Introduction: Apprenticeship in Early Modern Europe

Maarten Prak and Patrick Wallis

Apprenticeship is one of Europe’s most enduring institutions. For at least 800 years, young people have gained the experience and knowledge needed to carry out a wide range of skilled jobs through formal agreements with employers in which they exchange labour for training. Today, the significance of apprenticeship for the supply of an able and effective labour force in industry is widely accepted. It is, for example, commonly seen as one of the underlying explanations for the continued success of German manufacturing. This advantage is so generally accepted that the desirability of restoring, reintroducing or expanding apprenticeship has been a political commonplace for decades in the United States, United Kingdom and other countries struggling to maintain global competitiveness and anxious about the quality of their young workers.¹ Historically, the advantages offered by apprenticeship have been put forward as partial explanations for several of the most significant divergences in the wealth and character of nations, from the Great Divergence between Europe and China, to the ‘Varieties of Capitalism’ observed across the Western World, to the Industrial Revolution itself.²

Apprenticeship has mattered historically not just because of its connection to human capital, but because of its importance to our understanding of rights. In the period before national citizenship, one of the key local citizenship rights was the right to work – to exercise a particular occupation or trade. The right to work was frequently linked to guild membership, and guild membership was, in many parts of Europe, linked

¹ K. Thelen, How Institutions Evolve: The Political Economy of Skills in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
to apprenticeship. The effect was akin to a modern professional monopoly or occupational licensing regime, in establishing a barrier around a sector, defining access at least in part by technical ability, and leaving most of the control over entry to the members of the occupation itself. Other paths to these rights existed, especially for the sons of existing masters. But in most guilds, incomers supplied the majority of new masters, and they had qualified – in large part – through their apprenticeships. In what we might think of as the great age of the guilds, a period from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century when urban economies across Europe saw a wave of incorporation that expanded the number and extent of craft guilds, apprenticeship often possessed a doubled nature, as a source of both skills and rights.

Its centrality to both human capital and occupational rights meant that apprenticeship was a key ingredient in two major developments that fundamentally altered Europe during the three or four centuries before industrialisation. First, economically, European crafts were transforming the quality and quantity of their output in the centuries before the Industrial Revolution started to kick in. During what we might call the Industrial Evolution, between roughly 1400 and 1800, European industrial producers achieved a small miracle. Many of their products became


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increasingly sophisticated, while at the same time the prices of those products were decreasing spectacularly. As a result, many industrial products that were only accessible to the richest class of people in 1400, were available to ordinary people by 1800. Moreover, these cheap ‘populuxe’ goods of the eighteenth century were often of a higher quality than their very expensive predecessors of the Middle Ages. In the absence of breakthrough innovations or large capital investment in most industries, we must assume that labour inputs were largely responsible for this remarkable achievement. Apprenticeship was the mechanism that shaped the quality and quantity of those labour inputs in many industries.

Second, during the centuries covered by this book, Europe’s total population more or less doubled, as did the percentage of that population living in towns and cities. Europe’s urban population therefore quadrupled. More or less simultaneously, cities transformed their citizenship regimes. Citizenship emerged as a formal status, providing economic, social and political rights. In many of these towns and cities, guilds were represented in local government, but even when they were not, ‘honourable’ work, i.e. work that was incorporated, and civic status became mutually dependent. Apprenticeship thus emerged as one of the main gateways into urban privileges and duties.

While its doubled nature underlines the significance of apprenticeship, it has also contributed substantially to the uncertain state of historical evaluations of apprenticeship today, as different scholars have read off quite different implications from the actions of guilds, the behaviour of apprentices and the interest or disinterest paid by the state towards training. As will be discussed, apprenticeship has been swept up in debates over the benefits and harms of guilds and other pre-modern economic institutions that form part of a wider conversation about exclusion, inequality and social capital.

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diversity of apprenticeship across Europe. It is with an eye to achieving much needed clarity about apprenticeship in its own right that this book has been written.

The chapters in this book examine the different forms which apprenticeship took across Europe between the sixteenth and nineteenth century. Like most institutions, apprenticeship is both universal – to the extent that anthropologists repeatedly identify versions of it in traditional and modern societies – and highly particular. Our central concern is to trace what aspects of apprenticeship were common across the continent and which were distinctive to particular cities and regions. This comparative strategy aims to achieve a better understanding of the regularities of apprenticeship, some of which might even be independent from temporal contexts, and of the dimensions that varied across time and space and therefore suggest options, or menus, that were combined in distinct ways in different localities. Such menus will each have their advantages and disadvantages, in terms of recruitment and of learning outcomes. The sort of comparative historical analysis offered by this book therefore creates the possibility of using historical trajectories as laboratories of the long-term effect of institutional variation.

Despite historians’ long-standing acceptance of the importance of apprenticeship, this systematic comparison across nine European nations and cities is an exercise that has not previously been attempted. That it has become feasible now is a reflection of a dramatic growth in the scale of available evidence on the practice of apprenticeship, as a result of the digitisation of materials from across Europe, and a revival of scholarly work on the history of apprenticeship. Therefore, it is now possible to examine the realities of training alongside the norms and regulations that were the conventional focus of earlier studies of apprenticeship.

**Theories of Apprenticeship**

Thinking about apprenticeship has long been shaped by a pair of powerful theories that identify the institution as a solution to two of the basic problems that emerge from the human life cycle. The longest-standing, reaching back to the early modern period in many ways, analyses


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apprenticeship as a mechanism to manage adolescence. The majority of apprentices lived with people other than their parents, who had handed over the authority to govern their children’s behaviour to the master. By locking youths into patriarchal household structures outside the birth family, it secured them (or restricted their independence) during a potentially ‘dangerous’ period of life and instilled positive and productive cultural values. This is essentially a response to a sociocultural challenge.

Most apprentices were adolescents and, as this theory would suggest, part of their education was thus not so much concerned with their future jobs, but with life itself. Evidence for the importance of social regulation is widespread. Ensuring due respect, reproducing social order, instilling values and suppressing disorderly exuberance were the focus of many apprenticeship regulations, while breaches of domestic order were frequent sources of conflicts between master and apprentice. In 1640, the Aldermen of the City of London ruled that an apprentice would be eligible for citizenship if he could present himself ‘with the hair of his head cut in a decent and comely manner’. In post-Reformation German towns, youngsters of illegitimate birth were excluded from apprenticeship. In 1632, an Antwerp apprentice was sent away by his master when he refused to look after the shop while his master and mistress were out. As these examples suggest, it is therefore arguable that, socially, apprenticeship offered a framework ‘through which people in a wide range of occupations were indoctrinated into a common set of religious and cultural values’.

The economic problem is also one of transition: how to change unskilled young workers into skilled artisans? Behind this looms the larger issue of the formation of human capital. Increasingly, human capital is recognised as one of the most important assets of any society.


creation is, however, a challenge in its own right. Much of this has to do with the distribution of costs and benefits involved in training.

By enabling young workers to obtain the training they need to carry out skilled jobs, apprenticeship offers a solution to one of the key economic problems that affect labour markets. As Joel Mokyr discusses in Chapter 1, economists thinking about training distinguish between general and specific skills. Firms, they argue, will only invest in teaching workers ‘firm-specific’ skills; workers have to fund their own acquisition of general skills. It turns out that firm-specific skills are quite narrowly defined: skills that are only useful to that firm. If they could be useful elsewhere, the firm will not be able to recover its investment. If firms provide workers with instruction in more general skills – training them to weld, to keep accounts, to use a lathe – then they will be hard-pressed to gain any return from their investment or to even cover their own costs. A firm could try to pay the workers it trained less than their market wage. But then the worker will have every reason to move to another employer, who will pay them a wage that reflects their enhanced productivity. This problem is more acute in theory than practice, as frictions exist in labour markets and workers and firms both value the information and future career options that training generates.19 But the basic issue remains: because they will reap the benefits of their skills, it is workers (or their families) who need to fund the majority of their training.

Vocational training presents a further challenge when compared to academic education. Many occupational skills demand elements of practice that need to be learned ‘on the job’.20 In short, these skills can only be gained within workplaces, creating problems of scale and access that are apparent in the much lower ratio of apprentices to masters compared to the ratio of students and teachers achieved by schools. The problem is compounded if we recognise that relatively few ordinary families had much money to spare to pay a firm to train their children. Certainly, many would struggle to pay up front for instruction. Young people, in their own right, usually lack either the capital or the credit to raise money to purchase training. Apprenticeship slices through this problem by offering firms a way to recover the cost of training, and the youth a way to fund their learning. Apprenticeship fixes a term of employment during which

training will occur, and the apprentice will labour for her or his master. By giving up their right to change job – and thus to capitalise on their new-found skills – apprentices are able to fund their training through the sweat of their brow.

These two theories, one social, the other economic, offer compelling visions of an ideal type of apprenticeship. They are not, obviously, mutually exclusive, though they each suggest a different functional explanation, on one side sustaining social order, on the other increasing productivity, that may lay behind the institution. When applied historically, both, however, leave us open to the risk that we infer the efficiency of an institutional framework from its existence and durability. Where power and money are at stake, abuse can never be far away. Critics of apprenticeship, and more specifically of the guilds that regulated apprenticeship in most countries, have highlighted the potentially exploitative character of apprenticeship. They have pointed out, for example, that the variations in the length of the terms apprentices served suggest that in many places guilds were keeping apprentices longer than was strictly necessary to learn the skills they needed, with the purpose of exploiting this cheap source of labour. It has also been claimed that the existence of alternative mechanisms of learning suggests that the guilds’ ‘monopoly’ over training was really designed to regulate the in-flow of skilled workers, with the aim of driving up the price of their labour. In a similar vein, historians of early modern Europe’s patriarchal households have made clear the, at times, brutal and oppressive texture of life faced by some subordinate members.

The degree of abstraction and the essential functionalism of these ideas is the source of their power, but should also give us pause for thought. While they suggest powerful explanations for the basic purpose of apprenticeship, they do so in ways that are – by definition – hard to test.

Identifying the balance between order, productivity and rents in any specific context surely offers an important agenda for any history of apprenticeship. However, it is necessary to look beyond this debate, to pay heed to other, equally fundamental historical questions about the significance, impact and development of apprenticeship within the societies and economies in which it existed. For example, how was apprenticeship created, sustained and extended? How was it perceived and evaluated? Where did it thrive and when did it wither? Answering such questions requires us to open the black box of apprenticeship to ask what were the specific institutions – the rules of the game – that constituted this form of training. In thinking about the history of apprenticeship, we must also take a further step away from seeing it as a single, homogenous structure that worked in the same way across the continent and over time. In short, we need to ask: was apprenticeship one system or many?

Institutions of Training

In the late Middle Ages and early modern period, apprenticeship possessed a particular economic and political position that marks it out from what came later. While in many prominent contexts apprenticeship was tied into formal systems of certification for occupations backed up by local or central regulation, the state was not yet involved in vocational training to any meaningful degree. The combination of subsidised classroom instruction with on-the-job training that characterises modern-day apprenticeship did not exist until the late nineteenth century. Nor, of course, could apprenticeship yet obtain its purpose from serving the interests of the large, managerially led firm. If anything, the growth in the scale of economic organisation was one of the shocks of industrialisation that initially weakened apprenticeship in the nineteenth century.

The distinction from earlier periods is weaker. Much of the institutional framework around apprenticeship developed by guilds and cities had taken shape over the twelfth to sixteenth centuries. It grew in scale, but changed little in nature. Yet in at least one dimension early modern apprenticeship did experience a major development: that of a much enlarged set of welfare institutions that, in various ways, provided forms of apprenticeship to poor children to set them onto a productive trajectory, albeit rarely one that would lift them far up the social ladder.

Across early modern Europe, apprenticeship was primarily and initially a private legal agreement between the master and the apprentice and/or the apprentice’s family, depending on their age and norms on the legal agency of minors. In some regions and centres, the apprenticeship agreement had acquired a public element by the sixteenth century, through registration requirements or specifications about the terms of contracts. This public element was exercised at the local, usually occupational, level by guilds or cities. One of the central distinctions between early modern apprenticeship and its modern equivalent is the universality of state involvement, as governments have tied funding to the acceptance of regulation since the early twentieth century. Except in England, where it was regulated nationally from the sixteenth century, central governments were happy to leave local institutions in charge of apprenticeship.

The framework in which contracting took place varied over Europe. Broadly speaking, three traditions can be distinguished: notarial; city or guild-registered; and purely private. In notarial systems, such as France, Madrid and the Southern Netherlands, apprenticeship contracts were arranged privately by notaries, who brokered contracts and recorded them. In city or guild systems, seen in Dutch, English, Italian and Finnish towns and cities, contracts were also arranged privately, but were registered with guilds or city authorities, providing both a record of the contract and ensuring that they met local rules. Finally, a large number of apprenticeships were simply agreed between the youth’s family and the master; as areas without guilds outnumbered those with guilds, these were probably the most common – though also the ones that are least understood. These systems could overlap: in Spain and the Southern Netherlands, some apprenticeships were registered by notaries, while others were settled orally. An important question is how these different contracting regimes may, or may not, have affected the content and quality of the training, or its accessibility.

The exchange at the centre of all apprenticeship contracts was for the apprentice to work for the master for a fixed period, during which time the master would teach them their trade and usually accommodate them in his or her home. The core pair of commitments to work and train was rarely glossed much beyond this. What was to be taught was never

specified in detail, and only rarely defined beyond the generic reference to the master’s trade. Clearly, contemporaries recognised the impossibility of seeking to define the contents of such an open-ended process: no details were included of the curriculum, standards or elements of technique that were involved.

Yet many of the other elements of apprenticeship contracts were open to negotiation. How much would the master or apprentice pay each other? Where should the apprentice live? Who supplied their food or clothing? How long should the contract last? Who paid for their care if they fell ill? The extent to which these issues were fixed in the contract varied between regions of Europe. Some areas tended towards including greater detail in contracting, with specific clauses about the apprentices’ treatment, tasks and discipline. Unsurprisingly, this often went alongside the use of notaries.

Whether verbose or terse in format, the central issue behind these secondary features of apprenticeship contracts was balancing the supply and demand for training by adjusting the amount that a master earned from taking and training an apprentice against the size of the wage that the youth received. On the one hand, parents and apprentices could give the master fees in cash, agree to extended terms or take on the cost of clothing, feeding or – in a step that reshaped the relationship of master and apprentice in fundamental ways and remained relatively uncommon across Europe before the nineteenth century – housing the youth themselves. On the other, masters might offer wages, promise to release the apprentice early or offer to give him or her an end of contract payment in cash or kind. One would expect to find that where training was scarce relative to demand, as occurred most often in lucrative occupations such as overseas trade, masters wanted to be paid substantial amounts to take an apprentice. Where apprentices were most productive and demand for them was high, they could sometimes demand reasonable cash wages. Like other parts of the labour market, the level of the apprentice’s wage was the key variable. Unlike most other agreements, much (sometimes all) of the apprentice’s wage was received in kind: in bed and board.

Finally, the timing of exchange mattered because by deferring payments to particular points in the term of an apprenticeship both parties could build in a mechanism to encourage compliance. This is most obvious in the cash and tools that masters sometimes promised to give their apprentices at the end of their term. A similar intent is apparent when apprentices’ families split fees to masters over several years to reduce the risk that they would default on their obligations.

As markets changed, cities boomed or regions stagnated, the balance shifted and terms changed. The challenge is to find out if different