



craft production



what is it?

Craft (or artisan) production is about making (and repairing) useful (and often beautiful) things using a combination of hands and brain. Craft skills need time to acquire, and the work is often labour-intensive. Craft production can provide clothes, utensils, consumables, furniture, jewellery, toys, and useful items involving metal, wood, stone and various other natural or recycled materials. At the margins are foods (craft beers, artisan bread etc.), trades such as plumbing, electrical or building work, and these days even high-tech 'crafts' such as 3D printing or free software.

History: all production was artisanal until enclosures of land pushed people from rural smallholdings into urban factories. Prior to this, craftspeople organised themselves into guilds in most cities across Europe, throughout the Middle Ages. The guilds provided apprenticeships (often to people escaping serfdom, and so were a catalyst for ending feudalism), guaranteed quality, and excluded craftsmen found guilty of cheating the public. They often grew to dominate their cities, from their guildhalls, but were eventually overshadowed by the state. In the countryside, away from the influence of guilds, merchants travelled between the cottages of craft spinners, providing them with raw materials, taking away and selling their finished cloth and keeping a share of the profits – the beginnings of capitalism. As new machines were developed – such as the Spinning Jenny, bringing many workers together in water-powered factories – much craft work began to become obsolete, sparking an unsuccessful backlash by the Luddites. The Industrial Revolution brought mass-produced, lower-quality goods that were affordable by low-paid workers. The 19th century Arts & Crafts Movement mourned the loss of craft skills and conditions in early factories. They believed that craft production leads to well-rounded individuals and a better society; but they couldn't stem the tide. Some traditional crafts will probably never return (barring civilisational collapse) – no-one wants to make nails all day; but plenty of people want to make clothes, furniture, pottery etc.

Now craft skills are being lost everywhere, as workers in poor countries are forced into sweatshops to make low-quality products for a pittance; but there's growing interest in craft production in more developed countries. Who knows how many of the world's goods can come from craft production? Maybe some things (nails?) can be made via democratically-owned (rather than corporate) mass production, and others (the pleasurable ones?) made by hand.

what are the benefits?

Environment

- Supply chains are shortened, reducing fossil fuel requirement to transport goods.
- Materials are often natural and biodegradable.
- Quality is higher, so goods last longer (and can be repaired), and stay out of landfill for longer; no 'planned obsolescence'.

Community

- Profits stay in the community, rather than being sucked out to pay corporate shareholders.
- Small producers pay their fair share of taxes, whereas the corporates can afford expensive lawyers to ensure that they don't.
- Communities become more resilient to wider economic crashes, or even civilisational collapse.
- Craft production is part of a new kind of economy, in which people produce to exchange for goods that others have produced, rather than trying to make more and more money; a community built around small producers could be a much safer and healthier place.

Quality of life

- For producers: autonomous, interesting, meaningful work.
- For consumers: high-quality, durable, unique, beautiful products.



Passing on craft skills to the younger generation is essential to keep them alive.



what can I do?

First, if you can, purchase from craft producers. If more people do this, then if you decide to give it a go yourself, you'll have a larger market to sell to.

Re-skilling: try something you like; produce for yourself, friends and family; then maybe think about turning it into a job. See our craft topics to find useful organisations and course providers. Don't worry about not being good enough; you need determination for a career in crafts. As Richard Sennett said: 'we're more likely to fail as craftspeople due to lack of motivation than of ability'.

Scale: it's probably not a good idea environmentally if everyone tries to make their own pottery, glassware, forged metal goods, soaps etc. It's more efficient to do those things at the community level, and to trade with each other. Every community could support a potter, weaver, baker, brewer, blacksmiths or two. Craft production for trade represents the sustainable middle ground between giant corporations and attempts at self-sufficiency.

Prices: craft produce is expensive. But cheap means exploitation and environmental damage. This can be solved by committing to be each other's customers. What if the bread you bake, the furniture she makes and the baskets I make are expensive, If we commit to trade with each and get quality goods and a good income. This is as true in Indonesia, for people currently working in sweatshops as it is in suburban London or working-class towns in the north of England. It will involve a shift in thinking. We move towards seeing ourselves as producers as well as consumers – 'prosumers', if you like. As consumers, we want prices to be as low as possible – but not if we're also producers.

Mutual credit: one way to develop groups of community-based businesses that trade with each other is via a mutual credit club. Mutual credit is a

moneyless exchange system in which businesses trade via numbers in an account, not money. See lowimpact.org/mutual-credit; and below is part of a conversation with a weaver who understands the potential of mutual credit.

"If you're a producer as well as a consumer, the attitude to price is different. So if a weaver and a potter are in the same community – at some point he's going to need clothes from you and you're going to need plates from him. And there'll be lots of other trades represented in the community too. If you're producing things for, as well as consuming things from this local market, you'll pay, but also receive higher prices. So they cancel each other out – and everyone gets higher-quality, sustainable goods; and your job becomes more interesting – you're not on the slippery slope to the Amazon warehouse or Über cab. If you live in a community that hosts a mutual credit club, you could take the time to learn a skill, then join this group of people who are committed to buying from you, as long as you buy from them. The alternative is pretty grim. In your town, you'd be ostracised if you used slave labour. But corporations that do that are accepted; and they monopolise markets. If we can develop a new economy that uses corporations less, we can start to stamp out these activities. A mutual credit club can launch a shop for local produce, so that people can pick it up and have a look at it – but also advertising for conventional business services that accept mutual credit. Lots of shops are boarded up." Is this realistic? Not if we don't try.



Craft products can be beautiful as well as functional.

resources

- lowimpact.org/craft for more information, links, courses, products & books, including:
- Richard Sennett, *the Craftsman*
- John Seymour, *the Forgotten Arts & Crafts*
- James Dillehay, *Sell Your Crafts Online*
- craftscouncil.org.uk - the Crafts Council
- heritagecrafts.org.uk - advocacy for craftspeople
- ukcraftfairs.com - directory of UK craft fairs

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