



Alva and Gunnar Myrdal: Social Engineering in the Modern World

Thomas Etzemüller

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As two of the leading social scientists of the twentieth century, Alva and Gunnar Myrdal tried to establish a harmonious, “organic” *Gemeinschaft* [community] in order to fight an assumed disintegration of modern society. By means of functionalist architecture and by educating “sensible” citizens, disciplining bodies, and reorganizing social relationships they attempted to intervene in the lives of ordinary men. The paradox of this task was to modernize society in order to defend it against an “ambivalent modernity.” This combination of *Weltanschauung* [world view], social science, and technical devices became known as social engineering.

The Myrdals started in the early 1930s with Sweden, and then chose the world as their working field. In 1938, Gunnar Myrdal was asked to solve the “negro problem” in the United States, and, in the 1970s, Alva Myrdal campaigned for the world's super powers to abolish all of their nuclear weapons. The Myrdals successfully established their own “modern American” marriage as a media image and role model for reform. Far from perfect, their marriage was disrupted by numerous conflicts, mirrored in thousands of private letters. This marital conflict propelled their urge for social reform by exposing the need for the elimination of irrational conflicts from everyday life. A just society, according to the Myrdals, would merge social expertise with everyday life, and ordinary men with the intellectually elite.

Thomas Etzemüller's study of these two figures brings to light the roots of modern social engineering, providing insight for today's sociologists, historians, and political scholars.

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