

A SYMPOSIUM ON MATTHEW B. CRAWFORD'S *SHOP CLASS AS SOUL CRAFT: AN INQUIRY INTO THE VALUE OF WORK*

Working Class Heroes

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Matthew Crawford owns a “speed shop,” where he customizes and repairs Honda and other imported motorcycles. He also is a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia (he has a PhD in philosophy from Chicago). His book is an extended argument about why being a motorcycle mechanic is more ennobling, meaningful, and ethical than being an academic. I presume that it was written at the University of Virginia and not at the speed shop, but I will bracket that paradox (one of many in this strange little book) and concentrate instead on the larger question it asks: what does a “good” job look like?

Good jobs pay well and are invulnerable to outsourcing—characteristics shared by many of the skilled trades. *Really* good jobs also inspire pride. The motorcycle mechanic develops this pride because the work demands manual competence, practical judgment, and creativity. Objective standards determine the quality of the work. At the end of the day, the motorcycle is fixed or it remains broken, a fact that no amount of abstract theory can alter. This constant vulnerability to public failure refines the worker’s skills and builds moral character. It also promotes social solidarity between the worker and customer, and among workers themselves, who can appreciate the expert craftsmanship in a successful repair. The worker also feels pride when serving

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higher ideals, in this case, the aesthetics of metal and the spiritual transcendence achieved through high speed racing.

In contrast, academics don’t *do* anything. We engage in abstract theory with no objective standards or physical world to restrain us. We may experience moments of self-esteem, but this is a weak substitute for pride. With no practical know-how, we become dependent, passive, and narcissistic. Our jobs are not inherently meaningful, so we look forward to vacations and other rare occasions when we can reconnect with our humanity and catch glimpses of some higher purpose in life.

These are challenging claims to refute since I am an academic and anything I write is likely to sound defensive. (Granted, Crawford doesn’t criticize all academics—Einstein stands out as an exception, as do the members of his own dissertation committee—but I am not in that “star chamber.”) So I will simply concede the point. I do not know how to fix anything. I do not teach marketable skills. I am a knowledge worker who is dependent on others to judge my success. I am paid to

produce more knowledge workers who are "pliable generalists" who can work on "teams" and follow rules.

Crawford's aim is not to make academics feel bad, however. Instead, he wants to resurrect the trades as an honorable career choice for middle class workers. He blames snobby parents and educators for dissuading talented young people from the trades and streaming them into college and graduate school instead. Why should everyone go to college? Perhaps it is an okay choice for those who need guidance studying literature or philosophy for a few years. But even these young people should spend their summers learning a trade so they will have something to fall back on when all the knowledge jobs are outsourced. Not only would they reap secure economic rewards, their careers would bring deeper satisfaction, because unlike the cubicle jobs where most college graduates are destined, the trades offer their practitioners the opportunity to use both their brains and their bodies at work.

Crawford believes that the entire society would benefit if everyone developed some kind of practical, embodied expertise. The decline of craftsmanship and its replacement by "knowledge work" has produced a society of consumers with no sense of mastery, either over their lives or over their stuff. When something breaks, a consumer will just buy a new one, or else take the object to a specialist for diagnosis and repair. Even those spirited individuals who want to fix their own things are stymied by the layers of "electronic bullshit" that get piled on machines, which make it almost impossible to undertake a do-it-yourself repair. He reserves special contempt for the Mercedes, which is manufactured today without a dipstick. Cars need oil. This fact has not changed. In the 1970s, every teenager knew how to monitor the oil supply in their Volkswagen. (Well, I didn't, but mine blew up on the freeway, so I eventually learned.) Mercedes drivers today must rely on effete technicians in lab coats with access to the latest computer diagnostics to monitor their engine oil. How emasculating!

Crawford invites us to imagine a society where we are all masters of our own stuff. When something breaks, we either fix it in our workshop, or take it over to a friend's

house where we can put our heads together and work out a solution. Imagine a group of folks who hang out together regularly, puttering on their stuff and enjoying each other's company. Now imagine that on a grand scale, as an alternative to our current postindustrial, post-Fordist globalized economy, sort of a cross between Jefferson's yeoman farmer, the DIY culture of today's youth, and Marx's communist utopia.

All of Crawford's examples of meaningful work describe "masculine" arts and men-only spaces. His celebration of machine shop culture borders on the absurd: he relishes the "clubhouse" environment with its dirty jokes and high jinks, conceding only in a buried footnote that women and nonwhite men suffer exclusion from this charmed circle. (To me, C.J. Pascoe's 2007 ethnography of a high school shop class is far more compelling.) Looking past the book's ubiquitous misogyny, however, its argument could apply equally well to cooking, sewing, and the other so-called "feminine" arts. Crawford's point is that making and repairing the material things that we use in our daily lives will reconnect us with our human essence, develop in us a stronger sense of agency and purpose, and build communities devoted to the social good.

So what's stopping us? The villains in Crawford's account are the arrogant parents who disdain the trades, educators who are so intent on building "self esteem" that they never permit "gifted" children to fail, managers who subject workers to ridiculous teambuilding exercises that reward groupthink, and workers who are lulled into complacency by their "freedom" to purchase the latest electronic gadget. These groups have bought into corporate culture without realizing that they are being manipulated to further the global concentration of capital. In the face of the corporate behemoth, Crawford urges the growth of small commercial enterprises (trades unions are curiously missing from his account). His advice to consumers is to buy local goods and services from independent producers—but only if they are truly necessary.

But wait a minute. Aren't Hondas made in factories in Japan? And how much do people really "need" a souped-up motorcycle? More pesky contradictions. Crawford

admits to being a speed fetishist, and he understands all too well that his customers, driven by similar irrational desires, pay him vast sums to realize their motorcycle dreams. Now, I am the last person to begrudge them their consumer pleasures. But to be fair to the rest of us who might fetishize different commodities, it behooves him to clarify why some pleasures are more "soulful" than others. He tries to do this by drawing a distinction between "things" and "devices": the former have inherently meaningful qualities that require focused attention and disciplined mastery to fully appreciate (musical instruments are an example), while the latter provoke instant gratification, diversion, and distraction (e.g., the I-Pod).

If only matters were so simple. The problem is that items in material culture do not have inherent meanings. One person's "thing" is another person's "device." Crawford considers motorcycles a "thing"; others would put Barbie dolls in the "thing" category.

Despite Crawford's understandable yearning for objective standards—for work or for pleasure—judgments of value ultimately rest on subjective criteria. Just as our nature is to use tools, so it is to make meaning.

Meaning-making is a collective endeavor. But Crawford's book is about how his personal values emerged from his work experiences; it does not explore whether these values are shared by others. This is the sociologist's craft. Sociologists know how to ascertain workers' values and goals, and then assess whether they can be achieved in any given organization. We rarely have the power to fix organizations, but the knowledge we produce occasionally proves useful to those who can. Hey, maybe we actually *do* something after all.

Reference

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Fixing Work and the Work of Repair

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Philosophers often question the nature and meaning of work; Karl Marx is perhaps the most familiar to sociologists, followed by the likes of Hannah Arendt and Robert Pirsig. Sociologists, of course, often write ethnographies of virtually any and all forms of work; when I taught the cultural studies of work, I had compiled more than three hundred examples, ranging from firefighters to ballerinas to accountants. Sociologists usually dissect work to understand both its organization and how it forms human experience, but few sociologists (Richard Sennett's essay on craftsmanship is a notable exception) pose the question of what is *good work*. Surely we are interested in this question, and when most of us read Marx's *Manuscripts of 1844*, we were forever changed by the image of alienated work, in which our species beings were shown to be negated through the forced labor of capitalist, industrial labor; and we were inspired

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by the idea that in the Marxian utopia we would be a fisherman in the afternoon, a poet in the evening, and perhaps a motorcycle mechanic in the morning.

Thus philosopher Matthew Crawford's book can be seen as a conversation between Richard Sennet on craftsmanship, Harry Braverman on Marx, Robert Jackall on modern bureaucracies, and especially Robert Pirsig on repair. Pirsig watched others fix his motorcycle and then, frustrated by their inattention and other forms of bad work, learned to do it himself. This led Pirsig to balance the intuitive against the rational, the "romantic" against the "classical," and the "true" against the "good." Crawford writes

“to get a critical handle on my own work history; to understand the human possibilities latent in what I was doing when the work seemed good, and when it was bad . . . ” (p.198). Crawford’s book has received attention because it brings up the old themes of alienated and unalienated labor, and it does so by looking into fixing motorcycles in a funky repair shop. The book is interesting but slightly disappointing perhaps because his story is so much less compelling than Pirsig’s, to which it will be compared.

Crawford tells us that the digital revolution has led high schools to replace shop classes with courses that teach computers. As a result, according to Crawford, there is a shortage of workers for the trades, and a devaluing of trade work. That’s unfortunate, in Crawford’s eyes, because the trades offer work that is interesting, fulfilling, and well paid. Work in the trades requires teamwork; trades workers use their brains as well as their brawn, and their work is meaningful because it cannot be shipped offshore. Here is one of the ironies of the current moment that Crawford uncovers: we have entered an era where white collar as well as factory assembly is increasingly shipped offshore; jobs such as the analysis of MRIs and computer programming takes place any spot on the globe where a lone pioneer can hook up to the net. But it takes a mechanic to fix one’s car, an electrician must install the wiring on a new construction and a plumber must fix the toilet. These are good jobs now and they will remain so in the future.

Crawford notes that there is a false notion implicit in our current educational philosophy, that everyone is “above average” (to use Garrison Keillor’s phrase) and suited for “knowledge work.” The United States is alone in the developed world in this regard; schools in much of Europe track students from a young age toward service jobs (retail, secretarial and so forth), the trades, and only a small percentage prepare for academic universities. This certainly preserves the trades, and integrates them into the social fabric. When you deal with a butcher in Germany, you consult an expert. Our greater educational pluralism, compared to northern Europe, has, in Crawford’s eyes, dumbed us down while it has simultaneously diminished opportunities to be trained in vocational arts.

Crawford distinguishes the trades from crafts, and both of them from assembly, although the lines between the three are not always clear. A craftsman makes an object like a wagon wheel or a guitar, and draws upon subtle knowledge of materials and how they respond to a wide range of environments and actions. The replacement of crafts work by the assembly line began in the nineteenth century and is now largely complete. Crafts work per se is largely obsolete, except for the manufacture of objects like the musical instruments mentioned above. The trades are generally not like crafts work because they operate in a closed system and require exact knowledge: a carpenter seeks the center bubble of his (or her!) level and an electrician hooks up wires to work in only one exact way. The light is either on or off. Crawford distinguishes this kind of work from what Aristotle called the “stochastic” arts, practices that deal with failure and always draw upon incomplete knowledge. The stochastic arts are the basis of medicine and, significantly for Crawford, repair. Like craft work, repair requires tacit knowledge, intuitive as well as logical reasoning, and other non-rational insights. These discussions, however, blend into each other and overlap, perhaps because the trades, repair and craft are more alike than different.

Crawford draws his insights from his own work experiences. In one job for a digital resource center, he wrote abstracts of articles he discovered he didn’t have to understand and the time constraints he worked under made that impossible anyway. His friend and co-worker zoned out on heroin. His well-paid job for a think tank, where he worked after finishing his PhD, involved producing right-wing political position papers, such as denials of global warming. It is no surprise that he was drawn back to the trades as an electrical installer, and eventually to the work of repair, in which he dabbled at as a teenager. In these worlds, unlike the knowledge production worlds where he had worked, there were measurable outcomes and often a strong sense of community. As a result these work worlds had the integrity that the knowledge work did not.

Crawford’s experiences are unusual and interesting but they are limited and

sometimes lead to overly simple conclusions. For example, the connection between shop classes in high school and careers in the trades has never been strong. In my generation, boys (and sometimes girls) who grew up on small farms learned to repair, weld and even fabricate machines, and for them shop classes were so elementary they were largely a joke. We were making birdhouses while kids from farms had already welded manure spreaders together. The sons and daughters of small shops also learned at the hand of their parents and graduated to one form or another of trades work. A handful of us from the academic high school tracks got jobs in shops or otherwise became informal apprentices; this is how Crawford got his first taste of repair, in a California speed shop fixing his VW. Were one to think more broadly about changing opportunities to drift into the world of the trades, the evolution of agriculture from small to large farms, and the decline of mom and pop repair shops would likely be a more important factor than the diminished number of shop classes.

Crawford's discussion of how the computer has eliminated the face-to-face community of trades work also may be too simple. The demanding old expert that Crawford needles information from and pays in beer has been in part replaced by on-line manuals and blogs. In fact it is quite extraordinary to find oneself up against an unanticipated problem in the middle of a repair and to find the solution in a blog (with photos) that one has found simply by typing "clutch repair, 1991 Miata" into a Google search. The blogs are momentary virtual communities where others, for the pure pleasure of sharing, lay out even the esoteric repairs Crawford attempts.

He says he does not want to idealize the trades but he does, and at times because they seem to preserve a bastion of maleness. These male worlds are supposedly practical and straightforward; female work worlds are not. Crawford writes: "There is a real freedom of speech on the job site, which reverberates outward and sustains a wider liberality. You can tell dirty jokes. Where there is real work being done, the order of things isn't quite so fragile" (p. 157). He suggests that the ambiguity of the office "...

sounds like being part of a clique of girls, where one can commit a serious misstep without knowing it; where one's place in the hierarchy is made difficult to know because of the forms and manners of sisterhood" (p. 158). In treating gender stereotypically Crawford may tell us more about himself than about modern society. The trades are becoming gender-integrated and while the integration is far from complete, the assertion that the more slippery worlds of the office are somehow more "female" is, at best, strange. Crawford's idealization of repair work or the trades also obscures the degree to which the work of repair has been rationalized and in this way become dehumanized for both workers and consumers. The intellectual work of repair has been largely separated from the worker, just as it was decades ago in mass production. The computer tells the mechanic when to check a part for wear and when and how to replace it, seldom to fix it. The cost of owning a car, for example, even as cars have improved mechanically, has become astronomical because both consumers and mechanics accept the authority of the computer, even when it makes little sense at all. Recently, for example, my mechanic told me he had to charge me twice for disassembling the same part in my car's front axle (he'd done two repairs), because the computer program that determined the costs of repairs could not be overridden by a mechanic with good sense.

Crawford acknowledges that what he calls good work can exist anywhere. Here he draws upon Richard Sennet's insights about craftsmanship occurring not only in crafts production, but virtually anywhere, for it is a basic human impulse to do a job well. One of the most prescient arguments in Crawford's book describes the changing work of the mortgage banker. Not long ago they were integrated into communities and served as their moral arbitrators. A mortgage created a thirty-year relationship. The banker was a part of a community of shared goals and mutual respect. Laws prohibited banks from serving more than their local communities, so the connection between the bank and its customers was assured. The work was meaningful because it required a kind of craftsmanship of interpersonal judgment.

We now know what happens when this system is replaced with one in which greed-driven smartness creates an illusion of rationality while creating a financial system that is crazy to its core.

The heart of the book is an informal ethnography of Crawford's motorcycle repairing. Crawford specializes in old motorcycles that break down and wear out in complicated ways. Many parts deteriorate simultaneously and fixing one part may require fixing many others; repairs blend into restorations. If one takes a rational by-the-hour approach one could easily invest thousands of dollars in a machine that is in fact worth very little. Yet Crawford needs the work and so his attitude is conflicted. Perhaps he uses reverse psychology, appearing to talk a customer out of a repair. He determines a price for his labor that may pay him half his posted wages, assigning value to his work in irrational as well as rational ways. He can be an outsider because there is a market for the repair of unusual or old machines and his work creates a social identity he enjoys and finds meaningful. He writes: "I try to be a good motorcycle mechanic. This effort connects me to others, in particular to those who exemplify good motorcycling, because it is they who can best judge how well I have realized the functional goods I am aiming at. . . . My point . . . isn't to recommend motorcycling . . . nor to idealize the life of a mechanic. It is rather to suggest that if we follow the traces of our own actions to their source, they intimate some understanding of the good life. This understanding may be hard to articulate; bringing it more fully into view is the task of moral inquiry" (p. 197).

I got a lot of appreciative chuckles from the passages that describe his actual work. Crawford admits that he's not much of a mechanic—he's forever rounding off nuts or breaking off bolts. He's certainly dogged and learns from his mistakes, but he lacks a master. I remembered my own master in this universe, a small shop repairman

named Willie, whose work I studied. I found many of the same things Crawford found. Willie worked for the pleasure of doing a job well: I remember him once fixing the front alignment of a huge tractor, which involved taking a lot of stuff apart and grinding new grooves in steel rods, just because it bothered him that the tractor was perennially out of alignment and thus a bear to drive. Willie charged for his work, of course, but the calculus had very little to do with hourly rates or other forms of rational exchange. He was a respected member of poor rural community, where a lot of us depended on peculiar, often handmade machines. What was interesting, however, was that when I published Willie's story, I received many letters from workers at many niches of society who suggested that perhaps I had been wrong to associate Willie's instincts only to the kind of work he did. While Crawford acknowledges this theme, it gets a bit lost in translation. Perhaps had he found a master in his universe, his ideas would have been easier to develop.

Crawford's ideas are important in part because of their timing. The world is becoming extraordinarily more connected and as a result work is moving across national and cultural boundaries with dizzying speed. Low wages draw work to corners of the world in which workers and the environment are more easily exploited. Even skilled work that one could depend on for a career is being shipped to lower wage countries. The typical reaction in the West has been to emphasize preparation for knowledge work. President Obama has, for example, repeatedly advocated college or university education for all or most Americans, and very recently has re-introduced a G.I. Bill. The implication behind these policies is that even a little college or university is a good thing and, implicitly, that work that does not require university training is less worthy and less fulfilling. Crawford offers a counter argument, and it is refreshing to discover a philosophy PhD who draws his insights from the repair of old motorcycles.