Abstract

This article discusses the attempts of Gunnar Myrdal to overcome the rift between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ from his youthful and critical *Vetenskap och politik i nationalekonomin* (1930) to his monumental *An American Dilemma* (1944). Myrdal often emphasized his intellectual debt to the Swedish philosopher Axel Hägerström and the non-cognitive ‘value nihilistic’ theory according to which a moral theory had to be ‘a theory about, not of morality’. Myrdal used Hägerström’s ideas as part of his criticism of ‘ideologies’ such as socialism and liberalism. But he did not seek to eliminate values from social science; rather, his main aim was to find a way of introducing them into his programme of social engineering. According to Myrdal, social engineering had to have a political direction, and this could only be attained by introducing explicit value premisses, which were based upon the actual values of the studied society. However, his main challenge was to find a way of determining these values, and ultimately it seems as if his problem lay in finding a way of combining Hägerströmian value theory with his Enlightenment ideals and social democratic political convictions.
Overcoming the rift between ‘is’ and ‘ought’

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Arguably nowhere is the priority of science over ethics as manifest as it is in the notion of social engineering. It represents the anticipation of and trust in scientific solutions to all of the important social and political problems of the modern era. At the same time, there is something paradoxical in the idea of praising science as a normative and political beacon. It seems to involve a violation of the boundary between ‘is’ and ‘ought’, a principle fundamental to the ‘positivistic’ credo of the social engineers themselves. Here I shall discuss how the Swedish social scientist and social democratic intellectual Gunnar Myrdal confronted this paradox. For Myrdal the challenge consisted in combining modern social democratic political ambitions and ideals with the modern philosophy of Axel Hägerström, and in particular the ‘value nihilistic theory’. My central argument will be that Myrdal did not abandon Hägerström in order to overcome the rift between ‘is’ and ‘ought’, but rather, that the value theory continued to condition Myrdal’s philosophy of social engineering from his youthful and destructive *Vetenskap och politik i nationalekonomien* (1930) to the positive methodological programme of *An American Dilemma – the Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944) which Myrdal himself in retrospect labelled as a ‘more conclusive standpoint’.¹

The influence of the Swedish philosopher Hägerström on the development of the ideas of Myrdal has been emphasized by many, and not least by Myrdal himself.² Hägerström served as a symbol of modern thinking and modern philosophy for young and progressive Swedish intellectuals in the 1920s, 30s and 40s, and as shown by e.g. Staffan Källström and Ola Sigurdson, the Hägerströmian influence did not confine itself to philosophy, but reached various scholarly fields such as jurisprudence and social science, as well as the general...

cultural and political debates. A publicly declared adherence to Hägerström was considered as a sign of belonging to the modernistic and progressive camp, important especially for young intellectuals with social democratic sympathies, such as Vilhelm Lundstedt, Herbert Tingsten and Gunnar Myrdal. In a vivid passage Källström describes how Myrdal in 1935 travelled to Uppsala in order to get ‘the philosopher’s blessing’. And in a letter dated September 19th 1932, Myrdal asked Hägerström for ‘a not too small photographic portrait’, which he intended to hang on the wall of his new office, ‘together with pictures of other intellectuals I feel indebted to.’

It was not only Hägerström’s fervent refutation of nineteenth-century idealism and his strong anti-metaphysical credo that bestowed on him the status of a modernistic philosophical prophet. Of huge significance was also the controversial value theory, labelled by its critics ‘value nihilism’. In Sweden, Hägerström is famous for anticipating the non-cognitive theory of Ogden and Richards (1923), Charles Stevenson (1944), and

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5 Unfortunately, the letter does not reveal who the other intellectuals were. The voluminous Nachlass of the Myrdals is preserved in the Archives of the Swedish Labour Movement, Arbetarrörelsens arkiv, in Stockholm.

6 By employing the term ‘nihilism’ the critics, of course, wanted to imply that a general acceptance of Hägerström’s theory would lead to depravity and decadence. See e.g. John Landquist, ‘Angrepp på Hägerström’ in the newspaper Aftonbladet, May 23, 1931. As a rhetorical move against these critics, Hägerström’s follower Ingemar Hedenius, tried to colonize the term and to give it a more positive connotation. See Hedenius, Om rätt och moral (Stockholm: Tiden, 1941).
some leading logical positivists of the 1930s. As early as 1911, Hägerström stated that moral judgments are void of cognitive content and cannot be true or false but have to be interpreted as emotive outbursts. Consequently, he argued, ‘a moral theory cannot be a theory of, but only about morality’ [en lära inte i, utan om moral]. Moral philosophy, as a scientific endeavour, can only explore the actual values held by various individuals and groups in society, but never propose or prove any values of its own.

By Myrdal, Hägerström’s value theory was employed first of all as a weapon against political and scientific rivals. Combining Hägerströmian arguments with the ideal of Wertfreiheit, ascribed to Max Weber, Myrdal accused both liberalism and socialism of confusing science with politics, ‘is’ with ‘ought’. In this sense, as part of a criticism of ‘ideologies’ the Hägerströmian legacy has been interpreted as one of the main reasons for the alleged de-politicization, or perhaps rather, ‘de-moralization’ of politics in Sweden and the Nordic

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7 It has correctly been remarked by for instance Bo Petersson and Jan Bengtsson that the value theory of Hägerström belonged to the tradition of continental Werttheorie (Bretano, Meinong and Ehrenfels) rather than to the linguistic tradition of twentieth-century analytic philosophy. On the other hand, this does not make Hägerström exceptional. For example, Stephen Satris has made a convincing case that the roots of the emotive value theory, particularly in Charles Stevenson’s version, are to be found in the very same Werttheorie as Hägerström’s theory. See C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards, The Meaning of Meaning (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1923); Charles Stevenson, Ethics and Language (London: Yale University Press, 1944); Alfred J. Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1936); Rudolf Carnap, Philosophy and Logical Syntax (London: Kegan Paul, 1935); Bo Petersson, Axel Hägerströms värdeteori (Uppsala: Filosofiska studier utgivna av Filosofiska Föreningen och Filosofiska Institutionen vid Uppsala Universitet, nr 17, 1973); Jan Bengtsson, Den fenomenologiska rörelsen i Sverige – mottagande och inflytande 1900-1968 (Göteborg: Daidalos, 1991, p 93-96); Stephen Satris, Ethical Emotivism (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff philosophy library, vol. 25, 1987) and Satris, ‘The Theory of Value and the Rise of Ethical Emotivism’, Journal of the History of Ideas, vol. 43 (1982), 109-128.

8 Axel Hägerström, ‘Om moraliska föreställningars sanning’ (1911), in Hägerström, Socialfilosofiska uppsatser (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1939), 64.
countries during the golden years of Social Democracy. But this criticism of ideologies must of course itself also be understood as a political move in an historical context. Accordingly, the aim of the first part of this article is to discuss the ideological motives of Myrdal. What was Myrdal doing in calling for a separation of science and politics?

However, Myrdal realized that these critical arguments constituted a methodological challenge for his own programme of social engineering. In order to legitimize the political reforms he favoured, his main mission became establishing a way in which the gulf between science and politics, ‘is’ and ‘ought’, could be bridged without compromising scientific objectivity. Gradually he developed a ‘value premiss theory’, according to which valuations were introduced explicitly, as empirical facts, serving as contingent axioms that determined the political direction of the reform programme. These value premisses had to be founded upon actual values held in society and thus, as indicated by Pauli Kettunen, Myrdal’s philosophy of social engineering involved not merely a criticism of ideologies, but also a form of immanent critique, according to which society was criticized on the basis of its own normative standards. Myrdal’s ambition was not to eliminate valuations from science, but to take them seriously. But despite trying a wide range of solutions, varying from the optimistic hope of a future socio-psychological science, to a brief fascination for opinion polls, and an elaboration of a national community of shared values, Myrdal struggled to establish a proper method of determining these value premisses.

It has been suggested by Sven Eliaeson, that Myrdal gradually abandoned ‘the ‘Viennese’ creed of value-freedom’ of

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_Vetenskap och politik_ (1930) in favour of a Weberian account of Wertbeziehung [value-directedness] most consistently applied in _An American Dilemma_ (1944). From an historical point of view, this development can be understood in the light of the different political contexts and intentions of Myrdal in 1930 and in 1944. While in 1930 value-freedom and value nihilism were effective as critical arguments against the dominant liberal political and economic ideology, the political shift towards social democracy enabled and forced Myrdal to focus on developing a positive theory of social engineering. However, I shall argue that his mature position did not mark a break with Hägerströmian value theory, but rather that he followed its premisses to their conclusions in a way parallel to many of the value nihilist philosophers.

‘The frontier between positive empirical knowledge and metaphysical speculations’

_Vetenskap och politik i nationalekonomien_, published in 1930, translated into German in 1932, and into English (from German) in 1955 as _The Political Element in the Development of Economic Theory_, constituted Myrdal’s first comprehensive encounter with the problem of bridging the rift between

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12 Sven Eliaeson, _Max Weber’s Methodologies – Interpretation and Critique_ (London: Polity Press, 2002), 118-122; Eliaeson, ‘Gunnar Myrdal: A Theorist of Modernity’, _Acta Sociologica_ vol. 43 (2000), 331-341, 339. Eliaeson also suggests that the young Myrdal ‘was more of an ‘Otto Neurath’ than a ‘Weber” which, of course, must be understood in a symbolic manner that has little to do with Neurath and the Vienna positivists themselves. There is no evidence in Myrdal’s Nachlass of any correspondence with Neurath or any other logical positivists (save the Dane Alf Ross), and the position of the logical positivists and especially Neurath on the questions of value free science and meta-ethics is by no means an uncontested issue. See e.g. Cartwright, Cat, Fleck and Uebel (eds.), _Otto Neurath: Philosophy between Science and Politics_, Ideas in Context 38, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 111-114.
science and politics. It was intended as ‘a frontal attack on the dogmas of the older generation’, in particular the liberal laissez-faire doctrine that dominated Swedish economic theory. The key argument was that these economists had failed to pay enough attention to the distinction between fact and value, and that this had resulted in a politically biased economic science.

Myrdal admitted that he was not groundbreaking in promoting this ‘epistemological approach’. In fact, he claimed that this had been the official view of economists since the early nineteenth century. But remarkably, even if they all agreed on this principle, they failed to live up to it in practice. On the one hand the economists emphasised that economic science only observes facts and analyzes what can be expected to follow from them; on the other hand, the very same economists also presented arguments on what ought to happen and what ought to be done. It seemed as if they supported, not a demarcation between science and non-science, but rather a delimitation of two different types of science. This was something Myrdal vehemently opposed.

There is only one boundary which must be drawn and which should not be overstepped. But it is common to all sciences and not a frontier between them. This is the frontier between positive empirical knowledge and metaphysical speculations. The social sciences must, above all, be on guard against normative elements and teleological speculation. But this boundary does not separate one branch of knowledge from another; on the contrary, such separations only encourage metaphysics.

The task that Myrdal set before himself was to unveil the historical and philosophical roots of the confusion of ‘is’ and ‘ought’ in economic theory. According to Myrdal, these

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13 Unless otherwise stated, I am using the English translation by Paul Streeten, *The Political Element in the Development of Economic Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955). However, as the translation was based on the German edition (translated by Gerhard Mackenroth as *Das Politische Element in der nationalökonomischen Doktrinbildung* (Juncker and Dünnhaupt Verlag, 1932)), it has on a couple of occasions called for amendment in order not to distort the Swedish original.


15 Ibid., 155.
roots were primarily to be found in continental natural law philosophy and in British utilitarianism. Natural law philosophy was characterized by Myrdal, not as a mere inference of ‘ought’ from ‘is’ but as an identification of them. The starting point of the argument, and at the same time the conclusion, was an imagined ‘natural order’ that served simultaneously as a description of how things ‘are’ and how they ‘should be’. According to Myrdal, the doctrine of laissez-faire grew out of this identification of fact and value. It was conceived of as at once both a scientific law and a political postulate.\(^{16}\)

Myrdal did not devote many pages to the refutation of natural law philosophy. He was more inclined towards the empiricist programme of utilitarianism, and therefore he concentrated his efforts on an examination of British economic theories. In a lengthy passage he criticized utilitarianism for not providing a comprehensible definition of ‘happiness of all’. Does this cover only the nation, the whole of humanity, or future generations as well? And is it the total sum of happiness or the average happiness per head that is relevant? According to Myrdal, the choice of one of these principles above the others is entirely arbitrary, and violates the empirical programme.\(^{17}\) Furthermore, he attacked the idea of a disinterested observer, able to impartially observe and quantify the pleasure or happiness of everyone, without being biased and regarding some people more important than others. He insisted that ‘[n]o one is a disinterested observer of the course of social events. We all have our political convictions.’\(^{18}\) He also questioned the very basic premiss of utilitarianism, that individual amounts of happiness, pain or pleasure are indeed comparable, which, of course, was a condition for the possibility of calculating a total amount of happiness. This very problem, he argued, was ‘the key to the understanding of the utilitarian argument of the harmony of interests.’ If everyone by promoting their own interest also promoted the interest of all, there was no need for a social summation. According to Myrdal, this fiction of a spontaneous harmony, given an immortal expression of an ‘invisible hand’ by Adam Smith, had an almost ‘religious

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 29.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., 39.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., 40.
character’ in the eyes of the classical economists. Finally, he attacked the hedonistic premise of utilitarianism, the transition from a psychological hedonism to an ethical one, i.e. from ‘is’ to ‘ought’. The (purported) fact that everyone actually seeks his own happiness by no means entails that one should seek everyone’s happiness. Carefully analyzed, he argued, the only difference between natural law philosophy and utilitarianism is ‘the logical distance’ between the normative premisses and the practical political conclusions, and the result of the utilitarian endeavours was ‘only to increase the diameter of the logical circle’.

The critique of natural law philosophy and utilitarianism formed the philosophical basis of Myrdal’s critical examination of the doctrines of classical and neo-classical economic theory in the following chapters of Vetenskap och politik. According to Myrdal, classical and neo-classical economic vocabulary was permeated by the confusion of ‘is’ and ‘ought’. It would seem as if the terms ‘observations’ and ‘facts’ do not mean the same things in economics as they do elsewhere in scientific terminology. Economists appear to have access to a sphere of values which are both objective and observable.

Such a sphere of objective and observable values was, of course, unthinkable. Myrdal linked the call for ‘a value free science’ to Weber by referring to the essays ‘Die objektivität sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis’ (1904) and ‘Wissenschaft als Beruf’ (1919), but stated that ‘the central point of view of the present critical analysis of economic theory’ was Hägerström’s main thesis, that ‘there are no values in the objective sense, only subjective valuations.’ There were several reasons that made it vital for Myrdal to supplement Weber with Hägerström. The call for value freedom and the claim that value judgments cannot be true or false are, of

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19 Ibid., 41-45. Later, Myrdal would launch the concept ‘created harmonies’ by which he meant the modern welfare states. See Myrdal, Beyond the Welfare State (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), 72-77
20 Myrdal, Vetenskap och politik, 51.
21 Ibid., 14.
22 Ibid., 5. The italics are Myrdal’s.
23 Ibid., 12-13.
course, logically independent claims; it is possible to support
one while disapproving of the other.\textsuperscript{24} And while Weber’s meta-
ethical position is somewhat unclear, it was Myrdal’s explicit
intention to support and follow Hägerström’s theory.\textsuperscript{25} The
value nihilism of Hägerström was used by Myrdal as a weapon
directed at competing theories and ideologies. It enabled him
to refute them as metaphysical relics of past times, not least, as
Källström has emphasized, because of the political and cultural
associations a publicly declared adherence to Hägerström
implied at this time.\textsuperscript{26}

The political message of the non-political book

\textit{Vetenskap och politik} was a book of its time. Not only did it
reflect an interest in the foundations of science, characteristic of
early twentieth-century philosophy, it also contained a relevant
political message at a time when liberalism, and in particular
laissez-faire, was falling into bad repute, both internationally
and in Sweden.\textsuperscript{27} Even if there were very few references to the
international debate on planned economy, it was rather obvi-
ous that Myrdal’s refutation of the theory according to which
intervention in the economy had to be avoided, was intended
as a contribution to the case for rational planning. And even if
Myrdal considered his book as ‘entirely non-political’,\textsuperscript{28} there
was little doubt among its readers as to its political message.

In a review of \textit{Vetenskap och politik} in \textit{Statsvetenskaplig
tidsskrift} [Journal for Political Science] Johan Åkerman, who
later became one of the more famous Swedish critics of the
Stockholm school, claimed that the political aims of Myrdal

\textsuperscript{24} See e.g. Göran Hermerén, \textit{Värdering och objektivitet} (Lund: Studentlitteratur,
1972), 212-217.
\textsuperscript{25} However, as Myrdal’s intention was not to discuss Hägerström’s theory, but to
apply it within his own fields of economics and social theory, he was sometimes
a bit imprecise in his formulations. See below, note 62.
\textsuperscript{26} Källström, \textit{Värdenihilism och vetenskap}, 115.
\textsuperscript{27} The economic crisis fostered mistrust in laissez faire and a call for public inter-
vention in the economy. In the academic debate, liberalism had been challenged
by e.g. John Maynard Keynes in his \textit{The End of Laissez faire} (Hogarth Press,
1926).
\textsuperscript{28} Myrdal, \textit{Vetenskap och politik}, xii.
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were much more obvious and lucid than the theoretical, and moreover, that the economic policy he proposed would most likely decrease the total production of society. Conversely, the critical assessment of laissez-faire liberalism was warmly greeted among Social Democrats. Ernst Wigforss wrote an enthusiastic review in *Tiden* [Time, a Social Democratic journal for politics, economics and culture] in which he portrayed *Vetenskap och politik* as ‘a declaration of war, the modern youth’s revolt against a tradition which has dominated not least Swedish economic science.’ The book was recommended to everyone with an interest in political economy within the labour movement, and especially to those, who felt that there was some truth in the talk of a ‘bourgeois economic science’.

As Källström has pointed out, both Wigforss and Myrdal were surely aware of Hägerström’s book *Social teleologi i marxismen* (1909) which contained arguments similar to those presented by Myrdal, but directed at Marxist socialism. And Wigforss, who two years later became Minister of Finance in Per Albin Hansson’s Social Democratic government, raised the ‘complicated’ question of whether Myrdal’s critical analysis of liberalism could be applied to Marxist economic theory as well. The relation to Marxism was topical within the social democratic movement and Myrdal undoubtedly belonged to those who called for a break with the Marxist legacy. In retrospect, he claimed that during the 1930s he had the intention of writing a critique of Marxism as well, but that he concentrated *Vetenskap och politik* on a criticism of the ideas that were most influential in Sweden at that particular time. This political ambition was recognized by Wigforss, who underlined the fact

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30 Ernst Wigforss, ‘Ungdomens uppror’, *Tiden* (1930), 525-538, 531 and 533. This and all other unattributed translations are my own.

31 Källström, *Värdenihilism och vetenskap*, 130.


33 In the preface of the 1972 edition of *Vetenskap och politik*, 10; *Vetenskap och politik*, x.
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that ‘in our country, especially in its academic world, there is no Marxist orthodoxy to revolt against, only an economically liberal one.’\(^{34}\) According to Wigforss, Myrdal’s book provided the labour movement with the essential tools for breaking down the liberal dogmas. But in his characterisation of the position that would rise from the ashes Wigforss was considerably less straightforward. A categorical refutation of ‘bourgeois economic science’ was, however, in no way a better option than an adoption of the liberal dogmas. What was needed, rather, was ‘precisely the demarcation between science and politics, so forcefully and successfully advocated by Myrdal.’\(^{35}\) In the eyes of Wigforss, Myrdal’s book constituted a welcome and forceful appeal for the demarcation between science and politics; but this appeal was also very much in line with the particular way in which Wigforss and Myrdal wanted social democracy to develop.

When writing *Vetenskap och politik* Myrdal was not yet ‘formally’ a member of the Social Democratic Labour Party; he joined it in 1931, together with his wife Alva Myrdal, when they returned from their first trip to the USA.\(^{36}\) Shortly thereafter, the tacit social democratic sympathies of *Vetenskap och politik* were made quite explicit in the twin articles ‘Socialpolitikens dilemma I & II’ [The Dilemma of Social Politics I & II],

\(^{34}\) Wigforss, ‘Ungdomens uppror’, 537.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 538.

\(^{36}\) See Myrdal, *Hur styrs landet?,* 143, where Myrdal writes that they ‘formally joined the Social Democratic Party after returning from the trip.’ According to Myrdal, it was the ‘glaring social problems of America’ that awoke them politically. However, biographers have argued that it was Alva Myrdal who turned her conservatively inclined elitist husband into a devotee of the labour movement. See e.g. Eliaeson, ‘Gunnar Myrdal’, 332; Yvonne Hirdman, *Det tänkande hjärtat – boken om Alva Myrdal* (Stockholm: Ordfront, 2006), 181-184; Walter Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America’s Conscience – Social Engineering and Racial Liberalism, 1938-1987* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 55.
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published in the modernist cultural journal *Spektrum* 1932.\(^{37}\) Here Myrdal developed his position further, by repeating many of the arguments of *Vetenskap och politik*, but directing them at socialism as well as liberalism. He portrayed ‘the new social-political ideology’ as a rational and anti-metaphysical middle way between ‘the two main ideologies of the Enlightenment’.\(^{38}\) Marxist theory was criticized particularly on account of its teleological philosophy of history, according to which the socialist society would emerge more or less automatically from the collapse of capitalism. Socialism was therefore no less rooted in the metaphysics of natural law than liberalism. The new ideology of social policy, on the other hand, was neither socialist nor liberal, but emerged from the collapse and unification [*sammanbrytning*] of the opposing political ideologies. As the liberals were forced to accept some political intervention in order to ease the most pressing social problems, the socialists realized that social policy rather than revolution was the most efficient path towards social change. But the time was ripe for social democracy to more definitely dispose of the Marxist phraseology. In optimistic terms Myrdal declared that ‘[t]he world is getting rational and reasonable. The opposing political ideologies collapse together in the harmony of social policy.’\(^{39}\) A harmony that meant that political discussions and initiatives would be taken over by scientific expertise: experts on unemployment, on housing, on education, on prostitution. The new social political ideology was not sentimental, it was characterised by ‘the romantics of an engineer’.\(^{40}\)

\(^{37}\) Gunnar Myrdal, ‘Socialpolitikens Dilemma I’, *Spektrum* nr 3 (1932), 1-13; Myrdal, ‘Socialpolitikens dilemma II’, *Spektrum* nr 4 (1932), 13-31. Edited by e.g. Karin Boye and Gunnar Ekelöf, *Spektrum* was an important forum for modernist intellectuals in Sweden during its few years of existence in 1931-33. It published poems by the modernists T.S. Eliot, Elmer Diktonius and Harry Martinson, articles on functionalistic architecture by and on Paul Henningsen and Alvar Aalto, articles on ‘Neue Sachlichkeit in Piano Playing’, on psychoanalysis, as well as a presentation of the philosophy of the Vienna Circle written by G.W. Oseen. Not surprisingly, *Spektrum* also published an article by Hägerström, ‘Om social rättvisa’, *Spektrum* nr 1 (1932), 1-14. In this article Hägerström points to the shared roots of liberalism and socialism in a manner that resembles Myrdal’s argument of later the same year.

\(^{38}\) Myrdal, ‘Socialpolitikens dilemma I’, 4.

\(^{39}\) Ibid, 13.

\(^{40}\) Myrdal, ‘Socialpolitikens dilemma II’, 25.
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Myrdal was part of an international movement including such scholars as John Maynard Keynes and Karl Popper, who sought to establish a place for rational planning and social engineering without falling into Marxist socialism. The core of Myrdal’s vision seems to have been that the harmonious ideology of social policy, social engineering, is what will be left when the metaphysical elements of liberalism and socialism are disposed of. In this way, Myrdal used the anti-metaphysical credo of Hägerström to establish a position which half a century later was characterized as ‘a peculiar union of liberalism and socialism’, one of the features of the Social Democratic Welfare State in Gøsta Esping-Andersen’s famous regime-typology.41

The technology of economics

Value nihilism was undoubtedly an effective weapon for destructive purposes and Myrdal was not alone in using the philosophy of Hägerström as part of a critical argument against ‘ideologies’.42 But in the last chapter of Vetenskap och politik Myrdal admitted that there is ‘wide agreement that economics ought to be ‘practical’’.43 His challenge, therefore, was to find a way to bridge the gulf between economic science and practical political decision-making that did not fall under the axe of his own arguments. Following Weber, Myrdal began by elaborating on the classic ‘ends-means’ scheme, according to which the normative ‘ends’, the value premisses, were to be given from the outside, leaving economic science to concentrate on finding the most efficient ‘means’ of promoting these ends. According to Myrdal, the main shortcoming of this scheme was the establishment of the ‘ends’. It was in trying to find a solution to this very problem that the philosophers and economic scientists had resorted to natural law philosophy or utilitarianism, developing different metaphysical rationalizations such as ‘social harmony’, ‘natural state’, ‘common good’,

42 The most famous example is Herbert Tingsten’s critique of ‘ideologies’ in e.g. Idékritik (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1941).
43 Myrdal, Vetenskap och politik, 191.
‘justice’ and ‘fair competition’. The technology of economics, on the other hand, had to take empiricism seriously, and seek to establish the ‘ends’ on the basis of the actual economic interests of different segments of the population.

Such a study of the politics of economics could claim to be objective, just because it makes no recommendations save those which follow some specified, clearly expressed interest. For the same reason, it could not yield absolutely valid conclusions in the sense of an economically correct conduct as such, except, possibly, in the limited sphere where interests can be shown to be identical.44

But Myrdal acknowledged that there were many problems involved in a scientific exploration of the actual economic interests of people. Not only do the interests of people vary under different circumstances and ‘institutional set-ups’, the greatest difficulty was the fact that ‘[u]nfortunately – or perhaps fortunately – human actions are not solely motivated by economic interests.’45 People also have social and political ideals to which they want society to conform, and therefore, Myrdal argued, the technology of economics should not solely be built upon economic interests, but on social attitudes [ästiktsfält] as well. That is, in order to determine the ‘ends’, the technology of economics had to perform a study of the actual social attitudes, political convictions and moral valuations of individuals and groups of the population. 46

This requirement made the difficulty of determining the ‘ends’ considerably greater. Myrdal refuted the idea of simply asking people because the answers were likely to be ‘stereotyped stock

44  Ibid., 198.
45  Ibid., 199.
46  Myrdal, Vetenskap och politik, 257 in the Swedish edition. In the English translation from 1955 (p 200), the statement is stronger: ‘A technology of economics should not be built upon economic interests, but upon social attitudes.’ One must, however, be cautious with the term ‘social attitude’ as it was part of an American social psychological vocabulary that emerged in the 1930s but which Myrdal did not refer to in the Swedish original from 1930. See Fredrik W. Thue, In Quest of a Democratic Social Order, The Americanization of Norwegian Social Scholarship (Oslo: Doktoravhandlinger forsvart ved Det humanistiska fakultet, Universitetet i Oslo, nr 262), 108 ff.
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phrases which may have little bearing on actual behaviour.”47 On the other hand, it was no use confining oneself to people’s actual behaviour, because in order to be politically significant, i.e. to be able to argue for political change, a technology of economics would have to be able to say something about people’s probable responses to different potential political situations as well. Finally, people often based political and social attitudes upon ‘erroneous conceptions of the real world’, and therefore, a technology of economics would have to be based on the attitudes that these people would have ‘if they knew all the facts’. These problems raised great and complex problems of social psychology. Discussing a paragraph from Weber, Myrdal argued that a correction and reconstruction of people’s value hierarchies could not be done as a deductive logical process: ‘the desire to think of moral valuations as if they were logically coherent is a legacy from the days of the metaphysical systems.’ The connection between people’s valuations in different circumstances is psychological, not logical, and therefore a technology of economics would ultimately have to rely on a modern, psychologically-oriented sociology. However, Myrdal admitted that it was doubtful whether sociology would be able to provide a firm foundation for the technology of economics within the foreseeable future. Instead ‘we shall have to be content for a long time with vague generalisations.’48

The problem of the a priori

The final chapter of Vetenskap och politik constituted Myrdal’s first attempt at establishing a theoretical position for social engineering between science and politics. He combined the Weberian credo of Wertfreiheit with Hägerström’s call for a moral theory ‘not of, but about morality’, but ended up

47 Myrdal, Vetenskap och politik, 200-1. Myrdal refers to ‘American sociologists’ who have proved that the moral and ideological declarations of people regarding the Negro problem tend to have very little to do with their actual conduct in everyday life. On the other hand, he continued, the ideals are not completely without relevance to a technology of economics. Sometimes they represent ‘prevalent ideals to which people fail to conform’. This was an important addition, as it later became one of Myrdal’s central arguments in An American Dilemma.

48 Myrdal, Vetenskap och politik, 201-204.
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waiting for a future scientifically appropriate method for the analysis of the actual values of society. The idea of a technology of economics did not, however, go down well among the readers who often failed to see any substantial difference between Myrdal’s theory and the ends-means scheme employed by economists at least since J. S. Mill. Some reviewers complained that the last chapter of *Vetenskap och politik* amounted to nothing but a reconstruction of every dogma so vehemently criticized in the previous chapters, and that, consequently, the idea of a ‘technology of economics’ was refuted by Myrdal’s own arguments.49 Myrdal was not unaffected by the critique. In *Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift* he tried to explain the ways in which his theory differed from the traditional ends-means scheme, claiming that the critics failed to distinguish between personal political opinions and a projected method for studying these attitudes.50 He emphasized that the critical arguments of *Vetenskap och politik* were directed at different attempts at theorizing and rationalizing the value premisses and thereby concealing them in quasi-scientific rhetoric inspired by natural law philosophy or utilitarianism. By contrast, his own account demanded that the ‘ends’ had to be not only explicitly stated but also based upon a social psychological investigation of the actual valuations of the population.

But it was apparent that Myrdal had spent a lot of time since the publication of *Vetenskap och politik* thinking about his last chapter, realizing that the problems he had raised were far more complicated than he had initially thought. During his stay in the USA in 1929 and 1930, he had encountered American economists of the institutionalist school, and though he was undoubtedly influenced by them, he criticized what he portrayed as their naïve belief in an economic science totally void of valuations and politics. The most significant development of his account during these years was that he recognized the impossibility of restricting the evaluative element to the ‘ends’ level. Already in his 1931 ‘Kring den praktiska nationalekonomiens problematik’ [On the problems of a practical economics], Myrdal acknowledged that ‘values are attached

49 Åkerman, ‘Ekonomisk vetenskap’, 121 and 137. A similar point was raised by Sven Brisman in *Göteborgs Handelstidning*, 5.12.1930.
50 Myrdal and Åkerman, ‘Replikskifte’, 442.
not only to ‘ends’ but also to ‘means’ and that this complicates things considerably as ‘the reservations and hypotheses must be introduced at each stage of the argument’.\(^5\) In other words, Myrdal’s concern was that there would be an almost infinite number of alternative sequences that had to be examined. The task of the economic scientist would be insurmountable unless some kind of \textit{a priori} elimination of the large majority of sequences preceded the ‘ends-means’ scheme. And this elimination unavoidably involved valuation. Hence, Myrdal argued, valuations were necessarily present, not only at the ‘ends’ level and the ‘means’ level, but already when the social scientist limits the field of inquiry, when he chooses the field of investigation.

This, indeed, is the crux of all science: we can never get away from the \textit{a priori}. The large, unordered mass of facts does not fall into order by itself. Without a principle of organization scientific observation is impossible. Naïve empiricists, particularly common amongst American institutionalists, attempt the impossible: to gaze at reality without pre-conceptions, hoping that things will fall into place, and thus give rise to scientific laws.\(^5\)

The fact that valuations inevitably influence the scientist already at the stage when the research task is formulated made the problem of determining the value premisses more pressing and more difficult. It was no longer possible to simply isolate the value premisses as ‘ends’ separate from ‘means’; rather, it was necessary to elaborate on the ‘\textit{total} ideological attitude’ that moulded the particular social scientific programme. Here Myrdal seemed to draw (without actual references) on both

\(^5\) Gunnar Myrdal, ‘Kring den praktiska nationalekonomiens problematik’, \textit{Ekonomisk Tidskrift} vol. 33 (1931), 41-81. The latter part of this article was translated to German by Mackenroth and published as ‘Das Zweck-Mittel-Denken in der Nationalökonomie’ in \textit{Zeitschrift für Nationalökonomie}, vol. IV, nr 3 (1933). However, my references are, unless otherwise stated, to Paul Streeter’s English translation ‘Ends and Means in Political Economy’, in Myrdal, \textit{Value in Social theory}, 206-230. On this particular occasion to the pages 220-221.

\(^5\) Myrdal, ‘Kring den praktiska’, 228. In a footnote to this particular paragraph, Myrdal disputed the self-proclaimed political neutrality and objectivity of the American institutionalist school and called for an examination of ‘the political ideology that underlies American institutionalism’. Correspondingly, one of the aims of this paper is to examine the political ambitions of Myrdal’s own struggle for objectivity and value freedom.
modern American sociology and Weber by appealing for a social-psychological penetration of the political attitudes and valuations of different groups 'in the same way that “personality” or “character” are penetrated in individual psychology.' Myrdal admitted that the procedure had to be 'largely intuitive' and that it 'resembles the empathy of a poet and his identification with a group.' Relishing his Hägerströmian premises, he even conceded that this was not, strictly speaking, to be rendered as science, because the insights could not be reduced to 'true' and ‘false’. But still, he emphasized, as far as possible, practical political economy 'must be based upon modern sociological and psychological studies of attitudes, opinions, and ideologies.'

A few years later, in his 1935 inaugural lecture ‘Den förändrade världsbilden inom nationalekonomin’ [The changed world-view within political economy] as Professor of Economics in Stockholm, Myrdal developed his theory further, stressing the conventional and contingent nature of the value premisses. He made a distinction between a value naïve and a value critical approach towards the inevitable a priori. While the naïve approach treated the value premisses as sacred, self-evident and natural, the critical approach acknowledged the fact that the selection of the value premisses necessarily involved a choice. Indeed, he argued, the value critical approach made it possible and fruitful to work with alternative value premisses, something that would be unthinkable if one regards the value premisses absolutely true.

In a review of the inaugural lecture, published in the very first issue of the Swedish philosophical journal Theoria in 1935, the philosopher Gunnar Aspelin associated Myrdal’s value-critical approach with ‘a conventionalist line of thought current in many other scientific fields, e.g. in mathematics, where it has been raised by the development of non-Euclidian geometry.’ Aspelin figured that Myrdal’s central idea was that the values served as conventionally chosen axioms, which

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formed the basis upon which a social scientific programme was constructed. Such conventionalism has been characterized by e.g. Leszek Kolakowski as one of the basic features of positivist philosophy, and taking Aspelin’s argument further, the methodological conventionalism of Myrdal resembles a Poincaréan line of thought common among the contemporaneous logical positivists, given its most succinct expression in Rudolf Carnap’s ‘principle of tolerance’. According to Carnap, a logical system or ‘language’ has to be based upon ultimate axioms that have to be chosen as conventions or definitions (the so called analytic statements). Therefore, in principle, everyone is free to build his own logical system, but if he wishes to discuss it, he must ‘give syntactical rules instead of philosophical arguments.’ Similarly Myrdal claimed that social science had to be construed on the basis of a set of value premisses, which cannot be proven to be true by means of philosophical arguments, but rather, have to be chosen as conventions.

But the parallel between Carnap and Myrdal works only at the theoretical level where the conventional nature of the axioms is stated. As to giving a positive account of the actual choice of the axioms, Carnap and Myrdal diverged. Myrdal stressed that the conventional nature of the value premisses must not lead to arbitrariness, that the value premisses should represent valuations and interests of the population, enlightened and examined [genomlyst] by a sociological and scientific-critical analysis. Carnap on the other hand, did little but hint at ‘pragmatic considerations’ concerning the usefulness of a particular logical system, and was never particularly interested in any form of empirical investigations of the actual uses of language.

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59 Instead, such an ‘empirical semantics’ was developed by Arne Næss and his Oslo school. See Rudolf Carnap, ‘Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology’, in Rudolf Carnap, *Meaning and Necessity – a Study in Semantics and Modal Logic* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956 [1947]), 205-221; Arne Næss, ‘Truth as conceived by those who are not professional philosophers’ (Skrifter utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo, II. Historisk-Filosofisk Klasse, 1938).
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Objectivity and politics

It has been objected by for instance the Swedish philosopher Göran Hermerén that the ‘value premiss theory’ of Myrdal was based on the assumption that biases, i.e. the subjective valuations and prejudices of the scientist himself, are automatically eliminated through the explicit introduction of a set of external valuations. This assumption is certainly debatable and it is doubtful whether Myrdal actually solved the problem of objectivity. On the other hand, it is equally doubtful whether the problem of objectivity was his main concern at this point. Rather, by addressing the problem of the a priori, i.e. the inevitable influence of valuations, he was trying to justify his attempt at bridging the gap between science and politics, between ‘is’ and ‘ought’. In other words, he was not primarily interested in eradicating values from science, but in making social science practical. Accordingly, Myrdal claimed that a successful implementation of ‘value relativism’ in economics would not imply a divorce of science and politics.

On the contrary, it would mean that science is incorporated into politics, the two forming a more intimate union than J. S. Mill and his disciples ever thought possible. The political attitudes would become alternative and simultaneous premisses for science, without having previously been put through the workshop of objectivist theory. The classics would probably have found the new practical political economy – for which we hope – too ‘political’ rather than the opposite. The paradox lies in the fact that practical political economy can become

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60 Hermerén, Värdering och objektivitet, 212-217. Neither is the problem solved, Hermerén continues, by an explicit declaration of the subjective evaluative standpoint of the scientist (as indicated later on by both Alva and Gunnar Myrdal) because there is no guarantee that such a description is reliable. ‘It is often easier to deceive yourself than others’, Hermerén claims, addressing the possibility of subconsciously concealed valuations and prejudices which nevertheless influence the scientist.

61 I do not believe that by using the term ‘value relativism’ (or ‘value subjectivism’ in the Swedish original) Myrdal intended to suggest that values indeed can be true or false, even if only in a relative (or subjective) manner. This was written in 1931, at a time when the term ‘value nihilism’ was not yet the established name for Hägerström’s theory.
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objective only through ascertaining the political will without
disguise, in all its important manifestations, and through fit-
ting these directly into scientific analysis as its alternative,
simultaneously present, value premisses.62

As there was no way for social science to exclude valuations,
Myrdal argued, objectivity could only be attained by embrac-
ing the valuations and introducing them as contingent and
conventional political premisses within the theory. Some Weber
scholars have argued that Weber’s call for Wertfreiheit should
be interpreted as a defence of an autonomous and science-free
sphere of politics at least as much as a defence of a value-free
science.63 This was undoubtedly Myrdal’s ambition as well.
The value theory of Hägerström enabled Myrdal to make a
categorical distinction between that which can be true or false,
and that which is a matter of choice or personal opinion. While
his main argument in Vetenskap och politik had been that the
liberals confused the spheres of science and politics, Myrdal’s
positive programme asserted that there was no other way of
respecting the gulf between science and politics, fact and value,
than by being explicitly political.

The main challenge for Myrdal, however, remained the
elaboration of a method of determining the value premisses.
According to Myrdal, ‘the history of science provides sufficient
evidence that we cannot rely upon the ‘natural intuition’ of the
social scientist’.64 But the faith in a future socio-psychological
science voiced in Vetenskap och politik had faded and Myrdal
did not seem particularly satisfied with any of his method-
ological efforts in the following years. During their stay in the
USA in the late 1930s, the Myrdals were fascinated with the
opinion poll apparatus of Gallup and Ropers. Alva Myrdal
wrote enthusiastic articles in Tiden, and in their co-authored
Kontakt med Amerika (1941) they hailed ‘this modern form of
referendum’ claiming that it some day might be ‘just as natural

63 H.H. Bruun, Science, Values and Politics in Max Weber’s Methodology
(Copenhagen:Munksgaard, 1972); Kari Palonen, ‘Max Weber’s
Reconceptualisation of Freedom’, Political Theory vol. 27 (1999), 523-544, 525;
Palonen, Das ’Webersche Moment’ – zur Kontingenz des Politischen
64 Myrdal, ‘Kring den praktiska’, 226.
for a democratic nation to measure public opinions, as it is to count the number of poultry.\textsuperscript{65}

An American Dilemma

It was, however, not until \textit{An American Dilemma – the Negro Problem and Modern Democracy} in 1944 that Myrdal returned more extensively to the methodological problem of value premises in social science. The thousand-page treatise was followed by two appendices in which Myrdal discussed his theory of value. He echoed \textit{Vetenskap och politik} by contrasting his own theory with other studies (by Willliam Graham Sumner, Robert E. Park and William F. Ogburn) that he found biased on account of deducing ‘ought’ from ‘is’. In a familiar manner Myrdal traced the roots of this mistake to ‘the philosophies of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries’ in general, and to the attempts to base moral and political systems on ‘the nature of things’ (natural law philosophy) or ‘sensations’ (utilitarianism) in particular.\textsuperscript{66}

Nevertheless, Myrdal praised American social science for its long tradition of a healthy trust in ‘hard facts’ and the inclination to stress empirical ‘fact-finding’; it had been built on the model of the natural sciences and not on ‘philosophical system building’. But unfortunately this attitude had resulted in a naïve belief in a ‘disinterested social science’, a notion that he deemed as ‘pure nonsense’.\textsuperscript{67} The only way to escape biases, he argued, was for social engineering to work with explicit value premises.\textsuperscript{68} But the main challenge remained: how should these value premises be determined? He did not support the solution presented by, for instance, his personal friend Alf Ross,

\textsuperscript{65} Tiden, vol. 33 (1941:5) and vol. 34 (1942:7); Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, \textit{Kontakt med Amerika} (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1941), 75-82.

\textsuperscript{66} Myrdal, \textit{An American Dilemma – the Negro Problem and Modern Democracy} (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944), 1046. However, as noted by Carl Marklund in his contribution to this volume, the appendix of Myrdal reiterated many insights of recent American social science without actually referring to them. The same could also be said of Myrdal’s adoption of ideas from e.g. Hägerström, Weber and Alf Ross.

\textsuperscript{67} Myrdal, \textit{An American Dilemma}, 1064.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 1043-44.
the Danish legal scholar, who claimed that social engineers (or legal functionaries) should act merely as ‘rational technicians’, merely concentrating on an implementation of the valuations given by elected politicians. After all, Myrdal argued, social scientists are more familiar with the social problems than both the general public and the politicians, and therefore the social scientists themselves have to be allowed to direct their investigations by choosing the relevant value premisses. Moreover, while political decisions have to be made here and now, the democratic and bureaucratic process is often unduly time-consuming: much misery would be avoided if social engineers were less cautious in drawing practical conclusions from their research.

But even if Myrdal allowed the social scientist himself to choose the value premisses of his study to a larger extent than previously, he still stressed that this must not lead to arbitrariness. In fact, he compiled a detailed list of requirements that the value premisses had to satisfy. According to Myrdal, the value premisses had to be (a) explicitly stated and not hidden as tacit assumptions; (b) as specific and concretized as possible; (c) purposively selected; (d) of a hypothetical character (i.e. not a priori or self evident); (e) alternative (i.e. the social scientist should work with alternative sets of value premisses); (f) relevant (i.e. values actually supported by people) and (g) significant (i.e. values actually supported by a substantial number, or by politically powerful groups of the population); (h) feasible (i.e. possible to realize); and (i) mutually consistent. Myrdal admitted that his list represented an ‘ideal’ that was often difficult to attain. In this particular study of the American Negro problem it had been impossible, and therefore, he had chosen to adopt one single set of values as ‘an instrumental norm’, while other significant values were introduced at a later stage. But even if one particular set of value premisses was given a strategically favourable position, it did not constitute a methodological bias, because ‘the direction of research has been

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70 Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 1044.
71 Ibid., 1059-60.
determined under conscious control and by help of explicit value premises.’ 72

The methodological appendices were not added to An American Dilemma by chance; the value theory formed an essential part of the key argument of his treatise, that the segregation politics of the USA violated the very basic values of the nation, the ‘American Creed’. Accordingly, Myrdal devoted the first chapter of his book to an exploration of American ideals and to establishing his ‘instrumental norm’. Characterizing the American Creed, he conducted an eclectic cultural analysis, which arguably was quite remote from the empirical sociopsychological method he hoped for in Vetenskap och politik. Instead, he derived the principles of the American Creed from the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. He traced the origins of the American Creed to the philosophy of the Enlightenment, to a humanistic liberalism and a belief in the ‘self-evident’ truth of liberty and equality; to Christianity, particularly the democratic form it took in the protestant sects split off from the Anglican Church; and to the respect for law and order inherited from English law.73 Myrdal also relied on American fiction, and historical, sociological and philosophical literature, as well as his own observations and experiences travelling around the country, particularly in the South. He argued that the American Creed had been elaborated and discussed throughout the history of the USA, and that its position was so strong that even the most underprivileged groups, such as the Negroes themselves, actually believed that the USA was the land of opportunity, cradle of liberty and home of democracy.74 And so Myrdal arrived at the central argument of his study.

72 Ibid., 1061-63. Myrdal claimed that the existing studies of public opinion regarding the Negro question were scarce and unreliable. He also emphasized the difficulty of isolating the valuations in the Negro question from valuations in other questions. Furthermore, as people’s valuations are bound up with their beliefs, it is ‘a difficult undertaking’ to speculate on what the valuations would be if they were juxtaposed with correct knowledge.

73 Ibid., chapter 1.

74 Ibid., 4. ‘These principles of social ethics have been hammered into easily remembered formulas. All means of intellectual communication are utilized to stamp them, into everybody’s mind. The schools teach them, the churches preach them the courts pronounce their judicial decisions in these terms.’
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From the point of the American Creed the status accorded the Negro in America represents nothing more and nothing less than a century long lag of public morals. In principle the Negro problem was settled long ago; in practice the solution is not effectuated.75

The Negro problem of the USA, Myrdal argued, was essentially the white man’s problem, a dilemma he faced as the social reality and his own practical conduct did not live up to the ideals he cherished. The only way out of this dilemma, he concluded, was for the USA to live up to its Creed and end the segregation. Not only should the Negroes receive full civil rights, the Federal Government should also seek to improve their social and economic conditions through public efforts of social engineering. In a hopeful manner, Myrdal claimed that American social scientists no longer believe in a ‘disinterested social science’, as the experiences of the New Deal and the challenges of the Second World War had made them practically oriented and convinced that social problems could be solved. ‘[W]e have today in social science a greater trust in the improvability of man and society than we have ever had since the Enlightenment.’76

Value nihilism and the set of nationally shared valuations

The method adopted in An American Dilemma was, of course, essentially a modified version of the last chapter of Vetenskap och politik. The basic idea was the same: in order to be able to give normative policy recommendations without violating the demarcation between ‘is’ and ‘ought’, explicit value premisses were required. Sven Eliaesson has drawn attention to the fact that the value premiss theory of Myrdal bears a strong resemblance to Weber’s idea of Wertbeziehung [value-directedness]. Following the Neo-Kantian Heinrich Rickert, Weber emphasised the need for top-values in order to conduct an instrumental means-end analysis, and therefore, Eliaeson has good evidence in support of his claim that An American Dilemma ‘is

75 Ibid., 24.
76 Ibid., 1023-24.
very probably the most important and most consistent application of the methodological device of Weber.\textsuperscript{77}

Eliaeson raises a relevant point; Weber was undoubtedly an important source of inspiration for Myrdal. But this fact does not necessarily mean that Myrdal abandoned the Hägerströmian value theory. Rather, in the same way that Eliaeson has argued that \textit{An American Dilemma} is an application of Weber, Myrdal’s book can also be seen as a fascinating attempt to confront a challenge that followed from the non-cognitive theory, but which the philosophers often ignored: that of explicating the presupposed set of shared values. One standard objection to a non-cognitive moral theory, such as Hägerström’s value nihilism, is that it undermines the motive for moral argumentation. If truth and falsity cannot be ascertained moral reasoning is futile, because there is effectively no way by which you can be overturned by rational arguments. The usual reply is that moral disagreements, when carefully analysed, turn out to be disagreements on fact rather than disagreements on value. That is, when two persons disagree on the moral nature of a particular case, they do not disagree as to their basic moral convictions, but rather in their conceptions of the motives, consequences or circumstances of the particular case.\textsuperscript{78} Indeed, if they did not agree on the basic values, there would be no way for them to reach an agreement by means of argument. If they did not share a set of common basic values, they could hardly understand each other, as it would seem as if they were speaking in different languages (or employing different sets of logical axioms, if we return to the problem of the \textit{a priori} discussed above). But in specifying these shared values, or defining the extension of the cultural community,

\textsuperscript{77} Eliaeson, \textit{Max Weber’s Methodologies}, 118. However, Eliaeson also stresses that Myrdal’s version was a more ‘political’ one, as it relied to a lesser extent than Weber ‘on university professors or charismatic leaders as interpreters or innovators of values to ‘jump on’’. Eliaeson, ‘Axel Hägerström and modern social thought’, \textit{Nordeuropaforum}, 26.

\textsuperscript{78} See e.g. Ayer, \textit{Language, Truth and Logic}, 165-167.
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the philosophers have been remarkably silent. 79 *An American Dilemma* was Myrdal’s ambitious attempt to take the bull by the horns.

In his book on ‘the happy philosophy’ of Swedish twentieth-century intellectuals, Sigurdson emphasizes the significance of the idea of a set of shared valuations among the followers of Hägerström, i.e. Herbert Tingsten, Ingemar Hedenius and Alva and Gunnar Myrdal. 80 Already Hägerström himself argued that an ‘ought’ is meaningful only if the person who utters it and the person to whom the ‘ought’ is directed share ‘the same evaluative principle’, and that the degree of unity in valuations is a measure of the strength of a society. 81 Similarly, in his introduction to *An American Dilemma*, Myrdal emphasized the importance of a set of shared valuations.

The cultural unity of the nation consists, however, in the fact that *most Americans have most valuations in common*, though they are arranged differently in the sphere of valuations of different individuals and groups and bear different intensity coefficients. This cultural unity is the indispensable basis for discussion between individuals and groups. It is the floor upon which the democratic process goes on. 82

Of course, this idea of a set of shared ‘national’ valuations can be related to the nationalistic turn of the labour movement in the Nordic countries in the 1930s, most expressively visible in the people’s home [Folkhem] rhetoric of the Swedish Prime Minister Per Albin Hansson. 83 The Social Democratic Party

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79 It seems as if the ultimate axioms remain beyond reach. ‘Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man zweigen’ was Wittgenstein’s famous final paragraph of *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, which has been interpreted as a comment on the impossibility of addressing the ultimate principles of both ethics and language/logic.


82 Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, xlivii. The italics are Myrdal’s.

83 The Folkhem-rhetoric of Hansson was corresponded by the slogan ‘Danmark for Folket’ [Denmark for the people] proposed by the Danish Social Democrats in 1934 and the slogan ‘Hele folket i arbeid’ [The whole people at work] of the Norwegian Labour party in 1933.
which Alva and Gunnar Myrdal joined in 1931 no longer wished to represent only the working classes, but sought rather to represent the whole of the nation, ‘the people’. Conversely, it is interesting to note that the critics of social engineering and a planned economy also noted the premiss of a set of shared valuations. In his famous and highly influential *Road to Serfdom* (1944) Hayek claimed that a planned economy requires a scale that rates and ranks the different needs of the population. Hayek, no less than Myrdal, rejected the idea of objective values. Instead, the political direction of social engineering had to be established on the basis of the actual valuations of the population. Indeed, ‘socialists everywhere were the first to recognize that the task they had set themselves required the general acceptance of a common *Weltanschauung*, of a definite set of values’. But where Myrdal argued that agreement is often the case and that a community of shared values could be established as an empirical fact, Hayek insisted that such an agreement was impossible to reach, at least by democratic means alone. Eventually, Hayek claimed, the social engineers would start to employ their own subjective valuations, and then we are already far down the road to serfdom. Myrdal, on the other hand, would have insisted that the value premisses were not his personal opinions, but rather, that they were based on actual values relevant and significant in the society in question.

**American, Swedish or universal modernization values?**

Myrdal would have found it difficult to argue, as he did with *Vetenskap och politik*, that *An American Dilemma* was a non-political book. Praised as it was among liberal intellectuals, criticized by Marxists, and largely ignored by conservative Southerners, the reception generally reflected the attitude of the reviewer towards the political message of the book. The core argument, that the racial segregation violated the democratic valuations of the USA, had a certain persuasive power at

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a time when the political leaders of that country were legitimizing involvement in the Second World War in terms of a struggle between democratic and fascist values. But as Walter Jackson correctly points out in his book *Gunnar Myrdal and America’s Conscience*, it is rather striking how Myrdal consequently ignored both the inherent conflicts within the American Creed (for example, between the values of liberty and equality) and the ways in which the American Creed could be interpreted and used to promote political ideals distant from social engineering, not least the laissez faire liberalism so vehemently opposed by Myrdal himself. In fact, according to Jackson, the American Creed as construed by Myrdal reflected to a remarkable extent ‘the principles to which Myrdal had been devoted as a Swedish Social Democratic policy maker.’

Jackson does raise a relevant objection, even if he probably underestimates the American influence on Nordic social democracy in the 1930s and on Myrdal in particular. Unfortunately however, Myrdal never endeavoured an exposition of a Swedish Creed corresponding to his analysis of the American society. There are only some vague hints in a couple of public commission inquiries [*Statens offentliga utredningar*] and in the controversial but influential *Kris i befolkningsfrågan* (1934). But a detailed exploration of the value premisses that directed the programme of social engineering in Sweden, comparable to that of the first chapter of *An American Dilemma*, is not to be found in Gunnar Myrdal’s writings. For such a specification we have to turn to his wife Alva Myrdal and her book *Nation and Family* (1941), originally intended as an English reworking of *Kris i befolkningsfrågan* for the American public, written in the USA at the same time as Gunnar Myrdal was working on *An American Dilemma*.

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86 Ibid, 190-191.
88 The preface of *An American Dilemma* is dated in Stockholm, October, 1942, and according to Gunnar Myrdal himself, he left the manuscript to be completed by his assistants in September 1942. See Gunnar Myrdal, *Historien om An American Dilemma* (Stockholm: SNS förlag, 1987), 1.
On the very first page of the book, Alva Myrdal stated that the main difficulty of a ‘constructive social engineering is…the need of value premises to supplement knowledge of facts.’ To an American public Alva Myrdal dared to claim that the collaboration between social science and politics had been closer in Scandinavia than in other countries. This was, however, in no way threatening the objectivity of science or the autonomy of politics. In fact, referring to Gunnar Myrdal’s work, she claimed that the distinction between theory and practice was ‘clearer’ in Scandinavia than elsewhere. Both politicians and social scientists recognized that rational practical action needed not only knowledge of facts, but also explicit value premisses. The ‘general value milieu’ in Sweden was characterised by her as involving a positive valuation of freedom for the individual, economic equality, a high standard of living, and also of children, family and marriage. In Sweden, she claimed, the average citizen has a legalistic bent of mind, and ‘a rather strong belief in the usefulness of social control exercised through collective agencies, such as the state, the municipalities, and the large civic organisations.’ She emphasised that there was nothing sacred about these values; some individuals or nations would probably replace them with others. The leaders of totalitarian countries would not subscribe to ‘personal freedom’, and ardent supporters of laissez faire would deeply distrust the ‘Swedish pragmatic kind of variegated interventionism’.

What are we to make out of these analyses? Even if Gunnar Myrdal made an interesting characterization of the paradoxical ‘cultural heterogeneity and ideological homogeneity’ of the American nation, one can certainly object that he was exceedingly optimistic and generalizing. And even if one might (with some hesitation) agree with Alva Myrdal that ‘Sweden has had no problems with minorities’, it is considerably more

90 Ibid., 100-101.
91 Ibid., 103.
92 Myrdal, An American Dilemma, 3.
93 Myrdal, Nation and Family, 11-12. According to Alva Myrdal, there has never been an urge either to totally assimilate or keep the minority groups (Lapps, Finns and Jews) out of the Swedish community.
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difficult to accept the assumption of an ideological harmony in Sweden in the 1930s. Furthermore, as Jackson observed, even if the Scandinavian Creed seemed to stress social control exercised by the state to a higher degree, the extent to which it resembled the American Creed was indeed quite remarkable.

The high degree of overlap between Swedish and American values must, of course, be understood in the light of the Second World War and what the Myrdals perceived as a fight between democracy and totalitarianism. In *Varning för fredsoptimism* (1944) Gunnar Myrdal stressed that Swedish people should realize that they were not alone with their faith in democratic values.\(^9^4\) Similarly, one of the main aims of their co-authored *Kontakt med Amerika* (1941) was to contribute to the moral armament of Sweden by referring to ‘America’ as a mighty ally in the defence of democracy. Myrdal believed that it was the task of Sweden to be the America of the Nordic countries, acting as a bastion of democracy during the crisis, and taking economic and cultural responsibility for the reconstruction after the war.

    It is America and it is the Nordic countries who quickly must take responsibility for the old dream of peace, freedom, reason, good will, justice and order for all peoples – for humanity.\(^9^5\)

Thus, the set of shared values, constitutive of both the USA and Scandinavia, was not solely American and Nordic; rather, in this time of crisis, it served as an ideal for the whole of humanity. Accordingly, in *An American Dilemma*, Myrdal admitted that the American Creed did not confine itself to the USA.

    But this Creed is, of course, no American monopoly. With minor variations, some of which, however, are not without importance, the American Creed is the common democratic creed. ‘American ideals’ are just humane ideals as they have matured in our common Western civilisation upon the foundation of Christianity and pre-Christian legalism and under the influence of the economic, scientific, and political development


\(^9^5\) Myrdal and Myrdal, *Kontakt med Amerika*, 373.
The philosophy of social engineering

There can hardly be any doubt that a shift had taken place in Myrdal’s position between 1930 and 1944. The critical programme of Vetenskap och politik had been replaced by a positive programme of social engineering according to which a set of explicit values was introduced to determine the political direction of the reforms. I have argued that Myrdal never dismissed the Hägerströmian value theory, but that his philosophy of social engineering continued to be conditioned by the problems raised by ‘value nihilism’. In 1930, Myrdal used Hägerström as a critical argument against the confusion of ‘is’ and ‘ought’. Later, ‘value nihilism’ was used to highlight the conventional nature of the political axioms within the social scientific programme. These values were not to be considered as objective, sacred or even ‘true’; rather, they were

96 Myrdal, An American Dilemma, 25.
97 Gunnar Myrdal, Asian Drama – An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations (New York: Pantheon, 1968), vol. 1, 49-125, 55. In a footnote to the next page (56) Myrdal explicitly admitted that the modernization ideals were supported by the writer himself. However, he also emphasized that these ideals were not chosen on personal grounds, but because of their ‘relevance and significance’ in South Asia. Now ‘significance’ was by Myrdal solely interpreted as ‘values supported by politically important groups’ – the proportion of the population that supported them was not as relevant as it was in An American Dilemma, 1060.
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to be determined on the basis of ideals relevant and significant in the studied society. This idea was realized in An American Dilemma (1944).

Kettunen has argued that in order to understand Myrdal as ‘an actor of modernity and modernization’ it is important to acknowledge the function of the value premisses as criteria for an immanent critique of society.\(^98\) The selected value premisses represented the best normative standards of the society itself, that is, standards that were directed at modernization; only in this way could they serve as instruments for social change and reform. But in order to preserve the immanent character of the criticism, Myrdal had to find a way to anchor these ideals in the society under study. This remained his main challenge.

The Norwegian historian and political scientist Rune Slagstad has argued that it was positivism rather than socialism that was the main ideological commitment of the ‘labour party state’. Even if the reform project was driven by an ethical search for justice this normative ideal could not be theorized within the horizon of the governing positivism.\(^99\) Undoubtedly, one of the main puzzles of Myrdal was to find a way to unite the non-cognitive value theory of Hägerström with his Enlightenment ideals and social democratic political conviction. There is, of course, nothing in a commitment to Hägerström’s value theory to prohibit a strong personal moral and political opinion; Sigurdson has aptly suggested that Myrdal, while supporting the non-cognitive theory as a meta-ethical position, nevertheless cherished the values of the Enlightenment as a normative standpoint.\(^100\) However, the main problem of Myrdal’s account, given his own premisses, was precisely the attempts at ‘theorizing’ the value premisses as nationally and culturally, but ultimately almost universally accepted. The difficulty Myrdal perpetually returned to was the elaboration of a way of offering evidence in support of these claims. However conventional and non-cognitive logically and epistemologically, the presumed set of shared values remained

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\(^99\) Slagstad, ‘Shifting Knowledge Regimes’, 78-80; Slagstad, De nasjonale strateger, 433.
\(^100\) Sigurdson, Den lyckliga filosofin, 136.
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only slightly less universal than the values of the metaphysical systems Myrdal had been criticizing since 1930.\textsuperscript{101} 

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