

The Dilemma of *The Sum of Us*

James L. Taylor
Department of Politics, University of San Francisco

Heather McGhee's *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (2021) has been critically acclaimed and widely embraced by mainstream US society and yet these important arguments seemed very familiar. In fact, the groundwork for many of McGhee's findings have been long established by previous researchers and writers in this field. For example, the 1944 publication of Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal's massive book, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, set the foundation for liberalism in the modern Democratic Party and the liberal intellectual establishment in media, the academy, and the policy and legislative arenas of U.S. politics. *An American Dilemma* was developed during the New Deal and World War II and both benefited from and shaped the post-war intellectual milieu on democracy, race, and the contradictions inherent in "the American Creed" and the reality of anti-black Jim Crow laws and sentiment in U.S. society.

Moreover, leading African American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier and political scientist Ralph Bunche played significant roles as researchers and influenced the work's reception among prominent intellectuals like W.E.B. Du Bois—who was excluded in part due to his black Marxist radicalism—and Ralph Ellison, who pointedly responded to Myrdal's opus in a critical review. Ellison found Myrdal's work to be a conversation to and for American whites about American blacks, where Myrdal locates "the Negro problem" in the "heart of [white] America", North and South. Myrdal effectively highlights that "the Negro's strongest weapon in pressing his claims [is] his hold upon the moral consciousness of Northern whites." Ellison further insists, the "main virtue of *American Dilemma* lies in its demonstration of how the mechanism of prejudice operates to disguise the moral conflict in the minds of whites produced by the clash on the social level between the American Creed and anti-Negro practices". Where Myrdal's Swedish background betrayed him, was evident in the insistence that black life and culture are "pathological" creatures of white men's making, and mimetic in nature. In turn, Ellison famously notes, "men have made a way of life in caves and upon cliffs; why cannot Negroes have made a life upon the horns of the white man's dilemma".

Ellison asks a pertinent question about the timing of Myrdal's work: why did the Carnegie Foundation fund the study in 1937, and "why this sudden junk of ideological fixtures?" If this brief review of Heather McGhee's book *The Sum of Us*, has already spent too much space on another book, the reader should know that the origins of the moral sentiment that undergirds Myrdal's study traces back further, at least to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the second religious Great Awakening before the Civil War. But modern political liberalism and related liberal intellectual appeals to

the moral sensibilities of American whites has its origins in *An American Dilemma*. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s generation was socialized in the New Deal and influenced by the liberal ethos of Myrdal's work. King mastered Myrdal's charge that America "live out the true meaning of its Creed", even at the March on Washington in 1963.

The intellectual offspring of Myrdal's work scarcely recognizes its influence. And that is, to me, the most curious thing about the reception and acclaim awarded to McGhee's book, *The Sum of Us*. But also the acclaim granted to other books, like it, such as the popular works of Ta-'Nehisi Coates (*Between the World and Me*), Michelle Alexander (*The New Jim Crow*), Isabella Wilkerson (*Warmth of Other Suns* and *Caste*), Ibram X Kendi (*How to be an Anti-Racist, Anti-Racist Baby*), and even Nikki Hannah Jones (*The 1619 Project*), all, more or less, make Myrdalian moralist intellectual appeals to white liberal sentimentality on behalf of black folks, as though Malcolm X in the Nation of Islam and Black Power had not previously disabused American liberalism of its moral high ground in matters concerning race, relative to conservative thought. E. Franklin Frazier and Ralph Bunche's generation educated many of their teachers at Howard University. There, both men moved from Left radical to black social criticism and discourse because they were spent on liberalism's inability to understand the racial nature of U.S. society, politics and policy, economic relations, and intellectual life.

The acclaim of McGhee and her colleagues—from the *New York Times* and liberal academic establishment, to speakers' bureaus and policy think tanks—could be through hiring savvy book agents. But as Ellison asks of Myrdal's study, we can also ask of the recent popular reception of these works, "why this sudden junk of ideological fixtures?" The subject material of each neo- Myrdalian study, whether police violence and the drug war, post-1960s incarceration rates, the black migration and migration of blacks to American cities, race as caste, anti-racism, and the moral evil of slavery, are well documented in the writings, art, and scholarship of at least two previous generations of women and men writers and intellectuals. Mary Church Terrell in Washington, DC, Dr. Jewell Prestage ("Mother of Black political science"), Shirley Graham Du Bois, Zora Neal Hurston, Amy Jacques Garvey, Lorraine Hansberry (and later Toni Morrison), among others, represented black women's writing and knowledge production. Each woman promoted black independence from white institutions and norms, in writing, spiritual and cultural life, and politics (recall, for instance, Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer formed a black political party in 1964 Mississippi) and were more reluctant than their male counterparts to embrace liberal appeals to white audiences, or concern themselves with white audiences. But the New Deal-Civil Rights-Great Society liberal regime prevailed among the men and would shape the remaining decades of black intellectual production, which edged ever more toward the Negro cultural "pathology" and white moral dilemma of racism, original to Myrdal.

Which suggests the celebration and criticism of McGhee's work (and the others) rings of little that is new, or reflective of black women writers' reluctance toward moral liberalism, except the most recent headline it takes on. Each writer, especially Coates,

Kendi, and McGhee, appeals to white conscience based on their personal, anecdotal encounters with everyday racism. Each writer pulls the audience under the weight of the “American Dilemma” and asks for white-led reform and recognition, even if it sounds “revolutionary” to conservative ears. Even their appeals to reparations, for instance, offers nothing more than the appeal to it itself, without a program; a program that is the full logic of *The Sum of Us*, as it is in the work of William Darity and Kirsten Mullen.

It is not a sin for any work to be unoriginal; we all “stand on the shoulders” of intellectual and academic “giants”. But the wide, popular reception of repackaged wine in the new wineskins of an empty, though data driven, morally heavy appeal, to white liberal conscience, consciousness, and sentiment in the post Reagan era that produced, first, Jesse Jackson, but at last, Trumpism and MAGA reaction, feels like a long delayed academic dissertation finally reaching publication before it could adequately take on the implications of racial balkanization that exploded with white rage, resentment, and anger in the present era, as McGhee’s work almost tone deafly appeals to non “zero-sum” racial reasoning. This is music to some ideological ears, while the works of a prolific historian like Gerald Horne, which extends far beyond “the one hit wonder” character of some of the noted works, goes largely unacclaimed—like *The Wire* TV series. Harold Cruse (2005), author of *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* is largely ignored in the academy of today; his Harlem grade school classmate, James Baldwin, however, is widely celebrated. Baldwin, angrily highlighted white Christian and liberal policy limits and contradictions; Cruse advocated independent black cultural knowledge production and institutions and had little use, theoretically, for white liberalism or appeals to it. But if one does an unscientific search of *Google Scholar* and *Amazon* book reviews of the respective works, as I did, one will notice that these popular works, like Coates and McGhee, enjoy multiple thousands of reviews through the latter and receive very few academic citations on Google Scholar. Academics tend not to take these works as substantial enough, to replace the published social science research on which these studies build. In the end, McGhee’s guiding question, “Why can’t Americans have nice things” is answered, for instance in the social science studies of Edsall and Edsal (1992) in their definitive study on the racial dimensions of public policy choices, but also, it advances the cause for social justice little further than a more pressing rhetorical one bellowed by Frederick Douglass in 1852, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?”, that gets to the heart of their problem.

References

Cruse, H. (2005). *The crisis of the Negro intellectual: A historical analysis of the failure of Black leadership*. New York Review of Books.

Edsall, T. B., & Edsall, M. D. (1992). *Chain reaction: The impact of race, rights, and taxes on American politics*. WW Norton & Company.

McGhee, H. (2022). *The sum of us: What racism costs everyone and how we can prosper together*. One World

Myrdal, G. (1944). *An American dilemma; the Negro problem and modern democracy*. (2 vols.).

James Lance Taylor is Professor of Politics at the University of San Francisco. He is from Glen Cove, Long Island. He is author of the book *Black Nationalism in the United States: From Malcolm X to Barack Obama*, which earned 2012 "Outstanding Academic Title" - Choice: Current Reviews for Academic Libraries.