

# Social Science Bites

A new podcast series with  
leading social scientists

[www.socialsciencebites.com](http://www.socialsciencebites.com)

In association with  
 **SAGE**

# Richard Sennett on Co-operation

---

David Edmonds: *To navigate through modern life successfully requires myriad forms of cooperation with others – co-operation in schools, and places of work, in clubs and societies, in raising families, in politics. Richard Sennett is a distinguished social scientist at the London School of Economics. He believes that cooperation is a craft, requiring a set of skills that over time we have begun to lose*

Nigel Warburton: *Richard Sennett, welcome to Social Science Bites.*

Richard Sennett: Thank you.

Nigel Warburton: *We're going to talk about cooperation. What is it that we're talking about when we talk about co-operation?*

Richard Sennett: Basically cooperation is working with other people to do things you couldn't do for yourself. It's a natural impulse in human beings, it starts the moment people are born: infants need to work with their parents to be fed, children need to work with their teachers, with their peers, in order to learn, adults obviously need to co-operate to work, to make their communities work and so on. What my concern with this is about our *complex* forms of co-operation: where you are working with people you don't understand, people who are simply different from you, or people you don't like. And to practise those complex forms of cooperation you need skills. That sort of demanding co-operation is a craft.

Nigel Warburton: *Could you give an example of the kind of co-operation you're talking about here?*

Richard Sennett: Well if you have, for instance, an ethnically divided community, the ones I've studied are mostly in the States between blacks and Koreans, for instance, or Latinos and African Americans. Getting along together and making the community work requires suspending the notion that you'll cooperate well with people with whom you can identify, whose life experiences are similar to your own. People who are different in those ways need to develop skills, like good listening skills so that they're able to fathom what people mean, they need empathic skills, know how to express curiosity and to follow up curiosity about what somebody else is saying, they need to have learned to manage aggression - and those are all experiential skills.

Nigel Warburton: *So you're talking about a range of skills, particularly skills of conversation and mutual understanding, and allowing space for people to interact in ways which allow people to keep their respect,*

[www.socialsciencebites.com](http://www.socialsciencebites.com)

1<sup>st</sup> May 2012

*You may view, copy, print, download, and adapt copies of this Social Science Bites transcript provided that all such use is in accordance with the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)*

*that sounds almost like an Aristotelian moral position, that this is what a good person does, a virtuous person does. Is that what you're doing, creating a kind of image of what it would be to be a good citizen in a diverse society?*

Richard Sennett: I don't think I'm quite so moralistic. I don't know whether that makes you a good citizen. What being socially competent does mean is that when you're faced with challenges you don't fall apart and the social networks of which you are a part don't tear. Co-operation can be put to very, very bad ends: you can be very skilled at co-operating and doing very bad things. It's like craftsmanship, it's a technique which can be put to good or bad ends. I'm not very happy with a lot of the discourse around co-operative activity which takes it as a good in itself, that it's 'nice' to be co-operative. It can be that, but I think the problem for us today is that learning that kind of social competence so that you're able to manage complex situations, work with other people, is under threat for various reasons. Modern society is really, ironically, de-skilling people from many of the competences they need to deal with a very complex world, and as a sociologist, rather than a moralist, I'm interested in how institutions can disable co-operation.

I'll give you an example of this. We have in the educational world, we have extremely rigorous, now, testing regimes for individuals for upward mobility. We don't correspondingly think about organizing educational institutions so the groups of students study together and talk, we're using computer technology to isolate students even more and more from communicating with each other so that they learn from each other. So you've got a regime which is putting a high premium on performance and not exploring ways to use modern communication tools so that people would learn together.

Nigel Warburton: *If, as you've pointed out, co-operation can be used for evil as well as good ends, why would we be so concerned about the de-skilling of society in this particular realm?*

Richard Sennett: Well because I think the more incompetent people feel themselves to be in dealing with complexity the more they revert to very aggressive, hostile ways of dealing with the outside world. If you feel competent to manage your circumstances you're going to be less defensive. You're going to be more open, and so on. That's why it matters.

Nigel Warburton: *There is another model of conversation and debate where you have a conflict between strongly, perhaps aggressively-expressed views, and through that creative interaction between people, people do come to modify their views or become entrenched in their views, that is part of the rules of engagement that you are prepared to have your views challenged vigorously.*

Richard Sennett: When you practise what the philosopher Bernard Williams called ‘the fetish of assertion’ you shrink the space for actually exploring something that’s outside the boundaries of somebody else defending themselves. His critique was that basically conversation should leave space for ambiguity and for things that are unresolved, that aren’t part of the sort of possessive armament of individuals or groups, and that requires a different kind of speech act which is much more orientated towards the subjunctive, which leaves room for exchange. If you say to me ‘I believe X’ and I say ‘You’re all wrong’, it’s possible that by you defending yourself and me attacking you, we might open up a space, or we might simply say ‘What a shit, he doesn’t get it.’

Nigel Warburton: *Now if you took the model of a parliament in a democracy, there the ‘fetish of assertion’ rules. Many of us feel that that kind of open opinionated debate has proved to be fruitful.*

Richard Sennett: Well I’m not so sure I would agree with that. When I listen to debate in parliament, particularly Prime Minister’s Question Time, I don’t see them really arriving at a kind of dialogical space of agreement. One of the things about declarative aggressive speech is that it becomes more and more self-possessive. But I would respond to the issue you’re raising in a different way. I think the productivity of more dialogic forms of cooperation, which is what I’m talking about rather than debate, is really founded in politics from the ground up rather than from the top down. I mean the institutions that in the case of parliamentary debate are basically performances made for a vast public either a party or television and so on. You’re much more likely to get interactive and fruitful forms of communication and action if the structures that they occur in are face to face. This is the theory and practice of both community organizing and direct action, that the ambiguity in politics built from the ground up are more likely to privilege cooperation than they are this kind of possessive declaritiveness that’s enshrined in a different kind of power structure.

Nigel Warburton: *I know many people who say it’s a matter of their intellectual integrity that they assert their beliefs in direct language. Take something like a New Atheist, they’re going to say ‘Look there’s no point in being ambiguous about this, I strongly believe there is no God and I believe what you’re doing on the basis of your belief in God or gods is wrong.’ Now that isn’t opening up this sort of gentle area of cooperation and debate, but they say ‘Look if I disguise my actual beliefs I’m not being true to myself.’*

Richard Sennett: The notion that ‘This is what I think and I can think no other’ is a recipe for both intellectual and social death. If we do have strong beliefs, the question is how we relate them to other people who may have equally strong beliefs. If it’s a matter of trying to call attention to the fact in a confrontation that you believe something strongly you’ve got a dead

end situation. It's very unlikely you'll be able to change your beliefs because what you're emphasizing is the strength of your own conviction. It's somewhat natural in a case when somebody comes to a new epiphany or new revelation or I suddenly realise 'God is dead' or something like that, the first impulse is to speak as you've spoken, but I think when you get more confident with things you believe, the need to underline the fact that you're very convinced recedes. That's again what I mean by becoming skilful with it, so that you can be very comfortable with what you think, or with who you are, but not have to be in the face of somebody else always about them to say 'This is me!'

Nigel Warburton: *So this does sound like moralizing in a sense to me because you're saying Nietzsche's Zarathustra should have said 'God might be dead' not 'God is dead.'*

Richard Sennett: But he could believe it. I don't see Nietzsche having very good conversations with other people or ever working in a political collective.

Nigel Warburton: *You've described yourself as a sociologist. I'm really interested to know what sort of project this is. Is it based on statistical findings, empirical research as it were, or is it more of a social theory based on large scale observations about the changing nature of society?*

Richard Sennett: Well, neither. I mean, the methods I've used in my work are intensive interviewing, which is ethnography, a standard skill set for anthropologists, and now many younger sociologists have returned to ethnography. I'm quite interested because of that in issues of, philosophically, in issues of narrative, because ethnography is all about, they are, created narratives. I don't lie awake at nights worrying about 'What is Sociology?' Nor do I think that there are inherent Kantian divisions between the Humanities and the Social Sciences. I've learned a lot from literary theory and from novelists about conducting interviews. In the same way when I've studied the physical realm I've learned a lot obviously from architects, from artists. What I'd like to see happening in the human sciences is that we become more subject-centred, that is on subjects like The Body or Cities or Injustice, rather than assume that the starting point is some distinctive form of knowledge that has this little Kantian tag which is 'Sociology' or 'Social Thought'. I'd say that the boundaries between what has been thought of as Anthropology and Sociology is pretty much erased in my work.

Nigel Warburton: *I'm interested as well in the way that you use autobiography. In my mind I'm thinking you've talked about having been a talented cellist as a young man, whether those sorts of things have influenced the topics you've chosen?*



Richard Sennett: Well some of that is just egoism on my part, but some of it also has to do with a very particular concern that I've had throughout my life which is how to write in such a way that connects with a reader, how to revive the idea of the long intense essay which was so natural to earlier generations of social thinkers and rather died out in our time. And one of the ways to do that is not to hide behind a mask with your readers so that they don't know who's speaking to them. I don't like confessional literature, but I think that if you're trying to speak directly to a reader you need to be able to establish an authorial voice which gives your readers some sense of who's talking to them. I'd say this is another enormous challenge that modern human sciences face, which is how to learn to write outward rather than to talk down to readers. You know, I read these things where somebody does a kind of review of everybody else's thoughts on a particular topic and there are lots of commentary or critiques which are sensible only to about 8 or 10 people I think. Why? If you're writing a book for 10 people, email them.

Nigel Warburton: *Unlike many sociologists you do have a very wide readership and I just wondered if that's part of your aim, that you feel, not just as somebody wanting to express themselves and communicate their ideas, but there is some sort of role responsibility amongst sociologists to speak to a wider public.*

Richard Sennett: That's moralistic. My project is to write. I don't want to go into government, I don't want to be an advisor to anybody. I mean, often when we use this term 'public intellectual', we're thinking about somebody who is a kind of commentator/coach for politicians. That's not me.

Nigel Warburton: *You mentioned that reading novels and the notion of narrative is very important in you work, yet fiction writing doesn't necessarily purport to be true in a literal sense, it's exploring different sorts of perspectives, empathizing with different sorts of characters, and yet social scientists, sociologists seem to have a responsibility to say things which are true if they can. Is there any antagonism between drawing from literature and being inspired by the sorts of narratives that you find in literature, and doing what you do?*

Richard Sennett: We could get into a notion of 'what is truth?' and whether a string of numbers is more true than a sentence. Shall we avoid that? [laughs]

If you put that aside, I'd say that to me the canons of good social research are, for the kind of work I do, that, for instance, in an interview that you've done justice to the struggle that somebody else might have to actually say what they mean. Now that's neither true nor false but it's a canon of probity for the interviewer, and that means you don't take people as examples of a social condition like being a white woman working class resident of Neasden, but that they exist as a competent subject struggling to make sense of their experience. And

when I look at what I think of as dubious social research based on interviews it irons out the struggle for interpretation which most people have in trying to make sense of what's going on in their lives. I think this is a really a false issue; when we read writers like de Tocqueville or Weber, we don't read them in order to know 'well he solved that one', we read them because they've been able to put their hands on really significant issues and say something provocative about them. The notion that social science solves problems, you can forget about it because we have the data, it's kind of an imperialist recipe that is to say that you don't have to think about this anymore because we've solved the problem for you, I have all the data for it.

Nigel Warburton: *Richard Sennett, thank you very much.*

Richard Sennett: Well thank you. It's been very nice to talk to you.

[ends]