Sennett, Richard (2012)
Together
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Together is the last book by Richard Sennett. Its subtitle is *The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics*. One can guess off the top of one's head that the author will deal with Marx (the rituals of work), Freud (the pleasures of being together) and Weber (the political act). Sennett was founding director of the New York Institute for the Humanities, and is now professor of Sociology at New York University and the London School of Economics. He is the author of celebrated books such as *The Fall of the Public Man* and *The Corrosion of Character. Together* is second in a trilogy on *homo faber* that started with *The Craftsman* and will end with a study on urbanity and the city. In dialoguing with the classics, Richard Sennett proves his competence as a sociologist that knows how to put down the hard questions. He raises issues that are not easy to tackle, but that are framed in an effective way that gets the attention of a wide and heterogeneous audience, from a professor to a young student or a civil worker.

Cooperation is not a new topic. So much has been said on the need for cooperating agents in the financial market, in labor relations, in family and care. Still, Sennett is capable of approaching the topic from the triple angle that is targeted in the subtitle and write 300 pages of an easy read. Cooperation is framed as an activity that, while it is learned and reproduced collectively, constitutes an individual experience based on emotions and reasons. And with real consequences that go above the level of interaction to shape institutional structures such as the state, the market or the school.

The book has three parts, with titles (*Cooperation Shaped, Cooperation Weakened and Cooperation Strengthened)* that evolve around the sociologist's initial research question, namely, *how institutions can disable the skill for cooperation.* Each part has three chapters, nine in all, together with an Introduction and a Coda. These two addendums are wonderful essays that can be read separately. Actually, these two texts are the kernel of the book and build up the thesis of the author. We also find a satisfactory section with notes that are paramount for an academic reader, and an index with keywords that is extremely useful for students and journalists.

In his introduction, the author explains his dual view on social interaction. He makes it very clear that the lack of cooperation skills is not only a state of mind, but that it emerges from practical activity (6). This is the reason why the book is full of examples extracted from history and from current ethnographies on work, international relations and education.

On the one hand, following the author, there are hostile ways of dealing with the external world, based on intellectual assertion, in which one pronounces, "This is what I think and I can think no other". The author identifies this state of mind with a dialectic model of communication. This type of declarative-aggressive speech, which is getting more and more possessive, permeates media, political discourse and everyday talk. How often do we hear swear words in soap operas or reality shows? How much repetitive patterns can one take when viewing an ad online or on TV? This type of critique is not new: back in 1975 British writer Malcolm Bradbury published *The History Man,* a satire of a university campus where Marxism and Sociology are synonyms, and where authoritarian practices and attitudes prevail

under a leftist flag. In Bradbury's novel, we find the following dialog between a student and Professor Howard Kirk, the main character "Isn´t that debatable, Dr. Kirk? I mean, are you sociology? Yes, for the present purpose, I am." This exchange is what the author considers a type of social death, since there is no possible continuation, and in fact, in the novel what follows is "There is discomfort in the room" and the student leaving.

On the other hand, cooperation for Sennett comes with talk rather than in confrontation such as in the previous dialog. Dialogical conversation (Bahktin, 2004) from the ground up is an ideal type which "can be ruined by too much identification with the other person (20) and where a "good listener detects common ground more in what one assumes than says (19). Real cooperation then, is more empathy than sympathy, more about exchanging information and being curious about the other, than about understanding what the other person actually says or does. A dialogic conversation should leave space for ambiguity; it is a form of speech act towards the subjective.

Cooperation Shaped deals with the ritualistic patterns that make individuals learn, eat and work together. Sennett must be a good teacher, because some of his examples are brilliant. For instance, in his first chapter, on *The Social Question*, he recalls his childhood experience as part of Addams Hull House, a community center in a predominantly African-American working class neighborhood in Chicago. The function of this organization was making parenting, shopping and schooling easier. In a neighborhood with low-income immigrant families, the ordinary could become a battlefield for resources and for building hostility. The fact that the Hull House had no specific political goals, like a labor union does, was for Sennett the key to its role as a free-action-zone. The metaphor he uses for this type of joint activity is the staircase: "the structure of the image lies in its narrative of making a staircase, which shapes their shared purpose in time, their project furnishes their mutual respect (p. 62)". The activity model that the author proposes is that of lateral thinking and unexpected collective consequences of individual actions. The appeal of consumer cooperatives is to have access to better and cheaper produce; this practical goal is only attainable by working together with others that make this alternative production and distribution possible. One didn't go to Hull House or to the utopian workshops led by Owen or Fourier to learn about cooperation or solidarity.

Sennett writes beautifully: and this is both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing, because the reader meanders through its prose, like a sail boat on a mild summer day. One reads about history, education, society and politics with no effort, jumping from one study to the other, from one discipline to the next, from the US to the UK and back. And still, when closing the book, one feels wiser, yes, but also refreshed and stimulated. It is a curse, because as we will point out in more detail, the sociologist drags into the narrative heterogeneous topics and authors that are not always quoted correctly. These mistakes and inaccuracies make his arguments less sound and sociologically relevant.

The author is specifically worried about the corrosion of sociability, in a similar fashion as his previous book *The corrosion of character.* In *Cooperation Weakened,* which is the central and best part of his book, he looks into the socialization of cooperation, digging into psychology, psychoanalysis and the sociology of education. In his fourth chapter, he defines *Inequality* as a product of internalization and rutinization that go against the virtues of cooperation. Sennett points out the inverted digital divide, quoting a relevant and original study on media consumption by Mayo & Nairn (2009). The study describes poor kids as *consumer*

kids that spend more time online eating, before school and in bed than their counterparts. The sociologist warns us against a new form of inequality that adds on to income or knowledge inequality: "Face to face connections, personal relationships and physical presence can be forms of privilege (p. 146). The loss of social capital is the concern of those who challenge the MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses) teaching platforms. While classes can be easily recorded and distributed, attending classes in a first-class university involves much more than listening to the professor talk. Those who you share your time with between classes or who save you a spot in class might have a strong impact on your career, job opportunities, future employers and the like. While Sennett makes a good point here, he makes a daring claim some pages earlier.

"In Piaget's schema, children are particularly vulnerable consumers from the ages of six to eight, because of an inability to define the value of things apart from how they use game or toys; unlike Gopnik or Erikson, Piaget thinks that children in this stage make only crudely functional comparisons of themselves with others, as in "Mathew runs faster than Joey" (p. 142).

Sennett is worried that feelings of status inferiority might erode cooperation with others and he quotes another study that counters Piaget's claim, postponing this "status anxiety" to the teenager years. I happen to have Erikson's *Life History and the Historical Moment* (1975) on my desk. It has three references to Jean Piaget, such as "The cognitive facts established by Piaget make it plausible enough that youth tends to think ideologically (p. 204)". The psychoanalyst not only quotes Piaget, but considers his findings compatible with his own. In addition, Piaget (1928) says: "Thus, we believe only cooperation constitutes a generative process for reason". Moreover, while Sennett opposes Piaget's theory of cognitive development to Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, Erikson's own take on Piaget's statements are more dialogical and less confrontational. In all, saying that Erikson counters Piaget is a risky move, which comes as a consequence of the openness of mind and vast amount of material that Sennett puts together in a cohesive narrative. The sociologist exceeds the speed limit at times, and his ability in suggesting and asking the right questions hides the lack of rigor in managing references and locating his claims in the history of social thought.

Chapter 7, *The Workshop*, which opens the last part of this book, *Cooperation Strengthened*, is based on the first volume of this large project, *The Craftsman*, which will continue with a third volume on the city. The author puts forward his own thoughts on how to repair damaged cooperation in everyday life. While he doesn't seem to believe that social science can solve problems, he does suggest some ways out of inequality and social anxiety: "I will try to show how physical labor can instill dialogical social behavior (p. 199)". He then plunges into a detailed account of how *luthiers* work in their shop, describing their work process as a succession of informal gestures, formal habits and easy solicitations. This is Sennett's most phenomenological chapter: he embraces an embodied paradigm of cognition, and seems to follow the claims of philosophers such as Dreyfus (1996), Noë (2005) and Clark (2008), as well as cognitive scientists such as Sudnow (2001), Gibbs (2006) or McNeill (2005). Gesture is the flavor of the century, and learning more about how bodies interact, and how close the mind is to its biological wrap is definitely where all the money is going. Still, his knowledge —or at least his explicit reference to embodied, extended and distributed cognition— is limited. He touches the surface of this line of work but does not get into the social and cognitive mechanisms that take part in communication and work. Sociologists like Aaron Cicourel (2006) working with memory

dementia or anthropologist Alessandro Duranti (1997) in understanding jazz improvisation are relevant contributions to this particular field.

In the Coda, there is the following claim: "We frequently don´t understand what's passing in the heart and minds of people with whom we have to work (p. 274)." This pragmatic approach runs away from the black box of the theory of mind (Antaki, 2004, Muntanyola, 2014) to which Sennett dedicates chapter 2, *The Fragile Balance*. A lukewarm chapter because of lack of depth again, and a hesitant grip on the literature on Rational Choice and game theory.

From the point of view of method, which is a favorite topic for sociologists of all kinds and measures, the sociologist praises the value of intensive interviewing, of doing ethnography and of building creative narratives, such as the book we have in our hands. As a Weberian, the examples we find in our book pushes towards the understanding of how people make interpretations of what they do. And it is here where we find some real knowledge on what sociology can do for cooperation. Richard Sennett's hope seems to be a healthy optimism in the power of people to get things done. His journey is eclectic, at times bumpy and uncertain, but always engaging.

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