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Workplace cultures

Chapter 4

Workplace Cultures

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A cloth manufacturer from around 1150 in Ypres, already by that time one of the leading cloth manufacturing cities of medieval Flanders, would have had great difficulty recognizing his work environment two centuries later in the same city. Not that the importance of the industry, nor even the technological skills he required would have changed a lot. The most important technological changes had already been introduced before his own generation of textile workers. The broad horizontal loom, which necessitated complex labour relations, came to characterize urban cloth manufacture probably by around 1100.[1] Certainly, the range of woollens produced would have differed slightly across those two centuries. In the 1350s the output of Flemish cloth workers had become significantly smaller and was aimed at manufacturing only the most expensive luxury fabrics. Although they aimed at producing large quantities of cloth in different price ranges, the twelfth-century cloth manufacturers had already been producing expensive scarlets dyed in the most exclusive colours like their late medieval colleagues. Even the division of labour had reached extremely high levels by around 1150. More than fifty manufacturing stages were required to produce a piece of fine woollen cloth, and many of these were executed by specialist craftsmen, both men and women.[2]

But despite these great continuities, a lot had changed. Instead of a makeshift townscape of wooden market infrastructures, the cities had built impressive cloth halls, sometimes, like in Ypres itself, cathedral-like buildings where cloth manufacturers brought their woollens for inspection and where these were sold mostly to foreign merchants coming from the Hanseatic territories along the Baltic, Italy and the Iberian Peninsula.[3] In the 1350s textile workers were organized in powerful craft guilds, many of which succeeded in acquiring direct access to political power in the city councils.[4] But most importantly, many craftsmen

had also gained access to key roles in the complex manufacturing networks that structured the production of cloth. It was no longer mercantile elites who controlled manufacture directly, but instead the most successful artisans organized the successive production stages.[5] Even the urban soundscape had changed. Instead of one bell defining the work hours, a multitude of market and labour bells announced not only the beginning and the end of the working day, but also the hours for lunch breaks and for marketing cloth and labour.[6] From a highly informal labour market that was dominated by a tiny minority of wealthy entrepreneurs, where rules and regulations were limited, serving above all the interests of the dominant mercantile elites in providing flexibility and a steady supply of labour, labour markets had become much more regulated. Institutional arrangements had been adapted to deal with new economic circumstances. Perhaps above all, two fundamental things were quite different in the 1350s as opposed to the 1150s.

Foremost the social identity of the workers and their attitudes towards work had altered dramatically. The realities of the workshop had shifted along with them. Work had become synonymous for civic virtue, and those ideas reached out not only to the leading groups in urban society, but also to the majority of guild-organized craftsmen and retailers.[7] Perhaps this change was expressed most clearly in how the textile trades were described in the charters of Mechelen, another cloth city in the Low Countries. In the first part of the thirteenth century, cloth weavers and fullers were not allowed to participate in the organization of manufacturing. They had no access to entrepreneurship, which was reserved to the mercantile elites of the city. These merchants were organized in a merchant guild in order to defend their privileges abroad and monopolize political power at home. In the charters of the cloth trade, craftsmen were even described as belonging to the despicable trades (*fallacis officiis*). Shortly before 1300, however, the craftsmen gained access to the wool trade, first by organizing themselves in formal craft guilds of their own, then by being allowed to become entrepreneurs (and enter the merchant guild, albeit with the financial penalty of a higher entrance fee). After guild revolutions took place around 1300, a

watershed occurred when guilds gained access to political power and merchants lost their interest in organizing cloth manufacture. From despicable trades, the key workers in the Mechelen textile trades became cornerstones of urban society.[8]

Secondly, the influence of new urban middle classes on city politics and the organization of society and the economy had grown. Through a process of compromise and sometimes bloody conflict a new deal was struck with the traditional landowning and mercantile elites.[9] The changed political economy was felt in each and every workshop. Craft guilds and their members started to appropriate a discourse of the 'common good' in society and packed it with their own value system of solidarity, brotherhood and 'workmanship'. This discourse had roots, of course, in earlier developments. In the course of the twelfth century the urban mercantile elites had emancipated themselves from their feudal surroundings by creating 'communes', an urban body politic that was based on shared values and interests.[10] Although theoretically designed to incorporate all citizens, it had never become all inclusive. But by appropriating the idea of 'common good', craft guilds did not create an inclusive value system either.[11] Even if the economic success of the guilds boosted the level of political influence of the urban middle classes, not everyone was able to participate in these developments.[12] There were also losers in urban society.

Guild ideology was by no means geared towards creating an egalitarian society, not even among guild members themselves. If declining inequality rates from the fourteenth century onwards seem to imply a more even distribution of economic opportunity and economic gain (the redistributive effects of the Black Death were crucial in this process), not everyone was able to benefit from the opportunities. Within the craft guilds subcontracting flourished, giving entrepreneurial initiative to a select group of wealthy guild masters and reducing the other masters to mere employees.[13] From then on, formal hierarchies defined workshop cultures. There were many thresholds for achieving mastership, and even more informal ones for becoming established entrepreneurs embedded in social networks and with easy access to capital. As a result success ratios for already established guild families were

significantly higher, making the task for newcomers much more difficult. Many guild members therefore remained wage-earners as journeymen or dependent masters in the service of a group of successful guildsmen.[14] Women also lost economic agency in the process, and even the relatively advantageous circumstances for workers after the demographic collapse in the fourteenth century did not allow them to profit from better job opportunities or wages in the guild economy.[15] Unskilled workers were outside the guild system regardless and found it increasingly hard to achieve social promotion. Finally city-dwellers constituted only a minority of those who made their living from labour. The majority of the population, even in the most densely urbanized regions of medieval Europe, lived in the countryside and continued to till the earth.

Work Cultures in the Countryside

For most medieval Europeans farms, fields and pastures remained the main places of work. In general most of Europe was characterized by an unstable and changing relationship between two basic types of rural work. On the one hand peasants worked on farms. Labour relations were organized within the context of the household, in most parts of Europe a nuclear household. There were gender specific roles: weaving textiles and brewing were originally among the tasks of women; hard physical labour on the field such as ploughing and even harvesting was usually entrusted to the male members of the household. But in general family members shared labour, and wage labour by outsiders was kept as limited as possible. On the other hand there was work on the estates of the landlords ('demesne farming'), whoever they were, and on larger independent farms. Here work could no longer be provided by the household alone. Labour varied in these often different organizational constructs, from bounded labour on manorial estates, where serfs were obliged to do labour services for their lords usually in exchange for access to their own land, to free wage labour, often seasonal but sometimes also permanent, leading to more stable relations between employer and employee.[16]

This duality of work in the countryside did not mean, however, that it was an unchangeable world, nor that it lacked common features that connected both types of work environments. Custom was important in deciding workplace cultures: physical boundaries had to be set, often with the involvement of the community in highly ritualized procedures, or the community had to agree to collective agricultural practices, like crop rotation or access to the all-important commons.[17] But power relations aggravated by the increasing Malthusian tension between population growth and food supply in the thirteenth century and the demographic cataclysm of the fourteenth century changed workers' lives as well.[18] The same holds true for the power of nascent and developing markets, concentrated throughout most of Europe in cities and small market towns. All these elements changed the conditions under which people worked and the ways they thought about work. Regional diversity was perhaps even stronger for rural work than for urban work despite the immense disparities of urban ratios across Europe. In some regions barely five to ten per cent lived in towns, while in others urban ratios reached 25 to 40 per cent. Whereas craft guilds or guildlike institutions were present in one way or another in most European cities of some importance, recent research into rural society has demonstrated enormous differences across Europe, not only in the organization of agriculture or the quality of the land, but foremost in the different power relations that determined access to land and labour, the so-called social property relations. As a result labour practices differed strongly from one region to another.

This diversity had old roots. As recent scholarship about the large (post-)Carolingian rural estate has shown, the relationship between labour and land and the impact of the coercive power of landowning elites differed dramatically between the Carolingian heartlands in Northwest Europe and Mediterranean Europe with its Roman 'inheritance' (let alone the more peripheral regions of Anglo-Saxon England, Scandinavia and Central Europe), leading to fundamental differences in the nature of rural work.[19] In the ensuing feudal society of the tenth and eleventh centuries, so-called tenurial land gradually lost importance in some regions, certainly in what had been the Carolingian heartland, while it remained as or even

more important in other regions, most notably in early Norman England of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The nature of those relations was not stable either. Social homogenization seems to have characterized the emerging feudal society: the social categories of slaves and free were gradually transformed into a more generally unfree and bound labour force. Yet this homogenization did not result in similar patterns across Europe. In some regions serfdom remained important until the end of the Middle Ages and sometimes even beyond (England, Catalonia) and in others serfdom became even more important in the late Middle Ages (Eastern Europe). But in most regions of western Europe where demesne farming was the norm, serfdom and the fixed relations between work on tenurial and manorial land gradually dissipated. Monetization of labour relations in the countryside, especially after 1100, strengthened this process.

Work identities were primarily constituted by access to land, but access to land changed over time. As a rule, prior to 1000, landowning elites started to usurp royal authority and political authority fragmented. Europe became characterized by cellular power structures.[20] This process often led to different kinds of labour relations, levels of commercialisation and monetization, sensitivities about the juridical status of peasants, etc. No wonder that this patchwork of different systems also led to a patchwork of ways in which workplaces were organized, of who was involved in them and who could profit from easier access to land and property. The fact that peasants wanted to guarantee the continuity of their holdings is a key element for explaining the relationship between the users of the land and their labour. In most of western Europe tenurial land constituted the most dynamic part of the rural economy. It was land in theory owned by large landowners, but in practice fully owned by peasants in exchange for increasingly monetized rents. On the one hand inflation eroded these rents and land became more affordable. But on the other hand peasants were also threatened by demographic growth and the permanent risk, in regions of egalitarian inheritance practices, that their holdings would be split up into tiny plots. High levels of indebtedness among peasants resulted. With each generation they had to rearrange

properties in order to keep them sustainable. Sometimes hierarchical relations developed between tiny peasant smallholdings and larger farms, which had gradually grown from manorial land or from clustered peasant plots. As the lord's income eroded because of fixed monetary rents in many places, various waves of 'feudal reaction' led to changing power relations and increasing duties on peasant income outside regular land rents.[21] Moreover in some specific regions, commercialization pushed the rural economy towards specialization in order to meet the demand for food, fuel, building materials and raw materials in growing cities, particularly Paris and London, and of course the dense urban regions of northern Italy and the Low Countries.[22]

Hence extreme variety according to place and time characterized the workplace of most peasants. But they had one element in common. Whether bound by manorial arrangements (serfs), or in practice or legally free (peasants), wage labour in the countryside seems to have been rare before the thirteenth century and despite increasing urban demand and the introduction of more productive agricultural techniques, room for specialization was limited.[23] The need to feed an ever-increasing population led to the dominant cultivation of cereals. This meant that as a rule peasants tended not to be specialists. In particular regions, of course, cattle and dairy farming, sheep, woodland and vineyards were predominant, yet most peasants had plots of land dedicated to mixed farming. Most work took place on one's own farm (or in some regions on the lord's manor) and the basic unit of work was defined by the family, even in this period mainly the nuclear family, in which the available labour was pooled. Wage labour was, as a rule, limited on these small peasant holdings.[24]

The basic unit of work was, of course, different on large farms. Thanks to the spread of leaseholding from the thirteenth century and the rise of urban investors, the scale of agriculture changed dramatically in some regions. This required labour drawn from outside peasant households. Long-term contracts with servants, both male and female, constituted the backbone of agricultural work on large farms. Servants often lived on the farm and became integral members of farmers' households. Their wages were often substantially

lower than those of irregular workers, but in exchange they were provided room and board and a certain degree of employment security. Because real wages tended to decline in the period of medieval growth and were irregular at best in periods of crisis, job security was no small asset.[25] But the small workforce active in long-term contracts was usually not sufficient to deal with the seasonal peak periods of the agricultural year. Besides the permanent household a floating labour force was also occasionally put to work. Most workers were probably peasants who had their own smallholdings in the vicinity and combined work on their own holdings with wage labour on large farms. This was possible because the countryside was characterized by chronic hidden unemployment. Because of the seasonal nature of agriculture and the changing relations between land and population, a lot of the available labour was underused, a phenomenon that became more acute as population pressure built up and the average size of holdings declined. As land became ever more scarce, extra input of labour became available to increase land productivity, but at the cost of declining labour productivity. The relations between small peasants and large farmers were not entirely monetized, although irregular pay undoubtedly constituted a welcome addition to the income of smallholders. Relations of dependence were involved as well, as poor peasants often lacked the capital to invest in expensive agricultural tools and draft animals, mostly horses.[26] Some cattle for manure and dairy was often all they could manage, and therefore they relied on large farms for these services.[27] When proto-industrial development came into play, at least from the late Middle Ages onwards, the supply of raw materials and the control of financial and commercial networks proved another element in the hierarchical relations between large farmers and poor peasants.[28]

But specialist labourers were also involved. The uncertainties of weather conditions in the relatively short harvest period and the labour intensive harvesting procedures in grain- and wine-growing regions meant aristocratic landowners and later large leasehold farms needed to attract extra labourers in peak periods. Work cultures were completely different for these seasonal specialists. In contrast to peasants they were often very mobile, travelling

beyond the boundaries of their usual locale (their own village or cluster of villages).[29] Habitually they took on the form of established gangs, including both men and women. The phenomenon seems even to be growing in the late Middle Ages, when labour became more scarce. Travelling gangs of specialist labourers often used their bargaining power to negotiate higher wages than other rural groups, who were often prepared to undercut normal wages in exchange for more permanent employment or relations of dependence. As such these groups probably developed a working culture of their own and a proper identity. They were, however, not alone in doing so. In fact the countryside boasted a lot of other specialist trades.

[FIGURE *.1 HERE]

Besides agricultural work, many other activities took place in the countryside. Every village had its share of non-agricultural trades.[30] Blacksmiths, millers, soldiers, even specialist trades like moneylenders and, of course, clergymen abounded. Although sources do not allow scholars to trace their activities, they are duly recorded in charters and accounts. In some regions these activities even outnumbered agricultural ones. In mining settlements hundreds of workers, skilled and unskilled, clustered around one central activity, leading to often complex entrepreneurial relationships and a proper working identity of miners, linked to transfer of skill and knowledge.[31] In the period of the bipartite estates in the post-Carolingian era, manufacture of textiles on large estates was sometimes concentrated in workshops, so-called *gynaecea*, employing above all unfree women.[32] As a rule a lot of activities in the countryside, agricultural or not, were gendered just as they were in cities. Women tended to be active in brewing and textile production.[33] Yet this gendered identity was not always stable. As proto-industrial textile manufacture developed in the countryside in the late Middle Ages, the weaving of linen or woollen fabrics was usually entrusted to male members of the household, while spinning was exclusively female.[34] In general, non-agrarian activities became increasingly important as commercialization took off, and in many regions an equilibrium had to be found between work in industry (mainly as miners and proto-

industrial textile manufacture), in shipbuilding and fishing in coastal regions and in land or river transport. The spread of proto-industrial activity, and the added income it generated for households, even lowered the threshold for splitting up peasant holdings, leading to tiny farms that barely allowed the household's survival. But as a rule, these developments did not seem to have altered workers' identities that much. The household itself, and the reservoir of labour contained in it, remained the core of the labour system. It was also the starting point for all kinds of collective action, from the organization of common land to legal actions against an oppressive lord. Because of the necessities of agriculture (manure, tools, capital), complex relationships among holdings of various sizes developed. The larger holdings were, the more they relied on wage labour with all its hierarchical complexities. Only seasonal work gangs or specific kinds of non-rural and proto-industrial work (not textile manufacture, but rather seasonal activities like fishing or shipbuilding or mining) led to different workers' identities, with a higher degree of mobility or collective action of workers.[35]

The Mysteries of Trade

If the travelling gangs of harvest workers were characterized by high levels of mobility, high wages, gendered working patterns and a proper working identity, other specialist workers also developed such attitudes, linked as they were to a lifestyle of movement, specialist skill and a specific workshop culture. No other group has been as famous as the craftsmen who built the medieval cathedrals, belfries and castles. Skilled workers at these huge building sites, from architects to stonemasons, were often recruited from distant places, and their skill as craftsmen constituted their identity and prestige.[36] Stonecutters and building masters started to use their own signs and marks to distinguish themselves as specialists. They boasted about having been employed at particular sites, and they developed their own collective identity, with rules and practices that not only guaranteed the excellence of their work, but were designed to transfer skills and status, in short the mysteries of their trade across generations of craftsmen.

Building workers were not the only ones to develop their own collective identity. Travelling groups of entertainers similarly acquired a distinct work identity as did those engaged in intellectual trades, like teachers and scholars, for whom migration and mobility were key elements.[37] Less known is the fact that also the most important medieval manufacturing industry was characterized by movement. Textiles workers developed a group identity in part because clerical elites, who had a disdain for this type of manual labour anyway, viewed their activities with great suspicion. The monks of Sint-Truiden near the River Meuse in present-day Belgium called textile workers 'the most presumptuous and arrogant of all'. But in their disdain, they recorded at the same time what must have been the first examples of industrial collective action and workers' rituals in Northwest Europe. They described how in the early twelfth century travelling weavers gathered in a ritual around a ship on wheels that was rolled into town and how they kept watch over the ship, a watch that turned into a celebration for a substantial part of the town's population. Workers were also linked to all kinds of heretical movements. Some decades later the 'wretched weavers' of Arras, another important cloth city of the Low Countries, were suspected of belonging to Manichaean sects. Clerical authors explained how they gathered in their huts and cellars to practice their heretical ritual and described these weavers as highly mobile, moving from place to place, and as uncultivated and dangerously greedy. Undoubtedly these testimonies reveal the existence of a sense of group identity around 1100, long before any formal association came of age.[38] Weavers did not hesitate to associate their work with the deeds of Christ and saints.[39] As such, the nature of manual work became an intricate part of an emerging common identity. But it was still far from generally accepted yet.

Urban Work: Guilds as Artificial Family?

Undoubtedly the most important institution regulating cultures of work was the family, in the countryside as well as in towns. The relationship between work and household is discussed elsewhere in this volume, but in short, little agreement exists about when the so-called nuclear household, the single most important transition allegedly associated with the

second part of the Middle Ages, came of age. Many authors claim that it was the Black Death that finally decided the fate of the extended family in large parts of Europe, while others state that the success of the nuclear family dates from a much earlier period.[40] What is increasingly clear, however, are the strong differences across Europe. If the demographic cataclysm of the successive plague epidemics had a great impact on European marriage patterns, which resulted in small nucleated households, they were not the only cause. In some regions, even before the plague's arrival, nuclear families were at the heart of the organization of work, and other factors seem to have triggered the pivotal role of the nuclear household. It is striking that, in the second half of the thirteenth century, almost one hundred years before the Black Death, with the appearance of craft guilds, households, as focal points for organising work, entered craft regulations in the Low Countries, never to leave again.[41]

Because of the inherent demographic fragility of the nuclear family in a period of high child mortality and migration, the permanence of the family as a beacon of social stability and security for each individual could not be guaranteed over the long run. As a result other types of solidarity became necessary. Modern guild historians have often considered these associations to be 'artificial families'. The triumph of the companionate marriage and the declining importance of the extended family in the course of late Middle Ages are understood to have boosted this phenomenon. It made intergenerational solidarity within the context of the extended family more difficult. According to the so-called nuclear hardship thesis, the elderly were particularly at risk, because of lifecycle mismatches when solidarity and care were directed towards the immediate offspring. Hence alternatives in society needed to be organized, and guilds were instrumental in the process because of the complex institutional framework they created for providing health care, social security, retirement homes etc.

For a long time guilds have been understood as political and economic tools against a hostile feudal aristocracy and an oppressive commercial elite. But recent scholars have seen guilds as positive instruments for organizing solidarity, charity and devotion. Some

scholars even go so far as to state that guilds primarily embodied the values of brotherhood and mutual assistance in urban society.[42] So-called 'poor boxes' (or 'purses') were designed to help out guild members who were too old or sick to work. They were financed by contributions of guild members who wanted at a later stage profit from the guild box. This practice created a network of solidarity within the guild. In some guilds only a part of the guild community was allowed to participate (usually the masters), but in others the system was much more inclusive. But whether inclusive or exclusive, the 'poor box' added another layer of solidarity, a community within the community.[43]

Some of these institutions were already active at an early stage from the thirteenth century onwards, but they seem to have become more numerous over the course of the fifteenth century, particularly in northwest Europe. The fact that guilds developed this institutionalized system of health care and assistance relatively late strengthens the claim that brotherhood and solidarity were core values when guilds made their appearance. In the early periods formalization would not have been necessary. And indeed, most guilds had started as 'charities' over the course of the thirteenth century, and from their beginnings many were anxious to develop various, often informal systems of social security.[44] The charter of the cloth weavers' guild in Mechelen of 1270, that started this chapter, was issued not by the guild authorities, but by the mercantile elites of the city. Yet it states prominently how weavers, who were not able to work and earn an honest income, could rely on their guild brothers for assistance. They were allowed to visit all the weavers' workshops where they would receive a fixed amount of money to help them through their difficult period. The charter was, however, also keen to limit the number of times disabled workers were allowed to exercise these rights, and it is not at all certain if these limits were set by the urban elites. The internal regulation of the guild seems to have been, even at this early stage in Mechelen's guild history, the prerogative of the craft guild officers themselves.[45]

But guild solidarity of course targeted more than financial support. Guilds were foremost institutions of sociability. Collective rituals cemented guild solidarity. The collective

nature of devotion, celebration, guild administration, transition rituals and death moulded

guild ideology and identity. Social bonds between guildsmen were constantly being renewed

in weekly masses and in the decoration of guild chapels, and they were present in most guild

activities. In alms-houses old guildsmen or their widows could spend their final years.

Secular pageants and religious processions were organized, and in many cities ritualized

political action was also organized, for example the so-called 'call-to-arms' when guild

members paraded through the city with their armour and banners. In many cities of northern

Europe guilds provided the backbone of urban militias, a notable practice in a period when

organized and disciplined foot soldiers were gradually gaining the upper hand over

aristocratic mounted knights on the battlefield.[46] But daily events also helped to reinforce

bonds among guildsmen. The guild officers organized tours in the cities from workshop to

workshop to control the activities of their members and take out free-riders. Guild tribunals

dealt with internal matters. Meals and drinking events celebrated the admission of new

members or promotions to mastership. Impressive guild houses holding charters and

weaponry served as visual reminders of prestige and political power. In short guilds became

a cornerstone in the body politic of urban society.[47]

[FIGURE *.2 HERE]

Guilds also provided the framework in which individual members could organize their

lives. Their regulation fit the normal lifecycles of average craftsmen. The guild organized the

transfer of skill during adolescence and took care of disciplining young members; it facilitated

the establishment of social networks; it allowed entrepreneurial continuities after the death of

a guild master by allowing widows to continue the businesses of their deceased husbands;

and finally it assisted guild members and members of their household in their old age.[48] It

would be going too far, however, to state that associational life completely replaced family

life.[49] In late medieval cities, even in those where associations became strong pillars of

society, family relations remained at the heart of the circles of sociability surrounding

everyone. Whether they were craftsmen, beguines or single women, it was to family

members that most turned in their hour of need.[50] Surviving wills from this era testify to this practice. When for example beguines northern European cities, felt the necessity to draw up wills to dispose of their possessions after death, they always put their own blood ties first. Although they were part of a strong religious community with its own institutional organization and with well-established relations of work, friendship or shared devotional experience in the community, it was to their children or parents, to nieces and nephews and to brothers and sisters that they gave their wealth, and if fellow beguines were among the beneficiaries, they tended also to be family members. Similar patterns appear in the case of other town dwellers. Certainly gifts to guilds and their social institutions were plentiful, but these gifts, however important for the guilds, do not point at their role as alternative families, nor is there any contemporary discourse which claims they are taking on this role.

Formalizing Work

The economic actions of craft guilds are much better known than their cultural role. In most European cities, guilds came of age in the course of the thirteenth century as solidarities of people exercising more or less the same occupation. But guilds included wealthy entrepreneurs linked to the mercantile and even aristocratic elites of the cities as well as impoverished workers working for piece or time wages. And work hierarchies were increasingly formalized on the work floor. Guild masters could develop their own activities, while journeymen were by definition limited to working for entrepreneurs as skilled craftsmen and apprentices, usually under age and under the protection of the masters who trained them. But guild hierarchies did not necessarily reflect economic success.[51] Masters could work as wage earners for other masters; journeymen could, if they possessed skills which were in demand, use their bargaining powers to earn relatively high wages and apprentices, certainly at the end of their training, seem to have been used as a source of cheap skilled labour. Besides these formal guild categories, masters often made use of the labour present in their own households by involving their wives, children and servants in the activities of the workshop. Complex systems of subcontracting could complicate things further, leading to

networks of workshops that were organized to meet the demands of particular entrepreneurs or merchants.

Until recently scholars have been reading guild statutes in very legalistic ways. A superficial reading of guild statutes can present a seemingly egalitarian ambition linked to a carefully crafted and hierarchical world where various thresholds limited entrance into the guild and moulded patterns of social exclusion. But guild regulation was carefully drafted in order to allow entrepreneurs to achieve economic success through the loopholes of strict statutes. Although there was a tendency to curb extreme competition by stimulating access to skill and raw materials for all masters and by limiting the negative impact of asymmetric access to information for guild members and consumers alike, this did not stop competition within the guild.[52] Economic success did not only depend upon membership in the guild; access to social and financial networks was just as crucial.

All of this, of course, directly affected the work floor. Medieval artisanal activity has sometimes been described as static and not open to much technological innovation. Although this may be true in comparison to the dramatic changes of the Industrial Revolution, the argument is less convincing in light of everything that went on before. Medieval industrial development was not without its technological 'earthquakes'. The introduction of the broad loom, of the windmill and of new mining techniques must have had shattering consequences for the organization of labour.[53] It certainly had dramatic consequences for the status and the identity of the workers involved. If anything, organizational innovations triggered most changes in the workplace, and guilds seem to have been paramount in these developments. A striking feature of the organization of the workshop in the late Middle Ages is the labour market's much higher level of formalization. Entrepreneurs in the twelfth and early thirteenth century did not seem to have been much concerned with carefully regulating labour markets and setting wages. On the contrary, they profited from flexible labour relations. It was quality standards that they cared about, and these could be achieved through their own organizations (the merchant guilds or the city governments they controlled). Before 1300,

merchants tended to leave the initiative of manufacture to guild masters. They could mobilize only limited amounts of capital in order to control manufacturing chains, but they could rely on the collective actions of their guild. The craft guilds filled the institutional gap in many places, and from this moment on, labour relations on the work floor became meticulously regulated.[54] Formal labour markets were organized to bring entrepreneurs into contact with a floating work force, both skilled and unskilled; hierarchical relations between employer and employee were drafted; labour time was carefully regulated and publicly announced with clocks and bells. The late Middle Ages developed a standardized and predictable labour market, well suited for less powerful employers. Guilds were not only, and certainly not primarily, about consumer or worker interests. They were politically dominated by (albeit often small) entrepreneurs, and as such, they served chiefly their interests.

[FIGURE *.3 HERE]

Market transparency was seen as crucial both for the continuity of the premodern economy and to guarantee guild solidarity.[55] Free riders had to be taken out by implementing complex systems of fines: low for infractions that were only scratching at the surface of guild regulation, heavy for those that broke the essence of guild solidarity and jeopardized the guild's reputation. Only rarely did guild courts assess breaches of guild solidarity to be so great that removal from the guild was deemed necessary. They did so mostly when the position of the guild itself in the city as a whole was threatened. The result was an avalanche of sometimes seemingly petty rulings, which in the past were inevitably interpreted as conservatism and rent-seeking, stifling entrepreneurial initiative and economic growth, and of course guilds did, as we have seen, put up barriers in order to shield their activities.[56]

Yet the inflation of petty rules also served other goals than providing an impregnable fortress of guild exclusion. If anything is proven by the endless cases of litigation before guild and city courts about countless infringements on guild regulation, it is that these rules were constantly being negotiated, changed and adapted, and that only rarely did they really allow

strict monopolies or provide a waterproof system of exclusion. On the contrary, if the inflation of guild rules and their attempts to define all circumstances from production and exchange to leisure and sexuality of guild members, may seem intimidating, the dense regulation is nonetheless full of inconsistencies, even outright contradictions.[57] Moreover as research on guilds in the Low Countries, England and Italy shows, not all regulations were actually enforced all the time.

It is striking how high levels of product innovation characterized the late medieval economy. It allowed, for example, guild masters to follow the accelerating fashion cycles of the late Middle Ages, related to everything from dress to art, and thereby to produce fashionable new types of dress, panel paintings, tapestries, brocaded silks, and armour as well as the right kinds of hats, gloves, belts, sleeves, etc. Skill was paramount in this process of adaptation, and guilds were extremely attentive to the transfer of skill. It created the value of the product, and guaranteed the income and reputation of the guildsmen. It constituted their collective identity. Through all the minutiae of regulation of commodities and commercial exchange, it is this concern that seems paramount.

The concern for skill and constructed value came, however, at great expense for some of the workers. Non-guild workers, who in many cities constituted the majority of all city dwellers, were relegated to a less formalized economy of makeshift: less protected from the adversities of the market, less able to profit from its benefits. Most also became second-rate townsmen, as full citizenship increasingly was linked to access to political power and membership in one of the corporate bodies in the city. But entrance into the guild system still seemed feasible in the late Middle Ages. In the cities of Flanders half of all guild members had no pedigree in the guild whatsoever and many, if not most, were newcomers coming from outside the city.[58] Guilds were still open institutions. Thresholds for outsiders were rising nonetheless. More importantly masters' sons and native-born citizens profited from better social networks and access to capital to start businesses of their own. They had opportunities to climb the ladder of political power in the guild and city administration. Stories

of extremely successful newcomers are abundant from London to Gdansk, but one must remind oneself that success stories were still to a large extent exceptional. Guilds and their effects on the work floor were not always inclusive; they even tended to become increasingly exclusive after the Black Death.

It is probably women who paid the highest price of all.[59] Well before the Black Death they were banned from formal training schemes in the guild (foremost through apprenticeship). There were, however, exceptions. In some cities there were female guilds, where, usually under the guidance of male supervisors, women made up the bulk of the workforce. In Paris silk weavers were usually women, and the same is true for silk manufacture in some Italian cities as well. In Cologne there were several female guilds.[60] Yet as a rule women were ousted from the regular guild curriculum of apprentice, journeyman and guild master in most manufacturing guilds from the late thirteenth century onwards. Before 1300 the statutes of cloth towns in Flanders still mention female weavers or dyers together with their male counterparts; after 1300 this became rare, and the practice disappeared almost completely around 1350.[61] The process is simultaneous with the move towards manufacturing more luxury fabrics, whose reputation for quality was linked to expensive raw materials and, above all, to skill. Women outside the guild training schemes could no longer be associated with the end product. This does not mean that women disappeared from manufacture. Their role was, however, gradually limited to non-guild-organized stages of production (in cloth manufacture, for example, spinning and cleaning fabrics, which was badly paid and low-status work), while labour on the other more prestigious steps of production was gradually drawn into the patriarchal household of the guild master. Strikingly these changes occurred at the same time that guild statutes started to contain many references to the household as an economic unit.

Guild Values and Work Ethics: a Culture of Control and Reputation

The ideology of guild sociability and solidarity was also apparent in new work ethics. It was work and membership in the guild that constituted the worker's identity. In the process workers adopted a set of values, which focused on moral behaviour and strict hierarchy. With the increasing formalization of labour markets and the nexus of quality and transparency, new labour mentalities came to the forefront. Public morality and respectability became the core values for every guildsman, and as such they penetrated into the value system of the rising urban middle classes. Guildsmen were not allowed to live with a concubine while being married to another woman; they could not get involved in prostitution; they were not allowed to gamble or be found in improper situations when being drunk; they had to be dressed properly in the colours of the guild and honour the public engagements of the guild; they had to assist to public guild ceremonies.[62] Some guilds went as far as forcing their members to dress properly for work. The Mechelen statutes of the cloth weavers around 1300 mention that workers should wear decent woollen clothing. It is striking how pictorial representations of urban middle classes even in a merchant city as wealthy as fifteenth-century Bruges always show citizens dressed in fine woollens, rarely in silk, which remained the fabric of the nobility.

Guilds were permeated with a culture of respectability. There are, of course, also economic reasons for this. Reputation was an important asset in developing businesses and guaranteeing their continued success. Being disreputable meant being dishonest and not worthy of trust. Guilds tried actively to weed out possible infractions. In particular the workplace itself was increasingly regulated.[63] Teams of guild officers went from workshop to workshop, inside the privacy of the home, to see whether guildsmen abided with the quality regulations of the guild. The workshop was by no means a purely private space; it was a space shared by the craftsmen and their family, by the guild and consumers. Trust and control went hand in hand. Social control became even more important towards the end of the Middle Ages, when all kinds of disreputable behaviour of guild members were considered more and more threatening to the guild's reputation as a whole.

But the focus on reputation was not only enforced by the craft guilds and their officers; it was also deeply lived by the guild members themselves. It belonged to their way of life. This can be seen in court cases, when guildsmen had to develop lines of defence before a judge. While asking princely pardon for a sentence from the Duke of Burgundy in the fifteenth century, guildsmen in the Low Countries fashioned themselves as loyal subjects of the prince and as victims of unbridled passion and circumstance, like all other supplicants did.[64] But guildsmen usually added other elements to their self-fashioning strategies: they were not only loyal subjects, they were also loyal brothers to their companions, the notion of brotherhood and solidarity being among the core values of the guild. They were living from their own means and from their own work. Finally they had a reputation for being honest and utterly respectable as contributors to the urban society in which they lived as well as to the common good, which inevitably could only be beneficial for the prince as well. In short, they proclaimed, even at a moment of extreme tension when sometimes life or death was at stake, their guild identity as being the essence of their actions. They were no longer despicable trades.

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