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Introduction

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Introduction

To find the practical formulas for this never-ending reconstruction of society is the supreme task of social science. The world catastrophe places tremendous difficulties in our way and may shake our confidence to the depths. Yet we have today in social science a greater trust in the improbability of man and society than we have ever had since the Enlightenment.

—Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (1944)

Gunnar Myrdal (1898–1987) was the twentieth century’s most influential social democratic internationalist.¹ Throughout his long career—first as economist, then Swedish political figure, United Nations official, development expert, and prolific author—Myrdal was committed to promoting the national welfare state and a vision of economic internationalism premised on the need for an open and developing world economy. Despite his centrality to midcentury international politics, however, he has seldom been the object of sustained historical attention beyond his native Sweden and the United States. Swedes generally have discussed Gunnar Myrdal in the same breath as his wife Alva Reimer Myrdal and have seen the pair as key founders of the Swedish welfare state in the 1930s, as well as celebrities on the international stage. However, the couple’s reputation took a downward turn in the 1990s during public discussions of Alva Myrdal’s support for eugenic policies in the country. Since then, scholars in Sweden have attempted to understand the Myrdals’ role in the country’s eugenicist past.² By contrast, American literature on the Myrdals has focused far more on Gunnar than Alva, in large part due to his monumental study, *An American Dilemma*, which many have seen as crucial for shaping the country’s postwar policies on race.³ Most famously, the United States Supreme Court cited the study in its landmark decision, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). For many Americans, Gunnar Myrdal’s name is synonymous with this work. The title of his obituary in the *New York Times*, for example, referred to him simply as “Analyst of Race Crisis.”⁴

This dossier attempts to offer a fuller picture of Gunnar Myrdal’s career through reconsiderations of most of his major works, from his early writings on Swedish population policy to his last publications on the problem of global poverty. In doing so, it not only contributes to these national historiographies on Myrdal but also attempts to place him, in all of his guises, back into conversations on the intertwined histories of national welfarism, international organizations, and social science in the mid-twentieth century. New works on the history of international development, European

integration, and the role of experts in consolidating technocratic forms of internationalism have not fully documented Myrdal's crucial role in these processes. And while histories of neoliberalism grow in number, less has been written about the transnational networks of social democratic and Keynesian experts that shaped early postwar liberal politics in many different states. Returning to Myrdal's writings, this dossier suggests, can shed new light on these developments.⁵

The dossier also offers, throughout, reconsiderations of the range of his intellectual partnership with Alva Myrdal, who was a scholar and politician in her own right but who is often excluded, particularly in American literature, from accounts of her husband.⁶ Alva's most famous books include *Kris i befolkningsfrågan* (1934), which she coauthored with Gunnar, *Nation and Family* (1941), and *The Game of Disarmament* (1976). One of the first female ministers in Sweden, she was Sweden's ambassador to India from 1955 to 1961 and the country's delegate at the Geneva Disarmament Conference from 1962 to 1973.⁷ While Gunnar received the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1974, Alva won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1982 for her disarmament work. Throughout the couple's overlapping and diverging careers as scholars and public officials, Alva Myrdal not only inspired her husband to embrace the applied social sciences and policy work in the 1930s and coauthored manuscripts with him—it was due to her influence, for example, that Gunnar first pursued graduate work in economics—but also informed his analyses of equality in some of his single-authored works such as *An American Dilemma* (1944). For example, she was not listed as a coauthor in this American project, but Gunnar had found it impossible to write the manuscript without her assistance.

To be sure, this dossier falls short of considering Alva's evolution as scholar and policymaker independently from Gunnar, which is crucial for scholars trying to understand her career, the couple's influence on each other, and their symbiotic development as scholars and policymakers. However, it achieves the important aim of returning focus to the influence she had on Gunnar and the co-evolution of their ideas on national and international politics throughout their long careers in the twentieth century.

The dossier opens in the context of interwar Stockholm, a hotbed of the kind of social democratic politics the Myrdals would do so much to shape and promote. It was also home to a talented coterie of young economists, including Bertil Ohlin and Dag Hammarskjöld, who, like the Myrdals themselves, would achieve international fame both for their scholarship and their work as international officials. Gunnar's intellectual formation came during his student years at the University of Stockholm under Gustav Cassel, who at the time was one of the world's most famous economists, as well as a leading international economic expert and participant at the early meetings and conferences of the League of Nations (where Ohlin, another of one his protégés, would also work during the 1930s).⁸ Myrdal wrote a path-breaking dissertation with Cassel on the theory of price formation but quickly distanced himself from the orthodoxies of his teacher. After finishing his doctoral studies in 1927, Myrdal wrote *Vetenskap och politik i nationalekonomien* (1930), a critique of mainstream economics for its assumptions about its status as a value-neutral social science—an idea that remained at the center of most of his writings throughout his career.⁹ Myrdal made a

major contribution to contemporary economic debates in a series of 1931 lectures on monetary theory, which were recognized at the time of their English translation in 1939 as presaging many of the theoretical insights of John Maynard Keynes's 1936 *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*—a claim Myrdal would himself later make.¹⁰

After a brief appointment in 1930 as visiting professor at the Institut Universitaire de Hautes Études Internationales in Geneva—an important node in the emerging transnational network of neoliberal economists—Gunnar followed Cassel in 1933 as chair of political economy at Stockholm University. However, before moving to Geneva, the Myrdals had spent a year in the United States as Rockefeller Fellows touring social science departments across the country. They had been impressed by the devastating effects of the Great Depression and so too by American social scientists' reluctance to engineer solutions to it.¹¹ The couple shifted their focus toward collaborative work in social policy. Soon after their return to Sweden, they published *Kris i befolkningsfrågan* (1934).

This 1934 book led Gunnar and Alva Myrdal to become major fixtures on the Swedish Social Democratic scene. Gunnar was appointed government expert on a range of issues from housing and budget to population and agriculture, while Alva, for example, became secretary of the government commission on the right of married women to work outside the home and a member of the Social Democratic Women's Association.¹² In a close contextual reading of *Kris*, Nils Gilman shows that it was both a work of empirical social science and a manifesto for the welfare state in Sweden. Responding to contemporary literature linking the Myrdals to the country's eugenicist past, he argues that the pair was not politically or ideologically committed to forced sterilization but advocated it in order to thwart conservative political opposition to the expansion of welfare provisions.

In 1938, the Carnegie Corporation of New York commissioned Gunnar Myrdal to analyze American race relations and subsequently invited Alva to write an English-language summary of the couple's population work in Sweden. Alva's *Nation and Family: The Swedish Experiment in Democratic Family and Population Policy* was published in 1941, and Gunnar's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* followed three years later. His two-volume study not only listed the many ways that white Americans discriminated against black Americans but offered policy recommendations on how to achieve greater racial equality. Maribel Morey shows how Gunnar and Alva Myrdal's population work in Sweden, along with Gunnar's earlier writing as an economist, shaped key aspects of his sociological theory in *An American Dilemma*. She analyzes how these prior experiences helped Myrdal define both his audience for this text and the extent of the policy program it recommended.

After returning to Sweden in 1942, the Myrdals became active in Social Democratic circles planning for a postwar settlement. Alva served as a member of the party's postwar planning committee and the Government's Commission on International Postwar Aid and Reconstruction, while Gunnar headed the Swedish Postwar Planning Commission and became a member of the Swedish Parliament and central bank official. In 1944 he published *Varning för fredsoptimism*, which Lauri Tähtinen shows

was an eclectic and wide-ranging contribution to the popular genre of postwar planning literature. Like so many of his contemporaries, Myrdal feared that the immediate postwar period would see a devastating global depression, like the one that had come in 1920–21 in the wake of the First World War, and thus sought to disabuse his (largely Swedish) readership of their grandiose hopes for the postwar era. Instead, Myrdal outlined a new role for the small, weak, and neutral Sweden in a world order dominated by an ambivalent American hegemon.

In 1945 Myrdal was appointed as minister of commerce, where he negotiated a highly controversial commercial deal with the Soviet Union, which quickly led to his resignation.¹³ In 1947, he became executive secretary of the United Nations' Economic Commission for Europe, where he worked to facilitate a form of European integration that spanned the dividing lines between the two emerging blocs. While many of his organization's larger plans were stymied by the politics of the early Cold War, Myrdal brought together under his watch an accomplished group of economists, including Nicolas Kaldor and Ingvar Svennilson, and used the last few years of his tenure at the UN, which he quit in 1957, to publish a series of works on the possibility of reconciling national and international forms of welfarism. Jamie Martin, Samuel Moyn, and Isaac Nakhimovsky show how Myrdal, in these publications from 1956 to 1958, wrestled with the question of whether nationalism and internationalism were truly compatible. In all of these works, Myrdal considered how to square national welfarism and the creation of a "welfare world." He also offered a suite of policy suggestions for international development programs and weighed in on the terms of trade debates set into motion by Raúl Prebisch, his counterpart at the UN's Economic Commission for Latin America.

Two years after Alva Myrdal's appointment as Swedish ambassador to India, Gunnar Myrdal joined his wife in New Delhi, where he worked on the research that would form the basis of his 1968 *Asian Drama*.¹⁴ As Benjamin Siegel shows in his contextual account of its origins, Gunnar Myrdal's *Asian Drama*—while widely criticized at the time of its publication—offered an undogmatic and even prescient account of the challenges faced by India's development. Myrdal's suggestion that there could be no singular doctrine for the country's development set his work apart from that of his contemporaries. However, the dour note it struck on India's economic future marked a departure from some of his more optimistic writings of the 1950s on the possibility of a welfare world.

Throughout his writings and decades of travel from Sweden to the United States, and from Switzerland to India, Myrdal was committed to the amelioration of inequality both on the national and international levels. But there was a tension between Myrdal's preoccupation with inequality among individuals and nations and his appeal to white liberal elites to address it. Whether he was analyzing black Americans' status in the United States in the 1940s, the international economy in the 1950s, or the future of India in the late 1960s, Myrdal assumed that it was these elites who would take responsibility for engineering the policy solutions he sought, and it was to them that he crafted his appeal. Throughout his writings, Myrdal took for

granted a “top down” definition of equality, whereby the less fortunate were to assimilate to the norms of the privileged. This was particularly clear in *An American Dilemma* and *Asian Drama*.

Myrdal himself diagnosed another tension at the heart of his work: between the commitment to national and international egalitarianism. In the 1930s and 1940s, he was primarily concerned with constructing egalitarian communities among citizens in nation-states. But after the Second World War, he came to realize that the expansion of national welfarism could well serve as an impediment to international equality. Myrdal’s vision of a welfare world was an attempt to create a truly internationalist version of the kind of welfarism that, until then, had largely been limited to the national level. But by the end of the 1950s, Myrdal worried that nationalist sentiments in welfare states had made this task impossible. In the early 1970s, he largely gave up on this more ambitious vision of a welfare world, turning instead to a voluntaristic response to global inequality. Simon Reid-Henry illustrates this shift to humanitarianism by examining Myrdal’s largely overlooked publication *Challenge of World Poverty* (1970).

During his career as a scholar, statesman, and bureaucrat, Gunnar Myrdal grappled with questions of vital concern to citizens at both the national and global levels. In the United States as in Sweden, he worked to encourage solidarity between citizens so that they would build more egalitarian national communities. From the 1940s onward, he sought to bring this project to the global stage. It remains an open question whether or not these competing imperatives are reconcilable, and whether the internationalization of the kind of welfarism he and Alva Myrdal did so much to realize in their native Sweden is anything more than another lost ideal of the mid-twentieth century. This question is at the center of the pieces that follow.

NOTES

1. For biographical accounts, see Örjan Appelqvist, *The Political Economy of Gunnar Myrdal: Transcending Dilemma Post-2008* (London: Routledge, 2014); James Angresano, *The Political Economy of Gunnar Myrdal: An Institutional Basis for the Transformation Problem* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1997); and William Barber, *Gunnar Myrdal: An Intellectual Biography* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

2. See, for example, Niels Lynøe, “Race Enhancement through Sterilization,” *International Journal of Mental Health* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 17–25; and Hedvig Ekerwald, “Alva Myrdal: Making the Private Public,” *Acta Sociologica* 43, no. 4 (October 2000): 343–52.

3. See, for example, Walter Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America’s Conscience: Social Engineering and Racial Liberalism, 1938–1987* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); David W. Southern, *Gunnar Myrdal and Black-White Relations: The Use and Abuse of “An American Dilemma,” 1944–1969* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987); Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, *The Politics of Knowledge: The Carnegie Corporation, Philanthropy, and Public Policy* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1989); Maribel Morey, “The Making of *An American Dilemma* (1944): The Carnegie Corporation, Gunnar Myrdal, and the Unlikely Roots of Modern Civil Rights Discourse” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2014); David M. Kennedy, *The American People in World War II (Freedom from Fear: Part II)* (New York: Oxford University

Press, 1999); Leah Gordon, *From Power to Prejudice: The Rise of Racial Individualism in Midcentury America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); and Mitchell Duneier, *Ghetto: The Invention of a Place, the History of an Idea* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).

4. “Gunnar Myrdal, Analyst of Race Crisis, Dies,” *New York Times*, May 18, 1987.

5. For a recent account of Alva Myrdal’s work at the United Nations, see Glenda Sluga, “The Human Story of Development: Alva Myrdal at the UN, 1949–1955,” in *International Organizations and Development, 1945–1990*, ed. Marc Frey et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

6. One recent exception is Thomas Etzemüller, *Alva and Gunnar Myrdal: Social Engineering in the Modern World*, trans. Alex Skinner (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2014).

7. Kaj Fölster, “Myrdal, Alva,” in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History*, ed. Bonnie G. Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Yvonne Hirdman, “Chronology,” in *Alva Myrdal: The Passionate Mind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), xiii–xv; and Barbro Terling, “Biography,” in *Alva Myrdal: Kommenterad Bibliografi. 1932–1961* (Stockholm: Alva och Gunnar Myrdals Stiftelse, 1987), 11–13.

8. Benny Carlson, “Who Was Most World-Famous—Cassel or Keynes? *The Economist* as Yardstick,” *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 31, no. 4 (December 2009): 519–30.

9. Gunnar Myrdal, *Vetenskap och politik i nationalekonomien* (Stockholm: Kooperativa förbundets bokförlag, 1930).

10. Gunnar Myrdal, *Monetary Equilibrium* (London: William Hodge, 1939). The debate about who was first has long been a fixture of scholarship on the history of macroeconomic thought. For a recent take, see Martin Kragh, “The ‘Wigforss Connection’: The Stockholm School vs. Keynes Debate Revisited,” *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 21, no. 4 (August 2014): 635–63.

11. Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America’s Conscience*, “First Visit to America, 1929–1930,” 59–68.

12. Hirdman, *Alva Myrdal*, 203.

13. Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America’s Conscience*, 321.

14. Alva Myrdal was Swedish ambassador to India from 1955 to 1961. See Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America’s Conscience*, 332.