

Communities of Interest.

Social Capital and Trade Associations in England and America (ca. 1880-1910)

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On a sunny June morning in 1905 the twenty-sixth annual mid-summer outing of the New England Manufacturing Jewelers' Association took place. The day started with a parade, headed by the Hedley-Livsey band, of twenty pieces, followed by the Association's president, its officers, and members. According to their annual custom the men wore straw boaters and carried opened Japanese paper sunshades. More than 400 men paraded down the streets of Providence's Jewelry District, down to Custom House Street and then across the bridge, to the Crawford Street wharf, where they boarded the steamer Warwick for 'a delightful sail down the bay', followed by a clambake dinner². This whimsical picture of parasol bearing men, marching to band music, introduces a largely neglected topic in the history of capitalism, that of trade associations.

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed, in America and in England³, the rapid expansion of these voluntary associations⁴. The historiography on

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² *Manufacturing Jeweler*, vol. 36, no.26, p.682, 1905 (MJ hereafter)

³ Trade associations sprung up throughout the United Kingdom, but as Scottish firms operated in a different institutional environment, this paper will focus on England.

trade associations has limited its focus to some of the reasons why they were created: to harness competition, or as vehicles of political representation and defenders of employers' interests against those of workers⁵. However, much less clear is how men who competed against each other also found ways to cooperate. Determining how this happened matters, if we really want to understand how businesses have come to be part of the public sphere in a way that is now central to the political order⁶. This paper intends to explore how two communities of entrepreneurs came to define and harness their common interests, so as to offer a reinterpretation of small-scale producer capitalism in late Victorian England and Postbellum America. In order to do this the social scientist's methodology will marry that of the historian's and a theoretical section will be followed by the analysis of the sources.

I

Since the mid-1980s de-industrialisation, the shrinking of the welfare state and, for economic historians, the questioning of the Chandlerian paradigm⁷ have brought to the fore the importance of social networks capable of generating positive economic outcomes based on cooperation and trust as an alternative to growth led by multinational corporations. In the search for these networks, social scientists and historians alike have investigated small-scale capitalism in the shape of industrial

⁴ It is important here to make the distinction between trade associations and employers' associations. Trade associations provide services to firms (such as the regulation of competition) and act as pressure groups in the political arena. Employers' associations, instead, specialise in industrial relations. Although in historical terms the distinction between the two is often blurry, the literature has tended to focus on the latter type of organisation. For a review of this literature see: Lanzalaco, 'Business interest associations'

⁵ For examples of this see: Scranton, *Endless Novelty*; Becker, 'American Wholesale Hardware Trade Associations'; Galambos, 'The American Trade Association Movement Revisited' and *Competition and Cooperation*; Haydu, *Citizen Employers*; Turner, 'Servants of Two Masters: British Trade Associations in the First Half of the twentieth century';

⁶ Habermas, *The structural transformation of the public sphere*

⁷ Chandler, *Strategy and Structure*; *The Invisible Hand*; and *Scale and Scope*. The literature criticising Chandler's focus on large, hierarchically managed enterprises and the type of history it has generated is too large to list here, for an example of this critique see: Zeitlin and Herrigel (eds.), *Americanisation and its limits* and Hannah, 'The Whig Fable of American Tobacco 1896-1913'.

districts, clusters or area systems⁸. What underpins much of this literature is the desire to move away from static and monocausal notions of economic efficiency, based around the idea that growing market complexity can be controlled only by increasingly complex and integrated organisations. The idea that there are multiple alternative paths to economic growth and that ‘efficiency’ comes in many forms was analysed extensively by Michael Piore and Charles Sabel when they launched the flexible specialisation manifesto in 1984. Flexible specialisation was intended as a strategy of permanent innovation, accommodation to ceaseless change, rather than as an effort to control it; a strategy based on flexible, multi-use equipment, skilled workers and co-operative arrangements within clusters of small and medium-sized firms. Since the publication of *The Second Industrial Divide* flexible specialisation has become a by-word for a viable, modern alternative to mass production⁹. A year later *Past and Present* published another contribution to the debate, by Sabel again but this time with Jonathan Zeitlin¹⁰. These two works heralded two decades of efforts by historians, sociologists, economists and political scientists to show that alternative methods to those of mass production not only flourished during the Second Industrial Revolution but were also the solution to the economic crises of the twentieth century. Many of these books and articles were published at a time when the crisis of mass production seemed terminal and small firms and industrial districts were thought as being able to provide not just different ways of making goods but also a different model of capitalism, based on economic relations shaped also by cooperation and trust rather than just by competition.

⁸ for an extensive review of this literature see Zeitlin, ‘The Historical Alternatives Approach’;

⁹ Piore and Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide*, 17.

¹⁰ Sabel and Zeitlin, ‘Historical Alternatives’.

Over these two decades the grounds of the debate have shifted. The research that has gone on in the mean time has sought to chart the fortunes of small firms, regional economies and industrial districts while at the same time observing the reaction of large firms to changing market conditions. Large firms have not disappeared but have adapted instead, becoming more flexible and more adept at coping and influencing changes in demand, while industrial districts have shown their own limits and rigidities¹¹.

Although background conditions might be constantly shifting, and organisational forms change to adapt, one of the constant themes in this literature is the problem of economic governance, the issue of how to balance competition with cooperation, as well as how to create, police, and enforce trust¹². These aspects remain at the root of all productive relations, whether this is among small firms within an industrial district, or between multinationals competing in a global economy, but it is the literature dealing with the former that has most developed them¹³.

Paradoxically, however, the sociology-based approach that dominated this literature has emphasised the importance of trust and cooperation, but rarely explored

¹¹ Bagnasco and Sabel, *Small and Medium Sized Enterprises*

¹² Sabel, Zeitlin, *World of Possibilities*, 4

¹³ Most of the literature on industrial districts has focused on Italy and it is too sizeable to be summarised here, although two of the most influential contributions in Italian should be mentioned: Beccattini (ed.), *Mercato e forze locali* and Bagnasco, *Tre Italie*. Collections of essays in English are: Goodman, and Bamford, *Small firms and industrial districts in Italy*; Pyke, Beccattini, and Sengenberger, *Industrial districts and inter-firm cooperation in Italy*; Cossentino, Pyke, and Sengenberger, *Local and regional response to global pressure: The case of Italy and its industrial districts*. The most recent review of the theoretical literature, applied to the Italian case can be found in Beccattini, Bellandi, Dei Ottati, and Sforzi, *From industrial districts to local development*. For some English examples and a review of the literature see Wilson and Popp, *Industrial clusters and regional business networks*; and Popp, Toms, and Wilson, 'Strategy, Governance and Industrial Organisation: Historical Perspectives in Industrial Clustering In England'. An eclectic collection of essays on networks around the world can be found in Bergman, Maier and Tödman, *Regions reconsidered: economic networks, innovation and local development in industrialised countries*, and in Grabher, *The embedded firm: On the socio-economics of industrial networks*. Recent contributions to the literature on social structure and networks by economists can be found in Rauch and Casella (eds.), *Networks and markets*; Bhaskar and Jackson, *Networks and groups*.

in depth the dynamics of how and why they emerge. In fact, there can be nothing inevitable about cooperation between competing economic agents, because cooperation implies the sharing of knowledge¹⁴ and the presence of trust: ‘the confidence that others will do the “right” thing despite a clear balance of incentives to the contrary’¹⁵. One of the incentives to cooperate is that this generates information about one’s trustworthiness, an asset in which individuals, and organisations, are likely to want to invest in, foregoing immediate gains (those that opportunism might bring) for the purpose of enjoying benefits later¹⁶. As such, cooperation and trust cannot come for free. But in much of the literature on the subject cooperation is viewed as unproblematic: the explanation used is that firms can balance competition and cooperation because they accept the existence of a collective power that binds industrial communities (whether localised or not) together. This ethos allows the diffusion of an unspoken code of competition which discourages some forms of potentially disruptive business behaviour by attaching moral sanctions to it¹⁷. Central to this literature is the notion that economic activity is embedded in social relations. Economic agents, by operating inside a network of social relations embed economic action in social structures, and embeddedness generates trust and discourages malfeasance¹⁸.

This view has left economists and economic historians unsatisfied, and has pushed them to find a deeper layer of explanation, what can be seen as the search for

¹⁴ Maskell, and Malmberg., ‘Localised learning and industrial competitiveness’, pp. 167-85.

¹⁵ Granovetter, ‘The impact of social structure on economic outcomes’, p. 33

¹⁶ On this see the classic piece Dasgupta. ‘Trust as a commodity’.

¹⁷ This theme pervades all the literature quoted in footnote [7], but in particular see Beccattini, ‘Sectors and/or districts: some remarks on the conceptual foundations of industrial economics’, and Dei Ottati ‘Trust, interlinking transactions and credit in industrial districts’.

¹⁸ Granovetter, ‘Economic action and social structure: The problem of embeddedness’. The concept of embeddedness is one of the cornerstones on which the conceptualisation of industrial districts rests.

“what embodies embeddedness”. In this attempt, attention has been turned to the study of those organisations that operate within localised economies such as guilds, traders’ coalitions, chambers of commerce, trade associations and other voluntary associations¹⁹. The economics-based view tends to explain these organisations in functional terms, as devices to reduce transaction costs. No firm can grow big enough to internalise all market transactions and this is what makes transaction costs a fact of economic life. It is this problem that leads individuals to cooperate in the creation of institutions that can help in reducing information, monitoring and enforcement costs²⁰. Moreover, by cooperating in sharing, for example, machinery, the training of workers, and information about processes and customers, firms can reduce these costs²¹. This conceptual framework can be applied to collective institutions such as trade associations created by small and medium sized firms to deal with the contractual hazards associated with transaction costs²². By assessing in an ex-post way how effective these institutions were in achieving their aims we can write narratives of success and failure²³. The danger with this functionalist approach is that cooperation is reduced to little more than a coordination game, in which economic self-interest is the only driving force and the institutions created to reduce transaction costs are always efficient²⁴. The risk of excessive determinism and the narrow view implicit in the NIE approach did not appeal to scholars who see organisations such as trade

¹⁹ A wide ranging and diverse literature: Gaggio, *In Gold we Trust*, Amatori and Colli (eds.), *Comunita’ di impresa*; Ogilvie, ‘Guilds, efficiency and social capital’; Epstein, ‘Craft guilds, apprenticeships, and technological change in pre-industrial Europe’; Putnam, Leonardi, Nanetti, *Making democracy work*; Greif, *Institutions and the path to the modern economy*.

²⁰ Williamson, ‘Transaction cost economics’, p.37; North, *Institutions*, p.6

²¹ Mathews, ‘Competitive dynamics and economic learning: an extended resource-based view’, pp. 115-145; Amin and Thrift, *Globalisation, Institutions and Regional Development in Europe*; Bellandi, ‘The incentives to decentralised industrial creativity in local systems of small firms’, pp. 95-107.

²² Williamson, ‘The New Institutional Economics’...pp.603-604. For an overview of NIE literature and the distinctions between organisations and institutions see B.R. Schneider and R.F. Doner, ‘The new institutional economics, business associations and development’, *Brazilian Journal of Political Economy*, vol.20, no.3, 2000

²³ Carnevali, ‘Crooks, thieves and receivers’.

²⁴ For a critical review of this literature see Ogilvie, ‘Whatever is, is right? Economic Institutions in pre-industrial Europe.’

associations created not just to address economic needs, or nor just the result of the quest for efficiency. The reaction from the literature on social capital is to read trade associations also as social organisations that generate cooperation and trust and with broader functions than just facilitating economic transactions.

A good example of this approach is James Coleman's classic study of the diamond merchants of New York. In the process of negotiating a sale a diamond merchant will hand over to another merchant a bag of stones for the latter to examine at his leisure, with no formal insurance that the diamonds will not be substituted with one or more inferior stones, or replicas. Such free exchange is important for the functioning of this market. Without it the market would operate in a much more cumbersome, less efficient way. Coleman explained such high levels of trust and cooperation by looking at the social structure of this wholesale diamond market. This social network was made of a Jewish community, with a high degree of intermarriage, living in the same area of Brooklyn and going to the same synagogues. If any member defected by substituting stones or stealing they would be cast out of the community and lose all of these ties. These close ties of family, community and religious affiliation served many purposes, including the unintended one of providing the insurance to make economic transaction take place. Coleman's New York diamond traders formed a social network, that shared norms and information, that could enforce sanctions and act collectively, creating social capital that made possible the 'achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible'²⁵. These ends were of many different sorts: cultural, social and economic and Coleman went on to apply the notion of social capital to community organisations that are useful for the development of children.

²⁵ Coleman, 'Social capital in the creation of human capital'.

This example, although illuminating, presents us with a very specific type of social network, and its character rests in the fact that its members shared norms and values because it was a homogeneous closed community. Communities that share cultural norms are seen as underpinning also the practices that have allowed industrial districts to develop as productive systems based on cooperation and alternative to the hierarchies of mass production. But what about communities that are not religiously, ethnically homogeneous and that are more integrated with the outside world? How do they generate social capital?²⁶

This observation brings me to a second problem with the study of cooperation in the social capital literature. Similarly to what happens in the sociology-based studies of industrial network, the existence of cooperation is observed, and its emergence is often taken for granted. Rarely are the dynamics of cooperation creation explored. This is perplexing, because for every instance of cooperation we can find examples of non-cooperation and its ruinous effects. The example of Southern Italy is a good one. In his analysis of the reasons behind the economic disparity between Italian regions in the North and the South of the country, Robert Putnam studied voluntary associations as an important positive explanatory variable. Putnam associated the existence and the ‘density’ of these strong networks in the North of Italy (and their absence in the South) to northern regions’ higher levels of economic growth as citizens used the social capital generated by these networks to develop mutually beneficial cooperative arrangements²⁷. The example of Southern Italy shows that communities that are homogeneous, share norms and cultural values not

²⁶ This question is explored by Arneil in *Diverse Communities. The Problem with Social Capital*.

²⁷ Putnam, *Making democracy work*, p.173

always generate social capital, and even when they do this can be smothered by other, stronger forces²⁸.

Moreover, this literature is infused with the assumption that communities are always ‘a good thing’ and can only generate positive outcomes. But this is not true. We know that some social networks can create noxious forms of cooperation, ‘bad behaviour spreads’ as Arrow trenchantly puts it²⁹, and the Mafia so clearly exemplifies. Furthermore, communities do not always include everybody; at times social networks work for some, the powerful, and harm others, the weak, such as women³⁰. In studying these networks we cannot shy away from investigating issues such as hegemony, conflict and exclusion³¹.

In Putnam’s analysis the rewards of cooperation are enhanced political participation and economic performance. However, these rewards need preconditions to emerge. Cooperation is less likely to falter if peer monitoring and a common set of norms exist together with sanctions at a local level³². Therefore, cooperation most definitely does not come for free. To emerge, it requires both positive incentives and the credible threat of sanctions and enforcement³³. Viewed in this way, we can see how the structures needed for cooperation to emerge might be actively created. A conscious act of creation by a network of individuals would mean that social capital is not a public good, spontaneously generated and owned by a vague and broad collective. In this sense social capital can be defined as Pierre Bourdieu did as: ‘the

²⁸ This is not the place to discuss the perverse and deadly relationship between the Italian state, organised crime and the South’s economic, political and social development. For an introduction to the literature see: D. Gambetta, ‘Mafia: The price of mistrust’, in D. Gambetta, *Making and breaking cooperative relations*; Arlacchi, *La mafia imprenditrice*; Ginsborg, *Italy and its discontents*.

²⁹ Arrow, ‘Observations on social capital’, p.3

³⁰ Ogilvie, ‘Guilds, efficiency and social capital’.

³¹ Bourdieu, ‘The forms of capital’; The concept of hegemony pervades the whole of Gramsci’s writing, but an interesting insight on how the ‘moderates’ (a certain section of the middle classes) established their power over other social classes in nineteenth century Italy can be found in Gramsci, *Quaderni dal carcere*, vol.3, Quaderno 19, no. 24, pp. 2010-2034.

³² Serageldin, ‘Sustainability as opportunity and the problem of social capital’.

³³ Sethi, Somanathan, ‘The evolution of social norms in common property resource use’.

aggregate of the actual or potential resources that are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition'³⁴. The usefulness of this quote is that it reinforces the connection between institutions on the one hand and social capital and its creation as an intentional act on the other. By thinking of individuals as acting consciously in creating social capital and owning it as a collective through institutions we give agency back to agents. However, the danger then becomes that of falling back into a functionalist view where networks are seen as creating cooperation and trust as value-producing assets. This pitfall can be avoided by conceptualising networks not as structures (that shape action in a linear fashion) but as what Dario Gaggio has defined as: 'processes of relations' in which actors define each other in interaction and on the basis of their context, in which they can imagine alternatives, based also on how they re-interpret their own past'³⁵. This approach brings to the fore the need to understand the context in which communities take shape, and their cultures, in terms of understanding the process through which actors learn and apprehend the world'³⁶, or, in other words, re-acquiring the tools of the historian.

This paper investigates two communities of jewellery makers, one in Birmingham (UK) and one in Providence (Rhode Island, USA), made up of individuals who were also competing ceaselessly against each other. At a certain point in their history, contingency suggested that by cooperating with each other they could control some of the problems that were threatening to destroy their trade. The comparison of the ways found by these communities to create cooperation shows the role that historical contingency and context play in shaping decisions and outcomes. Both communities created trade associations and the social and economic links forged

³⁴ Bourdieu, 'Forms of capital', p. 249.

³⁵ Gaggio, *In Gold*, pp.16-19

³⁶ I am grateful to Kenneth Lipartito for providing me with this definition.

within these associations allowed the creation of cooperative activities that would not have emerged otherwise. These trade associations can thus be seen as conscious creations of social networks and of social capital.

The method used here is to study, through the evidence provided by archival sources and by trade journals, the ex-ante decisions taken (rather than the ex-post results) and the results the actors were hoping to achieve. The following pages will show that the intentional aims of these economic actors in setting up a trade association was entirely functional with cooperation explicitly conceived as the factor that would allow the establishment of rules of the game and the achievement of economic goals. However, I will also show how these associations were networks of sociability which provided its members with an identity that was both professional and social (so to do with status and power), while at the same time embedding individuals within a community with shared interests, without which no social capital could be generated, and therefore the functional aims of the trade association could not be achieved. Thus, these associations can be interpreted as artefacts, concrete expressions of values and practices that provided their members with a framework of meaning through which they could coordinate action. These values and practices, in which we can include the 'rules of the game' dear to transaction cost analysis, cannot be understood without reference to the specific cultural context in which these actors found themselves, as they were the result of the debate and discourse that went on between them and around them³⁷. By thinking of human action as shaped by dialogue with others this paper will tread a path between rational choice theories of cooperation (such as NIE) that are 'undersocialised' and cultural theories that are 'oversocialised',

³⁷ Lipartito, 'Business Culture', p. 604

as Mark Granovetter has defined them³⁸. Rational choice places individuals and their preferences as developing outside the world of social relations, while cultural theories link individuals to social norms without explaining how these norms are understood³⁹.

The importance of context and contingency in shaping what individuals, and their communities, understood their associations to be for, can be appreciated more fully by adopting a comparative methodology. This is not to mean that context will be used as an explanatory variable as the aim here is not to understand causation, or to explain differences and divergences. Instead comparison is used to unsettle the perceived naturalness of certain conclusions (for example the decline of craft methods of production) and allows us to see how similar circumstances can generate a range of possible alternatives, rather than think of events as a neat timeline that can lead to only one outcome; in this sense comparison will allow: ‘a glimpse of the counterfactual’ and throw a wrench in what would be, otherwise, an overdetermined historical narrative⁴⁰.

II

The expansion of the middle classes during the nineteenth century induced a gradual transformation of jewellery from a symbol of status to an item of fashionable consumption and centres of jewellery production blossomed on the European Continent and in the USA. By the 1880s both Providence and Birmingham vied for the title of ‘jewellery capital of the world’, competing against New York and London⁴¹.

³⁸ Granovetter, ‘Economic action and social structure’.

³⁹ Berk, ‘Communities of Competitors’.

⁴⁰ Cohen, ‘Comparative history’, p.64

⁴¹ The following footnotes will provide many references to Providence and Birmingham, but for an historical overview of jewellery styles, consumption and production see Bury, *Jewellery. The International Era*, vol.2

In 1860 about 75 jewelery manufacturers operated in Providence, employing 1,750 workers and making products worth \$2.2 million (22% of what was produced nationally). Although the Civil War depressed the industry for two years, the increase in demand for ornaments with a patriotic, martial or funerary style fashioned in brass and other base metals revived employment. By 1880 the Providence jewellery trade included 142 firms with about 3,300 workers (mostly men at this stage) and 32 companies offering specialty services and employing 300 workers⁴².

This was a trade with few barriers to entry. Craftsmen who had served five to seven years of apprenticeship and with some design skills, a set of tools, some savings and a good reputation could easily become proprietors. Casting had been replaced by die presswork to produce brooches, cufflinks, pins and lockets, decorated with stones, wirework or enamel and fitted with clasps and chains, all in different workshops. Machinery such as presses and lathes were widely used and mostly foot operated, as they were in Birmingham⁴³. Hundreds firms made and sold rings, bracelets, necklaces, earrings, hair ornaments and brooches; others made goods more commonly worn by men, such as watch chains, tie pins, cuff, shirt and collar buttons and studs. A dozen firms specialized in badges for fraternal and religious organizations and for unions. Other firms specialized in pearl, shell and stone work, while others only made rings. Some firms made findings and provided jewelry manufacturers with components from machine made brass, to plated chain to customized settings. In addition there were platers, die-cutting shops, enamellers, tool and machinery specialists and refiners. Jewelry manufacturers could also buy jewelry-boxes and

⁴² Scranton, 'The horrors of competition: Innovation and Paradox in Rhode Island's jewelry industry 1860-1914'.

⁴³ Scranton, 'The horrors of competition', p.48

sample cases made locally⁴⁴. The average size of firms was small, with some concerns employing no more than a handful of workers and only a few firms employing more than 50 people⁴⁵. By 1899 employment in the jewellery trade had increased to almost 9,000 people and jewellery had overtaken text mills as the largest employers in the state⁴⁶.

The structure of Providence's jewellery trade was mirrored by Birmingham's. In 1881 one of Birmingham's trade directories listed manufacturing jewelers and goldsmiths, gilt jewelry manufacturers, plated jewelers, stone setters, diamond mounters, jewelers' stampers and jewelers' materials manufacturers and dealers together with jewelers' blowpipe makers, box and case makers, alloy makers, draw and gauge plate makers and enamel makers. The census returns for 1881 show that the jewelry trade, including watchmakers, employed almost 20,000 people, making it the biggest employer in the region, alongside the brass and copper trade⁴⁷.

The jewellers of Providence have been defined by Philip Scranton as 'networked specialists' competing and cooperating in a well-defined area. However, the prosperous 1880s-90s were followed by decades of turmoil as the industrial district suffered under the pressure of 'opportunism, design copying, interfirm suspicion and price shaving...defenceless against the flow of workers-entrepreneurs who fuelled these abuses'⁴⁸. Scranton details how these evils destroyed the craft nature of the industry and in the long run generated negative externalities, even while the industry was growing in terms of output and of the number of firms. This pattern

⁴⁴ Scranton, 'The horrors of competition', pp.53-54

⁴⁵ *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Industrial Statistics*, Jewelry Manufacturing enterprises, p.30, 1888. RIHS Archives.

⁴⁶ Weisberg, *Why Providence?*, p.18

⁴⁷ Allen, *The Industrial Development of Birmingham and the Black Country*, Table 5, p.459.

⁴⁸ Scranton, *Endless novelty*. p. 326.

of spiralling, ruinous competition has been explained as the consequence of ‘the evils of overcompetition, derived from the jewelry sector’s own structure and technical capabilities’⁴⁹.

In Providence until the 1873 crash goods were sold to jobbers (wholesalers), for cash. But the crash changed this arrangement and after the mid-seventies jobbers were able to buy jewelry from manufacturers on credit, to sell on a consignment basis or with long delays in settling accounts. From the mid-1870s onwards, the growth of Providence’s jewellery trade was also a consequence of the unbalanced relationship between manufacturers and jobbers. Providence manufacturers, seeking business, accepted small orders, returns of unsold goods, cancellation of confirmed orders and the cost of huge inventories of all styles. Jobbers also showed one firm’s samples to another manufacturer inviting them to duplicate them at a lower price. Copying was made easy even for the smaller firms thanks to the presence in Providence of a large number of diesinkers and ‘findings’ firms (makers of chains, clasps and other small ornamental parts to decorate lockets, brooches, earrings etc). Copies could be made so quickly, in less than two weeks, that the more established firms were always chasing novelties, while their stocks were devalued. Design patenting was ineffectual and established firms either agreed to lower their prices or the jobber would go to the imitator’s firm, usually a newer, smaller concern⁵⁰. As a consequence, Providence’s firms turned their backs on specialty and the crafting of style, and the trade descended into sweatshop conditions by 1910⁵¹.

According to Scranton it was the very structure of the industrial district, its specific technological capabilities and the very nature of the product made that

⁴⁹ Scranton, *Endless novelty*, p.244.

⁵⁰ Scranton, ‘The horrors of competition’, pp.48-50.

⁵¹ Scranton, *Endless Novelty*, p.121 and N. Shapiro Pearl

induced ruin⁵². Too much flexibility and spatial concentration facilitated the ‘knockoff game’ and the turnaround time for copying jewellery was much shorter than that for fabric patterns or furniture. These elements created a marketing problem and increasing conflicts between the district’s established veteran firms and the hundreds of garret start-ups who depended on the jobbers for their livelihoods⁵³. To escape the jobbers’ power, and its connected evils, those firms that could invested in selling directly to retailers, of which more will be said about later.

However, individual firms’ decision to sell directly to retailers was not the only strategy devised, collective action was taken as well. On 18 October 1884 a meeting was held in the ‘spacious’ rooms of the New England Manufacturing Jewelers’ Association (NEMJA) at 151 Broad Street in Providence⁵⁴. The room was full, with people waiting in the hall. The reporter covering the event for the trade’s journal the *Manufacturing Jeweler* (*MJ* hereafter) wrote that ‘the earnestness of the conversation and the serious determined air of all, gave token that the manufacturers were ready to take definitive steps towards improving the condition of affairs....Most of the largest and most influential houses in Providence were present’⁵⁵. What brought the jewellers together was a sense that there was ‘excessive competition’ in the trade⁵⁶. For example, jewelers were harming themselves and each other by using practices like dating ahead to offer very long credit to jobbers as a form of competition. This was a problem because the extreme volatility of the jewellery trade meant that often jobbers went bankrupt, leaving the manufacturers with the burden of

⁵² By this Scranton does not mean that the trade disappeared, but that craft and specialty production declined.

⁵³ Scranton, *Endless Novelty*, p.111

⁵⁴ The NEMJSA was established in 1879 and its first offices were in the Wilcox Building. The association moved to Broad Street in 1883. *MJ*, vol.1, no.5, p.215, 1886

⁵⁵ *MJ*, vol.1, no.2, p.53, 1884

⁵⁶ *MJ*, vol. 1, no. 1, p.9, 1884

unpaid credits⁵⁷. At the meeting Mr. Dutee Wilcox of D. Wilcox and Co. was unanimously elected as chair. The meeting listened to two papers, one on the number of failures in the last month, 30 for a total of \$1,308,405, all among jobbers, and the second one on the board of trade set up by the clothing trade and how this collected information on the reliability and credit situation of its members. The meeting voted unanimously to create a jewellers' Board of Trade. The following week a second meeting passed the constitution and the by-laws of the Board⁵⁸.

The aims of the Manufacturing Jewelers Board of Trade as declared by its By-laws were ambitious, and they suggest the scale of the problems facing this community. Its object was to foster and promote the interests of the manufacturing jewellers, to protect them from fraud, to reform abuses in the trade (such as the practice of dating ahead bills and consignment of goods), to diffuse accurate and reliable information among its members as to the financial standing, credit and character of dealers in jewelry, to promote uniformity in the customs and usages of the trade and promote a more enlarged and friendly intercourse between manufacturers⁵⁹.

These problems were not unique to Providence. Across the ocean, in England, another community of jewellers was dealing with a very similar set of hazards. On the third of August 1887, more than 200 Birmingham manufacturers, representing almost the whole of the employers in the city's jewellery trade, attended a meeting in St. Paul's schoolroom on Warstock Lane in the heart of the Jewellery Quarter. The aim of the meeting was to discuss the "present wide-spread depression", and its chairman, Mr. Jacob Jacobs, told the meeting how the depression had led to a general fall in

⁵⁷ *MI*, vol.1, no.1, p.27, 1884

⁵⁸ *MJ*, vol.1, no1, p.55, 1884

⁵⁹ The Board of Trade was open to all jewelry manufacturers and related trades, but membership was by election through a ballot, hence allowing the possibility of exclusion. Manufacturing Jewelers Board of Trade, Constitution and By-laws, 1884 (Rhode Island Historical Society Archives)

demand, and the reaction had been to flood the market with goods, with a consequent fall in prices. To keep their place in the market manufacturers were selling at a loss and retailers were selling at prices lower than wholesale. Retailers and wholesalers ordered goods from manufacturers on credit only to undersell them and as a consequence could not repay their debts. The depression had shown the impact that the market could have in an unregulated environment. The meeting concluded that, 'Their disaster had thrown them a little closer together, and now was especially the moment when some trade association would be of lasting benefit to their business.'⁶⁰. The first annual general meeting of the Birmingham Jewellers and Silversmiths Association (BJA) was held on the 27 November and by then more than 80 firms had pledged their support⁶¹.

Over the years the BJA developed into a complex organisation, where various committees developed a number of activities to support the jewellers. Apart from the recovery of debts and credit checks, the Association prosecuted fraudsters, thieves and receivers of stolen goods. Its Vigilance Committee organised the policing of the district's streets, making it one of the safest areas of the city. Concerns over the quality of the goods produced and over the preservation of skills led the BJA to invest in the establishment of the School of Jewellery in 1890⁶². By 1900 its membership had risen to 226⁶³ and the Association moved into the twentieth century⁶⁴.

⁶⁰ *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, August 4, 1887.

⁶¹ This is a good place to give the reader some idea of the social makeup of the jewellery trade. A number of historical reasons had made Birmingham an open city where dissenters could easily find a place. Jews, Anglicans, Quakers and other Non-conformists all worked alongside each other. For more details see Carnevali, 'Malefactors and honourable men'. Although less is known about the specific Christian churches to which Providence's jewellers belonged (Methodists and Unitarians have been identified), the trade was similarly un-homogeneous, with descendants of the original settlers (Dissenters from England and other neighbouring colonies) alongside German Jews and Englishmen, many of whom came from Birmingham: see Weil, Cohen, 'Jews in the Jewelry Industry in Rhode Island' ; Hall, *Biographical History*

⁶² Mason, *Jewellery Making in Birmingham. 1750-1995*, pp. 82-4.

⁶³ BJA, Annual Report, 1900, MS 1646/263.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the paths followed by the two districts had stopped being similar. Employment increased in both, but firms in Providence tended to concentrate and become bigger, while at the same time outwork and piecework proliferated and this trend continued in the interwar period. The working conditions of the 1000s of immigrant women and children who worked in the trade were so poor that a report by the International Jewelry Workers Union characterised the industry as a ‘black hole in Calcutta’⁶⁵. By the 1970s the trade had become the symbol of the general collapse of light manufacturing in New England, trapped in a negative spiral of low-wage, low-price and low-quality and all the negative externalities associated with this⁶⁶. Instead, the Birmingham jewellery district is still alive today and it maintains a productive structure similar to that of the nineteenth century industrial district, producing almost half of the gold jewellery sold in the country. Jewellery is the Midland trade which has perhaps survived best, longer than most of the region’s manufacturing industries⁶⁷.

III

The history of the Providence jewellery industry can, and has, be told as a story of failure; in terms of how overcompetition destroyed the industrial district as firms grew in size and internalised processes, and failure to retain the craft nature of the industry and its skilled workers⁶⁸. Many of the developments that have taken place in the trade

⁶⁴ A very summary history of the BJA can be found in: Nott, *The British Jewellers Association, 1887-1987, 100 Years of service*.

⁶⁵ Meckel, ‘The Jewelry Industry, Industrial Development and Immigration in Providence 1790-1993’ p. 254.

⁶⁶ Gaggio, *In Gold*, p. 283-320; Browne, Sass, ‘The transition from a mill-based to a knowledge-based economy: New England 1940-2000’.

⁶⁷ For an in-depth analysis of the history of the Birmingham jewellery trade see: F. Carnevali, ‘Golden opportunities: jewelry making in Birmingham between mass production and specialty’, *Enterprise and Society*, 4, 2003, pp.272-298; F. Carnevali, ‘“Crooks, thieves and receivers”’: transaction costs in nineteenth-century industrial Birmingham’, *Economic History Review*, LVII, 3, 2004, pp.533-550.

⁶⁸ Gaggio, *In Gold*; Scranton, ‘The horrors of competition’.

have been seen as a failure of cooperation. Scranton's analysis of the New England Manufacturing Jewelers Association and the Manufacturing Jewelers' Board Trade is dismissive. According to his analysis, the jewellers who created these institutions were unable to act collectively and address the problems of price regulation, time of selling, rating of concerns, theft, litigation between bankrupt jobbers and retailers, and schooling for craftsmen. The NEMJA was not even effective as a lobbying group. Although the NEMJA and the Jewelers' Board of Trade were able to establish a credit-rating system, they could not enforce common seasonal opening dates, stop design piracy, establish standard trade terms, and establish uniform cost-accounting procedures. According to this narrative, the jewellers were unsuccessful in regulating competition and the NEMJA became little better than a dining club⁶⁹.

To a certain extent all this is true. This literature, however, would seem to imply that it was Providence's own industrial structure that created the conditions for decline and generated a specific set of reactions and responses in the actors. Spatial concentration was the problem, according to Scranton. What made the district also unmade it, as specialist networks made it very cheap for start-ups to be created and: 'further segmentation arose as veteran firms and novice firms warred to the benefit of distributors and auxiliaries'. In such a climate all that the trade associations could do was to 'nibble at the corners of key problems'⁷⁰. However, what happened in Birmingham shows that we should not look to the district's productive structure for an explanation of why overcompetition developed. In Birmingham the trade association's

⁶⁹ Scranton, *Endless Novelty*, p.247. The Sherman Act of 1890 was not the factor that made it difficult for the association to control competition. This was poorly enforced and in any case in 1895 the Supreme Court ruled that the Act did not apply to local trade associations as this was not interstate commerce. See Galambos, *Competition and cooperation*, p. 29 and Bensel, *The political economy of American industrialisation*, p.344.

⁷⁰ Scranton, *Endless Novelty*, p.121

role was not that of the hapless bystander and was able instead to act and foster cooperation.

Thanks to the benefit of hindsight the historian can be pitiless in her analysis and tell stories of dismal failure⁷¹, but if we follow her down this path we come to believe in the existence of a kind of perverse ‘death wish’ in these agents in that they wilfully pursued destructive short-term goals foregoing the long-term benefits of cooperation. Hindsight can lead us to accusing Providence’s jewellers of not being shrewd enough to understand what was good for them, especially in comparison with their English counterparts. But by assuming that people made decisions in search of outcomes that they thought of as positive at the time we can give them their innocence (or at least their agency) back. Therefore what this paper focuses on is the decision making process and on the intended consequences of those decisions. The aim here is to restore these communities to their histories, without employing deterministic notions of success or failure⁷². By taking this approach, the story of Providence and Birmingham’s jewellery industry can be re-cast in a different light by taking a closer look at the reasons behind the creation of the jewellers’ associations in both towns. This approach takes us away from the curse of hindsight and allows us to understand the part that contingency and context played on the decisions taken by these two communities in their search for cooperation.

Although the jewellery industry in Providence and in Birmingham developed along similar lines, an important difference between the two districts can be found in the relationship between manufacturers and jobbers. The Birmingham jewellers’ association brought together most of the medium and large firms in the district and it

⁷¹ Of this I’m guilty myself, in an earlier assessment of Providence’s history, see Carnevali, ‘Crooks, thieves and receivers’.

⁷² Ultimately, the reasons why the Birmingham industrial district flourished and small firms and craft declined in Providence, might have very little to do with how effective the trade associations were, but more to do with a complex range of many local, national and international factors.

was open to manufacturers and wholesalers alike. The decision to bring the two together had been a conscious one, and it had proved so contentious that the BJA first chairman, Jacob Jacobs, who had wanted an association open only to manufacturers, resigned⁷³. Through cooperation Birmingham jewellers and wholesalers were able to create mechanisms of enforcement and incentive that were effective in regulating competition (without price fixing) and avoid the excesses that ravaged Providence. In Providence instead, the manufacturers decided to exclude jobbers and their relationships remained adversarial. The reason for this separation between manufacturers and jobbers can be found in the fact that jobbers were hardly ever local; although they had offices in Providence, most of them came from New York⁷⁴. Instead, most of the wholesalers that belonged to the BJA were Birmingham firms who were both manufacturers and factors for the smaller manufacturing firms. Providence's jewellers determined membership rules on the basis of locality but an unintended consequence of this was that jobbers remained as predatory outsiders. Comparing Birmingham with Providence shows us that, in fact, even though Providence's jewellery making was networked in terms of production, it really was not integrated enough, as the commercial side of the exchange of goods was controlled by outsiders.

In Providence, as a consequence of the lack of cooperation between manufacturers and jobbers, some firms started selling directly to retailers, thus enlarging the size of their activities. Smaller firms did not have the internal resources necessary to do this and therefore had to adapt their production to the model imposed by the jobbers' demands. Therefore, the trade became divided into groups of firms either selling direct or dependent on jobbers: 'groups whose interests were opposed on

⁷³ Carnevali, 'Malefactors and honourable men'.

⁷⁴ U.G. Dietz, *The glitter and the gold. Fashioning America's jewelry*, (Newark, 1997)

most trade practices'⁷⁵. Larger firms, such as Ostby and Barton, hired roadmen and the rising department stores provided them with the first outlets, as these bought in large quantities and paid promptly. Some companies printed catalogues to be sent to the larger independent jewelers and to national fraternal, business, religious and sporting associations. Direct selling was complex and costly, especially when it came to collect payments from smaller stores and although the threat of direct selling was useful in stopping the jobbers' worst excesses it was not a long-term solution, especially for the smaller manufacturers. According to Philip Scranton different strategies created different interests and made it difficult for the local trade association to establish procedures and rules of behaviour that would make the community act as a whole. However, many of the larger Birmingham manufacturers also invested in travellers who took samples around the country, showing them to retailers, while printed catalogues made Birmingham's jewellery available throughout the Empire. Larger firms had more resources than the smaller ones, and could invest in different strategies, but they could, nevertheless, find enough in common to cooperate within the BJA.

It is through the comparison of Providence with Birmingham, a different but parallel reality, that we can reject what seemed like a reasonable explanation: that as firms became larger they integrated functions and therefore did not need cooperative arrangements to reduce external hazards. 'Structural' explanations such as this do not pass the test of comparison, and it is now time to move to an analysis that will focus on the internal world of these two trade associations.

⁷⁵ Scranton, 'The horrors of competition', pp.51-52.

IV

Crucially, our understanding of this world will be influenced by the nature of the sources available. The papers of the BJA and the pages of the *MJ* are two different types of sources. The *MJ* was the official publication of the MJBoT and on a weekly basis it reported on a range of matters that would interest the jewellers and on the activities of the NEMJA and the MJBoT. Although the journal's reports of the two organisations' meetings are very detailed, as a source it is a step removed from the voice of the jewellers; it is a source that represents them but where they do not describe themselves directly. The minutes of the meetings of the various committees of the BJA, instead, report in detail the internal dialogue between the association's members, how they viewed their own actions and how they interpreted the world outside. As no papers survive for the NEMJSA and the MJBoT, there is no way of getting closer to Providence's jewellers, and understand their agency, than to rely on the detail, and on the long quotes from the associations' meetings, provided by the *MJ*.

Reading the *Journal* and the papers of the BJA, it becomes clear that until the interwar period, the jewellers did not discuss price fixing agreements, nor were they concerned with cost accounting, in fact they did not share any information about costs. A constant refrain in both sources is that the jewellers were too secretive to discuss such matters⁷⁶. Their overriding concern, for the period covered by this paper, was with wholesalers' bankruptcies, and the nefarious effect this was having on their trade. It was this that had finally brought the jewellers together, as detailed earlier in the paper.

⁷⁶ This point is also made by Galambos, *Competition and Cooperation*, pp.34-36

Bankruptcies had the same effect in both countries: as factors and wholesalers went bankrupt their stock was sold without proper supervision at low prices, with disastrous consequences for those manufacturers who were still solvent. Firms left with a large stock, which was losing value on a daily basis, continued to put goods on the market, giving them to any wholesaler in the hope of some return. Extended credit and the absence of a system of status enquiry meant that this type of venture often ended in bankruptcy. Furthermore, insolvent wholesalers and retailers resorted to buying goods on credit only to pawn them to pay off their debts to somebody else.

In Britain, by the end of the nineteenth century, bankruptcy law was well established, with cases tried in London and county courts, and the estate of the bankrupt decided by an official receiver who was a member of the Board of Trade⁷⁷. Nevertheless, achieving an appropriate settlement for creditors remained problematic. When the BJA was established, its members resolved that its initial purpose would be to deal with those traders who defaulted on their payments and to call meetings of those members who were creditors and represent them in negotiations⁷⁸. These legal negotiations were costly for traders, in terms of money and time and hardly worth the effort. Normally, when a wholesaler or retailer went bankrupt the legal costs would eat into the estate, as the size of the estate was determined by the sale at auction of what stock was left, often without a proper evaluation of this stock. This could be avoided by organising creditors, and the Association also evaluated the stock with the aim of reaching a settlement (usually the repayment, in instalments of a percentage of the debt) between creditors and debtors that would avoid costly court action and

⁷⁷ Lester, *Victorian Insolvency*

⁷⁸ Birmingham Jewellers Association (BJA), Emergency Committee, Minutes, MS 1646/1, January 6, 1888. The papers of the association are deposited with the Birmingham City Library Archives.

bankruptcy⁷⁹. The settlement, monitored by the Association, ensured that its members recouped a part of their losses, eliminated the cost of a court case, ensured that no jewellery was sold below cost (hence protecting prices) and safeguarded the reputation of the dealers by avoiding bankruptcy⁸⁰. In cases of proven dishonest behaviour, however, the Association spared no effort in ensuring that members of the trade were punished. A good example of this is the case of the fraudulent bankrupt jeweller Alfred Bishton, who had escaped to Argentina in 1889 was pursued there by the Association, through pressure on the police and the Foreign Office. He was finally extradited two years later, sentenced to imprisonment and the Association could close his case⁸¹.

Providence's jewellers' suffered from the same set of problems, but compounded by the absence of a federal bankruptcy law. Although a federal law had been in place between 1867 and 1878, this had since been repealed and it was only in 1898 that a new law took its place⁸². The absence of a national bankruptcy law made it very difficult for those small firms that wanted to expand their activities outside their state to recover money if one of the wholesalers they dealt with went bankrupt. Each state had its own bankruptcy law and as firms had dealings with jobbers and retailers in other states, those that were too small to afford agents and attorneys were left at a disadvantage. Moreover, the state of Rhode Island had no insolvency law, just what the *Journal* termed a 'grab law', by which the first creditor who was first on the

⁷⁹ BJA, Case of Samuel Basnett, Emergency Committee, Minutes, MS 1645/1, 25 October 1888 and Emergency Committee Minutes, MS 1645/1, 14 March 1889.

⁸⁰ BJA, Case of William Brown, of Evans and Brown, General Committee, Minutes, MS 1645/1, 1 May 1891 and of John Ashwin, Emergency Committee Minutes, MS 1645/1, 14 January 1889.

⁸¹ BJA, Case of Alfred Bishton, General Committee and Emergency Committee Minutes, MS 1645/1, multiple entries.

⁸² Tabb, 'The history of bankruptcy laws in the United States', pp. 13-14. For an overview of the role of commercial organisations in lobbying the government for a national law see Hansen, 'Commercial Associations and the Creation of a National Economy: The demand for a Federal Bankruptcy Law'.

ground could satisfy his own claim in full, at the expense of all other creditors⁸³. Matters got worse over time, and this quote from 1888 gives a flavour of the difficulties facing Providences craftsmen: ‘ The failure recently of several Eastern manufacturers has emphasised the increasing difficulty of transacting business on a small capital. The time has been when a bench hand, with no capital beyond his hand tools and a name for paying his debts could have bench room, get a little stock on credit, make up goods and sell them profitably and in time establish a large business. That time has gone by. The long credit system now in vogue has made the chances of success and failure about even for a firm possessing as much as several thousands dollar in cash when they begin operation; in the case of those who have little or no capital disaster is almost certain’⁸⁴.

The absence of a national bankruptcy law also made it difficult to develop of the opportunities offered by the size of the market. California, for example, was a very large markets as there were no jewellery manufacturers beyond the Rocky Mountains. But that state’s bankruptcy law discriminated against creditors from beyond its borders. The failure of a large Californian wholesaler in 1895 left many Eastern manufacturers badly hurt as there was nothing left once the local creditors claims had been satisfied⁸⁵.

Without a national bankruptcy law and in the clear absence of enforcement of creditors’ rights the activities of the Providence Manufacturing Jewelers Board of Trade were of extreme importance as they acted as representatives for small creditors in the pursuit of defaulting debtors, paying the legal costs of their prosecution and

⁸³ *MJ*, vol.1, no.2, p.57, 1884

⁸⁴ *MJ*, vol.1, no. 12, p. 554, 1888

⁸⁵ *MJ*, vol.26, no.11, pp.263-64, 1895

assessing the value of the debtor's estate⁸⁶. The Board also placed the name of the bankrupt on a 'suspended' list, and during the time on this list no member was to have dealings with this person. If they did they would not receive any help from the Board in case of trouble. If the investigation established that the bankruptcy had been due to fraud, the bankrupt was 'repudiated' and any member who had dealings with them was expelled from the association.

Even after the federal law came into effect, in 1898, this had important differences compared with the English law, in particular in the key area of debt discharge. In England this was the result of well-informed and sophisticated procedures. Firstly, during the bankruptcy procedure official receivers were allowed to run deep inquiries into the cause of the distress and the debtor conduct of affairs, and passed this accurate and detail information to judges who decided about discharge. Secondly, bankruptcy law provided a wide set of criteria to base the decision upon, criteria encompassing personal morality and technical competence. Finally judges could choose among a number of different sentences; discharge could have been immediate, conditional to the payment of further shares of debts, suspended for a variable numbers of years, or simply denied. In practice, the discharge mechanism provided a reliable and sensitive reputational filter and a screening device. All that trade associations had to do was to make sure that no business was done with undischarged debtors. On the contrary, no such device existed in the USA, where no deep preliminary inquiry was possible, legal criteria to decide upon were much fewer, and the set of sentences much narrower than in England; discharge was either granted immediately, or not at all, and in most of the cases it was⁸⁷. This meant that the weight

⁸⁶ *MJ*, vol.1, no.5, pp. 202 and 230, 1886

⁸⁷ Tabb, 24-25 and Di Martino, 'Law, class and entrepreneurship: bankruptcy and debt discharge in England and Wales, c. 1890-1939'.

of the screening was on the shoulders of the MJBOT, by providing its members with credit checks on potential customers, and of the *MJ*, through the weekly publication of lists of bankrupt traders and of the uncollected accounts they were dealing with, as a warning to traders and possibly as an attempt to use “name and shame” tactics⁸⁸.

V

On the face of it, the activities of the two associations look relatively similar, providing coordination and support to help firms overcome the complexity of the environment. However, the different legislative regimes introduce an important variable that brings back into this narrative issues of community and social capital. The MJBOT was created at a time when there was no federal bankruptcy law, and the only law in place in Rhode Island and in other states was the ‘grab law’. Such a law provided individual creditors with the incentive to move fast and reach an agreement with the debtor to get hold of some of the assets as quickly as possible, regardless of a proper evaluation of these and of the other creditors’ claims. In other words, the law created short term incentives against the development of long term cooperation, the aim of the MJBOT, as described in the following case⁸⁹. In 1886 a Chicago jobber named Gratz, with more debts than capital, absconded, selling his stock and accounts valued at \$30,000 to another jobber called Shakman for only \$9,000. The *MJ* reported on this case at length, considering Gratz’s conduct ‘rascally’, but Shakman’s ‘an outrage’. The MJBOT issued an edict, stating that its members would refuse to sell further goods to Shakman until he had come to Providence to explain his conduct and the mean time it would pay a pro rata assessment of its members’ claims for the

⁸⁸ *MJ*, vol. 2, no.5, p.202, 1886; *MJ*, vol. 18, nos. 12-13, p.195 and p.201, 1896.

⁸⁹ A theoretical discussion of how trade associations organise the collective action while dealing with capitalists unwillingness to accept associational discipline can be found in: Streeck, ‘Interest homogeneity and organising capacity: Two class logics of collective action?’.

purpose of prosecuting Gratz⁹⁰. Although the BoT could issue an edict, it had no formal powers to stop any of its members from dealing with a dishonest trader, and this happened, time and time again⁹¹. Despite this happening, we know that to some extent the MJBoT must have been successful in fostering collective behaviour, as it continued to exist: in 1886 the Providence Manufacturing Jewelers Board of Trade had 95 members. Nine year later this number had increased to 110 and during that time the Committee of Arrangements of the Board had collected \$173,840 for 1,477 claims put in by its members⁹². After the national bankruptcy law came into being there was less need for services of the local association in recovering debts, while screening became more important. In 1904 the Board had collected more than \$35,000 for 295 claims in bankruptcy cases and about 70% of this was at no expense to its members. The rest had been collected on behalf of non-members, for a small fee. During that year the Board of Trade had also replied to more than 3000 credit enquiries lodged during the year by its 73 members⁹³.

On the one hand, it is obvious that the MJBoT and the BJA continued to exist because they provided a useful service. However, their own narrative was that they were also a moral force⁹⁴. Read, for example the words of the MJBoT president, Dutee Wilcox in his 1905 annual address: 'Fortified by age, by a strong treasury, and by able management, the Board of Trade has decided to go out into the field and solicit membership...One hundred of the leading manufacturing firms of the East allied together, and acting together for the common object, would make a power

⁹⁰ *MJ*, vol.1, no.5, p.202 and 230, 1886

⁹¹ *MJ*, vol. 18, no.9, p. 140,; no.13, p. 201; no.18, p. 286, 1896

⁹² *MJ*, vol. 18, no.1, p.40-41, 1895

⁹³ *MJ*, vol.36, no.2, pp.48-49, 1905. These lower figures for the number of claims and amounts recovered also reflected the fact the 1904-1905 were booming years for the jewellers' business.

⁹⁴ For the sake of brevity the narrative has to leave the case of Birmingham and focus on Providence. However, see Carnevali, 'Crooks' and 'Malefactors' for BJA evidence that parallels that of the MJ

which the dishonest jobber would fear, and which the honest jobber would be glad to co-operate with⁹⁵. However, in order for the threat of morally-based economic sanctions to carry any substantial weight, the jewellers had to act collectively, but in an institutional environment that gave them an immediate incentive to behave individually (if not dishonestly). Enforcement and sanctions had to be credible. This sort of behaviour could mean expulsion from the trade association but this would not matter, unless the individual had something to lose. But what was there to lose?

In order to answer this question, let us return to the other artefact created by the jewellers, the NEMJA, of which the MJBoT was the operative arm. The NEMJA had been created in 1879, at a time when in Providence, and across the USA, businessmen were creating associations that represented specialised interest, such as the manufacturing chemists' association, wholesale grocers and milk dealers. These associations served to accentuate 'occupational consciousness'. Apart from the specific reasons why these associations were created, none neglected to promote the social life of their members, through banquets, picnics, baseball games, etc⁹⁶. The meeting of the manufacturing jewellers in October 1884, where the constitution and by-laws of the Board of Trade were voted was followed that evening by a concert in the hall of the NEMJA. At the time this body had 204 members and although it acted mostly as a social club, organising concerts, picnics and banquets, its role as a 'bringer together' of the members of the community of jewellers should not be underestimated. In the words of the journalist who reported on the concert in the pages of the MJ: 'the steps taken by the association to encourage social gatherings and

⁹⁵ *MJ*, vol.36, no. 3, pp.65-66, 1905.

⁹⁶ Gilkeson, *Middle-Class Providence, 1820-1940*, p.104; Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, pp.112-123

furnish an opportunity to members to meet outside the routine of business duties and to become acquainted with one other's families cannot be too highly praised'⁹⁷.

It was through these events that the jewellers found the space and opportunity to 'become better acquainted'⁹⁸. Social networking mattered to these men (and their families). We can interpret concerts, banquets, picnics and clambakes as just the leisurely pursuits of an aspiring middle class or we can see in them as having a deeper meaning. We can see these activities as deeply symbolic, as meant to create a sense of occupational identity that would forge ties between individuals. These ties were meant to embed its members in a mesh of social relations that would generate the moral pressure to act collectively. However, to avoid the danger of an oversocialised (or even tautological) explanation, we need to establish how the members of this community understood its moral code. In doing this we are helped by the trade journal. The pages of the *MJ* were the public forum where these norms could be explained and behaviour decoded: the actions of the defaulting Gratz were 'rascally', but Shakman's behaviour, who had grabbed Gratz's assets depressing their value and thus damaging everybody, was 'an outrage' and placed him beyond the pale.

By looking at the NEMJA and its activities in this way we can move away from a functionalist interpretation of cooperation that reduces it to coordination, and see it instead as the jewellers themselves understood it, as a moral force. The sources show us how the jewellers perceived their collective endeavour and their Association as much more than just a social club, but instead as creating social capital: 'To the casual observer, these annual banquets may mean little beyond good fellowship. But there is a much deeper significance in the coming together of these manufacturers and their friends around the banquet table...The thinking man realizes that this

⁹⁷ *MJ*, vol.1, no. 2, 55, 1884.

⁹⁸ *MJ*, vol.1, no.1, p.17, 1884

[association] is a great and living force, potent for good and capable of exerting a vast influence and thus working for the happiness of thousands of people....This association stands for honourable business dealings...It is a vital force for good government...and its individual members are active and important in state and municipal government'⁹⁹. This social capital was put to use and the Association campaigned the State of Rhode Island and the Federal State on issues such as the stamping of silver, bankruptcy and hallmarking. It does not matter whether in they lobbying they were successful or not. Their collective action, made visible through the pages of the *MJ*, meant that the jewellers participated in the broader debate over issues of quality, standards and the relationship between businesses and the State.

VI

There is much in the pages of the *MJ* that is self-celebratory and certainly the rhetoric used was also meant to allure existing and potential new members. It is important to remember that the rhetoric also hid issues of exclusion and power, pitting employers against workers and the new manufacturing classes against the old mercantile ones, who had founded the city and controlled the State's government¹⁰⁰. This paper cannot develop these themes any further, but they should not be forgotten, as they form an essential part of the history of voluntary associations, such as these trade associations.

In both towns these manufacturers, owners of small and medium sized concerns, understood that competition could be excessive and harmful and chose to cooperate to temper its worse effects. In both towns this had not been the first attempt to create a trade association, but these earlier attempts had failed, as not enough members could be found. The almost simultaneous creation of these two organisations

⁹⁹ *MJ*, vol.36, no.11, p.259, 1905

¹⁰⁰ Gilkeson, *Middle Class Providence*

suggests that this act must have been deeply influenced by a specific contingency, and that can be easily identified in the depression that had hit the jewellery trade (and trade world wide). However, the establishment of these associations should also be placed in a broader context.

In the USA in the 1880s these organisations represented ‘the indispensable declaration of independence’ of local communities who were trying to generate and protect a sense of belonging among its members. This process led men who felt they had a special skill/knowledge to create local (and national) organisations to establish their own ‘class’, their own community, to forge links with others like them. This was part of the process that gave rise to a new middle class in the 1890s, groups of professionals in medicine, law, administration, economics, social work, but also business, labour and agriculture. These groups developed a consciousness of their skills and functions. They demonstrated this ‘by a proud identification with their category, by a determination to improve the procedures of a particular business, by an eagerness to join others like themselves in a craft union, professional organisation or trade association’¹⁰¹. These businessmen associated also to have a political voice not just to lobby for their own specific interests but also to influence the process of reform of the Federal government¹⁰². Belonging to an association gave individuals a legitimacy and a status that they might not otherwise have had. Although the historiography on middle class formation in England neglects trade associations, the expansion of these associations, as of professional ones, from the second half of the nineteenth century should be understood also as a process of status acquisition¹⁰³, and

¹⁰¹ Wiebe, *The search for order*, p.112 and *Businessmen and reform*

¹⁰² Skrownek, *Building a New American State*.

¹⁰³ The role played by associations in the process of class formation has been analysed for workers, shopkeepers and for the members of the professions, but not for manufacturers. See, for example: Perkin, *The rise of professional society*; Crossick, ‘The petite bourgeoisie in nineteenth century Britain:

placed in the broader context of the development in Europe and the USA of a public sphere where associations challenged established institutions. It is too easy to pigeonhole, and dismiss, trade associations as simply concerned with the defence of ‘petty’ economic interests, those of a small minority (owners) against those of a larger group (workers)¹⁰⁴. Instead they should be seen as places where civic discussion between state and individual was developed and businessmen found their place in the public sphere¹⁰⁵.

The comparison of these two communities shows that understanding context and contingency is important as ‘the scope of rational action is situational rather than universal’¹⁰⁶. These two communities established collective governance structures as a reflexive process based on the assessment of background conditions, rather than just as a response to the abstract problem of profit maximisation¹⁰⁷. In this perspective, what matters about the institutions created by the jewellers is both the context in which they came into being and the larger moral order that they codified and expressed¹⁰⁸. The sources show us how the jewellers wished to organise competition and control transaction hazards; the conscious establishment of ‘rules of the game’ was functional to the achievement of specific economic goals, but they also expressed what these businessmen thought of as ‘right’ and ‘wrong’¹⁰⁹. Moreover, these goals

the urban and liberal case’; Hosgood, ‘A “Brave and Daring Folk”? Shop keepers and trade association life in Victorian and Edwardian England’; Thompson, *The making of the English working class*; With specific reference to Birmingham’s working class associations see Behagg, ‘Custom, class and change. Behagg is also the author on an interesting review article on class relations in early nineteenth century Birmingham that shows how the structural-functionalist approaches have focused on conflict (or in Birmingham’s case the supposed absence of conflict) between employers and employees and their associations: ‘Myths of cohesion’.

¹⁰⁴ And for some reason they do not figure prominently in the literature on social capital either. See for example: Gamm, Putnam, ‘The growth of voluntary associations in America 1840-1900’.

¹⁰⁵ Habermas, *The structural transformation of the public sphere*; Ryan, ‘Civil Society as Democratic Practice: North American Cities during the Nineteenth Century’, p.563

¹⁰⁶ Lipartito, Sicilia, p.11

¹⁰⁷ Berk and Schneiberg, ‘Varieties in Capitalism; Varieties of Association’

¹⁰⁸ Lipartito, Sicilia, p.17

¹⁰⁹ In economic terms, being ‘good’ was expressed as being an ‘A1 man’, somebody with a reputation for paying promptly, or even paying in cash, rather than taking goods on credit. *MJ*, vol.3, p.398, 1887.

would have been unobtainable without credible enforcement and sanctions but these could not exist without embedding these individuals within a network of social norms. At the end of the nineteenth century the activities of these associations spanned the economic and social spheres, linking them together and creating the social capital that nourished them, fostering social connections and economic cooperation.

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