Crafting and Commoning: Points of Connection

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In ‘The Invention of Craft’,[1] theorist Glenn Adamson argues that the notion of craft as we understand it today emerged when the Industrial Revolution transformed the ways in which things were made, and the patterns of life that were entangled with them. Before this time, making by hand would have been taken for granted: the inevitable default for communities seeking to meet their needs via the resources, both human and material, at their immediate disposal. Thus craft as a category – defined by its distinction from other, more ruthlessly efficient forms of production – only emerged when its processes were consigned to the margins and could even appear to be at risk of slipping away altogether.

Likewise, in centuries past the practices that enabled physical resources to be held in common – such as shared rights to grazing, the collecting of firewood or fishing – would have been widespread, perhaps so familiar as to evade celebration. Such practices and resources would only become highlighted as commons when they were threatened by the “modernising” forces of enclosure that sought to privatise and commodify them. Thus both craft and commons, in contemporary life, can be accompanied – whether loudly or quietly – by what Leila Dawney has described as a “spectre of dispossession”,[2] a mournful sense of loss.

Yet this feeling does not give us the whole picture. Commons are indeed at risk of loss, because they are dependent on ongoing work. From another perspective, commons are always in a state of becoming – meaning that the potential for new commons is all around us. Similarly, although particular types of traditional craft knowledge are at risk of disappearing as their skills become concentrated in ever fewer pairs of hands, we can see vibrant communities inventing and developing new ways of making that respond to our contemporary context. These emergent qualities point to another connection between the two spheres: the benefits of shifting from noun

to verb, from craft to crafting, commons to commoning.

When we consider craft and commons as emergent processes rather than static things, we gain a new lens with which to view the world. By expanding our view from a commons as, say, a piece of land, a stock of fish or even a body of knowledge, to commoning as a process of negotiated sharing, we notice many unexpected places in which commoning happens. These practices of sharing and caring sneak into the nooks and crannies of life – in private places, in public spaces, using mass-produced goods – and defy neat categorisation.

When we shift craft from noun to verb, we place our focus on processes that combine embodied skill, materials and creative thinking, rather than the objects – bowls, jumpers, candlesticks – that these processes might most obviously create. By doing so our view once again expands, taking in the easily overlooked moments when we engage in what David Pye calls the "workmanship of risk":[3] improvising solutions in conversation with the resources at hand. Countless examples of such everyday ingenuity were evident in the early stages of the pandemic, when the hidden supply chains that service our day-to-day needs were ruptured.

A careful look through the crafting-commoning lens demonstrates that these miniature acts of negotiated sharing and resourceful improvisation are all around, filling the gaps between public and private in everyday life. How far could they spread, and how powerful could they become, if we gave them a little more fanfare?

1 Glenn Adamson, 2013. *The Invention of Craft*.

2 Leila Dawney, 2020. "On the idea of the commons", *Crafting the Commons*. Available at: https://commoners.craftspace.co.uk research-network/on-the-idea-of-the-commons/

3 David Pye, 1968. *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*.

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Crafting the Commons: Between Particular Acts and Universal Claims

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The historian E.P. Thompson describes the English commons as "a subtle and sometimes complex vocabulary of usages, of claims to property, of hierarchy and of preferential access to resources, of the adjustment of needs, which, being *lex loci* [in the law of the place], must be pursued in each locality and can never be taken as 'typical'."[1] The particularity of the commons extends beyond the English context. There are universal principles involved in the enactment of what is called commons – of justice, fairness, generosity even – but these only become meaningful when they are manifested in highly specific practices and forms. As this exhibition makes clear, the commons is not a relic of the past. There is nothing static or permanent about the commons, or what constructing it will involve. What the commons is, and how it is brought into existence, is itself always being made, un-made, re-made.

Historically, the commons was about subsistence – before waged labour, the work of the majority was in direct relationship with the land, rivers, forests, animals, which provided the means of subsistence. Rights of use and access were negotiated, agreed, contested. The kinds of labour involved in this economy were not just about social relationships (organising, working, sharing), but 'ecological' relationships, knowing the material properties and qualities of the local environment. Commoning, as the situated "doing" of care-work, involves navigating changing social and material needs, limits and possibilities. This will always involve forms of practical negotiation and experimentation, as Mabel McKay, a Powo healer, observes: "when people don't use the plants, they get scarce. You must use them so they will come up again. All plants are like that. If they're not gathered from, or talked to and cared about, they'll die." The commons is the idea and practice of a way of life that exceeds divisions of nature and culture, that understands material limits but within the contexts of social economies and fairness, rather than private property and accumulation.

The commons, then, is fundamentally about material existence and