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The Guardian Profile: Richard Sennett

## Inner-city scholar

Born in Chicago to radical parents, he reacted against the 'self-indulgence' of 60s alternative culture. When his promising musical career was cut short by illness he changed direction and became an authority on class and urban society. Melissa Benn on the LSE professor who returned to his socialist roots

**Melissa Benn**  
**Saturday February 3, 2001**

### Guardian

Richard Sennett enjoys the nearest to loft-style living that central London offers. His spacious, almost surreally well-ordered flat tops a maze of Farringdon offices. His roof terrace offers a dazzling view of an apparent jumble of warehousing and wasteground, a scene of brutal slate-grey beauty. It is the perfect view for one of the great urban enthusiasts of our age.

Chicagoan by birth, New Yorker by temperament, Sennett has settled in London only recently. Now 58, he took up the post of school professor of social and cultural theory at the London School of Economics in 1999. But he is a great deal more than a senior working, writing, administering sociologist. He is also a successful public intellectual, one of that special breed of writers and thinkers who cover a range of so-called specialisms but are called upon to tell us as a society who we are and how we got here.

Chiefly known for his elegant and scholarly writing, Sennett has produced a dozen books, including three novels, since the late 60s, mostly on aspects of the urban experience and the interconnection between authority, modernism and public life. His knowledge spans the disciplines of architecture, design, music, art, literature, history, and political and economic theory, but he adds to all that a rare anthropological hunger for the details of human experience. One of his apparent paradoxes is that while he so fiercely argues for a more disciplined form of public life over any therapeutic-style navel-gazing, he possesses a rare genius for getting into other people's heads and hearts.

He is also a socialist, who has returned to radical politics in late middle age. Ruth Levitas, reader in sociology at the University of Bristol, says he thinks class is important and fundamental, "which lots of people don't, but he also talks about what class means for real lives without drifting off into stuff about identity. He also writes beautifully".

It may be his politics or it may be the complex and wide-ranging nature of his enthusiasms which bring him just short of celebrity intellectual status. The author Victoria Glendinning, a friend for more than 25 years, says of his work, "It really ought to be better known. I will sometimes read some work of social theory and want to say, 'Oh, well, Richard said that'. His work isn't always as acknowledged as it should be because he's not just a sociologist but also a novelist, so his work doesn't fit into any easy slot. It is kind of uncategorisable and all the better for it."

But Sennett's work can also be understood as a life-long attempt to come to terms with his radical heritage, to both honour the idealism of an old left and re-mould it in the light of contemporary realities. Born in Chicago in 1943, he was a classic child of the left. His father and all his uncles were in the Communist party and his mother "was always involved in the labour movement", he says. His father and uncle fought in the Spanish Civil War, first against the fascists, and then against the communists. Proudly he shows me a portrait on his study wall of the Lincoln section of the International brigade. It includes his father and uncle, upright men in caps prepared to die to defend someone else's freedom.

His parents were together for only a few months after his birth. His father returned to Spain, to be with a fellow freedom fighter with whom he had fallen in love. He later became a translator of Spanish and popular Catalan poetry, which Sennett describes as "his one great love". Sennett never met him, although as child of a volunteer in the civil war, he was offered Spanish citizenship in 1988. But he did keep in touch with his uncle, William Sennett, who left the Communist party in 1958 and became boss of a transportation company while never losing his radical politics. Sennett was raised alone by his mother, Dorothy, whom he describes as a "remarkable woman and a fantastic writer. She had wanted to be a writer in the 30s but after my father left she was down on her luck and her dream was shattered."

She later became a distinguished social worker, an occupation she took up, says Sennett, "to arm her against pity". Now 91, and still living in the States, she continued to write until a few years ago. From the mid to late 40s mother and son lived on the Cabrini Green public housing project in Chicago, notorious for its poverty and violence. In book to be published by Penguin, provisionally entitled *Socialism: An Essay On Honour And Dishonour*, Sennett describes Cabrini Green, which was built during the second world war, as a "mixed community of blacks, the wounded, and the deranged (which) defined all-too tangibly what it meant to be left behind during the post-war boom".

A certain number of places were reserved for the white poor. In the so called "glass wars" black and white youths would sling sheets of broken glass across the street at each other. A young black girl nearly died of cuts to her neck. Yet, as Sennett has since written, this dangerous pursuit was more about the dubious satisfactions of gang warfare than racial revenge. The poor whites saw paternalistic social workers as part of the same threatening "them" as their black neighbours.

The Sennetts lived in two rooms with a bath, but were to some extent isolated from the wider "screaming, laughing, wailing, shouting life" of the housing projects. Playing the cello at six and composing at eight, living in a flat filled with books, the serious young boy could see a way out. "We had a tough time financially, but in the bohemian, radical milieu in which we lived, we were just another family," he says. "It had a curious class composition, this world. Most were Jewish, but it was a cultural milieu, not an ethnic one."

Sennett still remembers at school, "seeing a couple of men in a car watching me play. They wanted to find out who my playmates were. I think they assumed they could get into a network of activities through me. McCarthyism produced a horrible period in American history." By 13 Sennett was already performing in public. He was driven in a little VW bus to play Bach cantatas to exhausted miners in a small town in Minnesota, "people who had never heard classical music before. It was wonderful." It was also on a visit to France to perform that he learned to speak the language fluently and began to make contacts with influential artistic and intellectual figures such as Pierre Boulez and Michel Foucault.

Sennett's hopes of becoming a professional cellist were dashed in 1962, when he developed a form of carpal tunnel syndrome. A disastrous hand operation made his condition worse. His performing career was over. But then the Harvard sociologist David Riesman invited him to Harvard to "figure out what you want to do". It was, Sennett says, a lot easier to get into Harvard in those days. He was then caught up "in all this political stuff, in the 60s". He also discovered that with the help of an electric typewriter he could write painlessly. "I can still recall the joy of being able to do something expressive that wasn't physically painful."

Sennett began teaching at Yale in the late 60s. In the early 70s he went to New York University, where he later set up the influential New York Institute of the Humanities. The young sociologist made his name with his first two books, *The Uses Of Disorder*, a study of the effect of city life on personal identity, and *The Hidden Injuries Of Class*, written with Jonathan Cobb, a study of working-class confusion about self and status in a more affluent world.

Sennett and Cobb had set out to understand why an "increase in material power and freedom of choice should be accompanied by a crisis in self respect". Sennett says now that they were innocents. "Sociologists traditionally tended towards opinion surveys. We conducted the work rather as an anthropologist might have done. And we began with completely the wrong intuition, as I so often do in my work. I think it's going to be about politics and outer-world stuff, about economics. But it is often people talking out their subjectivity. In *The Hidden Injuries Of Class*, people are ashamed that they're not middle class, even though they have contempt for that class.

"In *The Corrosion Of Character*, published in 1998, the class issue is somewhat effaced and it is more about the

long term organisation of one's activity, the narrative of one's own life, rather than one's relation to others. In both cases, though, the issue is lack of mastery over one's life."

The Hidden Injuries Of Class still makes fascinating reading, largely because of its sensitive and subtle exploration of working-class lives. It dissects the ways in which doctrines of equality may work against most people in the modern world; with inherited social distinctions now apparently erased, "social difference can now appear as a question of character, of moral resolve, will and competence". It is an argument which has as much resonance in the age of so-called depressed affluence as it had 30 years ago.

It was clear from these early books that Sennett was a skillful writer. At its best, his sociology reads like a subtle, psychological novel, an absorbing biography or a piece of really good journalism. It amply fulfils his claim to be "a report on the act of thinking". His aim, he says, is to make sociology a form of literature, "as it was in the 19th century. This question of style is a huge issue in sociology," he says. "There's a great gap between politics and expression. So many academics are closed, anxious about performance and status. Foucault wrote in clear evocative French, but his followers have a possessive obscurity. Roland Barthes was a wonderful writer but there is a paralysis about his acolytes."

In 1974 Sennett published what was to become probably his best known book, *The Fall Of Public Man*, a study of changing forms of public and city life which was also a powerful argument for a more formal public culture and a swipe against the rise of a self-indulgent counter-culture. "Masses of people are concerned with their single life histories and particular emotion as never before; this concern has proved to be a trap rather than a liberation," he wrote. Given that each self is "in some measure a cabinet of horrors, civilised relations between selves can only proceed to the extent that nasty little secrets of desire, greed or envy are kept locked up".

Homi Bhabha, professor of sociology at the University of Chicago, first met Sennett only a few years ago, but as early as 1980 or 1981, he says, "a colleague had urged me to read *The Fall Of Public Man*. It was a book I'd flirted with but never really read. I realised that it brought in a whole range of social and intellectual interests and experience.

It was completely different from the evaluative, numerical view of experience of his number-crunching contemporaries. If I had to sum up Richard's work, I would say he is always interested in the relation between authority and experience." But the book was not without its critics. The radical commentator Russell Jacoby described it as "diffuse, vague, uncritical. Few pages attain clarity; few seem crafted." In Sennett's intellectual world, says Jacoby, "everyone adds a little piece to the story; everyone points out, reminds, or discovers something Sennett finds interesting. The pluralism and graciousness are estimable but also costly. Sennett nods to and compliments everyone he encounters. The warm collegiality that flows through his books douses the spark of ideas."

Such "warm collegiality" may have found its perfect expression in the New York Institute of Humanities, which Sennett co-founded and ran from the late 70s. He describes the institute as "an effort to create a 'town-gown' intellectual centre in new York, combining academia, the worlds of publishing and writing, musicians, diplomats, journalists, politicians, painters... a kind of All Souls with lousy food and lots of good talk".

Sennett ran the institute with the writer Edmund White, and its first fellows included Susan Sontag, Joseph Brodsky, Thomas Kuhn and Michel Foucault. White later wrote the experience up in his book *Caracole* as the "chat shop". Sennett says, "We did chat but we also supported a lot of starving intellectuals." It was in the mid to late 80s that Sennett also published three novels, *The Frog That Dared To Croak*, *An Evening With Brahms*, and *Palais Royal*, which were undertaken partly as a way "of recovering my word craft".

City life, with its promise of anonymity and community, is one of the great loves of Sennett's life. In *The Uses Of Disorder* he observes that "the city alone can make us conscious of a kind of equilibrium of disorder... the enemies lose their clear image, because every day one sees so many people who are alien but are all alien in the same way". Much of his later work, such as *The Conscience Of The Eye*, (1990) and *Flesh And Stone*, (1994) are attempts to trace the history between humans and the built environment.

The architect Richard Rogers, who has known Sennett for 15 years, says, "We are very much on the same intellectual wavelength. Richard believes in the importance of the public domain, that people should have direct involvement in relation to public space and buildings. We are both interested in sustainable development and the role of cities in a civil society."

City life also fosters the kind of intense but unclaustrophobic friendships that Sennett thrives on. "He has a near genius for contacts and friendship," says Victoria Glendinning. LSE director Anthony Giddens describes Sennett as "very lively, well-connected, good at talking to people. He has always had a wider coverage than the rest of us." Such friends describe Sennett as full of plans and curiosity, "always building castles in the air... some of which he will make happen" and as a good cook and generous host.

"Richard has the most astonishing ability to re-invent himself. He must be in about his fifth life by now," says the writer and old friend Marina Warner. However, on his private life, Sennett is guarded to a point of gracious stubbornness. He first married in 1968, the marriage being annulled later that year. He says only "I married very young and I divorced young." He was married again between 1974-78. He is more forthcoming on his present marriage to Saskia Sassen, 53, a formidable academic in her own right whom he met in New York in the early 80s and to whom he has been married for 14 years. Sassen, a specialist on the global economy, holds chairs in sociology at the University of Chicago and in political economy at the LSE. Sennett says "Saskia and I write about many of the same things. People imagine our pillow talk is all about the global economy. Well it isn't, well not much." Richard Rogers describes the couple as a "very interesting twosome, overlapping in their interests, but specialising in different areas. They are a powerhouse, but a very nice, humanist powerhouse."

Glendinning tells a story about the couple staying at a mutual friend's country house. The host told her that after everyone had gone to bed, peals of laughter were heard coming from their bedroom. Glendinning thinks that "for a couple who are apart an awful lot of the time, it works very well when they are together". Sennett, who has no children of his own, is by all accounts a devoted stepfather to Saskia's only son, Hilary, 25, a sculptor in New York.

Sennett's alliance with Sassen may have prompted him to the more international and economic emphasis of *The Corrosion Of Character*, published in 1998, a lucid study of the insecurities of the new economy and the ways in which it has warped the qualities of loyalty, trust, commitment and self-discipline. It is vintage Sennett, moving easily between 19th century political theory and 20th century interview and reportage. There is a masterly if somewhat ambiguous account of a visit to Davos, the Swiss resort that hosts the annual meeting of world business and political leaders. Here, one can almost feel Sennett torn between his sympathy and admiration for the skills of global leaders and an emotion bordering on contempt for their "ethical neutrality".

But if he is rarely critical of individuals, he holds nothing back in his criticism of the new economy in which "to make it you really have to plunge into much more superficial social relations. It is dysfunctional to feel loyalty to an organisation. The notion of accumulating a life history with an institution or a person doesn't work in this economy. The boom gave people the impression that the class divide was going to end - that there would be no losers. In fact, it has made it worse."

He is currently overseeing a research project in New York which involves interviewing young people in their 20s, who have gone into financial services, IT and the new media. They are confused, he says: "Everyone thinks they are going to be the next Martha Lane Fox but they are learning very quickly that all these fantasy worlds just aren't going to happen. Don't commit, don't be dependent, stay loose. Loyalty is very low on this list. But if you think dependence is bad, what you produce is a damaged human being."

Ruth Levitas of the University of Bristol describes *The Corrosion Of Character* as a "wonderful description of the way in which insecure work has taken away the basics for a certain kind of character". But she also thinks there's something about the thesis "that doesn't work in relation to women, something that's not quite right. Ultimately, I felt the book doesn't address gender".

Sennett has, he says "a complicated relationship with my country, an incredible ambivalence. I am uneasy when I am outside New York. The United States is very rich, but not very realistic. All the good things in US life are hidden while what is on the surface is stupid. America probably has the most sustained set of voluntary social relationships, charitable groups and citizen participation. Yet most small-town Americans have political attitudes to the right of Atilla the Hun. It's a real conundrum." *The Corrosion Of Character* was a bestseller in Germany, which may contribute to a feeling in some quarters that Sennett is "an American read by Europeans".

In his work in progress, *Socialism: An Essay On Honour And Dishonour*, he attempts to find a place for socialism after communism, "in particular to understand what notions of dependence and mutuality mean in the context of capitalism which is really focused on issues of individual competence". Even New Labour, which he broadly supports, "fosters this impossible image of a kind of New Labour superman".

In middle age, Sennett says he has returned to his political roots. "I started out in the 60s when it was pretty fevered on the left. And then I moved right in reaction to all the bullshit of the counter-culture. I got fed up with that anti intellectualism, the rejection of serious ideas, of serious art and the measurement of reality by psychological categories of the moment, an emphasis on immediate gratification."

The Fall Of Public Man was anti-psychological, an anti-touchy-feely book and in American terms, that was anti-radical. But the error he made, he says, was to draw political consequences from his rejection of the counter-culture... a trajectory that has finally brought him back to the left. "This genetic socialism reasserted itself and I've returned to overtly writing about socialism. In America, I voted Green at the last election for the simple reason that it has become a party with a single overarching ideal - electoral reform, which means ending the private funding of politics in the US.

"Even when I had this period of disillusion with the cultural left, I still voted Socialist Worker. I voted for the party not in one of its Trotskyist phases, which I hated, but in one of its Green, multicultural, pluralist phases, which I like." He talks about meeting President Clinton, who said to him "It's always good to meet an intelligent Democrat." "When I told him I voted Socialist Worker the famous Clinton smile froze."

Sennett lives most of the year in London, returning to the States for three months. Sassen similarly divides her time between the two countries. Although Sennett describes London as "our emotional base" he appears genuinely outraged at "the degree of bureaucratic micro-management in [British] academia. My colleagues, particularly the younger ones, are very depressed by it. Academics are constantly filling out forms, their emails can be looked at by the government. In America, there is far more appreciation of academics than in official Britain. Here there is an institutionalised contempt which makes it hard to do good work."

At the same time he describes his students here, "as the best I've ever had". Sennett claims he has written enough. He would like to end his days as he began them, as a professional performer or possibly running a music festival, maybe somewhere like the Wigmore Hall in London. When he has finished the current book on socialism, "I have probably only one book left in me. I would like to do something on the sociology of performing."

Music remains his great love and he has returned to playing the cello after several operations on his hand. "The ability to play again is one of the greatest gifts middle age has brought me." He plays in a small chamber group, with, among others, the Guardian's editor, Alan Rusbridger, on clarinet. But the popular reception for a work like The Corrosion Of Character suggests there is a hunger out there for the informed, exploratory, and in some ways gentle anti-capitalism that Sennett represents. With his grasp of history, his sympathy for the radical cause, his understanding of city life and his own professional success, he is one of the few writers who can puncture the pretensions and false hopes of the New Economy with some authority.

He was also one of the first writers to predict, again with admirable restraint, the economic and political turbulence that may lie ahead. For, as the chilling last line of the Corrosion Of Character observes, a regime "which provides human beings no deep reasons to care about one another cannot long preserve its legitimacy".

**Life at a glance:** Richard Sennett

**Born:** January 1 1943, Chicago.

**Educated:** Breck School; University of Chicago; Juilliard Conservatory New York (external student); Harvard University.

**Married:** First married 1968 (annulled 68); Caroline Rand Herron 74-78; Saskia Sassen 87.

**Career:** Yale University, lecturer 68-70; Brandeis University, asst. professor 70-72; New York University, professor 72-98. London School of Economics 99-.

**Some books:** Nineteenth Century Cities: Essays In The New Urban History (co-author) 69; Classic Essays On The Culture Of Cities (editor) 69; The Uses Of Disorder, Personal Identity And City Life, 70; The Hidden Injuries Of Class, (with Jonathan Cobb) 72; The Fall Of Public Man, 74; Authority 80; Flesh And Stone: The Body And The City In Western Civilisation 94; The Corrosion Of Character, The Personal Consequences Of Work In the New Capitalism, 98.

**Novels:** The Frog Who Dared to Croak 82; An Evening of Brahms 84; Palais Royal 86.

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