# Re-tooling craft

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# Re-tooling craft

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## *Texto integral*

**Alben cheese**

Source: Courtesy of CasArrigoni.it

1 Building on ongoing research on collective food procurement and food heritage, I propose to rethink and reimagine the meaning, status and future of craft for diverse social actors (alternative consumption networks, makers and smallholders, policy visionaries, etc.) who are operating in increasingly challenging contexts. These include new fragilities due to climate change combined with the social knock-on effects of the pandemic, plus the energy and financial crisis triggered by war at the frontiers of Europe. A perfect storm.

2 In this world, “craft skills” have taken on a particularly nostalgic flavour of mythic times and places. One finds online role-play games enlisting as “most common craft skills”: “alchemy, armor, baskets, books, bows, calligraphy, carpentry, cloth, clothing, glass, jewelry, leather, locks, paintings, pottery, sculptures, ships, shoes, stonemasonry, traps, and weapons”. In my field of experience, instead, skills for resilience often begin with food production and preservation, to then include a diversity of elements and cultures of craft-making that one picks up in their social environment.

3 A craft skill is usually understood as being solely aimed at production, creation, generation of something. But craft is not necessarily the skill to produce objects, rather to repair, adapt, and fix them. It is perhaps inspiring to consider craft as a remedy: a re-mediation of our often too abstract knowledge, its re-channeling through situated, sensory knowledge. But also a (partial) solution, an answer to increasingly challenging situations that seem out of reach and out of scale.

4 An object I consider significant for this research path is – ironically – cheese. Ironically, because I do not like eating cheese, although there are exceptions, of course. For example, I don’t mind the mild flowery taste of three- to six-months aged fat mountain cheese, which usually comes in cylindrical forms of around 10 kilograms, with still soft, lightly speckled cooked-paste. This traditional recipe is typical of upland communities specializing in seasonal transhumance and high-pasture summer grazing, whereby whole milk could be used for one simple but nutritious product – about a third fat, about a quarter protein, and rich in vitamins and minerals – as contemporary producers hasten to publicize on their websites. It is to be found under different denominations along the Alpine region, including the Lombard Alps, where it is commonly known as “Branzi-type”, from a village in Val Brembana where it is made to this day.

5 Local producers have variously revisited this recipe, making it more distinctive and prestigious, for example using raw milk, or obtaining a protected denomination of origin (PDO) tightly connected with their continuing transhumant tradition (as is the case with Bergamo’s *formai de mut,* literally “mountain cheese”). Historical research about a renowned Slow Food’s presidium for “the cheese of the Bitto valleys” indicates that Bitto is probably but one variation of the many Branzi-type cheese wheels that transitioned from the valleys north of Bergamo to Milan’s and Rome’s markets for fine wine and cheese, at least since the 16th century. The picture I chose for this “virtual exhibition” is neither of a PDO cheese nor of a Slow Food presidium. It is but one of many humble reinventions of mountain cheese, named after a local mountain, Alben.

6 In my work on dairy farming and cheese making in the Southern Italian Alps, I paid attention to the intertwined dynamics through which “simple” cheesemakers navigate the complex and fluid repositioning of their trade and ecology against the backdrop of what Michael Herzfeld has called “a global hierarchy of value”. I argued that reskilling is constantly necessary, even in remote mountain communities, to adapt and adjust to the harsh realities of extremely competitive markets (for heritage cheese, but also for the price of milk, ever raced to the bottom whether by the lowland dairies of the Po plains or by Dutch powder milk). Capillary and influential “politics of advice” favour not only new technologies (for example embryo transfer in animal husbandry, robotic milking, and potentially cloning – a technique already at hand, but shunned due to ethical dilemmas) but also new tendencies and priorities: from multifunctional agriculture, to catering for urbanites’ educational and aesthetic needs and preferences (through didactic farms, eco-museums, or agro-tourism restaurants).

7 Considerations on the constant need for reskilling and reinvention of craft extend beyond heritage food. Diverse practices are equally challenged by the “global hierarchy of value”. We can think of traditional apprenticeship in the artisanal professions (such as upholstery or building) or vocational training, in a society that seems to lack skilled practitioners of any kind, from plumbers to nurses. But we can also look at the “new” makers and hackers, who make active use and re-tool the latest technologies such as 3D printing, or code to provide open access software and communication technology. In all

their diversity, do-it-yourself (DIY) cultures broaden the scope of mere "production" to the remedial issues of future-making, climate-change proofing, and social flourishing.

8 They also confront one with the morality of making. Tim Ingold's *œuvre* inspires anthropologists to experience for themselves the mesmerizing perceptual transformation afforded by enskilment, and many of us have learnt (some aspects of) craft in carpentry, weaving, or pottery, as part of fieldwork. Situated learning delivers what Richard Sennett has called "material consciousness" in *The Craftsman* (2008), namely the capacity, skill and knowledge of how to put materials into shape through tools. As Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger noticed of craft and organizational learning, "situated peripheral participation" in communities of practice delivers not only enskilment but the inculcation of social norms and dispositions. I have proposed "skilled visions" as an ethnographic approach to the diverse layers of learning one absorbs through an apprenticeship of looking – among cattle breeders, and more recently, food growers in city gardens. Skilled visions are plural and exclusionary, all-encompassing but difficult to articulate. They are the way we look unto the world and fellow inhabitants in ways that are literally put into shape, in-formed, by our experiences of learning how to give and detect shape and form around us. David Turnbull, in his comparative study of the sociology of scientific and indigenous knowledge *Masons, Tricksters and Cartographers* (2000) has traced the blurred contours of tinkering as a core practice for the development of technoscientific knowledge as "an assemblage of knowledge spaces".

9 Anthropologists make themselves no idyllic expectations of apprenticeship – a social environment where neglect and active impediment from learning may well be the norm, as we can learn from ethnographers of apprenticeship (Jean Lave and Michael Herzfeld amongst others). Soumhya Venkatesan, in a 2010 JRAI article on craft mat-weavers in South India, reminds us of the social positioning of (female) manual workers and proposes that the anthropology of learning and the anthropology of work cannot easily be separated. In social history, knowledge of the hands is not rewarded. Allow me to illustrate this with a personal anecdote. My late mother began working in her father's workshop, making leather handbags, belts, and all-things-leathery, at the age of 12. When she retired at the age of 65, she closed down the workshop. By then, in 1998, it was not remunerative to make leather handbags to sell. Artisan ware was in principle lucrative, but only for luxury items – as it is even more so now globally as prestigious "made in Italy". But artisans catering for the lower middle classes cannot compete with ready-made imports that cost less to buy at wholesale prices than to make. My mother's two children chose different paths. My brother continued only the commercial part of the enterprise, taking over the shop but ditching the artisan production and embracing the retail side of things. I studied philosophy, then history of science, then anthropology (what a long way down!...). Sylvia Yanagisako's work shows longitudinally how as a result of the forced evolution of Italian family entrepreneurship into transnational capital, textile craft must face the issue of scale and becomes dependent on global flows of capital and labour (posing poignant demographic issues in the same breath). Gendered positionalities, paternalism, and control over the power of generation are tightly woven around the rise and demise of craft entrepreneurship.

10 While not keen on fetishizing craft, can our positionings as researchers in a knowledge economy synergize with more disenfranchised forms of knowledge and wisdom of manual work? For example, how could solidarity, diverse and green economies embrace DIY cultures and entrepreneurship? Grassroots civic initiatives seem to appreciate the role of traditional environmental knowledge in (re)building, preserving, handing down and transforming knowledge for future generations who are facing energy, climate, economic, demographic and geopolitical crisis. But how is this role articulated by diverse approaches to and societal understandings of craft, skill, and apprenticeship? Unfortunately, DIY urbanism and greening can go hand-in-hand with gentrification and farmers' dispossession, as observed in the doctoral research conducted in the framework of the Food Citizens? project (available at www.foodcitizens.eu). While comparative ethnographic research on craft and craft

foods is rich, it has not yet delivered an insight on which characteristics of craft could be essential in crafting our futures.

## *Índice das ilustrações*

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