

The Debate Surrounding Craft Guilds in Late 18th-Century Spain and its Manifestations in the Catalan Case

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ABSTRACT: *During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, some Spanish Enlightenment economists—like their European counterparts—voiced serious concerns about the guilds, arguing that they hindered manufacturing development. Others, equally enlightened, defended them, particularly in Catalonia, where they continued to play an important role. This article, grounded in both economic history and the history of economic thought, begins by reviewing the contemporary debate surrounding the guilds. It then presents the main arguments made by Spanish Enlightenment thinkers both for and against them, as well as the reform proposals that led to a government-promoted “mixed” system. Finally, the conflicts between the guilds and the “free” manufacturers are analyzed, as well as the way in which the institutions responsible for resolving them—specifically, the Board of Trade of Barcelona—addressed the clashes between the old order and the new during this transitional period. (JEL CODES: B19, B31, N33, N63)*

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El debate en torno a los gremios en la España de finales del siglo XVIII y sus manifestaciones en el caso catalán

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RESUMEN: *Durante el último cuarto del siglo XVIII, algunos economistas ilustrados españoles –al igual que sus homólogos europeos– expresaron serias preocupaciones en cuanto a los gremios, argumentando que obstaculizaban el desarrollo manufacturero. Otros, igualmente ilustrados, los defendieron, particularmente en Cataluña, donde seguían cumpliendo un papel importante. Este texto, construido desde la historia económica y la historia del pensamiento económico, comienza revisando el debate contemporáneo en torno a los gremios. A continuación, se exponen los principales argumentos de los pensadores españoles a favor y en contra de ellos, así como las propuestas de reforma que darían lugar a un sistema «mixto» auspiciado por el gobierno. Finalmente, se analizan los conflictos entre los gremios y los fabricantes «libres» y la manera en que las instituciones encargadas de dirimirlos –en concreto, la Junta Particular de Comercio de Barcelona–, abordaron los desencuentros entre el viejo orden y el nuevo. (CODIGOS JEL: B19, B31, N33, N63)*

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1. Introduction: The Contemporary Debate on Craft Guilds

The delayed industrialization of Spain has been a key topic for economic historians, particularly in relation to the Great Divergence, unequal development, and workforce training. In the 17th and 18th centuries, many reformers raised concerns about manufacturing, as subsistence agriculture remained the dominant economic activity.

In the latter half of the 18th century, “proto-industry” spread across Spain, involving rural households in the early stages of textile production and urban workshops in the later stages. This system allowed for worker training outside the guild structure and enabled merchants to accumulate capital. Although distant from the factory system that we associate with “industry” today, for enlightened economists like Campomanes (1780, pp. 50–56), industry included “all those arts, that is, simple maneuvers, which contribute to preparing raw materials and provide work for the idle, particularly women and girls: sedentary work that does not deserve the name of trade.”

During the era of Campomanes, the challenges faced by the manufacturing sector captured the attention of many economic thinkers. Initially, their focus was on understanding why Spanish manufacturers struggled to compete with their foreign counterparts in terms of both quality and price, leading to calls for reform. By the final quarter of the century, the first textile factories had been established in Catalonia. However, “industry” during this period encompassed a variety of organizational forms, including royal manufactories, the putting-out system, rural industries, and artisan workshops governed by guilds. Some of these models were expanding and evolving, as noted by Berg (1987). This text will focus specifically on guilds.

Craft guilds played a fundamental role in pre-industrial Europe, holding state-granted monopolies over specific trades and shaping production through detailed regulations. These included rules on apprenticeship duration to ensure skill development and craft preservation, as well as structured pathways from apprentice to master. Guilds also controlled supply chains, enforced product quality standards, regulated market access, maintained mutual aid funds for members, and secured representation in municipal councils to defend their legislative interests.

Corporate interests often took precedence over individual concerns, with a strong emphasis on cooperation rather than competition among guild members. However, this did not always result in harmonious distribution of market shares. As Minard (2006, p. 20) argues, guilds provided a framework for collective deliberation, addressing social, economic, and political issues. These discussions sometimes led to the modification or elimination of internal regulations, enabling guilds to adapt to external pressures and fostering the potential for internal transformation.

In the final third of the 18th century, guilds came under increasing criticism, often being labeled as inefficient obstacles to progress in Spanish manufacturing. Critics portrayed them as rigid, resistant to change and innovation, and monopolistic, with control concentrated in

the hands of master craftsmen. This perspective dominated European historiography until more recent times¹.

Ogilvie (2004, 2008, 2019), writing from a neoclassical perspective, reinforces the negative portrayal of guilds, characterizing them as exclusionary, rent-seeking institutions. She argues that their persistence was not a result of economic efficiency, but because they enabled political elites to capture economic benefits at the expense of broader economic growth. Guilds survive because they would arise from conflicts over resources and had the goal of using norms to redistribute wealth to their member. Although they did standardize product quality, Ogilvie contends that this should not be mistaken for efficiency, as consumers often preferred cheaper, lower-quality alternatives. She also critiques the apprenticeship system, viewing it as a tool for restricting entry to “undesirable” members, such as women and illegitimate children, while favoring the offspring of masters. The author acknowledges a certain flexibility within the guilds and their apprenticeship system, but this did not translate into efficiency. As a result, they contributed little to productive, organizational, or financial advancement and did not foster the capital accumulation necessary for rapid economic growth.

Ogilvie (2004, p. 321) highlights a paradox: in regions where wool guilds were strongest, such as Württemberg, manufacturing lagged behind compared to areas with weaker guild presence. She suggests that restrictive guild regulations partly explain the growing economic disparity between England and the Netherlands—where guilds were weaker—and the rest of Europe. However, this view has been contested by De Vries (2019), who argues that the distinctions between Northwest Europe and the rest of the continent are too complex to conclude that weaker guilds directly led to faster GDP growth.

Conversely, numerous researchers challenge this negative perception of guilds, advocating for a “revisionist” perspective that acknowledges their multifaceted roles—economic, religious, political, and social—and their adaptability to changing circumstances. Hickson and Thompson (1991) argue that guilds were efficient, cost-minimizing institutions that protected their members from exploitation while generating tax revenues for the state. Epstein and Prak (2008) contend that guilds thrived for centuries because they supported specialized interregional labor markets and facilitated the spread of technical innovations through labor migration. They suggest that the apprenticeship system was more open and flexible than traditionally perceived, enabling guilds to effectively adapt to economic shifts. Epstein (1998, p. 686) offers a political interpretation, asserting that the dissolution of guilds resulted from state actions rather than their failure to adapt. In response to Ogilvie’s arguments, Epstein (2008, p. 155) contends that she underestimates the role of guilds in England and the Low Countries, which other researchers have questioned.

Similarly, Pfister (2008) notes that the dissolution of guilds was driven more by political motives than by industrial necessity, and argues for the role of production coordination and guilds as substitutes for the firm. Lucassen et al. (2008) further highlight that innovation and entrepreneurship not only coexisted within guild frameworks but also thrived.

Research has underscored the significant role guilds played in knowledge transmission and human capital development—contributions that persisted even as industrialization gained

momentum. Prak and Wallis (2019) highlight the flexibility of the apprenticeship system, suggesting it was more responsive to labor market demands than previously acknowledged. However, considering Ogilvie's perspective and the results of her research, flexibility may not always be synonymous with efficiency.

In some cases, apprenticeship practices continued even after guilds were abolished. For example, in Barcelona, these models persisted after the 1834 legislation, allowing certain crafts to maintain control over labor recruitment and ensure their survival (Romero, 2005, p. 91). The author (2015, p. 95) also argues that in regions where guilds were particularly numerous and robust, such as Barcelona, the expansion of commercial and manufacturing capitalism occurred more rapidly.

In the early modern period, artisans were highly mobile, frequently migrating to urban centers. Studies show that many masters and apprentices across Europe were immigrants or from non-guild backgrounds (Prak et al., 2020), challenging the view of guilds as closed monopolies. In fact, guilds were often revitalized by newcomers (Farr, 2000), though some still favored the children of masters.

Consequently, apprenticeships could significantly increase employment opportunities for artisans and enhance product supply in densely populated areas. Moreover, the skills acquired through urban apprenticeships were often reintroduced to rural areas, contributing to local development (Humphries, 2011).

In the following sections, this paper explores the perspectives of key Spanish economists of the late 18th century who, while critical of guilds, advocated for reform rather than abolition. It compares their arguments—many of which align with Ogilvie's claims—with the findings of some empirical studies. It also examines the perspectives of Enlightenment economists who defended guilds, drawing parallels to the views of Epstein and other revisionist scholars. Lastly, it analyzes the tensions between traditional guild representatives and those advocating for liberation from guild constraints, focusing on the Catalan context. The aim of this paper is to analyze, from different perspectives, how the strengths and weaknesses of the guild system have been interpreted at a time of crucial transformation.

2. Main Arguments of Spanish Enlightened Economists Against the Guild System

The issue of Spain's economic "decline," first raised by 17th-century arbiters, became more pronounced in the 18th century as the economic growth of neighboring nations underscored Spain's stagnation. Urban consumption patterns were also shifting. The intensification of family labor, which some have associated with a so-called "industrious revolution" aimed at consuming more and better goods, and the rise of specialized agriculture would provide additional income for certain social groups, increasing the demand for "fashionable" products, including colonial goods and affordable imitations of luxury items previously reserved for the

wealthy (Moreno Claverías, 2017). The guilds struggled to meet this new demand, both in terms of quantity and pricing. Consequently, some free manufacturers seized the opportunity to establish businesses outside the guild system, while contemporary economists began advocating for reform.

Spain actively participated in the broader European debate on guilds, a discussion that became intertwined with the emerging scientific focus on Political Economy in the mid-18th century, contributing to Enlightenment culture (Astigarraga and Usoz, 2013). As liberal thought gained prominence, political economists primarily critiqued the distortions guild corporations caused to free markets, reflecting similar debates in France (Meyssonier, 1989; Larrère, 1992; Kaplan, 2001).

As early as 1724, Uztáriz argued that restrictions on production and special privileges were detrimental to the general interest (1757, p. 331). According to Rodríguez González (2023), Uztáriz's *Teórica y Práctica del Comercio*, which was translated into French by Forbonnais in 1753, resonated with Vincent de Gournay's circle, including figures such as Plumard de Dangeul, Forbonnais, and Clicquot de Blervanche. Gournay, a staunch advocate of free competition and the abolition of corporate regulations had a significant influence on Spanish thinkers. He believed that human labor was the foundation of national wealth and should be encouraged through deregulation, including the elimination of guilds (Meyssonier, 1989, pp. 66-70; Guasti, 2013). Favorable to the abolition of *maîtrises et jurandes*, the critiques from Gournay's circle facilitated Turgot's rise to government, where he championed the dissolution of corporations. In 1775, Turgot widely distributed a pamphlet written by Bigot de Sainte-Croix in 1767—*Essai sur la liberté du commerce et de l'industrie*—which argued that the monopolistic restrictions upheld by corporations disrupted the natural economic order. Indeed, French physiocracy, in which Bigot de Sainte-Croix's text is framed, had a significant influence on the school of Spanish economists in the 18th century and their positions on guilds. For some physiocrats guild restrictions limited competition and growth, hindering the freedom of trade and markets.

During the same period, Adam Smith, in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), criticized trade corporations for harming the economy and distorting the labor market by infringing on labor, which he considered the most sacred property of every individual. The book was incorporated into the thought of Spanish economists in the decades following its publication in different ways (Astigarraga and Zabalza, 2022). As Rodríguez González (2023, p. 57) observes, Smith came close to crossing the boundary that Bigot de Sainte-Croix had crossed in France. However, despite his criticisms, Smith did not advocate for the outright suppression of guilds, acknowledging that “the law cannot hinder people of the same trade from sometimes assembling together” (Smith [1776] 2007, I, X, p. 106). He argued that economic agents should not be subjected to excessive restrictions, as suppressing corporations would conflict with the principle of freedom itself. From Smith's perspective, guilds could impact the division of labor within workshops. The lack of specialization in simple tasks reduced productivity and undermined the principle of self-interest—the aim of maximizing output with minimal effort—thereby obstructing the natural operation of the “invisible hand”.

In some regions, the defense of free industry and labor led to the enactment of abolitionist legislation, as seen in Tuscany (1770), France (1776), and Vienna (1786), although these initiatives were minority and short-lived. The gradual reform of the guilds was the dominant approach in Europe: most governments sought to remove anti-free market elements without completely dismantling the guild structure. In Spain, aligned with the main trend in European countries, the path of gradual reform was also chosen, which was advocated by thinkers such as Ward, Ramos, Campomanes, Jovellanos, Arteta, and Sánchez, among others (Ocampo and Suárez, 2019; Moreno Claverías, 2018).

The first critiques of guilds in Spain were put forward by authors such as Ward, an economist in the service of Fernando VI (1762), and Ramos (1769). These critiques were part of a broader movement that generally favored moderate and gradual reforms of the corporate system (Astigarraga, 2017, pp. 344-346). Among the key critics of guilds, we will focus on Campomanes, Jovellanos, and Foronda, who, according to Cervera's (2019) timeline of enlightened economic thought, were prominent figures during the rise of political economy (1759–1773) and the dominance of civil economy in the late Enlightenment (1773–1792).

One of the most prominent critics of the guilds was Pedro Rodríguez de Campomanes, an economist and reformer under Carlos III on the Council of Castile. His proposals significantly influenced the authorities who legislated against guild privileges, with his works being financed and approved by the Crown (Guasti, 2013). In 1774, concerned about the economic decline in Castile, Campomanes wrote *Discurso sobre el fomento de la industria popular*, advocating for the promotion of “popular industry.” This focus is important, as much of the criticism by Spanish Enlightenment thinkers against guilds stemmed from their belief in the superiority of domestic industry over urban factories. Campomanes argued for an industry that would complement farming, allowing families to work during their leisure time (Campomanes [1774] 1975). He was not alone in this view; Ward noted that the prevalent method of using large factory buildings in some regions of Spain was inefficient compared to the French and English models, where workers used looms in their homes (Ward [1779] 1982, pp. 131-132). Similarly, politician Alcalá Galiano (1785) suggested limiting the privileges of guilds, such as those of embroiderers and tailors, and advocated for activities that could be performed at home at lower costs, particularly by women.

Campomanes proposed reforms to train the workforce—potentially with the help of foreign experts—and to provide employment for marginalized groups, including orphans, the poor, and women in the early stages of textile production. His goals included reducing begging and vagrancy, increasing rural incomes to prevent migration to cities often plagued by unrest (as “social peace” needed to be promoted), and easing the burden on the public treasury. In his 1775 treatise on artisan education, he criticized the guilds for hindering industrial growth through inefficiency, incompetence, poor-quality goods, and monopolistic practices. However, unlike Turgot, he advocated reform rather than abolition, aiming to strike a balance between tradition and innovation without introducing revolutionary changes (Llombart, 2000, p. 24).

For Campomanes, guilds could serve as vehicles for “popular education,” focusing on workforce training within the guild system while ensuring that apprentices were not exploited by their masters. He advocated for updating technical skills by adopting international advancements (Campomanes [1774] 1975, p. 176). Additionally, he argued that guilds should be regulated by the state, with local regulations transformed into national ones, which he believed would enhance labor mobility (Díez, 2014, p. 79).

In 1776, Campomanes published a treatise on craft guild legislation, drawing on abolitionist edicts from Tuscany and France. His views had become more radical, and he was the first Spanish thinker to reference Bigot’s renowned *Essai*. However, Campomanes argued that abolitionism was impractical in Spain due to the country’s underdeveloped industry, which needed protection from foreign competition. Instead, he favored the British model, as did Jovellanos, since guilds in Britain did not conflict with industrial freedom or the preservation of the public good and royal authority (Astigarraga, 2017, pp. 349-353).

Astigarraga (2017, pp. 347-348) notes that Campomanes developed a progressive reform strategy that was embraced by influential Spanish economists in the late 18th century, including figures from Aragón (Arteta, Normante), Galicia (Sánchez), and Valencia (Danvila, Sempere). This strategy emphasized the importance of common technical education for artisans and necessary adjustments to guild ordinances. Campomanes thus laid out the guiding principles for future official reforms, which would unfold over the next two decades. These policies were directed by the Council of Castile, which in turn influenced the *Junta General de Comercio* (Board of Trade), the body responsible for industrial policy in Spain. In this context, the Royal Economic Societies, particularly the *Matritense* (1776), played a crucial role as a consultative body for the Council of Castile.

Among the most significant reforms, in 1777, guilds were opened to foreign masters and artisans, provided they were Catholic, and geographic mobility for artisans was permitted. In 1778, the Royal Economic Societies were tasked with drafting a comprehensive reform plan to modernize the guilds as much as possible. Several provisions introduced in 1778, 1784, 1786, and 1789 liberalized technical manufacturing processes, particularly in the textile sector. Additionally, reforms in 1779 and 1784 advocated for the training and increased freedom of female workers, challenging the restrictions imposed by guilds (Díez, 2001, pp. 171-172).

In 1785, the Spanish Bourbon government implemented the pinnacle of its reforms: a decree that authorized the coexistence of arts practiced according to the textile ordinances alongside “free” arts, regulated by a permit and seal issued by the *Junta General de Comercio*. This “mixed” system, which allowed guilds and free artisans to operate simultaneously, was inspired, according to Astigarraga (2017, pp. 354, 360), by Necker’s “intermediate” system—a compromise between strict regulation and complete industrial freedom (Minard, 1998).

Also in 1785, the lawyer and politician Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos, in a report commissioned by the *Junta de Comercio*, proposed the gradual elimination of guild regulations, arguing that they hindered industrial growth. According to Rodríguez González (2023, p. 58), Jovellanos disagreed with Campomanes’s plan for corporate legal reforms and strongly supported the liberalization of labor and production. In his report, Jovellanos used language

similar to that of Sainte-Croix but fundamentally aligned with Clicquot de Blervache, who believed that, after radical reform, guilds could continue to exist without their old monopolistic privileges.

Convinced, like Campomanes, of the benefits of combining industry with agriculture, Jovellanos criticized the guild system for concentrating industry in cities, which he deemed unsuitable due to high housing and food costs, as well as the increased demands of luxury consumption (Jovellanos [1785] 2000, p. 441). His critique specifically targeted the concentration of industry in specialized urban establishments, such as workshops and factories, rather than the guild system as a whole.

Jovellanos viewed practical education as essential to economic development, leading some scholars to regard his ideas as early forms of human capital theory (Street, 1988). He criticized guilds for restricting access to trades and limiting innovation. While he accepted apprenticeships when they supported educational objectives, he observed that guilds disrupted the balance between supply and demand, which shifted with changing fashions. As a result, he called for an end to the “guild oppression” that stifled competition, raised prices, and contributed to the decline of manufacturing².

Although Jovellanos was more radical than Campomanes, he supported retaining certain guild regulations in specific sectors, such as textiles and silk, to prevent fraud and maintain product quality. He acknowledged the challenges of abolishing guilds: “The risks, abuses, and evils that can arise from freedom. Everyone knows that the guilds are evil; but they are viewed as a necessary evil, to avoid even greater ones” (Jovellanos [1785] 2000, p. 446). Like Campomanes, Jovellanos advocated for gradual reforms rather than revolutionary changes, aiming for structural economic improvements (Llombart, 2021, p. 114).

Valentín de Foronda is regarded as the first Spanish abolitionist, surpassing the reformist approaches of Campomanes, Jovellanos, and the Bourbon government’s “mixed system.” In his *Cartas sobre los asuntos más exquisitos de la Economía política* (1788-1789), Foronda vehemently opposed exclusive privileges, market price interventions, subsidies, and guilds (Barronechea, 2000, p. 551). Influenced by physiocratic thought, he rejected any form of state intervention that disrupted the natural flow of society, arguing that prosperity depends on property rights, liberty, and security (Patriarca, 2009, p.75).

Drawing inspiration from Bigot, Foronda embraced Turgot’s belief that labor is the primary property of the people and should be exercised freely (Astigarraga, 2017, p. 361). He argued that guilds stifled competition and deprived consumers of better and cheaper goods, describing guild regulations as “extravagant and tyrannical statutes dictated by greed” (Foronda [1788], 1821, V.1, p. 41). Foronda criticized the barriers journeymen faced in becoming masters, the exclusion of women from trades, the lengthy apprenticeships, and the restrictions on foreign artisans who could improve techniques and production. For these reasons, he advocated not merely for reform but for the complete abolition of the guilds.

Although abolitionism remained a minority perspective in Spain, Foronda’s radical liberalism laid an intellectual foundation more closely aligned with Turgot’s economic ideas. His views stood in sharp contrast to the dominant Spanish thought, which defended guilds

within a protectionist and interventionist framework. Moreover, as Astigarraga (2017, pp. 362-363) notes, the growing politicization of the Enlightenment contributed to the establishment of the principle of freedom of labor. This principle was later incorporated by Manuel de Aguirre, a member of these radical currents, into one of the first constitutional codes of Spanish Enlightenment thought in 1787.

During these years, the state continued to implement measures aimed at reducing the power of the guilds. In 1789, the mandatory years of apprenticeship were replaced by an examination; in 1790, the practice of the arts was declared free without the need for prior examination; in 1793, the first guild (that of silk twistors) was abolished; and in 1797, foreign masters were granted the freedom to establish themselves without restrictions (Díez, 2001, pp. 171-172).

In early 19th-century Spain, the principle of labor freedom emerged in parliamentary debates, particularly in June 1813, where two main positions were discussed: defenders of the guild system and proponents of a “mixed” system, supported by liberal politicians. This liberal view, influenced by thinkers like Adam Smith and Jean-Baptiste Say, emphasized individual interests to improve product quality and reduce costs (Astigarraga, 2017, p. 370). However, the full abolition of the guild system in Spain occurred only in 1834.

According to Rodríguez González (2023, p. 67), in continental Western Europe, corporate organization was generally compatible with the recognition of economic rights. In Spain, however, guild corporations failed to adapt to a revised model, despite Bourbon law allowing for such changes. As a result, guilds gradually declined due to economic stagnation and the lack of political support for a renewed corporate system that aligned with the freedom of production and labor.

Before exploring the arguments of guild defenders, it is useful to compare their critics’ assumptions with some findings from empirical economic history. Some Spanish studies suggest that guilds did not significantly contribute to development in productivity, organization, or financial progress, nor did they generate capital accumulation. This “deficiency” and their difficulty adapting to innovation led to their decline (Molas, 1979, p. 547). Additionally, it is argued that guilds survived in Spain not due to their claimed advantages, but because a more inefficient state delegated tasks it struggled to perform itself. As a result, craft guilds hindered the free market and contributed to the slower development of Castilian industry in pre-industrial Europe (González Arce, 2000).

Other authors caution against generalizing, given the diversity of local contexts. García Fernández (2016), studying Castilian wool production, argues that guilds more autonomous from central power were better able to adapt and contribute to economic growth. Unlike in Castile, where excessive regulation stifled artisan independence, Catalonia’s less rigid situation allowed artisans to engage in regional diversification and more intense industrial activity. The author also notes that the corporate structure wasn’t necessarily backward, as everyday practices often went beyond legal regulations to meet consumer demands.

A common argument among critics was that guilds impeded the development of disseminated manufacture. They claimed that by supporting women’s work, they were addressing

the real issues of idleness and poverty. These critics believed that income from “dispersed industry” would lead families to pay more taxes and increase consumption. However, this perspective may overlook the fact that such income could foster precarious, low-skilled, and poorly paid labor—conditions that have historically existed outside guild structures and will persist due to necessity³.

Research shows that the relationship between domestic industry and guilds was often complementary rather than oppositional. Guild artisans frequently worked under the capital of manufacturers and merchants, who also employed local women within a complex economic system. Torras (1991) argues that guilds stimulated, rather than hindered, domestic industry in many rural Catalan areas. Similarly, González Enciso (1998, p. 133) notes that the rural wool industry expanded in parts of Castile during the 18th century, particularly where guilds were present. In Segovia, García Sanz (1996, pp. 21–22) demonstrates a positive connection between the *Verlagssystem* and guilds, showing that manufacturers—often former guild masters—relied on guilds for technical oversight, quality control, labor discipline, and fraud prevention. Instead of seeking independence, these manufacturers valued the regulatory structure guilds provided to manage risk and uncertainty.

Fontana (1988, pp. 67-72) emphasizes that rural industry could either remain stagnant, as in parts of Castile, or lay the foundation for growth and industrialization, as seen in Catalonia. Geographical factors and uneven industrial development played a key role. Guild opposition to market liberalization in less dynamic regions like Castile contrasts with the Catalan experience (Lluch, 1999). In Catalonia, Campomanes’s reform proposals faced significant resistance from the *Junta Particular de Comercio*, the Academy of Physics, and the Academy of Agriculture, who argued that rural division of labor and the wool and cotton sectors created a different context from Castile, where collaboration among guilds, rural domestic industry, and merchant-manufacturers was the prevailing trend (Ocampo, 2023).

On the other hand, criticisms of guilds for their alleged inability to adapt to changing demand contrast with evidence from certain corporations in late-18th-century Catalonia. As cotton factories began reshaping the landscape and new workers entered the labor force, new guilds emerged—such as those for chocolatiers and brick makers—to meet the rising demand for specific products. Additionally, traditional trades experienced subdivisions; for instance, coopers separated from carpenters as wine became a key export for Catalonia. Furthermore, guild regulations were not static but were frequently updated to accommodate shifts in demand and technological advancements⁴.

Regarding the endogamous nature of craft guilds, an examination of the social and geographical origins of new apprentices reveals some complexities. In Barcelona, for instance, only 13% of the 169 apprentices who joined the silk twisters’ guild between 1762 and 1792 were children of guild members, and just 26% were from the city (Moreno Claverías, 2015a). Similar findings were reported by Arranz and Grau (1970, pp. 73-74), who studied the origins of apprentices in three Barcelona guilds (bricklayers, bakers, carpenters) during the 1760s; 75% of the 828 apprentices were outsiders, predominantly from rural areas, highlighting the guilds’ critical role in integrating the large influx of migrants from the countryside to the city.

In Madrid, by 1790, 55% of new master carpenters were not from the city or its vicinity. Similarly, only 18% of new master tailors were from Madrid or its province (Nieto, 2013), although during these years, the reforms carried out may have already loosened some corporate restrictions.

The endogamous practices are not as evident in entry to the guilds as they are in access to the mastership. In fact, the fees for taking the exam were lower for the sons of masters to facilitate the continuity of what was considered the cornerstone of the family heritage.

3. Main Arguments of the Enlightened Economists in Favor of the Guild System

In the debate over industrial production and labor organization in late-18th- century Spain, not all thinkers opposed the guild system; some, particularly Catalans, were strong supporters. Unlike in other regions where their influence was weaker and limited by public authorities, craft guilds in the Crown of Aragon had been deeply integrated into the political, economic, and social fabric since the late Middle Ages (Monsalvo, 2002, p. 164). In Catalonia, guilds not only provided honor and social status to artisans but also offered political visibility, playing an active role in local governance (Díez, 2001, p. 184).

The Catalan guild system remained strong in the late 18th century and coexisted with emerging urban and rural industries, which were not perceived as a threat. While some Barcelona guilds, like tin workers and wool weavers, declined, most remained active, with others—such as veil makers—growing stronger. New guilds also emerged, including those for brick makers and cotton manufacturers. This reflected broader shifts in manufacturing and consumption, leading to the simultaneous decline, growth, and formation of different guilds and sectors.

The adaptability of certain Catalan guilds contributed to the development of new industries, leading some thinkers to suggest that industrialization was more successful and occurred earlier in regions with stronger, more dynamic guilds. This prompted efforts to extend the guild system, with its perceived benefits, to the rest of Spain in line with 18th-century ideas about productive labor. The notion of compatibility between guilds and industrial growth has been a recurring theme in Catalan economic thought since the time of jurist and economist Francisco Romá (Llombart, 2000, p. 27).

Romá's thinking was notably influenced by authors like Bielfeld and Plumard de Dangeul, though they viewed the role of guilds differently (Lluch, 1973, pp. 32-33; Astigarraga, 2017, p. 348). In 1766, Romá argued that guilds could promote industrial growth and protect the national market, justifying their existence as a means of shielding domestic products from foreign competition. According to Lluch (1973, p. 28), this perspective contributed to the support for guilds among various contemporary Catalan authors, even as more liberal economic ideas gained traction in less industrialized regions of Spain.

For Romá, guilds played a crucial role in ensuring product quality and protecting consumers from counterfeits produced by “greedy rogues” seeking to profit from fake goods. He argued that the notion of guilds fostering monopoly and nepotism was misguided, as large cities like Barcelona were required to accept anyone wishing to practice a trade, provided they met the necessary qualifications. This abundance of labor increased competitiveness, ultimately driving down prices (Romá, 1766, pp. 25-27). Romá also valued the mutual aid provided by guilds, noting that seriously ill members received medical assistance and daily alms (Romá, 1766, pp. 20-21). This support was recognized by institutions that backed guilds, particularly for the apprenticeship opportunities they offered to children from poor families. For instance, in 1776, the Barcelona City Council pointed out that many young men, destined by poverty to pursue mechanical arts, could only do so through apprenticeships, as their families could not support them for extended periods. Without these opportunities, many would have been driven to beggary (Arranz and Grau, 1970, p. 77).

While Romá strongly defended trade guilds, Antonio de Capmany was even more emphatic in his support. In his 1778 *Discurso*, dedicated to Campomanes despite their differing views, Capmany saw no contradiction between maintaining the guild system and the vibrant growth of Catalan industry. He argued that the proliferation of guilds played a crucial role in fostering high levels of “industriousness” in Catalan cities, which were instrumental in driving economic growth. Capmany believed that this successful model should be promoted as a solution to the decline of manufacturing in Castile.

Capmany emphasized both the moral and economic benefits of the guilds: they instilled discipline and a strong work ethic in young people, while also supporting the needy by assisting orphans and providing aid to sick members and their widows. He believed apprenticeships helped prevent the “misery and perdition” of youth, and that the stable wages of journeymen encouraged marriage. Capmany noted that individuals without property have no ties or stakes, comparing the farmer without land to the artisan without a guild. He also believed that the apprentice-journeyman-master progression “engenders development”, as the desire to advance from one class to the next motivated diligence in work (Capmany, 1778, pp. 22-26).

Capmany highlighted a key advantage of the guild system: the craft learned within it was as valuable as land for farmers. He argued that passing this “property” from parents to children ensured continuity in trades, which, although not yielding quick fortunes, positioned artisans within the “medianía” (middle class), motivating hard work to maintain or improve their well-being (Capmany, 1778, pp. 10, 30). This view aligned with emerging liberal political thought, which saw moderate economic inequality as a motivator for industriousness among workers seeking a better life (Díez, 2001, p. 193). Capmany believed the guild system did not hinder industrial growth; wealthier masters often became successful traders, employing less prosperous masters and journeymen. Apprentices were also essential in sustaining guilds and preserving work practices and community ties.

The complexity of Capmany’s defense of the guild system is remarkable. He built his proposal on the most advanced ideas of political economy, emphasizing the importance of productive work and a well-occupied society. He also drew from contemporary theories on

industriousness, particularly influenced by Helvetius's *De l'Homme, de ses facultés intellectuelles et de son éducation*, published in 1773. From Capmany's perspective, modern economic theories were perfectly compatible with the Catalan guilds, which he had rigorously studied as a historian (Díez, 2001, p. 190). He defended the role of guilds in promoting industrial development and adaptability, arguing that "guild industry" fostered new trades in response to changing fashions and needs. He challenged critics by asking, "What new art or branch of industry has failed to become established or perfected in London or Paris because of the guilds?" (Capmany, 1778, p.56). The author claimed that guilds effectively organized labor and stimulated growth in regions like Italy, Flanders, France, England, and Catalonia. Guilds, he argued, helped alleviate artisan poverty and protected industries from external shocks, warning that in places without such systems, "a plague, a war, or bad harvest are enough to wipe out the industry" (Capmany, 1778, pp. 44–48).

While Capmany acknowledged instances of abuse within guilds, he rejected the notion that such issues warranted their abolition. He argued that, by that logic, one would also need to abolish "the regular orders, the clergy, even the courts," as these institutions also have their own abuses. In response to critiques regarding the hierarchical distinctions between apprentices, journeymen, and masters, he asked: "Why shouldn't the same inequality prevail among artisans that we see in other classes in the state?" (Capmany, 1778, p. 57).

4. Conflicts Between Guilds and "Free" Manufacturers: The Case of Catalonia

As the traditional organization of manufacturing labor was increasingly challenged, conflicts emerged between factory owners and artisans. Many free manufacturers, despite their guild backgrounds, viewed guild regulations as impediments to production flexibility. The Catalan cotton industry, a key driver of Spain's early industrialization, relied on capital, technical expertise, and guild labor (Molas, 1970, p. 519), with its interests being defended by the involved social groups against foreign competition.

Frequent disputes arose between guild authorities and manufacturers seeking independence under new legal frameworks. These conflicts were arbitrated by the *Junta Particular de Comercio de Barcelona* (Board of Trade), established in 1758, which represented the Catalan bourgeoisie and governed economic activities in Catalonia until 1847. The *Junta*'s responsibilities included defending the Catalan economy, advocating for protectionist measures, promoting education, overseeing public works, and supervising guild activities. According to Lluch (1973, p. 36), the *Junta* mainly represented the commercial bourgeoisie, whose relationship with the guilds during this period was closer than with the "new industrialists".

In 1807, the *Junta* was authorized to reform guild ordinances to promote manufacturing development (Molas, 1970, p. 225). It played a crucial role in mediating power struggles between guilds, ensuring adherence to ordinances, addressing grievances from guild members,

and reviewing requests from professionals seeking to operate independently. The documentation from the *Junta*, including complaints and responses, provides valuable insights into the roles of guilds, shedding light on their contradictions, strengths, and weaknesses.

The following case studies illustrate typical conflicts between guilds and those who viewed them as obstacles to their operations, a concern raised by figures such as Campomanes, Jovellanos, and Foronda.

In one instance from 1801, linen and cotton manufacturer Joan Antoni Font sued the linen and cotton weavers' guild, claiming that the guild had interfered with his business by fining him 25 pounds for producing cotton fabrics without a master weaver overseeing his establishment. The *Junta de Comercio* ruled in Font's favor, citing the Royal Decree of 1784, which promoted the textile industry. The weavers' guild's appeal against this judgment was unsuccessful⁵.

Another case, from 1790, involved Juan March, a manufacturer of *buratas* (light fabrics), along with other Barcelona weavers⁶. They reported that the veil weavers' guild had seized a piece of fabric they were working on because it was being produced on a loom "that was not one used by those of the said guild." March and the other weavers requested the return of the fabric. In other words, this manufacturer was producing fabrics similar to those of the veil weavers but using a different, possibly more innovative, loom.

Juan March, the main petitioner, was the son of Aleix March, who had previously clashed with the same guild. In 1776, Aleix, as director of Magarola and Antonio Nadal brothers' cotton company, faced a similar conflict when veil weavers' guild foremen broke into his factory and seized fabric⁷. The monarch, through the *Junta*, ruled that the fabric be returned and allowed Aleix to continue operating his factory.

In 1790, his son Juan sought a similar ruling for his case, and the *Junta* again sided with him, enabling him to continue his business. This case illustrates that both guild masters and businessmen operating outside trade corporations often passed their enterprises to their children, giving them an advantage over outsiders. Moreover, it highlights that two generations of the March family successfully operated outside the guild system, demonstrating that many regulations were not strictly enforced and that rigid guild structures could not fully suppress the growth of other industrial activities (González Enciso, 1998, p. 134).

The authorities of the veil weavers' guild contested the decision, arguing that Juan March could not be considered a manufacturer (*fabricante*) because he had not completed the required apprenticeship or exams to qualify as a master. While they acknowledged his right to produce goods, they insisted he comply with guild regulations. This revealed a key conflict: guilds saw it as unfair for one workshop to gain advantages over others, believing all workshops in a trade deserved collective protection. In contrast, "free" manufacturers like March prioritized individual profit and sought independence, viewing guild restrictions as obstacles to their business goals.

When a manufacturer received permission to operate outside the guild, it set a precedent that others could reference in similar requests. For example, in 1772, hosiery manufacturer Pere Calvet and his associates secured a franchise to operate independently, which prompted Josep Benet to seek the same freedom two years later, citing Calvet's case⁸.

In 1788, the Berga linen and wool weavers' guild sued Francesc Soler, a weaver who had not completed his apprenticeship and was independently selling ordinary linen cloth. The guild's primary concern was not only that Soler was producing and selling freely, but also that he was not contributing to the guild's finances. They feared that if Soler was exempt, others might follow, threatening the guild's survival and its mutual aid functions. However, the *Junta* ruled that, given the freedom established by the 1784 decree for manufacturing hemp and linen fabrics, it was difficult for the guild to compel Soler to pay the quota⁹.

So far, we have examined cases that align with the prevailing trends of the time: the state, influenced by Campomanes' ideas, was legislating in favor of industrial freedom, while the *Junta de Comercio* was tasked with upholding this principle. However, the *Junta* did not always rule in favor of the new manufacturers, contrary to what one might expect.

In 1791, a merchant and his associates from Puigcerdà sought permission to establish a silk-stockings factory with six looms¹⁰. However, the *Junta* denied their request due to the absence of a qualified master of the trade. The merchant argued that no such guild existed in his area and noted that other hosiery factories in Catalonia were operating without a master. He even submitted samples of stockings for inspection, emphasizing that his partners were skilled artisans from Ganges, "where silk stockings are most perfectly worked." Despite his appeals, the *Junta* upheld its decision and denied the establishment of the factory.

In 1793, merchant Lluís Anglada sought permission to establish a stocking factory and manage it without guild admission or a master. Despite a 1789 decree promoting greater freedom for merchants, the *Junta* received unfavorable reports regarding the quality of Anglada's products and ultimately advised against allowing the factory in the city¹¹. This suggests that the quality standards upheld by the guilds, emphasized by thinkers like Romá, remained influential even as new production methods were emerging.

The *Junta de Comercio*'s inconsistent rulings were influenced by factors such as the dynamics of the Catalan economy and the "mixed" system established by the Bourbon government, which allowed both guilds and free industry to coexist. This arrangement caused conflicts and was poorly received by many guilds. The *Junta*, undergoing transformation, faced ambiguities and contradictions. Its stance was generally "moderate reformist," though it fluctuated over time. In 1815, during Fernando VII's reign, it contributed to the restoration of guilds and oversaw a major regulatory reform program (Molas, 1970, p. 227).

To fully illustrate the conflicts and competing interests arising from differing views on the organization of industry, consider a curious but highly informative case. In 1796, tradesman Jaime Planas and his partners, who were not affiliated with any craft guilds, sought to establish a guild for silk manufacturers (*sedayres*) and submitted their ordinances to the *Junta de Comercio*¹².

The *sedayres* produced various silk items, including nets, hosiery, and caps, by utilizing what had previously been considered "rubbish". Planas and his partners emphasized the benefits of their operations, noting that it provided employment for thousands, particularly women and girls, who, "fickle in their feminine vanities", could contribute to the Republic through their involvement in silk production¹³.

The silk hose manufacturers' and haberdashers' guilds strongly opposed Planas and his partners, who produced silk goods from scraps and sold them at presumably lower prices. These tradesmen sought to establish a new guild rather than simply opening a production facility or requesting the freedom to market their goods, which the state supported at the time. They argued, however, that a specific guild would protect them from abuses by existing guilds, improve quality control, and facilitate tax payments to the treasury—something not possible in a free occupation. To support their application for a silk merchants' guild, Planas and his partners submitted ordinances requesting “the same prerogatives as silk hosiers and haberdashers”, hoping for royal approval¹⁴.

The *Junta*'s decision to deny the request for a new silk merchants' guild was clear and definitive. They noted that many artisans, including veil weavers and hosiers, had long been using silk waste to create various goods. While this sector had recently grown, the *Junta* attributed this growth not to the efforts of Planas and his partners, but to the contributions of numerous individuals within existing craft guilds. The *Junta* emphasized that the successful production and sale of these items coexisted with the guild system, countering claims from guild critics. This coexistence demonstrated that guilds remained a powerful institution in Barcelona, even as new industrial practices emerged.

The *Junta* argued that establishing a new guild would actually harm the existing silk industry, as both guild members and private individuals would prefer to let silk waste go unused rather than submit to additional guild regulations. They pointed out that the haberdashers' and hosiers' guilds were already permitted to work with silk waste, as outlined in a Royal Decree from August 1790. The *Junta* concluded that Planas and his partners sought to monopolize this activity, excluding existing guilds and families who relied on it. They criticized the manufacturers for wanting to impose barriers on an industry thriving under a state of freedom. Ultimately, the *Junta* deemed the activity “free,” despite some guilds also participating in it, which contradicted certain views expressed by Campomanes and Jovellanos.

This case illustrates the contradictions that arise during the transition from an old to a new economic order. Manufacturers like Planas sought to control a lucrative activity, relying on low raw material and labor costs that had previously been managed by a few guilds and many women working from home. Despite their criticism of guild control, they requested the establishment of a guild to leverage its benefits. In denying this request, the *Junta* defended not only the livelihoods of those freely producing goods from silk scraps but also the interests of existing haberdasher and hosier guilds engaged in the same activity.

5. Conclusions

The discourse on guilds after 1770, along with recent research, suggests that assessing their adaptability requires considering the broader economic, social, and political contexts. Guilds served multiple functions and should be understood within their historical intellectual frameworks, particularly during shifts in political economies (Minard, 2006, p. 17). It is also

essential to recognize the influence of geographical factors. During 18th-century Spain, a wide range of guild realities existed; for example, Castilian guilds were often rigid due to limited urban industrial transformation, whereas regions like Catalonia and Valencia were more dynamic (Diez, 2014).

The debate in Spain, as well as in Europe, regarding guilds was led by economists who believed they should be gradually reformed to address their flaws, while others argued that they should be maintained precisely because of their strength. The relationship between the state and the corporations was influenced by both the strengths and weaknesses of the guild system, as well as the state's capacity for centralization. The reformist positions of some prominent economists and the government eventually led to the creation of a "mixed" system, allowing the coexistence of free manufacture and the guilds, though not without frictions and contradictions in the early decades of its implementation.

What is clear is that the ideas of these thinkers were strong enough to have a real impact on the guild system. Their concern about the decline of manufacturing in Spain—at a time when they saw it growing in other European countries—sparked a rich debate that advocated for reform, with all the implications that a reform movement of such a centuries-old institution could entail.

It has been observed that by the end of the 18th century, some new guilds emerged or were transformed. This indicated the dynamism of certain sectors that still viewed the guild system as the best way to organize production. However, during the same period, other guilds or some of their constituent elements were abolished for being considered obsolete, although the underlying reasons remain unclear. Indeed, it would be interesting to determine whether the different evolution of certain guilds toward growth, survival, or dissolution during this transitional period was due to varying relationships with authorities, the very composition of each guild, or the type of activity they carried out. However, research conducted to date does not shed light on this issue.

This article shows the existence of several "contradictions", as seen in the decisions made by the *Junta de Comercio de Barcelona* regarding the conflicts between free manufacturers and guilds. Some of its resolutions favored free manufacturing, while others defended certain characteristics of the traditional guild organization. This apparent lack of coherence should be considered typical of any "reformist" process, which also resulted in a "mixed" system. In this transition, some elements of the guild system had to disappear or adapt to the new times, while others remained more or less unchanged.

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Notas

1. For instance: LANDES (1969), JACQUES (1972) or BLACK (1984).
2. For Jovellanos, as with most economists of the 18th century, competition would eliminate the inequalities created by monopolies, lower prices—benefiting consumers—stimulate efficiency, and improve overall welfare (PERROTTA, 2023, p. 39).
3. This must have been the case elsewhere. SMITH ([1776] 2007, vol. IV, ch. VIII), observing flax spinners in the Scottish Highlands, noted that “our spinners are poor people, women commonly scattered about in all different parts of the country, without support or protection.” In his view, this type of industry, encouraged by the British mercantile system, benefited only rich and powerful merchants and employers (BERG, 1987, p. 73).
4. For instance, in 1790, a craft guild in the city of Tarragona, like many others in Catalonia, modified its old ordinances dating from 1697, as “changing times have altered some of the circumstances that cannot be adapted to the present” (MORENO CLAVERÍAS, 2015a). The study of the guilds from Seville shows that 47% of the old ordinances from various trades were subsequently modified or rewritten (BERNAL et al., 2008, p. 92).
5. Arxiu Històric de la Ciutat de Barcelona (AHCB), Junta de Comerç (J.C.), vol. 25, ff. 169-174.
6. AHCB, J.C., vol. 29, ff. 172-189.
7. The Magarola brothers, Francisco and Félix, both traders, appear as signatories to the cotton yarn company in possession of 50 looms. Guild members’ factories were usually equipped with 25 looms (MOLAS, 1970, p. 536).
8. AHCB, J.C., vol. 21, ff. 61-139 and vol. 21, ff. 40-144.
9. AHCB, J.C., vol. 25, ff. 99-105.
10. AHCB, J.C., vol. 23, ff. 43-48. AHCB, J.C., vol. 23, ff. 43-48.
11. AHCB, J.C., vol. 23, ff. 49-64.
12. AHCB, J.C., vol. 4, ff. 194-208.
13. This view of women as subjects with a supposed natural inclination toward consuming luxury goods and fashion aligned with that of some 18th-century thinkers, although it is not always supported by empirical studies (MORENO CLAVERÍAS, 2015b).
14. AHCB, J.C., vol. 4, ff. 194-208.