

eriksen

on america

childhood and society

and national identity

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Psychoanalysts are not known for their humor, but Erik H. Erikson sometimes seeks a laugh in order to make a point. He tells, for instance, of encountering an elderly chassidic Jew in the streets of Jerusalem who asked simply, "An American?" Erikson nodded "yes" and his questioner replied with sympathy, "We know *where* we are and *here* we stay." Questions of place and identity, immigration and roots have dominated Erikson's work since he arrived in America from Vienna over four decades ago. In books and essays devoted equally to clinical observations and to theory, American identity has been to Erikson a motivating idea and psychological example. His influential biographies of Luther and Gandhi, and briefer studies of Shaw, Hitler and Gorky, reflect the study of national identity as it appeared in his early work on America. And *Dimensions of a New Identity* (1973) is testimony to the role of Jefferson in formulating a distinctly American style of politics and learning.

The choice of American themes was perhaps inevitable for a psychoanalyst with Erikson's clinical style and theoretical disposition, not to mention his flight with many other psychoanalysts from European capitals threatened by Nazism. His own awareness of the adaptation of his work to a new setting became in turn a central scholarly theme. His and other psychoanalysts' relation to Freudian tradition and his enthusiastic acceptance of American clinical opportunities as well as the distinctive features of our regional and national cultures are important aspects of Erikson's own intellectual biography. *Childhood and Society* is the complex realization of these interests, the most radical and inclusive example of the psychoanalytic style for which Erikson is justly admired.

the single endeavor in america

It is typical of psychoanalysts, whatever their clinical preferences, to state the relation of their work to Freud's. And loyalty to the Freudian canon, of course, is a persistent issue in psychoanalytic writing. In his own comments on Freud, Erikson has concentrated less on the interpretation of texts than on Freud's philosophical and epistemological orientation. While he writes and treats patients firmly within the Freudian tradition—he was trained by Anna Freud and other distinguished second generation psychoanalysts—Erikson is frank in recognizing some weaknesses in the original structure of psychoanalytic thought.

According to Erikson, Freud and his first colleagues in psychoanalysis focused on “a single endeavor: introspective honesty in the service of self enlightenment” (282).¹ Emphasis on the drives, defenses and neuroses, however, meant neglect of those aspects of the mind which synthesize a functional style of behavior consistent with the traditions and expectations of particular cultures. As essentially students of the id rather than the ego, early psychoanalysts reflected Freud's disposition to clarify and classify the etiology of sexual and other neuroses, and to make society more hospitable to those who suffered from them. Freud saw the social, economic and political environment of his patients as just that, a setting in which the instincts developed their own relation to the other parts of the mind. “The alliance of the superego with a high sense of cultural identity,” Erikson says, “remained neglected: ways by which a given environment permits and cultivates self-abandonment in forms of passion or reason, ferocity or reserve, piety or skepticism, bawdiness or propriety, gracefulness or sternness, charity or pride, shrewdness or fair play” (282). Within the shelter of Viennese intellectual life, the earliest psychoanalysts, in their preoccupation with the origins of adult disorder in childhood events, underestimated a complementary or allied dependency of the entire structure of mental life on the character of the society in which it unfolds.

Erikson's inclusive conception of cultural development required still another addition to traditional psychoanalytic theory. Freudian concentration on the earliest stages of life has denied to both theoretical and clinical work the advantages of insight into the ways in which later stages display their developmental tasks, including the assumption or rejection of particular domestic, social, occupational and intellectual initiatives. Emphasis on potentially debilitating aspects of the inner lives of infants and young children concealed from early psychoanalysts the equally powerful potential for society to meliorate the difficulties of youth in collective habits of family and social organization.

Psychoanalysis has consistently described the vicissitudes of instincts and of the ego only up to adolescence, at which time rational gentility was expected to absorb infantile fixations and irrational conflicts or to admit them to repeat performances under manifold disguises. The main recurrent themes thus concerned the shadow of frustration which falls from childhood on the individual's later life

and on his society. [I] suggest that to understand either childhood or society, we must expand our scope to include the study of the way in which societies lighten the inescapable conflicts of childhood with a promise of some security, identity and integrity. In thus reinforcing the values under which the ego exists, societies create the only condition under which human growth is possible. (277)

Attention to adolescence and succeeding stages, Erikson claims, not only completes our understanding of individual development but reveals how each generation, in its movement through adolescence and adulthood, revitalizes the very institutions which shape its growth.

Recognizing that his point of view entails a major shift in theoretical and clinical emphasis, Erikson proposes its condensation into a formula: "The patient of today suffers most under the problem of what he should believe in and who he should—or indeed might—be or become; while the patient of early psychoanalysis suffered most under inhibitions which prevented him from being what and who he thought he knew he was" (279). He claims that the study of identity is therefore especially timely, a contemporary counterpart of the Freudian study of sexuality. Yet Erikson by no means proposes that his efforts represent progress in psychoanalytic thought. His version of psychoanalysis, like Freud's, is expressive of *his* time and place as well as an account of timeless human qualities. Progress in psychoanalysis, as in other disciplines, is a function of collaboration and of recognition of fundamental continuities in intention and technique despite differences in orientation and results.

Historical relativity in the development of a field. . . . does not seem to preclude consistency of ground plan and continued closeness to observable fact. Freud's findings regarding the sexual etiology of the neurotic part of a mental disturbance are as true for our patients as they were for his; while the burden of identity loss which stands out in our consideration probably burdened Freud's patients as well as ours, as reinterpretations would show. Different periods thus permit us to see in temporary exaggeration different aspects of essentially inseparable parts of personality. (283)

Erikson's interest in identity is therefore a response to the historical imperatives of his time and to the place he chose to develop a clinical method.

Periodically throughout his career Erikson has commented on Freud's achievement, the fate of his legacy among succeeding analysts, especially those in the United States.² All of the citations above, however, come from a single source, a forceful statement of the meaning and limits of Freudian tradition. It is the compact preface to Erikson's well known "Reflections on the American Identity" which is itself the first section in a comparative study on national identity in his first and still most important book, *Childhood and Society* (1950).

By its position in the text, the statement on psychoanalytic tradition suggests that Erikson's strategy for supplementing Freud's orientation is

the analysis of national character. America is the touchstone against which chapters on Germany and Russia are presented, not because of the natural supremacy of American values, but because it is the purpose of *Childhood and Society*, beyond presenting the interaction of the two elements of its title, to locate the American identity in a post-World War II world. We will never know if Erikson, an immigrant to America in 1932, would have written the same book had he remained in Europe or emigrated to another country. (He thought, for a time, of settling in Denmark.) As a work of psychoanalytical theory, of course, *Childhood and Society* proposes—by no means to the satisfaction of all psychologists and psychoanalysts—a universal series of developmental formulae. In its clinical evidence, however, *Childhood and Society* is distinctly American, incorporating, in and out of the chapters on American identity, the observations of a new American on the traditions, cultural imperatives and opportunities now likely to become a part of his own identity. Devoting an introductory section to Freud, therefore, is Erikson's way of acknowledging the psychoanalytical point of view he left behind and the terms in which his own contribution to psychoanalysis needs to be understood. Freud, he reminds us, was largely aloof from the world revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and from the development of the industrial culture of America. In Freud's view, according to Erikson, "any organized group was a latent mob and a potential enemy to the spirit of individuation and reason" (281). Erikson accepts America as a subject of study, most obviously, but also as a nation whose collective struggle for identity, and whose typical citizens, display the representative themes of modern society.

Erikson saw these themes in a personal way. Addressing the plight of emigrants and refugees nearly three decades after his own emigration, he reviewed the special burdens of the *Vertrieben*, those who have been driven from their homelands. Their plain need to identify with a national culture is revealed in symptoms which suggest a loss in mastery as well as of the nourishment of community life. Hence initiative, as well as wholeness, central attributes of identity according to Erikson, require participation in a national culture in which one feels at home. The tendency of early psychoanalysts to consider identity formation as a one-way process, in which individuals identify themselves with others, limited psychoanalytic recognition of those processes of identity formation which represent elements provided by national cultures. Societies, says Erikson, "confirm the individual in all kinds of ideological frameworks and assign roles and tasks to him in which he can recognize himself and feel recognized."³ Though when he emigrated to America he was well beyond the stage when decisive events in identity formation take place, Erikson himself, of course, had to incorporate into the appropriate tasks of middle age the opportunities for adopting a new national identity.

Indeed, Erikson admits in his only autobiographical essay that his initial use of the terms "identity" and "identity crisis" seemed to emerge

naturally from his experience of emigration and Americanization.⁴ In *Childhood and Society*, however, Erikson also admitted the “deep hesitation” with which he approached the study of American identity. One reason was the expansion of scholarship in national character which followed World War II; another was the “precariousness” of the subject, especially with respect to a complex society like the United States. “It is impossible (except in the form of fiction),” Erikson says, “to write *in America about America for Americans.*” Some detachment is necessary. Lifelong citizens can travel and return with the required perspective, but immigrants and visitors have no special advantages. It is inevitably the very processes of Americanization which dominate the observations of all writers on the American identity. An enthusiastic traveler as a youth and young adult, he himself settled in America with gratitude and admiration, but also some detachment. “In the end,” Erikson says in 1950, “you always write about the way it feels to arrive or leave, to change or to get settled” (283).

Yet looking back on his career two decades later, Erikson could speak with considerably more confidence about the relation of American themes to the clinical responsibilities and theoretical orientation of an emigre psychoanalyst like himself.

In the Roosevelt era, we immigrants could tell ourselves that America was once more helping to save the Atlantic world from tyranny; and were we not hard at work as members of a healing profession which—beyond the living standards it accustomed us to—contributed to a transforming enlightenment apt to diminish both the inner and outer oppression of mankind? What now demanded to be conceptualized, however, called for a whole new orientation which fused a new world image (and, in fact, a New World image) with traditional theoretical assumptions.⁵

Such fusion is one of the goals of *Childhood and Society*, as Erikson’s attention to orthodox Freudian theory at a critical place in the text suggests. Further, with the advantage of hindsight, Erikson is even more deeply convinced that in choosing a particular stage of life for analysis in *Childhood and Society* and later books and essays he had located a distinctive feature of American life in relation to universal themes of human development. “If something like an identity crisis gradually appeared to be a normative problem in adolescence and youth, there also seemed to be enough of an adolescent in every American to suggest that in his country’s history fate had chosen to highlight identity questions together with a strangely adolescent style of adulthood—that is, one remaining expansively open for new roles and stances—in what at the time was called a “national character.”⁶ As a work of fusion, and an attempt to unify psychological and social themes and historical and psychoanalytical methods, *Childhood and Society* is Erikson’s effort to enhance Freudian theory, to illustrate the applicability of American themes to the national cultures and to fortify his own identification with American society.

childhood and society: mothers, autocrats, and adolescents

Like other analysts of the national character, Erikson proposes the organization of psychological traits into a series of polarities. Recognizing that it is a commonplace indeed to suggest that each American trait has its equally characteristic opposite, Erikson nonetheless proposes that a national identity is “derived from the ways in which history has, as it were, counterpointed certain opposite potentialities; the way in which it lifts this counterpoint to a unique style of civilization or lets it disintegrate into mere contradiction” (285). In America, moreover, the peculiarly dynamic quality of the polarities means for its citizens, in contrast to the other older industrialized nations, abrupt changes and extreme contrast time and again during individual lifetimes.

Erikson’s own catalogue of American polarities is in effect a summary of many familiar previous efforts to distill an American character.⁷ According to him, Americans face these choices and others in establishing and maintaining their own and shared identities: “Open roads of immigration and jealous islands of tradition; outgoing internationalism and defiant isolationism; boisterous competition and self effacing cooperation” (285). As each American finds an appropriate combination of such attitudes he or she also builds an ego identity from a synthesis of these additional dynamic polarities: movement vs. stasis, individuation vs. standardization, competition vs. cooperation, piety vs. free-thinking, responsibility vs. cynicism. America, like other cultures, gains its special flavor from the interplay of contrasts.

The polarities can be invigorating, as behavioral choices or as subjects of study, but they usually pose, Erikson claims, a clinical problem for which we have had an habitual if unappealing solution. For rigid adherence to one attribute or another includes an implied defense against its opposite which is feared but also sometimes desired. “The defense, in turn forces Americans to live with two sets of truths: A set of religious principles or religiously pronounced political principles of a highly puritan quality, and a set of shifting slogans which indicate what, at a given time, one may get away with on the basis of not more than a hunch, a mood, or a notion” (286). The coordination of such defenses with experiments in daily living, adaptations to the particulars of time and place and stage of life, is one of the tasks of identity formation. And societies themselves express in their unique national identities the results of polar organization, since “a living culture has its own balances which make it durable and bearable to a majority of its members” (292). Balance and durability can also be said to be the goals of each of the eight stages in human development Erikson outlines in *Childhood and Society*.

In this influential theory of human development Erikson proposes that each life gradually but inevitably organizes itself epigenetically around a series of complementary needs and virtues. He first suggested the stages through adolescence and then, a few years prior to the publication of

Childhood and Society, extended the groundplan through the rest of the life cycle. Its inclusiveness is certainly one reason for its appeal. Yet some clinicians (as well as scholars in other fields) have declared their scepticism because “epigenesis” appears to explain too much or on the grounds that in the theory clinical or social goals appear at times to dominate empirical evidence. Erikson has been called too idealistic and the eight stages theory termed a series of prescribed attributes. He himself, however, has warned against taking the stages as a definitive “inventory,” a standard against which to judge actual lives. “I only speak of a developing capacity to perceive and to abide by values established by a particular living system.”⁸

In the case of America the system lends itself to Erikson’s bipolar style of thought, his habit of expressing through contrasting imagery the structure of psychological, social and historical phenomena. Oddly enough, however, in *Childhood and Society* Erikson’s presentation of the bipolar American character is in terms of what Gregory Bateson named, speaking of the English character, a ternary framework.⁹ Three elements—“Mom,” an attitude toward work represented by the legend of John Henry, and the influence of the machine, organizational routine and “bossism,” especially on adolescence—are chosen to illustrate American efforts to build a satisfying identity.

American motherhood, and its characterization as “Mom,” represents, according to Erikson, a tangle of traits.

She is unquestioned authority in domestic mores and morals yet is vain in her appearance and infantile in her emotions. She is demanding yet hypochondriachal, puritanical yet exhibitionist, loyal to tradition yet fearful of aging. Above all she [artificially maintains] the discontinuity between the child’s and the adult’s status without endowing this differentiation with the higher meaning emanating from superior example. Mom is the victor and the victim. (290)

Belief that excessive concern about her role as mother is her prime potential fault has produced the opposite of what she wants. She is feared, mistrusted and blamed, likely to feel that her life was a waste. Erikson is unsparing in characterizing this American type, “a woman in whose life cycle remnants of infantility join advanced senility to crowd out the middle range of mature womanhood, which thus becomes self absorbed and stagnant” (290).

True to his method, Erikson finds the formative components of “Mom” in the psychological history of American culture; she embodies a timely response to the demands of the newly settled continent. “It was up to the American woman to evolve one common tradition, on the basis of many imported traditions, and to base on it the education of her children and the style of her home life. . . . it was up to her to establish new habits of sedentary life on a continent originally populated by men who in their countries of origin, for one reason or another had not wanted to be fenced in” (292). In order to do so, American mothers developed methods of child

rearing appropriate to the demands of continuous settlement and resettlement along the frontier and to the requirements of moral and domestic orthodoxy known as Puritanism.

The results of this adaptation was the debilitation of mothers and sons alike. Mothers needed to avoid weakening potential frontiersmen with excessive protective maternalism. Erikson terms this rejective attitude a "modern fault based on a historic virtue." Well suited to its time and circumstances, such deliberate rejection enabled sons to fit into the ceaseless movement and competitiveness of American life. Similarly, and inevitably, mothers were forced to convey the essential tenets of puritanism as a check on the aggressively secular influences of industrialization and urbanization. In doing so, Erikson says, they introduced into the tasks of pregnancy, childbirth, nursing and childrearing, the frigid point of view of puritanism. And "men were born who failed to learn from their mothers to love the goodness of sensuality before they learned to hate its sinful uses. Instead of hating sin, they learned to mistrust life. Many became puritans without faith or zest" (293). Erikson has little to say about American daughters except in so far as they fulfill their potential as willing American mothers. Since men were largely identified with the frontier ethos of exploration and conquest, sons always appear ready to take up an identity built on necessary skills and attitudes.

To illustrate one central adaptive trait, Erikson turns to the legend of John Henry as the second representative image of the American identity, an occupational model who is determined to master the rigors of the frontier and then the new industrial technology. Americans needed to marshal their strength and independence in order to confront two "autocrats": the continent and the machine. Mastery of the first yields frontier boosterism, aggressive independence nurtured by the unique circumstances and structure of American child-rearing patterns, especially in the historically determined and specialized role of "Mom." The second autocrat, the machine and industrial culture, also requires a particular approach to parental tasks. Children and adolescents must be taught the virtues of regularity and routine, willing adaptation to the needs of machine technology and large organization.

Therefore, in his summary of adolescence, the third of the three central images of the American identity, Erikson poses the struggle between critical developmental tasks and social needs. His subject is the typical male child in America:

In his early childhood he was faced with a training which tended to make him machinelike and clocklike. Thus standardized, he found chances, in his later childhood, to develop autonomy, initiative and industry, with the implied promise that decency in human relations, skills in technical details, and knowledge of facts would permit him freedom of choice in his pursuits, that the identity of free choice would balance his self-coercion. As an adolescent and man, however, he finds himself confronted with superior machines, complicated, incomprehensible, and impersonally dictatorial in their power to standardize his pursuits and tastes. (323)

In family life childhood is understood to have a social meaning in the need to prepare adolescents to establish their identities in light of the prevailing political and economic ideologies. As he argued in a paper written just a few years before *Childhood and Society* and its elaboration of the eight ages theory, adolescents gain relief from their developmental burdens by discovering a self in context, by accepting the historical necessity which contributes to what they are. "The individual feels free when he learns to apply that which is given to that which must be done. Only thus can he derive ego strength (for his generation and the next) from the coincidence of his one and only life cycle with a particular segment of human history."¹⁰ What must be done, of course, is only partly the work of the culture as it is expressed in a national identity. In America, Erikson claims, occupational choices are dominated by routine, standardization and organization. Choosing domestic and occupational initiatives satisfying to the self, reflecting an ego in society but also in control, is thus the task of adolescence and the stages which follow it.

Erikson's reason for placing adolescence at the center of his analysis of the American character is a sign of his interest in gaining wider clinical recognition for this stage. "Adolescence is the age of the final establishment of a dominant positive ego identity. It is there that a future within reach becomes part of the conscious life plan" (306). In so characterizing adolescence, Erikson helped to redirect psychoanalytic interest in adolescence from emphasis on physical changes and sexuality to questions of domestic, social and occupational identity. In these matters, of course, parents play a critical role, helping the adolescent to translate the national identity into a workable format for individual growth. The balance between a nascent ego identity and social conventions is at stake in family life. "The more idiosyncratic this relationship and the less adequate the parent in reflecting the changing cultural prototypes and institutions, the deeper the conflict between ego identity and superego will be" (312). In America, however, Erikson claims the adolescent is spared much of the potential difficulty in the process because of an "ingenious arrangement," the diffusion of the father ideal. Our "decaying paternalism" leaves a gap filled by "fraternal images" and by adolescent confidence in the power of youth in a rapidly changing society. In fact, Erikson says, "because of their greater affinity with the tempo and with the technological problems of the immediate future children are in a sense 'wiser' than their parents" (314). Overenthusiastic perhaps about the virtues of adolescence, Erikson also suggests that some of the energy of this stage is found in the belief that children may more nearly approach ideal types than did their parents.

Other features of American family life also fortify adolescence. Erikson finds an important analogy between the spirit of compromise in American politics and the balance of different interests within the family. He asks, "How does his home train [the adolescent] for democracy?" As Erikson's argument proceeds, it is clear that the question might also be reversed. Each system, political or domestic, is organized to prevent autocracy and inequality by producing people willing to bargain and adapt. And they

make it improbable that the American adolescent will become what his peers in other large industrialized nations sometimes become, “uncompromising ideologists.” The American system, therefore, as it is found in public and private life, is a “rocking sea of checks and balances in which uncompromising absolutes must drown.” It also has a related danger, “that such absolutes may be drowned in all-around acceptable banalities, rather than in productive compromises.” In the family especially, the spirit of compromise may mean that large areas of the “unacceptable” are displaced by “parallel daydreaming.” Real issues then, are neglected, mutual responsibilities denied which may “empty the pattern of majority concurrence of its original indignation, and thus of its dignity” (318). According to Erikson, the American family may be without conflict but also without the passion needed for important parts of adolescent identity to take shape.

In summarizing the situation of the American adolescent, Erikson supplements his typical evenhandedness with some impatience and irony.

This American adolescent then, is faced, as are adolescents of all countries who have entered or are entering the machine age, with the question: freedom for what, and at what price? The American feels so rich in his opportunities for free expression that he often no longer knows what it is he is free from. Neither does he know where he is not free; he does not recognize his native autocrats when he sees them. He is too immediately occupied with being efficient and being decent.

This adolescent will make an efficient and decent leader in a circumscribed job, a good manager or professional worker and a good officer, and will most enjoy his recreation with the boys in the organizations to which he belongs. As a specimen, he illustrates the fact that in war or in peace, the fruit of American education is to be found in a combination of native mechanical ability, managerial autonomy, personalized leadership, and unobtrusive tolerance. These young men are truly the backbone of the nation. (321)

The psychological economy of American organizations and institutions has produced in its “bosses” individuals convinced they are the “crown of democracy” but who are in fact the “ideal autocracy of irresponsibility.” It is precisely this ethical deficit which is to Erikson the chief threat to young workers since it represents the worship of “functioning” at the expense of human values. Erikson is most bitter in his condemnation of those who manage the American corporate economy and the legislative bureaucracy. “That these men run themselves like machinery is a matter for the doctor, psychiatrist or undertaker. That they view the world and run people as machinery becomes a danger to man” (322). The power and danger of “bossism” is finally illustrated in a matter typical among World War II emigre writers to America, suggesting that certain national tendencies are allied to fascism and other forms of totalitarianism. The chapters in *Childhood and Society* which follow that on America are certainly

meant to reflect on the traits Erikson found destructive in American society.

In the case of Nazi Germany, the central conflict of adolescent development, a split between “precocious individualistic rebellion and disillusioned, obedient citizenship,” meant persistent political immaturity. Culturally fragmented as a nation, reflecting and resenting the influence of the several cultures which surround it, Germany could not resist Hitler’s fairy tales of unification, autonomy and omnipotence. Whatever the defects in the frontier and industrial family systems in America they pale beside the “disparate paradoxes” in the German character as they appeared in Nazism.

In America an identity emerges from a selection among neuroses-producing but fundamentally ethical traits. Germany of the 1920s and 1930s, however, demonstrated the underside of the processes of identity formation. For “every person and every group has a limited inventory of historically determined spatial-temporal concepts, which determine the world image, the evil and ideal prototypes, and the unconscious life plan. These concepts dominate a nation’s strivings and can lead to high distinction; but they also narrow a people’s imagination and thus invite disaster” (345). Americans, in their tendency not only to reflect but also to transcend dominant national traits like conformity and competitiveness, compare favorably with the Germans and also the Russians. The latter, identified by Erikson as “our cold and dangerous adversaries,” are in his view still struggling, like Americans albeit at a different stage and rate, to manage the energy released by industrialization, as well as the political rigidities entailed in consolidation of the 1917 Revolution. Perhaps reflecting post-World War II optimism (some would say naivete), Erikson finds in the Russian identity a form of “delayed protestantism”—sectarian, individualistic and industrial—remarkably like our own. Avoiding war, therefore, will depend on the recognition of what mutually activates and binds national identities as well as on what inevitably makes them differ. By concentrating on youth and adolescence in his comparative study of American and other national identities, Erikson has illustrated the grounding of character in culture not as a formula for easy categorization and social forecasting but as a way of emphasizing that identity formation entails ideological and ethical choices crucial not only to the growth, at a critical stage in life, of individuals but also to the future of nations.

While American adolescence, and its relation to the authority of routine and organization, or “bossism,” is an image of national character with international significance so also are the American Indian tribes whose child rearing customs are outlined in *Childhood and Society*. Pleased to capitalize on the opportunities offered by anthropologists Alfred Kroeber and Scudder Mekeel to add ethnographic evidence to his nascent theories of child development, Erikson spent several months of 1938 and 1939 among the Oglala Sioux on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota and the Yurok of Northern California. He found them to be complete cultures, especially in their complex and purposeful styles of child rearing.

Part of the dismal American story of exploited minorities, American Indians also demonstrate to Erikson the integration of psychological traits manifested in particular child rearing patterns into a discernible group identity.

The durability of native American cultures, in fact, suggested to Erikson that seemingly primitive people can maintain an “elastic mastery” in psychological matters, often impossible in more sophisticated social systems. Speaking, for instance, of the ways in which the Sioux manage the early oral instincts of the children and the maintenance of tribal ethical ideals like generosity and fortitude, Erikson offers this statement of the structure of a national character, American, Indian or any other.

We are speaking of goals and values and the energy put at their disposal by child-training systems. Such values persist because the cultural ethos continues to consider them “natural” and does not admit of alternatives. They persist because they have become an essential part of an individual’s sense of identity, which he must preserve as a core of sanity and efficiency. But values do not persist unless they work, economically, psychologically, and spiritually; and I argue that to this end they must continue to be anchored, generation after generation, in early child training; while child training, to remain consistent, must be embedded in a system of continued economic and cultural synthesis. For it is a synthesis operating within a culture which increasingly tends to bring into close-knit thematic relationship and mutual amplification such matters as climate and anatomy, economy and psychology, society and child training. (138)

Mindful, however, of the responsibilities of clinical approaches to the disciplines of national character study, Erikson admits candidly, “How can we show this?” His answer is simply a summary of the structure and intentions of *Childhood and Society*. “Our proof must lie in the coherent meaning which we may be able to give to seemingly irrational data within one culture and to analogous problems in comparable cultures” (138). “Reflections on the American Identity,” therefore, has a purpose all its own. Yet its meaning can also be found in its relation to other parts of the text, including lessons to be derived from the examination of the child rearing practices of representative American Indian tribes, and from myths of childhood, adolescence and national character associated with other great international cultures.¹¹

evidence, inference and national character

Still, proof is elusive. And whatever the virtues of Erikson’s portrait of American identity, it now coexists with a bewildering array of other equally ambitious national character studies. Rights to this subject have been disputed among the disciplines, and the appropriate scholarly techniques debated *within* the disciplines. Historians, anthropologists,

sociologists and psychologists have worked within their own fields and also sought a satisfying synthesis of intentions, methods and results. That none agreeable to all now exists is no reflection on the capabilities of our scholars (like Margaret Mead, David Reisman and David Potter) but testimony to the elusiveness of the subject. Erikson himself termed "obscure" several passages of his "Reflections" and wondered after its publication what he "dreaded" so that he could not state directly what in the national identity needed to be preserved and what changed.

If "Reflections" is sometimes obscure then perhaps it is a sign of the division of purpose implicit in *Childhood and Society*. As one study of the development in this century of theories of national character has shown, the period of Erikson's emigration and early clinical, ethnographic and scholarly work in America was dominated by particular themes in statements on the national identity.¹² In the 1930s anthropologists and psychoanalysts, many of them also emigres in the United States, promoted the interaction of culture and personality as the decisive aspect of national character. Edward Sapir, Abram Kardiner and others employed psychoanalytic ideas to state their belief that individuals are molded by their cultures and express the values of its institutions, its prevailing styles of social and economic organization.

World War II stimulated national character studies which represented scholarly interest in analyzing the national character in an international setting, to suggest what values bound the United States to its allies and distinguished it from its enemies. Like national character studies in other periods, these efforts were usually more literary than scientific, concerned less with detailed evidence than with comprehensive generalization. For some writers, like Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson, and Charles and Mary Beard, influencing American attitudes toward the war, even enhancing morale, was a goal allied to historical analysis. Mead, an early American friend to Erikson and strong influence on his work, applied the spirit of her ethnographic work, if not its scholarly rigor, to the question of national identity in *And Keep Your Powder Dry* (1942). An honest attempt to evaluate the strengths and weakness of American society, this book stressed, as Erikson does, the debilitating psychological effects of shallow materialism and single minded economic competition. Post war America, and its relations with other countries, Mead hoped, would be based on values reflecting charity in the social system and restraint in world affairs.

With the advent of the Cold War, the best American character studies concentrated on foreign policy and the need to have a distinctly American ideology, based on some fundamental but functional beliefs which would demonstrate clearly the differences between the democratic and totalitarian systems. The search for a workable ideology is apparent in *Childhood and Society* as is Erikson's sensitivity to the dangers of not building a workable relationship with the Soviet Union. He expresses this idea in terms that, at the time of the publication of *Childhood and Society*, were fresh and, perhaps inevitably, scientific.

Whether or not a few men on the Eurasian continent or some nervous council of ministers will plunge us into war—we do not know. But it may well be that the future—with or without war—will belong to those who harness the psychological energies freed from the wasteful superstitions of ancient agricultural moralities on the European, Asiatic and African continents. Physics, in learning to split the atom, has released new energy, for peace and for war. With the help of psychoanalysis we can study another kind of energy which is released when the most archaic part of our conscience is “split.” As civilization enters into an industrialized era, such a split is inevitable. The enormous energy thus released can be benevolent, and it can be malevolent. In the end, it may be more decisive than material weapons. (401)

No more inclined to propaganda than scholars in other fields, Erikson nonetheless reflects in *Childhood and Society* the political environment in which studies of national character came to be seen. And one additional aspect of this environment needs to be cited in any consideration of the American background of his first book: the loyalty oath controversy at the University of California.

At the time *Childhood and Society* was published the regents of the University required faculty members to sign an oath affirming that the signer was not a member of the Communist party or any other organization which advocated the overthrow of the government by force or violence and had “no commitments in conflict with [his or her] responsibilities with respect to impartial scholarship and free pursuit of truth.”¹³ Erikson and a number of colleagues refused to sign but most were reappointed and simply given a warning. Yet when other instructors were dismissed for refusing, Erikson resigned his post. A statement he prepared in June 1950 borrows some of the ideas and diction from the concluding chapter of *Childhood and Society*, especially its suggestion that “judiciousness” is the quality needed by those who in “quiet work and in forceful words” can reveal to the public the oversimplifications characteristic of arguments favoring the loyalty oath. And speaking as a psychoanalyst but also as a scholar and teacher, Erikson stressed the need to marshal certain professional virtues in the Cold War struggle facing America.

My field includes the study of “hysteria,” private and public, in “personality” and “culture.” It includes the study of the tremendous waste in human energy which proceeds from irrational fear and from the irrational gestures which are part of what we call “history.” I would find it difficult to ask my subject of investigation (people) and my students to work with me, if I were to participate without protest in a vague, fearful and somewhat vindictive gesture devised to ban an evil in some magic way—an evil which must be met with much more searching and concerted effort.¹⁴

Erikson’s complete identification with America is clear as is his intention, in *Childhood and Society*, to synthesize the interests and methods of studies of national character in the preceding few decades.

While advancing the view of culture and personality theorists, Erikson also suggests the meaning of totalitarianism in its German and Russian varieties. Only by understanding the history of American identity, he believes, can its future be safeguarded. An emigre in America during the Great Depression, Erikson also applied his understanding of the demands of economic justice to the national character as the United States accepted a new role in international affairs following the war. In order to do so, to achieve the range of *Childhood and Society*, Erikson depends on considerable historical generalization. While the synthetic quality of *Childhood and Society* is widely recognized as one of its virtues, it is also perhaps its chief defect. Few historians would agree with the distinguished psychoanalyst Heinz Hartmann, for instance, who was certain that Erikson had fully integrated clinical and historical insights. The very range of his judgments was probably what forced Erikson himself to recognize some obscurity in "Reflections on the American Identity" after it appeared. Ambitious, though perhaps somewhat impatient in his historical statements, Erikson sometimes seems determined to load his favorite images of national identity with enough ideas to make them more widely applicable than experience suggests. The behavioral polarities proposed by him and others are too inclusive, too easy to question if not refute with exceptions.

Similarly, Erikson's historical generalizations ignore the particulars which enable other accounts of national character, especially by historians, to minimize the questions of identity and psychological development in favor of economics (or class) and politics. Sociologist and historian Ralf Dahrendorf, an admirer of Erikson, acknowledges in his own important study of the German character the arbitrariness of historical generalization on national identity and the need for a reliable theory. Until we have one, he admits, we will have to make do with several different "orientations" in order to "organize and relate the endless descriptive material about any society."¹⁵ Erikson's is one such "orientation," as rich in historical suggestiveness as it is limited in the use of orthodox historical data. Always a reluctant user of the term "psychohistory," Erikson subscribes to the explanation of that method offered by his student Kenneth Kenniston: "Psychohistory is more than anything else a series of questions that cannot be answered by psychoanalysis or history alone."¹⁶

Erikson's confidence in the basic argument of *Childhood and Society* lies in his understanding of the validity of certain kinds of evidence and inference. His first-hand studies of the American Indians, of course, differ considerably from his "Reflections" on traits held in common by large classes of Americans, the meaning of "Mom," John Henry and allied myths and legends. To the first category of data he brought the tools of traditional psychoanalysis and ethnography, patient person to person inquiry into the motives, actions, ideas and feelings of individuals, largely parents and children. Such clinical evidence is gathered within the four areas of psychoanalytical work he himself identified as crucial: intuition and objective data, a conceptual framework and experience. While the clinical method and the evidence it yields has, as Erikson acknowledges,

appearance of “quicksand” to some, it actually depends on “a core of disciplined subjectivity in both patient and analyst, which it is neither desirable nor possible to replace altogether with seemingly more objective methods—methods which originate, as it were, in the machine tooling of other kinds of work.”¹⁷

Even assuming the validity of such evidence, judgments made about the sickness or health of individuals are still difficult to prove conclusively. Proof lies, as Freud and his followers insisted, in the character and acts of those helped by psychoanalysis, the therapeutic results, and in the intellectual rigor and coherence of both clinical and therapeutic presentations to analysts and others. Nevertheless, whatever the inner logic and scholarly elegance of psychoanalytic generalization, acceptance still requires a leap of faith, belief in the unconscious and the relations of instincts and defenses identified by Freud as characteristic of mental and interpersonal behavior. The most convincing psychoanalytic evidence is still essentially inference, derived from assumptions and observations not available to the kind of testing associated with modern science. Psychoanalysis is empirical and poetic. And as Freud and others insist, as a mode of inquiry it is unique in the demands it puts on the observer to make himself or herself part of the inquiry. The data of *Childhood and Society*, including “Reflections on the American Identity,” relies on this kind of psychoanalytic insight, responsible as it is to the rigors of clinical technique. Like many of the best scholars in other disciplines, Erikson recognizes the significance of his own stake in his subject. For “clinical evidence,” he says, “will be decisively clarified but not changed in nature, by a sharpened awareness . . . of the psychotherapists as well as the patients’ position in society and history.”¹⁸

There are, however, genuine differences among the data offered in *Childhood and Society*. The exactness of the opening chapters, devoted to several case histories of childhood disorders, reflects the clinical evidence Erikson compiled working in carefully organized research projects at the University of California in Berkeley in the early 1940s. The Oglala Sioux and the Yurok were also the subjects of patient and orderly ethnographic investigation. With his theory of the eight stages of man, however, Erikson sought a more ambitious order of generalization, timeless in applicability while rich in suggestions for our time and place. The power of analysis of the eight stages carries over into the chapters which follow it, including “Reflections on the American Identity,” while the historical evidence is largely inferential and even slight: the presumed origins of cultural stereotypes like “Mom” and the social meaning of myths and legends. The observations on adolescence are on somewhat firmer ground, based as they are on clinical work, but they are still mainly inferential. Yet inference in the building of theories of national identity is perhaps the only choice for Erikson and others. For the question is, what can be made of the limitless but obscure and often contradictory materials, and the near forbidding complexity of collective identities? Scholars of national character are among our most ambitious students of texts and events, devoted to their materials by the logic of evidence and the artistry of inference.

Erikson's determination to make the American identity a subject of decisive psychological importance reflects also his belief that evidence and inference in psychology is the necessary counterpoint of the same two steps in historical inquiry. As he says in an important essay, "Psychological Reality and Historical Actuality" (1961), "Historians *and* psychoanalysts must learn to grasp fully the fact that while each individual life has its longitudinal logic, all lives lived interdependently within a given historical period share a kind of historical logic—and a-logic."¹⁹ An integrative style of clinical and scholarly investigation (in the mind of one scholar or of several collaborating) into issues like national character is a fruitful way of weakening the borders between disciplines. Speaking of the role of anatomical evidence and neurological inference in Freud's early work, Erikson noted that "a transfer of concepts from one field to another has in other fields led to a revolutionary transcendence of the borrowed concepts by newer and more adequate ones."²⁰ The need to give free reign to new modes of thought must be balanced with care that inference reflects the traditions of, as well as the innovations in, technique. Erikson is himself a great innovator, but in his orderly compilation of evidence and husbandry of inference he has avoided the estrangement of theory from clinical observation. National character study has benefited as has therapeutic technique.

conclusion: the future of a new idea

Justifiably wary of forecasting, Erikson was nonetheless prophetic as he looked at the American character in an essay written during World War II.

Historical change has reached a coercive universality and a global acceleration which is experienced as a threat to the emerging American identity. It seems to devalue the vigorous conviction that this nation can afford mistakes; that this nation, by definition, is always so far ahead of the rest of the world in inexhaustible reserves, in vision of planning, in freedom of action, and in tempo of progress, that there is unlimited space and endless time in which to develop, to test, and to complete her social experiments. The difficulties met in the attempt to integrate this old image of insulated spaciousness with the new image of explosive global closeness are deeply disquieting. They are characteristically met, at first, with the application of traditional methods to a new space-time; there is the missionary discovery of "One World," aviation pioneering on a "Trans-World" basis, charity on a global scale, etc. Yet there also remains a deep consciousness of a lag in economic and political integration, and with it, in emotional and spiritual strength.²¹

Three decades before "the age of limits" was discovered by the press and politicians and became a standard feature of even academic social analyses, Erikson suggested the political and psychological boundaries which must shape the American identity.

In *Childhood and Society* he added another: the dangers associated with superorganization, whether a “total war machine” or its “facsimile” in peacetime. To secure an American style of identity formation Erikson first recalls the original mission of psychoanalysis. For Freud “knew that man, in building theories, patches up his world image in order to integrate what he knows with what he needs, and that he makes of it all (for he must live as he studies) a design for living” (412). Erikson asks, then, if the American design can originate not only in the desire to meliorate deviations from the norms of individual and social behavior but also in the recognition of fruitful variations. The ego, as the central principle of organization in thought, experience and action, is the cornerstone of identity and as such should be the focus of clinical attention, domestic life, and occupational choices and social systems. Psychoanalysis, as a theory of ego development, can renew in America its own revolutionary impulse by supplying a workable if not infallible format. Practitioners of the discipline must also be responsible, as atomic scientists realized they must be attentive to the social and ethical implications of their work. For “we do not know in what way a new idea suddenly does the seemingly impossible and creates or maintains a variation of civilization in the midst of an apparent chaos of deviant contradictions” (415). Clinical knowledge, Erikson reminds us, is simply a tool dependent on the intentions and values of its users as they in turn are the unconscious and conscious instruments of national character.

America posed unique problems for Erikson as he was developing his developmental theory and as he continued in his clinical, historical and biographical work at least through the publication of *Dimensions of a New Identity*. He no doubt has shared at times the attitude of Saul Bellow’s alter ego Charles Citrine in *Humboldt’s Gift*. Bellow is another foreign born and astute observer of American life. Citrine is the frustrated author of *Some Americans: The Sense of Being in the USA* who wonders about America’s need for the wisdom and joy supplied by “inner miracles” like art, humanistic learning and psychological insight. “America . . . had so many outer ones. The USA was a big operation, very big. The more *it*, the less *we*.” Yet Erikson urges that the pace and scale of American life be adapted to the capabilities of its citizens. He even shows signs of a bit of native chauvinism. What is needed, he says, is a new kind of American, “one whose vision keeps up with his power of locomotion, and his action with his boundless thinking.” To achieve this it will be necessary, as the conclusion of *Childhood and Society* states, to move beyond fear and anxiety to judgment and mastery. Such a transformation, Erikson believes, will depend on the amount of “judiciousness” available to sustain such initiatives in all stages of life. “Judiciousness in its widest sense is a frame of mind which is tolerant of differences, cautious and methodical in evaluation, just in judgment, circumspect in action, and—in spite of all this apparent relativism—capable of faith and indignation” (416). Psychoanalysts share with other citizens the need for an identity which expresses these traits, which will become elements of the national character as they appear in the lives and works of individual Americans.

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notes

1. Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1963). All page references in the text are to this edition.
2. See Robert Coles, *Erik Erikson: The Growth of His Work* (Boston, 1970), 182-98 and Paul Roazen, *Erik Erikson: The Power and Limits of Vision* (New York, 1976), 1-6.
3. "Identity and Uprootedness in Our Time," in *Insight and Responsibility: Lectures on the Ethical Implications of Psychoanalytic Insight* (New York, 1964), 90.
4. "Identity Crisis in Autobiographic Perspective," in *Life History and the Historical Moment* (New York, 1975).
5. *Ibid.*, 44.
6. *Ibid.*, 45. The lines which follow indicate Erikson's awareness of the internationalization of this theme: "The problems of identity become urgent wherever Americanization spreads, and . . . some of the young, especially in Americanized countries, begin to take seriously not only the stance of self-made men but also the question of adulthood, namely, how to take care of what is being appropriated in the establishment of an industrial identity."
7. See Thomas L. Hartshorne, *The Distorted Image: Changing Conceptions of the American Character Since Turner* (Cleveland, 1968).
8. Richard I. Evans, *Dialogue with Erik Erikson* (New York, 1967), 30.
9. Gregory Bateson, "Morale and National Character," in *Steps Toward an Ecology of Mind* (New York, 1972), 96.
10. "Ego Development and Historical Change," in *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York, 1980), 50. This paper appeared originally in *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 2, 1946.
11. See Peter Blos, *On Adolescence: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (New York, 1962) for a study of the subject informed by Freudian tradition and Erikson's point of view. Joseph Kett's *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1970 to the Present* (New York, 1977) is an authoritative and comprehensive study which makes only limited use of psychoanalytic data and ideas. Waud H. Kracke provides a useful summary of issues related to Erikson's work on American Indians in "A Psychoanalyst in the Field: Erikson's Contribution to Anthropology," in Peter Homans, ed., *Childhood and Selfhood: Essays on Tradition, Religion and Modernity in the Psychology of Erik H. Erikson* (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, 1978), 147-188.
12. See Hartshorne, chs. 3-5.
13. Coles, 156.
14. "Statement to the Committee on Privilege and Tenure of the University of California Concerning the Californian Loyalty Oath," *Psychiatry*, 14 (May 1951), 245. Reprinted in Coles, 158.
15. Ralf Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany* (New York, 1967), 30. An example, from among many, of an "orientation" to American identity which focuses on the period treated by Erikson, and which is convincing and largely free of psychoanalytic interpretation is Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America* (New York, 1976). Gutman and European historians like E. P. Thompson stress the functional role of systems of power and property relations rather than the adaptive methods of the mind. One weakness of *Childhood and Society* is that it does not demonstrate very much interest in the historical literature on national character, not to mention primary and secondary sources for particular events or issues. This is a flaw which Erikson himself apparently recognized, since both *Young Man Luther* (1958) and *Gandhi's Truth* (1969) are dependent on the scholarship in their respective subjects. In fact, it could be argued that *Young Man Luther*, at least, is organized around Erikson's understanding of such historical materials. On the virtues and limits of Erikson's method, and for a useful review of general sources, see Cushing Strout, "Uses and Abuses of Psychology in American History," *American Quarterly*, 28, No. 3 (1976), 324-42.
16. Kenneth Keniston, "Psychological Development and Historical Change" in *Explorations in Psychohistory*, ed. Robert Jay Lifton (New York, 1974), 150.
17. "The Nature of Clinical Evidence," in *Insight and Responsibility*, 53.
18. *Ibid.*, 53.
19. *Insight and Responsibility*, 207.
20. "The Nature of Clinical Evidence," 77. An important statement of the uses of such "transfers" is Clifford Geertz, "Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought," *The American Scholar* (Spring 1980), 165-79.
21. *Identity and the Life Cycle*, 44.