



Commons and the nature of modernity: towards a cosmopolitical view on craft guilds

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Abstract

This paper argues that historical research on late medieval and early modern craft guilds fails to escape teleological and anachronistic views, including when they are addressed as commons or ‘institutions for collective action’. These present-day conceptual lenses do not only create idealized views on guilds, but also of the contexts in which they operated, especially the state and the market. This is especially the case with neo-institutional views on the commons, which fall back on a transhistorical rational actor, who can choose between three options for the allocation of resources and surpluses, namely the state, the market and the common. The paper shows that guilds were fundamentally entangled with both the state and the market and that their ethic implied a less utilitarian and instrumental attitude towards natural resources. The consequence of this is that the history of the guilds offers different lessons to present-day commoners than those implied by present-day research. With an eye at launching a reflection on that, I argue in favour of a cosmopolitical perspective, which invites to take fundamentally different worldviews seriously. This includes questioning our own conceptual and analytical abstractions like the state, the market and the individual, up to and including the very distinction between nature and society or nature and politics, which are at the very basis of modern science itself.

Keywords Commons · Guilds · Marxism · Modernity · Ostrom · Actor-network theory · Cosmopolitics

Historians with the ambition to do theory-informed research and address present-day societal issues are at risk, almost inevitably, to use anachronistic theories and concepts (Tosh 2010, chs 7 and 8). While concepts and categories are idealizations and abstractions by definition, historical distance inexorably widens the gap between the theoretical lens and the empirical reality. This is all the more the case if the research concerned

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addresses pre-modern periods, i.e., periods in which it is difficult to find historical equivalents for even the most fundamental analytical categories that we have become used to, such as class, capital, the state, the market, or even the individual. Most historians are well aware of this and have justifiable strategies to deal with it. They can either stick to the descriptive and narrative level and avoid theoretical concepts as much as possible or add a disclaimer about the anachronistic nature of the conceptual and analytical lens applied. However, things become more complicated if the very development of key categories is to be addressed in the research itself, which is the case as soon as Western modernization is involved (Chakrabarty 1992, 2000) – still the ultimate horizon of a great deal of historical research. My paper will address this problem through a focus on craft guilds. While the historiography of craft guilds is a long historical procession of anachronistic views, guilds also offer the opportunity to consider a new approach, which partly solves the problem.

Both in historical research and beyond, craft guilds have in recent research been looked at through the lens of the commons (e.g., De Moor 2008; Arvidsson 2019), which have emerged as new matters of concern for activists as well as scientists looking for strategies to combat social and political exclusion and environmental degradation. While commons are seen as social institutions for the management and allocation of resources (Ostrom 1990) ‘commoning’ is considered a political strategy for the creation of new spaces of economic productivity, social participation and political subjectivity (Hardt and Negri 2004, 2009; De Angelis 2017; Dockx and Gielen 2018). The key idea is to produce and manage resources at the level of a community, to the benefit of the community (rather than the individual or the public) and more or less independently from both the market and the state. This explains the interest in historical examples. Typical historical examples like communal fields and common meadows and woodlands thrived in a context in which both the state and the market were underdeveloped and in which the rights of a specific community as well as the definition of that community were based on custom and tradition. The long term history implied is one of ever more aggressive infringements on these traditions, as is exemplified with the well-known history of the ‘enclosure’ of communal lands (in England and elsewhere). Commons were privatized by ever more powerful economic actors – typically large landowners obtaining private property entitlements to land and other resources. This was enabled by increasingly powerful state-based bureaucracies which demolished communal customary rights and developed the juridical tools needed to grant and guard private property rights (e.g., Neeson 1993, 2000; Shaw-Taylor 2001a, 2001b; Tan 2002; also Brakensiek 2000, Demélas and Vivier 2003; Liddy 2015; French 2019).

The problem is, however, that this historical narrative to a large extent mirrors the political imaginary of present-day commoners faced with the hegemony of the market, the tenacity of private property rights and the persistence of public bureaucracies working in the service of these rights. It builds on Marxist views on primitive accumulation and the rise of capitalism, resulting in a tendency to idealize commons as pristine autonomous and egalitarian communities which resisted the infringements of economic and political elites geared towards a more intensive and market driven exploitation of labour and natural resources (De Angelis 2007; Linebaugh 2008, 2014; also Blickle 2000; De Keyzer 2018). These views have been challenged recently by scholars incorporating ideas and concepts from neo-institutional economics in general and as applied to the commons by Elinor Ostrom in specific. From this angle,

commons are defined as ‘institutions for collective action’ designed to collectively deal with risks and uncertainties as well as with infringements from outsiders (esp. De Moor 2008, 2015). Here as well, however, there is a tendency to idealize the commons. While protectionist and exclusionary mechanisms are defined as a response to free riding, scholars have stressed cooperation, collective and bottom up principles of decision making, egalitarian social dynamics and the ability to manage natural resources in a rational and sustainable way.

While all this has certainly enriched our views on the history of the commons, my paper will argue that it did not enable to escape anachronism. In the Marxist tradition, commons are somehow conceived as the ‘others’ of modernity, as part of ‘the world we have lost’ (in the words of Peter Laslett) and at which we look back with nostalgia – as Peter Linebaugh does when he describes them as ‘the antithesis of capitalism’ (Volont 2018: 319). From the Ostrom perspective, historical commoners very much resemble present-day commoners too, but here the commons share an essence with present-day examples, viz. the rationality of the commoners which shape them. As they very much adapt in a flexible and rational way to changing circumstances, the commoners’ behavior as a collective can be explained with the help of game theoretical models – based as they are on rational choice theories (cf. Ostrom 2005). This results in an entirely different past-present-relationship in which the past is not superseded by a supra-individual historical force (retroactively defined as capitalistic or bureaucratic) but is rather connected to the present by the existence of an a-historical rationality located in the individual actor. The resulting view on the commons as an historical reality is just as well a normative one, however – one in which commons in the past solve problems of the present.

This argument will in this paper be developed with a focus on craft guilds. In the first section, I will delve deeper into the historiography of both the commons and the guilds so as to further unpack the anachronisms of the dominant views. While showing that neo-institutional approaches are based on a transhistorical rational actor, I will also tackle the idea that guilds can be distinguished from both the market and the state, and that the latter can be reduced to exogenous factors which either tolerated guilds or – from the late seventeenth century on – infringed on their autonomy and collective rights. In the second section, I will then assess to what extent guilds can be seen as a type of commons at all, arguing that their history is relevant for the commons which nowadays dominate in Western cities to the extent that the latter are also not antithetical to market structures and political forces but very much entangled with them. When subsequently delving deeper into the commons’ ideologies in the third section, it will become clear that current approaches nevertheless fail to capture the complexity of historical developments. As I will show, craft guilds cannot be seen as resulting from a calculated choice for collaboration and sharing, nor as the autonomous and egalitarian associations which they are typically held for. Most parts of the underlying ideologies are even incompatible with the standards of modern liberal democracies, including those cultivated by present-day commoners. In medieval and early modern Europe, commons, even when they had egalitarian characteristics, were part of the deeply hierarchical and patriarchal structures which served as the bone of contention of Enlightened thinkers and which were abolished at the close of the eighteenth century during the political revolutions which we consider to be at the roots of political modernity. The problem still faced by historians is how to contribute to the debate

without simply reproducing an idealized view on the past in the service of ‘commonism’ as a ‘new aesthetics of the real’ – as it has recently been called (Dockx and Gielen 2018).

In the fourth and last section, I will then launch a reflection on a new way to write the history of the guilds, one in which the issue of modernization is tackled while anachronism is nevertheless avoided. To that end, I will build on earlier work in which I have used Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (De Munck 2014, 2017a), which proceeds from a radical refusal to take such modern concepts and analytical categories as capital, class, state, individual and structure for granted (for a general introduction, see Latour 2005). Rather than applying these concepts as explanatory or even descriptive categories, ANT invites to examine the processes by which they come into being. And rather than starting from views in which these historical realities have an essence of sorts, ANT urges to focus on the external relations and the multiple networks from which they result (see e.g., Callon and Latour 1981; Callon 1986; Law and Hassard 1999). This is all the more relevant with respect to commons because ANT moreover concentrates on the interaction between material, technological and infrastructural elements, on one hand, and mental and discursive elements, on the other, without giving causal precedence to either of them (see e.g., Law 1991; Latour 1992). When applied to the commons, ANT thus urges to address the relationship between the commons as nature or a set of resources and the commons as an idea, imaginary or ideology.

This brings us to the heart of the debate on modernity itself. What the Marxist and neo-institutional view have in common is their focus on nature, which in both cases is seen as increasingly exploited throughout history. What they both fail to appreciate, however, is the extent to which this is related to the history of knowledge. ANT’s most famous protagonist, Bruno Latour, has argued that the development of modern science was intricately related to the conception of nature. In his pioneering essay *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes*, science emerged from the history of Western ‘modernity’, which should in turn be seen as the fabrication of a distinction between nature and society, or between subject and object (Latour 1991, 1993). What this implies for the history of commons and the guilds, is that we should take into account the existence of different cosmologies and how they are related to the broader political (and also economic) context, which is what philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers’ concept of ‘cosmopolitics’ invites us to do. Stengers (2010) has shown that the history of our modern understanding of nature is fundamentally entangled with the development of the constraints and requirements of legitimate scientific activity, thus illustrating how other approaches to nature have become obsolete and illegitimate. Her work will in the last section of the paper serve as an inspiration for my ultimate argument that the history of the guilds can only be understood properly when addressing it through the lens of a broader modernization process shaped, in part, by epistemological transformations and changing conceptions of nature.

The need to look at epistemological transformations is what makes guilds particularly relevant for this endeavor in the first place. The key resource which late medieval and early modern urban craft guilds shared and managed was technical knowledge, access to which was sanctioned through their apprenticeship system (Epstein 1998). In contrast to theoretical concepts and analytical categories, this type of knowledge cannot be seen as idealizations or abstractions, rather to the contrary. While the latter in a way create a certain distance between knowledge and reality (or between culture or society

and nature), the artisans had immediate access to nature through their skills (Oosterhoff 2014). And this is exactly what was at stake in the long run. My ultimate argument will be that the disappearance of guilds was contingent on the emergence of a cosmology in which politics as well as science became detached from nature and in which nature was made manageable and comprehensible through politics and science. On a metalevel, my paper will thus present a new type of history writing, one in which the history of the epistemological fundamentals of our historical approach to the history of capitalism and modernity is itself implicated in the analysis.

My empirical data will be derived from secondary literature on guilds, especially from regions with strong guilds such as the Southern Netherlands (more or less present-day Belgium, see De Munck 2018a). Craft guilds in the Southern Netherlands and regions with similar cities and guilds such as the Rhineland and Sweden could wield a great deal of political power while they were run by a relatively egalitarian and autonomous community of freemen (masters) (Lis and Soly 1997, 2006a, 2008). As such, they resembled the typical ‘commons’ mentioned above more than did guilds in for instance the Northern Netherlands and Northern Italy, which were often governed from the top down by the mercantile elites which also governed the city. The rationale behind this choice is that strong guilds are likely to have shared more characteristics with the standard view on commons. While this enables to study the masters’ ideology from a commons perspective, it also reinforces my arguments about the deep entanglement of craft guilds with both the market and the state.

The commons as a conceptual framework: A critique

The problem with research on guilds and commons alike is that it has always been very much indebted to the ideological background of those writing about them (Lambrechts 1994; Lis and Soly 2006a). In large parts of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, historiography can roughly be divided in two positions: on the one hand, liberal and progressive intellectuals tended to describe guilds as institutions which hampered economic and technological progress. The guilds’ regulations were in this work seen as obstacles for the development of free market mechanisms in general and specialisation, division of labour and technological innovation in specific (see e.g., Crutzen 1887a, 1887b, 1888). On the other hand, religiously inspired or conservative intellectuals referred to the medieval guilds as beacons of harmony and stability. Stressing the religious dimension of the guilds as well as their members’ consensual attitude and respect for hierarchy and disciplining, the guilds were portrayed in this tradition as the anti-thesis of industrialization, the atomization of the social, and social unrest – i.e., as the ‘other’ of ‘modernity’ indeed (e.g., Kurth 1893).

As of the 1970s and 1980s, historians have gone to great lengths to qualify such anachronistic views, but they continue to struggle with the guilds’ ‘modernity’. As has recently been remarked by Lantschner (2014), the late medieval revolts such as the Ciompi Revolt, in which guilds played a central role, are still described as ‘veritable social and workers’ revolution(s)’, suggesting that they resemble the nineteenth-century workers’ movement. Moreover, the political structures in which the guilds were incorporated as a result of these revolutions are still considered ‘harbingers of a modern state-centred political order’ (Lantschner 2014: 3 and 5; also Liddy and Haemers 2013).

Such teleological views were fueled in the 1990s and 2000s by Robert Putnam's *Making Democracy Work* (Putnam 1993), in which guilds and religious brotherhoods are rendered as heralds of a modern civil society, because they would have created trust among urban citizens and would have fostered the practicing of democratic principles like deliberation and the election of representatives. While Putnam's book was a welcome correction to Jürgen Habermas' one sided-view on the emergence of a public sphere in eighteenth century England (and, by extension, NW Europe), it has re-invigorated a-historical views, in which the fundamental differences between medieval and early modern 'commons' and contemporary civil society organizations are eclipsed (for critical views, see Van Dijck et al. 2017; De Munck 2017b). In the spirit of Alexis de Tocqueville (1838) and Max Weber, guilds and similar organisations are now seen as modern social institutions, which – as artificial families of sorts – replaced clan and extended family networks and feudal structures (e.g., De Moor 2008: 207–8, De Moor 2015: 56).

This trend has been elaborated upon by economic historians building on the principles and concepts of the so-called new institutional economics, in which social institutions tend to be reduced to collective answers to problems of either economic efficiency or the distribution of resources and profits (cf. Epstein and Prak 2008; Ogilvie 2011, 2019). Historians studying guilds have for instance argued that they lowered transaction costs with respect to human capital formation and helped solve the problem of information asymmetry with respect to product quality. In the former case, minimum terms to serve and end term rewards for apprentices would have assured masters a return on their investment in training as it prevented their apprentices from absconding and, thus, increased trust on the learning market – resulting in lower prices and more learning (Epstein 1998). In the latter case, the guilds' hall marks and product quality standards would have created transparency with respect to the artisans' products, again producing trust and, consequently, preventing adverse selection (Gustafsson 1987; also De Munck 2011a). In line with this, the guilds' privileges are now also seen as collective patents, which assure a return on investments in new technologies and new production techniques (Belfanti 2004; also Davids and De Munck 2014).

These views are still anachronistic in that guilds are understood as solutions for what essentially are modern problems, in this case economic efficiency and free riding. Historical work on commons shares a similar anachronism. It took off as a critique on the classical view on the 'tragedy of the commons' articulated by Garrett Hardin (1968) in his famous 1968 article in *Science*. In it, it is argued that property held in common would almost inevitably lead to ecological degradation and depletion of resources in a context of population growth – because every individual has an incentive to favor individual gain in the short run over collective benefits in the longer run. This view is refuted by Ostrom and others with the idea that collective institutions are able to create the regulations and sanctioning mechanisms needed to prevent this tragedy and to manage resources in a communal as well as sustainable way (Ostrom 1990; also Poteete et al. 2010). The last two decades, these ideas have been introduced in historical research (e.g., De Moor 2008, 2015; De Moor et al. 2002), but this is not without problems (De Moor 2015: 47, 119–20). As argued by Tine De Moor (2015: 120) 'the available frameworks as yet do not offer the necessary instruments to capture the interplay among the resources, the people using the resources, and those designing the rules (...) in particular when studying the very long-term survival of commons.' The present-day conceptual framework, in other words, does not really chime with historical reality.

In response, De Moor (2008: 202, 2015: ch 1) has developed her own framework for understanding the emergence and persistence of commons, in which she distinguishes *conditions* (a tolerant state, space for non-kinship based relationships and the existence of legal tools for the recognition of alliances), *drivers* or *motors* (population growth, scarcity of resources and market development) and *motives* or *reasons* (risk avoidance and risk sharing, economies of scale and transaction costs). This framework too, however, is difficult to uphold in the face of historical reality. As has already been argued, the supposed conditions are too broad and vague to have any explanatory power, as is exemplified by the fact that too many examples can be pointed at in which commons emerged without these conditions being present. Moreover, a clear connection between the ‘favourable conditions’ and the ‘reasons’ is missing, which results in unclarity as to why certain societies opt for commons or not (Curtis 2013). In the words of Daniel Curtis (2013: 217), ‘(t)he problem with the framework is that it is implicitly accepted that “risk avoidance and sharing”, “advantages of scale”, and “(lower) transaction costs” are all things that every pre-industrial society aimed to achieve or benefited from.’

Moreover, the medieval individual is often reduced to a utility maximizing actor, even if he collaborates and is called a *homo reciprocans* or *homo cooperans* (e.g., Bowles and Gintis 2002; De Moor 2015: 148). This becomes clear as soon as we realize that the emergence of commons is often rendered as a choice between three options for the management of resources: private, public or communal. While De Moor (2008: 202) presents the choice for forms of collective action as ‘based on an assessment of their advantages or disadvantages’, Miguel Laborda Pemán and De Moor (2013: 12) argue that confronted with specific historical circumstances like population growth, urbanization or market development, ‘institutionalized cooperation may appear more attractive than purely public or private solutions.’ In line with this, reference is often made to a certain ‘toolbox’ of legal devices, like the legal notion of *universitas*, hailed from Roman Law (Laborda Pemán and De Moor 2013: 18).

To a degree, such a ‘menu’ and the related ‘toolbox’ could make sense in a present-day context, but it is inadequate to describe the pre-industrial situation, given that both the ‘market’ and ‘the state’ were entirely different realities. It is hard to imagine that a random sixteenth-century farmer would have recognized ‘the public’ or ‘the state’ as an option for the management of resources, or even for the regulation of surplus extraction. While the central state up to at least the eighteenth century was a very remote and abstract entity which most commoners would not have expected much from – apart from taxation and perhaps some legal powers unconnected to their daily lives – local political administrations were not the independent and legal entities we are familiar with today.

The market is perhaps more likely to have been recognized as such, although market mechanisms too were entirely different from present-day ones. In stead of the anonymous and abstract taxonomy of legally embedded options for transactions, the late medieval and early modern market presented itself to farmers or domestic producers as a physical space-time regulated at the community level through a bargaining process between different communities. Even when economic actors from different communities were linked by intermediaries like regional or international merchants, all transactions were nevertheless embedded in regulations agreed upon between these communities. Prior to the eighteenth century, the market did not exist as an abstract legal

principle, but was rather a bricolage of privileges which defined a limited and delineated space for transactions between specific parties (Epstein 2000; Horn 2015). As a consequence, it remains to be seen to what extent ‘the market’ was at all seen as an option different from the ‘common’ one.

The question is even more urgent in the case of the supposed public character of local governments. What we currently call ‘the state’ did not exist as a legal entity ‘outside’ the economy or the private sphere, certainly not at the local level. Local political structures should rather be seen as a type of commons in themselves, with the proviso that they were mostly very hierarchical, as power was typically shared between a local feudal lord, on one hand, and a range of house fathers, on the other. An ideal-typical manor with open fields was governed by a consortium of tenants, who collectively decided on crop rotation and the planting scheme, but the land was owned by a local lord, who collected rents and mostly also had legal powers (e.g., Ault 1972; Hall 2014; also Blickle 2000). Cities were mostly governed by mercantile elites who also controlled the local economy and were supposed to govern the cities as if it was their own household. Whenever representatives of craft guilds co-governed the city, they also merged their private economic interests with a public mandate.

In short, as neither the market nor the state existed in its ‘modern’ shape before the eighteenth or even nineteenth century, the use of neo-institutional concepts, at least to the extent that they are based on methodological individualism and rational choice theory, is problematic. Relatedly, the juridical notion of *universitas* cannot be reduced to an instrument which helped to establish commons, as De Moor does. What the notion of *universitas* implies is that corporations were legal personalities in which ‘a number of individuals turned into one’ – as the term is a composition of *unum* (‘one’) and *vertere* (‘to turn’) (quote in Mansell and Sison 2019: 4), which suggests that we should look at the differences rather than the similarities with present-day commons.

Guilds into commons?

Much of the recent ‘revisionist’ literature on guilds, especially when addressing ‘strong guilds’ in the earlier (late medieval) period, considers guilds as institutions which can potentially empower ordinary workers and manufacturers (e.g., Farr 1988, 2000; Sonenscher 1989; Kaplan 2001; Prak et al. 2006; Kluge 2009). This arguably builds on a third ideological position in addition to the abovementioned nineteenth-century liberals and Catholics, namely a socialist strand in which the guilds were seen as predecessors of the labor unions (cf. Wright 1978). On the surface, the recent trend to apply the concept of the commons as defined by Ostrom is in line with this tradition as well. Building on Ostrom’s ideas and drawing attention to the period in which commons would have emerged with greater intensity (roughly the tenth to the fourteenth century), De Moor included the urban guilds in her model of what she calls institutions for ‘corporate collective action’. This term serves as a framework for a broad range of medieval and early modern institutions, ranging from common pastures and woodlands to common (open) fields and waterboards, to beguinages to guilds.¹ De Moor thus adapts the concept of ‘institutions for collective action’ as used by Ostrom

¹ For more information, see <http://www.collective-action.info/> (8 January 2020).

and others to the historical reality of late medieval and early modern Europe (De Moor 2008; Ostrom 1990; also De Moor et al. 2002). However, the guilds seem to be in need of a special treatment nevertheless, which is betrayed by the fact that De Moor (2008, 2015: ch 1) often speaks of ‘commons and guilds’ or ‘guilds and commons’, thus distinguishing the two phenomena. Can guilds be seen as commons at all?

The answer to this question obviously depends on the definition used. Sociologist and expert in media studies Adam Arvidsson (2019) has recently compared early modern commons – both urban and rural – to present-day commons like those forming around free and open source software, peer-to-peer production and blockchain technologies, arguing that guilds can be seen as predecessors of present-day commons from the perspective of an upcoming new economic logic based on a multitude of ‘petty producers’. While he convincingly argues that guilds can be seen as a ‘source of alternative lifestyles and social movements [and of] significant technological, institutional and cultural innovation’ (Arvidsson 2019: 3), his views also imply that they need to be distinguished from the collective management of such natural resources as woodland and pastures. In the classical economic framework in which goods are categorized according to their excludability and rivalrousness, woodlands and pastures are mostly defined as ‘common resources’, to be situated on the axis rival and non-excludable (see De Moore, 2011: 427). The ‘resource’ which guild members shared is of a totally different nature, as it resembles more the so-called ‘club goods’, which are less rival and more excludable. Present-day examples of such goods include cable television, wifi or soft ware, but in pre-modern history the use of mills, bridges or toll-roads does not easily lead to scarcity or depletion either, while exclusion is rather straightforward. Craft guilds typically shared and guarded something even more specific, as they usually formed around a specific range of technical knowledge, which is not very rival while outsiders can be excluded rather easily. While sharing technical knowledge and skills does not lead to its diminution, access can be denied to outsiders.

The guilds nevertheless resemble the countryside commons like woodlands and pastures when looked at from an institutional perspective, as the way in which the resource was shared and managed was similar (De Moor, 2011: 428–9). A great deal of the debate on guilds has focused on the extent to which they excluded outsiders – a debate which is still ongoing (Epstein 1998, 2008; Ogilvie 2007, 2008, 2019; Prak et al. 2020). The last few decades, historians have often concentrated on the role of apprenticeship, i.e., on the acquisition of the club good involved. In a seminal article in 1998 economic historian Stephan R. Epstein argued that the introduction of minimum terms to serve for apprentices and such related entry conditions as a master’s test and entrance fees might have had beneficial economic effects because it ensured a return on investment for the master. Such a return was also guaranteed by end term rewards like a privileged position on the labour market and the exclusion of free riders (non-guild members wanting to employ the skilled labour) as the guilds mostly had a local labour market monopsony (see also Reith 2008). Unless a former apprentice emigrated, he either took part in that monopsony as a new member or master or had to work with a member of the guild. Theoretically, this neo-institutional approach makes a great deal of sense, but it was fiercely criticized nevertheless. Sheilagh Ogilvie (2007, 2008, 2019) in particular returned to a more traditional view on guilds, in which guild members were rendered as rent-seeking actors managing guilds as exclusive price-cartels.

What these views have in common is that craft guilds regulated entrance to an economic group producing and managing club goods (technical knowledge) while carving out a niche in a wider economic network. In addition, guilds betray a willingness to guard a certain equality among members by sharing the available resources among them. Guilds typically capped the number of apprentices and journeymen a master could engage, or the number of stalls or workbenches he could run – which was explained by the guilds themselves as necessary to maintain a certain equality in the group (Mackenney 1987: 16–21; Kluge 2009: 303–5; De Munck 2018b: 237–8). Moreover, guilds typically installed mechanisms to ensure that the available raw materials were more or less equally distributed among their members. Purchases per master could be capped and a master could be forced to share part of his raw materials (at the price at which he had bought it himself) at the simple request of a fellow master (e.g., De Munck 2018b: 233). This is not unlike countryside commons, provided that we use a broader definition of resources – one which includes raw materials such as wood, leather and metal as well as technical knowledge.

Still, this is not to say that guilds should be seen as independent and autonomous economic entities, rather to the contrary. Similar to present-day commons, they were deeply entangled with wider and overarching economic networks and had to deal with the logics of capital and exchange as well as with local governments. Guilds producing for export markets were very much dependent on merchants, which provided access to international fairs, in addition to credit and raw materials (Guenzi et al., 1998; Farr 2000, ch 2; Lis and Soly 2006b). As well, guilds producing for the local market were implicated in wider hierarchical structures. They were granted privileges by local governments and had to abide to local regulations (Farr 2000, ch 4). These regulations were often enacted with an eye to the common good, for instance when the quality and distribution of food was regulated. Strict rules were mostly enacted with respect to grain, which was subject to price regulations and restrictions on buying and selling so as to prevent speculation in times of price shocks, as well as with regard to bread (and other foodstuff), which were subject to maximum prices and minimum quality standards. As such regulations were mostly imposed on or through the guilds, they should be seen as an integral part of the urban economic and political fabric, and as crucial in the sustenance of the urban community (De Munck 2018b: 233–8).

An earlier generation of social scientists has referred to such measures with the term *Nahrung*, which is conceived as an attitude in which the ability to sustain individuals in a community trumps competition and utility maximization (Sombart 1921: 29–39; also Brandt and Buchner 2004). Sombart (1921, vol. 1: 36) framed this in a somewhat anachronistic way as a ‘pre-capitalist system’ characterized by the absence of a calculatory sense and a less developed sense for precise sizes and numbers (Reith 1999: 44 and De Munck 2021), but the guild’s values were embedded in a complex ethical tradition in which Germanic and Christian values play a fundamental role. Antony Black (2009) has distinguished their ethic from the ‘civil society’ tradition based on such liberal notions as personal freedom, legal equality, and individual independence (partly derived from Roman Law). Following Black, the ‘guild ethos’ is characterized by values like friendship, brotherhood and mutual aid resulting from a merging of a Germanic tradition of sworn communities and a Christian ethic of charity. This can be illustrated by the importance of the notion of *caritas* in the practices and rituals of craft guilds. The *caritas*-ideal – taking care of one’s neighbor as an act of love

of God – was behind such practices as maintaining an altar, attending Mass together, and providing for mutual aid by a common bourse (e.g., Rosser 2010; De Munck 2018b: 252–64; also Lynch, 2003). The analysis of practical documents like requests, legal files, pamphlets and also literary sources reveals that such notions as community, unity and, indeed, friendship and *caritas* were ubiquitous in the guilds' narratives (Dumolyn 2014, 2017).

On the surface, this suggests that the guilds shared a *specific* communal ideology, but this would be jumping to conclusion too soon. Arguably the most important terms were those referring to the 'common good', like *bonum commune*, *utilitas communis* and *utilitas publica*, which were ubiquitous in political and legal practices as well as political philosophy. These terms obviously served to justify political claims (cf. Lecuppre-Desjardin and Van Bruaene 2010), but they also had a performative function and served to transcend political antagonism and to integrate communities both socially and politically – and both at the level of the corporation and the higher level of the city (e.g., Isenmann 2010); they were even related to the 'spirit of association' understood in the Aristotelian sense, i.e., as a natural inclination of Man (cf. Rosser 2010; Dumolyn and Lecuppre-Desjardin 2010: 260–1).

A common ideology?

In response to the rational choice theories lurking behind neo-institutional perspectives, it could be tempting to ground the communal ideology and the spirit of association of guilds in their members' natural inclination to cooperate and share, as could be derived from references to a *homo reciprocans* or *homo cooperans*. However, even when these actors turn out to have favored cooperation and solidarity, their attitudes differed fundamentally from present-day ideas and practices of cooperation. While it has been shown for commons as well as guilds that they could differ enormously with respect to their inclusive or exclusive character (see e.g., De Keyzer 2019), they were never, at least in late medieval and early modern Europe, pristine egalitarian, autarkic and autocephalous communities external to any other political framework. Craft guilds were always part of a profoundly hierarchical corporative system, of which they were basically 'members'. Except in some large Italian city-states, the head of the political body was usually a prince, with cities being members of the larger body politic alongside aristocratic and clerical elites. Within cities, craft guilds often held key positions in the political as well as the social and cultural fabric, but cities too should be seen as hierarchal corporative 'bodies'. Guilds were members of this body, with their status depending on the power balance between guilds and the aristocratic mercantile elites (e.g., Najemy 1982; Farr 2000: ch 4; Boone 2010).

Nor did guilds strive for another political system. As is well known, the precise role of craft guilds in the urban political fabric was mostly determined by the outcome of urban revolts which shuddered most cities – often regularly – between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries (Schulz 1992; Dumolyn and Haemers 2005; Cohn Jr. 2009). If successful, the craft guilds succeeded in being structurally integrated in the body politic as their representatives were then granted access to the inner and outer councils of the urban governments – where a strict number (ratio) of seats was then reserved for them (Farr 2000: ch 4; Kluge 2009: ch 2.5; De Munck 2018b: chs 1 & 2). In other cities,

guilds were part of the corporative order too, but rather as subaltern bodies without access to the ‘head’ (the urban bench of aldermen), which was then exclusively reserved for the patrician elite (cf. Najemy 1982; Mackenney 1987; Prak 2006). In virtually all cases, however, guilds strove for being included – as a member – in the urban body politic (De Munck 2018b: chs 1 & 2; also Najemy 1982; Haemers 2009; Braekevelt et al., 2012). For their adversaries, this could nevertheless be world-shaking, as they considered it the replacement of a sound body with one head (the patrician elite) with a ‘many-headed monster’ (Genet 1981: 25; Keller 1988: 606), but the underlying ideology was strikingly similar.

This is corroborated by the fact that access to craft guilds and participation in the governance of a craft guild was partly based on hereditary rights and rights derived from birth. In the case of guilds, a distinction was often made between the rights of master’s sons and those of outsiders. While master’s sons were often born a member of the guilds (especially in the early period), outsiders had to meet a range of additional conditions, financial as well as socio-cultural. On the one hand, regarding fees for new apprentices as well as new masters, master’s sons often only paid half what outsiders were due (and immigrant outsiders moreover sometimes had to pay more than local non master’s sons) (recent views and references in Ogilvie 2019, ch 3; Prak et al. 2020). On the other hand, membership implied fulfilling a broad range of social, cultural and ritualistic obligations. While prospective members had to swear loyalty to the group (and the dominant religion) and had to provide for drinks and a meal for the members (or at least the board), membership implied taking part in collective activities such as celebrating the patron saint, attending Mass together, participating in religious processions and parades, and burying a deceased fellow member (recent views and references in De Munck 2018b).

All this was not merely ceremonial. While the collective activities were typically obligatory and sanctioned by fines, the guilds imposed a far-reaching integration in the guilds’ group culture. The most drastic regulation in that respect was arguably the obligation for apprentices to live under their master’s roof. Whether this was formalized in a written rule or not, most apprentices boarded with their master during their training. This, too, was part of a broader cultural pattern in which growing up in another household was far from uncommon (Laslett 1977: 34, 44; Wall 1987: 91), but for apprentices it implied that their master assumed a disciplinary role. His authority was not restricted to the shop floor, but included attending to the apprentice’s behavior during the evenings and on Sundays and Holidays. It also implied attending to whether the apprentice fulfilled his religious duties and his behavior in the public sphere, for instance when it comes to drinking and gambling. In short, the master acted as a surrogate father (in loco parentis), which serves as a strong reminder that becoming member of a guild was not a juridical matter (Reith 1989; Kaplan 1993; Prak 2004; De Munck 2010).

This is further substantiated when we return to the notion of *universitas*. While this obviously derives from Roman law (the Digest), the bodily metaphors associated with it are also tributary to the Bible and Canon law – with the mystic body of Christ and its members serving as a template. Membership of a *universitas* cannot be likened to something similar to the role of a present-day shareholder or a partner in a medieval *societas*. The medieval and late medieval notions of *universitas* and corporation rather imply that guilds and commons had perpetual existence and should be considered a

‘plurality in succession’ (Mansell and Sison 2019: 6, 11). With respect to the relationship between the guild and its members, this not only entailed that membership was inheritable but also that the boundaries of membership were blurred, because members’ wives, children, apprentices and servants might be conceived as passive members which were just as well encompassed in the corporations’ telos or goal. Last but not least, the notion of *universitas* did not at all imply that authority simply resided in the ‘head’ of the corporation, as a corporation was mostly instituted by another ‘head’, one higher up the feudal ranking (Mansell and Sison 2019).

In the long run, these caveats help explain why craft guilds were gradually discredited ideologically and on the discursive level. From roughly the second half of the seventeenth century on, intellectuals which historians now consider part of a new enlightened culture tended to see craft guilds as part of an *ancien régime* alongside aristocratic and clerical elites (Sonenscher 1989: ch 10; Farr 2000, ch 8; Maitte 2002; De Munck 2018b). What they shared with these elites was a privileged position, which in the case of the guilds was a local monopoly and labour market monopsony with respect to the production (and sale) of a defined range of products. This should not lead us to reduce the debate as one between regulation and deregulation, let alone to think that guilds were abolished for economic reasons (Haupt 2002). While political, economic and cultural elements were very much entangled, Adam Smith and other enlightened thinkers were trying to come to grips with what they called ‘commercial society’ on a far more fundamental level. Such thinkers as Montesquieu, Hume, Ferguson and even Smith proceeded from the observation that such values as public engagement and disinterestedness were threatened by commercial relationships. In a commercial society humans were considered to be in danger of passions like greed and self-indulgence, which is why the market was eventually defined as the basis for a new type of virtue and civil behavior. Faced with market mechanisms, self-interested individuals would eventually discipline themselves and become trustworthy and respectable out of self-interest (Pocock 1975: 462–505, Pocock 1985: 194; Hirschman 1976; Varty 1997: 31–34; Casson 2012; Boyd 2013: 455–458).

Nor does this imply that the guilds were only subject to processes imposed from the outside. Guild members themselves gradually disengaged with the guild framework. They gradually refrained from participating in collective activities like masses and processions and they increasingly tried to escape official functions within the organization – like assuming office in the board as a guild dean. In line with this, such collective activities like meals at the occasion of the acceptance of a new member often stopped being effectively organized and were transformed in financial compensations to the guild instead (De Munck 2018b: 242–6; also De Munck and Davids 2014). Such processes were entangled with both concentration trends (some masters growing larger at the expense of others) and oligarchisation (the guild being dominated by a network of powerful masters), but also with new types of thinking and the development of narratives related to natural rights. While eighteenth-century guild deans mobilized republican arguments about self-rule and autonomy in their political claims to protect their privileges, regular masters turned to more ‘democratic’ principles to oppose what they referred to as the ‘tyranny’ of the deans. Although these democratic principles were connected to a golden (medieval) age of the guilds, where decisions would have been made by ‘convocation of the whole guild’, discourses on natural rights were present as well. Masters in the Southern Netherlands for instance considered it ‘natural’ to elect the guilds’ boards from the bottom up (De Keyzer

2010). Journeymen excluded from the guilds and facing thresholds for entering the labour market like the obligatory apprenticeship term in the mean time invoked the natural right to work at one's convenience – thus mirroring Adam Smith's arguments (Sonenscher 1987: 96, 98; Sonenscher 1989: 57 and chs 3, 8 and 10).

In short, while craft guilds partly adapted to political modernity and were subject to the same bureaucratising mechanisms which accompanied it, they eventually fell victim to Enlightened ideological narratives which stressed natural rights and the liberty to work. However, while this invalidates a great deal of the guilds' usefulness in present-days pleas for commons, the craft guilds' views are not exhausted with reference to the most famous and visible Enlightened narratives. While these narratives were often used as justification for changed power relations, they were also related to underlying transformations in the conception of nature and at the epistemological level, as will become clear in the last section of this paper.

Commons and the nature of modernity

The ANT-approach as advocated in this paper urges to look at the entanglement and co-evolution of different societal dimensions, including the relationship between society and nature. With reference to Marx, geographers and others have already argued that the rise of capitalism was related to a new conception of nature. While nature was seen as an organic, living creation up to the Renaissance, it would have turned into something lifeless and purely spatial and physical in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Smith 2010; Goldstein 2013; also Cronon 1983; Olwig 1984, 2002). Prior to the advent of capitalism nature turned into an object ready to be exploited. While this very much chimes with the importance of the physiocrats in the rise of free market thinking, it also suggests that the development of what critical geographers and historians call 'capitalism' was related to epistemological transformations, as nature also turned into something external to and separate from society, as something the mechanical and physical laws of which can be discovered (Shapin 1996: ch 1; Pickstone, 2000: 3–4, 99–100).

What emerged here was not free market thinking as we know it today, which is shaped by the notion of utility and thinking in terms of demand and offer mediated by abstract forms of money and capital. While this type of thinking is grounded in a certain 'de-naturalization of the economic order', which only emerged in the nineteenth century (Schabas 2005), the economy was not yet seen as an entirely autonomous sphere. In the eighteenth century, nature was not yet understood in a Newtonian, mechanical way or reduced to matter. For most Enlightened philosophers, including the physiocrats, nature not only operated according to 'natural' laws, but was also seen as 'rational, harmonious, and orderly' (Schabas 2005: 6). While nature still had a certain telos and purpose for the physiocrats (Riskin 2003), Adam Smith considered nature as a wise, just and benevolent order (Schabas 2005: 3). However, the objectification of nature was nevertheless accompanied with a process in which nature started to penetrate the human world in the form of 'natural laws' – which were just as well seen as 'objective' (Smith 2010; Goldstein 2013: 359).

In political terms this implied that physiocratic and Enlightened ideas did not simply aim at removing state interventions, it was rather to bring economic policy in

accordance with nature and natural laws. Moreover, contrary to what we would be inclined to think today, this was very much related to political ideas about the ideal social order. The protagonists of these ideas assumed that the ‘natural’ social order would emerge as soon as economic policy making was in accordance with natural laws. With respect to the guilds, this meant that their privileges had to be abolished, as they were based on a pre-conceived (unnatural) order ordained by God (Kaplan 1986). Nor was this conception of the social order unrelated to the guilds’ political and economic ideas about technical knowledge as a resource. As is well known, Adam Smith and others took issue with the guilds’ apprenticeship system, which they considered contrary to nature. Yet this too, was not simply a matter of substituting the invisible hand for state regulation. As we will see in more detail in this section, Adam Smith’s ideas were contingent on new views on the value of skills and knowledge, which were in turn connected to changing conceptions of nature.

In their strife for political recognition in the late medieval period craft guild members typically stressed the value of their labour, often referring to the honesty of their labour in particular (Dumolyn 2014, 2017). This very much chimes with their regulations related to product quality, which did mostly not guarantee that the product in question was made in a sophisticated way or with the proper skills, but rather that it was made in an honest way. The guilds’ regulations and hall marks guaranteed properties which were not visible to the naked eye. Specifically, they guaranteed a certain ‘intrinsic quality’, viz. the quality and nature of the raw materials used – e.g., the alloy in the case of metal work, the type of wood in the case of cabinet making, the piece of hide used in the case of leatherwork, etc. (De Munck 2008, 2011b; Bettoni 2015). Admittedly, this too can be understood from a neo-institutional perspective (the guilds’ regulations and hall marks increasing market transparency), but it can also be linked to the guilds’ governance of resources and, hence, to their nature as commons. What guilds managed and sold, in a way, was nature, in a context in which a certain value was attached to nature (De Munck 2014, 2019), the key point being that nature was not reduced to something dead and passive, or something which can be addressed in a utilitarian way.

Moreover, the guilds’ attitude towards raw materials was intimately linked to their political status and subjectivity – with their attitude to honest work serving as a hyphen. Politically, craft guilds needed to argue that the ‘commonwealth’ of the city is not only based on trade but on the productive activities of artisans as well. In large parts of Europe the urban revolts resulted in guild based master artisans being accepted as political actors (Schulz, 1994; Dumolyn, 2010). While their guilds were integrated in the urban body politic, it was generally enacted that becoming a guild member implied being burgher of the city, or vice versa (De Munck 2018b: 47–50; Prak 2018: ch 1). In the terminology of ANT, nature and society and subject and object were not detached from the perspective of master artisans. The (intrinsic) value of the artisans’ products was contingent on the artisans’ political status, because this status guaranteed that they honestly worked in the service of the common good. Conversely, the political status of the artisans was conditional on a certain attitude to nature, one in which nature was more than instrumentalized raw material (De Munck, 2014, 2019).

This is why the work of Bruno Latour (2004) and Isabelle Stengers (2010) is particularly relevant for the history of the guilds. While both focus on the changing relationship between the human and the non-human – the former including culture and knowledge – they both assume that the way in which this relationship is articulated is a

political issue. In the late medieval period, a great deal of artisans focused on expensive luxury items requiring a sophisticated skill level (Cf. Van Der Wee 1988). This happened in a context in which both the value of matter and the very nature of knowledge transformed too. Like farmers, artisans had been denied the capacity to act as political subjects and full blown citizens with the argument that working with one's hands implied being a 'slave of necessity', which would have prevented them to act in a disinterested way in the service of the common good. Yet the argument also implied that they belonged to the realm of nature and hence had no access to the realm of politics. This is what the guilds countered during the revolts described above, and their ability to do so may have been contingent on the guild-based artisans being accepted as knowledgeable (cf. Long 2011).

Whether artisans are seen as knowledgeable or not, very much depends on the cosmology one adheres too. Historians of science like Pamela Smith (2000a, 2000b, 2004) and Richard Oosterhoff (2014) have argued that Renaissance artisans could be seen as having access to god's wisdom simply by crafting. Just as is the case with 'capitalism', this was contingent upon a specific conception of nature, in this case one in which God was immanent, i.e., present in all things natural. This becomes clear when looking at it from a Foucauldian perspective, which is at the roots of both Latour and Stengers. Foucault famously connected the development of political economy to epistemological transformations in his famous archeology of knowledge, in which the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed a shift from a Renaissance to a classical episteme. According to the former episteme, truth was based on the notion of resemblance. Things as well as words were considered to give access to the truth because God has left his 'signature' during Creation, so that they basically resembled what they meant. In this context, all things in a way referred to God's creation and the activities of craftsmen as well as artists amounted to imitating God's act of creation. In the words of a wooden spoon maker staged by the humanist Nicolas Cusanus: 'my art produces rather than reproduces natural forms and is, therefore, more like infinite art' – with infinite art of course referring to God's act of creation (Cusanus 1937: 51).

When the guilds were finally abolished around the turn to the nineteenth century – in France this happened with the famous D'Allarde and Le Chapelier laws in 1791, which, respectively, abolished corporative privileges and banned social organizations and 'combinations' – this was only the culmination of a long and protracted process in which the corporative order had inexorably crumbled, due to forces both exogenous and endogenous to the guilds themselves. After the mid-seventeenth century, the existence of guilds was increasingly seen as at variance with Nature, as the guilds' privileges would have prevented policy makers or the invisible hand to bring the economy in natural balance. By the mid-eighteenth century, artisans were no longer part of the body politic through membership of a 'guild'. While they were increasingly conceived as individuals with certain inalienable rights, the face-to-face context of their guilds was replaced by the context of two far more abstracted realities, viz. the market and the state. This process as well, however, is not exhausted with reference to either political and economic factors.

In Foucault's chronological framework, knowledge henceforth resulted from representations and the value and meaning of objects from the taxonomy in which they operated. With respect to economic transformations and the emergence of political economy as a discipline, this would imply, still according to Foucault, that money

could henceforth ‘represent’ wealth apart from its intrinsic value in economic theory and practice, whereas during the Renaissance it had meant wealth because it resembled wealth (Schabas 2005: ch 1; Vigo De Lima 2010; also Maifreda 2012). For manufacturing artisans it implied that the intrinsic value of their products (the quality and value of the raw materials used) could no longer be the ground for the value of their products – and, hence, for their political status. The value of products in this period increasingly derives from their place in a taxonomy of products, as novelty and fashionability become more important and ‘sign value’ rather than ‘intrinsic value’ becomes the determining factor (De Munck, 2014, 2019).

In short, what emerged from the sixteenth century on was a new cosmology in which the ground of what Pamela Smith has called ‘artisanal epistemology’ disappeared as a result of modernization processes. A better understanding of these modernization processes can be furthered by the theories of both Latour and Stengers, which offer the opportunity to merge and also transcend a political ecological perspective (focused on the exploitation of nature) and a neo-institutional perspective (focused on the management of resources). Both moreover take issue with the ‘modern’ myth of a Kantian universal epistemology capable of grounding a truly cosmopolitan humanity. Stengers has particularly argued that politics should ultimately be about conflicting types of attachments to the non-human – including at the epistemological level. In order to open up space for other than modern dichotomous views on this relationship, she has coined the term ‘cosmopolitics’, which proceeds from the idea that other cosmologies and approaches to nature are valid too.

To be sure, Foucault’s chronology is criticized. Margaret Schabas for instance qualifies Foucault’s idea that the concept of wealth was gradually grounded in a system of signs in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Her idea that ‘the economy’ as a separate domain emerged only in the nineteenth century notwithstanding, she attaches a great deal of importance to transformations in natural philosophy. According to Schabas, modern economic thinking is very much indebted to seventeenth and eighteenth-century views on nature, arguing that in the eighteenth century wealth was seen as a property of the physical world (Schabas 2005: 2). This was obviously the case with the physiocrats, which are often seen as having pioneered *laissez faire* thinking and the negative views on the guilds’ privileges, but such natural philosophers and historians as Carl Linnaeus too, regarded natural history as ‘a science of resources’ (Spary 2003) and nature as ‘a benign and self-regulating superorganism’ (Rausing 2003: 174), thus equating wealth with the fruits of the earth, which for Linnaeus included exotic minerals and plants (Koerner 1999). In the words of Schabas: ‘until the Enlightenment, the natural and the economic realms were one and the same’ (Schabas 2005: 5).

While these recent views problematize the straightforward connection between the rise of ‘capitalism’ and the changing conception of nature, the history of the guilds can help to understand the pivotal role of scientific modernity on the commoners’ political subjectivity. What the physiocrats and enlightened philosophers had in common, was their focus on natural laws and the way in which these were considered to be hampered by ‘privileges’. With respect to skills and technical knowledge, this entailed an instrumentalization which was very similar to what happened with nature and natural resources. While – in theory – citizenship was now a universal right, artisans were considered contributing to society only as a factor of production. Large entrepreneurs

referred to their workers as ‘setts of hands’ (McKendrick 1961: 46; Farr 2000: 144.) and Adam Smith considered them ‘in the same light as a machine or instrument of trade which facilitates and abridges labor, and which, though it costs a certain expense, repays that expense with a profit’ (Smith 1776, Book II, ch 1: 335). To date, all this has been explained by proletarianisation and the rise of market forces, which worked to abolish privileges. Yet for guild-based artisans, privileges were what linked their skills and technical knowledge to the political community and what had granted them citizenship or political rights (compare with French 2019).

The condition for this had been a cosmology in which skills and knowledge and the political community were connected to the artisan’s souls, which was in turn conditional upon a distinction between the perfectly ordered realm of the spirit and the disordered but animated realm of matter. As William Sewell argued already in 1980, the waning of the guilds was contingent on the rise of a new cosmology, one in which artisans were henceforth part of a single unified realm of nature to which they had access rather through their senses (Sewell, Sewell Jr. 1980: 22–5, 70–1). This explains why the so-called *sans-culottes* and radical artisans in the nineteenth century reaffirmed the value of their work and skills and why they distinguished themselves not only from ‘idle aristocrats’, but also from economic actor groups which did not work with their hands (Sewell Jr. 1980). By the revolution of 1848 some artisans and workers according to William Sewell would again have conceived their work as ‘the source of popular sovereignty’ and ‘the foundation of political order’ – to no avail, as history has learned (Sewell Jr. 1980: 263, 265; also De Munck 2018b).

Epilogue

As historians we are in a way condemned to use anachronistic theories and concepts, which we particularly need as soon as we want to be relevant to present-day debates. Yet the historiography on guilds eminently shows that the theories and concepts mobilized in research very much depend on the historian’s political position, which implies that the historical reality revealed in it is by definition normative. The most radical way to address this, is to problematize the epistemological position behind scientific research, and the most fundamental foundation thereof is the one revealed by Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers and others working in the sphere of Actor-Network Theory. Their insights are not new to historians. Thanks to historians of science and intellectual historians, it is increasingly accepted that there is a historical connection between the changing conceptions of nature (e.g., Daston 1991, 1998), on one hand, and the development of economic thinking, on the other (see e.g., the special issue on ‘Oeconomies in the Age of Newton’ in *The History of Political Economy*, 2003). These insights however await to be integrated in the history of the commons and the guilds.

What my paper shows at the empirical level, is that historical commons and guilds cannot simply serve as examples for the present-day commons-movement. The way in which they were governed was simply too deeply entrenched in a feudal, hierarchical and patriarchal worldview in which birth, origin and gender rather than principles of equality and rights determined access and participation. Yet their history can nevertheless provide lessons for those engaged in present-day commoning, provided that we embrace a ‘cosmopolitics’ of sorts, as advocated by Bruno Latour and Isabel Stengers.

What the history of guilds and commons learns from that perspective is that they thrived in a context in which the state, the market and civil society were not distinct realities. While present-day commons are mostly trying to carve out a space for themselves in between the state and the market, medieval and early modern society in Europe was in a way conceived as an concatenation of commons in which the political and the economic dimension were fundamentally incorporated. This was contingent on a specific conception of the body politic, influenced by both Aristotle and Christianity. In it, a commonwealth is likened to a ‘corporation’, in which the economy and politics merge as they do in a patriarchal household. For the management of the commons, neither a free market nor an overarching state were needed – including when it comes to dealing with free riders and outsiders. While the most fundamental social struggles in the medieval and early modern period revolved around who actually contributed to the common good and on what basis, the emergence of both the state and the market actually fostered the abolition of guilds and commons.

Secondly, and related to that, the commons thrived in a context in which commoners, policy makers and intellectuals shared a radically different view on value and wealth. Theirs was a world in which productivity and utility were trumped by religiously inspired virtues in which nature was to be taken care of. While utility and productivity emerged as relatively new concepts in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, pre-modern economic and political thinking cherished the term ‘stewardship’, which again goes back to Aristotle and other Antique ideas and implied that an ‘economy’ was to be governed like an household, by a housefather responsible for guarding and fostering the available resources (Firth 1998: 21; Schabas and De Marchi 2003: 4). Clearly, such terms again invoke the feudal and patriarchal context, but perhaps they can nevertheless help to find a new vocabulary and new practices in which responsibility for social and environmental sustainability replaces the idea of the economy being governed by anonymous processes sanctioned by democratic values (see also Swyngedouw 2018: ch 8, esp. 153).

Thirdly, we need to move beyond the opposition between man as a self-interested rational choice actor versus Man as fundamentally geared towards cooperation. As Gervase Rosser (2010) has argued, both the guilds’ history and medieval political philosophy have learned that community feelings are not inherent to human nature but rather result from collective activities and practice. Rather than brotherhood, friendship, love of neighbor and disinterestedness being states of being which produce the guilds’ rituals and activities, the latter had a ‘performative’ effect in that they created such feelings. According to Rosser, this again chimes with the dominant political philosophy of the time. Aristotle’s idea of Man as a ‘political animal’ (‘zoon politikon’) notwithstanding, virtuous people are in his views created by practice and result from ‘artifice’ (Rosser 2010: 220; also Rosser, Rosserm, 2015).

The ultimate challenge for historians, then, is to confront the historical worldview they examine with their own worldview, which includes problematizing the latter in their dialogue with the past. In my view, this is the best way to question the status quo of which we are all part and to help open up the future for new imaginaries. In the words of Stengers (2010: 10): “If learning to think is learning to resist a future that presents itself as obvious, plausible, and normal, we cannot do so either by evoking an abstract future, from which everything subject to our disapproval has been swept aside,

or by referring to a distant cause that we could and should imagine to be free of any compromise.”

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