

Uncommon Ground

Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation

By: Richard Sennett

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Pluralism is a very good thing. What a pity, though, that it is such hard work, demanding of us the concrete practice of cooperation – something we are asked to do rather than endorse in high-minded pronouncements. Beside other catchphrases such as 'diversity' and 'dialogue', the ritual waving of the pluralist flag is obligatory in contemporary politics, even among representatives of privileged social groups who broadcast delicate sentiments amidst the chores of a life in a Chipping Norton mansion. Or among those who, rather less suavely, find the presence of migrants repulsive.

Pluralism is enthusiastically endorsed by wide sections of contemporary psychotherapy, though at closer scrutiny its promoters seem to be pointing at something else, namely eclecticism, drawn in turn from a nebulous notion of 'post-modernism'. In retrospect, it could well be that a notion of pluralism divorced from difficult cooperative engagement is not too dissimilar from bland eclecticism or from an arbitrarily and summarily adopted 'post-modernist' stance.

'Dialogue' is another case in point. What goes on under this tag is often purely and simply mutual endorsement, the confirmation and amplification of our own cherished opinions. Yet Mikhail Bakhtin, the first to coin the word 'dialogical', saw dialogue as a conversation which does not end in mutual agreement, nor finds a common ground. Could it be that what goes under the name of dialogue in our current psychotherapy milieu is not dialogue at all? Personal experiences seem to confirm this. Whenever, for example, I write critical articles on the work of a colleague, the response is almost invariably frosty. When inviting a reviewer to write a piece on a particular book on these pages, I hear the refrain, 'No thanks, I couldn't possibly write a critical or "negative" piece'. But is it really true that all one wants to hear from others is praise? Is not the time spent studying, reflecting and critiquing another point of view

of any value? Are critical discussion and attention not in themselves marks of respect and consideration?

And yet notions of pluralism, dialogue and diversity have become universal. To those who naively forget that ideology is invariably at work each time a value is deemed universal, it may come as a shock to discover how the very opposite phenomenon, tribalism, is everywhere on the rise. In this formidable book, Richard Sennett gives the examples of The Netherlands, once upon a time an inclusive nation, but now a place where 'the mere mention of the word "Muslim" triggers a Wagnerian onslaught of complaints' (p. 3). The United States are also 'an intensely tribal society, people adverse to getting along with those who differ' (*ibid.*). In Europe we can't feel too smug either; it was only a few decades ago that tribalism, accompanied by the chirpy tunes of patriotic nationalism, produced horror and devastation. Genuine cooperation is hard, and it is not achieved by repressive unity or homologation, by lachrymose vows of empathic attunement, or manipulative incitements to a 'dialogue' designed to entice the interlocutor to the higher virtues of our position.

Aristotle was probably the first to be suspicious of repressive unity. A city dweller, he described the city as *synoikismos*, 'a coming together of people from diverse family tribes' – each dwelling having 'its own history, allegiances, property, family gods'. Tribalism for him meant thinking we know what others are like without knowing them: 'lacking direct experience of others, you fall back on fearful fantasies. Brought up to date, this is the idea of the stereotype'. (p. 4) Conversely, cooperation is 'an exchange in which the participants benefit from the encounter' (p. 5). In secular and sacred rituals, in formal and informal customs, one finds, Sennett writes, a coming to life of ethical principles. A healthy notion of cooperation *includes* competition – not the latter's shadow side, the legal robbery performed by bankers and the illegal theft perpetrated by gangsters. But this notion of cooperation, inspired by Bakhtin's dialogical philosophy, requires an ability to handle the natural contradictions and complications arising from impact with difference.

Unfortunately, we are less and less equipped to dealing with such difficulties. This is because modern society has produced, according to Sennett, a new character type, which he calls *the uncooperative self*,

the sort of person bent on reducing the anxieties which differences can inspire, whether these be political, racial, religious, ethnic or erotic in character. The person's goal is to avoid arousal, to feel as little stimulated by deep difference as possible. (p. 8)

Narcissism, complacency, an obsession with self-improvement born out of puritanical shame and a titanic struggle against oneself: these are some of the traits of this new character type, augmented rather than healed, according to Sennett (who quotes approvingly from Lionel Trilling's seminal book *Sincerity and Authenticity*) by popular notions of 'authenticity' and 'self-actualization':

Authenticity is not concerned with making oneself precise and clear; instead it is an inner search to find out what one 'really' feels, and contains a strong narcissistic trace. But this search is elusive; one never arrives at really knowing one's authentic feelings. Authenticity of the sort Trilling criticizes is perhaps best represented in the social sciences by the 'Maslow paradigm', named after the social psychologist Abraham Maslow, who devoted a lifetime to developing the idea of 'self-actualization'. Trilling's view was that, unhinged from other people, other voices, the search for authenticity becomes self-defeating. This was precisely Max Weber's view of the Protestant Ethic: it turns people inwards in an impossible quest. Other people have no place in the obsessional struggle to prove oneself: at most they count as instruments, as tools to be used. Cooperation with others will certainly not salve inner doubts. (p. 195)

For Sennett, cooperation is demanding and difficult; it is an attempt to connect with people who have different views and conflicting concerns – an endeavour that fully acknowledges the endemic inequality of everyday experience rather than indulging in phoney egalitarianism, woolly dialogue and bogus pluralism.

The book supplies ample historical examples of cooperation at work; some people and events shine like bright stars of courage and initiative. Based in Chicago, Saul Alinsky (1909–1972) was 'the most effective American community organizer of the last century', fighting for the rights of African-Americans in a climate of segregation, championing an informal method of social cohesion, getting people together who never talked to one another. His followers included Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, 'both of whom later strayed the master's path' (p. 50). Settlement houses and workshops present us with great examples of cooperation in action, the latter bringing forth the vision of the craftsman-citizen already endorsed by Confucius and Plato, who both believed that craftsmen made good citizens. Robert Owen in Scotland and in America; John Ruskin and William Morris in England – all can easily be seen as examples of 'self-conscious exercises in nostalgia for the pre-industrial era' (p 57). Yet some of these experiments did make a difference: B.T. Washington was an ex-slave who founded the Tuskegee Institute for ex-slaves,

where they could learn horticulture, carpentry and metal working, and learned how to teach others in turn, all geared towards relearning cooperation in view of reintegration in society.

Interestingly, many of these pioneers saw the workshop as a more refined form of social organization, and considered the factory a step back in human civilization. The focus here is not only the ownership of the means of production, as advocated by Marx, but on asking the crucial question of 'how to behave sociably once you are in control' (p. 60). There is a crucial difference, Sennett argues, between political cooperation and the politics of cooperation. The first is 'a necessity in the game of power', as in the example of the present Lib-Con coalition government in the UK; the second deals with face-to-face relating, as the examples of settlement houses, workshops and community organizing espoused by Saul Alinsky show. The politics of cooperation entail informal contact, empathetic attunement, learning how to navigate through difficulties and conflict, what the author calls 'the spectrum of exchange'.

There are, Sennett writes, five types of exchange: (1) altruistic; (2) win-win; (3) differentiating; (4) zero-sum; and (5) winner-takes-all. Acknowledging in passing 'the baleful influence of accountants felt everywhere in modern life' including behavioural psychology (pp. 72–3), Sennett concedes that as humans we are too complicated for our experience to be neatly translated within the language of losses and gains. Yet the spectrum of exchange is useful in mapping out the territory of encounter and cooperation.

The *altruistic* stance is one of self-sacrifice; corroborated by religion, it recently enjoyed a revival in psychotherapy with the attention some devoted to Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy of otherness. The *win-win* exchange is more openly reciprocal, but it is the *differential* exchange that is truly dialogical. Here, 'differences are exposed in the course of the talk; contact may stimulate self-understanding; something valuable will then have transpired through the exchange' (p. 79). In the *zero-sum* game, a remnant of reciprocity – of mutual acceptance of the rules – still persists, with one individual's gain becoming another's loss. In *winner-takes-all*, the defeated is utterly destroyed. This is the logic of genocide in war, of monopoly in business, a logic dominated by the elimination of all competitors. Interestingly, cooperation is absent in both the far ends of the spectrum, in altruism as in winner-takes-all.

This comprehensive guide to the rituals, pleasure and politics of cooperation is divided into three parts: Cooperation Shaped, Cooperation Weakened, and

Cooperation Strengthened. In spite of its thorough-going method of little concession to rose-tinted views, the book maintains a breezy, even musical tone, supported by the unshakable faith that cooperation positively enhances the quality of social life. 'Could community itself become a vocation?', Sennett asks (p. 273). Critically inspired by Hannah Arendt, Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, he imagines community as 'a process of coming into the world, a process in which people work out both the value of face-to-face relation and the limits of those relations' (*ibid.*).

The book ends with a coda on Montaigne's cat ('when I am playing with my cat, how do I know she is not playing with me?'). Musing on the mysterious life of others (we don't know what goes on in their minds, be they cats or humans), the final pages call for a social and political engagement from the ground up. Here the supreme value is empathy, and the greatest art conversation. These values and practices are not envisaged by the social and political order but happen at grass-roots level. There is great hope, Sennett implies: it lies in the fact that 'as social animals we are capable of cooperating more deeply than the existing social order envisions' (p. 280). **S**

hint at the fact that we are, at heart, adventurers of the spirit rather than consumers? What if the book presents us with a disquieting blend of illness, early death, sex, religion, rape, suicide, incest, the general fucked-upness of a society crushed under the yoke of a stultifying morality? What if all of the above is heart-breaking and tenderly suffused in elegiac, lyrical fraternal love and loss?

A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing has all of the above traits and more. And this is what happened to it: (a) it was thoroughly ignored for a decade, rejected by all of the publishers in the land; (b) it was taken on by the audacious Beggar Galley Press in Norwich; (c) it began to be reviewed positively by some reviewers, including Anne Enright, who first murmured the words 'genius' and 'old-fashioned'. Also around this time, the pathetically inept label 'stream of consciousness' began to stick, a term which in England is destined to any non-Dickensian or non-Orwellian novel that does not plead allegiance to either Saint Charles or Saint George and to any writer who dares to use (i.e. Virginia Woolf) free indirect speech; (d) it won one literary prize after another, and was praised for its imaginative and linguistic daring; (e) it got 'Fabered', i.e. crowned by one of the most prestigious publishers; (f) its novelty, as well as its intractability as a dangerous object, was 'understood' and canonized as an imaginative if hybrid offshoot of Joyce, Beckett and O'Brien.

If your reading diet consists almost exclusively of journalistic, hyper-conventional prose or, worse, of the staggeringly dreary clichés churned out in the majority of psychology and mental health 'literature', then this book will be a shock: in turn, the apparition of a numen or the sighting of a monster – or both. Once you decide to stay with its syncopated, truncated rhythm and with its pre-cognitive, pre-conscious idiom, the work shines through as a kind of short-hand naturalistic tale.

The language may be atypical, but the narrative is straightforward, depicting a young woman's relationship with a brother affected by a brain tumour. In the tradition of the naturalistic tale, it traces a downside trajectory towards annihilation, in this case via the route of *abjection*, i.e. 'the state of being cast off'. The term 'abjection' belongs to the European tradition, and was most notably articulated by Julia Kristeva. Yet as far as I can tell, only one reviewer, Kerryn Goldsworthy in the *Sydney Review of Books*, was alert to this association. I wonder why that is: could it be that there is more to Euro-scepticism than populists in tweed jacket, corduroys and brogues holding a pint of bitter? There seems to be a palpable terror to get one's insular 'cultural values' and literary taste soiled by perilous unorthodoxy. It's just about OK with the Irish, in spite of all their dangerous liaisons with thwarted

Send Me Shivers

A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing: A Novel

By: Eimear McBride

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Deprived of world, therefore, I fall in a faint.

(Julia Kristeva)

What happens if a piece of writing does not stoop to the Book Club qualifications of biography, grand historical yarns, plush rehabs sagas and adultery tales in even plusher surroundings? What if it refuses to slog along linearly redemptive 'psychological portrayals' and 'nature descriptions' served in either journalistic, sub-Nabokovian or third-rate populist plodding prose justified by that staggeringly insolent conjecture called 'This Is What the Public Wants'? What if the writing itself summons us readers to crawl out of our absorption in managerially redemptive tales, and reminds us that the very fact that we have bought the book might