

## Book Review by Yvonne S. Smith

**The Corrosion of Character:  
The Personal Consequences of  
Work in the New Capitalism**  
Richard Sennett. New York:  
W.W. Norton & Co., 1998.

The title of this book intrigued me. The business press tells us that to survive in the new economy companies need to be flexible and agile. People that work in the new economy must be able to embrace turbulence, reinvent themselves as free agents, and be willing to move from company to company without looking back. It sounds exhilarating. However, not everyone thrives on change. What about people who like stability and dislike risk? What about workers in the old economy? What effect does this “new economy” have on people in the long term? As Christians and business professors, such questions are important to ask. The author, Richard Sennett, is a prominent sociologist and has published several books on workers and the workplace. He seemed a person able to contribute substantially to the discussion of these issues.

Therefore I looked forward to reading the book.

*The Corrosion of Character* was simultaneously engaging and disappointing. As well as being a sociologist, the author is a sometimes novelist, and reflecting this, the book is woven around stories. Rico and his wife are full participants in the new economy but feel they have missed the community and continuity that Rico’s father, Enrico, had in his lifelong janitorial job. Rose sells her New York bar to try to break into advertising but finds that the “cult of youth” is against her, though she has the necessary skills. A small group of laid-off IBM programmers meet together to try and make sense of their situation and outdated skills. These stories make a wonderful contribution to the message of the book: that flexibility, the capacity to move infinitely from one shape to another, leads to corrosion of character and ultimately to the development of people without substance.

The problem is that this is a “message” book. Sennett has an agenda. His views tend to lean towards the radical left (as he

freely admits), and the language, framing, and suppositions of the book reflect his bias.

Furthermore, the author states in the introduction that his stories are “enhanced” and even “created.” It is almost impossible, therefore, to know whether the stories he presents as backgrounds for his musings actually happened or are fictions of the author. We may love or hate the message of the book, but we dare not assume that Sennett has given us any evidence to support it.

That is unfortunate. I found the speculations in this book interesting and worthy of further consideration. Sennett’s views of the angst and irony that characterize life in the new economy make compelling, if disturbing, reading. However, this book, despite its obvious passion and entertainment value, does not appear to contribute anything to the discussion of the character in the new economy except Sennett’s personal views.

*Caveat emptor.*

*Yvonne Smith*