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An Interview with Gunnar Myrdal

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Source: *The Phi Delta Kappan*, May, 1968, Vol. 49, No. 9 (May, 1968), pp. 490-494

Published by: Phi Delta Kappa International

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20372144>

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## An Interview with Gunnar Myrdal

*A modern-day deToqueville responds to key questions on family planning as a class, moral, and religious problem . . . on America's obligations with respect to the world population crisis . . . on the connection between race relations, the Vietnam war, and Malthus . . . even on birth control in Red China. It's a fascinating conversation with the Swedish social scientist who wrote the classic American Dilemma and last month published a widely reviewed study titled Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations.*

Gunnar Myrdal may be the only European of our generation who can criticize America like a native and hold our respect and admiration. He asserts that he feels as much at home in the United States as he does in his native Sweden. He and Mrs. Myrdal first came to this country in 1929, both on Rockefeller Foundation fellowships. In 1944 he published *An American Dilemma* after four years of studying race relations here, and the book is now a classic in the field. His many other works include *An International Economy*, 1956; *Beyond the Welfare State*, 1960; and *Challenge to Affluence*, 1963. A monumental three-volume 2,284-page study, *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations*, has just been published. It took Myrdal a decade to write it, with 20th Century Fund backing.

Obviously, Gunnar Myrdal is a citizen of the world, at home in many societies. In Sweden he has been a member of the Senate, Minister of Commerce, and a member of the Population, Housing, and Agricultural Commission. His wife

Alva, also a prominent author, is a former ambassador to India and is now a member of the Swedish Cabinet. She collaborated with her husband in writing *Crisis in the Population Question* and was an early champion of sex education in Sweden. She is also a co-author of the new book on South Asia.

Last fall Myrdal served as Visiting Robert Lazarus Professor of Population Studies at Ohio State University, on leave from his University of Stockholm professorship in international economics and recently resigned as director of the Institute for International Economic Studies. It was when he visited Indiana University during this period that the following interview was taped.

**KAPPAN:** *Dr. Myrdal, population control is obviously complicated by the fact that the least well educated and the least successful economically tend to have the largest families and be most resistant to notions of family planning. Is there any satisfactory answer for this situation?*

**MYRDAL:** This is very much a question of national consolidation and integration. In a country with a homogeneous population like Sweden, we could observe already a quarter of a century ago that we tended towards having a positive correlation between economic and social status on one hand and number of children on the other. If you have a different situation in the United States, it is because America is still a very loosely integrated country where you have a very heterogeneous underclass living in poverty and not really integrated in prosperous and progressive majority America. And people of this class have more children. If you reckon one-fifth of the nation as belonging to this underclass, one-fourth of the children are there, which is a very serious situation.

Now you ask me if there is any satisfactory answer for this situation. Sure there is. It is to spread birth control even to this lower stratum. How is that going to be done? Well, brother, I would say that there is a tradition in these Puritan countries that you rely too

much on birth control clinics. That makes it respectable. There's a doctor and individual conferences, etc. This is not very practical. Birth control is as simple as sex. What is needed is the spread of understanding of it and a willingness to use it. When birth control first came to the Western countries in the last quarter of the nineteenth century it started in the upper strata but spread downwards. The method used was not technical. It was withdrawal, *coitus interruptus*. What happened was only a change in people's attitudes towards child-bearing. And it is *that* which you will have to spread.

I developed this idea in a book a quarter of a century ago when I wrote about the Negro problem in *The American Dilemma*. The main requirement is what you might call adult education about the need for birth control. And then of course you must get people out of the slum-mindedness where they don't care. This is a part of really integrating these people into the American nation and the American culture.

KAPPAN: *Population increases continue most rapidly in the underdeveloped parts of the world, especially Asia and Latin America. Alfred Liu, in an article titled "Population Growth and Educational Development" [American Academy of Political and Social Science, January 20, 1967], says, "Countries most advanced educationally tend to have lower rates of population growth. In the least advanced nations (educationally), birth rates, already high, are rising." So the phenomenon can be viewed as a class problem within a country or as a class problem among nations. Have we an obligation to save Asians and Latin Americans (and eventually ourselves) from the results of their own overpopulation?*

MYRDAL: Yes, this is an international class problem. The underdeveloped countries in the world today have kept as a rule the same high level of fertility that they have always had, while mortality has been going down. The demographers state, and of course this is clear in theory, that sooner or later you will have to complete the popu-

lation cycle and really get down births and deaths to somewhat the same level. And that is a very, very long journey. It is not in sight in any large part of the underdeveloped world today.

You ask whether we in the rich countries have an obligation to save underdeveloped countries from the results of their own trend towards overpopulation. I would say we have an obligation to try to help these poor people to have a more human life in *all* respects. In economic matters and in others. We have an obligation to save them from a hunger crisis when food production tends to fall behind the increase in the population in spite of the fact that they are *underfed* already. Sure we have such an obligation, a moral obligation which we should fulfill.

But I think I should add that so far as the population problem is specifically concerned, there is not much we can do. Work with the conventional contraceptives has not been very successful.

KAPPAN: *None of the efforts in India have been successful in this regard?*

MYRDAL: They have not been successful.

KAPPAN: *Why is that true?*

MYRDAL: Well, it is tremendously difficult to really reach down to the masses. The masses are so extremely *many*. It is an administrative problem, very much, and a big one. But now we have had a technical breakthrough. It is the intrauterine device (IUD), which means very much. There is also the possibility of sterilization, although I wouldn't reckon that as being so promising. And you have the pills. I think in perhaps a short time we will have the means of sterilizing a man or a woman for a rather long period.

KAPPAN: *This is a development yet to come?*

MYRDAL: Well, we have the IUD already, of course. But remember, this must be used by the native population. If you take a woman and put her on a table and draw up the legs and put this thing through her vulva into the uterus, then you must at least speak her *language*.

The whole idea that *we* can go out and spread birth control is just nonsense. What we can do is very little. We can provide them the technical means, the contraceptives. But they are very cheap, so that is not very much. We can furthermore help them in training doctors and nurses. And even there of course our possibilities are not great. This is a thing which must be done by them.

KAPPAN: *We train their doctors and nurses and they stay here instead of going back.*

MYRDAL: That's right. That is another horrible thing: When we have trained them they very often remain or come back to us. It is the brain drain.

KAPPAN: *What can we do, then?*

MYRDAL: There really is not very much we can do. Our aid to underdeveloped countries must primarily be in other fields—agriculture, industry, education. We should not overestimate our possibility to be active particularly in the population field. And incidentally, we didn't care very much about that field until very recently. You remember that under Eisenhower there was, I think, a military committee which said that we should do something about birth control in other countries. There was an uproar in America and the idea was dropped. Now we have had rapid development in recent years towards fuller understanding. It was accelerated when we almost tried to escape our duty to help underdeveloped countries in economic matters by saying they had too many children. Well now, this is not an easy problem to solve and what we can do is a minimum.

KAPPAN: *That is a rather pessimistic answer.*

MYRDAL: We are generally over-optimistic as hell about underdeveloped countries generally. I want simply to be realistic.

KAPPAN: *Any problem as significant as this one of world overpopulation can be seen as a practical technical problem or as a moral problem. Is your reaction to it as a moral problem consistent with your response to the practical problem?*

MYRDAL: Yes, I very definitely consider it a moral problem. I consider all political problems moral problems. All problems of society are at the bottom moral problems. Those of my colleagues who try to escape the reality of ideals are wrong. Ideals are real when they are rooted in people's minds, and as you have them in your Constitution and various institutions. When people try to deal with human problems, social problems, as if people had not a conscience towards which they are pleading, they are just wrong, because these are realities. Certainly this is a moral problem, and before we see it more clearly as a moral problem and a tremendous one, the world is going towards greater and greater inequalities.

KAPPAN: *Morality is generally slow to change, isn't it?*

MYRDAL: Well, sometimes I used to joke and say that the Puritan background of this country has in many respects, what shall I say, disastrous and difficult effects. It gives you a moral backlash, the Puritan backlash. If you had stayed as much in American hotels as I have and had seen as many association meetings in order to have girls and drink whiskey, then you would see this whole stress on sex, in advertising and all that, as a Puritan backlash. And another unfortunate effect is the self-righteousness which we outside America very often notice in your pronouncements on your situation and your policies.

There are wrong things and difficult things in your Puritan background, but fundamentally that background also makes it much more possible to change attitudes. There is no country I know where people are so prepared for conversions as here. If you want me to give you an example from quite another field, here you had developed an extreme isolationism which lasted to the middle of World War II, and then suddenly you changed to an equally extreme interventionism. I hope that one of the lessons you will draw from the Vietnam war and other interventions which you have recently been up to is that



you come back to some sort of middle ground.

But nevertheless, what I wanted to point out here is my belief that this country is more able to change its basic attitudes than any country I know. Because of that you are also really more apt to see a moral issue which you are trying to escape. Some six or seven years ago, in all the new statistics, the conferences, the books, and so on, you began stressing that you have the poor amongst you, these enclaves, you know. I saw in that the beginning of an intellectual and moral catharsis. And that is exactly what the change of moral attitudes implies.

KAPPAN: *We have a high percentage of Catholics in this country. There seems to be great reluctance on the part of the Pope at least to make any important changes in the attitude of the Church toward birth control. Do you see the Catholic Church in this country, and perhaps also in Latin America where the population crisis is most severe, simply ignoring the Vatican?*

MYRDAL: Well, let's have a little background. If we go back 25 or 30 years, it was particularly the Protestant churches that were adamant against birth control, while the Catholics have always been a little more, what shall I say, permissive. You know: You sin and go to the confessor. Then the Protestant churches changed. The spread of birth control everywhere has gone against all the organized forces of society—the law, the church, the medical profession, the press, the school, the politicians. This has been a private enterprise—almost a subversive activity. But a society cannot stand too big a gap between private morals and public morals, and so we had *ex post facto* changes in Protestant churches. Now the Catholic Church will go through

the same process. It is true that the birthrate is higher among Catholic people than among others. But their rate has been sinking everywhere very rapidly, so they are following along. If they are not caught up with other groups yet, it is partly because in most countries the Catholics are at a lower social and economic level. Now what we see is actually a tendency toward change. It is easy to forecast that the Catholic Church will have changed its attitude in 10 years, just as the United States government has changed in 10 or 15 years.

KAPPAN: *Is that early enough?*

MYRDAL: The change will come. And remember, to a considerable extent it has already come. Two years ago the World Health Organization condoned aid to underdeveloped countries for birth control, although not for operational work, and this change actually was led by the Vatican. Incidentally, the same thing is happening in the Communist world. You realize that when the international organizations were prevented from taking part in the move for birth control, it was because of an unholy alliance between the Communists and the Catholics. You have the same change now in Communist thinking. I could quote from what they have been writing in recent years in the Soviet Union; they have said that particularly for underdeveloped countries "we will have to change our attitude." These countries will have not only to permit but to promote birth control.

So changes will come, my friend, if you take the historical view of what is happening.

KAPPAN: *What is occurring in Red China? Is there any move for birth control there?*

MYRDAL: Well, in Red China there was a move toward not only condoning but asking for birth control. This movement culminated in 1958. Then a great silence was brought over the question and many of the most prominent people who had been standing up for birth control were "put aside." You know, China, as a Communist country, has this method of not killing people



but just putting them down to be school teachers somewhere.

KAPPAN: *That is just about as low as you could get?*

MYRDAL: Yes. However, what we learn from press reports is that birth control is now a silent change. It is spreading; it's promoted. It is not promoted with the same force as other campaigns in China—for instance, killing rats and flies—and this I think you know. But nevertheless it is going on. My opinion is that when this rapid upward movement for recognition of the population problem in China was, so to speak, put down from '58 on, it was not only because of doctrinal differences among the higher-ups in the hierarchy; it was also because of a resistance among the people in China. No country can really work on such intimate problems as this against what is felt among the masses.

KAPPAN: *In your interview with Donald McDonald of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions you said, "... if you get out of this horrible Vietnam war, I suppose America will resume its gradual progress in race relations." Do you see the Vietnam war as further fulfillment of the Malthus theory?*

MYRDAL: No, I don't. Let me explain the McDonald quotation. There are two connections between America's war in Vietnam and race relations within the United States. One is simply this, that the war is tremendously expensive, costing 30 billion dollars a year. Even if you can demonstrate in some abstract way that America is able to carry on the war in Asia and also pay for big reforms at home, this is not how things develop practically in a political democracy. Both the Congress and the people, and I am sure the Administration too, must feel strained. It is the question of budget balancing and all of that. And this of course is one reason why the thrust has gone out of the poverty programs started some years ago and now just petering out. The poverty programs were from the beginning spurious, poorly planned, and badly administered. But they could have grown to

something. Now the air has gone out. The situation would be different if you really went out in a large-scale effort to rebuild your cities and to rehabilitate the slum-minded human inside the slums. Your underclass is very heterogeneous, and only one-third or one-fourth are Negroes. You have the Indians and Mexicans and the Puerto Ricans and many of the Asians, still many of the new immigrants. And you have the "white trash," the poor whites. You have them all over the place, not only in the Appalachians. You had them until recently in Bloomington, if I might allude to the ones you call Kentuckians. And I think you have done something about the problem here, but not generally. It would be very different if you had a planned attack and were prepared to do something serious, which will, as I have said elsewhere, take a generation and cost trillions. But the very fact that you started on a bigger scale would mean something for race relations.

Second, there is another association which is obvious to people outside America. It is that in the Vietnam war you are using all your might and all your modern technology to destroy a country, a poor, backward country, where people are colored. This is an association which incidentally makes both your war in Vietnam and the race riots at the present time a cause of revulsion in the whole world. It is one of the reasons for the political and moral isolation of America which I have been talking about in regard to the Vietnam war.

So you have these two connections. But when you then ask, "Do you see the Vietnam war as a further fulfillment of the Malthus theory?" don't let us become too ideological or theoretical. The Viet-

nam war is just bad politics. The steps which you have been taking for the past 20 years were unplanned; nobody wanted the Vietnamese intervention to be what it became. So it is just bad politics rooted in a lack of planning and the lack of enlightenment among the people who are around President Johnson carrying out this war, among the people in Congress, and in the end among the American people, the voters—because there is no country I know where Congress and the Administration are so sensitive to public opinion as in America. So the fault is lack of enlightenment.

KAPPAN: *What is going on now? An increase of enlightenment or simply a reaction to the frustrations of this war?*

MYRDAL: Well, of course, it is a terrible situation which we have come to face. You have a polarization of opinion which is very dangerous for national unity. You have a polarization both regarding the Vietnam war and race relations which splits this from the beginning not-too-well-integrated nation in a way I see as quite dangerous. What I hope for, of course, is that more and more people will be against this polarization. I see the process going on in the case of the Vietnam war. In race relations I am more scared, because there is a natural ambivalence, you see, in race relation issues in America. This ambivalence has its heart in almost every good American citizen. On one hand he must insist on law and order. Riots like this are really not part of orderly development in an enlightened and rich country. This is the one side. The other side is that you must not only suppress the riots, you must change the basic causes which are at the root of such riots. And here you have an ambivalence, and of course the petering out of the poverty programs. The Vietnam war, particularly if it should go on for 10 years as some military men have prophesied, makes it more natural that you put the stress on law and order. We have seen in history that putting too much stress only on law and order means that you get a reluctance to



do the big things which get at root causes.

We have very much the same situation in every problem of asociality in a country. Most of us have reached a level where we do not look upon criminals as enemies, but as pathological phenomena in an otherwise sane society. You see what I mean. This is the development of humanitarian attitudes in criminology which you see going on over the decades. We must look on race relations in the same way. The riots certainly cannot be permitted. You must have law and order in your cities. You can't see your cities burned, on the one hand. But you should at the same time, as you do in modern criminology, try to find out what is at the root of the riots. And at their root are actually the impermissible economic and social and educational situations which you must change.

Here I see an ambivalence which scares me. If this Vietnam war should go on for 10 years more, as I said, America could develop into a really reactionary country, simply trying to push down with a brutal police power everything which is against it in the world and in America. This I think is a wrong thing. Then I would see the end of what I have loved as the American dream and the American prospect of influence in the world.

But let me hope that this war will soon be over and that lessons are learned and that we can start on a big scale really to root out the difficulties in the world, to help the underdeveloped countries to rise economically and educationally, and to get America to become what it is not now, a homogeneous country without an underclass.

*KAPPAN: Have you observed political developments here closely enough to make any predictions in respect to the presidential election? Are we likely to develop a party, I guess it would have to be the Republican party, which would oppose the war?<sup>o</sup> We have elements within the Democratic Party about*

<sup>o</sup>The interview took place before either Senator Eugene McCarthy or Senator Robert Kennedy announced his candidacy.

*which I am much more hopeful, frankly.*

MYRDAL: Well, I have followed developments in America since my early youth very intensely. As a matter of fact I am more involved in American developments and politics than in Swedish. The Swedes take care of themselves very well, while here you really have problems. But I would not in this very dynamic situation try to make any real forecast. As I said, I look upon America as the people in the world where you have the greatest possibilities for conversions, for changes. I look upon America as a country where the Administration, the Congress, are most sensitive to public opinion. And I would hope, for the Lord's sake, that we can stop the acceleration and escalation of this war before—well, before the election.

*KAPPAN: Maybe there is some hope in the fact that our population is more than half younger than 27. People like Robert Kennedy apparently are pinning their political future on this fact. After all, during the past year we have had all these riots at the college and university level, mostly opposing the war in one way or another—opposing the establishment in many ways.*

MYRDAL: I would say this, if you would excuse me for joking a little. I look on Robert Kennedy as a very accomplished politician, as his brother was. When I see a politician taking a distance from the Johnson Administration, from Vietnam, then I see hope.

About the youth, we could have another interview about youth. I am impressed with the quality of your youth. □

### Cal. Seeks Sex Program Law

► Elementary and secondary schools in California will be required to establish sex and family life education courses if Assembly Bill 424 becomes law. One provision in the bill requires that candidates for teaching credentials must have had a college course in the teaching of the subject, including the emotional and psychological phases of human development, parental responsibility, and effective interpersonal relationships.

### Sex in College Now More Fun

► Sexual intercourse among college students is "more fun nowadays" than it used to be, according to Paul H. Gebhard, director of the Institute for Sex Research at Indiana University.

He said this observation applied particularly to college women, and that it reflected "a continuation of the trend toward sexual equality."

Gebhard commented in connection with preliminary findings of a nationwide survey of 1,179 students conducted in 1967 by the institute's staff. These findings were compared with data from a similar study during the 1940's and early 1950's, when the institute's director was the late Alfred C. Kinsey.

Gebhard, a professor of anthropology, said the latest study suggested that today's college woman is regarded both by men and by herself less "as a sexual object to be exploited and more as a fellow human with her own needs, expectations, and rights."

He also remarked that "it's becoming acceptable to be an admittedly responsive sexual female."

For example, the percentage of coeds who said they enjoyed their first intercourse increased from 46 to 73 among freshmen, from 48 to 60 among sophomores, from 35 to 63 among juniors, and from 46 to 65 among seniors.

For male students, the corresponding percentage increases were from 74 to 86 among juniors and from 65 to 89 among seniors.

### N. J. Sex Teaching Guide

► The State Department of Education in New Jersey has issued detailed guidelines for teaching about sex from pre-kindergarten to senior high school.

The booklet suggests content for sex education lessons at all grade levels and lists sources of information which teachers and students might refer to.

A first step in any district, the department recommends, should be creation of an advisory board on sex education composed of educators, doctors, clergymen, and parent representatives.

### Godwin Opposes Sex Teaching

► Governor Mills E. Godwin refused last December to endorse a state PTA resolution urging the Virginia Board of Education to create sex education programs in schools throughout the state. Local school systems now must seek state board approval to run sex courses—and in any case they may be taught only in secondary schools.

PHI DELTA KAPPAN