LOOKING UP AT THE UPPER CLASS: THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF BARBARA P. NORFLEET

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Though its origins are traceable to the eccentric 19th-century European upper classes, photography quickly found its true home as the medium of the middle class, and took firmest root in the United States, where middle-class values form the basis of a national mythology. With its emphasis on the material appearances of things and the private acquisition of vicarious experience, photography seemed uncannily well-fitted to the needs and inclinations of the American middle class. Since individuals who trade cultural roots for social mobility perpetually repopulate the middle class, middle-class photographers have found photography useful as a way to locate their position in a shifting social environment. The representation of "others"—people whose life circumstances are different from the photographer's—has been particularly used as a way of defining the photographer's relationship to the rest of the world. This "positioning" function of photography is enacted first between the photographer and the subject of the photograph, and then, by parallel construction, between the subject and the viewer. I am using the term "subject" in this essay to mean "the person pictured," not in the sense of "subject" vs. "object." The person pictured is one point in the photographer/subject/viewer triangle of relationships. Communication is maximized when the viewer shares the background and attitudes of the photographer; the subject then functions most fully as a conduit for the photographer's values.

Although we operate under the assumption that people from all walks of life are potentially available to be photographed, there is an unacknowledged culturally determined hierarchy that determines who may photograph whom. The photographer may point the camera down, towards a subject in a less advantageous position, or level, towards a subject with equal social standing (although a photograph of an equal is less useful as a positioning device). Photographers may not point their cameras up, toward those with higher social status, except under special circumstances. Photographs of the upper classes have traditionally been made in three ways: by the request of the subject (as with most formal portraiture); by the license of the press to photograph public events and figures (the paparazzi try to stretch that license into private life); and secretly (as in the work of Erich Salomon). The territory in which a photographer has implicit license to work thus seems to be demarcated quite strictly by relative

social standing. However, individual photographers negotiate that territory in a wide variety of ways, according to their personal inclinations and their cultural background.

The recent work of sociologist and photographer Barbara P. Norfleet is of great interest in this regard. In her candid photographs of the traditional North American upper class, Norfleet pushes at the limits of licensed photographic territory, using an informal "snapshot" style and pointing her camera up at a group of people whose lives have traditionally been closed to outside viewers. These photographs can be seen in her recent book, *All the Right People.*

Norfleet's success in gaining access to the private upper-class social events she photographed can be attributed to a combination of her persistence and skill and her socially respectable position. She is a Harvard professor whose father came from a family of Southern gentry. Although her mother was not part of the upper class and she herself did not participate in upper-class social life as she was growing up, Norfleet speculates that her name probably did help her gain entry into some situations, and that her appearance may have allowed her to go relatively unnoticed once she was there.

In addition, the partial disintegration of the traditional boundaries of the upper class has made some room in recent years for outsiders to enter. This decline in old ways is attested to in several of the seven interviews included in Norfleet's book. These testimonials by anonymous upper-class individuals are filled with personal insights, often of a painful nature, into the pressures and rewards of particular upper-class lives. They are very different in tone from Norfleet's pictures, in which she has chosen to record an overall view of social situations rather than concentrating on any one person, family, or group. Together, the photographs form a kind of visual sociology: a record of the dwellings, costumes, rituals, and body language of a particular society. Although middle-class viewers tend to remain voyeuristic outsiders in relation to these images, Norfleet's work also affords them a subtle opportunity to go beyond their preconceptions of upper-class life and to reflect on the relationships between classes.

The question of how "others" are represented becomes especially important when photographs are perceived as a form of knowledge about a group of people. I think it would be useful here to first look at the representation of people from lower economic classes, since this is the dominant tradition of photographing "others," and then return to discuss Norfleet's work. We can distinguish between two fundamental approaches to "photographing down": the subjects can be presented as clearly different, as people whose circumstances separate them from the middle-class viewer; or the differences can be played down in the interest of showing the subjects first and foremost as individual human beings,

with whom the viewer can identify.

The first approach—the one of emphasizing "otherness"—has been notably used in the work of photographers such as John Thomson and Jacob Riis, who each in different ways attempted to describe an urban underclass, Thomson in London in the 1870s and Riis in New York City in the 1880s. In each of their books (*Street Life in London* and *How the Other Half Lives*), individuals are used to represent social types, and the emphasis is as much on the environment as on individuals. Especially in Riis's work, the environment often seems to dominate the lives of the subjects.

The second approach—the humanistic one of de-emphasizing "otherness"—relies more on the presentation of individuals who appear to transcend their circumstances. The emphasis tends to be on the subject's expression of emotion and personhood in spite of dehumanizing circumstances.

The "otherness" of a subject can function to distinguish the viewer from the subject, or it can create a convenient distance across which the viewer can connect with the subject by projecting or reading "universal" human qualities. Speaking as a lingering humanist with strong reservations about the well-intentioned misuses of humanism, I think it is important to note who, in photography, is used to represent "universal" humanity and who is not. Generally, the more vulnerable members of our society, those who are made second-class citizens by virtue of class, race, gender, age, or national origin (members of non-technological cultures are perceived as less threatening to the photographer and the viewer), are more consistently used as stand-ins for "universal" human qualities. Their particular life circumstances seem somehow to more readily support middle-class generalization, to represent emotions in pure and simple form, unclouded by the nuances that would come to the fore in a setting more familiar to middle-class viewers.

Norfleet's work definitely places itself within the first approach, emphasizing difference; her photographs are attempts at social description that maintain a sense of "otherness" between subject and viewer. As such, they indicate that upper-class subjects are not readily available to the middle-class photographer, that collapsing of the distance between photographer and subject is not easily accomplished here. Universalization is not possible with the people in these pictures; the class-specific details of their appearance seem inseparable from the rest of their identities and function to maintain the distinction between subject and the implied viewer. Norfleet and the viewer both remain outsiders observing a well-fortified world.

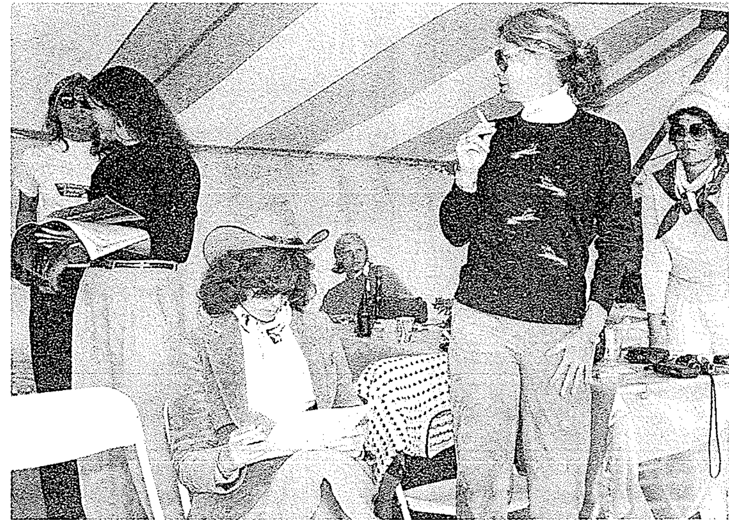
The women in Norfleet's photographs are particularly interesting in the way they present a closed, chilly inversion of the expected feminine image of availability. Conversely, in pictures of people from lower economic groups,

stereotyped images of women are often used to give the middle-class viewer more comfortable access to an otherwise strange social milieu. In this context, images of women as available for voyeuristic sexual pleasure and images of women as nurturers/mothers both tend to be perceived as eternal and ahistorical, and serve therefore to undercut the sense of social distance that might otherwise exist between the subject and the middle-class viewer. For example, Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, a Madonna-like image of a mother and children, is a highly charged conduit for the viewer's projection onto and empathy with the rural poor. The greater the social distance between photographer and subject, the more useful images of women (and children) become, both as the least threatening points of entry for the photographer, and as familiar and easily appropriated images for the viewer.

However, in Norfleet's pictures women are read as upper class first, and women second, and are therefore not as subject to the projection or generalization that tends to happen with images of other women. It seems that high social standing protects these women even when they are caught in photographs. All of the upper-class people in these photographs—men, women and children—seem almost to be reversing some of the one-way nature of photographic communication, and barring the viewer from appropriating their images. The viewer, in turn, out of class-based social inhibition, is reluctant to trespass. Norfleet's work has the sense of violating a taboo, and of a power struggle between herself as photographer, shaping and presenting images, and her subjects, trying to control and withhold their images. This peculiar dynamic, in which the subjects appear to reveal themselves but still hold themselves out of reach, is a reminder of how relative social status infuses itself into the picture-making process. It seems that, from a middle-class viewpoint, the socially disadvantaged are much more accessible and malleable as subjects than the upper classes.

The tension between photographer and subject is communicated in large part through Norfleet's presentation of the stances of her subjects and how they look out on their world. Often in a group picture, one person will acknowledge the presence of the camera, generally with coy self-consciousness, almost a tease or a come-on. Males and females of all ages (see *Flying Horse Farm, Three Brothers, Cambridge Boat Club,* and *Newport Casino*) acknowledge the camera by looking "caught in the act"; their self-conscious expressions reinforce an illicit sense of voyeurism for the viewer. The rest of the subjects in the group generally seem aware of being watched on several levels, but refuse to acknowledge the observer; their pictures both satisfy and titillate the viewer's curiosity.

Within the groups of people pictured, individuals almost never make eye contact with each other. They look past each other, or one will "eye" another without the look being returned. The glances among people at social gatherings



International Jumping Derby, Portsmouth, RI 1981 © Barbara P. Norfleet 1981.

Birthday Party, Private House, Brookline, MA 1985 © Barbara P. Norfleet 1985.

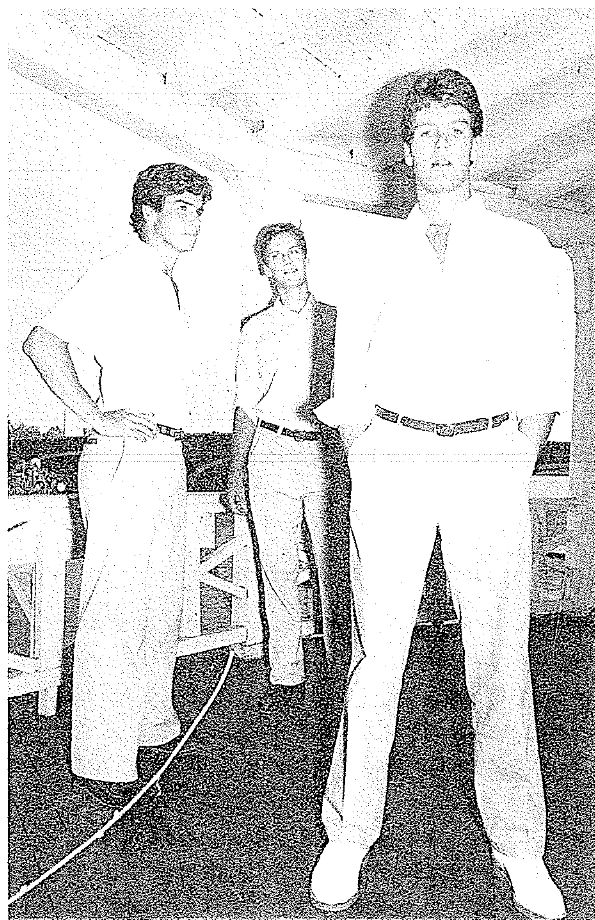
tend to move in closed circles; one person watching the next, who is looking at a third, who is in turn eyeing the first person. This non-mutual watching seems to reinforce and validate what is going on, to be an internal self-monitoring system. There is the sense through all this cagey looking that the people in the pictures have already packaged themselves to be seen, at least by each other, if not the camera.

The picture entitled *International Jumping Derby* is a good example of both this circular looking and the closed stance of the women Norfleet photographs. The faces of all five women in the picture are either turned away from the camera (in different directions) or hidden beneath sunglasses. The women come close to fulfilling images of glamour found in advertising, but stop short of being available for the voyeuristic pleasure of the viewer, partly because the looking already going on within the picture keeps the viewer an extra step removed.

Images of women and children predominate throughout Norfleet's book, and her photographs of children also have a strange feeling of remoteness to them. For example, in *Birthday Party, Private House* we see a familiar childhood ritual, except that the six little girls in fancy dresses and the five slim women all crammed into the frame appear to have virtually no contact with each other, to be each surrounded by her own private space. The cardboard puppets (parallel to the people?) out on a table are not touched or played with either. Norfleet has enhanced the feeling of isolation by cropping all the adults' heads off with the top of the frame.

These disturbing pictures of childhood raise a more general issue of stereotyping. Norfleet's pictures certainly do not conform to humanistic stereotypes, but do they invoke cooler stereotypes of upper class haughtiness and reserve? To some extent, yes. But this is countered by a peculiar far-away gaze that Norfleet finds repeatedly in her subjects: a dissociated looking that is remote, separate, self-conscious. At times this look seems imperious, entitled; at other times it seems, movingly, the look of an isolated individual burdened with an elaborate social front. An awkwardness, a profound discomfort, permeates the self-presentation of the people in these photographs. It is palpable in the pictures among the upper-class people themselves, between the upper-class people and their servants (the only comfortable relationships seem to be with animals) and between these subjects and the photographer. We cannot know how much of this awkwardness is already there in the situation, how much is there in response to the camera, and how much only appears to be there from the way people are photographed. In any event, what these pictures really represent is the point of contact between an isolated society and the larger world, which includes the photographer and the viewers. It is the very awkwardness of that contact that is a two-fold source of insight, both about the isolation of the upper-classes, and

about the difficulty any photographer encounters when trying to cross lines of power already present in the culture.



Three Brothers, Cambridge Boat Club, Cambridge, MA 1983 © Barbara P. Norfleet 1983.