir to a century-long tradition of compassionate will to build a unified national community, seemed to suddenly lose momentum.

But the threat to racial integration is by no means a recent concern under a government often accused of showing sympathy towards white supremacist and ultranationalist groups. It is the apotheosis of years of white intolerance as demonstrated by police brutality against blacks, undocumented immigrants, and Middle Eastern religious minorities. We all remember the 2015 “Charleston church massacre” by a white supremacist militant who claimed to have acted on purely racist motives, devising a plan to trigger what he called a “racial war.” One remembers too well the physical assault against a girl in Brooklyn who, together with her mother, were threatened to have their “throats cut” for simply wearing a headscarf. The influence of the 6,000-strong Ku Klux Klan community (a 2016 estimate by the Southern Poverty Law Center) might in fact seem insignificant in comparison with mainstream organizations. And yet the debate that the Charlottesville rally sparked in 2017 bears witness to the assailability of Liberal Integrationism as a public philosophy.

If, on the other hand, the resurgence of Black Power is received with indictment and blame for exacerbating racial animosities, ignoring the need for a conceptual reconfiguration of the current Integrationist strategy, in which notoriously ineffective policymaking has inhibited integration even more seriously, becomes hubristic intellectual tyranny, pure and simple. What is often derogatively referred to as the Liberal Left is today in need of rejuvenation as it should aim to re-invent itself for it to recover its mid-20th century popular appeal as a political approach to social justice. The ability

of the Liberal Left to translate the constitutional values of justice and equal opportunity into concrete social reality is a hallmark of historical significance for integration theorists and ideologues to appreciate. Because the promises of integration are today more than ever compromised, the renegotiation of the liberal/progressive position in the political arena should be done in light of the criticism levelled in right-libertarian conservative narratives.

My choice to write a book on Thomas Sowell was driven by two major considerations. For one thing, whereas critics in the conservative establishment (economists, sociologists and educationists) consider him as one the most influential economists of the past thirty years, in my opinion he stands above most right-libertarians as a perfect representative of this ideology, notwithstanding Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. In fact, Sowell's writings cover a larger range of academic areas than just economics. He wrote extensively about race and culture, public policymaking and even about late-talking children. Milton Friedman once commented on Sowell's exceptional contribution to the national conversation on social justice that he thought Sowell "[was] close to being [a genius]." Other observers describe him as a "national treasure" and a "peerless nerd." A 2015 *Forbes Magazine* article lamented that Sowell was not awarded the Nobel Prize because, it argued, "no one alive [...] turned out [as] many insightful, richly researched books [as him]."

Sowell could definitely be a "national treasure," a vocal intellectual who attempts to demonstrate with solid figures and data how "the performance of [American] society can be improved." His apologism for market deregulation and free trade might as well have had considerable influence on Neoliberal theories. Sowell is a senior fellow at one of the most well-reputed think tanks in the United States, notably the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, California. But because his political and economic writings as well as his numerous syndicated columns are so widely read and appreciated, what Sowell has had to say about racial integration should obviously be of particular significance in racial policymaking.

Reading Sowell has always provoked in me both admiration and frustration. I owe him so much admiration for his impressively dexterous handling of sociological and economic materials which he uses to produce an intellectually challenging rhetoric. But I find several of his interpretations of sociological and political data disputable, in addition to the highly subjective representations of the cultural dynamics of minority integration in many of his works. While current racial policies, for example, are far from being perfect, and I wrote this book specifically to suggest how they could be possibly revised and improved, the idea of discontinuing them altogether is exactly the kind of vicious complacency that I call hubris a

moment earlier. And so I decided to demonstrate that discontinuing preferential programs at this point when the Integrationist heritage is threatened by the rising bigotry and racism of the radical right could be a huge blow to the government's efforts to integrate minorities in general, and African Americans in particular. I should assume you asked why African Americans in particular and not Hispanics or Middle Eastern communities, for example. As I shall attempt to demonstrate, statistics based on both government and non-profit organizations' research show that communities with a comparatively recent immigrant experience, such as Asian Americans, are outperforming blacks in several different fields, including employment and education. I therefore argue that initial socioeconomic disadvantage cannot be excluded from any considerate examination of black-white performance disparities.

So my interest in how ideological dogmatism (as opposed to pragmatism and *realpolitik*) could be potentially dangerous in policymaking processes is also an important motivation for my choice of Sowell's work as the focus of this book. One could in fact see many of Sowell's recommendations clearly translated into concrete public policy guidelines under President Trump. Isn't "Trump's Mexican wall" an accurate reproduction of the entrenched prejudice of hardline conservative advisors around the President against non-native cultural communities?

Ironically, Sowell is black and very probably profited from preferential treatment as he was admitted to two Ivy League universities, Harvard and Columbia, after he had dropped out of school at the age of 17 to serve in the navy. This possibility for African Americans to enroll in the top-ranked universities is today being seriously challenged. And so is the longtime trust of sizeable numbers of African Americans in the dependability of the Integrationist alternative. Sowell's constant disparagement of black ethnic culture on the one hand, and his appeal for an end to preferential policies on the other are considered in this book as an intent to penalize a community that is already trapped in a double bind where the egalitarian promises of civic republicanism conflict with denigration and denial. This is eventually represented as an impending threat to the very ideal of an ethnically integrated society.

INTRODUCTION

On July 24, 2015, around 500 advocacy groups representing African American communities from all over the country met in a three-day conference at Cleveland State University to deliberate on the creation of a unified political front. Outside the conference facilities, demonstrators shouted slogans decrying what they perceived as deliberate institutional indifference to the plight of their communities in face of the dramatic upsurge of anti-black racism, police brutality and violence committed by white supremacist groups. The slogans echoed in essence those raised the year before during what historians call the “Ferguson unrest” in reference to the riots which broke out in two waves over the next four months following the death of 18-year-old Michael Brown. The effervescent crowd fueled further enthusiasm for the participants at the CSU conference who were by now intent on launching a political resistance platform to translate the slogans that had for long remained inconsequential into concrete militant action.

The Cleveland event came down in history as an additional hallmark of African American ability to bring together disparate small civil rights groups in ideologically unified movements. It heralded the birth of the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) which today represents in an action plan the interests of not less than 500 organizations articulating the grievances and aspirations of a large segment of the community. Its agenda (or “policy table”) comprises next to thirty policy guidelines aimed at promoting the overall well-being of the African American community, roughly falling in six broadly defined demands: an end to “the war on blacks,” compensation for past injustice, investment in the public sector, promotion of social justice, support for community-level decision-making, and empowerment of black organizations and associations. Highly active black grassroots organizations and collectives such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), Color of Change, and the Freedom Road Socialist Organization (FRSO) either support M4BL or are part of the coalition.

In their mission statement, M4BL argue that the underlying rationale behind the creation of the coalition is the conviction that mainstream democratic institutions, despite the existence of a battery of significant reform legislation, have failed to promote social justice and equal opportunity

for large sections of the African American community, including women and transgender people. In their own words, they are

Black people from all walks of life – young, elder, queer, cis, trans, differently abled. [They] have come together in the rich tradition of [their] ancestors to imagine new ways forward for [their] liberation. [They] are dreamers and doers knowing that [their] work draws on the best of [their] history but must go beyond it to forge a fierce, free and beautiful future together that [they] can only imagine into reality.¹

The distinctly essentialist overtones of this declaration of intents clearly supersede the possibility for a Universalist agenda. For the Movement for Black Lives identifies itself as an all-black network of organizations, a coalition which “recognizes” the richly resourced legacy of the “ancestors,” committing itself to the “liberation” of the black community by forging a “fierce” future. In light of this Afrocentric perspective, “the best” in black history could in fact be the narrative product of a deliberate displacement of white Anglo-Protestant cultural heritage and a reclaiming of centrality at the core of a new hierarchy, a fictive social ecology where blackness is rewarded for its redemptive role.

A few lines further down the mission statement, the listing of African American grievances turns into a cynical enumeration of the structural origins of the community’s social and economic ailments. Expressing disillusionment with political inertia and, more specifically, with the government’s failure to deal competently with the systematic transgressions of the constitutional provisions of life and justice for all citizens that are often committed by the representatives of the system, the statement develops an overtly critical stance against the state itself as when it argues that

[blacks] know all too well that the reforms that have passed at the local and state level do not address the root causes of the killing, dehumanization, and torture of [black] people. Instead, many increase police budgets and diagnoses the problem as one of “implicit bias” or “bad apples.” At best these are band aids on gaping bullet wounds, and at worse they are interventions that simply increase corporate and state power and make it easier for the state to devalue and destroy [black] communities.²

The use of an accusatory rhetoric against the government for allegedly conspiring to annihilate African Americans is reminiscent of Black Power organizations’ discursive tactics of resistance which put into question mainline conceptions about racial integration. It is also a solid reminder that advocacy for African American separateness is still attractive to a sizeable

section of the community, which might well compromise the historic civil rights assets gained through a decades-long struggle to integrate. The movement's "centeredness" and "rootedness" in black communities and its avowal to achieve "collective liberation" invoke Black Power's privileging of a resistance strategy anchored in the Separatist doctrine of black nationhood.

The movement's essentialist discourse contests Integrationism as the articulation of white political interests and a systematized reproduction of white supremacist narratives. By so doing, it problematizes the rationale behind the very principle of integration as a baseline for the community's struggle for socioeconomic advancement. More significantly, however, it resuscitates the conflictual atmosphere of the civil rights era during which sizeable African American communities were alienated by the seemingly irreconcilable positions of well-meaning idealist leaders. As the nation commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr's assassination in 2018, the Integrationist philosophy of this great African American civil rights leader is reexamined through the lens of a number of race scholars who start to question the widely shared belief that he was a resolute advocate of interracial partnership. Basing their revisions on passages from *Where Do We Go From Here?* (1967),³ critics of the traditionalist representation of King as an unconditional Integrationist promote the idea that, a few years before his assassination, he started to lose faith in the ability of American democratic institutions to ensure racial justice. The book is today a recommended reading in many universities across the United States and has been acclaimed as a manifesto against poverty regardless of race and ethnicity. And yet, there are passages that suggest disillusionment with the Integrationist discourse of white society as, to use Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., a "charitable enterprise" for white people to "do good" to blacks. In King's own words,

Negroes have proceeded from a premise that equality means what it says, and they have taken white Americans at their word when they talked of it as an objective. But most whites in America ... proceed from a premise that equality is a loose expression for improvement. White America is not even psychologically organized to close the gap—essentially it seeks only to make it less painful and less obvious but in most respects to retain it.⁴

Rethinking the Integrationist approach to racial equality might be a legitimate undertaking as parity in income, employment, and educational opportunity continues to be a deferred dream in this early 21st-century. King's occasional outbursts in his personal disillusionment with the ostensibly progressive intentions of white society is suggestive of what

could be referred to as an American dilemma, to use Gunnar Myrdal. The second part of King's book title "Community or Chaos" is a portentous indication of Integrationism's vulnerability as a mainstream ideology, while the rise of M4BL could in this vein be considered as an expression of the recent racial crisis as reflected by the recurrence of violent race riots.

However, the effects of a rollback to the dogmas of separateness and nationhood on African Americans may be too obvious to contest. Aside from the fact that it exacerbates black-white tensions at this point when neo-Nazi and other white supremacist groups are becoming increasingly assertive, a massive popular return to the Separatist mindset of the early twentieth century all but compromises the thin socioeconomic gains achieved during the 70s and early 80s. Sizeable numbers of middle-class African Americans are relapsing into poverty following the 2008 economic recession, research finds.⁵ And this precarious condition is made all the more difficult to cope with in the existence of a hostile ideology which breeds resentment and antagonism.

But while an inflammatory rhetoric could hardly help in levelling the playing ground for the community to make substantial inroads into the mainstream, a national conversation about race and ethnicity where the structural impediments to integration are carefully addressed is needed now more than ever. Former president Clinton launched an initiative on race in 1997 but it lacked the necessary follow-up and commitment.⁶ During Barack Obama's presidency, the racial issue was downplayed in favor a policy meant to promote equal access to opportunity for all without regard to race.⁷ The reason why racial integration is turning into a pressing issue is the increasing racialization of the public space where exchanging accusations and blame is becoming standard fare. Conservatives against liberals, apologists against dissenters, and traditionalists against progressives, the political landscape is morphing into an ideological battlefield after a short-lived respite at the dawn of this century when the country seemed to have finally overcome its racial problem.

The liberal insurgence of the past few years, which peaked after the election of Donald Trump, could be observed in mainstream media reports on a range of issues related to social justice and equality, such as immigrant rights, the right of formerly disadvantaged groups to preferential treatment, and cultural pluralism. In the context of this national disagreement on the true meaning of republicanism, civic ideology is perceived in liberal and ethnocentric scholarship as the quintessence of white Anglo-American supremacy. It is often described as a fictive substitute for cultural authenticity which, while allowed to white minorities, is denied to non-white ethnic

groups and nationals. Perhaps more controversially, it is represented as an impediment for minority socioeconomic advancement.

Blaming the victim for their own adversity implies a rewarding of the advantaged for their prosperity. This is of course tolerated in a presumably meritocratic society where success is synonymous with abidance by the white Protestant work ethic and identification with the values concomitant with the civic principles of the republic. What is objectionable, however, is to disengage from the moral responsibility to recognize the effects of discrimination and initial disadvantage on the quality of the subsequent economic performance of the discriminated communities. The backlash against affirmative action on the grounds that it promotes inequality illustrates the persistence of conservative (Neoliberal) influence on public policy-making. The indictment that ethnic culture is intrinsically deficient or incapable of meeting the standards of competition in a capitalist economic order is further evidence of the way non-white underperforming communities are marginalized.

The critique of preferential policies and cultural insularity as a stumbling block for African American socioeconomic ascension is the ideological linchpin of civic republicanism. The latter finds support among a number of prominent classical liberals such as Thomas Sowell, Shelby Steele, Walter E. Williams and Stephen and Abigail Thernstrom, all of whom are affiliated with the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. Although they recognize the persistence of substantial intergroup disparities in housing, income, employment and educational achievements, they tend to deemphasize the structural dimensions of disparity. Identifying solutions with a civic ideology that embraces the dogmas of a free market economy, they argue against compensation based on criteria other than merit and competitiveness. Research conducted by this group of scholars is essentially focused on the mechanisms by which preferential policies hinder integration, notably how they encourage the favored communities to rely on governmental assistance rather than engage in self-actualization through competition.

Critics of preferential policies at Hoover emphasize the counterproductive impacts of preferential policies and question their very constitutionality, and in fact summative research based on statistical data collected over the past few decades proves beyond doubt that preferential programs have negative effects on performance patterns among beneficiaries.⁸ Expanding on the premise that group favoritism is doing the targeted communities more harm than good, Sowell has developed a comparative analysis of policymaking processes in multiethnic societies, showing interest in the significance of historical perspective in designing sound policies. His historical perspectivism, informed by empirical research about ethnic cultures, allowed him to

expand the scope of his analysis into the structural origins of minority underperformance, lending his works on the subject a unique position in conservative scholarship.

The larger part of Sowell's work on culture is focused on the range of choices made by individuals and communities within a particular "cultural universe" which he considers to either expedite integration or slow it down. These choices, Sowell maintains, will not serve the interests of different communities because some cultures are more effective at meeting specific standards than others.⁹ This social Darwinist approach to group performance justifies to a large extent the relentless criticism which his works on culture have received from liberal observers who accuse him for resorting to eugenic theories to support his claims. Added to his critique of preferential policies, Sowell's cultural perspective is the second important mainstay of what this book presents as a fully developed theory of integration that none of the Hoover school scholars managed to elaborate.

But despite the argumentative cohesion one finds in much of Sowell's thesis about the political and cultural origins of minority underperformance, a number of founding assumptions in his approach remain highly questionable. One of Sowell's most controversial conjectures is the impossibility for African Americans to achieve socioeconomic progress *if* race-conscious programs are not immediately discontinued.¹⁰ As observed earlier, it is true that preferential programs have at times reached the point of diminishing returns for the targeted groups and society as a whole, notably in terms of incentives and opportunity cost for the more competitive individuals and communities. It could be even less sustainable that the disadvantaged members of the community are those who are truly benefitting from special admissions and hiring practices. However, hardly does Sowell discuss the initial disadvantage which snowballed into an almost insurmountable barrier for hundreds of thousands of African Americans. A major premise in this book is that preferential programs could instead be reformed based on a cognizant appraisal of its weaknesses and strengths. Pulling out of preferential programs while anti-black racist incidents are reported on a daily and nationwide basis by considerable numbers of African Americans might not be the finest option for the time being. This is an important part of the discussion in the final chapter where practical solutions are suggested in light of the empirical findings examined throughout the previous chapters.

It should be clear at his stage that postethnicity could be a highly misleading concept and that, therefore, a color-blind (postethnic) society may not be a perfect solution to the problem of black-white achievement gaps. Chapter four deals precisely with postethnicity as an elusive conceptual

construct and how it operates under a civic ideology masquerading as a progressive alternative to the status quo. The political and cultural critique provided in this book is integrated in part because preferential policies (the political) have had deep impacts on performance and achievement (the educational and economic) which could be difficult to account for without reference to specific areas of intersection. Respectively, chapters two and three discuss from a Sowellian point of view the problems of preferential policies and cultural essentialism or ethnocentrism. These chapters examine the presumed implications of a liberal approach to the problem of black-white disparities. This is where some of Sowell's claims about the counterproductive effects of implementing an "unconstrained" vision of human potential are explained and checked against empirical data. Some of the issues examined therein address questions at the core of political and cultural theory, and revolve essentially around the limits of human knowledge and capacity for change.

As currently implemented, preferential policies cannot solve the problems of poverty, unemployment, low income and academic underperformance among poorly educated African Americans. But neither can cultural insularity and parochialism for that matter. Black Power's plea for a "full and independent political power" intensifies racial tensions and, more importantly, cannot provide a realistic alternative to integration. M4BL's action plan might be paved with good intentions, but in my opinion, a return to the ideological warfare of the Black Power era may be way too detrimental to community cohesion. The argument here is that African Americans achieved substantial economic and educational progress starting in the late 1960s during which period Integrationism was the mainstream ideology in black America.¹¹ The socioeconomic gap continued to narrow down right through the 70s until the inception of the revisionist economic policies of the Reagan administration. That the will to integrate is a *sine quo non* condition for group advancement is a critical assumption in this book. Chapter One provides a full discussion of the Integrationist and Separatist solutions to the African American problem.

Recognizing the virtues of integration gives Sowell credit for addressing one of the most controversial issues in the civil rights debate. However, his biased views about identification with a distinctly African American cultural heritage are, in my understanding, what most specifically constitutes the nemesis of an otherwise well-developed theory. Certainly, his richly documented study of the demographic, historical and political determinants of cultural effectiveness provides unrivalled insights into the evolutionary nature of cultural formations. And yet, he seems to be barely aware of the importance of the ego-strength and self-esteem that come with ethnic pride

in motivating individuals to meet the prevailing performance standards in a particular society. Rigid cultural hierarchies could in fact be a serious deterrent for socioeconomically disadvantaged communities to reach higher standards of achievement and therefore, as argued in the final chapter, cultural emancipation (as one of multiculturalism's core doctrines) may be an indispensable condition for an effective equalization of opportunities.

Notes

1. Jane Rhodes, "Preface," in *News of Baltimore: Race, Rage and the City*, eds. Linda Steiner and Silvio Waisbord (NY: Routledge, 2017), xviii.
2. "Why a Platform?" The Movement for Black Lives, accessed December 12, 2017. <https://policy.m4bl.org/about>.
3. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (MA: Beacon Press, 2010).
4. *Ibid.*, 8.
5. Gillian B. White, "The Recession's Racial Slant" last modified June 24, 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/06/black-recession-housing-race/396725>. On the impact of the recession on the wealth of African American median household, the author observes that by 2031, "the downturn will have decreased [it] by almost \$100,000."
6. William J. Clinton, "Commencement Address at the University of California San Diego in La Jolla, California" last modified October 12, 2016. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=54268>.
7. A 2016 Gallup Poll found that only 32% of the surveyed thought Obama's presidency was "one of the most important advances for blacks in the US." See "In U.S., Obama Effect on Racial Matters Falls Short of Hopes," accessed April 22, 2017. <http://news.gallup.com/poll/194495/obama-effect-racial-matters-falls-short-hopes.aspx>.
8. "Affirmative Action: An Overview," *National Conference of State Legislatures*, accessed January 12, 2017. <http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/affirmative-action-overview.aspx>.
9. See, for example, Sowell's discussion of the Roman and Muslim cultures and civilizations in Spain in *Race and Culture: A world View* (NY: Basic Books, 1994), ix-x.
10. Sowell, "Affirmative Action around the World" last modified August 24, 2016. <https://www.hoover.org/research/affirmative-action-around-world>.
11. Africans Americans gained substantial access to better education and white-collar jobs and their income rose dramatically during the 60s and 70s as shown in Appendices 1 and 2.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|----------------|--|
| M4BL: | Movement for Black Lives |
| BLM: | Black Lives Matter |
| BNM: | Black Nationalist Movement |
| CAP: | Community Action Program |
| CAA: | Community Action Agency |
| CSA: | Community Services Administration |
| CSU: | Cleveland State University |
| ESSA: | Every Student Succeeds Act |
| FRSO: | Freedom Road Socialist Organization |
| GAP: | Grey Areas Project |
| Gen Y: | Generation Y |
| K12: | Kindergarten through 12th Grade |
| MCs: | Model Cities |
| NBPP: | New Black Panther Party for Self-Defense |
| NCLB: | No Child Left Behind Act |
| NOI: | Nation of Islam |
| OEO: | Office of Economic Opportunity |
| PRWORA: | Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act |
| USCCR: | US Commission on Civil Rights |

CHAPTER ONE

THEORIZING RACIAL INTEGRATION

Racial integration, or group advancement through effective participation in mainstream economy, remains a divisive issue in race theory. It has been considered by liberal scholars as the gateway to social and economic ascension and not an end in itself, though. By fully participating in mainstream economy and by assuming the civic responsibilities of American citizenship through political participation, supposed ethnic or racial cultural peculiarities are expected to be erased, gradually reducing interracial animosities. Or at least that is how total integrationists¹ expect racial integration to be about.

But ironically the political and cultural dimensions of Integrationism open the concept of integration up to multiple critical approaches. The need to appreciate the different aspects involved reflects the entrenched complexity of the issue. Conservative (or classical liberal) scholars of race, such as Thomas Sowell,² Shelby Steele,³ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.,⁴ and Walter E. Williams⁵ call attention to the existence of political and cultural patterns that predetermine to a large extent the degree of group adaptability to a specific sociocultural order. According to these scholars, it may in fact be difficult to comfortably contend that discrimination, which is eventually a major impetus for Integrationist policies, has caused minorities to perform less effectively in the economy. However, they argue, it can be empirically demonstrated that not discrimination but rather the prior cultural disposition of a specific group that makes it easy or difficult for it to integrate effectively into the specific society it interacts within. The concept of integration, they argue, should cover more than a hastened urge for inclusion. It should be associated to a set of correlated variables that touch upon the various systems at stake. These vary from group-culture to the society in which groups interact to the range of policies being followed in pursuit of integrating minority groups. Such an informed understanding of integration would very likely be of considerable usefulness to racial and ethnic policies, just as well as it might contribute to a better appreciation of culture and the critical role that it plays in interethnic relations.

While the civil rights legislation of the 1960s initially rested upon the premise that minority integration may be achieved by legally upholding the principle of equal opportunity for all citizens, and due to the judicial activism and the later developments in national politics,⁶ the original meaning of integration has been transformed to mean, not equal opportunity, but group favoritism. It was precisely at this stage that the movement towards integration, superseded by the disparate impacts of preferential policies, was shackled by crisis a crisis which brought to the fore the need for a theory of integration that is expected to meet the challenges of the politicization of the racial sphere.

The need for a general theory of integration is made all the more necessary to better understand the interconnection between politics, culture and race in Thomas Sowell. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the tension between the two ideologies of integration and separation as, this book argues, have caused serious conflicts within the African American community since the early days of this community's struggle to achieve equality and social justice. Of special importance in this discussion, however, is an operational definition of what is specifically meant in this book by "race" and "ethnicity" as, in my opinion, there is a great deal of misunderstanding about the terms which, in addition to the numerous areas of research in which they are used with different (sometimes conflicting) meanings, are often used interchangeably.

1. Race and ethnicity

A strict definition of race often requires of the researcher an awareness of the wide implications of the term when used in different contexts and for different purposes. Defining the concept often implies an ideological identification or a political position whereby supposedly objective definitions of race have frequently been subject to scholarly contention. A practical scientific definition, however, will identify race with the determinate sets of biological and physiological peculiarities that naturally pertain to an animal species or a human social group originating from the same natural environment and displaying systematic differences from other groups in terms of physical appearance.

However much this definition manages to fix limits to an otherwise elusive concept, it leaves unexplained a range of phenomena that cannot be left unexplored given the wide implications they might have for certain societies, especially those consisting of more than one race, such as the United States and a number of Asian and African countries and some European countries with substantial numbers of immigrants. For one thing,

this definition offers little insight into the real dimensions of racial intermixing.

Over the last century, groups have crossed national borders in pursuit of easier access to means of subsistence in distant settings, intermingled with new societies and ultimately regenerated into brand new stocks. The implications of such movements in the history of race on countries have ranged from a continual drawing and redrawing of national borders to ultimately affect the concept of nationality itself. For the waves of migrations across national boundaries usually dictated a renewed need to assert identity.

In fact, most problems of our modern world arise from racial and ethnic disputes over land and claims over cultural assets.⁷ At times, the need of a group to assert its identity entails more than fighting over material assets. It might lead a group to a struggle for the survival of a history, a cultural legacy, or a religion. Therefore, race may be qualified as a configuration of material as well as symbolic contortions.

According to Sowell, official definitions of race and ethnicity can affect socioeconomic status.⁸ Communities meeting official requirements might benefit from governmental programs, but not those that fail to conform to the definitional criteria.⁹ This is actually the case of the United States where only members belonging to the designated groups are entitled to benefit from affirmative action programs (Hispanics, blacks, American Indians, women). Yet, in multiracial societies in general, belonging to the racial group receiving preferential treatment can mean easier social ascension and a more effective economic and political participation.¹⁰ This is obviously the case in India where the central government is predominantly Hindu, and where only at the level of the local governments that racial and ethnic minorities dominate.¹¹

Admitting the difficulty with attempts at a definition of race that commands consensus, scholars in general adopt operational definitions that are likely to meet in thematic terms the focus of their studies. However, and given the social aspects of the concept, there is a tendency in a large number of works to treat it in a purely social sense. Such is true of Sowell who, in two of his most reputed works, *Race and Economics* (1975) and *Race and Culture* (1994), explores the sociocultural dimensions of race. In the latter, he admits that “because [most studies on race] focus more on social realities, rather than on biological realities, [...] racial (or ethnic) groups [are defined] primarily in social rather than biological terms.”¹² More significant is his assertion that “race is a biological concept, but it is a social reality.”¹³ A racial group may therefore be described as any social group that is distinct from the super-ordinate group

of white Anglo-American Protestants by skin color (or any other physical features for that matter), language and culture.

This last definition is of great help for the purposes of our discussion of issues such as cultural essentialism, ethnocentrism, group favoritism and a number of related concepts that constitute the theoretical backbone of the criticism advanced in this book. One may not be able to establish coherence and interconnectedness in Sowell's work without a clear understanding of his conception of race and ethnicity especially within the framework of our modern globalized world where migratory movements across national borders are ineffectively controlled and at an age of delocalized cultures.

2. Integrationism vs. Separatism

The aforementioned tension between Integrationism and Separatism is critically important to explore before any further discussion of Sowell's approach to integration because, as will be explained later, he seems hardly aware of the problems concomitant with ideological polarizations and multiple cultural identifications inside the African American community. His unrelenting critique of African American ghetto culture (which he describes as "redneck")¹⁴ ignores the established fact that we cannot speak of one single ghetto African American culture and social experience, but that specific geographic and demographic patterns have deeply affected the experience of the community in many different ways. The social and economic integration of blacks in the New England ghettos has been more successful at specific historical periods than that of sections of the community in the same historical periods in different parts of the country, such as in Los Angeles.¹⁵

The point is that few ideologies have had deeper influence on 20th and early 21st-century African American social and cultural thought than Integrationism and Separatism. Reflecting the changing character and importance of race and ethnicity in contemporary America, these ideologies have powerfully contributed in shaping the particular sets of attitudes, patterns of behavior and performance within the community. Although it could be quite difficult to quantify with empirical precision the influence of each ideology on the African American community, it is historically approved that, depending on the social and political circumstances prevalent at one time or another, the attractiveness of one hardly eclipsed the other, for both Integrationists and Separatists have all along benefited from substantial popularity.¹⁶

It is important to note first that Integrationism is only one among several other modes of integration, such as acculturation. An ethnic group may be said to be successfully integrated without having to acculturate since the latter basically implies the need for a complete dissociation of the individual member from their group's cultural and other moral and material idiosyncrasies.¹⁷ Separatism, on the other hand, consists in perpetuating the cultural characteristics and traits of the community through the celebration of the virtues of group belonging and the merits of resistance against the potential intrusions of the surrounding cultural practices.¹⁸

As Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. argues, Separatism, or call it ethno-nationalism, can even serve as a therapy "whose function is to raise minority self-esteem."¹⁹ Since self-esteem and ego-strength could not be achieved and protected without the preservation of group identity and culture, Black Separatist movements (initiated mainly by Black Nationalist/Pan-Africanist figures such as Marcus Garvey in the 1910s)²⁰ are a worthwhile experience which allowed African Americans to survive in a highly modernized, individualistic society. Contrariwise, failure to preserve the cultural heritage of one's ethnic group may be "a powerful reason for low esteem."²¹

The above distinction between integration and acculturation (or assimilation) is particularly enlightening in so far as it relates to the basic prejudice underlying Sowell's approach to black-white relations, assuming that if blacks are to advance socio-economically, they are expected to pursue it through acculturation. As we shall see later, Sowell's theory is one of integration through acculturation, which implies a bias toward African American culture and, therefore, highlights his inability to appreciate the particular aspects in it that may help the community reach higher standards of achievement based on its own cultural capital.

It is equally worth noting in anticipation of our discussion of Sowell apologism that compensating the historic injustice done to African Americans by increasing their representation in the better-paying job categories or in the prestigious universities does not necessarily imply acculturation. In fact, a majority of African American students who were admitted to prestigious universities on the basis of affirmative action quotas are found to be holding leadership positions inside their community, which eventually means that preferential treatment is not necessarily meant to force African Americans to acculturate.

In cases where candidates for affirmative action benefits falsely claim to belong to the "African American category" (called "ethnic fraud"), acculturation is often hardly solicited, if not avoided altogether. In such

cases, the candidate (whether a potential employee or a student) tends to conform to their work or academic environment to achieve success and may attempt to keep their patterns of cultural behavior at home and/or in the community. In the opinion of educationist Peter M. Hall, this is a case of “situational ethnicity” which supports the possibility of performing successfully in white society without having to give up one’s ethnic cultural traits.²² Preferential treatment (or positive discrimination) is not inimical to ethnocentrism. In fact, both may function as progressive forces that could help consolidate and enrich the multicultural composition of a society that is admittedly mired in racial prejudice despite the substantial improvement in interracial relations observed over the past four or five decades.²³

Classical rationalizations which explain the pace of group integration in terms of discrimination and exclusion *alone* are constantly put into question, losing ground to perspectives which nonetheless remain subject to theoretical controversy. At the core of this controversy is a questioning of the basic validity of the argument that attributes group backwardness and failure to integrate to the subversive racial attitudes among the white Anglo-American Protestant community. Discrimination, it is probably true, was decisive in slowing down the assimilation of minority groups into Anglo-American culture, denied them equal economic opportunity, and access to decent educational facilities and employment benefits.²⁴ It is widely assumed, however, that the adoption of the civil rights legislation (the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act) brought about substantial social, economic and political gains to minorities.²⁵ Sowell, for example, argues that minority income had increased even before “the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and its evolution into preferential policies.”²⁶

Despite such optimistic statements about the increased potential of progressive legislation to promote the socioeconomic achievements by racial minorities, there is evidence that the legal abolition of discrimination yielded limited benefits for the groups concerned. A passage from “The United States” depicts the picture as follows:

The regular foreign, visitor to the United States cannot fail to be struck by how much and how fast many things have changed, and changed for the better, over the past twenty years (...). It may be rather less obvious to the same traveler (...) how much has not improved - or may have changed for the worse. Poverty, unemployment, bad housing and every kind of social deprivation, are still the lot of a far higher proportion of blacks than whites (...). The undoubted and irreversible achievements of the second reconstruction in the field of civil rights and the eradication of political

discrimination have to be set against the persistent and obstinate problems arising from social and economic disadvantage (...). Segregation may be prohibited, but “segmentation” persists.²⁷

In fact, recognition of the failure of legislation and constitutional rights to facilitate full integration is a widely accepted belief among many scholars who previously entertained an unshakable faith in the ability of legislation to enhance social and economic integration. After a long exposé of the income gaps between white and black men during the period following the “Second Reconstruction” (commonly referring to the civil rights era, i.e. the 1950s and 60s), June O'Neill concedes that “although black workers have made dramatic gains in their relative earnings, a black-white differential of some magnitude remains, particularly among men.”²⁸

Obviously when the socioeconomic gap narrows down along racial and ethnic lines, integration ushers considerable inroads into concrete fulfillment. The rise of a sizable black middle class during the 1970s corroborates the fact that integration should start by genuine economic and political possibilities. By the late 1970s, a new class of ethnic doctors, engineers and professionals could afford to buy a suburban house and, despite the “white flight” phenomenon,²⁹ enjoy relatively better acceptance among fellow suburbanites. Conversely, the difficulty to integrate points to a widening socioeconomic gap whose cause cannot be defined in terms of discriminatory treatment alone. For despite the preferential treatment conferred upon minorities, in both employment and education, the lowest salaries are still those of minority employees,³⁰ the highest percentage of drop-outs and the poorest academic achievements remain disproportionately the lot of minority students.³¹ However, the failure of preferential treatment to officiate at integrating groups pleads with categorical considerations of the real constraints to full integration. New dimensions about integration should therefore be explored, including new approaches to a number of salient processes that could play an important role in determining the pace and effectiveness of integration.

The persistent ineffectiveness of current racial policy³³ is due to hubristic assumptions about knowledge that are theoretically deficient as they obviously fail to appeal to a practical awareness of the different dimensions at stake.³⁴ The discussion of racial integration should go beyond the conventional assumption that legally administering racial affairs ensures the achievement of the presumed objectives to embrace a broader spectrum of variables that should be eruditely approached.

To arrive at a better appreciation of the problem of integration, one probably needs to approach the issue from a cultural point of view where insights into the nature of group response to Integrationist policies might

explain, for example, why preferential programs have failed. Because of a fundamental lack in knowledge about the way racial and ethnic minorities culturally behave within a specific social order, many scholars fail to provide a plausible account of the reasons why, while politically motivated to integrate, racial and ethnic minorities achieve low levels of progress if ever. It is easy to put the blame on the discriminating employer since statistics will always show a widening differential in wages and positions between racial groups. But it may be difficult to quantify attitudes and dispositions towards performance and integration. A credible theory of integration should perhaps provide a plausible account of such unquantifiable variables. But whereas Sowell calls for an immediate termination of preferential treatment programs, I think the whole approach to preferential treatment should be rethought so as to allow for a reconsideration of the cultural factor in determining socioeconomic advancement.

3. Modes of integration

The previous section accounts for the existence of two major thought trends that govern African American attitudes towards integration. It was not, however, a vindication for the expediency or relevance of any one of them. Awareness about the multidimensional (cultural, political, and historical) aspects of these approaches enlightens us about the tension that has in fact negatively affected the community's efforts to improve its social and economic standing. This section attempts to explore even more deeply the different options at the disposal of the black leadership. Today, black organizations can be sorted and labeled along these different categories of ideological identification.

Let me start by observing that the current conversation on race and ethnicity is drawing upon a large corpus of research by a number of eminent scholars whose contributions vary according to their political affiliations, readings of history and their perception of American sociocultural realities. The importance of the issues involved for American public policy has vested the debate with a wide variety of approaches. A major aspect of this debate is the polarization of positions among intellectuals and social theorists along ideological lines, entailing different and often conflicting axioms and visions.³⁵

However, while the ultimate common objective has been to comprehend the structures of interracial and interethnic relations, the patterns of interaction between minorities and the majority group, attempts at theorizing racial integration have in fact been formulated at least along

three major models: the melting pot model, the pluralistic approach, and the Anglo-American core culture theory. These models attempt to evaluate the degree of success achieved by minority groups in integrating into the American mainstream and map out possible alternative guidelines for policy-making purposes.

The advocates of the melting pot model³⁶ claim that the greatness of American civilization lies in its capacity to preserve different group traditions and cultures within a single, unified national culture. Perhaps few other scholars have so succinctly summed this view up better than Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., when he contends that “the genius of America lies in its capacity to forgo a single nation from peoples of remarkably diverse racial, religious, and ethnic origins.”³⁷ The Anglo-American core culture theory, on the other hand, assumes that because of the hegemonic/imperialistic power of American national institutions, such as religion and politics, minority groups have been (and should for that matter be) culturally, hence structurally, subsumed into the Anglo-American culture.³⁸ The pluralistic approach, to end with, rests upon the assumption that the United States has always been a complex of separate, discernible sub-societies or sub-groups with different cultures and belief systems, yet the rich cultural interplay among these groups has been channeled into the all-inclusive structure of American society as a potential political, economic and religious absorbing force.³⁹

Common to these contending views, however, is a committed effort to theorize the social, political and economic manifestations of minority group experience for public policy purposes. In other terms, they mostly seek to historicize the experience of minority groups so as to find ways to design racial policy guidelines that best serve the ideal of peaceful interethnic relations by catering to the material needs and interests of the communities in question. At one end of the scale is a long tradition of Integrationism that is deeply anchored in the Civil Rights Movement, while at the opposite extreme stands the more recent ideology of ethnocentrism and multiculturalism.

Historically regarded as a gateway to social justice, struggling for integration into the super-ordinate white Anglo culture and society was also the ideal form of civil rights militancy for several community leaders.⁴⁰ Advocates of ethnocentricity, on the other hand, assume that the most significant socioeconomic achievements that minorities could probably reach come with the making of a separate identity, free from the absolutism of the dominant culture. In light of this conception of Integrationism, America is seen as “a federation of commonwealth of national cultures [...] a democracy of nationalities, cooperating voluntarily

and autonomously through common institutions [...] a multiplicity in a unity, an orchestration of mankind.”⁴¹

Conflicting discourses, therefore, have imbued American racial policy-making processes with conceptual schemes that are mutually exclusive. Until recently though, very few scholars have seriously been critical of Integrationism, including both liberals and conservatives, so much so that the need to re-conceptualize egalitarian ideology is taking center stage in contemporary academic and political debates on race and nation.⁴² To what extent could legally mandated Integrationism, mainly through preferential treatment, be said to enhance social ascension for the disadvantaged minorities? Has Integrationism contributed to any better understanding of race and ethnicity? Such questions become all the more legitimate when it comes to discussing in deep, insightful terms the sociocultural structure of the United States.

For as John D. Buenker puts it, “we have long taken for granted the structure of the [American] society.”⁴³ The latter, according to Buenker, is a three-tier system to which ethnic and racial groups adjust in different ways and at varying degrees of success: the political-legal-governmental, the urban-industrial, and the primary social relations layers. Understanding the mechanisms of this system explains much about the different pace of integration from both individual and group perspectives. The Integrationist bias, in Buenker's view, has yielded limited insights into the mechanisms of racial and ethnic integration. It hampers attempts at describing objectively the laws of ethnic and racial interactions and, instead, describes “what ethnically and ideally ought to be.”⁴⁴ Integrationism fails to explain, for example, the success of ethnics to adapt to the legal-industrial-governmental system (better access to higher quality jobs, for example) while failing to integrate into the basic primary relationships such as intermarriage.

To conclude, discrimination might not after all explain by itself the failure of several minority groups to integrate. One could safely assume that various other factors will determine the quality of minority access to society's basic socioeconomic and political structures. These factors include group culture and culture-bound attitudes toward social interaction, aspects of the racial policies being followed in relation to actual social outcome, and the basic nature of the social order in which minority groups interact.