

economic history but against its moralistic culture. Written near the end of the inter-war period, this work provides a frank assessment of conflict structured into the culture of the rising post-World War II power.

The Negro Problem as a Moral Issue

Gunnar Myrdal (1944)

There is a "Negro problem" in the United States and most Americans are aware of it, although it assumes varying forms and intensity in different regions of the country and among diverse groups of the American people. Americans have to react to it, politically as citizens and, where there are Negroes present in the community, privately as neighbors.

To the great majority of white Americans the Negro problem has distinctly negative connotations. It suggests something difficult to settle and equally difficult to leave alone. It is embarrassing. It makes for moral uneasiness. The very presence of the Negro in America; his fate in this country through slavery, Civil War and Reconstruction; his recent career and his present status; his accommodation; his protest and his aspiration; in fact his entire biological, historical and social existence as a participant American represent to the ordinary white man in the North as well as in the South an anomaly in the very structure of American society. To many, this takes on the proportion of a menace—biological, economic, social, cultural, and, at times, political. This anxiety may be mingled with a feeling of individual and collective guilt. A few see the problem as a challenge to statesmanship. To all it is a trouble.

These and many other mutually inconsistent attitudes are blended into none too logical a scheme which, in turn, may be quite inconsistent with the wider personal, moral, religious, and civic sentiments and ideas of the Americans. Now and then, even the least sophisticated individual becomes aware of his own confusion and the contradiction in his attitudes. Occasionally he may recognize, even if only for a moment, the incongruence of his state of mind and find it so intolerable that the whole organization of his moral precepts is shaken. But most people, most of the time, suppress such threats to their moral integrity together with all of the confusion, the ambiguity, and inconsistency which lurks in the basement of man's soul. This, however, is rarely accomplished without mental strain. Out of the strain comes a sense of uneasiness and awkwardness which always seems attached to the Negro problem.

The strain is increased in democratic America by the freedom left open—even in the South, to a considerable extent—for the advocates of the Negro, his rights and welfare. All "pro-Negro" forces in American society, whether organized or not, and irrespective of their wide differences in both strategy and tactics, sense that this is the situation. They all work on the national conscience. They all seek to fix everybody's attention on the suppressed moral conflict. No wonder that they are often regarded as public nuisances, or worse—even when they succeed in getting grudging concessions to Negro rights and welfare.

At this point it must be observed that America, relative to all the other branches of Western civilization, is moralistic and "moral-conscious." The ordinary American is

Excerpt from *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1944), pp. xlv–xlvii. Printed with permission from HarperCollins Publishers. Copyright ©1944, 1962 by Harper and Row Publishers.

the opposite of a cynic. He is on the average more of a believer and a defender of the faith in humanity than the rest of the Occidentals. It is a relatively important matter to him to be true to his own ideals and to carry them out in actual life. We recognize the American, wherever we meet him, as a practical idealist. Compared with members of other nations of Western civilization, the ordinary American is a rationalistic being, and there are close relations between his moralism and his rationalism. Even romanticism, transcendentalism, and mysticism tend to be, in the American culture, rational, pragmatic and optimistic. American civilization early acquired a flavor of enlightenment which has affected the ordinary American's whole personality and especially his conception of how ideas and ideals ought to "click" together. He has never developed that particular brand of tired mysticism and romanticism which finds delight in the inextricable confusion in the order of things and in ineffectuality of the human mind. He finds such leanings intellectually perverse.

These generalizations might seem venturesome and questionable to the reflective American himself, who, naturally enough, has his attention directed more on the dissimilarities than on the similarities within his culture. What is common is usually not obvious, and it never becomes striking. But to the stranger it is obvious and even striking. In the social sciences, for instance, the American has, more courageously than anywhere else on the globe, started to measure, not only human intelligence, aptitudes, and personality traits, but moral leanings and the "goodness" of communities. This man is a rationalist; he wants intellectual order in his moral set-up; he wants to pursue his own inclinations into their hidden haunts; and he is likely to expose himself and his kind in a most undiplomatic manner.

In hasty strokes we are now depicting the essentials of the American *ethos*. This moralism and rationalism are to many of us—among them the author of this book—the glory of the nation, its youthful strength, perhaps the salvation of mankind. The analysis of this "American Creed" and its implications have an important place in our inquiry. While on the one hand, to such a moralistic and rationalistic being as the ordinary American, the Negro problem and his own confused and contradictory attitudes toward it must be disturbing; on the other hand, the very mass of unsettled problems in his heterogeneous and changing culture, and the inherited liberalistic trust that things will ultimately take care of themselves and get settled in one way or another, enable the ordinary American to live on happily, with recognized contradictions around him and within him, in a kind of bright fatalism which is unmatched in the rest of the Western world. This fatalism also belongs to the national *ethos*.

The American Negro problem is a problem in the heart of the American. It is there that the interracial tension has its focus. It is there that the decisive struggle goes on. This is the central viewpoint of this treatise. Though our study includes economic, social, and political race relations, at bottom our problem is the moral dilemma of the American—the conflict between his moral valuations on various levels of consciousness and generality. The "American Dilemma," referred to in the title of this book, is the ever-raging conflict between, on the one hand, the valuations preserved on the general plane which we shall call the "American Creed," where the American thinks, talks, and acts under the influence of high national and Christian precepts, and, on the other hand, the valuations on specific planes of individual and group living, where personal and local interests; economic, social, and sexual jealousies; considerations of community prestige and conformity; group prejudice against particular persons or types of people; and all sorts of miscellaneous wants, impulses, and habits dominate his outlook.

The A
plained b
the cultur
on Freedo

Anythin
ful, no n
Any doc
listment
bility for
support

William I.
in the rese
ogy. *The P*
ideas, a cas
during the
the influx o
ish Peasant
disorganiza
New World

Though
Thomas an
born in rura
Tennessee.
He studied
then taught
ered the fou
Thomas's in
sonal letter i
work, Thom
of urban co
missed from
Znaniecki
Paris before
Znaniecki fir
Thomas fled
of the Polish
returned to a
self as a soc
Znaniecki vis
United States
of the Americ
1927 when y
the injustice o
years after Th

and a defender of the
ly important matter
al life. We recognize
mpared with meñ-
ican is a rationalistic
is rationalism. Even
e American culture,
acquired a flavor of
ole personality and
"k" together. He has
romanticism which
and in ineffectuality
e.

able to the reflective
ected more on the
common is usually
is obvious and even
more courageously
human intelligence,
odness" of commu-
is moral set-up; he
d he is likely to ex-

merican *ethos*. This
thor of this book—
n of mankind. The
ortant place in our
tic being as the or-
contradictory atti-
mass of unsettled
herited liberalistic
ttled in one way or
ognized contradic-
ch is unmatched in
onal *ethos*.

merican. It is there
e struggle goes on.
udes economic, so-
al dilemma of the
els of consciousness
is book, is the ever-
n the general plane
ks, talks, and acts
the other hand, the
personal and local
mmunity prestige
of people; and all
ok.

The American philosopher, John Dewey, whose immense influence is to be explained by his rare gift for projecting faithfully the aspirations and possibilities of the culture he was born into, in the maturity of age and wisdom has written a book on *Freedom and Culture*, in which he says:

Anything that obscures the fundamentally moral nature of the social problem is harmful, no matter whether it proceeds from the side of physical or of psychological theory. Any doctrine that eliminates or even obscures the function of choice of values and enlistment of desires and emotions in behalf of those chosen weakens personal responsibility for judgment and for action. It thus helps create the attitudes that welcome and support the totalitarian state. ❖

William I. Thomas (1863–1947) and Florian Znaniecki (1882–1958) collaborated in the research and writing that led to the first truly classic work in American sociology. *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918–1919) remains a source of ideas, a case study for methods, and a landmark study of an immigrant population during the period when America was still attempting to redefine itself in response to the influx of European workers. "Disorganization of the Polish Immigrant," from *Polish Peasant*, illustrates their sensitive use of personal documents to define the social disorganization of the Polish immigrant in relation to the conflict of Old World and New World cultures. It is empirical social theory at its best.

Though they respected each other and worked closely over a number of years, Thomas and Znaniecki came from very different backgrounds. Thomas had been born in rural Virginia to a family of modest means and grew up in the mountains of Tennessee. At the University of Tennessee, teachers inspired his love of scholarship. He studied in Germany from 1888 to 1889, after which he taught at Oberlin. He then taught at the University of Chicago, whose department of sociology is considered the founding department of the discipline in the United States. It is said that Thomas's interest in personal documents came from the chance discovery of a personal letter in the trash in one of Chicago's Polish neighborhoods. In his subsequent work, Thomas pursued the value of personal documents in the ethnographic study of urban communities. His career was ruined when, at age fifty-five, he was dismissed from the university for unproven morals charges.

Znaniecki was born into nobility in Poland. He studied in Warsaw, Geneva, and Paris before receiving his Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Cracow in 1909. Znaniecki first met Thomas in Poland in 1913. They renewed their relationship when Thomas fled Europe for Chicago during World War I. Znaniecki's native knowledge of the Polish people soon led to his active role in the *Polish Peasant* project. But he returned to a university position in Poland after the war, where he would define himself as a sociologist and found the Polish Sociological Institute. In the 1930s, Znaniecki visited Columbia University and eventually settled permanently in the United States after accepting a position at the University of Illinois. He was president of the American Sociological Society in 1953. Thomas, too, had been so honored in 1927 when younger members of the society pressed his candidacy, in part to rectify the injustice done him by the University of Chicago. Znaniecki died in 1958, eleven years after Thomas.
