Introduction

This book is about artisans in Europe's cities and towns from the late Middle Ages into the era of industrialization. It is also about modernization which, as we will see, was a process that partly shaped and was shaped by the unfolding history of labor, laborers, and labor relations. On such a large canvas, how does one rough out meaningful generalizations? Historians who make comparisons across vast stretches of time and place tread upon a knife's edge: on one side lurks the trap of endless listings of difference; on the other dwells the danger of underrepresenting the heterogeneity and diversity of the European artisanry by overdetermining similarities. It is difficult to generalize about crafts and craftsmen and craftswomen, for, as we will see, trades in urban society varied greatly from one to another. And yet, amid all of this diversity, we can still make out an outline of a more or less coherent artisan culture that endured for half a millennium.

To speak of artisan culture sets this book apart from most previous histories of craftsmen and craftswomen. In the mid- to late nineteenth century artisans became subjects of historical investigation, and since then three types of writings have emerged. One longs nostalgically for a world that was rapidly disappearing. This romantic vision of artisan life emphasizes the organic and communal nature of the artisan world, and overtly contrasts it with the emergent industrial society which these authors perceive to be plagued by anomie and social fragmentation. These histories are marked by their authors' implicit conviction that the artisanal, preindustrial past was a better world that had fallen victim to the destructive, antisocial forces of industrial capitalism. In these accounts we find the guild as the central institution in artisan life, and a ready assumption that prescription – the dictates of guild statutes and by-laws which so often sought to harmonize the relationships between guild brethren – reflected practice, or the actual behavior of artisans.

From the pens of economic historians also have flowed guild histories, and these, too, generally have accepted prescription as practice; but here, guild regulations against competition, for example, have not been

viewed positively as guarantors of societal harmony. Rather they have been taken to task for impeding the emergent free economy of liberal capitalism. The guild as millstone around the neck of economic growth is a theme that has had a near stranglehold on historical writings on guilds for most of the twentieth century.

The third perspective that has distinctly marked artisan histories written since the late nineteenth century is one that, like the nostalgic guild histories, equally emerged from assumptions about the impact of capitalism on traditional social relations. Here, however, the authors intend to account for the history of working-class formation. If the guild histories have tended to focus our attention upon master craftsmen, working-class histories have shifted our scrutiny to journeymen.

Each of these perspectives on artisan history has merit, but it tells only part of the story and, moreover, the explanatory power of each is often sapped by an overdetermined economism that informs its author's assumptions. At worst, such histories are teleological and even tautological, positing capitalism as the natural economy and guild or governmental regulation, therefore, as artificial and somehow unnatural. This liberal fallacy rests upon two questionable assumptions that have weakened guild histories for decades: first, that the existence of government or guild regulations in historical records is evidence for their effectiveness, and second, that regulatory activity in the economy "distorts" it and renders the system within its stultifying grasp "inadequate" to meet the demand that would otherwise be met in a "free," self-regulating economy. To measure economies and the role of guilds within them in this way, however, is ahistorical, misleading, and even tautological, for it assumes without empirical proof that a natural economy (if such existed) would function in an expansionary and developmental mode. This hypothetical system then becomes the measuring stick for actual economies which, like the craft economy of early modern Europe, are then in turn declared inadequate and distorted.

Yet even the working-class or guild histories that avoid such tendentious and circular reasoning often are narrowly informed by economistic assumptions, and so ignore a multiplicity of other logics that went into the construction of artisan culture. Surely an understanding of the artisan experience requires more than examining its economic dimension, important as that was? As Gervase Rosser recently wrote, "Much of the over-simplification of traditional views [of artisans] results from the failure to recognize that an individual simultaneously possessed plural identities . . . The very concept of the 'artisan' in modern historiography has tended to be too unitary and too static." He rightly

concludes that "the categories of 19th century discourse have blinkered modern interpretation."[1]

What, then, was an artisan? A deceptively simple question becomes surprisingly complex when we shift away from the traditional frameworks in which this question could be answered toward one informed by cultural analysis. One could respond to this question, as many historians have before, that artisans were members of guilds, or one could offer a production-centered definition, that artisans were skilled people who fashioned artifacts with their hands and tools but without the aid of machinery, the classic handicraftsmen. Yet even according to this definition we must note diversity, since "artisans" can be placed on a spectrum with, at one end, a journeyman working for wages little distinguishable (from our labor-centered perspective though, as we will see, certainly not from the journeyman's perspective) from wage-workers with no connection to the world of journeymen. At the other end of the spectrum we find entrepreneurial artisans no longer working primarily with their hands, spending most of their time wholesaling products or managing their enterprises. These men and women are almost indistinguishable (again from an economistic perspective) from merchants. Indeed, the boundaries at each end of the spectrum were porous, with men and women sliding into and out of what we think of as artisanal activity. In this book we will encounter "artisans" involved in many types of labor and production. As we will see, however, such a definition, important as it is, is only partial.

Karl Marx has been immeasurably influential in how historians have thought about craftsmen in particular and labor history in general. He isolated labor as the quality that makes us truly human, and assumed that economic rationality was essential to the labor process. Marx, for all his historicism, nonetheless "naturalized" labor no less than classical economists like Adam Smith or David Ricardo had before him, making it the foundation of the edifice of culture. Most historians of artisans, Marxist or not, have similarly "essentialized" labor, assuming that this activity defined an artisan's identity.

These traditional institutional and economic frameworks, however, are insufficient to analyze important aspects of the experience of the groups of people – men and women – whom we have labeled "artisans." Not every such person in fact belonged to a guild (few women did in their own right), nor were weavers (as they would be the first to tell us) simply men or women who happened to weave thread, bakers simply men or women who happened to cook bread. To grasp the sense that

[1] Gervase Rosser, "Crafts, guilds and the negotiation of work in the medieval town," *Past and Present* 154 (1997), 8–9.

these men and women had of themselves and that others had of them, requires moving beyond an institutional or productive (even economic) framework toward one that can accommodate both meaning and questions of identity.

To explain how artisans fashioned their identities and shaped their culture, let us consider the matter of status. As we will see, artisans from the late Middle Ages well into the nineteenth century were defined and defined themselves not primarily as producers as their labels may suggest, but rather as members of an *état*, a rank or "degree," a *Stand*. They designated themselves (and were so designated by the authorities) by occupational label not just because this described what they did (it often did not), but rather because it signaled status, for in the old regime status was in part contained through naming and the possession of titles. In the historical context of the hierarchical world of early modern Europe, identity (artisanal, or any other) was formed through erecting and maintaining boundaries between an imagined "us" and "them," and so identity was rooted in, as Peter Sahlins puts it, "a subjective experience of difference."[2] It was, therefore, relational, and contingent upon context. If we think of cultures as "meaningful orders of persons and things,"[3] then we might also recognize that groups of people cohere around shared values and activities. To keep the howling chaos of experience at bay, groups imagine boundaries of their communities in part by locating and defining activities in specified places – homes, workplaces, churches, taverns, and so on – and delimiting who belongs within them. By including or excluding individuals from those places or from performing those activities, they spell out the membership of the group, and so contribute to the ongoing process of shaping a culture. Of course, individuals can and do belong to multiple groups, resulting often but not necessarily in a hierarchical valuation of the various groups by the individuals so engaged.

Work, I would suggest, can best be understood when it is imbedded in cultural relations of which it was only a part, however important. Again, to quote Rosser:

> work . . . so far from being a mere function of socio-economic relations, was a varied, complex and evolving process, negotiated between individuals, which itself contributed significantly to the formation of ideas about society as a whole. Social structure, far from being a given, is the constantly renewed and revised product of human agency, however much that agency is framed by inherited circumstances.[4]

[2] Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley, 1989), p. 271.
[3] Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason* (Chicago, 1976), p. x.
[4] Rosser, 3.

Rather than assuming that an artisan found his or her social being defined by his or her labor, then, we might profit from thinking of an artisan's life (and his or her work) as being in important ways a product of what we might call symbolic exchanges, where labor was a sign of social place as well as a means to survival or material accumulation. Such exchanges were brief encounters in continually shifting situations, and so were simultaneously dynamic and structured by a shared system of communication in which meaning inhered. Because incessant change rendered friendships fleeting and social groups fragile, networks and alliances were continually recreated and reconstituted. It was through these infinite encounters and exchanges of "symbolic capital" that artisans continually fashioned and refashioned their sense of a coherent identity, remembering from the immediate past the attributes that defined them while plunging ineluctably into the future, a context forever in flux. Simultaneously and inextricably they established and reestablished their place within the taxonomic structure of society through an apprehension of difference, distinction, and status.

Late medieval and early modern society was increasingly organized across the intersecting axes of hierarchy and subordination, and so it was taken as natural that some people commanded more power, more resources, and more respect than others. Everywhere Europeans divided themselves more and more into a series of graduated ranks. Sometimes this was done formally by institutions authorized by political authorities (for example, through sumptuary laws which dictated what one could wear), sometimes informally. Nor was occupation the only or even the chief determinant of social place or social status, which was mostly determined by a mixture of criteria based on family, office, wealth, or membership in particular institutions (like guilds, or confraternities, which served as devices for social distinction, differentiation, and rank as well as placement in the social and political firmament). Old regime taxonomy was a structured system of hierarchical differences which reached its highwater mark in the seventeenth century, a structure which was nonetheless dynamic, fragile, and unstable. It was within this structure, a product of an incessant interrelationship of prescription and practice, that individuals and groups of individuals made their lives meaningful. Social and self-definition were rooted in cultural experiences which included, but also transcended, production; these definitions were profoundly influenced by shifts in political, legal, intellectual, as well as economic, developments across these centuries. Artisans did not make themselves in isolation, nor were they hapless victims simply molded by forces beyond their control. They were products of their own ceaseless struggle, not just to earn a living, but to maintain rank and a

sense of social place in the face of powerful, often inimical forces in their world, turning these forces to their advantage when they could, suffering fragmentation or transformation when they could not.

As society's elites increasingly distanced themselves from the craftsmen, artisans in turn became increasingly keen on defining the distance between themselves and their inferiors. At all social levels, this process of dissociation was visualized by cultural markers, and the key badge of artisanal status could be summed up in the word "honor." This swung on the hinge of respectability, and was the stuff of the dreams of all artisans, be they master, journeyman, or nonguild worker, as they were of the inimitable eighteenth-century French glazier and author of *A Journal of My Life*, Jacques-Louis Ménétra. Honorable, however, could mean a variety of things. For the master craftsman it could mean economic solvency and heading one's own reputable business and respectable household, while for a journeyman it surely meant being subject to no one's discipline, with no restrictions on one's freedom of movement.

Honor carried multiple meanings, but everywhere it cemented cultural ties. It would be difficult to overemphasize the importance of honor in the daily life of medieval and early modern artisans. Honor was society's measure of social standing in the hierarchy as it was a marker of personal self-esteem. At both levels, honor was a paramount social value that enforced standards of accepted conduct and measured an individual's actions and worth against a norm recognized by peers, superiors, and inferiors. Duty and obligation, revenge and redress against insult and humiliation, even vindication by violence, were all subsumed in a code of honor which relied on the notion that the social hierarchy was established by God and was mediated through signs and symbols by which the hierarchy could be "read."

The obverse of the coin of status and honor was discipline and subordination. Indeed, in many ways, as we will see, they were interdependent. These interlocked themes – status, honor, discipline, subordination – are woven like so many colored threads through most of this book.

One thread that can only intermittently be included in this tapestry is the history of female artisans. This book will largely be about men and about their activities and their identities. We now know that huge amounts of artisanal work was done by women, and we know that the household economy, largely the preserve of the woman, was inextricably linked to the craft and market economy beyond the home. All of these activities will receive attention in the pages that follow, but the fact remains that artisanal organization, political expression, public life, and

identity in early modern Europe were overwhelmingly masculine, and it is precisely because of the strongly gendered assumptions of the Old Regime and their ubiquitous inscription in the historical record left to the scrutiny of historians that the primary subject of this book will be men.

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1 The meaning of work: ideology and organization

Worthy or disgraceful?

From the Middle Ages to the industrial age men (and it was exclusively educated men who wrote about this) have had an ambivalent, even sometimes paradoxical, attitude to work. In the contemporary western world where the work ethic is so firmly embedded in our assumptions about nearly all of our activity, it seems peculiar that work could ever have been anything but positively valued. After all, are not the fruits of labor the goods and services western society so voraciously consumes and ostensibly values? And yet, it has not always been so. Indeed, only in the last 200 years has a positive connotation of work held sway, largely because of the triumph of a particular way of thinking about society and the role of economics within it. We call it modernity. As theorists like Adam Smith or Karl Marx reified and abstracted economics as the essential force shaping particular societies (notably their own), work, at least among the educated, was viewed more positively. How did this dramatic transformation in the thinking about labor come to pass? And how did educated men think about labor before?

The Greek philosophers Plato, and especially Aristotle, had an enormous influence on the way medieval men thought about nearly everything, and these Greek sages had considered manual labor as base activity, marking the laborer as inferior to men (like themselves) who did not work. They placed higher value upon intellectual activity than technical skill, and ranked men hierarchically in proportion to their possession of these qualities. Thus the pensive philosopher was superior to the craftsman who was nonetheless, by virtue of his possession of some creative genius, superior to the manual laborer (quite often a slave) who simply carried out the ideas of someone else.

For no medieval philosopher or theologian was work a central preoccupation, but we can glean from the writings of many of the leading minds of the age what work meant to them, and how they believed that it should be organized in society. Not surprisingly, all were influenced by