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The individual cornered in the market

Richard Sennett considers in his essays the ways of life that capitalism is destroying. He looks at the alienating mechanisms of the market, and considers more humane forms of production, which are able to give workers back their dignity.

IN DECEMBER 2009, the Barcelona Centre of Contemporary Culture (CCCB) invited Richard Sennett (born Chicago, 1943) to give a lecture on *The Craftsman*, the title of his latest book and the first in a trilogy about material culture. Apart from its undoubted academic merits, the vast intellectual output of this professor at the London School of Economics is significant due to its public impact. His essays, from the seminal *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1966, in collaboration with Jonathan Cobb) to the aforementioned *The Craftsman*, as well as *The Corrosion of Character* (1998) and several others, have crossed the boundaries of academia and reached a new segment of readers who are unhappy with the increasing deterioration of public opinion. In this respect, his work is comparable to that of Zygmunt Bauman, in that they both give the reasonably well-informed reader a perspective on contemporary society that transcends clichés without losing clarity. The types of sociology based solely on statistics, surveys and field studies are long since behind

us. It is true that without a minimum level of empirical support sociology would be devoid of all prestige, as well as of all credibility. As a human science, sociology cannot aspire to the accuracy of the natural sciences or exact sciences, but must instead find its own conception of rigour, competence, and its own method that does justice to the fact that the observer and observed, the subject and object of this science, are both located in the same entity, namely the human being. Bearing this complexity in mind, sociology should not be satisfied with describing societies, how human behaviour is shaped and how it has changed over the generations. A solely descriptive sociology runs the risk of impoverishing the academic sciences, which as a result of the requirements of institutional efficiency, have given up any regulatory or prescriptive aspiration, and are stuck in the limbo of useless subjects that are under constant threat of extinction.

In his essays, Sennett is continually inspired by his own experience. As a result, his musical

education enables him to take a close look at the complexity of craftsmanship, from which he draws his conclusions about the devotion that is required to achieve productive excellence. Another author translated and edited by Anagrama, who also represents the American informative tradition, Oliver Sacks, usually considers the issues he studies from the same subjective point of view, which should not be considered as merely a rhetorical strategy to win over the reader, but instead as a way of approaching the subject and disseminating it as authentically as possible. This confirms that the human sciences are a fusion of the subjective and the objective perspectives, the subject must study his own perspective, sociological science must of necessity include the experimenter, because otherwise it becomes a grey and empty discipline that will have difficulty contributing to making a reality that has become incomprehensible easier to understand.

From an anecdote of life to a sociological category

The sociology of Sennett (or ethnography, as he sometimes describes his work) is not limited to describing what exists, let alone to justifying it. Sociologists who do not commit themselves to a normative horizon or borrow their political and ideological guidelines from reality are functional under today's pressures and become confused with the requirements of existing institutions. By contrast, when the desire for description is included in a regulatory framework, sociology makes sense and becomes the ultimate expression of itself. Sociology can therefore create dangerous but necessary alliances with the issue of what is good, what is good for us, the source on which all our efforts are based. The recovery of the figure of the craftsman as a model for human activity is a continuation of his thoughts on one of the central themes of his work, namely that the changes brought about by the new capitalism "have not freed people" (*The Culture of New Capitalism*, 2006). With Sennett, the reader explores the experiences of the individuals as portrayed in detailed life stories. The life story becomes a sociological category: the starting point is

the ways of life that capitalism is destroying. Sennett's reflections are therefore based around capitalism: that is his choice of guideline, and what gives his perspective truth. Without getting bogged down in field studies, Sennett considers the alienating mechanisms of the market, and focuses on more humane forms of production, which restore workers' lost dignity (*Respect in a World of Inequality*, 2003).

A job well done, a dying value

Capitalist forms of production have displaced craftsmanship, and we have forgotten the processes that characterise human art and which entail a complex conception of our nature. The quality of work in ordered societies based on the flexible logic of capital detaches workers from any commitment, as it only requires that they adapt to the demands of efficiency. Capitalism has eroded the value of the things we produce, as they are interchangeable, and are indifferent to the hand that conceived them. Machinery and mass manufacturing have made the craftsman a figure of the past, an endangered species whose presence is merely symbolic.

What has been lost with the decline of craftsmanship is the value of a job well done. For Sennett, craftsmanship is "doing something well simply for the sake of doing it well," which requires a great deal of self-discipline and self-criticism. Craftsmanship seeks quality as an end in itself. Why does the conductor of an orchestra extend rehearsals despite this involving a cost to the promoter? Because despite the suffering involved in lengthy rehearsals, improving the performance is a value in itself that cannot be measured in purely economic terms.

Indeed, the fact that the quality of the hand-crafted product is more important than the economic cost of its production contributes to its prestige, but that is not the only reason. Practical work increasingly tends to be seen as a subsidiary part of intellectual work. This is because craftsmanship is considered a mere mechanical repetition which can in no way be compared to the complexity of abstract thought.

In *The Craftsman*, Sennett argues that we think with our hands, so to speak. To illustrate the connection between the hand and the brain, Sennett uses many examples from different traditions, involving either the problems of adaptation of a classically trained pianist when learning to play modern jazz, to the history of kitchen knives in Chinese cuisine, to the process of boning a chicken and the influence of computer-aided design programmes on contemporary architecture. When telling the specific stories of craftsmen, Sennett outlines a history of dexterity: the combination of physical and intellectual factors is necessary to achieve the precise action of the fingers and the subsequent coordination of the hand with the wrist and forearm, which will only succeed if it is accompanied by a fine calibration of the eye. As a result, the skill necessary to engage in complex manual skills, those of the carpenter, mechanic or construction worker, and the violinist, chef and engineer, cannot be reduced to intellectual processes, or to talent, but instead repetition and perseverance are essential and even sufficient for the individual to manifest the nature of *animal laborans* in all its fullness.

These are skills that never follow a linear process, that are not always – in fact are hardly ever – consciously used or practiced, and therefore cannot be simplified or rationalised, because in the words of the sociologist, we are complex organisms. Sennett emphasises the importance of repetition and discipline. The acquisition of a skill can be measured. As a result, ten thousand hours of practice are needed to achieve the level of excellence in craftsmanship. After this time, the ability becomes tacit knowledge, a way of seeing the world, or rather a way of transforming the world, of humanising it, doing it “by hand” in Heidegger’s terms. And only thus can we also live in the world: transformed, solved, embellished.

Mankind survives and progresses by simultaneously finding and solving problems posed by the environment. Diseases, transportation and food have been among the challenges to humanity since its earliest days. Craftsmen, from their most rudimentary forms to the most sophisticated methods in the digital globalized world, are not merely problem solvers,

but instead their relationship with objects always involves the discovery of new problems that ultimately lead to the improvement of the ways in which we inhabit the world.

Efficiency requires creative freedom

The bureaucratized and commercialised world is laying siege to the freedom to work well. Real efficiency does not always involve good centralised planning, but instead requires creative freedom. Creative work is not justified by the improved performance of workers who are happy with the work, but instead because it is the only way that humans can effectively do the work more efficiently, it is the only way they receive an emotional reward, which is as valuable as the financial one, or even more so.

Communities of craftsmen are based on principles such as service and loyalty, without which it is impossible to accumulate enough experience to achieve productive excellence. In the new economy, characterized by the flexibility of the market, individuals are uprooted, and the expertise necessary to do a good job is reduced to the value of the person who accumulates it. What gives meaning to craftsmanship is inverted. The structure of 21st century capitalism marginalises the craftsman, it does not reward effort sustained over a whole lifetime, and does not respect one’s self-narrative, focused on devotion to a trade.

One of the facets of capitalism that has contributed most to the corrosion of craftsmanship is machines. Working with computers, for example, prevents people from learning by repeating gestures, reducing activity to something that is intellectual. Sennett illustrates this misuse of computers using the example of computer-aided design, the well-known CAD program. In the field of engineering, this program has certainly improved the production of products ranging from screws to automobiles. But it has been abused in architecture, so that professionals have no perspective of the project as a whole. When drawing a building or plot of land by hand, the architect appropriates its object, he gets to know it. In the same way as a tennis player has to repeat his shots an infinite

number of times in order to perfect them, the repetition of the manual gesture with a pencil leads to a better understanding of what is happening, a maturation of thought. The shift from hand-drawing to working on screen eliminates the tactile, relational, and the incomplete, the physical experiences that occur during the act of drawing.

It is not, however, necessary to abandon technology in order to return to primitive forms of production. We are instead faced with a challenge, of “thinking like craftsmen who use technology well”. To that end, the architect should combine a computer simulation with the work on the ground, and acknowledge that without the seemingly insignificant gesture of the builder, there is no real knowledge of the product.

One example of this cooperative effort which reproduces the skills of craftsmen is the Linux operating system, an open community to which Sennett belongs. Linux’s process of continuous improvement resembles a bazaar, in which everyone can participate, identifying and solving problems simultaneously and collectively. It is the community itself that sets the standards for work well done, and which changes them as the development of skills accelerates. An open knowledge system produces better

results than a closed one, which may have some temporary success, but its difficulty in adapting does not withstand the test of time.

Creativity is given greater incentives by cooperation rather than competition; it is an organic process that must not be undertaken on a sectorial or individual basis. Based on this statement, Sennett develops his own philosophical workshop, in which a pragmatic view of human reality predominates. “Our body’s abilities to shape physical things are the same as those that inspire our social relations.” Mechanised and individualised forms of production based on vertical systems lead to a weakening of the social fabric, to *The Fall of Public Man*, as predicted by the sociologist in a book published in 1977.

Traditional knowledge is associated with pragmatism and democracy, as there is no elitist restriction on access to basic skills for dealing with the complexity of the world. If the basic requirement of democracy is that there are democratic citizens, then the traditional methods of production, democratisation of skills and surpassing mere imitation are old and revolutionary recipes for injecting some dignity into a dying citizenship II

■ Bibliographical references

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