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Soft Landings: A Review Essay

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Introduction

The incident depicted, US Air flight 1549, which was piloted to safety by Stephen Sullenberger on January 15, 2009, and that image, wings bobbing, floatation pontoons outstretched, and passengers walking on water seemed a prophetic apparition. The result was so un-Katrina, with its culture of meritocracy, so un-Wall Street, with its leveraging, and so un-post-structural, with its free-floating signifiers. Here community worked together to produce stunning results: not heroics; not criticality; and not creativity. This, rather, was a soft landing, enacted through craft.



I've always been a healthy skeptic of those well-placed anecdotes used by savvy politicians to distort policy deficiencies. However, events can provide testimony to the validity of theories.

Given the right events, in sufficient quantity, and viewed with a useful perspective they provide a more reliable indicator of future success than elegant ideology. This at least is the promise of American Pragmatism. In his 2008 book, *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett theorizes the efficacy of craft exhibited by the pilot and the crew of US Air Flight 1549. Writing theory, much like throwing pots, fabricating painting, writing code, or managing organizations, requires its own form of craftsmanship so that theories can become a viable tool to be used by others. The foundations of Sennett's work, that understanding is grounded in engagement, is drawn from John Dewey (1934) but also comes in more contemporary forms through the prophetic pragmatism of Cornel West (1989) and the neo-pragmatism of Richard Rorty (1989).

Perhaps we undervalue that Flight 1549 was an *aircraft*. The term "craft" in art education has a long history. In pre-WWI America "craft" was often the Germanic "kraft", a habit shared with the spelling of "keramics." The war promoted the an American distrust of European culture (kulture) marking the ascendancy of the softer "c." It also marked the beginnings of the consignment of craft to a minor status in the visual arts behind a sea of interlopers including "creativity", "aesthetics", "criticality", "design" to name a few. In the late 1920's craft became handicraft, which invited a paternalistic fondness for the hand wrought while lending to its demise.

It seems counterintuitive to put forward a book titled "The Craftsman" in the 21st century. Crafts were brushed back in the 1990's when the American Craft Museum became the Museum of Arts and Design. Everywhere you look, Product Design, busts out of the mass media, linking our lives to the global marketplace. Popular authors like Richard Florida (2004) and Daniel Pink (2005) are grasped by educators, vendors, and politicians all pushing the possibility of a "creative class" to save us from the encroachment of global competition. Sennett (2008) shuns the term "creativity" maintaining:

creativity carries too much Romantic baggage – the mystery of inspiration, the claims of genius. I have sought to eliminate some of the mystery by showing how intuitive leaps happen, in the reflections people make on the actions of their known hands or in the use of tools. (p. 290)

Sennett consigns creativity to a place enlivened by Romantic Modernism. Nor does he seed ground to theorists who have for the last forty years placed a premium on criticality.

Sennett's approach is to drive forward the position of craft, out of its colonial position, into the forefront of contemporary social theory. This ambitious undertaking requires the dogged work of a public intellectual, cast in the mold of a Lewis Mumford. And it requires an

understanding of the failure of past projects, most notably the influential efforts of Ruskin and the Arts and Crafts movement, whose Romantic sentiments allowed craft to be positioned in the untenable read guard position, left to clean up the debris of design and fine artists. In this regard, Sennett's text is more ambitious than other recent attempts to provide efficacy for craft objects. To my mind, Howard Risatti's carefully constructed *The Theory of Craft* allows the term to fall into the parochial, too eager to accept a position constrained by tradition and functionality. More to my liking is Sandra Alfoldy's anthology *NeoCraft: Modernity and the Crafts*. This provokes rich and complicated thoughts but is too ecumenical to be a focused theoretical tool. Sennett brings to this project his considerable grappling's with social theory found most notably in *The Fall of Public Man*, *The Culture of New Capitalism*, *Flesh and Stone*, and *The Conscience of the Eye History*. In those works, material culture in the form of theater and architecture were characterized as harbengers of social and political structures. This strategy is intensified in *The Craftsman* where a wide range of tasks, including art forms, office management, child rearing, political organization, and personal daily events are considered as forms of craft. To make this shift, Sennett rejects the constructs of Romanticism and Modernism, and embraces the tradition of craft as constructed in the Enlightenment, where understanding is drawn from encounters with the world, in both its physical form and the expertise of others. Sennett looks toward American Pragmatism to combat the narcissism that develops around private worlds unaccustomed to confronting personal limits. The project requires an informed discussion of how insight emerges from the ground up, how criticality is arrived at through skill and experience, and how theories, as well as hammers and pens, are tools of authority, which challenge the crafter.

Resisting Skill

Sennett identifies these enduring problems, as stemming from our fears of materiality, evidenced early on in Greek mythology and philosophy. This fear resulted in the troublesome tendency to privilege principles of self-organization drawn from theoretical knowledge. Sennett argues for a bottom up approach as a constraint against free-floating notions of genius, merit based on undefined potential, and the cult of personality, conditions which perpetuate a culture of anxiety. Far better Sennett maintains, that people learn as crafters, which offers the best model for humane and effective personal and civic development. To flesh out these issues, Sennett offers up three broad areas for discussion: the problem of motivation, the problem of skill, and the problem of quality.

Central is the problem of motivation, which refers to beginnings and to development. In social forms of teaching and learning considerations of authority and autonomy are central to the issue of motivation. Sennett's underlying premise is that development comes as people value and address limitations. Sennett looks historically to the guild workshop to illuminate a discussion of cooperative models of organization (cell phone development) as distinct from

either competitive (British Health Care) or collective models of organization (Soviet Construction Projects). The central trade off is: is it better to submit to authority, as occurs in the workshop, or swim in the sea of autonomy, as in our meritocracy. This is Dewey's twin pole of the anaesthetic life, a choice between duty and drift. Modernist ideology stressed the value of autonomy, preferring the opportunity for creativity and genius. Sennett positions this as a troubled space in that value is continually subjected to interpretive conditions. Students, workers, children, parents, managers alike are placed in a double bind of expectation disconnected from requisite skills. Sennett positions autonomy is a forever-receding ideal, like freedom dressed up as a shopping experience. Worse yet, is when instruction through submission is replaced with instruction through standards, as with formal knowledge. Sennett (2008, p. 80) maintains: "Since there can be no skilled work without standards, it is infinitely preferable that these standards be embodied in a human being than in lifeless, static codes of practice." Better to submit to the complex conditions made evident by a teacher's humanity, than by submission to disengaged rules.

Motivation from without, may come from the workplace, but it also comes from tools and machines that make demands upon us. W. J. T. Mitchell (2005) explores some of this territory in his provocative *What do Pictures Want?* How is it useful to think of human technologies as objects of authority? How do we orient oneself to their demands? Sennett moves us through this space with notable references to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Diderot's *Encyclopedia*, and Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture*. It is clear that Sennett wants to distance his position from the work of Ruskin, who saw technology as a force to be resisted, even as he embraces a shared respect for the craft. He also wants to establish that 1) craft is not contained within the world of pottery and jewelry but rather extends to the writing of code and raising a child and 2) that technologies include not only hammers and computers but also cookbooks, encyclopedias and critical theories. The preferred orientation of the pragmatist is to value the instrumental use of the tool (authority), but not to be paralyzed by it.

The third area focuses on issues of development. To discuss this Sennett focuses his attention on those relationships that occur between self and things. How do we work from the authority of materials to insight, complexity, and abstraction? To provoke, he quotes Stephane Mallarme's responses to Degas " My dear Edgar, poems are not made with ideas, they are made with words" (Sennett, 2008, p. 119). Materiality is associated with both foundations and graves. The downward tug of entropy enlivens our persistent dreams of dramatic rebirth, including Modernism's Avante Garde. So how does change occur from the bottom up? Sennett offers up three general accounts: metamorphosis, presence, and anthropomorphosis. Metamorphosis refers to those changes that occur as a form-type evolves. This can occur as a product of changing conditions, through the bonds that occur as one thing is joined to another and properties are shifted and shared, and through a domain shift, as ideas, structures, and

habits are shifted from one area of production to another. Presence is a documentation of the lived experience and cultural habits of the maker, presses onto form and form making traditions. Anthropomorphosis occurs as makers impart human virtues to the objects the materials they are working with. Sennett uses the example of brick makers applying the term “honest” to describe the value of their product. These motivating forces, workshop, the machine, and materials each set the stage for the development of the maker’s craft.

Craft

Whereas the section on motivation worked from the social framework of the workshop down to the encounter with materials and the problem of development, the section on craft, considers relations between purposeful action and ambiguity. Nor surprisingly, Sennett starts with a section on the hand and specifically the probing finger as an instigating force purposeful action. Purpose here is not theory driven intentionality, but rather prehension, the finger as probe seeking the other in a material world. It is an important move and the point about which Sennett’s mind/body reorientation pivots. In this reworking, the eye is less the originating force than a quality control center, assisting in an assessment of the rightness of action. Using examples drawn from Suzuki students and Jazz performers, Sennett repositions the probing appendage as the site of embodied criticality, where a gap between expectation and result occurs, forcing adjustments in timing, pressure, and location. From this starting point Sennett’s argument moves to the relation of fingers to thumbs, hands to one another, hand to wrist and forearm, hand to eye, and eventually hand to the whole of civic life. This is a remarkable play that transcends metaphor in a sustained argument for a skill-based epistemology. On the way from finger to polis Sennett makes significant points about broad dimensions of self-organization including coordination as a precursor to cooperation, the use of minimum force and restraint, and the value of rhythm in the development of concentration.

To advance his discussion of skill development, Sennett elaborates of the relations involved through three general domains: instructions, tools, and resistance. The section on “expressive instructions” offers as exemplars the texts of four different chefs for the cooking of Poulet a la d’Albufera. He finds the least effective those approaches that use dead denotation, a plodding step-by-step rhetorical voice. More successful are those that use metaphor, while identifying with the conditions of the cook or the conditions of the food. The highlight of this section being the instructions by Madame Benshaw, an Iranian cook whose English was “halting”, who cooked by example, and who, when asked to write down her recipe produced the most beguiling instructions imaginable. I’ll leave that section for readers to admire in situ. The next section on arousing tools provides a discussion of how our use of tools can motivate change. The chapter builds upon the Machines chapter, illuminating his take on how tools can provide opportunities for insight. Sennett introduces the concept of delay and the value of repair, as opposed to creation, as opportunities for understanding. The section on Christopher Wren’s

efforts to rebuild London, when Wren shifts ideas from one domain, biology, to another, urban planning, provides a rich example for how insight occurs if we allow for delay and wonder. Although not referenced, his discussion of how this occurs tracks remarkably well with ideas presented by Richard Rorty (1989). In Sennett's version, we form habits, which when placed alongside of other arousing tools creates tensions, from these we must be available to wonder, which is fortified by both formal knowledge and tacit knowledge developed through embodied skill development, with the final step being the fallibility of our solution, not allowing the hubris of perfectibility to inhibit our willingness to act and to fail. These orientations with arousal and delay are played out optimally when the crafter develops their skill with a tolerance for resistance and ambiguity.

Craftsmanship: Situating Quality

The problem of quality has met with troublesome times in heady days of postmodern romanticism, where interpretation feels more comfortable than judgment. Sennett's prescription is to learn "to use obsessional energy well." Sennett joins a history of pragmatism, redirecting the question of "well" back to civic engagement. Does the expert demonstrate the capacity to redirect their expertise back into the group through a capacity to mentor others? Does the expert consider the moral implications of their work? Does this fixation transcend community? The crafter, to accomplish quality driven work, trains their obsessional energy by "working, interrogating, and tempering it" within the framework of public life. What the crafter does work for is a "sustaining narrative" through which they harness their obsessional energies, which, counter intuitively perhaps, adds value to their work.

Lastly, Sennett takes on the issue of ability, which requires him to work through our fixation on talent. Against this preoccupation he presses forward our near universal capacity for work and play. It is in play that self-governance develops, which when transformed into work provides the Jeffersonian model for democracy. The agency in play is not the laughter but rather the delight that occurs as we press against the limits we establish in our play making activities. Sennett draws upon the familiar play theorists, Frederick von Schiller, Johan Huizinga, Sigmund Freud, and Clifford Geertz but comes down most convincingly in reminding us of the work of Erik Erikson, whose ideas focus on the child's innate interest in understanding limits and explore capability. This is because materials talk back and forces us to correct our perceptions. It is a resistance that we respect, possibly because it responds to us. It is this corrective interplay where development takes place as children learn to localize attention and inhibit impulse, to question perception, and to pry open possibility situated in the play between complexity and consistency.

Conclusions

Throughout this volume Sennett seeks to redefine our orientations toward public and private dimensions of experience, and personal and civic development. Like the soft landing of Flight 1549, Sennett suggests that to prepare for our own soft landings, we pay attention to experience-as-craft through the development of skills. In order to do this we need to put aside our fear that such practices will not: 1) provide adequate tools for motivation, 2) provide insight address the unknown, and 3) provide moral positions to confront our own hubris. It is through American Pragmatism that Sennett's interplay is most clearly theorized, and it is on the shoulders of this tradition, reinvented through a gap provided by present day neglect of craft, that Sennett reframes how insight emerges to enrich workspaces, schoolyards, politics and visual culture. He maintains that experience is best understood as craft, where understanding occurs by turning outward, by setting limits, by playing with resistance. His path is different than that of his teacher Hannah Arendt, who saw labor and democracy as incomplete pathways to statecraft. Sennett thinks that self and society can be insightful if democracy asks more of us. That more was best enacted during the Enlightenment, where limits were valued, where moved into empathetic relationships with worlds outside of themselves through project like Diderot's Encyclopedia, and where obsessional purposefulness is checked from hubris by an understanding of our fallibility. *The Craftsman* serves as both a fit-for-purpose manual and as an arousal tool. Readers will be provoked to discuss the best way to construct civic spaces where insight and the testing of limits and the preparation for soft landings are seen as co-constituted not mutually exclusive spaces. And they be asked to consider what they will need to give up in order to make this happen.

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