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Most commentators look at the issue of immigration from the viewpoint of immediate politics. In doing so, they focus on only a piece of the issue and lose touch with the larger picture. Now Thomas Sowell offers a sweeping historical and global look at a large number of migrations over a long period of time. *Migrations and Cultures*: shows the persistence of cultural traits, in particular racial and ethnic groups, and the role these groups' relocations play in redistributing skills, knowledge, and other forms of "human capital." answers the question: What are the effects of disseminating the patterns of the particular set of skills, attitudes, and lifestyles each ethnic group has carried forth—both for the immigrants and for the host countries, in social as well as economic terms?

Migrations and Cultures: A World View Details

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Adam Morva says

Chiefly, this book talks about the history of certain migrant groups of people (Germans; Japanese; Italians; Chinese; Jews; Indians) around the world. The picture Thomas Sowell paints about these groups spans across centuries and gives you an idea about how they were viewed and treated by their host nations, how they contributed to their respective societies, and lets you draw conclusions about migration patterns, the role of migration in a country's industry, economy, demographics, politics, and so on.

I was mainly interested in the migration aspect of the book rather than the ethno-specific history of things, but it turns out that Thomas Sowell can write an interesting book, and offer an interesting narrative even about the history aspect that I wasn't looking forward to that much.

As always, the writer is not afraid of pissing off the politically correct crows with lines like these:

"It may sound noble to say that cultures are merely different, not better or worse in any way, and that it is all a matter of perceptions and preferences. But this argument contradicts itself by saying that one way of looking at cultural differences is better—the way of cultural relativism preferred by a fringe of contemporary intellectuals, rather than the way preferred by the vast majority of other human beings around the world and down through the centuries."

or

"The very possibility that these disparities might be due to cultural differences affecting behavior and attitudes, or to differences in the human capital brought into the workplace, rather than to the behavior of the larger society, received no attention whatever, either in this statement or in much of the media or the academic world. Yet, when all this was being said, black American married couples with college degrees were at the same income level as white American married couples with college degrees.⁴⁹ Even a quarter of a century earlier, black males raised in homes with books and library cards were at the same income level as white males raised in homes with similar advantages and similar education."

And backs the whole thing up by a trove of citations and research. There are EXACTLY 110 (as in, a hundred and ten) pages of citations to other pieces of literature, making each chapter supported by hundreds of citations.

Thomas Sowell is a boss.

Dean Billings says

As far as books from the 1990's go, the summary in the last chapter is incredibly prescient: history is an anchor in reality; differences among groups are the norm not the exception; people have never been cultural relativists in practice, etc.

Also, as a Vancouverite, I never knew half of the history of Japanese immigrants in BC.

Karnok says

Nobody comes even close to Thomas Sowell in his discipline, objectivity, depth of research, clarity, subtle humour and restraint when he mocks other academics, insight and density of ideas. Not in my experience anyway. He doesn't go into rants or continually return to pet theories. He drowns you in facts. But not just random facts, he gives you the big picture broken down into understandable chunks so you actually get a sense of the world and its peoples throughout history (specifically in the context of migrations and what happens before and after).

He gives a lot of specific information but you also sense that it's all part of something wider. Having said that, he never implies any kind of black-and-white pattern, but rather that common threads exist.

Unlike many vocal intellectuals in the US in recent decades, Sowell is not content to look at black and white people in one country. He follows the history of Jews, Italians, Germans, the Japanese, Indians all around the world for hundreds of years. The political left's obsession with racism, sexism and discrimination as the sole possible explanations for differences between outcomes for groups is left embarrassed by Sowell's expansive research - by reality. Similarly, those who might turn to genetics as a way to explain all group differences are also proven wrong by a cascade of counterexamples.

Note that it was progressives and later national socialists and fascists who took the idea of genetic superiority and ran with it. It has been classical liberals, libertarians and the political right who consistently believe all individuals should be free and have the opportunity to make something of themselves. The right are social Darwinists, the left are social engineers and that engineering always means legal discrimination, sometimes including mass murder.

One common pattern is of an immigrant population being hard working, willing to work for less, becoming successful and then attracting jealousy or anger from the local people. This is followed by political attempts to suppress the immigrants, with minimum wage laws, affirmative action (quotas), massacres, expulsions or other methods. Some laws may be circumvented, which often leads to an escalation to more drastic measures. At this point, the economy usually collapses because (surprise, surprise) the immigrants were in fact doing a good job and adding wealth to the economy. In one case, maybe 19th century Western Europe (there's a lot to try to follow and remember), Jews were expelled because they apparently charged too much interest. Once they had gone, people complained that the Christian replacements charged even more! It never seemed to occur to the people to ask "compared to what" before grabbing their pitchforks.

Even after such policies prove disastrous for immigrants and locals alike, rarely is this admitted or learned from and we see it happen time and again across time and space. The exact same rhetoric is common today - with white males as the scapegoats for the political left. Nevertheless, the persecuted minority might be invited back to try to undo the damage - this offer is not always taken and certainly not without hesitation.

It's very interesting to note that explicit legal discrimination against groups works very effectively in gov't, but far less effectively in private business or things which are in-between like higher education. Even with the rules stacked against them, many immigrant groups still perform well above the average at university and in business but although they may better qualify for gov't positions, those are usually dominated by the politically powerful majority. This is unsurprising since gov't can afford to discriminate at tax-payer expense

while private enterprises have things like profits and losses to worry about.

Not all immigrant groups do well though, the Indians in Guyana for example, if I remember correctly. Also, different social groups tend to specialise in different fields, for the very same reason that they have accumulated different skills and interest historically and take that with them wherever they migrate. A famous example is Kenyans winning marathons like nobody's business. Many of the best beer brewing and piano making companies around the world were owned by people of German ancestry. I cannot remember many other specific examples, but the rule rather than the exception appears to be to find groups dominating particular fields wherever they go.

Sowell has no apparent agenda other than to lay out a thorough observation of the actual results we see in the real world as groups migrate and live among each-other. He is very disciplined in the sense of keeping commentary and speculation to a minimum and leaving much of the conclusions to be drawn, if any, to the reader. His final summary is modest, focusing more on dispelling ideas which are clearly wrong than on reaching some simple, ultimate theory of his own. But roughly speaking, his thesis (and mine) would be something like these two paragraphs:

Humans in different places and times develop different cultures (skills, values, behaviours, etc) depending on their surroundings. Geography plays a significant role in this, for example, explaining why Africa has been slower to develop than Western Europe (less navigable waterways among other things). Societies sometimes interact and may adopt things from other cultures to better survive and thrive. They sometimes choose (or are forced to) migrate and rarely have similar skills to the people where they arrive. As a result, they tend to specialise in what they're best at and dominate in those areas. Political efforts often arise to "fix" this situation, making things worse economically for everyone and often leading to blood shed. Theories which try to attribute differences solely to genes or to discrimination fall apart in the face of too many blatant exceptions.

If anything stands out, it's the incredible ability of humans to do well in all kinds of situations, to learn new things rapidly, to live peacefully with others and to both maintain separate cultures over long periods of time or mix with new ones. It's also clear that political "solutions" and passionate leaders who focus on group differences and grievances can stir up hatred and cause economic and social disasters in very short periods of time. Free markets have consistently led to the fastest improvements in living conditions and least social tensions.

There's a lot to learn from history and reading this book is a good starting point.

Nick Gibson says

Sowell analyzes the patterns, distinctions, outcomes, and motivations of multiple people groups as they migrate between countries throughout history. He lays out the empirical, historical fact before drawing a set of implications. At the end he presents his thesis: that skills are not distributed equally through cultures, that cultural strengths are not all relative, and that disparate outcomes and cultural representation (in industry, education, politics, or any other area of society) is not and never has been perfectly proportional. The result is a powerful empirical argument against ideological cultural leveling, against political solutions to politically incorrect realities that have existed from time immemorial, and in support of future cultural interchange based on global commerce and multinational firms instead of the physical exodus of peoples from undeveloped and economically immature countries.

Void lon iXarii says

This is one of those "desert island" books for me: a book so dense with information that I'm going through it a second time and still so little sticks in my brain of the data. That does not mean however that the general picture isn't crystal clear: again and again, with civilization and culture after culture the same patterns seem to repeat.

Whether it is the Germans, Chinese, Jews, Indians or the Italians, the walk through the history of their migrants tell a very rich and lesson full tale. Personally what stuck with me are some patterns for cultures that save and put value on work, and their success again and again not despite, but especially because they didn't pay much attention to the politics, but knew that real wealth and prosperity is acquired by... wait for it... CREATING it, not by taking it from somebody else with the force of the government, but by creating things and services for the people around you. This method seems to be so very successful that many times it results even in a painful backlash as many local populations often get very jealous and vengeful as they see that poor immigrants can rise much faster than they do, despite all their advantages. Many lessons can be learned from history, and the history of people is especially valuable!

Harley says

Very detailed and interesting history.

Ushan says

The story of six ethnic groups who migrated away from their homelands in large numbers - the Germans, the Japanese, the Italians, the Chinese, the Jews and the Indians. There are of course many more examples of mass migration, but these groups are representative. Many found niches in their host societies as "middleman minorities" - shopkeepers, moneylenders, peddlers, rent and tax collectors and the like. They were reviled by the majority ethnic group, who accused them of overcharging their customers and, contradictorily, of undercutting their competitors. Think of Gogol's Taras Bulba and Yankel, or more recently, Andrew Young and the Koreans, Arabs and Jews, or more tragically, Latasha Harlins and Soon Ja Du. Yet when they were expelled, as Idi Amin did with the Indians of Uganda and medieval European rulers did with Jews, the economy was wrecked. The hosts do not understand the reasons for the prosperity of the minority, like the Zambezi boatman who told Paul Theroux that the Indians catch diamond-stuffed fish using hearts of African virgins as bait.

Some of the ethnic groups and subgroups profiled came with the skills that made them richer than their hosts, as with German clockmakers and brewers who emigrated to the Americas. Some became rich through hard work, as the Volga Germans did first in Russia, and then, re-emigrating, in South America, running farms on the frontier that were much more productive than the farms of their Russian and Argentine neighbors. Some were poor but still lived honorably; far fewer Italian women in the United States became prostitutes than equally poor Irish and Jewish women. Different ethnic groups were concentrated in different occupations, had different family lives, and different attitudes towards education; for example, the Italians were much more tolerant of having their children work instead of going to school than American laws allowed. Attitudes

towards their mother country were also different; the Japanese Brazilians were ultra-nationalistic; when Japan lost World War II, some Japanese Brazilians organized a tour to the Atlantic coast to meet the victorious Japanese Navy, and murdered those of their community who said that the Japanese Navy had been sunk; the Japanese Americans were much less nationalistic, which is ironic given that they were treated much more harshly.

Sowell is not a biological racist; he does not say that the Cambodians run donut shops because they have a gene for it, and that the Jews are bad at farming because they don't have the right genes. He is a culturalist, though; he claims that some cultures are better in reaching wealth and avoiding poverty than others. A professor of ethnic studies may claim that no culture is better than any other; most other observers disagree, finding that members of different ethnic groups are more or less likely to have children out of wedlock, to save for their children's education, and in college to choose liberal arts versus engineering - and they choose to emulate some and disdain others. Why, asks Sowell, should we honor the professor's point of view over that of the other observers? Of course discrimination also affects the fates of different minority ethnic groups, but Sowell contends that its role is secondary to that of the group's own culture. This is of course wildly controversial, but I think he has a point. Why would the Japanese of mainland United States be more prosperous than the Japanese of Hawaii, the North Italians in the United States more than the South Italians? From the majority's point of view they are all Japanese and Italian.

Cleon says

An incredibly deep and timeless study of migration and cultural patterns.

Kenny says

Chapters on 6 different immigrant groups are filled with facts and have a section at the end of each that summarizes. The last chapter in the book relates trends seen with contemporary society. The book is 20 years old, but the arguments and conclusions are quite relevant today. Well worth reading.

Ebookwormy1 says

Previous work becomes contemporary as immigration is being debated throughout the West. I want to read what I have heard to be Sowell's brilliant thinking on these topics.

For Book 3 of Sowell's Culture series, see....

Conquests & Cultures, Sowell, 1999

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

Sam Motes says

A very insightful read into the migration patterns of nationalities around the globe and how they have impacted our every day lives. Dowelling digs into the second and subsequent generational career domination

a such as Jews who make up 1% of the population in some countries but make up over 90% of the lawyers. Fascinating read.

Bryan says

This is a historical book that examines the migrations of six groups of people (Germans, Italians, Chinese, Japanese, Indians, and Jews). It looks at how these groups moved to a number of other countries and cultures, and how they either interacted with the new areas, or maintained a separate lifestyle while living abroad. It was a very interesting read, especially given how much immigration has become a hot topic today, to see what has happened over a long history and around the globe. It also looks some at how the countries they went to changed, and what happened when the people left/were forced out.

While this is a lengthy book, and it may be easier for the average reader to start by just reading about one group of people, it is worth the read. It shows how some of these migrations have been celebrated and been very successful, and others were resented and their story ended in tragedy.

This should be a non controversial book, as it largely examines what happened, as opposed to evaluating the merits of the decisions made by different people and countries.

Randy Alanko says

Excellent. Sometimes his quoting of data slowed me down, but he supports what he writes.

Atul says

Excellent book. In this remarkable and extremely detailed history of six immigrant groups abroad (Germans, Japanese, Italians, Chinese, Jews, and Indians), Thomas Sowell convincingly argues that it is culture and human capital that play the biggest roles in the economic status of various groups around the world. He also argues that geography plays a significant role, but that this is not as essential, as seen in the cases of Japan and Switzerland.

Sowell points out numerous flaws in contemporary intellectual thinking about “oppression” and “discrimination” being the primary cause of differences in income or other statistical disparities between certain groups of people.

Sowell also draws an important distinction between race and culture (which some assume to be essentially the same). Race (your genes) isn't something you have a choice over, but culture is. Groups and countries throughout history have risen due to exposure to a more advanced culture, as seen in Scotland's dramatic rise out of abject poverty and Japan's progress in the late 1800s. Similarly, certain groups have been more willing to accept education than others, examples being the Ibos of Nigeria or the Ceylon Tamils of Sri Lanka. These groups tended to succeed economically to a greater extent than other groups in their home countries, who in many cases did not accept the education for various reasons. Same way, extremely poor immigrant groups such as the Italians initially did not have as much of an affinity for education as other groups such as the Germans, but after getting exposure to foreign countries (especially the United States), they developed a

higher interest in educating their children. In the beginning of the book, Sowell shows how Italian immigrants to the United States who returned to Italy were far more interested in education than Italians at home, and how these returnees to Italy founded schools and played a big role in “swelling” the Italian middle class.

My only problem with this book is that it is way too heavy on statistics, which can get somewhat overwhelming to sift through at times. I have also read Sowell’s “Conquests and Cultures”, also an excellent book, but which did not contain the same mass of statistics, and which was much easier to understand as a result. But overall, “Migrations and Cultures” is a 5 star book. I learned a great deal about immigrant groups around the world, and various historical facts that I had no idea about. I highly recommend “Migrations and Cultures”.

Some of my favorite quotes are:

”The importance of politics, and especially of protest politics, in advancing groups economically receives little or no support from the histories we have surveyed... Immigrants from India have been virtually invisible in American political life, even as their numbers and prosperity have grown remarkably in the late twentieth century.” (pg 378-379)

“Cultures are not merely customs to which people have a sentimental attachment, or badges of “identity” which permit them to engage in breast-beating. Cultures are particular ways of accomplishing the things that make life possible... Cultures differ in the relative significance they attach to time, noise, safety, cleanliness, violence, thrift, intellect, sex, and art.” (pg 379)

Jeanne says

There are many reasons that people migrate, better climate, better lives for their families, better jobs, or as refugees. What seems to be a recurring theme is that there is a certain amount of entrepreneurship in those who chose to migrate and a willingness to make it work once they arrive. They migrate to improve their lot so their capacity to work long and hard is expected. In many cases, however, the local population is carrying on with business as usual and are upstaged by the hungry new interlopers who are killing the prevailing work ethic. This makes the locals resent the newcomers as the migrants have a plan to stay and thrive. Overall, everyone benefits (over time) when the cultures merge and thrive together to become an inclusive society that share the best each has to offer.
