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Disassembling the city : a historical and an epistemological view on the agency of cities

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Late medieval political thinkers, both late scholastics and renaissance humanists, were heavily influenced by the ideas of Aristotle.¹ For the Greek philosopher, politics materialized in cities, in the polis, or the city-state; indeed, a city was seen as synonymous with a political community. Yet, while cities were considered a partnership of individuals, this was not defined in terms that we would use today. Nowadays we would refer to the specific laws, institutions, and power groups which create the city. For Aristotle, however, the city preceded all this; cities had an essence or a substance. While individuals were considered to have a natural drive to form such a community, the city itself had a telos or a purpose – which was to make virtue and happiness possible.²

Nor could the city and its inhabitants be separated in this view. In late medieval political philosophy, the relationship of the individual to the city was similar to the relationship of a part of the body to the whole body.³ Civic humanists described a free republic as ‘one body with many heads, hands, and feet’; and they saw office-holding as representing ‘the universal persona of the whole city’.⁴ Hence the organic metaphors used in political philosophy; but there is more. First, there is the idea that cities are inhabited by a certain race or a stock of families with a long ancestry; this idea can be found in renaissance eulogies of cities. Second, and somewhat paradoxically, cities are considered to shape the character and virtue of its people.⁵ Leonardo Bruni in his *Panegyric of the city of Florence*, notoriously wrote that ‘the Florentines are in such harmony with this very noble and outstanding city that it seems they could never have lived anywhere else. Nor could the city, so skillfully created, have had any other kind of inhabitants’.⁶

By the eighteenth century, all this no longer applied. To begin with, the image of the city had become far more ambivalent, if not outright negative. While physiocratic thinking considered towns the abode of the sterile class⁷, moralists and political thinkers started to connect urban life to aristocratic luxury, opulence and vice – thus heralding the nineteenth-

¹ Critical approaches in N. Rubinstein, ‘Marsilius of Padua and Italian Political Thought of his Time’, in J.R. Hale, J. Highfield and B. Smalley (eds), *Europe in the Late Middle Ages* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), pp. 44-75; Cary J. Nederman and J. Brückmann, ‘Aristotelianism in John of Salisbury’s Policraticus’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 21/2 (1983), pp. 203-229; Cary J. Nederman, *Community and Consent: The Secular Political Theory of Marsiglio of Padua’s Defensor Pacis* (London & Littlefield Publishers, 1995), esp. ch 2; James M. Blythe, ‘Aristotle’s politics and ptolemy of Lucca’, *Vivarium*, 40/1 (2002), pp. 103-136; Vasileios Syros, *Die Rezeption der aristotelischen politischen Philosophie bei Marsilius von Padua* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

² Alan Ebenstein, *Introduction to Political Thinkers* (Orlando: Harcourt College Publishers, 2002, 2nd ed.), ch 2. Also: J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment. Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

³ Jeannine Quillet, ‘Community, Counsel and Representation’, in J.H. Burns (ed), *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought, c. 350–c. 1450* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 520-545, p. 530.

⁴ Quoted in Nicolai Rubinstein, ‘Italian Political Thought, 1450-1530’, in J.H. Burns, *The Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 38-9.

⁵ Anthony Grafton, ‘Humanism and Political Theory’, in Burns, *The Cambridge History, 1450-1700*, pp. 23-25.

⁶ Leonardo Bruni, ‘Panegyric of the City of Florence’, in Benjamin G. Kohl and Ronald G. Witt (eds), *The earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978 [trans. Benjamin G. Hohl]), pp. 135-178, p. 136.

⁷ See e.g., François Quesnay, *Tableau économique* (1758).

century idea of urban degeneration.⁸ Moreover, even when they continue to be the culmination of progress as in Adam Smith's growth theory, cities appear to have lost their essence. Economic historians have described Adam Smith's economic theory as a theory of urbanization, but the city in his work is decomposed into a limited set of factors, the most important of which are: the rate of demand, the division of labor, and transportation costs.⁹ For Adam Smith, a city is in fact the result of agglomeration economies, with artisans and entrepreneurs settling in each other's vicinity to reduce transaction costs.¹⁰ Related to that, the cities' inhabitants are reduced to either consumers or factors in a production process. While the status of artisans and artists was intimately connected to the fame of the city in renaissance thinking¹¹, the personality of the artisans was in the eighteenth century mostly reduced to their ever more specialized skills.¹²

In other words, the city as a polis or community has, so to speak, evaporated in abstract reasoning. And the relationship between the city and its inhabitants is – or so it seems – called into question. Of course, this is an easy assertion from the perspective of intellectual history. The real challenge is to examine whether this shift in thinking about the city either had real consequences or was based on real transformations in urban life. This is all the more urgent as in present-day thinking and policy making a specific urban imaginary is connected to a specific view on the talents and skills of a privileged elite of urban citizens. According to Richard Florida and others, open, tolerant, multicultural and pleasant cities accommodate the so-called 'creative classes', an intellectual elite capable of fostering economic innovation and taking the lead in the cultural and creative industries.¹³ In this paper, I will historicize and denaturalize such views by focusing on guilds and the attitudes towards the skills and technical knowledge of guild-based artisans. Starting from the observation that guilds were 'members' of the urban 'body politic' and that guild-based masters were in turn 'members' of the guilds or 'corporations', I will shed light on the advent of the 'modern' (eighteenth- and nineteenth-century) city through a tentative examination

⁸ Carl E. Schorske, *Thinking with History. Explorations in the Passage to Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), ch 3 ('The Idea of the City in European Thought: Voltaire to Spengler'), pp. 37-55, esp. 43ff.

⁹ William J. Stull, 'The Urban Economics of Adam Smith', *Journal of Urban Economics*, 20 (1986), pp. 291-311.

¹⁰ 'Smiths, carpenters, wheel-wrights, and plough-wrights, masons, and bricklayers, tanners, shoemakers, and taylors, are people, whose service the farmer has frequent occasion for [but] as their residence is not, like that of the farmer, necessarily tied down to a precise spot, they naturally settle in the neighbourhood of one another, and thus form a small town or village. The butcher, the brewer, and the baker, soon join them, together with many other artificers and retailers, necessary or useful for supplying their occasional wants, and who contribute still further to augment the town.' Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London: W. Strahan, 1776, 1st ed.), Book III, Ch 1, p. 462.

¹¹ This clearly emerges from textbooks on art in the Italian Renaissance, although it is often not made explicit. See Peter Burke, *The Italian Renaissance: Culture and Society in Italy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1972); Evelyn Welch, *Art in Renaissance Italy 1350-1500* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹² See Footnote 86.

¹³ Charles Landry, *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators* (Near Strout: Comedia, Earthscan, 2000); Richard L. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Richard L. Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

of the intricate connection of the guild-based artisan's skills and the city as a political commune.

Under the influence of Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Actor Network Theory (ANT), historians of science have already explored the fabrication of science and matters of fact as an ideological activity.¹⁴ They have focused on learned and intellectual milieus, largely urban, and have analyzed the ways in which the urban context influenced and determined how knowledge and the related subject-object formations were 'constructed'.¹⁵ To date, however, they have only hesitantly taken into account the far larger group of artisans and artists who cultivated and reproduced a type of embodied and, to a certain degree, local knowledge – notwithstanding artists and artisans identifying with the city much more explicitly.¹⁶ As has already been shown, skills and technical knowledge for guild-based masters were part and parcel of a collective identity which was religiously and ritualistically cultivated and reproduced in the urban public sphere¹⁷, but the implications thereof for urban history have not been considered comprehensively. What has been overlooked, in previous research, is the connection between the city as a political corps and the artisans as working and economic subjects.

While cities are per definition political and economic units simultaneously, an actor's recognition and acceptance as a political subject is often related to his social and economic assets and identity. As a consequence, we need to connect the contemporaneous view of the city as a body politic to the economic personhood and self-understanding of the subjects involved. To that end, I will first sketch the co-emergence of specific types of skills and knowledge and the urban as a community in the late middle ages. My argument is that the economic identity of guild-based artisans and the city as a specific political community co-emerged in a process in which specific attitudes and practices related to matter and materiality were crucial. The latter point will then be further elaborated with a thorough examination of the decline of the guilds in the early modern period. While the access of guild-based artisans to the urban body politic was predicated upon a certain view about the relationship between nature and artifice, the eventual decline of the guilds was related to

¹⁴ The foundational book is Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer's magisterial *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), which de-naturalized the experimental method as it became dominant in the seventeenth century, and as such has inspired both Bruno Latour and subsequent works of numerous historians of science.

¹⁵ See e.g., Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Deborah E. Harkness, *The Jewel House: Elizabethan London and the Scientific Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Larry Stewart, 'The Laboratory, the Workshop, and the Theatre of Experiment', in Christine Blondel and Bernadette Bensusan-Vincent (eds), *Sciences and Spectacle in European Enlightenment* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 11-24.

¹⁶ An excellent introduction to the world of the guilds (with extensive references), is James R. Farr, *Artisans in Europe, 1300-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For the Low Countries see Maarten Prak et.al. (eds), *Craft Guilds in the Early Modern Low Countries. Work, Power and Representation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

¹⁷ Farr, *Artisans*, pp. 4-6. Also: Bert De Munck and Arjan Van Dixhoorn, 'The Body in the Performance of Knowledge: The Mechanical and Liberal Arts in the Civic Community (1568-1713)', in Sven Dupré et.al. (eds), *Embattled Territory. The Circulation of Knowledge in the Spanish Netherlands* (Ghent: Academia Press), pp. 255-278 (forthcoming).

epistemic transformations and new scientific and philosophical ideas on the relationship between subject and object.

In order to demonstrate this, I will in the following sections focus on the norms, discourses and practices of so-called 'strong guilds' on the continent, i.e. guilds in which manufacturing masters held the reins while enjoying some political clout at the urban level, as was the case in the Southern Netherlands, the German Imperial cities and many smaller towns in the empire.¹⁸ Most of the empirical evidence comes from my research on the Southern Netherlands, the pre-eminent case study for anyone examining autonomous cities with strong guilds.

The emergence of artisanal citizenship

The importance of guilds and corporatism is familiar to any historian studying artisanal labour and the socio-economic and political history of cities in (late) medieval and early modern Europe. It is generally agreed that economic activities of guild-based artisans were embedded in a 'corporatist' moral framework and idiom. Discursively this idiom referred to such brotherhood-like notions as friendship, equality and mutual aid, as well as the discipline, patriarchy and honourability related to artisanal work.¹⁹ This translated in norms and regulations like maximum numbers of journeymen per master, the obligation to contribute to a mutual poor relief scheme, product quality standards, and the obligation to learn – and often also board – with a master as a prerequisite to membership.²⁰ Such rules were to preserve friendship and equality among guild members and to guarantee the moral prestige of artisanal work.

Nevertheless, corporatism and the world of guilds was not an autonomous realm, rather on the contrary. While artisanal entrepreneurship has been shown to be the backbone of the pre-industrial urban economy, guilds were central political institutions in many a European city.²¹ In large parts of Europe, guilds became a structuring part of the

¹⁸ See Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, 'Different Paths of Development. Capitalism in the Northern and Southern Netherlands during the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period', *Review*, 20 (1997), pp. 211-242; Idem, 'Subcontracting in Guild-Based Export Trades, Thirteenth-Eighteenth Centuries', in Stephan R. Epstein and Maarten Prak (eds), *Guilds, Innovation, and the European Economy, 1400-1800* (Cambridge: University Press, 2008), pp. 81-113; Ulrich Pfister, 'Craft Guilds and Technological Change: The Engine Loom in the European Silk Ribbon Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', in Epstein and Prak (eds), *Guilds*, pp. 178-179.

¹⁹ See, among others, Antony Black, *Guild & State: European Political Thought from the Twelfth Century to the Present* (New Brunswick & London: Transaction Publishers, 2009 [4th ed., 1st ed. 1984]); James R. Farr, *Hands of Honor. Artisans and their World in Dijon, 1550-1650* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1988); Geoffrey Crossick, 'Past Masters: In Search of the Artisan in European History', in Geoffrey Crossick (ed.), *The Artisan and the European Town, 1500-1900* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1997), pp. 1-40, esp. 4-18. A synthesis and additional references in Farr, *Artisans*, esp. ch 1.

²⁰ The existing literature is too extensive to be cited here. Some recent overview works (with additional references): Epstein and Prak (eds), *Guilds*; Prak et.al. (eds), *Craft Guilds*; Arnd Klüge, *Die Zünfte* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2009).

²¹ Limiting myself to the Low Countries: Robert S. DuPlessis and Martha C. Howell, 'Reconsidering the Early Modern Urban Economy: The Cases of Leiden and Lille', *Past and Present*, 94 (1982), pp. 49-84; Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, 'Craft Guilds in Comparative Perspective: The Northern and the Southern Netherlands, a Survey', in Prak et.al., *Craft Guilds*, pp. 1-31; Maarten Prak, 'Corporate Politics in the Low Countries: Guilds as institutions', in Prak et.al. (eds), *Craft Guilds*, pp. 74-106.

political system during urban revolts in which lower and middling groups within the cities stood up against the mercantile and oligarchic elites and fought for political recognition and participation.²² These revolts often met with a great deal of success, although this could differ substantially according to the region and type of city involved. While the North-Italian urban *popolo* often pioneered this movement of civic emancipation in the thirteenth century, their successes were often already curtailed when the revolts took off, from the late thirteenth-century on, elsewhere in Europe.²³ Nor were the guilds in the largest cities the most successful in the long run. Rather, corporatism would appear to have been a key component of the urban body politic in particular in smaller and mid-sized towns, including what Bernard Chevalier referred to as 'bonnes villes' and what Mack Walker called 'home towns'.²⁴

Compared to other regions in NW and central Europe, the revolts were not only more fierce and ferocious, but also more successful, in the longer run, in the Southern parts of the Low Countries.²⁵ As a result, more than in the North-Italian regions, a 'guild ethos' was cultivated here. While the large Italian cities turned into mercantile oligarchies justified by a republican discourse stressing individual rights and liberties, the guilds in NW-Europe stressed friendship, equality and mutual aid as their core values.²⁶ To be sure, this was mere discourse to a large extent. Belgian political historians have recently gone to great lengths to understand the complex coalitions and strategies – including discursive strategies – formed and deployed in the revolts. They have added substantially to our understanding of the layered and complex character of political practices in late medieval cities – among other

²² Knut Schulz, *Denn sie lieben die Freiheit so Sehr...: Kommunale Aufstände und Entstehung des europäischen Bürgertums im Hochmittelalter* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft), 1992. Recent perspectives for the Low Countries in Jan Dumolyn and Jelle Haemers, 'Patterns of Urban Rebellion in Medieval Flanders', *Journal of Medieval History*, 31 (2005), pp. 369-393, 372-6. Also: Marc Boone, *A la recherche d'une modernité civique. La société urbaine des anciens Pays-Bas au bas Moyen Age* (Brussels: Editions de l'université de Bruxelles, 2010).

²³ As observed in Patrick Boucheron and Denis Menjot, 'La ville medieval', in Jean-Luc Pinol (ed.), *Histoire de l'Europe urbaine. I: De l'Antiquité au XVIIIe siècle. Genèse des villes européennes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2003), pp. 287-594, 530.

²⁴ Sylvia L. Thrupp, 'The Guilds', in M.M. Postan, E.E. Rich and Edward Miller (eds), *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe. Volume III: Economic Organization and Policies in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 230; Mack Walker, *German Home Towns: Community, State, and General Estate, 1648-1871* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971); Bernard Chevalier, *Les bonnes villes de France du XIVe au XVI siècle* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1982).

²⁵ According to Sylvia Thrupp, 'the guilds nowhere played a more spectacular and militant role than in the Low Countries'. Thrupp, 'The Guilds', p. 243. See also: Marc Boone and Maarten Prak, 'Rulers, Patricians and Burghers: The Great and Little Tradition of Urban Revolt in the Low Countries', in Karel Davids and Jan Lucassen (eds), *A Miracle Mirrored: The Dutch Republic in European Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 99-134.

²⁶ Black, *Guild*, passim. Also Jan Dumolyn, 'Privileges and Novelties: the Political Discourse of the Flemish Cities and Rural Districts in their Negotiations with the Dukes of Burgundy (1384-1506)', *Urban History*, 35 (2008) 1, pp. 5-23. Compare with: John M. Najemy, *Corporatism and Consensus in Florentine Electoral Politics, 1280-1400* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); Idem, 'Guild Republicanism in Trecento Florence: The successes and Ultimate Failure of Corporate Politics', *American Historical Review*, 84 (1979), pp. 53-71; Richard Mackenney, *Tradesmen and Traders: The World of the Guilds in Venice and Europe, c. 1250 – c. 1650* (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1987).

things pointing to the importance of cross-class coalitions.²⁷ However, they appear to have missed one crucial element, i.e. the relationship between political subjectivity and economic personhood.

Before the urban revolts, people who worked with their own hands could not take part in governance. This has often been understood as the exclusion of 'commoners' or of poor and proletarianized laborers. However, linking this to political philosophy, it seems plausible that it was not the low social standing which was decisive in their exclusion but rather the very fact of having to work with ones hands and engage in productive activities. Late medieval political theorists often had 'naturalistic' ideas about the origin of a political community, based on Aristotelian ideas of man as a *zoon politikon*, i.e. a political creature by nature and necessity. Yet this does not prevent there being an important field of tension between 'nature' and 'politics'. Although humans were seen as being born as political subjects, political society was considered the result of human contrivance or 'artifice'.²⁸ As a result, lower social groups could be excluded from politics based upon a paradigmatic distinction between, on the one hand, the realm of politics and rationality and, on the other, the realm of nature. For Plato and Aristotle, artisans belonged to the realm of Nature, and as a consequence they could not be political subjects. Having to work with ones hands precluded a contemplative life, as it was considered akin to slavery and opposed to independence and freedom.²⁹

This, rather than living standards and labor relations, may explain the ferocious and prolonged character of the revolts. In the Low Countries, the military and political successes of the guilds coincided with a shift, first but not exclusively in cloth production, towards high quality luxury products, the manufacturing of which implied the input of sophisticated skills and product knowledge and an institutional framework to standardize and guard product quality.³⁰ The guilds are said to have enabled this, given that they prescribed minimum terms to serve as an apprentice and the making of a master piece as prerequisites for master status, alongside product standards, workshop inspections, and collective hall marks, etc.³¹ The social emancipation of a middle range of artisans was in this view related to economic circumstances and strategies, without it being clear, however, whether the economic explains the socio-political (or the institutional) or vice versa.

In my view, it is possible to dig deeper and find a layer in history which explains both the economic strategies and the political recognition of artisans. By means of a discursive

²⁷ See e.g., Jelle Haemers, *For the Common Good: State Power and Urban Revolts in the Reign of Mary of Burgundy, 1477-1482* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009); Dumolyn and Haemers, 'Patterns'; Jonas Braekevelt et.al. 'The Politics of Factional Conflict in Late Medieval Flanders', *Historical Research*, 85/227 (2012), pp. 13-31.

²⁸ P.H. Partridge, *Consent and Consensus* (London: Pall mall, 1971), ch 1, esp. 11-2.

²⁹ Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, *Worthy Efforts: Attitudes to Work and Workers in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), ch 1, esp. pp. 13-6.

³⁰ Cf. Herman Van Der Wee, 'Structural Changes and Specialization in the Industry of the Southern Netherlands, 1100-1600', *The Economic History Review*, New Series, 28/2 (1975), pp. 203-221. Also: Bo Gustafsson, 'The Rise and Economic Behaviour of Medieval Craft Guilds', in Bo Gustafsson (ed.), *Power and Economic Institutions. Reinterpretations in Economic History* (Aldershot, 1991), pp. 69-106.

³¹ Recent views and references in Ian A. Gadd and Patrick Wallis (eds), *Guilds, Society & Economy in London, 1450-1800* (London: Centre for Metropolitan History, 2002) and Epstein and Prak (eds), *Guilds*.

analysis of documents like legal requests, pamphlets and poems (i.e. of Anthonis de Roovere, c. 1430-1482) Jan Dumolyn has recently revealed that labor – next to such notions as agreement, concord, friendship, mutual love and brotherhood – was central to the artisans’ self-understanding in the Low Countries.³² Simultaneously, such thinkers as Marsilius of Padua had a more pluralistic conception of the common good and favored the inclusion of different specialized groups in the body politic.³³

But, the ultimate inclusion of artisans must have required the bridging of the gap between the realm of Nature and the realm of Politics (or Artifice). And this is what actually happened at the time when guild-based artisans fought their battles with a degree of success. As has been argued by such historians of science and technology as Pamela Long, the distinction between manmade objects – i.e. Art or Artifice – and Nature gradually dissolved from the fifteenth century on. While Aristotle is supposed to have sketched an ontological difference between Art and Nature, these categories overlapped to a certain degree by the late fifteenth century.³⁴ The French Potter Bernard Palissy (c. 1510-1589) famously produced ceramic platters inlaid with reptiles, plants, shells and other once-living things; and the painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo constructed heads with natural minerals, next to such fabricated objects as metal weapon parts.³⁵

Art came ever closer to the perfection of nature, or was at least perceived as such; and nature experienced a first phase of disenchantment, among other things because of artisanal experiences of trial and error, personal observation and experimentation.³⁶ My hypothesis would therefore be that this intellectual transformation had political implications, with Artifice serving as a weapon against the presumed natural order of oligarchic rule. As we will see in the next section, artisanal knowledge was in any case of crucial importance in the guilds’ subsequent political strategies and discursive practices.

The craft guilds’ local knowledge and the body politic

Artisanal knowledge was traditionally examined almost exclusively by economic historians and historians of labor, who have both pointed to technological transformations and changing labor relations at the end of the *ancien régime*. Either from an optimistic or a pessimistic point of view, they have referred to processes of de-skilling and an increasing division of labor in the context of the industrial revolution(s).³⁷ An essential flipside of this

³² Jan Dumolyn, ‘Het corporatieve element in de middel nederlandse letterkunde en de zogenaamde laatmiddeleeuwse burgermoraal’, *Spiegel der letteren*, 56/2 (2014), pp. 123-154 and ‘“I thought of it at work, in Ostend.” The Language of Late Medieval Artisans in the Low Countries’, Paper presented at the Tenth European Social Science History Conference in Vienna, 23-26 April 2014.

³³ Nederman, *Community*, p. 61. Also Black, *Guild*, ch 7.

³⁴ Pamela O. Long, *Artisan/Practitioners and the Rise of the New Sciences, 1400-1600* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2011), ch 2. Also: Lorraine J. Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (Cambridge MA: Zone Books, 1998).

³⁵ Long, *Artisan/Practitioners*, pp. 7, 35-7; Lis and Soly, *Worthy Efforts*, pp. 414-6.

³⁶ Cf. Pamela H. Smith, *The Body of the Artisan. Art and experience in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

³⁷ E.g., Harry Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

evolution was the waning and eventual abolition of the guilds, which in the eighteenth century were considered obsolete by French physiocrats and Scottish enlightened political and economic philosophers among others. Their criticisms basically revolved around three related points. Guilds were criticized because they prescribed traditional apprenticeships (i.e. learning on the shop floor under the roof of a 'master' as a prerequisite for master status); because of their urban monopolies (i.e. the obligation to be a freeman in order to be entitled to make certain products), and because they allegedly guarded the so-called 'mysteries of the trade' or trade secrets.

Ever since, historians have re-examined this history, but they have not really considered the history of knowledge – and hence also their own paradigms – as part of the problem. William Sewell, in his eye-opening book *Work and Revolution in France*, has rightfully linked the gradual disparagement of artisanal labor and the eventual abolition of the guilds to the new philosophical ideas among Enlightened intellectuals like Diderot. According to Sewell, the existence of corporations was consistent with the idea of the opposition between the ordered realm of the spirit and the disordered realm of matter. Artisans were seen in that context as being connected to God's wisdom through their soul. The new metaphysics of Diderot and others, however, implied a 'single, unified, orderly realm of nature' of which man itself was part; man was disenchanting. The implications for the perception and regulation of labor was that the guilds' hierarchies, regulations and trade secrets were replaced with individual artisans observing matter through their senses and experimenting with new techniques and processes.³⁸

Unfortunately, such ideas were insufficiently picked up outside the history of nineteenth-century labor – let alone linked to recent ideas from STS and ANT which currently enrich urban history.³⁹ It is of course acknowledged that enlightenment thinking played an essential part in the eighteenth-century derision of the guilds. Both major political reformers and important merchants and entrepreneurs who wanted to remove the guilds' regulations justified their claims with references to French physiocrats like Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot and the Scottish political philosophers and economists.⁴⁰ But a genuine integration of, on the one hand, economic and political perspectives and, on the other, philosophical and epistemological elements has not been achieved – notwithstanding the idea that the enlightened political and philosophical discourses cannot be reduced to legitimizing instruments in the hands of powerful groups but involved, in the words of

³⁸ William H. Sewell Jr., *Work and Revolution in France. The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 22-25, 70-71.

³⁹ For a state of the art and further references on the abolition of the guilds, see Heinz-Gerhard Haupt (ed.), *Das Ende der Zünfte: ein europäischer Vergleich* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002).

⁴⁰ Steven L. Kaplan, 'Social Classification and Representation in the Corporate World of Eighteenth-Century France: Turgot's "carnival"', in Steven L. Kaplan and Cynthia Koepp (eds), *Work in France. Representations, Meaning, Organization, and Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 176-228; Josef Ehmer, 'Zünfte in Österreich in der frühen Neuzeit', in Haupt, *Das Ende*, pp. 87-126, 112-126; Daniela Frigo, 'Die italienischen Zünfte am Ende des Ancien Régimes: Stand, Probleme und Perspektiven der Forschung', in *Ibidem*, pp. 197-214, 208-214; Corine Maitte, 'Le réformisme éclairé et les corporations : l'abolition des Arts en Toscane', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 49/1 (2002), pp. 56-88.

Steven L. Kaplan, 'a rival classificatory system'.⁴¹ In my view, this results from understanding power in a traditional sense, with some groups gaining more capital and leverage than others without really taking into account power-knowledge formations.

Historians studying guilds have in recent decades particularly pointed to a growing gap between norm and reality.⁴² The guilds' rules would have been hollowed by concentration trends (some firms growing larger at the expense of others), subcontracting among masters (both within and across guilds) and illegal work ('false masters' entering into production and employing journeymen, apprentices and impoverished masters themselves rather than buying finished products from masters) – including economic activity in suburbs beyond the reach of guild officials.⁴³ Although there is general agreement about the existence of these trends, the implications thereof for the understanding of guilds is subject to debate. While some historians have pointed to the inability of guilds to control economic activity, others have stressed the capacity of guilds to flexibly respond to changing economic circumstances.⁴⁴ Catherina Lis and Hugo Soly have for instance suggested that the guilds strategically allowed for subcontracting among masters in order to enable large masters to compete and innovate.⁴⁵

The key issue for me is that all this was not new in the eighteenth century. Most of these trends have been revealed already for the sixteenth century – and often even earlier.⁴⁶ As a result, these trends cannot account for the changing attitude towards the guilds' rules after mid-seventeenth century. More important, in my view, was the changing connection between skills and the body politic. From an economic angle, all early modern guilds faced the challenge of producing or attracting a competitive amount of technical knowledge and skills. Urban authorities and guilds were typically eager to welcome and attract masters and journeymen who brought with them new and up-to-date technical knowledge and skills. Resourceful immigrants were offered free citizenship, infrastructure and accommodation, tax exemptions and waivers from civic duties, etc.⁴⁷ In this vein, migrating artisans can be seen as 'immutable mobiles', i.e. carriers of technical knowledge similar to texts, plans,

⁴¹ Kaplan, 'Social Classification', p. 277.

⁴² One recent example for the Low Countries is Peter Stabel, 'Guilds in Late Medieval Flanders. Myths and Realities of Guild Life in an Export Oriented Environment.' *Journal of Medieval History*, 30 (2004), pp. 187–212.

⁴³ See, among other work, Steven L. Kaplan, 'Les corporations, les "faux-ouvriers" et le faubourg St. Antoine au XVIIIe siècle.' *Annales. ESC*, 1988 (March-April), pp. 353-378 ; Michael Sonenscher, *Work and Wages. Natural Law, Politics and the Eighteenth-Century French Trades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), ch 5 and passim; Lis and Soly, 'Different Paths', 'Subcontracting' and 'Export Industries, Craft Guilds and Capitalist Trajectories', in Prak et.al (eds) *Craft Guilds*, pp. 107-132; Alain Thillay, *Le faubourg Saint-Antoine et ses 'faux ouvriers'. La liberté du travail à Paris aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris : Champ Vallon, 2002); Giorgio Riello, 'Strategies and Boundaries: Subcontracting and the London Trades in the Long Eighteenth Century', *Enterprise and Society*, 9/2 (2008), pp. 243-280.

⁴⁴ Compare, for instance, Kaplan, 'Les corporations' and DuPlessis and Howell, 'Reconsidering'.

⁴⁵ Lis and Soly, 'Craft Guilds', pp. 14-17, and 'Export Industries'.

⁴⁶ Some references for the Southern Netherlands in Lis and Soly, 'Subcontracting', pp. 100-1.

⁴⁷ A recent state of the art and additional references in Bert De Munck and Anne Winter (eds), *Gated Communities? Regulating Migration in Early Modern Cities* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012).

schemes and the like.⁴⁸ However, in addition to attracting skills produced elsewhere, guilds regulated the local training of apprentices. In so doing, it was generally not enough for apprentices to conclude a contract with a master and then pay an entrance fee to the guild. An apprentice who wished to become a master usually had to train for a specific number of years and make a master piece, which was prescribed by the local guilds. Thus, the knowledge passed to the apprentice during this apprenticeship period was, to a certain extent, local. The master piece consisted largely of making a product sold regularly on the local market – or, in export industries, something which was nonetheless typical for a certain city.⁴⁹ Moreover, during his term the apprentice became accustomed to local standards, norms and values which were often difficult to distinguish from skills.⁵⁰ Whether it be paintings, maiolica or such daily products as shoes, customers could often tell where the product was made based on its conspicuous characteristics – and, hence, production techniques.⁵¹ Whenever necessary, the guilds' strategy of targeting niche markets with standardized products resulted in rules which obligated guild-based masters to conform to local regulations on product quality.

In itself, it is of course no surprise to learn that the economic and the political are intimately entangled. As suggested above, the neo-institutional economic view for instance presupposes a connection between the politico-institutional context and product quality. Yet for the artisans there was more involved than just economic efficiency. Closer analysis reveals that ideas such as those of Leonardo Bruni loomed large. In 1582 the Antwerp diamond cutters substantiated their claim for a guild (i.e. a monopoly in cutting and polishing diamonds and a related labor market monopsony) by distinguishing the established masters from those who were not 'in the trade from childhood' and thus had not 'exercised in the art since their early days, and out of love for the noble stones and for the honour of the city'.⁵² Thus, they explicitly linked their alleged superior skills to the urban context and their own commitment to the city as something political.

Nor was this mere rhetoric. Firstly, the status of master was often conditional upon the juridical membership of the city as a political community. In order to become a master one typically had to be, or become, a burgher of the city in question (or, sometimes, vice versa); this implied a political and moral commitment to the city and included an oath

⁴⁸ For this concept, see Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), ch 6. Also: John Law, 'On the Methods of Long-distance Control: Vessels, Navigation and the Portuguese Route to India', in John Law (ed.), *Power, Action and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge?* (Boston: Routledge, 1986), pp. 234-63.

⁴⁹ E.g., De Munck, *Technologies of Learning. Apprenticeship in Antwerp from the 15th Century to the End of the Ancien Régime* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), ch 2.2.

⁵⁰ Cf. Bert De Munck and Hugo Soly, 'Introduction: Learning on the Shop Floor in Historical Perspective', in Bert De Munck, Steven L. Kaplan and Hugo Soly (eds), *Learning on the Shop Floor. Historical Perspectives on Apprenticeship* (London/New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), pp 3-32, 10-6; Bert De Munck, 'Corpses, Live Models, and Nature. Assessing Skills and Knowledge Before the Industrial Revolution', *Technology and Culture*, 51 (2010) 2, pp. 332-356, esp. 336-342.

⁵¹ Gary Richardson, 'Brand names before the industrial revolution.' *NBER Working paper series* (April 2008), <http://www.nber.org/papers/w13930> (15 September 2015).

⁵² Bert De Munck, 'Gilding Golden Ages. Perspectives From Early Modern Antwerp on the Guild-Debate, c. 1450- c. 1650', *European Review of Economic History*, 15 (2011), pp. 221–253, 244.

pledged in public.⁵³ Urban citizenship implied rights and obligations tied to a locality, such as local political rights and the obligation to reside in the city or to hold real estate there.⁵⁴ Immigrating artisans who were granted privileges often committed themselves to training local youth, thus linking their professional knowledge to the local urban context too.⁵⁵

Second, guild-based artisans linked their skills to the urban context through specific rituals and visual culture. Masters, or urban freemen, typically carried their blazons and coats of arms along in public processions and parades, or else they hung them in the guilds' chapels, above the altars or (for coats of arms) outside their homes and halls. The coats of arms and paintings and the like typically featured their instruments and products alongside their patron saints and other religious emblems.⁵⁶ In addition, not only did the guilds' rules prescribe product standards and control and sanction mechanisms such as workshop inspections and the obligation to have finished products checked⁵⁷, but the quality of the product was also communicated to customers through hall marks or quality marks. These marks were typically collective, although they were often accompanied by individual (master) marks and marks referring to the inspectors, so as to trace possible fraudulent masters. Moreover, the collective hall marks or quality marks typically referred to the city as a political context too, i.e. to the cities' emblems or coats of arms, which made these marks of origin at the same time. In Antwerp, for instance, a great deal of the guilds' collective marks feature either the typical 'hands' or the emblematic rhomb-shaped fortress.⁵⁸ In short, the value of the artisans' skills and technical knowledge was quite literally linked to the city as a political ideal.

⁵³ E.g., Steve Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds: Structures of Life in Sixteenth-century London* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 29-35, esp. p. 29; Christopher R. Friedrichs, *The Early Modern City* (London and New York: Longman, 1995), pp. 143-144; Marc Boone et al., 'Introduction: Citizenship Between Individual and Community, 14th-18th Century', in Marc Boone and Maarten Prak (eds), *Individual, Corporate and Judicial Status in European Cities (Late Middle Ages and Early Modern Period)* (Leuven: Garant, 1996), pp. 3-10, esp. p. 5; Jonathan Barry, 'Civility and Civic Culture in Early Modern England: The Meanings of Urban Freedom', in P. Burke et al. (eds), *Civil Histories: Essays Presented to sir Keith Thomas* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), pp. 181-196, p. 191.

⁵⁴ E.g., Gerhard Dilcher, *Bürgerrecht und Stadtverfassung im europäischen Mittelalter* (Köln etc.: Böhlau, 1996); Eberhard Isenmann, 'Bürgerrecht und Bürgeraufnahme in der spätmittelalterlichen und frühneuzeitlichen Stadt', in Rainer Christophe Schwinges (ed.), *Neubürger im späten Mittelalter. Migration und Austausch in der Städtelandschaft des alten Reiches (1250-1550)* (Berlin: Dunckler & Humblot, 2002), pp. 203-249.

⁵⁵ E.g., Corine Maitte, 'The Cities of Glass: Privileges and Innovations in Modern Europe', in Karel Davids and Bert De Munck (eds), *Innovation and Creativity in Late Medieval and Early Modern European Cities* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 35-53, esp. 49ff.

⁵⁶ E.g., Bert De Munck, 'The Agency of Branding and the Location of Value. Hallmarks and Monograms in Early Modern Tableware Industries', *Business History*, 54 (2012) 7, pp. 1-22; Idem, 'From Religious Devotion to Commercial ambition? Some Marginal Notes on the Religious Material Culture of the Antwerp Crafts in the 16th century', in Ria Fabri (ed.), *From Quinten Metsijs to Peter Paul Rubens: Masterpieces From the Royal Museum Reunited in the Cathedral*, (Antwerpen: De Kathedraal, 2009), pp. 21-31.

⁵⁷ See e.g., Gustafsson, 'The Rise'; Michael Berlin, "'Broken all into pieces'", in Geoffrey Crossick (ed.), *The Artisan and The European Town* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), pp. 75-91; John Forbes, 'Search, Immigration and the Goldsmiths' Company: A Study in the Decline of its Powers', in Gadd and Wallis (eds), *Guilds*, pp. 115-126; Patrick Wallis, 'Controlling Commodities. Search and Reconciliation in the Early Modern Livery Companies', in *Idem*, pp. 85-100.

⁵⁸ De Munck 'The Agency of Branding', examples on p. 4.

Product value and the immanence of god

And there is more. The connection between economic value and the local (political) context, was contingent upon a specific approach to materiality – one in which materiality had a value in itself. In contrast to what is often assumed, the guilds did not guarantee a sufficiently high skills level, but rather the honesty of the artisans – a moral quality. Guilds typically guaranteed the *intrinsic* value of their products, i.e. the value of the raw materials used.⁵⁹ Product quality was reduced in the guilds' ordinances to the alloy and purity of metal wares, the origin and quality of leather, the type of wood used, etc.⁶⁰ Their privileges were politically and morally justified by the claim that the products made within the guild (or within the city, which amounted to the same) were superior in that the customers were not cheated by use of inferior basic materials. As such, the guilds' regulatory system was geared towards a dimension of product quality that was both material and invisible to the naked eye and was, therefore, to be warranted morally and politically.

In all likelihood, this was in turn connected to the religious context, although not in a narrow ethical sense. While in product quality the material and the moral were connected, the Catholic faith was a material and at the same time communal religion to the core. In Christianity, at least before the Reformation, God was immanent in all things created, and people gathered to form a community either in mass in front of the host, or during a procession in the presence of a relic. The host and the relic did not represent God on the occasion but really made him present – thus making the nature of community contingent upon the religious nature of the material.⁶¹ This helps explain the intimate entanglement of the economic personhood and value of artisans with the city as a body politic. In a brilliant article in *Past & Present* Natalie Zemon Davis has already argued that the material city in Catholic rituals in sixteenth-century Lyon was not a mere background. Instead, the city as a material entity was essential in them – with for example the two rivers, the bridges and surrounding mountains playing a crucial part.⁶² This could easily be connected to the guilds' investments in halls, chapels, altars, and alms' houses, which helped transform the city into a sacred space.

⁵⁹ Bert De Munck, 'Skills, Trust and Changing Consumer Preferences. The Decline of Antwerp's Craft Guilds from the Perspective of the Product Market, ca. 1500 – ca. 1800', *International Review of Social History*, 53 (2008) 2, pp. 197-233; Idem, 'One Counter and your own Account. Redefining Illicit Labour in Early Modern Antwerp', *Urban History*, 37 (2010) 1, 26-44; Barbara Bettoni, 'Usefulness, Ornament and Novelty: The Debate on Quality in Button and Buckle Manufacturing in Northern Italy (XVIII-XIX century)', in Bert De Munck and Dries Lyna (eds), *Concepts of Value in European Material Culture, 1500–1900* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 171-206.

⁶⁰ Theoretical and historiographical reflections in Bert De Munck, 'Guilds, Product Quality and Intrinsic Value. Towards a History of Conventions?', *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, 36 (2011) 4, pp. 103-124, Special Issue, Rainer Diaz-Bone & Robert Salais (eds), *Conventions and Institutions from a Historical Perspective / Konventionen und Institutionen in historischer Perspektive*, and Bert De Munck and Dries Lyna, 'Locating and Dislocating Value: A Pragmatic Approach to Early Modern and 19th-Century Economic Practices', in De Munck and Lyna (eds), *Concepts*, pp. 1-29.

⁶¹ See e.g., James Mervyn, 'Ritual, Drama and Social Body in the Late Medieval English town', *Past & Present*, 98 (Febr. 1983), pp. 3-29; Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 1997), ch 5.

⁶² Natalie Zemon Davis, 'The Sacred and the Body Social in Sixteenth-Century Lyon', *Past and Present*, 90/1 (1981), pp. 40-70.

To this we can add sensitivities around the artisans' bodies. Learning was essentially a matter of both learning by doing and imitating a superior; and skills were very much rooted in the bodies of the artisans. Books, plans, schemes, recipes and the like were of minor importance for these artisans. Nor can the artisans' physical bodies be reduced to instruments or conveyors of skills, as has been customary since the Enlightenment. Following the revelatory ideas of Pamela Smith, I am inclined to afford more credit to the religious context in which these artisans worked. Smith has compared the attitudes of artisans towards materiality with the approach of sixteenth-century scientists such as Paracelsus. According to Paracelsus, knowledge resulted not from reason but from a fusion of the divine powers of both matter and the human body and soul.⁶³ Due to God being present in everything that was created, science (*scientia*) was in a way inherent within these things themselves. Applied to artisans, this would imply that *artificialia* not unlike *naturalia* can be seen as deriving their value from their relationship with 'the Book of Nature' or the wonders of the universe – in short, with God –, rather than from human dexterity or virtuosity as we understand it today.⁶⁴

On this account, manufacturing can be seen as the encounter of two religiously and morally charged 'bodies': the body of the artisan and that of the matter he worked with. Not coincidentally, guilds were traditionally organized according to the raw materials central to each profession. Typically, shoemakers were clustered with tanners, carpenters with cabinet makers, and so forth.⁶⁵ While this could at first sight be explained by business-related networking or the need for regulations spanning the various groups within a single sector⁶⁶, the focus on the intrinsic value of bullion and precious metals in early modern mercantilistic thinking and politics suggests that there was more to it. The preoccupation of urban authorities and guilds with the origin (and quality) of raw materials such as wool, leather and tin was part of the same mentality; with the proviso that this is, again, not to be reduced to something purely economic.⁶⁷ The replacement of mercantilism with laissez-faire thinking during the eighteenth century was accompanied by new taxonomies. For example, historians

⁶³ Pamela H. Smith, 'Artists as Scientists: Nature and Realism in Early Modern Europe', *Endeavour*, 24 (2000) 1, pp. 13-21, p. 17.

⁶⁴ Smith, 'Artists as Scientists' and Idem, 'Vital Spirits: Redemption, Artisanry, and the New Philosophy in Early Modern Europe', in Margaret J. Osler, *Rethinking the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 119-136. Also: Lorraine J. Daston, 'The Factual Sensibility', *Isis*, 79/3 (1988), pp. 452-467, esp. 456-458; Daston and Park, *Wonders*; Lorraine J. Daston, *Things That Talk: Object Lessons From Art and Science* (Cambridge MA: MIT-Press, 2004).

⁶⁵ See e.g., the extensive database concerning the establishment of trade guilds in the Low Countries, which can be consulted through the following website: <http://www.collective-action.info/>.

⁶⁶ E.g., Carlo Poni, 'Local Market Rules and Practices. Three Guilds in the Same Line of Production in Early Modern Bologna', in Stuart Woolf (ed.), *Domestic Strategies: Work and Family in France and Italy, 1600-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 69-76.

⁶⁷ To limit myself to the strategic importance of wool as a raw material: see John Munro, 'Spanish *merino* Wools and the *nouvelles draperies*: An Industrial Transformation in the Late Medieval Low Countries', *Economic History Review*, LVIII/3 (2005), pp. 431-484.

have identified a shift from basic materials to production techniques and the use of products as the prime organizing principle underlying professional taxonomies.⁶⁸

This suggests that something changed at the epistemological level as well. It could for instance be argued that the importance of intrinsic value was connected to knowledge production as described in Foucault's so-called 'Renaissance episteme', in which knowledge would have been accessible directly through words and things, which were considered to contain the ultimate religious truth and which would have resembled their own intrinsic truth. The shift from intrinsic value to fashion in the seventeenth and eighteenth century could then be seen as a shift to Foucault's 'classical episteme' – the advent of which is to be situated around mid-seventeenth century. According to Foucault the principles of similitude and resemblance were replaced by the principles of comparison and difference, as a result of which the meaning and value of objects resulted from, firstly, ordering them and visually observing differences and, secondly, discourses in which thoughts and ideas are represented.⁶⁹ As I will suggest below, such a transformation may have had an impact on material culture and the attitude towards product quality, given that fashion is akin to attributing value to products according to their place in a taxonomy of products and discourses on product quality were moreover increasingly created in such market devices as advertisements and catalogues.⁷⁰

Whatever the case, for these guild-based masters themselves, their political standing would seem to have been connected to their economic personhood and vice versa. One could argue that guild-based artisans created an image of their skillful bodies when displaying their tools and instruments during parades and processions. But, the artisans' bodies too were not only *represented* in public, they were also to be physically present. This is revealed when examining the spatiality of labor. In the early modern city, a distinction between shop and atelier was notably absent; both were typically located at the front side of the house.⁷¹ This is evinced by some idealized images of labor and craft presented by artists such as Jost Amman in sixteenth-century Germany and the Luiken brothers in the Dutch Republic. Their engravings and prints typically depict the labor process as being situated at the front of the home, with doors and windows open. Customers and passers-by are often pictured peering inside the work space; likewise, parts of the city are often

⁶⁸ Bernard Guibert, Jean Laganier and Michel Vovelle, 'Essai sur les nomenclatures industrielles', *Économie et Statistique*, 20 (1971) 23-63. Cited in Alain Desrosières, 'The Economics of Convention and Statistics: The Paradox of Origins', *Historical Social Research*, 36/4 (2011), p. 67 (Special issue on 'Conventions and institutions').

⁶⁹ Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses, une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris, 1966); and *L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris, 1969). For an earlier elaboration of these ideas, see De Munck, 'Guilds' and 'Artisans, Products and Gifts: Rethinking the History of Material Culture in Early Modern Europe', *Past and Present*, 224 (August 2014), pp. 39-74, pp. 67-68.

⁷⁰ See Footnote 90.

⁷¹ See e.g., Harald Deceulaer, *Pluriforme patronen en een verschillende snit. Sociaal-economische, institutionele en culturele transformaties in de kledingsector in Antwerpen, Brussel en Gent, 1585–1800*. Amsterdam: IISG Studies, 2001), pp. 90-96; Bert De Munck and Reinoud Vermoesen, 'Shops, Labour Relations and Distribution Networks. The Emergence of Retail and the Disappearance of Producer-Retailers in Alost, c. 1650-c. 1800', Paper for the *Third Flemish-Dutch Conference on the Economy and Society of the Low Countries before 1850*, University of Antwerpen, 2008.

discernible – and thus these images suggest a close link between labor and the urban context in both a symbolical and material sense.⁷²

To be sure, this could again be explained from an economic perspective at least to a certain degree. Artisans were often obliged to work in the front of their homes to prevent fraud and moonlighting.⁷³ Yet the presence of manual labor in the public realm was also part of a corporative culture in which artisans demonstrated their skills and honour in public. Like artisans, who made their masters' trials in public or semi-public spaces and who worked in visual spaces, rhetoricians also physically demonstrated their abilities and eloquence (itself partly physical) in public forums, on the occasions of competitions and contests.⁷⁴ It would thus seem that the presence of the body was not an instrumental one, but rather one part of a culture or ideology in which bodily metaphors (*corps de métiers*, corporations, etc.) related to the body of Christ were not coincidentally part of daily life.⁷⁵

Enlightenment thinking and the body of the artisan

The fact that historians have so often failed to recognize this dimension may be due to its subsequent evolution. Adam Smith's views on skills were very mechanistic. In his diatribes against the guilds' rules and monopolies, he notoriously regarded lengthy apprenticeships installed by the guilds as unnecessary because they hindered the application and employment of labor and skills at one's convenience. Yet this was based on a fundamentally reductive view on skills. According to Adam Smith, '(t)he improved dexterity of a workman may be considered in the same light as a machine or instrument of trade which facilitates and abridges labor, and which, though it costs a certain expense, repays that expense with a profit.'⁷⁶ Skills are entirely commodified here, subject to the same laws as other factors of production. Moreover, Smith implied a division between ingenuity and invention on the one hand and the routine manufacturing of artisans on the other.

'Long apprenticeships are altogether unnecessary. The arts, which are much superior to common trades, such as those of making clocks and watches, contain no such mystery as to require a long course of instruction. The first invention of such beautiful machines, indeed, and even that of some of the instruments employed in

⁷² E.g., Rolf Dieter Jessewitsch, *Das 'Ständebuch' des Jost Amman (1568)* (Münster, 1987); Jan and Kaspar Luiken, *Spiegel van het Menselyk Bedryf, vertoonende honderd verscheiden ambachten, konstig afgebeeld, en met godlike spreuken en stichtelyke verzen verrykt* (Amsterdam, 1694).

⁷³ Often guild boards were also entitled to enter workshops and search them. See e.g., Berlin, "'Broken all into pieces'"; Forbes, 'Search'; Wallis, 'Controlling'.

⁷⁴ Arjan Van Dixhoorn, 'Writing Poetry as Intellectual Training. Chambers of Rhetoric and the Development of Vernacular Intellectual Life in the Low Countries between 1480 and 1600', in Koen Goudriaan, Jaap van Moolenbroek and Ad Tervoort (eds), *Education and Learning in the Netherlands, 1400-1600* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 201-222, Idem, 'Chambers of Rhetoric: Performative Culture and Literary Sociability in the Early Modern Northern Netherlands', in Arjan Van Dixhoorn and Susie Sutch (eds), *The Reach of the Republic of Letters. Literary and Learned Societies in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 119-159.

⁷⁵ Cf. Farr, *Artisans*, pp. 258-260. Also: Davis, 'The Sacred'.

⁷⁶ Smith, *An Inquiry* (Book II, Ch 1), p. 335.

making them, must, no doubt, have been the work of deep thought and long time, and may justly be considered as among the happiest efforts of human ingenuity. But when both have been fairly invented and are well understood, to explain to any young man, in the compleatest manner, how to apply the instruments and how to construct the machines, cannot well require more than the lessons of a few weeks: perhaps those of a few days might be sufficient.⁷⁷

Notwithstanding the high appreciation of the mechanical arts in the eighteenth century, manufacturing artisans were regarded as lacking talent and ingenuity.⁷⁸ The renowned eighteenth-century entrepreneur Josiah Wedgwood referred to his workers as ‘setts [sic] of hands’.⁷⁹ To a degree, this was prepared for during the Renaissance, when painters, sculptors and architects started to separate themselves from ‘mere handworkers’, aligning themselves with the ‘liberal arts’ with the argument that their ‘art’ implied theoretical knowledge and ingenuity.⁸⁰ Moreover, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the distance between handwerk and talent must have grown due to, on one hand, the growing importance of novelty and fashionability and, on the other, concentration trends, subcontracting and the growing complexity of labour relations and economic networks. These trends are likely to have resulted in a distinction between people in need of integrated and cross-over skills – including the capacity to design and invent – and those whom only needed the skills to execute the orders of others in a ‘mechanical’ way.⁸¹

Yet, as argued above, a great deal of these transformations occurred already in the sixteenth century – if not before – while the mechanical arts appear to have even increased in status in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁸² In addition, it was not before the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that the inherent and inheritable connection with the city as a political and material unit as expressed by both Bruni and the Antwerp diamond cutters waned. This can be illustrated with the famous measures of Charles V in sixteenth-century Ghent, who abolished inheritable mastership with the so-called Carolinian Concession in 1540. Social and political historians to date have reduced this to a simple curtailing of the political power of the guilds by the prince.⁸³ Yet looking at it more closely, a field of tension between different conceptions of labor, skills and political subjectivity comes to the fore. When in 1608 some non-inheritable masters filed a complaint about the continuing dominance of the inheritable masters, they not only protested the fact that only

⁷⁷ Smith, *An Inquiry* (Book I, Ch 10, Part 2), pp. 152-153.

⁷⁸ De Munck, ‘Corpses’.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Neill McKendrick, ‘Josiah Wedgwood and Factory Discipline’, *Historical Journal*, 4/1 (1961), p. 46; and Farr, *Artisans*, p. 144.

⁸⁰ Zirka Zaremba Filipczak, *Picturing Art in Antwerp, 1550–1700* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 11–19; De Munck, ‘Corpses’, p. 342-348; Lis & Soly, *Worhty Efforts*, p. 379-400.

⁸¹ See e.g., Maxine Berg, ‘From Imitation to Invention: Creating Commodities in the Eighteenth Century’, *Economic History Review* 60 (2002) 1-30; De Munck, ‘Corpses’.

⁸² Pamela O. Long, ‘Power, Patronage, and the Authorship of *Ars*. From Mechanical Know-how to Mechanical Knowledge in the Last Scribal Age,’ *Isis*, 88 (1997), pp. 1-41, p. 3.

⁸³ E.g., Johan Dambryne, *Corporatieve middengroepen. Aspiraties, relaties en transformaties in de 16de-eeuwse Gentse ambachtswereld* (Ghent: Academia Press, 2002), 195ff.

inheritable masters held seats in the guild's board, but they also resisted the fact that inheritable master's sons were apparently not subject to the obligation of making a master piece. Moreover, according to the protesters, the inheritable masters trumpeted in public that the non-inheritable were 'not worthy to serve in the trade',⁸⁴ which led the protesters to ask the rhetorical question whether they were, perhaps, 'of lesser quality and freedom'.⁸⁵

In my view, this dispute gives a glimpse of a fundamental transformation. According to Pamela H. Smith, 'artisanal bodily experience was absorbed into the work of the natural philosopher at the same time that the artisan himself was excised from it.'⁸⁶ Smith thus hints at a process in which the mechanical arts underwent a shift in which savoir-faire and skills became distinguished from the artisans' political personality. In a way, this is precisely how Enlightenment ideas on the mechanical arts can be summarized. At first sight, it would seem that Enlightenment thinkers stressed the importance of artisanal skills and the mechanical arts, yet closer inspection – of, among other things, the prints in the famous French *Encyclopédie* – suggests that the artisans who embodied these skills were equated with tools and instruments.⁸⁷

Nor was this simply a matter of changing perceptions of labor and skills. The moral and religiously charged link between the religious value of raw materials, the artisan's body and the city as both a political body and a material reality transformed as a whole. First, intrinsic value appears to have become less important in the appreciation of products. Jan de Vries, widely cited among historians studying material culture and changing consumer preferences, has postulated a shift from intrinsic value (in so-called old luxuries, typically manufactured within a guild context) to design and decoration (new luxuries) as the important element in the value of products.⁸⁸ As a result, the guilds' hallmarks and rules related to product value (based upon intrinsic value) lost credibility for policy makers and customers alike.⁸⁹ In their place came display and fashion as a Foucauldian type of taxonomy and a range of discourses and narratives in trade cards, catalogues, leaflets, and the like, which proliferated from the eighteenth century on in particular.⁹⁰ Obviously, it is difficult to

⁸⁴ 'niet weerdich (waeren) omme de voorseide neeringhe te dienen'.

⁸⁵ 'van minder conditie ende vrijheijt'. Both quotes are from Dambruyne, *Corporatieve middengroepen*, p. 321.

⁸⁶ Smith, *The Body*, p. 186.

⁸⁷ Cynthia J. Koepf, 'The Alphabetical Order: Work in Diderot's *Encyclopédie*', in Kaplan and Koepf (eds), *Work*, pp. 229-257; William H. Sewell Jr., 'Visions of Labor: Illustrations of the Mechanical Arts Before, In, and After Diderot's *Encyclopédie*', in *Ibidem*, pp. 258-286; Simon Schaffer, 'Enlightened Automata', in William Clark, Jan Golinski and Simon Schaffer (eds), *The Sciences in Enlightened Europe* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 126-165, esp. pp. 126-34; Lis and Soly, *Worthy Efforts*, pp. 485-88.

⁸⁸ Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution. Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), ch 4. See also Helen Clifford, 'A Commerce With Things. The Value of Precious Metalwork in Early Modern England', in Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford (eds), *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe, 1650-1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 147-169; and Bettoni, 'Usefulness'.

⁸⁹ De Munck, 'Skills, Trust'.

⁹⁰ See e.g., Claire Walsh, 'Shop Design and the Display of Goods in Eighteenth-Century London', *Journal of Design History*, 8/3 (1995), pp. 157-176; Idem, 'The Advertising and Marketing of Consumer Goods in Eighteenth-Century London', in Clemens Wischermann and Elliott Shore (eds), *Advertising and the European City. Historical Perspectives* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2000), pp. 79-95. For the Southern Netherlands, see Dries Lyna and Ilja Van Damme, 'A Strategy of Seduction? The Role of Commercial Advertisements in the Eighteenth-

provide real proof for such a view, but it is supported by recent views in which new economic sensitivities are connected to such broader shifts in the production of knowledge as the Renaissance, the discovery of the new world, and the scientific revolution. According to Germano Maifreda these would have fostered a more abstract and mathematical approach, a new approach to nature and technology, and the emergence of a more relative value system based upon convention rather than something intrinsic to the artefact (including bullion and coins).⁹¹

Secondly, the connection between the body of the artisan and the city as a collective and material 'body' would seem to have declined. On the one hand, subcontracting, proletarianization and the increasing importance of retail appears to have caused a rift – independent from industrialization – between working and selling, as a result of which working moved away from the front of the house for the benefit of shops and the display of goods.⁹² On the other hand, working and the public sphere appear to have disconnected in a symbolical and ideological sense as well. This is suggested by a visual scanning of eighteenth-century prints and images of the labor process and crafts, such as the print collection *L'art du Potier d'Étain* from the French pewterer Pierre-Augustin Salmon⁹³ or the French *Encyclopédie*. In sharp contrast to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century images, artisans are depicted here in closed spaces and in environments dominated by instruments and machines. The public, urban environment has vanished, and the artisans' bodies are less pronounced in these images.⁹⁴ What happened really, then, was that the connection of labor with the urban as a body politic dissolved.

This is corroborated when including the guilds' rituals in the analysis and by addressing their economic strategies from a philosophical and epistemological angle. According to Edward Muir, rituals and ceremonies stopped being practices in which supernatural forces were literally (made) present; these rituals transformed rather into practices in which something was communicated or 'represented'.⁹⁵ While this is not new for cultural historians, a related evolution may have occurred in the economic sphere, as can be illustrated by the guilds' collective hall marks, which connected intrinsic value to the urban context. Collective quality marks in the seventeenth century typically merged three types of references: reference to an individual master was often contained within a mark

Century Retailing Business of Antwerp', *Business history*, 51/1 (2009), pp. 100-121; Bruno Blondé and Ilja Van Damme, 'Retail Growth and Consumer Changes in a Declining Urban Economy: Antwerp (1650-1750)', *Economic History Review*, 63/3 (2010), pp. 638-663.

⁹¹ Germano Maifreda, *From Oikonomia to Political Economy: Constructing Economic Knowledge from the Renaissance to the Scientific Revolution* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012). See also Iara Vigo De Lima, *Foucault's Archaeology of Political Economy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁹² Lis and Soly, 'Subcontracting'; Farr, *Artisans*, 292-294; David Alexander, *Retailing in England During the Industrial Revolution* (London: The Athlone Press, 1970); Hoh-Cheung Mui and Lorna H. Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping in Eighteenth-Century England* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1989); Carolyn Sargentson, *Merchants and Luxury Markets. The marchands merciers of Eighteenth-Century Paris* (London: The Victoria & Albert Museum, 1996); Ilja Van Damme, *Verleiden en verkopen. Antwerpse kleinhandelaars en hun klanten in tijden van crisis (ca. 1648-ca. 1748)* (Amsterdam: Aksant, 2007), ch 2; De Munck and Vermoesen, 'Shops'.

⁹³ Published by l'Académie des Sciences in 1788.

⁹⁴ See De Munck and Van Dixhoorn, 'The Body'.

⁹⁵ Muir, *Ritual*. Also: Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York, 1971).

which referenced both the city (as a political body) and intrinsic value. Finished products in the Antwerp pewter industry, for instance, were often stamped with an image of the Antwerp fortress. This quality mark referred to the intrinsic value of the piece (the origin and purity of the tin) while also encompassing the master's initials. In the nineteenth century, however, this visual connection between artisan, city and intrinsic value had disappeared. Marks referred to firms and family businesses apart from references to locality (such as 'made in...') and references to intrinsic value (like 'English blocktin').⁹⁶ The connection between product quality and the political 'quality' of the artisans had thus become obsolete in a symbolical sense as well.

Conclusion

The abolition of the guilds can be reduced to neither the natural unfolding of the free market nor the political triumph of a new political and economic elite (one based on the central level, rather than the urban). The eventual decline of the guilds can only be adequately understood when taking into account the moral, political and epistemological underpinnings of product quality. On the shop floor and in economic practice, the disappearance of the guilds proceeded amidst a myriad of activities in which the guilds' rules concerning intrinsic value were circumvented. Instead of buying products from masters, merchants often employed journeymen, apprentices or masters themselves, thereby trespassing on the production terrain reserved for masters. In so doing, entrepreneurs used hallmarks obtained from deceased masters' widows or by working in company with a regular (but impoverished) master; or they sold products, without hallmarks, made by illegal workers – as did retailers, who sold products made outside the guild framework and started to strike their own marks.⁹⁷ What these strategies had in common is that the link between intrinsic value and the political body of the artisan had vanished.

On a daily level of economic practice, it became increasingly difficult to guard and cultivate the connection between the inherent qualities of the raw material used and the identity of the artisan – if only because of the proliferation of products which combined different sorts of raw materials, such as earthen pots with tin lids and leather shoes with silver buckles.⁹⁸ As this was moreover related to the dissolution of the link between the skilled and enchanted body of the artisan and the city as a material and embodied reality, we are urged to look for more fundamental underlying transformations. Adam Ferguson observed in 1767 that the separation of professions served 'to break the bands of society, to substitute form in place of ingenuity, and to withdraw individuals from the common scene of occupation, on which the sentiments of the heart, and the mind, are most happily employed.' His gloomy conclusion was that 'society is made to consist of parts, of which none is animated with the spirit of society itself.'⁹⁹ Inadvertently, Ferguson, who is notorious

⁹⁶ De Munck, 'The Agency of Branding'.

⁹⁷ De Munck, 'Skills, Trust'; and 'One counter'.

⁹⁸ Ibidem.

⁹⁹ Quoted in John Varty, 'Civic or Commercial? Adam Ferguson's Concept of Civil Society', In Robert Fine and Shirin Rai (eds), *Civil Society: Democratic Perspectives* (London and Portland: OR, Frank Cass), 1997, pp. 29-48,

for his attempts to reconcile civic humanist ethics with commercial society, was thus putting his finger on a fundamental rift in the realm of artisanal labor. These shifts may in turn have been related to the emergence of the Cartesian subject, who attaches meaning and value to an object visually and autonomously. What came to prevail, after all, was the view of customers, who appreciated the visual appeal and comfort of products and underscored, in the words of Georg Marie Butel-Dumont in his *Théorie de luxe* (1771), ‘the pleasure that comes to us from objects situated outside of us’.¹⁰⁰

Further research is of course needed in order to adequately understand the changing connection between the personhood and subjectivity of economic actors and the agency of cities as implied by current political scientists, economists and economic geographers, who tend to see the urban environment as the natural hotbeds of economic innovation and creativity.¹⁰¹ In all likelihood, the connection between skills and talents and the urban imaginary did not so much disappear but rather transformed in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. While Smith and others (including artists who distinguished themselves from artisans from the renaissance on) laid the basis for an approach through agglomeration economics and a focus on a supposedly creative elite, other strategies for connecting political subjectivity and personhood to the urban context also materialized – or so it seems. In the nineteenth century, other economic actors linked their status, skills and knowledge to the city in order to enhance the value of their products. I’m thinking here about artists, who enhanced the value of their products by either training in such urban institutions as art academies or identifying with the city as a modern and creative environment. Or retailers, who sold exclusive products in exclusive urban districts and distinguished themselves with their knowledge of the cultural codes and conventions related to these products. The very modernity of the city was in the meantime fabricated in sociology, through such dichotomies as *Gemeinschaft* versus *Gesellschaft* (Tönnies) and ‘mechanic solidarity’ versus ‘organic solidarity’ (Durkheim). While city walls were demolished and early forms of urban sprawl developed, the distinction between the urban and the countryside was reproduced in new ways. Henceforth, the city would be an extremely ambivalent entity embodying modernity and degeneration simultaneously. In the early twentieth century, the city was considered an environment which produced modern individuals, although these were seen as not only rational and calculative, but also alienated.¹⁰² Yet what is clear is that the telos and purpose

p. 37 and Jean Terrier and Peter Wagner, ‘Civil Society and the Problématique of Political Modernity’, in Peter Wagner (ed.), *The Languages of Civil Society* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006), pp. 9-27, p. 15.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Michael Kwass, ‘Ordering the World of Goods: Consumer Revolution and the Classification of Objects in Eighteenth-Century France’, *Representations*, 82 (2003), pp. 87-116, p. 106.

¹⁰¹ See, among many others, Richard L. Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (New York, 2004); Edward Glaeser, *Triumph of the City: How Urban Spaces make us Human* (Basingstoke & Oxford, Pan Books, 2012). More references and a critical approach in Karel Davids and Bert De Munck, ‘Innovation and Creativity in Late Medieval and Early Modern European Cities: An Introduction’, in Davids and De Munck (eds), *Innovation*, pp. 1-33.

¹⁰² See e.g., Georg Simmel, ‘Die Grosstädte und das Geistesleben’, in Th. Von Petermann (ed.), *Die Grossstadt. Vorträge und Aufsätze zur Städteausstellung*, Jahrbuch der Gehe-Stiftung, Band 9 (Dresden, 1903), pp. 185-206; Robert E. Park, ‘The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Behavior in the City Environment’, *American*

of the city no longer materialized through people working with their hands, but through intellectuals and creative geniuses – including intellectuals working in the field of urban studies.