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Guilds, Product Quality and Intrinsic Value. Towards a History of Conventions?

Bert De Munck*

Abstract: »*Zünfte, Produktqualität und intrinsischer Wert: In Richtung einer Geschichte der Konventionen?*«. This article addresses the issue of conventions from the perspective of the early modern guilds' regulations related to product quality. Starting from the ideas of François Eymard-Duvernay one specific convention is identified: 'intrinsic value' (i.e., value related to the raw materials used). This convention enabled guild-based artisans to locate product quality in their political standing and, hence, was intimately linked to the (urban) political context. While this may be familiar to the ideas on 'justification' of Boltanski and Thévenot, an historical analysis reveals fundamental conceptual issues. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, both the convention of intrinsic value and the guilds' power to define product quality became obsolete because of (among other things) epistemological transformations. While intrinsic value as a convention was connected to the idea of matter possessing mysterious, religious and creative powers in itself, natural philosophers naturalized matter from the seventeenth century on. As a result, value may have become synonymous with either the products' place in a taxonomy of products or the meaning produced in discourses external to the product. Further research should in any case take fundamental epistemic shifts and shifts in the subject-object relationships into consideration.

Keywords: conventions, guilds, product quality, repertoires of evaluation, justification, urban history.

The 'economics of convention' have been of great use for a better understanding of economic practices and choices. In general, the theories of conventions have helped to reveal and problematize the field of tension between structuralist and rational choice approaches. In their attempt to confront and reconcile sociological and economic views, the scholars involved have sought for a middle ground between theories based upon predetermined and will-less subjects on the one hand and rational and utility-maximising individuals on the other (Dupuy et al. 1989; Orléan 1989, 1994; Batifoulier 2001; Eymard-Duvernay 2006). As such, convention theorists have shown that economic choices and actions are based upon conventions, which may be defined as implicit (common) rules or knowledge, collective representations, shared models of judge-

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ment or common interpretative contexts (see Biencourt, Chaserant & Rebérioux, 216). However, these theories continue to be haunted by fundamental conceptual problems, starting with the very definition of conventions. To what extent are conventions synonymous with (arbitrary) regularities or implicit knowledge? How do they connect to the ‘rational’ on the one hand and the ‘cultural’ or the ‘institutional’ on the other? And how do rules, politics and power intervene? (Recent perspectives and references in Batifoulier; Eymard-Duvernay et al. 2006; Stanziani 2005, 2006) Some scholars have tried to define conventions from ideas on bounded rationality and game theoretical models. Others have referred to ‘collective (cognitive) dispositions’ and used the concept of ‘(collective) apprenticeship’ in order to understand the emergence and dynamics of conventions (Favereau 1989, 1994; Salais 1989). In a way, this is still very much the difference between an economic and a sociological (or cultural) approach – which indicates that the integration is unfinished.

One of the main issues is the need for a diachronical perspective. Can the emergence and transformation of conventions and institutions be explained by the repeated character of games of coordination and cooperation on a market (while cultural elements are endogenized), or should values, culture and history be seen as exogenous elements? (Biggart & Beamish 2003; Eymard-Duvernay et al. 2006; Swedberg 2006) Most scholars now seem to admit that exogenous shocks and irregularities are involved and that a historical perspective is needed (e.g. Batifoulier & Larquier 2001, 126; Larquier, Abecassis & Batifoulier 2001, 157; Boyer 2006, 54-55). Moreover, after an initial focus on bounded and cognitive rationality and game theory, the last decades have witnessed a return to the interpretative and political perspective of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (Eymard-Duvernay et al. 2006; Boyer 2006; Biencourt, Chaserant & Rebérioux 2001; Batifoulier & Thévenon 2001). For Boltanski and Thévenot (1989, 1991) conventions were fundamentally linked to political philosophy and representations of the common good – which were historically contingent. The basic idea in their standard work *De la justification. Les économies de la grandeur* is that coordination and evaluation involved justification. While judging persons and things implies ranking them according to some basic ideas on what is good and just in a certain ‘monde’ or ‘cité’, evaluations are to be explicitly justified referring to the common good in the event of disagreements and disputes. Each convention will consequently have a political dimension. But here again, a historical perspective is needed. While Boltanski and Thévenot have identified six ‘cités’ or conventions, the roots of which were mostly to be found in pre-industrial times, other scholars have found new forms of worth in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as the ‘green’ worth, the ‘information’ worth and the ‘connectionist’ worth (Lafaye & Thévenot 1993; Thévenot, Moody & Lafaye 2000; Boltanski & Chiapello 1999; Thévenot 2002, 189). So how do ‘conventions’ come about, change and disappear?

In order to shed light on this, I will in this article confront the theories of conventions to the recent historiography on the early modern guilds (with an obvious bias to my own work on the Southern Netherlands), which can be seen as the ‘premodern’ economic institutions *par excellence* (see esp. Epstein & Prak 2008). Linking up with the political perspective on product quality of François Eymard-Duverney (1989, 1994; also Favereau, Biencourt & Eymard-Duverney 2002; Stanziani 2003, 2005, 2006), I will examine a premodern convention (intrinsic value) and how it transformed at the end of the *ancien régime*. As guilds are said to have solved problems related to information asymmetries and uncertainty in the context of thin and underdeveloped markets, they provide for an excellent case study of how problems of coordination are solved, how cooperation, coordination and competition were balanced and – last but not least – how objects and actors were evaluated. While guilds had firm-like functions such as collective bargaining and delegated monitoring (Pfister 2008), they are renowned for their rules and institutional mechanisms related to product quality (Gustafsson 1987). In guilds, a rather specific ‘savoir collectif’ regarding product quality and technical knowledge was at play (De Munck 2007). While this was intimately linked to the (urban) political context, it fundamentally transformed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Above all, guilds enable to develop a genuine historical and political perspective (see Farr 2000 for a historical introduction and additional references). The history of guilds provides for a privileged entry into the relationship of conventions with habits, routines and customs on the one hand and formal rules and institutions on the other. One of the questions to haunt theorists is whether rules and institutions are based upon conventions or the other way around. One could even ask whether there is a place for ‘conventions’ between these two intimately related realms at all (Bessy 2002; Stanziani 2006b). In the first part of this article it will be shown that rules and institutions are based upon pre-existing routines and customs. The formalization of these routines and the institutionalization of rules was the result of demographic, economic and political shifts which brought about a strain on face-to-face-relations and trust, but it cannot be explained from the perspective of the so-called ‘new institutional economics’ alone. While conflicts and power were important elements, discussions on the legitimacy of guild-related rules focused on the definition of product quality. In the second part of this article, I will argue that one specific convention can be identified. I claim that ‘intrinsic value’ (the value of the raw material used) was a broadly shared and very important convention in the urban and guild-based context of the late medieval and early modern period. This convention cannot be framed in the categories of Boltanski and Thévenot (1991), which fail to capture historical reality adequately – perhaps because they project a contemporary perspective upon the distant past. A historical analysis instead reveals a fundamental shift across the ‘conventions’ or ‘worlds’ as they are currently defined.

From the seventeenth century on, ‘intrinsic value’ tends to become discredited as a convention, as a result of guild-based artisans losing political and ideological credibility and, hence, losing grip on the definition of product quality (De Munck 2007b, 2008). What comes to the fore, however, is not only a new ‘cité’ but another epistemic context. Zeroing in on intrinsic value as a convention reveals that the guilds becoming discredited was not only the result of economic or political transformations in a traditional sense. Neither proletarianization and the industrial revolution nor processes of state formation sufficiently capture what was at stake. Intrinsic value as a convention rather became obsolete because of epistemological transformations related to the so-called scientific revolution and enlightened thinking. As a consequence, the long term perspective adopted in this article suggests that the identification of different ‘conventions’ or ‘mondes’ may not be sufficient. In the third part I will argue that the nature, and hence the very definition of what a convention might be, has changed over time. Starting from ideas familiar to Michel Foucault, Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, I will tackle the broader issue of modernization processes and the involvement of intellectuals and scientists in the construction thereof. My ultimate point is that these processes have had an enormous impact on economic theories and practices in general and on the demise of the urban-based artisans’ ‘conventions’ in specific – up to and including even our current views on ‘conventions’.

1. Conventions versus Institutions

Economic historians studying guilds tend to understand their rules and institutional mechanisms as solutions to a pre-existing economic problem. Collective bargaining and delegated monitoring are said to have lowered information and other transaction costs. The guilds’ labour market monopsony is considered to have increased investment in training – as it excluded free riders and stimulated both masters and apprentices to enter into apprenticeship contacts (Epstein 2008). The existence of a labour market monopsony may have stimulated masters to invest in training in its own right, but Stephan R. Epstein (1998) has suggested that both fixed term to serve and registration fees and end term rewards for apprentices moreover served to prevent apprentices from absconding and hence ensured masters that they could recover the cost of training by paying wages below the marginal product of labour. While guilds very often simply prohibited employing apprentices who had not finished their apprenticeship term (again guaranteeing a certain return on investment for masters) apprentices could be protected against exploitation. Maximum numbers of apprentices and the existence of standardized master pieces may have had the effect that apprentices learned more and could foresee what they would earn in advance – stimulating apprentices as well to invest in training (compare De Munck 2011a).

From the perspective of product quality guilds are deemed to have solved problems of information asymmetry. While the obligation to serve a fixed term for apprentices and to make a standardized master piece for prospective masters guaranteed a certain product quality *ex ante*, product standardizations and workshop searches enabled *ex post* sanctioning of product quality. In extension, product quality was communicated to customers (or merchants) either face-to-face or by means of collective hall marks (Gustafsson 1987; Epstein 2008; De Munck 2007b, 2008, 2011a). This distinction already suggests that problems related to product quality could be solved formally as well as informally, but reducing late medieval and early modern processes of institutionalization to the need to solve economic problems would be mistaken. Up to the sixteenth century at least, guilds were a type of brotherhoods in which devotional practices and egalitarian ideals took centre stage next to economic benefits and calculation (De Munck 2009a, 2010c). Entering the group was not a ‘game’ in which members received the benefits of the collective in return for a certain investment in terms of entrance fees. New members were either born into the group (as sons of masters) or they were socialized into the group via an apprenticeship term with an established master. This apprenticeship term involved both acquiring technical knowledge and adopting certain values. These values may have been related to a certain trustworthiness in an economic sense, next to religious and cultural ideals and principles, but reducing them to mere honesty and morality would imply that product quality was an unproblematic and natural characteristic of products. Instead, we should see apprenticeship as a process in which not only technical knowledge was acquired (next to cultural values) but some basic ideas on product quality as well.

When the Antwerp diamond cutters requested the city authorities the permission to erect a guild in 1582, they distinguished between outsiders who made inferior products and insiders who made the right products because they were in the trade from childhood and ‘had exercised in the art since their early days’ (De Munck 2011a, 244). When the guild was finally erected, product quality was not defined: the guild board assumed that those in the trade knew what was meant with phrases like ‘well and carefully cut’, because they were supposed to act ‘out of love for the noble stones and for the honour of the city’. Documents like these suggest that apprenticeship was a process of interiorizing certain conventions related to product quality, just as convention theorists have suggested. The erection of a guild of gold and silversmiths, and hence the prescription of fixed terms to serve and standardized master pieces, came along with lengthy rules on the origin of silver, the alloy, and a broad range of measures against fraud and deceit. This ordinance as well may at first sight be broached from the perspective of the problem of information asymmetry, but this does not prevent the eventual convention to apply being the result of an arbitrary choice (De Munck 2011a).

Should the body of a diamond be crystal clear or would a ‘birthmark’ or a shade of colour have an added value? Is a diamond to be cut and polished perfectly symmetrical or would some irregularities be valued in their own right? It all appears to be a matter of ‘pure’ convention. However, the institutionalization of conventions happened in the context of fierce economic and political conflicts. In Antwerp, guilds sought to define more closely who could be member of the group or not in the course of the long sixteenth century. While Antwerp guilds could decide ad hoc who would be member up until the fifteenth century – they only had to inform the urban authorities who someone was when accepted – a fixed term to serve was introduced in most guilds somewhere between about 1450 and 1550. Moreover, between the last decades of the fifteenth century and the first decades of the seventeenth, a standardized master piece was introduced for all those who wanted to become master (and sometimes for those who wanted to become journeyman). Notwithstanding very different chronologies, most guilds in the Southern Netherlands and beyond would seem to have experienced a similar transition in the long run. My research on Antwerp suggests that this process was related to demographic expansion, which put a strain on face-to-face-mechanisms. It cannot have been a coincidence that the Antwerp population at the same time quadrupled between the end of the fifteenth century and the third quarter of the sixteenth. In addition, this demographic transition came along with changing labour relations in general and with outsiders starting to employ apprentices and journeymen themselves – without being a regular master – in specific. Introducing fixed terms to serve and standardized master pieces clearly intended to exclude entrepreneurs who had not trained properly (De Munck 2009a, 2010a, 2011a).

As a result, this was not a matter of simply guaranteeing product quality to customers. While the argument used to exclude so-called intruders was often the superior quality of products made by guild members as opposed to the products of the outsiders, these conflicts involved the power to define what product quality was. Most founding ordinances of guilds (i.e., the first written rules) defined entry rules and product quality at the same time – which was clearly a political process. To the extent that it was a bottom up process, establishing a guild boiled down to recognizing the superiority of an established group of masters’ view on product quality. In most core regions in Europe these masters at the same time claimed or possessed a large degree of political clout. In the Southern Netherlands, for example, they held seats in the urban magistracy or at least a broader council up until the end of the *ancien régime* (exceptions left out) (Prak 2006). Moreover, these masters consequently referred to the common good of the city when claiming and defending their labour market monopsony and their rules related to product quality. As to entrance to the group, the first requirement for prospective masters was typically being a burgher of the city in which the guild was established. Immigrants had to buy “burghership” (citizenship) and swear loyalty to the city before they

could become master at all (De Munck & Winter 2011). So product quality was indeed a political issue, just as the theories of Boltanski, Thévenot, Eymard-Duvernay and others imply. The conventions as they come down to us, are the result of historical processes in which power relations are involved.

However, this is not to say that the models of Boltanski and Thévenot can simply be projected upon the late medieval and early modern guilds. While economists and sociologists often tend to connect guilds to relations of proximity and face-to-face-networks in which trust is produced ('convention domestique'), historians are perfectly well aware that guilds very often sold standardized products in wider markets with a large degree of anonymity in which trust is produced through the products' standards and the communication thereof with trade marks, packaging and the like – which could perfectly well be framed in the so-called 'convention industrielle' (Deceulaer 1998; Deceulaer & Jacobs 1998). As a consequence, guild-based masters could adhere to different conventions at the same time, which could in turn be connected to different market segments and the concomitant production structures and labour relations. In extension, guilds could be linked to the so-called 'monde civique', in which formal rules related to apprenticeship, membership and product standards served to protect and represent an ideal of solidarity and equality and the attainment of a collective goal.

However, reducing the issue of conventions to a question of market segments and collective action would be mistaken altogether. On the one hand, guilds working in different market segments could perfectly well adhere to one and the same political philosophy – as for example republican values or Antony Black's 'guild ethos'. In his classic book *Guilds & state* (first published as *Guilds & civil society*) Black starts from a distinction between a 'guild ethos' based on values such as friendship and mutual aid and 'civil society', based on liberal ideas about personal freedom, legal equality and individual independence. His central point is that a long term transformation, in which a modern civil society gradually replaced a guild ethos, is hard to find. Instead, what we call civil society today – a set of social organisations freely accessible by individuals and relatively independent from the state – is said to have existed since the twelfth century (in towns) and to have evolved alongside and intertwined with the guilds' values for centuries (Black 1984, 2009; Schilling 1988). On the other hand, a process of standardization and institutionalization can be identified across guilds and market segments (De Munck 2010a, 2011a). Up to a certain degree, institutionalization and product standardization seem to have been related processes from a historical perspective. While defining product quality went hand in glove with defining membership of the group, conflicts and changing power relations explain processes of institutionalisation and standardization. Hence, the need for a fresh look at the connection between conventions and the political context. What conventions were chosen and how

were they justified? To what extent were conventions arbitrary and how were they related to political philosophy?

2. Intrinsic Value as a Convention and Beyond

In order to understand the early modern guilds' conventions adequately, we should first of all realize that product standardization mostly involved some sort of 'intrinsic value'. What the guilds guaranteed with their seals and trade marks was, typically, the nature and the characteristics of the raw materials used. In textiles, they referred to the origin and quality (including preparatory stages) of the fibres used; in metal trades to the origin, alloy and purity of the silver and tin used; in leather trades to the origin and quality (again including preparation) of the leather used; and so on (De Munck 2007b, 2008, 2010a). Although durability may have been involved in some cases, 'intrinsic value' could be seen as a 'pure' convention, for why favouring 'intrinsic quality' instead of design, decoration or the shape of a product? And why favouring silver and tin instead of other scarce ores? However, for the guild-based masters involved, the choice for intrinsic value was not an arbitrary one. Notwithstanding apprenticeship terms and master pieces, guilds could never make sure that their skills and products were superior to those of outsiders. Masters or urban authorities not seldom favoured the skills of immigrants, because they were acquainted with new and innovative techniques and product forms (Reith 1994, 2006; Epstein 2004; De Munck 2004a; Belfanti 2004). In this context, stressing intrinsic value instead of skills or acquaintance with product forms enabled these artisans to link product quality to their political status. As guild rules and trade marks guaranteed that silver was made according to the proper alloy, that tin ware did not contain too much lead, that the proper leather and wood was used and so forth, product quality was not guaranteed by the quality of the artisanal skills applied. What guaranteed product quality was trustworthiness, a moral quality. This moral quality was in turn connected to the identification of a local master with the common good of the guild and the city – among other things by the obligation for masters to be a burgher of the city in question.

Looking upon the guilds' economic and cultural practices closely it becomes clear that product quality was deliberately linked to the city as a political context. While guilds carried along visual references to their products and instrument in public processions and parades, their hall marks to be stamped on their products explicitly referred to the city's coat of arms. Hall marks in Antwerp often referred to the Antwerp hand or the typical rhomb-shaped fortress. Hall marks in Nuremberg referred to the Nuremberg shield, with half of the double-headed eagle in a golden field on the left and three bends on the right (De Munck 2004b, 2009b, 2009c). From this perspective, the choice for intrinsic value as the leading convention becomes a rational one at least for the artisans

involved. But intrinsic value was also an obvious choice from the perspective of the leading economic and political theories of the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries. In mercantilism, the wealth of a nation or a prince was linked to the amount of bullion on its territory. In more advanced theories, this applies not only to bullion but to raw materials as well (Magnusson 2003). While tinsmiths on the continent favoured English tin as a raw material, the prosperity of drapery depended upon the availability of English (or Spanish) wool, while good quality silk was associated with Asia and (later) Italy, fur with Russia and (northern) North America, cotton with India and so on (e.g. Munro 2005).

In historiography, mercantilism has mostly been linked to the strategies of strong central states such as France (e.g. Minard 1998), but projecting it onto the city as the relevant political context automatically results in the primacy of intrinsic value – i.e. the value of the raw materials used – for the guilds. For the prosperity of urban industries and cities as well, the availability of raw materials was of the utmost importance, so adopting strategies and discourses geared towards ‘intrinsic value’ was an obvious choice. Still, the mercantilist theories may in turn have been related to the epistemological context in a broader sense. Up until the seventeenth century ‘nature’ was not seen as dead and passive matter out of which something valuable could be manufactured instrumentally. For natural philosophers, both *naturalia* and *artificialia* provided access to the book of nature or to the ultimate truth of god (Daston and Park 1998; Daston 2004). When creating the world, God had, as it were, left his signature in matter, as a result of which deciphering the signs led to his wisdom. For artisans this may have implied that agency (or creativity) was not only situated in their skills and embodied knowledge, but in the raw materials they used as well. According to Pamela Smith (2000a, 2000b, 2004) manufacturing was not unlike alchemy up until the seventeenth century. It implied a mystic encounter between two morally charged ‘bodies’, the result of which was a sort of unleashing the creative powers of the raw materials involved. After all, late medieval and early modern artisans often knew how to create certain ‘effects’ without really comprehending the ‘natural laws’ involved (Mokyr 2002).

So both these ‘mysteries of the trade’ and the ‘choice’ for ‘intrinsic value’ cannot be understood without considering the religious and cultural context these artisans worked in. Guido Guerzoni has shown that humanistic discussions on the idea of *liberalitas* included reflections on the transfer of material goods and the virtue of spending money and investing it in gifts and luxury items while carefully balancing the material goods and the *magnificentia* of the spender (Guerzoni 1999; Jeggle 2010, 37). While this also suggests a connection between the value of the object and the value of the subject, the predominance of a certain convention not only involved political and discursive power (and history) but epistemology as well. It may even be worthwhile to link this to Michel Foucault’s so-called Renaissance-*episteme*, in which the secrets of

the world could be deciphered through objects and artefacts which always led towards the same truth, just as words did. In any event, I very much sympathize with the idea of Michel Callon and others that economic (and political) theory has helped shape economic practices and instruments – including the fundamental conventions involved (Callon 1998a, 1998b; Callon, Millo & Muniesa 2007). Connecting this perspective to a long term historical view moreover allows for a more thorough understanding of conventions, including the very definition of what a convention is.

From an economic perspective, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed a shift from intrinsic value to design and decoration as important ingredients of product quality. While Guerzoni has pointed to the emergence of *splendor* as a new form of investment related to ostentation, Jan De Vries (2008) in particular has described a shift from ‘old luxury’ to ‘new luxury’, i.e. from a situation in which the value of a product derived from the value/quality of the raw materials used to one in which invention, newness and fashion played a more prominent role. While old luxury products had a long life cycle and a long-lasting worth (for instance on second hand markets), new luxuries were subject to a faster de-appreciation. This process appears to have been related to new views on artisanal labour. Enlightened thinkers at the same time developed new views on artisanal labour and skills. While the growing importance of invention and ‘ingenium’ may have been beneficial for some artisans and artists, the importance of the mechanical arts was stressed, among others in the famous *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and D’Alembert. Looking at it more closely however, it becomes clear that artisanal skills became instrumentalized (Koepp 1980; Sewell 1980; Schaffer 1999). On the one hand, guilds became discredited in a discourse on the need to disclose the ‘mysteries of the trade’. Enlightened thinkers apparently lost the capacity to understand the mysterious character of skills and technical knowledge other than through the grid of a cartel of entrepreneurs jealously guarding their knowledge and refusing entrance to outsiders. On the other hand, labour and skills came to be placed on equal footing with machinery and instruments. Scholars such as Adam Smith and others attempted to make skills public, but in this process were decomposing them analytically. Artisans were reduced to a type of very sophisticated robots in the end.

In the long run, this process appears to have been related to one of labour disappearing from the public scene altogether. While the guilds’ political power gradually became obsolete due to processes of state formation, the artisanal presence in the public realm waned. The ‘traditional’ processions and parades lost their importance and attractiveness (in part because of certain processes of appropriation from the part of urban elites). Perhaps more important the character of the rituals changed from practices in which supernatural ‘presences’ were created into practices that ‘communicated’ and ‘represented’ something (Muir 1997). Artisanal labour may even have become less visible in

a literal sense. At least in service sectors guild-based masters had often worked at the front side of their houses. They were even obliged to do so with a view on customers and guild officials being able to guard the working process and prevent fraud – while working in cellars, at attics or simply at the back of the house was associated with trickery and cheating. Long term structural economic transformations such as proletarianization and the so-called ‘retail-revolution’ resulted in manufacturing moving away from the front of the house in the course of the early modern period (De Munck, 2010a, 41). While masters increasingly worked as subcontractors or even employees to other masters, a category of ‘faiseurs de rien, vendeurs de tout’ emerged who displayed and sold goods at the front of the house (Mui & Mui 1989; Blondé et al. 2005, 2006). These goods, if not imported, were manufactured elsewhere, for example at the back of another house by a proletarianized master working for piece rates to a wholesaler.

Although this may give the impression that these transformation can be understood from a mere socio-economic perspective, a political and epistemological perspective may again be needed in order to understand this adequately. What happened from the perspective of product value is the disappearance of the link between product quality and the political status of the manufacturing masters. Whenever the ‘intrinsic convention’ applied, product quality was guaranteed by the political standing of the manufacturing masters. The link between intrinsic value and the political and ethical position of the master materialized in the collective hall mark – which referred to the city as a context and could only be applied by a regular master – i.e. a manufacturer who had finished his mandatory apprenticeship term and made a master piece. In a modern fashion system, however, a product’s ‘quality’ derives from the product’s place among a series or a taxonomy of products. Or else it became depended on an external discourse on product quality, to be found in catalogues, trade cards, shops signs, advertisements and so on. This is what took place in the long run. While the guilds disappeared and labour retreated from the public realm, goods became displayed and ranked in shops and warehouses (Walsh 1995; Hann & Stobart 2005; additional references in Van Damme 2007a). And while the guilds’ collective hall marks became obsolete, the products’ value was constructed through modern trade marks and advertisement strategies (McKendrick, 1960, 1982; Robinson 1963; Walsh 2000; Van Damme 2010).

3. Convention Theories, Post-structuralism and Latour

Now how to connect this to the current state of the art on product quality and conventions? Can this shift be framed in the model of Boltanski and Thévenot, which was subsequently adopted by Eymard-Duverney? Was there a shift from domestic and industrial conventions to something related to a ‘cité marchande’? Did the collective rules and conventions (related to product quality)

of the so-called ‘monde civique’ disappear or did they rather emerge (in the realm of labour relations) in the nineteenth century? And what about the ‘monde inspiré’? Should we connect this to intrinsic value (the spiritual presence in matter) or rather to the genius of nineteenth-century designers and artists? In my opinion, these models fail to capture adequately the shift which concerns us here. To the extent that the transformation sketched above can be seen as a shift from an ‘économie de l’offre’ to an ‘économie de la demande’ (Minard 1998, 160) there may be a growing similarity with the so-called ‘convention marchande’. After all, consumer preferences and the price mechanism may have become more important as a frame of reference for the assessment of products. But this of course does not prevent ‘orders of worth’ from being historically and culturally contingent. Nor were competition, opportunism, calculation and the price mechanism absent in early modern guild-based industries. Economic historians may even be inclined to associate a more ‘classical’ market mechanism to the prominence of intrinsic value. After all, cultural elements became more rather than less important as a factor in the price of products from the eighteenth century on.

What appears to have happened, then, was a shift from a ‘regulated’ to a ‘deliberated’ quality (Minard 2010), but this shift was related to new ways of ‘knowing’ product quality. To date, the precise historical processes involved are not entirely understood – while connoisseurship could shift from manufacturing masters to retailers (e.g., Van Damme 2007b, 2010), the object of knowledge is said to have shifted from (the appearance of) products to the production process (Reddy 1988) – but it is in any case clear that epistemic transformations should be considered in future research. My work on guilds in the Low Countries points to a shift which materialized across industrial sectors. Given the epistemic character of this shift, the work of Boltanski and Thévenot should in my opinion be complemented with the insights of Michel Foucault and Bruno Latour (see Diaz-Bone 2009 for an introduction and additional references). The value of products becoming dependent on either the place of the product among a taxonomy of products or of an external discourse on product quality is remarkably similar to the Foucauldian shift from a Renaissance to a classical episteme. According to Foucault (1966, 1969) truth became something man-made. From mid-seventeenth-century on truth was the result of taxonomies or discourses built by man, while the spiritual presence of god (in matter) disappeared. The so-called scientific revolution was of course an important watershed in this respect. Philosophers and artisans alike were involved in a process in which observation and experiment became important in the construction of ‘matters of fact’. While the portentous nature of prodigies – which often took the shape of body-like ‘things’ such as monstrous birds, oddly shaped animals and the like – were intensely discussed under the influence of religious turmoil in the sixteenth and first half of the seventeenth centuries, the

preternatural marvels of nature were gradually naturalized subsequently (Daston 1994).

To cut a long story short, the transformations guild-based artisans were subject to may have been part of a broader ‘disenchantment’ in which the material world was increasingly seen as passive matter subject only to natural laws. In the terms of Bruno Latour (1991, 1999), this may be seen as a ‘purification process’, in which objects or nature lost all ‘agency’ while subjects (scientists) constructed the myth of humans being autonomous actors detached from objects. This process may in turn be linked to the disappearance of the connection between product quality and the political standing of (the body of) the artisan. While the intrinsic value of gifts and other material goods was closely linked to the (moral) ‘quality’ of the spender in humanistic discourse in Renaissance Italy, guild-based artisans connected the intrinsic value to their political standing through apprenticeship rules and trade marks. What happened in the long run was the disappearance of this link, as a result of the guilds being abolished or their products being outcompeted by products without hall marks. In my view, this points to a fundamental restructuring of the object-subject-relationship. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, human subjugation to the magical powers of objects gradually came to be seen as a sort of fetishism that stood in diametric opposition to the emancipation process that is associated with the scientific revolution and enlightenment. In the same vein, the subject’s relationship with language and symbols is historically contingent. In western intellectual history, the idea took root, that humans master their language. While ‘primitive people’ appear to subjugate themselves to language in rituals and ceremonies – in which certain phrases are for example repeated until a state of trance is reached – nineteenth and twentieth-century missionaries boasted their ability to use language sincerely, as a genuine expression of the intimate self (Keane 2002, 2007).

In reality, language is of course a historical construction as well. Perhaps not coincidentally, language as we understand it today may have its roots in the seventeenth century too. The Saussurian distinction between the (material) signifier and the (ideal) signified has been traced back to John Locke, among others. While for Locke the relationship between sign and meaning was seen as something conventional (without a natural or necessary connection between them) the linguistic sign came to be seen as the representation of a pre-linguistic idea – and hence, of something mental (Aarsleff 1982). In this sense, scientific views up to and including post-structuralism, may result from a process in which the intrinsic value of labour and the connection thereof with the political claims of artisans via products and hall marks became discredited. Hence, the importance of linking epistemic shifts to changing economic practices. While Callon and others have studied the impact of economic theories and models upon daily economic practices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, others have pointed to the relationship between ‘the archaeology of

knowledge' and the emergence of political economy in the seventeenth and eighteenth century (Vigo de Lima 2010). Perhaps it is time now to connect a Foucauldian approach to the early modern artisans' views and attitudes.

For the time being, I am not sure whether to see the disappearance of 'intrinsic value' as a kind of 'disembeddedness' or rather an 'overdetermination' of markets, but from the perspective of the artisans involved, it must in any case have had the effect of a certain 'alienation' – without, however, understanding alienation in the Marxist sense. My source material suggests that guild-based artisans did not fear loss of control over the means of production. They did not resist being paid in raw materials or selling all their output at piece rates to one and the same merchant. What they resisted was illegal entrepreneurs selling products either without trade marks or with trade marks but without it being clear what the trade mark referred to. For instance, they resisted the formation of companies between a regular master and an entrepreneur who was not a member of the guild – because it enabled the entrepreneur to use the master's mark while employing the latter in reality. In the same vein, they feared the activities of masters' widows, who could often lend the deceased master's hall mark to an illegal entrepreneur (who might even marry her in order to escape apprenticeship requirements) (De Munck, 2007b, 2008, 2010a). In other words, regular masters were opposed to the separation of product quality and their own moral and political quality.

It could also be a fruitful idea, therefore, to frame this with the gift-concept in subsequent research (De Munck 2011b). From a gift perspective, products (gifts) convey the 'spirit of the giver', which is in turn connected to the latter's social status, prestige and political standing. What guild-based masters did with their hall marks, from this perspective, was to imprint their 'spirit' onto the product, and hence, implicitly claiming something in return from either their customers or the merchants they sold their products to. These products, in this sense, were not entirely commodified, nor can they be seen as disinterested works of art (as Marxist theory would enforce us to do). Instead, they could be seen as a type of gift, which up to a certain degree possessed the quality of a heirloom, as their value depended on the prestige of the previous owner (in this case the producer). Labour relations (e.g. the relation between masters and merchants) or buyer-seller relations (e.g. when a customer brings his own textile fabrics to a tailor) could in extension be seen as a type of patronage relationships. Conventions, in this context, must have functioned very differently when compared to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – although similar relationships may of course exist there as well.

Conclusion

From the perspective of markets becoming disembedded or overdetermined, the heterodox view on 'conventions' should be qualified. There are of course

different conventions in different market segments and socio-political, geographical and chronological contexts, but we should be wary not to conceal fundamental historical transformations across market segments and so-called ‘mondes’. In a long term diachronical perspective markets became a reified reality – or rather: an intellectual construction in which products were entirely commodified and the artisanal body instrumentalized. This becomes clear when zeroing in on the discursive practices and conventions of guild-based manufacturing artisans in (NW-)Europe. What they implicitly agreed on was the importance of intrinsic value in a product, which was expressed in their collective hall marks and linked to the urban political and a broader intellectual context at the same time. Of course, while this may have been limited to so called ‘strong guilds’, in which masters held the reins, and although it is likely to have been influenced by the cities’ level of autonomy, it must nonetheless have been embedded in a firm mental frame. While intrinsic value (the value of silver, gold and, in extension, raw materials) can be seen as the very fundament of mercantilist thinking, it enabled guild-based master to link their (urban) political standing to the value of their products. Their collective hall marks, which guaranteed a standardized product quality to customers, were only to be used by artisans who had finished an apprenticeship term and had become a burgher to the city.

From the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, this appears to have changed drastically. The gradual but profound severance of product quality on the one hand and the moral and political standing of manufacturing masters on the other may in part have been a consequence of changing labour relations and processes of state formation, but intellectual and epistemic transformations would seem to have been more important. While intrinsic value as a convention appears to have been connected to the idea of matter possessing mysterious, religious and creative powers in itself, natural philosophers and artisans naturalized matter from the seventeenth century on. In their wake, enlightened thinkers decomposed the ‘mysteries of the trade’ and, in the event, instrumentalized the artisanal skills and bodies. In the terms of Bruno Latour, this could be seen as a sort of purification process, in which agency became to be located exclusively in a Cartesian subject, which attached value to objects visually and discursively. As I see it, this history should be taken into account when discussing the nature, characteristics and definition of conventions.

Several conceptual problems surface when taking a historical point of view seriously. How did the role and functions of ‘objects’ (Boltanski & Thévenot 1989, 1991; Batifoulier & Thévenon 2001, 248-250) in the attribution of status change in the long run? How to understand the possible impact of the disappearance of patronage relations, the long term shift from gift-exchange to market-exchange and from guild-based hall marks to modern brands, trade marks and advertising? How did it change the networks and translation processes which attributed agency to humans and artefacts? How was the so-called ‘sa-

voir collectif" related to intrinsic value and the early modern apprenticeship system and how did apprenticeship transform when intrinsic value disqualified and skills became instrumentalized? How, in the end, were conventions produced? Could it be that this was farther removed from game theoretical models and (bounded) rationality in the late middle ages than it is today (if only because of the religious doctrines of the 'just price')? Whatever the case may be, given the historical impact of the social sciences on economic reality, economists, sociologists and historians should continue thinking very cautiously about definitions, models and transformations. Above all, they should continue to address them from a long term and interdisciplinary perspective.

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