

# Corporatism and Social Models in the Low Countries

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## Abstract

The historiography of 'corporatism' consists of three distinct strands, all of which are relevant to the Low Countries (the Netherlands and Belgium). The first is the history of guilds, which is basically limited to the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period. The second is the mostly confessional ideal of harmonious labour relations, in evidence during the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. The third refers to a type of society in which capital and labour managed to reach compromises on the bigger issues of socio-economic policy, together with the organisation of society overall. This chapter explores the connections between these three historiographies in the Netherlands and Flanders, and suggests possibilities for further research.

**Keywords:** corporatism, guilds, labour relations, social organisation

## Introduction

"Corporatism" has become a bit like God. Many people believe it is an important phenomenon, crucially affecting social life. But nobody really knows what it looks like, so disagreement persists, apparently forever, about what it is and about what it does'.<sup>2</sup> By combining three distinct strands of research, however, this chapter claims to provide a new, primarily historical perspective on the debate about the origins, development and ultimately also the pros and cons of corporatism. Even without immediately entering into the semantic debate about the meaning of corporatism, it is easy to

1 Many thanks are due to Ido de Haan and the editors of this journal for their helpful comments on an earlier draft.

2 G. Therborn, as quoted in Coen Teulings and Joop Hartog, *Corporatism or competition? Labour contracts, institutions and wage structures in international comparison* (Cambridge 1998) 26; also Oscar Molani and Martin Rhodes, 'Corporatism: The past, present, and future of a concept', *Annual Review of Political Science* 5 (2002) 305-331.

see that among historians the term refers to three phenomena that are interconnected, but not overlapping. Specialists of the Early Modern Period will probably identify the term immediately with 'guilds'. A second meaning of corporatism refers to a nineteenth and twentieth-century strand of social thought about the organisation of labour relations and the way this was translated into organisational structures. This is probably what comes to mind for historians of the Modern Period. Finally, some authors, including the present one, have applied the term, or an equivalent, to the organisation of some (mostly modern) European societies. I argue that in the history of the Netherlands and Belgium, all three elements were interconnected and can help explain crucial features of the development of society in the Low Countries. The following pages concentrate on Dutch and Flemish historiography, i.e. history writing about the Low Countries. International literature is referenced, where relevant, in the footnotes.

The most salient characteristic of corporatism, in all its various definitions, is that it constitutes a 'set of political doctrines and institutions aimed at governing the economy and organising civil society on the basis of professional and occupational representation. The goal is to resolve class or interest groups' conflicts through the harmonising and coercive role of the state'.<sup>3</sup> This definition applies both in the pre-modern and modern eras and highlights several aspects of corporatism: its collective dimension, the relationship between civic organisations and the state, and its dual character as representing sectoral interests and simultaneously acting as an instrument for socio-political control in the hands of the authorities. As a result of these features, corporate bodies are simultaneously instruments of social integration and of social exclusion. Economically, corporatism can be seen as a remedy to the sometimes extreme impact of free markets, or as rent-seeking interference by an 'invisible hand'. In the scholarly literature, as in real life, these two dimensions have been in permanent conflict and depending on which element is highlighted, corporatism has been praised or condemned.<sup>4</sup>

3 Fabio Padovano, 'Corporatism', in: Joel Mokyr (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Economic History*, Vol. 2 (Oxford 2003) 8; compare Max Stephenson Jr., 'Corporatism', in: Helmut K. Anheier and Stefan Toepler (eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society* (New York 2010) 582.

4 S.R. Epstein, 'Craft guilds in the pre-modern economy: A discussion', and Sheilagh Ogilvie 'Rehabilitating the guilds: A reply', both in *Economic History Review* 61 (2008) 155-174 and 175-182 respectively.

## Guilds in the Low Countries – a brief historiography

Guilds were ‘associations of skilled artisans of the same trade or craft’.<sup>5</sup> They were “bottom-up”, autonomous associations that negotiated with the state for public recognition but never became mere tools of public authority. Craft [guilds] were associations of employers rather than of workers. Active membership was restricted to the shop-owning masters, but apprentices and journeymen were subject to craft discipline’.<sup>6</sup> The first modern work in the Netherlands to discuss the guilds was in fact a book about their abolition. In 1938, C. Wiskerke raised the question of why the guilds were abolished. His conclusions were unequivocal: the guilds’ capacity to hinder economic processes had been very limited and both their defenders and the detractors were primarily motivated by political concerns.<sup>7</sup> This conclusion was confirmed by the most recent survey of the topic for the rest of Europe.<sup>8</sup>

Wiskerke’s thesis was the first ‘modern’ book about guilds, because it did not take them for granted, but raised fundamental questions about their contribution to society – or lack thereof. This is not to say that earlier social and economic historians completely ignored the guilds. H. Pirenne famously declared them to be the roots of ‘early democracy’ in Flanders.<sup>9</sup> In his 1906 work on the rise of Amsterdam, W. van Ravesteyn claimed that this was due to the fact that the guilds had been a marginal phenomenon in the city’s economy, dominated as it had been by a merchant bourgeoisie that preferred economic freedom over regulation.<sup>10</sup> N.W. Posthumus expounded the same view in his monumental history of the Leiden wool industry. Guilds were a marginal phenomenon in that industry, which was instead organised in

5 James R. Farr, ‘Guilds’, in: Peter N. Stearns (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Social History* (New York 1994) 312.

6 S.R. Epstein, ‘Craft guilds’, in: Joel Mokyr (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Economic History*, Vol. 2 (Oxford 2003) 36; see also James R. Farr, ‘Guilds’, in: Jonathan Dewald (ed.), *Europe 1450-1789: Encyclopedia of the early modern world*, Vol. 3 (New York 2004) 98-101.

7 Cornelis Wiskerke, *De afschaffing der gilden in Nederland* (Amsterdam 1938) chapter 3.

8 Heinz-Gerhard Haupt (ed.), *Das Ende der Zünfte: Ein Europäischer Vergleich* (Göttingen 2002).

9 Henri Pirenne, *Les anciennes démocraties des Pays-Bas* (Paris 1917), chapters 7-8; for a critique, Raymond Van Uytven, ‘Plutokratie in de “oude demokratieën der Neder landen”: Cijfers en beschouwingen omtrent de korporatieve organisatie en de sociale structuur der gemeenten in de late middeleeuwen’, *Koninklijke Zuidnederlandse Maatschappij voor Taal- en Letterkunde en Geschiedenis, Handelingen* 16 (1962) 373-409.

10 Willem van Ravesteyn, *Onderzoekingen over de economische en sociale ontwikkeling van Amsterdam gedurende de 16<sup>de</sup> en het eerste kwart der 17<sup>de</sup> eeuw* (Amsterdam 1906) 45-54, 162-165; also Oscar Gelderblom, *Cities of commerce: The institutional foundations of international trade in the Low Countries, 1250-1650* (Princeton 2013) 203.

*neringen*: employers' organisations without membership or autonomy.<sup>11</sup> In the introduction to his edition of sources concerning the economy of Amsterdam, J.G. van Dillen stated that guilds had in fact been much more important than Van Ravesteyn had claimed, but he did not develop this into a full-blown argument about the role of guilds in the pre-modern economy.<sup>12</sup>

Wiskerke's work had no discernible impact in the following decades on the historiography of guilds. Van Dillen's survey, published in 1970, had nothing much to say about them beyond the observation that they existed and were important for the training of the skilled workforce.<sup>13</sup> The survey preferred class and social mobility as topics for social history. It was not until 1978 that another book appeared, that might be classified as 'modern' in the context of guild historiography: R. Unger's *Dutch shipbuilding before 1800: Ships and guilds*. Unger, a Canadian historian, explicitly raised the question of what guilds might have contributed to the quality of the industry. He argued that they had a positive impact during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, because they helped to dampen the volatility in the market for ships, because they created continuity in the industry, because they were a platform for the exchange of technical knowledge, and because they thus helped promote the innovation that characterised the industry at the time. However, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, guilds became set in their ways and started to oppose innovation.<sup>14</sup> Unger's book proved to be a turning point, not only in the historiography of Dutch guilds, but also of European guilds more generally. In the following decade, a spate of influential papers and books was to appear that made guilds a niche topic. Many of those early works dealt with France. Gradually, however, the rest of Europe and ultimately the whole world came to be included in the debate about the role of guilds in the pre-modern economy.<sup>15</sup>

11 N.W. Posthumus, *De geschiedenis van de Leidsche lakenindustrie* Vol. 1 (The Hague 1908) 363, Vol. 2 (The Hague 1939) 335-338, 862-863. Also Karel Davids, 'Neringen, hallen en gilden: Kapitalisten, kleine ondernemers en de stedelijke overheid in de tijd van de Republiek', in: C.A. Davids, W. Fritschy and L.A. van der Valk (eds.), *Kapitaal, ondernemerschap en beleid: Studies over economie en politiek in Nederland, Europa en Azië van 1500 tot heden* (Amsterdam 1996) 95-119.

12 J.G. van Dillen (ed.), *Bronnen tot de geschiedenis van het bedrijfsleven en het gildewezen van Amsterdam* Vol. 1 = RGP Vol. 69 (The Hague 1929), x-xii; Vol. 2 = RGP Vol. 78 (The Hague 1933) viii-xvi; also I.H. van Eeghen, *De gilden: Theorie en praktijk* (Bussum 1965).

13 J.G. van Dillen, *Van rijkdom en regenten: Handboek tot de economische en sociale geschiedenis van de Republiek* (The Hague 1970) 291-292.

14 Richard Unger, *Dutch shipbuilding before 1800: Ships and guilds* (Assen 1978) chapter 5, 103-108.

15 Jan Lucassen, Tine De Moor and Jan Luiten van Zanden (eds.), *The return of the guilds, International Review of Social History (IRSH) Supplement 16* (Cambridge 2008).

Historians from the Low Countries have made significant contributions to this topic. There is no point in discussing all of them individually through a roll call of guild historians. However, four should be singled out. In the Netherlands P. Lourens and J. Lucassen published extensively about the guilds, making particular use of a large database they had set up at the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam.<sup>16</sup> With the help of their database, Lourens and Lucassen were able to provide a quantitative dimension to guild historiography that is usually missing elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> In Flanders, C. Lis and H. Soly initiated a string of articles and edited volumes, as well as PhD dissertations that have helped the region become, with regard to guilds, one of the most closely investigated in the whole world.<sup>18</sup> So, what has all of this research actually taught us about guilds, about the Low Countries and about the early modern economy and society more generally?

A number of salient points stand out in relation to the guilds themselves.<sup>19</sup> Probably the most important of these is the demonstration that guild 'monopoly' was a complete misnomer for a range of things the guilds

16 E.g. Lourens and Lucassen, 'Ambachtsgilden binnen een handelskapitalistische stad: aanzetten voor een analyse van Amsterdam ca. 1700', *NEHA-Jaarboek voor economische, bedrijfs- en techniekgeschiedenis* 61 (1998) 121-162; Lourens and Lucassen, "'Zunftlandschaften in den Niederlanden und im benachbarten Deutschland', in: Wilfried Reininghaus (ed.), *Zunftlandschaften in Deutschland und den Niederlanden im Vergleich*, Schriften der Historischen Kommission für Westfalen 17 (Münster 2000) 11-43; Lourens, Lucassen, and Bert De Munck, 'The establishment and distribution of craft guilds in the Low Countries, 1000-1800', in: Maarten Prak, Catharina Lis, Jan Lucassen and Hugo Soly (eds.), *Craft Guilds in the Early Modern Low Countries: Work, Power and Representation* (Aldershot 2005) 32-73.

17 Quantitative work on European guilds is now undertaken by Tine De Moor's project at Utrecht University, and especially Miguel Laborda Pemán's PhD-dissertation: see [http://www.collective-action.info/projects\\_ERCGrant](http://www.collective-action.info/projects_ERCGrant) (accessed 5th July 2013).

18 Among many more works: Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly (eds.), *Werken volgens de regels: Ambachten in Brabant en Vlaanderen, 1500-1800* (Brussels 1994); Lis and Soly, *Worthy efforts: Attitudes to work and workers in pre-industrial Europe* Studies in Global Social History, Vol. 10 (Leiden 2012) chapter 6. Complete bibliography in Margo De Koster et al. (eds.), *Werken aan de stad: Stedelijke actoren en structuren in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden 1500-1900* (Brussel 2011) 31-43; also their pupils Harald Deceulaer, *Pluriforme patronen en een verschillende snit: Sociaal-economische, institutionele en culturele transformaties in de kledingsector in Antwerpen, Brussel en Gent, 1585-1800* (Amsterdam 2001); Johan Dambruyne, *Corporatieve middengroepen: Aspiraties relaties en transformaties in de 16de-eeuwse Gentse ambachtswereld* (Ghent 2002); Bert De Munck, *Technologies of learning: Apprenticeship in Antwerp guilds from the 15th century to the end of the Ancien Régime* Studies in European Urban History Vol. 11 (Turnhout 2007).

19 I discussed some of these issues already in Maarten Prak, 'Ambachtsgilden vroeger en nu', *NEHA-Jaarboek voor Economische, Bedrijfs- en Techniekgeschiedenis* 57 (1994) 10-33.

really did.<sup>20</sup> It was a misnomer firstly, because guilds did not act as single businesses that might have had the objective of monopolising a market. Guilds were, on the contrary, associations of numerous – usually dozens, sometimes many hundreds – of small and sometimes larger firms. Price setting was unusual, except in certain specific types of business such as bread making, where the government took a strong interest because of public order issues.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, guild regulations sometimes explicitly allowed the import of products that were not available locally, they admitted merchants whose business it was to import products that competed with locally-made goods, and they sold licenses to outsiders who wanted to practice the craft temporarily.<sup>22</sup> In other words, guilds undermined their own potential ‘monopoly’. The word is also a misnomer, because membership of guilds was seldom limited in the ways that the monopoly theory implied. Only in exceptional cases – butchers and fishmongers with fixed numbers of market stalls seem to have been most consistent in this regard<sup>23</sup> – was membership of guilds in the Low Countries restricted to family members. Guilds may have put financial and other barriers in the way of newcomers, but that did not prevent huge numbers of people from outside the trade or the town from nevertheless joining a guild. Increased admission fees were not designed as instruments to restrict access, but rather as attempts to cream off extra revenue from a demand for membership and the related interest in citizen status that was a prerequisite for guild membership.<sup>24</sup>

This is clearly not to suggest that guilds were open to everyone. Elements of discrimination have been identified in a number of areas. First and foremost, women found it very difficult to enter guilds. In most guilds, they were either completely absent among the membership or a tiny minority,

20 For a substantive discussion, Bibi Panhuysen, *Maatwerk: Kleermakers, naaisters, oud-kleerkopers en de gilden (1500-1800)* (Hilversum 2000) 17-26, 276-279.

21 Jan Luiten van Zanden, ‘Kosten van levensonderhoud in Holland en Oost-Nederland 1600-1850’, *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 1 (*TvSG*) 1 (1985) 317-318 and 321 claims that the fixed price of bread was the result of collective action by the bakers, but Jan de Vries sees it differently in his ‘The political economy of bread in the Dutch Republic’, in: Oscar Gelderblom (ed.), *The Political Economy of the Dutch Republic* (Farnham 2009) 100-112.

22 Bert De Munck, ‘Skills, trust, and changing consumer preferences: The decline of Antwerp’s craft guilds from the perspective of the product market, c.1500-c.1800’, *IRSH* 53 (2008) 197-233; Daniëlle van den Heuvel, *Women and entrepreneurship: Female traders in the Northern Netherlands, c. 1580-1815* (Amsterdam 2007) 91-96.

23 Van den Heuvel, *Women and entrepreneurship*, chapter 3.

24 Ellen Burm, Bert De Munck, and Karel Davids, ‘Regulating entrance in guilds in the Early Modern Low Countries, unpublished paper presented at conference ‘Cities as centres of technical innovation’, Rome 2-3 September 2011.

as a result of various forms of exclusion.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, most women in guilds had acquired membership by taking the place of their deceased husband. However, behind this uniform pattern looms a more complex picture, as research on seamstresses has demonstrated. With the rise of fashionable clothing in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, seamstresses emerged as a relatively significant force in the clothing industry. In Amsterdam, they almost reached their objective with the formation of a separate organisation that was only nominally dependent on the (male) tailors' guild. In Haarlem, however, the seamstresses remained completely subject to the restrictive regulations imposed by the tailors. In smaller towns such as Zutphen and 's-Hertogenbosch (Bois-le-Duc), seamstresses were equally marginalised in the corporate system. The size of the town may have been a factor. In the Southern Netherlands, however, size made very little difference: seamstresses were and remained subjected to all sorts of discriminatory legislation imposed on them by the tailors. This suggests that political influence was also a factor. In towns where guilds were political actors, determining political outcomes, it was much more likely to find a strong bias against women.<sup>26</sup>

In the retail trade, female guild membership was significantly higher than in industry. During the eighteenth century, one in eight new members of the shopkeepers' guild in 's-Hertogenbosch was female. The gender balance even looked slightly better in the first half of the century, so there was no question of progress.<sup>27</sup> In Zwolle, the female members comprised less than 10 per cent of the membership of the local St. Nicholas shopkeepers' guild, but even here they were more numerous than in the average craft guild.<sup>28</sup> All of this suggests that guilds were a contributory factor in preventing women from independently establishing themselves as producers or traders in the Dutch marketplace. In the land-bound provinces, moreover, guild members were also instrumental in the introduction of legislation that excluded non-Calvinist immigrants (i.e. another vulnerable group) from

25 Ariadne Schmidt, 'Women and Guilds: Corporations and Female Labour Market Participation in Early Modern Holland', *Gender & History* 21 (2009) 170-189.

26 Panhuysen, *Maatwerk*, chapter 5; Deceulaer, *Pluriforme patronen*, chapter 6; Bibi Panhuysen and Harald Deceulaer, 'Dressed to work: A gendered comparison of the tailoring trades in the Noerthern and Southern Netherlands, 16th to 18th centuries', in: Prak, Lis, Lucassen and Soly (eds.), *Craft guilds*, 133-156.

27 Van den Heuvel, *Women and entrepreneurship*, 155-156.

28 J.C. Streng, *Vrijheid, gelijkheid, broederschap en gezelligheid: Het Zwolse Sint Nicolaasgilde tijdens het ancien régime* (Hilversum 2001) 112.

local citizenship, and thus from joining a guild.<sup>29</sup> Jews were hit especially hard by the guilds' negative attitudes. Although some exceptions have been recorded, it is fair to say that they were prevented from joining a guild everywhere in the Low Countries during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, it would perhaps be too easy to blame the guilds alone. In the proto-industrial village of Tilburg, where spinning and weaving were not incorporated, the proportion of female spinners was as low as in the guilded Leiden spinning industry.<sup>31</sup>

The general literature about guilds suggests that from the sixteenth century onwards, guilds were becoming increasingly closed to upwardly-mobile journeymen. This has even been proposed as an explanation for the exclusion of women: journeymen saw their own chances of promotion to master status reduced, and therefore insisted that women should be excluded from membership so as not to take the places that journeymen hoped to occupy.<sup>32</sup> Very little work has been carried out regarding social mobility in the world of crafts, as a result of which there is no conclusive evidence available for Dutch and Flemish towns. The most extensive research, concerning sixteenth-century Ghent, suggests two distinct patterns. When guilds were politically influential, social mobility was restricted. When, on the other hand, they were excluded from the political process, social mobility within the corporate world increased dramatically.<sup>33</sup> Data from the Northern Netherlands seem to confirm this pattern. Among the tailors of Amsterdam, the number of masters' sons joining the guild was very limited.<sup>34</sup> In the provincial town of 's-Hertogenbosch, the percentage of masters' sons among a range of crafts cannot have exceeded 15 per cent

29 Maarten Prak, 'The politics of intolerance: citizenship and religion in the Dutch Republic (17th-18th C.)', in: R. Po-chia Hsia and H. van Nierop (eds.), *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge 2002) 159-175.

30 Lourens and Lucassen, 'Ambachtsgilden binnen een handelskapitalistische stad', 134-139, 150-152; Maarten Prak, *Republikeinse veelheid, democratische enkelvoud: Sociale verandering in het Revolutietijdvak, 's-Hertogenbosch 1770-1820*, (Nijmegen 1999) 45-47; L.H. Remmerswaal, *Een duurzame alliantie: Gilden en regenten in Zeeland, 1600-1800* Werken uitgegeven door het Koninklijk Zeeuwsch Genootschap der Wetenschappen, Vol. 16 (Middelburg 2009) 120-121.

31 Elise van Nederveen Meerkeerk, *De draad in eigen handen: Vrouwen en loonarbeid in de Nederlandse textielnijverheid, 1581-1810* Amsterdam 2007) chapter 5, and 316-317.

32 Merry E. Wiesner, 'Guilds, male bonding and women's work in early modern Germany', *Gender and History* 1 (1989) 125-137, also in: M.E. Wiesner, *Gender, church and state in early modern Germany* (London 1998) chapter 9.

33 Johan Dambruyne, 'Guilds, social mobility and status in sixteenth-century Ghent', *IRSH* 43 (1998) 37-52.

34 Panhuysen, *Maatwerk*, 169.

in the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>35</sup> However, even among the tailors of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Brabant, the percentage of father-to-son successions was low, even though guilds remained politically influential in these regions. Moreover, access to the guilds was becoming increasingly easy, albeit slowly.<sup>36</sup> More data is needed before we can reach a verdict about the role of guilds in promoting or preventing social mobility.

One factor that makes it implausible that access to guilds became more difficult over time, is the fact that in sheer numbers the corporate system continued to expand. In absolute numbers, this expansion was most rapid in the Southern Netherlands during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and in the Northern Netherlands during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Relatively speaking, the corporate system also continued to expand: in the South, the number of inhabitants per guild declined from around 730 in the late Middle Ages to below 650 by the end of the *Ancien Régime*. In the North, the number of inhabitants per guild went down by about a third.<sup>37</sup> These numbers correct the traditional image of guilds in two significant ways. First, they belie the assumption that guilds were essentially medieval institutions that merely 'survived' into the early modern period. Guilds were and remained an integral part of the pre-modern economy. The second correction is that guilds were perfectly compatible with economic growth.<sup>38</sup> In the Low Countries, a region that was among the most economically advanced in Europe at the time, the number of guilds increased in particular in periods of economic prosperity. Even if they may have been as much the result as the cause of growth, the argument that they were an economic liability seems to find little support in these numbers.

As Unger's book on shipbuilding strongly suggested, the traditional idea that guilds were uniformly opposed to innovation is manifestly wrong.<sup>39</sup> It would, obviously, be equally wrong to portray them as champions of innovation. However, in many pre-modern industries, guilds contributed to innovation, although usually inadvertently. In the absence of professional state schooling, guild apprenticeships constituted the most obvious route to a career in industry. To become a guild master, proof had to be provided

35 Prak, *Republikeinse veelheid*, 100.

36 Deceulaer, *Pluriforme patronen*, 328-340.

37 De Munck, Lourens and Lucassen, 'The establishment and distribution', 37 (table 2.1) and 39 (table 2.2); the numbers refer to urban populations.

38 Lourens and Lucassen, 'Ambachtsgilden binnen een handelskapitalistische stad'.

39 Unger, *Dutch shipbuilding*. For more elaboration of this point, see the essays collected in Epstein and Prak (eds.), *Guilds, innovation*.

of the requisite years of formal training.<sup>40</sup> One of the questions that has dogged the debate about guilds is the significant variation in formal training periods across Europe. If the same trade was learnt in one place in two years and in another took double that time, then surely those formal training periods were merely a social selection mechanism. Recent work concerning training in specific sectors suggests that it was unusual for an apprentice to immediately proceed to the mastership.<sup>41</sup> Instead, an apprenticeship might be followed by several years' work as a journeyman. In some places, that period was included in the apprenticeship term, in others it was not.

Quality control is another area where more research still needs to be carried out. The idea that guilds by definition ensured some sort of minimum quality for the products of their members has been exposed as a fallacy, originating from the guilds themselves. Many guilds did not impose any quality standards at all. Quite a few, perhaps even the majority, failed to examine prospective masters. Where a masterpiece was required, the standards were sometimes outdated and the procedure might appear suspiciously ritualised.<sup>42</sup> Guilds may nonetheless have improved quality standards unintentionally, through various mechanisms. Some guilds had sales rooms, where customers could compare price to quality ratios. The painters' guild in Leiden organised lectures and permitted art lovers to join the guild, which allowed them to participate in discussions about artistic quality.<sup>43</sup> Guilds arbitrated between producers and customers when disputes about quality arose.<sup>44</sup> Guilds contributed to 'clustering' mechanisms, creating knowledge spillovers that raised quality standards. Many Amsterdam painters, for example, lived in the Nieuwmarkt area of the town, where the guild also had its headquarters.<sup>45</sup> Some guilds were specifically required

40 The most comprehensive work on training in the Low Countries has been done by Bert De Munck, especially in his *Technologies of learning* (2007); see also De Munck, Steven L. Kaplan and Hugo Soly (eds.), *Learning on the shop floor: Historical perspectives on apprenticeship* (New York 2007).

41 Panhuysen, *Maatwerk*, 156-157; Marion Goosens, *Schilders en de markt: Haarlem 1605-1635*, PhD dissertation Universiteit Leiden 2001, 85; Nico Slokker, *Ruggengraat van de stad: De betekenis van gilden in Utrecht, 1528-1818* (Amsterdam 2010) 114-116.

42 De Munck, *Technologies of learning*, 68-84; Bert De Munck, 'Guilds, product quality and intrinsic value: Towards a history of conventions?' *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 36 (2011) 103-124.

43 Ed Romein, 'Knollen en citroenen op de Leidse kunstmarkt: over de rol van kwaliteit in de opkomst van de Leidse fijnschilderstijl', *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 17 (2001) 75-94.

44 Maarten Prak, 'Painters, guilds and the art market during the Dutch Golden Age', in: Epstein and Prak (eds.), *Guilds, Innovation*, 164.

45 Marten Jan Bok, 'The rise of Amsterdam as a cultural centre: the market for paintings, 1580-1680', in: Patrick O'Brien, Derek Keene, Marjolein 't Hart and Herman Van der Wee (eds.),

to make quality checks. The Amsterdam silversmiths, for example, would check the silver content of their members' work – and destroy that work if it was found to be sub-standard.<sup>46</sup>

The idea that guilds were uniformly bad for the economy is also wrong for another reason. Guilds were not isolated institutions, but part of a larger institutional framework. The Low Countries in fact displayed three quite distinct guild 'landscapes' during the late Middle Ages and Early Modern Period.<sup>47</sup> In the Southern Netherlands, guilds had managed to become an integral part of local governance. The victory of the urban craftsmen over a feudal army in the Battle of the Spurs in 1302 marked a turning point in the political history of the region.<sup>48</sup> In many towns in Flanders and Brabant, guilds managed to obtain positions of influence in the aftermath of 1302. In the North, this only happened in Utrecht, which was the largest town in the Northern Netherlands at the time. From this position of political influence, the guilds managed to restrict access to their privileges, with the help of high admission fees for example. They also forced local governments to adopt pro-industry policies. In Holland, on the other hand, commercial elites continued to dominate urban governments.<sup>49</sup> Guilds received a fair hearing – and more than that. It has been demonstrated that the Amsterdam authorities often copied the text of guild petitions verbatim into local legislation.<sup>50</sup> However, commercial interests remained predominant in the Holland towns. A third pattern emerged in the eastern provinces of the Netherlands in the late fifteenth century, when the region was involved in the struggle against Habsburg dominance. To win the support of urban

*Urban Achievements in Early Modern Europe: Golden Ages in Antwerp, Amsterdam and London* (Cambridge 2001) 192.

46 Lidewij Hesselink, 'Goud- en zilversmeden en hun gilde in Amsterdam in de 17e en 18e eeuw', *Holland* 31 (1999) 127-147.

47 Wim Blockmans, 'Regionale Vielfalt im Zunftwesen in den Niederlanden vom 13. bis zum 16. Jahrhundert', in: Knut Schulz (ed.), *Handwerk in Europa: Vom Spätmittelalter bis zur Frühen Neuzeit* Schriften des Historischen Kollegs, Kolloquien Vol. 41 (Munich 1999) 51-63; Jan Lucassen and Maarten Prak, 'Conclusion', in: Prak, Lis, Lucassen and Soly (eds.), *Craft guilds*, 228-229.

48 Carlos Wyffels, *De oorsprong der ambachten in Vlaanderen en Brabant* Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België, Klasse der Letteren, Vol. 13 (Brussels 1951); Maarten Prak, 'Corporate politics in the Low Countries: Guilds as institutions, 14th to 18th centuries', in: Prak, Lis, Lucassen and Soly (eds.), *Craft guilds*, 75-78.

49 Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, 'Different paths of development: Capitalism in the Northern and Southern Netherlands during the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern period', *Review* 20 (1997) 228-230; Lis and Soly, 'Export industries, craft guilds and capitalist trajectories, 13<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries', in: Prak, Lis, Lucassen and Soly (eds.), *Craft guilds*, 107-132.

50 H.F.K. van Nierop, 'Popular participation in politics in the Dutch Republic', in: Peter Blicke (ed.), *Resistance, representation and community* (Oxford 1997) 286-287

citizens, they were granted extensive political powers, which directly or indirectly also benefitted the local guilds.<sup>51</sup>

Through their sociability, guilds contributed to the stability of urban communities. Massive immigration and religious diversity potentially undermined that stability in Holland during the seventeenth century, but guilds created an environment that was inclusive and remarkably free from religious prejudice. Despite the fact that Calvinism was the only religion allowed to perform its rites in public, guilds continued to display images of their patron saints and mark their day on the holy calendar with elaborate meals and festivities.<sup>52</sup> Another important dimension of the guilds' social activities was the welfare benefits they distributed among impoverished members. However, the majority of guilds were unable, or unwilling, to sustain such expensive provisions. Probably no more than 15 per cent of all Dutch guilds had funds for this purpose, or some informal arrangement in the shape of ad-hoc collections among members. Nonetheless, M. van Leeuwen has recently estimated that in 1811, 42 per cent of the male labour force in Utrecht, 55 per cent in Leiden and at least 22 per cent in Amsterdam were covered by some sort of guild-related insurance scheme.<sup>53</sup> Much of this aid had been initiated when the Reformation was introduced in the Northern Netherlands, during the 1570s and 1580s.<sup>54</sup> This, and the fact that guilds in Flanders and Brabant spent a lot on public display to sustain their political positions, makes it quite unlikely that the percentage of guilds with social provisions was higher in that region than in the Northern Netherlands.<sup>55</sup>

It is precisely these features of the corporate system that were highlighted in the late eighteenth century, when discussions about the abolition of the guilds got underway. Although guilds had been criticised before, there was no broad agreement that they were somehow obstacles to economic progress. Criticism of the guilds, and attempts to abolish them,

51 These regional patterns are discussed more elaborately in Maarten Prak, 'Corporate politics', 74-106.

52 Aart Vos, *Burgers, broeders en bazen: Het maatschappelijk middenveld in 's-Hertogenbosch in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw* (Hilversum 2007) chapter 4; also Streng, *Vrijheid, gelijkheid*, chapter 4; Slokker, *Ruggengraat van de stad*, chapter 11.

53 Marco H.D. van Leeuwen, 'Guilds and middle class welfare, 1550-1800: Provisions for burial, sickness, old age, and widowhood', *The Economic History Review* 65 (2012) 63.

54 Sandra Bos, *Uyt liefde tot malcander. Onderlinge hulpverlening binnen de Noord-Nederlandse gilden in internationaal perspectief (1570-1820)* (Amsterdam 1998).

55 Sandra Bos, 'A tradition of giving and receiving: Mutual aid within the guild system', in: Prak, Lis, Lucassen and Soly (eds.), *Craft guilds*, 192.

were overwhelmingly politically motivated.<sup>56</sup> Attempts to prevent their dissolution were, moreover, spearheaded by local governments, not the least of which was that bulwark of early capitalism, the city of Amsterdam. For urban elites, guilds were part and parcel of the autonomy of towns, and more broadly perceived as a system of governance in which the centre was relatively weak and authority concentrated in local institutions.<sup>57</sup>

Craft guilds were, of course, in no way unique to the Low Countries. A lot of new research on other European regions helps to set the results of research on the Low Countries against a broader background, keeping in mind at the same time that the Low Countries themselves were far from homogeneous as a guilds 'landscape'.<sup>58</sup> Such European comparisons confirm the observation that guilds everywhere not only survived far into the Post-Medieval Period, but actually flourished, as many new organisations were created. They likewise demonstrate that high levels of corporate organisation were compatible with innovation and economic growth. Further, they show that on every occasion that guilds were abolished around 1800, this was for political rather than economic reasons.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, to date such comparisons have failed to point to general patterns that apply everywhere.

Global comparisons, some of them initiated by scholars from the Low Countries, have suggested a number of additional points.<sup>60</sup> The first is that some sorts of craft organisations were found throughout pre-modern Eurasia. In Asia, the professional basis was mixed with other elements, most notably those of social background: caste in India and region of origin in China. The jury is still out on the – essentially Weberian – question of whether these differences were indicative of a more fundamental problem in non-Western societies. One argument is that Max Weber was correct in his analysis that outside Europe, social positions and economic activities were essentially 'ascriptive' (i.e. connected to family origins) and that European 'freedoms' were an essential ingredient of what we have come

56 Wiskerke, *Afschaffing*, 95-96; Karel Davids, 'From De la Court to Vreede: Regulation and self-regulation in Dutch economic discourse between 1660 and the Napoleonic Era', *The Journal of European Economic History* 30 (2001) 245-89; Haupt (ed.), *Ende*.

57 See the discussion below.

58 Lucassen, Prak, 'Conclusion', 228-229; the term 'guild landscape' comes from Reininghaus (ed.), *Zunftlandschaften*.

59 David Stasavage, 'Was Weber right? Guilds, political oligarchy, and the rise of Europe', forthcoming in the *American Political Science Review*, suggests that they may have been less helpful in the long run.

60 Lucassen, De Moor and van Zanden (eds.), *The return of the guilds*.

to call the 'great divergence'.<sup>61</sup> In this view, easy access to the guilds set European guilds apart from those elsewhere. An alternative explanation highlights the underlying uniformity in craft organisations throughout Eurasia and the variation in what the guilds were actually doing. Formalised training and testing of skills through examination, i.e. the production of a masterpiece, have been suggested as explanations for the innovative character of European craft production.<sup>62</sup>

### Corporatism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – continuity or change?

In all of the Low Countries the guilds were, after various earlier abolitions, finally abolished by law in 1820, when a decision was taken about the guilds' properties. This law, in combination with the series of previous attempts, effectively put an end to most guild activities and their disguised equivalents. In the Northern Netherlands, the French authorities had already terminated guild activities in 1812, a decision confirmed in 1818 and finalised by the liquidation of their assets in 1820.<sup>63</sup> In some branches of industry in some towns, informal agreements among producers continued to function well into the nineteenth century,<sup>64</sup> but the days of the guilds as effective organisations were well and truly over by 1820.<sup>65</sup> Three elements did survive, however. The first remaining element of the guilds was their symbolic repertoire and the sense of community attached to it. W.H. Sewell

61 Max Weber, *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), chapter 16 ('The city'); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the making of the modern world economy* (Princeton 2000).

62 See the essays collected in Maarten Prak and Jan Luiten van Zanden (eds.), *Technology, skills and the pre-modern economy in the East and the West* Global Economic History Series Vol. 10 (Leiden 2013).

63 Wiskerke, *Afschaffing*; there is no equivalent work for Flanders. For the rest of Europe, see Haupt (ed.), *Ende*.

64 Jan Luiten van Zanden, 'De introductie van stoom in de Amsterdamse meelfabricage 1828-1855; over de rol van marktstructuren, ondernemersgedrag en de overheid', *Jaarboek voor de Geschiedenis van Bedrijfs- en Techniekgeschiedenis* 8 (1991) 63-80.

65 Much 19th-century material is preserved in local guild archives, material that has not yet been studied systematically. The issue of institutional continuity was already discussed in J.G. van Dillen, 'Gildewezen en publiekrechtelijke bedrijfsorganisatie', *De Sociale Gids* (1934), 785-797, 860-874; Jan Lucassen, *Jan, Jan Salie en diens kinderen: Vergelijkend onderzoek naar continuïteit en discontinuïteit in de ontwikkeling van arbeidsverhoudingen* (Amsterdam 1991) chapter iii; C.A. Davids, *De macht der gewoonte? Economische ontwikkeling en institutionele context in Nederland op de lange termijn*, inaugural lecture Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, June 1995.

claimed to have demonstrated such continuity, but the actual evidence proved to be suggestive rather than substantive.<sup>66</sup> For the Low Countries too, this appears to be the case.<sup>67</sup>

Second, some of the insurance funds that some of the guilds had collected in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were continued as separate organisations. A survey conducted by the government to prepare the ground for the liquidation of guild assets, found that in 1820, guild funds were still active in Guelders, in Dutch Brabant, and in various towns in the province of Holland. However, all of these were suffering from the fact that guild membership was no longer compulsory and from the poor state of the economy.<sup>68</sup> In Flanders, it proved more difficult to demonstrate a direct continuity. In Ghent, *mutualités* emerged in artisanal industries. They used the language, the patron saints and other symbols of the guilds, but they were essentially new organisations constituting a transitional phase between the Old Regime and the industrial world. They no longer took responsibility for skills training, for example, and were also open to members from outside the craft, even when they were essentially professional organisations. At the same time, they were not yet trade unions either, and their insurance funds were not secret strike funds, as some over-anxious bourgeois and over-zealous proto-socialists assumed.<sup>69</sup>

The third element of the guild tradition to survive their abolition was the idea, or rather the ideal, of the guilds.<sup>70</sup> From the middle of the nineteenth century, conservative and mostly religiously-motivated commentators began to use the abolition of the guilds as one of the arguments against what they saw as the evils of modern society. In this vein, G. Groen van Prinsterer, one of the most outspoken Dutch critics of the French Revolution and its legacy, published a series of lectures in 1848 in which he mentioned the guilds as one example where the promises of the revolution had failed to

66 William H. Sewell Jr., *Work and revolution in France: The language of labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge 1980); Lynn Hunt, George Sheridan, 'Corporatism, association, and the language of labor in France, 1750-1850', *Journal of Modern History* 58 (1986) 813-844.

67 Lucassen, *Jan, Jan Salie en diens kinderen*, 32.

68 Loes van der Valk, 'Gilden, gildenbussen en vrijwillige contracten: De ontwikkeling van de verzekeringmarkt 1780-1850', *TvSG* 27 (2001) 184-187; Joost van Genabeek, *Met vereende kracht risico's verzacht: De plaats van onderlinge hulp binnen de negentiende-eeuwse particuliere regelingen van sociale zekerheid* (Amsterdam 1999) chapters 2-3.

69 Kathlijn Pittomvils, 'De Gentse maatschappijen van onderlinge bijstand in de eerste helft van de negentiende eeuw: Solidariteit, staking en/of segmentering?', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 25 (1994-95) 433-479.

70 Adriejan van Veen, 'De Kamers van Arbeid: Experimenten met politieke vertegenwoordiging in Nederland rond 1900', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden (BMGN)* 128 (2013) 36-37.

deliver. The abolition of the guilds in favour of the free reign of competition had brought about a world 'in which social ties have been ruptured, the rich and the banks have become predominant, while artisans and workers are deprived of a secure livelihood, society is divided into two hostile armies, a mass of paupers has emerged, and the attack of the property-less on the propertied is being prepared'.<sup>71</sup>

In a similar vein, A. Kuyper, the protestant leader and founder of the first political party in the Netherlands, lamented the disappearance of the guilds.<sup>72</sup> In Flanders, inevitably, corporatism was a product of the Catholic Church's attempts to come to terms with 'modernity'. Here too, the guilds were an important source of inspiration.<sup>73</sup>

The fundamental reason for the discontinuity between guilds and labour unions was, as A. Knotter demonstrated with reference to Amsterdam, that these organisations addressed two different social classes.<sup>74</sup> From the point of view of the bourgeoisie, both might concern 'ordinary people', but whereas the membership of the guilds had been self-employed craftsmen who prided themselves on their independence and status as propertied men, as much as on their skills, the modern labour union recruited wage labourers; men and women who were in somebody else's pay. Artisans who wanted to protect their independent status created co-operatives, which proved a dead-end street in terms of socio-political impact. In the long run, organisations of employers and employees would emerge as the dominant forces of the twentieth century.

Several surveys have summed up the literature on 'corporatist' labour relations in the Low Countries at various points, and for the purposes of this chapter it makes little sense to do more than briefly summarise the results of these surveys, which also provide extensive bibliographies.<sup>75</sup> Much of the research in this field has been produced not by historians, but by economists, sociologists and political scientists. In this literature,

71 G. Groen van Prinsterer, *Vrijheid, gelijkheid, broederschap: Toelichting van de spreuk der revolutie* (The Hague 1848) chapter 4; quote on page 83.

72 A. Kuyper, *De arbeiderskwesitie en de kerk* (Amsterdam 1871) 15-24.

73 Dirk Luyten, *Ideologisch debat en politieke strijd over het corporatisme tijdens het interbellum in België* Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België, Klasse der Letteren, Vol. 159 (Brussels 1996) 23-25.

74 Ad Knotter, 'Van "defensieve standsreflex" tot "verkoopkartel van arbeidskracht": Twee fasen in de ontwikkeling van de Amsterdamse arbeidersvakbeweging (ca. 1870-ca. 1895)', *TvSG* 19 (1993) 68-93.

75 Doreen Arnoldus, Karel Davids, Gregory Vercauteren and Ivan Wijnans, 'De groei van de overlegeconomie in Nederland en België', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis (TSEG)* 1 (2004) 76-109.

we can distinguish three distinct strands, which address the development of the organisations representing capital and labour, the emergence of the platforms where these met and finally, the policies they designed.

The historical literature concerning organisations consists to an important extent of straightforward histories of the various labour unions and associations of employees. The first employers' organisations emerged during the 1890s as a reaction to the formation of labour unions and in opposition to government legislation. Nonetheless, they managed to become formidable opponents, and later also very active participants in the corporatist framework.<sup>76</sup> For Dutch unions, the equivalent of Wiskerke's book on the guilds was published in a paper by Th. van Tijn in 1974.<sup>77</sup> Inspired by international social science literature, Van Tijn broke with the idealistic view of labour unions and described them as 'cartels of labour'. He defined their 'success' in terms of the contracts they managed to negotiate with employers. His theory, which was actually more an analytic framework, attempted to identify the conditions that allowed unions to conclude a centralised wage deal with employers' organisations. Subsequent research by his PhD students modified the results, in particular by highlighting the role of government, which had been marginal in Van Tijn's model.<sup>78</sup> Radically different levels of unionisation in Belgium and the Netherlands at the same time make short shrift of the assumption that the two countries can be easily classified under the same corporatist umbrella.<sup>79</sup>

Recent work on the Dutch *Sociaal-Economische Raad* (SER, Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands) and its predecessors has put to rest the assumption that regular negotiations between employers, labour and the government were the result of attempts at political innovation during and after the Second World War. In fact, the first platforms were created in the final years of the nineteenth century. These local Chambers of Labour were voluntary organisations designed to stimulate mutual understanding

76 Joris Van Ruysseveldt, Jelle Visser, 'Weak corporatism going different ways? Industrial relations in the Netherlands and Belgium', in: Van Ruysseveldt and Visser (eds.), *Industrial relations in Europe: Traditions and transitions* (London 1996) 218-222.

77 Theo van Tijn, 'Bijdrage tot de wetenschappelijke studie van de vakbondsgeschiedenis', *Mededelingenblad van de Nederlandse Vereniging tot Beoefening van de Sociale Geschiedenis* nr. 46 (1974) 89-108; translated as 'A contribution to the scientific study of trade unions', *IRSH* 21 (1976) 212-239.

78 Marlou Schrover, Erik Nijhof and Peter Kruizinga, 'Marx, markt, macht: Van Tijns analyse-schema ter verklaring van het succes of falen van vakbonden', in: Boudien de Vries et al (eds.), *De kracht der zwakken. Studies over arbeid en arbeidersbeweging in het verleden* IISG: Studies + Essays, Vol. 18 (Amsterdam 1992) 193-246.

79 Guy Van Gyes, Jesse Segers, Erik Henderickx, 'Het Belgische collectieve systeem van arbeidsverhoudingen gespiegeld aan Nederland', *Tijdschrift voor HRM* 1 (2009) 73, 76-78.

between unions and employers, but without any formal authority. Their impact was disappointing.<sup>80</sup> Nonetheless, it was decided to expand their remit quite dramatically. A national Supreme Council of Labour (*Hoge Raad van Arbeid*) was set up in 1920, as part of the overall expansion of state involvement in the regulation of the economy and society.<sup>81</sup> That whole process was strongly inspired by the corporatist ideology prevalent among Christian-democrat politicians.<sup>82</sup> Between the two world wars, the Dutch state created the foundations for what was to become the welfare state, as well as the organisational structures that would make representatives of capital and labour responsible for much of its execution. As a result, in addition to the parliamentary channels of individual representation through the ballot, a second representational structure of collective interests was created. Theoretically, the two would always sit uncomfortably together, because of overlapping and at times conflicting agendas.<sup>83</sup> In practice, stakeholders were usually able to carve out a relationship that worked to mutual benefit.<sup>84</sup> The portrayal of the Second World War as the 'critical watershed' in Europe's recent history is therefore seriously misleading with regard to the regulation of the economy and society.<sup>85</sup>

Whereas the earliest supporters of corporatist structures saw them as an alternative to state regulation, the result has been quite different. Corporatist societies tend to have high levels of taxation, large bureaucracies and a great deal of direct state intervention. The government is no passive bystander in the negotiations between labour and capital.<sup>86</sup> Instead, corporatist structures have permitted political interventions in economic and social processes that would have been otherwise impossible under democratic rule. Between 1945 and 1962, wage levels in the Netherlands for example were dictated by the government. During the 1980s, the Belgian government directly intervened in the economy on several occasions by setting wage levels. In 1996, it brokered an agreement between capital

80 Coen Helderman, 'De Kamers van Arbeid 1897-1922: Een mislukte poging tot bedrijfsorganisatie', *TvSG* 27 (2001) 77-98.

81 Coen Helderman, 'De Hoge Raad van Arbeid, 1919-1940(-1950)', *TSEG* 1 (2004) 45-70.

82 Van Veen, 'Kamers van Arbeid'.

83 Ido de Haan, 'Parlementaire democratie en maatschappelijke organisatie: De politieke context van de Sociaal-Economische Raad', in: Bas van Bavel et al., *SER 1950-2010: Zestig jaar denken voor draagvlak – advies voor economie en samenleving* (Amsterdam 2010) 23-48.

84 Jelle Visser and Anton Hemerijck, 'A Dutch miracle': *Job growth, welfare reform and corporatism in the Netherlands* (Amsterdam 1997) emphasise 'policy learning' as an important (incremental) feature of corporatism. See also Peter Lindert, *Growing public: Social spending and economic growth since the eighteenth century*, Vol. 1: *The story* (Cambridge 2004) chapter 12.

85 Hemerijck, 'Corporatist governance', 39.

86 *Ibidem*, 33-34, 55-56, 63.

and labour to fight unemployment. The Dutch government achieved the same – the well-known Wassenaar Agreement – by threatening a similar intervention in 1982.<sup>87</sup>

The most difficult part has been the evaluation of the results of the policies implemented by these platforms, or by the government at their instigation. Inevitably, much depends on the criteria that are applied to the comparison. With that caveat, however, various authors have been at pains to point out that the overall economic performance of corporatist societies does not suggest that they were structurally handicapped by their institutional structures, or their extended welfare arrangements with attendant high levels of taxation.<sup>88</sup> For example, P.A. Hall and D. Soskice compared what they call ‘coordinated market economies’ (which include Belgium and the Netherlands), with the liberal market economies of the UK and the US. They presented data that shows the former to perform marginally worse in terms of economic growth, but still produce higher GDP per capita and consistently provide higher rates of employment. In other words, they do markedly better in the social domain and slightly worse in the economic domain.<sup>89</sup> In one of the most powerful analyses along these lines, the American economic historian P. Lindert portrayed the European welfare regimes as a ‘free lunch’, which miraculously combined economic growth with social justice.<sup>90</sup> The key to this winning combination is ‘human capital’, which is becoming increasingly important as a factor of production in post-industrial economies and whose role in earlier societies has been re-evaluated as a result.<sup>91</sup> Historians of the guilds will instantly recognise the elements of skills formation and social welfare as two features characteristic of craft guilds.

## The organisation of society

Accordingly, we end up with a still larger canvas on which to paint the picture of corporatism. Whereas most of the literature employing the term

87 Van Ruysseveldt and Visser, ‘Weak corporatism’, 208-18.

88 Hemerijck, ‘Corporatist governance’, 76-77.

89 Peter A. Hall and David Soskice, ‘An introduction to varieties of capitalism’, in: Hall and Soskice (eds.), *Varieties of capitalism: The institutional foundations of comparative advantage* (Oxford 2001) 20.

90 Lindert, *Growing public*, 16-19, 306-307.

91 E.g. the essays in Prak and Van Zanden (eds.), *Technology, skills and the pre-modern economy*; also Darius Ornston, ‘Creative corporatism: The politics of high-technology competition in Nordic Europe’, *Comparative Political Studies* 46 (2013) 702-729.

'corporatism' focuses on industrial organisation, and more particularly labour relations, an undercurrent of work seeks to expand the patterns in these areas to a much broader typology of socio-economic systems, or indeed whole societies. An obvious example is the Dutch debate over the *Poldermodel*, a term originally coined in the context of labour relations, but according to some authors – including the present one – applicable to this wider canvas.<sup>92</sup> What unites this strand of research with the other two discussed above, is the fundamental question of the relationship between the state and its citizens. Under the Old Regime, state authority was partly delegated to, and therefore shared with, civil society organisations such as guilds. It was left to the post-Napoleonic states of continental Europe to produce alternative forms of personal freedom, where these were enshrined in revolutionary constitutions and practiced by parliamentary regimes. However, liberal individualism turned out to be as complex as the collective arrangements of the Old Regime had been, when it became clear that the individual was impotent *vis-à-vis* the power of the state, which in turn and as a result, failed to address major socio-economic issues related to industrialisation. This then led to a new wave of organisation building that included the creation of political parties, labour unions and employer organisations, but also forced the state to come to terms with the role of these organisations in the political domain.<sup>93</sup>

Such interactions have themselves been portrayed as a distinctive feature of Europe's socio-economic and political makeup, setting the continent apart from, on the one hand, the US where markets have been traditionally the dominant economic force, and on the other, various Asian societies, both of the capitalist and communist varieties, where the state has a much larger role to play.<sup>94</sup> Europe's corporatist model has therefore sometimes been dubbed the 'third way'.<sup>95</sup> So what arguments can be advanced in favour of the proposition that corporatism refers to a certain type of society? And which historical roots have been identified to explain the emergence of such societies?

92 Maarten Prak and Jan Luiten van Zanden, *Nederland en het poldermodel: Sociaal-economische geschiedenis van Nederland, 1000-2000* (Amsterdam 2013), and the debate about this book in *BMGN* 129 (2014) 88-133.

93 Colin Crouch, *Industrial relations and European state traditions* (Oxford 1993) 298.

94 Hemerijck, 'Corporatist governance', 29.

95 See especially Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (Cambridge 1998), and Giddens, *The Third Way and its critics* (Cambridge 2000); Crouch, *Industrial relations*, chapter 11, is one of many works highlighting the role of social-democratic parties in the creation of corporatist labour relations.

By the late medieval and Early Modern Period in Europe, the ‘corporation’ or ‘*Korporation*’ already referred to much more than just guilds.<sup>96</sup> A corporation was a group of people, united for a specified purpose, with a legal status.<sup>97</sup> That legal status was established in privileges, i.e. legal documents granted by the authorities. The organisations established by such privileges – which could range from civic militias to the nobility, and from universities to whole towns – usually shared a number of features. They were allowed to select their own administrators (usually subject to approval by the authorities), run their own affairs (autonomy), raise and spend funds for the purpose, present collective demands and represent their members, and require candidates to meet certain professional, moral, and other standards before they were admitted to the membership.<sup>98</sup> Many corporations also served more goals than just the primary purpose of their creation. Guilds, for example, were not merely professional associations, but could also act as political platforms, provide charity and support worship in local churches.<sup>99</sup> In *Ancien Régime* France, corporations were underwriting the public debt.<sup>100</sup>

Modern social theorists have likewise presented comprehensive analyses of certain types of societies, subsumed under the label ‘corporatist’. The political scientist, P. Katzenstein, portrayed corporatism as a phenomenon of small European states with open, export-oriented economies and a non-revolutionary past. Katzenstein’s essentially functionalist approach sees corporatism as a mechanism for dealing with the social and economic insecurities that emerge from excessive dependence on export markets.<sup>101</sup> C. Crouch’s work comes closer to the topic that interests us, because he dealt explicitly with industrial relations in the pre-modern era and under industrialisation. An important element in his argument about corporatist politics is related to the survival of guilds into the modern era. For a variety of reasons this happened relatively late, Crouch argues, in the two former

96 Gervase Rosser, ‘Crafts, guilds, and the negotiation of work in the medieval town’, *Past and present*, 154 (1997) 10-13, 30.

97 Wolfgang Hardtwig, ‘Korporation’, in: Friedrich Jaeger (ed.), *Enzyklopädie der Neuzeit*, Vol. 7 (Stuttgart 2008) col. 59; Jay M. Smith, ‘Corporate and estate organization’, in: Alan Charles Kors (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment* (Oxford 2003) 297-302.

98 Prak, *Republikeinse veelheid*, chapter 7; Tine De Moor ‘The silent revolution: A new perspective on the emergence of commons, guilds and other forms of corporate collective action in Western Europe’, in: Lucassen, De Moor and Van Zanden (eds.), *The return of the guilds*, 179-212.

99 James R. Farr, *Artisans in Europe, 1300-1914* (Cambridge 2000) chapters 4 and 6.

100 Bien, ‘Offices, corps, and the system of state credit’.

101 Peter J. Katzenstein, *Small states in world markets: Industrial policy in Europe* (Ithaca 1985) chapter 4 and *passim*.

continental empires of Germany and Austria, and in the republican federations of the Netherlands and Switzerland. Apart from Switzerland, these were all late industrialisers.<sup>102</sup> This combination of weak state centres and slow-moving economic modernisation allowed these states to absorb older structures of socio-economic representation into their political structures. In Britain, guilds had already declined before the onset of industrialisation. In France and Mediterranean Europe, the central state had to be constructed in direct confrontation with the guilds (and the Catholic Church).<sup>103</sup> The position of Belgium in this scheme is somewhat ambiguous. G. Esping-Andersen's well-known *Three worlds of welfare capitalism* (1990), distinguishes between liberal, corporatist and social-democratic regimes. It classifies Austria, France, Germany and Italy in the corporatist group, while the Scandinavian countries are typically in the social-democratic league. The Netherlands are situated on the liberal side of social-democracy and Belgium on the corporatist edge of the same group. The historical roots of these regimes are identified only superficially.<sup>104</sup>

These works all constitute ambitious attempts at comparative analyses of Europe's socio-political landscape and history. They all portray that landscape as varied. For all of them, some form of corporatism is part of the story. At the same time, one cannot help but note how they all classify European states in slightly different ways and disagree about which countries were properly 'corporatist' and which were not.<sup>105</sup> That makes it difficult to match the results of these various exercises in comparative history. This is primarily the result of methodological issues concerning comparison. These comparisons address different levels of generalisation, and in addition, different topics at those different levels. Comparative history seems to work best when the 'outcome' or 'dependent variable' is clearly defined.<sup>106</sup> It is easier, in other words, to explain through a comparative analysis, wage levels than corporatist structures of economic regulation, and it is in turn easier to explain those structures than whole societies. The implication seems to be that we will have to accept wider margins of error when the 'scale' of the outcome increases.

102 Crouch, *Industrial relations*, 314-315, 332.

103 *Ibidem*, chapters 9-10.

104 Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *Three worlds of welfare capitalism* (Cambridge 1990) 26-32, 70.

105 Wil A. Arts, John Gelissen, 'Models of the Welfare State', in: Francis G. Castles et al., (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Welfare State* (Oxford 2010) 575-576.

106 For comparative analyses in terms of 'outcomes', see Charles Ragin, *The comparative method: Moving beyond qualitative and quantitative strategies* (Berkeley 1989).

## Conclusions

Corporatism refers to co-ordination mechanisms that straddle the economic, social and political domains. More precisely, corporatism employs political organisations to correct market imperfections and externalities with the help of social mechanisms. Typically, corporatism bundles together labour relations and welfare arrangements with a political voice, to create outcomes of balanced, or 'general', interests. As such, it is a key feature of what is also known as Europe's 'co-ordinated market economies'. Corporatism, in other words, is not the opposite of capitalism, but its complement. For precisely this reason, guilds can no longer be portrayed as indicative of underdevelopment. They were part and parcel of the innovative industries that emerged in the late Middle Ages and Early Modern Period in the Low Countries, as well as of the prosperity that these industries produced. High levels of urbanisation caused significant percentages of the population to be drafted into the guild system and its attendant social security. One thing that also stands out from the literature, however, is that the straightforward generalisations – which used to be popular among earlier generations of scholars – cannot do justice to the varieties of historical experience. The debate about the 'good' and 'bad' of the guilds is likely to remain inconclusive, and the same may well be true about the pros and cons of the welfare state. This is not only because we lack the data to properly test the main hypotheses, but more importantly because these ignore the fact that institutions can have different effects under different circumstances.

The next step in this research area is to develop a comparative framework that will allow us to specify those circumstances, and datasets that will be sufficiently homogeneous to allow meaningful comparisons. Given the state of the sources, it is to be expected that such comparisons will be most fruitful at the level of nation states for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but that for earlier periods, local or regional comparisons will produce better results. Moreover, research agendas need to be better integrated. The three strands of corporatism research have much in common, but nevertheless tend to ignore each other's results. What historians can offer to this debate is the long-term data at their disposal, which allow them to observe the full lifecycle of corporatist institutions.

## About the author

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