

In Memoriam: Kai Erikson

Phil Brown, Michael Edelstein, and Steve Kroll-Smith



We mourn and celebrate our friend and colleague Kai Erikson, a legendary scholar who helped us see the relationships between environmental sociology and the sociology of disaster, who died November 10, 2025 in Hamden, Connecticut at the age of 94. The William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Sociology and American Studies, Emeritus at Yale University, Kai traversed a long career of creative, brilliant, sensitive scholarship that read like extended essays in a literary magazine.

Kai began his academic career at the University of Pittsburg. He was a tenured professor at Emory University when he accepted a position at Yale where he spent 45 years. Importantly, he had a joint appointment in Sociology and the American Studies Program. He edited the *Yale Review* for 11 years working with such luminaries as James Merrill, Joyce Carol Oates, R.W.B. Lewis, and Adrienne Rich, among others. His literary prose kindled both thoughts and ideas; and was widely appreciated across a range of academic disciplines. In Clifford Geertz' graphic phrase, Kai's work blurred genres expanding the reader's knowledge of the world well beyond sociology.

The *Wayward Puritans*, a classic study in the sociology of deviance, was published in 1966. The original publication by John Wiley and Sons went through more than 20 editions before a revised edition was released in 2004 by Allyn & Bacon. The book received the American Sociological Association's (ASA) McIver Award.

Everything in its Path: The Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood was published in 1976. This book received the ASA's Sorokin Award. Worth noting, Kai Erikson is

the only sociologist to ever twice win the top award of the American Sociological Association for the best book of the year.

Kai begins this book by noting “There was an urgency to this research quite unlike anything sociologists normally encounter in the course of their work.” He taught that urgency to generations of social scientists who studied the environment. He taught us that what were commonly thought of as “natural disasters” were either human-made or human-exacerbated. Kai broadened the field of environmental sociology with this brilliant and compassionate study of the lives and community harmed by the Buffalo Creek flood. His pioneering analysis combined both individual and collective trauma. His research blended sociology and psychology in the service of affected communities.

Kai’s deft use of theory insured that the abstract would always be in the service of the stories of human struggles. It was these stories that Kai put front and center in his work. His willingness to testify in court on behalf of environmental sufferers taught us the importance of such activity. Geographical, social, and cultural context were woven into the environmental tragedies Kai examined then and later – a mercury spill in Ojibwe land in Ontario, the nuclear reactor meltdown at Three Mile Island, Pa., and the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska. This work was the incentive for his 1994 book, *A New Species of Trouble*, whose title showed us that a qualitatively different form of disaster was becoming increasingly common in our profit-driven, unregulated, and technologically runaway society. We would learn this in sad form with Hurricane Katrina, many years later in 2005.

These efforts energized and gave direction to a young group of emerging scholars who took his lead. We are among those who benefited from his influence and generosity.

Mike Edelstein: “As an Environmental Social Psychologist, I was pretty much on my own in my earliest work on environmental contamination, innovating approaches that diverged from standard psychological practice. But, in early 1981, the attorney who hired me to study how a community was impacted by groundwater contamination in Jackson, New Jersey handed me *Everything in its Path* and said, ‘This is what I want.’ It was what I wanted too. The work assured me that I was on firm ground in using my qualitative methodology, emphasizing the narrative expression of victims and treating trauma and psychosocial impact as umbrella

concepts rather than getting lost in the deductive and specialized approach that characterized psychology.

He reaffirmed that field work, directly with victims, was necessary not only to in order to understand their experience but also to bear witness to their suffering. In this important sense, good research also serves as advocacy social science, enabling some resolution of the problems that are studied. I have done my best to further this important mindset and method that is one of Kai's great legacies in my research, writing, testimony and teaching."

Phil Brown: "As one of the young environmental sociologists influenced by Kai's work who starting doing ethnographic studies of toxic-affected communities in the mid-1980s, I was attracted by the creativity and legitimacy of Kai's work on a new field of research that was growing in front of our eyes. In particular, I learned to use member concepts and member validation, so that the voices of individuals could shape the narrative and give truth to the conclusions. Kai showed us that we were part of a new cohort of scholars and he praised us for our contributions. When I developed my first course on environmental sociology, I used *Everything in its Path* as a model, and taught it for decades in environmental sociology, environmental health, and qualitative methods courses."

Steve Kroll-Smith: In 2005 Katrina roared past the eastern flank of New Orleans. Her winds lifted the waters of Lake Pontchartrain and Lake Borgne well passed the height of the levees submerging roughly 80% of the Accidental City in up to nine plus feet of water.

A few days after August 29th I got a call from Kai. Not one to mince words he said, simply, "Hey we've got to get down there." Kai was 74 years old when he kindled the Katrina journey. We flew to Lafayette and met several colleagues in Bob Gramling's house. Sleeping on air mattresses, one person on the kitchen floor, another under the dining room table, others on sofas and beds, we thought, we talked, we listened.

The second day of our gathering I was standing outside with Bill Freudenburg (RIP). He asked me if I had seen the patch Jay Robert Lifton wrote when Kai retired from Yale. I had not seen it, I replied. Bill called it up on his phone. Lifton, the legendary psychiatrist and author, wrote these sapient words: "Erikson speaks softly and powerfully...No other social scientist—indeed no other American writer— can equal his capacity to move from the eloquent particular to the wise generalization." His kind heart and gifted mind brought empathy and intellect together.

Eventually we would call ourselves the Katrina Task Force. Guided by Kai's empathic intellect many of us went on to write books and papers that made room for the voices of those who lived with the miseries wrought by Katrina. Under Kai's tutelage several of these books were brought together and became The Katrina Bookshelf (U. of Texas Press).

The Katrina Bookshelf, University of Texas Press



Kai was a kind and friendly mentor. Knowing that at least two younger generations would be carrying out similar studies of environmental crises, he gathered a core group in New Orleans in 1995 for several days to informally engage. Friendships and collegial working projects sprang up there that continue to the present. Kai was available to co-author articles and books and speak to classes and research groups.



The Hazards Group (New Orleans 1995 with Kai on the far left)

Nearly 30 years later we assembled a number of this group for a 1.5 hour on-line meeting at Northeastern University's Social Science Environmental Health Research Institute in 2023. Kai was at that time too ill to even participate in the virtual meeting, and we missed his guiding presence. It was clear that his scholarship and friendship remained firmly in our hearts and minds. We had taught generations of students ourselves using Kai's approach as a basis.

Kai led more than our rag-tag group of activist-scholars. He served the discipline of sociology as president of the American Sociological Association and of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, testimony to the strength of his work and the depth of his mentorship. We miss him dearly.

Let us close with a patch of Kai's words that light-up his humanism. He writes about the Katrina work:

Our "collaborative was made up of both seasoned veterans

...and relative newcomers.... But I propose that no one listening to those proceedings would be able to tell who was the elder and who the acolyte. If you were to listen to the content of the remarks being made, of course, you would be able to make out who was speaking from longer experience and who was newer to that kind of activity. But if you were to listen to the tone, you would not hear the familiar sounds of status, the accents of authority, the inflections of hierarchy. Rank, like all weapons, was checked at the door.”

(Erikson, Kai. 2014. “Studying Katrina.” *Sociological Inquiry*, 84 (3): 344-353.)

This was Kai Erikson.