

the revolution started by the pill. The generation of 1968 had a very different outlook. Strangely, the reforms of the Second Vatican Council probably did not help distributism, as lay leadership was diverted onto school and parish boards. The impact of these larger political and sociological factors on distributism after the 1950s is not canvassed in the book. The focus on Santamaria and the Movement tends to overshadow what was happening in the meantime among the YCS and the other movements: What was the quality of their leadership? How engaged were their members? How effective were their organizations? Did the formal connection with the bishops hinder or help these different forms of lay activity? Mathews tells us a good deal of this story, but the book leaves the reader with a feeling that there is more to know.

It is the mark of a good book to provoke further questions and a wish to know more. Mathews opens up a fascinating local story of distributism, placing it in its broader context. He makes a learned and heartfelt argument for its promise in a time of growing concentration of wealth and power and increasing marginalization of workers, families, and local communities. *Of Labour and Liberty* brings back into focus some critical questions about the economy and the community in a free society that we need to recover in our difficult times.

—M. A. Casey

*PM Glynn Institute, Australian Catholic University, Sydney*

## The European Guilds: An Economic Analysis

**Sheilagh Ogilvie**

Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019 (645 pages)

Jean Baptiste Colbert loved them. Adam Smith hated them. The French Revolution abolished them. Napoleon crushed them. Pope Leo XIII nostalgically praised them. Modern labor unions descend from them. Contemporary scholars disagree about them. What is it about guilds that has occasioned such wildly varying reactions over the years? Cambridge University professor of economic history Sheilagh Ogilvie answers this question and many others in her recent work *The European Guilds: An Economic Analysis*. Surveying the institution of the guild, Ogilvie does not so much present a history of European guilds as much as a sustained analysis of how they worked and how effective they were, giving us, in the classic evaluation framework of *1066 and All That*, an evaluation of whether they were a Good Thing or a Bad Thing, and why it all should matter to us in the twenty-first century.

First, a few words about Ogilvie's methodology. There have been guild or guild-like organizations existing for millennia, in cultures as widely ranging as ancient Egypt, medieval China, and the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire, but for the sake of focus, Ogilvie confines her study to the guilds of Europe, from their origins in the eleventh century to their last days in the nineteenth. As with any historical analysis, particularly one involving the European medieval period, sources can be maddeningly limited. This is particularly true for European guilds, as the researcher does not just want compilations of their statutes,

but also some evidence of how these guilds actually functioned in reality. Over the years, historians have created two extensive databases of these materials, and it is upon them that Ogilvie relies primarily for her research. These databases are still works in progress, so there is always room for growth, but they are extensive enough for a capable historian to draw good conclusions from them. *The European Guilds* is a very well-organized work overall; each of its eight main chapters provides an in-depth exploration of a particular question about guilds, and there are numerous charts and tables presented throughout the text, as well as a series of illustrative color plates in the middle. The questions asked are common ones, the conclusions Ogilvie draws from them may wind up surprising the reader, challenging or dispelling a lot of common preconceptions about guilds.

What sort of conclusions does Ogilvie draw about European guilds?

Were guilds primarily private-order institutions of craftsmen and workers? Not at all, concludes Ogilvie; guilds worked hand-in-hand with governing agencies, providing favors for and exacting favors from them in a way that enabled members of guilds to wield power and extract resources from the economy that they could not have done on their own.

How about entry barriers—were guilds reasonably open and representational institutions, perhaps more interested in social matters than commercial ends? Absolutely not, replies Ogilvie; guilds had a bewilderingly complex series of entry and membership requirements that effectively barred membership to individuals and groups that guild masters wished to exclude, and they were always more interested in matters mercantile than matters social.

But what about market manipulation—nobody can deny that guilds manipulated markets in a wide variety of ways, but scholars have contended that by doing so, workers and consumers were protected. Is this the case? Again, no, contends Ogilvie; guild actions in this area were widely resented and resisted by customers, and had the overall effect of limiting production, wasting resources, and causing the poor to suffer most.

Well, then, what about women—while they did not have equal membership in guilds as men, was not that just due to cultural reasons, since there were all-women guilds, or guilds that had some women members? Here again, Ogilvie responds in the negative: all-female guilds were few, and female participation in guilds was small. Rather, women were just one more minority group (the largest, in fact), that guilds chose to exclude from membership for any number of reasons, most of them spurious (such as the 1600 exclusion of women from membership in the hosiers' guilds of Germany based on the claim that knitting was beyond the capacity of women to learn!).

But surely guilds provided a valuable service to society by regulating the quality of products at least, did they not? Here again, Ogilvie demonstrates that such was not the case. Guild quality standards were notoriously variable, even for guilds in the same country, and were more used to limit competition than to serve consumers (many of whom would have been happy to purchase lower-quality goods at lower costs, a production and sale model that guilds forbade).

Well, what about human capital—during an era when educational opportunities were limited, did not guilds, through their systems of training and apprenticeship, provide

a way to develop human ability? Sadly, no, concludes Ogilvie. The data indicates that standards for training and apprenticeship in guilds were even more variable than their quality standards—after all, apprenticeship was a very common practice, and one could frequently get a better apprenticeship in a non-guild trade than in a guild one.

But what about innovation—it is central to economic growth, and by regulating many commercial matters so members did not have to worry about them, did guilds free up resources and ability to allow more innovation? No again, maintains Ogilvie—the evidence shows that guilds resisted innovation at every turn, unless said innovations improved the masters' wealth and position, in which case they were adopted.

Finally, what about the big picture? Did guilds help or hinder the growth of the European economy? The evidence on this point is still contested, but it is pretty clear that at places and times in Europe when guilds were weaker, the economy was stronger. It is likely no coincidence that the European economy did not really take off until the eighteenth century, when most European guilds were closed.

"The guild was a Janus-faced institution," concludes Ogilvie, which is an understated way of concluding that guilds were, overall, a Bad Thing. Essentially, guilds functioned like cartels, rigging the system for the benefit of their members to the detriment of society as a whole. How were they able to get away with this for so long? Because guilds also tried to function like monopolies, chiefly by enlisting the support of local and national political authorities. When commercial *and* political elites benefit from a system, it can endure for a very long time, no matter how inefficient it is or how unfair to the rest of society. Overall, guilds were an economic disaster. They wound up stifling the kind of self-correction and growth that a free market allows, and they wound up making governments more corrupt than they otherwise would have been. But why does all this matter to us now? Because the negative phenomena associated with the history of European guilds are *not* confined to the Middle Ages—they can be seen as part of developing economies the world over, and even in developed economies where exclusion and inequalities are still problems. Like its subject, *The European Guilds* is also a Janus-faced thing, which, in the context of looking backward, also gives us a helpful look forward.

—Christopher Beiting, OFS, DPhil (Oxon.)  
*Waldorf University, Forest City, Iowa*