

## Family life within the making of a welfare state

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Jonas Frykman & Orvar Löfgren 2022. *Kärlek och kärnfamilj i folkhemmet: längtan, lust och oro*. [Love and nuclear family in folkhemmet: longing, desire and worry]. Malmö: Gleerups. 236 pp. ISBN 978-91-511-0841-4

In the book “Kärlek och kärnfamilj i folkhemmet: längtan, lust och oro” (Love and Nuclear Family in Folkhemmet: Longing, Desire, and Worry), Orvar Löfgren and Jonas Frykman examine the twentieth century’s transformation into the era of the nuclear family. They investigate the normalisation of the nuclear family in Swedish everyday life from the 1930s to the 1960s and its central role in the construction of the Swedish *folkhem*. *Folkhemmet*, translating to “The People’s Home”, embodies a welfare concept signifying the establishment of the welfare system in Sweden, rooted in the idea of societal cohesion akin to a large family, in which all members contribute and care for one another.

Through this thematic lens, the authors seek to extend their earlier work, “Den kultiverade människan” (The Cultivated Man), published in 1979, which delved into the emergence of bourgeois culture in the late nineteenth century. Their current book shifts its focus to the family in mid-twentieth century Sweden, commencing in the 1930s. They characterise this period as marked by both anxiety stemming from societal upheavals, and optimism fuelled by a desire for societal reform. The authors’ analytical emphasis lies in examining the practical manifestation, perception, and experience of the nuclear family, probing how it attained the status of an unquestioned mode of living. They depict the emergence of the nuclear family as a gradual revolution. The introduction culminates in two visits to the authors’ own basements, revealing familial histories and material artifacts. The book concludes in the 1960s, a time when the nuclear family faced challenges, and alternative family structures such as patchwork families or unmarried cohabitation began to emerge.

The book comprises six analytical chapters, each illuminating various aspects of daily life revolving around the nuclear family concept during this era. Accompanied by photographs from the period, these chapters explore diverse facets of life. The first chapter centres on courtship rituals, depicting interwar youth culture encompassing dances, movie outings, and the liber-

ating role of bicycles in enhancing mobility and freedom. This period witnessed evolving consumption patterns, access to new spaces, and the rise of media culture, fostering an atmosphere of romance and aspiration. However, these shifts in youth culture often led to intergenerational tensions and a moral panic regarding youth conduct. The subsequent chapter builds upon earlier work by Frykman (1988), addressing these moral anxieties and the oppositional worldviews between generations. Older generations believed that young people's frivolous habits threatened the basis for the building of the new Swedish *folkhem*: a robust, growing population. They feared that without more children being born within marriage, in combination with their preferred reduction of births outside of marriage, the population decline would threaten the construction of a welfare society. The fear of population decline and societal destabilisation spurred an emphasis on the nuclear family as a solution to preserve societal cohesion. The younger generation was also moving towards the nuclear family, but their motivation was driven more by longing and desire. Despite the fears of the older generations, this led to more marriages and more children being born, resulting in the post-war generation becoming the largest yet, commonly referred to as the baby boomers. Urbanisation, mobility, and evolving lifestyle norms further influenced the rise of the nuclear family.

The third chapter, titled "Flytta ihop", meaning 'moving in together', delves further into the establishment of a home. Here, the authors explore how families were organised in their everyday lives and under various living conditions, highlighting the cramped living spaces many families endured during the interwar period. The role of the housewife becomes central in this context, as she navigated the densification of home and family life while also shouldering the responsibilities of raising children. The subsequent chapter centres on the theme of sex life and its regulation by authorities. This realm became a subject of well-intentioned advice and warnings from authorities, emphasising the need for accurate information and hygienic practices around sex, underlining its presumed importance for a successful marriage. Illegitimate children were perceived as a threat to the nation, both in terms of the quality and quantity of the population. As a response, authorities advocated for children to be born within wedlock, in appropriate numbers, and at the 'right' time. Consequently, married women became defined by their ability to bear children, and sex was intricately linked with duty and responsibility.

The fifth analytical chapter examines the post-Second World War era and its transformative impact on family life in Sweden. With the advent of the welfare society, families experienced radical changes, including modernisa-

tion of living spaces, increased purchasing power, and leisure time. Frykman and Löfgren explore not only the material transformations, but also how these changes affected different social strata, and how hierarchies were subtly communicated through gestures such as looks, moments of silence, or shrugs. In the final chapter, the focus shifts to family traditions and how the nuclear family served as the cornerstone for the ritualisation of everyday life through various celebrations. Using Christmas and children's birthday parties as examples, the authors offer a class perspective on these traditions. The book closes with a brief concluding chapter.

While the authors draw on previous research, notably acknowledging contributions from colleagues in Lund, the discussion of this research is relegated to a brief appendix, making the scientific exchange somewhat untransparent. This decision enhances accessibility for non-academic readers, but may obscure the distinction between original research and existing scholarship, and makes it harder for academic readers to appreciate the authors' contribution to a larger research context. Additionally, the book's methodological approach, characterised by a bricolage method, could benefit from a more expansive discussion. The authors employ various sources, focusing on peoples' actions rather than their words, while also considering how the family has been portrayed in public debates and reform programs.

A notable strength of the book lies in the authors' evocative language, effectively capturing the zeitgeist of the examined decades and offering readers a vivid portrayal of daily life during that period. This aligns with their aim to study experience rather than discourse, focusing on lived reality rather than representations. However, the narrative's homogeneity overlooks diverse experiences, particularly those of women and minority populations. Even though the authors consider factors such as class, gender, and different generations to some extent, women's voices are predominantly heard in the chapter about sex life, with their experiences as mothers or wives outside of the bedroom receiving minimal attention. Even if this time could be described as the golden era of the housewife in Sweden, some women did work outside the home, but this is not given much attention in the book. The authors also mention children born outside of wedlock, but the experiences of these children or their mothers are not addressed. Immigrant and minority populations are also largely omitted from the analysis. Despite these limitations, the book provides a rich overview of Swedish family life in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, offering insights into the evolution of family norms and the construction of the Swedish *folkhem*.

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