Manufacturing in these towns was organized around the guild system. The guild system was a highly regulated, monopolist, and protectionist system–unlike the 'free' manufacturing that came into being after the industrial revolution.

The internal structure of the guilds supports our premise that towns and manufacturing were very much a part of the feudal process at this time. There were three classes of workers within the guild : the master, who taught the craft, the journeyman who travelled extensively both to pick up the necessary raw materials and sell the finished products and the apprentice, bound to the master for a specific period to learn the trade. The master stood in the same relationship to the apprentice as the feudal lord to his serf : the apprentices were not allowed to change crafts, move on, or to marry without the masters' permission. Nevertheless from the twelfth century the guilds acted as a safety valve within the feudal system. They witnessed a steady influx of serfs fleeing feudal exactions. The foundations for the emergence of a new urban proletariat-landless, propertyless and sometimes jobless and therefore ultimately hostile to the feudal system-were thus laid.

1.8 Social Unrest and Urban Insurrections after 1350

Restricted conditions and the downswing in the economy saw three types of protest emerging in the towns. First there was the demand of the guilds against the patrician dominated city councils for adequate representation in the municipal administration. We should remember that the city councils were dominated by feudal lords, wealthy merchants, bankers and speculators. This privileged class organized the entire city administration-education, hygiene, finance and credit, the establishment of markets, and representation on committees–to safeguard their hegemony and perpetuation as a class while living on the earnings of the majority of the workers from the guilds.

Municipal revolts now broke out in the Flemish cities, the Rhineland and the Italian cities. The process started at the end of the thirteenth century and reached its apogee in the fourteenth century : more so after 1350. At Liege the city fathers capitulated to the guilds in 1384 —from then on crafts dominated the administration. Similar constitutions favouring the crafts were made in Utrecht and Cologne at this time.

The revolt of the crafts against the patrician regime has been styled a class war and a democratic revolution by some historians. However the facts do not bear out these assumptions—the malcontents in power had no intentions of forming popular governments ; their horizons were bounded by the city walls and the framework of their corporations. The new administration remained as rigidly exclusionist and protectionist as the one it replaced.

The second type of unrest was visible in fights between guilds for civic supremacy. In cities where only one craft predominated this was not the case; the phenomenon was marked in those towns that held more than on corporation. In Flanders, in the towns of Ypres, Ghent and Bruges social hatred raged with frenzy as all guilds attempted proper and adequate representation on city councils. In Flanders the corporations of the weavers and fullers won out over smaller corporations; in Dinant copper workers won their rights; in Florence crafts won out over the bankers.

But the third type of protest was perhaps the most damaging in its consequences. We have noted that ever since their rise the towns had acted as a 'safety valve' for the surplus or dispossessed rural population. But after the plague the corporations began to cut down on production and hired no further apprentices. Moreover those apprentices and journeymen who were already absorbed were often laid off without a reason. Deprived of an eventual rise to a mastership, which was the aim of all workers, and witnessing the breakdown of the old paternalistic order which marked the guilds, the workers showed their discontent, and indeed increasing desperation, in demands for higher wages, a status equal to the masters and in repeated strikes.

There was a tremendous social antagonism which manifested itself in strikes in Flemish towns, and among the blacksmiths in the Rhineland. **Le Goff** however points out that the demands were *not for increased pay but for longer working hours.* This new proto proletariat which had already lost its land and which now had no craft or full time occupation to fall back upon was another attribute of the break up of the feudal order.

1.9 Comments and Interpretations of the Fourteenth Century Depression

Conventional historiography referred to the plague of 1347-1350 as heralding the depression. But recent research proves, as we have

already shown, that the plague was only the climax of the decline; the signs of the depression were visible in the early fourteenth century. **Pirenne** pointed out that there had already occurred serious famines from 1315 to 1317. From the time of the decline of the Champagne fairs it was obvious that the old North-Mediterranean system was experiencing a profound crisis.

Braudel felt that the plague was only one manifestation of the decline that had set in the old order. He preferred to call the fourteenth century a period of recession rather than one of depression. For **Dobb**, **Sweezy**, **Brenner**, **Wallerstein** and **Bois** the fourteenth century witnessed 'a crisis of the feudal system'

Demographic historians such as **Abel** also consider the fourteenth century as a century of recession but hold that the recession was due to excessive population pressure. For **Abel** the plague was a manifestation of a rising population with fewer food supplies and he considers the plague as the immediate cause of the fourteenth century recession.

Jugen **Kuczynski** however holds the opinion that population changes had no decisive impact on the breakdown of feudalism and the crisis of the fourteenth century. According to him a fully developed feudal system could only climax in a series of agricultural *crisis because of a crisis of internal feudal production processes.*

Lopez and **Miskimin** paint the events of the fourteenth century in the conventional sombre tones ; however Cipolla is of the opinion that the plague was a blessing in disguise ; by carrying off some 25 million out of a total of 80 million, or a third of the population of Europe the plague actually relieved Europe of the extra population pressure that was pressing upon the land.

We have to remember that the fourteenth century was also the century that gave birth to the Italian Renaissance. The **Lopez-Goldthwaite** debate concerned the fact whether a renaissance could rise in a 'depressed' economy at all. In fact **Goldthwaite** postulated that the existence of a luxury economy was a precondition of any kind of rebirth. **Lopez** felt that on the eve of the Black Death, as the plague of 1347 came to be called with the assumption that all evils originate in Asia, the Italian cities were poised for a massive industrial take off which was cut short by the plague. **Braudel** disagreed with this view ; he felt that the supremacy of the Italian cities was only felt after Italy had undergone the necessary structural

adjustments following the plague. Otherwise, according to him, we cannot accept the supremacy of Venice as a centre of the European economy in the fifteenth century. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were the last great ages of the Mediterranean; in the three centuries that followed 1350 the responses of each European state to the crisis they underwent, the interactions between society, economy and polity that they witnessed, produced in their turn a transformed Europe that resulted in the Renaissance, voyages of 'discovery' and exploration, scientific revolutions, religious wars and the rise of the Protestant ethic and finally, the hegemony of the Atlantic economies and the domination of the rest of the earth by Europe.