Craft production in rural Manitoba: some preliminary findings

Derrek Eberts, Brandon University

Abstract: Craft production has been adopted by many households in rural Manitoba. In some cases, it constitutes a significant component of household income, while in others it is little more than a pastime which may or may not generate any income at all. The contemporary economic geography of this segment of production is not well understood. This paper reports on preliminary findings of a research project designed to explore a number of aspects of craft production in rural Manitoba: importance to the household; institutional embeddedness; production relations; role of craft production in the local economy; and the geographical organization of the production-to-consumption chain.

Introduction

The mainstream of industrial geography is overwhelmingly concerned with what we consider ‘core’ or ‘heartland’, and largely urban, economic regions. However, what is often overlooked are the potential parallels to be found between such urban, industrial regions and peripheral, rural regions. This paper is an attempt to make such connections between some current work in what has become known as the ‘New Industrial Geography’ and potential changes in the nature of work in, and the economic structure of, South-West Manitoba.

In particular, this paper reports on initial findings of an investigation into craft production in South-West Manitoba. It is argued that craft production in this region arises from processes of economic restructuring comparable to that found in heartland manufacturing regions, and that although by no means ‘industrial’, the organization of work in this sector of the manufacturing economy is similar to that arising in the latter. The research is based on a survey of craft producers in the region

Context

Recent work on the industrial economy of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) has indicated a revival of manufacturing there (Gertler 2000) though, like elsewhere, it is argued that the old 'Fordist' model of production (based on mass assembly line methods in large vertically integrated plants) has been replaced by a variety of newer organizations consistent with several models loosely labelled collectively as 'Post-Fordist': flexible specialization (Piore and Sabel 1984), lean production (Womack et al. 1990), diversified quality production (Streeck 1992), etc. (see also Amin 1994). Focussing on the labour process, Eberts and Norcliffe (1999) identify 'neo-artisanal' production as one of these models. The core of the model is an artisanal labour process, in which the technical division of labour (the division of tasks making up the production process) is minimal, but which is accompanied by an extended social division of labour (the division of the total work of the economy among different producers/firms). Case studies of several sectors in the GTA support the principles of neo-artisanal production, while at the same time providing an alternative explanation for the locational patterns observed in many of the new industrial clusters identified in the literature on the New Industrial Geography.

The model of neo-artisanal production is more comprehensive than other versions of Post-Fordism in that it is not restricted to 'industry'. The artisanal labour process, demonstrated to have become more significant in industrial settings, may certainly continue to predominate in traditional artisanal settings as well (for example, household production). Furthermore, the role of technological change in the neo-artisanal model is less deterministic than in some of the other new models of production. For the latter, new technologies are almost always prerequisite to the new patterns of work. While labour process theorists have in the past often argued that such new technologies are usually associated with deskilling (eg. Braverman 1974), the neo-artisanal model allows a number of alternative configurations of technology and work. On one hand, new technologies can also require *en*skilling of workers to become more flexible, perhaps multi-skilled, suggesting possibilities for enhanced integration of tasks at the level of the worker - a *reduction* in the technical division of labour and therefore a move towards an artisanal labour process. Alternatively, old technologies can be used in new ways which are also more artisanal than their previous use. Both possibilities are supported by case studies across the economy of the GTA (the former, for example, by the use of computers for the production of animated film, special effects,

Table 1: *Change in the agricultural economy, Canada and Manitoba, 1996 to 2001. (source: Statistics Canada 2001)*

	Number of Farm Operators					
	Canada			Manitoba		
Farm Size[1]	1996	2001	% Change	1996	2001	% Change
<$10,000	94,220	72,960	-22.6	7,475	4,915	-34.2
$10,000 to $49,999	112,095	101,685	-9.3	9,135	7,835	-14.2
$50,000 to $99,999	57,395	47,665	-17.0	5,645	4,635	-17.9
$100,000 to $249,999	77,090	68,205	-11.5	7,155	6,370	-11.0
$250,000 to $499,999	30,255	34,515	14.1	2,575	3,050	18.4
$500,000 +	14,550	21,170	45.5	1,270	1,990	56.7
TOTAL	385,605	346,200	-10.2	33,255	28,790	-13.4

note: 1. Measured by Gross Farm Receipts
source: Statistics Canada 2001

etc., and the latter by the reorganization of lens manufacture at the level of the retailer in the production of eyeglasses).

The work just described has focussed on manufacturing in an old, urban industrial region. Its applicability to a non-manufacturing oriented rural region must be set within the economic dynamics of the context. This includes the so-called 'crisis' in agriculture - a dominant sector in South-West Manitoba. Some simple data from the 2001 census of agriculture illustrate the economic environment faced by producers in this sector. For Canada, from 1996 to 2001, the number of operators has decreased for small farms (all cateogories under $250,000) and increased only in the larger categories (see Table 1). The data for Manitoba follow the same pattern, only more accentuated - particularly pertinent are the greater losses in the smaller farm categories. This follows a long term tendency in the Prairies by which farm sizes have been increasing, the number of farms decreasing, and the number of workers required per farm declining moderately. From the 1930s to the 1980s, prairie agriculture became heavily capitalized, and the size of farms approximately doubled, while the number of farms was cut in half. The recent data suggest, if anything, an acceleration of this trend. This transformation has worked to the disadvantage of the smaller, family farms.

In this context, rural farm incomes have, for many families, declined in real terms, and the prospects both for future employment for young people entering their working years, and for sustained incomes for existing farmers, are bleak. As a result, alternatives on and off the farm are being sought on a large scale, and as we might expect, there have been significant shifts in population (notably out-migration of the rural farm population) and in economic activities of those who remain in rural areas (farm and non-farm). There are numerous possibilities for such people and families seeking new sources of income - non-traditional agricultural commodities,

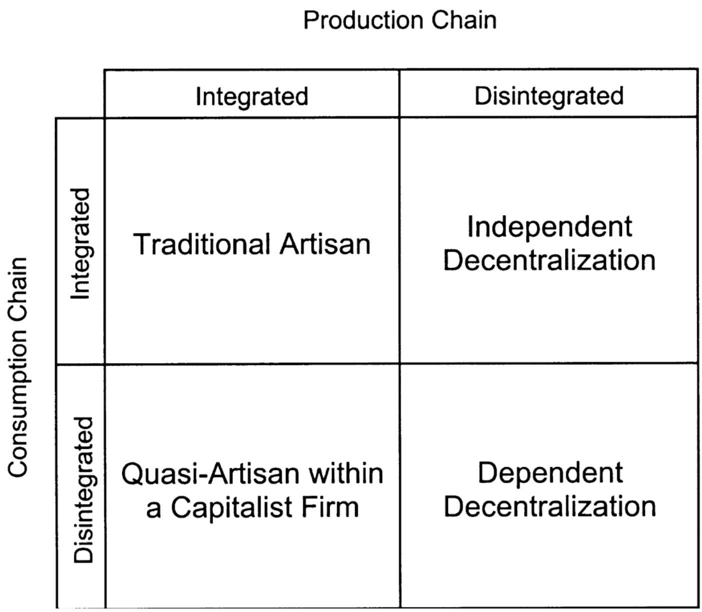

Figure 1: *A typology of neo-artisanal production.*

tourism, public services (health care, education), and home-based businesses, to name a few. Though not often considered very important, various forms of manufacturing ought to be included here. In fact, it is these activities which are the object of this investigation, and which, it is argued, provide a link between rural restructuring and the transformations taking place in urban industrial regions.

Craft production can be considered parallel to the traditional artisan, and is one of the many possible configurations of production within the model of neo-artisanal production (see Figure 1). The others represent forms in which the artisan is more tightly integrated within the broader capitalist social division of labour. In ‘quasi-artisanal production’, the artisan is a member of a larger firm, performing a special role in terms of the production process, but remaining disconnected from the consumer. In the two forms of decentralization, the firms themselves are part of larger chains of production, in which their work must be coordinated with the work of other firms in the kind of flexible relationships described in Piore and Sabel’s flexible specialization. The traditional artisan, however, does not so much represent ‘something new’, as a return to an old way of producing.

A comment on small business is informative at this point. As we shall see, craft production is, practically by definition, small scale. As such, its importance is easy to underestimate. However, it has recently been recognized that small business is a significant component of the Canadian, and Manitoban economies. A recent report notes that, for Canada, the small business sector grew faster in 2001 and 2002 than the economy in aggregate, by 0.5%, and that the gap is expected to widen in the future (Thorpe 2003). Furthermore, small business is considered to be the major contributor to employment growth in Manitoba (Kirbyson 2003). Though his studies were highly criticized, it seems that Birch (1987) was right to identify small business as a significant force for employment and general economic growth in modern economies. Craft production is therefore part of a very important and dynamic sector of the economy, both nationally and within Manitoba - though to be fair, data does not exist to demonstrate the share of small business that is, in fact, accounted for by craft production.

The Study

In order to investigate some of the dynamics of craft production in South-West Manitoba, a survey was conducted of a sample of craftspeople/ craft businesses in the region (see Figure 2). The sample frame was the participants of the major annual Christmas craft show in Brandon. Clearly, this was a convenience sample, but the show is large enough to cover a broad range of types of craft, and includes participants from throughout the study region (and beyond). After removing those crafters who do not reside in the study area, surveys were sent to the remaining 93. Of those, 25 useable responses were returned, producing a response rate of 27%. This is considered adequate for a survey in which there was no prior contact, and no incentive to participate.[1] Geographically, about 1/3 of respondents resided in the City of Brandon, with the remaining 2/3 scattered across the rest of the study area.

The survey was brief but covered a variety of themes including nature of the craft and how the craft is produced, participation in organizations supporting crafts (either craft-specific or regionally based), general importance of the craft (both by indicators of commitment to the activity, and by relative contribution to household economy), and locational dynamics of the craftspersons' participation in shows and festivals. These themes were designed to provide a general snapshot of the structure and significance of the craft economy to those engaged in it. Subsequent work will focus in more detail on specific themes.

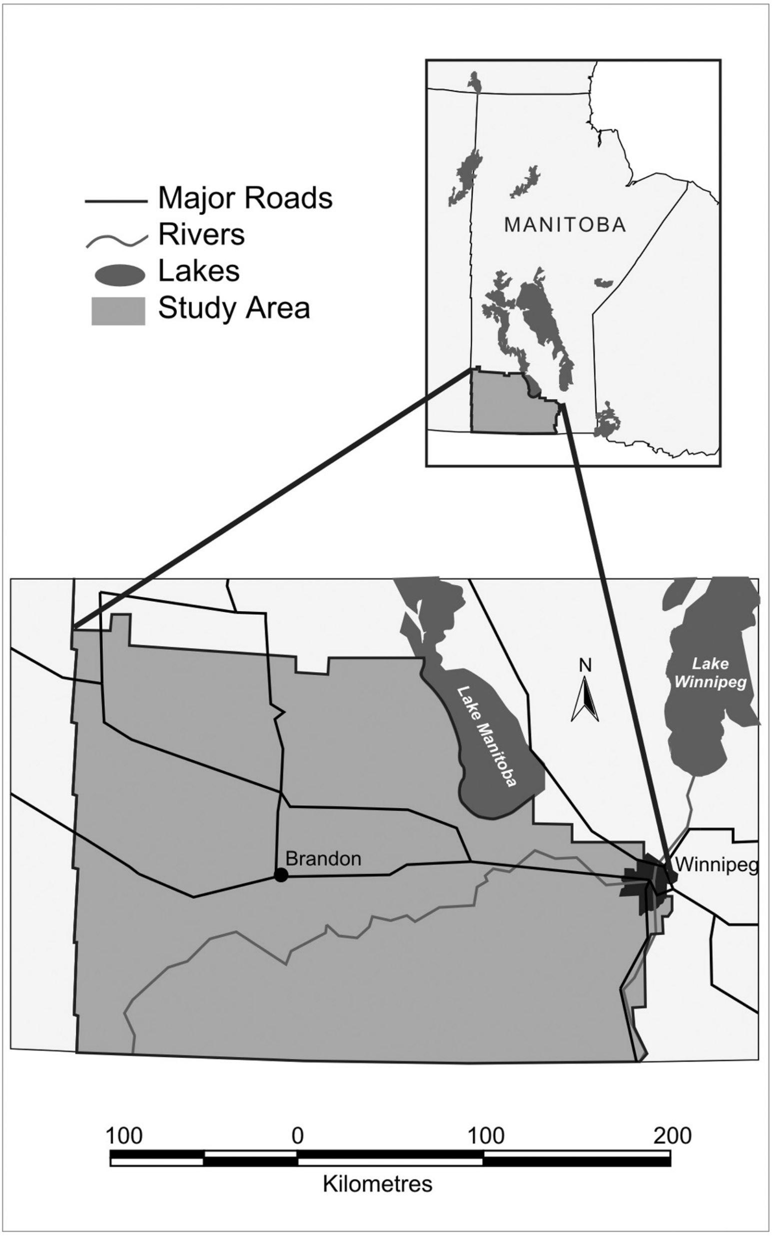

Figure 2: *Study area: South-West Manitoba.*

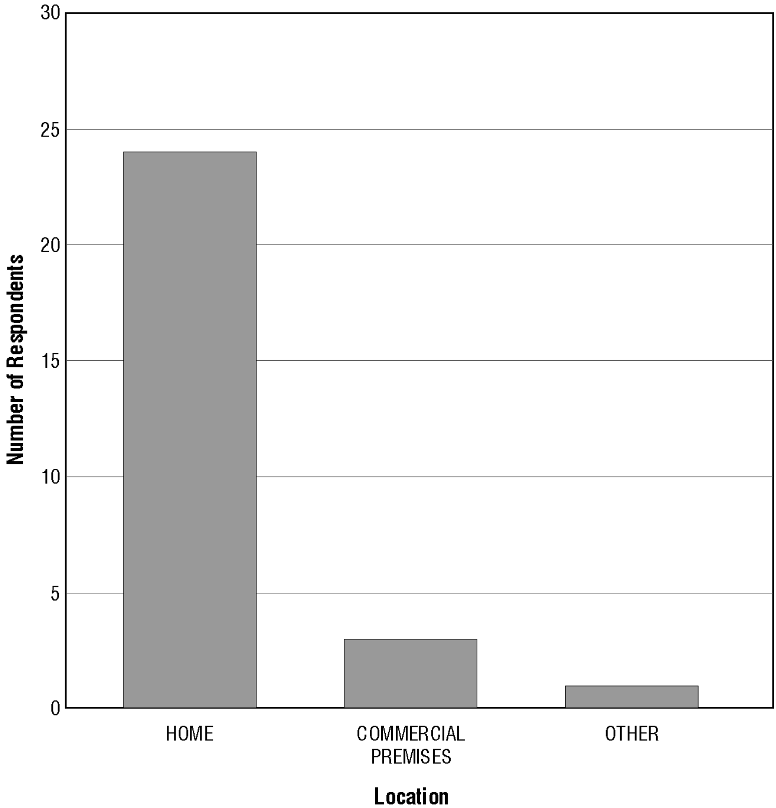

Figure 3: *Place of production.*

Nature of Craft Production: Work Process and Engagement in the Craft Economy

While the type of craft respondents were engaged in varied widely, some broad indicators of the nature of production were identified. Craft production is predominantly a 'home-based' occupation (see Figure 3). Of the 25 respondents, 24 indicated that at least part of the production took place in the home (the sum of responses reported for this question exceeds 25 because some respondents indicated production was divided among more than one location). As we might therefore expect, production may involve family members, but rarely extends to genuine 'employment relations' in which the craftsperson hires non-family members to work in

Table 2: *Survey responses.*

Question	Response	Number of Responses (n=25)	
How many individuals in this household/ family are engaged in production of the craft?	0	1	mean = 1.3
	1	17	
	2	5	
	3	2	
Do you formally employ anyone outside the family/household?	yes	2	
	no	23	
Do you 'contract out' any production tasks?	yes	4	
	no	21	
For how long have you been engaged in this craft (years)?	0 to 5	13	mean = 7.7
	6 to 10	5	
	10+	7	
Do you belong to a co-operative to assist with the purchase of materials?	yes	0	
	no	25	
Do you belong to a craft guild or association?	yes	5	
	no	20	
Do you belong to a guild or association specific to your community/region?	yes	2	
	no	23	
For how many household members is this craft the primary occupation?		14 reported of 33 total	
Do you operate the craft as an incorporated business?	yes	2	
	no	23	
Do you own a cash register which you bring to the shows?	yes	5	
	no	20	
Do you accept payment by credit card?	yes	6	
	no	19	

the craft (see Table 2). Respondents reported from 0 to 3 family members engaged in production[2], with a mean response of 1.3; on average, it is more than a ‘one-person’ operation. However, only two respondents reported having any non-family employees - one having one and one having two. Formal employment can therefore be considered of only marginal importance in exceptional cases. Suggesting similar conclusions, only 4 of the 25 respondents reported ‘contracting out’ any components of production. Clearly, we are looking at a system of production that is dominated by home-based production, engaging individuals within the household as the exclusive producers of the craft. There are few exceptions to this.

While technological change is often linked to broad processes of economic change, the thesis of neo-artisanal production allows for the organization of work with or without new technologies. Therefore, the nature of technology used in an artisanal context is an empirical question. In the case of the traditional artisan examined here, hand methods of

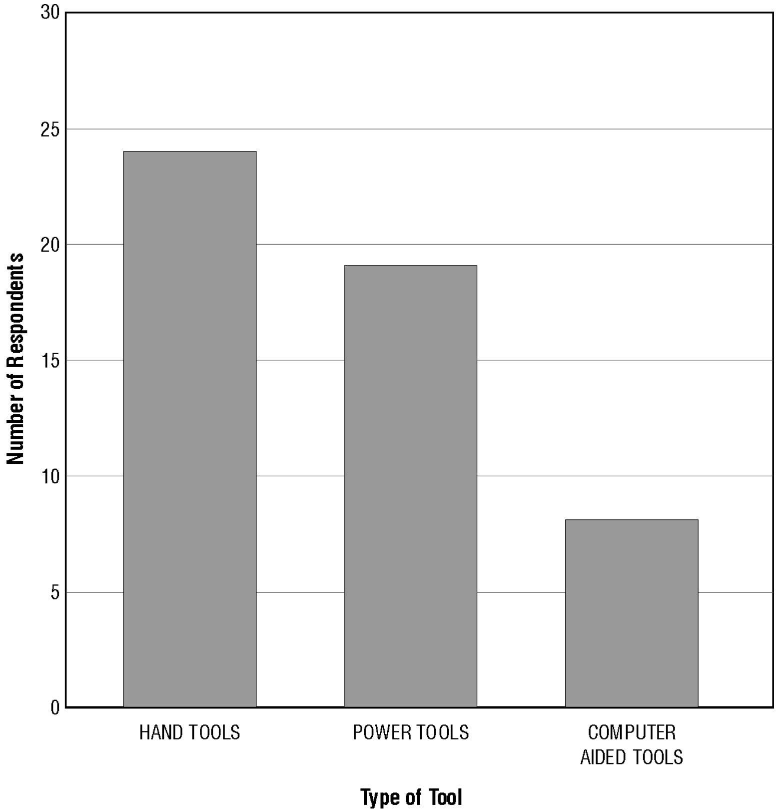

Figure 4: *Technology of production.*

production continue to be dominant (see Figure 4) - one might suggest this is true *manu*facture. However, power tools are widely used as well, indicating that the traditional artisanal methods have been 'updated' with newer tool technologies. Although the new industrial geography has been much concerned with the flexibility introduced into traditional factory production by the use of computer aided design and manufacture, the computer seems to play only a moderate role in the traditional craftsperson's workshop. Coupled with the other technologies, we see that even where they are used, computer based methods are more likely to be used alongside more traditional methods, rather than to replace them.

Length of engagement in the craft economy gives us an approximate indication of whether this represents something new - not as a system of production, but in terms of a revival of the artisan within the modern economy in this region. While some crafters reported having been engaged in the craft for some time (the maximum was 26 years), the average was only 7.7 years, indicating that for most of the people in this survey, the craft is a relatively new activity (see Table 2). Furthermore, over half the respondents reported being engaged in the craft for 5 years or less, reinforcing the suggestion of the recent resurgence of this as a component of the household economy for many participants. The nature of the survey, however, precludes any assessment of whether there has been a general resurgence of the craft economy, as crafters who have discontinued this activity were not surveyed. Anecdotal evidence from the craft shows, however, suggests that there have been increasing numbers of participants in these events over the past few years, giving at least a preliminary indication that the sector may be growing.

Role of Craft and/or Regional Organizations

An institutional analysis would suggest that organizations supporting craft activities might be of critical importance in maintaining the craft economy, both in its general operation and its spatial structure. None of the questions asked in the survey provided evidence of such institutions of any significance in this study. Of 25 respondents, not one indicated that they are members of any type of cooperative organization for the purchase of materials or distribution of products (see Table 2). Five said they belong to a guild or other such organization specific to their craft, with only two belonging to similar regionally based, non-craft specific organizations. The responses therefore clearly fail to indicate a craft-economy-structuring role for formal organizations geared toward cooperative forms of skill development, learning, support, distribution, etc. Although craft-based organizations may appear to play at best a marginal role, it is even more clear in the scarcity of geographically-based organizations that these do not illuminate the geography of craft production.

Importance of the Craft

Several indicators suggest the relative importance of the craft to the households in which they are engaged. A little under half the respondents indicated that for them (or the family members engaged), the craft represented their primary occupation (see Table 2). (For the remainder, it would be safe to assume that the craft is either a hobby or a secondary source of income for the individual.) The respondents reported being engaged in production of the craft (annually) for time periods ranging from one month (for example, ‘Christmas crafters’ - producing just for the Christmas sales), to the full year (indicating, at least for some, ‘full time employment’). Of the 25 respondents, only two were formally incorporated as a business, suggesting that although the craft was an important occupation for many, it is still an informal business.[3] Commitment to the craft is also indicated by a couple of interesting statistics. Five of the 25 respondents reported bringing a cash register to the sales, and six reported accepting credit card payments. The first indicates a financial investment in the ‘business’ of selling the craft, and also provides an image of professionalism. The latter also represents a commitment to the craft, since there are per-transaction costs that the craftsperson must cover with this form of payment. Clearly these craftspeople are operating on more of a formal business model than the retired hobbyist carrying a small cash box and not issuing receipts to customers.

More telling of the importance of the craft, perhaps, is the relative financial contribution of the craft to the household. While at the low end, some craftspeople did not consider their activity to contribute any significant amount to total household income, at least one craftsperson reported up to 80% of total household income derived from the craft business. This is clearly the main income for this household, not just for the individual. For five of the 25 respondents, the craft represented at least 25% of their total household income - certainly not an insignificant amount. We can safely conclude, therefore, that while the craft is the primary occupation for nearly half of the individuals surveyed, it does not appear to be the primary income for the households overall, with a couple of exceptions. It is more likely to be a form of supplemental income, secondary to the head of household’s main occupation, or to some form of support payment, such as a pension. However, while the overall average of about 14% of total household income may appear relatively low, it is worth speculating that for rural households whose primary economic activity is farming, this may be a meaningful contribution to a household whose financial situation may be described as precarious.

Locational Dynamics

In the craft economy, locational dynamics are tied to the means by which the craftspeople are connected with their customers. Given that the majority of production is *not* custom work done to the customers’ specifications (respondents’ average indication of custom production was

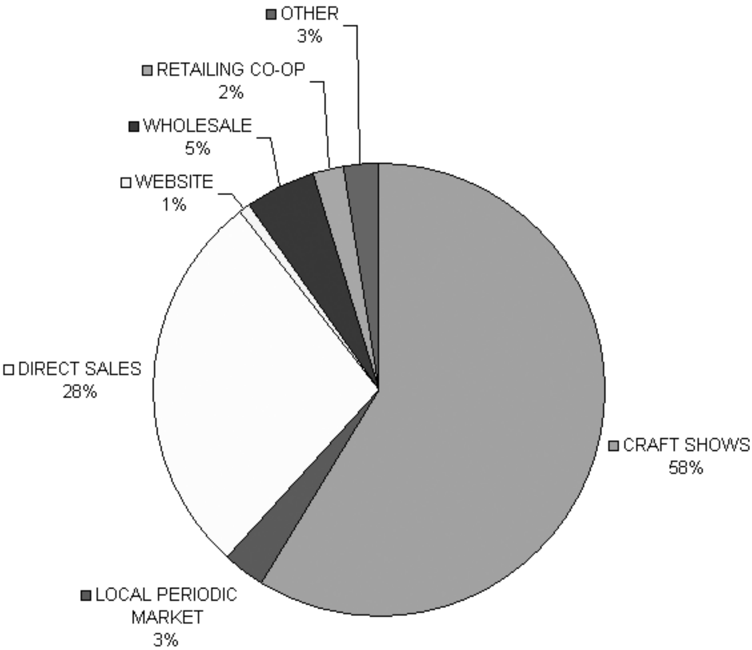

Figure 5: *Unweighted aggregate distribution of sales by market mechanism.*

just over 20%), the craftspeople rely on a variety of mechanisms to sell pre-made products to the general public (see Figure 5). Of these, by far the most important was the craft show (about 60% of unweighted aggregate[4] sales), followed by direct sales (28%), and a number of others, none of which account for more than 5% of total sales. The craft shows, therefore, introduce the locational dynamic to the craft economy. By definition, these shows require considerable geographical mobility on the part of many producers, and many consumers (certainly, some sellers at a show will be local residents, as will many, but not all, buyers). In this sense, the geography of production is likely of much less significance to the operation of the craft economy than the geography of distribution. Although not included in this survey, it is notable that many of the participants in the sale on which the sample frame was based are from outside the study region. It is safe to assume that such craftspeople participate in shows local to their place of residence as well, just as many Brandon-based craftspeople participate in shows outside Brandon. Therefore, being actively engaged as a craftsperson will, for most, involve considerable travel in pursuit of markets for their products. In a sense, production could really occur anywhere, with success being based on the shows more than on any other mechanism for selling the craft product - for most producers.

Conclusion

There is some indication that craft production is a relatively recent activity for many households, and therefore also likely to be showing a general resurgence in the contemporary era in the economy of rural regions, such as South-West Manitoba. Although for different reasons, this phenomenon is comparable to what is happening in other, core industrial regions' economies as well. The parallels are more convincing when set within the context of an artisanal model of production, argued to be gaining prominence in the latter, as well as the former type of region. As suggested by the evidence provided by the survey reported here, craft activities are, in many cases, a significant component of the household economy - much more than a simple hobby which may or may not pay for itself through minor sales to a local market.

There was minimal evidence of local contingency in support of production - lack of a role played by craft and/or regional organizations supporting production. The technologies of production were dominated by traditional hand methods, and secondly by power tools, neither of which are likely to be influenced by the sorts of factors relevant to the geography of industrial production - inter-industry locational linkages, regional dynamics of learning related to new technologies, etc. Furthermore, place of work was most often place of residence, indicating a complete lack of role played by 'industrial spaces'. Therefore the geography of production is, in a sense, trivial to the craft economy. What is much more important, clearly, is the geography of distribution - in this case dominated by the role of the craft show. This paper therefore demonstrates that there is a probable connection between the craft economy and tourism, a link that warrants further investigation.

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End Notes

[1] A follow up reminder was sent about a month after the initial survey was distributed. Occasionally, a new response will arrive, but clearly the bulk of willing participants have already responded.

[2] The question asked the respondents to include themselves in their count; the 0 might therefore be taken as a misunderstanding of the question.

[3] In informal discussions with craftspeople at sale after sale, as well as from detailed comments provided by one respondent to this survey, this researcher has found on many occasions that craftspeople operate to a certain degree 'under the radar' of the formal economy - many are not registered for GST, for example, and are apprehensive about revealing any financial information lest the 'tax men' in Ottawa come after them.

[4] In calculating this figure, all respondents' estimations of sales by mechanism were given equal weight. In reality, some craftspeople will in fact sell more than others, but dollar values (sales, income, etc.) were not reported in the survey.