

## 10.5. Towards a comparative approach to rural inequality in the transition debate

Panel organiser: Ryckbosch, Wouter, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium // Furio, Antoni, Universidad de Valencia, Spain



In explaining the transition from an essentially feudal to a predominantly capitalist rural society during the late medieval and early modern period, the contributions of evolving social property relations, the development and spread of leasehold, and the emergence and expansion of factor markets have generally taken pride of place in the historiography of the past decades. By comparison, the social and economic differentiation within late medieval and early modern rural society has received considerably less attention, and has often been treated chiefly as a side-effect of evolving class relations, of shifting institutional structures of land ownership and tenure, and of the functioning of land and credit markets. Although several authors have suggested that the outcome and prior emergence of these important transitional dynamics were themselves contingent upon the degree of social differentiation and inequality present within pre-capitalist peasant societies, rural inequality has but rarely figured as an explanatory variable in the transition debate (exceptions are Hilton 1978; Whittle 2000; Byres 2006). The present session aims to develop a comparative empirical framework for exploring the roots, dynamics and outcomes of inter- as well as intra-class dif-

ferentiation and inequality in the countryside of late medieval and early modern Europe. The central question posed in this session is not only whether inequality in land holdings (such as patterns of morcellement or engrossment) – but also the social distribution of different components of both moveable and immovable wealth, of housing, livestock, and financial assets – could act either as an impediment or as conducive to growth and transition. In bringing together different, but systematically comparable case studies on rural inequality, differentiation and polarization, it is anticipated that the evidence on the evolution of social inequality in the countryside can be re-integrated into the overarching narratives on long-term trends in pre-industrial inequality – a historiography which remains predominantly informed by empirical evidence relating to urban social stratifications alone (Van Zanden 1995; Milanovic et al. 2011). To this aim, the present session intends to adopt a thoroughly comparative approach, dealing with both regions in Southern Europe and in the North Sea area, and commercial areas as well as regions dominated by peasant ‘survival’ modes of production. The session will be organised in collaboration with the CORN research network.

Chair: Ryckbosch, Wouter, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

Thursday, 22 August 2013 // 1000 – 1200 // Session 10 – Room A 027

### 10.5.1. Long-term trends in economic inequality in rural areas. Central and northern Italy, fifteenth-eighteenth centuries

Alfani, Guido, Bocconi University Milan, Italy

Most of what we know about economic inequality in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period relates to cities. This is partly the consequence of the more abundant sources available for cities compared to the countryside, but partly depends on the current preference of historians for urban environments. The unbalance needs to be redressed whenever possible, not only because in preindustrial times the vast majority of the population resided not in cities, but also because to properly measure the general levels of inequality over large areas, and to understand what those inequality levels really implied for the population, we cannot leave the country aside. This paper makes use of data collected in Italian archives by the ERC-funded research project EINITE-Economic Inequality across Italy and Europe, 1300-1800. This data, which comes from the exceptionally good and ancient sources available for Italy (the *estimi*, or property tax records), allows to reconstruct long-term tendencies in rural economic inequality, and also to proceed to urban-rural comparisons. Different areas of the Peninsula are considered, including the Canavese in Piedmont, the territory of Padua in Veneto, the Florentine domains, as well as some case studies from Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna.

### 10.5.2. Patterns of economic inequality in town and countryside: Holland and Flanders (15th-16th centuries)

Ryckbosch, Wouter, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

In this paper we attempt to map the differences and divergences in inequality patterns between two small towns and their surrounding countrysides in Holland and Flanders at the beginning of the early modern period. We use taxation records from the small town of Edam and the villages in its hinterland to study the development of inequality in Holland in the 15th and 16th centuries. We will pay particular attention to the timing and speed of the development of wealth differences, as well as the social distribution of moveable and immovable wealth, such as land, housing, livestock, and financial assets. In the case of Flanders, fiscal records from the second half of the 16th century will be used to reconstruct the social distribution of wealth and land holding in the secondary town of Courtrai and its surrounding villages. The results will be placed in the context of the divergent processes of commercialization which beset both Holland and Flanders during this period. By contrasting the level and patterns of inequality and town-country differences in a maritime region of Holland on the one hand and the peasant economy of inner Flanders on the other, we hope to provide new perspectives on regional variation in wealth differentiation. Since both towns and surrounding villages will be studied, a clear link will be established between existing literature on the development of urban inequality, and lesser-known rural developments.

### 10.5.3. Comment

Furio, Antoni, Universidad de Valencia, Spain

#### Participants

##### Alfani, Guido

Guido Alfani is Associate Professor of Economic History at Bocconi University, Italy and Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Glasgow, UK. He is a member of Dondeña Centre for Research on Social Dynamics and chief editor of the journal *Popolazione e Storia*. His research interests include economic inequality, social alliance systems, and historical demography. He is the Principal Investigator of the ERC-funded project EINITE-Economic Inequality across Italy and Europe, 1300-1800. His most recent book is *Calamities and the Economy in Renaissance Italy. The Grand Tour of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Basingstoke: 2013).

##### Furio, Antoni

Antoni Furio is professor in medieval history at the University of Valencia. His research

interests are in the field of rural history, peasants, lordship, economic growth and social change, and standards of living and patterns of consumption.

##### Ryckbosch, Wouter

Wouter Ryckbosch is guest lecturer in Early Modern History at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium), and postdoctoral research fellow at Ghent University (Belgium). His research focuses on social structures and change during the early modern era and its relation to material culture and economic growth. In 2012 he successfully defended his PhD thesis, in which he questioned the close association between eighteenth-century consumer change on the one hand, and early modern economic and social ‘modernization’ on the other.