



An American Dilemma: A Mystical Approach to the Study of Race Relations

Oliver C. Cox

The Journal of Negro Education, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Spring, 1945), 132-148.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-2984%28194521%2914%3A2%3C132%3AAADAMA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-T>

The Journal of Negro Education is currently published by Journal of Negro Education.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/jne.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

An American Dilemma: A Mystical Approach to the Study of Race Relations

OLIVER C. COX

These two volumes, *An American Dilemma*¹ by Dr. Gunnar Myrdal are perhaps the culminating achievement of classical scholarship on the subject of race relations. They bring to finest expression practically all the vacuous theories of race relations which are acceptable among the liberal intelligentsia and which explain race relations away from the social and economic order. The theories do this in spite of the verbal desire of the author to integrate his problem in the on-going social system. In the end the social system is exculpated, and the burden of the dilemma is poetically left in the "hearts of the American people," the esoteric reaches of which, obviously, may be plumbed only by the guardians of morals in our society.

This critical examination, to be sure, is not intended to be a review of *An American Dilemma*. As a source of information and brilliant interpretation of information on race relations in the United States, it is unsurpassed. We are interested here only in the validity of the meanings which Myrdal derives from the broad movements of his data. The data are continually changing and becoming obsolescent; but if we understand their social determinants we can not only predict change but also influence it.

¹ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, New York and London, 1944. Although this is a work of considerable scholarly collaboration, we shall, in this discussion of it, assume that it is entirely by Dr. Myrdal.

In his attempt to explain race relations in the United States Myrdal seems to have been confronted with two principal problems: (a) the problem of avoiding a political-class interpretation, and (b) the problem of finding an acceptable moral or religious interpretation.² In the first part of this discussion we shall attempt to show how the caste theory is employed and, in the second part, how a shying away from the obvious implications of his data is contrived as solutions for these problems. We shall not discuss the concept from which the book derives its title, for it seems quite obvious that none of the great imperialist democracies either can or intends to practice its democratic ideals among its subject peoples.³ Myrdal does not bring to light the social determinants

² Myrdal conceives of his problem, that is to say of race relations in the United States, as "primarily a moral issue of conflicting valuations" and of his "investigation" as "an analysis of morals." *Ibid.*, p. xlvii.

³ In a debate on the status of South African Indians General Smuts faces the dilemma in this way: "I do not think our Indian fellow-subjects in South Africa can complain of injustice. . . . They have prospered exceedingly in South Africa. People who have come there as coolies, people who have come there as members of the depressed classes in India, have prospered. . . . They have been educated, and their children and grand-children today are many of them men of great wealth. They have all the rights, barring the rights of voting for parliament and the provincial councils, that any white citizen in South Africa has. . . . It is only political rights that are in question. There we are up against a stone wall and we cannot get over it." Quoted in P. S. Joshi, *The Tyranny of Colour*, Durban, 1942, p. 107.

of this well-known dilemma; he merely recognizes it and rails against its existence. It is a long time indeed since Negro newspapers have observed: "The treatment of the Negro is America's greatest and most conspicuous scandal."⁴ At any rate what seems to be of greater significance is Myrdal's explanation of the basis of race relations.

THE CASTE HYPOTHESIS

The whole theoretical frame of reference of *An American Dilemma* is couched in a caste hypothesis. As Myrdal himself puts it: "Practically the entire factual content of . . . this book may be considered to define caste in the case of the American Negro."⁵ Now it is evident that Myrdal—in spite of the lamentable use of such phrases as "in our view," "as we have defined it," and so on—does not intend to coin a new concept. In criticizing Charles S. Johnson's view of caste he declares, "we do not believe that such a caste system as he has defined ever existed."⁶ Therefore, in his explanation of race relations in the United States, our author means to accept the known concept as a norm. Of some significance is the way in which the term is selected. This is the reasoning:

The term "race" is . . . inappropriate in a scientific inquiry since it has biological and genetic connotations which . . . run parallel to widely spread false racial beliefs. The . . . term, "class," is impractical and con-

fusing . . . since it is generally used to refer to a non-rigid status group from which an individual member can rise or fall. . . . We need a term to distinguish the large and systematic type of social differentiation from the small and spotty type and have . . . used the term "caste."

Obviously, in arriving at this decision to use the term caste in explaining race relations in the United States, Myrdal employs the method of successive elimination. Without attempting to be facetious, it may be compared to the reasoning of the scientist who comes upon a strange animal and, having the necessity to classify it, says to himself: "this is not a cat, I am sure; neither is it a dog, I am positive of that; therefore, since I cannot think of anything else, I am going to call it a duck."

Now, there is no new theory of race relations in this study, but it develops the most elaborate defense of the caste belief. Myrdal has adopted not only the whole theory of the caste school of race relations in the United States but also its procedure. Like the leadership of this school, he appears to have taken some pride in regarding as worthless a study of Hindu society as a basis of making comparisons with Western society. Yet, as we should expect, he depends entirely upon the Hindu system for his orientation. Thus, the reader is asked to accept generalizations about the caste system in America when no other reference is made to the cultural norm than the following:

It should be pointed out . . . that those societies to which the term "caste" is applied without controversy—notably the ante-bellum slavery society of the South and the Hindu society of India—do not have the "stable equilibrium" which American sociolo-

⁴ Myrdal, *op. cit.*, p. 1020. Dr. Myrdal understands clearly that expressions such as this have now achieved respectability; in fact, they are desirable, since "it is becoming difficult for even popular writers to express other views than the ones of racial equalitarianism and still retain intellectual respect." *Op. cit.*, p. 96.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 669.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1375.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 667.

gists from their distance are often inclined to attribute to them. A Hindu acquaintance once told me that the situation in the United States is as much or more describable by the term "caste" as is the situation in India.⁸

From this, one thing is clear: Myrdal is very much in error in believing that it is recognized without controversy that slavery in the South constituted a caste system.⁹ Moreover, it is difficult to see how one could avoid the conclusion that the author has descended to some vulgar means in referring to the hearsay of "a Hindu acquaintance" as authority for the sociology of caste.

THE BIOLOGICAL PROBLEM

Probably the crucial circumstance in attempts to use some term other than race in describing race relations is a desire to get around the biological implications in the term. Yet it has never been shown that there is a real necessity for this. In fact those who verbally eschew the biological connotation of the term proceed, nonetheless, to make physical differences the crux of their discussion. This is particularly true of Myrdal. Says he, "Negro features are so distinct that only in the Negro problem does (belief in the desirability of a light skin and 'good' features) become of great social importance."¹⁰ And he proceeds, evidently without realizing it, to point out the relationship of skin color to caste:

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 668. See also note c.

⁹ We cannot be certain, however, that Myrdal has a settled view on this point, for he says elsewhere: "After the (Civil) War and Emancipation, the race dogma was retained in the South as necessary to justify the caste system which succeeded slavery. . . ." *Ibid.*, p. 88. See also pp. 221-24.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 669.

. . . the average Negro cannot effectively change his color and other physical features. If the dark Negro accept the white man's valuation of skin color, he must stamp himself an inferior. If the light Negro accepts this valuation, he places himself above the darker Negroes but below the whites, and he reduces his loyalty to his caste.¹¹

Myrdal continues his biological interpretation of race relations with great clarity. "When we say that Negroes form a lower caste in America," he asserts, "we mean that they are subject to certain disabilities solely because they are 'Negroes.'"¹² Manifestly, that is to say, solely because they are colored or black. Moreover, although the writer did not elaborate this point, he refers to Asiatics, Indians, and Negroes as "the several subordinate castes."¹³ It should be interesting to see how he fits these peoples into an American caste hierarchy. At any rate, with this conception of race relations, the author inevitably comes to the end of the blind alley: that the caste system remains intact so long as the Negro remains colored.

The change and variations which occur in the American caste system relate only to caste relations, not to the dividing line between castes. The latter stays rigid and unblurred. It will remain fixed until it becomes possible for a person to pass legitimately from the lower caste to the higher without misrepresentation of his origin. The American definition of "Negro" as a person who has the slightest amount of Negro ancestry has the significance in making the caste line absolutely rigid.¹⁴

Myrdal is so thoroughly preoccupied with the great significance of skin color that, although he realizes that in America Negroes of lighter com-

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 670.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 668-69.

plexion have greater social opportunities, he believes that they may as well be unmixed blacks so far as the "caste line" is concerned. Accordingly, he asserts: "Without any doubt a Negro with light skin and other European features has in the North an advantage with white people when competing for jobs available for Negroes. . . . Perhaps of even greater importance is the fact that the Negro community itself has accepted this color preference."¹⁵ This, however, has nothing to do with the rigidity of the caste line.

When Myrdal strays from his physical emphasis, he becomes confused. For instance, he concludes that "being a Negro means being subject to considerable disabilities in practically all spheres of life."¹⁶ Evidently it must follow logically from this that to the extent to which these "disabilities" are removed, to that extent also a person ceases to remain a Negro. The confusion is further deepened by the combination of a cultural and biological view of caste.

Caste . . . consists of such drastic restrictions to free competition in various spheres of life that the individual in a lower caste cannot, by any means, change his status except by a secret and illegitimate "passing" which is possible only to the few who have the physical appearance of members of the upper caste."¹⁷

In other words, caste consists in restrictions to free competitions, but restrictions to free competition are entirely limited by a man's physical appearance. Now, we may ask, what is the nexus between physical appearance and caste?

RIGIDITY OF THE CASTE SYSTEM

We may reiterate that the caste school of race relations is laboring under the illusion of a simple but vicious truism. One man is white, another is black; the cultural opportunities of these two men may be the same, but, since the black man cannot become white, there will always be a white caste and a black caste: "the actual import of caste is gradually changing as the Negro class structure develops—except in the fundamental restrictions that no Negro is allowed to ascend into the white caste."¹⁸ Yet, if this is so, what possible meaning could the following observation have? "We have been brought to view the caste order as fundamentally a system of disabilities forced by the whites upon the Negroes."¹⁹

Closely related to this amorphous concept of the rigidity of caste is the meaning given to interracial endogamy. Myrdal uses it to identify the races in the United States as castes.

The scientifically important difference between the terms "caste" and "class" is . . . a relatively large difference in freedom of movement between groups. This difference is foremost in marriage relations. . . . The ban on intermarriage is one expression of the still broader principle . . . that a man born a Negro or a white is not allowed to pass from the one status to the other as he can pass from one class to another.²⁰

Now it could hardly be too much emphasized that endogamy of itself is no final criterion of caste. Endogamy is an isolater of social values deemed sacrosanct by social groups, and there are many kinds of social groups besides castes that are endog-

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 697.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 668.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 675.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 693.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 669.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 668.

amous. The final test of caste is an identification of the social values and organization isolated by endogamy. To say that inter-caste endogamy in India means the same thing as inter-racial endogamy in the United States is like saying that a lemon and a potato are the same things because they both have skins.

An illustration of Myrdal's complete disregard of the nature of caste organization is his discussion of "caste struggle." This concept of "caste struggle", to be sure, is totally foreign to our norm, the Indian caste system. Moreover, this must be so because castes in Brahmanic India do not want to be anything other than castes. There is no effort or logical need to homogenize themselves. A caste is a status entity in an assimilated, peaceful, self-satisfied society. Regardless of his position in the society, a man's caste is sacred to him; and one caste does not dominate the other. The following description of caste has absolutely no application to caste in India.

The caste distinctions are actually gulfs which divide the population into antagonistic camps. The caste line . . . is not only an expression of caste differences and caste conflicts, but it has come itself to be a catalyst to widen differences and engender conflicts.²¹

MYSTICISM

If the scientist has no clear conception of the norm which he is using to interpret social phenomena, the norm itself is likely to become lost in the data. When this happens he will ordinarily have recourse to mystical flights. In our case Myrdal seems to attribute magical powers to caste.

Speaking of the cause of the economic position of Negroes in the United States he says: "their caste position keeps them poor and ill-educated."²² And, "Caste consigns the overwhelming majority of Negroes to the lower class."²³ Indeed, the whole meaning of racial exploitation in the United States is laid at the altar of caste. Thus it is observed: "The measures to keep the Negroes disfranchised and deprived of full civil rights and the whole structure of social and economic discrimination are to be viewed as attempts to enforce *the caste principle*."²⁴

More immediately, this mysticism is due primarily to a misapprehension of the whole basis of race relations. Caste is vaguely conceived of as something, the preservation of which is valuable *per se*. "The caste system is upheld by its own inertia and by the superior caste's interests in upholding it."²⁵ It is no wonder, then, that Myrdal falls into the egregious error of thinking that the subordination of Negroes in the South is particularly the business of poor whites. In this light he reasons: "That 'all Negroes are alike' and should be treated in the same way is still insisted upon by many whites, especially in the lower classes, who actually feel, or fear, competition from the Negroes and who are inclined to sense a challenge to their status in the fact that some Negroes rise from the bottom."²⁶ This, obviously, is a conception of race relations in terms of personal invidiousness. Surely, to say that "southern whites, *especially in the lower brackets*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 669.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 690. [Italics ours.]

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 669.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 689.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 676-77.

... have succeeded in retaining (the) legal and political system" is to miss the point entirely. We shall return to this question in the following section.

One primary objection to the use of the caste belief in the study of race relations rests not so much upon its scientific untenability as upon its insidious potentialities. It lumps all white people and all Negroes into two antagonistic groups struggling in the interest of a mysterious god called caste. This is very much to the liking of the exploiters of labor, since it tends to confuse them in an emotional matrix with all the people. Observe in illustration how Myrdal directs our view: "All of these thousand and one precepts, etiquettes, taboos, and disabilities inflicted upon the Negro have a common purpose: to express the subordinate status of the Negro people and the exalted position of the whites. They have their meaning and chief function as symbols."²⁷

It thus appears that if *white people* were not so wicked, if they would only cease wanting to "exalt" themselves and accept the "American Creed," race prejudice would vanish from America. "Why," asks Myrdal, "is race prejudice . . . not increasing but decreasing?" And he answers sanctimoniously: "This question is . . . only a special variant of the enigma of philosophers for several thousands of years: the problem of Good and Evil in the world."²⁸ The philosophers' enigma evidently leads him directly into a mystical play with imponderables. As he sees it, "white prejudice" is a primary determinant in race relations. "White prejudice and

discrimination keep the Negro low in standards of living. . . . This, in turn, gives support to prejudice. White prejudice and Negro standards thus mutually 'cause' each other."²⁹ Moreover, "the chief hindrance to improving the Negro is *the white man's firm belief in his inferiority*."³⁰ We shall discuss this controlling idea in a later section.

POOR WHITES

We should point out again that Myrdal not only closes his eyes to the material interests which support and maintain race prejudice but also labors the point that there is basic antagonism between poor whites and Negroes. Says he: "What a bitter, spiteful, and relentless feeling often prevails against the Negroes among lower class white people in America. . . . The Marxian solidarity between the toilers . . . have a long way to go as far as concerns solidarity of the poor white American with the toiling Negro."³¹ In fact the author goes further to intimate that the poor whites may assume a dominant rôle in the oppression of Negroes in the South, since the interest of the poor whites is economic, while that of the ruling class is a feeling for superiority:

Lower class whites in the South have no Negro servants in whose humble demeanors they can reflect their own superiority. Instead, they feel actual economic competition or fear of potential competition from the Negroes. They need the caste demarcations for much more substantial reasons than do the middle and upper classes.³²

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 101. [Italics ours.]

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 597. This social illusion concerning the naturalness of racial antagonism between Negroes and poor whites, a mirage ordinarily perpetuated by the white ruling class, is deeply imbedded in the literature.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 79.

The author hesitates to come to that obvious conclusion so much dreaded by the capitalist ruling-class: that the observed overt competitive antagonism is a condition produced and carefully maintained by the exploiters of both the poor whites and the Negroes. Yet, he almost says this in so many words: "Plantation owners and employers, who use Negro labor as cheaper and more docile, have at times been observed to tolerate, or cooperate in, the periodic aggression of poor whites against Negroes. It is a plausible thesis that they do so in the interest of upholding the caste system which is so effective in keeping the Negro docile."³³ And even more

For instance, Professor Louis Wirth declares with finality: "It has been repeatedly found by students of Negro-white relations in the South that the so-called white aristocracy shows less racial prejudice than do the 'poor whites' whose own position is relatively insecure and who must compete with Negroes for jobs, for property, for social position, and for power. Only those who themselves are insecure feel impelled to press their claims for superiority over others." See "Race and Public Policy," *The Scientific Monthly*, April, 1944, p. 304. Now, we may ask, why should competition be more natural than consolidation in the struggle for wealth and position? Why should insecurity lead more naturally to division than to a closing of ranks. Suppose the Negro and the white proletariat of the South decide to come together and unite for increasing power in their struggle for economic position, what are the sources of opposing power—disorganizing power—that will be immediately brought into action? Wirth might just as well argue that the antagonisms and open conflicts, which ordinarily develop between union strikers and scabs, are caused by a feeling of insecurity among the scabs. In the end this argument must be put into that category of vacuous universals which explain nothing, for who in this world does not feel insecure? And if it is a matter of the degree of insecurity, then we should expect Negroes to take the initiative in interracial aggression since they are the most insecure.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 598. And in another context he recognizes that: "there had been plenty of racial competition before the Civil War. White artisans had often vociferously pro-

testingly he shows by what means white workers are exploited through the perpetuation of racial antagonism. Says he: "If those white workers were paid low wages and held in great dependence, they could at least be offered a consolation of being protected from Negro competition."³⁴

At any rate, Myrdal refuses to be consistent. Accordingly, he asserts, attitudes against interracial marriage "seems generally to be inversely related to the economic and social status of the informant and his educational level. . . . To the poor and socially insecure, but struggling, white individual, a fixed opinion on this point seems an important matter of prestige and distinction."³⁵ It would not do, of course, to explain the situation realistically by concluding that if the revised black codes, written by the white exploiting class, against intermarriage, were abrogated, an increasing number of marriages between the white and the black proletariat would take place, the consequence of which would be a considerably reduced opportunity for labor exploitation by this class.³⁶

tested against the use of Negroes for skilled work in the crafts. But as long as the politically most powerful group of whites had a vested interest in Negro mechanics, the protesting was of little avail." *Ibid.*, p. 281.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 286. In the South African situation Lord Oliver makes a similar observation: "When the capitalist employer comes on the scene, making discriminations as to the labor forces he must employ for particular work in order to make his profits, which is the law of his activity to do, then, and not till then, antagonism is introduced between the newly-created wage-working proletarian white and the native—who, in regard to the qualifications which properly determine wage contracts, are on exactly the same footing." *The Anatomy of African Misery*, London, 1927, p. 135.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

³⁶ Hinton R. Helper, the renegade Southerner, who never bit his tongue in his criti-

THE RULING CLASS

Myrdal does not like to talk about the ruling class in the South; the term carries for him an odious "Marxist" connotation. Yet, inevitably, he describes this class as well as anyone:

The one-party system in the South . . . and the low political participation of even the white people favor a *de facto* oligarchic regime. . . . The oligarchy consists of the big landowners, the industrialists, the bankers, and the merchants. Northern corporate business with big investments in the region has been sharing in the political control by this oligarchy.³⁷

And he stresses the ineffectiveness of the exploited masses. "The Southern masses do not generally organize either for advancing their ideals or for protecting their group interests. The immediate reason most often given by Southern liberals is the resistance from the political oligarchy which wants

cism of the white ruling class of the South and who, however, never concealed his prejudices against the Negroes, spoke more than a grain of truth when he described the position of the poor whites. It is essentially applicable to present-day conditions: "Notwithstanding the fact that the white non-slaveholders of the South are in the majority as five to one, they have never yet had any part or lot in framing the laws under which they live. . . . The lords of the lash are not only absolute masters of the blacks . . . but they are also the oracles and arbiters of all the non-slaveholding whites, whose freedom is merely nominal and whose unparalleled illiteracy and degradation is purposely and fiendishly perpetuated. How little the 'poor white trash,' the great majority of the Southern people, know of the real conditions of the country is indeed sadly astonishing. . . . It is expected that the stupid and sequacious masses, the white victims of slavery, will believe and, as a general thing, they do believe, whatever the slave-holders tell them; and thus it is that they are cajoled into the notion that they are the freest, happiest, and most intelligent people in the world, and are taught to look with prejudice and disapprobation upon every new principle or progressive movement." *The Impending Crisis*, New York, 1860, pp. 42-44, *passim*.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 453.

to keep the masses inarticulate."³⁸ Furthermore he indicates the desperate pressure endured by Southern workers when he says: "The poorest farmer in the Scandinavian countries or in England . . . would not take benevolent orders so meekly as Negroes and white sharecroppers do in the South."³⁹

Sometimes Myrdal shakes off the whole burden of obfuscation spun about caste, creeds, and poor-white control to show, perhaps without intending to do so, the real interest of the ruling class and how it sets race against race to accomplish its exploitative purpose:

The conservative opponents of reform proposals (that is to say the ruling class in the South) can usually discredit them by pointing out that they will improve the status of the Negroes, and that they prepare for "social equality." This argument has been raised in the South against labor unions, child labor legislation and practically every other proposal for reform.

It has been argued to the white workers that the Wages and Hours Law was an attempt to legislate equality between the races by raising the wage level of Negro workers to that of whites. The South has never been seriously interested in instituting tenancy legislation to protect the tenants' rights . . . and the argument has again been that the Negro sharecropper should not be helped against the white man.⁴⁰

It seems clear that in developing a theory of race relations in the South one must look to the economic policies of the ruling class, and not to mere abstract depravity among poor whites. Opposition to social equality has no meaning unless we can see its function in the service of the exploitative purpose of this class. "When the Negro rises socially," says Myrdal, "and is no longer a servant, he becomes a

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 455.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 466.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 456.

stranger to the white upper class. His ambition is suspected and he is disliked."⁴¹ Again: "The ordinary white upper class people will 'have no use' for such Negroes. They need cheap labor—faithful, obedient, unambitious labor."⁴² And the author observes further: "In most Southern communities the ruling classes of whites want to keep Negroes from joining labor unions. Some are quite frank in wanting to keep Negroes from reading the Constitution or studying social subjects."⁴³

In the South the ruling class stands effectively between the Negroes and the white proletariat. Every segregation barrier is a barrier put up between white and black people by their exploiters. Myrdal puts it in this way: "On the local scene the accommodation motive by itself does not usually encourage Negro leaders to such adventures as trying to reach behind the white leaders to the white people."⁴⁴ Moreover, it is not the poor whites but the ruling class which uses its intelligence and its money to guard against any movement among Negroes to throw off their yoke of exploitation. "In many communities leading white citizens make no secret of the fact that they are carefully following . . . all signs of 'subversive propaganda' and unrest among the Negroes in the community, and that they interfere to stop even innocent beginnings of Negro group activity."⁴⁵

The reasoning which we are now following, it may be well to state, is not Myrdal's; we are merely culling those conclusions which the data seem

to compel the author to make, but which he ordinarily surrounds with some mysterious argument about caste.

During slavery the masters did not have so great a need for racial antagonism. Black workers could be exploited in comparative peace. As Myrdal observes: "exploitation of Negro labor was, perhaps, a less embarrassing moral conflict to the ante-bellum planter than to his peer today. . . . Today the exploitation is, to a considerable degree, dependent upon the availability of extra-legal devices of various kinds."⁴⁶ Obviously, among these extra-legal devices are race prejudice, discrimination, and violence—especially lynching and the threat of lynching. "Discrimination against Negroes is . . . rooted in this tradition of economic exploitation."⁴⁷

EMPHASIS UPON SEX

In spite of this, however, Myrdal refuses to accept a realistic interpretation of race relations. Throughout these volumes he warns his readers not to put too much reliance upon an economic explanation. Thus he declares: "The eager intent to explain away race prejudice and caste in the simple terms of economic competition . . . is an attempt to *escape from caste to class*."⁴⁸ The reasoning here, of course, is unrelieved nonsense. Incidentally it illustrates the hiatus in understanding which an inappropriate use of the concepts caste and class might entail. At any rate our author thinks it is more revealing to take sex as our point of reference. In fact Myrdal presents a scheme of social

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 593.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 596.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 721.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 727.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 459.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 792. [Italics ours.]

situations in which he ranks intermarriage and sexual intercourse involving white women as the highest motives for discrimination, while he ranks economic conditions sixth and last.

(1) Highest in this order [of discrimination] stands the bar against intermarriage and sexual intercourse involving white women (2) . . . several etiquettes and discriminations . . . (3) . . . segregations and discriminations in use of public facilities such as schools . . . (4) political disfranchisement . . . (5) discriminations in the law courts . . . (6) . . . discriminations in securing land, credit, jobs . . ."⁴⁹

This rank order evidences the degree of importance which "white people" attach to certain social facts calculated to keep the Negro in his place; and it is "apparently determined by the factors of sex and social status."⁵⁰ The Negroes' estimate, however, is just the reverse of this: "the Negro's own rank order is just about parallel, but inverse, to that of the white man."⁵¹ Here, then, is a perfect example of social illusion, an illusion that must inevitably come to all those who attempt to see race relations in the South as involving two castes.

In reality, however, both the Negroes and their white exploiters know that economic opportunity comes first and that the white woman comes second; indeed she is merely a signifi-

cant instrument in limiting the first. If the white, ruling class intends to keep the colored people in their place, that is to say, freely exploitable, this class cannot permit them to marry white women; neither can it let white men marry Negro women. If this were allowed to happen, Negroes would soon become so whitened that the profit makers would be unable to direct mass hatred against them,⁵² and would thus lose their principal weapon in facilitating their primary business of exploiting the black and white workers of the South.⁵³ If a Negro could become governor of Georgia, it would be of no particular social significance whether his wife is white or colored; or, at any rate, there would be no political power presuming to limit the color of his wife. But if, in a democracy, you could insist that his wife must be black, you could not only prevent his becoming governor of Georgia but you could also make him do most of your dirty and menial work at your wages.⁵⁴ Sexual ob-

⁴⁹ It should be made crystal clear that the motive of the ruling white people is not primarily to keep the blood of the white race "pure," but to prevent race mixture; it is, therefore, definitely as frustrating to their purpose to infuse white blood into the Negro group. Their purpose can be accomplished only if the Negroes remain identifiably colored.

⁵⁰ Decades ago George W. Cable observed: "the essence of the offence, any and everywhere the race line is insisted upon, is the apparition of the colored man or woman as his or her own master; that masterhood is all that all this tyranny is intended to preserve . . . the moment the relation of master and servant is visibly established between race and race there is a hush of peace. . . . The surrender of this one point by the colored man or woman buys more than peace—it buys amity." *The Negro Question*, New York, 1903, pp. 22-23.

⁵¹ In order to support his specious argument Myrdal relies pivotally upon such sour-grape expressions as the following by R. R. Moton: "As for amalgamation, very few expect it; still fewer want it; no one

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61. In similar vein he asserts: "It is surely significant that the white Southerner is much less willing to permit intermarriage or to grant 'social equality' than he is to allow equality in the political, judicial and economic spheres. The violence of the Southerner's reaction to equality in each of these spheres rises with the degree of its relation to the sexual and personal, which suggests that his prejudice is based upon fundamental attitudes toward sex and personality." (Italics ours.) *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

session, then, functions in the fundamental interest of economic exploitation.

THE VICIOUS CIRCLE

Capitalist rationalizations of race relations have recently come face to face with a powerful theory of society and, in order to meet this, the classical theorists have become mystics. This evidently had to be so because it is exceedingly terrifying for these scientists to follow to its logical conclusion a realistic explanation of race relations; and yet they must either do this or stultify themselves. In illustration, Myrdal advises Negroes not to become too radical and to think of many causes as of equal significance with the economic factor: "Negro strategy would build on an illusion if it set all its hope on a blitzkrieg directed toward a basic (economic) factor. In the nature of things it must work on the broadest possible front. There is a place for both the radical and the conservative Negro leaders."⁵⁵ This, obviously, will lead to a situation in which the ideas of one group of leaders will tend to offset those of another.

Although Myrdal overlays his discussion of race relations with a particularly alien caste belief, his controlling hypothesis has nothing whatever to do with caste. His "theory of

advocates it; and only a constantly diminishing minority practise it, and that surreptitiously. It is generally accepted on both sides of the color line that it is best for the two races to remain ethnologically distinct." *Op. cit.*, p. 62. This, from a Negro, is assumed to be evidence that Negroes do not want intermarriage. On its face, Myrdal might have asked: why should something that is not wanted be practiced "surreptitiously"? Moreover, would the white ruling class be obsessed with the prevention of intermarriage if the natural likelihood of its occurring were exceedingly remote?

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 794.

the vicious circle"⁵⁶ is his controlling idea. This theory is essentially an abstract formulation, inspired by a largely inverted observation of "a vicious circle in caste" by Edwin R. Embree⁵⁷ and rendered "scientific" by the application of certain concepts which Myrdal seems to have used to his satisfaction in his study of *Monetary Equilibrium*.

As we have seen in a previous section, the vicious circle runs as follows: "white prejudice . . . keeps the Negro low in standards of living. . . . This, in turn, gives support to white prejudice. White prejudice and Negro standards thus mutually 'cause' each other." These two variables are interdependent but neither is consistently dependent; a change in either will affect the other inversely. If we initiate a change in Negro standards, say, by "giving the Negro youth more education," white prejudice will go down; if we change white prejudice, say, by "an increased general knowledge about biology, eradicating false beliefs concerning Negro racial inferiority," then Negro standards will go up.

It is this kind of mystical dance of imponderables which is at the basis of the system of social illusions marbled into Myrdal's discussion. In the first place Myrdal does not develop a careful definition of race prejudice. He does say, however: "For our purpose (race prejudice) is defined as discrimination by whites against Negroes."⁵⁸ But he does not use this definition; indeed we do not see how he can, for race prejudice is a social attitude, an acquired tendency to act; it is not some act or action, which is the mean-

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 75-78, 207-9, and Appendix 3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1069 note.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

ing of discrimination.⁵⁹ Myrdal's studied analysis would lead us rather to deduce the following definition of race prejudice: a feeling of bitterness, especially among poor whites, aroused particularly by a standing, sexual threat of Negro men to white women.

If, according to Myrdal's "rank order of discrimination," the whites are most concerned with sex and Negroes with economic advancement, his fundamental equilibrium of social forces should be a correlation of white prejudice and Negro sexual aggression—not Negro standards, which are clearly basically economic. In this way white prejudice will tend to vanish as Negro men give up their interest in white women; Negro standards will also go up, but then only incidentally. If, for instance, Negro men would relinquish their desire to marry white women, "white people" would no longer be prejudiced against Negroes; the latter would be encouraged, say, to vote and campaign for political office, and to demand their share of jobs and public funds in the Deep South. To be sure, Myrdal does not demonstrate any such proposition. We may put it in still another way: if Negro standards go up and at the same time Negroes increase their interest in white women, then, to be consistent with Myrdal's sexual emphasis, white prejudice must increase. From this it follows that Negro standards is a non-significant variable.

The point which the author seems to have avoided is this: that both race prejudice and Negro standards are

consistently dependent variables. They are both produced by the calculated economic interest of the Southern oligarchy. Both prejudice and the Negro's status are dependent functions of the latter interest. In one variation of his theory of the "vicious circle" Myrdal reasons:

Assuming . . . that we want to reduce the bias in white people's racial beliefs concerning Negroes, our first practical conclusion is that we can effect this result to a degree by *actually improving Negro status*. . . . The impediment in the way of this strategy is . . . that white beliefs . . . are active forces in keeping the Negroes low.⁶⁰

Here beliefs are assumed to be prime movers; they "keep the Negroes low." This is mysticism. If we can "improve Negro status" the reason for the existence of derogatory beliefs about Negroes is, to the extent of the improvement, liquidated. With a rise in the standards of living of Negroes there tends to be merely a concomitant vitiation of the rationalizations for the depressed conditions of Negroes. The belief is an empty, harmless illusion, like beliefs in werewolves or fairies, without the exploitative interest with which it is impregnated. The effective interest is a need for slaves, or peons, or unorganized common laborers—a need for "cheap, docile labor." The latter interest, of course, is involved in a complicated web of feeling established by both immemorial and recent rationalizations. If beliefs *per se* could subjugate a people, the beliefs which Negroes hold about whites should be as effective as those which whites hold about Negroes.

This assumption of Myrdal's, that racial beliefs are primary social

⁵⁹ In another connection Myrdal seems to give a different meaning to the concept: "If for some reason . . . white workers actually came to work with Negroes as fellow workers, it has been experienced that prejudice will often adjust to the changed amount of discrimination." *Ibid.*, p. 1067.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 109. [Italics ours.]

forces, leads him to conclude almost pathetically that the "white man's" beliefs are only a "mistake," which he would gladly correct if only he had truthful information. Accordingly our author suggests the following attack upon the beliefs themselves:

A second line of strategy must be to rectify the ordinary white man's observations of Negro characteristics and inform him of the specific mistakes he is making in ascribing them wholesale to inborn racial traits. . . . People want to be rational, to be honest and well informed.⁶¹

Evidently the misapprehension in this presentation inheres in Myrdal's moral approach. He does not recognize consistently that the propagators of the ruling ideas, those whose interest it is to replace debunked beliefs with new ones, are not mistaken at all, and that they should not be thought of merely as people or white people. They are, in fact, a special class of people who fiercely oppose interference with the established set of antagonistic racial beliefs. The racial beliefs have been intentionally built up through propaganda. They are mass psychological instruments facilitating a definite purpose; therefore, they can best be opposed by realistic, aggressive propaganda methods.⁶²

Furthermore, the author's unstable equilibrium between race prejudice and Negro standards is evidently too simple. For instance, if Negro standards go up because of interference from some outside force, say the Federal Government, the cultivated race prejudice among the poor whites may tend to diminish, but, at the same time, the hostility of the ruling class

whites may increase. The reason for this is that, because of the interference, the status and problems of Negroes and those of the poor whites may be made more nearly to coincide and thus enhance the possibility of an establishment of a community of interest between these two groups, a process diametrically opposed to the purpose and interests of the white ruling class. Therefore, it becomes incumbent upon the latter class to reaffirm its position by bringing into play those very well known means of effecting racial antipathy.

Although Myrdal never permits himself to accept a consistently realistic approach to the study of race relations, he recites as historical fact that which his theory confutes. For instance, the following historical passage says quite clearly that race prejudice is an attitude designedly built up among the masses by an exploiting class, using acceptable rationalizations derogatory to the Negro race, so that the exploitation of the latter's labor power might be justified.

The historical literature of this early period . . . records that the imported Negroes—and the captured Indians—originally were kept in much the same status as the white indentured servants. *When later the Negroes gradually were pushed down into chattel slavery while the white servants were allowed to work off their board, the need was felt . . . for some kind of justification above mere economic expediency and the might of the strong.* The arguments called forth by this need . . . were broadly these: that the Negro was a heathen and a barbarian, an outcast among the peoples of the earth, a descendent of Noah's son Ham, cursed by God himself and doomed to be a servant forever on account of an ancient sin.⁶³

Now there is no mysticism here

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁶² This view also holds against certain popular conceptions of race prejudice as "superstition" or "myth."

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 85. [Italics ours.]

—nothing about “sexual drives,” “fears,” “inhibitions,” “labile balance,” and so on—the historical process is clear. The exploitative act comes first; the prejudice follows. It explains unequivocally that a powerful white exploiting class, by “the might of the strong” and for “economic expediency,” pushed the Negroes down into chattel slavery and then, as a justification and facilitation of this, utilized the means of propaganda, which are ordinarily in its control, to develop racial antagonism and hate in the white public for the Negroes.⁶⁴

Attacking beliefs by negation is obviously a negative procedure—sometimes even a futile one. In an essay of epoch-making significance, written in about the year 1800, Henri Gregoire⁶⁵ demonstrated, probably as clearly as ever since, that the white man is “making a mistake in ascribing Negro characteristics to inborn racial traits”; yet, this assignment is still freshly advocated. As a matter of fact, Count Arthur de Gobineau almost put men like Gregoire out of existence. In like manner, W. T. Couch, book editor of probably the most influential Southern press, proceeds to “gobinize” Myrdal.

Couch, in a caustic criticism of Myrdal, referring to him as “silly” and “ignorant,” says the white man cannot make concessions to Negroes because these will ultimately lead to

Negro men’s marrying white men’s daughters: “One concession will lead to another, and ultimately to intermarriage.”⁶⁶ In this unrealistic world of beliefs Couch has Myrdal where he wants him; he seems to triumph with such intuitive declarations as: “the assertion of equality is an assertion of values.”⁶⁷ And, in a characteristically pre-Civil-War, slave-holders’ contention about the meaning of the Declaration of Independence, he becomes involved with Myrdal’s moral orientation. “I believe,” says Couch, “*An American Dilemma* was written under gross misapprehensions of what such ideas as equality, freedom, democracy, human rights, have meant, and what they can be made to mean.”⁶⁸ Thus, without restraint and without enlightenment, the mystics, steeped in metaphysical truck, set upon each other.

A positive program, on the other hand, calls for an attack upon the source of the beliefs, so that it might be divested of its prestige and power to produce and to substitute anti-racial beliefs among the masses. In other words, the problem is that of teaching the white masses to understand and to recognize the ruling-class function of the beliefs and their effect as instruments in the exploitation of the white as well as of the black masses. Then, not only will the old beliefs lose their efficacy but also the new ones will die aborning.

A positive program calls for the winning of the white masses over to a different system of thinking. But the effectuation of such a program, the intent of which must be to alienate

⁶⁴ It is interesting to observe with what anonymity. Myrdal uses such key concepts as: “imported,” “captured,” “kept,” “pushed down,” and so on. One would think that the subject referred to by these terms of action would be of primary concern in the investigation. It is, however, highly impersonalized and the whole situation tends to remain as if it were an act of Nature.

⁶⁵ *An Inquiry Concerning . . . Negroes*, trans. by D. B. Warden, Brooklyn, 1810.

⁶⁶ *What the Negro Wants*, Rayford W. Logan, ed., Chapel Hill, 1944, p. xvi.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

public support of the aristocracy, will undoubtedly evoke terrific opposition from this class. To be sure, this fact merely demonstrates further the basis of racial antagonism in the South and the correctness of the suggested positive program. At the same time, of course, Negroes must learn that their interest is primarily bound up with that of the white common people in a struggle for power and not essentially in a climb for social status.

At any rate, it is precisely this realization which Myrdal constantly seeks to circumvent. Accordingly he argues inconsistently that the ruling class in the South is the Negroes' best friend.

Our hypothesis is similar to the view taken by an older group of Negro writers and by most white writers who have touched this crucial question: that the Negroes' friend—or the one who is least unfriendly—is still rather the upper class of white people, the people with economic and social security who are truly a "*non-competing group*."⁶⁹

The author, by one symptom or another, cannot help showing of what he is really apprehensive: the bringing into consciousness of the masses the identity of the interests of the white and the black workers. In accordance with this attitude he takes a superficial view of the economic order and asks Negroes to go to the labor market and see who is their real enemy. Thus he asserts:

The aim of (the theory of labor solidarity) is to unify the whole Negro people, not

with the white upper class, but with the white working class. . . . The theory of labor solidarity has been taken up as a last solution of the Negro problem, and as such is escapist in nature; its escape character becomes painfully obvious to every member of the school as soon as he leaves abstract reasoning and goes down to the labor market, because there he *meets caste* and has to talk race even racial solidarity."⁷⁰

As a justificatory illustration of the validity of his principle of "cumulative causation," the summatory interaction of the elements of Negro standards and other social factors, Myrdal says: "The philanthropist, the Negro educator, the Negro trade unionist . . . and, indeed, the average well-meaning citizen of both colors, pragmatically applies the same hypothesis."⁷¹ In reality, however, this is not a confirmation of a sound theory of race relations; it is rather an apology for reformism. Within the existing system of power relationship, this is the most that is respectably allowed. Reformism never goes so far as to envisage the real involvement of the exploitative system with racial antagonism. Its extreme aspiration does not go beyond the attainment of freedom for certain black men to participate in the exploitation of the commonality regardless of the color of the latter. This aspiration is the prospect which the southern oligarchy with some degree of justification ordinarily refers to as "Negro domination."

Besides, with reformation as an end, the logical "friend" of the Negro leader must necessarily be this same white aristocracy; for he must ultimately become, like the aristocracy, the inevitable economic adversary of the exploited masses. Indeed, assuming

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 69. [Italics ours.] It is interesting to observe how Dr. Myrdal has finally become almost reactionary in the sense of the incorrigible segregationist, W. T. Couch, who also says: "Nothing is more needed in the South today than rebirth of [Booker Washington's] ideas, restoration of the great leadership that he was giving." See Rayford Logan (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. xxiii.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 793. [Italics ours.]

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1069.

bourgeois proclivities, his very appeal to the masses for support in his struggle for "equality" is an unavoidable deception.

The reformer seeks to eliminate only the racial aspects of the exploitative system. In other words, he compromises with the system which produces the racial antagonism. But the white ruling class cannot willingly compromise, for it knows that the whole system is doomed if Negroes were permitted to achieve unlimited status as participating exploiters. In such an event, there would be no racial scapegoat or red herring to brandish before the confused poor whites as a means of keeping them and the Negro masses from recognizing the full impact of political-class oppression.

Today, "conservative" theories of race relations are not merely denied: they are confronted with a counter theory, the theory that racial antagonism is in fact *political-class* antagonism and that race prejudice is initiated and maintained by labor exploiters. It is not, it would seem clear, that the aristocracy is less antagonistic to the Negroes but that this class uses more respectable weapons against them, which are also infinitely more powerful and effective. As a matter of fact, the poor whites themselves may be thought of as the primary instrument of the ruling class in subjugating the Negroes. The statement attributed to a great financier, "I can pay one-half of the working class to kill off the other half," is again in point.

As we have seen, Myrdal does not favor this explanation. He declares that all the Negro's troubles are due to the simple fact that "white people" want to be superior to colored people; or, indeed, merely to the fact that the

Negro is colored. His argument follows:

We hear it said . . . that there is no "race problem" but only a "class problem." The Negro sharecropper is alleged to be destitute not because of his color but because of his class position—and it is pointed out that there are white people who are equally poor. From a practical angle there is a point in this reasoning. But from a theoretical angle it contains escapism in a new form. It also draws too heavily on the idealistic Marxian doctrine of the "class struggle." And it tends to conceal the whole system of special deprivations visited upon the Negro *only because he is not white*.⁷²

Throughout the study the author has found it sufficient simply to mention the name of Karl Marx in order to counter views based upon economic determinism.⁷³ After a studied argu-

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 75. [Italics ours.]

⁷³ And yet Myrdal has shown himself to be vitally wanting in an understanding of the difference between status rivalry and class struggle. Observe, for instance, the following typical confusion: "Our hypothesis is that in 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."

"It will be observed that this hypothesis is contrary to the Marxian theory of class society. . . . The Marxian scheme assumes that there is an actual solidarity between the *several lower class groups* against the *higher classes*, or, in any case, a potential solidarity. . . . The inevitable result is a 'class struggle' where all poor and disadvantaged groups are united behind the barricades." *Op. cit.*, p. 68. [Italics ours.] Myrdal thinks that Marx thinks the *upper class* and the *lower class*, mere social illusions, are in conflict. No wonder he seems to conclude that Marx is rather foolish. And he does not trouble himself at all to explain how the "higher classes" exercise the "necessary painful task" of keeping the lower classes subdued when, per chance, the latter stop fighting among themselves and turn their attention to their common enemy. This is, to use the term so frequently employed by Myrdal, "escapism."

ment in favor of the futility of Negroes' adopting a Marxian view of society, he concludes: "Even after a revolution the country will be full of crackers' is a reflection I have often met when discussing communism in the Negro community."⁷⁴ The least we could say about this is that it is very crude. On this kind of thinking John Stuart Mill is emphatic: "Of all the vulgar modes of escaping from the consideration of the effect of social and moral influences on the human mind, the most vulgar is that of attributing the diversities of conduct and character to inherent natural differences."⁷⁵ More especially it expresses the fatalism upon which the whole classical school of race relations inevitably rests.

There will be no more "crackers" or "niggers" after a socialist revolution because the social necessity for these types will have been removed. But the vision which the capitalist theorist dreads most is this: that there will be no more capitalists and capitalistic exploitation. If we attempt to see race relations realistically, the meaning of the capitalist function is inescapable. At any rate, although Myrdal criticizes Sumner and Park for their inert and fatalistic views of social change, he himself contends that any revolutionary change in the interest of democracy will be futile:

... a national policy will never work by changing only one factor, least of all if attempted suddenly and with great force. In most cases that would either throw the system entirely out of gear or else prove to be a wasteful expenditure of effort which could be reached much further by being spread strategically over various factors in

the system and over a period of time.⁷⁶

This is not the place to discuss the theory of revolution, but it must be obvious that the purpose of revolution is not to "throw the system out of gear." It is to overthrow the entire system; to overthrow a ruling class; and the cost of revolution did not frighten the capitalists when it became their lot to overthrow the feudalists.

This book, the most exhaustive *survey* of race relations ever undertaken in the United States, is a useful source of data. In detail it presents many brilliant analyses of the materials. But it develops no hypothesis or consistent theory of race relations; and, to the extent that it employs the caste belief in interpretations, it is misleading. Moreover, since we can hardly accuse Myrdal of being naïve, and since he clearly goes out of his way to avoid the obvious implications of labor exploitation in the South, we cannot help concluding that the work is in many respects a powerful piece of propaganda in favor of the *status quo*. In this connection we are conscious of the author's recognition that "social science is essentially a 'political' science." One thing is certain, at any rate, the work contributes virtually nothing to a clarification of the many existing spurious social theories of race relations—indeed, on the latter score, Myrdal's contribution is decidedly negative. And for this reason, evidently, he has been able to suggest no solution for the dilemma; but like the fatalists whom he criticizes, the author relies finally upon time as the great corrector of all evil.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 509.

⁷⁵ *Principles of Political Economy*, New York, 1899, Vol. 1, p. 390.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77. Long before this John Locke had said quite as much, see *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690.