

The Culture of the New

The Culture of the New Capitalism. By Richard Sennett. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006, 214 pp., \$25.00.

Back in the 1990s, it was the New Economy. In the New Economy, everything was different as old economic rules no longer applied. Then the 2001 recession occurred and the New Economy fell out of favor, but the thought of the world as a marketplace had taken hold as a management idea and remains with us to this day. In this new workplace, “potential” is the operative word, and experience is actually detrimental to workers. The focus is on the short term, on what can be measured now, and the challenge is to convince employees that they have no claim on their jobs based on past achievements. Past action conveys no benefit to the actor; only their perceived future value carries weight. The archetype of this new economy is the newly minted MBA, who brings value through their knowledge of the latest skills without the burden of experience or context.

Into this world Richard Sennett strides with a short, philosophical treatise, attempting to understand and explain how we have reached this position, and what we have lost along the way. By culture, he defines the “values and practices [that] hold people together as the institutions in which they live fragment.” A liberal activist in the 1960s, Sennett himself takes some of the blame for this shift in values as radicals of his generation fought to free themselves from the shackles of large bureau-

cratic organizations where creativity was seen as a threat to orderly structure. As he points out, the radicals won this fight, but in ways that they did not foresee. Instead of large corporations setting the standards for labor, labor markets have become more truly economic markets. Economists praise markets as efficient mechanisms for setting prices and distributing goods and services, but markets are also transactional by nature and have great trouble accommodating noneconomic information such as relationships.

The result is a change in culture, and a loss of structure; however, as it turns out, the loss of structure has led to larger, unanticipated losses as well. Sennett includes in his list a loss of institutional loyalty, diminishment of informal trust among workers, and a weakening of institutional knowledge. This occurs in areas outside the workplace as well, as politics becomes marketing and citizens are reduced to consumers, no longer seen as owners of their political institutions. Even the winners in this new economics-driven environment suffer from its deficits, as highly educated professional workers find themselves lonely, isolated, and fearful. Younger workers respond by continuing an endless search for connections outside themselves, even while benefiting from their freedom from economic restraints that older workers felt in large, bureaucratic organizations of the past.

Sennett does not suggest a mere rolling back of the clock to an earlier time, but he does propose three values to act as cultural anchors for the future—narrative, usefulness, and craftsmanship. By narrative, he means allowing people

to make connections by introducing policies that help people sustain relationships and build on their past experiences. Usefulness is an easier term to understand, and here he stresses the importance of status and the value that people find in helping others. Finally, Sennett focuses on craftsmanship, the ability of people to commit to doing good work and finding external, as well as internal, satisfaction in concentrating in one area and mastering it.

There is no suggestion in the book of a golden era when workers were productive and content, but the author does suggest that with the newly found freedom of the marketplace, workers must also find ways to overcome the social losses that come with this less structured, more economically based culture. He also believes that good public policies can overcome these shortcomings. It is ironic that in a time when political conservatives praise the American military, this institution least resembles the present economic environment that most workers find themselves in and actually serves as a model of the older, Weberian corporate economy which policymakers have discarded. As an insightful sociologist, Richard Sennett senses this struggle and believes that somehow, for the sake of their own futures, workers must find a compromise between the military model, where one’s rank is the key determinate to one’s life, and the market, where people are measured as transactions.

—Michael Wald

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