

Negro Intellectuals in Dilemma

Myrdal's Study of a Crucial Problem

Over four years were needed to complete this study.* It is a product not only of the Swedish scholar, Gunnar Myrdal, and his two associates, Richard Sterner and Arnold Rose, but of some seventy-five intellectuals, both white and Negro, who gave full or part time to the gathering and analysis of data. Some of these supplementary studies were elaborated and published separately. The outstanding of these are: *The Negro's Share*, by Richard Sterner, *Patterns of Negro Segregation*, by Charles S. Johnson, and *Organized Labor and the Negro*, by Herbert R. Northrup. Other manuscripts prepared for the larger study have remained unpublished, but have been placed on file at the Schomburg Collection, where they are available to the public. Even without these more detailed studies of separate aspects of the Negro problem, the Myrdal work comprises the most comprehensive thus far produced on the subject, and makes it possible to clear our shelves of many of the earlier volumes on this topic. This assertion, which has been made by the Negro intellectuals in their reviews of *An American Dilemma*, is not, however, repeated by the present reviewer as unqualified praise of the book. On the contrary, that this work makes such a clearing possible is only further testimony as to the paucity of adequate books on the subject. There is not a single outstanding work dealing with the Negro problem "in general," although there are good studies of specific facets of the Negro problem. In the present research we get an over-all view of the entire field.

**An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. By Gunnar Myrdal, with the assistance of Richard Sterner and Arnold Rose. Harper & Bros., 1944; 2 volumes, 1,483 pages, \$7.50.

However, in some instances, as on the Reconstruction period, it is a retrogression. I speak of retrogression because, whereas Myrdal states that no comprehensive scientific study of the Reconstruction period has yet been written by American historians, and urges that such a study be made, he is not helping the case along by more or less dismissing the Negro studies of the Reconstruction period as mere counter-balances to the prejudiced reports by the whites. W. E. B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction*, which is a first-class piece of research and analysis in a field barely touched by our venerable white historians, can in no way be dismissed so cavalierly.

One of the most serious shortcomings of the Myrdal book arises from the fact that in those cases where no study of a field had ever before been made, as on the Negro rôle in the Populist movement in the South, those unexplored fields are not only further neglected but are ignored. At the very height of the prejudice-ridden post-Reconstruction period, when the South was supposedly solidly white in thought and action, the Populist movement that was sweeping the country found its most radical expression in the South. The National Colored Farmers' Alliance alone numbered one and one-quarter million members and, although separately organized from the white agrarians, waged their class battles as one. It was a power to be reckoned with both in state and national politics, and was instrumental in the elections of Populist governors as well as national and state representatives. There have not been many Negro organizations with so large a membership. Any "social scientists" seriously studying the Negro problem, as Mr. Myrdal surely did, could not have escaped becoming in-

interested in and probing to the end this outstanding example of class solidarity across racial lines. However, Prof. Myrdal seems to be ignorant of this movement. In a bibliography of thirty-five pages, no reference is made even to such popular works as the scholarly and sympathetic study, *Tom Watson, Agrarian Rebel*, by C. Van Woodward, or the scholarly but prejudiced study, *The Populist Movement in Georgia*, by A. M. Arnett. The bibliography does include John D. Hicks' standard *The Populist Revolt*, which contains one reference to the Negro Farmers' Alliance. If that left any impression on Mr. Myrdal, however, it was insufficient to induce him to pursue the study of this phenomenon through primary sources.

This failure must be analyzed. It was surely not due to lack of money or unavailability of scholars to undertake such a study, if an awareness of the need for such research had been felt. Mr. Myrdal neither searched this field nor even indicated that it should be searched because his outlook could not encompass the possibility of such a movement. Mr. Myrdal emphatically rejects the Marxian concept of the class struggle. He writes:

Our hypothesis is that a society where there are broad social classes and, in addition, more minute distinctions and splits in the lower strata, the lower class groups will to a great extent take care of keeping each other subdued, thus relieving, to that extent, the higher classes of this otherwise painful task necessary to the monopolization of the power and the advantages. (Page 68.)

Clearly, this means that Mr. Myrdal thinks that the white and Negro masses, rather than turn against their common oppressor, will fight each other. "The Marxian scheme," he argues further, "assumes that there is an actual solidarity between the several lower class groups against the higher classes, or, in any case, a potential solidarity which as a matter of natural development is bound to emerge." (Page 68.)

Mr. Myrdal maintains that that "scheme" has influenced Negro intellectuals, and has thus evidently blurred their vision. As an example of this he calls attention to Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction*, where it is stated:

The South after the [Civil] war presented the greatest opportunity for a real national labor movement which the nation ever saw or is likely to see for many decades.

Mr. Du Bois is wrong. No such possibility existed then for the simple reason that the industrial development in the South was of insufficient scope to allow the proletariat in heavy industry to become the leading social force and act as a bridge for the whole area with the more developed industrial North. Mr. Myrdal, however, is entirely wrong when he attributes the failure of a national labor movement to have arisen then to racial differences.

From our point of view [he writes] such a possibility did not exist at all and the negative outcome was neither an accident nor a result of simple deception or delusion. These two groups, illiterate and insecure in an impoverished South, placed in an intensified competition with each other, lacking every trace of primary solidarity, marked off from each other by color and tradition could not possibly clasp hands. (Page 69.)

The fact, however, is that the "negative outcome," that is, the first appearance of the Solid South, was shattered but a few years after it was instituted due to the onslaught of the Southern agrarian movement in which white and black fought together against the planter-merchant-railroad vested interests. In the previously cited work on Tom Watson, Mr. Van Woodward traces this period of white and black unity, and comments: "Never before or since have the two races in the South come so close together as they did during the Populist struggles." Yet Mr. Myrdal, in a sum total of 1,463 pages on the "Negro problem," finds no space for so much as a footnote to

refer to the Negro rôle in this tremendous mass movement. This is the result of his "non-class struggle" approach. In this respect it is not devoid of interest to note that the sponsor of this study is the Carnegie Corporation.

Myrdal Justifies His Selection

The present study was projected by this corporation, which sank over a quarter of a million dollars into the venture. So prejudiced are the American "social scientists" that, in order to get the facts on the Negro problem impartially set down, the corporation found that it would need to engage a foreign scholar. Not accidentally, however, its search for one unprejudiced in racial questions ended when it found one who was anti-Marxist in political outlook. Mr. Myrdal's anti-Marxism colors his approach to the entire work as well as to his co-workers. Mr. Myrdal's insistence on the invalidity of the Marxian theory shows that he knows quite well where the "main enemy" is and who his sponsor is.

Mr. Myrdal denies that "the economic factor" is the primary one in the development of society, or rather, in the existence of the Negro problem. To him the Negro problem is a moral problem arising out of the conflict between the "American creed," that all men are created equal, and the American reality, in which the Negro minority is so unjustly treated. However, it is clear from the 1,000-odd pages of text, that, if the Negro problem is in the "mind and heart" of America, it has nevertheless a most solid economic foundation, and it is precisely the chapters that deal with the economic foundation that are the best in the two volumes. A particularly admirable job was done with the section on the Negro laborer. That section was under the general direction of Mr. Sterner, who also is the author of the appendix relating to this section. This appendix is entitled "Pre-War Conditions of the Negro Wage-Earner in Selected Industries and Occupations." It deals both with the industries in which the Negroes are the predominant labor force, lumber milling, fertilizer manufacturing, turpentine farming, etc., and with the industry which practically excludes any Negro labor, the major Southern industry, textiles. From it we also get a glimpse of the difference between the conditions in a non-unionized industry and a unionized one. In turpentine farming the Negro earns little more than \$200 a year and some forms of peonage are still extant. In mining, however, the worker gets comparatively high wages, being unionized in the United Mine Workers, where no discrimination exists. In fact, even in Alabama, the Negro union member talks as freely as the white union member, and the local union itself is generally administered by a white president and a Negro vice-president.

The study of the Negro worker is preceded by an examination of the plight of the Negro share-cropper. The chapters on Negro and Southern agriculture are on as competent a level as those on the Negro in industry. Anyone who has entertained any illusions as to what the New Deal meant to the poor farmers, white and Negro, in the semi-feudal conditions of the South, will have them quickly dispelled by the accumulated weight of evidence. This shows that the governmental agricultural policies had graver consequences in uprooting the Negro farmer than soil erosion, the boll weevil and the Southwestern shift of cotton culture combined.

The above citations indicate that the value of *An American Dilemma* does not reside in its "value premises" but in the fact that it offers up-to-date informational summaries of the economic, legal and social status of the Negro in America. No criticism of Mr. Myrdal's "value premises," however,

could have dealt them so fatal a blow as was struck by the author himself. This occurs when his thesis reaches the South, where, after all, four out of five Negroes still live, where the Negro problem was created, where it still has its roots. It is there that the contradiction between the "American creed" and the economic reality is sharpest. It is therefore not at all surprising that it is there that the contradiction between Mr. Myrdal, the scholar with "value premises," and Mr. Myrdal, the "social scientist," becomes not only acute but ludicrous.

Mr. Myrdal, the scholar, writes that with the entrenchment of slavery in the South, the blackout on independent thinking was so overwhelming that Southern thought to this day suffers from lack of free intercourse with the varied currents of thought since the early nineteenth century. "... The region is exceptional in Western non-fascist civilization since the Enlightenment in that it lacks every trace of radical thought. In the South all progressive thinking going further than mild liberalism has been practically non-existent for a century." (Page 469.)

Mr. Myrdal, the scholar, further demonstrates that the war, which has increased the militancy of the Negro, has scared these Southern white liberals into an outright reactionary position. They would not continue their cooperation with the Negro intellectuals against discrimination unless the latter accepted, nay, avowed, social segregation. So benighted is that region that the following passed for the words of a liberal! It is Mark Etheridge, ex-chairman of the FEPC, who writes in July, 1942:

There is no power in the world—not even the mechanized armies of the earth, the Allied and the Axis—which can now force the Southern white people to the abandonment of social segregation. It is a cruel disillusionment, bearing germs of strife and perhaps tragedy, for any of their [Negroes] leaders to tell them that they can expect it, or that they can exact it, as the price of their participation in the war.*

This, then, is the "American creed" when expressed in Southern lingo. What happens now to the scholar's "value premise," that the Negro is entitled to full participation in American democracy? Overboard goes the scholar and out emerges the "social scientist," who turns out to be a bourgeois politician. Mr. Myrdal, the "social scientist," begins to appeal to his Southern bourbon class brethren. Since, says Mr. Myrdal, the good bourgeois, "changes should, if possible, not be made by sudden upheavals but in gradual steps" (page 518), the South had better start enfranchising its Negro citizens now. Mr. Myrdal pleads that this "is truly a conservative" conclusion. And just to prove to the Southern bourbons that it is not a wild-haired Marxist who is asking them to take this plunge, he writes that they can, to begin with, start enfranchising "the higher strata of the Negro population" (page 519). The appeal of the "social scientist" is not a challenge; it is a whimper.

Here you have the political formula of this massive work in a nutshell! Here is a scholar who has digested the major part of the available literature on the subject of the Negro problem, who has conducted field studies and case histories, all of which lead him to uphold "value premises" that demand the full participation of the Negro in all aspects of American life, who holds no brief for intellectual Uncle Tomism of either Negro or white variety, who says the South is as backward intellectually as economically, that its ignorance is, in fact, unique in non-fascist Western civilization, and yet so bourgeois is he that his class instinct prevails upon him to pro-

* Cf. *The Virginia Quarterly Review* (Autumn, 1942) for view of Southern "liberalism," ("The Southern Negro and the War Crisis.")

duce so impotent, so ludicrous a "solution" as to turn the American tragedy into a Swedish farce! What is so elementary that even British imperialism has granted it to a colony like Jamaica—universal suffrage—Mr. Myrdal, "the social scientist from non-imperialist Sweden," is not yet ready to demand from the Southern bourbons!

"The Treason of the Intellectuals"

One might have supposed that the Negro intellectuals would arise one and all in criticism of *An American Dilemma*. But any such supposition is, unfortunately, quite unfounded. Mr. Du Bois, for example, who considers the "acculturation of the masses" to be the task of the "talented tenth,"** did not consider it the task of the "talented tenth" to criticize a work saddled with so much high-brow talk and so little high or low-brow action. On the contrary, he considered it to be a "monumental and unrivalled study" whose scientific approach should be emulated (*Phylon*, second quarter, 1944). In general, the Negro press met the work with paeans of praise. A sadder commentary yet on the state of the Negro intelligentsia than the Negro press is the manner in which Mr. Myrdal got from it its staff members. These intellectuals were at his beck and call at all times, although some of them seem to be so far to the left of him as to be on the opposite side of the fence. Mr. Myrdal's chief complaint against them is that they have been influenced by Marxism. Consider, then, the case of Charles S. Johnson, who has been so influenced and who considers the Negro problem to be rooted in economic factors. During the extensive Negro migrations northward in the period of World War I, Mr. Johnson saw the solution to the Negro problem in the urbanization and proletarianization of the Negro which, more or less automatically, would shift the problem from a racial to a class plane. When the depression interrupted the continuity of this development, Mr. Johnson seemed to rely upon the impact of the crisis to cause such an upheaval in the Southern economy as to unseat King Cotton. When the AAA pumped some subsidies into cotton culture and propped up the collapsing régime of cotton tenancy, Mr. Johnson still had his eyes on some "automatic" economic revolution to be caused by the introduction of the mechanical cotton picker. Mr. Johnson the scholar seemed blissfully unaware of the significance of the political alliance of the New Deal-Wall Street North with the bourbon semi-feudal South. Or perhaps not so much unaware as unwilling to give up the quiet of an academic chair for the hubbub of mass activity which would "induce" the "economic" revolution. Yet he continued to write radical words:

The acuteness of the industrial and relief situation in the cities of the North will find white and Negro unemployed making their demands together. There is, however, one disturbing possibility. It is that the anti-Semitism generated in Europe, in response to a hopelessly depressed economic situation, will find in the urban Negro an emotional scapegoat. In this event anything can happen.

Ever so often in the works of Mr. Johnson one finds a situation described so lucidly that the revolutionary answer to "anything can happen" seems clear enough. But it is never stated in so many words. The reason lies partly in the fact that the majority of the research projects or economic and social analyses regarding the Negro have white guardian angels in the form of some bourgeois fund, whether it is Carnegie, or Rockefeller or Rosenwald or the government. It is only nat-

**In connection with this section of the review, the reader should consult *The Journal of Negro Education*, July, 1939, the entire issue of which was devoted to "The Position of the Negro in the American Social Order," and to which Messrs. Du Bois, Bunche and Johnson made contributions.

ural that the studies stop short of their implicit conclusions, if indeed the professors ever breathe the conclusions even to themselves and thus jeopardize the comfort of the academic chair. Researchers, of course, are paid to indulge in "educational treatises," not to carry on revolutionary propaganda. Thus it happens that the attacks of the "radicals" on Uncle Tom Negroes does not encompass them, and the struggle against Booker T. Washington's philosophy of "cast down your bucket wherever you are" does not get far beyond the academic hall, while the Negro masses continue to be ground beneath the millstone of class and racial oppression.

The sorriest spectacle of the Negro "talented tenth" is presented by Ralph Bunche. Mr. Bunche is critical not only of the economic, political and social status of the Negro, but of all existing Negro organizations that strive to ameliorate this condition. He calls them "philosophic and programmatic paupers." He is critical likewise of all Negro leaders who, he says, "think and act entirely in a black groove." In his pamphlet, *A World View of Race*, he even comes up with a solution to the Negro problem:

The Negro must develop, therefore, a consciousness of class interest and purpose and must strive for an alliance with the white working class in a common struggle for economic and political equality and justice.

Yet this most radical of radicals found it permissible to shelve his more radical conclusions in the Schomburg collection, while his research data is used by Mr. Myrdal for his own conservative ends. This is not at all accidental. Mr. Bunche's revolutionary thunder is no more than radicalism of the chair.

Mr. Bunche may not attack Mr. Myrdal, but Mr. Myrdal does not hesitate to attack Mr. Bunche:

In passing it should be observed that the academic radicalism of Negro intellectuals exemplified by the citation from Mr. Bunche, can easily come to good terms with the type of liberal but skeptical *laissez-faire* [do nothing] opinion so prevalent among white social scientists, writing on the Negro problem. . . . Since neither party is very active in trying either to induce or prevent an economic revolution, it does not make much difference if the Negro radicals look forward to an economic revolution and the white sociologists do not. (Page 1398, footnote 12.)

The Proletarian Way

Of the Negro intellectuals who have reviewed the Myrdal volumes, the only critic so far has been L. D. Reddick, curator of the Schomburg collection. Mr. Reddick has written two reviews, one for the *Journal of Negro Education*, spring, 1944, and the other for *Opportunity*. In both reviews he offers three criticisms of the book. He rejects Mr. Myrdal's sociological concept of caste. He shows himself aware of the weaknesses of the historical sections of the book; and he is critical of Mr. Myrdal's solution. The best thing in the reviews is his recognition that the ultimate solution of the Negro question is along class lines. However, the way in which Mr. Reddick phrases this is extremely significant. He writes: "Finally, Dr. Myrdal is unduly pessimistic over the possibilities of Negro and white workers uniting and struggling together for common goals." If Mr. Myrdal is unduly pessimistic, it is clear that Mr. Reddick is not unduly optimistic.

Thus far we have not considered George S. Schuyler, who in the past has done one of the finest reportorial jobs in popularizing the CIO to the Negro workers and the Negro community as a whole. Mr. Schuyler for some time has shown himself a believer in managerial society. He condemns both sides of the war as imperialist. He has turned away from the revolutionary movement, but retains some Marxism. It is not surprising that, although he considers the Myrdal book a super-

rior work, he is cynical of any solutions. In his review of the book in the July issue of *Politics* he writes: "He [Mr. Myrdal] is modest enough to predict no solution, for the problem may well be insoluble."

This brings us to one of the most significant omissions of this book. If even Mr. Myrdal is unaware of the Populist movement, no one who thinks of the Negro question at all is unaware of the Garvey movement. This is the most remarkable phenomenon in the history of the Negro in the United States. Mr. Myrdal recognizes its importance. He writes:

For one thing it proves that it is possible to reach the Negro masses if they are appealed to in an effective way. It testifies to the basic unrest in the Negro community. It tells of a dissatisfaction so deep that it mounts to hopelessness of ever gaining a full life in America. (Page 749.)

Mr. Myrdal himself does not analyze the Garvey movement, although he states that this, along with a thorough study of the movement, ought to be done:

Negro intellectuals, for understandable reasons, show certain inhibitions in dealing with the topic, as do the white students of the Negro problem. But it is worthy of intensive historical investigation and careful reflection. (Page 749.)

Why Mr. Myrdal has not done so in a study lasting four years and covering 1400 pages of text remains inexplicable. Mr. Myrdal further observes that the

Negroes are beginning to form a self-conscious "nation within the nation," defining ever more clearly their fundamental grievances against white America.

America can never more regard its Negroes as a patient, submissive minority. Negroes will continually become less well "accommodated." They will organize for defense and offense. (Page 1004.)

To anyone who is concerned about the Negro question today, this neglect of the Garvey movement has just about reached its end. There is stirring in the Negro people in the United States today a racial consciousness which has at present found its most extreme expression in the writings of Richard Wright. Willfred H. Kerr, co-chairman of the Lynn Committee to Abolish Segregation in the Armed Forces, has noted the phenomenon, which he calls "Negroism." These are portents on the horizon which can be ignored only to the peril of the labor movement. But they must be approached upon the indispensable basis of the revolutionary struggle for socialism and of the proletariat as that social class which will solve the Negro problem along with all other major problems that capitalist society cannot solve. From the very fact that scholars like Mr. Johnson and Mr. Myrdal make such valuable contributions to the Negro question, it is necessary for Marxists to attack and expose without mercy their false philosophical premises.

F. FOREST.

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