

Jean Baudrillard
The Artisan//1973

[...] The status of the artisan is defined not only by the ownership of his 'labour power' (as distinct from the slave) but, as distinct from the salaried worker, by the ownership of his 'instruments of production'. He controls his 'means of production' and the process of his 'labour'. Only the distribution and commercialisation of the product escape him – not wholly however, since if the process of production develops in the framework of an integrated community (the corporation), the processes of distribution and consumption always take place in the cadre of integrated personal relations (self-subsistence, family, tribe, village, neighbourhood). This determination is at least as important as the strict 'juridical ownership of the means of production' in defining the artisanal mode.¹ At the stage of artisan exchange, there is still a collective mode to personal relations in which the circulation of products, though mediated by money, still does not have the general equivalence of commodities, just as the people who make the exchanges still do not have the status of equivalence with respect to a market. That is the basic definition of the artisan class: a mode of social relations in which not only is the process of production controlled by the producer but in which the *collective process remains internal to the group*, and in which producers and consumers are the same people, above all defined through the reciprocity of the

group. This situation can be illustrated by the example of language. Language is not produced by certain people and consumed by others; everyone is at the same time a producer and a consumer. In fact, there are neither producers nor consumers and what is established is not the general equivalence of individuals vis-à-vis language, but an immediate reciprocity of exchange *through language*.²

In the primitive exchange gift, the status of goods that circulate is close to language. The goods are neither produced nor consumed as values. Their function is the continuous articulation of the exchange. The situation is not completely the same in artisanal exchange since goods there already have a finality of use and a value. But something remains of the personal quality of the exchange that does not permit distinguishing production and consumption as two separated functions. Just as one cannot speak of the relation of the blacksmith to his hammer, or of the relation of the peasant to the plow or his land, as a relation to 'means of production', so the relation of the artisan to his work is not one 'productive force' applied to the other 'forces of production'. It is clear moreover that neither the product, nor the instrument, nor the operation itself can be dissociated from the personal relationship in which they occur. All the categories above only serve to rationalise the situation.

It is even false to say that in artisanal work the artisan is 'master of his labour' and 'product of his labour'. For he is not in the situation of an autonomous individual, in a position of 'control', that is, of productive exteriority. To define 'work' as a process of concrete labour, in opposition to industrial labour, is not enough. It is *something other than labour*. Just as there is no separation between the sphere of producers and the sphere of consumers, so there is no true separation between labour power and the product, between the position of the subject and of the object. The artisan lives his work as a relation of symbolic exchange, abolishing the definition of himself as 'labourer' and the object as 'product of his labour'. Something in the material that he works is a continuous response to that which he does, escaping all productive finality (which purely and simply transforms materials into use value or exchange value). There is something that eludes the law of value and bears witness to a kind of reciprocal prodigality. In his work, what he bestows is lost and given and rendered, expended and resolved and abolished, but not 'invested'.

All of this is clarified further through the problem of the work of art about which historical materialism, fixated in the scheme of production, has only been able to comment with respect to its mode of socio-historical determination, mechanistic or structural, never being able to account for the moment of its operation and of its radical difference.

But this is also true, to a lesser extent, of artisanal work (according to etymology, 'demiurge'), which draws a radical difference between work and labour. *Work is a*

process of destruction as well as of 'production', and in this way work is symbolic. Death, loss and absence are inscribed in it through this dispossession of the subject, this loss of the subject and the object in the scansion of the exchange. Starting from the concepts of production and labour, we will never grasp what happens there in the negation of labour, the negation of the law of value, in the destruction of value. The work of art and to a certain extent the artisanal work bear in them the inscription of the loss of the finality of the subject and the object, the radical compatibility of life and death, the play of an ambivalence that the product of labour as such does not bear since it has inscribed in it only the finality of value.

The world of production, our world, has eliminated this ambivalence. To project it everywhere else is a theoretically fraudulent operation, but also a failure to the extent that it annihilates its object in order to avoid its radical contradiction. All materialist writing bears the stigmas of the rigidity and the silence that it imposes on its object.

In relation to the Greek city, J.P. Vernant suggests a very important series of elements pertaining to the status of the demiurge and labour.

The unity of the polis is not based on a distribution of tasks, a division of labour, a functional differentiation, but on a 'philia', a political community of citizens defined as peers. There is no human or social function of labour. 'The social bond is established beyond the craft at that level where the citizens can reciprocally love one another.'³ The term 'division of labour' itself is anachronistic here. It assumes a representation of the craft in relation to production in general, a functional differentiation into abstract, rational elements which is not the case. There is a distribution of tasks as a function of needs and capacities; each 'labour' maintains its particular destination and does not have its meaning in reference to other 'labour', but uniquely in its end, in the need of the user. The activity of labour is seen exclusively as a function of the use value of the manufactured product. It places the producer and the user in a more or less direct relationship. A personal bond of dependence, a relation of service, seems to be established between them. 'From the perspective of use value, the product is not viewed as a function of the human labour that created it, as crystallised labour. On the contrary, it is labour that is seen as a function of the product, as appropriate for the satisfaction of a given need of the user.'⁴

Demiurgical labour does not produce 'value'. It is a response to a demand (the need of the user) and is exhausted in this response. Articulated by the demand of the other, and articulating this demand, the object does not take on the status of value (sum of accumulated labour) that could circulate beyond this relation and enter as such into other equivalences. By way of summary, the problem is one of the best use of things, not of their transformation through labour. (Praxis, a noble activity, is always one of use, as distinct from poesis which designates fabrication.

Only the former, which plays and acts, but does not produce, is noble.) The result is that in no way does 'productivity' emerge. The division of tasks is never considered as a means of organising production in order to obtain a maximum productivity from a given quantity of labour. Similarly, there is no 'technical' autonomisation of the instruments of labour. They do not have a technical status like our means of production, their *techne* is connected. They have neither technical thought, nor thought oriented toward indefinite progress.

All these facts converge toward one point: the inadequacy of the concepts of labour, production, productive force, and relations of production in accounting for, let us say, pre-industrial organisation (the same holds also for feudal or traditional organisation). However, an objection can be made against Vernant. Breaking with the primacy of production and denouncing the tendency to impose it in a context where it does not apply, Vernant transfers the emphasis to needs and the finality of personal use. It is these elements that define wealth and it is in them that the personal relation (on which social relations are based) is centred (and not in production, which is not significant). In the polis, two persons are united under the sign of use value, rather than in our economy, where the relation is put under the sign of exchange value. In effect, this defines, for us, the service relation.⁵ But it is necessary to see that the notion of service is still strongly impregnated by our categories: economic categories since it simply effects a transfer of exchange value to use value; psychological categories since it preserves the separation of the producer and the user, putting them simply in an intersubjective relation. 'Personal' exchange is, in this case, only a psychological dimension that comes to connote or to overdetermine properly economic exchange. (We see this today with the 'personalisation' of exchanges, the psychological designation of a relation as that of two equivalent economic subjects.) And 'service' is only a moralised, altruistic scheme that preserves the respective position of the subjects while seeking to go beyond it.

Symbolic reciprocity is very different from this. *The symbolic must never be confused with the psychological.* The symbolic sets up a relation of exchange in which the respective positions cannot be autonomised:

- neither the producer and his product;
- nor the producer and the user;
- nor the producer and his 'concrete' essence, his labour power ;
- nor the user and his 'concrete' essence, his needs;
- nor the product and its 'concrete' finality, its utility.

All these distinctions, which are evident in psychology and political economy, are excluded by symbolic relations.

Abstract social labour creating exchange value by the mediation of the whole system of capital is the formula of our political economy. Labour-use value creating product-use value in a direct relation of producer and user is the formula of the artisan mode according to Vernant. This is still an economic formula. In our contemporary ideology of service it functions in the first instance purely and simply as a bonus and excuse, just as use value in general serves as an excuse for exchange value. Symbolic relations call both formulas into question. To the extent that Vernant restricts the originality of the artisan form as in the second formula, he allows himself to avoid its specifically symbolic character; its irreducibly non-economic nature.

The materialist rewriting of the slave or the artisan (of the slave or feudal-artisanal mode) has serious consequences to the extent that schemas of 'liberation' and transcendence, which are in reality repressive schemas, develop from it. We have seen how the reinterpretation of slavery in terms of the expropriation of labour power led to considering its reappropriation by the 'free' labourer as absolute progress in the human order. This relegates servitude to an absolute barbarism, fortunately overcome thanks to the development of productive forces. This ideology of freedom remains the weak point of our Western rationality, including Marxism.

Similarly, the conception of the artisan as 'master of his labour and of his production', as 'subject of the system of labour'⁶ immediately implies the utopia of a *Golden Age of productive labour*. But, there is no 'labour'; there is only the division of labour and the sale of labour power. The truth of labour is its capitalist definition. Starting from this definition, the illusion is established of labour that would be nothing but labour, one that can be reappropriated in the totality of its process, as an artisanal alternative to the capitalist system. In fact, this alternative remains imaginary. It makes no reference at all to what is symbolic in the mode of the artisan, but to the artisan revised and corrected in terms of the mastery and autonomy of the producer. But such mastery is absurd since its definition encloses itself in terms of labour and use value. The individual who 'controls' his labour is an idealisation of this basic constraint. It is simply the slave who has become *his own master*, since the master-slave couple is interiorised in the same individual without ceasing to function as an alienated structure. He 'disposes' of himself; he is his own usufruct. This is self-management at the level of the individual producer, but self-management as we know is nothing but the metamorphosis of productive management. In its collective form, it outlines today the Golden Age of social-productivism. The self-management of the artisan is only the Golden Age of the small, individual producer, the apotheosis of the 'instinct of workmanship'.

But this nostalgic view of the artisan is not the deed of a few aesthetes or intellectuals. All worker demands that transcend wage demands even a little

aim, in this sense, at a reappropriation of the labour process, if not of the product. Through working conditions, 'job enrichment', the questioning of assembly-line work, the control of work rates and investments, etc., it is always a matter of becoming again 'the subject of the labour system'. Proudhon had envisaged 'the polyvalence by which the worker, accomplishing the whole cycle of production, would become once again the master of the complete process.' Whether this demand today is individual (it gets stranded in the potter or the neo-artisan), communal or collective, it is always the ideal of a reappropriation of labour and this ideal depends on sublimation. It perpetuates, under the autonomy of the labourer, the principle of the sublimation of labour.

- 1 [Footnote 2 in source] In a certain way, the moment of consumption remains of the artisan type even in the system of our political economy. The user who consumes enters into personal relationship with the product and directly recovers its 'use value', just as the process of artisan labour preserves the use value of the labour power of the artisan. But this personal exchange in consumption is restricted for us to the level of the privatised individual. This also remains the only moment that seems to avoid exchange value, hence it is invested today with a very strong psychological and social charge.
- 2 [3] Language is thus not a 'means' of communication (no more than the tool is a 'means' of production for the artisan or the primitive). Nor are individuals thinkable as separated terms outside the exchange of language. At this level, language is a symbolic form and it is so not, as is generally thought, in its coded signification function, nor in its structural agency.
- 3 [4] Jean-Pierre Vernant, 'Le travail et la pensée technique', in *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs* (1965) (Paris: La Découverte, 2008).
- 4 [5] Ibid.
- 5 [6] Moreover, it is this notion of service that is everywhere used as an excuse to revive the present system of exchange value, that is, the fiction (it can only be a fiction for us) of a personal exchange mediated only by use value.
- 6 [7] Pierre Rolle, *Introduction à la sociologie du travail* (Paris: Larousse, 1970) 148.