

The Silent Revolution: A New Perspective on the Emergence of Commons, Guilds, and Other Forms of Corporate Collective Action in Western Europe*

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A SILENT REVOLUTION?

During the late Middle ages, to an extent and with an intensity previously unknown, Europeans formed alliances which were based primarily not on kinship, but on some other common characteristic such as occupation. Guilds and fraternities were organizations providing good examples of that in urban settings, while in rural areas the late Middle Ages were the period when communal land tenure arrangements, or simply “commons”, were increasingly frequently formed and then institutionalized. It is not the actual formation of such types of collective action that is so striking, nor did their institutional characteristics make the region in that period at all exceptional, for as the essays in this volume demonstrate, craftsmen and merchants formed guilds elsewhere and in other times.

It was, however, the great intensity of the formation of new units of such collective action that makes this movement striking enough to refer to it as a “silent revolution”. A revolution, inasmuch as it was a movement which started from below, and because it might prove to have been as important to the ultimate course of European history as any other revolution; and silent, in that it was at first based primarily on tacit agreements between powerful rulers and demanding subjects, whether villagers or townsmen, and became explicit, which is to say written down, only after a time.

Mostly such agreements were formed peacefully. The rather discreet development of the forms of collective action described here means that for a long time it remained an unnoticed revolution too. Most attention in research into collective action has been devoted to short-term demands for change in the form of riots, protest demonstrations, and the like as motors of democratization and political change. In this article I will argue that the silent revolution to a large extent created the institutional

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infrastructure for socio-political change, and so for other forms of collective action which became characteristic in western Europe and came to be considered as a vital ingredient in preparing for its exceptional economic head start.

It would be quite exaggerated for me to claim discovery of this revolution. Several authors have already pointed to similar trends, either in rural areas¹ or in cities.² The point I want to make here is that most of them have missed the co-evolution of these developments, and by doing so they have failed to identify the major forces that led to this “revolution”. So far, these trends have been considered only in a fragmentary way, and have not been seen clearly enough as being coherent. Although in the literature both guilds, whether of merchants or of craftsmen, and commons have already been identified as institutions functioning according to the “law” of collective action, they have never been linked by reference to their simultaneous emergence, their parallel development, their similarities in structure, and in their functioning, rise, and decline.³ I suggest that there were links between the new institutions, rural and urban alike, and the specific development trajectory of the European economy between about 1100 and 1800.

The only historian so far who has in fact associated the development of different types of cooperative institutions, and who has done so for both rural and urban settings, is Susan Reynolds for the period 900–1300.⁴ According to Reynolds, lay society and government depended in that period “in a mass of different ways on the collective activities of a wide range of people [...] as a matter of course in support of government, as well as in opposition to it”.⁵ She stresses that the homogeneity of the set of values that combined inequality and subordination with a high degree of voluntary cooperation laid the foundation of the new raft of

1. In Blickle’s view *Kommunalismus* expresses “the mutual dependency of independent labor organizations of burghers and peasants on the one hand, and communes with state functions on the other (the commune imposed itself as a horizontal principle within the socio-political system from the thirteenth century). These two complementary factors challenged and altered the wider political regime by means of representation and resistance, establishing ‘communalism’ as a fundamental organizational principle between medieval and modern times.” See Peter Blickle, *From the Communal Reformation to the Revolution of the Common Man* (Leiden [etc.], 1998), p. 12.

2. Avner Greif, *Institutions and the Path to the Modern Economy: Lessons From Medieval Trade* (Cambridge [etc.], 2006).

3. See Avner Greif, Paul Milgrom, and Barry R. Weingast, “Coordination, Commitment, and Enforcement: The Case of the Merchant Guild”, *The Journal of Political Economy*, 102 (1994), pp. 745–776, on merchant guilds. On craft guilds, see Sheilagh Ogilvie, “Guilds, Efficiency, and Social Capital: Evidence from German Proto-Industry”, *Economic History Review*, 57 (2004), pp. 286–333.

4. Susan Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900–1300* (Oxford, 1997).

5. *Ibid.*, p. 332.

institutions that could be detected in the late Middle Ages, and which is the central point of this article.⁶

At the same time, we can detect a parallel but opposite demise at the end of the eighteenth century when both types of institution had gone through a long period of criticism fuelled by very similar arguments, the bottom line of which was the belief that these institutions were the enemies of innovation and economic progress. Did these remnants of a feudal, medieval, and backward past not limit the development of a nation's economy and its population's growth? Did they not restrict the implementation of the free market and the ambition of the individual mind? The kind of rhetoric that attacked those organizations during the eighteenth century (including the physiocratic movement) is to a large degree applicable to both types.⁷ In those times of legal reform towards the establishment of absolute private property and growing individualism, the very *raison d'être* of commons and guilds was at stake.

That view had to a certain extent been taken over by the historiography but has altered lately, thanks mainly to a more careful assessment of the economic effects of guilds and commons, and to a generally greater stress now being laid on the importance to economic development of institutions.⁸ Greif sees the formation of merchant guilds in the late Middle Ages as the distinguishing moment in European economic development. Guilds underpinned the "community responsibility system" according to which communities (i.e. towns) threatened to boycott each other if individual members of their communities did not honour their obligations – if,

6. Arguments similar to those made by Reynolds but relating to the development of merchant guilds can be found in Meir Kohn's forthcoming book, *The Origins of Western Economic Success: Commerce, Finance, and Government in Preindustrial Europe*, <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~mkohn/orgins.html> [last accessed on 19 June 2008]. See ch. 16 on merchant associations in preindustrial Europe.

7. On the economic motivations of the physiocrats, see E. Fox-Genovese, *The Origins of Physiocracy: Economic Revolution and Social Order in Eighteenth-Century France* (London, 1976). On the discussion of the abolition of the commons in western Europe, see the European chapters in Marie-Danielle Demélas and Nadine Vivier (eds), *Les propriétés collectives face aux attaques libérales (1750–1914). Europe occidentale et Amérique latine* (Rennes, 2003). On Belgium, see Martina De Moor, "Les terres communes en Belgique", in Demélas and Vivier, *Les propriétés collectives face aux attaques libérales*. On the new ideas about property, linked to the abolition of common property, see Rosa Congost and José Miguel Lana (eds), *Campos Cerrados, Debates Abiertos. Análisis Histórico y Propiedad de la Tierra en Europa (Siglos XVI–XIX)* (Pamplona, 2007). On the abolition of the guilds in the Low Countries, see Bert De Munck, Piet Lourens, and Jan Lucassen, "The Establishment and Distribution of Craft Guilds in the Low Countries 1000–1800", in Maarten Prak et al. (eds), *Craft Guilds in the Early Modern Low Countries: Work, Power and Representation* (Aldershot, 2006), pp. 61–64.

8. Following, of course, the studies carried out within the field of New Institutional Economics.

for example, they defaulted on their debts.⁹ That laid the foundation for the institutional development of western Europe in later periods too. Others have stressed the role guilds played in the transfer of technology.¹⁰

In more general ways, the recent social and economic historiography has seen a remarkable “return of the guilds”, thanks to detailed work on the actual operation and development of those institutions,¹¹ while recent work on commons has tended to alter the formerly negative view of their functioning. Bob Allen, for example, has compared the agricultural output of enclosed villages, which supposedly invested more in crop rotation and innovation, and open-field villages, and found that the productivity of the land was no higher in the former.¹² His rather pessimistic view of the potential contribution of enclosures to the increase in agricultural productivity, and later industrialization, contrasts with previous claims by Michael Turner and Donald McCloskey, among others, of productivity rises of up to 25 per cent after enclosure.¹³ At the same time, the institutional adaptability of the commons has been thought

9. See also Greif, Milgrom, and Weingast, “Coordination, Commitment, and Enforcement: The Case of the Merchant Guild”. Greif also looks beyond the guilds: “although the late medieval European institutions differ in form from those that followed, many of the elements and features of modern, welfare-enhancing Western-style institutions were already present or in the process of emerging during the late medieval period: individualism, man-made formal law, corporatism, self-governance, and rules reflecting a legitimate institutionalized process in which those who were subject to them had a voice and influence. To the extent that the Rise of the West is due to its underpinning institutions, [...] the roots of this rise may have begun to take hold as early as the late medieval period”; Avner Greif, *Institutions: Theory and History (Book-in-Progress)* (Stanford, CA, 2005), p. 1 of part 5, concluding comments.

10. See S.R. Epstein, “Craft Guilds, Apprenticeship, and Technological Change in Preindustrial Europe”, *The Journal of Economic History*, 58 (1998), pp. 684–713; Maarten Prak, “Guilds and the Development of the Art Market during the Dutch Golden Age”, *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 30 (2003), pp. 236–251.

11. Maarten Prak, “Corporate Politics in the Low Countries: Guilds as Institutions, 14th to 18th Centuries”, in Prak, *Craft Guilds in the Early Modern Low Countries*, pp. 74–106.

12. Robert C. Allen, *Enclosure and the Yeoman: The Agricultural Development of the South Midlands, 1450–1850* (Oxford, 1992).

13. Donald N. McCloskey, “The Enclosure of Open Fields: Preface to a Study of Its Impact on the Efficiency of English Agriculture in the Eighteenth Century”, *The Journal of Economic History*, 32:1 (1972), pp. 15–35. See also *idem*, “The Economics of Enclosure: A Market Analysis”, in William N. Parker and E.L. Jones, *European Peasants and Their Markets: Essays in Agrarian Economic History* (Princeton, NJ, 1975), pp. 123–160; *idem*, “The Open Fields of England: Rent, Risk and the Rate of Interest, 1300–1815”, in David W. Galenson, *Markets in History: Economic Studies of the Past* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 5–51; Michael Turner, “Agricultural Productivity in England in the Eighteenth Century: Evidence from Crop Yields”, *Economic History Review*, 35 (1982), pp. 489–510; *idem*, “English Open Fields and Enclosures: Retardation or Productivity Improvements”, *Journal of Economic History*, 46 (1986), pp. 669–692; J.A. Yelling, *Common Field and Enclosure in England, 1450–1859* (Hamden, CT, 1977); Carl Johan Dahlgren, *The Open Field System and Beyond: A Property Rights Analysis of an Economic Institution* (Cambridge, 1980).

of by several researchers as an asset in times of rapid social and economic change.¹⁴

This article contributes to the discussion about the role in the developing market economy of craft guilds and commons, and by analysing their institutional design I intend to demonstrate that institutions of both types should be seen as reactions to the risks and uncertainties of the new market environment, having the aim of adapting economic strategies to its demands and stabilizing social and economic relationships. Because of their omnipresence in north-western Europe from the late Middle Ages onward guilds and commons are the most suitable cases for studying corporate collective action in this “silent revolution”. I will concentrate on the Low Countries, a region that saw an early and strong development of institutions, especially in Flanders to the south. Other forms of corporate collective action that are part of the silent revolution include fraternities, brotherhoods with mainly religious purposes, and the *beguinages*, where women chose to live a religious life together independently without belonging to any religious order or convent.¹⁵ I will not include institutions of that kind in this discussion, but it would be worthwhile to consider them too, from the perspective of corporate collective action. In some literature the *beguinages* have even been described as female versions of guilds, although that was primarily because *beguines* were often involved in craft businesses, usually textiles.¹⁶

I shall start by briefly defining craft guilds and commons, sketching their genesis in the high Middle Ages. The focus will then switch to identifying the distinctive characteristics of this movement of collective

14. Congost and Lana, *Campos Cerrados, Debates Abiertos*; José Miguel Lana, “From Equilibrium to Equity: The Survival of the Commons in the Ebro Basin: Navarra from the 15th to the 20th Centuries”, *International Journal of the Commons*, 2 (2008), pp. 162–191; and Tine De Moor, “Avoiding Tragedies: A Flemish Common and its Commoners under the Pressure of Social and Economic Change during the Eighteenth Century”, *Economic History Review*, doi: 10.1111/j.1468-0289.2008.00426.x.

15. I have dealt with the motives behind the *beguinage* movement that emerged in the same period as that in which guilds and commons developed (from around the early twelfth century onwards) in another article. See the working article by Tine De Moor and Jan Luiten van Zanden, “GIRLPOWER: The European Marriage Pattern (EMP) and Labour Markets in the North Sea Region in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Period”, <http://www.iisg.nl/hpw/papers/demoor-vanzanden.pdf> [last accessed 20 June 2008], and also Tine De Moor and Jan Luiten van Zanden, *Vrouwen en de geboorte van het kapitalisme in West-Europa* (Amsterdam, 2006). Like guilds and commons, *beguinages* were able to develop in western Europe because of loose family ties, the European Marriage Pattern, and because of changes in the labour market, which allowed women – including single women – to secure their own incomes. In principle, one can compare *beguinages* with guilds: some of the women who became *beguines* did so because the “dowry” that had to be paid to a normal convent had become too expensive. In that sense they managed to stay out of the religious “market”, but by demanding official recognition from the church they managed to stay within the religious community.

16. See for example Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200–1565* (Philadelphia, PA, 2001), p. xi.

action and its peculiarities, while the second part offers an analysis of the factors behind these processes. Analysing and comparing the problems that collective action tried to solve requires sufficient dismantling and examination of the structure of each problem. A concept that helps to achieve that is the “social dilemma”. The social dilemma not only captures well the issues at stake in social problems where there are conflicting interests between individuals and society; research has meanwhile revealed what qualities collective actors must have in order to solve problems effectively and efficiently.¹⁷

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT: THE RISE OF GUILDS AND COMMONS BETWEEN 1000 AND 1300

Commons were institutions for the collective use and management of land and its resources. Although the history and typology of commons and nomenclature is quite different on the continent, the English term has become widely used to indicate, for example, the German *Genossenschaften* or the Dutch *meenten* and *markegenootschappen*, all institutions that were set up to regulate the collective use and management of natural resources, ranging from woodlands to river banks, and sometimes even the river itself. Overall, one can distinguish two types of common. The first type comprises land that was only temporarily open to a group of people, typically members of the local community, usually after the harvest for the remaining grain to be reaped or for cattle to be pastured on the stubble left behind. This type was generally indicated by the term “common arable”, was often not formally organized, and is therefore not included in this survey.

The other type of common was land open throughout the year, although perhaps with agreed periods to allow the land to recover, to a group of entitled users who could be defined differently from the rural community. This type of common can be divided into common woodland, common pasture, and common waste, the last usually being rather poor land open for pasture and other activities during most of the year. Rights were assigned to groups, in some cases comprising the whole local village and sometimes even more than one village; in other cases rights of use were limited to those who met certain qualifications, such as ownership of certain farms, or payment of a certain fee.¹⁸

17. Collective action is, of course, not the only change that took place in that region during the period. Elsewhere, I have described the changes in family structure and their consequences for the labour and capital markets. See De Moor and van Zanden, “GIRLPOWER”.

18. Further details of this typology of the commons can be found in Martina De Moor *et al.*, “Comparing the Historical Commons of North West Europe: An Introduction”, in *idem* (eds), *The Management of Common Land in North West Europe, c.1500–1850* (Turnhout, 2002), pp. 15–22, and the explanatory glossary on p. 61.

In the past, two main explanations have been given in the literature for the origins of commons. Elsewhere, I have distinguished those as the evolutionary explanation and the causal explanation.¹⁹ The evolutionary explanation considers the existence of commons as being part of a long evolution towards private property dating from Germanic times, when only movable items could become an individual's property and all non-movables belonged to the family, clan, or tribe.²⁰ Common property could be seen, as Engels, Marx, De Laveleye and many other nineteenth-century authors claimed, as a primitive form of property. Gradually, that common property would more or less naturally evolve into private property, a change which Marx and Engels clearly did not favour, but others such as De Laveleye stressed was a quite natural evolution:

When jurists want to account for the origin of such a right, they fly to what they call the State of Nature, and from it derive directly absolute, individual ownership – or quiritary dominium. They thus ignore the law of gradual development, which is found throughout history, and contradict facts now well known and well established. It is only after a series of progressive evolutions and at a comparatively recent period that individual ownership, as applied to land, is constituted.²¹

In the opinion of De Laveleye all property would evolve into private property in the long run.

Not only would that way of reasoning fail to explain the origins of commons in non-Germanic areas,²² it conflicts too with the known establishment of new common rights on large plots of lands during the Middle Ages and the foundation of many more commons from then on, when property systems had already evolved further in other circumstances.²³ For example, according to Slicher van Bath,²⁴ to mention just one eminent

19. See Martina De Moor, *Tot proffijt van de ghemeensaemheijt. Gebruik, gebruikers en beheer van gemene gronden in Zandig Vlaanderen, 18de en 19de eeuw* (Ghent, 2003).

20. J. Gilissen, *Historische inleiding tot het recht. Overzicht van de wereldgeschiedenis van het recht. De bronnen van het recht in de Belgische gewesten sedert de 13de eeuw. Geschiedenis van het privaatrecht* (Antwerp, 1981), pp. 595–601.

21. E. De Laveleye, *De La Propriété Et Ses Formes Primitives* (Paris, 1894). An English translation by G.R.L. Marriott of an earlier edition appeared in 1878 as *Primitive Property* (London, 1878). See here ch. 1, “The Gradual and Universally Similar Evolution of Property in Land”.

22. For many examples of such commons see the chapters on southern Europe and Latin America in Demélas and Vivier, *Les propriétés collectives face aux attaques libérales (1750–1914)*.

23. Similar to the expansion of common property rights over land is the growth of guilds – in the form of the foundation of new guilds – long after the Middle Ages. In the Dutch republic, for example, the number of guilds was about 564 around 1560. By the end of the seventeenth century this number had grown to c.1,300; Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly (eds), *Werelden van verschil. Ambachtsgilden in de Lage Landen* (Brussels, 1997), p. 52.

24. B.H. Slicher van Bath, *Bijdragen tot de agrarische geschiedenis* (Antwerp, 1978).

agricultural historian, the formation of *marken* and *meenten* (both forms of wasteland commons) went back no further than the twelfth or thirteenth centuries, although defenders of the “Germanic theory”, such as Heringa, have contested that.²⁵ Heringa saw a long continuous history in which the only change was that the rules for the use of the common were written down.²⁶

Although the origins of commons have not been thoroughly studied so far, it is clear that large numbers of commons appeared during the late Middle Ages as identifiable institutions in large parts of Europe, and that they did not necessarily stem from previously established collectivities of users. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries especially the first “corporate” commons appeared on the scene in the Low Countries, with a clearly outlined institutional basis.²⁷

I do not deny the existence of cooperation among villagers in the period before that, but what we witness in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is the formation of collectives or alliances based on some mutual agreement which was not primarily kinship, but existed between lords and villagers and among villagers themselves. They dealt with the use of resources, and their rules were written down, confirmed, reviewed, and – most importantly – enforced by the members of the collective.

In many cases, agreements should be read as settlements of conflicts that arose between the lords and the inhabitants of a village and which should be seen in the light of the great European reclamations that took place during the tenth to the twelfth centuries.²⁸ As will become clear in a later section of this article, such agreements can be considered to be forms of risk avoidance and as a way to benefit from economies of scale in the

25. J. Heringa, *De buurschap en haar marke* (Assen, 1982).

26. P. Hoppenbrouwers, “The Use and Management of Commons in the Netherlands: An Overview”, in De Moor, *The Management of Common Land in North West Europe*, p. 93.

27. P. Godding, *Le droit privé dans les pays-bas méridionaux du 12e au 18e siècle* (Brussels, 1987), pp. 203–204, and Slicher van Bath, *Bijdragen tot de agrarische geschiedenis*.

28. In a similar fashion, Blickle considers the introduction of more complex agricultural methods for improving output as having promoted collective decision-making: “The thirteenth century [...] witnessed a remarkable change in agricultural production [...] economic activities underwent considerable change: more and more crops were planted, using a field rotation system, arable land was separated more clearly from pasture, and neighbouring villages defined their respective territories much more explicitly. All this provides clear evidence for a more intensive use of rural resources in the face of rising population. [...] the comparatively complicated new rotation system ruled out individual choices of crops and demanded a process of collective decision-making involving all peasants. To settle the inevitable disputes, some form of local conflict resolution had to be found, while rules and regulations were necessary to keep the peace among neighbours who now lived in much closer proximity. The result was the emergence of village autonomy, village jurisdiction, and village legislation as autogenous rights of the inhabitants”; Blickle, *From the Communal Reformation to the Revolution of the Common Man*, pp. 2–3.

management of natural resources that are necessary or even vital to the agricultural system but which cannot be bought on the open market nor otherwise commercialized. The background is population growth, and the related changes to land use and its intensification.²⁹ Commons were a way of keeping the agricultural system in balance while keeping control of the cost, which was at least lower than would be incurred by privatization. That becomes clear on the basis of the many studies that suggest the prudence of the commoners.³⁰

Following Lourens and Lucassen, craft guilds are defined here as “organizations that – with the agreement of the local authority – unite members of the same occupational group, with as their most important goal the furthering of their economic interests, but not without taking into account the general well-being of their group as well”.³¹ Due to a lack of sources, it is often impossible to discover whether late medieval guilds would have corresponded entirely to that definition from their first foundation, and they might indeed have developed from relatively informal institutions eventually to be recognized by local authorities. Guilds were mainly urban institutions, but in some cases the densely populated setting in which they developed had, even so, not yet been awarded the legal title of “city”. In the Low Countries the number of rural guilds was rather small,³² just as, conversely, the number of urban commons was small, although many medieval towns did have their common pastures and fields used for such things as the bleaching of linen.

Given the urban character of guilds, it is quite natural then that we should see their origins in relation to the process of urbanization that occurred in western Europe between 900 and 1300. One of the prerequisites for the emergence of guilds is a certain concentration of members of the same occupational group in the same location.³³ If we consider the Netherlands, Lourens and Lucassen claim that in about 1400 a city needed to have reached a population of at least 2,500 inhabitants before more than a single craft guild would become established, so that

29. Such as the increasing application of three-course rotation from the eleventh century onward in north-western Europe. See Slicher van Bath, *Bijdragen tot de agrarische geschiedenis*, p. 99.

30. See, *inter alia*, Donald N. McCloskey, “The Prudent Peasant: New Findings on Open Fields”, *Journal of Economic History*, 51 (1991), pp. 343–355, and Allen, *Enclosure and the Yeoman*.

31. Translation of the definition of craft guilds given in Lis and Soly, *Werelden van verschil*, pp. 43–44.

32. For a more detailed description of the rural guild, see Ehmer’s article in the present volume, pp. 143–158.

33. See also Karl Gunnar Persson, *Pre-Industrial Economic Growth: Social Organization and Technological Progress in Europe* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 50–54.

small towns of fewer than 500 inhabitants could not usually support craft guilds. Although there are exceptions to their rule, there did seem to be a certain population threshold for guilds to be able to develop. There was, too, an upper limit to the number of guilds per urban centre, with an apparent maximum of about 50 guilds per city. Cities such as Amsterdam, with a much larger than average population, had only a single guild per 4,000 inhabitants (1670: 52 craft guilds per 200,000 inhabitants), but, as a form of compensation perhaps, each of those organizations included on average many more members.³⁴

The literature offers two interpretations of the rise of merchant and craft guilds in the centuries between 950 and 1300. The first constructs a link with the *collegia* developed during the Roman period; these proto-guilds disappeared in western Europe, whereas they continued to be important in Byzantium, although by the thirteenth century they had gradually disintegrated there too.³⁵ Most of them were, like the Roman *collegia*, closely supervised and monitored by the state, which contributed to undermining the “serviceability of the guild system”.³⁶

The model spread to western Europe via southern Italy, through the Byzantine link to Amalfi in the tenth century, typically mentioned as the first site of a “modern” merchant guild. Hickson and Thompson describe how the “guild model” reached French and Flemish cities from the south, where the merchants with whom the Italians traded at the Champagne fairs lived, followed by a spread to western Germany and England in the twelfth century, to Spanish trading centres around the middle of the thirteenth century onward, and in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to the East.³⁷

The alternative view contends that guilds developed from informal groups of merchants – or indeed other social groups – who in north-western Europe organized themselves spontaneously in the ninth and tenth centuries, the first examples being Saxon *gegildan* known from tenth-century England,³⁸ or the famous Frisian merchant guild from Tiel, known from an early eleventh-century reference by Alpertus van Metz. That body settled disputes between merchants, arranged for the

34. Lis and Soly, *Werelden van verschil*. For the evolution of the number of guilds in the Low Countries, see also De Munck, Lourens, and Lucassen, “The Establishment and Distribution of Craft Guilds in the Low Countries 1000–1800”.

35. On the evolution of guilds in Byzantium see the article by Yildirim in the present volume, pp. 73–93.

36. See George C. Maniatis, “The Domain of Private Guilds in the Byzantine Economy, Tenth to Fifteenth Centuries”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 55 (2001), pp. 342 and 368.

37. Charles R. Hickson and Earl Thompson, “A New Theory of Guilds and European Economic Development”, *Explorations in Economic History*, 28 (1991), pp. 137–138.

38. S.R. Epstein, *Wage Labor & Guilds in Medieval Europe* (Chapel Hill, NC [etc.], 1991), p. 40.

mutual exchange of credit, and organized the obligatory drinking and feasting.³⁹

Though the guild in Tiel was short-lived, elsewhere, in the southern part of the Low Countries, new guild-like associations would be formed whose original dates of origin are often hard to trace, but which by the thirteenth century had already been established in considerable numbers in the larger towns of Flanders, especially textile centres such as Bruges, Ieper, and Ghent.⁴⁰ The northern Netherlands were slower in the development of their guilds. In their analysis of the number of new craft guilds in towns with more than 2,500 inhabitants (in 1784), De Munck, Lourens, and Lucassen show that about 41 per cent of the well over 1,000 craft guilds in the southern Netherlands whose period of establishment is known originate from the years 1100–1399. In the northern Netherlands fewer than 8 per cent of the guilds (in total 1,374 by 1784) existed by then. The majority would be set up from 1400 to 1669.⁴¹

It is difficult to give an overview of the quantitative importance of commons in western Europe similar to that which we can give for guilds. Little inventory work has been done so far that could allow us to estimate the number of associations between farmers joining forces to use waste land, nor do we know the surface area they controlled. It is clear, however,

39. Tiel is a small Dutch town situated between the rivers Waal and Linge, south-west of Arnhem. Tiel took over Dorestad's position as the region's leading commercial town. Dorestad had been repeatedly plundered and burned down by the Vikings, and after the dykes along the Rhine were reinforced trade moved to nearby Utrecht, Deventer, and also Tiel. During the tenth to the twelfth centuries Tiel was an important international port and trading centre, where the river and maritime trade converged. To some extent, Tiel's prosperity during that period can be explained by the privileges granted to the town, as a consequence of being visited frequently by the German emperors. The writings of that period refer to a merchant guild set up by the *mercatores Tielenses*, as they were referred to by the monk Alpertus van Metz. The merchants managed to obtain an unusually powerful position, supported by a close relationship with the emperor. Alpertus mentioning that they had obtained a degree of legal autonomy, that they had yearly festivities, and that they had their own moral code, one that reflected the way of life of the merchants, has been considered sufficient evidence that the organization found in Tiel was, de facto, a merchant guild. See J.B. Akkerman, "Het koopmansgilde omstreeks het jaar 1000", *Tijdschrift voor rechtsgeschiedenis*, 30 (1962), pp. 414–417, and De Munck, Lourens, and Lucassen, "The Establishment and Distribution of Craft Guilds in the Low Countries 1000–1800", pp. 34–35.

40. *Ibid.* mentions the following figures: c.25 craft guilds in Leuven by 1267, 52 in Bruges around the same time, 52 by the beginning of the fifteenth century in Ieper, and at least 25 before 1400 in Ghent. Also, relatively small towns such as Sint-Truiden and Lier already had organizations of textile workers by the thirteenth century, which clearly indicates that the presence of textile manufacturing was often one reason why guilds were established.

41. For the period 1400–1559, De Munck, Lourens, and Lucassen recorded 478 guilds (or 35 per cent of the total number of guilds in the period 1100–1784) and for the period 1560–1669, no fewer than 561. See *ibid.*, pp. 37, and 44–51 for the regional overview contained therein.

that from the thirteenth century onward especially, by-laws regarding the rights of commoners to the use and management of their land are found increasingly often.⁴² Slicher van Bath made an estimate of the number of *marken* or *meenten* – two words indicating common land in the Netherlands – mentioned in written sources for the provinces of Drenthe, Overijssel, and Gelderland before 1500. He arrived at a total of nearly 300.⁴³ Almost half (127 of 286) of the *marken* counted by Slicher van Bath were found in sources dating from 1300–1399. In the period before that he counted 37 references, though some might have been overlooked because they had not taken on a name, such as *marke*, that make them easily identifiable as a common.⁴⁴ Similar counts for other regions are not available, so it remains unclear how popular the common property form really was in the late Middle Ages.

In order to complete our historical picture of corporate collective action it is worth mentioning the sudden rise of another form in the late Middle Ages. Simons has analysed the rise and disappearance of *beguinages* in the southern Netherlands and northern France and has shown in his overview that three-quarters of *beguinages* in the area originated in the thirteenth century,⁴⁵ and it seems that those and other forms of collective action went through similar stages of institutional development.

It has been argued that the institutionalization of the *beguinages* went through four stages⁴⁶ and it is not unlikely that craft guilds were actually modelled on merchant guilds. But what the merchant groups still missed was a formal institutional structure, as supplied by the concept of a legal body (*universitas*), and therefore a degree of persistence and continuity, and a governance structure, which became characteristic of late medieval guilds, about which I shall say more later. From those very early and tentative beginnings in tenth-century Europe – and so perhaps by two pathways, one originating from the elitist state structure of Byzantium, the other rooted in “Germanic” traditions of conviviality and

42. See, for example, Shaw-Taylor on southern England: L. Shaw-Taylor, “The Management of Common Land in the Lowlands of Southern England circa 1500 to circa 1850”, in De Moor, *The Management of Common Land in North West Europe*, p. 63. Shaw-Taylor notes that the number of surviving by-laws increased over the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries but that the most complete and informative by-laws appeared especially after 1500.

43. Slicher van Bath, *Bijdragen tot de agrarische geschiedenis*, p. 242. For England, see *inter alia* Bruce M.S. Campbell, “Population Change and the Genesis of Common Fields on a Norfolk Manor”, *The Economic History Review*, 33 (1980), pp. 174–192.

44. Slicher van Bath, *Bijdragen tot de agrarische geschiedenis*, p. 243.

45. 106 of the 140 *beguinages* listed by Simons dated from the thirteenth century, 23 from the fourteenth century, 9 from the fifteenth century, and 1 from sixteenth century. See Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, pp. 252–259.

46. See Lodewijk Jozef Maria Philippen, *De Begijnhoven. Oorsprong, geschiedenis, inrichting* (Antwerp, 1918).

brotherhood – a broad movement developed which by 1300 would give western Europe many hundreds, if not thousands, of guilds.⁴⁷

In the Low Countries, particularly Flanders, guilds reached the apex of their political power in the decades after 1300, or, to be more precise, in 1302, when they were the main organizational units of the famous Battle of the Spurs, when the Flemish citizenry – with a glorious role granted to the weavers' guild – defeated the French nobility.⁴⁸ This revolt of the guilds, which took over control of Flemish cities, became a truly international phenomenon, anticipating later revolutionary periods in European history. Revolutionary bands “exported” the revolt of the guilds, for example, to Utrecht at the centre of the northern Netherlands, where a similar “revolutionary” city government controlled by guilds was being installed in the early fourteenth century.

CORPORATE COLLECTIVE ACTION AS A DISTINCTIVE FORM OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

Such was the power of guilds in medieval Europe. However, the collective action considered in the historical literature has focused mostly on short, often sudden, rises in collective discontent in the form of popular risings and mass movements, rather than on the effects of enduring power relations among institutions for collective action.

Charles and Louise Tilly, Sidney Tarrow, and Douglas McAdam considered collective action mainly as large-scale mass movements that could often make their points only by recourse to riots, demonstrations, or forms of mass violence, such as peasant revolts. Charles Tilly justifies the use of the term “collective action” (instead, for example, of the term “rebellion”) by pointing to the many methods of action besides rioting or demonstrating used by groups to make their points and try to change their circumstances. For Tilly, therefore, collective action “consists of all occasions on which sets of people commit pooled resources, including their own efforts, to common efforts”.⁴⁹ Though that definition is broad enough to cover the type of collective action dealt with in this article, Tilly does not include any reference to guilds, commons, nor other

47. See Jan Luiten van Zanden, “Economic Growth in a Period of Political Fragmentation, Western Europe 900–1300”, http://www.iisg.nl/research/jvz-economic_growth.pdf [last accessed 19 June 2008], for an analysis of the context that permitted the spectacular development of that “bottom-up” movement.

48. On the role of guilds in local politics, see Prak, “Corporate Politics in the Low Countries”. On the Battle of the Spurs, see R.C. Van Caenegem (ed.), *1302: Feiten en mythen van de Guldensporenslag* (Antwerp, 2002).

49. Louise A. Tilly and Charles Tilly, *Class Conflict and Collective Action* (London [etc.], 1981), p. 19.

examples of institutionalized collective action in his description of the repertoires of such action.⁵⁰ Over the past few years the debate on Tilly's kind of collective action has merged into the debate on "contentious politics", so moving even further away from the more "silent" version of collective action.⁵¹

The forms of collective action most prominent in the revolution as described in this article are of a less ad-hoc, longer lasting type, although it is not unusual for members of those organizations to have been involved in protest movements – that "other" type of collective action – as for example in the previously mentioned Flemish Battle of the Spurs. Though they were made up of more than just guild members, many urban revolts during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, such as the *Bürgerkämpfe*, led to the establishment of formal representation of guilds on city councils, albeit with unequal effectiveness.⁵² Similarly, many commoners⁵³ were actively involved in protests and riots against enclosures, in England, France, and elsewhere.⁵⁴ In short, varieties of collective action often reinforce each other.

"Corporate collective action" is here considered the concept best suited to describe the exclusive, self-governed autonomous institutions that formed the core of the silent revolution, which depended on the idea that a group of people could form a legal body, a *universitas*, a concept developed during the "legal revolution" of the twelfth and

50. The evolution of the collective-action debate engendered by Tilly and Tilly should not surprise us: in their research they have always emphasized forms of expression among the collectivities they studied, and it was exactly those forms of expression that concerned the authorities. Charles Tilly does consider the guilds, but only as an organization that had forms of collective expression: "Its [collective action's] most dramatic recurrent forms were the food riots, concerted resistance to conscription, organized invasions of fields and forests, and rebellion against tax-collectors. Less visible, but in some ways more influential, were established public festivals and rituals during which ordinary people voiced their demands or complaints, and stated assemblies of corporate groups – communities, guilds, religious congregations, and the like – which produced petitions, lawsuits, condemnations, and occasionally even deliberated acts of rebellion"; Charles Tilly, "Introduction", in Tilly and Tilly, *Class Conflict and Collective Action*, p. 20.

51. See, for example, the work by McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly: Doug McAdam *et al.*, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge, 2001). In 1996 a new journal, *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, was founded to offer a forum to the debate on contentious politics.

52. Maarten Prak, "Ambachtsgilden vroeger en nu", *Neha-Jaarboek voor economische, bedrijfs- en techniekgeschiedenis*, 58 (1994), p. 22. Those revolts were concentrated especially in German areas and in the southern Netherlands; they appeared only sporadically in the northern Netherlands and not at all in England and France. Prak argues that these differences cannot be explained by the degree of urbanization.

53. The word "commoner" is used in this article to refer to a person with rights of use to a common, and not to the "common folk".

54. See, for example, the article by Wayne Te Brake on protests at the enclosure of commons in the eastern Netherlands: Wayne Te Brake, "Revolution and the rural community in the Eastern Netherlands", in Tilly and Tilly, *Class Conflict and Collective Action*, pp. 59–66.

thirteenth centuries.⁵⁵ What made corporate collective action markedly distinct from collective action in general was its degree of institutionalization, with group formation processes accompanied by the design of a set of rules to make collective action work, usually written down and regularly revised. After all, it was not because people once decided to act together that they would keep doing so thereafter, and go on later to develop rules and procedures to govern their institutions and, for example, suppress free riding.

Such a degree of institutionalization marks a clear difference from shorter-term collective action. Revolts are mostly a response to some immediate provocation, although the underlying causes might, of course, have been long built up grudges.⁵⁶ Riots and revolts are supposed to give immediate relief, whereas corporate collective action sets up institutions for particular goals which are not primarily aiming at immediate relief but rather constant relief, reinforcing the point about longevity referred to. Moreover, participants in short-term collective action aim for change, but do not necessarily see an active role for themselves in achieving it, neither in the short nor the long term, except perhaps those who cherish an ambition as leader. Linked to that is the fact that riots and so on aimed at forming large groups – “the more the merrier” and more convincing – were essentially composed of anonymous individuals. The institutions of the silent revolution on the other hand are almost always exclusively based on the definition of a “club”, to which some belong and from which others are excluded. This “identifiability” of the members of the club encourages the reciprocity and mutual control needed for the long-term survival of the group (see below).⁵⁷

INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN: EXCLUSIVE, SELF-ENFORCED, AND AUTONOMOUS CORPORATIONS

Exclusivity

The individual members of guilds and commons could not remain anonymous; in most cases they even had to swear an oath before they could become members, which made them visible and identifiable to the

55. H.J. Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), p. 393. Berman describes a corporation (*universitas*) as a “body of people sharing common legal functions and acting as a legal entity”; for a further discussion of the importance of the idea of *universitas* for economic development, see van Zanden, “Economic Growth in a Period of Political Fragmentation”, pp. 12ff.

56. De Tocqueville, Marx, Durkheim, Tönnies, and Weber adduced many causes of collective resistance and rebellion, including inequality, government reform, class conflict, social disintegration, conflicting religious values, and relative deprivation.

57. Jager considers identifiability as one of the group factors that positively influence behaviour in a dilemma. See Wander Jager, *Modelling Consumer Behaviour* (Veenendaal, 2000), p. 16.

rest of the group. As much as they might have had a deep and long-lasting effect on society, the anonymous crowds that figured in riots had entirely different objectives and applied methods and models of organization other than those of the individuals who formed institutionalized guilds and commons. It is known from sociological research that the degree to which participants in collective action know each other personally influences the potential success of their group in terms of reciprocity.⁵⁸ The requirement to swear an oath when becoming a member of a guild represents a fundamental difference from groups, often highly diverse and anonymous, who took part in revolts and riots. The willingness of sworn members to cooperate in plans for the future derives from the potential benefits to participants and the security implied.⁵⁹ This “willingness” has been at the centre of sociological and behavioural research into collective action (by Olson and Ostrom for example).⁶⁰

Cooperative behaviour within a group, of craftsmen or commoners, and respect for the resources of the group, was expected from its current members. In several charters it was apparent that members would be working for the wellbeing of the institution, thus implicitly ascertaining the importance of sustainable management of its resources. Given Mancur Olson’s remark that “rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interest”, we may suppose that the ambitions of our medieval ancestors seem highly unrealistic.⁶¹ Their method of resolving their social dilemma was to set up institutions for exclusive groups: institutionalization secures continuity, exclusion secures feasibility by allowing in only those with at least a minimal interest in keeping the institution going. Whereas sudden, short-lived collective action benefits from attracting as many participants as possible, sustained collective action tries to limit the number of participants.

Institutions limited the number of people who could become members by setting clear access rules, and guilds and commons alike wanted to

58. *Ibid.*, pp. 16–18.

59. In the sociological literature this has also been referred to as a “temporal dilemma”, or the choice between investing in today’s personal advantage or safeguarding the survival of future generations. See *ibid.*, p. 12.

60. “Identifiability of the behaviour. Jorgerson and Papciak (1981) found that cooperative behaviour is promoted if the other people can observe one’s personal choice behaviour. This effect only occurs when there is no communication. This suggests that identifiability has about the same effect as communication, namely the promotion of ‘social control’ to exercise personal restraint. This ‘social control’ mechanism may be responsible for the fact that people are more willing to work hard under conditions of high visibility than in more anonymous settings. Group size also plays a role in the identifiability of behaviour: the larger the group, the more anonymous one is”; *ibid.*, p. 16.

61. M. Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge, MA, 1965), p. 2.

differentiate insiders from outsiders, to set boundaries to the group and to the use of its resources by means of a set of rules that could be expanded or reduced according to the needs of the moment. Rules could include limitation of access to the group by means of various requirements such as financial resources or a “waiting period” as for apprenticeships. To avoid overproduction, maximum output quota could be set by the commoners and guild members to guard the local market against competition from farmers and non-guild artisans respectively.⁶²

However, to a certain extent, organizations did honour the requests of non-eligible individuals, under certain conditions. Guilds were, in principle, closed organizations, but to a certain degree they were open to non-members, as they sometimes derived income from non-members. Individuals living outside a city but of the same trade could practise their profession in the city temporarily, but they were obliged to pay redemption money to the guild.⁶³ The same applied to commons: in times when the members themselves could not provide sufficient livestock to graze the commons, non-members were allowed to use them.⁶⁴ Officially, their exclusiveness was strict, but in practice rather flexible, which can be explained easily: allowing foreign merchants (guilds) or non-commoners to take advantage for a short while of the benefits offered in return for payment did not mean they could make use of the other facilities too, such as social welfare, and in principle these temporary guests would then cost hardly any money. On the contrary, they would contribute to the institution’s budget.

Although in most of the literature they are considered primarily economic associations that regulated access by reference to occupational group, guilds could also take other forms, and so use other access rules. In the so-called “pre-corporative” period, guilds were primarily religious groupings, also referred to as fraternities. Later, with the parallel development of cities, access rules became intertwined with citizenship. In the Low Countries, for example, one had to be a *poorter*, which implied possession of full citizenship rights which could be obtained only in accordance with certain rules. If one did not have those rights in the ordinary way, as the son of a father with such

62. For an overview of guild regulations, see for example JPh de Monté VerLoren, *Hoofdpijnen uit de Ontwikkeling der rechterlijke organisatie in de Noordelijke Nederlanden tot de Bataafse Omwenteling (zevende herziene druk, bewerkt door JE Spruit)* (Deventer, 2000), pp. 212–214.

For an overview of regulations on access to commons, see De Moor, “Avoiding Tragedies”, p. 75.

63. Joost Van Genabeek, “De afschaffing van de gilden en de voortzetting van hun functies”, *Neha-Jaarboek voor economische, bedrijfs- en techniekgeschiedenis*, 58 (1994), p. 78.

64. For an example of such practice see De Moor, “Avoiding Tragedies”. On this particular common, situated east of Bruges, non-commoners were permitted to apply for temporary grazing rights at times of under-exploitation. This continued until the mid-eighteenth century, when population pressure was still relatively low. However, non-commoners were charged rather more for this privilege than commoners.

rights, it was most advantageous to marry the daughter of a *poorter*, which, considering the surplus of women in Dutch cities, was no very hard task at all.

In comparison with other countries, the third option, namely buying city rights, was relatively cheap.⁶⁵ Other factors, such as the comparatively short period of apprenticeship, indicate that guilds in the Dutch republic were more inclusive and open than they were elsewhere, but they did not forsake limiting entry to them. Membership was to a certain extent dependent on family relations: sons of masters often paid only half the cost exacted from external candidates, and only very few women could obtain the right to become a master. In cases when they did become members, women's rights to vote on guild matters, for example, were restricted. Even if a stranger managed to marry a master's daughter or to save the necessary funds, he would still need to work for several years with a master before being allowed to become a member himself, a requirement not set out at the foundation of the guilds but in most cases introduced only later, typically from the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries on.⁶⁶

Those taking part in collective action clearly wanted their organizations to last for several generations of members, rather than just for their own time. Guild members and peasants created institutions intended for succeeding generations, as becomes clear from documents that laid down rules to arrange succession within the common. In some cases, the rules included an "inheritance clause", whereby members or masters could inherit their guild rights only from their fathers, or where the right to use common land could be inherited only from family members.

There could be several reasons why such institutions were set up "for all eternity". The cost, in terms of reaching agreement with the local ruler, was relatively high, and having once obtained the right to "belong" one would not relinquish it readily; furthermore, participants must have realized that it would take time before they would really benefit from the institution. The "survival rate" of guilds in the Low Countries shows that they had some success in keeping themselves alive over very long periods of time. Of the total of 1,033 guilds established in the southern Netherlands before 1784, only 19 per cent had disappeared by then: a similar figure of 21.5 per cent has been derived for the northern Netherlands.⁶⁷

Self-regulation

The corporations were self-regulating for the most part and instead of relying on external bodies to give relief they became self-help groups

65. Lis and Soly, *Werelden van verschil: Ambachtsgilden in de Lage Landen*, pp. 53, 134–135.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

67. De Munck, Lourens, and Lucassen, "The Establishment and Distribution of Craft Guilds in the Low Countries 1000–1800", p. 37.

of a sort, forming autonomous bodies often enjoying good relations with local authorities. The fact that people formed groups is not in itself striking, but that they themselves regulated and controlled the execution of their own rules, including disciplinary matters, is less obviously to be expected.

To make their collective projects work, guilds and commons relied heavily for enforcement mechanisms on group norms, as opposed to formal legal enactments. They designed most of the rules themselves, with or without the involvement of the local powers, and that should not surprise us: sociological research has proved that member involvement in the design of rules offers a better guarantee of success.⁶⁸ Members supplemented these rules with impressive sets of “instruments” to make their alliances work. I will not be going into detail about such things as fining systems, but in the context of this article it is important to note that members of these corporate institutions, both guilds and commons, developed methods to protect their organizations from the functioning of the free market. They tried to safeguard at least part of the production market against the forces of the free market. It has often been assumed – but as often highly contested – that they tried to achieve a complete monopoly, but in practice it did not necessarily turn out like that.⁶⁹ Notwithstanding strict written regulations, in practice there were many, and often rather radical, exceptions to the guilds’ regulations that prevented any form of monopoly from being established.⁷⁰

“A world within a world”

With a large set of rules, commoners and guild members tried to regulate the behaviour of their fellows – to prevent them from free riding – and to control the effect their surroundings could have on the behaviour of the members. They developed a system of market regulation in order to protect their “own little world”. Measures were taken by both guilds and commons to achieve a reasonable income for their members and to eliminate the disruptive effects of the market, which was still at an early stage of development when commons and guilds were set up in Europe. Institutions such as guilds could make functioning within those settings less risky, though without losing too many of the advantages the market offered. “Prudence above all”, one could say.

We can agree with Prak and Panhuysen that the fact of the guilds’ domination of the markets being incomplete does not necessarily point

68. Jager, *Modelling Consumer Behaviour*.

69. For a critique of the claim that guilds were monopolistic, see Hickson and Thompson, “A New Theory of Guilds and European Economic Development”, pp. 128–129.

70. Lis and Soly, *Werelden van verschil*, p. 79.

towards an inefficient monopoly. They might not even have aimed to completely monopolize their trades in the first place.⁷¹ As noted by Panhuysen, guilds had a number of strategies to deal with these problems, including strategies designed to give master tailors control over the most profitable parts of their trade, while they were willing to compromise on what were seen as peripheral activities.

One method used by guilds in their attempts to master product markets was to form cartels.⁷² The number of conflicts concerning the right to form cartels demonstrates the importance of them to the guilds until the very eve of their abolition. The information about that and the effects it had is limited, but there are indications that the guilds managed to protect the market to a great extent, if not completely.⁷³ The question here is whether it was necessary for the guilds to dominate markets completely. Would that have been an objective of a small-scale organization aimed primarily at securing the income of its members who had particular skills and who, because of their human capital, saw themselves as being distinct from the less well trained “mob” who worked in the rural economy? Was there much advantage to be gained from a putting-out system when one does not have the capital to invest in such a system? It seems that the guild system, and the system of common land, each offered their members the advantages of scale in return for cooperation.

Peasants too tried to limit the influence of the market on their commons and their members. The background here is a continuous struggle to prevent the overexploitation of the common, although it is usually supposed, primarily by non-historians such as Hardin,⁷⁴ that commons were traditionally always overgrazed. In fact, regulation of the use of the common and rules to prevent or at least restrict the commercialization of its assets were devised, with two main methods.

One involved setting *stints*, or numerical limits, to the amount of resource units per person, and implementing a price mechanism that adjusted prices to the foreseeable pressure on the commons (payment per head of cattle). Depending on the type of resource involved, various types of rules limiting the influence of the market could be found on all European historical commons. In general the amount of produce a commoner was allowed to take was limited to a certain number of resource units. In some cases the surface of the common was expressed in

71. Bibi Panhuysen, *Maatwerk: Kleermakers, naaisters, oudkleerkopers en de gilden (1500–1800)* (Amsterdam, 2000), p. 276.

72. Although one might question whether, based on how they tried to regulate the market, guilds can be considered cartels. See Persson, *Pre-Industrial Economic Growth*, pp. 50–51.

73. Prak, “Ambachtsgilden vroeger en nu”, p. 19.

74. See G. Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons”, *Science*, 16 (1968), pp. 1243–1248.

terms of the number of units of cattle the pasture could feed. For example, for the Wijkerzand common in the central Netherlands the total of 180 “shares” and their size in the grazing rights of the common appear to have been laid down in the fifteenth century and have survived until today.⁷⁵ Often the shares of the commoners were limited not by the capacity of the common but by factors directly related to aspects of the prevailing subsistence economy and so unrelated to the wider commercial economy. One such rule was the express prohibition of the sale of produce from the common (wood, or milk from the commons’ cows) outside village borders, which helped protect the most valuable assets of the common against the negative side effects of the free market (commercialization and over-exploitation in the case of the common). But protection of members against the free market is in no sense the same as being *against* the free market. Commoners could have participated in the free market regardless of their activities on the common.

Commons developed other mechanisms to offer resources at a uniform price, the intention being to foster greater equality within the organization.⁷⁶ Prices of what could be harvested were uniform and equal for all members, but could be higher for non-members in cases where they were admitted.⁷⁷ That does not mean that prices for products were stable; they were adjusted, not to the prices of the market but to the situation of the common. Evidence can be found of commons that used an “internal market” to regulate the use of their resources, so that when demand for resources (by members) was high and threatened to become too high in comparison with what was available on the common, prices per individual animal were raised to reduce demand for cattle on the common.⁷⁸

The functioning of the guilds can be compared to that. Members of guilds aimed to put their products on the market at uniform prices to promote, though not necessarily of course to achieve, the highest possible average income for those members. Prak, however, notes that the great social differences between members of guilds indicates that there must have been other factors at work to turn that optimal average into a minimum wage.⁷⁹ Neither guilds nor commons used the law of supply and demand to set or change their prices, but used instead an internal

75. Hoppenbrouwers, “The use and management of commons in the Netherlands”.

76. For a similar argument concerning guilds, see Van Genabeek, “De afschaffing van de gilden en de voortzetting van hun functies”, p. 72.

77. In some cases non-members could ask to be allowed temporarily to use grassland or woodland. See De Moor, *Tot proffijt van de ghemeensaembeyt*.

78. *Ibid.*

79. Prak, “Ambachtsgilden vroeger en nu”, p. 21, and *idem*, “Een verzekerd bestaan’. Ambachtslieden, winkeliers en hun gilden in Den Bosch (ca.1775)”, in Boudien De Vries *et al.*, *De kracht der zwakken: Studies over arbeid en arbeidersbeweging in het verleden* (Amsterdam, 1992), pp. 72–75.

autonomously defined quality standard.⁸⁰ Products of the same quality were to be sold for the same price, which created a form of medieval quality label. That not only made trade easier, it also prevented internal conflicts from arising.

Gustafsson considers quality control a key organizing principle of medieval guilds. The variability of quality as determined largely by the individual craftsman's skill would be changed only with the Industrial Revolution, when the quality of products was made more homogeneous through the use of machines.⁸¹ Meanwhile guilds were necessary to solve the "quality problem" for traders in the emerging market economy. Gustafsson sums up several methods used by guilds to control quality: the examination of raw materials, scrutiny and regulation of production processes, setting standards and instituting compliance inspections for end products, and the use of marks to indicate a specific quality. One can assume that by controlling quality themselves, the guilds achieved a competitive advantage over free-market produce, as traders no longer had to control the merchandise so intensively themselves; their guilds did that for them.⁸²

The aim of offering the products of the guilds at uniform prices had an effect similar to what happened on the common: those who complied with the rules were assured of an income, probably not the best possible price they might have received in a free market, but certainly a sustained income. Guild members who decided to ignore the quality standard and made goods of a lesser quality offered at lower prices threatened the income of all the suppliers of better quality goods. That straightforward social dilemma was solved by a multitude of rules and sanctions, to prevent free riding by guild members. Richardson describes how the members of guilds were dependent upon each other to achieve that required income level: "[T]hey had a common theme. Guild members acted to increase their incomes, and their efforts required action in concert. Members had to cooperate. Each had to do his part for the guild to attain his goals."⁸³

80. Bo Gustafsson, *Power and Economic Institutions: Reinterpretations in Economic History* (Aldershot, 1991).

81. *Idem*, "The Rise and Economic Behaviour of Medieval Craft Guilds: An Economic-Theoretical Interpretation", *The Scandinavian Economic History Review and Economy and History*, 35 (1987), p.21.

82. *Ibid.*

83. Richardson continues: "If some slacked off, all would suffer. Guilds that wished to lower the costs of labor had to get all masters to reduce wages. Guilds that wished to raise the prices of products had to get all members to restrict output. Guilds that wished to develop respected reputations had to get all members to sell superior merchandise. The need for coordination was a common denominator"; Gary Richardson, "Craft Guilds and Christianity in Late Medieval England. A Rational-Choice Analysis", *Rationality and Society*, 17 (2005), p. 145.

Ignoring the quality standards of the guild can be considered a user strategy equal to overusing the resources of the common, either for personal or commercial use. In both cases members abused the fact that they belonged to a privileged group, such as commoners who would try to put more than their share of cattle on the common, abusing their legitimate presence there. Whether or not the abuse would be discovered depended on the functioning of the commoners' social control mechanisms. Similarly, guild members could abuse their reputation as members of a respected guild to offer products of poorer quality, with the pretence of guild quality. Records exist of manufacturers who, while guild members, preferred a low-quality-product strategy which conflicted with the general strategy of their guild.⁸⁴ Durability, for example, was important in the manufacturing sector because products often needed to be sold over long distances; if a product proved to be of lower quality, that could ruin the reputation of a guild.⁸⁵

To prevent members from free riding, social control played an important role in these institutions. We find evidence that members of commons could be fined if they did not report it when they saw others cheating, such as by putting too many cattle on the common, while guilds often required members to set up shop in the same area in order to encourage socially based control of each other.⁸⁶ The so-called gradual sanctioning mentioned by Elinor Ostrom in her list of design principles for durable common pool institutions is found in both institutions' methods of fining free riders.⁸⁷ In both guilds and commons, the punishment could amount to permanent expulsion from the organization.⁸⁸

Guilds held other trump cards to prevent free riding. Richardson explains that craft guilds combined spiritual and occupational endeavours because "the former facilitated the success of the latter and vice versa. The reciprocal nature of this relationship linked the ability of guilds to attain spiritual and occupational goals. By combining piety and profit the guilds could overcome free-rider problems and achieve common goals."⁸⁹ That kind of bundling of endeavours,

[...] increased the pain of expulsion. People expelled from guilds with both craft and Christian features lost both business and religious benefits. They lost not

84. Robert P. Merges, *From Medieval Guilds to Open Source Software: Informal Norms, Appropriability Institutions, and Innovation.*, p. 8, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=661543 [last accessed 19 June 2008], and Christopher Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: The People of Britain 850–1520* (New Haven, CT [etc.], 2002), p. 315.

85. Richardson, "Craft Guilds and Christianity in Late Medieval England", pp. 143–144.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 160.

87. See *ibid.* for examples.

88. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

89. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

only their colleagues but also their church, not only their partners but also their preachers, not only their means of prospering in this life but also their hope of passing through purgatory.

According to Richardson, the advantage of combining religious and economic goals lay in the fact that the religious consequences of defection could not be easily calculated as they might become obvious only in the afterlife, so the religious goals of the guild added an extra tool of enforcement. Richardson concludes that complex guilds, those combining endeavours, deterred shirking better than simple, secular associations and that the complex variants would be more profitable than the simple ones.⁹⁰

MOTIVES, MOTORS, AND CONDITIONS FOR A SILENT REVOLUTION IN CORPORATE COLLECTIVE ACTION

The above brief description of the similarities in “institutional design” of commons and guilds suggests that their more or less simultaneous emergence in north-western Europe might have common causes. In the medieval context, there are several reasons why those forms of collective action were often more advantageous than purely private or public solutions. To analyse them, I would distinguish among motives, motors, and conditions. Motors are here “exogenous” elements of change that can lead to collective action, such as population growth or market development, although how people react to such dynamic changes depends to a great extent on circumstances; the “conditions” are political (the strength of the state), societal (the degree of openness in human relationships), and legal (the potential for legal recognition of corporate bodies). The specific choice for those forms of collective action is based on an assessment of their advantages or disadvantages, which we shall call “motives”. I will start by explaining these motives.

Motives for corporate collective action – potential advantages

What motivates a group of people with a common, though basically not yet collective, objective to choose to join forces and act together in response to a social dilemma? If there is potential for collective action, if the “right” circumstances are created, what would then convince them that it were worth investing in a joint effort? What could be their motives? I deliberately avoid the term “causes” and use “motives” in relation to collective action, since I start from the premise that in theory at least there might have been other ways to solve social dilemmas. I will discuss here the two most important and relevant motives for deciding upon collective action: risk sharing and advantages of scale.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

Electing the cooperative answer has the advantage that one can share the possible costs that arise from uncertain or risky situations. In the case of commons, as too with some guilds such as construction guilds, the risks consisted in the dependency on the availability of resources – nature of course in the case of commons. When the flow of natural resources is not continuous, for example due to seasonal variations (flooding, excessive rainfall for instance), their availability can be seriously hampered in ways that often cannot be foreseen, so pooling resources and costs makes their use more productive and less risky. For commoners, each participant was certain of some part of the harvested resources, year after year, but the share was probably less than the short-term profit that could have been obtained in some years under a system of private property. And therein lay the difference: the average harvest of a collective system might have been more attractive than the seriously fluctuating harvest under a private system.

In the same sense, artisans in medieval times faced risks which they could try to limit by collective action. For guilds the main objective was providing a minimal but secure income for its members. The capital “asset” they pooled in order to prevent running great risks was their skill in combination with specific knowledge about their craft: and by banding together to exchange knowledge and training and by taking advantage of the scale of their organization, they could offer a uniform, high-quality product which could be sold at a minimum price. The “selling channels” and commercial knowledge the guilds built up over the years and passed on could prove helpful, for example, by reducing transaction costs. Those who were relatively highly skilled might have been able to secure higher incomes than could be obtained from within the guild, but it was probably unlikely they would gain in the long run, as they were dependent on the fluctuations of the market.

This collectivization of human capital has been described. One example is the situation of the glassmakers of Venice:

The skills to make quality glass constituted a form of intellectual property. Knowledge was [...] a valuable commodity. In the community of Murano, where practically everyone’s livelihood depended on glassmaking to some degree, the knowledge associated with the glass craft was “communal property”. Failing to protect or maintain this property was to the detriment of the community, the guild and the Venetian state.⁹¹

Larry Epstein has very clearly explained the precise advantage of the guild as an institution in the transfer of this specific property and

91. Patrick McCray, *Glassmaking in Renaissance Venice: The Fragile Craft* (Aldershot, 1999), p. 150.

identified the craft guild as the most direct source of premodern technological innovation. The guild system

[...] enforced the rules of apprenticeship against free-riding and exploitation [...] offered institutional, organizational, and practical support to the migrant apprentices, journeymen, and masters who transferred their knowledge from one town and region of Europe to another [...] [and] it supplies incentives to invention that the patent system did not by enforcing temporary property rights over members' innovations.⁹²

Although they were very different, the resources pooled by the guilds and commons were highly valuable in each case, and by joining forces a variety of important risks could be avoided. Persson points to the further advantages of guilds as insurance against the risk of declining demand or reduced supply of raw materials. Guild regulation ensured that the consequences of a decrease in demand were spread evenly throughout the guild because of the limited role played by competitive price offers. Rules forbidding members from hoarding raw materials limited the consequences of temporary periods of supply restraints, and in that sense risks threatening both supply and demand could be avoided or at least minimized.⁹³

Sticking together offers advantages of scale too, which broadens possibilities in comparison to acting alone. If resources were of low value, as was the case for many commons, the cost of fencing off the land into individual parcels would not have been covered by the potential and of course uncertain benefits. In those cases where a minimum surface of land was necessary to achieve an effective return, forming a collective is quite simply a necessity.

The same applies to guilds: they could achieve advantages of scale by buying raw materials in bulk. Prak gives the example of guilds in 's-Hertogenbosch which allowed a representative to buy goods in bulk on distant markets for a common account. In medieval Venice, butchers empowered a member of the guild to buy a number of pigs, while smiths bought their charcoal in common and ceramists bought white lead in bulk.⁹⁴ The combining of the limited resources of modest individuals offered guilds the possibility of mobilizing expensive legal aid, for examples of which we can see the many petitions filed by guilds allowing them to obtain specific privileges from the local authorities.⁹⁵ Similarly,

92. S.R. Epstein, "Property Rights to Technological Knowledge in Premodern Europe, 1300–1800", *The American Economic Review*, 94 (2004), pp. 382–387.

93. Persson, *Pre-Industrial Economic Growth*, p. 54.

94. Taken from Prak, "Ambachtsgilden vroeger en nu", p. 18. Prak has the impression that this practice of bulk buying goods became less important during the early modern period.

95. See *idem*, "Moral Order in the World of Work: Social Control and the Guilds in Europe", in Herman Roodenburg and Petrus Cornelis Spierenburg, *Social Control in Europe* (Columbus, OH, 2004), p. 186. Epstein also refers to advantages of scale in the use of knowledge: "Much premodern craft and engineering knowledge appears to have been shared or 'distributed' within

the users of a common benefited from collective investments in their common, such as drainage or the fencing of pasture, which could be done at a lower price. They also set up internally enforced social control to avoid illegal use of their resources or trespassing.⁹⁶

Motors of corporate collective action

Commons and guilds can each be considered as institutions founded with the objective of dealing with problems of collective action in order to profit from the advantages cooperation could offer (such as economies of scale and risk sharing). They were in fact dealing with similar problems stemming from similarities in the goods they were trying to protect. Both types of goods – large-scale vulnerable natural resources in the case of the commons and a pool of knowledge and skills in the case of the guilds – have a rather low degree of excludability, meaning that it is hard to exclude others from using the shared asset. The natural resources of commons are mostly too vast to be well delineated, and the knowledge and skills of guild members can be considered goods that are easily copied and therefore hard to protect. Once a guild member had shared his knowledge, it is very plausible that someone else might then share it with some third party who might not even be a guild member.

Guild members possessed a form of expert knowledge, which is quite different from knowledge in general, or “common knowledge”, and protection of their knowledge was necessary in the eyes of the guild not so much because it might be overexploited, as natural resources can, but because a more intensive use of knowledge would effectively overload the market they depended on. In other words, the equivalent of the commodifiable goods on the common (grass, peat, wood, and the agricultural produce that is the result of the use of a common) can be compared to the commodifiable goods produced by a guild’s members.

In both cases higher production and consumption of goods would have negative effects for the members of the corporation concerned: the natural resources on the common would become overexploited, eventually disappear, and so threaten the future of the common as an institution; increasing production would lead to lower prices and, from the point of view of the guilds, too much competition and the eventual collapse of the institutional guild structure.

industrial districts. [...] sharing was more likely in ship- and edifice-building, mining and metalworking, and in the production of clocks and scientific instruments, which displayed strong division of labor and advanced levels of coordination and where cooperation provided clear economies of scale and scope – sectors that are also notable for having played the most technologically innovative role in the Industrial Revolution”; Epstein, “Property Rights to Technical Knowledge in Premodern Europe”, p. 383.

96. See for example De Moor, “Avoiding Tragedies”.

The cause of ever growing scarcity is linked to population growth and accelerating urbanization in the late Middle Ages. Just as in the case of the commons, it became necessary to exclude others only when there *were* others. In the case of many commons, it is possible that originally the available resources could be used by all the inhabitants of the village but that in time some people from the village had to be excluded.

De Munck, Lourens, and Lucassen write that a certain population size was a prerequisite for setting up a guild, because there had to be sufficient people available to become members, and in fact in places of fewer than 500 inhabitants craft guilds normally would not develop.⁹⁷ Given the real drive behind the guilds, it must have been true that the larger the population, the greater the possibility that others, who were not guild members, would have taken part of the consumer market, which was growing as well.⁹⁸ Around 1400 in the Low Countries there was a strong correlation between urbanization and the presence of guilds, although there was a limit to the correlation in the largest cities. According to De Munck, Lourens, and Lucassen, that was a consequence of the political involvement of the guilds in those cities: where certain guilds had gained political power, they were no longer inclined to allow new organizations to flourish, certainly not those formed by splitting up existing guilds.⁹⁹

Besides population growth, the timing of the growth of guilds suggests that we should be looking elsewhere for the reasons for their growth. Although the population had dropped significantly after the Black Death, in the half-century following its first outbreak there was a very clear rise in the number of functioning guilds.¹⁰⁰ As increased demand for labour led to an increase in income for lower orders, more of whom could now afford to pay a guild membership fee and yearly dues for the first time.¹⁰¹ Moreover, the uncertainty that the Black Death had brought with it perhaps drew more people to membership. Membership of a guild was seen as a safeguard against future problems,

97. De Munck, Lourens, and Lucassen, "The Establishment and Distribution of Craft Guilds in the Low Countries 1000–1800", p. 36.

98. However, over time guilds did subcontract to rural areas too. See C. Lis and H. Soly, "Corporatisme, onderaanneming en loonarbeid. Flexibilisering en deregulering van de arbeidsmarkt in Westeuropese steden (veertiende tot achttiende eeuw)", *Tijdschrift voor sociale geschiedenis*, 20 (1994), pp. 365–390.

99. Ghent, for example, had many more citizens than Bruges and Ieper, but hardly more craft guilds. See De Munck, Lourens, and Lucassen, "The Establishment and Distribution of Craft Guilds in the Low Countries 1000–1800", p. 35.

100. Herbert Francis Westlake, *The Parish Guilds of Medieval England* (London [etc.], 1919), p. 28.

101. Virginia R. Bainbridge, *Guilds in the Medieval Countryside: Social and Religious Change in Cambridgeshire, c.1350–1558* (Woodbridge, 1996), p. 105.

and guilds provided members with services that they might be unable to afford individually.¹⁰²

Corporate collective action in the form of commons and guilds was a suitable *modus vivendi* to combine participation in the market with protection against the negative side effects of that market or “using the market without being abused by it”. Both commoners and guild members tried to avoid the negative side effects of the still weak and incompletely developed market by protecting their capital goods.

In the case of the commoners, they tried to protect the valuable and exhaustible resources they had. If these were simply to be sold on the market, that would threaten the sustainable management of resources and consequently the income of the commoners, since they were dependent on the common for the manure that was in turn a vital fertilizer for their commercialized agricultural produce.

Guilds faced similar threats to their income if they failed to place limits on the commercial benefits to be reaped from their members’ production. The capital good they needed to protect was their knowledge and learned skills. Making their knowledge available to others who were not members of the guild would likewise create a threat to members’ income since to a certain extent they would lose the security of their income and see a drop in their wages. There was a need for a *modus vivendi* because of the situation in the factor markets at that time. Capital was available but limited, and the labour market was at an early stage of development, although it was starting to become a threat to independent craftsmen. In situations with such unreliable markets, where large fluctuations can be expected in returns on investments, collective action institutions can offer an attractive alternative.

*Conditions for collective action: weak families, tolerant states,
and legal recognition*

One hypothesis to explain conditions favourable to the choice of collective institutions has been suggested by Michael Mitterauer, who stresses the importance of the disappearance of family bonds as a factor explaining the so-called European *Sonderweg*.¹⁰³ He argues that more “open” forms of social organization than systems based on kinship or tribal relations might have played a part in the development of collective action, particularly its corporate form, whereas in societies based on strict family lineage, tribal structures, or clans, there might not have been any “room” for the development of collective action. Anthony Black

102. Westlake, *The Parish Guilds of Medieval England*, p. 32.

103. Michael Mitterauer, *Warum Europa? Mittelalterliche Grundlagen eines Sonderwegs* (Munich, 2003).

considers the European guilds “artificial families”, which is probably one of the best descriptions of the status of guilds.¹⁰⁴ Perhaps the term “surrogate families” would still better emphasize their difference from other societies.¹⁰⁵

Besides such an open relatively non-kinship-based society, there must be the freedom to organize. Guilds and commons emerged in western Europe in a situation of fragmented sovereignty and a relatively weak state in which different social classes and groups such as the nobility, the Church, and independent cities vied with each other for control of what “state” there was and any established state-like institutions, such as independent communes.¹⁰⁶ It was typical for western Europe during the Middle Ages that power became negotiable, in which sense the “cooperative revolution” has already been noted, though by other historians and using other terminology. Cooperation then evolved into the broader form of “negotiation” accompanied by an institutionalization of estates into parliaments and imperial and territorial diets.¹⁰⁷ In sum, guilds needed the political institutions to allow them to develop.¹⁰⁸

One last point is the legal and political recognition of groups. Legal changes made it possible for corporations to act as single bodies in the name of their members, so that whatever their purpose they had sufficient recognition to function properly. In medieval Europe that was possible because canon law attributed rights of assembly to collectivities, as well as ownership and internal and external representation.¹⁰⁹ These organizations received their legal recognition according to the principle of *universitas*, which gave a group a legal personality distinct from that of its individual members.

The concept of *universitas* was newly introduced to European law in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, and although the term, meaning “corporation”, was derived from Roman law, the twelfth-century western European interpretation was substantially different from what the term had meant to the Romans. It would carry us too far from our path to

104. A. Black, *Guilds and Civil Society in European Political Thought from the Twelfth Century to the Present* (Ithaca, NY, 1984).

105. A more explicit link between the development of new family relations within the emergence of the European Marriage Pattern and the emergence of institutions of collective action has been made in De Moor and van Zanden, “GIRLPOWER”.

106. Van Zanden, “Economic Growth in a Period of Political Fragmentation”.

107. See also Blickle, *From the Communal Reformation to the Revolution of the Common Man*, p. 8.

108. Compare this with the condition set by Ostrom for the functioning of commons: Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 90.

109. Toby E. Huff, *The Rise of Early Modern Science: Islam, China, and the West* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 134.

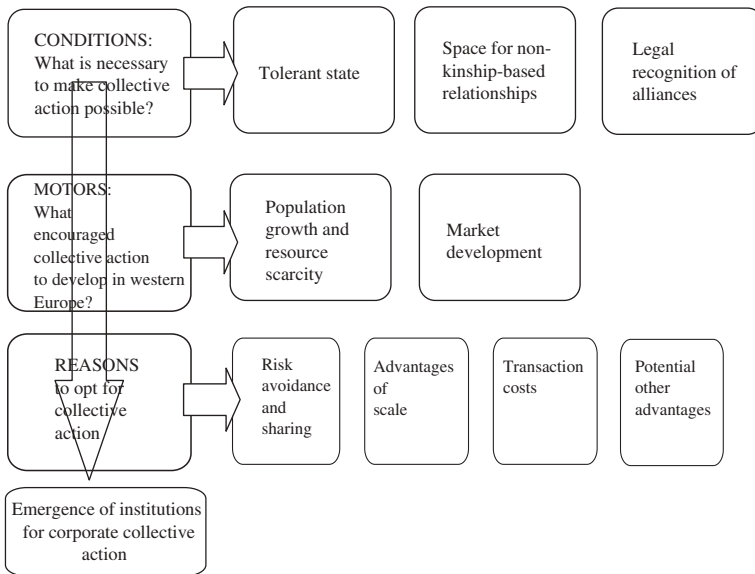


Figure 1. Motives, motors, and conditions for the emergence of institutions for corporate collective action.

expound the discussions among jurists of the period, but the core of the concept important here is that a debt owed by a corporation was not owed by the members as individuals; and an expression of the will of a corporation did not require the assent of each separate member but rather of a majority.¹¹⁰ The principle of *universitas* established the existence of fictive personalities that are treated as real entities in courts of law and in assemblies before kings and princes.¹¹¹ Those entities could be economic, such as guilds, educational bodies such as universities, or religious, and so on.

Besides recognition of the group as an entity, their regulation needed support from local and state powers. Although the attribution of the right to be a member can itself be considered a property right, since it gives the right to appropriate some of the resources, it differs significantly from the later modern property rights devised from the late eighteenth century onward, which were state-backed “rights to exclude” and, unlike the guild’s and common’s regulations, were not devised to solve an economic problem but to support a newly constructed political order in which individuals rather than groups formed the pillars of society.¹¹²

110. Brian Tierney, *Religion, Law, and the Growth of Constitutional Thought, 1150–1650* (Cambridge [etc.], 1982), p.19; Huff, *The Rise of Early Modern Science*, p. 133.

111. *Ibid.*, Berman, *Law and Revolution*, p. 214.

112. Eric A. Posner, *Law and Social Norms* (Cambridge, MA [etc.], 2000).

Given these conflicting backgrounds, it should be no surprise to us that in the century preceding their almost simultaneous dissolution at the end of the eighteenth century, both guilds and commons were the subject of fierce debate. The abolition of both types of organization was fuelled by the same arguments: these remnants of a feudal, medieval past were the enemies of innovation and economic progress, and the kind of rhetoric that attacked the organizations during the eighteenth century was to a large degree applicable to both types.

The struggle for life by guilds and commons at the end of the eighteenth century shows that corporate collective action needed backing from the state in order to succeed. As soon as that backing disappeared, members of guilds and commoners found it hard to survive.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article guilds and commons, two different forms of corporate collective action, have been compared in their institutional design and in terms of their own rise and decline and the role of political powers in the process. The results of these comparisons confirm that there are sufficient reasons to claim that the late Middle Ages was a period of innovation in dealing with social dilemmas to such an extent that we could call this development a “silent revolution”. Viewed from a more international perspective, it would appear that, first of all, corporate collective action could be a valuable and rather cheap way of solving social dilemmas, and second that the spread of institutions such as guilds and commons was more rapid in Europe than elsewhere. However, when considering intra-European geographical limitations it remains unclear where exactly the borders of this silent revolution should be placed. The rise of other institutions such as *beguinages* and water boards in the same period as guilds and commons does, however, suggest that the Low Countries, in particular, were a centre of rapid institutionalization of collective action. Further investigations of the subject should help to indicate how close a correlation there is between corporate collective action and economic development at large.¹¹³

At the micro-level we have found indications that guilds, commons, and other forms of collective action were adequate answers to the economic and social needs of contemporary north-western European society in response

113. At the moment a project to inventory the emergence of guilds, commons, *beguinages*, water boards, and journeymen's boxes (*knechtsbussen*) is being carried out by a group of researchers at the universities of Utrecht, Antwerp, and Milan, the University of California, Irvine, the International Institute of Social History, and the Technical University of Turkey (Ankara). Data on the emergence and other aspects of guilds are being collected for the period 1000 to 1900 for the Netherlands, Belgium, England, Italy, the Ottoman Empire, and China. For more information, contact the present author or visit the collaborative website at <https://collab.iisg.nl/web/Guilds/> [last accessed 19 June 2008].

to a quickly but far from fully developed market economy and social networks becoming inadequate as family networks weakened. Markets, although they could not provide a continuous income, were used as their channel for sales by guilds, who contrived to protect their members from negative side effects perhaps at the expense of a somewhat restricted average income. Commoners did not sell produce from the common but needed the common to provide foodstuffs for their cattle, which in turn were indispensable for fertilizing the land. The common therefore provided products for the market but at the same time provided a basic income.

Investing in goods is a risky affair. Craftsmen and commoners therefore relied on collective action to minimize costs, taking advantage of being a united body in the provision of social welfare for themselves and their families; and as groups they often interfered in political matters, which they could do because the rules of enfeebled feudalism gave them the room to do so. Organized in relatively small states that were always involved in some conflict or other, they might in any case not have had much choice.

Guilds could offer security of income and social welfare in a changeable world, so addressing two needs, and we can say exactly the same about commons. The not always straightforward but necessary combination of those two elements was in fact the strength of the system. The situation would be complicated by the fact that the social costs of some members affected the economic benefits for the others, but the social component was essential since without it the perhaps only temporarily weaker members of the group would need to work below the guild's set price limit, adversely affecting the income of the "stronger" members.

Because of economic and societal factors such as loosening family ties, solidarity was thus needed to make the system work. Given the variations in income between all members, that might not always have been clear to everybody, there was a need for strictly enforceable rules. The collective action organizations discussed in this article thrived on what can be called "bridging social capital" instead of upon the old kinship arrangements.¹¹⁴ Many populations, such as the Chinese, still depend largely on such kinship-based relations.

One of the conclusions of this article is that, given the right political circumstances, including the freedom to organize, rulers with whom it is possible to compromise, and specific economic incentives, the pursuit of joint welfare by means of collective action should be seen not as a cumbersome affair with little chance of success, but as an option frequently preferred by those forming the group.

114. In a brief footnote, Robert Putnam suggested in his renowned *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, NJ, 1993) that guilds might have made the difference in the construction of civil society in northern Italy. See p. 229, n. 20.

A new approach to guilds as institutions has been presented in this article. Although it cannot be denied that there is a clear need for a more global *horizontal* comparison of guilds in order to understand fully the functioning and role of such institutions, the debate would also benefit from a more *vertical* comparison, a comparison of the structure of the institution, with other forms of corporate collective action also being considered. But that would entail some risks. A theoretical approach as demonstrated in this article brings with it not only the possibility of too much generalization, it also restricts space for true empiricism. However, I hope the advantages of this new approach have been made sufficiently clear here.