

Excerpts from: *Black Rednecks and White Liberals* (2005) by Thomas Sowell

IN ANY GIVEN COUNTRY, A PARTICULAR MINORITY may be hated for any of a number of reasons peculiar to that country or that group. However, in a worldwide perspective, the most hated kinds of minorities are often not defined by race, color, religion, or national origin. Often they are generically “middleman minorities,” who can be of any racial or ethnic background, and in fact are of many. Many of the historic outbreaks of inter-ethnic mob violence on a massive scale have been against the Jews in Europe, the Chinese minorities in various Southeast Asian countries, against the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, the Ibos in Nigeria, and against other middleman minorities in other times and places. (65)

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Other kinds of minorities have of course also suffered violence, but the scale of lethal mass violence against middleman minorities has been unequalled. All the blacks lynched in the entire history of the United States do not add up to as many people as the number of Chinese slaughtered by mobs near Saigon in 1782, or the Jews killed by mobs in Central Europe in 1096 or in the Ukraine in 1648, much less the slaughters of Armenians by mobs in the Ottoman Empire during the 1890s or during the First World War. Only the Nazi Holocaust exceeded the slaughter of Armenians and, while the Holocaust was the ultimate catastrophe for Jews, it was also the culmination of a long history of lethal mass violence unleashed against middleman minorities around the world. What do all these groups have in common and why have they been hated so much? Partly the resentments and animosities against these groups have derived from the economic role they play, a role that has been widely misunderstood and widely resented—in very disparate societies, over a period of many centuries—even when this economic role has been played by people not ethnically different from those around them. Differences of race, religion or ethnicity, added to the resentments arising from the economic role itself, have produced explosive mixtures in many times and places. (66)

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Middleman minorities have been intermediaries between producers and consumers, whether in the role of retailers or moneylenders. The retailing has ranged from the modest level of street peddlers to that of grand merchants owning chains of stores and money-lending has likewise ranged from the level of the small neighborhood pawnbroker to that of international financiers. Jews have historically been the classic middleman minority, to whom others have often been analogized—the overseas Chinese as “the Jews of Southeast Asia,” the Lebanese as “the Jews of West Africa,” the Parsees as “the Jews of India,” and the Ibos as “the Jews of Nigeria,” for example. Shakespeare’s merchant of Venice was a Jew and the story revolved around his money-lending. Numerically, however, the 36 million overseas Chinese are more than twice as numerous as all the Jews in the world. (66-7)

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Although there have been many middleman minorities over the centuries and around the world, the tragic history of the Jews, as a people without a country for two thousand years, climaxed by the Holocaust in which one-third of all the Jews in the world were murdered, is unique. Yet the history of many other groups in other times and places has borne a remarkable similarity to that of the Jews in a number of ways, though of course no two groups are the same in all ways. These similarities include their economic patterns, their social patterns, and the pattern of responses they have evoked from others. (69)

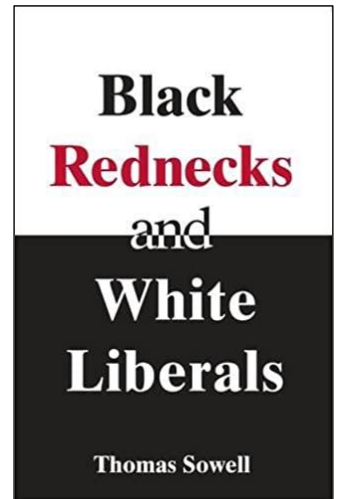
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Throughout most of the history of the human race, most people have made a living in agriculture—typically through arduous labor. The beginning of the industrial revolution meant, for most people, the transfer of the scene of that arduous labor from farm to factory. To such people, those who earned their livings without visible toil, with clean hands, and by simply selling things that others had produced at higher prices than the producers had charged, were ready targets of resentments, especially when these non-producers enjoyed a higher standard of living than those who worked in factories or on farms. It did not have to be a dramatically higher standard of living. Those nearby on the socioeconomic scale are often more hotly resented than distant rich people. (69-70)

Even in the absence of differences in toil or reward, the seeming conjuring of wealth out of thin air, apparently by “overcharging” others or making them pay back more money than was lent, has been seen as parasitic activity, rather than as a contribution to the well-being of the community. Suspicions are readily aroused against an occupation where an income is generated, in Friedrich Hayek’s words, “‘out of nothing,’ without physical creation and by merely rearranging what already exists,” an operation that to the uninitiated seems to “stink of sorcery.” (70)

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Thus, in centuries past, a Serb who charged interest on loans to fellow Serb peasants was called a “Greek,” a term of condemnation, based on Serbian hostility to Greek money-lenders.



Charging interest on loans was for centuries widely condemned as immoral, a condemnation often made with the sanction of religion. Jews played the role of money-lenders largely by default in medieval Christian Europe and in much of the Islamic world. Halfway around the world, Chettiars from India faced hostility, mob violence, and eventually expulsion as money-lenders in Burma, even though they generally charged lower interest rates than those indigenous Burmese who were money-lenders. (82-3)

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What all this implies is that middleman minorities must be very different from their customers. This differentness—and the social withdrawal needed to preserve this differentness in their children—then leave the middleman minorities vulnerable to charges of “clannishness” by political and other demagogues. Moreover, the lack of knowledge of either the business or the social imperatives of middlemen by outsiders leaves the majority population vulnerable to exploitation of their ignorance by politicians and activists who can spin plausible-sounding accusations against middleman minorities. These accusations can exploit racial, religious, or other differences, but this is not to say that such differences are the fundamental reasons for the hostility. (100)

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Hostility to middleman minorities has been widespread for centuries, though many have managed to live peacefully until some dramatic event or some talented demagogue managed to stir the population against them. For example, the plagues that decimated Europe in the Middle Ages were sometimes blamed on Jews, leading to mob violence against them. (102)

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The role of middleman minorities in various countries around the world has attracted the attention of many scholars and produced many suggested explanations of their roles and experiences. One of the most often cited studies has been “A Theory of Middleman Minorities” by Edna Bonacich. A crucial element in her theory is that of sojourning. Middleman minorities have often been sojourners rather than permanent settlers in the societies in which they live. Because “they begin as sojourners,” according to Professor Bonacich, they have less reason to assimilate to the society around them. While sojourning “is not a sufficient condition of the middleman,” Professor Bonacich says, “it is a necessary one.” (106)

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In terms of their achievements in the arts and sciences, Jews have been unique, not only among middleman minorities but also among the world’s population at large. They have been particularly over-represented among the leading figures in such fields as mathematics, the sciences, and philosophy. In the second half of the twentieth century, Jews won 29 percent of all the Nobel Prizes in the sciences, medicine and literature combined, even though Jews were less than one-half of 1 percent of the world’s population. Such spectacular achievements have come only in relatively recent times, as history is measured. These have been largely the achievements of Ashkenazic Jews, who were excluded from civil society for many centuries in most of Europe where they lived, and their remarkable rise to prominence among the leading intellectual figures dates largely from the nineteenth century, when severe restrictions on them were relaxed in a growing number of European countries. It was in the new nation of the United States that Jews were first accorded civil equality and it was here that their greatest successes were achieved. Another way of looking at this is that much of the world for much of history lost the benefits of the talents of these people—and of similar people elsewhere—through suppression and persecution. While the intellectual achievements of Jews have been unique, the bigotry and persecution that they suffered has been the fate of middleman minorities around the world.

While there are characteristics and achievements which are uniquely Jewish, the history of middleman minorities around the world seems to suggest that it has not been these uniquely Jewish characteristics which called forth venomous hatreds but characteristics and achievements common to middleman minorities, both when they are in that occupational role and after they move beyond into a wide range of occupations. Whatever is unique to each of these groups may be seized upon by those promoting hatred of them but that does not mean that the promotion of hatred in the first place has been due to qualities unique to each group. However unique any of these groups may be, historically the kind of hostility and hatred they have faced has been generic. (109-10)

Questions:

1. **What are the characteristics of middleman minorities in society; and what role do they play?**
2. **According to the author, why are middlemen minorities vilified by the majority?**
3. **What is the author’s primary thesis vis-à-vis anti-Semitism?**