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America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible by Stephan ; Abigail Thernstrom

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AMERICA'S EQUALITY PROMISE: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible. By Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997. 704 pp. Tables, notes, and index. \$32.50.

Late in the summer of 1937, Frederick P. Keppel, on behalf of the Trustees of the Carnegie Corporation, invited Dr. Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish social economist, to direct a comprehensive study of the Negro in the United States, "determining the social, political, educational, and economic status as well as defining opinions held by different groups of Negroes and whites as to his 'right' status."¹

In his jarring, voluminous tome, Myrdal wrote that "the Negro problem in America represents 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."² Of course, Myrdal understood that Negroes were not the problem; rather, many whites had created a racial caste system, designating all persons of African descent as inferior beings who were not entitled to equal rights with whites. They were seen, he points out, as "an anomaly in the very structure of American society." The embarrassment of inequality, the moral uneasiness from the American caste system, the menacing protests by aggrieved persons, and the shame and guilt of many whites underscored the extent to which the American dilemma was the paradox of privilege for a few and a caste for many. Many whites had determined that non-whites should not receive the same opportunities as whites. This white supremacy disease has been a core value in United States history. Of Myrdal's many important observations, perhaps the most significant was the simplest one, "Things look different, depending upon 'where you stand.'"³

America in Black and White, by Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom, is the latest attempt at imitation of Myrdal's important book. The books have very little in common. *America in Black and White* is a long, provocative assault against the modern civil rights lobby and many of the policies it champions. Many of its arguments are seductive, explaining current poverty and inequality in ways that minimize white responsibility. Like Shelby Steele, Dinesh D'Souza, Thomas Sowell, and others, the Thernstroms describe a redeemed

America far removed from its discriminatory moorings, a nation doing better by its subjugated people every day. I think the book merits broad readership because it provides a comprehensive summary of many conservative critiques of such modern remedial policies as affirmative action, busing, and redistricting. Also, the authors note that some conditions in America's ghettos are worsened by residents who engage in criminal or violent behavior.

Unfortunately, the book fails to capture Myrdal's core trait: objective description. Rather than describe America as it is, the Thernstroms understate the presence of multiple castes in America and overstate social, political, economic, and legal progress during the past fifty years. Even the title is reductionist, cleverly reifying socially constructed race labels (white and black) and making invisible other ethnic groups mired in caste. While criticizing America's embrace of the one drop rule, the authors themselves employ racial categories as if they are immutable or fixed. Their book portrays America from where the Thernstroms stand, ensconced in privilege, discounting other stories and perspectives as liberal, progressive critiques unworthy of serious consideration. In their view American progress in race relations is undeniable, and those who arrive at different conclusions do so because they have an agenda to protect affirmative action and related policies.

The Thernstroms think hard core white racism is a thing of the past; yet, they also suggest that many legal reforms and remedial policies have done little to improve race relations or specifically to help blacks. I disagree with many parts of the book. Even the limited observations on which the Thernstroms make some accurate points fail to present the entire explanation for the disparities they note. And, throughout the book, white privilege is largely invisible, and the reader hears time and again that racial caste has been significantly dismantled.

The book contains three large parts that provide the authors' perspectives on recent race relations between whites and blacks during the past century, especially since 1940. The authors begin with six historical chapters, describing developments that "fundamentally altered the place of African Americans in American society and altered American society itself" (p. 15). The racial problems of today, they assert, are in fact not the same as those of yesterday. In my judgment neither observation is wholly correct. This book fails to analyze rigorously the life experiences of blacks after slavery. Has there been a sea change in the lives of blacks? African Americans lived in a racial caste in the United States, not only in the South and not only from the turn of the century but throughout the nation in the 1940s, the 1960s, and the vast majority do so today. The Thernstroms appear to reason that unless blacks live in poverty, they have it made, especially given affirmative action policies. Regrettably, they offer little evidence to support this conclusion. Moreover, if whiteness does not matter, why is it clung to by so many Americans of multi-ethnic backgrounds? The Thernstroms might have made a more original contribution had they stud-

ied this aspect of racial passing, for American society has not dismantled African American caste and other forms of caste that have resulted from a long, sordid history of pro-discrimination legislation.

Hegemony, whether male, heterosexual, Christian, or white, is a drama in which those seeking to retain power develop discourses that rationalize their privilege. *America in Black and White* is such a discourse. The Thernstroms correctly observe that, between 1957 and 1991, there had been an anti-discrimination period in United States history and new laws had been enacted to halt some forms of overt, state-sponsored discrimination. But readers will find no evidence in this book that demonstrates the widespread adoption of anticaste policies. The authors devalue black caste by intimating that it ended with the demise of Jim Crow rules in the 1950s and 1960s. They maintain that "no ethnic group in American history has ever improved its position so dramatically in so short a period, though it must be said in the same breath that no other group had so far to go" (p. 70). This boast seems disingenuous because the authors fail to say anything about white ethnic groups that came to the United States as penniless immigrants through Ellis Island, who managed to attain the American Dream and who belong to America in ways from which blacks are still excluded.

The authors locate remarkable changes in the two decades *before* the civil rights movement, after blacks fled the South and after blacks, North and South, met during World War II. I cannot stand in the Thernstroms' shoes and comprehend their conclusion. But I know that The University of Alabama remained closed to all African Americans into the 1960s and that overt resistance to the mandate of *Brown v. Board of Education* has persisted to the present. It is hard to imagine why anyone would claim much race progress before blacks could vote, attend public schools on a nonracial basis, seek employment in traditionally white occupations, or access municipal services and facilities on a nonracial basis.

Part two presents five chapters on recent social, economic, and political trends in the United States. One trend that the Thernstroms emphasize is the rise of the black middle-class and a black political class. Utilizing empirical arguments, the authors point out the increased number of black lawyers, editors, engineers, and public officials to illustrate that blacks are better off today than a half century ago. What they fail to note is how well off blacks and others might have been in a society that had eliminated caste. But for discrimination and accumulated privilege, how many blacks or other persons of color or white women might now hold middle-class occupations? Moreover, while the authors provide numerous reference charts comparing the past and present, many of the tables do not support their conclusions. For example, the percentage of black physicians they report is now 4.5 percent, up from 2.5 percent fifty years ago. Is a total of less than 5 percent laudable? Why aren't there more black doctors?

And of the nine professional categories listed, only in one, social worker, are blacks more than 10 percent of the total; in most of the categories, blacks are fewer than 5 percent.

Another peculiar feature of the tables is that sometimes the authors use percentages and in other cases raw numbers, apparently switching back and forth depending on whether a raw number or a percent is most helpful to their contention. Consider the table on the percent of population with four years of high school or more. First, why is this a relevant statistic at all in the 1990s? What is the value of a high school degree without college and graduate school? Why not focus here on undergraduate degrees, law degrees, or perhaps doctorates? Even more, what is the value of a high school diploma if you cannot read or write at or above that grade level, as the Thernstroms charge is the case for so many blacks?

Some of the tables in the book raise more questions than they answer. For instance, the chart on median incomes is notable. It suggests that black males earn 67 cents for every dollar earned by white men and black women earn 89 cents for each dollar earned by white women. The first number is not anything to wave the flag over. In addition, it is here that the Thernstroms define what they mean by middle-class: an income at least double the official poverty rate set by the federal government, approximately \$31,000 for a two parent family with two children. Few Americans earning that sum would report that they are middle-class. That figure is absurd and more than arbitrary. If the Thernstroms had used \$60,000, I suspect they would not have been able to claim as much economic progress.

Part three of the book is an extended, unabashed anti-affirmative action critique in which the Thernstroms explain much that is wrong in America's schools and factories. They faintly echo DuBois, who insisted fifty years ago that blacks did not need black schools or white schools, they need educationally effective schools. With this observation I could not agree more, at least as a start. But how do you attain educationally effective public schools in the United States today? Certainly, competent teachers are essential. But is competence a code for whites first in terms of hiring and firing? Why do large disparities in student performance exist? It is no answer to say simply that black students need to work harder and to invoke Martin Luther King, Jr.'s memory.

In the final chapters, the reader learns why the Thernstroms oppose busing, afrocentric curricula, and various forms of affirmative action. Here, for the first time in the book, the reader gets the feeling that the Thernstroms are genuinely concerned about black children, but their recommendation to solve the problem seems superficial. They do not explain how blacks or their advocates can transform dysfunctional urban schools into successful ones except by doing what the Catholics do. They do not really take on the idea that some presence of minority teachers is important or explain why, after busing began, so many black

teachers and administrators lost employment. Thus, while I think this is the most important section of the book, I do not believe the Thernstroms dig in sufficiently to offer more than the most obvious reforms.

The Thernstroms locate good and bad in rising black enrollment in higher education. They identify a surge in black college enrollment between 1960 and 1980. Then, they give all the bad news, that blacks are often overmatched in college and suffer much higher dropout rates. The Thernstroms explain that blacks are admitted under double standards, implying that whites are admitted by merit. Again, neither observation seems wholly accurate. Schools admit students for a variety of reasons, and whites, blacks, and others, to varying degrees, benefit from non-numeric assessments. Moreover, it is unfair in one breath to assert that blacks have received inferior schooling and then to claim that college admissions standards for blacks and whites should be the same.

Only modest changes occurred in African American status prior to the enactment of the great civil rights statutes of the 1960s, namely the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the 1968 Fair Housing Act. Those laws were indispensable to halting pro-discrimination legislation. They took the government out of the discrimination business and checked some private conduct. But they did not dismantle American caste. The Thernstroms misunderstand the essential difference between anti-discrimination legislation and anti-caste legislation. Only the latter reduces accumulated caste. Although *America in Black and White* is not the worst book I have ever read, its failure at objectivity and balance ranks it low in potential persuasiveness. The book's empirical data appear carefully selected to support a viewpoint, not chosen to allow readers to make up their own mind. The authors flatly contradict comparative data found in recent studies by Andrew Hacker and others without explaining why or how the earlier writers got it wrong. Put simply, instead of objectivity, the hallmark of this book is exaggeration—overstatement and understatement.

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Notes

1. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New York, 1944), p. lli.
2. *Ibid.*, p. lxi.
3. *Ibid.*, p. lx.