

3 ECONOMIC CITIZENSHIP THROUGH THE GUILDS

Thomas Gent was born in Ireland, probably in 1693. He started an apprenticeship as a printer in Dublin, but ran away to England in 1710. The published version of his autobiography actually begins with Gent being seasick on the ship that took him across. Finding no printing press in Chester, his first port of call, he then travelled on to London, where he continued to learn his trade. By 1713 Gent had completed the seven years of training that were required under English law from every master artisan. During his apprenticeship he had been badly treated, he felt – ‘as a servant’ – but his master Midwinter assured him that this treatment was only meant to encourage his skill and ambition. And indeed, at the end of his term of apprenticeship, Midwinter offered Gent hospitality and protection: ‘I do not prefer my interest to your good; and though you came [as] an almost stranger to me, God forbid that I should send you as such abroad’. He helped secure Gent some odd jobs and finally a place as a journeyman printer in York. Subsequently, Gent returned to London and his former master, where there was more work and more adventures. However:¹

In the year 1717 I had the great happiness of being made a freeman of the Stationers, and on 9 Oct, commenced citizen at guildhall notwithstanding the false objection raised against me in the court, by one Cornish, that I had been married in my apprenticeship;² but my master, Midwinter, proved him a notorious liar, and he was reprehended by the warden and others. . . . Thus I became absolutely free, both in England and

Ireland, which made me give sincere thanks to the Almighty from the inward recesses of my soul.

Gent had gone through a process that was very common in England, albeit not on the continent: by becoming a master of the Stationers' Company (or guild), he could also become a citizen of the City of London.

The guild that Gent joined was not one of London's most significant: it ranked forty-seventh during urban ceremonies in the seventeenth century, far behind the Twelve Great Livery Companies of the City.³ In 1403, the 'text-writers' and 'limners' (illustrators) had received a privilege from the city authorities; from 1441 they called themselves the 'Company of Stationers'. The trade had benefitted enormously from Johannes Gutenberg's invention of moveable type and the subsequent expansion of book sales and other printed materials.⁴ In 1557, moreover, the London Stationers received from the crown a national monopoly for the production of printed material.⁵

The Stationers' Company was in various respects an ordinary guild in a city where guilds were at the time hugely important, not merely for regulating the local economy, but also as social and political organisations – capacities in which they remain active into the twenty-first century.⁶ It was at the same time unusual in its national scope. On the continent it was practically unheard of, and even in England quite rare, to find guilds with jurisdiction outside their own town and perhaps its immediate hinterland.⁷ In this respect, the Stationers were an extreme example of a trait that was common to the guild system as a whole: the monopoly. In their charters, guilds would receive the right, reserved for their members, to produce and trade in specific products; in the case of the Stationers 'impressing or printing any book'. They could search premises where they suspected illicit printed works were to be found, i.e. produced by printers who were not members of the Company. The charter of 1557 gave the Stationers' Company also the right to assemble, to elect its own officials and to make its own rules.⁸

The history of the Stationers' Company and of Thomas Gent's progression to the mastership in that company, and subsequent citizenship status in the City of London, serves to highlight several themes of this chapter. What was the role of guilds in the towns of premodern Europe? And how difficult was it to join them? The case of the Stationers

suggests two contrasting narratives: they held an unusually strong ‘monopoly’, but an ‘almost stranger’ found it relatively easy to join this London guild, even though he was from Ireland. And last, but not least of course, it shows how citizenship and guild membership were intimately related in premodern Europe. In many towns, candidates had to be formal citizens before they could join a guild. In some places, all citizens were required to join a guild. And in still other places, guild membership automatically conferred citizenship status.⁹ To contemporaries, the connection seemed almost inalienable. Incorporated trades were also known as the ‘citizens’ trades’.¹⁰ This intimate connection was articulated, for example, in many guild petitions, insisting that members were entitled to support from the council – as citizens and taxpayers.¹¹

For the argument of this book, there is an additional reason to look closely at the guilds. If citizenship was to have a positive effect on society, including its economic performance, then obviously the guilds would be a channel through which this effect might be accomplished. As it is, this is precisely the topic of a fierce debate among economic historians. The argument over guilds and economy has been constructed in two distinct ways. As discussed in the Introduction, the idea of ‘transaction costs’ is fundamental to Douglass North’s influential work. Whereas most economic theory assumes that the exchange of goods and services between two parties is free under perfect market conditions, North claims that such conditions do not exist in the real world and that there are therefore always costs; moreover, most of the time these costs are substantial. Transaction costs come in two types. One has to do with information. How do I know that the product I’m buying is the same as what is advertised? Is there an equivalent on the market that will satisfy my needs more cheaply? The other has to do with contract enforcement. If I pay for this product, will it actually be delivered? And will the producer stand by the warranty? To guarantee contract enforcement, advanced economies use a so-called third party, and for reasons of efficiency that third party is usually a public authority that can handle many conflicts over contracts in an even-handed way. At the beginning of the period covered by this book, by and large there was no such authority. As a result, the economy underperformed, simply because merchants could not trust their trading partners. According to Avner Greif, it was precisely this sort of institutional framework that the merchant guilds provided in the Middle Ages.¹²

There was also, however, another way in which the guilds could impact the economy. Since Adam Smith, in his *Wealth of Nations* in 1776, condemned guilds as ‘a conspiracy against the public’, generations of economists and historians have lined up to repeat the accusation. In recent years, revisionist scholars have tried to explain the emergence of guilds, and their persistence for more than half a millennium, in a more positive vein. This revisionist literature has distinguished between merchant and craft guilds, because of the different problems for which these organisations provided a solution. The problem of long-distance trade is one of information and contract enforcement. For craft guilds too, insecurity was an issue, but on top of that there were questions of technology and the training of the skilled workforce. Guilds contributed in all three areas, it has been claimed. They addressed issues of insecurity for their members by helping to create a stable economic environment, and for their customers through various instruments that helped establish quality standards; they clustered technological information, especially of the micro-invention type; and they set up an administrative system for the training of apprentices who would eventually carry on the industry in the next generation.¹³

This revisionism has not been universally accepted. Sheilagh Ogilvie has published two books and a string of articles, all arguing that merchant and craft guilds were rent-seeking organisations which sought to redistribute economic wealth to the advantage of their members and against the interest of migrants, women and other disenfranchised groups.¹⁴ They did so through collusion with the authorities, who were receiving taxes and loans from the guilds’ membership in exchange for permission to continue their rent-seeking behaviour. This is probably correct, but seems to measure their behaviour against the benchmark of perfect markets, or to elevate their impact to absolute levels.¹⁵ The question is not whether guilds were the best solution for market failures but whether, under imperfect circumstances, they could help overcome the economic problems created by rent-seeking states, or alternatively by the absence of any state control over economic processes. One of Ogilvie’s criticisms of ‘institutionalists’ like North and Greif is that they fail to produce empirical evidence for the beneficial effects of organisations like guilds. This is definitely a valid point. Unfortunately, it has proved equally impossible to establish the levels of rent-seeking that are the linchpin of Ogilvie’s own argument.

In this area the debate must therefore remain unresolved. The point to take away from these exchanges, however, seems to be that although merchant and craft guilds were capable of supporting economic development, they did not always work their positive magic; or phrased the other way around, they were a burden on the economy, but not always and everywhere.¹⁶ It is therefore important, in the following discussion of the citizenship aspects of these organisations, to be alert to historically variable circumstances that allowed or prevented rent-seeking.

The debate about the ‘good’ or ‘bad’ of guilds is relevant for the history of premodern citizenship in a number of ways, which mostly have to do with access to the incorporated trades, captured by the word ‘monopoly’. It is usually taken for granted that guilds used their ‘monopoly’ power to limit access to markets to their own members, and to keep that membership as small as possible. As a result, immigrants, women, religious minorities and even the sons and daughters of local inhabitants were prevented from entering the guild, or so it is alleged. Thomas Gent’s experience was remarkably different, however, as was the attitude of his master. Other issues have to do with the guilds’ presumed conservatism: as rent-seekers they tried to prevent innovations that would eat away their profits. In this chapter I argue that many examples can be found to support these claims, but that as broad generalisations they are nonetheless incorrect.

The Rise and Decline of Merchant and Craft Guilds

In the nineteenth century, two rival theories were developed, particularly in Germany, about the origins of the guilds.¹⁷ One portrayed guilds as the medieval successors of the Roman *collegia*, which originally functioned as platforms for the transmission of citizenship to urban inhabitants who did not own land. These *collegia* could be organised on an occupational basis, and they helped develop public services and public order in Roman urban society. The Codex Theodosianus (438 CE) mentions them explicitly in that role. With the collapse of the Roman Empire in the sixth century, however, the *collegia* disappeared as well, and there is no evidence of any continuity across the half millennium or so that elapsed before the guilds emerged. Likewise, the resemblance between Germanic tribal meetings and guild organisations has turned out to be nothing more than that: a similarity of form,

but without any direct connection. One has to conclude that Europeans of the central Middle Ages reinvented an organisational form that had been invented in previous times by other societies, but only gradually discovered those similarities, subsequently used to dignify the guilds' pedigree.¹⁸

The first to emerge were merchant guilds. Merchant guilds were organisations whose members were involved in long-distance trade.¹⁹ They were designed to overcome problems inherent in business deals where the two parties do not meet in person, but have to exchange through intermediaries and accept a time lag between delivery of the goods and their payment. These two distances, of time and space, created insecurities that were enhanced by the political fragmentation of post-Roman Europe, and again after the collapse of the Carolingian Empire. Where political institutions proved unhelpful, merchants were forced to resort to private-order solutions. The family was the most obvious of these, but by their very nature, family networks have a limited coverage in space, and are also subject to the vagaries of demographic fate. Guilds, it is argued, proved an ultimately more stable and therefore successful private-order solution, on one hand by enforcing rules among their own members, and on the other by threatening sanctions against foreign parties and their partners (e.g. other merchants from the same town as the cheater). Through the development of such collective mechanisms, Avner Greif has claimed, merchant guilds were not so much monopolising trade to limit supply and drive up the price, but on the contrary creating a secure environment that helped to expand long-distance exchange.²⁰

One of the reasons why merchant guilds turned out to be a successful solution to such problems of commitment is because from the beginning merchants sought, and obtained, government sanction.²¹ Merchants guilds worked in close cooperation with public authorities, and were able to pressure the authorities for more effective protection of merchant interests. No doubt the guilds' primary goal was to ensure that the benefit of their efforts accrued to their members. There is debate about whether this happened at the cost of competitors, and ultimately suppressed fresh initiatives, or whether it turned out to be also beneficial to society as a whole, because thanks to this protection merchants could invest in more daring commercial enterprises.²² The most likely verdict is that both were true, albeit in different ways in different places.

Bruges was the most significant port in fourteenth-century Northern Europe and inevitably a focus of merchants from Germany and other regions around the Baltic, who were united in the German Hanse, or Hanseatic League. Strictly speaking, the Hanse was not a guild, but a collaboration of merchant guilds in dozens of towns.²³ Abroad, however, it acted as a single merchant organisation to protect and further the interests of its members, i.e. the towns and their merchants. In 1358 the Hanse submitted a document to the Bruges authorities, complaining about English and Spanish privateers, local tolls, deficient weighing facilities and the confiscation of German ships to fight Antwerp. In their *Claghe der Oosterlingen*, or Complaint of the Easterners, the Hanse demanded compensation for the damages suffered by its members, and when the Bruges council proved uncooperative, the Hanse moved its *Kontor* to Dordrecht, a much smaller harbour quite a distance away from Bruges. Only when Bruges offered extra privileges and a hefty 24,600 guilders was the *Kontor* moved back to Bruges in 1360. In 1392 the Hanse managed to extract an even larger compensation for losses suffered by its members due to confiscations, as well as a promise from the collective Flemish towns about future compensations. On still other occasions it obtained smaller reparations. These actions demonstrate how collective action by merchants could protect them against the insecurities of long-distance trade, at a time when local and regional authorities were routinely attempting to short-change poorly protected merchants.²⁴

The heyday of merchant guilds was the period from the eleventh century to the sixteenth. After that, several factors made international trade a more routine business. The number of transactions had increased, and instruments for payment improved. Merchants now had agents to look after their interests on their behalf. The 'feudal anarchy' of the Middle Ages had been reduced as a result of the consolidation of larger states. Gelderblom and Grafe conclude from the rise and decline of merchant guilds in Amsterdam, Antwerp, Bilbao and Bruges that in the early days of the revival of international trade merchant guilds were one of a set of institutions that supported 'thin' markets. From the mid-seventeenth century they observe a notable decline in the number of institutional instruments supporting international trade in all four commercial centres. By then state institutions were providing the sort of framework that was previously supplied by the guild.²⁵ This may not have been true in East-Central Europe, and it

certainly was not true for the trade with non-European regions, which remained a domain of regulated trade, albeit not along the lines of the guild model because it was precisely in this trade that the first experiments with the modern company form, financed through permanent shares, were conducted.²⁶

Craft guilds emerged significantly later than the merchant guilds, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, i.e. in the middle of a period of rapid economic expansion.²⁷ Clearly, craft guilds cannot have been the cause of that expansion, which predates their emergence. They may, however, have acted as a dynamic element, sustaining the growth phase of the economy. Alternatively, they may have been a sign of consolidation, and in the long run a cause of stagnation. Some examples can illustrate the point.

Clock making was already known in the Middle Ages, but with the emergence of domestic-size products, it had become a genuine industry by 1500.²⁸ It expanded rapidly in the following decades and by the eighteenth century observers commented on the ubiquity of watches – 70 per cent of Parisian servants owned a watch by the 1780s, and even sailors were seen carrying them.²⁹ This expansion was accompanied by an incorporation of the trade: clock makers' guilds were established in Paris in 1544, Geneva in 1601, Rouen in 1617, London in 1631, Lyon in 1658 and so on. In many other towns, clock makers and watchmakers joined with the blacksmiths and other metal-working trades. The most important invention in the industry, the pendulum clock, was developed by Dutch astronomer and mathematician Christiaan Huygens, but so quickly was the innovation copied by clock maker guild masters that Huygens had to drop plans to patent his invention.³⁰

A similar story of guilds and innovation can be told about the silk ribbon engine loom. This invention, introduced in Leiden in 1604, permitted the production of multiple silk ribbons by a single weaver. The industry was found in many European towns, but the engine loom was adopted in only some of them. Where guilds were politically powerful, they were less inclined to accept this sort of labour-saving technology, and were able to persuade the authorities to introduce tariffs to restrain foreign competition. In other places, such as London and many Dutch towns, the authorities were more likely to take consumers' interests into account as well and force ribbon makers to adapt. However, the guilds' membership also made a difference. Where this was made up

of small masters only, conservatism was more likely to prevail, while a variegated membership was more conducive to innovation.³¹

Whereas merchant guilds had already begun to decline in the sixteenth century, craft guilds actually continued until the end of the eighteenth century – and beyond. Their disappearance has often been associated with the Industrial Revolution, but in actual fact these two developments were not at all closely connected. The first industries to mechanise – coal mining, weaving and spinning – were already located in the countryside long before the invention of the steam engine. In England the guilds were never formally abolished.³² On the continent, guilds were first abolished in countries that were actually late to industrialise, like France and the Netherlands. The chronological fit between the abolishment of the guilds and the emergence of modern industry is too poor to provide an explanation. In fact, craft guilds were abolished for political, not economic reasons.³³

Guilds and the Economy

Critics of the guilds have concentrated their objections on what is usually called the ‘monopoly’ under which guilds operated. This was the article, found in the regulations of really every guild, stipulating that only members could produce or sell the products specified in those same regulations. In other words, guilds were operating a closed shop. One of the ways to find how ‘closed’ in fact, is to establish what percentage of households were actually involved in the corporate system.

Asking the question is unfortunately much easier than answering it. This has to do with the state of the sources available to provide an answer. Very few sources survive that allow us to count directly the number of guild masters in a city or town in a given year, and then divide that by the number of that town’s inhabitants. Almost everywhere the guild records are so incomplete that an estimate of the total number of guild masters is hazardous. For Utrecht, a reconstruction of guild membership around 1650 suggests that half of all households had at least one guild member in their midst.³⁴ For ’s-Hertogenbosch I was able, with the help of a census from 1775 and membership lists from fourteen guilds for 1750–75, to calculate that about 25 per cent of heads of households must have been members of a guild in that year.³⁵ Despite the uncertainty, it has nonetheless proved possible to convert similar sets of data on guild membership into reasonably reliable estimates

Table 3.1 Percentage of masters' households in selected European towns, 1550–1800

| | 1550–1599 | 1600–1649 | 1650–1699 | 1700–1749 | 1750–1799 |
|------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| London | | 17 | 21 | 16 | 9 |
| Antwerp | | | | 23 | |
| Ghent | | | | 43 | |
| Utrecht | 31 | | 57 | | 32 |
| 's-Hertogenbosch | | | | | 25 |
| Dijon | 21 | 14 | | | |
| Lyon | | | | | 21–30 |
| Rouen | | | | | 28–43 |

Source: Minns et al. 2014

about the percentage of households headed by a guild member for a small number of towns in England, the Habsburg Netherlands and France. It makes less sense to take the whole population as a basis for estimation, because usually guild masters set up their own households; in many German towns this was even compulsory.³⁶ The estimates are shown in Table 3.1, and display a range from 14 per cent to 30 per cent, with outliers on both sides. Another way of saying this is that about one in four to five households was directly involved in the guild system. There is no obvious trend from the sixteenth to eighteenth century.

These figures actually underestimate the number of people indirectly connected to the corporate system, since they do not include apprentices and journeymen. Together these might add another 10 to 20 per cent of the population involved in the corporate system, albeit without the rights that mastership entailed.

Any guild career would have to start with an apprenticeship. Initially, these were unregulated, that is to say, the rules of early guilds make no mention of training. From around 1400, however, substantial legislation concerning apprenticeship began to emerge. In London the earliest regulations go back to the mid- and late thirteenth century. Two hundred years later a full set of regulations had formed. Halfway through the fourteenth century, for example, the length of an apprenticeship had been established at seven years – extraordinarily long by continental standards.³⁷ On the continent, guild regulations in Utrecht and 's-Hertogenbosch suggest a similar pattern.³⁸ The first regulation to be introduced concerned fees, beginning shortly after 1300; the next

placed limits on the number of apprentices that a single master could take on, first mentioned in 1421–22. The latter rules have often been interpreted as an attempt to limit access to the craft, but as far as we know most masters only had one or two apprentices throughout their whole career, so capacity was hardly an issue. Limiting numbers could also serve the interest of the apprentice: it guaranteed attention from the master and opportunities to actually practise the craft. In the fifteenth century, registration dues were introduced. In themselves these were modest, but registration might entail other payments that were not. From then on, apprenticeship was documented by the guild and, at least implicitly, certified. With the help of these registers, craftsmen would be able to prove that they had completed their apprenticeship and could be expected to have mastered the craft. We have seen how Thomas Gent felt he was ready to terminate his apprenticeship after seven years; he was clearly aware of the rules that applied.

The variation in the length of an apprenticeship and the inconsistent pattern of examination – why tailors and not painters? – have raised suspicions that these were again instruments to make life miserable for apprentices and discourage youngsters from seeking a career in the crafts. Such suspicions are deepened by the fact that guild regulations paid very little, or no attention at all, to the contents of the training.³⁹ Contrary to the popular image, we now know that it was unusual for boys (or girls) to be apprenticed to their parents;⁴⁰ rather, youngsters were supposed to leave the family circle to be trained under a master, who was responsible for the contents of that training. The guilds' contribution was to provide a framework of regulation and standards, rather than the training itself; that was left to individual masters. For that reason, guild registration was often supplemented by private contracts between a master and his pupil's parents or guardians. In fact, those contracts also contained little about the contents of the training, usually stating merely that the master was to share 'all' his knowledge about the trade with his apprentice, before going on to details about room and board.⁴¹

The most likely reason for this silence about craft training is that much of it was (and remains) difficult to articulate in writing. Craft skills are learned on the job, in personal interactions between expert and novice.⁴² During the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries such practical training was increasingly supplemented by classroom training, by printed manuals and by theoretical instruction.⁴³ However,

none of that could replace the practical instructions supplied by those working in the crafts.

Despite all these caveats, the sheer numbers of apprentices coming through the guild system testify to their significance. In mid-sixteenth-century London there were an estimated 7,250 serving an apprenticeship out of a total population of about 70,000.⁴⁴ In 1700, 3,800 youngsters started an apprenticeship in London. In Bristol, a city of 20,000, between 1686 and 1696 on average 250 new apprentices were enrolled every year,⁴⁵ which would create a constant pool of about 1,500 apprentices. A survey in 1738 counted 2,089 apprentices in Ghent, in an estimated population of 40,000.⁴⁶ In Amsterdam and other towns in Holland, civic orphanages, which took the children of deceased citizens under their wings, proved very keen to place their wards with guild masters, and not just any craft practitioners.⁴⁷

The combined effect of personal training and a migration of trained craftsmen was a circulation of technical knowledge. Again, guilds provided an important framework. In the German lands it was required of aspiring masters that they spend a considerable time on the road, working in various other towns to broaden their skills. Dietrich Meyer, a native of Zürich, where he trained as a goldsmith, started his travels in 1669. He worked in Basel, Augsburg, possibly Amsterdam and Basel again, before returning to Zürich in 1674 with a sketchbook full of designs that he had picked up along the way.⁴⁸ Technically, Meyer had completed his apprenticeship and was a journeyman; at the same time, his travels were clearly part of his education.⁴⁹ Some guilds explicitly required prospective masters to gain several years of experience before they could set up shop independently.⁵⁰ In other guilds this was the norm in practice. This was the reason why Rembrandt, for example, could contract aspiring painters who were technically no longer apprentices, but still paid him a fee to improve their skills.⁵¹

Formalised training and an institutionally embedded circulation of knowledge helped to improve European industrial production massively during the centuries of the guilds.⁵² From the Renaissance, but especially during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, an increasingly wide range of consumer goods became available to a widening range of consumers. These 'populuxe' goods and the rise of fashion were two indicators that Europeans were offered more choice at competitive prices.⁵³ The book trade – a highly skilled craft – is just one among many examples of craft inventions with a massive direct impact on

consumption, but also with unintended cultural and indeed economic side effects.⁵⁴ Apprenticeship was an important and almost universal element in the educational background of British inventors of the Industrial Revolution.⁵⁵ There is no indication that apprenticeships were becoming overall less important as time progressed, either in England or elsewhere.⁵⁶

Craft guilds claimed to maintain quality standards through a variety of mechanisms. Many guilds required the aspiring master to demonstrate his skill by making specified products in the presence of a committee of masters. The effectiveness of this practice has been disputed, and with some reason, for it seems to have been often more of a ritual than a serious examination.⁵⁷ Tests remained the same, for example, even though the products were changing. Marking products (a trademark) to allow the identification of the producer was probably more effective, a strategy used with precious metals (especially to check the silver or gold content), in the leather industry and in stone-cutting, for example. Textile guilds also certified their products with local seals or trademarks.⁵⁸ In Amsterdam, the Silversmiths' Guild destroyed all products that were of substandard quality. In the same town, the Guild of St Luke arbitrated between members and dissatisfied customers – for example, when one Diego d'Andrade was dissatisfied with the portrait Rembrandt had made of his daughter.⁵⁹

Guilds certainly were compatible with economic growth. During the Italian Renaissance, or during the Dutch golden age, the number of guilds increased dramatically.⁶⁰ Industrial output in England increased substantially between 1500 and 1700, two centuries during which the guilds were still influential.⁶¹ This era witnessed dramatic growth in the population of London, where the guilds were important both economically and politically.⁶² Another way of saying this is that early modern capitalism emerged in an environment where markets were supported by socio-economic organisations that allowed individuals to produce collective goods.⁶³

This does not in any way prove that guilds were responsible for industrial expansion, but neither can one say that they were obviously inhibiting such developments. The same mixed picture arises from an analysis of the coincidence between the expansion of the corporate system and the increase in rates of urbanisation in Italy and the Low Countries, the two regions that provide the best quantitative data. The figures show that phases of urbanisation or economic expansion,

and of de-urbanisation or stagnation and decline, were both accompanied by high guild densities.⁶⁴

Inclusion in and Exclusion from the Guilds

In 1632 Brigitta Müller from Memmingen submitted a complaint to the local council. She was a hosier who had learned the craft of knitting from her father. Now her brother, of all people, who had received the same education, was trying to prevent her from exercising her trade. Müller argued that, because she was working in an unincorporated trade, her brother's objections were out of order. The Memmingen council agreed. Thirty years later, however, the Hosiers' Guild had been set up in Memmingen, and the male masters of that guild attempted to exclude Müller from their industry because she did not have the proper – i.e. guild-sanctioned – training. Müller responded by saying that the guild documents only spoke of male training, which did not apply to her as a female, and that anyway, as a widow, she had to care for her children. The guild dismissed her objections as 'meaningless female waffle, . . . mere air and dust', and persisted in its demand to have her banned. In her case, the Memmingen council took pity and allowed her to sell her stockings from her own house, but not in the market where the guild masters had their stalls.⁶⁵

The exclusion of Brigitta Müller from the hosiery trade seems a typical example of the way in which guilds routinely excluded competitors from their industries. It is generally assumed that restricted access to urban trades constrained the premodern economy.⁶⁶ Restricted access was part of a wider set of regulations that imposed political constraints on economic development – 'feudalism'. Guilds, of course, were established by documents that laid down the ground rules for their role in society. One constant element was the granting of the exclusive right to members of a guild, as a privilege of their membership, to produce and sell a specific range of products, to the exclusion of all non-members. This privilege is usually called the guild 'monopoly'. In recent years, questions have been raised as to the effectiveness of the monopoly: could guilds really monitor and enforce this 'monopoly', especially in large urban centres? Or were they undercut all the time by interlopers, illicit producers and others who sought to enjoy the benefits of the trade while avoiding the burdens of guild membership?

These questions are still very difficult to answer with any certainty. However, we can say something about a related issue that is closely connected to the alleged ‘monopoly’: how accessible actually were urban guilds to those whom we might term ‘outsiders’, i.e. people without a previous connection to the trade, or indeed to the urban community of which the guild claimed to be an integral part? If it can be shown that access to the ‘monopoly’ was open to basically anyone whose ambition it was to join, then that ‘monopoly’ could not so easily have led to the types of disastrous outcomes that many critics of the guilds claim they had.

Although some guilds had obtained permission to formally restrict access to their ranks and so limit the membership, this was probably exceptional.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, to acquire membership of a guild required from candidates everywhere that he – only rarely she – overcome several hurdles.

One glaring obstacle was gender; the exclusion of women is discussed separately in the next section. Two other types of hurdles in the way of the prospective guild member were skills and money. In some regions a test of morals was added as still another obstacle. As far as skills were concerned, the great majority of craft guilds imposed at least one, and often two, sorts of requirement. The first was in fact apprenticeship. A minimum number of years was almost always prescribed before a craftsman could practise as an independent master. These apprenticeship terms varied significantly by region and by craft. England had an exceptional regime: its Statute of Artificers, from 1563, created a national framework for apprenticeships, and the Statute imposed a minimum seven-year apprenticeship for all trades. On the continent, the terms of apprenticeship were set locally, and varied for each trade. In the Low Countries the standard term was two years, in France five.⁶⁸

Besides the period of apprenticeship, some guilds also required their prospective members to first demonstrate proficiency in the trade by producing a masterpiece. In some parts of Europe, most notoriously in the Holy Roman Empire, guild membership and trade were often affected by issues of ‘legitimacy’ and ‘honour’, which could practically restrict membership and economic rights on the basis of parentage, moral behaviour or occupation.⁶⁹ Such rules were also in force in Dijon, situated quite close to German-speaking territories, and in late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century London. New masters in sixteenth-century Dijon moreover had to be ‘good Catholics’.⁷⁰ In the eastern

parts of the Dutch Republic rules were introduced during the seventeenth century, restricting access to local citizenship to Calvinists only. By implication, only Calvinist immigrants were admissible to the guilds. Such limitations would probably have been introduced under pressure from the guild masters who dominated local representative institutions. Similar institutions were lacking in the seaboard provinces of the Republic, where such restrictions were never introduced.⁷¹ It is quite possible that in other places affiliation to the dominant (or state) religion was so much taken for granted that it was not even stated explicitly.

Both the apprenticeship and the acquisition of master status required the aspiring craftsman to fork out various sums of money, sometimes very substantial sums. In London, apprenticeship premiums could rise to several hundreds of pounds in the more prosperous guilds. In many craft guilds, however, masters charged far more modest premiums. In the London food, clothing, footwear, textiles, woodwork, iron and building industries average premiums were between five and ten pounds.⁷²

Masterships could be cheap, but this was unusual. Moreover, many guilds distinguished between masters' sons, local residents and immigrants, with the first category paying substantially less than the second, which in turn received preferential treatment over the third. A pattern is, once again, difficult to establish. We also have to remember that membership dues were only part of the total cost of setting up one's own workshop – and for most aspiring craftsmen not the most important. Almost everywhere, the opportunity costs of training, as well as the investment necessary to start one's own business, dwarfed the obstacles created by guilds.⁷³

Newly collected evidence allows us to see whether these various arrangements did indeed lead to a structural exclusion of certain social groups, and more specifically, if they created a privileged position for the relatives of the established masters of the trade. The data for masters relate to sixty-five individual guilds in eighteen different towns, plus data on a mixture of guilds for eight towns. Together, they cover more than 100,000 masters. For apprentices our sample covers a much larger number of individuals: more than 450,000. However, they come from fewer guilds and places: fourteen guilds from six towns, plus eleven towns where we can observe a mixture of various guilds. The observations cover a range of towns from Bristol to Vienna and from Gdansk (Danzig) to Madrid. Much of the data relates to England and the Low Countries,

where some of the most active guild research has been concentrated, but there is sufficient evidence for France, Germany and Central Europe, and for Italy and Spain, to claim that the picture presented here is valid for Europe as a whole, rather than for a small – and possibly atypical – part of it. To overcome the dominance of the number of observations from London or Paris, the volumes have been ignored; instead, unweighted observations have been calculated. The results from tiny Wildberg (fewer than 1,500 inhabitants) therefore count for as much as those from huge London and Paris (both more than half a million), because we assume that Wildberg is potentially representative of a whole class of small towns.⁷⁴

For both apprentices and guild masters, entry barriers did not give rise to very strong restrictions on entry based on social or geographical backgrounds. No doubt all kinds of obstacles stood in the way of those joining the guilds, but such obstacles proved surmountable for large numbers of ‘outsiders’. In many places, the so-called guild monopolies were accessible to such a wide range of people that the term loses its explanatory value. This confirms earlier observations. As Shephard found in Dijon: ‘During the eighteenth century the guilds of Dijon were remarkably open to non-Dijonnais’. Ehmer reached a similar conclusion for Vienna in 1997.⁷⁵ There was regional variation, but not of the sort predicted in the literature, where a distinction is often made between the ‘progressive’ Low Countries and England, versus the ‘conservative’ German lands and Mediterranean Europe. This distinction does not emerge from Table 3.2.

We nonetheless have to acknowledge that over these two centuries there were substantial differences between guilds. One reason why the picture is mixed must be that guilds themselves had conflicting interests. Exclusionary policies on the parts of guilds encouraged ‘illicit’ entrepreneurs to set up business outside the control of the guild, for example in the suburbs or the adjacent countryside.⁷⁶ In the eighteenth century, guilds in the Habsburg, subsequently Austrian Netherlands, at one and the same time substantially increased their fees, making it much more difficult to join their ranks, but also encouraged people to join, because this was the only way guilds could reduce their debt burden. High fees thus were not always instruments for excluding applicants, but in this case used to raise funds for the activities of the guilds at the expense of new members who were ‘buying into’ the services provided by the guild.⁷⁷ All of this raises questions about the freedom that guilds

Table 3.2 Openness of European guild masterships and apprenticeships to migrants and non-kin, 1600–1799, by region

| | Open (> 2/3 outsiders) | Neutral (1/3 to 2/3 outsiders) | Closed (< 1/3 outsiders) | N= |
|----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----|
| <i>Masters</i> | | | | |
| German Europe | 20 | 35 | 6 | 61 |
| Low Countries | 13 | 3 | 5 | 21 |
| England | 9 | 21 | 6 | 36 |
| Mediterranean Europe | 11 | 5 | 0 | 16 |
| Europe | 53 | 64 | 17 | 134 |
| <i>Apprentices</i> | | | | |
| Europe | 22 | 19 | 9 | 50 |

Note: Figures show the number of guilds (and towns) that are open, neutral or closed, based on the share of new masters who did not originate in the town and city in question, or were sons/daughters of masters in the same guild. Where both types of data are available, only the percentage of migrants was used.

Source: Prak et al. 2018, data appendix

might or might not have had to set their own admission policies. In sixteenth-century Ghent, guilds closed their ranks when the local political constellation permitted them to do so.⁷⁸ In the Wildberg district in southern Germany the authorities were willing to give the guilds what they wanted: exclusive admission policies.⁷⁹ In London, however, where guilds were always an important political force, this did not automatically lead to a closing of ranks.⁸⁰

The authorities were equally ambivalent: they wanted strong guilds to help them impose political and social control, but they also feared the guilds as potential platforms for revolutionary activities.⁸¹ Urban communities found it very difficult, or even impossible, to reproduce themselves demographically.⁸² To maintain the size of the local population, not to mention ambitions of growth, an influx of immigrants was simply necessary. Moreover, all urban communities, but especially the larger ones, found it difficult to consistently monitor complex policies such as those selecting migrants.⁸³

Overall – and this is the big point – the available data do not support the claim that guilds prevented outsiders on a large scale from joining their ranks. Their ‘monopoly’ was undermined by a steady influx of new members from outside the circle of the established masters. Exclusion is more visible when it comes to apprentices, but this could be explained by the tendency of parents to seek instructors in their

own locality, rather than in faraway places. Guild masters, on the other hand, were socially and geographically mobile.

Gendered Guilds

If guilds were less exclusive than is often assumed when it came to migrants or non-family members, this was less obviously true for women.⁸⁴ Whereas females were described as at least potentially equal to male masters in the Middle Ages, clauses explicitly excluding women from the guilds' ranks gradually began appearing in their statutes. Changing religious attitudes may have been one of the reasons this happened, and the Reformation seems to have accelerated this development,⁸⁵ but the changes are better documented than explained. Paradoxically, women were in some ways also increasing their impact in the corporate world during the early modern period.

Many medieval guild statutes routinely assumed that a candidate-member could be of either sex. The statutes of the Tailors' Guild in The Hague, for example, stated as late as 1505 that the aspiring master had to demonstrate his skill 'as a man or woman' before the guild's examiners; the masterpiece could be either a man's or a woman's garment.⁸⁶ Two centuries earlier, in 1304, a general ordinance concerning the trades in Utrecht ordered that 'those who want to exercise an incorporated trade, be they man or woman, have to become members'.⁸⁷ Where gendered clauses are found in the regulations of medieval guilds, they tended to be inclusive. It is nevertheless difficult to assess the role of women in medieval guilds on the basis of this evidence alone. Most guild statutes remain completely silent on the subject. The fact that women were acceptable as members does not mean that they were numerous or influential within the guild.⁸⁸ It was highly unusual, for instance, for women to take up guild offices.

It does look, however, as if things were taking a turn for the worse during the sixteenth century. Thus, in 1524, the Tailors' Guild of Haarlem introduced a prohibition against women cutting new cloth, effectively barring them from the trade. The female members of the guild were allowed to continue, but 'they will die out, and no new female members shall be accepted into the guild'.⁸⁹ The same happened in London, where the Weavers' Company stipulated in 1578 that 'no manner of person or persons exercising [their trade] shall keep, teach, instruct, or bring up in the use, exercise, or knowledge of [weaving] any

maid, damsel, or other woman whatsoever'.⁹⁰ Around the same time, the Nuremberg Ringmakers decided that 'from now on, no maid is to be used for any kind of work in this craft'.⁹¹ It was a trend observed all over Europe, and it continued into later centuries.⁹² The regulations of the Genevan Watchmakers' Guild, set up in 1601, had been silent on the issue of gender, but in 1690 they introduced rules that forbade women, including masters' wives and daughters, to be involved in any other aspect of the trade than the production of chains and other elements separate from the watch itself, the production of which became the sole preserve of men.⁹³

The dramatic deterioration in women's positions in the corporate world has been explained in various ways.⁹⁴ Martha Howell sees the marginalisation of women as a consequence of shifts in the economy and the political role of guilds. Women's economic positions, she argues, had always been defined in the family sphere, as additional to their husbands' role, and was never seen as the mainstay of the household. As artisanal production moved away from household production into a more commercial mode, women lost their traditional foothold in the corporate world. Because they had never gained political influence within the guilds, they were now unable to counter this development by an appeal to the urban authorities.⁹⁵ Merry Wiesner has likewise argued that the guilds were a key factor in engineering these changes, but she blames the journeymen. During the sixteenth century they found it more difficult to set up shop as independent masters. Instead, journeymen were forced to live in hostels much longer, sometimes all their lives. The hostels were all-male communities, where the symbolism of male honour became much more important than it had been. These values were transferred to the guilds, as journeymen's associations clamoured for the exclusion of women from the trade, or brought their gendered identities into the guild when journeymen finally managed to win membership.⁹⁶

According to another explanation, the guilds' negative attitude towards women was primarily defensive: threatened by shrinking markets, male masters sought to break the weaker links in the chain of the trade. Thus, in the course of the eighteenth century, when rural proto-industry was making headway in Prussia, urban guilds there tried to redefine 'real' work as a male preserve, while the sloppy products of rural industry were thrown together with women's work, as the bottom end of the trade.⁹⁷ In the process, women's roles in relation to work

were recast in much more narrow ways. One telling example is the Berlin Tailors' Guild's proclamation, in 1803, that⁹⁸

[M]arried women must be maintained by their husbands, know housekeeping, and care for and educate their children. The unmarried may work as domestics ... or engage in other feminine occupations outside regular manufacture.

This opinion reflects a long tradition of discourse that was not necessarily new even in the sixteenth century, but much reinforced during that age.⁹⁹

The exclusion of women did not remain a matter of guild discourse and ideology; it also translated into practice. Females were still apprenticed in large numbers in eighteenth-century England, but the great majority were trained either in husbandry, or in 'housewifery'.¹⁰⁰ Already in the first half of the sixteenth century, two-thirds of female apprentices in Bristol were destined for specifically female occupations, such as seamstress and, again, housewife. Even though their social backgrounds were similar to those of male apprentices, they found it increasingly difficult to establish themselves as independent producers. By 1600 it was all but impossible for women to enter Bristol's incorporated trades.¹⁰¹ In Germany, commentators in the eighteenth century saw it as self-evident that girls could not be apprenticed, because 'masculine sex is one of the indispensable basic preconditions for admission to a guild'.¹⁰²

In the eyes of the guilds, the exclusion of women from the incorporated trades may have rid them of some serious competition, but at the same time it created new problems. One was that under certain circumstances cheap female labour could also be profitable for the guild masters. According to regulations going back to the mid-sixteenth century, female silk weavers in Lyon could work in the industry alongside their husbands. During the 1730s, when more and more master silk weavers were in danger of losing their independence at the hands of the merchants, they clamoured for a right to allow their wives to go and work in another master's workshop.¹⁰³ Another problem resulted from the creation of competition from outside the guilds' own jurisdiction. This was recognised by the London Weavers' Company, which had so emphatically excluded all females, and also foreigners, from its ranks in 1578. In 1630 the guild's bailiffs, wardens and assistants pleaded with the City's aldermen to allow them to admit foreigners

again into the guild, because only then would they be able to control the trade in the sprawling metropolis that was seventeenth-century London.¹⁰⁴ For the very same reason, if for no other, the guilds found it impossible to completely suppress female labour.

Guilds' anti-female policies did not prevent women from working in incorporated trades.¹⁰⁵ A survey of guild membership in Gouda showed how in 1788–89 no less than 84 per cent of the members of the large Tailors' Guild were female, while among the much smaller weavers it was still 61 per cent. Another seven guilds, including the locally important Clay-Pipemakers, had at least 10 per cent female members.¹⁰⁶ In some trades women actually acquired more independence after 1600. All-female guilds were not completely unknown before the seventeenth century,¹⁰⁷ but they acquired a new meaning after two centuries of guilds' attempts to force female labour into the framework of the artisanal family. Significantly, the new seamstresses' guilds, established almost simultaneously in Paris and in Rouen in 1675, swiftly developed a new language and social ideal that was diametrically opposed to the patriarchy of the traditional corporations. Whereas the tailors proposed a world view which emphasised family values, and women subject to male authority, the seamstresses underlined the individuality of the members. During the 1776 crisis, when Turgot abolished the guilds, the tailors depicted the future as one of total anarchy, now that both guilds and families were threatened, whereas the seamstresses pictured themselves as individuals who needed a guild of their own to protect them against undesired contacts with men.¹⁰⁸

Even for women, the guild system could work in opposing directions. In most places and trades it reduced women to second-class citizens or even non-citizens, without rights to exercise their occupation of choice. It is possible, and even likely, that the guilds' negative impact on female economic citizenship became worse, especially during the sixteenth century. However, in selected guilds we see large numbers of female members, even in the eighteenth century. French seamstresses, moreover, were empowered by the establishment of their own guilds.

Governing the Guilds

When the Cloth Merchants of Dordrecht met on 14 January 1784, the day of their patron saint Pontianus, all members had to take their designated seats in the meeting room, state their name, hear the

report on the previous year's finances and the board's activities 'concerning the maintenance and protection . . . of our rights and privileges', approve the accounts and select the guild officials for the new year. After the meeting, a meal was served in the Militia Hall which would continue until midnight. Members were expressly instructed to behave and not 'insult their fellow members' during the festivities.¹⁰⁹ Such events took place routinely across premodern Europe.

Guilds received their privileges from some higher authority, usually the town council, and were also supervised by that authority, but in many respects they regulated themselves. Guilds had their own sources of income, members selected the guild officials and regular plenary meetings allowed ordinary members a say in the administration of their guild. Guilds could also have jurisdiction over trade conflicts. Because public functions, such as tax collection, local security, political representation and welfare, devolved upon guilds, participation in the guilds' affairs was almost a form of citizenship in its own right.

Although it was compulsory for anyone wanting to work independently in an incorporated trade to join the guild, contemporaries considered joining the guild as essentially a voluntary act. Joining a guild implied that one subjected oneself to the guild's jurisdiction over the trade, as well as the financial contributions demanded from the members.¹¹⁰ At the same time it implied that masters had a say in the guild's affairs, and might be called upon to serve the guild in a variety of offices. The Bakers' Guild of Paris was governed by six *jurés*, who were assisted by forty members. These were selected by lot; twenty from among those who had acquired the mastership less than ten years before, and the other twenty from among the older members.¹¹¹ In Dijon too, the guilds were governed by *jurés*, while guild members met in assemblies. The *jurés*, or deans, were usually recruited from among the better-off members.¹¹² The same was true for the Tailors' Guild of eighteenth-century Amsterdam.

However, this was not always and everywhere the case. In 's-Hertogenbosch the wealth profile of the membership and administrators of the Tailors' and the Haberdashers' Guilds (whose memberships partially overlapped) was almost identical. The reason for this was a much greater participation of their membership in the guilds' administration. Whereas in the latter city 288 mandates were shared by ninety-seven individuals (1760–75), the Amsterdam Tailors filled 300 mandates with only thirty-five individuals (1734–94), even though the

Amsterdam guild was at least three times larger than the two combined guilds in 's-Hertogenbosch. One of the reasons for the difference was, no doubt, that in Amsterdam the board was self-selective, while in 's-Hertogenbosch the administrators were elected in a plenary meeting by the guild's membership.¹¹³ In Ghent, the Tailors' Guild reduced the number of offices after the sixteenth century, but the number of individuals participating in the guild's administration declined even more, so that the average administrator held about four mandates across his career. The same was true in eighteenth-century Brussels, where the Tailors' Guild administrators on average held five mandates.¹¹⁴ In Elizabethan London, some guilds were dominated by wealthy merchants, but others, like the Coopers or Plasterers, counted many ordinary artisans among their officials.¹¹⁵

The all-female guild of the New Drapers of Linen Clothes (*lingères en neuf*) in Rouen selected their officials in a general meeting on the Friday after Christmas. According to a (male) witness these meetings were enlivened by a 'plurality of voices [and] storms of debate'.¹¹⁶ During the sixteenth century, many London companies met every quarter for a meal, at one of which they elected their officers.¹¹⁷ Sometimes these elections were indirect, as for example in the Cloth-Makers' Guild of Cologne, where from 1397 twenty-nine delegates elected the deans.¹¹⁸ There was a worry that such guild meetings might turn political. In many German towns, a representative of the local authorities had to be present at, or at least informed about, the meetings and the discussions that had taken place there.¹¹⁹

Guilds had their own financial resources. In the mid-eighteenth century, the Bakers and Brewers' Guild of Arnhem owned two properties that were rented out, plus claims on two public institutions and four individuals worth a substantial 1,750 guilders. It maintained one widow with a regular allowance, but also spent five times ten guilders on distributions to the general poor of Arnhem. When the accounts had been read to the assembled membership, more money was spent on food and drink.¹²⁰ In France, guild finances were not only the concern of the guilds themselves, but also mattered a great deal to the government. French public finances used corporations of all sorts, including guilds, as means of leveraging taxation or raising loans, or even for what amounted to financial extortion. The worst example of the latter came in 1776, when the guilds were first abolished, but then on second thought allowed to buy back their privileges against the payment of

a substantial amount of money.¹²¹ In fact, by 1776 this policy had acquired a long pedigree: the French government had for this purpose developed a strong interest in the health of guild finances. The guilds themselves in turn had to worry about their indebtedness, and were forced to introduce substantial fee increases to take care of these.¹²² The same was true in many towns of the Southern Netherlands, where guilds were not merely economic, but also political organisations and felt compelled to underline their political prestige with lavish buildings. Perhaps the most famous example is Brussels, where guilds built expensive premises on the Grand Place, facing the town hall. Unfortunately, the square was destroyed in 1695 by a French bombardment – forcing the guilds into the further expense of rebuilding. In Brussels and other towns in Brabant and Flanders fees were increased substantially, both for insiders and outsiders, to help cover such costs.¹²³

The guilds used a governance model that was also applied outside the world of the merchants and crafts. Actually, the word ‘guild’ also applied beyond the economic domain, in the worlds of charities, religious confraternities and civic militias, to name but a few. All these organisations usually had financial autonomy, elected officials and general meetings of the members. They used the vocabulary of ‘brothers and sisters’ when referring to the membership, thus constituting themselves as ‘artificial families’.¹²⁴ Guilds were in many ways the miniature versions of the urban community; ideally, and quite often in reality, their governance model reflected the prescriptions of ‘urban republicanism’: open recruitment of the governors, rotation of officers, democratic influence of the membership and transparency of the organisation’s finances.¹²⁵

Guilds and the Civic Community

Members of merchant and craft guilds shared a common occupational background. Nonetheless, guilds did much more than regulate the economy or lobby for the members’ economic interests. They were made responsible for fire service, tax collections or jury duties.¹²⁶ Four areas where guilds as organisations made a particularly significant contribution to the community were politics, security, religion and welfare. Perhaps with the exception of religion before the Reformation, they were not uniformly active in these areas: in some towns guilds were involved in local government, in others they were not; some guilds

doubled as civic militias, others did not; only a minority of guilds provided formalised welfare schemes for their members. Still, guilds generally claimed, with some justification, that they were a mainstay of the urban community and hence of citizenship.¹²⁷ In all these areas guilds therefore provided a framework for practical citizenship. We have already discussed guilds and politics in the previous chapter, and there is more on guilds and welfare and on guilds and civic militias in the next two, so these topics can be dealt with relatively briefly here.

Guilds in Politics

The fourteenth century was such a significant turning point for the political involvement of guilds in Northern Europe that some historians have called it the era of ‘guild revolutions’.¹²⁸ In Flanders, the victory of an artisan army on foot over French mounted aristocrats in the 1302 Battle of the Spurs was the overture heralding a reshuffling of town governments. In Ghent, however, it merely meant a consolidation of a privilege granted in November 1301, giving the all-important Weavers’ Guild, together with the deans of fifty-three ‘minor’ guilds, a direct representation in the local government.¹²⁹ In France, these events inspired guilds to make similar demands – but to no avail.¹³⁰ In the German lands, guilds did achieve political influence, especially in the southern regions. In Oberschwaben, for example, guild rebellions in the middle of the century led to a ‘Zunft lieplichen und freuntlichen überein komen’ in Memmingen – an agreement popular with the guilds. In Lindau, Ravensburg and Überlingen too, new constitutions gave the guilds a commanding voice in local politics.¹³¹

Inclusion in local constitutions had the unintended consequence of increasing government interest and interference in the guilds’ internal affairs.¹³² In some towns, moreover, guilds lost their political positions in subsequent centuries. On the continent, Charles V was particularly active in suppressing guild participation in politics during the first half of the sixteenth century.¹³³ Nevertheless, in London and Cologne, to name two major towns, guild constitutions remained in place until the end of the Old Regime. As we saw in Chapter 2, the number of towns with popular representation declined during the early modern period, but not dramatically, and as cities with guild regimes, London and Cologne were still joined by many other minor and major towns and cities.

Guilds as Defence Associations

The citizens of fourteenth-century Basel were divided into fifteen guilds or companies of very unequal size, which took care of the night watch and defence against outside attack.¹³⁴ Only the elite guilds were also required to participate in campaigns beyond the city. Participation in Basel's defence was one of three duties assumed by any Basel citizen when swearing the citizen's oath; the other two were loyalty to the magistrate and paying taxes. During wartime, immigrants willing to participate in military services could even acquire citizenship for free.¹³⁵ In Osnabrück, everyone protected by the town's defences was required to lend a hand: mere inhabitants were called up for duty alongside the members of the guilds. All guild members were, however, supposed to have their own weapon. During the sixteenth century, recruitment temporarily shifted to a neighbourhood model, but under the threat of war the more familiar guild recruitment returned. Each company marched under its own guild banner.¹³⁶

Especially in towns where guilds were also directly involved in local governance, they became the basis of the defence organisation. This happened in many towns and cities of the Holy Roman Empire. One problem was the uneven size of guilds, ranging from a handful to sometimes hundreds of members. In Cologne it was therefore decided that only the seventeen largest guilds would constitute their own companies, while the others were assembled in five combined *Gaffel*.¹³⁷ In the sixteenth century this problem of unequal size, or perhaps simply Charles V's policy of reducing the guilds' political impact, also led to a reduction of the military role of guilds in many towns. Instead, recruitment became territorialised. This process may have been reinforced by the rise of professional soldiering, a process that accelerated precisely during the sixteenth century. In general, it would therefore seem that guilds in the early modern period lost much of their military significance.

Guilds and Religion

Invariably, guilds had patron saints. The metalworkers worshipped St Eloy; the shoemakers venerated St Crispin, while St Luke was the role model for the painters and other artists. The Haarlem Guild of St Luke had been the proud owner of a piece of the saint's

skeleton which, since Protestantism was about to take over in the province of Holland, they handed over to a priest from the Southern Netherlands during the Dutch Revolt. After the religious dust had settled, the guild went to considerable lengths to repossess its relic, despite the fact that Haarlem had officially become a Protestant town, only to find that the relic had been split into tiny pieces. The guild managed to locate one bit of its former prize possession and brought it back to Haarlem, where it was safely stored together with the guild's charters and accounts and inspected annually. Haarlem's Guild of St Luke had Catholic as well as Reformed members, but it would appear that the latter were just as satisfied as the former with the return of their relic.¹³⁸ We see the same pattern in 's-Hertogenbosch, a nominally Protestant town where three-quarters of the population were nonetheless Catholic. On the patron saint's day, members of a guild would go to their own church before commencing the common celebrations.¹³⁹

Craft organisation and religion had been closely related from the very start. In Venice, many guilds emerged out of religious brotherhoods, rather than vice versa.¹⁴⁰ We find the same in medieval England, France, Germany and the Low Countries.¹⁴¹ In many places the brotherhood and guild would ultimately merge, but sometimes they continued to exist side by side. Whatever the case, in Catholic Europe artisans in the same trade would worship at an altar they themselves had helped to decorate, usually displaying a picture of their patron saint, and where they paid for the masses read at what they considered as their own altar.¹⁴² The Reformation, averse as it was to saints and colourful church decorations, suppressed many of these practices, and in the Dutch Republic forced the guilds to shift their spending from religious to charitable causes. Religion nonetheless remained a feature of guild life in Protestant regions. In Catholic areas, the Counter-Reformation may even have resulted in an intensification of religious elements in guild expenditures.¹⁴³

The Reformation forced organisations like the guilds to take sides, accommodate different views or break up. There are very few examples of the latter, but the other two alternatives are seen even within the same territory. In sixteenth-century Augsburg, the Weavers' Guild saw the Reformation as an opportunity to reinforce communal policies, which they hoped would restrain capitalist entrepreneurs from dominating the textile industry. The local butchers, on the other hand,

who were doing business in a wide area beyond the town's perimeter, preferred the relaxed attitudes of the Roman Catholic authorities.¹⁴⁴ In Dijon Protestantism was also popular among artisans, who formed the backbone of the opposition to the Catholic town council, and inevitably the guilds were affected by the conflict. However, very few Dijon guilds committed themselves to one side or other; instead, they dealt with opposed views within their own ranks. In fact, religious affiliations seem to have been determined by personal networks that were in turn determined by a combination of work and neighbourhood solidarities.¹⁴⁵

The role of religion in the corporate world changed as a result of the Reformation. However, this did not terminate the ancient connection between guilds and religion. Guilds' identities continued to be shaped by religious symbols and rites, in Protestant as well as Catholic towns.

Guilds and Welfare

When the Dutch National Assembly, the parliament created after the French invasion and parallel revolution in the Netherlands, first met in 1796, the future of the guilds was one of the important items on the agenda. Critics of the guilds berated their negative impact on the economy. Among the guilds' most prominent and vocal supporters, however, were the governors of the city of Amsterdam and they had every reason to be concerned about the consequences of the guilds' disappearance. According to a modern study, 22 per cent of Amsterdam households were covered by some sort of guild insurance, while in Utrecht and Leiden the figure was twice that.¹⁴⁶

Guilds in many places maintained a range of schemes to assist members in times of adversity.¹⁴⁷ In sixteenth-century London, wealthy guild members left some of their estate to be distributed among the less fortunate. Robert Dowe was a successful tailor who also served as dean of his guild. Over his lifetime, Dowe donated some £3,500 for this purpose. In 1589, for example, he gave £400 to purchase some real estate in the vicinity of the Merchant Taylor's Hall. The rents of those properties were 'for the relief of the decayed state of the poor handicraft of tailory'. Six members would be provided with an annual pension of £4.¹⁴⁸ Such charitable activities had a long history; a survey in the late fourteenth century already established that London guilds spent

substantial amounts on charitable causes.¹⁴⁹ In York, the Carpenters' Guild ordinance from 1482 stipulated 'that if any of the said fraternity fall to poverty, so that they may not work, . . . then the foresaid brotherhood [will] give them 4d every week, as long as they live, by way of alms'.¹⁵⁰ In seventeenth-century Ghent the bakers, carpenters, brewers, stonemasons, skippers and mattress-cover weavers all provided weekly payments to poor members of their guilds. The Tailors in Ghent owned six houses whose rents went to six poor guild masters.¹⁵¹ In Naples the Gild-Spinners' Guild set up a charitable endowment of 16,000 ducats in 1632. The local Gold-Beaters' Guild had created a similar fund in 1627 to provide assistance to members incapacitated through illness or old age. The same guild also helped to settle debts and provided marriage dowries for the eldest daughters of impoverished members.¹⁵² In Seville, Strasbourg, Paris, Lille, Antwerp, Brussels, Mechelen (Malines), Augsburg and no doubt many more towns guilds maintained special buildings for members who were too old to work or otherwise incapacitated.¹⁵³

The hospital of the Utrecht Metalworkers' Guild is first recorded in a document from the mid-fifteenth century: in 1450 permission was given to expand the premises. In the sixteenth century Saint Eligius (Eloy) Hospital was home to eight men and women, but by 1798 their number had shrunk to three due to budget reductions.¹⁵⁴ A guild hospital was highly unusual in the northern Netherlands, however. Also unusual, though slightly less so, was the possibility to be buried in a guild grave, together with one's colleagues. Eleven Utrecht guilds owned such a common grave, where the burial was free of charge. These guilds also had a special fund to help members cover the additional costs of burying the dead; both the master and his wife were covered by most of these funds. Eight more Utrecht guilds had such a fund but no grave. Of these nineteen funds, twelve were set up in the seventeenth century. Thanks to a major endowment from one of its members, the Guild of St Eloy was also able to support twenty masters with a weekly allowance of some bread and a very small amount of money, handed out after the service in the church close to the guild's hospital.¹⁵⁵

The examples presented in this section – and more can be found in Chapters 4 and 5 – demonstrate how guilds were much more than professional organisations looking after their members' economic interests.

Conclusion

Membership of guilds implied, often formally but otherwise informally, membership of the wider urban community. In London and other English towns, citizenship was accessed through the guilds. In most continental towns it was the other way around: to join the guild, one first had to become a citizen. Whatever the order, guild membership implied joining a club that provided exclusive access to specific markets. In the case of Thomas Gent, whose story launched this chapter, that exclusivity was very clear: the London Stationers controlled much of the English book trade, confirming suspicions by contemporaries as well as later historians. In this chapter we have found these suspicions to be correct but incomplete. Joining this guild was not always as difficult as was often assumed. Rather than rejecting this Irish outsider, Gent's master had welcomed him into his house, 'though you came [as] an almost stranger to me', and continued to support Gent in subsequent years.¹⁵⁶

Among the various aspects of premodern citizenship discussed in this book, guilds are the best documented and also the most investigated by historians. Although the guilds were abolished in much of continental Europe after the French Revolution, their legacy persists.¹⁵⁷ In the City of London the livery companies still are a major force; the City's town hall is still called the Guildhall. On the continent, reformers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had their eyes firmly on the guilds as one possible model to combat major shortcomings of modern society, and their legacy has shaped social relations in many countries.¹⁵⁸ The activities of employers' organisations in many modern European countries look strikingly similar to those of the guilds and even though membership is not compulsory, they often organise 90 per cent or more of the firms in their line of trade.¹⁵⁹ Like the guilds, these employers' organisations can be portrayed as rent-seekers, lobbying for their members' interests, but also as the producers of public goods, for example through their training programmes.

Caught between these two interpretations – pillars of society versus naked pursuit of sectional interests – what can we say about guilds from the perspective of citizenship? Philosophically, perhaps, that it would have been really surprising if organisations like guilds had not displayed these two faces. How could individuals have been persuaded in such vast numbers to join guilds, if there had been nothing in it for

them? And similarly, why would the authorities have condoned such organisations on a massive scale, if they had been merely serving the private interests of their members? Advanced industrial societies all have labour unions and employers' organisations; markets with only unconstrained individual agents may exist in economics textbooks, but not in the real world. Therefore, the question must not be 'what', but 'how': how was a balance struck between these two dimensions of the guild organisations?¹⁶⁰

Guilds were governed by rules that gave them legal identity and thus allowed them to act as a party in political and legal disputes. Their rules were monitored and enforced by making membership of the guild compulsory. This was the point of the 'monopoly'. It was not a monopoly at all in the way most economists define the term. Too often, the impression is given that guilds were somehow comparable to a modern firm; they were not.¹⁶¹ Guilds were associations of independent producers who subjected themselves to certain rules. Sometimes those rules included the setting of prices and wages, but more often those were imposed by the authorities, as in the case of bread.¹⁶² Most branches of trade and industry had no fixed prices or wages. The 'monopoly' could also be used, or abused, to restrict access to the trade. The discussion in the third and fourth sections of this chapter has touched on examples where this was indeed the case. Women and religious minorities were two broad categories significantly underrepresented or even absent among the membership of individual guilds. Indeed, the groups most vulnerable to guild discrimination were usually the same groups that were discriminated against in other domains of public life. Guilds were reproducing more general mechanisms of social discrimination – and in some cases making them worse.

At the same time, this chapter has presented data showing that some guilds were open to women, and more generally how in a range of cities all over Europe guilds organised a substantial percentage of urban households and were open to outsiders. Again, in the light of these data the term 'monopoly' is misleading. Indirectly, the guild system also covered many journeymen employed by the guild masters. Their agency was much restricted, because they were excluded from full membership of the guild. Journeymen nonetheless participated in many of the activities undertaken by the guild, such as religious rites or fire services. In many towns journeymen had their own organisations to protect journeymen's rights and interests and negotiate with the masters of the guild.¹⁶³

Guilds provided a range of services, to their own members as well as to the wider urban community of which they considered themselves an integral part. It was unusual for a guild to encompass all these services; most of them combined a selection, including religious services and welfare provisions for the members, usually at their own expense. They could also include fire service, maintenance of public spaces and public order, local defence, tax collection and participation in political institutions: in other words, services which addressed both the immediate interests of the guild members and those of the community more generally.

Perhaps most importantly, guilds provided the framework for the training of the great majority of the skilled workforce. Clearly, training the next generation of artisans was primarily in the interest of the guild masters themselves. These were the people who would assist them in their workshops and ultimately take over. At the same time, vocational training benefitted society in general. The relatively low level of the European skill premium suggests that training was inclusive rather than exclusive. If we accept the argument of many economists that human capital is one of the most important stimulants of economic growth,¹⁶⁴ the training provided by guild masters and certified by guilds had consequences beneficial to society as a whole.

Those consequences were, however, not automatic, or even self-evident. Ogilvie would seem to be correct in her observation that in places where guilds were free to set their own conditions unopposed, they tended to create closed shops. The Wildberg district in German Württemberg, where she undertook detailed research, was clearly one such area.¹⁶⁵ However, the data presented here for a wide range of towns suggest that the absence of countervailing powers was exceptional, not the rule. In most towns, the local authorities prevented guilds from introducing such policies. All of this seems to confirm Epstein's claim that the 'key to the different performance by craft guilds in different European countries lies in the institutional and political frameworks in which they were embedded'.¹⁶⁶ Guilds themselves contributed to those frameworks, by giving ordinary craftsmen a form of economic – as well as political, social and religious – agency, which they would have found difficult to achieve single-handedly. Their collective action served the interests of the membership as well as those of the wider community. In this sense, guilds were a core feature of urban citizenship.