

(3-2) Cautionary Tales: Erikson Synopsis

Instructions: Read the following synopsis of Kai Erikson's Everything In Its Path.

Erikson, Kai. (1976) *Everything in its Path: Destruction of Buffalo Creek*. NY: Simon & Schuster.

Erikson analyzes the social - psychological impacts of a major environmental disaster in West Virginia, a disaster which killed over 100 people. His book was ground-breaking because it argued that the disaster resulted in a “collective trauma” as a result of the disruption of community social networks and neighborhoods. Because of its ethnographic eloquence and novel argument, this book won the American Sociological Association’s Sorokin Award and continues to be cited as a classic in the study of collective trauma and disaster response. Erikson’s findings were based upon legal depositions to support a lawsuit brought by victims of the disaster against the corporation that owned the coal waste reservoir that flooded the valley. Erikson ignored academic work on the subject.

Excerpts from Erikson

On the political economy of Central Appalachia:

“The key to understanding modern Appalachia, however, does not lie in knowing who the original settlers were and what they did with their land, but in knowing what has happened to them since at the hands of outsiders. Whatever one knows about economic theory, wherever one stands on matters of political ideology, one still must conclude that the men and women of Appalachia are among the most truly exploited people to be found anywhere. In the beginning, they had rights to good land. . . In the course of a few decades, however, dating from the last years of the nineteenth century, almost all of those valuable resources were cut or scraped or gouged away...” (Erikson 1976, p. 68)

On change and depression in Central Appalachia:

“It is said that change came slowly to Appalachia, and in one sense, at least, that is so. The people of the mountains were slow to adjust to the currents of industrialization and urbanization spreading across the rest of the nation and slow to develop a way of life in keeping with the rhythms of the new age. When observers remark that Appalachia did not change, however, they really mean that it did not ‘develop’ according to the prevailing American standards. It changed a great deal, in fact; but the direction of that change was downward and its end product was depression in both the economic and spiritual sense. . .” (Erikson, 1976, p. 71).

On the culture of Central Appalachia:

“The Appalachian way of life, then, like any other culture, can be visualized as a tangle of contrary tendencies . . . our task here is to identify those axes of variation that seem most characteristic of mountain society. . . I will mention five.

First, mountain life seems to generate a sharp tension between love of tradition on the one hand and respect for personal liberty on the other. In some ways, the mountaineer is hedged in on all sides by constraints on his freedom of movement. He is so deeply indebted to the values of a long-dead past and so reliant upon old customs and habits that he often finds it difficult to entertain new options or to visualize new futures....

Second, the mountain ethos seems to be characterized by a deep contrast between self-assertion and resignation. The mountaineer likes to be in control of his own territory . . . In that sense, it is hard to imagine anyone less submissive to circumstances. And yet the mountaineer submits all the time. For all his bravado, he has little confidence in his ability to influence outcomes and is apt to yield with surprising passivity to whatever fate has in store for him. He is helpless before the God who reigns over Appalachia, helpless before the crotchety ways of nature, and helpless before the crafty maneuvering of those who come to exploit him and his land...”

Third, the people of Appalachia are self-centered and group-centered at the same time, and they live in such uneasy suspension between these contrary leanings that they find it difficult to develop either strong selves or effective groups. There is an irony here that is hard to describe, but the outlines look something like this: Mountain people, as we have seen, are quite dependent for emotional nourishment on their families, their kin, and their immediate peers. . . . The tightness of family and peer relations, then, does not leave room enough for the development of a sure sense of identity and yet, in an odd way, the family does not appear to offer much security either . . . the anxieties of the parents are visited upon the children in endless ways, and many people emerge from their earlier years without the confidence to break new paths and without the security of belong to a really supportive group.. . (Note: in this section, he quotes Jack Weller)

Fourth, the people of Appalachia seem to be forever poised at some vague midpoint between ability and disability. On the one hand, they have earned a considerable reputation for physical sturdiness and an ability to survive hardship... But for all the hardiness they showed in their everyday lives, the mountaineers are full of apprehension about health and suffered from a remarkable variety of aches and pains. Perhaps there is a special logic in this after all. People who depend upon their bodies to make a living – athletes and dancers are good examples—can be the most hypochondriacal specimens to be found anywhere...

The fifth axis of variation to be discussed here is so far-reaching in its influence that the first four can almost be subsumed under it. By all odds, the major source of strain in Appalachian life is the tension one finds between a *sense of independence* on one hand and a *need for dependence* on the other. . .” (Erikson, 1976, p. 84-88).

Study findings:

“It is the *community* that cushions pain, the *community* that provides a context for intimacy, the *community* that represents morality and serves as the repository for old traditions. . . . I am going to propose, then, that most of the traumatic symptoms experienced by the Buffalo Creek survivors are a reaction to the loss of communality as

well as a reaction to the disaster itself, that the fear and apathy and demoralization one encounters along the entire length of the hollow are derived from the shock of being ripped out of a meaningful community setting as well as the shock of the meeting that cruel black water.” (ibid, pp. 193-94).