



Clanking Chains: Thomas Sowell Contrasts the Conceptions of the “Tragic” & “Anointed” Visions

Sowell, Thomas. “Flattering Unction.” Chap. 1 in *The Vision of the Anointed*. (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 2-4:

The focus here will be on the vision prevailing among the intellectual and political elite of our time. What is important about that vision are not only its particular assumptions and their corollaries, but also the fact that it is a *prevailing* vision—which means that its assumptions are so much taken for granted by so many people, including so-called “thinking people,” that neither those assumptions nor their corollaries are generally confronted with demands for empirical evidence. Indeed, evidence itself may be viewed as suspect, insofar as it is inconsistent with that vision.

Discordant evidence may be dismissed as isolated anomalies, or as something tendentiously selected by opponents, or it may be explained away ad hoc by a theory having no empirical support whatever—except that this ad hoc theory is able to sustain itself and gain acceptance because it is consistent with the overall vision. (p. 2)

Those who accept this vision are deemed to be not merely factually correct but morally on a higher plane. Put differently, those who disagree with the prevailing vision are seen as being not merely in error, but in sin. The benighted are to be made “aware,” to have their “consciousness raised,” and the wistful hope is held out that they will “grow.” Should the benighted prove recalcitrant, however, then their “mean-spiritedness” must be fought and the “real reasons” behind their arguments and actions exposed. While verbal fashions change, this basic picture of the differential rectitude of the anointed and the benighted has not changed fundamentally in the last two hundred years. (pp. 2-3)

The contemporary anointed and those who follow them make much of their “compassion” for the less fortunate, their “concern” for the environment, and their being “anti-war,” for example—as if these were characteristics which distinguish them from people with opposite views on public policy. Problems exist because others are not as wise or as virtuous as the anointed.

Sowell presents two worldviews and assigns an appellation to the proponents of each. We can now further broaden the definitions for each:

- The Anointed refers to those who have consecrated themselves as morally superior because of their intellect, compassion, and ideology. Such types believe they have a clear, unclouded vision of a problem-free future to which they are eminently qualified to lead mankind. In their New Tomorrow the ills of society, America, and the world will be permanently solved provided their progress is not hindered by the reactionary Benighted.
- The Benighted are the ignorant masses who are bound hopelessly to tradition, religion, and convention. Such types are criticized for their reliance upon outmoded political and social policies from a by-gone era that glorified authoritarian structures in society and stressed submission to absolute standards.

Thus Sowell’s “Anointed” are those we have identified as “progressives,” “cultural Marxists,” “reformers,” and “revolutionaries,” whose goal is to create an “utopian democracy.” Those Sowell refers to as he “Benighted” are the one’s thought of by The Anointed as “traditionalists,” “conservatives,” “reactionaries,” and the “mean-spirited” who stand in the way of progress and prevent the establishment of a perfect world order.

The strategy and tactics of attaining this world order are often utilized by special interest groups to which Anointed crusaders are attracted and recruited.



Sowell, *The Vision of the Anointed*, 5:

What all highly disparate crusades have in common is their moral exaltation of the anointed above others, who are to have their very different views nullified and superseded by the views of the anointed, imposed via the power of government. In a series of crusading movements during the twentieth century, several key elements have been common to most of them:

1. Assertions of a great danger to the whole society, a danger to which the masses of people are oblivious.
2. An urgent need for action to avert impending catastrophe.
3. A need for government to drastically curtail the dangerous behavior of the many.
4. A disdainful dismissal of arguments to the contrary as either uninformed, irresponsible, or motivated by unworthy purposes.

The prevailing vision of our era ... so permeates the media and academia, and has made such major inroads into the religious community, that many grow to adulthood unaware that there is any other way of looking at things. Many of these "thinking people" could more accurately be characterized as *articulate* people, as people whose verbal nimbleness can elude both evidence and logic.

- 17- The cultural war that now rages between The Anointed and The Benighted is characterized by Sowell as a contest between the Prevailing Vision and the Tragic Vision.
- 18- We have been observing in our series, *The Clanking Chains*, various manifestations of the Prevailing Vision and documenting some of the victories it has gained legally, politically, and academically as its acceptance becomes more and more widespread.
- 19- On the other hand, we have always been proponents of the Tragic Vision's worldview. Without calling it that we subscribe to the principle that man is a fallen creature and therefore is more inclined to follow the dictates of the sinful nature than not and thus must be restrained by law. This "Tragic Vision" concept was in the mind of James Madison as the developed the system of checks and balances and electoral filtrations written into our Constitution:

Collier, Christopher and James Lincoln Collier. *Decision in Philadelphia: The Constitutional Convention in 1787*. (New York: Random House, 1986), 47-48:

Madison accepted the fact that human beings were by nature neither altogether good nor altogether evil but a little bit good and a little more evil. "Human beings," he maintained, "are generally governed by rather base and selfish motives, by suspicion, jealousy, desire for self-aggrandizement, and disinclination to do more than is required by convenience or self-interest, or exacted of them by force."

One of the most important forces impelling human beings into evil, Madison believed, was the tendency to form "factions"—what we might call interest groups.

Above all, James Madison was intent on controlling power. Summing up, he said, "If men were angels, no government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: You must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place, oblige it to control itself. A dependence on the people is no doubt the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions."



20- Sowell takes up these two visions and compares them in Chapter 5 of his book:

Sowell, “The Anointed Versus the Benighted,” Chap. 5 in *The Vision of the Anointed*, 104-112:

THE UNDERLYING VISION. The vision of the anointed may stand out in sharper relief when it is contrasted with the opposing vision, a vision whose reasoning begins with the tragedy of the human condition. By tragedy here is not meant simply unhappiness, but tragedy in the ancient Greek sense, inescapable fate inherent in the nature of things. The two visions differ in their respective conceptions of the nature of man, the nature of the world, and the nature of causation, knowledge, power, and justice. These differences can be presented schematically:

Conception	The Tragic Vision	The Vision of the Anointed
<i>Human capability</i>	Severely and inherently limited for all.	Vast for the anointed.
<i>Social possibilities</i>	Trade-offs that leave many “unmet needs.”	Solutions to problems.
<i>Social causation</i>	Systemic	Deliberate
<i>Freedom</i>	Exemption from the power of others.	Ability to achieve goals.
<i>Justice</i>	Rules with just characteristics.	Equalized results.
<i>Knowledge</i>	Consists largely of the unarticulated experiences of the man.	Consists largely of the articulated intelligence of the more educated few.
<i>Specialization</i>	Highly desirable.	Highly questionable.
<i>Motivation</i>	Incentives.	Dispositions.
<i>Process costs</i>	Crucial.	Incidental.
<i>Decision-making mechanism preferred</i>	Systemic processes that convey the experiences and revealed preferences of the many.	Deliberate plans that utilize the special talents and more advanced views of the few.

Sowell evaluates these differing visions over the course of chapters 5 and 6. The comparisons between the two present clear distinctions and offer helpful illustrations that enable the reader to identify the strategy and tactics being used to assault the divine institutions in our client nation. I intend to only give highlights but I recommend this book to you for your further edification on this subject. It’s currently available in paperback.