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GUNNAR MYRDAL AS A SOCIAL ECONOMIST*

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This paper seeks to establish that Gunnar Myrdal's writings should be considered a contribution to social economics. Although Myrdal has been referred to as a social economist, [Hacken, p. 140] his work in the history of economic thought and economic analysis has not been emphasized by practitioners of this approach. That is, few social economists have included Myrdal's writings in their bibliographies. The following sections discuss the factors which led to Myrdal's unorthodox epistemology, the characteristics of a practitioner of social economics and the scope of Myrdal's social economics.

I

Raised in an agrarian environment, Myrdal became imbued with the attitudes prevalent throughout the peasant class in early twentieth-century Sweden. His childhood led him to develop a strong belief in the work ethic, to hold values stressing egalitarianism in social and economic matters and to adopt a rational, pragmatic approach toward problem solving. During his education in the *gymnasium*, he was introduced to the optimistic philosophy of the Enlightenment. Thereafter, he has held that human beings are basically good, that undesirable social conditions are not natural and that, because behavior is culturally conditioned, well-planned reforms and education can effectively alleviate society's problems. [Myrdal, 1956, p. 301]

Upon completing graduate work in economic theory, Myrdal received a Rockefeller Foundation award to study in the United States. He and his wife Alva¹ spent the 1929-1930 period travelling and studying in America. This experience, which included their observing racial tension and poverty for the first time, encouraged them to become politically active upon their return to Sweden. As proponents of the Philosophy of Enlightenment, they saw themselves as social engineers devoted to serving society by working to introduce planned, egalitarian reforms. For the past half century, they have become perhaps the paradigm for civil

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¹It would require another paper to give proper credit to the contributions made to the social sciences, as well as to the Swedish, American, and entire world community by Alva Myrdal. Part of her is embodied in all of Gunnar Myrdal's works, for she has been a major influence by directing and shaping his research.

servants. Working in the capacity of government minister, professor, or visiting scholar, they have tackled a multitude of political, social and economic issues, including family problems (e.g., child care, birth rates), race relations, poverty in underdeveloped nations and international relations.

In retrospect, Gunnar Myrdal has noted that his upbringing, education and work experiences led him to the conclusion "that there are no economic, sociological, psychological problems" [Myrdal, 1978b, p. 13] which can be analyzed in isolation. Instead, he believes that the problems society faces have demographic, political, attitudinal, sociological and economic aspects, all of which are "mixed and composite." [p. 13] Consequently, in each of the studies he has undertaken over the past fifty years, Myrdal has adopted an institutional approach to the problem in question. [1978c, p. 771] Is this approach similar to that typically followed by a social economist? To permit such a judgment, the characteristics of a practitioner of social economics must first be presented. This will provide a model of a social economist to which Myrdal's thought and analysis can be compared.

II

There is no definition of social economics that is universally accepted by either so-called practitioners of the field or by their orthodox counterparts. However, certain propositions can be identified which, when taken together, depict an approach to economics generally adopted by social economists. Hence, to be considered a practitioner of social economics one must

1. Be willing "to contribute to the establishment of social goals for his/her society." [Jensen, 1983, p. 4]
2. Adopt an interdisciplinary approach to issues whereby economic and noneconomic factors are included in the analysis.
3. Attempt to measure and explain particular social values that exist in society.
4. Emphasize an inductive approach to social problems with a concurrent rejection of narrow, orthodox economic analysis and the system of values implicit in the "deductive, static economics" of price theory and resource allocation. [Gruchy, 1981, p. 244]
5. Strive to convert economics into political economy [Gruchy, 1981, p. 253] and be willing to propose recommendations for institutional reform where deemed necessary.
6. Accept the task of making recommendations for reform and policy. These relevant propositions will serve as the basis for evaluating

Myrdal as a contributor to social economics. Toward this end, I will discuss the principal features of his analytical work as they exemplify his approach to economics.²

III

A. *Social Goals and Political Economics*

A feature of Myrdal's career has been his desire to be considered a political economist. As such, he believes that he must "recognize that economics is a moral science" [Myrdal, 1978b, p. 6] in the tradition of the classical economists, and that it is his duty to draw policy conclusions from analysis. His role as a political economist has, in part, been established by a long-standing theme prevalent throughout all of his works; namely, that one should accept that there cannot be a purely objective economic science. Instead, he argues that value premises necessarily play a significant role in an economist's analytical approach by establishing the "viewpoint necessary to have a view." [Myrdal, 1975a, p. 300]

The value premises Myrdal wishes to propagate into the societies he studied were shaped by his adoption of the ideals established during the Enlightenment. He notes that the radical philosophers of that period were motivated by moralistic rather than naturalistic interests. [1975b, p. 84] Myrdal praises the social scientists of this period for elevating what he calls higher valuations of liberty and equality of opportunity; i.e., "more general valuations — felt to be valid in relation to the whole nation or even to all human beings." [1969b, p. 16] He argues that the lower level valuations, or prejudices, held by particular individuals or groups invariably are "more narrowly selfish, more in the nature of economic, social, or sexual interests and jealousies in a particular setting at a particular time, and less universally benevolent and human." [p. 17] Further, he believes that these lower level valuations can be rationalized to the point of generating distorted beliefs. [p. 67] That is, individuals or particular interest groups will conceive of the socioeconomic reality in a biased, self-serving manner.³

²Myrdal has dealt with problems from both a mainstream (in the neoclassical, Austrian-Swedish school tradition) and heterodox perspective. This paper focuses on the contributions of the mature, anti-neoclassical Myrdal.

³Myrdal uses the term biased to mean unrealistic, stating "the beliefs are thus not only determined by available scientific knowledge in society and the efficacy of the means of its communication to various population groups but are regularly 'biases,' by which we mean that they are systematically twisted in the one direction which fits them best for purposes of rationalization." [Myrdal, 1958, pp. 76-77]

Among the lofty ideals he has envisioned are equal rights and opportunity for all individuals, liberty, justice, brotherhood, social cohesion, mobility within the community, participation by all in society — sharing benefits and bearing burdens equally, dignity of the individual, human solidarity and compassion for the needy. Another goal is equalization of living and working conditions, which Myrdal has referred to as a supreme ideal. [p. 83] On a slightly different level lie his vision of a decent standard of living for all groups in society as well as a measure of economic security.

Although these higher ideals have been the basis for the social reforms he labored to have introduced in Sweden, Myrdal does not see a national welfare state similar to the Swedish model as the ideal organization of society. He believes that such a system will result in a moral dilemma; namely, that the welfare state is nationalistic and, as such, will not promote the international cooperation he favors. [1960, p. 321-322] Consequently, he advocates a welfare world, which would extend the equality of opportunity ideals beyond national boundaries. [1957, p. 128-129]

B. Evaluation of Prevailing Social Values

Before advocating policy reforms designed to stimulate development, Myrdal has focused his analysis on societal values. In particular, the role of attitudes⁴ is emphasized by a statement pertaining to his study of underdeveloped nations in Asia: “What is needed is intensive empirical investigation of these [traditional] attitudes and beliefs in different strata of the population and their influence on behavior.” [1968, p. 94] His rationale for such an approach to social values stems from his view that behavior is not shaped primarily by market forces (i.e., especially by changes in relative prices). In arguing that behavior reflects one’s sociocultural environment, Myrdal draws from his experience with the Negro in America and the impoverished inhabitants of Southeast Asia to conclude that the living conditions of these respective groups shaped their valuations and, consequently, their behavior. [1975b, p. 1003; 1968, p. 112]

What has intrigued Myrdal in both of his landmark studies is the conflict between actual valuations professed by members of the intellectual elite and their beliefs and valuations regarding the impoverished citizens of the respective societies. He believes there is a dilemma in America concerning the existence of a “set of ideals (e.g., the ‘American

⁴By attitudes he means “the totality of the beliefs and valuations that cause behavior to be what it is.” [Myrdal, 1968, p. 102]

Creed' which includes the belief in liberty, justice, and equality of opportunity) and moral commitments" [1978b, p. 12] inherent in our beliefs which are rooted in the Constitution and consciousness. These ideals coincide with the negative attitudes toward the Negro, manifested by acts of discrimination and attempts to segregate black Americans. Myrdal points out that such behavior has resulted in a society in which a vast majority enjoy unprecedented affluence while a minority, especially Negroes, live in slums where unemployment, inadequate health and educational services, and crime are rampant. As he summarizes the conflict, "the Whites continually live in moral confusion. They proclaim ideals that are bluntly disobeyed in their daily life. This is the dilemma." [1975a, p. 305]

This same conflict between higher and lower valuations is evident to Myrdal in Southeast Asia. He depicts it as a drama because his work there led him to "sense a rather clear-cut set of conflicts and a common theme as in a drama." [1968, p. 34] The common theme is the desire within all underdeveloped Asian nations to realize the modernization ideals [pp. 57-67] which are the goals of their development plans. These ideals, which include greater rationality, rising levels of living, social and economic equalization and national independence comprise the ideology of the intellectual elite. However, as in the United States, there is a significant difference between the degree to which these ideals have been realized by all socioeconomic classes within these underdeveloped nations.

Having identified the existing social values, Myrdal subsequently offers means to stimulate progress. He recognizes that resistance to change is inevitable given the traditional attitudes and institutions of the inherited culture, [p. 1873] but he optimistically holds to the belief that through "educational efforts, attitudes can be changed so that individuals come to identify their own ambitions with the nation's striving for development, [and consequently] the conflict of valuations will have been resolved." [p. 1538]

The emphasis he places on education as a means for shaping attitudes (and thereby promoting progressive social change) can be traced to his belief that education, in making people more rational, will result in "forcing valuations out in the open . . . making it more difficult to retain valuations on the lower level opposing those on the higher level." [1969b, p. 40-41] He believes that liberally educated people will become better citizens and consequently will pursue his values of greater equality of opportunity and improved standards of living for the entire population. In the case of both the American Negro and the poor

inhabitants of under-developed countries, Myrdal argues that educational reform will not only awaken them and stimulate a desire to improve their social position, but will subsequently result in attitudinal changes among middle and upper class persons who will gradually become empathetic and will not view those less fortunate than themselves as being peculiar. He feels that this movement, in turn, will be likely to stimulate a process of cultural assimilation in which the vicious circle of poverty will be broken and egalitarian policies will be pursued.

Another agent for reforming existing valuations in the Myrdalian conception of reality is institutional reform, especially in the political area. He advocates the expression of a collective will through institutions such as churches, schools, universities, foundations, trade unions and the state. Myrdal believes that higher valuations are more likely to be enforced when expressed through man's "orderly collective bodies" [p. 36], thereby overcoming the prejudices manifested on the individual level.

C. *Interdisciplinary Approach*

Myrdal's academic and public service experience has led him to adopt a holistic [1978b, p. 15] approach to social problems. This approach reflects his "increasingly firm conviction that economic problems cannot be studied in isolation, but only in their demographic, social, and political setting." [1968, p. ix]

It was the study of the population problem in Sweden during the early 1930s that shaped his transdisciplinary approach. For a number of decades the nation's birth rate had been declining, especially among poorer families in which both husband and wife were employed. In his landmark study *Kris i Befolkningsfragan* (*Crisis in the Population Problem*), co-authored with Alva Myrdal, the Myrdals argued that any population policy involves the nation's basic social structure and therefore an interventionist social policy would be required to propagate their values of personal freedom and a higher overall standard of living, especially for the lower classes.

From their analysis of factors that could potentially have caused a declining birth rate, they concluded that the decline was not merely an economic problem but was "social cultural" and "social psychological." [Carlson, p. 200] In the course of their research, they found that the housing problem was related to the population issue, that the root of this problem could be found in the attitudes and institutions prevalent in Sweden at this time and that the poor housing conditions were not attributable simply to the existence of poverty [p. 171] The Myrdals

noted that many Swedes lived in tenements generally owned by absentee landlords, and that the favorable income of this latter group was perpetuated by a high incidence of poverty.

Popular attitudes toward the poor, namely a general willingness to blame this group for its own plight, coupled with a do-nothing social policy on the government level were subsequently identified as principal causes of the prevalence of declining birth rates and a high incidence of poverty. This conclusion was influenced by the attitudes held by the political and intellectual elite of Sweden in the early 1930s, especially Social Democratic leaders such as Ernst Wigforss, Per Albin, Gustav Moeller and the Myrdals. Each of them stressed the need for radical social and economic reform in Sweden for the purpose of promoting the well-being of lower-middle and lower-income families. Moeller exemplifies the conviction that the party must strive to create a society that would provide for its less fortunate members. In reference to his childhood, most of which was spent as an orphan in a slum inhabited by uneducated, impoverished, often drunk individuals, he states: "Society offered my mother no help against overwork, illness, and poor housing conditions. . . . She was overpowered by the circumstances and died prematurely [age 27]. I felt then that something had to be done about it." [Fleisher, p. 16]

In summarizing the findings from their research of the population question, the Myrdals concluded that natural forces (i.e., market forces in a *laissez-faire* economy) were not only incapable of rectifying Sweden's population problem, but also were lacking as a potential means for alleviating problems in the areas of housing, agriculture, international trade and poverty. They subsequently proceeded to transform the population issue into an argument in favor of widespread, well-planned, egalitarian reforms. [Myrdal, 1975a, p. 9] They argued that any policy aimed at the population problem must be nothing less than a broad social reform program. Such a program should focus on controlling the consumption side, which they believed would be a "comparatively easy task for competent social engineering." [Alva Myrdal, p. 151]

It was the Myrdal's opinion that policy measures such as collectivized housing, pre-school education, a guaranteed income for workers and stabilization of food prices "would be preventive, prophylactic, and thus productive." [Myrdal, 1975a, p. 9] Myrdal has since given credit to the population study for influencing the social reform legislation passed on behalf of family welfare, especially children, not only in Sweden but in other Scandinavian nations and in Britain.

When faced with the problem of poverty as experienced by the Negro in America or by inhabitants of underdeveloped nations, Myrdal recognizes that “nothing of scientific importance could be ascertained except by transgressing the boundaries between our inherited disciplines.” [1978b, p. 12] His approach to the specific economic problem (e.g., poverty) has been to “take account of the entire social system.” [p. 13] He conceives of a social system as being comprised of a number of relevant, interrelated economic and noneconomic conditions such as the level and methods of production, the distribution of income, the level of consumption, the nature of educational and health facilities, the institutions — including those that influence economic, social and political stratification as well as the distribution of power in a society, the policies chosen by the influential groups to deal with the community’s social issues and the attitudes towards life and work — especially as they are influenced by religion and social mores. While doing research for his *American Dilemma*, Myrdal examined the total American picture, recognizing that “the Negro problem is intertwined with all other social, economic, political, and cultural problems, and [that] its study affords a perspective of the American nation as a whole.” [1975b, p. xxiii]

D. Methodology

An additional factor shaping Myrdal’s interdisciplinary method has been an empirical approach along with a concurrent rejection of traditional economic methodology.

Myrdal has often expressed his dissatisfaction with the methodology developed by orthodox economists. He is critical of the inadequacy of the static equilibrium approach to social change, challenging the basic aspects inherent in this notion. He has been especially outspoken concerning the conventional assertion that the process by which changes in one basic, endogenous economic factor (normally price) generate subsequent adjustments in demand and supply conditions (until a new equilibrium price is restored) is typical of actual social changes. [1957, p. 13]

Myrdal accepts the view that “what exists are merely problems to be solved, theoretical and practical; and the rational way of attacking them is to use the methods which are the most adequate for solving each particular problem.” [1958, p. 40] He supports this view by emphasizing that there “is no ‘basic factor.’ Everything is cause to everything else. It is not even feasible to define clearly the ‘economic factor,’ supposed to be basic.” [1975d, p. 4]

He refers to his own theory of social change as the “principle of circular and cumulative causation” [1957, pp. 12-13]; a dynamic causation process in which he recognizes both the interrelatedness among all relevant economic and noneconomic factors involved in the process of social change as well as the interlocking nature of the circular and cumulative aspects of change. The process of social change in the Myrdallian system stems from changes in all relevant factors necessary to induce circular causation such that a “social process tends to become cumulative and often to gather speed at an accelerating rate.” [p. 13] First, a change in one endogenous condition will include a response in secondary endogenous conditions. These changes, in turn, are likely over the long run to generate new changes as the interrelatedness between conditions and changes creates a cumulative causation process. He argues that the changes which occur stimulate social change in one direction, and that the ultimate resting place of the system is not easily predicted.

Myrdal’s theory is exemplified by the contrast between the cumulative growth process realized in the welfare states due to the prevalence of conditions which foster spread effects [p. 35] and the experiences of the Negro in America and the poor inhabitants of underdeveloped countries. These latter cases offer examples where spread effects are weak, dominated by the regressive backwash effects. As a result, a vicious cumulative process prevails in which discrimination breeds discrimination and poverty breeds poverty. Myrdal describes this process as it determines the status of the American Negro:

The low plane of living, the cultural isolation, and all the resulting bodily, intellectual, and moral disabilities and distortions of the average Negro make it natural for the ordinary white man not only to see that the Negro is inferior but also to believe honestly that the Negro’s inferiority is inborn. This belief means, of course, that all attempts to improve the Negro by education, health reforms, or merely by giving him his rights as a worker and a citizen must seem to be less promising of success than they otherwise would be. The Negro is judged to be fundamentally incorrigible and he is, therefore, kept in a slum existence which, in its turn, leaves the imprint upon his body and soul which makes it natural for the white man to believe in his inferiority. This is a vicious circle; it is, indeed, one of the chief examples of cumulative causation. [1975b, p. 101]

This theory of social change, influenced by Myrdal’s interpretation of

history,⁵ provides a justification for the interventionist policies (social engineering) he has long advocated.

E. Proposing Reforms and Policy

Regardless of whether he is referring to the world economy, rich nations or underdeveloped nations, Myrdal has vehemently argued that the realization of his ideals would not be fostered by a do-nothing, *laissez-faire* approach based upon the belief that the natural evolution of market forces would inevitably create natural harmony. [1957, pp. 43, 49] Instead, he prefers rational planning; ie., “coordination of policies in order to alter anticipated social trends [which would result in a] ‘created harmony,’ created through policy interferences by organized society with the operation of market forces which, if left by themselves, would have led to disharmony.” [1957, p. 49; 1968, p. 1864] In a sense, Myrdal recommends to, and takes recommendations from, his studies, for he has actively sought to implement the findings and recommendations of his work.

In the Myrdallian approach, in which practical research is combined with rational planning, the result is what has become the foundation for his instrumental goals: social engineering. He argues that once a society believes social engineering will be beneficial and subsequently begins to intervene in the market place, then the state must also be willing to initiate a system of planning, thereby taking an active, indeed the decisive, role in the economy so as to guide economic activity by “establishing goals, choosing means, fixing targets and implementing policies.” [1960, p. vi]

Throughout Myrdal’s career he has been an active, engaged social scientist seeking to implement social programs consistent with his values. He has done so while serving as a member of the Swedish Parliament, as executive director of the United Nations’ Economic Commission for Europe (1947-1957) and as an international scholar. Once he had completed his analysis of the nature of poverty in wealthy as well as in poor nations, Myrdal boldly offered programs for raising the standard of living of those societies’ less fortunate members. Both his *Challenge of World Poverty* and *International Economy* provide ambitious agendas for the rich nations to adopt for the purpose of introducing redistributive reforms into regions experiencing poverty.

⁵Basically, Myrdal does not believe in any deterministic theory of history. He argues that people are capable of planning reforms for the purpose of “changing reality according to his design and [in doing] so [to] turn the course of future development.” [Myrdal, 1960, p. 7]

IV

Based upon the criteria for identifying a social economist presented earlier, Gunnar Myrdal seems to merit consideration as a member of this approach to economics. In addition, he should be recognized as a social reformer actively proposing and implementing policy. Careful study of his contributions could prove beneficial to practitioners of social economics.

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