

THE TOOLS OF FREEDOM BECOME THE SOURCES OF INDIGNITY

RICHARD SENNETT (1943–)



IN CONTEXT

FOCUS

Class inequality

KEY DATES

1486 Italian philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola says that unlike animals, people search for meaning and dignity in life.

1841 In "Self-Reliance," US philosopher and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson sees self-reliance as a moral imperative that enables individuals to shape their own destiny.

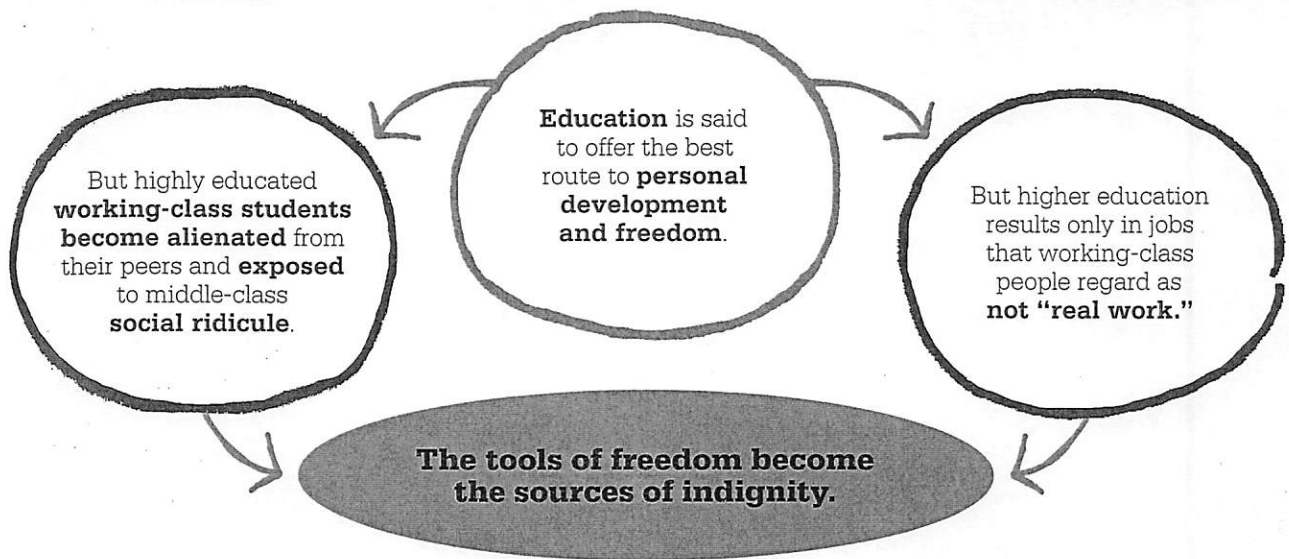
1960s French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre says that a class society is a society of resources unfairly distributed because some people have arbitrary power.

1989 British academic Richard Hoggart says, "Every decade we swiftly declare we have buried class, each decade the coffin stays empty."

Sociologists and economists traditionally accepted the idea that social class was linked to money: as workers earned higher incomes and gained more possessions, they would move into the middle class and enjoy not just prosperity, but also an increased sense of dignity. But this concept was challenged when US sociologist Richard Sennett, in collaboration with Jonathan Cobb, investigated a paradox that seemed to afflict working-class people who moved into the middle class.

What Sennett discovered in his interviews with workers, as outlined in *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, published in 1972, was

See also: Friedrich Engels 66-67 ■ W.E.B. Du Bois 68-73 ■ Pierre Bourdieu 76-79 ■ Elijah Anderson 82-83 ■ Georg Simmel 104-05 ■ Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis 288-89 ■ Paul Willis 292-93



that an increase in material power and freedom of choice was accompanied by a significant crisis in self respect. In reaching for greater freedom, workers were being asked to use "tools," such as education, that left them feeling alienated and incapable.

Immigration and racism

To explain how this might be happening, Sennett looked first at the history of the working class in the US. During the urbanization of the 19th century, rural workers moved from small farms to towns and then cities, which grew quickly under this sudden influx. In addition, most US cities had large enclaves of newly arrived European immigrants from Ireland, Italy, Poland, and Greece,

Immigrants disembark from a ship in New York in the early 20th century. These "foreigners" were often used for cheap labor, which led to hostility from some US citizens.

for example. Here the old languages were spoken and cultural traditions were kept alive.

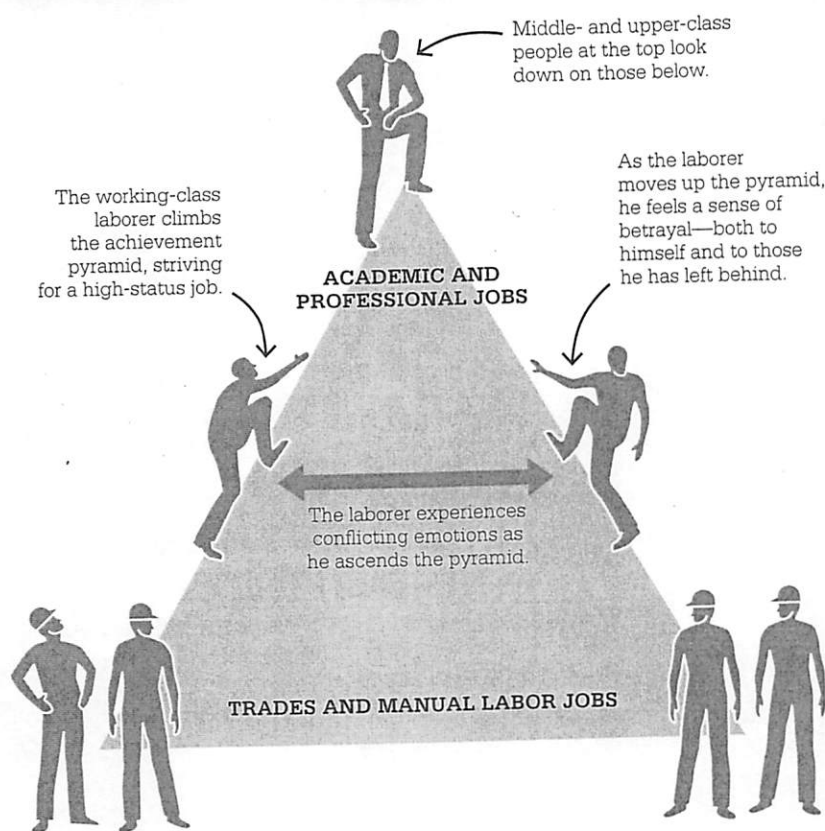
This mass immigration meant that industrialists soon realized that unskilled labor was cheaper than machine production. So they hired large numbers of immigrants

and switched the focus of their machinery to replacing the more expensive, skilled labor. Hostility arose toward the newcomers and there was a rise in racist attitudes.

A kind of "moral hierarchy" among nationalities soon gained widespread acceptance. Western »



The pyramid of achievement



Europeans (apart from the Irish) were at the top of this hierarchy; they were seen as diligent, hard working, and skilled. However, at the opposite end of the scale, Sennett notes that "Slavs, Bohemians, Jews, and Southern Europeans... were accused of dirtiness, secretiveness, or laziness." The new immigrants found that they could depend only on their countrymen for support, so ethnic communities flourished.

But during the mid-20th century, US cities underwent urban renewal programs that broke up the immigrant communities. Immigrant families were integrated into the larger society, which had different attitudes of social respect

from their own. In the wider US society, higher educated, "cultured" people were treated with the most respect. An honest, hard-working man or woman who may have been highly regarded in the "old neighborhood" was now viewed with disdain and suspicion for being ignorant and "foreign."

Education and failure

Sennett says that the working class was being challenged to become "cultured"; education seemed to be the way to acceptance and respect. However, there were several notable problems with this. First, to people who had always valued hard, physical labor, the "pen-pushing" jobs of the middle class

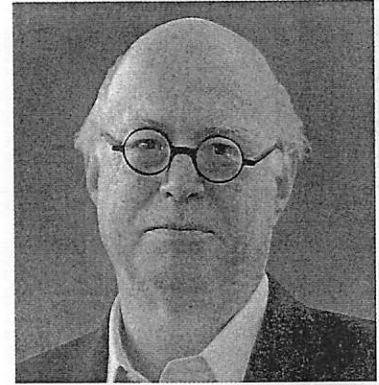
were not considered "real work." These jobs were not worthy, so a worker could not view himself with respect while doing them.

In addition, although intellect and education were held in high esteem by the middle and upper classes, it seemed to the workers that "the educated" did nothing worth respecting; on the contrary, they were often seen to use their privileged position to cheat, lie, and avoid working, while at the same time commanding high salaries. How, therefore, could a worker aim to maintain his dignity and self-respect in this position?

The workers interviewed by Sennett use the word "educated" to stand for a range of experiences and feelings that move beyond pure schooling. Education's elevated status results from the fact that it is thought to increase rationality and develop the finest human capacities. But Rissarro, a shoeshine boy turned bank clerk, explains how this works differently across the social divisions. He believes that people of a higher class have the power to judge him because they are more "internally developed." Despite Rissarro's rise to professional employment, his

The educated... middle-class people... [with] the 'right' values stand out from a mass whose understanding... they believe inferior to their own.

Richard Sennett



Richard Sennett

Literary author and sociologist Richard Sennett was born in Chicago to parents with communist beliefs. Both his father and uncle fought as internationalists in the civil war in Spain. Sennett was brought up by his mother in one of the first racially mixed public housing projects.

Sennett studied cello at Juilliard in New York City, but a wrist operation in 1964 brought his musical career to an end. He began a career in sociology at Harvard University, and has taught at Yale and the London School of Economics (LSE). In the 1970s he cofounded The New York Institute for the Humanities with writers Susan Sontag and Joseph Brodsky. Sennett made his name with *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, which he wrote after spending four years researching with Jonathan Cobb. He is married to sociologist Saskia Sassen.

Key works

1972 *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (in collaboration with Jonathan Cobb)

1974 *The Call of Public Man*

2005 *The Culture of the New Capitalism*

middle-class colleagues look down on him and he lacks respect for himself, because he feels that he is not doing "real work." He accepts society's admonitions to "better himself," but he feels like an imposter and is puzzled by his sense of discomfort. He believes that the only explanation is that there is something wrong with him.

Sennett maintains that workers tend to see their failure to fit in and achieve respect as personal failure, not as a condition of societal divisions and inequalities. He quotes James, a highly educated son of an immigrant, who sees himself as a failure, whatever he does. "If I really had what it takes," he says, "I could make this school thing worthwhile." On the other hand, if he "had the balls to go out into the world" and get a real job, that would earn him real respect. James holds himself responsible for not having more self-confidence and for having failed to "develop."

The political is personal

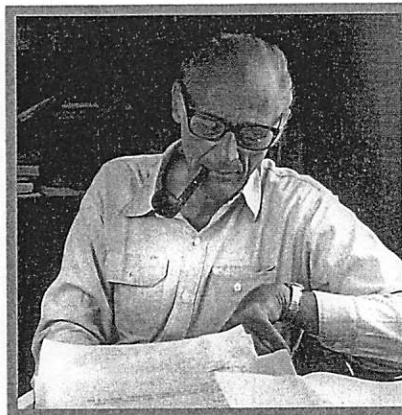
This conjunction of class and self is a uniquely US phenomenon, says Sennett, that is tied up with the prizing of "the individual." Success in IQ tests and schooling is seen as a way of freeing an individual from his or her social conditions at birth—everyone who truly has merit or intelligence will rise. This belief in equality of opportunity is at the heart of the American Dream.

Working-class children do not have the same opportunities as children from more affluent backgrounds, and those who strive to excel are seen as traitors. They are exiled from their peer groups, with a subsequent loss of self-worth. The tools of freedom are a source of indignity for them, both at school and at college, where they are looked down on for not knowing

the rules and lacking in wider cultural knowledge. Their educational achievement exposes them not to respect but to disdain from the middle-class people around them and they suffer a sense of failure and alienation.

According to Scottish-American businessman Andrew Carnegie, the justice of industrial capitalism is that society will always reward "a man of talent." If a person is worthy of escaping poverty, he or she can do so. If he or she does not have the ability to "make it," however, what right does that person have to complain? As Sennett notes: in a meritocracy, if you fail, you have no merit. Failure to succeed is due to personal inadequacy. In this way the inequalities of class become hidden by the widespread "personal failures" of working people.

The Hidden Injuries of Class is a subtle and sensitive exploration of working-class lives that exposes how social difference can be made to appear as simply a question of character, competence, and moral resolve, when it is essentially a matter of inherited class. ■



Arthur Miller was a working-class boy who rose to become one of the leading US dramatists of the mid-20th century—he was, however, largely looked down upon by US critics.