

30 years later the author reviews his book and decides to write another

Further Thoughts About An American Dilemma

Gunnar Myrdal

I take this opportunity to correct at least a few lingering misunderstandings of my old book. I am sometimes asked whether race relations in America, rooted in centuries of tragic and often hideous history and still injecting its peculiar bias in all social, economic and political relations in the country, could be "resolved" like a mathematical problem or an engineering project. Even after another thirty years we will be living with it, though it will have altered. I do hope that changes will proceed more rapidly than in the last five or seven years and that they will more consistently move toward a greater fulfillment of American ideals and aspirations.

I confess to a feeling of embarrassment when I am praised for having predicted so long ago what was going to happen in the field of race relations. Such predictions are impossible. As I stated in 1942 when I ended my work on the book: "History is not the result of predetermined fate. Nothing is irredeemable until it is past. The outcome will depend upon decisions and actions yet to be taken." As a scientist I must be critical of the present fad of futurology. Much of it is pretentious nonsense, and I often feel ashamed of what some in my profession produce along the line of prognostics, equipped with elaborate figures and diagrams.

In any case *An American Dilemma* was not in that sense futuristic. It was an analysis of facts and the causal relationship between facts as they stood at that time, that is, at the end of the thirties and the beginning of the forties. On the basis of history and data I could ascertain a few ongoing trends of change. The study explained why some trends could be expected to continue for decades. This was true, for instance, of the increase in the Negro labor force, and also of the migration from Southern agriculture to cities, particularly in the North and

West. But for most of the observed trends no such long-term predictions could be made.

It is perhaps understandable that I am more irritated when, instead of being praised for unbelievable prescience, I am criticized for not having foreseen all that has since then happened. A professor from California wrote a long article in the *New York Times Magazine* on "Where Myrdal Went Wrong." He is an historian, I am told, and should have some insight into the complex and capricious course of his nation's destiny. So much of what has been said about *An American Dilemma*, whether in praise or criticism, reflects a grotesquely mechanistic view of history and change. How, in 1942, could anyone foresee that America would permit the stupendous and still continuing deterioration and ghettoization of its cities? Or that this would happen in a country where already at that time city and regional planning was so advanced?

The book was in its time favorably received, even in the South. The reviewing there was handled by the Southern liberals, who traditionally enjoyed high status and dominated the region intellectually. (Reactionaries of Senator Eastland's type do not read books, particularly not heavy ones like mine. They only awakened after the Supreme Court's decision on the school segregation issue, since the Court had quoted me in support of their conclusion that "separate cannot be equal.") In all America there were at that time only two hostile groups: Communists and fellow travelers, who had reason for their opposition, since I pointed to a way of ameliorating the situation without revolution; and Roman Catholics upset by my position on birth control.

But my question is: Why, in spite of this fairly general approval, did the book not spur greater scientific exertions to investigate the problems of race relations in America? That it should do this was certainly my intention. I did not look upon my book as the last word, since, of course, in the scholarly world

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there can be no last word. The fact is, however, that from about the time of *Dilemma's* appearance there set in a decisive decline of interest in the scientific study of race relations in America on the part of foundations as well as of the academic community, lasting until after the rise of the Negro rebellion ten years later. This both reflected and contributed to the great complacency of the American public during that interregnum, and it certainly had its influence on the way the whole problem was handled. I did not foresee this decline and its consequences, and I dare say neither did any of my colleagues at that time.

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A third development that deeply influenced policies in the field of race relations, particularly in the last decade, and that was unforeseen and, indeed, unforeseeable in 1942, was the course of foreign and military policy. I was among the very few at the time who did not expect the friendly cooperation with the Soviet Union to continue after the war, but I did not, and could not, foresee the proportions of the cold war. No one could foresee McCarthy and Dulles and the evolution of a foreign policy that in the end led to America's escalating war in all of Indochina and in Thailand. The moral, psychological and financial effects of that war were greatly responsible for the abortion of the “unconditional war on poverty” proclaimed by former President Johnson. The victims were the Negro poor, who might account for up to one-third of all the desperately poor in America. Largely because of the war the entire thrust of the civil rights movement was shoved into the backwaters of public affairs.

At the end of the thirties the status of Negroes in America had remained fairly stagnant for more than six decades, that is, since the national compromise in the 1870's when, after Reconstruction, they were returned to the mercies of embittered Southern whites. Following an all too common predilection among social scientists to extrapolate from past experiences without observing incipient signs of change, the prevailing views of race relations in America among my fellow students at

that time were static and fatalistic. In this field of social study Summer's old dictum that “stateways cannot change folkways” remained the basic preconception. From my analysis of the forces operating in the American national community that this long era of stagnation was coming to an end, I even asserted that “not since Reconstruction had there been more reason to anticipate fundamental changes in American race relations, changes that will involve a development toward American ideals.”

On this point I proved to be right. In retrospect it is apparent that at about the time I was writing my book there were forebodings of a dramatic break, speeding Negro status upward in almost all respects. This trend continued and even accelerated up to the middle of the sixties, but then took a more uncertain and disparate course. Friendly persons have attributed the early breakthrough to the influence of my book. This should be heavily discounted—though the book might have had some importance in providing rational reasons for a development that was impelled by influences far more substantial. And the truth is that for all the very considerable changes, conditions under which Negroes in America now live are in general still cruelly inferior to those of whites. I did foresee the Negro rebellion. “America can never more regard its Negroes as a patient, submissive minority,” I wrote. I was perhaps jumping the gun slightly. It would take a decade before the organized protest became an important national concern. The causes of this movement, as I accounted for them at that time, were basically the then incipient improvements in Negro status. They are summarized in the last chapter of the book.

I also foresaw that the Negro rebellion would begin in the South. I recognized the crucial importance in the South, where the great majority of Negroes then lived, of the church as the one and only form of social organization where Negroes of all strata were joined. I thought the church rather passive, however, and did not foresee the active role it would come to play in the Negro rebellion. No one could predict the arrival on the scene of dynamic church leaders, in the first place Martin Luther King, Jr., who transformed the Negro church into an effective fighting organization with considerable discipline, program and tactical talent.

Even my social science colleagues have often failed to understand the research technique I advocated and tried to use in *American Dilemma* and since then. The technique is one of working with explicit value premises, tested for significance, relevance, logical consistency and feasibility. This technique serves three purposes. It helps to purge, as far as possible, a scientific investigation of distorting, usually unrecognized, biases. It determines in a rational manner the statement of problems, the approach and even the definition of main con-

cepts. It lays a tenable logical basis for reaching practical and policy conclusions.

When I found the ideals I called the "American Creed"—justice, liberty and equality—to be the relevant value premises for my study, I did not mean I adopted an unrealistically optimistic and idealistic bias, as some of my colleagues, not only those of a "Marxist" inclination, have occasionally contended. Value premises represent nothing else than the viewpoint necessary to have a view. They determine the questions for which answers are requested. They do not close the eyes to any relevant facts, least of all to discouraging facts. They do not by themselves imply "optimism."

The racial problem, like all other political problems, is fundamentally a moral issue, and this is highlighted by not evading the duty to state value premises for research. The problem comes to stand out as a "dilemma." This is realism, not idealism. Those of my colleagues who believe they are "hard-boiled" because they overlook the fact that human beings are struggling for their conscience are simply unrealistic. It is further realistic to recognize that ideals, such as the American Creed, are not without importance in social causation. Human behavior is never determined solely by simple and solid "attitudes" but is always in the nature of compromises. Yet behind these compromises are the "higher" valuations, together with opportunistic prejudices and interests on a different level.

When in the first and successful phase of the Negro revolt Congress enacted civil rights legislation more radical than anybody a few years earlier would have believed possible, the legislators did not act out of selfish interests but in this case out of fear. The explanation is that the Negro rebellion challenged America in terms of its official and living ideals. America cannot now, without a serious break from its inherited aspirations, take over the South African apartheid ideology and legislatively legitimate the segregation toward which various developments are now in fact creeping. Ideals, rooted in institutions such as the Constitution and in people's hearts, are real forces, though not the only forces; sometimes not even the most powerful forces. That is the dilemma; it is not my capricious invention but a description of the real situation.

While for the South I had foreseen the rising Negro protest and, following it, increased tension between the races, for the North I expected a more quiet development. I even expected a decrease in the social and economic discrimination against Negroes; a discrimination that was very much a fact in the North, in spite of Negroes' having enjoyed for generations, and in some places always, the vote and formal civil rights Negroes in the South had to fight for. My conclusions were based upon then visible trends of change. A number of forces at

that time were moving the social system, particularly in the North, in a direction favorable to Negro aspirations for greater equality.

World War II, into which the United States was then being drawn, was a war for democracy. America stood before the whole world as defender of racial tolerance and racial equality against the Nazis. The fact that Japanese propaganda utilized antiwhite feelings in Asia made it even more important to stress the racial equality principle. For natural reasons whites in the North found it easier at that time to affirm the principle wholeheartedly. Then too the war accomplished what the New Deal had not: It created a brisk demand for labor, all labor. During the Great Depression the Negro immigrants from the South had been given doles but not much employment. Now they and many newcomers were employed. In a full employment economy, white workers had less reason to exclude Negroes from jobs and unions.

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The years of the war and perhaps a few years afterward were the last time the American economy reached down to provide employment rather freely even for Negro workers. High levels of unemployment becoming customary in the postwar era, yet another development later worked to the disadvantage of Negro labor. Rising levels of capital intensity in industry, automation and general rationalization tended to decrease the demand for much of the type of labor Negroes could offer. These new trends, plus the spread in majority America of better education, tend to create an "underclass" of labor who are not "in demand" in modern society. To that class Negroes coming from the rural South or growing up in the miserable environment of city slums tend to gravitate. It took a long time for American economists to recognize what is sometimes called "structural unemployment" in the slums, a factor much earlier recognized by social workers and other researchers nearer the ground of reality.

Even the industries began to move out from the cities. This whole development was pushed by the unforeseen and unforeseeable reluctance to find effective ways to stop the deterioration of the growing slums, to which I have already referred. The Negro

protest when it reached the North, where now more than half of all Negroes live, changed character dramatically. It lacked the clear targets that had been so obvious in the South. Instead of getting the vote and challenging Jim Crow it had to fight a whole diffuse social system.

But I am now far away from the things I could study thirty years ago.

I would finally point to a few general traits and themes of my old study that are, I believe, still relevant in today's vastly changed situation. My study focused not on the Negro people in the United States, as did much of the literature at that time as well as now, but on what is commonly referred to as "race relations." In basic traits Negroes are inherently not different from other people. Neither, incidentally, are white Americans. These two groups live and have always lived in a singular human relation with each other, and this has left its stamp on Negroes as well as whites. In the course of my study it soon dawned upon me that "the Negro problem" does not exist as a separate issue set apart. It is one aspect of the whole complex of problems in the national community. I found myself writing a book on the American civilization in its entirety, with the stress on the conditions of life and work among America's most disadvantaged population group.

In the American community of thirty years ago Negroes made up less than 10 per cent of the population; they had very much less than 10 per cent of everything that gives social, economic and political power. In both respects the movement upward since that time has been slight, though definitely more important in the latter respect. The Negro problem was then, and remains today, mainly a white problem. The whites live in moral confusion. They

proclaim ideals that they bluntly disobey in daily life. This is the dilemma.

Often whites succeed in being ignorant of what they are really doing. Particularly in the North, the actual imposition of segregation and discrimination emerges from millions of individual acts often done by persons who do not see the cumulative effects of what they are all doing. This is quite possible. But all these individual acts form and reinforce a social system that is grimly disadvantageous to Negroes.

I am surprised that this old book is continually reprinted without change of a word or even of pagination and is still sold in thousands of copies every year. I can only conclude that, for all the changes in the situation, many general inferences are still valid. Then, too, readers may recognize that there are advantages in seeing present problems in historical perspective.

This book has so far been my one and only contribution to the scholarly study of the problem. Since then I have worked in other fields, though I have tried to keep up with what has been happening in American race relations. Now I have decided to go back to the problem and write a new book: *An American Dilemma Revisited: The Racial Crisis in the United States in Historical Perspective*. Many friends, both among academics and persons engaged in the problem from the practical angle, have generously aided me by sending material for my files and by offering advice.

The new book will not have the closely documented and comprehensive character of my old book but will be directed to the practical problems of policy. It is to me a very serious task, and it will probably take me years of preparation. I permit myself to mention it in this article in the hope that more Americans might accept the invitation to come to my assistance.