

IN SEARCH OF COMMON GROUND. Erik H. Erikson and Huey P. Newton (introduced by Kai T. Erikson). W. W. Norton and Co., 1974, 144 pp. \$6.95.

Reviewer: Barry Krisberg

In Search of Common Ground provides a record of discussions which took place between Huey P. Newton and Erik H. Erikson. Conversations between a leader of the Black liberation struggle in the United States and a distinguished proponent of psychoanalytic theory offer an engaging possibility for clarifying some of the ideological and theoretical issues which are being debated by criminologists as well as many others throughout the society. Such an encounter is likely to have its limitations but the ultimate worth of the project can be measured in terms of the substantive engagement of ideas and the stimulation of thought that is produced among those who are permitted to *listen in*. Thus, if Newton and Erikson provide a beginning, the burden to continue the dialogue rests upon those attracted by the ideas and accomplishments of each man.

The first meeting took place at Yale University in the early part of 1971. It was a time of intense national debate over the Vietnam War; of political activities by federal and local officials to destroy organized opposition to United States foreign and domestic policy; and a time of serious questioning of the content of the American promise of democracy and justice. As the first meeting took place, the trial of Bobby Seale and Erica Huggins along with other members of the Black Panther Party was reaching a conclusion in New Haven. Those who came to hear and see Newton and Erikson were keenly aware of the U.S. invasion of Cambodia, the shootings at Jackson State and Kent State, and the trials of leaders of the Black Panther Party throughout the country. The atmosphere was not typical of an ordinary discussion between two men of ideas. According to Kai T. Erikson, who organized the first meeting, "the Yale meetings took on the character of a high-level diplomatic encounter." Students packed into a room at the Yale library to witness what they believed to be a confrontation. It was to be the revolutionary Newton and the scholarly Erikson—"sparks were sure to fly." But the confrontation never took place. Instead of a superficial "happening" with two combatants trying to defeat one another with words, the audience heard two serious thinkers trying to articulate their basic ideas and trying sincerely to understand one another. The record which emerged was of greater value because the two men avoided the tendency to play out "stereotypes" and chose rather to respond to one another.

Both men began with formal statements which helped define many of the areas for further discussion. Although some of the observers felt that the formality would prevent an open exchange of ideas, the opening statements offer a good introduction to the ideas and methods of thinking of Newton and Erikson. At later meetings in Oakland, with the stiffness and tension relaxed, both participants were able to follow-up and explore major issues that were raised at the Yale meetings. Newton opened with a delineation of the ideology of the Black Panther Party and then answered questions from students for nearly two hours. Erik Erikson began the second day with a lengthy statement about the significance of Newton and the Black Panther Party. His analysis relied upon many of the ideas which Erikson had developed over a lifetime of research and writing. At the close of Erikson's statement, the students again focused their attention upon Newton who was the person that seemed to them to be the most relevant to the concerns which were felt urgently because of the events at Yale at that moment. If the students, pressed by the events of the day, missed the importance of Erikson's remarks, the importance of his ideas were not lost on Newton, who continued to pursue the interrelations of his own ideas with the renowned psychoanalytic theorist. Erikson and Newton spent a considerable amount of time talking informally during the Yale meetings, but sadly, the record contains only the public meetings, which were often made awkward by the large audience and the "theatrical" atmosphere that characterized the Yale meetings.

Huey Newton's opening statement contained a brief summary of many of his major concepts. The Party newspaper, *The Black Panther*, is a regular and excellent source for those interested in Newton's ideas, but collections of his writings such as *To Die For the People* (1972) and *Revolutionary Suicide* (1973) also offer an opportunity to grasp Newton's analyses of the struggles of oppressed people in America and throughout the world. Traditionally, criminologists and other social scientists have chosen to ignore the intellectual contributions of people such as Newton, Angela Davis, George Jackson, or Eldridge Cleaver. The ideas of the leaders of popular struggles are dismissed as being "unscientific," but what is actually at stake is that the revolutionary writers offer a direct challenge to the ideology of American social science and it is "safe" to dismiss the challenge on "scientific" grounds rather than to reveal one's own political and moral biases.

Newton's talk ranged across a wide variety of concepts. He spoke of the method of analysis used by the Black Panther Party—dialectical materialism. Newton explained the process of dialectical reasoning and the importance of such a methodology which recognizes that social

reality is in a constant state of change and transformation. The students at the Yale meetings were given an example of how the dialectical method is employed in social analysis as Newton described the development of the theory and practice of the Black Panther Party. Newton traced the growth of his own thinking from the position of black nationalism to the concept of revolutionary intercommunalism. Briefly stated, the ideology of revolutionary intercommunalism holds that the world has been transformed by the technological, military, and economic power of a small ruling group in America, into a world order which has made "nations" obsolete. The struggles of Third World peoples against colonialism have been subverted by the neocolonial approaches of the ruling elite. To obtain social justice, the oppressed of the world need to create a culture which unites their opposition against the American empire. The oppressed must seize control of their own communities as a step towards gaining control over the technology and the social institutions that hold the potential of alleviating the material contradictions of poverty, starvation, and social inequity. Newton explains:

The stage of history is now set for such a transformation: the technological and administrative base of socialism exists. When the people seize the means of production and all social institutions, then there will be a qualitative leap and change in the organization of society. It will take time to resolve the contradictions of racism and all other forms of chauvinism, but because the people will control their own institutions, they will be free to recreate themselves and to establish communism—a stage of human development in which human values will shape the structure of society. At that time the world will be ready for a still higher level of which we can know nothing. (Erikson and Newton, 1974:32)

During the two hours of questioning that followed Newton's talk at Yale, the students persistently asked questions about the nature of the new society and of the mechanisms necessary to bring that new society into existence. The students seemed obviously frustrated by Newton's responses to their questions. Many of them seemed to be asking Newton if *they* personally would like the new society. Others demanded a concrete theory that would guide a revolution. The questioning period revealed several points which could not be resolved by Newton and his youthful audience. Perhaps it was the continued reliance of Newton on the dialectical argument or the distance between the speaker and his audience in terms of class position, biography, and revolutionary commitment. One senses that the communication was difficult and both Newton and his audience were frustrated in sincere efforts to bridge the gaps between them.

Newton suggested that the primary constituency of intercommunalism would be those who did not possess the learned skills required to work in a highly developed technological society. Technology would swell the ranks of the "unemployables" in the future and the lumpen proletariat of the technological age would be the primary agency of social change. The role of the Black Panther Party, according to Newton, was to educate the people and to raise their consciousness about what is going on in their communities and throughout the world. The Party wished to help people to seize control of their communities. Newton observed that the Party's program must always be sensitive to the needs of its immediate community so that the community would accept the ideas of the Party and relate to the Party's activities.

On the second day of the Yale meetings, Erik Erikson offered a talk which he entitled "The Wider Identity." Erikson confessed that he found Huey Newton's statement so foreign to him that he did not know how to discuss the content of the opening presentation. As a beginning, Erikson attempted to find terminology from his own work that might bridge the distance between the leader of the Black Panther Party and himself. He offered a psycho-historical analysis of the role of Newton and the Panthers in American history. Erikson discussed the imagery that the Panthers had created through their actions which had highlighted many of the contradictions of American society. Newton and his Party had illustrated how the police were the symbols of "uniformed and armed lawlessness" which victimized Black communities. For Erikson, the deeds of the Panthers had destroyed the substance of the *historical identities* of white and black America by showing the sources of oppression and the possibility of collective resistance to that oppression. The famed psychoanalyst noted that the oppressed have often resisted the powerful but that this did not prevent the creation of a climate fostering "a negative self-image of defenselessness." The images had been "transvalued" at great risk by the Black Panther Party because the law enforcers were provoked to "involuntary confessions of lawlessness." Erikson mentioned the murder of Panther leader Fred Hampton by the Chicago Police. This was a revolutionary tactic because it created a lapse in the discipline of the oppressor. The police were the target of the Panther's activities because they were "the armed technicians serving on the frontier of society's identity crisis." Erikson then talked of his own study of Gandhi in which he found similar symbolic tactics and he noted that Gandhi believed that a people should know how to use violence before they can decide to use non-violence as a revolutionary tactic.

Erikson spoke of his own biography as a welcomed immigrant to the United States and as a participant in the revolution of psychoanalytic thought. He told the Yale audience that the original Freudian group constituted a social movement that attempted to free a "class" of people—the mentally ill, from the systematic prejudice of their day. Freudian concepts are still valuable in the understanding of revolutionary processes, according to Erikson, because outer oppression is not possible without inner oppression. Freud and Marx seem to be complementary in Erikson's perspective on oppression and consciousness.

Erikson argued that the struggle of the day was for a modern identity against an array of negative identities, both inner and outer. To understand Newton's concept of intercommunalism, the psychoanalyst Erikson uses his own term pseudo-species; groups considering themselves privileged in identity over all others and thus having the right to oppress others on this false basis. He agrees with the need to develop a universal people identity but wonders how wide this identity should become before becoming formless and ineffective.

At Yale, on the third day, the questions and conversations covered many topics. One student asked the two participants why there was no confrontation between them. Erikson replied that he personally rejected the idea of the necessity of a confrontation. He wanted to meet Huey Newton and this had been accomplished, but he felt that there was a desperate need for some discussion that might bridge the gap between the political statement of Newton and his own psychological analysis. Newton responded that he enjoyed the opportunity to meet with Erikson and the Yale students but he also had in mind the possibility of a book that would come out of the meetings that might generate funds that were badly needed by the Black Panther Party.

Two months later Huey Newton and Erik Erikson met in Newton's apartment in Oakland, California. They were joined by sociologists Kai Erikson and Herman Blake. The record of the Oakland meetings contains a lengthy discussion of "what went wrong" at the Yale meetings. Newton commented that he had read several of Erikson's books prior to their Yale meeting and found himself agreeing with some of Erikson's concepts. Newton also felt that the circus-like setting of the Yale conference was inhibiting. There is some talk of the expectations of the students and why they seemed to be disappointed. It was suggested that the students were confused with the theoretical approach taken by Newton because they wanted to see him as a revolutionary firebrand but they failed to understand the intimate relationship between ideas and action which is a vital part of the revolutionary process.

In Oakland, Newton and Erikson continued to explore the interrelations of their ideas. These included the dialectical character of Erikson's concept of *identity*, the meaning of the Oedipal myth, and the process of oppression, and the similarity between intercommunalism and the need to combat the formation of pseudo-species identities which justify for one group the oppression of others. Newton concluded that the creation of a transcendent universal identity was essential to the survival of humanity. He felt that a universal identity helps to prevent people from forming their own sense of identity at the expense of defining others as less than themselves. The Oakland conversations drew to a close with many issues thrown out for discussion and questions that remained unanswered.

The search for common ground was begun with the prospects for future development. Both men showed enormous respect for one another and one sensed the formation of a friendship that is likely to continue. But aside from the attempt to bridge conceptual gaps (by translating concepts from one system to another), a deeper unification of ideas was not accomplished. It appears that Erikson is making an attempt to interpret the social movement symbolized by Huey Newton and the Black Panther Party, but he is a *spectator* and many of his comments reveal that he does not truly grasp the human meaning of issues such as racism, imperialism, or class oppression. The bridge between the political and the psychological requires a mode of thinking which C. Wright Mills called "The Sociological Imagination." What is needed is an analysis of social structure which links "personal troubles of milieu to public issues of social structure." To understand the Black Panthers, their importance to oppressed people, and the threat which they pose to the status quo demands an analysis of the structures of privilege which maintain social injustice.

It would be easy to dismiss *In Search of Common Ground* as a superficial publisher's event that promised a large reading market but never came off as planned. There have been other staged literary "happenings" which have produced little of intellectual substance. But I think the reader of this book will not form such a cynical judgment about the efforts of Newton and Erikson. They stand, after all, a generation apart in age, worlds apart in terms of social background, and the ideas of each man have often been used by opposing sides in our society. Their attempt to define a communality symbolizes a mutual respect that required courage from both men. Newton, a symbol of the quest for social justice by the oppressed, is closely watched by the popular media for signs that he has "sold out." Erikson, too, takes some risks, for the ruling elites which embraced his earlier works and

showered him with accolades may now dismiss him. Thus *In Search of Common Ground* is a record, albeit tentative and sometimes unsatisfying, of two human beings who are attempting to help each other and their audiences understand how to gain control over their lives and their communities. Whether the personal efforts of Newton and Erikson succeed depends upon the *courage* of others who are likewise willing to risk something to understand the oppression of our age and the need for social change.