

The Johnson-Forest Tendency, radicalising Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma*

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Abstract: One of the studies that influenced US policies on race and integration the most after the second world war is Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* from 1944. At the time of publication, it received much praise from leading intellectuals, including W. E. B. Du Bois and the novelist Richard Wright. In this article, however, the author explores a neglected Marxist critique of Myrdal's work by Raya Dunayevskaya, who then worked closely with C. L. R. James and Grace Lee Boggs in the Johnson-Forest Tendency (JFT). In addition to criticising Myrdal's liberal position, the JFT developed a critique of class reductionist Marxists. Hence, this article examines the JFT's critique of Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* as a resource to advance further Marxist debates on the relationship between race and class today.

Keywords: 1940s US race relations, *An American Dilemma*, C. L. R. James, Grace Lee Boggs, Gunnar Myrdal, Johnson-Forest Tendency, Raya Dunayevskaya, W. E. B. Du Bois

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Marginalising Black people's voices and moments of inter-racial solidarity

The most ambitious sociological study of racism in the US during the 1940s was the widely influential two-volume work *An American Dilemma: the Negro problem and modern democracy*, under the direction of the Swedish economist and future Nobel Laureate Gunnar Myrdal.¹ In Myrdal's framework, the problem of racism in the US is presented as a moral dilemma, consisting of a tension or conflict between the ideals of Americans and their actual behaviour. Through rational planning and social engineering, these problems could, according to Myrdal, find a solution, or at least a significant improvement. Myrdal's work had a vast influence for many decades afterwards. In 1954 it was, for example, cited in the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to desegregate US schools. Even in Europe, it became widely known. When, for example, the Institute of Race Relations in Britain in the early 1960s obtained a large grant to produce a study on British race relations, which was to become *Colour and Citizenship: a report on British race relations*, the director of the institute, Philip Mason, hoped that it would provide 'a Myrdal for Britain', that like Myrdal could assemble 'a vast mass of information and set the whole in a new and illuminating perspective' and thereby 'help to avoid mistakes'.²

However, few today know about the original and radical critique of Myrdal's work by a creative and contemporary Marxist group called the Johnson-Forest Tendency. The most important intellectuals in this group were C. L. R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee Boggs. In a review of *An American Dilemma*, Dunayevskaya (who will be discussed more below) writes that Myrdal's study marks a progression in some respects, as there are some supplementary studies within it by Black scholars she thinks are of outstanding quality. Still, in other important aspects, she calls it a retrogression. She writes that one of the most serious shortcomings of the Myrdal book is that it not only neglects but ignores works by Black intellectuals and overlooks a moment in history when Black and white farmers in the South united and fought their class battle as one. She writes:

I speak of retrogression because whereas Myrdal states that no comprehensive scientific study of the Reconstruction period has yet been written by American historians, and urges that such a study be made, he is not helping the case along by more or less dismissing the Negro studies of the Reconstruction period as mere counter-balance to the prejudiced reports by whites . . . Any 'social scientist' seriously studying the Negro problem, as Mr. Myrdal surely did, could not have escaped becoming interested in and probing to the end this outstanding example of class solidarity across racial lines. However, Prof. Myrdal seems to be ignorant of this movement.³

The work by a Black intellectual Dunayevskaya refers to as being ignored by Myrdal is no less than W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America*,⁴ from

1935. Contrary to Myrdal, Dunayevskaya argues that the 768-page book by Du Bois, then a professor at Atlanta University, was a first-class piece of research and that it analysed a field barely touched on by white historians. The ignored historical moment she is referring to is the post-Reconstruction period in the prejudice-ridden South when the populist movement was sweeping the country, uniting the National Colored Farmers Alliance and the Southern Alliance. The National Colored Farmers Alliance alone numbered 1,250,000 Black farmers and they united with the white agrarian populists in the Southern Alliance to fight, across racial lines, against the white plantocracy. Dunayevskaya asks why Myrdal does not discuss this important historical event, let alone Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*. When trying to find an answer to the question, she locates bits and pieces in the book that, when put together, lays bare a notion for her. She concludes that:

Mr. Myrdal neither searched this field [the Populist movement during the post-Reconstruction period] nor even indicated that it should be searched because his outlook could not encompass the possibility of such a movement. Mr. Myrdal emphatically rejects the Marxian concept of the class struggle. He writes:

[quoting from page 68 of Myrdal's book] Our hypothesis is that a society where there are broad social classes and, in addition, more minute distinctions and splits in the lower strata, the *lower class groups will to a great extent take care of keeping each other subdued*, thus relieving, to that extent, the higher classes of this otherwise painful task necessary to the monopolization of the power and the advantages.⁵

Thus, she notes that Myrdal is explicitly rejecting what he terms a 'Marxian scheme' that 'assumes that there is an actual solidarity between the several lower-class groups against the higher classes, or, in any case, a potential solidarity which as a matter of natural development is bound to emerge'.⁶ Myrdal complains that this Marxian scheme has influenced Black intellectuals. He is obviously thinking of Du Bois, arguing further that this Marxist influence has 'blurred their vision'. Because of the Marxist influence, Myrdal believes the works of radical Black intellectuals are of little value. Thus, what Dunayevskaya is singling out in the opening paragraphs of her 1944 critique is how Myrdal is an explicit anti-Marxist and how through this, he is also marginalising, hiding and making the voices and contributions of some important Black activists and intellectuals invisible.

Myrdal and *An American Dilemma*

It was in the late summer of 1937 that the Carnegie Corporation of New York invited the then 38-year-old Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal to come over to the US to head a research team focusing on the 'Negro problem'. The issue was that during the 1930s, numerous lynchings of Black people in the Jim

Crow-dominated South and racial conflicts in segregated areas in cities in the North had caused a wide-ranging public debate on racism in the US. It appeared contradictory to many that the US opposed the development of Nazism and fascism in Europe while racism ran rampant at home. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, which wanted to develop a leading public voice, decided to fund a massive study on the topic. They wanted the study not only to describe the problem but also to point toward possible ways forward. As they felt that the issue was sensitive, they required someone from outside the US and from a non-imperialist country to lead the study, someone who would enter from a supposedly neutral and objective position. Du Bois, who wrote a review of *An American Dilemma*, explained in his review regarding the background and the persons behind the commissioning of the study:

It was made at the suggestion of a prominent American statesman who was a liberal and yet not too liberal. He was a signer of an anti-Jewish pact in Cleveland which kept Jews out of certain residential districts. He hesitated considerably when Secretary of War, as to just how far he should champion the Negro soldier. He came to be a staunch defender of the Negro effort in the war, but when after the war, as member of the Carnegie Board, Newton Baker was asked to vote for certain projects concerning the Negro he said bluntly that he needed more light and he wanted a study of the Negro which should tell what real conditions were. The Myrdal Study is a result of his request, but it was F. P. Keppel who really determined the character of the study. Otherwise, this study might have been like the African Survey of Lord Hailey: a splendid effort but designed to present the English point of view forcibly and completely. Not a single charge against English Colonial Policy in Africa has been left without very careful answer and excuse. All unpleasant details are elaborately glossed over. Keppel determined to have a man make study of the American Negro who was not misled and prejudiced by the Imperial colonial point of view. He wanted a foreigner who did not consciously or unconsciously inherit the American attitude; and he chose a Swedish professor and statesman who came here and made the study covering more than four years and costing well over a quarter million of dollars.⁷

The research team they gathered comprised about seventy-five members, both Black and white, drawn from various disciplines. As Du Bois noted, the Carnegie Corporation's full grant to Myrdal amounted to 250,000 US dollars. Eighty-five years later, that number equals approximately \$3,700,000. Myrdal accepted the offer to lead the research and about a year later, on September 10, 1938, he arrived in New York with his wife Alva and their three children to start the project.

At that time, Myrdal was an economist and an active and influential politician in the Swedish Social Democratic Party, which he had joined in 1932. During the 1930s, he lived in Stockholm and frequently travelled, met and hung out with

other intellectuals in the city. His educational background was originally in Law, but in the mid-1920s, he changed to Economics and wrote about price formation mechanisms. He also started to develop ideas about the importance of a value-neutral approach in Social Sciences. The latter was something he continued working on for many years and he became widely associated with it. In 1934, he and Alva published the very influential book *Kris i befolkningsfrågan* (Crisis in the Population Question) in Sweden. This publication became a breakthrough for them as they became recognised intellectuals from that point on. In the book, the Myrdals warned that Sweden could face a future of declining productivity and consequently lowering living standards due to high unemployment and low fertility rates. The measures they suggested to turn this dark destiny toward a brighter future were massive investments from the state in social reforms. At that time, this was something new and original, as hardly any nation state had yet engaged actively via welfare measures to change the economic development of a whole nation. The Myrdals thus sketched some of the first contours of what a new urbanised and industrialised welfare society could look like. State-subsidised childcare was, for example, one of the innovative ideas they formulated in the book. Nonetheless, the general idea they proposed was that a negative growth circle could be broken via significant investments from the state, such as infrastructure projects or social reforms. Hence, through a 'cumulative causation', one thing, such as childcare, would lead to women being able to find jobs and contribute to GDP. In this way, the economic downturn could be stopped and a brighter future could emerge.

Kris i befolkningsfrågan continued to exercise an enormous influence on public debate in Sweden for several years and it had an especially significant impact on the Social Democratic Party's ideas when it started to formulate the basic principles of the Swedish welfare state, which at this time began to see the light of day. What is less well-known internationally today is that in the book, the Myrdals also took a eugenicist stand arguing for the importance of preventing 'unwanted' elements in the population from reproducing. The goal of socio-political reforms, they wrote, was to increase the quality of society's human material. To achieve that, it was necessary, for example, to ensure that women in poor circumstances and the 'slow-witted' should not reproduce. They argued that sterilisation might need to be enforced with legal coercion if it could not be achieved voluntarily.⁸

By 1942, after only four years in the US, Gunnar finished the study on race relations in the US. Two years later, in 1944, the results were published by Harper & Row in New York in a two-volume book entitled *An American Dilemma: the Negro problem and modern democracy*, which numbered 1,483 pages. Arguably, it was the most ambitious study of race relations in the US up to that time. In terms of its broad impact on American social policies, it is sometimes compared with Alexis de Tocqueville's *On Democracy in America* (1835) and James Bryce's *The American Commonwealth* (1888). In his Introduction, Myrdal explains the outlook of his study as follows:

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 jealousies; 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.⁹

The two volumes contain forty-five chapters and ten appendices, in which everything from the history of slavery to current income, consumption and housing for Blacks, Southern conservatism and liberalism, discrimination against Blacks on the job market and in the courts, Black people’s organising and protest, the Black press, churches and schools, among other topics, are brought up and discussed.

Carl-Göran Heidegren, a sociological theorist at Lund University in Sweden, summarises Myrdal’s line of argument:

An American Dilemma is about the American dilemma. This dilemma is essentially a moral dilemma, consisting in a moral tension or conflict. Furthermore, it is a white man’s dilemma or problem. It is situated in the very heart of every white American. The dilemma is about the discrepancy between the most general values adhered to and lower-level valuations. It is about the discrepancy between the ideals of Americans, summarized in what is called the American Creed, and their actual behavior. This dilemma relates to various forms of social misdevelopment in America. It is about a complex of problems that can find a solution, or at least a significant improvement, by way of rational planning and social engineering.¹⁰

Heidegren’s study then specifically focuses on the theoretical underpinnings of Myrdal’s work. In it, he recognises a form of immanent critique in Myrdal’s analysis that reminds him of Axel Honneth’s *Das Recht der Freiheit*,¹¹ as he sees similarities between the two works. Heidegren goes so far as to conclude that Myrdal’s work is, in an odd way, anticipated in Honneth’s and could thus also be situated within a form of Hegelianism – that Honneth’s work is associated with, in that it adheres to an immanent critique. Myrdal does not directly reveal a Hegelian influence, nor does he overtly perform a form of immanent critique, but he never suggests a new set of moral standards alien to the American people. Instead, he

identifies their ideals, summarised in what he calls the American creed, which in turn can be summarised in the thought that 'America *is* the land of the free, *is* the land of equal opportunity, *is* the safeguard for human dignity, and *is* the home of democracy.' He focuses on exposing the gap between those ideals and actual behaviour rather than criticising those ideas. Heidegren concludes that Myrdal believes that the racism in the South was, first of all, a moral problem, which in turn means that white Americans are hypocrites. In other words, white Americans, especially in the South, do not live up to the American creed. Furthermore, Heidegren explains that Myrdal is inspired by the Swedish philosopher Axel Hägerström, who is most famous for writing on the doctrine of value nihilism, or value neutrality, rooted in Max Weber.¹² For Hägerström, 'There can never be any teaching *in* morality, only *on* morals.'¹³ An admirer of Hägerström, Myrdal was influenced by Hägerström's logic when he discussed how, via an immanent critique, American society could solve its race problems.

The Johnson-Forest Tendency

While Myrdal was working on his book, the Johnson-Forest Tendency (JFT) was formed. The context of the group's formation was a rare time in the radical US milieu. Among those progressive and radical thinkers in the 1930s and early 1940s in the US who gave up on their hopes for what the Russian revolution might bring were many who formerly had called themselves Marxists but now abandoned Marx as a source of inspiration. Others left the dominant Marxist group, which at this time was the Communist Party, and formed new groups which attempted to rethink Marxism from scratch. Many prominent US intellectuals gravitated towards small dissident Trotskyist groups and their journals during the second world war and the immediate post-war period, before McCarthyism set in around 1949. Among these were political and social thinkers like Irving Howe, Meyer Schapiro, Mary McCarthy and Dwight MacDonald, with others like McCarthy's close friend Hannah Arendt not part of these circles but indirectly connected to them. These circles also included well-known novelists like future Nobel Laureate Saul Bellow, the prominent Black writer Ralph Ellison, and Norman Mailer. What united these intellectuals was intense opposition to fascism, but in a manner that also included deep hostility to Stalinism, tracing itself back to what they often saw as Stalin's betrayal of the Spanish Republic and, most significantly, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 that paved the way for the outbreak of the second world war with the invasion of Poland. They clashed with those leftwing intellectuals who remained less critical of the Soviet Union, among them Lillian Hellman, W. E. B. Du Bois, Howard Fast, Oliver C. Cox, and later Jean-Paul Sartre.

The JFT was one of the dissident groups that was attempting to rethink Marxism. Initially, it was formed inside Max Shachtman's Trotskyist Workers Party when some like-minded members started questioning and challenging its leadership. The JFT disagreed with the Workers Party's leadership which it

considered unable to address the racism that existed both in the movement and in society and incapable of recognising the crucial role of the Black workers' struggle. The new grouping also tended to reject the traditional Leninist vanguardist form of organisation that the Trotskyist movement relied upon. James, Dunayevskaya and Lee led the theoretical development of this tendency.

C. L. R. James was a Black writer, historian, journalist and philosopher born in Trinidad in 1901 who had lived in London and Paris. In school in Trinidad, he studied English literature and nurtured a passion for plays and theatre. He spent most of the 1930s in Britain and became a widely known writer on culture and the sport of cricket. James had become increasingly involved in Marxism during his time in Britain, especially Trotskyism. Soon, he started writing and publishing critical articles on race and capitalism. His most radical writings on politics, literature and culture were published under the pen name J. R. Johnson. Before moving to the US, he went to visit Trotsky, at that time in exile in Mexico, where they had an important dialogue on race and class in the US. When James finally came to the US, he joined the American Trotskyist movement and went on a national speaking tour. He soon became known for speaking passionately without notes and moving the audience with illuminating facts and provocative ideas. In 1938, he published his most famous work, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*,¹⁴ a study of the 1791–1804 revolution by enslaved people in Haiti. It is still considered a classic.

Another member of the JFT, Raya Dunayevskaya, was born to Jewish parents in 1910 in today's Ukraine, then part of tsarist Russia. In 1917 she experienced the Russian Revolution, and in 1920 her family decided to emigrate to the US and subsequently settled in Chicago. As a teenager in Chicago, Dunayevskaya engaged with the local Communist Party. After a while, she noted inadequacies in dealing with racism by the party's leaders and, more provocatively, criticised Stalin's ascendancy, after which she was expelled. During the 1930s, she gravitated toward Trotskyist groups. In 1938, she moved to Mexico to become Trotsky's Russian-speaking secretary. In 1939, after her return to the US, Dunayevskaya developed differences with Trotsky. The differences had been growing, but she decisively broke with Trotsky over the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the non-aggression treaty between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. Trotsky held that Soviet Russia was still a workers' state, although degenerate. Dunayevskaya could not accept that a workers' state would make a pact with a fascist Nazi state. The pact, she held, was a definite manifestation that the Soviet Union had transformed from a workers' state into its opposite, a state-capitalist society. It was this issue that brought her and James together in 1941, as he reached a similar position, also writing on Russia as a state-capitalist society. Together, they conceptualised state-capitalism as a new stage in capitalism, including also fascist states and the New Deal under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Dunayevskaya often wrote under the name Freddie Forest.

A third influential member of the JFT was Grace Lee (Lee sometimes used the pen name Ria Stone and was later known as Grace Lee Boggs). She was the

youngest, born in 1915 to Chinese immigrants and the only one with a PhD which she obtained in Philosophy at Bryn Mawr College with a thesis on George Herbert Mead. In addition, she was fluent in German. Lee later married the Black auto-worker and author James Boggs and remained active as a social activist and writer in the Detroit area until she passed away in 2015 at the age of one hundred.¹⁵ By that time, she was very well-known. Even the then US president, Barack Obama, sent his condolences to be read at her funeral. Other influential members of the JFT were Selma James, later married to James, Charles Denby, a Black man from Alabama who worked in the auto industry and Martin Glaberman, a labour activist and a sociologist. The group name, the Johnson-Forest Tendency, came from the pseudonyms of James and Dunayevskaya.

The JFT criticised the Trotskyist movement's racial policies by writing on and making critical theoretical conceptualisations of the crucial place of Black revolt in the US radical movement. But this was not all of what they did in their early years. Kevin B. Anderson writes in *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism* that during the 1940s, this productive and creative group also developed a concept of Stalin's Russia as a totalitarian state-capitalist society, which was a wildly original contribution. They, too, critiqued the emergent labour bureaucracy and wrote about rank-and-file workers' revolts as examples of worker creativity. Furthermore, the group was among the first in the US to read, translate and discuss Marx's 1844 Manuscripts, Marx's debt to Hegel, and Lenin's Philosophical Notebooks.¹⁶ Besides, Dunayevskaya wrote several articles under her name in the major academic journal *American Economic Review*, focusing on Stalinist distortions of Marxism. Periodically, they published texts under their real names or pen names and occasionally under the 'Johnson-Forest Tendency', or the 'Johnsonites', as they sometimes called themselves. Examples of books they published included *The Invading Socialist Society*¹⁷ (1947) by James, Lee and Dunayevskaya; *The American Worker*¹⁸ (1947) by autoworker Paul Romano and Lee; *Indignant Heart*¹⁹ (1952) by Charles Denby (aka Matthew Ward) and co-edited by members of the JFT; and *State Capitalism and World Revolution*²⁰ (1950) by James, Dunayevskaya and Lee. After 1955, however, the tendency split into two branches over a debate on the role of revolutionary organisations in the movement for socialism, and on dialectics. Thereupon, the individual members developed different views on and ways to relate to their past activities in the JFT.

Nevertheless, only a couple of months after the publication of Myrdal's study, the JFT issued a unique and creative review of it, which Dunayevskaya wrote for *The New Internationalist* under her pen name, Freddie Forest, to which I now turn.

Bourgeois political conclusions to the race problem

After discussing how Myrdal dismisses both the voices of radical Black scholars and the Marxian framework, which, in Myrdal's words, 'assumes that there is an actual solidarity between the several lower class groups against the higher classes', Dunayevskaya targets the kernel of Myrdal's thesis. Myrdal, she writes,

denies that 'the economic factor' is the primary one in the development, or rather, in the existence of the problem of racism. Instead, he repeats that it is the result of a moral problem. Thus, Dunayevskaya sees the outstanding contribution of *An American Dilemma* in its chapters on the economic situation of Black people. In the chapters on Black labourers in the South, on housing conditions, etc., she thinks Myrdal presents devastating data about the inequalities in American society.

Anyone who has entertained any illusions as to what the New Deal meant to the poor farmers, white and Negro, in the semi-feudal conditions of the South, will have them quickly dispelled by the accumulated weight of evidence.²¹

But at this very point where Myrdal is trying to analyse how it can be that a society that holds the 'American creed' as its foremost ideal is still so unequal, is where Dunayevskaya finds its most problematic weakness. Myrdal's explanation as to why this contradiction between the ideals of Americans and the unequal society exists is that the system of slavery caused a blackout in Southern thought. By this he means that the system of slavery in the South caused a situation where it became impossible for any trace of radical or progressive thinking to spread. Dunayevskaya writes:

Mr. Myrdal, the scholar, writes that with the entrenchment of slavery in the South, the blackout on independent thinking was so overwhelming that Southern thought to this day suffers from lack of free intercourse with the varied currents of thought since the early nineteenth century. 'The region is exceptional in Western non-fascist civilization since the Enlightenment in that it lacks every trace of radical thought. In the South all progressive thinking going further than mild liberalism has been practically non-existent for a century.' (p. 469)²²

Myrdal's pessimism about the potential of white Southerners to develop progressive or radical ideas can also be seen in an interview with a Swedish journalist right after the book's publication. When asked how most white people in the South would react to the book, Myrdal replied with a sharp condemnation, 'They don't read books'.²³

His study ultimately addresses the upper class in the South and says that it had better start enfranchising the Black population, if possible, not by a sudden upheaval but in gradual steps. Myrdal also assures the class that this is a genuinely conservative conclusion and adds that they do not need to begin integrating the whole Black population. As a start, he writes, they can enfranchise only 'the higher strata of the Negro population'.²⁴

Here, Dunayevskaya finds that the value-neutral social scientist has stepped out in full daylight and suddenly appeared as a very moderate bourgeois reformer who appeals to his Southern class brethren to, as a start, begin enfranchising the higher strata of the Black population. She writes of this ludicrous appeal:

What is so elementary that even British imperialism has granted it to a colony like Jamaica – universal suffrage – Mr. Myrdal ‘the social scientist from non-imperialist Sweden’, is not yet ready to demand from the Southern bourbons!²⁵

Critique of Black intellectuals and class reductionism

In the next section of her review, Dunayevskaya unfolds a critical perspective on how Myrdal’s work was received by other scholars, especially by other radical Black scholars. She writes that she is sincerely surprised and disappointed to learn that in the Black press and the Black intelligentsia, and even by Du Bois, Myrdal’s work was generally praised.²⁶ In late 1944, Du Bois published a review of *An American Dilemma* in *Phylon*, the academic journal he founded at Atlanta University. He concluded in his review of Myrdal’s work that it was a ‘monumental and unrivalled study’.²⁷ The basis of this, Du Bois thought, was that Myrdal’s study marked a significant break from earlier attempts at studying race relations. In his review, Du Bois starts by quickly recounting how race relations during the nineteenth century were explained first by church ministers as a result of the curse of Canaan, then by natural scientists who found scientific support for slavery, later followed by statisticians and biologists who found other so-called empirical facts that backed the notion that Blacks are inferior to whites, inherently violent, etc. Hence:

they [earlier writers on race relations] were interpreting the Negro problem from the point of view of white people and very largely of those white people who did not believe in the Negro or in the possibilities of just race relations in the United States; and they did not know or try to know the whole Negro problem.²⁸

But Myrdal’s study was different, Du Bois wrote. He argues that never before in American history has a scholar so completely covered this field. Du Bois was especially impressed by the grand attempt to cover the problem of race relations so widely and also of Myrdal’s sociological methods:

He [Myrdal] does not attempt to be ‘scientific’ in the sense of depending solely upon such facts as lend themselves to accurate mathematical measurement. In other words, the sociology of Myrdal emancipates itself from physical and biological and psychological analogies, and openly and frankly takes into account emotions, thoughts, opinions and ideals.²⁹

Throughout the review, Du Bois does not make one criticism of Myrdal, never even mentioning the fact that his *Black Reconstruction* is ignored. Instead, he praises the conclusion that the race problem is essentially a moral problem:

It is in his general method and in this last part that Myrdal differs most with American sociologists; he insists on regarding the Negro problem as basically

a moral problem; he dismisses the argument of unchangeable racial differences; of the mores and subconscious impasse; of absolute psychological conditioning and ineradicable ignorance. He rejects the Marxian dogma of economic effort as ever dominant motive.³⁰

After writing this, Du Bois inserts a lengthy quote from *An America Dilemma* in which Myrdal adds a personal note saying that behind all outward dissimilarities, behind contradictory valuations, people are all much alike on a fundamental level. He writes, 'they are all good people. They want to be rational and just. They all plead to their conscience that they meant well even when things went wrong.' Here might lie one reason to explain Du Bois's seemingly unexpected praise of Myrdal's study. Until then, as Du Bois mentions, all major studies on race relations that had played a significant role in American policymaking had been explicitly racist. Now, here came the massive Myrdal study, founded by establishment organisations, which at least broke with the worst kind of explicit racism of the former studies. Myrdal's study at least ended with the hope for a non-racist future. In addition, quotes like the one above, when Myrdal talked about how all people are good people, also seemed to apply to Blacks. In the context of the previous research on race relations that Du Bois describes, this is, in a sense, a step forward.

However, this step away from the explicit and crude racism prevalent in former studies didn't hinder the JFT from critiquing the problems in the study. Dunayevskaya was, for example, incredibly disappointed in the Black radical intellectual Charles S. Johnson, who was a researcher in Myrdal's study.³¹ Johnson was known for being influenced by Marxism, which was something Myrdal complained about. During the 1920s, Johnson had developed an analysis of racism being rooted in economic factors. Now, Johnson argued that the solution to the race problem was to be found in the process of urbanisation and proletarianisation of the Black population. Through these processes, racism would shift from a racial issue to a class one. Therefore, Johnson was slightly positive toward expanding the Northern industrial economy. Dunayevskaya, who developed a sharp critique of the new industrial economy in her notion of state-capitalism, dismisses Johnson's thesis. She notes that during the Depression, the US government formed the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), a New Deal programme that aimed to restore the South's collapsing cotton industry. Thus, an enormous amount of money went from the state to the South. Dunayevskaya therefore writes:

Mr. Johnson the scholar seemed blissfully unaware of the significance of the political alliance of the New Deal-Wall Street North with the bourbon semi-feudal South. Or perhaps not so much unaware as unwilling to give up the quiet of an academic chair for the hubbub of mass activity which would 'induce' the 'economic' revolution.³²

When reflecting on these works, Dunayevskaya explains that one reason these Black intellectuals stop short of conducting a truly revolutionary conclusion is because they are funded by conservative funds that have their own ends. She writes that:

The reason lies partly in the fact that the majority of the research projects or economic and social analyses regarding the Negro have white guardian angels in the form of some bourgeois fund, whether it is Carnegie, or Rockefeller or Rosenwald or the Government. It is only natural that the studies stop short of their implicit conclusions, if indeed the professors ever breathe the conclusions even to themselves and thus jeopardize the comfort of the academic chair. Researchers, of course, are paid to indulge in 'educational treatises', not to carry on revolutionary propaganda.³³

Instead, Dunayevskaya's position is that the practice of racism has its roots in economic structures, that it developed as an ideology to legitimise the practice of suppressing Black people to work without compensation, but that it at one point breaks off and takes on a life of its own. Accordingly, while it is historically rooted in the economic system of capitalism, the fight against racism cannot be entirely subsumed under economics. Instead, it demands an independent and autonomous status. In the coming years, Dunayevskaya, James, Lee and the other members of the JFT would deepen their understanding of race and its relation to class, gender and the socialist movement in hundreds of articles, talks, books and essays. In 1944, it was just beginning to be worked out.

A radical alternative

However, there is one person who wrote about *An American Dilemma* that Dunayevskaya in 1944 thinks nailed it very well: Lawrence D. Reddick, a prominent Black historian. In 1944 he published two reviews of the book. In the *Journal of Negro Education*, Reddick admits that he thinks *An American Dilemma* is the best study on race relations so far. Still, he also stresses three significant problems in it. First, he points out the gaps in the historical sections of the book. He thinks these sections are greatly lacking, concluding that "There seems not to have been a basic understanding of the function of history in current "race relations".³⁴ Second, Reddick critiques Myrdal's sociological concept of caste, believing it to be unfortunate that Myrdal has picked up the caste theory of race, which had been used as a form of universal and transhistorical analysis of race, that Reddick thinks belongs to the past.

This caste-class hypothesis, which was first advanced as a general cover-all for Negro-white relations in the United States, has been pushed back to its last line of defense. It has been driven from the Northern part of the United States and now is understood to apply chiefly to small, sleepy Southern

towns where dynamic changes such as are observable in communities like Birmingham, Alabama, are not definitely operative.³⁵

Dunayevskaya particularly appreciates how Reddick argues that the solution to racism is along class lines. But he is *not* arguing that Black people should therefore forget about their Black identity and think of themselves only as proletarians. Rather, the idea is that the white workers should develop their consciousness and support and contribute to developing the anti-racist movement.

Reddick writes in his review that:

Dr. Myrdal is unduly pessimistic over the possibilities of Negro and white workers uniting and struggling together for common goals. Myrdal, who has banking as well as political and university connections in Sweden, states that the lower class whites manifest the cruder and more intense forms of anti-Negro prejudice. True. But to reason from this that it is not possible to overcome this prejudice or that the 'logical' or 'natural' orientation of the Negro is not with the bulk of the American people, who are in one way or another workers or, more specifically, with those broadly based organized labor movements like CIO, is not justified by what is going on about us at this very moment.³⁶

Dunayevskaya and James were very keen on this point, stressing the working classes' potential to develop and fight for progressive ideas. They were also very keen on emphasising that the Black anti-racist movement has a validity of its own and a significant role to play as an autonomous movement in the struggle for socialism, as James noted in his well-known 1948 resolution in *The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the United States*³⁷ for the Socialist Workers Party. At the end of the review, Dunayevskaya is therefore writing about an emerging movement around a Black identity and the importance of it. She writes:

There is stirring in the Negro people in the United States today a racial consciousness which has at present found its most extreme expression in the writings of Richard Wright. Wilfred H. Kerr, co-chairman of the Lynn Committee to Abolish Segregation in the Armed Forces, has noted the phenomenon, which he calls 'Negroism'. These are portents on the horizon which can be ignored only to the peril of the labor movement. But they must be approached upon the indispensable basis of the revolutionary struggle for socialism and of the proletariat as that social class which will solve the Negro problem along with all other major problems that capitalist society cannot solve. From the very fact that scholars like Mr. Johnson and Mr. Myrdal make such valuable contributions to the Negro question, it is necessary for Marxists to attack and expose without mercy their false philosophical premises.³⁸

This was written in November 1944, over a decade before the beginning of the Civil Rights movement, which would sweep over the country from 1955 onward.

The reason that she writes that it is the labour movement and the proletariat that have the capacity to abolish racism is because they are the ones who have the potential to shut down the factories and the institutions that the survival of the capitalist system is dependent on.

Heidegren argues that Myrdal believed in a change in race relations from above, from the Southern white elite and from the national government under Roosevelt. He writes that Myrdal argued that:

First of all, a change must take hold in the mind of the whites; indeed such a change is, according to Myrdal, well underway through the decay of the caste theory which says that people are born in such and such a way and that this cannot be changed. Secondly, such a change must be supported by an active policy of rational planning and social engineering.³⁹

To conclude, Myrdal considers that the problem is a moral one, that white people are hypocrites, and that the solution is that the state should intervene and spread the American creed to all people so that whites can get rid of their bad moral standards and Black people can take part in the American creed. Basically, Myrdal suggests that more of the American creed, which meant more of New Deal capitalism, is the solution. On the contrary, Dunayevskaya locates the problem's roots in capitalism itself. She analyses capitalism as a system that inevitably produces an underclass and that this is the root of race prejudices in capitalist society today. Thus, for Dunayevskaya, the solution to the race problem in America lies not in a more modern capitalism but in overthrowing it. Her differences with Myrdal's approach include the fact that he neglected important moments in history of interracial solidarity, that his value-neutral approach did not question capitalist relations of production and its relation to racism and also that he regarded the white workers in the South as hopelessly intellectually backward, thus refuting the idea of a possible future class solidarity movement across racial lines in the South. In addition, she believes he downplayed the economic foundation of racism. She also thinks it is a major problem that Myrdal ignored many of the more radical Black scholars because they were influenced by Marxism and its notion that racism was grounded in economic relations.

For her part, Dunayevskaya found economic structures, not bad morals, to be the root of the continuation of the white workers' racial prejudice, and she refused to see them as backward. Instead, she looked for traces of expressions of when their consciousness developed and tried to understand how this could emerge. And she also emphasised the key role of the independent and autonomous anti-racist movement. Thus, while Myrdal ignored the subjectivity of the Black masses, Dunayevskaya was moving toward a notion of the Black masses as a vanguard. This idea is more than one of inter-racial class solidarity as it emphasises Black workers' and activists' crucial role of self-activity. In her view, Black workers and activists could, via their autonomous struggle, change their own consciousness, that of white workers and society as a whole. This cuts right through Myrdal's

appeal to Southern white leaders to change their attitudes to moral and long-term economic relations. Hence, Dunayevskaya concludes that Myrdal recognises only the subjectivity of the dominant classes and develops a moralising idealism while both ignoring the economic foundation of racism and the subjectivity of the oppressed masses. Since the publication of *An American Dilemma*, Dunayevskaya's critique of Myrdal stands out for its detail and sharpness. As Dunayevskaya ends her review, 'it is necessary for Marxists to attack and expose without mercy their [liberal theorists such as Myrdal] false philosophical premises'.⁴⁰

References

- 1 In 1974, two people, Friedrich von Hayek and Gunnar Myrdal, were awarded the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel. The jury's motivation was 'for their pioneering work in the theory of money and economic fluctuations and for their penetrating analysis of the interdependence of economic, social and institutional phenomena'. See 'Gunnar Myrdal – Facts', in *Nobel Prize Outreach AB*, available at <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/economic-sciences/1974/myrdal/facts/> (accessed 18 October 2023).
- 2 Mason's quote can be found in P. Mason, 'Foreword' to E. J. B. Rose et al., *Colour and Citizenship: a report on British race relations* (London: Oxford University Press for IRR, 1969). For more information regarding the history of the Institute of Race Relations (IRR), see A. Sivanandan, 'Race and resistance: the IRR story', *Race & Class* 50, no. 2 (2008): pp. 1–30.
- 3 R. Dunayevskaya (aka Freddie Forest), 'Negro intellectuals in dilemma: Myrdal's study of a crucial problem', *New International X*, no. 11 (1944): pp. 369–70, available at <https://rayadunayevskaya.org/ArchivePDFs/271.pdf>.
- 4 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: an essay toward a history of the part which Black folk played in the attempt to reconstruct democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1935).
- 5 Dunayevskaya, 'Negro intellectuals in dilemma', p. 370. Emphasis in original.
- 6 G. Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: the Negro problem and modern democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1944), p. 68.
- 7 W. E. B. Du Bois, 'Review: the American dilemma', *Phylon* 5, no. 2 (1944), p. 121.
- 8 A. Myrdal and G. Myrdal, *Kris i befolkningsfrågan* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1935), pp. 217–26.
- 9 Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, p. lxxi.
- 10 C.-G. Heidegren, 'Ultimate values and immanent critique: on Axel Honneth's *Das Recht der Freiheit* and Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*', in *Recognition and Freedom: Axel Honneth's political thought*, O. Lysaker and J. Jakobsen (eds) (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 230.
- 11 A. Honneth, *Das Recht der Freiheit: grundriss einer demokratischen sittlichkeit* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011).
- 12 The doctrine of value neutrality implies that evaluative judgments cannot be true or false. Such judgments are instead thought of only as expressions of preferences.
- 13 Heidegren, 'Ultimate values and immanent critique', p. 222.
- 14 C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Penguin, 2001).
- 15 She also was, incidentally, a keen supporter of this journal.
- 16 K. B. Anderson, *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism: a critical study* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press), pp. 198–209.
- 17 C. L. R. James, F. Forest and R. Stone, *The Invading Socialist Society* (Detroit: Bewick Editions, 1947).
- 18 P. Romano, R. Stone and M. Glaberman, *The American Worker* (Detroit: Bewick Editions, 1947).
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- 20 C. L. R. James, R. Dunayevskaya and G. Lee Boggs, *State Capitalism and World Revolution* (Oakland: PM Press, 2013).

- 21 Dunayevskaya, 'Negro intellectuals in dilemma', p. 370.
- 22 Dunayevskaya, 'Negro intellectuals in dilemma', p. 371.
- 23 C. B. Hamilton and H. Hamilton, 'Gunnar Myrdal visade rasismen i USA:s hjärta', *Dagens Nyheter*, 7 June 2020, available at <https://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/gunnar-myrdal-visade-rasismen-i-usas-hjarta/>.
- 24 Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, p. 519.
- 25 Dunayevskaya, 'Negro intellectuals in dilemma', p. 371.
- 26 In 1945, a few months after the publication of Dunayevskaya's critical review of Myrdal, the famous Black novelist Richard Wright, who by then had become a nationally renowned author after publishing several books depicting the horrors of racism in the US, wrote an Introduction to St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton's *Black Metropolis: a study of Negro life in a northern city* in which he praised *An American Dilemma* and called it a 'monumental study'. Wright implied that what is needed is a philosophical and literary perspective to complement Myrdal's study on the Black experience. He wrote, 'We have the testimony of a Gunnar Myrdal, but we know that that is not all. What would life on Chicago's South Side look like when seen through the eyes of a Freud, a Joyce, a Proust, a Pavlov, a Kirkegaard?' See R. Wright, 'Introduction' to St. C. Drake and H. R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: a study of Negro life in a northern city* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1945), p. xxxi. In 1940, Wright had published *Native Son*, a book which tells the story of a young Black man living in Chicago's South Side. Dunayevskaya recognises that *Native Son* plays an important role in developing racial consciousness among Blacks (as will be seen in a quote further down). However, in 1945, Wright also published *Black Boy*, an autobiography in which he completed his break with the American Communist Party. In it, Wright argued that it was incapable of grasping the racial dimension. Afterwards, he started to develop a hostility toward Marxism and thought that Marxism was incapable of explaining racism. In the article 'Analogisk solidaritet: Gunnar Myrdal och Richard Wright om avkoloniseringsen och västvärlden under 1950-talet' from 2023, the Swedish researcher Ludwig Schmitz presents a fascinating portrayal of how Wright and Myrdal from the mid-1940s and onwards began to nurture a close friendship. Myrdal and Wright had got to know of each other's works during the 1940s, and started collaborating, sharing ideas and analyses with each other. For more details on the relationship between Wright and Myrdal, see Schmitz's chapter in T. Hübinette and P. Wikström (eds), *Sveriges arasifiering: uppfattningar om ras och rasism under efterkrigstiden* (Karlstad: Karlstad University Press, 2023), pp. 110–36.
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- 28 Du Bois, 'Review: the American dilemma', p. 121.
- 29 Du Bois, 'Review: the American dilemma', p. 122.
- 30 Du Bois, 'Review: the American dilemma', p. 123.
- 31 See memorandum from Gunnar Myrdal to Charles S. Johnson, 1 April 1940, regarding Johnson's participation: <https://dlc.library.columbia.edu/carnegie/cul:wwpzgmsd2x>.
- 32 Dunayevskaya, 'Negro intellectuals in dilemma', p. 371.
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- 34 L. D. Reddick, 'Review: scholarship and candor', *The Journal of Negro Education* 13, no. 2 (1944), p. 193.
- 35 Reddick, 'Review: scholarship and candor', p. 193.
- 36 Reddick, 'Review: scholarship and candor', pp. 193–94.
- 37 C. L. R. James (aka J. R. Johnson), 'The revolutionary answer to the Negro problem in the United States', in *C.L.R. James on the 'Negro Question'*, S. McLemee (ed.) (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), pp. 138–47.
- 38 Dunayevskaya, 'Negro intellectuals in dilemma', p. 372.
- 39 Heidegren, 'Ultimate values and immanent critique', p. 226.
- 40 Dunayevskaya, 'Negro intellectuals in dilemma', p. 372.