

## Urban Institutional Arrangements in Medieval Europe: An Ecological Approach

In a recent article, the historian Bas van Bavel called for the use of the past as a laboratory to test hypotheses about social and economic processes developed by social scientists and economists, and in particular theories pertaining to the formation and evolution of institutions. Institutions, broadly understood as rule-systems that enable and govern human interactions, have been at the forefront of scholarly research since the 1990s, when the so-called new institutionalism held sway across the political, social and economic sciences, initiated by the work of the economic historian Douglass North, amongst others.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, historical institutionalism developed as an approach with a historical orientation to the question how institutions structure and shape human behaviour.<sup>2</sup> Yet, several questions pertaining to the emergence, evolution and decline of institutions remain unresolved. Two particular issues relate to the design of institutions: on the one hand, the question of how they come into being; on the other, how they change over time.<sup>3</sup> This paper addresses the latter question. By taking urban corporations – trade and craft guilds, as well as religious confraternities – as case studies, it analyses processes of institutional continuity and change in late medieval urban contexts.

Processes of institutional change are possibly best explained by reference to the interdependence between institutions and the societies within which they evolve. In order to understand the complex relations of institutions and the wider environment in which they are embedded, this paper explores the merits of an ecological explanation. Commonly, ecology is understood as the study of the interaction between organisms and their environment. Biologists, for example, might provide an ecological explanation as to why a particular species is differentially better adapted than others to a certain environment. Such an explanation answers the why-question by analysing the reciprocal relations of a (group of) organisms with other organisms and their natural environment; however, it cannot explain the biological processes as to how an organism acquires certain advantages. Environments or

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<sup>1</sup> D.C. North, *Institutions, institutional change, and economic performance* (Cambridge; New York, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: M.C. Brinton and V. Nee (eds.), *The new institutionalism in sociology* (Stanford, CA, 2001); B.G. Peters, *Institutional theory in political science: the new institutionalism* (New York, 2012); S. Steinmo, 'What is Historical Institutionalism?', in M. Keating and D.D. Porta (eds.), *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 150–78, at pp. 150–78; A. Greif, 'Historical and Comparative Institutional Analysis', *The American Economic Review* 88.2 (1998), pp. 80–4.

<sup>3</sup> According to Ostrom, a theory of institutional change should explain both the origins and reform of institutions; E. Ostrom, *Governing the commons. The evolution of institutions for collective action* (Cambridge; New York, 1990), pp. 140–1.

ecosystems are by definition open and dynamic, meaning that ecological explanations take the complexities arising from contextual variation across space and temporal specificity into account.

In a way similar to how humans and other species are part of ecosystems, institutions can be understood as being part of open and dynamic complexes of political, social, economic and cultural processes.<sup>4</sup> Drawing on political ecology<sup>5</sup> or ecological economics<sup>6</sup> – two relatively young fields of research that in very broad terms engage with the political and economic aspects of the relations between society and its environment – this contribution shares the idea that human practices and their institutional embodiments are interdependent with the natural world. The focus here, however, is not on the interactions between societies and their biophysical base, nor on environmental issues in the strict sense of the word. Yet, important conceptual and methodological insights can be gained from these fields of research that can further our understanding of the ways in which premodern institutions evolved over time.

Ecological explanations are not predicated upon a single methodology, but use multiple methods to examine the reciprocal relationships between the living and the non-living that form a specific environment. Equally, when seeking to explain institutional processes, different methods of institutional analysis can be used to unravel the interactions of institutions with each other and the context of which they form part. Theories of institutional change distinguish between exogenously and endogenously induced change: the former are processes brought about by external factors; the latter are internal processes that either reinforce or weaken institutions. Exogenous institutional change is often linked with abrupt ruptures after longer periods of stability, while endogenous transformation is understood to be more gradual and incremental in nature. Scholars mostly focus on the second type of (slow) change, since it is regarded as the most common but less easily explained form of institutional

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<sup>4</sup> C. Ansell, 'Ecological Explanation', in G. Berk, D.C. Galvan, and V. Hattam (eds.), *Political Creativity: Reconfiguring Institutional Order and Change* (Philadelphia, 2013), pp. 55–77; S. Abrutyn, 'Toward A Theory of Institutional Ecology: The Dynamics of Macro Structural Space', *Review of European Studies* 4.5 (2012), p. 167.

<sup>5</sup> See, for a recent neo-Marxist of the field of political ecology: T. Perreault, G. Bridge, and J. McCarthy (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology* (London; New York, 2015). A particular emphasis is put on the epistemological questions; political ecology, according to the editors, is the 'theoretical and political lens through which to understand, challenge and structure further inquiry into nature-society relations in the contemporary world'.

<sup>6</sup> See, for a recent introduction: J. Martínez-Alier and R. Muradian (eds.), *Handbook of Ecological Economics* (Cheltenham; Northampton, 2015). 'One of the distinctive features of ecological economics has been a shared vision of the economic system as embedded in a biophysical base, which calls for looking at economic processes from a biophysical perspective (instead of solely from a monetary point of view) and thus invoking the notion of metabolism.'

evolution. Both forms, however, are to be regarded as adjustments to changes in the environment in which the institutions are embedded.

### **Theories of Institutional Change**

Apart from the shared conviction that institutions are a decisive factor in constraining and enabling human interactions, different strands of institutional theory make varied claims about what institutions exactly embody, their ontological status, and the nature of institutional change. Yet, the value that tends to be placed on the preferences and actions of actors over broader contextual factors in order to explain institutional persistence and change seems to be a second common denominator.<sup>7</sup> This line of thought is, for instance, reflected in Ogilvie's claim that 'the historical findings on guilds provide strong support for explanations according to which institutions arise and survive for centuries not mainly because they address market failures, but because they serve the distributional interests of powerful groups'.<sup>8</sup> In other words, it was not so much the way in which guilds fit into pre-modern society and (political) economy that explains their persistence, but rather the particular interests of elites who intentionally designed and used these institutions to serve their ends.

The focus on human agency as key explanatory factor in institutional change is common among historical institutionalists, even though they emphasise, more than rational choice theorists do, that institutions constrain actors and shape their preferences. In North's understanding, for example, endogenous institutional change is driven at different levels by the competition between institutions and organisations, as well as by the responses of political and economic actors to changes in the institutional framework as the result of – in cultural terms – changing tastes, or – in economic terms – changing relative prices that alter the incentives of individuals. The incremental path of institutional development is dependent on a number of factors, such as self-reinforcing lock-in situations, feedback processes, path dependency, and complementarities between institutions, implying that processes of change do not necessarily lead to more efficient institutions.<sup>9</sup>

North's background explains the emphasis he puts on economic behaviour and transactions costs, but the mechanisms he describes have been elaborated upon by scholars

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<sup>7</sup> G. Jackson, 'Actors and Institutions', in P. Morgan et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Institutional Analysis* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 63–86.

<sup>8</sup> S. Ogilvie, 'The Economics of Guilds', *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 28.4 (2014), pp. 169–92, at p. 187; See, for a similar argument: H. Swanson, 'The Illusion of Economic Structure: Craft Guilds in Late Medieval English Towns', *Past & Present* 121.1 (1988), pp. 29–48.

<sup>9</sup> North, *Institutions, institutional change, and economic performance*, pp. 7, 83–4, 89, 94–5.

from other fields. Thelen and Mahoney, for instance, have developed a theory of change of political institutions that explicate these mechanisms. Seeing institutional continuity and change as two sides of the same coin, they argue that a proper understanding of (path-dependent) institutional development is predicated upon knowledge of the reproduction mechanisms behind institutions and particular events and of the processes that enable change. Agents develop distinct strategies to deal with particular institutional contexts or institutional properties, thereby effecting four types of gradual change – the varying degree of compliance allowing rules to be altered through either displacement, layering, drift or conversion.<sup>10</sup> This theory gives a more balanced view of the importance of agency and structure for institutional change by emphasising the importance of the interactions between actors' strategies and contexts. Yet, by identifying different types of institutional change, the question why institutions evolve remains unanswered.

Scholars have mainly theorised about contemporary political and economic institutions; Greif and Laitin are an exception, deriving their theory of institutional change from historical examples.<sup>11</sup> Their game-theoretic approach draws on the political and economic histories of medieval Venice and Genoa to demonstrate how institutions have an impact on their own context and are subsequently self-reinforcing or self-undermining in their ability to adapt to these changes. Self-reinforcing institutions cope better with changing contextual 'parameters' (which become endogenous variables in the long run), thereby maintaining the equilibrium between players as they adhere to the rules in more situations and also in the face of exogenous shocks. The opposite is true for self-undermining institutions, which are 'less sensitive to environmental changes [which] can render an institution no longer self-enforcing in a given environment'. Endogenous change, in this view, is very narrowly understood, as it does not affect the behaviour of actors or result in the creation of new institutions. This would only happen if the beliefs – whether political, economic, social or cultural – of the actors alter and the associated behaviour were to lose its self-reinforcing function.

Thus, both historical and rational choice approaches to institutions attest to the fact that institutional change is caused by the dynamism resulting from the continuous interplay between institutions and their environments. In other words: history matters, because

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<sup>10</sup> J. Mahoney and K. Thelen, 'A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change', in J. Mahoney and K. Thelen (eds.), *Explaining Institutional Change. Ambiguity, Agency, and Power* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 1–38.

<sup>11</sup> A. Greif and D.D. Laitin, 'A Theory of Endogenous Institutional Change', *American Political Science Review* 98.4 (2004), pp. 633–52.

institutions are historically situated and contextually dependent. Actors are part of this environment and play a pivotal role in the (re)production of institutions. Rational choice theorists stress the strategic character of behaviour, but at the same time the preferences and interests of actors are historically shaped. More specifically, institutions are produced and reproduced over time by actors whose behaviour adheres to the rules of these institutions, but who can also reinterpret or deviate from these rules. Taking this historical dynamic into account helps us to understand institutional change without falling into the trap of functionalist explanations (overestimating the control of actors over institutions) and structuralist explanations (underestimating the influence of actors' behaviour on institutions).

A second problem of actor-centred explanations for institutional change is that they approach institutions in isolation, thereby disregarding the fact that their environment is not only constituted by actors but also by other institutions, of which the interrelatedness and complementarities provide another dynamic for continuity and change.<sup>12</sup> Institutions can be understood in Ostrom's term as 'nested' within a complex and open environment, characterised by a variety of interconnected or competing institutions, situated at different levels, that adapt to each other.<sup>13</sup> The main point here is that institutions are not (re-)produced by the behaviour of actors independent from their (non-)institutional contexts. The interactions between institutions and their environment mean that both are constantly changing, leading to processes of both exogenous and endogenous change, which are sometimes the result of rapid punctuation and sometimes of gradual adaptation.<sup>14</sup> Two final observations from the theoretical work on institutional change are, firstly, that neither institutional equilibria or historically grown institutional settings are stable in the long run, and, secondly, the complexity of institutional environments makes it difficult for actors to effectively (re-)design institutions to serve specific ends.<sup>15</sup>

### **Medieval Urban Corporations**

If medieval urban societies can be regarded as environments in which institutions were formed and transformed, it makes sense to adopt an ecological approach to explaining the myopically evolved institutional configurations and changes therein. This explanatory

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<sup>12</sup> See: M. Aoki, 'Endogenizing institutions and institutional changes', *Journal of Institutional Economics* 3.1 (2007), pp. 1–31.

<sup>13</sup> Ostrom, *Governing the commons*, p. 90.

<sup>14</sup> M. Blyth et al., 'Introduction to the Special Issue on the Evolution of Institutions', *Journal of Institutional Economics* 7 (2011), pp. 299–315.

<sup>15</sup> O.A. Lewis and S. Steinmo, 'How Institutions Evolve: Evolutionary Theory and Institutional Change', *Polity* 44.3 (2012), pp. 314–39, at pp. 320, 322.

framework does not favour a specific perspective, but analyses the dynamics of the urban environment at different levels: system, institution and actor. It also supposes that the continuous, complex interactions at and between these different levels of actors, institutions and environment are the main causes of institutional continuity and change. As a broad theoretical framework, an ecological approach allows us to tie together elements of institutional theories in conceptualising, analysing and explaining processes of institutional evolution.

The object of study here are corporations or voluntary associations; these institutions are understood to have been complexes of rules that served different functions, and that they formed part of a wider urban environment comprising multiple actors and institutions. Instead of discussing the effects of the behaviour of individuals or specific interest groups on the position of these corporations, or the extra-urban political, cultural, social and economic factors that shaped the urban environment, the following analysis focuses on the intermediary level of the urban institutional framework, the level at which the behaviour of actors connects with more distant and indirect environmental factors. The basic assumption is that the interactions at this level result in a co-evolution of institutions; a so-far poorly conceptualised process that generates complementary, overlapping or competing sets of rules.<sup>16</sup> In other words, it occurs when different components of an environment influence each other through feedback processes, resulting in mutual adaptation between, for instance, institutions, or between institutions and their environment.<sup>17</sup> This last aspect of emergent interdependencies is important, because it balances the emphasis often put on intentionality in the design or manipulation of institutions. It is difficult to get institutions to work together effectively at an aggregate level, and the effects of institutional adaptation can only be established in hindsight.

Thus, continuous interactions between institutions generate continuity and change. But how should this institutional change and its rate precisely be measured? What is, for example, the difference between incremental and rapid change? Does change affect the functions of institutions, or are changes in the rules embodied by institutions to be considered as proper institutional change? And if change occurs, is this the result of institutions being able to learn and to adapt, or does it transform them into new institutions? These issues have not yet been

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<sup>16</sup> See, for the notion of rules: E. Ostrom, *Understanding institutional diversity*, Princeton paperbacks (Princeton, 2005), pp. 16–8.

<sup>17</sup> In general, most theoretical studies focus on the coevolution between human behavior and institutions rather than between institutions. See, for example: J.C.J.M. van den Bergh and S. Stagl, 'Coevolution of economic behaviour and institutions: towards a theory of institutional change', *Journal of Evolutionary Economics* 13.3 (2003), pp. 289–317.

properly dealt with from a theoretical perspective, but the answer ultimately depends on how one defines institutions.<sup>18</sup> More practically, the data for those working on earlier periods in history not always allow for quantitative, longitudinal analyses based on a number of (proxy) indicators. Therefore, a provisional and pragmatic solution is chosen here, which seeks to identify the processes of both gradual and abrupt changes in rules, as well as the ways in which these changes manifested themselves in the functioning of the institutions involved. In many cases, a change of rules came in response to transformations in the environment, and of particular interest are the changes that were generated by the interactions among institutions at the intermediary level.<sup>19</sup>

Table 1: Guilds and confraternities in late medieval Florence, Ghent and London

	Guilds	Confraternities	Population	
	c.1300-1500	c. 1300-1500	c. 1300	c. 1500
Florence	21	163	c. 100.000	c. 58.000
Ghent	58	40	c. 64.000	c. 45.000
London	c. 110	c. 176	c. 88.000	c. 55.000

Late medieval Florence, Ghent and London serve as case studies to examine the processes of institutional continuity and change, and to provisionally test the hypothesis of the significance of the interactions of institutions with their environment to explain their evolution. In order to get a grasp of the major changes in the distribution and diversity of corporations in these sizeable cities, the number of occupational and religious associations are mapped over the period from about 1300 to 1500 (Table 1). Until the early fourteenth century, it is actually difficult to establish the exact number of corporations, because they were often less formalised and durable organisations that, consequently, left fewer documentary traces. It becomes clear from the table that there was no correlation between demographic developments and the number of corporations: the number of guilds remained more or less stable throughout the period in question, while the number of confraternities steadily

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<sup>18</sup> See, for instance: P. Rocco and C. Thurston, 'From metaphors to measures: observable indicators of gradual institutional change', *Journal of Public Policy* 34.1 (2014), pp. 35–62.

<sup>19</sup> Adapted from: Ansell, 'Ecological Explanation', pp. 60–1.

increased despite the demographic contraction.<sup>20</sup> This means that other factors account for the increase in the numbers of corporations during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The fixed number of guilds in late medieval Florence and Ghent is primarily explained by the political contexts of these cities; members of the artisan guilds competed for political influence with the established citizens and members of the merchant guilds, which resulted in the formation, from the late thirteenth century onwards, of a political system in which the guilds were represented. In order to maintain this constitutional order, new guilds were not politically recognised and attempts by those excluded from power were suppressed. It required the (exogenous) intervention from an external power to reform this institutional constellation, which ultimately happened in Florence in 1534 and in Ghent in 1540. The guilds in London, or companies as they were called, were also politically involved, but they did not play a formal role in the electoral procedures, and the authorities never placed restrictions on their number. The guild landscape in the English capital was therefore much more dynamic; changes in the economic environment had a clear impact on the number of companies and their composition.<sup>21</sup>

Although the urban authorities were initially worried about the potentially subversive activities of confraternities, these corporations primarily served the collective religious and social interests of their members. Within the urban environment, their relations with political institutions were of less importance than those with ecclesiastical, charitable and neighbourhood institutions with which they co-evolved. In the case of Florence, the confraternities were the most diverse in their devotional practices, charitable works and spread of membership. The *laudesi* companies, for example, served the devotional needs of the laymen, while the confraternities of artisans provided religious and social service for their members under supervision of the guilds. In Ghent and London, the majority of these corporations can be characterised as parish confraternities, because they were set up by parishioners who practised their piety in the local church. The number of confraternities may

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<sup>20</sup> This trend is obviously not clear from the table, and the precise foundation date of confraternities is often difficult to establish, but see: J. Henderson, *Piety and charity in late medieval Florence* (Chicago, 1997), p. 39; P. Trio, *Volksreligie als spiegel van een stedelijke samenleving: de broederschappen te Gent in de late middeleeuwen* (Leuven, 1993), p. 78; C.M. Barron, 'The Parish Fraternities of Medieval London', in C.M. Barron and C. Harper-Bill (eds.), *The Church in Pre-Reformation Society: Essays in Honour of F.R.H. Du Boulay* (Woodbridge, 1985), pp. 13–37.

<sup>21</sup> A. van Steensel, 'Guilds and Politics in Medieval Urban Europe. Towards a Comparative Institutional Analysis', in E. Jullien and M. Pauly (eds.), *Craftsmen and Guilds in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods* (Stuttgart, 2016), pp. 37–56.

have increased in the later Middle Ages, but from an institutional perspective the rules that guided the behaviour of their members remained comparatively unchanged.

In sum, the distribution of the guilds appears to have been more stable than that of the confraternities over time, but the guilds in Florence, Ghent and London were characterised by a growing internal diversity in terms of the rules that they embodied, their size and their functioning. In institutional terms, the homogeneity among the confraternities was stronger, and they appear to have been able to absorb changes in the urban environment – at least until the sixteenth century, when the exogenous factor of religious change came into play in London and Ghent, and state interference into the activities of the confraternities in Florence expanded.<sup>22</sup> Since guilds were active in many domains of urban society, they were deeply integrated into the institutional environment. Their relations with each other and with other institutions could be either competitive or cooperative, depending on the circumstances, whereas the confraternities were less connected to each other or to other institutions. In order to understand the dynamics of the urban environment that affected the distribution, diversity and relations of these corporations, it is necessary to have a closer look at the processes that shaped their reproduction.

### **Mechanisms of institutional reproduction**

The idea of embeddedness of guilds and confraternities in an intricate urban environment seems to confirm both the assumption of punctuated equilibrium models of institutional change – that those involved in a game will try to maintain the status quo – and the assumption of historical institutionalists that institutions are resistant to change because they are entwined with other institutions. If this were indeed the case, both approaches would perfectly explain why the number and organisation of guilds remained stable in late medieval Florence and Ghent until the second quarter of the sixteenth century; this would then be a period of institutional stasis, only interrupted by exogenous shocks that created ‘critical junctures’ during which the urban guild systems could be reorganised.<sup>23</sup> Yet, even during this period of apparent continuity, the guilds and confraternities reproduced themselves as institutions, and during this process the rules that defined their relationship with other

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<sup>22</sup> N. Terpstra, ‘Competing Visions of the State and Social Welfare: The Medici Dukes, the Bigallo Magistrates, and Local Hospitals in Sixteenth-Century Tuscany’, *Renaissance Quarterly* 54.4 (2001), pp. 1319–55.

<sup>23</sup> W. Streeck and K. Thelen, ‘Introduction: institutional change in advanced political economies’, in W. Streeck and K. Thelen (eds.), *Beyond Continuity. Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 1–39, at p. 7.

institutions, as well as those that guided their internal organisations, evolved. It can be argued that these processes amounted to institutional change.

One way of demonstrating this is to look at the statutes that were drafted by the guilds and confraternities or granted to them by the urban authorities, and the procedures by which these rules were designed or amended, approved or imposed. Historians tend to dismiss these sources as normative,<sup>24</sup> but such a verdict misses an important point about (unwritten as much as written) regulations, namely that even if the rules of the game were not always adhered to in day-to-day situations, they nonetheless combined as instructions to structure action fields, whether those acting followed them or disobeyed them. In fact, guild and confraternity members were probably well aware of, for example, the contents of their statutes, and it was common practices that the rules were read out to the members every year, or that they were translated into the vernacular, so to prevent anyone pretending not to be familiar with them.<sup>25</sup>

Medieval corporations shared a common legal and organisational form, but guilds and confraternities varied widely in terms of objectives, autonomy, and constitutional rules. Regulation was often written down after their foundation, at a moment when it benefitted the guild or confraternity members to formalise their common interests into a legal entity, for example when guilds or confraternities acquired properties or grew in membership. As a consequence, few of the preserved statutes have been drawn up at the founding of a guild or confraternity; they are mostly documents formulated by existing corporations to amend existing regulation or to address particular issues. In some cases, the urban authorities took the initiative to implement new regulations, as was the case in 1540 in Ghent, where all guilds received new ordinances that curtailed their autonomy and many of their activities after a rebellion against the city's lord.<sup>26</sup> In general, however, the process of formalisation and stricter control by the city councils were driven by the needs of the members as well, who were in many ways dependent upon the authorities to achieve or protect their collective interests.

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<sup>24</sup> More precisely, the objections are that statutory codes provide valuable information about the formal structures of medieval corporations and the official roles of members, but reveal little about the daily functioning of guilds and confraternities. Moreover, voluntary associations could exist long before, or even without ever, adopting formal statutes. Finally, it is not certain that members readily knew the rules that were written down in the official statutes and ordinances.

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, the statutes of the Florentine used-clothes dealers' guild: ASF, Arte dei Rigattieri, Linaiuoli, e Sarti, no. 6, fol. 10v (1358): 'Di far leggere li statuti dinançi all'arte (...) Accio che non possino alleghare ignorança'; and for a translation of the statutes of oil vendors and grocers from Latin into the vernacular (1310): F. Morandini, *Statuti delle Arti degli oliandoli e pizzicagnoli e dei beccai di Firenze (1318-1346)* (Florence, 1961), p. 161; P. Fiorelli, *Intorno alle parole del diritto* (Milano, 2008), p. 235.

<sup>26</sup> Universiteitsbibliotheek, Ghent, Ms. 58.

The rules laid down in the statutes and ordinances can be classified into distinct categories: instructions governing the corporations' administration and access to their membership, rules for their core economic or devotional duties, and finally guidelines for the manifold activities that fostered cohesion among their members. On the basis of these (sometimes very detailed) rules, the guilds and confraternities were similar in their design, but over time the regulation that encoded the behaviour and expectations of members expanded gradually. Since series of statutes belonging to the same guild or confraternity are sparsely preserved, I will instead analyse a few examples of processes by which these regulations evolved (thereby reproducing the institutions that embodied them), in order to identify the 'environmental' factors that explain the continuity or change of guilds and confraternities.

In the case of London, the crafts or companies increasingly sought official recognition from the Crown or the City Council from the fourteenth century onwards. A royal charter was an expensive prerequisite to become a proper incorporated body.<sup>27</sup> However, the mayor and aldermen wished (and formally enjoyed the authority) to approve the guilds' ordinances or changes to the rules. In 1464, for instance, the beer brewers requested that the mayor and aldermen approve an ordinance, 'as they have not ordenaunces ne rules set amongis theym like as other occupacions' in which new rules regarding the brewing of beer (instead of ale) were laid down, as well as grant them the right to appoint searchers who would ensure compliance.<sup>28</sup> About two decades later, in 1482, the wardens of the already existing guild of the (ale) brewers petitioned the mayor and aldermen to approve their renewed ordinances, which were partly a response to the competition posed by the beer brewers, as well as to the city's new electoral procedures in which the companies took part. All members of the company were required to take notice of the guild's statutes and ordinances once every quarter, in order to ensure no penalties were incurred out of ignorance.<sup>29</sup>

The companies often used the urban authorities to resolve conflicts among themselves. For example, the barbers sought the renewal of their ordinances in 1410, which were originally granted in 1378 so as to prevent any other craft or mistery, i.e. the surgeons, to

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<sup>27</sup> C.M. Barron, *London in the later Middle Ages. Government and people, 1200-1500* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 207–10; M. Davies, 'Crown, city and guild in late medieval London', in M. Davies and J.A. Galloway (eds.), *London and Beyond. Essays in Honour of Derek Keene* (London, 2012), pp. 241–61.

<sup>28</sup> London Letter-Book L, fol. 30r: '...all Mistiers and Craftys of the saide Citee have rules and ordenaunces by youre grete auctoritees for the comon wele of this honorable Citee made and profite of the same Craftys....'. The beerbrewers' mistery had its general ordinances approved in 1493, fol. 303v-304r.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, fol. 182r-185v. The mistery of the brewers The mistery of the brewers probably originated in the thirteenth century, the first royal charter was obtained in 1438.

practice the art of surgery.<sup>30</sup> Many similar requests were granted by London's mayor and aldermen in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The ordinances of the London guilds thus reveal the internal organisation of the companies, the mutual economic and political competition, and pressure from the urban authorities. The latter could to a certain extent be countered by purchasing charters from the Crown, a more distant political force in the urban landscape. Above all, these sources demonstrate that the dynamics within this environment acted as a catalyst for the companies to renew, amend or expand the rules that embodied them as institutions, ensuring the continuity of their organisation and activities. This process of endogenous institutional change was, on the one hand driven by the interests of the masters and liverymen of the companies and those of London's rulers, and on the other by the dynamics of the interactions between institutions and their relations with the wider urban environment.

The process of institutional co-evolution was more pronounced in late medieval Florence, where the guilds were deeply entwined with the city's political system.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, the guild system was not as static as sometimes portrayed: the *statuti* and *registri di deliberazioni* of the guilds show that rules were being continuously reformed, not only as the result of external pressures, but also due to internal considerations. All adjustments, however, had to be approved by eight so-called *approbatores statutorum atrium* of the commune of Florence, who were responsible for the revision, correction, cancellation, approval or disapproval of all guilds statutes and ordinances. They were annually selected by the members of the ruling bodies, and mainly represented the interests of the seven major guilds to ensure that the guild ordinances and the proposed *riforme* were measured against the constitution of the city.<sup>32</sup> The second half of the fourteenth century was characterised by the growing control of the major guilds, united in the *Mercanzia*, which guarded the collective political and economic interests of Florence's ruling families, over the fourteen lesser guilds, especially with regard to electoral procedures and internal organisation. As such, the economic regulation and policies of the lesser guilds came under the control of the communal

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<sup>30</sup> London Letter-Book I, fol. 95r; Letter-Book H, fol. 27v.

<sup>31</sup> J.M. Najemy, 'Guild Republicanism in Trecento Florence: The Successes and Ultimate Failure of Corporate Politics', *The American Historical Review* 84.1 (1979), pp. 53–71.

<sup>32</sup> F. Franceschi, 'Intervento del potere centrale e ruolo delle arti nel governo dell'economia fiorentina del Trecento e del primo Quattrocento. Linee generali', *Archivio storico italiano* 151 (1993), pp. 863–909, at p. 876; *Statuta populi et communis Florentiae publica auctoritate collecta, castigata et praeposita anno salutis MCCCCXV*, 3 Vols (Friburgi, 1778–83), II, 656, III, 20.

authorities, which increasingly withdrew economic and legal competences from the guilds.<sup>33</sup> By the end of the fourteenth century, the Florentine guilds ‘were reduced to offices of the state, subordinated legally and constitutionally to a sovereignty in which they no longer had any part’.<sup>34</sup> The increasing political centralisation in Florence was fuelled by (international) economic processes that necessitated a restructuring of trade and production from the mid-fourteenth century onwards, affecting the relations between the trades and industries and the labour market. Furthermore, the demographic and economic circumstances led to financial difficulties for a number of the guilds in the course of the fifteenth century.<sup>35</sup>

The question is whether this emphasis on the guilds’ role in Florentine politics tells the whole story about their evolution in the later Middle Ages. It is clear from the deliberations and ordinances that the consuls and other officials of guilds were able to respond to changing circumstances by adapting or drafting new regulations. The *legnaioli*, for example, followed a clear procedure to revise their regulations. Six of their members were elected every year to critically assess the statutes of the guild in the month of December; then, in the first month of the new year, the *corpo* of the guild of the carpenters was publicly informed about the changes.<sup>36</sup> The fact that all new rules had to be approved by the *approvatori* of the commune did not entail that they could not implement any of them.<sup>37</sup>

The changes made on the initiative of the guilds concerned all aspects of their organisation and activities. Firstly, the administration of the guilds was often amended, more specifically the procedures by which officials were elected. Several of the official guilds were made-up of several occupational groups, and the mutual relations had to be worked out. In 1377, for example, the flax workers were only recognised as full members of the guild of the used-clothes dealers and tailors, while the farriers were subject to the authority of the guild of blacksmiths in 1405.<sup>38</sup> Access to guild membership was an important concern of the guilds too. For example, the harness makers’ guild (*corregiai*) implemented new rules in 1378 concerning the matriculation fees for members, journeymen and apprentices.<sup>39</sup> Finally, the

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<sup>33</sup> Franceschi, ‘Intervento del potere centrale’, pp. 887–90; F. Franceschi, ‘Note sulle corporazioni fiorentine in età laurenziana’, in ‘Note sulle corporazioni fiorentine in età laurenziana’, *La Toscana al tempo di Lorenzo il Magnifico*, 3 (Pisa, 1996), pp. 1343–62, at pp. 1344–5.

<sup>34</sup> Najemy, ‘Guild Republicanism in Trecento Florence’, pp. 70–1.

<sup>35</sup> Franceschi, ‘Note sulle corporazioni fiorentine in età laurenziana’, p. 1349.

<sup>36</sup> ASF, Arte dei legnaioli, no. 4, fol. 13r-13v (1416) ‘...tutti e ciaschuno statuto di detta arte, agiugnere et sinuire, dichiarare, corregiere e dinuovo rifare e in tutto o in parte cassare e remuovere chome alloro o alla magior parte piacerà.’

<sup>37</sup> See, for example: ASF, Arte dei chiavaioli, ferraioli e calderai, no. 2, fol. 4r (1400).

<sup>38</sup> ASF, Arte dei rigattieri, linaioi e sarti, no. 5, fol. 72r, 73v, 131v; Arte dei fabbri, no. 1, fol. 122r.

<sup>39</sup> ASF, Arte dei corregiai, no. 1, fol. 41r-41v.

statutes of the guilds demonstrate that their officials actively sought to cope with economic and social developments. To give just one example: at the request of the subordinate *membrum* of the silk guild, the guild's officials decided in 1446 that two-thirds of the revenues coming from a payroll tax should be directed to the relief for the poor weavers and spinners and their families.<sup>40</sup> Thus, despite the apparent rigidity of the guild system, the case can be made that the guilds in late medieval Florence evolved institutionally in response to changes in the urban environment, of which those of a political and economic nature were indeed the most significant.

In comparison to the trade and craft guilds, the activities of medieval confraternities are generally less documented; they hardly ever played a prominent role in urban politics, often remained local in their membership, and frequently existed only for a short period of time. It might therefore be tempting to think of these corporations as relatively a stable cultural form and a social resource for members of the laity who pursued common interests.<sup>41</sup> Confraternities were nonetheless part of the same urban context as guilds; they were shaped as institutions by their interactions with other institutions, and their relations with the wider political, economic, social and cultural environment. The relative absence of family and kin from medieval urban societies is often cited as partly explaining the popularity of these 'artificial families'. The proliferation of foundations from the mid-fourteenth century onwards can at least in part be attributed to the consequences of the Black Death – a proper exogenous shock – when individuals sought religious and social safety nets to cope with the insecurities of life.

Combining the sacred with the secular, confraternities were perceived by contemporaries as vehicles that could create discord by pursuing narrow economic, political or religious interests. Hence, the city councils of Florence, Ghent and London kept a close eye on the activities of the brother and sisterhoods in the fourteenth century. At the same time, obtaining formal recognition of their existence from the secular or ecclesiastical authorities by submitting their statutes for approval had benefits for the corporations, as they could then function as legal entities. Again, these normative sources shed light on the rules that

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<sup>40</sup> The *compagnia* of the 'tessitori di drappi, filatoiai und torcitori di seta'; U. Dorini (ed.), *Statuti dell'Arte di Por Santa Maria del tempo della repubblica* (Florence, 1934), pp. 467–678, 565–569.

<sup>41</sup> C.f. N. Terpstra, 'De-institutionalizing confraternity studies. Fraternalism and social capital in cross-cultural contexts', in Black, Christopher F. and P. Gravestock (eds.), *Early modern confraternities in Europe and the Americas. International and interdisciplinary perspectives* (Aldershot, 2006), pp. 264–83.

structured the behaviour of the confraternity members.<sup>42</sup> Sometimes, the successive revisions of statutes allow us to identify the reasons behind efforts of the consuls and members to change the rules. This was the case for the confraternity of St Anne, which was founded in Ghent during the early fifteenth century. Two fifteenth-century statutes are recorded in the registers of the city's aldermen. The first dates from 1445-1446 and was issued by the confraternity to urge its members to fulfil their duties, as the corporation was experiencing financial difficulties due to the negligence of its members. The statutes address this specific issue by renewing the rules concerning the guild's administration and the members' contributions, whereas other (unwritten) rules were not included but remained valid. The second statutes were approved by the city's aldermen in 1469-1470; they were intended to amend similar problems that continued to threaten the survival of the guild.<sup>43</sup>

In sum, late medieval confraternities were confronted by both internal and external factors that required them to respond in order to ensure their continuity. Over time, there were shifts in the distribution of different types of confraternities, for example a trend towards an increase in the number of parish fraternities founded by laymen in the fifteenth century, which reflected the changing expectations of members from confraternal activities, as well as the broader economic, social and religious processes that shaped the urban environment.

### **Concluding remarks**

Urban institutional arrangements were far from static in the later Middle Ages. By adopting an ecological approach, it is possible to conceptualise and explain how contextual and structural factors moulded the evolution of institutions such as guilds and confraternities. These corporations evolved as social rule-systems, for so far as changes in the behaviour of the members and environmental factors fed back into the rules in which their collective behaviour was encoded. Guilds and confraternities also interacted with each other at an intermediary level, resulting in states of complementarity, competition or coevolution. The outcomes of new rules were often different from how they had been envisaged, as was the case when existing rules were applied to new situations or revised to find solutions for new problems (bricolage/translation). Thus, the design of these institutions was to a certain extent

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<sup>42</sup> M. Jurdjevic, 'Voluntary Associations Reconsidered: Compagnie and Arti in Florentine Politics', in N.A. Eckstein and N. Terpstra (eds.), *Sociability and its Discontents* (Turnhout, 2010), pp. 249–71, at p. 256; P. Trio, 'Confraternities in the Low Countries and the increase of written source material in the Middle Ages', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 38 (2004), pp. 415–26; C.M. Barron and L. Wright, 'The London Middle English Guild Certificates of 1388-9', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 39 (1995), pp. 108–45.

<sup>43</sup> Stadsarchief Ghent, Reeks 301/38, fol. 53v; Reeks 301/50, fol. 133v.

a matter of experimentation, as it is still today. From this point of view, the late medieval urban environment in which the corporations were embedded selected rules with fitness advantage, so that they were reproduced and institutional continuity or change could take place. Finally, in this context, the often-highlighted distinction between endogenous and exogenous-induced change of institutions was to a large extent gradual, because changes to the rules were all directly or indirectly responses to changing environmental circumstances, whether at a local or aggregate level.

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