

# Craft Fetishism: Skill, Labor, and the Artisanal Imaginary

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**ABSTRACT:** A central concern in Braverman's (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capital* is the role of skill in the struggle between labor and capital. The lasting understanding of the deskilling thesis is that changes in the organization of the labor process and its technical composition led to a siphoning of skill from the craft worker and its translation to specialized knowledge controlled by the professional managerial class. Fifty years since the book's publication, many processes Braverman described have continued to develop, even as management itself has been deskilled, distributed, and technologically rationalized. Over the past two decades, however, skill has emerged as a new site of scholarly debate, espoused by many as a path to liberation for today's immaterial workers. As digital technologies increasingly mediate social and working life, material skills practice offers potential reconnection to material knowledge and traditions. Arising alongside this emerging craft discourse are diverse economic manifestations of "craft capitalism." From heritage denim to craft beer, craft-branded commodities inhabit a privileged position in 21st century urban economies. This paper interrogates tensions between craft mythologies and labor process organization in craft industries, examining how craft skill is fetishized—remaining alienated from craft workers while deployed as a simulacrum for a timeless artisan and pre-industrial production routines.

## Introduction

In the introduction to his 1974 classic, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Harry Braverman asserts that his analysis avoids the romanticism of a "sentimental attachment to the outworn conditions of now archaic modes of labor" (6). In reading Braverman's work, one notices his commitment to understanding capitalist development as an unfolding historical process, with new managerial techniques, technological innovation, and workplace organization playing central roles in that process's trajectory. However, observing the rise over the last decade of a global neo-craft and artisanal economy, one wonders whether capital and its functionaries remain committed to a similar romanticism. Recognizing that this development depends on an image of artisanal and pre-modern productive practices, how should workers and scholars understand the contemporary cachet of markedly outdated, craft-inspired labor processes, and what role do craft workers play in their reproduction?

There are many entries into an analysis of the craft-inspired mode of production. Conveniently, a central concern for Braverman is the role of skill in

the struggle between labor and capital, a dynamic of central importance in discussions of craft and artisanry. The lasting understanding of Braverman's so-called deskilling thesis is that changes in the organization of the labor process and its technical composition lead to a siphoning of skill from the craft worker and its translation to specialized knowledge to be controlled by the professional managerial class. This is, as we shall see, an oversimplification of how skill is operationalized and extracted through the labor process, which depends, at least in part, on the externalization of craft knowledge from the worker and its concentration in the hands of management. Craft skill, in this sense, ceases to be a resource controlled by the worker, becoming instead the domain of engineers, designers, planners, and managers. For Braverman, the labor process functions, at least in part, to facilitate this dispossession of skill and knowledge from the worker, serving as a catalyst for the separation of conception and execution.

Fifty years since the book's publication, we observe the extent to which many processes

Braverman described have continued to develop, even as management itself has been deskilled, distributed, and technologically rationalized. However, over the past two decades the category of skill has emerged as a new site of scholarly meditation and debate, one espoused by many as a path to liberation for today's immaterial workers (Sennett 2008; Crawford 2009; Gauntlett 2011). As our social and working lives become ever more mediated by digital technologies, this argument goes, the practice of material skills for work and/or leisure holds the potential for reconnection to and reintegration of material knowledge and traditions. Such discourses would have been relatively unheard of in Braverman's time, his analysis being of the labor processes of Fordist capitalism. Much has changed in the last 50 years, and as one confronts post-Fordism's highly flexibilized, contingent, and digitalized division of labor, one must also contend with the degree to which Braverman's analysis remains applicable in 21st century production circuits.

Neo-craft industries represent particularly rich test cases, their workforces often composed of highly educated yet materially skilled workers while their output is typically materially substantive but culturally imbued. In neo-craft industries, we encounter a tense union of a more-or-less Fordist labor process engaged in producing the niche, culturally rich commodities of the post-Fordist economy. Discourses of tradition and quality often serve to obscure this tension, leading to an image of craft commodities as atemporal objects, existing outside and against traditional labor processes.

Arising alongside this emerging craft discourse are the diverse economic manifestations of "craft capitalism" (Anderson 2022) and the "hipster economy" (Gerosa 2024, 1). From heritage denim to craft beer, craft-branded commodities inhabit a privileged position in 21st century urban economies and beyond. What often goes unquestioned is precisely what the terms craft and artisanal mean in these contexts. Drawing upon popular and industry sources as well as interviews with makers and craft workers, this paper interrogates the tensions between craft mythologies and the organization of the labor process in craft industries. Specifically, it examines the function of

skill within these labor processes, highlighting the ways in which craft skill is fetishized in the craft industrial labor process, remaining alienated from the craft worker at the same time it is deployed as a simulacrum for a timeless artisan and the routines of a bygone age of pre-industrial production, marking, to a degree, capital's unwillingness to move beyond "the outworn conditions of now archaic modes of labor," instead opting to remobilize them in the valorization process, if only at a discursive level.

Moreover, as neo-craft enterprises proliferate, so does the discursive slippage of craft as a distinct category of production. Whereas the skilled activity of the artisan is readily apparent when one encounters the wares of a self-employed jeweler or ceramic artist, it becomes increasingly diffuse and imprecise when one considers large-scale craft branded industries. These craft enterprises operate under what I have elsewhere called "craft industrialism" (Anderson 2022, iv)—the tendency for scalable neo-craft firms to operate under Taylorized labor processes while mobilizing the discursive category of craft to imbue their output with an image of skill. This skill has been dispossessed from the worker, effectively making skill a fetish in the neo-craft economy. Simply put, under craft industrialism, firms operate as Fordist enterprises while positioning themselves discursively as craft or artisanal. This tendency creates the conditions for what I suggest should be considered craft fetishism—the replacement of craft skill at the point of production with the image of such at the point of consumption.

To interrogate this phenomenon of the fetishization of skill in the neo-craft labor process, this article begins with a brief overview of contemporary conceptualizations of craft and skill, particularly as these relate to the emergence of the neo-craft phenomenon increasingly carving a path throughout global urban (and increasingly rural) economies. After setting the conceptual backdrop, the discussion progresses to consider the methodological commitments and procedures of the present intervention, namely the prioritization of a set of voices regularly obscured in discussions of the neo-craft movement — those of craft workers, rather than craft entrepreneurs. The paper is motivated by the critical tradition of workers'

inquiry, a collaborative approach to qualitative data collection intended to uncover worker experiences while providing a platform for workers' interests (Notes from Below 2018).

With these definitional considerations out of the way, the article moves to its primary contribution. As the final three sections will demonstrate, the neo-craft resurgence presents theoretical complications vis-à-vis the role of skill in craft production. Specifically, whereas craft discourse portrays the neo-craft movement as an opportunity for the reunification of conception and execution, close observation of the labor processes at work in neo-craft industries reveals the opposite: that craft industrial labor processes continue the legacy of Taylorism, masking this behind a facade of autonomous creative labor, labor that is rarely observable in the more recognizable exemplars of craft production. In neo-craft industries we see the continuity of Taylorized, Fordist production, but with the sheen of post-Fordist flexibility, specialization, and distinction, a sheen not easily observable in the labor process itself. This article makes the case for a reconsideration of the role of the craft worker beyond the shallow discursive picture of the skilled craftsperson archetype, arguing instead that the craft worker is integrated into the neo-craft labor process as typical industrial or service labor while they are discursively propped up as a timeless, skilled artisan.

### Conceptualizations of Craft in the 21st Century

There is not a single, agreed-upon definition for craft in either its historical or contemporary usage. Braverman, for instance, described the crafts as the individual, unified tasks assumed by groupings of skilled workers under the social division of labor: wheelwrights, bakers, and so on. This is, essentially, the term's meaning when we use it to describe a particular vocational grouping today, the manual crafts. But importantly, the term also enjoys a complicated position vis-à-vis arts practice, either as an adjective describing artistic skill or as a disciplinary competitor to art, as in arts and crafts. Today, it is also used as a marker for a particular kind of commodity, one assumed to have been produced by hand, locally, or in small

quantities. Simply, craft is a complicated term with various applications.

Contemporary craft discourse conceives of craft as an alternative production approach that departs from mass manufacturing values and reflects different processes (Adamson 2019). Thought around craft's recent resurgence in so-called neo-craft industries tends to emphasize craft's connections to ideas of authenticity, tradition, quality, and localness (Crawford 2009; Sennett 2008; Gandini & Gerosa 2023; Gerosa 2024; Luckman 2015; Ocejó 2019). The craftsperson or maker, in both the popular imagination and the academic literature, is portrayed as a creative producer who, driven by their passion, sets about their productive activity with a commitment to quality for its own sake (Sennett 2008; Ocejó 2019). This focus on quality when paired with the small-scale craftsperson's output is conceived by many commentators as an implicit challenge to the mass production paradigm of the Fordist and early post-Fordist models. Craft, in this sense, represents an alternative approach to production, where work has the potential to be more dignified and less alienated. What often goes unaddressed is the degree to which the current cultural movement toward artisanal production is qualitatively distinct from its historical predecessors.

In his recent book, *The Hipster Economy*, Alessandro Gerosa (2024) makes a compelling case that one of the distinctions between traditional crafts and those activities and industries that compose today's neo-craft economy is the particularly ephemeral and consumable character of much of the output of today's craft industries. Consumption of such goods—craft beer, artisan coffee, and the like—for Gerosa, is an exercise in “petty conspicuous consumption” (2024, 64) wherein consumers can achieve small tastes of authenticity at a much lower price point than that of durable, traditional craft commodities—furniture, decor, etc. This ephemerality is understandable when we locate the contemporary wave of craft enthusiasm against the backdrop of both the neoliberal and digital social transitions. Consumption of craft commodities arguably allows one to reconnect with the material while they buy into neo-craft industries' discursive positioning as

alternative to the faceless, impersonal monoliths of the corporate world (Gerosa 2024; Land 2018).

That this image should extend into the world of work should be obvious. Just as craft commodities are assumed to be authentic by default, the work of producing them is frequently seen as less directly exploitative and alienating than that of their industrial and service counterparts (Anderson 2021; Fox Miller 2019; Delgaty & Wilson 2023). However, while the image of neo-craft industries evokes the traditional workshop and its internal structure, accounts from within these industries' labor processes often reveal an industrial division of labor and an internal hierarchy of roles and tasks, resembling the Fordist factory as much as or more than the pre-industrial workshop. Whereas craft makers and entrepreneurs, as self-employed or hobbyist craftspeople, enjoy some level of creative freedom and autonomy, the same cannot be said of craft workers who occupy support roles within craft industrial production.

Recognizing this contradiction between craft's popular image and its actually existing labor process, in the present analysis, craft, far from being the remit of passionate makers-cum-entrepreneurs, is conceived as a semiologically inflected grouping of productive enterprises that, while bearing the hallmarks of quality, localness, and authenticity, regularly use these assumed characteristics to obscure or hide a Fordist labor process. This is not, of course, universally the case, but as we will see, many neo-craft industries claim artisanality while they depend on a large workforce of deskilled or otherwise non-artisanal labor. In fact, skill represents a curious and contradictory element of the neo-craft labor process, one discursively exalted while concentrated within a top-down productive regime.

### **Skill and the Image of Such**

Understanding craft's contemporary meanings requires examining skill—craft's most contested element and the fulcrum of Braverman's analysis. Any discussion of craft in its present usage must contend with the factor of skill, particularly if one is interested in how the neo-craft labor process differs (or fails to differ) from its contemporary and historical counterparts. Skill is a curious element of the labor

process, one internal to but arguably externalizable from the worker. In Braverman's critical assessment of Taylor's (1911) principles of scientific management, skill occupies a central position as one of the lost elements of worker autonomy as the labor process is divided between conception and execution. The crafts in their basic form are, according to Braverman, constituted by the unity of planning and doing, each craft being a component of the societal division of labor.

Skill, for Braverman, is a product of the unity of head and hand, one that is eroded as these two elements of labor are separated, particularly through the introduction of scientific management and new technological innovations. To understand skill and its role within the labor process, however, one should take the requisite time to interrogate its relation to both conception and execution. Moreover, for the purposes of this paper we must also unpack and critically examine the role that skill plays in the neo-craft labor process and the ways in which this role is discursively employed to compose craft industrialism's popular image. In this section we set out to understand the complex role of skill in contemporary neo-craft production. This is accomplished, first, by discussing Braverman's conceptualization of skill and the function it plays in his analysis of the labor process. This leads, second, to a consideration of the application of skill in today's craft industries, revealing that in many, skill is a vestige of a lost regime of production, one that undergirds a common view of neo-craft industries as skill-driven even as many are administered in a Fordist manner. Finally, the section ends by positing that in today's craft industries, skill becomes an ingredient in a pervasive fetishization of craft in which the image of skill, the very idea of a skilled artisan at the heart of production, is enough to mark an industry or commodity as craft, even if that skilled worker is of negligible importance in the labor process.

To begin, let us consider skill both as understood by Braverman, but also in relation to the broader literature on craft. Skill is, in Braverman's use, a common element in both the industrial and pre-industrial labor process. His particular use of skill in relation to the control of the labor process suggests that he conceives of skill as existing at the nexus of



mental and manual labor, an element of work that is developed through the unified production of craft commodities. As management attempts to control the labor process through the separation of these two elements, unified skilled work is replaced by rote, kinetic operations; simply, as planning is removed from the process, the autonomous characteristic of skill is degraded and externalized to management. His key case to illustrate the process of deskilling is the application of Taylor's time and motion studies to simplify working routines. What is suggested in Braverman's treatment of skill is that as planning is removed from execution, planning is representative of craft knowledge, particularly that knowledge gained through actual engagement with craft processes. Once removed from the equation, being transferred to the remit of management, the remaining motive tasks become deskilled and interchangeable.

That some aspects of craft knowledge can be estranged from the worker is clear. Early examples of rationalization through an industrial division of labor clearly illustrate that knowledge gained through craft practice can inform the layout and routines of the labor process. However, how should one understand those elements of craft knowledge that are inalienable, that cannot be transferred between individuals?

Commentators on craft like Richard Sennett (2008) and Peter Dormer (1994) explain that much of craft knowledge is tacit, tacit knowledge being that grouping of insights that one learns through experience but cannot readily translate into language. As Dormer explains, craft skill is developed through years of experience working directly with materials, making skill a form of material knowledge not easily transferred from person to person. Meditating on this same characteristic of skill, Sennett offers an example of Antonio Stradivari and the layout and operation of his 17th-18th century workshop. While Stradivari trained and worked with several apprentices throughout his life, none were able to reach his level of mastery. For Sennett, this underlines the experiential nature of craft skills while simultaneously making room for the figure of the craft virtuoso.

Of course, mastery and virtuosity undoubtedly exist in some examples of neo-craft production; these are industries that attract scores of highly passionate

and talented people after all. However, we should question just how much of a challenge this is to the Bravermanian view of skill and its extraction from the worker in the labor process. Are the heights of skill (likely as compounded by a certain personal talent) reached by virtuosos like Stradivari representative of skilled work in the capitalist labor process, and, if this level of skill is inalienable from the skilled crafts-person, does this necessarily call into question the adequacy of Braverman's general analysis?

A critical reflection on today's craft industries would suggest that the answer to this question is a resounding "no," particularly since these industries still make room for virtuosotic flair within and as a discursive component of the labor process. Instead, in the neo-craft enterprise the Taylorist process of deskilling continues through a regimented division of labor which subordinates the material process of the craft commodity's production while the image of the skilled craftsperson, master, or virtuoso is elevated as a representation of the values of craft. Whether this skilled craftsperson is applying their skill in the production of the craft commodity is immaterial so long as the craft industry and craft industrialism generally can project this virtuosity onto both the process and its product.

Skill, in this sense, exists at the nexus of the material and the ideological. Skill as it is expressed in the unity of planning and execution is extracted from the worker through the material reorganization of the labor process and the degradation of the worker's role, while simultaneously being reified in the craft commodity. The craft commodity becomes a fetish of the craft labor process, evoking a sense of quality, artisanry and mastery even if no such mastery is on display in the labor process itself. In the neo-craft labor process, skill matters less than the idea thereof.

### **The Division of Labor and the "Unity" of Craft Production**

Having established skill's fetishization in neo-craft discourse, we must now examine how labor processes are organized in craft industries and the degree to which skill remains necessary. To begin unpacking these questions, this section will examine the division of labor in typical neo-craft industries, particularly

those that produce consumable craft commodities (brewing, baking, coffee roasting, and the like). Although this section will treat the neo-craft division of labor and labor process in a general and theoretical way, it is built upon previous ethnographic research, including non-participant observation and craft worker interviews conducted between 2018 and 2021 (Anderson 2022; Anderson 2021). This section uses Braverman's analysis of the capitalist labor process to locate neo-craft industries squarely within the Fordist tradition, even if influenced by the cultural markers of the contemporary "aesthetic regime of consumption" posited by Gerosa (2024, 13). It will do so by reviewing Braverman's general historical assessment of the evolution of the division of labor from a social division of labor to a Taylorized industrial division of labor. It will consider how the neo-craft division of labor resembles a Taylorized labor process and how this resemblance measures up against craft discourse. Finally, it will consider the roles of the craftsperson and the craft worker in this labor process, setting the stage for a discussion of the potential for craft worker organizing, the subject of the final section.

The early chapters of Braverman's book focus considerable attention on the division of labor and how its industrial maturation has led to a degradation of autonomy for the worker. Building upon the contributions of figures like Adam Smith and Charles Babbage, Braverman argues that the division of individual detail tasks amongst workers is a unique product of the capitalist labor process, as is the division of the routines of the worker under the dictates of Taylorism. Although we will interrogate these assumptions in the paragraphs that follow, they raise some important questions in relation to the ascendancy of neo-craft production in the post-industrial west. First, if the industrial division of labor is marked by the progressive segmentation of tasks and routines, to what degree might the unity of production under the neo-craft division of labor be thought of as a corrective of this outcome? Second, to what degree is the imaginary of a unified neo-craft division of labor accurate to the realities faced by craft workers? Asked differently, are the working routines of craft workers reflective of a kind of head/hand unity, or are there other aspects of the neo-craft regime of production

that should be brought into our understanding of craft industrialism?

To answer these questions, we should begin by considering the differences between the forms of division of labor reviewed by Braverman. In Braverman's analysis, the division of labor common to all human societies is the divvying up of socially necessary labor by occupation, specialization or role. Simply put, every society is dependent on certain tasks, tasks that are divided socially to meet a collective need, resulting in several crafts and trades. This social division of labor is one in which craftspeople are in control of their working routines, their labor process. The craftsperson under a social division of labor is responsible for the planning and execution of their productive enterprise, whether they go about their tasks in a holistic or variable manner. The craftsperson under such a productive regime enjoys a unity of mental and manual labor and the freedom to pursue this in the manner they see fit.

By contrast, the industrial division of labor brought forth with the rise of the industrial capitalist system further divides the process of production from vocations to tasks. Building upon Adam Smith's (1776) example of the pin factory, Braverman explains that under the detailed, industrial division of labor, management breaks the productive process down into its component parts, with craftspeople increasingly being relegated to the position of detail workers. In Smith's allegory, this involves moving pin production from a process of one worker completing multiple operations to multiple workers completing a single operation. For Smith, this is illustrative of the efficiency of the industrial labor process, the output of a detailed division of labor resulting in a much higher level of productivity than could be realized by a simple division of vocations. Such a division of labor, however, increases the alienation of the worker, further removing the worker from conception and relegating them to a labor process of rote repetition.

The conditions faced by workers under an industrial division of labor have been the fodder of critiques of the industrial system since its inception. For the early leaders of and adherents to the 19th century arts and crafts movement, the industrial division of labor led to the immiseration of and loss of dignity for

the industrial working class (Ruskin, 1854; Morris, 1883). For thinkers like John Ruskin and William Morris, the reduction of the worker to the provider of simple motive operations necessarily resulted in a loss of autonomy and a reduction in workmanship. For these thinkers, the unity of planning and execution was a necessary ingredient in both human fulfillment and the production of quality.

The arts and crafts critique, however, was of the labor processes and conditions of 19th century industrial production. One can but imagine their response to the advent of Frederick Winslow Taylor's (1911) principles of scientific management. Taylor was particularly interested in wresting even greater degrees of control from workers and reallocating those to management. This required an acceleration of the industrial division of labor, divvying up not only the discrete tasks of production, but the routines of each of those tasks. Whereas a pre-Taylorist industrial worker might be tasked with the repetitive completion of one operation leading to the production of a completed commodity, under Taylor's system, the particular manner by which the worker completed that operation would be studied and dictated by management, the latter striving toward even greater levels of control over the minutest details of the labor process in order to extract the maximum amount of labor from a given amount of labor time.

According to Braverman's assessment of the Taylorist onslaught, this quest for ever greater levels of control of the labor process led to a near-monopolization of planning on the part of management, destroying the historical unity of craft production and replacing it with deskilled and monotonous task work. Whereas even under the conditions of the 19th century industrial division of labor the workers maintained some autonomy in terms of how they went about completing their tasks, under Taylorism management exercised control by monopolizing workplace decision-making (Braverman 1974, 107). In essence, what has been commonly referred to as the deskilling thesis might better be thought of as the deunifying thesis: the process of building managerial control through the separation of planning and execution. Skills, of course, still have a role to play in such a conceptualization, but skill in this sense should

be thought of as a product of the unity of head and hand. As Braverman explains, Taylor's first principle aimed to render the labor process "independent of craft, tradition, and the workers' knowledge," making it depend entirely on managerial practices rather than worker abilities (1974, 113). Skill is removed from the equation not through the simplification of the labor process, as the deskilling moniker might imply, but rather through the siphoning off of craft knowledge and its replacement with managerial directives and procedures.

Over a century after Taylor's intervention, his principles are still observably in use throughout the industrial regime of production. Scientific management functioned as the dominant approach to organizing the labor process through most of the 20th century, both under capitalism and state socialism. Of course, through the intervening years managerial doctrines shifted and changed, but scientific management remained central to the planning and coordination of the labor process of mass industry. One still sees it in use in the massive factories of the automotive, textile, and electronics industries. Importantly, though, as mass production has increasingly moved from the traditional centers of the capitalist core to the emerging economies of the periphery, material production in the more recently de-industrialized north continues, but in some cases packaged differently, appealing to a new "aesthetic regime of consumption," to borrow a phrase from Alessandro Gerosa (2024, 13).

Proponents of the neo-craft renaissance often tout craft as a re-unified alternative to the impersonal routines of industrial production. One of the most influential voices in contemporary thought about craft is the American sociologist Richard Sennett (2008), who goes to great lengths to build a conceptual connection between thinking and doing as the cornerstone of the craft ethos. For Sennett, the impulse to produce high quality goods for their own sake is an emerging value in the 21st century economy and functions as an alternative to the alienation and disempowerment of traditional work. Craft, according to Sennett, is an orientation to productive activity that uses passion to reintegrate the head and hand, or, in the language we've been using, conception

and execution. Sennett's description of the process of separating conception and execution is not dissimilar to those offered by the thinkers of the arts and crafts movement, much of Sennett's discussion focusing on how the two elements of craft production are separated through various social processes. These include new computer-assisted approaches to design, the organization of the workplace or workshop, and the move toward mass produced uniformity. However, Sennett's analysis often falls flat vis-à-vis the conditions faced by workers beyond the psychological ramifications Sennett projects onto them because of the disunity between head and hand. The craft ethos, for Sennett, is one that is driven by a desire to reunite these two elements of craftsmanship (*sic*).

More popular commentators of craft, people like the American motorcycle mechanic and philosopher Matthew Crawford (2009) and (another) motorcycle mechanic and TV host Eric Gorges (2019), see craft as a pathway toward more edifying and dignifying working lives (not to mention lives in general). For both commentators, the material unity of craft is a compelling antidote to the generalized ennui experienced by many living in our heavily digitized world. Here again, these thinkers see a reintegration of thinking and doing as a corrective to the social ills brought about by the combination of technological development and the hegemony of Fordist production (though neither is likely to articulate it in this way).

Left out of these influential popular accounts of the rise of neo-craft is a serious consideration of the livelihoods, vocational outlooks, and working conditions for makers (craftspeople) and craft workers (employees). Fortunately, there are several thinkers in the general stream of Creative and Cultural Industries (CCI) who have taken on the task of understanding these important aspects of the neo-craft phenomenon. For example, whereas Susan Luckman's analyses of what she calls the most recent "wave of renewed interest" in craft also suggest the benefits of reuniting thought and action, particularly in the face of a crisis of authenticity in life and work, they probe deeper into the actual working routines and vocational patterns of makers and other craft workers (Luckman 2015, x; Luckman & Andrew 2020). This concern, for Luckman, is often focused on

the heavily gendered balance of reproductive labor in the home and entrepreneurial and aspirational labor in craft. This concern for the rhythms of production and their consequences for makers and workers is shared by thinkers like Alessandro Gerosa (2024) and Mark Banks (2010), the latter questioning how the historical and contemporary subordination of craft work to artistic work in the cultural industries threatens the conditions and vocational stability of craft.

We should note, of course, that Luckman and Banks are analyzing craft respectively as entrepreneurial fabrication and decoration and manufacture in cultural production. Less work up to this point has focused on the productive regimes undergirding craft industrialism, that is, the scalable production of authenticity-marked commodities. Gerosa identifies the scale production of authenticity as a central engine of valorization in the "hipster economy," pointing out that under the current "aesthetic regime of consumption" craft-inflected consumables give consumers a fleeting experience of authenticity, even luxury. Unfortunately for the purposes of the present argument, like other critical analyses of neo-craft production, Gerosa's intervention focuses considerable attention to the entrepreneurial impulse of craft business owners and makers, leaving the rank-and-file workers on whom these industries depend largely unaddressed.

While it is easy to reconcile the entrepreneurial maker with neo-craft discourse's focus on the unification of planning and doing, this unity is evasive as it relates to the craft worker. A common example given of the ascendancy of craft production is the craft brewery, but although it is trotted out as the prototypical neo-craft industry, seldom is its labor process examined. From the outside, brewing might appear as the creative work of a knowledgeable and talented brewer who, after conceiving of a recipe, sets out to realize it through fermentation. This is all technically true but overlooks the vast amount of labor necessary to translate that recipe from an idea to a physical can or keg of beer. While the brewer at an extremely small operation might do all the work by themselves, for municipal and regional breweries, it is far more likely that they will have a range of production and service assistance: assistant brewers,



warehousing and cellaring workers, bottling and labeling workers, retail associates, and so on. Viewed from this vantage, the labor process of an industry like craft brewing functions not as a reunification of conception and execution, but a continuation of the processes of the industrial division of labor, albeit one that elevates the “skilled craftsperson” above the rest of the craft workforce. If, as appears the case, the labor process remains divided along industrial lines, the centrality of skill remains elusive and dispersed.

Craft worker testimonies bear this out. Several workers interviewed for a study of the working conditions of neo-craft industries reported a disconnect between the discourse of skill and creativity and their daily work routines (Anderson 2022). Those working in support roles regularly reported that the creative planning in their craft industry (be that baking, brewing, coffee roasting, or clothing manufacture) is reserved for a select segment of the craft workforce, typically craftspeople with managerial responsibilities. Workers who were initially attracted to their industries due to an expectation of creative autonomy often found themselves following the designs, recipes, or plans of a craftsperson/manager. Arguably, this tendency compounds as a craft operation scales up. The unity of conception and execution in neo-craft production may, of course, exist in some craft enterprises, but many craft workers are aware that they remain alienated from the labor process and that their work remains largely deskilled.

One should ask at this stage what this division of labor means in relation to the pervasive discourse of neo-craft as somehow alternative to mainstream production. Craft discourse edifies the character of the craftsperson or artisan, putting them on a pedestal that eclipses the vast amount of work contributed by non-artisan craft workers. A close look at the labor process in a scalable neo-craft industry, however, reveals this to be a mirage, one that uses the image of skill to obscure the mundane division of labor at work in craft industrialism, one often made up of a range of so-called “unskilled” roles—packaging, retail sales, warehousing, and the like. The positioning of a business or industry as craft is often a simply discursive maneuver, allowing our collective imaginations to fill in the empty spaces

left by craft’s imprecision as a term. Skill, in this sense, is elusive because while it is present in the craft labor process, it is assumed to be ever-present, a fetish of a kind of work that plays a small role in much of craft industrial production.

This leaves the craft worker in a curious position vis-à-vis their role within the neo-craft labor process. Whereas the industrial discourse projects their role as one of skill, passion, and the like, they commonly confront a workplace where their skills are subordinated to rote, deskilled industrial routines. What does this contradiction mean for the ways craft workers understand their own vocational identities and the promises neo-craft discourse makes about their value as workers? And, importantly, if craft workers are not satisfied with the conditions they face in these industries, what recourse do they have for organizing alternatives?

### **Skill and Organizing in the Neo-Craft Economy**

The contradictions between craft discourse and craft labor realities have concrete implications for worker organizing. In 2020, as businesses and workers alike were navigating the massive workplace challenges leveled by the global COVID-19 pandemic, workers in two third-wave coffee chains in Vancouver, British Columbia organized to join the United Food, Commercial, and Warehouse Workers’ Union Local 1518 (UFCW 1518). Workers at Matchstick Coffee and Cartems Donuts decided they needed to come together to form a union for several reasons, citing furloughs, irregular schedules, and health and safety as primary concerns (Anderson 2022). The workforces of both companies were and continue to be greatly diverse, with the union drive at Cartems being led by queer workers and workers of color. Similarly, the roles held by these workers were varied. The eventual bargaining units of the unions included baristas, retail associates, and kitchen assistants. One notices, of course, that these are not roles that are automatically included in the craftsperson category. In fact, it might even be appropriate to categorize these workers as an alternative segment of the craft industrial workforce: craft workers rather than craftspeople (Anderson 2021).

The stratification of roles within the neo-craft economy is complex and variable by industry and firm. However, the exemplars of scalable craft industries, those producing consumable craft commodities like artisan food and drink, tend to have a regimented division of labor that depends heavily on the support of less skilled or deskilled work to elevate the role and image of the craftspeople. Interestingly, however, when asked about their attitudes to their work and their industry, many workers in the former category report high levels of passion for their work and their product. While some do aspire to creative working lives in their craft, many recognize the disparities of their industries' divisions of labor while maintaining a certain vocational loyalty to their chosen industry. In brewing, according to Chloe Fox Miller (2019), this is due in large part to the sense of glamour projected onto the industry, even for those workers who work in support roles. The tendency for these industries to attract support workers through the image of creativity and cultural value while the businesses themselves recognize their dependence on non-artisan workers reveals a key contradiction in neo-craft's discursive positioning. Fox Miller argues the glamour of craft brewing leads brewery owners to view workers as "interchangeable, rather than possessing unique skills valuable to the success of the business" (2019, 85), intensifying associations between manufacturing and unskilled labor.

Of course, just as businesses are aware of the contradiction between the image of the craftspeople and the roles of craft workers, so too are these workers themselves. As my (2022) research with craft workers in the Pacific Northwest region of North America suggests, workers in the region's craft industries (brewing, coffee, baking, and the like) increasingly see themselves as industrial workers rather than temporarily inconvenienced creatives. Initially attracted to these industries due to their image as hip, enriching places to work, my respondents reported high levels of disillusionment due to the mundane realities they faced on the job. Far from being the energetic, creative workplaces they expected, these workers found themselves in traditional, hierarchical workplaces where instead of being valued for their skill, they were treated as interchangeable inputs in the production (or service) process.

In an industrial grouping distinguished by its projection of skilled work, the fact that many neo-craft workers see their work as devalued at the level of skill is telling. For many of these workers, the cachet that comes with being associated with these kinds of industries is a crucial element in their initial and continued attraction to their current vocation (Fox Miller 2019), but if the creativity and skill projected onto these industries is not characteristic of their working lives, one wonders how long this attraction lasts. Indeed, while this attraction functions as a means for the manufacture of consent and generation of self-discipline, it simultaneously serves as a catalyst for worker discontent (Burawoy 1979). Moreover, as craft workers recognize their deskilled roles within the labor process, they appear primed to take decisive collective action in the form of unionization drives, particularly in those workplaces (like cafes and breweries) where the industry has positioned itself as progressive or community-minded and where employers have hired workers motivated by these values.

In essence, while workers in these industries are imagined as skilled craftspeople, many work in "unskilled" or deskilled roles, and recognizing this have recently begun organizing. While this doesn't necessarily implicate skill as the sole or even central factor in these organizing attempts, it does suggest that the labor processes in neo-craft industries are more complex and less "unified" than much of craft discourse suggests. Furthermore, in a division of labor that deifies skilled labor at the expense of less skilled but still necessary roles, it is becoming apparent that all is not creative, passionate and dignified. Instead, the subordinated roles of support workers and the disconnect between neo-craft's promises and practices are implications of a set of industries that hide exploitation and hierarchy behind an image that upon closer inspection fails to depict the actual conditions faced by the workers propping up the neo-craft renaissance.

As demonstrated above, this dynamic is a manifestation of a fetish that sits at the heart of craft discourse and the discursive positioning of neo-craft industries. Neo-craft enterprises depend on an assumption of skilled labor, but this assumption is

often based on little more than the idea of a skilled craftsperson's involvement in the production of the craft commodity. Frequently, this skilled work occupies only a small portion of an otherwise complex and deskilled labor process, sometimes one bereft of the kinds of craft skill purported to characterize both the process and the product. Obviously, craftspeople are still involved in the neo-craft economy, but craft fetishism obscures the labor process of neo-craft production, projecting an image of skilled work that may or may not actually be present, at least in a significant way, within the neo-craft labor process.

## Conclusion

This article has examined the paradox at the heart of contemporary craft production: while neo-craft industries position themselves as alternatives to alienated industrial labor, promising reunification of conception and execution through skilled work, they frequently reproduce Taylorized labor processes behind a facade of artisanal authenticity. By tracing skill's role from Braverman's original analysis through contemporary neo-craft economies, we have seen how craft industrialism depends on what I have called craft fetishism—the replacement of actual craft skill at the point of production with its image at the point of consumption.

The evidence from craft worker testimonies and organizing efforts reveals that many employees in neo-craft industries recognize the gap between discourse and reality. While craftspeople and entrepreneurs may enjoy creative autonomy, the majority of craft workers labor in deskilled support roles that bear little resemblance to the romanticized image of the skilled artisan. This stratification enables scalable production while maintaining the discursive benefits of craft branding, allowing firms to extract value from both the labor of deskilled workers and the cultural capital of craft itself.

Fifty years after Braverman warned against sentimental attachment to “outworn conditions of now archaic modes of labor,” capital appears to have found profitable ways to remobilize precisely such attachments. Where Braverman sought to avoid romanticism, contemporary craft capitalism embraces it, deploying the image of the timeless craftsperson

as a commodity fetish while continuing the processes of deskilling and managerial control he documented. The neo-craft phenomenon thus represents not a departure from Fordist production but its continuation under new aesthetic regimes, suggesting that Braverman's analysis remains as relevant today as when first published—perhaps even more so, as capital learns to commodify the very critiques mounted against its rationalization of work.

For craft workers increasingly aware of these contradictions, the path forward may lie in collective organizing that acknowledges their position not as aspiring artisans temporarily displaced from creative labor, but as industrial workers deserving of dignity, fair compensation, and democratic control over their labor process. Only by moving beyond craft fetishism can we confront the material realities of neo-craft production and build genuine alternatives to alienated labor.

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