

# *The threat of* exclusion

After a long and distinguished career, **Richard Sennett** retired as LSE professor of sociology in March of this year. Here, in an abridged version of an essay he wrote for the Gerda Henkel Foundation after being awarded the Gerda Henkel Prize for his life's work, he explains why the craft of writing matters in the social sciences.

From Montaigne to Tocqueville, it would have been taken for granted that an analyst of social life should be committed to the craft of writing. Largely, this was because early modern society had a verbal blind spot. Encased in rigid, fading social categories of hereditary station, the dynamism and energy of a more modern social order were difficult to describe, even to name.

Montesquieu needed to employ the resources of allegory in *The Persian Letters* to shock his fellow Parisians into an awareness of the localness and limits of European culture. When describing the 'dismal science', Adam Smith needed great verbal gifts to make his contemporaries aware of the power of the markets which were coming to rule their lives. Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* is laid out quite consciously, I think, on the model of Homer's *Odyssey*, a voyage into the foreign land of equality.

The literary powers of all these writers thus aroused in their readers a sense of the *social* as a problematic category, the writing made a disturbing gift of consciousness. Which is to say that the very strengths of their writing helped itself to create a public realm, as Hannah Arendt conceived it, a realm of shared, collective intelligence.

Today, many social scientists are menaced by exclusion from this public realm, due to their feeble powers of expression. This feebleness is not simply a personal failing. The history of academic institutions seeking to protect their freedom, the specialisation and bureaucratisation of knowledge, are general sources of intellectual isolation; the feebleness of shared intelligence is but one tangible result. The depth of what researchers know becomes incommunicable, due to a lack of expressive tools; the public is left with the husks, the surfaces of knowledge.

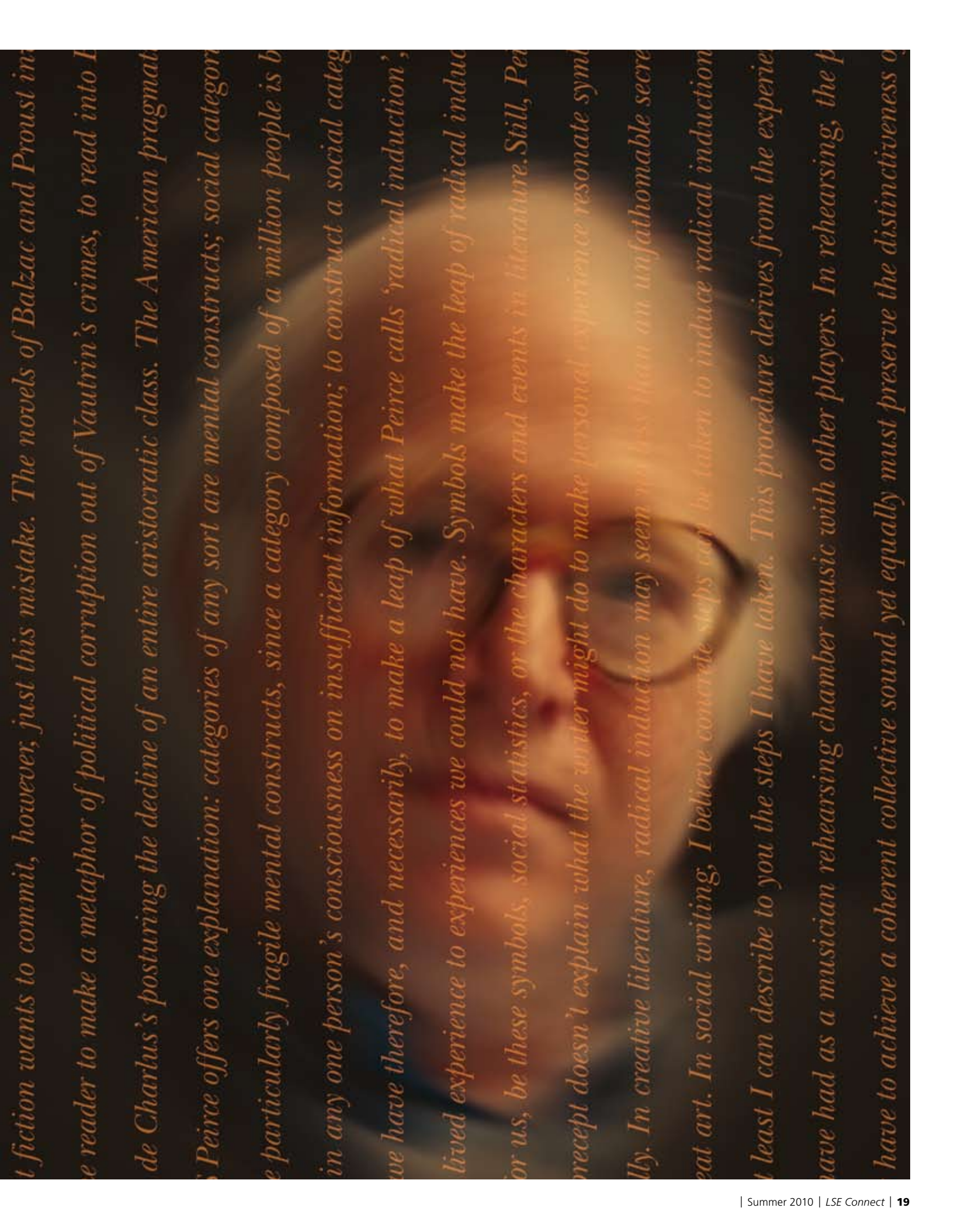
I want, therefore, to talk about the craft of social writing. What I am going to describe to you are issues drawn from my own experience – I certainly would not hold myself up as a shining example of writing well. But the problems themselves, I would claim, are generic to socially minded literature: these concern issues of authorial voice, narrative, arousal, and generalisation.

## Voice

In literature, voice is recognised most simply by the use of I or we; the third person voice, in the hands of a great novelist like Flaubert, makes the author's presence felt in every word on the page without the author ever speaking personally to the reader. In non-fiction writing, handling the issue of voice is a tricky and often frustrating challenge.

Say the writer wants to bring to life on the page the experience of a capable woman working for an incompetent male boss, the sort of boss who takes three-hour lunches leaving her to deal in the ►

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### 'The writing of social literature is a craft'

meantime with all the tough problems at the office. To make literature of this situation, the writer is going to have to do more than just enumerate circumstances of the sort I have just named. The writer wants to enter into the rounded, distinctive life of another person, which requires giving that person an *interpretative* voice, struggling to make sense of his or her circumstances.

Early on in my career, I studied the lives of American white working class adults and adolescents; many were and still remain hard core racists; these views are repugnant to me. In the field, I am a rather combative interviewer, arguing with racist interviewees; arguing conveys that I take them seriously, which I do. This translates directly to the act of writing. Someone who shares my working practice will want to make use of a fictional *as if* – reporting what he or she has been told as if the writer were also racist or a technician – and then step out of that *as if*, judging or posing naive questions. The writing which results should convey a doubling of perspective; on the page, there should be more than one active, interpretative voice.

### Narrative

The subject of narrative waves a big warning flag about considering social science as literature. Whereas the novelist is wholly in control of events, the social writer is not. This truism has a more particular application. Action in a novel accumulates.

Life histories and collective history do not possess this literary property. Individual life histories are often incoherent; collective histories may not accumulate

in value. Many of the workers I have interviewed in the new economy have short-term jobs rather than long-term careers. Though they work very hard, they lack a coherent narrative about the work itself. Faced with such incoherence, the social writer might want to chronicle its moments but not impose a narrative upon the mess. But this would do social reality a disservice. Human beings think in stories in order to understand cause and effect, that is, to give action value in terms of its consequences. Moreover, narratives can help people think strategically, by projecting different outcomes about an action we might now undertake. Strategic projection requires imagination not of one certain outcome but of many possible scenarios. Without narrative as a tool, social understanding radically diminishes.

### Arousal

The editor of the *New York Review of Books* once said to me, in rejecting an essay I had written on Linux, the open-source computer code: 'I'm sure what you say is correct, but it just doesn't interest me.' It is easy to believe that the sheer importance of a subject will arouse readers, if not editors. Open source is, after all, the future of computing. But there is no necessary connection between important and interesting. Sometimes writers respond to this dilemma by over dramatising an issue to engage others; they are prone to employ that much abused word 'crisis' to seize attention.

My starting point is that curiosity and surprise are much longer lasting stimuli than dread and fear.

Crisis calls attention to a subject, but curiosity takes the reader inside a book. There are two methods available to the social writer for stimulating curiosity.

The classic psychological studies of curiosity revolve around the experience of 'cognitive dissonance', a condition in which there are contradictory rules and rewards for behaviour; caught in this double bind, humans – like rats in the psychologist's laboratory – will pay close attention to their immediate circumstances, seeking to work out the puzzle; curiosity is engaged. On the page, the presence of differing, dissonant voices which I described earlier has the same effect.

What psychological research on cognitive dissonance reveals is that humans, or rats, caught in contradictions do not go into a state of crisis, they do not go berserk; instead, they live with the contradiction by focusing on particular behaviours, seeking to manage these within the confines of a larger situation they cannot resolve. In writing, we want to achieve the same kind of focus, setting up contradiction or dissonance in order to focus the reader on significant detail. Thus, in writing up interviewing notes, I include bodily gestures or tones of voice as part of my data, since these are frequently ironic or distancing commentaries on the actual words themselves; the dissonance established between a shrug of the shoulders and a declaration of principle makes the reader pay attention, just as it had aroused me in the interview.

Another practice which stimulates curiosity revolves around tacit knowledge, the assumptions we take for granted, the behaviours we practice unselfconsciously. The social writer will work with these taken-for-granted, gradually surfacing them to the reader's consciousness by a process of mutation, changing 'what everyone knows' step by step so that it appears increasingly strange and provoking. Thus, when writing *The Fall of Public Man*, I explored the handshake, connecting it in the 18th century to other bodily gestures of addressing strangers, then to habits of speaking in taverns and coffee houses. My reader, I hope, became more aware and more curious about the meaning of shaking hands as it became connected to hugging, kissing, and to verbal salutes.

I hope I have persuaded you by now that writing is something more than simply the means to an end. But what then is the inner purpose of voicing, narrating, and stimulating curiosity?

### Generalisation

This leads me to the fourth element of social literature, its address to the problem of generalisation. The practices of social literature I have so far described dwell on individuals and particulars. It would be perfectly correct to assert that, no matter how engaging, such experiences can make no claim to represent general social conditions.

Great fiction wants to commit, however, just this mistake. The novels of Balzac and Proust invite the reader to make a metaphor of political corruption out of Vautrin's crimes, to read into Baron de Charlus's posturing the decline of an entire aristocratic class. The American pragmatist CS Peirce offers one explanation: categories of any sort are mental constructs; social categories are particularly fragile mental constructs, since a category composed of a million people is based in any one person's consciousness on insufficient information; to construct a social category, we have therefore, and necessarily, to make a leap of what Peirce calls 'radical induction', from



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lived experience to experiences we could not have. Symbols make the leap of radical induction for us, be these symbols, social statistics, or the characters and events in literature.

Still, Peirce's precept doesn't explain what the writer might do to make personal experience resonate symbolically. In creative literature, radical induction may seem no less than an unfathomable secret of great art. In social writing, I believe concrete steps can be taken to induce radical induction, or at least I can describe to you the steps I have taken.

This procedure derives from the experience I have had as a musician rehearsing chamber music with other players. In rehearsing, the players have to achieve a coherent collective sound yet equally must preserve the distinctiveness of each instrument. I draw in my sociological work on just this experience of musical rehearsal, even when I interview people individually. Typically, I will try to interview in depth about 30 to 50 people who share something in common, such as the middle ranking computer programmers I interviewed for my book *The Corrosion of Character*. I then ask them to talk about this shared condition. In writing about their varied interpretations, I try to stage something like a group rehearsal on the page, one in which individual beliefs or experiences mean more when played together with others. Hopefully, the reader later joins the rehearsal. If the writing works, it does *not*, I want to emphasise, beget generalisations about all programmers; rather, it activates the process of symbolisation, in which their experience acquires more than individual meaning through association.

I have tried to show, through these techniques of voicing, narrating, stimulating curiosity, and symbol making, how the writing of social literature is a craft. The social writers I particularly admire – Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Michel de Certeau – write quite differently from each other, yet all share an essential ethos of craftsmanship. All established a set of practices for their prose, but these practices evolved in the course of their careers. All craftsmanship should have that aspiration; good technique is not a fixed, closed system. ■



### Richard Sennett

retired as LSE professor of sociology in March 2010. A full version of this article appeared in his book *How I Write: sociology as literature*, (Verleihung des Gerda Henkel Preises 2008; Rhema-Verlag, Muenster (Germany), 2009.)

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