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AMERICAN DILEMMA, AN

Emerging from a grant authorized by the Carnegie Corporation seeking an objective and comprehensive study of the Negro in the United States, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy* is a groundbreaking examination of Black–White race relations in the United States. Prior to the publication of *An American Dilemma* in 1944, the predominant theory of race relations built on the work of Robert Park and the “Chicago School” that viewed race relations as a process of competition and conflict that would ultimately be resolved once the minority group first accommodated and finally assimilated to the majority culture. *An American Dilemma* challenged the assumptions of the Chicago School by focusing on the responsibility of the majority population (in this case White Americans) in exacerbating racial tensions and placing the solution for racial inequality in their hands. Compiled from exhaustive research beginning in 1939 (and continuing despite the outbreak of World War II), *An American Dilemma* was published in 1944 and immediately became the inspiration for American liberalism’s approach toward rectifying racial inequity over the next 30 years.

Project Beginnings

Credited with instigating the project that would produce *An American Dilemma*, Newton D. Baker, a Carnegie Corporation board member, suggested that a solution to the “Negro problem” required attention to

the condition of Blacks in the North as well as in the South, and in October 1935 he proposed that the Carnegie Corporation sponsor a study on the condition of urban Blacks. Rather than selecting from the ranks of U.S. social scientists to direct their study, the Carnegie Corporation board sought a scholar personally unconnected to the nation’s racial history and, therefore, theoretically free from charges of ideological bias in his or her findings. The board selected Gunnar Myrdal, a social economist at the University of Stockholm and a member of the Swedish Senate, as the study’s general director, primarily because Sweden’s history was free from imperialism or colonialism, a fact that would reassure African Americans that the resulting study would be completely impartial. Ironically, Baker and the other board members (many of whom disapproved of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal and government-controlled social programs) overlooked Myrdal’s belief in the power of government-legislated social reform, a particularly liberal worldview that would significantly influence the study’s direction as well as its final conclusions.

Research, Methodology, and Findings

Myrdal, on accepting the commission, immediately began familiarizing himself with the existing scholarship on U.S. race relations. He visited the U.S. South on a two-month “exploratory journey” to develop his own personal understanding of U.S. race relations. In 1939, he began planning the study, collaborating with dozens of noted U.S. social scientists, including Robert Park, Charles S. Johnson, Ruth Benedict, Franz Boas, Ralph Bunche, W. E. B. Du Bois, Melville Herskovits, and E. Franklin Frazier. Following these consultations, Myrdal largely rejected the isolated focus on urban and northern African Americans originally envisioned by Baker and instead made an already ambitious project even more so by widening the scope of the study to understand all aspects of African American life in the United States and to document the opinions held by the U.S. populace regarding the proper status and treatment given to African Americans. Understanding the impact that the study’s findings would have on the African American community, leaders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League, and the Commission of Interracial Cooperation all gave considerable research assistance to the project, including

providing unfettered access to their organizations' archives. Myrdal, seeking the input of a Black social scientist, selected E. Franklin Frazier as the primary reviewer of the in-progress chapters. Frazier, originally skeptical of Myrdal's ability as a foreigner to decipher the peculiarities of U.S. race relations, generally approved of the submitted chapters and Myrdal's assessments.

Myrdal's continued leadership of the project fell into doubt following Germany's invasion of Denmark and Norway in April 1940 as Myrdal and his wife, Alva, contemplated returning to Sweden, believing that if Germany invaded Sweden, it would be their civic duty to provide their services to the Swedish government. Myrdal openly considered abandoning the study but was ultimately convinced by close friend and research assistant Richard Sterner (who believed that only Myrdal could do proper justice to the final written report) to remain project director. In Myrdal's physical absence, Samuel Stouffer, a University of Chicago sociologist, became acting director, but Myrdal continued writing the manuscript for *An American Dilemma*, traveling between Sweden and the United States before completing the initial draft in September 1942.

However, aside from the sheer magnitude of the project's research, which compiled existing published and unpublished studies, new research on African American communities, an exhaustive analysis of statistical data on all aspects of African American life (including but not restricted to income, employment, education, social life, and political activity), and qualitative interviews (many of which were conducted by Myrdal with individuals who were unaware that he was working on a study of the Negro in the United States), what distinguished *An American Dilemma* from prior examinations of race in the United States was a unique thesis that focused on the attitudes of White Americans toward African Americans to reveal a conflict between the ideals of the "American creed" largely held by most White Americans and the reality of racial discrimination in the United States.

Myrdal began by challenging William Graham Sumner's construction of "folkways" and "mores," dismissing them as overly simplistic and static explanations for social interactions, particularly when dealing with industrialized societies. Instead, Myrdal framed the discussion of race relations as a conflict between the "beliefs" of individuals, or how they encountered everyday life, and "valuations," or the ideals of how life should be. It is this conflict within

White Americans that Myrdal identified as the "American dilemma"—the disjunction between the ideals of the American creed and the treatment of African Americans by White Americans that violated those ideals. It was during his stays in Sweden, while observing the Swedish government's capitulation to Nazi German demands, that Myrdal began formulating the assessment of the American creed, which he defined largely as a high moral platform built on ideas of equal justice, political freedom, and civic duty.

The remaining text of *An American Dilemma* documents the status of African American life in terms of racialized status, population and migration patterns, economic conditions, employment, political activity, confrontations with the justice system, access to education, religious institutions, and the leadership of the African American community. In each instance, it documents how the most significant obstacle to African American equality has been the failure of the majority White population to live up to the American creed. In the final chapter, "America again at the Crossroads," Myrdal reiterated the opportunity presented by the impending victory in World War II for the nation to rectify its prior failures. Citing the lost promise of Reconstruction following the end of the Civil War, Myrdal urged a far more active role for social engineering and governmental involvement and a rejection of laissez-faire policies when addressing racial inequality.

In addition to the publication of *An American Dilemma*, the Carnegie Corporation initially scheduled nine monographs arising from the research for individual publication, but ultimately it printed only four: *The Myth of the Negro Past* (by Melville Herskovits), *The Negro's Share* (by Richard Sterner), *Patterns of Negro Segregation* (by Charles S. Johnson), and *Characteristics of the American Negro* (edited by Otto Klineberg).

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See also African Americans; Boas, Franz; Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt; Frazier, E. Franklin; Harlem Renaissance; Johnson, Charles S.; Park, Robert E.

Further Readings

Herskovits, Melville J. 1941. *The Myth of the Negro Past*. New York: Harper.
Johnson, Charles S. 1943. *Patterns of Negro Segregation*. New York: Harper.

- Klineberg, Otto, ed. 1944. *Characteristics of the American Negro*. New York: Harper.
- Myrdal, Gunnar. 1944. *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. New York: Harper.
- Sterner, Richard. 1943. *The Negro's Share*. New York: Harper.