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Book Review: *GUNNAR MYRDAL AND AMERICA'S CONSCIENCE: SOCIAL ENGINEERING AND RACIAL LIBERALISM, 1938-1987*. By Walter A. Jackson

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break strikes by using unemployed workers as “permanent replacements” and to destroy union militancy by devising cunning “participation” schemes, this reviewer feels that it is self-defeating to pose “co-operation” and “participation” between management and labor as the key to achieving stronger ALMP. A different ideological underpinning is necessary—one that emphasizes that employers (1), *benefit* from high unemployment rates; (2), *oppose* equity for workers; and (3), *oppose* labor “participation” except when they totally dominate the process. The way to obtain a stronger ALMP is to build a people’s movement whose strength is such that employers view a stronger ALMP as the least costly social alternative before them.

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GUNNAR MYRDAL AND AMERICA’S CONSCIENCE: SOCIAL ENGINEERING AND RACIAL LIBERALISM, 1938–1987. *By Walter A. Jackson.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990. Pp. xi, 447.

Walter A. Jackson’s *Gunnar Myrdal and America’s Conscience* is more than a biographical sketch of a unique political economist. It is a fine piece of intellectual history that institutionalists, in particular, will appreciate. Jackson gracefully examines the development of Myrdal’s thought as a political economist and its influence on his study of race relations, paying mindful attention to the historical context and personal influences shaping Myrdal’s work. As a result of Jackson’s research, we understand more fully not only the influence of Myrdal’s approach as a political economist on his study of race relations, but the way Myrdal impacted the American agenda in the important area of race relations.

Jackson begins by examining Myrdal’s family background and education. While Myrdal was from Dalarna, a small isolated village in Sweden, he eventually went to the University of Sweden to continue his education. Early on, Jackson argues, “Myrdal felt a conflict between his elitism and his affection for the ethos of his birthplace, so too did his newfound rationalism clash with the religious faith of his childhood” (p. 44).

At the University of Stockholm, Myrdal studied under Gustav Cassel, a leading neoclassical economist; however, in the 1920s and the

1930s Myrdal began to explore the contours of a new political economy. Influenced by his wife Alva, also an intellectual and activist, as well as John Dewey, Myrdal eschewed the notion of value-free inquiry and began to develop his role as a purposeful social engineer. As Jackson points out, at a time when most economists took refuge in the cloak of positivism and social science had little influence on public policy, Myrdal “embraced the legacy of Progressive social science—its moral energy, practical orientation and commitment to social engineering—and disdained the narrow objectivism and pursuit of value-free science then in vogue” (p. 64).

Shocked by the extreme inequalities of income on his first visit to the United States in 1929, Myrdal returned to Sweden in the 1930s where he continued to write on public policy matters. Together, he and Alva published *Kris i befolkningsfrågan*, an analysis of the Swedish “population problem” that reflected both Alva’s penchant for grass roots participation and Gunnar’s “top down social engineering.” In 1938, however, Myrdal returned to the United States to begin work for the Carnegie Corporation on the American “Negro problem.”

From the beginning, Myrdal approached his study of the “Negro problem” from an institutionalist framework. As Jackson points out, Myrdal explicitly laid out the value premises underlying his approach, emphasized that his study would have a practical orientation and attempt to offer solutions to contemporary racial problems, and examine the “Negro problem” within a broader economic, social, and political context (p. 106). Myrdal enlisted the efforts of a wide variety of scholars from several disciplines and with various ideological perspectives and traveled throughout the United States making personal interviews and observing the “Negro problem” first hand.

In the end, Myrdal did not deviate from this framework and *An American Dilemma* reflected the explicit value orientation, concern for practical solutions, and holistic approach Myrdal first envisioned. However, the central argument in *An American Dilemma* was, according to Jackson, influenced greatly by the events surrounding the Nazi occupation of Europe and Myrdal’s concern over Sweden’s position in World War II. Troubled by Sweden’s official neutrality and failure to criticize fascism openly, Myrdal wrote glowingly, in *Kontakt med Amerika*, of the American creed, which he viewed to be based upon “civil rights, civil liberties, a free press, and democratic decision making” (p. 152). As Jackson put it, “As Myrdal looked at Sweden and America in 1940, he saw within each country a discrepancy between the basic ideals of the people and the reality of social conditions and governmental policies” (p. 158).

Myrdal came to argue that the "Negro problem" was really a "white problem," a moral dilemma of a most complex sort that had not only economic dimensions but cultural, political, and structural dimensions as well (p. 316). His solution to this "moral dilemma" was not unidimensional. Myrdal called for governmental prophylactic reform and institutional changes. However, his framework did draw heavily upon Dewey and relied most fully upon the central role of education. As Jackson sees it, Myrdal was convinced that Americans believed in the American creed, which was at odds with the reality of racial discrimination, and that once they became aware of the extent of racial injustice, they would be moved to change.

Jackson goes on to describe the evolution of the study of race relations in the 1950s and 1960s and the shortcomings of Myrdal's study. While many of the arguments within *An American Dilemma* have been challenged and subsequent research on race relations has rejected the strict assimilationist view held by Myrdal, his influence on American thought in the 1950s and beyond is without question. As Jackson points out, "Counterposing the American creed to Nazi ideology during World War II, he offered a symbolic framework that helped to legitimate the struggle for civil rights" (p. 240).

There are, of course, some weak aspects to this study, which are quite small when compared to its strengths. For example, the extent of Myrdal's ties to American institutionalists, such as John Commons and Wesley Mitchell, is only briefly explored, as is the foundation for his world view, which is attributed to the influence of the Enlightenment. For institutionalists, this is significant because Myrdal fails to base his value-laden orientation on the instrumental value theory associated with the Dewey tradition. Moreover, while Jackson is careful to attribute much influence to Alva, one is left with the feeling that she may have had even more influence on Myrdal's "institutionalism" than John R. Commons!

In general, however, for institutionalists interested in one of our most prominent social engineers, for historians interested in the evolution of the study of race relations, and for social activists weary from a decade of calculated social injustice, this book will be both a pleasure and an inspiration to read. While we may have intellectual points of difference with Gunnar Myrdal, we remain indebted to his relentless advocacy of an explicit value framework and inspired by his commitment to social justice.

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