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*Looking for the islands of equality in a sea of inequality.  
Why did some societies in pre-industrial Europe  
have relatively low levels of wealth inequality?\**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Historical inequality is back on the academic agenda*

Before delving into the actual topic of this paper – wealth inequality in pre-industrial Europe and more specifically the cases of relatively low inequality and their causes – I would like to say a few words about the wider topic of economic inequality. First, it may be noted how, in recent years, income and wealth inequality have come back into the picture, in academia and society. Debates about inequality have also changed in character. In previous decades, if discussed at all, discussions were mostly fueled by social concerns about the injustice or unfairness of high material inequality. Levels of inequality were mostly seen as an outcome of economic, social or political developments and decisions, that is: as a *dependent* variable, and the focus in academic and societal debates was mainly on *income* inequality and the resulting disparities in consumption opportunities. This has changed in recent years. Discussions have become more extensive and they became more focused on the real or perceived effects of economic inequality. First and foremost the effects of inequality on economic growth and development, but also the issue of the compatibility of high economic inequality with the functioning of democratic and inclusive societies has been raised.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the focus of debates has shifted more to wealth inequality and to inequality as an independent variable: as a cause. The effects of wealth inequality, it is argued, may materialize both directly, through negative effects on participation of people in the economy, human capital formation or investments, or indirectly, through the growing leverage of wealth owners or the erosion of societal cohesion and resilience.

Striking in the recent debates about inequality is also the interest in historical developments and the insights they offer in the causes and effects of inequality. This is understandable from several insights won over recent years. First, it is has

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<sup>1</sup> For the latter: B. VAN BAVEL, *Open societies before market economies: Historical analysis*, in “Socio-economic Review”, february 2019, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/soceco/mwz007>, pp. 1-21.

become clear that there is no equilibrium in material inequality, with levels of inequality being steered, for instance by forces of supply and demand, towards some kind of natural balance. On the contrary, levels of inequality can substantially and fundamentally change over time, as is now becoming clear especially by way of empirical historical research. Second, it has become clear that history is not a unilinear march from societies that are characterized by poverty, arbitrary power of rulers, coercion and high inequality to societies that offer wellbeing, material equality and equitable outcomes. In the older literature, these latter societies were often equated with the Western ideal type societies of the second half of the twentieth century, which were seen as the realization of historical progress or as the fruit of modernization. Their fruition would make any comparison to the historical past useless. However, this idea, too, is left in recent years and dismissed as overly teleological. It has become clear, as a result of both empirical and more theoretical studies, that also modern, Western societies can generate high levels of inequality. Modernity, therefore, cannot be automatically equated with equality.

This links up with, third, the dismissal of the Kuznets curve, which often has been dominant in the thinking about the historical development of inequality. Especially in the older literature, the relationship between inequality and economic growth was approached within the framework of this curve, which describes how the first phase of economic growth leads to rising (income) inequality, but the second phase to a reduction of inequality.<sup>2</sup> Kuznets suggested that this reduction of inequality was the result of the dynamism and ongoing economic growth and the sectoral changes associated with the growth process. Even though Kuznets focused on a very specific part of history, that is, developments in the Western World in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, and he himself was very cautious in his interpretation, his curve of first rising and next declining inequality under economic growth conditions was long assumed to hold more generally. This idea of a Kuznets curve is now shown to be flawed, however, both with respect to causality and chronology. Regarding causality, it has been remarked that, even if a curve-like development is found in specific cases, the curve is still more a descriptive than an analytic instrument, and the elements forming the causal link between economic growth and inequality remain unclear.<sup>3</sup> In uncovering this causality, the focus likely has to be more on social and political factors than solely economic ones. What Kuznets actually observed in his research is the decline of inequality in the United States from the First World War, which was not an automatic result of economic growth, but rather that of growing self-organization, social unrest, political reforms and a resulting rise of state redistribution, stimulated further by the need to co-opt workers as soldiers in the mass mobilization during the world wars and the ensuing Cold War.<sup>4</sup> We thus need more specific empirical tests for longer historical periods,

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<sup>2</sup> S. KUZNETS, *Economic growth and income inequality*, in "The American Economic Review", 45, 1955, 1, pp. 1-28. See also: R.P. KORZENIEWICZ, T.P. MORAN, *Theorizing the relationship between inequality and economic growth*, in "Theory and Society", 34, 2005, n. 3, pp. 277-316, 279-285.

<sup>3</sup> T. PIKETTY, *Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Cambridge 2014, pp. 11-15.

<sup>4</sup> D. ACEMOGLU, J.A. ROBINSON, *The political economy of the Kuznets curve*, in "Review of Development Economics", 6, 2002, n. 2, pp. 183-203. For the link to mass mobilization: W.

using the historical record, in order to unravel the causality of growing and declining inequality.<sup>5</sup> And we need to place changes in levels of material inequality much more closely within their historical context, and within their social and political setting, in order to arrive at explanations.

The positive result of these recent insights is that the historical dimension and the use of historical data have become an integral part of the thinking about inequality. This is reflected in the recent works by Thomas Piketty, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, Branko Milanovic and Walter Scheidel, for instance.<sup>6</sup> It is noticeable that these works readily include pre-industrial periods; actually, they do not postulate any fundamental divide between the industrial and pre-industrial period. This is related to the dismissal of modernization thinking and of the idea that the present is fundamentally different from the past. It is now clear that mechanisms that were at play in the past still hold, albeit sometimes in different forms and manifestations, and this makes it more relevant to look back to the past, including the more distant one. This insight makes the pre-industrial period more relevant than ever before in understanding economic and social development more generally.

In their treatment of the pre-industrial period, these influential, recent works have in common that they look at very long, grand developments, generally at a macro-level. Until recently, however, not a lot was known about the actual mechanisms of the development of economic inequality in the pre-industrial period and its effects. This is not to say that inequality, or property distribution, has never been investigated by historical researchers. Actually, the 1970s and 1980s saw a fairly large number of scholars interested in this topic, producing a multitude of publications. One can think of the publications by Lee Soltow, particularly on wealth inequality in Scandinavia.<sup>7</sup> Also, there was a host of regional monographies, especially for France, where the distribution of land, as main wealth component, was amply discussed.<sup>8</sup> Also, in this period, there was a large number of studies published in the context of the so-called Brenner debate, or transition debate, where social property systems, and the distribution of property as their main constituent, were in the focus of attention. Different than today, scholars were mainly interested in the distribution of property over different social groups, as between peasants, burghers, noblemen and religious institutions, and the changes this distribution displayed over time, and figures were mainly presented this way. Because of this difference in presentation and focus, and also because underlying data is often not digitized and

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SCHEIDEL, *The Great Leveler. Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century*, Princeton 2017, pp. 115-173.

<sup>5</sup> An early attempt to do so for an earlier period: J.L. VAN ZANDEN, *Tracing the beginning of the Kuznets curve. Western Europe during the early modern period*, in "Economic History Review", 48, 1995, n. 4, pp. 643-664; more recent: G. ALFANI, W. RYCKBOSCH, *Growing apart in early modern Europe? A comparison of inequality trends in Italy and the Low Countries, 1500-1800*, in "Explorations in Economic History", 62, 2016, pp. 143-153.

<sup>6</sup> See the references to their work throughout this paper.

<sup>7</sup> For instance: L. SOLTOW, *Wealth distribution in Denmark*, in "Scandinavian economic history review" 27, 1979, 2, pp. 121-138.

<sup>8</sup> For instance: J. JACQUART, *La crise rurale en Ile-de-France (1550-1670)*, Paris 1975, pp. 101-122; H. NEVEUX, *Vie et déclin d'une structure économique*, Paris-La Haye 1980, pp. 230-239.

hard to access, these studies are hardly integrated in the current debates on economic inequality, even though they may have relevant things to offer, especially in the analyses and interpretations they offered.

Moreover, after the 1980s interest in this topic has waned and, with this, the older literature went out of the picture. One could even say that a gap in our knowledge has arisen, up to the very recent moment that the topic entered the research agenda again. This may have caused conclusions in this recent literature that perhaps are too hasty. One prominent scholar of inequality recently even stated that only accidental or exogenous events, including epidemics and wars, have changed inequality in pre-industrial economies, since the endogenous forces of economic development of the modern era that now shape inequality patterns were absent.<sup>9</sup> Also, since the recent research is often highly quantitative and undertaken by economists, there sometimes is a lack of knowledge about the context of economic inequality, while historians would argue that contextualization is crucial. Figures by themselves do not say a lot. A historical approach to inequality enables us to contextualize inequality and its evolving meaning for different groups and societies. Furthermore, it allows us to go beyond the level of 'national statistics' on aggregate evolutions of inequality. These national statistics conform to the present-day nation states, which seldom are the relevant units of analysis for the pre-industrial period. Moreover, by aggregating data for different regions, with very different economic, social and political characteristics, these 'national statistics' obscure important variables.<sup>10</sup> Only by going beyond aggregated statistics and delving into these separate regions enables us to reveal and explain the mechanisms which drive inequality and its effects.

It is, therefore, good to see that over the past years a lot of progress has been made in measuring income and wealth inequality in pre-industrial Europe and in understanding its causes and effects. The Datini conference of 2019 testifies to this progress. It also testifies to the fact that progress has not only been made for Great-Britain and the Low Countries, the parts of Europe which in recent decades have often been center-stage in international studies on pre-industrial economic development, but also, or perhaps even particularly, for Italy and the Iberian peninsula.<sup>11</sup> The picture thus becomes broader and richer, and this is important in order to arrive at more comprehensive insights.

Here, I will not try to recapitulate all the studies presented at the conference. I would like to focus on one particular issue, the occurrence of regions and periods where levels of wealth inequality were relatively low, and try to arrive at an inventory of possible causes of these exceptions, by building on the existing literature and including some of the insights won at the Datini conference.

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<sup>9</sup> B. MILANOVIC, *Global inequality: A new approach for the Age of Globalization*, Cambridge, London 2016, pp. 62 and, even more explicitly, 69.

<sup>10</sup> See the work by Erik Thoen on social agro-systems.

<sup>11</sup> I am thinking of the work by Antoni Furió and, especially, Guido Alfani, but more generally of all the scholars from Milano, Pavia, Napoli, Roma, Udine, Girona, Pamplona, Sevilla, Valencia and Barcelona who have recently published new work on this topic and presented their work at the Datini conference.

*High levels of income and wealth inequality in pre-industrial Europe*

Compared to the yardstick of modern, European societies levels of income and wealth inequality in pre-industrial Europe are high in two ways. First, levels were high in an absolute way, with income inequality roughly at a Gini of 0.4 to 0.6 and wealth at 0.6 to 0.9.<sup>12</sup> These figures need to be carefully evaluated in view of the source and measurement issues, which are amply discussed in several papers in this conference volume.<sup>13</sup> Also, even if these figures are calculated with necessary scrutiny, they are still not telling by themselves, as each figure needs to be contextualized and not taken at face value. Still, they do allow for the conclusion that pre-industrial inequality levels were generally higher than levels as we know them from twentieth-century Europe. Using the Gini as a measure, makes it difficult to tell whether this difference is found mainly in the extremes at the bottom and top of the distribution, or rather in the relative strength of the middle groups. Systematically showing and discussing deciles alongside Gini's could help bringing more clarity on this point.<sup>14</sup> What we can observe, however, is that the difference is pronounced especially for (net) income inequality, which in Europe in the second half of the twentieth century was substantially lower than in the pre-industrial period. Second, levels of pre-industrial inequality are very high in a relative way, that is, compared to what people would need as bare necessities. For income, only the part can be claimed by the rich that is not needed by the poor for subsistence. In the pre-industrial period, with levels of annual income being far lower than today, this is a big issue. Mathematically, this can be expressed in an inequality possibility frontier, which rises with the rise of annual income.<sup>15</sup> In view of this inequality frontier, figures of income inequality for pre-industrial Europe are even more impressive (that is: relatively higher) than the absolute figures suggest.

When focusing on wealth inequality, this inequality frontier is less of an issue, as there is no such subsistence level at play, and figures can thus more readily be compared over periods, even though they still need to be critically assessed, also in the light of source problems, and to be carefully contextualized. This paper will concentrate on wealth inequality, also because it plays an important role as independent variable and as cause of further economic, social and political changes, as recent literature suggests, and much more so than income inequality does.<sup>16</sup> Even though there is, of course, a relation between income and wealth inequality, it is not

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<sup>12</sup> B. MILANOVIC, *Towards an explanation of inequality in premodern societies. The role of colonies, urbanization, and high population density*, in "Economic History Review", 71, 2018, n. 4, pp. 1029-1047, 1033, and many other references including those in the papers in this volume.

<sup>13</sup> Including the papers by Héctor García Montero on Catalonia and Guido Alfani on Italy.

<sup>14</sup> The Gini coefficient, therefore, is by no means a perfect measure. Still, I will use it here, and refrain from discussing deciles, since this is an overview paper and Gini's are the yardstick that is best available for most of the cases.

<sup>15</sup> B. MILANOVIC, P.H. LINDERT, J. G. WILLIAMSON, *Pre-Industrial inequality*, in "The Economic Journal", 551, 2011, n. 121, pp. 255-272. See also: the introduction to this conference by Paolo Malanima.

<sup>16</sup> See for this, apart from the works mentioned above also: B.J.P. VAN BAVEL, *The Invisible Hand? How Market Economies have Emerged and Declined since AD 500*, Oxford 2016.

a linear and direct one,<sup>17</sup> and both causes and effects are different per type of inequality, so I will limit myself here to wealth inequality. For the pre-industrial period data on wealth inequality generally are more extensive and often more reliable than data on income inequality, as for the latter often no more than proxies or partial indicators are available. The availability of data and of relevant studies especially applies to Western Europe (the Low Countries, the Iberian Peninsula, Italy) on which this paper will therefore concentrate, even though I have tried to include information for other areas, when available.

As noted above, much more so than with regard to (net) income inequality, high levels of wealth inequality at present are ubiquitous in many parts of the world, and even in European societies wealth inequality in recent decades is rising again, while in the United States they are even rising back to the high levels we know of the nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> When going over the world as a whole and history as a whole, it would probably be correct to conclude that high levels of wealth inequality, with Gini's of 0.7-0.9, are the norm. A first large exception to this norm is formed by the early, small-scale societies of pre- and proto-historical periods, as inequality levels generally were lower, at Gini's of around 0.4-0.6, or even much lower still for small-scale societies of hunter-gatherers, foragers and horticulturalists.<sup>19</sup> We should be critical of exact figures presented in the literature, because of source and measurement problems, but it seems safe to conclude that levels in these periods were substantially lower. The second large exception is formed by the societies we know best: those we have seen in a large part of the twentieth century, and especially in the decades around the middle of the century, as some European countries may have stood at wealth inequality levels of 0.5-0.6. These low levels of the mid-twentieth century we sometimes implicitly take as "normal", but in recent decades, figures in many European countries have risen to substantially higher levels again. More importantly, these low levels of the mid-twentieth century are not the norm in history, but an exception.<sup>20</sup> The rest of history, including pre-industrial Europe, has high levels of wealth inequality.

The latter conclusion is endorsed by what we now are starting to find out about the more abstract driving forces behind wealth inequality. Both mathematically, conceptually and empirically it can be shown that wealth has the tendency to become very unequally distributed, even without any further specific cause.<sup>21</sup> The

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<sup>17</sup> Even though studies will find a linear relationship for some cases, as for eighteenth-century Spain: E. NICOLINI, F. RAMOS PALENCIA, *Comparing income and wealth inequality in pre-industrial economies. Lessons from eighteenth century Spain*, Working Paper in History and Economics Institutions, Universidad Pablo de Olavide de Sevilla 2016, n. 16.01.

<sup>18</sup> This being the main empirical observation of T. PIKETTY, *Capital*, cit.

<sup>19</sup> M. FOCHESATO, S. BOWLES, *Nordic exceptionalism? Social democratic egalitarianism in world-historic perspective*, in "Journal of Public Economics", 127, 2015, pp. 30-44, section 3; M. BORGERHOFF MULDER, S. BOWLES (et al), *Intergenerational wealth transmission and the dynamics of inequality in small-scale societies*, in "Science" 326, 2009, pp. 682-688. See also: W. SCHEIDEL, *The Great Leveler*, cit., pp. 25-42.

<sup>20</sup> As argued in *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> For an overview: M. SCHEFFER, B. VAN BAVEL, I.A. VAN DE LEEMPUT, E.H. VAN NES., *Inequality in nature and society*, in "Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences", 114, 2017, 50, pp. 13154-13157, in part going back to the work by Pareto. For a different line of reasoning, but with similar

larger the scale, the more profound this process is. Moreover, levels of wealth inequality are broadly found to rise with economic development and economic growth, with population growth and larger concentrations of people and with urbanization, and with the rise of larger, bureaucratic states and their fiscal systems, that is, all the processes gradually and intermittently taking place in pre-industrial Europe in the period 1000-1800. This means, in the light of all these inequality-enhancing mechanisms, that lower levels of wealth inequality can only have been reached as a result of countervailing forces. Which of these forces exist?

Among the possible factors especially catastrophes have recently been highlighted. The thesis of Scheidel's "The Great Leveler", and several other influential recent works, is that levels of inequality can be reduced only as a result of catastrophic events, including state collapse, massive plague, violent revolutions and, most particularly, mass-mobilization warfare. The latter, and most particularly the devastating two World Wars, would also be the main reason for the twentieth-century exception to the rule of high wealth inequality.<sup>22</sup>

Is this indeed correct? Can we find other societies in history that have relatively low levels of wealth inequality? Pre-industrial Western Europe with its diversity of societies and coordination systems, and its rich documentation, offers a great opportunity to check this. It is, surprisingly, also a part of history that is not well included in the influential literature mentioned here, as this mostly focuses on classical antiquity or non-European cases and on nineteenth- and twentieth-century history. Using the historical record of pre-industrial Europe would allow us to adduce many relatively well-documented cases,<sup>23</sup> to see whether other cases of limited wealth inequality exist and also to see what the causes of these relatively low levels of wealth inequality are. I will try to do so here, not by exhaustively going over all the literature available, but more as a kind of thought-experiment, in order to see whether indeed only catastrophic events were able to bring inequality down or also more peaceful ways were able to do so? I will try and offer a kind of inventory of possible inequality-reducing mechanisms, focused on pre-industrial Western Europe, in order to make a start in answering these questions.

## 2. CATASTROPHIC EVENTS

### *War and mass mobilization*

Most highlighted in recent literature as a decisive factor in reducing wealth inequality, or even the only possible factor in reducing inequality, are catastrophic events, most particularly mass-mobilization warfare.<sup>24</sup> There are several ways in

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conclusions: T. PIKETTY, *Capital*, cit., passim. For an institutional approach, but with similar conclusions: B.J.P. VAN BAVEL, *Differentials*, paper for the WINIR conference 2019.

<sup>22</sup> T. PIKETTY, *Capital*, cit., pp. 146-150, and passim; W. SCHEIDEL, *The Great Leveler*, cit., pp. 115-173.

<sup>23</sup> Including some of the cases discussed by Scheidel, but revisiting them and sometimes placing them in a new light.

<sup>24</sup> For the modern period: T. PIKETTY, *Capital*, cit., pp. 368-369 and passim; K. SCHEVE, D. STASAVAGE, *Democracy, war, and wealth. Lessons from two centuries of inheritance taxation*, in "American

which warfare potentially reduces wealth inequality. First, through the destruction of capital goods, a capacity that war has in common with other disasters that destroy capital goods, including earthquakes, city fires and floods. War-related destruction and capital losses could be caused by marauding armies, sieges, pillaging, extortion, burned soil policies and tactical destruction, as happened with the deliberate inundations of polders, for instance. Material losses, as well as losses of lives, could be substantial,<sup>25</sup> even though not on the large geographical scale of modern wars, but mainly at a regional or even local scale.

The effect of war destruction on wealth inequality is not unidirectional and automatic; it could both reduce or increase wealth inequality, and often the effect on wealth distribution was limited, especially in the long run. For instance, even in a very hard-hit town as Prato, in Tuscany, hit by the sack of 1512 and the massive pillaging and killing that went on, wealth inequality was only slightly changed, from a Gini of 0.62 in 1487 to 0.58 in 1546, the dates closest by the terrible event.<sup>26</sup> The only concrete instance of a substantial and more lasting reduction of wealth inequality in a war-hit town I came across in the literature, is Augsburg in the first half of the seventeenth century, during the Thirty Year War.<sup>27</sup> This case is very exceptional, however, because of the combination of war with heavy billeting, urban bankruptcy, plague and general loss of Augsburg's trading position, making the effect of war hard to isolate. This applies to the Thirty Year War more in general, being one of the few pre-industrial wars which does seem to have brought a more substantial reduction of wealth inequality,<sup>28</sup> but in an area and period which also saw epidemics, state failure, disruption of the fiscal system and economic decline, phenomena in part connected to the war but not wholly so. Apart from this massive, long-lasting and highly-destructive war, I did not come across cases of war-induced reduction of wealth inequality.

More importantly perhaps, much of the effect of war depended on the local context, especially the institutional one. The effects of war were never wholly direct, but mediated by the local and regional institutions, as shown for the effects of the Italian Wars in the first half of the sixteenth century on the heavily affected Geradadda region in Lombardy, with the organization for the management of the commons, and systems for credit and redistribution, playing a large part in the effects, in this case keeping wealth inequality fairly stable.<sup>29</sup> Also, the rules regarding

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Political Science Review", 106, 2012, n. 1, pp. 81-102. Also for the pre-modern period: SCHEIDEL, *The Great Leveler*.

<sup>25</sup> G. ALFANI, *Calamities and the Economy in Renaissance Italy. The Grand Tour of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, New York 2013, pp. 18-34.

<sup>26</sup> Figures provided by: G. ALFANI, F. AMMANNATI, *Long-term trends in economic inequality. The case of the Florentine state*, in "Economic History Review", 70, 2017, n. 4, pp. 1072-1102, 1084. On sacks in this period also: G. ALFANI, *Calamities and the Economy*, cit., pp. 27-32.

<sup>27</sup> J.L. VAN ZANDEN, *Tracing the beginning*, cit., p. 646. See also: W. SCHEIDEL, *The Great Leveler*, cit., pp. 335-341.

<sup>28</sup> G. ALFANI, V. GIEROK, F. SCHAFF, *Economic inequality in preindustrial Germany: a long-run view (fourteenth to nineteenth centuries)*, forthcoming 2019, pp. 31-34.

<sup>29</sup> M. DI TULLIO, *Cooperating in time of crisis. War, commons, and inequality in Renaissance Lombardy*, in "Economic History Review", 71, 2018, n. 1, pp. 82-105.

the division of costs of repair of houses and capital goods or other investments after destruction, as laid down in lease contracts, or in bylaws of town communities or water management organizations, for instance, could co-determine the effect of war destruction on the distribution of wealth. One can think of a region, as the Dutch river area, where the close alliance between large landowners and big tenants farmers in the aftermath of war-related destruction, as in 1543, led to the use of institutional arrangements for capital replenishment and leasing which resulted in both a relatively quick recovery of economic operations and to a strengthening of the position of the same big farmers.<sup>30</sup>

Second, warfare could reduce wealth inequality through the necessity to maintain a large group of propertied soldiers. Examples of this in pre-industrial Europe, however, are rather exceptional and they are mostly of cases where the role of people as soldiers was not the prime goal but rather one component within a broader societal constellation. One of these examples are the farmer-colonists in twelfth-century Holland, who all received a family holding in property, as a reward for their hard clearing work, but with the obligation of having to serve and to organize a ship with rowers per district in case of war.<sup>31</sup> Similar obligations of free, landowning peasants also existed in Scandinavia. The guild militias and other armies composed of citizen-soldiers in the late medieval towns are another example,<sup>32</sup> as these were composed mainly of independent artisans and other men who possessed their own means of production. These militias were thus linked to a social fabric with relatively large propertied middle groups and a more limited level of wealth inequality. These propertied middling groups also came to the fore during the English Civil War in the mid-seventeenth century, as several commentators, inspired by the works of Machiavelli, promoted the idea that soldiers should be propertied freeholders, that is, citizen-soldiers who were free and independent because of their ownership of property, most particularly land.<sup>33</sup> This was exceptional, however, since already in the course of the late Middle Ages in many societies popular militias were disbanded and replaced by employing professional soldiers, hired in the labour market.<sup>34</sup> More generally, the capacity to use and organize the means of violence in pre-industrial Europe was exactly the reserve of the elite and formed a cornerstone of their elevated material position and property, and a way to defend this property. Violence capacity thus mostly had the opposite effect: of legitimizing and sustaining high levels of inequality.

Third, warfare could reduce wealth inequality through the need to maintain the loyalty of the ordinary population (through taxing the rich in order to pay for war-

<sup>30</sup> B. VAN BESOUW, *On the Economic Consequences of Warfare in Early Modern Northwest Europe: Four Conceptual and Empirical Contributions*, PhD thesis, Utrecht 2019, chapter 3.

<sup>31</sup> H. VAN DER LINDEN, *De cope: bijdrage tot de rechtsgeschiedenis van de openlegging der Hollands-Utrechtse laagvlakte*, Assen 1955, pp. 140-144. See for this very specific case of colonization also below, p. 445.

<sup>32</sup> M. PRAK, *Citizens, soldiers and civic militias in late medieval and early modern Europe*, in "Past & Present", 228, 2015, n. 1, pp. 93-123.

<sup>33</sup> J.G.A. POCKOCK, *The Machiavellian Moment. Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, Princeton 2016, pp. 408-412.

<sup>34</sup> W.P. CAFERRO, *Warfare and economy in Renaissance Italy, 1350-1450*, in "The Journal of Interdisciplinary History", 39, 2008, pp. 167-210.

fare), as argued for modern cases.<sup>35</sup> In the pre-industrial period, war was indeed one of the main motivations for taxation. However, in the Middle Ages this taxation was only occasional and tax rates were quite low, so this did not have a strong effect on wealth inequality. In the early modern period, taxes became more general and substantial, but the taxes levied by central rulers in order to cover military expenses, were usually not progressive but regressive and thus mostly had the opposite effect, that is, of increasing wealth inequalities.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps an exception to this was formed by taxation out of direct necessity in cases of warfare, for instance in cities under siege, as these taxes could be higher and could target the wealthier segments of the population.

### *Earthquakes, fires and floods*

Nature-induced disasters could also cause losses of capital, but mostly at a small scale.<sup>37</sup> Arguably, the largest capital-destruction is caused by earthquakes. A main case in pre-industrial Western Europe, and a well-documented one, is the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. Still, the effect of the earthquake, and of the ensuing reforms initiated by the Marquis de Pombal, on wealth inequality in Portugal was limited. Burghers now came to the fore as new wealth owners, while the position of the Church was weakened, but the wealth inequalities remained, as most notably in the distribution of landownership.<sup>38</sup> It would be interesting to investigate more of these cases, as also the case of eastern Sicily after the earthquake of 1693, especially when sources would permit to reconstruct wealth distribution before and after the disaster, and again after the ensuing reconstruction. In doing so, it could also be interesting to look at city-fires, since these hardly caused deaths but, albeit at a local scale, could massively destroy buildings and capital goods. In the past, towns were regularly hit by big fires, in some cases destroying virtually all houses and other buildings. The Great Fire of London in 1666, which made three-quarters or more of all Londoners homeless, is a well-known example.<sup>39</sup>

Another type of nature-induced disasters is floods hitting riverine and coastal areas. Like city-fires, they hardly killed any people but they did destroy land, harvests, buildings, cattle and other capital goods. Initially, this may have leveled wealth inequalities. In most empirical studies on specific cases, however, the dominant conclusion is that in the longer run wealth inequalities were rather reinforced

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<sup>35</sup> K. SCHEVE, D. STASAVAGE, *Democracy, war, and wealth*, cit.

<sup>36</sup> G. ALFANI, M. DI TULLIO, *The Lion's Share: Inequality and the rise of the fiscal state in preindustrial Europe*, Cambridge 2019, pp. 145-152. See for taxation more extensive below, pp. 449-451.

<sup>37</sup> As amply discussed in collaborative work in B.J.P. VAN BAVEL, D. CURTIS, J. DIJKMAN, M. HANNAFORD, M. DE KEYZER, E. VAN ONACKER, T. SOENS, *Disasters and History*, under contract with CUP, to be finalized in 2019, on which this section partly builds.

<sup>38</sup> J.V. SERRÃO, R. SANTOS, *Land policies and land markets. Portugal late eighteenth and early nineteenth century*, in *Property Rights, Land Markets and Economic Growth in the European Country Side (13<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Centuries)*, G. BÉAUR, et al. eds., Turnhout 2013, pp. 317-342.

<sup>39</sup> M.L. ALLEMEYER, *Fewersnoth und Flammenschwert. Stadtbrände in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Göttingen 2007.

or even sharpened as a result of these floods. Smallholding peasants often did not have the resources to buffer their exceptional losses and became susceptible to expropriation, as argued for the early eighteenth-century floods that hit the northern coastal areas of Germany, for instance.<sup>40</sup> Also, the reinvestment in protective embankments in the wake of such inundations by wealthy urban citizens led in turn to a consolidation of absentee large-scale landownership.<sup>41</sup> Even though at the land user level there may have been more continuity, floods did often lead to a widespread loss of peasant land to urban investors and wealthy elite office-holders.<sup>42</sup> With regard to wealth inequality there was therefore mostly no levelling effect of pre-industrial floods, on the contrary.

### *Pandemics*

Large epidemics, and most particularly the Black Death, are also mentioned as forces in levelling wealth inequality. The suggested logic behind this equitable effect is the decimation of people while keeping capital intact, thereby tilting the economic balance in favour of labour.<sup>43</sup> According to this supply-and-demand line of reasoning, the gap between elites and the rest of the population, including peasants and labourers, was narrowed, as higher wages, easier mobility, reduced extra-economic impositions, and greater opportunity to purchase property, made post-pandemic societies more equal. This effect can be expected first and foremost in the distribution of income, but eventually also in that of wealth.

This hypothesis requires some critical perspectives, however. First, the current attention for the redistributive effects of pandemics diverts our attention from the underlying and more long term inequality trends. Even the catastrophic Black Death, which has been proclaimed as perhaps the most redistributive shock, affected societies mostly only on a scale of decades rather than centuries. The optimist view on “The Golden Age of Labour” and reduced inequality levels, has for been nuanced. For several societies, studies have found only a modest redistributive effect, an effect that, moreover, occurred not immediately after the Black Death and that lasted less than a century. Moreover, this effect is in most cases ascertained for wages, not for wealth, and the effect on wealth distribution would have been only

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<sup>40</sup> M. JAKUBOWSKI-TIESEN, *Sturmflut 1717. Die Bewältigung einer Naturkatastrophe in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Munich 1992, pp. 192-195, 200.

<sup>41</sup> T. SOENS, *Flood security in the medieval and early modern North Sea area. A question of entitlement?*, in “Environment & History”, 19, 2013, n. 2, pp. 209-232.

<sup>42</sup> D.R. CURTIS, *Danger and displacement in the Dollard. The 1509 flooding of the Dollard Sea (Groningen) and its impact on long-term inequality in the distribution of property*, in “Environment and History”, 22, 2016, n. 1, pp. 103-135; P. VAN CRUYNINGEN, *From disaster to sustainability. Floods, changing property relations and water management in the south-western Netherlands, c.1500-1800*, in “Continuity & Change”, 29, 2014, n. 2, pp. 241-265.

<sup>43</sup> W. SCHEIDEL, *The Great Leveler*, cit., pp. 304-305; S. PAMUK, *The Black Death and the origins of the ‘Great Divergence’ across Europe, 1300-1600*, in “European Review of Economic History”, 2007, 11, pp. 289-311, who both stress the interaction with more structural factors. See also: G. ALFANI, F. AMMANNATI, *Long-term trends*, cit., pp. 1089-1092.

more indirect. Only for cases in Italy a longer lasting effect of the Black Death on wealth inequality is established with certainty (see below).

Second, and even more importantly, the effect of any pandemic, especially in the longer run, is mediated by the existing political and social organization. This point was made already decades ago. For Eastern Europe it was hypothesized, for instance, that the population decline in the Black Death period and the resulting labour scarcity were followed by, or even gave rise to more intensive elite exploitation and inequality.<sup>44</sup> It was Robert Brenner who noted in the 1980s, by using this example and comparing it to the English experience, that a substantial decline of population thus not automatically translated into more equity and freedom, as simple supply and demand theories would predict, but could also result in the opposite.<sup>45</sup> Likewise, the depopulation of the Castillian-Granada frontier area in this period, as a result of epidemics, military insecurity and the expulsion of the Muslim population, is argued to have favoured the rise of large landownership and an expansion of seignorial power there, leading to a situation where powerful lords dominated a near-landless rural population.<sup>46</sup>

As these examples indicate, the roles of different coordination systems in place, and the relative position of different actors and groups within these systems, are crucial in shaping the effects of massive death. This effect, as with the Black Death, was very different in, for instance, a society dominated by powerful lords, as in parts of Eastern Europe and the Spanish frontier areas, or in a society dominated by open markets for land, labour and capital, as Northern Italy, or by an associational system dominated by independent, freeholding peasants, as the Campine area or Drenthe in the Low Countries. Rather than an inevitable drive towards redistribution after catastrophic shocks such as the Black Death, there are redistributive outcomes that are not unilinear. Outcomes sometimes even vary in their direction, while the effects also vary in intensity and are mostly not structural but only limited in time.

To be sure, any statement about the effect of the Black Death is plagued by the fact that inequality data for the pre-1348 period are very scarce, which makes it hard, and in many cases even impossible, to directly observe its effect on wealth distribution, let alone isolate it from other factors. For Germany, a few cases have been found where data on wealth distribution for the second half of the fourteenth is available, but only for one case (Quedlinburg) there is data from the pre-Black Death period.<sup>47</sup> Exactly in this case, the effect of the Black Death is hard to isolate, because the distance between the early source (1310) and the next fiscal source is almost two centuries, if I see correctly. For other parts of Europe, information for

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<sup>44</sup> I am thinking of the work by Witold Kula and by Evsey Domar, who in turn was inspired by the even earlier work by Kliuchevsky (1937).

<sup>45</sup> R. BRENNER, *The agrarian roots of European capitalism*, in *The Brenner Debate. Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe*, T.H. ASTON, C.H.E. PHILPIN eds., Cambridge 1995, pp. 213-327, esp. 272-283.

<sup>46</sup> D. OTO-PERALLIAS, D. ROMERO-AVILA, *Historical frontiers and the rise of inequality: The case of the frontier of Granada*, in "Journal of the European Economic Association", 15, 2017, n. 1, pp. 54-98, 60-61.

<sup>47</sup> G. ALFANI, V. GIEROK, F. SCHAFF, *Economic inequality in preindustrial Germany*, cit., p. 14.

this early period is even scarcer. The case of Northern and Central Italy may be somewhat different, however, in two respects. First, there is a small (but compared to other parts of Europe still remarkable) number of fiscal sources on wealth distribution available from the pre-1348 period and, second, in some cases these do allow us to observe an equalizing effect. In Lucca, there was a clear drop in inequality after the Black Death, with the Gini dropping some 16 percentage points from 1331 to 1386 (the dates closest by the disaster).<sup>48</sup> However, in 1411 the pre-Black Death level was already surpassed again, followed by a further rise of inequality to unprecedented levels during the remainder of the fifteenth century. The same applies to Poggibonsi, where after a similar rebound of inequality its rise further proceeded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to Gini's more than 20 percentage points higher than they had been before the Black Death. Other localities for which pre-1348 data is available, Antella and Santa Maria Impruneta in Tuscany, hardly or not show a drop in inequality after the Black Death at all, while they did see a rise in inequality in the centuries thereafter.<sup>49</sup>

Likewise, the material for the Italian region of Piedmont, which includes only one datapoint for the pre-Black Death period for two cities each, shows that wealth inequality declined in the period 1348-1450, but that this followed by a long rise of wealth inequality, with the 1348-level reached already around 1500.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, the vast mortality of 1630, in several parts of Italy equaling that of 1348, or perhaps even exceeding it, and blessed with far more datapoints before and after the pandemic, did not have a inequality reducing effect at all, but rather went along with a further rise of wealth inequality,<sup>51</sup> again suggesting that context is more important than population losses per se. In this case, a major component in this context was formed by inheritance rules. While systems of partible inheritance had facilitated a levelling effect of pandemics and their massive mortality, in seventeenth-century Italy institutions that had been developed in the meantime, including the *fideicommissum*, were rather geared towards keeping properties intact and undivided. In the seventeenth century in many parts of Northern and Central Italy more than half, or in some regions even up to three-quarters of the land, was bound by entails or in the dead hand, now disallowing fragmentation or dispersal of landownership.<sup>52</sup> Also, in several regions, as perhaps most clearly in Tuscany, in the meantime a process had taken place in which urban elites, in part by using the opportunities the markets for land, lease, labour and capital had offered them, had first amassed

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<sup>48</sup> F. AMMANNATI, *La Peste Nera e la distribuzione della proprietà nella Lucchesia del tardo Medioevo*, in "Popolazione e Storia", 2, 2015, pp. 21-45, esp. p. 33.

<sup>49</sup> G. ALFANI, F. AMMANNATI, *Long-term trends*, cit. pp. 1079-1084.

<sup>50</sup> G. ALFANI, *Economic inequality in northwestern Italy. A long-term view (fourteenth to eighteenth centuries)*, in "The Journal of Economic History", 75, 2015, n. 4, pp. 1058-1096.

<sup>51</sup> As also explicitly noted by SCHEIDEL, *The Great Leveler*, pp. 306-309.

<sup>52</sup> J.P. COOPER, *Patterns of inheritance and settlement by great landowners from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries*, in *Family and inheritance: rural society in western Europe, 1200-1800*, J. GOODY, J. THIRSK, E.P. THOMPSON eds., Cambridge 1976, pp. 192-327, 277-288; J. ZUIJDERDIJN, *Assets frozen in time. Intergenerational transfers, mobility of capital within families and economic growth in Italy and the Low Countries, 1000-1800, First draft*, Utrecht 2019; See also G. ALFANI, *Economic inequality*, cit. pp. 1077-1080.

enormous wealth and, next, used this to become politically dominant.<sup>53</sup> The means of non-economic leverage they had acquired in the process, in part even as a response to the increasing scarcity of labour after the Black Death, also must have reduced, or even precluded, a redistributive effect of the next pandemic.

The Italian evidence for a single pandemic, the Black Death, thus cannot be generalized. The long-effect of pandemics to a large extent depended on the social and institutional framework of the society in question. More generally, while shocks and catastrophes could produce some equitable outcomes, this was not always the case. Often, certain groups were better able than others to buffer these events, or even to benefit of them,<sup>54</sup> owing to their preexisting advantages in resources and power, and thus enabling them to instrumentalize the shock to their benefit, and in the process exacerbating inequalities.<sup>55</sup>

### 3. NON-CATASTROPHIC WAYS

#### *Newly colonized land*

We now move from shocks and catastrophes to non-catastrophic situations in which wealth inequality in pre-industrial Western Europe could be relatively low. One of these situations was where land was newly colonized. A possible example, colonized by Western Europeans, is the northeast of the United States in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The English settlers were obsessed with acquiring their economic independency as common people, preferably by way of acquiring the ownership of a family-sized farm. It was the ideal of many to become an independent yeoman, an ideal imported by the settlers from their homeland, where this status was much harder to realize.<sup>56</sup> A relatively high degree of equity and wealth distribution seems to be realized here, even though there are two nuances. First, available figures do not show this equity, at a Gini of wealth distribution of 0.64–0.67 in New England and other parts of the North,<sup>57</sup> and, second, any possible equity went at the expense of the original inhabitants of the area. Still, among English settlers freeholding did become widespread. In eighteenth-century New Hampshire, Virginia and Connecticut, the proportion of freeholding men varied from 50 to 90% per village. All figures show a presence of a large and strong segment of middling groups in American society. Still, the fact that this form of equity is not shown in the Gini's, and that the original population is not included in the calculations, makes me a little hesitant about this case, even though it is a celebrated one in literature.

<sup>53</sup> B.J.P. VAN BAVEL, *The Invisible Hand?*, cit., pp. 124–142.

<sup>54</sup> As shown for Italian cases: G. ALFANI, *Calamities and the Economy*, cit., pp. 76 and 134.

<sup>55</sup> As stressed even by W. SCHEIDEL, *The Great Leveler*, cit., p. 313.

<sup>56</sup> A. KULIKOFF, *The Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism*, Charlottesville 1992, pp. 37–41. See also B.J.P. VAN BAVEL, *The Invisible Hand?*, cit., pp. 218–221, 229–230.

<sup>57</sup> For the second half of the eighteenth century: W.B. ROTHENBERG, *The emergence of a capital market in rural Massachusetts, 1730–1838*, in “The Journal of Economic History”, 45, 1985, n. 4, pp. 781–808, 785.

Europe itself, in the late medieval period in particular, offered even clearer examples of large-scale reclamation and colonization resulting in relatively equal distributions of landownership. A conspicuous case is Holland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This period saw a massive reclamation process, which resulted in a highly equal distribution of landownership. The reclamations in the marshy wilderness of Holland were carried out in a kind of no man's land, where hardly any settlements or manors existed, no existing feudal structures could be extended or people living there could be coerced.<sup>58</sup> The near absence of people and the ample availability of land, in combination with the specific socio-political setting, resulted in the choice of princes to try and attract people to occupy this inhospitable area. The princes thus lured people from outside by granting them favourable, and equitable, conditions for settlement. The colonists who carried out the hard clearing work were granted freedom and in practice became owners of the land, owing only a small nominal rent to the prince.<sup>59</sup> All colonist families received a farm of similar size, about 12.5 hectares of land.<sup>60</sup> The resulting dominance of a free, landowning peasantry in Holland remained a characteristic feature of the region up to the fifteenth century, as still two-thirds to three-quarters of the land was held in free property by small- and medium-scale peasant landowners.

This situation of equality characteristic of medieval Holland was also found in areas on the German North Sea coast which here reclaimed in this period, in part by settlers from the northern parts of the Low Countries. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, here, too, a situation developed of personal freedom, relative material equity and broad political participation.<sup>61</sup> I am not aware of direct figures on wealth distribution from Northern Germany in the late Middle Ages, but other indications show how the rural society there was characterized by a relative degree of equity in property distribution. Up to the early modern period, the marshes and fens along the Northern German coast were dominated by peasants, yeomen and substantial farmers, who owned on average 70-90% of the cultivated area.<sup>62</sup> This situation of relative equity, reinforced by egalitarian succession rules, was eroded from the sixteenth century, as a group of wage labourers started growing, eventually giving rise to polarization within society.

It would be interesting to see whether other such examples of large-scale colonization with low levels of wealth inequality exist in pre-industrial Western Europe. Spain and its massive southward conquest and colonization in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries could be an interesting case. A main difference is that the area was already populated and cultivated by people who largely remained there, including parts of the Muslim population, thus creating more continuity in property distribu-

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<sup>58</sup> P.A. HENDERIKX, *Die Mittelalterliche Kultivierung der Moore im Rhein-Maas Delta (10-13 Jahrhundert)*, in *Siedlungsforschung. Archäologie-Geschichte-Geographie* 7, Bonn 1989.

<sup>59</sup> H. VAN DER LINDEN, *De cope*, cit., pp. 93-95, 160-182.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20-25.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 173-182.

<sup>62</sup> O. KNOTTNERUS, *Yeomen and farmers in the Wadden Sea coastal marshes*, in *Landholding and Land Transfer in the North Sea Area (Late Middle Ages - 19th Century)*, P. HOPPENBROUWERS, B.J.P. VAN BAVEL eds., CORN Publications 5, Turnhout 2004, pp. 149-186.

tion. Also, this was no peaceful colonization, but one with the use of means of violence, possibly giving the nobility a great weight than in the Northwestern European cases of colonization. Still, in the Valencia area, for instance, the peasant-settlers originally, in the thirteenth century, received fairly homogenous plots of land, thus perhaps creating some equity. The working of inheritance practises and the land market subsequently eroded any possible equity, however, as the region in the later Middle Ages was not characterized by low wealth inequality but rather fitted into the general Western European pattern.<sup>63</sup>

More to the southwest, in the south of Castile and Andalusia, the turn to more unequal patterns was even more pronounced. Here, too, the original idea in the thirteenth century was to repopulate the area with medium-sized holdings of free peasants. They would even have been attracted to the area to act as peasant-soldiers and to contribute to the defence of these frontier areas, by offering them land, resources and freedom.<sup>64</sup> This would have created, as some have argued for the south of Castile, a fairly equal property distribution. However, in these border areas between Christian and Muslim territories, the semi-permanent insecurity and violence quickly led to militarization and a dominant role of a military elite, going hand-in-hand with the rise of large landownership and the genesis of high levels of inequality, which remained in place up and into the modern period.<sup>65</sup> That military insecurity indeed had been a main factor in shaping this pattern of inequality is suggested by later developments in the far South of Spain. As the Muslim Kingdom of Granada had fallen, and the Muslim military threat was gone, this area was re-populated in a non-militarized way and was characterized by a more egalitarian distribution of landownership,<sup>66</sup> albeit at the expense of the Muslim population.

More generally, relative equality in wealth distribution was not an automatic effect of colonization. Especially when the homeland was characterized by high wealth inequality, the colonization often followed the same pattern and copied it into the colonized area, since the actors organizing the colonization had obtained their wealth and political leverage in this setting and would likely copy this, or even extend this, overseas. In the seventeenth century, for instance, the settlers from the northern parts of the Low Countries, which by then had shifted from having a relatively equal to a highly unequal distribution of wealth,<sup>67</sup> created a new society on the southern tip of Africa. This Cape Colony, even though the colonists were quite prosperous, was characterized by inequality, unfreedom, slavery, privileges and monopolies.<sup>68</sup> This situation resulted from the main actors being agents of the Dutch East India Company, the VOC, a company having become dominated by an oligarchy of rentiers, who were primarily interested in profits, at the expense of other

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<sup>63</sup> Personal communication by Antoni Furió (Valencia), 19 January 2019 and 2 February 2019.

<sup>64</sup> See the paper by Furió et al. in this volume, referring to the older work by Claudio Sánchez Albornoz.

<sup>65</sup> D. OTO-PERALLAS, *Historical frontiers and the rise of inequality*, cit.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>67</sup> J.L. VAN ZANDEN, *Tracing the beginning*; cit., B.J.P. VAN BAVEL, *The Invisible Hand?*, cit., pp. 192-195.

<sup>68</sup> J. FOURIE, *An inquiry into the nature, causes and distribution of wealth in the Cape Colony, 1652-1795*, Utrecht 2012.

considerations. A situation of high inequity in the homeland did usually not result in an equitable colonization outcome. This more generally applies to unequal forms of colonization, or subjection through coercion or force, be it military or economic force. So, there is no automatic effect of colonization on wealth distribution, but the effect depends on the context in the homeland of the settlers, the composition of the settlers and the goals of the main actors shaping the way the colonization is organized. Only in a few cases, including a few important ones, this has indeed led to equitable distributions of wealth in newly colonized areas.

### *Revolutions, revolts and processes of self-organization*

Revolutions and regime changes may be surmised to be able to bring about a reduction of wealth inequality. Their effect in pre-industrial Europe actually was limited, however. Most of them only had a negligible effect on wealth inequality, often just replacing one elite or ruler by another one, or had a short-lived effect. The limited effect on wealth inequality even holds for the most celebrated and successful revolution of the pre-industrial period, the French Revolution. Even though new groups (wealthy burghers) came to the fore and old ones (nobility and clergy) lost, there was no fundamental change in the level of wealth inequality. Private wealth inequality only slightly decreased between c. 1780 and 1810 and in the post-1815 decades even returned again to very high levels.<sup>69</sup> Other revolutions or revolts, which were mostly smaller and less successful, or quickly repressed, left even less of a mark.

The only revolutions or revolts that had a more fundamental or long-lived effect on wealth inequality were the ones that formed the end-stage of a long, massive wave of self-organization and societal change. The American Revolution formed the crown on the process of settlement by equity-craving colonists described in the previous section. The same applies to the Glorious Revolution of 1688. This revolution is highlighted in the literature as a major step towards modern equity.<sup>70</sup> Actually, however, its effect was built upon a social and political context that was shaped by a host of revolts, unrest and social movements, starting in the late fourteenth century, with the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, and intermittently continuing from then.<sup>71</sup> This movement included numerous cases of individual or local, small-scale resistance, which slowly eroded lordly power.<sup>72</sup> Also, this was

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<sup>69</sup> W. SCHEIDEL, *The Great Leveler*, cit., pp. 232-238, stresses the levelling in the 1790s more, but the figures provided by PIKETTY, *Capital*, pp. 341-342, do not show a large effect.

<sup>70</sup> D. ACEMOGLU, J. ROBINSON, *Why Nations Fail. The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*, New York 2012, pp. 102-103; D.C. NORTH, B.R. WEINGAST, *Institutions and commitment. The evolution of institutions governing public choice in seventeenth-century England*, in "The Journal of Economic History", 49, 1989, n 4, pp. 803-832.

<sup>71</sup> J. C. WHITTLE, *The Development of Agrarian Capitalism. Land and Labour in Norfolk 1440-1580*, Oxford 2000, pp. 276-315. For Norfolk: R. LACHMANN, et al., *Capitalists in Spite of Themselves. Elite Conflict and Economic Transitions in Early Modern Europe*, Oxford 2000, pp. 180-185.

<sup>72</sup> M. MATE, *The economic and social roots of medieval popular rebellion. Sussex in 1450-1451*, in "The Economic History Review", 45, 1992, n. 4, pp. 661-676; E. VALLANCE, *A Radical History of Britain*.

combined with a strong current of self-organization and broad participation of ordinary people, particularly in the pastoral areas of England.<sup>73</sup> A new peak in social agitation occurred around the mid-seventeenth century, as many were taken by the desire for reform. The revolutionary movement of the Levellers, which had strong egalitarian overtones, for instance, made a heavy impact in the 1640s, during the Civil War.<sup>74</sup> Much more than the Glorious Revolution, which was more aimed at reducing arbitrariness and not material inequality, these long-lasting and massive forms of self-organization and revolt may have pushed inequality down, although hard figures for England are notably absent.

The role of massive self-organization also holds, and maybe even to a greater degree, for the “Communal Revolution” in Italy and the “Guild Revolution” in the Low Countries, which both rather were a two-century-long series of all kinds of movements, revolts and regime changes, mainly at the local level. The effect these had on wealth inequality was, therefore, not brought about by one single political shock, or revolution, but by a long, massive movement in which the self-organization and actions of ordinary people played a major role. Moreover, it was not a direct effect, but an indirect one, that is, it was only effectuated through the institutional measures subsequently taken by these organizations and the local governments they controlled. In order to do this, these bottom-up organizations, or associations, needed the political leverage, or at least the chance, to institute and enforce these measures. This was a position that was gradually developed, or acquired, sometimes in peaceful ways and in other cases in more contentious ones. This drawn-out, massive process, which also has been coined the “Silent Revolution”,<sup>75</sup> did occur especially in Northern and Central Italy in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, and in the Low Countries in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, the cases highlighted above, but were also found in Switzerland, the west of Germany and the eastern coast of the Iberian peninsula, for instance. They were found in the towns, but in most of these areas, but least so in Italy, also in the countryside, with village communities, organizations for the commons, water management organizations and irrigation associations as the most conspicuous examples.<sup>76</sup> In these cases, the self-organization of ordinary people was institutionalized in all kinds of ways, especially at the local level, with reducing effects on wealth inequality, as will be discussed further below.

To be sure, even societies were these movements and revolts were defeated by an elite coalition could retain some equity as a result of their agitation and resistance. An example is the peasant movement in the south of Germany. The re-

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*Visionaries, Rebels and Revolutionaries - the Men and Women who Fought for our Freedoms*, Hachette 2013, pp. 87-99.

<sup>73</sup> M.R. SOMERS, *Citizenship and the place of the public sphere. Law, community, and political culture in the transition to democracy*, in “American Sociological Review”, 58, 1993, n. 5, pp. 587-620.

<sup>74</sup> G.E. AYLMER, *The Levellers in the English Revolution*, Ithaca 1975, pp. 25, 76-81.

<sup>75</sup> T. DE MOOR, *The silent revolution: A new perspective on the emergence of commons, guilds, and other forms of corporate collective action in western Europe*, in “International Review of Social History”, 53, 2008, n. 16, pp. 179-212.

<sup>76</sup> For the latter, found, for instance, in the Mediterranean *huertas*: see the paper by Furió et al, in this volume.

volting peasants, who had used their communal organizations, were defeated and crushed after the Peasant Revolt of 1525, but still peasants in these areas, perhaps as a result of their revolts and resistance, were able to avoid the unfreedom and inequity of the so-called second serfdom to which their northern and eastern neighbours were subjected. Some peasant revolts may even have induced rulers, alongside their appetite for repression of disturbances, to positive policy reforms, in order to reduce the stimuli for peasants to revolt.<sup>77</sup> It would be highly interesting to see whether this also affected levels of wealth inequality, but I am not aware of studies on this.

### *Progressive taxation*

Progressive, inequality-reducing taxation at the central or state level did not exist in pre-industrial Europe and neither did the redistributive systems we associate with the twentieth-century welfare states. First of all, continuous and regular tax regimes at the level of the central state only developed from the sixteenth century. Before, states or rulers could only levy a tax in case of war, or other extraordinary circumstances, such as war, the birth of a royal heir or a crusade. These taxes were then used for the war efforts or for the upkeep of the bureaucratic apparatus, rather than to provide services or welfare systems for the population. Second, many taxes were regressive.<sup>78</sup> Mostly, they consisted of excises or indirect taxes on consumption goods. Wealth taxes were levied only very intermittently, often had flat rates and their size was very modest.

One part of Western Europe where, by exception, steps towards a less regressive fiscal system were made, was the northern Low Countries. Here, the Habsburg regime in 1542 and again in 1568 tried to introduce taxes on exports and on commercial and industrial capital, and to make the tax on real estate proportional.<sup>79</sup> The moves in this less regressive direction were halted, however, by the Dutch Revolt. In the new Dutch Republic, in the first half of the seventeenth century, taxes on transactions of goods, land or capital existed, but they mostly had a flat rate, thus burdening the small owners most.<sup>80</sup> At the same time, two-thirds of taxes in Holland in 1600 were levied on basic necessities, rising to three-quarters in 1650.<sup>81</sup> Taxation thus pressed hardest on the middling and lower segments of society. After the 1670s, taxation in Holland became based on a more equal footing, by levying more taxes on real es-

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<sup>77</sup> W. SCHULZE, "Geben Aufruhr und Aufstand Anlaß zu neuen heilsamen Gesetzen". *Beobachtungen über die Wirkungen bäuerlichen Widerstands in der frühen Neuzeit*, in: *Aufstände, Revolten und Prozesse. Beiträge zu bäuerlichen Widerstandsbewegungen im frühneuzeitlichen Europa*, ed. IDEM, Stuttgart 1983, pp. 261-285.

<sup>78</sup> G. ALFANI, M. DI TULLIO, *The Lion's Share*, cit., passim and pp. 152-165, where they measure the level of regressive redistribution for Venice.

<sup>79</sup> F.H.M. GRAPPERHAUS, *Alva en de tiende penning*, Zutphen 1982, pp. 42-54 and 286-293.

<sup>80</sup> M.C. 'T HART, *The Making of a Bourgeois State. War, Politics and Finance during the Dutch Revolt*, Manchester 1993, p. 123.

<sup>81</sup> M. PRAK, *The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century. The Golden Age*, Cambridge 2005, p. 78. See also for the following numbers: 'T M.C. 'T HART, *The Making of a Bourgeois State*, cit., pp. 123-131, 137-139.

tate and luxury products, resulting in a decline of taxes in the form of excises on basic necessities, even though this share still remained substantial.<sup>82</sup> In other states, however, central taxation remained even more clearly regressive, even to a substantial extent,<sup>83</sup> thus solidifying or even widening wealth disparities.

To be sure, when the actual organization and partitioning of the fiscal levies was not in the hand of state officials but in that of local communities, the distribution of the burden could be more equitable. This was the case in some Catalonian localities, where local councils registered wealth and used this registration to set fiscal levies, which often happened in proportion to wealth.<sup>84</sup> This practice lasted from the fourteenth century into the eighteenth, as it was replaced by more centralized systems with a more regressive character. Still, even the earlier system had been proportional, not progressive. Moreover, in other instances, as has been argued for northern Italy,<sup>85</sup> local elites rather used their local power to shift the fiscal burden to people less closely involved in local decision-making.

One of the few exceptions where inequality was directly and explicitly targeted through redistributive measures was under the short-lived rule of the Anabaptists, the most radical offshoot of the Reformation. The Anabaptists had clear ideas on economy and society; they disapproved of private ownership of property, believing that it should be used for the benefit of all, and they strove for common ownership of goods.<sup>86</sup> In 1535, the Anabaptists rebelled in many places in Holland, such as in Amsterdam, their main centre, and also in Friesland, but their revolts failed and repression by local and central authorities was often severe. The Anabaptists did manage to take power, however, in the town of Münster in Westfalia. Thousands of Anabaptists from Holland and Friesland decided to go there. The social and economic revolution that was implemented in Münster in 1533-1535 reflects the ideas they held. Common ownership of property was introduced, accounts and titles were burned and personal valuables and money were confiscated.<sup>87</sup> The town council was to provide food, clothing, and housing. The rule of the Anabaptists was quickly broken, however, and brutally repressed, and with it the progressive taxation they had propagated.

Apart from the few exceptions like these, and turning to more peaceful situations, the most equitable types of taxes, both in the ways of levying and in the choice of expenses, were those levied by the bottom-up organizations and associations. Charity and social spending by these organizations, including foundations, poor boxes, almshouses, monasteries, hospitals and fraternities, amounted to some

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<sup>82</sup> W. FRITSCHY, M. 'T HART, E. HORLINGS, *Long-term trends in the fiscal history of the Netherlands, 1515-1913*, in *The Rise of Fiscal States. A Global History 1500-1914*, B. YUN-CASALILLA & P.K. O'BRIEN eds., Cambridge 2012, pp. 39-66, esp. pp. 56-60.

<sup>83</sup> G. ALFANI, M. DI TULLIO, *The Lion's Share*, cit., pp. 145-152.

<sup>84</sup> H. GARCIA-MONTERO, 'Wealth inequality in Catalonia', this volume.

<sup>85</sup> G. ALFANI, M. DI TULLIO, *The Lion's Share*, cit., p. 36.

<sup>86</sup> P.J. KLASSEN, *The Economics of Anabaptism. 1525-1560*, London 1964, pp. 28-34. See also: B.J.P. VAN BAVEL, *Manors and Markets. Economy and Society in Low Countries 500-1600*, Oxford 2010, pp. 276-277.

<sup>87</sup> J.M. STAYER, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, Lawrence 1972, pp. 236-237, 256-257.

1-3% of GDP, as calculated for the Netherlands and northern Italy in the period 1400-1800.<sup>88</sup> To be sure, most of the revenues of these organizations did not come from regular taxes, but from contributions, donations and returns from the property owned by these organizations, which was mostly derived from earlier donations. While most of this was spent on poor or needy people from the lower and middling groups in society, and thus can be seen as social transfers, the lion's share of contributions was made by the middling groups, not by the wealthy.<sup>89</sup> Even apart from the not so large absolute amounts transferred, the redistributive effect was therefore limited.

Relative equity in taxation was also found with the taxes levied by water management boards around the North Sea coast for the maintenance and repair of dykes and sluices. The taxes of the water boards were based on landownership and therefore excluded the poor and landless, and they were proportional to the landownership one used, and thus rather equitable. Still, they could be felt unequally. Since the money had to be paid in a very short time span in cash, it hit the lower middle classes hard, while large landowners could easily oblige.<sup>90</sup> Even though this type of tax was not regressive, as central taxes were, it did not reduce wealth inequalities either.

#### *Wealth limiting institutions at the local level*

The big, influential works on inequality almost exclusively focus on the state level, and on the wars, revolts and collapses taking place at this level. These works thus largely leave out the mechanisms at the local, non-state level and the periods in which central states were weak and did not carry much weight at the local level, as in many parts of Western Europe in the High and Late Middle Ages. This was the period in which town communities, villages, guilds and commons were largely responsible for organizing economic life at the local level, including the organization and allocation of taxation, and they often acted in order to reduce inequality. This points to the important role of other coordination and allocation systems than solely the state and the market. Western European societies also had the association, the community, the manor and the family, or kin, as important systems available. These each had other mechanisms and rules than state and market, and, even more importantly, other goals they prioritized, including providing security, offering solidarity, safeguarding ecological sustainability, reaching salvation, preserving a line-

<sup>88</sup> B.J.P. VAN BAVEL, A. RIJPMAN, *How important were formalized charity and social spending before the rise of the welfare state? A long-run analysis of selected western European cases, 1400–1850* in “The Economic History Review”, 69, 2016, n. 1, pp. 159–187.

<sup>89</sup> See, for instance: M.J. TITTS-DIEUVAIDE, *Les tables des pauvres dans les anciennes principautés belges au moyen âge*, in “Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis”, 88, 1975, pp. 562–583; M.H.D. VAN LEEUWEN, *Guilds and middle-class welfare, 1550-1800: provisions for burial, sickness, old age, and widowhood*, in “Economic history review” 65, 2012, pp. 61–90.

<sup>90</sup> T. SOENS, *Explaining deficiencies of water management in the late medieval Flemish Coastal Plain, 13th-16th centuries*, in *Jaarboek voor Ecologische Geschiedenis 2005/2006. Water Management, Communities, and Environment. The Low Countries in Comparative Perspective, c. 1000-c. 1800.*, H. GREEF, M. ‘T HART eds., Gent/Amsterdam 2006, pp. 35-62.

age, enhancing prestige, retaining a privileged position or other, widely differing goals.

One of these systems is family, or kin, using inheritance rules as a main instrument, but also employing other rules. Focusing on this would perhaps help to bring in the micro=perspective. More specifically, a system of partible inheritance may have contributed to reducing levels of wealth inequality, as suggested by isolated indications for Germany. Even though causality is hard to unravel, it is striking that in Germany a geographical overlap can be seen between the dominance of partible inheritance, the strength of rural communities and the spread of the 1525 peasant revolt.<sup>91</sup> Another brake on processes of accumulation was that kin could prohibit the transfer of land to outsiders. The prevailing feeling was that land belonged to the family as a whole and should be kept within it. Restrictive inheritance customs and family claims clearly limited the possibilities to sell land. Relatives, sometimes even distant ones, could resist or annul the sale of land to anyone who was not a family member, and the family had to agree to the sale. It was also possible to claim back the land which had been sold by a relative, or buy it back for the same price, often as long as a year and a day after the original sale.<sup>92</sup> In settings where manorial organization was prevalent, this was combined with manorial rules intended to keep holdings at equal size, to ensure the viability of holdings and the labour services connected to them.<sup>93</sup> Manorial lords, as in the county of Namur up to the thirteenth century,<sup>94</sup> frequently blocked sales of land, while manorial customs often prohibited the accumulation of land and the possession of multiple villeinage holdings. In these manorial settings, however, wealth inequality more broadly will not have been low, as a result of the elevated position and large wealth of the manorial lords. Non-manorial settings where independent peasant had a strong position, with the family as major coordination system, will thus more likely have seen a wealth inequality-reducing effect of such rules.

The coordination system that likely had the most elaborate and comprehensive set of inequality-reducing rules, however, was the associative one. Associations did reduce wealth inequality to a little extent by way of taxation – as discussed above – but mainly through restrictions on the transfer and accumulation of land and capital goods, imposing maximums on production, periodic redistribution of usage rights, etcetera. That they were able to do so, was the result of the lengthy process of self-organization of ordinary people described above, a process that included strikes and revolts, but also more peaceful forms of collective action and the development of associations of ordinary people, particularly peasants and craftsmen.

These wealth inequality limiting measures were thus found especially where this self-organization had been most successful. In many parts of Western Europe, we can see how in the Middle Ages, and especially in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, within local settings inequality was reduced, or at least kept in check, by limit-

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<sup>91</sup> Personal communication by Ulrich Pfister (Münster) 18 May 2019.

<sup>92</sup> O. MOORMAN VAN KAPPEN, *Met open buydel ende in baren gelde. Enkele beschouwingen over het ouden vaderlandse familienaastingsrecht*, Deventer 1973, pp. 4-11.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>94</sup> L. GENICOT, *L'économie rurale namuroise au bas moyen âge*, Louvain 1943, I, pp. 125-159.

ing opportunities of transacting and accumulating land and capital, and by developing mechanisms of redistribution, through guilds, commons and communities. These measures were put into operation at the local level, where in this period also most of the exchange and allocation of land and capital (that is: wealth) took place. In the Western European towns, these wealth-limiting institutions and protection of small- and medium-sized property were found especially where guilds had a large say in urban politics, as in Flanders and Brabant and parts of Germany in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Guild regulations often set a maximum on ownership or equipment per craftsman, as for weavers on the number of looms to be owned, for spinners the number of spindles, for ironworkers the number of hearths, etcetera.<sup>95</sup> Also, limits were placed on the number of apprentices and journeymen each master could employ. Guild statutes often explicitly declared that these regulations were meant to equally share work and ensure equal livelihood, that is, at least among the masters.<sup>96</sup> These regulations limited wealth inequality but also solidified the position of middling groups. Here, independent craftsmen, who owned the means of production, were the main actors, just as independent, landholding peasants through their associations were in the countryside (see below).

A more extraordinary setting where the role of associations and independent middling groups can be observed, but still clearly so, is in fishermen's villages. As is argued for late medieval England, fishing communities were often characterized by solidarity and egalitarian attitudes, solidified by risk-sharing arrangements.<sup>97</sup> Across the North Sea, in late medieval Flanders, coastal communities saw the development of associations of shareholders in ships and fishing expeditions. This was accompanied by regulations restricting the number of crew members per vessel, or per trip, in order to avoid concentration or monopolization.<sup>98</sup> Scattered evidence shows that these fishing communities indeed had rather egalitarian distributions of property in this period.

Even more striking examples of the role of associations are found in the countryside. One of these examples is the Campine area, where much of the land was used in common, grazing was strictly regulated, use of the hay meadows was maximized, and commercial sale of peat, sods and wood was prohibited.<sup>99</sup> In this region, in the sixteenth century, land and other forms of immovable wealth was "extraordinarily equally distributed".<sup>100</sup> Campine villages had Gini's of wealth distribution between 0.5 and 0.56,<sup>101</sup> with only a small number of peasant households owning either no land or possessing more than 10 hectares of land. Similarly, that

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<sup>95</sup> S. OGILVIE, *The European guilds: An economic analysis*, Princeton 2018, pp. 184-188.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibidem*, passim, who negatively assesses the exclusion of lesser groups.

<sup>97</sup> M. KOWALESKI, *Peasants and the sea in Medieval England*, in *Peasants and Lords in the Medieval English Economy*, M. KOWALESKI, J. LANGDON, P.R. SCHOFIELD eds., Turnhout 2015, pp. 363-369.

<sup>98</sup> Lambrecht & Ryckbosch, 'Paper', this volume.

<sup>99</sup> M. DE KEYZER, *The Common Denominator. The Survival of the Commons in the Late Medieval Campine Area*, Antwerp 2014 (University of Antwerp), pp. 81-83, 86-89.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50-56.

<sup>101</sup> E. VAN ONACKER, *Leaders of the Pack? Village Elites and Social Structures in the Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Campine Area*, Antwerp 2014 (University of Antwerp), p. 87.

the hilly and mountainous parts of Tuscany in 1427 had a low wealth inequality, at a Gini of 0.52-0.53, compared to Florence and its surrounding plains with a Gini of around 0.8, has nothing to do with the supposed poverty of these mountainous areas, since these areas were actually quite flourishing with a diversified and productive economy, but rather with the more resilient peasant communities and their institutions at the local level, including common rights, grazing rights and strict regulations for using the forest and fields, as shown for the Casentino area.<sup>102</sup>

All of this does not mean that a rise of wealth inequality was impossible within these associative settings. A case study on the common lands in the Lombard Alps in the eighteenth century shows how inequality in access to pastures and woods could actually grow, something also happening in the Friulian mountains, in the northeast of Italy, where rights in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries became more concentrated in a slow, but still noticeable process.<sup>103</sup> Neither can we automatically attribute an equalizing effect to the associations. The guilds, and especially in the early modern period, could be dominated by a small group of master craftsmen. Also, and despite their role in stopping or even reducing inequalities, both the guilds and the commons did also exclude people, privileging their members, mostly belonging to the middling groups in society.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, as has been argued for organizations for the management of the commons, the effect of this organization was not automatic, but dependent on the exact rules of the game and the distribution of power within the commons, which the rules of the common sometimes not reducing but entrenching existing inequalities.<sup>105</sup> In some cases, the rights to the commons could be linked to, and in proportion to, the distribution of private land or farmsteads (Castille, parts of England, the Po Valley, to mention some dispersed examples), thus not resulting into a reduction of wealth inequality, while in other cases the rights of the commons were more inclusive, more widely distributed or open to many (as in the Campine area, Navarra or parts of Scandinavia), which did reduce inequalities.<sup>106</sup>

We should, therefore, acknowledge the fact that the potentially equalizing effect of associational rules depended on their exact formulation and the distribution of rights. Still, my impression of the material would lead me to suggest, albeit tentatively, that societies organized by way of associational systems in pre-industrial Europe often had more equal distributions of wealth than societies dominated by the market and/or the state as coordination systems. Even in cases where they did so-

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<sup>102</sup> W. SCHEIDEL, *The Great Leveler*, cit., p. 93, sees the cause in poverty, but the economic florescence of this area is documented in D.R. CURTIS, *Florence and its hinterlands in the late Middle Ages. Contrasting fortunes in the Tuscan countryside, 1300-1500* in "Journal of Medieval History", 38, 2012, n. 4, pp. 472-499.

<sup>103</sup> L. MOCARELLI, *Managing Common Land in Unequal Societies: the Case of the Lombard Alps in the Eighteenth Century*, "Jahrbuch für Geschichte des ländlichen Raumes", 12, 2015, pp. 138-149; Claudio Lorenzini, 'Montagne diseguali?', in this volume.

<sup>104</sup> S. OGLIVIE, *The European guilds*, passim.

<sup>105</sup> D. CURTIS, *Did the Commons Make Medieval and Early Modern Rural Societies More Equitable? A Survey of Evidence from across Western Europe, 1300-1800*, in "Journal of Agrarian Change" 16, 2016, n. 4, pp. 646-664.

<sup>106</sup> Overview by Curtis, 'Did the Commons', early view, p. 7-10.

lidify existing wealth inequalities, the common rules did not increase them and may still have stopped their enlargement. Moreover, and this can be posited with less hesitation, societies with associational systems at least had the possibility and the institutional instruments to reduce wealth inequality, much more so than the other coordination systems, at least up to the twentieth-century state.

However, in the early modern period these local associations, in town and countryside, and the local governments they influenced or even controlled, saw their institutional framework gradually eroded, albeit with different speed and form, by the growth of international trade, migration, interregional labour and capital markets, and also by state-formation and the rise of larger and more centralized bureaucracies. The latter played an important role in this process, also because their fiscal systems were based on the taxing the monetary value of goods, services, purchases, revenues and wealth, and thus worked in tandem with the market as allocation system. They were thus less compatible with associational systems, where especially inputs of land, labour and capital remained less subjected to monetary mechanisms and could thus less easily be expressed in monetary terms and taxed. Moreover, centralizing states and state elites were often nettled by the countervailing, or in their eyes perhaps obstructing, power of associations and the local governments they controlled, leading to fierce state attacks on these local independencies.<sup>107</sup> Put in a very general way, all of these developments entailed or provoked processes of scale-enlargement, which in principle pushes up wealth inequality when no countervailing mechanisms exist.<sup>108</sup> These counter-mechanisms indeed were weakened in the same period, as a result of the same drawn-out process, as the centralizing states and inter-regional markets as competing coordination systems eroded and marginalized the associations and communal organizations, which were mainly embedded in the local level. Thus also their inequality-reducing roles were weakened, although not fully and certainly not with the same speed and intensity in all parts of Western Europe.

#### 4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

First a caveat. The preceding focused on wealth inequality. The information on income inequality in pre-industrial Europe is much scantier and reconstructions are often rather speculative. When more progress is made in this field, it may turn out to yield a somewhat different picture than the one developed here for wealth inequality, as the two are linked but do not necessarily move in tandem.

Now back to wealth inequality. As a general rule, wealth inequality in pre-industrial Western Europe was high and wealth was mostly accumulated in the hands of small elites, a process intensified in the early modern period by urbanization, population growth, proletarianization, economic development, state formation and scale enlargement. This insight, confirmed by many empirical studies, is now

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<sup>107</sup> W. BLOCKMANS, *Voracious states and obstructing cities: An aspect of state formation in preindustrial Europe*, in "Theory and Society", 18, 1989, n. 5, pp. 733-755.

<sup>108</sup> For the general mechanism: M. SCHEFFER, B. VAN BAVEL, I.A. VAN DE LEEMPUT, E.H. VAN NES., *Inequality in nature and society*, cit.

often framed as part of “the very long Kuznets curve”. If this concept or frame is accepted too readily or applied to lightly, however, we run the risk of getting stuck with an image of the pre-industrial period as one of high and ever rising wealth inequality per se. Furthermore, the only countervailing mechanism to this process, it is postulated by some recent studies, as most outspoken by Scheidel’s one, would be found in the redistributive effects of shocks, calamities and disasters, a view thus rendering society itself impotent in the face of rising wealth inequality.

This paper, if only cursorily, shows two nuances or counter-arguments against this picture. First, it argues that disasters may indeed reduce wealth inequality, but only depending on the social and institutional context in which they take place. This context may directly affect the impact of a disaster on wealth inequality, be it into an disequalizing or equalizing direction, or it may produce a rapid return to the situation in place before the disaster. Cases where a disaster in pre-industrial Western Europe did have a direct and long-lasting effect on wealth inequality are very rare.

Second, the paper shows how medieval societies did in some cases succeed in limiting wealth inequality in more peaceful ways. This was through longer-lasting, institutional counter measures, aimed at dividing property rights, limiting their transaction and setting maximums of ownership, production and use. These measures, or rules, were mostly embedded in other coordination systems than the market or the state, as most clearly in the associative system. Linked to this, these measures were developed and maintained at a local or at the most at a regional level. They were introduced in societies which either – as in a few exceptional cases – were reclaimed and colonized by free peasants, or which – in a much larger number of cases – underwent a very long period of self-organization of ordinary people, and especially the middling groups in society, who succeeded in obtaining a say in political decision-making. To be sure, if the measures they took indeed reduced wealth inequality, it was mainly by protecting the property of the same middling groups, which still left the possibility that a smaller or larger group at the bottom of society was near-propertyless.

The local and regional level where this was realized, however, was vulnerable to the scale-enlargement generated by centralizing states and expanding markets which were characteristic of the early modern period. In this period, the medieval islands of relative wealth equality were washed away by ever bigger waves of rising inequality. Also, with the erosion of the inequality-reducing measures instituted at the local level, societies did become more subjected to the disequalizing effects of population growth, economic development and scale-enlargement. This was not an uniform and synchronous development, however, since the absolute levels of wealth inequality, the chronology of its rise and the mechanisms driving it, or halting it longer, all differed because of the specific context given by the factors highlighted here. Neither was this rise an ongoing development, to which no answer proved possible, as shown by the experience of Europe in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as again a long-lasting period of self-organization of ordinary people succeeded in introducing a system of taxation and redistribution, now realized at the higher scale-level of the nation-states, a system only now undermined in a next wave of scale-enlargement and globalization.