History of European Ideas, Vol. 13, No. 6, pp. 817–824, 1991
Printed in Great Britain

0191-6599/91 $3.00 + 0.00
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REVIEWS

CONSTRUCTING THE MIDDLE CLASS

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Culture Builders: A Historical Anthropology of Middle-Class Life, Jonas Frykman and Orvar Lofgren, trans. John Gills (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987) (First published in Swedish, 1979).

The architectonic metaphor in the title of Frykman and Lofren's book is an apt and evocative one. In the first section of *Culture Builders*—which has already become a Swedish classic—Lofgren focuses on the ways in which the emerging Swedish middle-class from around 1880 to 1910 shaped—or 'built'—ideas about time, space, the family, the household, and gender while Frykman directs his gaze in the second section to conceptions of health, cleanliness, sexuality, and the body. According to Frykman and Lofgren, middle class (or bourgeois) life and thought evolved in response to the need for distinction from the simultaneously emerging working class and from the older classes of the aristocracy and the peasantry. The ambivalent—if not contested—relationship of the bourgeoisie to each of these other classes impelled it to establish a clear identity, to secure its ascendant social position by claiming superiority rather than simply difference, and ultimately to become a 'colonizing culture' (Lofgren 142). The middle class, then, did not merely elaborate a culture for itself, the authors explain, but also embarked upon a sort of empire-building by imposing its culture on other social classes through 'cultural warfare' (Frykman 266).

In many respects, the aristocracy provided a role model for the middle class whose members emulated or adopted much of what they could, sometimes assimilating themselves to it through marriage. In contrast to aristocratic values, however, the bourgeoisie valued work over a life of leisure and regarded the aristocratic lifestyle as prodigal. Whereas the ownership of property was important for the aristocracy, the acquisition of property was important for the upward-climbing middle class and it was pursued through hard work, diligence, thrift, and constant investment. Also in contrast to the old rich, this 'nouveau riche' was more meticulous about clearly distinguishing itself from the lower classes because it was closer to them and concerned with consolidating its novel social status. Efforts to do so were evident in the bourgeoisie's punctilious conformity to rules of etiquette, in their conspicuous consumption of money and leisure time, and in the clear spatial and cultural boundaries they erected between

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their domestics and themselves, something 'which had never been much of a problem for the aristocracy' (Lofgren 131).

It is this differentiation of the middle class from the lower classes that primarily concerns Frykman and Lofgren and they devote much more attention to those on the social rungs below the middle class—especially the peasantry—than to those above it. As they describe it, the two related features of bourgeois culture which distinguish it from the peasantry and working class are: (1) The strict compartmentalisation of the world, often into 'hierarchical polarities' (Frykman 270) and (2) The obsession with control, discipline, and rationality in their own lives and in their relationship *vis à vis* others.

Both of these features are manifest in the proliferation of well-defined norms, sanctions, and taboos and in the 'need to learn how to separate people, activities, and functions' (Lofgren 140). Members of the bourgeoisie considered themselves as not only distinct from, but also superior to, both the peasantry and the working class in self-discipline, self-control, and the economic use of time, money, and emotions all of which they considered the lower classes to squander. They believed the peasantry to represent a 'lack of culture and civilization' since they were 'living too close to nature [and] unable to exercise restraint, moderation, or long-term planning in their lives' (Frykman 268). The bourgeoisie defined the working-class negatively as 'what the middle class is not: uncontrolled, undisciplined, hedonistic, irresponsible, irrational, loud-mouthed, vulgar, careless, dirty, physical' (Frykman 270). They criticised the peasantry and the working class for lacking control of bodily functions (Frykman 225) and for being 'unable to bring up their children in a spirit of discipline' (Lofgren 109). And they were horrified by the lower classes' ignorance of the rules of privacy which, for the bourgeoisie, included separate rooms replete with closing doors for specific individuals and activities.

In fact, 'practically everything that was permitted and physically present in the working class home was tabooed and absent' (Frykman 221) in the middle class home and these differences extended to other cultural aspects such as dress, ideas and practices regarding hygiene, and eating habits—what was eaten, how it was prepared, and table manners—all of which became clear signs of 'who had class and who lacked it' (Frykman 257). The middle class derided 'the peasant world [which was] peopled with supernatural beings, dreadful ghosts, and spirits' (Lofgren 125) and based its own knowledge of the world on so-called scientific or rational evidence. Rather than interpret events as natural, they interpreted them as cultural or willed (Lofgren 24) such that competence became the core of their 'new charter of legitimacy' (Lofgren 27).

With regards to time, for instance, the 'new message [was that time] is in short supply and must be properly managed [and] that people create their own future' (*ibid*). For the middle class, time became 'geared to the future, obsessed with development, and the goal [was] to gain control over it' (*ibid*). Members of the bourgeoisie viewed time as 'evolutive' (Lofgren citing Michel Foucault, 29), seeing their life course linearly as a career and/or social ladder to scale alone at a faster pace than others with whom they are in competition. Whereas the questions 'Who are you?' and 'Where are you from?' were the major identity markers for the older classes of the aristocracy and the peasantry, it was the

answer to 'What do you do?' that assigned identity and status for the middle class. The faith of the middle class that they could in fact 'build' their culture gave them an unbounded optimism and hope for the future. But this forward-looking gaze was checked and balanced by 'a nostalgic longing for the past' (Lofgren 33) which often became mythologised and reified—one kind of compartmentalisation—into ancestor cults, family altars, the 'cult of nature and the peasant heritage' (Lofgren 61), and in the popularity and prestige of History and Ethnology as scholarly 'disciplines'. This attitude toward time and fate distinguished the bourgeoisie from peasants who did not reify nature and the past and who viewed life in a more cyclical and collective fashion with established and predictable rights of passage that are communally celebrated.

It was not sufficient, though, for the middle class to craft an identity and assert its superiority. The ambivalent status of the middle class also translated into an imperative to control, dominate, and discipline those below them on the social ladder who threatened their own uneasy footing. One way in which the middle class sought to impose its own values on the other classes was through compulsory schooling. Rule Number Eleven in the *Elementary School Primer*, for instance, stated: 'Violent emotions such as anger, envy, hate, and the like are dangerous for the health. Unchastity greatly undermines the strength of body and soul' (Frykman 215). By preaching goals inconsonant with those of the lower classes, compulsory schooling instilled in them a 'dual vision' of the world (Frykman paraphrasing Sennett and Cobb, 219–20) as it challenged the validity of their beliefs and practices while legitimising those of the bourgeoisie.

Much of the bourgeois distinction consisted in shifting the point of reference away from the church to the individual or household. Accompanying this shift from a religious/divine to a secular/rational view of the world was a value shift from what many historians describe as 'civic society' with its emphasis on the collectivity to a striving for independence and self-determination, variously referred to as 'familism', 'privatism', or the 'disciplinary society'. Once again, the use and perception of time was both symbol and symptom of this shift. The middle class began measuring time by using their personal calendars and wristwatches, both mass-produced in the bourgeois-owned factories, rather than by the movement of the sun and the seasons or the village clock mounted on the church steeple whose bells announced the important moments of the day, week, and year. For the middle class, time was no longer in the hands of God. It was in their own hands or, at least, on their wrists.

In spite of its power to evoke, the title's architectonic metaphor also belies the very portrayal of the Swedish middle-class that the authors draw for the reader. The active verbs used in the beginning of the text soon give way to passive verbs and phrases which convey a sense of powerlessness and vulnerability among the middle class rather than a sense of control. From active subjects who shape, create, define, reform, and of course build culture, the bourgeoisie are transmuted into objects who are acted *upon*. The construction 'they became . . .' (e.g. Lofgren 93) appears with great frequency—independent of explanations for why a particular change occurred—along with other passive phrases such as: family relations 'took shape' (Lofgren 106); the male role 'was constructed' (Lofgren 135); a new ideology 'became general among the Swedish bourgeoisie'

(Lofgren 107); and '[they were] a product of... change' (Lofgren 14, 141). Indeed, the ample data the authors provide from personal memoirs and other artifacts certainly convey impressions of being molded rather than of shaping selves and destinies.

To emphasise the rigidity of middle class life, Frykman invokes another architectural metaphor but this time the builder remains anonymous: 'Bourgeois society *was built* like a fortress, the walls of which defined the purity within from the dirt and pollution outside' (Frykman 235, emphasis added). Some of the boundaries erected include those separating the domestic from the public realm, disorder from order, nature from culture, the natural from the artificial, dirt from cleanliness, profane from sacred, female from male, childhood from adulthood, leisure from work, and the countryhouse in the summer from the townhouse during the year. These boundaries were behavioral and ideological as well as spatial, determining how to behave, think, and feel as well as where one could go both inside the house and outside of it.

By 1900, Lofgren explains, the Protestant work ethic of the Swedish middle class incited 'a new breeding for self-discipline and self-control' (Lofgren 111). Emotions and bodily functions—'had to be muffled and channeled into more civilized forms' (*ibid*). According to Frykman, members of the middle class were taught to 'discipline their instincts' (241) and to 'bridle their... emotions, and impulses' (225), particularly those having anything even remotely related to sex and as a consequence, 'language and culture [became] a straitjacket' (225). He describes what appear to contemporary American middle class sensibilities as hilarious linguistic gymnastics (223–5) and 'physical masquerade[s]' (231) which middle class Victorians had to master because of their modesty with regards to the body and bodily functions. Any transgression of these boundaries was punished by 'methodical corporate punishment' (Lofgren 110), later replaced by punishments which 'play more on a child's sense of guilt' (Lofgren 111).

But this clear compartmentalising and moralising of the world did not necessarily render it legible. To the contrary. Witness to the confusion accompanying the proliferation of sanctions and prohibitions was the huge amounts of physical and emotional ailments experienced by bourgeoisie of all ages along with the outpouring of advice provided for these ailments by new kinds of professionals specialising in them as well as guidebooks and manuals on etiquette, homemaking and interior decorating, and sexual relations. As Lofgren maintains, the 'need for absolute self-control combined with uncertainty about the reactions of others created a seedbed for many mental disturbances and illnesses, from everyday neurotic meditation about the self to hysteria and other common Oscarian complaints' (111). At the same time, 'Greater moral demands came to be made on parents' (Lofgren 136) such that 'the sanctity of private life became too important a social activity to be left to people themselves' (Lofgren 153). Parents 'needed help in their task of turning children into good citizens' (*ibid*) and in other arenas, so the privacy of the home 'was penetrated by admonitions and counseling' (*ibid*) and the bourgeois child became 'exposed to constant observation and correction' (Lofgren 113).

Bourgeois adults, for their part, were victims of repressed sexuality that they disguised 'in a cloak of gallantry' (Lofgren 103), rendering sexuality 'both a

mystery and a problem as never before' (Lofgren 105). In contrast, the older classes of the aristocracy and the peasantry 'had a more pragmatic view of marriage and a freer attitude to sexuality' (Lofgren 94).

Bourgeois women appeared to be especially constrained, largely because the 'ideal existence of femina domestica was defined by men' (Lofgren 134) who were usually significantly older than their wives. During the Victorian era, Frykman explains: 'It is always the man who is the observer and the actor, the man who defines what is feminine and what is not. It is also the man's suppressed view that is transferred to the women, becoming the filter through which they view themselves' (Frykman 238). To take one such instance, the bourgeois woman's dress concealed her body from herself as well as from others for 'she had consented to regard herself from a man's viewpoint' (Frykman 233) which saw the female body as 'shameful' (*ibid*). When it came to sex, 'The women had to learn that male sexuality was animal, something natural to which they were forced to be subordinate. The Victorian woman's given role was to "close her eyes and think of the Empire" ' (Frykman 238). While men were free to roam the public sphere of Oscarian society, then, women were largely confined to the domestic sphere. Lofgren summarily conveys the situation of the Victorian wife saying: 'Marriage was based upon the two being united into one—the one being the man' (101).

Since it can be oppressive being the oppressor, the male gender role was also constrictive. 'The interesting thing' for Lofgren 'is that many men felt themselves at the mercy of women' (105) and 'under the spell of female domesticity and intimacy' (135). The bourgeois male's role might be even more oppressive than the female one if seen through the optic of Mary Douglas's 'purity rule' whereby the need for 'control grows in proportion to the height at which an individual stands in the social ladder' (Douglas paraphrased by Lofgren 171).

Indeed, this elaborate cult of discipline, control, supervision, and punishment spanning private and public bourgeois life which Frykman and Lofgren richly elicit in *Culture Builders* reveals a middle class so restrained and constrained that the label 'culture builders' seems tongue in cheek. Rather, the members of this class appear to be swept along in a tidal wave of fear and confusion instead of being confident and creatively-inspired architects of their culture. They seem less master-builders of their fate than ensconced in a cultural straitjacket. And the culprit—or the inspiration depending on one's viewpoint—for the consolidation of this new middle class and its culture was, the usual refrain, the arrival of industrial capitalism onto the Swedish landscape. As Lofgren concedes, 'Their world view with its family rituals was *the product of* concrete economic and social changes in nineteenth-century Sweden' (Lofgren 141, emphasis added).

The bourgeoisie's perpetual efforts to legitimise its status as distinct from and superior to the lower classes—the feature of the middle class which these authors accent—is only one response to these changes. As by-products of industrial capitalism, this new class is also bounded by the very logic of the industrial capitalistic mode of production which propels capitalists around the globe in search of markets, setting off a chain effect wherever they go much like what occurred in the children's story about the goose who laid golden eggs. Coveting this golden goose, a man stole it but to his great dismay found that he could not

release it. Having discovered the thief, a policeman grabbed him but found that he too became stuck. The wife of the policeman tried to extricate him from the thief but also became glued and this process continued until a long human chain had formed, each link bound to those on either side. The treadmill metaphor is also effective for conveying the plight of the capitalist who must keep running just to stand still, who must run faster than others to get ahead, and who risks oblivion if s/he slows down or stops altogether.

The particular motivation for and means of elaborating bourgeois culture, then, derive largely from the logic of capitalism. Starting with the primal separation of home from workplace mandated by the factory system, other separations followed: Woman's place is in the home and man's in the workplace. The young and vigorous work while the old and weak do not. There is a time for work and a time for leisure. Work usually takes place in the city where machines and labor power are concentrated while the countryside is the place for leisure. And so on. Based on this primal home/workplace dichotomy, the mindset which prevails in capitalist society compartmentalises the world, usually into two opposite and complementary parts, each tinged with positive as well as negative connotations depending upon the circumstances.

Another reason for the bourgeois tendency to obsessively divide the world into categories is that the capitalist mode of production relies for its well-being on the fragmentation and cultural gaps which these divisions generate, such as those between men and women and among the different ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups. Finally, a necessary ingredient for triumphant capitalism is the ability to harness nature and people and to convert these into viable means of production, a task calling for control, discipline, and punishment.

Were bourgeois values in fact less dictated by a central power such as the church or state and more by individual will as the bourgeoisie claimed? Or was this social class a victim of the marketplace, an even more elusive and thus insidious central power? The view of the bourgeoisie as constrained by their position within the larger political economy rather than diviners of their own fate and that of others permits a more subtle understanding of the complexities of middle class life and thought which recasts the authors' views of them as culture builders and cultural colonisers.

To take one example, Lofgren describes how 'A totally new world *was created* inside the walls of the home' (126, emphasis added) of the Swedish bourgeoisie. Rooms which had previously been austere and simple but multipurpose became opulently and theatrically appointed according to the single function they were to serve (*ibid*). These decors connoted 'romance, sentimentality, and fantasy' (*ibid*) and included generously scattered mirrors so people could observe and appropriately modify their appearance and behavior (Lofgren 140). Such fetishising of the middle class 'home' could be understood in terms of four factors accompanying the political and economic restructurings of the society from which this new middle class emerged. First, more people had more money and their new and shaky position on the social ladder incited them to spend it conspicuously in an effort to demonstrate their status to others as well as to themselves. Secondly, the exorbitant amount of care demanded by so much decor and frill could now be administered by the bourgeois woman who did not

have to work in either the paid or unpaid workforce—like the peasant and working class women—and it could be carried out by the abundance of cheap domestic labor pooled from the growing rural proletariat (127). Thirdly, items used for home decorating were more numerous and less expensive than ever before since the working class was mass-producing them in the new factories mounted by members of the bourgeoisie. And finally, the noise, dirt, stench, ugliness, class tensions, anonymity, and other disagreeable aspects of the growing industrial city incited escape by those who could afford it, both away from the central city and into 'a compensatory world of intimacy, coziness, and warmth' (Lofgren 127), ideally a home which would be a haven from a heartless world.

Although the bourgeoisie did indeed attempt 'to colonize and reform other groups in society' (Lofgren 6) leading to the 'embourgeoisement' of many, their missionary zeal was in response to the threat posed by the growing size and mobilisation of the working class to their property and their fragile social status. These attempts might also reveal a more or less conscious self-doubt regarding the legitimacy of the various capitalist enterprises in which they were engaged and the associated gap between rich and poor which was growing larger and more conspicuous by the day. Their attempts to impose their own values and lifestyles on others, then, might be conceived as 'a defense mechanism against the social unrest that was plaguing society' (Frykman 259) or as 'an attempt to create a common national identity in a period of sharpened class conflicts in Sweden' (Lofgren 61).

These attempts were also largely well-intended and sincere efforts to make the world a better place. One thinks particularly of the middle-class women who volunteered much of their time and effort to 'reform' the working class. As Lofgren says, 'many of them were not aware of the fact that their reforming activities exhibited heavy moral overtones [and] complained of the suspicion and ungrateful attitudes directed toward them by the workers, who resented these moral connotations' (143). But although 'the aim of their work was no doubt noble, ... its effect was only to emphasize more strongly the difference between the two cultures' (Frykman 262). And ultimately, 'it deepened the gulf' (263) between them.

The dialectical relationship between the bourgeoisie and the rest of society, then, parallels that between bourgeois men and women. At first glance, the latter of the two pairs is subordinate to the former. Yet, the 'dual vision' of subordinate groups of people arms them with a rich cultural world of their own whereas the cultural world of bourgeois society and men would be incomplete without the other social classes and the women. This is because the very self-definition of the hegemonic groups is grounded in their domination over others, anchoring them in conservatism and compelling them to comply with well-established rules requiring self-control and control over others in order to legitimise and preserve their social position. The subordinate groups, on the other hand, may elaborate their (sub)cultures more freely without undue regard for established rules, without trying to justify it to others, without proselytising to swell their ranks, and without fear of losing hegemonic status since they do not have it. When the subordinate group of each pair appears to defer as in embourgeoisement and

female subservience, their superficial acceptance might reflect real acceptance or, as Lofgren says in reference to 'working-class appropriation of middle-class lifestyles' (150): 'Elements may be borrowed, but they are often charged with new meanings' (*ibid*). And a third alternative is appropriation as a form of passive resistance, as a ruse for the unhampered preservation of their own cultures.

The representation of middle class culture provided by Frykman and Lofgren is clearly from these hegemonic perspectives. It is an interpretation which is, for the most part, bourgeois- and male-centric concerned primarily with how the male middle class distinguished and legitimised itself and only peripherally with the questions of why this became necessary and what the attitudes of the female middle class were about all of this. The presuppositions implicit in the questions posed in this account are what render the middle class active culture builders and cultural colonisers.

A new culture was indeed being constructed in turn of the century Sweden. But was the new middle class the architect of it? Once we consider the larger scene from which middle class life and thought emerged and upon which it acted, it appears more accurate to see its members not as architects, but merely as the beneficiaries of the most commodious and prestigious houses built not by any architect at all actually, but mass-produced, distributed, and consumed, a process financed and choreographed by another capitalist, the speculative land developer. It was, in fact, the rise of the factory system and the widespread commoditisation of space during the Victorian era that provided the necessary tools for the large-scale mass production and consumption of housing which first appeared at that time and dominates our housing markets and landscapes today.

Rather than 'builders', then, the ascendant Swedish middle class might be more accurately described as the consumers and inhabitants of pre-fabricated mass-produced surburban tract houses instead of houses they custom-designed for themselves. And the women might be seen as the interior decorators of these houses, both literally and figuratively. For living in a world they did not build, they fashioned a world of their own.

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