

# ALVA AND GUNNAR MYRDAL

Originally, this paper was going to be about Gunnar Myrdal, the famous Swedish economist and sociologist, and how he reached the ideas that worked to bring about a massive societal change. I had identified him as being one of the men behind the policies adopted by the Social Democratic government of Sweden in the 1930s, the policies which resulted in the massive changes in Swedish society as it became “the people’s home.” However, the more I read, the more I realized that those policies had been at least as much his wife Alva’s work as his and would not have been possible without her vision and compassion. If more credit originally went to Gunnar, that was more a reflection of the mores of the time than an accurate picture of responsibility. In order that that mistake not be perpetuated, I decided to look at them both and at what their ideas helped to bring about. Besides, their lives and ideas were so intertwined that it would have been almost impossible to do otherwise. I found them both fascinating.

It would be difficult to find a more talented and interesting family than the Myrdals’. Both Gunnar and Alva were remarkable people – they were innovators and intellectuals, social scientists, policy influencers and policy makers. They had a strong effect on making Sweden the country it became. They were both well-known actors on the world stage and had positive influences on other countries and institutions. For their work, they each won Nobel Prizes, the only couple to do so in different fields: his was in Economics in 1974 and hers was the Peace Prize of 1982. Their three children are also famous to varying degrees. Their son and eldest, Jan, is a well-known and well-regarded Swedish author and intellectual, famous for his studies of other countries. He is also famous in part for his autobiographical novels depicting his parents in a harsh light. The Myrdals’ oldest daughter, Sissela Bok, is married to former Harvard president Derek Bok, and is a psychologist and author of several books, including a sympathetic biography of her mother. Their youngest daughter, Kaj Fölster, is a social scientist and author in Germany who has also written about her parents; unfortunately (for me anyway) this work is available only in Swedish and German.

Though both Alva and Gunnar were exceptional, there was nothing outstanding about either of their families. However, both families were somewhat dysfunctional, for different reasons. Alva’s parents were basically mismatched. Her father’s father was a troublemaker, a radical

blacksmith who drank heavily. Her father, Gustaf Albert Jansson, later Reimer,<sup>1</sup> followed his father in the first, but never touched a drop of alcohol. He was a radical thinker, an atheist who read Kropotkin and Rousseau and tried to live up to his socialist ideals; Alva later called him a “theoretical and practical idealist” (Bok, 1991, p. 19). As a youth he was active in the temperance youth movement, the labour movement and the cooperative movement. All of these movements, which helped in the transformation of Sweden, emphasized self-help and involved reading and discussion groups that met after 12 hour work days.

As an adult Albert built houses and apartment buildings, especially cooperative housing. He moved his family every two years or so to follow his buildings and to reflect his family’s changing fortunes. The family could have been wealthier had he not refused to charge poorer people for his work or make large profits from it, judging such processes immoral. Therefore, the fortunes of the family vacillated wildly. He always wanted to work for the “good” and viewed bringing forth food as the most noble profession. So, in 1914, during a recession in Sweden, he moved his family “back to the land,” taking over his wife’s family’s farm in Ekilstuna. The family stayed on the farm after that, and Albert became involved in local politics and continued to build cooperative housing.

Alva admired her father and got her strong social ideals from him, though she realized how difficult his ideals could make others’ lives. She also learned from him indirectly; her eavesdropping on the discussions of various cooperative housing boards, all men, led her to the realization that “the world planned by only one half [men] could never serve humanity well” (Bok, 1991, p. 26).

Alva’s mother, Lova (née Larsson), who came from a land-owning farming family, was more materialist and was politically a liberal (in the European sense). She loved art, music and theatre as well as fashionable clothes and hats. She was an excellent seamstress, teaching her daughters how to sew, weave and embroider well, and took pride in keeping her house clean. She was not a regular churchgoer, but believed in God and would often go to church to show off new outfits. She was little, pretty and coquettish with sharp wits and skills in story

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<sup>1</sup> At the time in Sweden it was quite common for families to change their surnames if they felt like it. The new surnames were felt to be more modern and to symbolize “Sweden’s own shift from a 19<sup>th</sup>-century agrarian society to a small 20<sup>th</sup>-century industrial state” (Taylor, 1991). Having continuing surnames was in itself fairly new – previously each generation had just taken the name of their father and added sson or sdottor. Alva’s father changed the family name simply because he liked the sound of Reimer.

telling. She could bubble with humour, unlike her serious, matter-of-fact, unmusical husband. Alva later reported that “her two passions were cooking and clothes. We children understood very early that this had replaced her lost dream of a career” (Bok, 1991, p. 15).

Having been denied the opportunity to do anything except be a housewife also made Lova very bitter. She also had several fears which led to conflicts with the rest of her family. One fear was getting pregnant, a fear which increased as she neared middle age; this fear led to conflicts with her husband about sexual issues. Her other major fear was germs. She developed this fear because two of her siblings had died of tuberculosis and she was afraid she was a carrier. Because of this fear she would not hug or kiss her children or allow them to take out library books.

For all these reasons, Alva developed a strong dislike for her mother which she carried with her for the rest of her life, never realizing her mother’s humanity. However, Alva emulated her mother in some ways: she always dressed fashionably and sewed for her own daughters, and she loved the arts, especially theatre. From her parents differing political and religious views and their “agreement to disagree” on political matters she saw that it was possible to have two views about the same issue.

Alva, born on January 31, 1902, was the oldest of Albert and Lova’s five children. Her name was a combination of her parents’ names. As the oldest, she received what Lova felt to be the most modern childcare, which included scheduled feedings and not being picked up when she cried. She had four younger siblings, the youngest of whom was ten years younger than she. After his birth, Lova retreated from the family and spent half the day in bed. Because of her family’s frequent moves, Alva never felt at home in any place. She also did not feel at home in her family. She remembered her childhood as a horrible time filled with conflicts, but her siblings did not share her view.

Alva fought hard against the customs that would not allow her to get more than six years of schooling simply because she was a girl. In the six years she was allowed, she went to various schools and did very well; however, she was never first, perhaps so as not to outshine everyone else and appear “forward.” She read voraciously, at first sneaking books out of her father’s cabinet and then hiding borrowed books from her mother. She did manage to get one additional year at a “commercial” school (like a vocational high school) in 1916, but that was all

that could be had in her town – the gymnasium, or high school, was not available for girls. So she went to work in a tax office and split her earnings between money for her family, books and saving for future study. She also found a used bookstore owner who let her read all she wanted.

From an early age the books she devoured included those on philosophy and politics. A short list of authors she had read includes Zola, Schopenhauer, Strindberg, Ellen Key, Voltaire, Auguste Comte, Jack London, John Stuart Mill, Maeterlinck, Scheele, and Renan. From these and others she developed philosophies that would guide her life. She always believed that change came from within and tried to work for a “kind of fully lived reform that began, in Gandhian fashion, from within” (Bok, 1991, p. 33). She also developed an almost Zoroastrian way of thinking about good and evil, wherein good and bad were white and black. She always struggled for good, but did not develop self-doubt about what good was. This belief lay behind the forcefulness and clarity that many saw in her and her feeling that it was self-evident which ideals were the right ones (Bok, 1991).

As a teenager, she wrote letters to a former teacher. In these she tries to tell him how her friends say they see her: honest, self-controlled, not envious, less biased than most, strong willed, possessed of “powerful enthusiasms and antipathies that lead her to be ready to do anything for those she admires but to be quite mean to others, especially her mother” (Bok, 1991, p. 6) and above all else, utterly herself. She thought this sounded unpleasant because it was not how girls were supposed to be. Her dreams were also against the norm: she wanted to go out in the world and have a “creative, adventurous life that would lead out into the world and make possible great contributions – and to do so without sacrificing the traditional feminine role” (Bok, 1991, p. 7). She was not sure how she would accomplish this as there were no models for such a life, but she knew that she would need an education.

Alva applied to gymnasiums in other towns that taught girls and was accepted by one, but her mother refused to let her go, even tearing up the completed application. By 1919, her father recognized her determination to get an education and, with some other parents, paid 900 crowns a year each (boys paid 80) so that Alva and some other girls could attend gymnasium classes. She excelled in those classes and loved her first year of high school. For, her, the struggle was worth it.

Gunnar, on the other hand, did not have to struggle to get the best education available. His family was outwardly successful: his father, Carl Adolf Petersson,<sup>2</sup> was a successful contractor in Stockholm. Carl was a stocky, aggressive, gregarious man with a lot of energy who had single-handedly made his family wealthy; he was also an alcoholic, a womanizer and a domineering patriarch. He had taken his family from the farming community of Solvarbo in the province of Dalarna when Gunnar was seven, but the family's ties to the country remained in their temperaments and religion. They stressed patriotic and communal pride and had a conservative stance. They were religious and did not question their religion. The family returned to the country in the summers and felt most at home there. These return visits were a source of stability for Gunnar and he would write much later that, "I had always thought that my true identity lies in this proud, obstinate, individualistic, traditionally stable, and utterly democratic Dalecarlian countryside" (Bok, 1991, p. 57).

When Gunnar was fairly young his mother made him responsible for taking care of the problems caused by his father from drinking and poor investments. When Carl retired in the 1920s he went back to the countryside and became active in politics. He was a Freemason and a political conservative and was part of the farmers' movement, and Gunnar served as his ghostwriter, writing several articles that contributed to his father's local prestige. His father became well known and well respected and was still remembered locally in 1970, long after his death in 1934 (Myrdal, J., 1991).

With his father, Gunnar outwardly played the dutiful son, pretending nothing was wrong, but inwardly he was embarrassed and wanted to live his life differently. His relationship with his father would influence him in several ways; he grew to resemble him in "his driving ambition, restless energy, contentious style, and insistence on deference from the rest of his family [and] though he would embrace an optimistic worldview, there would always be an undercurrent of worry and occasional depression that was a legacy of these family problems, a sense that things could turn out badly if careful, rational planning did not succeed." (Jackson, 1990, p. 41).

Gunnar's mother was named Anna Sofia (Sofie), née Karlsson. She was a gentle and pious countrywoman with no desire to be upwardly mobile. She was bitterly unhappy and resented

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<sup>2</sup> Gunnar's father also changed the family's surname (in 1914), but only for his children (though his wife would adopt it after his death). He changed it originally to Myrdahl, but the h was dropped by Gunnar three years later. He took the name from the area his family came from, but the meaning is amusing: it means swamp-valley.

the family's frequent moves, as well as her husband's drinking and womanizing. She complained tearfully to friends and relatives, but was powerless to do anything about it. However, she did her best to create a warm and stable family for her four children. She thought it important that they have piety, traditional morality, a strong work ethic and a sense of duty to the community and did her best to ensure that they did. She was responsible for Gunnar's sense of moralism and his belief that conscience was a guide to conduct.

Sofie doted on Gunnar, the oldest of her four children, born on December 6, 1898. She gave him special treatment because he was clearly gifted. He used to say that he had been born "quite abnormally curious" and that

as a child, one of his first memories had been of walking in a city and of itching to know about all the people living behind the many thousands of windows: "Men and women and children who work, eat and sleep, argue and laugh, talk over the telephone and read the newspapers: Where does their money come from? How do they get food? Why do people turn out to be what they are? Why do they marry precisely those they marry and have the children they have? Why do they act as they do, anyway? Why not otherwise? What would happen if they did? How does it all mesh? (Bok, 1991, p. 53)

His family viewed him as remarkable, a view he came to hold himself, and as Gunnar's son Jan later wrote, "nothing was allowed to disturb Gunnar's studies. Nothing was good enough for him who undertook to become first, best and greatest. There was no talk of the sisters continuing their studies. They were just girls and their duty was to admire their brother and take care of practicalities for him if he wished" (Myrdal, J., 1991, p, 94).

Despite his gifts, Gunnar was at first a troublemaker and irritating as a student, perhaps because of changing schools so often. He neglected his homework and got mediocre grades. This made his father very angry because he was letting the family down. As Jan wrote, "Gunnar was lazy and careless his first term in term in secondary school. It was then Grandfather talked to him and said: 'Either you become first and best and greatest, or you go out like a slave. In between there is nothing.' Gunnar became the best. He was, after all, gifted and Grandfather knew it." (Myrdal, J., 1991, p. 93). The proximal cause of Gunnar's change of heart was a broken hip that kept him out of school for several months and allowed him time to reflect on his fathers words, and kept him from excelling at sports when back at school. He started to excel at school.

He was at the best gymnasium in Stockholm, an outsider and a hick among the bourgeoisie at the school, and he grew to hold fairly elitist views, in part to please his teachers and fellow

students. He read Rudolf Kjellén, who thought that the individual should be subordinate to the state and that social scientists should participate in politics. Though Gunnar later ceased to be a conservative, he would be influenced by Kjellén's ideas throughout his life. Jan wrote that "Gunnar has never made a secret that of that [influence]. Kjellén is more significant than Marx for Swedish Social Democracy under the Welfare State" (Myrdal, J., 1991, p. 95). At the gymnasium he was also exposed to the ideas of the Enlightenment and his belief that "human conditions would improve as soon as reason triumphed over misunderstanding, bias, and superstition" (Bok, 1991, p. 55) was another factor that coloured his thinking throughout his life. In addition, he became interested in social policy issues, even though his focus was on natural sciences and mathematics.

He entered Stockholm University as a law student in 1918 partly because his father wanted him to become a lawyer. He was also still curious about how society functioned and both hoped and doubted that law would help him understand. He was also still elitist and influenced by the writings of Nietzsche; in his first year he gave a speech advocating the formation of an elite party to guide the unthinking, irrational masses. In part of that speech he also held that women only added to the problem by further undermining the rationality of the masses (Bok, 1991). These elitist views would not last long, as Alva would first shake his condescending view of women to the core and then guide him to socialism.

Gunnar and Alva's meeting was a cross between a fairy-tale and an old joke. In the summer of 1919, Gunnar was 20, and lanky with light brown hair and playful blue eyes. He was spending his holiday bicycling around Sweden with two friends. The three spent the night in a farmer's hayloft and in the morning met the farmer's daughters, the oldest of whom was Alva, then 17, and a "fair, slender, blond young woman with engaging blue eyes. She impressed [Gunnar] as self-confident and happy, with a mischievous sense of humour and a remarkable intelligence" (Jackson, 1990, p. 50). It was love at first sight for both of them, or perhaps more properly, love at first sound, for it was based largely on their conversation and recognition of the others intellectual talents. Alva said that talking to him felt as if "one had been invited to a feast of imagination, intellect and playfulness" (Bok, 1991, p. 59). He had a way of juxtaposing ideas and reaching unexpected conclusions as he tried to understand how people lived, what problems they struggled with and how they envisioned the future.

Alva bicycled with them for a day, and then a few weeks later Gunnar screwed up the courage to write her and ask if she would join him and his friend (the other friend had gone home). Alva agreed, lied to her father, and took the train to meet them. They had a great couple of weeks bicycling around the country and talking into the night, and ended up meandering down a river on a raft to reach Solvarbo, where Alva met Gunnar's family. In Solvarbo they started their physical relationship, something that Swedes were pretty relaxed about even then. She stayed until Alva's mother, who had been in a rest home, found out where she was. Alva went home, but she and Gunnar kept in touch by letter. Both knew they had found "the one."

Gunnar and Alva also started the process of intellectual companionship that would continue throughout their lives. They also caused each other to seriously reevaluate their thinking. Alva's obvious intelligence caused Gunnar to discard his nascent feelings of male superiority. He now accepted that women could be the intellectual equals of men. He was still elitist, but no longer believed that only males could be elite. In turn he persuaded Alva that her ideals needed to be tempered with rationality, so much so that she went home and burned all the poems, adventure stories, novels and diaries that she had written; she kept only what could be "elucidated and worked out scientifically and rationally – all that she could share openly with Gunnar" (Bok, 1991, p. 60).

Alva was still in the gymnasium, but got bored with the classes and finished her course in only three years, instead of the usual four, graduating with the highest honours in 1922. She then moved to Stockholm and did her first degree, studying subjects such as literature and history. She and Gunnar got married soon before she graduated in 1924, inviting only their two best friends to the wedding. She continued to study, moving to psychology, a subject not then taught in Sweden. She studied on her own, reading much of what was available in three languages and becoming an expert in child psychology. She and Gunnar continued to discuss everything and were absorbed in each other. Alva relished "what she saw as Gunnar's capacity to grasp and explore in minutes what others would painstakingly plod through, his way of playing with ideas and juxtaposing them in novel ways, his soaring to unexpected generalizations and then lighting on particulars with luminous perception" (Bok, 1991, page 68).

In 1923, Gunnar had graduated from law school and started to practice. However, he was not happy being a lawyer so Alva suggested that he study economics since he had always been

good at mathematics and it had greater potential to improve society than law did. She also shared the desire to comprehend the rules which governed society and to use them to effect reforms. Though he would not practice after 1927, Gunnar gained two benefits from law: the abilities to use words clearly and to sift through piles of evidence to get to the central problem.

Gunnar started his doctoral program while he continued to practice law. His advisor was Gustav Cassel, one of Sweden's leading economists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Cassel was a neoclassicist, and Gunnar followed his lead during the early part of his studies, believing that individuals should have equal opportunity and that the government should not interfere with the market, though he was still leery about the masses making their own decisions. He grew close to Cassel and regarded him as a father figure who he could admire. In turn, he was Cassel's favourite pupil. They exchanged letters for years and remained close.

As a wild young lion  
I went out into my morning  
to play and strike.  
Nothing was holy or great to me  
for I felt my strength  
greater than that of others.  
As the lion despises the antelopes  
the timid gazelles,  
the striped little zebras,  
which with rapid hooves speed away from his roaring -  
so I saw human beings  
little  
frightened  
inferior -  
and my pride was immense.  
Then I met you.  
Clear, wise, strong, and still.  
All that I lacked you possessed.  
Had I lacked anything?  
The depth of uncertainty under my proud roaring  
opened up  
like a chasm in the mountains  
but there you stood  
and gave me your hand  
and your belief in me  
threw a bridge over the depth  
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He whom a god loves  
or a woman like you  
he is invincible....

-A poem describing Gunnar and Alva's relationship by their friend, poet Gunhild Tegen. (Bok, 1991, pp. 73-4)

The Myrdals also had friends over for debates that could last all night. Gunnar was one of the most energetic and aggressive debaters, while Alva was somewhat quiet and shy, but held the discussions together and made them productive; her contributions were "clear, clever and original" (Jackson, 1990, p. 54). These conversations helped to shape Gunnar's thinking about the possible failures of the market system and to see the flaws in liberalism. Also, Alva's strong Social Democratic values helped Gunnar be concerned with equality and social welfare. Her readings in psychology, which she shared with Gunnar, helped him to see the basic irrationality of humans, and how they did not always act in their own economic self interest. He became curious about how human psychology and economics could interact, and about how economics could effect political change. His religious upbringing also caused him to question the liberal idea that maximizing economic self-interest would lead to happiness.

Gunnar started to pay more heed to an older Swedish economist whose ideas contradicted Cassel. This economist was Knut Wicksell, whose ideas, though similar to Keynes', predated them by about 30 years. Wicksell advocated market socialism and a welfare state, attained gradually and peacefully. Gunnar's dissertation and early work drew directly on Wicksell's work and refined it further. However, he remained close to Cassel and continued to call himself a neoclassicist. Cassel was a good liberal who believed in academic freedom and the free market of ideas; so much so that the four of his students who would become prominent in Swedish politics did so with four different parties.

Both Myrdals spent some time studying abroad – they went to Britain in 1925 and to Germany in 1925 and 1927 – Alva to continue her studies of psychology and Gunnar to read economics. These trips were exhilarating – they both read great thinkers, neo-Darwinists, utopian socialists and Enlightenment philosophers and “believed wholeheartedly in the power of science to illuminate human problems so clearly that all would come to see the self-evidence of the reforms they regarded as necessary” (Bok, 1991, p. 67). Because Sweden had not been involved in WW I, their optimism was unfettered by the postwar pessimism and disillusionment afflicting their contemporaries in other European countries. In England they also experienced discrimination for the first time in their lives as they made many Indian friends.

Though both were determined to live by Enlightenment principles, this did not mean that they organized their household in an enlightened way. It was enough for Alva that Gunnar accepted her as an intellectual equal, and it did not matter that neither he nor anyone else practiced real equality. Gunnar “loved her, admired her immensely, and fully accepted her as his intellectual equal. Unlike the great majority of men at the time, he had every intention of encouraging her career. But he did not expect this to entail any sacrifices on his part. He took for granted her subservience and with it men's dominance in general” (Bok, 1991, p. 72). Therefore, although Alva did not like housework, she accepted it as within her role. Likewise, when Jan was born in 1927 she did take care of him while continuing her studies. She was silent about her own needs, humble and submissive, putting Gunnar's needs first and seeing it as her duty to support his genius and to be his muse. This was quite all right with Gunnar, who never doubted his own importance and also believed his needs should come first. With him it was more than sex roles – he believed he was unique and that his gifts and his scholarly work released him from ordinary norms. “He knew his extraordinary intellectual force and saw vast

and challenging tasks before him; as a result, he demanded all the practical help he could get and felt mild contempt for the many who did not have his gifts.” (Bok, 1991, p. 72)

Gunnar received his Juris Doctor degree (Ph.D.) in 1927 and his dissertation, *Change and the Problem of Price Control*, received the highest mark possible (*laudater*),<sup>3</sup> one of only two Swedish economists during the heyday of Swedish economics to do so (the other was Wicksell). It was a highly theoretical look at risk and uncertainty and concluded that people’s anticipations and hopes about market conditions and technical development influence what price is set and how profits occur, something that neoclassical economics ignored. He also stressed the distinction between *ex ante* decisions (those before an event) and *ex post* measurable, actual values (the results) (Angresano, 1997). He is often given credit for inventing the terms, though they are properly attributed to a translator of his work, an economist and student of Myrdal’s named Gerhard Mackenroth (Streeten, 1988).

There is an obvious lack of agreement between the principles of research in economics and its practice. On the one hand, it is emphasized that economic science only observes social life and analyses what can be expected to happen in different circumstances, and that it never pretends to infer what the facts ought to be. On the other hand, practically every economist draws such inferences. And the various specific economic theories are most of the time arranged for the very purpose of drawing them. The result is political precepts of a supposedly scientific and objective nature. It would seem as if the terms 'observations' and 'facts' do not mean the same things in economics as they do elsewhere in scientific terminology. Economists appear to have access to a sphere of values which are both objective and observable. *The Political Element in the Development of Economic Theory*, p. 5.

Gunnar’s dissertation and its treatment of anticipation and uncertainty was a crucial factor in the development of the theories associated with the Stockholm school. The Stockholm school was a group of young economists with radical ideas who were active in Stockholm in the late 1920s and 1930s. The Stockholm school drew heavily on the work of Wicksell. The young economists, several of whom also became famous, “developed a body of analysis which is separate from, but parallel to, that associated with the name of Keynes” (Sandelin, 1991, p. 168) and anticipated the arguments of Kahn and Keynes about capitalism not producing equilibrium at full employment (Tilton, in Dostaler et al, 1992). They were most famous for the dynamic method, which contrasted with the static methods of neo-classical economics. And,

<sup>3</sup> There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, that Myrdal ended up writing a critique of his own dissertation: Cassel had recommended that he get the highest grade, but Gösta Bagge objected because he himself had only gotten the second highest grade, so he had to submit a minority report. He procrastinated and then, before a vacation, asked his grad student, Lindahl, to do it. But Lindahl didn't know what Bagge thought and did not understand Myrdal – so he called Myrdal and told him what the situation was and asked him to write it. Gunnar loved the idea and “instantly put together a few pages to suggest why his dissertation, although a work of genius, did suffer from some minor flaws which a petty mind might object to.” He gave it to Lindahl, who sent it in. A few weeks later at a ball, Gunnar entered and noticed Bagge “who seemed a bit embarrassed but finally came up to Gunnar and [said] ‘I hope you saw my minority report. Don't you think I was kind to you?’” (Streeten, in Dostaler et al, 1992, p. 115-6).

as a group, they were responsible for the theoretical justification which backed up the Social Democratic policies of the 1930s. Their influence there was in turn a result of the work the older economists had done in getting the government and public to accept economics as scientific and practical (Magnusson, 1993). But that is getting ahead of our story.

Gunnar became a lecturer at the University of Stockholm in 1927, where he offered students “the opportunity to ‘watch all the old theoretical garbage being torn down and swept away’” (Associated Press, 1987). In 1928, he started clearing away those “metaphysical cobwebs” when he gave the lectures that would become *The Political Element in the Development of Economic Theory*. The book, published in 1929, had started being written as a critique of *laissez-faire* economics but turned into a daring critique of classical and neoclassical economics. The older economists had believed that economics was value free and that the economist was a neutral, scientific expert (Magnusson, 1993). The book attacked that idea in no uncertain terms. Modern economics was “modified reminiscences of very old political thinking, conceived in days when a teleological meaning and normative purpose were more openly a part of the subject-matter of economics” (Myrdal, 1930, cited in Jackson, 1990, p. 56). It was not worthless, but should be recognized as a construct that could only approximate reality. He asserted that all economists confused their own valuations with fact and based policy on them and that economics should not try to influence norms if it was indeed a science. He also took exception to the idea that people are only motivated by economic self interest, and that they have a logical set of valuations and said that economists should take people’s irrational attitudes into account. He concluded that economic research should incorporate the economists biases’ and psychological and sociological insights, and that economists should present their value premises explicitly. They should also be modest and not try to postulate universal laws and norms. However, this should not stop them from working for social change, instead of accepting institutions as a given. “All institutional factors which determine the structure of the market, indeed the whole economic system including its tax and social legislation, can be changed, if those interested in the change have enough political power” (Myrdal, 1930, cited in Jackson, 1990, p. 57).

Unfortunately - or perhaps fortunately - human actions are not solely motivated by economic interests. The concept itself, though popular among economists, presents on closer inspection, certain difficulties. *The Political Element in the Development of Economic Theory*, p. 199.

Only if economists are modest in their claims and renounce all pretensions to postulate universal laws and norms can they promote effectively their practical objectives, viz., to keep political arguments rational, that is to say, to base them on as complete and as correct a knowledge of the facts as possible. *The Political Element in the Development of Economic Theory*, p. 206.

A leading Swedish economist of the previous generation, Sven Brisman, in a review of the book, told of a meeting of the *Nationalekonomiska klubben* (the Political Economy Club) in 1928:

One day about two years ago, a remarkable meeting was held at our political economy discussion club in Stockholm. Here we elder economists had gone for years, basking in our own splendour, full of an unfeigned mutual admiration, convinced that we had finally found the only True and Correct economic viewpoint. And then came Gunnar Myrdal, who was a young docent at that time, about whom I knew little more than that he had defended a brilliant dissertation. Figuratively speaking, he turned all of us upside-down. His presentation was one long glowing sermon from the mouth against everything we had considered most valuable in our economic education. And it was apparent that he had a group of enthusiastic followers among the even younger, who were indignant over the writings of Cassel, Heckscher and myself. All our old and beloved concepts, especially 'maximum welfare' and 'efficiency', not to mention 'population optimum' and the 'economic correct distribution of productive forces', 'national income', 'price level' and much more - all these were blown away like straw in the wind, until we didn't know if we stood on our heads or on our feet. (Magnusson, 1993, p. 82-3)

The book would strongly influence a generation of Swedish economists (Jackson, 1990) and would offend mainstream economists even up until the present day (Angresano, 1997). It also showed how Gunnar was moving further away from the *laissez faire* free market ideals of conventional economics. His trip to America would take him even further away.

In 1929, both Myrdals were offered funding from the Rockefeller Foundation to study in the United States as Rockefeller Fellows. It was a great opportunity, and although they regretted leaving Jan behind with Gunnar's parents, they did so and set off for the US, arriving in mid-October, 1929, a few weeks before the Crash. They travelled the country meeting with the top academics in country – Alva, working on a never finished doctorate in psychology,<sup>4</sup> met with social scientists and Gunnar met with economists. It was a mind-opening experience for them. The Myrdals appreciated US informality, spontaneity and openness, the lack of class differences and the lively intellectual environment, though they also noted how effectively Americans undertook political indoctrination of citizens. They were very impressed with the openness of the academic institutions and the acceptance of differing viewpoints. Sweden at the time was rather stultifying in this regard. They respected the social scientists and felt that they were far ahead of their European counterparts, though they felt much of the research was too narrow and technical. However, at the same time, they saw how powerless the social

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<sup>4</sup> Her dissertation was to be on Freud, but her advisor died while she was in the States and nobody else in Sweden would touch the topic as Freud was then viewed as charlatan by many Swedish academics. She tried to submit another topic, but this was also rejected because it did not fit with the work of the head of the Psychology Department.

scientists were to effect any sort of change, especially as the effects of the depression deepened. They came to appreciate Sweden's public railroads and hospitals.

Gunnar also started to further refine his outlook on economics. When he arrived in the United States he was very much against institutional economics, an school that had a number of prominent followers. At that time, the tenets of the school were

- (1) Institutions and not value are the object of economics
- (2) the analysis of process and social change require a dynamic analysis
- (3) to formulate realistic hypotheses, other social sciences (psychology, anthropology) must be involved, and empirical case studies must be undertaken
- (4) the rejection of the "laissez-faire" policy as a principle of economic coordination, and the necessity of social control and State intervention (Adair in Dostaler et al, 1992, p. 165-6)

By the end of the trip, Gunnar had begun to see the value in looking at things holistically and was half convinced of the validity of institutional economics. Before the end of the 1930s he would be calling himself an institutional economist.

The Myrdals were shocked by some of the things they saw in the States. Sweden at the time was not a wealthy country, but the level of poverty and the income disparities in the US were shocking to the Myrdals, not to mention the racism. The deepening depression drove home the downsides to the liberal free market system. Alva and Gunnar "woke up" politically and started to desire truly radical reforms. They also started to come closer together in their work and planned to work together when they got back to Sweden. They saw "far-reaching practical intervention as necessary to a society's well-being, [and] they rejected as superstitious any economic doctrines invoking some "unseen hand" or "natural harmony" that would set all to rights. For Gunnar, economics could never again be primarily theoretical" (Bok, 1991, p. 88). Gunnar underwent a transformation " from a theoretically oriented, neoclassical economist into a reform-oriented, interdisciplinary academic entrepreneur" (Jackson, 1990, p. 63). Alva also resolved to use education to foster democracy as John Dewey theorized. Both resolved to use the social scientific theories they had learned to bring about radical social and economic reforms in Sweden.

However, before they went back to Sweden they went to Switzerland for one year, taking Jan and Gunnar's sister. Gunnar had an appointment there as an assistant professor at the Graduate Institute for International Studies in Geneva, teaching international economics. Alva wanted to continue to study psychology, especially Piaget's theories of child development, but

instead she suffered a miscarriage with life-threatening complications. A doctoral student at the institute wrote about the effect of her illness on Gunnar, and thus on them all:

It took weeks before Alva Myrdal was out of danger, and although few of us had ever met her or even Gunnar, his love and fear of losing her were so intense that the whole Institute lived in an atmosphere of gloom. It was in these weeks that I experienced for the first time the strength of Gunnar's personality and his exceptional ability to create happiness and sorrow around him, simply by the intensity of his own feelings. (Bok, 1991, p. 99-100)

Alva later felt that the difficulties of that year helped them to mature, deepen their understanding of what was important and return to Sweden with clearer ideas. They also observed the weakness of the League of Nations and the intrigues within the organization, which made them feel that Sweden's problems were manageable.

When the Myrdals went back to Sweden they joined the Social Democratic Party with the intention of helping to bring about change. In wanting reform, the Myrdals were not alone. Sweden in the 1930s was a country in need of reform. The technological age had been late in coming to Sweden. At the end of the previous century the country had been primarily agrarian, and during the nineteenth century had sent huge numbers of emigrants to the States. The country was still fairly poor and had poor schools, housing and health care. Most people could see the need for reforms – the question was what sort of reforms would work best, socialist or liberal.

The Welfare State of tomorrow would then realize a type of society which in many fundamentals would have deeply satisfied John Stuart Mill and all the earlier liberal philosophers more than a hundred years ago, if they had had the power of imagination to envisage the final implications of a development they barely saw the beginnings of. Even that angry old philosopher-historian, Karl Marx, who gave such an uncompromising expression of the old liberal vision, held since John Locke, of a society freed from class monopolies, and who enjoyed such a sadistic dream about the painful way it was determined to be reached by natural development, would find much of his "realm of liberty." And Thomas Jefferson would most definitely see in the accomplished Welfare State a realization of "grass-roots democracy," though in a very different, much more complication, world than was within his vision. We would finally be reaching a state worthy of *consensus sapientium*. *Beyond the Welfare State*, pp. 95-68.

After years in which political power oscillated between the right and the left, the Social Democrats had come to power in 1932 with Per Albin Hansson at the helm of a minority government. His vision was of Sweden as the "people's home" where no one would go hungry and all would be made to feel like they belonged – everyone should have the basic necessities and benefits should go to everyone. The Social Democrats version of socialism was reformist and concerned with solving problems of unemployment, poverty, low productivity and labour strife.

In 1931 Gunnar wrote a book called *Monetary Equilibrium* which provided “a new conception of monetary equilibrium in which stability occurs only when there is correspondence between the actual and anticipated course of events” (Angresano, 1997, p. 36). It was a further elaboration of Wicksell’s works and anticipated Keynes in several ways. The book was influential both within and outside of Sweden.<sup>5</sup> His advice was being sought by the Swedish government and in many cases was being followed. In 1933, when his mentor Cassel retired, he was appointed to his prestigious chair at Stockholm University. Cassel, who had tried to dissuade Myrdal from economic planning and take him back to the idea of the free market, reacted as a true liberal, embracing him and saying “You are the most dangerous man in Sweden, but I’m proud to have you as my successor” (Jackson, 1990, p. 75).

[S]atisfaction with the regulative activity of the Welfare State becomes stronger, of course, the more intense the democratic participation is on the different levels of collective decision making .... When participation is on a low level, we should expect people to be more apt to feel that the regulations are imposed on them from above .... such attitudes will, in their turn, inhibit the intensification of participation, the lack of which was among their causes. Viewed the other way, feelings of solidarity and identification will lead to participation, while it is only participation that can inspire such feelings. *Beyond the Welfare State*, pp. 87-8.

In 1934 Gunnar was elected to the Senate as a member of the Social Democrats, where he helped to promote macroeconomic stabilization policies. He also began looking at housing, agriculture and population and became “devoted to the transformation of Sweden from a predominantly market-oriented economy with a modest agenda for the state to a democratically controlled social economy” (Angresano, 1997, p. 49).

Meanwhile, Alva was working at several things. She had a job at a prison clinic for law and psychiatry and gave a course for training parents on how to raise children based on her readings in psychology, but what she was really starting to become interested in was women’s issues. She began to wonder whether women were actually different from men, or whether their education was what made them feminine. She looked at what barriers prevented women from participating in the work force and sketched plans for a utopian collective dwelling that

<sup>5</sup> A contemporary of GM I, Egon Glesinger, recalls his experience with Myrdal during this time. “Having studied international economics in Geneva, Glesinger traveled to Sweden to determine who was the Stockholm’s School’s ‘big man’ in international economics among Myrdal, Ohlin and Gösta Bagge (all students of Cassel). Glesinger offered each a look at a theory of international trade developed by one of his professors from Geneva. Bagge did not analyze it. Ohlin (who was so gifted that by age 24 he held a chair in economics in Copenhagen) analyzed the theory and, in front of business leaders and government authorities, ‘suggested a campaign to which he pledged his fullest support.’ Myrdal read the theory, and rather than offer his own analysis asked one of his graduate students to evaluate the theory during a class with Glesinger present, after having first evaluated the theory with his students. The student pointed out the errors it contained. Glesinger conceded the errors, concluded who Sweden’s brightest young economist was, and referred to Myrdal and his students as ‘the most brilliant group’ of academics he had met” (Angresano, 1997, p. 37).

would free married women from housework and let them have jobs. She was also working on concrete proposals for social reform, especially for women, families and education, and writing articles proposing those reforms.

The Myrdals were further fueled by their trip to Germany in 1933 where they saw what Fascism was doing to the country. It was a frightening reminder of what could happen if a country's problems with unemployment went unsolved.

In the summer of 1934, Gunnar and Alva went to a cabin in the mountains of Norway for the summer, to work on the issues that were occupying both their minds. As usual, they left the children at home and just revelled in their intellectual companionship. From this summer emerged the book that help to determine what the Swedish Welfare State would look like. It was called *Crisis in the Population Question* and had a new combination of ideas from the right and the left which proved very convincing.

The central argument accepted the conservative idea that the population was declining and that this was a bad thing for the country. But rather than endorse the conservative solution of keeping families traditional and prohibiting contraception, the Myrdals suggested making sweeping reforms to social policy, something the social democrats favoured. However, the social democrats had not cared about population decline because they thought that it would reduce unemployment. Gunnar showed how a smaller population would do no such thing because it would just shift supply and demand curves and bring about new unemployment, while weakening the country and inviting takeover.

The Myrdals saw increasing rights for women and children as the foundation for these reforms and they thought that families should be strong. They also felt that children should be wanted, well-treated and well-educated and argued that parents would choose to have more children if they were less burdened by the financial cost of bearing them, and were not doomed to live in dismal apartments with one room and a kitchen, and their children to poor schooling and working conditions. They felt that

The principle of voluntary parenthood was laid down as the basis for our new population policy, and it was made clear that it was neither possible nor desirable to keep up the birth rate by holding poor people in ignorance about birth control; instead, the economic, social, and psychological hindrances to child-bearing ought to be removed throughout society. An increase in population, it was furthermore made clear, was far beyond the bounds of possibility: even the more modest aim of hindering the population from rapidly vanishing was marked out as a most distant goal. To prevent a cumulatively progressive decrease in population very far-reaching social reforms would be needed. *Population: A Problem for Democracy*, p. 91

since a sustainable population benefited the whole country, the whole country should be involved in paying for the children.

To accomplish this they suggested wide spread reforms in social policies. These included good medical care and housing for everyone, study loans, larger tax deductions for families with children, cash grants for child allowances, subsidies for pregnant women, open access to contraceptives (on the theory that if people could plan their children, they would be happier about them), sex education in schools, better education and education which stressed cooperation over competition, public housing and housing subsidies, free school lunches and textbooks, free public day-care centres, better parenting knowledge, loans to newly married couples in need, aid to orphans and children of widows and disabled men, laws preventing the firing of pregnant women, an improved national pension scheme, and a national dental service.

It was conceived to be a problem how to allow the married woman both to work and have a career and at the same time to have children. That problem, however, could not be solved by driving women back from the labour market, but only by a large number of social reforms, adjusting housing, supervision of children, and working conditions, et cetera, in such a way as to allow women to have both work and a family.  
*Population: A Problem for Democracy*, p. 103

The five main themes underlying these social policies were:

- (1) Socialization of consumption rather than production
- (2) Public planning instead of private planning, without changing the means of production
- (3) Preference for benefits in kind over money given to families
- (4) Preventative social policy orientation to hinder or eliminate the occurrence of poverty, unemployment and illness
- (5) That these were productive investments in social capital (Tilton, in Dostaler et al, 1992)

And standing above them all was the concept of equality.

Gunnar and Alva, secure in their Enlightenment philosophy that it was possible to plan society to make it a better place, thought that the reforms would be so self-evident that nobody would be able to refuse them. They were quite unprepared for what happened. As their daughter, who was in Alva's womb as the book was being written, would later write:

the book created a scandal by linking a discussion of sexuality and family planning to social reforms. Many thought it offensive for a woman even to sign her name to such views. Overnight my parents became the notorious "Myrdal couple." Meanwhile the book went into one edition after another. Its radical proposals regarding housing, education, medical care and the rights of women and children were debated across the country, and its vivid portrayal of the abject living conditions of many Swedish families led the government to set up commissions to consider the reforms the two young authors had proposed (Bok, 1991, p. 1-2).

The name Myrdal entered the public domain and became attached to things like the Myrdal cactus (with frequent buds) and love seats, which came to be called Myrdal couches. Alva was scolded for not being home with her new baby. But despite the furor, the book achieved its

aims. By using the population question and scaring people with the possible weakening of their country, Alva and Gunnar were able to persuade the nation that having more children was good, and that providing for them was a national priority.

The Prime Minister, Per Albin Hansson, was one of the first to accept the case the Myrdals had made, perhaps because, as Gunnar later said, “the detailed welfare program that we put forward lay so completely in line with Per Albin’s dream of the good people’s home” (Tilton, in Dostaler et al, 1992, p. 16). The Social Democrats took the reforms as their platform for next election and won overwhelmingly. The book allowed them to set the agenda for reform in housing, women’s affairs, sex education, birth control, day care and schooling. The threat of population decline provided public support for policies which otherwise might not have seen such wide public acceptance. Over the next decade most of the reforms would be implemented and they would have a crucial impact on the Swedish Welfare State, ensuring that everyone would benefit from social welfare policies, not just the elderly and poor as in the United States (Tilton, in Dostaler et al, 1992, p. 16).

The western world does not seem to suffer from any lack of natural resources. The fault is rather with the demand. Or, to put it more correctly and completely, what we lack is a rational and planned social organization of production and distribution. We have plenty of the means of production, as well as technical knowledge of how these should be used in order to maintain and raise our level of living, but we do not master the organization of production and distribution. Society is still our least efficient machine. *Population: A Problem for Democracy*, p. 136.

The reforms were extremely successful, politically, socially and economically. Politically, they helped the Social Democrats to stay in power for most of the rest of the century. Socially, they created one of the more egalitarian societies on the planet, and they even helped Sweden to do well economically. As Gunnar would crow in 1973:

The fact that forty years of steadily speeded up social reform has not stopped economic growth and progress, as the older economists were continually warning, but that in Sweden these forty years have proved an outstanding success even in “economic” terms, has now in hindsight given a pragmatic confirmation that we were right, even though behind this development were also other forces. Even if economic growth has tended to stagnate in the last few years, this is definitely not due to social reform policy, but to the fact that the development towards “stagflation” has now even reached Sweden (Myrdal, 1973, p. 9).

The book was a true collaboration between Gunnar and Alva, but most of the reform ideas were Alva’s – as Gunnar said almost fifty years later: “Alva was of course more responsible for these practical issues, social reforms of various types which we argued for.” He also said about the population book that “Alva was an expert and was interested in social reforms and I merely wrote it” (Angresano, 1997, p. 163-4). The book drew on everything that they had learned and experienced up until that point – their desire for radical social reform, Gunnar’s

incipient institutionalism and realization that neoclassical economics did not work, his elitism, their transdisciplinarity, Alva's concern for women and children, her strong socialist principles and conceptions of right and wrong – all of it influenced the reforms that they advocated.

After the book came out, in 1935, Gunnar, not Alva, was asked to chair the housing commission and was made a member of the newly formed population commission, on which Alva was a consultant. “Even the National Parents’ Association wanted him as its chairman. When he pointedly inquired whether the board had not in reality meant the post for Alva its members replied, somewhat embarrassed, that of course they took for granted that she would be the one who would do the actual work” (Bok, 1991, p. 126). It was not that she was a woman and a mother of small children, but that they were paired as the Myrdal couple so many people thought they could get both their ideas by only having one of them – so of course they approached the man. “It was only in the sixties that people realized that Alva was a better politician than Gunnar – that she was more conscientious, more dependable, more diplomatic, and a much better speaker – but by then she did not have many working years left” (Bok, 1991, p. 126).

Alva made do. She set up a training college for preschool teachers called the Seminar for Social Pedagogy. Like her earlier work, it drew on the current knowledge from psychology and aimed to provide better, more scientific, preschool teaching. In addition, in the early 1930s, she had become a leader in the newly formed Association for Working Women, which advocated equal rights and pay for women. In 1937, she was instrumental in helping to start, and then chairing, the Swedish branch of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women, which helped to bring about change in the rules of the Swedish Civil Service regarding women. She was also actively involved in the discussion on housing and school problems and was a prominent member of the Social Democratic Party.

White prejudice and discrimination keep the Negro low in standards in living, health, education, manners and morals. This, in its turn, gives support to white prejudice. White prejudice and Negro standards thus mutually "cause" each other. If things remain about as they are and have been, this means that the forces happen to balance each other. Such a static "accommodation" is however, entirely accidental. If either of the factors changes, this will cause a change in the other factor, too, and start a process of interaction where the change in one factor will continuously be supported by the reaction of the other factor. The whole system will be moving in the direction of the primary change, but much further. *American Dilemma*, pp. 75-6.

In 1936 Alva also designed a radical family house together with Sven Markelius, a famous Swedish architect. When it was completed in 1937 people used to come around just to look at it. The ground floor had a nursery for the girls (Kaj was born in 1936) as well as bedrooms for Jan, the maid and the housekeeper. It also had a kitchen, dining area and family room and all

the rooms had easy access to the garden. Upstairs was a work room which accessed an outdoor terrace, an archive room and bathroom, and perhaps the most novel idea, a bedroom with a movable wall between the beds so that she and Gunnar could choose when to be together and when to have private time.

By 1938, Gunnar was feeling restless in Sweden. He did not like his duties and was frustrated both by the bureaucracy and the slow pace (in his mind) of the reforms that they had championed – he was impatient with compromise and party discipline. Alva, while happy with her work at the Seminar, was somewhat frustrated because the population problem was more her area, but Gunnar was the one in politics. In 1937 Gunnar had been offered the chance to do a study on race in America and he had refused, but he reconsidered and accepted the offer the next year. The whole family packed up and left for America. Although both Gunnar and Alva would be involved in Swedish politics again, it would be the last time that they would have a lasting impact on the social policies of Sweden. Both of them would go on to achieve much more on the international stage.

The family's time in the USA was cut short by the war in Europe. Gunnar and Alva both felt they should return to Sweden so they could be of service should Germany invade – this despite knowing that they would be on the Fascists persona non grata lists and could be in danger. They took their children back with them, despite Jan's loud protests of wanting to stay in the US. When they got back to Sweden they found that they were not really needed. They were dismayed at the press censorship and that the Swedish government was bending in the face of German demands. They wrote *Contact with America*, which idealized the US, in order to help people remember to be democratic.

After a year or so, Gunnar, facing pressure from people back in the States to come back and finish his project, and realizing that he had little to offer in Sweden. He went back and pressured a reluctant Alva to join him, finally intimating that their marriage would be in danger if she did not. She did, this time leaving the

America feels itself to be humanity in miniature. When in this crucial time the international leadership passes to America, the great reason for hope is that this country has a national experience of uniting racial and cultural diversities and a national theory, if not a consistent practice, of freedom and equality for all. What America is constantly reaching for is democracy at home and abroad. The main trend in its history is the gradual realization of the American Creed. In this sense the Negro problem is not only America's greatest failure but also America's incomparably great opportunity for the future. If America should follow its own deepest convictions, its well-being at home would be increased directly. At the same time America's prestige and power abroad would rise immensely. The century-old dream of American patriots, that America should give to the entire world its own freedoms and its own faith, would come true. America can demonstrate that justice, equality and cooperation are possible between white and colored people. *American Dilemma*, p. 1021.

children in Sweden. Gunnar finished the study – it was truly in-depth and was viewed as a masterpiece. It was a transdisciplinary work drawing on Gunnar’s study, his travel around the US<sup>6</sup> and the work of many researchers but put together by Gunnar. Its central tenets were that the racial problem in the States was perpetuated due to cumulative causation, i.e. positive feedback, and that if the problems would get better if Americans would begin acting on their deepest belief in the American Creed, i.e. that all people are created equal. It was this disjunction between belief and act that led Gunnar to call the book *American Dilemma*.

When the study was finished they returned to Sweden and became involved in postwar planning. Gunnar was reelected to Parliament and was made Minister of Commerce. His performance there was one of the few times in his life when he was less than well received. Meanwhile, Alva, having turned down the offer for Minister of Education knowing that both she and Gunnar could not be in the Government at the same time, was feeling somewhat unfulfilled. She was busy – she had been among those who lobbied the UN to create OMEP (l’Organisation Mondiale de l’Education Primaire) and she was its first world president, she was continuing to work for social and educational reform, and she had resumed the directorship of her Seminar – but she lacked a clear goal for her life.

In 1947 Gunnar accepted the job as director for the Economic Commission for Europe, a UN agency devoted to the economic reconstruction of Europe and strengthening relationships among European nations and

Social study is concerned with explaining why all these potentially and intentionally good people so often make life a hell for themselves and each other when they live together, whether in a family, a community, a nation or a world. The fault is certainly not with becoming organized per se. In their formal organizations, as we have seen, people invest their highest ideals. These institutions regularly direct the individual toward more cooperation and justice than he would be inclined to observe as an isolated private person. The fault is, rather, that our structures of organizations are too imperfect, each by itself, and badly integrated into a social whole. The rationalism and moralism which is the driving force behind social study, whether we admit it or not, is the faith that institutions can be improved and strengthened and that people are good enough to live a happier life. With all we know today, there should be the possibility to build a nation and a world where people’s great propensities for sympathy and cooperation would not be so thwarted. *American Dilemma*, p. 1023.

That there is a tendency inherent in the free play of the market forces to create regional inequalities and that this tendency becomes more dominant the poorer a country is are two of the most important laws of economic underdevelopment and development under *laissez faire*. *Rich Lands and Poor*, pp. 34-5.

<sup>6</sup> A story is told that “As [Gunnar] traveled through the South and visited various high schools he would invariably be invited to talk to an assembly of black students. Invariably too, the -- usually white -- principal of the school would call on the school glee club or choir to sing some Negro spirituals for their guest. An *American Dilemma* notes that some Negroes believe that spirituals were a badge of slavery (p. 755). Myrdal told me that on such an occasion, when his time came to speak, he began by saying that since the school had sung him some of their folk songs, he would reciprocate. In an untrained, unaccompanied voice he then sang a Swedish folk song. Word, he said, spread quickly through the black population in the South that this Swedish white man had seen through the

between Europe and the rest of the world. He packed up the family and all moved to Geneva. In Geneva he threw himself into his work and by all accounts did brilliantly. He was happy.

Alva was not. She could not work in Geneva because she was a foreigner, except at the UN, where she could not work because of Gunnar's high position. She started work on *Women's Two Roles*, which exhorted women to prepare to work outside the home before and after having children, but recommended mothers stay home until the youngest child was at least nine years old. It was really a cry that she wanted to be working, especially now that her children were older.

The conclusion I have reached is that *inequality and the trend toward rising inequality stand as a complex of inhibitions and obstacles to development* and that, consequently, there is an urgent need for reversing the trend and creating greater equality as a condition for speeding up development. *The Challenge of World Poverty*, p. 50.

Alva stayed miserable until 1949 when she accepted a job to head the Department of Social Affairs at the UN in New York – the third highest post in the UN, which made her the highest placed woman in any international organization. After two years at that post, she accepted the Directorship of the Division of Social Sciences at UNESCO, which was in Paris and closer to her family. This job involved travel, most memorably to India, where she met and befriended Nehru.

There can be no doubt that, if the proportion [of women] in employment ... could be considerably increased, people in general would be better off economically, as well as better balanced socially and psychologically. Something must be wrong in a social organization in which men may die a premature death from coronary thrombosis, as a result of overwork and worry, while their wives and widows organize themselves to protest against their own lack of opportunity. *Women's Two Roles*, p. 186.

In the mid-fifties Alva and Gunnar decided that they wanted to live together again, and they decided that India would be the best place to do so. Alva had been approached by the Swedish government about several ambassadorships, so she let them know that she would be interested in the post to India, Ceylon and Burma. She was appointed in 1955 and did spectacularly. She tried to help India become “the egalitarian and progressive society that so many had envisaged during the struggle for independence” as the representative of another small neutral country which had lifted itself out of poverty “by the same combination of democratic reform, education, and cooperative measures that Nehru and other leaders advocated for India” (Bok, 1991, p. 241-2). She admired Nehru and became a

I understand development as the movement upward of the whole social system. In other words, not only production, distribution of the produce, and modes of production are involved, but also levels of livings, institutions, attitudes and policies. Among all the factors in this social system there are causal interrelations. *Against the Stream*, p. 190.

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patronizing habit of school administrators and had reached out to the black students by joining them at their level” (Streeten, 1998, p. 544).

close friend of his.

Gunnar came out the next year to work on *Asian Drama*, which took him until 1968 to finish, despite having planned to do it in two and a half years. The book, and the policy guide that followed (*The Challenge of World Poverty*), were the summary of his ideas for combating world poverty. The book was massive in scope, including “almost the entire social, economic and political life of nearly half the worlds population” (Angresano, 1997, p. 79). His central value premise was that economic and social development was beneficial. To achieve it he called for an institutionalist approach which took “cumulative causation” and the interaction of education, employment, housing and population density into account. He felt that development could be guided by careful planning. Throughout the book he was in favour of democracy, but he realized that a non-democratic government could realize the development he was advocating and that this would be a greater good than a “democratic” government that was unable to accomplish anything.

Successful economic planning requires a stable and effective government. But at the same time planning itself becomes a principal means of reaching national consolidation: first, because it will create an institutional structure to articulate government policies; secondly, because the result, when planning is successful, will be higher economic levels, greater opportunities for the people, and a symbol of national achievement. *Asian Drama*, p. 137.

Alva and Gunnar stayed in India until 1961, when she and Gunnar returned to Sweden. Gunnar was still working on *Asian Drama*, and Alva thought she would just grow old quietly. She did not know that the work that would make her the most famous was just around the corner. Upon her return to Sweden she was elected to the government and then became active its representative in the ongoing disarmament talks. She was a crucial part of the negotiations, as she helped to shape the initiative that allowed eight nonaligned nations into the proceedings in Geneva. She headed the planning group for the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and chaired it for the first year of its existence in 1966. The next year when she joined the Swedish Cabinet Gunnar took over as director. Alva resigned from government in 1973 and began work on her book, *The Game of Disarmament*, which became a classic. It was her work on disarmament, undertaken after she thought she had finished working, that would win her the Nobel Peace Prize in 1982.

The present competitive escalation of the arms race is a flagrant miscalculation. And it is endangering the security of us all. More security can only be assured by reversing the trend, by beginning and continuing to disarm and to demilitarize our societies. Such a strategy of truth means, in the final instance, facing the arms race as the major intellectual and moral dilemma of our time. As it has been created solely by mankind, it lies within our power to solve it. *The Game of Disarmament*, pp. 333-4.

*Asian Drama* would be Gunnar's last major work. In 1973 he released a collection of essays and addresses under the title *Against the Stream*, but that book had few new ideas. In 1974 he would receive the Nobel Prize in Economics, but he was bitter about that because he was given it along side someone he did not agree with, and several years after he felt he should have gotten it. After the award he struggled to work on a new edition of *American Dilemma*, but he was suffering from Parkinson's disease and became increasingly infirm. He was unable to finish the new edition during his lifetime, but his daughter, Sissela Bok, completed his work and it was released in 1996.

I am well aware that I am often considered almost not a part of the profession of establishment economists, though sometimes given credit for what I did during the first year of my working life. I am even referred to as a sociologist. And by that, economists usually do not mean anything flattering. Another, in some respects, like-minded rebel, Galbraith, who in addition writes a beautiful and forcible English, is often handled even more rudely by sometimes being classified by his colleagues as a journalist. But we insist on remaining economists. Let me end by making a personal declaration as to why I look upon this coming redirection of research as a proper task for economists. Economics has for two centuries been the "political" science, in the proper sense of this word. We have all been planners, even those of us whose conclusions were for non-interference. However deep down in detail and into particular micro-problems we go, we have never been afraid of taking the macro-view or of formulating policy proposals for a country or even the whole world. *Against the Stream*, p. 14.

Both Gunnar and Alva received many more awards and honorary degrees throughout their extraordinary careers, and to the end of their lives they had a complex and intertwined relationship. When Alva was completing her work on *The Game of Disarmament*, Sissela describes Gunnar as hovering "over her like a solicitous thundercloud" (Bok, 1991, p. 307). In 1980, in a joint interview, when asked how their marriage had lasted as long as it did, Alva said diplomatically that "Even when duty makes us sail apart, we're still consort battleships" (Jackson, 1990, p. 361). They still enjoyed talking to each other and Gunnar, at least, felt that they were close to the very end. He remarked to a friend that "I have never believed in God, but there must be a God, or Alva would not have come to me" (Jackson, 1990, p. 361). Sissela probably expressed their relationship best when she said that "In some ways their marriage was a conversation which started when they first met and really went on as long as it could be despite the ups and downs. My mother always used to say that she had never met another man who was as interesting to talk to, and that she felt to the end of her life" (McManus, 1991).

Alva died on February 1, 1986, one day after her 84<sup>th</sup> birthday. At her funeral, "Gunnar listened silently to the eulogies and laid a wreath in honour of his wife. At the close of the service, supported by grandsons on either arm, he walked out of the church surrounded by a procession of two thousand people carrying candles into the dark winter night and singing 'We Shall Overcome'" (Jackson, 1990, p. 365). He also listened to the Swedish Prime Minister, Olof

Palme, give the last public speech he would give before his assassination two weeks later. After Alva's death, Gunnar's health deteriorated further and he moved into a hospital where he stayed until he died on May 17, 1987. Their life-long collaboration was at an end.

Without Alva, Gunnar might have still become interested in economics, and would still have shone as a theoretician. However, he would likely not have become interested in how to apply economics to political problems, and the chances are small indeed that he would have shown any concern for the common people. He also would likely have remained an academic and not gotten involved in politics. Similarly, without Gunnar, Alva's ideals might not have gained their practical edge, and her policy suggestions would have remained just that, especially given the sexist nature of the times. And another man of that time might not have been committed to at least intellectual equality, and so she might never have found a forum. It was fortunate indeed that they found each other at the farm that day. The ideas the Myrdals had for reshaping society were the result of their endless, wide-ranging conversations, though both were brilliant, together they were blindingly so.

However, Gunnar and Alva's success has to be looked at in the context of when and where they were. They were both remarkable, but they were also fortunate to be in a small country looking to change its ways and willing to take advice from fairly young academics. The Myrdals could see ways to effect change from within the system and could try to live up to their ideals. Their later careers benefited from being at the peak of their careers as the UN was setting up operations. This is not to say that they did not deserve their success, they did, but that it has to be taken in context. To see how true this is, I contrast Gunnar with my father, who is frightenly similar to Gunnar in level of intellect, personality and desire to effect change. I think about them both at the beginning of their careers; where Gunnar became an academic and a politician, my father was part of the counter-culture of the late 60s and early 70s. It was at a time when many young people in the US gave up on

[Americans' puritan] legacy has certainly not always been productive of wholesome effects. Much of the naïve self-righteousness that many Americans, to the worlds annoyance, are apt to demonstrate is similar to the frame of mind of the people sitting on benches in the temple feeling superior to the sinners outside who have not received the grace of redemption. .... But another puritan trait is that the American nation more than any other can have conversions, indeed radical conversions, and then change course. *Against the Stream*, pp. 291-2.

I have not hidden that I am critical of the United States' present official policy and the support it has acquired in public opinion there. But this can be changed. I know of no nation that is more capable of switching policy line. The whole history of the country is a history of conversions, sometimes going against reason and morality, but as I see it, most often moving towards better fulfillment of the American Dream. The basis for this extraordinary readiness for conversion is its Puritan heritage and its fierce insistence on being an open society. *The Game of Disarmament*, pp. 331-2.

working within the system and tried instead to set up new ways of living, hoping that the world would follow. It did not work out that way, so my father has not been a success. That two such similar people could have ended up so differently points to the influences of time and place on their lives.

Nevertheless, the Myrdals were in the right place in the right time, and they were remarkably good at effecting change in societies. And although neither was officially a planner at any time in their lives, they often did act as planners and as such they have valuable lessons to teach us on how to plan for communities. From Alva we learn to look for the societal causes of problems and to address our efforts to ameliorating poverty and inequality, and to do it with broad based social reform. We also learn the value of restructuring education as a method for effecting broad societal change. From Gunnar we get the institutionalist perspective, which lets us look at things holistically and see where institutional changes can best be applied, but to think in the long term. We learn that the goal we are striving for is transdisciplinarity, not interdisciplinarity, and so we should try to learn as much as we can about problems and not be stuck in our limited disciplines. We learn to think beyond the free market and capitalist approach to things and realize that people have a social will that cannot be expressed through market forces – and that they are not rational about it. We also learn to keep in mind that there are no simple cause and effect relationships in society, but that things work in feedback cycles, what Gunnar called “cumulative causation,” and to look for where the cycles can be reversed by applying pressure. We learn to always be aware of the values that we are taking into our planning and to make those clear to others to try to avoid misunderstanding and overgeneralization. But the biggest lesson we learn from them both is that an individual can make a difference in how a community, or even a country, develops, as long as he or she keeps from despairing at the hopelessness of it all. Gunnar called it cheerful pessimism – by which he meant that “however small the chances of success of a desirable reform are, every effort must be made to achieve it” (Streeten, in Dostaler et al, 1992, p. 113). Alva agreed, and added that “Otherwise there would be nothing left but to give up. And it is not worthy of human beings to give up” (Bok, 1991, p. 1-2). If we can just keep trying to effect change to the best of our abilities, never giving up, maybe we can have as positive an effect on as large a number of people as the Myrdals did.

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