

The Hermeneutics of Work: On Richard Sennett

There is an incongruity in the title of Richard Sennett's recent book, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*.¹ From a certain point of view at least, the phrase "the culture of capitalism", like "the weak tyrant", looks oxymoronic. A "culture", broadly speaking, shapes and gives expression to the moral life of a people or a group. It is the realm in which "the good" is interpreted and pursued; a more or less spontaneous generator of values that enriches the identities of those who participate in it or connect with it. The term "capitalism", by contrast, refers us to a form of economic life, one in which the pursuit of capital dominates over other goals. Unlike pursuit of the good, the pursuit of capital requires ruthless calculation; unlike the generation of cultural values, the generation of economic value (capital) is oblivious to the nuances of moral identity. If capitalism, in its essence, involves the subordination of the moral life to the economic life, if social life comes to *coincide* with economic life under capitalism, then talk of a culture of capitalism, on the understanding of culture introduced above, cannot but sound like a contradiction in terms.

The culture of capitalism might seem an unpromising field of investigation for a less metaphysical reason: as the totality of economic phenomena, capitalism is surely best left to those with expertise in the science of that domain – the economists. Experts in culture are unlikely to have much of interest to say about the economy, it might be thought, not just because their area of speciality is different, but because their very standpoint is at odds with the kind of standpoint that is proper for mature economic enquiry. According to this view, the economist is no more interested in the cultural meaning of economic matters than the physicist is in the cultural meaning of physical laws. Moreover, it is precisely this indifference to culture that enables both kinds of enquirer to generate objective, practically effective knowledge. If we are serious about fixing the problems of capitalism, we must first unlock its secret; and this not by way of deep interpretations of a culture – of values for making subject-related sense of the world – but by objective scientific investigation of capitalism's underlying dynamics. From this perspective, the culture of capitalism seems either a side issue or a rough, amateurish approximation to the real stakes of enquiry.

Such a partitioning of cultural and economic objects, and the discourses that reflect on them, is as much a nostrum for some critics of capitalism as it is for its apologists. Right-wing think-tanks routinely invoke (and commission) the latest research showing how interference in the market will be the ruin of us all. Cultural or political regulation may be well-intended, they concede, but it is bound to have negative unintended consequences for the economy and on that account must be avoided. A familiar criticism of capitalism follows a similar logic: it accepts the *sui generis* character of market forces, but rather than attributing a redemptive significance to them, it construes them as an implacable source of destruction. Like the apology, this kind of criticism carries a presumption in favour of what might be called the *autonomy* of the economic. This in turn grounds a conception of what might be called the *priority* of the economic, in the context of which the role of culture can easily seem like an anodyne.

¹ R. Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (New York: Yale University Press, 2006).

It is of course a distinctive feature of the cultural left to deny the priority of the economic: culture, no less than the economy, is a source of oppression and so, from this perspective, is just as worthy of criticism. But this denial can sit quite comfortably with a more or less explicit commitment to the autonomy of the economic. On the one hand, the autonomy of the economic can be tacitly respected simply by keeping quiet about economic matters. Exclusively cultural criticism follows this path, leading inevitably, perhaps, to the opposite vice of ceding an unwarranted priority to culture. To avoid that consequence, the autonomy of the economic can rather be maintained as one moment within a comprehensive framework for social criticism. This is just what Habermas's theory of communicative action, and in particular his "critique of functionalist reason", is meant to achieve, and his model dominates contemporary discussions of the problem.² It frames the terms of the debate between Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth on recognition and redistribution, for instance, which departs from the assumption that the question of the relation between culture and economy, and the critical standpoint each admits of, is decisive for the future of critical social theory.³ But the progress made towards a solution to the problem in their widely discussed exchange is less clear.⁴

In the meantime giant strides have undoubtedly been made in what might be called the social anthropology of capitalism. Enquiries of the kind undertaken by Luc Boltanski and Robert Castel – to take two outstanding representatives of this genre – strive to articulate in systematic fashion transformations at the level of economic production and exchange with changes in the socially mediated experience of individual subjects.⁵ Analysis of economic forms is interwoven with interpretations of cultural values for the purpose of diagnosing social pathologies as they are manifest psychologically in individual experience. It is this synthesis, not the separation of cultural and economic domains and vocabularies, that provides the basis for critique.

Richard Sennett is one of the most accomplished practitioners of the social anthropology of capitalism in the English language. He is convinced that the categoric separation of culture and economy is disastrous for understanding the fundamental predicaments of modern society. Like so many philosophers and social theorists before him – and not unlike the French social anthropologists of capitalism just mentioned – Sennett traces these predicaments to the rise of subjectivist ideals of freedom and a parallel disintegration of the social bond.⁶ Like the diagnosticians of nihilism, such as Nietzsche and Heidegger, Sennett hones in on the fragility of the modern subject's hold on the meaning of things and the shallowness of the world this subject inhabits. But unlike the philosophers of nihilism, Sennett attributes this "loss of meaning" not to the absence of Gods, but – more in the manner of Marx and

² See J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2., T. McCarthy (trans.) (Cambridge: Polity, 1987).

³ See N. Faser and A. Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, J. Golb, J. Ingram and C. Wilke (trans.), (London: Verso, 2003), 5.

⁴ I lay out the reasoning behind this assessment in N. H. Smith, "Recognition, Culture and Economy: Honneth's Debate with Fraser", in D. Petherbridge (ed.), *The Critical Theory of Axel Honneth* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

⁵ See Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, G. Elliott (trans.), (London: Verso, 2005); Robert Castel, *From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers. Transformation of the Social Question*, Richard Boyd (trans. and ed.), (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003).

⁶ See J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, F. Lawrence (trans.), (Cambridge: Polity, 1987).

Durkheim – to deficits in the mundane, materially embodied processes of individuation and socialisation. In particular, Sennett points to the deficits of everyday work in its individuating and socialising capacity. Sennett finds in the world of work a key for understanding the nexus of individual freedom and social disintegration which philosophers since Hegel have seen as the hallmark of the times.

It is unusual, but by no means unprecedented, to make work central to philosophically informed reflection on the ills of modern society. Of course Marx did so, as did Arendt, and more recently Honneth has sought to reclaim the centrality of work in “recognition-theoretic” terms.⁷ As will become clear, the philosophical structure of Sennett’s social diagnoses is in crucial ways congenial to a recognition theorist like Honneth.⁸ But if we want to situate Sennett philosophically, we should look first to how his work connects with the hermeneutic tradition. This is not only where Sennett’s core philosophical commitments come from, but placing Sennett this way can also help to make sense of continuity and discontinuity in his social diagnostics. After reconstructing the basic conceptual shape of Sennett’s diagnoses of the maladies of the “old” and the “new” capitalism, I offer some broader reflections on the philosophical presuppositions of social criticism that departs from the centrality of work.

Social diagnostics: from alienation to narcissism

The titles of three of Sennett’s books – *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1972), *The Fall of Public Man* (1977) and *The Corrosion of Character* (1998) – clearly announce the adoption of a clinician’s standpoint on the social world.⁹ Each of them alludes to some kind of damage or affliction - a hidden injury, a fall, corrosion - suffered by, or on account of, some social reality: class, “public man”, character. They signify some socially mediated negativity, a negativity that is symptomatic of society’s general ill-health. Sennett’s task in these works is to bring these negativities, these symptoms of social distress, to our attention and to diagnose them.

The “data” on which the social diagnostics of *The Hidden Injuries of Class* are based are the articulated experiences (the self-interpretations) of a group of working class people from the Boston area, as revealed in interviews conducted with Sennett and his collaborators in the late 1960s. As Sennett himself emphasized, the significance of this data was by no means transparent: the descriptions given by the subjects were laced with ambiguities and contradictions. But this outcome, for all the problems about inductive generalisation it posed (since the results would not pass muster as “representative” of a larger class), could be turned to Sennett’s advantage if it could plausibly be shown that the ambiguities and contradictions in the subjects’ self-descriptions reflected a real ambivalence, and perhaps even contradiction, in the quality of the experience itself, which otherwise (if we followed the protocols of the

⁷ See K. Marx, *Early Writings*, R. Livingstone and G. Benton (trans.) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975); H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); A. Honneth, *The Fragmented World of the Social*, C. W. Wright (ed.) (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).

⁸ I will not pursue Sennett’s relation to recognition theory here, but for some preliminary remarks, see my “Work and the Struggle for Recognition”, *European Journal of Political Theory*, forthcoming.

⁹ See R. Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Knopf, 1972); R. Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Knopf, 1977) and R. Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character* (New York: Norton, 1998).

standardised social survey) would escape our notice. While by no means straying from the original descriptions, Sennett re-articulates them in a way that makes more visible an experiential content *hidden* by contradiction and ambiguity. And by providing an account of this content in terms of the social forces that give rise to it and are manifest in it, Sennett at once *interprets* the experience and provides a *social* diagnosis of the ‘hidden’ injuries of these working class people.

But what were these injuries? They did not concern material deprivations, or the relatively feeble reach of their material/financial resources. They did not concern an unquenchable resentment at being exploited or ripped off by their employers. Nor even did discrimination feature as a major issue: Sennett’s subjects did not have a sense of themselves as discriminated against on account of their class in the way that a black person or a woman, subject to racist or sexist abuse, would on account of their “race” or gender. They did not report suffering from the kind of overt disrespect that an insult, say, discharges. Rather, Sennett was struck above all by the “moral burdens” and “emotional hardships” his subjects bore.¹⁰ These moral burdens arose for them, fundamentally, from difficulties in maintaining the basis of their self-respect, and so a secure sense of their own dignity. This insecurity manifested itself in feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, and “secret” feelings of shame – emotional hardships that arose from internalising responsibility for their social condition. Their complaints, as revealed in the quality of their feelings, were not so much directed at the system as at themselves.

Nevertheless this *self-doubt* had social and cultural roots: namely, the “contradictory codes of respect in the America of their generation”.¹¹ According to the dominant code, respect is earned on the basis of individual ability and performance. One’s worthiness of respect is based not on the family, caste or clan one is born into, but on what one makes of one’s life by one’s own effort. One rightfully acquires a sense of self-respect by achieving something, and the higher one’s achievements, the more they stand out from the crowd, the more one will be respected by others. This code both establishes and legitimates distinctions of rank in a free society. The desirable positions in such a society are occupied not by those with inherited privileges, but by individuals who have made the most of their freedom, a freedom shared equally by all. The code encourages people to take full advantage of their freedom and abilities, to elevate their social position and enjoy the benefits it brings.

It was not that Sennett’s subjects actually believed that, as a matter of fact, social status was distributed according to ability: they knew only too well from their own experience of the ubiquity of power and privilege, and they told Sennett so. But this cognitive awareness of the obstacles confronting them did not prevent them from *feeling* responsible for their social position. They might understand that it was not their fault that they ended up in a boring, low-status job, constantly taking orders. They might understand that, say, daydreaming was not an unreasonable way of coping with such work. But their feelings of boredom, and their proclivity to daydream, was actually a source of profound anxiety for them. It was as if these feelings proved their inner inadequacy, their inability to do a good job, a job that showed they were worthy of respect. This anxiety was expressed alongside disavowals of the importance of

¹⁰ Sennett and Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, 76.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

their particular jobs to them. They did not *identify* with their work, but their *identity* was nonetheless bound up with it. They could see, from the outside, reasons to be dissatisfied with their work; but from the inside, this was experienced affectively as a kind of *self-dissatisfaction*. At an emotional level, they found it hard to separate the restricted freedom they actually exercised at work from the form of autonomy they were really *capable* of. Hence the worker's lack of conviction about a social wrong and the "secret shame for who he is".¹² The psychologically damaging assumption of individual responsibility for class position could thus be said to be one "moral burden" suffered by American working class people on account of the prevailing coding of respect. The code is partly contradicted by observation, but it is socially real enough to impact negatively on the *self-relations* of working class subjects, relations such as self-doubt, shame, and an inwardly directed contempt.

But if these negative self-relations arose from failing the tests of ability, success was not necessarily the answer. This was because the life-orientation required for developing one's abilities, and so improving one's social position, came into conflict with other norms, norms that were just as important in shaping a sense of self-respect. The issues here are complex but three kinds of normative conflict come to the fore in Sennett's account. First, it is clear that love relations, which are crucial in maintaining one's sense of self-worth, are not based on individual ability or achievement, and that an overriding concern with proving oneself to the other is bound to be destructive of a love relationship. This is true for everyone but it had a special pertinence for the subjects of Sennett's study, for whom the ability to provide for their family also compensated for the restricted freedom they enjoyed at work. Furthermore, self-advancement is no more a basis for healthy relationships at home than it is for social bonds at work. This is another general truth with class-specific significance. One of Sennett's most revealing findings was the extent to which his subjects were torn between the rewards of performing well at work – better pay, promotion, more independence – and a desire to maintain strong fraternal relations with their fellow workers. In some cases workers would deliberately under-perform so as not to make others seem less capable or less worthy of respect. But this in turn would trigger a hidden, unarticulated resentment, and the holding back would exacerbate the feeling of weakness to which they were already, on account of their class, disposed. The third norm to come into conflict with individual achievement, in addition to the norms of love and fraternity, was that of craftsmanship. This plays a relatively minor role in the argument of *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, but as we shall see it will feature prominently in Sennett's later work. The issue here was that although the work done by Sennett's interviewees was generally low-status manual labour, their working-class background had given them an expectation of what dignified work consisted in – making something well for its own sake – which hardly squared with the kind of orientation to work that was necessary to "succeed" in the America of their time. That orientation required instead the adoption of an *instrumental* attitude toward work and a focus on the development of an individual's generic (object-neutral) inner ability.

The subjects of Sennett's study feel the *normative force* of individual, self-responsible achievement, familial love and care, fraternity in the workplace and craftsmanship; but on account of the contradictory nature of these norms, the subjects are unable to *reconcile* them. In Sennett's view, this gives rise to an internal psychic fracturing, a

¹² *Ibid.*, 97.

splitting of “the active, performing self, seeking recognition from others as a distinctive individual” from the self reassured of its dignity through its social bonds.¹³ By splitting-off the performing, working self, by *alienating* himself from it, the worker obtains a certain degree of protection: his self-worth is not totally dependent on the recognition he gains from others of his ability. But as we have seen, the consequent disengagement from the working self, the withdrawal of emotional investment in it, also has its costs, as it can reinforce a sense of social uselessness.

And so Sennett and his collaborator Jonathan Cobb can conclude with the strange looking claim that “the plea we feel runs through all the lives presented in this book is to be relieved of having to prove oneself this way [through successful demonstration of individual ability], to gain a hold instead of the innate *meaningfulness* of actions”.¹⁴ At one level, all actions can be said to have meaning simply by definition, since to count as an action a piece of behaviour must be directed by a meaning-bestowing intention. But this is not by itself the feature of their actions that the subjects of Sennett’s study find to be lacking. Rather it is meaningfulness in a weightier, existential sense, the kind of sense that philosophical diagnosticians of modern nihilism, or the “loss of meaning” in modernity, had in mind. But the ‘meaninglessness’ experienced here has an ordinary enough source: a well-grounded reluctance to invest oneself in one’s work; to engage fully with others and with one’s environment; to commit oneself wholeheartedly to a task. This splitting-off or diremption of self and action for the sake of preserving the basis of self-respect was, in Sennett’s view, a defining pathology of the times.

The moral burdens described in *The Hidden Injuries of Class* are psychic consequences of the cultural norm of *autonomy* that emerged from the Enlightenment. The internalisation of this norm engendered shame about dependence as well as a crippling sense of responsibility for one’s social position, as if low social status necessarily reflected personal inadequacy. In *The Fall of Public Man* the ethic of *authenticity* comes under the spotlight. This too is the by-product of a ‘flawed humanism’;¹⁵ but whereas the social malady associated with the Enlightenment norm of autonomy is *alienation*, the malady characteristic of a culture dominated by the ethic of authenticity, at least as that ethic came to be interpreted in contemporary America, is *narcissism*. Up to a point, the symptoms of narcissism resemble those of alienation. An anxiety about meaning, a tendency towards social withdrawal, and “depoliticization” are common to both.¹⁶ But whereas the anxiety of Sennett’s alienated worker relates to the basis of self-respect, the anxiety suffered by the denizens of Sennett’s narcissistic society relates to the source of self-fulfilment. Under the sway of the norm of authenticity, the subject seeks to explore and be true to his or her inner feelings. And he or she expects fulfilment from the sphere which has prerogative for such exploration and expression: the intimate sphere. But the intimate sphere is crucially limited in what it can deliver by way of expression. It lacks impersonal standards capable of giving form and objectivity, and so depth and complexity, to the thing expressed. Drawing on a wealth of historical material, Sennett shows how expression was previously able to flourish in vibrant public spaces. With the decline of the public realm in the nineteenth century, however, an

¹³ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 256.

¹⁶ See Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, 44.

alternative norm of authentic *self*-expression took over. Paradoxically, as the cultural importance of expressive fulfilment rose, as the expectation of self-fulfilment through expression grew, the resources needed for delivering it diminished. The anxiety at the heart of the narcissistic disorder – which in Sennett’s conception amounts fundamentally to an atrophy of human expressive powers – arises from this paradox.

The New Capitalism

Alienation and narcissism are very much maladies of capitalist society. Alienation is, after all, a hidden injury of subordinated, working class people. And narcissism has its roots in the hegemony of private interest and the marginalization of the public good. Both concern, to borrow Daniel Bell’s famous expression, the cultural contradictions of capitalism. But from the mid 1970s, the period to which these initial diagnoses were applied, capitalism began to change. Precipitated, as Sennett recounts it, by new trans-national investment opportunities arising from the collapse of the Bretton Woods currency agreements following the oil crisis in 1973, and spurred on by other kinds of financial deregulation (particularly those favouring short-term shareholders), new technology, and access to massive new pools of cheap labour, capital entered a period of global resurgence.¹⁷ This was accompanied by structural transformation in the organization of labour, which is to say, deep-seated changes in the institutions that embed the productive process. At the “cutting edge” of the economy at least, so-called “Fordist” techniques of mass production – with its dreary assembly-line routines, top-down modes of micromanagement and surveillance, and rigid (if relatively transparent) functional hierarchies – gave way to “post-Fordist” regimes of flexible specialization, just-in-time production, short-term projects, networks, team-work, multi-tasking, and so forth. By the 1990s a “new capitalism” had set in. But while it did not contain quite the same cultural contradictions as the old, it inflicted its own kind of damage on those who worked under it. In *The Corrosion of Character* and *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, Sennett attempted to assess this damage. That is, he sought to diagnose the personal and social consequences of the structural transformation of work under capitalism’s new, post-Fordist productive regime.

The leitmotif of *The Corrosion of Character* is the effect these structural changes have on the worker’s experience of time.¹⁸ We can distinguish three aspects to this which tend to get run together in Sennett’s account (though they are intimately related and partially overlapping). First, there are the psychic consequences of the *increased rate of work-related change* under post-Fordism. The problems here arise from the *shortage* of time that the new capitalism allows for the development of crucial personal and social goods such as loyalty, commitment, trust, informal knowledge and craftsmanship. These goods require long-term involvement and so are stymied by the acceleration of change in the new working environment. The second aspect concerns not to much the amount of change as its *intelligibility*. The problems here concern the relation between one time-slice of working life and another (or between working and unemployment). If these are to be experienced as anything other than discontinuous, contingently connected slices of time, they must be synthesised in a narrative that makes sense of them. Bereft of such a narrative, the worker lacks the resources for sustaining a sense of self that endures through time. Hence the problem here has to do

¹⁷ See Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, 6; and Sennett, *Respect* (New York: Norton, 2003), 180ff.

¹⁸ See for example Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*, 30, 57, 83, 97.

with maintaining a sense of one's temporal orientation, of "where one has come from" and "where one is going" in the course of one's working life. The third aspect concerns *control* over time. This raises fundamental problems about the meaning of freedom and the distribution of power. Let us consider each of these aspects of the experience of time briefly in turn.

First, the consequences of what we might call the temporal deficit. In order to be able to respond quickly to changes in customer demand, to profit from new technologies, and to appear attractive to investors seeking quick returns on shares, the cutting-edge corporation focuses on short-term projects and furnishes itself with a flexible, easily mutated bureaucratic structure that can move on to the next project with minimum economic cost. But there are hidden, less easily measured costs associated with this restriction to the short-term. Fundamentally, these have to do with the *quality of attachment* that work is able to elicit from the worker. We can distinguish three valencies here. First, the attachment of a worker to the *corporation*, manifest say in feelings of loyalty to it and commitment towards it, typically grows with time; at any rate, it is unlikely to be strong in someone whose association with it is of short duration. Second, the attachment of the worker to *other workers* is affected by the amount of time that is spent with them. Loyalty and commitment are also at stake here, as is trust, which is crucial for the quality of working life. Workers who are unable to trust each other, or who have not been together long enough to know whom to trust, naturally find it difficult to depend on each other and to cooperate with each other. Third, there is the attachment a worker forms to *the tasks of working*, or as Sennett prefers to put it, to his or her *craft*. It is of course a distinctive feature of craftsmanship that it takes time to develop. One does not become a craftsman overnight; it takes an extended period of training, practice, discipline, and so forth to become "good at what one does". But the new "impatient" capitalism cannot afford such time. The new regime generates a need for skills that can be mastered quickly; "flexible" and "generic" skills that can readily be transferred from the present context of work to the next one not far away. The acquisition of this kind of skill is not a matter of *cultivation* as acquisition of the kind of skill characteristic of craft is. It has a different temporal structure and engenders a correspondingly different quality of attachment to working itself.

So in fact craftsmanship requires not only a certain amount of time, but time that has a certain shape and direction: there is something it is like to begin, to develop, and to mature. The stages are distinct but have intelligible relations to each other. The craftsman's experience of time has a direction that is fixed independently of that experience, namely in the quality of the work done. One is able to orient oneself temporally by reference to standards that apply to the craft in question. The self-conception of the craftsman is thus bound up with all the little (and perhaps spectacular) victories and defeats that brought the craftsman from where he or she "was then" to where he or she "is now" and can hope to be in the future. The craftsman's identity thus has an unproblematically narrative structure. Sense is made of the present by way of a story that connects the present with what came before and what will come after. In having such a self-conception, the craftsman can be said to have a "narrative identity".

But narrative identity is difficult to sustain under the new capitalism. In a world of twenty-four-hour-notice layoffs, sudden mergers, and seemingly constant if to all

appearances pointless organizational restructuring, it can be hard to keep a grip on how the past relates to the future. An increased exposure to contingency is one reason for the narrative (in addition to sheer temporal) deficit. Another reason arises from the reflexive relation to contingency built into the structure of the flexible organization itself. The readiness for unforeseeable change, and the demonstrated ability to undergo change almost at will, may increase the allure of the flexible firm to potential investors, but it serves as a constant reminder to the workers of the contingency and precariousness of their position. It also makes it hard for them to track the direction of their movement within the organization. Without the clearly defined hierarchy of roles and responsibilities that characterized its ancestor bureaucracies, the flexible organization lacks the reference points by which one is able to tell whether one is moving forward, backward, sideways or not moving at all in one's career. Indeed, the very concept of a career – which is already undermined by forces external to the organization, such as new technologies that remove the need for certain kinds of skill and consumer behaviour that reduces demand for them – loses its hold in such circumstances. If nothing else, the traditional career path enabled one to *plot* the course of one's working life. Without it, and with nothing like it to take its place, the worker is prone to experience their movement through time as aimless and directionless: as "drift".¹⁹ Of course, even in the old organizational structure people failed in their careers, had them abruptly and arbitrarily halted, or simply never had the chance to get them going. Contingency had its place there too. But the problem with new structure is not just, as have seen, that it increases exposure to contingency and reflexively incorporates it so that it affects the texture of everyday life: it also lacks the means for *making sense* of contingency and thereby coping with it. Lacking a narrative identity, the suddenly sacked silicon valley workers interviewed by Sennett struggled to make sense of their failure, sometimes with damaging personal consequences such as withdrawal from community life.²⁰ And even workers who have a well-grounded conception of themselves as successful over the years are less likely to have a story that is intelligible to others – to have a "witness", as Sennett puts it, to their past contributions and achievements.²¹

To be able to give shape to the passage of time, in the manner of someone with a narrative identity, is in an important sense to have some control over it. But there are broader issues to do with control over time that Sennett addresses and which go to the heart of the self-legitimation of the new regime of work. Flexitime, or flexibility over the hours one works, seems to hand control of work-time over to the worker. By providing the individual with more choice about when he or she works, it straightforwardly seems to make for more freedom at work. It seems to enhance worker autonomy, and this increase in freedom – reinforced by other features of the new regime such as team-work and a "delayered" management structure – is the flexible regime's chief justification. While Sennett accepts that flexitime has its advantages, he warns against exaggerating them, and is more concerned with the disempowerment of workers that flexibility brings. Flexibility about *when* work is done typically comes packaged, for instance, with intensified surveillance monitoring *that* it gets done. Worker surveillance may not now take the forms that grew out of Frederick Taylor's notorious attempts at maximising worker efficiency, as surveillance under Fordism (at least in its early history) did; but the techniques

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 15ff.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 124ff.

²¹ Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, 78.

available to the post-Fordist enterprise are no less direct or hostile to the worker's freedom for that. More generally, Sennett draws on a number of sociological studies to show that post-Fordist flexible regimes concentrate control over the tasks the worker must perform and the goals he or she must meet – which amounts to saying: control over the worker's time –in islands of management²² But because the power structure is less legible, because there is no visible centralisation of power, *responsibility* for the exercise of power is easier to avoid and genuine *authority* harder to establish. Sennett interprets the feelings of powerlessness, disengagement, and indifference expressed by the workers he interviewed about their work as their affective response to this situation. While their capacity for freedom remains stunted because it lacks an adequate medium of expression and development, those with power have the freedom of a more or less arbitrary will; that is, a will that can be exercised without consideration of its consequences for the workers – a socially unconstrained will. In both cases, Sennett can plausibly argue, the freedom created is of a formless, degraded kind.

It would be inaccurate to say that the subjects in Sennett's study are generally unhappy with work. Nor would it be right to say that they generally convey a sense of being exploited at work. Of course, one would not expect such feelings from the winners in the system, and such people do feature in Sennett's account. Constant readiness to move on, to risk everything, to surrender the gains of the past, seems to suit some fine. But even the losers do not suffer from unhappiness or injustice in any transparent sense, at least not a sense that is transparent to themselves. Their condition, as diagnosed by Sennett, has more precisely to do with the *unsatisfactory temporality* of their existence. They are situated badly in time, at odds with it. This prevents them from developing character, the symptoms of which are feelings of drift, disengagement, detachment, indifference, and disorientation.

Philosophical anthropology and social criticism

If this is a fair reflection of Sennett's findings, then the predicament facing workers under the new capitalism has not fundamentally altered from the one Sennett found amongst workers twenty-five years earlier: how to recover a sense of the *meaningfulness* of their actions. In *The Corrosion of Character*, this predicament is most tangible in Sennett's account of the difficulty the "flexible" worker has in maintaining a sense of narrative identity. Here, it is a sense of their actions at different times as being expressions of an enduring, secure self that needs recovery. Such a sense of self requires the kind of enduring institutional setting that is anathema to the new capitalism. In *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, Sennett takes this analysis of institutionalised time further and connects it with other ways in which "the meaningfulness of actions" is institution-dependent. For example, an institutional structure may allow for "interpretive modulation" of orders and rules by workers.²³ This interpretive input, while not necessarily enjoyable, nonetheless lends meaning to the work and simultaneously creates a social bond between worker and institution. The delayered, unmediated power structure of the flexible organization and the technologies it relies on, Sennett argues, squeeze out this space for interpretive transformation, which goes further to explaining why workers in such organizations

²² Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*, 56

²³ Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, 34-36.

should disengage from work and fail to find their work meaningful. For the new model institutional structure deprives workers of the opportunity to engage in interpretively mediated action.

What are we to make of this striking continuity in Sennett's social diagnoses? Perhaps we should reflect for a moment on his method for arriving at them. Sennett learned from the people he interviewed in *The Hidden Injuries of Class* that they experienced inner struggles over the basis of their self-respect that arose from their specific social location. One could not make sense of their experiences if one presumed them to be solely or primarily interested in their material well-being. But Sennett did not learn from the interviews that a concern about the basis of self-respect is fundamental to *being human*. He did not arrive at this thought by listening to the interviewees. He presumed it to be true: if he did not, he would have no basis for any general diagnostic claims which concern society *at large*. Rather than serving as an empirical truth, in the sense of being based on and refutable by scientific observation, it serves as an *ontological* truth, in the sense of providing a conceptual frame for his ethnographical observations and diagnostic speculations. When Sennett makes his ontological presuppositions explicit, such as when he says 'it is a mark of human beings that they need to feel a legitimacy for all their desires',²⁴ he is not so much offering a hypothesis as defining a stance toward the human. This is his way into anthropological phenomena. Likewise, while the interviews Sennett conducted in *The Corrosion of Character* informed him that workers at the cutting edge of the new capitalism lacked a sense of narrative identity, he is already committed to the ontological idea that narrative identity matters to human beings in general. Again, it is this more general idea (along with other things) that allows Sennett to move from ethnographical observations to social diagnostics.

This is all to say that Sennett's social anthropology of capitalism is framed by an ontology of the human and in this sense by a philosophical anthropology. The basic tenet of this philosophical anthropology is also the central axiom of philosophical hermeneutics: that human beings are self-interpreting animals. On this conception, the fundamental condition of human beings is, as Merleau-Ponty put it, to be 'condemned to meaning'.²⁵ They have to make sense of their experiences and actions and this requires them to understand themselves in relation to "standards of worth", as Charles Taylor put it, such as those by which we distinguish dignity (or legitimacy) and the lack of it.²⁶ It also requires them to understand their experiences and actions in relation to past antecedents and future consequences. This lends a distinct quality to human time, living through which humans acquire a narrative, or as Ricoeur puts it 'ipse', identity.²⁷ A third key commitment of philosophical hermeneutics, emphasized of course by Gadamer, is the dialogical nature of human understanding: the self-interpretation that is the mark of the human is first and foremost a matter of dialogue.²⁸ Self-awareness is mediated by other-awareness. All these features (and more I do not have space to enumerate here) of so-called "ontological" hermeneutics

²⁴ Sennett and Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, 114.

²⁵ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, C. Smith (trans.), (London: Routledge, 1962), xix.

²⁶ C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

²⁷ P. Ricoeur, *One self as Another*, K. Blamey (trans.), (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992).

²⁸ H-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall (trans.), (London: Sheed and Ward, 1993).

find their way into Sennett's philosophical anthropology.²⁹ And just as the likes of Gadamer, Ricoeur and Taylor developed these ideas to counter a subjectivism dominant in modern philosophy – manifest, for example, in the claim that meaning is “all in the head”, that standards of worth are arbitrary impositions of will, that the self is a ‘bundle of perceptions’ or that knowledge is paradigmatically monological – so Sennett wants to challenge a subjectivism dominant in contemporary practices of work. He shares the hermeneutic *ontological* view that the features of the self-interpreting animal just outlined are human constants, and this can explain the continuity in his social diagnostics. In addition, he shares the *critical* hermeneutic view that self-interpreting subjectivity needs certain conditions to flourish, conditions that subject-centred modernity undermines. Historical variation in the way that capitalism goes about this undermining, at least as Sennett interpreted it, can explain the differences in his diagnoses, such as they are.

It is important to see that one cannot have the critical hermeneutic view *without* the hermeneutic ontological view. The ontological view does not tell us substantively what the standards of flourishing subjectivity are, but it does give us clues about *where to look* if things appear to be going wrong with it. It is precisely such closer looks that Sennett's social diagnostics provide. By way of this empirically informed, though at the same time admittedly speculative procedure, Sennett is able to make his social criticism concrete.

Indeed it is more concrete than much social criticism in the hermeneutic tradition, for two main reasons. First, as we noted in passing, the critical animus of hermeneutics has typically been directed at *philosophical* theories and outlooks. Actual social processes are often criticised only, as it were, by proxy. Sennett's grounding in social anthropology protects him from this familiar conceit of the philosopher. Second, the hermeneutic focus on meaning and self-interpretation has been taken to warrant an overriding and sometimes exclusive concern with *language*. Of course philosophical hermeneutics was one of the main players in the so-called linguistic turn in philosophy (and for that matter critical theory), and it is hard to imagine how a serious account of ‘self-interpreting animals’ could do without a developed theory of language. But social criticism that takes its orientation from linguistic relations or linguistic structures is bound to remain abstract, if only because many things matter – and in that sense carry meaning – that have little to do with language. As Sennett says in a speech delivered upon receiving the Hegel Prize from the city of Stuttgart in 2006, the “physical fact” and “material circumstance” of people's lives obviously matters to them, but often not in ways that are transparent or obvious, and for that reason the meaning requires interpretation.³⁰ This provides the starting point for Sennett's own hermeneutic enquiries, which above all concern work (and, though I have not discussed this, the lived material environment of cities). The hermeneutics of work brings the problem of meaning down from the sky. And this enables Sennett to deliver a more concrete kind of social criticism than the kind we normally get from language-focused hermeneutics.

²⁹ Besides his occasional references to thinkers like Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, and Ricoeur, Sennett's allegiance to the hermeneutic tradition is clear from the ‘Introduction’ to R. Sennett, *Authority*, New York: Knopf, 1980), especially 9. See also the hermeneutic take on psychoanalysis in R. Sennett, “Narcissism and Modern Culture”, *October*, 4 (Autumn): 70-79.

³⁰ See R. Sennett “Cultural Materialism”, Hegel Prize Speech, available on the world-wide web at http://www.stuttgart.de/stadtbecherei/ldh/rede%20_sennett.pdf. Accessed 11.09.07.

Having said that, Sennett should be read as developing a potential in the hermeneutic tradition rather than as departing from it. In particular, he demonstrates the ongoing relevance for social criticism of the expressivist conception of the subject that goes back to Hegel. As we have seen, this conception emphasizes the role played by the externalization and objectification of human powers – and so *work* – in the formation (*Bildung*) of the subject, and it ties the secure self-relations that a *Bildung* properly establishes to fulfilling work in the context of enduring social institutions. This insight enables Sennett to link the *desocialised* institutions of capitalism with personal or *existential* insecurities in the worker. Indeed, the concept of “ontological security” (as Sennett puts it) features significantly in the *The Hidden Injuries of Class* as well as in his more recent diagnoses of the new capitalism.³¹

But the expressivist philosophical anthropology that underlies Sennett’s diagnoses makes his approach vulnerable to the following kind of objection. Expressivism implies that the kind of objectification involved in work is necessary for self-formation. That in turn suggests that working, in a broad sense of the term, is indispensable for the shaping of identity, and that meaningful work is integral to a well-formed identity. But surely, it might be objected, work need not have this level of significance. It might happen to matter for some, but not necessarily for everyone. Hermeneutics itself teaches that there are many worthwhile life-shaping goals, many kinds of identity worth having. Why privilege the kind of identity that comes from working? Is not meaningful work *optional* for well-formed subjectivity, so that a subject can flourish without it? If so, then what justifies the centrality of work for purposes of social diagnosis?

Someone wanting to defend the centrality of work has a number of responses at their disposal. Here are some. She might say, first of all, that just as it is no accident that the subject is materially embodied in the world, so it is not an accidental feature of the subject’s identity to be concerned by how it is materially placed. The “physical fact” and “material circumstances” of the subject are nowhere more concretely manifest than when working, and the material features of work can hardly fail to affect the subject’s identity, especially when the proportion of the subject’s time typically spent at work (in modern societies) is taken into account. Furthermore, as we have seen, it is not just the amount of time but its shape that matters here. And it could be argued that we have no option but to try to give some narrative shape to working life, again in a way that cannot but affect our identity, however consciously. To reiterate a distinction made earlier: if we spend long hours over a large stretch of time in *toil* we may not be inclined to *identify* with the work, but we will feel all the more need to *make sense* of it, by fitting it into the story of a human life, and so an identity. People who enjoy their work and find fulfilment from it are of course more likely consciously to identify themselves with their career and to integrate it into the story of their lives. Many people’s experience of work lies somewhere in between. But can anyone really relate to all their working hours as if it were empty, linear, so to speak, cosmological time? Can it be more than delusion to consider one’s real identity as completely outside of and untouched by all that? And if not, might it be just as delusional to suppose that the way in which individuals do make sense of their working time is by telling themselves

³¹ See Sennett and Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, 201 (where the notion of ontological security is attributed to R. D. Laing); Sennett, *Respect*, 234 (where it is attributed to Merleau-Ponty); and *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, 175 (where it is attributed to Margaret Mahler!).

individually made up stories in their heads? The social institutions in which work is embedded are the real meaning-makers here.

Expressivist anthropology implies that working plays *some* non-accidental role in the shaping of subjectivity. As we have seen, it posits certain human constants or universal features of the human life-form. But precisely the fact that these constants are *expressed* makes room for plurality and variation: the constants find multiple modes of expression across history. Expressivism posits, for example, that acquisition of some conception of the difference between a life with dignity and one without it is generally not an option for human beings, alongside cultural variation in what counts as dignity. But the cultural norms that determine the basis of dignity, respect, legitimacy and so forth impose their *own* kind of necessity on subjects. That is, they can make it non-optional for self-evaluation to take certain forms. It is not unreasonable to argue that in the context of the culture of modernity, self-evaluation or legitimacy based on work is one such form. The centrality of work can thus be defended in terms of the centrality of the work-ethic to the modern identity. Of course, the historical emergence and transformation of the work-ethic can only be understood against the background of broader social and economic change. But given all these changes, individuals find themselves in a space of identity-related questions, so to speak, that has to be navigated (like it or not) with some reference to work.

The work-related social pathologies diagnosed by Sennett arise in part from contradictions *between* the norms embedded in the culture of capitalism. These contradictions make identity-space difficult if not impossible to navigate, and this gives rise to anxiety. But the pathologies also arise from the *inadequacy* of norms as expressions of human capacities. The social diagnostician has no *a priori* knowledge of the limits of expression, that is, of the range within which norms can express human capacities without injury. Rather, it is the observation of symptoms of socially mediated distress that alert the critical social theorist to this possibility. It is not always clear whether Sennett's criticisms of the culture of the new capitalism are based on the inadequacy of its 'new' norms, and in particular the model of freedom as flexibility, or their conflict with other, longer-standing norms still at play in the culture. For example, Sennett sometimes argues as if the concept of "ontological security" were an anthropologically grounded condition of undamaged identity as such, but at others he seems to be articulating a cultural or psychological preference, as if some individuals or cultures may reasonable choose to do without it.³² When arguing this way, Sennett can give the impression of arbitrarily favouring certain values and traits over others: stability, continuity, constancy, predictability look good; change, indeterminacy, riskiness, detachment, bad. While Sennett would say that this is a misunderstanding of his position, it is a misunderstanding that further clarity about the basis of his critical norms would help to avert.

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³² See note 30.

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