

Antoni Furió

*Round table comments*

Vorrei cominciare facendo un elogio di ciò che la Settimana di Prato ha rappresentato e continua a rappresentare per gli storici medievalisti della mia generazione, in un momento in cui la storia economica non attraversa il suo momento migliore.<sup>1</sup> Per molto tempo, fin dai tempi fondativi di Fernand Braudel e Federigo Melis, più di cinquant'anni fa, la Settimana di Studi organizzata dal Datini è stata al contempo la vetrina più rappresentativa della migliore storia economica che si stava scrivendo all'epoca e un faro illuminante, una guida preziosa, sui temi, problemi e percorsi che si dovevano affrontare. E addirittura un anno la Settimana è stata dedicata proprio al tema *Dove va la storia economica? Metodi e prospettive*, esplorando e discutendo vecchie e nuove sensibilità, strumenti e rapporti con altre discipline (Ammannati 2011).

La Settimana, inoltre, è sempre stata molto attenta ai grandi e gravi problemi del nostro tempo e ha saputo reagire opportunamente alla crisi finanziaria del 2008, che ha messo fine al sogno di una crescita economica ininterrotta, all'aumento del *gap* tra i più ricchi e i più poveri, tra chi ha di più e chi non ha nulla o quasi, e al deterioramento e al crollo degli ascensori sociali. Ascensori che sono sempre più fuori uso e non garantiscono più che i figli vivano meglio dei loro genitori. E Prato ha reagito alle urgenze del presente dedicando una Settimana alle crisi finanziarie dell'età preindustriale (Nigro 2016), un'altra alla disuguaglianza economica (cause ed effetti) (Nigro 2020) e una terza – questa, l'edizione di quest'anno – alla mobilità sociale. In qualche modo, l'analisi della mobilità sociale è stata la continuazione logica degli studi sulla disuguaglianza economica che hanno dominato il secondo decennio del XXI secolo, come dimostrano anche molti dei progetti di ricerca, cominciando da quelli diretti da Guido Alfani sull'Italia – e pure sull'Europa occidentale – (Alfani 2015, 2020a and 2020b), ma anche quelli realizzati in altri paesi, come i Paesi Bassi (Blondé et al. 2020) o la Spagna, dove l'attenzione si è riorientata passando dalla disuguaglianza alla mobilità.<sup>2</sup> O meglio, ciò che abbiamo appreso e continuiamo ad

---

<sup>1</sup> Il suo arretramento è evidente tra gli storici, oggi più interessati alle diverse declinazioni della storia culturale, e i quali l'hanno progressivamente abbandonata nelle mani dei cliometri, attualmente egemoni nella disciplina. Tra le molte voci critiche che ne hanno fatto eco, si veda il libro di Francesco Boldizzoni (2011), così come le reazioni sulfuree che ha suscitato, tra cui quella di Deirdre McCloskey (2013).

<sup>2</sup> Si vedano, oltre al recente libro a cura di Carvajal de la Vega et al. (2024), i progetti di ricerca passati e in corso guidati da David Carvajal e Hilario Casado, *Crecimiento económico, consumo y desigualdad social al norte de la Corona de Castilla en el largo siglo XVI (ca. 1450-ca. 1580)* e

apprendere sulla disuguaglianza economica ci permette di capire meglio la mobilità sociale e di stabilire quali sono state le connessioni e correlazioni, ma anche quali le divergenze – poiché le tendenze non sono sempre parallele – tra crescita economica (e il suo opposto, la recessione), disuguaglianza e mobilità.

After these introductory words of acknowledgment, focusing on the discussion of the topic that occupies us, I shall start by talking about sources and methodology. Most of the studies on economic inequality and social mobility, and of the papers presented during the *Settimana*, are mainly based on fiscal and, to a lesser extent, notarial sources. Despite the at times significant differences between one region and another, we can speak of a common fiscal and financial culture that extends not only throughout Mediterranean Europe, from the Italian *estimi* and *catasti* to the Occitan *compoix* and *livres d'estimes*, the Catalan *manifests*, *estimes* i *values*, and the Castilian *padrones de riqueza* (Rigaudière 2006; Abbé 2017; Morelló 1992), but also extends beyond the Mediterranean arc and even reaches Portugal and England (Scrase 1996; Rosa 2023), where there are also wealth registers. This common culture that inspires the production of this type of sources not only allows us to better understand the underlying logic behind them, but also to share critical reflections on their possibilities and limitations, such as the presence or not of nobles and ecclesiastics, and of the poor, in this type of document, and also to share methods and analytical tools, such as the use of deciles, the Gini coefficient (and the Theil and Palma indexes) or Lorentz curves.

Although the spread of notarial sources is more restricted to southern Europe, to the Europe of notaries, the same is not true for the main documents for studying social mobility. These are found in notarial registers, and also in other very similar archival series in countries where notaries did not exist, such as dowries, wills and inventories of assets.<sup>3</sup> Despite the differences between one country and another I insist on the need to have a global conversation about the possibilities and limitations of this type of sources which, notwithstanding local and regional differences, are found in most of Europe and are the ones that historians fundamentally use to study economic inequality and social mobility from different perspectives. A third type of sources, less used so far, but equally rich in information on social mobility, are the municipal minute books, in which the composition of the political bodies and the names of the different magistrates and councillors are recorded, thus allowing us to trace the persistence and perpetuation of certain families and individuals in municipal positions, the incorporation of new members, and the closing of ranks and

---

*Desarrollo comercial, desigualdad económica y movilidad social en la Castilla septentrional (1450-1580)*; Pere Verdés, *La desigualdad económica en las ciudades catalanas y mallorquinas durante la baja Edad Media a través de las fuentes del impuesto sobre la riqueza* e *Desigualdad, movilidad y conflicto social en el mundo urbano: Cataluña y Mallorca, s. XIII-XVI*; e Antoni Furió, *Crecimiento económico y desigualdad social en la Europa mediterránea (siglos XIII-XV)*, *¿Crecimiento sin desarrollo? Distribución de la riqueza, movilidad social y acción política en la Europa mediterránea (siglos XIII-XV)* e *Breaking hierarchies. Social Mobility, Economic Dynamism and Institutional Development in the Western Mediterranean (13<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries)*.

<sup>3</sup> See, among the abundant bibliography on notarial records, inventories of assets, auctions, wills, dowries, and other documentary sources for the study of social mobility, Antenhofer, (2020), García Marsilla and Almenar Fernández (2022).

oligarchisation of political power (Angoy García 1988; Vicano 2011; Narbona and Bernabeu 2021).

After the sources, I shall talk about methodology. In particular – but not only – the need to combine quantitative and qualitative approaches. A large part of the historian's work consists of quantifying, measuring (Fourquin 1972; Lemerrier and Zalc 2013). We cannot just give merely an impressionistic account, using only qualifying adjectives, such as high or heavy tax burden, high or low social mobility. We need to quantify it, to use figures, numerical indicators, as has been done admirably these days here, either by calculating the mobility rate, constructing quintiles and matrices, establishing annual averages, or by analysing socio-professional variations from one generation to the next, from fathers to sons. But we cannot just present the numbers either. Historical explanation cannot be limited to tables, graphs and logarithms, to the use of increasingly refined and sophisticated methods, in order to come to very simple and platitudinous conclusions. The backbone, the skeleton, provided by the quantitative approach needs the flesh that the qualitative approach brings, the singular, microhistorical or prosopographical study of individuals, families and lineages (Levi 1992; Robisheaux et al. 2017; Lambert 2021; Kowaleski 2022; Bulst 2022), the analysis of careers and lives, economic, professional, academic and political trajectories (De Ridder-Symoens 1986; Verger 2006; Luengo 2016; Petracca 2023), in order to better understand social mobility, as the cases of Francesco di Marco Datini himself or the Borgia popes show (Nigro 2010; Boriaud 2021; Carrasco 2021). Cases that illustrate better than any number or index the pathways of advancement or, on the contrary, of falling down the social ladder – although the figures will help us to understand and explain the magnitude and generalisation of the rise and fall.

To quantitative and qualitative approaches, I would add the need for context. Long-term analyses, spanning several centuries, are all very well, but they have the major problem of the lack of context to explain the results at each point in time. In addition to often being teleological, arriving at an end that we already know from the start, they are comparing realities that have very different meanings and sources, and data that are not comparable. Data are constructed by historians on the basis of both the sources and their own knowledge of those sources and the social reality of the time, and the fourteenth century is not the same as the eighteenth century, even if they both fall under the common label of pre-industrial times or societies.

Examples of contexts in which to frame and explain social mobility in late medieval and early modern Europe are the processes of expansion and colonisation in the thirteenth century, the Black Death in the fourteenth century, and the plague in the seventeenth century, which have been discussed here these days. But I would like to highlight another process that has not received the attention it deserves, namely political and administrative centralisation and the rise and development of what was formerly known as the modern state and later the fiscal state, from the fourteenth century onwards, with the need for an ever larger and more specialised administrative bureaucracy (Blockmans and Genet 1995-2000; Bonney 1999; Béguin and Genet 2015). If the kings of the eleventh century had only a dozen servants and the monarchs of the thirteenth century a few hundred, those of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had by then thousands of officials and political and administrative

posts, not to mention those required by the municipal and provincial councils, or the Church itself. And that meant huge new possibilities for prosperity and social advancement, through the tenure of political posts or the pursuit of an administrative career in the service of the State (Autrand 1981; Monsalvo 1987; Álvarez 2003). Likewise, taxation, linked to the new political bodies, offered enormous business opportunities to those who leased taxes, whether royal or municipal, or invested in public debt, sustained by tax revenues (Boone et al. 2003; Cavaciocchi 2008; Zuijderdijn 2009; Béguin and Murphy 2017; Menjot et al. 2023).

On the other hand, although due attention has been paid to economic, socio-professional and, to a lesser extent, political mobility, in my opinion important aspects such as cultural, sociological and even anthropological ones have been overlooked. In particular, when studying social mobility, social and cultural markers as important as consumption, living standards, emulation, ostentation, reflected in aspects such as food, clothing, domestic furnishings, table etiquette, deserve more attention. I will end my comments with three examples. The first is the clear awareness of change and general improvement that could be perceived in Piacenza at the end of the fourteenth century, as is shown in a fragment of the chronicle of Giovanni di Musso quoted by Carlo Cipolla:

The people of Piacenza live at present in a clean and opulent way and in their houses they now possess implements and tableware of a much better quality than seventy years ago. The houses are more beautiful than they were then because they now have beautiful rooms with fireplaces, porticoes, courtyards, wells, gardens and attics. Each house now has several chimneys, whereas once there used to be no chimney at all and one had simply to make a fire in the middle of one of the rooms, and then everyone in the house would gather round that one fire and it was there that food was cooked. In general, the people of Piacenza now drink better wines than their parents did.<sup>4</sup>

The second is the complaints and lamentations of the privileged elites about the social ascent of the lower classes. Towards the end of the fifteenth century, the archbishop of Granada and confessor to Queen Isabella the Catholic exclaimed with great compunction that such is the pomp and vanity today of all the labourers and low people. He lamented the presumption and vainglory of the popular classes, who dressed in clothes far above what corresponded to their status, in order to appear more socially important than they really were. There is no longer, said the archbishop, a poor peasant or artisan who does not dress in fine cloth and even silk, which is more to be pondered (Furió 2021). The archbishop's complaint expresses the unease and even the fear of the elites in the face of the changes in and the subversion of the social order. If there were no social markers already in place, if even the poorest peasants and artisans could dress like lords, in the same beautiful clothes that the

---

<sup>4</sup> The *Chronicon Placentinum*, which covers the period from 222 to 1402, was published by Ludovico Antonio Muratori (1730, cols. 441-634). The English translation is by Carlo M. Cipolla (1993) and is reproduced and commented on in the unpublished doctoral thesis of Luis Almenar Fernández (2018).

latter had worn exclusively until then, social differences would vanish and with them the world as God commands.

Precisely to prevent or hinder this social ascent, and this is my last concluding remark, sumptuary laws were passed everywhere from the fourteenth century onwards, and in the Renaissance very rigid rules of protocol were codified, such as table etiquette and the way to use cutlery (knives and forks for meat, fish and desserts) directed against the parvenus, as Norbert Elias states in his beautiful work on the process of civilisation (Elias 1939). A rich farmer, a merchant, could be rich, richer even than a nobleman, but that did not make him a gentleman or a member of the privileged elite. This also required a good upbringing, a good education and manners, how he spoke, dressed, sat at the table, the way he behaved, which was exclusive to the upper classes and which the parvenus tried to emulate. Wealth, enrichment, was not enough for social mobility. To be accepted by the elites, it was also necessary to behave like them and share the same social and cultural values.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alfani, Guido. 2015. "Economic inequality in Northwestern Italy: a long-term view (fourteenth to eighteenth centuries)." *The Journal of Economic history* 75: 1058-96.
- Alfani, Guido. 2020 "Economic inequality in preindustrial Europe, 1300-1800: methods and results from the EINITE project", in *Disuguaglianza economica nelle società preindustriali: cause ed effetti/Economic inequality in pre-industrial societies: causes and effect*, ed. Giampiero Nigro, 21-36. Firenze: Firenze University Press.
- Alfani, Guido, and Erik Thoen, ed. 2020. *Inequality in Rural Europe: Late Middle Ages-18<sup>th</sup> century*, Turnhout: Brepols.
- Almenar Fernández, Luis. 2018. *La cultura material de la alimentación campesina. Consumo y niveles de vida en la Valencia bajomedieval (1280-1460)*. Valencia: University of Valencia.
- Álvarez, César. 2003. "Oficiales y funcionarios concejiles de la Corona de Castilla durante la Baja Edad Media (Un largo proceso de intervención regia y oligarquización)." In *Las sociedades urbanas en la España medieval (XXIX Semana de Estudios Medievales. Estella, 2002)*, 489-540. Pamplona: Gobierno de Navarra.
- Ammannati, Francesco, ed. 2011. *Dove va la storia economica?/Where is is economic history going?*. Firenze: Firenze University Press.
- Angoy García, José Luis. 1988. "Guía metodológica para el estudio de la insaculación de cargos concejiles a través de los libros de actas." In *Metodología de la investigación científica sobre fuentes aragonesas: (actas de las III Jornadas)*, ed. Agustín Ubieto Arteta, 323-34. Zaragoza: Universidad de Zaragoza.
- Antenhofer, Christina. 2020. "Inventories as Material and Textual Sources for Late Medieval and Early Modern Social, Gender and Cultural History (14th-16th centuries)." *Memo* 7: 22-46.
- Autrand, Françoise. 1981. *Naissance d'un grand corps d'État. Les gens du Parlement de Paris, 1345-1454*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne.
- Béguin, Katia, and Jean-Philippe Genet, ed. 2015. *Ressources publiques et construction étatique en Europe, XIIIe - XVIIIe siècle*. Paris: Institut de la gestion publique et

- du développement économique, Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière de la France.
- Béguin, Katia, and Anne L. Murphy, ed. 2017. *State Cash Resources and State Building in Europe 13<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century*. Paris: Institut de la gestion publique et du développement économique, Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière de la France.
- Blockmans, Wim, and Jean-Philippe Genet, ed. 1995-2000. *The origins of the modern state in Europe: 13<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Blondé, Bruno, Hilde Greefs, Wouter Ryckbosch, Tim Soens, and Peter Stabel, ed. 2020. *Inequality and the city in the Low Countries (1200-2020)*. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Boldizzoni, Francesco. 2011. *The Poverty of Clio: Resurrecting Economic History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bonney, Richard, ed. 1999. *The rise of the fiscal state in Europe, c. 1200-1815*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Boone, Marc, Karel Davids, and Paul Janssens, ed. 2003. *Urban Public Debts. Urban governments and the market for annuities in Western Europe (14<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries)*. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Bulst, Neithard. 2022. *Les États généraux de France de 1468 et 1484: recherches prosopographiques sur les députés*. Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne.
- Boriaud, Jean-Yves. 2021. *Les Borgia: la pourpre et le sang*. Paris: Perrin.
- Carrasco, Raphaël. 2021. *La famille Borgia. Histoire et légende*. Montpellier, Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée.
- Carvajal de la Vega, David, Hilario Casado, Esther Tello, and Lluís To, ed. 2024. *La desigualdad económica en España Siglos XIV-XVII. Nuevas aproximaciones a viejos problemas*. Madrid: Sílex.
- Cavaciocchi, Simonetta, ed. 2008. *La fiscalità nell'economia europea, secc. XIII-XVIII / Fiscal Systems in the European Economy, from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries*. Florence: Firenze University Press.
- Cipolla, Carlo M. 1993. *Before the Industrial Revolution: European Society and Economy 1000-1700*. London: Routledge.
- De Ridder-Symoens, Hilde. 1986. "Possibilités de carrière et de mobilité sociale des intellectuels-universitaires au Moyen Âge." In *Medieval Lives and the Historian: Studies in Medieval Prosopography (Proceedings of the First International Interdisciplinary Conference on Medieval Prosopography, Bielefeld, 1982)*, ed. Neithard Bulst, and Jean-Philippe Genet, 343-57. Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University Press.
- Elias, Norbert. 1939. *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation*. Basel, Haus Zum Falken. (Translated into English as *The Civilizing Process*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1969-1982).
- Fourquin, Guy. 1972. "Réflexions de méthode sur le quantitatif et l'histoire du Moyen Âge occidental." *Revue de l'Institut de Sociologie* 2: 213-21.
- Furió, Antoni. 2021. "'Tanta es la pompa y vanidad hoy de todos los labradores y gente baja': i nuovi consumi delle elite rurali nella penisola iberica nel tardo Medioevo." In *Una nuova cultura del consumo? Paradigma italiano ed esperienze europee nel tardo Medioevo (Atti del XXVII Convegno internazionale di studi: Pistoia, 17-19 maggio 2019)*, 153-82. Roma: Viella.

- García Marsilla, Juan Vicente, and Luis Almenar Fernández. 2022. "Fashion, emulation and social classes in late medieval Valencia. Exploring textile consumption through probate inventories." In *La moda come motore economico: innovazione di processo e prodotto, nuove strategie commerciali, comportamento dei consumatori/Fashion as an economic engine: process and product innovation, commercial strategies, consumer behavior*, ed. Giampiero Nigro. Firenze: Firenze University Press.
- Kowaleski, Maryanne. 2022. "A New Digital Prosopography. The Medieval Londoners Database." *Medieval People* 36-1: 311-32.
- Lambert, Bart. 2021. "I, Edmund?: a microhistory of an immigrant churchwarden in fifteenth-century Colchester." In *People, power and identity in the Late Middle Ages. Essays in memory of W. Mark Ormrod*, ed. Gwilyn Dodd, Helen E. Lacey, and Anthony J. Musson, 91-114. Abingdon-New York: Routledge.
- Lemercier, Claire, and Claire Zalc. 2013. "Le sens de la mesure: l'histoire et les nouveaux usages de la quantification." In *À quoi pensent les historiens?*, ed. Christophe Granger, 135-48. Paris: Éditions Autrement.
- Levi, Giovanni. 1992. "On Microhistory." In *New Perspectives on historical writing*, ed. Peter Burke, 93-113. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Luengo, Alberto. 2016. "Notariato e mobilità sociale nell'Italia cittadina del XIV secolo." In *La mobilità sociale nel Medioevo italiano: competenze, conoscenze e saperi tra professioni e ruoli sociali (sec. XII-XV)*, ed. Lorenzo Tanzini, and Sergio Tognetti, 243-272. Roma: Viella.
- McCloskey, Deirdre. 2013. "The poverty of Boldizzoni: Resurrecting the German Historical School." *Investigaciones de historia económica – Economic History Research*, 9: 2-6.
- Menjot, Denis, Mathieu Caesar, Florent Garnier, and Pere Verdés, ed. 2023. *The Routledge Handbook of Public Taxation in Medieval Europe*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Monsalvo, José María. 1987. "El reclutamiento del personal político concejil. La designación de corregidores, alcaldes y alguaciles en un concejo del siglo XV." *Studia historica. Historia medieval* 5: 173-95.
- Muratorì, Ludovico Antonio, ed. 1730. *Chronicon Placentinum*. In *Rerum italicarum scriptores*, vol. 16, cols. 441-634. Milan: Societatis Palatinae.
- Narbona, Rafael, and Sandra Bernabeu. 2021. *Proboms i cavallers de València; el Consell, 1306-1516*. Valencia: PUV.
- Nigro, Giampiero, ed. 2010. *Francesco di Marco Datini: the man and the merchant*. Firenze: Firenze University Press.
- Nigro, Giampiero, ed. 2016. *Le crisi finanziarie: Gestione, implicazioni sociali e conseguenze nell'età preindustriale/The Financial Crises: Their Management, their Social Implications and their Consequences in Pre-Industrial Times*. Firenze: Firenze University Press.
- Nigro, Giampiero, ed. 2020. *Disuguaglianza economica nelle società preindustriali: cause ed effetti/Economic inequality in pre-industrial societies: causes and effect*. Firenze: Firenze University Press.

- Petracca, Luciana. 2023. "Il ceto notarile in una provincia del Mezzogiorno d'Italia (sec. XV). Formazione, carriere e mobilità sociale." *Studia historica. Historia medieval* 41-1: 165-86.
- Robisheaux, Thomas W., Thomas V. Cohen and István M. Szijártó, ed. 2017. *Microhistory and the Historical Imagination: New Frontiers*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Rosa, Catarina. 2023. "Uma aproximação à documentação fiscal em Portugal: fontes para o estudo da fiscalidade municipal direta na Idade Média (sécs. XV-início do XVI)." *Comptabilité(s)* 15.  
<http://journals.openedition.org/comptabilites/6378>
- Scrase, Anthony J. 1996. "Working with British property records: the potential and the problems." In *Power, profit and urban land. Landownership in medieval and early modern Northern European towns*, ed. Finn-Einar Eliassen, and Geir Atle Ersland, 15-38. Aldershot: Scolar Press.
- Verger, Jacques. 2006. "Les études, facteur de mobilité sociale en Europe à la fin du Moyen Âge?" In *Europa im späten Mittelalter: Politik - Gesellschaft - Kultur*, ed. Rainer C. Schwinges, Christian Hesse, and Peter Moraw, 559-68. Munich: Oldenbourg.
- Viciano, Pau. 2011. *Regir la cosa pública: Proboms i poder local a la vila de Castelló (segles XIV-XV)*. Valencia: PUV.
- Zuijderduijn, Jaco. 2009. *Medieval capital markets. Markets for renten, state formation and private investment in Holland (1300-1550)*. Leiden: Brill.