

Guido Alfani

Round table comments

I will take advantage of the opportunity of this final round table to return to some of the topics that I have touched upon during my Prolusion – and maybe, to clarify a few additional aspects, and to propose a few examples.

First, I would emphasize the fact that mobility can be both upward, and downward. Indeed, when we measure mobility by looking at movement between portions of the wealth distribution defined in a ‘relative’ way, for example, movement between quintiles of wealth (as done by the papers presented at this Settimana Datini that relate to the SMITE project), mobility is symmetric. In other words, the fact that some individuals or households move up implies that a corresponding number moves down. And yet, we tend to focus more on upward mobility than on downward mobility: something which has also been apparent throughout the Settimana. This is partly due to the fact that those who succeed tend to leave a stronger imprint in the historical records than those who meet failure. However, we should also ponder the possibility that this is also because of a sort of instinct, or an unacknowledged preference, which we tend to have – but that we should resist. After having preached virtue, I will now turn my attention to upwards mobility: historians are all sinners, after all.

In my recent book *As Gods Among Men. A History of the Rich in the West* (Alfani 2023) I argue that, if we look at western history as a whole, three main paths towards affluence need to be highlighted: that of nobility, that of entrepreneurship/innovation, and that of finance (which should be distinguished from that of entrepreneurship because ‘making money out of money’ has always attracted a much stronger social reprobation compared to growing rich by means of, say, long-range trade or manufacture). There were, of course, others, and I’ll recall some of them soon enough, but these three are to be considered the main ones, not only because of how many people became rich by following them, but also because of their importance for our understanding of the processes of wealth accumulation.

Here, I will focus particularly on the path of nobility, which I could not fully highlight in my Prolusion due to time constraints. Let me provide three examples, taken from my book, of nobles who rose high in different epochs.

The first example is that of Alan the Red, who followed William the Conqueror in the conquest of England and who probably fought by his side at the battle of Hastings in 1066. The cadet son of a Breton count, he remained in England after the Conquest and established his own dynasty – exploiting his speciality, which was quenching rebellions. Every time that he defeated a rebel, the King gifted him parts

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of the rebel's lands, so that he soon became fabulously wealthy: possibly, in at least some respects, the richest person ever to walk the British Isles. This example serves to remind us that nobility (the acquisition of noble status) was not only the outcome of a process of social ascension (Kula 2001), but that within nobility itself we can encounter dramatic processes of upward (or downward) mobility.

And yet, in many cases the acquisition of nobility truly was the culmination of the rise of an individual, or of a dynasty. The second example that I wish to discuss is that of Antoine II Crozat. His father, Antoine I, was a merchant from Albi whose fortunes grew from the mid-seventeenth century, when he successfully added banking to his previous trades. Antoine I was also the first to try to pursue a path towards ennoblement, but not without facing resistances. He bought the fief of Barthechave and started wearing a sword and acting as a noble himself – until he was found guilty of ‘usurpation of nobility’ and repeatedly chastised. It was his son, Antoine II, who became fabulously rich by acting as tax farmer of Louis XIV and by exploiting his monopoly over the Louisiana trade, who finally convinced the king to ennoble him, in the early eighteenth century. Antoine II's descendants would be fully integrated in the French nobility. For Antoine II, ennoblement was not only the achievement of a long-term family objective of upward mobility, but also a way to be closer to the court: which offered its own opportunities for additional wealth accumulation.

The third example is that of Lodovico Manin, the last doge of Venice. I'll discuss his case shortly – but first, let me propose some considerations based on the two previous cases. That of Alan the Red pertains to a period during which the feudal system was strong. This system, as we have seen, offered its own opportunities for social advancement, but at the same time worked actively to hinder the rise of new non-noble groups. As argued by the great German sociologist Max Weber, «Feudalism, with its closely delineated rights and duties, does not only have a stabilizing effect upon the economy as a whole, but also upon the distribution of individual wealth» (Weber 1978[1956], 1099). In other words, although it established a fairly high degree of economic inequality, feudalism, precisely because it constrained the ambitions of the emerging groups, tended to prevent economic disparities across societies from reaching even higher levels, and it did so by constraining the potential for upward mobility of members of the bourgeoisie. It is for this reason that, arguably, in the Middle Ages the path of enrichment through entrepreneurship and innovation was easier in places where the feudal system was weak or almost absent: the Italian communes, and particularly the merchant republics, the ‘free cities’ of the Hansa League, and so on. However, Weber failed to notice that the rise of commoners' wealth could not have occurred without the presence of the nobility, because it was precisely to service the needs of the nobles that the Commercial Revolution of the eleventh and twelfth centuries had started: it was their desire for consuming luxury goods that led to the initial emergence of that network of long-range trade routes which made the fortune of so many merchants (Alfani 2023, 90-91).

The second point relates to how, especially in the early modern period when state bureaucracies began to expand vigorously, service to the state offered plentiful opportunities for upward mobility. In my Prolusion, I mentioned the service to the

army, but now I would like to highlight how interacting with the state in various ways offered much broader opportunities for advancement to people with very varied skills. The case of Antoine II Crozat, who was a tax farmer, is just an example. Another very interesting case is that of the Tasso family, originally from a village in the Alps of northern Lombardy, who developed the postal services of the Holy Roman Empire from the late fifteenth century and later expanded them to cover all corners of the Habsburg domains, from Germany to the Low Countries and Burgundy, to Spain. They became fabulously wealthy, and from 1624 were ennobled, becoming *Freiherren* of the Empire – and changed their name to Thurn und Taxis. To this day, they remain one of the richest families of Germany.

Also the final case that I would like to highlight, that of Lodovico Manin, somehow involves a process of ennoblement: the Manin family acquired the status of patricians of Venice ‘only’ in 1651. In fact, they bought it, paying the enormous sum of 100,000 gold ducats. It has been argued that, by the middle of the eighteenth century, in the Republic of Venice the only thing that mattered, to define the limits of one’s political ambitions, was wealth (Del Negro 1984). It is not by chance, then, that when Lodovico Manin was elected doge, in 1789, he was the richest man in the entire Republic. Unfortunately, old patrician families considered him a parvenu, as his forebears had acquired their seat in the *Maggior Consiglio* just a century earlier. His election was seen as a sign of the decadence of the once-proud Republic – just a few years later, in the face of the advance of the French revolutionary army led by Napoleon, the *Maggior Consiglio* voted for its own dissolution.

The right to sit in the *Maggior Consiglio* had been made hereditary in 1323 already. Indeed, the Republic of Venice was precocious in following that path of oligarchic closure that, as I have noticed in my *Prolusion*, befell many Italian polities during the early modern period. The fact that the *Maggior Consiglio* of Venice, like the senate of Milan, was never entirely impermeable to accepting new members should not hide the fact that newly-minted patricians had one feature in common: they were very rich. A possible way of looking at this, then, is that for a very rich, or even super-rich, ‘bourgeois’ family entering the nobility was not only the mark of further advancement, or an opportunity to exploit the additional opportunities that were open only to those who were close to the court – very often, it was also a way to expand the family’s political power. And whenever the future looked dark, those in power, including the ‘new’ families, collectively acted as the enemies of mobility, trying to protect their privileges and socio-economic status. As a matter of fact, this happened even where and when formal nobility was lacking: again Max Weber introduced the useful concept of aristocracy, which is broader than that of nobility as it does not require the presence of inheritable titles. For Weber, an aristocracy is defined by its high social status and by enjoying certain privileges. Wealth aristocracies, then, could arise also in the context of republican democracies, such as the United States during the nineteenth-century Gilded Age.

Here, what is important to highlight is that, as aristocracies (of wealth or otherwise) are defined by their privilege, they must also be defined by exclusion, as a privilege shared too widely is no privilege at all. Consequently, at some point they’ll have to act to actively try to keep the newcomers down, limiting upward mobility, then joining the ranks of the enemies of mobility. Historically, social closure,

economic closure, and political closure are often intertwined. In the past, often the richest individuals flocked to politics when they perceived troubled times ahead for the economy, and increased their grasp on public resources to defend their own socio-economic position. Let's hope that, in this regard, history does not provide any useful insights into what awaits us in the twenty-first century.

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