

BOOK REVIEWS

Kai T. Erickson, *Everything in its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976, 284 pages, \$ 9.95.

Kai Erickson's *Everything in Its Path* is a sociological tale of two disasters. The immediate disaster was that of the February 26, 1972 Buffalo Creek flood that swept through sixteen villages in Logan County, West Virginia, U.S.A. leaving 125 dead and 4000 of 5000 homes destroyed in its wake. The more profound, if less dramatic, disaster is the precariousness of life that had developed intergenerationally in this coal mining Appalachian community. Erickson documents and successfully employs some of the available state of sociological knowledge to explain the linkage between the larger cultural disaster and the community destroying effects of the catastrophic flood. In the process we gain some new insights about disasters and community organization, about cultural variation in American society and about the major advantages and, at least in this study, minor weaknesses of value-committed research. That is quite a combined accomplishment for one study and one book.

Let us consider the last point first. This was a value-committed study from its very inception. To conduct this research project Erickson did not submit a detailed research proposal to the National Science Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation or some other governmental or private research funding source committed to underwriting project proposals adjudged of high quality by an independent panel of disinterested anonymous reviewers. Instead Erickson

was hired by the law firm of Arnold and Porter to prepare a report that would support a law suit on behalf of 650 flood survivors against the Pittston Coal Company. The company was being charged with gross negligence in allowing years of sediment waste from mining operations to build into an unstable heap of over 100 million gallons of water mixed with more than a million tons of solid waste perched above Buffalo Creek. The fact that the survivor plaintiffs won \$ 13.5 million from the coal company does not necessarily prove that Erickson was entirely objective but it does suggest that he presents us with a strong case about the not-so-natural causes of the disaster.

While Erickson presents a strong case, does he present an objective account or one that suggests a distorted identification with his sponsor's clients? Erickson is clearly empathetic to the Buffalo Creek survivors and this identification may have resulted in some selected perception respecting his observations and analysis. Yet without being empathetic and, as importantly, being perceived by flood survivors as being supportive, it is unlikely that this study would have been done at all. Erickson early reminds us through careful documentation about the historical and contemporary outgroup status of the generally poor Appalachian folk. Buffalo Creek residents, like most other people of Appalachia, were suspicious of outsiders and would avoid them or be non-communicative. The research problem Erickson faced is not new and helps explain why many potentially useful empirical studies are never done. William Whyte confronted the same issue in his study of Italian streetcorner gang members. On the other end

of the stratification system C. Wright Mills dealt with this research issue in his study of power elites.

The issue is one of access and response. Erickson explains how suspicious people were of him until it became known that he represented the law firm bringing suit against the coal companies. When that fact became known Erickson notes that "my association with Arnold and Porter acted to peel away that outer layer of reserve all at once and to make me eligible for the extraordinary courtesy that lies underneath... I was able to take advantage of my consultant role to conduct lengthy interviews with scores of people as well as to distribute a questionnaire by mail to all adult plaintiffs in the action – more than 90 percent of whom responded." Once access was gained Erickson took a number of steps – including cross checking informant information, reading long legal depositions, reviewing psychiatric accounts, using local and national media coverage and citing historical accounts of Appalachian life – that suggests a balanced account. Erickson looks hard at the economic exploitation of Buffalo Creek's residents by interests located outside of Appalachia and he also looks hard at the cultural contradictions within Appalachia that have produced weak resistance to exploitation and have helped perpetuate economic deprivation.

The immediate focus of this study adds to our store of sociological knowledge about the community effects of disaster under certain kinds of social conditions. Since the end of World War II the federal policy concern with disaster impact studies stimulated the more general disaster research specialty. Empirical studies since have produced a number of general observations by widely cited disaster analysts such as Anderson, Dynes, Fritz, Killian, Quarantelli and Turner. We now know that certain widely held assumptions about disaster effects are myth. Generally people do not experience prolonged panic in the face of disaster, nor do they exhibit great

social disorganization or disorientation. Further, community organization tends to respond quickly in disaster situations and community morale in disasters tend to be high. These general propositions are based upon a quarter of a century of empirical disaster studies. Yet, in most respects these propositions do not apply to the survivors of Buffalo Creek. Erickson presents compelling evidence that Buffalo Creek survivors experienced prolonged social disorganization, psychological disorientation and received little effective organized community assistance from within or without.

This state of disruptive community affairs continued at the time of the author's writing, three years after the flood. After presenting details of the devastating impact of the flood and the continued state of economic, social and psychological disarray of the survivors in the years following the event, Erickson lets Buffalo Creek people speak for themselves. In response to the question, "What is Buffalo Creek like now?" some typical resident responses highlight the destruction of community: "It is almost like a ghost town now." "I don't know. A dreary hollow is how it seems to me." "It's like a graveyard, that's what. A cemetery."

Why is it that Buffalo Creek did not experience the resiliency, reorganization and rising morale typical of communities that have gone through floods or other disasters? Erickson cites factors in the immediate social situation and in the larger set of Appalachia cultural experiences. Two immediate situational factors in Erickson's analysis are the community-wide destructiveness of the flood and the particular destruction of post-flood kinship and neighborly ties. The first factor appears to contradict the research literature. It is generally the case that the more spatially specific a disaster the less likely will community-wide support be evident. In contrast, widespread random disasters tend to elicit more general community resident

identification and mutual social, psychological and practical supports. A case in point would be the Civil Disorders Commission report on the relative lack of community response support in the 1965 Watts ghetto area riot and the greater Detroit metropolitan response support in the 1967 riot disaster which spread to the city limits. Erickson points out that unlike most large urban communities there were few people in Buffalo Creek who had much in the way of available economic, psychological or other previously built up strengths.

The economic and social deprivations of this chronically depressed area had a few years of new stabilization as a consequence of the increasing new energy demand for coal in the past few years. When the flood wiped this out the survivors tried to rely on family and friends. Their efforts were frustrated by the coal company and federal HUD assistance that came into the area which resulted in haphazard temporary trailer camps to which people were assigned at random rather than by kin, neighborhood or local village identity. These temporary trailer camps lasted for several years. It is clear that the survivors' weak general social position made them vulnerable to the breakdown of *gemeinschaft* relationships which were their only stabilizing community ties.

The local breakdown of community cannot be fully understood by focusing entirely upon the immediate social scene. Erickson's analysis identifies the linkage between the micro community situation and the macro social forces that are powerfully present. He explains how the cultural ethos of Appalachia and the larger economic and social interests within American society combined to produce the prolonged disastrous effects of the flood. The area's ethos developed in its general geographic and social isolation from the industrially expanding and urbanizing general society. Unlike the general society Appalachia has considerably less of a pluralis-

tic mix of races, nationalities, religions and social classes. The area had not urbanized the way the rest of the country did. It has historically been a difficult one in which to farm or hunt. An individualistically, independent, relatively homogeneous small communal Anglo ethnic group had developed by the time the coal companies came early in the century. The companies represented the larger cultural interests taking resources out of the land and using the profits for their personal and social purposes outside the region. Erickson explains that the arrival of outside economic interests did not produce but rather exaggerated a series of cultural "axes of variation." The value on individualism and independence was conjoined by dependency on the company and on the immediate community of mutually pressed neighbors. Appalachians became self-centered and groupcentered in extreme form at the same time. Residents appeared to emphasize self-assertion and resignation at the same time.

The community destroying characteristics of dependency, resignation and psychological trauma and disability were built into Buffalo Creek residents by years of precarious communal life. These characteristics only surfaced visibly and were more emphasized in the wake of the flood disaster. Erickson helps us to understand that these social-psychological cultural traits were deeply engrained in the ethos of Appalachia as a consequence of defeated personal, familial and community experiences that go back intergenerationally and have been re-enforced by continuing economic deprivation and social isolation. Broadening the implication of the study, the author makes it clear that Buffalo Creek's weakened community life is more intense than but an extension of life in modern urban, industrial society. As he notes, "one of the long term effects of modernization... has been to distance people from primary associations and to separate them from nourishing roots of community."

Erickson ends on a broad but poignant policy note: “What happened on Buffalo Creek, then, can serve as a reminder that the preservation (or restoration) of communal forms of life must become a lasting concern, not only for those charged with healing the wounds of acute disaster but for those charged with planning a truly human future.” The need to develop strong communal ties as a buffer to short or to long term disaster conse-

quences is not a novel point of analysis but Erickson does such a fine job of getting this essential point across that a journey through this book is highly recommended.

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