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***American Denial* Premieres on *Independent Lens*  
Monday, February 23, 2015 on PBS**

**A provocative look at race in America through the prism of a landmark  
1944 inquiry into Jim Crow segregation**



Credit: Gordon Parks

(San Francisco, CA) – In 1938, the Carnegie Corporation commissioned Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal to begin his landmark study of race and inequality in the United States. His question: How could a people who cherish freedom and fairness also create such a racially oppressive society? Published in 1944, “An American Dilemma” was cited in the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to desegregate America’s schools. Seventy years later, Myrdal’s question continues to challenge America — how do we explain the disconnect between what we believe and what we

practice in what some have called a “post-racial” America? ***American Denial*** juxtaposes past and present, shifting from Myrdal’s investigation — and his own personal struggle with denial — and current stories of racial injustice that are often overlooked in our national insistence on the preeminence of the ideals of liberty, justice, and equality. Directed by Llewellyn Smith and produced by Christine Herbes-Sommers, Smith, and Kelly Thomson, *American Denial* premieres on *Independent Lens* on Monday, February 23, 2015, 10:00-11:00 PM ET ([check local listings](#)) on PBS.

An intellectual social visionary who later won a Nobel Prize in economics, Myrdal first visited the Jim Crow South at the invitation of Carnegie Corporation in 1938, where he was “shocked to the core by all the evils I saw.” With a team of scholars that included black political scientist Ralph Bunche, Myrdal wrote a massive 1500-page investigation of race he called “An American Dilemma.” His study, now a considered a classic, challenged the veracity of the American Creed of equality, justice, and liberty for all by arguing that critically implicit in the Creed — which Myrdal called America’s “state religion” — was a nefarious conflict: the way for white Americans to explain to themselves why black Americans could not succeed in a nation offering equal opportunity was to view blacks as inferior. Myrdal argued that this view justified practices and policies that openly undermined and oppressed the lives of black citizens. But are we still a society living in this state of denial seventy years later, in an era marked by the election of the



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nation's first black president?

*American Denial* sheds a unique light on the unconscious political and moral world of modern Americans. Archival footage, newsreels, nightly news reports, and rare southern home movies from the 30s and 40s thread through the story, as well as footage showing the surprising results of psychological tests of racial attitudes. Exploring “stop and frisk” practices, the incarceration crisis, and racially-patterned crime and poverty, the film features a wide array of historians, psychologists, and sociologists who offer expert insight and share their own personal, unsettling stories. The result is a unique and provocative film that challenges our assumptions about who we are and what we really believe.

Visit the *American Denial* companion website (<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/american-denial>) which features information about the film, including an interview with the filmmakers and resources pertaining to the film's subject matter.

#### **About the Participants, in Order of Appearance**

**Michelle Alexander** is a longtime civil rights advocate and litigator. She won a 2005 Soros Justice Fellowship and now holds a joint appointment at the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity and the Mortiz College of Law at Ohio State University.

**Danielle Allen** is a political theorist at the Institute for Advanced Study who has published broadly in democratic theory, political sociology, and the history of political thought.

**Mahzarin Banaji** is an experimental psychologist and professor at Harvard University and Chair in Human Dynamics at the Santa Fe Institute.

**Sissela Bok** is the daughter of Gunnar and Alva Myrdal and a philosopher and ethicist.

**Vincent Brown** is a professor of history and of African and African American Studies at Harvard University and a multi-media historian with a keen interest in the political implications of cultural practice.

**Kaj Fölster** is the youngest daughter of Gunnar and Alva Myrdal and an author and political activist.

**Walter A. Jackson** is a professor of history at North Carolina State University.

**Professor John A. Powell** is Executive Director of the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society (HIFIS) and Robert D. Haas Chancellor's Chair in Equity and Inclusion at the University of California, Berkeley.





**James Sidanius** is a professor in the departments of psychology and African and African American Studies at Harvard University.

**Sudhir Venkatesh** is professor of sociology, and a member of the Committee on Global Thought at Columbia University.

### About the Filmmakers

**Christine Herbes-Sommers (Producer)** is President of Vital Pictures, Inc. and has produced over 100 hours of documentary, dramatic, and educational programming for PBS since 1976. Her film *Joan Robinson: One Woman's Story* won the duPont-Columbia Award in 1981, and her work over the years has garnered many other awards. At Vital Pictures she partnered with Llewellyn Smith and California Newsreel to develop and produce the award-winning, four-part series *Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?* and was executive producer for the award-winning documentary *Herskovits at the Heart of Blackness*. She is currently producer for *Raising of America* and is spearheading the *Coming of Age in an Aging America* project. She and Smith were also producers for the groundbreaking series *Race: The Power of an Illusion* in 2001. Prior to Vital Pictures, Christine was a staff producer at WGBH/Boston and at The Big Picture Company in Rhode Island where she created innovative programming for schools nationwide. She has a BA in Political Science from Knox College and a MA from the Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy.

**Llewellyn Smith (Producer/Director)** is co-founder and project director at Blue Spark Collaborative. Until 2012, with his producing partner Christine Herbes-Sommers at Vital Pictures, they created a number of award-winning films. Smith was co-executive producer for the PBS series *Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?*, a look at the surprising impact social and economic conditions have in determining health and longevity. He also served as director-producer for the Vital Pictures documentary *Herskovits at the Heart of Blackness*, a look at the consequences of race identity politics, which aired on *Independent Lens*. In 2012, Smith directed and produced Vital Pictures' *Gaining Ground: Building Community on Dudley Street*. The film followed community organizing and community building effort over a two-year period in the remarkable low-income Boston neighborhood where he grew up. Other films or series contributions include *Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery* (1997), *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (2003), and *Forgotten Genius* (2007)

**Kelly Thomson (Producer)** served as producer and editor on Vital Pictures' award-winning films, including *Gaining Ground: Building Community on Dudley Street*, *The Raising of America*, *Herskovits at the Heart of Darkness*, and *Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?* She is currently in production on an independent documentary that profiles female leaders in Islamic mysticism (w.t. *Shaykha*.) Her first feature independent documentary, *Savage Memory*, has



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screened at festivals, museums, and universities across the globe. She recently served as Artist-in-Residence at the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative where she worked with teens to create short films. Thomson began working in film at the age of 19 and has worked on a number of independent films over the past fifteen years, including *Wild Art*, *Hotels 4*, *All Falls Down*, *A Vote for Choice*, and *Funeral of the Last Gypsy King*. She received her BA from New York University in Religious Studies.

### CREDITS

Director	Llewellyn Smith
Producers	Christine Herbes-Sommers Llewellyn Smith Kelly Thomson
Editor	James Rutenbeck
Supervising Producer	Wendy Riseborough
Illustrator	Line Olsson
Associate Producer	Jeremy Wolf
Director of Photography	Tom Fahey
Music by	OBT Music P. Andrew Willis

### About *Independent Lens*

*Independent Lens* is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS Monday nights at 10:00 PM. The acclaimed series features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by Independent Television Service, the series is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding from PBS and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. For more visit [pbs.org/independentlens](https://pbs.org/independentlens). Join the conversation: [facebook.com/independentlens](https://facebook.com/independentlens) and on Twitter [@IndependentLens](https://twitter.com/IndependentLens).

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