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Sheilagh Ogilvie, *The European Guilds: An Economic Analysis*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. xvi + 645 pp. Maps, tables, figures, plates, notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 US (cl). ISBN 978-0-691-13754-4.

Review by Steven A. Epstein, University of Kansas.

Ogilvie's book is a comprehensive study of European guilds from the eleventh to the last decades of the nineteenth century. This *longue durée* divides into medieval period (pre 1500) and an early modern sequel. This is a big Europe, from Bulgaria to Scotland, Portugal to Finland. The subtitle claims for guilds an economic analysis and this is proper for institutions whose primary purpose was the economic benefit of its members, almost invariably employers. But this is not the economic history pioneered by the *Annales E. S. C.* which originally fostered a tight interdisciplinary connection between economic and social history. For the purposes and audience of this review I will emphasize France and the history of its *métiers* and corporations, well known to students of French history *tout court*. Ogilvie's analysis depends on an immense database of 12,051 qualitative observations taken from many archival, primary, and principally secondary sources, the only way to manage such a vast undertaking. A curious reader may find this database by simply searching for "Ogilvie Quantitative Guild Database" and following the link to a straightforward Excel spreadsheet. Modern economic history is not discursive but depends on the quality of the database and this one is clear and reliable, and where appropriate tests the data for statistical significance. Since "France (by its 2018 borders) accounts for 16.5 per cent of observations of guilds and 14.4 percent of average European population across the period..." (p. 27) the database enables readers to place it, or any other region, in a European context. Ogilvie carefully assesses regional nuances over time and space. For France, this means that 1791 and the final abolition of the guilds, after some temporary experiments by Turgot and the Physiocrats, gives this state a sharp break, occurring earlier in some places (Tuscany) and later in others (England, Germany). In some times and places guilds did not matter.

Nine chapters and a tenth of conclusions divide this subject into topics investigated from beginning to end across Europe. This argument-driven book has a systematic style of presentation. First Ogilvie examines the standard or prevalent story, and this invariably turns out to be mostly wrong. Then she posits a series of important questions and proceeds to deploy the databases and tables to establish the facts, finishing with a new approach. This is how economic history works; since Adam Smith its practitioners have not minced words or shied away from controversy. Each generation clears space for its own light to shine and sharpens its teeth on rivals. This is entirely normal. What matters is if progress in understanding occurs or,

if in a parody of research, the bones are simply moved from one graveyard to another. Ogilvie's topical chapters address: the state of the debate, guilds and government, entry barriers, market manipulation, guilds and women, quality regulation, human capital investment, innovation, guilds and growth. In brief, guilds and governments frequently cooperated as corrupt institutions, they ratified discrimination against women, Jews, and others and institutionalized nepotism, they rigged markets to their own benefit and not consumers, they oppressed women, they hardly enforced rules on quality and schemed to obstruct other institutions that tried, they engaged in frequently shoddy or useless training, they stifled technological progress which mostly occurred outside their purview, and they probably did much more harm than good to European economic development and growth. If there was one good thing about guilds, I missed it and I was looking. These findings would have convinced the members of the National Assembly that they had voted wisely to abolish the *métiers*. Modern scholars, principally Stephan R. Epstein (1960-2007) and Maarten Prak, who have argued for a more positive role for guilds in the early modern economy, come in for stiff criticism.[1]

Ogilvie rightly regards this debate about guilds as an urgent historical subject that continues to shape assessments of apprenticeships and vocational education, women, work and general relationships between employers and employees, and the best ways to foster innovation or better a "culture of improvement" a phrase stressed by Robert Friedel.[2] Each chapter makes many compelling arguments with consequences beyond premodern European history. Summarizing a long book on a big subject in a short review is a fruitless endeavor. The general reader must turn to the table of contents to find the topics worth exploring, because the poor index makes it hard to consult this book rather than read it. Medieval and early modern guilds might appear to be two very distinct subjects, but Ogilvie's data allows for studying change over time in the economic history of guilds.

Guilds and governments become a study of rent seeking, looking for private gain at a cost to the general good by using state authority to extract it, as well as exploring how power and profit become entangled. The French monarchy took a keen interest in Parisian guilds from the thirteenth century (p.45) and organized the *métiers* as another tool of royal control. Centuries later Jean-Baptiste Colbert required all French occupations to form *métiers* to further his national plans for control from the center. Elsewhere, guilds also served the policies of centralizing governments (England, Venice) or occasionally for a season dominated government (Florence). Ogilvie's excellent survey of women and guilds looks beyond widespread oppressive patriarchy to document convincingly the economic damage guilds did to enforce a gender division of labor. Her institutional approach to economic history pays dividends--"The limits guilds placed on the economic choices of women, therefore, inflicted harm on the women themselves, on the families they supported, and almost certainly on the economy at large" (p. 306). Millions of women, across seven centuries. Rules on quality have encouraged some historians to romanticize the guilds whose employers, fortified by religious solidarity and the honor of their trade, feigned high standards to benefit consumers and required "masterpieces" to ensure technical skill. In fact, few guilds required masterpieces or devised ways for the privileged to avoid the test (p. 323). If "quality" was a fraudulent mask for entry barriers, then concern for the public good was best defended by other institutions without the self-interest of the guild masters.

"Human capital investment" is a modern phrase Ogilvie deploys in a close look at the terms of apprenticeship by asking the right questions about how long it took to master a trade, and how

well masters taught, and young people learned. So many apprentices ran away before the end of their terms, or simply never finished, that we are right to ask questions about any method of training that seems to stretch out the years for the benefit of the teachers and not the students, educational problems apparent to many academics in Europe and the United States today. Even the well-intentioned overseers of orphans in Saint Eustache wondered in 1684 if placing their charges into apprenticeships was worth the cost (p. 434). This traditional method of drafting orphans into work by pushing them into vocational training at the onset of their teens, if not before, hardly valued their consent to what were often severe terms. Ogilvie has perhaps too little time, however, for the ostensible paternalism of apprenticeship, whose rules frequently obliged the pupil to live a godly and sober life while frequently living with the master and receiving adequate food, clothing, and shelter and in some cases even a negotiated training wage. These aspects of apprenticeship, perhaps more social than economic and harder to quantify, might have received more attention, as well as to what extent another convention, the apprentice marrying into the master's family, occurred often enough to matter.

Ogilvie sensibly stresses, that just as there were plenty of apprenticeships without guilds, new technologies appeared outside guilds, many of which discouraged any changes to their privileged and secret trade techniques (p. 440). Since general arguments about the pace and timing of technological change in medieval and early modern Europe argue for its importance in the region's uneven economic development, one good aspect of the general incompetence of guilds was they hardly dented technological, let alone scientific progress. Other institutions, like patent laws and scientific academies (certainly not universities) provided practical means for encouraging and rewarding curiosity about manufacturing and agriculture. All this reasoning prepares the reader for the penultimate chapter in which Ogilvie convincingly demonstrates that far from contributing to economic development, guilds did more harm than good. A useful table (p. 535) supplies the dates of guild abolition in European countries 1770-1877. Beginning with precocious eighteenth examples of abolition in revolutionary France and countries it absorbed, England abolished its corporations in 1835 and only afterwards, during the beginnings of the second stage of the Industrial Revolution when coal, steel, chemicals, and electricity begin to dominate, did the guilds finally disappear in the rest of Europe. The nascent developers here, Germany, one of the last to abolish guilds and the United States (which never had them despite some colonial efforts to copy England) complicate any neat relationship between weak or non-existent guilds and better chances of growth. France makes for a typically intermediate example, not in the forefront of the first stage of the Industrial Revolution, but nevertheless one of the most prosperous and populous nations in Europe.

This rapid survey has not done justice to Ogilvie's entirely convincing, careful, and nuanced study of the economic consequences of guilds. To go beneath the surface let us look at the longest chapter, on entry barriers with its 408 footnotes. After Ogilvie summarizes the state of the question, she lays out in tabular form (p. 94) guild entry barriers apart from gender, and finds five broad categories and with twenty instances of particular behavior, ranging from limiting the total number of members, exclusions based on religion (originally weighing on Jews but eventually extending to Protestant and Catholic guilds) to issues of nepotism, fees, and worse. Each one of these cases receives careful scrutiny for its effects, and the combined force of the barriers amply justifies the conclusion that these obstacles to entering a trade or profession were one of the few things guilds invested in and did well enough to make the conditions of the poor and antisemitism even worse (p. 171). The value of basic fairness suffuses this book and makes this economic analysis, especially for those who seldom read any, truly

rewarding.

Is there anything left to say on behalf of guilds, or are they a useful reminder of institutions, like slavery and the duel, justly thrown on the rubbish heap of history? A nagging question remains: how could an institution with so many defects last so long? The mundane human proclivity to persist in error for as long as possible explains a lot of history. Also, nostalgia about guilds, however implausible, encouraged in some people regrets about the passing away of the benevolent old master and his fawning workers and students working away in household craft production far removed from the “satanic mills.” Some trade union movements of the nineteenth century, either emulating or depreciating the institutions of their employers, called their associations guilds, brotherhoods, federations, or unions in vernacular languages across Europe.

There was no truth to this “deep history” of guilds, which had almost invariably excluded workers from being members in any capacity other than being subordinate to their harsh rules. Perhaps European workers, over the centuries covered by this outstanding book, understood that they were part of another history, the rise of wage labor, from the individual to the collectively bargained wage rates. These millions of journeymen and women participated in a labor system that was itself a kind of new technology, yet also not dependent on organizations of employers for its existence. A scholar based in the medieval part of Ogilvie’s book inevitably can imagine an economy where slavery, serfdom, and coercion to the limit of human endurance determined the rules of labor, productivity, and the possibilities for sustained economic growth whose benefits the lord and masters called rightfully their own. If guilds in any way were a link between economies based on violence to ones permitting bargaining, this could be a coincidence requiring a great French *thèse* on the history of bargaining across Europe, where it thrived and where it did not. Almost fifty years ago a distinguished French medievalist, Pierre Michaud-Quantin, published a book on the medieval proclivity to band together in all sorts of associations to foster some common interest.[3] Not a society that bowled alone, except for the hermits.[4] Many guilds, for example, functioned as religious confraternities which involved the employers and their workers in common activities like praying or burying the dead. In turn the impulse to join led many people to become members of other confraternities having nothing to do with guilds. A person might belong to any number of confraternities and have a patron saint for one’s name and others for his or her occupation, city, and country. Ogilvie’s definitive work on guilds encourages asking questions about the broader economic and social experience of being in groups.

## NOTES

[1] The main works to which Ogilvie responds are: Stephan R. Epstein and Maarten Prak, *Guilds, Innovation, and the European Economy 1400-1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 2008) especially the introduction and most of the essays; Maarten Prak and Jan Luiten van Zanden, *Technology, skills, and the pre-modern economy in the East and in the West: essays dedicated to the memory of S. R. Epstein* (Leiden: Brill, 2013). Ogilvie’s vast bibliography is a guide to the entire literature.

[2] Robert Friedel, *A Culture of Improvement: Technology and the Western Millennium* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), pp. 153-4 on technology and guilds.

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[3] Pierre Michaud-Quantin, *Universitas: Expressions du mouvement communautaire dans le Moyen Age latin* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1970).

[4] An obvious reference to the remarkable book by Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community* (New York, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

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