

## Chapter 2

# Reading Renaissance Merchants' Handbooks: Confronting Professional Ethics and Social Identity

Jaume Aurell

Historians have often raised questions about the nature of work and its close link to social phenomena. Some historians have in fact assumed that work is the inescapable starting point of all social inquiry.<sup>1</sup> Work has been regarded as a cultural activity in its anthropological dimension, and as a social construct in its collective dimension.<sup>2</sup> Both dimensions grant it the privilege of being a core aspect of historical evolution. Every evolved society possesses an ideology of work, in the sense of a social doctrine deployed to serve special interests.<sup>3</sup> The division of tasks, from the three feudal orders to industrial bipolar societies, is the result of such ideology.<sup>4</sup> Changes in the perception of work are important for history, as they represent social mutations.<sup>5</sup> The causal relationship between these two spheres, the social and the professional, is, nevertheless, harder to prove.

In the current historiographic panorama, concepts such as 'production', 'social class' or 'output' have made way for other concepts more akin to the tenets of the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert L. Heilbroner, *The Act of Work* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1985), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Joyce, 'The Historical Meanings of Work: An Introduction', in Patrick Joyce (ed.), *The Historical Meanings of Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 1–30.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Anthony, *The Ideology of Work* (London: Tavistock, 1977), and Clive Jenkins and Barrie Sherman, *The Collapse of Work* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979); Jaume Aurell, 'La mutación de los valores profesionales', in Montserrat Herrero (ed.), *Sociedad del Trabajo y Sociedad del Conocimiento en la Era de la Globalización* (Madrid: Pearson, 2003), pp. 83–100.

<sup>4</sup> See the classic work by Adriano Tilgher, *Work: What It Has Meant to Men through the Ages* (New York: Arno Press, 1977, 1st edn 1930). On the three feudal orders, see Georges Duby, *Les trois ordres ou l'imaginaire du féodalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> Larry Blackwood, 'Social Change and Commitment to the Work Ethic', in Robert Wuthnow (ed.), *The Religious Dimension: New Directions in Quantitative Research* (New York: Academic Press, 1979).

new cultural history.<sup>6</sup> The topics which have attracted greater interest in recent years are the representations of work, perceptions of labour, issues of professional identity and the morals of work.<sup>7</sup> If we consider the answers given in the last two centuries to questions relating to the organizing principles of the dynamics of social structures, we can safely conclude that labour has been ascribed a key position in sociological theorization.<sup>8</sup> Sociology, anthropology and linguistics have become the social sciences of reference for a history of the past, to the detriment of economics or statistics.<sup>9</sup> In this epistemological context, the idea of *work in general* relating to an integrating consideration of the concept of *culture* has surfaced forcefully. In the 1980s, the American historian Michael Kammen suggested adopting a notion of culture along more anthropological lines, which would serve as the basis to reintegrate diverse historical approaches.<sup>10</sup>

In this manner, a deterministic and simplistic view of work is overcome, a view inherited from an anachronistic and often erroneous interpretation of the great works of the British Marxist School. Specifically, for example, Edward P. Thompson's book *The Making of the English Working Class*, published in 1963, represented a unique moment in Western historiography. But Thompson has been interpreted basically from an economicist angle, although he himself did not hesitate to state that nothing frustrated him more than a history devoid of culture.<sup>11</sup> Currently, economicist explanations of work and social identities are

<sup>6</sup> The identification of the 'history of work' with the 'history of the working class' is being clearly questioned today, but it has been hegemonic in all studies on labour for many years: Lenard R. Berlanstein (ed.), *Rethinking Labor History: Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Steven L. Kaplan and Cynthia J. Koepp, 'Introduction', in Steven L. Kaplan and Cynthia J. Koepp (eds), *Work in France: Representations, Meaning, Organization and Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> Claus Offe, 'Work: The Key Sociological Category?', in *Disorganized Capitalism. Contemporary Transformations of Work and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), p. 129.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, in the case of anthropological studies of work: Sandra Wallman (ed.), *Social Anthropology of Work* (London: Academic Press, 1979); Herbert Applebaum, *The Concept of Work: Ancient, Medieval and Modern* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992); from the sociological angle: Keith Grint, *The Sociology of Work. An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Kammen, 'Extending the Reach of American Cultural History', *American Studies*, 29 (1984): 19-42.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, 'In Memoriam: E.P. Thompson', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 46 (1994): 2-6; R. Rosaldo, 'Celebrating Thompson's Heroes: Social Analysis in History and Anthropology', in Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland (eds), *E.P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990), pp. 50-77, and James Amelang, 'Las culturas del trabajo', in Santiago Castillo (ed.), *El trabajo a través de la historia* (Madrid: Asociación de Historia Social, 1996), pp. 158-9.

totally insufficient from the epistemological point of view.<sup>12</sup>

Work is no longer seen as the simple result of a series of links established at the various phases of production, but as a cultural category of the first magnitude.<sup>13</sup> The division of labour is the result of the social hierarchy, and not its cause. This aphorism alerts us to the rich possibilities of anthropological approaches, which brings us closer to anthropologists such as Marshall Sahlins, Maurice Godelier and Clifford Geertz.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the studies of the language of work, inspired by the *linguistic turn*, have contributed to a more cultural, rather than economic, vision of work, and have rescued the history of labour from its excessive methodological polarization.<sup>15</sup> The making of corporate languages reflects with extraordinary precision the mutations in the perceptions of labour, as shown by William Sewell in his pioneering work.<sup>16</sup> The development of a specific profession may condition a specific reading of the world, as the works by Carlo Ginzburg on the reading of the miller Menocchio, or by James Amelang on the artisan writer, have made evident.<sup>17</sup>

The aim of this chapter is to show by means both of this theoretical perspective and of a specific documentation that a close relationship exists between perceptions of labour, social identity and the spiritual orientation of existence.<sup>18</sup> The attempt to bring together the notions of labour, society and spirituality is not original. Max Weber, for example, published his pioneering work on the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism a century ago, between 1904 and 1905.<sup>19</sup> From then on, commenting on and developing from Weber's theses are among the most common practices of historiography and Western sociology.

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<sup>12</sup> Lenard R. Berlanstein, 'Working with Language: The Linguistic Turn in French Labor History', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 33 (1991): 426–40.

<sup>13</sup> Maurice Godelier, 'Work and Its Representations: A Research Proposal', *History Workshop Journal*, 10 (1980).

<sup>14</sup> Joyce, 'The Historical Meanings', p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Amelang, 'Las culturas del trabajo', p. 149.

<sup>16</sup> William H. Sewell Jr, *Work and Revolution in France. The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). Sewell tried an audacious combination of various methodologies, like 'the new social history, intellectual history, cultural anthropology and certain strains of Marxism' (p. 6), referring in part to the postulates of Clifford Geertz.

<sup>17</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: the Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1980); James S. Amelang, *The Flight of Icarus. Artisan Autobiography in Early Modern Europe* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> To which we could also add, in a more generic way, a shared cultural identity: James R. Farr, *Hands of Honor: Artisans and their World in Dijon, 1550–1650* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

<sup>19</sup> I have used the English edition: Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner, 1958), which contains a meaty introduction by Richard H. Tawney.

Weber's starting point was the idea that economic practices are, to a great extent, conditioned by the spiritual environment in which they develop. Consequently, he refused to acknowledge the existence of the idea of a capitalist work ethic before Calvinism and Puritanism. Weber started off with the concept of rationalization, so specific to the Western world, to elucidate the creation and consolidation of this phenomenon as characteristic of capitalism. But capitalism is more than an economic system, as it enters into the world of convictions, of values. Capitalism was made possible because of the introduction in Europe of a new morality of work, such as the Protestant ethic. As opposed to what some commentators have affirmed, Weber does not approach the problem in a reductionist way. He declares explicitly in his preface that what interests him is the study of the type of causal relationship that occurs between capitalism and the development of certain religious beliefs and ethical convictions. What he attempts to show, in fact, are the connections between modern economic ethics and the rational ethics of ascetic Protestantism.

The enormous repercussions of Weber's ideas show the extent to which it is possible to speak of a relationship involving work, economics, society and religion. The German sociologist highlights the early modern period, in which he located the birth of capitalist ethics. Yet, capitalism has a number of precedents, to be found in the commercial environment of the republics in the north of Italy and in some cities of the northern Mediterranean coast. The culture of these commercial centres was based on a secular Christian tradition. Nothing could therefore anticipate the immediate advent of Protestantism as a religious persuasion and of capitalism as a conception of labour. Nevertheless, these pre-Protestant societies created some economic spheres of enormous vitality.

In the field of religious convictions, the differences between Protestantism and Catholicism are evident. But in the field of the perceptions of labour, are there so many differences between the practices of Renaissance Mediterranean cities and the nascent capitalism of the cities of northern Europe? And if we proceed from the fact that these various perceptions of labour are indeed different, to what extent are these differences caused exclusively by specific religious convictions? I am well aware that in order to give an answer to both questions I would need to embark on a study beyond the limits of this chapter. But I will propose a number of hypotheses and thoughts based on mercantile documentation of the Renaissance period, which can be completed later.<sup>20</sup>

In this case, my theories are based on specific documentary sources and a methodological framework which offers me the tools for their interpretation. The sources used are of three types: first, the merchant handbooks which spread along the Mediterranean coast during the Renaissance; second, evidence from notarial

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<sup>20</sup> Some historians had in fact already suggested this issue, though in other times. Peter Burke tackled it indirectly in his suggestive work of comparative history about Venice and Amsterdam in the seventeenth century (Peter Burke, *Venice and Amsterdam. A Study of Seventeenth-Century Elites* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

documentation, especially inventories, testaments and marriage contracts from Mediterranean merchants of the time; and third, the image that society had of merchants, through the writings of some authorized witnesses of the time. The methodological referents, in their turn, constitute a triple front: first, discourse about the concept of labour and its historical projection, from Max Weber to Patrick Joyce; second, the abundant works on late-medieval and Renaissance merchant culture, from Henri Pirenne and Armando Sapori to Christian Bec;<sup>21</sup> and third, the application of the tenets of the new social history of language, which provide an excellent instrument for the analysis of a society through its forms.

### The Making of a Mercantile Professional Ethics

The popularization of handbooks which summarized the basic knowledge that all merchants should have took place along the northern Mediterranean coast from the fourteenth century onwards.<sup>22</sup> These merchant handbooks amounted to more or less utopian ideological constructions which, apart from the collection of technical materials, established the moral bases for merchant activity. The information contained in these handbooks ranged from practical advice to more spiritual issues: from the good manners which all merchants should practise, to the more technical aspects they should be acquainted with. These compilations had an enormous influence on mercantile Europe, such that during the seventeenth century one could still find treatises based on the first handbooks produced three centuries earlier.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, their dissemination was the result of the profound transformation in professional values which took place throughout the Renaissance Mediterranean under the influence of humanistic philosophy and new possibilities, such as a life of opulence or the hope of fame.<sup>24</sup> The development of these treatises responded to both social and linguistic motivations. At the end of the Middle Ages, merchants possessed a certain social status. Consciousness of this status led them to develop a specific moral discourse, which was then reflected in the handbooks. But at the same time these handbooks imply a linguistic formulation of mercantile ethics, which is the best symptom of its consolidation.

<sup>21</sup> Henri Pirenne, 'L'instruction des marchands au moyen age', *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, I (1929): 13–28 and A. Sapori, 'La cultura del mercante medievale italiano', *Studi di storia economica (secoli XIII, XIV, XV)* (Florence: Sansoni, 1955), Vol. I, pp. 53–93; Christian Bec, *Les marchands écrivains, affaires et humanisme à Florence, 1375–1434* (Paris and La Haye: Mouton & Co., 1967).

<sup>22</sup> For a proper contextualization of this period, Peter Burke, *Culture and Society in Renaissance Italy, 1420–1540* (London: Batsford, 1972).

<sup>23</sup> As shown in the treatises by Antonio Spinola, *Scritti scelti*, ed. Carlo Bitossi (Genoa: Nuova Alfa, 1981), pp. 220–30.

<sup>24</sup> Amintore Fanfani, *Storia del lavoro in Italia. Dalla fine del secolo XV agli inizi del XVIII* (Milano: A. Giuffrè, 1959), p. 15.

Merchant handbooks have been traditionally considered a valuable source primarily of economic history, and not so much of cultural, moral or intellectual history. But the current historiographic panorama, with the hegemony of the 'new' new histories,<sup>25</sup> among which one could single out a new cultural history,<sup>26</sup> validates a careful reading of the moral and extra-economic proposals within these sources. Seven such handbooks have been published to date, six in Italian and one in Catalan.<sup>27</sup> Some others remain unpublished, like the suggestive Majorcan merchant handbook containing a long foreword with a description of the virtues that should govern the life of any good merchant.<sup>28</sup>

Handbooks provide valuable information on a large number of technical aspects relating to commerce. But, at the same time, they tend to be preceded by a number of pieces of moral advice that the merchant should abide by in order to attain true effectiveness in his work. Some certainly wax eloquent on these considerations more than others. For Francesco Balducci Pegolotti, the merchant-compiler of one of the more important handbooks in Renaissance Italy, a few sentences are enough to summarize the moral qualities that all merchants should strive to achieve:

This is what a true and straight merchant should have in himself: he is advised always to use frankness, ample largesse suits him, and he should make sure that he always fulfils what he has promised; if at all possible, he should have a bearing of fair and honest virtue, in accordance with what is required of his needs or intentions. To buy little and to sell a lot, [...] to use the Church, and to give for God's sake; [...] To avoid usury and chance games, [...] To write down properly the reasons and not fail. Amen.<sup>29</sup>

A series of virtues is made to play in this moral introduction. Among these virtues, the more outstanding ones are the bearing of a merchant, his loyalty, and his

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<sup>25</sup> On the concept of what is *new* in historiography, see Ignacio Olábarri, 'New New History: A Longe Durée Structure', *History and Theory*, 34 (1995): 1–29.

<sup>26</sup> Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989).

<sup>27</sup> Some of the critical editions published to date are the following: the Florentine Handbook by Pegolotti, c. 1340: Francesco Balducci Pegolotti, *La pratica de la mercatura*, edited by Allen Evans (Cambridge, MA: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1936); the Datinian *Pratica* from Prato, c. 1380: Cesare Ciano (ed.), *La 'Pratica di mercatura' datiniana (secolo XIV)* (Milano: Giuffrè, 1964); the Catalan Merchant Handbook, c. 1385: Miguel Gual Camarena, *El primer manual hispánico de mercadería (siglo XIV)* (Barcelona: CSIC, 1981); and the Florentine by Chiarini, c. 1450: Giorgio di Lorenzo Chiarini, *El libro di mercatantie et usanze de' paesi*, ed. Franco Borlandi (Torino: S. Lattes & c., 1936).

<sup>28</sup> See some comments about this handbook, which is still not edited, in Francisco Sevillano Colom, 'Un Manual mallorquín de mercadería medieval', *Anuario de Estudios Medievales*, 9 (1974–79): 517–30.

<sup>29</sup> Pegolotti, *La pratica de la mercatura*, p. 20.

religiosity. At the same time, the merchant is advised to keep away from usury – a practice whose prohibition is based on regulations issuing from scripture – and games. This will all result in a greater effectiveness in his work.

Later, towards the end of the fourteenth century, the compiler of a Catalan merchant handbook offered more reflections about the moral behaviour demanded of all merchants. The book opens with an invocation of the name of God and the Virgin ('En nom de Déu he de madona Santa Maria'), as was the custom in heading all mercantile documents, from contracts to private documents.<sup>30</sup> The title of the treatise adopts the form of a list which specifies its decidedly technical content: *Libre de conexenses de spícies, e de drogues e de avissaments de pessos, canes e massures de diverses terres* ('Book of Knowledge of Spices, and Drugs, and of Comparison of Weights, Lengths and Measurements from Various Lands'). In this respect, this work resembles the rest of merchant handbooks.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, what makes it different from the rest is the space dedicated to commenting on the virtues that should be exercised by those willing to devote themselves to the mercantile art (*l'art de mercaderia*).

This expression itself reflects the cohesion existing in the mercantile profession. Not surprisingly, the mercantile profession is thought of as an 'art'. This word represented, in the context of the time, something more than the development of certain skills for making profits, and referred to a number of specific and demanding personal conditions on the part of whoever might want to 'learn it and make use of it'. These conditions are in fact those which the compiler of the Catalan handbook attempts to list. Another fourteenth-century handbook, the one written in Majorcan, bears the title: *Llibre que explica lo que a de ser un bon mercader* ('A Book Explaining What a Good Merchant Should Be Like'). The book is meant for 'those keen to have and make use of the merchant art' (*aquells qui l'art mercantivol volen tenir e uzar*).<sup>32</sup> Indeed, expressions such as *to learn, to have, to use, to practise*, which recur in the handbooks, define the various ways in which merchants exercise their art. In the Majorcan handbook there is a similar defence of the mercantile art, defined as the art preceding all arts.<sup>33</sup> The dignity of this art is so great that the compiler feels unworthy to carry out his task, and so he begs for the help of the Most High, the grace of Jesus Christ and the light of the Holy Spirit. In this way, he suggests, he will be able to make light for all those willing to 'use and practise' this mercantile art.

<sup>30</sup> In an analogous way, in the oldest copy of the *Manuale di mercatura di Saminiato de' Ricci*, the following can be read in the heading, after the opportune invocation of the name of God: 'Questo libro [...] sul quale scriverò modi e forme che si deono tenere in merchantie e chambì in ongni luogho dove fosse. Amen'. Antonia Borlandi (ed.), *Il manuale di mercatura di Saminiato de' Ricci* (Genova: Di Stefano, 1963), p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> See a useful comparison of the most popular fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian and Catalan merchant handbooks in Gual, *El primer manual*, pp. 45–6.

<sup>32</sup> Sevillano, 'Un manual mallorquín', pp. 518–19.

<sup>33</sup> Sevillano, 'Un manual mallorquín', p. 520.

Any merchant proud of his status must comply with a number of objective conditions, which can be summarized as being a physically fit person with no disabilities.<sup>34</sup> A merchant's work is tremendously demanding and requires good health, which allows him to react promptly when faced with the continual, unforeseen events that present themselves. Indeed, if the merchant has physical preparation he will be able to sustain better 'the huge works and dangers which so often those who dedicate themselves to this art must face'.<sup>35</sup> There is another reason for the emphasis on the merchant's health, as what characterizes a merchant is his capacity to travel all over the world to offer his merchandise. For this reason, the compiler pauses to describe the etymology of the word 'merchant', which he claims to be related to 'market', demonstrating that what characterizes the work of a merchant is his going from one market to the other, buying, selling, 'making market', and 'bestowing gain' on all that he purchases. The will for profit is evident and does not require special moral justifications to legitimize it. The merchant must know his task well and make sure that he is up to date about the price of merchandise, which can vary from region to region. But beyond this technical knowledge, the merchant must exercise a series of virtues, which this social group seems to want to appropriate for itself: good judgement ('seny'), discretion, wisdom, prudence – which, using two sentences of clearly scriptural reminiscences, makes him 'know and choose what is best' – and charity – which makes him love others in the same measure that he loves himself.<sup>36</sup>

Loyalty is another virtue merchants hold in high esteem. The development of loyalty, beyond the intrinsic value it may contain from a moral point of view, makes it possible to carry out the mercantile profession with the ease of not fearing deception by others. Thus, the moral code issuing from the language used in the handbooks becomes something necessary for the efficacy of a specific profession. The utilitarian tendency of the moral code of merchants is well reflected in the language used in the handbooks. This tendency fits in perfectly with the professional mentality which was being disseminated during that period across a good part of Europe, and it would doubtless have an influence on the spread of Protestant ideas from the sixteenth century onwards.

The importance of loyalty is of such magnitude that if he does not exercise it, the merchant must cease to use this name, as he would no longer be worthy of it and come to be called 'deceiver and false'.<sup>37</sup> The words, the language, once again serve to confirm the group's cohesion, as they identify the actual name of the group ('merchant') with a full development of Christian virtues which, in turn, identify with professional virtues. Moral virtue and professional virtue are, then, two sides of the same coin in the development of mercantile activity, and

<sup>34</sup> The Catalan word used by the compiler is *adreta*, whose meaning reminds one more of the physical than moral integrity.

<sup>35</sup> Gual, *El primer manual*, p. 57.

<sup>36</sup> Gual, *El primer manual*, p. 58.

<sup>37</sup> 'Ans seria dit enganador e falç' (Gual, *El primer manual*, p. 59).



this is how the handbooks articulate it. Mercantile 'being' and 'doing' blend, a process which evidently strengthens the psychological cohesion of the group and, above all, its legitimacy in the face of the rest of the community. The cohesive and legitimating strength of the language is taken here to its final consequences. In this context, professional ethics is not something juxtaposed or merely external, as the true efficacy of any mercantile work – and, concomitantly, its moral integrity – derive from it. As a result, the merchant may also lose his name if he has no faith in his heart or if there is no truth in his language.<sup>38</sup> Professional efficacy and moral integrity come together again, through the binding concourse of a right direction of business.

Diligence is another of the better-loved virtues for the development of mercantile activity. The handbooks turn to some proverbial sayings, like that one about not leaving for tomorrow what could be done today: 'so that what he could do today he shouldn't adjourn till tomorrow, and what he could do in the morning, he should not leave for the afternoon'.<sup>39</sup> Negligence thus implies foolishness and should therefore 'be avoided'. A lazy merchant does not prosper, makes no progress, earns no profit from his business, has no good reputation and can easily be deceived by tricksters. Another virtue valued by the merchant community is discretion. Faulty reasoning may result in losing friendships, just as verbal excess leads businessmen directly to ruin. The merchant thus needs to be temperate, as he can more easily be deceived by unfair competition after having eaten and drunk copiously. This leads the Majorcan compiler to sketch an audacious and original simile: gluttony is the pot where all vices are cooked.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, merchants should have the fear of the Lord, which will lead them to strive to know His doctrine, and to love, serve and honour Jesus Christ, their Saviour. This salvific aspect is the one most appreciated by the merchant, as Jesus Christ defends the merchant from evil spirits. The exhortation to know the life of Christ was certainly not an empty recommendation. According to a good number of extant inventories, copies of the Bible were found on merchants' tables, which proves that this book was not merely an aesthetic presence in the house, but was used by its owner.<sup>41</sup> The fulfilment of the Holy Commandments of the Law of God out of 'pure and real love' will attract the favour, the piety and the mercy of God. He will help merchants to come closer to, and to walk along, the path of virtue. Thus the merchant will reach that integrity which will help him to manage and truly govern any mercantile action, and he will see himself free from the disasters

<sup>38</sup> 'No és mercader ni deu aver nom de mercader si fe no à al cor, ne veritat en la lengua' (Gual, *El primer manual*, p. 59).

<sup>39</sup> 'Axí que so que porà vuy fer no s'o sper a damà, e ço que porà fer al matí no s'o sper al vespra' (Gual, *El primer manual*, p. 59).

<sup>40</sup> Sevillano, 'Un manual mallorquín', p. 521.

<sup>41</sup> Jaume Aurell, *Els mercaders catalans al Quatre-Cents* (Lleida: Pagès, 1996), pp. 180–89.

and perils that threaten man, especially merchants, and in the end attain final glory in Paradise.<sup>42</sup>

This whole moral panorama leads straight to the values divulged in Calvinist spheres of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, where professional progress was linked with moral progress and, ultimately, divine predestination. Merchant handbooks proposed, already in the late Middle Ages, that the development of moral virtue increased the chances of mercantile success. This idea transcended the sense of solidarity issuing from medieval guilds, which provided a moral milieu for their members.<sup>43</sup> The moral influence of medieval guilds was considerable, though its effectiveness had never based itself on the exhortation to seek perfection in the work itself, but rather in taking advantage of all the relationships which were generated around work.<sup>44</sup> Merchants' handbooks, on the contrary, stressed the importance of the link between professionalism and moral virtue, providing a more comprehensive vision of the connection between work and life.

### The Social and Professional Cohesion of Merchants

From the eleventh century onwards, most of the cities on the coastline of the northern Mediterranean began to develop what has been called a *notarial culture*, as notaries began to proliferate in Mediterranean cities as a result of an increase in commerce.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, in the fifteenth century, eight out of every 1,000 citizens in Florence were notaries.<sup>46</sup> A large portion of the demand for notarial documentation – above all, mercantile contracts, marriage contracts, testaments, and inventories – came from mercantile agents, who required an official certification of their businesses and exchanges. A notarial culture therefore extended across the whole Christian Mediterranean during the Middle Ages, reaching its climax in the Renaissance. Thus, the development of this notarial culture in the urban centres of the Medieval and Renaissance Mediterranean has favoured the task of historians, who can now rely on privileged witnesses to the aspirations, the values and the mentality of this period. And yet, a problem which the historian thinks of immediately is that of the reliability of documentation. Not in vain have sociolinguists unveiled the various meanings which written languages have given

<sup>42</sup> Sevillano, 'Un manual mallorquín', p. 520.

<sup>43</sup> Applebaum, *The Concept of Work*, p. 312.

<sup>44</sup> Anthony Black, *Guilds and Civil Society in European Political Thought from the Twelfth Century to the Present*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 27.

<sup>45</sup> Peter Burke, 'The Uses of Literacy in Early Modern Italy', in Peter Burke and Roy Porter (eds), *The Social History of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 23.

<sup>46</sup> Carlo M. Cipolla, 'The Professions', *Journal of European Economic History*, 2 (1973): 37–52.

the type of documents in which they are located.<sup>47</sup> It is what other researchers, in a more subtle way, have called the relationship between the text and the context, in this particular case, the material context.<sup>48</sup>

Notarial documentation confirms the tendency, evidenced in the handbooks, to reinforce the links existing among the members of the social group. Indeed, records of testaments and marriage contracts show, in spontaneous and practical ways, what the handbooks had expressed as an aspiration. The expression 'mercantile art', articulated in an exhortative mode in the handbooks, appears naturally across notarial documentation. Some merchants speak in their last wills of their pride at professing the 'mercantile art'. A Catalan merchant starts off his testament in 1384 expressing his pride at belonging to the group of merchants, using in fact an expression which had already appeared in the handbooks: 'In the name of Jesus Christ God Our Lord, Amen. I, Francesc Bardina, *professing the mercantile art*, and being of good health and sane judgement [...]'.<sup>49</sup>

Among the documentation preserved in the Barcelona Notarial Archive there is a book by the 'defenders of the mercantile art', eloquent proof that the expression 'mercantile art' did not wear out simply through its external appearance, but it had a true influence as a meaning.<sup>50</sup> In any case, it would seem evident that, despite these cohesive aspirations, in the groups of merchants there coexisted several varying degrees of wealth, social aspirations and political convictions. But what really bound them together was the development of a shared professional activity.

This sense of belonging to the 'mercantile art' also involved a series of customs practised at the time of choosing husbands for the daughters of the members of the group. For this reason, the Catalan merchant Ramon de Sant Jaume lays down in his testament that his daughter Joanieta should marry, 'as it befits her, someone who professes the mercantile art'.<sup>51</sup> As was customary, marriage strategies continue to be used as one of the most effective procedures to strengthen social links. During the final stages of the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, a number of revealing processes of horizontal mobility – changes of residence, dispersion of the different quarters of the city – as well as vertical mobility, were enacted through carefully planned marriage strategies. But what remains is the fact of developing the same profession, the same economic activity. And this is the reason why merchants feel

<sup>47</sup> Joshua A. Fishman, 'Who Speaks What Language to Whom and When', in John B. Pride and Janet Holmes (eds), *Sociolinguistics: Selected Readings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), ch. 1.

<sup>48</sup> Gabrielle M. Spiegel, 'History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages', *Speculum*, 65 (1990): 59–86.

<sup>49</sup> Archivo Histórico de Protocolos de Barcelona (AHPB), Pere Ullastrell, *Manual de testaments, 1382–1387*, f. 45v, Testament of 26 May 1384.

<sup>50</sup> AHPB, Guillem Donadeu, *Primo libro contractum venerabilium defensorum artis mercantilis civitatis Barchinone, 1402–1404*.

<sup>51</sup> AHPB, Pere Ullastrell, *Manual de testaments, 1382–1387*, f. 75r, Testament of 7 June 1385.

so proud about their 'title': *mercator*. The expressive force of this concept not only reinforced the identity of the social group, but also clearly established the cultural and symbolic culture of merchants with respect to the other urban groups: artisans, artists, patricians.

The consciousness of exercising the same profession and the pride in developing it further had a real influence on the convictions of merchants, as is shown in a number of notarial documents. At the time of writing his last will, the merchant becomes especially aware of the need to dispose wisely of the goods he has obtained and managed during his lifetime, so that they may not be found 'in a disorderly state' after his death, since God will ask for an account of their administration. This justifies Barcelona citizen Pere Salelles' need to write down his testament carefully, an obligation which no merchant should evade.<sup>52</sup> Other testaments by Italian and Spanish merchants confirm this idea.<sup>53</sup> All this directs the merchant to the Gospel parable of the talents, with which the merchants were well acquainted.<sup>54</sup>

The cohesion of a social group has other manifestations which historians can track down by means of a careful analysis of documentation. The statistical study of some of the clauses in testaments enables the location of merchants in an urban context. This makes it possible to monitor the physical concentration or dispersion of the members of the group, which amounts to a clear symptom of its cohesion (horizontal-geographical mobility).<sup>55</sup> An analysis of marriage contracts allows the study of marriage strategies and the aspirations of social ascent. If these 'upward rises' are the main ones taking place, they automatically lead to a crisis in the social model developed by the actual group (vertical-social mobility).<sup>56</sup> Finally, an analysis of the professional values of the group allows us to negotiate in more depth the internal cohesion of a specific class, which appears stronger or weaker depending on the upholding or the crisis of these common values in the

<sup>52</sup> AHPB, Francesc Barau, *Primus liber ultimarum voluntatum, 1416-1433*, f. 44r.

<sup>53</sup> An Italian merchant of the middle of the fifteenth century expresses this idea at the outset of his testament: 'Ego Jacobus, dictus Esquaigle de Tiffis, de Florencia, [...] idcirco nolens decedere intestatus dum racio regis mentem et vigor viget in membris corporeque, infirmitate non occupatus [...]' (Sapori, *Studi di storia*, p. 123).

<sup>54</sup> Matt. 25: 14-30. Further references to this parable can be found in the texts of the fifteenth-century Catalan book *Espill o llibre de les dones* by writer Jaume Roig, edited by Marina Gustà (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1978), p. 180 (Coral Cuadrada, 'Volèn instroyr e informar los mercaders, aquells qui d'aquest art de mercaderia volen ussar', *Revista d'Història Medieval*, 5 (1994): 112-13).

<sup>55</sup> Jaume Aurell, 'Aspetto urbano e gerarchizzazione sociale nella Barcellona del Quattrocento', *Medioevo. Saggi e Rassegne*, 22 (1998): 55-92.

<sup>56</sup> Jaume Aurell, 'Culture marchande et culture nobiliaire à Barcelone au XVe siècle', *Revue Historique*, 613 (2000): 33-53.

development of its own task.<sup>57</sup> Next to these symptoms, which are more traditional from a historiographic point of view, there is a current upsurge of interest among historians in the study of specific languages as creators and strengtheners of group cohesion.

### The Function of Mercantile Linguistic Codes

The social history of language is the result of a combination which has taken place since the 1970s, blending the late triumph of social history with the influx of the 'linguistic turn'. This history has already been applied to the analysis of medieval, Renaissance and modern societies, and has borne abundant proof of its maturity and usefulness for monographic studies.<sup>58</sup> We can also argue that the development of the social history of language connects with the tendency of the new cultural history to emphasize consumption rather than production; symbolic rather than material capital; and, in short, depends on the linguistic code rather than the actual content of that being transmitted. For the new cultural historian, the bourgeois has ceased to be identified with the commercial investor and becomes the person who has a piano in his living room.<sup>59</sup> The processes of social ascent are no longer quantified through the accumulation of material capital, which has led historians of culture to focus on the concept of symbolic capital.<sup>60</sup> Historians have found in linguistic codes some excellent symptoms of the development of a specific culture.

One of the most notable consequences of this evolution is that the concept of *social class* has fallen into disuse, replaced by other, more integrating formulae, normally supported by the generic terminology of *social group*.<sup>61</sup> The membership of an individual in a specific social group is now being assigned by the concepts of *identity*, *marker* or *code*, rather than by the acquisition of a specific purchasing level. The *identity* implies the awareness that each one has of belonging to a group of individuals, as opposed to another, and the will to define oneself as a member. The *marker* is the material specification of this identity, so that everyone, even those who are alien to the group, may openly understand its meaning. It is the

<sup>57</sup> Jaume Aurell, 'Merchants' Attitudes to Work in the Barcelona of the Later Middle Ages', *Journal of Medieval History*, 27 (2001): 197–218.

<sup>58</sup> As made manifest in some of the monographic works used in the construction of the current work, Burke, *The Social History*, pp. 1–20.

<sup>59</sup> Jean Pierre Chaline, 'Qu'est-ce qu'un bourgeois?', *L'Histoire*, 121 (April 1989): 38–45.

<sup>60</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979).

<sup>61</sup> Georges Duby himself, in a long interview originally published in 1980, abjured his tendency to refer to 'social classes' in his early works: Georges Duby, *Diálogo sobre la historia* (Madrid: Alianza, 1988), p. 109.

function, for instance, of heraldic shields in traditional societies and of lapel pins in contemporary societies.<sup>62</sup>

Nevertheless, the definition of *code*, complementary to that of *identity* and *marker*, is perhaps more interesting for the purposes of this chapter: the *code* consists of the signs which enable members of a group to recognize one another and to exclude others; the subtlety of these signs of recognition all too often slips the notice of the uninitiated. Traditionally, these codes have been identified with external markers, such as clothing and good manners. But it would seem evident that the development of a specific language, which may or may not achieve the category of a specific *jargon*, is one of the most solid manifestations of the *code*, while, at the same time, eliciting the greatest interest on the part of modern historiography. Interestingly, the definition of *jargon* given by Peter Burke is in itself symptomatic of the greater attention that historians of culture are giving to 'consumption' to the detriment of 'production': 'Jargon is as much in the ear of the listener as on the tongue of the speaker.'<sup>63</sup>

In the 1980s, some historians who inherited the tenets of the *linguistic turn* acknowledged the opportunity afforded by the study of language as a social institution, as an essential part of culture, as a manifestation of a specific sensibility.<sup>64</sup> Other historians, who inherited the most radical postmodernism of Hayden White or the deconstructionism of Jacques Derrida, came to ask themselves whether what was really important was the *way* of communicating, rather than *what* was being communicated: again, the primacy of what signifies (form) over what is being signified (content).<sup>65</sup> The very title of some of the methodological points of reference of these currents led to the pre-eminence of form over content, reaching the extreme of awarding the form a supposed content.<sup>66</sup> Language becomes an essential part of reality, a true social entity, as it ultimately instrumentalizes its users when it ceases to be a passive instrument and becomes an active and creative agent. Derrida dared to affirm that the language uses those who speak it, instead of the other way around. We are the servants of our metaphors before we become their masters.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>62</sup> I use here some ideas from the work by Martin Aurell, 'El triunfo tardío de la historia social', in Carmen Erro Gasca and Inigo Mugueta Moreno (eds), *Grupos sociales en la Historia de Navarra* (Pamplona: Eunat, 2002), pp. 3–18.

<sup>63</sup> Peter Burke, 'Introduction', in Peter Burke and Roy Porter (eds), *Languages and Jargons. Contributions to a Social History of Language* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 2.

<sup>64</sup> Burke, *The Social History*, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> Peter Burke, *Hablar y callar. Funciones sociales del lenguaje a través de la historia* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 1996), p. 30.

<sup>66</sup> As made manifest by the suggestive title of a collection of essays by Hayden V. White, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1989).

<sup>67</sup> Burke, *Hablar y callar*, p. 39.

Beyond the obvious blind alleys to which some of these thoughts are condemned, these epistemological concepts have undoubtedly favoured the priority of the analysis of language in the new cultural history, which now fills one of the spheres in the current historiographic context. This has also invited a re-examination of the documents through a less naive perspective than that used previously, due to our new awareness of the enormous weight of context in any historical text. Taking advantage of the maxim that 'the medium is the message', historians privilege the transcendence of linguistic codes.<sup>68</sup> The code, the variety, or the register used, forms a part of the message which the historian cannot overlook. The language, whether it be merely referring or being referred to, comes to the foreground.

These methodological considerations are necessary to legitimize the method of approaching some specific linguistic codes. Through the analysis of these linguistic codes, the historian is able to go deeper into the knowledge of the identity signs of a specific social group and, therefore, into the true framework of its cohesion. Towards the end of the fifteenth century, the compiler of a Majorcan merchant handbook devotes a chapter to develop a curious yet expressive theory about the actual perfection of the 'name' merchant. The perfection of this 'art' – the *content* – is thus confirmed by the ternary perfection of its 'name' – the *form*. The theory is based on the Latin principle *numerus ternarius numerus perfectus*, focusing on the three syllables of the word (*mer-ca-tor*), on the three letters of the first syllable (*m-e-r*), and on the three strokes of the first letter (*m*). All of them are a reflection of the ternary essence in the Holy Trinity of God.<sup>69</sup>

Medieval and Renaissance merchants used a specific mercantile language which reinforced the links among group members and contributed to distinguishing them from other social and professional groups. During the Middle Ages, merchants configured themselves as a group whose cohesion rested on two pillars: the development of a profession and the sense of belonging to the same social category. Within this socio-professional group, enjoying a certain purchasing level was less important than developing a profession: commerce. This is, more or less, what a Catalan merchant handbook of the fourteenth century noted:

He is a merchant who comes and goes over different parts of the world, selling different goods, some of which may be of his own production. The name merchant comes from market, or, in other words, from those who go around fairs and marketplaces. He may buy or sell or simply market that which he has bought. By market we understand selling and buying and generating profits for his goods while being sold by others, or making profits by buying goods from others.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 7 ff.

<sup>69</sup> Sevillano, 'Un manual mallorquín', p. 520.

<sup>70</sup> Gual, *El primer manual*, p. 58.

Documentation in this sense is conclusive. The merchant always hastens to make clear his membership in his socio-professional group by writing *mercator* after his name, a fact amply documented in the abundant protocols of medieval notarial archives of Barcelona or Genoa. The same could be said of the rest of the social groups in the Europe of the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries. Nevertheless, the fact that the social category of merchants is determined by the development of a specific professional activity considerably increases the links among the group members. At the same time, relationships, solidarity and clientele that establish themselves among its components are generated and consolidated, a framework which some nowadays like to call centres of sociability.<sup>71</sup>

### Conclusion: Social Identity and Perceptions of Labour

At the end of the Middle Ages, the merchant had arrived at a consideration and a social prestige a far cry from the paradigm of the 'dusty footed' half-bandit and half-businessman portrayed in Romantic historiography and popularized by Henri Pirenne at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>72</sup> This increased his pride in his sense of belonging to a group and immunized him to potential desertions. It is true that the aspiration of some of its members to social rise is an element contrary to this cohesive trend. But recent research places emphasis on the pride of being a merchant, departing from the fatalist formula of Fernand Braudel about 'the defection of the bourgeoisie', which would find itself attracted towards the courtly way of life. The French and English bourgeoisie of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries always felt attracted towards the courtly models and codes, though this does not imply that its aspiration was to become part of the nobility.<sup>73</sup>

The misgivings stirred up by the image of the usurer merchant diminished throughout the Middle Ages to the extent to which he devoted himself to his specific profession. At the time of the Renaissance nobody remembered the hierarchy of professions established by Thomas Aquinas, based on a philosophical exploration of their inherent value to society. Significantly, merchants and shopkeepers were rated not only lower than farmers and peasants, but also lower than artisans. The priesthood and other sacred callings were ranked highest. Aquinas developed an

<sup>71</sup> Following the theses put forth fundamentally by Maurice Agulhon, *Le cercle dans la France Bourgeoise 1810-1848. Etude d'une mutation de sociabilité* (Paris: A. Colin, 1977).

<sup>72</sup> Henri Pirenne, *Histoire économique et sociale du moyen âge* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1963).

<sup>73</sup> Boris Bove, 'Dominer la ville. Prévôts des marchands et échevins parisiens (1260-1350)', unpublished doctoral thesis, read on 14 December 2000 at the University of Poitiers and, to compare with early modern England, the interesting study of Laura Caroline Stevenson, *Praise and Paradox. Merchants and Craftsmen in Elizabethan Popular Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).



argument to demonstrate how this ordering both was naturally just and reflected divine will.<sup>74</sup> These theses were more of a reflection of an aspiration than a truth. They had been articulated at a time when commercial life in the north of Europe and along the Mediterranean coastline was being revived and the consolidation of cities was undermining the feudal regime from within.

As a chronicler of fourteenth-century Florence put it, 'he who is not a merchant, and has not travelled around the world, and seen the odd nations of the peoples and returned home with goods, must be considered to be no one'.<sup>75</sup>

During that same time, the Catalan treatise writer Francesc Eiximenis expounded on this truth in a more radical way: merchants

constitute the soul of the republic; [...] they are the life of the land in which they live; they constitute the treasure of the republic; without merchants, communities fall, princes become tyrants, the youth go astray, the poor can only cry; [...] they are favoured by God, both in their lifetime and after their death by their enormous contribution to the republic; God our Lord has special mercy on them due to the great labours they undertake both on land and at sea, and to the great losses they often incur; the whole of the republic ought to offer constant and special prayers on behalf of merchants.<sup>76</sup>

One of the main consequences of the cohesion, and of the group's internal and external prestige, was the creation of an effective and specific language, which established boundaries with regard to the other social and professional groups. One of Eiximenis' more frequently quoted lines refers to the priority and effectiveness of the work of merchants as opposed to aristocracy, which renders them more capable of almsgiving, as they do not live exclusively on their private income: 'knights and citizens living off their patrimony care not for good alms'.<sup>77</sup> All the documentation shows that merchants were indeed very prone to almsgiving (the witness given by testaments is unequivocal in this sense); nevertheless, it is not very clear (the testimony now comes from the compilation of the income titles which appear in the inventories) that it should be possible to distinguish merchants from noblemen or citizens through the fact of not living on their income, at least towards the end of the Middle Ages.

At the same time, the issue which arises from the language used in merchant handbooks is the nature of the social identity of Renaissance merchants. Indeed,

<sup>74</sup> Anthony, *The Ideology of Work*, p. 27 ff.

<sup>75</sup> 'Chi non è mercatante, e abbia cerco il mondo, e veduto le strane nazioni delle genti e tornato alla patria con avere, non è riputato da niente' (Gregorio Dati, *Istoria di Firenze* (Florence: Luigi Pratesi, 1735), p. 50).

<sup>76</sup> Francesc Eiximenis, *Regiment de la cosa pública*, ed. Daniel de Molins de Rei (Barcelona: Imprempta Varias, 1927), pp. 168-9.

<sup>77</sup> 'Cavallers ne ciutadans que viuen de rendes no curen de gran almoines; solament mercaders són grans almoiners' (Eiximenis, *Regiment*, p. 168).

the problem of identity is complex, especially when this identity is harnessed for political ends. Historians are constantly concerned about fixing past identities through the verification of internal links revealing a sense of belonging. Concerning social groups in traditional societies, establishing *ad extra* identities would appear a simpler task than doing it through *ad intra* identities. It is easier for a specific social group to become well identified from outside, but things get more difficult when we attempt to identify the specific rules which the actual members lay down as their own identity codes.

The study of the social dimension of language palliates in part this methodological problem. The linguistic codes evidenced in merchant handbooks are excellent indicators of the identity values of the social group. The concepts found in the handbooks established the rules which enabled a member to develop to the utmost the qualities required of him to consolidate his prestige within the group. The rigid moral formulae appearing in the handbooks construct cultural frontiers which have the virtue of differentiating merchants from the remaining social groups. In this way, cultural frontiers fuse with symbolic ones, which would in their turn carry an enormous weight during the Middle Ages because of the evolution from the processes of social flexibility of the later Middle Ages to the rigid social patterns of the modern age.<sup>78</sup> Symbolic capital has more weight, once again, than material capital. It is in this context that the *matriculations* of merchants and honourable citizens occur, in an attempt by the new group members to seek entry 'from below'.<sup>79</sup>

Here, one could also take up the debate as to whether cultural identities are 'inventions' or whether they truly respond to reality. This debate arises especially when dealing with the type of identities responsible for the creation of states or nations.<sup>80</sup> In the case of social identities, however, and specifically in the creation of the identity codes of the merchant group, do these handbooks have a truly normative efficacy, or are they simply creations to consolidate a specific social location? It would seem that, finally, despite the attempts by handbooks to build definitive and clear cultural frontiers, these identities became fluid and fragile during the fifteenth century. Later, however, as from the sixteenth century, they regained their strength and became non-negotiable once again.<sup>81</sup>

An important question which is raised, nevertheless, is that of the referentiality of language. Can we trust a clearly pre-capitalist language issuing from the handbooks, from the notarial books and from contemporary witnesses? Do they

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<sup>78</sup> Burke, 'Lengua e identidad en la Italia moderna temprana', in *Hablar y callar*, pp. 88–9.

<sup>79</sup> As shown in James Amelang, *Honored Citizens of Barcelona: Patrician Culture and Class Relations, 1490–1714* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

<sup>80</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>81</sup> Lawrence Rosen, *Bargaining for Reality: The Construction of Social Relations in a Muslim Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

reflect realities, or merely aspirations? Can we trust the words contained therein, or are they simply theoretical statements which do not correspond to reality? The language used by the sources can, indeed, be deceptive and distort a specific historical reality. Nevertheless, I would in this case prefer to be guided by common sense and set forth a hypothesis which would extend beyond the paralysing effects of certain radical experiments linked to philosophical deconstructionism.

In this regard, knowledge of the historical and linguistic contexts in which the texts have been articulated appears to be decisive.<sup>82</sup> The medium becomes the message. Handbooks were elaborated to be used selectively, but they aspired to divulge the morals that all merchants should put into practice in the exercise of their profession. Thus, a fusion took place involving profession, social aspiration and moral convictions. This triple dimension is made manifest in the language of the documents. The expression 'mercantile art' or the moralizing language of the handbooks constitutes the best proof of the close relationship among social identity, the conception of labour and the professional ethics in the mercantile milieu of the medieval and Renaissance Mediterranean. The handbooks postulate a morality of the labour of merchants, which is to enable them to gain access to a way of life in agreement with their professional and ethical ideal. They state openly that the virtuous merchant's reward is not only of a spiritual nature, but also, here on earth, of a professional kind. The virtuous merchant is also the merchant who prospers in his worldly undertakings.

From this point of view, there is no doubt that handbooks and treatises are the forerunners of all the ideas that would be consolidated from the sixteenth century on in the rise of capitalism and the new concept of work deriving from the Protestant work ethic. At the same time, the aspiration to a specifically mercantile code of ethics is a very effective resource for the strengthening of the ties among the members of this social group, and, by extension, for consolidating its position in society.

The perception of work becomes, once again, a basic element of social cohesion. Language is the essential channel to divulge values and becomes the ideal vehicle of social coding. The creation of a specific corporate language is accurately reflected in the notarial documents and the merchant handbooks. Through this language, Mediterranean merchants generated a corporate sense of their profession, based on a moral sense of their work and their existence. Theirs was, however, a religious sense of life which did not achieve the religious sense of profession typical of Protestantism, which, through Calvinism, identified itself significantly with the concept of 'vocation'.

The significance of work that Protestant doctrine created was related to outlooks about the final import of actions more than to a specific organizational structure. In this sense, the perceptions of work in the Mediterranean cities were more pre-modern than modern. When Weber examined the enterprises of

<sup>82</sup> Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *The Past as Text. Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 'Introduction'.

Renaissance Italy, he concluded that ascetic Protestantism was not a *necessary* precondition for the development of capitalist *forms* of business organization, but it was a prior condition for a new general conception of work.<sup>83</sup> Before the Reformation, Mediterranean merchants established the same capitalist business associations and procedures as did their successors to the north. Nevertheless, the advent of the new Protestant asceticism and perceptions of work would give a novel appreciation of the ultimate significance of the professional actions, but not a different institutional or organizational structure.<sup>84</sup> The changes in the conceptions of work held by pre-modern Mediterranean merchants are just related to the sphere of *economic* culture; those of the modern cities of the North to the more general sphere of *cultural* culture.<sup>85</sup>

The pre-modern professional mentality rests on the idea of work as an obstacle to religious life. Instead, the modern professional mentality rests on work as an end in itself. The spirit of capitalism is the rational conduct of life based on the idea of vocation.<sup>86</sup> For pre-moderns, work is not an end in itself, it is not autonomous, its laws are not absolute, as it is ordained and subject to the common good. For moderns, it becomes an end in itself, and carries specific consequences in its social dimension. The profession is no longer medieval *officium*, or ministry, or service, so as to become a platform for personal justification, also from an eschatological point of view.

The concept of a providential vocation represented in the choice of a profession, so typical of Protestantism, is not yet present in the Mediterranean merchant handbooks. Nevertheless, the creation of a language which closely relates morals and profession serves as a clear precedent of the vocational sense of labour generated with the appearance of capitalism. This shows that – as foreseen by Max Weber and proved by Werner Sombart – Protestantism is not the sufficient and singular cause of capitalism, whose birth, rather, results from converging historical factors. Weber never claimed that Protestant religious values *caused* capitalist growth. He set out to show that the worldview and values derived from Protestantism were favourable to the establishment and expansion of a dynamic modern capitalist economy.<sup>87</sup> There is no doubt that among those factors favourable to the establishment of capitalism was the creation of a specific morality of work by Renaissance Mediterranean merchants.

<sup>83</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 67.

<sup>84</sup> Richard Biernacki, *The Fabrication of Labor. Germany and Britain, 1640–1914* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), p. 32.

<sup>85</sup> This idea is a free adaptation from Edward P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters. The Origin of the Black Act* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), pp. 261 ff.

<sup>86</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 181.

<sup>87</sup> The myth of the simplistic and determinist Weber was fortunately revised some time ago: Michael Rose, *Re-working the Work Ethic* (London: Batsford Academic and Educational, 1985), p. 12.