**Revealing "the struggle and the dream": Sterling A. Brown's role in producing *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy***

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**Abstract**. This article investigates the role of poet, critic and vanguard Black intellectual Sterling A. Brown in the production of *An American Dilemma* (Myrdal 1944*)*, a foundational book that would influence national policy in relation to race for at least fifty years after its publication. Commissioned to deliver an analysis of "the Negro in American culture," Brown set out to create a work of integrity that would convey the richness of African American cultural traditions and contribute to a balanced appraisal of their overarching experiences. The Carnegie Corporation selected outsider Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal to lead the study to ensure an unbiased analysis of the "Negro problem." This apparent commitment to impartiality obscures the reality of the impact of race on the book's construction. These dynamics had a particularly forceful impact on Brown, the only member of Myrdal's team with a deep understanding of the historical development, aesthetics and politics of the African American cultural tradition.

**Keywords**. African American culture, race relations, social sciences, history.

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In 1939, Sterling A. Brown was invited to participate in the Carnegie-funded "Study of the Negro in America," the most generously resourced and comprehensive study of race up to that time (W. Jackson 1990; Southern 1987; Southern 1995). In the years leading up to the study, he criticised white "interpreters" who considered "the Negro as one peculiarly endowed to bear the burdens" of being "dispossessed" and "kicked around." He drew attention to the stereotypes they produced of "the Negro" as primitive, comic, easy-going, sensual and quick to violence, whilst they forgot "to mention insult, brutality, deprivation of opportunity, injustice and exploitation" (Brown 1935: 280). At the same time, he had little patience for those Black authors and intellectuals who condemned as "propaganda" any writing that revealed Black urban life (particularly exemplified by Harlem) as more than "a round of cabarets or parties," or that depicted the lives of Black southerners as something other than "sunny pastoral" (Brown 1938a: 121). Brown exhorted Black American writers to portray the life and character of the race honestly and comprehensively, attending to all its different facets and to direct their energies towards exposing "the struggle and the dream." He was confident that "the truth of Negro experience in America is strong enough propaganda for anyone. The complete picture will not be one of unalloyed tragedy…" (Brown 1941:146).

Appointed to deliver an analysis of "the Negro in American culture," Brown set out to follow the advice he had given to other Black writers; to create a work of integrity that would convey the richness of Black cultural traditions, the "immense artistic fecundity of Negro folk life" (Brown 1930) and contribute to a balanced appraisal of the overarching African

American experience. Commissioned in the mid-1930s, the study Brown was a part of resulted in *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, a book that would wield an enormous influence on the shapers of American social policy (Myrdal 1944). Its principal author Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal highlighted the stark discrepancy between white America's professed democratic values and its treatment of its Black citizens. It was cited within the Supreme Court decision that legally ended segregation in the public schools in 1954 ("Brown V Board of Education of Topeka"). Acclaimed by the nation's leading critics, it became an essential text for intellectuals with an interest in American race relations (Southern 1995). One of the reasons why *An American Dilemma* became so indispensable was that Myrdal assembled a team which included the country's major social scientists of the day: economists, political scientists, educators, and anthropologists from all over the United States.

Wrangles about the "truth of Negro experience" and who could produce authoritative accounts of "authentic" Black life regularly surfaced during the twentieth century and beyond.[1] Whether in relation to the New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s, the romanticising of "authentic" folk culture at risk due to modernisation in the 1930s, how to interpret urban violence and the Black family in the 1960s, or the "racial authenticity" of President Barack Obama, the debates have been both inter- and intra-racial. Some saw arguments about "authenticity" as necessary in order to reach an objective "truth" about the Black experience in America, others saw them as part of the wider struggle for racial liberation from within a white supremacist nation (Carby 1994; Kelly 1992; Matlin 2013; West 2017). The Black

[1] See for example, Carby, H. 1994. "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston." Pp. 30-44 in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, edited by Fabre, G. & O'Meally, R. G. New York [etc.]: Oxford University Press; Kelley, R. 1992. "Notes on Deconstructing "the Folk"." *The American Historical Review* 97(5):1440-08; Matlin, D. 2013. *On the Corner African American Intellectuals and the Urban Crisis*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press; West, C. 2017. "Ta-Nehisi Coates Is the Neoliberal Face of the Black Freedom Struggle." in *The Guardian*. Manchester: The Guardian.

scholars involved in the Carnegie-Myrdal study frequently challenged the representations put forward by their white counterparts, whilst disagreeing among themselves as to how the differentiated layers of race and community should be represented. Black and white researchers brought clashing beliefs to their endeavour and they operated within a structurally racist framework without explicitly acknowledging how the inequalities they were addressing on a national scale were manifested in the ethics of their own practice.

Out of more than seventy contributors, Brown was the sole literary scholar. He had a sophisticated understanding of Black culture and was respected by African American and white intellectuals as an outstanding poet and an intelligent, outspoken and fair-minded critic. A key figure in the New Negro Renaissance, Brown reached readers interested in race through publications like *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*.[2] His poetry collection *Southern Road* (Brown 1932) achieved national acclaim and individual poems had been published since in national magazines such as *Poetry*, *Esquire* and *The Nation* (Brown 1938b, 1938c, 1939).[3] In his literary criticism, Brown systematically codified the most prevalent stereotypes of African Americans and exposed the political and economic motivations behind them (Brown 1933:197-98; Brown 1937b). In 1936, he became the highest-ranking African American employed on the Federal Arts Projects when he was recruited as the "National Editor of Negro Affairs" on the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) (Sklaroff 2009). He used his understanding of Black history to challenge racist misrepresentations of Black Americans in the popular State Guides; and his essay on the history of African Americans in *Washington:*

[2] Brown wrote nearly a dozen critical essays and more than fifty reviews for the National Urban League's *Opportunity.* Although it had a small number of subscribers in comparison to the NAACP's journal *The Crisis*, during the 1920s *Opportunity*'s influence grew as the *The Crisis*'s waned. It was a key debating ground for cultural criticism, debates on Black life and racial equality into the 1930s. Charles S. Johnson was editor from *Opportunity*'s inception in 1923 until 1928 when he departed to Fisk University. Hutchinson, G. 1995. *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
[3] For example, Brown, S. 1938b. "The Young Ones." *Poetry* 3; 1938c. "Glory, Glory." *Esquire*; 1939. "Bitter Fruit of the True." *The Nation.*

*City and Capital* caused a furore in Congress with its references to historical miscegenation and to the grim contemporary conditions of Black D.C. (Brown 1937a; Brown 1979). Although Brown's reputation was somewhat revived in the 1970s, he is less well-remembered than contemporaries such as Langston Hughes (whose renown scarcely wavered over subsequent decades) or Zora Neale Hurston (whose reputation was restored by 1970s feminists, particularly Alice Walker). However, he was at this earlier time a revered spokesperson and a highly influential cultural figure; Lawrence P. Jackson (2013: 37-53) sums up his importance as "the ombudsman critic during the 1930s and early 1940s." Brown's expertise meant he was in a strong position to interpolate his conception of "the truth of Negro experience" into the study.

And yet even a cursory reading of *An American Dilemma* is sufficient to establish that little about the aesthetics, folkways and cultural traditions that Black Americans had built as part of their active resistance to oppression filtered into the final text. In the process of shifting the moral responsibility of the "Negro problem" to the white majority, *An American Dilemma* inadvertently denied African Americans agency, cultural creativity and resilience. This void combined with the book's negative portrayal of Black culture (in the anthropological sense signifying a "particular way of life" - family structures, behaviours, educational, religious and civic institutions) meant that the study was later criticised for portraying African Americans as creatures whose every action was a reaction to white American racism.[4]

[4] See Ellison, R. 1958. "An American Dilemma: A Review." in *Shadow and Act*, edited by R. Ellison. New York: Random House. "But can a people…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?"

Myrdal and his researchers set out to convey the scale of prejudice against Black Americans. The unintended consequence of the arsenal of evidence they amassed was that the story told leaned towards "unalloyed tragedy" rather than towards what Brown wanted to convey - a more sophisticated understanding of "the truth of Negro experience in America." In fact, a single pernicious statement from the book in relation to Black culture was to be repeated so often over the subsequent decades that it would become a refrain: "American Negro culture … is a distorted development, or a pathological condition, of the general American culture"(Myrdal 1944). By the tumultuous mid 1960s the book was blamed for influencing labour secretary Daniel Patrick Moynihan to claim that slavery had left behind a legacy of destructive cultural mores that contributed to a self-perpetuating cycle of unemployment and poverty (Moynihan 1965). "Archconservatives" such as economist George Gilder and political scientist Charles Murray had "a field day explaining the ominous rise of the Black underclass in terms of moral deficiency" (Handlin 1963; Moynihan 1965; Rainwater 1967; Ryan 1971; Silberman 1964; Southern 1995:227-53, 41.).

How were Brown's efforts to showcase Black agency, creativity and resilience side-tracked within the Carnegie-Myrdal study? Scholars praised Brown's unpublished memoranda but most did not pay close attention to the specifics of his efforts (Farnsworth 2010; Gabbin 1985). Literary historian John Edgar Tidwell (2009:211) is the exception; he describes how Brown attempted "a radically different representational mode of preserving Black cultural expression..." Although historians increasingly explored the scholarship of Black social scientists of the mid-century (Gilpin and Gasman 2003; Harrison and Harrison 1999; Henry 1999; Hillis 1995; Holloway 2002; Platt 1991; Urquhart 1993), only Walter Jackson (1990) and David Southern (1987) attended to the engagement of Black intellectuals on the Carnegie study itself.

This paper is concerned with the social sciences at the mid twentieth century. Rather than see the weak representation of Black culture in *An American Dilemma* as a personal failing on the part of Brown (or Myrdal), I examine the context of its production. Could Brown and the other key players cast by Myrdal arrive at a shared understanding of "the truth of Negro experience in America"? Was Brown's view that Black cultural strengths provided a protective function shared by other participants? Was it even possible for Brown and the wider Myrdal team to communicate this widely to influence America's future treatment of its Black citizens without diminishing the impact of racism and inequality? Or did the power dynamics mitigate against the possibility of debate amongst the team and shut down opportunities for shared learning or attitudinal change amongst them?

Below I summarise the Carnegie Corporation's motivation for establishing the "Study of the Negro in America" and the perspectives of the various personnel who would assist its director Myrdal in its implementation. I situate Brown, the poet and critic, among the social scientists who were in the majority and grapple with what the key players thought about "Negro culture." I examine how culture is treated in the text of *An American Dilemma* before retreating behind the scenes to investigate what the archives tell us about the extent of Myrdal's commitment to exploring Black culture within his epic survey. Brown's intended approach was to incorporate a Black aesthetic into the methodological toolkit of the social sciences; to demonstrate the heterogeneity of Black culture and communities (as opposed to rudimentary stereotypes); and to describe culture's protective elements. I consider the barriers that Brown faced and the implications for conceptions of Black culture in later decades.

**Establishing the Study**

According to Frederick Keppel, President of the Trustees of the Carnegie Corporation, the aims of the study were to solve wide-ranging problems, to disseminate knowledge and to inform their own future funding strategy. Its roots, however, were more conservative. Trustee Newton D. Baker pushed Keppel to commission a study of the "Negro" (Myrdal 1944:vi). By the 1930s, various influences including that of anthropologist Franz Boas had undermined earlier arguments about Black intellectual inferiority in comparison to whites (Boas 1911; Myrdal 1944:90-91). However, many Americans including Baker remained convinced that African Americans were an "infant race" unable to live side by side with whites in the cities because of uncivilised habits they brought from the South (Lagemann 1989:127-29). Baker's belief that increased African American mobility would create social unrest prompted Carnegie to fund the study as much as the trustees' professed desire for increased knowledge. Tiffany Willoughby-Herard argues that Carnegie used their funding to advance "fictional meritocratic antidotes to economic antagonism and structural misery" (Willoughby-Herard 2015:13).

It is possible the Board members had altruistic motives for funding the study alongside Baker's "scientific" racism and fear of social unrest. What is certain is that Keppel made considerable efforts to find an impartial "outsider" from a country without an imperial past to lead the study. Eventually the Board chose economist Gunnar Myrdal, a professor at the University of Stockholm and a Social Democratic member of the Swedish parliament. Myrdal was assuredly a neutral outsider but it is unlikely that the trustees appreciated the extent to which he was a committed social engineer who believed in using his research to generate societal change (W. Jackson 1990:75-79, 94-95). He did not find many like-minded

social scientists in America. Instead, he found mainly what he referred to disparagingly as a "do-nothing" tendency" (Myrdal 1944:19). These were "nervous liberals," keen to stake out career advancement for themselves through defining what was "scientific" and legitimate, and to "control" what they saw as a society fractured by the dynamic forces of the Jazz Age of the 1920s (Gary 1999:2-7).

Although Myrdal's tendencies were towards "engineering" social change, he was determined to produce a final report that would be widely accepted as an objective assessment of American race relations. He selected staff and researchers accordingly, marshalling a notable roster to serve as his core team, including sociologist Dorothy S. Thomas, statistician Richard Sterner, economist Paul Norgren and two African Americans: Doxey Wilkerson and Ralph Bunche, both from Howard University. Additionally, the study employed 30 paid researchers plus a similar number of assistants and outside collaborators (Myrdal 1944:x-xi).

Many of the sociologists hired were influenced by the sort of "scientific sociology" described by William Ogburn in 1928; to be presented without "interpretation, popularization, and emotionalism" (Smith 1994:48). Donald Young from the University of Pennsylvania, a key adviser to Myrdal, was preoccupied with the need to prevent scholars allowing subjectivity or bias to affect their studies (Bannister 1987:215-20). At Chicago, Robert E. Park trained many of Myrdal's team including Guy B. Johnson, E. Franklin Frazier and Charles S. Johnson. Park was seen as the leading US authority on race in the early twentieth century. His conviction that race relations could only evolve in a slow cycle and that researchers were merely passive observers (Cortese 1995:235-54) was the polar opposite to Myrdal's belief in using research to foment change. Incorporating scholars with strong

credentials was one means Myrdal used from the outset to gain access to information and to ensure his conclusions would be widely accepted. Skilled in political manoeuvre, he also set out to disarm those he predicted might later find fault with his findings such as Howard Odum at the University of North Carolina (Beecher 2015: 164-5).

An impressive group of African American scholars participated as researchers including Charles S. Johnson and E. Franklin Frazier who were America's best-known Black sociologists in this period. Anthropologists Allison Davis and J. G. St. Clair Drake were also hired. Davis and his wife Elizabeth had researched extensively on class and caste in Mississippi, in partnership with white anthropologists Burleigh and Mary Gardner (Davis, Gardner, Gardner et al. 1941). St. Clair Drake would soon become well known for *Black Metropolis*, another foundational text in African American sociology and history (St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton 1945).[5] The Black Americans Myrdal hired shared a commitment to racial equality. They were aware that white American scholars perceived them as lacking objectivity because of their race and their advocacy for civil rights. In contrast, white social scientists were oblivious to the idea that their own whiteness might affect their scholarship. Of the Black scholars hired, Wilkerson and Lyonel C. Florant were communists; and Bunche, Frazier, and Brown had argued since the early 1930s for a greater emphasis on class (Miller 2012:105-12; Beecher 2015: 58-69). They dismissed notions of essential racial difference as justification for differential treatment and scorned depictions of African Americans as a homogenous group lacking differentiation or diversity (Brown 1933:189-91; Bunche 1936:6-7; Platt 1991:151-52). Myrdal did not share the racist view that Black participants would produce inferior work due to their race or radicalism. He recalled in later years: "It's history's

[5] This was a history of African Americans in Chicago during the first half of the twentieth century, drawn mainly from data collected during the Federal Writers' Project.

choice that the Negroes [were] in the situation they were in, if they were intellectually advanced people, they were of course radical" (W. Jackson 1990:111).

Myrdal deliberately mixed up the scholars he brought on to the project, not only to insulate his findings from potential criticism but also to ferment an intellectual energy and new thinking. It was laudable to constitute a racially mixed "team" at a time of almost total scholarly segregation. However, where the ethnically mixed national leadership team on the FWP at least shared a vision of their remit and strategy (Hirsch 2003), the Myrdal team had no shared mission. They had very little time together to thrash out conflicting perspectives but relied on a notion of objectivity which the white scholars on the project believed could not be attained by any of the African Americans. That being Black, clever and ambitious equated with being radical and activist in the segregated society of the 1940s was not under dispute.[6] That it precluded one attaining scholarly excellence was a disjunction in ideology between the scholars that appears to have affected the study tremendously without ever being named or discussed.

**Educating the Economist: "The Negro in American Culture"**

When Myrdal first toured the South shortly after arriving from Sweden in September 1938, he showed a genuine desire to learn from "cultural insiders" like Brown (Tidwell 2009:212). Brown, in turn, was excited about the possibility of participating in the project. Although he had a national reputation as a poet and critic, he had struggled to secure

[6] See for example, Denning, M. 1998. *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. London, New York: Verso; Jackson, L. 2013. *The Indignant Generation : A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934-1960*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press; Mullen, B. 1999. *Popular Fronts : Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935-46*. Urbana: Urbana : University of Illinois Press, c1999.

a publisher for his second and more radical poetry collection in the more difficult climate of the 1930s.[7] His senior role on the national editorial team at the Federal Writers' Project was over; the project wound down as the nation prepared for war (Mangione 1972:230). Therefore, Brown saw the Carnegie-Myrdal study as "a great chance for me to win my spurs in scholarship" and he wanted to be a part of an endeavour that would be potentially transformative for Black Americans (Sterling A. Brown to Gunnar and Alva Myrdal, 6 May 1940, Gunnar Myrdal Papers, Arbettarrörelsens Arkiv, Stockholm).

Brown was well-placed to take on a consequential role in that transformation. His prior writing demonstrated the power of cultural stereotypes in subjugating Black Americans. They were as effective in their way as the legal and extra-legal methods that Bunche and Arthur Raper would describe in their memoranda for the study (Mazzari 2006:190-211; Urquhart 1993:81-91). Equally, Brown had catalogued the expressive forms that developed to form a uniquely Black American culture. His perspective was crucial as the other scholars involved had given little prior attention to African American cultural practices, expressed through religion, music, speech, art or literature.

Some were simply not interested. For example, Young was more concerned with making comparisons of general functioning across racial groups. Those who were interested were entangled in acrimonious disputes. Were African dialects, musical styles, crafts, or religious practices retained when slaves were captured and brought to the "new world"? Anthropologist Melville Herskovits believed that African survivals formed the core of Black American culture and should be celebrated (Gershenhorn 2007:96). Senior Black intellectuals

[7] The *No Hiding Place* poems were not published in full until 1980 when Michael S. Harper edited an award-winning anthology. Brown, S. & Harper, M. 1980. *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*. New York: Harper & Row.

W. E. B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson had made a similar connection to Africa, and the study itself followed significant scholarship as part of the "early Black history movement" (Meier and Rudwick 1986; Dagbovie 2011). However, Herskovits dismissed Woodson and the like as mere propagandists. This was ironic given their academic credentials and the stark fact that as a white scholar Herskovits had far easier access to funding for comparative fieldwork in Africa and the Caribbean to prove his theories. Black scholars struggled to obtain funding as white gatekeepers accused them of lacking the required "objectivity."[8] Historian Rayford Logan later commented that in this period "the word of one white man could determine whether a project concerning Negroes could be approved or not" (Gershenhorn 2007:156).

The Black scholars on the study held varying views about African origins. Bunche believed that any differences between African American culture and the mainstream were due to economic, political and social contingencies and constraints (Henry 1999:87-88, 119). Frazier stated categorically that "when the Negro was introduced into America the break with African culture was well nigh complete." He feared that acceptance of African survivals "perhaps unwittingly left room for pseudoscientific racism to rush in through the back door" and enable differential and inferior treatment (Davis 1962:429; Frazier 1928:44; Hall 2002:47-67). On the other hand, Charles S. Johnson saw and documented many positive aspects of Black culture. In *Shadow of the Plantation* (Johnson 1934), he demonstrated the strengths of Black family structures. His goal for the race was assimilation but he situated this within his vision of a culturally pluralistic society, with the notion that Black customs would add richness to the wider culture (Gilpin and Gasman 2003:129,74). He was probably

[8] For example, Du Bois had recently proposed an "Encyclopaedia of the Negro" with the support of the Phelps Stokes Fund but Herskovits and Young opposed the funding based on their belief that Du Bois could not be "objective" because of his civil rights activism. Jackson, W. 1990. *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience: Social Engineering and Racial Liberalism, 1938-1987*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 25-26.

the closest to Brown in seeing Black Americans "as an integral part of a single tradition and as a unique collective experience" within American culture as a whole (Hutchinson 2007:176). As James McKee points out, Black scholars had a particular understanding "that Blacks did not want to disappear as a people" (McKee 1993:216-18).

Although Brown was eager to make a memorable contribution to the study and well placed to do so, he was isolated as the only literary specialist on the team and as the sole scholar with a deep interest in and understanding of the multiple ways that Black American folkways and aesthetics functioned within Black life and in shaping the national culture.

**From Economics to the "Moral Dilemma"**

Before exploring how Black culture was ultimately represented in *An American Dilemma* in more detail, it is necessary to take a short detour to understand how the thinking of its author, Myrdal, developed during his sojourn in America. Following a second tour of the South in 1939, this time accompanied by Bunche, a Black rather than a white "guide" (Myrdal 1944:ix), Myrdal's thinking began to range beyond economics to ethics. He realised that the position of Black southerners was fixed during slavery and perpetuated after the Civil War by sharecropping and the crop lien system. Their subjugation was perpetuated by limiting their access to education and employment and depriving them of political and legal equality, which profited whites by maintaining the status quo. Myrdal became convinced that there was a "moral dilemma" for white Americans in espousing democratic values that could not be reconciled with their actual treatment of the Black citizen (Handlin 1963:5, 26-27; Myrdal 1944:xlv-xlviii).

Myrdal's emphasis was skewed to the practical and ideological means by which white Americans perpetuated this unethical treatment. Thus economics, leadership, politics and social inequality were given the most thorough exposition within his final draft. He made extensive use of economist Sterner's memoranda, and on the work of sociologists writing about agricultural policy, race, class and societal structures such as Thomas J. Woofter, Raper and Charles S. Johnson (Myrdal 1944:205-428).[9] Bunche's four memoranda formed the core of Myrdal's chapters on leadership and politics (Henry 1999:95-116).[10] With indisputable proof of the extent of discrimination against Black Americans and how it benefitted whites, Myrdal hoped that white America's conscience would be forced into remedial action.

Thus after the study closed in 1942 and *An American Dilemma* was drafted, the structural and the statistical prevailed. There was little trace of Sterling Brown's influence on the text; contemporary Black culture, its historical development, its qualities and conflicts were barely perceptible. Only two of the book's forty-five chapters directly addressed culture. The absence of a coherent analysis of Black cultural expression left readers with little context for the statement that Black culture was "… a pathological condition, of the general American culture." Myrdal was clearly more convinced by psychologist John Dollard's pessimistic notion of a "pathological" fixed caste system controlled by whites for their own benefit (Dollard 1949:62-97),[11] than by Brown's conception of a strong Black aesthetic and

[9] This was Part IV Economics. See citations on 1477, 1482, and 1459. Charles S. Johnson produced *Patterns of Negro Segregation* as a monograph and Myrdal also cited *Shadow of the Plantation* (1934) and *Growing Up in the Black Belt* (1941) frequently.

[10] Bunche's memoranda were "The Political Status of the Negro," "Conceptions and Ideologies of the Negro Problem," "Extended Memorandum on the Programs, Ideologies, Tactics and Achievements of Negro Betterment and Interracial Organizations," and "Brief and Tentative Analysis of Negro Leadership."

[11] Myrdal's belief in the caste system was in contrast to most of the Black scholars on the study (with the exception of Davis and St. Clair Drake). Even the less radical Charles S. Johnson saw a "progressive shifting of these racial relations, notably in the South, from a caste-like structure to a class organization." Kneebone, J.

cultural foundation built by Black Americans as an act of protection from and resistance to racism and oppression.

What we find, therefore, in the section titled “The Negro Community,” compiled by the relatively inexperienced sociologist Arnold Rose, is a chapter on “Institutions” covering the family, the church, education and voluntary associations, followed by “Non-institutional aspects of the Negro community,” comprised of a curious jumble of contrasting topics: “peculiarities of Negro culture and personality,” crime, mental disorders, suicide, and finally, nestling amongst the pathologies, a brief segment on “Negro recreation and achievements” (Myrdal 1944:927-94). The exposition on the Black family in the “Institutions” chapter is brief (Myrdal 1944:930-35). It relies heavily on Frazier's recently published *The Negro Family in the United States*, in which he argued that Black family structures were different to those of other Americans because of slavery, its aftermath and the more recent effects of urbanisation (Frazier 1939). Whilst acknowledging that many Black families valued strong family units, Frazier claimed they were generally more disorganized than white families in terms of sex outside of marriage, illegitimacy, and “broken” homes (Frazier 1928:44). In relation to the sections on the church, “helping” organisations and Black schools, the stated premise was that assimilation to a normative culture was central to the “American creed” and that separate Black institutions were only a reaction to segregation (Myrdal 1944:92-930). Black religious leaders depended on white benefactors for personal security, and southern whites exploited this to perpetuate the caste system (Evans 2008). There was no acknowledgement of the church, especially the southern Black church, as a vehicle of cultural expression and resistance and a failure to perceive its dormant power,

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1985. *Southern Liberal Journalists and the Issue of Race, 1920-1944*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

which would be powerfully aroused in the civil rights struggles from the early 1950s (Degler 1969:556; Myrdal 1944:940-42).

By the latter half of the 1960s, *An American Dilemma* would be seen as the seedbed for the notion that matriarchal families were a root cause of welfare dependency and crime.[12] The racial discrimination it chronicled would be said to cause "personality damage." When Moynihan claimed that for "vast numbers" of Black urban-dwellers "the fabric of conventional social relations [had] all but disintegrated" due to a "tangle of pathology" affecting Black family structures, the finger was pointed at the book (Moynihan 1965:5-14,29). The impression that Black families were first condemned as "pathological" within its pages was not revised until historian Daryl Michael Scott demonstrated that it was actually liberal scholars pursuing civil rights who had pushed the "damage" thesis in the intervening decades (Scott 1997:54-56).

**"The Size of the Job"**

Historian Walter Jackson believes that Brown's "subtle understanding" of Black folklore was wasted on Myrdal and dismisses the idea that Myrdal ever intended to incorporate a cultural analysis (W. Jackson 1990:131-32). It is absolutely the case, as I have described above, that Myrdal prioritised 'hard data" showing the impact of racial inequality over a more nuanced understanding of the interplay of the complicated relationship of

[12] Myrdal cited Johnson in support of his view that "working off animal spirits" in the countryside could veer into "delinquency" in the city. Johnson, C. 1941. *Growing up in the Black Belt : Negro Youth in the Rural South*. Washington: American council on education. Cited in Myrdal, G., with the assistance of Sterner, R. & Rose, A. 1944. *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers.

societal structures, Black lived experience and culture within the text. However, his apparent neglect of culture seems also to be due to a lack of understanding. Where he discussed Black aesthetics or the cultural legacy, he was dismissive. He classified the New Negro movement as "a tendency to glorify things Negro in a creative way." He reduced the modern Black history movement to "an expression of the Negro protest" that substituted "a belief in racial achievements for the traditional belief in race inferiority" (Myrdal 1944:750-52).

However, the archival evidence suggests that Brown and "Negro culture" were not peripheral to Myrdal's intentions. To demonstrate Brown's importance, I return to the early days of the study. Brown impressed Myrdal when they met on his first tour of the South and he was one of the first scholars hired when his name was put forward by Young alongside those of Frazier and Charles S. Johnson (W. Jackson 1990:111). Young had been a power broker in the sociology profession from an early age (Moore 1977:12). His recommendation gives a sense of Brown's high stature at the time. Myrdal set the same tight deadline of the spring of 1940 for all of his staff to deliver their memoranda including Brown. He secured Brown's release from teaching duties at Howard for the Autumn 1939 term and provided him with research assistance (Myrdal to Dean Charles M. Thompson, 9 Jun 1939, General Correspondence and Memoranda, Carnegie-Myrdal Study of the Negro in America, New York Public Library [GCM, CMSNA hereafter]).

An early outline demonstrates that Brown's research brief was ambitious from the outset: "the Negro in" American art, literature, theatre, movies, music and dance, radio, humour and speech and sports, as well as an analysis of Black audiences for literature, movies and sports (Brown "A brief outline of the 'The Negro in American Culture,'" undated, GCM, CMSNA). Brown and Myrdal also had tentative discussions about including

"Negro scientists, inventors, etc. and Negro journalism" (Myrdal, "Notes of a Conference with SAB by GM," 10 May 1939, GCM, CMSNA). Further discussions between Brown and Guy B. Johnson expanded the brief to include science and "the Negro Press" in the areas he was to cover ("Record of a Conference with Sterling A. Brown by Guy B. Johnson," 29 Jul 1939, GCM, CMSNA).

Brown also took on Myrdal's cultural "education," becoming his guide and mentor. In New York, he took Myrdal to the Savoy and to the Elks Rendezvous in Harlem, where they watched Louis Jordan perform. At Café Society, they saw the blues shouter Joe Turner, and boogie woogie musicians Pete Johnson, Albert Ammons and Meade Lux Lewis. Brown introduced the second of the legendary "Spirituals to Swing" concerts at Carnegie Hall in 1939 and he made sure Myrdal was invited to the rehearsal. This was not a shallow race tourism. Brown spent hours preparing a comprehensive index of work songs, spirituals, jazz, boogie woogie and blues and lent Myrdal dozens of corresponding recordings from his personal collection to educate him ("Descriptive Catalogue of Forty-One Records by SAB," 20 Oct 1942, GCM, CMSNA). Myrdal's engagement with Brown suggests that he was from the outset excited about including "the Negro in American culture" in his analysis. Their outings could be trivialised as purely social but the considerable preparation Brown put into preparing his "catalogue" implies otherwise; he was very serious about educating Myrdal in the richness of the African American cultural traditions.

Furthermore, Myrdal demonstrated a significant commitment to Brown and to the importance of his research even as difficulties emerged. In January 1940, Myrdal agreed additional funding for three months. His justification was that Brown was "not only doing a work of bigger scope than we planned" but also "working up the anecdotes and stereotyped

concepts" for a separate section on societal attitudes ("Memorandum of Conversation with SAB by GM, 27 Jan 1940, GCM, CMSNA). Brown had influenced Myrdal to move away from merely documenting "great achievements" and towards a deeper analysis.

In May 1940, the war in Europe meant Myrdal felt obliged to return to Sweden. He was dependent on Brown to produce a cogent analysis but the ever-enlarging scope of the brief jeopardised its delivery. Brown reviewed the scholarly literature in the autumn of 1939 and produced a detailed draft prospectus. The scope and methodology were decidedly unrealistic. In his outline for "a study of the Negro in the moving pictures," Brown intended to analyse "All-Negro pictures" produced by white companies, consider the opinions of Hollywood directors and producers on Black participation, estimate the economic success of Black pictures, tell the history of Black production companies, critique productions, consider Black audience responses and obtain direct feedback from actors. Lacking adequate time, funding and personnel, Brown's prospectus nevertheless outlined more than a dozen such studies; all to take place within approximately four months ("Prospectus – The Negro in American Culture by SAB," undated, GCM, CMSNA).

Delivering on a brief with such a broad scope would have been arduous even if Brown had worked on the project full-time with sufficient assistance. With Carnegie funds reduced to half of his university salary from January 1940, Brown was obliged to return to teaching half-time. When Myrdal returned to Sweden in May, Brown seems to have neglected his memoranda. Perhaps he realised what he would admit to in writing later that year – that he did not have the capacity to deliver on such a broad remit. What is clear, however, is that alongside his teaching commitments, Brown started on the mammoth task of editing an anthology of Black literature, which would be published the following year as *The*

*Negro Caravan* (Brown, Davis, Lee 1941). He also followed up various Writers' Program (formerly FWP) projects although he was no longer on the payroll. He taught summer school in Kentucky and returned to work full-time at Howard in the autumn. He did submit partial sections of his manuscript to the study office, specifically on film and drama (Rowena Hadsell to Brown, 28 Aug and 4 Oct 1940, SAB, MSRC, Box 10, Folder H).

**"The Failure of all of our Negro Collaborators"**

As will become clear from the archival material presented in the following section, Brown was overwhelmed by the unwieldy nature of his remit and neither Myrdal, Guy B. Johnson or Samuel Stouffer (who had acted as Project Director temporarily whilst Myrdal was in Sweden) provided help to frame a more realistic scope. Myrdal's staff operated in the main as isolated individuals, most working separately from their home institutions, and with little editorial support or oversight. Brown was not deliberately abandoned or left to his own devices more than other contributors but as the lone literary scholar on the project, he experienced an additional layer of separateness and intellectual loneliness; and his lack of formal training in the social sciences made him less accustomed to negotiating a manageable brief.

When Myrdal returned to America in May 1941 and expressed his dissatisfaction with Brown's submissions as "lacking conclusions," Brown promised to draw up a concise summary. Nothing materialised and relations became strained. Myrdal emphasised how seriously he took Brown's input, noting that he planned "a whole chapter which I must build upon your contribution" and a second chapter on "Attitude and Opinion" in which "I will have to rely also very much on your work." Recognising his own

shortcomings in this area, he emphasised that he was more interested in Brown's analysis than in the materials themselves (Myrdal to Brown, 11 Aug 1941, SAB, MSRC, Box 9, Folder MO).

In September 1941, Myrdal sent a short but cordial letter to Brown asking for an update (Myrdal to Brown, 9 Sep 1941, SAB, MSRC, Box 8, Folder M). Brown apologised, citing the prior obligation to his fellow editors on *The Negro Caravan* to get that book out. He promised that his submission was "well in hand" (Brown to Myrdal, 13 Sep 1941, GCM, CMSNA). Behind the scenes, Myrdal prepared a stern memorandum which he asked Stouffer to draft into a formal warning letter in which he was to tell Sterling "that Charles [Dollard, President Keppel's assistant] or his Committee or the Carnegie Corporation felt very bad because he had not at all fulfilled his obligations but instead had taken other jobs (Myrdal to Stouffer, "Memorandum on the subject of 'Letter to Sterling Brown,'" 13 Sep 1941, GCM, CMSNA).

Brown responded to Stouffer's letter with a six-page missive explaining that "my conscience and my belief in myself as scholar and writer have taken a bad beating in this whole affair." Citing his inexperience and lack of professional training, Brown explained that he could not juggle his many commitments including research for Myrdal, teaching at Howard, follow up on the FWP and editorial work on *The Negro Caravan*. In autumn 1940, financial necessity had forced him to take on a new book about the South. The tone of the letter varied from paragraph to paragraph. He was apologetic, aware of the "the jeopardy of not completing work for which I gave my word, work for which I have been paid." Elsewhere he was defensive, noting that he had completed over a thousand pages of manuscript and had "received little critical assistance." In places, the tone was plaintive: "the

speed of the job and the threat of the deadline – really something of a nightmare – prevented my best and soundest work" (Brown to Stouffer, 5 Nov 1941, GCM, CMSNA).

Stouffer's response was somewhat sympathetic but behind the scenes Carnegie officials were less understanding. Charles Dollard found Brown's excuses "unconvincing." He wondered whether "the failure of all our Negro collaborators to produce anything which could be printed" could be "something in the nature of passive resistance" (Charles Dollard to Stouffer, 17 Nov 1941, GCM, CMSNA). This was a remarkable, deeply offensive and surely racist statement given that Bunche had contributed about three thousand pages of analysis (Urquhart 1993:50). Myrdal had also used Charles S. Johnson's writings extensively, so much so that Johnson wrote to his wife Marie to say that "it looks as if my materials are the core of the general study" (Gilpin and Gasman 2003:76).

By December 1941, Myrdal was in despair at Brown's lack of output. They had agreed on a "100 page condensed but stringent analysis" but Brown had still not delivered. In May 1942, he told Brown he had a month before he would finish the chapter where "the 'accomplishments' should fit" and could still use Brown's memorandum if there was any chance he could deliver (Myrdal to Brown, 5 May 1942, SAB, MSRC, Box 9, Folder Mo). On hearing that Brown had accepted a Rosenwald fellowship to do a new book, an "amused and irritated" Dollard wrote to Myrdal that "his conscience is certainly an easily quieted one" ("Unsigned File Note," 27 May 1942, GCM, CMSNA). Once again, Dollard showed his disregard of the financial constraints that affected Black intellectuals who were deprived of opportunity for advancement and fair renumeration due to both overt and subtle forms of racism and segregation.

Brown had developed his approach to cultural strengths with folklorist Benjamin Botkin in the early 1930s and he enhanced this on the FWP (Beecher 2015:73-157). However, he was unable to reconcile his modus operandi with the more empirical emphasis of the study. Whilst the majority of its researchers amassed evidence of systematic discrimination, Brown was interested in bringing to life the complexities of Black life, often through individuals' spoken words and music. He was caught between his own approach that was "subjective, intimate and humanistic" and Myrdal's "supposed objectivity" and he attempted to adopt a more "scientific" methodology (Tidwell 2009:209-33). Brown knew what approaches he could take – historical accounts, oral histories and short-form interviews, ethnographic observations, surveys, and analysis of data. Other African Americans (and whites) had also begun to experiment with a documentary approach, with oral testimony and with attempts to meld those with social scientific research. The FWP had facilitated this, both in terms of funding the collection of source material and in enabling some experimentation with new approaches. Two successful examples were *The Negro in Virginia* which Brown had worked on with Roscoe Lewis for the FWP (Virginia Writers Project 1994) and *Black Metropolis* (St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton 1945). Both used interview material alongside sociological and historical data and interpretation.[13] In both, the limning of Black lives was more polychromatic than their dull representation in *An American Dilemma*.

When Myrdal returned to Sweden for the final time in September 1942, Brown's chance to deliver was over. He submitted incomplete memoranda on sports, the stage, and music. His memorandum on music comprised only three out of eight planned sections, those on spirituals, ragtime and jazz (Brown, "Section G, Music," undated, GCM,

[13] See also McKay, C. 1940. *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*. New York: Dutton; Wright, R. & Rosskam, E. 1941. *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States*. New York: The Viking Press.

CMSNA – [Section G hereafter]).[14] Readers were left without a sense of Brown's thesis on the origins and development of Black music, the interplay between the races as the music developed and became commercially successful, and the tensions that arose along the way. Brown's account of the development of ragtime and jazz were fresh; there had been few previous attempts to fully record their development and certainly no comprehensive account by a leading Black scholar. Stylistically too, Brown had attempted to innovate, blending scholarly authority (careful referencing and a range of credible sources) with anecdotes and testimony from a wider range of primary sources than used by preceding critics.[15]

Brown set out to look even-handedly at the involvement of Black and white Americans in the music's evolution. This is not reflected in *An American Dilemma* which includes such facile sentences as: "Negroes have contributed such popular musical forms as ragtime, jazz, the blues, swing and boogie-woogie." The artistry of Black musicians, artists and writers is reduced to "buffoonery practice for the entertainment of whites" and "expressive activity practiced for the artists' own enjoyment" (Myrdal 1944:989). Where Brown wrote that "to approach the borderline between the genteel and the gross, to venture into the risqué, to mention the unmentionable, was 'not damaging to one's social or business reputation,' if the songs were about Negroes," Rose oversimplified to "whites stereotype the Negroes as immoral and somewhat bestial" so they "could enjoy the bawdy and frivolous songs, dances and jokes without 'sinning' themselves" (Section G: 90; Myrdal, 1944: 993).

[14] The focus here is on 'Section G – Music" as it here that Brown had the greatest influence in subsequent decades.

[15] He had advised the authors of *Jazzmen* and he used it liberally for his memoranda alongside autobiographies, biographies, and magazines like *Downbeat, Swing* and *Esquire.* Ramsey, F. & Smith, C. 1939. *Jazzmen*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

It must have made painful reading for Brown. It was too late for an internal challenge to conclusions about Black culture as a "distorted development..." It had been impossible with insufficient resources and an absence of editorial support, not to mention the clashing priorities that stemmed from a career stymied by racial segregation. But most of all, it was impossible to reconcile his methodology against the supposed "scientific objectivity" that Myrdal felt he had to embrace to ensure his social engineering in relation to racial equality would have the best chance of success.

## Conclusion

In his work in the 1930s and 1940s, Brown was at the vanguard of interpreting conceptually what would later be described by historians and critics as the Black Aesthetic (Gayle 1971), but its power and complexity were not conveyed in *An American Dilemma* which proffered a reductive portrait of Black cultural identity. A cogent analysis that articulated the strengths-based cultural perspective Brown delivered so eloquently elsewhere could have offered a counter-weight to the weaknesses set out by the social scientists. Where Brown's poetry and editorials in other publications communicated African American resourcefulness and group solidarity, the weakness of the chapters on culture and family life left a void later to be filled with stereotypes: spectres of welfare queens and Black fatherless youths roaming city streets, making it easier for conservative demonization of the Black family (Banfield 1970; Mead 1986; Murray 1984).

The reasons that Brown was marginalised were both structural and ideological; they included Myrdal's drive to engineer social change with solid "hard" evidence of

discrimination and his thesis of the "moral dilemma," the competing racial ideologies of the scholars on the team, the myopic definitions of what (and who) was "objective," inter- and intraracial disagreements about Black culture, and Myrdal's antipathy to what he saw as "puff" about racial achievements by Black scholars as a reactive substitution for the "huff" of whites about racial inferiority. Brown was disrupted the most by many of these attitudes because of his isolation as a literary scholar rather than a social scientist. His approach was subjective and humanistic, yet he felt obliged to attempt to be "scientific" as described by conventional paradigms of that time.

Even without explicitly agreeing on a shared mission, it is possible that the differing ideas held by the study's scholars about the social order and cultural context of 1940s America could have led to constructive, spirited debate. However, Myrdal deployed a heady combination of flattery and impatience to obtain the output he wanted from *individuals* rather than working to bring researchers together as a team ("Interview with Guion Griffis Johnson" 1974). He did not share the prejudicial views of some of the white American personnel on the study in relation to the abilities of the African American scholars and he became hyper-aware of the extent of structural racism in the U.S. as he travelled and absorbed the data gathered by the study. But he was less astute about the impact of racism on individuals,[16] and it is plausible to assume that the more genteel racism of some of the Carnegie officials went over his head.

To incorporate a comprehensive analysis of African American culture would have required significantly more than Myrdal and Carnegie were prepared to offer. They

[16] For example, he paid little attention to the conventions of segregation when travelling with Bunche in the South to the point where Bunche feared for his life on more than one occasion. Jackson, W. 1990. *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience: Social Engineering and Racial Liberalism, 1938-1987*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 123.

commissioned research that was unrealistic in scope and insufficiently resourced. The difficulty was exacerbated because Brown had no editorial support and was isolated as the sole cultural scholar on the study. Without a strong submission from Brown, Myrdal could not demonstrate that firstly, African Americans had developed a vibrant and protective cultural milieu which helped them to resist oppression and exploitation; and secondly, that they had strongly influenced America's national identity through their creative efforts. By the 1970s, scholars would be successful in drawing on the types of sources Brown wanted to use and in incorporating an ethos and a methodology which drew on his nascent working practices. By the 1990s, literary and cultural historians would explicitly acknowledge his influence. His approach would be seen in later decades as a model of excellence in qualitative methodologies in the social sciences and humanities (Blassingham 1979; Genovese 1974; Levine 1977; Rawick 1973; Rowell 1998; Stuckey 1994).

Although Brown did not succeed in infiltrating the relentlessly 'scientific" form and style of *An American Dilemma* in order to convey a "truth" or a more "complete picture" of the African American "struggle and the dream," he and Myrdal held in common a shared optimism in thinking about the entrenched racial inequalities of mid-century America. What they were unable to do was reconcile Myrdal's litany of the structural conditions militating against Black Americans with Brown's invocation of the rich cultural traditions that kept them proud and upright in the face of a hostile environment. We must ultimately judge Brown by his decision to divert his attention to *The Negro Caravan* where he could answer affirmatively the question that Robert G. O'Meally astutely identifies as "sounding through virtually every critical piece he writes … how true is this work to the lives of the people portrayed, as their real life counterparts themselves see it?" (O'Meally 1998).

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