pher which role it has played, in what periods, and why. Wailoo’s incisive study offers historians an outstanding example of the many rewards inherent in such an approach.

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America in Black and White: One Nation Indivisible: Race in Modern America. By Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1997) 704 pp. $32.50

In their survey of black/white relations and the status of African-Americans in American life, Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom have attempted to bring up to date Gunnar Myrdal’s classic study, An American Dilemma (New York, 1944). Their verdict: Myrdal was too optimistic in the 1940s, but the country is too pessimistic now.

The culprits responsible for this unfortunate misperception are many, but Andrew Hacker is the enemy who is treated with the most respect. “Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal, Andrew Hacker called his best-selling book,” the Thernstroms write. “Our book is in many ways an answer to Hacker. One nation (we argue), no longer separate, much less unequal than it once was, and by many measures, less hostile. Moreover, the serious inequality that remains is less a function of white racism than of the racial gap in levels of educational attainment, the structure of the black family, and the rise in black crime” (534).

These unemotional summary statements, however, convey nothing of the polemical power of America in Black and White. The book is not so much dispassionate social science as it is a brief for a particular conservative point of view. Even so, it is a rich compendium of demographic, economic, political, and opinion-survey data. The arguments, set forth with mounting ferocity and less care as the book progresses, amount to a formidable challenge that liberals of various stripes will have to confront for some time to come.

The Thernstroms are committed to racial equality and are fans of the early civil rights movement. They believe that the only way to get “there” from where we are today is through race-blind policies and efforts. Indeed, they believe that race-conscious affirmative action is “immoral.” Nevertheless, their book is an attempt to prove that the unintended consequences of government affirmative-action policies have been counterproductive.

Though the Thernstroms are careful to distinguish themselves from brands of conservatism with which they do not agree—those represented by such people as David Duke, Jesse Helms, Pat Robertson, and presumably Charles Murray—they do not give their enemies the same
benefit. There is a case to be made for a centrist liberal point of view; though not for the straw-figure liberalism that the Thernstroms burn at the stake. The evidence that the Thernstroms, to their credit, have amassed needs a more complex reading and a more eclectic public-policy menu than the Thernstroms provide. Obviously, that case cannot be made here.

Two small examples will have to suffice to suggest the limitations of the Thernstrom account. Although the authors emphasize the fact that blacks had been making educational and economic progress in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s—long before federal affirmative-action policies were in effect, they do not make this progress part of a coherent historical account; they simply leave readers to draw their own inferences (the easiest of which is that the civil rights movement was unnecessary, since progress would have been made anyway). Black progress before affirmative action is not news. In fact, the conventional explanation of the “Second Reconstruction” is that it was a “revolution of rising expectations.” Most important, it is extraordinarily simplistic to attempt to correlate the social experiences of a large category of people with a single kind of governmental policy, ignoring all of the other economic, cultural, intellectual, and political developments impinging on social reality.

The Thernstroms not only never confront the strongest arguments of their opponents, they prove to be incredibly dexterous in turning contrary evidence into support. For instance, they make only a half-hearted attempt to defend the Willie Horton ads from the 1988 presidential campaign, even though it would appear to be evidence of the sort of raw racism that the Thernstroms argue is no longer a problem in America. Instead, they cleverly argue that the Democrats’ use of the ads to create a backlash against the Republicans is proof that the Democrats believed the general public to be as free of racism as the Thernstroms maintain.

This interpretation scores debating points, but it does not even attempt to mine the interesting topography suggested by the simultaneous presence in the public mind of negative racial stereotypes and a strong desire for tolerance. With both of those tendencies latent, the contest is then to frame the public’s perception of the event in a way favorable to one’s own side. That is what so much of current politics is about.

That is also what so much of America in Black and White is about. It is an important book, but it must be read as only one side of an argument.

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