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Skill, craft, and *poiesis*-intensive innovation

ABSTRACT

What is craft practice? The purpose of this paper is to contrast the categorization of craft practice with that of skill and innovation. I argue for the relevance of innovative skilled practice to future-making. Both skill and craft play an important part in collective engagements with futuring. With an ethnographic methodology, typical of anthropological fieldwork, I have explored skill in dairy farming, cheese making, and currently food gardening. In all these three realms, the results of ethnographic observation are that ideational processes immediately connect to intimate acquaintance with materials and ecosystems (including flora and fauna, soil, climate, landscape and humans). My conclusion is that craft practice and its outcomes imply a highly localized cosmology of evaluation. I show how comparative ethnography allows the mapping of these relations between people and places, and their more-than-local connections.

Keywords:

Craft, skill, food, *poiesis*, responsible innovation, ethnography, anthropology.

INTRODUCTION

Skill and craft are cognate notions but seldom used to cover the same ground. For example extensive work on ‘skilled vision’ in animal husbandry would hardly count as craft scholarship, while studying heritage cheese could be easily understood as such (Grasseni, 2017). This article explores their connection with ‘poiesis’ (loosely translatable as making) in the context of literature on responsible innovation. The paper further investigates a comparative agenda for studying skill and craft, building on the methodology of ethnographic comparison, which was established and tested in the framework of a multi-sited study of collective food procurement (Grasseni, 2022).

Craft is a complex and controversial notion. It defines disparate forms of action that are only loosely connected by the notion of making something by hand. For example, Tanya Harrod compiles the following examples in the opening page of her catalogue *Craft Over and Over Again*: a former ceramic factory worker from Stoke-on-Trent performing the making of porcelain flowers under spotlights in a museum gallery; the everyday creativity of the poor of Rio de Janeiro as documented by artist Gabi

Gusmão; the Cuban collective Los Carpinteros, and the Tate Liverpool exhibition of Chinese artist Zhuang Hui *Factory Floor* (Harrod, 2018, 12).

Beyond the Arts and Crafts movement, the Bauhaus and the radical craft pedagogy of Black Mountain College (1933-1957), craft can be seen as a sphere of debate and political action (de Waal, 2005, 64). Black and Burisch notice how the role of craft is transformed under late capitalism: ‘craft in a global context is now mobile, flexible, available on-demand, highly desirable and ready-to-use’ (Black and Burisch, 2021: 1). In the market hegemony, ‘craftivism’ may obscure ‘ethical, environmental and labour issues in the chain of production’, thus performing ‘craftwashing’ (2021: 2).

Often, communities of craft practice exist (or resist) in a vacuum of futuring policies and in ambiguous discourse, associating craft and skilling with heritage and the past *tout court*. Their relevance to collective future-making often goes unrepresented, while R&D envisage and invest on enviro-tech systems apparently devoid of skills, bodies, and learning. To this, following a notion coined by Piero Bassetti, I oppose ‘*poiesis-intensive*’ innovation, a culture of learning and developing that is not necessarily tied to capital-intensive, high-tech, long value chains (Hankins 2019). Bassetti claims that ‘*poiesis intensive* innovation does not come from scientific methodology or protocol, but from knowing how to do things’ (Hankins, 2019, 709). ‘This form of innovation is driven by soft forms of knowledge such as design, function, organizational patterns, aesthetics and worldviews, and is often associated with small workplaces such as workshops and small-scale laboratories’ (Hankins, 2020). For example, *poiesis-intensive* innovation characterises the context of revolutionary designs such as that of the mini-skirt. In order to appreciate this, one has to follow ‘the social life of things’, to use a phrase famously coined by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1986). The mini-skirt was not an ad-hoc intervention and did not require capital intensive new machinery or technology. It was introduced in a new social design for youth culture, whereby boutiques would be welcoming places offering drinks and long hours to their hosts. From purely functional, they transformed youth clothing into a pleasant social experience – employing colour, patterns, and funny and provocative shapes. On the other hand, the capacity and intuition to introduce these types of innovation depended on the unique positioning of the innovator, Quant herself having been apprenticed to a milliner and producing her first items herself, then employing machinists while maintaining ownership of the design (Quant 2011).

On the online repository of the Bassetti Foundation for Responsible Innovation one can find debates about the relationship between Made in Italy traditions (especially the Milanese school of design) and *poiesis-intensive* innovation. Examples span artisan workshops and laboratories of ‘makers’, including traditional apprenticeship in furniture-making and upholstery (Redazione FGB, 2020). Across this spectrum, craft practice consists in the vision and ability to set up and follow through a process, embodying layers of skills sedimented over one’s life. Unfortunately though, as John Roberts notes, ‘sensuous artisanal skills have been stripped out of productive labour since the nineteenth century’ (2007, 3), while the same cannot be claimed of artwork (as the kinds of labour contained in artworks have not become deskilled in the same way as chain commodity production has).

In what follows I shall reflect on (re)skilling using examples encountered in my ethnographic fieldwork. I conducted fieldwork with dairy farmers and cheese-makers since the late 1990s, and more recently with food growers and horticulturalists in individual and collective allotments, in both Italy and the Netherlands. In what follows, I will propose a comparative agenda for investigating skill and craft through comparative methodology.

THEORIZING SKILL AND CRAFT FROM FOOD GARDENS AND CHEESE

Out of the potential spectrum of *poiesis-intensive* practices outlined in the introduction, I focus here in particular on ‘futuring’ craft practices, namely skilled practice that expresses an intrinsic vision of making futures through what is being produced. There are many ways in which this is achieved. For example, in my work on heritage cheese I have recently encountered a novel interest in ‘the life of cheese’, and extensive discourse on ‘moulds’, namely ferments, bacteria and the important microbiome of the cellars’ environment, in which cheese is aged and matured (Paxson 2012, Grasseni 2023). The cheese-makers of northern Italy I have been following since the late 1990s talk of ‘moulds’ as non-human forms

of life. On the other hand, horticulturalists in the Netherlands (where I have been living and working for the last nine years) employ a comparatively interesting talk of ‘soil life’ (*bodemleven*). What the two have in common is a ‘futuring’ perspective, in the sense that they both deal with allowing non-human forms of life to flourish and ripen (whether cheeses or crops). These ‘multispecies’ perspectives (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010) are very down to earth, being very much tied to a ‘how-to’ dimension. Growing, weeding, salting, scrubbing and ripening, entail material skills. Therefore, a critical dimension of analysis of such skills requires addressing issues of skilling, reskilling and deskilling.

Crafting a food garden means not only tapping into but also amending age-old knowledge, situating innovation in place, retooling craft in an instrument of collective, intergenerational, diffused ecologic-economic (*oikos*) competence. For example, gardening and watering techniques are heavily affected by the types of soil (whether clay-based or sand-based). Soil composition is partly natural, partly the result of the extent and the manners in which previous generations of gardeners have tended to it. For example, an issue regards how to remediate the chemical imbalances introduced by working the land for crops. One can work unfettered greens into the land, but this results on the long run in a lack of nitrogen, which reduces soil fertility. Vice versa, excessive manuring results in the accumulation of nitrogen from artificial fertilizers in the fields. Manuring and composting are two concurrent strategies to replenish nutrient-depleted soil, and to keep it light and porous. Manuring is concomitant with keeping animals, though keeping animals on the same plot does not help the second objective (keeping the soil light and porous) because of the repeated trampling on the surface. To be self-sufficient in terms of nitrogen balance, then, a farming plot must keep animals and crops separate from each other.

This is just one example of farm-managing dilemmas, as there exist multiple and even conflictual views on what constitutes sustainable food gardening. For the Dutch food gardeners I volunteer with, soil life (*bodemleven*) refocuses dilemmas about gardening knowledge and the interlinked aspects and processes of skill and craft. For example, my fellow volunteers are debating whether to work the soil, or rather convert to a no-dig philosophy. The latter, however, runs counter to almost every gesture, routine and tool used for decades, as it prescribes no spade, no fork, no plough, no hoe, minimal weeding, etc. Along the same line of thinking, permaculture techniques make one reconsider whether to remove weeds or to be more inclusive in one’s definition of what is harvest and what is weed. The choice of some of these working methods inevitably affects garden management and thus the type, quantity, quality and frequency of labour requested from volunteers. Equally, these choices impact how visitors understand the garden and its connections with the other parts of an urban farm (which may include an animal farm, a visiting centre, a café, a shop selling food grown on site, but also orchards, school gardens, and permanent shrubs and trees). Moreover, animals’ captive functionality to food production is increasingly in contrast with animal welfare concerns.

While we know that there exist different and competing discourses about agriculture and horticulturalist skills, here I underline how they have political consequences which reverberate in society in tangible ways. For example, the ‘nitrogen problem’ (*stikstofproblematiek*) mentioned above greatly influenced the Dutch political debate in the provincial elections of March 2023. The government strove to picture the nitrogen problem as a technical dilemma, simply requiring rational decision-making. On the one hand, environmental scientists deemed it necessary to ‘give back’ some of the scarce agricultural soil to nature in order to abate nitrogen pollution, which cripples national biodiversity. On the other, this required reaching substantial compromises with the powerful agrarian sector of the second largest food exporter in the world after the USA. However, this negotiation process became a political nightmare, preventing the government from implementing their policy (Government of the Netherlands, n.d.). This had a national effect. From a one-person party, the farmer-citizen movement (*boerburgerbeweging*), achieved a relative majority in most province administrations and as a result, also in the first parliamentary chamber. This eventually brought the government down in the following summer.

Craft practice is thus, not politically neutral and warrants a theorization allowing future-making. The connection between gardens, craft, and sustainability for example requires focussing on which forms of knowledge and practice constitute acceptable premises for the gardeners but also what forms

of tools and sorts of breeds ‘go well’ with a location. Just about any aspect of gardening routine can be doubted, debated or re-deliberated (for example, when, how and to which extent to use ‘mulch’ over growing crops). This is a universal dilemma and a novel challenge in the face of climate change and the pressing need for a collective transition towards sustainable ways of living. Answers to this dilemma can only be the result of or localized, situated, thinking-in-place.

The category of craft itself does not apply evenly to skilled practices that are, nevertheless, intrinsically connected. For example, historical evidence on the origin of food heritage in northern Italy shows how abundant riverine reservoirs in the plains and spring water in the mountains has afforded centuries of rice, maize and pasture for dairy farming. Transhumance connected the latter with mountain communities through a thriving cheese trade (Corti, 2019). However, current climate change in Italy alternates severe drought with devastating storms and water surges, which challenges this economy and forces one to rethink whether the river Po’s wet plains will sustain dairy farming and cheese making for long. Concerns with human and nonhuman life and death form thus an intrinsic part of human and nonhuman eating, growing, and futuring.

Studying the skilled vision of dairy breeders in the context of Italian Alpine dairy husbandry was not usually considered as a ‘craft science’. The idea of applying skill to ‘crafting’ and evaluating an animal body is seldom encountered (but see Crowder, 2016). Further down the value chain of milk, however, cheese-making (often practiced by the same cow-breeders as dairy farmers) earns heritage status for their ‘craft cheese’. For example, food heritage scholarship often refers to *terroir* and its terminology to define a revered food craft practice, as in cheese-making. As Elizabeth Barham sums up, ‘historically, *terroir* refers to an area or terrain, usually rather small, whose soil and microclimate impart distinctive qualities to food products. The word is particularly closely associated with the production of wine. A *terroir* can be identified, for example, as one that produces a *grand cru*, or a particularly excellent wine. It can also be said that a certain wine has a *goût*, or taste, of its particular *terroir*’ (2003: 131).

The semantics of *terroir* (which has especially informed discussions of food, place and taste in American scholarship about Europe, see for example Laudan 2004, Trubek 2008) has been taken as an objective link between taste and place in a certain location due to (micro)climate, soil condition, cultivation and production techniques and traditions. The historical establishment of this linkage in particular regions has of course been scrutinized and debated, particularly in the case of wine. *Terroir* is the result of a process of construction of lineage authority, commercial competition and hierarchic rhetoric (Ulin 1994). Furthermore, *terroir* does not fit the multiple and idiosyncratic specificities of European locations, histories, and debates.

Finally, climate change and sustainability challenges also reconfigure a territory from a cultural and geographical point of view. Waterways, elevation and length of the seasons also pertain to any cognate area of craft food-making practice. While creativity, innovation and excellence are also associated notions, the environmental adaptation to the territory’s local traits also play a fundamental part in how this tradition is appropriated and translated in ecological and economical practice. In sum, what connects various forms of crafting food - in allotments or in dairy farming and cheese making – is then the urgent need to reconceptualize skill and to reinvent it in ways that are resilient to multiple challenges – a form of *poiesis* intensive innovation. In what follows I explore a methodology for this research agenda.

A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON SKILL

This section elaborates on comparative ethnography as a method to juxtapose and highlight differences and similarities among cognate ethnographic case studies, according to a matrix or pattern of comparison. Juxtaposing and contrasting similarities and differences between case studies has been the team methodology of a project on collective food procurement in three European cities, running from 2017 through 2023 (Grasseni 2022). A team including the principal investigator, two post-docs, three Ph.D. candidates, and two research assistants participated in setting up and executing the field research and data analysis. Research data was gathered during 16 months of ethnographic fieldwork over the period December 2018 - August 2020 (212 interviews, 23 cultural maps, 16 video and photo elicitations,

5 focus groups). The project resulted in an interactive platform that visualizes the ethnographic comparison emerging from the entire project (De Musso et al. 2022). Here, rather than defining the object of the project ('food citizenship'), I focus on its methodology to propose extending it to the study of craft and skill.

Through ethnographic comparison, connecting and contrasting patterns emerge at a glance (as in table 1 below). Table 1 offers a summary of how ethnographic case studies of collective food procurement conducted by the *Food Citizens?* team show diverse social constructs of gardening skills vis-à-vis scale, solidarity, and diversity in three European cities (Gdańsk, Rotterdam and Turin). For example, social diversity could be invoked and packaged as part of the marketing or 'branding' of 'green spaces', in projects of urban regeneration of unkempt or fallow fields in the urban peripheries of Turin. In some cases, aesthetics plays a hegemonic role in defining pleasant and coherent social spaces for food gardening (Vasile and Grasseni, 2022). The kind of skills that NGOs in particular need to develop in order to guarantee a steady flow of project-related funding inevitably moves the focus of long-term careers and capacities away from the core mission of sustainability and social inclusion (for example through collective food gardening or food surplus redistribution in marginalized areas) to the treadmill of third-sector funding (Vasile 2023). Food collectives, however, embrace *poiesis*-intensive forms of innovation. For example, pickling workshops are ways in which urbanite women adapt rural food traditions to an urban scale and lifestyle in Gdańsk. Managing the porous borders of urban and rural social networks, female food entrepreneurs manage collaborations with other women's business initiatives through relations of solidarity (Gracjasz, 2022). In the Netherlands, associations such as *Herenboeren* organize themselves to acquire land collectively, so that the issue of access to farming land can be tackled not as individuals but as cooperatives (Walstra 2020a). Food collectives are sufficiently flexible and resilient to go digital in times of pandemic and thus organize aid virtually (Walstra 2020b).

TABLE 1. Samples of the *Food Citizens?* case studies are available in multimodal form on the interactive documentary site of the project, which can be consulted at www.foodcitizens.eu/idoc containing 60 videos, 70 photo slideshows, 10 sound files and 10 documents. It is preferable to navigate with Firefox or Chrome browsers.

SKILL...	...AND SCALE	...AND SOLIDARITY	...AND DIVERSITY
<i>Case study TURIN (by Maria Vasile)</i>	Reskilling projects mobilize local volunteers but favour neoliberal austerity at higher levels of governance.	Aesthetics plays a hegemonic role in defining pleasant and coherent social spaces for food gardening.	Gardening skills can be used for 'branding' certain types of 'green spaces' in urban renewal projects.
<i>Case study ROTTERDAM (by Vincent Walstra)</i>	Organized forms of land purchase by associations (<i>Herenboeren</i>) intervene in land access issues.	Food collectives can go digital in times of pandemic and organize virtually.	Food growing socializes people, as DIY practice facilitates collaboration and group activities.
<i>Case study GDANSK (by Ola Gracjasz)</i>	Pickling workshops are ways in which urbanite women adapt rural food traditions to an urban scale and lifestyle.	Women food entrepreneurs manage collaborations with other initiatives through relations of solidarity.	Traditional food gardening (allotments) and new 'community gardens' exist in disparate parts of the city.

I propose here to build on ethnographic comparison to investigate how skill and craft can be placed in juxtaposition, contrasting case studies that favour overview by varying one dimension, as in the *Food Citizens?* project in table 1 above. For example our project, focussing on collective food procurement networks, inevitably also addresses the artisanal production of food in contemporary urban dynamics such as neighbourhood redevelopment, urban greening, and planned requalification of post-industrial peripheries. Artisanal (food) production thus confronts the ruination of post-industrial places, juggling the rationale of economic sustainability, community engagement, and gentrification. Historic craft/design divides are surprisingly to be found even here, for example when different 'visions of the

urban green' compete for control of 'greening' plans for Turin's peripheries (Vasile and Grasseni 2022). Acknowledging the collaboration between landscape architect and cultivator seems as arduous as acknowledging the collaboration between architect and maker. In both cases, the importance of grounded skills is not factored in the participatory equation from the beginning, and as a result, the power imbalance is skewed towards the project direction and management.

CONCLUSION

What is craft practice? In order to answer, this paper connected skill, craft, and poiesis-intensive innovation. Reconceptualizing and re-grounding new and old crafts is an emerging agenda for socially participated forms of transitions. Poiesis-intensive innovation is in principle available to anyone, since the social learning of skills does not exclusively happen in professional apprenticeship, but through personal engagement and exposure to diverse forms of craft (professional, artistic, academic).

Broad and narrow definitions of craft connect it with communities of practice involved in distinctive ways of doing, learning, and valuing. The paper exemplifies and contextualizes some of these grounded practices and their dilemmas, highlighting that skilled practice and its outcomes imply a highly localized cosmology of evaluation.

The cases provided (from heritage cheese-making in Italy to organic horticulture in the Netherlands) point out the 'futuring' challenges that poiesis-intensive innovation must provide a solution to. In the final section I proposed a comparative perspective on craft. This was concept-proofed in a project that contrasts and correlates skill with diversity, solidarity and scale, namely mapping relations between people, places and practices in ways that can be made visible by cross-cutting related aspects of skill (such as skill vis-à-vis solidarity, skill vis-à-vis scale, or skill vis-à-vis diversity).

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