

# Organizing *Tekhnē*: Configuring processes and politics through craft

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**Marta Gasparin**   
Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

**Daniel Neyland**  
University of Oxford, UK

## Abstract

In this paper we investigate how craft as *tekhnē* configures organizations and their politics by exploring the relations of technology and organization. Through a two-year ethnographic study of remote craft villages in Vietnam, we consider how political concerns are mobilized, distributed and materialized through craft. Defining craft as a process of organizing that often involves mundane objects, but also sits at the centre of political concerns, we are interested in understanding how craft as *tekhnē* is realized in organizations and suggest two key features: craft as a location for politics and as a basis for mobilizing politics of scale. We provide three main contributions. First, we show that *tekhnē* can hold steady a focus on organizing through mundane objects. Second, we demonstrate that attending to the mundane reveals distinct relationships between technology and forms of organizing, that mobilize political concerns. Third, we explore the ways mundane objects of *tekhnē* are not only involved in representing and preserving cultural heritage, but also in challenging the marginalized status of these communities.

## Keywords

craft, ethnography, objects, politics, scale, science and technology studies, technology, *tekhnē*

## Introduction

Every Sunday<sup>1</sup> in the main square in Sapa, a rural village in Vietnam, there was a traditional Hmong<sup>2</sup> market, a place where the locals would meet, exchange goods, eat and drink together and, of course, gossip. During the tourist season, this local market was replicated every evening. However, following a tourism boom, commercial stalls have been replacing local, handmade, artisan craft products with industrially made ‘craft’ to be sold to tourists. These items are not very well made, and the prices are considerably lower than the traditional handmade products that used to be

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## Corresponding author:

Marta Gasparin, Associate Professor in Culture, Organization and Entrepreneurship, Copenhagen Business School, Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy.  
Email: [mga.mpp@cbs.dk](mailto:mga.mpp@cbs.dk)

on offer. This has created organizational issues in the traditional craft market, as the craft makers have seen their work devalued. New challenges have emerged around price and competition, and younger generations of Hmong have progressively lost interest in learning traditional skills and techniques involved in making products that can now be made more quickly through technology, with, for example, machine-printed patterns instead of hand-stitched embroidery.

The local market in Sapa illustrates some of the tensions, struggles and issues involved when craft is not only a product, but also a technology that plays a part in organizing and materializing everyday practices in new ways. In this paper, technology is approached as a process (Scott & Davis, 2007), as the realization of something new (Cooper, 1993). From the earliest Greek narratives, craft and technology were intertwined, central to organizing matters and materiality (Beyes, Holt, & Pias, 2020a, p. 505). The word technology comes from the Greek *tekhnologia*, and is composed of *tekhnē* – art, craft – plus *logia*, the ‘systematic study of an art’.<sup>3</sup>

For the ancient Greeks, *tekhnē* meant the art of making present, of bringing something to realization: a chair, a coat, a field of corn, the word of God. In these examples, *tekhnē* brings a required object or event present to the human senses and so makes it available for use and understanding; it gives clear form to what was formerly remote or absent. (Cooper, 1993, p. 279)

Thus, in this paper, we are interested in understanding what constitutes craft as *tekhnē*, and what its role is in organizations. We suggest that craft as *tekhnē* can generate matters of economic and political concern.

Our paper joins a recent focus in the organization studies literature on the organization and meaning of craft in contemporary society (Bell, Mangia, Taylor, & Toraldo, 2019). Here, craft is analysed as a multifaceted, inclusive notion of embodied organizational relations, with ethical importance in organizational life (Bell & Vachhani, 2020). Craft products are presented as meaningful artefacts, as skilfully worked material (Holt & Yamauchi, 2019), and as sites of resistance (Rippin & Vachhani, 2019). Craft is also used to understand work and organizations (Bell, Toraldo, Taylor, & Mangia, 2019), and past and future imaginaries (Bell, Dacin, & Toraldo, 2021).

Crucially, craft is a political technology (Black & Burisch, 2020). In Vietnam, craft has been playing a role in national and international political decision-making. For example, in the post-colonial period, in the years which built up to the United States vs. Vietnam War, the US government manipulated the production of Vietnamese handicrafts to be absorbed into the American market, as part of its anti-communist campaign (Way & Grant, 2020). Through craft, the USA wanted to establish a robust and enduring economic connection to South Vietnam in order to keep this region under its influence. We can note here that craft is not a neutral artefact, but it generates, embeds and distributes organizational, political and economic concerns, which we aim to explore.

Drawing on our fieldwork into small artisanal organizations in Vietnam, in this paper we investigate craft as a specific way of thinking through relations of technology and organization. More specifically, we are interested in understanding how craft as *tekhnē* is involved in making visible political issues and how craft objects can mobilize political concerns. In this paper we investigate: How does craft as *tekhnē* configure organizations and their politics? How are political concerns mobilized, distributed and materialized through craft? Since craft is often deeply involved in everyday organizational life, we are interested in investigating how it is realized through ordinary objects. Thus, we also ask: How does *tekhnē* accomplish a demarcation of objects as mundane, and what happens when this demarcation is challenged?

In addressing these questions, we contribute to the special issue on ‘Technology and Organization’ by showing that craft as *tekhnē* can provide a specific way of apprehending relations of technology and organization, in which political concerns emerge through mundane objects and in clashes

between scales. Thus, we define craft as a process of organizing at the centre of political concerns. We focus our discussion on what we found to be two key features of craft as *tekhnē*: craft as location for politics and craft as a basis for mobilizing politics of scale. We demonstrate this in three stages.

First, we propose that craft as *tekhnē* can hold steady a focus on forms of organizing involving mundane objects, through which political concerns are mobilized. In our analysis, we present two mundane objects: a table and a vat, which are central in organizing the socio-economic, cultural and environmental aspects of the craft villages. In defining mundane objects, we draw on the Latin *mundus/mundanus* (meaning worldly, or of the world; see Pollner, 1974). These objects accomplish their status as mundane through their involvement in organizational routines and practices, and help construct experiences, meanings, representations, and practices. Our suggestion is that, if we start to explore how *tekhnē* becomes an embedded part of everyday forms of organizing through mundane objects, we can unfold the political concerns with which these mundane objects are involved. Without this attention, the politics of *tekhnē* can become overlooked and the possibilities for change missed. By paying close attention to *tekhnē*, we can instead offer due regard to the opportunities these objects provide for a recasting of organizational politics.

Second, by considering craft as *tekhnē*, we show that attending to the mundane reveals new and distinct relationships between technology and socio-economic forms of organizing that raise political concerns. In the craft of rural ethnic minority communities in Vietnam, these politics become evident. For example, as we will see in the analysis, holding craft together as emblematic of traditional ways of working, despite the rapid industrial transformations that characterize much of contemporary Vietnam, is sometimes seen by the Vietnamese government as an act of anti-state subversion. At the same time, mundane objects act upon the politics and challenge the marginalized status of these communities. However, being mundane, these forms of *tekhnē* are often overlooked.

Third, politics appear as a revelation in those moments when *tekhnē* is challenged as an enduring combination of technology and performance. In our ethnography, this happens when the ordinary and mostly small-scale work of artisans in remote villages is suddenly confronted by the large-scale global tourist industry and its infrastructural developments in rural Vietnam. In this confrontation, traditional work, traditional ways of organizing and who gets to have a say in new developments, become sites of political tension. Through these clashes, we suggest that *tekhnē* is mobilized as part of what we will term a politics of scale, which entails a rethinking of the relations between technology and processes in organizations. Craft is drawn on to act as emblematic of traditional ways of working in the face of rapid development, as a preservation of the rural countryside against the aggressive construction of infrastructures that appear to place development ahead of heritage. But this in itself requires effort and is a struggle. As we shall see, accomplishing scale and challenging the political marginalization of craft is not straightforward.

We begin our paper by reviewing the concepts of *tekhnē* and technology in organization studies; we then reflect on everyday objects in organizations, on the issues of scale, and why these matter for organization studies. Having set out our theoretical focus, we outline our method, which is based on ethnographic research as a key means to apprehend the mundane (Cochoy, Hagberg, & Kjellberg, 2019). Our analysis is presented through two mundane objects that open up our exploration of *tekhnē* in craft communities in Vietnam: the table and the vat.

## Literature Review

### *Technology in organization*

The relationship between technology and forms of organizing has been widely explored and continually reworked in organization studies through multiple perspectives. For example, research has

investigated technology and its relation with multiple, emergent and shifting assemblages in contemporary organizing (Orlikowski, 2007, 2010), ethical issues (Bloomfield & Vurdubakis, 2015), organizational temporal structures (Hernes, Feddersen, & Schultz, 2021) and everyday political, aesthetic and administrative performances (Jørgensen & Holt, 2019). Cooper (1993) indicates that the contemporary meaning of technology is disconnected from the original meaning in Greek etymology, as the concept of technology has changed connotation:

The modern glossing of technology preserves this old meaning but gives it a curious twist. Instead of the concern with making present, with the art of constructing something for the apprehension of the senses, the modern interest in technology puts the stress on immediacy of use, constant availability and the easing of effort. (Cooper, 1993, p. 279)

In recent years, we have seen studies that promote a renewed interest in the governance or organization of technology (Ziewitz, 2016), work on the organization of innovative technologies to address climate change (Lederer & Kreuter, 2018), research on emerging technologies and hegemonic practices (Räsänen & Linde, 2004) and analyses of how technologies shift workplace boundaries (Manley & Williams, 2019). Through these inquiries, we are confronted with an array of ways of rethinking what constitutes technology and organization and the relation between them, as well as how organizational actors make sense of technology (Nyberg, 2009). In this stream of literature, the focus is predominantly on new technologies and their associated demands for reworking forms of organizing. Algorithmic developments, for example, require new modes of governance (Introna, 2016; Neyland, 2015); technological innovations necessitate new patterns of organizing (Zammuto, Griffith, Majchrzak, Dougherty, & Faraj, 2007); and the arrival of new technologies creates disruption in organization (Pentland & Feldman, 2007).

By way of contrast, in Cooper's (1993) work, technology is 'immemorially connected' to representation (p. 279), and *tekhnē* 'now becomes a transient aggregate given to assembly, disassembly and reassembly' (pp. 281–282), which invoke new forms of power. Power here is not understood as emanating from within, nor is power located in universal laws. Instead, power is created within the moment of actualization from which politics folds and unfolds (Spoelstra, 2016). In this way, reality is not singular and absolute, but an indeterminate set of realities mediated by technologies (Cooper, 1987). Rather than focusing on technology as new, as the crisis that requires control, Cooper (2009) treats technology as the ongoing basis for translating the *modus operandi* of social life, by bringing forward the mute and mutable matter of the world as a distant source of infinite potential.

In our study, we reflect on this *modus operandi*, on this *tekhnē* of art and object that occasionally clashes with the new to generate politics. We suggest that there are two key sites where these politics emerge: in demarcating matters as mundane and in clashes between scales.

### *Ordinary, pervasive, mundane*

Objects are considered by the organization studies literature as pervasive in organizations (Cooper, 2009), and an increasing number of studies have been putting these ordinary objects at the centre of investigation. In this research, objects are said to be shaped and enabled by organizational processes (Beyes, Holt, & Pias, 2020a). At the same time, objects mediate, embody and transform the practices, structures, relationships, identities and histories of organizations (Beyes, Holt, & Pias, 2020b). In return, objects disseminate and disperse organizations (Cooper, 2009), facilitate decision-making, planning and control (Beverungen, 2020), distribute space and time (Chun, 2020;

Whyte, 2020), make visible power and gendered roles (Zundel, 2020) and offer forms of resistance (Just, 2020).

Objects are an assemblage of human–non-human actants whose attendance is material, ideational and social, since they express both functional and social relations (Burrell & Dale, 2020) that are never fixed (Beyes et al., 2020b). Objects and technologies are considered as epistemologically productive; their materiality affects the organization through mediation (Beyes et al., 2020a). They play a part in accomplishing the nature of the organization, raising a broad array of questions around such important concerns as order, transparency and place. For example, the typeface is

essentially homeless; it lives to be something else, and can become almost anything. Its omnipresent prodigality is so commonplace as to be barely recognized. It works silently and perfectly time after time, without decay, and carrying within itself all the meaning, menace, and love a world might muster. (Holt, 2020, p. 465)

From this, we can see that objects point towards the importance of the role of the mundane in forms of organizing. In studies of plastic (Hawkins, 2018), queueing technologies (Vargha, 2018), collaboration and coordination in technologically saturated settings (Luff & Heath, 2019), the very status of something as mundane – or as Pollner (1974) suggests, of how something becomes of the world – is an important part of organizational politics. To become embedded within and taken for granted in the operations of an organization, to become a fundamental characteristic of a way of working, to become pervasive, are all ongoing processes with a political bearing. Politics lies in accomplishing this demarcation of the ordinary; here, different practices emerge, enabling different visions of the world (Mol, 2006).

We can infer that politics reside in the ongoing accomplishment of the relationships between people, organizations and objects. Mundane objects in organizations are widely distributed, and they are critical to provoking questions of identity, access and voice. As they are often routinized, mundane objects are often taken for granted. As we will analyse in our study, it is important to pay attention to what happens when the mundane status of objects is challenged.

## Scale

Alongside demarcations of the mundane, we have also noted in our research that politics emerges in clashes between scales. Cooper (1993) suggests that technologies create and enable power–knowledge effects by appropriating represented items on a grand and potentially all-consuming scale. Such scaling facilitates control at a distance (Cooper, 1987) and, at the same time, scaling depends on many small technological operations through socio-technical networks (Cooper, 1992).

A notable source of inspiration for Cooper's ideas is Latour's (1983, 1993) early work on Pasteur and the development of the anthrax vaccine for cattle. For Latour, Pasteur's great achievement was to move between scales. Pasteur's laboratory acted as the theatre of the proof through which the cause of anthrax – a micro-organism – could be isolated from the world of agriculture. In the laboratory, the cattle were miniaturized in a Petri dish; the anthrax bacillus, invisible to the human eye, was increased in its scale, made visible, easy to control, and cooperative to Pasteur's inquiry.

Politicians, farmers, other scientists and writers from beyond the laboratory could then be recruited to the cause by demonstrating that cattle can be vaccinated to prevent their death. But evidence of the success of the vaccine required projecting the results from the laboratory back into agriculture. The laboratory results had to be upscaled through this projection back into the world of agriculture. Thousands of cows must be vaccinated and stand among the corpses of the

non-vaccinated. The recruits (politicians, farmers, writers) can now see the results, and hence talk, write about and publish this success.

In the next sections, we analyse how *tekhnē* at times accomplishes a settled, pervasive, mundane form of organizing, and at other times provokes fundamental questions about, for example, place, identity, marginalization and voice. We reflect on the politics that are provoked by demarcating mundane objects; for example, when efforts are made to move between scales.

## Methodology: Ethnography in Vietnam

Our fieldwork on ethnic minority craft makers in remote rural villages in Vietnam brought to the surface the ways in which craft as *tekhnē* is both ordinary and taken for granted, becoming of the world of crafts people, and is entangled in politics of scale.

### Research setting

The ethnic minority communities visited by one of us (Marta) still carry some stigma from the French-colonial War and the American–Vietnamese War. Marta was told, behind closed doors, that these communities from the mountains fought alongside French troops when communists descended from the Chinese border to liberate Vietnam from colonial power. The Vietnamese revolution had a profound global impact as it defined the end of French colonialism. Because of their support for the French (possibly not voluntary), for many years these communities and their craft skills were not represented in museums nor mentioned in books, since the post-revolutionary nation state imposed a very specific cultural vision of a Vietnamese state and society. Moreover, the Hmong communities have been perceived as anti-communist because Hmong pilots from Laos joined the American ranks. Hence, the Hmong have been carefully monitored by the government. Furthermore, the trauma that they suffer due to the consequences of the American–Vietnamese War is not talked about. The war is not only profoundly embedded in their collective memory, but it also still affects many families: as in other regions of Vietnam, here people have lost family members, keep losing limbs (there are still unexploded mines in rural areas) and are struggling with mental health issues. Moreover, children are still being born with deformities caused by the effects of Agent Orange.

Vietnam is an interesting country in which to explore *tekhnē* because it operates as a nexus for rapid change, creating a vast array of tensions, for example between the old and the new, between rural preservation and urban development, and between traditional work and high-tech solutions. We can note that, since the introduction of the Doi Moi Policy in 1986 (which can be translated as ‘the renovation’, and refers to a set of reforms to introduce market forces), Vietnam has transformed its economy from central planning to a socialist-oriented market-based approach. During this period, the number of privately owned enterprises has increased at a rapid rate, while incidences of state ownership have declined. Vietnam has transited from being one of the poorest countries in the world to (aspiring to be) a middle-income country. Since the end of the American embargo, over 40 million people have been lifted out of poverty<sup>4</sup> by opening up the economy to private enterprise, attracting high levels of foreign direct investment, creating new markets, modernizing industries and building infrastructures. Forms of organization and organizing have been transformed in a very short period.

In this process, the focus of transformation has caught our attention: on the one hand there are efforts from the Vietnamese government to focus on new technology, digital development, fintech, large-scale tourism and social media; on the other hand, there are efforts initiated by local communities to preserve traditional and rural Vietnamese culture organized around craft. Although



steeped in its own heritage, craft is currently enabling new collective actions through the organization of a creative economy that, as we will see, is starting to orient towards the rediscovery of local heritage, collaborations with ethnic minorities and the design of eco-friendly products.

### *Science and technology studies approach*

Ethnographic research can make explicit the often overlooked and concealed processes of creating meaning, including its emotional and political aspects (Ybema et al., 2009). To explore the relations between *tekhnē* and forms of organizing, we used a science and technology studies (STS)-informed ethnographic approach. That is, we followed the actors in the field (Latour, 1987, 2005) to untangle their socio-material constructions, to understand the struggles in which they were involved, and to research how politics emerged. STS research has provided the inspiration for various studies investigating the roles, status, identity and ontologies of technologies in forms of organizing (Woolgar, Coopmans, & Neyland, 2009). This STS work draws on a history of anti-determinist or post-essentialist research (Rappert, 2001) that suggests moving away from treating technology as agentially singular with fixed characteristics that produce predictable effects. The central empirical move has been to engage with science and technology in action in order to explore how, for example, technologies and material things play a part in the accomplishment of organizing. This set of theories has the benefit of continually urging researchers not to take for granted the likely role or impact of a technology in an organization, to move away from overly comfortable assertions that material things will operate in predictable ways, and to avoid only considering the tricky humans (Lange, Lenglet, & Seyfert, 2019). Instead, the researcher should explore how things are accomplished by critically reflecting on knowledge displayed in particular circumstances (Lynch, 2008).

### *Fieldwork*

This paper draws on ethnographic research conducted in four separate periods of fieldwork from the summer of 2017 to September 2019. The fieldwork with craft communities took place in the north of the country (Hanoi, Ninh Binh and Sapa), where one of us (Marta) stayed with local artisans, twice over the summer (in 2017 and 2019), once in the spring (2018), twice in autumn (2017 and 2019) and once in the winter (2017). During each visit, she stayed with a different community in order to learn about the specific craft of each village, and to understand the cultural dynamics of each community (e.g. patriarchal vs. matriarchal community). Marta experienced the different ways of living of ethnic minorities, different craft techniques, and how craft processes changed with the passing of the seasons, respecting the cycles of nature. Short breaks also allowed her to reflect on the fieldwork and on preliminary analyses that could inform the subsequent phases of the research. In fact, the fieldwork, the way of experiencing seasons, the theoretical framework and the technologies of analysis are all entangled, productive and disruptive of the material capabilities involved in conducting it (Bell, Winchester, & Wray-Bliss, 2021).

Communication, so often a central medium in ethnographic research (Van der Waal, 2009), was challenging. Marta spent three months as a visiting researcher in a university in Ho Chi Minh City, where she undertook an intensive course in Vietnamese language, in order to understand general conversations held in Vietnamese. For the fieldwork, she decided to recruit local interpreters to accompany her in the remote communities, as the ethnic minorities speak their own language, they do not always know Vietnamese, and they rarely speak English. Working with local people who acted as interpreters was necessary to understand the specific local nuances of terms about craft. The interpreters were not randomly chosen, they were engaged after a thorough search. It took time

to establish connections with Vietnamese professionals in Hanoi, to get to know Vietnamese people who are not only proficient in English, but also who are known and trusted by local craft communities, interested in this research topic, willing to create connections, to introduce craft makers from the villages, and able to explain to Marta (accurately) informal conversations about craft.

During her first visit, her translator was a local guide belonging to the Hmong ethnic community. For the second and fourth visits, she went into the field with a designer from Hanoi, who has established a slow fashion label. The designer collaborates with ethnic minority groups to make products and co-create sustainable practices, challenging the logic of mass consumerism while informing customers of ethical choices (as in Bell, Dacin et al., 2021). In the third visit, another local guide, belonging to the Khin (the major) ethnic group, acted as interpreter.

### *Data collection and analysis*

The data collected is described in Table 1. Twenty-six in-depth interviews were conducted by Marta, in English in Hanoi, and with the help of interpreters in the remote villages. They were recorded on a digital device and subsequently sent to a Vietnamese professional transcriber, who transcribed them into English; around 40 informal conversations were noted in the field diary, 1,540 photos taken, 9 videos recorded, and numerous observational notes were written during the fieldwork. Every evening the jottings, notes and visual cues were written up (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011) in Evernote as a field diary, and uploaded on a secure server (as soon as the internet was available). As a result, the fieldnotes included accounts and reflections on her daily experiences. In addition, secondary data from documentary sources were collected. Over time, we came to understand that a key point of tension running through our data was how demarcations of technologies as mundane were accomplished or challenged.

We analysed the transcribed interviews and field experiences along with our fieldnotes using thematic coding with an STS sensibility towards materials and their politics (Neyland, 2008). In particular, we studied emerging craft practices as a means of producing materials that embody politics. Over time, we began to look for the mundane objects that were used in craft, as these seemed to take on importance in local villages. Last, we examined secondary data from documentary sources, such as books, newspapers, magazines, websites, blogs, Facebook and Twitter posts, and photographs. We conducted the primary analysis while we were in the field to maintain a closer connection with the data (Emerson et al., 2011). These in-process memos focused and guided our attention in the field (Emerson et al., 2011), permitting us to create connections by reflexively engaging with emergent concepts from the empirical material (Pink, 2012). Finally, memoing helped us to theorize the themes at play in the craft villages.

We completed three rounds of coding: (1) identifying the communities, practices and actors involved in craft making, and their everyday practices; (2) identifying organizational actors and their engagement with politics; and (3) grouping data together in three main areas of action in the last round of coding: the vat, the table and their representation in London (see Figure 1). Through the data, we came to understand that the mundane craft skills of the local community are thus already a site of political tension: to talk of these skills or to discount these skills from representations of the Vietnamese nation is a political act.

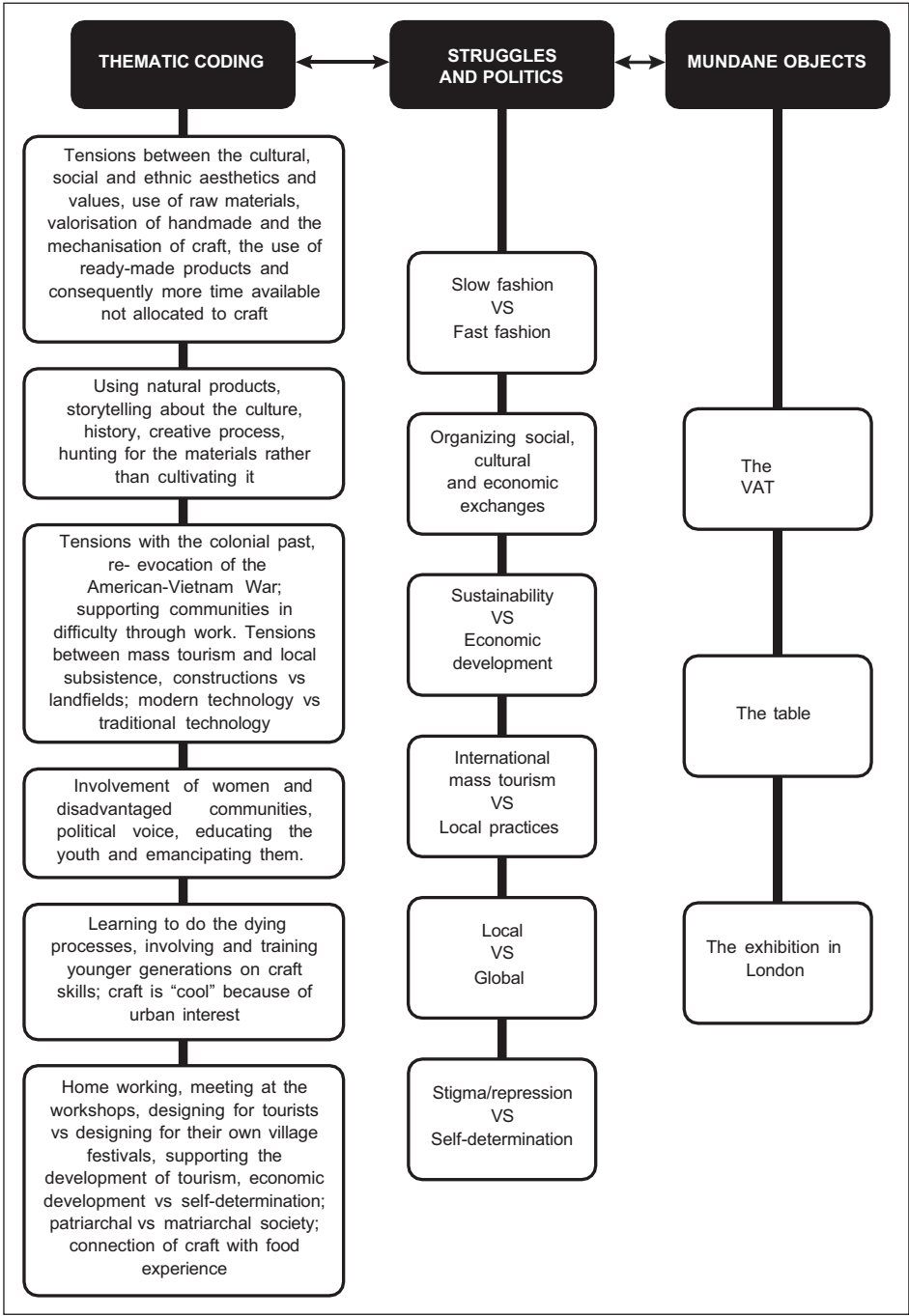
### **Findings**

In this analysis, we engage with two objects that in our fieldwork embody craft processes in the communities that we visited in the North of Vietnam, and that reveal new and distinct relationships between technology and forms of organizing that invoke political concerns. These two objects are



**Table 1.** Data collection.

Data source	Type of data	Use of the analysis
<b>Observations</b>	Field notes from entering the field	In this phase, connections with gate keepers were made. Also, Marta engaged in networking and looked to understand the relations between the urban designers and the craft villages.
	Meeting the key gatekeepers	Understanding the socio-political context of the field.
	Networking	Familiarization with the context, developing connections, and being introduced into the craft villages. Development of an understanding of how values are shaped.
	Being introduced to the craft villages	Development of the research questions and creating an understanding of local craft practices and their meanings, how these are created, as well as the wider political and power configurations they are entangled with. Revealing the embodied engagements with others and their socio-material discursive and sensory environment.
	Field notes from the villages	Ethnography of craft practices in the villages, aimed to understand and become familiar with craft practices, power struggles, challenges in organizing, and understanding. In these fieldnotes Marta emphasized the embodied experience of the place, encounters with the women, walking in the fields to discuss biodiversity, highlighting the social, physical and intangible components of the human and non-human encounters. In subsequent memos, during the analysis, she wrote and noted down the memories that she recounted, enacted, defined, or reflected. She shared with the other co-author (Daniel) ethnographic accounts to reflexively reconstruct the fieldwork experiences.
	Digital visual and audio technologies	Triangulating interpretations from the interviews and analysis of the embodied, sensory and affective experiences, their negotiation and intersubjectivities. It helped to triangulate the experiences of the place and remember the social, physical and intangible components that might have been taken for granted during the fieldwork.
<b>Interviews</b>	Preliminary interviews	Interviews with designers working with craft makers, to understand how designers were relating to craft makers and who could be part of the research.
	Craft interviews	Understanding craft practices, processes and the construction of the social in craft villages.
<b>Archival data</b>	Expert interviews	Research with those working on Vietnamese crafts to triangulate the data.
	Reports, social media, books	Familiarize with the context to support and triangulate the data.



**Figure 1.** Coding Structure.

the table and the vat.<sup>5</sup> The artisans we met are very skilled. Their approach towards craft is written deep with a fraught heritage that combines multi-generational makers' knowledge with political marginalization from the wars of the 20th century, which continue to cast a long shadow across the

Hmong. Simultaneously, as we will see, their craft is becoming central to a new and emerging form of organizing that acts as a counter to rapid and large-scale developments that continue to be supported and promoted by the national government. This is dangerous territory: to place a value on the craft heritage of marginalized communities and to stand against state-sponsored development could be seen as acts of subversion. To make more sense of this potential subversion, we unfold the demarcation of these craft communities' technologies as mundane, and how this demarcation underpins their ordinary, day to day, but also, as it turns out, highly political craft skills. Through ethnographic accounts of the table and the vat, we reflect on these demarcations. As we will explain in subsequent sections, these objects were selected as they are fundamental to the craft production of the Hmong communities.

### *The table*

Marta and the Vietnamese designer who acted as her interpreter enter a house/workshop. The designer makes tailored streetwear that draws on heritage craft skills; she is one of the pioneers adopting this approach to fashion in Vietnam. The house/workshop is where Hmong artisans meet to do batik,<sup>6</sup> working around a table. These gatherings of women from different households help to preserve the handmade techniques that are passed down orally from one artisan to another. They are very proud of working with a designer from Hanoi, as they feel their traditions are considered fashionable and appreciated by urban customers. Hence, when the craft makers sit to do batik work, they do so around the table, but also with the designer either when she is present in person or through anticipation of her needs.

The table has been something more than a place where people work: as a mundane object it plays a part in organizing various aspects of village life. Around the table, connections are forged, divergences stabilized, decisions made, reorganization of domestic duties negotiated. The table provides a focal point for craft, as it helps to bring it into realization (Cooper, 2009). For example, after a long morning making textiles and producing batik designs on the table, it becomes a gathering place to eat lunch and exchange stories; afterwards, the table operates as a material focus for re-embedding local cultural practice and doing business.

The table as mundane object plays a part in organizing activities and in the distribution of practices of representation (as in Cooper, 1992). A younger female member of the community is sitting on the floor, near the table, and is carefully embroidering. 'What does it represent?' 'A chair', the designer translates. She is embroidering a chair on her shirt because she is about to get married. Once she is married, she will be allowed to sit at the table with the other married women, and she is fixing this moment on her shirt. Here, the table also creates and distributes gender and age dynamics. In a patriarchal society like the Hmong community, women are elevated after they marry, and the continuation of these craft practices enables the table to accomplish a putative status as mundane, an important part of the world of Hmong life, materially embedding these gender differences (for more on the way materials embed difference, see Miller, 2008). Embroidery has a clear structure within the community, clear rules of composition, transmission and representation. In a similar manner to the typeface analysed by Holt (2020), the embroiders' actions are part of a performance from which wider social understandings and norms can be deduced, as explained by a graphic designer based in Hanoi: designing a pattern is a cultural technique configuring an aesthetic approach, and, at the same time, an entire system of organization. Patterns narrate specific intent and move across communities through the clothes onto which they are stitched.

We change village and enter another workshop. It is positioned in the main street, part of a well-known hiking route for tourists. Here, a Hmong artisan folds a piece of cloth and puts it on her table, full of other colourful craft products, handmade with natural fibres and natural colours. They are carefully displayed to attract the attention of tourists (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** The table and the crafts on display.

The table, as an object that acts as a site for craft practice, moves from within the workshop to become a small-scale, local infrastructure of exchange and commerce. Merchandise, stories and everyday tales are interweaved through the table. The table accomplishes its status as mundane through its involvement in routines and practices: for example, it is used to exhibit produce and sell goods, and it becomes the display through which stories of heritage textile production and design techniques can be woven into goods. While the textiles might be notably exotic for tourists, the table is not. Yet, its role in organizing exchange is central. Potential customers are attracted by the colourful objects that they see from the street on the table.

Potential buyers are invited by the artisan to pick up the craft objects from the table, to unfold them, to look carefully and to check how they are made and constructed. They are encouraged to touch them, to feel the difference between hemp and cotton. Thus, the table becomes a mediator in constructing experience for potential buyers, including tourists who are exploring the village, or other community members who buy these products to resell at the central market. The table, in accomplishing its status as mundane, weaves potential buyers into the everyday world of Hmong craft making.

In the late afternoon, Marta sits with an elderly woman who is working at her table on a batik cloth for the designer's atelier. Her signature items are an indigo blue long dress (for women) and a blue shirt (for men), both with batik stripes. The designer, looking at the stripes on the cloth and on a dress, comments:

These women they don't have big tables . . . they have a tiny table which they always use either for dinner, they sit the whole family around this table, but they're like a square, like 50 . . . 60 centimetres, that small. And they use that as [the] table for drawing batik as well, even if it's so narrow. They have to constantly move the fabric, and when they move, they can't make the perfect lines anymore, they have to stop, and that creates this (shows the irregular stripes; Figure 3). And to me, it's so beautiful, and I say that 'I really like this', it has a very painting kind of feel to it, and they're handmade. They were so worried, initially, that I wouldn't like it, and I say 'No, keep doing it, I love it'.





**Figure 3.** Imperfect batik stripes.

The designer considered buying a new table for the craft makers, larger and longer, used only for batik work, but she felt it would have reorganized both the batik work and altered the organization of the community, perhaps with negative effects.

The designer realized that the mundaneness of the table – its deep scoring of everyday life – was central to the process of making her bestselling items. It creates imperfections, patterns of resistance of the cloth to the table, and reflects the incorporation of the table into family and community life as well as into the design of materials. The final cloth carries an imprint of the size of the family dinner table on which they are produced. The designer can now carry the cloth, but also the narrative of its production, to her urban and international customers. The relationship between craft as *tekhnē* and organizing the craft community, their work, the role of mundane objects in the process, and the importance of *tekhnē* as a combination of performed craft and material objects, become apparent to us with the table being a focus for distributing relations of representation, organizing village life and for establishing the possibility of exchange. But these practices also hint at possible politics; the table, the performance of craft through which the textiles are produced, opens but does not settle a series of political questions around giving voice to marginalized communities, to which we will return shortly. To allow the Hmong to speak through craft and to value their heritage is not without controversy, as we will see in the next section.

### *The vat*

The role played by objects in Vietnamese craft is further emphasized by our encounter with an indigo vat. There are various elements to the organization of a piece of cloth within these craft communities in Vietnam that we have yet to encounter, including important roles for the indigo pistil, hemp, water and bacteria in the soil. These come together in the vat.

In an attempt to follow hemp from the field to its transformation into a skirt or a dress, on a very hot sunny day in August, Marta enters the backyard of a workshop, which she has not visited

before. The owner, standing still, shows Marta what she considers to be the most important object in the production of cloth: the indigo vat. Around the vat, women meet and discuss their day-to-day lives, much in the same way as they do around the table. In this way, the *tekhnē* of the vat is somewhat similar to that of the table. Around the vat, the community share secrets and problems, and they gossip. But, unlike the table, the community takes care of the vat. The workshop owner has had her vat since she was a little girl, and she has kept it alive for more than 20 years. She brought it from her family home to her husband's home when she married. As they did not have enough space, they had to build a new room for the vat. This gives us a glimpse of the centrality of the vat to village life, its mundane participation in maintaining what it means to be a member of the Hmong.

To suffer from the death of a vat is somewhat commonplace. The designer suffered such a fate herself the first time she tried to dye, which turned into a very unfortunate experiment:

I went where all the women gather together, they were waving their hands, and I heard her voice [indicating the second artisan showing us the vat] running to us and say 'Thao, you made my indigo vat die. It's gone!' I said, 'What do you mean it's gone?', and she said: 'It's not active anymore, it's not working anymore', and I said 'OK. . . I don't know what to do!' After that, I gained a lot of knowledge from this experience, I did workshops with artisans, and I realized what I did [was] completely wrong.

The vat as an object and the community's dyeing practice involves maintaining the life of the vat, and, in turn, maintaining the life of the village. With no indigo vat, craft makers cannot dye in blue, the colour of which indicates the products are Hmong. Among these rural Vietnamese ethnic minorities, textile colours play an identifying role: each community has their own colour that is predominant in their tribes' clothes, worn on special occasions such as weddings and funerals: 'colors illuminate the backdrop of myths and set the body alight during ceremonies' (Taussing, 2009, p. 6).

But like the table, the vat does not operate alone. One artisan is a recognized expert in keeping vats alive. Other craft makers go to her for suggestions when they are in doubt. The indigo vat needs a bit of light, but not too much, otherwise it dies. In the winter, like an elderly man, it needs a bit of rice wine, to prevent it getting cold. The alcohol reacts with the pH of the vat and the vat needs a high pH value for the dyeing process. Craft makers use lime to increase the pH value, sugar to reduce oxygen in the water, and rice wine to increase the temperature. They mix the indigo pistil with a bit of methylated spirit in a small container to make a paste. Then, they mix the indigo paste with a small amount of water. The maker stirs the vat and if there are bubbles on the surface, produced by the bacteria in the vat in contact with oxygen, then it is alive. The women do not have organoleptic notions of the vat's composition, but they are aware there are non-human actors in the vat that need to be fed and kept alive.

After having stirred the indigo in the vat (Figure 4), the artisan raises her hands in a solemn gesture, puts her index finger into the liquid and tastes it. She smiles. It is not too acidic. She invites Marta to taste it. She stirs it again and it bubbles. It is alive. As in the table, the vat demarcates the period of life of a Hmong woman: she can touch the vat if she is not pregnant or has her period, as the heat from the body is said to damage the vat (for a discussion on the indigo vat, femininity and the female body, see Taussing, 2009).

The indigo used by the Hmong is natural; in these communities, indigo is not farmed but found in the mountains. The vat is deeply mundane, enabling the world to become a constituent of the cloth. In the same way that the table operated at the centre of a set of working practices that became embodied in the cloth, the vat also operates as a central pivot. The fields – where the group of women 'hunt' for indigo pistils, where seeds are sown, and where plants are grown and nurtured,





**Figure 4.** Hmong craft-maker stirring the indigo vat.

harvested and processed, – the performance of craft work, the history of the makers and of their craft traditions, the struggles of women and their lives, and the political history of Vietnam, are all drawn together in the vat and become part of the world of the cloth.

The indigo vat makes craft a social process. It fixes colours but it also fixes issues – a local problem borne by one of the women, a regional problem of sustainable growth or beyond (as we shall shortly see), a global problem of the destruction of nature in the name of economic development. But in this process of craft making, it is not just nature that is sustained, but the craft itself. In the shadow of historical repression, keeping the craft alive works hand in hand, through the stirring of the vat, with keeping nature alive. The indigo vat is living nature and the crafts women must work to protect it, nourish it, take care of it.

We can note here that the demarcation of the vat as mundane operates in a slightly different way compared to the table. Unlike the table, which secures its place in narratives of craft if the fashion designer manages to successfully narrate its role in tales of the rural craft-based family home to urban clients, the vat must be maintained as a mundane source of community, entangling with its organization. Keeping the vat alive, securing its ordinary and everyday role in the community, is a means to preserving craft skills. The vat, as a mundane object, combines the performance of craft with its own material presence. But it sits at the centre of a form of organizing that is always and already under threat; the fashion designer swiftly and easily (accidentally) kills a vat. The vat underpins the role of the designer and of the cloth as joint-spokespeople who talk on behalf of the craft skill and material things embodied within the cloth, which is produced by this form of organizing. But this places a value on the skills of the marginalized Hmong – a political act in itself.

Marginalized communities and half-forgotten craft skills come together at the vat, and then talk through the cloth of a potential future of craft and a potential value for Hmong craft skills.

Yet, in the same way that the table plays a part in shifting scales when the designer narrates tales of local village life through material objects to potential consumers, who have a desire for craft authenticity, the vat also has its own challenges of scale to manage. In recent years, the Lao Cai province (Sapa is the main town in this province) witnessed rapid economic expansion. There has been a proliferation of hotels, large-scale resorts and other tourist-related buildings. A 400% growth in tourism in five years (from 2012 to 2017) has required deforestation, introduced traffic congestion and caused pollution, which have interfered with craft activities. The local environment is becoming materially saturated by concrete buildings and concrete roads, supplanting hemp plantations.

A report from the World Bank (2021)<sup>7</sup> has pointed out that this rapid economic growth has not been friendly to the environment, with massive use of energy and water, which have been taken away from the craft makers and their agricultural needs. Furthermore, economic development is not inclusive. Although the Hmong craft workers live in the villages of this province, craft is not intertwined with tourist activities. Also, as we saw in the opening example for this paper, in markets set up close to these new tourist enclaves, traditional handmade and environmentally friendly products have been replaced by cheap, imported, machine-made copies of traditional craft, passed off as genuine. At best, ethnic minority groups are offered the chance to sell these machine-made Chinese fakes as their own works for a meagre living. At worst, the local villages are gradually destroyed, and their natural resources taken away to feed the larger tourist industry.

The large scale of tourism is accomplished by its partial dislocation from specific territories – global flows of capital circulate between multinational holiday companies, along with a global flow of tourists arriving to stay in resorts that are increasingly marketed through their similarity to other resorts around the world. ‘Vietnam’ and ‘craft’ have become an add-on to a tourist package, an optional experience of an excursion beyond the confines of the resort, as much dependent on cheap, polluting, artificial, imported Chinese versions of traditional Vietnamese products as something local, crafted and made with care. The small-scale *tekhnē* created through the table and vat seem dwarfed here by state-sponsored tourist developments. The political marginalization of the Hmong seems set to continue, operating in the shadow of huge resorts and Chinese imports. Yet, these scales are not entirely fixed in place.

### *The vat, the table and politics of scale at the Design Biennale in London*

The designers we followed through remote rural villages and in Hanoi became interested in the results of Marta’s research and decided to bring Vietnamese craft to the world, translating it into an art exhibition. The designers act as the Pasteurs-of-the-Hmong. They narrate *tekhnē*, distant agricultural practices, and craft skills, which are embodied by the small-scale Vietnamese cloth. They want to bring new audiences of buyers and supporters to craft workers’ produce. By representing the craft processes in an exhibition, they hope that journalists will be recruited and will write about these craft practices in their articles, blogs and social media stories. They also hope that other designers will be convinced to establish a demand for this cloth and, at a future date, place orders. Like Pasteur, the designers look to bring the world to the cloth, but then also to project outwards from that cloth, generating scale through interest, orders and finance. At the same time, they hope to empower and enable marginalized rural communities through craft, and consequently to challenge the inequitable scale of global tourism.

Through the exhibition, the designers wanted to connect with different audiences, especially with those that did not have the chance to travel to Vietnam, following difficulties with fundraising.



**Figure 5.** The artistic representation of the indigo vat at the London Design Biennale.

The Pasteurs-of-the-Hmong took part in the London Design Biennale at Somerset House, London (8–27 September 2018). They designed a pavilion at the Biennale to showcase Hmong craft work through two installations. In one room, an artistic representation of an indigo vat (Figure 5) is displayed and presented to the public through a narrative linking innovation, creativity and heritage with new textile designs. The textiles represent traditional techniques, and emphasize an emerging form of sustainability through which they are displaying their own history, as well as the political marginalization from which they materialize. In the second room, a digital indigo vat (Figure 6) is positioned at the centre, and it has a sensor. The public can watch videos on craft production on the screen, and can change videos through the sensor. An explanation appears with a novel typeface designed for the exhibition and inspired by the batik lines drawn by the Hmong on the table.

Thus the table and the vat are now in London, and they sit alongside the cloth.

Hmong mundane objects (the table and vat) and craft performance have travelled along with the organizational relations in which these are embedded. The textiles that narrate this material embodiment of vat, table and craftwork can only succeed and result in being seen as authentic through successfully demarcating craft *tekhne* as mundane, even in this new space. The table and the vat are positioned within the display as part of the ordinary and everyday world of the Hmong craft workers. And the same holds for their new ambitions for scale. New textile designs, made through traditional techniques, can only shift scales if they talk to the world of journalists and potential buyers. And if the table and vat fulfil their role as authentically mundane objects, they might help not only to extend the reach of Hmong craft, but also preserve it.



**Figure 6.** The digital indigo vat at London Design Biennale.

Although the table and the vat are now out of place, rendered ‘exotic’ by their London location, within a design Biennale, they also crucially attest to the authenticity of the narrative of Hmong *tekhnē* on offer. This is not a marketing gimmick, an empty gesture to reassure the ethical concerns of mass consumers. The vat and the table are here to act as reliable material witnesses, carrying with them and speaking of their natural location, their Hmong roots. Their exotic out-of-placeness provides the audience with an entry into this mundane authenticity. The relations between technology and forms of organizing that they represent (of craft and careful agriculture) offer a form of rescaling: it now speaks in a new location, among new audiences.

## **Discussion and Conclusion: The role of mundane technologies in political concerns**

Our analysis suggests that *tekhnē* offers a means to think through and apprehend relations of technology and organization, and that technology facilitates the representation of political issues and communities’ concerns, challenges them through craft objects, and questions them through organizational processes. We analysed two objects that accomplish a status of being mundane when they are deeply embedded in the organization of everyday life, for example in the distribution of practices of representation, gender, age hierarchy and status. Such objects thus embed, distribute and challenge political concerns in local matters. In our analysis of craft among rural Vietnamese communities, these mundane objects also play a part in national politics (with the craft work of the



marginalized Hmong communities given value) and global concerns (with objects playing a part in attempts made to address the mismatch in scale between marginalized communities and the global tourist industry). Thus, our ethnography suggests two key features that make craft central as *tekhnē*: as one location for politics, and as a basis for mobilizing politics of scale.

### *Tekhnē as one location for politics*

The designers in our study do not approach their work through a nostalgic craft-in-the-past approach, but as future-oriented craft imaginaries that engage with disruptive organizational, societal and ecological changes (as in Bell, Dacin et al., 2021). Heritage is represented and preserved, and value is placed on craft techniques. At the same time, this opens up one seam of politics, as placing value on the work of the politically marginalized could be seen as a form of subversion that challenges state suppression of rural ethnic communities such as the Hmong. *Tekhnē* becomes a location for these politics, enabled by mundane objects. The table as a mundane object is a focal point for different forms of organizing, with its 50 cm<sup>2</sup> size embodied by the cloth. It also has a role in displaying goods, enabling exchange to take place and an income to be generated for the Hmong. This valuing of craft work potentially runs against the marginalization of the Hmong and may even open up opportunities for the community to access extra income to pay for education, which would allow them to have a voice in political matters and challenge their marginalized status.

But the status of the table as mundane, as an ordinary and pervasive feature of the life of the Hmong, is important. The designer we travelled with uses the table and its position within the household and within the community as a characteristic of the narrative of the cloth that can be retold and sold to urban consumers. The dress, its patterns and lines, but also importantly the way the dress embodies the size of the table through batik stripes, can move from the village to urban consumers, simultaneously opening up opportunities for the community's craft to be valued.

### *Tekhnē as a mobilization of politics of scale*

The movement of goods, narrative and *tekhnē* from the villages to urban settings opens up one political front, challenging the marginalization of communities such as the Hmong. As we saw in our study, these communities also face a challenge of scale, with the global tourism industry threatening the practices of these craft workers. The Hmong look to defend their livelihoods, practices and heritage. What is at stake in our study for the designers, the craft workers and a Hmong form of *tekhnē* is not a technical prowess dominating nature (as in Tsing, 2015), but a rethinking of relations between technology and forms of organizing in the face of technical and infrastructural prowess. The local craft workers must work hard to keep their indigo vats alive. These live within and participate in community life. To use Pollner's (1974) term, they are 'of the world' of the village.

There is no sensible way in which bigger tables or larger vats could be made sustainably to enable the craft workers to overcome the inequitable distribution of scale through which they sit in the shadow of multinational tourism. Tables or vats the size of factories would eat up the local environment just as much as tourism now threatens. Instead, the focus becomes the locally hand-made. Because of the interest of urban designers in this craft, some of the young girls from the villages are getting involved in craft once again. Craft skills are re-emerging as a way to define their identity, their culture and their hopes. What is required to sustain the combination of material forms and craft performances that produce a specifically Hmong *tekhnē* is a different set of relationships between objects, technology and forms of organizing to produce a different means of accomplishing scale. A future of many tables and many vats is required, and this distribution of small scale needs to take shape.

The differences in scale between these forms of village-based *tekhnē*, mundane objects and the global flows of tourist capital are not insurmountable. The Hmong appear dependent on a performance of materially mediated craft and attendant forms of organizing that are focused on slow, natural production cycles. The tourist industry appears fixated on extracting short-term profit from the region before rapidly moving on to the next location for development, creating a tension between value creation and value extraction, common in neoliberal markets (Mazzuccato, 2019). The mundane table and vat seem dwarfed by these global flows of capital. And yet, the table and the vat can move, and through these movements new relationships are formed, opening up the possibility for moving between scales.

The small scale of craft is designated by the ties between these workers and their local community, their land that produces natural products, and their mundane objects, such as the table, which becomes embodied in the cloth produced. *Tekhnē* plays a part in organizing the work of the community and their creative approaches, transforming raw materials into meaningful crafted forms, which are appreciated locally and may have the potential to be sold globally. In place of an absolute distinction between the global flows of capital that underpin the rapid and huge material saturation of the environment through tourism on one side and the small, local, politically marginalized craft workers on the other, a new distinction is appearing. On the one side, traditional Hmong *tekhnē* is representative of a future in which rural Vietnamese ethnic minorities shift scales, and gain a voice and access to politics, with new supporters recruited among, for example, journalists and designers. On the other side is an apparently rampant and irresponsible form of tourist capitalism.

The cloth, table and vat, the Hmong and the designers are offering a narrative for others to buy into. Scale is about allowing this Hmong *tekhnē* to travel almost everywhere. The designers, the vat, the table, the cloth and the craft workers may not have yet produced Pasteur's vaccine that can effortlessly move across scales, but they are making moves, most notably through their appearance in global design events, for example in London.

### *Future directions and associated questions*

Drawing these threads together, our study suggests three possible directions for future organizational studies. Since *tekhnē* is intended as a specific way of thinking and apprehending the relation of technology and organization, it would be interesting to see more work that looks at how technology is involved in demarcating matters in different forms of organizing. In particular, what is the role of technology in other settings? How do objects in other settings become routinized but, at the same time, fundamental to organizations and organizational processes? What politics arise from the relationships of these technologies and forms of organization?

Second, we have suggested that *tekhnē* forms a useful focus for analysing contemporary organizational politics. O'Doherty (forthcoming, Spring 2022) questions craft and its ambivalence as forms of politicizing responses and adaptations to the new climatic regime, and gets tangled up in shoes as a form of making and inhabiting the landscape, or performing/remaking the landscape–human relationship. Given the growing movements in such matters as slow design, ecologically sensitive work and various forms of activism, would it be possible to explore what issues and struggles emerge through *tekhnē* that are entangled with new political and aesthetic landscapes?

Third, we have focused here on politics of scale and looked to make a contribution to the corpus of studies on scale in organizations. With an ever-growing number of concerns occupying our attention – from climate change to pandemics, to political and trade disruption – what new opportunities arise for organizational studies to explore the continual cascading from small to large and back again?



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## ORCID iD

Marta Gasparin  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6934-2525>

## Notes

1. Every Sunday refers to the period during the fieldwork in Vietnam, as specified in the Methodology.
2. The Hmong are an ethnic group living mainly in Southern China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar.
3. The first detailed explanation of *tekhnē* appeared in the book of Nicomachean Ethics, in which Aristoteles distinguishes two forms of actions: *praxis* (self-referential) and *tekhnē*.
4. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/vietnam/overview>
5. We asked the designer based in Hanoi as a key participant to confirm the details we have included in this analysis.
6. Batik is a printing technique: the artisan draws patterns with beeswax on the cloth, then they dye the cloths several times; once the dyeing process is completed, the cloth is boiled in hot water and the wax is removed, leaving the printed pattern.
7. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/vietnam/overview>

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### Author biographies

**Marta Gasparin** is associate professor at Copenhagen Business School, Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy. She draws from science and technology studies (STS) and continental philosophy, and combines studies of design management, innovation and slow movements with organization studies. In particular, she explores how design and innovation processes emerge, how values are created, and the role of the human and non-human actors in innovation, design and craft processes, and how these actors mobilize organizational politics and aesthetics. Designing in the Anthropocene, ethical sustainability, slow design-driven innovation, and the aesthetics of craft are at the core of her investigations.

**Daniel Neyland's** research interests cover issues of governance, accountability and ethics in forms of science, technology and organization. He draws on ideas from ethnomethodology, science and technology studies and his research is ethnographic in orientation. His substantive interests are quite varied. Across a number of research projects he has ethnographically engaged with: markets, cement, security and surveillance, traffic management, waste, airports, biometrics, parking, signposts, malaria vaccines, universities, algorithms and speeding drivers.