

Hopes for America

Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience.

Social Engineering and Racial Liberalism, 1938–1987. WALTER A. JACKSON. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 1990. xxiv, 447 pp., illus. \$34.95. Fred W. Morrison Series in Southern Studies.

This is a wide-sweeping, incisive, and penetrating biography of a great intellect and international figure. It is also a timely book. Little more than four decades ago, African-American soldiers returned from a World War against fascism to face unrelenting racial discrimination and segregation at home. Despite limited and ambivalent federal attention to their rights and needs, African-Americans successfully mounted a civil rights movement to dismantle many of the institutional bases of racial oppression. Today, in the context of war in the Persian Gulf, African-American leaders decry the disproportionate number of black soldiers sent to the front lines and the failure of the federal government to join a serious home-front battle with poverty, interracial turmoil, increasing infant mortality, schooling crises, homelessness, and underemployment. Historical echoes and parallels come cheap; but here they are fitting—as Walter Jackson's illuminating biography examines the development of Gunnar Myrdal's opus *An American Dilemma*, a work that pricked the conscience of postwar white America and helped produce the liberal orthodoxy about race that informed social policy and popular thinking for a generation. In this imposing analysis, Jackson traces the evolution of Myrdal's work, locating it in his intellectual and personal development and in the social history of and scholarship about American race relations after the New Deal. He focuses as well on Myrdal's rich and troubled personal history, his sustaining relationship with and dependence upon the gifted Alva Myrdal, and his substantial contributions as a Nobel laureate economist and Swedish citizen. But the centerpiece of this substantial biography is Myrdal's contribution to postwar efforts to address the American racial crisis.

An American Dilemma was commissioned

by the Carnegie Foundation under the leadership of its president Frederick Keppel. The project was unusual. The Carnegie style of philanthropy was to identify interesting research ideas and then locate "exceptional men" to undertake them. Interested in the idea of a study of urban Negroes, Keppel initially conceived a research project that would follow this model: identification of an individual "free from sentimental and social bias and from political prejudice," who would travel in the United States and write a report for the educated public—a modern Tocqueville. Unlike other major philanthropies, Carnegie had paid little consistent attention to race relations. The Foundation was not beholden to the southern elite, had given limited funding to black colleges that were still dependent on the paternalism of southern whites, and supported few scholars who researched issues of race. As a result, this exceptional researcher was free of the checks and restrictions that generally shaped research funded by major philanthropies, including the orthodoxy of American social scientists.

In many ways, Myrdal was a modern Tocqueville, an intellectual aristocrat. Born into a religious, upwardly mobile, unhappy family, Gunnar was the first member to move beyond grammar school. A brilliant student, he resented intellectual authoritarianism, embraced rationalist ideas of progress, and possessed a pragmatic optimism about social intervention. Although a member of the inner circle of Gustav Cassel, a leading neoclassical economist, Myrdal gradually came to view positivist economics as permeated with metaphysical assumptions and subjective valuations. A year in the United States as a Rockefeller Fellow coincided with the beginnings of the Great Depression. The exposure to extremes of wealth and poverty, the glaring absence of a class-conscious labor movement, extensive discussions with American social scientists, and the powerful influence of his wife, Alva, clarified his vocational vision: the economist as social engineer and social democrat. He returned to Stockholm and quickly realized this vision. Successor to Cassel as Lars

Hjerta Professor of Economics at the University of Stockholm, Myrdal was also an economic adviser to the Social Democratic government. In these capacities, he wrote and advocated "an intellectually coolly rationalistic," "technically oriented," "prophylactic social welfare policy" calling for deficit spending to finance public works in times of recession, population planning, full employment, redistribution of income, and family support measures. The man later commissioned to research American race relations was committed to the development of a social welfare 'state. As the Nazi regime broadcast its racist propaganda throughout Europe, he felt attracted to the offer to lead a study about "certain fundamental features in the tragedy of humanity."

Myrdal's lack of knowledge of or involvement in the scholarship of American race relations freed him to develop a research project that encompassed a broad range of perspectives and interpretations. Walter Jackson incisively summarizes the competing research agendas and scholarly interpretations of American social scientists, both black and white; he delineates the dexterity with which Myrdal was able to secure collaboration from liberals, centrists, and radicals. He describes in telling detail Myrdal's skillful research into and observations of U.S. race relations. And he explicates the important influence of Ralph Bunche, the black intellectual closest to Myrdal, who finally failed to persuade Myrdal that most people had no difficulty in rationalizing their prejudices.

After extensive travel and organization of reports from his collaborators, Myrdal wrote *An American Dilemma* in Sweden, in the midst of the war. Deeply troubled by Swedish neutrality, government restrictions on the press, and accommodations to Europe's New Order and constantly exposed to the power of Nazi propaganda, Myrdal turned to his hopes—more than to empirical evidence—in propounding the power of the American creed for advancing democracy and eliminating racial oppression. Clearly echoing the arguments of Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois, Myrdal posited that there was an irreducible contradiction between egalitarian and democratic ideals and the practices of racial oppression in the United States. Myrdal argued as well that this contradiction was institutionalized in the political and legal system, and in the tensions between the social bases needed for a technologically developed economy and those of an agrarian racial caste system. But the decisive issue for Myrdal was the moral conflict such contradictions created within whites—between their belief in the American creed and their defense of irrational

prejudices and traditions that had been shaped by local economic and political factors. *An American Dilemma* sought to resolve these many contradictions by delineating the irrational bases of racial prejudices, documenting the scientific evidence that refuted claims about inherent racial differences, and explicating findings of the deleterious effects of prejudices, discrimination, and racial oppression on the African-American community. Myrdal argued that a "vicious circle" of racial prejudice, stereotypes, poverty, and prejudice generated a cumulative process. And he warned consistently of the dangers of neglect, of the growth of an alienated underclass. But he concluded that the power of the American creed in popular culture and political life was sufficient to halt this process.

Jackson chronicles the popular and scholarly reception of *An American Dilemma*, its utility in providing a popular education on the scope and complexity of racial discrimination, its influence on the direction of scholarly research, and its role as the key text in the new liberal orthodoxy about civil rights. In penetrating analysis, he also discusses the important silences in this work: the absence of a focus on African-American culture, institutions, or communities; the assumption that assimilation rather than cultural pluralism was the democratic solution to racial oppression; the failure to analyze how to address persistent poverty, de facto segregation, or racial polarization. In all of these senses, Myrdal was no Tocqueville—who had been deeply pessimistic about the intractability of racism. In his subsequent work and writing, Myrdal heightened his emphasis on the structural sources of racial oppression and began to appreciate the tremendous obstacles to the development of a social democratic movement across racial lines in America. His service in the Swedish cabinet and his important work heading the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and supporting east-west trade frequently pitted him against the Cold War superpower that had provided his second home. And his writings on Third World development and opposition to the Vietnam War further strained relations with U.S. government elites. Myrdal died in 1987, his sequel to *An American Dilemma* unfinished. He had hoped to restore to Americans a moral concern with racial inequality. However pessimistic we may be about the current racial crisis, this important biography draws us back to the power of ideas and to the crucial role of an optimism of the will in movements for social change.

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Physics in Geneva

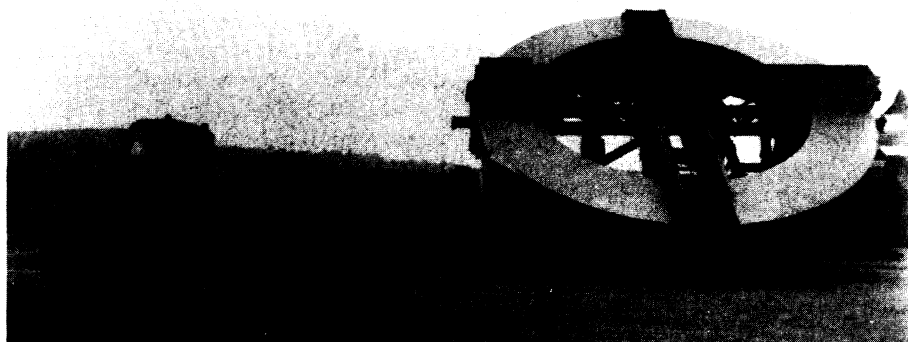
History of CERN. Vol. 2, Building and Running the Laboratory, 1954-1965. ARMIN HERMANN, JOHN KRIGE, ULRIKE MERSITS, and DOMINIQUE PESTRE, with a contribution by Laura Weiss. North-Holland (Elsevier), New York, 1990. xxii, 880 pp., illus., + plates. \$138.50.

This second volume by the "Study Team for CERN History"—an international group of European historians and physicists that formed to write the history of the Geneva-based international high energy laboratory—makes a substantial contribution to the scholarly literature on big science since World War II. The first volume focused on the politics of founding the laboratory. This one touches all major facets of CERN's development in the 1950s and '60s, uncovering a multitude of cultural, scientific, technological, and sociological themes relating to the building of the accelerators and detectors, the organization of the large-scale collaborative research effort, the administrative and financial program, and the negotiation of contracts with industry. Special attention is given to the relationship of CERN to the states that were members of the enterprise and to outside countries, particularly the United States. Each chapter stands alone, reflecting the interests, experience, and style of its author. Thus, some accounts are presented in the more analytic and often provocative tone of the historian (Krige and Pestre) and others in the more matter-of-fact voice of the physicist (Mersits and Weiss). Broader in focus than the other chapters is Hermann's social and institutional essay connecting CERN to the larger field of high energy physics in the '50s and '60s.

Volume 2 begins at the end of 1954, with the replacement of the original Conseil Européen de la Recherche Nucléaire by the English-named European Organization for Nuclear Research. It recounts the building of CERN's first two accelerators—the 600-MeV Synchro-cyclotron (SC, first beam in 1957) and 28-GeV Proton Synchrotron

(PS, first orbit in 1959)—and the early years of research with these machines and continues through the launching in late 1965 of the Intersecting Storage Rings (ISR) and 300-GeV Proton Synchrotron (SPS) projects. Two themes are interwoven: how the inexperienced CERN physicists learned to conduct big science and how they struggled to catch up with the Americans, having to experiment in the '50s and '60s, as Pestre explains, "with very heavy equipment on the scale of that in the best American laboratories, but without having the benefit of a tradition, without having transited through medium-sized devices or intermediary energies." Although American laboratories were a "source of expertise," CERN could not simply borrow from them, because of its need to be, above all, "reliable and accessible to all countries." This need, Mersits proposes, bound the laboratory by "a kind of conservatism hindering spontaneous developments. . . . The need of balancing national interests combined with a lack of experience on this terrain, resulted in a tendency to a rather heavy committee structure and meant being overcautious in commitments to very new ideas." The committees slowed down decision-making; CERN tried "to proceed by the most precise and secure way, which was often far from being the most efficient and quick one." Initially, CERN physicists did not worry about their detectors being "late." But by the time the PS was under construction, Krige points out, the importance of being "ready in time" was all too obvious. Victor Weisskopf, CERN's fourth director-general, a veteran of wartime Los Alamos, where time was perhaps the most pressing constraint, reflected, "It is no good in this field to be excellent and always late."

The authors zero in on many specific issues of collaborative research in the international high energy physics laboratory. One was "whether or not the builders of the detectors should have particular advantages when it came to using them." Pestre explains



"The Synchro-cyclotron magnet coil on its way to Geneva, December 1955." [From *History of CERN*, vol. 2; CERN photo]