Rewinding Civil Society: Conceptual Lessons from the Early Modern Guilds

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Traditionally it is assumed that "modern" civil society originated in the associations, clubs, and public sphere of the eighteenth century as a result of the "liberation" of the individual from the "shackles" of absolutism, religious intolerance, and the patriarchal family. However, recent research goes further back in time. Scholars such as Robert Putnam (sociologist), Antony Black (political scientist), and Katherine Lynch (historian) associate the origins of civil society with the heyday of confraternities and guilds in the late Middle Ages. This has serious consequences for our understanding of the characteristics and functions of civil society. Given that confraternities were permeated by religious devotion and crafts were inextricably bound to the (often undemocratic) political establishment, fundamental questions arise about the importance of religion in civil society and the role of associations in the political participation of individuals. This article suggests that several long-term trends can be observed when broaching civil society from the perspective of guilds (or brotherhoods). In early modern guilds, the fraternal ideals related to mutual aid and equality appear to have gradually disappeared. Craft guilds stopped being "brotherhoods" and "substitute families" and transformed into formal and bureaucratic juridical institutions, while retreating into a sphere separate from household and family.

Introduction

Civil society is back from an absence. After the breakthrough of neoliberal and individualistic thinking in the 1970s and 1980s, the acceptance that human beings are social beings steadily returned. Policy makers count on associations and community works once again to approach social problems—such as those that primarily occur in cities. While social organizations are seen as beneficial for the integration of groups with another cultural background, it is expected of neighborhoods and districts that they (with the help of governments) develop initiatives that repair the social fabric. However, from an historical perspective the question can be asked to what extent civil society fulfills that function. At least in part, after all, "civil society" is a normative ideal regarding how to behave in the public sphere and how social organizations should function.

In this article, the debate on the origin of the so-called modern civil society is tackled. Traditionally it is assumed that modern civil society originated in the associations, clubs, and lodges of the eighteenth century because of the "liberation" of the individual from the "shackles" of absolutism, religious intolerance, and the patriarchal family (Hall 1995; Khilnani 2001; Trentmann 2000). While medieval brotherhoods were traditionally perceived as being entrenched in religion and devotion and while guilds have traditionally been associated with coercion and patriarchalism, these new voluntary organizations are thought of as independent and self-ruled instruments in

the hands of self-governing individuals. "Civil society" was seen as an autonomous sphere separate from both the public realm of politics proper and the private sphere of the family. Recently, however, scholars such as Robert Putnam (sociologist), Antony Black (political scientist), and Katherine Lynch (historian) associate the origins of civil society precisely with the heyday of brotherhoods and guilds in the (late) Middle Ages (Black 1984, 2003; Lynch 2003; Putnam 1993). Medieval brotherhoods and guilds are now thought to have lain at the roots of the modern, Western civil society. They are assumed to have created "social capital," which, in turn, is necessary for democratic and efficient political and economic institutions (Black 1984; Putnam 1993; van Zanden 2009: 32–68; for a critical view on the concept of social capital, see Ilmonen 2000: 142).

This has, of course, serious consequences for our understanding of the characteristics and functions of civil society. Given the religious character of confraternities and the guilds' inextricable links with both the patriarchal family and the political establishment of cities, fundamental questions arise as to the importance of religion in modern civil society and the role of associations in the political participation of individuals. To tackle these questions, I examine brotherhoods and guilds in a long-term perspective. Notwithstanding the recent turn to the Middle Ages, current research tends to be ahistorical and teleological. The influence of Enlightened thinkers (up to Jürgen Habermas) in the definition and conceptualization of civil society has led to a conceptual frame in which specific features of social organizations and collective activities come to the fore while others remain hidden. Moreover, the shift toward the Middle Ages happened at the expense of the early modern period—as a result of which possible fundamental transformations such as state formation and bureaucratization, confessionalization and secularization, ever-increasing market forces, and a growing "privatization" of the nuclear family are eclipsed.

Recent research has already depicted confraternities as having become oligarchic and politicized from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries onward (C. F. Black 2003; Donnelly and Maher 1999; Pullan 1971; Terpstra 1995, 2000; Weisman 1982). Venturing into the early modern gap between late medieval guilds and brotherhoods, on the one hand, and the "enlightened" type of civil society (as we know it through the lens of current research), on the other, my article will focus on guilds (Cf. Farr 2000; Lis et al. 2006; MacKenney 1990). Examining the guilds' regulations and activities from the late Middle Ages up until their entrance in the hostile context of the Enlightenment will enable me to tackle not only religion and devotion, but also the relationship of voluntary associations with both political structures and ideas and the patriarchal family. The first chapter deals with several recent historiographical evolutions, in particular the shift of focus to the urban societies of the late Middle Ages. I will point out how the "classic" concept of "civil society" emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, more importantly, how it affects even current ideas on medieval brotherhoods and guilds. Subsequently, starting from the idea that the dominant definitions of *civil society* in current social theory may have a profound impact on the historical approach, one case study will be presented, namely the Antwerp craft guilds, which will be studied from a long-term perspective (fifteenth to eighteenth

century). From this case study, many conceptual and theoretical suggestions are then formulated, with the intention to stimulate further debate and research. My overall argument is that the use of civil society as a concept tends to conceal some very important transformations.

Historiographical Perspectives

In a conceptual sense the origin of "civil society" is connected to the ideas of John Locke, the Scottish thinkers of the commercial society, and eventually Hegel (Khilnani 2001). Locke made no distinction between civil society and political society. He saw civil society simply in opposition to the state of nature and as based on a representative political order, with its individual freedoms such as property rights and freedom of religion. For Locke, a civil society originated as the individual freed himself from the absolutist, patriarchal, and corporate shackles that suppressed the individual politically and economically. The Scottish thinkers as well (Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith) saw civility in the context of a free market and as imbedded in a righteous judicial and political framework, with the understanding that interpersonal relations, friendship, sentiment, and morality were also required. Impersonal market relationships had as it were the unintended effect that they permitted private, social relations, apart from the individual importance and maximization of needs. Finally, for Hegel, it had to do with the space in which a modern type of subjectivity could originate. Hegel tried to reconcile the origin of the modern free individual with the moral principles of a society. The rational self that arises in civil society is not "natural" or "given," but forms only within society, through processes of cultural and historical interaction, and then mainly through "recognition" (Stedman Jones 2001).

In these cases a civil society is strongly associated with the rise of impersonal (market) relations and a modern (autonomous) individual—in particular with the late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers. Moreover, civil society is seen as a sphere separate from the political order. Empirically, civil society is seen as a specific type of "club" and "society" originating in the eighteenth century, and particularly in England (or English cities) (Clark 2000; Morris 1983). This type of organization is strongly connected with the so-called public sphere, the well-known concept of Habermas that also strongly marked the rift between the *ancien régime* and "modernity." Habermas has described the *Bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit* as a "space" in which public opinion originates. Concretely, he points to the rise of coffeehouses and reading groups, theaters and exhibitions, and a free press. Individuals come together there and form "a public" that is relatively independent from the private and particularistic backgrounds of its members. Private individuals enter debate and, as a consequence, generate a "communicative rationality" (Habermas 1962). Just as "civil society," this public sphere is associated with the (origin of) bourgeois individualism.

The parallel between the culture of associations, on the one hand, and the existence of a certain "free" individual in the framework of a (liberal) democracy, on the other hand, ensured that research has mainly concentrated on the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries. It focused on the origin of so-called freedoms—also if the authors were, for example, to go back to the relative autonomy that cities in the (late) Middle Ages already enjoyed, or to the religious wars and the origin of (religious) tolerance (Hall 1995; Trentmann 2000). Even a nineteenth-century and "conservative" thinker such as Alexis de Tocqueville—who conceptualized civil society as an answer to what he saw as an unfettered freedom and individualism—made a case not for a return to the old situation, but for a new sort of corporatism that was independent from the state. In opposition to Locke, Tocqueville did make a distinction between political and civil society. As such, he surely did some injustice to the corporative tradition of the guilds, which were—at least in the early (and highly) urbanized regions of Western Europe—part of the local political fabric. This, of course, complicates the idea of guilds being part of the seedbed of civil society in the Middle Ages, as it was conceived by Robert Putnam, a sociologist who is usually regarded as an heir of Tocqueville (Putnam 1993, 2000).

According to Putnam, associations generate mutual trust that is essential to modern society. Guilds, brotherhoods, and the like are thought to have created a framework of communal values and norms that promotes participation in economic and political activities, and to have enabled the individual to practice democratic social conventions and decision-making processes. From this perspective, associational life is conceived as a type of "modern" community, in which emancipated individuals detached themselves from tyrannical structures such as the state and patriarchal family but at the same time needed to build networks and organizations in order to be able to survive. Given that Putnam links this to late medieval confraternities and craft guilds, however, there arises an interesting problem from a historical perspective. According to Putnam there is a direct connection between the civic culture of the (Italian) cities and city-states and the social capital available in modern Western liberal democracies. But how does this mesh with the late medieval confraternities and guilds being permeated by religion and (political and patriarchal) coercion?

Katherine Lynch, as well, recently linked civil society with an urban-based modernity projected in the Middle Ages. Building further on the so-called nuclear hardship thesis of Peter Laslett, she has linked civil society to poor relief and mutual aid, and, in turn, poor relief and mutual aid to community-building processes. The idea is that people created and joined a multitude of associations—which, among other things, provided mutual aid—because of the absence of enough kin and strong family ties in urban environments (Lynch 2003: 103–35; 2004). In opposition to Putnam, Lynch pays great attention to religion. With regard to the definition of *civil society*, she nuances the distinction between public and private poor relief provisions as well as the transition from a confessional to a civic model. In the model that she places against this, both elements are present from the start and remain important (on a local level.) At the same time, she calls for a better understanding of the boundary between the world of the voluntary associations and the world of local urban authorities (Lynch 2003: 213). However, the crafts, which lie precisely on the crossroad, are not given sufficient attention—which is perhaps due to her definition of *civil society* as a sphere that is again separate from both "formal political life" and "the narrow confines of

household or family" (ibid.: 19). As we will see in the following section, guilds were indeed neither.

Antony Black, on the contrary, focuses on the world of the guilds, although he too defines *civil society* as "a nexus of relatively free individuals and groups without reference to the state" (Black 2001: 33). According to Black (2001, 2003), this nexus already existed in the twelfth century (in the cities), but the question remains as to what extent guilds can be considered part of it. The red thread running through Black's classic study *Guilds and Civil Society* is rather a tension between guilds and civil society. Black associates guilds with the idea of a community based on values such as confraternity, friendship, and mutual aid. The concept of civil society, by contrast, links up with liberal ideas on person and property, such as legal equality, personal freedom and security, and individual independence. In the long run guild values appear to have declined in favor of the ethos of civil society, but the ethos of the commune and the ideas of civil society often developed simultaneously, at least in political theory. Moreover, the ideas of friendship and mutual aid did not disappear, they rather migrated from the context of the guilds to the context of the civil society: "[T]he age-old value of mutual aid, which was fundamental to medieval guild sentiment, is here transposed and . . . becomes a central value for civil or market society itself," according to Black (1984: 134).

What is thus suggested in the works of both Lynch and Black is that a simple transition from religious and political associations, which functioned as "shackles" to the secular voluntary associations in which free individuals become members out of their own initiative in the context of a sort of free market, cannot be found. Along with Putnam, both Black and Lynch stress continuity rather than discontinuity while framing guilds and brotherhood with the use of a modern template. Related to that, they tend to underplay differences between eighteenth-century realities and discourses on civil society, on the one hand, and medieval realities and discourses, on the other. Lynches ideas presuppose more or less self-governed individuals who organize themselves for well-defined goals—notwithstanding her stressing religion as an ever-present motivating force. Just as with the enlightened thinkers, her ideas imply a type of *modular man*, as Ernest Gellner has called it. With this term, Gellner pointed to the free individuals who can enter into organizations on their own initiative as well as leave them again, and thus consciously can join associations without truly binding themselves (Gellner 1995).

This corresponds with current views of social and economic historians on early modern and medieval *corpora*. Traditionally it was taken for granted that early modern corporative organizations were marked by *Zunftzwang* (the obligation to join), and hence they were associated with coercion and submission. Recently, however, it has been argued that the reasons for joining and the perpetuation of these organizations could be very rational. From an economic perspective, guilds are now seen as institutions that promoted economic growth, among others by providing a judicial framework for entering into and enforcing contracts (De Moor and van Zanden 2009; Epstein and Prak 2008; van Zanden 2009: 32–68). Trades and guilds also lowered transaction costs, for they ensured the description and guarding of quality

norms (Gustafsson 1987) and they stimulated investments in human capital (Epstein 1998). In short, these organizations are said to have been the result of rational and free choices of individuals who had good reasons to unite themselves (Cf. De Moor 2008). Some even argue now that trades were necessary for the realization of technological innovation and economic growth altogether (Epstein 1998), so that in the end they may be seen as preconditional for the emergence of the bourgeois middle class that supported the so-called civil society in the first place. (For a fierce debate on these views, see Epstein 2008; Ogilvie 2007, 2008)

From a political perspective, moreover, the "republican tradition" is referred to, which is said to have been based on a strive for political autonomy (in an urban context) and consisted out of the cultivation of individual rights and liberties and of an equal and egalitarian participation in the political power (for middling groups) (Schilling 1988; van Gelderen and Skinner 2002). In reality, the social emancipation that guilds realized in the well-known urban revolutions of the late medieval period were politically translated into a formal participation in city administrations. Instead of thinking in terms of "shackles," we could see the guilds' partaking in the local political system as a type of emancipation and as a sign of political power of middling groups (see, e.g., Boone and Prak 1995). The most radical approach is summarized in the concept of communalism, with which relatively autonomous communities (in the city and in the country) were meant, which functioned as counterparts to princes and states (Blickle 1986, 1991). Such traditions, moreover, are held to have persisted into the nineteenth century. In political history, it is currently accepted that the western parliamentary and constitutional democracies, and the political revolutions that were the groundwork for them, were indebted to the republican and communalistic traditions such as those existing in the ancient, medieval, and early modern cities (Blickle 1986; Pocock 1975; Skinner 1998). Even the theories of the Enlightened Scotsman Adam Ferguson (1723–1816)—often seen as the pioneer of modern thinking on civil society—were not only directed to progress, but also were embedded in a republican tradition that was perceived as being threatened (Morris 2006: 2).

However, this does not prevent the nineteenth-century republican and liberal tradition differing from the corporative tradition fundamentally (De Smaele 2005). For one, guild membership seldom ensured political participation directly. Guild members could have a say in the election of urban magistrates; they could even have a contingent of seats reserved for their deans in specific (local) councils (Prak 2006). Second, as masters acted *in loco parentis* to their apprentices, the private and the public sphere were intimately intertwined in a corporative context. To become a member, you had to pass through an apprenticeship term and to work and live for some years under the roof of a master who acted as a surrogate father (Prak 2004; Smith 1981). So, from the perspective of craft guilds, the link between medieval and late medieval brotherhoods and the concept of civil society is all but self-evident.

While the aforementioned books by Black and Lynch may offer a good stepping-stone, a more comprehensive understanding of historical transformations occurring between the late Middle Ages and the end of the *ancien régime* is needed—taking

issue with the still-existing influence of the normative and teleological character of the concept of civil society as it originated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The assertion that the difference could not have been that modern organizations were more goal oriented, or more politically inspired, does not mean that no important long-term transformations took place. The issue is to approach these very cautiously from their particular historical context with attention to the layered and multidimensional character of the associations in question.

My attention goes to the way in which crafts made up a part of the political arena and the familial domain. According to the current European literature, the way in which organizations could exist independently from these domains is indeed crucial to the question of whether they can be seen as a (modern) "civil society." In addition, the changing role of "market forces" will be considered.

Case Study: The Antwerp Guilds from the Perspective of Civil Society

Guilds appear to have been "voluntary associations" when they were first established, but soon they exercised a certain *Zunftzwang*, obliging all artisans who wanted to manufacture or sell certain products in a certain locality to join. From the thirteenth to the fifteenth century on, craft guilds very often became part and parcel of the urban political system—especially in the Southern Netherlands (along with parts of Germany, Italy, and Northern France), embodying the "urban communities" either in tune or in opposition with other "corpses" or "orders" within the city (Blockmans 1999; Dumolyn and Haemers 2005; Schulz 1992; Wyffels 1951). In many Flemish and Brabantine cities, the craft guilds succeeded not only in being able to elect the local representatives, but also even in directly taking part in the political power. This usually meant that a preset number of the seats among the aldermen and other councils were reserved for the representatives of the craft guilds. The guilds' chairmen who filled these places were elected in a (more or less) "democratic" way from the ranks of and by the masters. As the guilds in Flanders and Brabant were, moreover, governed by deans elected among and by the masters, they may be termed "strong guilds"—contrary to the guilds in the Northern Netherlands (and England) (Prak 2006).

In the long run, however, their autonomy was increasingly curtailed by the central authorities (Blockmans 1994; Boone and Prak 1995). The guilds in the Low Countries were, for example, suppressed, or rather incorporated, under Habsburg rule in the long sixteenth century. Among others, Charles V is reputed to have dramatically limited the power of the craft guilds during his rule (Cf. Dambruyne 2002; Jacobs 2: 2000). The most well-known example in our region is the so-called Carolingian Concession, with which in 1540 the Ghent craft guilds were denied, among other things, the right to elect their own deans (they were henceforth assigned by commissioners). By contrast, the giant trades that came along with the monoculture of textile industries and that were often controlled by the major merchants (who often also had a say in the alderman's college) were gradually substituted by a multitude of smaller and

often quite different trades in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (De Munck et al. 2006). In these trades, moreover, the internal coherence could also greatly differ and, in time, the social composition of the trades often experienced significant changes (De Munck 2010b; Lis and Soly 2008).

Moreover, current research has already shown that guilds could not only have a different connection to the local political structures, but that this could have an impact on their self-perception as well. While guild members in the Southern Netherlands were mostly represented in the local political councils directly (by their deans), political participation in the Northern Netherlands was either absent or indirect (e.g., by having a say in the election of magistrates) (Prak 2006). This distinction between direct political representation and the (relative) absence of political participation was paralleled with different political discourses. While guild members in the Southern Netherlands typically referred to their collective legal rights in their requests to the local magistrates, those in Amsterdam referred to their political rights as individual burghers (Lis and Soly 1997: 27–28; Prak 1996, 1997).

Based on the current definition of *civil society*, it may be tempting to equate this difference between "strong" and "weak" guilds (and the Northern and Southern Netherlands) to the difference between a "guild ethos" and "civil society." However, current research does not permit firm statements on the nature of guilds in both the north and the south of the Low Countries. While there was not much change regarding the formal political structures after the mid-sixteenth century, the divergent discourse has only been established for the eighteenth century (and then only in one limited case study). What exactly changed in the early modern period? And how are we to frame the long-term transformations in the field of tension between the brotherhood-like nature of guilds and confraternities and "civil society"?

Paying attention to both small-scale transformations in the organizations' formal structures and daily practices I will show that fundamental shifts did take place in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. In order to highlight some of these changes, this article will look at early modern Antwerp guilds from three perspectives: (1) regulations related to the access to the group, (2) poor relief provisions, and (3) the relation with the patriarchal family. Starting from these three perspectives I will examine in which way guilds may be seen as either brotherhoods with core confraternal values, friendship and mutual aid, or as voluntary associations that were a part of a sort of "civil society," based on personal freedom, individual independence, and exchange. Did these characteristics coexist from the start, or was there a paradigmatic shift from one set of characteristics to another?

Entry Requirements, Proletarianization, and a Waning Sense of Brotherhood

With regard to access to the group, important transformations occurred in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Before 1450 there were no formal and standardized entrance requirements. Very likely there were meals, treats, and devotional activities required. Not only did these continue to exist far into the early modern period, in the first

written records there is frequent mention of in-kind payments such as wine or wax. Most likely, these were used for the meals and ceremonial practices, or they were in any case a consequence of them. A standardized masterpiece and a fixed term to serve did not, in general, exist originally. In most fifteenth-century ordinances it is unclear whether apprenticeship terms were required or how long they should last. Mostly, urban officials simply asked to have declared before the city magistrates "who that person was" when someone was taken in as a new member (De Munck 2010b: 35; 2011: 223–24). This makes us assume that the organizations determined informally and through face-to-face mechanisms whether someone could become a member. In case that someone was a stranger, the initiate was sometimes asked to prove that he could work the craft (De Munck 2010b: 35). I assume that the possibility existed to request a master trial ad hoc whenever it was deemed necessary—in the function of the need for a standardized product quality. Formal entrance requirements (apart from the entrance fee, see following text), however, only came about after 1450. In the second half of the fifteenth century, a fixed term to serve as an apprentice (i.e., a term that was the same for everyone) was installed in virtually all guilds. And, between the last decades of the fifteenth century and the first decades of the seventeenth century, in nearly all known guilds, a standardized master trial became obligatory (De Munck 2010b: 33; 2011: 223, 232–35; Prims 1940: 48, 1942: 76; Thijs 1987: 99). This was the case also in other cities in the Southern Netherlands. In Ghent, many master trials were installed only around 1600 (Dambruyne 2002: 196–98).

Both regulations came about in a period of staggering demographic growth—in Antwerp from about 10,000 inhabitants in the second half of the fourteenth century to more than 100,000 in 1568 (Blondé and Limberger 2004: 307–9)—which suggests that face-to-face mechanisms came under pressure. On top of this, the pressure on the masters' status increased because of changing labor relations. Masters increasingly worked as subcontractors to other masters, as a result of which the distinction with common workmen steadily grew smaller (Lis and Soly 2008). Moreover, the major merchants increasingly behaved as producers. Instead of buying finished products from masters, they recruited apprentices, journeymen, and even masters to make goods immediately for their own account. The masters were strongly opposed to this because it reduced them to proletarianized laborers, selling their labor rather than their products (although in reality the difference may have been small, taking into account Kauf and Verlag systems). The solution for them existed in prescribing an apprenticeship term and master trial so that all those unable to do the job themselves were excluded from mastership. In this manner, not only was product quality ensured, but also the guild members could continue to boast about their exclusive ability to ensure good quality (De Munck 2007b; 2007c: 116–44; 2008). In short, as a result of structural economic and demographic shifts, the informal character of confraternities was under pressure, and more formal and bureaucratic distinction mechanisms were reached for. To be sure, this was not necessarily related to an exclusive politic. The Antwerp guilds seem to have rather striven for taking up the so-called *faux-maîtres* into their ranks (even if this was only because their low-price competition could be better tackled in this way). Moreover, there were several mechanisms with which

pupils were attracted or encouraged to become masters, among other things, to prevent them from using their acquired skills elsewhere (De Munck 2007a, 2007c: ch. 2.3).

In the meantime, the so-called guild ethos also came under pressure. To start with, the guild ordinances show a growing disinterest for collective and devotional activities. Increasingly, fines were administered for colleagues who were not present at the masses for the patron saint, annual processions, and burials of a fellow member (De Munck 2010a: 13–14). Over the long term, even the collective dinners as such disappeared. From the sixteenth century onward, the meals that were required from a joining member were replaced by financial contributions to the guild treasury (the Antwerp guilds usually had a large burden of debt) (De Munck 2007c: ch. 2.3.3). In some guilds, masters even had to be forced to fill certain director functions. Some were prepared to pay considerable sums to escape when they were elected dean or poor box master (e.g., Deceulaer 2001: 119–20; Huys 1926: 94–95, 100). Significantly, markers of a communal identity gradually faded away from the regulations as well. While until the fifteenth century, every member was supposed to own the guild's costume (De Munck 2010a: 14), not a single reference to any sort of uniform could be found in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ordinances. By mid-seventeenth century, craft guilds had become bureaucratic legal institutions, which were important for the regulation of the labor market and defining the status of master, but in which sociability was waning. Many uses continued to exist until the eighteenth century, and for some groups they probably remained important. But increasing social tensions within the involved professional groups, internal conflicts, and a waning religiosity caused, in the long term, a significant erosion of the sociability (cf. Verleysen 2005).

Mutual Aid, Insurance, and the Fiscalization of Solidarity

This is also shown in the evolution of the poor relief systems. At first glance, the importance of mutual aid and poor relief grew in the Antwerp guilds. The guilds installed poor boxes on a large scale in the course of the sixteenth century. While five poor boxes were founded between 1450 and 1499, 19 were established in the sixteenth century—half of which in the 1550s and (the first half of) the 1580s (all figures are minima). Rather than an increase of poor relief, however, this must again be understood as a shift from informal and face-to-face mechanisms to a formal and bureaucratic system. The nature of the mechanisms related to mutual aid and solidarity changed drastically during the "long sixteenth century." Expenses related to collective activities such as the distribution of beans on Lost Monday (Monday after Epiphany) were converted into financial contributions to a poor box (Huys 1926: 39–40, 75, 55–56). This suggests that there was a trade-off between activities aimed at creating or maintaining "friendship," on the one hand, and a more formal and anonymous type of solidarity, on the other. After all, this evolution was part of a more general one by which duties in kind were converted into financial contributions. The custom of having prospective masters offering wine and wax, for example, was converted

into entrance fees *tout court*, which makes us suspect that collective and devotional activities decreased in importance altogether (De Munck 2007c: ch. 2.1).

In the short term, the establishment of poor boxes can be seen as a way to generate more income (references in De Munck 2009). In a way, erecting a poor box was nothing more than earmarking specific income for poor relief, which was paired, moreover, with the prescription of new income fees for new masters and new annual contributions of masters, so that the guild treasury could ultimately benefit from this. In the long term, however, this evolution links up nicely with the transformation from face-to-face relations to anonymous rules as I have described them in the preceding section. In fact, the establishment of poor boxes can perfectly be seen as a symptom of a declining brotherhood spirit and solidarity, rather than the other way around. While guilds could provide aid to wandering (nonmember) masters and journeymen before (Bos 2006: 177), the construction of poor boxes was in fact coupled with the meticulous description of who could benefit from the box. Henceforth, aid was limited to the masters only. Masters were not only required to contribute, they were in principle also the only ones entitled to relief (in certain circumstances also their widow and children). The idea was that only one who had contributed could later benefit, so that the establishment of poor boxes can also be seen as the origin of an insurance system—and hence: a type of civil society (De Munck 2009; Van Leeuwen 2012).

If in the definition of *civil society* the emphasis lies on the voluntary character of the associations involved, then these poor boxes cannot be seen as a part of a civil society because for masters it was still obligatory to join. What is clear, however, is that the craft guilds largely discontinued to be confraternities. This is corroborated by the finding that the sense of equality among masters declined as well. While individual firms were kept small up to the sixteenth century, the rules on the maximum number of apprentices, journeymen, and equipment per master were gradually relaxed in periods of economic expansion (i.e., the sixteenth and the second half of the eighteenth century). This was paralleled with a fiscalization of solidarity. In the eighteenth century, large masters in some guilds paid more yearly taxes because of the taxes being (in part) relative to their output or the number of their employees (De Munck 2009: 185). Framing this in terms of an evolution toward civil society would be somewhat awkward. Instead, I see the broader process as a transformation in which the craft guilds (in Antwerp) evolved from a confraternity or brotherhood with economic and political power into a judicial and institutional instrument used by different power groups (masters, merchants, and urban authorities) to the business-like achievement of economic, political, social, or cultural goals.

To be sure, this is not to say that solidarity declined on an aggregate level. The bureaucratic character of the poor boxes' mechanisms can just as well be understood as a way of avoiding favoritism and exclusive mechanisms. The larger anonymity may have caused a decrease in the coercive nature of the values and norms with which "belonging to the group" can go together. What this meant for civil society, as a whole, is simply not clear with the current stance of research. Given that, parallel to this evolution, new organizations and organizational forms also came about, such as

friendly associations, cultural clubs, and charity associations, and given that other organizations such as archery guilds and chambers of rhetoric also strongly transformed, it remains unclear how the historical evolution as a whole must be understood.

Apprentices between the Private and the Public Sphere

Moreover, with regard to the craft guilds (and most likely also other organizations), the relationship with the (patriarchal) family domain must also be included in the research. As to guilds, it is usually taken for granted that masters—who can be seen as a sort of representative of the trade—exerted a sort of fatherly authority over their pupils, so that the association is seen as a type of substitute family (e.g., Black 2001: 33, 2003; Prak 2004; Smith 1981). Recent insights, however, suggest that in the early modern period this is also not unchangeable (Brooks 1994). My research indicates that the public domain of the guild and the private domain of the (nuclear) family steadily grew apart. This is apparent, for example, in the changing entrance terms for the masters' sons. Until the fifteenth century, the masters' sons were practically born into the guild. They did not need to register as apprentices and did not have to pay an entrance fee—apart from "the wine" sometimes offered to the guilds' deans (De Munck 2010a: 6–7). In this way, they fundamentally differed from the nonmasters' sons who had to go through a sort of initiation into "the family"—that is, the apprenticeship term under the roof of the master, the master piece, the entrance fees, and all rituals related to that—which shows that the frequently occurring family metaphors were not by chance.

Quite noticeably, however, this changed drastically during the early modern period, especially again from the sixteenth century onward. Gradually the masters' sons had to fulfill requirements that did not differ greatly from the requirements of the nonmasters' sons. By about the middle of the seventeenth century, they often paid about half of what outsiders paid, and by the second half of the eighteenth century, this could go up to three-quarters and more (De Munck 2007c: ch. 2.1). To an important degree, these transformations fit in with a quest of the guilds for money because of their rising debts, but that does not prevent that the declining distinction between the masters' sons and others can be approached from the perspective of a changing relationship between family and organization. By the eighteenth century, masters' sons were often also required to be registered as pupils and to do a master trial, so that they were roughly dealt with more and more as a type of outsider—who thus no longer was "born into" the organization (De Munck 2010a).

Perhaps this shift may be framed in a Habermasian sense, where participating in civil society is based upon a separation of one's private and public role. In addition, it is likely to have been connected to growing "market forces." Recent analysis of apprentice contracts and trials on breach of contract indicates that training on the shop floor was increasingly commodified. The contracts involved were aimed at the transfer of technical knowledge, rather than on the description or confirmation of the patriarchal rights of the master (De Kerf and De Munck 2009). Apprentices were

opposed to doing household tasks because they did not learn from this, and hence were drawing a more defined barrier between the shop floor and the private sphere of the master. The number of apprentices that lived with the master at all decreased in the meantime from about 90 percent in the second half of the seventeenth century to about 60 percent in the second half of the eighteenth century (De Munck 2010a: 11). In other words, while guilds stopped being warrants of a decent upbringing, learning branched out from upbringing.

Preliminary Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research

Now what do we learn from this? In my opinion, it is in any case clear that the use of the term *civil society* is thorny when used to refer to late medieval guilds and brotherhoods. If we indeed define *civil society* as a domain that is relatively separate from the private domain of the family and the public domain of formal political structures, then the late medieval and early modern guilds cannot be framed with it; the more so because guilds too were permeated by religious practices and hence stand in opposition to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century enlightened thinking on which the definition of *civil society* is largely based up to the present day. For a better understanding, a long-term vision is necessary, as well as a greater sensitivity for concepts that were used in the past. Contrary to "public sphere" or "civil society," late medieval craft guilds used terms such as "friendship" and "equality" (Dumolyn 2014; Rosser 2015: ch. 4)—albeit that the importance of these concepts decreased, at least from the sixteenth century on. The sense of brotherhood—with its collective activities, devotional practices, poor relief, and face-to-face mechanisms that regulated access—appears to have been on the way out in the early modern European cities.

   Was there, then, a shift *toward* civil society? From the perspective of the guilds as such, the answer cannot be but cautious. In the long run, guilds surely stopped being "brotherhoods." Mutual aid and assistance within the group shifted from face-to-face mechanisms and an emphasis on "friendship" and "confraternal love" toward a more formal, bureaucratic, and anonymous type of solidarity. Guilds erected poor boxes, which may be seen as insurance schemes in which pecuniary mechanism decided on who could enter or not. Still, it remains difficult to frame this in terms of a shift toward "civil society." The impact of (local) authorities most likely increased even with regard to poor relief. Although the guilds' poor boxes to a certain extent embraced also the insurance idea that arose between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, the required participation and formal-judicial entrance mechanisms remained in power. Nor did entrance to the guilds on the whole become independent of political structures in the Southern Netherlands. Here as well, a certain bureaucratization is the most important transformation to be identified—next to a growing exclusiveness, due to rising entrance fees (De Munck 2007c: ch. 2.3).

Above all, this modest case study raises questions about the precise "content" of civil society. To begin with, the link, supposed by Robert Putnam among others, between "civil society" and "social capital" is to be qualified. Should "social capital"—understood as mutual trust and shared values and norms—be situated in the framework of the old ideal of brotherhood, or rather in the context of more bureaucratic assistance or insurance schemes? Membership and access are obviously defined entirely differently in both cases. Possibly bureaucratic systems were ultimately more inclusive than informal face-to-face relationships such as those in the medieval guilds and confraternities. Next, questions on the relationship between civil society and the state arise. While Putnam connects a "strong society" with a "strong state," could you go, on the basis of the early modern evolution, just as well from the reversed relationship? Dependent on where civil society or social capital are situated precisely, there was a proportional or rather inversely proportional relationship between civil society and the state. Moreover, here the question is posed regarding the causal relationship. Did a "genuine" civil society guarantee a strong state, or is it exactly the other way around, and was a strong state rather an answer to problems (of exclusion?) in the civil society?

In any case, the historical evolution cannot be explained through the one-dimensional relationship between "civil society" and "the state" only. One at least equally important factor is the relationship between familial bonds and associational life. In the long term, the rift between both "systems" grew in our case study. While the child of a member was born into the organization in the fifteenth century, he had to fulfill nearly the same provisions for joining as an outsider did by the eighteenth century. Given that at the same time the custom of the boarding of pupils with a master was eroding, we may deduce from this that the guilds as an organization stopped being "artificial families" in which the master served as a substitute father. The next question, then, is what part market forces played in this. The apprentice contracts appear to have evolved in the direction of an economic contract aimed at the transfer of a well-defined amount of skills and technical knowledge. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries apprentices were no longer socialized in the organization concerned, but rather were present as a sort of client on the shop floor. This seems to suggest that the rise of free-market thinking was not completely foreign to the evolutions sketched out, although, of course, further research is necessary here.

Future research may first of all bring "civil society" into focus as a whole. Were the functions that went lost in the guilds (*qua* brotherhoods) taken over by other organizations? Was there a shift from participating in guilds toward participating in new types of organizations? Whatever the case may be, a large difference with the guilds is the changed relationship of these organizations with the political structure after the D'Allarde and Le Chapelier laws were introduced in de Southern Netherlands in 1795. Not a single one of the organizations that made the transition to the nineteenth century (whether they were journeymen associations or clubs, poor boxes and voluntary societies) were able to directly take part in political decision making. In this sense, the relationship of the civil society with the state had changed for good.

Every bottom-up influence would from now on transpire indirectly, at least until the rise of the workers' movements, unions, and political parties. More than what we call civil society today, these political and neocorporatist structures are in fact the heirs of the early modern guilds. All other organizations are bound to be broached from a Habermasian perspective, examining whether they created a public opinion and perhaps realized a revolutionary climate, as they are thought to have done in the run up to the American and French revolutions (or other, more recent, "revolutions" such as the fall of the Berlin Wall).

So, if we want to use civil society as a concept for such late medieval and early modern organizations as guilds and brotherhoods, we should define it differently—closer to the Aristotelian concept of *Koinonìa politikè*, which from the thirteenth century on was translated in Latin as *societas civilis*. (See the introduction to this special issue.) But, before anything else, it is necessary to link the nature and functions of the organizations to several old-fashioned historiographical debates on long-term transformations. I am thinking in particular about (1) processes of state formation, bureaucratization, and rationalization (cf. M. Weber); (2) the rise of free market forces and ideas (or what C. B. Macpherson has called "possessive market society"; see Macpherson 1962) and proletarianization; and (3) the development of the family sphere as a private and intimate realm. Of course, from these perspectives as well, there is a risk of trapping into the pitfall of Western teleological thinking, but it is nevertheless necessary to approach the role and functions of the confraternities, craft guilds, and voluntary associations from a long-term perspective and to link them to the most fundamental transformations that the European communities have undergone from the Middle Ages on. Linking up with Black's study on political thought, we could move on to examining political and cultural *practices* within the organizations involved and, from there, try to reconstruct early modern ideas and practices from below.

First, the relation of associations with the political arena comes to the foreground. How were deans and other officials elected and what changed as a result of changing political structures and ideas? How did these associations connect the involved individuals to the political establishment? To what extent and how was political participation or the formation of a public opinion possible through associations? Was there a difference between strong and weak guilds, as is suggested by the different political discourses in the Northern and Southern Netherlands? A second set of questions relates to the idea of associations being artificial families. Did associations function as a type of surrogate family, and which consequences did this have for the inclusive or exclusive character of these associations? Did men and women join together or not? Did pressure on familial relations and a large fragmentation indeed cause a need for social organizations (based on solidarity, and thus with mutual aid in mind)? How did the ideas of "commune" and "brotherhood" evolve at all? A third set of questions involves changing market forces and the social and the contemporaries' strategies to tackle the risks related to them. For instance, it could be checked whether groups that were mainly torn by circumstances from their trusted social ties (family, neighborhood, production means, etc.) were the best organized. Did immigrants organize

themselves because they lacked familial networks? Were reading clubs established with the intention of generating cultural capital? Was an exciting associational life correlated to a large geographical mobility and the disappearance of the "neighborhood life"?

In the end, we could ask whether or to what extent a new sense of self and individuality arose in Renaissance or Enlightenment Europe. Without, again, falling into a teleological or Eurocentric trap, the final aim should be to shed light on the relationship between the individual and collectivities and on how this changed in the long run.

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