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'Guild Society: Social capital and Guilds in early modern England'

In several strands of recent scholarship, the purpose, power and agency of early modern guilds has been linked to the social capital that the members of guilds shared, exploited and reproduced together. Arguably, guilds emerged because of social capital, used it to coordinate strategies to exclude others, and collectively benefited from the mutual trust it generated. Social capital was, in short, central to the impact of guilds on European economies and societies.

This paper examines the analytical and empirical challenges raised by this account through the case of late medieval and early modern London. It focuses on three questions. First, and most generally, does social capital offer a useful framework through which we can interpret guilds and their activities? Second, how do we measure and evaluate the nature of the social interactions that produced social capital within guilds? And third, what was the relative importance of the social relationships fostered within guilds, compared to those that emerged out of the other social structures that existed in early modern cities? To address these, we explore several new methodologies by which the strength of social capital within guilds can be evaluated.

In particular, we exploit long-run data on the networks created by guild members within urban society to secure inheritances and the care of offspring, using the records of London's Orphans Court. These allow us to evaluate the significance of fellow guild members relative to relationships that were probably fostered through other types of activity over several centuries. Our results show a waxing and waning of the importance of guilds within Londoner's most trusted connections. We relate these results to the forms and intensity of sociability fostered by guilds as they changed over this period.

The paper is the work of a number of students at LSE working collaboratively with the lead author. Full list of authors: Ammaarah Adam; Raphael Ades; Will Banks; Canbeck Benning; Gwyneth Grant; Harry Forster-Brass; Joe Miller; Daniel Phelan; Seb Randazzo; Owen McGiveron; Matthew Reilly; Michael Scott; Sebastian Serban; Carys Stockton; Patrick Wallis*