Introduction: proto-industry and the social framework

Theories about proto-industrialization have, over the last twenty years, encouraged a flowering of research on early modern European industrial regions. This research has revealed both important common characteristics in early modern economies, and important differences and divergences among them. Perhaps the most important common feature is regional specialization. By the end of the sixteenth century, few parts of Europe remained autarkic ‘less developed economies’ engaging in subsistence production. Instead, Europe was turning into a differentiated patchwork of inter-dependent regions, specializing in a variety of different branches of agriculture and industry, and trading among themselves through a network of towns and cities (de Vries 1976). Proto-industries and regions of commercial agriculture were arising almost everywhere in early modern Europe.

But important differences and divergences within Europe have also emerged from studying proto-industrialization. Although proto-industries arose everywhere, different proto-industrial regions developed in radically different ways. A few underwent demographic, social and economic changes close to those postulated by the original theories, but many others did not. These differences can be very enlightening – not just about proto-industrialization, but also about the wellsprings of social, demographic and economic change in general. It is now the task of the ‘second generation’ of proto-industrialization studies to explain the divergences, as well as the similarities, among different European proto-industrial regions.

In this chapter, I will try to show that a great deal of this divergence – although not all – was caused by profound and enduring differences in social institutions among European societies. By ‘social institutions’ I refer to the sets of established rules and practices through which people organized their economic, social, demographic, political and cultural activities. For economic development, the
most important existing institutions in early modern Europe were landholding systems, communities (villages, towns, cities) and corporate groups (guilds and merchant companies). There were also two new institutions which expanded rapidly during the early modern period: the state and the market.

All of these institutions varied a great deal among different societies – sometimes even among different regions of the same country. All of these institutions also changed over time, as they interacted with one another and were influenced by demographic, economic and political changes. In the brief space at my disposal here it is naturally impossible to provide a complete survey of the numerous social and institutional frameworks which existed in European proto-industrial regions. Here, I will simply point out some important general features of the social and institutional framework, its wide variability across the continent of Europe, and its development over time, which were not recognized in the early literature on proto-industrialization, and suggest ways in which they may constitute an important focus for future research.

Social institutions constrained most forms of economic, social, demographic and cultural activity in early modern European societies, yet they have been surprisingly neglected by both the theories of proto-industrialization and the criticisms of them. A central component of the original theories proposed in the 1970s was that proto-industrialization cleared away the obstacles to industrial capitalism in Europe by breaking down traditional social institutions (seigneurial systems, village communities, privileged towns, guilds, merchant companies), and replacing them with unregulated markets. Yet this was theoretically assumed, rather than empirically demonstrated, and subsequent research on proto-industrialization has not confirmed it.

In some parts of Europe, village communities and the institutions regulating access to land and settlement rights were already weak, without proto-industrialization. This was the case, for example, in most areas of England, Flanders and the Netherlands, and in parts of highland Switzerland (e.g. Kanton Zürich, Appenzell-Ausserrhoden) and of the Rhineland (e.g. Krefeld and the Wuppertal) (Braun 1978; de Vries 1974; Kisch 1981b; Kriedte 1982b; Macfarlane 1978; Tanner 1982; Wrightson 1982). The causes of this weakness of community and seigneurial institutions are a matter for lively debate by historians; however, proto-industrialization is clearly not the cause, since communities were weak in these societies in agrarian areas as well as proto-industrial ones. There were also many parts of Europe, as we will see on pp. 27–30 of this chapter, in which community and seigneurial institutions remained strong despite the existence of proto-industry, and played a major role in the development of the economy and society during proto-industrialization.

Likewise, in some parts of Europe, craft guilds and merchant companies could easily be evaded by moving industry outside the towns. This was the case in England, where the state was too weak to provide support or enforcement for the institutional privileges of towns over the countryside (Clark and Slack 1976). It was also the case in Flanders and the Netherlands, where the large number and density of cities created too much inter-urban competition for effective control of the countryside, or effective capture by a single city of state enforcement for its privileges against all the other cities (de Vries 1974). But, as we will see on pp. 30–3 below, in most other parts of Europe cities and corporate groups exercised considerable influence over rural industry, throughout proto-industrialization. Seldom, outside England and the Low Countries, were putting-out and proto-industrial exporting the domain of individual ‘capitalist’ entrepreneurs; instead, they were monopolized by guild-like companies of finishers and merchants with state privileges. In some parts of Europe, proto-industrial workers were unregulated and unorganized; in others they set up guilds, even in the countryside, to defend themselves against the merchant companies, and to exploit their own employees and suppliers (especially females and young people, who were often legally prohibited from engaging in the more lucrative stages of production).

Social institutions thus varied widely across European regions, both before and during proto-industrialization. It cannot be said that in general strong non-market institutions prevented proto-industries from arising. Indeed, as we will see, there are many cases in which it was precisely the strength of specific non-market institutions which artificially created favourable conditions for proto-industry, for instance by lowering the cost of labour. Nor can it be claimed that in general proto-industrialization broke down non-market institutions and replaced them with markets. Indeed, in most regions, social institutions other than markets profoundly and enduringly influenced how proto-industries developed.

**Social institutions and costs**

Why and in what ways did social institutions have such strong effects on proto-industry? A useful way to think about this question is in terms of costs. Like any form of production, proto-industries faced costs for their inputs – raw materials, labour, capital and sometimes land. They also faced what are called ‘transactions costs’ – costs of transportation,
negotiation, information, contract enforcement, protection from coercion and so on. Transactions costs affected many aspects of production itself (such as embezzlement of raw materials, quality maintenance and responsiveness to changes in demand). They also affected almost every aspect of marketing and selling proto-industrial output. A proto-industry was more likely to arise in a region where the particular mix of inputs required by its technology could be obtained, and where export markets could be reached, at lowest cost. Once in existence, an industry would tend to organize production so as to take advantage of the characteristics of the region, in order to continue to minimize costs. Any industry which failed to exploit cost advantages would find itself undercut in all but very monopolistic export markets, since input costs were a major, although not the only, influence on output prices.

Especially in a pre-industrial economy, cost should be understood in the usual economic sense of opportunity cost – not just in money, but in terms of foregone alternatives. For example, in a region with fertile soils and easy access to land people had good potential earnings in agriculture, and the opportunity cost of working in proto-industry was high; infertile soil or institutional restrictions on access to land lowered the opportunity cost of proto-industrial labour. In pre-industrial Europe, just as in modern developing economies, many inputs were not formally traded in markets, and thus did not have money prices, but they did have opportunity costs for the economic agents concerned, and it is this cost which is analytically important.

What determined these costs? One important determinant was physical geography: climate, soil, natural resources, energy supplies, topographical barriers to transportation, location near trade routes and so on (Mager 1988). But proto-industries arose in regions with no special physical characteristics to favour their development. Even industries with the same technical requirements could arise in a variety of environments, and could develop very differently as a consequence. Moreover, many regions with infertile soils, good energy supplies, or cheap sources of raw materials failed to develop proto-industries. Physical factors alone, therefore, were neither necessary nor sufficient to cause proto-industries to arise or to develop in specific ways.

This is not surprising: input costs and output prices can be affected by other things than characteristics of the physical environment. In particular, they are affected by the social institutions governing the transactions through which inputs are obtained, production is organized and output is sold. In European proto-industries, this means we must examine the ways in which markets in land, labour, capital, raw materials, and industrial output were regulated by village communities, landholding systems, urban centres, occupational corporations such as guilds and merchant companies, and – not least – the emerging early modern state. What mattered was not so much the strength or weakness of these institutions, but the precise way in which they inflated or reduced costs.

Community institutions

Community institutions often regulated whether people could settle, work, hold land, use common resources or marry. This was especially the case in societies in which landlords were relatively weak, but village communities could also be strong in areas of the ‘second serfdom’, even though in these areas seigneurial institutions were stronger and had the final word. Because of the regulatory powers they enjoyed, communities often controlled the availability, and thus the cost, of labour, land and natural resources. The original hypotheses argued that proto-industrialization required, and furthered, the breakdown of community institutions (Mendels 1982: 80; Kriedte, Medick and Schlumbohm 1981: 8, 16-17, 40). But research does not confirm this.

Where weak community institutions lowered industrial costs, proto-industry might, holding other factors constant, seek out communities whose institutions were already weak; this appears to have happened in Switzerland (Braun 1960) and in England (Levine 1977). But other factors also affected costs, and we therefore find proto-industry in areas of strong community institutions where other factors favoured it. An example is Scotland, where proto-industries arose in arable regions with strong communities because the ‘cottar system’ in such regions lowered the costs of proto-industrial labour compared to pastoral regions where communities were weaker but other factors were unfavourable (Whyte 1989: 231, 237-8, 243-5).

Certain strong community institutions actually encouraged proto-industry by lowering its costs. Thus in Twente, in the Netherlands, the strong community institution of the marken system gave hereditary rights of access to common land to a group of established peasant families, excluding the rest of the population, which therefore turned to proto-industrial work; that is, community institutions in Twente reduced the opportunity costs of labour in proto-industry by preventing a part of the population from engaging in agriculture (Hendrickx 1993: 330-1).

In Cento, in northern Italy, access to all land was regulated by a community institution called the partecipanza, which distributed a share of land to each family according to its size, but only as long as family
members remained resident in the village. However, each share was not sufficient for a family's subsistence, so instead of emigrating (which would have lost their family its right to a land share), a large part of the population stayed in the community but turned to proto-industry to supplement their earnings from farming their insufficient land share. That is, community institutions in Cento provided strong incentives to the population to remain in the countryside but engage in industry, thereby reducing the opportunity cost of proto-industrial labour (Belfanti 1993: 265–6).

In most European regions, including proto-industrial ones, communities laid down a dense network of rules about how land could be held, sold and inherited, how labour could settle, reproduce and be employed, how capital could be lent and borrowed, how natural resources could be used, and how agricultural products could be bought and sold. In the dense worsted proto-industry in the south German duchy of Württemberg, for instance, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries strong communities regulated marriage, settlement, labour mobility, output markets and women's work, and helped enforce market regulation by rural proto-industrial guilds (Ogilvie 1986, 1995). Similarly, in the rural cotton proto-industry in the Waldviertel of Lower Austria, until the 1780s village communities strictly enforced the one-heir inheritance system, stringent controlled new settlement and restricted access to and use of common lands, thereby affecting labour costs, demographic behaviour and social structure (Berkner 1973; Komlosy 1988).

Community rules, which varied enormously across Europe, affected the costs and prices of most factor inputs and most products. Counter to the original arguments of the theories of proto-industrialization, communities were not broken down, weakened, or even uniformly affected, by proto-industry. The influence of proto-industry on communities was extremely various: in some parts of Europe they were already weak, even where the regional economy remained agrarian; in others, communities remained strong, even where the regional economy shifted over to proto-industry. In such regions, community institutions themselves shaped proto-industry, helping to decide whether a rural population would turn to proto-industrial work, which groups would do so, which tasks they would engage in and whether their demographic behaviour would change.

Landholding institutions
Proto-industry is supposed to have required, and furthered, the breakdown of traditional institutions governing landholding and agriculture, and is portrayed as a major force in the transition from feudalism to capitalism (Kriedte, Medick and Schlumbohm 1981: 8, 16–17, 40; Mendels 1982: 80). But this theoretical proposition has not been borne out empirically. For one thing, proto-industries arose throughout eastern central and eastern Europe, where feudal institutions continued to survive for centuries. It was originally argued that these 'feudal proto-industries' arose only in areas where feudalism had begun to weaken. But Rudolph has shown that they arose throughout Russia in areas of classic feudal production on large estates, and were not associated with even such a partial 'breakdown' of the serf system as the commutation of labour dues to money payments (Rudolph 1980: 111, 1985: 48, 54, 57–61, 63). Strong feudal institutions could positively encourage proto-industries by decreasing their costs. Thus in Bohemia after 1650, the so-called second serfdom strengthened lords' powers to benefit from their peasants' industrial activities (through feudal dues and contract payments from foreign merchants), to urge (and even occasionally compel) their peasants into proto-industrial work, and to keep proto-industrial costs low through 'forced wage labour', exploitation of labour services for proto-industrial auxiliary tasks, and restricting peasants' alternative options (Klima 1959: 35, 38, 1974: 51, 53; Myška 1979: 59–63). In addition, strong feudal institutions encouraged proto-industry in both eastern Europe and northern Italy by weakening the industrial monopolies of urban guilds (Belfanti 1993; Klima 1991). In the Swedish iron proto-industry, seigneurial institutions remained strong enough to prevent the rise of a land-poor proto-industrial labour force on the English pattern, but had weakened too much to provide an adequate supply of forced labour for transport and charcoal burning as in Russia (Florén et al. 1993). Thus what mattered for proto-industry was not so much the 'strengthening' or 'weakening' of feudalism, but rather the specific effect of feudal institutions on industrial costs.

Non-feudal landholding institutions also affected industrial costs. In eastern Rumelia in Bulgaria, for instance, landholding institutions supported by the Ottomans enabled large landowners and graziers to hinder settlement of wastes and restrict access to land until 1878, artificially creating cost conditions favouring proto-industry (Palairet 1982). In Tuscany, sharecropping tenancies adjusted farm size to family membership and contractually obliged tenants to labour for the landlord, thereby precluding proto-industrial employments (Belfanti 1993). In Ravensberg in Westphalia, the 'Heuerling' ('cottager') system interlinked landholding with labour relationships: peasants permitted Heuerlinge to settle on their farms and to make de facto (although not legal) use of the common lands, in exchange for having a right to demand their...
labour when it was needed on the farm. The combination of agricultural day-labouring for the peasants and use of commons was not enough for Heuerlinge to survive, so they also engaged in proto-industry in the interstices left by the labour demands of the peasants. Empirical research has shown that this agrarian institution affected the labour available for proto-industry, the seasonality of production, the demographic and familial behaviour of proto-industrial producers and the resulting social structure (Kriedte, Medick and Schlumbohm 1992: 85, 240–2; Schlumbohm 1992).

As research such as this shows, landholding institutions also affected social structure and demographic behaviour in proto-industrial regions. In the Waldviertel in Lower Austria, for instance, strong seigneurial and communal controls over landholding and settlement permitted the existence of a rural cotton proto-industry, but prevented proletarianization and population explosion (Mitterauer 1986). In proto-industrial areas of Switzerland, France, Württemberg and Upper Lusatia, smallholding systems remained strong, and proto-industrialization failed to transform the rural social structure or abolish agricultural by-employments (Kriedte, Medick and Schlumbohm 1992). Even where proto-industrial groups were landless, institutions such as the Heuerling continued to influence the organization of proto-industrial labour within the family. By affecting the opportunity costs of labour and other resources, landholding institutions had far-reaching effects on the options of proto-industrial workers.

**Guilds and companies**

Proto-industrial costs were also affected by corporate groups such as guilds and merchant companies. According to the original theory, proto-industries arose in the countryside precisely to avoid corporate regulations; by doing so, they are supposed to have hastened the breakdown of guilds and companies (Kriedte, Medick and Schlumbohm 1981: 7, 13, 22, 106, 115, 128; Mendels 1981: 16, 26). But this idea is based on an unjustified generalization of the experiences of England and the Low Countries, where urban and guild powers over the countryside appear to have been breaking down in the sixteenth century independently of proto-industrialization (de Vries 1974; Kellett 1958). It is important to recognize that this was quite exceptional. Almost everywhere else in Europe, proto-industries were regulated by corporate groups of ‘capitalists’, and often also of ‘workers’, well into the eighteenth century.

In this context, the corporate groups of ‘capitalists’ – the merchant companies which enjoyed monopolies and other state privileges over most European proto-industries outside England, Flanders and the Netherlands – should not be confused with modern capitalist corporations. Merchant companies were much closer in nature to guilds: indeed, they often originated as ‘merchant guilds’ or guilds of finishing crafts (such as dyers), and were issued with state charters which strongly resembled those of guilds. Merchant companies and guilds shared many characteristics. As a general rule, a merchant company was not a voluntary association any more than a guild was: it was a corporate organization which one was compelled to join if one desired to operate as a merchant in a particular industry, or if one wished to trade in a particular commodity. Many proto-industrial merchant companies either altogether refused to admit any new member who was not the son or relative of an existing member, or charged prohibitively high fees for the admission of outsiders, much higher than the admission fees charged by ordinary craft guilds (Kisch 1972; Thomson 1982; Troeltsch 1897).

Above all, both guilds and merchant companies enjoyed legal monopolies and other state privileges over production and trade in particular sectors of the economy, which they used to prevent competition by non-members of the corporate group, and to increase their own profits by charging higher than competitive prices to customers and paying lower than competitive prices to their suppliers and employees.

The privileges of guilds and merchant companies were often, but not always, associated with the institutional powers of urban centres. One frequent criticism directed at the original theories of proto-industrialization is that they ignored the many stages of proto-industry carried out in towns and cities (Cerman 1993; Poni 1985). In few European towns outside England and the Low Countries did guilds and merchant companies lose power before the late eighteenth century, whatever happened in the countryside. France was a transitional case, in which towns gradually began to lose their powers during the first half of the eighteenth century, although they retained a number of privileges until at least 1760 (Gayot 1981; Guignet 1979; Lewis 1993; Poni 1985). Since a corporate monopoly sought to reduce prices paid to suppliers and increase prices charged to customers, an effective guild or company in an urban stage of proto-industry was very likely to affect the costs faced by rural workers, irrespective of whether these also possessed a corporate organization. Urban guilds in one industry could also increase costs of other industries, as shown by the successful lobbying of woollen and silk-weaving guilds to impose restrictions on the cotton industry (Mager 1993; Thomson 1991).

Rural proto-industrial workers also formed their own guilds. In the small iron goods industry of Berg (in western Germany) and the
violent political struggles broke out when attempts were made to production in themselves, they did oppose such changes where these productivity-enhancing changes in technology or the organization of which has, in most cases, not yet been carried out. However, some wage ceilings, price floors - which were enforced with varying effectiveness, threatened their corporate ability to prevent competition, charge monopoly prices and restrict the pay of their employees and suppliers. But whether they find a corporate group anywhere in Europe, whether of merchants or of workers, which effectively regulated markets without state enforcement. This is one indication of how strongly European proto-industries were influenced by the growing power of the early modern state. Thus we cannot study proto-industries without also looking at state institutions and the political framework.

State institutions

Early modern Europe saw the rise both of proto-industries and of the modern state. Yet the role of the state is one of the least-researched aspects of proto-industrialization. Partly, this neglect is a reaction against interpreting state policy as a mirror of reality. Closer empirical research shows that often state economic policies and industrial legislation did not have the intended outcome; but state economic regulations often had serious unintended consequences. Another reason for the widespread neglect of the state was that the original theories viewed proto-industrialization as causing the transition to 'capitalism' and 'market society', concepts which are held (often unjustifiably) to exclude the notion of state intervention in the economy.

It is now becoming clear that this neglect of the state was an
over-reaction. Not only successful economic policies but also those that misfired, and, indeed, state actions undertaken for non-economic purposes (to wage war, for instance, or to gain domestic political support) could have important if unintended economic repercussions. While states' direct attempts to encourage proto-industry saw mixed success, their indirect role, particularly in supporting, changing or challenging other institutions, was substantial.

The little attention which has been directed at the role of the state in proto-industrialization has focussed on the attempts by many European states to set up proto-industries and give them direct support. Yet the vast majority of these attempts failed, and many were damaging to other economic endeavours. Thomson, for instance, describes how many states of central and eastern Europe in which 'corporative economic structures' predominated tried to encourage calico-printing proto-industries through privileges, monopolies, subsidies, state loans, state manufactories and coerced labour from serfs. These were overwhelmingly unsuccessful: 'They contributed to an uncompetitive environment and the policy of granting concessions from, rather than reforming, the corporative system created a situation of yet greater institutional complexity unlikely to favour industrial expansion' (Thomson 1991: 64). Lewis describes how the French state, foiled by provincial resistance to new coal laws in the mid-eighteenth century, began to issue royal mining 'concessions' designed to encourage technological advance and productivity growth. Not only did these attempts fail, but one of the reasons for their failure was the local resistance evoked by the concession holders' privileges enabling them to infringe on local institutional privileges, close down existing producers and charge monopoly prices (Lewis 1993: 24). In Austria, the state-privileged proto-industrial manufactories were granted a wide array of special powers raising costs or destroying the business of other industrial concerns, yet most failed dismally themselves. The Ponegeneg hosiery enterprise in Upper Austria was founded in 1764 with a wide range of state privileges which proved immensely costly to other producers, yet 'in spite of all the official support it received, the undertaking did not flourish' and eventually went bankrupt (Grüll 1974: 39ff, 49). The Linz manufactary, although it limped along with state support for a much longer period, causing enormous costs to other producers, eventually suffered a similar fate (Freudenberger 1979). Whether they contributed to industrial development is not apparent: certainly this part of Europe was one of the latest to industrialize. It is equally difficult to trace the beneficial effects of most other examples of state assistance, even for successful proto-industries. Although, therefore, state intervention in

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In *city-states*, the community was co-extensive with the state, and often urban guilds and companies played an important role in the government. This was an important factor influencing proto-industrialization in northern and central Italy (Belfanti 1993), the territories of the German Free Imperial Cities (Kießling 1991; Kisch 1981b), and to a considerable extent also the territories of the Swiss Federation (Braun 1978).

In *feudal states*, which existed in different forms in eastern Europe, parts of Italy, and the micro-states of southern Germany, either the prince was also the major landowner, or the great landowners enjoyed governmental as well as tenurial powers over their peasants (Belfanti 1993; Kießling 1991; Kisch 1981b; Klima 1991; Palaisret 1982; Rudolph 1985). The establishment and control of proto-industries by feudal landlords were only possible because in such territories the state and the seigneurial system supported one another.

It was often not until the second half of the eighteenth century (or even later), and thus only towards the very end of the period of proto-industrialization, that most European states became strong enough to begin to try to dispense with the support they obtained from traditional social institutions — whether these were local village communities, towns and cities, guilds and companies, or feudal landlords. Even then, there was almost always a prolonged phase during which these institutions retained significant portions of their traditional powers. Even if they no longer enjoyed complete monopolies, even if they were facing competition from new institutions, they nevertheless retained important privileges, which often enabled them to exercise real economic effects on proto-industries (and other economic sectors) for generations longer. During this phase, production and trading activities which violated these institutions' surviving privileges continued to be persecuted and penalized; at best, such activities constituted a ‘black market’ or ‘informal sector’ (as it is called in modern developing economies), not an open and regulated ‘market economy’. Moreover, the institutional arrangements with which the state formally replaced the traditional institutions of communities, landlords, guilds and companies were generally not open markets, but rather countervailing structures of privileges and monopolies (such as those of the ‘Fabriken’ — manufactories — in Austria and Bohemia), protecting the interests of new and favoured social groups, and enforced with new effectiveness by the rationalized administrative apparatus of the ‘enlightened’ absolutist state.

The emerging modern state thus played a range of roles in European proto-industry. It intervened directly, though not often effectively, to encourage proto-industrial enterprises. It made war, collected taxes, captured and administered colonies, and set up customs barriers, helping to shape the export markets within which proto-industries operated. Above all, however, the state provided support to the other institutions — whether communities, landlords, guilds and companies, or the new structures of privilege and protective regulation emerging from the late eighteenth century on — which had such a wide-ranging impact on most European proto-industries and, indeed, often survived into industrialization proper.

**Conclusion**

Perhaps the greatest service performed by the concept of proto-industrialization is to have generated so many studies of the same phenomenon in such a wide variety of contexts, thereby making comparisons across societies more fruitful than is ordinarily the case. These comparisons have revealed an important common feature throughout early modern Europe: an enduring specialization of production, creating a network of interdependent regions of agriculture and proto-industry linked by urban centres with one another and the non-European world.

Yet such comparisons have also revealed profound differences and divergences among European societies. Some proto-industrial regions — particularly in north-western Europe — experienced economic growth, social transformation and ultimate industrialization. Sadly, many others did not, and this had enduring consequences for their economic and political futures, particularly in the case of eastern Europe. A major factor behind these differences in proto-industrialization — and, by implication, economic development in general — appears to have been the framework of social institutions, which profoundly affected the costs of different economic, social and demographic decisions. Deeper investigation of these social institutions, and closer analysis of their effects, may hold out the best perspectives for explaining differences in economic development, certainly in early modern Europe, and perhaps in pre-industrial societies more generally.
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