

Work Cultures in the Modern Age

di Gregory Hanlon

Andrea Caracausi, *Dentro la bottega: Culture del lavoro in una città d'età moderna*, Marsilio Editore, Venezia, 2008

It's a pity that the interest in economic history has waned in the last two decades. There has been a renewal of interest in state formation, in the activities of tribunals, and in measuring the social scope of political power and influence. All of these are in fact good points of departure to revisit the important work done on early modern Italian economic history in the 1960s and 1970s. Historians like Carlo Cipolla¹, Richard Rapp² and Domenico Sella³ taught us how important Italian manufactures were in Europe at least until the onset of the Thirty Years War. They offered more compelling reasons for Italian de-industrialisation after 1620 than anything that came before. That interpretation sometimes argued that the corporations governing city manufactures were too rigid and backward-looking to recover from the dismal conjuncture of the 17th century, and that their focus on high-end products to offset the decline proved misguided in hindsight. These studies did not ignore the guild archives and they drew a great deal of information from the statutes. But a new generation of historians has returned to study the guilds in Britain, France, Germany and Italy itself, and their closer examination of those records affords us new insight into the supposed 'rigidities' of the system.⁴

¹ C.M. Cipolla, *The Decline of Italy: the Case of a Fully Matured Economy*, in *Economic History Review*, 5 (1952), pp. 178-187

² R.T. Rapp *Industry and Economic Decline in Seventeenth-century Venice*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass, 1976

³ D. Sella *Crisis and Continuity: the Economy of Spanish Lombardy in the 17th century*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass, 1979

⁴ An example of more recent work on guilds is the substantial collaborative volume under the direction of A. Guenzi, P. Massa & A. Moioli, *Guilds, Markets and Work Regulations in Italy, 16th-19th centuries*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 1998, which echoes some of the work done by Carlo Poni in the 1980s. The most recent work on Italy is reviewed in an excellent article by L. Mocarrelli, *Guilds Reappraised: Italy in*

Andrea Caracausi has selected the woolworker's guild (L'Università dell'Arte della Lana) in Padua as a convenient point to push our knowledge of guild activities farther, but at the same time his book serves as a unique and compelling insight into the world of urban work in general. There are echoes here of Renata Ago's pathbreaking *Economia Barocca*, that incorporates the concern for honour and fair dealing into the realm of urban artisans.⁵ This is a healthy modernization of economic history in a way that gives the workers more influence or goal-directed action. The woolworkers guild was the institutional reference for a wide variety of specific activities around the production of woollen cloths and woollen knitwear. It is not the least attractive feature of this book that Caracausi describes the dozens of processes required in the production of a bolt of woollen fabric or a piece of knitwear, and indicates the kinds of buildings and physical plant that each process required. This descriptive process that constitutes the first of four chapters comprising the book is the most painstaking I have ever encountered, and is worth the price of the book on its own. The author patiently describes the differences between *panni alti* and *panni bassi*, evokes the growing number of textiles of mixed fibres, and the advantage of knitwear which made ready-to-wear garments over bolts of cloth that required the skilled cutting and fitting of tailors. Padua, like other Italian cities, produced articles for a broad range of consumers, including cheap textiles.

The second part of the book takes us into the physical space of the shops themselves, after a brief presentation on the many different ways merchants and manufacturers articulated the numerous processes into a system to produce saleable products. Most of these processes were accomplished by decentralizing production into small or medium-size spaces, but fulling, purging and stretching of cloths required larger buildings and water-powered machinery. Spinning and knitting might take place in the home or in small shops, or it might activate whole convents or orphanages. Some merchants preferred to centralize

the Early Modern Period, in *International Review of Social History*, 53 (2008) Supplement, pp. 159-178

⁵ R. Ago, *Economia barocca: Mercato e istituzioni nella Roma del Seicento*, Donzelli, Roma, 1998

as many processes as possible into a single building containing specialized rooms, while other merchants preferred to outsource everything, merely providing raw materials and collecting the finished product. The guiding norm was flexibility, not rigidity, so that they could make the best use of the limited availability of good wool and avoid overhead expenses. The guild in fact had few constraining norms, for its main purpose was to collect the taxes levied on finished products. The variety of organizations is mirrored in the diversity of the workers themselves, who could be men, women or children, native Paduans or foreigners, shop masters, journeymen or apprentices. Merchants animated the system, but their calling required a great deal of mobility, such that the shops were managed by factors and agents. Master craftsmen might be merchants on their own, or merely salaried personnel directing the work of a team. Rather than oppose “merchants” and “workers”, Caracausi reveals the extraordinary diversity and degree of management control of the latter, and so refers instead to “work providers” and “workers”. These latter committed their labour for a short period or a long one, on the basis of piecework or payment over time (which also varied), individual work or work for a family. Women, who were never absent from this world, became increasingly visible after 1600, and typically became foremen-figures tending to children who entered the working world as young as 7 or 8 years old. One should not imagine a fixed supply of workers in each activity waiting for masters to provide them with materials. Workers increased their skills and transmitted techniques by moving from city to city, especially as young adults. Merchants did not always have the upper hand. One example of this was the custom of paying workers in advance in order to attach them better, just as Ago’s Roman merchants sold goods on credit to keep up an ongoing relation with consumers in a period of weak demand. Compensation to workers could take the form of cash, or lodging, food, raw materials or finished products, and every combination thereof. Workers judged the merchants according to how they were treated, and if they were unhappy, they would move somewhere else or select another. While there were affinities among members of a similar trade, workers also had good reasons to create bonds of confidence with their supervisors. They needed time to build up reputations as being good workers, which would realistically pro-

vide them with steady employment. “*Dentro la bottega erano presenti non solo i lavoratori e il loro lavoro, ma attori sociali intenzionati ad affermare le rispettive e differenti identità*” (p. 86). This was a system based on bilateral trust. Lest one accuse the author of viewing his problem through rose-tinted glasses, he has made the most of the rich judicial holdings of the *Arte della Lana*. But here too he reminds us that tribunals had numerous functions, not all of which were punitive. The tribunal’s aim was not so much to deliver an impartial judgement on civil disputes as to arrive at a consensus and an agreement for action between the litigants. Workers and their work-givers made frequent recourse to the tribunal, frequently without written proofs, but witnesses were important. The weakest adversaries in its proceedings were newcomers who had few people to vouch for them or who did not know the statutes.

Workers frequently had recourse to the tribunal to complain of unjust or excessive punishment of the children placed in these shops. Their presence increases in the decades after 1600, particularly as spinners and knitters, where adult men were rare. The presence of women and children tends to be under-represented in guild records but they spill out of cases before the tribunal. The salaries of children were not uniform, but they were always much lower than adults, for they were not as productive or skilled in their work, and the function of the women minding them was often a managerial one, to teach them the techniques and especially how to focus on their tasks. Knitting was almost universally practised by newcomers and vulnerable people such as orphans. Adults used knitting as a way to teach discipline to children, to obey orders at an easy, repetitive and boring task with materials given out by a merchant or supervisor. Their defective application resulted in physical punishment whose principle parents accepted but whose excessive severity they challenged. The difficulty for the merchant or master was to keep the children coming into the shop to work. Children were usually put to work outside their families, which allowed their parents, the mothers included, to do other work outside the home. As they matured, the boys especially moved on to other activities, for there were few women who were dyers, shearers, finishers etc. These pages on the massive presence of children drawn into the world of paid employment are extremely sugges-

tive in the light of our recent discovery of the widespread practice of newborn infanticide by married parents. Peasants preferred boys over girls by a wide margin, but parents who feared for the future of their offspring in textile neighbourhoods had good reason to sacrifice the boys and keep the more docile girls.

In the third section of the book, Caracausi studies the deliberations of guild meetings over 150 years, where some 2,000 civil procedures and just under a thousand sentences for criminal procedures produced by the tribunal, demonstrate how lax the guild really was. The officers were merchants to be sure, but a wide assortment of tradesmen belonged to it and had recourse to its tribunal. The guild meetings were dominated by the defence of their monopoly, their access to good wool and the restriction of imports. The guild's interest in controlling work and its quality was very minimal. The civil procedures were numerous against workers who stole raw materials. There was an increasing worry over the availability of foreign cloth, especially the cheaper varieties sold by mercers. Merchants and shepherds did what they could to impose sharp deals on each other by the chicanery of the first and the evasiveness of the second. Concern for the quality of the final product was not something that interested guild officers, for merchants did what they wanted with these cloths. Even the *bollatura* of the piece had little to do with its quality, for it was attached before the delicate finishing operations. The defects of the work were not always visible, for the quality derived from the use of the product.

This flexibility of the guild system in Padua, Caracausi holds to be typical of many cities in north-central Italy before 1650. This rich text avoids however the problem of the secular decline of Italian city-based manufactures, and here the author is content with noting the disappearance of the *panni bassi* in the half-century after 1600. Let's concede the argument to Andrea Caracausi that the guilds allowed a great latitude to its members to produce and sell what they wanted. This only begs the question of why the peninsula's manufacturing cities declined over the longer term. In the age of Italy's second great process of de-industrialization, it would be important to know the true causes of the first.