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Rehabilitating the guilds: a reply

By SHEILAGH OGILVIE

This article examines Epstein's attempt to rehabilitate pre-modern craft guilds by criticizing my German case study. It demonstrates that his criticisms are baseless and his assertions about European guilds unsupported. Long survival does not establish the efficiency or aggregate economic benefits of any institution. Contrary to rehabilitation views, craft guilds adversely affected quality, skills, and innovation. Guild rent-seeking imposed deadweight losses on the economy and generated no demonstrable positive externalities. Industry flourished where guilds decayed. Despite impairing efficiency, guilds persisted because they redistributed resources to powerful groups. The 'rehabilitation' view of guilds is theoretically contradictory and empirically untenable.

My 2004 article, 'Guilds, efficiency, and social capital', used a detailed German case study and cross-European comparisons of the worsted industry to challenge recent theories attempting to rehabilitate guilds as economically efficient.¹ My study found the rehabilitation view theoretically contradictory and empirically untenable. Contrary to rehabilitation theories, guilds adversely affected quality, skills, innovation, and economic policy. Despite impairing efficiency, guilds persisted because they redistributed resources to powerful groups. Only by acknowledging its distributional effects can we properly assess this important economic institution.

Professor Epstein's comment presents no new findings and ignores the theoretical issues I raise.² Instead, he reasserts an alleged 'modern consensus' on the economic benefits of guilds, supported solely with unsubstantiated assertions and inaccurate criticisms of my case study. Here I provide a brief overview of the weaknesses of his comment, while referring the reader to my working paper, 'Can we rehabilitate the guilds?' for a systematic dissection of the rehabilitation case.³

I

Epstein denies contending guilds were 'efficient', disclaiming any view that they were 'socially optimal'. But here he confuses social equity with economic efficiency. Even a rehabilitation theorist cannot defend guilds on equity grounds, as they redistributed resources from workers, women, and consumers to cartels of male masters. But Epstein does assert that guilds' 'aggregate social benefits outweighed their costs'—essentially a claim that they were efficient. He also repeats the tired old efficiency claim that guilds' persistence demonstrates their economic benefits. This too is untenable, since an institution that keeps the economic pie small but distributes large slices to powerful groups—established masters, townofficials, state

¹ Ogilvie, 'Guilds'.

² Epstein, 'Craft guilds: a discussion'.

³ S. Ogilvie, 'Can we rehabilitate the guilds? A sceptical re-appraisal', Cambridge working papers in economics 0745 (2007) [URL: <http://www/econ.cam.ac.uk/dae/repec/cam/pdf/cwpe0745.pdf>].

bureaucrats, princes—can be sustained for centuries by its powerful beneficiaries.⁴ Finally, Epstein accuses me of assessing guilds against ‘a hypothetical competitive optimum’. On the contrary, I compare strongly guilded industries (as in my German case study) with numerous institutional alternatives across pre-modern Europe. All economies faced market imperfections, I find, but some institutional solutions were better than guilds—which therefore cannot have been efficient.⁵

II

Epstein claims that guild controls were the best way to ensure high quality and low variance. But the appropriate quality–price combinations are those that consumers want. High quality per se is not obviously desirable. Guilds’ minimum standards cut off the lower part of the quality distribution—an effective barrier to entry but a bad way to address consumers’ wants. By prohibiting legal exchange in the lower quality–price combinations demonstrably demanded by poorer consumers, guilds pushed nasty-but-cheap wares into the black market where cheated customers had no legal redress. Guilds’ net effect on variance was thus indeterminate, while their prohibition of lower price–quality combinations damaged consumers—especially the poor.

Epstein defends legislative evidence, contending that guild concern for quality is sufficiently demonstrated by any mention of quality, however brief, in most guild statutes. This ignores evidence in my study and others that guild statutes allocated little space and trivial sanctions to quality offences.⁶ Epstein contends that numerous quality violations—highlighted in my study⁷—show serious guild concern for quality control. A more persuasive interpretation, also adopted by other scholars, is that numerous violations and lenient penalties instead demonstrate guilds’ indifference and ineffectiveness.⁸ Epstein inaccurately claims that my conclusion that guilds controlled quality poorly is based solely on ‘a few merchant complaints about the Württemberg and Gera worsted industries’. In fact, I document failed guild quality controls from four major European worsted industries⁹ and successful non-guild quality controls from eight additional case studies.¹⁰ Epstein argues that my strong German guilds controlled quality poorly because the industry was rural and dispersed. In fact, the Württemberg worsted industry was highly concentrated, with 26–43 per cent of communities’ households headed by weavers and guild officers residing locally.¹¹ Furthermore, the 12 European case studies mentioned

⁴ On the importance of distributional conflicts as well as efficiency in explaining institutions, see Ogilvie, ‘“Whatever is, is right”?’, sections V–VI; Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson, ‘Institutions’, esp. pp. 389–95, 427–8.

⁵ For a detailed discussion of rehabilitation claims concerning the efficiency of guilds, see Ogilvie, ‘Can we rehabilitate the guilds?’, section 1.

⁶ See, for instance, Ogilvie, ‘Guilds’, p. 292; L. Mocarrelli, ‘The guilds reappraised: Italy in the early modern period’, paper presented to the conference on ‘The Return of the Guilds’, Utrecht, 5–7 Oct. 2006 [URL: <http://www.iisg.nl/hpw/papers/guilds-mocarrelli>], p. 7.

⁷ Ogilvie, ‘Guilds’, pp. 293–4.

⁸ An example is N. R. Goose, ‘Review of *Guilds, society and economy in London, 1450–1800* (eds. Gadd and Wallis)’, Institute of Historical Research online reviews (2003) [URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/paper/gooseN2.html>].

⁹ Ogilvie, ‘Guilds’, pp. 295–6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 300–1.

¹¹ Ogilvie, *State corporatism*, pp. 277, 310–21.

above demonstrate no correlation between quality and guilds—whether urban or rural.¹² Epstein's claim that demand for Württemberg worsteds shifted to lower quality after 1648 but improved after 1700 is unsubstantiated and is refuted by the literature.¹³ His attempted reinterpretation of the Jacob Zeyher case is inaccurate and bizarre, as documented in my working paper.¹⁴

III

Epstein asserts that cognitive psychology demonstrates that guild training was essential. Yet 'the cognitive foundations of human learning' in his account boil down to two propositions: firstly, that learning to do something usually requires training, formal or informal; secondly, that becoming a 'top-level' expert is time-consuming but most professionals attain 'average' performance more quickly. These truisms say nothing about how much training, what type of training, or what training institutions were best for pre-modern crafts. Epstein shows no connection between psychology and guilds.

Epstein fails to address my cross-European comparisons demonstrating that learning craft skills took much less time than guilds claimed, did not require formal apprenticeship, and was managed in many successful industries through non-guild institutions.¹⁵ His suggestion that worsted production was unique in not needing guilds for skills transmission is undermined by the existence of many other crafts that were guilded in some societies but unguilded (and successful) in others.¹⁶ Epstein's claim that absolute numbers of apprentices were high in dynamic economies such as England and the Netherlands is irrelevant, since numbers of non-apprenticeship-trained workers were also high and many apprenticeships were concluded without guilds.¹⁷

Epstein's criticism of my German evidence is again vitiated by errors and distortions. His inclusion of masters' daughters among women who could do craftwork freely is simply false.¹⁸ His claim that spinners demonstrate that non-guild-related females could work at guilded crafts omits to mention that guilds *restricted* them to spinning, prosecuted all other female 'encroachers', and capped spinners' wages. His accusation that I assume female labour productivity to equal male is false: I explicitly analyse gendered productivity differences.¹⁹ His implication that guilds' exclusion of females is justified by women's domestic responsibilities and low productivity is called into question by demographic realities and guild masters' opposition to women as skilled competitors.²⁰ Epstein's reinterpretation of woollen-weavers' objections to short worsted training as a defence of their

¹² Ogilvie, 'Guilds', pp. 295–6, 300–1.

¹³ Ogilvie, *State corporatism*, pp. 348–57; Troeltsch, *Calwer Zeughandlungskompanie*, pp. 35–7, 101, 125–31, 163–6.

¹⁴ See Ogilvie, 'Can we rehabilitate the guilds?', section 2.4.

¹⁵ Ogilvie, 'Guilds', pp. 302–14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 313–14.

¹⁷ C. A. Davids, 'Guilds, guildsmen and technological innovation in early modern Europe: the case of the Dutch Republic', *Economy and Society of the Low Countries working papers*, 2003–2 (2003), pp. 3–10; Heaton, *Yorkshire*, pp. 308–11.

¹⁸ See Ogilvie, *Bitter living*, pp. 130–4, esp. n. 204, for examples of guild restrictions on craftwork by masters' daughters throughout Europe.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 111–14, 127–8, 286–95, 322–6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 40–9, 127–8, 130–4, 296–8, 305–8, 322–6.

guild's reputation is unjustified, since worsted wares were new in 1582 and woollen-weavers operated in different markets.²¹ Epstein's assertion that non-guilded labour could not compete with guild-masters' 'all-round expertise' is unsupported by the Yorkshire study he cites and is undermined by masters' opposition to unapprenticed workers as dangerous competitors.²² His claim that when apprentices absconded they were manifesting a 'sophisticated understanding' of the importance of guild training is far-fetched beside the alternative interpretation that apprentices who quit had decided guild training was useless.²³ Epstein's statement that Württemberg worsted guilds did not restrict apprentice numbers is simply false.²⁴ His notion that outside entry declined after 1650 because no one desired to enter is refuted by voluminous evidence of outside applicants rejected by the guild.²⁵ His claim that the guild cannot have become more exclusive after 1650 since numbers increased ignores internal recruitment of masters' sons.²⁶ His assertion that average output fell after 1650 because of weak demand for guild jobs is based on careless misreading of evidence on guild output quotas.²⁷ His argument that apprentices would not have paid guild fees had they not valued guild training is ridiculous: becoming a journeyman or master required an apprenticeship certificate, issued only if fees were paid.²⁸ Epstein's claim that my evidence shows labour productivity was higher in guilded towns than 'unregulated villages' is based on misquotation of my study, muddled conflation of guild quotas with labour productivity, and disregard of evidence on guild regulation in villages.²⁹

IV

Epstein speculates that guilds only opposed harmful innovations. But if an innovation was harmful, its adopter would go out of business, so why oppose it? Despite previously having claimed to advance 'a theory of guild innovation'³⁰ and to show that 'the main *direct* source of pre-modern technical innovation was the craft guild',³¹ Epstein now denies arguing that guilds directly favoured innovation. Tacitly abandoning his earlier assertions that guilds encouraged innovation through monopoly rents and industrial agglomeration—discredited by my 2004 article—Epstein now contends only that apprenticeship 'indirectly' favoured

²¹ Ogilvie, *State corporatism*, pp. 87–92; Troeltsch, *Calwer Zeughandlungskompagnie*, pp. 6–11.

²² Compare Epstein's account with what is actually stated in Heaton, *Yorkshire*, pp. 308–11; see Ogilvie, 'Can we rehabilitate the guilds?', section 3.4, for detailed analysis.

²³ As is concluded by P. Wallis, 'Apprenticeship, training and guilds in preindustrial Europe', paper delivered to the Economic History Society Annual Conference, 30 March–1 April 2005 [URL: <http://www.ehs.org.uk/ehs/conference2005/Assets/WallisAbstractIVC.doc>], in his analysis of high quit-rates by English apprentices.

²⁴ Ogilvie, *State corporatism*, pp. 139–43.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 139–79; Ogilvie, 'Guilds', pp. 309–10.

²⁶ As is made clear in Ogilvie, *State corporatism*, pp. 139–79.

²⁷ For detailed dissection of this misreading, see Ogilvie, 'Can we rehabilitate the guilds?', section 3.4; the evidence of high demand for guild masterships and guild-mandated output quotas in this period is unambiguously presented in Ogilvie, *State corporatism*, pp. 143–80, 188–216; see esp. tabs. 7.1 and 7.2.

²⁸ As made clear by the discussions in Ogilvie, *State corporatism*, pp. 139–55, and Troeltsch, *Calwer Zeughandlungskompagnie*, pp. 73–80, 103–6, 117, 165–6, both footnoted by Epstein.

²⁹ Ogilvie, *State corporatism*, pp. 155–79, 204 (misquoted by Epstein). For an expanded criticism of the rehabilitation view on guilds and training, see Ogilvie, 'Can we rehabilitate the guilds?', section 3.

³⁰ Epstein, 'Craft guilds', p. 695.

³¹ Epstein, 'Property rights', p. 386 (original emphasis).

knowledge transmission. Yet his claim that ‘virtually all technical knowledge’ in pre-modern Europe was generated and transmitted by guilds is unsupported by a scintilla of evidence and is contradicted by my examples of innovative yet unguilded producers and industries.³²

Epstein’s attacks on my case study are simply wrong. His statement that weavers’ guilds opposed innovation only after 1650 and only because of ‘merchant charges’ is false. Weavers’ guilds already opposed innovation in 1619–21 and post-1650 opposition was spearheaded by the merchant-dyers’ own guild-like association.³³ Epstein’s claim that rising per capita output demonstrates that guilds enhanced innovation is also false: he confuses guild quotas with labour productivity.³⁴

V

Epstein asserts that deadweight losses from guilds can be measured by the monopoly rents of guild members, which must have been small because per capita lobbying expenditures were low. This reflects conceptual confusion. First, the deadweight loss to the economy is quite distinct from the monopoly rents of guild members, and may be either larger or smaller than them.³⁵ Second, the monopoly rents of guild members are not measured by their lobbying expenditures, because there was no competitive market in lobbying for a Württemberg guild. Epstein’s calculation of low per capita lobbying costs is also based on factual errors—claiming 600–650 masters instead of only 150–250, and restricting costs to money expenditures while ignoring the time, effort, and private subsidies documented in my study.³⁶

Epstein claims that guild rent-seeking actually benefited pre-modern economies, by enabling the state to ‘coordinate’ the activities of ‘decentralized agents’ in ‘thin markets’. This flight of fancy is unsupported by any evidence. Did agents need state coordination? Did early modern state policy provide it? Were states that granted rents to guilds particularly effective coordinators? Did benefits of state coordination outweigh costs of monopolies and rent-seeking? These questions are left unaddressed.³⁷

VI

Epstein’s desire to associate strong guilds with economic success motivates him to portray English and Dutch guilds as especially strong; yet his reversal of the standard English historiography is not fully supported even by the studies he cites, which focus on guilds that survived and were well documented after 1660.³⁸ This ignores the many English guilds abolished, weakened, circumvented, or forced to

³² Ogilvie, ‘Guilds’, pp. 317–19.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 315, 320–1.

³⁴ For a detailed discussion of rehabilitation arguments on guilds and innovation, see Ogilvie, ‘Can we rehabilitate the guilds?’, section 4.

³⁵ Kay, ‘General equilibrium’, p. 328.

³⁶ Ogilvie, *State corporatism*, pp. 370–8.

³⁷ For a detailed dissection of rehabilitation arguments concerning guild rent-seeking, see Ogilvie, ‘Can we rehabilitate the guilds?’, section 5.

³⁸ As acknowledged by these very studies; see Snell, *Annals*, pp. 238–69; Walker, ‘Extent’, chs. 1, 3.

liberalize from the sixteenth century onwards.³⁹ Epstein also sedulously ignores the abolition of guilds in much of the Dutch textile industry after the 1560s and the relatively liberal controls exercised by those that survived.⁴⁰ His claim that the strong guilds (and stagnant economy) of my German case study—and its many central, southern, and northern European cognates—were ‘fundamentally atypical’ is, like most of his assertions, unsupported by the evidence.⁴¹

VII

Epstein seeks to dismiss my arguments on methodological grounds, objecting both that they are based on ‘a single case study’ and—rather contradictorily—that they commit ‘analytical confusion’ by comparing one worsted industry with others elsewhere in Europe. His epistemological basis for this criticism is unclear. Surely the best way to test a general theory about guilds is to confront it with evidence about how guilds behaved in practice and to compare guilded with non-guilded industries? But this distaste for the inconveniently empirical permeates Epstein’s article, which is a tissue of unsubstantiated assertions underpinned by startlingly inaccurate criticisms of my German case study, quotations from cognitive psychology textbooks, and references to a small circle of like-minded believers. Countervailing views from adjacent fields of economic history not yet converted to the rehabilitation orthodoxy are never cited; thus Epstein’s article is strikingly free of references to histories of technology,⁴² women’s work,⁴³ migration,⁴⁴ Jewish occupations,⁴⁵

³⁹ Snell, *Annals*, p. 239, n. 27, openly acknowledges that there may have been a phase of guild weakening in the sixteenth century, long before the period analysed in his study. For concrete examples of English guilds whose economic controls did weaken in the sixteenth century, see Berger, *Most necessary luxuries*; Kellett, ‘Breakdown’; Kramer, *English craft guilds*; Marshall, ‘Capitalism’; Swanson, ‘Illusion’; Unwin, *Gilds*.

⁴⁰ Davids, ‘Neringen’; idem, ‘Guilds, guildsmen and technological innovation in early modern Europe: the case of the Dutch Republic’, *Economy and Society of the Low Countries working paper 2003-2*, 2003 [URL: <http://www.lowcountries.nl/2003-2.pdf>]; Lis and Soly, ‘Craft guilds’, pp. 8, 15–17; Lourens and Lucassen, ‘Gilden’, esp. pp. 67, 69, 75–8; H. Soly, ‘The political economy of European craft guilds: power relations and economic strategies of merchants and master artisans in medieval and early modern textile industries’, paper presented to the conference on ‘The Return of the Guilds’, Utrecht, 5–7 Oct. 2006, esp. pp. 15–16; van Nederveen Meerkerk, *Draad*.

⁴¹ For an expanded discussion of the issues of guild ‘strength’, ‘weakness’, and ‘typicality’ raised by the rehabilitation case, see Ogilvie, ‘Can we rehabilitate the guilds?’, section 6.

⁴² Clark, ‘Early capitalism’; J. Mokyr, ‘The industrial revolution and the Netherlands: why did it not happen?’, paper presented to the 150th anniversary conference organized by the Royal Dutch Economic Association, 10–11 Dec. 1999; idem, *Gifts*; idem, ‘Intellectual origins’; idem, ‘Ambiguities’; idem, ‘Long term economic growth’, esp. pp. 14, 50; P. A. David, ‘Patronage, reputation and common agency contracting in the Scientific Revolution: from keeping “nature’s secrets” to the institutionalization of “open science”’, Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research discussion paper (2004).

⁴³ I. Bandhauer-Schoeffmann, ‘Widows and daughters: Austrian business women and their status in family firms in the 19th and 20th centuries’, paper delivered to the 14th International Economic History Congress, Helsinki, 20–25 Aug. 2006 [URL: <http://www.helsinki.fi/iehc2006/papers1/Bandhauer.pdf>]; Coffin, ‘Gender’; Crowston, *Fabricating women*; Hafter, ‘Female masters’; idem, ‘Women’; Jacobsen, ‘Gesetz’; Ogilvie, *Bitter living*; Quataert, ‘Shaping’; Simon-Muscheid, ed., ‘Was nützt’; Vámos, ‘Appearance’; van Nederveen Meerkerk, *Draad*; Vicente, ‘Images’; Wiesner, ‘Guilds’.

⁴⁴ Luu, *Immigrants*, esp. ch. 4; Goose and Luu, eds., *Immigrants*; O. Yildirim, ‘Ottoman guilds (1600–1826): a survey’, paper delivered to the conference on ‘The Return of the Guilds’, Utrecht, 5–7 Oct. 2006 [URL: <http://www.iisg.nl/hpw/papers/guilds-yildirim.pdf>], esp. pp. 6–8, 16; Lee, ‘Urban labor markets’; Esser, ‘Citizenship’.

⁴⁵ Wischnitzer, *History*; Penslar, *Shylock’s children*; M. Botticini and Z. Eckstein, ‘From farmers to merchants: a human capital interpretation of Jewish economic history’, Centre for Household, Income, Labour, and Demographic Economics working paper (2003).

illegitimacy,⁴⁶ or economic marginalization,⁴⁷ where guilds are assessed in more sober terms. Instead, Epstein continually reiterates the existence of a ‘modern consensus on guilds’ from which no one may now deviate. The test of an argument, though, is not whether it is fashionable or widely held, but whether it is theoretically coherent and empirically tenable.⁴⁸ Epstein’s comment fails this test.

My article argued that we can only assess the economic impact of guilds through detailed primary research, cross-European comparisons, and consistent economic reasoning. To these I would now add accuracy in the use of others’ evidence and critical evaluation of any putative consensus. Epstein’s polemic fails to satisfy any of these requirements.

University of Cambridge

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⁴⁶ Boes, ‘“Dishonourable” youth’; Ogilvie, ‘Coming of age’; Kuehn, *Illegitimacy*.

⁴⁷ Stuart, *Defiled trades*; Boes, ‘“Dishonourable” youth’.

⁴⁸ On methodological issues raised by the rehabilitation view of guilds, see Ogilvie, ‘Can we rehabilitate the guilds?’, section 7.

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CONTENTS

ARTICLES

JORDI DOMENECH

Labour market adjustment a hundred years ago: the case of the Catalan textile industry, 1880–1913

PATRICK WALLIS

Consumption, retailing, and medicine in early-modern London

WRAY VAMPLEW

Successful workers or exploited labour? Golf professionals and professional golfers in Britain 1888–1914

RICHARD HAYMAN

Charcoal ironmaking in nineteenth-century Shropshire

PETER SCOTT

Did owner-occupation lead to smaller families for interwar working-class households?

GEOFFREY JONES

Blonde and blue-eyed? Globalizing beauty, c.1945–c.1980

COMMENTS AND REPLIES

S. R. EPSTEIN

Craft guilds in the pre-modern economy: a discussion

SHEILAGH OGILVIE

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REVIEW OF PERIODICAL LITERATURE

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MARK FREEMAN, JULIAN GREAVES, AND HUGH PEMBERTON

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