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A craft under pressure: moral geographies, expertise and occupational legitimacy in artisanal butchery

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Abstract. Artisanal butchery in Germany is undergoing profound structural change, marked by industrial consolidation, shifting food systems and increasing public critique of meat production. This development is widely framed as a crisis, both within the trade and in public discourse. Based on qualitative research in Germany, this paper explores the strategies that artisanal butchers employ to reclaim legitimacy in the face of these challenges. The findings highlight how narratives of regionality and craftsmanship, alongside performances of expertise, shape the restaging of the trade. Situating these accounts within human geography and the sociology of labour, the paper shows how invocations of craft and regionality function as mechanisms of boundary-making through which occupational authority and hierarchies of value are reproduced within contemporary food systems. Workers in morally contested and structurally threatened occupations therefore respond to devaluation by reworking cultural repertoires of space, skill and tradition to sustain professional coherence and authority.

1 A craft under pressure: contextualising the butchers' crisis

In Germany, the number of existing artisanal butcher shops is steadily declining: although there were still 18 819 independent businesses in 2002, their number fell to 9660 in 2025 (Deutscher Fleischer-Verband, 2026:56; Statista, 2025), meaning that the number of existing butcher shops has halved within the past 2 decades. According to a vocational training report published by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research in 2021, almost half of the training positions remained unfilled in 2020 (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2021:65–66), making butchery the training occupation with the highest share of unfilled positions in Germany. These trends are not the result of a single cause but emerge from the intersection of several forces: the industrialisation and consolidation of food production, the corporatisation of retail through large-scale supermarkets, shifting consumer patterns and a growing public contestation of meat production in the context of animal welfare and climate debates (Nungesser and Winter, 2021).

Artisanal butchery in Germany is therefore facing a profound crisis that is simultaneously economic, structural and moral. This diagnosis is also articulated within the trade itself, where professional associations and practitioners increasingly describe their situation in existential terms (Deutscher Fleischer-Verband, 2026:9, 54). This crisis is embedded in a broader transformation of the German food system: a structural shift away from small-scale, locally anchored production towards industrialised and globally integrated commodity chains. Part of this transformation is the *artisanal butcher shop* as a form of craft-based, spatially embedded production that has been progressively marginalised as food systems have scaled up and standardised. This shift has not only diminished the economic viability of artisanal butchery but has also eroded its social visibility and symbolic legitimacy (Ocejo, 2017:108–109). Meat, once purchased from a local butcher who represented a visible link between animal husbandry and meat consumption, is now predominantly sold as a pre-packaged commodity whose origins remain invisible. As a result, artisanal butchers find themselves operating in a food system that renders their mode of production both economically peripheral and culturally con-

tested (Nungesser and Winter, 2021). In contrast to many craft occupations whose legitimacy is primarily challenged by industrial competition, artisanal butchers must also negotiate growing public criticism of meat production and consumption. The trade's dramatic numerical decline, the spatial reorganisation of meat production and the moral contestation of meat consumption therefore form the backdrop against which this paper addresses its central research question: *What strategies do artisanal butchers employ to reclaim legitimacy in a rapidly changing food system?*

Existing research has examined meat production and slaughter as sites of emotional and moral tension, bodily labour and human–animal relations (Meara, 1974; Cudworth, 2011; McLoughlin, 2019; Sebastian, 2021, 2025; Ben-Yonatan, 2022). These studies have illuminated dynamics of distancing, emotional labour and the marginalisation of killing work. Building on this literature, this paper shifts attention to *artisanal* butchery as a distinct site of meat production beyond large-scale facilities and supermarket butcheries. Artisanal contexts are theoretically revealing because they offer greater scope for individual agency and responsibility, narrative self-positioning and the mobilisation of craft-based forms of occupational value (Ocejo, 2017; Paxson, 2013; Schnell and Reese, 2003). This paper approaches craft-based work as a potential site of professional self-recognition and occupational value, without presuming such qualities as given. Instead, it examines how responsibility, agency and control over production are narrated and negotiated in artisanal contexts.

Analytically, the paper approaches these processes through two interrelated dimensions that emerged as central from the empirical material: craft-based expertise and space. First, it examines how notions of craftsmanship and expertise are articulated in butchers' narratives and how these narratives figure in their professional self-understandings. Second, it explores how spatial relations, such as regionality, proximity and localisation, are invoked and made meaningful within the trade and how they intersect with questions of value, distinction and authority. Taken together, these dimensions provide an analytical lens for examining how professional worth and legitimacy are negotiated within the contested field of meat production. By foregrounding craft-based work and spatial anchoring as key resources in contemporary struggles over occupational legitimacy, this paper contributes to debates in food studies, human geography and the sociology of labour. Section 2 of this paper situates the butchery trade within its historical and structural transformations, showing how industrialisation, the decline of craft-based production and changing societal attitudes towards meat have shaped the contemporary challenges of the profession. Building on this context, Sect. 3 develops theoretical perspectives to analyse craft-based and spatial dimensions through which butchers construct authority and meaning in their work. Section 4 outlines the methodological approach, describing the qualitative methods through which butchers' experiences, practices and narratives are explored. Section 5 then presents the empirical findings that emerge from this framework, before Sect. 6 draws together the argument and discusses its broader implications.

2 History, spaces and localisation: the structural developments of the meat industry

To examine the profession of butchery and its structural changes, the following section draws on approaches from human geography, history and sociology. These approaches provide an interdisciplinary framework that grounds the profession's development and its practitioners' challenges in spatial context and local specificity.

Society's relationship to meat, and by extension to animals, is deeply intertwined with the historical development of capitalist forms of social organisation (Winter, 2023:28–34; Sebastian, 2017; Gunderson, 2012, 2013). Whereas the production of meat increases with industrialisation (Teuteberg, 1988:72), the cultural approaches to the production of meat change, as Norbert Elias traces:

> "This direction is quite clear. From a standard of feeling by which the sight and carving of a dead animal on the table are actually experienced as pleasurable, or at least as not at all unpleasant, the development leads to another standard by which reminders that the meat dish has something to do with the killing of an animal are avoided to the utmost." (Elias, 2000 (1939):102)

This shifting standard forms the cultural backdrop against which the structural reorganisation of meat production unfolded. A first dimension of this reorganisation concerns the labour process itself: the transformation from localised craft to industrial standardisation. As the historian Christian Kassung (2021) shows for the German context, industrialisation introduced a new division of labour in meat production, giving rise to increasingly specialised occupational fields. Pre-industrial butchery was based on the slaughtered animal as an individual, where "individual animals are killed, cut and sold. [...] And it is the butcher who practises this craft" (Kassung, 2021:11, *translated by author*; see also Fitzgerald, 2010). Industrialisation led to a break with this form of butchery, replacing it with much more far-reaching processing methods involving standardisation, rapid fattening and breeding of animals for maximum productivity (Settele, 2020). Economic security on this scale could only be guaranteed through this standardisation and assembly-line processing. It was no longer individuality and manual skills that were required in the slaughtering process but the standardised handling of possibly enormous masses (Kassung, 2021:12–13). This shift reflects a technological change as well as the capitalist logic of profit maximisation and cost reduction shaping industrial meat production.

A second dimension of this reorganisation was genuinely spatial: industrialisation transformed not only how meat was produced but also where. Until the 19th century, slaughtering, processing and selling took place in the same spatial setting: meat was primarily produced at the place where it was ultimately needed for consumption (Kassung, 2021:11). With industrialisation and advancing urbanisation, this local arrangement dissolved. The emergence of mass production of perishable meat also led to stricter hygiene regulations: fears of epidemic disease and new regimes of meat inspection framed decentralised slaughter as a sanitary risk and legitimised the concentration of killing in enclosed, supervised municipal slaughterhouses (Brantz, 2008). The same spatial arrangement that enabled control also produced invisibility: relocated to the urban periphery and accessible only to professionals, slaughter (and the violence inherent in it) disappeared from everyday urban experience (Elias, 2000 (1939); Fitzgerald, 2010). Hygiene therefore operated as a hinge between economic rationalisation and moral sensibility. This spatial separation led to an alienation from the previous practices of butchery, whereas butchers in specialised shops today mostly have no contact with live animals.

While Kassung describes these developments for Germany, similar processes unfolded in the US, albeit differently structured. Whereas German industrialisation proceeded through a comparatively decentralised, municipally organised model, US meat production became highly centralised and vertically integrated (Pacyga, 2015). Despite these differences, both contexts produced analogous dynamics of spatial distancing, the segmentation of killing from consumption and the removal of animal death from everyday visibility (Pachirat, 2011; Lee, 2008). These US-based studies are invoked here not for a national comparison but to illustrate the broader structural significance of these dynamics. This historical distancing of meat production from everyday life can be understood as part of a broader transformation in human–animal relations. Richard Bulliet (2007) describes this shift as a movement away from societies characterised by direct and routine interaction with animals towards forms of "postdomesticity" (Bulliet, 2007:1), in which animal life and killing are increasingly removed from everyday experience and rendered abstract.

Recent research has pointed out that this historical distancing of meat from the animal body has not remained entirely uncontested. Rather, contemporary food cultures have seen selective attempts to symbolically and materially reintegrate the animal into practices of meat production and consumption. As Gutjahr (2013) argues, these reintegration practices do not undo industrialisation but reframe animal presence through curated forms of visibility, authenticity and moral reassurance. This is a dynamic that McLoughlin (2025) also identifies in industrial contexts, where slaughterhouse tours stage transparency as carefully curated visibility that reinforces rather than challenges existing relations of production.

Similarly, Madsen and Leth-Espensen (2019) show how what is called *New Carnivorism* provides an increased visibility of the physical transformation of animals into meat. This constitutes a complex narrative of authenticity and respect that functions to justify rather than question meat consumption. The animal reappears not as a living being or site of violence but as a meaningful reference that reconnects meat to origin, care and responsibility.

These developments provide an important backdrop for understanding how artisanal butchers position themselves today within a food system shaped by both spatial distancing and selective re-embedding. For the butchery trade itself, these developments have had lasting occupational consequences: slaughtering as abattoir work and butchery are differentiated as different occupational fields, and it is the abattoir worker who carries out the killing of the animals. With the retreat of slaughtering from public view both in Germany and the US, the stages of meat production (killing, processing and selling) has become increasingly segmented and spatially separated. Production chains and therefore the origin of the meat are often largely opaque for both companies and consumers (Münchhausen and Fink-Keßler, 2019). This shift is also reflected in consumer behaviour, as Ocejo notes in the chapter "Show the Animal" in *Masters of Craft*: "[. . .] people began buying their meat in the same manner as other foods: packaged, labelled and with largely unknown origins." (Ocejo, 2017:108). Alongside independent butcher shops (which form the focus of this study), supermarket-based meat retailers emerged, while large industrialised slaughterhouses and processing plants further fragmented and scaled the post-slaughter stages of meat production.

The production of meat is therefore inherently spatial, shaped by historical, social and economic processes that determine where and how animals are raised, slaughtered and processed. To understand how butchers position themselves within a food system that is both transformed and continually transforming, the following section develops the analytical lenses through which this study approaches the field. The intertwined dimensions of craft and space provide the conceptual basis for analysing how authority, status and professional identity are negotiated amid structural change and growing public criticism.

3 The making of meat: theoretical approaches to value, craft and space

The structural crisis of butchery is not only an economic or organisational one but also a crisis of professional recognition and occupational value. As established professions lose social legitimacy, workers are confronted with questions of how their work can be understood as meaningful, skilled and morally justified. Studies show that industrialised meat production, and the practice of slaughtering in particular, are associated with significant moral stigmatisation (Sebastian,

2021). Work in large-scale abattoirs is additionally linked to economic precarity and migrant labour (Sebastian and Seeliger, 2022; Birke, 2021; Lever and Milbourne, 2017).

Following Hughes's (1958:49–50) concept of *dirty work*, butchery can be understood as an occupation that is morally ambivalent and socially devalued due to its association with death and animal killing. Hughes (1962:7–9) further argues that such work is socially necessary yet delegated: society requires certain tasks to be done while distancing itself from those who perform them, so that the devaluation of the activity is transferred onto the occupational group itself. In Meara's (1974) early study on American meat cutters and Turkish butchers, this perspective is applied to the meat trade, showing how workers construct "honour" in stigmatised work by emphasising skill, autonomy and control over their craft. This study is an early indication that craft-based self-valorisation is a longstanding response to the moral ambivalence of butchery.

Although killing is not necessarily part of the everyday work of artisanal butchers, the occupation nevertheless remains symbolically associated with death and bodily matter (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999, 2014:83). In this sense, elements of physical taint persist through proximity to animal bodies and meat processing. Moral taint stems from the involvement in a process that necessarily entails the killing of animals. Research on dirty work has shown that workers in these occupations develop strategies to manage stigma and sustain positive professional identities (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014:82).

Ben-Yonatan's (2022) analysis of Israeli slaughterers reveals how moral ambivalence towards killing is navigated through moral and religious justification. The moral question of slaughtering is expressed through tensions "between action and meaning, between emotions and religious rationality and between human–animal similarities and differences" (Ben-Yonatan, 2022:355). Similarly, McLoughlin (2019) focuses on "how emotions are negotiated and neutralised as both human and non-human identities are constructed, perceived and experienced in a way that diminishes the gravity of industrial slaughter" (McLoughlin, 2019:323). The author shows how slaughterhouse workers navigate the emotional challenge of killing through emotional labour: following company "feeling rules" modelled on hegemonic masculine ideals of detachment, workers repress their emotions, reframe slaughter as food production and perceive the animals as commodities rather than sentient beings. Taken together, these studies highlight the fact that stigmatisation and the management of moral taint are central to understanding how workers in meat-related occupations sustain a sense of legitimacy. However, both studies are situated in industrial slaughter contexts. The artisanal butchery examined in this paper occupies a distinct structural position. Here, craft-based identity, institutional recognition and spatial embeddedness shape how occupational legitimacy is established, defended and renegotiated in response to processes of devaluation. Rather than approaching these as isolated themes, the paper treats them as analytically intertwined dimensions of legitimacy work. It thereby examines how competence, "good work" and professional identity are continuously articulated and negotiated within the trade.

3.1 On the value of craft

The training pathway into butchery in Germany is institutionally framed as a craft, organised through the dual vocational system (containing schooling as well as practical training on site) and governed by guild-like professional bodies. This system has historical roots in the medieval guild tradition (Sennett, 2008:58) and continues to underpin today's three-tiered craft training structure, characterised by the hierarchical distinction between apprentices (Auszubildende), journeymen (Gesellen) and master craftsmen (Meister) (Handwerksordnung, 2025 [1953]). The title of *master* is therefore not an honorific but a formally conferred, state-recognised qualification requiring years of professional experience and the successful completion of a master craftsman's examination. As a result, it functions as an institutionally sanctioned marker of expertise and authority within the trade, one that is constitutive of the hierarchies of value and prestige that structure artisanal butchery as an occupational field. In Germany, the title of master craftsman is required to operate a butcher shop (Handwerksordnung, 2025 [1953]). Industrial workers, too, claim expertise to destigmatise their labour (see above). What distinguishes artisanal butchery is that this expertise is institutionally codified and credentialed rather than informal, not least because industrial meat work is often marked by precarity and migrant labour outside formalised training structures (Birke, 2021; Nachtwey and Seeliger, 2019; Lever and Milbourne, 2017). The institutionally supported emphasis on butchery as a craft does not only provide technical knowledge but also fosters an identification of butchers with skilled, artisanal work grounded in mastery and manual technique (Janowsky and Winter, 2023:29).

As a sensitising analytical backdrop, this paper draws on the concept of boundary work (Gieryn, 1995; Lamont and Molnár, 2002). Originally developed to describe how scientists demarcate science from non-science, the concept captures the discursive practices through which social actors draw symbolic boundaries. These are conceptual distinctions that categorise people, practices and objects in order to claim authority, status and resources. Symbolic boundaries, as Lamont and Molnár (2002:168) emphasise, constitute resources in struggles over recognition: where they become widely accepted, they can harden into social boundaries that structure access to markets, positions and prestige. Both dimensions examined in this paper – craft-based expertise (this section) and spatial embeddedness (Sect. 3.2) – are approached as resources through which such boundaries are drawn. Craftsmanship is one of the symbolic resources through which these boundaries are produced.

Following Richard Sennett's understanding of craftsmanship as an ethical orientation towards doing "good work for its own sake", (Sennett, 2008:20) an emphasis on craft can be understood as a mechanism through which occupational groups stabilise moral authority and claims to professional competence under conditions of critique and structural change. As I show below, this mobilisation of craftsmanship does not only shape the trade, it also reproduces boundaries, hierarchies and hegemonic authority. In Sennett's account, craft is not only a category of manual labour but also a moral claim about good work and quality: "All craftsmanship is quality-driven work [...] the aspiration for quality will drive a craftsman to improve, to get better rather than get by" (Sennett, 2008:24). Artisanal butchers leverage this claim to reassert control over meaning and legitimacy amid escalating criticism of meat production and the uncertain status of their occupation due to the structural change of the food systems. Linked to the claim of quality is a moral dimension. As Ocejo illustrates specifically for the artisanal production of meat:

> "Quality meat means it tastes good when you eat it. But it also means the animal was raised and slaughtered humanely and butchered properly. These elements – a locally and humanely raised and slaughtered animal, carefully butchered with artisanal techniques – come together in the meat at craft butcher shops". (Ocejo, 2017:111)

Importantly, the value of craft in this context is not self-evident but relational. Craft gains significance precisely in contrast to industrialised forms of meat production that are associated with standardisation, anonymity and the fragmentation of responsibility. By foregrounding mastery, embodied skill and quality-oriented practice, artisanal butchery establishes an evaluative framework in which professional competence and moral responsibility are closely intertwined. Craft therefore functions not only as a mode of production but also as a normative reference point (Ocejo, 2017).

By examining craft as a central dimension of butchery, this study asks *how notions of craftsmanship and expertise are articulated in butchers' narratives and what role these understandings play in the negotiation of value of work and legitimacy under conditions of structural change*.

3.2 On the meaning of space

Building on the spatial character of meat production outlined in Sect. 2 and drawing on spatial theory, particularly Ermann and Strüver (2020), this study attends to spatial dimensions of meat production, including the localisation of production networks and "moral" geographies (Ermann and Strüver, 2020:3).

In response to the globalisation of food production, regionality has emerged as a key feature for artisanal producers to differentiate themselves from industrial producers. Ermann and Strüver (2020:6) argue that spatial proximity in food production is often associated with moral superiority, as seen in the growing popularity of "local food" movements. Ermann (2005) elaborates:

> "In the marketing of products 'from the region', geographical proximity also becomes a political issue, in that regionality is not only associated with the quality of the products, but the production and consumption of regional food is presented as something morally imperative." (Ermann, 2005:11, *translated by author*)

The concept of "regionality" is fluid and context dependent. As Ermann and Strüver (2020:6) note, regionality implies a combination of origin (where the food comes from) and distance (how far it has travelled). These definitions are not fixed but are negotiated through social practices and discourses. Schnell and Reese (2003) demonstrate this performative dimension by showing how microbreweries function as cultural anchors that spatialise authenticity through the emphasis on locality. By foregrounding place, small scale, rootedness and moral transparency, microbreweries do not merely reflect regionality, they produce it as an ethical claim embedded in narratives of distinctiveness and belonging. In conservative political discourses, the concept of regionality is used as a strategy to emphasise *Heimatverbundenheit*[1] (Ermann, 2005:24). Reflections on attachment to one's home region are both backward-looking (as an idealised, past state) and forward-looking (as a state that should be restored and aspired to in the future). Furthermore, this moral dimension of regionality encompasses ideas of solidarity, transparency and product quality as well as good working conditions. As Tilo Felgenhauer emphasises:

> "Proximity and transparency of production, distribution and consumption establish the actors' perception of solidarity relationships, favour ecological purchasing decisions and also stand for the consumption of regionality as a specific (product) quality." (Felgenhauer, 2013:48, *translated by author*)

Ocejo writes about the dimensions of space and quality in artisanal meat production and how it is reflected in "several moral tenets of where meat 'should' come from and how it 'should' be produced [...] meat's status is based on where the animal comes from, how it was slaughtered and butchered and how unique the cut is" (Ocejo, 2017:109). Although the moral value of the meat is directly linked to spatial distances and is aspired to be local or regional, Ocejo concludes in his empirical study that for "workers at other shops who also consider their meat to be 'local', the supply chain is longer. The actual distance is arbitrary" (Ocejo, 2017:112).

[1] Emotional attachment to one's *Heimat*, i.e. the home region or place one feels one belongs to.

By examining the spatial dimensions of butchery, this study asks *how regionality, the organisation of space and the moral geographies of food production contribute to the ways in which butchers navigate the structural challenges of their trade*. It therefore also discusses more generally how space shapes, and is shaped by, social practices, power relations and cultural meaning. Building on these theoretical considerations, the following section outlines the methodological approach before presenting the empirical results.

4 Approaching the butcher's world: a qualitative study

Fieldwork was conducted between 2021 and 2024, and comprised interviews, digital ethnography (König, 2020; Hjorth et al., 2017) and on-site observations (Knoblauch, 2001). The empirical basis of this paper consists of 10 qualitative interviews with 11[2] butchers ($n = 10$), conducted between 2023 and 2024. The primary objective of the interviews was to reconstruct the participants' subjective horizons of meaning as experts in their fields (Bogner et al., 2014). Germany constitutes a particularly relevant national context for examining the navigation of occupational legitimacy in butchery. Public debates around animal welfare, climate protection and meat consumption are highly pronounced, reflected in comparatively high levels of support for animal welfare regulation (European Commission, 2016) and a comparably large share of vegetarian and flexitarian diets (BMLEH, 2025). These dynamics have contributed to an ongoing public and media-driven image crisis of the meat industry, the effects of which extend beyond industrial production and increasingly affect artisanal butchers as well.

The sampling process was shaped by challenges in field access, as academic research on meat production was frequently met with scepticism by potential participants. Recruitment started in Hessen, Germany, due to existing professional contacts and the accessibility of local butcher networks, which facilitated initial field access. Snowball sampling then extended the sample beyond the initial region. The sample includes butchers in specialised butcher shops, with one participant just starting her vocational training as a butcher after her training as a salesclerk.

Within the sample, four participants were women and seven were men. The sample included predominantly men who work as butchers with long professional trajectories, many of whom are master butchers and owners of their respective family businesses. Their ages ranged from the early twenties to the late fifties, although the majority were in their forties and fifties, reflecting the still largely male-dominated structure of the trade at the level of business ownership and technical mastery. Most men who participated had more than 3 decades of work experience. In contrast, the four women in the sample tended to have shorter professional trajectories and entered the trade later in life or through indirect pathways. These patterns point to gendered entry routes, with men more commonly positioned in longstanding, intergenerational career paths and women more often entering the craft at a later stage or through alternative routes.[3]

The collected interview data and observation protocols analysed were inspired by the theory-generating approach of grounded theory. Most importantly, the analysis proceeded through open and axial coding as proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1996); initial inductive codes were clustered into higher-order categories through constant comparison, resulting in the category system from which the findings discussed below were developed. Although the analytic process follows grounded theory principles, the study deviates insofar as sampling was shaped by field access rather than strictly by theoretical sampling. In this study, the two analytical dimensions of craft and space were not imposed as an a priori framework but emerged inductively through the coding process as recurrent and analytically significant themes across the interviews and observations. Through constant comparison, these dimensions crystallised as key lenses for understanding how butchers interpret, justify and stabilise their professional practices under conditions of structural pressure. The following empirical analysis is therefore structured along these two dimensions, reflecting the outcome of the grounded analytical process rather than its starting point.

Ethnographic fieldwork provided insights into craft-specific forms of interaction, professional self-presentations and industry discourses that do not always surface in interview situations. The interviews were guided by a semi-structured and open-ended interview guide designed to elicit biographical narratives, professional routines and participants' interpretive frameworks (Bogner et al., 2014). The guide served as a flexible orientation, allowing participants to introduce their own relevancies. To explore processes and role dynamics without imposing predefined categories, participants were asked open questions such as "Which different tasks are carried out in your shop and who performs them?" This approach allowed participants to expand and unfold their descriptions and interpretations, providing rich, context-specific insights into how they envision the future of their profession.

[2] One interview was conducted with two butchers: the business owner together with his son, the designated successor.

[3] Gendered perspectives on butchery and work practices emerged as a salient theme across the interviews and was also reflected in the composition of the sample. Owing to the scope and analytical depth required to adequately address these dynamics, gender is not examined as a central analytical dimension in this paper. This decision reflects the thematic and spatial focus of the present contribution rather than the empirical irrelevance of gender, which constitutes an important avenue for further analysis. Gendered dimensions of artisanal butchery are discussed in more detail in related work by Janowsky and Winter (2023).

5 Empirical findings: narratives of space and craft

5.1 Visions of the past: regionality, proximity and quality

The interviews conducted for this study reveal a striking consensus among participants regarding the importance of regional, local and proximate production networks. Many butchers emphasised the value of sourcing products from nearby areas, associating such practices with quality, sustainability and a sense of community. In this way, they responded to the notion that meat production predominantly takes place in industrial slaughterhouses. Proximity and regionality therefore serve artisanal butchers as a means of distinguishing themselves, also symbolically, from industrial and globalised meat production. However, although the significance of these networks was widely acknowledged, the precise definitions of what constitutes "regional", "local" or "near" remained unclear. Boundaries between what is considered close or distant were rarely explicitly drawn, leaving room for interpretation. This openness in their narratives reflects a fluid understanding of spatial and relational dimensions within their trade and a vague moral superiority regarding the concept of regionality. In the following, I will explore how these concepts are articulated and how they shape the butchers' visions of their profession and potentially its future. To the question of "What makes good quality meat?", one participant, the owner of an artisanal sub-urban butcher shop, responded:

> "[. . .] [S]hort transport routes. That means from the slaughter or from the farmer to the butcher. That is very important. So we have this [government seal of quality]. [. . .] And we've been working with regional suppliers for as long as I can remember. But some of the business relationships we have are from my great-grandfather. Our meat trader in particular, that's a company that moved from City A in the abattoir to Smalltown B and then to Smalltown C. And the business relationships, they're still here now. And we've had a business relationship with this retailer for over 45 years now. And it's always the same here in the region and with the farmers too. So it's actually already a tradition. We don't really know any other way" (Int_05, pos. 24)

Beyond its strong and detailed emphasis on regional sourcing, this account also references the temporal dimension. For this butcher, regionality is the "only known way". This practice has a "seal of quality" and is also a multi-generational affair. In a different interview, similar sentiments are made:

> "Well, in the early days, we still did our own slaughtering here on the farm. I did when I was a little boy. My father, they had a cattle transporter, they also collected the meat from the farmers in the village [. . .]. In the past it was even tighter. [Now there are] fewer and fewer farmers and the circle got a bit bigger. And today, the [region farther away] is also regional and we've never really changed that. So it always remains very close-knit for us."
>
> Interviewer: "But you couldn't do it in the town anymore?"
>
> "No, no, we don't have any more farmers here in town [. . .] so the last ones, they were dairy farmers, they gave up their dairy farm 5 or 6 years ago. And as I said, it looks really bad here. It's the same in the neighbouring villages. There used to be at least 10 or 15 farmers here and that's all. But that was 40, 50 years ago." (Int_06, pos. 28–30)

The interviewee's statement highlights the profound transformation of local agricultural landscapes over the past decades. The decline of dairy farming in the town and neighbouring areas reflects broader structural changes in rural economies. This loss of local producers has not only altered the material conditions of butchery but also reshaped the meaning of regionality. As the interviewee notes, the number of farmers in the area has drastically decreased, from 10–15 farms 40–50 years ago to virtually none today. Over time, the circle of what constitutes "regionality" to him has expanded. Although in concept he continues to valorise proximity, the practical boundaries of what is considered "regional" remain vague. This flexibility allows butchers to maintain the narrative of regionality as a marker of quality and ethical responsibility, even as the material conditions of production change.

However, the participant's account also conveys a sense of loss and nostalgia for a time when local production networks were, in his perspective, more robust. The decline of dairy farming is not just an economic issue but also a cultural one, as to the participant it represents the erosion of a way of life and the social connections that once defined rural communities. This nostalgia for a "better past" reinforces the moral geographies of regionality, where proximity is equated with higher quality and ethical superiority (Ermann, 2005). Yet, it also reveals the contradictions inherent in these narratives, as butchers must navigate the tension between their idealised visions of regionality and the practical challenges of sourcing local products. In this context, regionality becomes not just a spatial category but also a moral one. The emphasis on proximity may also reproduce existing power dynamics, as it tends to marginalise actors who are structurally positioned outside localised production networks, including migrant workers in industrial slaughterhouses (see Nachtwey and Seeliger, 2019; Birke, 2021) and reinforces traditional hierarchies of value.

To further reinforce these points, the butchers also talk about the production and spatial contexts they explicitly reject. When asked to describe how their products differ from those of local supermarkets, two participants responded:

> "We pay a lot of attention to regionality. I don't want animals from overseas or from the Eastern Bloc or anywhere else. Instead, I want to support the farmers around us, do business with them" (Int_10, pos. 35)

> "In Germany, there's no company that produces meat with a shelf life of 6 months. But if you buy an Argentine rump steak, it has a best-before date that's 4 months out. How is that possible? Well, everyone keeps quiet about it. No one says a word. They call it the "mafia" in those countries and that's how things work there. You can imagine how it's done. With acids, ultraviolet light and so on. But the meat mafia really takes great pride in that. Go to a wholesaler [...] and look at a piece of meat from Uruguay or Argentina: check the production date and the best-before date. There are months in between. Take a piece like that and put it in your own fridge. You'll never reach the best-before date. Never. No matter what you do, it won't last that long" (Int_01, pos. 45)

The butchers' statements reveal a clear demarcation between what they consider acceptable (regional, local production) and what they reject (industrialised, globalised production). This contrast is not just about sourcing practices but also about moral and ethical values, as well as perceptions of quality and authenticity. The participant refers to allegedly criminal or underground structures that, in their view, persist in South American meat production. Without naming specific actors, they construct an image of a system marked by corruption, manipulation and disregard for official standards of hygiene and production. References to the "meat mafia" and the use of "acids and ultraviolet light" serve to delegitimise these foreign production practices and to contrast them with a supposedly more transparent and regulated German system.

This statement can be read as an expression of drawing a moral boundary (Lamont and Molnár, 2002): by attributing criminality and deceit to "others", the butcher reinforces moral distinctions between domestic (German/European) and foreign (in this case, South American) production cultures. This discourse not only constructs hierarchies of trust and purity but also reflects broader narratives of globalisation, in which distant production sites are often framed as opaque, unsafe or morally inferior. The reference to "mafia" and secretive practices simultaneously reveals a lack of trust in global food systems and can be understood as a form of cultural protectionism and a way of reaffirming local moral and economic order against the perceived risks and contaminations of global trade. Similar critical views on globalised food systems and chemical interference are echoed through the interviews. This emphasis on regionality may also carry undertones of cultural chauvinism, particularly when the rejection of globalised production is accompanied by a blanket devaluation of products from certain regions (e.g. "overseas", "Eastern Bloc" or "meat mafia"). These spatial hierarchies are not merely economic or cultural but carry a racialised dimension: the framing of South American or Eastern European production as criminal and opaque, and their product as chemically manipulated, draws on broader discourses in which certain regions and their populations are coded as less trustworthy and less regulated, therefore morally inferior. This racialisation of food provenance reproduces hierarchies of difference that extend into the domain of national and ethnic imaginaries, positioning German producers as the standard of cleanliness, transparency and moral legitimacy. This resonates with longstanding critiques of food localism such as the "defensive localism" that Winter (2003) identified in England's new food economy and the "local trap" (Born and Purcell, 2006), which caution against equating the local with the good and highlight its exclusionary potential (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005).

Beyond the explicit moral distinctions articulated in these narratives, the emphasis on regionality and proximity can also be read as structurally necessary forms of differentiation within a highly competitive and unequal market. Artisanal butchers operate in direct comparison to economically dominant, industrialised producers whose scale, pricing and distribution they cannot match. The mobilisation of spatial closeness functions as a key resource for asserting relevance and survival. Read in this way, narratives of regionality operate simultaneously as moral claims and as economically grounded practices of differentiation. They allow butchers to position themselves within a field structured by asymmetric power relations, where survival depends on emphasising precisely those qualities that industrial producers cannot credibly embody.

Across the interviews, regionality emerges as a central theme, closely linked to notions of expertise, deep knowledge about food and greater control over production processes. Participants associate regional sourcing with quality and transparency – values they see as integral to their craft. This emphasis on control is particularly poignant considering the historical structural changes that have diminished the autonomy of butchers over time.

> "Because we are no longer local suppliers. [...] [T]he local supplier of today is ALDI, LIDL, Netto, Penny[4]. We are indirectly a cultural asset and this should be expanded and brought closer to people with our expertise." (Int_03, pos. 14)

> " 'Money makes the world go round'. That's just the way it is, unfortunately. [...] People should get back to nature and explain to their children that cows aren't purple and that sausage doesn't come from a packet. And then a lot will have been gained." (Int_01, pos. 73)

[4]German discount supermarkets.

Through these narratives of *returning* to nature and being a cultural asset, the butchers are reclaiming a sense of control that was once central to their profession, staging themselves as providers for a whole region. In addition to the wishes to restore past structures, regionality and tradition also play a key role in the narratives of butchery. In presenting themselves as those who reconnect consumers with the origins of meat and educating that "sausage doesn't come from a packet", butchers position their trade as a counterpoint to the postdomestic estrangement of animal life from everyday experience (Bulliet, 2007). By emphasising their connections to local farmers and traditional practices, butchers construct a narrative of authenticity and expertise that will be explored in the upcoming section.

5.2 Professional authority: skill and expertise

The wish for more control is not only reflected in the narratives about regionality and transparency but also in narratives about mastery of the material. Across the interviews, butchers describe their work as a form of deliberate and skilled intervention into the materiality of meat: an intervention that distinguishes their craft from both industrial mass production and unskilled labour. Mastery here becomes a means of asserting professional authority and reclaiming autonomy in a sector increasingly shaped by standardisation, regulation and public critique. One participant responded as follows when asked about his entry into butchery and the development of his professional practice over time:

> "Well, we see ourselves somewhat as affineurs. Like those who turn cheese into something special. Because with our ageing processes, we only sell the meat when it has reached the perfect level of maturity. With a lot of expertise at the counter and also with modern cutting techniques. Simply better and more competent than others." (Int_10, pos. 36–37)

By positioning himself as an *affineur* – that is, a specialist in the ageing and refinement of cheese – the participant draws on a reference from another field of artisanal food production that is strongly associated with refinement, patience and expert judgement (Stengel and Barthélemy, 2015)[5]. The figure of the affineur evokes a mode of work in which quality is not produced through speed or standardisation but through time, attentiveness and the skilled assessment of material processes. In this sense, the comparison elevates butchery from a form of manual processing to a practice of transformation that requires sensory knowledge, experience and care. Invoking the affineur can therefore be read as a form of symbolic boundary work (Gieryn, 1995; Lamont and Molnár, 2002): by borrowing the vocabulary of a culturally prestigious craft, the participant demarcates artisanal butchery from industrial mass production and unskilled labour, while simultaneously claiming membership in a community of knowledge-intensive, quality-oriented food crafts. This narrative strategy operates parallel to (and extends beyond) the institutional prestige conferred by the title of *master butcher*. Where the master qualification functions not only as a formal credential but also as a key mechanism through which prestige and hierarchy are reproduced within the trade, the invocation of the affineur reaches beyond the boundaries of the trade itself, aligning artisanal butchery with a broader field of valorised craft production. Together, these registers – the institutional as well as the symbolic – constitute overlapping mechanisms through which prestige is generated and professional legitimacy is claimed. Mastery is framed not merely as technical proficiency but as the capacity to judge when a product has reached its optimal state, which is a competence that cannot be formalised or fully standardised. Through this narrative, control over materiality becomes a claim to professional authority: the butcher presents himself as someone who does not simply process meat but who understands, guides and perfects it.

At the same time, the affineur metaphor draws a boundary to industrial production. Where industrial meat processing is associated with fixed procedures, external standards and temporal acceleration, artisanal expertise is presented as situational, experience-based and oriented towards singular outcomes. In the same interview, the participant articulated his perspective even more explicitly:

> "But why is our meat different? Because we may have a different approach. I'll put it provocatively: in a large operation, like a supermarket production facility, you have unskilled workers in some parts of the process. There, the product, or the production factor of food, meat, goods, is just processed according to standard procedures. With us, at every link of the chain, there are trained professionals who assess the meat differently and can therefore use it and handle it differently. They pay attention to the maturation, to the right cut, and they can be flexible, rather than processing everything according to some guidelines written down somewhere in a manual, in a standardised way." (Int_10, pos. 41)

This articulation of mastery can also be read as an expression of occupational pride and as a response to stigma. As early as Meara's (1974) study on meat cutters and butchers, pride emerged as a central resource through which workers countered the moral ambivalence and social devaluation associated with killing work. Meara analysed pride primarily in relation to the physical and moral taint of slaughter, but the narratives in this study suggest both continuity and transformation of this dynamic.

Under contemporary conditions, pride is articulated less in opposition to the immediate stigma of killing alone and more

[5] For an in-depth analysis of the crafting of cheese, see Paxson (2013).

in response to broader processes of de-qualification, standardisation and moral critique directed at meat production as a whole. The emphasis on refinement, judgement and mastery over materiality allows butchers to reframe their work as demanding, knowledge intensive and worthy of recognition. In this sense, the invocation of the affineur does not merely serve as a claim to distinction but functions as a narrative strategy through which experiences of devaluation are countered and professional self-respect is stabilised under changing moral and economic conditions.

Similar contrasts between industrial standardisation and craft-based judgement were articulated across the interviews. One participant, for instance, described visiting a large-scale operation where work was highly standardised:

> "I once visited a large-scale operation where people literally stand at an assembly line and keep making the same cut over and over again, always the same movement. I find that quite unfortunate; when you don't, you have no variety at all in your tasks and no opportunity to really develop yourself. That's different for us. And we try to make sure that people actually see the whole process. As I said, I try to respond closely to individual needs and to assign tasks to people that they are good at." (Int_08, pos. 37)

Beyond questions of product quality or prestige, this passage highlights how craft-based work is articulated as intrinsically valuable for those performing it. Artisanal butchery is framed as a form of work that allows for task variety, learning and personal development. In contrast to industrial labour organised around narrowly defined and repetitive tasks, craft-based work is described as enabling engagement with multiple stages of the production process and as offering opportunities for the gradual development of individual skills. The contrast is articulated not only in terms of skill but also through different spatial arrangements of work, with the assembly line standing in for scale, fragmentation and distance from the production process as a whole. These accounts do not simply celebrate craft as superior work but articulate a specific understanding of what makes work meaningful from the perspective of the practitioners themselves. "Good work" is constructed in opposition to standardised and fragmented labour processes, not only because of differences in output or quality but also because of the ways work is experienced and organised. Skill is therefore not presented solely as a resource for external recognition or market distinction but also as a source of intrinsic occupational value, tied to autonomy, learning and the possibility of self-development over time. Moreover, quality is linked not to speed or standardisation but to craft judgement, embodied knowledge and situational decision-making.

Industrial labour is framed as unskilled and mechanical, whereas artisanal butchery is portrayed as flexible, evaluative and grounded in expertise. As Sennett puts it: "The difference between brute imitation of procedure and the larger understanding of how to use what one knows is [. . .] a mark of all skill development" (Sennett, 2008:58). By emphasising judgement, flexibility and embodied knowledge, butchers construct a contrast between small-scale craft-based work and industrialised production that extends beyond technical differences. Skill becomes a moralised resource through which control over material, process and outcome is reclaimed in a field characterised by standardisation and external regulation. Mastery over meat functions as a claim to autonomy and authority, positioning artisanal butchery as a form of work that cannot be reduced to procedural execution or automated routines.

6 Concluding discussion: navigating tradition and change

This paper set out to examine how artisanal butchers navigate the structural crisis of their profession in the context of ongoing economic pressure and increasing public critique of meat production. The empirical findings show that butchers engage in strategies of re-legitimation that draw on spatial anchoring, craft-based expertise and moralised notions of quality. By analysing these strategies, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how craft and spatial relations function as narrative mechanisms through which meaning and legitimacy are produced in the contexts of occupational devaluation.

First, the findings demonstrate that regionality and spatial proximity function as central resources in the construction of professional legitimacy: References to local supply chains, short distances and personal relations to farmers and customers are not only descriptive but also performative: they establish moral boundaries (Lamont and Molnár, 2002) between artisanal butchery and industrial meat production. Through these spatial framings, butchers differentiate their practices from industrialised forms of production and present them as transparent, responsible and ethically grounded. This mobilisation of spatial framings also entails a notable historical reversal: the discourse of hygiene and cleanliness, which in the 19th century served to delegitimise decentralised, craft-based slaughter and justified its removal into centralised facilities (as outlined in Sect. 2), is now invoked by butchers themselves as a boundary marker that codes German artisanal production as clean and regulated against a supposedly opaque and contaminated globalised meat trade. A discourse that once marginalised the craft has therefore been appropriated as a resource of its re-legitimation. These findings support and extend existing research on moral geographies of food (Ermann and Strüver, 2020) by showing how spatial narratives are mobilised not only in consumption contexts but also within professional self-understandings of producers operating under conditions of structural pressure.

Second, the emphasis on craftsmanship and expertise highlights the role of craft as a strategy for stabilising occupational value under the conditions of de-legitimation. Drawing on notions of skill, mastery and "proper" practice, butchers frame their work as qualitatively distinct from industrialised meat processing. Craftsmanship therefore functions as more than a technical category: it becomes a moral claim about good work, responsibility and authority. Rather than representing a purely nostalgic orientation, these craft-based narratives articulate an adaptive response to economic pressure and moral critique, through which professional value is reasserted and redefined. In this way, the findings contribute to sociological discussions of craft by demonstrating how artisanal identities are reworked in response to structural change.

Taken together, the analysis shows that spatial anchoring and craft-based expertise do not operate as separate resources but as mutually reinforcing strategies through which artisanal butchers reconfigure legitimacy under conditions of moral and structural crisis. The combination of small-scale spatial embeddedness and claims to highly skilled, judgement-based work enables butchers to position themselves as morally accountable producers within a food system otherwise associated with opacity, standardisation and ethical contestation. The findings therefore suggest that artisanal butchery is best understood as a moral-economic arrangement rather than merely a mode of production. It positions itself as a locally embedded and highly qualified form of work in which legitimacy is not derived from efficiency or scale but from proximity, responsibility and embodied expertise. This configuration allows butchers to counter processes of devaluation and stigma by producing value that exceeds technical quality alone. While craft in other sectors may primarily serve as a marker of quality or distinction, artisanal butchery is compelled to generate legitimacy in relation to an activity that is itself morally contested. Skill and space consequently function not only as markers of competence but also as moral resources through which responsibility for animal life, production practices and food quality is actively claimed. This study therefore contributes to debates in food studies and sociology of labour by showing how craft and space jointly operate as mechanisms of moral re-legitimation in occupations facing both economic marginalisation and ethical critique. Rather than resolving the structural contradictions of the meat sector, these strategies render them manageable at the level of everyday practice and professional self-understanding. More broadly, the findings suggest that legitimacy in morally contested occupations is not maintained solely through technical competence or economic performance but also through the continuous production of convincing moral narratives about work, place and responsibility.

Finally, the findings point to a broader tension within contemporary food politics that extends beyond the scope of this paper. The moral narratives mobilised by artisanal butchers, centred on transparency, regionality, proximity and reconnecting consumers with the origins of their food, partially overlap with claims advanced in vegan and animal rights discourses, despite being grounded in fundamentally different ethical projects. This convergence suggests that legitimacy in contemporary food systems is increasingly negotiated through shared moral vocabularies rather than shared political positions. Recent work on transparency politics supports this interpretation. As McLoughlin (2025) demonstrates in her analysis of Danish slaughterhouse tours, transparency has become a key strategy through which meat producers seek to generate public trust. Yet transparency functions less as unrestricted openness than as a carefully curated mode of visibility that reinforces rather than unsettles existing relations of production. From this perspective, artisanal butchers' appeals to regionality, craftsmanship and quality can likewise be understood as forms of transparency politics. These narratives foreground visibility, proximity and responsibility as sources of legitimacy while leaving the fundamental organisation of meat production and consumption intact. Future research could build on this insight by examining how different actors across the food system – including artisanal producers, industrial firms and animal advocacy organisations – mobilise similar moral vocabularies of visibility, proximity and responsibility in pursuit of markedly different ethical and political objectives.

Data availability. The interview data underlying this study are not publicly available due to the confidentiality agreements with the participants and to protect their anonymity. Anonymised excerpts are included in the article.

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