

Book Reviews

Civil Rights: Rhetoric or Reality

Thomas Sowell

The State Against Blacks

Walter Williams

Housing and Urban Development in the U.S.S.R.

Gregory D. Andresz

Civil Rights: Rhetoric or Reality? Thomas Sowell, William Morrow and Company: New York (1984) and **The State Against Blacks**, Walter Williams, New Press: New York (1982).

Civil Rights: Rhetoric or Reality? by Thomas Sowell and **The State Against Blacks** by Walter Williams have very little, if anything, to do with planning. Yet, the implications they have for planners and the planning profession are staggering. Drs. Sowell and Williams, both conservative black economists, have directly challenged the major themes that have long guided urban and civil rights policy, as well as the responses of planners and others to those policies. In the process, the two authors have succinctly turned the conventional wisdoms of the liberal welfare state on its head.

In his examination of civil rights legislation and judicial history, Sowell argues that government has been unable to translate its intentions into action. Wilson goes even further: Government initiatives have actually hampered the economic improvement of the disadvantaged.

Dr. Sowell's book is not an attack on civil rights, although he is considered a pariah within the civil rights community. What Sowell does criticize is the shift from civil rights as a means to insure equal opportunity without regard to race, creed, or gender, to a method of enforcing equality of group results as is manifest through affirmative action, quotas, and comparable worth. The criticisms of legislative and, sometimes, judicial activities that Sowell lays out in his latest work stem, in part, from his earlier

writings which examine group results in the context of cultural traits. His belief is that cultural habits and traits, not 'discrimination,' are the primary cause of disparities in group results. Legislation that focuses only on results and not the correct causes is doomed to fail.

Sowell challenges the statistical disparities in income and employment that are used to make the sweeping generalization of rampant discrimination. Age, education, and geographical distribution barely scratch the surface of group differences. They are, Sowell contends, merely more quantifiable. What is needed is inclusion of a far more qualitative analysis of factors such as cultural attitudes towards education, discipline, and work habits. An example Sowell is fond of using is the disparities between West Indian blacks who have immigrated to the U.S. and American blacks who have migrated to the North. Race alone cannot explain the rather stark income and employment differences, not only among those in the first generation, but their children and grandchildren, as well. As anathema to the civil rights vision as that may be, Sowell's contentions and supporting data make a strong case.

Williams is even more critical of government intervention than Sowell. As his thesis states:

The government laws that have proven most devastating for many blacks are those that govern economic activity. The laws are not discriminatory in the sense that they are aimed specifically at blacks. But they are discriminatory in that they deny full opportunity

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turning the welfare state on its head

government has been unable to translate its intentions into actions

to the most disadvantaged Americans, among whom blacks are disproportionately represented.

The specific arguments supporting his thesis are especially convincing, especially with regard to entry barriers within low-skill industries. For example, the taxicab industry should not, in theory, be outrageously expensive. One needs a car, a map, a meter, and might perhaps be required to pay a small licensing and inspection fee. Yet, in most major metropolitan areas, entry is sharply curtailed, especially to the economically disadvantaged. New York, for example, requires a medallion to legally operate a taxicab though none have been issued since they were first granted free in the 1930s. Those medallions are now worth over \$60,000. The prohibitive entry costs result in a very limited availability of medallion cabs in Manhattan at rush hour or at any time in the poorer areas of the city. Washington, D.C. on the other hand, only requires a \$25 dollar license fee. The competitive dynamics of the Washington market are plainly evident in the vast supply and convenience of cab transportation.

Williams also makes a strong case against occupational licensing restrictions for plumbers and electricians. He argues that service costs are artificially inflated and, more importantly, services are denied low income residents as a result of the monopoly behavior of occupation restrictions. A major objective of the restrictions, according to Williams, is to restrict blacks from participating in the market. He argues, furthermore, that by eliminating wage differentials and floor wage rates, people are able to make employment decisions on the basis of non-economic factors such as racial discrimination.

If there is a weakness to the two works, it lies in their implicit contentions concerning solutions to the problems at hand: 1) eliminate all restrictions, and 2) reverse the offending court cases. Such simplistic solutions neither improve economic conditions for blacks nor advance contemporary thinking on civil rights issues. In fact, these solutions suggest a denial of the problem in toto. After critiquing existing civil rights measures, the authors never attempt to offer more effective means of government intervention. Strategies for advancing the welfare of disadvantaged minorities are given cursory attention. Whether this omission belies the authors' true concern for minority welfare is debatable. Instead, what seems apparent is a failure in the authors' arguments; a failure common to welfare policy analysts

who attempt to assign principles of conservatism to a context of a market failure.

The value of these works thus lies not in their implied solutions and/or recommendations, but in their honest critique of liberal government's inability to resolve the wide disparities between economic groups and between races. One may not agree with *Civil Rights: Rhetoric or Reality?* and *The State Against Blacks*, but the analysis and evaluation they present are so forceful that policy makers throughout the country must at least appreciate their general concerns.

Housing and Urban Development in the USSR by Gregory D. Andrusz, SUNY Series in Urban Public Policy, State University of New York Press, 1985. 400 pp. \$14.95 paper, \$39.50 cloth.

Many American planners are unfamiliar with the profession's practice outside the continent. What problems do planners in the United States share with planners elsewhere? How important is governmental structure in dictating the planners role? Are the same trends in planning shared by other industrialized nations? How are other governments dealing with these trends?

Gregory D. Andrusz' thorough account of housing and urban development in the Soviet Union is a proper starting place for those interested in such international planning questions.

Planners, at one time or another, wistfully reflect on how different things would be if we could carry out to the fullest our carefully formulated plans. Yet, for good or ill, we live in a society that puts a premium on individualism. Capitalism is the yardstick by which a planner's actions are measured. Our power is limited to the degree to which we can infringe on individual rights of property ownership, freedom of expression, and home rule. If these limits were not in place, might we be able to implement more effectively?

Andrusz carefully paints a picture of a country with a completely different political system. He details the manner in which the Soviet Union has tried to resolve the problem of housing its citizenry. The portrait that emerges reveals some startling similarities and differences to the U.S. system. For example, in an account of the private housing sector, the author points out that private ownership and home building were actually encouraged by the Soviet

offering meager solutions

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the influence of individualism

an admission of failure



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carolina planning is published biannually by students in the Department of City and Regional Planning, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, with the assistance of funds from the John A. Parker Trust Fund, Department of City and Regional Planning.

Subscriptions to **carolina planning** are available at an annual rate of \$8.00, or \$15.00 for two years.

government even though the practice was contrary to the tenets of Marxism. Even more surprising, the individuals who chose to own their homes were not from the upper class of Russian culture, but recent peasants and country immigrants. The cultural association of lower class households in privately owned homes has placed individual home ownership in low esteem; those of a better situation prefer high rises close to the central city.

Perhaps the most instructive chapters involve an assessment of urban policy effects on the development process. Clearly, the Soviet Union is not afraid to jump into housing with both feet. Indeed, the very nature of socialism dictates the government's involvement. But there is still squabbling over which level of government is in charge of what, and which policy should be adopted. Coordination among agencies — long the bureaucratic battle cry of the western world — has not been resolved in the U.S.S.R.

The reader may be surprised at the kind of data Andrusz' has gathered to support his conclusions. Specifically, the book is filled with detailed cases of housing programs and policies which realized marginal success or failed entirely. This admission of failure is perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the study. Sensitive to the health and viability of Soviet socialism, Andrusz' discussion seems a frank and rather detached appraisal of the nation's progress in housing development.

The book, though lengthy and of a scholarly stamp, is worthy of attention by those who seek some understanding of alternative planning processes. The author presents a detailed analysis of housing conditions and the effect of certain policies on urban development, but it is left to the reader to measure the Soviets' ultimate success. In most cases, the author compares the Soviet housing with conditions in the United Kingdom. For many Americans, it is hard to appreciate these comparisons without some familiarity with English town planning.

All in all, the book is not entertaining reading. It is not meant to be. It is, however, food for thought which will expand the international awareness of western planners and policy analysts. In the void of socialist planning literature, **Housing and Urban Development in the USSR** is an important contribution.