

# Mind-changing Books



By Thomas Sowell

From time to time, readers ask me what books have made the biggest difference in my life. I am not sure how to answer that question because the books that happened to set me off in a particular direction at a particular time may have no special message for others—and may even be books I no longer believe in today.


The first book that got me interested in political issues was *Actions and Passions* by Max Lerner, which I read at age 19. It was a collection of his newspaper columns, none of which I remember today and all of which were vintage liberalism, which even Max Lerner himself apparently had second thoughts about in later years.

The writings of Karl Marx—especially *The Communist Manifesto*—had the longest lasting effect on me as a young man and led me to become and remain a Marxist throughout my twenties. I wouldn't recommend this today either, except as an example of a masterpiece of propaganda.

There was no book that changed my mind about being on the political left. Life experience did that—especially the experience of seeing government at work from the inside.

The book that permanently made me a sadder and wiser man was Edward Gibbons' *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. To follow one of the greatest civilizations of all time as it degenerated and fractured, even before being torn apart by its enemies, was especially painful in view of the parallels to what is happening in America in our own times.

The fall of the Roman Empire was not just a matter of changing rulers or political systems. It was the collapse of a whole civilization—the destruction of an economy, the breakdown of law and order, the disappearance of many educational institutions.



It has been estimated that a thousand years passed before the standard of living in Western Europe rose again to the level it had once reached back in Roman times.

How long would it take us to recover from the collapse of Western civilization today—if we ever recovered?

The kinds of books most readers seem to have in mind when they ask for my recommendations are books that go to the heart of a particular subject, books that open the eyes of the reader in a mind-changing way.

You will never look at the Third World the same way again after reading *Equality, the Third World, and Economic Delusion* by Peter Bauer. It demolishes many myths about the causes of poverty in the Third World—and about “foreign aid” as a way of relieving that poverty.

You will never look at crime the same way after reading *Crime and Human Behavior* by Richard J. Herrnstein and James Q. Wilson. It is a strong dose of hard facts that shatter the illusions of the intelligentsia and the mushy rhetoric of “root causes” and the like.

Edward Banfield’s 1960s classic, *The Unheavenly City*, likewise cuts right through the pious cant about urban problems and confronts some inescapable realities. You will never look at urban issues the same way again.

Among my own books, those that the most readers have said changed their minds have been *Knowledge and Decisions*, *A Conflict of Visions*, *Basic Economics*, *Black Rednecks and White Liberals*.

Frankly, *Knowledge and Decisions* is not an easy book to read and it was not an easy book to write. But it goes to the heart of why certain kinds of decisions are better made in particular kinds of places—whether economic, political, or other institutions, or in informal settings like the family. Unfortunately, those decisions are often made in places that don’t do as good a job.

*A Conflict of Visions* is my own favorite among my books but it too is not for everyone. It traces the underlying assumptions behind opposing ideologies that have dominated the Western world over the past two centuries and are still going strong today.

The most readable of these four books is *Basic Economics*, which may also be the most needed, given widespread economic illiteracy.

*Black Rednecks and White Liberals* challenges much that has been said and accepted, not only about blacks but also about Jews, Germans, white Southerners and others.

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