

Book Reviews

Walter A. Jackson: *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience: Social Engineering and Racial Liberalism, 1938-1987*. (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1990). 447pp.

Gunnar and Alva Myrdal must surely rank among the most influential intellectuals in the twentieth century; at least for a time. Not only because they set the agenda for scholarly debates on birth control and child care, public housing, agricultural policy, educational reform, European reconstruction after World War II, East-West détente, nuclear disarmament, Third World poverty, and—race relations. By way of comparison it is doubtful whether for instance Simone de Beauvoir or Sartre ever left a similar impact on the minds of policy makers as the Myrdals did during certain crucial periods. Certainly not over such a range of issues.

The Myrdals more than most academic educators, economists and social scientists gained the ear of policy makers in Sweden, the USA, India and several other countries. But they gained it within limits. These limits, as far as race relations are concerned, are indicated by the subtitle of Walter Jackson's important study of Myrdal's legacy: "Social engineering and racial liberalism, 1938-1987." Racial liberalism's heyday lasted from c. 1944 until c. 1964. These two dates mark the hegemony of *An American Dilemma* in the debate and politics of liberal thought on racial relations in the U.S. A period made possible by the New Deal, the war and terminated by the breakdown of the liberal consensus in the 1960s when blacks themselves began to define their political and cultural objectives. The moment of Martin Luther King's "I have a Dream" sermon was ironically both the vindication and the inauguration of the end of Myrdal's dream of a liberal welfare state in the USA.

Myrdal began work on what became *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (the subtitle is important!) in 1938. It combined history and social critique, particularly of racial segregation in the South with a number of specific welfare state proposals in the domains of education, housing, health, and employment practice, the aim of which was to gradually improve the conditions of the Afro-American population.

Ideologically and politically Myrdal's project was tied up with a belief in what he named the "American Creed" as a coherent system of ideas that the American (white) middle classes believed in—the "high national and Christian precepts," embedded in the American Constitution and part of the "moralistic and rationalistic being" of the "ordinary American."¹ Through appeals to this

¹ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, I (New York: Pantheon, 1972 (1944)), I, ixix.

"Creed" grounded in the Enlightenment, the American upper and middle classes could be reached by education. By moral and intellectual persuasion they could be made to change their racist practices.

Although Jackson makes clear that Myrdal sincerely believed that the rational was also the good and the just, and was deeply committed to the idea that educated people should serve their country and government in order to do away with poverty and injustice, he also lays bare how much Myrdal's notion of social engineering was modeled on his experiences of economic planning. His concept of "social engineering" was couched in the language of fiscal and monetary theory but was here applied to complex "social and cultural variables." Social engineering was polemically pitted against mono-causal explanations of social change. But in any case it presupposed that democracy must be introduced from above by experts.

Social engineering in order to function necessitates a keen awareness of the various power bases in a society. Myrdal had that sense. Whatever his sincerity about the "American Creed" it flattered the American people and his reform proposals concerning discrimination and poverty were carefully couched in a moral discourse that made racism primarily a moral problem in the white mind.² Although several Marxists were involved in the "American Dilemma" project—e.g. Ralph Bunche and E. Franklin Frazier—Myrdal never allowed them to get the upper hand. Explaining discrimination in terms of ultimately economic discrimination Myrdal recognized would not unite the American middle classes ideologically as the "American Creed" might make them do—and particularly not at a time when America was engaged in a battle of democracy against totalitarianism and Nazi slavery. Jackson's study pays careful attention to how dependent on the War situation was the liberal consensus between social scientists, the press, grant foundations and politicians that *An American Dilemma* helped construct.

Jackson's book explains why Myrdal succeeded where others had failed. The powerful conviction that Myrdal's book came to convey was carried no doubt on the back of its full-scale institutional backing. The fact that it was endorsed not only by the Carnegie and Rockefeller foundations but also apparently by every social scientist who had ever written about race issues, including prominent black intellectuals like Du Bois. But Jackson also shows the inspiration from progressives like John Dewey and an intellectual milieu that during the 1930s and 1940s looked for a way to weld together a national identity in terms of democratic values derived from local American traditions.³

2 Cf. *An American Dilemma*, I, lxxiii.

3 Myrdal's "American Creed" fits in well with the concern about myth and culture as rhetorics of participation and belonging that Warren Susman outlines in "The Culture of the Thirties," repr. in *Culture as History* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 150-183 *passim*.

Furthermore Myrdal seductively presented an argument to the upper and middle classes that the morally right thing to do was the also the politically expedient thing to do. Morally Myrdal argued how central to the meaning of the US war effort the race issue was. Expediently, he prophesied on the basis of rising black militancy that chaos might result if segregation and discrimination were not ended. And, indeed, before his book came out there was a serious riot in Detroit in 1943, to be followed by others later. Finally the role of the USA as moral and economic leader in a new international economic order fell in with ideas already discussed by leading groups in American government and business.⁴

Although Myrdal's career took off after the publication of his book—Myrdal took up important posts under United Nation auspices and produced books like *Asian Drama* and *Challenge to Affluence* (1963), Myrdal's second most important book about the United States in Jackson's view—Jackson's main effort rightly focuses on the period *An American Dilemma* set the agenda for the "Negro problem" in USA.

Jackson accounts for the significance of Myrdal's background and upbringing in Dalarna in Sweden, and his early entry in practical Swedish politics as chief planner of the Swedish Social Democratic welfare state, but his book is especially rich in its account of how Myrdal affected the history of the study of race relations in the USA. It is a history that records among other things how W.E.B. Du Bois' proposed project about an Encyclopedia of the Negro was not supported by the Carnegie or any other Foundation. It is particularly good at examining how central to the development of the discipline of social psychology after 1945 with its innumerable studies of prejudice (Gordon W. Allport), authoritarian personality (T.W. Adorno *et al*) and resolution of group conflict (Kurt Lewin) the issue of race was. Jackson's pertinent chapter here perfectly anticipates and supports Toni Morrison's insight in *Playing in the Dark* that race is the hidden referent also of the social sciences in the USA.

Jackson's book is supremely important, I think, to American Studies in that it traces not only a narrative of the history of the study of racial relations in the U.S. through the career and activities of an "activist" scholar. But also because it is a serious contribution to our knowledge of American scientific culture from the 1930s and onwards by making it clear how essential race has been to the constitution and development of the social sciences. Perhaps it will inspire to further studies of how American Studies have been founded on the 'race problem'.

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⁴ Compare Gabriel Kolko, *The Politics of War: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1943-1945* (New York: Pantheon, 1968), Ch. 11: "Planning for Peace, I: General Principles."