

With due respect

Some remarks on social sustainability and the city

INTRODUCTION

When I was asked to make some comments on the occasion of this year's Megacities lecture by Richard Sennett, I felt honoured and challenged. I had just read his latest book, *Respect*, and it had triggered the same reactions all his books had in the past. I felt jealous that he had again chosen the right moment to deal with this subject. It is a subject that many people involved in the debate over the future of our welfare state regard as important, but fail to bring forward strongly enough. Richard Sennett remedies this omission, with his usual combination of social consciousness and intellectual incisiveness. But, as when I read 'The fall of public man' years ago and more recently his book on flexibility, I felt the urge to protest and to dispute his arguments. I believe that Sennett's thinking is too closed, placing too much emphasis on the past and not enough on opening up new approaches to the social developments he analyses in such a masterly way.

The organisers have positioned this year's Megacities lecture in the context of the quest for social sustainability, a term that is preferable to 'sociale cohesie', social cohesion. This is the central term in the Dutch discussion about the condition of society as a whole, but it is also used more and more for specific cities and neighbourhoods in particular. Social cohesion is used in discussions that focus on neighbourhoods – and even staircases – the small residential communities that have broken down into different worlds that do not communicate with each other anymore. Accordingly, the solutions that are sought involve community building: meeting your neighbours and getting to know them. Social sustainability deals with social cohesion at the higher level of society as a whole, or the city as a whole, perhaps the megacity as a conglomeration of different cities and the peripheral areas between them, the network city. This difference in focus is not only a question of scale, but also of

perspective. It raises the question of how sustainable our cities are when large parts of their population do not participate in city life socially, economically or politically. This shift of perspective also brings to the fore the question of the form that this participation should and could take. What kind of social capital do we mean when we talk about social cohesion or social sustainability? Is it bonding: keeping together the small group of peers and neighbours, or bridging: exchanges between different groups? These questions cannot be answered only in terms of the integration of certain groups in society as it is. They require a rethinking of the way society and our cities are socially 'constructed' as a 'machine' of integration or disintegration. The work of Richard Sennett is extremely important for this rethinking.

Nevertheless, my objection to the work of Richard Sennett relates to the almost exclusively moral appeal it makes to change our habits and our policies. For Sennett, the aim of such changes is to give human beings deep reasons to care about one another, to encourage respect from the strong for those destined to remain weak, or to transform the indifference that seems to be the result of the growing difference in our cities into a conscience of the eye. I am not arguing against the correctness of these moral appeals, but against the apparent omission from the analysis of social tendencies and developments that could be seen and developed as anchoring points for the desired new habits and policies. Without these points of application, the nature of the appeal remains too exclusively moral, where it could put forward possible alternatives based on seemingly weak and marginal trends that could nevertheless become stronger and more mainstream if supported in the proper way.

60

To make my position clear, I will give an example taken from current Dutch planning policy. The debate about urbanism and spatial planning is dominated by moral claims. On reading policy documents about the encouragement of urban living and mixed neighbourhoods, one gets the impression that nobody actually wants to live like that. Everyone who can afford it wants to live in the country, preferably on private land and certainly not with other groups – the less fortunate or foreigners – in one and the same neighbourhood. And most certainly not with people who do not quite fit in or people with psychiatric problems. The spatial policy gives the impression of being a necessary counterbalance to developments driven by individualism, consumerism, self-interest and fear of everything that is foreign, developments that encourage the disintegration of society. The spatial planning policy constitutes 'resistance'. On the other hand, it is criticised more and more for catering to the trend in which a growing middle class of consumers strive after differentiation, reducing architecture and urbanism to accessories for the representation of lifestyles, regardless of the 'brand' assigned to a particular neighbourhood. Both criticisms are certainly not unfounded. It is unclear, however, where the required resistance can be embedded, given the prevailing counter-developments in society. Points of application can only be found in everyday life and in the aspirations, desires, ambitions, fears and values which shape that everyday life. Having said this, we must acknowledge that the task is not an easy one. Recent shifts in politics in the Netherlands make that very clear. The simple slogan that politicians should listen to the people better is only one step away from a very questionable populism.

Throughout the history of political concern with and theoretical reflection about daily life, different approaches have struggled for prominence. The main contention is still an issue today: should engagement with everyday life take the form of a socio-pedagogical project (as a component in the emancipation of specific groups) or should it seek the scent of liberation that the everyday world grants from the world of the system? This controversy is seen currently in, for example, the debate about the policy for the renovation of post-war neighbourhoods, in which concepts such as integration and values and norms struggle for prominence before being swept away by a surge of uncomplicated populism, traces of which are evident in the International Building Exhibition Rotterdam-Hoogvliet, which took the theme 'Welcome into My Backyard!' – 'WiMBY!' Neither view makes it possible to see daily life for what it actually is.

Everyday life is not a homogeneous phenomenon, but one that is highly differentiated. Not everybody, for example, wants to live in homogeneous suburbs. The social heterogeneity of the living environment can also be a sought-after lifestyle feature. This is true for a large proportion of the white middle-class and there is no reason why it should not be true for a growing black middle-class. So perhaps, on our side, we should ask spatial policy not to bother us with moral demands, but to create the conditions that make living in mixed, urban areas possible.

With this in mind, I would like to comment on three points:(a) respect and the debate on integration, (b) different worlds in cities as shrinking and expanding ways of life and (c) the creative city and the re-embeddedness of craftsmanship.

61

RESPECT AND THE DEBATE ON INTEGRATION

It is impossible to talk about social sustainability without touching on the debate about the integration of ethnic minorities that has been raging in the Netherlands in recent months, both on the national level and in different cities. Respect is an important issue in this debate, an important aspect of which is a lack of respect in the Sennett sense. I must confess that a feeling of shame overcomes me when I hear or read contributions to this debate. The demand for stricter policies in this area has led to a hardening of language that often stretches the limits of civilised discourse. Particularly questionable are the ways in which words acquire a totally different meaning in these debates. Deprived or vulnerable people are no longer people who need help or assistance. They are troublemakers who should be excluded from certain areas. There is also a tendency to jumble up all the different categories: immigrants of different generations and origin, working and unemployed, highly educated or unskilled, respectable or criminal.

One of the main reasons advanced as an explanation for the dramatic shifts in politics in the Netherlands in recent times is that we maintained for too long a political correctness that blinded us to widespread social dissatisfaction. But that is no excuse for the way social problems are formulated and solutions advanced nowadays. Perhaps respect is, in many cases, simply a question of precision, in what one says and in what

one thinks. However, a frequently-heard argument these days is that the soft approach to immigrants and others in the last decade was actually an example of disrespect. By contrast, requiring them to integrate, participate and assume their responsibilities is evidence of greater respect. As far as I understand, we do touch here exactly the argument Professor Sennett puts forward in *Respect*. However, he makes clear that this is not a simple choice between assistance or demands. Respectful treatment is more complicated than that.

A distinction made by Rinus Penninx, Professor of immigration and ethnic studies at the University of Amsterdam, may help here. In the case of integration, he distinguishes between the acquisition of a social position by immigrants and the allocation of that position by the institutions of the receiving society. In my opinion, the current debate in the Netherlands concentrates on the former, and Richard Sennett emphasises the latter.

This process of allocating a position is not only an important issue for immigrants; it relates to every process of integration, emancipation or socialisation. As a member of the Taskforce Vermaatschappelijk Geestelijke Gezondheidszorg (Taskforce for the Socialisation of Psychiatric Health Care), I have encountered the same processes in the (re)socialisation of psychiatric patients. The empowerment of these patients alone is not enough; society must also change itself to welcome these people in a helpful and respectful way. This brings us to the question as formulated by Richard Sennett: 'In society, and particularly in the welfare state, the nub of the problem we face is how the strong can practice respect towards those destined to remain weak.' Indeed. But there are practices developing that try to deal with this problem. For example, there is the 'kwartiermaken' (setting up camp) project of Doortje Kal, the aim of which is to prepare neighbourhoods for their role in receiving people with psychiatric difficulties. The project consists of involving neighbourhood institutions and professionals as well as individual residents and neighbours. Another example is the way the new residential area of Amsterdam, IJburg, is constructed as a living environment 'zonder scheidslijnen', without the borders that usually place elderly and disabled people apart.

Once a disabled lady told me: 'I don't need help, I need assistance.' And that is exactly the point, however subtle this distinction may seem. The point is illustrated by all the assistants, consultants and advisors, lawyers and accountants, – as well as therapists and life style advisors who help you with the organisation of your professional and personal life.

Turning to the integration of ethnic minorities, one could easily object that we have done our best to welcome them, but they simply didn't respond to the invitation to join society. The allocation of a position is more complex than that. It is not only functional but also highly symbolic. Respect and reputation are feelings often neglected by politicians and professionals, but for most people they are important motives in the organisation of daily life, in their ambitions and dreams about the future. But do we talk in terms of supporting ambitions? No, we talk in terms of minimising deprivation. In the case of urban renewal, we are talking about the dispersal of problems instead of the creation of a geography of opportunities.

I am involved with a very interesting and innovative project in Hilversum, a new building in which residential apartments and care facilities are combined with two schools, a primary school and a secondary vmbo-school (power vocational education). The director of this school told me why he was interested in the project: 'My pupils too are aware of what people think about them; this project gives them the change to gain more self-respect and respect from others, let them demonstrate to others and to themselves that they can fix things and take care, that they are somebody.'

DIFFERENT WORLDS: SHRINKING AND EXPANDING WAYS OF LIFE

The way people organise their everyday lives is the result of a complex balance of often-conflicting dreams and aspirations. In addition to the various orientations of value systems that are currently receiving much attention in all kinds of lifestyle studies, the practical limitations and dilemmas – associated, for example, with the income and the composition of the household but also with family ties and friendships – also play a role here. Perhaps we should be more interested in what people do, instead of what people are; less in identities and more in uses, as the French sociologist Michel de Certeau put it.

A specific 'world' with spatial, physical, social and cultural characteristics fits the resulting way of life. That way of life is certainly also determined by notions of differentiation, respect and reputation. In these worlds, familiarity and surprise, tradition and renewal, play a role alongside each other.

Today's societal diversity is the result of the coexistence of different worlds with distinct notions of time and space. And these worlds are in flux rather than static. That distinguishes the modernity in which we live, the 'liquid modernity' as Zygmunt Bauman calls it, from the 'fixed modernity' of the not too distant past.

63

The dominance of a specific cultural world, the symbolic stamp it leaves in urban space, depends on the size and the power of the corresponding way of life. Not too long ago, large parts of our cities were dominated by the way of life of the 'organizational man', to use a term from American sixties sociology. Nowadays this world is shrinking and is being replaced, pushed aside in a certain sense, by the social and cultural worlds of other groups. These groups are not only immigrants; they also include a group that is still in its formative phase and that has therefore been given different names (starters, new urbanites, independents, creative class) but is already leaving a deep mark on the image of the city.

A recently-published Dutch study distinguishes between two important groups, that form the poles of the social spectrum. On the one hand, there are active citizens, and it is clear that the young, creative urbanites referred to above are part of this group. On the other hand, there are the threatened citizens, and it is also clear that they include the group of original city-dwellers.

The term 'threatened citizens' raises the question of who, or what, is threatening them. And the next question: is it possible to eliminate these threats? Of course, the obvious example is the experience and the sensation of insecurity and, to a certain extent, we

can do something about this. However, what we cannot change is that we are witnessing a shrinking and, ultimately, disappearing world associated with this specific way of life. In the first place because it is merging with the way of life of a growing middle class and is therefore moving to newer suburbs. Secondly, as we have seen, it is being pushed out by other groups and, thirdly, by commercial strategies and public policies as well: the disappearance of familiar shops, banking branches and post offices, alongside political pressure to open community facilities for newcomers, have also contributed to the gradual disappearance of this world. A way of life that was always characterised more by bonding and less by its bridging potential. Nevertheless, once again, there is not a single, homogeneous reaction to this 'threat'. In my own research, I identified at least three ways of dealing with the disappearance of this way of life.

Some feel expropriated. They feel that their world has been taken, has been stolen from them. Many of them are people who have played an active role in all kind of community activities. In this sense, they were active citizens. They do not blame in the first place the new arrivals to their area, although they do resent their non-communicative behaviour. Above all, they hold politicians and institutions like housing corporations and community centres responsible for the decline of their world. 'They knew it, I have told them often enough, but they ruined it deliberately.'

A second group mainly feels uprooted: without moving, they find themselves in a completely different neighbourhood. They actually say: 'It's not our neighbourhood anymore.' And by this they don't mean, like the first group, that the area is out of their control; they mean that it is no longer the familiar everyday environment they were used to. They decide to move to the suburbs, following their children and one-time neighbours, where they often find bits and pieces of their old world.

The last group seems less affected by the social changes in their environment. Perhaps because they have always been more independent from it. They have been able to renew their networks, in part with members of the new groups of residents. They also enjoy the new facilities those groups have brought into the neighbourhood. 'So much hasn't changed,' they will tell you.

How to deal with such a diverse situation? I don't know. But I do know that an urban-renewal policy that creates the illusion of reshaping a world from the past must fail. On the other hand, a policy that neglects signals given by the first two groups and focuses complacently on the third group will not succeed either. What we need is a spatial and social policy with an open attitude to the needs of different parochial domains that together form, by intermixing and overlapping, a new public domain.

THE CREATIVE CITY: RE-EMBEDDING OF ARTS AND CRAFTS?

In the last decade, the debate about cities was dominated by the concept of the network society, based on flows of information. The places-to-be were defined as those places best connected to the informational network. Recently, we have witnessed an interesting shift in thinking about city economics and city culture. The slogans are now 'the creative city', 'the innovative city' or 'the knowledgeable city'. They are

expressions of a growing awareness that the true kind of capital that cities flourish on is social and cultural capital, in other words: human capital. In the light of our search for social sustainability, that is of course an interesting development.

The creative city is by definition a city of immigrants; a city of diversity and tolerance, where newcomers are welcomed not with benefits but with opportunities. However, what to every individual may seem opportunities and niches, looks from a more objective point of view like a large pool of overworked and underpaid creative talents. Nevertheless, most people stay for a longer period in this growing pool of creative workers. Simply because they are themselves very much involved in creating and innovating, paid, underpaid or even unpaid. They form the group I mentioned above, the new urbanites, starters and independents, more recently designated as the creative class.

For them the attraction of a city depends not simply on the availability of workspace, but on the conditions for a whole – creative and innovative – way of life. The innovative city is not the sum total of individual artists doing their thing. It is the outcome of creative experts working together in networks, meeting each other in intermediate spaces, like galleries, festivals, discussion forums, café's, restaurants and clubs. At this point, we can observe the cultural generator of this new 'creative class' at work, not only creating a lifestyle but also leaving its stamp on a growing part of the city. This class develops itself the facilities it likes. Not only do these people move to places where they find the right atmosphere, they create those places. That distinguishes them from the group of 'threatened' citizens, who seem to have lost the cultural generator that created their life world in the past. The local is not lost, what is lost is the local as we knew it, as Sharon Zukin mentioned during a lecture in Amsterdam a few months ago. Or should we say: as they knew it?

65

However, the new forms of cultural production cannot flourish without being connected to the local situation. Not 'glocalisation' – as it is called sometimes – seems the issue, but 'lobalisation': the embedding of global processes in local conditions. The innovative or creative city is not the result of flying in a bunch of talented young experts, giving them workspaces and helping them with grants and interesting commissions. It is the outcome of a permanent interaction between local skills and traditions, and importing new ideas and talent. That is at least what students of the subject are telling us: these interactions could create a form of 'mixed embeddedness'. However, once again, this seems a bit too easy. What about another observation, that consumers and producers in certain domains have the same kind of cultural capital? They might differ in terms of economic capital, but clients and servants in shops and restaurants often share the same lifestyle.

Nevertheless, the shift from the informational city to the creative one could be an important trend, bringing an end to the disdain for the world of real production and craftsmanship. But only if the new cultural producers do not concentrate mainly on a subcultural niche but organise connections and overlaps with other cultures in the city. That is also true for cultural production (Is there a connection with old and new local craftsmanship? Is professional training encouraged at all levels, including such

projects as in Hilversum?), for cultural consumption (Are they only producing for the lifestyles of the new cultural class themselves or do they express the cultural diversity of the city?) and for public space (Do they organize just a pleasant parochial realm for 'our own kind' or enrich the city with a new public domain?). Bonding and bridging are both – and together – necessary conditions for innovation and for social sustainability.