Guido Alfani*

Social and economic mobility in preindustrial Europe

Introduction

When thinking about how best to frame this prolusion to the *Settimana Datini*, which this year is dedicated to social mobility, I was first and foremost faced with a dilemma: where to begin?[1] With the relatively little we know from previous publications on this topic? With an overview of what I think were the long-term developments of social mobility? Both seemed fine options, but in the end, it occurred to me that, first and foremost, we need to understand why we are convened here to discuss social and economic mobility, which is not at all a traditional research topic for economic historians. Although this topic is somewhat implicit in the work of many, it is only in the last decade or so that social mobility has become an *explicit* objective of research in economic history.

I believe that there are two reasons for this new interest, one direct and one indirect. First, the direct one: we are concerned about the levels of social mobility *today*, which in much of the world, and definitely across most of the West, tend to be perceived as low and declining. Consequently, we seek to better understand mobility in the past because we want to figure up what is happening today (it is a well-known fact that the questions we ask when exploring the past are often determined by the present, that is by the epoch that we live in and by the challenges that our own society is facing). The second, indirect reason for which many social and economic historians are now looking at social mobility, is that this avenue of research seems to be a logical next step after all the collective effort that went into exploring long-term trends in economic inequality, an effort which has substantially intensified from the beginning of the Great Recession in 2008 (Wade 2014; Alfani 2024a).[2] This refocusing of the attention from inequality to mobility was surely important for me personally: the two

* Dondena Centre and IGIER, Bocconi University (Milan), Stone Center on Socio-Economic Inequality (New York), Stone Center for Research on Wealth Inequality and Mobility (Chicago)

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2 This recent, collective effort in researching long-term trends in economic inequality built upon a long tradition of research by economic historians: see Alfani 2021 for an updated synthesis of older and more recent research conducted on preindustrial inequality.

Guido Alfani, Bocconi University, Italy, guido.alfani@unibocconi.it, 0000-0001-5534-8694

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ERC[3] projects that I led focused on inequality first, and later aimed to add social mobility to the picture.

Even if, arguably, our enquiry into social mobility (as our enquiry into economic inequality) is largely driven by 'modern' concerns, this does not exclude that by adopting this perspective we can look in new ways at the past, and maybe we can reach a better understanding of certain historical phases, and of certain courses of individual action. To clarify this point I will resort to an example particularly suitable to the occasion: that of Francesco di Marco Datini.

The Black Death and social mobility

Francesco Datini was born in 1335 (or around that date) to a middling family. When the Black Death arrived in Tuscany, in early 1348, he was just a boy. The terrible pandemic extracted a heavy toll on his family: Francesco lost both parents as well as his only sister and one of his two brothers. The Black Death caused mortality on such a scale that we struggle to even imagine it, killing indiscriminately the old and the young, the poor and the rich. It shook society, and felled many – but others, it elevated. This was also the case for Francesco Datini who just a couple of years after having been orphaned by the plague, aged about 15, sold some land that he had inherited from his father raising a capital of 150 florins, left Prato and moved to Avignon in South France. The city, which at that time hosted the papal court, was an important center for trade, where Italian and Flemish merchants met and where their interests intertwined. Within a decade Datini was well-established, forming partnerships with other Tuscan merchants and specializing in the trade of metals, arms and armour. This was only the beginning of his rise: Datini's business network and range of activities grew continuously throughout the second half of the fourteenth century.[4]

Francesco Datini was surely a brilliant merchant and entrepreneur, but he was also exploiting an exceptional historical situation. The Black Death had shredded consolidated economic and social structures, had broken and fragmented entrepreneurial and financial dynasties, had simply *killed* about half the population of Europe and the Mediterranean (Alfani 2024b) – and in so doing, it had opened spaces across society, which some could use as stepping stones to move up the socio-economic pyramid, sometimes (like in Datini's case) in a spectacular way (while others had their businesses and their families ruined, and fell down: although we tend to look at those who went up, mobility works both ways). In John Padgett's words, in Florence the Black Death caused a «huge tidal wave» of new lineages (including the Medici) entering the local economic and political elite (Padgett 2010, 369).

Of course, this flourishing of economic opportunities in the post-Black Death period was not limited to Tuscany, but it is found across most of Europe. In England, for example, soaring prices of wine caused by pandemic disruption of traditional trades led to excellent commercial opportunities from which both English and

[3] The ERC (European Research Council) is the main public body for funding of scientific research in Europe.

[4] About the economic rise of Francesco Datini, see Melis 1962; Luzzati 1987; Nanni 2010; Nigro 2010.

French traders from Bordeaux and Gascony profited greatly throughout the 1350s. From about the same period, exports of woollen cloths from England began to grow quickly, reaching unprecedented heights and generating new commercial opportunities for others, prominent among them the Genoese merchants who provided the English textile entrepreneurs with growing quantities of dyes and of alum from their mines in Asia Minor.[5] More generally, for England it has been argued that beginning with the demographic collapse caused by the Black Death and until the early fifteenth century, «social advance» was made easier not only by exploiting new opportunities in trade, but also by successfully following three other avenues of advancement: war (due to English early successes during the Hundred Years' War), other non-military services to king and barons, and the pursuit of lay professions related to the law and the judicial system (Payling 1992, 65-67).

The impression we get from these few examples – and indeed, the impression we get very clearly from the overall literature about post-Black Death conditions[6] – is of a marked acceleration in the speed of movement of individuals, families or groups across different social strata, which is basically how social theory defines an increase in social mobility. Such strata can usually be understood, and defined, as socio-economic strata (economic theory explicitly focuses on the movement from a certain economic status to another).[7] But how can we argue that the Black Death truly boosted socio-economic mobility? Thankfully, this crucial period in the history of Europe and the Mediterranean has attracted considerable attention. So we know, also thanks to the efforts of a large-scale research effort coordinated by Sandro Carocci which resulted in several books about social mobility in the Middle Ages published between 2010 and 2018, that the Black Death inverted a tendency for a slowing down of mobility which, in Italy as elsewhere, began to set in from the second half of the thirteenth century:[8] that is, when the phase of new opportunities opened by the Commercial Revolution of the eleventh and twelfth century was finally coming to an end. This was also the end of a phase of deep political change, which saw in at least some parts of Europe and definitely in Italy the rise of new social, economic and political groups, and particularly of the *Popolo*. This 'structural mobility', defined not at the individual but at the collective level, however, by the early fourteenth century had basically dried up; not even the shock caused by the Black Death was able to revive it (Carocci and Lazzarini 2018, 14).

What the Black Death did revive, then, was the mobility of individuals and families, and *this* is the dimension of mobility that we can actually measure by exploiting the exceptional sources available in some European regions, such as

[5] About the Anglo-French wine trade, see Blackmore 2020. About post-Black Death changes in the market for textiles, see Lopez and Miskimin 1962; Hunt and Murray 1999, 166-70.

[6] For a synthesis, see Carocci and Lazzarini 2018; Alfani 2023; 2024b; Cristoferi 2025.

[7] Note that, in a late-medieval context, in many European settings social advancement could also be defined as the outcome of a successful process of ennoblement; see for example the classic contribution by Kula (2001; first Polish edition 1983). On the continued importance of the acquisition of noble status for social advancement in an early modern context see for example Mousnier 1974 and Lukowski 2003; for a recent synthesis, Alfani 2023, 70-75.

[8] Carocci 2010, 5-7; also see the five volumes of the collection *La mobilità sociale nel Medioevo italiano*, Viella 2016-17, and Carocci and Lazzarini 2018.

Tuscany. John Padgett (2010) used information about marriages, tax assessments, and political offices to measure the appearance of new lineages in the Florentine elite, and was able to observe the boost to socio-economic-political mobility triggered by the Black Death and its subsequent waning: 198 new elite lineages became established in Florence during 1352-79, 91 during 1403-97, and just 7 during 1458-80 when the city was firmly in the hands of the Medici (Padgett defines lineages as descent groups identified by a «public last name»[9]).

More recently, my ERC project *SMITE – Social Mobility and Inequality across Italy and Europe, 1300-1800* has focused on collecting data from the earliest surviving property tax records (the *estimi*), linking households across time by exploiting all the available information. The advantage of this procedure is that, in principle, it allows to observe mobility across society. Unfortunately, due to the fact that the vast majority of rural familes of fourteenth-century Tuscany did not have a surname (Padgett's «public last name») and also due to the confused situation in the aftermath of the Black Death, we have to accept a lot of attrition, that is a relatively large prevalence of unlinked households. Nevertheless, the overall impression we get from a sample of 23 communities is so coherent that there is little doubt about the overall dynamics: the prevalence of "mobile" households (those who were able to move – either up or down – across the ordered quintiles of the distribution of taxable wealth) in the contado of Florence oscillated around an average of about 4.5% yearly in the forty years before the pandemic, increased by about 50% (reaching a level close to an yearly 6%) in the immediate post-Black Death period and remained at a relatively high level for a generation and more. Thereafter it set on a slow declining trend, so that by the early fifteenth century socio-economic mobility measured in this way was almost back to the levels that had prevailed one century earlier.[10] While this approach allows to clearly distinguish a general trend, the size of the boost caused by the Black Death to socio-economic mobility must be understood taking into account the fact that it has been measured based on a sample of rural communities, not on a large and dynamic city such as Florence. For a *rural* context, a 50% increase in yearly mobility can be considered truly exceptional.

[9] «Especially in an erratically growing city like Florence, with its many immigrants, the attainment of a recognized family name was the result of a dynamic process of becoming accepted as contributing members of the community and citizens in the republic. Attaining a last name, in other words, was itself one measure of social mobility», Padgett 2010, 364. On this mattert, also see Molho 1994.

[10] The estimates, which must still be considered provisional, are from Alfani, Ammannati and Balbo 2022.

Social mobility and 'calamities' in early modern times

Writing in 1942, the Russian-American sociologist Pitirim Sorokin – in many respects, a pioneer in studies of social mobility – argued that:

> By destroying a considerable proportion of the population any large-scale calamity creates many vacancies in the various strata of the society affected and its institutions. These vacancies occur not only in the lower positions but also in the higher ones, which frequently have to be filled from the lower ranks. In this way calamities intensify enormously the factor of upward mobility. Calamities strikingly accentuate also the factor of downward mobility – of demotion to a lower position in the social scale (Sorokin 1942, 111).

Among these «calamities» able to speed up «vertical mobility», Sorokin included the Black Death:

> as a result of the depopulation of England by the Black Death, the wages of farmhands doubled or trebled, and there was a widespread improvement in their general condition. […] Serfdom sharply declined, and many a serf became free – that is, climbed to a higher rung of the social ladder. The same plague intensified vertical mobility in other ways. A high degree of mortality occurred also within the rich and upper classes. […] The same was true of ecclesiastical positions. Owing to numerous vacancies, they frequently had to be filled by persons who would otherwise have been ineligible or would have had to wait long to climb to these positions (Sorokin 1942, 111).

This picture fits perfectly with our previous description of the consequences that the Black Death had for social mobility. But Sorokin was making a general statement about the power of large-scale calamity to reshuffle society, and the kinds of events that he had in mind were not only plagues (or epidemics more generally) but also famines, wars, and revolutions. As calamities are, unfortunately, a recurrent feature of human history, we could expect them to cause, from medieval to early modern times, a continuous sequence of mobility waves of the kind of that generated by the Black Death in the fourteenth century. This assumption, however, is only partially supported by the currently available evidence – evidence which, admittedly, is relatively limited.

In the context of my project SMITE, we explicitly focused on major plagues of the early modern period, and particularly those of the seventeenth century which, in central and southern Europe, were on a scale comparable to the Black Death in terms of overall mortality rates, to determine whether they also caused a substantial boost to socio-economic mobility. The conclusion, however, is that while these demographic shocks were indeed able to cause a spike in mobility, it was not nearly on the same scale as that produced by the Black Death either regarding its overall intensity, or (and more importantly) regarding its ability to persist for a long span of time. For example during the plague of 1629-30 in northern Italy, which killed about one-third of the population of the affected area (roughly two million victims. Alfani 2013a), we find in the city of Ivrea in Piedmont a mobility spike comparable to that caused by the Black Death in the very short run, but just 3-4 years after the crisis yearly mobility was back to the pre-plague level. Ivrea is one of the few exceptional cases where we can measure yearly mobility (exploiting records of regular *correzioni* or 'amendments' to the property tax registers); when we have to do with sources that are distant in time, the (presumed) mobility-promoting effect of plagues becomes difficult, and sometimes impossible, to observe. This basically confirms the view that early modern plagues had a much inferior capacity than the Black Death to trigger a mobility wave, a conclusion that SMITE reached for various regions of Italy[11] as well as for South France and some other parts of Europe.

Regarding another kind of calamity featured in Sorokin's list, famine, we have almost no specific studies focused on its immediate impact on socio-economic mobility. What seems clear, again based on data from the project SMITE, is that (at least in southern Europe) even the worst famines, such as those that afflicted the continent in the 1590s and in the 1690s (Alfani and Ó Gráda 2017), were not able to cause any identifiable wave, or even any structural break in the series (that is, they did not trigger an inversion of the trend from a long-run tendency towards mobility increase, to a tendency towards reduction, or vice versa). However, based on the literature on the so-called "proletarianization", that is the process through which an increasing proportion of the European population lost control of the means of production and had to sell its labour to survive – a phenomenon which tended to come in waves, mostly triggered by large scale-famines (Tilly 1984; Alfani 2021) –, we could hypothesize that, at least in south Europe, major and long-lasting famines did not cause any visible effect because they were simply strengthening a pre-existent tendency towards reduction in mobility. This, of course, if we measure socio-economic mobility as relative movements between portions of the wealth distribution (as SMITE did). In fact, in this case, (absolute) "vertical mobility" *à la* Sorokin would simply mean making the poor poorer, and the rich richer, without modifying their position as, for example, the poorest 20% will remain trapped at the bottom, and the richest 20% will just consolidate their position at the top (Alfani 2023, 293-96).

Finally, wars and revolutions. While the impact of major wars on socio-economic mobility has attracted a relatively large amount of attention for the modern period, we have very few studies for the long preindustrial phase. The main attempt is a study of France from ca. 1720 to 1986, focused on intergenerational occupational mobility. For the eighteenth century, this study reported (on a baseline orientated towards slightly increasing mobility over time, defined as the decline in association between the occupational class of the father and that of the son) that the French Revolution did not have any strong immediate impact on mobility, although it might have contributed to reach a somewhat higher mobility baseline in the following decades (Van Leeuwen et al. 2015). A study of England in the run-up to the civil war which erupted in 1642 explored a different possible connection between socio-economic mobility and violent upturning of political regimes: it argued that declining upward

[11] See several other contributions to the proceedings of this Settimana Datini.

mobility during 1589-1639 spread discontent and favoured political radicalization among sectors of the urban middle class who experienced worse conditions compared to those enjoyed by their fathers, and in this way contributed to create a setting favourable to political upheaval (Bearman and Deane 1992).

Regarding war more generally, given the current scarcity of specific studies we can undoubtedly accept that it offered, to some at least, plenty of opportunities to move up or down the social and economic ladder (Alfani 2013b; 2023). However, in a preindustrial context at least some of those opportunities were reserved to those belonging to specific social categories. For example, in the army men rising from the ranks were rare and officer status, with the opportunities for personal enrichment that it entailed, was open almost exclusively to the nobility (by contrast, the Church was much more generous in offering to lowborn individuals the opportunity to climb high. Poussou 2004). Finally, in some situations those wielding political power might have enjoyed exceptional opportunities of exploiting the war conditions, as seemingly was the case for the political elites (and those individuals that assisted them in the city administration) of the German city of Nördlingen during the Thirty Years' War of 1618-48 (Schaff 2024).

Social mobility in the very long run

Overall, and with the very notable exception of the Black Death, major preindustrial crises or 'calamities' seem to have had a much more limited ability to produce spikes in vertical mobility than Sorokin had imagined. The implication is that long-term mobility trends might have been relatively flat – although how flat, and whether they were upward- or downward-oriented, remains the object of debate. This debate was mostly triggered by the publication, in 2014, of an important book by Gregory Clark (with coauthors for specific chapters), *The Son also Rises*. Clark argued, based on a novel and very 'parsimonious' method to estimate the levels of mobility in the very long run, that upward mobility rates were very low and constant in time, and that status was inherited in ways similar to the inheritance of genetically-controlled attributes (controversially, Clark stated that «nature dominates nurture»: Clark 2014, 14).

Clark measured the long-run pace of preindustrial social mobility for England and partly for Sweden (he achieved a much broader geographic coverage for the modern age), exploiting the information available about the distribution of rare surnames and that of the surnames of members of elite groups: the Norman conquerors of England in 1066, the students attending the universities of Cambridge and Oxford, etc. Whenever sources allowed, he exploited information for intermediate dates, properly breaking down the very long time periods that he explored into a sequence of shorter periods (Clark 2014, 70-87; see also Clark et al. 2015). Others tried to apply the same approach without any consideration whatsoever for intermediate periods (which, from a historical point of view, can be considered an *excessively* parsimonious approach). This is for example the case of a study of the city of Florence, which connected the distribution of surnames and of the related wealth status in the *catasto* of 1427 to tax records for 2011 (Barone and Mocetti 2021).

Excessive parsimony (resulting either from an absolute scarcity of data, or from an unwillingness to collect more data from the archives when additional primary sources would in principle be available) is one reason why studies of this kind have been criticized, even when (as in the case of Florence) they could take into account entire societies, that is, all the individuals or households, independently from their status, existing in a given community or area.[12] Clark's own mobility estimates have also been criticized precisely because they *did not* cover entire societies, but focused only on the elites[13] – and we can't rule out that the processes of status transmission characterising the elites were different from those of the rest of society. Indeed, sociologists have long argued that the link between the status of parents and that of their children is much stronger at the top of the income distribution (and possibly even more at the top of the wealth distribution) than across the general population.[14] Unfortunately, this is also true (although for different reasons) for the lowest strata: those at the bottom of the income distribution (and their descendants) tend to be trapped in poverty, today as in the past (Alfani 2022). Regarding the wealth distribution, consider that those with no wealth and an income close to subsistence will be, by definition, unable to save and to start accumulating wealth (Alfani and Di Tullio 2019, 154-55). In principle, they might inherit, but it is a rare occurrence indeed that a preindustrial poor had any rich relations willing to bequest them anything.

The criticism addressed to Clark's (and related) research should not hide the fact that his novel approach contributed to spur a surge of studies in an area that had not been systematically explored before for preindustrial societies. In general, these new studies were based upon large-scale campaigns of new archival research of the kind needed to measure socio-economic mobility in more traditional ways, and which in principle could take into account the possibility that substantial short-term fluctuations existed (of the kind that could be generated by calamities), something that Clark's approach, even in the best conditions, is not very well-suited to do. While such short-term fluctuations might not alter much the estimates of the average pace of mobility across the ages, which was the focus of Clark's interest, they might have considerable importance for our understanding of specific historical phases or 'conjunctures' (*à la* Braudel), as is evidenced by the recent research concerning socio-economic mobility before and after the Black Death.

The downside is that these studies required data which was not previously available and which proved to be extremely labour-intensive to collect (even by the standards of historians fully committed to intense archival work…), which is why many are reaching publication stage just now. For example, my own project SMITE reconstructed complete (or almost) household wealth distributions from property tax

[12] In fact, all applications of Clark's method, even when (as is the case of Barone and Mocetti 2021) they begin with individual-level information for entire societies, in practice measure *only* between-group mobility, and not other components of the overall *individual* mobility: see Torche and Corvalan 2018.

[13] In practice, his approach consists in measuring to what degree those families who carried an elite surname still belonged to the elite at a later point in time.

[14] Form this kind of criticism to Clark, see Breen 2015.

records, for samples of communities in various Italian and European regions. Records as close in time as possible were linked together, and the relative (and when the sources allowed, also the absolute) movement of households across the wealth ladder was studied by means of traditional social mobility matrixes.

I have already illustrated SMITE's main findings regarding the ability of calamities to generate (or not) a surge in mobility. Regarding long-term tendencies, the general impression that we get from the case studies which have been completed so far is for a long-run tendency for socio-economic mobility to slowly decline during the early modern period in various parts of Italy (or at most to stagnate, as seems to have been the case in south France). This seems to have happened, for example, in the city of Bergamo in Lombardy from the mid-fifteenth to the early-seventeenth century, in Ivrea in Piedmont throughout the seventeenth century, and in the countryside of Vicenza from the mid-sixteenth to the late-seventeenth century.[15]

Beyond Italy we have some information for Catalonia. In the area of Barcelona, Gabriel Brea-Martínez and Joana Maria Pujadas-Mora argued, based on data from the *Barcelona Historical Marriage Database*, that the period from 1570 to 1639 was one of stagnant and relatively low mobility (measured as intergenerational persistence of occupational prestige or of economic capacity).[16] Finally, for northern France in the eighteenth century (Vendôme, Pas-de-Calais), a tendency toward a slight increase in intergenerational occupational mobility from the 1720s to the early nineteenth century has been reported (Van Leeuwen et al. 2015). This is obviously too little to argue for a North-South divide in mobility levels across early modern Europe. However, some additional evidence that in the context of the so-called Little Divergence such a divide did tend to develop comes from recent studies in long-term trends in economic inequality.

Before discussing what inequality studies can tell us about socio-economic mobility, it seems necessary to highlight another aspect of the debate: that concerning the absolute intensity of mobility. Beyond arguing that the pace of social mobility was about constant across time, and basically unchanging from the Middle Ages until today, Clark also claimed that it was very low: for him, there exists «a universal constant of inergenerational correlation of 0.75, from which deviations are rare and predictable» (Clark 2014, 12).[17] His critics, such as sociologist Richard Breen (2015), argue that this is roughly two times the prevailing estimates of intergenerational correlation of incomes in modern western societies. Even hypothesizing that social mobility was lower in preindustrial societies, the remaining difference is huge: all the more so, considering that for England during 1200-1700 Clark estimates that among

[15] For this and additional information from the SMITE project, see the articles by Ammannati, Crivelli, Di Tullio, Maffi and Viale included in the proceedings of this Settimana Datini. As seen in the previous section, SMITE measured socio-economic mobility as the movement of households between different quantiles of the overall wealth distribution.

[16] Brea-Martínez and Pujadas-Mora 2022 (also see Pujadas-Mora et al. 2018). These authors found relatively higher mobility in the period 1750-1829, which they explain with the spread of protoindustrial activities.

[17] Note that «intergenerational correlation» of status measures how much the status of the parents is transmitted to the children. With an intergenerational correlation of 1, all children would inherit the status of their parents.

artisans and students of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge the intergenerational correlation of status was in the range 0.77-0.85, then higher that the supposed "universal constant" (Clark 2014, 74). For the Barcelona area during 1580-1650, Brea-Martínez and Pujadas-Mora (2022, 10) estimated an intergenerational correlation in the range 0.45-0.5, apparently more in line with the traditional estimates – but based on a different kind of sources and a different method. Which is only the tip of the iceberg: when comparing surname-based estimates with those based on occupations or on assessments of taxable wealth, produced with a variety of regression techniques or calculated from mobility matrixes, and so on, we have a huge and unresolved problem of calibration and standardization. This is to say that as new quantitative estimates of socio-economic mobility will become available over the next few years, we will be faced with the problem of figuring up ways of making them comparable. This, at least, if we want to be able to qualify such estimates as suggesting 'high' or 'low' overall mobility.

Social mobility, inequality, and inequality extraction ratios

Although addressing the *absolute* intensity of mobility in preindustrial societies remains a difficult and potentially contentious issue, we can already meaningfully interpret the available series of mobility estimates as qualifying certain historical contexts as more or less socially mobile than others. In other words, we can already interpret in a meaningful way the *relative* development of mobility rates. As I have already argued, we have some signs that in early modern times southern European societies were becoming less mobile, while northern European ones were able to preserve more open features, or even enjoyed a slow increase in socio-economic mobility. This, which must be considered an hypothesis (due to current limitations in the available data), has potentially very important consequences for our understanding of the Little Divergence.

As evidenced by over fifteen years of intense research on preindustrial inequality, there appears to have basically been *no difference* in the trends in economic inequality found across the European continent from the late fifteenth to the end of the eighteenth century: after a phase of inequality reduction triggered by the Black Death in the fourteenth century, from the mid-fifteenth century (and sometimes, like in Tuscany, from a bit earlier) inequality growth had resumed everywhere and continued throughout the early modern period.[18] But it is not the same thing to experience inequality growth in a context of relatively easy social mobility (when all, or at least many, have a reasonable expectation of enjoying upward mobility based on their competences and behaviour, and maybe a bit of luck) or in a closed society.[19] Indeed, concerning modern societies a widespread (and basically faulty) idea is that high inequality might be somewhat caused by upward mobility, or more generally that it might result from economic growth (think of the rise of many early protagonists of

[18] For an updatde summary of this branch or resarch, Alfani 2021; 2024a.

[19] In general, higher socio-economic mobility can be considered desirable as it helps to attenuate many of the negative consequences of an unequal distribution of initial endowments (Fields and Ok 1999, 561).

the computer and information age to super-rich status, especially in the United States). This idea is often used to 'justify' a condition of relatively high inequality, as basically it leads to argue that higher inequality is simply an undesired side-effect of something positive (economic growth). But we now have ample evidence that, in preindustrial as well as in modern societies, inequality dynamics are largely independent from economic growth (Alfani 2021; 2024a), and that the relationship between economic inequality and social mobility is not unidirectional. We know, for example, that in some contexts high economic inequality ends up chocking social mobility (OECD 2015, 71-73; 2018).

The complex and debated relationship between levels and trends in social mobility, in economic inequality and in economic growth implies that they *must* be *measured independently* one from the other, and that it is simply impossible to even roughly derive, for example, inequality levels from estimates of per-capita GDP. In principle, then, we can have any combination of the three variables, which allows to formulate in this way our hypothesis about a growing "mobility divide" in early modern Europe: as the Little Divergence progressed, north Europe enjoyed economic growth and relatively high and maybe growing socio-economic mobility, moderating the negative consequences of growing inequality. At the same time, south Europe suffered from the worst-case scenario, that is a combination of economic stagnation, growing inequality and relatively low and even declining socio-economic mobility.

As arguably low socio-economic mobility is harmful to long-term economic development (OECD 2018; Neidhöfer et al. 2024), the dynamics of this complex system might have worked towards reinforcing and expanding the process of North-South divergence itself. South Europe would basically have remained trapped into an unfavourable situation until the industrial transition and the process of social modernisation offered a window of opportunity to escape this "mobility trap", and only with great difficulties (interestingly, the combination of a stagnating economy, high and growing inequality and social immobility characterized south Europe also around the time of the last major economic crisis, the Great Recession which began in 2008 and was followed by the sovereign debt crisis).

While, in principle, relative levels of social mobility in north and south Europe, and their trends, must be measured directly in order to make any less than hypothetical statement regarding the role that they played in the Little Divergence, it is also true that the general trends in economic inequality and in economic development which have now been reconstructed for various European areas do suggest that some scenarios are more likely than others. First, we have to consider that the early modern divergence in mobility between northern and southern Europe, if it really took place, would tend to characterize southern European societies as increasingly more 'extractive', and their elites as somewhat more 'predatory' of other social strata, compared to the northern European ones.

But the concept of 'extractive societies' resonates with that of 'inequality extraction', which has been applied systematically by recent literature to try and gather insights into the actual social significance of inequality change in preindustrial times. While the concept of extractive society is intuitive and can be used with some flexibility, that of inequality extraction, or more properly of «inequality extraction ratio», has been formalized by Milanović, Lindert and Williamson (2011) as the ratio (in percentage) between the Gini index of income inequality actually estimated for a given society and period, and the Gini index corresponding to the theoretical situation in which that same society, given its level of economic prosperity (as proxied by its estimated per-capita GDP), 'extracted' as much inequality as possible by assigning to all its members just enough to survive, and redirecting all the surplus above mere subsistence to a single super-rich individual or household.[20]

An increase in income inequality does not necessarily make a society more 'extractive' as well (that is, keener on redistributing the surplus produced by the collectivity towards the elite), as that will depend on whether that society is also growing richer. When increases in average income, proxied by per-capita GDP, are quick enough, it is theoretically possible to have a society growing more unequal while also becoming less extractive. However, in presence of economic stagnation or decline *any* increase in inequality will make a society more extractive: and then, presumably, also nastier towards most of its population and organized in such a way as to favour in an ever-clearer way the social-economic elite.[21]

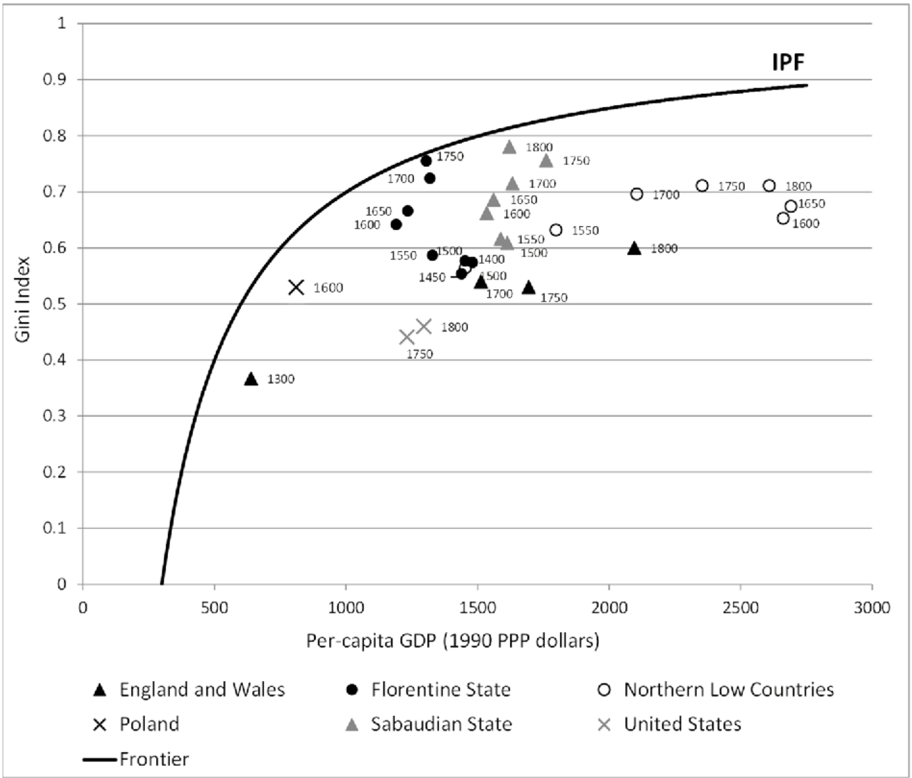
Graph 1 shows how different societies in different time periods were positioned looking at the combination of their average level of income and their inequality. In some cases, we have enough observations in time to observe patterns of change. Note that whenever a society tends to get closer to the inequality possibility frontier, marked as the IPF in the graph, it is also becoming more extractive. This was for example the case of the Florentine State, which by ca. 1500 was probably about as extractive as other highly-developed societies in central-northern Italy or in the Low Countries[22], but which throughout the early modern period appears to experience a constant growth in overall levels of extractiveness. By circa 1650, the Florentine State was already more extractive than any other contemporary state of Western Europe for which we have estimates, reaching the boundary of the IPF by 1750 (98%). The Sabaudian State followed a similar trend, although at a less steep pace. Northern European countries, instead, experienced very modest increases in extractiveness, or even a decline. For example, in the Dutch Republic (Holland) the inequality extraction ratio of 71% around 1500 increased by just 9 percentage points in the following two and a half centuries (80% by 1750), while in England and Wales the inequality extraction ratio went from 69% in the immediate pre-Black Death period to 67% by 1700. At that point in time, it was the lowest recorded for any European state.

[20] Note that the value of the Gini index varies between 0 (perfect equality: each household or individual has the same income or wealth) and 1 (perfect inequality: one household or individual earns or owns everything).

[21] In Milanovic, Lindert and Williamson's own words (2011, 268), «[t]he [inequality extraction] ratio offers a different perspective on how powerful, repressive and extractive were the ruling groups, their institutions and policies».

[22] The Low Countries were the only other area of Europe which, towards the end of the Middle Ages, could match central-northern Italy in terms of economic development.

Graph 1. **Inequality Extraction in Europe, 1300-1800**



Sources: Alfani 2021.

The fact that, in early modern Europe, economic inequality tended to grow independently from the economic conditions seems to suggest that human factors played a role. But was some segment of society actually working towards concentrating the economic resources in their hands, and towards preventing new individuals or groups to rise and to challenge their privileged positions? In other words, did social mobility have some declared enemy?

The enemies of mobility

Why was the mobility surge caused by the Black Death not replicated after later major plagues? Why, from at least the early seventeenth century, do we find signs of a slowing down of mobility in southern Europe? These are complex questions which would deserve careful contextualization and a multi-faceted answer. Here, however, I will highlight a specific factor: the defensive strategies pursued by the social-economic elites when faced with a new threat (like the return of the plague to Europe in the fourteenth century) or with worsening economic opportunities. This will also help looking behind the abstract macroeconomic variables which I have just illustrated, bringing to the fore human agency – that is the explicit, intentional attempts of human beings to change things (usually in their favour), either directly, through their own choices and actions, or by promoting institutional change to serve specific purposes.

The case of the Black Death is, again, exemplary. At the beginning of my prolusion I have presented the case of Francesco di Marco Datini, who skilfully exploited the relatively fluid situation brought forward by the pandemic to rise from relatively humble conditions to entrepreneurial prominence. But at the other extreme of society, those who had entered the pandemic as belonging to the socio-economic elite had much to lose: not only their life, but also their chances of ensuring the continued fortunes of their lineage. One of the reasons why the Black Death led to a substantial reduction in wealth inequality, something of which we have solid historical proof (Alfani 2021; 2022), is that mass mortality tended to fragment property simply because (given the partible inheritance systems which prevailed in much of late-medieval Europe) patrimonies came to be divided evenly among many inheritors.

Patrimonial fragmentation posed a direct threat to the preservation of the socio-economic status of the elites and consequently, as soon as it had become clear that plague had returned to Europe to stay, wealthy individuals deployed defensive strategies to protect their families. As they couldn't do anything to preserve the lives of their descendants, they set out to protect the family patrimony against plagues and other possible mortality crises. After all, as southern European jurists from the fifteenth and sixteenth century stated, *familia, id est substantia*: the family *is* the patrimony. In practice, across the continent patrimonies were protected by recurring to institutions that derogated from the general rule of partible inheritance, such as the *fideicommissum* (entail).[23] While in some partible-inheritance areas the *fideicommissa* were already in use before the Black Death, archival records suggest that they became commonplace, including outside the nobility, only in the centuries following the pandemic; by the sixteenth century their use was generalized (Lanaro 2000; 2012; Leverotti 2005, 162-67). Allowing for some local variation, we find a broadly comparable timing of institutional adaptation across central-northern Italy, an adaptation that also involved other practices such as the *fraterna* (undivided property among brothers) customs of the Venetian merchant families and the associated 'limited marriage' system (Bellavitis 2013; Alfani and Di Tullio 2019, 84-85).

Practices and institutions of this kind are to be encountered in a variety of forms across Europe (think of the Spanish *mayorazgo*, analogous to the *fideicommissum*, regulated in detail by Castilian law since 1505 but already existing before that date) and all served similar purposes: to protect the patrimony from undesired fragmentation and in this way, to preserve the status of the lineage. Consequently, as I argue in a recent book dedicated to the history of the rich in the West,

[23] The *fideicommissum* established that a well-defined set of family properties was to be transferred unaltered from one generation to the next, and then to the following one, with no end, usually being passed on to the oldest son.

> when the last great plagues affected seventeenth-century Europe, the rich were ready, and they appear to have been able to preserve their social-economic status much better than during the fourteenth century, when the Black Death had taken them by surprise. This, however, also had the unfortunate side-effect of preventing mortality crises from levelling the playing field and maybe from liberating fresh social-economic energies. For the simple fact that the incumbent wealth elite was better able to maintain its strong grip on an overwhelming share of the economic (and social and political) resources meant that the opportunities open to other parts of society to move up the social ladder were drastically curtailed […]. More generally, the rich of early modern times seem to have been able to prosper relatively well in times of crisis (Alfani 2023, 293).

Arguably, the same institutions also helped the southern European socio-economic elites to face another problem: the worsening of economic opportunities associated with the Little Divergence, especially from the early seventeenth century. But on that occasion, the defense of status was not purely passive, as the elites also actively tried to strengthen their grip over the available resources –both the economic, and the political resources– and to make their privileged position as unassailable as possible. In Italy, a process of 'closure' of the local councils began in the late fifteenth century and became particularly intense during the sixteenth (Leverotti 2005). This was aimed at slowing down the rise of successful individuals and families coming from the middling strata of society, while at the same time protecting the 'rights' of those who used to be placed at the top.

Formal norms, however, are misleading indicators of social openness: they could be circumvented, and the norms themselves were usually established in periods of intense upward mobility (Cattini 1984b). A similar point has been made by Luca Mocarelli (2009) in his study of the way in which new families could be accepted into the nobility and the patriciate of Milan. Consequently, we need to move beyond regulations, looking at which and how many families were able to have their representatives sitting in local councils. Based on a sample of communities in the Emilia-Romagna region, including the important cities of Modena, Parma and Piacenza, Marco Cattini and Marzio Romani (Cattini 1984b; Cattini and Romani 2005) were able to document a marked reduction in the permeability of the local elite from the early seventeenth century, a process which strengthened in the eighteenth century.[24] Over the last few years, the SMITE project has developed additional case studies of the composition of the local political elite (defined as those families able to express members in the local councils); the provisional results seem to confirm a pattern of political closure from the early seventeenth century, for example in Ivrea in Piedmont, in Bergamo in Lombardy and in Verona in Veneto.

[24] Cattini and Romani used lists of council members included in the local *ordinati* (yearly books recording the deliberations of the councils of the community, which also include information about the members of local councils), building upon a methodology pioneered by Cattini (1984a) in his study of the rural town of San Felice.

The oligarchic closure of city councils, with 'old families' attempting to ward off the intruders by erecting legal barriers against their eligibility for public posts, did not only serve a political objective but also had clear economic motivations, as it ensured privileged access to the resources of the community, as shown by Matteo Di Tullio (2014) in a study of the Geradadda area in eastern Lombardy during the sixteenth century.[25] To use the lexicon of some recent studies in economics, Italian and in general southern European elites seem to have reacted to the worsening of the economic scenario by developing predatory behaviours: that is, they tried to maximize their immediate revenue even at the risk of damaging the long-run development opportunities of society as a whole.[26] By adopting this behaviour, they really acted as 'enemies of mobility', as this kind of status protection requires preventing as much as possible the rise of any potential challenger.

At the turn of the seventeenth century, the actions of southern European elites conscious of the new scenario of the Little Divergence – one in which, for example, Italian merchants were at a relative disadvantage in accessing directly the Atlantic trade routes – led them to choices that stifled socio-economic mobility also in an indirect way: «when capital-rich families decided to divert their ample resources from industry and trade to real estate, often profiting from times of crisis and particularly from famines when starving small-owners were forced to sell their properties at an unfavourable price, they established a distributive condition that tended to lock the lowest strata into a disadvantaged economic (and political) situation» (Alfani 2023, 115).

While the shift from investment in trade and industry towards land had some strong economic reasons, it also had an aristocratic connotation. Indeed, the 'aristocratization' of economic elites is a process which is often encountered in European history. It did not only happen in societies facing economic stagnation, but also in some which were at the peak of their success: including (at the other extreme of the Little Divergence) the Dutch Republic during its Golden Age. When, towards the end of the seventeenth century, competition with England over dominance of the seas and colonial spheres of influence became more intense, at the individual level it made perfect economic sense for Dutch families that had already accumulated considerable wealth to avoid the high personal and financial risks intrinsic in the Atlantic trade and to focus on other activities: including by becoming involved in government. As a collective behaviour, however, this had serious consequences. The regents (*regenten*), a category that covers all kinds of rulers of the Dutch Republic (including city leaders and heads of organisations) and whose members originally came from the richest and most successful merchant families of each locality, became an increasingly specialized class, anxious to preserve its position. By the early eighteenth century, 83% of the newly-appointed city councilors of Rotterdam and 79% those of Hoorn were a close relation of another councilor. At the same time, members of the regent class became less and less active in trade and in other sectors

[25] The economic importance of controlling political resources is confirmed by Schaff's (2024) study of seventeenth-century Germany. Interestingly, Schaff reports a correlation between a stronger oligarchic or anyway 'closed' character of local political institutions, and higher economic inequality.

[26] Regarding the concept of «predatory elites», see Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; 2012.

of the economy, and developed more aristocratic features (de Vries and van der Woude 1997, 586-96; Prak 2005, 126-27; Prak and van Zanden 2022, 184-86).

Following the sociologist Max Weber, members of an aristocracy are defined by possessing some sort of privilege, which must be protected from outsiders – as a privilege shared too widely is no privilege at all.[27] Consequently, the very development of 'wealth aristocracies' will tend to be inimical to socio-economic mobility. But there is also reason to think that, across history, this process led to the end of many phases of exceptional economic efflorescence and innovation, from the Dutch Golden Age of the seventeenth century[28] to the American Gilded Age of the nineteenth century (Alfani 2023). In this light, current concerns about the progressive development of a «global aristocracy»[29] might lead to more substantial worries about our future prosperity and economic opportunities: and give us all an additional motivation to explore the past, looking for clues about the complex and multifaceted way in which, across history, mobility flourished, or perished, in human societies.

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[27] Note that formal nobility (with the hereditary transmission of titles, etc.) is only a sub-category of the broader concerpt of aristocracy. For a discussion of the implications, see Alfani 2023, 65-67, as well as Weber 1956.

[28] The connection between accumulation of political and economic resources, ultimately leading to social polarization and institutional sclerosis, and the end of the Dutch Golden Age has been recently reaffirmed by Bas Van Bavel (2016, 195-200).

[29] For a synthesis of the relevant literature see Alfani 2023, 84-86.

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