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Crafts in Transition

There has been much debate about the role, function - even the justification of traditional and contemporary crafts in western culture. We may argue that in the traditional crafts there survives a pre-Modern vision set against a culture primarily defined by serial production. Crafts and their practitioners may be conceptualised as vestiges of resistance against the increasing commoditisation of our lives. Yet even crafts are subject to the logic of late capitalism (Jameson)¹, the tyranny of the sign (Baudrillard)² and the conspicuous consumption of the leisure class (Veblen)³.

It is hard to envisage a truly post-industrial age when the dominant industrial paradigm still operates as if we have an endless supply of resources that can fuel the global myth of progress, measured by the consumption of commodities. Thus we hear much talk of sustainability yet see very limited action. Living sustainably means dramatically changing our lifestyle – something only few of us are prepared to do. Indeed the post-industrial world is likely to be thrown upon us by nature itself – and when this happens it is the primordial nature of our craft skills that are central for our adaptation to the new conditions we will find ourselves in.

In the light of the global environmental crisis: the mass extinction of species, the depletion of resources and the devastating implications of climate change, the role of crafts and their practitioners will change and evolve into one more reminiscent of our pre-industrial past, but with a remit to create and sustain what we prioritise for our survival.

This paper will outline why we are in transition towards a de-industrialised future and why crafts skills are set to play an important role in the survival of the human species. The paper will make reference to the Transition Towns Initiative (Hopkins)⁴. It will draw upon a number of case studies from Transition Initiatives and discuss the emphasis placed upon re-skilling and the role of crafts in realising the vision for a sustainable society.

¹ Jameson, Fredric – Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism / London:Verso, 1992

² Baudrillard, Jean, 1929-2007 – For a critique of the political economy of the sign / St Louis, MO: Telos

³ Veblen, Thorstein, 1857-1929, The theory of the leisure class / Harmondsworth:Penguin Books, 1994

⁴ Hopkins, Rob – The transition handbook: from oil dependency to local resilience / Totnes, Devon: Green Books 2008