

## **Universalizing the American Creed: Gunnar Myrdal and Ralph Bunche on Promises, Progress, and Midcentury Social Science**

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*Prepared for presentation at the Political Theory Workshop, March 27, 2017*

*Thank you for reading! This is a fairly early draft; per usual, please don't circulate or cite, and apologies in advance for incomplete citations and other clunkiness. - Emma*

### I. American Universalism as Politics and History

When the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* came out in 1944, it provided not only an assessment of its moment, but a projected narrative of what was to come after the war: an expansion of an American promise of universal rights to the world, a trajectory on which America would, by universalizing its promise internally, simultaneously universalize that promise for all humanity. The culmination of a larger study financed by the Carnegie Corporation, and initially slated for publication in 1943 but delayed due to wartime paper rationing, the book now appears to mark the beginning of an era, as it articulated and helped establish the terms through which many Americans would imagine the peace.

On the standard reading, Myrdal venerates what he terms the "American Creed," a deep-seated belief in universal equality that defines the nation. Myrdal's vision of American racial inequality as a conflict between the country's defining beliefs and its actual practices allows him to depict a "dilemma" between the fulfillment of the American promise, on the one hand, and continued hypocrisy, on the other. Racial prejudice, on this view, is an aberration, one that could be overcome by the expansion of a foundational commitment to equality. Because of the strength of the Creed, he is optimistic that the "American dilemma" will be resolved in the direction of progress; the American promise is all but self-executing. The task is to heighten the sense of cognitive dissonance, so as to bring practices in line with stated ideals, by reminding white

Americans of both their better virtues and the reality of their deeds and thereby allowing them to see past their own racial prejudice. The book articulated and helped establish a version of American exceptionalism on which America's uniqueness, paradoxically, arises from its universality; the fulfillment of its founding principles requires the universalization of that promise both abroad and at home.<sup>1</sup>

I want to return to Myrdal's text for several reasons. First, I want to challenge the standard account, to read Myrdal against Myrdalianism. I argue that even Myrdal, that exemplar of belief in American progress toward the fulfillment of its promise, had his doubts about the prospects for progress – and, more saliently, about the usefulness of narratives of progress in achieving measures of equality. This was because he did not see American hypocrisy as primarily a matter of a conflict between ideals and practices (though there were cases of that as well), but rather as a conflict among different moral valuations, and he thought people had the capacity to hold conflicting ideas in their heads without being overcome by, or even admitting, the dissonance between them. Yet while he makes a strong case that the Creed will not always overcome conflicting values, and that such values are often disavowed, he does not take this far enough to note the interconnection: he did not see how an avowal of the Creed might itself enable the continuation, and ongoing disavowal, of those other values. Secondly, and relatedly, I argue that his doubts about the strength of affirmations of the Creed alone led him to look not

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to the book throughout as Myrdal's, though it was the product of research by a larger team, including Ralph Bunche and Alva Myrdal. Much of the drafting was done by Gunnar Myrdal and Arnold Rose, then a University of Chicago sociology graduate student, but drew on lengthy memos prepared by the research team (Bunche's were particularly lengthy). While crediting Myrdal is sometimes taken as an inequity, he does bear a responsibility for the text, and its theoretical framing, that the others do not. At the same time, in addition to receiving the bulk of the credit, he was also better compensated than either Bunche or Alva Myrdal – in large part because of Carnegie's insistence on a policy of paying people an amount that would leave them "neither richer nor poorer" than they would have been in their previous jobs, thereby replicating prior inequalities. (For negotiations over pay, see general correspondence and memoranda, Carnegie-Myrdal Study of the Negro in America research memoranda collection, 1935-1948, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.)

primarily to appeals to the American Creed as a basis for improvement, but instead to appeal to an alternative but related universalism, that of social science. On his telling, social science provided an orientation in thinking that could allow Americans to overcome racial prejudice, so as to more objectively weigh conflicting values, in part because the advancement of scientific progress provides a more reliable guarantee of progressive enlightenment. In this sense, he was recovering something more profound from Enlightenment political thought: not just the concept of universal right, but the idea that the expansion of reason – of enlightenment itself – was part of what made those rights providential.

Reading Myrdal in this way allows us to see a way out of the dilemmas of contemporary debates over his significance. Recent political theorists have voiced several critiques of *An American Dilemma*. Perhaps most prominently, Rogers Smith has objected to the equation of America with its best ideals, as though conflicts with those ideals were aberrations, the product of less essentially American ideas or of simple self-interest. Published at the beginning of the Clinton presidency, Smith's critique questions both the primacy of the "Creed" in the American ideological landscape and the inevitability of progress toward its fulfillment. Smith identifies Myrdal as part of a tradition running from Alexis de Tocqueville to Louis Hartz, all of whom, on his telling, take the Creed to be definitional of America, despite the continued presence of "racial, nativist, and religious tensions." Smith wants to emphasize, instead, the plurality of traditions in America, and the persistence of backlash.<sup>2</sup>

Nikhil Singh and Aziz Rana have each added to this, criticizing Myrdal for treating white supremacy (a term Myrdal also uses) as a matter of racial prejudice, and color-blindness as a

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<sup>2</sup> "Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in American," *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (Sept 1993): 549-566. Smith lists as examples of such backlash "the Buchanan and Duke campaigns, the Christian Coalition, the Los Angeles riots, the English-Only agitation, the popularity of anti-Japanese novels, renewed patterns of residential segregation, and the upsurge of separatist ideologies among many younger minority scholars."

goal; because Myrdal frequently slips between “white America” and “America” as such, that color-blindness reads like a relegation of black Americans to a secondary or provincial status, yet to be assimilated into universal humanity. Singh amplifies the critique Ralph Ellison wrote in 1944: that Myrdal sees black politics as purely reactive, and that, as he puts it “in almost perfect symmetry, the counterpart to Negro provincialism was the promise of America’s universalism.”<sup>3</sup> Singh’s book emphasizes the importance of drawing on radical black imaginaries, rather than trying to derive resources from the supposed American promise. Writing more recently, during the Obama presidency but after Trump’s election, Aziz Rana writes: “Obama’s skill as a politician was bound to how perfectly he embodied that creed, even as more Americans grew suspicious of the story—from its presumptions about class mobility and inevitable racial accord to those concerning the basic justness of existing institutions.”<sup>4</sup> Rana sees a story about the Creed as having been necessary to Obama’s success, and yet it now appears “moribund.” What to do in the face of “a white nationalist who came to prominence by questioning the legitimacy of Obama’s birth certificate”? Rana argues, like Singh in 2004, for recovering past Third-Worldist and radical imaginaries.

I agree with their primary critiques of Myrdal, and yet I argue that by thinking more with Myrdal about hypocrisy and the dilemmas to which it gives rise, we can see the ways in which promises of universal rights enabled the maintenance, and the simultaneous disavowal, of more pernicious ideologies. Re-reading Myrdal and taking his conclusions a bit farther, we can see – implicit in his own argument – an acknowledgement of the possible complicity between narratives of progress toward the fulfillment of universal rights, white supremacy in the US, and

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<sup>3</sup> Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for American Democracy* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2004). See 148.

<sup>4</sup> Aziz Rana, “Decolonizing Obama: What Happened to the Third-World Left?,” *n+1*, no. 27, Winter 2017. To be clear, Rana was skeptical of Myrdal well before Obama’s loss; see Aziz Rana, “Race and the American Creed: Recovering Black Radicalism,” *n+1*, no. 24, Winter 2016.

American imperialism abroad. An insistence on the fundamental universalism, yet to be realized, of the American promise should be understood as a disavowal of the very provincialism of that promise – as a refusal to acknowledge, as Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, “how universalistic thought was always and already modified by particular histories,” in this case of race and a twentieth century postwar international politics.<sup>5</sup> And we can think, then, neither about appeals to better angels, nor (necessarily) about recovering past paths not taken, but about forms of politics that can respond to the disavowal effected by narratives of American progress by undercutting precisely its universalist claim.

Myrdal found it necessary to supplement his narrative with the universalism of social science as an antidote to racial prejudice. This has historical relevance, in connecting a postwar social science of “development” to the politics of a postwar human rights imaginary; it has theoretical relevance as well, in showing the limits of even a revisionist version of Myrdal’s politics. To him, the universalization of human rights required a focus on a scientific universalism that would overcome race prejudice. Myrdal’s vision was based on an understanding of social science as a potentially democratic tool for planning and governance. And yet the version we see in *An American Dilemma* should provide a warning about the dangers of harnessing such democratic visions to a project of universalizing an Enlightenment promise.

I begin with a story that aims to situate the study in the politics of its time, in order to suggest why Myrdal’s adamancy about the Creed, as part of a projection of a future American universalism, may have seemed like a necessary account to give. From there, I move to a reading of the book itself. This is followed by an effort to contextualize the book’s afterlives in the work of both Ralph Bunche and Alva Myrdal [the portion on Alva is truncated in this version.]

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<sup>5</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007 [2000]), xiv.

## II. Nazism and America

On May 15, 1940, Ralph Bunche took a taxi to the White House to meet Eleanor Roosevelt for lunch. Bunche, who at the time was the chair of the political science department at Howard University and would later win the Nobel Peace Prize for his work at the UN, was interviewing Roosevelt as part of his involvement with the Carnegie-Myrdal study.<sup>6</sup> In his memo recounting the interview, Bunche jokes: “This would surprise Gunnar, but I violated the racial stereotype and arrived at the White House at 1:25.”<sup>7</sup> Bunche continues: “I sat in the Red Room, rather lonely like, until 1:35...I entertained myself with thoughts about how silly it is that it should be considered so much more significant that a Negro would be sitting in the Red Room waiting for lunch, than should a white person be sitting there.”<sup>8</sup>

When Roosevelt arrived, Bunche was ushered to the South Portico, where, over jelled soup and chicken salad, the interview began. Asked by Bunche to identify the primary sources of any “hope for progress toward solution of our ‘Negro Problem,’” Roosevelt said that she took some hope from the increasingly progressive attitudes among American youth, as their outlook was, on the whole, more “sound and realistic” than that of their elders. Her list of “threats toward a worsening of racial conditions” was more concrete: the “worsening of our economic situation” and “the European situation.” She expanded on the first, stating that “the most effective work toward solution of the race problem must be in the broad improvement of our basic economic conditions,” an expansion of the policies undertaken in the New Deal, to improve conditions and alleviate competition for jobs. Bunche reports: “She intimated that if our economic problems are

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<sup>6</sup> Ralph Bunche Papers, Schomburg Center, NYPL, Box 33, folder 20.

<sup>7</sup> Jokes like this run throughout their correspondence, more often on Bunche’s side.

<sup>8</sup> Bunche also catalogues the race of each of the staff members he encountered as porters and waiters in the White House, almost all black.

not bettered and we undergo more depression and unemployment, the status of the Negro may well become much worse than it is now.”

More foreboding was her assessment of “the European situation,” and specifically the threat posed by Nazi Germany both to Europe and America. Bunche reports her comments: “If Nazism, with its racial doctrines, triumphs in Europe, the racial repercussions are quite likely to be felt very severely here. There is no doubt, she said, that a great many Americans would look with some favor upon a triumphant Nazism simply because we are a people who tend to admire things that ‘work.’”<sup>9</sup> She confided in Bunche that, from her conversations with “Franklin” (the scare quotes are Bunche’s), “the Allies had already made feelers to Hitler for peace terms and that Hitler had turned them down and that there was nothing for them to do now but to fight on until they are overwhelmed.” It was fully expected, she warned, “that England will be invaded and that the English government will retire to Canada.” There was nothing the US could do to help (the ships it might sell to Britain, through the Lend-Lease program her husband was advocating at the time, would hardly be sufficient), and, as Bunche tells it, “it is her belief that if Nazism triumphs in Europe, the United States will be in grave danger of being engulfed by it.”

This was both a prediction concerning German strategy (if they took England, they would certainly take Africa and South America, she said), and an assessment of America’s ideological vulnerability to Nazism. In addition to “Fifth Column activities,” she again echoed what she had hinted at earlier about the American character: “that many Americans will be attracted by the amazing success of the Nazi system.” The “race problem” enhanced the potential appeal of a victorious Nazism among white Americans because, she cautioned, “the conditions of racial

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<sup>9</sup> I should emphasize that this is Bunche’s recollection of the conversation; he did not take notes at the time, but wrote up an account from memory just afterward. While nothing he says is inconsistent with views Roosevelt expressed elsewhere, it is certainly possible that he placed extra emphasis on positions that accorded with his own, such as the importance of economic improvements for poor whites.

intolerance in the country, the disregard for law and authority in the South, are weaknesses upon which Nazi doctrines might well prey.”

Unsurprisingly, she was less worried about black sympathy for the Nazis, though she was concerned about communist sympathies. It would be “entirely understandable,” she told Bunche, if “in view of the treatment accorded minority people such as Negroes here, they would be attracted by alien doctrines and by radical groups,” especially in light of “Russia’s racial policy.” But sympathy for communism no longer seemed tenable to her after the Soviet-Nazi pact. She mentions Richard Wright, whose recently published *Native Son* had impressed on her the gruesome conditions facing black Americans, but whose reported communist sympathies she couldn’t comprehend.<sup>10</sup>

Roosevelt also related to Bunche her ongoing disagreements with Vice President John Nance Gardner. Gardner, who had opposed the New Deal, saw racism in the US as insurmountable because he did not believe that the “social question” – that is, issues of intermarriage and miscegenation – could be set aside; she disagreed. On his view, segregation served to enforce not only material inequality, but social separation; Southern whites would never relinquish that. Roosevelt described their clashes over the issue: she thought interracial relationships were “a personal and individual matter,” and so could be “crossed out of the equation,” yet Southerners like Gardner kept introducing it; she could not talk with him about race except in terms of “social equality.”

The Bunche-Roosevelt interview did not make it into the final manuscript for *An American Dilemma*; the two references to Eleanor Roosevelt in the book both concern her

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<sup>10</sup> Roosevelt was surprised when Bunche reported that he and others had reservations about Wright’s book, and had experienced the character of Bigger Thomas as eliciting something more complex than straightforward sympathy. Bunche suggests something like the critique more famously voiced by James Baldwin: that in the character of Thomas, black life is depicted as purely pathological.

interventions with her husband on behalf of the March on Washington Movement's campaign to end racial discrimination in war industries. Before the interview, Bunche had told her that the point was to get a sense for the shape of the arguments at play, rather than to quote anyone directly. In addition to a deep uncertainty about race, its place in Americans' lives, and the possibilities for reform, the interview highlights the uncertainty about the war's outcome at the time, and a concern about the viability of Nazi doctrine in America. Roosevelt depicts Americans as practical people, guided not by custom or any deep ideology of either racial hatred or racial equality, but by an appreciation for what works. She identified racism among whites, particularly Southern whites, as an empirical fact, not logically necessary to American ideology or the perpetuation of material self-interest, though coexisting historically and interacting with both. On her telling, racism is part of a politics of resentment, a way of scapegoating others both as an object of exploitation and of blame. Nazism had potential in America because it played to that resentment, while also promising even greater success.

The study would soon be shaken more directly by the war. After the Nazi occupation of Norway, and amid speculation that Sweden was next, Myrdal decided to return to Sweden. The decision, Myrdal claimed, was about being true to his identity as part of "that ancient civilization," and his desire to raise his children there as well.<sup>11</sup> (It also cleared a path for Carnegie to install Samuel Stouffer as acting head of the study, whom they seemed to prefer – and who was, indeed, notably better than Myrdal at adhering to both deadlines and budgets. When Myrdal returned, rather than work in the Carnegie offices, he was placed in a residency at Dartmouth, with a suggestion that the cloistering would better help him think.<sup>12</sup>)

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<sup>11</sup> Myrdal/Bunche letters; general correspondence, Carnegie-Myrdal Study. TK

<sup>12</sup> general correspondence, Carnegie-Myrdal Study (TK)

As Myrdal prepared to depart, Bunche wrote him a letter, conveying how much he had enjoyed working together, and counted on their continued friendship, then cautioning: “But this is a strange and ominous world in which we live...While the horrifying threat is perhaps not so imminent as it is for you and your country, I am greatly perturbed about what may happen to my people, my family, my friends and me here. My mind is fearful for the future of all of us.” He closed by echoing a similar theme, praising Myrdal’s decision to go to Sweden as a “great sacrifice in order to strike vigorous blows in defense of freedom, democracy and human decency. No other cause has ever been so vital to humanity, and when the opportunity arises here, as I think it soon will, I will be only too eager to put my shoulder to the same wheel.”<sup>13</sup> The question of a democratic nation’s vulnerability to Nazi ideology was present throughout the study’s writing: the question of what defined a nation, and just how easily that could be swept aside; an anxiety not just about Nazi victory in the war, but about what America stood for, and what Americans would countenance.

### III. Myrdal’s Methods: Value-Premises and the American Creed

The common pairing of Myrdal and Tocqueville usually begins from a basic similarity: each was a foreign observer who sought to describe what was essentially American, to define and give voice to what Myrdal would call the “American Creed.” But to accept this description is already to misunderstand Myrdal and his project. *An American Dilemma* is not travelogue. Unlike Tocqueville, Myrdal was invited to the US to produce a book for an American audience, funded and overseen by an American foundation, written in American English. He was tasked with studying not the significance of an imagined America for his compatriots at home, but rather what Frederick Keppel, president of the Carnegie Corporation, had referred to in offering

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<sup>13</sup> Bunche to Myrdal, May 1, 1940. Bunche Papers, NYPL, Box 29, folder 8.

him the job as “the Negro in the United States...as a social phenomenon.” An economist, Myrdal presided over a team of researchers, including a large number of sociologists, who fanned across the country, conducting surveys, collecting personal histories, and carrying on interviews, assembling data on school enrollment, voter registration, hospital access, land ownership, crop failure rates, and workplace conditions. The team included several Chicago School sociologists, including Arnold Rose, Edward Shils, Samuel Stouffer, and Louis Wirth. The office in New York sent questionnaires and other requests for information to local newspapers, historically black colleges and universities, local and national advocacy organizations, churches, and others. So why did Myrdal decide he needed a theory of “the American Creed”?

To begin, he needed it methodologically. On August 12, 1937, Keppel had written to Myrdal, inviting him to lead a new project being launched by Carnegie: “a comprehensive Study of the Negro in the United States to be undertaken in a wholly objective and dispassionate way as a social phenomenon.” Keppel explained that they had chosen Myrdal in part because he wanted “someone who would approach the situation with an entirely fresh mind,” someone “whose thinking is not influenced by emotional factors of one type or another.”<sup>14</sup> As he had put it in an earlier letter to an outside advisor, “No American could do this, because the whole matter is charged with emotion and complicated by traditionalism in approach.”<sup>15</sup> They wanted a foreigner, but not just any foreigner; Keppel’s letter to Myrdal continues: “We have thought also

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<sup>14</sup> Keppel to Myrdal, Microfiche 1A [pt3, p 2]. This should not be taken to indicate detachment on the part of Myrdal; by 1940, when leaving the US to return to Sweden, Myrdal wrote to Bunche that “it is nearly heart-breaking to leave this study” and that “I understand now, when I have to go, how deeply engaged not only my brains but also my heart, has got in these problems.” Myrdal to Bunche, April 29, 1940, Bunche Papers, NYPL, Box 29, folder 8.

<sup>15</sup> Keppel to J.H. Huizinga, February 1, 1937. Microfiche 1A [pt 2 p 15].

that it would be well to seek a man in a non-imperialist country with no background of domination of one race over another.”<sup>16</sup>

For Myrdal, his foreignness made him part of an experiment – an experiment that was, on his telling, quintessentially American, but that for precisely the same reason left him without moorings. In the introduction to the book, Myrdal quotes Keppel’s letter to him, and describes his proposal as “an idea singularly American,” marked by “American moralism, rationalism, and optimism—and a demonstration of America’s unfailing conviction of its basic soundness and strength.” We already see him marrying his methods and his subject, a scientific approach with an understanding of the American character: that the task given him was both a scientific experiment, and a distinctly American one.

After this praise, and implicit in his argument for looking to America in beginning to think about similar questions elsewhere in the world, Myrdal moves to describe his approach to the project. This was an approach that demonstrated a clear affinity with those very same traits, yet was enabled by what he describes as a “more basic relativism”: that “*Things look different, depending upon ‘where you stand’* as the American expression runs.” He was selected to run the study precisely because he had “never been subject to the strains involved in living in a black-white society and never has had to become adjusted to such a situation.” In this sense (and

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<sup>16</sup> Keppel to Myrdal, Microfiche 1A [pt3, p 2]. This is a bit misleading; the first person Keppel had seriously considered for the job, Hendrik Mouw, was a retired Dutch colonial administrator, who had studied Chinese and Colonial administration at Leiden University, and had been recommended to Keppel precisely because the mandatory retirement age in the colonial service meant that the “experience and judgment” he had gained in his earlier career would be wasted otherwise. Keppel rejected him, it seems, because he judged him intellectually uncreative, without sufficient field research experience, and because of “doubts [about his] ability to get along with people” – not because he objected to his affiliation with imperial rule. See J.Th. Moll to H. Mouw (undated); Moll to Keppel, November 2, 1936; Keppel to Moll, November 12, 1936; Keppel to Huizinga, February 1, 1937; and chart of Negro Study Personnel Suggestions through July 15, 1937. Microfiche 1A [parts 1 and 2]. Some of this is also described in Walter Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America’s Conscience* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

Myrdal here describes himself in the more objective third-person) “he was asked to be both the subject and the object of a cultural experiment in the field of social science.”<sup>17</sup>

Continuing in the third person, Myrdal writes: “he had to construct for himself a system of coordinates. He found this in the American ideals of equality and liberty.” Here, Myrdal introduces the notion of the “American Creed” to solve a methodological problem: it provided an orientation for his analysis. It was what he termed a “value premise,” and tracking the operation of such value premises was essential to understanding social reality.

The reason he needed such an orientation – especially since his lack of orientation was part of why he was selected for the job – has to do with what he meant by “value premise,” the role of value premises in constituting social reality, and their significance for social scientific methods. In the appendix on his methods, Myrdal explains:

People have ideas about how reality actually is, or was, and they have ideas about how it ought to be, or ought to have been. The former we call “*beliefs*.” The latter we call “*valuations*.” A person’s beliefs, that is, his knowledge, can be objectively judged to be true or false and more or less complete. His valuations—that a social situation or relation is, or was, “just,” “right,” “fair,” “desirable,” or the opposite, in some degree of intensity or the other—cannot be judged by such objective standards as science provides. (1027)

Social science would need to focus on valuations, as a set of coordinates to understand a society. It was necessary to study not just facts and beliefs, or the gap between belief and reality, but valuations, because they helped constitute social reality (more on this in a bit).

Valuations were not fixed, but necessarily mutable. Here, Myrdal distinguishes his notion from William Graham Sumner’s notion of “mores” and “folkways”; we might also read this as an articulation of his departure from Tocqueville’s *moeurs*. Myrdal rejects Sumner’s framework for its “*laissez-faire* (‘do-nothing’) metaphysics,” as though values aren’t constructed as part of a

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<sup>17</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. New York: Harper and Row, 1962 (1944), p. lx-lxi. Pagination is consistent between the original and the 1962 editions, and is continuous across the two volumes. Page citations for *An American Dilemma* will be included parenthetically in the text throughout this paper.

shifting social reality. A focus on “mores,” on Myrdal’s telling, oversimplifies individuals, and fails to account for the ability of one person to hold multiple and conflicting values, as well as for how such values are constituted and reconstituted collectively over time. Valuations are volatile: “The valuation spheres, in such a society as the American, more nearly resemble powder-magazines than they do Sumner’s concept of mores” (1031-1032).

Value premises were also dangerous for social scientists – if they went unstated. All social science was subject to bias. Some of that bias was not specific to social science but a risk for any scientific inquiry: an optimistic temperament, say, could throw off any study. Such biases would be easy to identify, as they would give way to logical inconsistencies in the research. But social science was vulnerable to a more pernicious sort of bias, one more easily hidden: biases in what sorts of hypotheses seemed viable, what questions to ask, what topics seemed significant. By being both an outsider, and then by explicitly stating his own “value premises,” Myrdal sought to avoid such a biased version of social science.

The “value premises” guiding any particular study should not simply be the explicitly stated values of the researcher; rather, they should be local: “The value premises should be selected by the criterion of relevance and significance to the culture under study” (1045). In addition to internal consistency and fairness, this had to do with the mission of the social scientist. Social science was oriented, like all science, toward progressive enlightenment, the expansion of knowledge. But as distinctly social, it was also normative, carrying with it a “tremendous moral responsibility.” That responsibility arose because, as Myrdal puts it:

We [social scientists] know even better than the politician and the ordinary citizen that the facts are much too complicated to speak an intelligible language by themselves. They must be organized for practical purposes, that is, under relevant value premises. And no one can do this more adequately than we ourselves. There is a common belief that the type of practical research which involves rational planning—what we have ventured to call “social engineering”—is likely to be emotional. This is a mistake. If the value

premises are sufficiently, fully, and rationally introduced, the planning of induced social change is no more emotional by itself than the planning of a bridge or the taking of a census. (1044)

The right ordering of value premises was not only necessary to properly understand society, but to guide its transformation. Such guidance was entirely objective: as scientific as any other sort of engineering.

There is a strong pragmatist influence in Myrdal's thinking here; in explaining both the significance of valuations in the creation of social reality, his understanding of a "social problem," and the pursuant role of the social scientist in guiding social transformation, Myrdal frequently cites John Dewey. He takes on board Dewey's view of society, rejecting a supposed separation between material conditions and values or morality. Social science, on this account, is concerned with the interaction between moral valuations and material conditions, guiding social policy by enabling conversations about problems of distribution and justice – an alternative to either a materialist focus alone, or a totalitarian set of decisions from above. Dewey's articulation of this in *Freedom and Culture*, the volume Myrdal usually cites, carries its own version of American exceptionalism, associating "the 'ideology' of the Declaration of Independence" with a democratic tradition that found its first true expression in America, a country founded in a new land, breaking with the traditionalism of Europe.<sup>18</sup> Yet for both authors, it is democratic reworking, guided by science, that can improve things. Dewey is explicitly anti-teleological; social science is true to its task when it exists to aid "the energetic, unflagging, unceasing creation of an ever-present new road upon which we can walk together."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989 [1939]). See page 12; also chapter 6, "Science and Free Culture."

<sup>19</sup> Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 134.

In his central articulation of the “American dilemma,” Myrdal relies on these terms. The dilemma is not a conflict between morality, on the one hand, and material reality, on the other; it is not a conflict, that is, between belief and practice. Rather, the dilemma is a “moral dilemma”:

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. (lxxi)

The Creed here appears not as a primary, or more deeply held, set of morals; rather, it is higher in the sense of being more general, and associated with the nation as a whole, as opposed to the more specific morals associated with individual and community life.

Viewing values, behavior, and material interests as intertwined in this way allowed Myrdal to see racism as a moral issue that was also a material one: one’s practices were part of one’s outlook; they implied something about one’s valuations. Achieving equality required that those valuations be addressed. Following Dewey, Myrdal emphasizes the importance of understanding the “dilemma” as a conflict between two moral views, and not as a conflict between, say, morals and material interests, a view that would be both condescending and counterproductive. The choice of material interests is itself a matter of valuation, and so a matter for democratic engagement. Overcoming American hypocrisy is not a matter of bringing actions into lines with ideals; rather, it requires that conflicting values and ideals be squared with each other, to better guide action. This meant he could understand opposition to “social equality” as entwined with economic practices as well as attitudes about sex that were necessarily public; they were not, as Eleanor Roosevelt saw them, something private that could be “crossed out of the equation.” While Myrdal does describe racism as a kind of bias or prejudice, this is not to

minimize it to psychological phenomenon alone; instead, it allows him to give a richer account of the structural injustices used to maintain ideas about race than he is often credited with.

As he has been criticized for, Myrdal does insist on studying race by studying white attitudes, and not, say, the lives and experiences of black Americans on their own terms. At the same time, Myrdal's emphasis on values and morals allowed him to better appreciate the depth of white Americans' commitment to racism. Myrdal describes racism as "the '*white man's theory of color caste*,'" which involves above all a commitment to "racial purity" and the prevention of "amalgamation"; from this follows an opposition to "social equality" as "a precaution to hinder miscegenation and particularly intermarriage"; from this the extension of segregation to all spheres of life (58). He offers a "rank order" of forms of discrimination and inequality – ranked based on how central each is to the maintenance of "racial purity."

Again in Chapter 7, on population, he does not pull any punches about American white supremacy: "*the overwhelming majority of white Americans desire that there be as few Negroes as possible in America. If the Negroes could be eliminated from American or greatly decreased in numbers, this would meet the whites' approval—provided that it could be accomplished by means which are also approved.*" This genocidal intent is what he calls a "general valuation," rarely expressed in public but evident by looking at history and policy. Because of an unwillingness to countenance actual genocidal means, as well as the continued profits from economic exploitation, the initial valuation is modified into a kind of slow violence: "the dominant American valuation is that the Negro should be eliminated from the American scene, but *slowly*."<sup>20</sup> This view is reflected in Myrdal's definition of the "Negro problem": that the very

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<sup>20</sup> He was also aware of whites who advocated black resettlement in Africa; Myrdal met in 1940 with Senator Theodore Bilbo, who emphasized this point and followed up with a copy of his own article on the subject, "Voluntary repatriation of American Negroes in Africa." See carbon of letter by Myrdal to Bilbo, April 10, 1940, box 29 folder 2, Ralph Bunche Papers, NYPL.

presence of black Americans is a problem for white Americans, a problem in the mind of the white American. His language here echoes W.E.B. DuBois's famous formulation in the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folks*, about the feeling of "being a problem."<sup>21</sup> It is counterbalanced by a concern, guided by the Creed and shared by black Americans (here Myrdal explicitly cites DuBois as evidence, whose language on the issue is even more crass than Myrdal's) that quality of life should be assured equally, even if one would rather limit the quantity of people (168-171). In a conflict between the Creed and the theory of caste, then, a commitment to the Creed manages to curtail all-out genocide, and to dictate that some basic quality of life should be assured. This not exactly a romantic story.

#### IV. Dilemma and Hypocrisy

Myrdal's faith in the Creed's ability to assure progress toward equality is not nearly as strong as it is often portrayed. Rather than a singular theory, Myrdal details, in different places, different mechanisms by which tension between the Creed and the caste theory is rendered sustainable. Some of this is a public performance, in which adherence to the "caste theory" is simply downplayed; recounting to Bunche his meeting with Dr. H.W. Evans, Great Dragon and Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, in Atlanta in 1939, Myrdal says that Evans described the Klan as far more moderate than it was often made out to be, claiming that "night-riding," the subject of so much public fuss, wasn't something they did very often (Evans' daughter interjects to ask Myrdal if being from Sweden meant he was a socialist, which on Myrdal's telling made

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<sup>21</sup> See Myrdal's introduction and chapter 2. As Jacqueline Stevens points out, DuBois is among the most cited authors in *An American Dilemma*. Smith argues that Myrdal broke from DuBois in seeing a conflict not between two codes (caste and the Creed), but between a lower set of values and a higher one, and that Myrdal thought that Americans would ultimately recognize the "irrationality" of the theory of caste, rejecting it in favor of the higher Creed. As I discuss later, I read this "rejection," in Myrdal, as being mediated by social science, not as the overcoming of the caste theory by the Creed itself. See Jacqueline Stevens and Rogers Smith, "Beyond Tocqueville, Please!," *American Political Science Review* 89, no. 4 (December 1995): 987-995.

the conversation suddenly quite embarrassing).<sup>22</sup> But values in conflict with the Creed, in addition to being downplayed publicly, can also be more deeply repressed: as he puts it in chapter 2, such conflicts are often kept “below the level of consciousness,” their effects explained away. Attempts to push back are met with escapism, and “an unstable equilibrium is retained and actually believed to be stable.” Cognitive dissonance between the Creed and the theory of caste does not, on its own, produce reexamination and breakthrough.

Hypocrisy and dilemmas are, on his telling, managed in part through what we might call disavowal: they are known but their acknowledgement is actively denied. Myrdal recounts a visit to an art exhibition in the South, where he saw a sculpture of a hanged man, with a medal on his chest, titled “Soldier in the Rain.” When he referred to it as a sculpture of a lynched man, however, he was met with incredulity, as the staff insisted that it was of a soldier who had been hanged, probably for some military infraction. After some back and forth, he concluded that the staff “sincerely believed that they were right”; he asked to speak with the artist. When they met, the man initially denied Myrdal’s suggestion, insisting the sculpture’s subject could be “any soldier.” After a bit of this, Myrdal recounts:

I came to feel slightly exasperated, and I said, “If you, the artist, do not know what you have created, I know it as an art spectator. You have depicted a lynching, and, more particularly, a lynching of a Negro.” The sculptor then suddenly changed personality, became intimate and open, and said: “I believe you are right. And I have intended it all this time.” I asked, “Don’t you think everybody must know it?” He said, “Yes, in a way, but they don’t want to know it.” (35)

Asked how he could ever expect to sell it, the man replied that he intended to keep it, and to store it in his closet, as perhaps the more proper title would be “American Skeleton in the Closet.” The story, while more than a little self-congratulatory, is used by Myrdal to illustrate how ideas that conflict with the Creed can be “canalized,” kept from consciousness; a sculpture that might

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<sup>22</sup> The meeting took place on November 5, 1939, while Myrdal and Bunche were traveling together in the South. Myrdal’s account of the meeting can be found in Bunche Papers, Box 33, Folder 5, NYPL.

produce scandal is instead reinterpreted to mean something different, as the actual scandal is known, present in the artwork itself, but not acknowledged.

Myrdal goes further, claiming that a resistance to the dissonance of moral conflicts is itself distinctly American, and part of what makes American hypocrisy both particular and intractable. He describes in Chapter 1 a certain compulsiveness, an “American eagerness to get on record one’s sins and their causes”; he cites what he calls a widely known letter by Patrick Henry, in which Henry says that he owned slaves out of convenience, but that he could not justify the practice, and that he was doing his duty to virtue by saying so (Henry uses the French *devoir*, suggesting this was not, for him, so distinctly American a concept). Confession of one’s sins, without in fact changing one’s practices, is presented as a compulsion. American wrongdoing is widespread: “Some Americans do most of the sinning, but most do some of it,” he writes. But Myrdal attributes to Americans a “moral optimism” that leads them to publicly lament their own failings, yet not to change their ways: “there is a little of the muckraker and preacher in all Americans. ...[America] is not hypocritical in the usual sense of the word, but labors persistently with its moral problems” (22). American hypocrisy, on this telling, arises from being at once sinner and preacher. More neurotic than just not practicing what one preaches, Americans fixate on their wrongdoing without correcting it, incessantly confessing as its own form of ministry.

And yet Myrdal himself maintains optimism about progress toward the fulfillment of the Creed and the withering away of the caste theory. His clearest narrative comes in Chapter 45, “America Again at the Crossroads.” He starts with the ruptural force of war, claiming that “The three great wars of this country have been fought for the ideals of liberty and equality to which the nation was pledged”: the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and World War I. Each brought

with it progress, but also backlash: respectively, the abolition of slavery in the North and end of importation of slaves in the South, followed by “fortification of the plantation system and of Negro slavery”; emancipation and Reconstruction, followed by the retrenchment of white supremacy; job opportunities in the North in the war industry, followed by the Great Migration, but also by race riots and resistance. This is a curious history: notably, the Civil War is treated as a foreign war, as though the South weren’t part of America; World War I is treated as purely domestic, as primarily a jobs program. The nation’s “pledge” is made prior to even the Revolutionary War, and progressively realized: war appears pivotal, a moment of rupture, and yet also continuous. With each, despite the reaction, “not as much ground was lost as had been won.” The current war is being fought, as well, on behalf of liberty and equality; while “History is not the result of predetermined fate,” with “some insight into the temper and inclination of the people who are both the actors and the spectators of the drama being staged, we can estimate which are the most probable developments” (997-98).

Improvements come not from material forces, but from “changes in people’s beliefs and valuations”; to that end, Myrdal identifies not the Creed itself, but “*the gradual destruction of the popular theory behind race prejudice is the most important of all social trends in the field of interracial relations.*” He expands: “It is significant that today even the white man who defends discrimination frequently describes his motive as ‘prejudice’ and says that it is ‘irrational.’ The popular beliefs rationalizing caste in America are no longer intellectually respectable...Most white people with a little education also have a hunch that they are wrong.” That loss of credibility, while it currently provokes a kind of disavowal, or confession of sins, will ultimately make racism untenable. The growing lack of intellectual support for white supremacy has

generated a dilemma, one that Myrdal believes will be resolved in the direction of the Creedal values of equality and liberty:

The white man is thus in the process of losing confidence in the theory which gave reason and meaning to his way of life. And since he has not changed his life much, he is in a dilemma. This change is probably irreversible and cumulative. It is backed by the American Creed. The trend of psychology, education, anthropology, and social science is toward environmentalism in the explanation of group differences, which means that the racial beliefs which defended caste are being torn away. (1003)

While the Creed is involved in this change, it is not the catalyzing force. The Creed helps generate the dilemma, but it is social science, and the progress of knowledge, that drives people to resolve that dilemma in the direction of equality. The scientific justification for racism is being torn away by better social science, a change that is irreversible because it represents the advance of knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

Myrdal's view of the centrality of social science should be no surprise: it explains his very project. As he explained it in Chapter 4, those wishing to "reduce the bias in white people's racial beliefs" were stuck in a "vicious circle" of racial bias: the most effective strategy would be "actually improving Negro status, Negro behavior, Negro characteristics," yet the very beliefs in need of changing were also responsible for "keeping the Negroes low." A second strategy, then, would be that of social science:

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. We may assume that, until the Negro people were studied scientifically—which in a strict sense of the term means not until recent decades—the raw material for beliefs which the average white man had at his disposal in the form of transmitted knowledge and personal observations placed only the most flexible limits to his opportunistic imagination. When, however, scientific knowledge is being spread among people...this means that the beliefs are gradually placed under firmer control of reality. (109)

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<sup>23</sup> This view of race as a scientific fact, but racial prejudice as anti-scientific, was given renewed prominence in 1950 in UNESCO's "Statement on Race," to which Myrdal was a signatory. The statement emphasizes people's genetic unity as a species, with some genetic variation based on race. UNESCO, "Four Statements on Race," available at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001229/122962eo.pdf>

Myrdal saw his own mission as explaining the poor conditions of black Americans as products of white bias, exacerbated by forces of capital and of nature, rather than as evidence of racial inferiority. His chapters do this; black rural poverty in the South, for example, is explained through a history of biased policies on land ownership and labor and employment, after slavery, which made blacks disproportionately vulnerable to environmental factors like the boll weevil. Spreading such knowledge, in place of received information and anecdote, would help correct for bias. Bias here is understood as arising from bad information; getting white people to accept the facts of the matter, to see and care about truth, was the best strategy available.

What's more, he saw a deep affinity between rational thinking and the American Creed: "*People want to be rational, to be honest and well informed,*" he writes, adding in a footnote that "the desire to be rational, to know the truth, and to think straight is...central to the American Creed, and is accepted by everybody in principle." While they might initially resist the implications of new knowledge, and seek to rationalize their own beliefs, they would eventually be swayed. (109) This can make it look as though scientific knowledge is itself part of the Creed, and it is the Creed that's doing the work; Myrdal's point seems to be more precisely that social science is necessarily compatible with the Creed's emphasis on universal equality; the two are allied by their providential universalism.

This is an old theme: Enlightenment ideals of equality and cosmopolitan right were associated with enlightenment as such, the perpetual extension of the light of reason. Myrdal calls upon this intellectual inheritance explicitly – though he stops short of actually citing Kant – writing that "The social engineering of the coming epoch will be nothing but the drawing of practical conclusions from the teaching of social science that 'human nature' is changeable and that human deficiencies and unhappiness are, in a large degree, preventable. ...this spirit [is] so

intrinsically in harmony with the great tradition of the Enlightenment and the American Revolution” (1023). Human perfectibility was what defined human nature itself; a commitment to that perfectibility was the animating spirit of social science, and of America.

It was the expansion of those Enlightenment concepts of universal right through reason that Myrdal set out, in closing the book, as the trajectory for American after the war. When he was writing, the outcome of the war was far from certain, yet what he set forward helped define a version of American internationalism. He is also strikingly prescient about coming struggles over self-determination and black internationalism, though his language is not exactly praise-worthy. He imagines the postwar world was one in which America would have the responsibility of leading the world through “the long era during which the white peoples will have to adjust to shrinkage while the colored are bound to expand in numbers, in level of industrial civilization and in political power.” While he defines America here as a “white nation,” he also aligns the politics of race in America with a broader international politics, and he isn’t wrong about America’s allegiance with European imperial powers. Indeed, what he writes in 1944 reads like the more triumphant histories of human rights written today:

Declarations of inalienable human rights for people all over the world are now emanating from America. Wilson’s fourteen points were a rehearsal; Roosevelt’s four freedoms are more general and more focused on the rights of the individual. The national leaders proclaim that the coming peace will open an age of human liberty and equality everywhere. This was so in the First World War, too. This time something must be done to give reality to the glittering generalities, because otherwise the world will become entirely demoralized. It will probably be impossible to excite people with empty promises a third time. (1019)

On this narrative of human rights, the “promises” of universal rights, distinctively American and therefore also universal, rolled out from America to the rest of the world. After World War I, those promises had gone unfulfilled; after World War II, it would be all the more essential to make good on them, as part of an effort to build the postwar peace. Universalizing those

promises required not just their proclamation, but a demonstration of the possibilities of making good on them: America must “show the world a progressive trend by which the Negro became finally integrated into modern democracy” (1021).

Myrdal’s imagination of a peacetime founded on universal right and enlightenment rested on an understanding of America as both universal and distinctly white.<sup>24</sup> That tension already points to one of the problems with his narrative: equality meant assimilation. This was unproblematic for Myrdal because of his view that black life was reactive, forged in response to white discrimination; to study white attitudes was to study black life. This is in many ways the heart of Ralph Ellison’s critique of Myrdal’s book, in a review written in 1944 but only published in 1953 as part of a collection. Ellison criticizes Myrdal for taking the conditions and lives of black Americans as entirely reactive to white actions, as entirely negative. Ellison asks:

But can a people (its faith in an idealized American Creed notwithstanding) live and develop for over three hundred years simply by *reacting*? Are American Negroes simply the creation of white men, or have they at least helped to create themselves out of what they found around them? Men have made a way of life in caves and upon cliffs; why cannot Negroes have made a life upon the horns of the white man’s dilemma? (315-16)<sup>25</sup>

Making a life on the horns of a dilemma, constructing something for oneself rather than merely reacting, Ellison continues, can mean rejecting certain values, and creating others of one’s own – not merely accepting or failing to have yet accepted the more “general” values of the Creed.

To Ellison, Myrdal’s ability to ignore black life and culture as a creative project in its own right came from his “clinging...to the sterile concept of race” (316). This was part of a broader inheritance Myrdal took from social science, and particularly sociology, in America,

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<sup>24</sup> Suggesting again a Kantian mood, Myrdal did seem to think about peace as a kind of time – in counterpoint, perhaps, to the new understandings of “wartime” wrought by World War II. For more on World War II as a defining American experience of “what war should be,” and of the temporality of war, see Mary Dudziak, *War-Time* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Ralph Ellison, “*An American Dilemma: A Review*,” in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1953): 303-317.

which Ellison argues, since the Civil War, has taken on “the pragmatic problem of adjusting our society to include the new citizens.” Previous answers had sought to justify Southern racial practices and the Northern refusal to intervene, in the service not just of the Creed but of American capitalism. Such reconciliation of moral conflict is more often the provenance of religion, philosophy, art, or psychoanalysis, and yet sociology had outdone them all in “its myth-making consisting of its ‘scientific’ justification of anti-democratic and unscientific racial attitudes and practices. If Myrdal has done nothing else, he has used his science to discredit all of the vicious non-scientific nonsense that has cluttered our sociological literature. He has, in short, shorn it of its mythology” (305). This would appear positive, though Ellison intends it as a cautionary note: social science is malleable, and serves the interests of its times; if Myrdal’s book appears like a positive contribution in the upsurge of democratic feeling during World War II, it is not guaranteed to remain such. And should the winds turn, Ellison cautions that it could become part not of a romance, but of a tragedy (317).

Even in praising Myrdal, Ellison rejects his claim to universalism. What is valuable about Myrdal’s study is that it undercuts attempts to legitimize racism through “science.” Ellison suggests that, because he cuts through mythology in this way, Myrdal’s work is more truly scientific than the others. Yet on Ellison’s account the book’s value, and danger, comes from its reception, its use for politics: what people can make with it. For Ellison, it seems, politics is a matter of how we make and remake a world – something Myrdal did not entirely see, despite his commitment to pragmatism. Instead, Myrdal saw politics as the expansion of enlightenment ideals through the expansion of enlightenment itself, a planning enabled by social science and guided by universal principles of equality.

The distinction is relevant for thinking about what might appear to be one of Myrdal's more prescient moments, when he anticipates the NAACP's petition to the United Nations (though not its suppression). Myrdal writes:

I have, for instance, met few white Americans who have ever thought of the fact that, if America had joined the League of Nations, American Negroes could, and certainly would, have taken their cases before international tribunal [sic] back in the 'twenties....After this War there is bound to be an international apparatus for appeal by oppressed minority groups. In America, Negro organizations like the N.A.A.C.P. are excellently equipped for such conspicuous litigation. (1019)

In 1947, Myrdal supported DuBois's effort to bring his *Appeal to the World* petition before the United Nations. Viewed through the terms of *An American Dilemma*, he would have understood that petition as an effort at inclusion in a promise from which black Americans had been excluded. It brought the threat of international scrutiny of American hypocrisy. The significance of such a petition, to Myrdal, was not in the democratic politics of petitioning, of public appearance and self-assertion (as I have emphasized in previous chapters), but in the demonstration that the American Creed had not yet been fully universalized.

Myrdal's story about an American Creed, and progress toward its fulfillment, was not straightforwardly chauvinistic about America's promise; he did not, I've argued, see the promise itself as self-executing, but saw the need for a complementary universalism, that of social science, for its full realization. Yet in the face of uncertainty about what was to come, his account was aspirational: the effort to impose a narrative on history, to project a happier future, was necessary precisely because such a future seemed far from assured. His universalism is a response to the particularity of its own moment. Looking at America – a country that, even to Eleanor Roosevelt, appeared as potential fertile ground for Nazism – Myrdal identified in its founding promises a set of universalist ideas, so far unfulfilled but that, through the progressive enlightenment offered by social science, might be rendered universal.

The Myrdals' 1940s enthusiasm about the American promise would not always keep them on the good side of the US government: in 1953, landing at New York's Idlewild Airport en route to the UN, Alva Myrdal was denied entry to the United States, then eventually admitted on a probationary basis, after a public outcry and the intervention of her government and others (including René Cassin). The US would eventually claim that the issue arose because her son Jan, at age 16, had joined a communist organization.<sup>26</sup> Shortly after this, Gunnar Myrdal would write to UNESCO, to protest that copies of *An American Dilemma* appeared to have been removed from the main UNESCO libraries; he hoped that this was unrelated.<sup>27</sup>

While Myrdal remained largely optimistic that social science can help overcome racial divisions, there are moments when he hesitates. In a 1967 interview, Myrdal remarked on the speed of change, as well as on the war in Vietnam, which he fiercely opposed. He reaffirmed his optimism that progress in America might be slow, but once achieved, while temporary backlash was possible, could not be reversed. Yet he expressed concerns as well: "I am scared my friend about the Vietnam War. Because if this escalation is going on, if you are isolating yourself, before world opinion, and rely upon financial power and military power to run the world then for a generation or longer everything you and I stand for might be lost." He starts to retreat from his own prior optimism about the impossibility of reversing progress, once achieved, especially if racial prejudice persists: "The most horrible thing which can happen in the world, is if the conflict between white and poor people, nations, becomes complicated by the racial issue. Then I

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<sup>26</sup> Material on the flap is collected in X07.83 MYRDAL, "Missions of Mrs. A. Myrdal," UNESCO archives, Paris. Cassin's correspondence on the issue are in 382AP/130.

<sup>27</sup> TK: Carnegie-Myrdal Study Correspondence, NYPL

would say we are really lost. ... And I know we are all playing down this racial issue, they too, the leaders of these countries, but it's smoldering under – this is what I'm really scared of.”<sup>28</sup>

#### V. Bunche, the Myrdals, and Human Rights Politics After the War

After *An American Dilemma*, Gunnar Myrdal went to Geneva, to run the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, where he advocated greater worldwide economic planning in order to help incorporate newly independent countries into a global economy and to render international the idea of the welfare state.<sup>29</sup> Alva Myrdal took over the Division of Social Sciences of UNESCO, running it from 1951 to 1955. She presided over, among other things, the organizations “enlightenment campaign” on human rights, which sought to measure attitudes and spread awareness of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In this role, she continued to emphasize that social science provided a universalism which could allow people to overcome race. Summarizing the accomplishments of UNESCO twenty years after its creation, Alva Myrdal pointed to the cooperation between social scientists and biologists against race prejudice. “It is now considered ‘backward’ and ‘uneducated’ in most countries and societies to hold beliefs of racial superiority and inferiority. Where racism is on the wane, it is because insight into the fundamental equality of all human beings is being taught and accepted.” As her pull quote emphasized: “If you’re a racist you’re definitely not with it!”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> “A Second Look at the American Dilemma” (Audiotape), The Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, 1967, Schomburg Center, NYPL. The interview was also published as “The American Dilemma: 1967 – An Interview with Gunnar Myrdal,” by Donald McDonald, *The Center Magazine* 1, no. 1 (Oct-Nov 1967): 30-33.

<sup>29</sup> For more on this period, see Jamie Martin, “Gunnar Myrdal and the Failed Promises of the Postwar International Economic Settlement,” and Samuel Moyn, “Welfare World,” *Humanity* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2017).

<sup>30</sup> Alva Myrdal, “Two Decades in the World of Social Science,” *The UNESCO Courier*, July-Aug 1966: 40-43.

Ralph Bunche rose to prominence as a US representative at the UN, serving in various roles from its founding through the 1960s, and winning the 1950 Nobel Peace Prize. Bunche worked to negotiate independence for former colonies, articulating a vision for human rights that saw it as the fulfillment of foundational Enlightenment promises, an effective counter to racism and imperialism. He also saw race as a source of psychological bias that posed an impediment to universalist ideas of both human rights and the American Creed. Bunche put forward a view of human rights politics that involved the progressive ratcheting up toward the fulfillment of founding promises, and that explained decolonization itself as part of this story, through the use of international law.

In his letter recommending Carnegie hire Bunche, Myrdal had described him as “as far as I know, the only Negro who is a trained political scientist,” adding “I do not know of any white political scientist with knowledge and interest in the Negro.”<sup>31</sup> He went on to note that Bunche “had not met with racial prejudice until he was 16 years old,” and that this probably accounted for his character: “intelligent, open-minded and cooperative.” This isn’t entirely accurate, but is how Bunche often presented himself.<sup>32</sup> Bunche was the first African American to receive a PhD in political science in the US, writing his dissertation at Harvard on French colonial administration in Togoland and Dahomey.

The dissertation appears to be something of a shift from his MA thesis on the political thought of Robert Filmer – though there is also some continuity between them. Bunche’s 1928 thesis praised Filmer for “the introduction of both rationalistic and historical method in a science of political thought which was sorely in need of it”; however, he argued, “Filmer’s greatest error

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<sup>31</sup> Microfiche 2B part 2 [7].

<sup>32</sup> In 1951, for example, Bunche described his childhood in Detroit and Los Angeles, writing that he had “often felt the whip-lash of racial prejudice.” Ralph Bunche, “Peace and Human Progress,” in *World Cooperation and Social Progress* (New York: League for Industrial Democracy, 1951). The speech was delivered at the 46<sup>th</sup> Annual Luncheon of the League, presided over by John Dewey.

was in rejecting the dogma of the freedom and equality of man.” Because of this, Filmer was often passed over, overshadowed by Hobbes, who for his part had rightly sensed what way the wind was blowing, and managed to harness a dogma of freedom and equality for his royalist cause. Bunche continues: “We know increasingly day by day in our own country that even democracy, that ‘seed-ground of our hopes,’ is possible only where favorable conditions of intelligence in the masses, sound economic policy, self-control, and a certain amount of indefinable confidence are present.” He adds in closing: “if there is any divine law in our political theory today it is a divine law of adaptability—of mutability and progress.” Listing the enemies of democracy, he includes Bolshevism, Syndicalism, and Fascism; the final word is crossed out from the typewritten version, replaced by hand with “National Socialism” – mirroring a change, on the first page, where he had crossed out “Mussolini” and replaced him with “Hitler.”<sup>33</sup>

Bunche’s dissertation was, he said, “stimulated by a deep interest in the development of subject peoples and the hopes which the future holds for them.” He writes of Africa: “Here is one place in a troubled world where mistakes previously committed may be corrected; where, indeed, a new and better civilization may be cultivated, through the deliberate application of human intelligence and understanding.” He proceeds with a study of colonial policies and regulations, based on research at the British Library and the Bibliothèque nationale de France, and a month of fieldwork funded by the Julius Rosenwald Fund,<sup>34</sup> though cautions that “too often...in the earnest consideration of Africa and her myriad problems, sight is lost of the African.” He expands:

Frequently in recent years the world has been deluded and often dazzled by the intricacies of imperialist diplomacy, the amazing statistics of colonial resources and trade, periodical expressions of broad but vague humanitarian principles, and the development of popular

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<sup>33</sup> Ralph Bunche Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. Box 12, folder 3.

<sup>34</sup> Bunche OSS files, page 27.

sentimental slogans such as “white man’s burden,” “trusteeship,” “mandates,” “mission civilisatrice,” and others. But one must sometimes wonder what is to become of the native,--what specific role is this innocent and too frequently incidental pawn to play in the game?

While this would seem to set out an effort to re-center the “native” as a political subject, that isn’t exactly Bunche’s point. Or more precisely, if it was his goal, he would present it as the endpoint of the trusteeship system, a reminder of what imperialism should achieve. At the same time, he would advocate some changes that seemed designed to more subtly shift power away from the colonial powers: the League should ensure that mandates were small, and overseen by a range of different colonial powers, to keep things manageable. The dissertation concludes by emphasizing that mandates should be run unselfishly, so as “to afford them an opportunity to properly prepare themselves for the eventual day when they will stand alone in the world. The African is no longer to be considered a barbarian, nor even a child, but only an adult retarded in terms of Western civilization.”<sup>35</sup>

Between completing his PhD and joining the Carnegie study, Bunche published his first book, *A World View of Race*, again echoing many of these themes. There, he exalts the promises of the American and French revolutions, and their “political promise” of universal human equality. Yet these ideas had, he claimed, “fallen on hard times”: while people continued to “pay lip service” to equality and rights, economic and political interests had overrode such ideals. This was accomplished largely through ideas about inherent racial inequality. Race was a concept with no scientific validity, but a compelling “social voodoo” power.<sup>36</sup> “Because theories of race lend themselves so conveniently to the exigencies of political and economic control,” he claimed, such theories had become widespread; echoing themes that would reappear in his notes

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<sup>35</sup> Bunche files, NYPL, box 12 folder 5.

<sup>36</sup> Ralph Bunche, *A World View of Race* (Washington, DC: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936). See pages 1-5.

on his interview with Eleanor Roosevelt, Bunche thought it possible that, with the strengthening of Fascism in the South, a version of Nazism could become more prominent in America, with blacks and Jews the most likely scapegoats.<sup>37</sup>

After the war, and following his work with Myrdal, Bunche placed a good deal of hope in the American promise. In 1951, describing “highly significant revolutions underway today...especially in Asia and Africa,” Bunche would insist: “The aspirations of these people are similar to those expressed by American colonials 175 years ago, though generally less radical and violent.”<sup>38</sup> In his 1947 Marshall Woods Lectures at Brown University, on “The United Nations and the Colonial Problem,” Bunche echoed arguments from his dissertation: “Those impatient voices which urge that all that is needed is a willingness on the part of the colonial powers to ‘free’ their colonies are, to put it kindly, naive in the extreme.” The colonial powers had undertaken “solemn responsibilities;” the colonial people were not yet ready to “shoulder” those themselves.<sup>39</sup> Yet the UN approach differed from that of the “mission civilizatrice” and the “white man’s burden”; there is “little that is Kiplingesque about it.” Instead, it was oriented toward securing peace, which would be hampered by either continued colonialism or immediate independence.<sup>40</sup>

Bunche’s 1950 Walgreen Lectures at the University of Chicago offer a more sustained consideration of human rights and national independence. With the Charter of the UN, he claims, “The Rights of Man are formally, if belatedly, confirmed by international edict.” And yet those

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<sup>37</sup> And yet, he concluded, while “wars involving white and dark peoples will be fought, so long as there are dark peoples to be conquered and held in subjection,”<sup>37</sup> the main dividing line in the future would be class. Bunche, *A World View of Race*, 93-96.

<sup>38</sup> Ralph Bunche, “Peace and Human Progress,” 7.

<sup>39</sup> Ralph Bunche, “The United Nations and the Colonial Problem,” collected in “Imperialism Ancient and Modern,” Marshall Woods Lectures, Brown University, October and November 1947: 51-61. Collected and bound by Brown University. See page 54.

<sup>40</sup> Bunche, “The United Nations and the Colonial Problem,” 57.

rights are far from realized: for “scores of millions of people,” including minority groups in the US, “the promises of the Atlantic Charter, the Four Freedoms, and the United Nations Charter remain unrealized.” (167) Such progress is underway: he points to the UDHR in particular as providing a “standard of achievement” for the territories still under imperial control, which he takes as evidence of its strength. And yet, responding to those who “profess not to be able to understand why these less fortunate peoples are malcontent and dissatisfied with the controlled and graduated progress,” he reminds them: “minority groups, as for example, the American Negro, have long since learned that there must be no compromise on the issue of human rights; that a right compromised is no right at all.”<sup>41</sup> (168)

Bunche can seem, in places, to be an apologist for imperial power. And yet he was savvier than this: committed to expanding a promise of rights and self-determination universally. Doing this required overcoming not only racial prejudice, but, as a prerequisite even for that, the self-interest of imperial powers, including those who would emphasize gradualism as a way of opposing change. He did not see that gradualism as purely an exercise in bad faith: rather, it was a problem of self-interest getting in the way of one’s better ideals. Combating it required not the staking of political claims – not an insistence the immediate seizure of rights, whether or not people were “ready” for them – but the ratcheting up of another universalism: that of international law.

## VI. Historicizing Universalism

Myrdal’s description of America, in the closing of *An American Dilemma*, as “humanity in miniature” betrays one of the more paradoxical aspects of American exceptionalism: the idea

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<sup>41</sup> Ralph Bunche, “Man, Democracy, and Peace—Foundations for Peace: Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms,” in *Ralph J. Bunche: Selected Speeches and Writings*, Charles P. Henry, ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995): 165-174.

that America is unique for being universal, that its specialness comes from its more perfect embodiment of something quintessentially human, and that its promise is providential for all. As the historian Tim Borstelmann summarizes the idea, partially quoting the character of a US colonel addressing US soldiers in Vietnam in Stanley Kubrick's 1987 film *Full Metal Jacket*: "inside every foreigner, there is an American trying to get out." Borstelmann expands:

From Plymouth Bay in 1620, to the Philadelphia convention hall in 1787, to Woodrow Wilson's White House in 1917, to the invasion route through southern Iraq in 2003, there has been an abiding assumption that American culture—American principles and practices—are not only the best ever created by human beings, but are also closely aligned with the very essence of human nature. The ultimate logic of American exceptionalism, on brightest display during the Cold War, held that U.S. history and American institutions had facilitated the full liberation of the human spirit and the fulfillment of the highest human aspirations.<sup>42</sup>

The narrative Borstelmann describes is one in which Myrdal's book appears to participate:

America is unique for its universalist aspirations; those aspirations require further realization, or universalizing, in America, in part to affirm America's status as a metonym for all humanity.

This narrative is widely criticized by political theorists for its treatment of racism as an aberration and assimilation as a goal. Critics of Myrdal are correct in many ways, but they also miss something important about him: his reliance not on the Creed alone, but on a separate yet related universalism of social science that he felt would allow people to see past racial prejudice or personal self-interest. Bunche, too, saw promise in international law to universalize the promises of the Enlightenment. Promises of universal human rights were not enough on their own. Myrdal understood, as did Bunche, that narratives of gradual fulfillment were not necessarily on the side of progress; they could also enable ongoing delay, the continued disavowal of the dilemma one was in. They each told histories (Bunche more than Myrdal) in

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<sup>42</sup> <https://academic.oup.com/dh/article/40/1/1/2366099/Inside-Every-Foreigner-How-Americans-Understand>

which the promise of universal rights had itself been complicit in that disavowal. To achieve progress, the promise had to be hitched to another aspect of a universal Enlightenment project. Yet their emphasis on universalism made alternative politics seem, as Ellison puts it, purely reactive. Rather than understand demands for equality as efforts to construct a new world, to make something for oneself, Myrdal and Bunche viewed those demands as efforts at fulfillment and inclusion in a prior universal.

Theorists have responded by emphasizing a pluralism of traditions, arguing that we either advocate progress, but do so without Myrdal's teleology attached, or that we reject the Creed as unsalvageable, opting in favor of some more radical alternative. But the dilemma now is not about which side to take: to recover something from Myrdal, or to recover something from elsewhere. The challenge is to see Myrdal, and the history of human rights that he attempted to project forward for the postwar peace, as caught up in the disavowal of its own limitations. Myrdal's project was contingent and unstable, built in response to uncertainty and attempting to project forward an imagined future of peace and universal right. To do this, he needed to rely on yet another universal, that of social science, in order to (he thought) transcend race. This was more than a claim to universalism in which everything else was cast as particular: the America Creed's claim to universalism was built on a disavowal of its own provincialism.