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Reforming the Science-Policy Boundary: The Myrdals and the Swedish Tradition of Governmental Commissions

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Issues related to the intriguing relationship between science and politics are often central to today’s diversified discussions on research policy, higher education, and the role of the intellectuals. In one sense it is probably correct, as several voices claim, that we are now in the midst of a process of social transformation, characterized by new modes of knowledge production and dissolved boundaries between academic science and extra-academic research, which among the social sciences have actualized the need for both a new type of “public intellectual” and a revitalized “public sociology” (cf. Gibbons et al. 1994; Prospect 2004; Burawoy 2005). In another sense, however, it is possible to problematize these conceptions from a historical point of view and recall that the production of scientific knowledge has never been an exclusively academic concern. The social sciences, for example, have always developed in close contact with the public and the state, where different, nationally-framed traditions of extra-academic social research and state inquiry have provided important arenas for the production of policy-relevant social knowledge (cf. Bulmer, Bales & Sklar 1991; Wagner et al. 1991; Rueschemeyer & Skocpol 1996).

In this essay, the role of academics as public intellectuals will be dealt with by connecting the theme of the book to questions concerning extra-academic research and the relationship between social science and social policy. Empirically, it deals with Sweden during the interwar period. More specifically it focuses on what may be described as the historical meeting point between, on the one hand, the domestic tradition of governmental commissions (Statsens Offentliga Uredningar, SOU) and, on the other, Gunnar and Alva Myrdal’s trajectories as public intellectuals. At that point of intersection, special attention will be paid to the so-called Population
Commission (Befolkningskommissionen), one of the Myrdals' earliest and most important commissionary inquiries but also one of the largest and most influential commissions conducted in the history of Swedish social policy. By analyzing the Population Commission in terms of a historically-situated “trading zone” or “boundary organization”, i.e. a place where different knowledge cultures meet and the boundary between science and policy has been negotiated and stabilized (cf. Galison 1997: 803; Guston 1999: 93; see also Eklöf 2007, for a similar approach to Swedish governmental commissions in terms of boundary organizations), it will be argued that the Myrdals both conceptualized the science-policy boundary in a new way on the discursive level and widened the sphere of action for social researchers within the Swedish commission system on the practical level.

The government commission: An expanding arena for social research

As in most other industrialised nations, the Swedish government has made use of, been informed by, and funded social research for a very long time. One of the most important arenas for this interdependence between social research and social reform has without doubt been the institutionalized tradition of the “Royal” or “governmental” commission. In Sweden, this tradition stretches far back in time, at least to the constitution of 1809, which charged the government with acquiring knowledge about society and consult experts in all matters of significant importance (Hesslén 1927; Eriksson & Qvarsell 2000: 15). It has also been suggested that the Swedish system of government commissions is unique in its kind since in no, or very few, other countries is so much preparatory work done outside formal government offices, and that the commission system therefore constitutes a fundamental component of Swedish political culture (Anton 1969: 92-94; Helander & Johansson 1998: 14).

In practice, however, the government commission is a multi-purposed creature, not merely concerned with producing knowledge on which to base policy decisions. The commissions are also important in resolving conflicts and building political consensus, as well as acting as vehicles for policy planning (Johansson 1992: 3). The order of priority between these different tasks and functions has shifted historically, and from case to case, depending on the changing political and bureaucratic contexts. But with these reservations kept in mind it is still possible to point at a long tradition of governmental fact-gathering, where the commission system has served as an important arena for collaborative action between reform-minded researchers, intellectuals and politicians in the production of policy-relevant social knowledge. It has also been suggested that there is probably no other field of extra-academic study in which the social sciences have had as much impact on the policy-making process (e.g. Therborn 1973: 21-26).

Earlier research on the history of the Swedish commission system offers a rich source of solid empirical studies (e.g. Hesslén 1927; Meijer 1956; Johansson 1992). A deficit in this context is, however, the fact that these studies have been rather one-sidedly focused on politics. Only a few of them have recognized the government commission system as a place for social research, and these have usually been restricted to developments in more recent years (Premfors 1983: 640; Foyer 1969; Helander & Johansson 1998). Still absent are more systematic historical studies of how the spheres of action and the relationship between social science and social policy have changed over time. The intention of this essay is of course not to drastically remedy this situation. What however is possible to do in this context – in order to offer a framework for interpretation of the case study at hand – is to briefly overview the general development of Swedish government commissions in quantitative terms. For that purpose, a compilation of the statistics presented in Hans Meijer’s study of the period 1905-1954 offer a good starting point.

Swedish governmental commissions, 1905-1954

Figure 1. Numbers of Swedish governmental commissions convened in the period 1905-1954, based on Meijer (1956).
By commenting on the numbers and fluctuations in Figure 1, several preliminary points can be made. First of all it should be mentioned that the whole period as such is characterized by vital expansion. Compared to the preceding fifty-years period (1855-1904), when a total of 531 commissions were convened, the number between 1905 and 1954 increased fivefold to 2,729. Actually, the very year 1905 marks the beginning of a decade of intensified commissionary work. In the ten-year period before 1905, 181 commissions were convened, whereas in the following ten years over 400 commissions were set up. This marked rupture is primarily explained by the dissolution of the Swedish-Norwegian Union that year, which spawned new commissions in both Sweden and Norway (Meijer 1956: 8-9).

The most apparent fluctuations in the figure are however explained by the impact of the two World Wars on the one hand and, on the other, the effects of political stability. In the former instance, the World Wars fostered periods of uncertainty, followed by periods of intense postwar recovery efforts and rapidly multiplying numbers of commissions. In the latter, minority governments (e.g. the period 1922-35) have due to political instability not had the chance to prioritize future-oriented planning in the same way as majority governments have (ibid.: 15). Hence, in the Swedish case it is important to consider the effects of the Social Democratic Worker’s Party’s lengthy term in power, 1932-1976 (the first three-year period in coalition with the Conservative Party).

When these parameters are disregarded, however, the most significant pattern that emerges is the steadily growing number of commissions throughout the period. Basically these numbers indicate the level of governmental activities, in the sense that the more active the State was, the more commissions were convened. But the expansion of the commission system also reflects the limited flexibility of the bureaucratic apparatus, where the commission often functioned as a complementary and more flexible arena for governmental actions outside the departmental organization. Accordingly, when the latter grew, several of the issues that the earlier commissions had taken care of “moved” into the ordinary governmental departments in the form of “in-house” inquiries. The rapid growth of the departments is clearly illustrated by the fact that while in 1910 there were only 4,000 payrolled civil servants, by 1954 there were as many as 95,000! (ibid.: 16). Thus, the development of the commission system has to be understood in the context of the rise and expansion of the modern state and its successively developing bureaucracy.

But it is also important to note that the figure makes no distinction between one-person commissions and large-scale commissions like the Emigration Commission, convened in 1907, or the 1935 Population Commission. If we make such a distinction, the general expansion of the commission system becomes further accentuated, since one-person commissions were especially frequent at the very beginning of the period. But they were also common in the ten-year period 1925-34, when as many as three-quarters of the total number were of the smaller size (Meijer 1956: 20). When these observations are taken into account a partly new pattern appears, which suggests that it is possible to locate one of the most significant historical periods of expansion in the mid-1930s.

Having commented on these general patterns in quantitative terms, the main interest of this essay is however focused on aspects of a more qualitative kind, namely how the commission system has functioned as an arena for social research. Meijer touches upon this question when he discusses the different uses of “expertise”, and mentions that the group of external experts has tended to grow in comparison with the group of parliamentary representatives. Unfortunately, this observation is based solely on a limited sample survey chronologically restricted to the period 1945-1954 (Meijer 1956: 22).

This motivates a somewhat closer, but still brief, look at the so-called Emigration Commission (Emigrationsutredningen), which was convened in 1907 and produced no less than 21 volumes of reports in the next seven years. In this large-scale investigation, where the demographic, financial and social state of the nation was mapped out in order to remedy what was called the “emigration question”, i.e. the increasing number of citizens who left Sweden for a more promising future in America (Källmark 1972), government action was intimately bound up with the new academic social sciences. As a matter of fact, the Emigration Commission can not only be seen as one of the first public performances of a new policy-relevant academic social science, but also as an early example of the new quest for scientifically-based reform. Considering the small size of the professional academic community of social scientists at that time, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that more or less every social scientist was involved in the Commission in one way or another.

The chairman and leading force behind the whole organization was Gustav Sundbärg, a civil servant in the Swedish Central Bureau of Statistics (Statistiska centralbyrån, SCB), who in 1910 became Sweden’s first professor of statistics in Uppsala. Three new professors of economics and sociology, Knut WickSELL, Gustaf Steffen and Gustav Cassel, who had attained their chairs in Lund in 1901, Gothenburg in 1903 and Stockholm in 1904, respectively, all participated in the commission (Wisselgren 2000: 211-224). So did professors of statistics and economics Nils Wohlin and
Eli Heckscher, and political scientists Pontus Fahlbeck and Rudolf Kjellén. Furthermore, the Emigration Survey became an important launch platform for younger scholars like Gösta Bagge, later professor of economics and social policy in Stockholm, and Kerstin Hesseling, later head and a kind of “research leader” of the Female Factory Inspectory, as well as “amateur sociologists” such as E.H. Thörnberg (Emigrationsutredningen 1913: 39-42; cf. Lindkvist 2007: 37-38, 66-68).

The presence of the social scientists in the Emigration Commission gave the results produced, as well as the political reforms that were based upon them, legitimate scholarly credibility. At the same time, the commission offered the young social scientists a chance to prove that the knowledge produced was both useful and policy-relevant. In that sense, the Emigration Commission provided a “transaction sphere”, where science and policy could meet and where scientific legitimacy and policy relevance could be mutually exchanged, and thus laid the groundwork for a “co-evolving” social science and social policy discourse (cf. Nowotny et al. 2001: 144-147; Jasano et al. 2004: 1-12). Accordingly, Bo Malmberg and Lena Somestad suggest that the Emigration Survey can be seen as an early example of a typical “rationalistic approach” to social problems, where the social scientists regarded themselves as central agents of change (Malmberg & Somestad 1996: 69). However, keeping the larger quantitative background picture in mind, it is also important to underline that the Emigration Commission was after all rather unique in its time, and that this kind of large-scale, expertise-driven commission became more common in the 1930s – i.e. more or less at the time Gunnar and Alva Myrdal entered the scene.

To understand the motives and interests of Gunnar and Alva Myrdal to step into this sphere of science-based reform, it is necessary to first say a few words about their early careers and the contemporary academic setting.

**The Myrdals as public intellectuals: Between social research and reform**

Sven Eliason and Hedvig Ekerwald have in their chapters in this book already commented on the vast and rapidly expanding body of literature on Gunnar and Alva Myrdal’s multifaceted oeuvres. There are nowadays a number of specialized studies on Gunnar’s theoretical and scientific writings, as well as on Alva’s biography and political achievements (for bibliographical overviews, see also Wisslengren 2006a-b). In this context, however, it is important not to separate their individual careers or to isolate the scientific and political aspects from each other. Instead it is worth emphasizing that they identified themselves as a collaborative couple and that their scientific ambitions and political efforts were intimately interlinked.

Applying such a perspective, it is also important to note the fact that the Population Commission was preceded by Gunnar and Alva Myrdal’s first visit to the US as Rockefeller research fellows in 1929-30, and that their experiences from this visit, as many scholars have witnessed (e.g. Carlson 1990: 42-44; Jackson 1990: 59-68; Hirdman 2006: 153-162), had a formative impact on their subsequent activities as social researchers, as well as on their standpoints in social policy issues. Before they departed for the US, both Gunnar’s and Alva’s main interests were academic in the strict sense of the word, Gunnar’s especially in the area of economics and Alva’s in social psychology. Gunnar had at that time already made himself a name as one of the young and promising economists of the so-called Stockholm School of Economics, while Alva had started working on a dissertation in pedagogy at Uppsala University. Accordingly, their scientific ambitions were set high. Alva’s explicit aim for embarking on the trip was, as she formulated it in her application to the Rockefeller Foundation, “to specialize my studies in the direction of social psychology, a branch which is until now almost exclusively an American science”, in order to “prove competent for holding an academic lecturership in psychology and theoretical pedagogics” (A. Myrdal 1929a).

Another important point in the argument is that the contemporary status of social science in Sweden was vague and insecure. There were for example no chairs in psychology and sociology – although there had been a chair in sociology and economics in Gothenburg since 1903, held by Gustaf Steffen, which after his death in 1929 had been left vacant. Subjects like political science, statistics and pedagogy existed at the universities and university colleges in Uppsala, Lund, Stockholm and Gothenburg, but in very limited numbers compared with today. Instead, the real expansion of the academic social sciences in Sweden was a postwar phenomenon, something still to come. The only exception within these vaguely institutionalized social sciences was the field of economics, which in the first decades of the 20th century had developed remarkably, especially in the direction of neoclassical economic theory. At the same time, however, and paradoxically as it may seem, there were several voices in the public debate that repeatedly indicated the need for a strengthened social science. I would hold that, it is in this historical situation characterized by a vague supply and a strong demand for social research, that both Alva’s and Gunnar’s serious and far-reaching plans as
social scientists should be understood (Larsson & Wisselgren 2006:165-167).

In that context, Gunnar and Alva Myrdal’s year in the US was crucial. What they encountered there, in stark contrast to the underdeveloped Swedish social sciences, was a dynamic, more interdisciplinary, applied and reform-oriented social science aimed at solving social problems (Jackson 1990: 59-68). During their stay at Columbia University and travels across the Continent, they made acquaintances and familiarized themselves with research that became key to their converging developments as social researchers. In their collaborative approach they were especially inspired by Dorothy Swaine and W.T. Thomas, who lived, worked and performed as an intellectual couple, and were engaged in research and policy issues closely related to the interests of Alva and Gunnar, and with whom they developed a close and long-lasting relationship (Lyon 2001). With great enthusiasm Alva explained the dialectical result of their planned joint projects: “An economist + a social psychologist, united in marriage and authorship, makes naturally and easily a sociologist” (A. Myrdal 1929b). But they also saw a future role for themselves as social scientists and public intellectuals when they returned to Sweden, or as Allan Carlson has summarized the impact of their American experiences, leaving Sweden as detached intellectuals, they returned a year later committed to political action and radical reform on the basis of a scientific sociology (Carlson 1990: 42).

Back in Sweden, the Myrdals were drawn into politics and from that moment on began to perform as public intellectuals. They joined the Social Democratic Worker’s Party and soon became practically and ideologically involved in the growing social reform movement. Alva Myrdal became vice-chairman of the newly-established Swedish branch of the Working Women’s Association (Vrkeskinnors Klubb), and member of the editorial board of the Social Democratic women’s journal Morgonbris, while contributing to almost every other journal and magazine associated with the women’s movement. She was also frequently asked to give lectures on family issues, and was soon regarded as one of the central authorities in the women’s movement. Meanwhile, Gunnar became one of the leading figures in the circles of young radical intellectuals revolving around the so-called acceptera-group and the journal Spektrum, which included prominent authors, artists, philosophers, social scientists, architects and physicians, united in their conviction of the need for social reform in order to encourage a more modern and democratic society (Hirdman 1989: 97-101; Hirdman 2006: 166).

Of special importance in this context were the practical implications of Gunnar Myrdal’s theoretical writings on the science-policy boundary. Already in the Spring term 1928, he had held a series of lectures “On the Concepts of Value and Utility in Economic Theory” at the Stockholm University College (G. Myrdal 1928). What he did during the year in the US was to elaborate these thematic lectures into a Swedish book manuscript, published in 1930 as Vetenskap och politik i nationalekonomien, which was later translated into German (in 1932) and English under the title The Political Element in the Development of Economic Theory (1953). It must however be emphasized that he nuanced and modified his standpoint in important respects during this two-decade long process. In the preface to the English translation, for example, he criticized some of the earlier assumptions made in the Swedish original as expressions of a naive empiricism (G. Myrdal 1953: vii).

Nevertheless, it is clear that it was during the period in the US that Gunnar Myrdal laid the theoretical foundation for what was to become the main theme of his social and political thinking in the following decades. What he basically wanted to do was to theoretically draw the boundary line between science and policy (G. Myrdal 1930: 10-12). Indirectly, this demarcation was meant as a severe critique of dominant contemporary neoclassical economics, which he regarded as value-laden and certainly not as objective and “scientific” as it claimed itself to be. The implication was not however that economists and social scientists should try to eliminate social and ideological elements from their work. On the contrary, Gunnar argued, they ought to explicate the value premises in order to make their results more “honest”. In other words, he wanted to defend the scientific credibility of the social sciences – by problematizing its ideological bias. In that sense, he reformulated what may be described metaphorically as the “contract” between social science and social policy (cf. Guston 2000: 37-63). In practice, this did not mean that the social scientists’ sphere of action should be restricted, but – as paradoxical as it may seem – widened instead. Myrdal strove to open up new gates to science-based political reform or, as he wrote in his original Swedish book, “social political solutions that can be described as scientifically objective” (G. Myrdal 1930: 278; all translations the author’s unless otherwise indicated).

In that sense, Myrdal’s boundary work had a threefold aim. He wanted to defend science from political intervention, criticize contemporary neoclassical economic theory, and expand the sphere of social scientists into the political sphere – all at the same time. Offered here is an unusually clear example of what Thomas Gieryn would describe as the three most common types of boundary-work strategies: “protection of autonomy”,
“expulsion” and “expansion” (Gieren 1999: 15-18). The most important analytical implication in this context is however that the very character of this key idea motivates a broadened perspective, where Myrdal’s theoretical concerns about the scientific credibility of economics are interpreted in relation to his contemporary political involvement in social and economic issues.

This interpretation of Myrdal’s conceptualization of the relationship between social science and social policy in the 1930s is further strengthened by a number of other key texts presented in the following years, all of which can be read as variations on the same theme. In his inaugural lecture as Professor of Economics at Stockholm University College in 1933, for example, he repeated the main arguments from Vetenskap och politik on the need for a demarcated distinction between science and policy, and heavily criticized liberal economics from a theoretical and analytical point of view, while adding what he regarded as the political implications of that critique by arguing in favour of systematic political planning (G. Myrdal 1934: 7-41). In that sense the lecture not only outlined a scientific program for further research – as would usually be expected from lectures within the genre – but somewhat startlingly also a political program.

Part of the story is that Gunnar Myrdal had already explicated that political program in a widely-read article on ”The Dilemma of Social Policy”, published in 1932 in Spektrum, the progressive journal of the intellectual radical circle mentioned above, where he indicated the need for systematic political planning in housing issues, but also more principally declared that social policy efforts should not be seen as financial deficits but as components in a “prophylactic social policy program” (G. Myrdal 1932a-b).

The pathbreaking importance of Myrdal’s key idea was however dependent on its historical context, and the fact that the Social Democratic Party entered into its first period of political power that very year. In that sense Myrdal’s conceptualization served as an ideological pillar in the way it rhetorically framed the party’s social policy program. Another key text, produced in the very same period, is Myrdal’s memorandum on business cycles and public financing, in which he basically repeated the main idea from the Spektrum article, that public subsidies in the social area should be seen not as negative budget posts but as future-oriented, long-term financial investments (G. Myrdal 1933: 150-152). The memorandum was included as an appendix to the budget proposal of 1933, which marked the start of the Social Democratic government’s economic program aimed at rescuing the nation from the contemporary financial crisis, as well as serving as a foundational document for the development of future Swedish policy (Magnusson 1997: 405).

One of the many spin-off effects of these orchestrated events, was that both Gunnar and Alva Myrdal were drawn into the very centre of political power and soon became involved in their first commissionerly works, one on social statistics and another, larger commission on housing in 1933.

However, even more important to understanding their joint contribution to the Population Commission is their co-authored book on the so-called population question, Kris i befolkningsfrågan (Crisis in the Population Question), which appeared in Swedish in 1934. In this book, the Myrdals conceptualized the decline of birth rates as a crucial issue of national concern, and proposed a family-centred social policy whereby the state became the instrument to putting things on a new course (Hatje 1974). The book was widely read among radical reformers and conservatives alike and was received in a way that probably no other book has been in Sweden in modern times. The Myrdals were thrown into the centre of public debate almost overnight. Their last name became a household word, and their second child, born in the midst of the debate, was regarded by some cynics as a PR stunt for the book. The first edition sold out quickly, and was soon followed by several new editions, including a special so-called “people’s edition”. The new Swedish Radio Corporation broadcast a major debate, and local study circles were soon popping up all over the country (Carlson 1990: 114-115). Altogether the public debate in the wake of the book resulted in no less than thirty (!) volumes of press cuttings, currently stored in the Labour Movement Archives and Library, Stockholm (S. Andersson 1998: 15). As a direct result of the book and the debate, the government decided to set up the Population Commission in 1935, to which Gunnar was recruited as Secretary and Alva as an external expert.

Looking back at the preceding five-year period it is possible to discern that both Gunnar and Alva Myrdal had made an important cognitive move, from their originally academically-oriented interests in the social sciences toward a more articulated commitment to political action based on social science. Hence when the offer to become involved in the Population Commission was made in 1935, this gave both Gunnar and Alva Myrdal an opportunity to develop the practical implications of the former’s theoretical key idea. In order to fully understand exactly what this operationalization meant requires a closer look at the Population Commission.
The Population Commission: From research to reform

When the Population Commission was set up in 1935, it was only one out of 46 commissions convened that year. After a decade of relatively few commissions, partly dependent on minority governments with limited opportunities to initiate new reforms, the mid-1930s brought an important change. Most of the commissions were however small ones with less than four members, whereas the Population Commission, with its nine formal members and numerous external experts, was one of the largest of the day. It also produced more than twenty reports, fifteen of them based on major social investigations, and a final report presented at the end of 1938.

To clearly distinguish the Population Commission from the other commissions of the era is easier said than done. In practice the various commissions often overlapped, both in terms of individual members, who might be engaged in two or more commissions at the same time, and in terms of the issues dealt with. The Housing Commission, mentioned above, which was initiated in 1933 and active up until 1945, and the Women’s Work Commission, set up the same year as the Population Commission, illustrate this pattern of overlapping in both respects. While Gunnar was a member of and Alva contributed to the Housing Commission, Alva was at the same time the secretary and leading force of the Women’s Work Commission (SOU 1938: 47). Furthermore, the Population Commission had explicit directives to collaborate with the Housing Commission in its study of family housing needs and family-oriented urban planning, while the Women’s Work Commission and the Population Commission definitely amplified each other’s arguments, e.g., on the need for advanced housing and population statistics (Carlson 1990: 121).

Formally, however, they were clearly distinguished from each other. The initiative to set up the Population Commission was taken by the Minister of Social Affairs, Social Democrat Gustav Möller, in May 1935, and formally approved by His Royal Highness. The same minister formulated the formal directive to investigate the national population question and present proposals on how to handle it. According to the commission directive, the central aim should be to present "a reliable and comprehensive investigation of the population issue aimed at clarifying both the ends and the means [and that] in that context social scientific as well as eugenic and ethical points of view should be properly recognized" (SOU 1938: 5: Population Commission 1938c). It was also recommended that the commission should proceed quickly and present its results to parliament in 1936. And unlike, for example, congressional or presidential commissions in the US, the work and results of the Swedish commissions were always taken seriously by the bicameral parliament, the Riksdag (Carlson 1990: 129).

In practice this meant that the minister appointed nine members, from whom he selected one as a chairman and recommended another as secretary. The commission members were chosen on two different grounds; they should be either "individuals with special competence in the areas of knowledge dealt with", i.e., experts, or "individuals with practical experience from the social conditions of our nation in general", i.e., parliamentary laymen (SOU 1938: 57: 6). The nine ordinary members of the committee were:

- Nils Wohlin (chairman), Director-General of the Customs Department and leader of the Conservatives in the First Chamber of the Riksdag, a former member of the Emigration Commission, where he had acted as secretary, and after that Professor of Statistics in Uppsala 1916-30.
- Gunnar Myrdal (secretary), Professor of Economics, who at that time still had not entered parliament, but would do so in 1936 when he became a member of the First Chamber.
- Andrea Andreen-Svedberg, M.D., active in the women’s movement.
- Sven Wickell, Professor of Statistics, Lund University.
- Nils von Hofsten, Professor of Genetics, Uppsala University.
- Disa Västberg, Chairman of the Social Democratic Women’s movement, and editor of its journal Morgenbris.
- Karl Magnusson from Skövde, chief gardener and Conservative member of the Second Chamber.
- Johan Persson from Tidaholm, factory worker and Social Democrat in the Second Chamber.
- A.L.E. Österström from Härnösand, journalist and Liberal Party member of the Second Chamber.

A few comments can be made on the constitution of the members. First, there were more experts (Wohlin, Myrdal, Andreen-Svedberg, Wickell and Hofsten) than parliamentary laymen (Magnusson, Persson, Österström and Västberg), although several of them represented more than one field of competence or interest (Västberg and Andreen-Svedberg, for example, also represented the women’s movement, while Wohlin and later Myrdal...
He wrote two important appendices to the report, the statistical projections on future Swedish population developments, and a summary of the methodology of the study of population policy. Alva participated with two appendices to the same report, one on the psychological importance of family size, the other on the social-psychological purpose and organization of parental education (A. Myrdal 1936a-b).

Of special relevance in this context is Gunnar’s first appendix, where he wrote a principally formulated methodological treatise on the scientific character of the population question. In the text, aiming primarily at conceptual clarification, he once again took up the question of the relationship between science and policy, and the fact that “all research has a practical purpose” (G. Myrdal 1936: 156). It is also significant that it is the first of the seventeen appendices, placed there, I would argue, to legitimize and guarantee the scientific credibility of the report.

The Report on the Sex Question was widely read, signifying that governmental commissions not only welcomed social research, but also provided a public channel with greater reach than ordinary academic reports. It was also distributed in a cheap edition which sold more than 20,000 copies in several printings (which can be compared to the report on rural depopulation which was distributed in only 1,000 copies) and was also the only report that was translated into English, Report on the Sex Question, in 1940 (Carlson 1990: 158). When the commission presented its final report in December 1938, it was regarded as a public event. The newspapers wrote widely about it, as they had while the process itself was still going on. The newspaper Social-Demokraten announced on the 20 December 1938 that "this remarkable committee", with "Professor Gunnar Myrdal as the primus motor" had finally completed its task (Social-Demokraten 1938).

Concluding discussion: Reforming the science-policy boundary

Looking back at the Population Commission and its practical work, it is easy to conclude that both Gunnar and Alva Myrdal played significant roles, and that the Commission offered an important arena for interfaces between social research and social policy. From a widened historical perspective, which takes into account the longer domestic tradition of governmental commissions, another dimension is added, namely that the co-production of social research and social policy was not an entirely new phenomenon. Instead, its historical roots are possible to trace back at least to the constitution in 1809, and as early as the first decade of the 20th
century, a similar collaboration based on the mutual interests of the new academic social sciences and contemporary social policy efforts was established in the Emigration Survey. In that case, however, the science-policy boundary was sketchily drawn.

The contribution of Gunnar and Alva Myrdal as social researchers and public intellectuals to the realm of governmental commissions becomes evident upon considering their preceding biographical experiences. In that context, Gunnar’s theoretical writings on the ideological elements of economics were important in re-formulating and articulating the science-policy contract on a discursive level and, paradoxically, widening the sphere of action of the social scientists to include the sphere of policy-relevant social knowledge production. Accordingly, from the Myrdals’ point of view, the Population Commission offered an attractive opportunity to transform these theoretical principles into practical action on a larger scale than earlier commissioner experiences had done. In that sense, the Population Commission can be interpreted in terms of a boundary organization within the trading zone or transaction sphere of the governmental commissions, where the social scientific discourse was practically interwoven with the social policy debate in fundamentally new ways.

In order to understand the success and ease with which Gunnar Myrdal introduced and transferred his theoretically reformulated contract between science and policy into the sphere of governmental commissions, it is also important to consider the contemporary state of the social sciences as well as the political context. Both the attraction and the rhetorical strength of Myrdal’s metaphorical contract were in important respects historically and institutionally situated. The vaguely established social sciences in combination with the expanding system of governmental commissions resulted in a demand for social scientific competence and expert knowledge within the political sphere as – not least important in this context – the Social Democratic Worker’s Party entered upon its four decades of political power. In this contingent situation, Myrdal’s science-policy contract – which both gave scientific legitimacy to the political social reforms and offered a broadened job market for the social scientists – was perfectly timed. Partly as a result of the redrawn boundary, governmental commissions developed into probably the most important arena for social research in the interwar period, i.e. in a period when few other such spaces existed.

For these reasons it is important not to anachronistically overemphasize the boundary between academic social science and extra-academic social research, but rather to regard them as two communicating vessels. With such an institutionally-widened perspective it is possible to more correctly estimate the importance of governmental commissions in the context of the history of the social sciences, as well as to recognize the ways in which public intellectuals like the Myrdals have combined their roles as researchers, teachers, disseminators, experts and citizens (cf. Kalleberg 2000; and the contributions to this book). But it will also be easier to understand the remarkably rapid expansion of the social sciences in the subsequent postwar period, and how the contested science-policy boundary has continued to change and be redrawn up until today’s debates on public intellectuals and public sociologies (see BJS 2005, and McLaughlin, Kovalchuk & Turcotte 2005, for good overviews of the debate).

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