

Richard Sennett:

The Corrosion of Character

The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism

A critical reading by

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide a critical reading of Richard Sennett's book *The Corrosion of Character – The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*¹.

After introducing the central idea of Sennett's book (Chapter 2), I will proceed to a critical reading of his book by discussing the underlying assumptions of his argument and the conclusions he has drawn (Chapter 3). Sennett argues that the personal consequences of work in the New Economy has lead to disorientation of the individual because of the use of concepts like *flexibility, decentralisation and control, flextime, change* and *long-term commitment*, as well as *work ethics and teamwork*. This chapter will outline flaws in Sennett's argument and discuss in what way his arguments remains valid.

The last chapter (Chapter 4) draws a conclusion trying to go beyond Sennett's main argument and proposing ways out of the rather gloomy situation he has depicted.

2. Synopsis

In his book *The Corrosion of Character* Richard Sennett shows a disturbing and bleak picture of today's economy. By presenting anecdotes about people working in what he calls the "New Economy", he draws conclusions about the personal consequences of work in the new capitalism. People, he argues, have to cope with new concepts of *flexibility, flextime, teamwork, de-layering* and *ever-changing working conditions* that are seemingly presenting new opportunities of self-fulfilment to workers, but in reality creating new forms of oppression ultimately disorienting individuals and undermining their emotional and psychological well-being. Emphasis on the above-mentioned concepts is affecting character as expressed by loyalty and commitment and ultimately leads to the decline of values and personal traits that are desirable in society.

Sennett does not propose any clear solution to the situation, but evokes the necessity of people to rely on communities to build up their identities. On the other hand, he is convinced that the "New Economy" can not last and concludes that "a regime which provides human beings no deep reasons to care about on other cannot long preserve its legitimacy"².

¹ Richard Sennett: *The Corrosion of Character - The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, New York 1998

² Sennett, p.148

Richard Sennett makes his point by putting into parallel anecdotal evidence about people he met with arguments from historical, social and philosophical theories ranging from Denis Diderot over Max Weber to Hans-Georg Gadamer.

3. Critical reading

Sennett defines the New Economy as the new form of “flexible capitalism”³ that has arisen during the last decade: “Today the phrase flexible capitalism describes a system which is more than a permutation on an old theme. The emphasis is on *flexibility*. Rigid forms of bureaucracy are under attack, as are the evils of blind routine. Workers are asked to behave nimbly, to be open to change on short notice, to take risks continually, to become ever less dependant on regulations and formal procedures.”⁴ The main reason for the emerging of a New Economy lies for Sennett in the introduction of information technology that has fundamentally changed the rules of economy, and has a deep impact on organisation, on the workplace and on how people relate to their work. These new modes of organisation in the New Economy have direct consequences on people and in particular on their character defined as: “Character particularly focuses upon the long-term aspect of our emotional experience. Character is expressed by loyalty and mutual commitment, or through the pursuit of long-term goals, or by the practice of delayed gratification for the sake of a future end.”⁵ A number of questions emerge from this situation: “How do we decide what is of lasting value in ourselves in a society which is impatient, which focuses on the immediate moment? How can long-term goals be pursued in an economy devoted to the short term? How can mutual loyalties and commitments be sustained in institutions which are constantly breaking apart or continually being redesigned? These are the questions about character posed by the new, flexible capitalism.”⁶ He argues that the New Economy can not sustain the emergence of character and that ultimately the new form of capitalism is undermining the individual. With no orientation that guides the individual, he or she is not capable to shape a meaningful narrative of his or her future.

Sennett presents a number of ideas and assumptions in order to make his point. He bases his argument on concepts typical of the New Economy such as *flexibility, decentralisation and control,*

³ Sennett, p.9

⁴ Sennett, p.9

⁵ Sennett, p.9

⁶ Sennett, p.9

flexitime, *change*, and on *teamwork*. This chapter will focus on his main assumptions and conclusions drawn under these concepts and shall question their stringency and validity.

3.1 Flexibility

Sennett cites Charles Stuart Mill for whom *flexibility* meant the origin of personal freedom and which still influences our understanding of this concept. Sennett claims that “pursuit of *flexibility* has produced new structures of power and control, rather than created the conditions which set us free”⁷ Three elements contribute to setting up these structures of control and power: discontinuous reinvention of institutions, flexible specialisation of production and the concentration of power without centralization of power. The central tool that allows an organisation to change rapidly is information technology: “[It] is possible for a very large corporation to see what all the cells in its institutional honeycomb are producing by using SIMS software, and so cut out duplication of ineffectual units quickly”⁸ *De-layering* and *re-engineering* are perceived as consequences of new technologies that mainly aim at reducing the number of workers in a company: “Estimates of the number of American workers who have been downsized from 1980 to 1995 varied from a low count of 13 million to as high as 39 million. Downsizing had a direct connection to growing inequality, since only a minority of the middle-aged workers squeezed out have found replacement labour at the same or higher wages”⁹ Based on findings from studies carried out in the early 1990s, he argues: “The AMA found that repeated downsizings produce *lower profits and declining worker productivity*”¹⁰. Sennett establishes a link between declining productivity and declining morale and motivation of the workers due to downsizing. Last but not least, Sennett says that “there are at least good grounds for doubt that the present past era is more productive than the recent past”. He provides data showing that “growth was greater in the era of bureaucratic dinosaurs”¹¹.

First, it needs to be said, that control over the workforce has always existed, in 19th century manufactures, in 20th century industrial production as well as in today’s New Economy. What has changed is the mode of control, but not the control itself. Ford knew exactly which units were productive and which units did not live up to his production expectations. He did not need any

⁷ Sennett, p.47

⁸ Sennett, p.48

⁹ Sennett, p.49

¹⁰ Sennett, p.50 Sennett refers here to results reported by Eileen Applebaum and Rosemary Batt in *The American Workplace*, Ithaca N.Y; Cornell University Press 1993, p.23

¹¹ Sennett, p.50, see also Appendix: Table 3, p.151

computers to tell him, but had supervisors in the factories that allowed controlling workers' productivity. Second, according to one of the accepted central models of long-term macroeconomics, the Solow growth model¹², technology has on the long run been a job creator and not a job destroyer. While it is true that jobs have been made redundant by new technologies, in particular information technology, economic data has also shown that on the long run, new technologies have been the main explanatory factor for growth in economies. Information technology has not only destroyed jobs, but also created more new ones. Neither labour, nor capital input can explain sustained increases of the standard of living in today's economies: "In the steady state of the Solow model, the growth rate of income per person is determined solely by the exogenous rate of technological progress"¹³. Sennett's claim is based on observations made in the 80ies and early 90ies when computer technology did not show any positive effect on growth. In the late 90ies, growth figures have been increasing and it is generally acknowledged that this growth is due to advances of new technologies, namely information technology. Economic data provides some support for the idea that new technologies influence growth with a long lag. This would also account for the findings of the studies cited by Sennett in which Sennett sees dropping motivation for lower productivity. Third, Sennett claims rightly that wages have gone down for middle aged workers in the US where economic evolution in the last twenty years has widened the gap between rich and poor while at the same time keeping the average wage level stable. In Europe, however this does not apply. On average wages have increased. On the other hand, unemployment has reached higher levels than in the US. Sennett admits that the New Economy with its new technologies have either created jobs (in the US) or wealth (in Europe), and that it has been unable to create both. He blames the New Economy and its attributes for failing to do so, but he does not explain how the New Economy in particular is responsible. Putting the blame on the New Economy seems unjust and Sennett does not provide sufficient arguments in this sense. One should rightly ask what would have happened if no new technologies had been introduced. Would there be less unemployment and more wealth? I doubt so. As to his last point regarding dropping productivity rates, Sennett is again right with respect to the observation, but errs on the conclusions. There is no doubt that productivity measured by GDP per person had impressive growth figures in Europe and Japan in the years after World War II. What Sennett does not say, is that the same figures are a lot less impressive for the US. Thus all countries having suffered serious damages to their economy during the war had

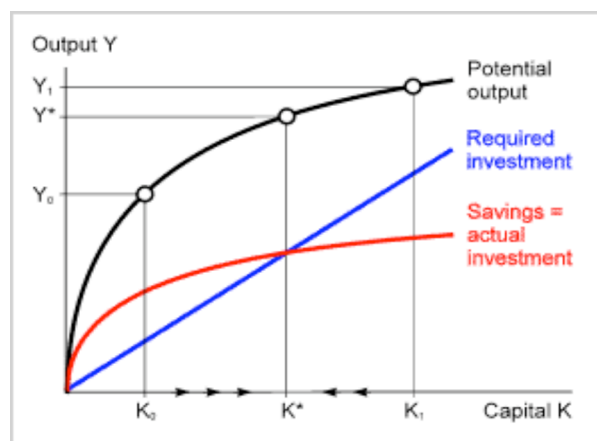
¹² See N.Gregory Mankiw: *Macroeconomics*, 5th edition, New York, 2003. p.180f

¹³ N.Gregory Mankiw, p.226. See for more information Chapter 7 and Chapter 8, in particular p.188 with direct reference to the examples of Germany and Japan and 208ff.

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The Corrosion of Character - The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism

important growth figures after the end of the war. This leads us again to the Solow model which provides an explanation for this fact. Countries like Germany, Japan or even France had suffered important damages during the war. Their capital had been destroyed, while labour forces had – in general terms – remained relatively stable. In the Solow model represented below the destruction of capital is shown by as a slide on the output curve from point K^*/Y^* to K_0/Y_0 . The countries having suffered important material damage during the war had been helped on the one hand by the winners and on the other hand these countries benefited from technological advances made in the US in the years during the war. Reconstruction was therefore very efficient and lead to the observation that reconstructing the country in Germany – in the model a slide from K_0 to K^* - lead to a larger increase in output – a slide from Y_0 to Y^* - than the quantitatively same slide from K^* to K_1 – as for instance for the US after the war – which lead to a small increase from Y^* to Y_1 :



(Graphic from www.fgn.unisg.ch)

Sennett's argument that growth in productivity was greater in times of bureaucracy was greater is true. But growth in productivity does not mean necessarily higher standards of living as he implicitly tries to make believe. Germany and other war torn countries were simply catching up from their lower levels with the US which had much higher real output figures. Today, all these countries have roughly the same growth rates of about 2%. Just because China has growth rates of over 11% this does not mean that it is managing better its economy or that it has a better standard of living than countries with growth rates of only 3%¹⁴.

I agree with Sennett that *flexibility* is a characteristic of today's working environment. I also agree that it does bring advantages to corporations and enterprises having introduced it. To Sennett, *flexibility* is a main cause of growing disorientation of people in today's world. In my opinion,

¹⁴ The Economist, March 1st-March 7th 2003, p.98f.

flexibility also mean more autonomy and responsibility for each individual. This does not only challenge the status quo but leads also to more uncertainty about what is to come. It is too simple to just focus on the negative consequences of *flexibility*. At moments Sennett almost seems to glorify the past days of Fordism and to give it a nostalgic undertone. In those days, *flexibility* was not existent and routine structured the workday of the workers and provided them with stability and job-security. This argument sounds strange to me. No one would blame democracy for leading to uncertainty about the future by giving the people the possibility to make choices. It seems awkward to argue that dictatorships are better for people because they provide certainties about the future and make people feel good about the world they are living in.

However, people facing *flexibility* need guidance and it is right that people – whether in the working environment or anywhere else – are not well equipped to face uncertainties. Sennett’s observation about *flexibility* in the working environment is right, but his claim that the New Economy is to be blamed is not substantiated by plausible arguments.

3.2 Decentralisation and Control

“One of the claims made for the new organisation of work is that it decentralises power, that is, gives people in the lower ranks of organisations more control over their own activities. Certainly this claim is false in terms of the techniques employed for taking a part the old bureaucratic behemoths. The new information systems provide a comprehensive picture of the organisation to top managers in ways which give individuals anywhere in the network little room to hide”¹⁵. Sennett claims that modern information technology has brought unprecedented control over the workforce. His main observation is that traditional forms of control – pyramidal hierarchies – have been replaced in the New Economy by shapeless domination through information technology.

These observations call for two comments. First, control has always existed in the working world. Whether we consider workers in the pre-industrial time, during the industrial revolution or in the 20th century, control has been a main key of success. It is right that the material form of the control has been altered. While until the introduction of information technology control was carried out through the hierarchical structure of the organisation by people, the New Economy using information technology allows to by-pass middle-management and gives top management

¹⁵ Sennett, p.55

indications of what is going on. However, this does not mean that people have less autonomy in their work. This would be the case, if top management told everyone in the company what his or her task was. But this is currently changing: organisations need to adapt to changing conditions on the market. These changes are decided to a certain extent by top managers as Sennett rightly points out – decisions by top managers touch mainly questions of corporate strategy. But a growing number of decisions are shaped by people in direct contact with the market. If a company wants to be successful in the New Economy it needs to listen to what front-line workers are saying. It's these frontline workers that are in touch with the changing market, not top management. It's their input that can help shape the business strategy of a company. In the past, people were not only told what to do, but also how. In today's working environment people are still being told what to do (corporate strategy), but no longer receive instruction about how to achieve their goal (business strategy). I believe that this is not a negative development, since people are given the possibility to shape their work, to decide what is best, instead of blindly following the instructions that might even lead to failure. It is true that people in today's world are more exposed to changing economic conditions and that job security has gone down considerably. But this does not mean that people no longer have the possibility "to organize a life narrative"¹⁶ - of shaping their work and their life through work.

Sennett neglects an important characteristic that accompanies the implementation of new technologies in the New Economy: the strengthening of informal networks of people. While information technology has reinforced supervision of organisational processes, it also has provided a formidable tool to bypass control and to disseminate information within an organisation. The central tool for this is e-mail: information is traded, questions are asked, coalitions are formed, and opposition is formulated through hundreds of informal e-mail exchanges. It might be argued that e-mail exchanges in a company are controlled; however, with the number of exchanges taking place, there is no way that companies could possibly control all of it. And even if this might be possible, most of the e-mails exchanged do not contain forbidden information. The important aspect of it is that it links people in an organisation in a way that has never been possible before. It gives people the opportunity to get support from others, to organise meetings and to gather and shape opinions in a way that has never been possible before. The reason being: it is almost invisible. I believe that these people networks counterbalance the possible disadvantages information technology might have brought. Information technology has

¹⁶ Sennett, p.117

maybe given more shapeless power to top management and lowered job security, but it also gives workers more responsibility and more informal tools to shape their immediate working environment; thus giving working people opportunities to “organise a life narrative”¹⁷ to cope with their future that has – according to Sennett – become so uncertain as to disorient people.

3.3 *Flexitime*

Sennett argues that *flexitime* has become a central element of the New Economy. He explains the arising of *flexitime* with the influx of women into the world of work. *Flexitime* was introduced in order to accommodate women into the working force, allowing them to combine part time work and full time parent. “Flexitime today operates in several ways. The simplest (...) is for a worker to put in a full work week but determine when during the day he or she is at the factory or office. (...) In the United States, white, middle-class men and women today have more access to flexible work schedules than factory operatives or Hispanic workers. *Flexitime* is a privilege of the working day. (...) Flexible scheduling of time is more a benefit conferred on favoured employees (...). If *flexitime* is an employee’s reward, it also puts the employee in the institution’s intimate grip. Take the most flexible of *flexitimes*, working at home. This award arouses great anxiety among employers; they fear losing control over their absent workers and suspect that those who stay at home will abuse their freedom. As a result, a host of controls have come into being to regulate the actual work processes of those who are absent from the office. People may be required to phone into the office regularly, or intranet controls may be used to monitor the absent worker; (...)”¹⁸

Sennett’s criticism of *flexitime* is not very credible, since it first makes us believe that it is a privilege for the white middle-class and then tries show us that *flexitime* is in fact a way to control workers even more, while giving them the irrelevant choice of location. I doubt that companies would waste money proposing *flexitime* to their workers, if there were no advantage for the company to do so. Why would a company decide to introduce the possibility of working at home, if this would carry important cost for controlling the workforce outside the office? There is no obligation to do so. Asking workers to call the office is simply silly, if it aims at controlling. Accessing e-mails – besides being often illegal – is an equally futile exercise. Either there is trust

¹⁷ Sennett, p.117

¹⁸ Sennett, p.57-59

and possible advantages to working at home, or there isn't; and in this case a company should – and I believe: would – refrain from giving this options to their workers.

3.4 Work Ethics and Teamwork

Sennett outlines the importance of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*¹⁹ indicating how it sought to show the birth of a new character type, the "driven man"²⁰, as a consequence of the emergence of protestant work ethics. Unlike Catholicism which is a community based religion, Protestantism the theology of the individual²¹. Teamwork, one might therefore believe, could bring the working man back into a community and therefore be salutary. But Sennett denies that teamwork has this capacity and denounces it as a chimera.

"The work ethics is the arena in which the depth of experience is most challenged today. The work ethic, as we commonly understand it, asserts self disciplined use of one's time and the value of delayed gratification. (...) Delayed gratification loses its value, though, in a regime whose institutions change rapidly. It becomes absurd to work long and hard for an employer who thinks only about selling up and moving on."²² According to Sennett, teamwork "is the work ethic which suits a flexible political economy. For all the psychological heavy breathing which modern management does about office and factory teamwork, it is an ethos of work which remains on the surface of experience. Teamwork is the group practice of demeaning superficiality."²³

Sennett does not provide convincing arguments supporting this statement. He outlines the experiences of Rose, a former bar keeper, that did not get any recognition in a group of marketing yuppies that did not listen to her advice as a specialist. As a consequence the group's proposal got rejected by the client. Sennett provides more evidence by introducing examples from other authors concluding that teamwork is basically a fiction. Because of the superficiality of content and focus on the immediate moment, because of the avoidance of resistance and

¹⁹ Sennett, p.98ff.

²⁰ Sennett, p.105

²¹ "The driven man does not conform to the old Catholic images of the vices of wealth, such as gluttony or luxury. (...) The life history of the driven man becomes an endless quest for recognition from others and for self-esteem. Yet even if others would praise him for his worldly asceticism, he would fear accepting that praise, for it would mean accepting himself. Everything in the present is treated as an instrumental means to the final destination; nothing right now matters for its own sake. This is what became in secular society of the theology of the individual." In: Sennett, p.105

²² Sennett, p.99

²³ Sennett, p.99

deflection of confrontation within teams, the concept of teamwork is only “useful in the exercise of domination”²⁴ and has no further value.

I disagree with this view. While it is right that teamwork is often put into practice with little effect, and in these cases leads to no substantial improvement of work or working conditions, I believe that one can not argue that teamwork in itself is counterproductive for the well-being of workers. Conceding that the concept of teamwork can be used as a tool to manipulate workers, I see also that teamwork can provide genuine improvement of work conditions, if implemented correctly. One should not blame the stone thrown into a window, but the thrower of the stone. Teamwork has the advantage of bringing people together, of having exchanges of ideas, of creating and strengthening social networks in enterprises; in this sense teamwork can resemble what Sennett considers an ideal community referring to Lewis Coser: “A more realistic view of how communities hold together appears in Lewis Coser’s classic essay *The functions of Social Conflict*. Coser argued that people are bound together more by verbal conflict than by verbal agreement (...). In conflict they have to work harder at communicating; as often happens in labour or diplomatic negotiations, gradually the ground rules of engagement bind the contenting parties together (...). The scene of conflict becomes a community in the sense that people learn how to listen and respond to one another even as they more keenly feel their differences.”²⁵ While Sennett believes that this is possible in a community, he denies that teamwork can provide these qualities.

Unlike Sennett, I believe that teamwork allows to find modes of solidarity, to find places to exchange and test ideas with people working on the same level of responsibility, and to learn how to listen to others. The danger lies in the implementation of teamwork. Not every organisation is adapted to such work, not every person likes to work in teams and not every company has the persons with the necessary skills to manage teams. Sennett is certainly right to warn of abuses in this sense, but he is wrong to blame the concept for them.

3.5 The underlying concept: Change

Change is inherent to human culture. In the early days of human kind, people had to adapt to changing environmental conditions. People were nomads moving constantly from one place to

²⁴ Sennett, p.115

²⁵ Sennett, p.143

another to adapt to different seasons and hostile environments. Later people adapted more sedentary modes of living, trying to hunt down animals, sometimes travelling long distances into unknown grounds and spaces, and trying to gather berries, roots and plants; then humans discovered agriculture, found a geographically more stable mode of living, but still facing the changing climatic conditions. Later, humans developed their mode of functioning through the exchange of goods, the introduction of craftsmanship, of trade, of home manufacturing systems and finally by the introduction of industrial production. This completely changed the working environment and redefined social relations and hierarchies. Economic independence of a large part of the population was a consequence of it. Change is also inherent to human nature. From a state of a little baby we grow into childhood, adolescence, adulthood before reaching old age. Over our life time, we keep changing our ideas, our views on the world, and our goals in life. Our bodies change physically over a determined period of time; all the cells in our body having a short lifetime of several months are constantly being renewed. In reality, our body is renewed several times during our life times. Change is finally also inherent to nature. Creation and destruction is a subtle balance that shapes our world. Mountains are created and then eroded by the elements. Animal species emerge and other disappear – the sad fact that human kind and its actions has caused an increase in the disappearance of species should not make us forget that species have been extinct before humans existed. Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*²⁶ is the outstanding witness of this fundamental characteristic of nature and human kind.

Sennett observes that *flexibility* in the working environment has made it difficult to the individual to make long term commitments and to shape a “narrative”²⁷ or “history”²⁸ for its future. Disorientation and fragmentation of coherent objectives for the individual is the consequence. I agree with Sennett that disorientation is a main characteristic of western societies. But I also contest that this disorientation stems from the New Economy’s characteristics Sennett enumerates. I believe that the cause to this problem is linked to the very situation of western society today.

²⁶ A very interesting and entertaining book in this respect is Christoph Ransmayr’s *Die Letzte Welt*, which is deeply inspired by Ovid’s masterpiece, depicting the disappearance of the individual in a post-modern and deconstructed world.

²⁷ Sennett, p.117

²⁸ Sennett, p.104

4. Conclusion

So what does this all prove? Does it mean that Sennett has simply no point regarding the growing disorientation of humans in modern society? No, I believe that Sennett has made a good point, but he lacks precision in his argument. His book is rather an essay than a strictly scientific analysis of what is happening.

Sennett points to the New Economy as the main culprit for the growing disorientation of humans in modern society. While his observation of the state of human kind - disorientation - might be right, the arguments he holds against the New Economy are weak and most observations made for the working place are also valid for domains outside the New Economy. Why blame the New Economy? This makes look the old economy as a place of joy and fulfilment which it clearly wasn't. Sennett is aware of this danger when he reminds the reader that the old economy was no better place²⁹. Modern capitalism, as opposed to the New Economy, provided personal security serving profound practical as well as psychological needs, but carried a high price. In order to find a more satisfying answer than Sennett's we have to enlarge the picture.

Looking at today's society, Sennett's observation of disruption and disorientation can be found in domains as diverse as culture, politics and even sciences. Traditional symbols of authority like the priest (religion), the mayor (politics) or even the doctor (medicine) have lost their status in today's western society. Their acts no longer remain unchallenged, but are subordinated to the people's scrutiny as any other person's. With the destruction of traditional values and of traditional orientation guides, humankind is left in a vacuum. The comfortable lighthouse of myth and religion has been brought down by modern capitalism and there is nowhere to hold on anymore. Modern capitalism allowed people to liberate themselves from the myths, religions, beliefs and values it had created to survive. These tools had provided over centuries the necessary narratives and history to shape a meaningful future.

Modern capitalism indirectly disturbed the existing status quo and equilibrium, and replaced the family as the main provider of social ties by introducing routine and discipline as the main characteristics of the work place. The shift from agriculture – a structured work that gave people narrative and meaning – to industrial production made people abandon their family ties. New ties

²⁹ Sennett, p.117f.

were set up by the factory and by the industrial companies. Military discipline was imposed to make people behave the way the company wanted. The new companies were the new fathers with paternalistic methods in the best case and military discipline in the worst cases. People were not given the possibility to create their narrative, but were given a frame within to work, a rigid frame in which nothing could be decided. At the same time, modern capitalism led to growing economic independence of the people which in turn slowly made people drift away from traditional religious constraints. This movement is important to understand today's situation.

Economic independence showed us that we are naked in front of reality, and that myth and religion are mere mirages helping to cope with chaotic reality, without which we are disoriented. It allowed human beings to become aware of their situation and as a consequence western society has witnessed a growing discontent with both major religions that shaped it; at the same time new movements, sects and esoteric movements and believes have gained popularity. However, going back to religion and myth does not to work and most people remain disoriented.

The general disorientation is reflected and might eventually be reinforced at the work place in the New Economy, but this phenomenon of disorientation is not *caused* by the work place. Sennett is right about his observations, but he is wrong about the diagnosis. The New Economy with its new characteristics of *flexibility*, *teamwork* and *adaptability* makes us understand what has been lost with modern capitalism. Many claim that the observed disruptions are the traits of the post-modern society we are living in.

Summarizing the observations we can see that, as a consequence of the evolutions witnessed in the last 100 years, western society finds itself with a disrupted family nucleus, with a disrupted working environment and alienated to its traditional religious believes and myths. This reminds us of Salman Rushdie describing the modern self as “a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved”³⁰ – the deconstructed individual.

Where to go from here? I don't think it is sufficient to bash on the man of Davos and to hope that “a regime which provides human beings no deep reasons to care about one other cannot

³⁰ Quoted in Sennett, p.133

preserve its legitimacy”³¹ We should just take this as a chance of building something new instead of mourning past values and monuments as Sennett is seemingly doing. However, Sennett gives us a first hint as what to do to re-establish a frame for the life narrative:

“One of the unintended consequences of modern capitalism is that it has strengthened the value of place, aroused a longing for community. All the emotional conditions we have explored in the workplace animate that desire: the uncertainties of *flexibility*, the absence of deeply rooted trust and commitment, the superficiality of teamwork, most of all the spectre of failing to make something of oneself in the world, to get a life through one’s work. All these conditions impel people to look for some other scene of attachment and depth.”³² Communities will have to role of shaping identities and helping human beings making sense of their existence. It is not surprising that we can observe recurrent nationalism in western society. Disintegration of nations and redefinition of one’s community leads to reinforcement of traditional links and structures. It is a natural reflex to define one self by the exclusion of others. Sennett clearly shows that this mechanism also applies to the working world when discussing the situation of the IBM programmers having lost their jobs³³: “The desire for community is defensive, often expressed as rejection of immigrants or other outsiders. (...) *We* is often a false locution when used as a point of reference against the outside work.”³⁴

The question remains: How to shape communities while avoiding to fall into the trap? One way is through education. Education has in the major part of the 20th century focussed on knowledge transmission telling the pupils and students what the truth was. This reflects of course the predominant view of the world where only one truth exists and where science is a way to discover this one truth. Making errors has to be avoided because it means postponing access to one and only truth. At the beginning of the 21st century, this view of the world has been shaken by scientific observations, that reality and truth is no longer homogeneous and especially not independent of us as observers. Multidimensional perception of reality and truth is the consequence. Given this revelation, at the dawn of the 21st century, education should focus on how we can cope with reality. What is truth and how can we create sense in a seemingly senseless

³¹ Sennett, p.148

³² Sennett, p.138

³³ Sennett, p.136f

³⁴ Sennett, p.138

world? We have to learn from mistakes and education has to stop behaving as if making errors was impeding progress.

The importance of Sennett's book lies in his observations, but he fails to identify the real culprit in his book. The characteristics of the New Economy let appear the *malaise* of human kind that has liberated itself from the old chains of myth and religion without replacing the central function of these tools: to provide meaning and "narrative" – orientation - in a chaotic world. The task is not to reconstruct a new static edifice providing "truth", but to learn as a society to cope with this volatile and chaotic environment and to create a dynamic sense of meaning. This is not going to be an easy thing to do, but I believe that human kind has the means to adapt to new challenges as it has done in the past.