

The Making of an American Dilemma: The Philanthropists and Social Scientists of the Civil Rights Movement

By Maribel Morey

Ph.D. Candidate, Department of History
Princeton University
New Jersey

mmorey@princeton.edu

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For the last three years, I have been writing a dissertation on a landmark study that the United States Supreme Court, the Truman Administration, Congress, and the public-at-large in the 1940s and 1950s cited when discussing the urgency for white/black integration in the United States: Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944).

Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* was an ambitious two-volume, 1,483 page treatise that became a centerpiece in postwar discussions of white/black relations in the United States. In this famous study, the Swedish author argued that the so-called "negro problem" was a moral issue in the hearts and minds of white Americans. In order to address white-black inequality, he explained that white Americans needed to bring their actions in line with their cherished American Creed of "liberty, equality, justice, and fair opportunity for everybody." He was certain that these Americans would address this moral problem because, as he noted in 1942, they were already beginning to challenge the discrimination and segregation of black Americans.¹

Six years after its publication, the sociologist Louis Wirth argued that *An American Dilemma* was "leading American social scientists to focus their research on issues of prejudice

and attitude formation.”² Four years later, the United States Supreme Court cited Myrdal’s work in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).³ In 1955, the Chicago sociologist Ernest W. Burgess declared that the book had been of “first importance” in recent “epoch-making advances in the field of race relations.”⁴ He considered *An American Dilemma* “the most powerful instrument of action in the field of race relations since Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.”⁵ The book became an authoritative text for advocates of white-black integration in the postwar. It was also a study that was dreamt up, not in Myrdal’s office in Stockholm, but rather, in the Carnegie Corporation of their New York offices on Fifth Avenue in the mid-1930s.

“The Making of *An American Dilemma: The Philanthropists and Social Scientists of the Civil Rights Movement*,” looks back to the American philanthropists and American and European social scientists involved in the project and asks why they came to produce a two-volume study in 1944 that argued in favor of white-black integration. In the process, the dissertation writes this community of elite philanthropists and social scientists into the postwar U.S. civil rights narrative, placing them alongside civil rights activists, the federal courts, and lawyers, as important instigators of socio-legal change with respect to race relations in the United States. Moreover, the dissertation situates the U.S. civil rights movement in a larger global context. It explains that the making of Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma* (and the postwar integrationist movement that followed) was one episode in American philanthropists’ and European and American social scientists’ efforts throughout the 1920s and 1930s to find social scientific policy solutions to perceived problems in race relations in British Africa, Europe, and the United States.

Rockefeller Archive Center Collections Consulted

I was at the Rockefeller Archive Center in the summer of 2010, and during that time I consulted the papers of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), the General Education Board (GEB), the Rockefeller Foundation (RF), the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial (LSRM), and the Russell Sage Foundation. I was particularly interested in learning the following: how these foundations interacted with the Carnegie Corporation of New York (which funded Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*); how they might have encouraged or influenced the Corporation's decision to shift its funding practices with respect to black Americans in the 1930s; and, how they contributed to the Corporation's "Study of Negro Americans," which became Myrdal's project.

For the purposes of my research, I found that the most relevant and helpful collections were the SSRC and the RF papers. While reading through these collections I began to see how American social scientists in the 1920s to the 1940s discussed white-black relations in the United States. Consequently, I could see the conversations Gunnar Myrdal was entering when he took on the Corporation's *Study of Black Americans* in 1937. Even more, I was able to understand the level of communication between these foundations and the Carnegie Corporation. The material I collected at the Rockefeller Archive Center will help me write chapters four and five of my dissertation that describe American social scientists' own work on black-white relations in the 1920s and 1930s and situate Myrdal within these arguments.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944, p. 54.

² Walter Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience: Social Engineering and Racial Liberalism, 1938-1987*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990.

³ *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954): "Whatever may have been the extent of psychological knowledge at the time of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, this finding is amply supported by modern authority ...," see generally Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 1944.

⁴ David W. Southern, *Gunnar Myrdal and Black-White Relations: The Use and Abuse of An American Dilemma, 1944-1969*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987.

⁵ *Ibid.*