

Introduction

AN AMERICAN DILEMMA REVISITED grew out of a symposium hosted in 1994 by Morehouse College and the Morehouse Research Institute. The symposium was conceived in memory of Gunnar Myrdal, author of the monumental study *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944), from which the symposium drew its title. In his classic work, Myrdal developed a detailed historical, social, and economic inquiry into the status and life chances of African Americans during the period between the Great Depression of the 1930s and World War II. One of the products of the Morehouse symposium is this volume featuring essays by participants in the symposium. The chapters in this book assess the status of African Americans in various areas of contemporary American society since Myrdal's research and writings of the 1930s and 1940s. The authors address the interactions of race with the political, economic, educational, and justice institutions in the United States. Related issues such as gender and demographic shifts are also discussed.

Most of the problems that Myrdal saw as critical to the plight of African Americans remain prevalent: poverty and unemployment continue to be unacceptably high; crime and delinquency are rampant in our cities and suburbs; and racial discrimination and prejudice continue to divide Americans. When Myrdal's book was first published, racial segregation was widely accepted as a structural feature of everyday life in the United States. The belief among whites that they were innately superior to blacks was reinforced by the separate and unequal public accommodations in schools, employment opportunities, housing, and other accoutrements given legal sanction by the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision which upheld segregation with its "separate but equal" ruling. Racial polarization in the United States was exacerbated by the inability, or unwillingness, of the federal, state, and local governments to enforce the laws of the land, especially the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution. Blacks were repeatedly thwarted in their attempts to achieve equal and humane public accommodations. This, combined with de jure segregation in all vital areas of life contributed to the persistence of racial prejudice and discrimination.

Many African Americans gave up hope that any real change would occur in the South, where prejudice and discrimination were worst, and moved North in search of better futures. This sense of hopelessness is frequently cited as the major cause for the mass migration of African Americans from the South throughout the century. In 1900, only 10 percent of African Americans lived in northern cities; by the mid-1960s 50 percent resided in northern cities.

Many economists and historians refer to the decades after 1940 as a watershed for African Americans—a time of building, creativity, and economic progress. These decades, however, also witnessed the rise of a large African American underclass. Migrating African Americans often lacked the resources and education that employers demanded and ended up settling in inner cities under conditions of high unemployment and abject poverty, which were often worse than the conditions they had sought to escape in the South. This migration coincided with an awareness of a host of new urban social problems created by white flight: the migration of jobs out of the central city; the construction of highways, which often destroyed neighborhoods; and increases in crime, delinquency, and school dropout rates.

In *The Truly Disadvantaged*, William Wilson (1987) suggests that the ghetto poor, a group which is disproportionately African American, have become divorced from the lifestyle associated with American culture. Wilson argues that because members of this urban underclass are both spatially and culturally isolated from the middle class, they are denied the opportunity to adopt middle-class values and norms. This residential segregation has allowed generations to grow up without hope for advancement. Racial prejudice compounds the problem. Bobo and Klugel (1991) found that whites still perceive African Americans as more willing to live on welfare and as less intelligent and career-oriented than whites. Other recent studies (Ferguson, 1994; Reich, 1992) suggest that African Americans are losing ground in today's labor market. To make the preceding point more salient, unemployment among African Americans is now significantly higher than it was during the 1940s. According to the authors of *A Common Destiny* (Jaynes and Williams, 1989), the unemployment rate among black and white men was virtually equal in the 1940s, with only 1 man in 10 among both blacks and whites unemployed. By the 1980s, however, fewer than 8 in 10 black men were employed, while the unemployment rate among white men remained virtually unchanged. The same study illustrated that white women are more likely to be employed than black women. Another way of expressing the same finding is to examine the unemployment ratio of black to white workers. This ratio was 1.69 in 1948, but had increased to 2.32 in 1983 (Clayton, 1992).

The writings in this volume do not argue that no economic gains were achieved by African Americans from 1940 to 1980, but rather that improvements were concentrated in a relatively short time span, between the late 1960s and mid-1970s, when federal antidiscrimination laws were being strictly enforced. This federal activism led to a dramatic increase in the number of African Americans employed by federal contractors or in firms subject to affirmative action requirements. However, the advancements appear to have waned or ended entirely in the mid-1970s. Moreover, since the 1980s there has been a public backlash against any set-aside programs based on race, and the courts have generally ruled that these programs are unconstitutional.

At the heart of this book is the question of whether the presence of an African American “underclass” has become a permanent feature on the American landscape. Have we become, as Gunnar Myrdal argued in 1944, a caste-ridden society which passes the same social status from generation to generation? If the answer to these questions is yes, what are the implications for racial equality and economic parity? This book will examine the factors that have led to declining economic conditions for many African Americans, and it will suggest ways to improve their economic standing. The authors examine the complex interactions among the problems that contribute to the disadvantaged position of African Americans in today’s society: prejudicial attitudes limit African Americans’ access to jobs and housing; residential segregation isolates African Americans, which can breed negative attitudes and behaviors on both sides of the racial divide; high unemployment and low wages limit access to many of the basic amenities taken for granted by other Americans.

In chapter 1, Stephen R. Graubard frames the historical background within which Myrdal’s research took place. Graubard argues that even though animosities between blacks and whites have declined somewhat, race remains a pressing problem in the United States. In contemporary America, factors associated with race have increasingly been confused with structural changes in the economy, economic dislocations of workers, and changes in social class and lifestyles. Graubard shows how this social-historical and economic background shapes so many of America’s race-related social problems.

In chapter 2, Robert A. Dentler examines what strides African Americans have made in the political arena. When Myrdal conducted his research, African Americans residing in the South were effectively excluded from the political system by the legalized discrimination of the Jim Crow laws, persistent prejudice, and violence. The violence faced by African Americans during the 1940s was almost as frequent as it was after Reconstruction. Although laws have changed and African Americans are widely enfran-

chised, Dentler illustrates that African-American political power has not matched their electoral participation.

The causes and problems of residential segregation are the topic of chapter 3. Like Myrdal, Reynolds Farley suggests that racial residential segregation is one of the key factors leading to the educational and economic disadvantage of African Americans. In essence, many African Americans are stuck in poverty due to their cultural and spatial isolation. Farley demonstrates that with improvement in their socioeconomic standing and with limited migration to small cities, segregation declines.

In chapter 4, Ronald Ferguson attempts to explain the differentials in earnings between African Americans and whites. Ferguson examines the “skills mismatch” caused by the limited or inferior education and job training available to African Americans. This mismatch limits their ability to compete for high-skilled entry level jobs, and many end up in the lowest paying service and retail labor markets. Many African Americans also suffer from a “spatial mismatch,” as blue collar jobs move from the central cities where most African Americans live. To reduce economic disparity among entrants in the workforce from different racial backgrounds, Ferguson calls for increased support for—and accountability from—the institutions that should inspire, train, and educate our youth.

Chapter 5 addresses the central question of whether a large black underclass has become a permanent phenomenon in the United States. William Darity, Jr., asks whether social mobility in this country has slowed significantly over the course of the century. If so, what are the prospects for achieving racial equality? These questions were central to Myrdal’s research. As Myrdal wrote, “White prejudice and discrimination keep the Negro low in standards of living, health, education, manners, and morals” (Myrdal, 1962). But Myrdal thought that Americans would ultimately abandon discriminatory practices and uphold the American creed: “One implication of their belief in the principles of democracy and Christianity is that they are more susceptible to the more specific and practical consequences of these principles.” It has been fifty years since Myrdal penned those words, and, as Darity writes, American society remains segregated and unequal.

In chapter 6 John Sibley Butler examines how social forces affect the acquisition of skill and success in labor markets. Butler points out that, when Myrdal wrote, assimilation was the dominant measure of success for black entrepreneurs. Since then, however, research has pointed to the importance of “self-contained communities” for the development of professional and business classes within the context of larger societies. Reexamining American history from this perspective shows more successes among African Americans than previously observed. Butler also calls for more at-

tention to programs designed to produce successful, independent businesspeople in today's changing economy.

Either directly or indirectly authors of each of the preceding chapters stress the importance of education in the battle for racial equality. Unfortunately, as Walter R. Allen and Joseph O. Jewell discuss in chapter 7, education is an area where African Americans have not fared well over the past several decades. According to Allen and Jewell, the best educational opportunities have been most available to the privileged and rich. Unless we rethink our educational policies, many young African Americans will enter the twenty-first century unprepared to participate fully in American life.

In chapter 8, Clayton examines the role of the churches during the civil rights movement. I believe that minimal interaction between the black and white churches prolonged the battle for social integration, and that religion was often used to justify the status quo. Despite their great potential for effectiveness, both black and white churches generally responded to the civil rights movement with silence. Myrdal observed similar problems, but despite the reluctance of many churches and churchmen to actively participate in the Civil Rights Movement, he saw hope:

It is true that the church has not given much of a lead to reforms but has rather lagged when viewed from the advanced positions of Negro youth and Negro intellectuals. But few Christian churches have ever been, whether in America or elsewhere, the spearheads of reform. That this fundamental truth is understood—underneath all bitter criticism—is seen in the fact that Negro intellectuals are much more willing to cooperate with Negro churches than white intellectuals with white churches (Myrdal, 1961).

Churches have become more activist since the 1970s, and urban ministries are now focal points in most denominations, but much work remains to be done if the churches are to become true spearheads of reform.

Chapters 9, 10, and 11 are concerned with crime and the application of justice among African Americans. Susan Welch and her collaborators (chapter 9), and Samuel Walker and Cassia Spohn (chapters 10 and 11 respectively) suggest that increased crime among African American youth cannot be overlooked when studying the economic disparities between black and white Americans. Likewise, social and economic conditions must be considered when examining crime. African Americans are involved in criminal activities at an alarming rate, primarily because of poor job prospects and higher labor force dropout rates. As Myrdal observed, "Most people discuss crime as if it had nothing to do with social conditions and was simply an inevitable outcome of personal badness" (Myrdal, 1944). Poor em-

ployment opportunities, especially in the inner-cities, contribute to the lack of hope for a decent job among many youth. For others, the pay for available jobs is so low that many individuals leave the labor force and turn to illegitimate or illegal markets. The criminal record that many ultimately receive places them at a disadvantage in the labor market, creating what William Wilson (1987) called the "left behinds."

The number and proportion of African Americans in prison constitute a grave problem. There are more African American men under correctional supervision than there are in colleges and universities (Bureau of Justice, 1989; U.S. Department of Education, 1990). Given such a startling statistic, it is unlikely that an inner-city child does not know someone who is or has been in prison. This phenomenon has serious implications for the youth in these communities, who often view "doing time" as an initiation rite. These chapters demonstrate that, despite improvements in the administration of justice, true justice will not have been served until the underlying social and economic inequalities between whites and blacks are addressed.

To understand the nature of racial conflict in the United States it is also necessary to understand the demographic transformations that have accompanied the social construction of racial differences and racial acceptance. In chapter 12, Antonio McDaniel illustrates how the population of the United States has changed over time and how these changes have led to social problems. McDaniel believes that racial conflict and competition have been hallmarks of American society since European settlers encountered established Native American populations in the fifteenth century, and that they are unlikely to vanish in the foreseeable future.

The final chapter deals with the intersection of racial inequality and an equally salient social problem: gender inequality. In the tradition of Myrdal, Doris Wilkinson writes that, along with racism, class oppression and sexism pervade American culture. Myrdal drew many comparisons between the status afforded women and African Americans. Specifically, Myrdal stated that when studying discrimination and prejudice directed at "Negroes" one must examine another disenfranchised group, women: "Their present status, as well as their history and their problems in society, reveal striking similarities to those of the Negro" (Myrdal, 1944). Wilkinson believes that racism, sexism, and class differences are crucial variables in the mapping of life experiences. Furthermore, any discussion of racial and structural differentiation exclusive of gender leaves a void in our knowledge base and hence in our comprehension of racial realities.

Whether explicitly or implicitly, each chapter in this book illustrates the deleterious effects of racism and prejudice, which have eased only slightly since Myrdal wrote *An American Dilemma*. Animosity between blacks and whites persist, although less entrenched than in the years preceding the

civil rights movement of the 1960s. *An American Dilemma* made a seminal contribution to the field of social research on racial relations. This volume was conceived as a report card on where the United States stands on the same issue today. While the focus of this book is on African Americans, the significance of the issues is not limited to African Americans. Many of the problems at hand, which have gone unnoticed or unresolved since the 1940s, have a new urgency in light of the massive, racially diverse immigration of the last two decades. Despite the daunting magnitude of the problems associated with race in the United States, America cannot afford to allow significant numbers of its citizens to lose hope, to give up on the myriad opportunities of American life. Somehow we must find workable solutions to an enduring American dilemma.