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Institute of Economics
Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna

Piazza Martiri della Libertà, 33 – 56127 Pisa, Italy
ph. +39 050 88.33.43
institute.economics@sssup.it

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# "Non-Competing Social Groups"? The Long Debate on Social Mobility in Italy (c. 1890-1960)

Giacomo Gabbuti [a]

[a] Institute of Economics, Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna, Pisa, Italy.

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# "Non-Competing Social Groups"?

# The Long Debate on Social Mobility in Italy (c. 1890-1960)[1]

Giacomo Gabbuti

(Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna, Pisa)

giacomo.gabbuti@santannapisa.it

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## Abstract

In the light of the recent literature on the intellectual history of inequality, this paper offers the first survey and a tentative classification of the Italian literature addressing issues related to social mobility, from late-19th century to the 'Economic Miracle' of the 1950s. During these decades, the foremost Italian economists and statisticians (among others, Pareto, Gini, Einaudi and Pantaleoni) worked on issues, from the role of inheritance to the intergenerational transmission of status, which are very related to the modern understanding of social mobility. While reflecting the evolution and debates in Italian society, these authors participated to a broader international debate, that should lead us to reconsider the lack of interest for inequality by economists in this period.

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## 1. Introduction

Social mobility did not attract great attention by historians of economics, and possibly of the broader social sciences. While the first to adopt this terminology was Pitirim Sorokin (1927), the start of 'modern' analysis of social mobility is commonly referred to pioneering works such as Lipset and Bendix (1959), and to the broader sociological literature of the post-war economic boom. In fact, according to the enthusiastic reviewer of the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 'no economist who is alive to the possibilities and implications of his subject' could 'fail to be interested' in social mobility (Joslyn, 1927). To appreciate similar statements, one clearly needs to 'relax' the definition of social mobility. Considering related issues such as as the 'circulation of élites', or the 'hereditability' of abilities and occupations, but also the more theoretical issue of equality of 'starting positions', it is clear how economists, statisticians, social anthropologists (who greatly influenced 19th and 20th-century economics: Maccabelli, 2008b) had dealt with the problem of intergenerational transmission of economic status well before the interwar decades. The first to advance a systematic definitions of the issue, Sorokin also explicitly focused on the transformation determined by both the industrial and Russian revolutions, distancing from those investigating mobility in a pre-industrial, '*ancient regime* mindset' – for instance, looking at Indian caste system (Mulè, 1992, pp. 6-7).[2] Still, from the end of the 19th century, the 'dynamic' aspect of inequality was also the main focus of the pioneers of modern inequality measurement, such as the Italian Vilfredo Pareto and Corrado Gini (Gabbuti, 2020, p. 440).

Indeed, while Italian sociologists were, with few exceptions, late-comer in the post-WWII, 'modern' study of social mobility (Ammassari, 1977, p. 11; Cobalti and Schizzerotto, 1997, p. 7), the issue had attracted early, widespread attention in the country. According to

[2] Unless otherwise indicated, translations of quotes from non-English references are my own.

Alberto De Stefani (1921, p. 3), the intergenerational transmission of economic status was 'among the most common' issues in the economic literature at his times. Contributing to the recent literature on the intellectual history of inequality (Alacevich and Soci, 2017; Ramos Pinto and Paidipaty, 2020), this paper offers a first, selective survey of the theoretical and empirical contributions by Italian social scientists on 'social mobility', from the late 19th century to the appearance of modern surveys in the 1950s. To approach this large, heterogeneous body of scientific works, I advance a non-mutually exclusive categorisation. First, section 2 discusses inheritance and its taxation – a topic in which, according to Einaudi (1928), Italy had provided scholars of public finances with the greatest innovations, starting from Eugenio Rignano's foremost proposal of a tax able to reconcile 'socialism' and 'liberal economics'. Clearly related to the issue of intergenerational transmission of wealth and economic status in general, contributions dealing with inheritance can be easily grouped together – even though, as proven by Rignano himself, they almost inevitably led to the issue of equality of opportunity or 'starting positions'. Taking advantage of the link between these two issues, section 3 discusses this other 'strand' of literature, linked to the broader concern on social mobility, but conceptually distinct. Indeed, equality of opportunity and social mobility are commonly associated, if not confused, in the public debate (Swift, 2004). It is not surprising, then, that attempts of empirically measuring the two phenomena show high correlation between them (Corak, 2013). As reconstructed in section 3, inequality of opportunity attracted the interest of foremost Italian economists, such as Luigi Einaudi and Maffeo Pantaleoni, for the whole first half of the 20th century. Sections 4 and 5, then, finally deal with the more heterogeneous, early Italian contributions to the conceptualization and measurement of social mobility. In this case, a convenient distinction can be made between the so-called 'elitist' school, and the more genuinely empirical contributions, mostly dominated by (but not limited to) the work of Gini and his collaborators. As discussed in section 4, elitist

scholars such as Pareto, but also Robert Michels, discussed the circulation of individuals and groups across the social pyramid, in a way that had already attracted Sorokin's interest, and producing interesting reflections on a very modern issue, such as the link between social mobility, political stability and 'revolutions'. While these theories are well known, the same cannot be said of coeval, and often very related empirical contributions by Gini, but also foremost scholars of inequality such as Rodolfo Benini and Paolo Fortunati. These statistical works, surveyed in section 5, resemble in many ways more modern, sociological approaches.

Similar distinctions are necessary to treat this large body of research in a meaningful way, but overall, the scholarly works surveyed throughout the paper prove De Stefani (1921) true, and suggest the existence of a true 'debate' on social mobility in liberal and Fascist Italy. While this early interest was arguably not specific of Italy, the country's socio-political developments were surely peculiar. Theories of élites circulation permeated the ideology of early Fascists, who perceived themselves as a new, rising elite. It was again De Stefani (1923), as a Fascist candidate, to argue that, if the French Revolution had 'facilitated upward mobility of worthy men', it was still necessary to get rid of 'individuals at the top of social and economic pyramids', who 'hold on to that like an oyster, and do not want to go!'. The same De Stefani, in 1923, few months after being appointed Finance Minister by Mussolini, was to abolish inheritance tax – a unicum in post-WWI fiscal history (Gabbuti, 2021a). As discussed in section 6, the Italian case, provides historians of economics with motivation to investigate the pre-WWII contributions of economists to the issues of inequality and social mobility, especially focusing on empirical and 'political' ones.

## 2. The Taxation of Inheritance

Inheritance has always attracted the interest of economists and social scientists dealing with inequality and the transmission of economic status - for obvious reasons. For the British

case, it suffices to mention John Stuart Mill, James Meade, or Hugh Dalton; in Italy, even before Rignano 'there is no lack of other proposals of progressive taxation of inherited wealth, in a more equitable way', and inheritance was 'a field in which Italian scholars have made a remarkable contribution' (Fausto, 2008). However, the issue has attracted little interest by historians of economics (Silvant, 2015). In the Italian tradition, according to Fausto, 'the main case for progressive taxation rests upon inequality; that is, the socio-political objective of reducing the great disparities of economic opportunities arising from the unequal distribution of income and wealth', rather than on distinctions between 'productive' activities and less deserving ones (as in Mill). This was the case of inheritance too: what characterized it among existing taxes, was its practicality – for the authorities, that could assess transmitted assets more easily, in a mostly rural economy, thanks to the association with the real estate register; but also for the taxpayer, called to sustain the burden when inheriting wealth. For instance, Augusto Graziani (1890, p. 58) considered inheritance tax an indirect levy, aimed at 'integrating income taxes, to which, for technical reasons, many taxable entities evade', also because fiscal declarations at death were 'more reliable than any other time'. Consistently, inheritance tax played an ancillary role in the late-19th and early 20th century debate on the fiscal reform (Favilli, 2009, p. 93). Curiously, among the few to explicitly advocate for its role was Giuseppe Ricca Salerno (1897, pp. 106-107), who added the lack of 'opposition from private interests' to the practical arguments in favour of the tax; at the same time, observing international trends, he had 'no doubt' that inheritance tax would increase its role in Italy as well. For Ricca Salerno (1897, pp. 122-123), a progressive inheritance tax, while addressing 'the needs of distributive justice', was to greatly increase its revenues, given that 'more than 60%' of the transfers happened in direct line and paid very low rates. Indeed, while the introduction of a general, progressive income tax was always delayed, a mild progressive levy on estates was introduced in 1902 – the first in Italian fiscal history, and just after France had done the same. While liberal

economists such as Einaudi considered the new tax as ‘very moderate’, or even ‘modest’ (Favilli, 2009, pp. 208-215), it still encountered a strong opponent in Pantaleoni. The so-called ‘Prince of Italian economists’, who had already expressed his radically anti-redistributive positions (Michelini, 1997, p. 88), opposed particularly the progressivity of inheritance taxation: possibly the first to raise this argument in the Italian debate, for Pantaleoni such a tax, practically applicable only on real estate property, was to induce capital flights (Michelini, 1998, pp. 205-206).

More open than his friend to the possibility of redistribution was, at least in theory, his friend Pareto, who devoted Chapter 10 of the *Systèmes socialistes* to the issue of ‘selection and distribution’ (Pareto, 1902, pp. 540-571). As will be discussed in section 4, and clearly signalled by the title, Pareto discusses inheritance within his broader theory of the circulation of groups within the social pyramid, with strong links to the coeval, French evolutionary theory. While, as clarified in the introduction, inheritance (in wealth and power positions) did not play a necessary role in the decay of ‘aristocracies’ (an example being the ‘Catholic clergy’ between ‘9$^{th}$ and 18$^{th}$ centuries’) (Pareto, 1902, p. 136), after discussing the (very imperfect, according to him) methods selection among human societies, Pareto conceded that also systems ‘wealth distribution’ was far from ideal – ‘especially through inheritance’, to the point that ‘some defences’ of that system ‘are hilarious’. True, heirs of rich families often dissipated inherited wealth, this was, however, further evidence against a system that needed ‘to destroy wealth in order to properly function’ (Pareto, 1902, pp. 561-562). ‘All you can say in support of this distribution system, … is that it is the worst evil we have found so far’. While leaving the possibility for ‘good-willing reformers’ to design ‘projects to improve the existing system’ – rejecting the idea that there was a ‘natural’ system of distribution, given the many historical alternatives developed so far – Pareto (1902, pp. 563-564) developed a list of demanding requirements for proposals to be really improvements. These included ‘clarity’; the need of

being consistent with 'human characters, as we know them'; that of ensuring the 'essentially subjective' happiness of real, heterogeneous human beings – including, given the links between distribution and production, a sufficient amount of material wellbeing'. While the 'socialist' theories discussed in the book failed to reach these high standards, it is interesting to note that while admitting historical varieties in wealth distribution systems, Pareto's views on inequality implicitly excluded their possibility of altering income distributions.

Back to inheritance taxation, just one year before its reform and Pareto's discussion, a socialist independent scholar, Rignano (1901), had published a proposal that was to dominate the European post-war debate on the matter. Rignano 'framed his proposal in a critique of the capitalist system based upon the works of Achille Loria and Marx', and 'argued that the existing inheritance systems tended to perpetuate the deprivation of the working class and to confer an immortal character to the fortunes accumulated by the capitalist class' (Erreygers and Di Bartolomeo, 2007, pp. 610-611). Rignano acknowledged the powerful incentives to work and save provided by property rights, resulting in more rapid accumulation of capital than collectivism; still, the *conservation* of formed capital could be the responsibility of public authorities. The three principles on which this 'alternative property regime' was based were: 1) the ultimate nationalisation of means of production; 2) the rapid de-cumulating of private fortunes, to prevent large wealth inequality; 3) preserving stimuli to work and save. This led him to propose 'to differentiate the right of bequest according to the "origin" or "age" of the property involved. (…) When a man dies, his possessions have to be split up into different parts according to the number of times a property had been transferred (by means of inheritance or gift) to reach its present state' (Erreygers and Di Bartolomeo, 2007). The estate is thus divided in several parts: first, what had been personally accumulated and saved by the deceased (no previous transfer); the wealth inherited from people who had accumulated them personally, such as the deceased's father's own savings (1 transfer); the wealth the father had inherited

from his father (2 transfers), and so on. Progressivity was then applied on the number of transfers, rather than on the value, and would result in ‘a socialism in accordance with liberal economics’.

Rignano’s ideas clearly marked a radical break with the aforementioned Italian tradition, but they went ‘almost unnoticed in the first two decades of the century’, with the partial exception of France (Maccabelli, 2007, p. 97-99). It was only after the Great War, and the consequent change in attitudes towards progressive taxation (Scheve and Stasavage, 2016), that Rignano’s work was translated in England and the US and endorsed by authors such as Dalton (Erreygers and Di Bartolomeo, 2007, pp. 621-630). After the Bolshevik revolution, Rignano presented his proposal as a pragmatic middling way to address the inequalities created by the war, as he argued both on the *Economic Journal* and in a letter to the Socialist leader Filippo Turati, published in the party’s newspaper (Rignano, 1920). Not surprisingly, this time the proposal attracted severe critiques, not only on practical terms (most notably, evasion). Graziani contested Rignano’s ‘extra fiscal’, ‘socio-political’ objectives (Rignano, 1920, pp. 46-52). For Einaudi (1919), Rignano’s scheme presented so many practical difficulties ‘to make it useless to discuss it’. Moreover, from a quite conservative standpoint, Einaudi criticised the very idea of contrasting ‘the preservation of families and fortunes throughout following generations’; excessive inheritance taxes would

> accelerate the process of family dissolution, of annihilation of traditions, and conversions of men into nomads, living in rented houses or in hotels, holding securities, have international tastes and do not feel any attachment to the land where they were born and their parents and ancestors rest (Einaudi, 1919, pp. 162-165).

Interestingly, while opposing Rignano’s political goals, Gini supported a ‘minimal’ version of Rignano’s principles, to tax differently ‘revenues from labor and from capital’, given that ‘what is acquired by less effort can be disposed of with less pain’ (Erreygers and Di Bartolomeo, 2007, pp. 624-625). An interesting objection, based on…gender equality, came from De Stefani (1921, pp. 118-119): given that ‘the share of wealth coming from individual

accumulation is arguably higher' for men, such progressivity 'would disproportionally hit women and those' (such as children) 'who do not contribute to increase social wealth, in the light of their natural condition'. Curiously, a public finance scholar very close to Turati – Benvenuto Griziotti – was the only to provoke a harsh reply by the usually amenable Rignano (1920, pp. 103-104).[3] Despite stressing the importance of inheritance taxation against wealth inequality, and among the few to oppose its abolition few years later, Griziotti (1921, pp. 42-43) warned workers socialists the lures of 'demagogic finance' (Gabbuti, 2021a, pp. 176-178). Still, the socialist leader included a Rignano-style proposal in a programmatic parliamentary speech in June 1920 (Erreygers and Di Bartolomeo, 2007, p. 605).

In 1920 and 1921, Pantaleoni (1922, pp. 26-47) had violently denounced the 'Italian bolshevism' – a term under which he included the redistributive reforms proposed by the last liberal cabinets – arguing that wage increases and 'political prices' – of which 'inequality (and its non-acceptance, the idea that equality can be achieved by law) is the most powerful cause' – had 'artificially altered the normal, Paretian curve of incomes'. After the March on Rome, Pantaleoni became the main advisor of the new Finance Minister, De Stefani: in this role, he drafted a paper, posthumously published, arguing for the complete abolition of inheritance tax. From the first lines, Pantaleoni (1928, pp. 5-7) denounced inheritance taxation as the most 'political' of all taxes. Ironically quoting an advocate of inheritance taxation, his friend Edwin R. A. Seligman, Pantaleoni defined it 'the by-product of modern democracy' – something Fascism had no reason to imitate. For him, inheritance taxation 'destroys capital': contrary to 'rich countries, like England', a labor-abundant, capital scarce country could not afford the 'luxury' of destroying part of their assets 'to give some political satisfaction to the Labour

[3] Notably, in 1919-1920, Rignano very politely wrote to Einaudi, and asked him to 'lend me for 48 hours' Pigou and Fisher's comments on his proposal, that he was not aware of: Archivio Einaudi, Corrispondenza, Rignano Eugenio, 1919-1920.

Party' (Pantaleoni, 1928, pp. 12-14). For this 'destructive' nature, Pantaleoni (1928, p. 15) saw no middling ground: any tax on inheritance was a concession to socialism; the only alternative was to deny it completely, adhering to an alleged 'Roman' mentality (*mentalità quiritaria*) based on 'the respect for the family, in its sentimental and practical reality'. Interestingly, to contrast Mill's and Rignano's arguments, Pantaleoni (1928, pp. 16-17) entirely denied the possibility of identifying wealth 'due to circumstances' (*congiuntura*) from the one coming from 'personal effort'; any similar attempt would

> (…) undermine all the productive system as illegal, because no productive act is independent from circumstances. Circumstances distribute health and physical strength among men; talent and genius; moral and immoral qualities, (…). There is no proportion, as a fact, between labour and return, because the latter depends on many variables, of which labour is just one. Every generation inherits, by circumstances, the Fatherland, its traditions, its civilisation, its organisation (…). Where is merit? (Pantaleoni, 1928, pp. 16-17).[4]

Pantaleoni's arguments – almost verbatim repeated in the Royal Decree that abolished the tax (Gabbuti, 2021a) – were rigorously scrutinised by a student of Griziotti in his dissertation. Pugliese (1926) dismissed as 'superfluous' any critique to 'such a badly and inappropriately invoked concept, such as quiritarian law' – a 'feudal', pre-modern concept applied in societies with large families and no taxes at all. More serious were the 'economic arguments' on potential capital flights, tax evasion, territorial equity, and the scarce amount of revenues lost by the state; but these arguments would imply that 'any tax on capital income is harmful, because any tax of this kind induces capital flights, is not remunerative when badly administered, and evaded if poorly designed and grievous' (Pugliese, 1926, p. 193-194). Indeed, for Pugliese the underlying rationale of the 1923 abolition was 'an unconfessed (…) aversion to any capital tax', based on 'Ricardo's classic objection that inheritance tax *undermines capital accumulation*'. Ironically, the pragmatic support for progressivity shared by most Italian economists – that, according to Fausto (2008), while 'not well founded from a

[4] A similar, although less radical, dismissal of the possibility of ascertaining and measure individual 'merits' can be found in Pareto (1902, pp. 568-569).

theoretical viewpoint', was mostly motivated by 'political and social reasons' – had been overcome by the radically conservative views of Pantaleoni.

### 3. Starting Positions and Equality of Opportunity

Given that the starting point of one generation is the end of the previous one, philosophers and economists, such as Rawls or Sen, who discuss 'equality of opportunity' also deal with the acceptable degree to which the past should matter in determining present opportunities (Ferreira and Peragine, 2015). The birth of the concept is generally associated with enlightening and the French revolution (Maccabelli, 2012); looking at historiography, however, one could think the issue did not attract economists' interest until very recently.[5] In fact, as will be discussed in this section, two of the most important Italian economists of this period, Pantaleoni and Einaudi, dedicated specific works to the issue. In doing that, it is worth noting how both referred to the 'well-known' theory of 'the equality of starting points', without explicit references. Indeed, Pantaleoni's radical opposition to inheritance (and any progressive) tax derived from his extreme ideas on these matters, rightfully deserving to be considered 'one of the most irreverent and destructive analysis ever proposed of the concept of equality of starting points' (Maccabelli, 2012, p. 174), somehow anticipating later reflections by Hayek (1976).

Published in the same year of Rignano (1901), and at the peak of the debate over fiscal reforms, Pantaleoni's *Note on the nature of initial positions and their influence on the ending ones* (1901) should be understood in the context of a widely discussed 'ideology', that as argued by the British economic historian Tawney (1931), 'was formulated as a lever to overthrow legal inequality and juristic privilege, and from its infancy it has been presented in

[5] An exception is Maccabelli (2007).

negative, rather than positive terms'.[6] The paper started from the metaphor of a horse race: if horses have 'been lined up on a line whose points are all equidistant from the goal', then 'they have initial starting positions, with respect to the *distance* from the starting point to the goal' (Pantaleoni, 1901, p. 334).[7] This equality 'is *in the will* of the judges': the state could create such equality by law. But what about the way in which horses had been fed, trained, or the parental match operated by the breeder? Moreover, in economic life, one cannot find fixed, predetermined ends: the end (…) was achieved wealth, now it is misery. It was honour and glory (…) now it is the opposite. (…). Mental and physical qualities, once useful, become hopeless' – in line with the 'relativist' discussion of 'circumstances' two decades later. It is thus 'of great importance' to know whether those factors the state could modify 'are relevant or not, with respect to the invariable ones'. While not addressing the issue, Pantaleoni referred to 'Pareto's theory on the shape of income curve', proving that 'even the most profound, artificial alteration of initial positions is irrelevant', determining the 'general inefficiency' of any intervention (Faucci, 2014, p. 133).[8] This was particularly true for inheritance tax, defined by Pantaleoni (1928, pp. 6-7) an attempt of 'levelling every citizen's initial economic position' and '*achieving initial de facto equality*'.

Pantaleoni's 1901 essay attracted the admiration of contemporaries and influenced later elaborations on the equality of starting point (Maccabelli, 2008a; 2012); however, historians have overlooked its 'distributive' implications. An exception is Mosca (2015, p. 31), who also argued for a comprehensive assessment of Pantaleoni's work, without distinguishing between an earlier, more academically productive period, and the later involvement in politics: also in

[6] Indeed, Tawney's idea that 'equality of opportunity' was nothing less than the 'lightning-conductor' of his times (Tawney, 1931, pp. 100-103) rules out the idea that this debate was only Italian.
[7] Unless differently specified, italics in the original.
[8] While, as previously noted, Pantaleoni (1922) would later admit the possibility of altering this curve by means of 'political prices', it should be noted that Pareto's law had been contested by several Italian authors (Gabbuti, 2020, p. 439).

this case, Pantaleoni's 'anti-socialist criticisms are all evidently based on a theorical, economic structure' (Mosca, 2015, p. 34). For Pantaleoni (1922), 'inheritance is the only distributive process that does not consist of and result in production, that for this reason attracts the appetite of smart Bolshevik writers such as Eugenio Rignano'. Indeed, this brief discussion of Pantaleoni's views on the matter allows us to fully appreciate Rignano's opposite, 'overall palingenetic project', generally 'overlooked' by those considering only the technicalities of his proposal (Maccabelli, 2007, pp. 89-90).[9] As stressed by De Francisci Gerbino (1925, p. 236),

> Rignano thinks that inheritance is the main cause of maintaining the division of society into the two opposite classes of holders of capital and workers without the implements indispensable for their work, and that this is contrary to nature, because, by placing individuals in initial different conditions in the struggle for life, it causes the survival, not of the fittest, but of those who are artificially less inured to conflict.

On the same vein, one of those economists and statisticians working on the measurement of income distribution, Costantino Bresciani Turroni, argued that inequality did not come from 'human nature', but rather 'from the organisation of our society', and in particular, precisely from 'the institution of inheritance'. Contrary to Pareto and Pantaleoni, Bresciani Turroni considered the role of 'starting positions' as very important, concluding that radically different societies (such as socialism) would result in different distributions (Maccabelli, 2004, pp. 208-210).

Few decades later, the centrality of initial position had been advocated by another pioneer of modern inequality measurement, Rodolfo Benini, a statistician with a long history of empirical work and reflections on the relationship between inheritance and income distributions (Maccabelli, 2008a; Gabbuti, 2019, 2020). In the years of the Great Depression, Benini (1929, 1930a) entered the 1930s debate on 'corporatist economics' (Faucci, 2014, pp. 187-191), arguing that the study of 'more or less advanced initial positions' was to be made 'the very first chapter' of a new economic science, founded on a radically inductive,

[9] A more extended discussion of Pantaleoni's positions is in Gabbuti (2021b, pp. 192-197).

quantitative basis. Economics had in fact been so far 'half a science', for the choice of focusing only on what he defined as the 'application points', ignoring the way in which that initial distribution had been determined by inheritance and institutions (precisely the kind of 'historical enquiry' Pantaleoni considered outside the dominion of economics). In a further article, Benini (1930b) stressed that these initial conditions translated into different 'resistance capacity'. Even within the marginalist framework, introducing inequality was necessary to fully understand how observed equilibria had been reached – something he stressed again in his 1936 textbook of political economy (Maccabelli, 2008a, pp. 120-126). From the terminology, Benini clearly drew on Pantaleoni (1901), but also on 'Cairnes' theory of *non-competing groups*'. John Elliot Cairnes wrote in 1874 that within the labour market one could find:

> (…) not a whole population competing indiscriminately for all occupations, but a series of industrial layers, superposed on one another, within each of which the various candidates for employment possess a real and effective power of selection, while those occupying the several strata are, for all purposes of effective competition, practically isolated from each other.[10]

Interestingly, Pantaleoni's annotations on his books, reported by Gangemi (1939) (according to which they 'must be dated between 1887 and 1894') reveal sympathy for these theories. Contrary to Benini, however, for Pantaleoni 'economic science must discard those problems that, if approached with its own tools, end out without solution' (Gangemi, 1939, p. 40): while annotating that 'major sources of attrition are the starting positions of individuals, the historical and social conditions, the strength relationship between social classes' (Gangemi, 1939, p. 37), in public Pantaleoni (1904, p. 45) urged economics to be limited exclusively to 'economic phenomena' – that is, 'relationships that must take place according to a presumption of equality among sides, presumption that holds even where initial positions, the *starts* are not equal'.[11] According to Gangemi (1939) – that, ironically, in 1923 was working as head of De

[10] Quoted in Caldari (2006, pp. 330-331), who also discusses Marshall's views on non-competing groups.
[11] 'Starts' is in English (and italics) in the original.

Stefani's press office, thus celebrating the abolition of inheritance tax (Gabbuti, 2021a, p. 194) – by the late 1930s non-competing groups were 'a fundamental basis for corporatist economics', that had found its 'logic and clear development' in Benini's recent textbook.[12]

In fact, as noted by Maccabelli (2008a, pp. 112-120), Benini's views on initial positions were completely ignored by Einaudi, despite the economist had entered the debate to reply against the statistician's defence of public intervention. Einaudi's (1949) following statement on the importance of equality of starting points (infamously calling for a strong inheritance tax, able to 'mow down', at death, all individual fortunes, apart for allowances of spouses and offspring's needs) was a late conversion, that impressed some of his colleagues (Maccabelli, 2012, p. 182). Contrary to the impartial stance assumed in Einaudi (1928), the economist had first opposed Rignano using words that revealed a 'social philosophy' in 'total opposition to the principle of equality in starting points' (Maccabelli, 2012, pp. 176-177), and also actively participated in the campaign against the post-WWI 'confiscatory' inheritance taxes (Gabbuti, 2021a). Even in 1940s Einaudi's 'conversion' was still 'troubled': for Maccabelli (2012, p. 172), Einaudi never reached the point of 'championing a society organised according to the principle of equality of starting points', and he raises 'historiographical concerns on the recent interpretations of Einaudi as an advocate of equality in starting points'. In the chapter, written in 1944 during his Swiss exile, Einaudi (1949, pp. 241-250) argued that there are no effective arguments against an *ex-ante* egalitarian redistribution of resources, what would make possible for markets to tend towards a meritocratic *ex post* distribution; this form of redistribution would not entail the downsides of equality in final positions. However, the statement is followed by clarifications that limit its general validity, rather emphasising its limitations and unintended,

[12] Curiously, the issue of starting points was raised in the same years by the eclectic scholar of public finance Massimo Fovel, but in relationship with political regimes. For instance, Fovel (1928) adopted concepts very similar to those developed by Pantaleoni (1901), as well as the 'economics of non-competing groups' to criticise liberalism – just one of the possible 'political starting position', together with collectivism and 'corporatism – that is, the sum of new initial positions created by law, jurisprudence, the will of a party' (p. 347).

negative consequences. In practice, while the unfairness of the distribution of opportunities is greatly exaggerated, the 'leveller tax' just advocated as a matter of principle, would encounter many complications in order to be applied. Moreover, Einaudi still described a 'society organised around the principle of equality in starting points' in 'absolutely dismal, dark' tones (Maccabelli, 2012, pp. 179-180):

> A society, in which really, the book of life had to restart from each generation, would be an inferno of men wildly fighting against each other for primacy, or a phalanstery or monastery ruled by Mandarins. (…) You'd get a society of bureaucrats, the opposite of a society of free men, bond by strong ties of family and place (Einaudi, 1949, pp. 217-218).

As noted by Forte (2009, pp. 113-114), Einaudi seems often to advocate for some guaranteed 'vital minimum'; while arguing for some reduction in the inequality of starting points (especially in terms of human capital, and the abolition of entry restrictions in professions and economic activity), including some taxation of the wealthiest (*tagliare le punte*), he did not 'juxtapose an autonomous principle of justice' to the one of freedom. Rather than Rawls, Einaudi's ideal resembles Popper' 'open society' (Forte, 2009, pp. 215-216). If one adopts Roemer's (2000, p. 1) classification, Einaudi never really argued in favour of 'levelling the playing field', although placing himself somehow at the left of those simply arguing for 'a mere principle of 'non-discrimination'.

From the specific perspective of this survey, it is also worth noting Einaudi's dismissal of the 'empirical' importance of equality of starting point:

> It would be useful if its supporters would not expose it often only in terms that sound too much a rhetorical exaggeration to be able to get the real truth. The comparison between a dumb "daddy's boy" [*figlio di papà*], taking up the most profitable jobs, and the 'unacknowledged genius', living a miserable life in obscure occupations because he had the misfortune to be born from poor parents, sounds impressive in the tribune's mouth on in the famous novelist's pages; but which statisticians could ever measure the frequency of that? (…) Are there any studies on the greater or lower frequency of *self-made men*,[13] of men coming up from nowhere, and reaching leading positions? (Einaudi, 1949, pp. 247-248).

Somehow surprisingly, an erudite scholar like Einaudi overlooked the existing (although far from conclusive, as discussed below) literature on the matter, and stated that

[13] English in the original.

'judging by first impressions, … in every country and in every field of political, religious, intellectual, artistic, and economic life, the *homines novi* are the majority of the accomplished'. Further light on Einaudi's views on the matter is given by the private correspondence with Ernesto Rossi in the months before writing the *Lezioni*. In a letter dated February 23, 1942, discussing education, Einaudi argued that the increase in the number of students proved that, in 1942 Italy, 'if one deserves, he succeeds', it was enough for the state to offer good schools, serious and rigorous examinations, and scholarships for the deserving poor (Einaudi and Rossi, 1988, p. 90). The same letter anticipated, more explicitly, his 'quantitative' beliefs. On July 10th, we find also the aforementioned 'Mandarin' bureaucrats: this time, Einaudi also listed 'the professors, statisticians, wise men, academics' (Einaudi and Rossi, 1988, pp. 98-100), suggesting that he must have known some of the empirical works on the matter. In 1945 – after both Einaudi and Rossi fled to Switzerland after the Nazi occupation of Northern Italy, and just few days after his appointment as Governor of the Bank of Italy – Einaudi eventually confessed to his diary that he finally 'adhere[d] to Rignano system' (Einaudi, 1993, p. 60). Few months later, taking service as President of the Republic, he stressed that the new Constitution 'guarantees to all people, whatever may be the circumstances of their birth, the greatest possible equality of starting points'. In the light of the evolution of his thought, it seems reasonable to consider, in line with Forte (2009, p. ix), these late-1940s statements as born in a 'particular moment', in which more redistributive but still moderate solutions could be advanced.

## 4. 'Circulation of Aristocracies' in the Elitist Literature

A third group of thinkers who contributed to the Italian debate on 'social mobility' is the so-called 'Italian elitist school', that attracted abundant scholarly attention, but mainly in political science, leaving aside social mobility aspects. Sorokin (1927) himself, however, considered political mobility as one of the three dominions of social mobility, and referred

several times to these authors. While economists mostly recall his 'law of incomes' (Persky, 1992), Pareto had in fact engaged extensively with the movement of individuals within that curve and considered 'circulation of aristocracies' an essential component of the 'determination of social equilibrium' (Pareto, 1906, pp. 102-103; but see also Pareto, 1901, pp. 125-183).

A very useful summary of his (well known) views on what we could define social mobility comes from a student of Gini, who devoted an essay to a comparison of 'two modern Italian theories that tried to give a scientific explanation' to 'social change' – a phenomenon that 'is assuming great importance, especially in current times' (Levi della Vida, 1935, p. 1).[14] Pareto first discussed the issue in the aforementioned *Systèmes*, and then in the *Manuale di economia politica* (1906), before systematising it in the *Trattato di sociologia generale* (1916). Pareto's starting point was 'social heterogeneity': human societies are formed by 'physically, morally and intellectually different individuals' who constitute many, almost indistinguishable classes. For the sake of simplicity, Pareto discussed two groups – the inferior and the 'superior', in turn divided between those ruling and those not. In all societies, even pre-industrial ones, there is a natural process of 'degeneration' of the élite group, in which, contrary to the view of Gini and other contemporaries, demography plays no role (Levi della Vida, 1935). 'In the absence of obstacles to circulation, the superior class will be repopulated by members of the inferior class, able to rule'; 'achieving wealth', 'military success', 'political ability', or 'literary success' were among the selection processes adopted by different societies (Pareto, 1902, p. 163). As argued by Maccabelli (2008b, p. 506), Pareto's concept of social mobility was 'radically different' from those held by most of the 19th-century 'anthroposociological' authors: 'The idea that individuals coming from the "lower" ranks can contaminate the aristocracies was turned upside down by Pareto. If there were not this "turnover," society would be destined

[14] See also Mosca and Somaini (2018, pp. 84-89), even though their focus is on political power of different classes rather than social mobility.

to perish. It is precisely the subjects coming from the lower classes that allow the social system to continually renew itself'. Indeed, Gini and Pareto both considered positively circulation among classes (Levi della Vida, 1935, p. 26). On the other hand, as noted by Nye (1986), it is possible to see the origins of Pareto's views of social mobility within a Lamarckian evolutionary framing. Despite, since the late 1890s *Cours d'économie politique*, Pareto 'explicitly rejected Darwinian evolution and…social Darwinism, because of their "finalist" implication', works such as Pareto (1902) showed how 'Pareto seems to have derived many of his biological ideas from French sources'. In particular, 'the two principal concepts he borrowed from French science were neo-Lamarckian evolutionary theory and the primarily medical idea of degeneration' (Nye, 1986, p. 99).

Pareto's starting point was the observation that historically, élites had constantly fell and disappeared. As noted by Levi della Vida (1935, p. 16), Pareto did not elaborate on the normal functioning of social change, but rather on its anomalies: for him, whenever circulation from the strata was impeded (for instance, because an entrenched élites prevented talented people from moving upward along the distribution) 'social equilibrium gets extremely unstable, and a violent revolution is imminent' (Pareto, 1906) – an idea clearly echoed in Fascist antiparliamentary rhetoric (De Stefani, 1923). Sorokin (1942, pp. 111-116) also suggested a link between economic mobility and political outcomes, but for him, the causation process was the opposite: as 'any large-scale calamity', wars and revolutions created 'many vacancies in the various strata of the society', 'by destroying a considerable proportion of the population'. For Sorokin, therefore, revolutions triggered periods of exceptionally high mobility, and would eventually need some 'reverse circulation', when the 'many persons' who ended up 'occupy[ing] very responsible positions whose duties they are incapable of adequately discharging' must be replaced by the most qualified among the 'depressed upper and middle classes'. On the contrary, Pareto would agree with Goldthorpe (1992, p. 127) that

social mobility ‘performs important legitimizing and stabilizing functions’, while its absence could lead to revolutions. Interestingly, Pantaleoni (1922, p. 36) discussed a rather peculiar case of short-term ‘ascension of social class’ motivated by political factors: the imposition of ‘political prices’, that he saw as ‘a tool to simultaneously move a whole class one step upward’, while normally upward class mobility was ‘an individual phenomenon’. Indeed, as noted by Mosca and Somaini (2018, p. 85), he distinguished ‘a kind of social mobility, that we might call natural, which originated in competition under shared rules, and another brought about by the intervention of an external authority’.

Pareto himself considered these issues to belong to the field of sociology: not surprisingly, after his death, most of his ‘school’ focused on other lines of research in economics, even though ‘the composition of different social classes and their relationship with political elite’ was discussed with reference to public finance, interpreted as ‘a process of redistribution between individuals or groups’ (Pomini, 2017). Still, Tusset (2018, pp. 65-86) recently surveyed some authors who continued the line of ‘mathematical’ research opened by his ‘law’ of income distributions. These authors, part of a more mathematical, ‘abstract’ approach to the distribution of income, gave it a dynamic representation: for instance, the mathematician Guido Castelnuovo, after interpreting income distribution in probabilistic terms, developed an analogy with theories regarding gas distributions, and concluded that ‘the initial conditions did not matter because the causes influencing the formation of income groups were so numerous that the final distribution, or equilibrium, could not be referred to the initial one’ (Tusset, 2018, pp. 70-71).

Way more pragmatic, and political, was the approach of another ‘elitist’. Robert Michels, the German-born sociologist, who moved to Italy and is normally included among the ‘Italian school’, paid great attention to the issue of social mobility (and is indeed quoted fourteen times in Sorokin, 1927, just like Pareto): as argued by Ventura (2021), Michels was

particularly concerned with a sub-group of the intellectual class – those, in his own words, 'who do not find a satisfactory place in the social order are retrospectively *déclassés*: they have been lost to their class of origin (birth); and prospectively *spostati* (dislodged): they have not proved their ability to win good jobs' (Michels, 1932). 'Intellectual unemployment' and its consequence for political stability was a serious concern of Italian elites since the unification of the country in 1861 (Barbagli, 1974); as reconstructed by Ventura, Michels was initially involved in debates within the left on whether this group (that experience either downward mobility, or frustrated expectations of upward mobility) was to be considered a truly revolutionary force. In a later period, Michels (1936) – now supporter of the Fascist regime – discussed the 'social and intellectual movements in the post-war period'. The 1936 book is influenced by 'the most recent developments in American and German sociology' (Ventura, 2021): Michels constantly referred to German, as well as Swedish and Hungarian studies on university students' social mobility, given that 'the role of university in the history of upward mobility of social classes is very important' (Michels, 1936, p. 41). While lamenting the absence of appropriate data for Italy, Michels (1936, p. 73) noted that the number of students coming from the working class was 'scarce', and that the recruiting process of 'traditional faculties' was 'evidently endogenous in character', to the point that 'Italy probably resembles more 1871 than today's Germany'. While determining a high quality of Italian professionals, this limited the chance 'for valuable men to emerge' professionally, as it had been the case, politically, 'with Fascism' (Michels, 1936, p. 75). According to Michels, Fascism 'represented an irreparable break that hit the liberal strata of ruling bourgeoisie', but the same could not be said, however, 'on the economic side'. Despite 'infinite individual movements' had occurred, and the upward mobility opportunity represented by Fascism for 'many members of petit bourgeoisie', testified by many of his leaders, the social structure remained similar (Michels, 1936, pp. 134-136). All in all, for Michels (1936, p. 150) changes of social classes within the

‘bourgeois system’ depended on ‘three fundamental causes’: the ‘objective’ demand of human capital from the economy; the fertility of different social classes; and finally, the ‘upward dynamics’ – that is, human effort to ‘improve their fate and climb the social ladder’. Available statistical evidence convinced him that the ‘upward stream from modest and middle classes to the wealthy and ruling classes’ was stronger than the downward flow; moreover, ‘those falling down’ normally ‘stopped at some intermediate step, without reaching the bottom of the ladder’ (manual labour) (Michels, 1936, p. 153).

## 5. ‘Social Change’ and the Birth of an Idiosyncrasy

Alongside more theoretical contributions, Italian statisticians had been carrying on applied work in order to investigate the various concepts of ‘mobility’ discussed in this paper. As argued convincingly by Ramos Pinto and Paidipaty (2020), these empirical contributions – often overlooked by historians of economics – are fundamental to ‘historicize inequality knowledge’.

From their earlier contributions, authors such as Benini and Bresciani Turroni considered separately the distributions of wealth and income, and tried to approach their dynamic relationship, and its effect on intergenerational mobility. Many authors, including Michels (1936, p. 82), mentioned Benini’s results on ‘wedding homogamy’, that pointed at assortative mating as another, strong force against social mobility. Moreover, Benini estimated a ‘coefficient of inherited incomes’, the ratio between the private wealth transmitted and the total income earned (Gabbuti, 2020, p. 437) – an ‘empirical law’ that he later interpreted in less mathematically, with clear references to Cairnes:

> Statistics, although conjectural, supports the common view. Lower classes, lacking sufficient wealth to access remunerative professions requiring long, expensive training, work from young age – they earn soon their life, but do not earn much more than what they need. Relatively upper classes start earning later in life, but more than proportionally. Because of their greater or lower wealth, different social groups constitute non-competing groups

when selecting professions – or rather, competition is easy from upper to lower strata, but hard the other way round (Benini, 1906, p. 332).

The reconstruction of the relationship between Benini and the coeval 'non-competing groups' literature, as well as with similar empirical work carried on by scholars such as the German Karl Bücher (see the review in Chessa, 1912, pp. 6-8), goes far beyond the scope of this contribution, but could be an interesting chapter of the largely unwritten global intellectual history of inequality. For sure, the 'index of attraction' developed by Benini to explore assortative mating was favourably quoted, among others, by the same Lipset and Bendix (1959, p. 27).[15]

At this point, Chessa (1912) – often mentioned as the only Italian pre-WWII genuine contribution to the issue of social mobility (Cobalti and Schizzerotto, 1997, p. 7) – might appear less pioneering; for his times, however, it was an impressive contribution. After an insightful theoretical survey of the 'qualitative theories' of inheritance of profession (notably featuring both Cairnes and Marshall), Chessa analyzed the transmission of professions from the most heterogeneous sources, including the British *Who's Who*. In opposition to the surveys independently carried on by other scholars, Chessa stressed that mobility had to be analyzed by means of large samples, given its variability across time, place and profession (Mulè, 1992). In line with Sorokin, Chessa identified growing social mobility as a long-run feature of modern societies: 'industrial progress and the development of division of labour break down the old professional and social classes', making it harder 'to inherit professions from fathers to sons'. Indeed, the upward movement of lower classes was a separate, independent phenomenon from the hereditary transmission of some professions. Methodologically, he combined the indices devised by Gini and Benini, into a new 'synthetic index'. All in all, also for Chessa upward mobility was stronger than downward mobility, and the tendency was to even more social

[15] See also Jones (1985), and the literature surveyed in Ammassari (1977).

change, given that the role of inherited traits declined with economic development, compared to the importance of acquired skills.

Among the empirical works on intergenerational transmission we also find the aforementioned De Stefani, who analysed French estate data to discuss

> How does inheritance affect wealth distribution? Which are the effects of persistence, among some families, some groups, of the economic dominion, due to the transmission of goods from fathers to sons and to nephews? (De Stefani, 1921, pp. 3-4).

In this work, De Stefani tried to investigate the ways in which inheritance influenced the distribution of wealth, as well as to infer its trend, showing eclectic and often inconsistent influences by authors such as Pareto, Pantaleoni and Gini, along with racist anthroposociological theories. For instance, at page 8 he hints at Pareto's law, by stressing that across generations, the 'initial distribution of wealth' is maintained, with people changing position within groups of constant size, while later, he advanced the idea that wealth inequality had reached an absolute peak in his times, and 'demographic-economic-industrial concentration will possibly appear to the future historian as the most salient feature of our times' (De Stefani, 1921, p. 161).

More consistently, De Stefani (1921) rebutted Gini's demographic (and after all, biological) theory of social change. As Pareto, Gini had come to study income and wealth distribution from concerns related to what we would define as 'social mobility'. In his first works on the measurement of inequality, Gini (1909) was concerned with 'differential reproduction among social classes' – an issue that 'had by that time solicited the attention of a vast array of authors' (Levi della Vida, 1935, p. 9). Contrary to Pareto, for Gini, 'differential fertility was the engine of social mobility' (Favero, 2004, p. 48): the demographic shrinking of the rich, together with the wider demand coming from a more developed economy, provoked 'a true upward stream, bringing deserving individuals to the upper strata', and a corresponding, 'much less intense' downward movement (Levi della Vida, 1935, p. 9). Contrary to Michels or

Pareto, for Gini (1912, p. 26) the elites did not 'circulate, but for the great majority, extinguish, and have to be replaced by new elements from below'. Against all the evidence, Gini insisted on attributing these dynamics to biological, rather than socio-economic causes – to the preposterous extent of attributing the diffusion of Christianism and Socialism to the faster demographic growth of the working classes. Gini's discussion of social mobility was also part of a more ambitious attempt of explaining the overall rise and decline of 'nations' (Gini, 1912, p. 35). Nonetheless, the same work included a social mobility matrix, reporting the data collected by the Statistical office of Rome on 'the profession of husbands at wedding, and his father's occupation at his birth': the 3,127 observations, classified in four groups according to profession, showed that 'the upward stream is more than double in its intensity than the downward one', but 'much weaker' than the ones detected in Sweden, especially considering that 'our data refer to a big cities, in which we must assume social change and particularly the rise of lower classes are stronger' (Gini, 1912, p. 26). Gini's personal library also includes the only first edition of Sorokin (1927) listed by the Italian national library catalogue.[16]

Indeed, Gini seemed to spend both his academic and institutional influence to promote research on 'social change'.[17] During Gini's direction, the newly found National Institute of Statistics (Istat) launched on a survey on the social origins of university students (Istat, 1936), filling the lack of statistical knowledge denounced by Michels.[18] As a scholar, Gini steered a research group on these issues, as testified by CISP (1935) – a volume collecting the papers presented by members of the *Italian committee for the study of population issues* at the congress of the *Institut International de Sociologie*, mostly focused on 'social turnover'. The volume featured, among several related contributions: Levi Della Vida (1935); an anticipation of

[16] On the relationship between Gini and Sorokin, see Cassata (2005).
[17] As discussed in Gabbuti (2019, pp. 121-122), Gini promoted an enquiry on inequality as well, but possibly due to his resignation, this did not result in any official publication.
[18] Fortunati (1937, p. 149) attributes to the statistician Mario De Vergottini, at the times head of service at Istat, the authorship of the 'detailed' introductory note.

Michels (1936); a work on 'the social origin of students' by Vincenzo Castrilli (a former employee of the Ministry of Education, quoted by Michels himself as the 'foremost expert on educational statistics'); and Gini's own comment on 'apparent and real exceptions to the norm of lower natural increase of upper classes'. This line of research continued at least until the early 1950s, as testified by works such on 'the social origin and differential outcomes of roman students' (Giurovich, 1955): by the late 1930s, at least in Italy, the 'cyclical theory of population, who Gini developed in roughly thirty years, … represent[ed] an inevitable reference for scholars' investigating 'the differential reproduction and demographic change of social classes' (Fortunati, 1937, p. 147). The reluctance of sociologists to consider these works in their 'internal histories' is arguably explained by the troubled legacy of Italian demography and the Ginian school, especially considering its involvement with Fascist 'natalist' policies (Cassata, 2005; Favero, 2004). Fortunati's paper is interesting precisely because, while coming from a 'Ginian' statistician, it also testifies the possibility of a 'modern' approach to the issue of social mobility within this scholarly tradition. Fortunati (1937, p. 148), who few years later was to join the Italian Communist Party, motivated the importance of studying social mobility not only 'on a speculative ground', but 'on the political-demographic-economic ground, given the increasing regulatory intervention by the State on individual activities'. Interestingly, Fortunati's study built on the 'yearly study on the social origin of students, and their family composition', carried on by the University of Padua by means of a 'specific survey' students had to fill in order to being enrolled since the academic year 1933-34, building on the aforementioned Istat (1936) survey carried on in 1931-32. The admittedly tentative comparisons with Prussia, Hungary and Poland showed that 'social change takes place almost in the same form in all countries for which data on social origin of university students are available' (Fortunati, 1937, p. 155) – thus rejecting Michels' hypotheses. By emphasizing the 'delayed' nature of social ascension – the very low share of students from working class origins

led him to assume a process in which, while the second generation could access professions 'requiring only high school diplomas', only the third generation could reach university – and the low fertility of student families, Fortunati (1937, p. 166) called for a 'coordinating action of broad scope by the State', to remove economic constraints to enrolment. The final remarks, mentioning the historical model provided by the Catholic Church, and the aim of 'renovating the life cycle of Italy's people to suggest the course of a new civilization', sound like a Fascist veneer over genuinely progressive concerns.[19]

Curiously, in 1948, Italy's first systematic household budget survey included two questions, on both father's and grandfather's 'professional category'. As stressed by the scientific responsible of the survey, the two questions on mobility were 'suggested' by the statistician Livio Livi (Luzzatto Fegiz, 1956) – one of the contributors to the empirical debate on the impact of the Great War on income distribution (Gabbuti, 2019). Later, Livi (1950) exploited the 636 individual responses to write a methodological paper on the estimation of social mobility. While Livi had interpreted his results as indicative of 'quite strong' mobility, once compared with the evidence increasingly available for other countries, Italian figures represented the 'one major exception' to the strong mobility experienced by all industrial societies (Lopreato, 1965, p. 311). In the third edition of his popular *Conditions of economic progress*, the economist Colin Clark (1957, p. 554) read social mobility figures as proving that 'Italy is [intrinsically] a society of much greater hereditary stratification than any of the other countries examined'.[20] In the same years, American scholars became increasingly interested in the Southern Question, in a way that according to Schneider (1998) should be included in the 'wider context of Orientalism'. In different ways, works such as Banfield (1958) and *The Leopard* (also published in 1958) contributed to the definition of an Italian 'exception' in terms

[19] On Fortunati's early works on inequality, see Tassinari et al. (2021).
[20] On Clark, see the recent biography by Millmow (2021).

of intergenerational mobility and family ties. This international attention motivated the Italo-American Joseph Lopreato – described by Ammassari (1977) as a 'Paretian scholar' – to work on what are considered the first modern empirical works on social mobility in Italy. First, in short note aimed at amending Italy's idiosyncratic figures, Lopreato (1965) took advantage of a new, larger survey, carried out in 1963-1964. The resulting figures were finally in line with those shown by Lipset and Bendix (1959) for other North American and European countries. Lopreato explained the difference to the limited sample adopted by Livi (1950), but in retrospect it could well be that the 1948 survey, carried on before the rapid structural change of the Miracle, consistently captured the lower social mobility suggested by Michels and others for the interwar period.[21]

## 6. Conclusions

It will take the 1980s to have the first nationally representative mobility survey, carried out by a group of sociologists based at the University of Trento (Cobalti and Schizzerotto, 1997). As I tried to reconstruct in this paper, however, it seems to hold for Italy as well that 'the scarcity of historical empirical mobility studies does not reflect a lack of interest in the subject (Long, 2013, p. 2). Italian economists and statisticians were concerned with the transmission of status (including the role of inheritance), the issue of equality of starting position, and the circulation at the top of the social pyramid and in the broader society and explored these issues both theoretically and empirically. It is interesting that Italian authors, while not obsessed by 'class' as the British ones, showed some constant concern for or the transmission of status to *figli di papà* (an expression recurring in both Einaudi and Rignano), and for the persistence of an entrenched 'political caste' – two issues still raised by

[21] See Gabbuti (2021b) for a discussion of the historical literature on social mobility in modern Italy.

pamphleteers nowadays. As for inequality (Gabbuti, 2020), the interest of Italian scholars in social mobility was in some sense 'premature', for a country that (as they recognised themselves) was not at the frontier of industrialisation and structural change, nor showed dramatic mobility fluxes. In the absence of consolidated long-run figures for social mobility, it would be tempting to 'explain' the fading out of this interest with absolute and relative improvements caused by the Economic Miracle, and in turn, the contemporary surge of interest with the post-1992 enduring economic decline.[22]

The interest of Italian scholars for social mobility seemed often provoked by the same concern of the protagonist *The Leopard*: even though they did not personally experience neither the rapid structural change, nor the upward and international mobility lived by Sorokin, Italian statisticians and economists seemed scared of 'living in a mobile reality'. Concerns on inheritance tax, for instance, emerge several times in the correspondence of the economists' 'Prince'. Son of a Irish noble-woman and an MP, Pantaleoni suggested how to deal with the tax both his colleague Antonio De Viti De Marco, when offering him the condolences for the loss of his father, and (multiple times) his friend Pareto (Pareto, 1962) – indeed, the latter was able to focus on research thanks to a very large bequest. Strikingly, if, on one hand, Sorokin mentioned some Italian socialist leaders, such as Turati and Arturo Labriola within those who had enjoyed vertical mobility thanks to party affiliation,[23] in line with Italian elitist theories, several of the scholars working on these issues (such as Livi and Graziani) had both fathers and sons working in academia, providing further anecdotical evidence in support of Michels (1936). The early interest for 'social mobility' of Italian academics could be interpreted, all in all, as another aspect of the 'crisis' of so-called Liberal Italy; not so paradoxically, many of

[22] Also in this case, scholarly interest is 'matched' by literary works, such as Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* series.
[23] Both Labriola and Turati were among the major opponents of the 1923 abolition of inheritance tax (Gabbuti, 2021a).

these scholars were supportive of its violent outcome – Fascism – starting from those, like Pareto, who had 'predicted' it.

While focusing on the Italian case, this paper contributed to the emerging historical literature on the measurement and conceptualisation of inequality – somehow at the interception between the history of economic thought, and broader intellectual and social histories (Ramos Pinto and Paidipaty, 2020) – as well as the narratives and 'ideology' discussed by Piketty (2020). In this sense, this work qualifies Alacevich and Soci's (2017, p. 10) argument that 'inequality has for very long time remained at the margins of economic discourse'. Apart for Pareto's 'law', economists working on inequality and social mobility did not build consistent, formalised theories of inequality; but this did not stop them from doing applied work on the matter, or to address these issues in what they considered, as Pareto, 'sociology', as well as in public, political interventions, as in the case of Pantaleoni. In dealing with an inherently normative issue such as inequality, it seems the case to extend Mosca's (2015) recommendation of not separating the more 'scientific' (and most of all, theoretical) works, from the alternative ways in which economists entered the public debate.[24] While, following Robbins, economists have tended to 'limit very rigidly the scope of economic inquiry' to those 'ascertainable facts', leaving to 'ethics or political philosophy' all those topics (such as inequality) involving value judgements (Maccabelli, 1998, p. 453), it would be hard to claim that inequality was not important for some of the most influential Italian scholars of the period, such as Pareto, Pantaleoni, and Einaudi. Indeed, the inclusion of more political writings, as well as a broader discussion of the socio-political context, made possible to appreciate both the consistency of the 'Fascist' Pantaleoni with his earlier thinking, and to

[24] This is particularly the case for economists, such as Pantaleoni, Pareto or Einaudi, who 'showed a lively, lasting interest in politics, which led to a considerable amount of publicist writings as well as to active militancy' (Mosca and Somaini, 2018, p. 82).

qualify Einaudi's support for the equality of starting point. While the Italian case presents original traits, the paper showed that Italian scholars were aware to participate in a wider, international, multi-disciplinary debate: hopefully, new research will soon make possible to write its global history.

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