

Still an American Dilemma

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I recently attended a day of talks given by several internationally respected activist-writers working to curb climate change, environmental degradation, and run-amok capitalism. The New England village's lecture hall was filled by a vocal, fairly affluent audience of a few hundred. I was the only brown-skinned person in attendance. Around the room, conversations on a green economy, on 350.org and the Copenhagen climate talks, and on what "we Americans need to do" shimmered with an energy infused by these movers and doers. But the dimensions of class, gender, and race were absent in the lectures and in all of the exchanges I overheard.

A child born today enters a world of rapid and extensive ecological changes. The list is often repeated: Human population continues to grow. Ecosystems globally have never before been so widely fragmented or degraded by human action. (Nearly 1,400 scientists convened by the United Nations cautioned in their 2005 *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment* that "humans have changed ecosystems more rapidly and extensively than in any comparable period of time in human history," resulting "in a substantial and largely irreversible

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loss in the diversity of life on Earth.”)¹ Coal, petroleum, and other fossil hydrocarbons, once abundant and seemingly cheap “resources,” literally fueled industrial revolutions and the mechanization of food production. And because of this fossil-fuel economy, greenhouse gas levels continue to climb, ever exceeding the highest atmospheric concentrations since our species evolved.

While the types, rates, and degrees of environmental change might be unprecedented in human history, the embedded belief and political-economic systems behind them in the United States—the most energy-consumptive nation—are not. Their long, deep roots have allowed and continue to amplify fragmented ways of seeing, valuing, and using “nature” and human beings. The factors and economic frames considered to measure the human (or ecological) footprint on Earth, for example, mask how the exploitations of land and of people are interconnected. Quantifying the area of productive land and water needed to provide ecosystem “services” or resources—like clean water, food, fuel—that are used or consumed, and the wastes then generated, is just a partial measure of the biosphere’s regenerative capacity. (And by this measure humanity’s footprint already exceeds Earth’s ecological limits.)

But American prosperity and progress have come at great human costs, too. Forced removals of the continent’s native peoples yielded land to newcomers from Europe and their descendants. The new republic became an economic and political power in large measure from a system of industrial agriculture fueled by enslaved labor. Consuming *other* people’s labor, dispossessing *other* people of land and life connection to it, devaluing human rights, and diminishing one’s community, autonomy, and health—these are not just events of the past. In this globalizing world, agribusiness giants like Cargill and ConAgra can take advantage of enslaved labor in Brazil at a comfortable moral distance. And far too many degraded environments in America are also citizens’ homes: forty out of forty-four states with hazardous waste facilities have disproportionately high percentages of people of color and the economically poor living next to those sites.

1. *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment* (2005), www.millenniumassessment.org.

As I listened to conversations that ignored these facts and their consequences for climate change action, *An American Dilemma* came to mind.² When the United States entered the Second World War, a social economist named Gunnar Myrdal wrote from Princeton, New Jersey, of his troubled and hopeful impressions of American society. He'd traveled across the nation, particularly in the South, and finally concluded that Americans seemed to be under the spell of a "great national suggestion"—the ideals of an "American Creed of liberty, equality, justice, and fair opportunity for everybody"—that failed many of the nation's citizens in actuality. This failure, Myrdal thought, came from a moral struggle that raged in the minds and hearts of most white Americans as creed clashed with daily life. The inequities that were forced on many of the nation's citizens because of differences in race, class, and gender were "perhaps the most glaring conflict in the American conscience and the greatest unresolved task for American democracy." These words come not from letters to Myrdal's distant home in Stockholm, but from the collective labor of a research team he directed under the auspices of the Carnegie Corporation and published in *An American Dilemma*, a volume of nearly 1,500 pages.

Structural racism and exclusion need not require intentionality so much as ignorance or compromise. People of color were largely left out of the major social policies of the early and mid-1900s that built today's middle class, and current policies largely, even if unintentionally, reinforce disparities created then. The Social Security Administration, which was established as part of FDR's New Deal in the 1930s, long excluded domestic and agricultural workers—more than two-thirds of the African American population at that time—from retirement, disability, and unemployment benefits. The reason: Roosevelt yielded to southern politicians for their votes. Nearly all major New Deal labor laws excluded migrant farm workers, and today's federal laws don't protect them from unfair labor practices. Even an attempt by the Truman administration to nationalize health care in the early 1950s failed in part because the white South feared integration of the health-care system.

2. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1944).

The unspoken issues in that lecture hall reminded me, just as much as the recent rise in hate crimes, that the American dilemma remains. This society contains many walls, seen and unseen, reflecting patterns of living that dis-member, alienate, and exclude. I've often been asked why people of color don't participate in or contribute to the environmental movement. (We do.) And I've been asked, "Why don't more of 'you' come to the table?" (Well, my preference is that "we" design and build a table together rather assume "others" should come to one already built without their input.) Gated suburban communities—with Keep Out and No Trespassing signs—are paralleled by perhaps less visible but no less powerful borders segregating ideas and senses of who "we" really are. *It doesn't affect me. It's somebody else's problem. It isn't my job.* Those with the wealth and power to distance themselves from the impacts and consequences of environmental contaminants make "not in my back yard" a legal but deadly joke.

How many members of the conservation and environmental movements of the last half century chose to focus within a narrow frame, thinking there was no need to recognize any intersections with other movements like civil rights? People directly experiencing the impacts of contaminated environments or climate change as loss (of home, of food source, health, or livelihood)—and those who are just trying to meet basic human needs—haven't had the opportunity to choose.

This country long ago became accustomed to the unacceptable. A presumption of equality might exist in the minds of many Americans, but huge gaps do exist between expectation and reality. At times I think the anomalous "moral lag in the development of the nation" that Myrdal posited really is a reinforcing symbiosis of embedded otherings (by classism and racism), capitalism's growth-for-profit imperative, and an unexamined mythology of American democracy.

I hesitate writing "we must" or "we should," because such imperatives mean little without both a widespread recognition and moral acceptance of all "we" are. And Aldo Leopold's call to enlarge the moral boundaries of the "community of interdependent parts," and of the social conscience, to the "land" writ large can't be answered if the community's human members deny or avoid our own interconnectedness beyond hierarchies of dominance.

MORAL GROUND

There are no simple answers. Perhaps there are none at all unless each of us chooses to re-member human identity in the largest possible life-sense. Each day, each moment, offers a call to be conscious of divisions and an opportunity to recognize to what and whom we are all connected and thus obligated. The alternative may be a life framed by false problems in false situations.