

BOOK REVIEWS

A Conflict of Visions

Thomas Sowell

New York: William Morrow, 1987, 273 pp.

In his most recent book, Sowell describes an observation that is so familiar one rarely reflects upon it:

One of the curious things about political opinions is how often the same people line up on opposite sides of different issues. The issues themselves may have no intrinsic connection with each other. They may range from military spending to drug laws to monetary policy to education. Yet the same familiar faces can be found glaring at each other from opposite sides of the political fence, again and again [p. 13].

A Conflict of Visions reflects upon this common observation; it is an inquiry into the reasons why we so often find such a remarkable correlation in people's views across a broad array of issues. As Sowell conjectures, the commonly observable correlation and clustering in political opinions cannot be understood as simply reflecting some underlying structure of interests. A more appropriate account, he argues, must be given in terms of certain fundamental ideas or premises—referred to as “visions”—which, largely unarticulated, are behind and give coherence to people's particular political opinions.

A *vision* in Sowell's terminology is a “sense of how the world works,” a “sense of reality and causation.” Visions are theoretical constructs but they are much broader and more general than what we ordinarily refer to as theories. They are the “foundations on which theories are built,” yet they are much more remote from and only quite indirectly related to observed reality. This makes them far less exposed to and vulnerable to potential counterevidence, a fact that accounts for their apparent robustness and stability.

While an almost infinite differentiation in visions is, in principle, conceivable, Sowell supposes that many differences and conflicts in social and political thought, past and present, can, in fact, be understood as ramifications emerging from two systematically opposed kinds of visions which he contrasts as the “constrained” and “unconstrained” types. The first part of Sowell's book (chaps. 1–5) aims at a general characterization of the two conflicting visions, citing authors like Smith, Burke, Friedman, or Hayek as exemplifying the constrained variety and Rousseau, Godwin, Veblen, Galbraith, and others as representing the opposite prospects. The second part (chaps. 6–9) looks into applications of the two visions to the issues of equality, of power, and of justice.

The substantive conflict between the constrained and the unconstrained vision is identified by Sowell in their different conceptions of “the nature of

man, the nature of knowledge, and the nature of social processes.” Viewing the motivational limitations of human nature as given and placing less trust in abstract reason than in common experience, the constrained vision emphasizes the function of rules and institutions in guiding social and political processes. In contrast, the characteristic features of the unconstrained vision are its belief in the perfectibility of man, its confidence in the power of reason, and the role it assigns to discretionary planning and deliberate design in producing the “common good.”

Like his earlier *Knowledge and Decision* (1980) Sowell’s new book is very much in a Hayekian spirit and, in fact, in reading *A Conflict of Visions* one feels strongly reminded of a theme that is central to many of Hayek’s writings, namely, his distinction between two traditions in social and philosophical thought that he discusses under labels such as “French and British Enlightenment,” “True and False Individualism,” and “Kinds of Rationalism” (see *Individualism and Economic Order*, chap. 1; *The Constitution of Liberty*, chap. 4; *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*, chap. 5). Sowell’s description of the “unconstrained vision” actually reads like a somewhat popularized restatement of and variation on Hayek’s critical account of “constructivist rationalism,” that is, the view that deliberate organization and rational construction are the principal means for creating a desirable social order. The same kinds of arguments are central to both conceptions and a certain ambiguity that characterizes Hayek’s account is present, in even intensified proportions, in Sowell’s assessment as well.

Boiled down to its very core, Sowell’s characterization of the unconstrained vision of politics reads like this: In this vision politics is a matter of implementing some knowable and identifiable “social good”—such as the Marxian ideal of a classless society—rather than a matter of reconciling potentially conflicting interests and perceptions of what the “social good” might be. Accordingly, its focus is on the “who shall rule” question, and the logical answer to this question is that those whom are most competent in identifying the knowable “good”—the “philosopher king,” the “enlightened avant-garde”—ought to be in control. Quite naturally, then, such a view has no systematic place for the idea of subjecting the political process to general rules and institutional constraints. On the contrary, such constraints are only perceived as hindering or obstructing an effective implementation of the “known good.”

Though Sowell’s stated purpose is merely to portray the two visions rather than to “determine their validity” (p. 224), there can be no doubt about his judgment in this matter. Paralleling Hayek’s criticism of constructivist rationalism, Sowell clearly wants to argue that—in contrast to the “abuse of reason” in the unconstrained vision—the constrained vision embodies a sounder understanding of the proper scope and limits of reason and rational design in social and political matters. It is here that Sowell’s argument suffers from a fundamental ambiguity, an ambiguity that mirrors an indistinctness in the Hayekian concept of constructivist rationalism. In his use of this concept Hayek fails sufficiently to distinguish between two issues, namely, the issue

of social and economic planning in the sense of direct control over outcomes, and the issue of rationally judging and shaping the institutional framework within which social interaction takes place. These two issues are of a quite different nature and what qualifies as “abuse of reason” may be quite different in each case. In fact, while clearly rejecting the social planning mentality, Hayek explicitly recognizes that rational evaluation and deliberate reform of the institutional framework are not only consistent with an appreciation of a spontaneous market order and rule-guided social processes in general, but are the principal means for improving such an order and such processes. Admittedly, though, arguments of this kind may be more easily found in Hayek’s earlier writings (for example, *Individualism and Economic Order*, chap. 6). In his later publications the emphasis has been clearly shifted to a notion of *cultural evolution* which seems to suggest passive acquiescence in some, barely specified, spontaneous process at the institutional level itself and to leave little room for any rational evaluation of and reform in rules and institutions.

The failure to separate the two varieties of “constructivist rationalism” is even more characteristic of Sowell’s book. Sowell fails systematically to distinguish between the issue of whether relying on general rules, as opposed to direct planning of outcomes, is a superior way of organizing our social affairs, and the issue of whether we can and ought to analyze rationally the “quality” of rules and engage in deliberate reform of rules. It is this failure that gives a quite irritating anti-rationalist flavor to Sowell’s portrayal of the *constrained vision*, a flavor that reflects and intensifies the anti-rationalist tendencies in Hayek’s notion of cultural evolution. Sowell’s portrayal invokes again and again the same formulas—“power of unarticulated processes,” “naturally evolved systemic processes,” “implicit wisdom of systemically evolved procedures,” and so on—without ever really addressing the issue of what the characteristic features of those processes are that the constrained vision would recommend us to rely on. These formulas are certainly not meant to imply that any “unarticulated process”—that is, any process in which deliberate coordination of individual efforts is absent—operates in a desirable way. Yet, if only certain kinds of processes qualify as “beneficially working,” then our prime attention has to be on specifying the characteristics of “good” processes and on explaining why they can be expected to work beneficially. In other words, rational comparative analysis of the working properties of alternative systems of rules and institutional frameworks would have to be a principal concern of a “constrained vision.” There is almost nothing of this, however, in Sowell’s treatise and it is quite indicative that his book contains no reference to Buchanan whose work is most pertinent to these issues.

Certainly, there are general references to the role of institutional constraints, to the “systemic effect of competition” (p. 57), and to incentive structures as “the crucial characteristic of any social system” (p. 86). Also, Sowell repeatedly argues that the constrained vision is interested in “the relative merits of alternative processes” (p. 130) and that it “emphasizes

incentives to lead to socially desirable results” (p. 182). But there is no systematic discussion on the issue of how a social community should go about the task of identifying and implementing a desirable framework of rules and institutions. The potential role of collective decisions on institutional matters is never really discussed in Sowell’s treatise. In fact, Sowell does not seem to see any such role (see, for example, pp. 98f., 109, 112f., 116), and statements like “There are no ‘constitutional choices’ to make, if man cannot choose social results anyway” (p. 201), as well as his comments on Rawls (pp. 103f., 172f., 194f.), indicate that the whole notion of choice among rules and institutions seems to be alien to him.

Sowell’s *A Conflict of Visions* is, on the whole, a very stimulating book and it argues a very important point, namely, that the political struggles which will shape our future social and political order are not only, and maybe not even primarily, driven by identifiable interests and by rent-seeking activities that use politics as a pure machinery for the redistribution of material wealth. Sowell rightly reminds us of the genuine power of ideas and visions in the political arena. Yet, rather than attempting to give an overall assessment of the merits and shortcomings of *A Conflict of Visions*, I have focused my review on one aspect that seems to me to be characteristic of certain anti-rationalist tendencies in the modern tradition of classical liberalism, tendencies that have been fueled, unfortunately, by certain ambiguities in Hayek’s critique of “constructivist rationalism” and his arguments on “cultural evolution.” These tendencies are present in interpretations of the spontaneous order and spontaneous process notion that sound as if the absence of collective decisions and deliberate coordination were sufficient to guarantee a beneficial working of social processes, without any further need to look into the specific characteristics of these processes. Adam Smith used the concept of the “invisible hand” as a label for a kind of social mechanism that he carefully specified and the working principles of which he very rationally analyzed. He not simply *postulated* that “spontaneous” processes have beneficial characteristics; he also systematically explained under what conditions, and why, this is so. Some of his modern followers tend to invoke an invisible-hand rhetoric that must provoke sarcastic comments such as Dworkin’s remark on “the silly faith that ethics as well as economics moves by an invisible hand . . . to a frictionless utopia where everyone is better off than he was before” (quoted in Sowell, p. 53). If the spontaneous order notion and the invisible-hand concept are not to degenerate into a matter of faith, let alone of “silly faith,” their modern advocates have to continue the type of rational analysis in which the 18th century’s classical liberals engaged. In particular, they ought rationally to analyze and evaluate comparatively the working properties of alternative institutional arrangements. They should not acquiesce in some unanalyzed process of evolution through which, for some mystic reason, “the competition of institutions and whole societies” will lead “to a general survival of more effective collections of cultural traits” (p. 41).

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