The Specter of the Craftsman
Ubaldo Fadini

The title of Richard Sennett’s latest work could perhaps be reformulated, in the spirit of Benjamin, as The Fate and Character of the Figure of the Craftsman. In effect it is not particularly difficult to see the work in question as an interpretation of the era of separation, in various senses, of manual and intellectual labor, of doing and thinking, of execution and projection, that points towards a possible overcoming of this predicament. For the author expressly reaffirms a mastery of doing and making that can be recognized today in those who work in so-called “open source” programming, and are active in the common realization of some good intimately held “in common,” of a software that cannot simply be “privatized.”

A very rich field of research, of “material culture,” lies behind Sennett’s thought-provoking text. His book defends the idea that certain practices of life and work, that were typical of pre-industrial societies, are now re-emerging in the contemporary context, albeit with novel aspects and dimensions that are clearly worth investigating with particular attention and sensitivity, and also specifically with regard to the differences involved. One very striking feature of The Craftsman is its “autobiographical” openness, for Sennett emphasizes the connection between his own investigation and the teaching of Hannah Arendt, particularly as presented in her interpretation of the vita activa in her book The Human Condition, perhaps the “dominant” ethical “view,” as it were, on the adaptable world of capitalism that pragmatically identifies certain dynamics, figures, and features that are capable of reaffirming the specific value of the liberty that belongs to the domain of know-how, however this is specifically interpreted. The author critically evaluates Arendt’s distinction between animal laborans and homo faber, according to which the former produces/reproduces the necessary means of preserving life (and this is its exclusive function: in this regard the human being is “akin to a beast of burden”), while the latter is the subject that self-reflexively relates to its own activity, and sees itself as the maker and creator of this activity. Sennett effectively synthesizes aspects of Arendt’s analysis, identifying homo faber as “the judge of material

labor and practice” (The Craftsman, p. 6) that certainly represents a “superior” capacity to that of animal laborans, a being wholly immersed in a dimension life where all that counts is the production of things, the execution of pre-determined tasks. But Sennet is extremely critical of the image of animal laborans as a being concentrated exclusively upon the question of means, of the “how,” rigidly separated from that of homo faber as a being that asks after the end, after the “why.” He regards this distinction as a “false” one because “it slights the practical man or woman at work. The human animal who is Animal laborans is capable of thinking; the discussions the producer holds may be mentally with materials rather than with other people; people working together certainly talk to one another about what they are doing. For Arendt, the mind engages once labor is done. Another, more balanced view is that thinking and feeling are contained within the process of making” (The Craftsman, p. 7).

The alternative and “more balanced” view is that of a “cultural materialism” capable of genuinely appreciating the abilities/qualities that have been realized and developed by the human animal as a working or laboring being, of evaluating them in a positive way, emphasizing the concrete character of the interest in question, the sensibility that also involves a pleasure in making things that can “generate religious, social, or political values.” In short, the key idea behind Sennett’s investigations, once we identify its critical relationship to any potential downgrading of the role of labor in Arendt’s conception of the question, is that “Animal laborans might serve as Homo faber’s guide” (p 8). What does this overturning of Arendt’s specific analysis precisely consist in? The reply is clear: it consists in reuniting, with regard to a specific social-historical phenomenon, the modalities of the “how” with a judgment on the “why,” thus illuminating a form of “making” or “doing” that can truly be described as “masterly.” The phenomenon in question is that of the craftsman, who combines a wisely trained attention to the process of making with a cultivated and formative-educative talent in relation to the learner or apprentice, as well as a sophisticated understanding of particular working techniques, and a highly developed sensibility for the social value of accomplishing the best possible and creative “labor” of cooperation, of something “skillfully produced.” The craftsman is thus capable of uniting quite specific technical knowledge, or expertise, with a sort of ethic of responsibility that is based on the ideal of cooperation, as Sennett himself shows in a memorable “procession” of different expressions of the mastery of doing and making. Here we discover the real possibility of describing the virtuosity of the individual as itself “social” in character, in the context of skilled workshops where the authority of the “master” lives with, and enlivens, both a sentiment of autonomy and a recognition of the vital necessity of transmitting skills by word of mouth and of learning, through imitation, the “semantic knowing” that is indispensable for articulating a “making of quality.”

It is specifically with regard to the importance of transmission of “abilities” – sustained by processes of intelligence, imagination, and “affectivity,” namely by sociality – that Sennett does not simply limit himself, as we have pointed out, to underlining the undeniable value of “managing” or controlling things. For he investigates the figure of the craftsman, almost as if it were an image of destiny (as an inevitable destination), as something demanded once cognitive capitalism insists upon the centrality of “skillfully produced work” as an essential expression of potential “capital” return on the individual’s entire field of life (in terms of mind and body, of heart and brain). If it is possible
to grasp the figure of the craftsman as a combination of “labor” and “artistic” elements, then the particular history of this figure can also tell us something significant about the way in which the image of the craftsman is developed and exploited in contemporary capitalism. Of course, this history must be reconstructed in a very precise way, and Sennett describes it as follows: “History has conducted something like a set of experiments in formulating the craftsman’s images as drudge, slave, worthy Christian, avatar of Enlightenment, doomed relic of the preindustrial past. This story has a spine. The craftsman has been able to call to his or her aid a capacity and a dignity ingrained in the human body: signifying acts as simple as human grip and prehension, as complex as the lessons of resistance and ambiguity that give to human tools and physical constructs an intelligible form. The unity of the craftsman’s mind and body can be found in the expressive language that guides physical action. Physical acts of repetition and practice enable this Animal laborans to develop skills from within and to reconfigure the material world through a slow process of metamorphosis. The origin of all these powers is as simple, as elemental, as physical as playing games with toys.” (pp. 293–4).

Far from being a relic of the preindustrial past, the figure of the craftsman now appears marked by a destiny that is by no means “tragic,” in the sense that, apart from being intensely “desired” by cognitive capitalism, it also seems to offer itself, in a “post-Fordist” context, as a model for a more preferable organization of social life based upon the recognition and promotion of talent, of a “virtuosity” linked with various networks of knowledge and expertise that articulate the levels of productive activity, even in its more “immaterial” forms; and in such a way that this model (with its particular value/ mode of valuing) allows us to envisage a genuinely concrete alternative, in a social and political sense, that can counter the claims and presumptions of the “culture of the new capitalism,” with its already established and apparently solid structures.

That the “classical” figure of the craftsman exercises an indubitable appeal for much critical-radical thought is evident not only from Sennett’s own attempt to re-evaluate animal laborans, that has the undoubted merit of revitalizing this concept and facilitating a better understanding of the specific features of cognitive worker within the so-called “knowledge society.” For in fact there certain precedents for this approach that are well worth recalling and reconsidering here, in order to try to provide more “substance” to the cultural materialism espoused by the sociologist who spoke of the “corrosion of character” in the period of flexible and adaptable capitalism itself. In this respect it would be worth drawing attention, for example, to “the many excellent works of Egar Zisel” (as Alfred Sohn-Rethel writes in his fundamental work Geistige und körperliche Arbeit. Zur Theorie der gesellschaftlichen Synthese, published in 1970). Zisel discusses that relationship between craftsmen, with their empirical knowledge and expertise, and “the learned,” with their codified power of “abstraction,” that allows an overcoming of the medieval division of mind and hand, in a process that would finally see the reassertion of “a new and more profound division between mind and hand,” characterized by the productive cooperation introduced between the terms of the “modern” dichotomy. Taking up Sohn-Rethel’s analysis, one could also say that the overcoming of the old medieval fracture between mind and hand and the introduction of the new dichotomy between them leads to an emphatic development of scientific method that finds exemplary expression in the priority now accorded to the mathematical science of nature, as methodologically
articulated by Galileo. Together with the Sohn-Rethel who was well aware of the discussions of H. Grossman and F. Borkenau (on the social bases of mechanistic philosophy and its relationship to the sphere of manufacturing, as revealed by their investigations of the specific characteristics of the transition from the feudal picture of the world to that of the bourgeois age) and the penetrating observations of Lucien Febvre regarding Franz Borkenau’s book on the subject of 1934 (Der Übergang vom feudalen zum bürgerlichen Weltbild: Studien zur Geschichte der Philosophie der Manufakturperiode), we must emphasize the way in which the Galilean method actually transforms the precise knowledge of nature into a pure expression of intellectual labor, “liberating” this knowledge, as it were, from a dependency on the “unity of hand and mind characteristic of the craftsman” and on the “cooperation with the forces of waged manual labor” already at work in the process of capitalist production: “the miracle had been accomplished: it now became possible to determine natural phenomena on the basis of sources completely different from the empirical means of manual labor, that is to say, according to concepts of thought that have been universally socialized and completely liberated from the individual dimensions of singular manual labor. The explanation of the formal genesis of social nature and of the dimension of this conceptual structure provides the key for understanding the mathematical science of nature historically, as an essential part of the capitalist relations of production. This also allows us to understand how such science is socially necessary for the capitalist mode of production.” (A. Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und korperliche Arbeit. Zur Theorie der gesellschaftlichen Synthesis*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970).

Quite apart from the sophisticated and also philosophically fruitful analyses that we have recalled here, it seems to me that an entirely exclusive attention to the process of technological development always risks treating the “nature of things and material factors” as the crucial and decisive factor, thus inhibiting a more careful consideration of the effects that economic development, and the relations of production, exert on that technological development itself, leading to a transformation of the old craft workshops and the eventual disappearance of the master craftsman, now replaced by the typical mechanisms and procedures of an autonomous process of production that prefers and promotes the figure of the “engineer to facilitate the real subsumption of labor by capital.” In order to reduce this risk, with regard to an analysis of the relationship between the “old” and the “new” division of mind and hand, we could also simply underline, as Weber does, how the rules of organization governing craft labor certainly did not always furnish the foundations for the development of “early” capitalism, which emerged rather on the basis of quite new products (commodities) that were not the result of craft activity at all. But all of this does not prevent me from indicating that we can almost certainly expect a new manifestation of this division of mind and hand in the “new capitalism,” which can effectively be interpreted as the concretization of an original cooperation between the terms of the division itself, quite different from that which historically prevailed until only a very few decades ago. Sennett’s proposal to rethink the idea of the “craftsman” is one that is very positively to be welcomed – apart from the lack of any explicit engagement with the aforementioned critical literature, something which I believe is indispensable here – precisely because the insistence upon the possibility of bringing intellectual and manual labor back together finds some encouragement today (even if the prevailing capitalist order, a form of association that disqualifies itself in
this respect by its characteristic method of appropriation/expropriation, certainly does not permit any easy solution) in a highly socialized form of productive technological labor, especially in relation to recent telematic developments, that is characterized by an extremely high level of scientific knowledge and expertise. In short, Sennett’s work amply repays close attention, and is also concretely instructive if placed in the context of an investigation and analysis of the contemporary possibilities of advancing beyond capitalism, beyond a mode of production based upon the private appropriation of realized wealth. And with regard to the more specifically historical consideration of the figure of the craftsman, one can only point out that there were no “intermediate logical stages between the process of production based on individual labor and that based on highly socialized labor,” although this does not of course mean that we cannot recognize the presence of certain “intermediate practical forms” here (the “small-scale craft labor that requires patience,” or “the empirical art of the engineer,” or “the semi-scientific technology” to which J. Watt and B. Franklin have alluded). As Sohn-Rethel writes: “up until the 19th century, these practical-empirical and semi-scientific methods showed themselves to be adequate to the technology of production corresponding to the levels of socialized labor attained up to that point. The technology of production only became really scientific with the development of large-scale chemical industry and of modern electrical industry” (*Geistige und körperliche Arbeit*) But perhaps we can say, given the remarkable intensification of the contradiction between private capitalist appropriation and the increasingly social character of production, that the specter of the craftsman floats amongst us insofar as it appears to reflect an extraordinary socialization of labor in a – precisely – *immaterial* way, one that pushes towards the possibility of overcoming the division of our human productive ability into a merely intellectual capacity on the one hand and a merely manual one on the other. Thus we should give serious consideration to Sennett’s note, underlining his own sympathies for the pragmatist tradition, on John Dewey’s reflections on the relationship between work and play, between technology and expressivity – reflections that capture the latter’s conviction that “[g]ood craftsmanship implies socialism” (p. 288), above all where the quest for quality may well run counter to the pursuit of profit demanded by the inner logic of capitalist value.

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*Work and Action*
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1. In his book *The Craftsman* Richard Sennett undertakes to rehabilitate the model of craftwork in order to grasp the transformations in the character of work that are currently transpiring under the impact of recent technological innovations (above all those related to information technology) and of global economic and financial proc-
Sennett claims that the transformations in the character of work in “post-Fordist” societies tend to promote or at least lead in the general direction of a form of craft labor that differs significantly from the forms of work that were characteristic for most of the 20th century.

Sennett is the author of the well-known and highly influential book *The Corrosion of Character* (1998), which has made a particularly important critical contribution to the discussion regarding the human consequences of the “flexible” patterns of work and labor, anticipating themes and analyses that bear upon a very open and problematic question for us today. Sennett is not only a well-informed and theoretically very interesting author, but an intellectual who is capable of grasping important contemporary tendencies and developments with great intelligence and sensibility. His latest contribution, therefore, deserves close attention, and not merely with respect to its most obvious and immediate import. In my view, his contribution has the merit of addressing the central issue of work and the transformations of work in the context of the “human condition” that we are now historically traversing. In this sense, Sennett’s work belongs in the best tradition of North American sociology, in the context of which, given the particular themes addressed here, we would naturally evoke the names of T. B. Veblen, C. W. Mills, and D. Riesmann. Nonetheless, I cannot wholly endorse Sennett’s specific line of argument, even though it is quite clear that *The Craftsman* represents an important contribution to a deeper understanding of the themes in question. But I believe that the conclusions that Sennett comes to in the course of his investigation are capable of shedding considerable light on the contemporary significance of work and labor, and are particularly valuable in their own right. In the following I shall thus attempt to clarify how, in a certain sense, we may endorse a certain conclusion without accepting the particular line of argument that supports it.

2. We can identify three principal elements underlying Sennett’s approach: 1) a philosophical outlook inspired by pragmatism (especially by John Dewey); 2) the influence of Hannah Arendt’s book *The Human Condition* (1958) and the associated distinction between “labor,” “work,” and “action;” 3) the 19th and 20th century tradition (J. Ruskin, W. Morris, L. Tolstoy, H. Bergson, and C. W. Mills) that prized the specific character of craft labor over against factory work. Basically, Sennett draws upon this tradition (and particularly on John Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice*, 1851-1853) for a certain idea of craft labor that he applies to the emerging forms of work in contemporary society, specifically through a pragmatist-inspired critique of the opposition that Arendt established between the realm of “work” and that of “action.” For on his approach, and this is the consequence that I am particularly concerned to emphasize here, the character of work is “ferried over,” as it were, into the domain of “action.” It seems to me particularly important to emphasize the “action” character of work, even if this is not the principal objective of Sennett’s investigation, and derives from an argument that involves a double anachronism: namely the craft anachronism of Sennett versus the labor anachronism of Arendt, an approach that nonetheless ends up leading to a highly positive
re-evaluation of Arendt’s seemingly obsolete proposals regarding the dimension of “praxis.” But let us proceed in due order here.

From the tradition that exalts the character of craft and manual work, and which he himself develops and enriches with a substantial historical excursus on craft labor between the medieval period and the modern age, Sennett develops an idea of craft labor as a perfecting of manual work, something characterized by a sense of professional skill and by a love of activity in its own right, that is, valued independently of the economic functions and purposes of the object that is produced: “The craftsman represents the special human condition of being engaged” (p. 20). This emphasis upon the interest that the craftsman takes in his own activity, in perfecting the execution of his craft, in the “dignity” and “pride” that are involved in the exercise of his special skill and ability, in realizing a life that finds its own centre of gravity and its own expression in such activity, is quite different from earlier prevailing interpretations (in Plato and Aristotle, in Hegel and Marx) which focused the analysis of craft labor in part upon the consciousness of the object, of the materials and means that are required to produce it, and in part upon the personal effects and consequences that derive from the mediated process through which the object enters the domain of use (loss of freedom and alienation on the part of the worker). In other words, like Ruskin before him, Sennett lays particular emphasis upon the vital, individual, and psychological aspects of craft labor (the idea of a harmonious unity between the rhythm of life and that of work), whereas the prevailing analyses insist upon the economic and material aspects, and are framed above all in terms of the transformation of matter. In this way Sennett can assimilate craft labor to the activity of the artist, or that of professional and intellectual labor: “The carpenter, lab technician, and conductor are all craftsmen because they are dedicated to good work for its own sake” (p. 20). It is clear that the emphasis on this identity is only viable to the degree that we ignore or abstract from the issue of economic value and the function of the market, for on this level the identity in question is broken, and various forms of social and economic conflicts and inequality come into play. On the other hand, the opposite is also true, and an exclusive attention to the economic aspects alone can easily obscure the vital, individual, and psychological aspects of the “activity” involved in craft labor.

Sennett is also encouraged in this interpretive line by his sympathy for the philosophical principles of classical American pragmatism (C. S. Peirce, W. James, J. Dewey), by the careful attention that this philosophical tradition bestows on the relationship between doing (from the perspective of physical and manual intervention) and thinking, and by the idea that intellectual progress, and human progress generally, is bound up with active and “experimental” interventions of one kind or another, and that social progress is bound up with the development of more acceptable and humane forms of work and labor. In this respect it is instructive to consider the following passage from Dewey’s book Democracy and Education, as cited by Sennett himself in The Craftsman: “Both work and play are equally free and intrinsically motivated, apart from false economic conditions […]. Work is psychologically simply an activity which consciously includes regard for consequences as part of itself; it becomes constrained labor when the consequences are outside of the activity, as an end to which activity is merely a means. Work which remains permeated with the play attitude is art” (pp. 287–8). But “false” economic conditions are also capitalist economic conditions.
reads:

3. Yet it is the central relationship to the thought of Hannah Arendt, whom Sennett openly acknowledges as his “teacher,” that furnishes us with the profound theoretical key to *The Craftsman*. I have already suggested that this relationship involves two conflicting anachronisms, and that this itself gives rise, with regard to the issues we are analyzing here, and over and beyond the express intentions of either author, to a certain “un-contemporary” character that is nonetheless theoretically fruitful, for it bears precisely on the question of “action.” When Arendt published *The Human Condition* in 1958, Taiichi Ohno in Japan had already been developing for over thirteen years the industrial technologies and systems of production that enabled Toyota to transform the oil crisis and the economic recession of 1973 into an opportunity for industrial expansion, thus becoming in only a few years the leading automobile producer in the world. This industrial success significantly increased the fortune and profile of the “Toyota spirit,” an active element and protagonist in those processes that brought about the “crisis of Fordism,” that is, from the perspective that interests us here, the crisis of mass labor and production, the 20th century emblem of *animal laborans* in Arendt’s sense. In other words, Arendt reifies a particular historical form of labor as an eternal typology of the human condition, and does so at the very moment when this form was beginning to disappear, or at least when its centrality and its capacity to furnish the socially necessary kind of labor were entering into an irreversible crisis. This is the objective anachronism of Arendt’s argument, which projects *animal laborans* as a permanent dimension of the human condition on the basis of a specific historical condition, that of the 20th century worker, at the very point when its historical decline is beginning. Sennett also denies that the condition supposedly represented by *animal laborans* can claim actual social reality before the onset of the Industrial Revolution during the 18th century. But in doing so he commits, in his own way, another anachronism, one that again, since it is profoundly re-described, is not without fruitful and anticipatory cognitive consequences of its own: what he proposes as a permanent model of labor activity, and thus also as valid for today, is one been drawn from a figure, the craftsman, that in the West has been in decline for over two hundred years now.

*Animal laborans* is the human creature that essentially, if not exclusively, expends physical and psycho-physical energy on work requiring onerous and repetitive processes, work that machinery has segmented and “alienated” rather than alleviated or rendered more amenable to subjective experience, in order to guarantee objects for the immediate reproduction of life. *Homo faber* is the human creature that is concerned with the constant production of the material world, of objects and “works” that continue to accompany human life, or are not simply submerged in the immediate cycle of material reproduction, and this productive figure is superimposed in some degree on that of the craftsman. But over and beyond both these typologies of concrete forms of “working” we also encounter the human being as a creature of “action” and “initiative” who engages in creative activities that are immaterial and “autonomous” in character on the basis of discourse and language, who discovers in politics a particularly suitable dimension in which to develop these activities and to furnish the results of this concrete form of working with public significance.

The fact is that the transformations of work that transpired in the final decades of the 20th century, especially the crisis of “Fordism,” and the innovations and advances of the various processes of globalization, have facilitated the emergence of a new rela-
tionship between work, knowledge, and machine technology (especially information technology) and disseminated forms of work with specific characteristics, starting with certain immaterial characteristics, that Arendt reserved exclusively to the sphere of “action” rather than work and labor. Forms of work that possess various features of action and that therefore, we could add, also possess an intrinsic political value. In this sense, Arendt’s distinction comes to appear both anachronistic and futurological in character, both “un-contemporary” and fruitful precisely because it proposes a classical idea of praxis that can be deployed to interpret the new emergent forms of work, rather than simply to emphasize the difference between “action” proper and the domain of work and labor. Forms of work, namely, that in a society based on a “knowledge” and “information” economy tend to assume, even in their more subordinate expressions, unsuspected aspects of autonomy, freedom, and creativity that objectively possess a disruptive political significance, as long as we know and understand how to realize it (in political and collective terms.) These “activities” can no longer be contrasted with the domain of work and labor in the manner of Arendt since this domain also assumes aspects of freedom, autonomy, and creativity, and a linguistic significance and symbiotic relation to the machine that alleviates physical demands and brings such work, at least in its newest forms, ever closer to the domain of “action,” without any necessary reference to craft labor as such. In this sense, Arendt has the distinct merit of having re-proposed the ancient notion of praxis, except that this notion seems rather more appropriate for conceptualizing the new forms of work than it does for drawing a contrast between the domain of work and the independent activities that are ends in themselves, of which Aristotle speaks and which for him (and Arendt) unfold beyond the realm of work and labor that is engaged with producing objects for consumption by others.

4. Sennett repudiates Arendt’s distinction here “because it slights the practical man or woman at work.” (p. 7) But Sennett does not argue his case in historical terms, any more than Arendt does, and when he speaks of the “practical man or woman” who works, he means the practical individual as this has always supposedly existed. In reality, it is not Arendt, but the modern system of industrial production that has diminished the personal aspect of work, even to the point of negating personality in the form of the “mass worker.” While Sennett is right to reemphasize the personal dimension of work, it seems he can only recognize this in craft labor, that is to say, in the form of manual work characteristic of the period prior to the industrial revolution. In this sense, he certainly reopens in principle the discussion regarding the value and significance of work, but since his gaze is turned towards the past he does not succeed in formulating the demand for a new conception appropriate to new post-Fordist forms of work that have little to do with the activities of the pre-industrial craftsman. And thus the critique of (20th century) work that Arendt mounts in the name of what is not work (namely “action”), Sennett mounts in the name of a kind of work that seems characteristic of the past, in the name of a “desire in many of us, that of returning to a way of life or achieving an imaginary future in which we will dwell more simply in nature.” (p. 3) Both writers end up by developing an idea of work that does not allow us to focus upon the new forms of “post-Fordist” work, with Sennett in particular using the crisis of the 20th century conception of work to re-propose the model of craft labor, and Arendt using it to point the contrast between the domain of work and that of politics.
Nonetheless, both of them furnish elements that could assist us to focus upon this question: Arendt with her un-contemporary reassertion of the Aristotelian conception of praxis, and Sennett with his nostalgia for the “quality” associated with craft labor. But these elements, as I have attempted to show here, must be dismantled with respect to the supporting arguments in each case, and thus reveal their fruitfulness even though they are anachronistic and precisely because they are un-contemporary.

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It Takes Time: Work of Quality, Work of Innovation
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Like all of Richard Sennett’s works, his recent book The Craftsman is also distinguished from much current literature by the richness and variety of the thought-provoking suggestions that it furnishes the reader, and all within an argumentative context that is coherently presented and advanced throughout the entire course of the book. And the way in which he marshals relevant material to support his claims is also interesting and often entertaining, freely drawing as he does on private and public sources, whether they be scientific or mythological, specialist and professional or literary and artistic, and without imposing any particular historical or geographical limits on his investigations. Sometimes this encyclopedic approach can prove a little too copious, something which – rather more importantly – inevitably leads the author to make some insufficiently precise claims that rather weaken the force of his arguments (I shall provide a clear example of this later.) Nonetheless, the book makes an important contribution to the issues, and one that is certainly well worth thinking about, with respect to the ideas that it advances and the positions that it challenges.

In the few pages at my disposal here, it is clearly impossible to address all of the main themes of Sennett’s book. For this reason, I shall have to make a rather arbitrary, or as we might say, somewhat subjective selection of specific issues to discuss. But I shall begin with one unavoidable issue that concerns the basic thesis that Sennett maintains in his book. It is a thesis that is deeply rooted in the tradition of American pragmatism, and especially in the thought of John Dewey, that was fundamentally concerned with articulating the philosophical significance of concrete experience (in this connection, see Dewey’s Democracy and Education of 1916). In what is essentially a cordial polemic with his former teacher Hannah Arendt, the author proposes in this book to re-evaluate the animal laborans in relation to the problematic and over-glorified homo faber. For while the latter continually asks the question: why create things in the first place?, it fails to pay the required attention to the question that must in fact be the central preoccupation of human beings: namely, how do we create things?
And here Sennett distances himself emphatically from a well-established tradition of thought that finds its greatest representative in Max Weber, and that interprets the history of the West in terms of progressive “rationalization,” a process that arises from the fundamental rupture with the magical and ritual tradition that was effected in the ancient Jewish world between 700 and 500 BC through the prophetic warnings of disaster, when the Levites were required to furnish a constant and reliable framework for interpreting the Tables of the Law if they wished to avert the ruin of the people. As we know, this process eventually culminated in the Protestant Reformation, that required the faithful to furnish a complete rationalization of their own conduct as the only hope (though not the certainty) of being counted amongst the elect. (Here, we might add in passing, Sennett falls into an interpretive trap when on page 275 he defines the Calvinist notion of predestination as an aporetic “theological rabbit hole” since this destiny can be altered by showing oneself worthy of salvation: something that neither Calvin nor Protestantism in general ever remotely dreamt of claiming).

Sennett contrasts the idea that Western humanity must constantly relate means to ends with an alternative vision of the relationship between human beings and the domain of work and labor. We could describe this approach as an “expressivist” one, although the use of this term requires some clarification and qualification here. Sennett does not endorse a notion of labor that is derived from the Marxian tradition (for which human beings should express themselves in their own labor as naturally as a silkworm produces silk; see K. Marx, *Theorien über den Mehrwert* (1905); *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, London: Penguin, 1976, p. 1044; but nor does he endorse a Weberian conception of work (where human beings can realize the vocation to which they feel called in the sphere of work; see M. Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (1904–1905); [The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London: Unwin University Books, 1974, chap. 5, p. 158 ff.]) For this latter notion would imply that work (in the ideal case) allows specific expression for specific talents or individual senses of vocation, that are of course unequally distributed amongst human beings and, what is more, are evident only in a minority of people. Sennett’s view of the matter is very different. According to him, everyone, or almost everyone, in principle possesses the possibility/capacity of doing anything, or almost anything. It is the relationship with material culture – too long despised in the history of our culture – that must be cultivated and developed, and this relationship does not demand any one specific talent since the great majority of human beings, if adequately motivated, are quite capable of acquiring technical skills and abilities, of accumulating relevant experiences, of developing valuable forms of know-how, and even attaining a level of know-how marked by the highest quality.

As the title of the book indicates, we are engaged in an ideal-typical construction of the human being as craftsman, of the craftsman. But Sennett provides a detailed and extensive account of the category that goes well beyond a primarily manual activity as this is usually understood, and implies a sort of quality that we would normally describe in terms of the word artisan. In certain respects, everything is fashioned or crafted in one way or another: whether we are creating a fresco for the church, or making a Stradivarius, or producing an atom bomb, or designing an information system … This expanded conception of craft or artisanal labor may seem, and I think in part actually is, a weakness of Sennett’s general argument. One risks losing the force
Ubaldo Fadini, Giovanni Mari, and Paolo Giovannini

and specificity of the description, it seems to me, and everything threatens, in the final analysis, to become simply (if we may put it this way) a discourse on work in general.

In fact, Sennett attempts, in several sections of the book, to specify the numerable (and by no means insignificant) conditions that must accompany craft or artisanal labor. Thus it is not enough to say that it involves the “intimate connection between hand and head” (p. 9) that was also postulated in the utopian Marxian notion of reuniting intellectual and manual labor, and that the social and historical processes of the division of labor increasingly sundered into two worlds that have no effective contact with one another. One also needs to elaborate upon other, and no less important, points than these. Let me consider the principal ones a little further here.

Sennett argues, in specific detail and in continuity with what has been just been said, that the relationship between “mind” and “hand,” between ideation and practical execution, is not – as most people believe – a straightforward or univocal relationship that trivially posits the latter as the realization of the former, which itself possesses and maintains complete control over the process of realization for as long as this lasts. On the contrary, the dimension of practice and execution, the handling of things, in short experience itself as an accumulated form of consciousness and understanding continually reacts back in turn upon the process of ideation, enriching and modifying the latter. And furthermore, if there is a certain priority involved in this relationship, then it falls more to the doing and making than it does to the process of envisaging and anticipating the result. Sennett cites an anecdote that nicely illuminates this point. Degas is said to have remarked to Mallarmé: “I have a wonderful idea for a poem but I can’t seem to work it out,” to which the poet replied: “[…] poems are not made with ideas, they are made with words” (p. 119).

But what is this doing and making? What is the source of its power? For an answer to this question we may have to wait for the second of the three volumes that Sennett hopes to produce on the subject of material culture, namely the one dedicated to the creation and construction of ritual practices (under the title of Warriors and Priests.) But the few indications already contained in The Craftsman, (the first volume of the trilogy), and the particular way in which Sennett uses the word “ritual,” immediately suggest some rather perplexing questions. He seems to believe that arts, and crafts, and skills of a technical kind all involve a strongly ritual content, and that ritual practices in turn demand a certain technical ability, and a performance of some deed or work that is executed as perfectly as possible (p. 11 ff.). If I have understood him correctly, Sennett is here acknowledging and evaluating an aspect of making and doing that is undeniably present in any process of “work,” and thus in the ritual deployment, according to well-established tradition, of any practice or technique. But in the terms posited by the author, this hardly, or only poorly, explains the innovative process, let alone the creative one, that is supposed to be at issue. In short, if technical facility consists principally in a capacity for the perfect deployment of the skills and forms of knowledge that have already been handed down to us from earlier masters or through the experience of the past (something that Weber would say is highly characteristic of the great oriental civilizations), then we should still have to discover and identify the specifically non-ritual and non-traditional aspects of doing and making (the innovative, inventive, and creative ones). Otherwise, we will fail to explain the tremendous capacity for change that has found historical expression in Western civilization, or indeed – to stay with
Sennett’s own examples – to explain the productive craft “experiences” involved in building the atom bomb or creating the open source system Linux.

I should like to turn to another point here, perhaps of particular interest since it has also been much discussed in Italy, especially amongst sociologists and economists who have been concerned with the industrial zones and districts. In several respects, Sennett invites us to focus our attention specifically on the form and process of work, that is, upon the skills and techniques involved in experience itself. It is here, under certain conditions, that we encounter the notion of tacit knowing, the central and extraordinary significance of which has already been recognized by pragmatist philosophers such as William James (see The Principles of Psychology of 1890) and social scientists such as Michael Polanyi (see Personal Knowledge. Towards a Post Critical Philosophy of 1958, and The Tacit Dimension of 1966). Sennett makes a further important contribution in this regard, that I should like to explore freely here for the benefit of the discussion to which I have referred above. If tacit knowing is so significant, and perhaps more so than codified knowledge, this is because it can become a disseminated tacit knowing when the craftsman or the expert operate in specific social and organizational conditions that promote its “social character.” In fact Sennett restricts himself to indicating the positive role that institutional action, in the context of a “well crafted institution” (p. 246), can play when it promotes the socialization of the tacit knowing of the “craftsman.” But I think we can also relate something else, and something more, to Sennett’s analysis without doing significant violence to his thought here. The entire discussion about tacit knowing that has marked the debate on the industrial districts over the last few decades, prompted by Beccatini’s interpretation of the “industrial atmosphere” thematized by Alfred Marshall (see G. Beccatini, “Riflessioni sul distretto industriale marshalliano come concetto socio-economico,” Stato e mercato, 25, 1989), could profitably draw, it seems to me, on Sennett’s argument here. In the sense that we can also invoke, over and above institutional forms of action (that Sennett himself discusses), those other conditions – typically evident in the local societies where the specific experiences of particular districts grow and live – that embody the respective territorial cultures, the social and relational networks that here become entwined with one another, the particular styles of everyday life and work of the populations in question. It is in sites and places such as these that the tacit knowing of the “craftsman” becomes part of a collective inheritance, one that everyone or almost everyone is capable of using and sharing in some way by living out their own lives: in the family, in peer groups, in the context of study, of work, of leisure – in a word, in the very air they breathe.

Sennett swims emphatically against the current when he addresses a central question of work and labor, namely that regarding its quality. As he had already argued in his book The Corrosion of Character (1998), “bad work” is one of the most damaging consequences of the now dominant practice of completely and indiscriminately endorsing the alleged advantages of “adaptability” and “flexibility.” For in fact it takes time to produce things of quality, whether because the processes of learning (both formal and informal) that bring our knowledge and our technical skills to a superior level of attainment can only be developed over a long and sustained period, or because the actual work process itself, in its constant relationship between ideation and realization, also needs to slow down and allow some pause for consideration and reflection,
to permit opportunities for the exercise of imagination and time for further trial and experimentation. It is only in this way that one can succeed in producing goods and services of genuine quality, thus rejecting merely “short term thinking” and engaging with a longer perspective instead. The dominant practice of fragmenting the work experience, one that has turned work into something volatile, discontinuous, invariably partial and often merely temporary, is the exact opposite of what is required in order to produce things of quality. While this argument possesses a quite general validity, it seems to me to be of particular relevance to a country such as Italy, that commonly trails the rest of Europe in relation to investment in education, professional training, and research. Germany and France have shown a much greater readiness than Italy to develop and promote general qualifications in the field of work, not to speak of the United States, of course, or the major emerging countries such as India. The United States has invested huge resources in technical and professional development at the intermediate and higher level, thus looking much more effectively to the future than we have been able to do in Italy. If we fail to move in the direction indicated by Sennett, and thus to acknowledge the significance of sustained perspectives and long term thinking, if we permit an indefensibly myopic political and intellectual outlook to prevent us from looking beyond the immediate present, then we shall almost certainly condemn ourselves to an increasingly marginal role in the context of the international division of labor. For unless we take our stand on the ground of quality, the possibilities and opportunities for Italy to compete in the national and international markets are inevitably scarce or non-existent.

In this regard, Sennett’s arguments are very strong and can wholeheartedly be endorsed. All that is lacking here, it seems to me, is a more differentiated evaluation of the conditions in which the experience of work unfolds in relation to the subjective characteristics of the worker. I shall imply mention two points here. Sennett is fully justified in criticizing the absolute privilege that is currently accorded to the culture of risk and flexibility, thereby forgetting or ignoring the advantages that spring from security and continuity in the field of work. Nonetheless, it would be helpful if the analysis were more specific here. Should we not recognize, for example, that objective and subjective dispositions in relation to situations of risk or security normally vary in accordance with the different stages of one’s life, the groups to which one belongs, the different material and immaterial connections and relationships that accompany one’s changing and developing experience? This takes us into an expressly sociological terrain that unfortunately is largely neglected in Sennett’s work here. And similarly, except in relation to the inequalities that are undeniably social in character, we find little feeling for our entirely subjective dispositions and attitudes in relation to situations of risk and/or security (even if these attitudes have also been socially developed). It seems to me – as a general rule and independently of Sennett’s own work – that it will always be too late once social policies end up directing their measures and interventions at whole groups that are regarded in a completely standardized and undifferentiated way (the old, the young, the unemployed, women, immigrants …), without taking account of the individual variability that reveals the differences between people, between their different dispositions and attitudes, within the group in question. As has always been known, nothing is more mistaken than treating people who are not the same as if they were.
I would like to conclude by referring to an observation of Sennett’s that is of considerable social and political importance. Promoting and encouraging the role of the craftsman not only produces the positive consequences of which we have already spoken, but also, according to Sennett, helps to “shape our dealings with others” and contributes to “making human relationships” (p. 289). “Good work,” where one learns how to make things, where one learns to employ a skill or technical ability, is also a place, and an experience, that develops and cultivates the sociality of human beings, that enriches our social relations, that bestows a more than simply private significance on life, that brings the craftsman within the field of public discourse, that increases one’s capacities for judgment regarding the political organization of society itself, that helps to produce citizens who are aware of their obligations, but are also concerned to exercise their rights.

Here the circle is closed. To treat craftsmanship as the very prototype of work is, according to Sennett, the path that society and individuals are now called upon to take. To bestow meaning on one’s own activity, to appreciate its social value, to cultivate and develop our capacities and abilities, to emphasize the quality of the experience of work, is not merely to approach a condition of relative happiness, and to engage human beings in public space instead of encouraging them to seek refuge in the purely private domain. It is also a way of extending and enhancing a conscious sense of citizenship, for the craftsman, who understands and masters the rules that lead to a work well done, will know – on the basis of these very principles – how to judge whether society, and the state and its institutions, are also well constructed and well governed.

(Translated from Italian by Nicholas Walker)

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