I. Alva and Gunnar Myrdal: A Symposium on Their Lives and Works

Symposium Editors’ Introduction

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Sponsored by the Research Committee of the History of Sociology, International Sociological Association, a symposium on the lives and works of Gunnar Myrdal (1898-1987) and Alva Myrdal (1902-1986) was presented at the meeting of the World Congress of Sociology in Montreal, in July, 1998. Sven Eliæson, professor at Stockholm University, arranged and chaired the session. The papers examined the scientific, epistemological, methodological, and policy influencing effects and implications of the Myrdals’ many writings while exploring the impact of their academic careers and numerous ventures into public service on their own and their children’s domestic lives. Of these papers, one—Stanford M. Lyman’s “Gunnar Myrdal’s An American Dilemma After a Half Century—Critics and Anticritics”—has been published in an earlier issue of this journal (Vol. 12, No. 2, 1998, pp. 327–389). Here, we present revised versions of four papers written for the aforementioned congress or developed shortly thereafter in relation to its theme.

Both jointly and separately the lives and works of Gunnar and Alva Myrdal have influenced 20th century social thought, socioeconomic methodology, and public policy. Long associated with the ideology and praxes of social democracy in Sweden, the Myrdals also contributed to an understanding of the race problem in America, provided a reconceptualization of economic development in post-colonial Asia, examined the place of values in social science, and offered a critical revaluation of the character of and possible solutions to such public problems as housing, population decline, family formations, and long-term poverty. It can be said without exaggeration that no other social science-oriented public intellectuals have had a greater

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impact on issues that are still extant,—and now more likely to be treated under the rubric “globalization,”—than the Myrdals. In 1974, Gunnar Myrdal was awarded the Nobel Prize in economics; in 1982, Alva Myrdal received the Nobel Peace Prize.

As might be expected, the Myrdals’ theories, conceptualizations, methods of social research, value orientations, and modes of political participation have been grist for continuous debate and subjects of enormous controversy. Moreover, each of the Myrdals engaged in life-long self-criticism, publishing or planning to publish, revisions, critiques and alternative approaches to their own original theses and policy proposals. Thus, Gunnar Myrdal, attacked by both white supremacists on the one hand and radical Marxists on the other, reconsidered the argument of his An American Dilemma many times during the more than forty years since its first publication, modifying certain of its hypotheses, suggesting different ways to resolve America’s race problem, and, shortly before his death, was forced by deteriorating eyesight to cease the correcting of the manuscript of an entirely rewritten version of what had been acknowledged in 1944 as a defining statement on the topic. Alva Myrdal’s Nation and Family is not only an examination of sociocultural and demographic effects on nation building, but that work also serves as a critique of Swedish social policies to which she had earlier contributed both concepts and proposals. In the great debate—that some would consider a scandal—over sterilization policies undertaken for more than four decades under the guidance of Sweden’s welfare state and social democracy, both Alva and Gunnar Myrdal were criticized harshly for their roles in promoting a practice said by their critics to be comparable to programs undertaken during Germany’s Nazi regime. In addition, given the Myrdals’ lifelong concerns for both civic and family life, their own child-rearing practices and modes of parenting have been the subject of bitter recriminations as well as controversies that touch on the re-examination of ethics in welfare-oriented democracies and inspire investigations that seek to sort out the relationship between the personal, the academic, and the political.

Two of the essays in this symposium throw new light and provide hitherto unexamined materials on Gunnar Myrdal’s psychosocial perspective at the time he directed the research team working on the report that would be finalized in 1944 with Harper and Brothers’ publication of An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy. Erik Berggren investigates the conception of self that is to be found in as well as adumbrating the major thesis of Myrdal’s text, pointing out what he wishes to designate as “Myrdal’s Freudian liberalism,”—a synthesis combining the “American Creed” with a psychoanalytic perspective on racism. Professor Berggren unpacks certain unappealing latent elements of this form of liberalism but concludes, nevertheless, that such an understanding of Myrdal’s argument is