

In praise of work on the side

Some books catch your eye first as an object. This is the case with Robert Kosmann's book in which the illustrations and text combine to powerful effect. A wealth of photos allows you to flick through the book, in an order of your choosing, without necessarily reading the associated text. The book as a whole sheds light on a common situation in the world of work that has been little studied and that is known in French as "*la perruque*" (literally the wig), or work for yourself during working hours, particularly using an employer's equipment and materials. This original piece of work creates such an affinity between the reader's experience and that of many people who work on their own projects during working hours that your attention is caught by their creativity.

In this book, "*la perruque*" refers to the many forms of work on the side or, more precisely, objects made for personal use instead of those required. These are objects with multiple functions that often merge into one: they are ingenious in their demonstration of know-how, artistic in a society in which art seems to be created only by an elite, and practical or fun, such as the remarkable chess sets with pieces made of bolt heads that resemble futuristic sculptures. These objects are also political with a language that sometimes makes them seem like objects of piety; they are also militant, particularly in terms of self-defence, such as the arsenal of slings, rocket launchers and protective boxes made by shipyard workers in Gijón (Asturias) in 2009.

This is a universal phenomenon for which specific terms are used in many

languages. In Chinese for example, "*Gan Sihuo*" can also mean "living for yourself", "bootlegging" or "moonlighting". In American English, the term "government job" is often used, whilst the British talk about "pilfering" or "fiddling". It was in the mid-19th century that the term "*perruque*" began to be used in France with this specific meaning of using an employer's time and materials to make an object.

Robert Kosmann's career has been as unique as the subject of his book. Born in 1948, he started work at the age of 15 as a messenger in a bank. His political activism then pushed him towards metallurgy. He was a milling-machine operator at Renault until 1991 when he was made redundant due to the closure of his plant. He then studied history and joined the tax authority while remaining a union activist. Now retired, he still contributes to historical research on the labour movement by writing biographies for the *Dictionnaire Maitron*¹.

In his book, Kosmann explains the multiple meanings that "*la perruque*" can have, as well as the ambiguity with which it is received by both employers and trade unions. Employers often tolerate it, provided that it remains within certain limits. In a way it helps to make work less boring and to maintain the dexterity that repetitive tasks can reduce. Trade unions are sometimes suspicious of it as an individual practice that can seem to contradict collective action. It is one of a series of informal acts of resistance that range from absenteeism through sabotage to slow

working. At times "*la perruque*" has been associated with collective struggles, as in the case of clothing workers at Nina Ricci who occupied their workshop one day in 1999 and made an evening dress to be worn by a model. This piece of work was meant to be an emblem for the strikers during a fashion show.

The book also looks at the future of "*la perruque*" given the development of robotic and digitalised work. The author is optimistic on this point and predicts a bright future for "*la perruque*", which he believes will adapt and transform. In his words, "it is a mark of pride in, and re-appropriation of, know-how, and a resistance to the de-skilling of work". He points out that, in 1975, the Hungarian oppositional activist Miklós Haraszti imagined a future in which society was organised like a "*Grande Perruque*" of worker self-management².

— Laurent Vogel

Sorti d'usines.
La perruque,
un travail détourné
by Robert Kosmann,
Éditions Syllepse,
Paris, 2018

1. This incredibly detailed biographical dictionary of the labour movement and social movement can be accessed at <http://maitron-en-ligne.univ-paris1.fr>

2. Haraszti M. (1977) *A Worker in a Workers' State*, Penguin, New York.