

## Constructions of Class in Swedish Women's Magazines at the Beginning of the 20th Century

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Analyses of social conditions in early twentieth-century Sweden have generally focused on all the obvious subjects bar popular culture: the workplace, schools, and charities. Indeed, it is only recently that historians have begun to take seriously primary sources such as the weekly press and television as a means of understanding the past. However, in this paper I want to put forward some examples of the usefulness to historical research of popular culture as source material, as well as the contribution of historical method to cultural studies. The point of departure is my thesis *Populärkulturen och klassambället* (Popular Culture and Class Society, 2005), in which I examine how class society was constructed linguistically in *Svensk Damtidning* (The Swedish Ladies Magazine) at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Class**

My guess is that class is on its way in to the academic debates from the chill. In the 1990's thing looked different, though.

There is probably a direct link between historians' shying away from class, and the currents of thought in society at large such as the fall of Communism, the increasing strength of the capitalist hegemony, and the global changes in work and property ownership, the advance of individualism in the western world. As an historian, though, one might reflect that although class may today appear a more diffuse and impenetrable phenomenon, this in no way argues against its usefulness in understanding society a hundred years ago. The term 'class', used alone or in different linguistic constructions, peppers the primary sources that date from this period.

That said, we cannot ignore the post-Modern assertion that ‘the great narrative’ of class has played a part in rendering invisible important conflicts both present and past. But in my opinion the term class must be examined in the complex contexts where once it was formed. Despite what a number of post-Modernists argue, I suggest that questioning the grand narratives and enduring ideas about society inspires a renewal rather than a rejection of studies of class. The seeds of change are there to be had in post-Marxism (Mouffe and Laclau 2001) and feminism (Scott 1999, Skeggs 1997). E.P. Thompson’s *The making of the English working class* (1963), with its argument that class is something that ‘happens’, and is created actively by people in a ‘process’, was a much-needed counterweight to Structuralism. Yet, following the British historian Patrick Joyce (1994), I argue that Thompson’s account becomes a teleological account of the past, a history with a standardised human subject at its centre.

### **Popular culture**

By 1900 *Svenske Damtidning*, a journal started in 1889 had the second largest circulation of the three weekly journals aimed a female readership (the others being *Idun* and *Hemtrefnad*). It had a relatively good circulation and large print run. In the spirit of the new journalistic ideals of the day, it consciously appealed to people ‘from castle to cottage’, even to ‘the lower classes’. Compared with its British equivalents, it welcomed correspondence from, for example, servants, factory workers, and seamstresses who wrote in with their experiences.

The contents of the journal varied, and consisted of short stories, poems, serials, social reportage, descriptions of the Swedish landscape, portraits of cultural figures, letters to the editor, and the like. There was little in the way of picture material.

In terms of the theory of knowledge, in my view the women’s journals demonstrate no clear boundaries between text, author, and reader. As source material, they are a *remnant* of

deliberations on discourse and experience, of how people lived out gender and class. They thus show how the margins of different identities were determined in a specific historical context, and the ways open to people in which to think about themselves and others.

### **Popular culture and classification**

Rather than take for granted what class meant a hundred years ago, I have attempted to write the history of the term's origins, the genealogy of its power, so to speak.

Research into language and class suggests that from the nineteenth century onwards class society's language evolved so that one increasingly spoke of 'class' instead of 'classes', while other 'older' models and terms of social categorisation became outdated and increasingly rare. According to this version of events, strongly coloured by Modernism, we should frequently be able to trace a process of class formation for which the aim was capitalist class society, where it generally resolved into two principles and two classes: work and capital, and 'the working class' and 'the middle class'.

First, I studied all the other equivalent terms used to denote a 'social map'. There was a welter of social designations available: *echelon, level, degree, position, situation, standing, place, circle, sphere, party, rank, caste, category, type, estate*; and images of society as a *ladder, a plant or tree*, or as a *body*. Second, I studied the linguistic gradations that judged individuals as *high* or *low, great* or *small; refined, good, or better* versus *base, miserable, common, ordinary, or worse; educated or uneducated*. Third, I examined the classic imagery that associated individuals with qualities such as *light* or *dark; cleanliness* or *foulness; health* or *ill health*, and so on.

In *Svensk Damtidning*, it was common to write of 'classes' in the plural, and with more designations than just 'worker' and 'bourgeois-/middle-' (as in workin-class). The term 'class' rarely corresponded with the usual stereotype of the muscular, sweaty man, sucked into the deafening factories of industrial society. Servants, actresses, singers, and other professional

women, were equally likely to be depicted as specific classes at this time. Further, the term was used repeatedly in the wider and more general sense of ‘a group of people with shared qualities’: women, young people etcetera; all were described as classes.

The explanation may be that ‘class’ was used in senses close to its etymological origins. From the Latin *classis* we take the meaning ‘levy, group of members, division etceteras’, probably derived from the verb *calare*, ‘to proclaim, summon’. In the eighteenth century it became linked to the Enlightenment’s thirst for knowledge, and the rise of classification as a scientific method. It was a history that also had a Swedish connection in the shape of Carl von Linné, whose *Species Plantarum* laid out what is still universally accepted as the classification of the plant and animal kingdoms. This legacy was later expanded in the great French *Encyclopaedia* to incorporate human social groupings (Calvert 1982).

As is apparent, today’s definition of the term ‘class’ fits poorly with *Svensk Damtidning*. If we see each period in its own light, what happened next becomes unimportant: people in the early twentieth century did not know what was going to happen, so it could not possibly have any meaning for them. With a greater knowledge of the genealogy of the term ‘class’, I argue that even in its broadest historical sense class is still relevant: as a designation with origin far back in the eighteenth century.

Furthermore, in research into representations of ‘the working class’ often great weight is placed on its definition as ‘the other’. However I show how contributors to *Svensk Damtidning* repeatedly drew attention to qualities in ‘working’, ‘uneducated’ or ‘poor’ women that were attractive, and were presumed lacking in many ‘better’ or ‘educated’ women. This attitude to ‘uneducated’ women, and workers both male and female, stemmed from the Christian tradition, not least from Luther’s idea of human calling, which pronounced that work is good, and central to human existence.

Thus, by deconstructing different discourses, I can show how linguistic signs such as 'woman' or 'working woman' were over-determined; they were decided by several discourses simultaneously, opening the way for erosions in significance, and the opportunity to renegotiate them.

The continuing debate on class in Sweden is concentrated on the term 'working class'. On the right it is frequently suggested that 'the working class' vanished with the demise of industrial society, while on the left proving its continued existence is seen as key to the survival of a class analysis as a whole. In my research I have attempted to move on from this discussion, which bears a similarity to feminism's difficulties over the term 'woman'. I argue that it is fruitful to abandon the great narrative of the working class's rise and probable fall, not only because 'the working class' never existed other than as a figure of speech – although one that certainly governed people's self-image and thus found material expression in the real world - but also because this figure of speech was far from alone in its own presumed heyday (it was not only half-naked, brawny men who belonged to classes). This in turn does not mean that I deny the existence of material differences and fissures in society, be they now or in the past. Rather, I wish to shift the focus to examine how these differences were politicised, and were subsumed into social power games. It is power games that reinforce our tendency to classify in both word and action, our habit of constructing classes that constantly change, but sadly presumably exist in Sweden, welfare state or no, long into the future.

So connecting to our theme *Popular culture and social change* I want to conclude that popular culture is an excellent source material for capturing social change, just as history as a way of doing research can contribute with for instance the genealogical reading, moving from present to past to catch the voices forgotten or the roads not taken, just as Raymond Williams, ones claimed.

Partly translated by Charlotte Merton Gray

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