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A Conversation with Richard Sennett

Richard Sennett is Professor of Sociology at New York University and the London School of Economics and Political Science. Before becoming a sociologist, he studied music professionally. Richard Sennett was born in Chicago in 1943. He grew up in the Cabrini Green Housing Project, one of the first racially-mixed public housing projects in the United States. Richard Sennett trained at the University of Chicago and at Harvard University, receiving his Ph.D. in 1969. He then moved to New York where, in the 1970s he founded, with Susan Sontag and Joseph Brodsky, The New York Institute for the Humanities at New York University. In the 1980s he served as an advisor to UNESCO and as president of the American Council on Work. In the mid 1990s Richard Sennett began to divide his time between New York University and the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Richard Sennett is one of the world's most prominent critical sociological thinkers. He has received many prizes and honours, amongst them the Hegel Prize for lifetime achievement in the humanities and social sciences, and the Amalfi and Ebert prizes for sociology. He is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Royal Society of Literature, the Royal Society of the Arts, and the Academia Europea. He is past president of the American Council on Work and the former Director of the New York Institute for the Humanities.

His central publications include: The Craftsman *(Yale University Press, 2008),* Practicing Culture *(Routledge, 2007),* The Culture of the New Capitalism *(Yale University Press, 2006),* Respect: In a World of Inequality *(Norton, 2003),* The Corrosion of Character *(Norton 1998),* Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization *(Norton, 1994).*

At the beginning of the interview I ask Richard Sennett to tell me more about how he got interested and involved in the study of sociology, and in particular the study of forms of new capitalism and its social and political consequences.

Richard Sennett: Well, I'd say two things. One was that I grew up in a rather unusual family, because all members of my family worked for the communist party in the 1930s. So, they were resolutely on the left. I just swam in this as a child. And even though my mother and my father and my uncle left the party – in 1939 my mother left, and my uncle left in 1956 – this was always there; this was social reality for me. When I started in sociology, I reacted quite strongly against some of the more doctrinaire aspects of it. This happened to many people in my generation from the extreme left, which was very tiny in the United States, a sect more than a political group. So when I was in graduate school, I was very attracted to in-depth interviewing and to ethnographic work, because it seemed so corrective on the ground that a lot of the ideological nostrums that the American communist party was able to say were the least intelligent and the most rigid of all the modern communist parties. You know, I reacted very much against that.

I suppose what's happened in my career is that I returned to the left, but from a different kind of data, and that has produced a different kind of social analysis. I have studied two things in my career: work and cities – work and place. These are the two things I am interested in. And [in the late 1960s, early 1970s] I started doing research on the sociology of work for a book called the *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, which is just about to be published again in Britain, after thirty years of being out of print. It was a book that looked rather sceptically at a proposition about the United States, and at a proposition about class. The proposition about the United States was that American workers had very low levels of class consciousness. And the proposition about class itself was about its bourgeoisification, a thesis that was in the 1970s quite dominant. The book used intensive interview data from a hundred people to combat that idea. And then in the nineties when the current phase of globalised capitalism started to become apparent, I got really interested in the subject of work. And the last four of the books I've written have taken up that interest. I still use a lot of ethnographic and intensive interview material, but I also tried to introduce more of a historical frame into the study of capitalism. But again, I focused on the labour process – that's what these last four books have all been about. And I have to say that the more I've studied the effect of modern capitalism on ordinary workers the more I feel I return to the radical roots of my childhood. This system is obscene. And I think it's really

hard on ordinary workers, culturally and socially, not just in terms of familiar things like inequality gaps or wages, but also in terms of conducting a family life, relations to other people in the community, sense of life merit. It's a culturally destructive system.

How would you see your work in relation to the field of economic sociology? To what extent has your work been influenced by works that have been done within the field of economic sociology?

Well, part of the answer is a very personal one, since I am married to an economic sociologist [Saskia Sassen]. I have learned every twist and turn in this field as it were on the pillow. But more generally I've had good relations with people like Mark Granovetter, people who did network analysis, even with Harrison White. My interaction with people in this field has been about the relation in work between social networks and what you would think of as more functional productive networks, and particularly the relation between informal and formal networks. And I really learned quite a lot from Harrison White and Mark Granovetter. That was very useful work to me.

In what way?

Well, because if you are a cleaner from Portugal in a British office, or a Mexican farm worker in North America, it's the informal networks you have that keep you not only on life support, but keep up your courage, your determination, your will to survive. That is a very ambiguous relation between knowing whom to call, for instance, to get work and knowing who's going to be supportive when you don't get it. I actually have a question for you. How much do you think that economic sociology has had itself a vigorous discussion with behavioural economics which has also been a field of inquiry that I found very stimulating. My sense is these are two quite different scholarly domains.

I guess they are. But I think there are more and more attempts by economic sociologists to engage with economics, and different strands in economic scholarship. For example, we had one issue in this economic sociology newsletter which looked at the interrelationship between economic sociology and economics, focussing not only on neoliberal economics but also on other strands, including behavioural economics. I actually wanted to ask you about the relation of your work with economics. Why did you find behavioural economics very fruitful and useful to engage with? And what strands in economic thinking would you say do you write against?

Well, whatever I would write against, obviously, is neoliberal economics. I'm afraid a bête noir of mine is Jeffrey Sachs. The kind of work he did, you know, did enormous harm when it was applied in the real world. As you know, I am a critic of the social and cultural consequences of neoliberalism. Against those economists I feel very strongly. And I would say my work is set against particularly rational choice forms of economics. The economists I found very sympathetic are people like Edmund Phelps and Joseph Stiglitz who are both of course critics of neoliberalism. I think Phelps for example has made enormous advances in understanding the role that skill plays in structuring work life. So, those have been really positive stimuluses for me. I've been more ambivalent about people like Richard Layard who is a friend, but – and what I say to you I have said to him endlessly – it's misplaced to confuse the respect that people get from work, and the sense of having integrity, with happiness of gratification, and that kind of economics is, it seems to me, not very sociologically sophisticated. – That basically is where I have had contact with – both positive and negative – with economics. I mean I read somebody like Galbraith, of course, as we all do, it is a great pleasure, because he is a great writer, but in my own work it has not meant that much.

Leaving economics aside, what other major works have had a major impact on your work?

The strongest reference point for me is my teacher Hannah Arendt. I sometimes felt that I've been engaged in a life-long quarrel with her, somebody who is very anti-economic. But she is a point of departure for almost everything. For all the more theoretical work I have done. I'd also say a point of departure for me was certainly Foucault who was a friend, with whom I lectured, and with whom I wrote. And in the field of what is sometimes called cultural sociology, Michel de Certeau was a big influence on me. De Certeau, by naming the forms of practice and the modalities of practice, seemed to be really useful for me and anyone who does ethnographic or in-depth interviewing work, because de Certeau is looking at all the adjacencies and unexpected turns that occur in practice. Foucault is a very interesting figure for economic sociology, or at least should be for economic

sociology. You know that he was resolutely anti-Marxist, and what interested me was that dialectic in his work between agency and subjectivity. It's quite ambiguous. At the end of his life, the claims on subjectivity that appeared in the last works he did on sexuality appeared stronger in that the whole problem of the dominance of agency over subjectivity is of course what the works we read him for are about, the kind of agency that manages to mask itself as subjectivity. So philosophically that was quite interesting to me. I would say those are three points of reference for me: Arendt, Foucault and de Certeau.

I would now like to turn to specific notions and concepts that you developed in your work. One important notion is the notion of the narrative. Why is this notion so important? What does an analysis of narrative structures tell us about economic life? Why is it an important focus of analysis?

There are two reasons for that. The first has to do – from the point of view of the workers themselves, and particularly workers way down the class scale – if you are doing crappy work, one of the ways to keep yourself motivated and growing, despite the fact that you are treated badly and that you are getting poorly paid, is that you can give an account of not merely how you fed yourself during the week, but the long-term value of it – for your family or your relations. It's a kind of class contempt that would see low-wage workers as simply orientated to their pay package each week. Of course they have to be. But as I found in my research – I have done research over a long period of time with low-level workers – they have to make it narrative, and so this very crappy work has to be slaughtered into a narrative. And historically that narrative had to do with the home ownership. In 19th century, early 20th century American-British workers could organise a narrative of work around eventually being able to own a home. Immigrant workers have of course to organise a different kind of narrative: Why have they left? When you interview immigrant workers now about sending money back home, it's usually framed in terms of the story about what they are going to do later when they return, what it has done for their families and so on. So, on the side of workers one way of dealing with oppressed work is to find a narrative which gives that oppressed worker some sense of agency and purpose. So that's one answer to this.

The other part has to do with the way work itself is structured. For much of the 20th century, despite ups and downs in the business world, firms were organised around long-term employment and seniority. Unions certainly were organised around that. There was a narrative. If not jobs for life, at least the structure of businesses was organised around the notion of a narrative of moving through the firm, either up or down. And one of the things that struck me when I started studying flexible forms of organisation in the 1990s was that this kind of work structure was being taken apart. The firms viewed labour in terms of concrete jobs, rather than career patterns. And of course the firms viewed themselves as no longer having a long-term narrative of their own development. They swung radically from opportunity to opportunity. I remember Don Carter of the Harvard Business School once said: "A firm does not have an identity. It has a bank account."

What are the consequences of this?

Well, the consequences are what I tried to lay out in my various books. From a sociological point of view, they have been disastrous – set in the context that only a few people of the top benefit from this kind of denarrativised instant transaction. It makes loyalty between two firms a disaster. For instance, it profoundly weakens the sense of identity with the firm. If the firm has no long-term responsibility to you, or a design for what happens to your work – well, in my research I have found that people's sense of loyalty to the firm, when it needs its workers, is radically diminished. Correspondingly, it's hell on solidarity. If you are constantly moving in and out of jobs, the sense of solidarity with other workers is low.

One of the things I'd like to say about this, if I could, is that measuring unemployment rates is a very imperfect way of understanding flexibility in the firms. Up until this basic crisis, unemployment levels were nothing out of the ordinary during this huge capitalist boom. The real issue is the kind of changing position that people would have within firms and decisions voluntarily to change employment. These are normal employed workers. They are flexible in short-term horizons. They have very poor bonds to their firm, but they are normally employed. A lot of discussion on my work on flexibilisation somehow got derailed into the study of unemployment per se, which is not a good measure.

So, if you take apart the firm's structuring of narratives of experience, as a manager you weaken them. I mean a real world issue is whether it's possible to have jobs for life anymore – tenure, seniority and so on. It could be argued that those kinds of narratives of work which were absolutely fixed, rigid, particularly within the manual labouring classes to the extent that unions could prevail, that it was too much. But what happened during this phase of globalised capitalism was that the structures were simply removed, in place of too much fluidity. There was no structure. And firms are now paying a price for that.

Being now faced with the current crisis, what new opportunities can the crisis bring? In one book of yours, The Culture of the New Capitalism, you refer to Schumpeter's work and his notion of "creative destruction" and that this can deliver new opportunities, would you say that the current crisis can also open up new possibilities?

Well, that's what I hope. And what I hope it opens up is a different relationship between ownership, management and labour. Because firms, during the boom, were so attentive to the capital invested in them, to making their numbers every quarter in terms of share price and so on, that this tended to deal workers out of much say – they were irrelevant in a certain way to making the numbers. You could have a very unproductive firm or a firm that produced nothing at all as in the dotcom bubble, but made its numbers.

So what I am hoping that comes out of this is a couple of things. One, that the Anglo-American world will learn some lessons from German co-determination, but not others. One of them is that to make a viable firm you need some kind of worker participation. It may come through other organisations than unions. So, my hope is that we get a more participatory arrangement of firms. For instance, that people in back offices in merchant banks may actually have a say in how the banks are run.

I also hope that what comes out of this is the dethroning of finance as an image of economic growth. During the boom finance was seen to be the way in which to grow economies. And in a country like Britain you got basically a monoculture of economic growth driven by the City. And what I hope comes out of this is a more balanced economy, and in particular that the government will put money into small firms and into small shops. Small businesses tended to have a very rough time during the boom, unless they were high-tech. Your corner iron monger, your local independent pub, these were all seen as unsexy and backwards. And from the point of view of labour that's a disaster. I was appalled at the degree in which Britain has opened itself up to mega-stores. The interest of the public is in having businesses that sustain a sense of community. I would go so far to say that if, say, a local shop can't compete in terms of price against Walmart or Tesco, that there is a public interest in giving it help, to keep it alive. So what I am hoping will come out of this is a politics which focuses on the very ordinary businesses, which keep people in work, but also keep communities together. If I had a choice between giving £60bn to AIG or setting up a fund for local businesses, I would not have hesitated for a moment. To me it is an outrage that the banks have hoovered up these huge amounts of money – the same banks that were saying "all this local business is not profitable", and then they turn round and go broke. So, from a social point of view our interest is in provisioning businesses which keep communities together. And those are small.

So, those are the two things I'd like to see come out of this. More worker democracy and more government support for local business.

This actually links nicely to the next theme: your latest book on craftsmanship. Why would you say is the notion of craftsmanship that you develop in your book relevant for economic sociology and the study of economic life?

We use the term skill all the time in the social sciences. But we really understand very little about what it is to become skilled. Most of us think of it as just technique or knowledge. The actual process of acquiring it and valuing it – the self-discipline it takes, the way learning a skill is organised, the social relations that result from possessing a skill – all of this seemed to me, when I was writing this book, to be ignored by social scientists. In fact, we are creating crafts all the time. We have created them in high-tech, medicine, computing, and services obviously. And the notion of craftsmanship, the notion of wanting to do a good a job for its own sake, is not something that goes out of date. For most workers to do something well provides a profound source of pride. So, I really wanted to get into the insights of what it means to be skilled. And I did an account not from an economic point of view but from a sociological and cultural point of view of what skill means now and what it has meant in the past. In particular, I wanted to break down the

dichotomy between manual and mental skills – that mental skills had nothing to do with physical skills and were superior to them. So that's what that book is about. I tried to show continuity of it. And at the end of the book I inserted something which made people very uncomfortable, which is that for the majority of jobs that exist in the labour force most people have the ability to perform them. The reason I have done that is that part of what's formed in the modern culture of work is a notion that talent is very scarce. And you need to look at one in 20 who is very talented. It's a cultural trope which means that the other 19 get rather neglected. It's founded on a long notion of matching up what most jobs do require to what we know about intelligence in the population. I guess that's really the socialist in me speaking. For instance the notion that you have to be a genius to trade commodities is wrong. It requires really very little mental understanding. But I mean the assumption has been that structural inequality reflects the structure of inequality of talent. And I believe that's fundamentally wrong.

How does that touch economic sociology? I don't think it does. Maybe this is something that will prove to economic sociologists stimulating about my work and unusual. I don't know. But I think the problem I am trying to deal with in this matter, is a "déformation professionelle", an assumption of modern culture which is that skill whatever it is – which most people don't know about – is in short supply. And terrible consequences follow from that – the most horrible legitimation of inequality.

If you look at how labour is often organised through performance measurement systems, bonus schemes, would you say that there is a danger that this displaces a focus on craftsmanship, or would you say that even within such a system you always find craftsmanship?

Well, I'd say it's a very confused thing for most workers. One way to clarify it is to look at the way in which performance is evaluated and standardised in tests, which are really a skim of right answers. But as we know, frequently a wrong answer can be very intriguing, very provocative. If somebody is taking a test who delves on a wrong answer because it's interesting, then he would score lower than somebody who just skims through superficial knowledge and got the highest score possible. But the one who sets an interesting problem and scores lower is a craftsman. – Now that also can reflect itself in the job world. One of the things about flexibilised labour in, say, the form of business consulting is that the business consultant is like that test taker – a sort of "McKinseyite" hotshot flown in – he gets a kind of superficial feel for a situation, writes his report, gets paid and leaves. He does not delve in the ambiguities of a problem. And he is certainly not practicing the remedies that he is preaching. He is not a craftsman. He is very well rewarded for a performance which is defined in another way – which is a superficial take-up for a month or two months during which you change this firm so that you can say that it worked – restructuring to raise the stock price.

Whatever this is saying to you about [craftsmanship] is that it is how you evaluate performance – good craftsmanship is not just about problem solving. It's about finding problems as well. And you have to be in a situation which is institutionally structured where you are allowed to find problems. Think about it in science. Negative results should be something that every scientist should be very friendly towards, because it's finding a problem, and getting inside something – not problem solving. You are learning, because something cannot be solved. But as we know, and scientists keep telling us, there are very few professional rewards for negative results. So it's a very superficial measure of productivity. And the reason it matters in the real world is that often times by getting this kind of skimming for quick answers, the problem solving gets worse. The instant suggestion often masks the deep, fundamental problem. For instance, this was what we saw in the British Health Service in the late 1990s. The people who were the reformers of the health service did not think at all like craftsmen. They wanted an instant fix, and the problems just got worse and worse, and they could not understand why. They'd come up with one reform after another, but they weren't fundamentally getting at the problems in the system, which were about delivery rather than about targets. So, that's why this matters.

Going back to your earlier work on narratives – do you think that craftsmanship is something like a vision, and something that would imply very specific narratives, which are more long-term?

Well, I would not put it in those terms. I wouldn't say it's a vision. I would say it's a discipline. And the essence of that discipline is a very simple one, that through repeated practice – repetition – a practice improves. Some-

thing self-evident in sports. You forget about it in the economic world. It isn't just about getting something right once according to a very superficial standard of problem solving, but about getting better. And the discipline that that involves is doing it over and over again. In technical language, that is a metamorphitic practice, and that is a narrative – that is you can mark out the stages of getting better, and you move through those stages, but in my view by only being self-critical, posing problems as well as solving them. It's not a smooth progress. If you like it's a punctuation that occurs in stages, and it is a narrative. And here this isn't in the realm of speculation, we can study how that process of repetition and metamorphosis works. We know how long it takes for instance – roughly about 10,000 hours – to acquire in a sport or in any physical activity the repertoire of the different practices necessary to deal with the problem, not simply in one mechanical way, but to have different alternatives to dealing with it. 10,000 hours is about five to six years of work four, five hours a day. It has got a very contained shape in time. There are very few institutions in the new economy that make provision for that kind of skill, for that kind of expertise to develop.

So, why is that the case?

You are moving people around. You are responding to very rapidly changing market conditions. The ideal world in which you take people with one skill, and then they apply it to a new situation, and this is the way they build up their skills, is a fantasy. This is not efficient. People learn how to do something, they are then yanked into doing something else – they start all over. So you don't get work narratives where you are building up skill upon skill. You just get ruptures. You get rupture, rather than this kind of punctuated rhythm. To make that happen you have to decide that your employees are a long-term resource, that your human capital is real for the firm.

What projects are you currently working on?

I am working on a second volume of this study, which is about performativity, but very largely redefined from the way that this term is used in the social sciences. I am looking at the ways in which people recover, resile or resist crisis by getting performative skills. I am interested in taking what I learnt in the book on craftsmanship about dealing with an unknown physical world and applying it to social relations. In the back of my mind, I am thinking that that application is applying from things to social relations, and that that's performative. In some way I have to explain to the reader, but it feels actually very much spurred on by the present crisis, because the last way to craft a different kind of social relationship is to return to what you have been doing before. It's about doing something different, rather than restore the past.