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Essay by Thomas Sowell

## THE UNHEAVENLY CITY AT FIFTY

*Edward Banfield's book was ahead of its time—and ours.*



SOMEWHERE WINSTON CHURCHILL SAID that all wisdom is not new wisdom. That is certainly true of Edward C. Banfield's landmark book, *The Unheavenly City*, published fifty years ago. Many, if not most, of the people discussing urban problems today have not yet caught up to what Banfield said half a century ago.

Education is a classic example. People on both sides of many education issues today would be appalled at Banfield's plain-spoken truths. While people on one side of education issues speak of "inclusion" and "diversity," people on the other side say such things as "no child left behind." Banfield, however, presents the brutal truth that there are some students who have no real interest in education, and whose disruptive behavior in the classroom can deprive many other students of a decent education and a decent future.

While others urge programs to keep adolescents from becoming "dropouts," *The Unheavenly City* asserts that there are "compelling reasons for getting non-learners out of school" earlier than the current school-leaving age. This, Banfield urged, would be benefi-

cial—not only to the other students, but to the non-learners themselves, and to society. According to Banfield, "children who cannot or will not learn are injured by too-long confinement in school." "The boy who knows that he has learned nothing since the eighth grade but that he must nevertheless sit in boredom, frustration, and embarrassment" until he reaches the legal school-leaving age "must be profoundly disaffected by the experience." Banfield cited an empirical study which suggested that "much juvenile delinquency originates in the adolescent's anger at the stupidity and hypocrisy of a system that uses him in this way."

WHILE MANY PEOPLE TODAY MAY simply dismiss what Banfield said, it is impossible for me to dismiss it. As a personal note, I happen to have dropped out of high school at age 16, and took a full-time job as a messenger delivering telegrams for the Western Union telegraph company. But the law required me to also spend some time in what was called a "continuation school."

It was a time-wasting farce. I informed the teacher that the law could force me to be there, but it could not force me to participate, and I had no intention of participating. I was indeed angry "at the stupidity and hypocrisy of a system" that used me like this. Fortunately, Western Union had its own continuation school for its messengers, and I transferred there, where I learned to type, a skill that would be of some value to me in later years—instead of being used to justify some teacher's job in a public school.

Today, one can read reams of writings on education, by people with a variety of viewpoints, and never encounter the problem of the non-learning student who needs to be either removed from class, allowed to leave school, or otherwise sidelined—both for the sake of the other students and for his own sake. Other possibilities may be well worth exploring. But allowing such students to destroy the education—and the futures—of many other students is a very high price to pay for the pretense that there are no such students. Or the greater pretense that there are feel-good "solutions" available.

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EVEN THOSE WHO DISAGREE WITH BANFIELD'S prescriptions—on this or other issues—can nevertheless understand the importance of his highlighting inconvenient facts that so many others avoid. Another issue on which many of today's intelligentsia have not yet caught up to what Banfield said half a century ago is the effect of minimum wage laws on the employment of young people—and especially non-white young people.

Over the years, vast amounts of ingenuity have been deployed by some economists to avoid the obvious fact that minimum wage laws can make unskilled labor too expensive for most employers to hire many inexperienced workers. The result has been disastrously high levels of unemployment for black teenagers, as politicians pass "living wage" laws that make it difficult for young blacks to get any wage at all.

*The Unheavenly City* produces both data and a devastating graph, showing that, when the federal minimum wage law—the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938—was rendered ineffective by runaway inflation during the 1940s, teenage unemployment in 1948 was a fraction of what it later became, after a series of minimum wage increases began in 1950, in order to catch up with the effects of inflation.

Perhaps most telling, there was virtually no difference in the unemployment rate between white and non-white teenagers in 1948. But a huge racial gap in teenage unemployment rates opened up as the minimum wage rate increased. For some people, racial gaps are automatically taken as proof of racism. But was there no racism in 1948? That would come as quite a surprise to those of us who actually lived through that era.

Just as there is no free lunch, there is no free racism in a market where supply and demand set prices, including the price of labor. By definition, racists prefer one race to another. But, like other people, racists tend to prefer themselves most of all. There is a limit to how much money most racists are prepared to lose by discrimination.

Even in South Africa during the era of apartheid, there were some occupations in competitive industries where black workers outnumbered white workers—in occupations where it was illegal to hire any black workers. White employers responsible for this situation might well have voted for the white supremacy laws they were violating. But it cost nothing to vote for white supremacy, while it could cost plenty to pass up opportunities to make profits by hiring black workers.

When minimum wage laws create a chronic surplus of unemployed teenage labor, the cost of racial discrimination falls to virtually

zero. Who should be surprised when there is more racial discrimination when it costs the discriminator nothing?

ANOTHER WAY IN WHICH BANFIELD was more advanced 50 years ago than many intellectuals are today is that he did not regard differences between races as necessarily racial differences. That is, such differences need not reflect either differences peculiar to a particular racial group or biases against a particular racial group. He pointed out that "there are groups—rural Southern whites, for example—whose handicaps are much like the Negro's." When cultural factors that overlap different groups to different degrees are taken into account, many intergroup differences shrink substantially, according to Banfield—and according to much later data. If his insights were taken more seriously today, the current vogue of simply seizing on a statistical difference and crying out against injustice might be much less common, or at least much less persuasive.

Perhaps the chapters in *The Unheavenly City* that are most relevant to our current social problems are the chapters on crime and riots. Banfield rejected the common claim that high crime rates and riots are results of deprivations and discrimination. He even declared: "The reason why crime rates tend to be higher in large cities than in small ones may have something to do with the fact that in the larger city the individual has more schooling, more income, and more opportunity."

Jolting as that conclusion may be to some, Banfield proceeded to test it against empirical evidence—showing that some of the most devastating riots of the 1960s occurred in cities where blacks were better off than elsewhere. The Detroit riots and the Watts riots in Los Angeles were classic examples.

In addition to cultural reasons cited to explain his claims, Banfield also cited changes in the surrounding society that made crimes and riots more prevalent. Among these was a sense that the less fortunate "have a kind of quasi right to have their offenses against the law extenuated or even to have them regarded as political acts reflecting a morality 'higher' than obedience to law." These new kinds of attitudes toward crime and riots that became widespread during the 1960s led to such scenes as: "Sometimes the police had to stand by and allow looting to go on before their eyes." In our own time, this has now become almost standard procedure.

Although the media, then as now, tended to feature the loudest and most extreme statements of racial activists or "leaders," as if these

were the views of blacks in general, Banfield cited opinion polls in the 1960s that showed most blacks having very different views. Most "were neither sunk in hopelessness nor consumed with anger," he said. Among these 1960s-era polls, 81% of blacks in non-Southern metropolitan areas thought things were getting better for them, and 87% said that America was "worth fighting for."

WHETHER SUCH BELIEFS WOULD still be prevalent today—after whole generations have been indoctrinated in the schools and in the media with a steady drumbeat of victimhood and resentments—is something we may never know. Few in the media seem interested in testing what is said on their broadcasts against what the black population as a whole say.

Long before Harvard Professor Steven Pinker's massive study, *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011), showing that long-run trends in declining homicide rates suddenly "did a U-turn" and shot up in the 1960s, Banfield's *The Unheavenly City* suggested that "violent crime in the metropolitan area as a whole declined steadily over the last century" before being "interrupted and even reversed in the central cities and in its larger, older suburbs." Banfield drew a sharp distinction between pre-1960s ghetto riots and the numbers and kinds of ghetto riots that became common during that decade and later. These latter-day ghetto riots tended to be riots "involving several hundred rioters and lasting more than a day." But no such riots on that scale occurred prior to July 1964, according to Banfield.

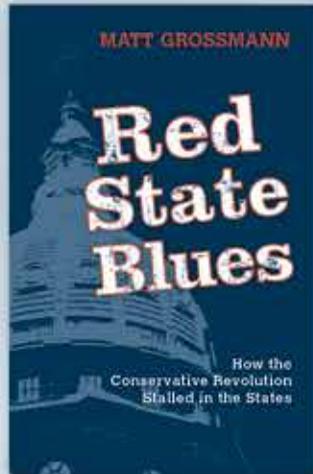
Banfield also pointed out that riots in general were not peculiar to blacks, but were common among young males from a variety of backgrounds. His suggestions for reducing these youth-led riots included "repealing the minimum wage and relaxing the child-labor and school-attendance laws." Whether anyone can actually repeal these political sacred cows is another question.

*The Unheavenly City* presents a very different vision of the causes and cures of urban problems. Considering how many massively expensive policies and programs for dealing with urban problems have failed disastrously, taking a look at a different paradigm may at the very least provoke some much-needed new thinking. Banfield's book is virtually a demolition derby of fallacies that continue to dominate thoughts and actions in our own time.

*Thomas Sowell is the Rose and Milton Friedman Senior Fellow on Public Policy at the Hoover Institution.*

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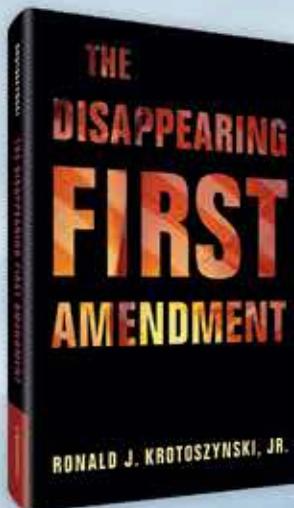


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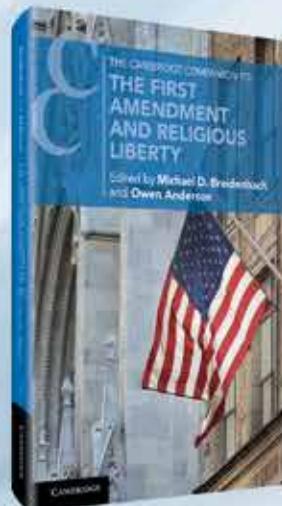
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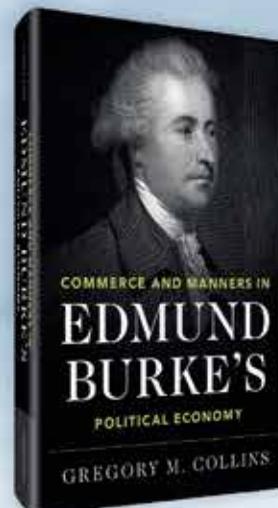
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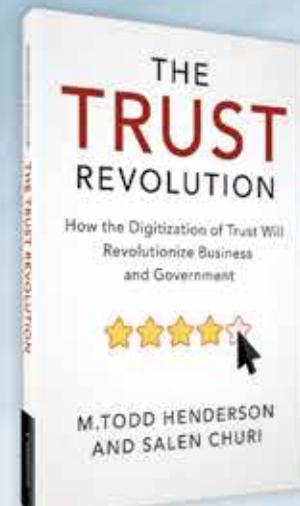
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