Alva Myrdal and the transformation of Sweden in the 1930s
Urban children, family politics and gender equality
by
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Sweden as country in the 1930s went from being underdeveloped, authoritarian and agricultural to becoming a modern, democratic and industrial country with broad welfare. The most famous people behind the Swedish welfare state are the couple Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, intellectuals, scholars and politicians. In 1934 Alva and Gunnar Myrdal wrote their manifesto for the transformation of agricultural Sweden into a modern nation, ‘Crisis in the Population Question’ (in Swedish). During the next few years there was a feverish governmental investigation activity in which the couple was involved. It was followed by reforms. In ‘Nation and family’ (1941), written from a distance in United States of America, Alva Myrdal evaluates the investigations, the reforms and some of their immediate results. In the book at focus in this paper it is still a manifesto text, Alva Myrdal’s own ‘Urban Children: A book about their upbringing in big size nurseries’ (1935, ‘Stadsbarn: En bok om deras uppfostran i storbarnkammare’). It treats a specialty of the Swedish welfare state, what could be called a children’s perspective and the transformative importance of this on gender relations.

The aim of this paper is to present an important aspect of the transformation of Sweden into a welfare state, its children’s perspective, developed by intellectuals such as Ellen Key¹ and in the 1930s especially by the protagonist of this paper, the social scientist and politician Alva Myrdal.

¹ Ellen Key, The Century of the Child (Barnets århundrade), Stockholm, Bonniers, 1900, in English 1909. This book is Key's most well-known oeuvre internationally and in it she advocates the human rights of the child in a new way.
Myrdal. The latter has written two famous classics, namely *Crisis in the Population Question* (1934, in Swedish with Gunnar Myrdal) and *Nation and Family* (1941). For anyone taking on himself an endeavor not only to understand transformation but also to understand its possibilities may ask himself: How did the Swedish welfare state in the 1930s evolve and how did the social scientists at that time describe the situation and its ways out?

Alva Myrdal is as said the author together with Gunnar Myrdal of the manifesto of the Swedish welfare state, *Crisis in the Population Question* (1934), the most sold social scientific book in Sweden in the twentieth century, still though not translated into English (Ekerwald 2001). She was only 32 years old when the Crisis book was published. She was at that time in the middle of bringing up children, her three children, born in 1927, 1936 and 1938. 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 the Swedish ambassador to India in 1955, a post she upheld to 1961 and she was Sweden’s delegate to the Geneva Disarmament Conference 1962-1973, a work which was one of the main reasons for being 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 woman government ministers in Sweden. Overall concerning her work in Sweden, she has had a great influence on how the Swedish welfare state turned out to be. Since the international scientific centenary conference of her birth, “Alva Myrdal’s Questions to Our Time” (Uppsala, Sweden 2002), there has been a growing interest not only in her effect on politics but also in her scholarly work itself.

This paper has her oeuvre *Urban Children* at its focus. “Urban Children” has the subtitle “A book on their education in big size nurseries” (“Stadsbarn: En bok om deras uppfostran i storbarnkammare”, 1935) and it is published just a year after the above mentioned famous Crisis book, it is written only by Alva Myrdal, not together with her husband as the Crisis book, and it is written before the takeoff of the Swedish welfare state. It is Alva Myrdal's first book written on her own. The first part of the paper is devoted to Urban Children and the second part is an illuminating comparison with the analysis of an American historian of today, Allan Carlson.

*Transformation and a children's perspective*

A presupposition of this paper is the following. How we develop a society is something political. In the perspectives on development there are gender differences. Men and women have by tradition looked differently at social development. During the whole time of written
history the main political decisions have been taken by men and societies have been planned, developed and destroyed by elites consisting mainly by men. Not until the 20th century were there women on a larger scale engaged in planning, developing and also destroying societies. How we look at societal development is partly something derived from a general perspective dominating the society and this general perspective does have a strongly masculine bias. This perspective can be sketched in some of its many variations, the neo-liberal with its stress on individual freedom, market freedom and inequality, the social democratic with its stress on the welfare state, regulation and equality and the Soviet Marxist with its stress on development of heavy industry, military defense and production of food and housing. Other variations could be an anarchist utopian, an environmentalist, a Muslim fundamentalist or a Western colonial variety of perspectives on societal development. All these variations are mainly masculine in their ideology. "Masculine" means the culture evolving around men, coming from traditions of the societal division of labor between the sexes. When women started to come into politics this masculine dominance came to be questioned. How we look at societal development is partly something derived from the social division of labor in society. Forced by their societal role in this division of labor, women often had a non-verbalized perspective differing from the general perspective dominating society. This other specific perspective, probably as full of variations as the general masculine perspective as also women are separated by sexual, ethnic, religious and class structures, has mostly been invisible and not even mentioned but sometimes seen and then being termed such things as "women's culture" or "caring culture". By looking at society and its development from a children's perspective this above mentioned masculine bias is obvious and other options for development are discovered. Without mentioning any of these presupposition arguments and without mentioning anything about a children's perspective but instead by arguing from the position of what is rational for every thinking "man", Alva Myrdal in "Urban Children" actually unfolds what I call a children's perspective.

**Urban Children**

Let me start by summarizing the book in focus, *Urban Children* (1935). We are looking at what Alva Myrdal is saying, her analyses, and also at how she expresses her arguments, this by giving quotes. The aim is to convey a colorful picture of the content of Urban Children to satisfy those interested in Alva Myrdal and her first full book, unattainable in English, and those who are interested in a children's perspective on a nation's development. My close
reading will then be followed by a contextualizing of her analyses of child care and nation building in today's research.

First some words on the title. The subtitle in English would be "A book on their upbringing in big size nurseries" or "A book on their education in big size nurseries" ("Stadsbarn: En bok om deras uppföstran i storbarnkammare"). The Swedish word "uppföstran" can be translated with "education", "upbringing", "nurture" or "training". It is a general word that is more often used in connection to practices in families, not institutions. To use the word "education" on two-year-olds could seem out of place in Sweden of the 1930s where children started school at the age of seven. The expression "big size nurseries" is one single word in Swedish, a language that allows bringing any two or three words together into a new single word. It is not the word used for today's wide-reaching municipal child care. This child care is used by almost all Swedish parents for their children. Big size nurseries are today called "daghem" which means "the home during daytime", usually translated into English as "day care centers".

The book itself of 184 pages is divided into nine chapters, "Small children in cities", "Who are the children needing big size nurseries?", "Development of nurseries in different countries", "Educational program", "Place and play materials", "Children's health", "Personnel and their education", "Parents and the big size nursery" and "Some conclusions".

Children in industrial society

In the first chapter, "Small children in cities", Alva Myrdal gives her analysis of the situation for children in industrial cities and I will devote more space to that chapter than to the other chapters. The first words of the book are "Small children do not fit in cities." (p. 9 in "Urban children" in its Swedish edition from 1935 and the following page references also refer to this edition. All quotes are translated by HE.) Today's cities are made for adults. She even says that what happens to small children in cities is that they "wither"—a strong word to use. She continues that children do not fit industrialism as a whole. In the cities few children are born, only half or a third of the children that would be needed to maintain the size of the population is born. This is one of the signs of how "hostile to children the urban culture has turned" (p.9). She makes one word in Swedish of "hostile to children", "barnfientlig", an important word. Perhaps due to the book "Crisis in the Population Question" (1934) but this book is not mentioned, everybody's eyes are now on changing society so that people want to have

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2 Compare the famous Swedish troubadour Ulf Peder Otlōg's "Rosenbloms vaggsång" from 1956 where he uses the long word "barnavårdsnämndsssekreteraren".
children. She writes that "Everybody now has a bad conscience for children."(p. 9) But of all things that can be done, one of importance is to take away the poor relief stamp which is easily attached to measures for bettering people's conditions. I think that Alva Myrdal alludes to that people do not want to be associated with the group of poor people, dependent on benefactors and charity. Independence might be more highly valued in the Swedish society than in other societies, perhaps for historical reasons³. Alva Myrdal's argument is that social measures should be promoting child care, they should not be poor relief. She takes up the purpose of her book, to discuss care and education of small children in cities. She talks about the half sterile families, those families with only a few children and she argues that "when children do not fit the cities, then the correct thing to do is not to abolish children but to change the cities" (p.11). She states that cities cannot be abolished, industrialism cannot be stopped and ought not to be stopped and the people cannot move back to the countryside. The cities have to change.

The main argument for Alva Myrdal to propose big size nurseries is the following: With industrialism and technical advancement homes turn more and more barren and they are not enough for children to grow up in. As is usual for Alva Myrdal she views the old peasant society as a good society. The farms were self-catering, there was plenty of room, animals and plants surrounded the children, the work of adults was visible to all and everybody looked after the children while working productively. Now in the city, this "stony desert", the dwelling is just a box among other boxes in staples of flats. The many-sided agricultural household is opposed to the small, modern consumption household and the few tasks done inside the modern boxy dwelling "do not give the children the same richness of immediately educating experience". (p. 12) How do we compensate for that? We, and Alva Myrdal writes "we", try to compensate with toys, modern upbringing techniques and at times more intense and careful togetherness with the children both at home and on trips⁴.

The productive work has moved away from home and woman follows after work. "Or more correctly, she stays in employment - when unmarried almost every healthy woman has a specific job and an income of her own. We have now reached a fairly general

³ Sweden had a high proportion of free peasants and a low degree of feudalism, it was and still is also sparsely populated, two reasons that might contribute to an explanation for the comparably heavy stress on independence in Sweden.

⁴ As Alva Myrdal wrote in a humorous quote from a long letter to her and Gunnar Myrdal's American friends Eve and Arthur Burns in 1932 concerning a week long family vacation in Dalarna when their then single son Jan Myrdal was five years old: "And we fulfilled our parental duties for about a year forwards." (Hirdman 2006 p. 168, translated from English to Swedish by Hirdman and from Swedish back to English by HE).
agreement that this development cannot be turned around." (p. 13) Alva Myrdal writes this in 1935 but ahead of her lay the 1950s, the decade with the biggest proportion of housewives in Swedish history. She continues that "if obstacles and restraints on married women's right to work are introduced, then marriages are punished and "loose relations" are favored. If women are not dismissed until they are going to give birth, childbearing is punished." (p.13) Mothers should have the right to work, working women should have the right to have children. But whatever we do to support those rights, there will still be "a strenuous conflict" between taking care of one's children and working. Alva Myrdal stresses that if a woman has to choose between work and children it has consequences for her whole life although the period when she has small children is just a short period of her life, not a lengthy period. This short period-argument was one of the main arguments in Alva Myrdal's later book written together with Viola Klein, *Women's Two Roles: Home and Work* (1956).

Is there also "a strenuous conflict" in interests between the woman and the child? Or rather, is what is best for the child also best for the adult? Most certainly not. But Alva Myrdal stresses those aspects of the relationship where interests of the child for rich, understanding and stimulating surroundings go hand in hand with interests of the parent to be able to work productively with peers in society. On talking in 1933 about the famous collective house built in Stockholm that the Myrdal couple helped into existence, Alva Myrdal says "It should not be a secret that the collective house is also an idea from those working for equality between women and men". (Hirdman 2006 p. 173) This could as well be said about the big size nurseries.

I would guess that for Alva Myrdal to be the lonely adult full time with a single child was giving her a sense of imprisonment, however nice her son was and however big and beautiful her home was. But this feeling that might have existed is not so much talked of in "Urban Children". We are made to see the situation from the children's perspective. She writes: "Even in those cases where the married woman declines her professional work, the confinement itself becomes burdensome in the majority of all families where no paid labor can be employed. Finally what is left is what we just said, that the home as the only place for bringing up children becomes enclosed and barren." (p.14) To this factor of barren homes is added the small number of siblings. In the old days there were many siblings in each family and this formed a "natural help for social training" of the children (p.14). To have many children is something belonging to the past "and it should also be so" (p.14). The negative consequences for a family of having many children are a pained and sometimes infirm mother and a more difficult economical situation. "We neither want to nor are able to bring back
these big families. Already the hope to be able to reach an average family size of three children through a powerful population policy is very optimistic." (p. 14) I will now quote the ending of this first chapter:

But let us drop the look at future and keep ourselves to the problems of today. And let us look at these problems directly from the small children's own perspective, their interest of care and upbringing. This coincides with the interest of society of getting citizens in the next generation that are healthy, capable for work, socially adjusted and happy. (Italics HE) As milieu for upbringing of children the city home is not enough. The family must not be replaced but be supported and extended through big size nurseries organized by society to give small children those opportunities for play, care and education that no single family can procure. (Italics AM) (Alva Myrdal in Urban Children, 1935, p. 14)

The majority of children are needing big size nurseries
Which children need big size nurseries? The second chapter gives an answer. Alva Myrdal finds the following groups of children needing them: children from overcrowded flats, to give them a bigger space for playing, children of working mothers, for care during the time the mother is away at work, children of housewives ("mothers working at home"), to give the mother some hours of relief from her confinement, children with no siblings to give them playmates, children difficult to train, to give them a special pedagogical direction, and finally children now brought up by housemaids and children who would be born if there were no contradiction between being a mother and a working woman. The mothers of this last group of children would use the big size nursery to be able to combine motherhood and work (p. 20, cf. p. 31). Here, only the two groups of children from overcrowded flats and children without siblings will be highlighted.

The conclusion is that big size nurseries are much needed almost by everybody and there has to be an expansion. Whether the expansion of big size nurseries comes through state supported construction of residential buildings, through the school system or through municipal child care is an open question, the idea of big size nurseries will "certainly mature" (p. 44) and take form in one way or another – this is Alva Myrdal's conviction, a true conviction of hers or a conviction held for rhetoric reasons only. In Alva Myrdal's case I think she actually believes in the success of the goals she strives for. The world is formed by us, not predetermined. During the Second World War for example she was radiating a belief in the
victory for the Allied and their victory was not something that might happen, an "if event", but always a "when event". (Ekerwald 2002).

An important theme in this chapter is the above mentioned one of overcrowded flats. Around half of all urban flats in Sweden at that time consisted of one room and a kitchen and according to the governmental investigation of the housing question, 46 percent of all children lived in such very small flats. Alva Myrdal takes up the physical consequences of living crowded, such as getting a bad sleep. A bed of one's own for each child is her demand. These bad housing conditions can probably not be so quickly undone but they can be partly compensated for by the big size nursery giving the children a collective playroom. She also takes up the psychological consequences of living in overcrowded flats, these too being arguments for big size nurseries. I will give a lengthier quote that tells about an irritation among lonely adults taking care of small children without other adults around, an irritation that probably is found not only in overcrowded flats:

The constant closeness between many individuals in the incommodius, overcrowded dwelling – individuals who due to being related and in solidarity with each other, are especially interested in each other, an interest which also often is of a psychologically complex nature – produces thereupon a general, nervous irritation that is very tiresome. For small children it is perhaps not the overstimulation in itself that is most dangerous but instead exactly this irritation from the adults, the tattered family life, which is caused by the overcrowded flat. Conflicts, strenuous relations, causes for friction are constantly produced. The family life itself becomes agonizing for the individual when it is exhausted, and the concord of the family is easily destroyed by the enforced, inseparable togetherness. Now it is the pre-school children and the mother who are the only persons who regularly are forced to live constantly under this irritation. The other family members find rest in their school or at their work from this overly stimulated place that your home in such cases are. A wish will be that there should be an opportunity also for small children to exchange this place for parts of the day for another, for example the big size nursery ("barnträdgården eller lekstugan") and this so much more as it also solves the problem of spare time for the mother." (Alva Myrdal, Urban Children p. 27-28, italics HE)

The opposite of the overcrowded flat is the family with a single child (or a child without siblings, "syskonlös"). This child needs the big size nursery as badly as the child from the
overcrowded flat. Alva Myrdal asserts that "all child psychologists agree with pity that an upbringing of a single child is something highly hostile to life and harmful for its psychological balance." (p. 34) What would she say about today's China? A child is a single child if it lacks siblings or if it only has siblings of a very different age from its own. A single child needs company from peers of age from the time when they are three years old or even earlier. By socializing with equals it learns social habits and consideration for other people.

> They must above all, before it is too late, grow into getting a fairly reasonable apprehension of themselves, they must get the chance to compare their abilities with the ones of their mates, they must get the chance to expect the evaluations and attitudes of their mates. The single children live their lives with an apprehension of their own selves in a fully unrealistic world: partly, they are heavily feeling their inferiority by comparing their childish imperfection with the abilities of the adults; partly, they overestimate themselves due to the too strong encouragement from their parents. (Alva Myrdal, Urban Children p. 34)

It can have disastrous psychological consequences to start school without having had equals of age around. Also, to grow up alone with one's mother without having had playmates is a fertile ground for egoism.

Someone who has studied the biographies on Alva Myrdal could read into her text her struggle for getting siblings to her oldest son, Jan Myrdal, born in 1927, his siblings being born in 1936 and 1938 after one or several miscarriages.5

In this second chapter of "Urban Children" Alva Myrdal reports a study that she obviously had done herself, an early sociological study with a questionnaire. The aim was to study if mothers misuse those big size nurseries that existed. One of the biggest single organizer of such nurseries was the still today important HSB, an association for tenants with a savings bank and construction compound (Hyresgästernas sparkasse- och byggnadsförening) and through it Alva Myrdal had distributed questionnaires to the pedagogical leaders of the nurseries, who in turn had posed these questions to mothers on one Tuesday and one Friday in April 1935. The questions concerned the reasons for mothers to leave their children in these big size nurseries. The reasons given are valid for around 500

5 On reading the personal life into professional texts, see for example Yvonne Hirdman's analysis starting: "But if we return to the authors, we could also read the whole Crisis in the Population Question as a documentary, not about the Swedish people, but about the couple Alva and Gunnar Myrdal." (Hirdman, 2006, p. 208-210)
children, 175 staying for some hours in the nurseries and 321 staying full time (on average 8.4 hours a day). I quote her result:

You can hardly find a cause to dislike a single one of all the given reasons. Even the harshest family moralist would at most be able to object that the mother does not have the "right" to abandon her child for an invitation or a sport event. This is the closest you could come to any "misuse" and it was given as reasons for the absence of mothers for 5 out of the 3,791 hours that these children were residing in the nurseries ("lekstugor"). All talk about nurseries being "misused" should after such a report be difficult to do." (Alva Myrdal, Urban Children p. 39)

A careful and interesting report follows of all the motherly reasons for leaving their children at the nurseries. For example, the nursery is especially helpful for the children who are only temporarily at the nursery when the mothers are sick at home or have to go to a doctor. Otherwise, "the mother may not be ill, or if she must be so, the children are either sent out on the streets and backyards or they must disturb her. The visit to the doctor must be cancelled, or you are forced to bring the small children with you. /.../ Relatives and helpful neighbors are namely not always at hand" (p.40-41).

The value of such a sociological study as her own, is stressed by Alva Myrdal:

Surely no general discussion of the arguments supporting big size nurseries, no abstract telling of the changes that industrialism and urban living brought to the resources of single families for the upbringing of children show more clearly how both rightful and truly imperative these reasons are, than what such a sample study of the real conditions does. (Alva Myrdal, Urban Children p. 42)

Seen from today's point of view this can be taken as an example of the big importance that scientifically careful, empirical studies of living conditions of different groups plaid in the building of the Swedish welfare state.

Big size nurseries in other countries and in the old days

We leave this second chapter. The third chapter is on the situation for day care in other countries and the history of cooperative care of children in Sweden. It also gives a general history of ideas around child upbringing, where the following reformers, pedagogues and philosophers are mentioned: Plato, Comenius, Francke, Oberlin, Scheppler, Cochin, Mirbeau, Magnus Huss, Rousseau, Robert Owen, Pestalozzi, the Mayo siblings, Mme Kergomard,
Friedrich Fröbel, Stanley Hall, John Dewey, Decroly, Montessori, Grace Owen and Rachel and Margaret Mc Millan.6

Program for big size nurseries

The fourth chapter gives Alva Myrdal's proposal for the upbringing program that should guide the big size nurseries, probably much based on her studies of family sociology and child psychology in USA and Switzerland. In USA from October 1929 she and Gunnar Myrdal spent a year of studies. Alva Myrdal then had the chance to listen to psychologists like Charlotte Bühler, Alfred Adler, G. Murphy and Robert Woodworth, and family sociologists like William Ogburn and Ernst W. Burges ("The Child in America" 1928), and she and Gunnar made friends with the sociologists W.I. Thomas and Dorothy Thomas and Robert Lynd. In Switzerland, where Gunnar Myrdal had become a professor in Geneva 1930-1931, Alva Myrdal took part in Jean Piaget's seminars. (See Hirdman 2006, p. 153-157 and p. 164.) Of all themes in this program for big size nurseries, many have been realized and become part of ordinary day care practices, also in today's Sweden7.

What is Alva Myrdal's program? I could summarize it as an education to democracy. She argues for an upbringing without physical punishment and without threats from the adult side but at the same time she argues for an upbringing that is different from so called free education. She herself writes: "Social training and individual treatment, solid habits and free activities - a good nursery upbringing could be summarized in these apparent paradoxes." (p. 80) She argues rhetorically as if her program were generally accepted by all wise and reasonable experts. The base is child psychology: "When it comes to practices, we agree far more on what is pedagogically good or bad for small children than you would believe if you just judged from more theoretical discussions, where, as everyone knows, the views collide quite strongly." (p. 77) It is as if important differences are due mostly to differences in skill, not in principles: "One could actually be prone to relate these differences mainly to a difference between pedagogically high class nurseries and pedagogically more indifferent nurseries, between those who are able to offer a free space to children's individuality and zest for activity without causing anarchy and those who must bring up the children more 'collectively', meaning what is typical of an institution and with tight reins." (p.

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6 The most famous of these on today's day care scene in Sweden are probably Pestalozzi, Fröbel and Montessori.

7 According to preschool teacher Elisabeth Rodhe who has been working in day care centres all since the expansion phase in the 1970s and who is still so working. I interviewed her on July 8, 2012 concerning Alva Myrdal's proposals and today's practices.
77-78) Alva Myrdal stresses individualism: "And no one could revert to the simple misunderstanding that joint upbringing would be some sort of 'collectivism' in the sense of children being steeped in the same form, stamped by violence to uniformity. That misunderstanding would be absurd given the importance that has here been attached to individual treatment of the children, which is the central meaning of 'mental hygiene'." (p. 102)

This individual treatment of each child is a recurrent theme in the program. When the child arrives to the nursery for the first time the personnel has to determine its intellectual maturity. If a child becomes troublesome the first thing is to regard this as a temporary thing that will disappear as time goes by. If the negativism does not disappear the personnel have to go deeper into the problem and try to understand it: "It may be a reaction to too many rules and bans, it may be due to a wish to dominate, a tendency to compensate for feelings of inferiority or it may have its roots in some unresolved emotional conflict. You need to analyze this 'cause' and decide on treatment accordingly. The difficulties to succeed are depending on the temperament of the child and the health of its nerves, but also on how insoluble the conflict is, seen from a purely objective point of view." (p. 99) Each child should be understood accordingly on its own terms. The personnel should also cooperate with the doctor and the parents of the child to try to solve its problems.

The main aspects of the program are the trust in the self activity of the child, expressing itself in self-governed play, and the combination of individualism and a group direction. When it comes to the self activity of the child, its inner direction, Alva Myrdal criticizes what I would call the schoolification of the nursery:

A danger of social overstrain is lurking however, when a too big portion of the day is devoted to scheduled activities under leadership – for example in an orthodox Fröbel nursery, where all children are folding, cutting and pasting paper on a set time and in a definite order. When children choose their activities freely, their loneliness in the sense of 'privacy' is protected. You should often watch them devoting themselves to the 'work' they are having at hand with an interest that makes them blind to other people. The main part of the day for the child in the big size nursery must be devoted to this free play and during that time the children themselves lead the pace." (Alva Myrdal, Urban Children p. 100, italics HE)

Alva Myrdal's stress on play resonates in Swedish day care centers today although challenged by calls for early scheduled teaching. I agree with Alva Myrdal on the importance of play. We
humans are *homo ludens* and children develop through play, inner directed creative activity. The material for play should according to Alva Myrdal not be toys but "play possibilities" (p. 89). The rooms of the big size nursery and the space outside should be built directly for children and there the children can be doing activities that are noisy, dirty and not liked at home (Alva Myrdal gives the examples of music practice and water play) and the toys can be bigger and of richer variation than at home. Alva Myrdal quotes Homer Lane (the American educator who influenced A.S. Neill with his Summerhill school): "The child nailing on a piano, give him another place to nail on, but let him nail" (p. 89).

When it comes to group direction, this is something the nursery can make use of. It is more difficult in a family's home. "The social training of children can be promoted through being together in a group." (p. 79) But then the group must be small (from 8 to 15 children depending on the age of the children) and kept together for a long time, and there must be direction from adults so that the children learn solicitude. The personnel are educated for the job, they are used to many different kinds of children, they are having a greater experience than mothers and nannies, and they get help from doctors and inspectors to make the best. The group direction is also connected to strong habits concerning food, toilet and rest and when a whole group is having those habits, the new child in the group easily adopts them too.

The chapter on the big size nursery program starts with what I regard to be the most important argument in the book, a pleading against authoritarian upbringing, what the Polish-Swiss psychologist Alice Miller later called "poisonous pedagogy" (actually "Schwarze Pädagogik", Miller 1980, 2002) and Alva Myrdal calls "old upbringing" ("gammal uppföstran"). Alva Myrdal also calls this “upbringing of convenience". The educator gets results quickly but side effects are ignored. The method is coercion "and the psychologically active factor in coercion is simply fear" (p. 78).

This method, however, of bringing up children nowadays – which by way of introduction should be underlined here – has no knowledgeable proponents but should be viewed exclusively as an emergency escape from difficult situations. Even the best educators must sometimes resort to coercion; then they have not made or not been able to make the sufficient and necessary preparatory work and

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8 In the interview with Elisabeth Rodhe, see note above, she gave the information that furniture in day care centres in the 1970's was in child size but that this was changed in the 1980s as the adult personnel got troubles in their backs from leaning over small tables and low basins etc.
Then they are standing in a situation, that demands immediate action. But at such times they recognize their emergency and they do not raise the compromise to an ideal." (Alva Myrdal, Urban Children p. 78)

We recognize the rhetoric. The victory is on her side. It is a "when event" when old pedagogy disappears, not an "if event". Coercion and physical punishment are part of authoritarian upbringing. Alva Myrdal argues that such upbringing is bad as no expert today thinks it is good. Those who know child psychology can never propose physical punishment. Knowledge prohibits you. People who on the other side defend physical punishment say that just as a child learns not to touch fire as it has once been burnt by touching it, just by the same logic can it learn several other things. Alva Myrdal argues that fire is very different from a person giving a child a physical punishment. The fire burns you every time you touch it, but more importantly, the fire is impersonal. Physical punishment is bad for the relation between educator and child. The trust is failing, the child interprets the box on the ear as contempt for his person, an interpretation with fateful effects. "You get resentment against someone punishing you; never against the fire burning you."(p.94) But Alva Myrdal defends one form of punishment that is not an accepted method in today's day care centers in Sweden – isolation. "There is one form of punishment, that in the social lives of human beings is like a law of nature: if you break the rules of the group, you will be disliked by the group. It is easiest to understand and at the same time least humiliating if this disliking is expressed so that you simply leave the child alone." (p. 94)

There are homes and nurseries using bans, threats and punishments and forcing the child to obey. Education of both parents and personnel can be helpful in changing this. Also a good selection of personnel is effective. The nursery educators should be talented in working with children and interested in developing the child. Their education should make them know the general stages of development of pre-school children, they should be able to analyze the individual child and its background, and they should be able to lead a group. The point is to demand as much from the child as it is mature enough to manage:

A 3- or 4-year-old child can carry a jug and he can serve his table mates. But then he must be allowed to try, he must get this responsibility and trust: the risk of smashing the jug and spilling it out is what educators have to pay for children to learn and for not holding back children in a state of dependency and spoiling them, something that follows when they are served. (Alva Myrdal, Urban Children p. 91)
Education of children has as its goal "to give over a civilization and a culture to the next generation" (p. 86). Alva Myrdal hopes that by not denying nature, finding nurture important and having a good milieu and treatment of children based on understanding, children are made to like the morale of the society and develop their own powers to a higher ability and a greater happiness.

Returning to the isolation punishment, Alva Myrdal says that in most cases it is not needed in the big size nurseries but it could be needed at home. If you don't obey the rules of game you are put out of the game. I will finish the summary of this chapter with connecting the program to democracy:

This is the democratic basic character of inclusion unlike the subordination that in the olden days characterized both society and the upbringing of children. Today we do not want to have people obeying individual dictatorial persons; the family is said to be the only remaining autocratic governance. If we do not want to educate people for new dictatorships, then this education for personal obedience is unneeded, while respect for order and rules and the rights of fellow men is more needed. (Alva Myrdal, Urban Children p. 94-95)

**More on children's play**

The following four chapters of Urban Children take up the aspects, in order, of facilities, play material, children's health, the personnel and their education, and finally the relationship between parents and the big size nurseries. These four chapters are full of concrete, detailed knowledgeable aspects and I will touch upon a few points in them. Interesting to today's reader is that Alva Myrdal proposed gender equal toys. She writes:

*All toys should be offered in the same way to boys and girls.* If there is any "natural difference" between the sexes, then that will be proved by itself, but it should not be evoked artificially ("suggereras fram"). Girls miss so much if they are not allowed to play with cars or handicraft tools; boys both need and like playing household" (Alva Myrdal, Urban Children p. 123, italics AM)

She has more than six pages on play and theories of play (Herbert Spencer, Stanley Hall, Karl Groos, William Stern and again Charlotte Bühler, Maria Montessori and Friedrich Fröbel) and I want to present a long quote giving her views on play and the importance of play:

What is most important for our attitude to "toys" is exactly this, that they are considered to be material for activity. They should give
knowledge about form and material and about how the laws of nature function: they should develop the child's mobility skills and sensoric powers of observation. They should be plastic for to express the creative imagination of the child; they should fascinate the child's zest for activity and give it the satisfaction from producing something. They should make it possible for the child to encounter in this indirect way a rich variation of experiences, that its isolation in real life forecloses; they should also – and this concerns especially the material for the child's artistic activity – provide experiences of beauty; they should finally – by making some of them suitable for cooperative play – promote social interaction and establish good cooperative habits. Therefore, it is not possible to treat toys of children as insignificant or look at them with arrogant indifferance. (Alva Myrdal, Urban Children p. 123, italics AM)

At one point the level of applicability of Alva Myrdal's proposals is surprising. We discover that Alva Myrdal has made toys herself with a carpenter that she has co-operated with and even that anyone can order these toys from a specific shop in Stockholm! One example that she has produced is a double easel that allows two children to paint on it at the same time, such as the ones the widespread child pedagogical program Reggio Emilia uses today. She gives a list of toys and play material occupying 3.5 pages, a list she calls "short", and this is the introduction of her list of toys:

Some of these toys are so simple that they are found or can very easily be acquired both at home and in the nursery, some are found in ordinary shops, some toys have been newly manufactured in accordance with directions from the author and they can be obtained – together with the big box for construction – through the HSB Furniture shop in Stockholm. These last mentioned are marked with an asterisk. (Alva Myrdal, Urban Children p. 123 and 125, italics HE)

The task to give a vivid picture of the content of Urban Children must now, due to limits of space, be finished. The next section contextualizes Alva Myrdal's day care program in society and in the history of the welfare state.

The Welfare state and its children

We have said it above but it can be repeated. Since the 1970's this program of Alva Myrdal for big size nurseries was realized in its general patters and also in details with a few
exceptions. (One such exception was the role of doctors and medical care in the day care centers. Parents use medical services for their children outside the domain of day care centers and doctors and nurses are not part of them.) But the realization phase did not arrive until the 1970s.

A technical book on daycare centers, how can it be said to be of value to understand the development of a nation? Is not all reported here a question of logics? Is not everybody agreeing on the goal to have small children in good facilities with well educated personnel? And is it not a good goal to put children's creative play at the centre of the daily program? Reading researchers with a different agenda than Alva Myrdal's and her compatriot researchers behind the Swedish welfare state illuminates the clear political choices behind Alva Myrdal's writings. It is only partially a question of logic and rationality. It is more a question of values.

In order to contextualize Alva Myrdal's program I will in this section compare her program with the critique of an American researcher, Allan Carlson, a historian that has written several pieces on the Swedish welfare state. As president of "The Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society", Carlson puts his research in service of politics to strengthen the nuclear heterosexual family, building on values that can easily be contrasted against Alva Myrdal's. The two interesting articles by Allan Carlson that will be used here is, shortly, "Deconstruction of Marriage: The Swedish Case" (2007) and, more deeply, "Rice and Fall of the American Family Wage" (2006-2007).

We start with "Rice and Fall of the American Family Wage". First, a note on Sweden. I would say that in feminist studies the importance of women's work has always been underlined. To earn an income of your own, makes you less dependent on your husband and makes it easier to divorce. If it is easier to divorce, the spouses have to take better care of each other to preserve the marriage. With the expansion in the 1960s and 1970s of women's paid work, there was a decrease in the proportion of children living in families characterized by prolonged frictions and unhappiness. With the increase of women's paid work, there has also been a clear decrease in the number of women killed by their male partner (from around 20 every year in the 1970s to around 16 every year in the first decade of the 2000 in Sweden). A woman will not stay in a marriage where the husband beats her and with a salary of her own

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9 Allan Carlson is distinguished visiting professor of history and politics at the private college Hillsdale, a liberal arts college in Michigan with a proud non-discrimination history and also described as a "citadel of American conservatism".
she can dare a divorce. Of course women are killed and beaten by their men also in Sweden, still these are the tendencies.

There used to be a family wage in Sweden where the husband's wage was supposed to be high enough to provide for himself and his family but where a woman's wage could be lower as she lacked family responsibilities. Workers had according to employers and workers' agreement different salaries for men and women, even for the same job, up to the early 1960s. Taxation also mistreated women. Men usually had higher salaries than women and in married couples the income of the woman was put on top of the husband's income. With progressive taxation that meant very little incentive for part time work for women. Almost all her income was lost in the increased taxes. Individual taxation was introduced in the 1970s and meant a lot for women's participation in salaried work.

Allan Carlson sees things from a different angle. When he investigates the history of the family wage in USA, he is committed to the value that family wages support families by supporting the division of labor between the spouses, thereby contributing to preserving marriages. Husband and wife need each other also for other reasons than purely emotional. This gives the stability that is so good for children. He writes about "Christian values" meaning responsibility, altruism and long-term commitments and puts that against "secular individualism" which is according to him "focused on the desires of the self" (Carlson in Deconstruction of Marriage, p. 161).

Any feminist researcher must be interested in the history of the family wage, the system that society accepts that men's salaries shall be higher than women's salaries because man is supposed to provide for a family while woman only adds her income to the household. Which events does Carlson stress when it concerns USA? His study shows that there was a family-wage regime from the 1880s until the late 1960s. Before WWII there was generally a direct wage discrimination, favoring men's salaries, but this system was replaced after the war by job segregation of men and women. The collapse of this family-wage regime "has been associated with" unhappiness such as "mounting tensions between the workplace and home, rising divorce, a retreat from marriage, sharply lower marital fertility and growing inequality" ("Rise and Fall of the American Family wage", p. 557). Carlson analyses the family wage as a question of justice between social classes. Also workers should be able to provide for a family. (Alva Myrdal's contrary argument that also working women should be allowed to have children is in a similar vein.) His sources are such as trade union documents and religious documents, the latter preferably from the Catholic Church. Carlson quotes a Catholic bishop seeing the housewife role as a "holy mission towards her husband and her children". In
the middle of the 19th century the trade unions could write: "We must strive to obtain sufficient remuneration for our labor to keep the wives and daughters and sisters of our people at home" (Carlson p. 558, italics AC).

There was one problem with having different salaries for women and men. "If women were paid at lower rates than men for the same work (an approach for which some argued), the most likely result would be that employers seeking to keep costs low would hire more women and fewer men." (p. 559) Therefore, people struggling for preservation of family wages must also push for job segregation between men and those women that were wage working. This is a quote from Father Ryan, professor at St. Paul Seminary and later at the Catholic University of America, in 1920:

In the telephone industry, at least in the telephone exchanges, what has happened is that the men have abandoned it, and the wage has gone down to the woman's level. In other places, where the men are strongly organized, they insist on monopolizing the occupation.

(Father Ryan, in Carlson p. 560).

The goal of having housewives was from a religious point of view also fought for with an argument that Swedes today might regard as Islamist, namely that homework is fitting as it preserves the "modesty" of the woman (p. 558), Carlson here citing Pope Leo XIII's "groundbreaking" Rerum Novarum from 1891.

Carlson shows through Martha May's study of more than 3000 investigations of household income from 1890 up to WWII that family wages did not exist from the start but was something slowly gaining land. I would say that it became a family wage through a political process where at the 1890s all family members contributed to the household's income but where the father alone did so in the times preceding WWII, that is a family-wage regime was set in power before WWII. A single example of the political process is that the United Mine Workers in 1919 barred women from being members. They also fought for a "family of five" standard (p. 563). Just as well is there a political process making the family-wage regime gradually disappear and be replaced by double income families around the millennium. The women's movement is unmentioned but its visible accomplishments, the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the United Auto Workers' pledge to "bring women into full partnership in the mainstream of American society now" (p. 566) are mentioned. "A second cause" for the decline of family wages was "the addition of the word 'sex' to title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964" (p. 567). With the very effective work of the "Equal Employment Opportunities Commission on the basis of title VII, "the consequences were great" (p. 567).
The wage differential of men and women was narrowed down with seven percent in the few years of 1967-1974. Also, many jobs were opened up for women.

Allan Carlson enumerates the negative consequences of this development, such as "rising divorce, a surging number of out-of-wedlock births, declining marriage rates, later marriages, more permanent singlehood and cohabitation, and a growing recognition of work-family conflicts" (p. 569). A central aspect seems to be that the economic rationale for marriages seems to have been "sharply reduced" (p. 569). Does Carlson mean women's incentive for marrying? He writes at another place in the article that "many men were probably happy to be relieved of the 'breadwinner' role and its onerous financial expectations" (p. 568).

The well documented and verified study of Allan Carlson underlines this political process where ideas mean much to the resulting picture. The struggle on the ideological level has its many consequences.

I have one more point from Carlson's article which I have not seen elsewhere and which he has based on Census Bureau statistics. When there was a family-wage regime, the GINI index of inequality was low, with American households being comparatively equal, but with double income families inequality has increased and the GINI index risen, between 1970 and 2005 by twenty percent. (p. 566 and 569) "One cause may be the growing probability of marriage between economic equals (e.g., a physician marrying another physician), which exaggerates household income differentials" (p. 569-570).

If we look shortly at the other article of Allan Carlson, "Deconstruction of Marriage: The Swedish Case", its thesis is that it is not same-sex marriage that undermined the marriage institution, as, I think, many conservative Americans might have thought, but the case is instead that "the deliberate deconstruction of marriage in Sweden began over seventy-five years ago" (p.154), with the Myrdal couple. Carlson summarizes:

As launched by the Myrdals seventy-five years ago, the strategy was to achieve a socialist society through the revolutionary transformation of private life, rather than through the hitherto conventional socialist method of state ownership of the means of production. Marriage and private life would be deconstructed, to be replaced by the universal dependency of all adults and children on the central state. (Carlson, 2007 p. 169)

My comment to this is that I agree. I support Alva Myrdal's approach but I think that it also demands a critical stance to the state. It is interesting how Carlson stresses the transformation
of private life, something Gunnar Myrdal, however genial he might have been, would never have thought of if he had not been on equal footing with his wife and understood her endeavor of equality between the sexes and what that demands from men and society.

I would finally like to end with a table summarizing the differences between the child centered approaches of the two social scientists Alva Myrdal and Allan Carlson:

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**Table 1. Differences in family and societal models of two social scientists from different epochs, Allan Carlson and Alva Myrdal, or of two ideologies, conservative American Christianity today and Social democracy in Sweden in the 1930s**
References and further readings


