

Introduction

This critique of a large and imposing study of the Negro question is published just when the post-war drive of reaction against the Negro people is approaching a stage of crisis.

The wartime fair employment practice program of the Federal government has been repudiated. Poll tax repeal legislation has again been blocked. The War Department has reaffirmed and strengthened the Jim Crow policy of the army.

A police officer in Freeport, Long Island, lined four Negro brothers against a wall and shot them without warrant, killing two veterans, and wounding another. An armed expedition of state and local police in Columbia, Tennessee, angered because Negro citizens repulsed a lynch mob the night before, invaded the Negro section at dawn, guns ablaze, and destroyed every business establishment and almost every home in the area.

A United States Senator and the governor of a state won primary nominations (with assurance of election) on "white supremacy" platforms calling for the disfranchisement and violent oppression of Negro citizens. The Ku Klux Klan rides again. A wave of anti-Negro police brutality is mounting in northern industrial cities. Lynch-terror stalks across the South, and most of its victims are Negro veterans but recently returned from the war.

This whole reactionary trend was horribly dramatized before the world by the planned, cold-blooded murder of two Negro sharecroppers and their wives in Walton County, Georgia, and the killing of another farm worker nearby—a veteran, the lone Negro citizen in Taylor County who defied the Talmadge-inspired campaign of terror and voted in the primary elections. Moreover, hardly a week passes without

some new revelation that lynch terror has claimed another Negro victim.

The Negro question has now become one of the most crucial and fundamental issues confronting our nation. Not only are the lives and liberties of fourteen million Negro citizens in dire jeopardy, but the fascist pattern of terror by which they are oppressed threatens to spread and destroy the freedom of all Americans.

Why are the Negro people oppressed? Why is it that now, so soon after mankind's victory over the armed forces of world fascism, the traditional oppression of Negro Americans takes on the virulent pattern of terror so characteristic of the Nazi enemy we have but recently destroyed? These are questions on which there must now be the utmost clarity. They are questions which oppressors of the Negro people try in every way to confuse, but which this important volume by Dr. Herbert Aptheker does very much to explain.

I.

The Negro people are oppressed because the rulers of our society find it highly profitable to oppress them. In terms of fundamental motivations, the explanation of the Negro question is as simple as that; and any effective program for resolving this question must be directed toward destruction of those institutionalized economic, political, and social discriminations which are designed to facilitate and buttress the super-exploitation of Negro workers.

This is a "dangerous" doctrine, of course, for it lays bare the sordid material basis of Negro oppression. If the masses of decent Americans clearly understood that the whole rotten system of anti-Negro discriminations is, fundamentally, a means to superprofits by the owners of our economy, they might be moved to economic and political struggles which would weaken and destroy the vested interests of those landlords, industrial employers, financiers, and their governmental stooges whose wealth and power are based upon this traffic in human misery.

Thus it is that the rulers of our society have found it neces-

sary to invent an elaborate network of myths, stereotypes, and ideologies designed to obscure the real driving power behind the oppression of the Negro people, and to popularize the false belief that anti-Negro prejudices and discriminations arise from alleged inherent inferiorities of the Negro people themselves, or from some unexplained "moral" defect in the personalities of individual white Americans. The "causes" of anti-Negro discrimination are interpreted as almost, if not quite, ineradicable; and the "solution" is said to lie in the long, gradual, never-ending process of "education." In terms of this point of view, the profit seeking foundations of Negro oppression are less vulnerable to attack; and efforts to improve the lot of Negro Americans are channeled into the relatively innocuous task of trying to change the "attitudes"—or the "hearts"—of individuals.

Crude and subtle propaganda designed to gain widespread acceptance of this "safe" view of the Negro question flows constantly from the press and radio, the school and church, the cinema and stage, and from the political hustings. It also abounds in pseudo-scientific literature; and of this there is no more pretentious and dangerous an illustration than Dr. Gunnar Myrdal's two-volume, corporation-financed, so-called "monumental and definitive" study of the Negro in America, published under the highly revealing title, *An American Dilemma*.

This is the study which Aptheker here subjects to thorough and painstaking analysis and evaluation. With fine scholarship, brilliant Marxist insight, and (happily!) a strong sense of righteous indignation, he demonstrates conclusively that the philosophical premises of *An American Dilemma* are superficial and dishonest, its historiography distorted and false, its ethics vicious, and its analysis of the Negro question, "weak, mystical, and dangerous."

If the masses of American people were allowed to learn the true history of their country, or even to understand the economic and political system in which they now live, they would not be misled by *An American Dilemma's* distorted interpretation of the Negro question as a "moral problem." They

would know that "the decisive struggle" lies, not "in the heart of the American," as Myrdal would have us believe, but in the market place and factory, on the southern plantation, in the executive offices and legislative chambers of local, state and national government—in the ballot!

They would understand, with Aptheker, that "there is no American dilemma for believers in, and fighters for, democracy and full rights for all people."

If there is anything which the history and contemporary life of America clearly reveal about the Negro question, it is the stark material, profit-seeking core from which all of the varied forms of anti-Negro discrimination and oppression emerge.

The institution of slavery, for example, did not develop because of some previously observed "inferiority" on the part of Negroes, or because the seventeenth century colonists had some peculiar "moral" deficiency. The slave system began and flourished because it was *profitable*. The mercantile traders made good money selling their captured human commodities to southern planters in need of cheap labor; and the planters, especially on the cotton plantations, profited handsomely from an agricultural enterprise manned by workers to whom they did not have to pay wages, and over whose lives they had complete control.

Only *after* slavery proved to be profitable did the myth of "Negro inferiority" gain prominence. Far from being a *cause* of the Negro's enslavement, the doctrine of "white superiority" emerged as an *effect* of the developing slave system. It was consciously invented as an ideological justification and support for a system of human exploitation which was developed to serve purely material interests.

Precisely this same relationship between material interests and Negro oppression exists today. Consider a few dollars-and-cents illustrations.

The per capita annual income of southern Negro tenant farmers and day laborers in 1930 was about \$71, as compared with \$97 for similar white workers. Multiply this difference of \$26 by the 1,205,000 Negro tenants and day laborers on

southern farms in 1930, and it is seen that the planters "saved" approximately \$31,000,000 by the simple device of paying Negro workers less than they paid white workers. And this does not take into account the added profit from the labor of some 571,000 *unpaid* Negro family workers on southern farms.

The almost universal Negro-white wage differential in southern non-agricultural occupations is well known. It too makes possible the "saving" of many millions of dollars annually in employers' labor costs.

So likewise in the schools. Southern white public school teachers received an average income of \$907 during the 1935-36 school term, as compared with \$450 for Negro teachers. On the basis of the 56,000 Negro teachers employed, this Negro-white salary differential aggregated about \$25,600,000—money which, with an equalitarian salary scale, would have been paid to Negro professional workers in the public schools.

Consider also that southern white workers—agricultural, industrial, clerical, and professional—are themselves grossly underpaid, and that probably the *main* consideration which makes them tolerate their low wages is the fact that they know comparable Negro workers are paid *even less*. Their position as severely exploited white workers is "superior" to that of the super-exploited Negro workers; so they find it easy to believe that they profit from the Negro's plight. Thus does the system of anti-Negro wage discrimination serve to intensify the exploitation of white workers. Indeed, although there are very real differences in degree, the southern Negro-white wage differential actually operates to the disadvantage of more white workers than Negro workers—for there are many more of them.

There is truly big money involved in this super-exploitation of southern Negro workers. No wonder the rulers of the South use every means possible—political disfranchisement, caste-like social prohibitions, severely limited educational opportunities, "kept" Negro upper-class leaders, and lynch terror—to keep their highly profitable Negro labor force in hand, to force Negro workers to "stay in their place!" No wonder they deluge the white workers with incessant "white supremacy"

propaganda and enlist their aid in the oppression of Negroes! If the deluded white workers who join in this anti-Negro program would but realize it, they are, themselves, the unwitting victims of the system of Negro oppression.

These very substantial material interests in the oppression of the Negro people are not confined to the South. The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, for example, probably rates as the largest owner of agricultural lands in the South; and the corporate profits of this vast financial enterprise are greatly enhanced by the *special* oppression and exploitation to which southern Negro plantation workers are subjected. So it is with scores of other Wall Street concerns which have heavy investments in southern agriculture and industry. That is why they and their Congressional errand boys are among the most implacable and powerful foes of a federal fair employment act, anti-lynching and poll tax repeal legislation. That is why their newspapers and theaters and radios and cinemas persist in efforts to perpetuate the myth of "Negro inferiority." That is why their philanthropies subsidize only those institutions and organizations and investigations and "leaders" which they consider completely "safe" on the Negro question, not at all tainted with "radical" and "trouble-making" beliefs. That is why the roster of contributors to the political campaigns of a Eugene Talmadge and a Theodore Bilbo includes some of the greatest names in American industry and finance.

Northern Big Business has deep profit-making stakes in the oppression of the Negro people; and (although more or less covertly) it is intensely aggressive in its efforts to "keep the Negro in his place."

This profit motivation, of course, does not directly explain all of the *individual* manifestations of anti-Negro prejudice and discrimination on the part of white Americans. But it does explain the basic forces which shape our Jim Crow institutions and culture, which, in turn, set the pattern for individual attitudes and behavior.

II.

The oppression of the Negro people is being greatly in-

tensified since the war because the rulers of our society realize that now they are in grave danger of losing the vested material interests they have in the system of anti-Negro discrimination. In short, more and more, the Negro people have been "getting out of their place," and the virulent pattern of post-war reaction is designed to "put the Negro back in his place."

Under the stress of the war emergency and the ever-growing freedom struggles of the Negro masses, the rulers of our society found it necessary to relax many of the traditional Jim Crow barriers which had served so well to facilitate the super-exploitation of Negro workers. This was true in the armed forces, in war industries, in the Federal civil service, and even in the political and social areas of American life. The Negro people moved forward rapidly during the war; and increasing hundreds of thousands of white allies joined hands with them to strengthen their struggles for full democratic rights.

Set into motion by the powerful progressive currents which the anti-fascist war unleashed upon all mankind, the Negro people have continued during the peace to build and strengthen their national organizations, and to struggle against Jim Crow oppression with a militancy unknown since the days of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Moreover, increasing thousands of progressive white allies, especially in the ranks of organized labor, move actively to support the Negro's struggle toward freedom.

Three major developments have brought this forward movement of the Negro people to a point where the rulers of our economy (and hence of our country) are justly alarmed, especially in the South, lest they now lose those "white supremacy" controls which have paid such rich dividends in the past.

First, the southern Negro masses are exercising their constitutional right to vote. The Supreme Court decision outlawing the traditional "lily-white" Democratic primary elections, which are decisive in the South, gave impetus to tremendously effective register-and-vote campaigns among southern Negroes. Many hundreds of thousands of Negroes who never voted before in their lives placed their names on the registration

lists and actually cast their ballots in the Democratic primaries. Moreover, in almost every community where there are greatly increased registrations among Negro citizens, there are also greatly increased registrations among white citizens. Still further, as has been demonstrated in several southern states—notably Alabama, Georgia and Texas—there is a growing tendency for these new voters among the white and Negro masses to join forces in the support of progressive candidates.

Heretofore the exploiters of southern white and Negro workers have been able to consolidate and perpetuate their super-profits by means of their oligarchic political control over southern state and local governments, and through their ever-faithful representatives in Congress. Now that undemocratic political control, together with the profits which it was designed to protect, is seriously threatened by the new and broadened and increasingly democratic southern electorate.

No wonder the Talmadge and Bilbo mountebanks are calling for the use of every means available, even physical violence, to keep the Negro people away from the polls!

Second, the American labor movement, especially the Congress of Industrial Organizations, has launched a serious campaign to organize the white and Negro workers of the South, and to mobilize them for progressive political action. An effective trade union movement in southern industry and agriculture will mean widespread collective bargaining, higher wage scales and improved working conditions. It will mean increasing unity among white and Negro workers, with consequent weakening of the whole rotten structure of "white supremacy." It will also mean greater power for the political upsurge already under way among the southern white and Negro masses.

No wonder the Ku Klux Klan is being revived as a terroristic counterforce to the growing power of organized labor in the South!

Third, hundreds of thousands of Negro veterans of World War II have returned to their homes in the South fully determined to enjoy those democratic freedoms for which they fought and helped to defeat the fascist enemies of their country. These southern Negro veterans are in the very forefront of

the struggle for democratic elections. It is they who most readily embrace the extended hand of organized labor. It is they who are most prone to violate the humiliating Jim Crow customs and laws which seek to perpetuate the subordinate social status of the Negro people.

No wonder the terror of the "white supremacy" police and lynchers is being directed with special violence against the Negro veterans in the South!

The southern Bourbons and their northern imperialist accomplices although still dominant and powerful and dangerous, are justly fearful that their whole elaborate structure of Jim Crow exploitation will crumble under the impact of the progressive forces of the people now moving forward to challenge their rule. They are fighting back with ever increasing fury—just as every exploiting class in history has fought to stem the tide of human progress.

Herein lies the basic explanation of the post-war reign of lynch terror now being let loose upon the Negro people of America. It is a specialized aspect of the even broader postwar reaction against the growing power of organized labor and the working class generally. It is integrally tied up with the mounting imperialist war drive against the upsurge of the democratic people's forces throughout the world. It is counter-revolution in the classic sense of that term.

But let us never forget that the very intensity of this profit-seeking reaction is a measure of the progress being made by the people toward that freedom and security which are, indeed, the "unalienable rights" of all men.

III.

These are some of the insights into the nature and dynamics of the Negro question which one has a right to expect from an honest and competent investigation and analysis of the Negro in America. They are understandings sorely needed to give clarity to the progressive masses of the people, and thus to help consolidate and extend the gains they have already made, and eventually to rout the "white supremacy" and imperialist exploiters of our country and the world. But it is

precisely such insights as these that Gunnar Myrdal's ideological monstrosity on the Negro question serves to distort and confuse.

It has truly been said that the most practical thing in the world is a sound theory. In terms of this premise, Herbert Aptheker's theoretical critique of *An American Dilemma* contributes mightily to the practical struggles now gaining momentum for the attainment of full democratic rights and security for Negroes and all other Americans.

DOXEY A. WILKERSON