

## Democracy's Dilemma: Explaining Racial Inequality in Egalitarian Societies<sup>1</sup>

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*While contemporary criticisms of Gunnar Myrdal's liberal reformism provide an important perspective on racial ideology (G. Myrdal (1944) *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Democracy*. New York: Harper & Row), most people miss Myrdal's most provocative point. Rather than assuming that egalitarianism could only oppose racial inequality, Myrdal argued that commitment to egalitarianism led Euro-Americans to avoid the dilemma presented by racial inequality in an egalitarian society. Rather than predicting the disappearance of racism, this analysis can be used to predict an increasing demand for racism in the wake of de jure attempts to eliminate racial inequality.*

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*The Negro problem is not only America's greatest failure but also America's incomparably great opportunity for the future....America can demonstrate that justice, equality and cooperation are possible between white and colored people.*

(Myrdal, 1944:1021)

Equality is democracy's promise. From Paris streets to Chiapas hills, egalitarians have demanded that democracy honor its word. So, too, did the U.S. civil rights movement challenge inconsistencies between espoused

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egalitarianism and actual inequality through protest, political pressure, and legal action. In the 1950s and 1960s these efforts helped establish greater *de jure* equality through major federal court decisions, legislation, and enforcement efforts. These serious and important changes have been taken as support for the “liberal” view that egalitarianism is so central a democratic value that it will inevitably reform even the most entrenched racism and inequality.

For over half a century, Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma* (Myrdal, 1944) has served as intellectual support for liberal hope and effort. Myrdal’s liberal faith in the reformative power of U.S. egalitarianism was not shared by all, however. From the time the landmark book was published, its reformist hope has been criticized. Contemporary critics in sociology, history, and legal studies oppose the Myrdalian analysis because they do not see democratic egalitarianism as necessarily opposed to racial inequality. In fact, these critics see the development of racial ideology after the civil rights era as direct evidence against Myrdal’s analysis and resulting optimism. They argue that the contemporary use of democratic egalitarianism as a basis of *opposition* to policies and practices designed to promote equality, such as affirmative action and antidiscrimination efforts, show that liberal faith in the redemptive power of egalitarianism is misplaced.

While contemporary criticisms of the liberal reformism represented by *An American Dilemma* provide an important perspective on contemporary racial ideology, most miss Myrdal’s most provocative point. Rather than assuming that egalitarianism could only oppose racial inequality and racism, Myrdal actually argued that commitment to egalitarianism itself led Euro-Americans to avoid the dilemma presented by racial inequality in a purportedly egalitarian society. This avoidance was most easily accomplished through racism. The dilemma was avoided by seeing inequality as a result of African Americans’ racial inferiority, rather than as a failure of Euro-Americans to implement their egalitarianism. Rather than predicting the eventual disappearance of racism and eventual triumph of equality, Myrdal’s analysis can be used to predict an increasing demand for racism in the wake of *de jure* attempts to eliminate inequality. *An American Dilemma* thus suggests a provocative reading of contemporary racial ideology and its relation to democratic egalitarianism. Despite its age, Myrdal’s analysis can be developed to inform and extend more contemporary criticisms. Below I discuss the liberal reformist hopes of *An American Dilemma*. I then briefly review some of the contemporary criticisms and discuss their analyses of the relationship between racial ideology and egalitarianism, rethinking these criticisms and analyses with the aid of Myrdal’s treatment of the ways in which egalitarianism itself promotes racism and racial inequality.

### AN AMERICAN DILEMMA

The Carnegie Corporation asked Gunnar Myrdal and many of the major social scientific authorities of the time to provide an original review and analysis of the African American position in U.S. society (Jackson, 1990; Myrdal, 1944, foreword and preface). The 1500-page final report, *An American Dilemma*, documents and analyzes the social, economic, and political disenfranchisement of African Americans. Since its publication more than 50 years ago, so many social scientists have invoked Myrdal's notion of a moral dilemma that it now serves as a historical touchstone for analyses of racism and racial inequality. Most commentators see Myrdal as arguing that egregious racial inequality forced a troubling moral dilemma on a society deeply committed to equality. Indeed, after spending years surveying the extent of racial inequality and discrimination in the United States, Myrdal hoped that a deeply ingrained egalitarianism would lead Euro-Americans to resolve the dilemma he presented them by extending full democracy to all. For example, he argues early in the book that "the equalitarian creed operates directly to suppress the dogma of the Negro's racial inferiority and to make people's thoughts more and more 'independent of race, creed, and color,' as the American slogan runs" (Myrdal, 1944:89).

### Contemporary Criticisms

Contemporary criticisms of Myrdal's liberal reformism abound. Many see *An American Dilemma* as the quintessential example of a flawed liberal investment in gradual reform. This critique is developed primarily by challenging Myrdal's analysis of the relationship between democratic egalitarianism and racial inequality. Specifically, Myrdal's hope that democratic egalitarianism would work to oppose racial inequality is challenged. van den Berghe, for example, criticizes Myrdal's liberal reformism in his important book *Race and Racism*:

[I]n spite of the claim of many social scientists that detachment and objectivity are possible and that they can dissociate their roles as scientists and as private citizens, much of the work done by North Americans in the area of race has, until the last three or four years, been strongly flavored with a great deal of optimism and complacency about the basic "goodness" of American society and with the cautious, slightly left-of-center, reformist, meliorative, gradualist approach of "liberal" intellectuals.

At a more theoretical level race relations in the United States have, following Myrdal's lead, been interpreted more often as a moral dilemma in the hearts and minds of men rather than a complex dynamic of group conflict resulting from the differential distribution of power, wealth, prestige, and other social rewards. (van den Berghe, 1967:7)

van den Berghe's argument is that liberal analyses are limited by an unquestioning belief in the moral virtue of U.S. democracy. He believes that liberalism is incapable of a more radical critique of the ways in which democratic societies have, sometimes quite consciously, institutionalized inequality.

A similar criticism of the liberal commitment to gradual reform of a fundamentally good society is found in the critical race theory approach to legal studies (West, 1993:chaps.12, 13). Encouraged by critical legal studies' criticisms of liberal reformism, critical race theory challenges the notion that legal doctrine or practice can be free of the racism that operates in the larger society (see Bell, 1992; Crenshaw *et al.*, 1995; Scheppele, 1994). From this perspective, the hope that U.S. egalitarianism will eventually reform racism and racial inequality ignores the fact that racism and inequality are as central to the society as egalitarianism. Both egalitarianism and racism contribute to the codification and interpretation of law. Along similar lines, Omi and Winant's influential "racial formation" perspective criticizes *An American Dilemma* for solidifying the dominance of a liberal "ethnicity paradigm" that failed to develop a more progressive alternative to gradual liberal reform:

The appearance of Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* in 1944 marked the ascent of the ethnicity paradigm to a position of theoretical dominance. . . . He argued that the "American Creed" of democracy, equality, and justice had entered into conflict with black inequality, segregation, and racial prejudice in general. . . . Myrdal's assessment was optimistic about the ultimate resolution of this battle—the contradictions would give way to racial equality and the eventual integration of blacks into the mainstream of American life. (Omi and Winant, 1986:17; see also Winant, 1994)

In contrast to Myrdal's liberal reformist trust in the power of egalitarianism, the racial formation perspective argues that democratic states are not above racism because "[t]he state from its very inception has been concerned with the politics of race" (Omi and Winant, 1986:78).

Omi and Winant see the clearest evidence against Myrdal's optimism in contemporary (mis)uses of egalitarianism by interests opposed to policies and practices designed to increase equality (Omi and Winant, 1986:chap. 7). They argue that a post-civil rights backlash against policies such as busing, affirmative action, and antidiscrimination law and enforcement has been couched in terms of egalitarianism. Omi and Winant believe that the use of egalitarianism to oppose racial equality signals a fundamental shift in the relationship between egalitarianism and racial inequality that could not be anticipated, and cannot be explained, by the Myrdalian liberal reformism. They describe the conservative post-civil rights attack on government efforts to promote racial equality as a "racial reaction" against blacks' concrete gains in the 1960s and 1970s. Omi and Winant argue that

this antiegalitarian sentiment is made to appear principled by a reinterpretation of racial equality as concern for "reverse discrimination" against Whites. Much empirical research is consistent with these claims. Pettigrew and Riley (1971), for example, identified this paradoxical use of egalitarianism in their research on working-class White support for the racial vitriol of presidential candidate George Wallace. Their survey research suggested that working-class White men were attracted to Wallace's segregationism because they believed that they were being ignored by political elites who seemed more concerned with "undeserving" Blacks (see Leach *et al.*, 2002). Other research shows that in the wake of major civil rights legislation and federal action in the 1960s, a sizable minority of Euro-Americans express the belief that antidiscrimination and fair housing laws, desegregation, and affirmative action promote racial inequality by *disadvantaging Whites* (see Dunk, 1991; Edsall and Edsall, 1992; Vanneman and Pettigrew, 1972; Wellmann, 1993).

Some social psychologists use the term *modern* or *symbolic* racism to describe a similar form of racial resentment. They argue that egalitarianism commingles with hostile racial prejudice to fuel White opposition to political candidates and policies seen as benefiting African Americans (McConahay, 1986; Sears, 1988, 1998). The modern/symbolic racism perspective opposes Myrdal's faith in egalitarianism by arguing that democratic egalitarianism and racial prejudice have actually come to converge rather than conflict. This enables Kinder to ask, "Forty years after Myrdal, in the wake of dramatic changes in public opinion and social custom, why do many White Americans continue to resist efforts designed to bring about racial equality?" and to answer, "the importance of racial prejudice and traditional American values" (Kinder, 1986:152).

In a somewhat different interpretation, Sniderman and Carmines, along with others, argue that much Euro-American opposition to programs and policies designed to promote racial equality is based in a *genuine* belief that such programs are inequalitarian (Carmines and Merriman, 1993; Sniderman *et al.*, 1993; Sniderman and Carmines, 1997). As Sniderman *et al.* put it, "[a]ll of [the American creed's] primary components, Myrdal supposed, were working in concert to promote the principle of racial equality. However true that may have been in the 1940s, when the primary issue was legally sanctioned segregation, it is profoundly at variance with the racial politics of the 1980s and 1990s" (Sniderman *et al.*, 1993:235). The principled opposition perspective argues that the gains of the civil rights era have eliminated the dilemma described by Myrdal and replaced it with a genuine concern for preventing any and all "racial preference" in policy and practice. Thus, opposition to liberal policies designed to promote equality can be made out of a principled concern for racial equality.

While these commentators may be right to criticize Myrdal's faith in U.S. egalitarianism and the liberal reformism that follows from it, their representations of Myrdal's analysis of racial ideology are incomplete. In fact, most contemporary discussions do not address Myrdal's most provocative point regarding egalitarianism and racial ideology. Rather than expressing an absolute faith that the dilemma presented by racial inequality in an egalitarian society would be resolved through an extension of equality, Myrdal argued that U.S. commitment to egalitarianism was so strong that it *prevented* recognition of the American dilemma. Whereas Myrdal believed that egalitarianism could oppose racism and inequality, he also believed that egalitarianism could encourage racism and inequality. Thus, his analysis can be used to challenge current approaches to racial ideology that see the convergence of egalitarianism and racial inequality as a new, post-civil rights, reaction. In fact, Myrdal identifies a fundamental need for racism in democratic societies that espouse egalitarianism but practice racial inequality. This suggests the somewhat paradoxical prediction that racism becomes more, not less, necessary to the explanation of racial inequality in democracies that increase *de jure* equality.

### Myrdal's Analysis of Dilemma Avoidance

Although he hoped for reform, Myrdal was not naive about the extent of, and investment in, racial inequality in the United States. In fact, he worried that his attempt to highlight the shortcomings of U.S. democracy would offend his readers. In the preface to *An American Dilemma*, he expressed these fears by saying, "[T]he Negro problem presents a moral lag in the development of the nation and a study of it must record nearly everything which is bad and wrong in America. The reading of this book must be somewhat of an ordeal to the good citizen" (Myrdal, 1944:xix). Myrdal hoped that the evidence he and his colleagues had gathered would force Euro-Americans to see the dilemma presented by racial inequality in a society that espoused egalitarianism. Myrdal's purpose was to highlight the conflict between egalitarianism preached and inequality practiced. In this way he hoped to *encourage* an American dilemma.

While Myrdal hoped that attention to racial inequality would lead the United States to resolve its dilemma by more fully enacting egalitarianism, his effort was predicated on the fact that many did not see the conflict between democratic values and racist practice. In fact, Myrdal argued that egalitarianism had a "double direction" and could quite easily converge with racial inequality. That is, egalitarianism itself could contribute to racism and racial inequality:

On the one hand, the equalitarian creed operates directly to suppress the dogma of the Negro's racial inferiority and to make people's thoughts more and more "independent of race, creed, and color," as the American slogan runs. On the other hand, it *indirectly calls forth* the same dogma to justify a blatant exception to the Creed. (Myrdal, 1944:89; emphasis in original)

Myrdal hints at four interrelated processes through which egalitarianism actually feeds and fuels racial inequality. Although this part of *An American Dilemma* often goes unacknowledged, it has been echoed by numerous contemporary scholars, often as part of a critique of Myrdal's liberal reformism.

### *Egalitarianism Prevents Perception of Discrimination*

Myrdal believed that Euro-Americans adhere to the notion of equality in a "nearly fetishistic cult of the Constitution" (Myrdal, 1944:12). He argued that this idealized attachment to egalitarianism prevents Euro-Americans from seeing the obvious racial discrimination around them. As he put it, "In our study we encounter whole systems of firmly entrenched popular beliefs concerning the Negro and his relations to the larger society, which are bluntly false and which can only be understood when we remember the opportunistic *ad hoc* purposes they serve" (Myrdal, 1944:23). According to Myrdal, racial discrimination had to be denied to protect Euro-Americans' idealized image of their society as fair and equal; thus, he argues that believing the society is equal can blind people to the ways in which it is not.

Consistent with Myrdal's reasoning, discrimination has not been considered an explanation of racial inequality even in periods where it appeared obvious. In fact, during the time Myrdal was writing, only a small minority of Euro-Americans believed that African Americans were treated unfairly. In 1946, for example, just under 40% of a Euro-American national sample believed that African Americans were treated unfairly (Pettigrew, 1971: chap. 8). This belief in racial fairness was expressed at the same time that just over 50% of a comparable sample believed that Whites should have the first chance at a job (Schuman *et al.*, 1997). Moreover, this belief in racial fairness was expressed in the context of legal and widespread segregation. That is, only a minority of Whites believed Blacks were treated unfairly in the years before the formal guarantees of equality offered in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* supreme court decision, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, or the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

That so many Euro-Americans failed to see the blatant and widespread racial discrimination and inequality in the 1940s supports Myrdal's notion that espoused egalitarianism worked to limit the perception of inequality. Somewhat surprisingly, the number of people who perceive African

Americans to be treated unfairly has not changed much since the early polls. Contemporary studies show that discrimination and other forms of structural disadvantage have remained consistently unpopular as explanations of racial inequality (Kluegel, 1990). For example, Kluegel and Bobo (1993) show that across a number of national polls in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s about 40% of Euro-Americans believed African Americans to be treated unfairly. This is almost exactly the number found in 1946. From the time of *An American Dilemma*'s early documentation of racial discrimination to more recent social scientific studies of discrimination in housing, employment, and other sectors, only a minority of Whites have perceived African Americans to be treated unfairly. Myrdal's claim that an idealized attachment to democratic egalitarianism prevents the perception of discrimination offers one possible explanation of this puzzling pattern.

### *Egalitarianism Is Limited by Group Boundaries*

Myrdal also argued that the dilemma between democratic egalitarianism and racial inequality can be avoided by defining equality as extending only to Whites (see Myrdal, 1944:Appendix 1). In one example, he describes the way in which an equality limited by group boundaries was used to legitimate slavery: "It should be observed that in the pro-slavery thinking of the *ante-bellum* South, the Southerners stuck to the American Creed *as far as whites were concerned*; in fact they argued that slavery was necessary in order to establish equality and liberty for whites" (Myrdal, 1944:87; emphasis in original). Thus, a measured egalitarianism is seen as relevant only to the community to which the majority belongs. Although critical of liberal reformism, van den Berghe (1967) has made a similar point regarding the relationship of democratic values and racism in the European tradition.

The egalitarian and libertarian ideals of the Enlightenment spread by the American and French Revolutions conflicted, of course, with racism, but they also paradoxically contributed to its development. . . . The scope of applicability of the egalitarian ideals was restricted to "the people," that is, the whites, and there resulted what I have called "Herrenvolk democracies," regimes . . . that are democratic for the master race but tyrannical for the subordinate groups. (van den Berghe, 1967:18)

According to van den Berghe, the endorsement of equality for one's own group does not guarantee that equality will be extended to those seen as outside the group (see also Rex, 1980:131). In a *Herrenvolk* democracy, equality is expected only for those already seen as equal and thus deserving of it (see also Omi and Winant, 1986; Winant, 1994). As Myrdal put it, "In so far as the Negro can be placed lower in the biological order than the white man and nearer to the animals, he is also, to an extent, kept outside the white man's social and moral order" (Myrdal, 1944:103). Similar ideas



concerning the bounded nature of values have been discussed in terms of "moral exclusion" in social psychology (see Opatow, 1990, for a review).

In a related line of thinking, a number of political theorists have explained the parallel development of liberal democracy and racism by pointing out that most Western democratic states arose as nationalist projects (see Gilroy, 1987; McClelland, Held, and Hall, 1984; Miles, 1993). That is, modern democratic states were formed as specific national, cultural, religious, linguistic, and often pseudoracial, communities (Anderson, 1991). As Balibar has said, "[I]t is not the modern state which is 'egalitarian' but the modern (nationalist) nation-state, this equality having as its internal and external limits the national community. . . . It is, first and foremost, an equality in respect of nationality" (Balibar, 1991:49–50). Thus, several more recent analyses echo Myrdal's claim that egalitarianism may not be extended to all members of a democratic society. This bounded form of equality is one possible explanation of how racial inequality can exist in egalitarian societies without presenting a dilemma to the racially advantaged.

### *Egalitarianism Is Subordinated to Group Interests*

Myrdal also argued that democratic egalitarianism has continually been truncated by economic and political interests: "When the constitution was written, slavery had to be taken as an economic and political fact" (Myrdal, 1944:86). Indeed, despite grand allusions to liberty and equality, "[t]he constitution did not do away with slavery; it legalized it" (Zinn, 1994:340). Similarly, the 14th and 15th amendments to the constitution, passed in 1868 and 1870, respectively, established equal protection under the law and the right to vote in principle, but not in practice, as nearly 100 years would pass before a president or the Supreme Court would enforce them (Zinn, 1991). Many critics of liberal reformism use such historical evidence as support for the notion that egalitarian ideals have always been subordinated to political interests. For example, Takaki (1979) traces the use of democratic values in support of racial inequality and discrimination back to the earliest political figures in U.S. history (see also Higginbotham, 1992; Roediger, 1991:chap. 2). Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and Andrew Jackson all utilized the democratic value of equality to legitimate the denial of economic, political, and social rights to Asian Americans, African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans. The democratic republic was structured in a way that disenfranchised those seen as political and/or social threats.

Historian Barbara Fields offers a similar discussion of the economic constraints on egalitarianism in the antebellum south (see also Jordan, 1974). She writes, "Whatever truths may have appeared to be self-evident in those days, neither an inalienable right to life and liberty nor the founding of the

government on consent of the governed was among them. Virginia was a profit-seeking venture, and no one stood to make a profit growing tobacco by democratic methods" (Fields, 1990:102). Although Fields is critical of "attitudinal" analyses like that in *An American Dilemma*, Myrdal made much the same argument nearly 50 years before: "In the precarious ideological situation—where the South wanted to defend a political and civic institution of inequality which showed increasingly great prospects for new land exploitation and commercial profit, but where they also wanted to retain the democratic creed of the nation—the race doctrine of biological inequality between whites and Negroes offered the most convenient solution" (Myrdal, 1944:87–88; emphasis in original).

Focusing on a later period, Hunt (1987) documents the many ways in which U.S. involvement in South America, the Caribbean, and Asia during decolonization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was guided by economic and political interests. In Cuba, Colombia, Hawaii, and the Philippines, for example, the U.S. legitimated its control of economic resources and political processes by arguing that it was preparing its protectorates to govern themselves democratically. Racist notions that these places were too backward and immature to govern themselves legitimated continued U.S. involvement and postponed democracy and true independence. In this way, U.S. economic and political interests took precedent over efforts to "promote" democracy and equality. In an analysis of twentieth-century racial politics, Quadagno argues that egalitarian principles have been consistently distorted by the political interests of policymakers (Quadagno, 1994:chaps. 3, 4; see also Edsall and Edsall, 1992:chap. 4). Quadagno documents the ways in which federal social welfare policy—including the New Deal, the Social Security Act, and Federal Housing Authority loans—and antidiscrimination laws have been "colored" by racial ideology and politics. For example, as a concession to Southern members of congress, the 1935 Social Security Act contained provisions that excluded agricultural and domestic workers from receiving benefits. This meant that the majority of African Americans (and women of all groups) did not share in this major advance in social welfare until a generation later. The policy, while appearing to be an egalitarian advance in the most liberal of democracies took account of "race" (class and gender) and actively promoted group inequality. These historical analyses show how economic and political interests can guide an uneven application of egalitarianism.

Myrdal suggested three ways in which democratic egalitarianism might coexist with racial inequality. Subsequent research supports his ideas that egalitarianism can limit perceived discrimination, that it can be applied only to those seen as worthy of equality, and that it can be subordinated to economic and political interests. Myrdal was not, however, most interested in

the ways that egalitarianism could coexist with inequality. In *An American Dilemma* he goes further by developing the provocative notion that egalitarianism could actually require racism and thereby promote racial inequality.

### *Egalitarianism Requires Racism*

According to Myrdal the potential dilemma presented by racial inequality in an egalitarian democracy was best avoided through firmly entrenched “race dogma” (Myrdal, 1944:chap. 4) This dogma established the congenital inferiority of African Americans as *the* explanation of their inferior position. In a democratic society where equality was expected, racism made sense of what appeared to be a paradox or dilemma without it. Fields echoes Myrdal’s notion in her more recent discussion of the antebellum south:

Racial ideology in its radical American form is the ideology to be expected in a society in which enslavement stands as an exception to a radically defined liberty. . . . It is the ideology proper to a “free” society in which the enslaved descendants of Africans are an anomalous exception. There is no paradox; it makes good, common sense. (Fields, 1990:102)

Myrdal’s discussion of racism presents his most original claim regarding the American dilemma. He extends his argument that egalitarianism does not necessarily lead to support for equality by claiming that egalitarianism actually requires racial inferiority in order to explain inequality. What can explain why, in a society with equal opportunity to succeed, particular groups of people do not? In a truly equal society, group inferiority (in ability or effort) is the only viable explanation of social inequality. Myrdal believed that widespread racism firmly established Black inferiority as the explanation of racial inequality, thereby preventing awareness of the moral dilemma that he hoped would be a problem for the national conscience. He argues,

The race dogma is the only way out for a people so moralistically equalitarian, if it is not prepared to live up to its faith. A nation less fervently committed to democracy could, probably, live happily in a caste system with a somewhat less intensive belief in the biological inferiority of the subordinate group. *The need for race prejudice is, from this point of view, a need for defense on the part of the Americans against their own national Creed, against their own cherished ideals.* And race prejudice is, in this sense, a function of egalitarianism. The former is a perversion of the latter. (Myrdal, 1944:89; emphasis in original)

Rather than proposing that egalitarianism always works against racism and inequality, Myrdal argues that egalitarianism actually requires racism as a defense against what appears to be its failure in practice. He argues that it is the commitment of Euro-Americans to egalitarianism in principle that leads them to need notions of racial inferiority to explain their practice of racial inequality. In this ironical reading, the very egalitarianism that is the basis of

the liberal hope for reform is the thing that feeds racist notions of inferiority. Although many contemporary analyses of racial ideology acknowledge that egalitarianism can be used to promote racial inequality, none propose the ironical relation between egalitarianism and racism suggested by Myrdal.

## CONCLUSIONS

Most contemporary critics oppose Myrdal's liberal reformist view that democratic egalitarianism is anathema to racism and racial inequality. The critics contrast contemporary, post-civil rights era ideology to that of the 1940s. It is argued that democratic egalitarianism can no longer be relied upon to ameliorate racial inequality because egalitarianism can now be used to legitimate inequality. Indeed, egalitarianism is itself seen as the source of opposition to race-conscious policies and practices that are represented as "reverse discrimination" against Whites. This characterization of contemporary racial ideology and its relationship to egalitarianism is so widely shared that it is utilized by perspectives that otherwise oppose each other. For example, although the perspectives of modern/symbolic racism and principled opposition are highly critical of each other, they both share the view that egalitarianism came to be used in support of racial inequality only after the civil rights era.

Having shown that Myrdal's liberal reformism was an optimistic hope separate from his realist diagnosis, I suggest that many contemporary analyses of racial ideology have much to learn from Myrdal. Like more contemporary critical theorists, Myrdal saw racism as central to U.S. democracy. Rather than assuming that egalitarianism only had redemptive value, Myrdal believed that ideological commitment to egalitarianism is what protected Euro-Americans from the moral dilemma they should have experienced from the very founding of the state. In fact, he argued that the belief in egalitarianism was so strong that it forced Euro-Americans to rely on racism as a defense against egalitarianism itself. A fervent belief in the racial inferiority of African Americans was the only viable explanation of racial inequality in a society that prided itself on equality. Myrdal's notion that racism is a function of egalitarianism has not been acknowledged by contemporary critics. This is unfortunate because his view is one of the few that attempts to explain the paradox of racial inequality and racism in societies that espouse egalitarianism. As such, it should be at the center of current analyses of racial ideology. Indeed, Myrdal's analysis may be especially useful in emergent democracies, such as postapartheid South Africa, where racial inequality coexists with budding egalitarianism.

A reexamination of Myrdal also has implications for contemporary analyses of racism and other racial ideology. His analysis of the paradoxical

relation between egalitarianism and racism challenges the widely accepted idea that contemporary racial ideology is a unique product of the post-civil rights era. In fact, contemporary analyses of "racial reaction" serve only to identify current forms of what is a long-standing trend in U.S. racial ideology. It is thus unwarranted to call contemporary racial ideology "new" simply because egalitarianism is used in defense of inequality (see also Leach, 1998; *et al.*, 2000). *An American Dilemma* and many more recent historical analyses show clearly that democratic egalitarianism has never guaranteed opposition to racial inequality. From the earliest stages of the state, democratic egalitarianism has had a complicated relationship to racial inequality. Myrdal argued, well before major civil rights legislation, that egalitarianism did not necessarily oppose inequality and racism. Indeed he argued that egalitarianism could itself require racism as an explanation of its shortcomings. Contemporary analyses of racial ideology that fail to see this possibility, or see it as a "new" form of ideology, should be rethought.

Myrdal's most provocative argument—that racism in U.S. society is itself a perverse product of egalitarianism—also suggests a cautionary reading of the future of racism. It is important to remember that Myrdal's description of "racial" dogma occurred in the context of *de jure* segregation (as established by the Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896). If the majority of the U.S. population could believe that racism was not a viable explanation of racial inequality in 1944, surely racism became no more viable an explanation after civil rights legislation decades later. As mentioned above, contemporary studies show that discrimination and other forms of structural disadvantage remain as unpopular an explanation of racial inequality now as they were before major civil rights legislation. Contrary to what is suggested by the popular reading, Myrdal's analysis can be used to predict the rise of racism in a society where *de facto* inequality comes to replace *de jure*. Ironically, from Myrdal's perspective, racial inferiority becomes a more viable explanation of racial inequality if systemic racism is disavowed but allowed to continue in practice. This suggests that the many legal and legislative efforts at promoting racial equality enacted in the last 40 years may have the ironic effect of increasing, rather than decreasing, the appeal of racism as an explanation of enduring racial inequality. As Todorov put it,

By virtue of another irony, racism (like sexism) becomes an increasingly influential social phenomenon as societies approach the contemporary ideal of democracy. . . . Although actual equality does not prevail, the ideal of equality becomes a commonly shared value; differences (perhaps somewhat attenuated) continue to exist, but the social ideology refuses to acknowledge them. (Todorov, 1986:372)

Current racial theories, while often avoiding more blatant expressions of biological inferiority, are no less effective in explaining inequality by attributing it to the poor effort and/or relative inferiority of ethnic minorities

(Bobo and Kluegel, 1991; Leach *et al.*, 2000). The task for students of contemporary racial ideology is to identify the ways in which contemporary racism works to explain inequality while at the same time squaring itself with (some form of) egalitarianism (see Balibar, 1991; Barker, 1981; Billig, 1982; Reeves, 1983; Wetherell and Potter, 1992).

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