

Interview

Richard Sennett / Benoît Heilbrunn

Benoît Heilbrunn: *Thank you very much for accepting this invitation. The IFM research and publishing department will release in November the issue n°18 of Research Report about “Neo-craftsmanship”. And as you know, your book, The Craftsman has been extremely successful in France. We understand that your book The Craftsman is not an isolated book in your publications since it comes after books on respect (Respect in a World of Inequality), on work (The Corrosion of Character. The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism), and on your reflection about the evolution of capitalism (The Culture of the New Capitalism). It is a trilogy, so my first question is how do you relate this work on craftsman to previous works you did and to these two volumes?*

Richard Sennett: When I started writing *The Craftsman* (2008), I always knew that I was going to do these three volumes, one on the hand and the mind – the manual and mental skills –, something on social skills, and I thought originally I would contrast cooperation in religions and in warfare (Together: The Ritual, Pleasure, and Politics of Cooperation, 2012), and I knew that I will do a third book about the city. So I decided with this book, the second volume, that I wanted to do something

that was more theoretical and structural about cooperation rather than a book of compare and contrast. With the third book, which I am just starting now, I realized that I was interested in the dialogue between design and habitation, that is between making and using, and the condition of being a kind of exile in the city or a foreigner was really not a way to get at this relation between making and using. It was a very circuitous way to do it, it was too Baroque, I had to reformat the titles, but this project still remains what it was, which is to look at *Homo Faber* physically, socially and environmentally. That was always the project and it's still the same. How does this relate to what's come before? I have been a critic for a long time, as you know, of the labor process in capitalism, and it was mostly a negative critic of capitalism's effect on the labor process. I guess I wanted to do something that was not just simply more critic but something that has also a more pro-active, as we would say in English, positive but pro-active position, what should be done, what is good work and so on, so I guess that's how they fit together.

B.H.: *I remember you were a student of Hannah Arendt, and you overcame dichotomy between Animal Laborans and Homo Faber, can you just tell us a word about that?*

R.S.: Like what I said in the book, I think it was a terrible distinction. I think it is actually “animal laborans” who thinks, and like in Heidegger, the physical, the bodily is absent in this kind of discourse. She was a great teacher, she was fantastic, but as I said in the book, this is a divergence between us.

B.H.: *What is interesting is that at the same time your book appeared in the States, there was another book by your colleague and friend Matthew Crawford, Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work. How do you relate to his work?*

R.S.: Well, we are colleagues and friends, it is a very similar kind of endeavor. I think he is maybe a little more psychologically oriented than I am, and a little more sociological, but basically we are in the same, not school, but we're in the same "*chemin*".

B.H.: *Both of you make use of your personal interest, he with motorbikes and you with cello.*

R.S.: The interesting thing to me about his work, is that now he is really writing philosophy. This was not as some people thought a kind of anti-intellectual book on his part, but it was just to say that there is a real issue about cutting off the physical, and thinking about issues of the self, of life value, and so on. I suppose also my book has more about the techniques of craftsmanship. But basically he's got much more about the psychological experience. So there is just a different emphasis on the same subject.

B.H.: *It was very surprising for the French audience to see that the titles of these two books were totally different in French and in American.*

R.S.: What was Matthew Crawford's book title in French?

B.H.: *It was Éloge du carburateur. Essai sur le sens et la valeur du travail.*

R.S.: Beautiful, *Oh! C'est beau ! Ce que sait la main* is much better than *The Craftsman*.

B.H.: *And so this was my next point, the fact that in American the title is more focused on the craftsman, whereas in French it is really positioned on the hand: Ce que sait la main.*

R.S.: I wonder if that means anything. The irony in the United States is that skilled manual labor has come to be something that Americans treat with contempt, something

that Mexicans do, that foreigners do. We are in a neo-liberal culture that emphasizes office work and particularly finance, high-tech, creative industries. The world of skilled manual labor is just a kind of grey zone, and that is an effect of neo-liberalism. It is the same thing in Britain. One of the reasons both these books were provocations in both countries is because this world of skilled manual labor was thought to be fit only for people who couldn't do office work. And we were saying just the opposite, that this is anything but the case. So, you have much greater tradition of what we think of in English as "craftsmanship" in France, than what we have in neo-liberal economies, so that might be a cultural difference.

B.H.: *Do you think that one of the consequences of your work is to overcome the distinction between craftsman and industrial, and the machine/man dichotomy?*

R.S.: For me the real point of this is to overcome the distinction between art and craft, between technique and expression. For me, that's what this is about.

B.H.: *Basically the idea is that craftsman is a part of human identity and that everybody can develop his own craftsman skills?*

R.S.: Not quite. What I am arguing is that there are basic sets of physical skills that people develop mentally, and those skills are often neglected, and particularly in modern education. But there are skills that help us experiment, think about alternatives, recover the sensuality that's involved in thinking. It is a very important thing, if not the sexuality of it, certainly the sensuality of thinking. It is why the line, this barrier between art and craft should never be closed, because if you make something creative in the abstract, you haven't created yet, you have made nothing. That is my preoccupation about this, I had

that as a musician. It is a terrible thing separating technique from expression, in any art that's the case. But there is a lot of pressures in modern society, the hard part of it is also reflection, judgment. It is not simply emotion, it is also self-understanding. But I think it is a basic quality of making, that it has to be grounded, and yet it has to be reflexive. It is true in social relations, like cooperation, in making physical objects, or in making a place.

B.H.: *And of course, the question we are tempted to ask is what is creativity? If you overcome the distinction between art and craftsman, how can we define creativity?*

R.S.: Well, the way we've defined it since the romantic era is uniqueness.

B.H.: *You said singularity, sometimes, is a social etiquette. But if we get singularity out of art, what remains to art, is it creativity?*

R.S.: What remains to art is differentiation. If you look at a group of cellos made by Stradivarius, they are not unique, they're tight form as they say in the book. But they are very different, and each one of the differences, in this type of form, is expressive. So they are not multiples in the sense that Warhol makes a multiple in which there is no variation. And creativity is in that differentiation. Romantic ideas were something that came from the novel. Homo Faber was somebody who made something when there was nothing. We all agree on this idea. So the creativity part of it is understanding the differentiation and to make that differentiation speak.

B.H.: *And what distinction do you make between differentiation and singularity?*

R.S.: It is part of the whole trope of modernism that is still embedded in 19th century romanticism. That singularity is a virtue. It is a more

creative practice to make an incomplete form from which others would make more forms, because your form is not finished. And it is to make something: "*Voilà, un nouveau modèle, tout neuf!*" That's in a way a closed system, whereas in an open, and I think more creative system, working is incomplete, "*c'est inachevé*" and it requires others to be engaged to it.

B.H. : *And there is also a very interesting opposition between touching and seeing in the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience, I have the impression you underlined, more than you developed, the hegemony of seeing in occidental culture. And I have the impression that you emphasize the anthropological twist that goes from seeing to touching.*

R.S.: You've understood me well. Actually I should have said more about that, because I've written about it elsewhere. I use screens all the time. As you can see, we're full of screens, but what's happened particularly in the last fifteen years is that the dominance of the screen has meant a loss of tactile understanding, of touch. It is one of the peculiarities of vision, that it seems to erase the need to touch. It is a dominant sense today, in that it substitutes for the other senses, of smell for instance, or look at something we don't think of... "I want to know what that smells like", or "how rough it is", or even "how big it is". When I work on the screens, I can make things that are twenty-story or a micron. I wrote about this in an earlier book, screen work is something that has to be treated, we have to use them, but we also have to know the limit of this. We lose tactile sense and particularly we lose the sense of resistance. It is what is important for all forms of *poiesis* is the notion of something that is an impediment, and thinking about the impediment, experiencing resistance is terribly important for thinking. It is very easy to get over resistance when working on screens.

B.H.: *But at the same time, a brand like Apple, which is very strong here and in France, has changed the relationship to technology, making it shifted from visual to tactile, like the gestures that you do with your iPhone or iPad.*

R.S.: Yes, but they are not gestures of resistance. When you do touch the screen, you're doing very primitive gesture. What you're actually not exploring with your hand is the object that is there. The hand is not that dihaptic at all. We use Linux here, it is not smooth the way Apple is. Even when we run them on the machines because we've disabled the kernel Apple. Linux is more cumbersome when you think of what you do. You get lots of feedback from other people. You can go on line while you're working on a project, and the other people say "why are you doing that". What you get with Apple is a completely closed system. There is not this kind of mutual exchange. But I think what you say is absolutely right, that this dihaptic sense – touch – is repressed by the screen. The reason that I think it matters is because what we get through touch is dealing with resistance.

B.H.: *Isn't there another kind of resistance that isn't mentioned which is the language resistance, because people in linguistics, for example, would explain to you that you cannot experience something if you cannot verbalize your experience. As a matter of fact, in most languages, there are many more words to talk about seeing than to talk about touching. Isn't there in the language a barrier to the development of haptic senses and craftsmanship?*

R.S.: I would not say so. Actually you can assume that language is adequate to reality, you can assume that it is not. And if you were somebody like Michael Bakhtin you would assume that what he calls a "veil of words" was never adequate to reveal a meaning. And actually that insufficiency is a kind of

resistance. And we feel it physically, we can't really say what we mean, but we're doing something in a dialogical state, we're searching for something else. That if we were completely glib, we could be exactly clear about what we meant, there would not be any resistance, the words are there for us, and they might be quite dead. So I think there is an analogy, and that's what I try to say in this book, between dialogical forms of verbal expression and its physical experience resistance which is touch.

B.H.: *Most books are made of very "cold thought", intellectual thought, and what is fascinating with your writing, is that it is warm, "il y a de la chair", "there's flesh". Isn't there also a problem of an intellectual tradition that has difficulty talking about the senses. You talk a lot about Ruskin, which is for me a counter-example of all our intellectual tradition.*

R.S.: What about Barthes? He was a great friend of mine. I think there is this other visceral tradition which is writing.

B.H.: *Yes, but you mention authors who have no disciples, like Derrida. There are people who admire them, there are people who try to do the same.*

R.S.: They are writers, they are not university lecturers. I think that leads into a whole other kind of discussion. What we call "sciences humaines" is often quite inert, it has lost touch with ways of communicating with other people. You mentioned people that have had a profound hold on ordinary intellectual life. It's the same thing with Foucault, he's an extraordinary writer.

B.H.: *Two more points. I'm coming back to the routine. One of the very interesting aspects is that you do not glorify but explain the importance of repetition through routine. We would expect for example the word "surprise" that doesn't really occur in The Craftsman.*

R.S.: We need rupture sometimes which is different than surprises. What I said about routines, is that it has a narrative contained in it. For instance, in a couple of hours, I'm going to spend three and a half hours practicing cello. In those three and a half hours, I will do many routine tasks. I'll be bored and I'll be un-bored. There is a coming and going on which is related with this cycle of tacit knowledge, explicit reconsideration and reinscription in the task. At least for musicians and I think it is also true for people who do other kind of handwork. The experience of routine has this kind of inner rhythm in it. The problem with industrialized labor, is that it's simply repetition. On the factory line, it is very hard to achieve that kind of thing. After you spend three hours doing a music practice session, you're in a different place than you were at the beginning. There can be surprise, there're similar discoveries but mostly what there is, is this play between repetition and rupture. Thinking about that is how we get better at something.

B.H.: *You talk a lot about Pandora, and we were expecting also the Metis, the Greek goddess of duplicity, "la ruse". There's a very good book by Jean-Pierre Vernant, about Metis or the ruse of intelligence (Les ruses de l'intelligence. La m tis des Grecs) that was also developed by Michel de Certeau. Do you feel close to the work of de Certeau.*

R.S.: I'm a great admirer of his work.

B.H.: *As a conclusion, what could be, to go back to capitalism, the impacts of your proposal, because I had the impression that consumer society is based on a kind of contract which is "I buy something, so I work", and if we are in true cooperation how do you envisage the value creation process? If everything is open source, then people can make themselves the objects?*

R.S.: In fact, we're not going to have to worry very much about it. It is true that everybody could be a craftsman, that was the Marxist dream, the Marxian dream of communism, but in this wonderful state of affairs... we know that's not going to happen. I look at this crisis of labor now as an opportunity for some people to find another path out of neo-liberalism. It would not be a tragedy to become a carpenter or a plumber rather than being one of 20.000 people trying to get a job in new media. It is not a general solution but, when with Matthew Crawford we talk to groups of students about this, they complain they have no jobs and so on. We say to them: "You know, if you had a different mindset about what it was to work", "if you wanted to work with your hands", but there is an absence of lots of those kinds of labor, it's why we have so many immigrants, people who do it. I think that liberalism dematerialized the ethos of labor. And the fact that the capitalist system is now in this crisis, might lead some people to think about doing something which is not bourgeois, which has more to do with proletarian in the old good sense. It is obviously no solution to the crisis of neo-liberal capitalism and I don't think there is one.

B.H.: *No, but doesn't it mean that we need also to develop new program in schools?*

R.S.: Of course. There are lots of practicalities like that, but I think the cultural effect of neo-liberalism was to give people a notion that mastery was basically a mode of life, and that, in a very fundamental way, is incorrect. Engagement is to engage, it may mean that the whole orientation of what you do with your life is redefined. I really haven't been thinking much about this, but Matthew Crawford has. From the point of view of profit for the elite, this is a system that needs fewer and fewer workers, and more and more unemployment is a natural consequence of neo-liberalism. And so, one's got to think oneself out of that. As long as this kind of power is in place, the defense against it has got to be to go somewhere else.