

ANNOTATIONS

AN AMERICAN DILEMMA¹

MYRDAL's two-volume AN AMERICAN DILEMMA is the final report of the director of the comprehensive Study of the Negro in American Life, a survey sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The report is in several respects a unique study of the Negro in the United States. Departure from convention began when the Carnegie Corporation decided that directorship of the Study should be placed not in the hands of a citizen of this country, white or colored, but in the hands of an outsider. As explained by the late Mr. Keppel in the "Foreword" of the report, "the search [for a director] was limited to countries of high intellectual and scholarly standards but with no background or traditions of imperialism which might lessen the confidence of the Negroes in the United States as to the complete impartiality of the Study and the validity of its findings. Under these limitations, the obvious places to look were Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries, and the search ended in the selection of Dr. Gunnar Myrdal, a scholar who despite his youth had already achieved an international reputation as a social economist, a professor in the University of Stockholm, economic adviser to the Swedish Government, and a member of the Swedish Senate." (pp. vi-vii).

Dr. Myrdal began this work in 1938. Desiring first to get the "feel" of the problem, he spent some months of exploratory travel in Southern States and to Northern industrial centers. In his initial tour of the South he was accompanied by a wise counsellor, Mr. Jackson Davis, but later Myrdal often struck out on his own and made it a point to talk with all sorts of people, white and colored, rich and poor.

The next step, taken in 1939, was the employment of an exceptionally

¹ Myrdal, Gunnar: AN AMERICAN DILEMMA: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy. New York, Harper & Brothers, 1944, Two Volumes, 1,483 pages, \$7.50.

large and able staff of American social scientists, white and colored, for the purpose of assembling and analyzing available factual materials on specific aspects of the Negro problem. The original plan was to have the reports of professional collaborators published as a series of monographs preliminary to the synthesizing report of the director. This plan materialized only partially; but four special reports² have been published and the manuscripts of the others have been deposited with the Schomburg Collection in the New York Public Library.

With the mass of data at his disposal, Myrdal, with comparative ease, might simply have written a systematic "findings report," replete with tables and charts. Such a report might well have been the most comprehensive source book on Negro problems in this country. The author, however, conceived his task to be the more difficult and more hazardous one of interpreting the Negro problem in terms of a single thesis.

One might well judge that the author postponed writing until he had developed his central thesis in entirety. For this thesis affords both title and unifying principle for the book. In fact the author seems to believe that in his thesis, stated below, he has found the quintessence of the Negro problem in America:

The American Negro problem is a problem in the heart of the American. It is there that the interracial tension has its focus. It is there that the decisive struggle goes on. This is the central viewpoint of this treatise. Though our study includes economic, social, and political race relations, at bottom our problem is the moral dilemma of the American—the conflict between his moral valuations on various levels of consciousness and generality. The 'American Dilemma,' referred to in the title of this book, is the ever-raging conflict between, on the one hand, the valuations preserved on the general plane which we shall call the 'American Creed,' where the American thinks, talks, and acts under the influence of high national and Christian precepts, and, on the other hand, the valuations on specific planes of individual and group living, where personal and local interests; economic, social, and sexual jeal-

² Herskovits, Melville J.: *MYTH OF THE NEGRO PAST*. New York, Harper & Brothers, 1941, 374 pp.

Johnson, Charles S.: *PATTERNS OF NEGRO SEGREGATION*. New York, Harper & Brothers, 1943, 332 pp.

Stern, Richard: *THE NEGRO'S SHARE*. New York, Harper & Brothers, 1943, 433 pp.

Klineberg, Otto (Ed.): *CHARACTERISTICS OF THE AMERICAN NEGRO*. New York, Harper & Brothers, 1944, 400 pp.

ousies; considerations of community prestige and conformity; group prejudice against particular persons or types of people and all sorts of miscellaneous wants, impulses, and habits dominate his outlook. (p. xliii.)

In line with the above are the author's belief that the "Negro problem" is basically a "white man's" problem and his statement, "we shall in this book have to give *primary* attention to what goes on in the minds of white Americans. . . . When the present investigator started his inquiry, his preconception was that it had to be focused on the Negro people and their peculiarities. . . . But as he proceeded in his studies into the Negro problem, it became increasingly evident that little, if anything, could be scientifically explained in terms of the peculiarities of the Negroes themselves." (p. xlvi.)

The author does not explain the bearing of this changed point of view on the assigned work of his research staff. To the present writer's knowledge there was no outright shift from studies of the Negro to studies of the white man. Furthermore, although the author's change of heart may have led to less use of the materials submitted by the collaborators than would otherwise have been the case, certainly the author did use them abundantly.

The "ideological" and "value premise" aspects of Myrdal's approach constitute the novel or unique features among existing studies of the Negro in America. The book, however, is by no means simply a philosophical treatise. The author comes down to earth in his grips with various aspects of the Negro problem, and separate sections of the book are devoted to such topics as population and migration, economics, politics, justice, social inequality, social stratification, leadership and concerted action, and the Negro community. Thus in the section on economics, the author states:

In a general way we know why the Negro is poor. As a farmer, he has been kept in a dependent position and has been exploited. He was tied to cotton agriculture where the risks were such that at one time it brought sudden riches to white people but now forces surplus workers, particularly Negroes, to leave the Southern land. As a city worker, he has been kept out of jobs, especially the good ones. He has seldom been allowed to prepare himself adequately for jobs requiring high skill or professional training. Because of residential segregation, he is confined

to slums to an even greater extent than his low purchasing power makes necessary. He does not share equally with his white fellow citizen in the free services given by the government. (p. 364.)

The author frequently ventures concrete suggestions regarding solutions of specific problems. For example, after discussing the bleak prospects for employment opportunities for Negroes, especially in Southern agriculture, he suggests that a federal employment service, working in close cooperation with private and public institutions, investigate the possibilities of directing some portion of the Negro labor reserves to small Northern cities that now have few or no Negroes. This type of resettlement should in no sense partake of forcing migrants on given communities; it should be rather that of recommending a few especially qualified Negroes for specific job openings in a specific community. The author would purposely refrain from sending more than a small number to any one town, for, as he sees it, an outstanding need is to have an increasing number of localities in which the Negro is appraised on the basis of his individual merits.

As expected, the descriptive pictures painted by Myrdal are dreary and show little hope for substantial improvement of the Negro's lot in the near future. Writing before the marked liberalization of war-time employment of Negroes, the author proved to be somewhat too pessimistic regarding the placement of Negroes in war industries. He was probably right, however, in his prediction that in the postwar period the Negro's status will advance in some respects and recede in others. He does note a gradual diminution of "slave attitudes" toward the Negro among younger generations of the South and believes this process has been hastened by the war and will be continued with further industrialization. In this connection he states: "No Yankee will be tactless enough to mention it, in so many words, and no Southerner can afford to admit it, but *the main thing happening to the South is that it is gradually becoming Americanized.*" (p. 466.)

In his concluding chapter "America Again at the Crossroads" Myrdal resorts to his underlying thesis for an ending note of optimism: "When in this crucial time the international leadership passes to America, the great reason for hope is that this country has a national experience of uniting racial and cultural diversities and a national theory, if not a consistent practice, of freedom and equality for all. What America is

constantly reaching for is democracy at home and abroad. The main trend in its history is the gradual realization of the American Creed." (p. 1021.)

Space limitations preclude a full and just appraisal of this book. If it were widely read by all classes of people the general reactions might range from complete endorsement to complete damnation of the author's point of view. Neither would one expect uniformity of reaction from social scientists regarding matters quite apart from the racial issues, i.e., the basic premises, the methodology, or general interpretation. Odum, for instance, has taken the author to task on several points regarding methodology, but he probably voices the opinion of many in prefacing his discussion "with the assumption that *An American Dilemma*, in its comprehensiveness, in its originality, in its analysis, is the best thing that has been done on the Negro and is likely to be the best for a considerable time to come. To the social scientist and the 'intellectual' planners, publicists, and reformers, the book is a 'must.'"³

The Carnegie Corporation may justly feel that its decision to import an outsider for this task has panned out exceedingly well. The chief disadvantage is that the author, skilled as a social engineer in his own country, must leave to others the solution of the problem. When the patient finds a promising doctor he wants to keep him around. He is hardly satisfied with a written diagnosis or even with a prescription.

CLYDE V. KISER



RACE SUICIDE?¹

DR. McCLEARY presents here in brief and simple form most of the more significant results relating to the growth of national populations arrived at by study in this field during the past several decades. He understands well the meaning of these facts and does not misuse them for his particular purpose as so often happens when laymen use such materials, nor has he let personal bias lead him astray in his interpretations although he has a thesis to support.

³ Odum, Howard W.: Problem and Methodology in *An American Dilemma* (a review). *Social Forces*, October, 1944, xxiii, No. 1, p. 95.

¹ McCleary, G. F.: *RACE SUICIDE?* London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1945, 126 pp. 6s.