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Towards a new history of old mobility: obstacles and prospects

1. The waning of an old social order

In his masterpiece *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga described more than a century ago how late medieval society was eminently hierarchical (Huizinga 1991 (2024), chapter 3). Huizinga saw orders and estates everywhere he looked in the late medieval world. Not just in the classic trifunctional division of social estates into clergy, nobility and peasantry, but also in the ranks at court, in church, guilds, fraternities, and marriage. Society was composed of groups of people who were bound to specific functions and who presumably aimed for little more than to carry this burden as well as they could, and thereby to honour God's creation.

Huizinga was too good of a historian not to know that this was largely a fiction – propaganda even. He was well aware that in actual practice the Third Estate was incredibly heterogeneous, and that the trifunctional system had failed to properly reflect the rise of cities, the bourgeoisie, and proletarian labourers since at least the eleventh century. Huizinga did not argue for a complete 'histoire immobile', and noted how the nobility was constantly replenished from the ranks of the wealthy bourgeoisie (compare to Le Roy Ladurie 1974). Nevertheless he maintained that the pervasive ideal of the society of orders remained alive and well until the eighteenth century. If not in practice, then at least in culture and politics. The discrepancy between ideal and reality fit well in Huizinga's pessimistic interpretation of a society that continued to live by nostalgic ideals that were well past their prime and were increasingly obsolete.

Given his fairly nuanced views on the matter, it is unlikely that Huizinga would have been particularly surprised by the recent literature on social and economic mobility in medieval and early modern Europe (Carocci and Lazzarini 2021; Padgett 2010; Sala 2020; De Bellaigue et al 2019; Alfani, Ammannati and Balbo 2022). Superficially at least, most of these findings would have confirmed his basic insight that despite the generally accepted rhetoric of a stable hierarchy individual social mobility was in fact rather common. Thanks to a renewed interest in social mobility today, caused at least in part by a creeping sense of diminished opportunities in late capitalism (Chetty 2017), historians of medieval and early modern Europe have begun to enlist an impressive array of new sources, methods and interpretive frameworks to analyse social mobility in the past. However, the contributions in the current volume also indicate that a new synthesis to surpass Huizinga's paradox between ideal and

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reality, is not yet around the corner. In fact, there are reasons to suggest that the 'new history of old social mobility' based on a newfound empiricism should not lead to hasty new narratives any time soon (compare Jackson 2023).

2. A confusion of tongues

The implicit acceptance of shifting social fortunes should not lead us to conclude that concerns over social mobility were of no interest to medieval and early modern Europeans. A popular late medieval tale – recounted in different versions and varying endings – told the story of Griselda (Howell 2010, 254-56). She was a simple peasant girl until an Italian nobleman decided that he wished to marry her. Since she did not possess a dowry herself, he provided her with a dress appropriate for a lady of noble status, and in doing so thereby bestowed a new social rank upon her. In the remainder of the tale, he proceeded to test her inner 'nobleness' in various cruel ways: by sending her away, claiming to marry someone else, and telling her that he murdered her children. Griselda showed how her true nature was indeed worthy of noble status by remaining patient and untouched by all of this, and accepting her fate. According to Martha Howell the story and its many variations appears to play on the difficulties of determining what one's rank and social identity was: could it be transformed by marriage and lifestyle – or was Griselda aristocratic all along, despite her peasant bearings, as proven by her reaction to the tests of her husband?

Such popular preoccupations suggest that social mobility was not necessarily uncommon, but could nevertheless provoke uncertainty and confusion. However, as the story of Griselda indicates, with its focus on marriage, appearance, and behaviour – instead of on wealth or income, such concerns were not necessarily the same as the ones that pervade discussions of social mobility today.

A first obstacle towards a new synthesis, is based in its conceptual diversity. The recent upsurge in interest in social mobility of the past has also led to a conceptual broadening of the topic itself. Part of the allure of social mobility as a topic of interest is perhaps the wide array of loosely connected issues to which it seems to refer, often with little more in common than a vague association with ideas of openness, fairness and modernity. Although such limited conceptual delineation has produced a vibrant and stimulating research field, it can also lead to the understatement of contradictions and dissimilarities. Grand trends of growing openness or oligarchisation can present themselves too easily when the criteria are insufficiently delineated or heterogeneous phenomena are amalgamated to singular phenomena.

Although historians are keenly aware of the distinctions between different types of social mobility, it is not always recognised how such different types do not necessarily evolve in parallel to one another (Van Leeuwen and Maas 2010). The desire to add new empirical data to the debate has led to an admirable creativity in enlisting new sources and approaches to study social mobility, but has also broadened the conceptual scope. The contributions to the current volume give testimony to the variety of mobility types of potential historical interest, but one would be ill-advised to attempt to draw general conclusions from such different and sometimes conflicting phenomena. Many, if not most, chapters are concerned with issues of absolute

mobility, which refers to the rising incomes or living standards of individuals or groups over time. In most cases changes in absolute mobility are the result of wider processes of economic growth or decline: tides that lift all boats, even if some are lifted higher than others. Relative mobility on the other hand refers to the changing of individual positions in a hierarchy that does not necessarily change: some get rich, others become poor – but inequalities remain the same. Although this relative mobility is often colloquially understood as 'genuine' social mobility, many historical case studies of individuals, social groups, or areas on the ascent do in fact refer to absolute mobility instead (see also Chetty 2014).

Not only the movements up or down, but also the subjects doing the moving are more problematic than often recognised. Most often historical studies of social mobility refer to the changing of social positions by individuals, but there are also many cases in which groups or collectives are discussed instead, such as merchants, political elites, or religious minorities. A traditional literature which has recently received a second lease on life, are those studies of social mobility in which family lineages are the units of analysis. It would be hard to generalise across the conclusions from such diverse studies, as individual and group mobility are not logically, technically or causally related to one another. The attestation of the rise of a new dynasty in a city's political elite does not automatically affect the ability of socially inferior individuals to move up or down the social ladder.

A third distinction between different mobility types relates to the timeframe under scrutiny. Inter-generational mobility – usually measured from parent to child – most closely corresponds to the conceptions of mobility that figure in narratives of modernisation and the transition from a society of estates to a society of classes, but also intra-generational, career mobility has recently been studied more often. However, intra-generational and inter-generational mobility are not necessarily governed by similar mechanisms, since life-cycle and household changes in large part determine the former, whereas education, employment and inherited wealth tend to impact the latter more forcibly. There is no a priori reason to suppose that societies with low levels of inter-generational mobility would also have lower levels of intra-generational mobility – in fact, both might conceivably be inversely related to one another.

Finally, and perhaps less obviously so, the dimensions along which mobility is measured also tend to vary significantly. Most influential among sociologists and modern historians are studies on occupational class positions, while studies of income and more recently wealth mobility have recently been gaining in importance (Bowles and Gintis 2002; Clark and Cummins 2014, 2015; Solon 2018; Fagereng et al 2021). However, studies of older historical periods also frequently focus on access to political power or legal status such as nobility (for instance Padgett 2010; Buylaert 2010; Buylaert and Geens 2017).

Although in some historical periods several mechanisms and types of mobility might have moved in tandem – twentieth-century postwar Europe would conceivable have been such a case – this is neither theoretically nor logically necessary. Conflating different types of mobility thus tends to superficially contribute to overarching narratives of democratisation, fluidity, openness and meritocracy – and thus to modernisation – without making such hypotheses empirically falsifiable.

Although the lack of conceptual rigour perhaps adds to the vibrancy and dynamism of the field of historical mobility studies, the wide-ranging nature of the results it produces can not easily be synthesised. Any attempt at grand narratives therefore best avoids adding more confusion by conflating and amalgamating different objects of study.

3. Mobility and (early) modernisation

Perhaps the most eye-catching results from the current volume attest to the role of economic expansion in case studies of social mobility across pre-modern Europe. Commercial growth during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries across much of Western and Southern Europe, or proto-industrial and capitalist expansion in Catalonia or France during the eighteenth century, seem to have given rise to structural, absolute mobility: a growth in absolute living standards for specific groups of people. Such studies are closely linked to economic histories in which economic growth, structural changes in occupational structure, or rising living standards take central stage. Absolute mobility informs us first and foremost of the rise or fall of social groups – such as landowners, merchants or urban magistrates – but has relatively little to say on how easy it is for individuals to move in or out of these social groups.

Relative mobility was not absent from pre-industrial Europe either, as indicated by the first results from ongoing large-scale projects measuring relative social mobility based on name-linking between subsequent tax registers (Ronsijn and Ryckbosch in this volume, for instance and more results will emerge from Alfani's SMITE projects in the near future). Interpreting relative mobility requires not only an assessment of economic and political change, but also a consideration of perhaps more prosaic and definitely more commonplace changes related to family and lifecycle. David Herlihy already noted that demographic mechanisms alone were enough to explain the regular renewal of medieval elites, without necessarily diminishing the unequal nature of social structures (Herlihy 1973). If aristocratic families in the late medieval and early modern period appear obsessed with establishing family trees in order to show how deep their roots stretched back perhaps this was a hotly contested attempt at negotiating social positions and hierarchies, rather than vain pastimes for the rich (Buylaert and Haemers 2016; Friedrich 2023).

Despite their best attempts, elite renewal in the late medieval and early modern period was indeed quite normal, as Huizinga had already observed. Whereas the nobility as a social group did not necessarily grow or shrink much, their ranks had to be constantly replenished by newly ennobled families (Buylaert 2015). A similar process characterised many late medieval and early modern urban magistrates.

Demography alone does not tell the whole story. It has been suggested that the early modern period was in many places characterised by a gradual process of oligarchisation, thus pointing to long-term changes in the openness to relative social mobility at the top of the social hierarchy (for instance Malinowski 2024). A bold synthesis of this literature could perhaps begin to narrate the emergence of a high degree of absolute and relative mobility from the commercial revolution of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, followed by a tendency towards oligarchisation in

the centuries after the late medieval crisis, and the return of a more absolutely mobile dynamic - at least in some areas – from the eighteenth century onwards.

However, I believe it would be wise to resist this temptation, and to learn from some of the errors of our ways in the historical literature on inequality. Of course all new insights into pre-industrial mobility are valuable, even if we have to be careful not to arrive too quickly at syntheses and grand claims based on heterogeneous methods, definitions, and case studies. Many students of pre-industrial mobility argue that their findings are of particular importance because little evidence or consensus currently exists on the topic of pre-industrial mobility levels and trends – an argument familiar to anyone who read the literature on pre-industrial inequality about a decade ago (a recent synthesis of the status quaestionis in that field in Alfani 2021, 2024). The implicit straw man for many of these studies is the baseline assumption of many a sociologist, economist or modern historian that the history of social mobility was essentially immovable before 1800 (see Sorokin 1998; Van Leeuwen and Maas 2010). Staple images of a rigid and static pre-industrial world are of course helped by the mental image of the three estates, which was evoked up until the end of the eighteenth century as a structuring principle for society (in general see Mousnier 1972).

Narratives of a stable society in which estates were fixed by birth chimed well with nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernisation theories in need of an immutable pre-industrial society as a starting point for their own, contrasting social imaginary. The presumed fluidity of modern societies was imagined as precisely opposite to pre-industrial estate societies based on ascription. Joseph Schumpeter famously compared the 'modern' wealthy elite to a bus of which the passengers changed continuously, suggesting a constant process of renewal based on 'creative destruction' that distinguished modern – benevolent – elites with pre-industrial, extractive ones (Schumpeter 2013 (1942); Beckert 2022). When visiting the United States, Alexis de Tocqueville was struck by the social, political, and cultural ramifications of a society without a landed elite and inherited, aristocratic wealth (De Tocqueville 2003 (1838)). He believed that American wealth changed hands so quickly that two succeeding generations could rarely find themselves in its full enjoyment.

This modern imaginary has been in an increasingly desperate state of besiegement in recent years. Recent studies on social mobility today – especially with regards to wealth - have shown how wealth positions are passed on more often than previously expected (Pfeffer and Killewald 2018). It has been shown, for instance, that parental wealth is associated with educational attainment, labour market outcomes and transition to homeownership, while individual wealth facilitates self-employment and transition into homeownership and affects life-cycle decisions such as marriage, parenthood, and retirement (Killewald, Pfeffer, and Schachner 2017). Not only the effect of parental wealth appears to correlate with the wealth of adult children, but also the wealth of grandparents (Long and Ferrie 2018; Braun and Stuhler 2018).

As far as social mobility, meritocracy and the 'American Dream' are concerned, especially if both wealth and a longer timeframe are taken into account, most countries seem to be a lot less modern than they had imagined themselves to be (compare to Latour 2013). If modernisation theory has proven to be quite mistaken in its

interpretation of mobility today, what about the implications for pre-industrial mobility studies?

4. Conceptual challenges ahead

Although most medieval or early modern historians would feel little hesitation over abandoning notions of an immobile pre-industrial past with low levels of social mobility, other implications of modernisation theory have become more subtly entrenched in the discipline. The implicit focus of modern mobility studies – also those applied to the pre-industrial past – is often inherently individualistic, as it situated modernity in the free movement of individuals in and out of voluntary social groups. The dimensions of interest are also deeply tied up in theories of modernisation, by focusing on income, wealth or occupation they adopt modern conceptions of political economy.

The problematic origins and anachronistic nature of its central concepts is not unique to the field of historical mobility studies, nor does it invalidate results obtained by applying them. The ways in which we measure or interpret many aspects of social and economic history in the distant past are anachronistic and would have been foreign to the categories of analysis available to contemporary observers. Few would dispute the relevance of measuring economic growth in the twelfth century, or CO_2 emissions in Ancient Rome despite the fact that these concepts were entirely unknown to people living during those times. However, when empirical observation makes way for interpretation, the conceptual categories and knowledge structures of contemporaries should not be taken for granted based on modern assumptions tied up with modern concepts.

Households in medieval or early modern Europe were not necessarily as much motivated by individual desires for increasing their wealth, income or class position as political economists from Adam Smith onwards would advise them to be. Not much is known with any certainty, or indeed knowable at all, of popular conceptions of political economy before the enlightenment, but individualistic conceptions of relative social mobility – central to modern conceptions of social mobility – are unlikely to have been a central concern. When analyses of social mobility connect their findings to instances of social and political uprising such as the Florentine Ciompi (1378), or the Communidades (1521), it would be tempting to find causal links – from closed societies to popular resentment – which are not necessarily straightforward. Political analyses of late medieval and early modern revolts usually do not stress individual, relative social mobility as a central point of contention. Instead, they emphasise the language of the 'bonum commune' – or the common good – and how it was threatened by individual members of the elite who enriched themselves for selfish reasons (Haemers and Eersels 2020). When social and economic concerns were raised during such times of upheaval (Dumolyn, Speecke and Ryckbosch 2021), it was often about transparency and fair competition, fair wages, or decent living standards for collectives (such as craft guilds or labourers) – not about a lack of individual, relative mobility (Van Gelder 2018; Farge 1993; Wood 2017).

The relationship between popular understandings of fairness, social mobility, and political agitation is complex, not only in the past – but also today. Studies in political sciences have often demonstrated how poorer social groups are not necessarily in favour – let alone vote for – the most redistributive policies (Bartels 2005). Many of the losers of a free-for-all market capitalism are often the greatest supporters of keeping the American dream alive. If such relationships are difficult to disentangle today, we must be wary not to assume their existence in the more distant past. It would be tempting to attribute great significance to social mobility, or the lack thereof, in the pre-industrial world – but in fact it remains hard to assess what the causes and effects of such mobility patterns were.

5. Pre-modern visions of mobility

If we can not take our own assumptions about the interpretations of mobility for granted – neither about the kinds of mobility that matter most, nor about their inherent desirability – perhaps more attention should be directed to the interpretative frames available to medieval and early modern Europeans when trying to make sense of shifting social trajectories. Although this was not a major point of concern for most of the contributions to this volume, it will be necessary in order to better understand the meaning of these results. A.T. Brown has argued that in late medieval England the fear of downward social mobility was a more important driver of economic change – both in consumption and in land exploitation – than the desire for upward mobility (Brown 2019). Regardless of the direction, it seems clear that concerns over social mobility became greater from at least the fourteenth century onwards, even if it is unclear whether this corresponded to actual changes in rates of mobility at all.

Against the moralists regarding any path of social mobility as an aberration, medieval and early modern individuals could always invoke the idea of the wheel of fortune ('rota fortunae'). Fortune was a classical trope used to explain, predict, or warn against the unpredictable changes in economic or social status that could befall everyone. Fortune already played a central role in Chaucer, and was a common invocation in many mercantile letters, but its domain seems to have been quite limited otherwise. Over the course of the early modern period, fortune seems to have gradually expanded her reach, imposing a degree of fluidity, mobility and unpredictability on an ever wider range of social contexts and domains.

When in the decades before the French Revolution social positions began to be understood more in terms of political economy and less in the moralistic terms of an estate-based society (Sewell 1994), this was perhaps the temporary culmination of a longer process with potentially more impact in affecting social and economic behaviour than any lived experience of social mobility itself (compare to Levy and Immerwahr for similar interpretations on fortune and social status in late nineteenth-century US: Levy 2014; Immerwahr 2024).

In the discussion on the fiscal sources used by several of the contributions included in this volume, it is frequently noted that medieval tax regimes often exempted specific groups or assets from taxation. Although it has been discussed

here primarily as a point of source criticism or a methodological hurdle to overcome, the gradual disappearance and abolishment of fiscal privileges and exemptions over the course of the period that we cover here in itself indicates the loosening grip of the order-based society of the old regime (Kwass 1998).

In recent decades, the growth of the early modern market for consumer goods has been interpreted as an indicator and a driver for economic growth and growing market specialisation (De Vries 2008; Kwass 2022). It does not take much imagination to interpret the gradual decline of sumptuary legislation across early modern Europe (Hunt 1996), as well as the growing participation of consumers from across the social spectrum in a consumer culture based on shared values of novelty and fashion, as indications of a growing acceptance of social fluidity, and a rejection of a fixed social order (Sewell 2014). Whether the acceptance of social mobility also led to more mobility in practice is a question which the new empirical literature on the latter can hopefully help to answer.

6. Mobility and marginalisation

If despite the obstacles outlined above, a general theory of changes in pre-industrial social mobility were nevertheless to emerge, it would be important to consider explicitly to whom it applied. The scarcity of data to analyse mobility in the more distant past often limits our ambitions to establishing a few snapshots here and there. Yet it is important to consider whether the processes and mechanisms such snapshots reveal were applicable to all in equal degrees. In the literature on medieval social mobility patterns, attention has often been aimed at those social groups who left sufficient source trails: often relatively wealthy men (see also comments on this in Brown 2019; Carocci 2011). In the current volume a wide range of social groups has received attention, including merchants, sons of peasants, craftsmen, serfs, and members of the urban patriciate or parliament. Yet it would be a stretch to claim that all social groups present in medieval and early modern society are equally represented. Quite a few groups, such as women, or colonised people overseas, barely figure in our analyses of social mobility.

The drive for more and better empirical data also threatens to exacerbate the implicit social bias in historical social mobility studies. Linking different archival sources over time in order to create trajectories of mobility directs attention to citizens over transitory or migrant populations. The implicit bias towards less mobile, sedentary, and traditional household structures falsely gives the impression that everyone could potentially achieve social mobility. But was this actually the case? Moreover, the tendency to focus on upward rather than downward trajectories of social mobility threatens to implicitly bring back older viewpoints on the history of empire and colonialism. Post-colonial perspectives again have become quite distant when mercantile capitalists, protoindustrial entrepreneurs, and colonial administrators become re-centered in the analysis, whereas those whose opportunities for improving their wellbeing were negatively impacted as a result – in Europe or overseas – quietly disappear from the narrative again.

7. Conclusions

In a recent essay in Past and Present, Trevor Jackson has suggested that the historical literature on pre-modern inequality might hold more insights for the near future than the study of the more recent past (Jackson 2023). It might be interpreted as a rather pessimistic interpretation of late modernity as an autumn tide. A growing literature in sociology and economic anthropology draws on suggestive terminology from the pre-modern past to describe new and often alarming trends in social structures (Beckert 2022). 'Neo-feudal', 'patrimonial', 'oligarchic', 'plutocratic', and 'dynastic' would at first sight appear as anachronistic terms to describe modern societies (McGoey and Thiel 2018; Piketty 2013; Winters 2011; Freeland 2012; Savage 2021), yet they are meant to invoke the return of an undesirable and unjust past with high inequality and rigid social structures. Not unlike Huizinga's invocation of a society whose chivalric ideals no longer corresponded to its more prosaic reality, the social conditions of modernity appear to many to be similarly paradoxical.

If the rise of nepo-babies and the death of the American Dream today suggests that the modernisation paradigm of social mobility is over, then what lessons would pre-industrial Europe have to offer? One possible answer could perhaps be found not so much in the desire, but the fear for social mobility apparent in much of late medieval and early modern Europe. Voluntary associations such as guilds and confraternities, taking oaths of mutual support and assistance as measures against the threat of individual impoverishment, and markets organised for transparency and fairness rather than growth or accumulation, might hold some clues as to the ways in which those with less power protected themselves against the downward spin of the Wheel of Fortune.

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