

# The Sweetness of Home

## Class, Culture and Family Life in Sweden

Orvar Löfgren

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This paper discusses changing perceptions of home and family life in 19th and 20th century Sweden, exploring the gap between ideals and everyday realities. It traces the emergence of a familistic life style in 19th century bourgeois culture and the construction of new symbolic meanings of home and hominess. The focus is on how these ideas about domesticity were anchored in everyday life and routines.

The second part of the paper deals with the ways in which this new middle class ideal of home life was confronted with working class life in the 20th century. In the making of the new welfare state the home became an arena of cultural warfare, where different cultural traditions, class interests and ideologies were confronted. In this cultural conflict the idea of the threatened or disintegrating home became a powerful social metaphor.

*Docent, fil. dr. Orvar Löfgren, Department of European Ethnology, University of Lund, Finngatan 8, S-223 62 Lund.*

### Introduction

'The road back home:

New winds are blowing in Sweden. Winds which are carrying us back home again. *Home, to a house of our own.*

In a society with growing insecurity the family ties are strengthened and we feel it important to safeguard the integrity of the family.

We have discovered leisure. More and more of us have a growing ambition to use our leisure time in a meaningful way.

Quality of life has become a popular concept and this is something which really concerns the home-maker.

We need a fixed point in our lives. A firm ground to stand on, where the members of the family can come together and develop.

We need a feeling of hominess.

At Scandinavian Housing we have thought a lot about hominess. It is hardly something we can include in our building contracts. But we can supply the prerequisites ..."

Most things can be marketed today, even feelings like hominess, as in the advertisement above, published by a Swedish firm selling pre-fabricated houses. It is hardly a coincidence that commercial messages like that have become more common during the 1980's. They echo a longing for a stable and secure family, a haven of privacy, warmth and togetherness in times of growing social and economic insecurity.

There is, however, nothing new in the message. The concepts of home and family are powerful symbolic images and metaphors in Western culture, but the way they have been used differs widely between classes, periods and social settings.

There exists a large literature on the development of a familistic life style in modern European history. Much of the research has focused on the formation of a domestic ideology and the new constructions of gender among the rising bourgeoisie from the 18th century to the present.<sup>1</sup>

This paper explores the gap between ideals

and realities in home and family among Swedes during the last hundred years. My perspective is anthropological and I am mainly interested in the cultural processes which relate ideology and value systems to praxis. How are ideas about domesticity anchored in everyday rituals and routines, how are they communicated and internalized in social life?

Such a cultural analysis calls for a historical perspective in order to demonstrate how notions of home, gender and family life are produced and reproduced in society, how different classes develop their cultural constructs of domestic life in a dialectical dependence on, and in opposition to other classes.

My starting point is the emergence of a familialistic ideal in 19th century Swedish bourgeois culture. I will discuss how this ideal was expressed in the material setting of the home, in the socialization of children, in the new sexual division of labour and the rituals of family life. My examples are mainly drawn from what is called the late "Oscarian" period of Swedish history circa 1880–1910.<sup>2</sup> This is the period when a bourgeois life style emerged as a distinct and elaborated dominant culture in Swedish society.

My material has been presented elsewhere and consists of autobiographies, oral histories, manuals of etiquette handbooks of home making and children's education etc. from this period.<sup>3</sup>

The second part of the paper deals with the ways in which this ideal of domesticity became part of a dominant culture and world view: the natural order of things. The children of the Oscarian bourgeoisie redefined themselves as representatives of a middle-class normality and tried as cultural missionaries to spread their ideals to the working class. The turn of the century debate is compared to the campaigns for better homes and 'modern living' during the 1930's and 40's, when the foundations of the Swedish Welfare State were laid. In this period the home became an arena of cultural warfare, where conflicting values and interests clashed.<sup>4</sup>

My discussion is part of an ongoing research project 'Culture and Class in Swedish Society 1880–1980' which is carried out at the De-

partment of European Ethnology, University of Lund. The project studies the culture building of different social groups and classes and the processes of cultural dominance and confrontation in a complex society. How is cultural homogeneity and cultural differentiation produced and reproduced over time, and how are these cultural patterns related to changes in social structure?

## Public and private – the Victorian home as stage and shelter

The family ideal of the rising 19th century bourgeoisie was based upon a new definition of love. Sentiment and love between the married couple and between parents and their children should bind the family together, but the new ideal was also built upon ideas of intimacy and privacy: the sacredness and sweetness of home. Neither the peasants nor the old aristocracy shared these notions.

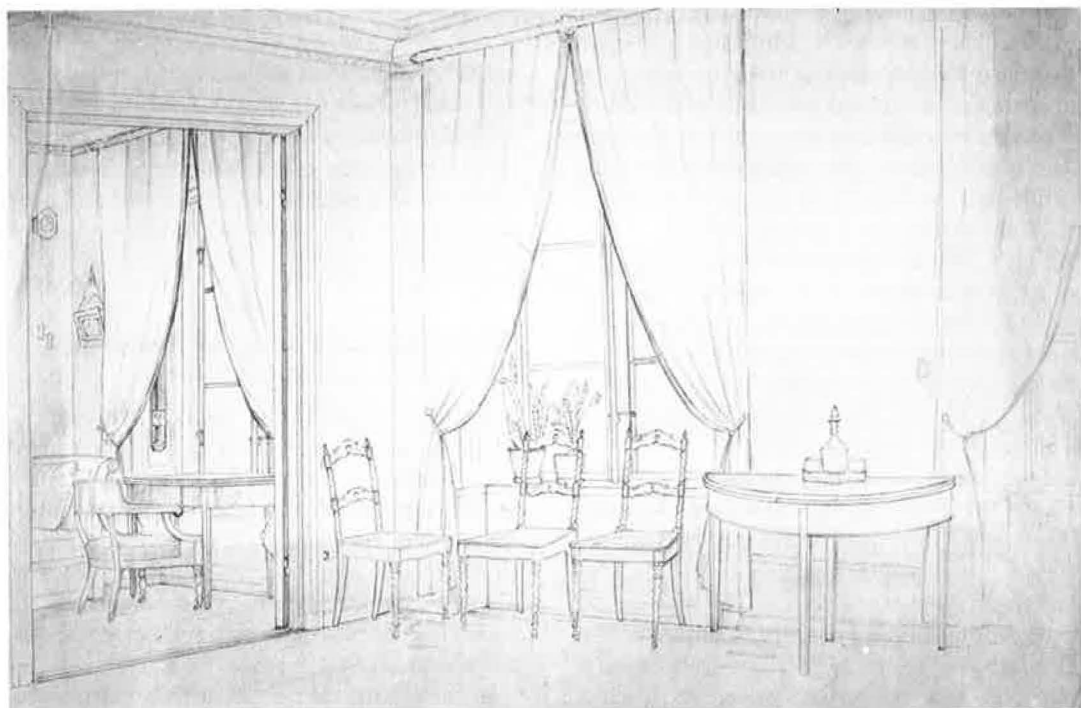
In early 19th century bourgeois culture the concept of intimacy in personal relations became very important. It was often used as a cultural weapon against the traditional elite, the aristocracy. The bourgeoisie asserted the sincerity, involvement, and sentiment of their own family life against 'the amoralistic and shallow life style' of the old nobility. By the end of the century the good home had become a key symbol and a powerful metaphor in the world view of the Oscarian bourgeoisie.

But what is a home? If we look in a manual of etiquette from 1930 we get this definition:

"Fine furniture and expensive interiors do not create a home, but we may talk of both a good and a superior home, where the inhabitants of the house have tact and good manners ..."

In bourgeois culture home was not only a practical but a moral project, and words like home-sick, home-loving, home-made and hominess were loaded with important values.

When discussing the role of home in bourgeois culture, we don't have to limit our discussion to ideals and norms about what a home ought to be. The actual lay-out of houses and apartments, their interior decoration and all



Simplicity and flexibility characterized the interior decoration of early 19th century bourgeois homes. Furniture was often lined along the walls and rooms could be used for several different functions. (Pencil drawing, Nordiska museet).

the material objects which make up a home display for us the ways in which ideals were realized in everyday life. The study of home-making thus becomes a key to the understanding of how family life changed during the last century and how ideology was put into practice.

During the later half of the 19th century middle-class living in Sweden changed radically. Up to the middle of the century dwellings were characterized by simplicity and austerity. The pieces of furniture were few and placed along the walls. The same room could be used for different functions: eating, working, entertaining and sleeping. This traditional pattern started to change in the mid-century period. A totally new world was created inside the walls of the home. Austerity was replaced by opulence and almost a *horror vacui*. The floors were filled with bulging sofas and curved chairs, doors and windows were draped in heavy silk and smooth velvet. The walls were

bestrewn with pictures and ornaments. Empty spaces were filled with plants, bric-a-brac and souvenirs. Tassels and lace decorated everything.

During the period of c 1860–1910 different styles were mixed with a bold heart, but the basic themes remained the same: romance, sentimentality and fantasy characterized interior decoration.

When one looks at pictures of these overloaded interiors, their theatrical features are striking. As never before families invested time, money and a burning interest in designing their domestic tableau, creating impressive landscapes and special atmospheres in room after room.

There was, of course, a material foundation for these displays and interests. The growing wealth of the rising bourgeoisie made investments in better housing and more extravagant interior decoration possible, while new technological innovations made housing arrange-



During the later part of the 19th century homes are overladen with heavy furniture, thick textiles and a multitude of bric-à-brac. (Photo, Folklivsarkivet).

ments more comfortable and mass-production of furniture and ornaments feasible. The social transformation of Swedish society also produced another important resource for Oscanian home-making: a growing rural proletariat from which cheap domestic labour could be recruited. The sweetness of home depended upon drudgery of numerous servants.

For the bourgeoisie the home was both a show-case to the world and a shelter against it. The family home became the stage on which the family paraded its wealth and displayed its social standing. In this period of rapidly changing class boundaries the communication of status and social ambitions was of great importance, which increased the representative function of the home.

At the same time there was a development which stressed the significance of the home as a private domain and haven. The same economic class which administrated the new production system under capitalism also

created a compensatory world of intimacy, co-siness and warmth. The Oscanian home became an antipole to the growing anonymity, rationality and effectivity of the outside world. This cultural contradiction is important to remember.

The actual layout of the typical Oscanian home was a testimony to this dual function of the home as stage and shelter. A number of spatial boundaries were drawn with the use of entrances, passages, doors and files of rooms to separate public from private, servants from family and children from their parents.

The history of the bedroom is a good example of this rearrangement of social space. The notion of a private and secluded room for sleeping was generally unknown in early 19th century Sweden. Even in upper class settings the bedchamber was used for social entertaining. With the growing emphasis on the privacy and intimacy of the married couple the bedchamber was transformed into the *sleeping* room. Dur-



ing the Victorian era it was moved as far away from the entrance of the house as possible, and it became the most private domain of the home, open only to the married couple. Its back stage atmosphere was underlined by the fact that it often was furnished with older, less fashionable furniture. The eyes of a visitor would never fall on it. Towards the end of the century the new ideology of "hygienism" underlined the special atmosphere of this room. The whiteness of the walls, the polished brass or shining mahogany of the large double bed stress that here lies the sanctum for the most intimate of all social relations, that between man and wife. It was the arena in which the only form of legitimate sexuality could be performed in total seclusion and privacy, and a room to which the married couple could withdraw to at night in order to discuss the happenings of the day.

It is hardly surprising that it was the bedroom of the parents which was relocated and reconfigured in this way. The adults did not worry all that much about the sleeping arrangements of the other members of the household. In bigger apartments the maid could have a room of her own, however, the servant girls usually slept in the kitchen or with the children.

In new apartment buildings and villas a separate room for the maid were included towards the end of the century. It was usually located next to the kitchen with room for a single window, a bed and a dresser. Maids were denied any great amount of privacy in middle-class homes.

Children were also given a low priority in Oscarian housing arrangements. As late in the 1870's separate nurseries were rare. Children usually slept with the servants in a small dark room furnished with 'left-overs'. For most children the parent's bedroom was forbidden territory: "Behind the dining room was a world I never entered, but where I guessed my parents had their rooms", recalls one Oscarian. He remembers his father, a judge, visiting the nursery only once during his childhood. Another Oscarian states that he shared rooms with the servants above his parent's apartment and that he had 'rather shady ideas

about what went on downstairs'. In these upper middle class settings the sweet sound of tiny feet should only be heard at suitable occasions.

When the campaign for light and roomy nurseries with their own style in furniture, started toward the end of the century, it was initiated by changing perceptions of both the meaning of childhood and the role of children in family life. It is also at this stage, that parents started worrying about the unsuitable closeness between children and servants. (This had never been much of a problem for the aristocracy.) New boundaries, both cultural and physical were drawn between these two social categories in many middle class homes.

The changing significance of the bedroom and the nursery illustrates the growing stress on intimacy and privacy in family relations. A private sphere emerged, a territory to which outsiders were denied access. At the same time as this back stage of the home developed, the public part or the open stage of the home was elaborated and differentiated. Visitors were sorted out according to rank. Some had to go through the tradesman's entrance or the kitchen door, others were only allowed to enter the hall or were told to remain on the doorstep. In larger apartments and houses we find an intricate system of social sluices: entrance, hall, drawing-room and sitting-room were stations leading toward the heart of the home. The actual rituals of entering these stations became more complex. An analysis of Swedish etiquette books shows that the chapters on the art of visiting considerably expanded towards the end of the 19th century.

The drawing-room becomes the main stage for greeting visitors (of the right social standing) and it is a room which had to be decorated with great care. In a contemporary handbook of interior decoration this rule was laid down as follows:

"The drawing room is the place for entertaining visitors, the place for social contacts between the family and the outside world. From this follows that this is the room in which the house must present itself in a most spectacular fashion ...

... Empty tables, naked walls, bare surfaces can in no way be tolerated in the drawing-room. The chilly atmosphere would counteract the warmth of the welcoming, during which the conversation should cover thousands of topics, all the time drawing its inspiration from the surroundings."

This conscious or unconscious theatrical aspect of home-making fits well into one of the main themes in 19th century bourgeois worldview: the view of 'Civilized Man' as a polished and sophisticated actor, who maintains self-control and a pleasant but restrained facade towards others. Another home-making manual states that the master's study should be decorated in a way which underlines the sincere and masculine, dark colours and strict patterns are to be preferred. Different roles could be acted out against different domestic stage settings.

The interior of the home was also given a form which stressed its function as a place of retreat and rest. A cosy and comfortable world was created in drawing-rooms and sitting-rooms with the help of bulging padding and a multitude of cushions. The halflit rooms had a quiet and restfull atmosphere, and there was a radiance of sensuality coming from the warm colours, the rounded edges, the soft materials. Home was like a snug and sheltered theater box, from which the family looked at the stage of the busy outside world. The feeling of hominess was growing ...

### The heart of the home

"A real home-loving person is a kind of sun. Whether she sits in her own corner, smiling genially or walks from house to house, spreading warmth, she is always at home, radiating cosiness. Such a person is invincible ..." (Wahlman 1902: 68).

In this way a leading Swedish architect defined the home-loving person in 1902, or rather the home-loving woman – it is quite obvious that the production of hominess was woman's work. During the Oscanian era the qualities of home became the qualities of women. Notions of

home and womanhood, privacy and sentiment were strongly interwoven.

Other economic and moral rules were applied in the domestic than in the public sphere. 'Home' stood for emotions and warmth, for security, harmony and cosiness. While the Victorian middle class male was defined through qualities like rationality and efficiency which were demanded in the sphere of production, his wife should have been filled by love and care, passive rather than active. In this new construction of gender differences the career-oriented *homo economicus* is contrasted to the tender *femina domestica* (Cominos 1973).

The woman stands as the guardian of home and its many virtues. If we examine Victorian childhood memories, home and mother, appear to have been an inseparable entity: "What was the lifework of my mother?", asks the daughter of a civil servant and continues "it was the home she built for us. In this task she invested all her most painstaking cares and her warmest love. This was her calling ..." Another author summarized the same feeling in the words "Home was, above all, Mother ..."

The ideal existence of *femina domestica* was defined by men. Middle class women, were supposed to be spared heavy and dirty cores at home. Real productive work was not for them, they were expected to express their womanhood through other activities. It was up to the housewife to provide an atmosphere of hominess. Inside her own home a woman was free to build her own fantasy world, she was able to paint and embroider, as well as plan and decorate. Her delicate piano playing and her warm smile ideally should have filled the house. The lovingly arranged bric-à-brac on shelves and mantel-pieces symbolized the new womanhood. There was always a thousand ways to elaborate and ritualize the day, while day-dreaming and waiting for the man of the house to return home from the outside world.

Female ambitions were expected to focus on making home a pleasant domain. However, for whose benefit? The new manuals for good house-keeping state it quite clearly, as in this example from 1888:



Every room should have its own distinct atmosphere. "Daddy's room" was usually forbidden territory. The dark colours, the masculine furniture, the perfect order on the desk are all details which underline his role as the head of the household and its link to the productive life of the outside world. (Photo, Nordiska museet).

"A man, who spends most of his day away from the family, who has to work outside, counts on finding a restful and refreshing atmosphere when he returns home. Maybe sometimes even a little merriment or a surprise. The man who not only provides for his family but even brings it some of the delights of life, if his financial situation admits it, has the right to demand a warm welcome and it is his wife's duty to provide it. She must do her utmost to make his stay at home as pleasant as possible; this way she can continue to influence him and keep his affection undiminished ..."

In order to understand the new images of domesticity we have to relate them to the bourgeois reorganization of gender. Contrary to notions of gender in, for example, traditional Swedish peasant culture, the new conceptions were based upon a notion of complementary

emotional structures. The ideal of the rational and disciplined male operating in the public sphere was constructed with the help of a new femininity. A loving wife and a supportive home became an important asset for the man who wanted to conquer the world. But home was not only a female domain, it was also a cultural breathing space where men could act out the more emotional or even feminine parts of their cultural personality.

Every evening the Oscanian child was able to witness the transformation of Father, the capable, disciplined and rational professional or business man, into Daddy, the family man. The ritual transformation from the dark coat and the polished leather boots into soft slippers and a velvet smoking jacket also signalled a change in roles and expectations. In the secluded privacy and intimacy of the home, sur-



rounded by his nearest and dearest, he was able to behave in a more relaxed and often boyish fashion, showing emotions which were taboo in the public sphere.

The new construction of gender polarities was not a fixed set of male and female roles, but rather polarities of masculinity and femininity which had a more dialectic relationship. The *femina domestica* helped to underline the maleness of the man in the public sphere but also created a private antipole to the outside world, a cultural space where men would be under the spell of female domesticity and intimacy.

However, when looking at this Oscanian era it is important to discern between male dreams and ideals about femininity and the actual everyday activities of women. The majority of middle class housewives spent most of their time doing other things than playing the piano or producing needle-work. They became homemakers in a more practical sense. Running a household in this period was a complex task, especially if the suitable level of respectability, orderliness and ritual complexity should be kept up. Even in urban households there remained quite an amount of self-sufficiency, with the time-consuming preparation and preservation of food. The wives of civil servants, factory owners and clerks had few opportunities for idle day-dreaming, and this was even less the case in the vicarage or the small manor house in the countryside. The discrepancy between the ideal and the real was as great marked in this area, as it was in many other fields of Oscanian culture.

## The hidden heritage

It is evident that most middle class children who grew up around the turn of century left home with strong notions about what family life should be like.

An analysis of childhood reminiscences from this period shows how much children learned about social relationships and cultural rules from the actual physical arrangements in their home, which became part of a silent and unconscious socialization. The walls kept talking to the children.

The strict musty colours of Father's study with its impressive and disciplined array of books and polished desk communicated ideas about "serious work" and male responsibilities, just as the choice of colours and furniture for the boy's and girl's rooms provided pervasive comments on gender.

The many mirrors scattered around the house gave them a chance of observing their own behaviour and countenance, and also reminded them how important it was to know how 'to carry yourself'.

Above all the silent socialization of the home kept bombarding them with one of the essential ground rules of bourgeois culture: *there is a time and place for everything*. The need to learn how to separate people, activities and functions was taught with the help of the many spatial and temporal rituals which structured everyday life at home. Children learned to respect the boundaries separating various arenas of the home, never to enter their parent's bedroom without permission and to be aware that you had to behave differently in the drawing-room than in the nursery. They observed the difference between the atmosphere and language of the kitchen, (where the servants reigned), and the restrained behaviour in the dining-room.

They were reminded of the importance of time and time-keeping by the multitude of clocks and the constant reminders of the need for keeping times. Time was everywhere. Even as the child moved around in the stillness of his or her home, the sound of ticking and chiming clocks was ubiquitous.

Each family meal became a lesson in the necessity for functional differentiation and self-discipline: Be on time for dinner, wash your hands before sitting down at the table, keep your elbows in and your mouth shut, only answer when you are talked to!

In their memories of these Oscanian childhood days, people also reorganize and reinterpret the past. The process of idyllic idealization suggests that actual experiences are repressed or reinterpreted. It is interesting to compare what people want to remember with the way the cultural stereotypes of family togetherness and parental love were con-

structed. Although parents were, in reality, often distant and formal figures it is the memories of the family gathered around the evening table or mother as a warm, radiant sun one seeks to remember. These memories are more of a symbolic statement on the way family life ought to be.

The fact that there were so many cultural contradictions in bourgeois world view and such a gap between ideals and realities of domestic life meant that we find a great deal of compartmentalization of conflicting messages and experiences. Most children of that era grew up with very clear ideas about what life at home ought to look like and these ideals became part of their ambitions to reform and educate the lower classes.

Towards the end of the 19th century the old social structure of Swedish society was crumbling. Traditional rules of hierarchy, loyalty and social control no longer seemed to be functional. The rapidly growing working class was seen as a menace to the old social stability. There was an atmosphere of tension, of clashing values, which made those at the top frightened. If the old order could not be rebuilt, certainly a new moral cement was needed in order to keep society from disintegrating. For some, one of the answers to this problem was found in the importance of a good home life. If only the working classes could be domesticated, if only their unrest and ambitions could be turned inwards, towards the home and family, many problems would be solved. The change should be moral rather than economic.

A government committee stressed the importance of state loans for working class home-makers who wanted a small house of their own. In their report from 1899 they state:

"There is all reason to believe that a home-owning worker will feel stronger for both his community and his fatherland..." (Egnahems-kommittén 1899: 14).

A home-owner's journal was started and it carried the motto: "Goal: A home of your own on freehold land. Means: Industry, thrift and godliness." A number of organizations worked to protect the values of home or to increase the

love of home in society. One of the most ardent missionaries of this perspective wrote in 1910:

"If all good thoughts were united into a mighty wave to save our homes and protect our nation. *To make our homes sweet and loveable and make our nation strong and healthy.* This would carry us forward, it would protect us from much evil and avert dangers. This would be a new year's promise we ought to give in every home, our hands united in a closed circle as a symbol of our unity, our strength..." (Tenow 1910: 28).

The virtues of a stable home life were echoed in parliamentary debates, in newspaper articles and pamphlets. The ideals were spread through many channels, such as housing and educational reform programs, welfare agencies, and campaigns for good housekeeping among working class women.

It would be wrong, however, to talk in terms of a well-planned attack with the explicit goal of pacifying the unruly working class. Many of the social reformers saw themselves as missionaries of 'the good life', of modernization and development. They wanted to improve housing conditions, food habits and child care. Many of them were not aware of the fact that their reforming activities exhibited heavy moral overtones. Many of these reformers complained of the suspicion and ungrateful attitudes directed towards them by the workers, who resented these moral connotations.

## Working class homes

What about the actualities of working class life at the beginning of the 20th century? The most striking feature was overcrowded homes. As late as in the 1930's the majority of Swedish working class families lived in a single room and kitchen or just one room with a small stove in the corner. Both in rural and urban areas living conditions were poor and housing shortages made rents relatively high.

In these conditions family life took on a rather different character than evidenced in middle class settings. A young middle class boy, whose family moved into a working class



neighborhood during the 1920's was surprised to find out that the local children insisted on adding a bachelor to the list of characters when playing mummy-daddy-kids. He gradually realized that lodgers were a normal part of working class households. Single persons had to attach themselves to existing families, that needed the extra cash.

We can contrast middle class ideals about family life by a looking more closely at life in a rather typical working class urban setting during the period 1910–1940, in the town of Landskrona.<sup>5</sup>

Life in a single room apartment meant that beds and various other sleeping arrangements took up most of the interior space. "Home" was not a place where you longed to spend your spare time. Socializing had to be carried out elsewhere.

A striking feature of working class life up to the Second World War was the relative unimportance of family togetherness. The men spent their time with their mates, women visited each other and children often looked after themselves, playing in backyards or roaming about the neighbourhood. There was neither material conditions nor cultural traditions for a more familistic lifestyle, village life had also been based on a rather sex-segregated pattern of socializing.

This meant that the social landscape of working class children who grew up during this period had a far less home-centered focus than in middle class settings. The childhood memories of Landskrona workers are organized around many more *we's* than just the family: "we on our street, in our neighbourhood, in our apartment house ..."

One's social identity was to a great extent anchored in these territorial units. The boundaries between 'us and them' were manifested in many ways, from neighbourhood nick names to gang fights. Local solidarity was also maintained through systems of reciprocity and sharing. Across hallways, backyards and alleys there was a steady flow of cups of sugar, flour and other necessities. This borrowing between households had both economic and symbolic aspects. Unlike middle class families working class households lacked both re-

sources and space for independent domestic budgeting. The constant borrowing was a part of working class economy just as the weekly visits to the pawnbroker, however, by entering a network of reciprocity you also manifested a social belonging.

There is, however, a note of ambivalence, in memories of these neighbourhood networks in Landskrona, as in many other working class settings. People will talk about the steady borrowing among housewives and then add: 'but in our family we always kept ourselves to ourselves' or 'we always managed on our own'. To fend for yourself, to be dependant upon neither neighbours nor welfare was an important mark of working class respectability. This cultural contradiction was usually resolved by the discrepancy between normative statements and actual behaviour however, beneath the notion of fending for yourself was an important working class fight for self-esteem and pride in a society, where you constantly were reminded by representatives of the dominant culture that your home and family life rarely reached desirable standards.

There were always examples of families in the neighbourhood, who 'had given up' or 'no longer cared'. They were families living at the mercy of social welfare and thus in the hands of the municipal authorities.

It is therefore quite misleading to equate notions about respectability with a process of *em-bourgeoisement*, of imitating middle class values of domesticity and propriety. Working class families did not simply reproduce patterns of the dominant culture. Although they often appropriated cultural forms from it, these elements were charged with new meaning as part of a different cultural system.

A number of detailed surveys threw public light on the poor housing conditions of the working class during the 1920's and 30's. Both conservative and progressive commentators could agree on the graveness of this problem but both their analysis and solutions tended to disagree.

Was the overcrowded home an economic or cultural problem? An official survey from 1933 in the city of Gothenburg argued that overcrowding "is not a result of economic necessity



A typical parlour from a working-class home at the beginning of this century. This was a room which one entered in one's Sunday best and with a Sunday behaviour. (Photo, Nordiska Museét).

but must be related to habits of home and family life which seem unsatisfactory from a social perspective". The problem, the authors said, is not lack of money in the first place but a tendency for working class family members to squander their money on other things than a decent standard of housing (SOU 1933: 25). This moralizing attitude has a long tradition in middle class discourse on working class life: no long term planning, wrong priorities, insufficient love of home. They demonstrate a lack of understanding of both working class culture and material realities.

Another argument found in the housing debate of the period is that working class families used their living space incorrectly. The most blatant example of such bad habits was found in the use of the parlour.

Let us return to Landskrona and a typical

description of the domestic scene from the son of a cooper, who grew up in the 20's:

"We mainly lived in the kitchen. The room my parents used as parlour should be on parade and you had to be very ill to get to lie down in there. When the doctor came to visit you couldn't of course be bedded down in the kitchen. Apart from that all the five of us lived in the kitchen. And the kitchen wasn't big, something like 2,5 · 3,5 meters. It was kept warm by an iron stove, but when times were real hard we had a miniature burner on top of it. It was warm enough and we had a good home ... Nearly all of us shared beds in those days. When I got a little bit older Mum and Dad made me an extra bed on top of a couple of boxes. We all slept in the kitchen and the other room was kept neat."

"... and the other room was kept neat". This phrase is echoed in most other childhood memories from the period:

– "We had a parlour too, it was so neat that you barely was allowed to touch the door-knob ... It was always like that. No matter how little space you had, there had to be a parlour ..."

– "I had a mate at work, his family had a room and kitchen. Well, they took in a lodger, a bachelor, who got the parlour, but he always thought it nicer out in the kitchen, so that room stood empty most of the time ..."

For middle-class intellectuals this seemed a strange and wasteful way to live. They found it hard to understand that working class wives fought hard for their parlours. To have one silent and wellkept room, where no one was allowed to sleep was well worth the nuisance of an overcrowded kitchen or second room. The parlour with its plants, its mantelpiece clock and lace-decorated sofa was not a simple attempt to imitate bourgeois life styles, instead, the room had its own symbolic meaning in working class culture.

It was a cultural space separated from the drudgeries of everyday life, and when you entered it you were ritually transformed. It had an atmosphere all of its own.

## Does mother really know best?

The puzzle of the parlour also bothered many left-wing intellectuals. When the Social democrats gained power in 1932, improved working class housing was a top priority. Although depression meant that implimentation of the development programs was slowed down, progressive architects, planners and social scientists were busy drawing up blueprints for the new welfare society, which also included the concept a new modern family.

Functional living! was the rallying call for these intellectuals. With great optimism they argued that science and technology would defeat poverty and traditionalism. Change was not only a question of giving the working class

a better standard of living, but, it was also a question of reorganizing everyday life on a more scientific and rational basis. To change society and the family one had to start at home.

At the great Stockholm exhibition in 1930 this plea for rational and modern living was forcefully presented with the help of model homes. The author Ivar-Lo Johansson has captured the atmosphere of the exhibition summer:

"I drifted out along the main street to the big Stockholm exhibition in 1930. It was summer and piercing hot. The sun of the new decade was shining on my forehead. A whole new city of steel, glass and concrete had been erected on the plain, until then just an empty space. Houses, restaurants and music grand stands looked like birds rising with stiff wings. In the crowd people spoke about the new architecture which would give birth to a new spirit of life. A door handle, a picture window, a matter-of-fact piece of furniture would in short time influence the family living in the house so that their feelings and thoughts became open and transparent ..." (Lo-Johansson 1957).

In the radical manifesto of the exhibition, aptly named *acceptera!* (Accept!), it was argued that there was a problematic cultural lag in Swedish society. While industrialization totally had changed technology and production, home life was still hopelessly oldfashioned. However, a modern family was emerging and this new family would have needs and goals in life that differed from the needs and goals of the traditional family.

The arguments for modern living and modern homes were expressed in the image of the home as 'a machine for living'. Great energy was taken not only to redesign housing and home interiors but also to develop a domestic science that would make it possible to modernize home life. The key concept was *rationality*. 'Modern living' involves a strict division of functions: such as working, cooking, eating, entertaining, resting, sleeping, cleaning. Play and leisure activities as well should preferably be separated in the home. During the 1930's

there was a rapidly expanding literature on the scientific reorganization of domestic life. A good example of this genre is the work of a committee for the standardization of kitchens, which produced its detailed report in 1935. It starts out with a general motto:

"A pleasant, practical and hygienic work place for those who handle the daily care of the house is the primary condition for an orderly home." (Kommittén ... 1935: 23).

This new domestic order was firmly founded in scientific notions. With great care every thinkable function of the home and the kitchen is listed in this report. No task was too trivial to be analysed. The source of inspiration was modern industry, the authors state. It was the art of scientific management and the time-budgeting of Taylorism which began to enter the home.

The suggestion for improvement in the report were not limited to the planning of the kitchen but also included advice about the rationalization of housework. Here one could, step by step, learn the proper method of washing up after dinner or the correct way to organize kitchen utensils in the cupboards.

Establishing a field of home economics also embraced a redefinition of the role of *femina domestica*. Because more working class women returned to the home during the depression and many middle class women no longer could afford the same amount of domestic help previously available, this interest in the role of the housewife is hardly surprising.

During the interwar period there was a marked tendency to talk of housework as an occupation and housewifery as an occupational role. This notion was also related to the discussions of equality between the sexes. By raising the domestic tasks to the level of *work*, an ideological symmetry was created between the wage-labour of men and the housekeeping of women. For example, the committee on the standardization of kitchens, stressed that work in the kitchen should be regarded like any other job. A symbolic expression of this was the advice that one should create a small office corner for the wife at home, where records and

recipes could be kept as well as being a place where budgeting and planning could be carried out.

The authors also tried to define the minimum requirements society should demand of those engaging in housekeeping:

1. Effective and economic care of all the tasks necessary for the livelihood of the family (housing, clothes, food, heating etc).
2. a mentality directed towards the creation of a 'homely atmosphere,' of sympathy, stimulation, renewal, education which in turn calls for:
3. an organization and cultivation of both material and spiritual resources, from which also follows
4. possibilities to partake in the welfare work of the greater home – the society and nation ... (Kommittén ... 1935: 37).

In retrospect it is easy to satirize this flood of normative statements and well-meaning advice with which housewives were swamped. It is, however, important to remember that the propagandists for modern housekeeping were a heterogeneous group with diverse ideological motivations. The intensive discussions about the role of the housewife during the 30's and 40's mirror several distinct interests.

One of them was anchored in the emergence of a new Welfare State in which the link between the little home and the 'greater home' of the state and nation became important. It is hardly a coincidence that the Social Democrats named their vision of a future, more egalitarian society the '*people's home*'. In this integrative process the mother and housewife was given a key role. She was seen as a very important mediating link between the new welfare reform programs and the everyday life of individuals (cf. the discussion in Frykman 1984). Social change had to start at home, where new ideas about child upbringing, health, hygien and rational behavior had to be implemented.

Ideas about scientific housekeeping and a symmetrical family thus cannot be reduced to an attempt to domesticate working class family life. For the radical planners it was seen



as a way of constructing a modern family, a more democratic family and in this process they fought both against 'the old bourgeois family life' and against the lack of knowledge among 'the common people'. In this utopian ideal the family was no longer the sheltered haven or refuge but it was seen as the foundation of an open, democratic society.

For conservative commentators the interest in the role of the housewife and the home was more of a worry that the true values of home and its guardian angel, *femina domestica* were threatened and the rapid changes in society had to be counteracted by a fight for domesticity in a campaign for 'women back to the home'.

A third influence is found in the growth of a consumer goods market during this period. We find a commercial concern for the housewife and the home as an expanding market for household appliances. Here modern living was equated with investing in new technology, from vacuum-cleaners to germ killers.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the ideas about modern home-keeping were never more than ideals. The progressive reformers who wanted to change the situation of over-worked housewives, making the drudgeries of household work easier, were often surprised at the resistance they met in spreading their ideas.

It turned out that middle class housewives readily embraced the ideology of modern living. This is hardly surprising as the ideals to a great extent reflected middle class values and world view, especially among the expanding groups that saw themselves as champions of a progressive life style – the *modern* middle class (cf the discussion in Frykman & Löfgren 1984).

Resistance was more marked in working class settings. The reformers often did not realize that their preachings had an element of class moralizing and a paternalistic tone, which did not go unnoticed among working class women. Furthermore, all the well-meaning advice which was meant to strengthen the self-respect of the women often had a contrary effect. They felt threatened by the new specialists.<sup>7</sup>

In these campaigns traditional forms of cultural competence were lifted from the common

individual into the waiting arms of specialists and experts. Social knowledge was redistributed and fragmented. A cultural insecurity often resulted from this process: am I a good mother and a modern housewife, is our home organized in a rational manner? Mother no longer knows best.

The working class resistance to the arguments for modern living posed a problem for progressive intellectuals who saw themselves as champions of the welfare society. While workers in the Oscarian era were accused of a lack of culture, middle class commentators in the 1930's accused workers of being too traditional, too conservative in their home life.

One reason for this 'working class conservatism' was again the lack of resources. Even during the 1930's and 40's few families could afford bigger flats, in which the grand schemes of scientific and functional living could be carried out. Who could separate family activities in a one-room apartment? Even in cases where families acquired more space there was a reluctance to follow the advice of the functionalists. The primacy of the parlour continued to be an important symbol of working class respectability. The home became a cultural battle field during this period, an arena where different value systems and different cultural priorities clashed. One more example may help illuminate this process. Let us return to the kitchen.

According to functionalist dogma, this room should be used for productive work only; cooking and cleaning. In working class homes, however, families stuck to the rural tradition of using the kitchen as the heart and centre of the home. The kitchen was a place where unannounced visitors dropped in for a cup of coffee, the place where one had one's meals, where mother mended clothes, the children played and Dad took a nap on the kitchen bench.

This crowding of people and activities was judged as both unsound and unhygienic. In many of the new housing estates planned in the 30's kitchens were made very small, in order to force alternative activities into other rooms. To their disappointment architects found that people persisted in crowding into



For middle class observers of the 1930's working class scenes like this one represented both a lack of order and culture. (Photo, Nordiska muséet).



the kitchen, leaving the parlour which architects had renamed 'the everyday room' empty and on parade for special visitors and ritual occasions.

These battles about the correct ways to organize your home life illustrate several points. First of all, it is obvious that much of the obsession with *functional differentiation* in fact had less to do with the demands of 'hygiene' or 'objective science' than with one of the basic foundations of Oscanian worldview viz: the bourgeois fear of mixing categories, of not drawing sharp boundaries, of sleeping and eating in the same room, of mixing meat and potatoes on the dinner plate. The Oscanian motto 'there's a time and place for everything' was still imprinted on the mind of the intellectuals who thought that they were busy creating a totally new society in the 1930's. Just as the Oscanians complained about the sloppy and unorganized life of the peasants, the new middle class intellectuals could not see that the

life of working class families had its own cultural order, its own rules and norms.

### The dying family

The class bias is easier to detect in the conservative debate on the future of home and family that occurred in the 30's and 40's. While the radical intellectuals complained about the fetters of tradition and suggested the need for a new type of family with new sex roles and new methods of child-rearing in the modern Welfare State, conservative commentators viewed this utopia with less enthusiasm. Conservatives saw the Social democratic visions and the working class demands for a better material life as a threat to the established order, and as an attempt to cut everybody down to the same size. Their lament was that the traditional values of family and home were eroded and their utopia was not to be found in the future but in the past. They extolled the

happy and sound family life of the Victorians.

Let me quote some examples of this devolutionary attitude, which sees nothing but disintegration and demoralization in modern family life. The first quotation is from a book on the home in 1947:

“We seem to be living in a time of crisis for the home. Not only because of the rapidly increasing number of divorces but also because of the new style of life, if one can call it style: parents play bridge and go to the cinema, they go on holidays to the seaside without their children and let their little ones grow up in kindergartens or boarding schools ... (Söderberg 1947: 1).

There are a number of books like this, calling for a protection of the home, published during the 1940's – more than during any other decades of this century. Another typical specimen is the collection “Our Swedish Home. 33 Authors Look at the Problems of the Home.” The following remarks come from the introduction:

“The rapid development of our society during the last generations has created many and difficult problems. The institution which more than any else has been damaged in this process is *the home*; discussions about its future existence are not only of academic interest, it concerns us all. At the same time as the conditions for a survival of the home have deteriorated (the minimal dwellings, industrial work, which splits up the family, the strong forces which especially lure the young away from home), we have come to understand that the home is the indispensable foundation for human happiness and the healthy evolution of Mankind ...” (Hedström 1947: 9).

Such reports on the sorry state of the home also led to calls for vigorous action. What could be done to improve conditions? In 1941 a committee published a proposal for more and better education in the art of home-making in Swedish schools. It started its report with this statement:

“We need a revival of the family. Modern Man who has lost so many of his illusions and so much of the support found in traditions must not be bereaved of the values we still own. The family can provide the security and the happiness which our hunted mankind needs, today more than ever. The family must not only be defended; it must be made to render more support than it has done for the last generations ...” (Hem och familj 1941: 5).

A detailed program was presented to further this aim. Children were to be given a more positive view of the home and the family. They should receive more instruction in home-economics and home-making, they should be prepared for marriage and their parental duties. Underneath all the suggestions runs the belief that a moral rearmament was needed and that even marital happiness can be improved by these types of really useful knowledge: “It can even be said that better knowledge is needed if individuals shall be able to attain more happiness in their family life”.

This normative approach to the reform of family life among ordinary people was very typical of the period. In “Our Swedish Home” several authors were mourning the passing of the old togetherness of the Victorian family, gathered around the paraffin lamp, and there were appeals for the revival of this institution: “Every family ought to decide to turn at least some evenings during the week into ‘evenings at home’, in the sign of family fellowship and hominess ...”

In the interest for education and enlightenment both conservative and progressive intellectuals sometimes joined hands. The need for more stable and healthier homes also called for a domestication of husbands. In accordance with the new marriage ideal of spouses as comrades or equal partners in the joint family business, men had to change. Boys should be encouraged to take a greater interest in their future roles of good husbands, men ought to spend more times with their families etc. No longer should the domestic sphere simply be a female domain or a male resting-place. Building a happy home called for two interested and well-educated spouses.



The symbol of togetherness: the family gathered around the evening lamp. This was how many Oscarians liked to remember their childhood. (Photo, Nordiska museet).



But why all this worry and concern? Looking back on the 1940's one can argue that during no other period of Swedish history has the family had such a strong and clearly delineated position in the social landscape. At this time the old collectivity of working class neighbourhoods had started to disintegrate and we find a much more familistic life style emerging also among workers. The fact that one in sixteen marriages ended in divorce in 1937 was a cause of grave concern for some observers at that time. Today, when the Swedish divorce rate is one in four, these figures seem less menacing.

The notion of the disintegrating family becomes even more difficult to understand if you look at the history of household formation in Sweden. A century earlier 43% of all children were born outside marriage, while only 26% of all women of marriageable age were married in the city of Stockholm. These figures were something of a European record.<sup>8</sup> In that urban setting the nuclear family household was not a dominant cultural form.

## The threatened home

During the last Swedish election campaigns, there was a message, carried by some of the political posters that lined the street, which seems strikingly familiar. It said: **SAFE-GUARD THE FAMILY!** It seems that the family nearly always has been threatened during the last hundred years, the only century in Swedish history when we have had a very strong familistic culture.

There are several lessons to be learned from a study of the gap between ideal and reality in family life. First of all the historian of the family must learn not to take statements about the death of the family or radical changes in family patterns at their face value. As in all historical reconstruction we must distinguish between normative rules and ideals on one hand and everyday realities on the other. Any cultural analysis must tackle the important difference between what people say and what people do. But normative statements are interesting too. They may tell us, in an often indirect way, of anxieties or cultural dilemmas in the period under study.

We have to ask 'why is the family portrayed as a threatened institution, who is supposed to threaten it and who feels threatened?' In order to understand the debate on the future of the family in 1900 or 1930 we must see concepts like home and family as powerful images, symbols and metaphors. We may argue that the family seemed to have been a rather stable social institution in the 1940's at least compared with the situation a hundred years earlier. The image of a disintegrating family system should rather be seen as a metaphor for other social anxieties. It mirrors the self-conception and the worries of the middle-class, which felt itself threatened during this period. It is not necessarily the family which is changing but the society. We find the same tendencies in the Victorian debate on the family.

Different social groups and classes will, for different interests use the image of the home or the family as a cultural weapon. In this process the past will often be reorganized for the present. The Victorian middle class extolled the virtues of family life in the 'traditional peasant culture'. The picture they painted of a stable, home-centered life, of obedient children and loving parents tells us more of their own aspirations and ideals than about historical realities. Their homage to the mythical 'Grand Family' mirrored the longing for a more stable and patriarchal structure in a rapidly changing society.

In the same way critics of the Welfare State in the 1940's created their picture of the sound and happy family life of the Victorian bourgeoisie and used that to prove their point that the family was going under fast. Contemporary radicals turned history the other way round and talked about the unhealthy and false family life of the Victorians.

But *who* is threatening the family? All kinds of dark forces are called forth depending on who is formulating the argument, but there is a strong tendency to put the blame on the working class, which rarely seems to have managed a tolerable family life at all. There is at least a strong element of class moralizing in the debates of both the 1880's and the 1930's, a moralizing which is hiding behind the dominant culture's definition of normality.



"Every family ought to decide to turn at least some evenings a week into 'evenings at home'" was the normative caption to this illustration from the book 'Our Swedish Home' published in 1947.

In these debates we can find some of the roots of the strong normative tradition in modern Swedish society: the strings of 'oughts' and 'shoulds', often formulated with the most wellmeaning aims.

What even radical observers often failed to see was that working class resistance to change could be part of a fight for identity and self-respect. If one grows up in a society where one is constantly being bombarded by messages from the official, dominant culture, messages which tell you that there is something wrong with the way you live your life, then you will most probably develop cultural defences. One of them is turning a deaf ear to the flood of good advice and admonitions, another is turning home into a private shelter. You may be ordered around at work, at school or at the

welfare agency, but here, at home, nobody has the right to meddle, to tell you what to do.

Today there are often complaints about the strong privatization in Swedish everyday life, of people closing their doors and keeping themselves to themselves. There are many reasons for such a reaction but one is probably found in the attempts to reform the home and family during the last century.

In my paper I have argued for a cultural analysis in which ideas about the home and the family are studied in a wider social and historical context. I have stressed the dialectics between the private world and the outside world. The sweetness of home tends to increase as the world outside becomes more complex and problematic, but terms like home, privacy and respectability must never be used as



transhistorical concepts. They need to be anchored in time, space and class, they mean different thing for different people.

The class dimension is important here. We cannot talk of a simple process of *embourgeoisement* during the 20th century. It is important to discern between form and content when discussing working class appropriation of middle class life styles. Elements may be borrowed but they are charged with new cultural meanings.

The same class perspective is necessary of we want to understand the heated debate on home life in Swedish society during the last hundred years. In a society where open references to class interests or class differences become more and more of a taboo, class conflicts tend to be acted out on other cultural stages. The home becomes one of these battlegrounds and in order to analyze processes of cultural confrontation we have to constantly change perspective and contrast middle class visions of home life with working class ones. The same cultural phenomena will take on different meanings when viewed from different positions in a social hierarchy.

## Notes

1. I will make no attempt to present this rapidly expanding literature but only acknowledge the inspiration I got from the pioneering works of Leonore Davidoff (1976 and Davidoff et al 1976) and the studies edited by Martha Vicinus (1973 and 1977) as well as from the anthropological discussion in McCormack & Strathern (eds.) 1980.
2. "Oscarian" refers to the reign of king Oscar II of Sweden 1872–1907.
3. See Löfgren 1979. Unless otherwise stated the Swedish quotations translated by me into English come from this work.
4. See the discussion in Löfgren 1981 and the empirical analysis of the family in the period 1920–1950 in Frykman and Löfgren 1984. The translated Swedish empirical examples in this later part of the paper have been fetched from this study, unless otherwise stated.
5. The following discussion is based upon interviews which are presented in Frykman & Löfgren 1984.
6. Cf the American discussion of domestic ideology and scientific housekeeping in Hayden 1982, Wright 1980, Ewen 1976 and Ehrenreich & English 1979.

7. This cultural confrontation in Sweden of the 1930'ies has been discussed by Åström 1984. See also Martin (1981: 53ff).
8. Figures are from the 1850's. Only Vienna had a higher rate of illegitimacy, while cities like Paris and London had a percentage of 51 respectively 46% married women (cf the discussion in Matovic 1984: 73).

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