

*Not bad at all?*

*Reassessing the guilds in the early modern period*

BY

ANDERS VIND EBBESEN<sup>1</sup>

Adam Smith famously described the guilds in the following words: »People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices. It is impossible indeed to prevent such meetings, by any law, which either could be executed, or would be consistent with liberty and justice. But though the law cannot hinder people of the same trade from sometimes assembling together, it ought to do nothing to facilitate such assemblies; much less to render them necessary.«<sup>2</sup> For about 200 years virtually all economists and historians shared the view of Adam Smith in regards to the guilds. Smith's argument has »become akin to an article of faith.«<sup>3</sup> With Whiggish historians judging the guilds as remnants of feudal society, and Marxist historians viewing them as mere stepping-stones for the inevitable progress, the guilds have almost uniformly been seen as reactionary elements in history. Detailed studies of guilds in recent years have added nuances. Research based on original archival material have added to our understanding and challenged the previously prevalent broad dismissal of any positive influence from the guilds.

The aim of this paper is to investigate and discuss the reassessment of the guilds that have taken place in recent years. The focus will be on

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper has been downloaded from [www.almuevennen.dk](http://www.almuevennen.dk)

<sup>2</sup> "Smith: Wealth of Nations, Book 1, Chapter 10, Library of Economics and Liberby", accessible at <http://www.econlib.org/library/Smith/smWN4.html#B.I,%20Ch.10,%20Of%20Wages%20and%20Profit%20in%20the%20Different%20Employments%20of%20Labour%20and%20Stock>, paragraph 82.

<sup>3</sup> S. R. Epstein, "Craft Guilds, Apprenticeship, and Technological Change in Preindustrial Europe," *The Journal of Economic History* Vol. 58, No. 3 (1998): 688.

the economic influence of the guilds – and how historians have judged it – although other areas will be touched upon as well. Additionally this paper will primarily deal with the influence of guilds in the early modern economy, and only mention their influence in the medieval or early industrial economies en passant. Investigating the economic influence in the early modern period leaves two areas of particular interest: England and The Low Countries. In this paper focus will be on The Low Countries, since the current historiographical debate on guilds mostly concerns continental Europe.

The paper initially sketch out the methodological problems in writing a historiography of the guilds. This is followed by a critical historiographical survey of the various *schools* that make up the landscape today. At the end of the paper an attempt is made to explain why the multitude of schools have emerged since the mid-70s.

### *Methodological considerations*

Writing a historiography is normally straightforward: Read the existing literature on a given subject and categorize it. Writing the historiography of guilds is a more ambitious undertaking. The first problem is scale. The existing literature spans from Bert de Munck's comprehensive studies of certain aspects of specific guilds in a narrow time frame and a small geographic area (Antwerp) to Sheilagh Ogilvie's broad sweep covering merchant guilds in Europe from 1000 to 1800. One can discard neither the detailed nor the broad literature, since the debate itself often involves the matter of scope. Where a number of historians, who has performed surveys into specific guilds, celebrate their contribution, Ogilvie has noted that: »A scholar studying a particular institution may come to identify with it, either for its own sake or because it is associated with a modern institution which that scholar values.«<sup>4</sup> In this historiographical survey both types of exposition are therefore included.

The second problem is the normative nature of the question being investigated by historians. Is social security a good thing? What if it only pertains to a small in-group? Ogilvie seems to present a literally delicious way out: When investigating institutions like the guilds we should consider what effect they have on the size of the pie, what effect

---

<sup>4</sup> Sheilagh Ogilvie, *Institutions and European Trade: Merchant Guilds, 1000–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5.

they have on the type of pie and what effect do they have on the distribution of the pie.<sup>5</sup>

But Ogilvie's approach is still normative. As we shall see, all current historians who deal with the early modern economy and the guilds accept developments towards a liberal economy as good: Innovation is good, free trade is good, and growth is good. Writing in 1999 Peter Musgrave summed up: »The period between the end of the Middle Ages and the onset of 'industrialisation' and 'modernisation' at the end of the eighteenth century (or possibly later) has traditionally been seen as the period in which the feudal economy of the Middle Ages gave way to a new type of economic and social organisation, out of which was to grow, as an *inevitable consequence*, the economy of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.« (My emphasis)<sup>6</sup> Musgrave tried to break away from this paradigm, but in reality all historians of the early modern economy have written within this paradigm. The following historiographical survey therefore also subordinates itself to this paradigm. When using words like contribution, benefit, and good the terms must be understood in this context.

#### *The traditionalists*

Guilds are bad. Three words easily sum up the consensus of historians until the 1970s. Writing a social history of Europe 1550-1660, Henry Kamen noted: »By mediaeval precedent the guilds, which represented individual crafts or groups of crafts, regulated conditions of employment, training and production. [...] The rules were totally anti-capitalist, and would have restricted textile production to being a cottage industry. Admirable as the aims of the guilds may have been in trying to protect their small producers, they were an open hindrance to a developing industry.«<sup>7</sup> The quote is from a chapter called *The Growth of Capitalism*, and as shown it did not merely describe how capitalism took over from the antiquated guilds – it salutes it. Kamen do admit, that the alternative to the guild system was not always beneficial for the people involved and notes the textile boom of Leiden in 1638-48, which saw four thousand orphan children imported from Liège to work the looms. Their condition improved in 1646, when an

---

<sup>5</sup> Sheilagh Ogilvie, "Whatever is, is right"? Economic institutions in pre-industrial Europe," *The Economic History Review* Vol. 60, No. 7 (2007): 662.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Musgrave, *The early modern European economy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Kamen, *The Iron Century: Social Change in Europe 1550-1650* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), 115.

edict dictated that children should work no more than fourteen hours a day.<sup>8</sup> There are ample examples of such industry during the early modern period, but it is treated as a sign of progress. Kamen also points out how guilds as well as workpeople opposed the Dutch loom (engine loom enabling a single person to weave several tapes or ribbon at the same time) and thereby tried to stifle innovation and the spread of new technology.<sup>9</sup>

Kamen is just a single example, but worth including since the purpose of his book was to write the *social* history of a century and to »concentrate on social change and the fate of the lower classes.«<sup>10</sup> Maintaining a narrative of how the progressive elements of society triumphed over the out-dated economic structure, Kamen manages to ignore the wider social impact of the new economic structure. Writing a social history and celebrating »the outstanding capitalists of the century like De Geer«<sup>11</sup> while ignoring the plight of the masses toiling away in factories instead of craft workshops is a testament to the century long perspective on guilds Kamen was influenced by while writing his book.

In general, economic historians have maintained a negative view on the guilds. Even if not really concerned with the guilds per se, it seems obligatory to perform small jabs, as when David Landes in his book on clocks notes »most guilds defended the interests of their weakest and most timorous members [...], they were compelled to wage a ceaseless struggle against the forces of change.«<sup>12</sup> Again, the premise that change is good, which is a notion only introduced following industrialization,<sup>13</sup> provides a conclusion on guilds, without even investigating them.

In a broader survey of the early modern European economy Musgrave in 1999 attached the usual labels to guilds: Restrictive, rent-seeking, protective, and anti-innovation.<sup>14</sup> As previously indicated, Musgrave was well aware of the trap that the *inevitable capitablism* narrative presented: »Why indeed should any student of the early modern

---

<sup>8</sup> Kamen, *Iron Century*, 117.

<sup>9</sup> Kamen, *Iron Century*, 115.

<sup>10</sup> Kamen, *Iron Century*, xiii.

<sup>11</sup> Kamen, *Iron Century*, 98.

<sup>12</sup> David Landes, *Revolution in Time: Clocks and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1983), 210.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Patricia Crone, *Pre-Industrial Societies* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), 188-190.

<sup>14</sup> Musgrave, *Early modern*, 71-72.

economy wish to reject this simple, elegant and above all logically structured pattern of development?« Followed by the answer »Economic and social historians no longer feel able to accept the simple Marxian pattern described above without at least considerable modification.«<sup>15</sup> Still, Musgrave in large part of his survey seems unable to break free of the paradigm that he readily identifies. His amalgamation of the Marxist theory of history and capitalism is noteworthy, though. Liberal and Marxist historians seem to have shared the dislike for guilds, and the only disagreement has been which stage of development should be considered the final destination.

With a body of work reaching back more than 200 years, there are thousands of examples of the traditionalist perspective on guilds. One would be hard pressed to find a book on economic history written before 1975 that do not subscribe to this view.

### *The social revisionists*

R. W. Unger is often identified as the first historian to challenge the traditional view on guilds as wholly bad with his publication *Dutch Shipbuilding before 1800* in 1978. Other revisionist works followed from Anglo-American historians like Steven Kaplan, Michael Sonenscher, and James Farr. With a focus on France the authors emphasized the social and political importance of the guilds in the ancien régime. Placing the guilds in a larger context it was revealed how they adapted to changing conditions over time and how their impact was far from only negative.<sup>16</sup>

A slight *apologetic* feel runs through much of the social revisionist literature: The social revisionists argue, that perhaps the guilds were not good for the economy, but they performed religious, social and political tasks which benefited the guild members but often the surrounding society as well. The social revisionist school is still active. An example of this school taken to the extreme is *Civic Ceremony and Religion in Medieval Bruges c. 1300-152* by Andrew Brown published in 2011. Brown notes that there was a notable overlap between the municipal authority figures and guild members, and then writes: »Guilds could also serve civic or municipal needs. The Holy Blood guild increased the sacred dimension of the town council's authority. The cluster of guilds

---

<sup>15</sup> Musgrave, *Early modern*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> S. R. Epstein and Marteen Prak, "Introduction: Guilds, Innovation, and the European Economy, 1400–1800," in *Guilds, Innovation and the European Economy, 1400–1800*, eds. S. R. Epstein and Marteen Prak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2-3.

involved in municipal service by the fifteenth century gave religious expression to the expansion of town bureaucracy. Official subsidy of shooters, jousters, rhetoricians and minstrels helped create a civic programme of festivity.<sup>17</sup> In other words: The guilds supplied the city with political and military manpower, secured religious backing and arranged festivities. The only thing not touched upon? The guilds influence on the economy of Bruges. By focusing on the medieval era and virtually ignoring the economic aspects (except the expenditures related to festivals) it is possible for Brown to ignore the siren call of the inevitable capitalism.

Some social revisionists do include parts of the economy in their exposition. When Marco H. D. Van Leeuwen investigated *Guilds and middle-class welfare, 1550-1800 – provisions for burial, sickness, old age and widowhood* covering the Netherlands, he noted that »only in rare and special cases« could guild masters or journeymen receive support from both the guild box and a poor relief agency.<sup>18</sup> Did this benefit the society as a whole? On the one hand, it alleviated the strain on other poor relief arrangements – on the other hand it ensured a much higher standard of living to poor members of the guild than the common poor. Orphaned children experienced the same division. Orphans placed in burgher orphanages in Amsterdam received proteins, vitamins (perhaps except vitamin C) and calories that would suffice to »feed today's taller and sturdier American children,« whereas the living standard of common orphanages and non-institutionalized children were much lower.<sup>19</sup> These examples (Leeuwen presents a range of cases, as the title indicates) illustrate very well the complex nature of the question “did guilds benefit the society at large?” The question cannot be answered without further qualification – and such qualification is often missing.

The social revisionists have been included for completeness sake. They do not challenge the view of the traditionalists in regards to the broader economic development, but adds valuable – and often very detailed numbers – on the non-economic contributions of guilds to the early modern city life.

---

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Brown, *Civic Ceremony and Religion in Medieval Bruges c. 1300-1520* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 186.

<sup>18</sup> Marco H. D. Van Leeuwen, “Guilds and middle-class welfare, 1550–1800: provisions for burial, sickness, old age, and widowhood,” *The Economic History Review* Vol. 65, No. 1 (2012): 83.

<sup>19</sup> Leeuwen, “Middle-class welfare,” 84.

## *The rehabilitation school*

The traditionalists were attacked head on from the beginning of the 1990s by a new breed of revisionists. The new school argued, like the social school, that the guilds had performed important tasks on behalf of the society as a whole, but also emphasized that the guilds had been a beneficial force in regards to the early modern economy. The aptly named *A New Theory of Guilds and European Economic Development* by Charles R. Hickson and Earl A. Thompson from 1991 can be considered the birth certificate of this school. The authors explicitly set out to challenge the traditional view and introduce the concept of *efficiency*: The guilds existed with the blessing of local authorities because they were the most efficient way of handling a number of society's tasks.

Hickson and Thompson presents a case of special interest that both articulates the conflict between artisan guilds and merchant guilds and touch upon the economic transformation of society. The economist Pieter de la Court and the politician (autocratic leader might be a better term) Johan de Witt in unison with the large merchants and trading companies attacked the entry-restricting power of craft guilds in the 1660s. On the surface it made sense, since a freer market would make the United Provinces more price competitive. What they had not contemplated was the military support the craft guilds traditionally had contributed with when required.<sup>20</sup> The result is today known as the *rampjaar* (the disaster year). According to Hickson and Thompson, de Witt did not increase taxes (which could have hurt their allies in the financial elite) and with the loss of military support from the craft guilds, Holland saw itself subordinated to foreign powers in 1672.<sup>21</sup> The free-market thinking of Pieter de la Court might have benefited they economy in the short term, but it eventually resulted in a national catastrophe.

If the guilds were so effective, why were they phased out? According to Hickson and Thompson: »Guild decline typically began with the elimination of the regional role of guilds in administering laws, [...] while fairly impressive economic performances followed such bureaucratic changes, economic disaster systematically followed whenever the loss in the administrative function of guilds was ideologically inspired.«<sup>22</sup> In other words, the guilds faded when a government

---

<sup>20</sup> Charles R. Hickson and Earl A. Thompson, "A New Theory of Guilds and European Economic Development," *Explorations in Economic History* Vol. 28 (1991): 132-133

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Hickson and Thompson, "New theory," 150.

bureaucracy could take over, but if the transition was forced it resulted in disaster.

The latest and most comprehensive economic history of the Low Countries is found in *The First Modern Economy: Success, failure, and perseverance of the Dutch economy, 1500-1815* by Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude. Guilds are covered somewhat haphazardly in their tome. The authors readily admit, that the purpose of the book is to bring together a perspective on structure (with a hat tip to the Annales school) and the »characteristic of the modern economies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.«<sup>23</sup> But the authors do not fall into the *inevitable capitalism* trap. On the contrary they present a case showing how guilds re-emerged in the mid-seventeenth century: The rapid urbanization that had taken place until then was suddenly reversed, and Dutch cities experienced a »ruralization of the textile industry«. Cities trying to restore the old order made, in unison with guilds, refinements to local guild regulations with the aim of protecting the local (urban) textile industries – although to no avail.<sup>24</sup> If the research by Hickson/Thompson and Vries/Woude are combined, a picture emerges of the craft guilds as being supported by the cities they existed in, but opposed by the merchant elite (who could themselves be organized in merchant guilds) and the autocratic ruler.

The probably most ardent proponent of the rehabilitation school was S. R. Epstein, who argued that guilds were not efficient per se, but their aggregate benefits outweighed their costs. In his seminal journal article *Craft Guilds, Apprenticeship, and Technological Change in Preindustrial Europe* Epstein presents an efficiency argument in regards to the transfer of expertise. It requires three things: Teaching of skills, allocation of cost (ensuring incentives for masters and apprentices alike), and monitoring of market supply and demand to avoid major imbalances. Without compulsory schooling and an efficient bureaucracy to handle these tasks, the guilds were the most efficient.<sup>25</sup> Concurring with Hickson and Thompson, Epstein also notes »they [guilds] finally disap-

---

<sup>23</sup> Jan De Vries and Ad van der Woude, *The First Modern Economy: Success, Failure, and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 4.

<sup>24</sup> Vries and Woude, *First Modern Economy*, 293.

<sup>25</sup> Epstein, »Craft Guilds,» 688. Epstein did not himself appreciate the »efficiency» label attached to his argument, cf. S. R. Epstein, »Craft Guilds in the Pre-Modern Economy: A Discussion,» *The Economic History Review* Vol. 61, No. 1 (2008): 158.

peared not through adaptive failure but because national states abolished them by decree.«<sup>26</sup>

Epstein remained a diligent defender of the guild's positive impact on the early modern economy until he unexpectedly and all too early passed away. In an anthology edited by him and Maarten Prak, they honestly present their case: »This book claims that the impact of guilds on the early modern economy was more positive than has so far been acknowledged by historians of the traditional, and even of the revisionist, school. It investigates how and why this was so.«<sup>27</sup> Unsurprisingly, the list of contributors to the anthology reads like a who's who of the efficiency school, and include among others Ulrich Pfister, who investigates the diffusion of the engine loom, previously decried by Kamen, and reaches the almost diametrical conclusion.

*The reactionary*

With the gauntlet thrown down by the *rehabilitation school*, the obvious question was: Would anybody pick it up or had a paradigm shift in the Kuhn sense taken place? Not content with the attempted shift, the spirited Sheilagh Ogilvie attacked the rehabilitation school.

Much of the current literature reads like Ogilvie versus the world. This is obviously not the case. The traditionalists still have a presence, and e.g. Joel Mokyr, the grand old man of economic history, in a recent book on the origins of the knowledge economy also singled out guilds (together with tax collectors) for their detrimental influence on the early modern knowledge economy.<sup>28</sup> But whereas Mokyr followed the tradition and paid marginal attention to the guilds, Ogilvie has immersed herself in the guild debate. For example instead of discussing one single argument presented by another historian, Ogilvie points out while naming names – in one single page – why Hickson, Thompson, Gustafson, Persson, Pfister, Epstein, van Zanden, Greif, Milgrom, Weingast, Volckart, and Mangels all have been wrong about the guilds influence on the economy.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, Ogilvie has been attacked from a similar number of sides.

Ogilvie is interesting for a number of reasons. Most importantly she attempts to bridge the gap between broad economic history and the particular cases often brought forth by the rehabilitation school. She

---

<sup>26</sup> Epstein, "Craft Guilds," 684.

<sup>27</sup> Epstein and Prak, "Introduction," 23.

<sup>28</sup> Joel Mokyr, *The Gifts of Athena: Historical Origins of the Knowledge Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 31.

<sup>29</sup> Ogilvie, "Whatever is," 654.

has introduced the *conflict view of institutions*, which was superficially illustrated by the pie example on page 2-3. Her theory is a reaction to the revisionists, who – according to Ogilvie – have only presented the positive contribution of particular guilds in particular circumstances, but did not sufficiently include the broader society in their judgment. Ogilvie’s approach by itself has a lot going for it. First of all it seems very sound at first sight: How can we tell if an institution was a good thing for society, if we do not widen the focus in our studies to include the society surrounding the particular institution we are studying?

Ogilvie’s attack on the rehabilitation school is summed up in a journal article, which loan its title from the 1732 *Essay on Man* wherein Alexander Pope notes: »One truth is clear, “Whatever IS, is RIGHT”.« According to Ogilvie, this sentence nicely sums up the efficiency-perspective on economic history: An institution like the guilds prevailed, because they were the most *efficient* solution to the present problems. They existed because they made the pie larger. As previously shown Hickson and Thompson presented a theory of guilds explicitly based on this efficiency view: Guilds were for centuries the most efficient way of solving a number of tasks, including collecting taxes and ensuring military protection for the society as a whole. They only waned in the early modern period, when the state bureaucracy reached a size, where it could take over and handle these tasks more efficiently.<sup>30</sup>

Ogilvie’s main argument through all her research is, that the efficiency school is wrong. The guilds did not make the pie larger per se. Instead they only ensured that the existing pie was divided into portions that benefited the rulers and guilds themselves. With the backing of the rulers, guilds were enjoying a larger share of the pie without »maximizing aggregate economic welfare.«<sup>31</sup> Instead Ogilvie champions the proto-industry as the alternative to the guild economy. The putting-out system can be summed up as follows: A single person (merchant, capitalist) purchases wares produced by low-skilled labour in their own – often rural – homes. The skill required was minimal and it enabled also women to participate in the production, just as men could work e.g. the loom when not tending the fields.

Ogilvie is probably right, that the *number* of people enjoying an increase in living standard was larger with a proto-industry: One capitalist could have a high number of people living in rural areas working

---

<sup>30</sup> Hickson and Thompson, ”New theory,” 150.

<sup>31</sup> Ogilvie, ”Whatever is,” 664-665.

for him, in contrast to the specialized craft masters in the cities who seldom had many journeymen or apprentices employed. The social revisionists would point out, that a craft master often had a social fatherly role to play in regards to his employees as well, whereas the capitalist did not have any social responsibilities for the people working as simple subcontractors. And, where the craft master to some degree had to share his profit with his peers (other guild members, widows, etc.), the capitalist did not need to do any sort of revenue sharing. The number of people benefiting from the putting-out system might have been larger than under the craft system, but the distribution of income was also far more skewed.

*Good or bad?*

So, were the guilds as an institution a good or bad thing for the society as a whole? Once again we must return to the problem of scale. The efficiency theory presented by the rehabilitation is quite attractive, since it explains why the guilds prevailed for so long. The theory is universal: It was because they were the most efficient solution to a number of problems. Ogilvie on the other hand presents a theory that has an inherent problem of scale: She does not explain what context the pie exists in. A number of revisionist historians have attempted to present both a particular case and relate it to a larger context. Laura Cruz investigated the printer and bookseller guild in Leiden in detail and reached the conclusion that the actions of the guild were beneficial to Leiden. If the pie was the city economy, the guilds make it larger. But not only that: »[...] the printer/booksellers' guild made small but important innovations in the way books were distributed, which consequently created a market for secondhand books where none had existed and promoted a division of labor among Dutch cities that allowed them to dominate Europe in their respective markets.«<sup>32</sup> So if the pie was the economy of the Dutch Republic the actions of the guild in Leiden did also make the pie larger. But then again: What if the *society* should refer to entire continental Europe? The actions of the Leiden guild might have had a bad effect on the booksellers in e.g. Paris or Hamburg. In other words: Ogilvie conflict view of institutions can only be applied, if the world constituting the pie is exactly defined.

The next problem with Ogilvie's theory is the fact, that it makes general claims backed up by fragmental empirical evidence. A lot of

---

<sup>32</sup> Laura Cruz, "The Secrets of Success: Microinventions and Bookselling in the Seventeenth-Century Netherlands," *Book History* Vol. 10 (2007): 24.

her opposition to the guilds stem from detailed studies of the worsted industry in Württemberg.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, she illustrates how guilds had a negative social impact by producing one example of a weaver in a German village who was denied marriage because he »was in no sort of position even to raise the community citizenship and guild master-ship admission fees.«<sup>34</sup> It was no doubt a sad situation for the individual, but is it sufficient to judge an institution to be bad for society as a whole?

*Why the debate?*

The historiographical survey above rises an obvious question: With a two century long virtual consensus in regards to the guild's effect on the economy, what suddenly made historians challenge this view? To answer this question, the historiography presented above must be considered inside a wider historiographical context.

Jürgen Kocka has noted how the social sciences and history had a merry relationship until the early 1970s.<sup>35</sup> The Annales school, Marxists and historians performing *Historische Sozialwissenschaft* all shared a common structural approach to history and the gap between social sciences and history was narrow. History then took what some have called a *historiographical turn*. No longer should everything be explained by structure; individual actors had a place in history as well. Ranke experienced a revival as well. After being looked down upon by the theory-heavy historians of the 1960s, historians again began investigating *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. Historical developments should no longer be understood as pre-determined consequences of the inevitable march of progress, but investigated as particular events under specific circumstances.

The guild historiography presented above has followed this general historiographical pattern to a remarkable extent: From the traditionalists, where the demise of the guilds was inevitable, to the revisionists who started investigating particular guild activities. The debate has been amplified by the urge of some historians to create general theories based on particular empirical evidence, where both camps can be faulted for cherry picking to some degree. One might argue, that judg-

---

<sup>33</sup> Pointed out in Epstein, "A discussion," 157.

<sup>34</sup> Ogilvie, "Whatever is," 673.

<sup>35</sup> Jürgen Kocka, "History and the social sciences today," in *The Benefit of Broad Horizons: Intellectual and Institutional Preconditions*, ed. Hans Joas et. al. (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2010): 53.

ing if the guilds as an institution was beneficial to the society as a whole is a futile endeavor and only particular instances can be judged.

### *Conclusion*

Until the early 1970s, guilds were unanimously considered bad for society. Free market proponents saw them as detrimental due to rent seeking, protectionism, and anti-innovative actions they had been credited with since the days of Adam Smith. Marxists saw them as reactionary elements that would inevitably be obsoleted by progress. A number of historians ignored this alluring structural explanation and began investigating specific guilds in detail and their particular circumstances. Initially the new research showed, that the guilds actually contributed in a number of not-directly economic ways to society as a whole. Following the social revisionists, the efficiency school attacked the traditionalists directly. Many cases could be brought forward that illustrated, how the guilds actually had a positive influence on the economy in early modern Europe. Answering this challenge Ogilvie (with the backing of general economic historians) introduced a broader theory by which guilds should be measured, and concluded that they had a detrimental effect on large parts of society as a whole. Coincidentally, Ogilvie based her conclusion on particular cases as well.

Concluding if the guilds had a positive or negative effect on the early modern economy – even if limiting us to the Low Countries – is impossible. Any number of particular cases can be brought forward to support either standpoint. This is of course a result of the normative nature of the question being asked. Without identifying precise what doing good, and what the boundaries of the *society* being referred to are, it is difficult to judge even a particular case fairly. Still, the revisionists have illuminated many aspects of the guilds that were previously considered irrelevant in the study of history.

*Bibliography*

Brown, Andrew. *Civic Ceremony and Religion in Medieval Bruges c. 1300-1520*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Crone, Patricia. *Pre-Industrial Societies*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003.

Cruz, Laura. "The Secrets of Success: Microinventions and Bookselling in the Seventeenth-Century Netherlands." *Book History* Vol. 10 (2007): 1-28.

Epstein, S. R. "Craft Guilds, Apprenticeship, and Technological Change in Preindustrial Europe." *The Journal of Economic History* Vol. 58, No. 3 (1998): 684-713.

Epstein, S. R. "Craft Guilds in the Pre-Modern Economy: A Discussion." *The Economic History Review* Vol. 61, No. 1 (2008): 155-174.

Epstein, S. R., and Marteen Prak. "Introduction: Guilds, Innovation, and the European Economy, 1400–1800." In *Guilds, Innovation and the European Economy, 1400–1800*, edited by S. R. Epstein and Marteen Prak, 1-24. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Hickson, Charles R. and Earl A. Thompson. "A New Theory of Guilds and European Economic Development." *Explorations in Economic History* Vol. 28 (1991): 127-168.

Kamen, Henry. *The Iron Century: Social Change in Europe 1550-1650*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971.

Kocka, Jürgen. "History and the social sciences today." In *The Benefit of Broad Horizons: Intellectual and Institutional Preconditions*, ed. Hans Joas et. al. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2010.

Landes, David. *Revolution in Time: Clocks and the Making of the Modern World*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1983.

Leeuwen, Marco H. D. Van. "Guilds and middle-class welfare, 1550–1800: provisions for burial, sickness, old age, and widowhood." *The Economic History Review* Vol. 65, No. 1 (2012): 61-90.

Mokyr, Joel. *The Gifts of Athena: Historical Origins of the Knowledge Economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

Musgrave, Peter. *The early modern European economy*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999.

Ogilvie, Sheilagh. *Institutions and European Trade: Merchant Guilds, 1000–1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Ogilvie, Sheilagh. “Rehabilitating the Guilds: A reply.” *The Economic History Review* Vol. 61, No. 1 (2008): 175-182.

Ogilvie, Sheilagh. “‘Whatever is, is right’? Economic institutions in pre-industrial Europe.” *The Economic History Review* Vol. 60, No. 7 (2007): 649-684.

Pfister, Ulrich. “Craft Guilds and Technological Change: The Engine Loom in the European Silk Ribbon Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries.” In *Guilds, Innovation and the European Economy, 1400–1800*, edited by S. R. Epstein and Marteen Prak, 172-198. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Pfister, Ulrich. “Craft Guilds, the Theory of the Firm, and Early Modern Proto-industry.” In *Guilds, Innovation and the European Economy, 1400–1800*, edited by S. R. Epstein and Marteen Prak, 25-51. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Vries, Jan De, and Ad van der Woude. *The First Modern Economy: Success, Failure, and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500–1815*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.