

Open Borders as Global Justice: Sowell Edition

Immigration laws don't merely allow discrimination; they *require* it. As the result, such laws are deeply anti-meritocratic. Employers may be allowed to hire the best citizen for the job, but not the best *person*.

Even more strikingly, the injustice ripples down through the generations. When you trap a foreign-born father in a Third World country, you don't just stunt his prospects; you stunt his children's prospects as well. Indeed, this physical and mental stunting is often plain as day.

These truisms came firmly to my mind when I recently re-read the title essay of Thomas Sowell's *Compassion Versus Guilt*:

Many years ago, in a Third World country, I noticed by the side of the road a ragged and forlorn little boy, who bore an uncanny resemblance to my son. It was a momentary but penetrating shock – followed by a sober realization that that was what my son might be like, if we had been born there instead of in the United States.

The essay continues:

Even the most ardent believer in individual merit must recognize that where you happen to have been born, how you were raised, or where you happen to have been located when opportunity or disaster came along, can make all the difference in the world.

Sowell then wisely warns that we should not let pity drive us to rash, counter-productive remedies:

People are different, and these differences have consequences... Many of our attempts to share our good fortune with others, at home and abroad, have undermined the very efforts, standards and values that make that good fortune possible. Trying to ease our own guilt feelings is very different from trying to advance those less fortunate.

Many of Sowell's fans will take this as a thinly-veiled critique of open borders. Nowadays, Sowell himself might do the same. But that's an unreasonable reading of what he meant at the time. No, Sowell's top two worries were: (a) labor market regulations will disemploy the poor, and (b) redistribution will lead the poor to make bad long-run decisions. Neither remotely applies to simply deregulating labor markets so the global poor are free to accept job offers in the First World.

Notice, moreover, that Sowell is pushing the classic libertarian/conservative argument that government intervention is ultimately bad for the poor *themselves*. But when pressed, even the angriest critics of immigration usually admit that deregulation makes the immigrants themselves better off. They just care a lot more about relatively poor natives than absolutely poor foreigners - and want government to enforce this perverse priority on our whole society.