

The Culture of the New Capitalism. By Richard Sennett. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006. Pp. 216. \$25.00.

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What's wrong with the culture that contemporary work induces? Richard Sennett offers three critiques of the postmodern firm and its companion culture in *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, a sweeping formalization of three lectures delivered at Yale in 2004. Sennett argues that the potentially dominant culture of new-economy firms dramatically changes the organization of work, the potential for personal fulfillment at work, and mass political practices in deleterious ways. Sennett provides a description of this change and its consequences, rather than a strict causal narrative, in order to argue that postmodern firms constitute "normality" today the same way that fordist firms constituted normality during the 1950s and 1960s.

For Sennett, the modern fordist corporation represented the logical end point of the military command and control disciplines first introduced to regulate armies based on mass conscription of nominally free citizens. Max Weber's descriptions of the Prussian bureaucracy captured the essence of these quasi-military organizations: commonly understood goals, career ladders that provided a fulfilling if too predictable life narrative for the average worker, and a politics of substance and equality. Sennett argues that these aspects capture what was best about modernity. The corporate version of this discipline involved relatively small pay differentials across the firm's fixed hierarchy, loyalty up and down that hierarchy, and the subordination of individuality to a common social purpose. Unconsciously echoing Hayek (or is it Jaroslav Hasek's Schweik?) Sennett claims that these command and control machines required considerable local knowledge and initiative to grease their gears, since total knowledge and, thus, total control are impossible. But the corporation's shared sense of social purpose allowed activation of that local knowledge in meaningful and useful ways, as workers at the bottom adapted orders from the top to local realities.

By contrast, Sennett argues, postmodernity's flexible firms fragment goals and common identities by pitting project teams against each other, create unstable careers and the threat of enforced uselessness, and produce a kaleidoscopic politics of spectacle. A yawning pay and social chasm separates upper management from the denizens of the cubical farms, and management uses the impersonal financial tools and transactions rather than more personal relationships to control those denizens. From management's point of view, these new techniques promote greater efficiency and thus profits. Sennett, though, thinks that the absence of loyalty and of a clear common purpose makes mobilization of local knowledge impossible; microrationalization leads to systemic irrationalities. This plays

out in politics as well. Postmodern politics is a mash-up of Wal-Mart—centralized parties displaying cheap goods but lacking cadres capable of interpreting and transforming mass politics—and Nike—otherwise undifferentiated goods made falsely unique through emotional branding and spectacle. Finally, permanent underemployment and the "specter of uselessness" haunt the postmodern worker, rather than fear of episodic unemployment.

Sennett has a supple and subtle assessment of the past that is rooted in a discourse that is largely forgotten these days. Contemporary discourses about the problems attending the giant corporations and welfare bureaucracies of the 1960s largely grew out of neoclassical critiques of the economic distortions and dependency each created. But Sennett hails from the left-wing critique of those homogenizing and controlling bureaucracies first articulated in the United States at Port Huron, and most memorably portrayed in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (Doubleday, 1932). Sennett's orientation leads him to proffer narrative, usefulness, and craftsmanship as antidotes to the ills of postmodern life.

Here, though, is where the book's weaknesses become apparent. By narrative he means basic income schemes akin to those once offered up by Richard Nixon; by usefulness, volunteerism and the production of social capital; and by craftsmanship, a return to use value rather than exchange value. Sennett rather explicitly yearns for the lost positive aspects of the modernity so thoroughly criticized by left and right in the 1960s and 1970s.

Sennett appears nowhere more out of touch with the postmodernity he surveys than when he longingly discusses these alternative paths. All three are ongoing, unseen but under his nose, as it were. Consider his discussion of personal MP3 players. Sennett sees them as both isolating and mindless, in that they encourage a pointless accumulation of more music than any ear-phoned person can possibly absorb. In fact, MP3 players also display everything Sennett desires. They are highly social, with the viral dissemination of playlists constituting communities around use values and shared cultural narratives. Surely this has something to do with the surprising collective—and on average younger—social movement that gathered around Barack Obama's presidential campaign. This campaign blended online communities and project-based teams with the centralized command and control of the old modern firm. At the same time, Sennett also misses the huge religious revival that partially reshaped American politics and social life over the past two decades. Neither movement looks like the industrial-worker-led movements of the fordist era. But they nonetheless are social movements in rebellion against the postmodern pointlessness Sennett decries.

Sennett's analysis, while largely correct, thus misses how our postmodern condition has inverted Schweik. Schweik blindly, literally, and disastrously followed orders, exposing the limits of command and control. Confronting a center that has abandoned any compelling and unifying

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narrative, postmodernity's Schweiks are spontaneously creating new narratives from below. This means there will be no single overarching narrative unifying society. But as Sennett's critique of modernity suggests, this is not necessarily a bad thing.