

# THOMAS SOWELL

COMMON SENSE IN A SENSELESS WORLD

## Discussion Questions

1. What finally turned Thomas Sowell away from Marxism?
2. In the film, host Jason Riley argues that three things distinguish Thomas Sowell's scholarship:
  - a. *Intellectual honesty; following facts to logical conclusions even if unpopular.*
  - b. *Importance of incentives and the reality of tradeoffs in addressing social problems.*
  - c. *Belief that a group's upward mobility derives primarily from its development of human capital.*Do you agree or disagree with Dr. Sowell on each of these three things? Explain your position.
3. What effect did exposure to a public library have on Sowell's reading habit?
4. When Sowell went to middle school, what effect did he say having school choice had on him?
5. Charter schools are tuition-free public schools that have to meet state standards but also have greater autonomy than traditional public schools. What effect do you think greater autonomy has on educational outcomes for specific neighborhoods or groups of students?
6. Charter schools can be shut down much faster than traditional schools if they do not perform well. How do you think that consequence incentivizes those who run the school?
7. Economist Walter Williams makes the argument that the homelife of a student is a big component of student success. How much of a component do you think it is?
8. How did Steven Pinker explain Sowell's love for photography as a metaphor for understanding tradeoffs?
9. Sowell said that "at [the University of] Chicago if it was true, it was true because you could prove it was true." Do we live in that era with modern media and politics?
10. Sowell and a majority of economists are aware that raising the minimum wage (especially dramatically) tends to increase unemployment among the least skilled workers; the very people the wage was designed to help. Why do you think this well-known principle is rarely part of the discussion around minimum wage policy?
11. What do you make of Sowell's "mismatch hypothesis," i.e., the idea that students sent to schools in which their scores or achievement level were mismatched would succeed at a lower rate than those who weren't mismatched?
  - a. *Sowell mentions black students being in the bottom 10% of math students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) but also being in the top 90% in math in the country, and that 1/4 of all blacks at MIT don't graduate. Would these 25% of clearly talented students be better served at another university, such as a top state university or another Ivy League school?*
  - b. *Explain whether you think the mismatch hypothesis holds, in part, for students admitted to elite universities for things other than race, e.g., children of alumni, athletes, parental donations, etc.*
12. One of the Sowell quotes in the film was: "It takes considerable knowledge to realize the extent of your own ignorance." How can you apply this quote in your own life?
13. One of Sowell's more famous quotes is: "The first lesson of economics is scarcity: there is never enough of anything to fully satisfy all those who want it. The first lesson of politics is to disregard the first lesson of economics."
  - a. *Many countries carry heavy debt loads. The United States of America has \$26 trillion in debt and \$222 trillion in unfunded future obligations. How does this quote apply to such debt?*
  - b. *Why do politicians ignore scarcity so often?*
  - c. *Why do voters so often reward politicians who ignore scarcity?*