Continuity and Change **26** (*3*), *2011*, *367–404*. © *Cambridge University Press 2011*
doi:10.1017/S0268416011000257

Social mobility and the Middle Ages

SANDRO CAROCCI*

ABSTRACT. *Notwithstanding its relevance, social mobility has not been at the forefront of the agenda for historians of the Middle Ages. The first part of this paper deals with the reasons for this lack of interest, highlighting the role of historical models such as the French 'feudal revolution', the neo-Malthusian interpretations, the English commercialisation model and the great narrative of Italian medieval merchants. The second part assesses the extent to which this lack of interest has been challenged by conceptions of social space and social mobility developed in recent decades by sociologists and anthropologists. Therefore, it is really important to indicate the gaps in our understanding, and to clarify research questions, technical problems and methods. The paper examines the constitutive elements of social identities, the plurality of social ladders, and the channels of social mobility. It touches upon the performative role of learned representations, and upon the constraints imposed upon human agency by family practices and genre. It underlines the importance of studying the mobility inside social groups, and argues that we must distinguish between two different types of medieval social mobility: autogenous social mobility, and endogenous or conflictual social mobility.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Social mobility and the Middle Ages are an unusual couple. In the field of medieval studies, mobility has never, or hardly ever, found itself at centre stage.

Of course, there is no longer anyone who still thinks that the two partners in the couple were completely unrelated. Countless pathways of social ascent or descent have been identified both in detailed studies of

* Università di Roma Tor Vergata, Dipartimento di Storia.
An Italian version of this essay first appeared as: S. Carocci, 'Mobilità sociale e medioevo', *Storica* **15**, 43–45 (2009), 11–55. It has been translated into English by Fred Sengmueller.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0268416011000257 Published online by Cambridge University Press

single individuals and families and by investigations into the longer-term trends of the Middle Ages. The barbarian invasions, the crisis of free peasants in the Carolingian period, the establishment of lordship in the tenth to twelfth centuries, the rise of cities, the emergence of a legally defined nobility, and the great political expulsions of Italian communes are only a few of the medieval dynamics in which social upheaval is often an implicit assumption of any work of research. The myth of a medieval society that was characterised by a non-existent or very low level of social mobility, a myth which nevertheless recurred in the work of Werner Sombart or Richard Tawney, was demolished some time ago.[1] On the contrary, mobility, especially after the eleventh century, has become a kind of axiom among scholars.

Obviously, the conception of medieval society has also been transformed. Historians no longer describe societies as being made up of rigid hierarchies of classes and *ordines* where any movement was difficult or impossible to achieve. If anything, the results of most recent studies suggest that we should push forward, to the end of the Middle Ages and the early Modern period, the time when the development of social boundaries culminated, and less permeable hierarchies reached their highest degree of formalisation. This trend towards social definition and closure has also been observed in the forms of kin organisation (as shown by the tendency to exalt the cohesion of kin groups, to create hierarchies of descent groups and to establish more rigid systems of succession) and it was sustained by the spread of formally privileged groups that laid claims to offices, lordly rights, monopolies and so on.[2] The transition to a society that was truly ordered by estates, to a *Ständeordnung*, is a phenomenon of the early Modern period.

Nevertheless, in the scholarly literature on the Middle Ages, social mobility remains only implicitly present, a background as it were, that has received little special attention.

There are complex reasons that account for this lack of interest: the state of the documentation, conceptions of society, trends in historiography and sometimes even the ideological orientation of historians themselves. A number of these reasons stem from objective difficulties; others have been resolved with advances in historical research and the redefinition of interpretative categories. I will devote some space here to this question. Later I intend to move on to historiography in the English-speaking world, the only area where the problem has received a certain amount of attention. Finally, drawing on the results of a recent conference on social mobility in the Middle Ages, I aim to discuss, though by no means exhaustively, a number of hypotheses and analytical models.[3]

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An outdated topic, one that appears to be associated with bygone periods of scholarship and for that reason was never developed properly, can be taken up again and reveal an unexpected potential. A topic's supposed staleness, its odour of mustiness, comes from the way it is conceived. If we begin to perceive it differently, if its lineaments are redrawn, it can offer unexplored avenues of insight.

2. TAKING STOCK OF THE SITUATION

Before undertaking this re-evaluation we first need to recognise how, for several decades now, both the notions of society and social movement have been radically redefined. Studies on social mobility in the Middle Ages were long held back by the impossibility of describing social structures (due to the paucity of documents) with the same quantitative exactness that could be attained when dealing with the modern or contemporary periods. This objective limit still remains, but it ceased to pose an insurmountable barrier when, under the influence of anthropological sociology, historians began to conceive of the social world as a process of ongoing transformation, produced by multiple and changing interactions. Losing in stability and definition, social structure was no longer thought of as a simple list of distinct social groups that lent themselves to precise classification on the basis of objective parameters. Rather than change from one clearly defined status to another, social mobility must be understood as any shift that not only brings individuals and groups, but also objects and values, to a new position within the hierarchy of wealth and professions, within the constellation of regard and prestige, of political participation and any other significant element within a given social space.

In his work *Social mobility* published in 1927, the Russian-American sociologist Pitirim Sorokin, inventor of social mobility as a separate scholarly subject, already insisted on the multi-dimensional character of social space.[4] Sorokin made a special point of emphasising how social stratification and, hence, any shift within the social space occurred along multiple and varied axes. Taken together, these different dimensions of social stratification (or hierarchy) seemed to him to be attributable to three main types: economic stratification, political stratification and professional stratification. The place of any individual in the social space is determined by the position he or she occupies in the various hierarchies. The different types of stratification may be independent, but, for the most part, they are related to each other, though with many imperfections and gaps. In the concrete studies on social mobility that were carried out in later decades, this sense of the multi-dimensionality and complexity of the

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process of mobility was often neglected since the need for concreteness led scholars to prefer very simple scales of stratification, or resort to mathematical models that were of little use to historians.[5]

Today, historians have come to take it for granted that social space is a non-Euclidean reality made up of multiple dimensions. While a few historiographical interpretations remain that view social groups in naively substantialist terms, under the influence of anthropological sociology in the 1960s and 1970s, the idea has long taken root that in social interplay every individual is defined by different sets of attributes. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the forms of capital immediately comes to mind: economic capital, cultural capital (schooling, but also any form of knowledge from technical knowledge to internalised behaviour), social capital (the sum of influential relationships available to any individual), symbolic capital (subjectively the most important form of capital: that for which we invest the most in social play, which most justifies an otherwise miserable human existence, and whose real importance we only realise when we are deprived of it).[6] Alternatively, we might refer to the tri-dimensionality of every social structure as maintained by Walter Garrison Runciman and which he defines as economic power, ideological power (or social prestige) and coercive power – the very three sins that medieval moralists stigmatised under the terms *avaritia*, *vana gloria* and *cupiditas potentiae*.[7]

For the study of social mobility in the Middle Ages these theoretical considerations have served to clarify a series of points, to eliminate conceptual obstacles and ultimately to provide more freedom for analysis. For example, they suggest that we should devote attention to changing trends and combinations of the different factors that determine every social status. Medievalists are becoming increasingly aware of how the relative importance of different hierarchies varied with period and social level, and how important it is to take into account contemporary representations of wealth, status, social ethics and mobility itself when interpreting social change. These are all points to which we shall return later.

The new conceptions of social space prevailing over the past 30 years have had a liberating effect on the field of medieval studies. They have freed historians of the Middle Ages from a sense of inferiority that arose from the above-mentioned absence of reliable quantitative and statistical sources. In a social space considered to be unstable, one that is in a process of continuous construction and reconstruction through the actions of players who often move unconsciously or irrationally, even contemporary sociologists find it increasingly difficult to make any precise measurement of phenomena of mobility. The difficulty of measuring social mobility and the certainty that we can obtain only approximate results that bear only

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on a part of social identities must be our starting point and not a pretext for avoiding enquiry. Even hitherto unimaginable sources such as fragments of pottery from archaeological excavations have begun to speak to us of mobility.

3. REASONS FOR THE LACK OF INTEREST

As already mentioned, it is the rarity of any specific reflection on social mobility that most tellingly characterises how the topic has been received in medieval studies. In many ways this is a paradox, since in every domain of the medieval millennium there have been numerous studies dealing with processes of transformation and social change, in other words, with the phenomena of social mobility. A particular example is the historiography on the early Middle Ages which in recent decades has been especially rich. However, only a few cases have made the problem of mobility their central theme, one meriting separate study and reflection.[8]

For this lack of interest, there are reasons of a general nature, as well as reasons specifically related to the historiographical cultures of different countries. As for the general reasons, the view that social mobility is a problem somehow bound up with modernisation clearly hindered its reception by medievalists. As a result, historians of the modern period preferred it as an explanatory paradigm, while it was often deemed unsuitable for the Middle Ages. Other general reasons are the scarcity of quantitative data and the presumption that any serious analysis has to be able to produce a clear map of social stratification, an impossible task on the basis of medieval documentation. Further factors seem to be the scanty attention devoted to mobility within social groups, and perhaps an ideological prejudice that applied a Marxist lack of interest in mobility to the Middle Ages (even Marxist-inspired sociology sometimes dismissed the term as a 'bourgeois problem').[9]

All of these general reasons explain why social mobility has received much more attention in studies on the modern or contemporary periods. They also explain why the only country where reflections by medievalists on social mobility have been less modest is England. However, here we are dealing with causes related to different national cultures.

In England, obviously, one topic felt to be of such central relevance to the national narrative as to colour interpretations of the past and motivate research was the industrial revolution. It was precisely an interest in the English origins of modernisation that drew historians' attention to all those changes that, as early as the Middle Ages, supposedly laid the groundwork for a new more entrepreneurial way of thinking among the

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gentry, and which, in rural areas, favoured more dynamic personalities, more open to risk. This is true to such an extent that medievalists found themselves having to reckon with the entrenched myth of the fluidity of English society, a notion which recurred as early as the seventeenth century and which even continued to characterise historical research until quite recently. In fact, historians of the modern period insisted on the permeability of the aristocracy to merchants and businessmen which favoured political stability, the introduction of new forms of management and a different attitude towards income earned from investments.[10] How much the prospect of modern industrialisation stimulated medieval studies also appears evident from the chronological period that was most frequently chosen, the final span of the Middle Ages, and the distinctly 'economic' spirit of the studies that until relatively recent times were wary of viewing social mobility through the categories of anthropology and cultural sociology.[11]

Every historical culture has its own set of motivations and obsessions and this is not the place for a complex analysis of the various national historiographies. I intend to confine myself to a few brief remarks for the purpose of general orientation.

For the Middle Ages in Spain, the *Reconquista* was for a long time the main grand narrative, along with the subsequent Christian colonisation of new territories. It was precisely thanks to the *Reconquista* and colonisation that Iberian historians were led to interpret social mobility as primarily related to geographical mobility, while they connected the turnover in the replacement of noble groups to accelerating or decelerating phases in the process of acquiring new territories.[12]

In French historiography, the fundamental role attributed to the construction of feudal society during the high Middle Ages meant that conspicuous phenomena of social mobility were confined almost entirely to the very early phases of that world of knights, fiefs and cathedrals, long considered one of France's main contributions to European history. For Georges Duby and many other scholars, the establishment of feudalism and lordship was accompanied by the social ascent of slaves and serfs, while a downward social mobility occurred for the majority of peasants, with the exception of the fortunate few who managed to become knights by exploiting their physical abilities, their political relationships and the possession of less slender family patrimonies; for the *domini* with a lordship and the *milites* who contributed to the exercise of banal powers the new situation guaranteed a positive mobility.[13] Under this interpretation (not just French) the investigation of phenomena of mobility was hampered by the idea that once the 'feudal revolution' had occurred, an unbridgeable gap opened up, separating the power and wealth of the

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seigniorial elites from the mass of the subjects. For the peasant world rendered homogeneous by its subjection to the banal *dominus*, the only limited margin for mobility could be service to the lord. Given the prevalence of historiographical interpretations such as these, the study of the processes of mobility was confined on one side to the aristocracies, and on the other to the new emergent phenomena that were viewed, accordingly, as external to the feudal world, in other words the cities and most of all the mercantile classes.

In Germany, while research on *sozialer Aufstieg* and *Führungsschichten*[14] again favoured the Modern Age, medievalists reflected deeply on methodology and this process led to quite a strong reaction against preceding historiographical currents. Discussion arose over a conception of aristocracy that had gained ground from the 1930s to the 1960s and was known as the *Neue Lehre*. According to this conception, the phenomenon of nobility was understood to be a very long-lasting phenomenon, the result of the millennial continuity of an ancient Germanic nobility that was characterised by its atavistic aptitude for command.[15] In the opinion of Karl Bosl, a leading exponent of this interpretation, there is no form of medieval social mobility that 'depends on factors that were originally social or even less economic, but rather it depends exclusively on political factors', in other words, largely on the behaviour of the aristocracy.[16] However, the reaction was directed against a more general target: the rigid conception of a society of *ordines* and *Stände* typical of the German *Verfassungsgeschichte*.

This is a very diverse set of developments which was initiated in the 1960s and is still underway. Among the earliest contributions we should mention the studies conducted by Karl Schmid on kinship, monastic communities and nobility,[17] and more recently, the work of Gerd Altoff on the social weight of a series of institutional phenomena (for example, the ritualised *amicitiae* and the role of the *mediatores*).[18] But of special importance are Otto Gerhard Oexle's numerous studies on the role of community aggregations and the *coniurationes*, as well as on the way social facts were perceived and interpreted by contemporaries.[19] While, on the whole, these studies did not directly focus on the question of social mobility, they did serve to alter the framework surrounding the topic because they viewed early and high medieval society as a conglomerate of groups in continuous interaction. This insistence on the multiplicity of social groups simultaneously active in society contributed in part to reducing the tendency of German historiography to think in terms of estates, *Stände* and orders,[20] along with the fact that social groups were no longer presented as historical players, but as cultural constructs, as collective notions and mental classifications of reality. According to

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Oexle, this process of reflection mainly concerned the *Deutungsschemata*, the ways of representing and conceiving social reality by contemporaries (and today by historians).[21]

In Italy the scarcity of a specific reflection on social mobility, in the case of the age of the communes, stemmed from reasons that were, in a certain sense, the opposite of those that characterised the *Verfassungsgeschichte*. While in the *Verfassungsgeschichte* the image of a society of stable *ordines* denied any space to social movement, in Italy the emphasis on the dynamism of cities encompassed the problem of social ascent, robbing it of its autonomy and ultimately of its visibility. Italian cities were at the centre of a more general vision of dynamism during the high and late Middle Ages, one that characterised in different forms very dissimilar personalities in twentieth-century medieval studies, from Henri Pirenne to Roberto Lopez and Carlo Maria Cipolla. According to this view, the development of cities and the rise of mercantile groups to political power were the great contribution these centuries made to the crisis of the feudal world and the establishment of an urban bourgeoisie.[22] It little mattered how antiquated the social paradigms were that prevented historians from grasping the dominant role that the noble classes had long played in the field of commerce. Social mobility was held to be a fundamental component of the communal world, a reality which, precisely because it was present everywhere, was taken for granted and exempted from any effective analysis.[23]

In this interpretative context political mobility came to be superimposed over social mobility: social changes were interesting, above all, because of the influence they exerted on processes of replacement and aggrandisement of the political elites. In a certain sense, this superimposition was the product of the lofty origins of the medieval sources, which make them particularly suitable for providing information on turnover among the political elites; it was also due to the obviously important role that political institutions played in the attainment of social success, as we shall see both in the early and late Middle Ages. However, in the world of Italy's communes what counted most was the emergence of an objectively new phenomenon that first appeared in the twelfth century and reached its apogee in the second half of the thirteenth: a relationship between the financial and commercial roles and governing roles in the city. Thus, social mobility was studied for how it made an impact on the ruling classes in those communes which, according to the dominant view of national history, had been medieval Italy's greatest contribution to the modern state and had performed the 'political and constitutional role that elsewhere was ascribed to the monarchy'.[24] However, the gap and the dialectic between economic change and political transformation, between

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social mobility and political mobility, were not sufficiently taken into account.[25]

4. ENGLISH MOBILITY

As I have said, analyses focusing directly on social mobility in the Middle Ages appear to be less sporadic in historiography on England and, generally speaking, in the works of English-speaking historians. On the whole, these studies have been characterised by the application of concepts and categories from sociology. An example of this is the repeated distinction made between 'structural' mobility, the product of technological innovations and fundamental changes involving entire professions and social groups, and 'pure' mobility, which was the result of free behaviours on the part of individuals: while sociologists are more interested in pure or individual mobility, historians are also interested in changes that affected entire groups. Alternatively, the notions of 'polarisation' and 'compression' are used.

England in the early Middle Ages would appear to be a clear case of polarisation.[26] Economic growth between the sixth and tenth centuries together with foreign and domestic wars and the concurrent development of royal and ecclesiastical power structures seem to have combined together to generate on the one hand a turnover for the purpose of replacing nobles killed in battle, and on the other hand an increase in social differences caused by the emergence of new roles, as well as a widening of the distance between the upper and lower ends. These structural changes were caused by the needs of the kings and the great lay and ecclesiastical landowners, that spawned new classes of administrators and a plethora of royal officials. They were the result of growth in the powers and possessions of the nobility, growing influence of ecclesiastical organs, the rising prestige of clergy and monks, as well as the inverse mobility of large segments of the population, such as small freeholders who were coming under pressure from an ascendant nobility. Thus, what we have here is a simple model, one that is demographic in the wider sense of that term, but, as has been pointed out, useful for identifying certain periods in the early Middle Ages when the degree of polarisation was greater, such as those connected to the Carolingian conquests.[27]

An age of careerism, an age of ambition: unquestionably the most important characteristic of English historiography is its insistence on the theme of change in the late Middle Ages (together with its stress on the decadence of the Anglo-Saxon nobility after 1066). The titles of monographs show how strong the tendency was among English-speaking historians in the 1960s and 1980s to emphasise the social dynamism at the

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end of the Middle Ages, and the entire period tended to be labelled as one of mobility.[28] The interpretative model was demographic only in its initial stages. A consequence of the pandemic of 1348–1349 and the subsequent crises in mortality was that previously unimaginable opportunities for social mobility had opened up. At the higher social levels the increased rate of extinction of families supposedly gave rise to an accelerated process of turnover, favouring new entrants into the ranks of the landed aristocracy.[29] At the same time, a series of changes was thought to have sparked ambitions for social ascent and paved the way for making them possible: the crisis that reduced both the aristocracy's income and its authority, higher compensation for peasants, craftsmen and wage earners, greater availability of lands and resources, and demands raised by the once subject social classes who were now enriched by the new state of affairs. The abandonment of direct management of vast demesnes, which became universal from 1360 to 1380, along with an overall lower level of intervention by the nobility in the economy and in production, allowed the peasants to appropriate a larger share of agricultural output. The peasant world became more stratified with the establishment of yeomen and farmers, a category of wealthy cultivators–entrepreneurs.[30] As a result of the initiative taken by the classes below the small nobility, new spaces opened up when servitude ended and prohibitions on emigration were lifted, when restrictions on economic innovation were eased and, above all, when consumption levels began to rise. All of this acted to accelerate commercial exchanges and strengthen the role of merchants and artisans.

In recent years this interpretation has been partly revised. No one denies the relationship between collapse in the population and increases in wages and social competition. On the contrary, scholars continue to stress the dramatic and, in many ways, liberating impact the demographic crisis had on previous social and economic structures, which helped to stimulate consumption and trade, specialisation in production and technological innovation.[31] However, the doubt remains that the earlier interpretations of intense mobility may in some respects have inadvertently accepted the complaints that were being expressed by aristocrats over the rise of *parvenus*, the decadence of the old noble families, the end of hierarchical respect and the crisis of community solidarity. Above all, with regard to the gentry and higher aristocracy, monographic studies on single geographic areas tend to point out the limits of social ascent and emphasise how few cases there were of enduring social success.[32]

The exercise of caution when dealing with aristocratic sources has become compulsory: from literature and doctrinal writings historians have

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extended their caution to those administrative documents that in the past decades have enabled them to compile those wonderful lists of prices, revenues and wages, the fruit and merit of a long tradition of English economic historiography. What has become clear is that the administrative documents of the large estates, especially from noble manors and churches, provide a misleading picture of economic decline and social conflict in the late Middle Ages, since the lords experienced it as a period of collapsing agricultural revenue and of crisis in their own power and prestige. An altogether different picture emerges, however, if we look at other kinds of sources, such as written documents from the peasant world (above all inventories and wills), and even more at material sources: here we see a cohesive, dynamic society, an economy able to adapt itself to the new times, as characterised by a continuous growth in consumption and markets and in constant expansion.[33]

This more nuanced picture and the revised interpretation of the impact of the processes of social change are also linked to a major reassessment of the period that immediately preceded the late Middle Ages. This reassessment concerns the entire economic narrative of England during the high Middle Ages, but it culminates in the thirteenth century, a pivotal century in the island economy's process of commercialisation. We can no longer continue to attribute innovations and dynamisms that had their origins in the distant past only to the latter part of the Middle Ages. Over the last 20 years the commercialisation thesis has become overwhelmingly hegemonic in English historiography and not only here.[34] According to this interpretation, the proliferation of markets, the expansion of commerce, the growing use of money and more in general the great rise in consumption that relied on trade, in the twelfth and even more so in the thirteenth centuries favoured the rise of cities and manufacturing activities (it is now estimated that the urbanisation rate was around 20 per cent).[35] New jobs were created, demographic growth was stimulated, productivity increased, far-reaching merceological innovations appeared, together with a higher degree of differentiation and specialisation in productive processes. It was a radical and irreversible turning point that 'changed the way of life of everyone, as not just those who migrated into towns but also those who were left behind in the country learned new methods of production and acquired new tastes in consumption'.[36]

In the case of the thirteenth century, this model has been the object of some theoretical doubts and many detailed criticisms. For example, it risks overestimating urban demand, the actual degree of freedom of trade, the openness of manorial agriculture to the market and other aspects. However, above all, the question has been raised about whether the increases in output and productivity that resulted from the growing number

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of markets and from specialisation were sufficient to offset the negative effects of a growing population or whether they simply served to temporarily relieve pressure on resources. It is hard to say how much small producers took advantage of commercialisation and it appears clear that small peasants were sometimes exposed to excessive risks. Perhaps commercialisation made it possible for the population to increase, but under conditions of great fragility.[37]

Moreover, taken as a whole, the interpretation appears to be solid enough. For our purposes it makes it problematic to accept analyses of social mobility connected to a neo-Malthusian view of the late Middle Ages in England, a view that was dominant until the end of the 1980s. This view and its relation to social dynamics is the subject of an excellent essay, one still rich in ideas, published 30 years ago by an Israeli historian, Zvi Razi. His essay draws an interesting connection between demographics, economic dynamics and social mobility.[38]

The subject of this study is Halesowen, a rural parish in the west Midlands. From the end of the thirteenth century to the beginning of the fourteenth century a detailed analysis of seigniorial sources show that the population and total output continued to grow from 1270, the date when the study begins, until 1348. However, at the same time, growing phenomena of social rigidity could also be observed. By the end of the thirteenth century the demographic expansion that had been underway for centuries had reached extremely high levels, with the result that a drastic imbalance emerged between land and population. Land was now so scarce that only the richest peasant families had enough resources to invest in land. They then purchased the holdings of their poorer neighbours or paid the lords entry fines for vacant plots. Even the most affluent among them found it impossible to increase their family holding, however. In fact, the dominant inheritance practice among peasants was primogeniture. Consequently, land was acquired with the intention of providing endowments for younger sons and not in order to increase the size of the family holding. The active land market and the relative scarcity of land therefore generated an inverse social mobility: only the eldest sons of the wealthiest peasants held on to the same lands as their fathers; their younger brothers tended to descend the social ladder. Matters were even worse for medium or small holders who, in the interplay of property transactions, ended up yielding part of their lands to their richer neighbours desirous of possessing some property they could allot to their younger sons. Only the Black Death put an end to this system of rigidity and inverse mobility. The greater availability of land and the same high mortality rates that reduced the number of sons also allowed the more capable peasants to increase their landed patrimonies, and also made it

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possible for many younger sons to be endowed with a sufficiently large patrimony to maintain their social position.

5. DAVID HERLIHY: A MIDDLE AGES ALL IN DECLINE

General reflections on social mobility are also rare and come exclusively from the English-speaking world. Some of these, such as those of David Nicholas, are so riddled with approximations and errors that they serve more than anything as a warning.[39] The only general interpretation that today does not seem too generic or inexact appeared in an article published by David Herlihy in 1973 and reprinted several times since then.[40]

A student of Roberto Lopez, an expert in Italian social history, Herlihy was one of the first medievalists to use computerised data analysis. In 1966 he undertook, together with Christiane Klapisch, the monumental study of the Florentine *Catasto* of 1427.[41] Herlihy's 1973 article bears witness to how much reading and reflection went into interpreting the enormous quantity of data collected from the *Catasto*. In little more than 20 pages he outlines three patterns of replacement processes which he links to three phases of the medieval period. The 'age of stagnation' until 1000 was succeeded by an 'age of expansion' which lasted from 1000 to 1300, while for the fifteenth century the pattern focuses on relationships between city and countryside.

Herlihy's main explanatory approach is demographic. He explains every structural dynamic by positing differing rates of reproduction among the classes, caused, in every age and in every society, by the fact that the wealthy were more successful in reproducing themselves and raising their children. From this he deduces a structural tendency towards inverse mobility that runs throughout the entire Middle Ages, since in the absence of corrective events the higher social classes, who were becoming more numerous, could not ensure that all of their many offspring would remain at the original social level.

However, in Herlihy's opinion, this mechanism produced different kinds of social mobility that varied with the period. During the 'stagnant' economy of the early Middle Ages, the scarce possibilities of compensating the tendency to lose status gave rise to a continuous though slow process of replacement at the social apices by the more fortunate or enterprising members of the lower groups. During this period the main channel for social mobility was obviously not entrepreneurial activity in trade, the crafts or finance, but service to the lord or to any other powerful figure. For the period of economic recovery that came after 1000, Herlihy views social mobility as being in acceleration. The structural tendency

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continued to be one of inverse mobility, but the economy's greater dynamism now made it possible for those with sufficient resources, but who still risked a loss of status, to assume active attitudes and use the resources available to them to become financial or commercial intermediaries, to offer their services to the powerful, or go to war. This was the age of the younger sons, knights of adventure, of the meteoric rise of William Marshall, the Hauteville, but also of merchants.

For the third pattern, Herlihy uses the research he was conducting on the Florentine *catasto* of 1427 and he takes Renaissance Tuscany as the model for dynamics of social replacement in more urbanised regions. Here again, Herlihy focuses on demographic data. In Renaissance Florence only the urban patriciate appear to have had enough sons to reproduce and expand. As a result, young patricians were forced to assume entrepreneurial or dynamic attitudes in order to come up with additional resources (in business, finance, or culture) to stem the structural process of status decline.

However, incentives for dynamism did not only exist for the patriciate. In fact, middle- and lower-level groups in Florence only partly managed to reproduce themselves and this demographic shortfall attracted to the city able and enterprising men from the smaller centres of Tuscany who filled the gaps left in the ranks of the craftsmen, notaries, civil servants and every other profession that needed persons of talent. Masaccio, Leonardo da Vinci, Boccaccio, Leonardo Bruni and many other protagonists of the cultural and artistic life of the Florentine Renaissance are excellent examples of this replacement mechanism.

6. COMPLICATING THE PICTURE: FACTORS OF HIERARCHISATION AND CHANNELS OF MOBILITY

After more than 30 years, the weaknesses in this brilliant and generous sketch of ideas have become quite evident. While the basic demographic assumption of greater fertility among the affluent groups appears to be well founded, it deserves to be analysed more closely (even in the case of Florence it is open to some doubt whether craftsmen and other mid-level groups were already in a state of reproductive deficit before 1348). However, it is obvious that the main defect of the three-pattern model is its crude and simplistic approach. There is a pressing need to draw a more complicated picture of things, to apply the concepts and methods of sociology, anthropology and the new paradigms of economic history, as well as to expand the base of the sources.

The most glaring insufficiencies of this interpretation are its underestimation of economic change and a conception of social dynamics

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lacking in flexibility and freedom. In his essay Herlihy conceives of a social space as characterised by a structurally immobile stratification, without change in the relations between different social groups. To borrow from the terminology of sociology, he obliterates any phenomenon of 'absolute' or 'structural' mobility. He neglects the capacity inherent in processes of commercialisation, specialisation and technological development to set off growth mechanisms that would have permitted an overall increase of wealth and numbers, both at the social apices and among large groups of manual labourers who were now in the position to work more and more productively.

Of course, the omission was a product of its time. When Herlihy described the three patterns, a neo-Malthusian interpretation of medieval social and economic affairs held sway. The commercialisation thesis and the reassessment of the late medieval crisis were still far away – coming as they did more than a decade later. They are also absent from Razi's above-mentioned study on Halesowen, which made the mistake of completely ignoring the opportunities offered by the crafts and the market, and of moving from a static view of social stratification.

Social space in these essays was, moreover, a mono-dimensional reality revolving entirely around the hierarchy of wealth and professions. Once again, this conception was a reflection of its time, since in the 1960s and notwithstanding Sorokin's teaching, mobility was interpreted almost exclusively as change in the stratification of incomes and professional status.[42] Needless to say, interpretations like this were already theoretically outdated when they appeared and today they are unacceptable, as they fail to take into account a social movement that plays out on multiple levels.

Today, it is easier for us to conceive how a direct correspondence could occur between the different factors of hierarchisation or, more often, that there might be a partial dissonance. For example, studies on the world of Italian craftsmen have shown how in the Middle Ages there was no automatic connection between a craftsman's economic resources, his social prestige and his professional status. What counted most was the type of craft, the regard bestowed on it by society, which varied with the level of technical competency required, with the cost of the materials used and also with the type of local economic structure. Profitable trades such as butchers might be considered impure and ranked far below other trades which, though less lucrative, were held in high esteem. As a rule, the manufacture of luxury objects, and the relationship with the elites this implied, ensured a maximum of esteem. Nonetheless, the prestige of a given trade varied from city to city as a result of a combination of factors which today are only partly identifiable (an extreme case is that of Rome,

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where in the thirteenth century the entrepreneurial and speculative aspects connected with cereal production ranked the *ars bobactariorum*, agricultural traders, at the top of the city's hierarchy of guilds). Moreover, for the individual craftsman what mattered was his status within the guild, since master craftsmen enjoyed the highest regard, while less respect was accorded to employees and other lower grades. Wealth and business success were of less importance than symbolic factors and one's position within the guild, and it often happened that a master in serious financial trouble held on to his social prestige intact.[43]

Medievalists have become aware of how, depending on the period and social level, the importance of different hierarchies shifted in relation to each other. The emphasis that the previous generation's studies placed on economic resources has tended to be replaced by an interest in symbolic elements (to which we shall return later) and in relational ones. The relevance of this latter aspect does not always appear to be clearly appreciated. In this regard, the criticism raised against a recent important study is of significance. The study managed to reconstruct the acquisitions and accumulation of landholdings that were practised for decades by an inhabitant of a village in the Abruzzi during the late Carolingian period and it presents this individual's land investments as a failed attempt at social mobility, since they ended with the lands that had been accumulated being yielded up to a large monastery and then leased back to him (*precaria*):[44] but, as we have seen, this view confers an anachronistic importance to the notion of property and fails to take into account how the transition from being the owner of an *allod* (free of rent) to being a tenant, that is, to being the client of a powerful monastery, in reality opened up a better path to social ascent: the path of service.[45]

Another factor to consider is the risk of mechanically applying sociological instruments. For example, we might take Sorokin's notion of channel of social mobility in the narrowest sense of the term, closer to the way he originally intended it, or in a wider sense. In the former sense we are talking about institutions: education, the Church, political structures and so on. For the Middle Ages, however, a looser interpretation of 'channel' appears to be called for, one that takes the idea of institution in it broadest meaning, including informal client relations, and investigates the kinds of resources that fed social mobility.

There is an added advantage to taking the term 'channel of social mobility' in the wider sense. We can use it in a way that was little developed by its inventor, to enquire into the motors of social decadence, the channels of inverse mobility. The question has particular relevance for the Middle Ages, both because of the general economic dynamics of the period and because interpretations such as Herlihy's present the Middle Ages as

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a time that was generally characterised by downward mobility. Focusing explicitly on social failures can help us avoid anachronistic interpretations, such as mistaking for channels of social ascent what were, in reality, footholds on a slope of structural decline, or what for the majority of the population amounted to escalators on the way down. For example, military activity, in the context of the new organisation of warfare that emerged at the end of the thirteenth century, appears to have acted, for a large segment of the aristocracy, more than anything as a brake on the processes of decline, rather than as a channel of social ascent.[46] Later, in many regions a motor of decline for the majority of the peasant population was the widespread use of coins, credit and land markets,[47] or processes of technical innovation in agriculture which accentuated differences in wealth, since usually only a minority of the population had sufficient resources to take advantage of the market and technical innovations.[48]

With regard to the vehicles of social mobility we can observe a number of varieties differing from the period and the regional contexts, and from the type and the way they were interconnected and hierarchised. Even channels of mobility understood in the most classical sense could assume a different role. For example, the meaning of a merchant's geographic mobility, a subject that has been widely studied, changed in the late thirteenth and the early fourteenth centuries. With the birth of the system of 'companies' and the consolidation of the great routes of international trade, journeys to distant markets ceased to be the decisive factor in social promotion that they had been in the past: the great merchants stayed in their offices, while it was now their representatives ('*fattori*') who travelled and who only in rare cases might achieve the kind of dramatic rise, once so common among those who had made the same journeys two centuries before.[49]

In the entirely different context of the low and middle ranks of the clergy during the same period, we can observe a new development and a revealing contrast. The new development was that, for the first time, scholastic capital clearly established itself as a factor of central importance in career success. While in the past a cleric's education had also been an advantage, family origins were always the decisive factor when aspiring to positions of a certain level. However, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries saw a proliferation in the number of canons, bishops and prelates from modest families, whose careers had been furthered by university studies. It was a new situation that also appears to have been characterised by a geographic contrast between Italy, Provence and other regions on the one hand, and areas such as northern France and England on the other. In the former regions the new importance of scholastic

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capital remained subordinate to the relations guaranteed by the young cleric's family. In these parts of Christendom the nobility and the patriciate were easily able to establish direct relations with the papal *curia* which had at that very time become the main centre for the distribution of benefits, so that social capital remained the crucial factor for career success. The benefit of study was felt fully elsewhere, where local elites had more difficult access to the papal *curia*, where monarchies played a greater role and a complex series of other factors was involved.[50]

Conspicuous among the infinitely nuanced factors for social promotion during the centuries of the high and late Middle Ages is the relative decline in the importance of economics in favour of politics. Obviously politics was also a means for controlling and distributing resources during the early Middle Ages, together with landed wealth and horizontal social relations. Nor did politics lose all of its importance with the demographic and economic take off that occurred in the new millennium which gave new weight to economic factors. In the areas that were most affected by the new dynamism, during the course of the eleventh and even more in the twelfth centuries, opportunities for enrichment and social ascent depended increasingly on economic activities both of production and intermediation. However, at a certain point a clear change occurred: at different times and varying from case to case, but almost always as early as the late thirteenth century and the first decades of the following century, economic factors gave way to the new and unprecedented importance of political conditions. Everywhere, or almost everywhere, economic factors continued to count for a great deal but public institutions became the main vehicle for upward mobility. Among the factors for social promotion, primacy shifted away from economics to politics.

It is difficult to confine to only a few lines an account of this transformation, one that was so diverse in its aspects and chronology.[51] I should merely like to draw attention to its general outline. Above all in the second half of the thirteenth century, processes of state building, also ones that were very different from each other, shared a common tendency to absorb a mass of rapidly expanding resources. The development of bureaucratic apparatus of every type, the cost of a new conception and of a new desire to control territorial space, the claims by the State of an increasing number of responsibilities, changes in military technology and the consequent rise in the cost of warfare were the core phenomena, though these might take on different forms that varied with the context. Everywhere, they had the effect of making public institutions the main vehicle of upward mobility.

While this observation is generic, it appears to hold true for a number of areas. In money markets, after this change occurred, the most lucrative

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opportunities were servicing public debt, obtaining public contracts, taking part in the running of rapidly growing tax systems and making loans to sovereigns. The organisation of warfare also underwent various types of changes, such as the professionalisation of military activities, the creation of permanent contingents, the recruitment of mercenaries for brief periods and the general spread of monetary compensation for combatants. These changes not only raised the expenditures of waging war, they also augmented the role that the State played in defining the close relationship between warfare and social eminence. Finally, in a world as demographically 'full' as that of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, where the apparatus of government was in the process of being developed and real economic policies were being adopted for the first time, even geographic mobility relied on a relationship with the State in order to lead to social mobility: for craftsmen, merchants, notaries and jurists it became almost indispensable to establish some kind of relationship with a State, which could mean obtaining concessions for tax privileges, offering their services to the prince or joining any part of the new administrative apparatus.

7. OTHER CATEGORIES, NEW CONCERNS

One of the factors holding back studies of social mobility in the Middle Ages has been the scarce degree of attention devoted to a series of concepts and categories developed by sociology and anthropology after the 1960s. A further contributing factor is that scholars have only paid lip service to another aspect of sociological research into the contemporary world, namely, internal mobility within social groups. Let us take a brief look at this point.

In the medieval world, internal mobility, in other words, movement not from one social group to another, but within the same group, doubtless played a more important role than it does in today's societies. For the overwhelming majority of the population, a radical change in status was indeed a rare occurrence. Rather, what appears to have been more common was a reduced movement within a different but hierarchically comparable group, or even more frequently, movement within the group one already belonged to. A study of medieval social dynamics must not fail to take into account internal mobility. It is a question, moreover, better suited to new conceptions of social space that are careful to stress the complexity of hierarchising factors.

For example, during the twelfth century and for a large part of the thirteenth century internal social mobility in the world of Italian craftsmen was intense. One pathway of ascent was that leading an individual to

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the top of his craft or trade, through the formative period of apprenticeship, followed by employment as a worker, culminating, if he was successful, in the status of independent master. Furthermore, since the hierarchical differences among the guilds were very marked, changing one's craft also led to increased mobility. Often craftsmen launched some of their children into trades that were different from their own, and they might even bear the costs of a son's apprenticeship, as long as they could ensure his admission into a more prestigious or profitable guild.[52]

It is harder to identify processes of internal mobility among peasants. For much of the medieval period, written sources, all of them of seigniorial or urban origin, tend to paint a picture of the peasant world as a flattened-out place without any differences. There are a number of reasons for this near-sightedness, and they range from the rigidity of the ecclesiastical representation of the tri-partite nature of the terrestrial world, through the desire of lords to attribute a cohesion and homogeneity to their dominion that was often lacking, to a distance from and contempt for rustics.[53] In this area, material sources can furnish decisive aids to understanding, as long as there are enough archaeological excavations devoting attention to the problem of consumption. Here again, English studies appear to be in the forefront. In the late thirteenth century, while the written documents, which are mostly useful for the study of peasant production activities, tend to describe an overcrowded world in the grip of poverty, an examination of consumption provides a less bleak picture. It shows that every type of merchandise continued to be acquired, even in situations where calculations of peasants' budgets appear to indicate that most of the population was struggling to survive and deprived of any type of consumer surplus. Processes of diversification and, hence, of mobility within the peasant world are visible in the English countryside above all after 1350, thanks to increases in consumption that came in the wake of the Plague of 1348–1349. In villages some houses began to develop more elaborate structures, introducing architectural or decorative innovations such as jetties on the upper floor, the decoration of timbers and the spread of cruck houses. In some of the kitchens of more affluent peasants, stone mortars began to appear, a sign that elaborate meat dishes such as *mortrewes* were becoming more common. Tablecloths were also introduced, metal basins, pewter jars, new clothes and a quantity of tiny objects such as buckles and copper, tin or tin-plated ornaments.[54]

Even a channel of mobility such as migration, which has been crowded in every age, could lead to a horizontal shift or even to a decline in social standing. Historians have dwelt very little on this point, since the various forms of geographic mobility – the migrations of barbarian populations

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during the early Middle Ages, the flight of slaves deplored in the laws of the Ottonian emperors, the colonisation of uncultivated lands, the urbanisation of peasants and so on – were primarily a factor of social ascent. On this point, a wealth of testimony and research exists. Countless studies have shown how migration, usually to a city, was the starting point along a fortunate pathway of social ascent. Less research has been done on those migratory flows (even ones of great intensity) where it is harder to determine if moving away physically led to a substantial improvement in status.[55] For example, it is a complex task to investigate in what cases the transition from peasant to member of the composite world of urban labourers could of itself constitute an improvement, since a move to a town meant the end of compulsory labour and subjugation to the lord.[56] Rather, urban labourers, especially those with few skills, hired under short- or very short-term contracts and burdened with a family to support, could easily cross the threshold from *indigenza lavoratrice* (working poverty), a condition which affected nearly all wage earners and many craftsmen due to periodic economic uncertainty, to a condition of true destitution.[57]

If a lack of attention to questions of internal mobility had the effect of hindering the study of social mobility in the Middle Ages, medievalists' reluctance to adopt a series of themes and analytical categories developed by sociology and anthropology is even more serious. At the very least, I should like to discuss agency, the practice of exclusion and inclusion, and, finally, the performative character of social representations.

Without treading into vast theoretical jungles, with regard to agency, let me just say that the problem of acting, understood both as action and the capacity to act, has led anthropologists and sociologists to emphasise the impossibility of giving a linear interpretation to human actions. It is pointless to examine only rational and conscious plans, while neglecting unconscious, habitual or incorporated motivations.[58] The discovery of this fact has gone hand in hand with an awareness that studies of social change have too often taken for granted the nature of individual or collective motivations: thus, the Smithian drive to improve one's lot in life has lost its almost biological connotation as an omnipresent force pervading all social actors.

As a result, social mobility has ceased to be thought of as a universal objective, pursued by all individuals in every age and social context. Thanks in part to the spread among medievalists of Alexander Chayanov's theories of the peasant economy, to the field of economic anthropology and the theoretical materials developed in the study of emerging economies,[59] it has become easier to conceive of medieval societies as places where the search for self-sufficiency and the consensus

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of one's neighbours were the guiding forces, instead of the desire for accumulation and economic improvement. Indeed, for the early Middle Ages, Chris Wickham has hypothesised a peasant mode of production which was characterised by the absence or only marginal presence of the State and/or aristocracies in social and economic life. In this type of peasant society, one that for many centuries represented the majority in large parts of northern Europe and also various regions of the Mediterranean, the accumulation of wealth and power was difficult. What prevailed instead was a continuous redistribution of any surpluses towards relatives, friends and neighbours and its allocation for collective ceremonies, in a context where social relations and individual status were based on the reciprocity and support of other inhabitants.[60]

More research has also been devoted to the relationship between social mobility and family practices. In this field, questions that emerged clearly as early as the 1960s were the new agnatic emphasis placed on kinship beginning from the tenth century, along with the introduction of primogeniture. In addition to research in these areas, subsequent studies dwelt on domestic ideals, family practices and gender history.

In reality the enormous range of conditions that family and gender, in a society such as that of the Middle Ages, could place upon an individual's capacity for action and ascent has only been studied to a very small extent. With regard to the social significance of gender, English studies again provide the best reference. First, they have emphasised how increased access by women to property and inheritance rights favoured the circulation of wealth and social mobility.[61] Some subsequent studies maintained that in late medieval England the limitations imposed on women in the areas of property, economic opportunities, access to education, legal rights and political power transcended differences in wealth and status to such an extent that gender became a defining social feature – and a factor of a different mobility – that was even more important than class.[62]

With regard to family practices, two clear examples come to us from the world of Italian craftsmen and merchants. In the case of craftsmen, much of the thirteenth century remained characterised by a high degree of openness to the transmission of technical know-how. The widespread presence of apprenticeship contracts and the absence of restrictions preventing an apprentice from rising to master meant that immigrants and the sons of other craftsmen could learn more lucrative or prestigious trades, ensuring them a high degree of social mobility.[63] However, at the end of the thirteenth century and even sometimes at the beginning of the fourteenth century, training periods began to stretch out and rules were introduced limiting access to the guilds to the sons of masters, while

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the status of apprentice began to resemble more that of an employee than a future master. One change in the models of family behaviour was crucial in this transition from a phase of openness to phase of rigidity. Craftsmen began to view the 'craft itself and everything connected to it (workshop, tools, technical know-how, clients) as an inheritance to be passed on to their descendants and, therefore, something to be defended and safeguarded'.[64] The patrimonial practices of the affluent classes were thus adapted to suit the situation of the craftsmen, who ultimately appropriated family models that were the expression of the upper strata of society. Also among merchants, pathways of social mobility altered in the thirteenth century with the spread of new family practices. 'Fraterne', late marriages, bachelorhood, endogamous marriage practices and other mechanisms moulded the mercantile classes into 'highly cohesive and integrated socio-political groups, but which, inside, were increasingly complex and hierarchized': they were groups that were best suited both to the new system of trade based on companies and stable and permanent markets, and to the purpose of conserving and managing the political power that had been acquired inside the communes.[65]

With these changes, we have, in some respects, crossed the boundary into another theoretical field: the practices of exclusion or inclusion adopted either consciously or unconsciously by social players for the purpose of distinguishing themselves or acquiring or maintaining identity. Above all, after Bourdieu's theoretical considerations on 'distinction',[66] it has become clear how important it is, when analysing social mobility, to consider those relational behaviours which arise from social differences, which mark these differences out or perpetuate them over time.[67] Practices aimed at including or excluding served to condition movement from one group to another, the very definition of the group, its identity and its boundaries. Explicit and formalised types of closure existed, such as the guild legislation mentioned above, which limited access to the status of master. However, the modes of exclusion and closure were also the result of the increasing cohesion of families, the definition of more rigid systems of succession (including primogeniture, the exclusion of women, restrictions on the alienability of possessions, etc.) and a vast range of behaviours, along with values and manners that were assimilated in childhood from one's own milieu. In an important study of Douai in the Renaissance, Martha C. Howell has shown, for example, how the city's more fortunate social groups, by means of tax privileges, hierarchical sumptuary laws and guild barriers, sought to exclude other groups from accessing the system of privileges that they enjoyed. At the same time they developed inclusion structures, such as drinkers' clubs and marksmen's confraternities that were restricted to certain social levels.[68]

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Another socio-anthropological category that has been little applied in the study of medieval social mobility has to do with the performative value of social representations. This theoretical approach is to be found mainly among German medievalists. In the work of Oexle,[69] an analysis of the interpretative schemata of social facts (*Deutungsschemata*) is accompanied by the author's emphasis on the performative value contained in these acts of classification, which were present in works that varied widely in their literary status and aim. In other words, they were a form of social knowledge that interpreted reality and at the same time modified it – indeed in some respects (for example, the division between clergy and laymen) they even created it. Consequently, Oexle is against interpreting them in purely abstract terms, as stereotypes empty of any content, or at the most as cultivated ideologies that were developed for the purpose of maintaining the *status quo* and ensuring the superiority of the ecclesiastical world or royal power. In Oexle's view this interpretation, which inspired the celebrated analyses of Jacques Le Goff and Georges Duby on the '*imaginaire médievale*' and on the model of functional tripartition (priests, warriors, labourers),[70] prevents us from grasping to what extent representations contributed to creating social reality itself.

These positions are not entirely convincing. Critics have rightly pointed out that the absolute primacy attributed to representations and the absence of any analysis on the social use of the *Deutungsschemata* can sometimes degenerate into a search for idealised constants that have weak or non-existent links to concrete historical situations.[71] Here it should be pointed out that these analyses mirror or, in some respects, anticipate the importance that certain scholars have recently given to the construction of shared narratives of social belonging and even of mobility itself in today's societies.[72]

The question is also a valid one for the Middle Ages, though perhaps to a lesser extent than for the contemporary world. Literary sources are indispensable if we wish to understand how much was cultural or 'constructed' in social groups and in phenomena of mobility. As an example, we might take the high degree of sensitivity shown to phenomena of social movement and redefinition that we find from the mid-thirteenth century in poems, *fabliaux*, didactic poems, sermons and treatises. Widespread topical motifs, such as the '*gente nova e' sùbiti guadagni*' (Inferno XVI, 73), parodies of the newly rich and merchants, the decadence of old families and the omnipresence of money, represented more than a mere reaction to mobility, or the traumatic acknowledgment of the gap that could frequently be observed between economic status and political position, between the novelty of blood and power. They have also been interpreted as a factor of change, since they brought wealth to the centre

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of attention while contributing to a definition of social models and behaviours.[73] Or, if we shift our gaze to the Byzantine world of the ninth to eleventh centuries, how are we to account for the continued presence of tales and praise of upward mobility? In part, these stylemes mirrored the workings of a social dynamic that in some respects still resembled the ancient world, where the predominant factor for promotion was one's favour with the Emperor or the role one held in the public administration, and where frequent *coups d'état* allowed even those of humble rank to rise as far as the throne. However, these discourses also contributed, either intentionally or not, to producing reality, if only because they repeatedly stressed a conception of politics and society whose unquestioned centre was the power of the Emperor.[74] It is precisely when dealing with representations, with contemporary conceptions of social mobility, wealth, status and social ethics that today's level of historiographical analysis appears to be particularly advanced.

8. VALUES, GOODS AND SYMBOLS

As for every other period, no study of social mobility in the Middle Ages should be undertaken without analysing the values, goods and symbols that defined the social structure and movements within it. Indeed, social mobility can also be viewed as a competition for status, for something immaterial, definable only in comparison with other groups.

Starting from the idea that mobility was primarily a competition for esteem, certain economists, followed by a number of historians of modern European economy, came to the rather hazardous conclusion that social mobility could also be achieved by reducing esteem for the lower strata. For example, it has been argued that in modern Germany the closure of inheritances among the patriciate or the introduction of limited access to guilds based on the birth or occupation of relatives guaranteed upward movement precisely because it deprived the excluded groups of status.[75]

For the medieval period, the most interesting data come to us from material sources. Here we are dealing with social mobility according to its definition by Pitirim Sorokin as: 'any transition of a social object or value – anything that has been created or modified by human activity – from one social position to another';[76] and individuals and social relationships are clearly visible behind this world of objects and symbols. Still, the material sources are not always easy to interpret.

We can begin by looking at the fate of the splendid floor mosaics of Roman villas. In the ancient West, rural aristocratic residences were scattered throughout almost every region. These *villae* could attain a high degree of complexity and stunning architectural refinement. Colonnaded

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peristyles, anterooms, libraries, halls, bath-houses and heating systems were decorated with paintings, marbles and mosaics. Precisely because of these ostentatious architectural features, the evolution of the rural villa has been a subject of continuous debate in the endless quarrels over the end of the Roman world and the transition to the Middle Ages. The emphasis which historians have placed in recent years on the slow transformation of the ancient world, rather than on rapid change, has been challenged by archaeological data that in many cases were excavated from these very structures.[77] As early as the fourth and fifth centuries in northern Gaul and later, between the sixth and seventh centuries, further south, the villas underwent radical changes. Many were abandoned or became simple estate-centres, or they were replaced by monasteries and churches. Even those that survived as residences irrevocably lost their monumental character. Many fell into ruin while others were recycled in a simpler way, often refurbished with wood or materials stripped from other structures. The mosaics were covered over with floors of beaten earth.[78]

In the past, these dramatic changes were interpreted as being the result of the barbarian invasions, the expropriation and sometimes the elimination of the senatorial classes and other ancient landowners, the political hegemony of new populations who were endowed with their own social elites, along with all the other elements found in conventional accounts of the end of the ancient world. In recent decades historians have become aware of how simplistic such interpretations are. Nevertheless, wide differences remain between those who view the material effects of change as evidence of a complete economic and social destructurisation, hence making it impossible to speak of transformation or of any real continuity, and those with a more gradualist approach, one more interested in the cultural significance of these changes. This latter interpretation embraces a wide range of variations, and in its more moderate versions it does not deny the impact of the destructurisation of the ancient systems of tax collection, trade and production. However, it also associates the establishment of what was unquestionably a simpler material culture with a change in the forms of aristocratic ostentation, in the allocation of its resources and its values.[79] Rather than being a sign of the ruin of the elites, the transformation of the villas may indicate that Christianisation and the influx of barbarian culture had altered the expression of social preeminence. During the periods that the aristocrats spent in the country, the sources of social capital ceased to be the senatorial *otium*, literary culture and luxury, that is, the activities expressed in the architecture of the villas, and became the relationship with churches and monasteries and even more the values of a social superiority that was by now completely

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militarised. A mosaic floor depicting exotic wild beasts and other classical iconographies could be destroyed or covered up with more functional floors.

This example provides more than one indication of how to interpret social mobility. At an initial level of analysis, it invites us to draw a theoretical distinction that is actually suggested by the entire question of social mobility in the Middle Ages: we must distinguish between mobility driven by the ordinary workings of society and the economy, which is the mobility that sociologists normally look at, and the mobility that arises from factors external to the normal workings of that society, such as political conquest, the migration of a people, a devastating war, or an epidemic such as the Black Death. In the first case, we could speak of an autogenous mobility, in the second of exogenous or conflictual mobility.

Since it is often associated with devastating wars and mass migrations, exogenous mobility often reveals a relationship with violence. For the entire West, the upheavals of the fifth and sixth centuries, with their sequence of plagues, wars, political changes and social turmoil, were a period when exogenous mobility reached the height of its expression. On the whole, this was probably the time of greatest social mobility during the entire Middle Ages although there are many other examples, such as Sicily during the first century and a half of Norman rule, or the changes that were caused in central and southern Spain by the *Reconquista*, or the replacement of entire socio-political elites in England after 1066, or in the Saxon and Bavarian territories conquered by the Carolingians in the eighth and ninth centuries. Moreover, violence is not an exclusive characteristic of exogenous mobility: below a certain level, violence is also part of the normal functioning of society and of processes of turnover within it. The mass political expulsions of Italian communes, or the transformations associated with the establishment of lordship, remind us that mobility activated by violence was also internal and endogenous to all medieval societies.

Besides being described as exogenous, mobility that arises from outside the normal workings of a social situation might be labelled as conflictual.[80] This adjective does not refer so much to violence, as to a clash between two symbolic universes and, above all, between sets of social values. Let us return to the case of the ancient mosaics and the radical reconfiguration of social values attributed to wealth, manufactures and behaviours. The mosaics were covered over by floors of beaten earth because their owners no longer perceived the value in them; the sign of their social superiority, the purport of their ostentation and the evocation of mythologies no longer held any meaning for the new 'barbarian' elites.

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Other ways now existed to display wealth and draw attention to pre-eminence such as the possession of costly weapons or precious belts for men and of buckles or decorations for women, the capacity to put on enormous funerary celebrations where immense treasures were buried with the deceased (the height of conspicuous consumption), or the great patrimonies destined for the construction or endowment of churches and monasteries. The owner of the villa who destroyed or covered over the mosaics may not necessarily have been unrelated to the person who had laid them: but most certainly the horizon of his values and symbolic goods had changed.

On the other hand, autogenous mobility generally transpired within a single universe of values. This was by far the most common situation, and during the Middle Ages the normal behaviour for anyone aspiring to social recognition was mimicry; in other words, they adopted the cultural models most typical of the dominant classes. Reactions to such mimicry can be found both in late medieval satires that lampooned the new rich bourgeoisie for their miserliness and cowardice (the very antithesis of chivalric virtues) and in sumptuary laws that were aimed at restricting expensive garments to those of higher rank and their descendants. Once again, however, we should avoid generalising, because on rare occasions this mobility generated from within a society also led to the appearance of new sets of values that were different from, and at least partly opposed to, the previous hegemonic ones. Such mimicry was even less likely to occur when the mobility involved the rise of whole new groups: in such cases a process of identity construction might be launched, in which the ascendant groups laid claim to their own specific features, rather than attempting to camouflage them through imitation. Among these, the case that has received the most recent historiographical attention is that of the *Popolo* in some Italian communes during the latter half of the thirteenth century and the early fourteenth century.[81] In Bologna, Florence, Pisa, Perugia and a few other cities, the establishment of popular regimes appears to have led to a decline in the attractiveness of aristocratic values and social markers. While unable to compete on symbolic terrain, by devising strategies of social distinction that were alternative to those of the aristocracy, the popular groups legitimised their own authority as a new political class and developed a new model of the citizen as a wise, moderate politician, a lover of peace and of the common good.

However, it is precisely the material sources for the late Middle Ages that show how rare such cases were. The sources bear witness, rather, to the emulation of the higher social groups by the once subordinate classes who were now richer and who, in a climate of social competition, sought to imitate their betters.

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In Italy between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries the most plentiful archaeological indicator, ceramics, shows how manufacturing techniques became more complex, forms and functions much more abundant and specialised and aesthetic aspects decidedly more refined. Previously unknown techniques, such as enamel work and slipware, were introduced from the Islamic or Byzantine worlds. From a few strictly functional forms (in general, uniform types of jars without decoration) variety increased to a wide range of more refined and attractive objects, such as cups, bowels, pans, jars, etc., designed to hold both liquids and solids. Producers invested in various ways to tempt clients to buy in a climate of competition and rapidly expanding markets. For consumers the new, richly decorated ceramics corresponded to new needs for decorum in the consumption of meals. Eating while seated at a table with a tablecloth and appropriate cutlery became a mark of pre-eminence that later spread to other social groups.[82] From a broadly inclusive reading of this material that takes into account the relations of various objects within a given context, for those cases where archaeological data are sufficiently abundant, there emerges a gradual trend for luxury consumption to spread to wider social strata.

Once again, these themes appear to have received the most attention in the studies undertaken by English scholars. The changes referred to above in the architecture and in the decoration of wealthy peasants' residences, in their cooking utensils and furniture were the result of efforts they made to export to the countryside the symbols of distinction and the lifestyles of the urban classes, the group that village social climbers looked up to as their most direct reference. This fact also had paradoxical consequences when it came to architecture: upper-floor jetties, which had a practical function in crowded cities by allowing the upper storeys of buildings to expand without encumbering the street space, served no other purpose in the country than to show off the wealth and sophistication of the proprietors.[83] Even more examples of these processes of emulation can be observed among those who moved from the country to the city, or among the lower ranks of the aristocracy. Above all, when the demographic contraction in the mid-thirteenth century resulted in increased resources for workers, competition to consume could be found everywhere and at many levels.[84]

For the Middle Ages, but also for other periods as well, studying social mobility does not necessarily mean performing painstaking reconstructions of 'objective' and measurable parameters, such as the hierarchy of wealth and access to political power. What, however, cannot be avoided is an analysis of material sources and symbolic markers. In the competition for status, social mobility might occur within a single universe of values

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through the closure and distinction strategies adopted by destination groups, or through mimicry on the part of social climbers; or it might erect different and opposing sets of values, as in the above case of the Italian *Popolo*.

9. CONCLUSION

Here my account of a relatively little-known couple ends. I have attempted to shed light on the problems and not pass over the many dark areas. Much research still needs to be done and the difficult task remains of identifying solid bases from which to compare different areas and periods, but for the Middle Ages, social mobility is a promising field of research that invites us to ask new questions and intertwine various disciplinary approaches.

I have attempted to show this by enquiring into the various types of mobility, into the phenomena of polarisation, the motors of social decline, the interconnection and hierarchisation of channels of ascent, the modes of exclusion, family practices, representations, distinction and many other aspects. However, a number of other questions still remain. For example, we need to establish when and in what manner mobility was conducive to a given social structure, and when it interfered with that structure or in what cases it might even undermine it and ultimately unhinge it. From the standpoint of economics, we must avoid an uncritical acceptance of the idea that social change always played a positive role. This idea of a directly proportional relationship between mobility and economic dynamism was, in fact, present in liberal thinking and it emphasised the success of the best endowed, the stimulus to competition and a more efficient division of labour; even Karl Marx, who was critical of social mobility as a tool of the dominant classes to maintain their supremacy, viewed the assimilation by elite groups of individuals on the basis of merit as a factor for efficiency and dynamism. In the most recent theories these certainties have gradually faded, though on the whole the verdict remains positive. However, in the case of the Middle Ages, it is truly difficult to take it for granted that social mobility played an automatically positive role in the economy. In order for social mobility to produce beneficial economic effects, an institutional framework had to be in place that was only partly or very tenuously present in the Middle Ages: there had to be a labour market free from restrictions, open social institutions and a whole series of other conditions that would have been ill suited to the differentiated world of pre-modern privileges. Nor should we unquestioningly assume which type of mobility it was that most contributed to growth in the economies. Was it really only the upward mobility of the most

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capable? It is impossible to make the claim that this was always the case. For example, according to a long-prevailing interpretation, the emergence of banal lordship led to dramatic inverse mobility for vast groups of peasants, transforming owners of *allods* into concession holders and above all burdening the population with new and rising taxes. Yet, according to the same interpretation, it was this inverse mobility that provided the basic impulse behind the take off of the European economy. The power of the banal lords obliged peasants to increase production and concentrated resources in the hands of the seigniorial aristocracy, thereby raising the demand for manufactured products and commercial goods.

Thus, the range of questions before us is a wide one, and it might be expanded even further. The heuristic valence of the topic appears to be strong since it has the merit of shifting our sightlines and providing new perspectives on a number of social and economic issues of the Middle Ages. Moreover, by putting mobility at centre stage we are required to reflect on the disparities between representations and practices. It obliges us to think about the factors that defined the social space and how these changed according to periods, situations, the actions of agents, their different languages and different forms of rhetoric. It also asks another more general question, one that is important for historians who by now are accustomed to refusing facile clusterings of social groups and classes. By now we have become adept at dissecting the medieval world in all its bewildering social complexity. We are finally aware of how nuanced and dynamic social spaces were and how the various hierarchical scales that defined those spaces were moulded and sometimes even denied by the players themselves. Nevertheless, we must ask whether spaces and social scales might not have continued to form some kind of tangible shape in which it was often objective forces related to production and the economy, or which resulted from the use of power or coercion, that led to the formation of concrete social identities, which, while they may not have been classes in the strictly Marxist sense of the term, were nonetheless bearers of real needs and demands.

ENDNOTES

1 W. Sombart, *Der moderne Kapitalismus. Historisch-systematische Darstellung des gesamteuropäischen Wirtschtslebens von seinen Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, 2nd edn (Munich and Leipzig, 1916); R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the rise of capitalism: a historical study* (London, 1926).

2 For families, see for example D. W. Sabean, S. Teuscher and J. Mathieu eds., *Kinship in Europe. Approaches to long-term development* (*1300–1900*) (Oxford, 2007).

3 S. Carocci ed., *La mobilità sociale nel medioevo* (Rome, 2010).

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4 P. Sorokin, *Social mobility* (New York and London, 1927). A good intellectual and biographical profile of Pitirim Sorokin is C. Marletti, 'Introduzione', in P. Sorokin, *La dinamica sociale e culturale* (Turin, 1975), 1–73.

5 There are many introductions to sociological research on the mobility; see, for example, A. De Lillo, 'Mobilità sociale', in *Enciclopedia delle scienze sociali* (Rome, 1996), V, 727–39.

6 P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste* (Harvard, 1984); P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice* (Cambridge, 1977).

7 W. G. Runciman, *A treatise on social theory* (Cambridge, 1983–1997), II, 27–37.

8 For some of most meritorious exceptions to this lack of interest, I mention the studies of Alma Poloni concerning the Italian communes in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries: A. Poloni, *Trasformazioni della società e mutamenti delle forme politiche in un Comune italiano: il Popolo a Pisa (1220–1330)* (Pisa, 2004); A. Poloni, 'Fisionomia sociale e identità politica dei gruppi dirigenti popolari nella seconda metà del Duecento. Spunti di riflessione su un tema classico della storiografia comunalistica italiana', *Società e Storia* **28** (2005), 799–822; A. Poloni, *Lucca nel Duecento. Uno studio sul cambiamento sociale* (Pisa, 2009).

9 N. Poulantzas, *Les classes sociales dans le capitalisme aujourd'hui* (Paris, 1974), 22.

10 On the age-old idea of English society's high degree of openness and for the interpretations of modern historiography, see the studies of Lawrence Stone: centred on the idea of high mobility are L. Stone, *The crisis of the aristocracy, 1558–1641* (Oxford, 1965) and L. Stone, 'Social mobility in England, 1500–1700', *Past and Present* **33** (1966), 16–55; while in L. Stone and J. C. Fawtier Stone, *An open elite? England 1540–1880* (Oxford, 1984), the original positions are refuted and the author maintains that the permeability of England's elites was only a myth which contemporaries themselves believed, since they were blinded by a glaring misunderstanding: in fact what really occurred in modern England was not that nobility was more open, but that noble values spread towards the gentry and the middle class. Thus, the lower classes were 'psychologically co-opted' into the social hierarchy of the nobility (p. 293).

11 The most important studies are: F. R. H. Du Boulay, *An age of ambition. English society in the late Middle Ages* (New York, 1970); M. J. Bennett, 'Sources and problems in the study of social mobility: Cheshire in the later Middle Ages', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* **128** (1978), 59–95; M. J. Bennett, 'Careerism in late medieval England', in J. Rosenthal and C. Richmond eds., *People, politics and community in the later Middle Ages* (Gloucester, 1987), 19–39; W. G. Runciman, 'Accelerating social mobility: the case of Anglo-Saxon England', *Past and Present* **104** (1984), 3–30; J. Gillingham, 'Some observations on social mobility in England between the Norman conquest and the early thirteenth century', in A. Haverkamp and H. Volrath eds., *England and Germany in the high Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1996), 333–55; C. Phytian-Adams, *Desolation of a city: Coventry and the urban crisis of the late Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2002); J. S. Bothwell, *Edward III and the English peerage: royal patronage, social mobility, and political control in fourteenth-century England* (Woodbridge, 2004). Particularly rich is the interpretative and empirical framework of C. Dyer, *An age of transition? Economy and society in England in the later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2005). For more studies, see notes 28–38 below.

12 Readers are reminded of the importance of the frontier and of colonisation and, hence, of the structural diversity of the Iberian peninsula, as emphasised in the theses of C. Sánchez Albornoz, *España, un enigma historico* (Buenos Aires, 1956), and the studies on the twelfth- and thirteenth-century transformations of the nobility by S. de Moxó,

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'De la nobleza vieja a la nobleza nueva. La trasformación nobiliarias castellana en la Baja Edad Media', *Cuadernos de Historia-Anexos a la revista Hispania* **3** (1969), 1–210.

13 F. Bougard, 'Genèse et réception du Mâconnais de Georges Duby', in *Studi sulle società e le culture del medioevo per Girolamo Arnaldi* (Florence, 2001), 31–54; P. Freedman, 'Georges Duby and the medieval peasantry', *Medieval History Journal* **4** (2001), 259–72; S. Carocci, 'Signoria rurale e mutazione feudale. Una discussione', *Storica* **3**, 8 (1997), 49–91.

14 For example, G. Schulz ed., *Sozialer Aufstieg. Funktionseliten im Spätmittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit* (München, 2002), that was based on a research project on 'Deutsche Führungsschichten in der Neuzeit', which between 1965 and 1978 had led to the publication of six volumes.

15 On the *Neue Lehre*, a clear and classical analysis is G. Tabacco, 'La dissoluzione medievale dello stato nella recente storiografia', *Studi Medievali*, serie III, **1**, 2 (1960), 397–446, reprinted in G. Tabacco, *Sperimentazioni del potere nell'alto medioevo* (Torino, 1993), 279–303. For the studies of the following decades, E. I. Mineo, 'Di alcuni usi della nobiltà medievale', *Storica* **7**, 20–21 (2001), 9–58.

16 K. Bosl, 'Soziale Mobilität in der mittelalterlichen Gesellschaft. Soziale Aufstiegsbewegungen im europäischen Mittelalter', in K. Bosl, *Die Gesellschaft in der Geschichte des Mittelalters* (Göttingen, 1975), 44–60; the quotation is from O. Capitani, 'Introduzione', in K. Bosl, *Modelli di società medievale* (Bologna, 1979), 25–6.

17 Two excellent reconstructions of the studies and methods of K. Schmid are P. Guglielmotti, 'Esperienze di ricerca e problemi di metodo negli studi di Karl Schmid sulla nobiltà medievale', *Annali dell'Istituto Storico Italo-Germanico di Trento* **13** (1987), 209–69, and O. G. Oexle, 'Gruppen in der Gesellschaft. Das wissenschaftliche Oeuvre von Karl Schmid', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* **28** (1994), 410–23.

18 See especially the essays collected in G. Althoff, *Spielregeln der Politik im Mittelalter. Kommunikation in Frieden und Fehde* (Darmstadt, 1997), and G. Althoff, *Verwandte, Freunde und Getreue. Zum politischen Stellenwert der Gruppenbindungen im früheren Mittelalter* (Darmstadt, 1990; English translation: *Family, friends and followers. Political and social bonds in medieval Europe*, Cambridge, 2004).

19 O. G. Oexle, 'Deutungsschemata der sozialen Wirklichkeit im frühen und hohen Mittelalter. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Wissens', in F. Graus ed., *Mentalitäten im Mittelalter. Methodische und inhaltliche Probleme* (Sigmaringen, 1987), 65–117 (English version: 'Perceiving social reality in the early and high Middle Ages. A contribution to a history of social knowledge', in B. Jussen ed., *Ordering medieval society. Perspectives on intellectual and practical modes of shaping social relations* (Philadelphia, 2001), 92–143; O. G. Oexle, 'Die funktionale Dreiteilung als Deutungschema der sozialen Wirklichkeit in der ständischen Gesellschaft des Mittelalters', in W. Schulze ed., *Ständische Gesellschaft und soziale Mobilität* (München, 1988), 19–51; O. G. Oexle, *Paradigmi del sociale. Adalberone di Laon e la società tripartita del Medioevo* (Salerno, 2000), with the useful R. Delle Donne, 'Introduzione'.

20 This tendency is still present in important essays such as M. Mitterauer, 'Probleme der Stratifikation im mittelalterlichen Gesellschaftssystem', in J. Kocka ed., *Theorien in der Praxis des Historikers* (Göttingen, 1977), 13–54.

21 On *Deutungsschemata*, see also the two paragraphs in the text corresponding to notes 69–71.

22 H. Pirenne, *Medieval cities: their origins and the revival of trade* (Princeton, 1925); H. Pirenne, *Economic and social history of medieval Europe* (London, 1936); R. S. Lopez, *The* commercial revolution *of the Middle Ages 950–1350* (Englewood Cliffs, 1971); C. M. Cipolla, *Before the industrial revolution: European society and economy,*

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1000–1700 (London, 1976). Important reflections on the subject are now in G. Petralia, 'Problemi della mobilità sociale nel mondo dell'intermediazione commerciale e finanziaria (secoli XII–XIV, Italia e Mediterraneo europeo)', in Carocci ed., *La mobilità sociale nel medioevo*, 247–71.

23 Very influenced by the dominant interest in the city and its ruling classes are also the few researches on social mobility in rural areas, starting with the pioneering investigation of Johan Plesner, *L'émigration de la campagne à la ville libre de Florence au XIIIe siècle* (Copenhagen, 1934); about this book and subsequent studies where emigration to the city is mainly connected with the history of the urban ruling classes, see R. Comba, 'Emigrare nel Medioevo. Aspetti economico-sociali della mobilità geografica nei secoli XI–XVI', in R. Comba, G. Piccinni and G. Pinto eds., *Strutture familiari, epidemie, migrazioni nell'Italia medievale* (Naples, 1984), 45–74: 47–51 and 56. For recent Italian researches, in addition to the studies of A. Poloni mentioned above in note 8, see P. Pirillo, *Famiglia e mobilità sociale nella Toscana medievale. I Franzesi Della Foresta da Figline Valdarno* (*secoli XII–XV*) (Florence, 1992), and S. Tognetti, *Da Figline a Firenze Ascesa economica e politica della famiglia Serristori* (*secoli XIV–XVI*) (Florence, 2003).

24 A. Gamberini, 'Le parole della guerra nel ducato di Milano. Un linguaggio cetuale', in A. Gamberini and G. Petralia eds., *Linguaggi politici nell'Italia del Rinascimento* (Rome, 2007), 445–67: 462–64.

25 Petralia, 'Problemi della mobilità sociale'. See also P. Cammarosano's rich interpretative outlines, 'Il ricambio e l'evoluzione dei ceti dirigenti nel corso del XIII secolo', in *Magnati e popolani nell'Italia comunale*, Proceedings of the XV conference, Pistoia, May 15–18, 1995 (Pistoia, 1997), 17–40, and G. Petralia, 'Élites sociales et institutions politiques des villes libres en Italie de la fin du XII^{ème} au début du XIV^{ème} siècle', in *Les élites urbaines au Moyen Age*. XXVII^{e} Congrès de la S. H. M. E. S., Rome, May 1996 (Rome, 1997), 193–200: in which attention is devoted to the outbreak of internecine conflict that shook Italian cities after the mid-thirteenth century, explained by the gap that appears to have opened up between a process of economic and demographic expansion and mobility, and a social dynamic that involved concentration and stiffening at the socio-political vertices.

26 At least in the opinion of a sociologist with a great sense of history: Walter Garrison Runciman. Runciman, 'Accelerating social mobility'.

27 F. Bougard and R. Le Jan, *Quelle mobilité sociale au haut Moyen Âge?*, in Carocci ed., *La mobilità sociale nel medioevo*, 41–68.

28 Du Boulay, *An age of ambition*; Bennett, 'Community, class and careerism'; Bennett, 'Careerism in late medieval England'. This emphasis on social mobility is also part of the modernising approach of A. Macfarlane, *The origins of English individualism. The family, property and social transition* (Oxford, 1978). A well-known essay is R. H. Hilton, 'Ideology and social order in late medieval England', in R. H. Hilton, *Class conflict and the crisis of feudalism, essays in medieval social history* (London, 1985), 246–52 and 332–33.

29 The theme recurs in all the studies, but for a quantitative assessment see S. J. Payling, 'Social mobility, demographic change, and landed society in late medieval England', *Economic History Review* **45** (1992), 51–73, which on the basis of some 5000 examples identifies a sharp rise in the extinction rate of male lines of descendancy as a result of the demographic crisis: while already before 1350 almost two out of three aristocratic lineages broke off after the third generation of male descendants, following the plague the same extinction rate was exceeded in only two generations (my calculations based on the tables on pp. 54–5 in Payling).

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30 The most comprehensive and recent overview is Dyer, *An age of transition?*, 4–5 and 194–210.
31 For the new visions of the late medieval 'crisis', see S. R. Epstein, 'The late medieval crisis as an "integration crisis"', in S. R. Epstein, *Freedom and growth. The rise of states and markets in Europe, 1300–1750* (New York and London, 2000), 38–72, and Dyer, *An age of transition?*. A useful introduction to the historiography on late medieval English economy is J. Hatcher and M. Bailey, *Modelling the Middle Ages. The history and theory of England's economic development* (Oxford, 2001).
32 C. Carpenter, *Locality and polity: a study of Warwickshire landed society, 1401–1499* (Cambridge, 1992); M. Kowaleski, *Local markets and regional trade in medieval Exeter* (Cambridge, 1995); J. Kermode, *Medieval merchants: York, Beverly and Hull in the later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2002). A recent overview that insists on the limits of social mobility is C. Maddern, 'Social mobility', in R. Horrox and W. M. Ormrod eds., *A social history of England, 1200–1500* (Cambridge, 2006), 113–33.
33 The most convincing examples of this criticism of the traditional sources are the studies of C. Dyer: *An age of transition?*; C. Dyer, *Standards of living in the later Middle Ages: social change in England c. 1200–1520* (Cambridge, 1989); C. Dyer, 'Did the peasants really starve in medieval England?', in M. Carlin and J. T. Rosenthal, eds., *Food and eating in medieval Europe* (London, 1998), 53–71.
34 R. Britnell, *The commercialisation of English society 1000–1500* (Cambridge, 1992); R. Britnell and B. Campbell eds., *A commercialising economy. England 1086 to c. 1300* (Manchester, 1995); J. Hatcher and E. Miller, Medieval England. *Towns, commerce and crafts, 1086–1348* (London, 1995). A good summary of the research in Hatcher and Bailey, *Modelling the Middle Ages*, 121–73.
35 C. Dyer, 'How urbanized was medieval England?', in J.-M. Duvosquel and E. Thoen eds., *Peasants and townsmen in medieval Europe: Studia in honorem Adriaan Verhulst* (Gent, 1995), 169–83, and D. Palliser ed., *Cambridge urban history of Britain*, 1 (Cambridge, 2000), 4 and 507–8.
36 Dyer, *An age of transition?*, 176–7.
37 For a good overview of the criticism, see Hatcher and Bailey, *Modelling the Middle Ages*, 149–73.
38 Z. Razi, *Life, marriage and death in a medieval parish. Economy, society and demography in Halesowen, 1270–1400* (Cambridge, 1980), 90–9 and 146–50.
39 D. Nicholas, 'Patterns of social mobility', in R. L. DeMolen ed., *One thousand years: Western Europe in the Middle Ages* (Boston, 1974), 45–108.
40 D. Herlihy, 'Three patterns of social mobility in medieval society', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* **3** (1973), 623–47 (also republished in D. Herlihy, *The social history of Italy and Western Europe, 700–1500*, London, 1978, n. XI, and in R. I. Rotberg ed., *Social mobility and modernization*, Cambridge, MA, and London, 2000, 19–43).
41 D. Herlihy and C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Les Toscans et leurs familles. Une étude du Catasto florentin de 1427* (Paris, 1978).
42 The first were studies conducted in the USA by Natalie Rogoff and in the UK by David Glass. As is generally known, the main tool developed for the purpose of census taking and mobility analysis, the double entry table, also called the 'matrix of mobility' actually takes into account only one stratification – usually the head of the family's profession.
43 D. Degrassi, *L'economia artigiana nell'Italia medievale* (Rome, 1996), 100–6; D. Degrassi, 'Il mondo dei mestieri artigianali', in Carocci ed., *La mobilità sociale nel medioevo*, 273–87. For the Roman case, see. S. Carocci and M. Vendittelli, *L'origine*

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della Campagna Romana. Casali, castelli e villaggi nel XII e XIII secolo (Rome, 2004), 198–200. For the prestige of different corporations, see A. I. Pini, 'Le arti in processione. Professioni, prestigio e potere nelle città-stato dell'Italia padana medievale', in A. I. Pini, *Città, comuni e corporazioni nel medioevo italiano* (Bologna, 1986), 259–91.

44 L. Feller, A. Gramain and F. Weber, *La fortune de Karol: marché de la terre et liens personnels dans les Abruzzes au haut Moyen Âge* (Rome, 2005).

45 See P. Cammarosano, 'Marché de la terre et mobilité sociale dans les Abruzzes aux IXe–XIe siècles. À propos d'un livre récent', *Revue Historique* **130**, 2 (2008), 369–82.

46 A. Fiore, 'L'attività militare come vettore di mobilità sociale (1250–1350)', in Carocci ed., *La mobilità sociale nel medioevo*, 381–407.

47 The most obvious reference is to the fate of peasant populations in rural territories under the rule of the Italian communes, but similar dynamics also appear to be present in other areas of Europe. Even among proponents of the commercialisation thesis in England, the prevailing impression is that only the peasant elites were really able to take advantage of the spread of credit, trade and the land market. Readers are referred to articles in the following collections: L. Feller and C. Wickham eds., *Le marché de la terre au Moyen Age* (Rome, 2005), and those under publication in the proceedings of the second and third meeting on *La conjoncture de 1300 en Méditerranée occidentale*, devoted to *Dinámicas comerciales del mundo rural: actores, redes y productos* (Madrid, 17–19 October 2005), and to *Monnaie, crédit et fiscalité dans le monde rural* (Madrid, 8–10 February 2007).

48 In general, see G. Sivéry, 'Social change in the thirteenth century. Rural society', in D. Abulafia, *The new Cambridge medieval history*, vol. 5, *c.1198–c.1300*, (Cambridge, 1999), 38–48: 40; an English example: M. K. McIntosh, *Autonomy and community: the royal manor of Havering, 1200–1500* (Cambridge, 1986).

49 See P. Grillo, 'Mobilità geografica e mobilità sociale in Italia e nella Francia meridionale (1300–1348)', in Carocci ed., *La mobilità sociale nel medioevo*, 555–76.

50 This argument follows F. Menant and É. Anheim, 'Mobilité sociale et instruction: clercs et laïcs du milieu du XIII^{e} au milieu du XIV^{e} siècle', in Carocci ed., *La mobilità sociale nel medioevo*, 341–79; 370–76.

51 For the most useful references see Carocci ed., *La mobilità sociale nel medioevo*, especially in J.-C. Maire Vigueur, 'Conclusioni: mobilità e identità sociale', 577–89; G. Milani, 'Il peso della politica nella mobilità sociale (Italia comunale, 1300 ca.)', 409–36; Fiore, 'L'attività militare'; Grillo, 'Mobilità geografica'.

52 Degrassi, *L'economia artigiana*, 43–63; Eadem, 'Il mondo dei mestieri'.

53 P. Freedman, *Images of the medieval peasant* (Stanford, 1999).

54 The best overview is Dyer, *An age of transition?*, 126–72; for dating the *cruck houses*, see C. Dyer, 'English peasant buildings in the later Middle Ages', *Medieval Archaeology* **30** (1986), 19–45; for new knowledge on furniture, see C. Dyer, 'Furnishings of medieval English peasant houses: investment, consumption and life style', in *Pautas de Consumo y niveles de vida en el mundo rural medieval*. Coloquio internacional di Valencia (E), 18–20 September 2008, available at www.uv.es/consum/dyer.pdf.

55 The image of migrants from rural areas as fugitive servants has come to discourage the study of urban immigration of the lower strata of the rural world; see W. R. Day Jr, 'Population growth and productivity: rural–urban migration and the expansion of the manufacturing sector in thirteenth century Florence', in B. Blondé, E. Vanhaute and M. Galand eds., *Labour and labour markets between town and countryside* (*Middle Ages–nineteenth century*) (Tournhout, 2001), 82–110.

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56 F. Franceschi, *Il mondo dei salariati urbani*, in Carocci ed., *La mobilità sociale nel medioevo*, 289–306 (see 293–5).
57 For the concept of *indigenza lavoratrice*, see especially C.-M. de La Roncière, 'Poveri e povertà a Firenze nel XIV secolo', in C.-M. de La Roncière, *Tra preghiera e rivolta. Le folle toscane del XIV secolo* (Rome, 1998), 197–281 (see 208).
58 Among the vast quantity of research on how individual strategies can modify the social framework and, above all, how social actors are influenced, sometimes decisively, by a set of predefined fields, see Margaret Archer's concept of 'internal conversation'. For Professor Archer the relationship between structure and agency is mediated by human beings' aptitude to think, reflect and imagine about themselves and their own social world, thus influencing social pathways: M. S. Archer, *Making our way through the world: human reflexivity and social mobility* (Cambridge, 2008).
59 For example, works on agriculture in the Third World by Ester Boserup and on economic anthropology by Karl Polanyi and Marshall Sahlins.
60 C. Wickham, *Framing the early Middle Ages. Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford, 2005), 303–6, 428–34 and 535–50.
61 This is a valid observation in every situation, and is as true amongst the early medieval aristocratic families as it was in the world of late medieval artisans and merchants. See W. G. Runciman, 'Accelerating social mobility'. For a detailed analysis of the impact on social mobility of the change in late medieval women's inheritance rights and owners, see M. Howell, *The marriage exchange. Property, social place, and gender in cities of the Low Countries, 1300–1500* (London and Chicago, 1998).
62 M. E. Mate, *Daughters, wives, and widows after the Black Death. Women in Sussex, 1350–1535* (Woodbridge, 1998); S. H. Rigby, 'Gendering the Black Death: women in later medieval England', in P. Stafford and A. B. Mulder-Bakker eds., *Gendering the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2002), 215–24.
63 Degrassi, *L'economia artigiana*, 46–58; Eadem, 'Il mondo dei mestieri'.
64 Degrassi, 'Il mondo dei mestieri', 283.
65 Petralia, 'Problemi della mobilità sociale', 253.
66 See note 6 above.
67 Max Weber's notion of 'closure' is the most obvious reference, along with its subsequent development by Frank Parkin and Raymond Murphy into the theory of 'social closure', based on their analysis of inclusion and exclusion practices adopted by privileged groups (on the basis of profession, citizenship, race and gender, etc.) to impede the access of other groups to the privileges they enjoy. F. Parkin, *Marxism and class theory: a bourgeois critique* (New York, 1979); R. Murphy, *Social closure: the theory of monopolization and exclusion* (Oxford, 1988). For the particular case of medieval England, see: S. H. Rigby, *English society in the later Middle Ages: class, status and gender* (London, 1995).
68 Howell, *The marriage exchange*.
69 Oexle, 'Deutungsschemata der sozialen Wirklichkeit'; Oexle, 'Die funktionale Dreiteilung'; Oexle, *Paradigmi del sociale*.
70 J. Le Goff, *Imaginaire médiéval: essais* (Paris, 1985); G. Duby, *Les trois ordres ou l'imaginaire du féodalisme* (Paris, 1979). More generally, see the numerous French and German studies indicated in Oexle, 'Deutungsschemata der sozialen Wirklichkeit', 66–75.
71 Mineo, 'Di alcuni usi della nobiltà', 48–56.
72 For example, N. Abelmann, *The melodrama of mobility: women, talk, and class in contemporary South Korea* (Honolulu, 2003), and R. Bruce, *Upward mobility and the common good. Toward a literary history of the welfare state* (Princeton, 2007): whether it

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is an account by several Korean women of their social ascent or novels whose protagonists are men of success, the emphasis is on the performative role of the narrations – words contribute to the making and changing of social worlds, and obviously of mobility. Behind these essays is the idea of a radical transformation underway in contemporary societies, above all in the USA and in emerging countries: given that the possibility and legitimacy of a fixed order of status has disappeared, mobility is presented as being the constant norm, because status is not an ascribed attribute, but the result of the moment, continuously reconstructed by individuals in a social world that is itself under continuous transformation.

73 É. Crouzet Pavan, 'La pensée médiévale sur la mobilité sociale, XII^{e}–XV^{e} siècle', in Carocci ed., *La mobilità sociale nel medioevo*, 69–96.

74 Bougard and Le Jan, 'Quelle mobilité sociale', 41–3.

75 O. Volckart, *Social mobility, institutional choice and economic performance: Germany from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries*, VIII Annual Conference (2004), International Society for New Institutional Economics (available at www.isnie.org/ISNIE04/Papers/volckart.pdf). For theoretical references, see Geoffrey Brennan and Philip Pettit, *The economy of esteem. An essay on civil and political society* (Oxford, 2004).

76 Sorokin, *Social mobility*, 133.

77 For a recent criticism of the continuist position, see B. Ward-Perkins, *The fall of Rome and the end of civilization* (Oxford, 2005).

78 The scientific literature is vast; see for example A. Chavarria Arnau, 'Considerazioni sulla fine delle ville in Occidente', *Archeologia Medievale* **31** (2004), 7–19; G. P. Brogiolo, A. Chavarría and M. Valenti eds., *Dopo la fine delle ville. Le campagne dal VI al IX secolo* (Mantova, 2005); A. Chavarria, J. Arce and G. P. Brogiolo eds., *Villas tardoantiguas en el Mediterraneo occidental* (Madrid, 2006), and, in particular, Tamara Lewit 'Vanishing villas: what happened to elite rural habitation in the West in the 5th and 6th centuries A.D.?', *Journal of Roman Archaeology* **16** (2003), 260–74.

79 In addition to the studies cited in the previous footnote, it is essential Wickham, *Framing the early Middle Ages*, 200–2 and 465–81.

80 A. Molinari, 'Archeologia e mobilità sociale', in Carocci ed., *La mobilità sociale nel medioevo*, 117–44.

81 For an examination of the historiography and for a position that clearly marks out the differences between *Popolo* and nobles, not only with regard to political culture and ideology, but also to behaviours and values, see Poloni, 'Fisionomia sociale e identità politica' (which contains extensive references to previous studies), and Milani, 'Il peso della politica'. A different view that insists on the aristocracy's symbolic superiority is to be found in R. Bordone, 'I ceti dirigenti urbani dalle origini comunali alla costruzione dei patriziati', and in G. Castelnuovo, 'L'identità politica delle nobiltà cittadine (inizio XIII–inizio XVI secolo)', in R. Bordone, G. Castelnuovo and G. M. Varanini eds., *Le aristocrazie dai signori rurali al patriziato* (Rome and Bari, 2004), 37–120 and 195–243.

82 Molinari, 'Archeologia e mobilità sociale', 136–42.

83 S. Pearson, 'Rural and urban houses 1100–1500: "urban adaptation" reconsidered', in K. Giles and C. Dyer eds., *Town and country in the Middle Ages: contrasts, contacts and interconnections, 1100–1500* (Leeds, 2005), 43–63.

84 Again the best overview is Dyer, *An age of transition?*; and see also C. Dyer, 'Methods and problems in the study of social mobility in England (1200–1350)', in Carocci ed., *La mobilità sociale nel medioevo*, 97–116.

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