Part 1

Elites, Institutions, and Civil Society

Chapter 1

Reassessing Power and Governance in Late Medieval Cities: Institutions and the *Cursus Honorum*

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It is generally regarded as a truism that medieval society was fundamentally hierarchical, but also that, in the words of M.M. Postan, medieval cities were 'non-feudal islands in a feudal sea'.[1] The freedom of cities from outside control is often taken to have been one of their defining characteristics, but how was power configured within them? Historical interpretations of the nature of power in late medieval and sixteenth-century cities have shifted considerably over the last century. From a focus on community and commensality to oligarchy, and most recently political culture more broadly, there has remained a focus on political office holding as the primary expression of power. After exploring existing interpretations of the urban hierarchy, this chapter goes on to investigate the wider forms and experiences of power within late medieval and earlier sixteenth-century London, and other northern European cities. A micro-historical case study of one late fifteenth-century Londoner's brushes with power serves to illustrate the varied avenues of authority and conflict resolution, as well as the ways in which they were frequently blocked. Looking not only at urban citizenship and civic office, but also the role of guilds and of wealth, emphasises the diffusion of power, and allows a view from the 'bottom up' (or at least the middle), rather than the top down.

The hierarchical model of medieval society is often also employed to explain urban civic structures: the common English system of Mayor, Aldermen and Citizens offered a mirror or microcosm of political structures at large. Citizenship in medieval and early modern cities was a limited and exclusive right, either inherited or earned, and almost always restricted to males; women and the vast majority of international migrants were excluded. Citizenship was a right specific to, and granted by, a particular city. While it might often (if not always) have been predicated upon having been a denizen - that is someone born within a nation or realm - it should not be confused with modern national citizenship. Citizens were usually the only members of urban society eligible for administrative and political offices, and the only ones able to vote for them. While details of systems of administration varied considerably between cities, especially

across different European realms, all could be described as oligarchic. Within the Holy Roman Empire, for example, the political systems of cities varied between those such as Lübeck and Hamburg, which had relatively open councils where any merchant could aspire to office, to those such as Nuremberg, which had a tightly defined and closed patriciate.[2] What all these cities seemed to have in common was that power officially rested in a relatively narrow male elite, who in practice all came from the richest strata of urban society. But, as we shall see, the relationship between wealth and power was anything but simple. Another defining characteristic of medieval cities was the fact that their populations were fluid and high mortality rates meant that constant migration was required to sustain their populations. Consequently, few were born to power, especially in England, where urban dynasties were virtually unheard of. So, while the formal structures of power were hierarchical, they were also fluid, and frequently allowed for considerable social mobility.

The archetypal urban civic career is told in the tale of Richard 'Dick' Whittington, three-time Mayor of London in the earlier fifteenth century, whose story was elaborated in later sixteenth-century retellings to create a story of elevation from rural poverty to urban riches and power.[3] The story of Dick Whittington's supposed progression from domestic service to the mayoralty might have simplified the process, but it stood as testament to the fact that a sequence of offices, beginning with formal citizenship, could, for the adept and the lucky, lead through the structures of civic government to the office of mayor and the power it entailed. Historians have equated this process with the *cursus honorum* ['course of honour'] of classical Rome, since medieval London's offices of Common Councillor, Alderman, Sheriff and Mayor each served as the prerequisite of the next, much like the Roman ranks of Questor, Praetor, and Consul. Hence, these offices and ranks presented a hierarchy or pyramid of power and status: a course, or perhaps ladder, of honour – literally a *cursus honourum*. In the words of Caroline Barron, within the city a Mayor was 'a king with many of the powers and some of the prestige of that office'.[4] Some historians, including the highly influential, if pessimistic, Peter Clark and Paul Slack, have painted the *cursus* as a tool in the maintenance of oligarchy.[5] Yet, in London after 1389, as in most English cities, mayors only served for only one year, partly as an attempt to favour the maintenance of custom and constrain radical policy making by preventing the consolidation of power by any one individual or faction.

Historians' interpretations of the formation and maintenance of urban oligarchies have shifted dramatically over the course of the twentieth century. The first wave of serious English urban histories of this period, beginning in the 1940s and still in evidence today, took an institutionally focused approach, structured around administrative developments, often resulting in a consensual and communal picture of late medieval cities. Charles Phythian-Adams observed that the vast majority of histories of medieval towns in print when he was writing in the 1970s were 'essentially municipal histories', rather than 'studies of urban society as a whole'. Indeed, Phythian-Adams cited Sylvia Thrupp's *Merchant Class of Medieval London* as a notable exception, and, together with his own study of Coventry, that largely remains the case today.[6] While a host of notable studies of pre-Reformation towns and cities have appeared, most focus on a single issue, most often their institutions of government, economy, or individual trade guilds.[7] The concentration on the formal aspects of urban institutions, rather than urban society in general, means that most works on the pre-Reformation period tend to emphasise formal hierarchies at the expense of other manifestations or processes of power.

Phythian-Adams' own influential history of late medieval Coventry, published in 1979 and reflecting the structural tendencies of post-war social historians, presented a much more nuanced and complex picture of urban oligarchy and urban society by looking across a range of institutions. This study depicted the 'career-cycle of the successful citizen' in the form of an idealised grid of social mobility and progression through the overlapping ranks of craft guild, religious gild, civic office and city council; this complex picture simultaneously conveyed the hierarchy and the institutional diffusion of power in late medieval Coventry.[8] Phythian-Adams was at pains to emphasise the complexity and diffuseness of this system, but the presentation of a grid, with high office at its apex, inherently accentuated its hierarchical nature. While formal civic government was undoubtedly hierarchical, late medieval civic administration was also inherently participatory. Civic authorities had many minor elected and honorary roles, all of which existed alongside a range of formal institutions such as craft guilds or livery companies, as well as semi-formal elite religious guilds. These combined to constitute a very broad base of participation. Trade guilds and their officers theoretically held their powers by authority of the mayor, but, in London especially, the structures of this hierarchy were often short-circuited by

direct relationships with the crown. While at first glance the urban hierarchy might mirror the realm, the power of the mayor was much less absolute than that of the monarch.

The period between the mid fifteenth and mid sixteenth centuries tends to be characterised as one of dramatic, although not revolutionary, change. Medieval became early modern. Not only was this the era that spawned the Reformation, but economic and social changes were fundamental, inspiring the title 'the Age of Transition' from one influential historian.[9] In the urban context, this is often seen in the transition away from an egalitarian, meritocratic social structure, in which, freed from feudal control, the hard worker could ascend the social structures of guild, parish and corporation to achieve wealth and status, just as Dick Whittington had done. In the medieval era, urban inequality had been justified through social mobility - or so the common impression holds.[10] The early modern period, however, saw urban elites close ranks and restrict social mobility: few could ascend the ranks of their guild to become liveryman or master, let alone Mayor.[11] This entrenchment of oligarchy is often seen as having been embodied in the growing-apart of the elite 'Livery' and rank and file 'Yeomanry' of London Companies in the sixteenth century – even feasting, the most basic integrative function of the medieval guilds, became segregated.[12] At the civic level, this rise of oligarchy and the 'closed corporation' is even held to have been manifested physically in the move of business within town halls from open moot halls to private mayor's parlours.[13] In this context it appears that power was held in ever narrower ranges of hands and became ever more remote from the average city dweller. While English medieval urban historians had tended to emphasise a consensual model of urban government, the apparent increase in oligarchic control over the period considered here certainly raises the question of how conflict continued to be avoided in English towns. Work by Samuel Cohn Jnr. has shown that English towns were not quite so devoid of conflict and rebellion as supposed, yet this is a theme which is considered integral to any understanding of medieval cities in most other European contexts.[14] This difference may well be explained by the very different broader political contexts and relationships between cities and states in England, where the centralised state was long established, and the Low Countries, where that relationship was still very much contested.

The focus on the *cursus honorum* and the highest ranks of civic office obscures the fact that, even amongst the relatively restricted numbers of urban men with citizen status, very few would ever rise to those positions. Steve Rappaport's cohort study of 530 men who were admitted to London's freedom between 1551 and 1553 found that only fourteen of them achieved the rank of Master of their respective guilds, and none served in high civic office. The administrative office holders were so few, relative to the citizen population, that this surely begs the question of how much of the story they can really represent. To reverse the common metaphor, if we focus on power being synonymous with the highest rungs of the career ladder, we are in danger of not being able to see the trees for the forest.[15] In a system where power could only be ultimately consensual rather than absolute, and where a far greater number of people were members of the institutions and structures of power than ever led them, we need to look for power throughout, and even beyond, the hierarchy.

During the 1980s a new generation of social historians of sixteenth-century London introduced a much broader way of conceiving of urban power and governance in an explicit effort to understand how the City avoided widespread unrest. Put simply, if life in late medieval and sixteenth-century towns was as oligarchic and repressive as had been held, why did rebellion remain as rare as it did? While Phythian-Adams had emphasised the diffuse institutional structures of late medieval Coventry as being key to understanding the acquisition and maintenance of status, these later London historians shifted the emphasis onto the networks of office holding and power that extended below the level of the merchant elite. While still framing their work in social and structural terms, these historians were looking from the bottom up, rather than from the top down. Ian Archer's *Pursuit of Stability* (1991) squarely addressed the question of how London managed to avoid the widespread rebellions and conflicts that had been held to characterise the urban experience of the late sixteenth century, especially in Southern Europe, but were notably rarer in Britain. Archer's account of this remarkable stability rests upon the constancy and unity of the elite, and the role of local government, guilds and parishes, in mediating power. Archer's observation was that in a system lacking coercive control, elite power depended upon responsiveness to those at the bottom. Substructures of government, guilds, and parishes, he argued, provided 'channels of communication between rulers and ruled and institutional frameworks within which the redress of grievances could be pursued'.[16] The

exercise of punishments by late medieval urban authorities has more recently been interpreted as a carefully calibrated 'exercise in public relations', rather than coercive control.[17] Steve Rappaport's *Worlds within Worlds* (1989) made similar arguments, based upon the profusion of organisations and institutions that composed what he termed the 'substructure' of urban society. Intermeshed networks, ranging from journeymen's associations within guilds, through guilds themselves, parishes and their vestries, and the infrastructure of the wards, all served to provide attainable goals in terms of status and hierarchy, and gave a wide cross section of London society a stake in the structures of power.[18] Valerie Pearl, writing on seventeenth-century London, held these 'tiny pluralistic authorities and their officials' to have been a force for political stability, and a training ground for negotiating, bargaining and mediation: ingredients, she said, of modern democratic society.[19] Power was thus, in a sense, diffuse, and certainly more complex than the simple hierarchy of office holding.

By the turn of the new millennium, in line with the tendency toward more cultural approaches to understanding governance, Mark Gouldie had expanded these insights to argue that participation was a far more significant expression and understanding of citizenship, and power, than simple hierarchy: 'governance was not something done from on high to the passive recipients of authority, but something actively engaged in by lesser agents of government; and every citizen was in some measure a lesser agent of government'.[20] If power was not exerted hierarchically from above but was exerted throughout the whole hierarchy, there was little reason to seek out high office for its own sake. Indeed, London's late sixteenth-century chronicler, John Stow, wrote that the fact 'euery man rather shunneth then seeketh the Maioraltie' was a virtue – 'forasmuch as the gouernment is by a Paterne, as it were, and alwayes the same, how often soeuer they change their Magistrate'.[21] In Stow's opinion this tendency to shun individual power in favour of government through custom and precedent meant that factions and rebellions were avoided. The *cursus honorum* certainly held true in respect of the fact that most offices had prerequisites (at least most of the time). But this is only relevant if we see the holding of the highest offices as an aim in and of itself. Rather than having been a profession, Goldie argued that 'governance was the required activity of any, and every, citizen'.[22] Conceiving of power in this sense, we should look beyond the traditional confines of office holding and consider the full range of activities that might be equated to 'civil society' in more modern eras. This more

cultural and 'multidimensional' approach to understanding the dynamics of late medieval and early modern cities is now well established, and serves as the central premise of Christian Liddy's recent monograph *Contesting the City* (2017) which explores the 'partial and divisible identities of the citizen and the multiple senses of citizenship'.[23] If we accept that the multiplicity of institutions and offices meant that power was diffuse, how might early modern city dwellers have experienced this, and what opportunities were there for the majority of citizens to exert or influence power?

Freedom, Citizenship and Power

Returning to Postan's initial point, the root of urban freedom, and therefore of all notions of civic power, was the freedom of the city from feudal control. It was the fact that the city itself had freedom to enact its own laws and regulation which allowed it to bestow upon its citizens positions of power that could rival those of the highest nobility. The freedom of cities was often claimed to be customary, predating the realms in which they were located, but, in reality, it usually depended upon charters granted by the monarch. While this meant that a city's freedom was theoretically in the monarch's hand, the economic power of great cities, especially London, meant that their relationship was essentially symbiotic. Granting cities their freedom offered rulers economic prosperity, compliance with royal justice and cooperation in delivery of taxation.[24]

The freedom bestowed upon a city generally revolved around the right to elect or appoint its own leadership. Often a single Mayor was elected, as in London, while other cities had systems of two bailiffs, or a more complex governing council. The question of who would be allowed a political voice in this system tended to go hand in hand with economic rights within the city: neither were automatically available to all. Citizenship, or 'freedom' as it was often known, was a right that was granted to only a subset of those living within the city, and required an aspiring citizen to contend with a variety of barriers, both in terms of personal qualifications (gender, religion, origin) and practical requirements and hurdles (cost, time).[25] In London, citizenship could be acquired through patrimony (your father had been a citizen), redemption (payment of a fine), or apprenticeship. Apprenticeship, usually for a period of seven years, was by far the most common way of gaining citizenship. While the extent of citizenship within the population waxed

and waned, an overall majority of Londoners – aliens (those born outside of the realm), the poor and women – were excluded. How easily the rights of citizenship could be acquired varied dramatically over time and between cities. Inheritance through patrimony was relatively rare in southern England, but common in northern England, and was the dominant way of acquiring citizenship in the northern Netherlands. In the southern Netherlands, it was birth within the local area, rather than direct inheritance, which provided the most common qualification for becoming a citizen. In Germanic Europe marriage to a daughter or widow of a citizen was a popular way of acquiring citizenship.[26]

Given the range of difficulty in acquiring citizenship, the extent of citizenship also varied considerably. Calculations by Minns *et al* show that the proportion of citizens amongst the total population in English, Netherlandish and Germanic cities between 1500 and 1850 ranged between around four and thirty per cent. Considered in terms of households, however, between ten and one hundred per cent of these populations lived in households headed by a citizen.[27] Looking at London in more detail, estimates show the volatility of the proportion of citizens over time, and especially the influence of political changes to policy around citizenship. Thrupp estimated the citizen population of the City of London in 1501-2 to have been only 4,400 male household heads, which she estimated would equate to 16,000 individuals including dependents living in those citizens' households. In a total population in the region of 33,000, therefore, around 48 per cent of the total population would have lived in a household headed by a citizen.[28] In 1531, however, the English parliament legislated to dramatically reduce the fees that could be charged for admission into apprenticeship, which was already the most common route to citizenship, and thereby to citizenship. The fee to enrol as an apprentice in the Grocers' Company dropped from 30s to 2s 6d.[29] The floodgates were opened, and the proportion of citizens increased. Rappaport reported an increase of admissions of 94 per cent between 1550 and 1600 in those companies with surviving records, but in the context of a rapidly growing population, this still represented a declining proportion of residents.[30] Based on London's only two years of surviving freedom admission registers around 1552, Rappaport estimated that 14,800 of the 19,700 adult males in London at the time were citizens – 75 per cent.[31] Citizenship in the medieval and early modern city was therefore far from universal, but seldom rare, and had

no clear trajectory. Minns *et al* concluded that the decline in citizenship, long held to be characteristic of the early modern period, was only significant in the later eighteenth century.[32]

One feature of urban power structures that was less consistent was the existence of a patriciate. This term, and the more general use of the word 'patrician' as a mark of high status, derives from the classical world and has been used in many contexts to describe a semi-hereditary urban elite and, specifically, the patriarchs of these families. Within much of the German-speaking world and especially toward central Europe, however, participation in urban government was frequently restricted not just to citizens, but to a closed and tightly defined patriciate. While in Hamburg and Lübeck, as in much of North Sea Europe, any 'honourable' citizen other than a manual worker could hope to join the governing council, in Nuremberg the 1521 law of *Tanzstatut* defined 42 families eligible for civic office.[33] If citizenship bestowed political and economic rights, and in some contexts these rights were even more tightly circumscribed, there were clearly also many urban dwellers who lacked any formal political power.

This did not mean, however, that they lacked power altogether. Participation in local government can take many forms, and Prak has argued that 'non elites' were routinely involved in urban politics.[34] Even the most oligarchic civic systems in Europe still appear to have provided opportunities for participation. Positions such as ward scavenger, petty juryman, constable, wardmote juryman and churchwarden provided an opportunity for a wide cross section of society to experience office holding, and thus gain a stake in the system. In Cornhill ward, admittedly one of London's wealthiest, no fewer than one in three residents could expect to hold some kind of civic office at any given time.[35] Mark Gouldie has argued that in many contexts we should be less concerned with the 'duties of office than the significance of office holding'.[36] This was also particularly significant in those Germanic towns where citizenship was tightly delineated – while Nuremburg had a notably tightly circumscribed council, for example, it simultaneously provided opportunities for meritocratic advancement as part of what has been described as a uniquely long term and comprehensive view of economic policy.[37] Considered in comparison to the exceptionally narrow participation in politics at the national level during this era, politics at the civic level tended to be inclusive and consensual. This was equally true in the parallel structures of urban guild and parochial power. The operation of these parallel structures, each of which

undoubtedly served as a significant marker of social capital, combined to offer a broad base of participation in civic power.

Guilds and Power

In most English cities, and many Netherlandish and German cities too, citizenship and economic rights were tightly bound up with the role of the guilds – the craft or trade focused brotherhoods, also known as fraternities, companies (in London, livery companies), or mysteries. In London, as in most English boroughs, apprenticeship was the most affordable, accessible and common way of achieving citizenship, but was tightly controlled by the guilds. To be a citizen of London, therefore, one had to also be a member of a guild or 'company'. The companies consequently served as the building blocks of urban identity, and, along with the administrative wards and ecclesiastical parishes, served as the substructure of civic power. As part of this broader *civic curus honorum*, as conceived by Phythian-Adams, 'craft office represented the first rung on the ladder to higher status still'.[38] Much like the city itself, the guilds contained a complex hierarchy of status and influence. From apprentice to master, an individual's position within the guild was tightly defined and circumscribed. Completion of apprenticeship (as judged by the company) brought the opportunity to become free of the company - and thus the city.[39] Further progression was dependent upon financial success, and often co-option by the existing leadership. To progress from being a wage-labouring journeyman to a full 'companyman' required the possession of your own business. The next rank, that of the livery - both literally a set of robes, and a status that both reflected existing wealth, and offered additional economic rights – was reached only by co-option. The real positions of influence, on the company's court of assistants, or as warden, were generally elected by the existing leadership rather than the wider membership.[40]

Within trade guilds there were numerous office-holding positions aside from the formal roles of leadership. Many trade guilds exerted a right of search, in order to regulate and enforce quality standards in their products, and the position of juror on these searches was a role that offered some power, as well as useful networking opportunities. Dana Durkee has shown in the case of Norwich's Worsted Weavers that this was not a role that strictly constituted any one position on any hierarchy – although it was more common earlier in a career, those in their first year of

freedom rubbed shoulders with ex-masters.[41] Durkee gives the example of Richard Mannyng, a Norwich Worsted Weaver, who, despite never having held any civic office, but having been one of that guild's most active jurors and several-times warden, was admitted to the prestigious civic religious guild of St George – normally reserved for those who had served on the Common Council.[42] This illustrates the transferability of social capital within the civic sphere, and the limitations of conceiving of a single hierarchical *cursus*. The sixteenth century saw both the consolidation of the oligarchic livery, and also a growth of organisations for the 'rank and file' within the guild. The 'yeomanry' of London livery companies began not only to organise to advocate their own rights and conditions, but to elect their own wardens and even keep their own funds and accounts. The yeomanry became a company within a company.[43] The proliferation of communal structures like this might have, at one level, distanced 'rank and file' individuals from the pinnacle of power within their companies, but it also created a range of new offices and positions that, in their own small way, possessed some form of power and influence, providing more opportunities to take that first step up the ladder.

London in the earlier sixteenth century also offers interesting examples of the contestation of power between the City authorities, the guilds and the crown. London's companies were sufficiently large and important to maintain direct links with the English crown, and, when they did not get their own way within the city, they did not hesitate to short-circuit the normal hierarchical structures of power to achieve their aims. Seeking a charter from the Crown rather than the civic authorities inevitably drew attention to the limitations of the City's authority.[44] The best known such dispute related to the Taylors successful attempt to secure the more prestigious sounding title 'Merchant Taylors', which was quickly followed by a less successful attempt to do the same by the Haberdashers.[45] This direct petitioning by companies even extended to the smaller guilds. In 1508 the Stockfishmongers, who had only relatively recently been merged into the larger Fishmongers, grew frustrated at their lack of voice in the new structure, and the City's adherence to the interests of the Fishmongers, so sought their independence again by directly approaching the King. In late December 1508, the City's Court of Aldermen noted that the Stockfishmongers 'lately hath dissendred themselves from the Fishmongers by the King's Letters Patent' and allocated them a place in civic processions next to the Vintners.[46] The choice to seek authority outside of the city betrayed the relative weakness of the Stockfishmongers and

strength of the Fishmongers within the civic oligarchy. In one sense the ability of the smaller company to petition successfully the highest authority in the land might be seen as a sign of power, but it also showed their lack of influence within the normal structures of power. Faced with the realities of enacting these policies, the Stockfishmongers, like the Haberdashers, were not able to make their independently obtained status stick. These episodes show how complex and ambiguous the networks and negotiations of power in the late medieval city were, and emphasise the importance of consensus in actually exerting that power.

Wealth and Power

Holding civic office is obviously the clearest expression of power in a city, but this is complicated by the fact that medieval and early modern office holding was often predicated on wealth, and commercial interests often succeeded in exerting their power even when their representatives were not the office holders. Wealth was consistently the clearest factor determining access to office holding. In some ways this was implicit: selection as a liveryman within a guild or company generally depended on the perception of commercial success, and offices were generally unpaid, requiring the holder to both spend time away from their own business interests and to personally fund banquets and entertainments. In other ways, the link between wealth and power was explicit: sixteenth century London aldermen were required to possess a personal wealth of not less than 2000 marks (£1333 6s 8d).[47] Historians, adopting the framework of the *cursus honorum* (whether explicitly or implicitly), have tended to see the correlation between wealth and office holding from the perspective of the holders of high office. Power was not simply concentrated amongst the richest, nor were the richest automatically involved in the structures and offices of power. In a study of the relationship between wealth and power in the city of Hamburg, which was in many ways comparable to London, Jeannin found that the office holders of the city council were only a small subset of the economic elite of the city, but that the overlap and interaction between these groups defined 'the locus of meaningful exercise of power'.[48] The observation that the vast majority of holders of high office were wealthy, however, does not necessarily imply that the two went hand in hand. Wealth did not necessarily lead to office holding, and indeed many actively avoided it. The obligations of office holding could be considerable, and the benefits less certain. While there was undoubtedly an element of duty and obligation, the chance to use office holding to shape policy was quite

limited. The checks and balances of urban government, resting as they did on the heavy weight of 'custom', and dependent upon consent rather than coercion, certainly tempered the power of office holders in favour of the 'popular' opinion.[49]

The locus of power at the intersection between wealth and political office was particularly visible because of the specialisation of many urban economies in one particular industry, which created a concordance of interests amongst many of their wealthiest inhabitants. Office holding was used as a mechanism to ensure favourable regulation within the city, and to lobby for it more effectively with national government. In London in 1564, 24 of 26 Aldermen were members of the cloth exporting Merchant Adventurers, while a few generations earlier the clear majority had been wool exporting Staplers.[50] This transition reflected the general trend in English exports between the mid fifteenth and mid sixteenth centuries: cloth exports were by far the most profitable business. So, when economic interests were aligned, there was not such a difference in power between those who held office, and those with same interests who did not.

London had a clear overlap between the leading merchants and the holders of civic office. Though this was not always the case in other cities, the interests of local commercial interests were often still reflected. The Dutch town of Leiden serves as another example of political accommodation of economic specialisation at the same period, but one where the economic and political elites were not synonymous. While free from the control of the Counts of Holland, the town's government became ever more oligarchic in the later fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, being made up of numerous rural noble families. The influence of these noble and hereditary influences meant that, in the words of Hanno Brand, 'the political and economic elites did not overlap completely because not all rich burghers were represented in political bodies, nor were all town administrators important economically'. [51] Nonetheless, in this context where the richest Drapers might not have been office holders, they were informally consulted as the *ryckdom van der stede* as part of the *vroedschap* (advisory committee). The town's government was unambiguously directed toward maintenance of the cloth industry, even without the Drapers dominating office holding. It is certainly true that 'caution is needed in relating the content of policy to those responsible for it' – the members of a city's economic and administrative oligarchy were not necessarily synonymous.[52]

The earlier and mid parts of the sixteenth century, when civic oligarchies were supposedly entrenching themselves, also saw an increasing tendency for the richest and theoretically most qualified individuals to refuse office holding – a seeming 'flight from office'.[53] In Coventry the office of Sheriff was refused for the first time in 1520 and increasingly fierce fines were instituted to compel those elected in subsequent years to take up their office.[54] Meanwhile, in London, Archer found that fifteen men refused office of Sheriff between 1559 and 1579, and there were a further 56 refusals within Elizabeth's reign.[55] Requests to avoid office holding cited its financial obligations, but this was simply one of the tropes of medieval petitioning. Kermode argued that if there was any trend amongst those avoiding office, it was those whose occupations were the most time consuming; greater merchants, she argued, who perhaps had less to lose in terms of time, were not as reluctant to serve as has been portrayed. [56] Several historians have also observed an apparent flight *to* office in many towns in the Dutch Republic later in the early modern period, but this appears to have been based upon the possibilities for installing oneself into remunerative offices.[57] Either way, it is clear that elected office was seldom fiercely fought over in competitive elections.

The locus of power in the relationship between political office and wealth was complex and disputed in all contexts, as the contrasting examples discussed here emphasise. If office holding was not universally sought by the richest members of late medieval and early modern urban society, it stands to reason that many of the richest and most important citizens might not have stood amongst the ranks of Mayors, Sheriffs and Aldermen. Numerous historians have cross referenced taxation registers with records of civic and guild office holders, but they have almost always presented their work in terms of the wealth of those office holders.[58] Making these comparisons in the other direction can be equally illuminating. Amongst 43 Londoners assessed to pay £40 or more in the 1541 Lay Subsidy taxation, fourteen were serving aldermen, one was a widow of an alderman, and another five would go on to be elected in later years; eight had already served as Mayor, and another five would go on to do so later in their careers. Of the 22 richest Londoners listed, therefore, served in no high-ranking civic office, despite having had personal wealth estimated between £1600 and £3000. Within this pattern there were further clear chronological trends; amongst the seventeen taxpayers assessed to pay more than £50, only five

did not serve as Alderman, and one went on to become an Alderman after 1541. Amongst the eight Aldermen assessed between £40 and £50, only four ever served as Mayor; four had already been elected by 1541, and four were subsequently elected. The correlation of wealth and office holding is evident in general terms, but under closer examination it is clear that the relationship was never direct. To reach the very apex of commercial and political influence, participation in the structures of civic power was clearly essential, yet many of those who did not join the civic *cursus honorum*, including those who were excluded from office by their status as aliens, were not so far behind in wealth. Wealth was a prerequisite for office holding, but office holding was not necessarily a prerequisite for wealth - although it appears to have helped.

***Table 1.1* – City of London 1541 Lay Subsidy Assessments over £40 and Office Holding**

Name	£	S	D	Mayor	Alderman
Sir John Gressam, knyght (£5000)	125			Mayor 1547	Alderman 1540
Sir William Holies knight (£4000)	100			Mayor 1539	Alderman 1528
Sir Rauf Waren knight Allderman (£4000)	100			Mayor 1536, 1544	Alderman 1528
Robert Trappes (5000 marks)	83	6	8		Alderman 1534
Marten Bowes alderman (5000 marks)	83	6	8	Mayor 1545	Alderman 1536
Rowland Hill (5000 marks)	83	6	8	Mayor 1549	Alderman 1542
William Daunse Alderman (£3000)	75				Alderman 1536
Richard Jervys (£3000)	75				
Raff Rowllett (£3,000)	75				
Sir John Alen knight (£3000)	75			Mayor 1525, 1535	Alderman 1515
Wylliam Wyld (£140)	70				
Mastres Symondes wedowe (4000 marks)	66	13	4		Alderman 1515 (widow of)
Myghell Dormer, alderman (4000 marks)	66	13	4	Mayor 1541	Alderman 1531
Sir Richard Gressam, knyght (4000 marks)	66	13	4	Mayor 1537	Alderman 1536
William Watson (200 marks)	66	8			
John Osborne (200 marks)	66	8			
John Edlyn (200 marks)	66	8		Mayor 1525, 1535	Alderman 1515
Philip Weldon gent (£50)	50				
Anne Lady Pargetter (£2000)	50			Mayor 1530	Alderman 1528

Henry Hoberthorne (£2000)	50		
Richard Dobbes (£2000)	50	Mayor 1551	Alderman 1542
Thomas Palley (£100)	50		
Bartilmew Campane (£1000)	50		
Robert Palmer (£2000)	50		
Sir Bryan Tuke knight (£2000)	50		
William Butler (£2000)	50		
Thomas Whyte (£2000)	50	Mayor 1553	Alderman 1544
John Tolowes (£2000)	50		Alderman 1538
Elezabeth Statham (£2000)	50		
Richard Callard (£2,000)	50		
Paintellyn Spynnell (£1000)	50		
John Franke straunger (£ 1000)	50		
John Pope, Alyen (£1000)	50		
Sir William Denham (£2000)	50		Alderman 1531
Bartyllmew Campayngne [alien]	50		
Hughe Mynors (£100)	50		
Robert Smythe (£100)	50		
Sir James Spencer knyght (£2000)	50	Mayor 1527	Alderman 1516
Edward Altham (£1600)	40		Alderman 1556
John Maydenhed (£80)	40		
William Lock (£1600)	40		Alderman 1545
Sir Rychard Ryche (£800)	40		

Sources: Alfred Beaven, *The Aldermen of the City of London Temp. Henry III.-1908* (London, 1913), http://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/london-aldermen/hen3-1912; R. G. Lang, ed., *Two Tudor Subsidy Assessment Rolls for the City of London 1541 and 1582* (London, 1993), http://www.british-history.ac.uk/london-record-soc/vol29.

Other Expressions of Power: the case of Richard Arnold

Power could also emerge in other forms. Some individuals were able to exert disproportionate influence despite theoretically limited status in terms of both wealth and office holding. This is particularly visible when Social Network Analysis is used to examine early modern civic networks. Individuals such as housing landlords, innkeepers and scriveners often appear to have acted as community 'brokers', able to influence and connect diverse neighbours. Drawing upon the masses of wills and property deeds in the area around London Bridge in the fifteenth century, I have shown elsewhere that the individuals appearing most frequently as witnesses to testamentary documents were not clergy or aldermen, but innkeepers.[59] Similar analysis of local

wardmote juries in later fifteenth century London by Charlotte Berry has also shown the way in which highly connected individuals tended to also serve as jurors, reflecting their stock of social capital accrued from multiple fields of life.[60]

The ambiguous relationship between power and formal structures and hierarchies can be seen rather neatly by looking at the case of one rather exceptional individual. Richard Arnold (fl.1473-1495) was a Haberdasher, and the unlikely (and possibly unintentional) author of a printed book known at the time as *The Customs of London*, and more recently as *Arnold's Chronicle*. Halfway between a manuscript commonplace book or notebook and a chronicle or almanac, this strange little volume defined itself as containing 'things useful for a Londoner to know'. Aside from a brief chronicle organised by London mayoral years, a collection of household recipes and a doggerel poem, the bulk of the volume comprised examples of Arnold's business correspondence presented as a formulary or guide to writing different types of document; it is the first printed English language merchant manual.[61] Amongst the 107 different entries in Arnold's book, no fewer than 21 can be categorised as regarding civic custom and law. Twelve entries on canon law (especially regarding tithe disputes and enforcing the duties of parish officials) outnumber eight that might be seen as religious (and none of those could be seen as strictly devotional); the majority of the remainder were commercial in character. The letters provided by Arnold as pro-forma examples are particularly revealing in witnessing how a Londoner of mixed fortunes was able to address and exert power. As with many other subjects of microhistory, Arnold's life cannot be considered representative, but his struggles illuminate the dynamics of the system within which he was trying to function.

The enduring theme throughout the correspondence is conflict and struggle. Arnold's legal adversaries ranged from his parish priest; a friend's wife who became the victim of his inattention during a day of archery practice; a group of German pirates; one of the Sheriffs of London; the Duke of Flanders; and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Arnold's struggles, or frankly failures, do however neatly illustrate the avenues and strategies that someone who failed to make his mark in the formal structures of power could employ. While he was a member of one of the Great Twelve mercantile companies, and active as a Merchant Adventurer exporting cloth to the great marts in Antwerp, he appears to have never achieved any kind of elected office – not even

that of churchwarden. But this did not stop him taking a strong interest in the workings of the civic bureaucracy and his parish, nor dissuade him from attempting to use petitions and the courts to express his convictions and exert a form of power.

Trade disputes between Londoners tended to be handled by the City's, or even the Livery Companies', own courts, under the system termed 'law merchant'.[62] Yet Arnold repeatedly resorted to the royal courts, and even foreign courts, to attempt to obtain adjudication over his disputes. During the 1490s, Arnold's ship, the *Christopher Arnold*, was seized by 'Estirlynges [Germans] as it is sayd, callyng themself Danes', who took it into the Flemish port of Veere.[63] Illustrating the cutthroat attitude to trade, the ship was sold by the pirate, Hans van Alton, to the factor of London armourer John Waren the elder. Arnold's complaints to King Henry VII resulted in their inclusion in the demands of an embassy to Emperor Maximilian I led by the Garter King of Arms (John Writhe, not so coincidentally Arnold's brother in law).[64] Despite their negotiation, the Emperor informed them that as the purchaser of the ship was English, the dispute was an English matter. Yet back in London, despite mustering further testimony, Arnold was not able to achieve redress. Waren flatly denied the charges, or that his factor had even been in Veere, and the case appears to have gone no further.[65] This episode illustrates the complex interplay of influence and power that Arnold was subject to. While he could draw on prestigious family connections, his complaints were simultaneously ignored by the civic courts. In another episode, Arnold attempted to petition the Mayor over a judgement made against him by the then Sheriff, Robert Fabyan. Somewhat predictably, this did not succeed in releasing him from the writ that had been issued against him.[66] Power and influence in one sphere did not easily translate into others.

While Arnold's legal disputes tended to end in failure, his book stands testament to his belief in the power of justice to overcome his lack of power and influence within the civic oligarchy. Many of the collections of documents within his book can be read as an amassing of evidence to support a particular argument or case. As well as his various commercial disputes, clusters of documents related to disputes over tithe payment within the city, the responsibilities (and shortcomings) of churchwardens and even the rights of tenants of residential properties. Arnold might not have been able to bring many of his cases to a successful conclusion – he appears to

have died in poverty while seeking sanctuary from his debts – but his faith in the power and impartiality of the law is an important reminder of the limits to the power of any individual or faction.

Conclusion

While late medieval and sixteenth century cities across northern Europe varied in terms of their political structure, it is certainly fair to conclude that these structures were predominantly oligarchic, and were becoming even more so over the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Cities certainly had their freedom from feudal control, and many of their residents had rights as citizens, yet the exercise of power rested not in any sense of democracy, but on the intersection of wealth, office holding, and social capital. Over the past few decades, in step with the move from institutional, to social, and then to cultural approaches, historians have tended to focus more and more on this intersection of social influences, not least the breadth of office holding and minor participation. Berry's work on the wardmote inquests of fifteenth century London, for instance, conceived of these administrative events as multi-layered opportunities for social networking. Such interactions might have offered opportunities for those with ambition to stake their claim to respectability and begin their ascent of the *cursus honorum*, but in order to do so they had to successfully navigate the tensions of their immediate neighbourhood.[67] The example of Richard Arnold presented above similarly highlights the complexity of the relationship between traditional marks and discourses of status and the actual experience of power, which Arnold consistently failed to achieve. New research in the urban history of this period is continuing to focus upon the relationship between discourse, networks and rituals in a way which should further illuminate the experience of power.[68] Only by understanding the diverse and diffuse nature of social capital in the late medieval city can we understand the nature of power.

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5 Peter Clark and Paul Slack, *English Towns in Transition 1500-1700* (Oxford, 1976), 128–32.

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[20] Mark Goldie, 'The unacknowledged republic: officeholding in early modern England' in Tim Harris (ed.), *The Politics of the Excluded, c.1500-1850* (Basingstoke, 2001), 153–5.
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[29] Rappaport, *Worlds Within Worlds*, 48.
[30] Ibid., 53.
[31] Ibid., 52–3.
[32] Minns *et al*., 'The scale and scope of citizenship in early modern Europe', 21.
[33] Jeannin, 'Holders of power and economic activity in German merchant towns in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', 38–40.
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[65] Arnold, *Arnold's Chronicle*, fols. 48–50.
[66] Arnold, 135.a
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