



## Adolescent Intellectuals

Thomas Sowell

Colaboraciones n° 1778

June 21, 2007

To a small child, the reason he cannot do many things that he would like to do is that his parents won't let him. Many years later, maturity brings an understanding that there are underlying reasons for doing or not doing many things, and that his parents were essentially conduits for those reasons.

The truly dangerous period in life is the time when the child has learned the limits of his parents' control, and how to circumvent their control, but has not yet understood or accepted the underlying reasons for doing and not doing things. This adolescent period is one that some people – intellectuals especially – never outgrow.

The widespread and fervent use of the word "liberation" in a wide variety of contexts is one of the signs of the adolescent belief that only arbitrary rules and conventions stand in

the way of doing whatever we want to do.

According to this vision of the world, the problems of all sorts of individuals and groups – women, minorities, homosexuals, children – are to be solved by liberating them from the restraints of laws, rules, conventions and standards.

They are to be liberated even from the threat of adverse judgments by other individuals. We are all to be "non-judgmental."

Two centuries ago, the great British legal scholar William Blackstone pointed out that there are some laws so old that no one remembers why they existed or what purpose they served then or now. But the bad consequences of repealing some of these laws have often made painfully clear what purpose they served.

Some of the painful consequences of various "liberations" that began in the 1960s have included the disintegration of families, skyrocketing crime rates, falling test scores in school, and record-breaking rates of teenage suicide.

A long downward trend in teenage pregnancy and venereal diseases sharply reversed during the 1960s, starting a new trend of escalating teenage pregnancy and venereal diseases, climaxed later by the AIDS epidemic.

Sometimes bad things happen because of adverse circumstances – poverty or war, for example.

But our post-1960s social disasters occurred during a long period of peace and unprecedented prosperity. Murder rates, for example, were much lower during the Great Depression of the 1930s and during World War II than they became after various "liberating" changes in the 1960s.

One of the signs of maturity is the ability to learn from experience. Some of us have learned and we have halted or reversed some of the adverse trends. For example, the quest for those elusive "root causes" of crime, so dear to the political left, has been put aside in favor of locking up more criminals – and the crime rate has declined.

The left is upset that we have so many people behind bars and lament how much it is costing to keep them there. They do not even bother

to estimate how much it would cost to turn them loose.

The left has never understood why property rights are a big deal, except to fat cats who own a lot of property. Through legislation and judicial rulings, property rights have been eroded with rent control laws, expansive concepts of eminent domain, and all sorts of environmental restrictions.

Some of the biggest losers have been people of very modest incomes and some of the biggest winners have been fat cats who are able to use political muscle and activist judges to violate other people's property rights.

Politicians in cities around the country violate property rights regularly by seizing homes in working-class neighborhoods and demolishing whole sectors of the city, in order to turn the land over to people who will build shopping malls, gambling casinos, and other things that will pay more taxes than the homeowners are paying.

That's why property rights were put in the Constitution in the first place, to keep politicians from doing things like that. But the adolescent intellectuals of our time have promoted the notion that property rights are just arbitrary rules to protect the rich.

Many academics and federal judges are sufficiently insulated from reality by tenure that they never have to grow up.