

*CULTURE BUILDERS. A Historical Anthropology of Middle-Class Life*

By Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren

Translated by Alan Crozier - Foreword by John Gillis

New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1987, pp. 321.

Reviewed by Cas Wouters (*Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 7 (1990) nr 1, pp. 166-169).

This book is one of the earlier results of a Swedish research project, that up to the present day is still continued. It is an enquiry into the roots of present day middle class culture, as it developed between about 1880 and 1910 in Sweden. As their starting point the authors have taken the middle class virtues that are recognizable in the stereotype of the typical Swede: the nature-loving and conflict-avoiding person, obsessed with self-discipline, punctuality, orderliness and the importance of living a rational life. From this stereotype, the industrial and professional middle classes are easily recognizable as the ones who have defined the dominant ideas about the good and proper life. In summary, this book describes 'the process through which middle-class culture building moved from the position of counter-culture to dominant culture and then to national culture, and finally became invisible as ideas about human nature' (Löfgren 198 :81). This process however, is *not* typical for Sweden alone (which may have been the reason why the authors do *not* refer to Sweden in their title), but since the book deals with Sweden only, the title is somewhat misleading. The question as to what is typically Swedish, their national character or identity, is not seriously raised, because any comparison with developments in other countries is absent. This means that it is impossible to get an impression or estimation, however rough, of the ways or degrees in which the typical Swede differs, for instance in conflict-avoidance, from other national identities or stereotypes.

Löfgren and Frykman have each written three chapters; in the first part of the book, called Rational and Sensitive, Löfgren deals with time-keeping, nature-loving and home-building. In the second part, called Clean and Proper, Frykman deals with bodily functions, purity and dirt, discipline and orderliness. In this way, they cover most of the feelings and practices of 'every day life'. Their empirical sources are quite diverse. As the authors indicate, 'cultural taxonomies, notions about the good and proper life can be found in everything from zoology readers to cookbooks'(p.9) and so they used ethnological archives, research literature on nineteenth-century peasant society, private sources like biographies, letters, diaries and memoirs, and material from public discourse like etiquette manuals, newspaper articles, pamphlets on health and children's education.

According to the authors, their theoretical framework focusses on 'the dialectics between class formation and culture building.' In the words of Löfgren (1987:76): 'The focus was thus on the *relations* between culturally distinct groups and subcultures, and the dialectic processes whereby different classes and strata develop their identity and culture in both dependence on and opposition to other social units...' Their approach is called 'historical anthropology' and in the 'comparative historical analysis', the comparison is between the life of the bourgeoisie and what is known of nineteenth century peasant life. In addition, they present a description of the transition from peasant culture to working class culture.

Löfgren and Frykman write in a down to earth, theoretically informed way, which hardly contains any explicit theoretical excursion. They mainly confine themselves to mentioning the expanding type of what they, in their introduction, call 'cultural research' that is influenced by 'scholars as diverse as Pierre Bourdieu, Norbert Elias, Michel Foucault, Richard Sennett, E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams' (p.2).

In many ways Löfgren and Frykman capture the effect of industrialization processes. A brief account of some changes in the experience of nature, for instance, may show how stimulating their studies is. Here, they observe that 'the first tourist pilgrimages were not to agricultural scenery, but to the wilderness' (p.51). Their interpretation runs as follows: 'The new interest in mountaining and wilderness treks mirrors a masculine cult of asceticism, achievement and individuality. The man who endures hardship and deprivations to conquer a mountain single-handed... masters both an inner and an outer nature' (p.52), an interpretation documented by the words of an alpine enthusiast. In this context, they point to the paradox that these feelings can be seen as the result of a 'domestication of nature' and a 'new alienation from nature'. In other words, the more nature was exploited, the more an unexploited nature was valued. It was the mountain and seaside scenery, they say, that satisfied many of the new emotional longings: 'The absolute stillness, the dying of the day, the open landscape, all gave a feeling of total belonging, of a quiet ecstasy... It was like a ritual return to a mystical past and a real life' (p.55). In this way, Löfgren and Frykman sketch how industrialization stimulated the creation of a dream image, a middle-class mythology of an old harmonious peasant society, where everybody knew his or her station in life:

There was no large rural proletariat to disturb the image of the happy village *Gemeinschaft*. Here one found the stereotypes of a freedom-loving, individualistic and principled peasantry, embodying honesty, honor, and love of traditions. They represented the kind of ancestors the middle class wanted to have in their cultural charter. (p.60)

This tensionless, egalitarian and completely integrated peasant society expressed the nostalgic longing for a more natural and more simple life than was felt to be possible in an industrializing society, seen in some ways as an 'overcivilized *Gesellschaft*' in which life was experienced as 'nervous'. Something comparable happened to 'our animal friends': when people 'had mastered the animal within' and had developed a moral superiority to 'the more bestial lower classes' (p.85), they felt a growing intimacy with animals and at the same time distanced themselves from them. The middle classes developed 'an abhorrence for 'natural ways' together with a longing and fascination for 'the natural way of life' (p.86).

Although the authors do not mention it, the formation of these feelings was not something completely new, nor connected only with processes of industrialization. Already in the process of courtization, in which knights ceased to be the independent rulers of their domains and became courtiers, similar sentiments arose and a new domain of imagination was created, a domain that later came to be known by the word 'romantic'. Courtiers found some release of the social and mental tensions of living a court life in the dream world of the pastoral romance, in which they created their versions of ideals like love, freedom, sincerity, simplicity and the like – the sociogenesis of aristocratic romanticism.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, in processes of differentiation and coordination of social functions and networks, with its connected social and mental tensions - in processes of courtization as well as in those of industrialization and urbanization - people to a certain extent came to experience their figurations as 'needlessly repressing' or as 'decadent'. In an attempt to escape these agonies, the dream of 'Gemeinschaft', established<sup>2</sup> in aristocratic romanticism and reinforced - in an adapted fashion - by both nineteenth-century liberals and socialists, also came to function as a model for a better future. The movement and the connection between agony and dream are captured in the sentence: 'The more the heart is managed, the more we value the unmanaged heart' (Hochschild 1983:192).

In general Löfgren and Frykman succeed very well in creating a lively and factual picture of the differences between both classes, the bourgeoisie and the peasantry. They enable the reader to see clearly how these people experienced life: the scenery, courting,

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Country life became a symbol of lost innocence, of spontaneous simplicity and naturalness. It became an opposite image to urban court life with its greater constraints, its more complex hierarchical pressures and its heavier demands on individual self-control'. Elias 1983:214-267.

<sup>2</sup> An idea may be 'constructed' but that does not yet 'establish' it. Although the verb 'to construct' is quite popular and, in this context also used by Löfgren and Frykman, I prefer to refer to the *establishment* of ideas, because only this formulation directs the attention to shifting power relationships, not to a 'history of ideas'.

timing, parenthood, home making, keeping servants, etc. They have succeeded quite well in stepping into the shoes of earlier generations, keeping an equal and fair balance between the risks of identifying too much with either established or outsiders in their hegemonial struggle. Only in few formulations, like 'the tyranny of time' – a reification, a slight romantic or middle class bias has slipped in. This metaphor of stepping into someone's shoe, made me realize that the book does not pay much systematic attention to clothing, to people's 'second skin'. It contains a chapter on the treatment of the body and its 'first skin' and the chapter on homemaking – the 'third skin' – is considered to provide "a key to understanding the way family life changed during the past hundred years and how ideology was put into practice' (p.126). This made me wonder how revealing a chapter on differences and changes in dress and the care for the 'boundary' of one's 'second skin' could have been. I use the term 'boundary' here, because as far as the second part of the book is concerned, the name of Mary Douglas should be added to the ones mentioned in the introduction.

Frykman, the author of this part, seems to be more fond of 'boundaries' than Löfgren, and to my taste, the theoretical excursions in his chapter 'The Cultural Basis of Physical Aversion' contain too much sentences like 'Things without names do not exist and are therefore tabooed' (p.168), 'These things are considered repulsive and disgusting, charged with power and danger, because they are on the boundary' (p.168) or 'Ideas of impurity defend the status quo' (p.171). Writing and thinking like this, makes it difficult to perceive changes and impossible to explain them, for example:

The putative barbarism of the feudal lords was gradually eliminated after the Renaissance, as a civilized human ideal began to take shape in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The elimination of barbarism was achieved, according to Elias, by means of hygiene (p.252). [...] Health was the weapon with which barbarism was eliminated (p.254). [...] The strict morals of bourgeois culture can therefore be derived from ideas of hygiene and health, ideas about the importance of always being clean and wholesome in thought, word and deed. (p.256)

Here, Elias's work is heavily misunderstood and distorted. Nowhere in *The Civilizing Process*, the book Frykman refers to, Elias ever did use the word barbarism; he has always stressed that there is no zero point in civilization. And, in this book, he explicitly denies that arguments of hygiene and health played a significant role – in his period of research they did not play any role at all - Goudsblom(1986) took up this problem and confirmed Elias' observation –, the most important driving forces being competitive struggles for power, status and identity. He does not deny the functions of ideals, but the emphasis is on explaining them in terms of

competitive power struggles, growing interdependencies, differentiation and integration of social functions.

On the whole, explanation is not the major strength of these authors anyway. The reader gets a clear picture of the changes, but the view on the motors, the driving forces of the processes, is less sharp. As to the questions how and why it all changed, the hegemonial class struggles are referred to, but they are not really depicted. In this respect, the answers that the authors present mainly consist of suggestions, i.e. to the driving forces operative in the processes of industrialization and urbanization.

Since the book deals with processes in Sweden only, one cannot tell to what extent the Swedish story differs from that of other European nation states where the middle classes also came to dominate. But, as far as this reader is informed, the similarities are striking. From the distance that is created by time and an integration process towards larger survival units - a war between European states would now be experienced to be a civil war - more and more similarities have become obvious, whereas before, only differences seemed to meet the eye. All the middle class virtues that went into the popular stereotypes of Swedishness and every description of Swedish middle class culture on the move are identical for the Netherlands and most probably for all the other industrialized European countries, with only differences in emphasis and pace. This means that, what the authors call the material basis of culture building, 'the simple fact that different groups of people live under different conditions, which produce different experiences', has been quite similar in Europe, and that the process of middle class culture building in Sweden has been part of a much broader process. The richness of observations like 'supernatural beings policed the landscape' (p.48) demonstrates that most of the 'backward' beliefs, attitudes and practices of people in Third World countries were present in the societies of our (grand)grandparents, pointing to still broader (civilizing) processes, if only because the people there, have also started to see their nature 'as a kingdom of slumbering riches, waiting to be exploited' (p.50).

This book, being an early result of a longer term research project, has convinced me that, in the meantime, more 'slumbering riches' is waiting to be translated.

## *References*

- Elias, Norbert (1978/1982) *The Civilizing Process*, Vol. I: *The History of Manners*, Oxford 1978, Vol. II: *State Formation and Civilization* (title of US edition is *Power and Civility*), Oxford 1982.
- Elias, Norbert (1983) *The Court Society*, Oxford.
- Goudsblom, Johan (1986) 'Public health and the civilizing process,' *The Millbank Quarterly*, 64 (2):161-88.
- Hochschild, Arlie R. (1983) *The Managed Heart*, Berkeley.
- Löfgren, Orvar (1987) 'Deconstructing Swedishness: culture and class in modern Sweden' in: Anthony Jackson (ed), *Anthropology at home*, ASA Monographs 25, London.