

Richard Sennett: **The Craftsman***

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Sennett knows his craft. *The Craftsman* is an essay about the desire to do a job well as an end in itself, and this definition of craftsmanship, with which Sennett begins his book, has in a certain sense been a leitmotif throughout the writing career of this philosopher of society. The result is a book that's hard to put down. Sennett takes us to various lifeworlds – the medieval workshops of the goldsmith, the kitchens of the Old and New Worlds, or contemporary architectural offices, to name but a few – and links these excursions to considerations on abilities, on the learning and the impact of craftsmanship. This should suffice to sketch out the reasons why Sennett's book – the start of a trilogy on material culture – *craftsman, warriors and priests*, as well as *stranger* – demands to be read through to the end. This review is concerned with the importance of this book for a particular circle of readers – practitioners and scholars in the particular management-oriented disciplines – beyond just a general interest in the contemporary social philosophy of labor.

Sennett's considerations begin with his recalling a passing conversation with his teacher Hannah Arendt in the wake of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. In the conversation, Arendt insisted on her standpoint – developed in *The Human Condition* – that the engineer, or, more generally, the active person is not the master of his own fate. The self-destructive potential of technological development confirmed her in her rational fear that opening Pandora's box – here, technological developments – can prove to have consequences that turn against both their creators and the entire human race if politics does not provide clear guidelines. In a sense, Sennett is indeed writing against this rational fear and its roots in the distinction between *animal laborans* and *homo faber* or the division of mental and manual labor: in Sennett's view, the human animal found in *animal laborans* can indeed think, and thinking does not just begin when the labor is completed.

With this proposition, Sennett is taking a position that actively refuses one widely accepted and subliminally effective in the various subdisciplines of management – labor and organizational sociology, organizational and industrial psychology, and business personnel management and organization studies – that craftsmanship abilities and orientations have disappeared with the emergence of industrial society. Of course, Sennett knows Marx and the consequences all too well to want to overlook principles of the division of labor into “old” or “new” capitalism. *The Craftsman* should be seen before the backdrop of his recent works on “flexibility” or the new culture of capitalism. But despite all his pragmatism, Sennett is enough of a dialectician to see the sublation of craftsmanship orientations in developed industrial societies of contempo-

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rary capitalism beyond the realm of qualified manual labor among computer programmers, doctors, or artists.

In the first part of the book, we become acquainted with the craftsman as part of a social community that shares a certain idea: delivering quality and doing good work. Sennett links the formation of this ideal to institutions that strengthen cooperation. In this light, neither individuated competition nor bureaucratic control proves to be successful models of organization. Accordingly, we are presented with examples from Japanese factories and northern European high tech companies as models of organization that promote cooperation. Furthermore, craftsmanship is based on the development of practical abilities, that is, repetitive and concrete practice. The division of the mind and the hand ultimately damages the mind in Sennett's view. He clarifies this by using examples where technology was introduced to replace manual labor too quickly, as in the use of computer-based design in architecture at the expense of free-hand drawing and the linked visit to the construction site. Finally, quality craftsmanship finds itself confronted with contrary criteria of quality. Explicit and thus absolute notions of quality often find themselves in contradiction to implicit knowledge of practical solutions to problems. Sennett explains these three problems of the craftsman in the further course of the book with considerations on the workshop as an institution for motivating craftsmanship, the relationship of abilities and machines in the eighteenth century's age of the Enlightenment and finally in the craftsman's consciousness of the material as a line of compromise between explicit and implicit criteria of quality.

The second part of the book is dedicated to craftsmanship itself. One of the book's nicest chapters is about the hand: grasping, touching and coordinating hands, hand and arm, eye and movement. The learning of a string instrument, the use of a cooking knife, and the craft of glassblowing are impressive studies he uses to illustrate the issues. In so doing, Sennett also explores the question of how to shape the oft-mentioned 10,000 hours of practice that are needed to learn a complex ability in both mental and physical terms, and, if you will, achieve mastery in any area. Mechanical practice and routine are at any event not a hindrance in achieving a skill. Mental understanding alone is of little help. Sennett pursues this line of thinking further when he explores the principles of instruction and inspiring tools. Good instruction is not necessarily precise, but needs to be sufficiently expressive and fantasy-inspiring. Above all, good instruction shows how things work, and does not just say it. Such inspiration is also offered by tools that inspire the gift of invention, for example in case of repairs.

But what is the significance of the skill of craftsmanship, the focus of the third part of the book, for contemporary organizations? This is one of the questions that Sennett poses at the end of his work. One answer is that the skills of craftsmanship have undergone something of a renaissance with the rise of the quality management movement. Other concepts of organization that signal an "end of the division of labor" could be mentioned as well. All the same, the quality orientation of organization also brings along with it grave social problems that Sennett oddly scarcely mentions. For the process of concentrating on human capital specific to an organization leaves unqualified labor as the loser of these new processes of rationalization, not just eco-

nomically, but in social terms as well. That is, what is needed are not only well-constructed organizations that respect the desire of their members for a fulfilled life and indeed profit from this, but also social institutions that allow for such organizations. Sennett does explore the question of social selection, for example in the focus on aspects of testable intelligence, but in my view a more detailed analysis of schooling and training is here lacking here. Perhaps the Western societies are here too different to be treated in a single work.

Beyond the wealth of inspiring ideas that Sennett offers the practitioner and above all the professional scholar of questions of organization and personnel management, the decisive argument of the book is that intrinsic motivation, this fundamental building block of contemporary business organization, is not an individual characteristic, but a social construct embedded in several linked routines, realizations, and orientations. This very thought alone could help to change the dominant viewpoint and makes *The Craftsman* a book well worth reading.