Case 17

Transforming America’s Perceptions of Relations Among its Races: Karl Gunnar Myrdal’s *AN AMERICAN DILEMMA*

*Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1936*

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*Background.* In its first few decades, the Carnegie Corporation of New York was largely occupied with meeting its financial commitments to other Carnegie philanthropic organizations. In the mid-1930s, when the Corporation began to catch up with those obligations, then-president Frederick Keppel began to contemplate new strategies for the Corporation’s discretionary income.

A member of the Carnegie Corporation’s board of trustees, Newton D. Baker, first suggested at a board meeting in 1935 that the Corporation consider “the general questions of negro education and negro problems.” Baker grew up in the South and was suffused with Confederate tradition. The motivation behind his suggestion was clearly conditioned by his racist attitudes; Baker believed that racism was based on biological distinctions, and he suggested “an infant race like the black people in this country” would enjoy greater benefit from education if they were forced to work for it.

Keppel traveled to Cleveland in 1936 to visit with Baker about a possible Corporation project embodying Baker’s suggestion. In following Baker’s advice, Keppel settled on a comprehensive study of race in America as an appropriate endeavor for the Corporation.

*Strategy.* Influenced by the 1936 study on race published by the Rosenwald Fund, which was written by a Dutch scholar, Keppel sought a European to conduct the study, understanding that the study should be perceived as objective and unbiased by domestic racial attitudes. Keppel collected a list of nominations from a variety of advisors of potential European scholars to conduct the Carnegie study on race in America. Karl Gunnar Myrdal, a Swedish economist, was one of twenty-five nominations, submitted by former assistant to a previous Corporation president, Beardsley Ruml. Myrdal had been a Rockefeller Foundation Fellow, along with his wife, in 1929–30, and his interaction with the Rockefeller philanthropies caused his path to cross Ruml’s. In August 1937, Keppel asked Myrdal to lead the Corporation study. Myrdal first declined, but then accepted in a telegram from Stockholm. Baker, when he learned of Keppel’s decision, expressed his satisfaction that the European professor was a better choice than any American.

Myrdal came to the United States in 1938 to deliver the Godkin Lectures at Harvard and to meet with Keppel about the proposed study. Myrdal then returned to Sweden while Keppel arranged a two-month tour through the South upon his return, to be guided by Jackson Davis, associate director of Rockefeller’s General Education Board.

Upon completion of this tour, Myrdal submitted an initial report to the Corporation on how he intended to conduct his study. In Keppel’s response to this report, he demonstrated a concern that the approach might be too broad and that he hoped Myrdal’s study would focus more directly on opportunities for Corporation grantmaking in the area of “Negro” education. Aside from this request, Keppel never directly ordered any particular approach nor wavered from steadfast support for Myrdal’s independence, despite what became growing criticism of Myrdal and his work. In assessing the relationship between Keppel and Myrdal, Ellen Condliffe Lagemann writes, in her history of the Carnegie Corporation, that Keppel’s “willingness to help [Myrdal] by making suggestions, combined with his insistence upon regard for Myrdal’s autonomy as a scholar, were vital to the inquiry from beginning to end.”

After submitting his initial plans to Keppel, fifty-one individuals reviewed Myrdal’s plans for proceeding. In April 1939, a group of scholars met at a week-long conference to refine and finalize his plans. Myrdal then commissioned forty research memoranda from scholars on race-related issues
across the country."

From the research memoranda and his own observations, Myrdal compiled and drafted the two-volume *An American Dilemma*, a vast study containing the commissioned studies of particular facets of the race problem as well as Myrdal’s own analysis stemming from his interpretation of these reports and his experiences on the Southern tour. The Carnegie Corporation published *An American Dilemma* in 1944."

*Impact.* According to Lagemann, *An American Dilemma* “had a lasting impact on public opinion and public policy.” In his assessment of the role of Myrdal’s study in American public policy, David Southern compared the impact of *An American Dilemma* in the civil rights field to George Kennan’s influence in the field of foreign policy through his famous “X” article in *Foreign Affairs.* The Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 rested its reasoning in part on Myrdal’s conclusions and those of other social scientists in part because it found history “inconclusive.”

Myrdal’s study has been cited by the Supreme Court in at least five different opinions. *An American Dilemma* served as supplemental proof to anecdotal evidence, from the service of blacks in World War II, that racial discrimination had no foundation in natural inferiority. It was a critical element of the persuasive case the early builders of the civil rights movement pieced together to combat institutional racism.

John Stanfield, in *Philanthropy and Jim Crow in American Social Science*, takes a more skeptical view of the impact of *An American Dilemma*, at least of its intrinsic value. He declares that the Myrdal study “has been viewed as a seminal work because it is too big for most people to read and because at least through the early 1980s no other agency or foundation has successfully attempted such a comprehensive analysis about blacks.” In deriding the study for providing a paradigm that essentially distracted liberals with false hopes for racial integration in lieu of the more efficacious means of solving racial problems through power and pluralism, Stanfield notes that *An American Dilemma* stood as a formidable weapon for liberals in discourse on race on account of its origins and association with what he calls, with some sarcasm, “a great democratic organization.” Despite Stanfield’s reservations about popular and intellectual reverence accorded to the Carnegie Corporation, the credibility Myrdal’s study was afforded in social matters cannot be denied, and Stanfield’s own critique demonstrates the value and forcefulness that the study gained, aside from financial support, from the study’s association with a foundation such as the Carnegie Corporation.

Despite its broad use outside the Carnegie Corporation, and despite Keppel’s request that the study offer the Corporation guidance in its grantmaking, the Corporation found little of practical use in *An American Dilemma*. No significant shift in its funding strategies can be detected. Only in the 1960s did the Corporation first begin to celebrate its role in providing intellectual stimulus to the civil rights movement in Myrdal’s study.

Notes

242. Ibid., 123.
244. Ibid., 132–33.
245. Ibid., 134–35.
246. Ibid., 136.
247. Ibid., 139.
248. Ibid., 140.
249. Ibid.
250. Ibid., 142–45.
251. Ibid., 124.
258. Lagemann, Politics of Knowledge, 146.