

“Hold Them to Account”

RICHARD SENNETT in Conversation with BORIS VORMANN

Boris Vormann:

The title of this special issue is *Common Grounds*? Are there such common grounds in American society? And do you even think they are a necessary condition for democracy to become possible?

Richard Sennett:

I don't like the language of “coming together” or of “common ground.” To me, this goes back to a very old idea from the Greeks, *isegoria*, which is to be held accountable for your words. And I think that people on the radical right have to be held accountable for their words. We made Holocaust denial a hate crime, holding people accountable for their words. I think we have to do that for racism, which, to me, is the deep motor of Trumpism. So rather than thinking about common ground, I am thinking about how we can hold people accountable for things that do other people harm. They epitomize hate speech, and they should be punished for it. “Bringing America together” seems to me misguided. I have written a lot about the White working class over the course of my life. I've seen where some of these racist things come from. But in the end, treating people like adults is to say that this is not acceptable: “You cannot do that, and as much as I understand you, I do not empathize with you.”

Boris Vormann:

I don't disagree at all with what you are saying. By “common grounds” we are not insinuating that we should reach out to the radical right. But don't you think that there needs to be at least some common acceptance of truth, or a common political space in which to disagree with one another for democracy to work?

Richard Sennett:

Well, it depends where you draw the line. If you say, as is now evidently the case on radical media outlets, that vaccination against COVID is a communist plot, *that* is a crime to me. There is no common ground that can be had with that. What I believe in is cooperation when you can find it, but I think the notion of a new American consensus is just taking us down the wrong path. When people are in fantasies, it is their own responsibility to work their way through them. I am not interested in why somebody believes vaccination is communism. What interests me is getting them to understand that what they say has consequences that are harmful to themselves, to their family, to their children, and so on. I don't like this liberal rhetoric of mutuality and common ground.

Boris Vormann:

Should it then, above all, be the criminal justice system that ensures people are held accountable?

Richard Sennett:

Holocaust denial, for instance, is something that the criminal justice system punishes. Other forms of hate speech that really do harm to people, such as racial hate speech, should be punished, too. This is not a Talmudic idea on my part, but is fundamental to the operations of a polity in which words have consequences. Otherwise, why have a debate? Why have speeches? If anything goes, if you are post-truth, you don't need a polity. Of course, I'd criminalize any kind of hate speech through the justice system.

But there is also a more structural point to be made. I do not think there is any way that you can work people out of that corner of fantasy and unreality through discursive interaction. There have to be boundaries outside of which discursive relationships simply do not apply. It makes me very uneasy to hear people in Washington speak about things like "healing America's wounds." You can do that discursive play, but only within limits. Unfortunately, I think this is a wound that won't heal. I think there is a bedrock of haters in America—a solid bedrock of cruelty and fantasy that goes all the way back to the Civil War, and even before that. We have to recognize this as part of what it means to be an American: that you are always tempted by the "other" America, which is intolerant, racist, and permanently angry.

Something that struck me about Trump is that there was an inflection of this kind of racist America which before had been more regional. What I have understood about Trump is that he found a way to deregionalize the American South. You find it in Massachusetts now, even though the state voted overwhelmingly for Joe Biden, but there is still

a solid core of Trumpists in a so-called liberal state. That is also true in New York City. If you go to Staten Island, you are in Trumpland. During liberal hegemony, those were silent and passive voices. Now they are not.

Boris Vormann:

What do you think the role of fear is in producing and mobilizing these voices? There are certainly true grievances from deindustrialization, from alienation in the workplace, or, say, the lack of public goods. But isn't there something less tangible than these insecurities that goes well beyond that? Fears that politicians like Trump have been able to stoke?

Richard Sennett:

That's what I am writing about now: how fear on the far right is a performance. If your fear is that communists are in control of vaccines, to go back to that earlier example, that is something that you have not arrived at deductively. That is a fear that has been enacted for you and performed. We know that about Viktor Orbán in Europe, for instance. Hungary destroyed almost all of its Jewry, but he is able to perform antisemitism as something that arouses that kind of fear.

I actually have to say, I don't see this as a majority factor for the people that I interviewed over the course of my life in the working class, and from which I come myself. I would say even when they are racist, their racism is tempered by the knowledge that they work with particular Black workers whom they exempt from this kind of categorical racism. Whereas the middle class is often not exposed to the "other" in the same way. I think the working class gets a rather bad rap on this, as though this irrationality is all due to the fact that they are these poor, left-behind workers. I just think racism is generated in a completely different way. It is not simply that there is a wound suffered in the world that people are responding to by moving to the right. I just don't believe that is true.

Boris Vormann:

I am wondering about the 74 million who voted for Trump. They would certainly not all consider themselves far right. How to deal with these 74 million voters?

Richard Sennett:

But who is speaking to them? There is really an issue about how center-right parties can detach themselves from extreme-right parties.

But if you are, like me, on the center-left or left, that is not our problem. We are not going to do that work for Chancellor Merkel. She is going to have to do it for herself. It is a kind of false empathy to say that they cannot do it for themselves—that they are not responsible for taking care of themselves, and that we, the good-hearted, tolerant, empathic left somehow have to engage and rescue them. That is not our problem. It is also something that William Kristol, an anti-Trump Republican, said: this is not a problem for Democrats. This is a problem for center-right Republicans to decide where they stand. And, again, that is something that has to come from them, not from the nation “healing its wounds.”

Boris Vormann:

Would you say that your research on changes in capitalism, and, more specifically, the world of labor, holds insights that can also be helpful in analyzing Trumpism?

Richard Sennett:

I don't think, at least in the work I have done, that the result of alienation is extremism. It takes many different and many more compelling forms. Like the loss of hope in oneself—workers who give up trying to take care of themselves. There is a kind of politicization of people's experience which denies its complexity. The problems for workers I have interviewed are much more pressing ones: How am I going to live a good life if the work that I am offered is oppressive? The idea that the answer to that question is that I'll become a racist, that's for journalists. That is not how people actually live frustration and wounds, because it doesn't tell you what to do tomorrow morning.

The academy often has an almost pornographic relation to the left-right divide. This is the kind of riveting obsession that everything falls into that dynamic. And it is just not true. When I interviewed software engineers fifteen years ago in Silicon Valley at Microsoft, they were all very right-wing, they were libertarians. But, in a sense, political ideology was so divorced from the problems that they had, thinking about getting into debt. These are the low-level programmers; they are not the poster boys, and there are thousands and thousands of them. When they're thinking about going into debt, or why they are working twelve hours a day, tethered to their computer and not allowed to go home at night—that kind of political pornography is not a way to solve that kind of problem. It is a great temptation that we must avoid as scholars. Journalists love it: Will they turn to Trump? That's a compartment that is separate from what, to me, seems to be the real injuries of class: a loss of direction, not knowing how to create a work narrative that orients you forward.

Boris Vormann:

Our everyday lives today are characterized by apocalyptic scenarios of the future. You have been working as a consultant for the United Nations on climate change and its implications for cities, and you are more aware than most of us about its potential, harmful consequences. Democracy, by contrast, seems to require a vision of abundance and possibility. In other words, does today's so-prevalent apocalyptical discourse risk undermining the potential for democracy?

Richard Sennett:

In my work for the United Nations, this question has been very much on my mind for a very practical reason: apocalyptic thinking tends to be paralyzing. The response of many people when you declare a climate emergency, for instance—which we have seen happen in many countries—is that people think we cannot do anything about it. You are paralyzed. It is a kind of pacification. And so we have been having many discussions, particularly about how to approach COP26, the next United Nations Climate Change Conference. How do you actually mobilize people? How do you put pressure on political systems to change?

Rhetoric of emergency can be disabling in its pacification. But one of the odd things I have observed is that a certain amount of individual agency does not get paralyzed, with people, for example, becoming willing to bicycle or walk or take electric cars. However, this is not translating into a form of collective action that would, for instance, hold the six big oil-producing international firms accountable. So there is a kind of glitch in democracy. You have an agent, but that agent remains at the level of individual action.

Boris Vormann:

I don't want to urge you to look into the crystal ball, but, by way of conclusion, I'd be interested to know how you think this particular, tumultuous historical moment might be understood when we look back on it from the future?

Richard Sennett:

Well, the one thing that I hope will happen is that the majority of Americans will come to a kind of *Aufklärung* about the fact that we aren't one country, and that people will move on from there. Everything I have said to you can be positive, in a way. Once you stop having a fantasy of common ground, then there are ways to act, ways to hold people morally and legally responsible. But this requires a kind of

recognition that where we are now is reality itself, not just something gone wrong. It is something that has bubbled to the surface, like a rock that's been exposed. That is why I hated all the journalism about what Trump did to democracy. The only thing he did was expose something that has been there since the time of slavery. He stripped away all the silences around it—but he did not do or create anything. What I hope for is sober reckoning that we have a huge criminal element in our country. And criminals have to be recognized as such. That's my vision of the future.