

WORKING EUROPE

The Persistence of worker's savoir-faire in industrialized Europe

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ABSTRACT

It is usually thought that workers' know-how (*savoir-faire*) consists only of technical or manual skills, which have gradually been reduced or replaced by technological advances since the industrial revolution. However, workers' specific skills, i.e. their *savoir-faire*, has rather transformed and adapted to this day, in relation to a number of significant historical developments, including the transition from craft to industry, the second industrial revolution, and the end of the Fordist cycle. In this historical perspective, the endurance of *savoir-faire* and respect for the 'rules of art' also demonstrates the ethical and political dimension of the changes at stake.



Worker at the Ginori artisan factory in Doccia (Florence) portrayed during the pressing phase of the mixture for the production of ceramics, 1902.

(Source : [Archivi Alinari, Firenze, APA-f-013459-0000](#))

With the so-called Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries and the development of factories, the nature of work was profoundly transformed. Mechanization, automation, standardization, time measurement: these dynamics raised issues about the future of workers' *savoir-faire* and more generally, the meaning given to work. Indeed, workers' *savoir-faire* encapsulates ethical and civic implications. As Adam Smith noted with respect

to the development of modern manufacturing, the worker “has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention [...]. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become [...] Of the great and extensive interest of his country, he is altogether incapable of judging” (*An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, London, 1776).

Taken over time almost literally by several authors important to the history of politics and labour, from Tocqueville to Marx, Smith’s conception proposes a correlation between the parcelled-out and deculturized labour of manufacturing and the deficit of participation in active citizenship. The cynicism with which Smith proposed his reading of the outcome of the process of the social division of labour therefore shows that the issue of the workers' *savoir-faire* is the basis of the giant process of social and civic integration of the masses of workers in contemporary society. Between the 18th and 19th centuries. While the workers radically changed their status, from subjects to citizens, their *savoir-faire* too changed significantly.

Historians have acknowledged this shift for a long time. In his famous ‘Unbound Prometheus’, David Landes chronicled in the 1960s how the impetuous advance of industrial mass production led to the complete transformation of work processes and cultures, definitively killing off the old individual *savoir-faire* of workers. However, other studies have shown how historically small-scale production was able to adapt to innovation, sometime with greater flexibility and speed compared to mass production. This led to the birth of new craftsmanship, which was able to maintain sophisticated and technically advanced skills and *savoir-faire* in small but significant companies.

19th Century Universal Exhibitions: a test of the resilience of workers' *savoir-faire*

Universal Exhibitions testified to the survival of workers' skills. Since the first one held in London in 1851, Universal Exhibitions had been conceived of as gigantic events promoting the values and culture of industry and technical progress, exported from Europe all over the world. Yet, these events highly valued the ancient *savoir-faire*, technical skills, and aesthetic taste of the craftsmanship specific to various countries. The British industrialists, who had been at the forefront of promoting the event, strongly criticized this tendency towards rewarding products of better quality and taste (and not, for instance, those of lower price).

Following the subsequent London Exposition in 1862, the United Kingdom did not host any more World Expositions. However, the participation of other European countries became important: France in particular hosted no less than five of the ten largest Universal Exhibitions in the second half of the 19th century, the last of which had more than fifty million paying visitors in 1900. In several exhibitions, prizes or entire sections were dedicated to highlighting the inventiveness, intelligence, and skill of individual workers. In Paris in 1855, the intention to 'prize real work' was emphatically expressed; it was, in fact, decided to award prizes also to the 'co-operators' in production and thus to the foremen and the workers themselves, so that 'justice would be done to all merits and to all principal agents of labour'. In London, in 1862, the phenomenon of workmen's exhibitions valorized the individual contributions and skills of the workers; the figures of the worker-inventors and their contribution to technological improvement played a special role.

Savoir-faire as an asset for international exports

Accordingly, the importance of artisan *savoir-faire* was also very marked in Europe for a long time. The European capital was undoubtedly Paris. At the beginning of the 20th century, it is estimated that Paris, with a myriad of small enterprises, centralized around 85% of national production in the field of fashion, furniture, jewelry, luxury goods – productions that France exported all over the world. To a lesser extent, Italy also forged a reputation in this field. In

the country of a 'hundred cities', on the basis of a centuries-old tradition of craftsmanship, quality productions capable of expanding into international markets were developed (ill.). In Spain and Germany, craftsmanship similarly resisted the encroachment of the industrial mode of mass production with some success.

It must be said, however, that blue-collar *savoir-faire* retained its own value even in the face of new basic industrial production processes. The great engineer André Coyne claimed in 1936 for instance that, for the composition of *béton*, "no machine can replace a trained eye". Craftsmanship and its values also persisted in industrialized and advanced economies outside continental Europe. In the United States, David Montgomery observed the endurance of so-called "factory artisans" in large factories. The American historian has shown in particular that even in the United States, the resistance of the skilled workers to the rationalisation process of the large capitalist factory that deprived them of their specialisation formed the basis of a strong common action between skilled and unskilled workers.

Political implications and new adaptations in the 20th century

As described by historian Eric Hobsbawm in his essays on the "working-class aristocracies" in Great Britain at the end of the 19th and in the beginning of the 20th centuries, even in the modern factory, the workman retains the personal *savoir-faire* of his "craft", but he also takes care of his civic and political culture in associations, trade unions and professional leagues. In Germany in particular, the resistance of the craftsmen was significant, given the strength of the German industrial apparatus, and was also based on cultural and social motivations, shared by different and even opposing political parties. In Italy and France, too, the link between left-wing political cultures and skilled workers was strong but was not exclusive to the left. In Italy, after the advent of fascism, even Mussolini strongly supported the world of artisan labour; the same policy was later followed by the Nazis, in both cases favouring artisans with corporate protection measures.

The end of the Fordist cycle in 1960s and in the beginning of the 1970s raised the question again on a new basis. The progressive replacement of the assembly line by production islands and the reliance of the most repetitive operations on new automation processes, revived a certain degree of worker autonomy. The new digital revolution seems to have brought a new attack on worker's *savoir-faire*, in a world where work has become increasingly uncertain, precarious, changeable, and no longer closely fitting the worker profile. Today's working *savoir-faire* resides not in competing with technique, but rather in the ability to control and dominate it, making it compatible with the environment and nature. In the present working world, the working-class aristocracy is no longer identified only with a stable and fixed individual specialization, but with adaptability, with the ability to master, control, and respect ethical, health and naturalistic constraints in work activities being quickly transformed. In short, despite all that has meanwhile changed, the workman's *savoir-faire* continues to be, ultimately, an issue of civilisation.

The old continent is nowadays competing on a global arena. It bases its identity and internal cohesion on principles and values, which have led to relatively highly advanced EU legislation in the field of labour protection. Could the EU succeed in defending the diverse and multifaceted *savoir-faire*, autonomy and creative intelligence of the individual worker, even within new hyper-technological economies?

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