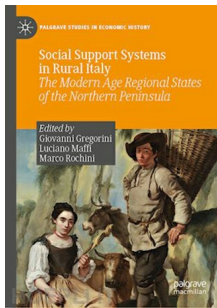


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Giovanni Gregorini, Luciano Maffi, Marco Rochini (eds.)

Social Support Systems in Rural Italy

Review by: Matteo Pompermaier



Editors: Giovanni Gregorini, Luciano Maffi, Marco Rochini

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The book edited by Giovanni Gregorini, Luciano Maffi, and Marco Rochini delves into the social support systems established in rural northern Italy roughly between the 13th and 19th centuries. It aims to understand «the causes that generated the variety of social support systems» (p. 2), investigating the agents and factors that shaped their development. The volume tackles two significant gaps in the current literature on the topic. Firstly, it emphasizes the importance of a comparative perspective to analyze the systems implemented to support the lower strata. Secondly, it redirects attention towards rural areas, often neglected due to the lack of source material and the scholarly “predilection” for urban contexts. Through a cohesive and choral effort across its various chapters, the volume convincingly addresses these challenges. The result is a compelling exploration of the various social welfare systems developed in northern Italy.

The book guides the reader through a comparative and long-term analysis of social support systems developed in different Italian regional states. It considers institutional fragmentation not as a hindrance but as an «advantageous observation point for exploring the evolution and features of social support systems» (p. 3). By examining the activity of different actors involved in the support of the lower classes, it assesses «the extent to which the formation of a more or less structured support system influenced the establishment of local identity and the rooting of individuals» (p. 3). Rather than merely describing the functioning of specific institutions established to support the lower strata, the book retraces their origins and places their trajectories within a broader context. The objectives are ambitious, but the volume succeeds in building a discussion about the forms of poor reliefs created at a local and regional level, shedding light on the reasons behind similarities and variations.

As explained in the introductory chapter, the editors leverage a method that has been successfully applied in other contexts, such as England and the Netherlands (p. 3). The approach compares social support systems at a regional level to uncover the various types of assistance provided and their beneficiaries. This method fits well with the fragmented nature of the Italian peninsula during the late medieval and early modern periods. The editors shift the focus from the institutions themselves to the functions they served, which allows them to develop broad comparisons. Economic historians also employed this method, also known as the “functional approach”, as a lens to observe the evolution of complex financial institutions over time^[1]. I believe this is a very appropriate choice: by studying specific functions, and the various forms of institutions introduced to address them, the book manages to reveal – and in some cases explain – differences and similarities in social relief systems across time and space.

The volume not only highlights differences but also relevant continuities. It is often mentioned the significant number of social bodies available in the early modern period to support the poor. However, despite local variations – remarkable the case of the diocese of Tortona (see Rochini and Maffi, chapters 3 and 6) – what is striking is also the continuity that can be observed throughout the book. Indeed, there are forms of social support, like for instance grain banks, municipal pawnshops, confraternities, and hospitals, that formed a network of institutions that contributed to unifying what was undoubtedly a politically and economically fragmented context.

The chapters explore diverse regions spanning from the Republic of Genoa to the Republic of Venice, areas belonging to the Papal States, Lombardy, and Trentino during the 13th to 19th centuries. They offer valuable insights into the social support systems in these regions, covering not only the role of credit but also other forms of assistance. The essays touch upon a wide range of intriguing topics, encompassing social, economic, and cultural history. Particularly relevant is the debate about the identity of the poor, and the set of criteria used to identify who deserved access to public support, and who did not (among others, see chapters 7 and 9). Also, the discussion about the ritualistic nature of charity, and its societal implications for both recipients and benefactors seem very pertinent (among others, see chapter 3). Pivotal to the volume is the exploration of the dynamics between central authority and local communities, and the urban-rural divide. This includes discourses on the effectiveness of central decisions at the local level and the financial sustainability of welfare institutions over time – recurring themes across several chapters. The topics highlighted by the various authors are highly relevant to the core questions of the volume.

My overall assessment is very positive, but I do have a couple of minor suggestions that I believe could enrich the discourse further. These suggestions, rather than criticisms, should be considered more as potential avenues for future development within the scope of the book itself. First, I believe the editors could have provided a more thorough exploration of what they mean by “systems” of social support. Are they stressing their organized nature? What is their interpretation of the relationship (if there was one) between the various actors involved in the support of the lower classes? These are very interesting questions that are not fully addressed in the introductory essay (p. 14) nor consistently dealt with in the single chapters. Second, there are also areas left unexplored. For instance, I think that discussing the social and financial support available to individuals at different stages of their lives – with a focus on the family life cycle – would have added even more value to the whole volume^[2].

In conclusion, *Social Support Systems in Rural Italy* initiates two important discussions: firstly, the comparative aspect between different regions, which is a stated goal of the book, and secondly, the operational dynamics of various forms of poor relief within the same context. These discussions, approached from a comparative perspective, deepen our understanding of the forms of support established to sustain the lower strata and offer a fertile and solid ground for additional explorations.

[1] See Z. Bodie - R.C. Merton, *A Conceptual Framework for Analyzing the Financial Environment*, NBER Working Paper, n. 95-062, 1995; J. Jonker, *Competing in Tandem. Securities Markets and Commercial Banking Patterns in Europe during the Nineteenth Century*, in D.J. Forsyth - D. Verdier (eds.), *The Origins of National Financial Systems. Alexander Gerschenkron Reconsidered*, London, Routledge, 2002, pp. 80-102; see also C. van Bochove - C. Colvin - O. Gelderblom, *Detecting the Function of Finance through History: An Essay in Celebration of the Work of Joost Jonker*, in «Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis», 18, 2021, 3, pp. 125-166, here p. 149.

[2] For instance, there is a growing literature on the use of different financial tools to support individuals in their elderly years, see C. van Bochove - J. Zuijderduijn, *Years of Plenty, Years of Want? An Introduction to Finance and the Family Life Cycle*, in «The history of the family», 27, 2022, 2, pp. 201-220.