

Erik Erikson: Critical Times, Critical Theory

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ABSTRACT: The work and legacy of Erik Erikson are described in this brief outline of his career, his theories, and his impact on psychoanalysis, psychology, history, and the broader culture. His conception of the adolescent task—weaving internal tastes, talents, and values together with elements of one's life history and the demands of one's culture into a coherent identity—has had profound effects on developmental psychology and the way in which sophisticated youth construct and describe their lives. His extension of development through adulthood and old age established the field of life course development. His emphasis on the impact of history and culture on development was a critical element in the developing field of ego psychology. Many of his major contributions can be fruitfully understood in the context of his personal history and individual qualities.

KEY WORDS: Identity; Intimacy; Life Course; Marginality; Psychoanalysis; Socialization; Youth.

Erik Erikson taught us to look at the intersection of the individual life and the historical moment. The influence of his work on the subsequent development of psychology and psychoanalysis over the recent past cannot be overestimated.

One of his critical contributions was his keen and thoughtful analysis of the process by which the individual and society intersect, his searching effort to understand how it happens that a particular individual—Gandhi, Luther, in the most unfortunate case Hitler—comes to represent in microcosm in his life and in ideology the central preoccupation of a particular society at an historical moment. This remarkable isomorphism between an individual mind and the mass of society absorbed his curiosity and analytic powers for most of his intellectual career.

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How apt, then, that Erikson's own life and work should exemplify this same kind of historic alignment in so striking and emblematic a way. His life as a young person—a wandering, artistic quest for the place in his world that would realize and express his deepest yearnings, thoughts, and needs—instantiated a critical theme of our times: the marginality of youth, the extended period of moratorium, the search for meaning and for fit, the hard work of building an identity that both satisfies an inner need for meaning and continuity and can find acceptance in one's society. The ambiguity of his patrimony combined with his artistic talent and the youthful freedom that his stepfather's professional status could provide both pushed and allowed him a moratorium sufficient to nurture his insightful creative powers of observation and reflection.

Erikson himself stresses marginality in his life history. Responding to Robert Coles' inquiries about his youth, Erikson made the following remarks:

Yes, if ever an identity crisis was central and drawn out in somebody's life, it was so in mine. Let me tell you some of my marginalities. . . . So it is true, I had to try and make a style out of marginality and a concept out of identity confusion.

Marginality also colored later parts of his life—his immigrant status in the U.S., his seeking out cultures different from his native and adopted ones to allow him the meta-view that emerges when one straddles cultures or social groups, and his voluntary assumption of an outsider position when he refused to sign a loyalty oath in order to maintain his academic post in California. In these and other ways Erikson lived out the position of the observer, the alienist. His marginal position—his simultaneous commitment to the culture in which he resided and the culture of his origins—provided him a view of the paradox and problematics inherent in all human society. It was the source of his profound insight and clarity as well as his humility. He was clear about his own principles and values but he also knew that he participated in whatever was human. Status and honors followed him because of his humanity and his intellectual power, not because he sought them.

Erikson, along with Freud and Marx, is one of a handful of theorists in the human sciences who have had a direct effect on their culture. He has influenced the way we all think about human development, particularly development during adolescence and young adulthood. It is not possible to think of adolescence without invoking his concepts

of identity and the psycho-social moratorium.² It is equally difficult to think of young adulthood without focussing on issues of intimacy and boundary conditions. It is hard for our current students to imagine that there was a time when identity struggle was not inscribed in adolescence. It is common coin in discourse within and beyond psychology and the academy.

Not only adolescence and early adulthood drew his attention and theoretical analysis. He opened the whole field of adult development with his addition of tasks that require developmental changes in later adulthood and laid the groundwork for the field of life course development. He did this at a time when he was himself in middle adulthood—a brilliant example of the use of the self as an instrument of knowledge. He continued this sensitive and sophisticated use of self observation as he moved into late adulthood and old age, producing *The Life Cycle Completed*³ in 1982 and *Vital Involvement in Old Age* in 1986.⁴

*Childhood and Society*⁵ arrived on the academic scene in 1950 like a klieg light, illuminating and clarifying problems and issues that had been only vaguely or partially apprehended before. His focus on ego capacities and the influence of social/cultural factors on development restated issues in psychoanalysis that had been on the boards but never so strikingly and convincingly argued or so vividly expressed through apt case examples. His extension of analytic theory across the life course and his construction of personality development in its earliest beginnings to include social factors positioned him as a precursor of much of contemporary analytic theory and as an ambassador who brought psychoanalysis credit and legitimacy in academic circles.

Erikson's work has been criticized for adhering closely to Freud's misogynist theories. Rereading his description of children's block constructions or the development of the American boy⁶ (in which he gives short shrift to the development of the boy's sister and makes it depend nearly exclusively on the man she marries) is certainly to encounter texts that seem markedly and oddly dated. And he focussed his psychobiographical work entirely on male figures. But the central body of his theory—for example, his emphasis on trust, intimacy, generativity, and the importance of feeling and awareness of feelings in humane and healthy development—validated qualities that resonated with women's development and had been underplayed in academic psychology. In his emphasis on male development, he also reflected his times.

That essay on the American boy⁷ like much of Erikson's work, deserves to be read frequently and often. It is extremely useful for its insight and powerful analysis. Despite its historical specificity it has much to say about our culture and the way we socialize our male children—much that holds true today in large segments of upper middle class America. Juliet Mitchell argued cogently that in critiquing Freudian theory, feminists should not overlook the fact that it offers a profoundly apt analysis of child development under patriarchy.⁸ The fact that it is phallogentric and constrained by its time and culture does not invalidate it as a description of family interaction in a certain culture and historical era. Erikson's understanding of the American boy of the fifties has much to say about our society at that time—and about segments of the culture now.

In the period when Erikson wrote *Childhood and Society* psychoanalysis in the United States was at the beginning of a long period of pathologizing life and behavior and narrowing the conception of maturity to a bland, highly controlled, rational, self-oriented heterosexual resolution. Here again Erikson brought to the table an inspiring faith and delight in the marvels of diversity. His theories held that growth and change continued in adulthood and that people were capable of intentionally reconstructing the outcomes of hardship and distortion visited on them in childhood. He validated and took pleasure in the eccentric and creative resolutions of which human beings were capable. Shaw⁹ and Gandhi¹⁰ would never meet an orthodox definition of "genital maturity." But surely they managed great lives that made the world a better place.

The breadth of his curiosity is a striking and rare quality that Erikson brought to his clinical work and his scholarly writing. He joined a group of anthropologists to explore the dimensions and range of variations in social processes, particularly those processes designed to bring the young of a culture into fully participating adulthood. But he was not just an armchair anthropologist absorbing what he could from a seminar with his stunning colleagues (imagine what those sessions must have been like with Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson, Geoffrey Gorer, etc.). He went to the field to meet and engage with the Sioux Riders Across the Prairie¹¹ and the Salmon Fishers of the northwest coast.¹² His curiosity carried him into history and his studies of particular lives—emblematic, heroic, or somehow representing an aspect of growth and socialization that particularly compelled his attention or added a piece to the intellectual puzzle he was

focussing on at the time. So his studies of Hitler,¹³ Gorky,¹⁴ Luther,¹⁵ Bernard Shaw,¹⁶ and Gandhi¹⁷ developed over time.

He remained throughout his career as curious and open to the world as he had been as a young artist when he accepted an offer to move to Vienna and co-direct a school for the children of Freud's circle—despite having no real training for the job. He continued to be open to the real world and its dangers when he moved to the United States to escape the horrors of fascism. He was drawn from the east coast to Berkeley at least partly by his interest in native American cultures. But he returned to the East—to the Berkshires—when McCarthyism arrived in Berkeley and made demands that he could not abide—demands to compromise his conscience and yield his intellectual freedom. Nevitt Sanford had counseled both Erikson and Elsa Frankel-Brunswik to be cautious—to remember that he (Sanford) and the other resisters who were not going to sign would understand that they (Erikson and Frankel-Brunswik), as immigrants and naturalized American citizens, were in a highly vulnerable position and might need to sign.¹⁸ Nonetheless, as a teacher and man of conscience, he could not take this more cautious way.

In his middle years—in that life stage he would lead the field to call the generative period of life—he again engaged the political reality of his world: he studied the young civil rights workers who sat in at the lunch counters in the south.¹⁹ He deeply appreciated their work and at the same time he explored the generational issues their actions precipitated—the anxieties of their parents who had reason in their histories to know that the heroic actions their sons and daughters were taking could elicit the violence of powerful racists and lead to the death of their precious progeny. Few people seem to remember that Erikson also composed a little book with Huey Newton, who was at the time the Minister of Defense for the Black Panthers. Titled *In Search of Common Ground*,²⁰ the book is more remarkable for its existence than for the importance of its substance. It is, again, a witness to the courage and open heart that Erikson brought to his encounters with the contemporary world. The Dalai Lama has said that it is not the power or sophistication of the mind that is important in life—it is rather, he says, the open heart. In Erikson we have a figure who represents both a great mind and an open heart.

No description of Eric Erikson's work and its powerful effect would be complete without mentioning the beauty and persuasiveness of his writing. At a time when most psychologists thought of their writing

as a kind of cut and dried activity—the facts, ma'm, just the facts—Erikson used the devices of poetry: allusion, metaphor, imagery—to carry us convincingly along his line of argument. His writing is evocative, richly allusive. He anticipated and influenced our current awareness of the intimate connection between the power of concepts and their presentation in compelling language. His work and its impact fit neatly—even exemplify—T.S. Kuhn's formulation of the political context of knowledge.²¹ In his life and work he has given us a legacy of very great significance.

Summary

T.S. Kuhn has implied that breakthroughs in science—new theories that move a field from established ways of conceiving the world to a new paradigm that shifts the dominant perspective—come from those who are marginal, who are both well trained in the established conceptions yet marginal enough to the field to be able to see and articulate problems and contradictions inherent in the established view. Erik Erikson is an exceptionally powerful example of this relationship. He straddled many boundaries: artist and scientist, clinician and theorist, ethnographer, psychologist and historian, European and American. His gently cultivated marginality allowed him to see both what all cultures share and how they differ. It gave him a profound insight into the problems and paradoxes of all human society and an aesthetic appreciation for the many forms that human development can take. He illuminated the period of adolescence and the adult developmental stages and tasks that followed. These are part of a great intellectual legacy that he left us.

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