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Cacciaguida as Sociologist. Representations and Social Change in the Italian Communes

Despite having been talked about for at least a quarter of a century, representations[1] still occupy a secondary role in the study of social mobility in the Middle Ages. The term is sometimes used to mean a symbol of change, such as when a precious type of pottery represents (makes visible) its owner's membership of the upper echelons,[2] whereas at other times it is taken as meaning evidence of a certain kind of evolution, such as in peasant satires – *satire del villano* –, which represent (enact) the decline of the rural classes.[3] In both cases, though, representations are assumed to be the consequences of change, not its causes. This is puzzling, especially since, for some decades now, thanks to the work of Pierre Bourdieu and others,[4] a fundamental role in social dynamics has been attributed to what has been called "symbolic capital", and it has been demonstrated that the raising or lowering of social status depend not only on the given (economic capital, family ties, political resources) but also on the perceived (prestige, honour, positioning within a classification).

In the following pages, while remaining anchored in communal Italy but trying to observe it via disciplines bordering on social history (history of literature, archaeology, history of law), examples, based on recent studies, will be given of representations that are active – capable, that is, of causing (and not just testifying to) change in society. First of all, the role of poetic representations will be discussed, looking at how the notion of class consciousness can be seen from this active perspective rather than from a passive one, and then some examples of aesthetic representations will be considered, dwelling briefly on the active capacity of what we call *status symbols*, before moving on finally to a third type

1. Roger Chartier, "Le monde comme représentation", in Roger Chartier, *Au bord de la falaise. L'histoire entre certitudes et inquiétude*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1998, pp. 67-86.

2. About this point, see Alessandra Molinari, "Archeologia e mobilità sociale", in *La mobilità sociale nel medioevo*, ed. by Sandro Carocci, Rome, École française de Rome, 2010, pp. 117-144: 136, and below, par. 4.

3. Cf. Elisabeth Crouzet Pavan, "La pensée médiévale sur la mobilité sociale", in *La mobilità sociale nel medioevo*, pp. 69-96: 85.

4. Pierre Bourdieu, *Choses dites*, Paris, Édition de Minuit, 1987, p. 160: "Du fait que le capital symbolique n'est pas autre chose que le capital économique ou culturel lorsqu'il est connu et reconnu, lorsqu'il est connu selon les catégories de perception qu'il impose, les rapports de force symbolique tendent à reproduire et à renforcer les rapports de force qui constituent la structure de l'espace social".

of representations, namely, those shaping decisions made in citizen councils and courts to define groups and membership.

The starting point for this argument will be the most famous text of all on social mobility in Italian cities in the late Middle Ages: the long speech on Florentine families given by Cacciaguida, Dante's great-great-grandfather, when he and Dante meet in the heaven of Mars, as recounted in cantos XV and XVI of *Paradiso*.[5]

Cacciaguida's evocation of small, simple twelfth century Florence, the revelation that some of the noble families of that period no longer existed at the time of the vision (1300) and of how, in that "good old time", some of the lineages destined to become powerful had only just moved into the city, all contribute to the love social historians have for these verses. Moreover, it would be hard to find another text of such authoritativeness, capable of illustrating so clearly the basic processes of social mobility – downward by an old aristocracy and upward by new groups – that historians have identified in Italy in these centuries. And it would be even harder to find elsewhere that sense of regret and antipathy towards change that so typify the idea of social mobility, expressed by the elitist tradition which influenced also Pitirim Sorokin.[6]

This is why historians have often used Cacciaguida's speech as an illustration of social movements identified in other contexts on the basis of social scientific empirical data and theoretical models. In the pages to follow an attempt will be made to take this approach in earnest by explicating, in an extremely schematic but hopefully useful way, three possible readings of the Cacciaguida speech based on three different sociological theories: the Marxian theory of successive class systems, Pareto's theory of the circulation of elites and Shmuel Eisenstadt's institutional theory.[7] One of the aims of this will be to demonstrate the difficulties encountered by the first two approaches and the usefulness of the third, before moving on from Dante to a broader discussion of mobility. Shifting the accent on to the constructed and negotiated nature of social identities, in fact, makes it possible not only to attribute a more active role to representations in societal transformations, but also to reflect on how to actually define those transformations.

1. *Cacciaguida as sociologist of class*

A first possible way of reading the transformation described by Cacciaguida has its origins in the century when Dante was rediscovered, the 1800s, and consists of interpreting the process in Florence as an alternation of classes, or rather, as

5. I base myself on Dante Alighieri, *Commedia. Paradiso*. Revisione del testo e commento di Giorgio Inglese, Rome, Carocci, 2016, pp. 199-225. I referred to this text in the conclusion to a paper on "Il peso della politica nella mobilità sociale", in *La mobilità sociale nel medioevo*, pp. 409-436: 435, to which this paper is linked.

6. Pitirim Sorokin, *Social mobility*, New York, Harper & Row, 1927.

7. Shmuel Eisenstadt, *Tradition, Change and Modernity*, New York, Wiley, 1973; Shmuel Eisenstadt, Bernhard Giesen, "The Construction of Collective Identity", *European Journal of Sociology*, 36 (1998), pp. 72-102.

the transition from a government of a military and feudal aristocracy to that of a new commercial and financial bourgeoisie. One of the first to argue this was Ugo Foscolo, who directly boosted Dante's popularity by "connecting it", as Umberto Carpi wrote, "to the cultural climate engendered by the revolutionary cycle of the 1700s".[8] "Florence and other small republics — he wrote — after extirpating their nobles, were governed by merchants who, having neither ancestors to imitate, nor generosity of sentiment, nor a military education, carried on their intestine feuds by calumny and confiscation".[9]

This interpretation enjoyed great success in the second half of the twentieth century. In the popular commentary to the *Commedia* written by Daniele Mattalia in 1960, for example, frequent reference is made to the idea of class, Gaetano Salvemini's *La dignità cavalleresca* is quoted and the contrast in Florence's ruling class between "noble ostentation" and "plutocratic bourgeois vanity" is noted.[10] The same kind of interpretation is current in school textbooks, although at academic level, where it has met with more resistance, it has been reintroduced only recently by Carpi himself. In his great book, *La nobiltà di Dante*, whilst acknowledging that social historians have done much to play down the idea of a feudalism-to-capitalism succession in the thirteenth-fourteenth century, Carpi chooses to reaffirm its general lines, starting from these very same Cacciaguida cantos.[11]

In truth, interpreting the development of society in those centuries as a succession of social classes linked to specific modes of production,[12] already problematic in itself, is even more so when used as a key to understanding the recounting of that process in the middle cantos of *Paradiso*. Notwithstanding the great emphasis, here as in the whole of the *Commedia*, on the role of cupidity

8. Umberto Carpi, *La nobiltà di Dante*, vol. 1, Pisa, Polistampa, 2003 p. 19.

9. Ugo Foscolo, "A parallel between Dante and Petrarch", in Ugo Foscolo, *Essays on Petrarch*, London, Murray, 1823, pp. 187-188, quoted in Carpi, *La nobiltà di Dante*, pp. 19-20. According to Carpi this is a paraphrase of Machiavelli, but the paraphrase appears to be not very faithful in that the Florentine secretary referred not so much to merchants as to the *Popolo*, reffering to a political rather than economic sphere and accounting for a dialectic, which, as we shall see, unlike that between the landed nobility and the moneyed bourgeoisie, is actually described both by Dante and in contemporary sources.

10. *La Divina Commedia*, ed. by Daniele Mattalia, Milan, Rizzoli, 1960: comment on *Par* XV 106): "To these houses, built with the lordly swagger and vanity of the plutocratic bourgeoisie, there can be added, to complete the picture of the restless Florence of the thirteenth century, the great groups of fort-like houses of the various political cliques and the forest of tower houses: fortresses, bricks-and-mortar documents of an agitated, discordant political life."

11. Carpi, *La nobiltà di Dante*, p. 14: "No longer can anyone use classifications such as the old [...] between the Latin element and the Germanic element, and nor even more modern ones (which contained partial elements of truth) between landed and propertied magnates and banking and industrial *popolani* [...]. And yet, in this century-long clash between elites starting from the years of the *Primo Popolo*, demarcation lines of a sharpness to the point of pitilessness did actually exist, without reserve and beyond any ideological or sociological clarification [...]".

12. Paolo Cammarosano, "L'economia italiana nell'età dei comuni e il 'modo feudale di produzione': una discussione", *Società e storia*, 5 (1979), pp. 495-520.

and money in the world's decline, the translation of this moral criticism into the definition of a new nobility, sociologically definable as a capitalistic aristocracy, is not possible. Cacciaguida talks primarily about a city that changes from being little and pure to big and corrupt. The difference in the role of money in the first and second scenarios – when referring, for example, to the price of clothes and the size of dowries in canto XV[13] – is quantitative rather than qualitative. The passages that the class interpretation of Cacciaguida is based on are actually very few and support the argument poorly; in fact, for each defect in the new aristocracy that could be seen as typically "capitalist", Dante mentions at least one more that could equally be applied to a "feudal" nobility. When Cacciaguida describes how women, in his day, were not abandoned by their husbands travelling to France (for business), he counters this with the fact that they used to die in their own land and not elsewhere (because of political exile).[14] When Cacciaguida talks about the Chiaramontesi family using false grain measures (XVI 105), a typically "bourgeois" sin, he also, when talking about another recent family – the Cerchi – a few verses earlier, uses a technically feudal term, "nova *fellonia"* (new felony).[15] Cacciaguida describes how the Adimari are hard on those who flee but easy not only on those proffering "the purse" namely money, but also on those showing their "teeth", i.e. force.[16] And perhaps the least suitable of all the references used to qualify these cantos as class-related is the one quoted most frequently of all, namely, that of the nostalgia for the days when the *contado*-dweller still "andava alla cerca" (i.e. guarded his castle or, according to another interpretation, begged) and was not yet a Florentine town-dweller who "cambia e merca" (i.e. changes money and trades).[17] A recent interpretation suggests associating these verbs not to money, commodities and trade but rather to political changes and corruption in public life.[18]

Even without accepting this last point, the fact remains that for both Cacciaguida and his interlocutor Dante, unlike their nineteenth and twentieth century readers, what lies at the origin of the change and decline of Florentine society is not the transformation of the kind of economic activity practised by the Florentines but, as we shall see, a political change. And it is within this political change that the economic transformations originate.

2. *The poet's consciousness of belonging to a social group*

This conclusion has a number of consequences regarding a question that has been much discussed recently: whether and how Dante changed his ideas about nobility during his lifetime. Umberto Carpi argues that he vacillated between

13. *Par* XV 100-104.
14. *Par* XV 118-120.
15. *Par* XVI, 94-99; 103-105.
16. *Par* XVI 117-118.
17. *Par* XVI 61.
18. Riccardo Chellini, "Il Sedicesimo canto del «Paradiso»: fonti, nuovi documenti e nuove proposte d'interpretazione", *Medioevo e Rinascimento*, 17 (2013), pp. 49-94: 70.

positions more linked to the conception of nobility as an individual virtue (as in the canzone *Le dolci rime* or Book IV of *Convivio*) and those harking back to the possible role of blood, or descent, in qualifying someone as noble (as in *Monarchia* and the Cacciaguida cantos).[19] Before Carpi, this change of idea was not stressed, the tendency being rather to emphasise the unity of Dante's thought on this question.[20] I personally would be cautious about giving too much importance to these changes in Dante's conception of nobility. If, in fact, one accepts that the Dante of *Paradiso* was not the bard of the succession of two coherent social groups – the feudal nobility and the capital's aristocracy – at the helm of society (for the reasons that this succession was much more complex and indistinct than previously thought and because it was not described in these terms at the time), then the two concepts of nobility that he is said to have vacillated between no longer have the value of being attached to the two distinct ideologies of two social groups, and the vacillation, if there was any, becomes less attributable to a change of Dante's audience (the former bourgeois town dwellers and the latter courtly and rural lords).

The reason for mentioning this debate is that it may make historians reflect on the point that interests us here, namely, the relationship between representations (literary, in this case) and one particular aspect of social change, which we can call consciousness of one's social belonging. Realising that an author is describing a changing society in ways that differ to our preordained schemes makes us realise that in the distant past too, in communal Italy, people were not naturally ascribed to a precise class; things were more complicated than that. There was more room for manoeuvre and for reflecting on one's place in society and its transformations.

What we know of Dante's family origins leads us to believe that his continuous reflection on the idea of nobility stems not so much from an impellent need to satisfy changing audiences, but rather from the intermediate position of the Alighieris in general and Dante in particular in the social space of the time. As demonstrated by recently published documents in the new *Codice Diplomatico Dantesco*[21] and recent studies related to these documents,[22] the Alighieris originated from a family

19. Carpi's argument in *La nobiltà di Dante* is taken up by, amongst others, Marco Santagata, *Dante. Il romanzo di una vita*, Milan, Mondadori, 2012, pp. 262-263 and Luca Marcozzi, "Il declino di Firenze e il trionfo del tempo", in *Cento canti per cento anni, III. Paradiso 1*, ed. by Enrico Malato and Andrea Mazzucchi, Rome, Salerno editrice, 2015, pp. 459-489: 460-461.

20. This debate is thoroughly discussed by Guido Castelnuovo in *Être noble dans la cité. Les noblesses italiennes en quête d'identité (XIII^{e}-XV^{e} siècle)*, Paris, Garnier, 2016, pp. 342-370.

21. *Codice diplomatico dantesco* ed. by Teresa De Robertis, Laura Regnicoli, Giuliano Milani and Stefano Zamponi, in *Nuova Edizione Commentata delle Opere di Dante*, VII. *Opere di dubbia attribuzione e altri documenti danteschi,* t. III, Rome, Salerno Editore, 2016.

22. Enrico Faini, "Ruolo sociale e memoria degli Alighieri prima di Dante", in *Dante attraverso i documenti. I. Famiglia e patrimonio (secolo XII-1300 circa),* ed. by Giuliano Milani and Antonio Montefusco, *Reti medievali. Rivista*, 15, 2 (2014), pp. 203-242, Silvia Diacciati, "Dante: relazioni sociali e vita pubblica", in *Dante attraverso i documenti. I.* pp. 243-270; Giuliano Milani, "Per una nuova biografia di Dante. Prospettive storiografiche da una lettura aggiornata dei documenti danteschi", in *Dante fra il settecentocinquantenario della nascita (2015) e il*

which, in Cacciaguida's time, probably had neither the resources nor the skill for knightly combat, but which in the course of the three subsequent generations managed to seize the great opportunities offered by the economic growth and, by the end of the century – thanks above all to money-changing and the ability to survive regime changes – achieve a good level of wealth, a foothold in political institutions and a number of advantageous marriages. This acquired wealth gave Dante (unlike his father and grandfather) the opportunity not to have to work, to be able to study, to learn how to fight as a mounted knight and, in a little society that was a sort of social melting pot, to frequent members of elite families, such as Guido Cavalcanti. His conception of nobility – in which the possibility of it being transmitted by blood of proven virtue is not denied, and in which its conferral on the basis of time and wealth alone, if not accompanied by virtuous conduct, is criticised – appears compatible to the historical climate. Furthermore, it seems to be a conception proposed to a society that is changing, in which neither those from families of recently acquired wealth – but wealthy enough to be highly regarded socially – nor those who, although less wealthy, are bearers of values traditionally associated with pre-eminence, can be considered ignoble. It is in this context of providing a possibility to a society in a state of transformation that Dante's representation of nobility is active; it is not limited to representing the values of a given social group, but serves the purpose of founding a new one, in this case the city's ruling class, made up of both old and newly rich.

This same constructive and not merely illustrative aspect of social belonging can be found in the way other poets from the communal age represent another aspect of society in their time, namely, phenomena related to downward mobility. In a recent analysis by Fabio Zinelli of a series of poems written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries,[23] a link is formed between the impoverishment of the authors and the melancholy this has plunged them into. The picture that systematically emerges when matching these poems to details of the authors' lives and other poetical works is more complicated than that resulting from an unquestioning adhesion to the feudalism-to-capitalism model that is sometimes used when analysing these texts.

These examples clearly confirm that representations of social mobility (downward in this case) are always produced by people occupying a position in society. But when one goes on to try and define what that position is, things get more complicated and intricate, and behind what at first sight seems to be the faithful transposition of a familiar ideology, one can glimpse the attempt to produce a new social as well as literary identity.

This, referring to just two of the examples discussed by Zinelli, is the case for Monte Andrea and Cecco Angiolieri. The former wrote a series of *canzoni*,

settecentenario della morte (2021), ed. by Andrea Mazzucchi and Enrico Malato, Rome, Salerno editore, 2016, pp. 1991-224 and Laura Regnicoli, "Nuovi documenti sul padre e su un figlio di Dante", in *Dante fra il settecentocinquantenario della nascita (2015)*, pp. 817-836.

23. Fabio Zinelli, "Personificazioni di emozioni nella poesia comica di età comunale", in *«Ragionar d'amore». Il lessico delle emozioni nella lirica medievale*, ed. by Alessio Decaria and Lino Leonardi, Florence, Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2015, pp. 201-258.

probably in the last quarter the thirteenth century, in which he employs stylistic elements normally used to narrate the loss of love to describe the loss of money. Monte's profile is thus that of a major banker, but not only. He is also the protagonist of a great number of *tenzoni* in which a second aspect of his social identity is revealed, that of a devoted Guelph and avid supporter of Charles I of Anjou. These two characteristics may seem conflicting but in fact are not, because it was on the basis of the alliance with Charles of Anjou that Florentine money-lending took off in the second half of the thirteenth century. Thus, through Monte, we learn that being a trader in thirteenth century Tuscany implies not actually defending the value of liberty, as in other historical moments, but also and above all ostentatiously promoting the subjection of one's city to a king.[24]

Better known is the case of Cecco Angiolieri, object of an extensive debate on the purely literal or real character of certain autobiographical allusions.[25] This descendent of a wealthy banking family (his father, Angioliero, son of Solafica, was a papal banker, his mother was a Salimbeni), known to have died deeply in debt, had proclaimed his rejection of the market, loans and interest.[26] Putting aside the question of how realistic this rejection was, what is certain is that this ostentatious gesture was made not to lament the threat posed to an old courtly value by newly ascendant classes, but to vindicate Cecco's specific situation as an heir who intended not to carry on with his father's business but rather to squander the inheritance as quickly as possible.

Thus, the "melancholies" of Monte and Cecco are not so much symptoms of the social movement of two specific classes (i.e. the *popolani* taking power or the magnates ceding it), but rather two possible forms of generational delusion. In Monte we glimpse the sentiments of someone who, having accumulated great wealth thanks to political circumstances, lives in terror of losing it because of those circumstances changing; in Cecco, the attitude of someone reaping the benefits of economic growth but not wishing to embrace the ideals of his relatives who produced it. In both cases, these authors do not limit themselves to passively representing the ready-made ideology of a "given" social group but, with their works, contribute actively to the construction of a new ideology.

3. *Cacciaguida as sociologist of elites*

A second possible reading of the movement described by Cacciaguida, radically different to the feudalism-to-capitalism succession approach, sees the

24. Su Monte v. ora Antonio Montefusco, "La linea Guittone-Monte e la nuova parola poetica", in *Dante attraverso i documenti. II. Gli anni dell'impegno politico a Firenze,* ed. by Giuliano Milani and Antonio Montefusco, *Reti medievali. Rivista*, 18, 1 (2017).

25. Andrea Poli, "Per la riapertura del "caso" Cecco Angiolieri. In margine a due edizioni recenti", *Studi medievali*, 52 (2011) pp. 773-808.

26. Cecco Angiolieri, *Rime*, ed. by Gigi Cavalli, Milan, Rizzoli, 1990, p. 87 (LXXV) "che non mi piace 'l prestar ad usura"; and 90 (LXXVII) "In nessun modo mi posso acconciare / ad aver voglia di far masserizia".

process as an example of the circulation of elites. According to this perspective, the transition in Florence in the twelfth-fourteenth centuries was not between two social classes with different economic bases and ideologies, but simply between two sets of families.

This kind of perspective, as we know, is a typical product of *Belle Époque* social science, developed in this case by Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca in an explicitly anti-Marxist mould.[27] According to this approach, society, in every period and in every place, is always divided between an elite with most of the economic resources and talents and a less gifted large majority with less wealth. Given that the levels of economic resources and talents are slightly out of phase, the only movement possible within this theoretical framework is when talented individuals are co-opted by the economic elite.

Ever since it was first divulged, this theory of social change has been applied to the communal period in Italy, especially to Florence in Dante's time.[28] It is surprising, therefore, that in the commentaries on the Cacciaguida cantos it has not met with great success, especially since, to tell the truth, Cacciaguida's description fits much better into the rise and fall of ruling groups in an elite circulation process than with the replacement of a feudal nobility by a money aristocracy.

It has been written recently that "Cacciaguida lists [...] the noble families that were great in 'his time', that is, in the first half of the twelfth century, and now no longer are, dividing them into different categories, almost as if to mean the different moments in their rise and subsequent decline".[29] And, in fact, the dozens of listed families are divided into groups in an order that actually seems to depend on the position they occupy in an inescapable, supposedly "natural" cycle of ascent and decline, as argued by elite theory sociologists. The first group to be named consists of families that were "già nel calare, illustri cittadini", namely, those that once occupied a high position and were already downwardly mobile in Cacciaguida's time. This is followed by a group of families classified as "così grandi come antichi", or rather, very wealthy and old and thus, in relation to the first group, firmly established at the top in Cacciaguida's time. This is followed by a third group, which the frequent use of "già" (already) classifies as being upwardly mobile in Dante's great-great grandfather's time.[30] The underlying logic to this classification is thus based on what we could call the positioning of the family within a preset range of possibilities (which Dante explains by going back in time), consisting of ascent, a period at the top and decline.

However, as strong as the analogy is between the model Dante has in mind when describing the evolution of Florentine society and that presumed by elite

27. Vilfredo Pareto, *Trattato di sociologia generale*, Florence, Barbera, 1916; Gaetano Mosca, *Elementi di scienza politica*, Rome, Flli. Bocca, 1896.

28. Massimo Vallerani, "La città e le sue istituzioni. Ceti dirigenti, oligarchia e politica nella medievistica italiana del Novecento", *Annali dell'istituto storico italo-germanico di Trento*, 20 (1994), pp. 165-230.

29. Marcozzi, *Il declino di Firenze e il trionfo del tempo* p. 485.

30. Dante Alighieri, *Commedia* with commentary by Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, Milan, Mondadori,1991-1997, III. *Paradiso*, commentary to *Par.* XVI.

theorists such as Mosca and Pareto, it is not absolute. The main difference is an aspect that has already been mentioned and which will be analysed more extensively below, namely, the importance given to the political element in Florence's social development. If, for the elitists, the change in form of government constitutes an epiphenomenon in the elite circulation process, initially triggered for economic reasons, for Dante, on the contrary, it is actually a political element – the weakening of the Empire because of the Church and the resulting freedom to expand that was abused by Florence – which lies at the origin of the subsequent social evolution. Furthermore, while the elitists of the 1900s put the accent on the similarities in the behaviour of the various ruling classes in the historical succession, Dante insists on the cultural and other differences between the old and modern nobility, demonstrating – as we have just seen – a desire not so much to distinguish between landed nobility and moneyed aristocracy, but rather between the nobility typical of a small, self-contained and orderly state and the nobility typical of a larger, overgrown and anarchical political context. And, to distinguish between these two different nobilities, Cacciaguida not only uses moral categories but also makes reference to a number of symbols of distinction, thus leading us into a second aspect of our discussion of the active nature of representations.

4. *The economic role of status symbols*

As alluded to previously, at the beginning of his speech Cacciaguida mentions that fashion was simpler in his time and that people saw clothes as less important than in the Florence of the 1300s. People wore no necklaces, diadems, brightly coloured skirts (or, according to another reading, fancy stockings) and what we would call accessories, which, if sold, would have been worth more than the person who wore them.[31]

To dramatise the difference between his own crisis-ridden times and the good old days, Dante tells us how the frivolousness and taste for luxury of his contemporaries would have made the chaste Florentines of three generations earlier shudder, or, in historical-sociological language, how the participants in the process of upward mobility in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries imposed new (and dreadful) status symbols, especially in the field of fashion.[32]

This perspective invites us to look at the relationship between representations and social mobility from the point of view of the sociology of consumption, an approach born from the dialogue between historians, archaeologists and other students of material culture. Research in these areas can provide us not only with a context to Cacciaguida's criticisms, but also a starting point for reflecting

31. *Par.* XV, 100-102: "Non avea catenella, non corona, /non donne [or rather *gonne* - skirts] contigiate, non cintura /che fosse a vender più che la persona".

32. While the concept *status symbol* seems to be of great interest to philosopers (Barbara Carnevali, *Le apparenze sociali*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2012) historians use it less and less. In the recent *The Routledge Handbook of Material Culture in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Catherine Richardson, Tara Hamling and David Gaimster, London, Routledge 2016, it occurs only twice.

on how limited it is to see the clothes and accessories of the fourteenth century Florentine nouveau riche simply as a symptom of intensive social mobility. Chris Dyer has shown that in the very period starting from the age of Dante, between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, there was an increase in consumption, in which fashion played a very important part. It is only a context such as this, of a growing number of consumers that phenomena such as competition for certain products, emulation and differentiation (or snobbery) in consumption become socially significant.[33] More recently Alessandra Molinari has tried turning this perspective on its head by asking "to what extent can the material world itself constitute a channel for social mobility (the possession of certain objects, the control of certain places, the organisation of settlements, etc.), or rather, to what extent can it play an active role in the activation of social transformations".[34] The clearest example, provided by Molinari herself, regards a kind of domestic glazed pottery known as archaic maiolica that became popular as an elite product from the beginning of the thirteenth century, spreading first of all through Italian coastal towns with an Islamic and Byzantine design and then horizontally in society as its prices fell. This diffusion led on the one hand to the need for new designs to express symbolically the distinctiveness of the aristocracy and, on the other, an overall increase in production.[35]

A recent excellent review of Richard Goldthwaite's great book by Alma Poloni seems to point in the same direction.[36] According to Poloni, the social distribution of wealth, one of the fundamental elements of social mobility, depends on two factors: firstly, the propensity of the merchant classes to buy, or rather, to invest their resources in consumer items that mark and reinforce their status, and secondly, the city's ability to satisfy this consumption. The picture that Goldthwaite paints of the fifteenth century suggests a process of this kind. The economic growth from 1350 to 1450 leads to the formation of a middle class that becomes visible only in the sixteenth century, when it is actually able to supply the richer segments of city society with the luxury products they demand. According to this interpretation, a not insignificant or indeed essential element of social mobility is thus linked to the affirmation of new status symbols capable of generating new demand and of the market's capacity to satisfy this new demand.

We have evidently come a long way from the idea of status symbols as mere effects of growth occurring elsewhere. If this is the way things are, Cacciaguida's denouncement of the decline of his city takes on the aspect of a paradoxical prophecy, destined to be fulfilled in a very unexpected way. Thanks to those very bangles, chains and symbols of ostentation, the highest echelons of Florentine

33. Christopher Dyer, "Material Culture: Production and Consumption", in *Material culture in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Guy De Boe and Frans Verhaeghe, Bruge, Instituut voor het Archeologisch Patrimonium, 1997, pp. 505-513.

34. Molinari, "Archeologia e mobilità sociale", p. 143.

35. V. n. 1.

36. Richard A. Goldthwaite, *L'economia della Firenze rinascimentale*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2013 and Alma Poloni, "Una società fluida. L'economia di Firenze nel tardo medioevo", *Storica*, 61-62 (2015), pp. 1-26.

society were able to survive the great crisis of the 1300s and, despite that crisis, launch a new phase of economic development that was capable, amongst other things, of conserving the political system so detestable to Cacciaguida by adapting it to the new reality.

5. *Cacciaguida as sociologist of institutions*

There is one point on which the older and more judicious analyses of cantos XV and XVI of *Paradiso* and more recent ones actually agree: the prevalence of the political dimension.[37] The centre of interest for Cacciaguida and his interlocutor Dante is neither the desire to delineate an epochal transformation between modes of production that starts with the dominion of one class and ends with the dominion of another, nor to list the natural succession of families at the apex of Florentine society. These two elements are someway present, as we have seen, but are subservient to a third need, that of portraying negatively the historical and political process that led to the current situation. The disappearance of the Empire, thanks the inopportune interference of the Papacy in its exercise of power, left the commune of Florence with the freedom to exceed its geopolitical limits, conquer the *contado* and integrate the population of this vast region into the ranks of its citizens.[38] And it is from this bad integration that the melting of people ("confusione delle persone") derives, and hence the specific negative form (involving cupidity, conceit and envy) which, according to Dante, this otherwise natural process had assumed in Florence, consisting in the rise and fall of noble families.[39] The series of conflicts from the beginning of the thirteenth century will lead to the decline and death of the city, unless that providential imperial order which, when broken down, triggered the process of decline, is restored.

This prevalence of political reasons shows that for Dante, what we define as the movements of society depended ultimately on changing relationships between institutions. And even if it is true that in his view the social history of the city of Florence presented itself as a succession of families at the top and that, according to the period, there were various vices prevailing over various virtues, that rise

37. In addition to the essays by Marcozzi and Chellini quoted above, see also at least, amongst the more recent readings: Elisa Brilli, "Memorie degli avi e invenzioni dei posteri. Dante, *Cacciaguida* e la storia di Firenze", in *Dante e l'esilio*, ed. by Johannes Bartuschat, *Letture Classensi*, 44 (2015), pp. 67-84. Of the older *lecturae* see at least those indicated by Giorgio Inglese in Dante Alighieri, *Commedia. Paradiso*, pp. 199 and 212.

38. *Par* XVI 58-66 on which Giorgio Inglese in Dante Alighieri, *Commedia. Paradiso*, p. 216, comments: "In giving '*briga*' (trouble) to the Empire, the Church brought about the disorder described point by point in canto VI of *Purgatorio*; it is within this framework – but considerably earlier chronologically – that the Florentine expansion in the Arno valley is located".

39. In fact, the list of families ends with verses confirming how limited the city was in former times *Par.* XVI 124-126: "io dirò cosa incredibile e vera/ nel picciol cerchio s'entrava per porta/che si nomava da quei della Pera" on which Chellini in "Il sedicesimo canto del *Paradiso*", p. 58, comments: "in that he notes the very slight expansion of the *picciol cerchio*".

of some families and consequent fall of others and that process of moral decline depended not on economic factors or simple power relations, but on institutional factors that varied according to different contexts. This is demonstrated in a succinct and particularly clear way by two tercets which, one after the other, describe two ways in which institutions control social mobility. Dante recalls how, in Florence in the good old days, upward mobility was based on the marquis of Tuscany and his power to confer "milizia e privelegio", while in the Florence of 1300 downward mobility was caused by the anti-magnate laws, which barred some nobles from government.[40]

This importance given to institutions by Dante should convince any historians wanting to use these tercets to illustrate the movements in Florentine society that the theoretical models they adopt must be capable of allotting a significant role to institutions in social mobility. And, among the models available, those developed by Israeli sociologist Schmuel Eisenstadt seem to be particularly useful. In the decades between the end of the second world war and the beginning of the twentyfirst century, Eisenstadt, in his comparative studies on societies far apart in space and time, often stressed the need to lessen the emphasis on preconstituted categories (classes, ruling class, etc.) and formulate specific questions for each context: "What constituted a resource in the given society? What path was considered as being socially upward or downward? And were these movements in the social scale encouraged or subject to sanction?".[41]

Many of the conclusions reached by Eisenstadt in his writings are echoed in some of the points raised above: the focus on generational belonging as a potential conditioning factor in the membership of certain social groups,[42] the emphasis on the importance of the cultural and symbolic sphere in guiding what sociologists call interaction between structure and agency, or rather, between factors that condition the behaviour of individuals and groups and their autonomous space.[43] But what turns out to be even more useful for historians is what could be defined as the processual approach to social structures, i.e. the fact that for Eisenstadt values and institutions are not seen as taken for granted *data* but rather that they constitute

40. *Par.* XVI 127-132, in which it is recalled that the families with the ensign of Ugo marquis of Tuscia in their coat of arms received their knight's girdle from Ugo, but that a member of one of those families, the Della Bella (i.e., Giano, who was responsible for the more radical version of the Ordinances of Justice of the anti-magnate legislation), has now joined up with the *Popolo*.

41. As paraphrased by Simona Cerutti in "Stratificazione e mobilità sociale in Europa e nel Mediterraneo", in *Storia d'Europa e del Mediterraneo*, ed. by Alessandro Barbero, *V. L'età moderna (secoli XVI-XVIII)*, ed. by Roberto Bizzocchi, vol. XI *Culture, religioni, saperi*, Rome, Salerno editrice, 2011, pp. 507-555, p. 510, quoting Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Essays on Comparative institutions*, New York-London-Sydney, Wiley, 1965 and *Centre Formation, Protest Movement and Class Structure in Europe and United States*, ed. by Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, Luis Roniger and Adam Seligman, London, Pinter, 1987.

42. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *From Generation to Generation: Age Groups and Social Structure*, New Brunswick, London, Transaction Publishers, 2009 (ed. or. 1956).

43. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Revolutions and Transformations of Societies. The Comparative Study of Civilizations*, New York, The Free Press, 1978.

variable *processes*, or points of convergence between demands emerging from groups and the fulfilment of these demands within social exchange systems.[44] For Eisenstadt, collective identities, and this includes classes or elites, are not generated naturally but constructed socially, by means of the social building of boundaries that presuppose symbolic codes of distinction, these in turn positioned in relation to factors usually seen as being more structural, namely, the division of labour, access to resources and social differentiation.[45]

6. *The institutional creation of belonging*

I believe that a theoretical approach of this kind of can contribute more effectively than others to making us understand not only how Dante viewed the processes that we now call social mobility, but also the form these processes took in his day, or rather, what forms of social change existed in the communal age and the *ancièn régime* in general. What points us towards this conclusion is a recent paper by Simona Cerutti, who has already in the past acknowledged her debt to Eisenstadt.[46] Cerutti, starting from a discussion of E. P. Thompson's programme of social history, stresses emphatically that social characterisations are not a fixed attribute. They are linked, she argues, to the specific institutional context that produces the sources we study. Thus, writing a history of society "from below" cannot mean writing a history of classes defined according to exogenous categories as *popolari*; it has to mean studying the history of those social groups that the group that produced the sources – with the use of political, juridical and jurisdictional definitions – has placed beyond the "boundary", to use Eisenstadt's term, that defines it.[47]

Although both Thompson and Cerutti were talking about eighteenth century movements, I believe that the attempt to apply their argument to communal society actually confirms it. If it is evident in eighteenth century England that the people involved in the revolts and resistances – those normally defined as "below" – are not necessarily members of a working class but people who, regardless of their status, demand the justice and distribution of resources denied them by their rulers, then it is even truer for the thirteenth and fourteenth century communes in the age of Dante, where the rulers define themselves as *Popolo*.[48] In these regimes, paradoxically, anybody not "*Popolo*" is "below": those demanding fiscal privileges or struggling against new taxes that are consequently defined as *malpaghi* (tax-

44. Joseph Sumpf, review of Eisenstadt, *Essays on Comparative Institutions*, in *Revue française de Sociologie*, 7 (1966), pp. 388-390.

45. Eisenstadt, Giesen, *The Construction of Collective Identity*, pp. 74-77.

46. See note 41.

47. Simona Cerutti, "Who is below? E. P. Thompson historien des societés modernes: une relecture", in *Annales HSS*, 70 (2015), pp. 931-955.

48. Giuliano Milani, "Contro il comune dei *milites*. Trent'anni di dibattito sul regime di Popolo", in *I comuni di Jean-Claude Maire Vigueur. Percorsi storiografici*, ed. by Maria Teresa Caciorgna, Sandro Carocci and Andrea Zorzi, Rome, Viella, pp. 235-258.

avoiders);[49] those – irrespective of whether they are actually nobles – opposed to bringing vendettas under control that are thus called *magnati* (magnates);[50] individuals leading independent religious lifestyles that are thus classed as heretics;[51] notaries or councillors allocating resources in widely practised but not government-approved ways and who are thus sometimes accused of being corrupt officials, *barattieri* or *trabutatores*.[52] As in eighteenth century England, the people belonging to these groups are sometimes able to argue their case. In this sense, the existence of an evolved, complex legal system not only – for the rulers – offers the possibility of further strengthening the boundaries, but also – for the ruled – represents a considerable resource that enables them to negotiate sets of definitions and redraw boundaries between the included and the excluded.[53] But as well as having a political and legal meaning, these moments of defining and redefining belonging also have consequences in terms of social structure. Changes in the groups occupying the top and bottom rungs of society are caused by political changes that can be both revolutionary (such as the *Popolo* taking power and the imposition of an anti-magnate regime) and, more often, gradual (such as the establishment of legal systems that regulate and marginalise retaliations or the criminalisation of tax evasion).

7. *Two consequences for social mobility*

Looking at things from this perspective also radically changes the image of those processes we define as "social mobility". On the one hand, what we call endogenous mobility loses ground against the exogenous kind, and on the other – and on this point we conclude – it becomes more difficult to see these processes as movements of individuals and groups along a scale of preset, once-and-for-all fixed positions.

As regards the first point, it is worth recalling that, for Sorokin, what we call "endogenous" and "exogenous" mobility were opposites also in terms of value judgement. Despite these terms do not appear in his work as such, they are in some way underlying. Convinced as he was, in the wake of Pareto, that the economic structure of society would always be pyramid-shaped, with a few rich dominating the many poor, and that, even if shaken up, this pyramid would inevitably reform

49. Massimo Vallerani, "Fiscalità e limiti dell'appartenenza alla città in età comunale. Bologna fra Due e Trecento", *Quaderni storici*, 147 (2014), pp. 709-742

50. Andrea Zorzi, "Politica e giustizia a Firenze al tempo degli Ordinamenti antimagnatizi", in *Ordinamenti di giustizia fiorentini. Studi in occasione del VII centenario,* Atti dell'incontro di studio organizzato dall'Archivio di Stato di Firenze (Firenze, 14 dicembre 1993), ed. by Vanna Arrighi, Florence, Edifir, 1995, pp. 105-147.

51. Andrea Padovani, "L'inquisizione del podestà. Disposizioni antiereticali negli statuti cittadini dell'Italia centro-settentrionale nel sec. XIII", *Clio*, 31 (1985), pp. 345-393.

52. The first results of the research I have begun on this topic can be seen in Giuliano Milani *L'uomo con la borsa al collo. Genealogia e uso di un'immagine medievale*, Rome, Viella, 2017, cap. 8.

53. Massimo Vallerani, *La giustizia pubblica medievale*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2005.

itself, Sorokin distingued two ways in which pyramid could be shaped: "under normal conditions", when "the economic cone of an advanced society fluctuates within definite limits", and "under extraordinary circumstances" when these limits may be surpassed.[54] These extraordinary circumstances could lead to more stratification or to the flattening of society. The forces driving to equalization – the "levelling forces" in Sorokin's terms – appeared from time to time and included not only natural calamities such as earthquakes and epidemics, but also the redistribution of land and capital, progressive taxation, the cancellation of debts and expropriation.[55] In his view "revolutions and violent redistribution of individuals among different strata" provoked by these forces – what we call "exogenous" factors of social mobility – were a serious risk for society.[56] It was processes like these, in his view, that prevented society from waste its "best human fuel".[57]

Clearly, this position is entirely incompatible with the sociology of institutions approach referred to above. If movements between social levels are conditioned also and above all by the ways these levels are legally redefined by the political institutions, then it is clear that all mobility processes acquire the value of processes which are, to a certain extent, "exogenous".

More generally, an approach rooted in this sociology of institutions undermines the very basis of the idea that it is possible to study mobility as an upward or downward process in relation to given positions. As explained in exemplary fashion by Christopher Dyer in the 2008 conference, there exist four possible meanings of social mobility: "Changes in the size of specific social groups; changes in their character (or identity), changes in the fortune of individuals; changes in the distribution of wealth and power".[58] It seems to me that the first and third meanings refer to a model in which the actors, be they groups or individuals, move within a range of given positions, whereas the second and fourth refer to a more general transformation in which it is the positions themselves that change, and not just those occupying them. The sociological approach proposed here as the most useful one for studying communal society on the basis of a greater adhesion to the chosen source suggests opting for this latter possibility, whilst always considering changes that involve not only all of society and all social strata but also the actual categories with which these strata come to be determined, before establishing what has been the trajectory of specific individuals or groups.

54. Sorokin, *Social mobility*, p. 63.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 373, and Sorokin *Sociology of Revolutions*. See also Antonio De Lillo, *Mobilità sociale*, in *Enciclopedia delle Scienze Sociali*, vol. V, Rome, Treccani, 1996, pp. 728-731.

57. Sorokin, *Social mobility*, pp. 497-498: "We may or may not dislike the caste-system, but the fact that it does not burn out its best human material is its characteristic correlated with immobility, and is probably one of the causes of the long existence of such a society. The rapid progress of the mobile societies is paid for very highly. They must burn their best human fuel".

58. Christopher Dyer, "Methods and Problems in the Study of Social Mobility in England (1200-1350)", in *La mobilità sociale nel medioevo*, pp. 97-116: 102-112.

In conclusion, whether the mental representations of social mobility are those of individuals that establish whether their position is better or worse than that of their parents and forebears, those of consumers that collectively determine the matching (or non-matching) of demand and supply, or those defined as legitimate by institutions that decree by law who is included and who not, representations is what they always are.

(Trans. Robert Elliot)