

The Monopolistic Confraternities of Jean Bodin

Jean Bodin (1530-96) is best known to historians of economic thought for his demonstration in *Response au paradoxe de M. de Malestroit*¹ that inflation in 15th-16th century France was the result not only of the currency debasement which de Malestroit had identified, but also of the increased amount of gold and silver that went into circulation in Europe after the conquest of South America. He then went on to argue that a subsidiary cause of rising prices was monopolistic collusion:

I shall pass over another cause of dearness because it is not so important in the case before us, namely the monopolies of merchants, artisans and wage-earners, when they get together to raise the price of goods or to make their days and products dearer. And because such gatherings are usually covered by the cloak of religion, Chancellor Poyet wisely advised that we should remove and cut out the confraternities, which has since been confirmed at the request of the Estates at Orleans, so that there is no lack of good laws. (*Response*, 16)

The laws were not put into effect, however, and Bodin later suggested that establishing public granaries in each town would not only keep prices down, it would also: "cut out the monop-

¹Jean Bodin. *La Response de Maistre Jean Bodin Advocat en la Cour au paradoxe de monsieur de Malestroit, touchant l'encherissement de toutes choses, & le moyen d'y remedier* (Paris: Martin le Jeune, 1568). Page references throughout the present paper are to the facsimile of the above text, edited by Henri Hauser and published in 1932 as *La Vie Chère au XVI^e Siècle: La Response de Jean Bodin* (Paris: Armand Colin).

olies of merchants who get hold of all the corn, and often buy it before it is ripe, to raise its price when they wish" (*Response*, 35).

It seems clear that Bodin's interest here is in economic *confrairies*, but the reference to their operation under the cloak of religion suggests some overlap with their more strictly religious counterparts. This is supported by the 1561 ordinance requested by the Third Estate at Orleans, Article 10 of which required that the confraternities' revenues be used to provide for divine worship, alms and schools (*service divin, aumôynes, écoles*; *Response*, app. p. 90).

Some of the reason for this overlap lies in the institutions themselves: religious confraternities might draw their membership almost exclusively from one trade, for example; and trade guilds might set up pious confraternities to meet the spiritual needs of their members. There was also a certain amount of strategic manoeuvring as confraternities sought to avoid liabilities, gain indulgences, or (as at Venice) permission to invest in real estate. Another reason however can be seen in Bodin's *Republic*² where there is a lengthy discussion "Of Corporations, and Colledges, Estates and Communities" (*Repub.* 3.vii, 361). Bodin was the first political philosopher to identify a clearly defined social role for these bodies, locating them (together with confraternities, consociations, companies and societies) midway between the family (*mesnage, familia*, ultimately the classical *οικος*) and the state (*République, Res publica, Commonweale*).³

²Jean Bodin. *Les six Livres de la Republique* (Paris: Jacques du Puys, 1576). This was followed in 1586 by a substantially revised Latin edition *De Republica libri sex*. The only complete English translation is that produced by Richard Knolles in 1606, who combined the French and Latin editions as *The Six Bookes of a Commonweale*. Page references in the present paper are to the facsimile edition of the Knolles translation edited by Kenneth Douglas McRae in 1962 for Harvard UP. The use of 's, u and v' has been modernised.

³The ultimate justification for treating confraternities of all sorts as a mean between family and state can be found in Bodin's cosmology, in which there is a mean between each pair of links in the Great Chain of Being. A curious example is that "betwixt men and beasts, are to be seene Apes and Munkies,

Although Bodin distinguishes between colleges and companies ordained for religion, and those set up "for policie," which "concerne but worldly things" (*Repub.* 3.vii, 364), his political theory led him to place more emphasis on the similarities and parallels between them. Thus their senior official may be called the "Principall, Bishop, Abbat, Prior, President, or such like," but all have essentially the same kind of authority; and exactly the same organisational structure obtains whether we consider "the Bishop, Chanons, and Chapter; the Abbat, Religious, & Convent; [or] the Principall, Bursors, & College" (*Repub.* 3.vii, 366).

The disciplinary powers of "the principals of schooles and colleges" are effectively the same as those of "other corporations and colledges, as of physitians, and tradesmen"; and the rationale of having the Roman Senate policed by members of Senate itself is "the selfe same reason" as that for placing the civil jurisdiction of merchants under "certaine magistrats and Consuls of the corporation and companie of marchants" (*Repub.* 3.vii, 368).

Colleges, confraternities and the like were not absolutely essential, since a state could consist simply of families. But it was advantageous to have them in the state and Bodin was impressed by the value to society of associations which bring people together and add to the stability of the community; not only do they provide an administrative link between the state and its families, but the amity and friendship and informal resolution of disputes which are traditionally promoted by fraternities are even more important to the preservation of society than justice itself (*Repub.* 3.vii, 363).

This assumes that the college is composed for the most part of honest citizens. But just as any form of state can be corrupt, so Bodin recognises that fraternal co-operation can turn into conspiracy:

except we shall with *Plato* agree, who placed a woman in the middle betwixt a man and a beast..." (*Repub.* 6.vii, 793).

...colleges and communities evill governed, draw after them many factions, seditions, part-takings, monopolies...under the shadow of religion divers colleges have covered some most detestable and execrable impietie. (*Repub.* 3.vii, 389)

The role of religion is stressed and repeated in discussing this, for as a general proposition "the false opinion of religion is pretended for to colour villainies. For that there is no conspiracie, which may not be contrived and made in such secret assemblies" (*Repub.* 3.vii, [380]/389).

The examples he cites range from antiquity, when "the fraternitie of the Bacchanals in Rome...devised under the colour of religion" to cover their "abominable villainies, by them committed under the colour of religion," down to the more recent experience of the Anabaptists in Munster ("conventicles and meetings of seditious persons, under the pretended show of religion" *Repub.* 3.vii, [380]/389). It would seem to be a small step from this to the suspicion that the religious and charitable activities of craft fraternities might also be a cloak for commercial conspiracies.

The problem for Bodin, then, was to strike the best balance between the dangers and advantages of confraternities and similar groups. The argument advanced in the *Response* is recapitulated in the *Republic*:

...to permit and suffer all assemblies, and all fraternities, is not also without danger...In them also oft times are covered conspiracies, and secret Monopolies, whereof we have many examples, which hath bene the cause often times by expresse Edict in this Realme to take away these fraternities; which for all that could never yet be put into execution. (*Repub.* 3.vii, 386)

However the total abolition which he had favoured when writing the *Response* is replaced in the later text by the view that "much better it were to take away the abuse, than the thing it selfe that is abused" (*Repub.* 3.vii, 386). Where religious meetings are concerned, the solution he puts forward turns on greater

openness: abolish nocturnal meetings, and have the fraternities meet in the clear sight of all (*Repub.* 3.vii, [380]/389). As to the monopolies of merchants and artisans, Bodin puts forward an ingenious proposal suggesting that unless there were technological constraints such as the need to have access to supplies of water:

...to avoid Monopolies amongst artificers and trades men, it is good to divide them into divers streets and quarters of the citie, and not to seat them in one street or quarter together.... (*Repub.* 3.vii, 386)

This runs counter to standard Renaissance town planning, which typically grouped members of the same trade together, in quarters (in square town plans, like that of Dürer, 1527) or along radial streets (in star cities, like that of Doni, 1552).

Setting aside the convenience of having trades dispersed throughout the city, Bodin's main aim seems to be to find the best attainable combination of price inflation and social coherence. His reasoning seems to anticipate the Prisoner's Dilemma of games theory, or the proposition that joint profit-maximising collusion will tend to collapse if information on prices is not available to all sellers:

For...there must needs either be secret monopolies amongst them so to sell their marchandize and wares the dearer, or else ielousies and quarels, if one of them shall sell better cheap than another, before his face that hath refused to take the money.⁴ (*Repub.* 3.vii, 386)

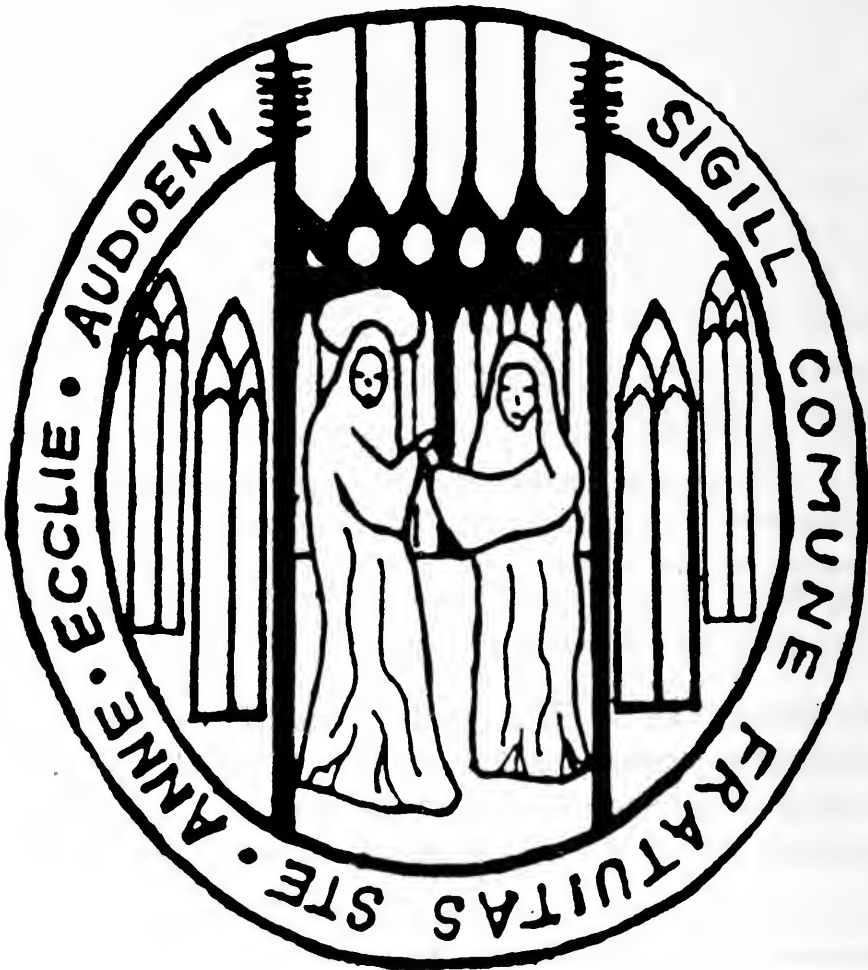
Bodin's assumption is that members of the same economic group are inclined as *confrères* to co-operate rather than compete with each other. Where the neoclassical economic paradigm assumes competitive individuals who will undercut each other if they see

⁴The point is repeated in the next chapter in a more general form: "citizens of the same occupation or trade, divided into divers parts of the citie, cannot so easily conspire against the common good, or delude the lawes, as if they dwell together" (*Repub.* 3.vii, 403).

that they may lose a sale, Bodin takes it that members of the same association will hold to the agreed price rather than lose face by being seen to break ranks.

What Bodin fails to make clear is whether confraternities of all kinds have a similar effect on market behaviour. The emphasis he places on their organisational similarity unfortunately conceals the differences in behaviour that we should wish to observe.

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Seal of St. Anne's guild, from Mary Clark and Raymond Refaussé. *Directory of Historic Dublin Guilds*. (see Reviews, pp. 22-24)