

Critical Theory of the Family is a well-written and well-documented volume directed toward an audience of scholars of history and family studies. The book is probably too sophisticated, and assumes too much, for undergraduates, but could be fruitfully utilized by graduate students to familiarize themselves with the historical approach to the family. The volume is well worth reading for those not familiar with family history perspective.

OPENING AND CLOSING: STRATEGIES OF INFORMATION ADAPTATION IN SOCIETY. By Orrin E. Klapp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

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Klapp defines society as communication: "our richest and most reliable" channel of information. He argues that communication requires an effective balance between opening (scanning for desired information) and closing (screening of adverse information to inhibit information overload and entropic communication). Opening and closing are conceived as "natural processes": individual (perceptual) and collective (cohesive) strategies for getting the best information with the least noise.

Klapp maintains that the concept of progress is biased in favor of opening; and that, in consequence, modern society suffers from a crisis of social noise and a failure of resonance. In contrast to modernist theories of art and the liberal ideal of a "free market of ideas" (re: J.S. Mill); Klapp regards closing as an essential constituent of creativity, discovery, and forward movement. For unlimited opening (pure eclecticism) produces an overload of information and an inability to perceive (create) new patterns or plans for action. Overload forces individuals and societies to develop a wide spectrum of insulating tactics such as specialization within intellectual and occupational groups; anti-pollution measures; creation of protected sanctuaries ("islands of taste in a sea of kitsch") for creative work, leisure activities, or spiritual retreats; utopian thinking; movements for religious renewal, and experiments in communal living. Cults are the most effective (and the most extreme) collective solution to the problem of overload. Walls, locks, phone booths, head-sets, and ear-plugs are the external hardware of more prosaic responses.

For Klapp, noise is more than an acoustical phenomenon. He uses it as a tag or metaphor for "the entire mass of extraneous, irrelevant, and useless stimuli from our environment that the mind must negotiate to find what it seeks". It is all that impairs or distorts communication --a vast category indeed.

Klapp's "noise" is roughly equivalent to "dirt" in the more epistemologically sophisticated theory of communication developed by Mary Douglas in Purity and Danger and Implicit Meanings. Similarly, it includes but is broader than what Habermas, Mueller, and O'Neill identify as distorted or repressed communication. I cite these parallels because Klapp seems to be cheerfully unaware of them. This insulation is at once the charm (freshness of viewpoint) and limit (failure of resonance) of a book which boasts approximately five hundred bibliographic entries ranging from Samuel Beckett to Anatol Rapoport and includes a strategic (case-establishing) reference to Habermas (on page 6).

It would be easy to write an uncompromisingly critical review of Klapp's work citing the thinly disguised resurrection of the equilibrium model; the organic analogies; the methodological defensiveness; the epistemological naivete; the occasional tendency to cite inane examples (Jackie Gleason's views UFO's!); the use of dated statistics (some are more than a decade old) to describe rapidly changing trends like publishing outputs and media exports; the enthusiastic endorsement of the esoteric scannings of the me-decade without acknowledging recent devastating critiques of their Narcissism; and the conservative bias which intrudes in spite of Klapp's precautions (not in the advocacy of "good closing" where he anticipates the charge but in the muted tendency to equate feminism and noise, e.g. door opening confusion, the adulation of refuges such as monasteries and traditional mountain communities where women's place is not problematic).

It would be easy to write such a review because Klapp's book is seriously flawed. But it would also be arrogant and ultimately dishonest. For, in spite of these complaints, I enjoyed --yes, enjoyed-- reading Klapp. His prose is remarkably lucid. He avoids jargon and never fails to concretize his points with examples. He knows how to use analogies effectively --richly. His learning ranges wider than that of most sociologists. And his methodological defensiveness does not prevent him from asserting that a conversation with Socrates is still the best education. In short, he makes a lot of good sense -- the kind of good sense that he would be pleased to hear described as "wisdom": the "good redundancy" of maturity which preserves "gems of experience and meaning [to] give us deep answers to big problems without our being continually shifted by every new bit of information" (115). The evidence he marshals in support of his main argument --that the liberal bias toward openness produces information overloads which increase susceptibility to manipulation and social malaise-- is not easily refuted. The models of "good closing" he projects are of the Small Is Beautiful genre. The book may not be the blueprint for future research envisioned by Klapp. But it is a good read: sensitive and sensitizing.