

Liberty and Fraternities in the English Revolution: The Politics of London Artisans' Protests, 1635–1659

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Summary: A series of artisan revolts in the London corporations between 1635 and 1659 found both radical ideas of individual liberty and the guild ethos of fraternity relevant to their aims. The apparent paradox of democratic demands combined with calls for stricter economic regulation can be explained only by examining the participants' concrete grievances and specific demands. The protesters were neither rising industrial capitalists nor a new wage-earning class, but small masters attempting to restrain competition, the use of cheap labour, and the enlargement of enterprises. Their concerns had something in common with those of the Levellers, but the movements diverged in significant ways.

I

At the beginning of 1653 Nathaniel Burt, a dissident member of the London Saddlers' Company and a former parliamentary soldier, published an open letter "to incite free-born Englishmen to stand and contend with a godly jealousy for their Birth-rights, their Liberties." He addressed his readers as "Fellow-Commoners, who are the Commonwealth, or Native Countrey-men, or brothers English-men," and quoted Psalm 133: "How comely would it be for brethren to live together in peace, in amity."¹ This ideal of brotherhood was not only a biblical one: it was also part of the everyday language of the London corporations, which were commonly described as fellowships or brotherhoods, welcomed new members as "free brothers", and might insist that members who had quarrelled "shalbe lovers and friends and shake hands".² Burt's fraternalism went further than a narrow corporate ideal, however. He went on to discuss the rights and liberties of all Englishmen in terms of collectivities analogous to the craft corporations:

Wherefore do but look back upon the love, care and faithfulness of our Ancestors, who set forth Magna Charta and other good Laws and Charters

¹ Nathaniel Burt, *A New-years Gift for England, and all her Cities, Ports, and Corporations* (London, 1652/1653), p. 12.

² Saddlers' Company Minutes, London Guildhall Library MS 5385, f. 273.

[. . .] and to allay the proud corruption of such who should usurp in Governing left power to the Communalty in their several places of abode and capacities in England, and to every free-born English man therein, whether in Counties, Cities, Corporations, Parishes or Companies to chuse Governours, or Parliament-men, or all manner of officers therein [. . .].³

Burt's collective concept of liberty is a useful starting-point for a study of the politics of radicalized London craftsmen during England's mid-seventeenth-century revolution. The mobilization of large numbers of London artisans in support of the Independents and Levellers in London during the 1640s and 1650s has frequently been noted by historians.⁴ That many of them had in these decades their own protest movement against the rulers of their corporations, a movement which grew more radical in its language as the national revolution developed, has been less widely recognized. Important studies of this phenomenon were carried out by George Unwin and Margaret James earlier this century, and Maurice Dobb made some use of these in his seminal work on the transition from feudalism to capitalism.⁵ Both Unwin and Dobb were concerned to situate these artisan protests within their wider theories of the development of capitalism, while Margaret James's work (which has been surprisingly neglected by later historians) was one of the first to draw attention to social conflicts within English puritanism at the time of the revolution.

None of these historians was entirely successful, however, in explaining and locating the London craftsmen's protests of the revolutionary period, because in most cases these radicalized artisans, who used the language of liberty and natural rights, wanted control of their corporations in order to regulate and restrict individual economic activity more effectively. Since it has long been an axiom of both right- and left-wing historiography that capitalism and economic freedom go together, guild regulation in the early modern period has been categorized as backward-looking, essentially feudal, and inimical to modernity or capitalism.⁶ Some historians who have studied late medieval urban economies closely have also taken the view that guild regulation was

³ Burt, *A New-years Gift*, p. 13.

⁴ Most recently in Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict and London's Overseas Traders, 1550–1653* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 343–345, 395, 452, 549, 693, 702, 709.

⁵ George Unwin, *The Gilds and Companies of London* (3rd edn, London, 1938), pp. 333–343; *idem*, *Industrial Organization in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (2nd edn, London, 1957), pp. 203–210; Margaret James, *Social Problems and Policy during the Puritan Revolution 1640–1660* (London, 1930), pp. 193–223; Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* [hereafter, *Development of Capitalism*] (2nd edn, London, 1963), pp. 134–138.

⁶ Dobb, *Development of Capitalism*, pp. 123–176; John Merrington, "Town and Country in the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism", in Rodney Hilton *et al.*, *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London, 1978), pp. 170–195.

principally a means by which merchant capitalists or other urban elites restricted and taxed the households of urban producers and retailers, whose activities were too varied and volatile to fit easily into this straitjacket.⁷

There are, however, other aspects of the guild tradition which may help us to understand the London craftsmen's protests. Antony Black, in an important work on the guild ethos in medieval western Europe, draws attention to the emphasis on fraternity and friendship, the sense of identity and the social bonding which guilds offered to members who had migrated to the towns from the countryside. He argues that pride in skill and concern for the honour of the craft were important for building self-esteem among the lower classes in response to aristocratic contempt for manual labour. In the constitution of the medieval craft guilds, common consent and the election of officers and representatives were central features, and this ethos of corporate self-government from below could be a challenge to noble domination of society.⁸ Though urban elites might strive to take over and manipulate guild institutions, craft guild members often retained a vision of corporate self-government which led them to struggle for control of their own guilds rather than the abolition of such institutions.⁹

Black argues that two sets of values, the guild ethos and the concept of civil society, "flowed like red and white corpuscles in the bloodstream of medieval and Renaissance political thought."¹⁰ Of the two, the concept of civil society, with its individual liberties guaranteed by fundamental rights, has been frequently observed among English radicals in the seventeenth century.¹¹ Nathaniel Burt provides an example of the other, corporate ideal of liberty related to the guild ethos which was still important to London artisans in the mid-seventeenth century. Yet Burt was also capable of citing Coke's individualist definition of legal liberties as "the best right the Subject hath, for thereby his goods, lands, wife, children, his body, life, honour and estimation are protected from injuries and wrong."¹² Collective and individual concepts of liberty

⁷ Elspeth M. Veale, "Craftsmen in the Economy of London in the Fourteenth Century", in A. E. J. Hollaender and William Kellaway, *Studies in London History presented to Philip Edmund Jones* (London, 1969), pp. 133–151; Heather Swanson, "The Illusion of Economic Structure: Craft Guilds in Late Medieval English Towns", *Past and Present*, CXXI (1988), pp. 29–48.

⁸ Antony Black, *Guilds and Civil Society in European Political Thought from the Twelfth Century to the Present* (London, 1984), pp. 12–75.

⁹ Gene A. Brucker, "The Florentine *Popolo Minuto* and its Political Role, 1340–1450", in Lauro Martines (ed.), *Violence and Civil Disorder in Italian Cities, 1200–1500* (Los Angeles, 1972), pp. 155–183.

¹⁰ Black, *Guilds and Civil Society*, p. 44.

¹¹ C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 107–159.

¹² Nathaniel Burt, *For every individuall Member of the Honourable House of Commons, Concerning the Major, Magistracy, and Officers of Dover* (London, 1649), p. 4.

existed side by side in the seventeenth-century English revolution, and this may help to explain the apparent paradoxes in the outlook of London's artisans at that time.

II

Before examining the artisans' protests, it is necessary briefly to discuss the nature of the London corporations in the seventeenth century and their place in London life. (I have chosen the term "corporations" because the term "guilds" had almost fallen out of use by this time, and "Livery Companies" is not an accurate term, since only fifty of London's seventy or so corporations had a livery section, and two of the companies discussed below, the Watermen and the Clockmakers, were not among them.) Some of these corporations had a continuous history from the first formation of guilds in London in the late twelfth century; others dated from the new wave of incorporations in the late fourteenth century, when the inclusion of outsiders in the fraternity of a craft or trade increased its respectability. Still others were new incorporations of the early Stuart period, when a number of occupational groups split off from older corporations or demanded recognition for new crafts.¹³

In none of these companies – not even the new seventeenth-century incorporations – was membership limited to practitioners of the craft or trade from which the corporation took its name.¹⁴ Entry into company membership by patrimony or purchase, and a liberal interpretation of the London custom which allowed freemen to change their trade, had led to a situation in which some of the companies were more concerned with prestige, property and patronage than with the business after which they were named. This was especially true of the "Twelve Great Companies" from which the Lord Mayor had to be chosen. Members of the Drapers' Company in the 1620s, for example, practised over a hundred trades, and the company claimed in 1650 that nine-tenths of the drapers in London were freemen of other companies.¹⁵ This was not the case in all of the Twelve, however, and it will be seen that sections of the membership of the Goldsmiths', Merchant Taylors' and Clothworkers' Companies practised the craft and wanted more control over it. Among the dozens of lesser corporations, the association with a craft or trade was frequently stronger but never exclusive.¹⁶

¹³ Unwin, *Guilds and Companies of London*, pp. 155–175, 302–328.

¹⁴ Clockmakers' Company Minutes, London Guildhall Library [hereafter LGL], MS 2710/1, pp. 15, 23. In both these cases, new members were specifically forbidden to practise clockmaking.

¹⁵ Rev. A. H. Johnson, *The History of the Worshipful Company of the Drapers of London* (Oxford, 1922), vol. IV, pp. 96–102; Thomas Girtin, *The Triple Crowns: A Narrative History of the Drapers' Company, 1364–1964* (London, 1964), p. 244.

¹⁶ See for example: Roland Champness, *The Worshipful Company of Turners of London* (London, 1966); F. J. Fisher, *A Short History of the Worshipful Company of Horners* (London, 1936).

The institution of a livery – a special class of members who wore the company's distinctive clothing on ceremonial occasions and paid a high entrance fee for the privilege – raised the prestige, the funds and the political power of a corporation. The liverymen of all such companies sat together in Common Hall to elect candidates for Lord Mayor, one of London's two sheriffs, and two of the city's four members of Parliament; in the early years of the civil war Common Hall also laid claim to a wider role.¹⁷

In livery companies, the ordinary members were usually known as the yeomanry, the commonalty, or the generality of the company. This layer included the smaller masters, younger masters who would rise into the livery later in their career, and journeymen who worked for wages. In some companies, the yeomanry had its own meetings under "Wardens of the Yeomanry" chosen by the company rulers.

By the early seventeenth century all the companies were governed from week to week by a Court of Assistants, which consisted of the Master (or in the case of the Weavers, Bailiff), two to four Wardens, and a dozen to two dozen former Masters and Wardens. This body managed the company's property, organized its feasts and ceremonies, and implemented whatever regulatory powers it had over the craft, except in cases where these last were delegated to the Wardens of the Yeomanry. In most corporations, the Court of Assistants also chose the Master and Wardens. It was this self-perpetuating oligarchic system which was the focus for radical constitutional protest within the corporations in the revolutionary decades.

Few historians would dispute the importance of the corporations in London's political life, though surprisingly little work has been done on their part in the politics of the period 1643–1660.¹⁸ But one recent tendency in London historiography has denied that by the mid-seventeenth century the corporations played any significant role in the economic or even the social life of the metropolis. According to this view, the extremely rapid growth of the suburbs (which brought the population of the metropolitan area from about 120,000 in 1550 to 375,000 in 1650) swamped the population of the small city area and provided an unregulated environment for the growth of manufacture in which the corporations were unable or unwilling to enforce controls. Membership of the corporations came to be confined to a small,

¹⁷ Valerie Pearl, *London and the Outbreak of the Puritan Revolution* (Oxford, 1964), pp. 50–53, 120–122; Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, pp. 322–324, 343–345, 362, 692. Brenner appears to believe, wrongly, that all freemen of the companies sat in Common Hall.

¹⁸ Pearl, *London and the Outbreak*, does not go beyond 1643; Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, misleadingly categorizes men on whom he has no information related to overseas trade as "nonmerchant citizens"; Keith Lindley's forthcoming work on London between 1640 and 1653 should dispel the obscurity surrounding this aspect of the revolutionary years.

privileged minority of even the adult male population, while informal networks such as kinship and neighbourhood played more part than company membership in social life.¹⁹ Even Steve Rappaport, who argues that the corporations still held a central place in the sixteenth century, assumes that they declined steeply from 1600.²⁰

There is, however, an alternative view, which argues that the city was still more populous than the outparishes until the 1670s, and that the proportion of male householders who were freemen (i.e. members of one of the corporations) may have been as high as three in four. Many corporations sought to extend their powers of regulation into the suburbs, and were supported in this by the City authorities.²¹ While it is clear that at some point in the seventeenth century the suburbs did outgrow the city, and company regulation did eventually become ineffective, it is not easy to agree on when these developments occurred: these major turning-points in London's social and economic history may have come after the Restoration of 1660 rather than before it.

Whatever the truth may be about the distribution of the population or the effectiveness of regulation, membership of the corporations proved important in the revolutionary period, above all because it provided a focus for collective political consciousness which neither manufacturing capital nor wage labour evidently did, however much they flourished in the city and suburbs. It was around this focus of corporate identity that many London artisans became involved in the English revolution.²²

III

Disputes within the London corporations were not new in the mid-seventeenth century. Certain forms of "protest", such as the presentation of grievances by the yeomanry, or the demand that the company's

¹⁹ A. L. Beier and Roger Finlay (eds), *The Making of the Metropolis: London 1500–1700* (London, 1986), pp. 26–27, 141–167.

²⁰ Steve Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds: Structures of Life in Sixteenth-Century London* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 23–60, 162–214. See also Ian W. Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 100–148.

²¹ Valerie Pearl, "Change and Stability in Seventeenth-Century London", *London Journal*, V (1979), pp. 3–34; William F. Kahl, *The Development of the London Livery Companies* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), pp. 26–28; J. R. Kellett, "The Breakdown of Guild and Corporation Control over the Handicraft and Retail Trades in London", *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, X (1957–1958), pp. 381–394. The main problem with Pearl's calculations is that although she allows for a certain proportion of freemen to have been living in the suburbs, she does not say what this proportion is, nor is it easy to think of how it might be determined. Company membership records for the seventeenth century are unhelpful, as the habit of listing addresses with names did not appear widely until the eighteenth century.

²² For the continuing association of the London livery companies with differing political alignments in a later period, see Gary Stuart de Krey, *A Fractured Society: The Politics of London in the First Age of Party, 1688–1715* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 121–176.

charter or ordinances be read to a general meeting, were almost formal procedures which might be designed to lead to a reassertion of unity rather than to further conflict.²³ The disputes of the period from 1636 to 1659 were, however, exceptional in several ways, apart from their clustering together. Rank and file protests increasingly focused on the election of company rulers, and appealed to radical ideas in support of demands for wider participation. In a few companies there seems to have been a real desire to unseat the existing rulers and replace them. The frequency with which protesters took their case outside the corporation, not only to the Court of Aldermen, but to Parliament and its committees, is also a feature of this period. Normally, corporations aimed to resolve disputes internally, or failing that, within the City of London.

All these features appear in the first major revolt, in a corporation which was neither a craft guild nor a livery company, but which, because of its importance to London as a whole, was governed by overseers directly appointed by the Lord Mayor and Aldermen. This was the Company of Thames Watermen, who plied the river boats that provided London's most important transport network. Company members petitioned both Lords and Commons in 1641 for the overseers to be elected by "the Generality of watermen", claiming that those appointed by the City government were corrupt. The overseers claimed in a counter-petition that the leader of the dissident watermen had "boasted that now during this Parliament time they were free from all government and need not in anything obey the petitioners, their rulers". This may reflect the overseers' fear more than rank and file political theory, but the protesters' persistence won them an Act of Parliament giving them electoral rights in the Company, and as a result the old ruling group was permanently expelled from power.²⁴

There are indications of constitutional conflicts within a number of other companies in the late 1630s and early 1640s. In the Weavers' Company, the rank and file were by 1636 protesting that the rulers had "denied, debarred and excluded the Commonaltye of the said Company from their right in chooseinge of Bailives", and in 1638 they forced the Assistants of the Company to concede that a limited number of the commonalty, equal to the number of officers, assistants and liverymen present, should take part in elections.²⁵ In 1640 the rank and file Girdlers tried, but failed, to get the election of officers by the whole

²³ Dr J. Ward of Wayne State University, Detroit, has convinced me of this point, which would explain the common occurrence of such incidents in various company minute books; e.g. Cutlers' Company Minutes (1602–1670), LGL MS 7151/1, f. 375, which was seen by Margaret James as another instance of conflict: James, *Social Problems and Policy*, p. 220.

²⁴ Christopher O'Riordan, "The Democratic Revolution in the Company of Thames Watermen, 1641–42", *East London Record*, VI (1983), pp. 20, 17–27.

²⁵ Weavers' Ordinance and Memorandum Book, LGL MS 4647, pp. 352, 453.

membership written into their company's new charter.²⁶ In the Pewterers' Company, the livery and yeomanry appeared at the Court of Assistants on 6 September 1641 and argued that by the Company's recent charter there is power given to ye whole Comonaltie to rule and governe ye brothers and members of this Company as well as ye Master Wardens and Assistantes, and for that they are come to desire their priviledge accordingly, and that they may have ye choice of the Master and wardens as well as the Court of Assistants.²⁷

When asked what their concrete grievances were, the rank and file Pewterers said that they would state them to a higher authority, which they apparently did by taking the case to the Court of Aldermen. In June 1642, the Court of Assistants agreed that in future members of the livery should be allowed to participate in the election of the Master and Wardens, and on the election day in August nineteen livery members (out of fifty-three listed in the Company's current collection book) appeared and took part.²⁸

There is also some evidence of a constitutional revolution in the Cutlers' Company at about this time, for in 1639 and again from 1644 onwards the election of the Master took place in the company hall instead of in the Court of Assistants.²⁹ We know only a little more about the incident in the Saddlers' Company in 1646, when members of the livery turned up on election day without invitation and sent two of their members into the Court of Assistants to demand the right to participate, but were refused.³⁰ In the Stationers' Company in 1644 and 1645, a group of booksellers (led by George Thomason the tract collector, among others) demanded electoral rights for the commonalty and tried to replace the Assistants, but they were defeated by an alliance of the Company's rulers and its printer members.³¹

In the Carpenters' Company, where the membership did elect the Master and Wardens, there was an unsuccessful attempt in 1644 – well organized with “printed tickets” distributed among the members – to have elections for the Company's clerk and beadle also. The demand was refused on legal advice which made the distinction between annually elected officers and servants employed by the Company.³² In the

²⁶ W. Dumville Smythe, *An Historical Account of the Worshipful Company of Girdlers, London* (London, 1905), pp. 98–99.

²⁷ Pewterers' Company Minutes (1611–1643), LGL MS 7090/4, f. 339v.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, ff. 338, 339v, 342v, 345v, 346v; Pewterers' Collection Book, LGL MS 7095/1 (1642); Corporation of London Record Office [hereafter CLRO], Repertories Vol. 55, ff. 196, 203v.

²⁹ Cutlers' Company Minutes (1602–1670), LGL MS 7151/1, ff. 316v, 347v, 352, 363.

³⁰ Saddlers' Company Minutes (1605–1654), LGL MS 5383, f. 269v.

³¹ Cyprian Blagden, *The Stationers' Company: A History, 1403–1959* (London, 1960), pp. 130–137.

³² Carpenters' Company Minutes (1635–1656), LGL MS 4329/5: 1643–4, f. 9.

Goldsmiths' Company, dissident members took one of the most radical actions of the movement in 1652, when they held their own alternative election after the Assistants had left the company hall, and persisted in trying to get recognition for their chosen officers. They wrote to the parliamentary committee on petitions that by the exclusion of the commonalty from elections "their privileges are infringed; the common good of the said Company hath thereby bene much neglected; the revenues thereof not managed to the best advantage."³³

The last of these constitutional disputes seems to have been in the Clockmakers' Company in 1656, when dissident members demanded an arrangement similar to the Weavers' in 1638: that they might choose a number of representatives equal to that of the Assistants to join with them in electing the company rulers. This was resisted by the Master and Wardens.³⁴

IV

These disputes – and their clustering especially in the early 1640s – suggest that the parliamentary politics of the civil war period had some resonance among the organized artisans of London, but they do not tell us much about their thinking. More is known about the arguments circulating in the disputes in the Clothworkers', Weavers' and Founders' Companies between 1648 and 1652, when the constitution of England itself underwent radical change, and this material suggests that a significant degree of politicization was taking place among the artisans involved.

The Clothworkers' dispute lasted from January 1648 into early 1651. From the beginning, the demands of the yeomanry of the Company focused on "whether the Eleccion of Master Wardens and other Officers were not in the Master, Wardens and Cominalty accordinge to the letter of the Charter."³⁵ Each side brought in learned legal opinion: counsel for the rulers cited Coke's Case of Corporations, in which the judges had ruled that the limitation of electoral rights was legitimate "for avoiding of popular confusion", even where a charter gave rights to the whole body.³⁶ The yeomanry, undeterred, went on to challenge the validity of the ordinances made by the rulers in 1639. The Assistants were worried enough to try to get the whole membership to subscribe

³³ Sir Walter Sherburne Prideaux, *Memorials of the Goldsmiths' Company*, II (1896), pp. 22, 10–12.

³⁴ Samuel Elliott Atkins and William Henry Overall, *Some Account of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers of the City of London* (London, 1881), pp. 60–64.

³⁵ Clothworkers' Hall, Company Minutes 1639–1649, f. 180. The Clothworkers' Company archives do not seem to be systematically numbered or catalogued, and some of the references in the printed literature could not be found.

³⁶ Sir Edward Coke, *Fourth Part of the Reports* (London, 1738 edn), ff. 77v–78.

individually to these ordinances, and went on to take the case to the Court of Aldermen themselves. By March 1649 the dispute was before a Committee of Parliament, and by December 1650 before the Commonwealth's Council for Trade.³⁷

When a member of the Clothworkers' Court of Assistants took to print in 1650 to defend the *status quo*, he deployed arguments which went beyond the obligatory biblical references and Coke's Case of Corporations, to address what seem to be more radical ideas circulating among the dissident members. He asked whether if ordinances were made by common consent, "would any Journeyman or irregular Freeman put a power into the Wardens hands to punish himself?" To the argument that what concerns all should be decided by all, he replied:

All the people of England, both in lives and fortunes are subject to Acts of Parliament; yet not any woman, not every man, no not the major part of them have voyce in election.³⁸

A new round of conflict over company elections broke out in the Weavers' Company in 1648 also, and reached Parliament by way of petitions and counter-petitions from the protesting artisans, the company rulers, and the Common Council of London, which was worried by the prospect of "disorders" involved in rank and file demonstrations. Though the Rump Parliament appears to have passed an Act in favour of the rank and file of the Company early in 1649, its content is not known and the company rulers may have evaded it for some time.³⁹

The pamphlets and broadsides published in defence of the rank and file of the Weavers' Company show that the radical ideas hinted at by the Clothworkers' Assistant were indeed circulating. The most sophisticated of these weavers' pamphlets argued that "All Legall Jurisdictions must be either primitive or derivative"; that a corrupt custom does not become legal by long usage, because "Customs are only valid when reasonable"; and that "Legal Representatives must be legally chosen by the persons represented, or else they cannot, or at least ought not to be bound by their determinations." As for the company rulers' claims to have precedents on their side, these were described as "but rotten props to support their worm-eaten sovereignty." To Coke's Case of Corporations, it replied:

Surmises of events are no valid arguments [. . .] But it is a known maxime, a surmise of a probable evil should not hinder a certain good. There are many

³⁷ Clothworkers' Hall, Minute Book 1639–1649, ff. 183v, 184v, 186, 187v, 198, 199v, 200v, 211v; Minute Book 1649–1665, f. 9.

³⁸ *The Government of the Fullers, Shearers and Clothworkers of London* [. . .] compiled by a member of the court, circa 1650, pp. 4, 14. This was indeed a flaw in the Levellers' theory of government by consent, which they never confronted.

³⁹ James, *Social Problems and Policy*, pp. 214–220.

examples of general elections, and yet no such evil effects follow as these men would persuade you.⁴⁰

In the Founders' Company, a petition was put forward in February 1652 in the name of the commonalty. It claimed:

Our interests are nothing else but to attend the Providence of God in the use of all lawful means for a seasonable reducement of ourselves to our primitive rights and privileges: and this we know is justifiable both by the law of God, of Nature and of Nations.⁴¹

Though the petitioners asked only to have the Company's charter read to them, the minutes of the meeting at which it was presented show the nature of the incident from the Assistants' point of view:

Under this pretence there was used many unseemly speeches unto the Court claiming an equal power with the Court of Assistants in government and authority without distinction of persons to the great disturbance of the said court and peaceable government of this Company.

The content of the unseemly speeches included some homely insults: one Thomas Browne said "that the things and business of the Company should be ordered by the yeomanry in spite of Mr. Pilchard's nose." But five of the protesters left the meeting threatening to pay no more dues "except the Company would keep better their Charter and let them have those priviledges unto which they were borne, for they had been made slaves long enough by the Company." The Company's rulers were in no doubt about the political motivation of the protesters: they told a parliamentary committee that those who wanted the charter read were concerned only with "what they could catch at to enlarge their levilling myndes and proud imperious wills."⁴²

How far should arguments such as these be taken as evidence of the politicization of rank and file artisans in the London corporations? Some were clearly more sophisticated than others: *The Case of the Commonalty of the Corporation of the Weavers*, for example, is essentially a more political version of another pamphlet, *To the High Court of Parliament: The Humble Representation of the Commonaltie of the Weavers Company*, which lists the same grievances but does not include the passages of general political theory.⁴³ But the five Founders who left the company meeting grumbling about birthrights and slavery

⁴⁰ *The Case of the Commonalty of the Corporation of Weavers of London truly stated* (London, n.d.), pp. 1–3, 5–6.

⁴¹ William Meade Williams Transcripts (Founders' Company), LGL MS 6353, p. 102. The Founders' Company archives, like those of the Girdlers' Company, were unfortunately lost in the Blitz of 1940, but the Williams transcripts on this incident seem very full.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 107–108, 131.

⁴³ *To the High Court of Parliament: The Humble Representation of the Commonaltie of the Weavers Company* (London, n.d.).

were expressing themselves in the language of contemporary radicalism, even if in an unsophisticated way. There seems to be no reason to disbelieve the authors of petitions and pamphlets who claimed to be members of the companies complained of (although in the case of the Clockmakers the rulers said some were not⁴⁴) because as Keith Lindley has pointed out, there is plenty of evidence that “the expression and discussion of political and religious opinions by ordinary men and women were stimulated by the highly-charged atmosphere of London” in the revolutionary decades.⁴⁵

Experience in the parliamentary armies had also politicized some of the participants in these disputes. Nathaniel Burt and the three other Saddlers who joined in his appeal to Parliament said they had fought for the parliamentary cause, and the authors of *The Case of the Commonalty of the Corporation of Weavers* claimed to have been discriminated against by the Company’s rulers because they had served in Parliament’s armies.⁴⁶ The Goldsmiths’ Company members who defended their independent election of officers claimed “their just rights and priviledges, for the which they have cheerfully with the hazard of their lives and fortunes ingaged, for the preservation of the Commonwealth, and are still ready to do the same upon all occasions.”⁴⁷

There was not one pattern of political alignment opposing rulers to rank and file in these companies. The Weavers’ pamphlet accused their rulers of being “Malignants” (royalists), and the Founders claimed theirs were “persons notoriously disaffected to the present government”, that one of them had served the king and the company clerk was “a Mocker and Scoffer of all manner of godliness.”⁴⁸ But the Saddlers’ Company rulers were Presbyterians who had put pressure on their members to take the Covenant, and the dissident Goldsmiths faced a presumably glittering array of prominent supporters of the Commonwealth regime – which may have been one reason why the parliamentary committee on petitions dismissed their case.⁴⁹

The struggle between Presbyterians and Independents for control of London in the years 1646–1648 seems, however, to have had a generally

⁴⁴ Atkins and Overall, *Account of the Clockmakers*, p. 62.

⁴⁵ Keith Lindley, “London and Popular Freedom in the 1640s”, in R. C. Richardson and G. M. Ridden (eds), *Freedom and the English Revolution* (Manchester, 1986), p. 132.

⁴⁶ Burt, *New-yeers Gift*, p. 3; *Case of the Commonalty of the Weavers*, p. 5.

⁴⁷ Prideaux, *Memorials of the Goldsmiths*, II, p. 23.

⁴⁸ *Case of the Commonalty of the Weavers*, p. 5; Williams Transcripts, LGL MS 6353, pp. 127–128.

⁴⁹ Saddlers’ Company Minutes, LGL MS 5383, ff. 257–258; Prideaux, *Memorials of the Goldsmiths*, II, pp. 24–25; the committee set up to hear the protesters’ case included Aldermen Viner, Noel, Wollaston and Allein, and Colonel Barkstead, Lieutenant of the Tower, who can all be usefully followed from the index of Brenner’s *Merchants and Revolution*.

politicizing effect. The readiness of artisans to claim loyalty to the Parliament, and later to the Commonwealth, confirms the view that they were not motivated by simple conservatism. The rank and file ideal of guild fraternity may have been a traditional one, but it seems to have been separable from the traditions of monarchy or oligarchical company rule. After all, no company ruler at any point is found accusing dissenting artisans of royalism or of disloyalty to the Commonwealth, and this is surely a significant absence.

V

Previous historians have discussed the aims of these craftsmen's protests in terms of autonomy for the yeomanry organization within the companies. This is a valid point in some cases, but it is also a complex one, and I do not wish to focus on it here.⁵⁰ There were also important practical purposes for which the rank and file wanted to control their corporations or yeomanry organizations. In almost every case, the protesters wanted more effective regulation of their craft, to be carried out by working craftsmen. The only exception is the Stationers' Company, in which both booksellers and printers were bitterly opposed to the control exercised by the wealthy members through their joint stock monopolies.⁵¹

Far from abandoning their claims to regulate London's manufactures in the early seventeenth century, most companies had sought to expand them. Old companies had acquired new royal charters, and many new ones had been incorporated, with rights to regulate their crafts over an area considerably wider than the City of London and its ancient liberties. Early Stuart charters frequently granted corporations the right to search and regulate within three, four, seven or ten miles of the City.⁵² The Pewterers' and Goldsmiths' Companies were still partially exercising nationwide powers of search which had been granted to them in the fifteenth century, by attending certain fairs outside London and

⁵⁰ Unwin, *Guilds and Companies*, pp. 335–343; *idem*, *Industrial Organization*, pp. 204–210; James, *Social Problems and Policy*, pp. 193–223; Archer, *Pursuit of Stability*, pp. 106–113, 119–120. In some companies (e.g. the Saddlers), members of the livery were chronically reluctant to serve as Wardens of the Yeomanry because of the expense of holding the dinner expected of them, and almost every year the Assistants had difficulty in collecting the fines due in lieu of the dinner or for being allowed not to hold the office. The yeomanry organization was thus not always a political issue.

⁵¹ Blagden, *Stationers' Company*, pp. 130–151.

⁵² The early Stuart charters of a large number of companies were produced for inspection by the nineteenth-century enquiries into local government in London, and may be compared in the *Second Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Municipal Corporations of England and Wales* (London, 1837); *City of London Livery Companies Commission: Report and Appendix* (London, 1884), vols II, III.

bringing cases of defective work found there to their Courts of Assistants.⁵³

The pressure for this extension of corporate regulation may have come from below. Artisans' petitions for more effective searches and "for the reform of abuses in the trade" were a regular occurrence in the early seventeenth century in most of the companies studied here. In normal times the rulers were expected to respond, and they may even have required such pressure from the rank and file as justification for searches and sanctions whose legality was doubtful.⁵⁴ But in those disputes of the 1640s and 1650s which escalated, as we have seen, into prolonged and bitter confrontations, company rulers were accused of culpable negligence or corruption in their refusal to implement the ordinances for the craft, and rank and file artisans demanded that their own elected representatives should participate in searches or even take them over.

In 1636, members of the Girdlers' Company petitioned the Lord Mayor and Aldermen for the right to present candidates to the Court of Assistants from among whom twenty artisans might be chosen,

which are to bee of the yeomandry and to bee attendant to goe in search with the Maister and wardens [. . .] That the said yeomandry and wardens substitute may [. . .] have power of themselves to make searches throughout the kingdome of England and dominion of Whales for false and deceptfull Wares and for abuses which doth or may any way preiudice or concerne the said Arte.⁵⁵

These demands – unlike the electoral reforms they also pressed for – were apparently granted in the Girdlers' new charter of 1640.⁵⁶

A similar "yeomanry", or inspection force of sixteen artisans, was at the centre of the long-running dispute in the Weavers' Company. First established in 1594, this institution had lapsed by 1625, when it was revived in response to a "humble Petition of a great number of the Commonaltie".⁵⁷ The Sixteen seem to have played an active part in prosecuting breaches of the Company's ordinances in the late 1620s and early 1630s, against some opposition from the Assistants, who on one occasion shut them out of the company's parlour; and they repeatedly took proceedings against the Company's rulers to the Court of Alder-

⁵³ Charles Welch, *History of the Worshipful Company of Pewterers of the City of London* (London, 1902), I, 38–49, 82, 84, 90; Prideaux, *Memorials of the Goldsmiths*, I, 126–127 and *passim*.

⁵⁴ Archer, *Pursuit of Stability*, pp. 124–130; Kellett, "Breakdown of Corporation Control", pp. 383–385.

⁵⁵ CLRO Repertories, vol. 50, ff. 92–93.

⁵⁶ Dumville Smythe, *Historical Account of the Girdlers*, pp. 98–99; T. C. Barker, *The Girdlers' Company: A Second History* (London, 1957), pp. 60–61.

⁵⁷ Alfred Plummer, *The London Weavers' Company, 1600–1970* (London, 1972), p. 43; Weavers' Ordinance and Memorandum Book, LGL MS 4647, pp. 294–295.

men.⁵⁸ But by 1633 the Bailiffs and Wardens were refusing to allow weekly searches by the Sixteen or to pay them the journeymen's quarterly fees for their expenses as agreed.⁵⁹ The dispute that began in 1648 still centred on the company rulers' opposition to the powers of the Sixteen, and this went on until 1653 when the Court of Assistants agreed to a new yeomanry of nineteen men.⁶⁰

The dispute which broke out in 1649 in the Merchant Taylors' Company was also concerned with an inspection force of four Wardens Substitute and Sixteen Men, first appointed in 1578. Here again, the yeomanry's demand in 1649 to elect a new "Subcommittee" to carry out the functions of this body was not an abstract point of principle but an attempt to get more effective enforcement of the craft regulations, and they accepted a compromise by which additional informers would be added to the existing body.⁶¹ The conflict in the Clothworkers' Company ended similarly in 1651 with an agreement to increase the regulatory powers of the yeomanry and rank-and-file control over the choice of yeomanry wardens. Margaret James's comment on the Clothworkers' yeomanry, that "at the height of their presumption, they had demanded universal suffrage and declared that the ordinances made by the present governors of the Company were invalid, and, in the end, they appear to have been content with a slight extension of their domestic jurisdiction," misses the point, because the constitutional demands were means to an end, and that end was more power to regulate the craft.⁶²

Since it seems that the desire for collective self-regulation was an important stimulus for the adoption of democratic ideas among these artisans, we must look more closely at the kinds of regulation they most wanted to enforce. Some company regulations were concerned with the quality of the product, an important but complex matter which cannot be explored within the scope of this article. Demands for the enforcement of apprenticeship, however, featured far more prominently in the mid-seventeenth-century rank and file protests.

Although the celebrated judgement in Tolley's Case (1614) had accepted that the custom of London allowed a freeman who had served an apprenticeship to one craft to practise any other within the City, that precedent was reversed when in 1636 the Recorder of London, called upon to certify whether this was indeed the custom of the City,

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 179–181, 188–192, 244–250.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 259–261.

⁶⁰ *To the High Court of Parliament*, p. 4; *Case of the Commonalty of the Corporation of Weavers*, p. 7; James, *Social Problems and Policy*, p. 219: James was therefore mistaken about the novelty of the 1653 yeomanry.

⁶¹ Charles Mathew Clode, *Memorials of the Guild of Merchant Taylors*, II (London, 1875), pp. 24–28; James, *Social Problems and Policy*, pp. 205–207.

⁶² James, *Social Problems and Policy*, pp. 204, 200–205.

declared “that there was no such Custom for one who useth a manual Trade [. . .] but that there was such a custom concerning Trades of buying and selling”.⁶³

As well as the basic requirement that all practitioners of a craft should have served at least seven years’ apprenticeship to it, every company had rules limiting the number of apprentices a master could keep at one time, and forbade “turning over” apprentices from one master to another without permission. These regulations were central to the artisans’ demands for more effective controls in the seventeenth century. The fining of masters for keeping excess apprentices was placed top of the list of powers which the Clothworkers’ yeomanry acquired in 1651, for example.⁶⁴

Most companies allowed ordinary members only one or two apprentices at a time, livery members one more, and Assistants another; the Weavers were exceptionally generous in allowing native-born yeomanry members three, liverymen four and Assistants five.⁶⁵ Turnovers were controversial when a newly-bound apprentice was transferred immediately to a new master (making the binding in effect fictitious), or when masters were covertly trading in the unpaid but almost fully skilled labour of apprentices near the end of their terms.

While there are innumerable examples, in all the companies’ minute books examined, of artisans who resented or resisted company searches, when acting collectively they never called for the abolition of regulation, but rather for its implementation under their own control and according to democratically decided and properly publicized rules.

VI

Foremost among the obstacles which artisans believed stood in the way of effective regulation were the government of their companies by non-artisans, and the influx of migrants to the city and suburbs.

The complaint that the government of corporations responsible for regulating manufactures had fallen into the hands of men with no knowledge or experience of the relevant craft was a common one, and far from new. In the early seventeenth century, artisan factions in the Cutlers’, Skinners’ and Joiners’ Companies had tried unsuccessfully to have office-holding restricted to practising artisans, or to ensure that the artisan body controlled elections.⁶⁶ In the mid-century protest

⁶³ Sir George Croke, *Reports* (trans. and ed. Sir Harebottle Grimston, London, 1669), pp. 516–517; Sir Henry Calthrop, *Reports of Special Cases Touching Several Customs and Liberties of the City of London* (2nd edn, London, 1655), pp. 48–65.

⁶⁴ Clothworkers’ Company Minutes (1649–1665), f. 18.

⁶⁵ Plummer, *London Weavers’ Company*, p. 17.

⁶⁶ Cutlers’ Company Minutes, LGL MS 7151/1, f. 31; John James Lambert, *Records of the Skinners of London: Edward I to James I* (London, 1933), pp. 341–342; H. L. Phillips, *Annals of the Worshipful Company of Joiners of the City of London* (London, 1915), pp. 16–17.

movement, this becomes one of the most prominent themes. The Girdlers, for example, complained in 1636:

that for the most part the Maister and Wardens are gentlemen of other trades and therefore not experienced in the aforesaid Arte and are many times out of town to whom accesse cannot be had for reforming of abuses when and as need shall require.⁶⁷

The Merchant Taylors' yeomanry "perceaved an intention in the Company to exclude the Taylors members of this Society from all office and place of audit"; the artisan Clothworkers offered the Council of trade "Reasons why the Government of the Company of Clothworkers should be by Artizan Clothworkers and not by Drapers, Mercers, Cheesemongers, Smiths, etc."; and the dissident Founders complained that their rulers were "not capable of judging of any thing relating to the Trade [. . .] being men of other callings of which three third parts of the Assistants doe consist."⁶⁸

In the Goldsmiths' Company, a proposal was put forward in 1650 "that none be admitted into the Livery but such as are goldsmiths, for it is alleged that the government of the company may otherwise fall into the hands of such as are altogether ignorant of the Mystery."⁶⁹ This was extraordinarily bold and somewhat unrealistic, since the Company's considerable financial and political power depended on rich members who were not working craftsmen.

Complaints against "foreigners and strangers" – which meant non-Londoners and non-English respectively – were also common and longstanding. Xenophobia was often a feature of these complaints, as for example when the Weavers declared in 1635 that many alleged refugees from religious persecution looked more like soldiers who had deserted their colours; but the Weavers were also telling the truth when they assured the pastors of the refugee churches in the 1620s that "we doe not only complaine this against Strangers, but also against our owne Nation where we finde the like abuses."⁷⁰

The settlement of French and Dutch weavers in the eastern suburbs of London became a leading cause of conflict in the Weavers' Company partly because the company's rulers pursued a policy of openness towards foreigners and strangers, while the commonalty called for their exclusion. French and Dutch weavers were admitted to the Company (for greatly enhanced entrance fees), to the Court of Assistants and to the highest offices, which brought strong protests from the rank and

⁶⁷ CLRO Repertories, vol. 50, f. 93.

⁶⁸ Clode, *Memorials of the Merchant Taylors*, II, p. 26; James, *Social Problems and Policy*, p. 205; Thomas Girtin, *The Golden Ram: A Narrative History of the Clothworkers' Company 1528–1958* (London, 1958), p. 116; Williams Transcripts, LGL MS 6353, p. 119.

⁶⁹ Prideaux, *Memorials of the Goldsmiths*, I, p. 272.

⁷⁰ Weavers' Ordinance and Memorandum Book, LGL MS 4647, pp. 299, 304.

file. In 1636, their petition for electoral rights claimed that the Assistants, in collusion with the livery,

have without the privy Consent or approbacion of the said Commonaltye Chosen French and Dutchmen as well as the English to be Baillyves to rule over them some of them never experienced in the said Art of Weavinge which Baillyves with the Consent of the Wardens and Assistants have lycenced many hundreds of Alyens to weave in London and the Subburbs thereof.⁷¹

The Weavers' dispute of 1648 was essentially a continuation of the same quarrel, but this time the dissidents publicly accused the rulers, in print and before Parliament, of greed and corruption, of admitting aliens for purely financial motives and of wasting or misappropriating the extra income they drew from them. These accusations, unlike previous complaints, were not entered in the Company's register of grievances, and the livery agreed to a levy of £10 each to help defray the costs of defending Company's government in Parliament.⁷²

Protesting Clockmakers in 1656 also complained that their rulers were unduly partial to foreigners, taking apprentices and turning them over to aliens, and choosing a Frenchman as an Assistant "who was no wayes capable to judge of our Art". When the dissidents showed the company rulers a list of the foreigners and strangers they objected to, "they asked if wee would have them tear out the bowells of ye Companie, so deare are these foreigners and strangers to them."⁷³

The main substance of most artisans' charges against aliens or strangers was that they had not (or could not prove they had) served seven-year apprenticeships as required of the English; and that they employed cheap, unregulated labour. This leads us to the wider question of the underlying changes in London manufacturing during the seventeenth century which were affecting many small masters in weaving and certain other trades.

Artisan tailors complained in 1649, for example, that strangers were keeping excessive numbers of apprentices, and concealing additional workers by claiming that they were domestic servants.⁷⁴ Working goldsmiths in 1653 protested that too many strangers were "working

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 340; Plummer, *London Weavers' Company*, pp. 55–57; for the origins of these conflicts in the sixteenth century, see Archer, *Pursuit of Stability*, p. 134.

⁷² *To the High Court of Parliament*, pp. 2–7; *Case of the Commonalty of the Weavers*, pp. 3–5; *To the Right Honourable the betruisted Commons of England Assembled in Parliament. The Humble Petition of the Commonalty of Weavers of London: being many thousands* (London, n.d.).

⁷³ Atkins and Overall, *Account of the Clockmakers*, pp. 61, 62. Although Atkins and Overall suggest (pp. 4–5) that the number of non-Englishmen in the Company can be calculated by observation of "foreign" names, one of the dissidents' leaders had the un-English surname Fromanteel (the spelling engraved on his products in the Guildhall museum). The English-born may have been acceptable whatever their parents' origin.

⁷⁴ Clode, *Memorials of the Merchant Taylors*, II, pp. 24–25.

privately” – probably a reference to chamber-workers who did not keep their own shop or work for one shopkeeper.⁷⁵ But the most persistent complaints about the employment practices of migrants to the metropolis came from the Weavers, whose industry had seen important changes since the late sixteenth century.

According to these allegations, French and Dutch weavers taught their craft to fourteen- to eighteen-year-old boys who did not live in their masters' households, and went on to employ them as journeymen for wages after two or three years. The London weavers saw this flouting of the apprenticeship system as a threat to the traditional household order as well as unfair competition. They told the elders of the Dutch and French refugee churches:

By (this) example of your younglings our apprentices murmer and grudge at their long service, and often runne away, and would be Jorneymen before their tymes;

and on another occasion they feared the result would be that “all Masters shall have small command over their Apprentices, but shall be dyspised and neglected.”⁷⁶ The protesters admitted that they employed young people themselves: indeed they “sett on worke more poore children, then any Three Companies in London”; but it appears that these were, like the artisans' wives and daughters, ancillary workers rather than weavers.⁷⁷

Sometimes it was suggested that there was a division of labour between the immigrant weavers, who made broad silk stuffs, and the Londoners, who wove ribbons and laces; but in 1648 the protesters alleged that some of them had been driven out of their former trade of broad weaving by the strangers, especially during the civil wars.⁷⁸ The strangers' introduction of the “engine loom”, which wove many narrow pieces at once, was said to have deprived the children and old men of the weavers' households of the work they had done on “single looms”. There were also repeated complaints about the way in which the French and Dutch weavers sold their products, through men and women brokers who went round the mercers' and haberdashers' shops, and even the houses of the nobility and gentry, offering goods for sale on behalf of several weavers at a time.

All these complaints were repeated many times from the 1620s onwards in documents claiming to represent the views of the commonalty of the Weavers' Company.⁷⁹ They paint a convincing picture of changes

⁷⁵ Prideaux, *Memorials of the Goldsmiths*, II, p. 46.

⁷⁶ Weavers' Ordinance and Memorandum Book, LGL MS 4647, pp. 298, 311.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 159; Plummer, *London Weavers' Company*, pp. 60–62.

⁷⁸ *Case of the Commonalty of the Weavers*, pp. 4–5.

⁷⁹ Weavers' Ordinance and Memorandum Book, LGL MS 4647, pp. 157–159, 294–312, 340–360.

in the structure of the typical enterprise, from the traditional artisan household with master, apprentices, journeymen and ancillary women's and children's labour, to a system employing cheap outdoor labour, importing labour-saving technology, and developing new relationships between production and exchange.

Nevertheless, these may not have been the changes which were actually threatening the rank and file weavers' independent artisan status most. A petition of "poor men" of the Company from the mid-1620s demands that no one be allowed to set up as a silk weaver except on the basis of being paid by the merchant "owner" of the raw material for the "workmanship" of weaving, "either by the pound or by the dozen, as both parties can agree."⁸⁰ This suggests a well-developed system of outwork, reducing the artisan to dependence on merchant capital in an almost wage-like relationship – and one can only wonder what worse terms or insecurity the "poor men" wanted to avoid by supporting this system. The impoverishment and loss of status which the artisan weavers complained of so bitterly may have stemmed from this dependence on the silk merchants as much as from immigrant competition.

The artisan weavers frequently anticipated many later anti-immigrant protests by criticizing the strangers for their poverty and overcrowded conditions – living in "chambers and odd corners, being Inmates with dyvers families in one house".⁸¹ But they also attacked some of the Dutch and French newcomers "who are rich and beareth much swaye in the Companie", and complained that some of them had no experience of the art of weaving. They held these men responsible for the licensing of hundreds of poor immigrant weavers.⁸² The weavers' xenophobia does not entirely obscure the possibility that there were divisions between rich merchants and poor outworkers among the immigrants also.

Whether the problems of London craftsmen in the mid-seventeenth century stemmed more generally from the dominance of merchant capitalists in their company organizations is hard to say. Both the protests against company rulers who were not skilled in the craft, and the relations between native and foreign weavers and their rulers, suggest that this may have been an underlying problem. It undoubtedly continued to be an issue in the Clothworkers' Company, where the interest of merchant members in evading the statutes which required a certain proportion of cloth exports to be finished had long been a source of conflict and was still a major grievance in the artisans' petition of 1650. But recent research into the Clothworkers' Company has shown

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 161; Plummer, *London Weavers' Company*, pp. 17–18.

⁸¹ *Weavers' Ordinance and Memorandum Book*, LGL MS 4647, p. 301.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 217, 352.

that in the late sixteenth century only a minority of the assistants can be shown to have been involved in overseas trade. Ian Archer's conclusion is that the ruling bodies of such companies were "pluriform in character", including retailers and artisans who operated on a larger scale and had capital to invest in a range of diverse activities including trade.⁸³ This situation does not seem to have changed much by the 1640s and 1650s. Not all the company rulers were actually dealers and exporters of the related craft products, however. Some may even have been pursuing social status, prestige and political clout rather than investment opportunities, and the fact that membership of London corporations was not confined to followers of the occupation named in their title encouraged them to do so.

VII

The multi-occupational structure of the corporations was something that many artisans wanted to change, seeing it as one of the main obstacles in the way of more effective regulation, and during this period they seem to have won a section of both the corporations' and the City's leadership to their cause.

The Merchant Taylors' yeomanry alleged in 1649 that many tailors were joining other companies because the fees were lower,⁸⁴ and individuals might hope to evade the system of regulation by belonging to a company that claimed no power over their craft. This pattern made it difficult to enforce the regulations: when the Goldsmiths' Company tried to stop wire-drawers among their members from taking extra apprentices in 1649, these members replied "that persons using the same trade, but free of other Companies, take as many apprentices as they please."⁸⁵

To those who wanted more effective regulation, the answer was simple: all those who practised the same craft ought to belong to one company, which would then enforce the regulations and effectively enjoy a collective monopoly. The Girdlers in 1633, the Clothworkers in 1641 and the Founders in 1652 claimed that reducing all the practitioners of their craft to one corporation would prevent abuses and protect the public from substandard goods, as did a score of companies who made application to the Common Council of London for special legislation in the 1650s.⁸⁶ The fact that the Common Council responded

⁸³ Girtin, *Golden Ram*, p. 114; G. D. Ramsay, "Industrial Discontent in Early Elizabethan London: Clothworkers and Merchants Adventurers in Conflict", *London Journal*, 1 (1975), pp. 227–239; Archer, *Pursuit of Stability*, pp. 103–106.

⁸⁴ Clode, *Memorials of the Merchant Taylors*, II, p. 25.

⁸⁵ Prideaux, *Memorials of the Goldsmiths*, II, p. 29.

⁸⁶ CLRO Repertories, vol. 50, f. 92; Common Council Journal, CLRO Jor. 41, ff. 173–187. Clothworkers' Company Minutes (1639–1649), f. 51; Williams Transcripts, LGL MS 6353, p. 120.

by passing the acts they requested raises interesting questions about the significance of economic regulation during the Interregnum in general.

Since many companies made difficulties about transferring members even when they wanted to move, forcing a mass realignment of corporation members was out of the question. A series of acts of Common Council between 1651 and 1659, however, recognized the desirability of such a realignment, and recommended a device (for which precedent was found in the reign of James I) by which it was intended that all artisans of a particular craft residing in the City

may in time be reduced and brought to be free of the said Company of [. . .] whereby the wardens of the said Company for the time being may have a more free and absolute view search and oversight of things pertaining to the said art [. . .] and the due workmanship thereof and the correction and punishment of all freemen of this City using the said art.

The device involved binding apprentices to officers of the appropriate company and turning them over immediately to the masters who would train them; after completing their apprenticeship they would be presented for their freedom by the fictitious master and become members of his company.⁸⁷

The companies benefiting from these acts (which also confirmed their power of search and regulation within the City and liberties) were a mixture of old and new, from Blacksmiths and Weavers to Framework Knitters and Spectacle Makers. More companies (including the Founders, Clockmakers and Carpenters) were petitioning for similar acts when a protest from the Twelve Great Companies stopped any more being passed (except one more in 1659 for the Clothworkers' Company, which was itself one of the Twelve).⁸⁸ The prestigious non-specialist companies had no intention of losing members to the craft corporations, or giving up their role as a safe haven for evasion of the regulatory system, and they therefore stopped the attempt to tighten up that system.

The Common Council's move towards greater regulation was far from being a backlash against the policies of central government at the time. G. D. Ramsay has argued, in an influential article, that far from taking up the cause of *laissez-faire* which modern historians assume is identical with the interests of capital, the Commonwealth and Protectorate regimes supported corporate regulation, even approving the setting up of new corporations such as the Framework Knitters' and Needlemakers' Companies and a new company of Norfolk weavers. He sees this as a policy of "conservative reconstruction" following *de facto* relaxation of industrial regulation during the early Stuart period.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ CLRO Jor. 41, ff. 59, 173–187.

⁸⁸ CLRO City Extracts I (7), Jor. 41, f. 210.

⁸⁹ G. D. Ramsay, "Industrial *Laissez-Faire* [sic] and the Policy of Cromwell", in Ivan Roots (ed.), *Cromwell: A Profile* (London, 1973), pp. 136–159.

As far as the early Stuarts are concerned, Ramsay ignores the fact that while neglecting parliamentary regulation of industry, they pursued a policy of industrial regulation through the granting of royal charters which confirmed and reinforced the powers of corporations. They also granted new charters of incorporation to groups who had not previously had corporate status, who broke away from older London companies, or who practised relatively new crafts. In his classic study of the London guilds, Unwin listed twenty-seven new incorporations between 1600 and 1640.⁹⁰

In this early Stuart system of “privatized” economic control, however, economic regulation was up for grabs. The proliferation of courtier monopolists, new craft groups attaching themselves to patrons, and overlapping patents of all kinds, created additional strains and tensions.⁹¹ Although Unwin saw the early Stuart incorporations as an alliance between the crown and the craftsman, his account gives more reason to believe that the crown’s alliance was with the “speculating capitalists” who tended to dominate these companies.⁹² London artisans in the 1640s and 1650s certainly do not seem to have regarded the last two reigns as a period in which their influence increased. From the beginning of the Long Parliament in 1640, the early Stuart monopolies were under attack; but the traditional corporate regulation of manufactures does not seem to have been thought of in the same way as patents to courtiers and speculators, or trading monopolies such as the Merchant Adventurers’.⁹³

There is, however, some evidence that London artisans expected the Commonwealth regime to reform corporations, rather than abolish them. They addressed their aspirations for collective self-government and effective regulation not only to the pro-Commonwealth regime which ran London in the years 1649–1653,⁹⁴ but to the Rump Parliament, the Council of Trade at Whitehall, and committees of the Parliament, especially the Committee for Corporations.

The Committee for Corporations is known only from a few parliamentary references and the local history of town corporations in whose affairs it intervened. It seems to have been in existence from mid-1649, and its main interventions in corporate towns occurred during the Protectorate, in 1655–1656. But in September 1652 it was given a remit to consider “how Corporations may be settled conformably with the

⁹⁰ Unwin, *Gilds and Companies of London*, p. 302.

⁹¹ In the Pewterers’ Company, relations with the tin patentees caused disputes and possibly factions; the members would have preferred free trade in their raw materials, whatever their view on industrial regulation. Pewterers’ Company Minutes (1611–1643), LGL MS 7090/4, ff. 259–260, 286v–289, 290v, etc.

⁹² Unwin, *Industrial Organization*, pp. 142–145.

⁹³ Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, pp. 347, 381–387, 608–613.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 494–557.

government of a Commonwealth, and how their respective charters may be altered and renewed to be held from and under the authority of a Commonwealth".⁹⁵ Both the dissenting Founders and Nathaniel Burt with his fellow-saddlers were encouraged by this to present their demands for electoral rights in their companies to the Committee.⁹⁶ Perhaps as a result of these hearings, in November 1652 the Committee asked to see the charters of all the London corporations. This must have caused some consternation among company rulers, for the Goldsmiths resolved to send only a copy for fear the Committee might retain the original.⁹⁷ In the end, the Committee for Corporations seems not to have interfered in any general way with the running of the London companies, perhaps because the new Protectorate regime was less ambitious to overhaul longstanding institutions than the Commonwealth.⁹⁸

A petition from the artisan Clothworkers to the Council for Trade in 1650 suggests that some artisans' hopes had been raised by the revolution of 1649. They complained that the way in which their Company's affairs were managed

tended to the enriching only of a few [...] but to the impoverishing of thousands which as our present worthy Lord General Cromwell lately intimated is manifest contrary to the nature of a Commonwealth.⁹⁹

Recent works by Brian Manning and Robert Brenner have stressed the radicalism of the moderate republicans who controlled the Commonwealth, a regime which has often suffered in the eyes of modern historians from unfavourable comparison with the more democratic and egalitarian Levellers and Diggers. That the Commonwealth should have been seen by some of the lower middling sort as setting out to narrow the gulf between rich and poor fits in with what Manning and Brenner tell us about the regime's constructive attitudes to poor relief and improvement. If, as both these historians argue, the regime did include members of social groups below the greater gentry and privileged merchants who had not had access to power before, then it is not so surprising that some of the lower middling sort may have thought that their own turn had come.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ B. L. K. Henderson, "The Commonwealth Charters", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, VI (1912), pp. 132, 129–162.

⁹⁶ Williams Transcripts, LGL MS 6353, pp. 118–123; Burt, *New-years Gift*, pp. 1–10.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8; Prideaux, *Memorials of the Goldsmiths*, II, p. 20.

⁹⁸ The chairman of the Committee for Corporations at the time of this enquiry into London corporation charters, Daniel Blagrove, appears as an opponent of the Protectorate oligarchy in his home town of Reading a few years later. Henderson, "Commonwealth Charters", pp. 136–138.

⁹⁹ Girtin, *Golden Ram*, p. 115.

¹⁰⁰ Brian Manning, *1649: The Crisis of the English Revolution* (London, 1992), pp. 64–102; Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, pp. 494–557. There are, of course, historians who would deny that any of these ideas were radical in any meaningful sense, since they

The policies of the Commonwealth and Protectorate towards corporations should not be seen in terms of a simple opposition between “progressive” economic freedom and “conservative” regulation. With regard to manufactures, it was a question less of whether there should be regulation or not than in whose hands responsibility for regulation should lie. While Ramsay has claimed that the regulatory bias of the Protectorate reflects “the fundamental opportunism of a conservative mind”, events in London suggest that some aspects of regulation might more reasonably be seen as an aspect of the radicalism of the period.¹⁰¹

VIII

In placing the London artisans' protests of the revolutionary period within the long-term history of class formation and the development of capitalism in England, the interpretations of previous historians present problems. Both Unwin and Dobb saw the movement as a manifestation of the rise of industrial capitalism. According to Unwin:

The rising power of the capitalist manufacturer is to be observed as the moving force which gives an almost involuntary direction to the action of the rank and file small masters.¹⁰²

Dobb similarly attributed the conflicts in the seventeenth-century corporations to “the rising predominance of a class of merchant-employers from the ranks of the craftsmen themselves among the Yeomanry of the large companies”. He admitted that “there is little evidence that bears directly upon it”, but concluded that “the fact that this was the case seems to be the only explanation of events that were occurring at this time in the Livery Companies”.¹⁰³ Both were consequently at a loss to explain why the yeomanry in so many cases demanded more regulation rather than less, seeing this as a loss of motivation, or capitulation to the merchants, by the rising industrial capitalists in the yeomanry.¹⁰⁴

Margaret James, on the other hand, saw the rank-and-file protests as representing “the discontent of the journeymen” and “the demands of a growing class of wage-earners, who had little or no share in the

did not meet the “functional” criteria for radicalism suggested by J. C. Davis, “Radicalism in a Traditional Society: The Evaluation of Radical Thought in the English Commonwealth 1649–1660”, *History of Political Thought*, III (1982), pp. 192–213. I believe this is to misrepresent Davis's article, which does not invalidate all enquiry into historical connections or continuities, but simply ignores this dimension of the subject.

¹⁰¹ Ramsay, “*Industrial Laisser-Faire*”, p. 141.

¹⁰² Unwin, *Industrial Organization*, p. 203.

¹⁰³ Dobb, *Development of Capitalism*, p. 134.

¹⁰⁴ Unwin, *Industrial Organization*, pp. 199–200; Dobb, *Development of Capitalism*, pp. 137–138.

government of their crafts".¹⁰⁵ These two interpretations are clearly incompatible, but what they share is a desire to categorize the opposition within the London corporations in terms of the two most important classes in modern society, industrial capitalists and wage-earners.

To question the appropriateness of placing mid-seventeenth-century artisans in either of these categories is not to deny that capitalism was developing in seventeenth-century England or that this was an important element in the fears and aspirations of those same artisans. But what these conflicts reflect most directly is the small master's defence of artisan independence against both merchant capital, which through putting-out or control of the supply of raw materials threatened this independence in a well-established pattern, and emerging industrial capital, which offered dangerous competition by hiring cheap labour and dispensing with the egalitarian regulations of the old guild system.

The fact that almost without exception the protesting artisans demanded the implementation of regulations which enforced the seven-year apprenticeship, restricted the employment of young people to ancillary tasks, and limited the number of apprentices a master could keep at any one time, flies in the face of any attempt to see them as representing – consciously or unconsciously – the rise of industrial capital. Enterprising, competitive manufacturers who enlarged their operations with extra labour or labour-saving technology were not welcome among the rank and file of the London corporations in the mid-seventeenth century, as the example of the Weavers so plainly shows.

T. H. Marshall long ago suggested that Unwin was wrong about this, and that new-style industrial capitalists were typically maverick, individualist "rebels against the system" rather than belonging to an established layer within it.¹⁰⁶ This is confirmed by the example of Benjamin Stone, a sword manufacturer who met opposition from his company, the Cutlers, at every step of his career, from his first employment of extra apprentices to his blade-mill at Hounslow in the 1630s: he was a truculent and unco-operative member throughout (being fined more than once for coming to meetings dressed in the notoriously casual "falling bands", boots and spurs) and there is no evidence that he was involved in rank-and-file activity or enjoyed the support of a layer of his fellow-members.¹⁰⁷ No one like Stone is to be found among the rank-and-file opposition in any of the corporations which experienced protest movements in this period and whose records survive. One cannot help feeling that if they existed, they would stick out like a sore

¹⁰⁵ James, *Social Problems and Policy*, p. 223.

¹⁰⁶ T. H. Marshall, "Capitalism and the Decline of the English Guilds", *Cambridge Historical Journal*, III (1929), pp. 23–33.

¹⁰⁷ Cutlers' Company Minutes, LGL MS 7151/1, ff. 154, 163v, 167v, 268, 272v, 288v, 289v, 291v, etc.

thumb, and that to suppose they must have been there all the same is a very dubious hypothesis.

There is insufficient evidence, on the other hand, to support the contention that the opposition within the corporations represented the interests of journeymen or a new class of wage-earners. Margaret James seems to have been misled in this by the example of the printers in the Stationers' Company, who complained that they were "made perpetuall bondsmen to serve some few rich all their lives".¹⁰⁸ The printers were a special case because of the Stationers' Company monopoly and government press controls which strictly limited the number of master printers; after these were removed by Act of Parliament in 1649 and the number of masters increased, the printers declined to support the booksellers' constitutional protest in the Company in 1644–1645. By 1651 they were agitating to set up their own separate corporation rather than reform the Stationers'.¹⁰⁹

Apart from this, there are no references to the specific problems of journeymen in petitions or other documents from any of the companies in which there was trouble, and no evidence of any strikes or wage demands during this period. This is at first sight surprising, since journeymen were certainly present in the yeomanry or commonalty of all the companies; yet this body invariably presents itself as one, undifferentiated interest group, and there are no visible signs of tension between masters and journeymen such as had existed in the sixteenth century.¹¹⁰

It would be useful to know the proportion of journeymen to masters in the mid-seventeenth century, but little direct evidence survives. The Weavers' Company allowed a maximum of two journeymen to ordinary members, native born or foreign, though liverymen could employ unlimited numbers.¹¹¹ Most companies required time-served apprentices to work as journeymen for a minimum of two or three years before setting up as masters, but found this regulation hard to enforce. Companies readily sanctioned new freemen setting up their own businesses after levying a fine, sometimes even lending them money out of company funds to give them a start.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ James, *Social Problems and Policy*, pp. 211–212 ("Printers' Company" on p. 211 is clearly an error).

¹⁰⁹ Blagden, *Stationers' Company*, pp. 130–152.

¹¹⁰ Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds*, pp. 219–224, 238–250; Archer, *Pursuit of Stability*, p. 102. An extensive search of the Court of Aldermen's Repertories for the period 1640–1660, mainly but not exclusively concentrating on the companies which are known to have experienced constitutional conflicts, has produced no examples of journeymen's collective cases other than those mentioned in this article.

¹¹¹ Plummer, *London Weavers' Company*, p. 17.

¹¹² Minute books of the Carpenters', Cutlers', Clothworkers', Founders', Pewterers' and Saddlers' Companies, which I have consulted for various periods between 1600 and 1660,

Apprentices who ran away or failed to complete their terms were a constant problem, so it is unlikely that there was an over-supply of qualified journeymen, especially at the ratio of seven years' apprenticeship to two or three years' journey-work. Indeed, in 1654 a Pewterer was allowed an extra apprentice because "Journeymen are not to be had upon any reasonable terms".¹¹³ The spread of outwork, blurring the distinction between journeymen and householders, further complicates the issue. In the Clockmakers' Company an ordinance of 1647 dealt with "Journy-men and Chamberworkers" who stole or pawned work they had been given to mend, and then took work from other masters.¹¹⁴ In the Goldsmiths' Company, the term "workman" meant a craftsman who supplied a shopkeeper, but the latter was clearly not his employer.¹¹⁵ It cannot be said, therefore, that the gulf between masters and journeymen was widening in most of the companies under consideration here; if anything, it seems to have been narrowing. The new entrepreneurs (for example, in weaving) hired cheap, unapprenticed labour rather than qualified journeymen as we have seen.

The one case in which more is known about the journeymen members is that of the Silkthrowers' Company, which did not (so far as we know) experience constitutional conflicts or small masters' protests. But in 1640 and again in 1659, the journeymen Silkthrowers protested against the masters' employment of foreigners and of "maids and children".¹¹⁶ In 1640 the Lord Mayor and Aldermen accepted the counter-allegation of the masters – "whoe are well knowne unto us and esteemed honest men, and of credit" – that the protesters were only a few troublemakers dismissed for bad behaviour:

These Journeymen are idle and negligent and will not follow their labour and when their Masters have hast[e] of work and most need of them they (to do their Masters a displeasure if they will not lend them what money they please to demand) will rise from their work and absent themselves and spend their time and meanes idley and vainely and draw others of their fellows to do the like.¹¹⁷

In 1659, however, a similar protest by the Silkthrowers' journeymen met with a remarkably different response from the aldermen. This time they recommended:

contain examples far too numerous to list. See also Champness, *Worshipful Company of Turners*, pp. 87, 130, 134–135.

¹¹³ Pewterers' Company Minutes, LGL MS 7090/5, f. 78.

¹¹⁴ Clockmakers' Company Minutes, LGL MS 2710/1, p. 39.

¹¹⁵ Prideaux, *Memorials of the Goldsmiths*, I, pp. 203, 229–232.

¹¹⁶ The work of the wives and daughters of incorporated artisans was never seen as a problem in any of these incidents, and the cheap labour of "boys" was condemned at least as frequently as that of "maids". This is not to say that women enjoyed equality within the crafts, but their labour was not at this time a point of conflict.

¹¹⁷ CLRO Repertories, vol. 54, f. 310v.

that the said Maisters be not strictly tyed to imploy none besides the said Journymen freemen, in regard of their small number and the greatnes of the Trade; But we thinke fitt that alwaies the freemen be preferred soe as never to be out of worke, demeaneing themselves honestly and diligently therein; And further, that being soe few, and likely of better experience then others, it be recomended by this honourable Court to the said Maisters to consider the said Journymen freemen as to some allowance and increase of Hire and wages above the others, which they seemed unto us well satisfied to doe.

The Court of Aldermen not only accepted these recommendations but added an additional restriction, that no person above the age of fourteen should be employed without formal apprenticeship.¹¹⁸ This remarkably generous labour policy may perhaps be accounted for by the radical upsurge of the last months of the Commonwealth; but it also suggests that journeymen in some trades were far from being ground down as many historians have supposed.

The example of the Silkthrowers' journeymen stands almost alone: the only other case of a journeymen's petition in this period which I have been able to find in the City records is that of the Dyers' journeymen, who complained of masters "especially of the silk trade" employing excessive apprentices in March 1658; but the outcome is not recorded.¹¹⁹ It may be that the changes in the silk industry discussed above had also brought about the beginnings of the journeymen weavers' organization which probably existed by the time of the weavers' riots of 1675, but it has left no traces.¹²⁰ Unwin may have been largely right to date the emergence of journeymen's organizations in London to the period after the Restoration,¹²¹ and this might then suggest that the development of the new class alignments which previous historians have been anxious to see reflected in the events of the Interregnum was delayed, rather than hastened, by the flourishing of artisan protest in the 1640s and 1650s.

IX

The ways in which protesting corporation members described themselves had more in common with the Levellers' proclaimed ideal of the free-born Englishman – the self-sufficient householder with a wife, children and living-in servants of his own – than with any modern concepts of capital or wage labour.¹²² "Artisans", "manual clothworkers", "working goldsmiths", "cutting tailors", "artists" (a term applied to needlemakers

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 66, f. 331v.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, f. 64v.

¹²⁰ Tim Harris, *London Crowds in the Reign of Charles II: Propaganda and Politics from the Restoration until the Exclusion Crisis*, pp. 189–216.

¹²¹ Unwin, *Industrial Organization*, pp. 214–227.

¹²² Macpherson, *Possessive Individualism*, pp. 137–142.

as well as clockmakers¹²³), “artisans having both wife and children”, and “housekeepers” are all among their chosen terms. The Weavers as usual described most graphically the deskilling and loss of independence which they feared:

By which practises of theirs [the foreigners’] many good housekeepers, which have served many yeares for their Trades, and kept dyvers Servants of our owne Nation at worke, are utterly undone, and nowe constrained to give over house keepinge, and themselves glad to become Servants to the Strangers, others become Porters, Water bearers Labourers and such like servile meanes, being not able to lyve of their trade.¹²⁴

The fear of becoming “porters and water bearers” was a longstanding formula, being found in artisans’ petitions from the fifteenth century onwards.¹²⁵ The expression “to give over housekeeping” is not so hackneyed, however, and draws attention to the importance of the household economy among the artisan class. It may also be that, as Ian Archer suggests, the members of this artisan class were all the more assertive when they had grievances because “the achievement of householder status [. . .] may have made them less inclined to be pushed around.”¹²⁶

The Levellers made a number of direct appeals to this artisan ideal of the independent householder. They claimed to speak on behalf of the poor artisan oppressed by merchant capital, in *The mournful Cryes of many thousand poor Tradesmen* where it was alleged:

You of the City that buy our Work must have your Tables furnished, and your Cups overflow; and therefore will give us little or nothing for our Work, even what you please, because you know we must set our Families on work, or else we famish.¹²⁷

A number of leading Levellers were themselves members of London corporations: John Lilburne of the Clothworkers’ Company, William Walwyn of the Weavers’, Thomas Prince of the Tallow Chandlers’, Maximilian Petty and Edward Sexby of the Grocers’, and the Chidley family of the Haberdashers’.¹²⁸

¹²³ CLRO Repertories, vol. 65, f. 68; Atkins and Overall, *Account of the Clockmakers*, p. 64.

¹²⁴ Weavers’ Ordinance and Memorandum Book, LGL MS 4647, p. 298.

¹²⁵ Barker, *Girdlers’ Company*, pp. 27–28.

¹²⁶ Archer, *Pursuit of Stability*, p. 16.

¹²⁷ William Haller and Godfrey Davies, *The Leveller Tracts 1647–1653* (New York, 1944), p. 127.

¹²⁸ Gerald Aylmer, “Gentlemen Levellers?”, *Past and Present*, XLIX (1970), pp. 120–125; Clothworkers’ Company Minutes (1639–1649), f. 36; Jack R. McMichael and Barbara Taft (eds), *The Writings of William Walwyn* (Athens, Georgia, 1989), p. 2; Karl Bottigheimer, *English Money and Irish Land: The “Adventurers” in the Cromwellian Settlement of Ireland* (Oxford, 1971), p. 189; Ian Gentles, “London Levellers in the English Revolution: the Chidleys and Their Circle”, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, XXIX (1978), pp. 281–309.

The demand that elections in the London corporations should be reformed, “restoring the Comunalty thereof to their just Rights”, found its way into the influential Leveller petition of 11 September 1648.¹²⁹ In the same month an anonymous tract which may have come from a writer close to the Levellers called for the election of masters, wardens and liverymen in the London companies; but in calling for the abolition of the electoral rights of Common Hall it raised a demand which proved unpopular with all but a very few members of the corporations.¹³⁰

An anti-Leveller pamphlet accused the group of wanting to abolish all corporations, and of having a “great and unparallel’d Designe against the twelve famous Companies of London”; but in their reply the Leveller leaders ignored this specific charge, concentrating instead on refuting the accusations of atheism and communism which it had also made.¹³¹

Despite such suggestive pieces of evidence, not one of the well-known Levellers can yet be shown to have played a part in any protest within the corporations. Lilburne expressed support for his fellow Clothworkers’ demands; but he also believed free trade was a “hereditary right” of all freeborn Englishmen, and reprinted in one of his own works the view of Thomas Johnson that since England as a whole was “a Corporation or society of men, under one form of civill government”, all “particulars, patent-societies”, or “private societies” were against the fundamental laws.¹³² This was an opinion which could lend colour to the anonymous company man’s charge.

Lilburne also discussed a grievance of poor members of the Weavers’ Company which, curiously, is not mentioned outside Leveller literature. This was that Company members were forbidden to sell their own work by sending their wives round the inns, and that some of the women who did so had been attacked and even killed.¹³³ Indeed, since the organized Weavers’ rank and file were hostile to the “broker” system (in which women were employed) and accepted the putting-out relationship with the silk merchants, the Levellers seem to be speaking here for a group whose problems did not find a voice within the Company. It may well be that the Levellers were in some respects more sympathetic to the disenfranchised suburban manufacturers than to the organized artisans.

¹²⁹ Haller and Davies, *Leveller Tracts*, p. 153.

¹³⁰ *Londons Ancient Priviledges Unvaild* (London, 1648); Prideaux, *Memorials of the Goldsmiths*, I, pp. 285–287; II, p. 5.

¹³¹ *England’s Discoverer, or the Levellers’ Creed* (London, 1649), p. 1; *The Craftsmen’s Craft, or the Wiles of the Discoverers* (London, 1649).

¹³² John Lilburne, *An Impeachment of High Treason against Oliver Cromwell and his Son in Law Henry Ireton* (London, 1649), p. 38; *idem*, *The Charters of London: or the Second Part of Londons Liberty in Chains Discovered* (London, 1646), pp. 1, 37–40.

¹³³ Lilburne, *Impeachment of High Treason*, p. 38; Haller and Davies, *Leveller Tracts*, p. 127.

The Levellers also differed from the organized craftsmen in providing an active role for women, as petitioners, demonstrators and defenders of civil liberties.¹³⁴ Women were economically active in all the crafts as wives, widows, shopkeepers and mistresses of households, but they had no political presence, and appear in the artisans' protests as suffering dependants whose fate hung on the work and status of their husbands, fathers and masters.

The artisans' protest movement within the companies seems to have contributed to the general atmosphere of awareness of radical political ideas in which the London Levellers briefly flourished. Nevertheless, their concerns were tangential to those of the Levellers, and perhaps at heart incompatible with them. The Levellers adhered much more firmly to the idea of civil society, with its individual liberties and fundamental rights, than to the corporate guild ethos which so many of the craftsmen seem to have identified with freedom.

Yet the fraternal idea was never lost to English radicalism, and Unwin was surely not wrong to see these small masters' protests as contributing in the long run to the emergence of trade unionism. It was, of course, the late E. P. Thompson who did most to make historians aware of the artisan tradition in British radicalism; and one point at which Thompson perceived the transition from guild to trade union happening was the foundation of a local wool combers' society in Essex in the 1690s, which was set up "that we may show the love we have to our trade, and to one another for trade sake".¹³⁵ The idea of liberty has attracted a great deal more attention than that of fraternity in the English Revolution of the seventeenth century, but both were present, and contributed to the radical tradition of the "Good Old Cause".

¹³⁴ Patricia Higgins, "The Reactions of Women, With Special Reference to Women Petitioners", in Brian Manning (ed.), *Politics, Religion and the English Civil War* (London, 1973), pp. 179–222.

¹³⁵ E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (Harmondsworth, 1993), p. 63.