

# Response to Sven Hellroth's review of Walter A. Jackson's *Alva and Gunnar Myrdal in Sweden and America*

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I am responding to the review of Walter A. Jackson, *Alva and Gunnar Myrdal in Sweden and America: Unsparing Honesty* (New York: Routledge, 2021), which appeared in *Historisk tidskrift* 142:3 (2022) pp. 498–501. Unfortunately, Sven Hellroth's review does not provide an accurate summary of what the book contributes to our understanding of the Myrdals. Since Jackson died before the manuscript was complete and I edited the work for publication, I am the only person in a position to respond as the author might have done.

The review missed two main points. First, the book is based on previously unknown primary sources, particularly Alva's private writings from 1944, and on a new interpretation of the Myrdals' extensive correspondence. Walter Jackson would be especially distressed that the reviewer treats Yvonne Hirdman's work as an accurate representation of their relationship. Scrutinizing the original, hastily scribbled letters that Alva and Gunnar exchanged before their marriage, he transcribed crucial passages differently than Hirdman did in *De blå kuverten* (2003). Jackson found no evidence for Hirdman's contention that Gunnar and Alva had a sadomasochistic sexual relationship, offering different readings of the passages she cites, and on page 211 he explicitly rejects the interpretation Hirdman offers in *Det tänkande hjärtat* (2006).

The main theme of the first section of the book, which Hellroth does not discuss, is that both Alva and Gunnar came from troubled families and brought confused feelings and self-contradictory ideas to the intimate relationship they formed in late adolescence and early adulthood.

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When Gunnar's manic depression led him to demand more from Alva than anyone could offer, Alva withdrew slightly to protect her autonomy. But they committed themselves to "unsparing honesty" in their relationship and consciously struggled to act as equal companions in life and work, which became increasingly fused. The Myrdals' focus on the social conditions and policies required for women to be full participants in the labor force and the polity grew out of their own experiences in confronting these dilemmas, which had no purely personal solutions.

Second, by overlooking the Myrdals' critique of conventional gender relations, this review entirely misses the main point of the book: that through their intense personal exchanges and shared social-scientific analyses, Alva and Gunnar developed an understanding of patriarchy that integrates race and gender (or, as they called it, sex) and explains white men's power over white women and women and men of color. The difference between this dialectical model of oppression and emancipation and Hirdman's conception of a singular gender system that renders women always already victims and operates independently of race and class is highly significant. Jackson was an intellectual historian, and his argument that the Myrdals developed this model is a major contribution to the transnational genealogy of intersectional feminist theory. Indeed, African Americans' thinking about equality was infused into Swedish social thought much earlier than has previously been recognized.

In the early 1940s, while Gunnar was probing the contradictions between white Americans' ideology of equality and their practice of racial segregation, Alva was exploring the familial, economic, and political forces that kept women in subordinate positions and confined them to unpaid housework and segregated, low-paid wage labor. In their letters, and then in a neglected appendix to *An American Dilemma*, the Myrdals brought these two forms of inequality together in a model of patriarchy that was resistant to change but was being called into question by the conditions of modern life, which demanded the full development of the talents of all women and men, regardless of race, and their collective contributions to the defense and extension of democratic society.

I hope that Swedish historians will read Walter Jackson's *Alva and Gunnar Myrdal in Sweden and America, 1898–1945: Unsparing Honesty*, with the careful attention it deserves and continue to debate the ideas and legacy of these influential social scientists and policy makers.