
2

The Organization of Work in Preindustrial Times

All work has to be organized in some way. Even work performed by a solitary individual cannot be done in a random fashion; it is necessary to decide what needs to be done, the procedures to be adopted, the equipment to be used, the time to be allocated, and the sequence of activities to be followed. When several individuals are involved in a productive activity, things get a lot more complicated. Now it also is necessary to determine who does what, who will make decisions and exert authority over others, how individual tasks will be coordinated with the tasks performed by others, and how the workers will be motivated to do what they are supposed to do. Sometimes, all this can be done in an ad hoc manner as the need arises, but it is far more efficient to have structures and procedures already in place so it is not necessary to expend an undue amount of time and effort to get organized every time something has to get done.

The organization of work encompasses a great variety of structures and procedures. Some are based on traditional arrangements—“We’ve always done it this way”—that may or may not be effective. Others are the result of a great deal of prior thought and analysis. Most organizational modes fall somewhere in between, representing mixtures of longstanding precedents and new ways of doing things. In this chapter, we will concern ourselves with means of organizing work based on established social roles and statuses. In Chapter 4, we will bring the story into the modern era when we look into organizational structures and procedures deliberately designed according to principles that are supposedly “rational.” In both cases, organizational forms will be put into a larger social context. While organizations have a large influence on the kinds of societies we live in, the converse is also true. In every society, the organization of work reflects existing social structures and processes, with all that entails—both good and bad.

Traditional Societies and the Organization of Work

Hunters and gatherers do not need elaborate means of organizing their activities. When they go out to get some food, it is already quite clear what

needs to be done and who is going to do it. The range of tasks is small, and there is not much day-to-day variation in these tasks. One of the key organizational issues, how tasks are to be allocated, is resolved by reliance on established social categories, which are limited in number. There isn't much specialization and division of labor, and work roles are allocated on the basis of what sociologists call *ascribed statuses*. An ascribed status is a position in society that is based on characteristics an individual cannot change, most notably age and sex, and very often race and ethnicity.

Unlike an *achieved status*, which is derived from ability, effort, training, or some combination of all these, an ascribed status is largely immutable. Barring a sex-change operation, there isn't anything we can do about being either male or female, and like it or not, aging is an inevitable process that carries us from infancy to old age. It must be said, however, that biology need not be destiny, as there is substantial variation from one society to another in regard to what is properly "men's work" and "women's work." In similar fashion, when viewed cross-culturally, age categories are quite flexible; the roles, responsibilities, rights, and privileges associated with a given chronological age vary a great deal from one place or historical period to another. In one society, a 14-year-old may be considered an adult who is expected to take on the tasks and responsibilities appropriate to adulthood, while in other societies, one may not step into a fully adult role until the mid-20s or even later. At the other end of the life span, in some societies, an elderly person may be considered a vital source of information regarding the best way to get things done, while in others, he or she may be deemed obsolete, irrelevant, and worn out.

Later chapters will explore how race, ethnicity, and gender continue to influence the jobs held and the work done in today's world. In regard to work roles in the oldest economic activity, gathering and hunting, ascribed attributes have had a substantial, and in some cases overwhelming, influence. As we saw in Chapter 1, gathering is socially defined as the work of women and children, while hunting is something that men do. A similar pattern can be seen in traditional farm work, where gender and age have been the primary influences on the allocation of work responsibilities, although there is quite a bit more variation in gender-based work roles. Tasks requiring considerable physical strength may be a male's domain, but there are many examples of women performing the most arduous farm chores. Farming is also a more complex activity than gathering and hunting in terms of the kinds of tasks that need to be performed, and many of these tasks can be, and have been, performed by women. As one tabulation of the allocation of work roles in a large number of different societies indicates, the cultivation of crops was largely a male activity in only 28% of the horticultural societies and 59% of the agrarian societies. In all the rest, cultivation was primarily the work of women or was equally shared by both women and men.¹ Specific farm tasks often reflect a sex-based division of labor, but the apportionment of these tasks may vary from society to society. In traditional China, picking cotton, tea, and mulberry leaves was considered "women's work," while rice

cultivation was supposed to be exclusively a man's domain. By contrast, transplanting and harvesting rice in Japan and Southeast Asia was mostly done by women.²

Two other key sources of ascribed status are race and ethnicity. Race is often defined as a biological category manifested by certain physical attributes such as skin color, hair texture, and shape of facial features. In reality, race is at least as much a social category as a biological one. Although it is often assumed that people can be neatly sorted into specific races, in fact, racial identity is quite elusive. The movement of people through time and space has resulted in a great deal of genetic mixing, rendering the notion of "pure" races a fiction that has had many unfortunate consequences throughout history. That race is a social construct becomes evident when individuals are identified as belonging to a particular race even though their biological heritage may be mixed. On the societal level, official statistics such as census figures have sorted people into racial categories, but these categories have not remained constant over time—another indication of the arbitrariness of racial labels.³ On the individual level, ideas about racial identities often overemphasize a single genetic component, as with the "one-drop rule," whereby a metaphorical one drop of "African" blood is deemed a sufficient basis for identifying a person as "black" or "African American."

Race is sometimes treated as interchangeable with ethnicity, notably with the use of "Hispanic" as a racial category in government statistics. But as a sociological category, ethnicity is not based on supposed biological differences; it centers on shared language, culture, and history. Yet as with race, the division of humanity into distinct ethnic groups is a hopeless endeavor. Unless a population remains confined to a small, isolated area for a long period of time, their ethnicity will reflect a wide variety of influences from other places. As with race, ethnic "purity" is rarely found among humans, who have always moved around, borrowed cultural elements from other people, intermarried with them, and in general formed ethnic identities that are amalgamations of indigenous and borrowed elements, all of which have evolved over time.

Although race and ethnicity have much less substance than is often assumed, they are anything but irrelevant to the apportioning of an individual's place in society. As the sociologist W. I. Thomas noted many years ago, if people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.⁴ If racial and ethnic identities are assumed to reflect actual differences, and if some groups and individuals find it advantageous to make these assumptions, race and ethnicity can be transcendent realities. And as we shall see, these imputed differences can affect many aspects of work organization.

The Family as a Basis of Work Organization

Along with gender, age, race, and ethnicity, the family one is born into is a significant ascribed status—after all, we can't choose our mother, father,

siblings, and other blood relatives. Modern societies are inconsistent when it comes to delineating the connection between family-based status and an individual's economic opportunities. The inheritance of a family business is considered to be entirely proper, but in an organizational setting, it is seen as illegitimate to use family connections as a basis for hiring and promotions, a practice known as nepotism. Whether viewed as a legitimate influence or not, family ties often have been incorporated into the organization of work, and they continue to be important today.

Family membership was especially evident in preindustrial workplaces. Most of the work was done in family settings, so much so that there was scarcely any distinction between "family" and "work unit." One description of the French rural economy in the 17th and 18th centuries can be applied to many other times and places:

The family and the enterprise coincide: the head of the family is at the same time the head of the enterprise. Indeed, he is the one because he is the other . . . he lives his professional and his family life as an indivisible entity. The members of his family are his fellow workers.⁵

Although this description of the linkage between work and family implies that the head of the operation was a man—presumably the husband and father—women, be they wives or daughters, also made essential contributions to family enterprises. On the farm, they were engaged in a variety of tasks, ranging from garden cultivation to the brewing of beer. In craft enterprises, women could often be found working alongside their husbands, and there are numerous instances of widows taking over the business upon the death of their husbands.

From the agricultural revolution until fairly recent times, the primary work activity for most people was farming. But rural work entailed considerably more than sowing, weeding, reaping, gleaning, and other agricultural tasks. Farm families had to supply many of the goods and services they needed, everything from making clothing and preserving food to treating illnesses and providing much of their own entertainment. Today's families, both rural and urban, generally do not exhibit this level of self-sufficiency, but a considerable amount of work continues to be done as a family-based activity. Necessities and luxuries are for the most part purchased rather than made at home, but the home continues to be the center of many work activities, even though they may not involve direct payments to those doing the work. In particular, the raising of children and the constant performance of household chores can surely be counted as work, even though it is not done for direct remuneration. Work of this sort is still disproportionately borne by the women members of a family. Their tasks have changed over time, but the total time spent on housework has not diminished as much as might be expected.⁶

A reliance on family ties and the ascriptive statuses inherent in them resolves a lot of organizational issues within an enterprise. For one, the assignment of particular tasks often parallels one's place in the family. This

has been most evident in preindustrial societies, where fathers, mothers, children, and other members of the family all have certain kinds of tasks assigned to them. Family structure also provides a ready-made hierarchy that reflects age and gender, with fathers and older males usually exercising authority over women and younger members of the family. The fairness of this arrangement can certainly be questioned, but it does provide a basis for allocating and coordinating the work performed by individual family members, as well as a way of justifying who has authority over whom.

Families also offer something that is vital to the functioning of effective organizations: trust. To be sure, one may learn through bitter experience that not all family members are trustworthy, but because of their duration and intensity, family ties offer a better basis for relationships of trust than social connections that are more distant and ephemeral. This is especially true in societies where it can be presumed that extra-familial organizations such as the government, military, and even organized religious bodies are primarily out for themselves and that their relationships with individuals are likely to be exploitative. Under these circumstances, membership in a family unit constitutes a bulwark of protection and mutual support in a world full of dangers, uncertainties, and real and potential enemies.

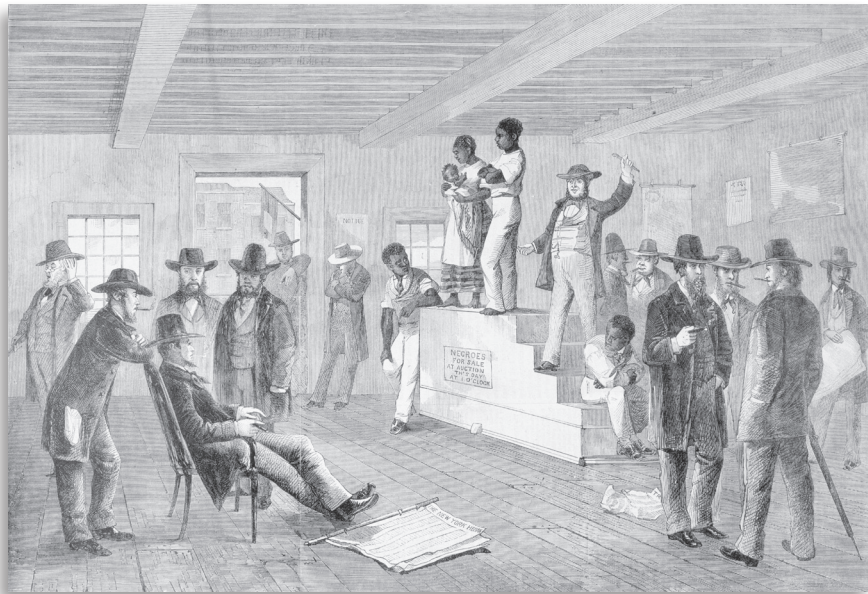
Trust, of course, is a two-way street. In return for the physical and emotional benefits of family membership, individuals are usually expected to pull their own weight, and a great deal of pressure can be applied to those who don't. This aids considerably in addressing another issue confronting all organizations: motivation. An outside employer can punish or fire an employee for dishonesty or poor performance, but the loss of the respect of family members (and in extreme cases, expulsion from the family) is likely to be a far more severe sanction. More positively, the honor and respect that come from supporting one's family can be a powerful stimulus for hard work, as exemplified by the millions of immigrants from poor countries who send substantial portions of their incomes to their families back home.⁷

Slavery

Ascriptive statuses derived from family membership may result in the exploitation of some members of a family to the benefit of other members. But work roles based on other forms of ascription can be far more exploitative. The worst of these has used ascriptive statuses as the basis of involuntary servitude or, to put it more bluntly, slavery. In some slaveholding societies, the basis of ascription was ethnicity and often followed the conquest of one group of people by another—in fact, the word *slave* is directly derived from “Slav,” the predominant ethnicity of Eastern Europe. A less common basis for the enslavement of a people was race, as was practiced in the American South prior to the Civil War. At the same time, racial and ethnic distinctions, both real and perceived, were reinforced by legal, social, cultural, and political power that maintained the boundary between the free and the enslaved.

Slavery has been widely practiced throughout much of human history; sad to say, it exists even today.⁸ Slavery was a major source of labor in ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian societies, although to a somewhat lesser extent in the latter. Slavery was tightly woven into the fabric of society throughout antiquity. Much of the work done in Greece and Rome was performed by slaves, and it is no exaggeration to say that slave labor was the foundation of a large portion of economic life in the ancient world. Under these circumstances, ideas about individual dignity and freedom were not universally applicable. In Athenian “democracy,” for example, a sharp division between the rights of slaves and citizens was taken for granted.

Photo 2.1 Slave auction in the antebellum South



SOURCE: ©Leonard de Selva/CORBIS.

The number of slaves and their ratio to free citizens in ancient Athens and Greece as a whole have been matters of considerable debate among scholars. The number of slaves in Athens by the end of the 4th century B.C. has been estimated as ranging from 20,000 to 400,000, with a modal figure of about 100,000. This last number implies a ratio of one slave to every three free citizens, about the same proportion found in the American South on the eve of the Civil War—although slaveholding was probably more widely diffused through Greek society.⁹

Slave labor continued to be used in early medieval Europe, as there was nothing in contemporary Christian doctrine to discourage it, even when the slave and his or her owner were both Christians. At the same time, however, the spread of slavery was inhibited by the belief that Christians should not wage war against fellow Christians in order to enslave them. Even so, some substantial enterprises made abundant use of slave labor. For example, in the 13th century, Frederick II, emperor of the so-called Holy Roman Empire, had several textile workshops in Italy and Sicily in which the work was performed by female slaves.¹⁰ Slavery continued to exist in urban settings, and some of the great merchant city-states such as Venice and Genoa gained a fair portion of their wealth by trafficking in slaves.¹¹ By the 13th century, the buying and selling of Christian slaves was forbidden by the Church, but people of other faiths, notably Muslims, continued to be fair game.

Slavery was less prominent in farming, and by the early Middle Ages, it had been replaced by serfdom as the primary form of unfree agricultural labor in western Europe. Under the conditions of serfdom, rural people were nominally free, but they were bound to the land they lived and worked on, which meant that when the land was sold to a new owner, they were included in the transaction. The freedom of serfs was further circumscribed by mandatory work on the landowners' properties, and they were required to hand over a portion of the crops they had grown. Serfs also had to use the landowners' facilities for milling grain (and pay for it), and they could be impressed as soldiers should the need arise. Although serfdom began to go into decline in England as early as the 14th century, it persisted on the European continent. Many French peasants had the legal status of serfs prior to the Revolution that began in 1789, and serfdom was not legally abolished in Russia until 1861.

Urban slavery also had considerable staying power in western Europe. After diminishing in the early Middle Ages, it became more common during the 14th century when the Black Death produced a substantial labor shortage.¹² Involuntary servitude was particularly prominent in the lands along the Mediterranean, where slaves were extensively used as domestic servants.¹³ It wasn't until the late 15th century that slavery began to wane as the Turkish control of the Black Sea region cut off the supply of potential slaves, but even so, some vestiges of slavery could be found in Italy as late as the 18th century.

While slavery was slowly declining in Europe, it was gaining a new lease on life in the New World, where the plantation economies of the West Indies, the American South, and parts of Latin America created an enormous demand for slave labor. Unlike the situation in antiquity, military conquest was not the primary source of slave labor. Large numbers of slaves were supplied by profit-seeking enterprises that took advantage of the highly lucrative trade in humans from Africa to the New World. In another departure from ancient and medieval practices, slavery in the Americas was based solely on the ascribed characteristic of race. As noted above, "race" is a problematic,

ambiguous characteristic only weakly grounded in biology, but owners of slaves were not troubled by such subtleties; any fraction of African ancestry rendered a person “black” and, hence, subject to enslavement. Early slavery in the New World had some of the flexibility found in other slaveholding societies in that some men and women of African ancestry could eventually attain their freedom. But as the plantation system became the foundation of the economies of the American South and islands of the Caribbean, slavery and racial differentiation powerfully reinforced each other.¹⁴

Slavery, in turn, had direct consequences for the way work was apportioned. In the antebellum South, slaves were forced to labor as field hands, or, if a bit more fortunate, they were put to work as domestic servants or workers in plantation-based industries such as sugar refining. Some slaves even worked as skilled craftsmen and as operatives in industrial enterprises. But whatever the tasks they performed, slaves in the New World worked under an economic and social order far more confining than many other examples of involuntary servitude. Slaves were defined as “chattel,” and their legal status was no different from that of the inanimate property held by slave owners.

In contrast, slavery in ancient Rome and Greece was a looser system in some respects. For one, slavery was not always based on race or ethnicity, although the warfare that was the wellspring of slavery often pitted one ethnic group against another, as when Romans successfully took up arms against Germanic “barbarians” and brought them back as slaves. Slavery in the ancient world did have a strong hereditary component; no matter what talents they may have possessed, being born the child of a slave (especially when one’s mother was a slave) usually destined a person to a slave’s existence. At the same time, however, the working lives of some slaves might have entailed the exercise of considerable skills and responsibilities. Most slaves in the ancient world were agricultural workers, artisans, and household servants. The least fortunate worked under appalling conditions in underground mines, where free labor scarcely existed. But some slaves were employed in positions that required a fair amount of skill and responsibility, serving as artists and craftsmen, musicians, scribes, teachers, physicians, and even minor government officials.

Most important, to be a slave in the ancient world was not necessarily a permanent condition. Some slaves in the Roman empire were able to earn money through various means, such as taking on jobs outside their usual duties. In some cases, slaves even owned slaves of their own, who could be the source of a substantial income.¹⁵ Over time, a few slaves amassed sufficient savings to buy freedom for themselves and their families. Other slaves were set free by their masters, an act known as *manumission*. Some slave owners ordered that their slaves be freed after their death, while others occasionally freed their slaves through humanitarian impulses or simply because they no longer could afford to keep them. A freed slave, however, did not immediately vault to the status of citizen; in Rome, full political status was not attained until two generations had followed the initial manumission.

Before leaving the topic of slavery, something should be said about slavery's effects on work and worker motivation. Unlike wage earners, slaves were a fixed cost for the owners; their food, clothing, and shelter were not directly linked to their output or general work performance. Moreover, slave labor usually was highly inefficient when compared with most forms of free labor. Work could be (and often was) coerced through a variety of punishments, but this necessitated a high level of supervision, and it was poorly suited to any kind of work that required initiative, innovation, or attention to detail. For the most part, slavery was an effective form of labor organization only when tasks were repetitious and relatively simple and when work could be closely monitored. Under these circumstances, slavery was hardly conducive to the development of a skilled labor force.

It frequently has been asserted that slavery also inhibited the development of labor-saving technologies. This is not altogether convincing; after all, if they were so inclined, slave owners could have increased their incomes by making their slaves more productive through the invention and use of newer and better ways of doing things. More likely, slavery inhibited technological advance in an indirect manner by causing work, especially physical labor, to be disparaged as an activity unworthy of free men. This attitude occasionally appears in statements by Greek philosophers, who of course were members of the privileged slaveholding class. When Aristotle claimed that "no man can practice virtue when he is living the life of a mechanic,"¹⁶ his objection to manual work centered on the worker's need to sell his wares or serve as someone's employee. As Aristotle saw it, work done for another, even if it entailed selling items one had made, implied servitude, and this was not an appropriate role for citizens, whose chief concerns were supposed to be politics and pursuit of learning.¹⁷ From this perspective, work done for an employer or a paying customer was bad enough, but slavery was the ultimate form of servitude. This belief may have been appropriate for an elite that had no qualms about being supported by slave labor, but it also constituted an obstacle to the development of productive technologies. Technological advance requires the mental capabilities prized by the Greek philosophers, but it also depends on the willingness of inventors and entrepreneurs to engage in the sort of hands-on activities that Aristotle found distasteful.

The ancient world's attitude toward work contrasts sharply with the Protestant Ethic described in Chapter 1. Neither perspective, that of Greek philosophers nor Protestant businessmen, was the decisive element in shaping the trajectory of economic change, but the denigration of work characteristic of the ancient world surely contributed to a slow pace of economic advance. In similar fashion, the perpetuation of slavery in the European Middle Ages and the enormous expansion of slavery that accompanied the settlement and colonization of many parts of the New World also inhibited the creation and development of workplace technologies that ultimately made slavery obsolete and unnecessary.

Caste and Occupation

Slavery based on race or ethnicity is the most extreme example of an ascribed status determining the conditions of one's working life, but ascribed statuses based on other group characteristics can also strongly affect the occupations people hold and the way they go about their work. The most striking of these is caste, the system of social differentiation that is usually associated with India, although some other societies have caste-like aspects.¹⁸ A caste is a group that claims a common ancestry and practices endogamy, the choice of marriage partners from within the group to which one belongs. In India, caste¹⁹ developed as a blend of indigenous cultural elements with practices brought by Aryan groups that migrated from central Asia into northern India from 1500 to 500 B.C.²⁰ As it became the dominant mode of social organization, society was divided into four major castes that were hierarchically arranged according to beliefs about purity and pollution. These qualities reflected karma, the actions in past lives that determine one's present life. Each of these four major castes corresponded to broad occupational categories: *Brahmins* (priests and scholars), *Ksyatriyas* (soldiers and rulers), *Vaisyas* (farmers and merchants), and *Shudras* (artisans and laborers). Below these four castes stood another grouping, whose work was deemed so defiling—activities such as removing the carcasses of dead animals—that they were given the name “untouchables” (the preferred term today is *Dalit*), because any contact with them was thought to pollute a higher-caste individual.

Within each of these broad castes were a large number of groupings, or *jati*, many of them associated with a particular occupation. In some cases, low occupational status corresponded to low status in the caste hierarchy. To take one example, tanners, shoemakers, and other leather workers were drawn from the ranks of the *Dalit* because this kind of work necessarily entailed working with the remains of dead animals. Other occupations, such as barbering and doing laundry, were a bit higher up the ladder but still would not be held by people who were born into *jatis* associated with less-polluting work.

Although traditional occupations reflected caste divisions, membership in a high-status caste did not necessarily entail holding a prestigious occupation. To take one noteworthy example, although Brahmins occupied the top position in the caste order, many of them worked as cooks, which is not a particularly high-status occupation. Brahmins were sought for this kind of work because, as members of the highest-ranked caste, they could cook for anybody, whereas cooks drawn from the ranks of a lower caste would pollute the food they prepared for members of higher castes. In similar fashion, caste and *jati* position did not always determine economic power. The value of a product or service in a particular locality often was the primary source of workers' ability to

strike favorable bargains with their clients, no matter what jati they occupied.

In recent decades, a number of forces have weakened the caste system and its influence over the distribution of occupations. The government of India has discouraged caste organization and has even enacted a form of affirmative action for Dalits and other disadvantaged groups. At the same time, urbanization and geographic mobility have uprooted people from the traditional villages that preserved the fixed relationships between jatis. Expanded educational opportunities and the diffusion of ideas grounded in modern science have undermined the traditional ideas about purity and pollution that supported caste division. The establishment of a democratic political order, along with a host of socioeconomic changes, has resulted in political power and social class becoming more important bases of social differentiation. Finally, technological changes and the availability of industrially manufactured products have eliminated the need for many of the occupations that traditionally had been filled by particular jatis, such as carrying water and making pottery.²¹

The Guilds

In today's society, where individuals are at least nominally free to choose the kind of work they do, the traditional Indian coupling of caste and occupation seems a strange feature of a far-off, exotic society. In fact, many societies, our own included, reveal numerous examples of work and occupations embedded in particular social arrangements. In some places and times, these arrangements have been quite powerful; they determined who was allowed to practice a particular craft, how they went about it, and even the price that could be charged for their products. In medieval and early modern Europe, a particular kind of organization known as a *guild* (sometimes rendered as *gild*) was the predominant form of work organization in urban areas, and many aspects of working life reflected its importance.

A guild can be defined as a grouping of skilled workers performing a particular task or producing a particular product, usually within the confines of a single town or city. In medieval Europe, individual guilds encompassed weavers, stonemasons, metal smiths, shoemakers, and many other craft occupations. It has been said that in some parts of the world, there even have been guilds for beggars and thieves.²² Guild membership centered on a particular craft, but it also entailed a number of noneconomic functions. Guilds served as charitable agencies and mutual aid societies that provided assistance for members in difficulties. They also had a strong religious component. The dominance of medieval Christianity meant that guild members all subscribed to the same religion, and celebration of a guild's patron saint would be an occasion for processions, feasting, and affirmation of guild membership.

Photo 2.2 The Doge of Venice receiving the bylaws of the weavers' guild



SOURCE: The Granger Collection, New York.

Guilds, by their nature, were restrictive; where guild power was strong, one could practice a particular craft only as a member of the relevant guild. These restrictions were enforced in a number of ways. Workshops were largely confined to specific neighborhoods, which made it easy for practitioners to monitor one another. Craftsmen also were required to put distinctive marks on their products so inferior goods could be traced back to their makers.²³ And social practices such as the ceremonies and festivals just mentioned contributed to a sense of guild solidarity that aided in the exclusion of nonmembers and the monopolization of a particular craft.

The cohesiveness of guild members also manifested itself in what we today would consider blatant discrimination. Women, for the most part, were not well served by guilds, although there are records of women belonging to guilds and of guilds composed exclusively of women in late 13th-century Paris.²⁴ Much later, that city contained all-women guilds

populated by “dressmakers, combers of hemp and flax, embroiders, and hosiers.”²⁵ Members of these guilds took in young women as apprentices, but in other places, there are a few instances of women taking in male apprentices.²⁶ A few occupations, notably silk weaving, employed large numbers of women workers,²⁷ and midwifery was an exclusively female occupation.²⁸ In general, however, women’s occupational roles deteriorated over time, and by the latter part of the Middle Ages and the early modern period, women were largely excluded from guild-based artisan work. Women continued to work in craft industries, but in most cases, they were able to do so only because they were wives or daughters of guild members.²⁹ Membership in the appropriate guild was out of reach because women were usually denied the opportunity to serve a formal apprenticeship, a prerequisite for attaining the status of master. Even more restrictive measures applied to Jews, who were almost always excluded from craft occupations and their associated guilds.

Possessing monopoly power over a given trade, individual guilds were able to control many aspects of work within that trade. Guild regulations often specified the kinds of materials that could be used for particular

products, as well as the times (such as the Sabbath and certain religious holidays) when work could not be done. Guild members also checked weighing scales, inspected workshops, and on occasion confiscated goods that were deemed to be of substandard quality.³⁰ In the name of maintaining quality, guilds limited the number of apprentices that could be employed, forbade working under artificial light (which in those times meant candlelight), and even set limits on the size of the windows in which wares could be displayed.

Self-regulation was fundamental to the structure and operation of guilds. To put it more blatantly, a primary purpose of a guild was to insulate the practitioners of a particular craft from the workings of the free market. By limiting membership, guilds were able to restrict the number of producers when demand for a product was high, thereby ensuring higher prices for their wares—although they may not have taken full advantage of this circumstance due to the medieval Christian stipulation that one should charge no more than the “just price” necessary for a decent level of subsistence.³¹

When demand dropped, artisans faced the prospect of abandoning what they were doing and confronting an uncertain economic future. But guild organization prevented this from happening by limiting what each guild member could produce. Under these circumstances, the incomes of individual members might decline, but nobody would have to go out of business. Guild regulations that enforced quality standards also can be seen as a way to circumvent the market by ensuring that products were not made in excessive numbers, which would result in depressed prices.

Efforts to limit competition reflected the belief of guild members that they lived and worked in a zero-sum economic environment. That is, they were embedded in an economy that grew at a very slow pace, if at all. Under these circumstances, any individuals’ gains were assumed to be matched by the losses of others. Guild regulations and restrictions may have prevented some members from maximizing their incomes (if they were inclined to flout the “just price”), but at the same time, these rules preserved the livelihood of other guild members who may have been less endowed with skills, energy, and luck. This leveling of fortunes was well suited to an economy and culture that, as noted in Chapter 1, did not place economic success at the pinnacle of human values.

Guilds also reflected the surrounding society and culture in their replication of existing social institutions. In the first place, it was often the case that entry into a guild-regulated trade was open only to individuals who had family members already in the guild or who married into one.³² No less important, the family also provided a model for many aspects of guild life. Guild members were craftsmen whose workplaces were also their places of residence. In most cases, a single structure housed a workshop, salesroom, and living quarters. This building also was the residence of one or more apprentices, who might be treated as junior members of the family. In addition to working alongside their employer and living in his house, apprentices took their meals with him,

worshipped with him, and in general lived their lives under his tutelage and supervision.

Apprenticeship

The first stage of entering a guild was a period of apprenticeship, during which a novice developed essential skills. Until well into the 19th century, preparation for only a few occupations—primarily medicine, law, and the clergy—occurred in a university setting, and even these “learned professions” made considerable use of apprenticeships. For everything else, apprenticeship was the only structured educational route available. Apprenticeship was a formal status, often based on a sworn oath or a written contract guaranteed by the parents of the apprentice, who usually had not reached the age of majority and could even be a young child. The apprentice agreed to work for a stipulated period of time and not leave the master or get married unless allowed to do so. In return, the master promised to teach the apprentice and provide him (or, very occasionally, her) with room, board, and clothing. Violation of these stipulations by either side could result in the payment of a cash penalty to the aggrieved party.³³

The exact terms of the agreements varied considerably, and it is likely that masters in lucrative crafts could drive a harder bargain, which might include a payment from the apprentice’s family.³⁴ Apprentices learned their trade by working with the master, usually beginning with jobs that were easily mastered or unpleasant, or both. In time, an apprentice was given the opportunity to learn and practice the “mysteries” or skills of a particular craft. In addition to learning the technical aspects of a trade, apprenticeship was a time for occupational socialization—the assimilation of the values, norms, and attitudes characteristic of the people engaged in that trade.

The period of apprenticeship, which in some trades extended 10 years or more but much less in others, was often followed by elevation to an intermediate position known as journeyman. It is often said that this term reflects the practice of traveling from one place to another in the course of developing one’s skills, and many journeymen did, in fact, ply their trades in a number of places. However, the word is actually derived from the French word for “day” (*journée*) because journeymen often were long-term employees who usually were paid on the basis of how many days they had worked.³⁵ Many of them remained stuck at this level, never attaining the rank of “master” and guild membership.

When apprentices or journeymen were in full possession of the necessary skills, they pursued guild membership through the creation of a “masterpiece” that bore witness to their capabilities. If it was deemed of sufficient quality, the masterpiece qualified its creator for admission to the guild, which also may have entailed paying a fee to government officials, securing sufficient capital to set up a shop, and taking an oath to uphold the guild’s regulations.³⁶

An Assessment of Guild Organization

The guild has to be reckoned as a highly successful social and economic institution, if for no other reason than its survival for hundreds of years. But eventually, the power of guilds began to wane as they came under fire on two fronts, one political and the other economic. Political opposition came from the nation-state, which became the dominant form of government in many lands. Nation-states, even when they are democratic regimes, have low levels of tolerance for organizations that seek to regulate themselves and to remain insulated from state control, which is exactly what the guilds had been able to do for hundreds of years. But their autonomy, and even their very existence, came to an end when they were summarily abolished by legislative action in France (1791), England (1835), and Germany (1869).³⁷

By this time, guilds were already under assault by forces that were transforming the world economy. First, the ability of guilds to maintain their control over their trades was undermined by alternative modes of production. We have seen how the putting-out system bypassed guild organization through the use of cheap, predominantly rural labor. At the same time, the growth of commerce expanded the size of markets, undercutting the local monopolies that guild members had enjoyed. Commercial growth and the parallel rise of capitalism also worked to the benefit of mercantile guilds, which exercised increasing control over the market for products made by the members of craft guilds, as well as the supply of raw materials used to make these products.³⁸ Finally, many of the technological changes that were an essential part of the Industrial Revolution resulted in machinery taking the place of skilled labor. Moreover, industrial production was oriented to the large-scale manufacture of inexpensive, low-quality goods, which was the antithesis of craft production under guild auspices.

The passing of the guilds and their influence over the economy was not universally mourned. Guilds came in for particular scorn on the part of free-market advocates such as Adam Smith, who looked askance at social institutions that dampened the operation of market forces. As Smith saw it, the free movement of labor was an essential part of an efficiently operating market system, but in Britain, it was stifled. The Elizabethan Statute of Apprenticeship stipulated that one could practice a craft only after being apprenticed for a minimum of 7 years. As a result, argued Smith, declining industries were stuck with a surplus of workers, while rising ones were hard-pressed to meet their labor needs. This, in turn, led to serious distortions in the wage rates: “while high wages are given to the workmen in one manufacture, those in another are obliged to content themselves with bare subsistence.”³⁹

Guilds also have been accused of retarding economic progress by suppressing technological innovation, both in regard to the kinds of products their members made and the procedures used to make them. This criticism contains more than a grain of truth. Guilds, by their very nature, were conservative institutions that aimed at maintaining a stable social and economic

climate. Technological changes can destabilize economies and societies by bringing new products and processes to the fore while rendering obsolete many well-established ones. Consequently, it should not be surprising that guilds and their members often exhibited an indifference to, and even hostility toward, innovations of any sort.

But this isn't the whole story. In reality, the effects of guild organization on technological change were mixed and complex. Guild regulations and attitudes may have dampened the desire to innovate, but in contrast, the apprenticeship system embedded in guild organization was of considerable long-term importance for technological advance. Technological processes, be they old or new, have to be learned. Sometimes reading a book will be sufficient (assuming the ability to read, which was not usually the case in medieval and early modern times), but a great deal of learning, then as now, requires the acquisition of "tacit" skills that come only through observing these skills being practiced and then engaging in hands-on practice.⁴⁰ This is exactly what apprenticeship provided.

In return for receiving essential training in a particular craft, an apprentice provided low-cost labor.⁴¹ The long periods of apprenticeship typical of guilds were hard to justify simply in terms of the time it took to learn a particular craft, but they made perfect sense as the key element of the bargain struck between apprentices and their masters. And if cheap labor was deemed an insufficient payment, a master could charge an apprentice fee, which might be likened to modern-day students taking out loans to finance their educations in the hope of boosting their future incomes. At the same time, the nonrefundable fee created a strong expectation that the apprentice would stay on the job during the stipulated period and would in general be a trustworthy member of the enterprise. Family members who entered into an apprentice position paid a low fee, or none at all, as it was assumed that family ties were a sufficient basis for a relationship of trust between master and apprentice.⁴²

Guilds are usually associated with long-past times such as the European Middle Ages and with societies that are still enmeshed in traditional ways of doing things. It is certainly true that guilds, as they were constituted in medieval times, have passed from the scene, even though a few modern labor unions cling to the term—most notably, the Screen Actors Guild. Although traditional guild organization has been dissolved by a multitude of economic and political forces, some occupational settings maintain guild-like characteristics. Most important, today's professions resemble guilds in that their structures and processes eliminate or diminish market-based competition. Like the guild-based occupations of the medieval era, today's professions are able to resist competitive pressures through their control over recruitment and training procedures, government support, and their members' possession of specialized knowledge. Consequently, a certain sense of *déjà vu* may be expected when we take a close look at some key attributes of modern professions in Chapter 9.

Guilds and other traditional modes of organization are no longer as prevalent as they were in times past; the operation of a modern economy necessarily rests on more complex modes of organization. But what is meant by a “modern economy”? Social scientists have long argued about what demarcates a *modern* economy and society from a *traditional* one, but that peasant farmers and artisans are no longer at the center of economic life is indisputable. Beginning about 250 years ago, the nature of work has been transformed by a set of forces collectively known as industrialization. How this has happened is the topic of the next chapter.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. How important are circumstances beyond one's control, such as the family one was born into, for the choice of an occupation and the ability to prepare for it? How might research be conducted in order to determine the influence of social institutions such as the family on occupational choice?
2. Sociologists often look at race as a “social construction” rather than a biological reality. What do you suppose is meant by this phrase? Through what social processes is race constructed?
3. Are there particular kinds of enterprises where families are important units of production? What is it about these enterprises that makes them particularly well suited to be family-run operations? Do families necessarily provide benign work settings for their members?
4. Slave labor was extensively employed in most of the world's great preindustrial civilizations. These civilizations were the source of great achievements in philosophy, religion, the arts, astronomy, mathematics, and architecture. Would these achievements have been possible without the use of slave labor? If not, do these achievements justify slavery in the ancient world?
5. Are there any modern occupations that have some or all of the characteristics of medieval craft guilds? Why have they persisted? How have they been able to do so? Who has benefited from their persistence?

Notes

1. Gerhard Lenski and Patrick Nolan, *Human Societies: An Introduction to Macrosociology* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2004), 118, Table 6.2.
2. Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 5, 218–9.
3. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

4. William I. Thomas and Dorothy Thomas, *The Child in America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1929), 572.
5. Henri Mendras, *The Vanishing Peasant: Innovation and Change in French Agriculture*, trans. Jean Lerner (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970), 76. Quoted in Louise A. Tilly and Joan Wallach Scott, *Women, Work, and Family* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1978), 21.
6. Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technologies from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic, 1983).
7. Krissah Williams, "Immigrants Sending \$45 Billion Home," *Washington Post*, October 19, 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/18/AR2006101801756.html> (accessed February 2, 2007).
8. According to the U.S. State Department, in 2001, as many as four million persons, most of them women and children, worked in slave-like conditions, many of them victims of the international sex trade. U.S. Department of State, "Trafficking in Persons Report," <http://usgovinfo.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http://www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/2002/> (accessed May 11, 2007).
9. Yvon Garlan, *Slavery in Ancient Greece* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 59–60.
10. David Herlihy, *Opera Muliebria: Women and Work in Medieval Europe* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990), 85.
11. Milton Meltzer, *Slavery: A World History* (New York: Da Capo, 1993), 221–2.
12. Melvin Kranzberg and Joseph Gies, *By the Sweat of Thy Brow: Work in the Western World* (New York: Putnam, 1975), 73.
13. Susan Mosher Stuard, "To Town to Serve: Urban Domestic Slavery in Medieval Ragusa," in *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 39–55.
14. Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2006), 45–60.
15. Meltzer, *Slavery*, 144.
16. *Politics* 1278, quoted in Alison Burford, *Craftsmen in Roman and Greek Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), 34.
17. Claude Mosse, *The Ancient World at Work* (New York: Norton, 1969), 45.
18. George De Vos, *Japan's Invisible Race: Caste in Culture and Personality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).
19. The word *caste* is not of Indian origin; it is derived from the Portuguese *casta*, which means "pure breed." The term generally used in India is *varna*.
20. Pauline Kolenda, *Caste in Contemporary India: Beyond Organic Solidarity* (Menlo Park, CA: Benjamin/Cummings, 1978), 29–32.
21. *Ibid.*, 51–4.
22. Gideon Sjoberg, *The Preindustrial City: Past and Present* (New York: Free Press, 1960), 187.
23. Curt Tausky, *Work and Society: An Introduction to Industrial Sociology* (Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock, 1984), 24.
24. Martha C. Howell, "Women, the Family Economy and Market Production," in Hanawalt, *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe*, 200.
25. Tilly and Scott, *Women, Work, and Family*, 49.
26. Herlihy, *Opera Muliebria*, 96.
27. *Ibid.*, 162.

28. Merry E. Wiesner, "Early Modern Midwifery: A Case Study," in Hanawalt, *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe*, 94–113.
29. Daryl M. Hafter, "Women Who Wove in the Eighteenth-Century Silk Industry of Lyon," in *European Women and Preindustrial Craft*, ed. Daryl M. Hafter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).
30. Kranzberg and Gies, *By the Sweat of Thy Brow*, 67.
31. Adriano Tilgher, *Homo Faber: Work Through the Ages* (1930; repr., Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1958), 39–41.
32. Mack Walker, "Hometowns and Guilds in Early Modern Germany," in *Work and Community in the West*, ed. Edward Shorter (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 40–1.
33. Steven A. Epstein, *Wage Labor and Guilds in Medieval Europe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 66–7.
34. *Ibid.*, 76.
35. *Ibid.*, 65.
36. Kranzberg and Gies, *By the Sweat of Thy Brow*, 69.
37. S. R. Epstein, "Craft Guilds, Apprenticeship, and Technological Change in Preindustrial Europe," *Journal of Economic History* 58, no. 3 (1998): 706.
38. Carlo M. Cipolla, *Before the Industrial Revolution: European Society and Economy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1980), 295.
39. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (1776; repr., London: Methuen, 1904), 136.
40. Pamela O. Long, "Invention, Secrecy, Theft: Meaning and Context in Late Medieval Technical Transmission," *History and Technology* 16 (2000): 223–41.
41. Epstein, "Craft Guilds," 690–1.
42. *Ibid.*, 691.

