

Urban polymath: “Trying to insulate yourself by a fence is an act of self-wounding.”

Richard Sennett’s research focuses on the ties between the modern world, the public realm, and urban space. In his essay ‘The Public Realm’ he differentiates between borders and boundaries – borders being porous, in contrast to boundaries. We had the opportunity to talk to him about newly emerging and well-known boundaries between countries and within cities and their consequences for our society.

INTERVIEW: ALEXANDER GUTZMER, ISA FAHRENHOLZ

topos: In your essay ‘The Public Realm’, you speak of borders and boundaries with regards to cities. How can you apply this to countries?

RICHARD SENNETT: A porous or open border is not the same as having no border at all. In my understanding, the open border resembles a membrane, a filter, which lets good things pass through and won’t let bad things pass. The arrangement of the European Union and the Schengen treaty are good examples of porous borders. But I am worried about the open borders of Schengen. Britain is about to turn its borders into boundaries. How can we maintain borders that are like membranes and do not close? It’s quite interesting to see how such a filtering process can work in society.

topos: You mentioned good and bad things. What do you mean by that?

SENNETT: The problem today is that we have decided to equate bad things to outsiders. From an empirical perspective, this does not hold true. Outsiders do much more good than harm – certainly in Britain, but in most other countries as well. It is a fact that we have a shortage of skilled and unskilled labor. Therefore, our society would collapse if we had no immigration. The notion that a place like Hungary is so self-sufficient in terms of its needs that it can shut out foreigners completely is a kind of fantasy act.

topos: In the U.K., this new thinking led to the Brexit vote. Do you think the Brexit will happen?

SENNETT: It looks like there will be a reversal of the Brexit decision. It depends on who will become the next prime minister and whether the far right loses its grip on power. Furthermore, the Conservative Party is so much at war with itself that it will not reach an agreement until October. And whatever Great Britain will propose to exit the EU will at least be rejected by one of the 27 member countries. And then, the entire Brexit is a non-starter.

topos: So you are optimistic the Brexit will not happen?

SENNETT: I am never optimistic. But I think the Brexit will fail.

topos: What do you think is the reason for new boundary tendencies all over the world?

SENNETT: These tendencies are partly due to neoliberal globalization, which has proved traumatic for many people. The traumas are displaced by the notion that if people were more isolated, they would be more insulated. Certainly, this process is taking place in the U.S., where the question of inequality has been answered by keeping out foreigners. But that means blaming the wrong group of people for a problem which is much more complex. Another reason for the increasing boundary-making is the psychological mechanism that makes people see the other as a threat.

topos: How can societies avoid this new fear of the other?

SENNETT: People need to become educated on the notion that they can manage otherness. We aren’t doing a very good job in teaching that the threat of the other is unreal. I think this entire discussion about immigration is a smoke screen for political, economic and psychological factors.

topos: If Donald Trump builds his wall, it might become the longest wall in the world. If you believe him or his supporters, it will become a boundary. In your mind, is this wall merely another fantasy, or will it actually be built?

SENNETT: It certainly is a fantasy of his. If people are determined to cross the border, they will find a way to do so. For instance, drug dealers will take a boat or dig a tunnel instead. But Trump is only worth ignoring and we should not waste our time with his ideas. What I think is worth thinking

Richard Sennett lives in London and is worried about the Brexit. He is an active part of the Anti-Brexit movement.



Photos: Thomas Struth

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RICHARD SENNETT is the Centennial Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics and former University Professor of the Humanities at New York University. He is currently a Senior Fellow of the Center on Capitalism and Society at Columbia University. Sennett has studied social ties in cities and the effects of urban life on individuals in the modern world. He was a Fellow of The Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and of the Royal Society of Literature. He is the founding director of the New York Institute for the Humanities.

about is another border – the Israeli concrete border. The state of Israel is being converted into a state of siege mentality. Many Israelis I know think this boundary is doing them more harm than protecting them. Because trying to insulate yourself by a 20-foot fence is also an act of self-wounding.

topos: How does the fear of the other influence your idea of the open city?

SENNETT: The open city is a proposal about how to combat right wing tendencies given the current political order. However, I don't think the open city is a proposal that will actually and independently defeat fascism. That would be a project for political economy. Defeating fascism requires political organization. You need to know what you want to achieve as well as what you want to defeat. However, this overly high expectation is linked to something I found enormously disturbing about architects and urbanists: Their idea that a certain design, a certain architectural program alone will actually make Goldman Sachs crumble. There is no design which has that power. Urbanism has to be a more modest pursuit.

topos: If you say that design cannot lead to the breakdown of Goldman Sachs, then how far does the political role of design reach?

SENNETT: Design has the capacity to imagine what could be, instead of merely serving the current state of affairs. For example, if I wish for a place whose inhabitants are continuously involved on a societal level, a place that demands a certain way of doing projects or of living together: What would such a particular structure look like, and who would have to be involved in creating it? I have worked for the UN in poor environments. We developed certain models in emerging cities that we could

and should be taking back into places like Berlin or London. It is not enough to free capitalism and everything will be fine. We need specific techniques to allow for us to create better when building cities.

topos: We have already talked about borders and boundaries between and within countries and cities. What about the borders between people, for instance when it comes to integration? You seem to be somewhat critical of the idea of integration?

SENNETT: I am very critical of it. Integration is a way of denying the differences between cultures. It presumes that there is one model which everyone should subscribe to. That is why I use terms like coproduction or codetermination instead.

topos: But even if we leave the notion of integration aside for a moment – can a city work as an idea that offers some form of identification? Is there an example for that?

SENNETT: It definitely can. And there are examples. Think of Bogotá. In its center, very poor people live together with middle-class citizens. Not brilliantly – people do not love each other – but they are living within the same space and are aware of each other. And the open city is not about everyone agreeing and loving each other, it is non-discursive and focused on physical presence. It has the capacity to outline how to make a place where people coexist without violence. The urbanism of the open city is about how you can physically mix races, classes, and ethnicities so that they use the same public space.

topos: Are you referring to the concept of the multicultural society? We keep hearing from some commentators that the multicultural society has failed.

SENNETT: Do you really think it has failed? If you thought about a

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multicultural society where young children coexist with elderly people, you wouldn't think that failed. The same applies to the coexistence in the workplace where people have different skills. So what we are really talking about is a racialization of the problem. We need to be self-critical about that. The same problem as with racialization occurs with social classes: to push out working class people of spaces used by middle-class people.

topos: What about people who don't see it that way, those who vote for populist, right-wing parties?

SENNETT: They should be contested, rather than us naturalizing a problem they actually create themselves. We live in a complex society. The key question today is whether we should let foreigners in or whether we should instead aim at becoming a monochrome society of our own. That is the issue, and that is what we have to debate. But it does not help to naturalize the monochrome viewpoint, arguing that people who are different can't live together.

topos: So how should we house refugees? Should we locate them outside of the city or in the center of it?

SENNETT: It is better for everyone if people are in the center of the city and are distributed as much as possible, so that they cannot form a self-sufficient community. Refugees adopt more rapidly and learn the new language more quickly when living amongst people who speak that language.

topos: Generally speaking, what is the biggest challenge cities are confronted with today?

SENNETT: I would say it is to build cities that can change in the future and adapt themselves in terms of climate change, people's living patterns, but also in terms of the economy.