

LOOKING BACKWARDS: The Fraternal Origins of Working Class Organizations In the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism

Eugene Plawiuk, Industrial Workers of the World, Edmonton

118

In order to understand the development of capitalism in the past five hundred years we must look at the transition of guilds to both corporations and trade unions.

World systems theory (Wallerstien; Arrighi) dates the early formation of capitalism back to the 1400s. This paper will posit it back further, in the transition of guilds and fraternities from Catholic State institutions of feudalism to the new organizations for the primitive accumulation of capital; the capitalist state and its civil society (Braudel).

Kropotkin and Marx both discuss the power of the guilds and the free cities. Kropotkin's history of the state focuses on the free cities of artisan guilds of the medieval period. The new bourgeoisie emerges in these city-states as the guilds build a select group of master craftsmen, owners of the means of production and their trade.

Marx describes this transition of guilds into corporate bodies of civil society as the master owning the tools for which Journeymen become the renters of the tools and thus new labour for the masters. This is a result of the breakdown of the co-fraternal nature of the guilds, which shared wealth in common. In the famous opening of *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels proclaim:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes. (n.pag)

From the beginning of Constantine's rule, all of Europe was Catholic, in one form

or other. By the time of the Crusades, popular resistance against the domination of the Church hierarchy was forming, as were competing claims to the papacy and Holy Roman Empire. The politics of feudal Europe were church politics and would be so for five hundred years. In this case it is important then to remember that what was left of the social structure of the decadent Empires of Rome and Byzantium (100-1000 AD), guilds, the churches corporate body and political hierarchy, was the model for feudalism in Europe.

The crusades forced the ruling classes in Europe to expend their finances in a three century long foreign war. The expansion of the Catholic Empire forced feudalism to begin the transition to the primitive accumulation of capital, the crusades created a crisis in the political economy of feudalism.

This crisis begins with the primitive accumulation of capital by the Knights Templar. The Knights Templar signifies a break with the Catholic Church hierarchy. They are the first fraternity to be a separate and parallel organization to the church hierarchy, answerable only to the Pope and able to accept excommunicates.

All other co-fraternities were answerable directly to either a Bishop (e.g. Saint Bernard de Chevalier) or the council of bishops. The Catholic hierarchy mediated relations between their chartered co-fraternities and guild and the Pope. Only the Knights Templar were answerable directly to the pope and were able to accept excommunicates.

Holding all property in common, the Knights were able to amass a large amount of capital in monies, land and peasants as well as artisans. They acquired titles to lands in Southern France after the first crusade against the Cathar heretics. From there, they continued to amass a great fortune in lands and strategic fortresses during the crusades in the Levant.

This fraternity was able to develop its lands in Europe and Jerusalem and far from being a poor order able to build a fleet of ships that allowed them independence from the Genovesian and Venetian shipping guilds.

With this amount of capital, they become the first banking institution in Europe, able to hold monies in safe keeping in their chapels and sanctuaries, and charging a holding fee (Barber; Burnham; Butler & Dafoe; Partner; Stinton). The depositor was given a recouped for their deposit, and was able to discharge it anywhere the Knights had a Temple.

As an armed military order, able to run independently of the church and the city states in Italy, the Knights act as a form of corporation in fact as a bank, with the primitive accumulation of capital from the crusades.

The Order begun in 1195 meets its end in 1330 when the King of France, Phillip the Fair, hard pressed financially to pay his share of the crusades, and having already bankrupted several major Italian banking families, turns to creating a pogrom against the Jewish community in Paris, and to having the Templars declared heretics, in order to gain their riches.

The destruction of the Templars is the stuff of mythology, and much mythology has developed around them including their inclusion in the origins and history of modern Freemasonry (Butler & Dafoe; Burmann; Barber).

The Templars properties were transferred to the Order of the Knights of Malta, whom we still know today as St. Johns ambulance. As well as being divided up by the Kings of Spain and Portugal who created their own military orders to take over the Templar properties in their provinces.

This attack on the Templars comes as the crusades formally end, the defeat of the Templars in Jersulaem and the fall of the holy lands opened them up to attack by the King of France and his appointed Pope.

Arrghiri in the long Twentieth Century, contends that in this period, begins the opening of the trade routes around the Levant to the Italian City states of Florence and Venice, while the Genovesian guilds begin trading with Spain and Florence. The development of shipping and shipping lanes during the crusades becomes the new route for the accumulation of capital, and the creation of the first bourse, or stock exchange in Flanders, followed there after by the expansion of the Dutch colonial interests and the Amerstdam Bourse. European royalty now begins to use the Genovesian guilds for colonial exploration, the expansion of primitive capital accumulation through colonialism is transforming European society from feudalism to capitalism.

This period sees a decline in the military orders, the rise of city states representing artisan guilds and familial business interests. Since guilds and fraternal/military orders were originally chartered by the church, this period of feudalism's decline, sees the rise of civil society, through towns controlled not by the church but by the guilds.

It is this period that Kropotkin details the role of the free cities, or guild cities in his small pamphlet: *The State*. And we see that through out Europe and in England, the guilds taking on the role of civil society, electing and determining town politics and policies, electing aldermen and mayors, developing internal laws for disputes, and the election of judges to mediate disputes of an economic and political nature.

Guilds determined the prices, quantity and quality of goods produced, who could join, apprenticeship (correctly called indentured servitude, even today in the craft unions, as a hold over from their feudal structure), and the certification of the new class of artisan; the journeyman. The surpluses created by guilds were shared amongst the townspeople's, through lavish religious festivals. We have the York mystery plays that were performed in York Scotland from the 1400s till the 1590s. The city was prosperous in the aftermath of the Black Death, and workers were able to determine their own prices (Beadle & King). This Easter festival of plays represents the cycle of Christian mythology and is played out for the townsfolk of York in a week of feasting, with elaborate plays performed by each guild, and paid for from their profits. Each guild took a day and with elaborate rolling stages they created to do their performances. The tailor's guild performed the story of Adam and Eve, for they represented clothing and what better tale of the origin of being clothed then that of the first humans.

Each guild had their own patron Saint, and tale from the Old and New Testament. The weeks of feasting, the guild parade and the mystery plays were all paid for by the guilds, it was their way of sharing their profits. And of course the competition was to see who could create the most elaborate staging.

These traditions carry on into modern craft unionism in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, with such formations as the Knights of Saint Crispin in North America, the patron saint of shoemakers and their guild. The guild parades with their biblical stories and representation still are carried on by early craft unions such as the tailors, whose Adam and Eve imagery was used in labour parades in England, the United States and Canada (Forsey).

Guild and craft traditions are kept alive throughout the transition from feudalism to capitalism, in workers organization and in the rise of the Enlightenment based fraternal orders such as the Freemasons.

These traditions were not just for the sharing of profit, the guilds

determined working hours, holidays and all the conditions of work. Contrary to popular mythology the artisan of the medieval period worked far less than we do today. Home based craft industry meant that working hours were subject to daylight hours, holy days were days off work and with saint days included workers had up to 165 days off a year. Maudy Monday was a non working day, Sunday was a non working day, and Saturday was a half day of work only (Schor).

With the Black Death the guilds are able to set prices and wages, which increase due to a shortage of workers. The State in England under Elizabeth sets out to consolidate national status and declares an end to guild sanctioned free towns, municipalities come under the control of the crown, and she sets wage and price controls over the guilds.

Through out Europe the consolidation of the national state in this period ends the civil society of the guilds (Kropotkin; Hobsbawm). As the guilds decline in power over civil society they begin to expand as forms of corporations, they now evolve from common sharing of profits to the private accumulation of wealth for each Master.

This then is the creation of bourgeoisie, a separate class through out Europe, who contest with the church and the aristocracy for power in the civil society. In losing their power over wages, conditions of work, holidays, election of aldermen and mayors, etc. the guilds now become insular shareholder corporations, amassing great wealth and power for the masters and an expanding number of journeymen.

The Master craftsman, owns his own tools of the trade, the shop and employs and houses his journeymen and apprentices. Prior to this the Master craftsman was not distinct from the journeyman as (Marx), and with the accumulation of capital by the guilds the Masters jealously guard their power and monopoly by creating a closed shop amongst themselves and expanding the class of journeymen, those craftsmen who could work as well as the Master but were still in bondage to him not allowed to ply their trade independently of a Master.

It is this move to a corporate structure that transforms the guilds into initiatory associations of independent masters. The Great Fire of London, in 1666, gives birth to this new corporation, and to the rise of the fraternal orders, friendly societies and clubs. The rebuilding of London created work and wealth for these new corporations. The London Masons guild (Knoop; Jones), in fact a corporation

of individual master craftsmen shareholders, extant record for that year indicates who was a member of the corporation, including one woman master, how much raw granite was purchased, to whom it was sold and crafted, the purchase rate, sales rate and share profit. The corporation kept the old traditions of secrecy and initiation ceremonies, to keep the business knowledge of its members private.

The Freemasons are the first such a fraternity in England that reflects this change in the guilds, especially the guilds in the City of London, and York. Freemasonry was the only secret society that was declassified; it allowed aristocrats, master craftsmen, and journeymen to meet together. Other fraternities, such as the Royal societies, were strictly for the aristocracy, the clubs and friendly societies were exclusive to their specific class origin. Not so the Freemasons. They mixed artisan and aristocrat, especially around the discussion and publication of scientific pamphlets, and the new rationalism.

Founded in London in 1717, Freemasonry was rooted in the club scene of eighteenth century England. Freemasonry's internal mythology dates its origins back to the stonemasons guilds of the middle ages, especially those dedicated to Cathedral building. Its particular success, while other secret societies and clubs were being closed, lay in its dynamic interaction between artisans, a growing bourgeoisie and the aristocracy in England. The aristocrats represented in the first Grand Lodge of England, were those most interested in the natural sciences, in fact the First Grand Master of Freemasonry; Jean-Theophile Desaguliers, was a founding member of the Royal Society of England. While the practitioners of science in Seventeenth and eighteenth century London were members of the aristocracy, those who read their published works and actually worked many of the experiments were artisans. Because of the sharp class distinctions inherent in the structure and origins of various English clubs and societies, the Freemasons are unique in having breached the gap between the classes.

Those who became Masons involved themselves in the remnants of a tradition-laden medieval institution whose elaborate rituals and mythical accounts of the ancient origin remained centrally important to Accepted Masonry's definition of an ongoing, if declining, trade, laid the basis for many of Freemasonry's lasting characteristics; its existence as a secret brotherhood, the sense of consistent Masonic identity from one

lodge to another, the centrality of ritual, initiation, the myths of origin, and the explicit connection to an artisan culture...Central to this content was the idea that in becoming a Mason, a gentleman symbolically assumed the identity of a craft worker, a manual worker, albeit a highly skilled one. (Clawson n.pag)

While hierarchical in nature the internal function of the Lodge was a meritocracy promoting the democratic ideals of brotherhood, equality, liberty and religious tolerance. These secular ideals were reflected in a pseudo-religious terminology that belied the scientific naturalism of Freemasonry.

Masonry and its ideals of a secular brotherhood and religious tolerance were the driving force behind the American revolution and much of its leadership. While freemasonry heralded the evolution of urban bourgeois values in Europe and America, it still came into conflict with the traditional religious and aristocratic ideals. In England freemasonry had lessened this contradiction by embracing the upper classes as members and patrons. In Europe freemasonry on the other hand was closely identified with the American and French revolutions, and in particular Jacobinism and Illuminism:

As a social paradigm, Freemasonry offered a complex of values that can be characterized as those of an emergent bourgeoisie—detachment from inherited social identities, a belief in social mobility, an acceptance of market relations and property-based authority, and a positive evaluation of science, technology and productive labour... Nonetheless, Masonic social inclusiveness proved startling to many who inhabited the hierarchical and circumscribed social worlds of the eighteenth century. (Clawson n.pag)

The Masonic mythology of its origins are in the humble beginnings of the original craft guilds of the stone masons and free masons, the church builders of Europe. Based on a craft guild charter in York from the period of the Mystery plays, the Freemason founders modeled their order on the guild structure, its secret handshakes, signs, symbols and oaths. These became elaborated over the next hundred years, with a pseudo occult mythology about the building of the original

temple of Solomon, and the inclusion by Jacobite Scottish masons of the link to the Knights Templars.

While master craftsmen were now owners of shops there was a massive growth in journeymen, independent of the masters now, able to hire out or work from home in competition with the guilds that were that in name only.

This expansion of the class of journeymen is the transition to wage labour in later capitalism as steam and industrialization destroy the home-based crafts. It is this period that sees the journeymen creating craft unions to deal with the masters and their corporate guilds.

Influenced by Freemasonry (Hobsbawm; Durr), the new union movement adopts as its craft traditions a mix of guild traditions, oaths, secret handshakes, officers, jewels, banners etc. The English mechanics union of early nineteenth century banner shows the Masonic symbol of the Great Geometer, the all Seeing Eye in a Triangle with the angle and level.

The Masonic ideals of meritocracy, self-help, etcetera, become the ideals of many of the craft unions. The Masonic structure of organization is crucial to the development of these unions who faced state attack as being unfair combines.

The Masonic influence in the second wave of unionism, the new unionism in England, Canada and the United States and Australia is clear from the founding of the Knights of Labour by Uriah Stevens and three other Masons. The whole of the elaborate rituals, knowledge lecture, jewels, officers, are present in the Knights.

It is also present in many craft unions. The Carpenters whose symbol includes the All seeing Eye, the level and the angle, and whose motto is Labor Omnia Vincent also shows this Masonic influence. This also holds true for the Brotherhoods such as that of the Railway Carmen, whose union meetings opened with elaborate Masonic style ceremonies, oaths of secrecy, officers in jewels and aprons. This continued until the early 1960s according to one local official.

The International Association of Machinists (IAM), began this way as well with elaborate ceremonies, rituals, secret oaths etc. In fact it is reported that at the beginning of the last century the IAM executive divided themselves politically between what they called the Masons and the Catholic board members.

Fraternal Orders and Friendly Societies made up of workers boomed after the American Civil War, as did unionism, and they overlapped. Workers who were members of unions and fraternal orders formed the early workers' death and benefit societies. These benefit societies such as the Modern Woodmen of the United States, would become insurance companies in the early years of the Twentieth Century. Again repeating the transition that the earlier guilds had made to becoming corporations.

It is this overlap between fraternal orders, their ideology of modernism and the enlightenment, bourgeoisie values that influenced the craft unions and create the tradesman's consciousness, the labour aristocracy of Lenin.

The fraternal societies influenced socialists and anarchists alike, Bakunin being an example of a revolutionary who used his Masonic status to create subversive organizations in Russia, Poland, Italy and Spain. Bakunin's Secret Brotherhood, is a Masonic order stripped of its elaborate ceremonies and pantomimes.

Workers organizations evolved out of and parallel to the development of Masonic and other secret societies, reflecting another aspect of the guilds evolution into corporate bodies of civil society. The masters amassed profits and created shareholder corporations, the journeymen created unions to bargain with them. While twice a month or more the two conflicting classes would meet upon the level in Lodge, as was the case in the United States with the Masonic members of the Knights of Labor (Fink).

The influence of Masonic values still can be found in unions today. In the ideology of merit, self help of the craft unions, and in the remnants of ritual and officers of the craft, such as the Tyler. Meetings of unions like those of the craft still require being tyled during elections, the Tyler being the Masonic outer guard to the temple. Some unions still used the black ball voting procedure used in the craft to accept new members. Balls of white indicate acceptance the black ball is rejection, hence the term to be 'black balled.'

The origin of the Labour Aristocracy can be found in the relationship of craft unions and their leadership to fraternal orders.

Works Cited

Arrighi, Giovanni. *The Long Twentieth Century*. London: Verso 1994.

Bakunin, Mikhail. "The Program of the International Brotherhood." *Marxists Internet Archive*. <<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/bakunin/>>

Barber, Malcolm. *The New Knighthood, A History of the Order of the Temple*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Beadle, Richard and Pamela King. *York Mystery Plays, A Selection in Modern Spelling*. London: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Braudel, Ferninand. *After Thoughts on Material Culture and Capitalism*. Blatimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977.

Burman, Edward. *The Knights Templar, The Rise and Fall of the Knights Templars*. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1986.

Butler, Alan and Stephen Dafoe. *The Warriors and the Bankers, a history of the Knights Templar From 1307 to the Present*. Belleville, ON: Templar Books, 1998.

Clawson, Mary Ann. *Constructing Brotherhood; Class, Gender, and Fraternalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

Cook, Ezra A. *Knights of Labor Illustrated, "Adelphon Kruptos", the Full, Illustrated Ritual, including the "Unwritten Work" and an Historical Sketch of the Order*. Chicago, Illinois: n.p., 1886.

Durr, Andy. "Ritual of Association and the Organization of the Common People." *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum: Transactions of the Quatuor Coronati Loddge* 100.2076 (1987): 88-109.

Fink, Leon. *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983.

Forsey, Eugene. *Trade Unions in Canada 1812-1902*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982.

Hobsbawm, Eric J. *Worlds of Labour, Further Studies in the History of Labour*. London: George Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1984.

Kropotkin, Peter. *The State*. London: Freedom Press, 1970

Marx, Karl. "Critique of Political Economy." *Marxists Internet Archive*. <<http://www.marxists.org>>

Marx, Karl. "Capital, Volume 1." *Marxists Internet Archive*. <<http://www.marxists.org>>

Marx, Karl. "German Ideology." *Marxists Internet Archive*. <<http://www.marxists.org>>

Marx, Karl, and Frederick Engels. *Communist Manifesto*. London: Verso Press, 2001.

Partner, Peter. *The Knights Templar and their Myth*. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1990.

Schor, Juliet. *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline in Leisure*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.

Stinton, Edith. *The Piebald Standard, The Story of the Knights Tempar*. London: Cassell and Co., 1959.

Wallerstien, Immanuel. *Historical Capitalism*. London: Verso Press, 1993.