

Well Structured Thinking

Arthur Lochmann, *La vie solide. La charpente comme éthique du faire*, Payot

By Olivier Crasset

Could craftwork, which is too often denigrated, be a model not only for intellectual life, but also for reforming contemporary forms of work? This is the position of a young lawyer and philosopher who took a professional detour by learning the carpenter's trade.

Playing a violin is easy. All you have to do is slide a bow across the strings or pluck them with your other hand. While no one in their right mind would agree with such an assertion, one simply has to replace the violinist's gestures with those of ordinary manual labor, such as sawing or nailing, to elicit agreement. Rejecting these clichés, Arthur Lochmann's book seeks to rehabilitate the craftsman's gestures by celebrating their complexity. Building on Richard Sennett's work, he goes so far as to consider craftwork as a model for healing the ills of contemporary work.

Lochmann's trajectory is an unusual one. After studying law and philosophy, he learned the carpenter's trade from the *Fédération compagnonnique*¹ before working for several companies in France and elsewhere. After this decade-long adventure, he has returned to the halls of academia and is completing his training as a lawyer. From this experience, he has extracted an earnest tale, propped up by solid philosophical references. His argument, which is accessible yet complex and nuanced without being affected, is colored by the vocabulary of a trade whose material and symbolic significance he unveils. Lochmann is not the first intellectual to venture into a

¹ A professional association of French workers in the construction industry based on principles of *compagnonnage*, that is, a form of craft labor based on journeymen's organizations.

workshop, but, unlike Simone Weill or the Maoists of the 1970s, he is not trying to start a revolution. Rather, he is on a quest for self-discovery and a new relationship to reality that requires learning a trade so that he can “think materially by using [his] hands and accepting the verdict of things” (p. 197). Based on this experience, which is described in the first part of the book, Lochmann draws its lessons, proposing a model that would liberate society from “bullshit jobs”² and its generally disruptive course.

2 See Davis Graeber, *Bullshit jobs*, Les Liens qui libèrent, <https://laviedesidees.fr/Les-emplois-inutiles.html>, September 2, 2019.

The Psychic Benefits of Concrete Work

The experience described by the author is, in the first place, an encounter with a material with which he developed an intimate relationship: touching wood, recognizing its essence in the scent of sawdust, learning to read its fibers in order to put it in the right direction while placing “its heart in the sun” (p. 17), feeling one’s tool slide along the material as if it were an extension of one’s hand. His approach is poetic and multisensory without being contemplative, since his goal is to tame matter through a deployment of techniques.

Yet measuring, sawing, and assembling are operations whose complexity becomes apparent only when one tries them out. “For the outside observer, a good gesture always appears simple and easy” (p. 58). The narrator learns, with the help of some physical pain, that the apprentice’s body is soft paste. Backpain and hand boils try his enthusiasm, and show how his body is shaped by work. The trade has begun to set in.

The evidence of concreteness—if something is cut too short, it is immediately apparent—stands in contrast to academic speculation. Intellectual reflection, while necessary, no longer suffices. One must learn to think with one’s body, to coordinate eye, brain, and hand, while remaining fully conscious of an often dangerous environment. One’s perception of the world is, in this way, heightened; through repetition, one can strive for the perfect gesture. Or, to be precise, the author tells us, one manages to render acceptable the inevitable imprecisions found in each operation, until one can say, when looking at two well assembled pieces of wood: “They look good.”

Confronting matter has psychic benefits, and taking the path of humility makes one proud to have produced “something that is outside of oneself” (p. 91).

The carpenter’s work always assumes a collective character, as it is the final link in a chain that leads back to the first. The author describes the history of the trade, but does not succumb to the idea of a timeless past. “Each roof is a kind of laboratory” (p. 138), in which ancient knowledge and advanced techniques are experienced. If a structure resists the passage of time, it testifies to the effectiveness of the methods used to build it.

The culture of this trade is considered in particular by referring to the art of the line, a kind of applied geometry making it possible to cut out complex parts that, once assembled, will transform a two-dimensional drawing into a volume occupying space. Once it is set up, the structure inspires the feeling that it has a grip on the real world. The object can be seen by all and lasts for a long time, perhaps until a colleague from the next century gets back to work on it.

But just as the best structure is always established on a temporary basis, one's embodiment of the trade is called into question by age and experience, which the author did not have time to witness first-hand. Continuing to work despite the decline of one's physical resources is part of knowing the trade. One would have liked to learn more about this topic.

A Social Project or Social Homogeneity?

The book's title is a reply to the description of the ills of modernity described by Zygmunt Bauman in *Liquid Modernity*.³ Under pressure from continually accelerating social temporalities, contemporary individuals have become unstable, as they constantly change jobs, residences, and families over the course of their lives. No longer can anything permanent be built on the scale of a human life; hence individuals become increasingly multiple and liquid in an increasingly immaterial world.

Building on a current of thought that goes back to the Arts and Crafts movement and that is continued at present in the work of Richard Sennett⁴ and Matthew Crawford,⁵ Lochmann calls for a return to favor of craftsmanship—and sees the first steps being taken in this direction. By connecting ancient knowledge with modern techniques and associating them with an ethos of service to the community, craftsmanship would make possible the achievement of complete projects under good conditions, in a tight-knit community. From this practice of work would be born a social project, for, as the author puts it, “the kind of material thought fostered by craftsmanship constitutes a formative practice for the mind, one that can restore a more active relationship to the world and to politics” (p. 169).

3 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity, 2000.

4 Richard Sennett, *Ce que sait la main, la culture de l'artisanat*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2010.

5 Matthew Crawford, *Éloge du carburateur. Essai sur le sens et la valeur du travail*, Paris, La Découverte, 2010. <https://laviedesidees.fr/La-philosophie-dans-le-garage.html>

Craftsmanship is thus bedecked in unexpected virtues. But exactly which kind of craftsmanship is being discussed? Considered as the practice of a trade associated with a specific culture, the book defines it in a way that mirrors contemporary work. It is “the reverse of alienated labor. It is a free and cultivated relationship to the materials employed, through the implementation of a complex know-how” (p. 171). Like Sennett, Lochmann sees artisanal culture as characterized by a desire to do one work’s well.

Indeed, while the ideal of emancipated labor remains present in artisanal companies (in these sense of the totality of independent workers exercising a trade and their employees), the fact remains that the actual conditions for practicing such work diverge significantly from it. If the book occasionally mentions these conditions, it is as anecdotes, with no attempt to analyze what is at stake. This is true of the risks involved in being on top of roofs, which are presented as sporting feats and described as instances of everyday heroism (p. 56) or as “dirty work” – an idea mentioned only in passing (p. 127).

Other aspects that are integral to the daily lives of companies are idealized by Lochmann. Thus his description of work units makes no mention of power relations between employers and employees, or subcontractors or temp workers. In this perfect world, there is no trace of the 26% of artisans who work more than 60 hours a week, of the 66% who suffer muscle and joint pains, nor the 58% who say they experience stress,⁶ not to mention concessions in work quality made in order to get contracts and meet deadlines, which are part of the day-to-day lives of construction workers. The reality of these working conditions diverges considerably from the rosy picture of cathedral builders that Lochmann paints. Where is this “ethical, social, and professional model suited for confronting modernity’s challenges” (p. 152)?

This model does in fact exist, but it applies only to a minority, a subcategory of artisans who, since the 1970s, have been described as “neo.” Its members belong to the middle class and have high levels of cultural capital. Indeed, these neo-artisans seek creative work on a human scale and that allows individual fulfillment. Particularly common is artistic craftwork, though it can also be found among the building trades, when practiced in a creative and intellectualized style. Capable of elaborate discourse about what they do, they are culturally homologous with a clientele that is passionate about custom-made personalized objects. Since these artisans consider quality of life

6 Baromètre Artisané 2018, <http://www.iris-st.org/upload/document/Etudes/barometre-artisané-2018.pdf>

as part of their compensation, what they consider to be an acceptable minimum wage is quite low and can even be made up for by other economic resources at this social group's disposal. Neo-rural artisans, "makers," engineers who combine new technologies and trades in shared workshops, and even former executives who run guestrooms belong to this category. If their status allows them to occupy the niche of the creative artisanry, the latter remains very limited, and where social homogeneity is practiced, there is not room for everyone. To suggest that this model is applicable to society as a whole is a trap. As Christine Jaeger's work shows,⁷ the artisanry has survived today thanks to its ability to slip into the interstices of industrial production, but it has never been in a position to alter the relations of production. Moreover, artisans' political demands have, for the entire twentieth century down to the present, inclined towards a small-business-owner conservatism.

Lochmann's personal experience is rich in lessons and his critique of contemporary work is solid and well documented. But it is unfortunate that in the second part of the book, he gets lost in ungrounded considerations, drawing on authors whose limitations he does not question. The appeal of practicing a trade is nonetheless a social phenomenon that merits attention. Having become objects of distinction due to their scarcity, trades are now practiced as an inner experience and are seen as sane occupations bereft of effort. Deconstructing the value judgments associated with so-called "manual" labor is an admirable task, but by focusing on its intellectual dimension and the inner experiences it elicits, one forgets that the hardship of labor contributes significantly to differences in life expectancy between social classes. Consequently, one risks creating vocations that will be little more than traps. If work is to contribute to emancipation, one must not only gather up its pieces, but also improve working conditions—about which artisanry's pleasure cruisers care little.

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⁷ Christine Jaeger, *Artisanat et capitalisme. L'envers de la roue de l'histoire*, Paris, Payot, 1982.

