Introduction

Much of the historical writing on the urban craft or manufacturing economy in the early modern era has focused on guilds and, moreover, has been bedeviled by a lack of distinction between the theoretical nature of the guild system and actual economic practice. Historians of this economy frequently ask two related questions: What role did guilds play in the functioning of the market economy? And what impact did guild regulations have upon economic development? Until recently historians had assumed that the tight regulatory regime that the guild system pronounced in its statutes, and that municipal, ducal, or royal governments endorsed in legislation, restricted economic growth, and thus strait jacketed the development of free market capitalism in places where the guild system was most firmly entrenched. This argument frequently rests upon the assertion that the English experience was different, and that part of the explanation for the vitality of England’s economy and its technological innovations in the eighteenth century can be traced to the moribund nature of its guilds. Conversely, French economic and technological “backwardness” has likewise, in part, been

* The salient ideas that have guided the writing of this article were framed as an indirect result of extensive and provocative conversations with my colleague John Lauritz Larson at Purdue University, and with Leonard Rosenband of Utah State University when our fellowships at the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies at Princeton University coincided during the academic year of 1994-95. I offer them my thanks.

† This view is recounted in most textbooks, but also can be found in most scholarly works published before the 1980s. See, for example, Henri Pirenne, Histoire de Belgique (Brussels, 1908); Hermann Kellenbenz, “The Organization of Production,” vol. 5, The Cambridge Economic History of Europe (Cambridge, 1963), and The Rise of the European Economy: An Economic History of Continental Europe, 1500-1750 (New York, 1976); Carlo Cipolla, Before the Industrial Revolution (New York, 1980); Domenico Sella, Crisis and Continuity: The Economy of Spanish Lombardy in the Seventeenth Century (Cambridge, MA, 1979); Jaime Vicens Vives, An Economic History of Spain, trans. Frances M. Lopez-Morillas (Princeton, 1969); and Etienne Martin Saint-Léon, Histoire des corporations de métiers de leurs origines jusqu’à leur suppression en 1791 (Paris, 1922).
attributed to the effectively restrictive nature of French guilds.  

This proposition has been challenged on both an empirical and theoretical level. Several historians deeply familiar with archival sources in a variety of European cities have asserted that the regulatory reach of the guild system was short and incomplete, and that much, in some places most, economic activity hummed along without being influenced significantly by the guilds and governments one way or another. Most of the research supporting this position has focused on northwestern Europe in the eighteenth century, and the point has often been made (but seldom adequately proven) that the craft economy of this century was somehow dramatically different from that of the preceding centuries, and that this difference was somehow related to the vital or moribund condition of the guilds. Recent research on early modern artisans forces us to reconsider these assumptions. In this article I will push the analysis of the urban craft economy back in time, broader afield, and beyond the guild. In drawing upon recent archival research of scholars working in cities across Europe, I will present evidence for a dynamic, flexible, and creative craft economy even in the purported heyday of the guild system, the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries. Although a great deal more research needs to be done, findings thus far reveal noticeable continuities between the craft economy of the eighteenth century and that of the preceding three or four centuries. The differences between the centuries appear to be of degree rather than kind. I do not suggest that the regulatory regime of guilds had no impact on the craft economy, for it certainly did. But it does seem conclusive that the regulatory reach of the authorities was short and

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2 For a concise and useful introduction to this debate, and for a helpful bibliography, see Colin Heywood, *The Development of the French Economy, 1750-1914* (Cambridge, 1995); on technology and guilds, see Joel Mokyr, *The Lever of Riches: Technological Creativity and Economic Progress* (New York, 1990).

