



TRUST AND MISTRUST IN PREMODERN EUROPE AND THE MEDITERRANEAN

Edited by

ANNABEL LAURA HANCOCK

and **IAN FORREST**

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A TAXONOMY OF TRUST

CONTRACTING AND CONSPIRING IN THE PREMODERN WORLD

SHEILAGH OGILVIE

“TRUST” APPEARS AT first sight to be something quite straightforward: a confident belief in the reliability of someone or something. But we cannot always trust first appearances. This essay uses premodern history to explore how, behind its trustworthy façade, “trust” conceals a more complicated and deceptive range of behaviour. Analysing the types of trust we observe in the premodern world can help us better understand its role in society, whether historical or modern.

Premodern Voices

Let us begin by listening to premodern people themselves. In mid-fourteenth-century Florence the anonymous author of a merchant advice book states in no uncertain terms that trust is crucial, but this is precisely because we cannot take it for granted: “One must take good account of the types of people one deals with, or to whom one entrusts one’s goods, for no man is trustworthy with money.”¹ Trust coexists with mistrust. The Florentine banker Francesco Balducci Pegolotti spells out this coexistence in his

¹ Quoted in Molho, *Social and Economic Foundations of the Italian Renaissance*, 54.

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1339–1340 handbook, *The Practice of Commerce*. He describes how you can smuggle gold into Tunis, but this untrustworthy behaviour has a downside: “Although you may be found trying to hide things in order to avoid paying the duty, and being found out, you pay nothing except the duty; nevertheless you lose faith and honour by it, so that they will never trust you as before your crime was found out.”²

For these medieval merchants, trust was related to your identity. For one thing, it was limited to particular “types of people.” Only traders who fell into one of those “types”—who had certain characteristics—should be trusted, either by other merchants or by the authorities. For another, if you showed you were the wrong type of person, “they will never trust you as before.” This suggests that trust in persons was not “generalized,” applying to everyone no matter their background. Instead, it was “particularized”: it was linked to specific characteristics which made it more possible to have confidence that someone would behave with probity.³

Our second example comes from the opposite end of the social spectrum: a serf society in central Europe. In the second decade of the seventeenth century, the northern Bohemian serf commune of Mildenau complained that the village headman was causing perpetual conflict with other villagers, abusing his office for his own profit, defrauding the overlord, and spectacularly failing to organize communal affairs. Despite all this, in 1616 the manorial court refused to dismiss him, declaring uncompromisingly that “this headman has once and for all been entrusted with the village court by the overlord.”⁴ In the central Bohemian serf commune of Radovesnice in 1656, likewise, the village headman and elders conspired to steal from an old woman on her deathbed and defrauded the manor of its legally mandated share of her estate. Nonetheless, the manorial administrator refused to dismiss them. For one thing, they were essential for organising coerced labour levies and collection of state taxes. For another, “concerning other men, I have even worse opinions.”⁵

2 Quoted in Dotson, “Commercial Law in Fourteenth-Century Merchant Manuals,” 210.

3 Ogilvie, “The Use and Abuse of Trust,” 18–20; Ogilvie and Carus, “Institutions and Economic Growth in Historical Perspective,” 405–6, 416–18.

4 Quoted in Ogilvie, “Communities and the ‘Second Serfdom’ in Early Modern Bohemia,” 90.

5 Quoted in Ogilvie, “Communities and the ‘Second Serfdom’ in Early Modern Bohemia,” 91.

These cases are striking because the manorial authorities themselves openly acknowledged that these village headmen had abused the trust of the manor as well as that of other serfs. But communal headmen were central to manorial extraction. The unsatisfactory Mildenau headman was responsible for organising coerced labour services for the manorial demesne, collecting dues, rents and taxes from the peasantry, ensuring that adolescent serfs render their years of obligatory servanthood for the manor, monitoring illicit migration, providing surveillance over the economic activities of serfs, and running the village tavern where serfs were obliged to purchase manorial beer. Finding another man who was able and willing to take on the responsibility (as well as illicit rewards) of mediating between peasants, overlord, and ruler would involve high transaction costs and an interruption in the flow of rents to the manor. In Radovesnice, the manorial administrator explicitly stated that he would not dismiss the untrustworthy village officers because they were central to feudal extraction and impossible to replace. Untrustworthy men were entrusted with particular functions because they had obtained a particular position in the institutional framework of the “second serfdom.” They kept their positions even when they behaved in untrustworthy ways because they performed key functions in enabling the manor and the state to extract resources and obedience. Trust was not “uniform” but rather “differential”: it was embedded in the rules, norms, and requirements of specific institutions.⁶

The particularized (identity-specific) and differential (institutionally embedded) nature of premodern trust emerges clearly from our third example, the junk-dealers’ guild of eighteenth-century Vienna. In the aftermath of a plague epidemic in 1714, the guild of Viennese “citizen junk-dealers” petitioned for their members to be allowed to resume trading. The Vienna magistrates granted permission,

but only to the citizen junk-dealers, as opposed to the non-citizen junk-dealers in the suburbs and liberties, since the former as sworn citizens are trustworthy, and additionally would hardly expose themselves to the risk of infection for small sums. Nonetheless, for greater precaution, the garments to be sold shall be aired out for a further 14 days before being put on sale.⁷

6 Ogilvie, “The Use and Abuse of Trust,” 18–20; Ogilvie and Carus, “Institutions and Economic Growth in Historical Perspective,” 405–6, 416–18.

7 Stöger, *Sekundäre Märkte?*, 166. Translation by present author; all translations not otherwise attributed are those of the present author.

As in medieval Florence, trust was limited to particular types of people: those who were masters of a specific guild and had, in addition, taken the oath as a citizen of the city of Vienna. As in seventeenth-century Bohemia, trust was based—rightly or wrongly—on institutional status: guild membership and town citizenship. Even then, the right type of people anchored in the right institutions were not fully trusted, as shown by the fourteen-day rule. Trust was personalized, institutionalized, yet still conditional.

These three snapshots illuminate key features of trust in premodern societies. For one thing, trust was important in very disparate communities: in some of the richest mercantile metropolises in the premodern world, but also in some of the poorest peasant villages under the “second serfdom.” But mistrust, too, was important everywhere: in the great trading cities “no man is trustworthy with money”; in the depth of the enserfed countryside “we have even worse opinions of other men”; in the Habsburg imperial capital, magistrates impose conditions on guild masters “for greater precaution.” In all these different communities, we observe trust co-existing side-by-side with mistrust.

A second feature to emerge from these three cases is that trust—and its obverse, mistrust—was important across all social strata. It might be thought that concern with probity would be restricted to the upper strata, that it was a luxury that could only be enjoyed by those who were not struggling for daily subsistence. Yet these cases show that trust was important to enserfed peasants, international smugglers, and non-citizen junk-dealers. On the other hand, it might be argued that trust should play a major role in face-to-face communities at the bottom of society but lose importance for the upper strata with their superior access to formal institutions such as the state and the legal system. But these cases show trust playing an important role for literate merchants, manorial administrators, town magistrates, and customs officials.

The third feature to emerge from these examples is that trust played a role in the operation of core social institutions: traditional institutions, such as village communes, serfdom, guilds, local citizenship, and urban magistracies, but also emerging modern institutions, such as globalized market and fiscal state. Yet those in charge of each of these institutions habitually entrusted important tasks to untrustworthy agents. Deathbed testaments, coerced labour, and state tax collection were entrusted to men who conspired against commune and manor. Long-distance trade was entrusted to men who could not be trusted with money or who smuggled gold to avoid taxes. Public health was entrusted to those who might sell plague-infested wares.

These examples from the premodern world raise fundamental questions about trust in society more widely. First, how justified are we in regarding trust as more important in small-scale, face-to-face villages than in large, impersonal metropolises? Second, how reliable are theories that regard trust as a luxury of the rich or—by contrast—a necessity of the poor? Third, what is the relationship between formal institutions (which are supposed to be impersonal and independent of trust) and informal norms (which are supposed to rely on interpersonal sentiments and foster a culture of trust)? Finally, should we regard trust as playing a central role in society or as being neutralized by the ubiquity of mistrust?

Social Capital

For social scientists, the starting point in thinking about trust remains the theory of “social capital.” Pioneered by the sociologist James Coleman and the political scientist Robert Putnam, “social capital” is defined as a stock of trust-enhancing benefits generated when a “social network” invests resources in nurturing a body of relationships among its members.⁸ The benefits generated by social capital consist of norms, information, sanctions, and collective action. Mutual norms create expectations of trustworthiness which reduce the costs of reaching agreements. Shared information creates the trust necessary to solve market and state failures caused by incomplete or asymmetric information. Group sanctions foster the trust that deviations from network norms will be punished. Collective action is fuelled by group trust and in turn reinforces it.

These concepts were brought to bear on premodern societies by Putnam and his co-authors, who argued that the social capital of medieval guilds and communes account for superior socio-political outcomes in northern compared to southern Italy into the present day.⁹ Lessons from premodern history were used to formulate policies that recommended investing in social capital and social networks to solve problems of social exclusion and regional disparities in the rich west, economic transition in post-communist eastern Europe, and development challenges in the Third World.¹⁰

8 Coleman, “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital”; Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work*.

9 Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work*.

10 Ogilvie, “The Use and Abuse of Trust,” 16.

Social capital theory also postulated that particular types of interpersonal relationships and specific kinds of social institution were most likely to foster social capital. Coleman argued that “interesting” social capital—the sort yielding trust-enhancing norms, information, sanctions, and collective action—was most likely to be generated by interpersonal interactions possessing two key features: “closure” and “multiplex relationships.”¹¹ “Closure” means that network membership is clearly defined so that members’ actions can be easily monitored, norm-violating behaviour effectively punished, and norm-compliant behaviour collectively rewarded. “Multiplex relationships” mean that members of a social network engage in repeated transactions with one another, which encompass different spheres of activity, such as the economic, social, political, and religious. This generates multistranded interpersonal relationships which endow members with multiple means of communicating norms between, getting information about, punishing deviance in, and urging collective action on one another.

Particular types of social institution were thought to be likely to nurture social capital. Social scientists use “institution” to refer to systems of rules, customs, and practices governing human interaction: “the rules of the game in a society or, more formally...the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction.”¹² Social capital was thought to be especially nurtured by “horizontal” institutions in which members were similar to one another, so that they formed links as near-equals, based on shared interests and capabilities. Conversely, social capital was regarded as being choked off by “hierarchical” institutions in which members were graded or ranked and consequently formed vertical relationships based on dissimilarity of interests and power. Networks fostered egalitarian fellowship, reciprocity, and “mutual solidarity,” making it possible to resist the “power asymmetries, exploitation and dependence” characteristic of hierarchies. In the premodern world, according to this view, trust was encouraged by horizontal institutions such as merchant associations, local communities, and guilds, which counteracted the mistrust fostered by vertical institutions such as patronage networks, feudal systems, and authoritarian states.¹³

This is still the analytical framework that many social scientists use to understand trust, and much of its content is drawn from a particular vision

11 Coleman, “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital,” S104–10.

12 North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*, 3; Ogilvie and Carus, “Institutions and Economic Growth in Historical Perspective.”

13 Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work*, 123–35

of historical societies. But is it consistent with what we actually observe in the premodern world?

The remainder of this essay explores that question by looking at evidence from three “horizontal” social networks which were central to premodern societies and play a vital role in how modern social scientists think about trust: merchant associations, guilds, and village communities. Examining how these premodern institutions deployed trust shows that social capital theory only takes us so far. Additional analytical tools are needed to understand dimensions of trust which have hitherto largely been neglected. Attentive exploration of concrete evidence on premodern societies, I argue, can help us develop better conceptual tools.

Trust in Merchant Associations

The first “horizontal” institution we examine is the merchant association. Premodern merchants formed multiple types of association. There were local merchant guilds formed by all traders within a particular town, often including humble retailers alongside rich wholesale merchants. Second, there were alien merchant guilds or “communities” formed by those of a city’s merchants who did business in a particular foreign destination (e.g., the community of Pisan merchants trading in Constantinople, the community of German merchants trading in Venice). Finally, there were multi-city organizations such as the “universitas” of Provençal merchants trading at the Champagne fairs after 1246 or the German Hanse comprising the long-distance traders of dozens of German and Dutch towns between the thirteenth and the sixteenth century.¹⁴ As the centuries passed, new types of merchant association appeared.¹⁵ In rural industrial regions, proto-industrial merchant associations sprang up, obtaining state privileges over purchasing and exporting industrial wares. In the expanding early modern trade between Europe and non-European destinations, “regulated” and “chartered” companies appeared, which combined features of a traditional merchant guild (legal monopolies over trade in particular destinations and wares) with those of a modern joint-stock corporation (selling shares and trading collectively). Outside Europe, too, other forms of merchant association proliferated between antiquity and the twentieth century. Despite

14 Ogilvie, *Institutions and European Trade*, 19–40.

15 Ogilvie, *Institutions and European Trade*, 31–38.

their diversity, all these associations displayed the features social scientists believe to nurture trust.

For one thing, merchant associations had closure; it was clear who their members were. People knew who was and was not a member of the Florentine merchant guild at home in Florence, the Pisan merchant community based in Constantinople, the German Hanse trading in one of its four north European Kontors, the Calw proto-industrial merchant trading association, or the English Merchant Adventurers. The partial exception was the emerging chartered company: company members were the only individuals allowed to trade on the routes and sectors it monopolized, but non-members were allowed to own shares and thus to partake of the company's profits—a first step away from network closure.

Merchant associations were also characterized by multiplex relationships. Members often married each other's offspring, hired each other's relatives, worshipped in the same churches, socialized at the same assemblies, clubs and guild hostels, and attended each other's weddings and funerals. These multistranded ties made relations inside the association "appropriate." That is, the resources of one relationship could be brought to bear on other relationships with the same person. Closure and multiplex relationships meant that merchant associations generated intense bonds of internal trust. They had multiple means to reinforce shared norms, convey and receive information, inflict penalties on other members who violated norms, and efficiently organize collective action.

Members of merchant associations used the trust they fostered to facilitate trade, as much economic history research has emphasized.¹⁶ For one thing, merchants used their associational social capital to smooth the way to agree and enforce commercial contracts. The trust nurtured by shared information and sanction enabled traders to decide whether an unknown trading partner was a member of a reputable association whose members were normally regarded as trustworthy or which was known to penalize a member who defaulted on contracts. Merchant associations also fostered the trust needed to guarantee property rights and personal security. If one member of the association was attacked or had his goods confiscated, he could trust the other members to come to his defence or put pressure on the authorities to protect his rights. Not only did the merchant associations generate trust that helped to enforce contracts, guarantee property rights, and provide personal security; they also helped correct market failures (e.g.,

16 For a survey, see Ogilvie, *Institutions and European Trade*.

information problems) and failures of state capacity (e.g., in providing public security and legal remedy), with potential positive effects for society as a whole.

But this trust also had a dark side. It facilitated activities that were not so good for economy and society. Unsurprisingly, closure and multiplex relationships enabled members of merchant associations to deploy their social capital to do the exact opposite of what Coleman, Putnam, and other social capital theorists optimistically postulated. Merchants used trust inside their own associations to manipulate the market and subvert the state. Instead of nurturing better-functioning economies and polities, they conspired to corrupt them in their own interests. Concrete examples can serve to illustrate these analytical considerations.

In 1327, for instance, the wool growers of the East Riding of Yorkshire complained that the merchant guilds of York, Beverley, and other towns had conspired “by writings and oaths” not to pay the growers more than a certain, artificially low price for raw wool. Outsiders, too, complained that the English Company of the Staple—comprising the merchant guilds of fourteen English towns—had used their exclusive privileges over exporting English wool to harm wool producers by deterring foreign merchants from even attending the Boston fairs.¹⁷ The oaths sworn by members of merchant associations to assure one another of trustworthy behaviour were being used to operate a cartel. This benefited members of the association by securing them artificially high profits, but it harmed suppliers and competitors. The trust generated by the merchant association was being used to corrupt the market and redistribute resources from outsiders to members of the association.

Trust inside merchant associations also harmed consumers, as emerges from our second example. The Seville merchant *consulado* was a powerful association of merchants that enjoyed the exclusive right to organize the trade between Spain and its overseas colonies. In the sixteenth century, Spanish American colonists repeatedly complained about scarcity of everyday necessities caused by the “deliberate restriction by the merchants of the *consulado* for the purpose of maintaining prices.” So devastating were the effects on consumers that even Spanish colonial governors sometimes turned a blind eye to illegal English or Dutch interlopers who ensured regular deliveries and lower prices to Spanish colonists.¹⁸ Trust inside the Seville

¹⁷ Lloyd, *The English Wool Trade in the Middle Ages*, 117–18, 193–224.

¹⁸ Ogilvie, *Institutions and European Trade*, 130.

consulado was used to organize collective action that profited its members but starved consumers.

Even weaker members of a merchant community could suffer from the trust it generated. By around 1630, vigorous trade between England and Spain had generated a group of more than ninety English merchants who based themselves in the Spanish city of Bilbao over the long term. In pre-modern European trading centres, some foreign merchant communities set up their own consular courts: tribunals manned by merchants, operating according to the legal norms of the home polity, and exercising autonomous jurisdiction. But many merchants in alien trading destinations did not organize such consular jurisdictions. Why did they refrain? One reason was given by English merchants in Bilbao around 1640, who strongly opposed the idea of setting up an English consular court there, arguing that it “would only be a vehicle of a few important merchants to monopolize the trade.”¹⁹ Their reason was not too little trust inside the association but too much. This echoes similar objections by many other premodern traders who feared that trust inside merchant associations could as easily foster conspiracies as facilitate contracts. Long-distance merchants trading in alien trading centres often voluntarily chose public courts over guild consuls. Even Christian merchants in the medieval Middle East brought conflicts in front of Muslim courts in preference to their own guild consuls. In 1405, for instance, a Montpellier merchant indebted to a Genoese one was threatened with denunciation before a Muslim court despite his protests that “a European should not do this to another, but should apply to the latter’s consul.”²⁰

Why would merchants prefer public courts to guild tribunals? The cases that survive suggest two main motives, both involving trust. First, merchants demanded reliable contract enforcement and did not trust guild tribunals to ensure compliance. Second, merchants demanded impartial judgments and did not trust guild tribunals to provide it against powerful members of the guild. One’s fellow merchants inside the guild might provide better judgements and enforce them better because of the social capital of information transmission inside the guild, which meant they were more highly informed about one’s commercial conflicts. However, the same social capital made them less able—and perhaps less willing—to judge impartially. This emerges from one of the earliest surviving texts about merchant guild courts, Alpert of Metz’s account of the Tiel merchant

19 Grafe, “Atlantic Trade and Regional Specialisation in Northern Spain,” 23.

20 Quoted in Ogilvie, *Institutions and European Trade*, 261.

guild in 1020: “They are hard men, unaccustomed to discipline, who judge suits not according to law but according to inclination.”²¹ In the 1430s, likewise, the Gdańsk trader Egghard Westranse refused to settle his case before a Hanseatic tribunal because he suspected that its judges would favour merchants from heavy-hitting Hanse cities like Lübeck and Wismar over someone from subordinate Gdańsk.²² Other merchants feared that guild court judges would be drawn from factions unsympathetic to their interests. Precisely the trust, norms, information, and sanctions generated by closely knit associations could be manipulated by dominant members or factions, harming smaller-scale traders.²³

Merchant associations also used internal trust to exclude competitors and coerce suppliers. From the 1560s on, the southwest German territory of Württemberg developed a successful rural textile industry producing mass-market New Draperies. For the first ninety years after the industry arose, its cheap and cheerful fabrics were exported to markets and fairs all over Europe by a variegated ecosystem of local traders including weavers, women, peasants, and migrants. But in 1650, a group of two dozen merchant-dyers drawn from just thirteen families in the Württemberg town of Calw set up a new merchant association, the Calw Worsted Trading Association. This merchant association secured state privileges entitling it to exclude all other domestic exporters of worsted and to compel all the rural weavers to sell exclusively to members of the association at fixed prices and quotas. Until its dissolution in 1797, this merchant association displayed almost complete closure, limiting its membership to fewer than forty-three Calw merchants drawn from just fourteen families and restricting admissions to male relatives of existing members. It also fostered multiplex internal relationships, with most members holding citizenship in the town of Calw, meeting face-to-face in repeated interactions, serving on the town council, worshipping in the same church, endowing the same charitable institutions, marrying into each other’s families, and organising collective political action. The closure and multiplex relationships of the Calw Association generated impressive stocks of trust via shared norms, information transmission, sanctions on cartel-breakers, and collective action. But the Association used this trust to exclude competitors from what the previous participants protested had been “an entirely free and uncoerced trade.” It also mobilized its internal

21 Quoted in Ogilvie, *Institutions and European Trade*, 263.

22 Quoted in Ogilvie, *Institutions and European Trade*, 263.

23 See the evidence discussed in Ogilvie, *Institutions and European Trade*, 261–64.

trust to coerce poor rural weavers, who claimed the association treated them as its “slaves and serfs.”²⁴ Yet the Württemberg princely government repeatedly confirmed and expanded its privileges, describing the Calw Association in 1736 as “a substantial national treasure, as shown especially with the moneys that had to be raised during the recent French invasion threat, and hence no just opportunity should be lost to extend it a helping hand in all matters.”²⁵

Closely knit and multistranded associations of premodern merchants thus generated impressive stocks of trust. In some ways, they indeed behaved in the ways emphasized by social capital theory. They used their shared norms, information, sanctions, and collective action to facilitate their members’ business and defend it against external attacks. From the point of view of the members of these associations, this trust made both market and state work in advantageous ways. But the effect of this trust on society as a whole was much less benign. Merchant associations used their trust to manipulate markets and pervert governments to serve their interests. In direct contrast to the theory of social capital, the trust generated by this type of horizontal merchant network did not improve the operations of market and state but rather corrupted them to serve the interests of a small group of wealthy and privileged men.

Trust in Craft Guilds

It might be argued that merchant associations are not such a good way of exploring premodern trust, despite the emphasis placed on such institutions in the economic history literature. Perhaps merchant associations were not “horizontal” enough, as implied by the English merchants in seventeenth-century Bilbao, who thought having their own consular jurisdiction would just be a vehicle for “a few important merchants.” Other types of social network, such as that of the craft guild, might correspond more to the predictions of the social capital literature. Perhaps craft guilds were more “horizontal,” nurturing a trust based on egalitarian fellowship, reciprocity, and mutual solidarity rather than the power asymmetries, exploitation, and dependence characteristic of merchants’ more hierarchical organizations?

Craft guilds were organizations of men who engaged in the same economic activities in a particular place. (Very few guilds included women,

²⁴ Ogilvie, *State Corporatism and Proto-Industry*, 379.

²⁵ Ogilvie, “Guilds, Efficiency and Social Capital,” 328.

which we shall see shortly is directly relevant to our concerns.) A craft guild had the exclusive right for its members to practise that occupation locally, to decide who could become a member, and to regulate the business activities of members and outsiders operating in adjacent markets. Guilds existed across the world from antiquity into the twentieth century and dominated many craft and service occupations in Europe from ca. 1000 to 1883.²⁶

Guilds were characterized by closure; everyone knew who was a member, since non-members were not entitled to practise the occupation. Guilds were also characterized by multiplex internal links. Historical sources reveal clearly how guilds engaged in economic, social, religious, cultural, and political activities, which created multiplex internal ties that members could appropriate for other purposes. By interacting in multiple spheres, guild members nurtured the shared norms, information, sanctions, and collective action—the social capital—that enhanced their capacity to communicate and elicit trust both internally and externally.

Craft guilds actively used all this trust. They used it in ways that, according to some strands of the literature, benefitted the premodern economy. One thing they did was to ensure training through apprenticeship and journeymanhood, creating trust among customers that a guild member had the right expertise and could be relied upon to do decent work.²⁷ Craft guilds also used their social capital to provide quality guarantees concerning the goods and services that their members produced. This helped solve the problem of information asymmetries between producers and consumers about product quality which could stifle local exchange and create a bad reputation outside the town.²⁸ Guilds could thus use their social capital of trust to make markets work better.

But guilds also deployed the trust they generated in less beneficent ways. They used it to fix artificially high prices for the goods and services they produced. They used it to set artificially low prices for the inputs they used, especially labour. A craft guild was a network of employers—the “masters” of the guild—who used their shared norms, sanctions, and trust to agree among one another to cap the wages they paid their apprentices, journeyman, and freelance workers (such as spinners) and to agree not to compete with one another to offer higher pay or better working conditions. Guilds also used their ability to engage in collective action to reach internal

26 See Ogilvie, *The European Guilds*, 8–16.

27 Ogilvie, *The European Guilds*, 354–437.

28 Ogilvie, *The European Guilds*, 307–53.

agreements to oppose innovations that threatened their business model. Finally, craft guilds used their social capital to discriminate on the basis of gender, ethnicity, religion, skin colour, citizenship, and parentage, erecting barriers to entry into apprenticeship, journeymanhood, and mastership. The historical record contains literally thousands of examples of guilds behaving in these ways.²⁹

Many vivid insights into guild trust—both positive and negative—emerge from examining concrete examples. In the 1390s, the barber-surgeons' guild in the English town of Coventry was accused of conspiring to fix artificially high prices for its members' services, "making the cost of that art so much dearer to the damage of the whole people."³⁰ When one barber-surgeon refused to comply with his guild's price-fixing, the other masters threatened him with violence and took him to court for breach of oath: he was behaving untrustworthily towards his fellow masters in offering better prices to his patients.³¹ This was no isolated case. Hundreds of other guilds acted likewise, imposing non-trivial price increases on customers.³² In the Swedish community of Aalborg, for instance, poor people complained in 1685 about the artificially high prices imposed by the bakers' guild. In the Ukrainian town of Dubno in the eighteenth century, the guilds of Jewish tailors, butchers, and bakers imposed high prices that were "oppressive to poor Jews." In the Swiss village of Münchenstein around the same period, the craft guilds "increased the price of their work and wages and the poor common country-dweller is burdened not a little."³³ The trust generated by guilds coordinated collective action which guild members viewed as beneficial contracts among producers but which consumers experienced as harmful conspiracies.

Guilds also used their social capital of trust to impose barriers to entry. In early modern Spanish towns, for instance, guilds imposed "purity of blood" restrictions, which traced applicants' ethnicity back generations and excluded everyone who could not demonstrate pure Christian ancestry. In

29 See the data discussed in Ogilvie, *The European Guilds*, 24–31. The thousands of observations of guilds behaving in these ways are contained in the Ogilvie Guilds Databases, which are available on open access at <https://sheilaghogilvie.com/guilds-book/guilds-databases/>.

30 Lipson, *The Economic History of England*, vol. 1, p. 303.

31 For many additional examples of medical associations behaving in this way towards patients, see Ogilvie, *Controlling Contagion*, 358–72.

32 Ogilvie, *The European Guilds*, 218–24.

33 Ogilvie, *The European Guilds*, 197.

early modern Valencia, even the humble cobblers' guild excluded "negroes" and "mulattoes of the color of quince marmalade, because of the protests and disturbance which would result from the sight of such persons mingling with honorable and well-dressed people." In early modern German towns, hatters' guilds blacklisted any journeyman who defiled himself by working alongside a woman. German rulers sought to protect their realms from guild boycotts by ordering all hatters' guilds who still employed females to sack them. So effectual was the misogynistic trust generated by German hatters' guilds that after 1500 the tramping routes of German hatter journeyman began to avoid the Netherlands where hat-making workshops still employed females.³⁴

Sometimes a guild would arbitrarily exclude someone because existing guild members simply did not like him, as in 1553 when Wolfgang Vincentz decided to prolong his journeyman travels for a second time and delay applying for mastership status, because he did not know "who among the Breslau masters would on this occasion be unfavourable towards me."³⁵ The internal trust fostered by the closed and multiplex network of the guild enabled it to make decisions about you. Many of these decisions were consequential for your life. If powerful members knew and liked you, they might be favourable. But not everyone had special access to powerful decision-makers.

The trust generated by craft guilds enabled them to impose entry barriers that profited their members but harmed outsiders. Guilds used their entry barriers to limit the number of producers, creating artificial scarcity that enabled them to raise prices. It was easiest to do this by discriminating against people with particular identity-related characteristics—gender, religion, ancestry, skin colour, citizenship—since that could leverage existing discriminatory norms in the wider society. But guilds also used their entry barriers to keep out anyone who threatened to compete too successfully with guild members. Trust within the guild enabled it to make decisions that affected customers, competitors, and the economy at large.

Guilds also fostered trust which enabled their members to coerce their workers. Guilds, as already mentioned, were organizations of employers. They deployed their trust to serve the interests of masters, not workers. In the late sixteenth century, for instance, worsted-weavers across a large zone in the northern Black Forest formed regional (rural-urban) guilds. These

34 Ogilvie, *The European Guilds*, 160, 266, 280; on the entry barriers imposed by guilds and associations of physicians, surgeons, apothecaries, and other medical practitioners, as well as their effects on patients and public health measures, see Ogilvie, *Controlling Contagion*, 348–58.

35 Ogilvie, *The European Guilds*, 132.

guilds not only conspired to restrict entry and limit output but also reached internal agreements to oppress subordinate workers. One of the first acts of the Wildberg worsted-weavers' guild when it was set up in 1598–1599 was “to agree and ally with the guilds in Herrenberg, Calw and Horb, to make and establish an ordinance about the independent working of unmarried journeymen.” In the first decade of its existence, sixty-one percent of fines levied by the Wildberg guild were imposed on workers, particularly journeymen. In 1605–1606, “the unmarried journeyman revolted, and refused to work any more,” but the strike was broken by joint action between the worsted-weavers' guild, the woollen-weavers' guild, and the state governor of the local district.³⁶ Guild wage-fixing was then extended to the thousands of freelance spinners. In 1611, the worsted-weavers' guilds agreed internally that “spinning a pound [of yarn] shall be paid at as high a wage as the guild agrees among its members, and the dyers as well as the worsted-weavers shall support this in all ways, and each master shall then unfailingly stick to the agreed wage.”³⁷ Guilds, as organizations of employers, leveraged their trust to coordinate agreements that guild masters regarded as beneficial contracts but which their workers experienced as harmful conspiracies.

Trust and Local Communities

The village commune is a third institution widely believed to have generated a social capital of trust that benefited premodern societies. Before 1800, the rural economy employed eighty percent of the labour force in central, eastern, and Nordic Europe, sixty percent in France, Spain, and Italy, and fifty percent even in the precociously urbanized Low Countries and England. Village communities were a central institution of premodern European rural economies, so their operation is crucial to understanding the entire functioning of medieval and early modern societies.

Like other horizontal social networks, the rural commune was characterized by closure—everyone in the village knew who was a member and who was not. Villagers lived close to one another in spatial proximity, constituting a small, face-to-face group whose members were highly informed about one another, knew who held citizenship or settlement rights, who was entitled to use common woods and pastures, and who could ask for welfare support. The rural commune was also characterized by multiplex

36 Ogilvie, *State Corporatism and Proto-Industry*, 388.

37 Ogilvie, *The European Guilds*, 190.

internal relationships: community members were neighbours, they collectively maintained wells and lanes, they listened to each other working, they attended the same church, they organized village processions and festivals, they used common pastures and woods, and they married into each other's families. This enabled them to generate a social capital that nurtured trust inside the community.

These communes often used this internal trust in beneficial ways. They deployed communal norms, information, sanctions, and collective action to manage environmental resources such as common pastures, woods, and waters. They used internal trust to organize the three-field crop rotation system which predominated across medieval and early modern Europe as a way of regenerating nutrients in the soil. Community-based welfare provision also relied on norms of solidarity, information about the deserving and undeserving poor, and sanctions against villagers who failed to contribute. During epidemics, village communities organized sanitation, social distancing, provisioning during lockdown, and even collective immunization, as in the case of the well-known "general inoculations" against smallpox observed in eighteenth-century European villages.³⁸ Village communes were also crucial in organising resistance to predatory landlords and extractive states, as in the tax revolts in German societies after ca. 1550 or the serf uprisings in Bohemia after ca. 1680, which were often spearheaded by village headmen and elders. The village commune and the trust it generated was central to managing environmental challenges, organising cultivation, providing welfare, and resisting exploitation.

But communal trust also had a dark side. Village communities used their norms, information, sanctions, and collective action to allocate common resources unequally, discriminate against outsiders, oppress women and the lower strata, organize resistance to public-health measures such as lockdowns and vaccination, and even collaborate with extractive landlords. Access to communal pastures and forests was managed by the largest farmers, who used communal social capital to allocate common rights disproportionately to other better-off villagers and exclude the lower rural strata of smallholders, cottagers, and houseless lodgers. Rural communes used their internal trust to exclude migrants, pedlars, beggars, Jews, and Roma. Even among insiders, communities mobilized trust to discriminate against women, young people, labourers, and the land-poor and landless. Village

38 On the role of local communities in epidemics, see Ogilvie, *Controlling Contagion*, 193–227.

oligarchies might act as ringleaders in peasant uprisings, but in normal times they collaborated with landlords and rulers, helping organize coerced labour, rent- and tax-collection, and conscription in return for favours from landlord or state.

How did this work out concretely? One vivid example comes from the Bohemian serf commune of Lusdorf in 1618. Michell Petzelt and one of his neighbours got into a boundary dispute, which the communal court decided against him. Petzelt complained in the manorial court that the community had judged the dispute corruptly “because he is a stranger, and the headman and village justices were each other’s kin.” The word Petzelt used for “stranger” was “fremd.” Nowadays that word means “foreign,” but in seventeenth-century Bohemia it could just mean that he originated from outside the village, even another village on the same estate. Certainly, Petzelt was now firmly settled in Lusdorf since he occupied a farm in the village. However, as far as the community court was concerned, he was an outsider. The importance of multiplex relationships within the commune is illustrated by Petzelt’s accusation that village headmen and justices were not only members of the communal oligarchy but also members of the same local kinship network. The trust fostered among communal insiders could be deployed against even residents of the village who originated elsewhere and continued to be regarded as “strangers.”

Communal trust was also used to coerce female villagers, as our second cluster of examples illustrates. In the Bohemian village of Mildenau in 1605, Jacob Wildner’s wife complained that the village headman had helped a male relative steal her paternal inheritance. In another Bohemian village in 1645, Hans Hübner’s widow complained that the village council had decided that she “could not manage her farm,” so was subjecting it to forced sale at a peppercorn price. In 1685, the Hermsdorf village council tried to eject Jacob Schmied’s widow Anna from her smallholding, and she only managed to retain it (conditionally) by appealing to the landlord. Rural communes discriminated against women because they regarded them as unable to bear their share of communal burdens of coerced labour, rents, taxes, and conscripts for landlord and state. The village oligarchy regarded it as a rational strategy to use communal trust to redistribute resources towards male household heads, even if it harmed their wives, widows, and daughters.³⁹

It might be thought that this dark side of the commune was created not by its own “horizontal” trust but by the surrounding hierarchy of serfdom.

39 Ogilvie and Edwards, “Women and the ‘Second Serfdom.’”

But even in non-feudal western Europe, communities had a dark side. The village of Oberjettingen was located in the southwest German territory of Württemberg, a society in which peasants were among the freest in Europe since Württemberg society contained no strata of nobles or landlords and was governed by one of the strongest parliaments outside England. In Oberjettingen in 1740, a widow applied to be allowed to move into the village and set up a little shop, for which she even obtained a license from the state. But the Oberjettingen community council refused her permission on the grounds that “there is already a shopkeeper in the village.” Such examples were no exception in strong and closely knit Württemberg villages.⁴⁰ Communal trust was also deployed against local widows, as in the early 1790s, when, in response to complaints from young male citizens, the Württemberg community of Wildberg decided that any widow who remarried would be deprived of her plot of common land to which—until that point—each community citizen had been entitled.⁴¹

The trust and collective action that village communes developed to coordinate the three-field system also had its dark side. The community controlled cultivation, required that everyone plant and harvest at the same time, and monitored compliance through communal field wards and field inspectors. This created obstacles to agricultural innovation, as in the German community of Wildberg in 1745, when the introduction of root crops and even the cultivation of barley outside the three-field system were prohibited because these new activities would require that “people go to the fields on several occasions outside the appointed time,” thereby threatening damage to neighbours. Communities also imposed local craft prerogatives, compelling all members of the village to patronize local bakers, millers, or fullers, as in the village of Gültlingen in 1752, when the communal assembly decided that the existing village baker should be granted a prerogative requiring each villager to patronize him instead of being “permitted free choice among bakers.”⁴² These communal norms might protect the business model of established local producers, but prohibitions on new crops hindered agricultural innovation and monopolies for local craft masters reduced competition on both quality and price, in turn harming the living standards of local consumers.

40 Ogilvie, *State Corporatism and Proto-Industry*, 50.

41 Ogilvie, *A Bitter Living*, 252.

42 Ogilvie, *State Corporatism and Proto-Industry*, 68–69.

A Taxonomy of Trust

The historical evidence makes clear, therefore, that trust had both a bright and a dark side. It facilitated both contracts and conspiracies. This finding is not only important in itself. It also holds broader implications for how we think about the role of trust in society and what forces direct it in beneficial or malignant directions.

For one thing, evidence from premodern societies shows that it is useful to distinguish between different objects of trust. In particular, do we trust *persons* or do we place our reliance on *institutions*? Do we trust particular professional practitioners, communal leaders, or town citizens because of the type of persons they are? Or do we trust the institution of the professional association, village headmanship, or urban citizenship? How, moreover, do the two types of trust—in persons and in institutions—interact with one another?

Trust in persons and trust in institutions might often seem to interact as substitutes. Where trust in specific persons is high, as in many traditional societies, people may feel that they can dispense with trust in the systems of rules and customs that we call institutions. Where trust in institutions is high, people may feel they no longer need to trust in persons. This is the view of trust adopted in many branches of the social sciences.

But the two types of trust can also complement one another. Where trust in persons is high, it may create cognitive habits or social expectations that spill over into higher trust in institutions. Conversely, where trust in institutions is high, people may feel more confident about trusting persons. This is the view of trust that animates the theory of social capital, where trust in interpersonal interactions spills over positively into trust in market or state.

Premodern evidence suggests that any taxonomy of trust must distinguish it by whether its objects are persons or institutions. This has the analytical benefit of raising the question of whether the two types of trust counteract or reinforce one another and what social features might tip the balance between the two.

A second feature of any taxonomy of trust, which also emerges naturally from premodern history, is that trust in persons itself falls into two distinct types. One the one hand is a *particularized* trust in persons of known and approved attributes, whether these are gender, ethnicity, kinship, or membership of a particular social network such as an association, community, or guild. Michell Petzelt, for instance, was not trusted in seventeenth-century Lusdorf because, although resident in the village, he was both a “stranger” to the village and unrelated by kinship to the village leaders. A boy with skin

darker than quince marmalade was not trusted to become a guild member in early modern Valencia because, although local, his parentage was Moorish, Jewish, or African, which meant that Valencians of “Christian” extraction would be reluctant to have confidence in him. The other type of trust in persons, by contrast, is a *generalized* trust in persons whose attributes one does not know. Such generalized trust in persons makes it possible to transact peaceably and productively with people with whose attributes and network membership one is not already acquainted. Many examples of the dark side of trust which this essay has examined involve personalized trust taken to extremes, restricting the circle of trust solely to people of specific, identity-related characteristics such as local citizenship, male gender, or shared religion and ethnicity. But many examples of the bright side involved generalized trust in persons beyond the closed network—non-relatives, migrants, foreign trading partners. Trust resulted in beneficial economic and social outcomes when it was generalized but malignant ones when it was excessively personalized.

A third feature of our proposed taxonomy, which also emerges clearly from premodern history, is a distinction between two types of trust in institutions. First, there is a *differential* trust in institutions whose norms and rules treat individuals differently depending on who they are. So a premodern person will trust his guild because he knows it will treat him favourably as a master (or journeyman, or apprentice) of that guild, while a non-member will not trust that guild because they know it will treat them unfavourably as an outsider. A premodern person will trust their community because it will treat them favourably as a community member, while a non-member will not trust it because they will treat them unfavourably as a stranger. Viennese junk-dealers were treated differently depending on whether they were citizens of the community (who were regarded as trustworthy) as opposed to “non-citizen junk-dealers in the suburbs and liberties” who might harm the community by “exposing themselves to the risk of infection for small sums.”

This differential trust in institutions whose rules are identity-directed contrasts with what we might call a *uniform* trust in institutions whose rules apply to everyone, regardless of their identity. In sixteenth-century Bilbao, for instance, medium- and small-scale English merchants trusted the public legal system which was open to every merchant regardless of his identity—indeed, they trusted it more than the consular court proposed for their merchant community. Uniform trust in institutions is the one aspired to by an impartial state with the rule of law, or by an impersonal market that is open to any producer, consumer, or trader. Conversely, we tend to observe

malignant outcomes when trust in institutions is excessively differential and insufficiently uniform.

A final component of our proposed taxonomy also emerges clearly from premodern history. It focuses not on trust directly but rather on the degree of *homophily* in the underlying social network. Homophily refers to the tendency for individuals in a network to interact preferentially with others who are similar to them. Conversely, *heterophily* is when a network favours interactions between individuals who are different from one another. Networks characterized by high homophily on “fixed” (i.e., identity-based) characteristics such as gender or ethnicity tend to spill over as homophily on “mutable” (i.e., choice-based) ones such as education, opinions, occupations, or residence, giving rise to complete segregation between networks.⁴³ Such segregation is particularly common where network homophily is supported by the wider social and institutional framework. In early modern Valencia, for instance, the cobblers’ guild excluded all women as a matter of course, but also kept out darker-skinned males “because of the protests and disturbance which would result from the sight of such persons mingling with honorable and well-dressed people.” The guild transmuted the “fixed” traits of dark skin and male sex into complete educational and occupational segregation between the white males who were allowed to learn and practise the trade and the females and dark-skinned males who were not.

Conversely, networks with lower homophily will avoid the tendency for identity-based traits to spill over into choice-based traits and will therefore typically foster less segregation between similar and dissimilar nodes.⁴⁴ Network heterophily can also be supported by the surrounding social framework. This is illustrated by the early modern Netherlands, which assigned women an unusually favourable status, leading Dutch hatters’ guilds to tolerate female workers. Network homophily, by contrast, was illustrated by early modern German hatters, whose guilds enforced gender homophily because German towns and rulers enforced discrimination against female craft employment.⁴⁵ Low-homophily networks will be less likely to impose entry barriers or organize conspiracies against the public, as in sixteenth-century Spanish America, where colonists were better supplied by networks with low homophily (i.e., that included interloping English and Dutch merchants) than by the high-homophily network of the privileged Seville

43 Schelling, “Dynamic Models of Segregation.”

44 McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook, “Birds of a Feather.”

45 Ogilvie, *The European Guilds*, 280.

consulado. Homophily inside networks is associated with the malignant side of trust (e.g., entry barriers, discrimination, supply shortages, price-fixing, and rejection of innovation). Heterophily inside a network is associated with the beneficent side of trust, by contrast, yielding high gains from trade and greater openness to innovation.⁴⁶

The taxonomy proposed in this essay generates predictions about the type of trust more likely to result in good social outcomes. First, trust in institutions—systems of norms, customs, and rules—had greater capacity to foster good social outcomes than trust in persons because it widened the circle of potential contractual partners. Second, generalized trust in persons regardless of gender, ethnicity, or origin was likely to benefit society more than particularized trust awarded to people solely on the grounds of their identity-related characteristics. Third, uniform trust in institutions that treated everyone equally was more likely to generate the beneficent side of trust, whereas differential trust in institutions that treated people differently depending on their identity or group affiliation was more likely to let trust turn in on itself, creating malignant social outcomes. Finally, the trust generated by networks with high heterophily, in the sense of favouring interactions between dissimilar individuals, was more likely to give rise to good social outcomes than the trust generated by networks with high homophily, which intensify ties between already similar individuals. Nothing could guarantee that trust would not be abused, as shown repeatedly in premodern history. But this taxonomy, and the premodern historical findings inspiring it, illuminates the type of trust more likely to facilitate contracts than to foster conspiracies.

46 Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*.

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