

People vs. things: the Worshipful Company of Weavers and regulation in eighteenth-century London

William Farrell, Department of History, Birkbeck, University of London

Originally presented at *Innovation before the Modern: Cloth and Clothing in the Early Modern World*, Pasold Research Fund Conference, Nordiska Museet, Stockholm. 27-28 September 2012.

In 1749 the Weavers' Company in London was informed that a group of people were going to Spain with looms and tools "in order to Set up and exercise the Said [woollen] manufacture".¹ The Company quickly condemned this as potentially damaging both to itself and the nation's industries. They asked their members to gather information on the agents organising the move and to take actions to stop them. Consequently, several weavers were arrested and the Company agreed to pay for the costs of prosecution.² Alarmed by this episode, the Weavers' Company pressed for legislation to be updated to impose harsher penalties on those 'seducing' weavers and tools into leaving the country. Master weavers now took it upon themselves to police the act. John Peters was reimbursed five guineas for attempting to stop a group of foreigners buying weaving tools and sending them abroad. He chased them all the way to Gravesend but the ship had sailed before he could arrest them.³ Eleven years later, in 1765, a group of silk stocking weavers left London for Copenhagen where they had been recruited to work on 53 new looms that had been established there.⁴ In 1773 more weavers again left for Denmark where they had been promised work "for two Years certain, at very good Wages."⁵ On both these occasions no protests were heard from prominent masters and no action came from the Weavers' Company. There was no new legislation, no arrests. What might explain these two different reactions?

The Worshipful Company of Weavers' was founded in 12th century and is one of the oldest Livery Companies in London. The Company was for weavers of all textiles, but during the seventeenth century there was a shift away from worsteds and towards silk, both within the London economy and the membership of the Company.⁶ According to its statutes, all those who practised weaving in the City of London, Southwark and within 10 miles of the city walls had to be members of the Company. As in the other Livery Companies, apprentice weavers were supposed to be formally bound to their masters at the Company's Hall. The officers of the Company had the right to search workshops to enforce these laws. Unlike some other

¹ Guildhall Library (GL) Ms. 04655/15, f.327.

² GL Ms. 04655/15, f.330.

³ GL Ms. 04665/16, ff.13-14.

⁴ "Report of Committee on the Silk Industry", *Journals of the House of Commons*, Vol. 30 1765-66, p.208; *Public Advertiser*, December 10th 1765,

⁵ *Public Advertiser*, November 6th 1773; *Public Advertiser*, June 21st 1774.

⁶ Plummer, *The London Weavers' Company*, pp.8-10.

guilds, such as the Goldsmiths' Company or the Stationers', the Company was not involved in assessing the quality of work produced by its members. How widely these rules were obeyed and enforced, at any point in its history, is unclear. Certainly there were illegal weavers working in London during the later seventeenth and eighteenth century, and searches were not carried out with great frequency. However, in the first decade of the 1700s the membership was still a healthy 5919, but it dipped below 5000 to 3731 in the 1740s, and ended the century at 1157.⁷ The Company also lost authority to other bodies, for example from 1773 it was local magistrates who were given the power to regulate wages rather than the Company.⁸

The silk industry in London was small throughout most of the seventeenth century until the arrival of Huguenots refugees in the 1670s and 80s. The Huguenots not only provided a sizable workforce, but brought with them French weaving techniques and designs. This greatly improved the quality of silk made in London and by the 1710s the reputation and exports of English silk began to rise. Master weavers estimated that there were about 1600 looms and 5200 employed in the silk industry in 1765.⁹ A French visitor thought there were 8,000 looms in 1773. There were 12,000 silk looms in London in 1815 (Lyon had 14,500).¹⁰ Whilst the French silk industry based in Lyon was the acknowledged premier centre in eighteenth century Europe, English silk became a 'number two'. This expansion was achieved through the growth of sub-branches and specialization, with workshops focusing on specific types of weaving – plains, figured stuffs, velvet, ribbons – and types of cloth: bombazines, stains, poplins.¹¹ Success depended upon a reputation for quality and keeping up with fashion. As the Italian merchant Antoni Zanon remarked “The English and the French genii battle even over the invention of new designs. And armies will perhaps decide the fate of fashions.”¹² In this period designers such as Anna Maria Garthwaite acquired significant reputation for their work and Natalie Rothstein identified at least ten distinct stylist periods in silks produced in London over the 18th century.¹³ This diversity of silks allowed the industries to adapt to changes in

⁷ See Table 8.1 in Natalie Rothstein, “Huguenots in the English Silk Industry in the Eighteenth Century,” in *Huguenots in Britain and their French background, 1550-1800: contributions to the Historical Conference of the Huguenot Society of London, 24-25 September 1985*, ed. Irene Scouloudi (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), p.125.

⁸ Rothstein, *Silk designs of the eighteenth century*, pp.24-25.

⁹ ‘Report of Committee on the Silk Industry’. in *Journals of the House of Commons, 1765*, 208.

¹⁰ Alain Cottureau, ‘The Fate of Fabriques Collectives in the Industrial World: The Silk Industries of Lyon and London, 1800-1850’ in *World of Possibilities: Flexibility and Mass Production in Western Industrialization*, eds. Sabel and Zeitlin, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.), pp. 96, 77.

¹¹ Rothstein, “The Silk Industry in London”, p.466; Alain Cottureau, ‘The Fate of Fabriques Collectives’ in *World of Possibilities*, p.96

¹² Carlo Poni, ‘Fashion as Flexible Production: The Strategies of the Lyon Silk Merchants in the Eighteenth Century’, in *World of Possibilities*, quoted p.43.

¹³ Rothstein, *Silk designs of the eighteenth century*, p.37.

fashion and dress - as, for example, in the 1790s onwards designs became plainer and lighter, and accessories such as ribbons and shawls became more important.¹⁴

What was the role of the Weavers' Company in this success? The older historiography saw the eighteenth century as a period of growing irrelevance for the Livery Companies to the economy of London.¹⁵ Certainly, the Company did not play an active role in key changes to the silk industry. This was partly because changes in technology and production happened outside London and therefore outside its jurisdiction. Investment in larger units of productions, at the turn of the 19th century occurred in Coventry and Macclesfield rather than the capital. However, the newer work on guilds, such as Epstein's, argues for a more nuanced understanding of their role and chronology, and suggests that some did provide benefits to their industries, beyond welfare provision for their members.¹⁶

The Weavers' Company was active in several areas and commanded some authority both within and outside the silk trade. One area was lobbying Parliament for legislation to protect the industry from foreign competition. It won a ban on imported printed cottons in 1721. In the mid-1760s the Company resolved to apply for legislation in the next session of Parliament with the central aim of banning French wrought silk imports as the "only Effectual means to give Relief and Encouragement to our own Silk manufactures".¹⁷ Specifically they proposed additional duties on French brocaded and flowered silks and velvets and a separate set of duties on other foreign wrought silks.¹⁸ The subsequent Act was regularly renewed for the rest of the century and up until 1820s when it was repealed, with disastrous consequences. These waves of legislation were also demanded by journeymen in their vigorous demonstrations and petitioning of the Company, Parliament and the Royal Family. The Company served as something of an organising committee for channelling these energies into formal lobbying of politicians.

However, the Company could play a more a more positive role. In the face of riots from journeymen in the 1680s the Company had backed the introduction of engine looms by some

¹⁴ Rothstein, 'Fashion, Silk and the Worshipful Company of Weavers'. In *La Seta in Europa Sec. XIII-XX: Atti Della 'Ventiquattresima Settimana Di Studi', 4-9 Maggio 1992*, edited by Simonetta Cavaciocchi. (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1993), p.480.

¹⁵ J. R. Kellett, 'The Breakdown of Gild and Corporation Control over the Handicraft and Retail Trade in London'. *The Economic History Review* 10, no. 3 (January 1958): 381–394.

¹⁶ Epstein and Prak. 'Introduction' in *Guilds, Innovation and the European Economy, 1400-1800*, eds. S Epstein and M Prak. (Repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.); Berlin, 'Guilds in Decline? London Livery Companies and the Rise of a Liberal Economy, 1600 - 1800'. in *Guilds, Innovation and the European Economy*; Gadd and Wallis, 'Introduction' in *Guilds, Society & Economy in London 1450-1800*, eds. Wallis and Gadd. (London: Centre for Metropolitan History, Institute of Historical Research in association with Guildhall Library, 2002.)

¹⁷ GL Ms 4655/16, 353.

¹⁸ GL Ms 4655/17, I, 1.

French masters. There was also a close relationship with the Customs and Excise over smuggling, advising them on whether foreign textiles that had been seized by officials broke the relevant statutes. The Company also encouraged its members to inform on mercers selling foreign silks in London and offered rewards for information that led to prosecutions. In 1764 Mr Trott, one of the customs men who consulted with the Company over smuggling, told them that he had seized a pattern book of French silks “of all sorts” from some French agents. This book would have been used by the agents to advertise the design and craftsmanship of Lyon weavers and to win orders. The book contained “several thousand” examples in it:

“consisting of Gold and Silver Brocades, Silver Tissues, Flowered Velvets, Brocades, Peruvians, Lutestrings, Clouded and Plain, of all Sorts and Colours, Grogarns, Serges, Tissues, painted sarsens and Sattins etc.”

The Company was determined to get the book and paid the customs £50 for it. It then drew up a detailed set of rules, as to who would be allowed access to it. The patterns could be inspected on Wednesday and Thursday, from 10am to 1 pm. A Committee of 12 liverymen had to be present and only 6 people or less could view the patterns at a time. These people had to be freemen and were required to send a note to the Clerk “who would allocate times according to their Seniority of standing on the Livery”.¹⁹ The Wire drawers Company was also instructed by Customs to have a member attend Customs House every Tuesday and Friday to inspect the gold and silver lace in the book. The weavers were told to do the same for gold and silver brocades.

Regulating people

Theoretically, of course, the Company was supposed to regulate the workforce in London, and issue fines against those who were working ‘unlawfully’ [weren’t bound apprentices or freemen] or ‘foreign’ weaver – those who learnt their trade outside of London. In practice, like most livery companies it did not carry out regular and systematic searches of workshops. Lacking a permanently large number of bailiffs the Company lacked the information to carry out effective prosecutions. It is clear, for instance, that it did not keep an up-to-date record of all the master weavers in London.²⁰ People were only coming forward to bind apprentices or take up their freedom on a voluntary basis.

Despite this weakness weavers still looked to the company to enforce the regulations, especially of so-called ‘unlawful workers’. These often occurred during trade downturns, and

¹⁹ GL Ms. 04655/16, f.347.

²⁰ See GL Ms. 04655/15, f.67. GL Ms. 04655/15 f.92.

blaming unlawful weavers for lack of work was an easy scapegoat. Throughout the century there are regular periods of lobbying followed by a flurry of real or threatened prosecutions. Bringing a prosecution was expensive – the company owed £116 in 1787 for a court case against two weavers – so was used sparingly.²¹ The lobbying itself was sporadic and was not always followed up by prosecutions. The court was careful to demand names and evidence from those complaining, and would dismiss complaints where no evidence had been brought before it. On one occasion it sent a group of journeymen away by pointing out that they too were unlawful workers, and did not, therefore, have much of a case.²²

Indeed the Company's inclinations went in the opposite direction. From the mid-seventeenth century onwards it had upheld the right, often in the face of opposition from English weavers that 'foreign brothers' could practise the trade in London. Masters were permitted to employ an extra loom and take on an extra employee, in order to take on new arrivals.²³ Thirteen years before the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, the Company had already had the oath of admission translated into French.²⁴ By the 1730s it had dropped the distinction between 'aliens' and 'foreigners' in official proceedings and documents. When the silk industry in Dublin suffered a series of downturn from the late 1730s weavers from Ireland also moved to London to seek work. A second smaller cohort of Huguenot weavers came over in the 1750s. Whilst the Livery Company may not have played a role in actively recruiting immigrants, it did provide a space for integration. New arrivals were often keen to join the Weavers' Company. Andrew Fleming had been a member of the Corporation of Weavers in Dublin and within a year of his arrival he applied for freedom of the Weavers' Company in London.²⁵ For its part, the Company consistently upheld the right of weavers born in different countries to become freemen. It admitted John Baptist Caron, whose names had turned up in one of the trawls of unlawful workers, after he produced a certificate showing that he had "been bred a Weaver" in Normandy.²⁶

The Weavers' Company had to its own satisfaction (if not to all of its journeymen's) successfully managed and absorbed the Huguenots into the industry and the workings of the Company. At the beginning of the century Huguenots were already 17% of all the weavers in the Company. This held up well until the 1790s when it dropped to under 10%.²⁷ Perhaps more importantly, from 1740 Huguenots began to occupy a greater proportion of the Livery and

²¹ GL Ms. 04655/18, f.68b.

²² GL Ms. 04655/16, f.325.

²³ Gwynn, *Huguenot heritage*, p.71.

²⁴ Plummer, *The London Weavers' Company*, p.155.

²⁵ GL. Ms. 04655/16, f.19.

²⁶ GL Ms. 04665/16 f.60.

²⁷ See Table 8.1 in Rothstein, "Huguenots in the English Silk Industry in the Eighteenth Century," p.125.

then of the assistants and officers in the Company.²⁸ Huguenots now began to take up official positions with enthusiasm, so that by December 1749 seven of the ten new members of the Livery were French.²⁹ Many of these members came from the new sub-branches. Of the Liverymen listed in 1739-40, two can be identified as customers of Anne Maria Garthwaite, and a further seven as masters in the flowered silk branch.³⁰

The Company also admitted soldiers and sailors, following state policy. Under George II, legislation had been passed allowing ex-servicemen who had taken up a trade to be admitted to the freedom of the respective livery companies, without having to have served an apprenticeship. The company admitted several weaver ex-servicemen under this legislation.³¹ Similarly, William Dupree, after being an apprentice to his father, then became a sailor, then returned and was a journeyman for 12 years. John Hesten, originally apprenticed in Somerset, served as a soldier in the Old Buffs for four years, before taking up the trade in Spitalfields. Both these men came forward to take their freedom after the Company had agreed to halve the fees. This had been to encourage poorer weavers to join the Company and suggests that this life history was typical of many journeymen.³²

Correspondingly, many weavers left the silk trade for military or naval service. As I show elsewhere using court records, it was very common for weavers to leave the trade temporarily to become soldiers or sailors. For journeymen and apprentices this was clearly linked to times of un- or underemployment. London was a major recruitment centre for both the military and merchant fleet, and so it was easy to find work. The guaranteed income and the bounties paid to new recruits were very attractive for those fallen on hard times. Most of these men then re-entered trade several years later, and some had a second period at sea or in the King's service.³³ Unlike Lyon or Piedmont which had formal restrictions on workers leaving to practice the trade elsewhere, the London silk trade was relaxed about seeing workers being recruited by master in other countries. A minimal set of labour regulations allowed for the flexible labour force that masters needed, and for poorer men acted as a safety value, allowing them to seek work elsewhere. Finally, this ease of movement for silk weavers (and shorter training periods than officially prescribed seven years) points to the generic skills of weaving with a drawloom, at least for plain weaves.

²⁸ Rothstein, "Huguenots in the English Silk Industry in the Eighteenth Century," p.125.

²⁹ Plummer, *The London Weavers' Company*, p.158.

³⁰ Rothstein, 'Fashion, Silk and the Worshipful Company of Weavers', in *La Seta in Europa*, p.471-472.

³¹ See the cases of Joseph Banks, ex-marine, and Joseph File, ex-sailor, GL Ms. 04665/16, ff.1-2, f.63.

³² GL Ms. 04655/16, f.276.

³³ See for examples the cases of Thomas Bonney, John Fosset, William Bolingbroke in the Ordinary of Newgate's Account. *OBP Ordinary's Account*, 5 October 1744, OA17441005; *OBP Ordinary's Account*, 8th November 1738, OA17381108; *OBP Ordinary's Account*, 22nd December 1738, OA17381222.

Conclusion

To return to the two incidents at the beginning. The Weavers' Company pursued one and not the other, because it regulated (where it did regulate) to allow labour mobility but not 'thing' mobility. The silk industry in London 'innovated' by expanding the number of sub-branches, especially those involved in fashion, diversifying its products and encouraging specialisation of workshops. The Weavers' Company encouraged this by working against the spirit of its own statutes. It allowed free movement of labour, and helped foreigners with new skills integrate into the silk trade. However, it sought to control the movements of things: keeping rival products out of the home market and keeping tools and pattern books which were of use to the trade within the city. From the point of view of the Company, this was a sensible and effective strategy. Most of the costs of regulating foreign imports could be borne largely by the State, whilst the costs of regulating a large and mobile workforce were avoided.