



Wooden Ships: Cultural Cohesion and Continuity in Freud and Erikson

Daniel Burston

What holds cultural communities together, especially in times of crisis? And what causes them to fragment sometimes, even when they enjoy material prosperity? These are not idle questions. In *The Future of An Illusion* (Freud, 1927) and *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Freud, 1930) Freud drew attention to the forces that disrupt or destroy cultural cohesion, including our supposedly innate propensities to incest and homicide, our natural disinclination for work, and our eagerness to enslave or objectify others. According to Freud, the intrapsychic forces that normally prevent these impulses from surfacing or being acted on are anchored in a kind of social contract, in which participants yield a significant portion of their freedom to follow their spontaneous inclinations and desires in exchange for guarantees of security and freedom from violence in turn (Freud, 1930.)

This collective renunciation of aggressive instincts is supported, said Freud, by a ‘cultural super-ego’ that intervenes to punish transgressions and enforce the laws impersonally, ostensibly for everyone’s benefit (Freud, 1927), and by the secondary transformation of our raw, instinctual desires via sublimation and ‘aim-inhibited’ Eros, resulting in strong interpersonal and institutional bonds, the glue or cement that presumably holds a family and a culture together, and holds the individual’s aggressive drives in check (Freud, 1930.) Though no fan of democracy himself, Freud nevertheless allowed that the social stability engendered by these ‘civilizing’ trends are endangered by stark economic inequalities, which afford the ruling elite far more opportunities for instinctual satisfaction and the sublimation of the drives than commoners enjoy. Indeed, when the level of instinctual renunciation the masses must endure exceeds a certain threshold, warned Freud, it profoundly intensifies our innate and enduring ‘hostility to culture.’

Without denying or minimizing the role of Eros, aggression and the superego in fostering (or eroding) social cohesion, Erik Erikson added another dimension to the discussion that merits continuing reflection – intergenerational identification, or the ability of one generation to identify with the experiences and attitudes of their elders, and to inspire a similar sense of identification in their own offspring, as well. Absent a strong degree of intergenerational identification, adolescents and young adults identify far more with one another than with their elders, the usual social barriers of race and class may become attenuated, or even drop away entirely. That’s the good news. While we’ll explore the negative consequences of the decline of intergenerational identification momentarily, the point is that these are different issues than the ones Freud addressed, because they involve conflict or tension between children and their elders, rather than between an individual’s instinctual endowment and the requirements

of civic order, or between the elites and the masses respective claims on the available wealth.

While born of clinical experience, of course, Erikson's ideas were also grounded in firsthand experience. After all, he witnessed or participated in two movements and moments in history where intergenerational ties was profoundly eroded, and where an element of cynicism and mistrust towards one's elders colored most adolescents' and young adults' search for identity and self-definition. The first time was as an itinerant youth in the *Wandervögel* movement between WWI and WWII. Young Erik Homberger spent many months wandering the fields and forests of Weimar trying to 'find himself' and to settle on a vocation. And as he noted in *Young Man Luther* (Erikson, 1957), he and his fellow wanderers often shared a profound mistrust of their elders, and above all, of their fathers (Burston, 2007.)

Then, in late middle-age Erik (Homberger) Erikson was teaching at Harvard at the height of the so called 'generation gap', when young people felt that their elders had abdicated their ethical responsibilities, embracing a deadening complacency or a mind-numbing conformity that robbed them of the capacity to inspire trust and respect. In other words, they had 'sold out.' (Or, as Paul Simon once said: 'Don't trust anyone over 30.')

Though they seldom said so explicitly, it was evident from their music that despite their disenchantment with their parents, young people of that era still yearned for a sense of connection with elders whom they could trust and emulate. Illustrations of this abound. For example, for a raw, unvarnished expression of their collective disappointment, take the song 'My Generation', a rock anthem from the British invasion, sung by Rodger Daltrey of *The Who*, released in 1964. The song's refrain - 'Talkin' 'bout my generation' - was interspersed with bitter complaints of being routinely 'put down' by one's elders. Towards the end, the young Roger Daltrey splutters angrily 'Why don't you all fu-fu-fu-fade away!' - a thinly disguised obscenity and a veiled death wish. This was one aspect of the phenomenon.

On the other end of the spectrum (though still in the United Kingdom), we find *The Moody Blues'* memorable album of 1970, *To Our Children's Children's Children*. The title alone expressed a yearning for intergenerational connection, and the hope that the experiences and sensibilities of young adults living in those turbulent times would still have resonance for their distant progeny three generations hence. Here in the United States, a similar sort of ambivalence – a conflict between anger and disappointment, on the one hand, and a deep desire for connection, on the other - was vividly expressed in Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young in their iconic album, *Déjà Vu*.

The song 'Wooden Ships' contained a plaintive and undisguised reproach to their elders, 'We are leaving; you don't need us!' – a very vivid and direct reference to what Erikson termed the 'missed mutuality' that underscores so much psychopathology. And yet, in striking contrast to this reproach, Graham Nash's moving melody 'Teach Your Children' stresses the possibility that a degree of reconciliation, even of mutual respect and love, is actually attainable, once youth grasp

the struggles and deprivations that their elders endured, and embrace the dreams that they dreamt, but never achieved for themselves, and still cherish for them.

Songs like these are quite rare, nowadays, but there were many other songs like this in the sixties and seventies. Consider ‘Conquistador’, by *Procol Harum*, a smash hit in 1967, or the song ‘Father and Son’ on Cat Stevens’ album *Tea for the Tillerman* in 1970. On the surface, they appear quite different. ‘Conquistador’ was electric, fast paced, and narrates the thoughts and impressions of a young man who is deeply disenchanted with an older role model. By contrast, ‘Father and Son’, is lyrical, folksy and slow paced. It narrates a father’s well meaning admonitions to his son to seek safety and stability, and the son’s internal dialogue, as he wrestles with the difficulty of explaining his frustration with the ‘status quo’, and his decision to leave home, take risks, and to live his life authentically. But the core similarity between the two songs is that in neither one is there any genuine *dialogue* between the two generations. In ‘Father and Son’, the father holds forth while the son listens, while in ‘Conquistador’ the younger man addresses his older counterpart in a monologue suggestive of conversation, but with the older party remaining silent. Different songs, different styles, different artists – but the underlying message is the same.

So artists like *the Who*, *Procol Harum*, *the Moody Blues*, *Crosby Still and Nash* and Cat Stevens all expressed varying degrees of optimism or despair about our ability to remedy the intergenerational malaise they experienced, which was commonly referred to as ‘alienation.’ And as Erikson’s pre-eminent biographer, Lawrence Freidman points out, when Erikson taught at Harvard, he sought to assure students that people can grow older without losing their moral or spiritual compass, whilst cautioning them that if *they* remained stuck in bitterness and estrangement, their youthful cynicism would breed despair in middle and old age, which in turn, would harm their own children, and erode the hopefulness and wholesomeness of the next generation (Friedman, 1999.) Indeed, Erikson’s eloquence on this score was integral to his immense popularity as a teacher.

Nevertheless, while he was wildly popular with students, Erikson worried that most baby-boomers would never achieve the stage he termed generativity, being arrested, as he thought, in a prolonged adolescence. And later, as evidence of this socially patterned defect, Erikson cited our looming ecological crisis, cautioning us repeatedly that our collective unwillingness or inability to protect the biosphere and avert the climate catastrophes which threaten all life on this planet, are symptomatic of arrested development, a lack of foresight, and a mind-boggling indifference to the toxic and hostile environment that will greet our children’s children’s children as the result of our collective shortsightedness (Burston, 2007.) In effect, by our actions (and collective inaction on climate change), we are saying to future generations: ‘Après nous, le déluge.’

If developmental arrest at a cultural or collective level gives rise to a decline of generativity, as Erikson feared, it is abetted by the concurrent decline of tradition. Let’s not forget that the crises and conflicts between adolescence and middle age, which Erikson described so persuasively, take place in between the two overarching

transitions of the human life-cycle; birth and death. One of the hallmarks of tradition, as Erikson pointed out, is that we rely on it to endow these existential transitions with a numinous significance through ritual (Erikson, 1966.)

But tradition does much more than that. Unlike many other species, we have relatively little deeply wired instinctual programming, and are therefore ‘generalists’, said Erikson, capable of adapting to almost any ecology on the planet. But our lack of instinctual programming means even in the most natural of settings, our instincts, such as they are, are too diffuse to provide us with immediate and obvious answers to urgent questions that normally confront teens and young adults, like: ‘What can I eat, how do I acquire food, or cope with scarcity. How do I find or build shelter? How do I find a mate, rear my young, greet strangers, fight my enemies, etc.’

Our instincts don’t provide us with self-evident answers to urgent questions like these, and so different cultures generate a multitude of responses to them. Why? Because there is no single instinctual or hereditary pattern for us to follow, and the basic repertoire of knowledge and skill required to address these needs and contingencies varies widely according to a society’s language, customs, history, climate, geography and the overall level of technological development.

Despite the dazzling diversity of culture patterns across the globe, for most of human history, tradition has provided our kind with authoritative and uncontroversial answers to basic, existential questions. And while skeptics and sophisticates may scoff at it, if they wish, one clear advantage to this state of affairs is that it is fairly stable, and entails a very low degree of identity confusion. In traditional societies, people know who they are, what to expect of others, and what is expected of them in turn. This all changed drastically in the wake of the industrial revolution. The global reach of capitalism displaced large populations, and provided powerful incentives for immigration, bringing very disparate cultural sensibilities and norms into close and frequent contact with one another.

Moreover, it is instructive to note that in bygone eras, tradition modulated the pace of technological change, and the changes in social and political structures that inevitably followed in their wake. Nowadays, however, competition drives the relentless pursuit of technological innovation, which in turn drives the market (and creates large scale unemployment, which is a separate issue.) And finally, don’t forget that the free market is such a fickle and amoral entity that looking to precedent, or to the experiences and perspectives of our elders for guidance, yields less and less of the ‘competitive edge’ young people need to thrive in our brave new world.

In such circumstances, the idea that tradition - *any* tradition - can provide clear cut and authoritative answers to basic questions of how to live seems quaint or faintly ridiculous to many people. Why? Because the more rapid the rate of technological innovation, the less capable the younger generation are of empathizing and identifying with the older generation’s typical attitudes, experiences and skills. No one understood this better than Erikson’s friend (and former graduate assistant) Kenneth Keniston, who said:

A man born in the beginning of this (20th) century has seen in his lifetime changes in the quality of life which no one in his youth could have anticipated or prepared him for. Changes that once took centuries now take less than a generation. Technological changes that were the science fiction of our parents are the commonplaces of their children . .

The human capacity to assimilate to such innovations is limited. Men can of course adjust to rapid change - that is, make an accommodation to it and go on living - but truly to assimilate it involves retaining some sense of connection with the past, understanding the relationship of one's position to one's origins and one's destination, maintaining a sense of control over one's life in a comprehensible universe undergoing intelligible transformations. This assimilation becomes increasingly difficult in times like our own. Whatever is radically different from the present inevitably tends to lose its relevance. (Keniston, 1974, pp. 251-252).

What Keniston said then, in 1974, is even more true today. And if, as Keniston implied, the capacity for intergenerational identification declines in proportion to the speed of technological and social change, we are in deep trouble. Why? Technological developments move at such blinding speed nowadays (Kurzweil, 1999) that the vast majority of people haven't the faintest idea of what they entail or portend for the future, and cannot engage in a rational or democratic debate about their potential uses and abuses (Fukuyama, 2002.)

In some ways, Erikson anticipated our present predicament in 'Identity and Uprootedness in Our Time,' where he wrote that:

somewhere between the exploitation of nature and the self-exploitation of mercantile and mechanized man a gigantic transformation has taken place which was first the subject of Marx's passionate attention: it is the creation of middle men between man and nature. And it dawns on us that the *technological* world of today is about to create kinds of alienation too strange to be imagined. (1964, p. 104-105).

Why so strange? Because we are the *only* species capable of driving a wedge, as it were, between sex and reproduction - of becoming 'middle men,' as Erikson put it, between ourselves and nature. This distinctive ability makes us the only species capable of stepping completely outside the evolutionary framework of natural selection that has governed the destiny of *all* species on this planet until now. Who knows where this could lead?

In 1932 Aldous Huxley published a dystopian novel called *Brave New World*, which anticipated a society where sex and reproduction had been entirely divorced from one another. In this technologically savvy consumer paradise, sex is never more than a novelty or a past-time. Like the 'hook up' culture that has replaced dating in the last few decades, the sexual landscape in Huxley's world did not entail a search for lasting commitments or emotional attachments between adults, much less to children, whose entry into the world is managed in industrial 'hatcheries' run by scientists who

tinker with the human genome to create different strains of human beings – the Alphas, who are extremely intelligent, and generally run the show, the Betas who are less intelligent, but necessary, and generally obliging, while less intelligent strains were confined to purely menial tasks. In short, a new caste system of well-adjusted conformists, run on eugenic lines.

Up until recently Huxley's nightmare was the stuff of science fiction. Now, however, it is an objective possibility, given the advent of CRISPR, an extremely precise and efficient gene editing technology that makes these kinds of interventions into the human gene pool entirely possible within the next few years. Some scientists imagine that the use of CRISPR on human genes can be limited to averting serious, life threatening and debilitating diseases, somehow. But others caution that once we start down this road, there is no turning back. We've been told that cloning humans is off limits, too. Possibly so. But we are already hearing about scientists cultivating chimeras – or animal-human hybrids of various kinds – and very soon, perhaps designer babies, including some who are not the product of in vitro fertilization, but bona fide 'test tube babies,' whose genetic material may come from 3 or more donors.

Meanwhile Ray Kurzweil and his friends at Google predict that with the help of nano-technology and other kinds of 'enhancements', we will soon produce human-machine hybrids that are in constant rapport with myriad other computerized systems, and that these will vastly exceed our species in intelligence, physical strength, speed, sensory range and acuity, and last, but not least, longevity.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud remarked that science has conferred powers of perception, communication and destruction on human beings that would have appeared god-like to our ancient forbears. In his words, modern technology had made us all 'prosthetic gods.' But a prosthesis is an artificial limb or body part, and Freud was merely talking about telegraphs and telephones, telescopes and microscopes, balloons and biplanes - all of them 'prostheses', in that they can be turned on or off, attached or detached at will.

Post-humanists are not talking about 'prostheses' in this sense, but of radical biological interventions that have irreversible consequences: electronic implants in our brains and bodily organs, modifications to our DNA, RNA, mitochondria, and so on, through genetic engineering and nanotechnology - modifications that are not detachable, and cannot be 'switched off' at will. On the contrary, their effects will be irreversible. A lot of capital is already invested in pursuit of technologies that promise to enhance or augment our basic biological capabilities, because they promise to alter the molecular and atomic structure of our DNA, RNA and neural networks so that we become even more exquisitely receptive and responsive to information and 'feeds' emanating from machines, which will modify our experience and behavior drastically. (They are piloting this research on rats already!)

What is at stake here is an effort to transcend the built-in biological limits and constraints that have shaped our evolution as a species to date. Many researchers greet these developments as the next stage in human evolution – though strictly speaking,

they bypass the normal evolutionary mechanisms of impregnation, gestation, childbirth and attachment, and have nothing to do with natural selection. Sadly, however, few (if any) of the scientists involved in these efforts pauses to reflect on what effect these technologies will have on our collective mental health; to wonder whether clones, chimeras and human-machine hybrids, who are manufactured, rather than born, and divorced from the experience of early attachment and acculturation, will really identify deeply with *any* of their ‘progenitors’ – if that is even the right word. If Erikson is right, we are probably paving the way for a new, more intense, more bizarre and more dangerous kind of ‘generation gap’ than anything we’ve experienced in the past – a technological nightmare then blends the worst features of Nietzsche’s ‘übermensch’ with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

While we cannot anticipate precisely what new, enhanced and/or hybrid entities will emerge in the decades ahead, we know one thing for sure. They won’t be the product of human sexual activity, will not be subject to natural selection, and may very well lack many of the nurturing and restraining features that promote the growth of mature, judicious human beings. And if it ever came to a contest between us and them – well, I am not a betting man, but my money is on the hybrids and the cyborgs.

So, our collective efforts to transcend the hitherto insurmountable limits of aging and death, and the vagaries of natural (and sexual) selection, have placed us on a very slippery slope. While some approach this new threshold with naïve enthusiasm (Firestone, 1970; Harraway, 1991; Kurzweil, 1999), the sense of unease and foreboding that grips many more reflective science-watchers nowadays reflects the fact that events ‘on the ground’ are rapidly outpacing public awareness, and society’s ability to regulate technological developments in the public interest (Fukuyama, 2002; Rubin, 2014.)

Another worrisome dimension to this issue is that the ‘benefits’ of the emerging biotechnologies will doubtless be showered disproportionately on the wealthy, and those who serve and protect their interests. If wealthy people can buy the enhancements that enable them to live significantly longer lives - 200, 300 years, or longer - they will have a longer time to accumulate capital and power. In short, the new biotechnologies, ostensibly designed for the ill and elderly, will likely benefit the wealthy far more than the average person, deepening existing inequalities.

So yes, the emerging bio-technologies will empower us to do god-like things in medicine, communications, and warfare. But they will also lead to new forms of alienation and depravity. Why? Because since the dawn of recorded history, human societies have had markets in flesh - flesh for rent, and flesh for sale. Only now, it will be ‘designer flesh,’ and not quite human, but built to our prior specifications. And the market, as we know, is an inherently a-moral mechanism. And for that very reason, the newer forms of alienation that await our kind will be more subtle and pervasive than they are now, and inscribed, enforced and legitimated by the powerful technocratic elites that own and manage the new means of reproduction.

And what is the solution to this emerging problem? Perhaps there is no single, simple or straightforward solution. It is difficult to impossible to put the genie back in the bottle once it is out, and for every new experiment or breakthrough that is reported in the popular press, there are probably a dozen or more that are performed discretely in the shadows to push these technologies further ahead. But if we take Erikson's work seriously, we must try to raise public awareness about these issues, to insure that the public is informed, and able to develop creative responses to contain and minimize the dangers that lie ahead. Erikson would expect no less from us.

Granted, Erikson's reflections on the human life cycle and his developmental schemata are dated, in need of revision, and not always suited perfectly to this purpose. Because of the ways technology rapidly transforms the 'average expectable life world' of teens and young adults today, changing our definitions of (and expectations for) children, teens and adults, they need to be constantly updated to reflect the changing worlds that we and our children inhabit. But his reflections on intergenerational identification, and the role it plays in insuring cultural vitality and continuity, remain valid in any case. Let us hope that our children's children, and their children's children, still get the message when we have all returned to dust.

References

- Burston, Daniel. 2007. *Erik Erikson and the American Psyche: Ego, Ethics and Evolution*. Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson
- Erikson, Erik. 1958. *Young Man Luther*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Erikson, Erik. 1964. 'Identity and Uprootedness in Our Time,' in *Insight & Responsibility*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Erikson, Erik. 1966. 'The ontogeny of ritualization,' in R. Lowenstein, L. Newman, M. Schur and A. Solnit, eds., *Psychoanalysis – a general psychology. Essays in Honor of Heinz Hartmann*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1927. *The Future of An Illusion*. Standard Edition, vol. 21, London: Hogarth.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1930. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Standard Edition, vol. 23, London: Hogarth.
- Friedman, Lawrence, J. 1999. *Identity's Architect: A Biography of Erik H. Erikson*. New York: Scribner.
- Firestone, Shulamit. 1970. *The Dialectic of Sex. The case for feminist revolution*. New York: William Morrow.
- Fukuyama, Francis. 2002. *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*. New York: Picador.
- Haraway, Donna. 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*. New York: Routledge.
- Huxley, Aldous. (1932.) *Brave New World*. Perennial Modern Classics, Harper Collins: New York, reprint, 2006.

- Keniston, Kenneth. 1974. 'Psychological Development and Historical Change,' in Lifton, R. and Olson, E. *Explorations in psychohistory: the Wellfleet papers*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Kurzweil, Robert. 1999. *The Age of Spiritual Machines. When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence*. New York: Penguin.
- Rubin, Charles. 2014. *The Eclipse of Man: Human Extinction and the Meaning of Progress*. New York: New Atlantis Books.

*Daniel Burston is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. He is the author of numerous books and articles on psychoanalysis and society, including *The Legacy of Erich Fromm* (1991), *The Wing of Madness: The Life and Work of R.D. Laing* (1996) *Erik Erikson and the American Psyche: Ego, Ethics and Evolution* (2007) and *A Forgotten Freudian: The Passion of Karl Stern* (2016.)*