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ISSN: 1286-4692

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## ■ Christian MARAVELIAS 2012

Book review:

Richard SENNETT,

Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of  
Cooperation.

*M@n@gement*, 15(3), 343-349.

M@n@gement est la revue officielle de l'AIMS



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## Book review

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Richard SENNETT (2012)  
Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of  
Cooperation.  
Yale University Press.

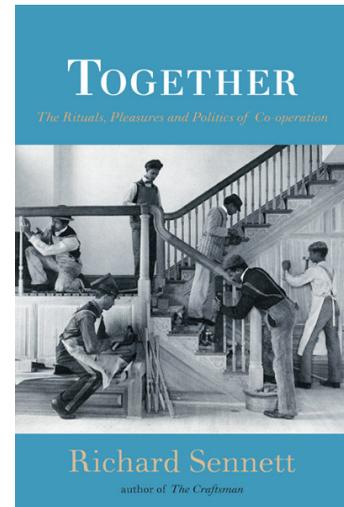
**Hardcover:** 336 pages  
**Publisher:** Yale University Press; 1 edition  
(January 17, 2012)  
**Language:** English  
**ISBN-10:** 0300116330  
**ISBN-13:** 978-0300116335

Reviewed by  
**Christian MARAVELIAS**  
Stockholm University – School of Business  
chm@fek.su.se

Richard Sennett's career covers more than four decades. He has provided us with an impressive series of works that provide a comprehensive and historically grounded diagnosis of the ailments of urban life and work. Famous books such as *The Fall of Public Man* (1977), *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1973), *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (1999), *Respect in a World of Inequality* (2003) and *The Craftsman* (2008) all provide us with a mirror of our society and suggest how we may take society and ourselves further. While having an unquestionable identity as an academic scholar, Sennett has never attempted to hide the fact that he is also a political writer. His latest book, *Together – The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (2012), is no exception. It not only seeks to diagnose the premises of cooperation in contemporary society, but also dwells on how cooperation has been shaped politically, how and why it has been weakened by neo-liberal political doctrines, financial capitalism, social media, etc., and how it may be remedied.

The problem which this book sets out to explore is the tendency for society to become ever more complicated materially, economically, racially, ethnically and religiously while people tend socially to avoid people unlike themselves. Modern politics, Sennett suggests, often emphasizes unity and similarity, "encouraging the politics of the tribe rather than of complexity". The book explores how this situation has arisen and what might be done about it. As such the book is a fairly straightforward read. Yet, it is not an easy read, not only because it draws on such a wide range of academic disciplines, including history, philosophy, psychology, sociology and political science, but also because it makes use of art, literature and Richard Sennett's own personal life experiences to paint a subtle picture of the complexities and challenges of cooperation.

The book's basic argument is that cooperation is not so much a matter of a certain moral attitude towards others and of shared ideals as it is a matter of skill. Cooperation, Sennett argues, is an embodied craft which is conveyed by social rituals. The problem of contemporary society is not only that many of the traditional rituals which have encouraged people to bond with others are waning, but also that those rituals that replace them – temporary forms of work such as team and project work, non-face-to-face social media such as Facebook, etc. – tend to undermine the craft of cooperation.



The book comprises three parts. Part one outlines how cooperation has been shaped in politics. Sennett uses the Paris Universal Exposition in 1900 as his starting point. The Exposition, we are told, was mostly a celebration of the triumph of the industrial societies in Europe and the US. Yet, tucked away on a side street, a part of the Exposition was devoted to the human issues raised by this triumph. This part of the Exposition was named "The Social Question". Sennett points out that all the contributors to the social questions room shared a common enemy: "the surging capitalism of their era, its inequalities and oppressions". They also shared the basic idea that cooperation among the people was the way to combat this enemy and its ills. Only through cooperation could a sense of solidarity be established. Yet, they were divided with regards to how cooperation and solidarity would be achieved. Whereas, for instance, the Germans believed in a top-down approach based on centralized unions, the American representatives stood for a bottom-up approach based on voluntary participation in local workshops.

This example is important to Sennett, not only or even primarily because it came to distinguish the radical from the more compromising political left, but because it was indicative of two opposed views on how cooperation and, as a result, solidarity would be achieved. Whereas the top-down approach emphasized unity, even if it had to be superimposed, the bottom-up approach emphasized involvement and inclusion, even if this meant that unity in belief and thinking would be weak. The top-down approach saw cooperation as an instrument that would lead towards the higher end, unity in thinking and in beliefs; the bottom-up approach saw cooperation as an end in and by itself.

Sennett goes on to elaborate this difference in relation to the thinking of Karl Marx and the American utopian, Robert Owen. While the dialectical thinking of Marx, Sennett argues, implies the formation of unified and politically opposed social classes whose struggles eventually result in a political synthesis, Robert Owen's dialogical thinking was more open-ended, local, pluralist and modest in its approach. Robert Owen was interested in how people from diverse backgrounds, without any real unity, could live and work together and, despite having no shared cause, how solidarity could eventually evolve between them if they were mutually responsible for a joint craft. To Robert Owen the workshop was the site where this form of cooperation and solidarity could develop. To him the factory was not a step forward but a step backward in the social development of societies.

Throughout the book Sennett comes back to the importance of dialogue (rather than debate), mutuality (rather than unity) and the workshop as the site and institution where cooperation based on dialogue and mutuality can be established and sustained. In our times, Sennett seems to argue, where people with little unity must find ways to live together, help each other, and cooperate without a shared, grand cause, Robert Owen's thinking deserves new attention. In the remaining chapters of part one, Sennett discusses first how competition, between individuals, groups, corporations, etc., is an inescapable part of cooperation that threatens to undermine it, and second, how cooperation and competition are possibly balanced by shared rituals. A balance between cooperation and competition requires that people be not too remote, that they be not too independent, and that their exchanges be not over determined by the short term. Since rituals establish at once repetition and stability in everyday life, symbolic bridges between specific exchanges and their more general meaning,

and an expressive dimension that provides individuals with specific identities, they are fundamental for establishing the conditions required for maintaining a balance between cooperation and competition.

With references to Max Weber's works on relations between the religious reformation and the development of modern industrial capitalism and Norbert Elias's works on the spread of new codes of civility, Sennett then makes the point that the modern era established new rituals that opened up new possibilities for sociability and cooperation. "Civility", says Sennett, "made sense of how people in experimental, innovative workshops could best learn from one another, civility as an open, inquisitive discussion about problems, procedures and results ... Civility was the social frame our Reformation ancestors put around lively communication. It remains a good frame". Industrial capitalism drew on the new rituals and codes of civility, but bred alienation in its factories and big cities. Interaction shrank into mechanical work routines and a defensive tolerance of others unlike oneself.

In part two of the book this exploration of the historical conditions of cooperation provides Sennett with a platform for discussing how and why the weakening of cooperation has proceeded in our times. Here Sennett draws on the ideas developed in *The Corrosion of Character* (1998), *Respect in an Age of Inequality* (2003) and *The Craftsman* (2008), as well as on earlier works such as *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1973). He discusses how contemporary capitalism and neo-liberal politics have created huge inequalities so that people today live in different worlds with little chance of respecting and understanding each other. Furthermore, he points out how the current capitalist regime coupled with neo-liberal politics have resulted in a culture characterized by individualism and consumerism in which people are ashamed of and reluctant to depend on others while they become more dependent on the symbolic values of the things they consume.

In the more specific world of work, things are no better. Whereas until the 1970s work was dominated by large and relatively stable institutions (large profit-seeking corporations, hospitals, schools, public bureaus, etc.), current capitalism and neo-liberal politics have moved the world of work away from the time-stable institutions to flexible institutions that are capable of dealing with a fluctuating short term. A world of work dominated by team work, projects and temporary employment requires people that are skilled when it comes to coping with stress and dealing with many issues at once; people with acting skills who are able to adapt quickly to different social settings while appearing sincere and authentic. Yet, individuals with such highly individualized character traits tend to withdraw from genuine social interaction, becoming narcissistic and "uncooperative selves", according to the author.

Sennett is not nostalgic about 20th-century industrial capitalism and the 'organization men' and factory workers that it created. Yet, he maintains that the long-term and stable institutions of the 20th century helped to establish strong informal bonds between workers that are now largely lost. In Sennett's studies of work in the US in the early 1970s (1973) he found that workers, despite differences and conflicts, still respected their bosses' authority and established strong informal bonds with their colleagues, which, when things were rough, made them help each other out by cooperating. Drawing on his recent studies of back-office employees on Wall Street, Sennett shows how the stress of not being able to do enough, a fear of losing one's job, and little

respect for the competence or moral stature of those in charge makes these employees highly selfish and short-sighted. Hence, almost 40 years after his original studies of cooperative behavior, Sennett finds an individualized working life where the conditions of cooperation are very weak.

If part two paints a gloomy picture of what is, the final part of the book tries to paint a brighter picture of what might be to come. Many of the themes brought up in the first two parts of the book reappear here. In particular, Sennett discusses how cooperative skills and the rituals that uphold them take time to develop and how we must thus establish institutions in which people stay longer with their work and with each other. It is only if we let things take time, Sennett seems to argue, that informal behaviors and routines can develop, that commitment to our jobs, friends and colleagues can mature, and that dialogue and an acceptance of differences can be maintained.

Without doubt, few scholars are so well read in such a rich variety of scholarly fields as Richard Sennett. Likewise, few scholars have Sennett's ability to enliven academic insights with anecdotes and stories – often drawn from his own life. This book is no exception in these regards. Even so, the book is still set back by problems, which relate to the basic issue it states and sets out to explore, namely the tendency that while the ability to live and cooperate with people unlike oneself is becoming more and more important, people are tending to lose this ability and turn away from one another. Obviously, the problem is not that this issue lacks relevance. Yet, exploring the conditions under which we can live and work together is not so different from exploring the social conditions of society as such. This is a major task, to say the least. How does Sennett attempt to tackle such a challenge? Obviously, he does not seek to make use of his empirical excursions into the world of cooperation to show where theory, in the form of political science, sociology, economics, etc., falls short in its analysis of the political, social or economic state of contemporary society. That is, he does not seek to make a specific theoretical contribution. Yet, neither is his ambition to develop an empirical understanding of aspects of this issue by exploring a limited set of well-chosen examples. Instead, Sennett gives himself the task of exploring this issue in full and not only that, he seems to want to outline how we can solve it as well. This does not make for a problem-driven analysis, but for an admittedly insightful, but in my mind too general and at times disparate, discussion.

A second problem of this book relates to the object or objects of its analysis. Given that the book attempts to help us understand why we find it increasingly difficult to live and work together and what we can do about it, it says surprisingly little about how broader political and economic developments affect these conditions. Sennett comes closest to discussing the structural or macro conditions of cooperation in the second part of the book, where he brings up expanding inequalities as one of the most important factors behind the weakening of cooperation in contemporary society. Yet, even here, he does not discuss the political economy as such, but how it affects – negatively – our social-psychological abilities to cooperate. He devotes ten pages to a section that elaborates on how children are affected by being brought up in a society where inequalities are huge. It is interesting, but it does not help us much when it comes to understanding why these inequalities are so huge and what can be done about them.

This critique relates to the political message that Sennett puts forth: that political

action must start locally. Rather than striving for the realization of some grand ideology, we should strive to come to terms with one another even though we differ. Sennett is critical towards David Cameron's ideas of a "Big Society" based on volunteer-led social repair. He writes that "The local community, like the colony, is stripped of wealth, then told to make up for the lack by its own efforts". Yet, somehow he still remains firmly on the non-dogmatic left and comes back to Robert Owen's ideas about the importance of the workshop and the local community in establishing cooperative skills among people who differ. The 'social question' is still part of the evils of capitalism. Yet, solidarity in the form of some administrated unity among people is less of a solution to those evils than it ever was before, says Sennett. He cites the maxim of La Rochefoucauld: "we are different from each other, as we are divided in ourselves: let's talk!" Dialogue, rather than debate in local communities and workshops is, if not a solution, then at least a way and a place to start. It is difficult to disagree with such a message. Yet, somehow, I cannot help thinking that it is a form of resignation, a form of political surrender. Big Capital and Big Politics are beyond our reach. All we can do is to try to stick together; if we do, who knows what may happen?

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