Alberto Concina, Maïka De Keyzer, Jan Peeters

Economic growth and prosperity: two sides of the same coin? A comparison of the countryside of Antwerp and Piedmont in the long eighteenth century

1. Introduction

Could people improve their social position in society? Were they able to change their profession, social status, marital strategy, or income? These are some of the vital questions in the debates on social mobility in the past. Most scholars focus on the profession, marital options, and intergenerational changes. Using demographic data such as marital registers, scholars have looked into the ability of either relatively small groups of individuals or large demographic groups to better themselves in life (Lynch 1998; Van Bavel, Peeters, and Matthijs 1998; Clark and Cummins 2013; Long and Ferrie 2013; Reixach Sala 2020; Éspin-Sanchez, Gil-Guidardo and Vickers 2022). In most of these debates, pre-modern societies are considered relatively stable. Most of the population had an agricultural background and remained peasants or farmers, like their fathers and forefathers. However, recent research has clarified that upward and downward mobility and absolute and relative mobility were more common than previously thought.

Moreover, it has been proven that the presumed drivers of social mobility do not necessarily matter the most. Wars, pandemics, and the Industrial Revolution were often considered cataclysms of social mobility (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1993; Miles 1999; Alfani 2010). If a large segment of the population died, it would create opportunities for others to better themselves by inheriting or applying for jobs that would normally not be available. The industrial revolution would provide a wide range of new jobs and opportunities for the large masses that were stuck as farmers or labourers in a limited set of occupations. Marco Van Leeuwen (2016) shows that neither the French Revolution nor the Industrial Revolution were France's main drivers for social mobility. During the eighteenth century, significant changes could be witnessed. Jan Luiten Van Zanden (1995) has already stated the same. His work on inequality and the long Kuznets curve showed how pre-modern economic growth provided significant opportunities for those who could skill themselves to climb the social ladder and become better-paid and more esteemed workers or professionals. Different push and pull factors for social mobility are at place, calling for a reassessment of the immobility of pre-modern societies.

In this article, we want to join this particular debate and explore the opportunities and pitfalls of different types of sources and methods to study social mobility. We do not want to focus on marital choices or intergenerational mobility. Instead, we want to pay attention to another aspect of social mobility. We will zoom in on land ownership and material welfare. We analyse the prospects of probate inventories and

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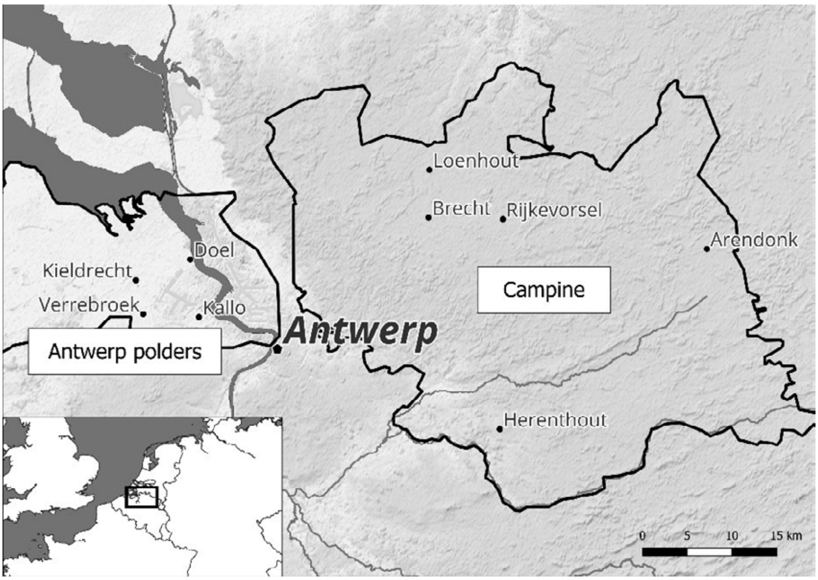
censuses to complement the fiscal and parish records that have dominated the field. According to us, these sources can answer whether households could improve their social status and material welfare in the long eighteenth century. This is a crucial question because multiple hypotheses, like the long Kuznets curve and the industrious revolution, have suggested that commercialised urban and rural regions were able to improve their living standards in the eighteenth century (De Vries 1994; Van Zanden 1995). In this article, we want to test whether we can link this research to material welfare and prosperity and debates about social mobility.

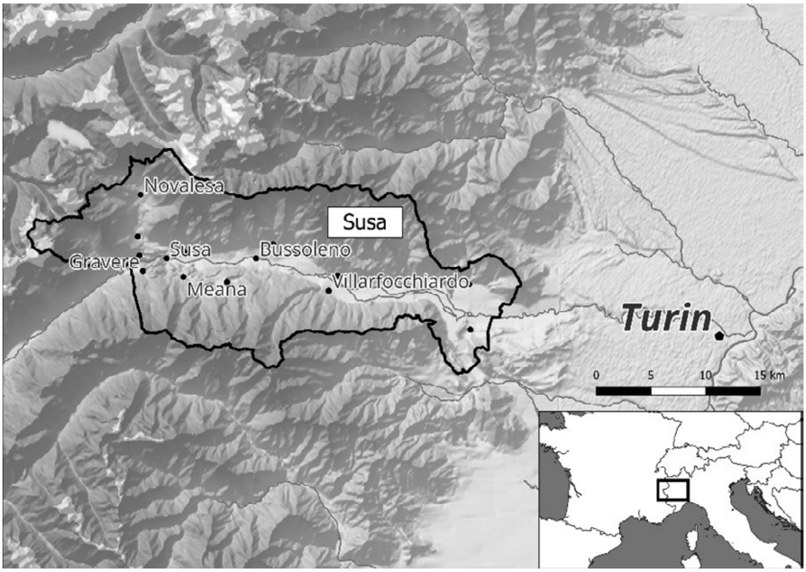
We are exploring two different regions that provide interesting case studies. We compare the North of the Southern Low Countries with the North-West of Italy. Until now, social mobility has mainly been studied from a national or local perspective. Big datasets that provide statistical analysis and microstudies that provide details have been very valuable. By using a comparative regional perspective, we will show that there are significant regional divergences and that the sources used to study social mobility can be biased in fundamentally different ways depending on the selected regions. We picked two rural regions per case study: the Polder and Campine area in the North of the Southern Low Countries (Figure 1), around Antwerp, and the lower valley of Susa and irrigated plains of Vercelli in Piedmont (Figure 2a and 2b). Susa and the Campine area are peasant economies with low inequality levels and subsistence-oriented households. Vercelli and the Polder area are highly market-oriented regions with high inequality levels.

Fig. 1. **Case studies for the Low Countries**



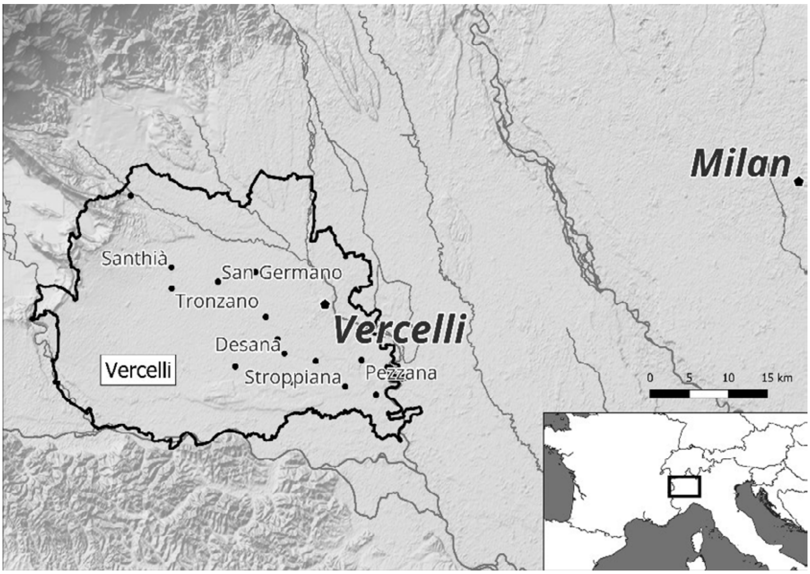
Sampled communities are in black dots. The city of Antwerp has been added for reference but is not included in the sample. Map author: Seb Verlinden. Combination of own work with layers from GIStorical Antwerp, EU-DEM and EU-Hydro.

Fig. 2a. **Case studies for Piedmont. Lower valley of Susa**



Sampled communities presenting probate inventories are in black dots. Named communities are those for which land registers and census data have also been collected. The cities of Turin and Milan have been added for reference but are not included in the sample. Map author: Seb Verlinden. Combination of own work with layers from EU-DEM and EU-Hydro.

Fig. 2b. **Case studies for Piedmont. Irrigated plains of Vercelli**



Map author: Seb Verlinden. Combination of own work with layers from EU-DEM and EU-Hydro.

We want to test the hypothesis in this paper whether the regions experiencing economic growth and an agrarian revolution witnessed more profound social mobility than the steady-state peasant economies. To test this, we look at different parameters. First, we analyse land and tax registers to calculate inequality levels and whether or not these changed over time. Here, we take a similar approach to Guido Alfani (2015) and Van Zanden (1995). We want to test whether the market economies experiencing economic growth witnessed a more significant polarisation or whether the inequality levels showed a similar trend. Our tax registers of the Low Countries are different from the Italian *estimi*, but the relative changes through time can be compared. We will calculate Gini indices and compare decile ratios to dig into social mobility. If inequality was rising, was it caused by upward social mobility at the top of society or the downward mobility of the middling or the poorest groups?

Second, we look at the material wealth of households through probate inventories. Probate inventories give a good impression of a household's social status and prosperity. We can compare the total monetary value or stock of movable goods, but we will also take a closer look at some indicators of social standing. We will focus on the adoption of new consumer trends, such as the consumption of colonial products and new luxury items. In the abundant literature on the Industrious Revolution, these goods are seen as signals of social status. Jan De Vries (1994; 2008) stated that from the seventeenth century onwards, households increasingly engaged in labour and commodity markets to increase their spending power and adopt a new consumer culture formerly reserved for the upper classes. Even rural dwellers and peasants started an industrious revolution, to purchase new status symbols and heighten their comfort levels. By tracing which social groups could purchase them and how they did or did not trickle down during the eighteenth century, we can assess if lower social strata could climb the social ladder and adhere to this new consumer culture.

Two things stand out by comparing these two case studies and four different regions. Firstly, the eighteenth century did not lead to uniform social mobility trends. While the commercialised and the subsistence-oriented regions witnessed rising inequality, the drivers differed. While the elites in the commercialised regions experienced upward mobility, the lower social classes in the peasant economies faced downward social mobility. Secondly, although households in commercial societies were more capable of embracing aspects of the emerging consumer culture, this remained primarily an elitist phenomenon. The majority of society, particularly agricultural wage workers, were either unwilling or unable to engage in novel consumption practices and did not own even the simplest conspicuous items.

2. Inequality over a long period

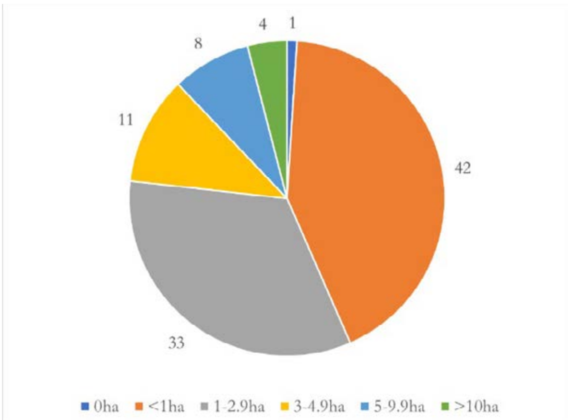
Research on early modern inequality highlighted rising trends across Europe (Alfani 2015; Ryckbosch 2015; Alfani and Ammannati 2017; Alfani 2021). From the dynamic and sprawling cities of the Netherlands to the more stagnant countryside of Southern Europe, it seems that no society escaped rising wealth inequality. Whether this phenomenon was caused by a Kuznets curve interpretation of increasing inequality at the beginning of periods of economic growth, by the consolidation of more fiscally extractive modern States, or by the societal changes that followed the agrarian revolution is still debated (Van Zanden 1995; Alfani 2021). Structural causes of inequality aside, what has been noticed is that the accumulation of wealth among local elites represented the major *in situ* driver of inequality. The tenth decile, in general, and the top 5 to 1 percent, in particular, had the most considerable influence on inequality trends across all observed societies, vastly outstripping all other percentiles regarding share of overall wealth (Alfani 2015). It has also been observed that in rural areas, the distance between the middling and poorer strata of society did not fundamentally change in the long run, perhaps due to the poorest rural dwellers leaving their homes behind to seek relief or an occupation in the cities. At least regarding wealth distribution, the rise of rural elites oversaw a stagnant society that bled out the poor. Social mobility is expected at the top and bottom of our rural societies. This picture finds a concrete parallel in the societal developments that followed the agrarian revolution, with the rise of large-scale farms worked by wage labourers who eventually became dispossessed of their land. It seems more difficult to argue for it to fit the historical developments of the steady-state peasant economies. As inequality rose even among peasant societies, what were the drivers? How much did the trends between peasant and market societies diverge?

We reconstruct wealth inequality levels based on wealth taxes or registers. In early modern Piedmont, these documents are the *estimi* or *catasti* that each community had to draft to allocate the fiscal burden among households based on the estate. Each parcel of land owned by resident and non-resident households in the community was evaluated and appropriately taxed. While the fiscal value associated with each parcel was not directly its market value, it can be reasonably assumed that the two were proportionate to one another (Alfani 2015). For the Low Countries' Campine region, we have used the "20th penny" registers, wealth taxes levying a 20th of the total value of the land. Just like the *estimi*, the value is a theoretical rather than an actual market value. Still, they are suitable for reconstructing rural communities' social distribution of land and wealth. For the Low Countries' Scheldt Polder region, however, we used "*pointinglijsten"*. These tax registers only give a measure of the wealth position of the taxpayer as perceived by the village authorities, based on land use, but also more subjective estimates. The source provides insight into the extent to which the village authorities estimated and allocated the fiscal capacity by distributing the predetermined tax to be collected among the villagers.

Inequality rose steadily in our steady-state peasant economies and market-oriented societies. Nevertheless, the peasant communities in Susa and the Campine area showed remarkably low wealth inequality throughout the long eighteenth century. In the Campine area, inequality never reached a 0.6 Gini coefficient (Table 1a). From the Middle Ages onwards, the area was dominated by small but independent peasant households (De Keyzer 2018). The absolute majority owned between 0 and 3 hectares of land. There was a significant middling group, owning or leasing between 3 and 10 hectares of land, but only 4 percent owned or leased more than 10 hectares, and even the largest estates did not exceed 50 hectares (Figure 3). In the Scheldt Polder region, Gini coefficients rarely dipped below the 0.6 boundary and reached almost 0.7 by the end of the eighteenth century (Table 1b).

Here, we see a different type of society (Soens, Tys and Thoen 2014; Vande Sompele 2021). The Polders were dominated by an elite of wealthy tenant farmers managing large estates. The middling groups were predominantly artisans rather than farmers. Landless labourers and seasonal migrants performed agricultural labour. It is essential to know that seasonal labourers are not included in the tax registers, and therefore, the inequality levels are lower than expected. If we look at the decile ratios, we can see what caused this shift in wealth inequality. In the Campine area, the poorest villagers are becoming poorer than the middling groups and the elites. The poorest group's share of total village wealth was more than halved between 1670 and 1770. The shares of the other deciles remain more or less stable. We are not certain what the causes are, but the partible inheritance system of the Campine area can probably explain this. All land was divided among all children, and therefore the tiny peasant estates quickly dipped below the subsistence line, forcing them to become landless labourers or seek a livelihood elsewhere. The middling and wealthier groups could probably maintain their estates by purchasing or leasing the land that was freed up in this way. These figures do not indicate a real polarisation in the Campine villages between the most affluent strata and the rest, nor a decline in the position of the middle groups. Rather, they show a significant decrease in the position of the lowest decile. In the Polder region, the growing dominance of the tenth decile is most striking relative to the middling and the poorest groups. The share of fiscal wealth accumulated by the tenth decile exceeded 50 percent and grew even further at the end of the eighteenth century. The position of the poorest decile was much worse than in the Campine region but remained stable. In the Polder region, there was not so much a slipping behind the poorest villagers but a growing polarisation of the upper village stratum with the rest.

Fig. 3. **Land distribution in a Campine village (Loenhout) in the eighteenth century (in ha)**[1]



[1] All the archival sources this paper has examined are in the bibliography.

Tab. 1a. **Inequality figures for the Campine area 1672-1766**

Campine Area	Year	Gini	D10/D1	D10/D5	D5/D1	Share D1	Share D10
Rijkevorsel	1672	0.48	13.6	3.43	3.96	1.9	26.4
	1708	0.51	25.47	2.77	9.19	1	24.9
	1752	0.52	30.28	2.83	10.69	0.8	25.6
	1766	0.53	35.57	3.25	10.65	0.8	28.2
Loenhout	1672	0.47	22.52	6.42	3.5	1.8	40.5
	1696	0.57	95.09	12.91	7.36	0.5	50.9
	1750	0.57	78.69	8.22	9.57	0.5	39.5

Tab. 1b. **Inequality figures for the Polder area 1663-1793**

Polder area	Year	Gini	D10/D1	D10/D5	D5/D1	Share D1	Share D10
Doel	1663	0.53	19.8	4.4	4.5	1.5	29.3
Kieldrecht	1741	0.64	223	19	11.7	0.24	53
	1793	0.69	276.4	25.6	10.8	0.2	54.6
Verrebroek	1713	0.67	222.8	22.3	10	0.2	45.3
	1790	0.66	138.5	20.4	6.8	0.3	47.9

Similar trends can be observed in Piedmont (Table 2). In the valley of Susa, inequality levels peaked below 0.6 after a steady rise in line with regional trends (Alfani 2015). Inequality levels remained consistently and notably lower than in the rest of the region and in the province of Vercelli. We can find a picture reminiscent of the Low Countries here. Mountain communities are primarily comprised of small landowners who possess between 1 and 5 hectares. Middle-size landowners possessing between 5 and 10 hectares remained a stable presence throughout the period, and very few households could boast an estate larger than 20 hectares. While the share of families living off less than 1 hectare rose in both areas, by the end of the eighteenth century, it had become majoritarian in the plains. The irrigated lowlands reached high levels of inequality in line with the rest of the region. By the half of the eighteenth century, the processes connected with the agrarian revolution had almost reached their full conclusion. Large farms belonging to local elites, nobles, and ecclesiastical institutions dominated the landscape. Around these estates larger than 50 hectares stood households of agricultural wage workers who owned increasingly less land at best and none at worst (Table 3). The difference in decile ratios noticed for the Low Countries returns again for Piedmont. The dominance of the rural elites was decisively more pronounced in the market-oriented area. The wealthiest part of society had captured more than half of the community's land-based wealth by the end of the observed period, strongly outstripping all other households from society's middling and lowest strata. By contrast, these last two groups did not experience significant changes in their wealth shares, and the ratio between them remained stable. In the mountains, the rise of the elites mainly came to the detriment of the poorest groups. The distance between the wealthiest and the middle part of society widened slightly in the eighteenth century. Just as for the Campine region, the ratios D5/1 remained consistently higher than that D10/5, meaning that at least in terms of share of overall wealth, the middling groups remained more similar to their wealthier than poorer neighbours.

Tab. 2. **Inequality figures for Piedmont. 1650-1800**

Province	Year	Gini	D10/1	D10/5	D5/1	Share D1	Share D10
Susa	1650	0.54	82.3	6.7	12.2	0.5	38.3
	1700	0.50	71.4	6.0	12.0	0.5	35.0
	1750	0.52	75.6	6.8	11.0	0.5	37.8
	1800	0.57	103.1	7.3	14.0	0.4	39.0
Vercelli	1650	/	/	/	/	/	/
	1700	0.62	129.1	13.0	10.0	0.4	48.1
	1750	0.73	305.5	32.3	9.4	0.2	60.4
	1800	0.76	364.4	36.8	9.9	0.2	61.1

The recent findings of inequality hold for our case studies as well. Inequality was rising, regardless of economic growth or stability. Both the peasant societies and the market economies witnessed a rise in wealth inequality. While the relative trend was similar, the difference was significant in absolute numbers. Peasant societies were able to remain highly egalitarian societies with strong middling groups. In a time of proletarianization, the middling groups in the peasant societies showed less downward mobility, and the wealthiest deciles could not widen the gap. The question remains what this meant for their material wealth.

Table 3. **Land distribution among resident households in early modern Piedmont**

Province	Year	<1ha	1-4.9ha	5-9.9ha	10-19.9ha	20-49.9ha	>50ha
Susa	1700	25.6	52.0	18.6	3.3	0.4	/
	1750	38.7	48.7	10.1	2.1	0.2	/
	1800	38.7	47.4	10.7	2.8	0.4	/
Vercelli	1700	22.2	31.2	13.0	15.6	13.8	4.1
	1750	45.9	33.0	10.3	7.0	2.9	0.9
	1800	54.3	29.8	7.3	4.3	3.1	1.2

3. Improving one's material wealth and social position?

3.1 Historiographical perspective

Social standing and status were defined not only by one's landed possessions but also by their consumption culture. From the seventeenth century onwards, scholars have identified fundamentally changing consumption patterns. Elevating oneself also meant adhering to these new fashions, more comfort, and more conspicuous consumption. Noble and urban elites had set a new standard. Light, colourful, linen and cotton items replaced durable, sturdy, and woollen clothes. Inheriting dresses or slightly altering a couple of statement pieces was no option since fashion styles changed more rapidly. Unbreakable tin plates had to give way to breakable majolica and, even better, porcelain. Houses became bigger, spacious, lighter, and filled with more goods and more comfortable furniture. Feather beds, soft chairs and couches, stoves, and abundant candles made houses cosy, comfortable, warm, and illuminated. Finally, the cuisine was revolutionised by introducing spices, tea and coffee, chocolate, and potatoes (De Vries 2008; 122-85).

After a couple of decades of research into the consumer revolution, the consensus seems to be that this was a trickle-down principle and that everybody able to purchase these goods would eventually do so. By looking at material possessions via probate inventories, scholars like Schama (1987) and De Vries (1994) shattered the idea of deprivation in the pre-modern period. Amsterdam showcased embarrassing riches due to global trade, and not only the wealthiest merchants could improve their lifestyles. Rural societies trailed behind urban and noble households, but by the end of the eighteenth century, even the most remote and poor households would improve their lifestyle. According to the historiography, predominantly households engaged in commercial agriculture or crafts were able to adopt these new consumer preferences. Jan De Vries (2008) studied rural households in Holland and Friesland and concluded that thanks to a surge in industriousness, even the middling groups could afford a new consumer culture and live much more comfortably than before. As a result, they could catch up with the elites and improve their social standing. While firstly considered a phenomenon typical of the most advanced economies of Europe, it is now clear that a shift towards higher and new forms of consumption happened across the continent. Not everybody shared this positive perspective on rising welfare levels, however. The flipside of the industrious revolution coin is that large groups in society did not have the opportunities to improve their lifestyle. Erik Thoen (2001) showed how peasant commercial survival economies did not improve their prosperity. They remained too poor and proletarianised to join any consumer revolution and were impoverished during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

3.2 Probate inventories and material wealth

We use probate inventories to study trends in early modern material wealth. These versatile documents have long been the cornerstone of the historiographical debate about material living standards in past societies (Dean et al. 2005; Poukens 2012; Béaur 2017; Mas-Ferrer 2020; Bovenkerk and Fertig 2023; Viale 2023; Falk 2023). They are widely available across Europe and similar enough for comparison. While studies on urban material wealth levels often focus on one city in particular, our case study has a broader scope as inventories have been drafted across the selected case studies. In early modern Piedmont and the Habsburg Low Countries, an inventory was drafted following certain circumstances around the passing of the household head or spouse, such as death *ab intestato* with heirs of minor age. A notary or alderman accompanied by an estimator, some witnesses from the community's best members, and the legal tutor to the heirs would record and estimate all the movable goods and financial assets of the deceased household head or spouse. While Piedmontese probates do record the deceased's estate, the Low Countries records do not consistently mention immovable goods. The overall recorded patrimony would coincide with the total material wealth found in the household shortly after the death of the household head or spouse. We have analysed 80 probate inventories for the Low Countries, 47 for the Campine region, and 33 for the Scheldt Polder. For Piedmont, 300 inventories were analysed, with 150 for each province.

For how useful they are, inventories come with some critical shortcomings. The level of detail for each inventory varies from case to case, and the criteria to assess the quantity and quality of objects were not set in stone. Often a notary or estimator would pool together similar objects or categories or evaluate them according to weight instead of nominally. More troublesome is their representativeness bias. It is well known that probate inventories overrepresent households from high and middle-high social groups. So far, it has been assumed that the degree of bias in the source is somewhat the same across different types of society. Instead, we discovered that inventories drafted in highly unequal societies are more biased. The underrepresentation of the poorest groups in society is more significant in inegalitarian market economies than in peasant societies. We divided society into socio-professional categories based on the historical reality of the time. These are notables, yeomen, craftsmen, peasants, sharecroppers, wageworkers, and the poor. We determined the profession of the deceased household head either through direct statements in the inventory or by matching it with entries on the closest available census. In this latter case, we used the closest living relative whenever it was impossible to trace the household head directly. The bias was then assessed by comparing each socio-professional category with its size, as in the two most complete census data sets for pre-modern Piedmont. Unfortunately, copies of the census of 1734 and 1774 for both provinces have not been equally preserved; thus, we have used the former for Vercelli and the latter for Susa. As table 4 shows, wage workers are almost half of the total population of Vercelli, yet only 12 per cent of the probate inventories belonged to wage workers. Notables and yeomen, on the other hand, are at the absolute top of society and constitute only 5,4 per cent of the total population, while almost a quarter (22%) of all probate inventories are from individuals from this social category. The disparity is much smaller for Susa. While notables were also overrepresented, the poorer groups are much better represented in our selection of probate inventories.

Tab. 4. **Percentage of inventories and households based on socio-professional profile. Piedmont**

Source	**Notables**	**Yeomen**	**Craftsmen**	**Peasants**	**Sharecroppers**	**Wageworkers**	**Poor**
Susa Inventories	12.7	0.0	15.3	64.0	1.3		1.3
Susa 1774	1.0	0.21	13.9	80.6	4.3		/
Vercelli Inventories	15.3	6.7	12.7	23.3	23.3	12.0	0.0
Vercelli 1734	3.6	1.8	12.8	13.5	17.5	46.9	4.1

For the Southern Low Countries, we have more difficulties reconstructing the socio-professional profile of the households in the probate inventories. The biggest obstacle is our inability to link those households to tax registers or censuses covering the entire village population. The available tax registers do not link up to the probate inventories, which are more scattered throughout our time intervals. We have used cattle units mentioned in the inventories to distinguish between social strata. To evaluate the social bias of inventories, we compare the distribution of cattle possession with historical cattle counts based on the entire village, with Rijkevorsel and Kallo representing the Campine and Polder regions, respectively (Table 5).

Tab. 5. **Comparison of cattle units in tax registers and probate inventories to measure the social bias of probate inventories**

Source Rijkevorsel	**No cattle**	**1 cattle units (CU)**	**2-3 CU**	**4-5 CU**	**6-8 CU**	**>8 CU**
Inventories 18th century	16,1	3,2	6,5	9,7	42	22,6
Cattle count in 1741	8	3	11	18	41	19
Source Kallo	**No cattle**	**1 cattle units (CU)**	**2-3 CU**	**4-5 CU**	**>5 CU**	
Inventories 18th century	19	0	38,1	9,6	33,3	
Cattle count in 1736	48,5	17,9	20,1	9,6	3,9	

Using this methodology, it becomes clear that the Campine probate inventories' distribution, like those of Susa, aligns more closely with the cattle register distribution compared to the Polder inventories, where the overrepresentation of the wealthiest cattle owners is conspicuous. The social bias in probate inventories measured by the distribution of cattle is much smaller in the Campine than in the Polder area. This has significant repercussions for research about material living standards and social mobility. Probate inventories and the rise of consumption levels are often compared. Studies from one city, region or country are reference points for other areas. Plus, they are taken as a representative case for societal trends. Our findings here show that we cannot assume this in the future. We can trace the evolution of material living conditions of the upper classes reasonably easily. Still, if we want to grasp the ability of the lower social classes to improve their living standards, we need to adjust our methodologies and source selection.

In the following section, we show how this social bias can skew trends and evolutions that we witness. For pre-modern Piedmont, we reconstructed the distribution of inventories based on the socio-professional profile of the household head (Table 4). In this article, we split our results by social group and calculate weighted averages to correct the social bias of our sources. The circulation of movable goods has been calculated by weighting the frequency in which said goods appeared among determinate socio-professional groups by those groups' sizes in society based on two general censuses. As mentioned, we could not have the same level of detail for the Low Countries and will leave this case study out of the equation.

3.3 Buying your way up the social ladder? Consumption of luxury and new colonial goods

We start by establishing whether both kinds of societies in Piedmont underwent a period of rising consumption. In Piedmont, the total amount of movable goods per inventory has been taken as a proxy for material wealth levels due to a lack of monetary evaluations by notaries. During the long eighteenth century, households from both the steady-state peasant economy (Susa) and the market economy (Vercelli) experienced gains in material wealth (Table 6). Households from Vercelli consistently owned more goods than those in Susa. This could indicate that market economies were better at securing higher absolute levels of wealth. The wealthiest members of market economies were far more prosperous than the elites of the peasant economies. Whether this trend of overall rising household wealth materialised similarly across the different societies remains to be seen. To this end, it is helpful to consider further specific dimensions of household wealth associated with improving one's material living and social condition.

Tab. 6. **Average stock of movable goods across Piedmontese households. Number of recorded items**

Province	1650-99	1700-49	1750-99	Rate of increase XVIII
Susa	54.6	93.9	131.7	1.4
Vercelli	89.9	122.1	157.0	1.3

All items except foodstuff, raw materials, and farm animals have been considered.

While the stock of movable goods indicates trends in material wealth, it still needs to be shown whether households from all social groups managed to improve their social position. The increase could have been spurred by the accumulation of already present items rather than by acquiring new goods, suggesting a possible increase in social standing. For this purpose, we have selected a basket of new luxuries and single items that research has deemed crucial in the consumer revolution of the eighteenth century. New luxuries comprise paintings, mirrors, and clocks. Under the umbrella of colonial goods, we have included spices and all items associated with coffee, tea, and tobacco consumption. Majolica and glazed earthenware have been counted on their own. Unlike porcelain, glazed earthenware is less indicative of higher luxury levels but is still an item associated with a new consumption wave. The most coveted items that have formed the core of previous research into early modern prosperity have been new luxuries and colonial goods. These objects represented a novelty in many pre-modern households and a testimony of their aspiration to better their material and social position. So far, historiography has been almost unanimous in pointing towards rural market economies as inherently more capable than peasant ones in accumulating these types of goods. While it is logical to assume that households that are better integrated in commodity markets have higher access to novelty luxuries, the degree to which a social trickle-down of the same happened has yet to be adequately established.

Regarding the consumption of new luxuries in Piedmont (Table 7), we can see differences and similarities in how these items circulated across society. New luxuries were scarce in the province of Susa. In the lowlands, the presence of novelties steadily increased and ended with almost a fifth of society owning at least one of these items. Colonial goods that could be found were even more exclusive. They were virtually absent until the middle of the eighteenth century and started to appear in a minority of the probate inventories in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Tab. 7. **Percentage of households owning luxuries. Piedmont**

Province	**Period**	**New Luxuries**	**Colonial**	**Majolica**
Susa	1650-99	0.5	0.2	9.3
	1700-49	12.0	0.0	0.0
	1750-99	9.6	11.6	12.9
Vercelli	1650-99	9.8	0.0	14.0
	1700-49	14.4	1.8	32.9
	1750-99	18.1	12.9	40.2

3.4 Societal stratification of conspicuous consumption.

But these were just the general trends. The picture becomes more complex but also more interesting if we step away from aggregate figures and break down our calculations based on our social categories. Studying the distribution of significant objects across these categories can convey to what extent early modern society could improve their social standing. We took the more representative groups of the time: notables, peasants, craftsmen, and wage workers. Notables represent the local elite, those who we can assume to be more accustomed to novelties in luxury and consumption trends. Peasants from the plains and the mountains are different groups but share their status as owners of small and medium estates. This said, an estate in the plains differs from one in the mountains, and based on the average stock of movable goods, peasants in the plains were significantly wealthier, with double the amount of goods in the late eighteenth century. Craftsmen have been taken because they represent arguably the most similar group after notables between the two areas, at least going by socio-professional categorization. Regarding wealth, a craftsman's household could be at any point of the distribution from wealthy innkeepers to poor cobblers. Wage workers have been taken as they constituted the majoritarian group in the rural communities of the province of Vercelli despite being absent from mountain inventories.

Since the probate inventories of the peasant economies are much less biased than those of the market economies, the picture for Susa does not change much (Table 8a). New luxuries and colonial goods remained the privilege of the local elites. The most important finding is that even the notables do not seem keen on investing in conspicuous consumption, with no fundamental change in their consumer culture throughout our study period. The findings on Vercelli, however, do significantly change (Table 8b). New luxuries and colonial products were omnipresent in the households of the rural elites with rising abundance. Colonial products follow the same trend as Susa, but in the province of Vercelli, they were found in more social groups, with around a third of craftsmen and farmers consuming some exotic product. While the rising consumption of new luxuries is undeniable in the market-oriented context and happened especially during periods of economic growth, it remains clear that the largest share of the population was wholly excluded from this phenomenon. No wage worker's household ever owned any luxurious item, not even cheap paper paintings to show. Their only advancement was in the ownership of majolica, whose value as luxury items can be questioned.

Tab. 8a. **Percentage of households with luxuries across social professional groups. Susa**

Group	Period	New Luxuries	Colonial	Majolica
Notables	1650-99	50.0	16.7	33.3
	1700-49	33.3	0.0	0.0
	1750-99	57.1	85.7	14.3
Craftsmen	1650-99	0.0	0.0	0.0
	1700-49	62.5	0.0	0.0
	1750-99	35.7	28.6	14.3
Peasants	1650-99	0.0	0.0	11.1
	1700-49	3.7	0.0	0.0
	1750-99	5.0	8.3	13.3
Wageworkers	1650-99	/	/	/
	1700-49	/	/	/
	1750-99	/	/	/

Tab. 8b. **Percentage of households with luxuries across social professional groups. Vercelli**

Group	Period	New Luxuries	Colonial	Majolica
Notables	1650-99	66.7	0.0	66.7
	1700-49	62.5	50.0	37.5
	1750-99	75.0	83.3	66.7
Craftsmen	1650-99	50.0	0.0	0.0
	1700-49	50.0	0.0	33.3
	1750-99	54.6	36.4	63.6
Peasants	1650-99	7.1	0.0	42.9
	1700-49	18.2	0.0	36.4
	1750-99	50.0	30.0	70.0
Wageworkers	1650-99	0.0	0.0	0.0
	1700-49	0.0	0.0	37.5
	1750-99	0.0	0.0	25.0

We wanted to examine material wealth as a proxy for households' ability to better their social position. Previous historiography has argued for an advantage of market-oriented societies regarding material living standards, pointing at how rising prosperity levels and economic growth accompanied one another even in the pre-modern period. We can partially agree with the previous literature based on the Piedmontese data. On an aggregate societal level, we see an increase in households owning luxury items only in the province of Vercelli. Peasants in the mountains possessed fewer new luxuries. They even demonstrated a contraction during the eighteenth century, possibly indicating a widespread inability to better their social conditions and material living standards. Still, the hypothesis that economic growth or commercialisation would lead to a significant rise in prosperity needs to be questioned once we look at the province of Vercelli.

Even at its peak, less than a fifth of society possessed any novel luxury, a share still higher than in the mountains but also modest. It should be noted that in this fifth of the population, we can find groups that demonstrate a desire to achieve a higher social status, particularly peasants. They did this by investing in status symbols and cultural capital. The highest gain in the consumption of novel luxuries can be noticed in this social group. Starting from 7 percent, the share of households owning any new luxury item rose to 50 percent, primarily due to art consumption. These peasants were different from their counterparts in the mountains. They mainly possessed arable land, producing the most valuable crops in a province deeply integrated into domestic and foreign markets. They indeed benefitted from the advancement in land productivity and rising grain prices. Still, the largest group in the province of Vercelli, agricultural wage workers, never experienced any significant gain. Aside from the occasional plate in majolica, their houses remained void of novel luxuries.

By critically assessing probate inventories as a source to analyse material living standards, the previously assumed narrative about an inherent advantage for market-oriented societies experiencing higher living standards and social mobility across its strata needs to be nuanced. While novel luxuries and colonial products circulated at higher rates among households in a market-oriented economy, these often remained an essentially elitist phenomenon. This was particularly the case in Piedmont, where, in both the mountains and irrigated lowlands, most of the population remained consistently excluded from experiencing any form of luxurious consumption.

4. Conclusions

We can confirm that the long eighteenth century was a period of significant social mobility. However, by comparing two different types of societies in two different pre-modern states, it becomes clear that there is no uniform trend to distinguish. Depending on the context, the rate of economic growth, the societal structures, and the type and pace of social mobility were different. When we look at inequality as an indicator of social mobility, we see that peasant economies are much more stable than market economies. Inequality levels rose in all four case studies, but the inequality was already much higher, and changes were more pronounced among market economies.

In the Southern Low Countries, economic growth in the Scheldt Polder region provided the opportunity for the rural elites to accumulate land and wealth, widening the gap between the middling and poorest groups in society. The Campine area was a true steady-state economy. Nevertheless, inequality levels did not remain the same, but they steadily rose in line with European trends. Inequality levels here were not determined by the upward mobility of the elites but rather by the downward mobility of the poorest groups. While the middling groups were remarkably resilient and could retain their social position, a part of the peasant households on the verge of poverty or landlessness saw their share of the total wealth decline. They most probably became increasingly landless labourers due to partible inheritance and the subdivision of their farmland beyond a subsistence level.

For pre-modern Piedmont, inequality trends fit the picture described for the Low Countries. Inequality in the mountains rose at the same rate as in rural Piedmont but remained substantially lower. At the same time, in the market-oriented province of Vercelli, the trend was much more sustained and reached higher levels. Crucial in distinguishing the two provinces was the local elites' dominance and the middling groups' strength. Alpine elites never captured the same share of their communities’ wealth as their counterparts in the irrigated plains. At the same time, middling groups in the mountains remained consistently closer to their wealthier than poorer neighbours, at least in wealth levels based on the estate. While in the irrigated plains, the top of society was rapidly outpacing the rest, the trend remained more contained, and the society was more steady in the mountains.

However, wealth is not the only relevant parameter in analysing social mobility. One's social position is not only defined by landed possession or professional status. We claim that it is essential to move beyond fiscal and parish registers and take material living standards into account as well. However, the field of material living standards is facing a big challenge. Probate inventories are socially biased, and in this article, we showed that not all regions have a similar social bias. Scholars need to consider this if they want to prevent studying only the consumption patterns of society's elites and comparing consumption patterns based on unrepresentative sample cases.

For the Italian case study, unsurprisingly, Vercelli stands out with the highest aggregate levels of material prosperity. Rural households displayed an abundance of goods and were able to increase their material wealth throughout the eighteenth century. It seems to confirm the hypothesis that commercialisation and economic growth went hand in hand with rising prosperity. Yet a look across socio-economic groups urges us to nuance this story. The aggregate numbers hide social inequality as the benefits of economic growth were not equally divided. In Vercelli, status goods like new luxuries and colonial products did not trickle down the social ladder. If we split our results into social categories and use weighted averages, it is clear that the upward social mobility of the rural elites stands out. They were able to increase both their landed property and their status. By addressing the social bias of the sources, it becomes clear that the difference between the subsistence and market economy was not that big. The absence of a significant group of rural elites can explain the difference in material wealth rather than a difference in living standard trends.

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Piedmont

Probate inventories

Susa

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Vercelli

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