

Book Review

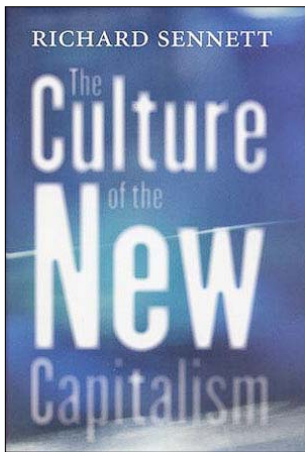
The Culture of the New Capitalism

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“But the flexibility they celebrate does not give, it cannot give, any guidance for the conduct of an ordinary life. The new masters have rejected careers in the old English sense of the word, as pathways along which people can travel; durable and sustained paths of action are foreign territories.” This was the bitter conclusion of the nearly classic *The Corrosion of Character*, printed in 1998 (*The Corrosion*, p. 147). After the more eminently ethical-moral interlude of *Respect in an Age of Inequality* (2003), Richard Sennett took up again where he had left off in *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (which was given as the Castle Lectures at Yale University in 2004); he again brings up for discussion the consequences of the new institutions’ flexibility: “The fragmenting of big institutions has left many people’s lives in a fragmented state: the places they work more resembling train stations than villages, as family life is disoriented by the demands of work” (*The Culture*, p. 2). He also begins to oppose this culture with the “ideal of craftsmanship” against which the emerging social order militates, as celebrated in *Craftsman*, published last year (*The Culture*, pp. 4, 194-197, 103 ff.).

But let us get back to the effect of the new institutions. The first aim of *The Corrosion* was to show “the personal consequences of work in the new capitalism”, i.e. that “the conditions of the new economy feed instead on experience which drifts in time, from place to place, from job to job. [...] short-term capitalism threatens to corrode [...] character, particularly those qualities of character which bind human beings to one another and furnishes each with a sense of sustainable self” (*The Corrosion*, pp. 26-27). Sennett takes up his discourse again from this point: “the cultural ideal required in new institutions damages many of the people who inhabit them” (*The Culture*, p. 5). Playing a major part in both books is the fact that the flexible institutions, first of all enterprises and the market, no longer act in the long but the short term, and this transformation involves both self-employed professionals that work in the sphere of the new economy as well as employees. If, as a result, some analyses come to overlap, the sphere is nonetheless extended as now the welfare institutions and the public realm are also considered. This extension corresponds to the adoption of an enlarged perspective: the analysis aims to sketch out the cultural ideal and the embodiment of the ideal man, demanded and promoted by the institutions of new capitalism. In short, at the core is the “new cultural model” or the “culture of the new capitalism” and its effect on society (pp. 3-8). And this provides the structure for the volume: analysis of the transformations in the institutions brought about by the shortened framework of time, developed in the first long chapter (“Bureaucracy”). The relation between fears about being made redundant or left behind and the talent required by the “skilled society”, i.e. the relation between work, unemployment and *Bildung* in the second chapter (“Talent and the Specter of Uselessness”). The relation between



consumer behaviour and political attitudes in the third chapter (“Consuming Politics”). Finally, a brief conclusion that aims to outline some public remedies for the ills of the new institutional model (“Social Capitalism in our Time”).

Beyond a certain disjointedness, one of the threads that seems to me to unify the analysis of the above mentioned spheres is the critical state of new capitalism’s cultural model: its negative effect on different levels. The analysis indeed aims to show that the new model not only produces anxiety and stress in the worker of the flexible enterprises (pp. 52, 65-68, 127, 181), but also presents some deficits and malfunctions in the productiveness and organization of those enterprises, which often prove their “undoing” (pp. 43, 64-71, 156), as well as a scourge on the welfare institutions and the political models (pp. 163 ff., 173-178). And it is this transversal negativity which could perhaps be given further examination. In the sense that if Sennett clearly writes that there is a net “class divide between those who profit from the new economy and those in the middle who do not” (p. 131), and that the new system brings a more and more radical social and economical inequality (54 ff.), it nevertheless seems to me that in the analysis of the functioning of the new system more emphasis could be put on the difference and even struggle between the different interests, needs and social expectations at stake. First of all between the perspective of the workers “below elite levels”, increasingly subjugated to the new labour market mechanism, i.e. to the process of “casualization” of the labour force (pp. 48-51, 61-62, 76-77), and the perspective of the top executives, consultants and more generally the elite. While the new mechanisms could in some way have an anxiety-inducing effect on these workers, at the same time they guarantee high incomes and relatively good future expectations (pp. 54, 80-81).

And so different interests come to interact in various ways with the interests of the owners and the old- style stockholders, with their aims to increase dividends and reduce labour costs by recruiting deunionized and cheap young workers (pp. 48-49, 95-97, 134), while also sacrificing quality to achieve “high profits” (p. 106). In its turn a perspective different from that of the “new” stockholders, who instead are looking to make a profit in a short time (pp. 38-40). In brief, if the innermost conflicts of these perspectives were pointed out in a clearer and more articulate way, the negative effect of the new model could perhaps be better defined, more specific, and less transversal. From here one could then also further examine the crucial correlated question of the assertion of the new model. With regard to this, Sennett writes that the “new cultural model” is that of the new economy and that, although it “is still only a small part of the whole economy [...] it does exert a profound moral and normative force as a cutting-edge standard for how the larger economy should evolve”; it has also “a cultural influence far beyond its numbers”; from a complementary viewpoint, and in simple terms: “the avatars of a particular kind of capitalism have persuaded so many people that their way is the way of the future” (pp. 10-12). However, no answers are given to the questions about the way in which this “persuasion” has taken place, nor are there any reasons why and how “the extension of the new values is [so] broad”, despite their negative effect (p. 182).

To conclude, in order to try to better highlight the conflictual character of the different perspectives at stake and at the same time to try to illuminate the process leading to the assertion of the new model, it seems to me that it may be useful to interpret the working of the new order as the exercising of a new form of hegemony. An approach that could contribute both to examining the different power relations between the social partners at stake and to analysing the processes of obtaining consent. And an approach that could integrate in that “critical mind-set of ethnographers” through which the “ideological proposals”, writes Sennett, reveal their elusive character (p. 11). In other words, I believe that what could perhaps arise from this conceptual-methodological integration is a renewed form



of criticism that can unmask those power mechanisms underlying the hegemony exercised by those “new masters” that celebrate flexibility and “have rejected careers in the old English sense of the word” and which, in spite of the negative effect of the new order on the mass of citizens-workers, nevertheless ends up achieving widespread consent in public life.

