To Build a Nation: Alva Myrdal and the Role of Family Politics in the Transformation of Sweden in the 1930s

Hedvig Ekerwald

In the Swedish transformation into rational Modernity, the social engineering of Alva and Gunnar Myrdal played a significant role. They both made double careers as scholars and policy makers. The jointly written *Kris i Befolkningsfrågan* (Crisis in the population question, 1934) is a manifesto that probably generated more debate than any other social science text in Sweden in the Twentieth century. It had a formative influence on the transformation of agricultural Sweden into a modern nation.

During the next few years, they were involved in feverish government investigations and activities, followed by a series of reforms. In *Nation and Family* (1941), written from a distance in the United States of America, Alva Myrdal evaluates the investigations, the reforms, and some of their immediate results. The book, which forms the focus of this chapter, is also a manifesto text, Alva Myrdal’s *Stadsbarn: En bok om deras uppfostran i storbarnkammare* (Urban children: a book about their upbringing in large nurseries, 1935).

This book examines a speciality of the Swedish welfare state, taking what could be called a children's perspective and investigating the transformative importance of this perspective on gender relations and the development of society.

During the more than two decades since 1989, the transformation of the former Soviet Union and former Eastern Europe has been turbulent. The meaning of nation building in this new era is vague, and is differently understood by different social groups. In this context, classical sociologists and their oeuvres could provide a useful tool for understanding this revolutionary transformation.

This chapter aims to present an important aspect of the transformation of Sweden from an undeveloped, authoritarian, and agricultural nation into a developed country with a mature welfare state. The chapter focuses on Sweden’s *children’s perspective*, developed by intellectuals such as Ellen Key.

---

2 Ellen Key, *The Century of the Child* (Barnets århundrade), Stockholm, Bonniers, 1900, in English 1909. This book is Key’s most internationally well-known publication; in it she advocates the human rights of the child in a new way.
and—particularly in the 1930s—by the protagonist of this paper, the social scientist and politician Alva Myrdal. This perspective may be of special importance to countries that are currently facing a population decline, such as Russia and Ukraine. To throw new light on this perspective, it is contrasted with an alternative view, proposed by the American conservative Allan Carlson. Alva Myrdal wrote two famous classics, *Kris i Befolkningsfrågan* (Crisis in the population question) with her spouse Gunnar, and partly in English *Nation and Family* (1941). This elucidates how the Swedish welfare state in the 1930s evolved, and how the social scientists at that time describe its associated problems and their solutions.

Alva and Gunnar Myrdal’s *Kris i Befolkningsfrågan* was the best-selling social scientific book in Sweden in the Twentieth century. It has still not been fully translated into English (Ekerwald 2001). She was only thirty-two years old when *Crisis* was published, herself a mother who could draw on personal experiences. Thereafter, she had an extraordinary international career. She was appointed principal director of the United Nations Department of Social Affairs in 1949, and the director of the UNESCO Department of Social Sciences in Paris in 1951. She was appointed Swedish ambassador (first minister) to India in 1955, a post she held until 1961, and she was Sweden’s delegate to the Geneva Disarmament Conference from 1962 to 1973; this was one of the main reasons why she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1982. Parallel to her international work, she took part in Swedish politics as a public intellectual, and she also became one of the first female government ministers in Sweden. Taking her work in Sweden as a whole, she had a huge influence on how the Swedish welfare state developed and matured. Since the time when an international scientific conference, entitled “Alva Myrdal’s Questions to Our Time” (Uppsala, Sweden 2002), marked the centennial of her birth, there has been growing interest not only in her effect on politics but also in her scholarly work (see the reference list below).

This chapter examines her book entitled *Urban Children: A book on their education in large nurseries* (1935), which was published just a year after the more famous *Crisis* book. It was the first book that Alva Myrdal wrote herself.

We start with an illuminating comparison to an alternative analysis of children, gender relations, and society, carried out by Allan Carlson, a modern American historian. The arguments in this alternative analysis must have been similar to the arguments facing Alva Myrdal in the 1930s, in response to which she formulated her own rational and modern solutions. The chapter then takes

---

3 See, for example, “Russia Vanishes. Tony Wood writes about the country’s demographic crisis” in *London Review of Books*, 6 December 2012.