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# Private Spaces and Private Lives: Privacy, Intimacy, and Culture in Icelandic 19th-Century Rural Homes

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## ABSTRACT

One of the most common methods of dividing space is to distinguish between “private” and “public arenas”, where the former are seen as concealed and hidden places and the latter as spaces which are open and accessible. This chapter uses 19th-century court records to study how people in the Icelandic countryside organized their living space, and how ideas about public and private spaces can be used to analyze perceptions of space in the past.

*Rétturinn til einkalífs er oft talinn meðal mikilvægustu mannréttinda í nútímasamfélögum. Í þessum rétti felst sú krafa að einstaklingar geti skapað sér sín eigin svæði þar sem þeir fá að vera í friði frá öðrum, og þá bæði frá meðborgurum og ríkisvaldi. Slíkt einkalíf er háð ýmsum félagslegum og efnahagslegum skilyrðum, svo sem tengslum fjölskyldulífs og vinnu og skipulagi húsakynna. Í íslenskum sveitum á fyrri tíð var þannig erfitt fyrir fólk að finna sérstök svæði innandyra þar sem það gat verið út af fyrir sig, því að oft mataðist það og svaf saman í litlum badstofum þar sem allir urðu varir við hverja einustu breytingu annarra heimilsmanna. Það sem meira var þá voru sveitaheimili á fyrri tíð bæði vinnustadur og heimili þeirra sem þar bjuggu, hvort sem þar var um að ræða fjölskyldu bóndans eða vinnufólk. Fyrir þá sem voru að mestu bundnir á heimilum var því skipting í einkasvæði og opinbert svæði merkingarlítill, því að þeir áttu litinn sem engan aðgang að opinberu lífi.*

*Í þessari grein er rými og rýmisskynjun í íslenskum sveitum skoðað út frá kenningum um skiptingu rýmis í einka- og opinber svæði. Stuðst er við vitnisburði nokkurra vitna í tveimur dómsmálum í Árnessýslu á síðari hluta 19. aldar, en þessar heimildir gefa okkur ómetanlega innsýn í hugmyndir alþýðufólks um málefni sem sjaldan er rætt um í rituðum heimildum. Niðurstaðan er sú að hugmyndir nútímans um skiptingu í einka- og opinber rými eigi illa við þegar talad er um fátæk sveitaheimili á þessum tíma, því að fólk bjó í ótrúlegri nálegð hvert við annað. Samt sem áður hafði það ákveðna möguleika til að rekta einkalíf sitt, því að yfirleitt reyndi heimilsfólk að skipta sér sem minnst af einkahögum hvers an-*

*nars. Þetta var jákvætt að því leyti að erfitt getur reynst að búa við stöðugt eftirlit annarra, en um leið setti slíkt afskiptaleysi fólk í mikla hættu sem var í þjónustustöðum, sérstaklega vinnukonur, því að einkalíf þess var ekki varið með lögum heldur frekar með óskrifuðum reglum sem erfitt gat reynst að framfylgja.*

## INTRODUCTION

In modern democratic societies, privacy is often regarded as one of people's most important social needs, if not a fundamental civil right. It is not very clear, however, what this concept means, but it is sometimes defined as protection against government intrusion, or the entitlement of all citizens to create a zone or space of their own where they can act without interference from others. The Supreme Court of the United States has, in recent decades, repeatedly defended this meaning of the concept in its rulings. Thus, although the term is not explicitly mentioned in the United States Constitution, neither in its original form nor in any of its amendments, the Court has – to quote Justice Harry Blackmun's well-known majority opinion in the landmark ruling on *Roe v. Wade* (1973) – “recognized that a right of personal privacy, or a guarantee of certain areas or zones of privacy, does exist under the Constitution”<sup>1</sup>.

Privacy has also been seen as a basic condition for the personal development of every individual citizen, and thus an important part of the human condition<sup>2</sup>. In an article discussing the relationship between autonomy, privacy, and liberty, the Irish philosopher Maeve Cooke emphasizes, for example, “the need for a space of one's own, an area in which we are left to try to do or be what we want to do or be, without the interference of other persons.” This is, she argues, a precondition for personal autonomy, as “the imaginative, contemplative and critically reflective capacities necessary for authentic yet creative self-definitions and assignments of meaning and value presuppose the availability of a private space into which the individual subject may temporarily withdraw”<sup>3</sup>.

What this means is the idea that modern citizens need their own “private spaces” in order to develop and defend their autonomy from others; in other words, privacy is a precondition for acquiring the authenticity and self-awareness necessary to become “real” individuals in an individualistic society. For most contemporary Europeans – at least if “space of one's own” is understood in a topographical or “cartographic” sense, that is, as a physical space – this private space is primarily to be found in their homes, which are usually regarded as people's private domains *par excellence*. The home is a castle, a place for private life and intimacy in the modern world, where the family can find protection from public scrutiny and government control. The home, writes the Australian social researcher Peter Saunders, “shelters the smallest viable unit of social organization”, the household.

It offers both physical and psychological shelter and comfort. It is the place where the self can be expressed outside of social roles and where the individual can exert autonomy away

from the coercive gaze of the employer and the state. It is the private realm in an increasingly public and intrusive world<sup>4</sup>.

One of the most common ways of dividing the world is, therefore, to separate it into two distinct parts, each of equal value for the social functions and the personal development of its citizens; these are the public sphere of the *polis* and the private and domestic world of the *oikos* – the household. The former, writes Hannah Arendt in her seminal essay *The Human Condition*, is “the sphere of freedom”; it is “reserved for individuality”, while the natural “community in the household was born of necessity.” Both realms are important for people’s existence, she thought, as, although the public sphere “was the only place where men could show who they really were”, they needed the privacy of the home to give meaning to their lives; a “life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes, as we would say, shallow.” The only effective way, she continues, “to guarantee the darkness of what needs to be hidden against the light of publicity is private property, a privately owned place to hide in”<sup>5</sup>. In this manner, the home provides the individual with the space “to unfold capacities, dreams and memories, to nurture the wounds of the ego”, the philosopher Seyla Benhabib argues in her feminist appraisal of Arendt’s analysis of the private and public dichotomy<sup>6</sup>.

In order to create “a place of one’s own”, a person needs, however, a private space which is really private; privacy in this sense presupposes that people have enough space in their homes to make it possible for them to withdraw from the gaze of others, even from the observation of close relatives, during the most intimate moments in their lives. In a world where the home was not only a place of social reproduction, but also the primary location for economic production – as was the case with most rural homes in the past – people’s opportunities for privacy were much more limited than they are in the industrialized world today<sup>7</sup>. In this chapter, moments in the history of two 19th-century Icelandic rural homes will be used to illustrate how people experienced privacy in their daily lives, and how they reacted to the fact that they could never escape entirely the gaze of others – at the same time as they could constantly scrutinize the most intimate moments of their fellow members of the household. The question to be answered is how people reacted to these circumstances, what were the strategies they used to create spaces of their own or limit the surveillance of their fellow members of the household, and what were the opportunities they had to “nurture the wounds of the ego”. In other words, was it possible to construct private lives in a world where enclosed private spaces were more or less non-existent?

This study is, to a large extent, limited by the sources available to answer these questions. Unfortunately, the great majority of Europeans of the past left few traces in the written sources used by today’s historians. As the “common people” lived for the most part outside of the scrutiny of public authorities, and had not the same access to public discourses as the elite, we have very limited knowledge of how they viewed their surroundings, or how they construed their lives. This is obvious when it comes to issues

related to perceptions of private space or privacy in general, because as these matters were seen as “private”, they were usually concealed and not discussed or articulated in written documents. Court records are often the only sources to break this silence, as they document “public” appearances of people who otherwise spent their entire lives “backstage”, and often they deal with matters which were, under normal circumstance, thought of as totally “private” and thus of no interest to others<sup>8</sup>.

Here, testimonies in two court cases form the basis for the analysis, because they provide a unique insight into two 19th-century peasant homes in Iceland. The reader has to keep in mind that court records cannot be perceived as “objective” or “neutral” accounts of what happened in the past, because the poor rarely entered the public world of the courts of their own free will. Moreover, those who were questioned had no control over the environment in which they were placed, nor over the questions they were asked. The objectives of the interrogator and the interrogated were almost always diametrically different, because the former wanted to approach what he or she regarded as the facts of the matter, while the latter simply wished to escape the public eye and withdraw to the anonymity of her or his private life. Therefore, court records have to be used with great care, because they give a very partial view of the past – people do not speak freely in courts, as what they say can be used against them. The records that were preserved are also produced by the authorities controlling the scene, and therefore they represent their views and (mis)understanding of what was said in the court. But these sources are often the only opening available into the private world of the past, and therefore they cannot be ignored.

## ONE NIGHT AT THE FARM SVARFHÓLL

On Friday 26 March 1886, Guðlaug Ólafsdóttir, a 37 year old farmer’s wife from the small Icelandic farmstead Svarfhóll, appeared in the district court of Árnes County<sup>9</sup>. The county magistrate in this rural district in southern Iceland summoned Ólafsdóttir to the court, because the authorities suspected that one night, a few weeks earlier, someone in her household had broken into the general store of the nearby village, Eyrarbakki. In order to fix the movements and whereabouts of all the members of the household at the time of the crime, the magistrate pressed Ólafsdóttir to describe what she had observed and experienced during the night in question and to explain in detail how the fellow members of the household had spent the night.

According to Ólafsdóttir’s testimony, this was a very ordinary winter’s evening and night at the farm. The Svarfhóll household consisted of Ólafsdóttir, her husband (the farmer Helgi Helgason<sup>10</sup>), their two young children, a servant by the name of Jón Magnússon, and a maid, Guðrún Jónsdóttir. In addition to the regular household members, one guest stayed at the farm during the night in question, a maidservant from a nearby farm, Elín Árnadóttir. As was the usual practice on small farms in Iceland at the time,

the whole household slept in the same room, the so-called *baðstofa* (literally this word translates as “bathing hall”), which served both as the living room and the sleeping quarters for the whole household<sup>11</sup>. The *baðstofa* at Svarfhóll was arranged in the usual manner, with a row of beds alongside each of the two longer walls of the oblong room, separated by a narrow aisle<sup>12</sup>. The actual size of the *baðstofa* at Svarfhóll is not known, but in poorer homes these rooms were as a rule around 5-7.5 metres long and 2.5-3.5 metres wide, or somewhere between 12.5 and 25 square metres<sup>13</sup>, and one has to assume that this was also the case at this farm. At Svarfhóll, as was the common practice in the Icelandic countryside until the early 20th century, two people slept in each bed, and during the evening people sat on their beds, where they ate their supper and performed their evening chores until it was time to go to sleep<sup>14</sup>. Normally, during the winter, “people at the farm undressed between 8 and 9 in the evening,” Ólafsdóttir stated, “but the maid and the wife [referring to herself] went to bed a little later than the men, usually in the 9th or the 10th hour”<sup>15</sup>. The evening in question, people went to bed somewhat later than usual, Ólafsdóttir noted; Helgason (her husband) undressed first, around 10 pm:

Jón [Magnússon, the servant] undressed also a little later, at the same time as the woman herself [Ólafsdóttir], but he sat in his bed and read a story for Guðrún [Jónsdóttir, the maid], his fiancée, who sat on his bed until it was almost midnight. Then, Guðrún came through the room, bringing the *týra* [a small homemade lamp] with her, and went to sleep in the same bed as the guest who stayed overnight [Elín Árnadóttir] ...

When Jónsdóttir came to her bed, which was across the aisle from the bed of the farmer’s couple, Ólafsdóttir overheard “Elín say to Guðrún that she had not been able to fall asleep because her feet were cold ...” From that time on, everyone in the room slept soundly until around one-thirty, when

the youngest child woke up and the woman lit the *týra*, which she had by her side. She noticed that Elín woke up a little later. From then on the woman stayed awake until after four, when the baby fell asleep again ... While she stayed awake, the light was on the whole time, and she knew that Elín woke up intermittently ... while Guðrún, Helgi and Jón, who snored at the other end of the room, slept through the entire night.

Just before seven in the morning, Ólafsdóttir woke up and went down to the kitchen to heat up coffee which she brought to the people who were still lying in their beds.

The other two women questioned in the court, Elín Árnadóttir and Guðrún Jónsdóttir, described this uneventful night in a similar manner. Árnadóttir explained in her testimony how the people sat for a while by the light from the oil lamp, the women knitting, while the servant (Magnússon) read aloud for the whole household from the best known Icelandic medieval family saga, *Njal’s Saga*. The farmer wove a rag on a loom at one end of the *baðstofa*, and the work ended when he had finished the cloth he was working on. Árnadóttir saw “everyone undress that night and she believed she was the last of those present to fall asleep ...”<sup>16</sup>. According to Guðrún Jónsdóttir, the light

of the oil lamp was put out when people had undressed, “but then Guðrún lit a *týra*, which she kept on until she went to her bed.” She sat for short while on her fiancé’s bed, Jónsdóttir stated, as he read a short story to her. Jónsdóttir’s sleep was interrupted frequently during the night,

because a crib with a baby, who was restless and cried, was placed in the aisle between the beds ... As usual, the oil lamp was turned out at the time when people went to bed, but a *týra* was lit when the child needed to be picked up, and most of the night there was some light burning on at Svarfhóll, with short intervals<sup>17</sup>.

The testimonies of the three women at Svarfhóll provide an unusually detailed picture of personal relations at a small farm, at a time when nothing really happened. There is no certainty though that the scenes from the Svarfhóll household described in the court records are truthful accounts of what *really* took place in this small rural home in 19th-century Iceland, because the people questioned clearly wanted to convince the county magistrate of their innocence. Through their testimonies we can, however, reconstruct what *might* have happened during the night in question, and how people of “the masses” attempted to create their private spaces in the very constrained surroundings of the rural household.

## THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE – THE GREAT DICHOTOMY

“Through constant and continuous use,” writes the Italian political philosopher, Norberto Bobbio, the conceptual pair “public” and “private” has “become one of the ‘great dichotomies’ used by several disciplines – social and historical sciences as well as law – to define, represent and order their particular fields of investigation”<sup>18</sup>. Using a metaphor from the theatre, social space can be divided into two diametrically different and mutually exclusive theatrical stages, where a “public performance” means what is “open to the public’, ‘performed in front of spectators’, while private is that which is said or done in a restricted circle of people or, taken to the extreme, in secret”<sup>19</sup>. In Erving Goffman’s analysis, to use a slightly different version of the division of social space, people’s behaviour changes as they move between the “regions” or “settings” of their performances. In front of an unfamiliar audience, in public, people follow a tightly formulated script, or set rules and regulations; this is the “front region” or the “front stage” in people’s lives. In a more private setting, “backstage”, their “language of behaviour” changes – it becomes relaxed and intimate, allowing for profanity, informal dress, “playful aggressivity”, etc. “In general,” Goffman writes, “backstage conduct is one which allows minor acts which might easily be taken as symbolic of intimacy and disrespect for others present, while front stage conduct is one which disallows such potentially offensive behavior”<sup>20</sup>.

Underlying this division of social space is the idea that people live in a bipolar world of public and private spaces, where the former is “front stage” while the latter can be

called “backstage”. In this split existence, the public realm is usually regarded as the space of rationality, political action, and commercial relations, while the private space is the place for family life, kinship relations, and relaxation. Moreover, social theorists often regard both zones as essential for building people’s social relations and personal development, as the public domain is the space for freedom, in Arendt’s terms, while the private realm is the space of necessity<sup>21</sup> – in other words, “a zone of intimacy and exclusive relations: a space within which any unsought-for presence will be felt as an intrusion, frustrating, embarrassing, painful, or merely disturbing”<sup>22</sup>. What this means is that the lives of modern citizens are shaped through their continuous oscillation between the open and revealed spaces of the public world and the zones of intimacy and secrecy in the private realm.

It is clear that the contrast between public and private spaces has varied greatly through time, because it is closely connected with shifting ideas about people’s rights – as defined by gender, social class, race, etc. – and the dominant forms of production and reproduction<sup>23</sup>. Concepts like “home”, “family”, and “community” had, for example, very different meanings in the world described in the testimonies of the three women at Svarfhóll to those they have for people living in the industrial and democratic societies of Europe today. Thus, in the Icelandic rural society of the past, “public spaces” – however defined – were of much less importance for most people than they are for modern Europeans, as the overwhelming majority of Icelanders spent almost their entire lives inside the confines of farming households. Until the late 19th century, access to formal education and positions in the state hierarchy in Iceland was limited to a small group of men belonging to the elite, and farming or agricultural labour, which was conducted in farming households similar to the one at Svarfhóll, was the only viable economic activity for the rest.

Seen from this perspective, most 19th-century Icelanders lived very private lives. As was the case in all pre-modern agricultural societies, production and social reproduction were tightly integrated, with the farming household serving as a place for work and family life. Even primary education was a family affair in Iceland, because the first elementary schools in the country were founded during the second half of the 19th century. For this reason, most social relations were defined in familial or patriarchal terms, with farmers and their wives seen as parents, while servants and maids had the same social status as their biological children<sup>24</sup>. The household played, in fact, an unusually important role in Iceland, because the country was sparsely populated and farms were generally organized as individual farmsteads rather than in hamlets or villages, as was the norm in most European agricultural communities in the past. “Roads and communications can never be satisfactory in as large, mountainous, and sparsely populated country as this one is,” wrote Tryggvi Gunnarsson in 1868 – then a carpenter and a farmer in northern Iceland, but later a Member of Parliament and the first director of the National Bank of Iceland. “The population sparsity makes the nation both sluggish



and unsociable; everyone lives in virtual seclusion, isolated from others, and only rarely does one meet anyone from outside the home ...”<sup>25</sup>. In Iceland, “each home is a separate state,” claimed another 19th-century commentator, “the masters are the governors but the other household members are the subjects”<sup>26</sup>.

Living one’s life in a “private space” does not automatically secure privacy however, as it is clear that the cramped living quarters at Svarfhóll sheltered neither the employers nor the employees from each others’ gaze. In fact, the people at Svarfhóll not only worked together, but ate, slept, and rested in the same small and bounded space of the *baðstofa*. This does not mean that privacy was of no importance to them, but rather that it could not be obtained or secured through the partition of the living space into common and private zones. Rather, people created “places of their own” inside the common space of the *baðstofa* through various usages of light and subtle rules of indifference and inattention in their personal relationships. Thus, although everyone saw and heard what went on in the *baðstofa*, the rule was not to meddle in other people’s affairs – at least not as long as their behaviour was inside the bounds of accepted decency. The county magistrate clearly understood the social relations on the farm, and through his questioning he consciously attempted to expose what people should have known about each other’s conduct in the *baðstofa*. Through the people’s responses to his questions, one can see interesting patterns in the configuration of space, constructed by the use of light and invisible walls of silence.

### CONFIGURING THE SPACE: LIGHT AND CULTURAL CONSUMPTION

During the long and dark nights of the Icelandic winter, the use of artificial light was of great concern and importance to everyone. Without it, people were unable to move in the cramped surroundings of the *baðstofa*, and most other actions during the evenings and nights were conditioned by people’s access to some form of illumination. Therefore it was no coincidence that the county magistrate seems to have been obsessed with the use of light in his questioning of the people at Svarfhóll, because it signalled their movements in the *baðstofa*, at the same time as light would have allowed those present to observe the activities of the other persons in the room.

Reading the women’s testimonies one can detect particular methods in the use of light at Svarfhóll, indicating its role in defining the spatial arrangements on the farm. The two types of light used in the *baðstofa*, the kerosene lamp and the small lamps, *týra*, served specific functions and were applied in very different ways. Thus the former lightened up the whole room and was under the control of the master of the house, the farmer, while the latter – the “dim light” – was inexpensive and clearly under the personal control of the various members of the household<sup>27</sup>. During work time, when the household operated as a single unit, the bright communal light – the kerosene lamp – united all the members of the household in their tasks. This was the time of com-

munity in the household, where the room was defined as one undivided “public” space, or as one workplace, and when this space was under the unquestioned authority of the one who controlled the lamp<sup>28</sup>. When people retired to their beds, however, the light of the kerosene lamp was extinguished, signalling the end of convergence in the room. At this moment, the *baðstofa* was turned into separate spheres, where the farmer and his wife had their “privacy” in their bed, while the other members of the household were allowed to create their own zones of privacy through the use of their personal lights, that is, their own *týra*. During the evening in question, the maid and the servant stayed for awhile together in his bed, using their own light, which they seem to have been allowed to use as they saw fit. In a sense, the lovers had their “private” moment in the *baðstofa*, although the fact that they could both be seen and heard by all their fellow members of the household certainly limited the real privacy of their encounter.

The transformation of the *baðstofa* from one communal or public space to separate private zones was reflected in the cultural activities in the room. During work time, the servant read aloud to the whole household, as was general practice on Icelandic farms in the past<sup>29</sup>. This was the evening *veillée* (or *kvöldvaka* as it was called in Icelandic), during which people performed their evening chores while listening usually either to a religious text or an Icelandic saga read aloud by one fellow member of the household. In more than one of the testimonies, the common reading material was noted; it was an Icelandic medieval saga, *Njals Saga*, which was a popular choice for a public reading of this sort. At the end of the work period, the servant, Jón Magnússon, continued to read out loud, but this performance was specifically addressed to his fiancée, Guðrún Jónsdóttir, and only to her. No one commented on the subject of his reading, although two witnesses remarked that he had read a short story<sup>30</sup> – thus people in the room could clearly hear what was read, but as it was not meant for them, it was not proper to pay much attention to the content of the text.

Through the reading practices and the use of light at Svarfhóll one can determine how “public” and “private” spaces could be structured not only as bounded places, delimited by walls or other physical forms of partition, but also by reconfiguring the internal boundaries of the living room with light and ways of speaking and listening. In this manner, our glimpses into one farming household in Iceland supports Henri Lefebvre’s suggestion of seeing social space not merely “as a ‘frame’ or container into which nothing can be put unless it is smaller than the recipient ...”, but rather as “social morphology”. One should not, he argues, “be content to see a space without conceiving of it, without concentrating discrete perceptions by means of a mental act, without assembling details into a whole ‘reality’, without apprehending contents in terms of their interrelationships within the containing forms”<sup>31</sup>. With this in mind, one can observe how perceptions and understandings of living space at the farm were constantly changing; at one point in the evening, the *baðstofa* functioned as an undivided common area, although it can hardly be called “public space”, while at another time it was divided into

a number of private spheres. It is obvious that the boundaries or borders between these private zones were both permeable and transparent – in a sense, they were imagined rather than real – but they were experienced as barriers all the same. Thus everyone could hear every word or sound that was uttered in the small room, but people acted as if they did not perceive the things that did not concern them. This wall of silence was the only protection people had for their privacy, and therefore the private space depended on people’s willingness to respect it by keeping out of each other’s affairs. Sometimes these walls were sufficiently strong to create a sense of privacy, but sometimes they did not hold. For the latter we can study another court case from the same county, which occurred a few decades earlier.

### CULTURE OF INDIFFERENCE: SILENCE, RUMOURS, AND INFANTICIDE

In early November 1857, the county magistrate of Árnes County began to investigate a possible infanticide at Breiðumýrarholt, a farm about ten kilometres to the south of Svarfhóll<sup>32</sup>. What set this investigation in motion, the magistrate stated as he opened the cross-examination of his witnesses, were rumours the magistrate had overheard a few days earlier. According to the magistrate’s informers, Ingibjörg Árnadóttir, a maid-servant at Breiðumýrarholt, “had been pregnant this summer, and around a month ago, she was believed to have delivered a child, but the child had not been seen ...”<sup>33</sup>.

The case unravelled fairly quickly, because when pressured, Árnadóttir freely admitted her offence to the court. Thus she described in harrowing detail how her contractions had started during the middle of one night in October, as she slept in her bed in the *baðstofa* at Breiðumýrarholt. After attempting to go out of the house, Árnadóttir delivered her child on the mud floor of the corridor leading to the entrance of the farmhouse. Rather than bringing the newborn child into the *baðstofa*, she carried it out of the house and buried it in a hole in the earth she dug with her bare hands. There she covered the body with wet moss, and went back to the house. As she returned to the *baðstofa*, she hid the placenta in her bed and went to sleep. Árnadóttir confirmed that her master, Ólafur Gíslason, was the father of the child, but he lived on the farm with his wife (Steinunn Jónsdóttir), his parents (Gísli Ólafsson, the former farmer at Breiðumýrarholt, and his wife, Þórunn Jónsdóttir), one servant (Jón Jónsson), the maid (that is, the suspect, Ingibjörg Árnadóttir), and a young foster child<sup>34</sup>. “When she first felt the contractions”, the court records paraphrase her testimony,

and before she put on her clothes, she had said to Ólafur Gíslason, who was awake, ‘I feel ill’, but he responded: ‘yes, yes’. Gísli Ólafsson, his wife Þórunn Jónsdóttir, and Ólafur’s wife, Steinunn Jónsdóttir, were awake, she assumed from the sound of their breathing. No one went out with her, and none of these people spoke to her while she was in the house<sup>35</sup>.

This tragedy was, of course, not a “normal” episode in the history of a 19th-century Icelandic farming household, because, although infanticides were certainly not unheard of

at the time<sup>36</sup>, they were very rare. The case illuminates, however, both how individuals living in the same household observed each other – or rather how they failed to do so – and the limits to privacy in Icelandic rural society. Through denial and indifference, the people at Breiðumýrarholt refused to interfere in Árnadóttir's affairs; even if they should certainly have been aware of her pregnancy or noticed when she delivered her child, they acted as though they saw or heard nothing. For example, when the county magistrate asked Gíslason's father, Gísli Ólafsson, about the maid's pregnancy, he responded that he had seen that "Ingibjörg had been 'thicker' this summer, but he had not given this thickness any thought. He did not see it grow, and neither did he see it disappear, and certainly not very suddenly"<sup>37</sup>. Þórunn Jónsdóttir, his wife, also admitted that she had noticed the change on Árnadóttir's body, which suggested that the maid was pregnant, but "she had not involved herself in the matter, or ever asked Ingibjörg if she was pregnant ..." At the same time as Jónsdóttir said that she regretted this lack of concern, she denied "having ever noticed that Ingibjörg was ill during the night [from the childbirth], or having heard her complaints about being ill, or noticing when she left the house during the night"<sup>38</sup>. When asked, every person present in the *badstofa* at Breiðumýrarholt, except for the child's father and his wife, told a similar story: they had not been aware of Ingibjörg Árnadóttir's movements during the night she delivered the baby, nor had they noticed her exchange with Ólafur Gíslason and his wife. What happened to the maid was none of their business, and therefore they simply ignored what took place in the room where they were all sleeping.

The wall of silence held until the moral codes of the community were clearly violated, and then the authorities stepped in to correct the people's behaviour. Thus, when Árnadóttir's "thickness" disappeared without a child appearing, the rumours of her pregnancy became a public concern and a cause for a criminal investigation. According to a number of testimonies in the Árnes-County court, Árnadóttir's condition had been discussed in the community during the summer, but the constant denial by the maid herself and her superiors kept these rumours at bay. "There is no child in her", Gísli Ólafsson, the old farmer at Breiðumýrarholt, stated, as one of his neighbours inquired about Ingibjörg Árnadóttir's condition, "no more than there is one in me". The same strategy of denial was used to silence the young servant on the farm when he asked Árnadóttir if she was pregnant; "then she cursed him", Jón Jónsson told the county magistrate, "and said that this was a lie"<sup>39</sup>. Infanticide could not be tolerated, however, and it forced the county magistrate to step in and to invade the private space of the household, exposing the crime – and eventually a number of other offences committed by various members of the Breiðumýrarholt household.

From this case one can see that in spite of the extreme proximity of the people in the room to each other, Ingibjörg Árnadóttir was given a certain privacy in the *badstofa* at Breiðumýrarholt, or a zone where she could act without interference from the other members of the household. Created by a culture of indifference, or by a general inclina-

tion of not interfering in other people's affairs, Árnadóttir was able to shield her private life and personal conditions from scrutiny. Although apparently the young maid slept naked, as was customary on Icelandic farms at the time<sup>40</sup>, her pregnancy did not become an issue in the home – or people did not pursue the matter when she denied being pregnant. What should have been seen or heard was not noticed, as a private space was constructed around others' personal lives. It must be noted, however, that "privacy" of this kind, which was not supported by legal rights and enforced by public authorities, offered people in subordinate positions very limited protection against violence from their superiors. Ingibjörg Árnadóttir was clearly at the mercy of her master, and it was only when she decided to let her newborn child die that the community and the authorities acted in her case – and then not to protect her against her employer, but to punish her for killing her child. This supports the comment of the feminist legal scholar Catharine A. MacKinnon, that "for women, the private is the distinct sphere of intimate violation and abuse, neither free nor particularly personal. Men's realm of private freedom is women's realm of collective subordination"<sup>41</sup>. To Árnadóttir, the privacy of the home did not mean "physical and psychological shelter ... away from the coercive gaze of the employer", it rather locked her in conditions where it was utterly dependent on the authority of her superior.

#### CONCLUSION: PRIVATE SPACES AND PRIVATE LIVES IN THE ICELANDIC COUNTRYSIDE

As can be seen from the two court cases studied here, the division into public and private spaces, and this division's relation to individual privacy, are always marked by their social and physical context. Thus, the function and organization of social institutions such as the home, family, and household, have changed drastically during the last centuries, because production and reproduction have been separated into two distinct and spatially detached processes, and because family residences have generally become more spacious and clearly compartmentalized. For the people living at two Icelandic farms studied here, Breiðumýrarholt or Svarfhóll, the family home was not a private space in the meaning of a place where people shed their public persona or escaped the gaze of their employers or employees, because superiors and subordinates worked and lived together in the same limited space. Moreover, the living space at these two farms, perceived as a physical reality, was very different from the homes of most Europeans today. To have a "room of one's own" was a mere fantasy to the members of these two farming households, as they had to adjust to a life that was lived in the constant presence of others.

This lack of a secure private sphere inside the private space of the home did not mean that people had neither need nor desire for privacy. Through subtle changes in the organization and perception of the living space available to them, individual members of

the household were able to create their separate zones and to keep a certain distance from each other. These zones of privacy were constructed and maintained through rules of non-interference into other people's affairs, at least as long as their behaviour was regarded as acceptable according to the established social and moral norms of Icelandic society. "Privacy" of this nature was restricted however, both by the fact that it provided those in subordinate positions with almost no protection against the violence of their superiors, and because it could only be maintained as long as everyone respected the rules of the game.

The world of Breiðumýrarholt and Svarfhóll has now disappeared almost without a trace. During the early 20th century, farming households became generally smaller in Iceland at the same time as houses grew larger, and hence the living space was carved up into separate rooms, each serving particular functions and needs<sup>42</sup>. As a consequence, the "family" was separated from the "household", and servants were divided into separate rooms by gender and age – and, in fact, by the mid-20th century, the class of agricultural servants had disappeared almost totally in Iceland. This transformation changed people's perception of space and access to privacy, at the same time as it sharpened the division between public and private spaces for the great majority of Icelanders. Thus, today's Icelandic homes, both in towns and countryside, have become castles of private lives, where people cultivate their intimate relations – and this is true not only for the privileged few but also for the "common people".

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> U.S. Supreme Court, *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973), <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?navby=search&court=US&case=/us/410/113.html>. See also: U.S. Supreme Court, *Griswold v. Connecticut*, 381 U.S. 479 (1965), <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?navby=search&court=US&case=/us/381/479.html>; cf. L. H. Tribe, *God Save This Honorable Court. How the Choice of Supreme Court Justices Shapes Our History*, New York, 1985, pp. 12-18.
- <sup>2</sup> See M. Cranston, *A Private Space*, in "Social Science Information", 1975, 14:4/5, pp. 41-57.
- <sup>3</sup> M. Cooke, *A space of one's own: autonomy, privacy, liberty*, in "Philosophy & Social Criticism", 1999, 25, 1, pp. 23-53. Quotations are from pp. 23 and 31.
- <sup>4</sup> P. Saunders, *A Nation of Home Owners*, London 1990, p. 311.
- <sup>5</sup> H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago 1958. The quotes are taken from pp. 30, 41 and 71.
- <sup>6</sup> S. Benhabib, *Feminist Theory and Hannah Arendt's Concept of Public Space*, in "History of the Human Sciences", 1993, 6, 2, p. 107.
- <sup>7</sup> See T.K. Hareven, *The Home and the Family in Historical Perspective*, in "Social Research", 1991, 58:1, pp. 253-285.
- <sup>8</sup> For an interesting but controversial use of such records, see C. Ginzburg, *Il formaggio e i vermi: Il cosmo di un mugnaio del '500*, Turin 1976.
- <sup>9</sup> National Archives of Iceland [NAI], Skjalasöfn sýslumanna og sveitarstjórna [SkSS] (The Archives of County County magistrates and Municipal Councils), Árnes County, V.25. Dóma- og þingbók, 1880-1886, 3 February-29 October 1886.

- <sup>10</sup> It should be noted here that in Iceland the custom is still to use patronymics – that is, there are no family names, as men’s last names are formed by adding “son” to the genitive form of the first name of their fathers while in the case of women, “dóttir” (meaning daughter) is added to the father’s name. Helgason was therefore the son of Helgi, but Ólafsdóttir, the daughter of Ólafur. As last names are not “family names”, women keep their names in marriage.
- <sup>11</sup> See J. Jónasson, *Íslenzkir Þjóðbattir* 2nd ed., Reykjavík 1945, pp. 456-464; H. Ágústsson, *Íslensk byggingararfleifið. I. Ágrip af húsaagerðarsögu 1750-1940*, Reykjavík 1998, pp. 43-47; M. Gíslason, *Kvállsvaka. En isländsk kulturtradition belyst genom studier i bondebefolkningens vardagsliv och miljö senare hälften av 1800-talet och början av 1900-talet*, Uppsala 1977, pp. 26-33.
- <sup>12</sup> For a survey of Icelandic turf houses in the southern part of Iceland, see D. Bruun, *Fortidsminder og Nutidshjem paa Island*, Copenhagen 1928, pp. 242-246.
- <sup>13</sup> See for example G. Eiríksson, *Aldarháttur í Önundarfirði á 19. öld*, in “Ársrit Sögufélags Ísfirðinga”, 1957, 2, pp 65-71.
- <sup>14</sup> Jónasson, *Íslenzkir Þjóðbattir* cit., pp. 9-12
- <sup>15</sup> NAI, SkSS, Árnes County V.25, 26 March 1886.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 February 1886.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 March 1886.
- <sup>18</sup> N. Bobbio, *Democracy and Dictatorship. The Nature and Limits of State Power*, Minneapolis 1989, p. 1; see also J. Weintraub, *The Theory and Politics of the Public/Private Distinction*, in J. Weintraub, K Kumar (eds.), *Public and Private in Thought and Practice*, Chicago 1997, pp. 1-42.
- <sup>19</sup> Bobbio, *Democracy and Dictatorship* cit., p. 17.
- <sup>20</sup> E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York 1959, pp. 106-140; quotations are from p. 128; see also A. Wolfe, *Public and Private in Theory and Practice: Some Implications of an Uncertain Boundary*, in J. Weintraub, K Kumar (eds.), *Public and Private in Thought and Practice*, pp. 182-203.
- <sup>21</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition* cit., p. 73.
- <sup>22</sup> Cranston, *A Private Space* cit., p. 54.
- <sup>23</sup> See for example J. Bailey, *Some Meanings of ‘The Private’ in Sociological Thought*, in “Sociology”, 2000, 34:3, pp. 381-401; G. Gumpert, S.J. Drucker, *The Demise of Privacy in a Private World: From Front Porches to Chat Rooms*, in “Communication Theory”, 1998, 8, pp. 408-425; D. Coole, *Cartographic Convulsions: Public and Private Reconsidered*, in “Political Theory”, 2000, 28, 3, pp. 337-354.
- <sup>24</sup> See L. Guttormsson, *Bernska, ungdómur og uppeldi á einveldisöld. Tilraun til félagslegrar og lýðfræðilegrar greiningar*, Reykjavík 1983, pp. 96-105 and passim.
- <sup>25</sup> NAI Private Documents, E.10.14: Personalia Jóns Sigurðssonar. Tryggvi Gunnarsson, 20 October 1868.
- <sup>26</sup> *Hvernig eigum vjer að byrja hina nýju þúsund-ára-öld?*, “Norðanfari”, 4 September 1876.
- <sup>27</sup> See G. Ólafsson, *Ljósferi og lýsing*, in F.F. Jóhannesson (ed.), *Íslensk þjóðmenning*, vol. I, *Uppruni og umhverfi*, Reykjavík 1987, pp. 362-367.
- <sup>28</sup> See G.Á. Gunnlaugsson, *Ljós, lestur og félagslegt taumbald*, in G. Hálfðanarson, L. Guttormsson, Ó. Garðarsdóttir (eds.), *Saga og samfélag. Þettir úr félagsögu 19. og 20. aldar*, Reykjavík 1997, pp. 55-61.
- <sup>29</sup> Gíslason, *Kvállsvaka* cit., pp. 95-100.
- <sup>30</sup> See NAI, SkSS, Árnes County V.25, 26 and 27 March 1886.
- <sup>31</sup> H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Translated by D. Nicholson-Smith, Oxford 1991, pp. 93-94.

- <sup>32</sup> NAI, SkSS, Árnes County, V.20. Dóma- og þingbók, 1851-1858, 7 November 1857-10 May 1858; see also J. Óskar, *Konur fyrir rétti. Frásagnir af átta dómsmálum á nitjándu öld*, Reykjavík 1987, pp. 229-261.
- <sup>33</sup> NAI, SkSS, Árnes County, V.20, 7 November 1857.
- <sup>34</sup> See also the most recent census, NAI, Manntal á Íslandi, 1 October 1855, Árnæssýsla.
- <sup>35</sup> NAI, SkSS, Árnes County, V.20, 9 November 1857.
- <sup>36</sup> See M. Jónsson (ed.), *Dulsmál 1600-1900. Fjórtán dómar og skrá*, Reykjavík 2000.
- <sup>37</sup> NAI, SkSS, Árnes County, V.20, 25 January 1858.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 January 1858; see also 23 April 1858.
- <sup>39</sup> NAI, SkSS, Árnes County, V.20, 7 November 1857.
- <sup>40</sup> See *Ibid.*, 9 November 1857; J. Jónasson, *Íslenzkir þjóðhettir*, p. 10.
- <sup>41</sup> C.A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, Cambridge MA, 1989, p. 168.
- <sup>42</sup> A.L. Rúnarsdóttir, *Á tímum torfbæja. Hibýlahettir og efnismenning í íslenska torfbænum frá 1850*, Reykjavík 2007.

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