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Inequality (un)perceived: The emergence of a discourse on economic inequality from the Middle Ages to the Age of Revolutions

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Abstract

Long-term developments in economic inequality are attracting growing attention. Earlier works focused on producing reliable measures of inequality, which overall suggest that in Europe, inequality levels were already high in preindustrial times and tended to grow almost continuously from the Middle Ages until the eve of the Industrial Revolution. Proposing a significantly different perspective, this article explores whether the change in inequality is connected to a change in how a condition of unequal distribution of property/income was perceived. By referring to large databases of manuscripts and printed editions covering ca. 1100-1830, we measure the occurrences of keywords connected to the notions of equality/inequality to determine when inequality became a topic considered worthy of specific reflection. Key texts are analyzed in depth to discover how and when such keywords acquired an economic meaning. Lastly, changes in meaning are connected to changes in levels of economic inequality. We demonstrate that the notions of equality/inequality appeared first in scholarly fields far from economic concerns and only slowly acquired economic meanings. This process intensified in the decades preceding the French Revolution of 1789, suggesting that changes in inequality levels contributed to brewing political upheaval in the Age of Revolutions.

Keywords

Equality; inequality; economic inequality; social inequality; middle ages; early modern period; French revolution; economic thought

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Long-term developments in economic inequality are attracting growing attention from economic historians worldwide. While in the past research had focused on the impact of the Industrial Revolution on general levels of inequality—to test a hypothesis originally put forward by Simon Kuznets (1955), who theorized that inequality was fairly low in preindustrial societies, then entered a rising phase triggered by the industrialization process, which a declining phase would have followed—in the last few years research on the preindustrial period has intensified. For certain areas of the world, those who attempted to provide an overview of long-term developments in inequality have been forced to write a ‘history without evidence’ (Williamson 2009), but usually, and surely in the case of Europe, scholars have steadily been producing new information by means of intense archival research. While until recently the only work on long-term trends in economic inequality based truly on data was Van Zanden’s study of Holland (Van Zanden 1995; Soltow, Van Zanden 1998), we now have some information for other areas of the Low Countries (Ryckbosch 2010; 2012; Hanus 2012), northern Italy (Alfani 2010a; 2010b; Alfani and Barbot 2009), and Spain (Santiago-Caballero 2011; Santiago-Caballero and Fernández, 2013). The map is still mostly blank, but there has been clear improvement, and what’s more, new research projects dedicated specifically to this topic, like the ERC-funded project *EINITE - Economic Inequality across Italy and Europe 1300-1800*, in which the authors of this paper participate, have been launched and are steadily providing new data.

This article, however, is not aimed at providing new quantitative data about general inequality levels. Instead it explores a different, although closely connected, topic, one that is becoming increasingly urgent and relevant both in the light of the recent findings about the long-term developments of inequality, and considering the current social and economic situation leading many to question whether income and wealth are distributed ‘fairly.’ Regarding the first point, while caution is needed as the completed case studies are still few and much of the data we have access to is provisional, it seems that in Europe at least, levels of economic inequality (especially of wealth) were already quite high in preindustrial times and, what’s more, they showed a tendency to grow almost continuously from the late Middle Ages until the eve of the Industrial Revolution. Considering the second point, while nowadays western societies clearly perceive it legitimate to at least ask the question about whether high levels of inequality are fair (see for example Osberg and Smeeding 2006), for preindustrial times it has been suggested that economic inequality was perceived quite differently (or, as the title of this article suggests, was *unperceived* as such). In fact, preindustrial Europeans (from the Middle Ages through at least the whole of the Early Modern Period) were well aware that their economies and societies were highly unequal, but this situation

was usually seen as acceptable, ‘natural,’ and inherent given God’s plans (Brants 1897; De Roover 1970; La Roncière 1974; Levi 2003; Alfani 2009).

The notion of inequality, then, needs to be contextualized and understood in the light of the cultural and social characteristics of preindustrial societies—otherwise, we risk making very wrong assumptions about what an uneven distribution of wealth and income meant for those societies. This article will focus on the cultural side of this story. It will trace back in time the emergence of equality/inequality and related terms as keywords used by those reflecting on economic matters (and it will show that such words acquired an ‘economic’ meaning in fairly recent epochs). It will also connect long-term changes in the use of these terms, which we take as indicative of a change in how an unequal distribution of property and income was perceived, to the aforementioned recent hypotheses about changes in inequality levels. In other words, if (as we demonstrate) the word ‘inequality’ became slowly charged with an economic meaning, and if this change in scholarly discourse on economic matters (high culture) reflects a broader cultural change and a transformation in how a condition of very unequal distribution of wealth and income was perceived, is it possible to connect this change in culture and perception to a change in the overall levels of inequality? By exploring this and related questions, this article provides a much-needed frame of reference for current and future projects attempting to measure inequality through time.

The first section of the article discusses the databases of manuscripts and treatises we used and the keywords we chose to consider, as well as clarifies the methods of analysis we applied. The second section provides a quantitative, descriptive analysis of the findings. The third and fourth sections offer a deeper interpretation, showing that certain keywords of current economics had their origins in very far removed fields (mathematics, music, medicine...), and analyze the ‘textual paths’ that led them to slowly acquire a meaning similar to the current one. The fifth section proposes a tentative linkage between change in culture and economic discourse on the one side, and long-term tendencies in inequality levels on the other. It also suggests that inter-linked changes in inequality levels and in perception of inequality could have contributed to brewing political upheavals, particularly the French Revolution of 1789.

1. Methods, Sources, and Databases

It is a well-known fact that specific words, especially those related to abstract concepts, have been used differently in different epochs. However, this fact is also an easily forgotten one. When we consider, for example, the word ‘inequality,’ we tend to attribute to that word the current meaning,

which is deeply charged with economic significance. A second possible error is to think that a condition of high economic inequality, which today would be considered worthy of reflection as such, was also significant to those who, in the Middle Ages or the Early Modern period, pondered economic matters. When we read a Medieval text, in order to understand it correctly we need both an understanding of the meaning that was attributed to an apparently familiar term in a specific epoch, as well as a grasp of the social and economic situation to which the use of that term in that way was connected (La Roncière 1974; Vigueur 2008).

This is not to say, though, that studying the occurrence in the past of terms that are significant for the current debate on economic matters is not a worthy task. On the contrary, we think that very relevant questions can be asked: when did such an essential keyword for current economics like ‘inequality’ start being used in scholarly discourse, and when and why did it acquire an economic meaning given that, as we will demonstrate, its origins lie in semantic areas far removed from those associated with economic matters? When did economic inequality start being perceived as such? In other words, when did a condition of very uneven distribution of wealth and income start being perceived as a problem? In this way, while we are indeed proposing a research question closely connected to the current language and culture (and inevitably, to the current social and economic condition), we are not imposing that culture and those linguistic uses on the ancient texts we study.

This article focuses on the word inequality and on its contrary, equality, but it does not involve only such words and does not consider only the English language. Our first step has been translating the key concepts of equality/inequality in the pair of Latin words *aequalitas/inaequalitas*, to which we added an entire family of related terms. In fact, we could not investigate the meaning of inequality in the Medieval or Early Modern period without considering more generally which cultural context was connected to such a notion. From this point of view, semantics is a powerful tool for historical research, as suggested by the methodological debate related to the ‘history of concepts’ (Chignola 1990 and 1997; Guilhaumou 2000; Richter 1995; Koselleck 1985). As Anthony Black demonstrated, during the Middle Ages different languages developed with their own concepts, prose style, argumentative methods, criteria of judgment, typology of texts, and authorities of reference. These languages were open, meaning that even if they had distinctive characteristics (each had its own ‘grammar’), nevertheless they interacted constantly among themselves. Economic reflection, for example, referred to a dense vocabulary of words coming from the ethical-theological language, as well as from the Aristotelian and the juridical languages, as well as the one related to poverty (Black 1991).

During the Middle Ages, the notions of economic *aequalitas/inaequalitas* do not appear to have an autonomous tradition. Instead, they recur in the broader philosophical-theological and ethical-political debate on the cohabitation of individuals within the *civitas* ('city') and on the inclusion in, or exclusion from, the *civitas*. In this sense, *aequalitas* becomes a keyword for a wider semantic context: Its meaning cannot be separated, for example, from that of *aequitas* and is also closely connected to that of *civitas* as a body, of the virtue of *liberalitas/largitio* (generosity), and of the vice *avaritia* (avarice) as well as of its virtuous opposite, *prudentia* (prudence). In this perspective some notions, like that of social utility/common good, honor/citizenship, and distribution of wealth/poverty, assume key importance in legitimating economic actors and economic behaviors (Todeschini 1994, 2002, 2007; Ceccarelli 2003, 2006; Piron 2004). And consequently, they also must be considered in our study of *aequalitas/inaequalitas*.

In the light of this, the words we individuated as essential references for our inquiry are: *aequalitas/inaequalitas*; *aequitas* (which is the juridical translation of the notion of equality); *utilitas* (an essential keyword for the Medieval tradition of political writing, which developed around the notion of *bonum commune*, or common good); and *distributio* (a term that evokes actual economic activity) (Nederman 1988; Langholm 1992; Kempshall 1999; Costa 1999, 2007; Grossi 2010).

After selecting the keywords, we measured their occurrence in the scholarly and literary production of the Old Regime. In particular, we focused on the titles of manuscripts and printed books, using them as a privileged observatory of the cultural tendencies of different epochs (see Turrini 1991 for a similar procedure). This method needed some refinement when working on manuscripts that do not have an 'identity' based on a specific author and a title. Instead, the *traditio*, or transmission, of a Medieval text from one manuscript to another is tied to the *incipit*, that is, the first words transcribed by the copyist. However, *incipit* are useful material and, thanks to the fact that recently many historical catalogues of important European libraries have been included in digital databases, we could use the *incipit* in the same way we referred to titles for more recent works. We considered our keywords in different variants so as to obtain results as exhaustive as possible. In particular, and especially referring to the characteristics of the Latin language, 1) we considered the forms with or without diphthong, to take into account the writing practices of the Middle Ages when readings were not frozen in exemplary forms (*aequalitas/equalitas*); 2) we took into account the nominative form and, whenever the database gave us the opportunity, also the truncated form (*equalit**) so as to identify also the declensions of the term; 3) for each keyword, we considered also the possible

vernacular variants (*equal/egal*); and 4) we proceeded in similar ways as well for fully vernacular forms in selected languages, namely English, Italian, and French (*equality/uguaglianza/égalité*). An important theoretical premise of our inquiry has been to consider written documents as the expression, albeit ‘indirect,’¹ of the culture of the time². The language used in written texts is the expression of a specific set of ideas; consequently, those texts are an adequate instrument to evaluate how common it was to actually reflect on the topic of equality/inequality, and also to discover the meanings associated with those terms in different epochs. This kind of procedure is not standard for economic and social historians, but it seems to offer rich opportunities for integrating more common approaches, as also suggested by recent publications (for example, Snell 2012). Given the long time period covered (1100-1830), our research also had to take into account different practices of cultural transmission, distinguishing between manuscripts and printed books. Consequently, the databases we used cover both.

This is a fairly new method of inquiry, as it makes use of instruments—the databases of titles, *incipit*, or whole texts—that only recently have been made freely available on the web or otherwise by libraries or cultural institutions. Their availability has been steadily increasing in the last couple of decades as a result of a broader push to digitalize ancient books and documents and to increase the availability of the information they hold, implementing open access web strategies. The current situation, where a significant amount of new material is available that has rarely been used, seems to call for experimental inquiries like our own. These databases rarely provide ‘final’ data, as they are continuously expanded and renewed. All the censuses of ancient works we used are work-in-progress and consequently the data they provide have to be considered partial. But it is much more exhaustive than anything available in the past. As a consequence, those who use such databases need to clarify the date of consultation: In our case, August 2012.

We selected the databases we considered according to principles of reliability, completeness, and accessibility. In particular, we valued the possibility of exploring a database according to a plurality of keywords, and to refine research also referring to non-lexical parameters, like chronological ones. We provide a more detailed description of each database in the Appendix; here an overview will suffice. For the printed books, we chose databases that allowed us to cover the longest period of time while also considering the different kinds of editorial products prevalent in each epoch (*incunabula*, *cinquecentine*, and ancient books in general, up to 1830). We then selected three

¹ Here we are referring to the idea that the connection between production of books and culture in a given time period cannot be understood in terms of simple mirroring but, as explained by the English sociologist Richard Hoggart, in terms of ‘oblique attention’ (Hoggart 1957; see also Chartier 1990, p. 104).

² About recent debates on the notion of ‘culture,’ see Burke 2004; Arcangeli 2007.

databases: Incunabula Short Title (ISTC), Edit16, and SBN Ancient Books. As per the other databases mentioned, Table 1 details the size of each of them as well as the time period they cover.

Table 1. Databases of manuscripts and printed editions.

Databases	Kind of Sources	Period Covered	Number of Works Included
In Principio	Manuscripts	1100-1800	4.388
Manuscripta Mediaevalia	Manuscripts	n.a.	n.a.
Manus on Line	Manuscripts	1100-1830	39.855
Digital Scriptorium	Manuscripts	1100-1830	6.080
Nuova Biblioteca Manoscritta	Manuscripts	1100-1830	22.998
Quodlibase	Manuscripts	1230-1350	124
British Catalogue	Manuscripts	1100-1600	2.701
Incunabula Short Title	Printed editions	1452/53-1499	29.365
Edit16	Printed editions	1500-1599	63.154
SBN Ancient Books	Printed editions	1600-1830	651.683
Note: Databases accessed in August 2012.			

Exploring manuscripts proved to be a more complex task, both because in this case the setting up of digital databases is a more recent phenomenon, and because there is a greater fragmentation of many different initiatives connected to specific areas, or to specific preservation institutions, which work autonomously on their own collection without contributing their catalogues to broader, shared databases. However, we selected the six most recent, updated, and complete Opacs (Online Public Access Catalogues) available. These are: Manus Online (MOL); Nuova Biblioteca

Manoscritta (NBM); In Principio. Incipit Index of Latin Texts; The Digital Scriptorium (DS); Manuscripta Mediaevalia; and the British Library Catalogue, Archives and Manuscripts.

To these databases of manuscripts we added Quodlibase, a database with different and very distinctive characteristics. It does not focus on the presence of a given codex preserved by a given library or institution, but instead documents a specific typology of texts. In fact, it collects the incipit of manuscripts belonging to a literary genre, the ‘*quodlibetales*’ questions—that is, the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century public disputes organized twice a year (during Advent and Lent) at the University of Paris. By privileging a specific kind of source, this database allowed us to follow a specific chain of texts, analyzing in depth the changing uses of our keywords (discussed below).

Geographically, the area covered by our databases is principally Italy (whose central position in the European culture during the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period is well known), however the inquiry we led on vernacular variants allowed us to expand our research to consider the emergence of the use of our keywords in vernacular forms not only in Italy, but also in France and in England. This choice is grounded in etymological considerations, as from the Latin word *aequalitas* derive: 1) the Italian vernacular form *eguaglianza* in its many variants³; 2) the middle French word *égalité*, in the forms *igaleité*, *ivelté*, *équalité* (from the Latin *aequalitas*); 3) from the middle French derives the middle English word *equalite*, also in the variants *equalyte*, *eqwalyte*, which during the fifteenth century became *æqualitie* and in the sixteenth *æquality* (from the middle French *équalité*). Also in this case, as with the work on titles, we referred to the most recent databases of lexicons, glossaries, and historical vocabularies⁴.

During the Middle Ages, the fact that Latin was the unchallenged common language of high culture makes it so that the production of manuscripts had a supra-regional character (Burke 1993), somewhat independent from geography. However for the printed books spreading across Europe from the fifteenth century (Gutenberg’s Bible, which made use of mobile type printing, dates from 1455), both the place and the language of the edition have fundamental importance. However, the survival of Latin in printed works through the seventeenth and the eighteenth century is helpful in understanding which meanings of our keywords stayed linked to the ‘high’ academic tradition.

³ Eguagliança, eguaglianza, eguaiança, equalança, equalance, eguallanza, guagliança, guaglianza, ‘gualança, ‘guallança, iguaglianza, iguallianza, inguaranza, oguagliança, ogualança, uguagiança, uguaglianza, ugualiança, ugualianza.

⁴ In particular, for Latin, the *Latin Dictionaries* (DLD) database managed by Brepolis; for Italian, the *Tesoro della Lingua Italiana delle Origini* (TLIO); for French, the database *Analyse et traitement informatique de la langue française* (ATILF); for English, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED).

2. A Quantitative Overview

A quantitative analysis of the data about the occurrence in time of our keywords is useful to delineate long-term trends, and constitutes a premise for researching in greater depth the changing meaning of such keywords (see the next section). Of course, the actual number of citations in titles or in *incipit* depends on the number of works considered per year (a piece of information that few databases provide) as well as on the emergence of new literary genres; a particularly important threshold is the spread of printed editions. The quantitative information we collected, then, should be considered indicative—but they also prove informative, suggesting clear tendencies and the existence of threshold events, in particular the French Revolution (1789). The data are summarized in Table 2, where they are arranged per century save for the most recent periods, for which we took as a dividing point the year 1789.

Table 2. Diffusion of keywords related to the notion of inequality in titles of manuscripts or printed editions, 1100-1830.

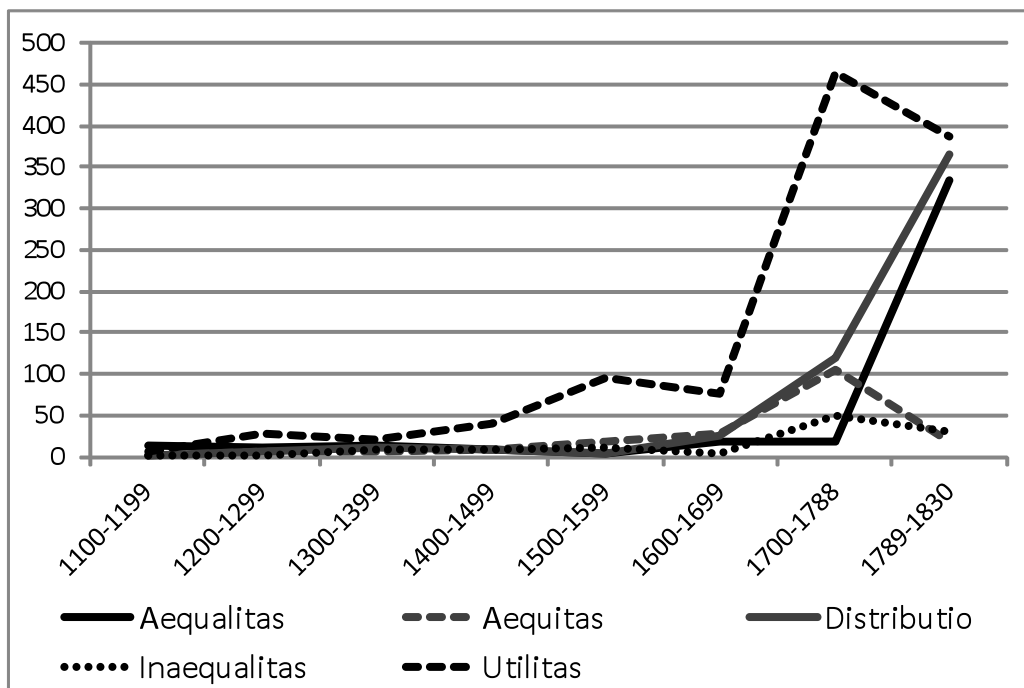
Period	Aequalitas		Aequitas		Distributio		Inaequalitas		Utilitas	
	M.*	P.**	M.	P.	M.	P.	M.	P.	M.	P.
1100-1199	13	-	2	-	1	-	2	-	7	-
1200-1299	12	-	7	-	7	-	2	-	27	-
1300-1399	14	-	7	-	12	-	8	-	20	-
1400-1499	8	1	8	0	8	0	8	0	30	11
1500-1599	0	3	5	14	2	2	0	10	0	95
1600-1699	0	19	0	29	1	25	0	3	1	76
1700-1788	1	17	3	101	0	120	0	50	4	459
1789-1830	0	334	0	19	0	366	0	31	0	387

* M. = 'Manuscripts' ** = 'Printed editions'

Notes: No printed editions are found before the fifteenth century. Gutenberg introduced mobile type printing around 1455.

The data presented in the table show a long-term increase in the frequency of all of our keywords, albeit more marked for some, and in particular for *utilitas*, *aequitas*, and *aequalitas*. Overall, *inaequalitas* also seems to be used quite rarely compared to others at the end of the period we considered (1830). It does, however, show an interesting tendency, as its occurrence clearly intensifies from the beginning of the eighteenth century (50 occurrences in the period 1700-1788, compared to a total of 33 in the six preceding centuries). More generally, all of our keywords, with the exception of *aequalitas*, show a very marked increase in the pre-revolutionary part of the eighteenth century. The stability in the use of *aequalitas* is all the more striking, as this is the keyword most dramatically affected by the French Revolution (334 occurrences in 1789-1830 compared to just 17 in 1700-1788). This should come as no surprise, as the French Revolution made equality one of its signature ideals (*liberté, fraternité, égalité*—that is, liberty, equality, fraternity); nevertheless it is interesting to note that the Revolution almost ‘invented’ it as a keyword able to orientate the discourse. All these tendencies appear even more clearly if represented graphically (see Figure 1, where manuscripts and printed editions are merged).

Figure 1. Diffusion of keywords related to the notion of inequality in titles of manuscripts and printed books, 1100-1830.



If we consider the relative trends of *aequitas* and *aequalitas* during the eighteenth century, they seem to mirror each other. While the occurrence of *aequitas* intensified during the pre-revolutionary decades, that of *aequalitas* remained stable. After the Revolution, however, *aequalitas* (*égalité*) boomed while *aequitas* declined. This is an interesting tendency, as we could hypothesize that the abstract concept of equity was replaced by a keyword describing a matter-of-fact ‘equity’ in the distribution of rights (equality), and possibly also in access to resources. We will return to this hypothesis after having discussed the change in meaning of our keywords through time (next section). What is sure is that it was the French Revolution that spread a new use of the word for and concept of equality across Europe. For example, if we take the case of Italy, most of which was conquered by Napoleon and directly or indirectly controlled by France for many years, we find a parallel increase in national libraries of the presence of works including *égalité* in their title or the Italian equivalent, *eguaglianza*. The same is not true, however, for inequality (*inegalité/ineguaglianza*), as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Occurrence of equality/inequality in 1700-1830 in Latin and other European languages in printed editions available in Italian libraries.

SBN	<i>Aequalitas</i>	<i>Égalité</i>	<i>Eguaglianza</i>	<i>Equality</i>	<i>Inaequalitas</i>	<i>Inégalité</i>	<i>Disegualianza</i>	<i>Inequality</i>	
Period									Total
1701-1710	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	18196
1711-1720	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	20713
1721-1730	2	1	0	0	1	0	3	0	24390
1731-1740	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	27994
1741-1750	1	0	1	0	3	0	0	0	30203
1751-1760	1	0	1	0	3	10	0	0	36361
1761-1770	1	0	0	0	1	3	0	1	39384
1771-1780	0	0	0	0	0	3	11	0	43427
1781-1790	0	1	3	0	0	5	1	0	50466
1791-1800	1	79	225	3	0	9	7	0	51584
1801-1810	0	1	15	0	0	2	8	0	44794
1811-1830	0	3	1	1	0	4	0	0	131305

The data in table 3 come from *Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale* (SBN) and consequently they record the occurrence of the keywords in printed editions physically present in Italian libraries only. Italy, however, is an exemplary case of how revolutionary ideas influenced culture in much of continental Europe. The data also confirm the findings from the inquiry conducted on the full set of databases. In general, we can conclude that the French Revolution spread the ideal of equality, but

did not also spread the idea of inequality as a condition worthy of specific attention. The interest in the concept of inequality seemingly had been growing slowly before the Revolution, and did not intensify immediately after it. The Revolution surely affected it, but before putting forward any hypotheses about this, it is important to obtain a deeper understanding of the original meanings of the word inequality, and of how it changed from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern and Modern period.

3. Understanding Inequality: The Manuscript Tradition (ca. 1100-1450)

Having reconstructed the occurrence through time of our keywords, we analyzed their exact meaning in the context of the full titles. This allowed us to subdivide the works in which they were used into a number of semantic groups, and to identify certain trends of change within the main semantic groups. In particular, we explored the evolution in meaning of the couple equality/inequality.

As previously stated, in this article we are considering ‘culture’ as a ‘tradition’ (*traditio*), that is, a process of production of texts by means of earlier texts, a continuous creation of texts genetically or functionally connected to others (Costa 2007, 565). Especially in the case of the Medieval manuscript tradition, the redaction of a text is closely tied to the pre-existing *traditio* and to the great *auctoritates* (authorities) that are continuously recalled. This interaction must be borne in mind to understand how the semantic fields of our inquiry are characterized by the close connection between the meaning of *aequalitas* in a given period, and the group of ancient authorities from which different meanings originated and were passed on. As a consequence, the meaning of *aequalitas/inaequalitas* during the Middle Ages is part of a theoretical system built upon ideas that traversed the centuries through the works of authoritative authors. Within this theoretical system, we do find references to the political and economic fields, but—and there is no doubt about this—until the eighteenth century there are absolutely no works specifically dedicated to *aequalitas/inaequalitas* as keywords for such fields.

The concept of *aequalitas* does not polarize the Medieval and Early Modern ethical-economic reflection, it is not capable of orienting that reflection as much as becoming a topic considered worthy of specific analysis. Our research on titles shows that *aequalitas* has historically been connected to other semantic fields, and that only over time did it contribute to constructing an economic meaning for this word. Identifying these fields means reconstructing the set of interconnected meanings attributed in the past to *aequalitas/inaequalitas*, which is a necessary step

to understanding what ‘inequality’ really signified during the Old Regime. Of course, equality and inequality were well-known words, however they were used differently. *Aequalitas*, for example, was used in connection with certain Aristotelian categories, with the persons of the Trinity, or with the physiological components of the human body, but it was never used to describe human beings as part of a collectivity of ‘equals.’ In the last sense, *aequalitas* was a condition that human beings enjoyed only in the garden of Eden (discussed below).

During the Middle Ages, *aequalitas* is not considered a normative concept, that is, an ideal that should give a direction to political action or a condition that should be realized. On the other hand, *inaequalitas* is not used in contexts related to a condition that gives rise to claims, or that is unfair and consequently must be changed. In this period, both terms are politically neutral.⁵ In fact, Medieval texts propose an ideal of social ‘order’ in which a condition of inequality between individuals must be safeguarded—to an extent—to ensure the good functioning of the city, metaphorically represented as a ‘body’ (Nederman & Lagdon Forman 1994). This metaphor provides an idea about the unity of a human group (a community) that is intrinsically unequal, as it results from the solidarity of different bodily parts, cooperating to give life to the whole. At the same time, the natural disposition of the bodily parts implies that such parts are ordered according to a specific hierarchy. More generally, the medieval universe is an ordered universe *because* it is composed of hierarchically ordered parts (Costa 1999, 6-12). From Augustine of Hippo (354-430) to Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), order is meant as ordering of inequalities. ‘Order,’ as we read in *De civitate Dei* (XIX, 13), ‘is the disposition of equal and unequal things in such a way as to give to each its proper place.’⁶

Inequality is an element that nature and the wisdom of Creation reveal at every degree of being: Even angels are hierarchically ordered and even *in statu innocentiae* (‘in a condition of innocence’) the tie between inequality and dominion is apparent, as Thomas Aquinas demonstrates in *Quaestio* 96 (a. 3: ‘Whether Men were equal in the State of Innocence?’) of his *Summa Theologiae*⁷. The

⁵ Samuel K. Cohn’s research on the spread of ‘political’ rebellions across Medieval Europe confirms that claims raised in the name of ‘freedom’ did not explicitly include greater ‘equality;’ at most, this was somehow implicit in a new notion of freedom: ‘After the [1348-50] plague, not only did the presence of the word liberty increase vertiginously to describe and explain popular revolts; its meaning began to shift as well, from the privileges of a few or of a special community toward an implicit sense of equality’ (Cohn 2006, 239).

⁶ ‘Ordo est parium dispariumque rerum sua cuique loca tribuens dispositio.’

⁷ ‘Utrum homines in statu innocentiae fuissent aequales.’ Before original sin, in fact, there was no condition of servitude, but dominion existed with the meaning of an individual ‘qui habet officium gubernandi et dirigendi liberos’ (‘who has the office of governing and directing free men,’ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, q. 96, a. 4). Thomas Aquinas developed his doctrine referring to two *auctoritates*: Augustine (from whom he took the notion of order) and Aristotle (from whom came the concepts of dominion and common good). According to Augustine, all things coming from God are ordered, and this implies that they are unequal. In the same way, human beings, even before the Fall, were not all equals but differed due to gender, age, qualities of the soul, and qualities of the body. As they were, according to

entire political system, and its representations, are grounded in an axiom that is the opposite of the ‘egalitarian’ one we are familiar with, and which will develop only from the end of the Early Modern period. Inequality is not only a rule according to which the parts of a whole are distributed, but it conditions how the individual is perceived; in fact, an individual is not equal to all others, but is defined by the unequal relationships to which he or she belong (Costa 1999, 37; Frigo 1988).

In this theoretical system, the notion of order is connected to that of diversity, and both are connected to that of beauty. Beauty is grounded in order, but diversity, or inequality of components, is its pre-condition. The perfection and beauty of the universe derives from the diversity and the inequality of its components, not from uniformity and equality: ‘Therefore, as the divine wisdom is the cause of the distinction of things for the sake of the perfection of the universe, so it is the cause of inequality. For the universe would not be perfect if only one grade of goodness were found in things’⁸ (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, q. 47, a. 2). The inequality of components reveals the ordered structure of the universe, that is, the rationality of the Creation (Parotto 1993, 165-6). It should come as no surprise, then, that *aequalitas* appears to be the keyword of the seven liberal arts, and in particular of the *quadrivium*—music, arithmetic, astronomy, and geometry—which from the end of Antiquity were considered propaedeutic to the study of theology. In the titles related to these arts, the words *aequalitas* and *inaequalitas* can be found together, in a dialectic relation that must be understood in light of the neo-platonic teaching of Augustine of Hippo and Boethius, according to whom every inequality can be reduced to equality, and disorder is an expression of order. This way of thinking characterizes the whole of the Augustinian tradition up to the thirteen-century theologian Bonaventura from Bagnoregio (1217/21-1274): ‘Beauty is nothing other than numerical equality: and there the numerous causes are reduced to one’⁹ (Bonaventura, *Collationes in Hexaemeron*, VI, 7).

This theoretical context is essential to understanding the results of our inquiry. In particular, if we focus on the manuscript tradition from the twelfth to the fifteenth century, we can enumerate five main semantic fields with which the keyword *aequalitas* is associated, and with which, according to what we clarified about the Medieval culture, a specific system of authoritative authors corresponds:

Aristotle, naturally sociable, human beings tended to aggregate but, due to their original differences, those who showed the greatest capacities tended spontaneously to exert a dominion over the others (freemen and not slaves) directing them towards the common good (for more about this see Costa 1999, p. 572).

⁸ ‘Sicut ergo divina sapientia causa est distinctionis rerum propter perfectionem universi, ita est inaequalitatis. Non enim esset perfectum universum, si tantum unus gradus bonitatis inveniretur in rebus.’ Here Thomas is answering positively to the question ‘Whether the Inequality of Things is from God?’ (‘Utrum inaequalitas rerum sit a Deo’).

⁹ ‘Pulchritudo nihil aliud est quam aequalitas numerosa: ibi autem sunt rationes numerosas ad unum reductae.’

1. The aforementioned *quadrivium* arts (music, arithmetic, astronomy, and geometry). Here the *auctoritas* of reference is Boethius (475-525), who in his works *De institutione musica* (II, 7) and *De institutione arithmetica* (I, 32) argued that ‘Omnis inaequalitas ex aequalitate procedit’ (‘every inequality proceeds from equality.’ Boethius, *De institutione arithmetica*, I, 32, p. 114). In this field, *aequalitas* is a word related to the quantitative/numerical dimension.

2. Theology. Theological thought refers to the mathematical meanings of *aequality* when discussing religious tenets. Here Augustine of Hippo and Boethius are the *auctoritates* for a tradition that uses the word *aequalitas* in different ways, all re-elaborated in the *Sentences* of Petrus Lombardus (1100-1162ca.), a compendium that was pivotal in Medieval academic learning. In actual application, the main use of *aequalitas* refers to the doctrine of the Trinity, as already Augustine asked the question of how the relationships between the three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost) should be understood, and particularly their relationship of equality, concluding that the distinction between the persons of the Trinity is the only one that does not imply inequality (Augustine, *De Trinitate*, lib. 7, cap. 6, 11-12).¹⁰ As Lombardus clarified, the equality of the persons of the Trinity lies in the fact that none exceeds the others regarding eternity, greatness, or power (*aeternitas*, *magnitudo*, or *potestas*) (Lombardus, *Sententiae*, I, 19, 1). A second theological use of *aequalitas* has to do with the doctrine of original sin, according to which Eve ‘*voluit usurpare divinitatis aequalitatem*’ (‘wanted to usurp an equality of divinity’)¹¹ (Lombardus, *Sententiae*, II, 22, 4). Her sin consisted of, in fact, having aspired to ‘have the similitude of God with a certain equality, thinking, that that which the Devil said was true’¹² (Lombardus, *Sententiae*,

¹⁰ ‘But in God it is not so; for the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit together is not a greater essence than the Father alone or the Son alone; but these three substances or persons, if they must be so called, together are equal to each singly: which the natural man does not comprehend’ (‘At in Deo non ita est; non enim maior essentia est Pater et Filius simul quam solus Pater aut solus Filius, sed tres simul illae substantiae sive Personae, si ita dicendae sunt, aequales sunt singulis, quod *animalis homo non percipit*’) Augustine, *De Trinitate*, VII, 6, 11; ‘Or if we choose to admit the plural number, in order to meet the needs of argument, even putting aside relative terms, that so we may answer in one term when it is asked what three, and say three substances or three persons; then let no one think of any bulk or interval, or of any distance of howsoever little unlikeness, so that in the Trinity any should be understood to be even a little less than another, in whatsoever way one thing can be less than another: in order that there may be neither a confusion of persons, nor such a distinction as that there should be any inequality’ (‘Aut si iam placet propter disputandi necessitatem etiam exceptis nominibus relativis pluralem numerum admittere, ut uno nomine respondeatur cum quaeritur quid tria, et dicere tres substantias sive personas, nullae moles aut intervalla cogitentur, nulla distantia quantulaecumque dissimilitudinis aut ubi intellegatur aliud alio vel paulo minus quocumque modo minus esse aliud alio potest, ut neque personarum sit confusio, nec talis distinctio qua sit impar aliquid’) Augustine, *De Trinitate*, VII, 6, 12.

¹¹ ‘Ex quo manifeste animadverti potest quis eorum plus peccaverit, Adam scilicet Eva. Plus enim videtur peccasse mulier, quae voluit usurpare divinitatis aequalitatem, et nimia praesumptione elata credidit ita esse futurum.’

¹² ‘And, indeed, such an elation was for certain in the mind of the woman, by which she believed and willed to have the similitude of God with a certain equality, thinking, that that which the Devil said was true’ (‘Et talis quidem elatio in mente mulieris fuit pro certo, qua credidit et voluit habere similitudinem Dei cum aequalitate quadam, putans esse verum quod diabolus dicebat’) Lombardus, *Sententiae*, II, 22, 2.

II, 22, 2). *Aequalitas* is used in similar ways in connection to Lucifer, who sinned because he intended ‘*Deo se aequare*’ (‘equate himself to God’)¹³ (Lombardus, *Sententiae* II, 6, 1). Finally, the word is associated with the doctrine of angels, and with that of the Creation.¹⁴ All these matters became central arguments of theological discussion within the universities, as reflected in two literary genres: the Commentaries to the *Sentences* of Petrus Lombardus, and the *Quaestiones quodlibetales* (see section 2). It is in the *incipit* of these kind of texts that *aequalitas/inaequalitas* appear with the greatest frequency.

3. Medicine. A fair number of *incipit* refer to Hippocrates’ theory of the *complexio* (‘constitution’) of the four bodily fluids or humours. In a healthy individual, temperance is associated with the perfect equilibrium, or equality, of the four humours. Instead, a condition of inequality determines a specific character (wrathful, melancholic...) depending on the prevailing humour.

4. Ethics and politics. These fields make use of *aequalitas/inaequalitas* when reflecting on virtues. This is especially the case from the thirteenth century onward, when across Europe these terms become recurrent in Latin translations and commentaries on the works of Aristotles, particularly the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*. In these texts, the word *aequalitas* is often associated with the topic of justice and equity (*aequitas*), and sometimes it is connected to the reflection on *oeconomica* (‘economic matters’),¹⁵ in which the keywords *publica utilitas* and *distributio* are used frequently.

5. Law. *Aequalitas* is used in juridical writings. In fact, since the re-discovery of the Roman Law during the twelfth century, the term is associated, or used as synonymous, with *aequitas*.¹⁶

¹³ ‘[Lucifer] was proud toward his own Creator unto so great [a degree], that he willed even to equate himself to God’ (‘in suum Creatorem superbivit, in tantum quod etiam Deo se aequare voluit’) Lombardus, *Sententiae* II, 6, 1.

¹⁴ This range of meanings is confirmed by an inquiry we conducted by means of the browser of the website Augustinus (<http://www.augustinus.it/>), which collects the whole works by Augustine of Hippo. Here, considering the whole texts and not just the titles, the word *aequalitas* appears 52 times: 4 in the *De musica*, 20 when discussing the relationship between Father and Son, and 6 referring to angels.

¹⁵ From this point of view, only an inquiry led on the whole corpus of Medieval Latin translations and comments of Aristotle can offer sound results. From a first inquiry into the database *Aristoteles Latinus* (collecting all translations from Greek to Latin of Aristotle’s works), we counted 103 occurrences of the word *aequalitas* and 45 of *inaequalitas*. Many of these refer to Book V of *Nicomachean Ethics*, where *aequalitas* is a keyword used while developing the theory of ‘commutative justice’ (about this, see Langholm 1992; Kaye 1998; Lanza 2010; Piron 2010; Maifreda 2012). These words are also frequent in Book II of *Politics*, in which *aequalitas* is a fundamental keyword used to present the theory of Phaleas of Chalcedon, who advocated equality of property among all citizens of a given community. Equality also pertains to ethics (*aequalitas* is a necessary condition of friendship), logics (*aequalitas* and *inaequalitas* are keywords in the theory of contrariety), and physics (*aequalitas/inaequalitas* are synonymous with *sanitas/alteritas corporis*).

¹⁶ For more about the notion of *aequalitas* as the juridical expression of *aequitas*, see Prodi 2000, Sbriccoli 2003, and Quagliani 2004. This notion is essential to understanding the idea of justice not only during the Middle Ages, but throughout the Old Regime (Alessi 2007).

This whole range of meanings is associated with *aequalitas* and *inaequalitas* across the centuries. However, it is possible to identify certain general asymmetries in the semantic evolution of the two words. We already noticed that, from a quantitative point of view, *inaequal** is used less frequently than *aequal**. We should now add that, from a qualitative point of view, the two terms are associated with greater stability in different semantic fields. *Inaequalitas* is more commonly used in connection to music and arithmetic, as well as in medical texts. Consequently, it reveals a concrete meaning, usually being associated with the names of ‘things’ like sounds, numbers, and figures. *Aequalitas*, instead, is more commonly used in theology, and shows a propensity for being associated with a similitude between ‘persons,’ not ‘things;’ in this sense, the term describes most perfectly the relationship between the persons of the Trinity, which are connected one to the other by a relationship different from the ‘quantifiable’ one corresponding to the similitude between specific creatures and beings. This kind of equality is unattainable for human beings, as they cannot become the equals of God. More generally, during the Middle Ages, ‘equality’ does not describe the relationship between human beings—and it will not do so for a long time yet, as discussed in the next section.

Some final considerations are needed with regard to our other keywords. As we anticipated, in the manuscript tradition *aequitas* has a mostly ethical-theological significance, and is connected to reflections about justice, which also involve the exegesis of the Bible. *Utilitas* is used with a wider range of meanings, appearing with greater frequency in writings about politics, where it is often coupled with the adjective *publica* (‘public utility’). However, it recurs also in theological writings, where it refers to circumcision or the crucifixion, and in astronomical-mathematical texts. Finally, *distributio* is primarily a word of rethoric and logic, and secondarily, is used when discussing the administration of the clergy, particularly the practice of assigning benefices, tithes, and alms.

4. Understanding Inequality: Printed Editions (ca. 1450-1830)

The first books printed with mobile type (*incunabula* and *cinquecentine*) concerned traditional topics, in which *aequalitas* is mostly associated with the arts of the *quadrivium*. In 1459, when this term becomes the title of a printed edition, the *De aequalitate* of Nicholas of Kues (1401-1464), its deep ties with the medieval tradition are confirmed. Kues’ work, in fact, refers to Augustine’s *De Trinitate* and applies the tools of arithmetic to the study of the persons of the Trinity.

Only from the sixteenth century we find the first, few, instances of the use of the term in works published in vernacular (Italian); these are related to the practical field of the distribution of the *estimo*, that is, of tax quotas, and of the collection of tributes ('*egualanza*'¹⁷). Through the seventeenth century, this word is still enrooted in its traditional meanings, which are perpetuated through publications produced by, and/or destined to, the academy: prolusions or treatises in which equality is a keyword for reflection on astronomical and theological matters. In this century, however, we also find the origin of a school of thought that makes use of *aequalitas* in the ethical-juridical reflection, suggesting that equality is a characteristic of human beings in the so-called state of nature. This use reflects the diffusion of a new paradigm—jusnaturalism—that, from the early seventeenth century offered a deeply innovative vision of the political order, determining a break with the Medieval political tradition. Reflecting on the state of nature, jusnaturalism aimed to discover the characteristics of the human being per se, before and independently from the ties and relationships that give him, at the same time, membership in and dependency from a community. The individual imagined by the likes of Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), and John Locke (1632-1704) has two essential qualities: freedom and equality.¹⁸ Each individual is free as he is not the subject of any other who can exert power or influence over him; each individual is equal to every other as all individuals are equally free from a higher power able to command them.

By referring to the fictitious condition of the state of nature, the main coordinates of the Medieval discourse about citizenship—the metaphor of the body and the idea of hierarchical order—are abandoned. Order is not a 'natural' structure that has always been in place, and human beings do not collect spontaneously into an unequal body. Hierarchical ties, which for Thomas Aquinas were intrinsic in human beings even in their uncorrupted condition preceding the Fall from Eden, in the new jusnaturalist paradigm are related instead to a subsequent phase, to something to be realized (Costa 2007, 574-5). However, already in the second half of the sixteenth century scholars belonging to the 'second Scholasticism,'¹⁹ like Francisco de Vitoria (1483/1486-1546), Domingo de Soto (1494-1560), and Francisco Suarez (1548-1617), had considered equality a distinctive

¹⁷ This word does not appear for the first time in the sixteenth century. On the contrary, it has a long tradition that can be traced back to the thirteenth century, particularly to works by Brunetto Latini (*La Rettorica*, 1260-61; *Il Tesoretto*, 1274) and Egidio Romano (*Del reggimenti dei principi*, 1288).

¹⁸ According to these authors, natural law is 'rational,' as it can be understood by means of reason alone, without help from the Creation. In his turn, each author connected the notion of equality to different conceptions of the state of nature, and to different conceptions of the 'contract' on which the political association based on the positive law is grounded (Macpherson 1973).

¹⁹ Second Scholasticism was a cultural movement that during the late fifteenth through early seventeenth centuries, especially in Spain and Italy, recovered topics typical of Medieval debates, and in particular those developed by Thomas Aquinas.

characteristic of the state of nature preceding the Fall, a condition in which no individual had power over others. On the basis of this principle, they had argued that human beings are equal according to natural law. For these sixteenth and early seventeenth century authors, *aequality* is a condition closely connected to the juridical concept of *aequitas* (Grossi 1972).

If we consider the keyword *aequalitas*, in the long term there is a gradual but clear semantic movement from an attribute of divine relationships to an essential characteristic of the nature of human beings, and of their ‘political’ coexistence. From this point of view, it is indicative that some French inquiries on the lexical uses and the discourse connected to the vernacular (French) word *égalité* during the eighteenth through twentieth centuries show that the emergence of its political and philosophical meaning was fairly late, not occurring before the eighteenth century: ‘According to our inquiry, the morphological family of *égal* seems to concern, in the first half of the eighteenth century, things more than people. When it appears in connection to people, the sphere in which it is used is that of law. The words *égaux* and *égalité* are used, in the meaning that is of interest to us—that is, a relationship of similarity between persons—only in two specific fields: that of religion, and that of antiquity’ (Piguet 1999, 28-9, our translation). It is also significant that the political meaning of *égal* tends to be absent from the dictionaries and lexicons of the eighteenth century, as if their writers tried to avoid a difficult topic. When present, the entries related to equality offer vague and a-temporal definitions, which usually focus on the use of the term in relation to things (conformity, parity, relationship between equal things) and not to people (Antoine 1981). An important exception is the *Encyclopédie*, one of the most celebrated fruits of the French Enlightenment. In the entry *égalité* published by Louis de Jaucourt in 1755, a sub-entry is included labelled *égalité naturelle* (‘natural equality’), which opens in this way: ‘That, which exists among all men due to their natural constitution. This equality is the origin and the foundation of freedom’ (*Encyclopédie*, vol. V, p. 414, our translation). It comes as no surprise, then, the fact that this sub-entry follows all others that relate to the ‘main’ meanings of the word, that is, the logical, astronomical, geometric, and arithmetic.

If we consider the word *inégalité*, even in the *Encyclopédie* the corresponding entry has no philosophical-political meaning. Instead, the only meaning included in the entry published by Jean-Baptiste le Rond d’Alembert in 1765 is the astronomical one: ‘Word much used in Astronomy, to describe many irregularities that are observed in the movement of the planets’ (*Encyclopédie*, vol. VIII, p. 695, our translation). However, ten years earlier Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) had made of this concept the cornerstone of a book, *Le discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes*, which would have orientated the ethical and political reflection on

inequality up to the nineteenth century, bringing forward a significant increase in the number of works dedicated to this topic: ‘It was Jean-Jacques Rousseau [...] who turned onto itself the philosophical reflection, including into it the subjective dimension of a revendication and inverting the terms of the problem, substituting the traditional reflection about the conditions necessary to realize equality with a more fundamental query about the concrete causes of inequality’ (Fiala 1999, 8, our translation). It is around the middle of the eighteenth century, then, that a philosophical-political discourse started to develop, in which the couple equality/inequality assumed new and complex meanings. Apart from a descriptive use of the terms, a prescriptive use is now found in political texts, which start using subtle distinctions between a natural equality to be claimed and a chimerical one, and between an acceptable inequality and one to be overcome: ‘Since then, a red line has connected in the texts the words of (in)equality, the scholarship and the historical events: from the revolutionary period to the contemporary epoch, from Babeuf proclaiming «real equality or death» to the recent movements promoting gender equality within institutions, or the recognition of equal social rights to the immigrants, to the jobless, to the clandestine *sans-papiers*, passing through [a variety of] utopist projects ...’ (Fiala 1999, 9, our translation).

Our research confirms this tendency, as the keywords, in particular in the vernacular forms (*uguaglianza/égalité/equality*; *disuguaglianza/inégalité/inequality*) become more recurrent in titles during the eighteenth century (see Table 3 in Section 2). At the same time the Latin forms wane, surviving only in the academy and being mostly used in works on philosophical-theological matters. This is particularly apparent in the case of *aequalitas*, which from the middle of the eighteenth century, and especially after the French Revolution, is found in a great abundance of titles in vernacular? and is used mostly in pragmatic-political contexts or in the philosophical-political discourse elaborating the new ideas and debates of the eighteenth century. Even in the rare Latin occurrences the term tends to be associated with the new meanings (particularly with the theory of the state of nature, especially at the beginning of the century), while the connection with the arts of the *quadrivium* is definitively broken. However, this is not the case for *inaequalitas*, for which such a connection survives up to the nineteenth century. In fact, the analysis of the occurrence of this word in printed editions reveals a clear preference for the use of the Latin form, associated with the scientific field (especially astronomy) and medicine, with a continuity in frequency from the sixteenth century until around 1760. The vernacular forms of the term, instead, are used mostly in philosophical-political works printed after the middle of the century and usually related to the debates generated by Rousseau. As mentioned previously, this peculiarity in the use of inequality is reflected by the *Encyclopédie*, which, as late as 1765, bears witness to the consolidated ‘astronomical’ use of the term only. Something similar is found for another keyword we considered,

distributio. Over the whole period, this word maintains the traditional connection to the practice of distributing alms, tithes, and ecclesiastical benefices, however during the eighteenth century a new use of the word appears, especially in vernacular, which connects distribution to a condition of economic inequality. The most interesting occurrence is probably the work of the physiocrat Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot (1727-1781), *Réflexions sur la formation et la distribution des richesses* (1766).

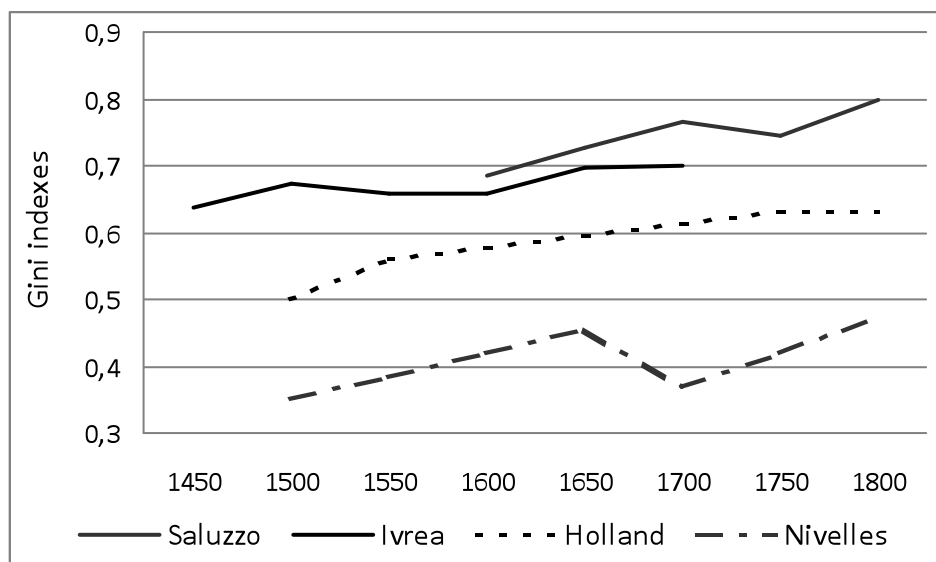
5. Cultural Change and Economic Change: Mirroring Tendencies

In the first sections of this article, we provided a long-term reconstruction of the changes in the frequency with which a set of keywords related to the idea of inequality were used, and connected these tendencies to a change in the meaning of such keywords. Now it is time to debate whether these processes reflect, or are reflected by, long-term changes in economic structures. As mentioned in the Introduction, inequality levels in preindustrial times (especially from the late Middle Ages or the sixteenth century) are the object of an increasing amount of new research. This is changing the situation compared to what was the case until recently, when the only area of the world that had been studied systematically for a long period of time was the province of Holland in the Dutch Republic.

For Holland, Van Zanden suggested that, during the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, a tendency toward slow but continuous growth in economic inequality can be found. This would be associated with a long period of economic growth: a preindustrial phase of increasing inequality connected directly to a phase of further increase, triggered by the beginning of the industrialization process in the late eighteenth-early nineteenth century. A phase of declining economic inequality would not begin before the twentieth century or the late nineteenth century at the earliest. The traditional picture of an inverted-U curve, the so-called ‘Kuznets curve’ that would be associated solely with the times of the Industrial Revolution, in this area of Europe should be replaced by a kind of ‘super-Kuznets curve,’ whose rising left side covers four centuries at least (Van Zanden 1995; Soltow, Van Zanden 1998). More recent works have provided support for the idea that a long-term rise in inequality also occurred in other areas, both in northern Europe (Low Countries) as well as southern Europe. Here, Italy is the area that has been, and is still being, researched most thoroughly (Alfani 2010a, 2013; Alfani and Barbot 2009). The first completed case studies, and especially those covering longer time periods, suggest quite clearly a picture of general levels of economic inequality—as measured, for example, by means of Gini indexes of wealth distribution—

rising almost continuously from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century. In Figure 2, trends in economic inequality in Holland and in selected communities of northwestern Italy (Ivrea, Saluzzo) and the Low Countries (Nivelles) are compared²⁰ (a change in sources between Italy and Holland makes direct comparisons of Gini absolute values problematic, consequently attention should be paid to the tendencies more than the levels of inequality).

Figure 2. Long-term trends in economic inequality across Europe: Northwestern Italy and Low Countries, 1450-1800 (Gini indexes).



Sources: Elaboration from data published in Alfani 2010a for Ivrea; Alfani 2013 for Saluzzo; Van Zanden 1995 for Holland; Ryckbosch 2010 for Nivelles.

According to Van Zanden (1995), a long-term increase in economic inequality could be the consequence of preindustrial economic growth. This view is somewhat questioned by the fact that a multi-secular tendency toward increasing inequality is also found in areas affected by economic decline, such as in the case of the Italian city of Ivrea and its surroundings, whose economy stagnated from the sixteenth century onward. As suggested by Alfani (2010a; 2010b), demographic factors could be responsible for a long-term increase in economic inequality also in absence of

²⁰ These are the cities Ivrea and Saluzzo, both in Piedmont, a region to the northwest of the Italian peninsula. In the period covered by the graph, Ivrea was part of the domains of the House of Savoy, which from 1601 also controlled Saluzzo.

economic growth. What's more, ongoing research like that conducted within the framework of the EFINITE research project is suggesting that the tendency toward a rise in economic inequality from the late Middle Ages to the nineteenth century had a pan-European character. While this finding still needs to be confirmed, it seems clear that there are today open questions about the history of economic inequality that can be answered only by considering the general, supra-local, and even supra-national picture. It should also be noted that rises in economic inequality in the long run are consistent with the idea that more advanced economies can 'extract' more inequality (Milanovic, Lindert and Williamson 2011).

It is not the aim of this article to provide any new explanations for the factors that promoted growth in economic inequality across preindustrial Europe. However, our reconstruction of the change in the meaning of equality and inequality suggests new questions of general interest to that debate. We have shown that the words equality/inequality did not have an economic meaning, or even a 'political' one of equality of rights between human beings, until fairly recent epochs. This situation started to change from the late sixteenth-early seventeenth century, with the Second Scholasticism and especially with the spread of jusnaturalism. Was the change in meaning of our keywords connected to a change in economic structures? Of course, in these matters it is difficult, if not impossible, to reach any final conclusion. We are, however, convinced that there was indeed a connection. From the late Middle Ages, European societies had been steadily becoming more unequal, especially in terms of wealth distribution. This is evident in the available time series of quantitative inequality indicators, but the process is also described—albeit a bit indirectly—by scholars who have studied changes in economic thought and economic culture.

Throughout the Old Regime, European societies were very unequal from the social, juridical, and economic point of view. However, they were not arbitrary or dominated by abuse, nor were they characterized by the systematic exclusion of the poor from access to resources (no such society would be able to last long). Economic and social differences were accepted as 'natural' and were reinforced by Christian (Catholic) doctrine (La Roncière 1974; Levi 2003; Alfani 2009); in our own reconstruction, this is clearly apparent, for example, in the tradition related to Augustine's *De civitate Dei*. The huge differences in individual wealth and income, however, had somehow to be managed, especially when new social groups started building enormous patrimonies, constituting an economic elite whose entitlement to own and manage a large share of the overall assets and resources was increasingly questioned by theologians and others. By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Medieval ideal of wealth as something that could have a 'good' use was contrasting with a reality of merchants and other economic actors animated by 'greed.' Greed itself was then

proposed as a virtue, and the greedy became, for some authors, those who saved to the benefit of the entire community, as has been shown by Giacomo Todeschini (2002).

Authors like Todeschini provide many arguments that can be used to trace changes in economic culture back to changes in economic structures, particularly in the distribution of wealth and income. From our methodological perspective, cultural changes are reflected in the frequency with which specific keywords are used. It should also be noted that this process should not be considered mono-directional, as cultural change also *allowed for* further structural changes, for example by providing a different and less negative concept of greed, and attributing to the super-rich an ‘acceptable’ role to play within the community. Our own research, however, is innovative in focusing on the very long term, and in providing proof of a continuous change in the perception of equality/inequality, which became words increasingly distant from theology and increasingly connected to the material conditions of human beings.

As discussed in Section 2, our work on titles suggests that the crucial turning point is the eighteenth century, when the occurrences of words like ‘equity’ and ‘inequality’ cumulated in the decades immediately preceding the French Revolution in 1789, and the Revolution itself made equality or *égalité* one of its signature ideals. The impact that the Revolution had on the spread of some of our keywords in the following years is clear (Figure 1). We could wonder if the Revolution itself, like the cultural and theoretical change that had brought increasing attention to the condition of actual disparity between human beings, was somehow connected to a long-term process of rising inequality, whose levels might have exceeded a threshold beyond which the society became unstable (also consistent with the economic theory of revolts²¹). However, among the scholars who studied the French Revolution, just a few focused on its economic aspects (Doyle 1980; Aftalion 1987). More commonly, economic factors have been subordinated to the analysis of the social-political roots of the revolutionary process. In fact, scholars of the French Revolution have been traditionally divided by a heated debate, characterized by the opposition between a social interpretation of the phenomenon (applying the Marxist category of ‘class struggle;’ Lefebvre 1951) and a revisionist interpretation that argued for a political explanation of the origins of the Revolution, rejecting the simplistic view of the Old Regime society as one lacerated by the struggle between a capitalistic bourgeoisie and the feudal nobility (Cobban 1964; Taylor 1967; Furet 1978). Recent research on the topic has amended the revisionist views, analyzing the ‘languages’ coeval to

²¹According to the economic theory of revolts (Alesina & Perotti 1996; McCulloch 2003), there is a positive correlation between inequality and the tendency to rebel. A condition of extreme inequality would not be compatible with a stable society.

the Revolution and looking for possible connections between social and political factors.²² Our own research suggests that there is also room for a fuller consideration of economic factors, and notably of the change in general levels of economic inequality, in any attempt at providing an overall explanation of this fundamental event of European history.

Conclusion

Our reconstruction of the change in the use and the meaning of a set of keywords related to the notion of equality/inequality demonstrated that, during the Middle Ages and for most of the Early Modern period, economic inequality (a condition of disparity in the distribution of income or wealth) was very un-perceived or, more precisely, was not perceived as a problem per se. From Augustine to Thomas Aquinas and the late Medieval theologians and philosophers, an ordered society was thought to be intrinsically unequal. The population accepted the situation, because a condition of disparity in wealth, even an extreme one, was not automatically considered unjust—as long as actual access to essential resources was guaranteed to everybody. Only from the seventeenth century, and more clearly during the eighteenth, ‘political’ equality started becoming part of the debate: first in reflections about the state of nature, and later giving rise to a claim of equality of rights, a claim that culminated in the French Revolution elevating *égalité* to one of the main political aims to be pursued and enrooting it as an essential keyword of Western culture.

During the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period, the slow change in meaning of equality/inequality proceeded in parallel with a continuous increase in actual economic inequality. As suggested by recent research, this was probably a pan-European process, one that we argued interacted in complex ways with cultural change. In other words, as societies became more unequal, inequality became a matter of interest first, and then subsequently a matter of concern. From the late Middle Ages, concentration of patrimonies led to a more positive reflection on the sin of ‘greed.’ Later, further increases in inequality levels were probably connected to the new way in which jusnaturalists started comparing a theoretical state of nature with the actual situation of the time, a change in perception of unequal conditions that from the middle of the eighteenth century gave rise to entirely new political claims. By 1830, when our inquiry ends, the meaning of the word equality had almost completely changed compared to its Medieval meanings related to theology, astronomy, music, and medicine. The change in the meaning of inequality was seemingly slower and delayed.

²² The languages of luxury (Maza 1997), of patriotism (Smith 2000), of political economy (Shovlin 2006), of public debt (Sonenscher 2007), and of sociability (Gordon 1994) have all been explored.

As a matter of fact, even in the early decades of the nineteenth century the economic meaning of inequality, which today is probably the dominant one (a cultural condition that the current economic crisis seems to be strengthening), was still fairly marginal.

Some reconstructions of very long-term changes in levels of economic inequality suggested that those levels continued to increase from the early modern period to the nineteenth century. Chronologically, the moment when inequality finally acquired an economic meaning probably coincides with the European industrialization process—the rising phase of the Kuznets curve. This is a period that, from our perspective, still requires careful research, however we will conclude with a suggestive hypothesis: it is only when actual levels of economic inequality reached a multi-secular peak that a too-unequal distribution of access to material resources started being considered incompatible with really equal political rights, and the word inequality finally acquired a meaning similar to the current one.

APPENDIX: DATABASES USED

This Appendix provides additional information about the databases used in this article (also see Table 1).

Databases of Manuscripts

1. Manus Online (MOL)

Comprises the description and digitalization of manuscripts preserved by about 100 Italian public, ecclesiastic, and private libraries, most of which are from Lombardy. The database, started in the early 1980s by the Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo Unico (Rome, Italy), aims to identify and catalogue manuscripts in Latin produced from the Middle Ages to the Contemporary period, including collections of letters. Recently, MOL acquired the data produced by Codex, a database focused on Tuscan libraries. MOL is a national (Italian) project that captures information from a number of regional opacs and single catalogues that consequently are not listed here—with the exception of NBM (see below).

<http://manus.iccu.sbn.it/>

2. Nuova Biblioteca Manoscritta (NBM)

An independent project that intends to catalogue the patrimony of manuscripts of Veneto, started in 2003 by the Veneto Region together with the Department of Humanities at Università Ca' Foscari (Venice, Italy). NBM includes information about many libraries from Veneto (only four libraries from this Italian region participate in MOL). Also in this case, the period covered is from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century.

<http://www.nuovabibliotecamanoscritta.it/>

3. In Principio. *Incipit Index* of Latin Texts

Comprises the *incipit* of manuscripts preserved at Institut de Recherche et d'Histoire des Textes - Section Latine (Paris, France), Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (Collegeville, Minnesota, U.S.A.), Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Département des Manuscrits (Paris, France).

Chronologically, the database comprises Latin works surviving in manuscript form from the origin of Latin literature until 1600 ca.

<http://apps.brepolis.net/BrepolisPortal/default.aspx/>

4. The Digital Scriptorium (DS)

Includes illuminated manuscripts dated or datable from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The project was started in 1996 by Bancroft Library at University of California (Berkeley, U.S.A.) and by Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Columbia University (New York, U.S.A.). The aim is to realize a large collective catalogue of Medieval and Early Modern books preserved by the founding libraries, as well as other participating U.S. libraries, including Union Theological Seminary (New York, U.S.A.) and De Bellis Collection (San Francisco, U.S.A.).

<http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/digitalscriptorium/>

5. Manuscripta Mediaevalia

Comprises information about manuscripts and fragments of manuscripts preserved by German libraries. The database was started by State Library Berlin (Berlin, Germany), German Documentation Centre for the History of Arts (Marburg, Germany), and State Library Munich (Munich, Germany).

<http://www.manuscripta-mediaevalia.de/#|49>

6. British Library Catalogue, Archives and Manuscripts

The new ‘Search our Catalogue Archives and Manuscripts’ service of British Library (London, U.K.). This online catalogue incorporated information from collections catalogued since 2009, as well as from the pre-existing archive and manuscript catalogues including, in particular, the Western Manuscripts collection.

http://searcharchives.bl.uk/primo_library/libweb/action/search.do?vid=IAMS_VU

7. Quodlibase

Includes the theological *quodlibet* (1230-1350), that is, the extraordinary sessions of *questiones disputatae* (‘disputed questions’) organized twice per year by the University of Paris, during Advent and Lent. The *quodlibet* allowed a larger public to question the masters, who agreed to participate in the event, on any kind of topic. Consequently, this documentation is very helpful in capturing the vitality of Medieval intellectual debates. Quodlibase comprises the repertories by Palémon Glorieux (dated 1925 and 1935), amended and updated on the basis of earlier research. The 124 manuscripts included are not dated, but all of them relate to *quodlibet* and involve scholars active between the mid-thirteenth and the mid-fourteenth centuries.

<http://quodlibase.ehess.fr/>

Databases of Printed Editions

1. Incunabula Short Title (ISTC)

Comprises printed works published during the fifteenth century ('incunabula'). The database has been developed at the British Library since 1980, with the support of Bayerische Staatsbibliothek (Munich, Germany), Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale (Rome, Italy), Bibliographical Society of America (New York, U.S.A.), Koninklijke Bibliotheek (The Hague, Netherlands), and Bibliothèque Royal Albert Ier (Bruxelles, Belgium). The database records almost every book printed with mobile type before 1501 (not including fully-xylographic editions).

<http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/istc/index.html>

2. Edit16

Records all books printed in Italy, plus works in Italian published outside the Peninsula, from 1501 to 1600, including coeval and later fakes. The database is managed by the Laboratorio per la bibliografia retrospettiva of ICCU (Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo Unico, Rome, Italy).

http://edit16.iccu.sbn.it/web_iccu/ihome.htm

3. SBN Libro Antico

Comprises all monographic works published since the fifteenth century until 1830 (the date that marks the transition from the 'ancient' to the 'modern' book). The SBN catalogue (OPAC SBN) allows consultation with all libraries participating in the Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale (SBN): about 4,500 libraries, comprising public national and local institutions, university libraries, and libraries of other public and private institutions active in different scholarly fields. The catalogue comprises records related to all books acquired since 1990 by the participating libraries, as well as to all books listed in the pre-existing paper catalogues for the period preceding 1990.

<http://www.sbn.it/opacsbn/opac/iccu/antico.jsp>

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