

Guido Alfani

ISE – Bocconi University

Centre “Carlo F. Dondena” for Research on Social Dynamics

guido.alfani@unibocconi.it

Concentration of Wealth and Population Dynamics in the Early Modern Period (Ivrea, 15th-17th Centuries)

Wealth concentration and distribution during Early Modern Age is not a favoured field of study among economic historians. Much more interest has been devoted to income distribution, and research has focussed mainly on the period affected by Industrial Revolution (about 1750-1900).

Surely this is due to the fact that interest in variation in inequality (of income and of wealth) in the past has mainly originated from the hypothesis of Kuznets (1955), according to which a clear pattern between per capita income and inequality can be discerned. Inequality would be relatively low in pre-industrial societies (Modern-Age societies as well as poor societies of any epoch), then would increase in the first stages of the industrialization for later inverting the trend and starting to decrease.

Recently it has been suggested, for the case of The Netherlands and particularly of Holland, the existence of a “Super-Kuznets Curve” spanning many centuries, actually connecting “modern” and “pre-modern” growth which as a whole would be associated with a long-term phase of rising inequality, followed by a downward phase only in the 20th century (Van Zanden 1995).

The Netherlands however during Early Modern Age were probably the fastest growing economy of Europe. On the contrary, Italy is commonly thought to start declining since 16th Century. We could thus wonder in which way long-term economic decline influences wealth concentration.

The paper presents a first case study, developed in the context of a broader research project financed by Bocconi University and other Institutions, which aims at studying in a comparative perspective concentration and distribution of wealth in Northern Italy since about 1400 up until the beginning of the Industrialization. The case is that of the small city of Ivrea, part of the Duchy of Savoy and placed in Northwestern Italy, for which an exceptional documentation survived, comprising censuses, “estimi” (property tax registers) and the much rarer “libri delle correzioni degli estimi” (literally, books of corrections of the property tax registers). After almost 10 years of research I have put together a unique database of information about distribution of real estate and other components of wealth spanning 15th-17th Centuries. For 17th Century I have been able to

reconstruct indexes and measures of concentration on a yearly basis, which allowed me to study in detail the effects on wealth distribution of shocks such as the terrible epidemic of plague of 1630.

Ivrea is the perfect example of a community declining both from the demographic and economic point of view during Early Modern Age, so that it is an excellent starting point to develop the issue of the relationship between decline and concentration of wealth in pre-industrial societies. Of course, this kind of information is of great value in the ongoing discussion about concentration of wealth in countries which are currently developing, given the relevance that Kuznets' hypothesis had and still has in the debate.

Other issues which are discussed in the paper include an analysis of the way in which distribution of wealth in Ivrea was linked to the local environment. Given that land accounted for the biggest share of wealth in preindustrial societies, and given that the *physical* amount of available land in Ivrea changed in time according to the destructive floodings of the river Dora, the case is particularly suitable to be studied in this perspective.