Socio-economic inequalities during the conjuncture of the fourteenth century: sources and methods, dynamics and representations (Italy and Europe, c. 1270 - c. 1350). An outline

by Davide Cristoferi

Il capitolo discute le caratteristiche, le dinamiche e l'evoluzione delle disuguaglianze socio-economiche durante la congiuntura del Trecento, integrando i principali risultati dei contributi di questo volume con quelli in letteratura. Dopo aver delineato il contesto storiografico del volume, il saggio discute gli obiettivi, l'arco temporale e i concetti ivi utilizzati. Il cuore del capitolo è suddiviso in quattro sezioni, che si concentrano rispettivamente sulle fonti, i parametri e i metodi utilizzati per studiare le disuguaglianze, sulle evidenze quantitative e qualitative riscontrate e sulle percezioni, le rappresentazioni e le risposte all'ineguale distribuzione della ricchezza e delle opportunità nell'Europa occidentale e in Italia centro-settentrionale tra 1270 e il 1347. Il saggio termina riassumendo le dinamiche e le possibili cause dell'evoluzione delle disuguaglianze socio-economiche durante la congiuntura del Trecento.

The chapter discusses the characteristics, dynamics and evolution of socio-economic inequalities during the fourteenth-century conjuncture, integrating the main findings of the essays of this edited volume with further evidence and insights from past and current research. After setting out the historiographical context of the volume, the chapter discusses the aims, timeframe and concepts used. The core of the chapter is then divided into four sections, each focusing on the sources, proxies and methods used to study inequality, the quantitative and qualitative evidence found, and the perceptions, representations and responses to the unequal distribution of wealth and opportunity in Western Europe and Central-Northern Italy between 1270 and 1347. The chapter concludes by discussing the development and causalities of the evolution of socio-economic inequalities during the fourteenth-century conjuncture.

Medioevo, secoli XIII-XIV, Western Europe, Central-Northern Italy, conjuncture, socio-economic inequalities.

Middle Ages, 13th-14th centuries, Europa occidentale, Italia centro-settentrionale, congiuntura, diseguaglianze economiche e sociali.

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1. *Introduction: at the crossroads of two outstanding debates*

Economic inequality, social mobility, and poverty have been at the centre of the research agenda of medievalists, economists and economic historians in the last decade.[1] Relevant research programmes and publications, such as those of Piketty, Milanovic, Alfani, Scheidel, Thoen, Benito, Carocci, Feller and others, have been driven by the desire to go beyond previous scientific paradigms and – perhaps even more – to address (directly or indirectly) problems and concerns of the present, especially in the Western world, such as the growth of inequality, the blockage of social mobility, the rising number of super-rich or even the increasing downward shift of middling and poor social groups, often linked to the impact of globalization, pandemics, wars and migration.[2] As far as preindustrial economic inequality is concerned, an increasing number of sources – tax registers, land registers, probate inventories, dowry and marriage contracts, etc. – have been mobilized and analyzed by scholars in a standardized way, resulting in a large dataset of Gini and/or Theil index measures of wealth concentration in cities, regions and states for the period c. 1350-1800.[3] The main result of this massive research effort is to show an almost monotonic concentration of wealth across Europe in the long run, challenging the Kuznets paradigm that links rising inequality to economic growth.[4] In fact, rising inequality can be observed almost everywhere

[1] This volume, the results of which are presented and discussed here, publishes the proceedings of a panel conference held at the ESSHC of Gothenburg in April 2023 (*Economic Inequality before the Black Death: Sources, Methods and Case-studies (1290-1348)*) and two online seminars held in June and October of the same year (*Socio-Economic Inequalities during the Crisis of the Fourteenth century: Reality and Perceptions (Italy and Europe, 1270-1330)*) as results of the FWO (n. n. 12Z8221N) and FNRS (n. 40005274) funded project EI-MED (2020-6). I would like to thank Thijs Lambrecht and Alexis Wilkin, the appointed supervisors of my research project at Ghent University and the Université libre de Bruxelles for their generous and constant support during these years. I am grateful to all the authors for their original contribution to this editorial adventure and, in particular, to Gabriella Piccinni, Paolo Nanni, Antoni Furió, Chris Briggs and Giacomo Todeschini for their invaluable help in discussing the perspectives and issues of the seminars and their proceedings. I would also like to thank Franco Franceschi and Guido Alfani, who attended the first seminar online and were an important reference for both this volume and my research on economic inequality as well as the anonymous reviewer for the helpful comments provided. In this respect, the responsibility for what follows is mine. Finally, my gratitude goes to the editorial and scientific board of *Reti Medievali E-Book* for accepting this volume in their series.

[2] Piketty, *Capital*; Milanovic, Lindert, Williamson, "Pre-Industrial Inequality;" Milanovic, *Global Inequality*; Banerjee, Duflo, *Poor economics*; Scheidel, *The Great Leveler*; Alfani, Di Tullio, *The Lion's share*; Alfani, "Epidemics, Inequality;" Alfani, *As Gods among Men*; Alfani, Thoen, *Inequality in rural Europe*; Carocci, *La mobilità sociale*; Carocci, Lazzarini, *Social mobility*; Benito, Carocci, Feller, *Économies de la pauvreté*; Feller, Grillo, Moglia, *Donne e povertà*; *Ricos y pobres*; Boisseuil, Feller, *Fortunes*.

[3] Nigro, *Disuguaglianza economica*; Alfani, "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial;" Alfani, "Economic Inequality in Northwestern;" Alfani, Ammannati. "Long-term trends;" Alfani, García Montero, "Wealth inequality;" Alfani, Gierok, Schaff, "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial."

[4] Alfani, "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial," 19-30; Kuznets, "Economic growth."

in early modern Europe where the economy was stagnating or growing.[5] As a result, van Bavel has rightly defined some regions and periods of European (and global) history as "islands of equality in a sea of inequality".[6] Moreover, this now consolidated wave of studies raises many questions about the deeper causes of changes in inequality: consistent lower concentrations of wealth in the pre-industrial era have only been observed in the case of major pandemics, such as the Black Death of 1347-52, or prolonged wars and particularly the Thirty Years' War (1618-48).[7] At the same time, scholars have discussed the role played in increasing inequality by economic or demographic growth, urbanization as well as by institutions such as regressive taxation, inheritance systems, access to commons, and labour regulations.[8] In addition, poverty and changes in social mobility have been studied by medievalists as part of the medieval economic growth that Western Europe experienced between the eleventh and late thirteenth centuries, as well as a complex outcome of social hierarchies and marginalization processes.[9]

Before all these studies, the so-called crisis of the fourteenth century was revisited in the years 2004-8 by the extensive research campaign led by Bourin, Carocci, Menant, Drendel and To Figueras, which deconstructed the Postan-Duby paradigm in favour of a complex mosaic of regional socio-economic transformations, both in the North Sea area and, especially, in the north-western Mediterranean.[10] The commercialization of the rural economy, far from being beneficial only to those who have access to the market, turned out to be a relevant factor in shaping production and access to resources, without necessarily leading to economic recession during the first half of the fourteenth century. In this respect, these authors introduced the more balanced term of 'conjuncture'. In fact, there were areas, social groups and economic activities that were able to benefit from the new economic changes, while others were more or less severely damaged and previous structures transformed.[11]

[5] Alfani, Ryckbosch. "Growing apart."
[6] van Bavel, "Looking."
[7] van Bavel; Alfani, "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial," 19-30; Scheidel, *The Great Leveler*. The Thirty Years' War is the only conflict of medieval and preindustrial Europe for which we have clear evidence of inequality decline: Alfani, Gierok, Schaff, "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial."
[8] Alfani, "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial," 19-34; van Zanden, "Tracing;" van Bavel, "Looking;" Blondé *et al.*, *Inequality*.
[9] Carocci, *La mobilità sociale*; Carocci, Lazzarini, *Social mobility*; Collavini, Petralia, *La mobilità*; Benito, Carocci, Feller, *Économies de la pauvreté*; for a comprehensive synthesis of recent and less recent research: Fara, "Emarginazione." See also the proceedings of the 55° Datini Study Week (2024) on *Social Mobility in pre-industrial societies: tendencies, causes and effects (13th-18th centuries)*.
[10] Bourin, Carocci, Menant, To Figueras, "Les campagnes;" Bourin, Drendel, Menant, *Les disettes*; Bourin, Menant, To Figueras. *Dynamiques*; Drendel, *Crisis*.
[11] Bourin, Carocci, Menant, To Figueras, "Les campagnes." For an important regional case-study (Lombardy): Grillo, Menant, *La congiuntura*. For the Italian peninsula after the Black Death: *Italia 1350-1450*.

It should be noted, however, that the term 'conjuncture', which we have also adopted in this edited volume, is generally used by French (*conjoncture*) and Italian (*congiuntura*) medievalists, and not in English or in Spanish historiography of the late Middle Ages, for instance.[12] In Spain, the term *coyuntura* is used to describe a historical situation resulting from a series of defined factors and circumstances over an average period of time (from one generation to around a century), and not necessarily linked to the fourteenth century: this definition and use, as is well known, is mainly due to the influence of the Braudel and *Annales* school and has also spread from French to Italian historiography.[13] However, the term 'crisis' is still used by Spanish scholars to describe the period after the Black Death, although the applicability of the Malthusian explanations is denied contextually due to the low population pressure, or to define specific negative events, such as mortality or food crises.[14] Similarly, for England and the Low Countries, the term 'crisis' is also considered by scholars to be the more appropriate even for the pre-Black Death period, without denying the post-Malthusian meaning attributed to it by the above-mentioned research.[15] In addition to the differences in perception, historiography and traditional use of the term 'conjuncture', this choice is probably due to the different impact and sequence of adverse events that occurred in the early fourteenth century, such as the Great Famine of 1315-7, between the northern and southern parts of Western Europe.[16] More recently,

[12] See footnotes 10 and 11 above. In Italian historiography, the debate has been open since the 1990s: at a congress in 1993, terms such as 'crisis', 'transformation' and 'development' were used in combination to describe the changes that occurred in Italy between 1350 and 1450: *Italia 1350-1450*, while in 2001 the early fourteenth century was seen as the 'apogee' of the development of medieval Mediterranean cities: *Le città del Mediterraneo*. In this volume, for example, the term 'crisis' is still used by Palermo and Montanari to describe their case-studies.

[13] The meaning of the French, Italian, German and Spanish versions of the word 'conjuncture' is the same as one of the original meanings of the term in English, introduced from the French in the seventeenth century but then gradually abandoned: *Oxford English Dictionary online*, s.v., "Conjuncture," Accessed February 11, 2025, https://www.oed.com/search/advanced/Entries?textTermText0=conjuncture&dateOfUseFirstUse=false&page=1&sortOption=Frequency. The use of this term was central to Braudel's subdivision of historical temporality – in *evenément*, *conjuncture* and *structure* – (Braudel, *On History*) meaning it as the tool to study "social history, the history of groups and groupings" and divided into the so-called intermediate conjunctures which include wage and price cycles, rates of industrialization and wars, and long-term conjunctures, which refer to secular changes such as "long-term demographic movements, the changing dimensions of states and empires, the presence or absence of social mobility in a given society, the intensity of industrial growth": Smith, "Braudel's temporal rhythms," 25. A fundamental contribution to disseminate the Braudel's use and definition of the term in Spanish historiography was made by Vilar, *Iniciación al vocabulario*. Before, the distinction between *konjunktur* and *krise* was also at the core of Wilhelm Abel's reconstruction of the European medieval and modern agrarian history: Abel, *Agrarkrisen und Agrarkonjunktur*.

[14] See, for instance, *Europa en los umbrales*; Iradiel, "De 'hija de la Pestilencia;" Benito, *Crisis alimentarias* and the chapters of Furió, Almenar Fernández, Miquel Milian and Morelló Baget in this volume. For a reconstruction of the long-term evolution of the use and meaning of the term 'crisis' in European historiography until Postan, see: Furió, "La crisis."

[15] See Drendel, *Crisis*; Drendel, "Introduction."

[16] See: Bourin, Menant, To Figueras, "Les campagnes européennes;" Bourin, Carocci, Menant, To Figueras, "Les campagnes."

however, the term 'conjuncture' – defined as "unlucky" – it has been used by Bruce Campbell to interpret the fourteenth-century phase of the integrated climatic and socio-economic transition of the medieval world, between the 1270s and 1470s, from efflorescence to instability to recession.[17] Given the different historiographical traditions that we wish to draw upon – mainly converging beyond a Postan-Duby paradigm of the fourteenth century – and taking into account the obvious differences in impact, pace and chronology of the socio-economic changes that occurred during this period, we believe that 'conjuncture' is a more appropriate term to describe the full range of transformations that took place across Europe between c. 1270 and c. 1350, and which form the context and one of the two core themes of this volume.

In addition to the debate on the late medieval conjuncture, French and English archaeologists and historians have argued, on the basis of material culture, that – at least from the second half of the fourteenth century, but sometimes even earlier – the period previously regarded as catastrophic was actually an "age of opportunity", while Italian archaeologists have also recorded positive economic changes, at least in some regions.[18] However, because of the focus on the positive aspects of the expanding late medieval market economy, the extent and depth of the impoverishment of the peasantry and urban workers during this period of peak and transformation has not been widely addressed until recently.[19] In a recent publication the role of labour, credit and the market as triggers of impoverishment, whether permanent or temporary, has been extensively claimed.[20] Conversely, if historians have emphasized the positive influence of economic factors on social mobility since the twelfth century, they have also stressed that this leverage gave way to non-economic channels of advancement with the economic downturn around 1300.[21]

However, with a few exceptions, economic inequality has remained largely unexplored in the research agenda on the conjuncture of the fourteenth century, and especially its first phase, until recent years.[22] The scarce availability of complete and extended datasets and their uneven geographical coverage before 1347 (Figure 1), may explain this gap, together with the predominance of a longitudinal, i.e. diachronic, approach among economic historians privileging long-term data series where available. In addition, and perhaps also because mainstream economic research correspondingly studies economic inequalities using its own statistical approaches, which often shift the focus from interpreting the sources to interpreting the numbers, historians of the late Middle Ages have probably stayed away from this debate until recent-

[17] Campbell, *The Great*, 399.
[18] Burnouf, *Archéologie médiévale*; Dyer, *An age of transition?*; Hinton, *Archaeology*; Molinari, *La congiuntura*.
[19] Benito, Carocci, Feller, *Économies de la pauvreté*. A relevant exception is: *Ricos y pobres*.
[20] Feller, "Introduction;" Carocci, "Conclusioni." Before, see: Mollat, *Les pauvres*.
[21] Maire Vigueur, "Conclusions."
[22] For Tuscany: Pinto, "Ricchezza;" Cherubini, "Proprietari."

ly.[23] Since the last decade, however, economic historians such as Guido Alfani and various research groups of Spanish medievalists have been the first to focus on the levels of economic inequality before the Black Death, for which we now have evidence for Tuscany, Piedmont, Southern France, Germany and the Iberian peninsula, as we will discuss later.[24] However, the aim of these studies has often been to measure and explain the declining trend in wealth concentration as a consequence of the Great Plague, rather than to investigate the cause of the high pre-Black Death inequality found. In this respect, an in-depth study of socio-economic inequality during the first phase of the conjuncture of the fourteenth century, i.e. *before* 1347, is still lacking.

The exclusion of economic inequality from the debate on the conjuncture of the fourteenth century and vice versa risks being detrimental to both research agendas. Indeed, if economic growth seems less relevant now as an explanatory factor for economic inequality, things might be different when considering the early fourteenth century. As early as 2015, Gabriella Piccinni, considering the strength and extent of medieval growth, questioned, in the light of the then nascent debate on economic inequality, whether "all Italians benefited from it in the same proportion" or whether "for everyone, whether in the city or in the countryside, this growth was a dispenser of an additional share of well-being and an opportunity for social advancement, or it also brought to some new material and/or moral misery, physical pain, renewed daily fatigue, unprecedented job insecurity, more hunger".[25] In short, whether inequality is actually 'endogenous' (and to what extent) to economic growth, as Piketty and Milanovic strongly argue for modern societies by looking at the effects of capitalism and global market integration from 1800 to the present.[26] Moreover, in the first half of the fourteenth century, the medieval economy was already undergoing profound changes due to climate transition, disease and warfare, while social change was also exploding with regime changes and popular uprisings such as in the Low Countries.[27] It may therefore be the case that socio-economic inequalities were exacerbated during both the economic peak and the transformation of the fourteenth century, in a relationship that is still difficult to disentangle. In this respect, as has been pointed out, the fourteenth century "continues to elude us to a large extent, even though we are increasingly able to ask it the crucial questions".[28]

[23] Cf. Ammannati, *Dove va la storia*; Carocci, "Il dibattito;" Grohmann, "Considerazioni." See also: Hudson, Ishizu, *History by numbers*, XV-XX, 1-22.
[24] See: Alfani, "Economic Inequality in Northwestern;" Alfani, Ammannati. "Long-term trends;" Alfani, García Montero, "Wealth inequality;" Alfani, Gierok, Schaff, "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial;" Alfani, "Epidemics;" Furió *et al*, "Measuring economic inequality;" Morelló Baget *et al.*, "A study;" Carvajal *et al.*, *La desigualdad económica*.
[25] Piccinni, "All'apogeo," 384, translation from Italian by the author.
[26] Piketty, *Capital*; Milanovic, *Global Inequality*.
[27] Bourin, Cherubini, Pinto, *Rivolte*.
[28] Carocci, "Il dibattito," 29, translation from Italian by the author.

2. *This collective study: objectives, definitions and structure*

The aim of this volume is to bring together, discuss and further develop the findings and perspectives of these two areas of research – the fourteenth-century conjuncture and pre-industrial economic inequality – through eighteen original and state-of-the-art contributions in English and Italian by established scholars and promising young researchers on socio-economic inequalities in Central-Northern Italy and Western Europe between c. 1270 - c. 1350. More specifically, the volume aims to a) understand how and to what extent medieval society was unequal in the seventy years before the Great Plague of 1347-52. This is central to b) exploring and discussing the causal mechanisms of socio-economic inequalities for this specific context but also on a more general level. Finally, c) to examine how socio-economic inequalities were perceived, represented and dealt with by contemporary medieval societies. Each objective is addressed in a specific section of the volume. In this respect, the volume does not aim to exhaust the topic, but rather to lay the foundations and pave the way for further analyses through a careful choice of scope and time frame which we can summarize in the following four points.

First (1), concerning the concept of inequality we use. By socio-economic inequalities, we mean the unequal distribution of wealth and/or income among groups and individuals, as well as of status and opportunity in a given society, according to the *Encyclopaedia of the UN Sustainable Development Goals*.[29] This dual concept allows us to address the manifold phenomenon of inequality in a more comprehensive way. On the one hand, we can study the inequality of specific "material dimensions of human well-being", such as income and wealth, and examine its structure, dynamics and causes.[30] On the other hand, we can explore the complex web of 'capabilities' and 'entitlements', which in turn are shaped by factors such as formal and informal institutions, mentality and customs, and the unequal concentration of economic variables, all of which contribute to affecting access to income and wealth, but also to food and other goods fundamental to human development as elaborated by Amartya Sen.[31] Moreover, the latter concept can be further integrated with the study of the "economic rationality of the poor" by Nobel laureates such as Banerjee and Duflo, which is particularly helpful in focusing on the lives, aspirations and needs of the people of the lower deciles of a distribution and the socio-economic mechanisms of the so-called 'poverty trap'.[32]

[29] Kamalvanshi, Kushwaha, "Economic Inequality."
[30] Alfonso, LaFleur, Alarcó, "Concepts of Inequality."
[31] Alfonso, LaFleur, Alarcó; Sen, *Resources*, 497: "entitlements are the set of alternative commodity bundles that a person can command in a society using the totality of rights and opportunities that he or she faces". *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "The Capability Approach," substantive revision December 10, 2020: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/capability-approach/: "capabilities are the real freedoms that people have to achieve their potential doings and beings".
[32] Banerjee, Duflo, *Poor economics*. See also: *La ricerca*.

All these concepts are considered by the contributors to this volume to be central to a better understanding of the perennial phenomenon of inequality, all the more so in a context characterized by social hierarchies and constraints, as well as the onset of profound economic and demographic changes, such as those experienced by Western European society since the end of the thirteenth century. The choice of this precise chronological, geographical and cultural space (2) is non-trivial for two reasons: firstly, as mentioned above, it provides an original and coherent, albeit varied, case-study of socio-economic inequalities, that, as said, remained unexplored until recently before the Black Death. Secondly, the paucity of serial written sources and the often incomplete nature of the few that are available force us – in order to study inequality – to be both inventive and cautious at the same time in terms of the records, the parameters and the methods we use, to be comprehensive in terms of both quantitative and qualitative analyses, and to be interdisciplinary, with particular reference to archaeology and statistics, for example.[33]

This synchronic and interdisciplinary approach, beyond its statistical application, is at the heart of the whole volume and has several advantages, as the six chapters in the first section on *Sources, proxies and methods* clearly demonstrate. By using both qualitative and quantitative methods, by focusing on punctual observations and short-term trends as well as on archaeological sources, they are able to overcome the gaps in the archival record and in the geographical coverage of cities or areas such as England, Bruges, Tuscany and more specifically Siena and its countryside, Tortosa, and the Valencian countryside.[34] Indeed, each contributor to this volume rightly has his or her own area of expertise, research interests and intellectual preferences: this is evident, for example, in the chronology used. While the proposed timeframe is indeed between 1270 and 1347, i.e. when European society was at a turning point between its economic and demographic peak and its imminent decline or transformation, some authors have extended their analyses beyond the Black Death in order to detect, for example, a trend or change in the distribution of wealth as well as in economic and socio-political opportunities or mentality.[35]

However, focusing mainly on the period before the Black Death (3) allows us to further question the causes and mechanisms of socio-economic inequalities. For example, we can ask whether the mechanisms behind the rise in economic inequality were the same (or not) before and after an epochal event such as the Great Plague.[36] How unequal was the distribution of wealth

[33] See for instance Blondé *et al.*, *Inequality*.
[34] See the chapters of Orecchioni, Briggs, Geens, Cristoferi, Palermo, Miquel Milian and Morelló Baget, Almenar Fernández. Missing from this section is a contribution on the statistical tools developed to measure inequality in early fourteenth-century England. See also: Alfani, García Montero, "Wealth inequality."
[35] See the chapters of Miquel Milian and Morelló Baget, Almenar Fernández, Feller, Furió, Montanari, Poloni, Nico Ottaviani, Nanni.
[36] For a discussion: Alfani, "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial," 19-34.

and opportunities within medieval society at its peak – and we all know that medieval economic and demographic growth was the greatest Europe had ever experienced before the Industrial Revolution.[37] In this respect, whether or not the Kuznetsian paradigm of growth and redistribution applies to this period or to some areas, to what extent, and up to what point.[38] Or, conversely, whether Piketty's argument – based on the mismatch between (higher) rates of return on capital and (lower) rates of economic growth, which the economist believes to be valid for the preindustrial period as well – could apply to at least some of the evidence of economic inequality found in the first half of the fourteenth century, when economic growth appears to have slowed.[39] Finally, whether there is a direct relationship between socio-economic inequalities in the early fourteenth century and the degree of resilience of rural and urban society to pandemics such as the Black Death or famines such as that of 1315-7.[40]

The seven chapters of the second section – focusing on *Contexts, dynamics and causalities* – are not intended to provide an exhaustive answer to all these questions, but at least to contribute to a better assessment of them – as I will resume in the following pages – by exploring the dynamic evolution of socio-economic inequalities and their biunivocal relationship with other variables. These are poverty and impoverishment, demography, property relations and agrarian contracts, land distribution, famine and access to rural and urban food markets, social mobility and political representation. Furthermore, these dynamics were compounded for women by the high unequal gender structure of medieval society.[41] The chapters zoom in and out from a broader Western European perspective to the Iberian Peninsula, to regions such as the Southern Low Countries or Italian Romagna, or to individual cities such as Florence and Rome.[42] From this broad perspective, however, the volume regrettably lacks a chapter on a relevant factor in early fourteenth-century urban inequality, namely the institutions, labour regulations and organization of the guilds and of the 'industrial' sector, especially the textile production.[43] Other relevant causal factors to be considered are also the impact of warfare and war economy and of regressive taxation: in this respect, some insights

[37] See Piccinni, "All'apogeo" and *La crescita*.
[38] For later period: van Zanden, "Tracing;" Alfani, "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial," 19-34.
[39] Piketty, *Capital*, part 1, also for preindustrial period; Alfani, "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial," 19-34.
[40] Curtis, *Coping*, chapter 4. Historians have focused on the redistributive consequences of epidemics rather than the resilience of unequal societies to them: Alfani, "Epidemics, Inequality;" van Bavel, "Looking."
[41] See the chapter of Feller and Feller, Grillo, Moglia, *Donne e povertà*.
[42] See the chapters of Feller, Furió, Speecke and Lambrecht, Montanari, Wilkin, Poloni.
[43] Missing from this section is a paper on the internal hierarchies of guilds and the organisation of work in the cities of Central-Northern Italy, presented at the preparatory seminar in June 2023. See also: Franceschi, "Mobilità;" Franceschi, "Salariato."

from past and current research can nevertheless be made, as they are presented in the following pages.[44]

Finally, the urban society of Central-Northern Italy (4), already a point of reference for the study of inequality and the fourteenth-century conjuncture, offers one of the best case-studies for cross-referencing (and thus going beyond) the measurement and explanation of socio-economic inequalities with the way they were represented, perceived and, eventually, accepted or dealt with by contemporary medieval society and its own members. This is indeed the subject of the five chapters in the last section of the volume – which focuses on *Perceptions, representations and responses*: by looking at this triad, these contributions do not intend to offer a mere counterpart – that of 'immaterial perception' – to the 'material reality' of inequalities. On the contrary, by examining the written, visual and material languages used, the political discourses, the sumptuary laws and the welfare policies enacted in the early fourteenth-century Italian urban society, these chapters remind us once again that even the sources we use to quantify, for example, the distribution of an economic variable are not neutral, but at the very moment they describe such an unequal reality, whether they intend to or not, they also contribute to creating, framing, certifying and justifying it and to activating processes of exclusion/inclusion, marginalization or, even recognition and alleviation.[45] Such an awareness is seen as fundamental both to a correct epistemology of our sources and data, and to a reconsideration of the whole Kuznetsian argument about the positives of inequality. In addition, this focus can provide more insights to a research field now central in the debate of modern and contemporary inequality: the social awareness, reproduction and justification of socio-economic differentiations.[46]

The focus on Central-Northern Italy, nevertheless, reminds us of a final regrettable omission, namely the limited geographical scope of the volume on the Italian Peninsula, which is limited to the areas above Rome (Figure 1). Southern Italy, recently included in the quantitative research on economic inequality for the early modern period, still awaits a combined analysis on the distribution of wealth and opportunities in the last centuries of the Middle Ages with the recent advances in the study of social mobility.[47] However, we do hope that the different approaches and perspectives presented here can inspire future research in this direction.

[44] Alfani, "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial;" van Bavel, "Looking;" Scheidel, *The Great*."
[45] See the chapters of Todeschini, Piccinni, Mucciarelli, Nico Ottaviani, Nanni. For a general discussion: Todeschini, *Les Marchands*. For some case-studies: Gravela, *Certifying*; Vallerani, "Certificare;" Lambrecht, "*Si Grant*."
[46] Tilly, *Durable Inequality*; Piketty, *Capital and Ideology*; Milanovic, *Visions of Inequality*; Banerjee, Duflo, *Poor economics*.
[47] See: Alfani, Sardone, "Long-term trends." Concerning social mobility in late medieval Southern Italy, see the contributions in Carocci, Lazzarini, *Social Mobility*: Senatore, Terenzi, "Aspects of Social Mobility;" De Divitiis, "Architecture;" Silvestri, "Social Mobility."

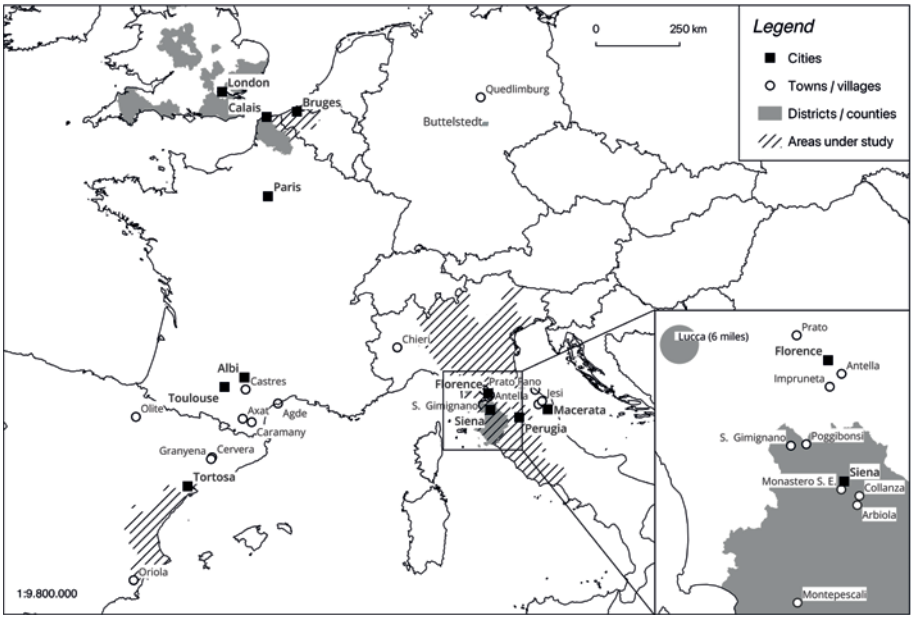

Figure 1. *Fiscal sources in Europe before the Black Death and areas studied in this volume (c. 1250-1347): geographical distribution*
Sources: elaboration of the author from the EI-MED database.

Following this introduction, the chapter presents a summary of the main findings of this collective study according to the structure of the volume. However, in order to provide a more comprehensive state of the art, for each section I also add further evidence and insights from past and current research, especially as it relates to measures of economic inequality. In doing so, I will focus first on *Sources, proxies and methods* (3), then on *Quantitative* (4) and *Qualitative evidence* of inequality in rural and urban areas (5). Finally, I will discuss *Perceptions, representations and responses* to inequality in Central-Northern Italian cities (6). In the concluding remarks (7), I will summarize the volume's hypotheses on the evolution and causalities of socio-economic inequality during the late Middle Ages.

3. *Sources, proxies and methods*

Throughout the pre-industrial period, and even more so before the Black Death, written sources rarely allow us to measure inequalities, and even when they do so locally, we are usually far from obtaining general data (Figure 1).[48]

[48] Piccinni, "All'apogeo," 382-3.

In this respect, as the chapters in the first part of this volume show, there are several possible research methodologies, both quantitative and qualitative, which in turn imply the use of a range of different sources and proxies, in order to cope with the lack of data and to exploit those that are available.

The most common method is to make the best use of the few serial sources available, mainly to reconstruct Gini indexes of distribution, as has been done extensively for the whole of the pre-industrial period. By providing a standardized coefficient between 0 (equality) and 1 (maximum inequality), the Gini index is particularly useful as it allows case-studies that differ in chronology, geography and sources to be compared. Together with its graphical representation, the so-called Lorenz curve, and the ranking of a distribution into deciles, is the most widely used standardized measure of concentration.[49] Other – less widely used but often integrated to the Gini – measures of dispersion are the Theil and the Palma indexes.[50] While this statistical approach clearly has its advantages – first and foremost because it makes it possible to exploit and compare what could be exploited and compared – it is not without its problems. In fact, the typology of wealth or income taken into account and the amount of information available in the source may introduce some distortions – often combined with the different sensitivity of each coefficient to certain elements of a distribution – of which users should be aware.[51] For example, as Chris Briggs has shown in his contribution, Gini measures derived from English lay subsidies – based on wealth recorded above a minimum threshold – or income distributions produced by social tables can be misleading at the micro level because they focus on either land or movable assets in isolation, whereas the income structure of the lower strata of English society was more complex and perhaps their condition less harsh than the high Ginis found could indicate.[52] Moreover, if it is true that immovable property, and land in particular, has been the main driver of wealth inequality in pre-industrial period and can cautiously be used as a proxy for income inequality – also because it is often the only one available – it is undisputed that wealth inequality is generally higher than income inequality.[53] In this respect, comparison of wage levels, are still of great interest, although particularly difficult for the scarcity of data and for their representativeness.[54]

Once these distortions have been taken into account, another problem is the often-incomplete nature of the available sources. To the best of my knowl-

[49] Cowell, *Measuring Inequality*, 26-37.
[50] The Theil index measures an entropic 'distance' the population is away from the 'ideal' egalitarian state of everyone having the same income. The Palma ratio is a measure of inequality that divides the share received by the richest 10% by the share of the poorest 40%: Cowell, 53-61.
[51] For instance, the Gini index is more sensitive to transfers from a wealthier household to one in the lower portion of the distribution than it is when the recipient is in the middle of the distribution: Cowell, 26-30.
[52] See the chapter of Briggs.
[53] Malanima, "Ineguaglianze," 5, 14-8.
[54] For a discussion: De Keizer, "How was City Life?" For an example: Tognetti, "Attività."

edge, there are about fifty serial sources, mainly property tax records, available in European archives or already edited for over thirty among cities, towns and villages, and sometimes for larger regions such as Artois and seventeen English counties, between 1250 and 1347, as shown in Figure 1. These sources are generally fiscal records such as property tax rolls (lay subsidies in England, *tailles* in France), property tax records (*estimi*, *compoix*, *manifests* in the north-western Mediterranean…), cadasters or land tax (such as in Siena or in Flanders), feudal surveys (such as the *enquêtes* in Southern France), house tax records (*häuserverzeichnis* in Germany), tax rolls redistributing quotas of forced loans and annuities (such as in Florence and Bruges).[55] This list could probably be extended to include other sources, especially forced loans. However, only a few of all the property tax records are complete or almost complete: most of them, such as the *estimi* available for a few villages in Central Italy, are only fragments or have lost at least half of their content.[56] Even where these sources have survived almost in their entirety, they do not record all the households or even all the landowners. Propertyless, for obvious reasons, are generally excluded from tax lists as are privileged categories such as religious institutions and the clergy, the nobility and the ruler, be it the monarch, the lord and their family or a city-commune. As a result, a significant proportion of the wealth is often not accounted for.[57]

Guido Alfani and Sam Geens have tested different solutions to this kind of problem. For early fourteenth-century Bruges, the latter has identified the top one per cent taxpayers of forced loans and then analyzed the changes in inequality within this group. Although it is not necessarily representative of the differences found in the population as a whole this group appears more regularly in the sources while the accumulation of wealth at the top, as already tested by scholars, increases "the potential for surplus extraction and thus the potential for rising economic inequality".[58] For Florence, on the other hand, Geens has also worked in his PhD dissertation with an incomplete forced loan, from which he was able to extrapolate the distribution of wealth for the entire Florentine population in 1325 by using a statistical method for modelling left-truncated income data.[59] This method was first developed and tested by Alfani and García Montero on the English lay subsidies for the period 1290-1319 and 1327-32, which, as previously noted, are tax rolls based on wealth recorded above a minimum threshold and thus only consider the mid-

[55] Database of the author: I would like to thank Sam Geens and Thijs Lambrecht for providing relevant integrations to this list. See also the chapter of Cristoferi, Furió, Geens, Miquel Milian and Morelló Baget in this volume and Ammannati, "La disuguaglianza;" Alfani, "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial;" Alfani, "Economic Inequality in Northwestern;" Alfani, Ammannati. "Long-term trends;" Alfani, García Montero, "Wealth inequality;" Alfani, Gierok, Schaff, "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial."
[56] Ammannati, "La disuguaglianza."
[57] See: Alfani, "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial Europe."
[58] See the chapter of Geens.
[59] Geens, "A Golden Age," 265-7.

dle and richest side of a distribution.[60] Indeed, as all these authors acknowledge, this approach depends on making some *a priori* assumptions about the shape of the distribution, which remain controversial in recent literature. However, the main advantage of the method is that, once these assumptions have been made, it requires no additional information other than an estimate of the population covered and allows the use of otherwise quantitatively unusable sources, such as those that do not cover households below a certain wealth threshold. In this case, however, the method is useful for providing rough estimates rather than precise measurements. A similar process, with milder problems, is when we also need to add the propertyless to a distribution, which means, if it is possible to estimate such a number, simply adding the appropriate number of 'zeros' to the distribution. The most common alternative, and one that is widely used in many other cases, is to remove the propertyless from each sample in order to create a more coherent database: this has been calculated to have a 20% reduction effect on the Gini coefficient for late medieval and early modern Florentine tax records. However, as pointed out in the chapter on Siena, the range of reduction can also vary from 5 to 15%.[61]

Once we have more complete sources, however, we should overcome another problem specific to the pre-Black Death period, namely the lack of subsequent serial records, which usually hinders the reconstruction of the evolution of inequality and, consequently, the study of its causes. The chapter by Miquel and Morelló on the Catalan city of Tortosa reiterates the longitudinal, i.e. diachronic, approach used elsewhere for the pre-industrial period. The two authors do this thanks to the recent rediscovery of a property tax record from 1316, which is then compared with the other earliest and most complete *manifest* known to date, that of 1353. In this way, they have been able to present the only data on economic inequality *before* and *after* the Black Death found for a city on the Iberian Peninsula (including the propertyless) and, consequently, to discuss the redistributive effects of the Great Plague.[62] Moreover, this longitudinal approach has only been possible for a few other urban and rural settlements in Europe, such as Toulouse, Albi, Prato and three villages in Tuscany.[63]

The methodology I used in my contribution on Siena is conversely cross-sectional, i.e. synchronous: the lack of other comparable observations for one of the earliest and most complete surviving medieval cadasters could be overcome by comparing the results of the statistical analyses carried out on this source with those available for other areas in the same period.[64] Al-

[60] Alfani, García Montero, "Wealth inequality."
[61] Alfani, Ammannati, "Long-term trends," 1094-5. See the chapter of Cristoferi.
[62] See the chapter of Miquel Milian and Morelló Baget.
[63] Alfani, "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial," 17-8; Alfani, Ammannati, "Long-term trends," 1094-5.
[64] See the chapter of Cristoferi.

though this approach does not allow us to detect a trend in inequality, it does allow us to increase the data available for the period before the Black Death, to study the structure and some causal mechanisms of late medieval economic inequality in the Sienese context, to measure the representativeness of the other available observations for Tuscany and even Europe as we will see in the following section.

However, when fiscal records are not available – as is often the case – we have to look for other, more complete and extended written sources to apply quantitative analyses. For the Iberian Peninsula this research has led to exploit two different kind of sources: the first are the so-called *libros de repartimiento* (distribution books) which record the allocations made to Christian settlers during the colonization process that followed the great conquests of the thirteenth-fifteenth century and show the relevance of demography and access to land in shaping inequality, as suggested by Antoni Furió.[65] The second records are private sources such as wills, probate inventories, dowries and marriage contracts. The study of probate inventories – whose distribution in time and space is also far from homogeneous – although particularly time-consuming, can generally provide a proxy of wealth and even detailed evidence of its composition (land, house, animals, cash, furniture, objects, ornaments...), but not for all social groups and only for a small sample of the total population. However, Luis Almenar's chapter demonstrates that it can also be successfully applied to early fourteenth-century Iberia, for which tax records are almost non-existent, to explore inequality: in this respect, he zooms in on Valencian peasants, the "bulk of medieval society", to analyze the distribution of landed property – as a proxy of wealth – before and after the Black Death.[66]

Because of the limitations of quantitative analysis mentioned above, a more qualitative approach must also be taken into account, using different kinds of parameters that can be identified in late medieval society and in the sources that produced it. In this respect, cross-referencing standards of living, levels of consumption and, more generally, proxies of entitlements and capabilities, seem to have great potential. For example, Maïka de Keyzer has recently questioned wage series as a reliable welfare indicator for the past, proposing a broader analytical framework inspired by the Human Development Index and a closer examination of household living standards.[67] Gabriella Piccinni, on the other hand, has developed her own argument on the correlation between medieval growth and inequality, using as proxies the deterioration of working and living conditions in the city and the countryside, the difficulties of access to food, the increasing differentiation of the housing market, the growing number of poor and the formalization of inequality in

[65] See the chapter of Furió.
[66] See the chapter of Almenar Fernández.
[67] De Keizer, "How was City Life?"

sumptuary laws.[68] Laurent Feller, by focusing on poverty intended "as the material expression of inequality", shows that this was reflected "in destitution, poor diet, poor quality clothing, mediocre housing and poor protection from the cold and weather" from one side, and to "attitudes of ostentation" of the rich from the other, as well as by, indirectly, the spread of charitable institutions since the thirteenth century on.[69] In the context of this volume, it should be noted that access to food still seems to be the most valuable and feasible parameter, albeit inevitably complex, to verify the level of inequality within a medieval society, whether urban or rural. It is not without reason that seven of the chapters refer directly or indirectly to access to food as a proxy for inequality and to the regulation of food markets as a way of highlighting, shaping and reinforcing socio-economic inequalities across medieval society.[70]

Finally, material evidence such as ceramics, archeozoological findings, metal artefacts, anthropometric analyses, architectural elements or building materials have not yet been fully integrated by historians in their analyses of inequality in the late Middle Ages, despite their possible geographical and chronological coverage: all this makes the research avenues discussed by Paola Orecchioni in her contribution of extreme interest.[71] Indeed, since the changes that took place during this period seem to have had a profound impact on the material conditions of people, the study of archaeological sources must certainly be developed whether or not written sources are available. In this respect, the author addresses the issue of inequalities by looking at the differentiation in consumption – through ceramics – and diet – by designing a global approach using ceramics, anthropometric and isotopic analyses, and archeozoological and archaeobotanical evidence as proxies – showing the potentiality of this method with data from excavations in Tuscany, Sicily, England and France.

4. *Quantitative evidence: measures and trend*

The different approaches described above, once applied, consistently indicate that socio-economic inequalities were extremely high in the early fourteenth century. In this respect, the quantitative evidence now available for medium and large urban centres between 1270 and 1347 is clear, once the coefficients are taken as representative not of absolute values but of general patterns. It is enough to integrate the two case-studies of this volume, such as Tortosa (1316: Gini index = 0,720) and Siena (1318: 0,788), together

[68] Piccinni, "All'apogeo."
[69] See the chapter of Feller, translation from Italian by the author.
[70] See the chapters of Orecchioni, Feller, Speecke and Lambrecht, Palermo, Wilkin, Mucciarelli and Nanni.
[71] See the chapter of Orecchioni for an overview of archaeological research on inequality, including for non-medieval and non-European contexts. See also: *Construir*.

with those of San Gimignano (also with the countryside, 1277: 0,712), Perugia (1288: 0,706), Chieri (1311: 0,715), Quedlinburg (1320, 0,463), Prato (1325, 0,703), Florence (1325, reconstructed distribution: 0,743), London (1280-1319: observed distribution = 0,761; reconstructed distribution with poorest strata = 0,961; 1327-32: observed distribution = 0,664; reconstructed distribution with poorest strata = 0,953), the bourg of Toulouse (1335: 0,752), Albi (1343, 0,637) and Cherasco (quarter of San Martino, 1347: 0,614).[72] In fact, nine out of thirteen of these observations have Gini coefficients above 0,700, while three others are between 0,614 and 0,664: still a high figure.[73] Only the German city of Quedlinburg has a Gini coefficient below 0,500. Moreover, in Bruges between 1296 and 1348, for which no Gini reconstructions are available, it was observed that "the super-rich contributed a fifth of the elite taxes in this period and the average household possessed about 1,5 times more fiscal wealth than the poorest member of the top one per cent", suggesting a similar pattern of distribution to that found in all the other urban centres.[74]

Outside the cities, in suburbs and rural areas, economic inequalities are more varied but slightly high too. Again, most of the evidence comes from Alfani and Ammannati's research on Tuscany, such as for the rural hinterland of San Gimignano (1290: 0,674), the Florentine settlements of Impruneta (1307: 0,462; 1330: 0,556), Antella (1319: 0,452) and Poggibonsi (1338: 0,550), the rural and suburban districts around Lucca (1331: respectively 0,544 and 0,620), then integrated by new data from three Sienese villages in 1320-5 studied in this volume: the suburb of Monastero Sant'Eugenio (0,565), the hamlets of Arbiola and Collanza (0,609) and the community of Montepescali (0,681).[75] In general, the concentration of wealth ranges between 0,452 and 0,681, with eight out of ten observations above 0,500, the threshold over which inequality is usually considered to be high.[76] Similarly, new evidence also suggests an unequal pattern of distribution outside rural Tuscany: for example, the concentration of land in only a section of Valencian rural society – that of the peasant class – between 1283 and 1350 has a Gini coefficient of 0,420, which rises to 0,790 if landless agriculturalists are taken into account.[77] In Thuringia, where tax records from before the Black Death (1333) have been preserved

[72] Alfani, "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial;" Alfani, "Economic Inequality in Northwestern;" Alfani, Ammannati. "Long-term trends;" Alfani, García Montero, "Wealth inequality;" Alfani, Gierok, Schaff, "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial;" Ammannati, "La Peste Nera;" Grohmann, *Città*. Unless otherwise stated, Gini coefficients are calculated excluding the propertyless.

[73] Considering only the two distributions observed and not reconstructed for London.

[74] See the chapter of Geens.

[75] See the chapter of Cristoferi and Alfani, Ammannati. "Long-term trends;" Ammannati, "La Peste Nera." Gini coefficients are calculated excluding the propertyless.

[76] Malanima, "Ineguaglianze," 8.

[77] See the chapter of Almenar Fernández.

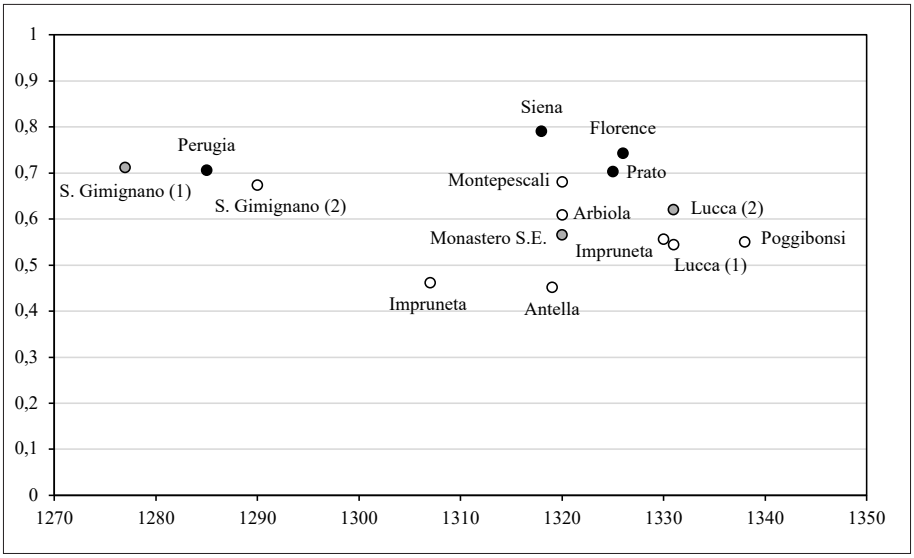

Figure 2. *Economic inequality in Tuscany and Perugia (1277-1338): Gini indexes*
Note: black dots = cities; grey dots = suburbs or rural+urban settlements; white dots = rural settlements. *San Gimignano* (1): including the *contado*, excluding istitutions; *San Gimignano* (2): *contado* only; Lucca (1): rural districts (*pivieri*) within a 6 miles radius form the city (*6 miglia*); Lucca (2): suburban districts (*comuni*) within a 6 miles radius from the city *(6 miglia*). *Sources*: *Antella*, *Impruneta*, *Poggibonsi*, *Prato*, *San Gimignano*=Alfani, Ammannati, "Long-term trends," 1082-4; *Florence* = Geens, "A Golden Age", 266-7 and Appendix, 103-4; *Lucca* = Ammannati, "La Peste Nera," 33; *Arbiola* and *Collanza*, *Monastero Sant'Eugenio*, *Montepescali* = see the article of the author in this volume; *Perugia* = Grohmann, *Città*, 134; *Siena* = see the article of the author in this volume.

for seven German parishes in the bailiwick of Buttelstedt, the Gini coefficients range from 0,470 to 0,705, with five above 0,500.[78]

The figure for both urban and rural areas is even more evident if we focus on the best reported case-study at regional level, namely Tuscany (to which we add the city of Perugia, Figure 2). This region has the most extensive data series, which is concentrated for a shorter period (1277-1338) than the full sample presented above and in the most homogeneous way, without taking into account propertyless and institutions and on the basis of similar sources.[79] Figure 2 accordingly shows that wealth concentration was indeed extremely high in the cities and still high but less so in the countryside, with suburbs or bigger villages in between. However, suburbs with characteristics

[78] See Alfani, Gierok, Schaff, "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial," Appendix: the parishes of the district of Buttelstedt are: Bachstedt (0,470); Daasdorf (0,705); Großobringen (0,476); Hottelstedt (0,629); Oberndorf (0,521); Ottmannshausen (0,680); Schwerstedt (0,590).
[79] For the differences between the Florentine and Lucchese *estimi*, the *libra* of Perugia and the *Tavola* of Siena: Alfani, Ammannati, "Long-term trends;" Ammannati, "La Peste Nera;" Grohmann, *Città*, 69-152; and the chapter of Cristoferi.

halfway between urban and rural may also hide higher inequality than is shown in the graph.[80] This pattern is confirmed also for England, where the coefficient of distribution of movable property across fifteen counties – that is, including towns and rural settlements together – in 1327-32 ranges from 0,325 (Staffordshire) to 0,470 (Kent) if we look at the observed distributions (based on partial data), while it rises to between 0,455 (Devon) and 0,798 (Kent) if we look at the reconstructed distribution (including the poorest strata). London has in both cases the highest inequality.[81] Moreover, the English data are also useful to show an inter-regional variation in distribution, which can only be guessed at by comparing the Florentine and Sienese coefficients. In this respect, the English and Tuscan case-study show from one side that wealth inequality was extremely high between 1270 and 1347, from the other that such unequal distribution can also consistently vary across regions or between city and countryside and even within the same urban center.[82]

Having assessed the general figure for the samples, we should also ask whether it is possible to detect a trend in the evolution of the distribution of wealth (or income) within the period under consideration and beyond on the basis of the information available so far. In this respect, the Iberian Peninsula, despite its originality in the late medieval European context, can provide some interesting hints about the long-term trend of inequality in rural areas between thirteenth and fourteenth century.[83] In the Navarrese town of Olite wealth inequality was above a Gini index of 0,500 for the two observations available in 1244 and 1264, higher than the land concentration for the town of Oriola (1308-14) in Mediterranean Iberia.[84] However, this evidence was probably lower than that we can infer by the measures of land concentration calculated for the Valencian peasants between 1283 and 1350.[85]

Once we look at other contexts, however, the trend of distribution appears as less linear and more wavering, especially between 1300-50. For example, between 1280-1319 and 1327-32, some English counties "experienced a significant decline in inequality whereas other communities [including London] witnessed stability or a slight increase".[86] In Bruges, we observe a peak in inequality among the top 1% of taxpayers after the first Franco-Flemish War, then a decrease and a new rise between 1320-40.[87] In Florentine Tuscany, moreover, "different trajectories can even be found in neighbouring localities. Between the last quarter of the thirteenth century and 1332, wealth differ-

[80] See the chapter of Cristoferi.
[81] Alfani, García Montero, "Wealth inequality," 16-9. The same pattern is also confirmed for the Iberian peninsula in the fifteenth century: see the chapter of Furió.
[82] Alfani, García Montero and the chapter of Cristoferi.
[83] Concerning the economic and demographic specificities of the Iberian Peninsula in medieval Europe, see the chapters of Furió and Almenar Fernández.
[84] See the chapter of Furió.
[85] See the chapter of Almenar Fernández.
[86] See the chapter of Geens and Alfani, García Montero, "Wealth inequality," 17-8.
[87] See the chapter of Geens.

ences declined by almost a third in the countryside of San Gimignano while it increased by five per cent in the city".[88] Conversely, in the rural village of Impruneta – the only settlement for which we have up to three observations before 1348 – inequality has a Gini of c. 0,450 in 1307, then falls slightly in 1319 and rises to 0,556 in 1330.[89] This last tendency might also be supported by the other observations charted in Figure 2, which show a concentration of high unequal patterns of distribution in the years 1320-30.

Finally, as regards the impact of the Black Death on the distribution of wealth, the evidence found, especially for the Iberian Peninsula, does not always confirm the pattern already observed in Tuscany, Piedmont, Germany and Southern France (and suggested also by the scattered evidence about income distribution), where inequality generally decreases in both urban and rural areas.[90] In post-Black Death Bruges, the decline in fiscal inequality among the richest 1% suggests a broader trend in urban society as a whole.[91] Conversely, in Mediterranean Iberia, wealth concentration increases after 1348, whether we look at the taxed households of a medium-sized town or at a sample of peasants. By 1353, wealth had fallen by 14,5% and was slightly more unequally distributed in Tortosa than in 1316. Interestingly, women, who made up only 20% of the taxable population there, followed a different pattern: inequality among them also increased, but less markedly than among the male population, while they accumulated more wealth on average than in 1316, unlike men.[92] Among Valencian peasants, the Gini coefficient increased from 0,42 to 0,47. In both the Tortosa and the Valencia cases, the increase in inequality is due to a greater concentration of wealth among the richer classes of the urban and rural population, as part of the redistributive effects of the plague, but also to the new mechanisms of enrichment that the epidemics favoured.[93] Indeed, a more complex pattern for the post-Black Death period can also be argued for other case-studies, whether in the trend or in the still high levels of inequality found in the second half of the fourteenth century. In Impruneta, for example, inequality, which fell after 1348, did not fall further after the *pestis secunda* of 1363, but actually began to rise again until the epidemic wave of 1400.[94] In the German part of the Holy Roman Empire, cities such as Esslingen (1362: 0,755), Frankfurt am Main (1354: 0,766) and Munich (1369: 0,747) also experienced high levels of economic inequality after the Black Death (but no data are available for the period before 1348), with Gini coefficients declining but remaining well above 0,598 until 1500. The only town for which we have observations of wealth inequality before and af-

[88] See the chapter of Geens and Alfani, Ammannati, "Long-term trends," 1083-4.
[89] Alfani, Ammannati, "Long-term trends," 1090-1; Alfani, "Epidemics," 8.
[90] *Ibid.*
[91] See the chapter of Geens.
[92] See the chapter of Miquel Milian and Morelló Baget.
[93] See the chapter of Almenar Fernández.
[94] Alfani, "Epidemics," 8-9.

ter the Black Death is Quedlinburg, which seems to confirm this decline (from 0,463 in 1320 to 0,396 in 1525), albeit with a lower starting level of inequality and with a large gap between the two data points. Similarly, in the county of Wertheim, 63% of the rural villages for which tax records are available for the period 1350-1400 show Ginis below 0,500.[95]

5. *Qualitative evidence: contexts, dynamics and causalities*

The structure and trend of distribution presented above cannot be observed quantitatively in other areas of Western Europe, but can be consistently confirmed if we look at several qualitative parameters such as the emergence of famines and the unequal structure of the food market, the rise of charitable institutions, the exploitation of cheap day labour in the textile industry, the pervasiveness of the seigneurial lordship, the increasing fragmentation of peasant holdings, the process of land consolidation by urban landowners and the development of more extractive agrarian contracts, or the spread of pluriactivity in urban and rural areas.[96] These dynamics are both the source and the consequence of more deeply unequal economic and social structures throughout late medieval society, as Laurent Feller's essay on poverty points out, which in turn made the poorest classes' access to the three pillars of economic independence – land, housing and work – more uncertain and unstable, exposing them to the vagaries of the agrarian and economic cycle and increasing the divide with the upper strata.[97]

In the city, the unskilled day labourers of the textile industry made up the majority of the working population around 1300, constantly threatened by unemployment, socially and politically marginalized, and often tied to the employer: indeed, the latter could also be their main creditor, or the landlord, or the alderman in charge of urban labour regulations, or the judge in gild disputes, as reported in Douai at the end of the thirteenth century.[98] This group, or 'working poor', were indeed vulnerable, especially to the rise in food prices – particularly between 1300 and 1347 – which could aggravate their situation to the point of starvation. To this group should be added those who were living on the edge of poverty and who could suddenly become so – the so-called *poveri vergognosi* (shameful poor) – due to unemployment, health or family

[95] See Alfani, Gierok, Schaff, "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial," 17-8 and Appendix: in the county of Wertheim, of the thirty-three villages recorded, one has a Gini below 0,300, five between 0,300 and 0,400, fifteen between 0,400 and 0,500, eleven between 0,500 and 0,600 and only one above 0,600.
[96] See the chapters of Palermo, Almenar Fernández, Feller, Speecke and Lambrecht, Wilkin, Montanari and, for textile industry: Franceschi, "Mobilità;" Franceschi, "Salariato."
[97] See the chapter of Feller.
[98] See the chapter of Feller and Franceschi, "Mobilità;" Franceschi, "Salariato."

accidents, or to movements of downward social mobility.[99] At the bottom of all these groups, whether in urban or rural society, are women, who were more vulnerable to downward mobility and poverty because of unequal access to dowry and property and highly gendered social constraints.[100] In this context, as Luciano Palermo and Roberta Mucciarelli have pointed out in this volume, famine was a powerful detector and amplifier of socio-economic inequalities, threatening the social and political order of the city on the one hand and market demand, and hence production and employment, on the other.[101] As a result, policies were adopted almost everywhere to maintain some kind of balance between resources and needs, especially in terms of food supply, but their development and results varied considerably, as Alexis Wilkin has shown for the Southern Low Countries, in terms of geographical and social opportunities.[102] In this case, for example, the policies were "not uniformly favourable to consumers" in terms of the quality, timing, price and space to sell the staple foods and "confirmed the dominant position of the clergy [and of the city] in the food market", always at the expense of the surrounding area.[103] In Siena some of the magnates were co-opted to collaborate with the popular regime to deal with famines while in Florence the policies adopted did not even alter the functioning of the food market, protecting the food entitlements of the workers, but also the private interests of the wheat merchants and those of the employers, who were not forced to increase wages.[104] In this respect, poverty and, consequently, inequality, appear to be "organically linked to the development of cities and the diversification of activities carried out there, especially manufacturing, where the use of abundant labour is a necessity and its cheapness an advantage".[105] This situation was aggravated by immigration from the countryside, which in turn kept the mass of unskilled workers and thus wages stable, often leading to the further impoverishment of the lower classes of rural immigrants.[106]

During the first half of the fourteenth century, the situation in the European countryside was not so different from that in the city, if not harsher. In 1350, inequality in the Valencian countryside seems to be correlated to the

[99] They should also be added those who, because of age or health problems, abandonment or lack of family ties, were also poor and destined to remain so: Feller, "Introduction."
[100] See the chapter of Feller and Feller, Grillo, Moglia, *Donne e povertà*.
[101] See the chapters of Palermo and Mucciarelli. The Florentine case-study (Pinto, *Il libro del Biadaiolo*) is still particularly relevant for a comparison of the various socio-economic effects of medieval famines, their causes, their perception and the policies adopted to counteract them, along with a number of recent studies: Bourin, Drendel, Menant, *Les disettes*; Benito, *Crisis alimentarias*; Benito, Riera, *Guerra y carestía*; Palermo, Fara, Benito, *Políticas contra el hambre*; Alfani, Ó Gráda, *Famine in European history*.
[102] See also Pinto, "Food Security."
[103] See the chapter of Wilkin.
[104] See the chapters of Mucciarelli and Feller.
[105] See the chapter, of Feller, translation from Italian by the author.
[106] See the chapters of Feller, Wilkin and Nanni.

high fragmentation of peasant holdings, whose average size was 0,9 ha.[107] This phenomenon, apart from the differences in population pressure and agricultural system, is well known for Île-de-France (< 5 ha.), Norfolk (about 1,2 ha.) and Sienese Tuscany (about 0,9 ha.) around 1300.[108] This is also confirmed for coastal Flanders in the chapter by Mathijs Speecke and Thijs Lambrecht, who describe "a bottom-heavy rural society characterized by the dominance of small landholdings and a high degree of land fragmentation", as shown by a modal landholding of 1,32 ha.[109] Land fragmentation was the result of both demographic growth and a dynamic land market in the thirteenth century, making rural society structurally vulnerable to adverse conjunctures, and thus a trigger for both inadequate food production and high inequality. Similar patterns can be seen throughout rural Europe, but the impact of the Great Famine of 1315-7 in West Flanders is particularly revealing. The adverse weather conditions led to a sharp fall in yields and in an immediate rise in cereals prices, further exacerbated by the isolation and destruction fostered by the Franco-Flemish war. As a result, "whereas net consumers faced dire times in 1315 and 1316, net producers of grain stood to gain from food scarcity and high prices", especially lay and ecclesiastical urban landowners, who were then able to buy additional land.[110] On the other side, the chronic lack of capital often forced peasants to liquidate their capital (land, livestock, working animals) in order to survive, and thus to be "condemned to live on charity, to be dependent on wages, or to accept harsh contractual conditions for a plot of land". A similar pattern was widespread in Europe, as seen, for example, in the countryside of L'Aquila during the famine of 1330.[111]

As the previous example suggests, the interplay between the socio-economic structure of late medieval society and exogenous factors such as climatic change, war and epidemics is relevant to explaining the dynamics of inequality during the conjuncture of the early fourteenth century and beyond.[112] The redistributive effect of the immediate population loss caused by the Great Plague of 1347-52 is well known: in this respect, the recent combination of isotopic, anthropometric and palaeostological analyses of corpses from fourteenth-century cemeteries in France and England suggests a general improvement (albeit differentiated by gender, social class and urban/rural context) in diet and consumption after the Black Death and especially in the fifteenth century.[113] For example, an increase in animal protein (in Grenoble), dietary diversity (sorghum, sugar cane, fish, animals, in Toulouse, especially among women) or animal protein (in Cambridge, especially among men). In London,

[107] See the chapter of Almenar Fernández.
[108] See Fourquin, *Les campagnes*, 94-5; Campbell, *The Great*, 184-5; Cherubini, "Proprietari," 285.
[109] See the chapter of Speecke and Lambrecht.
[110] See the chapter of Speecke and Lambrecht.
[111] See the chapter of Feller and the footnote 101 above.
[112] Campbell, *The Great*.
[113] See the chapter of Orecchioni.

the analyses available so far show an increase in life expectancy, a reduction in the risk of death and an improvement in health in the generations following the plague epidemics of 1348. At the same time, they suggest that the mortality rate from the plague may have been increased by nutritional deficiencies in the period before the epidemics due to worsening social inequalities, in line with the evidence presented above and available in the literature.[114]

However, the demographic decline accelerated by the Black Death and the epidemics that followed in the fourteenth century, while reducing economic inequality, may have indirectly provided the fertile ground for its recovery in the long term.[115] Indeed, as Montanari's chapter on the Romagna countryside suggests in this volume, the economic and social upheaval was "an opportunity that the landowners did not miss". The need, in many cases, for a new start in agriculture and the unusual mobility of the rural labour force allowed landowners to make changes in land use, to renew customs, to introduce new methods of land management and the control of rural labour. This was achieved through land consolidation and the introduction of sharecropping with extractive clauses, a type of contract that was uncommon in thirteenth-century Romagna.[116] A similar pattern is well described in Florentine and Sienese Tuscany – where sharecropping, urban-driven land consolidation and city-political expansion were already disrupting rural society before 1348 – and in some French regions such as Haute-Marche. In others such as Vexin, some lords, trying to restore their wealth and income to pre-plague levels, imposed conditions similar to those of the pre-crisis period, keeping the small farmers in a state of permanent poverty.[117]

War had also an increasingly structural impact from 1300 onwards, and even more so after 1347, "when destruction from mere accident became systematic, destroying the capital, productive infrastructure and movable wealth of entire countries", reducing inequality from the one hand, and disrupting economic activity and the food market on the other.[118] A regressive effect on inequality could also have occurred in the financing of wars, when governments created and then increased taxes, "imposing a tax burden that was often difficult to bear, as in Provence at the beginning of the fourteenth century".[119] However, warfare may also have a potentially redistributive effect, as taxes and plunder went to mercenary armies – in full spread during the fourteenth century – and from them to other sectors of the urban and rural

[114] See the chapter of Speecke and Lambrecht and the footnote 101 above.
[115] For a discussion of some theoretical models: Alfani, "Epidemics," 11-6.
[116] See the chapter of Montanari, translation from Italian by the author.
[117] See the chapters of Feller and Mucciarelli together with Ginatempo, "Processi;" Cristoferi, "The Ties."
[118] See the chapter of Feller, translation from Italian by the author, and Bertoni, "Costi;" Grillo "«Pace»." In general: Alfani, "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial;" van Bavel, "Looking;" Scheidel, *The Great*.
[119] See the chapter of Feller, translation from Italian by the author and Mainoni, "Finanza;" Alfani, Di Tullio, *The Lion's share*.

population, such as merchants, blacksmiths and artisans, food producers and sellers, horse breeders, carriers and prostitutes...[120]

Finally, inequality in the fourteenth-century conjuncture seems to have been widened not only by downward social mobility, but also by the parallel social advancement of middle groups, households or individuals, due to the complex interplay between processes of enrichment, political turnover and economic and demographic downturns. The results of such interactions, as revealed by cross-referencing fiscal wealth and political representation, are clearly visible in the case-studies of Florence and Bruges discussed in this volume. Alma Poloni, by studying the presence of local entrepreneurs, merchants, shopkeepers and artisans in the lists of government members in fourteenth-century Florence, suggests that this society was probably more polarized in the first half of the century than in the second, when the trend of social mobility seems to overlap with that of (declining) post-Black Death inequality. However, extreme polarization in the early fourteenth century did not mean social blockage: indeed, "supra-local trade and finance were still active channels of social mobility, but the very fact that they allowed rapid accumulation of wealth for the fortunate few who succeeded tended to accentuate rather than mitigate polarization and economic inequality".[121] Conversely, Sam Geens's study of the overlap between the top 1% of taxpayers and officeholders in fourteenth-century Bruges shows, on the one hand, a composition of the richest taxpayers in constant flux and, on the other, fiscal inequality in check as a result of the political turmoil and of the crisis of the textile industry triggered by the first Franco-Flemish war (1297-1306) and then by the Great Plague. In this respect, the middle classes, such as artisans, seized new opportunities in the market and in government as a result of the decline in economic and political inequality, but this was probably to the detriment of the lower classes.[122]

6. *Perceptions, representations and responses*

So far, we have recalled how the distribution of wealth, wages, status and opportunities appears to be highly unequal across European regions around 1300, and how this polarization had multiple and harsh consequences at times of famine, war, environmental crisis and at the height of economic transformations such as in the first half of the fourteenth century. We must therefore ask how this strong social and economic differentiation – which also seems to be well rooted in the economic and demographic growth of the thirteenth century – was constructed, perceived, represented, lived and dealt with by

[120] Bertoni, "Costi;" Grillo "«Pace»."
[121] See the chapter of Poloni, translation from Italian by the author.
[122] See the chapter of Geens.

those who experienced it, the men and women of the Middle Ages. Especially by those who suffered most from it – usually voiceless, as women and poor –, or who could benefit from it, or who had to cope with it to avoid major social crises – generally more represented in our sources. In short, we need to get closer to the subjects who described, elaborated and interacted with these social and economic differentiations to better understand their depth and impact.[123] Indeed, as Paolo Nanni has suggested, we may wonder whether the desperate words of the blind and lame in the Triumph of Death in the Florentine Basilica of Santa Croce in 1345 – "Since prosperity has left us, O Death, medicine for every pain, come and give us the last supper" – painted after two famines, a flood and an epidemic, are those of the poor or of the people who frequented that church.[124]

In this respect, it should also be borne in mind that the consequences of an unequal distribution of wealth and income on key aspects such as food or clothing may appear even harsher than they were in reality if observed only within the framework designed by the study of official fiscal wealth or the formal food market. Alternative means of subsistence from the second-hand, informal and even illegal market, various forms of formal and informal charity, or additional untaxed or usually unrecorded sources of income or capital such as animals, tools or chattels, together with the skills and creativity of medieval peasants, the recognition of the participation of the poor in the social body and the emergence of a subculture of adaptation of the poor have been shown by recent studies, and even by some of the chapters in this volume, to have been extensively at work in medieval European society, with varying results, but not to be underestimated.[125] As Briggs and Nanni suggest in this volume, although it is often difficult to incorporate these aspects into quantitative research, a degree of caution or nuance may be advisable, making it worthwhile to focus also on less measurable aspects of inequality, as follows.

The spectrum of analysis chosen in the last section of this volume – perceptions, representations and responses – implies a number of possible approaches to socio-economic inequalities, as the five chapters, which mainly uses Central-Northern Italian cities as a laboratory, show. One approach considers the representations – that is, the mediated description of one or more specific languages of objects and aspects of reality – and the reflections – intended as conceptual elaborations by theologians, policy-makers, and economic actors – on inequalities.[126] By framing unequal socio-economic hierarchies, both elements contributed to their rationalization, but also

[123] Piccinni, "Signori," 1205-6; Piccinni, "La ricerca."
[124] See the chapter of Nanni, translation from Italian by the author.
[125] See the chapters of Briggs, Feller, Wilkin, Nanni together with Benito, Carocci, Feller, *Économies de la pauvreté* and the as yet unpublished session organized by Antoni Furió at the Rural History Conference 2019 in Paris: "Innovative peasants. Land property, investment, work and agrarian change in late Middle Ages".
[126] See *Oxford Reference*, s.v. "representation;" accessed August 9, 2024: https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20111014165925770.

to their justification, as Giacomo Todeschini's essay on the representation of second-hand dealers and retailers in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Western Europe demonstrates. By looking at labour regulations and scholastic treatises, the author observes, in the context of the medieval economic expansion, "a precise tendency to transform the economic habits and inequalities that qualified the protagonists [great merchants, bankers, entrepreneurs] into politically significant normative dynamics" against the lower economic strata (craftsmen, second-hand dealers, retailers). What was at stake was the right to set the price of goods and, consequently, access to and control of the market, intended by medieval Christian society as the space to realize the common good.[127]

In the name of the common good, processes of exclusion and inclusion based on perceptions and representations of wealth and social status also divided the political and social body of the city during the so-called regimes of the *Popolo*. This was the middle and upper class of merchants, entrepreneurs, artisans, judges and notaries who ruled the urban communities of Central-Northern Italy, mostly between 1250 and 1347. In this context, socio-economic inequalities were framed through political discourse and its concrete application in the form of laws and exclusion lists against the magnates – that is, the land-based military urban elites – as analyzed by Roberta Mucciarelli. In her chapter, the author shows how the complex interplay between political power, social behaviour, profession and source of wealth, and fame, i.e. the public perception of all these elements, was crucial in organizing society, reintegrating or excluding magnates' households and groups, and negotiating the space of their political participation as well as their economic expansion in the countryside.

The different levels of wealth and political and economic 'citizenship' of each social group were also expressed primarily through clothing which, together with home property and other luxury items, was a relevant social marker in medieval society.[128] Clothes, along with jewellery, armour, palaces, furniture, horses and equipment, were at once a source of social distinction, a means of hoarding wealth, and a sign of ownership of the means of production such as land and money. As such, they represented and justified inequality – since they were signs of wealth and power to be (partially) redistributed as alms or protection to the poor –, but they were also targeted by the Church and the sumptuary laws because they represented a form of immobilization of capital that would be better used if it were invested in productive expenditure.[129] In this respect, the sumptuary legislation of the cities of Central-Northern Italy, discussed by Maria Grazia Nico Ottaviani in this volume, were in the hands of urban elites "a political tool, an effective means

[127] See the chapter of Todeschini.
[128] Muzzarelli, *Guardaroba medievale*; *Una nuova cultura*; Piccinni, *All'apogeo*.
[129] Boisseuil, Feller, "Fortunes," 7-8.

of reinforcing hierarchies, of making them recognizable, of communicating them through clothing and ornaments". Inherited from a deep-rooted Roman tradition, they began at the end of the thirteenth century as a disciplining of expenditure, mostly related to women's clothing and accessories, regardless of social class. Then, during the fourteenth century and beyond, sumptuary laws tended to represent and reinforce the already existing socio-economic differentiations and mechanisms of exclusion and hierarchization between nobles and artisans, upper and lower classes, old and new elites, urban and rural, men and women.[130] A similar mechanism of socio-economic differentiation – shaped through culture and fashion rather than legislation – also seems to have been at work in private art production and consumption, with the transition from the post-Black Death collective and individual patronage of the newly enriched middle and lower strata of Italian urban society to that exclusively associated with the urban elites of the Renaissance.[131] All these processes, moreover, seem to converge with the reinterpretation of great private wealth and its owners, usually bankers, merchants and entrepreneurs, as a fundamental pillar of Italian cities, as a source of public financial security, economic dynamism and urban ornamentation, carried out by Renaissance intellectuals (and even partly by Franciscan theologians), especially in fifteenth-century Florence.[132]

Before, however, the profound differentiations observed around 1300 in Western Europe in general, and in Italian urban society in particular, and their roots in the preceding economic and demographic expansion and its subsequent transformation, appear to have been as much exacerbated as they were understood and tentatively and variously addressed by contemporaries, especially by those who held religious and political power.[133] In the second half of the thirteenth century, for example, lay preachers and gild notary members such as Albertanus from Brescia and Bono Giamboni from Florence were already discussing the relationship between justice (as the redistribution of surplus through alms) and increasing poverty in Italian cities, while Thomas Aquinas was condemning the accumulation of wealth as sinful.[134] In the early-fourteenth century Siena an anonymous chronicler claimed that wealth is not conducive to high thoughts and virtuous conduct, for the rich man "always seeks to find something to the injury of the poor and to his own advantage".[135] A similar point was made in the second half of the fourteenth century by the French intellectual Nicolas Oresme, who argued that "in cities governed 'democratically', the super-rich [superabundantes] should be ex-

[130] See the chapter of Nico Ottaviani, translation from Italian by the author.
[131] Cohn, *Paradoxes* and the project "Art and Inequality in the Post-Black Death Century": https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=EP/X023516/1#/tabOverview.
[132] Alfani, *As Gods among Men*, 218-25; Todeschini, *Les Marchands*.
[133] Feller, "Introduction."
[134] Gazzini, "Albertano;" Alfani, *As Gods among Men*, 214-5. For the sin of avarice in Thomas Aquinas, see: Palmeri: "Sulla Q. 13."
[135] See the chapter of Mucciarelli, translation from Italian by the author.

pelled, since otherwise they would enjoy overbearing political power, being among the people 'as God is among men'".[136]

In this respect, discussing and addressing poverty and inequality was not a neutral argument – although it is not neutral even today – but was part of the political argumentation and propaganda of the Italian urban elites and, in particular, of the regimes of the *Popolo*, thus showing that the lower social strata – intended in the classification mentioned above, i.e. the 'shameful poor', the 'working poor', the elderly or the abandoned – were considered part of the social body and integrated into the urbanization process, as Paolo Nanni and Gabriella Piccinni argue in this volume. Indeed, addressing socio-economic inequality, for example through alms and food distribution in times of famine, was also a mechanism to "further reinforce submission to an unequal, but not necessarily perceived as unjust, social order", as Feller suggests.[137] This point is clearly illustrated by the famous frescoes of the Buongoverno in Siena of Ambrogio Lorenzetti, where strong social differences are included but reconciled by the painter in a system "where productivity can coexist with civil charity": there are not social conflicts, only institutional or political ones.[138] In general, as some studies have noted, concepts such as "the common good, peace, law, rights, freedom, unity and harmony" remained central to both political discourse and the motivations for revolt throughout late medieval Europe, while those relating to the inequality between rich and poor, although recognized as a reality, were less widespread until the early modern period and especially the eighteenth century.[139] In fact, as suggested by the theologians, chroniclers and intellectuals mentioned above, economic inequality was perceived in the late Middle Ages more as an issue for its negative socio-political and spiritual consequences (thus condemning the greedy and motivating redistribution through alms or proposing to hinder the political power of the extremely rich in a medieval commune) than as a problem *per se* (with also potential implications for economic growth, social justice or human rights) as it is considered in the contemporary debate.[140]

Nevertheless, "the beauty of the Italian cities of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries would not have been built without a kind of great consensus", as Gabriella Piccinni points out in her chapter. In a physical context constantly marked by signs of inequality – such as walls, building materials, home ownership, regulations to access spaces – public buildings and infrastructures such city halls, churches, roads, hospitals, bridges, fountains

[136] Alfani, *As Gods among Men*, 11-2, 215-8.
[137] See the chapter of Feller.
[138] Piccinni, *Operazione*, 260, translation from Italian by the author.
[139] See: Alfani, Frigeni, "Inequality (un)perceived," in particular 52-6; Dumolyn, Haemers, "A bad chicken;" Cohn, *Lust for liberty*, 239.
[140] See: Piketty, *Capital*; Piketty, *Capital and Ideology*; Milanovic, *Global Inequality*; Milanovic, *Visions of Inequality*; Alfani, *As Gods among Men*; Kamalvanshi, Kushwaha, "Economic Inequality;"Alfonso, LaFleur, Alarcó, "Concepts of Inequality;" Banerjee, Duflo, *Poor economics*; Tilly, *Durable Inequality*; Sen, *Resources*; Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*.

and markets were first of all an important source of work for low-skilled workers: both urban dwellers and political elites were well aware of their counter-cyclical function. Moreover, all these elements and especially hospitals played a role in developing a sense of civic belonging within urban society and in the way the poor could perceive urban life, through the wide range of services they offered, but also through the beauty of the spaces, paintings and furniture. In this respect, the beauty of the city was a message container to build up a political consensus beyond the social strata directly involved in the *res publica*. As a result, the *Popolo* and subsequent regimes invested heavily in the construction and maintenance of these spaces, which could also become the scene of social unrest when famine or unemployment made this unequal society unbearable for part of the population.[141]

Finally, the way in which medieval society responded to poverty and inequality during the conjuncture of the fourteenth century should also be reconsidered in the light of recent research on the development of the hospitals and welfare institutions in late medieval Italy, not only in terms of quantity but above all in terms of the quality of the responses enacted, as Paolo Nanni argues in his chapter using late medieval Tuscany as a privileged observatory.[142] From the end of the thirteenth century, the growing number of poor and the social needs observed during the medieval growth were addressed by the city governments and urban elites by taking control of the centuries-old religiously founded hospitals that already existed. While it is true that these institutions did not eradicate the causes of inequalities and their consequences, and that "the reintegration of workers into the market supply was the most that the medieval ruling classes could do in terms of equality", they did contribute, "at least in part, to maintaining a minimum of urban social balance", while up to half of the urban population could be involved as active or passive actors in their activity.[143] All the more, these institutions witnessed a series of improvements and innovations in the quality and awareness of social interventions, leading scholars to define them as part of a proper welfare system. In fact, the *raison d'être* of these institutions was declaredly the poor, some of their characteristics were comparable to those of (modern) public and social enterprises, and their purpose was a broader defense of the social body, with general and individual custom-designed interventions covering a wide range of social needs through the supply of labour, the operation of the food market and by establishing networks of social relations.[144] In this respect, the hospitals and welfare institutions (as well as the operation of some religious institutions) of the Italian cities of the late Middle Ages seem, at this stage of the research, to differ from those studied, for example, in the Low Countries, in terms of the scope and depth of the interventions, and perhaps also in terms

[141] See the chapter of Piccinni, translation from Italian by the author.
[142] Piccinni, *Alle origini*.
[143] See the chapter of Feller and Nanni, translations from Italian by the author.
[144] See the chapter of Nanni.

of awareness. This could also be the result of a different historiographical interpretation: in any case, a broader comparison remains to be made, especially between Northern and Mediterranean Europe.[145]

7. *The evolution of socio-economic inequalities in the late Middle Ages: an outline*

On the basis of the above findings and caveats, we can finally offer some insights into the structure and evolution of socio-economic inequalities in the conjuncture of the early fourteenth century and, tentatively, beyond.

First, it seems clear that an increase in economic inequality – varying in depth at the regional and even micro level, but probably monotonic in its general tendency – can be suggested since the second half of the thirteenth century, and probably even earlier. In this phase, social mobility and growing number of poor were also part of the pattern.

Second, that this trend probably peaked between 1290 and 1330 and was more extreme in the urban centres than in the countryside, in the suburbs than in rural villages. In this respect, high inequality is observable at two levels: within the city and between the urban and rural areas.

Third, that during the first half of the fourteenth century – in parallel with a slight increase of the statistical observations available but also with a more complex economic phase – cities, rural areas and regions could witness also diverging path of slight decline, stability or even further rise of economic inequality. In this context social mobility seems also lowering while urban welfare institutions and food regulations, as indirect proxy of unequal social relations, spread. Moreover, as shown for Florence, Bruges and Siena, the middle class seems to have been the protagonist of this phase, with differences in the socio-economic sectors involved, the scale, the duration and the causes in each case-study.

Fourth, that this pattern of wealth concentration was not always hindered or at least stopped for the following decades by the Great Plague of 1347-52. If such a decline is clearly visible, for example, in post-Black Death Tuscany – where it was also reflected in greater social mobility in Florence – Southern France (Albi and Toulouse), Piedmont (Chieri and Cherasco) and Germany (the district of Wertheim in Baden-Württemberg), it is not evident in the areas of Mediterranean Iberia studied in this volume, where we can only observe an increase in inequality, albeit a slight one. There, moreover, women seem to have benefited from accumulating more wealth than at the beginning of the fourteenth century (while in other contexts such as Toulouse, they have reduced gender inequalities in protein consumption and dietary diversity).

[145] Cf. for example the chapters of Nanni and Wilkin together with Piccinni, *Alle origini*; van Bavel, Rijpma "How important;" Haemers, Ryckbosch, "A targeted public."

Furthermore, the data available for German cities after the Black Death in this region (1348) still show high levels of inequality: unfortunately, there is only one case (Quedlinburg) where data are available before and after the Black Death, while for the others the declining trend is clearly visible from the second half of the fourteenth century and, especially, in the fifteenth century.[146] The Iberian cities, with a more incomplete series of data, show a similar trend to the German case-study for the late Middle Ages, with the economic recession and reduction in inequality only occurring at the end of the fourteenth century.[147]

In this respect, further research and new evidence should be pursued to clarify the different demographic, gendered and redistributive impacts of the epidemics that occurred between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (and not only the Black Death), and their interplay with other factors.[148] In addition, this research will also benefit from cross-referencing evidence on economic inequality with the growing body of bioarchaeological data on living standards and levels of consumption before and after the Black Death, as suggested by Paola Orecchioni in this volume. At the current state of research, the general reduction in inequality seems to coincide with an improvement in diet and consumption in Grenoble and Toulouse and in living standards and life expectancy in London.

The essays in this volume, as well as earlier scholarship, reject a monocausal explanation for all these trends, especially as they relate to the first phase of the fourteenth-century conjuncture. On the contrary, they all point in different ways to the complex interplay between the economic and demographic phase and the wide range of formal and informal institutions at work in late medieval society and mentality. In this respect, Kuznets's inverted U-shape of distribution – that is, inequality is initially growing and then reducing after an economy has reached its peak – may be confirmed only in its first part, and not only as a result of economic growth.[149]

Between c. 1250 and 1300, rising inequality seems to have been the result of economic expansion – with increasing exchange, growing production, greater social mobility – together with demographic growth and urbanization – with the fragmentation of peasant landholdings and the urban migration of low-skilled workers – and pre-existing or new unequal property structures and relations – such as seigneurial or those resulting from the injection of urban capital into the countryside. All these factors have also intersected with the constant attempts by religious, market and political elites to under-

[146] Gierok, Schaff, "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial," 17; Alfani, "Epidemics," 9.
[147] See the chapter of Furió; Furió *et al*, "Measuring economic inequality," 180-2; Carvajal *et al*., *La desigualdad económica*.
[148] Alfani, Ammannati, "Long-term trends," 1090-1; Alfani, "Epidemics." See the research projects and seminars developed within the recently founded network of the École française de Rome "La mémoire des crises dans les sociétés méditerranéennes. Antiquité-début de l'époque moderne": https://www.efrome.it/reseaux-thematiques-de-recherche.
[149] See also: Milanovic, *Global Inequality*, 61-2.

stand, reshape and exploit or counter the emergence of new dynamics of social mobility and economic change, resulting in a new structuring of unequal socio-economic relations. In this respect, it seems that while growth has created new opportunities, it has also, in combination with the above factors, pushed many groups to the margins of society.[150] In addition, it should be emphasized that socio-economic inequality in late medieval European society – although it was also recognized in what was considered to be its potentially negative spiritual and socio-political consequence – seems to have been generally accepted (with a few exceptions when it was excessively exacerbated, as in the case of famines or economic crises), partially addressed and widely reproduced.

Cities appear to be the main stage for these dynamics, as the qualitative and quantitative evidence in this volume and elsewhere shows. Their study refutes the Paretian assumption that economic growth is followed by an upward levelling of incomes: as the case of Florence, this is only verifiable above a certain threshold of per capita income, below which growth increases economic inequality and thus social contrast in the community.[151] Moreover, from the end of the thirteenth century, the high level of inequality reached by late medieval society is confronted with cycles of crises (agrarian, financial, military and demographic) and a series of economic transformations which, in combination with previous socio-economic structures, seem to have produced more regionally differentiated and urban-rural fluctuating patterns of distribution of wealth, income and opportunities. Although these patterns appear to be less linear, it can be argued that inequality does not appear to be always consistently decreasing. Its interplay with famines, wars and the new opportunities offered by financial and industrial crises to landowners, market elites and some social sectors seems to have widened the gap between rich and poor and reproduced unequal socio-economic conditions. The development of welfare systems and food regulations did not reverse this trend but did probably help to mitigate some of its harshest effects by balancing such growing polarization and confirming it at the same time.

Finally, the demographic loss and economic transformation following the Black Death reversed the situation, reducing inequality, increasing wages and social mobility, and improving diet and consumption at various levels. This trend is clearly widespread, but the evidence in this volume suggests that it has probably not been for everyone, not for all regions and sectors, and in some cases not for long. The Iberian Peninsula, for example, "experienced an increase in inequality, primarily due to rising prices that did not decline as quickly as in other European regions. As a result, the inflation that followed the mortality crisis rapidly offset the increase in nominal wages", while specific inheritance systems, such as in Catalonia, may also have contribut-

[150] Fara, "Emarginazione," 23.
[151] Fara; Malanima, "Crescita."

ed by favouring the transfer of family wealth to one heir.[152] The dietary improvements observed so far in few excavations in France and England were still marked by gender and social differentiation, with clergy, urban dwellers and men appearing to benefit more than peasants and women. As for women, their conditions seem to have partly improved after the Black Death, with female taxpayers accumulating more wealth than men in Tortosa, access to protein increasing in Toulouse, and wages for less-skilled female workers rising in fifteenth-century Antwerp, but a general overview of different proxies (and an extensive dataset) to measure and compare this trend across Europe is still lacking.[153] Moreover, it seems that the Black Death with its various effects on demography and redistribution may have also contributed to the full spread and establishment of the idea and realization of a complex and varied welfare system, as suggested in some cases for late medieval Italy and the North-Western Mediterranean. In any case, this process had begun earlier, at the height of the medieval economic development, and continued later, until the sixteenth century.[154] In general, however, the new economic and social spaces and opportunities created by the Great Plague and subsequent epidemics were also open to those (old and new) elites and social sectors that had the political power and economic capital to shape society through laws, fiscal and inheritance systems, the market and even fashion, as this volume shows for Central-Northern Italy. Even the perception of the role and public relevance of the highest socio-economic strata changed, with large private fortunes, once seen mainly as the fruit of *avaritia*, were now seen as a necessary contribution to the public good. When all these factors intersected with demographic growth in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, inequality began to increase monotonically again, rather than decreasing or fluctuating.

[152] See the chapter of Miquel Milian and Morelló Baget, footnote 60.
[153] For wages, see: De Pleijt, van Zanden, "Gender wage inequality." See in general: Feller, Grillo, Moglia, *Donne e povertà*.
[154] Luongo, "Gli ospedali;" and, in general, Piccinni, *Alle origini*.

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